

Civil Society



EYE BANKERS

Wiping out corneal blindness in India



'I CAN DERISK THE FARMER 15 DAYS AHEAD'

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EYE BANKERS WITH HEART

SightLife, an American non-profit, works to eliminate corneal blindness. In India, it partners leading eye banks to make them sustainable and trains surgeons, technicians and counsellors.

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Civil Society

READ US. WE READ YOU.

People to people

SIGHTLIFE came to our notice some years ago. We knew immediately that it was a story worth writing. SightLife's efforts with its Indian partners are a good example of how collaborations should be built between countries — in this case India and the US. Ties are uniquely cemented when people reach out to people with expertise and knowledge and a spirit of collective caring.

Such bonding needs to be recognised for the creative energy it represents. It goes much beyond what governments can do with governments. It also serves to strengthen economies in ways that endure and go far beyond the bottom line concerns of corporations. Social innovators should be seen as drivers of ideas and systems from which can come long-term and sustainable change. When a health issue like corneal blindness is addressed, the benefits are in fact difficult to measure and are across domains.

As we looked closely at SightLife we could see several stories waiting to be written. We knew it wouldn't work for our readers to write all of them at once. What we hope we have managed to put in perspective is the importance of triggers in finding solutions to longstanding problems like blindness. In a country as large as ours with huge backlogs, we invariably feel overwhelmed by what needs to be done. SightLife's work here shows us how much can be quickly achieved with fresh thinking.

We have also tried to capture the excitement and satisfaction that come from such joint initiatives, the alternative careers they offer and so on. Making a difference can be a magical feeling. Small teams working together intensely leave an impression and have an impact far beyond their immediate scope. The significance of this in the transformations many of us would like to see in society can't be emphasised enough. SightLife's work in India draws on expertise in management, ophthalmology, surgery, logistics, quality control and social outreach. We could do with more of such an approach. We need platforms and no silos.

We were also very happy to interview Jatin Singh for this issue. Jatin is a former journalist whose company Skymet has changed weather forecasting in India. Skymet began by providing weather information to TV channels. It went on to serving power companies. And now the state government of Maharashtra is looking to it for all its weather information needs. This year Jatin was in the news for outdoing the Indian met department in getting the monsoon forecast right. The good thing about Skymet is that it is being grown as a business that goes much beyond business. Jatin believes a huge economic opportunity is being lost because we don't get weather forecasting right and, more importantly, take the information to farmers. His is a mission that should be adopted as a national priority.

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SWACHH BHARAT ABHIYAN THE TOILET REVOLUTION

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NEED FOR ESTABLISHING SANITATION FACILITIES:

- ★ Only 31% of our country's population has access to proper sanitation facilities
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- ★ India is the country with the highest number of people practicing open defecation most of it occurs in rural areas where the prevalence is estimated at 65 percent of the population
- ★ Women having to defecate in the open, at odd hours, not only threaten their dignity, but their safety as well
- ★ Children fall ill due to the germs spread from open defecation and cannot attend school
- ★ Many girls drop out of school due to absence of sanitation facilities which hinder their education process

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IN THE LIGHT

SAMITA RATHOR



the social target of reaching the poorest of the poor.

Ritu

There is great scope for new small entities in the financial architecture of the country to service the urban and rural poor. The challenges before the economy are of inclusion, efficiency and access through technology. For far too long now banks have failed to serve the unorganised sector though experience tells us that it is vibrant and productive and made up of borrowers who can be trusted to pay back. The question is of reaching them.

Anita Sehgal

RTI warriors

Rakesh Agrawal's story, 'Young RTI warriors from the hills,' proves that RTI is still a potent weapon in the hands of citizens. Use of this law can force erring officials to do their jobs. Youngsters are the best people to spread RTI and use it effectively especially in remote and inaccessible places like in the hills.

Suresh Thapaliyal

INA market

Your story, 'INA market falls off the civic map of Delhi' is incorrect as far as the NHRC is concerned. The NHRC has been monitoring the case. It summoned six top officials in this connection. The apex human rights body took up the case filed by Radhakanta Tripathy so seriously it registered two cases separately and summoned top bureaucrats.

Sant Dharamveer Chotivala

Letters should be sent to response@civilsocietyonline.com

LETTERS



because it is sustainable. The SST ensures that communities are able to stand on their own feet. The goodwill that villagers feel towards the company is awesome. TVS is a household name and regarded with a lot of respect.

P.T. Vishwanathan

marketed and advertised.

Asha Sachdev

MFI surge

I read your interview with Alok Prasad, CEO of Microfinance Institutions Network, with great interest. There is little doubt that microfinance has a relevant role to play in ensuring financial inclusion. Regulation has brought stability to the sector and a formally recognised role for MFIs. It is a good thing and much needed. But we must go from here to greater depth of services and quality too. So, while we should celebrate the rise in MFI lending, we should also continue to raise the bar for MFIs and ensure they don't stray. The purpose of microfinance must remain

Family planning

Thanks for the interview with Poonam Muttreja on the need to talk about family planning. India's population growth is a matter of concern. We may be happy about our 'demographic dividend' but in today's world we need more brain and less brawn. We need to reinvent the slogan: 'Hum do, hamare do,' and, yes certainly, contraceptives should be vigorously

TVS connects

Thank you for your cover story on TVS, 'Connect, Empower, Withdraw'. The work being carried out by the company's Srinivasan Services Trust (SST) is very inspiring. I am one of many grassroots community development professionals who have seen SST's work in and around Hosur and Krishangiri where we work among the Irula tribes near Denkanikottai. I have met Venu Srinivasan, a great industrialist and social philanthropist. TVS services in the south are well known. They started a bus service from Madurai to Devakottai decades ago. Their novel ways of working need to be studied by state governments and other NGOs.

Sam Chelladurai,
readcentre@gmail.com

The work being carried out by TVS through its trust is really noteworthy

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‘I can derisk the farmer 15 days in advance and I won’t be wrong’

Civil Society News
New Delhi

IT is to the Indian Meteorological Department (IMD) that the nation turns for important weather forecasts. So, this year, when the IMD predicted less than normal rainfall and the possibility of drought, everyone braced themselves for a year of scarcity.

But an independent forecast that contradicted the IMD was also in the reckoning this year and it got a lot of attention. Skymet, India’s first private weather forecaster, said it would be a normal monsoon. Every announcement of the IMD predicting low rainfall was followed by one of normal rains by Jatin Singh, founder and CEO of Skymet. As it turned out, he was right.

A former journalist, Singh launched Skymet in 2003 with his own modest funds. Skymet has come a long way since then. It now has investment from Omnivore Capital and offers a clutch of services to farmers, power companies and producers of agricultural inputs.

More people are logging into Skymet since its weather forecasts are perceived as accurate, accessible and closer home. Skymet has also been nimble in offering weather and agriculture-related services to state governments. Maharashtra depends on Skymet for its weather forecasting needs.

Skymet has shown that weather forecasting has evolved and that it can be an exciting socially relevant enterprise. In his neat and modern office in Noida, Singh says that there is a lot that can be done to ensure that farmers do not suffer because of the vagaries of the weather, especially in these times of global warming and changing weather patterns.

Extracts from an interview:

The IMD predicted 2015 as a drought year. But you said it would be normal.

Skymet has said it’s a normal monsoon. Our forecast of normal rain in July has been accurate. For June we said rainfall would be normal to above normal. We said 107 mm and it ended at 116 mm.

Technologically how advanced is Skymet? Have you caught up with the IMD?

I think we are ahead of the IMD. We have 3,000 sensors of our own. More technology and computing means you have more material. Maybe you don’t need that much. If we are able to do so much with

so little then what is the IMD doing? It’s a question the taxpayer should ask.

We need to thank the US government for putting meteorology on the Internet and making the weather super structure available to everyone. Raw data, codes, ensembles, every bit of R&D is placed online by the US government. The World Meteorological Organisation exchanges all weather data. The US government makes it available online and that allows small companies like ours to do our R&D with that data and build our products.

The IMD knew about the El Nino-monsoon correlation as early as 1980. But they deployed this knowledge only from 2014 after we came on the scene. A lot

of dots were not being connected. There is also traditional Indian knowledge of the monsoon that was not really exploited by the IMD.

INTERVIEW

Jatin Singh

How accurate have your forecasts been?

I have been doing monsoon forecasts since 2012-13. We have been correct all three years. If you look at the historical accuracy of IMD forecasts after 1998 they were mostly in the region of 98-99 with an error of plus-minus five per cent. So, 98-99 is very interesting because you go normal and then below normal. You catch both. I think they were really forced to refine their forecasts when they found we were getting it right over and over again. In 2014 they went for below normal. They were right and so were we. In 2015 I don’t know why they stuck their necks out and went for drought. This is the first drought forecast by the IMD ever.

But we had drought in 2002 and then again...

You had one but the forecast was not of drought.

How is that possible? We have had so many drought years.

IMD has never caught a drought.

Is it because it is politically incorrect to say it’s a drought year?

That is the way the dialogue in India has evolved. You’ve got so much in open source today, both in the government and companies. You have vernacular papers. I make sure whatever information we put out is also in Hindi, Marathi and Telugu. So now people are talking about El Nino, IOD (Indian Ocean Dipole) and the man on the street can rattle off statistics on drought. If the impact we have makes the IMD better, well, that’s a good thing.



Jatin Singh: ‘This technology is not fiction’

There is a lot of talk of climate change. Is the weather changing?

Climate change is a very big and debatable subject. We don’t work on that, honestly, we just forecast. There are certain observations, though, that are being attributed to climate change. One, in the Indian summer monsoon the number of rainy days has reduced but the average rainfall is still the same. There is still no valid theory to explain this dynamic. Science can also be conjecture.

The other speculation is the effect climate change may have on the Indian monsoon. In the first 20 years from 2000 we will be in a low rainfall regime and as a result, we will have multiple droughts. Post 2020-30 when the warming cycle is complete we are supposed to slip into an epoch where the number of rainfall years will increase. The theory is that because of heating caused by climate change there should be more rainfall. However, the latest report suggests that the world has actually cooled. But we don’t work on climate change.

Is it possible to provide accurate and timely micro-information of the weather to each and every small farmer in India?

Absolutely. We do it. It’s on our website. I can derisk the farmer in India on an average of 15-20 days in advance and I will not be wrong. Those services are available and are being rolled out to agri-input companies. A version is there on our website.

AJIT KRISHNA



A precipitation forecast at village level between October and March over the next 20 days has an accuracy rate of 90 per cent. We caught every unseasonal rainfall event in winter way in advance and it is there in open source.

This technology is not fiction. It is available. During the monsoon the accuracy goes down slightly. For example, I said June was good, which meant it was good for sowing, agri-inputs would not be wasted and irrigation would not be required.

In July, too, I said it would be good for the second stage of the crop. We also said that in north, east, central and northeast India, rainfall was going to be okay. Peninsula India would have a problem. We can forecast the number of rainfall periods in a month. I can go state by state and village by village and I will not be wrong. Now if this data is available to each and every farmer imagine what they could do and what governments could do.

But how do you get weather information to village level?

I think frankly the best way to do it is for the government to get Skymet on DD Kisan and All India Radio. But then they have to take a decision to work with us. The first government to take that risk is Maharashtra. We have been working with them since 2012. The mindset is changing at the Centre too. The problem is once they decide to go with a private agency they have to justify why they are not going with the IMD.

So how did Maharashtra justify it?

Maharashtra has a more innovative government. We are in the midst of doing a ₹100 crore project with them. We will be providing micro-climate information. We are putting up 2,065 automatic weather stations. We will be giving agri-advisories to farmers along with long-range forecasts, short-range forecasts, everything.

When will this be rolled out?

We will begin rolling it out this year. By 2015-16, long-range weather forecasts will be available to every farmer in Maharashtra.

So Vidarbha, the suicide district of India in Maharashtra should benefit?

See, in the last five to six years, Vidarbha has become less vulnerable to drought. The state that is more vulnerable to drought today is Bihar. It fails more often than Vidarbha or Rajasthan. Insurance companies make a killing because the two states are going in opposite directions: Bihar wants flood cover and it gets drought and Rajasthan wants drought cover but it is getting normal rainfall.

In 2012, and in 2009, the monsoon failed not just in Vidarbha but in the whole of Maharashtra. Bihar has failed more times. In the long term, eastern India — UP, Bihar and the northeast — need to watch out for drought. The thing is that 'normal' rainfall in the northeast is pegged so high.

So the ideal situation is that the farmer gets weather forecast well in advance, but if he doesn't get rain at the promised time then he is insured?

There are three ways of derisking the farmer. The first is measurement. Our crop statistics are a mess. Everybody knows this. Our crop yields are going up but there is so much political pressure to under report. My value is 100 to 200 per cent of the government's published value, especially for the summer crop. You need to measure crop acreage. For instance, corn is a much bigger crop than it's made out to be.

We have no reliable statistical data on horticulture. Our total horticultural production occupied eight per cent of the total arable area but its contribution is equal to the total cereal production of the country in value.

That much?

Yes. That's a McKinsey report but you have no numbers on this. You really don't know how many pomegranates, tomatoes, potatoes, and so on you are growing. Every alternative year there is a crash in prices because you are not counting.

So potatoes crashed this year. Last year they were booming. Farmers thought potatoes are fetching good prices and too many of them started growing potatoes. Then there is no storage. If you have data then you will be able to figure out that everybody is growing potatoes so the market is going to crash. We measure exact acreage at individual farmer level by flying drones.

You need to forecast the weather accurately and measure the acreage of the crop under production. Just by measuring alone you can derisk the farmer.

The second part of derisking is obviously forecasting. If I know rainfall patterns then I will do what I can. The third is the insurance product. All three have to go hand in hand. We handle them all. The farmer pays a small amount as premium and if all else fails he gets a payout.

Are you dealing directly with farmers?

Absolutely. We are dealing with around 10,000 farmers. We have just collected premiums in Punjab and Haryana. These are baby steps. I can grow insurance by 100 per cent. The total number of farmers covered is 30 million out of 120 million.

Politicians say the premium is too much. The biggest problem really is trust. First, we explain to farmers that the insurance money will be paid if there is crop loss. Then we explain the basis for settlement. We make our data available for free.

The farmer can see the automatic weather station. If the temperature goes below a certain level he can click a button and see how much money is due to him. Even if we lose money in a couple of seasons we seek to build trust. Farmers know that if all else fails the crop insurance money will come in.

The weather-based crop insurance scheme is based on a weather trigger. If our forecast is not accurate and it doesn't rain, say, for 10 days, the farmer gets a pay out. If he can save his crop, then that's good for him.

How do you monetise?

We monetise through crop insurance and by doing big government infrastructure projects as in Maharashtra. We will be using drones there to figure out crop yields. We are doing a lot of innovation in Maharashtra. ■

Compactors take over, ragpickers fade away

Subir Roy
Kolkata

THERE is a crisis brewing among scavengers or ragpickers, as they are more respectfully referred to, in Kolkata. Over the last few years the city has witnessed the arrival of “compactors”, funded by the Asian Development Bank and “compactor stations”.

The smartly built stations which house the compactors, have been replacing vats — filthy overflowing collections points for garbage, an eyesore and a health hazard — that have been the hallmark of the city for as long as people can remember.

The ability of the Kolkata Municipal Corporation (KMC) to replace the vats with structures and equipment which are new, neat and supposedly scientific has been widely appreciated and unsurprisingly the Trinamool Congress has recently re-won control over the state’s premier civic body for another five years.

But in the process, the compactors and stations have come to pose an existential threat to the city’s over 100,000 ragpickers who live by collecting recyclables like paper, plastic, glass and metal from the garbage and selling them to aggregators.

Thanks to the compactors, their daily income is down by around half, from ₹200-250 to ₹100-150, according to Shafkat Alam, joint secretary of the Tiljala Society for Human and Educational Development (Tiljala SHED, named after a deprived east Kolkata area), the NGO which has promoted the Association of Ragpickers of Kolkata. The latter has been in existence for 15 years and has over 300 members. Founded by a retired government school teacher, Muhammad Alamgir, Tiljala SHED has for over two decades

worked among ragpickers in mostly deprived slum ridden east Kolkata which has a large concentration of Muslims.

If the current state of affairs continues, according to Alam, the city’s ragpickers will soon run out of any little savings they may have had and thereafter be driven to pure destitution and forced to take to begging and crime.

While some ragpickers have lived in the city’s worst slums (yes, there are better and more awful

If the current state of affairs continues, says Alam, the city’s ragpickers will soon run out of any little savings they may have had and thereafter be driven to pure destitution.



An urban job guarantee scheme of 100 days is being introduced

slums) for several generations, many landless labourers, mostly from the scheduled castes and Muslims, have migrated from the countryside in search of some kind of income and begun right at the bottom of the economic and social ladder, scavenging in the city’s garbage for recyclables, as they have absolutely no education or skills.

The clouds looming over the future of ragpickers is the result of the role compactors play in the dis-



The problem with compactors is that they disallow segregation of recyclables

PICTURES BY PRASANTA BISWAS



for ragpickers in Kolkata

A major challenge for ragpickers is to get any kind of official identity which can then pave the way for them to be part of government welfare programmes. Two hundred and fifty members of the association applied for voter ID cards and 150 got them.

organise segregation at source by households, municipal markets and restaurants and other commercial establishments. But KMC does not have any plans of introducing segregation by households in all the municipal wards of the city.

Such segregation was introduced in seven of the 144 wards in the city some time ago and according to Debobrato Majumder, member-in-charge of conservancy in the mayor's council, only a very small amount of recyclables is being handed over by households in the seven wards which have been provided with separate bins for compostables and non-compostables.

His explanation is that the proportion of organic waste is very high in the solid waste generated by Indian households and whatever can be recycled like old newspapers and empty bottles has for long been segregated by households and sold to the *bikriwala* or *kabadiwala*.

Indians have also not bought into the disposable culture prevalent in the richer countries. Majumder narrates the story of how a 1970s vintage TV set, no longer functioning, has not been thrown away and still rests in one corner of his house as it used to be viewed by his father and so has become a family heirloom.

On the other hand, ragpickers have survived before compactors came by extracting recyclables from the garbage that city households, markets and restaurants have thrown out. A ragpicker's working day begins well before dawn when he starts prowling the city's streets to pick up any kind of recyclable before municipal sweepers can carry them away and ends around midday at a vat where he lends his hand in the sorting and thereby lays claim to some of the recyclables and their sale value. Walking close to 10 km in a day is routine for a ragpicker.

This sorry lot is worried at the prospect of more and more compactors arriving and the number of vats dwindling. Majumder says there are now 42 compactors in the city and the number is likely to go up to 100 within the current financial year. In his scheme of things compactors have come to stay and most citizens are for them. On compactors gobbling up recyclables, his answer is, "There are positives and negatives in every situation. Besides, nobody wants vats with their mounds of garbage and foraging man and beast (stray dogs)."

Ragpickers have a lower life expectancy than the overall population, few going beyond 60 and the plight of the aged among them is particularly severe. Youngsters want the elderly to go wherever they can as a single *jhopri* cannot accommodate more than one family. The association people speak of one couple, Palan and Molina Haldar who must be in their sixties. Palan is blind and so they work together, with the man resting his hand on the shoulder of the woman who forages for recyclables. But Molina is too weak to carry a load so what she collects is put in the sack which Palan carries.

Children, as soon as they are old enough, join their parents in the daily odyssey of collection. Some

whose parents are better off and want their children to get some education, go to municipal schools in the morning. Tiljala SHED runs afternoon schools for them so that they get a bit of extra help, what private tutors would provide for the better off.

A major challenge for ragpickers is to get any kind of official identity which can then pave the way for them to be part of government welfare programmes. Alam says 250 members of the association applied for voter ID cards and 150 got them. One big issue is being able to give an address as they mostly live in unrecognised slums. So you get things like everyone in one cluster giving one address in an adjoining recognised slum as their address. But perhaps the biggest hurdle is being able to get a Form 6 with which you apply for a voter's ID. Officialdom very quickly rejects applications with incomplete paperwork.

In getting some kind of official identification the association finds helpful the West Bengal government's State Assisted Scheme of Provident Fund for Unorganised Workers. But there is a problem for ragpickers as there is no official category for them and they describe themselves as daily wage earners or housemaids. This is in contrast to the situation in Delhi where an NGO, Chintan Environmental Research and Action Group, has issued identity cards to members of the "Safai Sena" which bear the logo of Delhi's municipal corporations.

Ragpickers have a notoriously short perspective on life. What they earn in a day they mostly spend by the end of it by having a decent meal and drinking. They are loners by nature, prowling city streets from the early hours of the morning. They do not want to be tied down to a daily routine. Alam says it is a headache getting together a group at one time to go to some government office for paper work. A common refrain among middle class people and city civic staff is that ragpickers refuse decent employment and prefer their life of addiction and petty crime.

Ragpickers exist only in poor societies where alone you can find human beings willing to do such demeaning work. Once they are a little better off they will quit this work and move on. So if compactors make them redundant then officialdom and civil society have to join hands in bringing them into the social mainstream. One way is for them to be able to find decent work and a good starting point could be the "100 days" urban jobs scheme fashioned by the state government after the centre's rural employment programme. Under this one can see men and women diligently sweeping city streets in selected areas.

Majumder says he will be happy to "offer jobs under this scheme if ragpickers come as a group and promise not to hang around compactor stations sorting recyclables." When I played this back to the association people they told me, "This is news to us; we will take it up with the officials concerned." In any case it is income for 100 days in a year of 365 days. What does the ragpicker do for the rest of the 265 days? ■

posal of the city's garbage. Earlier, the municipal sweepers would bring the garbage collected from households and sweeping of the streets to the vats where it would stay for a time, as lorries to take the garbage to the city's landfill, Dhapa, would invariably take time to come.

This would provide the ragpickers a critical window of opportunity, allowing them time to forage among the garbage and collect the recyclables in separate sacks for plastics, paper and the like. This resulted in vats with a permanent stock of garbage and beside them a small collection of ragpickers with their filthy looking sacks of sorted recyclables. Some even lived on the pavement next to the vats and exercised territorial rights over a vat and its garbage.

The change today is that the garbage from the handcarts goes straight into the compactors which compress it, taking out water and reducing both volume and weight. Trucks, specially designed to carry containers in which compacted garbage is collected, come with some regularity to take the containers away to the landfill. Usually by midday, the compactor station is free of garbage, cleaned, washed and dusted with disinfectants. Initially, ragpickers were gone from around them but at some compactor stations there is a sign of returned ragpickers, sorting the recyclables in separate sacks.

While doing away with vats is an absolute positive, the problem with compactors is that they disallow the segregation of recyclables as you cannot look for plastic or paper in compacted garbage. Segregation and recycling are the sine qua non of sustainable living and all developed countries and increasingly others are going in for it. These have the added advantage of reducing the amount of solid waste that has to be dumped at a landfill and thereby extend the life of a landfill. This is extremely useful at a time when virtually every Indian city is running out of landfill space.

The way to ensure that segregation and recycling take place and vats do not make a reentry is to



Le Binh, Prof. Sung Yong Lee, Dr Rakesh Kumar, Dr Mallika Kaur and Laura Rahm

Law not enough to improve sex ratio

Kavita Charanji
New Delhi

THE Union government's 'Beti Bachao, Beti Padhao' campaign, has been panned by activists in the social sector, but it is a start. India's child sex ratio has been plummeting. In 2011 it was estimated to be 918 girls per 1,000 boys between 0-6 years — the lowest since Independence.

If uncurbed, worry activists, India's child sex ratio could lead to further disempowerment of women and increase trafficking, gender violence, forced marriages and migrations. The child sex ratio reflects both pre-natal gender-biased sex selection and post-natal discrimination against girls.

At a recent international policy dialogue on pre-natal sex selection in Delhi, experts from India, South Korea, Germany and the US met to brainstorm on international best practices and policies. In their ranks were activists, academics, NGO representatives, researchers and government officials.

The conference was organised by Centre for Social Research, supported by Heinrich Boll Stiftung, India. The event was pathbreaking as the discussions that took place provided rare insights into South Korea's success story in improving its child sex ratio, the challenges being faced by Vietnam and the divided attention to sex selection in the US with its Indian and Asian diaspora.

The tone for the dialogue was set by Dr Ranjana Kumari, director of Centre for Social Research that runs the successful 'Meri Shakti, Meri Beti' campaign against pre-natal sex selection in Delhi and Haryana. "Male child preference persists even today. In India, we have in place the punitive Pre-Natal Diagnostic Techniques (Regulation and Prevention

of Misuse) Act and PCPNDT Acts that ban the use of diagnostic techniques to determine the sex of the foetus but they are difficult to implement. On the surface, Delhi may present a better picture in child sex ratio figures, but border areas in Haryana like Jhajjar and even affluent Gurgaon are among the districts that have the lowest child sex ratio," she said.

Clearly it is possible for doctors, clinics and the public to circumvent the law. Delhiites simply go to border areas for sex selective abortions. An increasing number of states are witnessing an alarming dip

The Korean success story is the outcome of a shift in cultural mindsets that accompany rapid economic growth. Family structures have dramatically changed.

in the child sex ratio and the sex ratio at birth. This pernicious practice is spreading to rural areas.

Offenders get away due to lackadaisical government checks on those who seek such abortions and doctors who do them. The low rate of convictions also encourages non-compliance of the law. Participants at the conference pointed out that government penalties against gender-biased sex selection need to be "likely, immediate and severe" to work.

That's only part of the problem, says Kumari. "Social mindsets towards women haven't changed

substantially. When we see the global picture it isn't just a focus on technology that works but empowerment of women through steps like education and job creation."

While family sizes have shrunk in India, the preference for sons hasn't. Says activist and Senior Fellow at the Centre for Women's Development Studies, Dr Mary John, "People want two or three children. But they want at least one son and, at most, one daughter."

Vietnam, believed to be the country with the highest abortion rates, has great challenges ahead, said Le Binh, Gender Advisor, University of Science and Technology, Hanoi. Sex selection gained inroads into Vietnam in the 1990s when people were able to access cheap technologies. Today, son preference is culturally embedded in the patriarchal Confucian value system, she said. "Preference for sons also arises because social welfare systems are not well developed and elders depend on their sons to continue their lineage and look after them," said Le Binh.

But the picture is getting brighter now, explained Le Binh. One change taking place is that parents are relying more on their daughters to care for them. Greater political commitment, an active civil society and challenging cultural traditions have made a difference though radical change is some way off.

South Korea is the only country to have found a way to curb its skewed sex ratio at birth that at one time saw some doctors in vulnerable areas performing two or three sex-selective abortions a day.

Sung Yong Lee, Professor of Sociology at Kangnam University in South Korea, says that the Korean success story is the outcome of a shift in cultural mindsets that accompany rapid economic growth. Family structures have dramatically changed and more nuclear families have come into existence. The value of daughters has increased as they are given more rights within the family.

His theory, that the value of sons was showing a downward spiral, signifies the increasing weakness of familism in South Korea.

"My argument is that there is evidence to show the weakness of patrilineal familism and solidarity of the family in Korea. According to the New Family Law of 2005, children must equally inherit their parents' assets regardless of gender. Likewise, the perception of sons carrying on the family lineage has suffered a beating as the government has abolished the Patrilineal Family Register in 2005 and replaced it with the New Family Register."

Moreover marriage customs have changed. In recent reports, the grooms, by and large, bear the cost of the marriage. Grooms spend, on average, three times more on the marriage than brides.

But the scenario is not all that bright. Though a larger number of Korean women work, according to Laura Rahm, a researcher in polices against sex selection at the Centre for Population and Development, Paris, "Korean society is still very male dominated and patriarchal. It is a study in contrast. It is one of the countries where you have the largest number of female graduates but they stay at home and don't work because of traditional values."

With all its flaws is it possible to replicate the South Korean success story in India? Rahm has her doubts. "Whether we are talking about India or Vietnam, it is open to question whether there can be replication between cultures that are so completely different in terms of history, political systems, ethnicity and region." ■

Tourism slumps in Kashmir

Jehangir Rashid
Srinagar

THE tourist season this year was a damp squib in Kashmir for political reasons and those in the tourism sector squarely blame the state government.

Prominent hotelier and former President of the Kashmir Hotel and Restaurant Association (KHARA) Siraj Ahmad, says the Mufti Mohammad Sayeed government took many decisions that sent the wrong signals to people living in other parts of India.

“In the last week of March, the government gave the impression that yet another flood was round the corner. In fact, there was no flood-like situation. Failure of the drainage system led to the inundation of Lal Chowk and surrounding areas in Srinagar. But the government created this impression that Kashmir was all set to witness yet another flood and they were ready to tackle the situation,” says Ahmad.

This, he says, gave a chance to the media to project Kashmir negatively. He said the issue was blown out of proportion but the fault lay with the people at the helm of affairs.

“Cancellations followed as soon as images of a likely flood were beamed on TV sets across India. Since then we are not able to recoup and we are suffering huge losses. The images led to a fear psychosis among imminent tourists and they cancelled their visits,” said Ahmad, one of the owners of Orion Hotel in Lal Chowk.

Ahmad, who is now chief spokesman of the Kashmir Economic Alliance (KEA) headed by Mohammad Yasin Khan, said that decisions and steps taken by the government also led to a situation where tourists felt it would not be wise to go to Kashmir. He said the state government has been marred by controversies, dealing a severe blow to the tourism sector.

“The release of separatist leader Masarat Alam Bhat was not liked by the BJP-led National Democratic Alliance (NDA) government at the Centre. Mufti was taken to task after this and Masarat was rearrested. That led to protests in Kashmir and once again the people associated with the tourism sector had to bear the brunt,” said the KEA chief spokesman.

He added that the killing of civilians at Tral and Narbal in Pulwama and Budgam districts, respectively, had a negative impact on tourism. A tourist would come only when the situation was fine.

“The contradictory statements emanating from New Delhi and J&K about the settlement of Kashmiri Pandits led to further confusion among the masses, including those who intended to visit Kashmir. The Home Minister, Rajnath Singh,

announced that separate colonies would be set up for the settlement of Kashmiri Pandits in the Kashmir Valley. This announcement led to anger among the people of Kashmir and they came out on

‘Cancellations followed as soon as images of a likely flood were beamed on TV sets across India. Since then we are not able to recoup and we are suffering huge losses.’



Boatmen await tourists at the Dal Lake in Kashmir

the streets to register their protest,” said Ahmad.

The KEA chief spokesman said that the state government had failed to come clean on the issue since the BJP and the People’s Democratic Party (PDP) were singing different tunes. How can you expect tourists to visit a place that is likely to erupt any time with street protests by locals, he asked.

“Since Mufti is the minister for tourism in the state he should have the vision to develop this sector in a proper manner. The steps taken by him so far suggest that he is not aware of the ground realities. There is a need to take both long and short-term measures for the success of the tourism sector in Kashmir,” said Ahmad.

Muzaffar Ahmad, a tourist taxi operator, says the volatile situation following the release of Masarat led to largescale cancellations by tourists. He says

the state government should handle tricky issues in a proper manner.

“For a successful tourist season in Kashmir it is imperative that the situation is normal. Kashmir has been a flashpoint in the subcontinent over the past 25 years. The law and order situation needs to be handled in a professional manner so that the people associated with the tourism sector do not suffer huge losses. Unfortunately, it happened this time, he said.

The president of the Adventure Tour Operators Association of Kashmir (ATOAK), Rauf Trambo, holds the central government responsible for the uncertainty in the tourism sector in Kashmir. He believes the BJP wants to ‘crush’ Kashmiris on all fronts, including their economy.

“From day one, the BJP has been against Kashmir

BILAL BAHADUR

and the interests of Kashmiris. They want to crush us in all ways. They want the people of Kashmir to beg before them and for that they can go to any extent. The BJP becomes jealous when Kashmir gets promoted internationally as an all-season tourist destination,” he alleged.

The ATOAK president said that the tourist inflow to Kashmir had not picked up despite the announcement of many packages by the tourism industry. The airfare to Kashmir from different parts of India was slashed but tourists did not come in droves.

“It is not only conventional tourism that is suffering. Not long ago, 600,000 to 700,000 people would come to Kashmir for the Amarnath Yatra. This figure dropped to 300,000 or so in 2014. A deep-rooted conspiracy has been hatched to damage the Kashmir economy so that the people suffer,” said Trambo. ■

PICTURES BY SHREE PADRE



Sajeewan Kavumgara has been educating people about edible leaves and shoots

Kerala takes a leaf from tradition

Shree Padre
Kasaragod

A campaign by Sajeewan Kavumgara, an employee of Kerala's Public Works Department (PWD), has left housewives wondering whether that trip to the market to buy vegetables is really necessary.

For the past five years, Sajeewan has been devoting all his spare time to promoting leafy vegetables that can be grown in a homestead or are sprouting all around but people haven't noticed.

"So far, nobody educated us about local vegetables. But after listening to Sajeewan I am using 15 leafy vegetables that were growing in my homestead since the last monsoon. I saved around ₹500," says Sabitha, an assistant engineer with the Kerala State Electricity Board (KSEB).

Through his Eleyariv (knowledge about edible leaves) campaign, Sajeewan has been educating people about leaves and shoots they should eat. He also holds Leafy Vegetable Science Festivals for schoolchildren.

Kerala is today rife with movements promoting traditional foods and diets. There is Bhakshya Swaraj that is inspiring people to grow food. Then there is the organic food movement, the Save the Rice movement and the Prakruthi Bhakshanalaya network (Natural Food hotels). The Kerala Agricultural University (KAU) has also jumped on the bandwagon. All these campaigns have given a fillip to Sajeewan's Eleyariv effort.

"The average Malayali's meal doesn't include even 20 plant varieties today," explains Sajeewan. "Our tradition was not so limited. Even today, you can find about 125 uncultivated leafy vegetables within a one-km walk from your home."

A recent health survey sent shock waves through the state. "Although Kerala has such high literacy you will be surprised to hear that 34 per cent of housewives have malnutrition-related problems," says Prabhakaran V.O., a retired agriculture officer and an Eleyariv activist.

Sajeewan has conducted about 350 Eleyariv workshops throughout the state. At his programmes he displays pictures of leafy vegetables and exhibits plants grown in pots. In some of his programmes he even cooks leaves that were regarded as mere weeds to demonstrate that they are edible.

"Unfortunately, we see an increase in serious diseases like cancer. During all our gram sabha meetings, we mention traces of pesticides in our food.

Though the main focus is on leafy vegetables, zero-cultivation fruits like papaya, jackfruit and mango that are abundant in Kerala are part of the campaign.



A student makes notes during a Leafy Vegetable Science Festival



Sajeewan's house has a lot of uncultivated leafy vegetables

Ninety per cent of our families can eat vegetables without actually cultivating them. Wherever available, housewives have started using such vegetables," says A.K. Ramya, President, Eranheli Gram Panchayat of Kannur district.

Sajeewan's house in Kadiroor near Tellicherry has a lot of such uncultivated leafy vegetables. Take, for example, *Laportea interrupta* or hen's nettle. Called *choriyanam* in Malayalam, the plant is a small, hardy, slightly fleshy herb with hair that irritates the skin. That's why people keep away from it. Sajeewan makes *thoran* (stir-fried veggies) with the leaves of this plant.

Another common herb, purple in colour and similar to *amaranthus*, is called *iodine cheera* in Malayalam. "The plant somehow got confused with iodine," says Sajeewan. "So housewives were not going near it. Now many of them are cooking it. *Iodine cheera* has high iron content."

Tamil Nadu consumes more leafy vegetables than its neighbouring states and its markets are well-stocked. The best example is *Manithakkali* (*Solanum nigrum*), a highly reputed medicinal plant which, says Sajeewan, is now being commercially cultivated around Madurai. In Kalpathy, near Palakkad, a rice additive is made with it.

At his Leafy Vegetable Science Festival, Sajeewan tries to popularise traditional foods among schoolchildren. A plethora of such programmes is organised in the state, with the most number taking place in Kannur, Sajeewan's home district.

Though the main focus is on leafy vegetables,



these edible leaf plants so that students and interested people can visit and become acquainted with them. “So far, we hadn’t planted many of these plants. But we have planted them now for the exhibition,” explains Seema, Sajeevan’s wife.

Farm-fresh vegetables consisting of green leaves and tubers were once common in Kerala’s traditional food basket. Certain foods were especially recommended in Ayurveda for women’s health. Various plant-based diets or traditional nutraceuticals were recommended for pregnancy, lactation, post-natal care, menopause and so on.

To revive this rapidly eroding tradition, KAU has started promoting cultivation of and products made

tion and help them understand the importance of safe food.

After joining hands with NGOs to spread awareness, Bhakshya Swaraj has now entered its second phase of direct action. “Rice production has many problems in the state,” says Paikada. “The majority of paddy fields are either encroached upon or abandoned. They face shortages of labour and water. With this in mind we have to consciously shift our attention from rice to other alternatives. Tubers are the best option. They require less water and labour, contain all essential carbohydrates and have 10 times the productivity of rice.”

Bhakshya Swaraj is now concentrating on devel-

Farm-fresh vegetables consisting of green leaves and tubers were once common in Kerala’s traditional food basket. Certain foods were especially recommended in Ayurveda for women’s health.

from green leafy vegetables to combat women’s health disorders. “Many women in Kerala, regardless of income, suffer from iron deficiency and osteoporosis. But they lack awareness. They don’t realise the need to eat calcium and iron-rich food. This affects their reproductive life,” says Dr Geetha Kutty, Professor and Project Coordinator of Ayushmathi Mission, initiated by KAU two years ago.

Sajeevan’s demo garden of green leafy vegetables will be used by KAU to promote awareness about cultivated and uncultivated leafy plants and popularise their use. KAU is also thinking of distributing planting material.

The local media too is spreading awareness. People in the state have started rethinking their post- Green Revolution diets. “Everyone fears cancer,” says Prabhakaran.

“Kerala has 7.5 million families. Around 5 million families own not less than 25 cents of land. There is water, sunshine and a favourable microclimate. Yet, producing vegetables and other foods for consumption is decreasing. Those who produce for the market use high levels of pesticides,” says Sunny Paikada, coordinator of Bhakshya Swaraj.

Bhakshya Swaraj’s objective is to inspire everyone to produce food. That won’t make us self-reliant, says Paikada, but it will connect people to cultiva-

tion and help them understand the importance of safe food. In three years they hope to set up a cluster of 50 to 100 families and help them achieve 75 per cent self-reliance in food, including vegetables. They have started cultivation at their first centre in Konnakkad in Kasaragod district.

The collective effort of all these movements have helped Sajeevan’s Eleyariv campaign get a good response. “In the last five years, Eleyariv has created a silent revolution in Kerala. Of course, it has received very active support from like-minded movements,” says Prabhakaran V.O.

There are many indications of a very positive impact. *Colocasia* was earlier grown only for its tuber. Now, its leaves and stalks are used in curries. Housewives perceive it as a dependable vegetable. Earlier, they would wait for the tomato to turn up from neighbouring states. Now, housewives realise they have alternatives within their compounds.

For the first time, during Onam last year, six to eight types of new leafy vegetables arrived in Payyanur and other cities of Kannur district. *Ponnanganni Cheera* (*Alternanthera sessilis*) was the best example.” Of course, these are yet to start appearing in our regular vegetable shops. For that to happen, we have to work a few years more,” says Sajeevan, smiling happily. ■

zero-cultivation fruits like papaya, jackfruit and mango that are abundant in Kerala homesteads are an integral part of the campaign. Such plants make your garden edible, quips Sajeevan, showing a sweet potato vine displayed in front of his house.

Other plants he advocates are *Chaya Manasa* (*Cnidocolus aconitifolius*) and *Sahruda Cheera* (*Pisonia grandis*), a hardy plant with large leaves.

The Kerala Agriculture University (KAU) has provided aid of ₹15,000 to develop a garden of all

SAMITA’S WORLD

by SAMITA RATHOR





Young people volunteer with BookWorm to help children read and learn

How BookWorm failed, survived

Frederick Noronha
Panjim

TAKE a passion for books. The desire to do something. A team of women with growing children. Mix well and what you get is Goa's most ambitious reading experiment for the young.

BookWorm is many things to many people. For the middle-class, it has been a child-friendly library. For deprived schoolchildren in rural areas it has been their lifeline to colourful books and stories. Children resettled from former slum areas have also got access to a mobile library through BookWorm and its friends.

Over the years, BookWorm has morphed. It started off as a partnership firm and it is now a trust. Even if the business lessons might not be all that encouraging, the ideas and the impact it has had in promoting reading among children in Goa is definitely inspiring.

Besides their own colourful and attractive library at Taleigao, a fast-urbanising village just on the outskirts of Goa's capital, Panjim, BookWorm also has a Libraries In School project and a mobile outreach programme which gives children access to books. They have a fellowship scheme too.

Storytelling, argues BookWorm on its site, is the oldest form of narrative enquiry. Studies show that children who read show a marked improvement in academic performance. It adds: "Learning to be literate is the most pressing need for communities who are new to this form. The Libraries in Schools (LiS) programme aims to bring these two strong pedagogic practices together to strengthen learning, literacy and the human experience."

BookWorm is now a decade old. In 2005, two young mums, Sujata Noronha and Elaine



BookWorm is always adding new books for children

Mendonsa, started it as a children's library with "open equal access" for just ₹80 as membership fee. "The idea for a children's library emerged out of an extensive private collection of children's books that needed to be shared and the absence of a good children's library in Goa," explains Sujata.

The biggest challenge from the start was the limited space due to an overwhelming response from

the community of young readers (and their parents, of course).

This was in the era when Panjim was rather "activity-less" and, therefore, an ideal environment for a children's literacy and library centre. Being one of India's smaller state capitals at that time, many remember Panjim as having very few options for entertainment or keeping children busy.

"From the very beginning we designed reading and literature based extension programmes that kept us active but also drained us with the demands and the pace," says Sujata.

Interestingly, there was no business model to start with. "It was accepted that the library would be underwritten (from personal funds) right from the start and it is a financial investment that I continue to make year after year earning nothing, taking nothing but receiving a lifetime of joy from sharing books and supporting children's literacy," says Sujata.

In their second year they began a school outreach programme. They were soon "hit" by the knowledge that children did not have access to books or the literacy skills to read and many a time neither did teachers. "We continued to aspire to support under-resourced schools by stretching ourselves and our families thin, but realised in our sixth year that we must look towards more support and slowly began to accept the idea of a registered charitable trust," says Sujata.

Do they think it's possible to break even with a library, that too one exclusively for children? What have their experiences been?

"Never! Not with the quality and number of books we buy. We spend close to ₹1.8 lakh per year on new books, we weed out approximately 450 titles every year. Bookworm Library is totally sub-

sidised," Sujata says. As BookWorm sees it, unfortunately, a paying reading audience does not access the library as much any more. They choose other pursuits, and thus there is no critical mass to sustain the library financially.

But they see their role as agents of change and empowerment. "Through the internship programmes we offer, every year we attract young people from different parts of India and abroad who volunteer to help children read and learn. We have developed resource models of work within communities that are already being understood (through exposure-based training) and are being implemented in many parts of India, particularly literacy and print-deprived communities. We have supported organisations in Rajasthan, Maharashtra and Karnataka," Sujata analyses.

In Goa they work within the state school system to demonstrate how an active library can empower and provide children with a rich opportunity to become critical readers and thinkers. They continue to believe that hard research and documentation and an environment of reflective learning makes their work in children's literature and access rich and empowering

What are the pitfalls they encountered along the way? In Goa, it was "a very weak and uninformed view" about children's literature and literacy. Then there was the total absence of civil society action within the pedagogy of elementary education and therefore a sense of being alone.

Besides, their work depends on human resources and this is probably Goa's biggest drawback. Despite the positive image it has and figures which show Goa as one of the high-achieving states, BookWorm sees Goa (population 1.6 million, area 3,700 sq km) as having "a youth community that are not alive, not motivated and rather bogged down by their own literacy demands and therefore unable to imagine giving back, sharing and learning more."

What's their advice to anyone wanting to embark on this road? "If you are doing this for money, fame or power, do not start," says Sujata. "But if you have been empowered by literacy and want to share the joy that comes from reading, then jump in and there is nothing that can stop you."

New initiatives have also come up. In 2015, BookWorm and others launched an unusual scheme in Goa. "The Book Stop at Panjim's municipal garden is an open library, the first of its kind in the state to help promote the reading habit," commented the local newspaper *Herald*. It allowed anyone to pick up books for free and drop off surplus books for other unknown readers.

Says Sujata: "It has been an act of faith and a humbling experience. A literate community is a sign of hope. Given the numbers of books (around 1,500) that were consumed within the first five months of Bookstop, we believe that Goa has a high density of readers. We were humbled by the goodwill of many people who donated books to the Bookstop and we have faith that, in time, books will be returned so that they can be passed on."

BookWorm has indeed had an impact in diverse ways. It has even published books written by children just entering their teens. BookWorm has certainly wormed its way into people's hearts. ■

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Villages to monitor primary schools in Jammu region

Iftexhar Ahmad

Jammu

THE walls of the government's primary school in Mohalla Usmani in Hadi village looked like they would collapse in a heap anytime. Students used to go to another school to attend classes. But, on paper, money had been recently spent on constructing the school building. Yet it was in a dilapidated condition. Villagers wondered about the quality of material used.

Mohalla Usmani's primary school isn't an isolated case. There are many schools in Surankote tehsil of Poonch district in Jammu where children have to study outside even during the bitter cold winters.

But now villagers are hopeful that things will change. The state government of Jammu and Kashmir (J&K) recently formed hundreds of Village Education Committees (VECs) to encourage the community to become more involved in primary school education. The VECs are part of the Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan (SSA), a programme initiated by Atal Bihari Vajpayee aimed at the universalisation of primary education.

"VECs play a significant role in micro-planning. They prepare the school development plan and assess the requirement of buildings, toilets and drinking water facilities," explained Naeem Akhtar, the state's Minister for Education.

Hundreds of school buildings in Jammu are lying in disrepair, teachers are not regularly present and poor facilities in schools have forced many children to dropout.

"VECs set up earlier had lost their significance due to corruption and nepotism. For example, if a teacher shared good rapport with the committee then no action was taken even if the teacher did not attend school regularly," said Nazam Din Mir, a social activist from Poonch. He hopes that this time the committees will make a real difference.

Located 250 km from Jammu city, Poonch is one of the most backward districts in the state. Despite being near the border, it has often received stepmotherly treatment in development, especially education.

According to the 2011 Census, the overall literacy rate of Poonch district is 66.7 per cent. In 2001 it was 51.19 per cent. The male literacy rate is 78.84 per cent compared to 65.04 per cent in 2001. The female literacy is 53.19 per cent. In 2001 it was 35.96 per cent. The statistics for women, especially those belonging to SC/ ST communities, are even worse.

Parents still believe that educating a boy makes more sense than sending their daughters to school. "She has to get married and take care of her household, after all. There is no point in sending her to a school which is located miles away and does not even have a toilet," argue villagers.

Abbas Kazmi, a local villager, says even if they could change the mindset of the parents about sending girls to school, it would still be tough to justify the long distances the young girls would have to travel and the discomfort they would have

to endure in the absence of toilets.

The guidelines of the SSA scheme envisage setting up new primary and upper primary schools in underserved areas within a distance of one to three km, bridging gaps in physical infrastructure, providing textbooks, educational inputs and so on. Besides, the scheme also focuses on improving the quality of elementary education to reduce the dropout rate substantially.

"It looks good on paper," said Mehfooz Kohli, a resident of Surankote tehsil. "Small children from remote villages have to walk several km to reach the nearest school. Many parents do not send their children, girls or boys, to school as they fear they might hurt themselves while trekking on serpentine trails."

Those who make it to school despite the hurdles are disappointed by its poor infrastructure and facilities.

The shameful state of schools doesn't end here. The attitude of government schoolteachers is another major factor that affects education standards in the district. Teachers posted to remote villages often bunk classes.

"They take turns to visit the school. If the maths teacher comes on Monday, then the science teacher will be there on Tuesday. Is this how they should be working?" asks an agitated Abbas Kazmi.

The difference in the attitudes of government schoolteachers and those working in private schools worries parents even more. Government schoolteachers earn higher salaries and yet private schoolteachers work much harder.

According to villagers, one of the reasons behind the apathetic attitude of government teachers is that they fear no one. The villagers are also unhappy with the quality of education that the teachers offer.

A recent report published in *The Kashmir Monitor*, shares the findings of the latest Unified District Information System for Education Survey report. It reveals that 75,640 teachers in the schools (both government and private) have no professional qualifications, be it a diploma course in teaching or a B.Ed. degree.

While 71,035 teachers are just graduates, 38,326 have studied only up to higher secondary level. Around 47,121 teachers have studied English up to school level and 117 teachers have a PhD or possess an M. Phil degree.

This indicates that the setting up of the VECs is not enough. The government must shoulder the responsibility of improving the standard of education in rural areas.

Teachers must be made accountable. Improving infrastructure, making villagers aware of the benefit of education, maintaining transparency in the selection process, appointing qualified candidates, incentives for teachers posted in far-flung areas are just some of the steps that could be taken. The VECs also need strong support from the government to ensure schools are run properly. ■

Charkha Features

‘Leprosy is a disability’

Civil Society News
New Delhi

WELL-known disability rights activist Javed Abidi has taken up the cause of leprosy victims. He says since those who get leprosy often suffer disability, they should be given the same rights as other disabled people. Besides, leprosy victims endure social stigma. Even if they get cured of leprosy they are still lepers for society and end up living in isolated leper colonies.

Abidi is director of the National Centre for Promotion of Employment of Disabled People (NCPEDP) in New Delhi and an impassioned advocate for India's disabled citizens. He explained his stand to *Civil Society*.

Why do you think leprosy should be treated as a disability? It is a curable disease.

Many people think that leprosy is just a health issue and not a disability issue. The fact is a significant population has disability due to leprosy and, as a consequence, faces grave barriers to effectively participating in society.

Deformity as a disability is an old notion. The United Nations Convention for Rights of People with Disabilities has a new definition that includes “sensory disabilities”. The new paradigm suggests that it's not my impairment that is my disability but the societal environment and its attitude that makes my impairment into a disability.

The Government of India accepted leprosy as a disability way back in 1995. My concern is that, in spite of it being listed as a disability, nothing much has been done for people affected by leprosy.

Is leprosy treated as a disability in the rest of the world?

It would vary from country to country. In most countries leprosy has been eradicated but it has high prevalence in 18 countries. India is one of them.

Laws and policies differ from country to country. For example, India considers leprosy to be a disability but hasn't done much about it. In some countries



Javed Abidi: ‘Stigma will end when you equalise society’

it is not considered a disability but people are advocating for it to be included as a disability.

Have NGOs who have taken up the cause of leprosy sought your intervention given your vast experience in raising these issues?

Well, as far as we are concerned, we are a cross-disability organisation. We fight for the rights of all people with disability.

See, even within the population with disability there is great imbalance. Disabled people say that they are discriminated against by society. The harsh truth is that within the disabled community we also discriminate amongst each other. Some disabilities are regarded as being stronger and others not so strong.

Nobody talks about the “neglected disability”. I call leprosy one of the “neglected disabilities”

AJIT KRISHNA

because in the disability movement I have not found many leaders who have brought up these issues in the past.

So it's not a question of somebody approaching us. It's our duty and responsibility to think of these issues and bring them up.

How will treating leprosy as a disability remove the main problem that the victims of leprosy face, which is social stigma?

Stigma is a creation of humanity. It is not created by God. You and I create stigma or discrimination or call it by any other name.

There was a stigma against disabled people too 20 to 30 years ago. Disability was supposed to be a curse of God. In India, there was a lot of talk about disability being the result of sins committed in a previous life. Now such talk is rare because we have a law, rights, and reservations for the disabled. Earlier those with a disability were seen as a burden to their family and society. Now they are not.

When you equalise society, create a level playing field and start giving rights and entitlements to disabled people, perceptions will change.

My preaching about it and your writing about it won't change social stigma. Stigma will end when the government takes up the issue seriously and starts ensuring that people who contact leprosy are not discriminated against, that they are given their rights and entitlements on a proactive basis. Archaic discriminatory laws must be reformed.

Unless you remove the poverty people with leprosy face and improve their living conditions, the stigma around leprosy won't end. A systematic effort has to be made by society as well as the government.

What are you seeking by way of legislation?

The Law Commission set up by the government has categorically recommended a new law. They have drafted the bill. Its called the ‘Eliminating Discrimination Against Persons Affected by Leprosy Bill’. All that the government has to do is to take it to Parliament and get it passed this year. ■

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EYE BANKERS WITH HEART

How corneal blindness can be wiped out in India

Civil Society News
New Delhi

IT was late in the evening on December 30 two years ago when Dr Vikas Mittal's number flashed on Mridula Chhetri Singh's mobile phone in New Delhi. It was actually his assistant calling on his behalf from Ambala, 200 km or so away. The surgeon urgently needed a corneal tissue for a transplant that he had to perform before January 1 if his patient's eye was to be saved.

In minutes, Singh had sent out the request to a nationwide network of eye banks she is in touch with. A tissue was found with the Eye Bank Association Kerala at Little Flower Hospital in Angamaly, 2,600 km away in the south. The challenge was to get it to Dr Mittal in Ambala by January 1.

The Kerala eye bank is known to be quick in such circumstances. The tissue, preserved in a bottle like the one pictured on the right, was put into a thermocol box with frozen gel packs to keep it cool for at least 48 hours. It was booked on an Air India flight to New Delhi the same night. From Delhi it was to be sent on the early morning flight the next day to Chandigarh. Ambala being close by to Chandigarh, Dr Mittal's assistants would be able to pick up the tissue and get it to him in time for the surgery.

The thermocol box from Little Flower Hospital arrived in New Delhi as planned, but dense fog in the morning resulted in cancellation of the flight to Chandigarh on December 31. It seemed Dr Mittal's deadline would be missed. In a last-ditch effort, Singh drove to the airport and picked up the tissue from the cargo section. She took it home and got a colleague to rush to Ambala with it in a car. The surgery was performed and an eye was saved.

It is five years now since SightLife, a non-profit eye bank based in Seattle in the US, set up an office in New Delhi as part of its efforts to eradicate corneal blindness in the world. It has been partnering eye banks across India to improve their functioning so that healthy and transplantable tissues can be made available to surgeons like Dr Mittal in Ambala and elsewhere.

In 2013 SightLife facilitated 10,000 transplants and in 2014 another 10,000. This year it hopes to make 12,000 transplants possible and keep the number growing by 30 per cent year on year till 2020. Many hopes are pinned on a Cornea Distribution System. Singh is SightLife's national distribution manager in India. She and her colleague, Robin G. Thomas, carry their mobile phones with them at all times because an eye surgeon's deadlines can be exacting.

SightLife has worked hard in India to get to this point. There are many stages in its interesting story. By nurturing partnerships with 20 eye banks, SightLife has helped shape managerial efficiencies that never existed before. There are now employees at its partner eye banks in the country who have imbibed protocols and aspire all the time to meet global standards in the functions they perform. They see themselves as professionals fulfilling a public health need and take pride



in being known as eye bankers. This is a change because eye banks in India have mostly been charitable initiatives out of a desire to do something good but run any which way. Validated systems at eye banks have made it possible to deliver quality tissues on time to surgeons. The Cornea Distribution System is the grid into which all this effort finally flows as corneal tissues move at high speeds from donors to recipients and vision is restored.

A few years before SightLife opened its office in New Delhi in 2010, it worked closely with the L.V. Prasad Eye Institute (LVPEI) whose legendary chairman, G.N. Rao, a corneal surgeon himself, took a keen interest in upgrading eye banks in India.

"The relationship started on the quality aspect of our eye bank and also on how we could escalate our performance on the number of corneas that we retrieved," recalls Dr Prashant Garg, director of education at LVPEI. "The biggest success of this association has been to focus on quantity while not compromising on quality."

It was after a conference on eradicating corneal blindness in developing countries in 2005 that SightLife decided to use its relationships in India to build a model it could employ in other poorer parts of the world.

It has meant working on the three fronts of improving quality at eye banks, increasing the number of usable corneas and encouraging surgeons to undertake corneal grafting.

"As SightLife's partner we have worked on all three fronts," says Dr Garg.

It is estimated that 100,000 corneal transplants need to be done every year in India. Getting 100,000 tissues should not be a problem since the number of deaths in the country is many times that number. But, in fact, only 25,000 transplants take place. What this means is that there are 75,000 people each year who can't avail of transplants because of the want of tissues and surgeons.

At current estimates, the cost of collecting, storing and supplying a single tissue is ₹12,000. The surgeon's fee is over and above this. But the basic cost of making 100,000 tissues available for surgery is just ₹120 crore a year. It is a small sum for dealing with a serious public health issue and could even be subsidised in its entirety. Cross-subsidies are also possible with those who can afford it paying more. But there is more to the elimination of corneal blindness than mere number-crunching.

Much work remains to be done. Transplant failure rates, for example, are high. Around 40 per cent of all corneal transplants in India fail because of the lack of post-operative care. Patients require follow-ups for several years after a surgery. Records show that 50 per cent of them do not return to the surgeon because they invariably travel to urban medical facilities from far-flung places. Specially trained ophthalmologists are needed to attend on patients who have been through a transplant in areas where the patients live. Also, surgeons with expertise in corneal grafting are required in much greater number. Right now eye sur-



Manoj Gulati (left) is country director and Saurabh Biswas (above) is programme manager. Below: Rakhi Nathawat, manager of the Hospital Cornea Retrieval Programme, with three eye donation counsellors: Shalendra Kumar Tripathi, Pooja and Umesh Kumar. These counsellors play a key role in promoting the donation of corneas for grafting

geons prefer to do cataract surgeries since they are quicker and also because corneal tissues aren't always available. It could take all of another 10 years to put expertise and systems in place, but with a concerted effort an end to corneal blindness is possible.

"There are corneal diseases for which the success of transplants is not very high and there are diseases for which it is high. Unfortunately, in the developing world, the diseases that are causing corneal blindness fall into the first group," explains Dr Garg.

"Surgery is the first step. Post-operative care to ensure that the graft remains clear is most crucial. For that we will have to work at the residency level to train ophthalmologists," says Dr Garg. "At present there is not much interest in this because many medical colleges and residency programmes are not performing corneal surgeries and residents are not getting exposed to the challenges in corneal transplants."

Manoj Gulati is the country director of SightLife in India. For 17 years he was a management consultant in the US before he returned in 2010 to set up SightLife's office here. "At that time we were supporting 3,500 transplants," says Gulati. He was motivated by what was clearly a huge challenge.

"Initially we only offered consultancy services to eye banks and then we evolved to surgeon training and more recently we created the Cornea Distribution System. We realised that we had to look at the whole ecosystem and not just eye banking," explains Saurabh Biswas, programme manager.

SightLife has been gently persuasive in changing mindsets. Eye banks had to be educated on international best practices. Simple things needed to be done, like having a manager for the eye bank. Most eye banks would have only a surgeon and a technician. Quality standards had to be enforced. Corneas were being donated but as many as 30 per cent of the corneas were not usable. Often this was because the removal techniques were shoddy. Greater vigilance was also needed on the health of donors so that tissues were not collected from people with HIV, Hepatitis B, syphilis and rabies.

Says Gulati: "India has 720 eye banks. In reality you do not need so many eye banks. You need large and efficient eye banks. In 2012 when we did an analysis we



found that of the 720 eye banks only 125 were active and among them the bulk of the business was being done by 20 to 30. The rest were small eye banks doing 50 to 100 transplants in a year. With such volumes how can you afford a manager?"

So, SightLife decided to work with the 20 largest eye banks to understand their problems and help them adopt the best international practices.

SightLife plays the crucial role of improving systems and training and motivating people. Managers, technicians and counsellors have been encouraged to see themselves as professionals. They have been given responsibility and status and better salaries to strengthen the system and deliver quality at all levels.

Eye Donation Counsellors (EDCs) for example have a very important function.

By nurturing partnerships with 20 eye banks, SightLife has helped shape managerial efficiencies that never existed before. There are now employees at its partner eye banks in the country who have imbibed protocols and aspire all the time to meet global standards in the functions they perform.

Changes in policy at the national and state levels could make things much easier. A national register is, for instance, needed so that donors and recipients are easily identified. Right now, if a tissue is available, it is not possible to know who needs it.

They network hospitals and meet the families of people who have died. It is a complex task that begins with getting to know that a death has taken place and then persuading the relatives to allow the cornea to be retrieved.

EDCs in India work under difficult conditions. Prior consent is not common and there is no central register to go by. An EDC has to be not just persuasive with family members, but also check on the donor's disease profile and ensure a blood sample is collected and sent for analysis within 24 hours of the death.

An EDC used to earn ₹4,000 or ₹5,000 a month and the work would be considered essentially voluntary in nature. After SightLife's interventions, EDCs earn ₹12,000 to ₹15,000 a month. Other salaries have also gone up. A manager of an eye bank gets paid ₹25,000, which wasn't the case earlier.

A new professionalism is in evidence with career opportunities that didn't exist before. The example of K. Srinivas is very interesting. He has worked as a technician for 13 years at the Ramayamma International Eye Bank at the L.V. Prasad Eye Institute in Hyderabad. He has a BSc degree. Three years ago he was sent to SightLife in the US for training and he is now empowered to evaluate corneal tissues, a task that used to be only entrusted to ophthalmologists earlier.

An important aspect of SightLife's strategy has been to streamline functions. As in the developed world, technicians are being given the skills to extract corneas and decide which tissues are usable. This frees up ophthalmologists and eye surgeons from these functions and makes eye banking more efficient.

A transition is also being made to providing pre-cut tissues. The cornea has five layers. In a pre-cut tissue the layer needed by the surgeon is separated and made ready for transplant. The surgeon is then free to focus his skills on the surgery. It also means that more than one transplant is possible from a single donated cornea.

Changes in policy at the national and state levels could make things much easier. A national register is, for instance, needed so that donors and recipients are easily identified. Right now, if a tissue is available it is not possible to know who needs it. First person consent should also be institutionalised. In the US it is put on the driving licence. In India, permission of family members is mandatory and they can refuse to allow a cornea to be collected though the individual had pledged to be a donor.

"We do agree that one should perhaps also talk to the family to know if the donor changed his or her mind. But if he or she didn't then the donor's decision should be respected," says Gulati.

A national registry of donors with first person consent will immediately increase the availability of tissues. Similarly, a national registry of patients will



Robin G. Thomas and Mridula Chhetri Singh manage the Cornea Distribution System



Claire Bonilla: 'We think strategically on building the capacity and capability of a country'

solve the problem of allocation.

There is also no mandatory notification of death by hospitals. In the US, every hospital where a death occurs has to notify the local eye bank and organ centre. The hospital has to also provide access to the medical record of the person for the purpose of screening. It has to provide information on any possible medical reason why the tissue or organ should not be collected.

If a hospital in the US does not have 95 per cent compliance on these parameters it will not qualify for a federal grant. "Such policies are very helpful," says Gulati.

Independent regulation of eye banks is needed so that standards and protocols are followed. "Right now there are no checks and balances, which has led to this huge proliferation of eye banks. Standards exist but there is no way to say that they are being followed," says Biswas.

Finally, the free transportation of tissues by air needs to be made mandatory. Air India and Spicejet carry tissues free. But Indigo refuses to carry tissues and Jet Airways charges. Since the tissue is in a small thermocol box that weighs very little perhaps the Ministry of Civil Aviation needs to step in because it could improve distribution dramatically.

It is deeply satisfying to help someone see again. SightLife's successes are built on good management practices, but the organisation seems equally driven by the mantra of feeling good. Its team members are emotionally charged and brim with enthusiasm.

Rakhi Nathawat, manager of the Hospital Cornea Retrieval Programme (HCRP) at SightLife, holds regular training sessions for the EDCs. There

is continuous interaction and learning through quizzes and messages shared in a WhatsApp group.

Nathawat, the first woman to work in her traditional Rajasthani family, was a manager at the Eye Bank Society of Rajasthan (EBSR) in Jaipur before joining SightLife. She involved herself with the eye bank because she had time on her hands after completing a Master's in biotechnology. Initially, she counselled people on donating corneas. Over time she was given a managerial role. She earned very little there but found the work deeply satisfying.

SightLife came in touch with Nathawat when it began partnering EBSR. She has helped build SightLife's cadre of EDCs who are paid by SightLife and given on lien to partner eye banks. Nathawat stays closely in touch with each one because counsellors need high levels of motivation.

Singh and Thomas are hooked to those bursts of activity that follow calls from surgeons. Singh used to be a journalist and Thomas has a hospital management degree. Prior to SightLife he worked at a key trauma centre in New Delhi and at an NGO spreading awareness of public health issues. In running the Cornea

Distribution System there is the thrill of performing under pressure. Swapnali Gogoi as quality assurance coordinator looks closely at what eye banks do in implementing standards. She comes from a quality management background and is also at SightLife out of a sense of public spiritedness.

Over several conversations with us Gulati remains passionate about SightLife's goals and its role in helping people in eye banking upgrade skills and get better salaries. The manager in him finds fulfilment in such achievements and especially so because they address a public health requirement. As a student in Calcutta, where he grew up, Gulati had helped organise eye camps and volunteered at Mother Teresa's Home For The Dying. When he returned to India for SightLife it was with a new sense of purpose.

Biswas is an engineering graduate from IIT Kharagpur and an MBA from the Indian School of Business (IBS). He has held corporate jobs in supply chain management and logistics in the past. He is understated and quietly supportive in his style, but, as he opens up, it is clear that his four years spent in SightLife have been a high point.

At the Deen Dayal Upadhyay Hospital in west Delhi we meet Shailendra Kumar Tripathi, Umesh Kumar and Pooja. The three are successful and motivated EDCs with personal stories to tell about their work and what it means to them.

Kumar, 30, wanted to join the Army but didn't get in. Tripathi, 29, used to be a security guard in a hospital. Pooja, 24, was a desktop publishing operator. It is clear all three have found their metier in being EDCs.

Just hours before we meet at the hospital, Kumar has convinced the family of a labourer, who passed away suddenly, to donate the man's corneas. The wife was so distraught that it was impossible to speak to her. Kumar explained to others who came with her from a slum where she lived that donating the cornea could give sight to someone else.

An EDC is required to talk to families when they are grieving and often aren't in the frame of mind to hear about the advantages of organ donation. An innate ability is therefore needed to navigate such delicate situations. But training helps EDCs develop the capacity to be gentle and unobtrusive and yet persistent enough to be successful.

In India, an EDC is expected to network a hospital to know when a death happens since there is no national register of donors of first choice. The next stage is getting in touch with the deceased person's family. Calls from hospitals can come at all hours. It is the EDC's job to turn up.

Tripathi recalls how it was the festival of Dussehra and he had just begun his prayers at home when he was informed of a death. He first spoke to the family on phone and then, leaving his prayers unfinished, went to the hospital to speak to them directly and do the paperwork for the donation.

"It is not just the question of getting someone to donate a cornea," says Tripathi earnestly. "In the approaches we make we are ambassadors for the very idea of eye donation. In the evening that Dussehra when I visited the family of the person whose corneas had been donated, all the family members and their immediate neighbours came out to greet me with their hands folded. They thanked me and said they would register to donate their corneas and encourage others to do so," says Tripathi.

SightLife has been influential in developing and training allied health persons somewhat in the mould envisioned by the World Health Organisation. The EDCs are an example. Similarly, eye bank technicians have begun to play a more important role by learning to evaluate corneas — there are two at the L.V. Prasad Eye Institute and others at the Shroff Eye Bank and Shankar Netralaya.

Claire Bonilla, SightLife's chief global officer, was in India to meet partners in Pune, Chennai and Madurai. We talked to her in New Delhi where she held a daylong consultation on strategic plans with SightLife's Indian team.

Bonilla has years of experience in working in developing countries. She was last at Microsoft where she was closely involved with a lot of the company's CSR activities.

"We think strategically on building the capacity and capability of a country without a continuing dependence on outside international organisations," says Bonilla of SightLife's overarching strategy.

"We build the capabilities and capacities of local institutions whether they are eye banks or hospitals; state and national governments because regulatory policy is very important; and surgeons so as to be able to do their surgery," she says. "Once we have got that capacity we can actually move on and look at other countries. But it is very important to do it in a sustainable way. The other key thing that we look at



Dr Prashant Garg, director of education at the LV Prasad Eye Institute in Hyderabad

'Surgery is the first step. Post-operative care to ensure that the graft remains clear is most crucial. For that we have to train ophthalmologists.'



K. Srinivas, a technician, has been trained to evaluate corneas

is the ecosystem. It is important to know whom to partner with in the value chain."

Bonilla cites the example of surgeons in India. "There are tremendously talented cornea surgeons in India. I've met some of them and seen them operate," she says. "But there are primary issues that these surgeons face. One issue is innovation. New ways of doing surgery that can help increase the success of the graft."

SightLife brings some of the top US surgeons over to actually train surgeons in new techniques. "We develop curriculum with local hospitals to fill gaps in training. We have trained 38 surgeons and fellows," says Bonilla.

Through the eradication of corneal blindness, SightLife seeks to make a much bigger economic impact in the long term. By helping to restore sight it unlocks the capabilities of otherwise healthy individuals and allows them to be productive citizens.

"Curing blindness has a cascading effect. It enables people who are bilaterally blind to rediscover their potential and contribute to family, society and the nation," says Bonilla. ■



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‘Herbals trade wants realistic law it can work with’

Biodiversity Act does not help communities, conservation

Civil Society News
New Delhi

AN effort is underway to deal with several grievances of players in the medicinal and aromatic plants sector with a conference in New Delhi in May taking on board suggestions for simplifying the National Biodiversity Act (NBA), rationalising government rules and putting in place regulation that can ensure higher standards.

The sale and processing of medicinal plants has been a steadily rising business in India with an annual turnover of around ₹700 crore, which is expected to grow at 10 per cent. It has backward linkages with cultivation and collection and implications for rural livelihoods.

A global trend towards natural remedies provides multiple opportunities for India because of its vast biodiversity and traditional knowledge of plants and their efficacies.

However, despite a National Biodiversity Act, India lags behind in workable norms for sustainability, quality and validation. The result has been over exploitation of natural habitats, poor selection and extractions of dubious quality. Revision of official definitions is overdue.

So, while the trade thrives in India, it is increasingly hurt by questions about its credibility. Structure and regulation are needed. So are scientific interventions. Ethical questions are frequently raised about what is being done for communities that preserve natural habitats and the custodians of traditional and folk knowledge.

To find ways forward, the Federation of Medicinal and Aromatic Plants Stakeholders (FEDMAPS) and the National Medicinal Plants Board (NMPB) with the Union Ministry of Ayush recently held a conference to focus on problems and possible solutions.

FEDMAPS has been formed to help stakeholders share their concerns and have them conveyed to the government. It proposes to offer networking opportunities and build communication channels.



AJIT KRISHNA

Janak Raj Rawal: 'We are not realising our true potential'

‘The purpose of JFM was sustainable forest management through the involvement of communities. It is a huge, huge opportunity to raise incomes and take prosperity to the grassroots. JFM should be used for sustainable forest produce collection. It is crucial to the herbals industry.’

We spoke to Janak Raj Rawal, President of FEDMAPS, on the priorities of the industry:

What are your federation's expectations from the government?

So far, the medicinal and aromatic plants sector has grown on its own steam. But we are not realising our true potential because we don't have a national vision. Such a vision has to come out of consultation and should be led by government. Many things need to be cleaned up and made more transparent so that traders, growers and the economy as a whole benefits.

First of all we need a clear policy. Right now we

don't have one. Next regulatory provisions should be put in place, but that is in itself not enough. Regulation and policy should adapt and evolve over time. An advisory board, which represents all interests, is desperately needed so that we can periodically make course corrections.

Structure with accountability and flexibility should therefore be addressed first of all in my view.

The medicinal plants trade comes in for a lot of criticism for how it sources raw material. It has been said that there is little concern for genuine quality.

If there are problems they come from the lack of

regulation. Our laws and rules defy practical application and don't serve the purposes they were meant to. The National Biodiversity Act should be simplified and made user-friendly. It should be a medium for promoting conservation and the sustainable use of natural resources. The law should be seriously revised to address ground realities. For instance, I can't see the problem in accepting plants with a clear source of origin as agricultural produce.

So what you are saying is that deviations are the result of opaque and even impractical policy.

I am saying that it will help ensure quality and stop bad practices if we have regulations that are framed with the serious purpose of realising the economic potential of aromatic and medicinal plants. Right now that is not the case.

There are economic and social issues involved here. We should address them in the national interest.

In India we have 84,632 Joint Forest Management (JFM) committees across 28 states. But they are not functioning. The purpose of JFM was sustainable forest management through the involvement of communities. It is a huge, huge opportunity to raise incomes and take prosperity to the grassroots. JFM should be used for sustainable forest produce collection. It is crucial to the herbals industry. Of the medicinal plant boards in the states, only two or three are functioning.

What are the specific changes being sought in the National Biodiversity Act?

First of all the act lacks clarity and is subject to different interpretations by officials. Its regulations are old, inconsistent and contradictory. An advisory board with all stakeholders should be appointed and the act should be urgently revised. We need better definitions of bio-resources and value-added products. Herb powders, oils, oleo-resins, extracts, formulations and isolated phyto chemicals should be treated as value-added products as these are neither physically separable nor recognisable as per the definition given in the act.

In simple words, we recommend that herbal substances, which are naturally produced, as such, by nature should be treated as bio-resources and all the processed forms (which are made by man in industrial units) should be treated as value-added products. It is important to have this clarification because the act requires every non-Indian to seek prior permission before obtaining any Indian bio-resource. Thus, if herb powders, oils, oleo-resins, extracts and isolated phyto-chemicals are treated as bio-resources instead of value-added products the exports of this sector will completely collapse.

We are also seeking exemption from provisions relating to access and benefit-sharing. At present the act treats cultivated bio-resources and bio-resources collected in the wild in the same way.

Also, exemption from access and benefit-sharing is only given when raw herbs are traded. On the one hand the government wants us to do value addition. On the other hand when we do value-addition we are taxed. We are seeking exemption for all normally traded species listed under Section 40 of the Act.

We also want all cultivated plants to be exempted from access and benefit-sharing. The plants could be cultivated by the manufacturer or obtained through contract farming. ■

Women farmers start a ragi producer company

Preeti E. Ramanathan
Bengaluru

THE Vrushabhavathi Farmers Producer Company is likely to be another trendsetter. Its members are around 160 Self-Help Groups (SHGs) of women from Kolar district of Karnataka. Eighty per cent of them are millet farmers with very small landholdings. The company's president is V. Bhagyalakshmi, a millet farmer in Bathalahalli village, which comes under the Donimaduvu panchayat in Kolar district of Karnataka.

Bhagyalakshmi has spent over 40 years tilling her family's tiny rain-fed field. In 2001, she joined an SHG called the Lakshmi Mahila Sangh, set up by MYRADA, a reputed NGO, which manages savings and credit programmes for the poor in southern India. In those days, Bhagyalakshmi could save just ₹10 per week.

In 2012, MYRADA floated the idea of SHGs joining hands to form a producer company. After extensive talks the Vrushabhavathi Farmers Producer Company was born and Bhagyalakshmi's name was proposed as president. Her children are all educated and have moved to Bengaluru.

Bathalahalli is in a semi-arid area. Bhagyalakshmi grows *ragi* (finger millet) and *saamai* (little millet). Of two bore wells on her land, one dug 400 feet deep, went dry and the other at 250 feet deeper, failed to yield any water. Bhagyalakshmi would like to earn more for her produce. She hopes that the producer company will help small farmers like her transit to agri-business, which would be a more lucrative proposition.

Thanks to an amendment made in 2003 to Section 9A of the Indian Companies Act 1956, the Vrushabhavathi Farmers' Producer Company will become a legal entity when it is registered.

The amendment gives permission to producer companies, whose shareholders and owners are farmers or artisans, to buy and sell the produce and products they grow, manufacture or create. As a legal entity with limited liability, the farmer/artisan shareholders can access financial markets without having to take loans against their small landholdings and limits their risk to the extent of the shares they hold.

In 2013, S. Dodappa, the manager of the Community Managed Resource Centre (CMRC) set up by MYRADA in the Kamasamudra area, was given the responsibility of explaining the idea of a producer company to 160 SHGs in the NGO's fold.

Dodappa, who is from Anabur village in Davangere district, is like a budding social entrepreneur. He attended a four-day workshop in the town of HD Kote in Mysore to understand the composition and functions of a producer company. Those who trained him came from a similar project

involving cotton farmers.

Enthused with the idea, Dodappa handled the difficult process of registering members with patience and persistence. For over a year, discussions were held with the SHGs and their 3,000 members.

"Everyone had a good opinion of it," says Dodappa. "It's good synergy to form a collective to sell farmers produce. The brokers are exploiting small farmers by buying at lower prices during harvest. There are serious issues concerning weighing



SHGs discussed at length the benefits of forming a company

of their produce too. Since the small farmers produce one or two quintals, it is not feasible for them to go to the nearest APMC (Agricultural Produce Market Committee) yard at Bangarapete."

He says brokers do not evaluate the crop fairly and bad yields are offered the same price as the good crop. "During the last crop season, local brokers made as much as 40 per cent more than the farmers' farm gate price," says Dodappa.

He then cites an example. One broker he knows has stocks of about 30 quintal of *ragi* and *saamai* in his warehouse. The broker accumulates stock from 15-20 farmers and usually sells the lot after about three months, when rates are higher.

Dodappa believes that by being shareholders of a producer company not only can small farmers achieve higher prices after harvest, they can also stock and sell at more favourable market rates later.

"Vegetables and *ragi* are the main produce here. But we don't have cold storage facilities. Those need huge investments. So we decided *ragi* was best suited for our producer company as it can be stored for longer periods without spoilage," says Dodappa.

Bhagyalakshmi believes the Vrushabhavathi Farmers Producer Company, like the SHG movement, will bring small farmers together and empower them.

"We can avoid brokers. Instead, we can process our grain into flour and sell it to companies at a higher price. Our producer company can even retain a small profit margin while doing that," says Bhagyalakshmi.

G. Chinnamma from Giddalahalli village in Bangarapete taluk is a member of the Janaki Mahila

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AMBA's unusual work force

Shweta Vitta
Bengaluru

IN 2007 Priya Chandrashekar joined AMBA-CEEIC (Centres for Economic Empowerment of the Intellectually Challenged) in Bengaluru, not knowing what to expect. With an IQ of 51, she had struggled through school till Class 7 with her twin sister who had normal intelligence. Priya faced ridicule and disrespect in school and in her social circle. After her parents admitted her to a school for special children, she passed Class 10 through the National Institute of Open Schooling (NIOS).

At AMBA, Priya underwent a three-month training programme to become a back office data entry operator. The curriculum had been especially designed and simplified. Her trainers watched her closely. It struck them that Priya had this natural inclination to help others. So they trained her to become a trainer by helping her improve her skill sets.

Since 2013, Priya, now 27, has trained 200 intellectually-disabled youngsters. Many are employed in AMBA centres elsewhere. Some work with reputed companies. Indirectly, Priya has trained over 1,000 youth as trainers or as data entry operators.

"AMBA isn't just an organisation. It is a model that has the ability to benefit over 35 million Indians who are intellectually disabled and are often the most ignored and disempowered section of our society," says Sugandha Sukrutaraj, an Ashoka Fellow and Founder of AMBA.

The American Association of Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities (AAIDD) defines intellectual disability as "a disability characterised by significant limitations in both intellectual functioning and adaptive behaviour, which covers many everyday social and practical skills."

Children with intellectual disability find it difficult to perform simple day-to-day tasks. They can't follow schedules and routines, travel alone, manage money and so on.

Until 2003, India didn't even recognise intellectual disability. According to estimates, around 3 per cent or 35 million people are intellectually disabled



Sugandha Sukrutaraj, sixth from left, with her trainees

in India. "They have no access to lifelong formal education. This excludes them economically and marginalises them socially. Also, there are no institutions that care for such individuals beyond the age of 18," says Sugandha.

"What makes it worse is that since intellectual disability is largely an invisible disability (an exception being Down's Syndrome), it is often overlooked very easily by everyone — be it the government or people like us."

Founded in 2004, AMBA has developed the world's first visual methodology of learning called the 'Learn and Earn' concept. This allows intellectually disabled adults with low IQ (of less than 60) and slow intellectual development, to perform back office data entry jobs accurately and easily.

The methodology bypasses formal mainstream learning. It enables individuals to learn alphabets, numbers and words as images in a methodical step by step manner. In six months to a year, those who join learn how to use computers and enter data with a zero per cent error rate.

Trainees acquire the ability to perform other low-skilled back office operations such as visual data entry from handwritten forms, mail-merging, scanning and dispatch.

The training provided by AMBA is very effective since it is peer driven and there is no pressure to

reach a certain target. Some trainees might manage to enter only five forms a day and there are others who can do as many as 50 forms.

AMBA has, through its training, created a new pool of low-skilled workers who can be employed by mainstream companies and a job niche for the intellectually disabled who have always been excluded and have had no economic privileges.

"The intellectually disabled don't understand seniority or subordination, right or wrong. You ask them to do data entry and they enter what they see. If they come across a form with illegible handwriting, they will plainly refuse. This is why there is zero per cent error and that's our biggest strength when we work for any company. The quality of our work is very high," says Sugandha.

AMBA centres handle customer application forms, KYC forms, feedback forms, data entry forms as well as forms for loans, schools and census data entry.

Over the years, Sugandha has worked with corporates such as Intel, Reliance Telecom, HDFC, Honeywell, Hero Honda and Ford. AMBA has also successfully managed to place some intellectually disabled adults in main-

stream companies and in the government.

However, a large percentage remain employed with AMBA-CEEICs across the country. "On an average, a person working in AMBA earns around ₹1,500 per month. The trainers get ₹3,000 and the peer directors about ₹5,000. The salary doesn't depend on the number of forms one does. This was a collective decision AMBA took after discussions with their parents. But it isn't the money that drives these adults to AMBA centres everyday. It's the status the job brings. They say with pride, I too am an IT person," says Sugandha.

"When we approach a company, we only ask for 2 per cent of their forms and that makes a world of difference to AMBA employees. It gives them a sense of identity and purpose."

AMBA has impacted over 3,200 individuals across 16 states in India.

By 2020, AMBA hopes to train and employ at least 6,000 intellectually disabled adults and develop infrastructure that will support 30,000-50,000 youngsters.

Sugandha Sukrutaraj hopes to build a campus, accessible globally, which will provide training and employment to youngsters who are intellectually challenged. It will be a research and development centre for the intellectually disabled or 'my children' as she fondly calls them. ■

To know more, visit www.india.ashoka.org.

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Sangha since 2002. She is the president of the CMRC of which Dodappa is the manager. Her family has a farm of about four acres and they grow mostly ragi.

All 10 members of her SHG have paid ₹500 each to become shareholders of the Vrushabhavati Farmers' Producer Company, and are eagerly waiting for its registration to be completed.

Dodappa, the proposed CEO of the newbie producer company, is full of plans. "We can make flour and sell it to biscuit companies. We want to have a retail outlet in Bengaluru where we will sell ragi biscuits and ready-to-make porridge. We want to get

into branding our products so that we acquire a good reputation."

But it isn't all smooth sailing. The process of forming a producer company is long, arduous and costly. The reason cited for the company not being registered yet is the difficulty in getting the women recognised as 'producers'. Most of the land that they farm is registered in the names of the male members of their family. So women find that agricultural departments are unwilling to certify them as 'farmers'.

There are other factors that may also hinder the aspirations of the new producer company. The Revathi Mahila Sangh, for instance, has opted out of

the producer company. Formed in 1996 with an initial savings rate of just ₹1 per week, it is one of the oldest SHGs in the area.

With advancing years, the women of the Revathi Mahila Sangh are finding it difficult to farm commercially. Their children have opted out of farming.

Chinnamma agrees that families are changing in their district. "Our children are getting educated. They are sitting for recruitment tests and trying for government jobs. They want to be farmers, but there is no water here," she cautions. She hasn't planted her ragi seeds yet because she is still waiting for rain to bless her fields. ■

INSIGHTS

OPINION | ANALYSIS | RESEARCH | IDEAS

Wake up call on rural poverty

AJIT KRISHNA



RAJIV KUMAR

INDIA FIRST

THE recently released Socio Economic and Caste Census (SECC) paints a really grim picture of rural India or Bharat. Of the 179 million rural households (73 per cent of total households in the country), 13 per cent do not have a proper roof over their heads, 23 per cent do not have a literate person older than 25 years of age and 51 per cent survive on manual casual labour.

Shockingly, more than 60 per cent of households live on a monthly income of less than ₹10,000 per month. This translates into \$158 per month or \$31 per month per person — assuming an average family size of five members. Thus, 60 per cent of households in rural India survive on marginally more than \$1 per day per person, 67 years after Independence.

The SECC findings, therefore, provide solid empirical basis for the extensive dualism that characterises India's economy and society. Evidently, the vast majority of Bharat dwellers are deprived, live in unacceptable conditions and have been left far behind. It is a paradox that our democracy permits such extensive dualism.

These findings should trigger deep introspection among our policymakers and force a thorough review of our policies for agriculture and rural development.

The present policy regime has three principal components. First, transfer payments for the vulnerable and excluded — the economist's euphemism for doles and handouts done through schemes such as the Mahatma Gandhi Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MNREGA), the Antyodaya scheme and subsidised food. Second, input subsidies (principally fertiliser and electricity) and the occasional debt waiver directed to cultivating households. These are ostensibly meant for small and marginal farmers but end up benefitting only the relatively larger cultivators or the corporate sector. Third, minimum support prices for major cereals and commercial crops like sugarcane and cotton. These can, by their very nature, benefit only 30 per cent of rural households who are engaged in cultivation.

The SECC points out that 86.9 million or 48 per cent of rural households suffered from deprivation as per a seven-fold criteria. Moreover, we know that the rate of growth of agriculture has averaged about 2.8 per cent over decades. Both these facts point to the failure of India's present approach to agriculture and rural development. Therefore, a business-as-usual



Only 30 per cent of rural households are engaged in cultivation

approach will not suffice. There is a crying need for a paradigm shift in thinking about Indian agriculture.

It is worth noting from the SECC findings that only 30 per cent of rural households are engaged in cultivation. More than 50 per cent relied on manual casual labour for their livelihood. Fourteen per cent were employed in the formal sector with jobs in government, private enterprises or in public sector undertakings (PSUs).

Therefore, the key to eliminating rural deprivation could well be to wean manual workers to higher productivity employment in the manufacturing and services sectors. A successful approach for rural development must, therefore, include a well worked out programme of skill development for rural landless workers.

At the same time, shifting to a system of direct cash transfers to targeted beneficiaries in place of price-based subsidies will also prevent misutilisation of both input and food subsidies. The government must implement direct transfer of food and fertiliser subsidies without waiting much longer because it has successfully created the basis for direct money transfer by announcing the Jan Dhan Yojana for financial inclusion.

For raising agricultural yields and productivity, we will have to shed the traditional mindset towards Indian agriculture. It is time to evolve an alternate approach to the growth of agriculture on the lines put forward by Agarwala, Kumar and Shah in their recently released book, *Resurgent India: Ideas and Priorities*.

The authors urge policymakers to treat farming as "... a modern, knowledge intensive, tech-savvy, entrepreneurial activity". They call for a complete paradigm shift in agriculture because in their view the "... continuation of the current situation of policy distortions and administrative paralysis will yield an agriculture growth of no more than 3.5 per cent per year..." In order to achieve 9-10 per cent rate of growth of GDP, which is the declared objective of the NDA government, agriculture output must itself grow at no less than 6 per cent annually for the next 10 years at least.

Sustaining a 6 per cent rate of growth of agriculture output over the next decade or longer calls for a complete overhaul of policy. Some elements of this approach have already been implemented in Gujarat.

Two of these bear mention. First, laying down separate electricity feeders for villages, which has allowed the state government to charge differentiated tariffs for electricity consumed by rural households and that used for agricultural production. Second, the successful digitisation of land records in Gujarat has created the conditions for the emergence of a genuine land market. This is a giant step in making land transactions more transparent and generating the necessary trust among farmers so that they can exercise their right to property without any encumbrances. Both these measures must be replicated in all other states for rural India to be liberated from deprivation and backwardness.

A more scientific and tech-savvy approach towards

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agriculture will have the following components.

One, shift the focus of agricultural research and extension services to the eastern states of India like Assam, Bihar, Chhattisgarh, Jharkhand, Madhya Pradesh, eastern Uttar Pradesh and West Bengal. The second Green Revolution is waiting to happen in these states, which continue to suffer from low yields and low productivity.

Two, review procurement practices to encourage agricultural activity in these eastern states.

Third, review the system of minimum support prices so that these promote cultivation of high value-addition and labour intensive crops instead of land and water intensive crops like wheat, maize, rice and sugarcane.

Fourth, pay greater attention to water management by encouraging water harvesting through check dams and restoration of water bodies and promote the adoption of modern water conserving

irrigation practices like drip irrigation.

Fifth, support the growth of local aggregators by allocating more resources to agencies like the Small Farmers Agri-Business Consortium, which promotes farmer-producer organisations.

Sixth, initiate agriculture marketing reforms starting with the nationwide abolition of the Agriculture Produce Marketing Committee (APMC) Act and enact legislation for establishing online marketing facilities for agro-products.

Seventh, revamp the Lead Bank scheme to ensure easier availability of farm credit and some sharing of risks faced by cultivators.

Eighth, encourage increased reliance on organic farming and promote exports of organic agriculture products.

Ninth, transfer public expenditure from input subsidies, which are becoming counter productive, to investments in irrigation, water management, research and extension and rural infrastructure. The

government's recent announcement allocating ₹50,000 crore for irrigation is a much needed step in the right direction.

Finally, reduce waste of unprocessed agricultural produce, currently estimated at nearly 30 per cent of total output. This can be done by encouraging agro-processing and establishing direct links between farmers and organised retailers.

The SECC is a wake up call. It must be taken cognisance of. The government should design a policy response that is not business-as-usual or simply tinkering at the margins. The 10-point agenda suggested here, if adopted, could bring about a much needed paradigm shift and put Indian agriculture on a sustained 6 per cent growth path. This, combined with a focus on rural skill development to wean labour away from agriculture, will transform Bharat and bring it closer to India. ■

Rajiv Kumar is Senior Fellow, Centre for Policy Research, and Founder-Director of Pahle India Foundation

Hill state's dam dilemma

BY RAKESH AGRAWAL

UTTARAKHAND has an old history of opposing unsustainable development. The famed Chipko movement began here in Reni village in Chamoli district in the early 1970s and became a rallying point for environmentalists all over the world. The Beej Bachao Andolan (Save the Seeds Campaign) started in Uttarakhand. Organic agriculture and value-added products like jams and pickles by women farmers have been nurtured by NGOs and become brand names. In short, Uttarakhand has been a laboratory of experiments in sustainable living since the 1980s.

But, surprisingly, the political class seems curiously blind to such developments. Instead of helping the state develop in an eco-friendly manner, it seems hell bent in turning Uttarakhand into an Urja Pradesh (energy-producing state) by building bumper-to-bumper dams on its fragile earthquake-prone ecology. The state's blueprint is to build 558 dams and hydroelectricity projects (HEPs) on Uttarakhand's revered rivers.

The simple hill people here have always opposed dam building. People have questioned, struggled and fought against 92 projects that have been commissioned so far and 38 that are in the pipeline.

In 1978, people began protests against the mega Tehri Dam. It was a long struggle that caught the attention of urban environmentalists. But the people lost. Tehri town was drowned to make way for the dam and its people were relocated to New Tehri.

On November 9, 2000, Uttarakhand became a separate state after a vigorous campaign led by the people. The irony is — it made no difference. Soon after, residents of 10 villages rebelled against the 112.5 MW Bhilangana HEP in Tehri district. The state cracked down. In January 2005, 120 protestors including 65 women and two children were arrested.

In 2007, in Chamoli district, women united under the Vishnugad Bandh Prabhavit Punarvas Sangharsh Samiti and supported by the Painkhanda Mahila Parishad, a women's group, protested

against the 400 MW Vishnuprayag HEP on the Alaknanda river. But the state did not budge.

Kamala Pant, convener of the Uttarakhand Mahila Manch, a network of women in the state, rightly says that the state's notion of development is faulty. During the struggle for a separate state, Uttarakhand was envisioned as a place where people would have rights and control over *jal, jangal, jameen* (water, forests and land). But all governments since 2000 have opted for a tired, outdated model of unsustainable development based on strong state control over forests and rivers. Even the Forest Rights Act has hardly been implemented.

Therefore, the net result is that sustainable, eco-friendly livelihoods were not boosted in a big way. The lack of jobs has forced people to continue to migrate in search of work. Uttarakhand is still a 'money order' society. It relies on migration and unsustainable tourism for revenue.

This is why in December 2014 a section of the population began to protest against the UPA government's notification declaring 100 km from Gomukh to Uttarkashi as an Eco-Sensitive Zone (ESZ) where dams and hydroelectric projects would not be constructed. All political parties including the Congress, the BSP and the SP now demand withdrawal of the ESZ notification. Panchayat representatives of villages along the ESZ corridor joined the protests because tourism is their livelihood.

This situation suits the contractor lobby very well. They mint money from dam building. Trepan Singh Chauhan, convener of Chetana Andolan, an anti-dam movement, calculates that dam operators and contractors make two or three times the money they spend on construction of dams and producing electricity.

On the other hand, NGOs continue to take a

comprehensive view of dams and HEPs, 'keeping ecology, social justice and equity principles in mind,' points out Ravi Chopra ex-director of the People's Science Institute in Dehradun.

But, perhaps for the first time, in the cash-rich religious tourism circuit from Rishikesh to Gomukh, the solidarity of the people has been broken because dam building and unsustainable tourism hold out the lure of jobs.

Dams, for sure, don't provide those jobs. "The Bhilangana HEP provided temporary jobs to 19 people. The work lasted only till the dam was completed in 2006. People from five villages had to migrate," says Chauhan.

It is in the interior villages that people continue to hold out, persistently opposing dams and hydroelectric projects. Residents of Chaein village, 12 km from Joshimath town, bitterly protested against a hydroelectric project because their farms and homes were totally destroyed by relentless blasting to dig a tunnel.

Laxman Singh Negi, secretary of Jandesh, an NGO in Joshimath, says that it is essential to inform people about the ill-effects of dams and HEPs and unite them. The problem often is that due processes are not followed. Gram sabhas don't know in advance about the projects coming up in their vicinity. The Environment Impact Assessment (EIA) may not be shared with them. Their voices are not heard during public hearings.

No energy mapping of Uttarakhand has been done till date. Activists and NGOs feel that small run-of-the-river projects of 15-20 MW on tributaries would meet the energy requirements of the state and people would not be displaced. Most of the electricity generated from monstrous HEPs will be channeled to other states. ■

All governments in the state since 2000 have opted for a tired, outdated model of unsustainable development based on strong state control over forests and rivers.

See the child's bright side



DILEEP RANJEKAR

BACK TO SCHOOL

MY colleague, who recently shifted his family to another city, got admission for his six-year-old son, Akshay, in Class 1 of a reasonably reputed school. Akshay is dealing with several kinds of challenges — a new city, new school environment, new teacher, a radical change between early childhood education and formal education and more. My colleague told me that Akshay stands out in his command over the English language. He is quite fond of reading in English but detests learning Hindi — which gets reflected in his unwillingness to learn that language.

While Akshay's teacher has acknowledged his exceptional skills in English, in practically all parent-teacher meetings so far the only thing she has discussed and emphasised is Akshay's unwillingness to learn Hindi. One of the reasons for this is that Akshay is learning Hindi for the first time.

Akshay's parents are aware of his Hindi language problem and, in fact, this issue is troubling them too. But why is the teacher harping on this point alone? Why is the teacher not accepting that Akshay is otherwise a bright child, has several other abilities and over a period of time will improve his Hindi language skills? Why does the teacher think that only his parents have to do something about the problem? What is her own concrete action plan? Who is primarily responsible for addressing this issue (assuming it is such a big issue for the teacher)? Since it is less than a month since the child has been exposed to this new language, why not wait?

Back in Bengaluru, I know of another similar case: Anurag, a child who is studying in Class 2 in a reputed school. The teacher is constantly complaining about Anurag's poor handwriting and that he has no interest in drawing and painting. Anurag has several other strengths — he is very good at maths and in fact does two digit additions and subtraction without using pen and paper at an astonishing speed. His Abacus teacher (who teaches children outside the school) thinks that the child has exceptional abilities compared to other children. Anurag also learns various games much quicker than even

adults. He plays several sports with great enthusiasm and leads a very active life.

In both cases, I don't doubt the genuineness of the teacher's concern. But the problem probably lies in their belief system and to a large extent in the way they have been trained as teachers. It appears that teachers want each of their students to learn everything that is in their so-called syllabus with equal speed and alacrity.

Globally, it is now well accepted that children learn at a different pace and that different children learn different things. It is necessary for the school and the teachers to provide space for the children — at least during the elementary phase. Precisely for this reason, the Right to Education (RTE) Act has introduced the no-detention policy up to Class 10. Even at the Class 10 stage, students have to appear

As a result, in the vast majority of schools the purpose of education is merely to cover the syllabus and prepare the children to answer four or five questions at the end of each lesson in the textbook. Aspects such as comprehending, analysing, applying, empathy, critical and independent thinking are regularly sacrificed or ignored. The process of education, instead of focusing on leveraging the strengths of the child and helping the child to develop areas of their preference, focuses instead on what the child cannot do or does not know. This fails to pursue the overall development of the child.

In companies, it took some time for hardcore businessmen to accept that every employee cannot do everything. Each employee has some strengths — and it is in the interests of the company to leverage those rather than try to develop areas that the

employee is less likely to excel in. Most companies have repositioned their employee development programmes after realising that there is no point in training "tortoises to jump or rabbits to swim". Even team configurations are done on the basis of the mixed strengths of its members.

If hardcore commercial organisations have accepted the principle of employee development, it is high time that the education system — especially teachers and parents — reconcile with the changed paradigm in education.

The Indian child is reeling under several pressures. The burden could include: learning at least three languages, taking care of his or her own studies where the parents are either unable to contribute to

their learning and development or have no bandwidth to do so, or dealing with teachers who are completely non-empathetic to the child's problems.

Learning languages is a case in point. Take the example of a child in Chhattisgarh or Rajasthan or Bihar. The child's language at home could be Chhattisgarhi or Marwari or Mythili. But the moment the child enters Class 1, the medium of instruction is Hindi — which could be as foreign a language to the child as English. Thus only a teacher who knows this reality can deal with the problems facing the child by providing space and special coaching.

We need to keep the education process aligned to the principles laid down in our own policies and commitments and not violate them — in all schools. We need to provide our children opportunity to articulate what they want and pursue that with freedom and care. We need to understand the intent of policies and rules and comply with that in spirit and in letter. This needs proper training to prepare all those who are responsible in contributing to the education process of our children. ■

Dileep Ranjekar is CEO of the Azim Premji Foundation.



LAKSHMAN ANAND

In the vast majority of schools the purpose of education is merely to cover the syllabus and prepare the children to answer four or five questions at the end of each lesson.

for the exam only if they want the certificate. The spirit of the RTE law has not been understood by many parents and teachers. They are resentful of this policy without appreciating the principles behind it. And they are unhappy about it for different reasons.

Similar to the cases of Akshay and Anurag, teachers and parents continue to expect children to excel in everything that is part of the standard syllabus.

EIA needed for all big construction



KANCHI KOHLI

MANY of us travel by road and over the years we have seen landscapes change. This hasn't happened just in our cities where shopping malls, office spaces and gated communities are on the rise. Drive a few km outside city limits and you will see the transformation that has taken place in rural areas.

Spaces which we once knew as wetlands, agricultural land, forestland, grazing land and even riverbeds are being consistently converted into housing complexes, highway resorts and educational institutions. State governments have also allotted subsidised land as institutional areas where private and public sector colleges and universities have been set up.

It is argued that such construction, especially housing and education, are important to fulfill the aspirations and demands of the people. There are many social, economic and policy critiques of this argument, including strengthening rural economies.

But I focus on a simple regulatory question. Should these constructions go through the environment impact assessment process and public consultation to ascertain whether they are socially and ecologically viable? If yes, then I hope you add strength to what I say below and if no, you are standing in unison with the decisions of the Ministry of Environment Forests and Climate Change (MoEFCC).

Section 8 of India's Environment Impact Assessment (EIA) notification 2006, clearly states that all buildings and construction projects larger than 20,000 square metres and less than 150,000 square metres of built-up area have to go through a special appraisal process. Similarly, townships and area development projects greater than 50 hectares (ha) and lesser than 1,50,000 square metres of built-up area also need to go through the same process.

These projects are considered to be Category B projects and need to be approved by the State Environment Impact Assessment Authority (SEIAA). They don't have to go through the rigour of commissioning a full EIA and public consultation, as is the case with other industrial and infrastructure

projects. The project proponents need to submit a detailed Form 1A to initiate their environmental appraisal.

There is a reason for this. Back in 2005-2006 when re-engineering of the EIA notification was under intense debate, the representatives of several private builders and associations like CREDAI had made submissions to the ministry of environment demanding that they be kept out of the purview of the EIA notification.

Their submissions argued that the EIA notification would cause delays and discourage investors in the real estate and construction sector. They also argued that this sector is not as environmentally damaging as industry. This is why the construction sector has a negotiated privilege under the EIA notification 2006.



No EIA is carried out for the huge number of private colleges and universities that have come up

Logically, would a huge law college on the outskirts of a city or town have environmental consequences? Would we not have wanted to know beforehand what was being constructed and accordingly have the right to take a decision? Where ecological damages are irreconcilable, the site should be shifted. If the impact of the construction is detrimental, then mitigation measures would be needed. Is not going ahead with even the existing processes as required by law a justified decision?

On December 22, 2014, the MoEFCC issued another amendment to the EIA notification in its gazette, exempting industrial sheds, schools, colleges and hostels for educational institutions from the purview of the EIA notification, provided they follow sustainable waste and water management practices, use fly ash bricks etc.

On June 9 this year, the MoEFCC issued "Sustainable Environmental Management" guidelines to be followed by industrial sheds and educational institutions. The guidelines say that the main environment facets to be considered are in relation

to land, air, noise, energy, water and waste.

The guidelines now require a project proponent to provide information related to the project. This includes the design of the construction and whether the project authorities have sought permission for a building plan, groundwater withdrawal, forest diversion and pollution control consents from different authorities concerned with these sectors. Some general conditions are also listed. For instance, the muck generated during construction should not be disposed off in a way that it has an impact on the health and safety of people living in the neighbourhood.

There are also specific guidelines on reducing the use of glass by 20 per cent in buildings, no burning of waste to control air pollution and keeping noise levels of diesel generators under control. The compliance of these guidelines is to be monitored by State Pollution Control Boards and the nine regional offices of the MoEFCC on a six-month basis similar to environmental conditions for projects granted "environment clearance."

Two questions arise. Should educational institutions be exempt from EIA requirements? Secondly, will these guidelines make any substantial difference to managing environmental impacts?

Statistics reveal that in the academic year 2011-2012, the number of universities and colleges in India increased to 659 universities and 33,023 colleges. In 1947, we had just 20 universities and 500 colleges. The same study points out that this has been possible mainly due to the increase in private institutions for higher education which make up 60 per cent of the total of these institutions. The buildings would have been constructed only after changing the existing land use without any understanding of the environmental consequences it would have caused. An assessment of the environmental damage done due to change in land use has never been carried out.

Is it appropriate to assume that construction of educational institutions don't have severe environmental consequences and can therefore be exempt from EIA processes altogether? Is merely determining aquifer capacity and yield of groundwater enough to ensure that they are not damaged or depleted?

These scattered questions only attempt to raise genuine concerns that a blanket exemption to an entire sector from impact assessments is far from justified. Town planning norms, which are being referred to, don't necessarily take into account the ecological damage construction can have.

Perhaps next time we are on a road trip, we should stop at a private college on the highway and ask them: what was this land before your college was built? Maybe they will reply that there used to be an old village pond or tank here, maybe it was a resting place for pastoralists and their livestock herd, maybe it was a small forest, the route of migratory birds, perhaps an orchard from where you bought fresh fruit. The construction of the educational institution might not seem so environmentally benign then. ■

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Lajwanti – The Honour Keeper is based on a fable by celebrated writer Vijaydan Detha

When Lajwanti strayed

A delicate film on a timeless tale

Saibal Chatterjee
New Delhi

RAJASTHAN has always held a prominent place on the map of Hindi cinema. But rarely has the region's cultural ethos imbued a film quite as profoundly as it does in first-time director Pushpendra Singh's *Lajwanti – The Honour Keeper*.

But then, this independent film is far removed from the heart of the manic Mumbai movie industry. It defies the rules of the latter with unwavering determination.

Its texture is defined so comprehensively by the Thar Desert landscape and the values that it cradles that they become inalienable components of the uniquely inflected love story.

Lajwanti – The Honour Keeper, which has been written, directed, produced and designed by Singh, had its world premiere last year at the Berlin Film Festival.

Screened in early July in Delhi at the 6th Jagran

Film Festival, it is now scheduled to travel across the country until the first week of October, when the travelling festival winds down in Mumbai.

Adapted from a Vijaydan Detha-authored fable, the exquisitely well-crafted *Lajwanti* does a fine job of capturing the poetic quality of the celebrated Rajasthani litterateur's writing.

The film's languid tempo, visual aesthetic and carefully calibrated sound design coalesce to evoke the sense of a timeless parable that showcases life's rhythm in its purest form.

"Bringing alive the enduring reality of the place and its people was the biggest challenge," says 36-year-old Singh, an alumnus of the Film and Television Institute of India (FTII), Pune, where he now teaches acting.

This isn't the first time that Detha has been brought to the big screen. Mani Kaul based his critically acclaimed 1973 film, *Duvidha*, on a work by



Pushpendra Singh

the prolific Sahitya Akademi Award-winning writer who penned over 800 stories until he passed away a couple of years ago at the age of 87.

In 1989, Prakash Jha adapted another story by Detha for *Parinati*. In 2005, the folk tale that yielded *Duvidha* enthused Amol Palekar to direct a star-studded version, *Paheli*, with Shahrukh Khan, Rani Mukerji and Juhi Chawla in the lead roles.

Singh, of course, has spun his own unique yarn from the raw material provided by Detha.

The air of authenticity in *Lajwanti* is enhanced by the participation of an array of talent drawn from local performing communities: the Manganiyar, Jogi and Tera-taali singers and the Kalbeliya folk dancers. "The idea," says Singh, "was to not only make a film about the people of the area, but also to engage them in the process of the making of the story."

Continued on page 30



Lajwanti's refusal to reveal her face is a talking point for the women

Continued from page 29

He adds: "These local artistes and performers brought their natural talent to the film. They adapted quickly to the rhythms of the shoot and also understood the constraints faced by an independent filmmaker like me."

Singh, who also plays a pivotal on-screen role in the film, was born and raised in Rajasthan and understands the milieu like the back of his hand, a fact reflected in every frame of *Lajwanti*.

But wasn't directing himself as an actor while handling numerous other artistic chores an onerous proposition? "No," he says. "I always knew I would play the male lead because the character is, in many respects, like me — a dreamer who will go to any length to get his way."

The character that Singh fleshes out on screen is a nameless and mysterious nomad who collects white doves and crisscrosses the desert in his odd, single-minded pursuit.

This 'outsider' catches the fancy of a married woman, Lajwanti (Sanghmitra Hitaishi), whose visage is always hidden behind her veil. Her refusal to reveal her face to the world is the talking point among the women that she accompanies on the daily long trek to the well to fetch water.

On the way to the well, Lajwanti's companions shed their inhibitions once they are at a safe distance from the village and the songs that they croon and the banter that they indulge in reveal their hidden desires. But Lajwanti stays within her veil.

When the bearded male stranger, attired in white, crosses their path, the reticent Lajwanti is immediately struck by his stoic demeanour. The man is focused on nothing except the doves that he seeks in the wilderness.

Unable to reconcile herself with the women's friendly digs at her, Lajwanti opts to break away from the group and begins to walk to the well all by herself. And as she is drawn towards the dove collector, she embarks on her own journey of self-discovery — an act of immense daring given the tradition-bound society that she is a part of.

"In Vijaydan Detha's story, the focus is wholly on the man's dream. In the film, I have opted to explore Lajwanti's dream, too," says Singh. "Cinema is markedly different from literature. It gives you the freedom to reinterpret the written text. Cinema as a

medium has the power to conduct a dialogue with other art forms."

Singh attributes the contemplative tone of *Lajwanti* to the lyricism inherent in Detha's writing. "On the very first reading of the story, I could see that it had an intrinsic cinematic quality. I merely added my own storytelling style to it," the actor-writer-director explains.

Singh's filmmaking style, of course, is rooted in the folk traditions of Rajasthan and the rules of Indian classical music. He says: "In a classical bandish, there is room for elaboration, improvisation and interpretation... Indian music follows the principle of repetition, a motion in time of an essentially circular nature. The film has been structured on the same lines."

Of course, the cyclical structure might put *Lajwanti* — *The Honour Keeper* beyond the instant grasp of the film-going masses of this country. This, after all, is an uncompromising view of "the other India" that respects the norms of the society that it is about and makes no concessions to popular predilections.

"*Lajwanti*, both as a film and as a character, comes from the very background that I grew up in," says Singh. "Women in my own family and those in many villages of Rajasthan still live exactly the way that she does."

"I broke away from that part of the world to explore a wider universe. The veiled woman in my film seeks to do pretty much the same in the context of her situation," Singh says, when asked why he opted for this particular Detha story for his directorial debut.

Singh went to boarding school in Mount Abu and the Birla School in Pilani, where his romance with cinema first began. "They had a lively extracurricular activity system, which included a film show every Saturday," he says.

It was during one of his winter vacations that he saw *Pathar Panchali* on Doordarshan. "I obviously did not understand the language, but the images left a deep impression on my mind. They have stayed with me," says Singh. "In my next film, I will pay a tribute to some of those *Pathar Panchali* images."

If *Lajwanti* — *The Honour Keeper* is anything to go by, it would be well worth our while to keep an eye out for Pushpendra Singh's next directorial outing. ■

Take a break in a hill village

Rakesh Agrawal
Munsiyari

THE view from our room was spectacular. Straight ahead were the snowcapped peaks of Panchachuli, a range of five mountains where it is said the Pandavas attained *moksha*. We too experienced a fleeting moment of *moksha* as we gazed at the mountains and the verdant forest while a blue magpie flew across the azure sky.

We were at Sarmoli village, two km from Munsiyari, in Pithoragarh district of Uttarakhand. Munsiyari means 'a place with snow' and it is truly heavenly.

Our host Kamala Pande, 52, cheerfully picked us up from the *kutch* road where the taxi dropped us off. From there we walked up 100 metres to her homestay. Our room had French windows, an inviting bed, bamboo chairs, a table with books, a teapot and solar lanterns in case the lights went on the blink. We had planned to stay for a few days. Many tourists stay for weeks to explore local culture, savour Kumaoni cuisine and experience a slice of village life.

Sarmoli's rural tourism initiative was started by Malika Viridi, 52, a former mountaineer with a masters in social work. Originally from Punjab, Malika was born and brought up in Delhi. Keen on action rather than research, she settled in Munsiyari in 1992 with her husband E. Theophilus, "to be a farmer and a mother."

"I was really awestruck by the beauty of Munsiyari and the simplicity of its people," she said. But acceptance by the villagers as one of their own was tough. For years, Malika toiled like a hill woman, slogging as a farmer in fields and forests, cutting grass and fetching wood. She was finally accepted by the villagers and in 2003 they elected her as sarpanch of the Sarmoli Van Panchayat.

During her tenure as sarpanch, Malika ensured that the community's forest bloomed. Today it is dense and lush with indigenous trees and rhododendrons standing on a thick carpet of grass. She then linked forest conservation to tourism so that people could earn more. Subsistence farming wasn't paying and most men were migrating to the cities for work.

"In 2004, we started the Maati Sangathan and decided to turn our homes into homestays," explained Kamala.

Since the women did not have money to renovate their homes, they got every member to contribute a little and these contributions work as a revolving



A traditional home in Sarmoli village



One of the rooms offered to tourists



Basanti Rawat, member of the Maati Sangathan, with Malika Virdi

Guests can try their hand at planting potatoes, digging a pond, fixing solar lanterns, clearing cowdung, taking care of goats, learn knitting or go bird watching.

fund. Loans are given at nominal interest to members for converting their homes. Around one per cent of what their homestays earn is given back to the Sangathan for forest conservation.

The forest department has also helped out. In 2007, it gave the Sangathan around ₹14 lakhs to construct toilets in the homestays.

“We take an oath when we join the Sangathan that we won’t ruin our forest and we will not sell or serve liquor,” says Basanti Rawat who runs a homestay in Shekhdhura village.

Today 25 households offer 15 homestays in the three villages of Sarmoli, Shekhdhura and Nanasem. Malika’s idea has taken firm root and is yielding impressive results.

Rekha Rautela, who has a homestay in the upper reaches of Sarmoli, earned ₹160,000 last year. Our host, Kamala Pande, earned ₹120,000 and Beena Nitwal, another homestay owner, earned ₹115,000.

Many Maati Sangathan members also double up as nature, wildlife, trekking and birding guides.

Pushpa Sumtayal is a trekking guide while Rekha Rautela is a nature guide.

“We have 326 bird species or one-fourth of the total bird species found in the country in this valley,” said K. Ramnarayan or Ram, 32, a member of the Maati Sangathan. He also runs Himal Prakriti, a nature club, to conserve the region’s wildlife. A bird-

ing expert, he takes visitors on bird watching trips.

On offer are two treks to a hilltop at 3,474 meters called Khalia Danda and Chhipa Kedar or two longer treks to the Milam Glacier and the Nanda Devi Base Camp.

“The homestay programme is not just about visitors getting a taste of village life. It also transforms the lives of women here. It leads to cultural exchange and is connected to conservation,” said Malika.

Guests can try their hand at planting potatoes, digging a pond, fixing solar lanterns, clearing cowdung, taking care of goats, or learn knitting. But no special cultural programme is staged.

“We don’t sell our culture,” she said. “Visitors are most welcome to take part in any cultural and religious function if it is being held in the village.”

Travelers come from all over the world. So do groups like Engineers without Borders. A Polish woman engineer stayed here for four months and, along with the villagers, mapped all the water sources in the village. This helped the gram sabha plan its water supply efficiently and initiate water conservation steps.

A project to understand the habitat of wild pheasants by a guest provided visitors with the opportunity to participate in biology conservation. The pheasant project collected baseline data that led to a plan for protection of the pheasant’s habitat.

Word has been spreading about Sarmoli’s unique tourism. Guests tell others once they go home, or write blogs about their experience. “That’s how we get publicity. We never advertise,” claimed Ram.

Since 2014 around 262 tourists have stayed in these homestays bringing in a revenue of ₹12-15 lakhs for the 25 households in three villages.

Sarmoli also has an unusual school without buildings, classrooms or a syllabus. It’s called Jangle School and has 27 children who choose their own principal and teacher.

“We meet before or after our formal school. Anyone can join if he or she agrees to three conditions: we’ll clean our villages, if we leave our villages for jobs, we’ll come back and if we travel, we’ll tell stories about our experiences,” said 14-year-old Priya Rautela, the principal of the school.

Malika Virdi told us that this informal school not only helps children learn from other children, it also teaches adults a few things. “Last week, Champa Tolia, a student of Class 5, told us about a different kind of mushroom that is very tasty and nutritious.”

Night fell and the stars lit the sky. We enjoyed our dinner of brown *manduva chapatti*, *gahat daal*, *lingoda saag* and *jhingora kheer* — authentic Kumaoni food.

Until a few years ago, Munsiyari was an obscure town with one *dhaba* and a derelict hotel. It used to attract a few ardent trekkers and nature lovers. Now it is a tourist hotspot with hotels, resorts and restaurants. To stem the tide, Malika has joined hands with five hotels to form the Munsiyari Union of Sustainable Tourism.

“Tourists should leave behind their footprints and take just their memories with them. That’s the kind of tourism we would like to promote,” said Malika Virdi. ■

FACT FILE

How to reach Munsiyari: From Delhi, take an overnight train to Haldwani, then a taxi to Munsiyari which is at a distance of 300 km and takes 10 to 12 hours.

Nearest railway station: Kathgodam (about 300 km).

Nearest airport: Pantnagar (about 350 km).

Rates: From ₹800 to ₹1,500 per person, per day (including meals).

Contact: Malika Virdi: 9411194041
K. Ramnarayan (Ram): 9411194042.

Kerala's annual boat frenzy

Susheela Nair
Bengaluru

FROM July to September, the tranquil backwaters of Kerala resound with the chants of 'thai thai thaka thaka thai thom' as oarsmen splash to the fast paced rhythm of the *vanchipaattu* (boat song). This is the season for boat racing in Kerala, a sport that attracts tourists from around the world.

The famed snake boat (*chundan vallam*) that takes pride of place in the race, traces its history to Alleppey. Around 400 years ago, the kings of Alleppey used to fight each other in boats along the canal. One dispirited king, who kept losing his battles, ordered a boat builder to make him a bigger better boat so that he could beat his rivals. Thus was born the famous snake boat. The king began to win but his victories didn't last long. His enemies quickly copied his boat design.

Over time, the boats began to be used for religious rituals and then for sport. At first these water regattas were mild, friendly events but now participants compete fiercely to lift the coveted trophy.

The annual boat racing season kicks off with the Champakkulam Moolam Boat Race, the oldest one in Kerala. Its genesis is closely connected to the Sree Krishna Temple at Ambalappuzha. The deity used to be transported in a snake boat from Kurichi in Kottayam district to Ambalappuzha. One night the oarsmen, weary with fatigue, rested in a Christian household in Champakulam, around 25 km from Alleppey. Since then, every year Champakulam becomes the venue for a commemorative boat race. The race is held on the day the deity was installed at the temple. This year, the event was held on July 1.

The Champakkulam Moolam Boat Race is followed by the Nehru Trophy Race and then by the Mannar, Kandassankadavu and Payippad Jalotsavam.

Aranmula, a tranquil village in Pathanamthitta district, holds a post-harvest boat pageant and race. The two-day Aranmula boat race, which takes place on the fourth day after Onam, is a traditional and solemn religious affair. Although in precision and speed, the Aranmula race does not match the Nehru Trophy Race, it is a colourful water carnival with caparisoned and parasol-decked elephants, gaily decorated floats and temple-related ritual activities.

This race recreates a legend about a devout



Snake boats fly out over the water sending showers of silver spray into the air

Brahmin, an ardent devotee of Krishna, who used to go to Aranmula in a boat with all provisions for the sumptuous Onam feast every year. One day, rivals from another village intercepted his boat. But villagers from the Brahmin's village arrived in snake boats and rescued him. Since then, snake boats accompany the sacred boat to Aranmula every year.

The most awaited event is the Nehru Trophy Boat Race held in the Punnamada Lake near Alleppey town on the second Saturday of August when the monsoon rains have just retreated and the lake is brimming with water. The competitive fever started in 1952, when a race was organised for the visit of India's first Prime Minister, Jawaharlal Nehru. He was so enthralled by the race that he broke the security cordon and jumped into the winning boat. On his return to Delhi, he sent a silver trophy, a replica of a snake boat inscribed with the words: 'To the winners of the boat race which is a unique feature of community life in Travancore-Cochin'. This trophy is presented to the champion snake boat every year.

Over the years, the Nehru Trophy Race has become the biggest water regatta in India with the highest number of participants. Villagers throughout Kerala's backwaters devote all their attention to preparing for this race.

Although this is also an Olympics of a special kind, sadly, the Government of India has yet to recognise it as a sporting event. The boat race here signifies the excellent team spirit, integration and amity of the people of this backwater country. Thousands of aspirants undergo vigorous training and practice, hoping to qualify for their village team. The life of the entire village revolves around feeding, coaching and preparing their water-warriors. They are fed a special diet of roasted beef, onion salad, groundnuts and black tea.

Hectic preparations start much in advance. Ritual prayers are conducted and the boats are smeared with oil for lightning speed. Turmeric, coconut shell and carbon mixed with eggs are also applied to the boat. Villagers and big business houses contribute enormous sums of money for the upkeep of the boats and participation in the boat race. The entire region is gripped by fierce competitiveness. The boats are zealously guarded to prevent any attempt at sabotage by rivals, which is common.

The race begins with a colourful pageant of floats and a mass drill. It is delightful to watch lady participants with their saris tucked at the waist, whizzing past, maneuvering the elegant swan boats. The Punnamada Lake comes alive with frenzied cheering when the long and graceful snake boats are launched into the river amidst the lilting refrain of the classic boat-warriors' ballad to the accompaniment of drumbeats and pipes.

It is fascinating to watch the helmsmen perch on the high sterns, designed to resemble the hood of a cobra, with paddles in their hands, when the awesome snake boats fly over the water sending a shower of water into the air. Equally exciting is the thumping and whistling of the cheerleaders who pace the precision rowing. Powered by 100 perfectly coordinated oars, they slice through the water at great speed. Each boat is manned by four helmsmen, 25 singers and 100-125 oarsmen who row in rhythm to the boat song.

As soon as the trophy is handed over to the winning team, they return to their village for a bout of wild celebration. There is lavish feasting and toddy drinking. The trophy is proudly displayed. For a year the villagers will bask in the glory of its *chundan* warriors. The defeated teams will strategise for the next boat race. ■

BOAT RACE CALENDAR 2015

August 8 -Nehru Trophy

August 30- Payippad

August 30- Kumarakam

August 31- Aranmula

For details:
www.keralatourism.org

Why India's south is ahead of the north

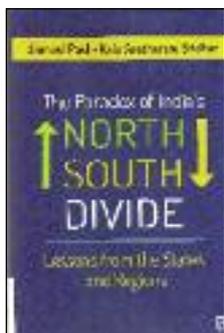
IN Delhi, talk about the civilised south being so much better than the boorish north finds general endorsement. It is not just public behaviour. The quality of life is better there, it is said, so is the infrastructure, the job opportunities and schooling. Some of this chatter has been backed by reports showing that southern states have better human development indicators. The south's progress, in this respect, has been likened to Sri Lanka's and Thailand since the 1990s.

Samuel Paul and Kala Seetharam Sridhar in their book, *The Paradox of India's North South Divide*, set out to find out if all this is really true. To cut a long story short, it is.

Samuel Paul is former director of the Indian Institute of Management in Ahmedabad and founder of the Public Affairs Centre in Bengaluru. Kala Seetharam Sridhar is professor at the Centre for Research in Urban Affairs, Institute of Social and Economic Change, in Bengaluru. The authors have worked with extensive data and the book is replete with charts, graphs and appendices. But it is an easy read and an eyeopener.

The authors compare the BIMARU states — Bihar, Madhya Pradesh, Rajasthan and Uttar Pradesh — with the more developed southern states of Tamil Nadu, Karnataka, Andhra Pradesh and Kerala.

That comparison today looks sort of unfair. Yet in 1957, the south didn't fare too well. At that time Paul Appleby, an American expert on public



Samuel Paul & Kala Seetharam Sridhar. Sage ₹ 850

administration, identified UP and Bihar as India's best-governed states.

So why, when and how did the southern states overtake the north? The research here overlaps economics, sociology, political science and management to find answers. The yardsticks the authors use to measure divergence are human resource capabilities, urbanisation, infrastructure, efficiency in using resources, governance— including political stability and law and order — and social mobilisation which creates demand for all of the above.

The first comparison is between UP and Tamil Nadu. No surprises here. From the data gleaned, Tamil Nadu scores higher than UP in all parameters — health, education, infrastructure, governance and so on. Its public distribution system is seen as a model among activists and it started India's first successful midday meal programme for schools. What's more, Tamil Nadu, a rain-fed state, has done well in agriculture too. It has used its resources efficiently.

Similarly Kerala, Andhra Pradesh and Karnataka score higher than their BIMARU counterparts. The authors also study if such development has percolated to the poor by comparing data on slums in the north and south. Slums in the south have more access to water, sanitation and electricity. In the north, slums still rely on kerosene for lighting and don't have sanitation or dedicated drinking water.

The take-off period for Tamil Nadu was the era

of liberalisation set in motion by the Union government in the 1990s. The southern states, especially Tamil Nadu, were on the whole well prepared to take advantage of the opportunities offered. They had the infrastructure, a considerable pool of technical manpower and better governance.

Perhaps one big reason the south did better than the north is because of social mobilisation, a point made by economist Santosh Mehrotra in an earlier study of UP and Tamil Nadu and quoted by the authors. He describes the Dravidian movement as one of the biggest achievements of the Tamil Nadu government.

Social movements got political support. There was reservation and an expansion of school education. Caste networks in Tamil Nadu mobilised and invested in engineering and technical colleges. So although Tamil Nadu has fewer general graduates than UP, it has many more techies and engineers.

Kerala too witnessed strong social movements and awareness of the benefits of education among the historically deprived. So did Andhra Pradesh. Karnataka had a historic advantage. The Wadiyar kings invested in education, founding the venerable Indian Institute of Science in Bengaluru.

In the 1960s and 1970s people from the south routinely migrated to the north for jobs. Today, Bengaluru, Chennai and Hyderabad have emerged as hotpots for young entrepreneurs.

But there is hope for the north. Rajasthan now fares better in governance and UP is trying to bridge the gap in its human development indicators. They should have started on this journey a long time ago. ■

Time to liberalise legal services?

INDIA's legal services sector looks as confusing as its legal system. There are a whole lot of small proprietary firms, some large legal firms and many standalone lawyers. There is also the guy under a tree outside the courts willing to do your affidavit for a few rupees. On the whole, the cost of legal services has zoomed in India in the past decade but services provided are not that efficient. The legal system itself is partly to blame. It is inefficient, overloaded and delays are inevitable.

Foreign legal firms are likely to enter India's legal world sooner or later. Already, there are quiet tie-ups between local legal firms and foreign firms. Indian companies, keen to go global, also approach foreign legal firms for advice. With the entry of more multinational companies into the Indian market, foreign legal firms, who are mostly interested in providing corporate advisory services, will step into India's legal services sector in the near future.

Rupa Chanda and Pralok Gupta in their book, *Globalization of Legal Services and Regulatory Reforms*, examine the issues that India's legal services sector faces and the regulatory environment

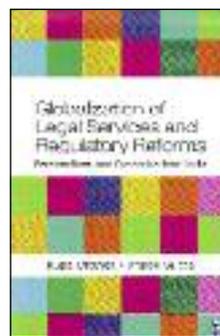
needed to help them achieve global standards.

Rupa Chanda is a Professor of Economics and Social Sciences at the Indian Institute of Management in Bengaluru. Pralok Gupta is Assistant Professor at the Indian Institute of Foreign Trade in New Delhi.

This is an excellent book, simply written and of great use to those keen to understand the legal services sector in India and how it could change.

The authors explain international negotiations and how globalisation of legal services has come about. There are details about the regulatory environment in the US and UK and how regulation of legal services differ from country to country.

The authors analyse legal services and regulation in India, including India's FDI policy in legal services and the domestic regulations it faces. Chapter 5 has an interesting survey which gauges how legal firms in India feel about the entry of



Rupa Chanda, Pralok Gupta. Sage ₹ 850

foreign firms, their likely impact and the kind of regulation they think is required.

Indian legal firms face restrictions on size, they cannot access capital and they aren't allowed to advertise. Legal services do not have industry status. The quality of legal education provided is largely poor and better law graduates are being mopped up by foreign firms.

Opinion on the entry of foreign firms is divided. On the issue of reciprocity too there isn't any consensus. Some felt the domestic market

offered enough scope and most Indian firms were not that keen to practice abroad, anyway.

What seems clear is that liberalisation of legal services needs to be done step by step. Hurdles that stand in the way of small legal firms should be removed. A better regulatory environment is needed. The authors make some pertinent recommendations. But, alongside, the legal system needs to improve. ■

Ringal baskets

WOMEN from Maati Sangathan weave baskets in all shapes and sizes in shades of gentle brown. There are tokris that measure grain, dokas (large baskets), dalias (shallow baskets), puthukas (grain baskets) and dvaks or baskets that are tougher and can handle heavier loads.

Maati Sangathan is a cooperative of women from three villages near Munsiyari in Pithoragarh district of Uttarakhand. The baskets they weave are made of ringal or dwarf bamboo which grows abundantly in the state. Farmers fetch the ringal from forests in October and November. The bamboo is split into small strips in different widths for warp and weft and the excess fibre is removed.

During Uttarakhand's chilly winters, the women weave baskets. In summer, guests arrive at their homestays. Many of them buy baskets and other products made by the women. The women also make fruit and vegetable baskets, pen stands, flower vases and tea trays. All are eco-friendly and beautifully woven in attractive design patterns like plain weave, basket weave and twill weave. ■

For enquiries contact: Malika Viridi: 09411194041, Email: malika.virdi@gmail.com.
K. Ramnarayan (Ram): 09411194042, Email: ramnarayan.k@gmail.com Address: Maati Sangathan, Village Sarmoli, P.O. Munsiyari, District Pithoragarh-262553, Uttarakhand.



Bija for diabetics

THE Bija Diabacheck Tumbler is made from the bark of the wondrous Bija tree (*Pterocarpus marsupium*) that grows in the deciduous forests of the Northern Western Ghats.

The Bija is known to have many medicinal properties, but it is a vanishing tree because of indiscriminate felling. To do your health a good turn, store water in the wooden tumbler overnight and drink it in the morning.

In Ayurveda, the Bija's bark is used to treat diabetes and inflammation. It works on the pancreas and results in boosting insulin production. The Bija is also known to reduce cholesterol levels.

The Bija's benefits have been detailed in a study conducted by the Indian Council of Medical Research (ICMR).

The Bija Diabacheck Tumbler is being manufactured by Nature Connect India, which collaborates with the Applied Environmental Research Foundation (AERF), an NGO based in Pune which revives and conserves forests in the Northern Western Ghats.

AERF has a My Forest initiative that allows you to adopt trees in the Western Ghats. Forest dwellers are financially compensated for giving up felling. So it was that AERF came across a cluster of Bija trees about to be felled. It persuaded the landowner not to cut them. Instead from a single tree tumblers like this one were made and sold and the money put back into nurturing the other Bija trees. ■

Contact: Nature Connect India Pvt. Ltd. 22, Siddhi Apartments, Bhaktiyog Co-op Housing Society, Kothrud, Pune-411038
Website: www.aerfindia.org

Mushrooms, nuts, honey

THE black morel is a wild earthy mushroom. It is regarded as a delicacy and savoured across the world. In India, you can buy black morels, locally called guchi, in Kashmir. The famed mushroom grows wild in high mountains near the roots of trees.

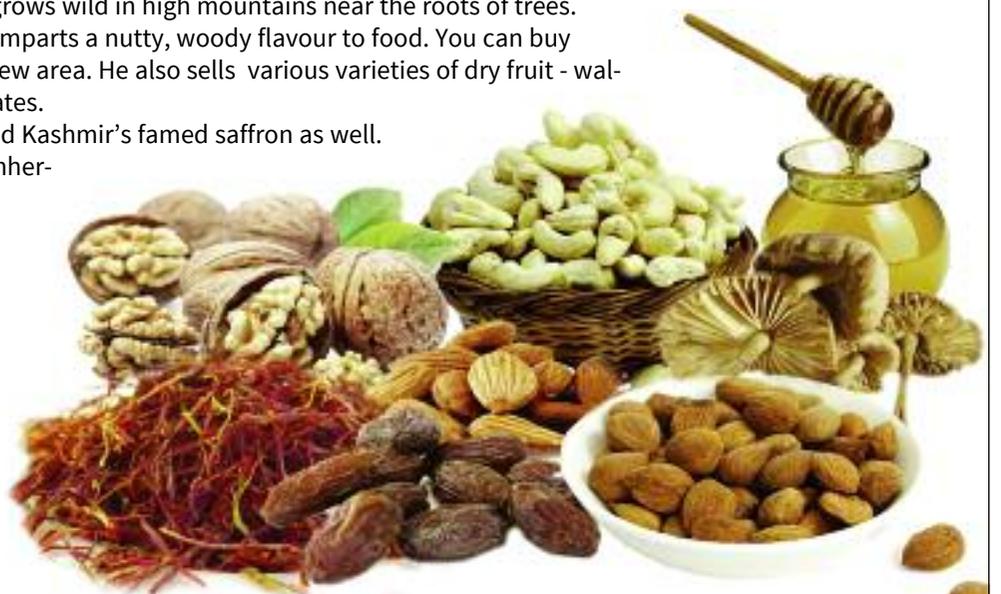
Mostly used in rice dishes in Kashmir, the mushroom imparts a nutty, woody flavour to food. You can buy guchis from Amin Bin Khalik's shop in Srinagar's Polo View area. He also sells various varieties of dry fruit - walnut kernels, almond kernels, apricot, cashew nut and dates.

Khalik is well-known for selling good quality honey and Kashmir's famed saffron as well.

He is an old hand at the dry fruits business which he inherited from his father, Abdul Khalik. This is his traditional profession.

"Our business mostly depends on the inflow of tourists to Srinagar. We also pack and send dry fruits to different markets in India. This year, fewer tourists have visited Kashmir so naturally our business has suffered," said Khalik. ■

You can visit him at:
Shop number 1- A Polo View, Srinagar.
Mobile: 09906598692





Skill training provides employment for rural youth.

After I graduated from college, I wanted to work and support my parents who get a meagre income as daily wage agriculture labourers. The only opportunity for employment in my village was working as a farm hand that was poorly paid seasonal work. Without any job prospects and income, I was depressed to be financially burden on my family.

SST team help me in finding a suitable job for my qualifications. They enrolled me in a 10 days youth development training program in soft skills. Once I completed the training, I got a job in a KFC restaurant in Mysore. Now I have a regular income of ₹ 7000 per month. This helps me to meet my need and also contribute to family income.

Mr. Chaluva Nayaka
Kembal village, Mysore district, Karnataka.

SRINIVASAN SERVICES TRUST
(CSR Arm of TVS Motor Company)

TVS MOTOR COMPANY

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TATA STEEL



SHAPING THE FUTURE

Healthcare - the key to a sustainable future

Tata Steel Rural Development Society (TSRDS), Tata Steel Family Initiatives Foundation (TSFIF) and Urban Services have been building capacity through training programmes to create community based healthcare partners as well as grassroot volunteers. Tata Steel also partners with local

government agencies to implement healthcare programmes of Central and State Governments, including the National Rural Health Mission (NRHM). In 2014, nearly 3.50 lakh people benefited from primary healthcare services in areas of operation.



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Sahiyas' - Mansi Project Jharkhand
TSRDS supports Sahiyas' to take care of pregnant women and their newborns