

Civil Society



DELHI'S ORANGE BOOST

The story of a friendly bus service



‘MY BOOK DOES NOT HAVE ANY LIES IN IT’

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DELHI'S ORANGE BOOST

Corporatisation of bus services has worked wonders for Delhi's transport. There are 1,100 orange-coloured buses plying every day, transporting perhaps 500,000 people safely and cheaply.

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Civil Society

READ US. WE READ YOU.

Orange blessing

PUBLIC transport defines life in a city. It helps people get around cheaply and safely. It also signals inclusion and equality, which are hallmarks of evolved urban living. When people irrespective of income, education, gender and age travel together daily, many divides begin to be bridged. Cities are meant to be such melting pots. It is from the mingling that they find the energy to be engines of opportunity and growth.

An efficient public transportation system promotes better public health by reducing pollution caused by the use of personal vehicles. It has the potential to make roads safer for pedestrians and cyclists. It has an influence on choices made in housing.

In this magazine we watched with dismay as the Bus Rapid Transit(BRT) initiative descended into chaos in Delhi. Dismay because Delhi desperately needs to allocate road space more efficiently. Dismay also because we have seen success with buses in other cities – both in India and elsewhere in the world. Ours was perhaps the only publication in those days to speak up for the BRT and ask for efforts to solve its problems and make it work better.

We are therefore very happy to report in this month's cover story that 1,100 orange-coloured buses running on Delhi's roads are serving the city well and have raised the bar for public transportation. The buses have been bunched together in clusters and are under corporatised ownership. Supervising the system and ensuring compliance is another company, the Delhi Integrated Multi-Modal Transit System Ltd or DIMTS, which is a joint venture between the Delhi government and the IDFC Foundation.

Innovations abound in the running of the orange buses and you will find most of them mentioned in our story. But the single big achievement has been in the business model for the service. By transparently arriving at the cost of running a bus efficiently and safely, DIMTS has made it possible for bus operators to earn money the honest way. Earlier Redline and Blueline private buses would compete crazily with each other to make profits. The orange bus operators, on the other hand, are assured a certain profit, with the government providing a subsidy, and the city of Delhi gets a service it can depend on.

Sanjiv Sahai, the CEO and MD of DIMTS, who is an IAS officer, has shown that results depend on the design of a system. Some of the Blueline bus operators who had such a bad name for causing accidents and harassing commuters, now own orange buses and take pride in going by the rules.

Also in this issue is an interview with Sanjaya Baru, now in the eye of a storm over his book on the Prime Minister and the UPA. We also have Trilochan Sastry of the ADR on the challenges in cleaning up elections. And there is Bandhan, the MFI that proved itself deserving of a bank licence.

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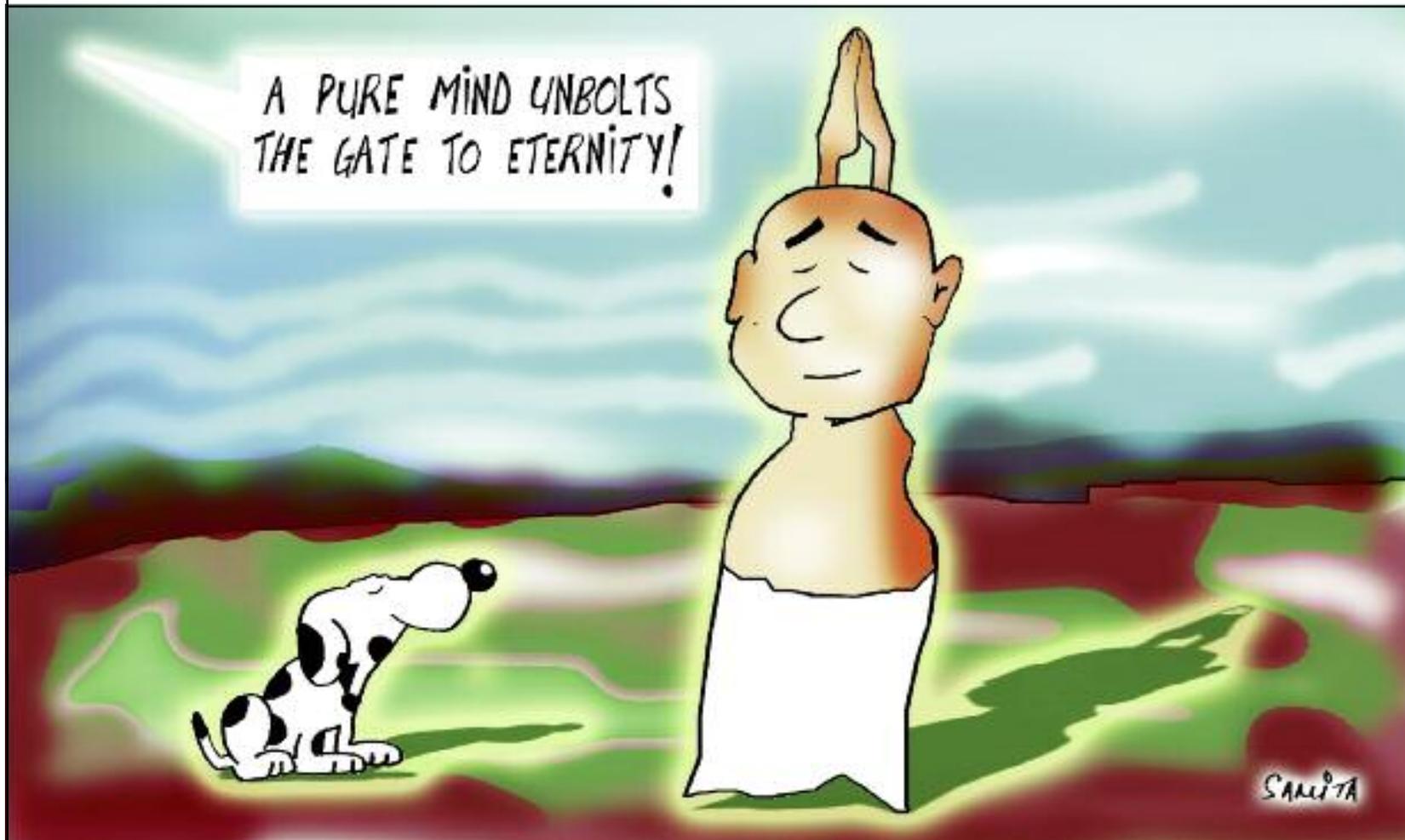
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IN THE LIGHT

by SAMITA RATHOR



LETTERS



PHCs can work

Your cover story, 'Making PHCs work,' highlighted an important initiative in building rural health facilities. Primary health centres should be equipped with diagnostic tools, paramedics and doctors so that villagers don't have to spend time and money on healthcare. A functioning PHC, as you mention, also brings down infant and maternal mortality. The best part of your story was the monitoring done by villagers. This is the key to

improving the PHCs. GRAAM's work is worthy of emulation.

Shakti Goswami

I think there needs to be a national mission to improve primary health centres across the country. A blueprint should be drawn up by each district and presented to the state government. But people must be involved. As your story states, it is people's participation that resulted in improving the PHCs. GRAAM understood this very well.

Mandira Baig

GudNeSs

At such a young age Rajvi Mehta has provided service to society. I really appreciate her effort to eradicate anaemia. This shows that today's generation does care about society. They want to do good. I also want to give this bar to my son. Please tell me where I can get it in Hyderabad.

N. Sessa Sai
(ns.sai1970@gmail.com)

Toybank

I read your story, 'Toybank at 10'. Congratulations to Toybank, especially to Chari and her wonderful

team. It's great to see young people help children find their feet. The importance of toys and games for children can't be overstated. In fact, toys and games are becoming more sophisticated and are catering to very specialised needs of children. But there's nothing like a good old-fashioned game to get children to bond and laugh.

Dr Ramesh Akash

Toybank is doing a great job. Keep it up, Chari and team. Every school should have a 'toy day' once a year when children just bring toys to school and play. Teachers can join them too. The whole day can be devoted to toys, games, good food and stories. What fun!

Shikha Garg

Srijan

I read your interview, 'Leadership, motivation are crucial for government schemes,' of Ved Arya, founder-director of Srijan. It is very relevant, given the funds allocated under different schemes. We also need to ensure this cadre of private individuals laterally placed in the government system are held accountable and ensure transparency over the

long run. Community-based monitoring, joint reviews and so on are some methods that need to be deployed along with these human capital changes. This should be a combination of social and financial sustainability. Also important is a continuous improvement cycle, even if it means capacity building for this cadre in a systematic manner. Over a course of time, they need to ensure villages are self-sustaining economies with vibrant social delivery systems, and there is an exit plan. Else, there is the risk of having two layers of potential bureaucracy, each comfortable in its own role.

Mahesh (veemahesh@gmail.com)

ERRATA

In the article, 'AAP big draw in hills,' published in the April issue, it was erroneously stated that Kanchan Chaudhary Bhattacharya would be contesting from Tehri constituency as an AAP candidate for the Lok Sabha. In fact, she is contesting from Haridwar constituency.

Editor

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'MANMOHAN WAS KEY TO THE

INTERVIEW

Sanjaya Baru

Umesh Anand
New Delhi

IN the short time that *The Accidental Prime Minister* has been on the stands, its author, Sanjaya Baru, has been called many names: backstabber, gold-digger, turncoat, disgruntled ex-employee....

So colourful are these epithets that they can make you laugh. Baru, of course, deserves better and should be judged on his entire book and not just the controversial extracts that have been driving up sales.

It is an important book because it tells the story of the enigmatic Dr Manmohan Singh – an honest man of great intellectual stature swimming in the swirling currents of politics during a decade when India as an emerging economy has been grappling with the problems of rapid economic growth and inclusion.

Baru was media adviser to Dr Singh and an important insider during the first five years of the United Progressive Alliance (UPA) government. He has laid himself open to the charge of using his access as media adviser and personal proximity to Dr Singh to tell a story as a journalist would. He is accused of betraying trust and there are valid arguments on both sides.

But did Baru meticulously time the book's release to make money? Did he do it to play politics and embarrass the UPA government and Dr Manmohan Singh? Is he a devious mischief monger?

I, for one, have reason to give him the benefit of the doubt.

Much before the book took shape, I had met Baru and asked him to do an independent biography of Dr Manmohan Singh for our fledgling book-publishing venture, Nimby Books.

Baru was reluctant, saying that he had been in the thick of things in the Prime Minister's Office and didn't want to go public with revelations that could embarrass Dr Singh in any way while he was still in government.

He also said that he had already turned down a request from Penguin and if he were to do the book it would have to be offered to Penguin first. The mention of Penguin whetted my entrepreneurial ambitions even more. T.S. Sudhir had recently moved from Penguin to us with a biography of Saina Nehwal, which we published with much success and in record time before the Olympics. Baru on Manmohan Singh would have been a much, much bigger catch!

But clearly, over time, Penguin prevailed on Baru and he began writing the book for them. The next I heard of the book was when I visited him at the Centre for Policy Research in connection with a completely different matter.

As we were talking, a call came on Baru's mobile from Chikki Sarkar of Penguin. She wanted him to have the manuscript ready so that the release of the



Sanjaya Baru: 'This book does not have any lies in it'

'I think he maintained silences on many issues, but he did go along with a lot of what Sonia Gandhi was doing. The impression outside that she is socialist, that he is neo-liberal is completely wrong.'

book would coincide with the elections. But Baru, at least up to that stage, was adamant that he wanted the book to be out only after the elections. "At my age, I want to sleep peacefully at night!" Baru said with a laugh to Chikki Sarkar.

Books, however, have to sell and with Dr Singh announcing his retirement plans, Baru had to acquiesce to Penguin's demand for a release during the elections.

The timing has delivered a bestseller. It is an easy read and very gripping, which is both its strength and weakness too. Had it been stodgy and academic, perhaps no one would have minded because almost no one would have read it!

And Baru, as he feared, has faced a barrage of controversies which have cost him many nights of

sound sleep.

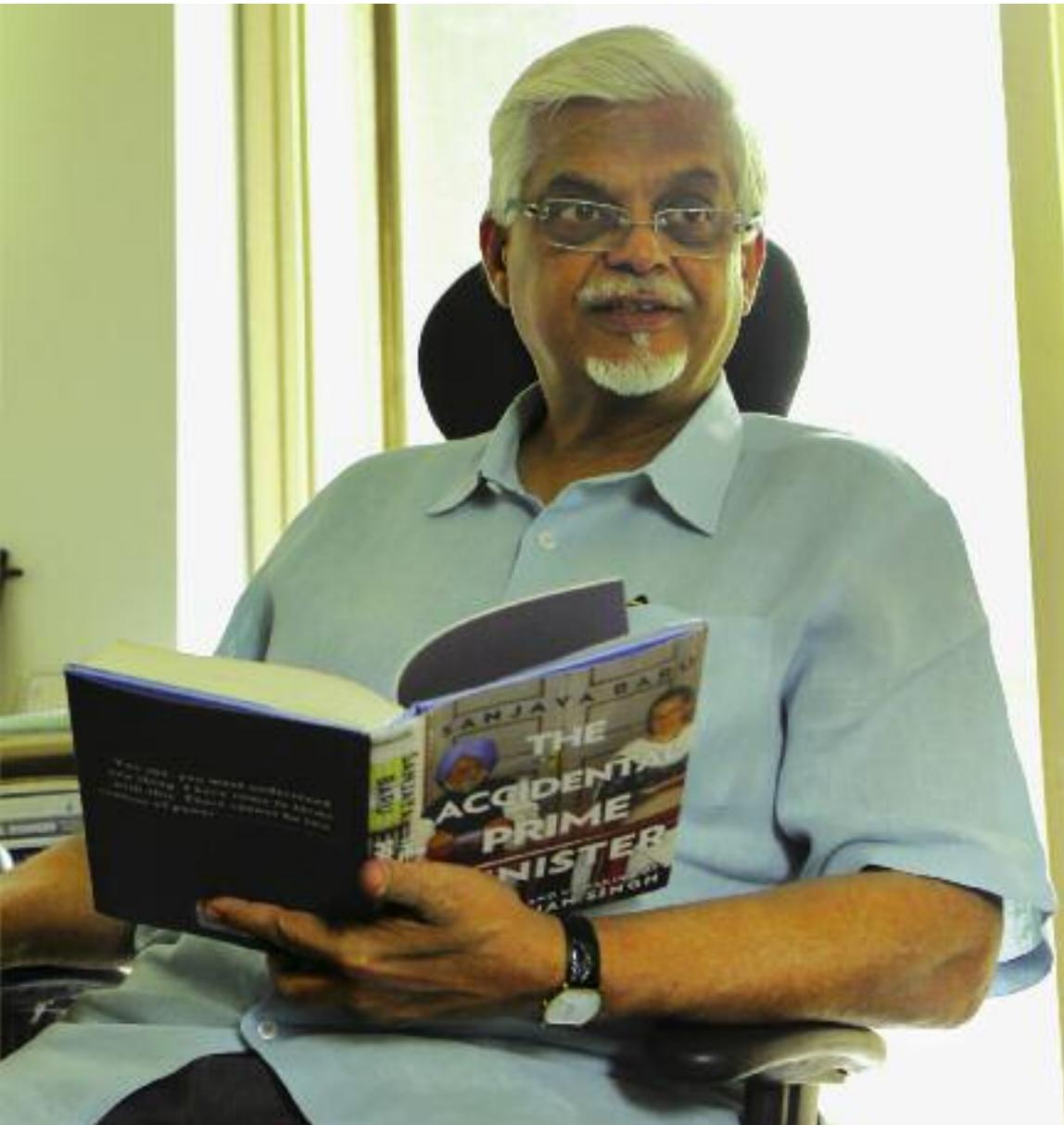
Extracts from *Civil Society's* interview with him on 17 April:

The Manmohan Singh who emerges in your book seems to be locked in some kind of Faustian bargain. Of course there was no personal gain, but then what was this Faustian contract between an honest man and a corrupt system?

It's certainly the case that the relationship between the party and the Prime Minister was defined by the nature of the mandate of 2004. I have discussed it in some detail and many others have also commented that in 2004 the verdict was for Sonia – she was the president of the party, she led the party back to power, but because she was Italian in origin and

SUCCESS OF THE COALITION'

LAKSHMAN ANAND



because her children were too young, she had to pick someone else and she chose Dr Singh.

As I have said in my book, he was the best person for the job because he fulfilled both the qualifications she was looking for, that is, he was competent and he was someone she could trust: competence and compliance is what I have said.

I think my only real criticism in the book was that in 2009 the situation had changed. He had delivered five years of a very good government, which ensured nine per cent growth. It had raised India's stature globally and his own personal stature was at a height which he had never experienced in his life ever before. Therefore, he could have said to his party that he wanted to be the Prime Minister and wanted to contest from the Lok Sabha, which I think would be the honourable thing the party could have agreed to do. But that's the point when he compromised.

The Faustian bargain was not in 2004, the Faustian bargain was in 2009, which is why I believe that UPA II is weaker than UPA I. UPA I played by very different rules of the game. And finally, in UPA II, Rahul Gandhi appeared. The whole focus of the

party and the family was on how to secure the transition, how to secure the change of Prime Minister, either within the term of UPA II or at the end of UPA II. I think it is that dilemma which has ruined the second term of Dr Manmohan Singh.

But he doesn't seem to have any problem with that.

No, first of all, he was a willing partner in the fact that he didn't contest from the Lok Sabha. But, about the rest of it, I can't say. For example, I did say that he was like Bheesma in the *Mahabharata* consumed by rage at not being able to answer Draupadi's question – What point of *dharma* are you using to defend yourself? So, one doesn't know...we would have to wait for his autobiography to know why he did what he did.

You say, very significantly, he could have stood for election from Assam or another such state and won. He did lose in 2004 very badly in South Delhi. Now, assuming that he had won, was there that much of a politician in Manmohan Singh that he could have been your model of a Prime Minister and a party leader rolled into one?

Certainly. Any man who has lived the life that he has lived has the resources to be a politician, to be the head of a government, to be the head of a political party. This is what I have said all along. Look at his life story. It's really a record of great achievement. It suggests that he is a man of great talent and emotional resources, intellectual resources and the ability to manage human beings and situations. Otherwise, he wouldn't have got to where he has got.

So, you are saying that he had it in him to lead the entire Congress party and to be a Prime Minister. I think Digvijay Singh answered that question, and I have quoted him in my book, when he said that Dr Manmohan Singh may be an overrated economist, but he is certainly an underrated politician.

Who is the Manmohan Singh that went through with NREGA, Bharat Nirman, RTI? Even with a livewire media adviser like you, he has never been properly understood. For instance, as you have pointed out, he was Keynesian in his orientation as an economist, but his critics in the social sector accused him of being a neo-liberal, free-market type and instead regarded Sonia as a socialist.

That's true. I think Manmohan Singh would have been far more convincing if he had articulated his real vision of policy. I think he maintained silences on many issues, but he did go along with a lot of what Sonia Gandhi was doing. The impression outside that she is socialist and that he is neo-liberal is completely wrong. I do think that he believed in a lot of economic initiatives that she was taking. He was himself the author of the farm loan waiver. But I think the real difference is that, having been the finance minister, he had become fiscally far more prudent. And I think his overriding concern was that you cannot go on printing money. But the party really didn't care. They were all for printing notes and spending that money.

So, he was deeply in favour of a lot of developmental measures that were being taken, but was really worried about the financial implications of it on the Indian economy. I think the loan waiver was an excellent example. You have spelled that out well in your book. Why didn't you spell things out on NREGA and RTI?

Honestly, I don't have an answer to that, which is why I didn't speculate. I cannot recall him being as much of an enthusiast for RTI as Sonia was. That's an honest reply.

On NREGA, I think at the end of the day, the NREGA we got was something between Manmohan Singh and P. Chidambaram and Raghuvansh Prasad (Minister for Rural Development from Lalu Yadav's Rashtriya Janata Dal).

They were able to offer something, which was more manageable, and roll it out in a phased manner as opposed to what the National Advisory Council was initially saying.

And I do pay fulsome due to Raghuvansh in my book. I think he is a minister who deserves more credit than he has been given because even he

Continued on page 8

Continued from page 7

belongs to a party run by a family. But, that guy was very smart.

I think a very important part of your political assessment of Manmohan Singh is his handling of the coalition partners. This has mostly gone unnoticed.

He was the key element to the success of the coalition. I would describe him as a consensus-maker. He did not take any important decision without first consulting with his allies. And I remember many occasions when I would wait to communicate to the media while he would be phoning Karunanidhi in Chennai, Lalu wherever he was, Pawar wherever he was. He would tell all his allies what had been decided and what was going to be done. I am witness to the fact that in every important decision, even though they were not in Delhi, he would inform each one of them and whenever there was any objection he would hold back the decision.

‘He was the key element to the success of the coalition. I would describe him as a consensus-maker. He did not take any important decision without first consulting with his allies.’



He did play a key political role that has been overlooked. I mentioned an incident when Lalu declared a vote of confidence for the Prime Minister in the UPA Coordination Committee at a time when I was getting reports that there were moves to unseat him. On one occasion, Praful Patel came to me and he said that there were some rumours that the Congress party wanted to make Sushil Kumar Shinde the PM, but to tell Dr Singh not to worry, the NCP was with him. I think the coalition partners, Lalu, Pawar, Karunanidhi, all liked working with him.

So, this image of him being a reticent, withdrawn, ineffectual file-pusher and note-maker is not entirely true.

No, it is not true.

You have been called all sorts of names. In hindsight, would you have written this book differently?

Not at all. The real issue is whether it should have been published now or published later. And even many people who have called me names have said we should have published after the election. In fact, that was my intention. It is only after Dr Singh's announcement of his retirement on 3 January, at a national press conference, that my publisher told me that since he was not going to be around nobody would be interested in the book after the election. So, I finally agreed. I gave the consent sometime in March, and then, of course, I informed the Prime Minister that this book is coming out and alerted him to the fact that there would be controversy.

The only other thing I would say is that if the book had come out after the election people would have then accused me of waiting until he was not in his office, they would say that this guy had no courage to publish it earlier, now that they are no longer there in the office, he is publishing it.

The past 10 years have been critical in the emergence of the Indian economy. So many issues of growth and inclusion have been played out. And here you have an Indian economist, right in the middle of it, playing a political role. Don't you think you needed to go deeper into the issues around policymaking than the style and format of this book have allowed you to?

True, then it would have become a more academic book.

If you are scared about writing an honest book, then it's not worth writing a book. This book does not have any lies in it. I am not scared about that. Being criticised, being attacked, I have lived with that. That's not an issue.

The real issue is how much more depth should have there been in the book? Let me tell you, I have a full chapter explaining Manmohan Singh's foreign policy, called 'The Manmohan Singh Doctrine.' That's the only chapter where I have included foot-

notes. My publisher's view was that this was not for the *aam janta* (ordinary reader). "This is too serious...can we dispense with this stuff?" is what my publisher said to me.

This book has been written for a lay reader. Anyone can read this book. In fact, the only chapter which people would find boring or difficult to go through would be 'The Manmohan Singh Doctrine.' The reason I felt it was necessary to have that chapter is because, at the end of the day, UPA I and 10 years of Manmohan Singh are really about his foreign policy.

What is the most important thing Manmohan Singh would be remembered for? He was asked this question at a press conference on 3 January. He said, the nuclear deal. He himself said that. And the nuclear deal is the one issue on which he was willing to stake his government. I felt that it was necessary for people to understand his worldview on foreign policy. If I had similar chapters on economic policy and social measures it would have become far more academic and maybe the book wouldn't have had the popular appeal it now has.

Are you sleeping peacefully at night?

No, I have spent a terrible five days. More for my family than for myself. I have been a journalist. I have been in government. I am used to these kinds of attacks. I was attacked even when I was in government. I was called names when I was sitting in the PMO. So, to be called names when you are outside is not a big deal. I am not worried.

I am a little worried about my parents. They read all the newspapers...I am concerned for my wife and daughter, just as I understand the Prime Minister's family is concerned for him. But, I keep saying that 90 per cent of my book is praise for him. It's only the last chapter where I have some harsh things to say and if I had not said them, I would not have been honest to myself. ■

Spat over



Tosa Maidan: Villagers say the Army's firing range has ruined their

Jehangir Rashid
Srinagar

TOSA Maidan, a sprawling meadow in Central Kashmir's Budgam district, is in the eye of a storm. Often called the 'ultimate destination' by environmentalists for its natural beauty, this meadow is being used as a firing range by the Army posted in Kashmir.

The firing range was leased to the Army on 18 April 1964 for 50 years. The lease has now expired. The demand of the people living near Tosa Maidan is simple: "Don't extend the lease."

Spread over 1,200 hectares, Tosa Maidan is located 51 km from Srinagar, the summer capital of Jammu & Kashmir (J&K). It is not an isolated spot. The area is surrounded by at least 58 villages. Some of them are Shunglipora, Dreng, Sutharan, Lassipora, Lachmanpora, Zugu Kharen, Silbrass, Khanpora, Sugan and Kokar Bagh. There are also significant places in the vicinity of Tosa Maidan like Kadlabal, Haffaz, Nagnibal, Gatamarg, Pagen valley, Pagen, Bassamgali and Pandan valley.

The tourist industry has for long been lobbying to develop Tosa Maidan as a tourist destination. They believe it would be a valuable addition to the routine itinerary offered to tourists in Kashmir. Currently, the meadow is lying in a state of neglect and ruin.

meadow at J&K firing range

BILAL BAHADUR



environment and lives

“During the past five decades 63 persons have lost their lives. Forty-three have become permanently deaf due to the explosion of shells in Tosa Maidan. More than 20 per cent of people living near the meadow have impaired hearing. There are children who are totally deaf,” said Dr Shaikh Ghulam Rasool, Chief Patron, Tosa Maidan Bachav Front (TMBF).

TMBF is a forum of various associations fighting to ensure that the lease of the firing range is not extended. The front consists of representatives from the Jammu & Kashmir Right to Information Movement, Rural Voice, Panchayat Association, Budgam’s Bar Association, Traders Federation and various civil society groups.

“Ours is purely a social movement. There are no political strings attached to it. We want politicians to keep away from this issue so that the genuine demand of the people does not get diluted. The people of this area have suffered a lot and need to be



Women picking up wood near the firing range

given some relief so that they live their lives as normal citizens,” said Dr Ghulam Rasool.

Chief Minister Omar Abdullah cut a sorry figure some days back on the Tosa Maidan firing range issue. The state government claimed that the Army is not ready to shift the firing range. However, an Army spokesperson based in Srinagar said that orders to shift had not been received from the state government.

The state government also said that the Army has

been told to shift its firing range from Tosa Maidan to Gurez in North Kashmir’s Bandipora district or to the Wadwan valley in Kishtwar district of Jammu division. But Lieutenant Colonel N.N. Joshi, spokesman of 15 Corps, based in Srinagar, said that the Army hasn’t received any proposal so far.

The state government has now formed a sub-committee headed by Shailender Kumar, Divisional Commissioner, to hunt for alternative firing sites for the Army. The sub-committee has been asked to submit its report by June to Chief Secretary Mohammad Iqbal Khandey who is also heading a similar panel.

The Army, on its part, has made it clear that it will vacate Tosa Maidan only when asked to by New Delhi.

“Artillery fire has taken a heavy toll at Tosa Maidan. Sixty per cent of forest cover has been damaged due to direct firing or sprinkling of gunpowder. The flora and fauna has been severely damaged and local wildlife has migrated,” said Dr Ghulam Rasool.

TMBF alleges that glaciers in the vicinity of this meadow have shrunk and, as a result, the supply of water to Ferozpora and Sukhnag streams has drastically reduced. Most people living in Srinagar, Budgam and Baramulla districts are facing water shortage since they depend on the Ferozpora and Sukhnag streams.

“Not only have glaciers shrunk, military wastes like oil and other liquids as well as carcinogenic metals are getting mingled with our sources of water. The same water is supplied to people living in Central and North Kashmir. It is bound to affect their health in some way or the other,” said Dr Ghulam Rasool.

He also pointed out that the behaviour of children living in villages in the vicinity of Tosa Maidan area has undergone a change for the worse. “They have become much more aggressive. Children can’t concentrate on their studies because of the firing and educational standards have gone down,” he said.

The village economy, based on natural resources, has also been badly affected. “The economy of the people here is dependent on grazing. They are afraid to move around so how can they graze their cattle? They have been shattered economically. The world seems to have come to an end for them. Instead, this meadow can be developed for trekkers and those seeking adventure. Develop it as a tourist destination,” said Dr Ghulam Rasool.

Surrounded by snowcapped peaks, Tosa Maidan has great topography. There are beautiful lakes nearby, adding to its natural beauty. “Trekking won’t be able to find a better trekking route than this one,” said Dr Ghulam Rasool.

Mohammad Akram, Vice-Chairman, TMBF, said that the state government would be solely responsible for any untoward incident if the lease is extended. He said that the inhabitants of villages adjoining Tosa Maidan would launch a mass agitation.

“The people have suffered a lot. But we will not keep quiet anymore. We have decided to raise our voices so that the lease is not extended. If it is, then members of the panchayat will resign en masse,” said Moulvi Maqbool, spokesperson of the Panchayat Association in Budgam. ■

'A lot of voter awareness is

INTERVIEW

Trilochan Sastry

Anuradha Mukherjee
New Delhi

PROF. Trilochan Sastry is a Founder-Trustee of the Association for Democratic Reforms (ADR), which has played a key role in prompting measures to clean up elections in India.

Public interest litigation (PIL) by ADR in the Delhi High Court in 1999 resulted in the Supreme Court making it mandatory for candidates to declare criminal records, financial assets and educational qualifications to the Election Commission.

Most recently, an ADR initiative resulted in the Delhi High Court indicting the Congress and the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) for receiving funds in contravention of the Foreign Contribution (Regulation) Act (FCRA) from Vedanta subsidiaries.

Prof. Sastry spoke to *Civil Society* about electoral reforms that have worked and other measures that need to be taken.

Have elections become cleaner?

In terms of muscle power and violence during elections, things have certainly improved and all credit goes to the Election Commission. But in terms of the kind of people standing for election and the process of elections, I'm not sure much has changed. In fact, the role of black money and big money in elections has increased tremendously. This is bad news. Also, the profile of candidates, as we are seeing people with criminal records, is a matter of great concern.

You are saying that while the EC has been able to control use of muscle power and violence, it has not been able to really make much headway in improving the electoral process.

Booth-capturing is a thing of the past, thanks to the Election Commission's initiatives, ensuring that it does not happen with the use of the police and so on. But people around the country often ask me whether using the CRPF and various police forces to hold peaceful elections is the right way to do it. That's the only way we have found so far.

What do you think would be required to improve the quality of candidates and clean up the process?

We need two kinds of initiatives to make clean and fair elections happen. One is to clean the supply side, basically, the law and enforcement mechanism. The laws need to change. The second is on the demand side, which is the voters' side. Voters also need to stop voting for such people. A lot of voter awareness is required.

What is it that is working? Is it the intervention of the courts, public pressure, the Election



Trilochan Sastry: 'The profile of candidates is a matter of great concern'

'I'm not sure much has changed. In fact, the role of black money and big money in elections has increased tremendously. This is bad news. Also, the profile of candidates, as we are seeing people with criminal records, is a matter of great concern.'

Commission, the ongoing agitation against corruption by AAP, growing public awareness?

The courts have played a fantastic role. There's no doubt about that. But for the courts, we wouldn't have reached anywhere. The courts have intervened wherever different groups, mostly our group, have gone to court asking for relief under public interest

litigation. I don't remember a single case where the court didn't uphold our or other groups' appeals. So the courts have played a very significant role.

To what extent do you think public pressure or the anti-corruption agitation have had an effect?

Whether we like it or not we have a new Lokpal Bill. So that's a direct outcome of the anti-corruption agitation.

What is your take on the Lokpal Bill? How do you assess that?

I think there is scope for improvement in that Lokpal Bill. As you can see, even in the process of appointment, Fali Nariman and Justice Thomas have said they don't want to be on that committee. It's a step forward, but we need to improve it further.

Are there any broad areas you want to point out in the Lokpal Bill that you feel are problematic?

One is the process of appointment itself. People like Fali Nariman have pointed out that the selection process is wrong because the ultimate power is with the government. If you appoint the wrong people, setting up the Lokpal won't matter. You can go through all kinds of legal jargon, but the basic requirement is that the Lokpal should be able to quickly investigate, prosecute and put people in jail. So the Lokpal needs to have more teeth. We need to have safeguards so that innocent people don't get unnecessarily fixed. Also, you need to have strict penalties.

Recent polls have shown that corruption is not the main issue for a lot of people and they are okay with electing someone who may not be clean. How do you respond to

such surveys?

The issues are very mixed. I don't think these people have got it right. In our survey, India's or maybe the world's largest such survey, we have covered 250,000 people. And 78 per cent said that you should not vote for people with criminal records. So there is an intention. But how far people know who is a criminal,

needed'

who is not a criminal is an issue. And, therefore, we are saying voter awareness is required. Everything cannot be decided on majority. If people have to decide what is right and what is wrong by voting, then we don't need a Supreme Court, we don't need a justice system. Everything can't be decided based on what people say. It is based on the Constitution of India, it is based on universally accepted norms and rules of what is right and wrong.

Candidates don't seem to be spending less on election. In fact there seems to be no limit to freebies. So, in your view, how should elections be funded?

Election funding should be completely transparent. Right now it is not at all transparent. For example, the Reserve Bank wanted to roll back old notes of 2005 or 2006. But there are reports that that's precisely the money that is being distributed and used in elections. So they have rolled it back by one more year. There have to be penalties. If you are using black money, there should be a strict penalty and if you are using it in elections, your election will be overturned. That needs to be done.

There are suggestions that elections should be state-funded.

If you have transparency, penalties for not following the law, limits on what an individual can give to a party or a corporation, then we are halfway there. On the issue of public funding, I think you must first have a strict penalty, which you can implement, on wrong use of funds. In the current setup, they will use public funding and they will also use black money. We need to work on both the fronts simultaneously. In an ideal society, it should be public funding. Or volunteers can devote their time to campaign for a candidate, or you can give ₹10 or ₹100 or ₹500 at the maximum. And it should be open and transparent and limited. When one person can give ₹500 crore, which is probably happening, then that person or his company can control the government. We need to have a limit on spending and a limit on funding. There's no limit on corporate funding.

Do cleaner candidates make Parliament more effective and decorous? Do they result in better governance?

Where do we have cleaner candidates? We don't have cleaner candidates. Parliament needs to function better, but even if Parliament functions and everybody behaves decently and nobody uses unparliamentary language or nobody shouts and throws mikes, this does not mean that governance in the country will improve. To say that Parliamentarians are misbehaving and correcting that is going to ensure that the whole country will function properly is a huge leap of faith. We need to do many more important things. The capture of a great nation's government by big money, the use of ₹200,000 crore of black money in elections, 30 per cent criminals in politics, this has got to change. After this changes, Parliament will automatically start functioning rightly. ■

Rajasthan welfare schemes to stay

Civil Society News

New Delhi

SOCIAL welfare schemes in Rajasthan will not be discontinued or curtailed in any way. This promise was made by representatives of the state government in Jaipur on 7 April, close to the date of polling for the Lok Sabha elections.

The welfare schemes date back to the tenure of the Congress government in Rajasthan. After the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) won the Assembly elections in December and came to power in the state, there was speculation that it would dump the schemes and cut expenditure.

But spokespersons of the BJP laid these fears to rest at a Jan Samwad attended by 7,000 people from across Rajasthan. Not only would the schemes continue, the BJP government would also make every effort to improve delivery and accountability.

BJP spokesperson Suman Sharma said, "I want to assure everybody gathered here at the Jan Samwad that we will not stop any schemes announced by the previous government such as universalised pensions, free medicines, expanded rations and NREGA. After the (Lok Sabha) elections they will be improved and expanded with better implementation."

The Jan Samwad was attended by spokespersons from all the political parties – the BJP, the Congress, the Aam Aadmi Party and the Communist Party of India. They promised that they would not allow the schemes to be rolled back.

The Jan Samwad is an attempt to help ordinary people influence the outcome of elections by raising their demands directly with political parties. Holding the Jan Samwad 10 days before the Lok Sabha polls gave 7,000 people from different districts in Rajasthan an opportunity to enter into a dialogue and voice their demands.

In much the same spirit, Jan Awaaz was launched in Delhi on 5 and 6 April by noted social activist Aruna Roy, to serve as a "creative and inclusive" platform for citizens, at a meeting held in Delhi.

Siddharth, an advocate fighting against the death penalty, said: "Most of us have been working on single issues. There are many individuals not with NGOs or political movements who are working on their own and would like to join an independent platform. We find youth issues missing, even in political manifestoes. It is also important to keep the social sector apolitical. If the social sector is not rich, politics will be poorer."

Jan Samwad and Jan Awaaz have been launched to take people's voices and concerns to political parties. Both are non-political platforms.

Both Jan Awaaz and Jan Samwad underline the continuing relevance of social movements in focusing attention on the marginalised and influencing electoral outcomes.

In recent times, activists and professionals have been entering mainstream politics in large numbers. But there are many who aren't ready to join politics and yet have a significant contribution to make. They need ways of making elections instruments of change without grabbing power.

"How do we bring our issues together? We can draw up common issues which all political parties have to take a stand on. We can also act as a watchdog or social auditor and see that rights and entitlements are delivered," suggested P.V. Rajgopal of Ekta Parishad, well-known for his long-drawn battle to get marginalised people land rights.

A noted activist said people were tired of protests. "How do we reengage them," he wondered.

At the same time the importance of reviving the apolitical space cannot be overstated. India needs sage advice from the grassroots, untainted by politics, to develop inclusively.

"We need to do our jobs," said Dinesh Mohan, ex-IIT professor and transportation expert. "Young people go and support the wrong issues. Professors don't know their jobs. Politicians also do the wrong things. We need to support politi-

cians with good advice."

Activists also felt that in recent months mistaken notions had been spread to the middle class. Issues had been misinterpreted and strategies used by activists, misused.

"This idea that change comes from the middle class is wrong. It is the campaigns that have brought about change," said Anjali Bhardwaj of Satark Nagrik Sangathan.

"Even politicians are using the language of social activism. The ground is slipping from under our feet," said Ritika Khera of the Right to Food movement.

"Corruption is now being seen only as a character defect. The structures and processes which lead to corruption are being glossed over," rued another activist.

A note issued on the occasion said, "the two mainstays of the Indian Constitution which are pathways of achieving and sustaining socio-political liberty and equality and material welfare for its citizens i.e. the Directive Principles of State Policy and Fundamental Rights, will be the 'common minimum agenda' adopted by this platform.... Let this be a campaign to make elections informed, the State accountable and in the process make democracy deeper and alive." ■

CONFLICT ZONE

Locked anganwadi at end of long trek

CHARKHA



Little children are victims of anganwadi workers brazenly shirking their responsibilities

Ajaz ul Haq
Poonch

FIVE-year-old Saima hurriedly zigzags across the hilly terrain, clutching an empty steel plate with one hand. With the other hand she tries to balance her frail body on the narrow, dangerous path. Why is this little girl in such a hurry? She replies breathlessly, not bothering to turn, “*Aaj centre khula hai, khichdi leni hai.*”

Saima is rushing to the Anganwadi Kendra where children like her arrive every morning, travelling distances far too long for their tender age, in the hope of receiving a nutritious meal along with day care facilities.

The anganwadi, located in the Arai Malkha panchayat of Mandi Block, around 30 km from Poonch town in Jammu & Kashmir (J&K) is supposed to be open and functioning the entire week. The truth is, it does not follow its own guidelines in letter or spirit. Most of the time, little Saimas, despite their long and arduous trek, return empty-handed as the anganwadi worker and helper are habitually absent. Reasons (read excuses) vary predictably – the anganwadi worker’s grandmother has expired (for the 10th time in a year, if anyone cares to count) or is unwell (yet again) or the rations are not available... the list is endless.

These Anganwadi Kendras, set up under the Integrated Child Development Scheme (ICDS)

were launched in 1975 by the Central Government to fight malnutrition, assist the holistic development of children below the age of six and cater to the needs of expectant and nursing mothers and adolescent girls. A package of services is supposed to be provided: supplementary nutrition, immunisation, health check-ups, referral services, pre-school education, nutrition and health education. The ICDS is aimed particularly at the most vulnerable sections of the population and is meant for backward rural areas, tribal tracts and urban slums.

According to the 2001 Census, India has around 16 crore children under the age of six, approximately 15 per cent of its total population. A vast majority of these children live in an economic and social environment which impedes their physical and mental development. These conditions include poor sanitation, disease, infection and inadequate access to primary healthcare. In states like J&K, besides these socio-economic factors, conflict plays a major role in affecting the physical and mental health of children. Therefore such schemes have a larger responsibility to shoulder.

The government’s well-intended format makes the ICDS one of the world’s largest community-based child development programmes. Unfortunately, the scheme, even after almost 40 years, has not been able to achieve its desired results. Good intentions have not translated into positive outcomes.

One can estimate how the Anganwadi Kendras in this border district of Poonch are contributing to the ‘holistic development’ of tender minds.

Surankote Tehsil mirrors the situation in Mandi Tehsil. According to Sidique Hussain Shah, a local from Kansla Mohalla in Phagla village in Surankote block, “The only anganwadi centre in Kansla that caters to a population of around 400 never gets to see its worker as she lives in Mumbai. The only time we see the doors unlocked is when the centre receives rations, supposedly meant for its small beneficiaries.”

When the Superintendent of the Social Welfare Department was informed, officials there said they had sent an inquiry team. But local villagers say that on the day the inquiry team visited, the helper rounded up all the children and staged a fully operational centre before the visitors. This continued for a couple of days. On the third day this charade was over and the anganwadi centre was locked once again. A local resident, on condition of anonymity, said that the centre has not functioned since the inquiry team’s last visit.

A similar situation can be witnessed in the Bufliaz village of Surankote Tehsil. The anganwadi centre at Mohalla Setha was found to be locked till noon. When the helper was asked why, she said that the anganwadi worker started living in Mandi Tehsil after she got married and she now visits the centre occasionally.

After questioning her further, the helper washed her hands of all responsibility and blamed the non-functional anganwadi entirely on the worker who, when contacted on the phone, questioned the right of the caller to ask her such questions!

Anganwadi workers who are appointed to make villagers aware of the importance of nutritious food for the growth of their children, brazenly shirk their responsibility and jeopardise the health of the impoverished family. They are answerable to society for their indifference.

When the concerned officer was contacted, to understand the other side of the picture, he took a diplomatic stance. They would be able to fight the problem if they have the support of the villagers, he proclaimed. In short, he completely skirted the role his team should have played in proper implementation of this ambitious scheme.

In January this year, Preeti Madan, Joint Secretary, Ministry of Women and Child Development, announced that a proper inquiry into the functioning of anganwadis would be conducted. Three months have passed and nothing has been done.

Another published report reveals that many Social Welfare Officers in J&K are corrupt. They sell off rations meant for little children coming to the Anganwadi Kendras and instead serve very poor quality rations, thus playing with the health of innocent children.

In J&K there is a deficit of trust between the people and the government. Departments in charge of anganwadi centres need to be much more vigilant and uphold the objectives of the ICDS.

Villagers believe there is a need to streamline the entire process right from the allotment of centres, the appointment of anganwadi workers and helpers, proper surveillance of rations distributed and involvement of the parents to know whether their children are benefitting from the scheme. This will not only make little Saima’s arduous trek worthwhile but also help build a healthier future. ■

Charkha Features

No cheap food for Delhi's poor

Kavita Charanji
New Delhi

NAJMA, a domestic worker living in Sunlight Colony in Seemapuri, Northeast Delhi, is angry and anguished. Abandoned by her husband seven years ago, she has three young children, no proof of her husband's desertion and no visible means of support. Neither can she furnish a death certificate that will entitle her to a widow's pension. She approached the sitting MLA and local police for help many times but both are indifferent to her plight.

Munni, a widow in the same colony, is even more distressed. Her 26-year-old disabled son runs a tea stall in Seemapuri. She has been unsuccessful in securing a widow's pension although she has an Aadhar card, a disability certificate and other documentary proof of identity. Rather than helping her, the police extort ₹1,000 a month to allow her son to run his stall.

People like Najma and Munni were the focus of activists belonging to the Pension Parishad and Right to Food Campaign. They recently undertook a week-long Delhi Ration-Pension Yatra to pressure political aspirants in the Lok Sabha elections to address the needs of such people. The activists visited several slums and impoverished areas in the seven Lok Sabha constituencies in the capital, trying to hammer home the slogan: "Pension, ration nahin toh vote nahin!" (No pensions and rations means no votes).

Music and theatre were used during the yatra to spread awareness about the pension rights of the poor and to explain the new food security law.

Navneet Singh, senior supervisor of Ashray Adhikar Abhiyan, an NGO that works for the homeless, said, "We talked to senior citizens in shel-

ters in Fatehpuri who said that they were denied pensions for lack of ID proof." Vimla, field coordinator for the Centre for Advocacy Research, says, "In Delhi, 12 lakh marginalised people are eligible for pension. However, only three lakh actually receive such support. Some of our demands are the universalisation of pension, a minimum pension of



The Ration-Pension Yatra spread awareness of people's entitlements

₹2,000 per month or half the minimum wage, whichever is higher, inflation-linked pension and an effective grievance redressal system."

One of the aims of the yatra, says Vimla, was to spread awareness among the marginalised of their right to adequate pension and food. Despite the passage of the National Food Security Act, 2013, slumdwellers in Delhi's JJ Bandhu Camp, Bhanwar Singh Camp and Sunlight Colony, for example, were unaware that each eligible person is entitled to five kilos of foodgrains and pregnant women to ₹6,000 in the form of maternity entitlements.

Sejal Dand, member of the steering committee,

Right to Food Campaign, says that the Act has changed nothing at the ground level. "In some of the areas that the yatra covered, malnutrition was worse than in some of the country's worst-off areas like Jharkand. Anganwadis too were totally absent in areas like the Sangam Vihar Tigris bastis," he said.

A review meeting at the conclusion of the yatra was attended by well-known social activists like Aruna Roy and Nikhil Dey. Roy pointed out that it was a travesty to ask people for identity proof when they were unsure of even their birth dates. She added, "While the issue of pensions may have featured in some manifestos, the much-needed commitment to the elderly is missing. They are being treated with scant regard. No one has focused on the poor in these elections. There is a move to simply look at growth-driven paradigms that leave people and the poor behind."

Dey pointed out, "People most in need are being denied rations on one ground or another. Moreover, many don't even get the pittance of ₹200 which has been promised as pension. The discourse of political parties has been highly disappointing. The yatra showed that the people are determined to continue the struggle for pensions, rations and NREGA."

The conclusion of the yatra does not spell the end of activists' efforts to get the poor their rights. Applications are to be filed under the Right to Information Act (RTI) so that it is possible to ferret out precise data about the number of beneficiaries in Delhi, the total budget and how many pension applications are pending. A meeting has also been sought with the Lieutenant Governor, Najeeb Jung, to highlight issues regarding the pension system and implementation of the National Food Security Act. ■

SAMITA'S WORLD

by SAMITA RATHOR



The beauty of waste

LAKSHMAN ANAND



Anita Ahuja with her bags and artworks made from waste

Kavita Charanji
New Delhi

CREATIVITY comes naturally to Anita Ahuja, artist, author, designer and feminist. In 1998, she and her husband Shalabh, a civil engineer, set up Conserve India as a small waste management project in Madhuban in East Delhi where they still live. Disposal of plastic bags turned out to be their biggest headache. It was tough to recycle this sea of dirty plastic.

Conserve India experimented and eventually invented a technology that converts used plastic bags into sheets of plastic, called Handmade Recycled Plastic. It can be used to make fashion accessories like bags, footwear and jewellery or interior accessories like fabrics, rugs and wallpaper. Conserve India is now a thriving social enterprise

that exports its products to high-end retail shops in Europe, Japan, Australia and the US.

Ahuja firmly believes waste is a creative resource. At a recent exhibition at the India International Centre in New Delhi, Ahuja demonstrated how. She displayed an eclectic collection of paintings, multimedia art works and handbags fashioned out of plastic bags, textile waste, tyre tubes and scrap leather. Titled 'At War with the Obvious,' the exhibition was born of a desire to draw attention to how waste can become a valuable resource instead of an insurmountable environmental hazard.

"My canvas is Conserve India. Like a canvas painting, it is in different colours and my art is a natural progression," she says.

"Waste is waste only if it is perceived as waste, otherwise it is a resource that can generate wealth, jobs and endless opportunities. I hope these artworks will

make their way to homes as a reminder that waste has immense potential if used optimally."

One of Ahuja's favourite works was *The Virgin Garden*, made of disposed tyres and industrial and textile waste. She described it as 'the artist's vision of an unspoiled and elusive place.'

Her artworks are mostly a telling social commentary. Take *Cosmopolitan*, a canvas inspired by a National Geographic aerial map that revealed the unequal distribution of electricity between affluent regions like the US and impoverished Africa. Using tyre tube waste, plastic bags and the caps of soft drink bottles, she has produced a work that reveals how waste is distributed around the world.

The Crazy Society, made of leather scrap and jeans labels, tries to illustrate that "God has become like a brand as the level of affluence determines the kind of temple you visit." Another work, *People talk too much generally*, also made with leather scrap depicts a woman's visage plastered over with labels. "Instead of using cosmetics, women are using brands to heighten their beauty," says Ahuja, who says that she is always pushing her creative barriers "to make life more interesting."

Today Conserve India's factory at HSIIDC Industrial Estate in Bahadurgarh, Haryana, churns out the well-known 'Conserve hrp*' products that provide employment to 300 slumdweller, mostly ragpickers. The dilemma Conserve India faces is that there are around two to three million slumdweller in Bahadurgarh. "So far we have trained 1,200 ragpickers through adult education and financial literacy, and encouraged the development of soft and technical skills that will enable them to work in other factories in the rapidly expanding industrial estate of Bahadurgarh," says Ahuja.

Alongside the creative aspect of Conserve's commercial wing, Ahuja also heads its social projects – a school, health centre and training, as well as design and marketing. Meanwhile, Shalabh oversees the finance, sales production and managerial aspects.

Ahuja believes that adding value or creating wealth is the keyword. The problem with most NGOs, she points out, is that they teach skills like candle or incense making. "Our philosophy is to generate wealth. How else will we help society, if not through money?" she says. ■

Hotels angry about STPs

Jehangir Rashid
Srinagar

TOURISTS travelling to Kashmir this year are advised to book early. There could be a shortfall in accommodation. Hoteliers and the state government are engaged in a war of words over the setting up of Sewage Treatment Plants (STPs).

The hotel owners say the government has ordered them to instal STPs. But these won't work, they say, and it will put their thriving businesses in the red. They invoke the Union Ministry of Tourism's guidelines that exempt hotels that obtained completion certificates before 1 April 2012 from the installation of STPs. But the State Pollution Control Board (SPCB) retorts that those guidelines don't apply to Kashmir.

Ghulam Mohammad Dug, President of the

Kashmir Hotel and Restaurant Owners Federation (KHAROF), says that Kashmir's climate and lack of electricity will make STPs a worthless investment.

"The bacteria that helps STPs break down sewage can survive only in temperatures in the range of 15-20 degrees Celsius. Once the temperature goes below this range, bacteria do not survive," he says. "Besides, uninterrupted power to run STPs is a rarity in Kashmir."

"A minimum of 1,000 to 2,000 sq. ft. of land is required for setting up an STP," says Faiz Bakshi, Chairman, Coordination Committee, "most of us don't have land available." Also, hoteliers say the tourist season is restricted to 90 days so the sewage load from tourism is not that much.

"The STPs will become cosmetic pieces or junk since we don't have supporting facilities. This is the

reason why individual STPs already installed under the orders, recommendation and supervision of the SPCB have become redundant," said Faiz.

The hoteliers are accusing the government of pursuing 'repressive' measures against them. Dug said that the SPCB has disregarded its own guidelines of 2011 by ordering the installation of STPs in hotels with at least 20 rooms. "Hotels use conventional methods to treat sewage through septic tanks and soakage pits approved by the SPCB," said Dug.

Hoteliers suggested that instead of singling them out the government should set up common STPs that would cater not only to hotels but to commercial establishments and residential buildings and thereby help in fighting water pollution.

The state government, after facing reprimand from the High Court, issued an order in November 2013 saying that common STPs would be installed in Srinagar and Jammu. These would treat waste water from all structures. In fact, construction of a common STP in Pahalgam has already been completed. ■

Passion a delight for Idukki couple



George and Elsy Kurian with bottles of Passion Delight

Shree Padre
Idukki

INDIANS aren't passionate about passion fruit. They know little about it, unlike in Hawaii where passion fruit is called lilikoi and is hugely popular.

This is changing in a small way. In Idukki district of Kerala, a farming couple, George Kurian and his wife, Elsy, are buying passion fruit from the higher mountain ranges of the district and converting it into pure and wholesome syrup, without additives and preservatives. The syrup sells under the brand name Passion Delight and is becoming a bestseller.

There are two reasons why their passion fruit syrup is so popular. It is free of chemicals and it is made from very fresh fruit grown in the mountains.

"Generally, chemical preservatives like sodium benzoate or potassium metabisulphate along with artificial flavours and colours are used in fruit processing. But these aren't good for health. We are using a technology that makes it possible to process passion fruit without chemical additives," says George.

"Passion fruit is available almost round the year in the lowlands. But in the high ranges, you can buy it for just three or four months. Yet, in aroma, colour and juice content it is far superior. You can't have this outstanding quality if you use fruits grown in the lowlands," he says.

George used to be a software expert. He spent 18 years working in Vienna, Austria. His wife, Elsy, was

a nurse. But he returned to Kerala in the mid-1990s so that his two sons, Robin and Sebin, could get an Indian education.

In 1998, they bought a rubber plantation in Idukki district and started farming. Some years ago, a friend visited George's farm for some work. He brought along a bottle of passion fruit syrup he had made. The taste was excellent. As George and his friend talked, the question uppermost in their mind was: why couldn't they produce this syrup commercially?

"I was interested. We had some spare time too. After a few months we decided to go ahead," he recalls. In 2010, they started trial production.

The initial plan was to bottle the syrup in glass. But six to eight per cent of glass bottles get broken in transit. Since this was a risky option, the Kurians opted for Pearlpet plastic bottles. To design a bottle would require an investment of several lakhs. Luckily, George came across a local Pearlpet manufacturer who had an attractive design he had made for another industry.

Eventually, in 2011, the Kurians began their agro-processing venture, Mountain Fruits. Its only product, passion fruit syrup, was launched under the brand name, Passion Delight.

Although Passion Delight caters to a very small market, Thrissur, Thiruvananthapuram, Chennai, Bengaluru and Ernakulam, demand is constantly increasing. Ambrosia Bakery in Thiruvananthapuram, for instance, regularly serves passion fruit juice made with this syrup.

The harvesting time for passion fruit in the hills almost coincides with the onset of the monsoon. The fruit is available from May to end-August. Elsy and George work together to extract the pulp from fresh passion fruit and store it in a freezer. As summer approaches, they hire four women to help them with production. George and Elsy work with them. All the processing is done in a small building near

SHREE PADRE

their residence. This is a remote area and electricity supply is erratic. So the Kurians have bought a 5 KV generator as a back-up.

Very few farmers in the high ranges of Kerala or anywhere in south India are cultivating passion fruit commercially. "In fact, even without care, passion fruit provides a very good yield," says George, "but we find only the yellow variety suitable for processing. The maroon variety is sweeter and therefore not good for syrup-making."

Mountain Fruits is on the lookout for more passion fruit. To bridge the gap between production and demand, George has decided to support cultivation of passion fruit on 12 acres in the high ranges belonging to a friend. But this year's heavy rain proved detrimental to the crop.

In Thailand and China, where passion fruit syrup is a very popular product, seeds are retained for their nutritive value. Indian consumers aren't aware of this. The Kurians' production unit separates the seeds during the syrup production process. "We are freely distributing the seeds to high range farmers for cultivation of more passion fruit," says George.

In the high ranges, shops buy passion fruit from home growers. They sell the lot to wholesalers who then supply the fruit to Mountain Fruits. One kg comprises 15 fruits. The Kurians pay between ₹35 to 40 per kg. To make one kg of raw juice, six kg of fresh fruit is required.

"Passion fruit doesn't require very fertile soil. It grows even on wasteland. Spreading the vine to fence is the easiest way. Chemical fertilisers aren't necessary. So far, the incidence of pest attacks and disease has been marginal. When the fruit is ripe, it falls off. So harvesting the crop doesn't require extra effort. Even school-going children can pick up fallen fruits. The only menace the passion fruit faces is the squirrel," says Elsy.

George is now experimenting with a new type of passion fruit syrup for diabetics. "This syrup will be sugar-free. We are adding a new natural sweetener that is said to be 100 times sweeter than sugar. However, this is still under trial," says George.

George's friend, who developed the technology to make syrup without any additives, explains, "Passion fruit is a tasty fruit that doesn't require any pesticides. It caught my attention a long time ago. Fruits grown 400 metres above sea level are distinctly superior. I conducted trials for four to five years to invent this technology. Passion fruit has about three per cent citric acid. This helps to preserve it without any artificial additives." ■

Website: <http://www.mountainfruits.com>
Email: mountainfruits@yahoo.com, Phone: 098951 93445

DELHI ROADS GET

The story of a friendly city bus service

Civil Society News

New Delhi

THE orange coloured bus weaves its way through South Delhi's crazy traffic and slows to a halt at a bus stop. It is 9 am. Commuters alight and others board smoothly. The bus rolls off again. Among the passengers is Saheli Bakshi, a post-graduate student at Hindu College. "We've got to travel," she says. "We can't sit at home out of fear. These orange buses are comfortable. At night they are well-lit. I can see outside and people on the street can see inside."

Amid the rough and tumble of Delhi's roads, the orange bus has added an element of dignity to public transport. In the past, young women like Bakshi would

LAKSHMAN ANAND



Women find orange buses easy to use

The 1,108 orange buses are organised in nine clusters, owned and managed by six corporate entities and regulated by the Delhi Integrated Multi-Modal Transit System (DIMTS). The buses are tracked via GPS, every ticket is registered on a central computer, drivers are required to undergo training and there are strict timings for journeys and standards for cleanliness.

"I take my son to school on an orange bus every day on my way to my shop," says Subhash Sharma who owns a food stall in central Delhi. "The orange buses don't deviate much from their timetable. I like that. Even if the bus is late, I don't have to wait more than five or six minutes for the next one."

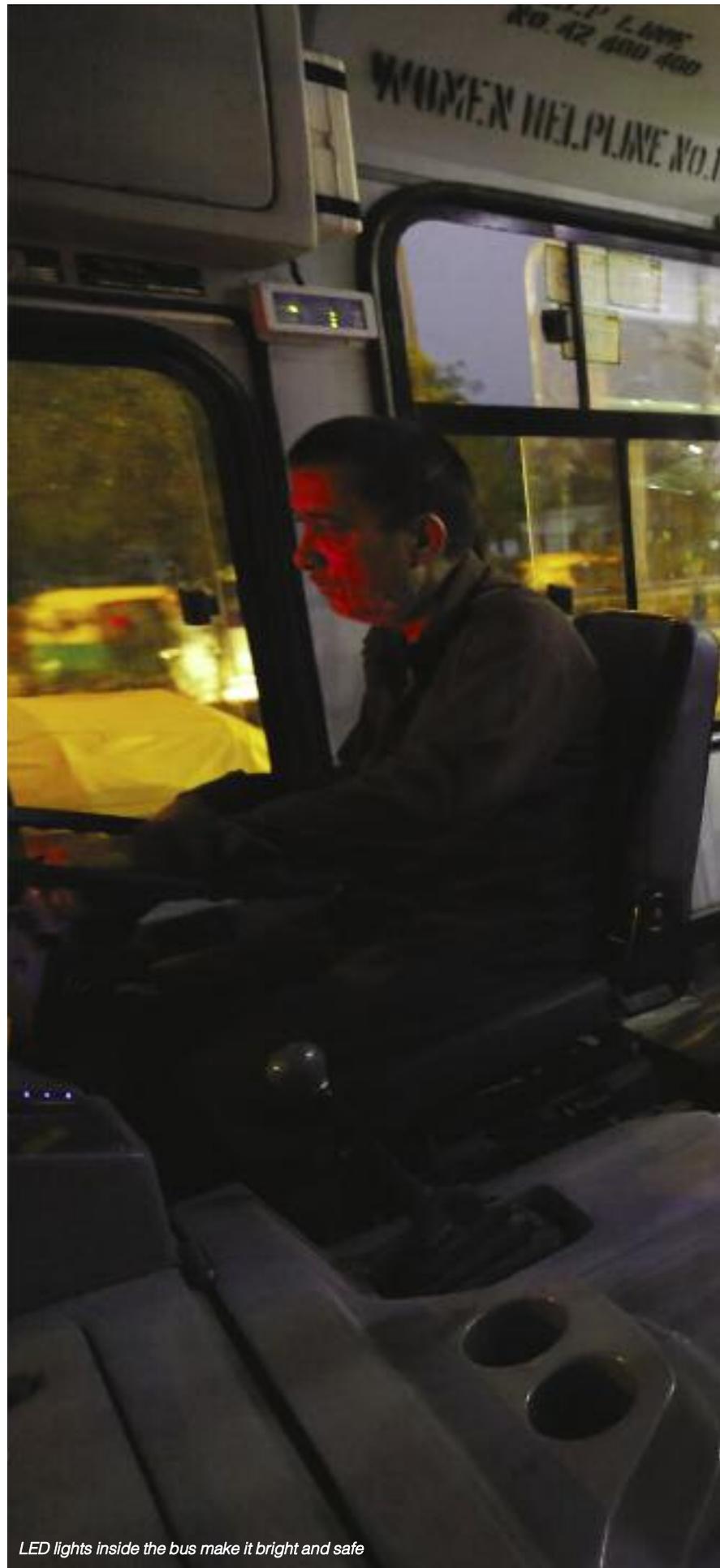
In the past, Delhi's bus system was rough and ready. The badly maintained DTC buses were very few in number. To beef up services, licences were given to individuals to run Redline, and later Blueline, bus services. The number of buses went up but there was a free for all on the capital's roads. Reckless drivers caused innumerable deaths as buses competed with each other for passengers.

In 2006, a court order finally took Blueline buses off the roads and told the Delhi government to put in place a proper bus policy. Thereafter, the orange buses came into existence.

use public buses but with distaste for the ride because of the misbehaviour of male passengers and the poor driving. The orange buses have made it possible for more than a million commuters to travel in relative safety and ease every day.

There are also 2,500 green and 1,275 red buses, run by the Delhi Transport Corporation (DTC). All are low-floored and the red ones are air-conditioned. They are a vast improvement on the old DTC buses but it is the orange buses that have made the real difference. New systems of ownership, regulation and use of information technology have raised the bar.

The 1,108 orange buses



LED lights inside the bus make it bright and safe

ORANGE BOOST

LAKSHMAN ANAND



LAKSHMAN ANAND



Sanjiv Sahai, CEO of DIMTS

‘Delhi has 7.5 million registered vehicles. Yet 50 per cent of the city’s population doesn’t own a vehicle.’

DIMTS is an equal equity joint venture of the Delhi government and the IDFC Foundation formed in 2007 to deal with infrastructure and urban transport. The company has supervised the renovation of Delhi’s Inter State Bus Terminus (ISBT) at Kashmiri Gate near the Old City, converting the ramshackle bus station into a neat, gleaming terminal. DIMTS has also employed a range of smart technologies at its command centre in the ISBT to monitor the orange bus service and ensure safety and efficiency.

Commuters say the orange buses are punctual and clean. They also approve of the bus design, incorporating a flat floor and large windows. In contrast, DTC’s red and green buses have two levels. Passengers say this puts them at risk, especially when the brakes are applied suddenly.

Gaurav Sengar, an IT programmer at BSES and a regular commuter on the 427A route between Nehru Place and Masjid Moth, says, “I used to travel on green buses before. One of my main reasons for switching to the orange bus is its plain design. I travel during office hours, which means the bus is always packed but I don’t have to worry about where I am stepping.”

Tickets are priced at ₹5, ₹10 and ₹15. The affordable rates attract students, the middle class and the working poor. “Being a student, I can’t afford to pay for autos every day,” says Shruti Handa, a second year arts student at Lady Shri Ram College. “The orange buses are cheap and fast too. Although the green buses have the same fare, I find these orange buses are more frequent on my route.”

Inside the bus, emergency helpline numbers are flashed on LED boards and are announced continuously. Kumar Vijaya, a conductor, says, “At DIMTS, we drivers and conductors are trained to ensure the safety of our passengers. If we come across any trouble, we are instructed to call the depot immediately and report it, and we are assured action will be taken at once.”

In addition to an app that informs passengers of bus timings, DIMTS has also introduced a security app called TellTail that can track a person’s movements and alert family and friends in case of danger. Both can be easily downloaded on a mobile phone.

Orange buses are not air-conditioned and are slightly higher than low-floor buses. “It is tough to travel in an orange bus in the scorching heat of a Delhi summer,” says Sengar. “So I switch to the red air-conditioned buses in summer. But I definitely prefer orange buses when the weather is cooler.”

NEW-AGE SOLUTIONS: The orange buses’ favourable features are a result of considerable evangelism within DIMTS. As CEO, Sanjiv Sahai is an ardent promoter of the use of buses for transport. His enthusiasm is infectious and so his team too is on a high. Born in Bhagalpur, Sahai joined the IAS in 1986 and has been Chairman and MD of DTC. Among his other assignments was a stint in the Prime Minister’s Office in 2005.

“Delhi has 7.5 million registered vehicles. Yet 50 per cent of the city’s population doesn’t own a vehicle. For shorter distances the working poor, the elderly and those below 18 depend on unorganised transport – cycle rickshaws, e-rick-



The gleaming new ISBT



The command centre for the orange bus service

LAKSHMAN ANAND



LAKSHMAN ANAND



shaws, *phatphats*. For longer distances, they require bus services,” says Sahai, in his office in the ISBT building.

Unlike DTC, which takes its buses off the road in the afternoon for school duties or other reasons, the orange buses ply through the day. So the service is very predictable, cheap and safe.

“We also identify the drivers biometrically. And we have a scorecard for them. If a driver speeds, he is sent for re-training. If he continues to over-speed, he can get thrown out. They cannot be re-employed,” says Sahai.

Ironically, some of DIMTS’ best bus companies have been formed by former Blueline operators. “You will be surprised to know that Clusters 1, 2 and 6 are operated by Blueline operators and Cluster 6 is doing the best in terms of operating parameters. Cluster 2 is operating with the lowest cost,” says Sahai.

Why were those Bluelines so reckless earlier? Sahai blames the nature of the contract. “Blueline buses operated through a revenue risk model. The entire revenue risk was borne by the Blueline operator,” says Sahai.

The price of bus tickets used to be fixed by the government and kept as low as possible for commuters. It was a political decision, not an economic one. As a result, prices of tickets didn’t keep pace with rising costs. So, to make money, Blueline operators plied on the most lucrative routes and ignored routes that attracted fewer passengers.

“They packed people into buses like sardines and lowered the cost of operations by bringing in cheaper drivers. They reduced investments in maintenance and so on. The Bluelines tried to get in as many passengers as possible, they competed with one another. They even paid DTC bus drivers not to pick up people,” says Sahai wryly. “It was the nature of the contract that was at fault.”

DIMTS radically changed this model, moving from the revenue risk model to the gross cost model. The revenue risk is now borne by the government.

One orange bus carries 1,000 passengers per day, earning around ₹7,300. But its total cost, including the profit the company operating the bus needs to make, is ₹13,000. The government pays the balance as subsidy. Freed from the niggling worry of balancing their finances, bus operators have found it easier to concentrate on improving their services.

“That means I bring in a roadworthy bus, a trained driver, I do not over-speed, I stop at all designated stops, I do not alter routes and I stick to the route as much as road conditions allow,” explains Sahai.

An economy of scale has also been created. Each company puts 200-300 buses on the road. The cost of running the depot, maintenance of buses, spare parts and other expenses are divided over the number of buses.

“None of these buses makes a profit,” says Sahai. “That is not what public transport is meant for. I want to throw this whole profit business out of the window. Our land use policy is that we move the poor to the outer circle of the city, to its borders. We impose a time penalty on the poor and we now want to impose a cost penalty as well. Equity, efficiency and the environment make it imperative for public transport to be subsidised.”

TECHNOLOGY WORKS: Inside the DIMTS command centre, six screens display traffic activity at six junctions. Abhijit Sarkar, Chief of Road

LAKSHMAN ANAND



Abhijit Sarkar, Chief of Road Transport

Inside the command centre video feeds continuously stream in.

LAKSHMAN ANAND



Vijay Kumar Palta, Depot Manager

If the bus breaks down, a service car is sent to the location within 30 minutes.

Transport, and his colleagues explain how the systems in the command centre contribute to an efficient bus service.

DIMTS has employed a range of technologies – wireless traffic signal control, CCTV surveillance of junctions, red light stop line detection and many more. Vinod Puranik, who has many years of experience with such technologies, shows how video feeds continuously stream into the control room. Even minute traffic violations can be seen. These are reported to the Delhi Traffic Police. DIMTS doesn't have the authority to penalise violators or enforce road discipline.

Adjacent to the screens is a GPS sensor-based vehicle tracking system. Every orange bus is fitted with GPS sensors. On a live map, the operator, sitting in the control centre, can track the bus number, its route, location, the driver and conductor's name and phone number, and the speed at which the bus is travelling.

Saumya Bhattacharya, Senior Manager, says, "The system also shows whether a bus is travelling on a given route or deviating from it. If it is deviating, the map will show the reason why. It also gives us an idea of the traffic situation."

At times, due to construction on a road, an orange bus has to take an alternative route. "In such cases, we get information from the traffic police on the condition of the road and its availability."

From GPS sensors fitted in other vehicles, like auto-rickshaws and DTC buses, DIMTS' command centre gets a clear picture of traffic movement, its density and volume. "It helps us find out whether a driver was genuinely late due to traffic or just took a break which our guidelines don't allow," says Sarkar.

The system also monitors the electronic ticketing machine (ETM). Whenever a ticket is issued, a live update appears on the database, which shows the amount paid, the origin of the journey and destination. The system also monitors the battery charge available on the ETM. Bhattacharya says, "If we see that an ETM is running out of charge we contact the conductor via phone and tell him to change the battery."

"We have stored all the information since the very beginning as we have to provide it to the government when required," says Bhattacharya.

DRIVERS AND BUSES: Even in the early morning hours, the Tushak Nala bus depot, or Cluster 2, as it is called, is bursting with activity. Orange buses leave the station one after another in an orderly manner as a guard notes down the bus number, driver ID and route details.

"We have a very tight schedule. Buses start leaving the depot from 4.30 am. By 8 am, 232 buses from our depot are out on the streets," says Ganesh Kumar, Action Depot Manager.

Kumar is a busy man in the early hours. He walks from one bus to another, checking how clean they are. "If any bus is found dirty, it is immediately sent to the automatic wash stations," says Kumar. "We have two automatic wash stations in our depot."

The Cluster 2 depot has 244 buses out of which 232 buses ply on 15 routes in Delhi. The depot was made operational in November 2011. Around 650 drivers work from the depot. "As a rule, we keep a number of drivers, around two-and-a-half times the number of buses in a depot," says Kumar.

The Cluster 2 depot is owned by 11 former Blueline bus owners.

According to Delhi High Court regulations, a driver must have passed Class



Bus depots are closely supervised



Young bus conductors

Orange buses leave the station in an orderly manner with guards noting the bus number, driver ID, route details.

If an orange bus breaks down, a service car is sent to the location within 30 minutes. Kumar says, "If on-the-spot repair is possible, it is done, otherwise a new bus is sent from the depot to the location to ply on the route. We never recall buses or drivers. Any change, if necessary, is done on the route itself."

Vijay Kumar Palta, Depot Manager, says, "We follow a strict penalty system to ensure an efficient workforce. For example, if a driver is found skipping stops, he is fined. As a result, drivers ensure they don't break the rules."

"All the buses are fitted with GPS, which helps us track each and every bus and monitor their routes and timings. Reports on a day's activity are submitted to the DIMTS headquarters."

There are 10 orange bus depots in Delhi. "Each depot has to go through a quarterly performance appraisal through the year," says Palta.

The Tushak Nala depot is at present working on an in-depot CNG refilling station. It already has a fully operational workstation, where buses are repaired.

"People are rational. They respond to correct incentives. The Bluelines were responding to a perverse infrastructure. In the gross cost model, they have responded positively," says Sahai.

By seamlessly integrating technology, training and infrastructure, DIMTS has shown that privatisation, when socially sensitive, works very well. The orange buses on Delhi's roads have meant happier passengers and fewer accidents. The bar for public transport has been raised. ■

Reporting by Shayak Majumder

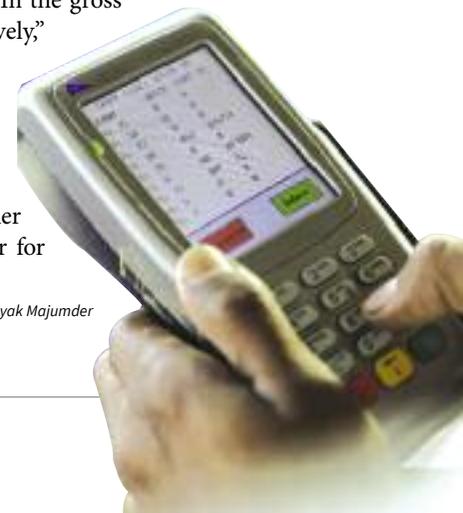
10 and have a Heavy Motor Vehicle Driver's licence to operate within Delhi. Each driver works a shift lasting eight-and-a-half hours and is paid a monthly salary.

Rakesh Kumar has been driving orange buses for over a year. Earlier, as a Blueline driver, he says he earned more but the management, infrastructure and job security are better now. "I used to earn around ₹40,000 per month, driving Blueline buses. But we were paid on a daily basis. So managing money was a bigger problem then," says Kumar. "Here, I get around ₹23,000 per month, but the payment method is better and more transparent. We also get incentives if we perform better."

Sonu Kashyap, another orange bus driver, says, "I used to drive private buses before. When I joined here I had to go through a training session. We were shown how to operate the orange bus, the GPS and signal board. We are strictly instructed not to miss a single stop on our route and to always keep the speed limit within 40 kmph."

Drivers often get on the wrong side of some commuters for following speed regulations. Kumar says, "Some passengers complain that we are driving slow or not opening the door whenever they ask us to. They quarrel with us. But we have been instructed to open our doors only at bus stops and to never over-speed. Most passengers don't create a fuss."

The conductors are trained to operate the ETM. Ravikant Bidholia, a conductor, says, "All the conductors are given a strict set of guidelines. Safety and comfort of passengers remain our priority. Apart from the ETM, we also carry pre-printed tickets, just in case the ETM stops working." An orange bus conductor earns about ₹8,500 per month.



THE TRANSITION TO ORANGE

Shayak Majumder
New Delhi

ORANGE buses have shown that clear rules and firm regulation can lead to multiple transformations with social benefits. Almost everyone respects a system that works. Take the example of owners of the former Blueline buses. They used to be reviled because their vehicles were badly maintained and the drivers did pretty much what they pleased on the road. But many of them now run orange buses efficiently without a trace of the earlier excesses for which they were infamous.

Former Blueline owners have been encouraged to set up private limited companies to run orange buses under contract with Delhi Integrated Multi-Modal Transit System (DIMTS). They have successfully made the transition to more organised and accountable ways of doing business.

Sunil Kumar is one of them. He, and eight other former Blueline owners joined hands to form the Govardhan Transport Company, which at present operates orange buses in Cluster 6.

Cluster 6 currently has 111 buses operating on seven routes from the Dilshad Garden depot. “We have a contract for providing 232 buses. As soon as we get a new bus depot, we are ready to supply the remaining number of buses,” says Kumar.

Govardhan Transport scores high on efficiency. But establishing a corporate structure wasn't easy and it is still a new company finding its feet in

Govardhan Transport scores high on efficiency. But establishing a corporate structure wasn't easy and it is still a new company finding its feet in more ways than one.

more ways than one. “Earlier, we used to handle our own individual businesses. We didn't have to confer with anyone else and we were responsible for our own profit or loss. But, things changed as we started the transport company.”

First came the realisation that a bus licence couldn't be got through political favours or hush money. Says Kumar, “There were big players in the game when DIMTS sought tenders for the clusters. We applied but didn't qualify initially.”

But on 28 October last year, Govardhan Transport was finally chosen for Cluster 6. Kumar now sits in a small office at the Dilshad Garden bus depot. His office window gives a clear view of the depot. Looking at a building under construction on the side, Kumar says, “Our offices are still being made. For now, all my colleagues make do with this small, makeshift office.” He points to a pile of rugs and mattresses in the corner of the room and says, “This is where we sleep when it's late. We are still a new company and work comes first for us.”

“Our depot is not even a year old. We are still learning. But, so far, the feedback from drivers and passengers has been positive.”

Says Kumar, “Bluelines were operated by individual owners. To get the most out of the business, the buses competed with one another. This resulted in packed buses and rash driving.”

Drivers were committed to pay a certain amount in a day to the owner. “After that they drove rashly and did whatever they could to maximize their earnings. There were no fixed routes and so invariably the most lucrative ones were preferred. Now, thanks to DIMTS, all the buses are of the same colour and ply fixed routes. There is no competition. The bus drivers are more relaxed and they drive well,” says Kumar.

“Revenues from Bluelines used to fluctuate. With orange buses, there is a fixed structure which we like as it is easy to monitor and maintain.” ■

LAKSHMAN ANAND



Sunil Kumar, who used to be a Blueline bus owner, now measures up to his corporate identity

BUSINESS

ENTERPRISE | CSR | ICT | GREEN TECH

Bandhan's big leap India's largest MFI gains bank status

PRASANTA BISWAS



Chandra Shekhar Ghosh, founding chairman and managing director of Bandhan

Subir Roy
Kolkata

WHAT is the secret behind the success of Bandhan, the microfinance institution (MFI), which was able to beat all the large corporate houses and powerful financial firms to win an in principle licence (along with IDFC) to become a full fledged commercial bank which puts it in the category of the Grameen Bank of Bangladesh? It is a repeat of the biblical story of David defeating Goliath, a big, powerful business being trounced by a small, nimble enterprise.

Kolkata-based Bandhan first surprised everybody when it became the largest MFI in 2012, barely a decade after its birth. But that was partly due to some of the leading MFIs with a big presence in Andhra

Pradesh falling behind after the state government there passed a law severely impairing microfinance operations and causing them huge losses.

But no such fortuitous development helped Bandhan get the in principle banking licence. It surprised everybody by audaciously applying for a licence and was not seen as a frontrunner since 23 applicants were in the field last year.

The clue to Bandhan's success lies in the fascinating path that Chandra Shekhar Ghosh, its founding chairman and managing director, now in his mid-

fifties, has traversed in the last quarter-century. After securing his masters in statistics from Dhaka University, Ghosh, whose family hails from Tripura, first started working with BRAC, a leading civil society organisation in Bangladesh working on multiple fronts for the uplift of the poor.

This, plus working with several NGOs after shifting to India in 1997, convinced Ghosh that he had to have his own setup if he wanted to scale up quickly. He recalls that Bandhan was not formed in textbook fashion with plans and resources first in place.

The clue to Bandhan's success lies in the fascinating path that Chandra Shekhar Ghosh, its founder, has traversed in the last quarter-century.

“I simply quit my job one day,” he recalls, “with no other offer in hand, so as to do something on my own. My family, close relatives and friends thought I was crazy, what with a four-year-old son and wife to take care of. For the first few days Nilima, my wife, just wouldn’t stop weeping. But after the initial phase she has stood by me like a rock.”

How well she understood him comes through with the story of how the name Bandhan was hit upon. When the core group, so to speak, discussed what name to give to the venture, it was Mrs Ghosh who said that “the name should reflect the basic emotions and feelings that fired the initiative – wanting to bond with the poor.” Thus transpired Bandhan’s *namkaran* (naming).

Bandhan Konnagar, named after a small town 25 km from Kolkata where Ghosh’s family had a house, was registered as a society in 2001. “We first had two employees. I must mention their names as they are still with us as part of the management – Partha Pratim Samanta and Fatik Bera.”

After the women’s groups to take the loans were formed, Bandhan faced the first serious hurdle, finding the money to give the loans. There was fruitless knocking on the doors of banks and financial institutions and tension mounted as the date for disbursement of loans approached. Then, so as not to lose face before the women who had been promised loans, Ghosh took out all his savings, borrowed from relatives and even took a loan from a money-lender at 7.5 per cent interest per month.

Deliverance finally came from the Small Industries Development Bank of India (SIDBI) in the form of a ₹25 lakh loan. Until this happened, “we were all losing hope though no one mentioned it. I will always remain grateful to SIDBI which stood by us when no one else did.” In the startup phase funding was the biggest problem but slowly some private banks came forward with assistance.

Over time Bandhan established a reputation for quality in the microfinance world and in 2006 decided to convert itself into a non-banking financial company under the rubric Bandhan Financial Services so that bank finance could be easily accessed. But the developmental work, like helping the ultra poor, continued through the original registered societies. To keep that going, five per cent of the yearly net profit of the microfinance business is transferred to the societies.

The next big break came in late 2007 when *Forbes*, after studying the work of over 600 microfinance organisations across the globe, selected 50 and placed Bandhan at number two! “The next morning we were flooded with phone calls and visitors. Many nationalised banks offered us finance. Now Bandhan receives funding from over 30 banks, Indian and foreign, and financial institutions.”

Bandhan faced several key problems in the initial years. One was opening accounts with banks with Bandhan’s branch-level officials operating them. Top people like president, secretary or treasurer, under whose signature accounts could be opened, could hardly be expected to operate them on a day-to-day basis.

Even getting poor village people to understand what an MFI was, proved onerous. “They commonly perceive us as chit funds.” This is because when chit funds canvas for deposits they heavily publicise their so-called assistance to the poor when they are only into deposit-taking, whereas it is MFIs which actually lend to the poor. “Initially, we had to work



A Self-Help Group of women discussing loans and savings in a village

It is the emphasis on skill development that is likely to be of invaluable help to Bandhan as it gears up to become a full-fledged bank.



even on lower-level district officials to clarify this.”

Another problem was local moneylenders. “After all, we were taking away their customers. Therefore they created a lot of hurdles in our way.” But in the initial days, perhaps the biggest hurdle was getting people to work for Bandhan when neither the organisation nor the sector was well known. And even if someone joined, retention and training were issues. Field training was very important and Ghosh sought to utilise the weekends for this. So he coined a slogan: ‘Give me your weekends and I will give you your future.’

Today the picture is far different. Bandhan has

nearly 13,000 employees, a residential training centre in south Kolkata called Bandhan School of Development Management and a training cell of 30 trainers. It is this emphasis on skill development that is likely to be of invaluable help to the organisation as it gears up to become a full-fledged bank.

A challenge in dealing with villagers, often illiterate, was to make a distinction between the substance of process and the formal process itself. To address this Ghosh has devised another slogan: ‘We are strict in our principles, not in our behaviour.’ This gives a clue as to how the organisation reaches out to its clientele.

For Ghosh the emotional history of the organisation is not complete without recalling how it first branched out of West Bengal into Tripura in 2006. The small team from the head office that set out had some who had to buy proper travel bags for the trip. The office staff came onto the street to see them off as they got into cabs for the airport. Many of them had never travelled by air before.

Today, in seven years, Bandhan is present in 22 states and union territories with just over 2,000 branches serving over five million borrowers, an outstanding loan book of ₹6,000 crore, reserves exceeding ₹1,000 crore and a recovery rate of over 99 per cent.

When it begins to function as a bank in a year’s time, it will not have to struggle to meet the regulatory requirement of 40 per cent of its advances going to the priority sector. Its entire loan book will be made up of priority sector advances! The real big thing will be the ability to take deposits from you and me. Now it has to borrow money from banks at around 12 per cent to lend to poor women at around 20 per cent. By paying depositors much less than 12 per cent but more than what other banks do, Bandhan will be able to cut its lending rate, already among the most competitive in the microfinance sector. ■

Comics get a makeover



Vivek Goel, CEO and Art Director of Holy Cow Entertainment

Shayak Majumder
New Delhi

COMICS are a reflection of our society, believes Vivek Goel, CEO and Art Director of Holy Cow Entertainment (HCE), a company that is winning accolades for its superlative comics and graphic novels.

“Today, stories in comics are darker and more violent. Their superheroes are more believable because they don’t reach their goal with two fights and a few punch lines. Instead, they struggle against all odds to save humanity. This gives us hope in a world riddled with wars and riots,” he remarks.

Launched in 2011, HCE is India’s first creator-owned comic book and graphic novel publishing company. Goel, who founded the company, is a hands-on owner, drawing his own comics and relating unconventional tales.

HCE’s flagship series, *Ravanayan* and *Aghori*, tell stories of anti-heroes and their fight against fate and dark forces. *Aghori* was nominated for the best comic series two years in a row at the prestigious Annual Indian Comic Con Festival.

Ravanayan is an unconventional take on Ravana, the formidable King of Lanka in the epic, *Ramayana*. Traditionally, Ravana is depicted as a master villain, whose ill deeds are brought to an end by Lord Rama.

But there are many versions of the *Ramayana*. A deeper look at ancient literature reveals poets and writers who have saluted Ravana’s power, wisdom and strength of character. So what drove a brave king like him to resort to trickery and kidnap Sita? Why did a mighty king like Ravana drive his beloved family and his rich kingdom to doom?

Ravanayan tries to answer these unresolved questions. “We researched a lot for *Ravanayan*,” explains Goel. “We took excerpts from Valmiki’s *Ramayana*



and added our imagination to it.” Six issues of *Ravanayan* have been published and the last one will be released in the middle of this year.

Goel describes *Aghori* as India’s answer to the British horror franchise, *Hellraiser*. The story is about the journey of Veera, a Sadhu, to the depths of hell to save that which he holds dear. *Aghori* introduces the reader to a dark fantasy where gory battles take place with surprising twists and turns. *Aghori* is HCE’s bestselling series, providing an insight into the choice and demand of modern readers.

“Seeing the popularity of *Aghori*, we have decided to expand the *Aghori* universe with new flagship heroes and villains who will cross paths and battle each other,” says Goel. “We have already introduced characters like Solomon and Desh and two more will be launched this year.”

These new characters will have their own comics series, set in an intermingled HCE universe. This is similar to the American Marvel and DC comics.

HCE is inspired by Virgin Comics. “In 2004, Virgin revolutionised the India comic book scene by introducing us to digital printing, glossy paper and international comic book size. They also showed us that we could come up with comics of global standards with local content,” says Goel.

Like most start-ups, HCE didn’t happen overnight. Goel had to struggle. He faced rejection,

got exploited and learnt the tricks of the trade the hard way. It was his intense passion for comics that saw him through.

Goel gave up a promising career in the Merchant Navy to join a degree course in Fine Arts at Rachana Sansad College in Mumbai. “Art always ran in my blood,” says Goel. “My mother is a fashion designer. I always wanted to paint.” While in college, he freelanced for TV channels and other ventures. “I also designed cakes for special occasions,” he says.

In 2004, during his final year, Goel came across *Fathom Issue 1*, designed by Michael Turner.

“When I read Turner’s comic, I thought to myself, I can do this. I wanted to create comics in India of the same quality. Turner became my mentor.”

Goel got hooked to the idea. He joined Raj Comics in Delhi and worked as an inker for two months. “Inking is the art of applying brush strokes on pencil sketches to give art work the final shape before a comic is printed,” explains Goel. “It really helped me hone my skills as an artist. Naturally, my pencil art got better with time.”

Goel believes that being misused had an upside. It helped him understand the market better. “For instance, I learnt about the importance of trademark and copyright after I was befooled by a publisher who stole my artwork and character sketches only because I hadn’t registered them.”

After a long struggle, Goel came across Level 10 comics which offered him his first professional assignment. He worked with storywriter Vijayendra Mohanty and published five issues of *Northern Song*, a fantasy on medieval India that Goel describes as the Indian *Lord of the Rings*.

“I not only got my first registered series, I also learnt a lot about social networking and online marketing.” He also took keen interest in the process of printing and post-production of comics.

In 2011, Goel won an online competition and became the first Indian artist to design the cover of *Phantom – The Ghost Who Walks*, published by Moonstone Books in the US.

It catapulted him to fame and he became a recognised name in the world of comics.

Goel began working on *Ravanayan* with Mohanty at this time. “Initially, we thought of giving it to a separate publisher. But, owing to past experiences, I decided to invest in my own company and thus HCE was born.”

“I might be the cheapest artist in the country, as I draw my own books,” remarks Goel. “In the initial year, we had to look at a lot of cost-cutting options. While I drew, Vijayendra did the lettering and so on. But, from a team of three or four, we have become a reputed organisation. I have finally started hiring artists and office staff.” Goel believes that to make a venture a success you need to have passion and thorough knowledge of your market.

“So far, I have invested ₹15 lakh in HCE and now we are at the point of breaking even,” says Goel. “However, more than money, it is the passion of creating independent comics that pushes us forward.” ■

INSIGHTS

OPINION | ANALYSIS | RESEARCH | IDEAS

Do people matter?

AMIT DASGUPTA

'The people had lost their faith in the government which could only be regained by redoubled efforts. Would it in that case, not be simpler if the government dissolved the people and re-elected another?'

Bertolt Brecht

BY the time this article is published, the process to instal a new government in Delhi would have almost been completed. What has possibly distinguished these elections from the earlier ones is the unusually acrimonious and divisive campaign and, furthermore, a genuine angst that people cease to matter once the elections are over. This alienation between the people and the government is particularly worrying because it goes against the very tenets of democratic governance. After all, if people are what democracy is all about and if people are no longer relevant, has democracy died? Let me explain.

The universally accepted view has been that democracy is governance 'by the people'. What this essentially means is that since all the people in the country cannot, naturally, be involved in day-to-day governance, the process of governing is delegated to others through elections. In other words, the elected persons then become representatives of the people. It is like outsourcing. You get someone else to do the running-of-the-country job that you, personally, do not have the time or the money for. You expect the job to be done well and you decide to whom you will delegate the job on the basis of a free, fair and regular process. This is what the elections are expected to guarantee. If the persons you delegate the job to, do the job well, you might agree to hire them again. If not, you are free to delegate to someone you consider more competent the next time around. The freedom to delegate or to elect someone to represent your interests and welfare is, thus, considered a core attribute of democracy.

India's first elections were conducted between October 1951 and February 1952. It was a decision that Pandit Nehru took, despite opposition and criticism that it would be a disastrous experiment. Nehru believed that if India were to become a truly independent nation, democracy and, thus, democratically elected governance must lie at its core. It must represent, in other words, a critical element of the idea that is India. Since then, 17 elections have been held in India and the numbers of the electorate have been swelling. In 2009, over 400 million persons cast their ballot in India voluntarily, which is over 20 times the population of Australia, where voting is compulsory. Indians are rightly proud of our electoral process and the continual improvements that have taken place, including the electronic voting machines, or EVMs, which are indigenously manufactured. So, the first box can be



The freedom to delegate or to elect someone to represent your interests and welfare is considered a core attribute of democracy.

ticked: electing your representative.

Let us go to the second box. When a person votes, he agrees to 'hire' that person or agency, in this case, the candidate and party. This effectively means that those you hire must be accountable to you, as you are the employer. You hire the persons or agency on the basis of their manifesto and past performance. Regular monitoring, thereafter, takes place to ensure that time-lines are met and that what was promised is delivered. The first tenet of democracy is, thus, closely linked to the second and fundamental attribute – accountability to the people.

The recent elections are expected to see a record turnout of voters, not simply because of an increase in the population size but rather as a reflection of heightened consciousness among the electorate of the importance of electing a representative. Whom they elect as their chosen representative to form the government would, thus, be ideologically based and, more important, a conscious exercise. This is a major departure from the 1952 general election where choice was largely based on the re-building of India after colonial domination. Today, the scenario of choice has dramatically shifted with the

wide availability of information and thus, the comparisons that voters make to life elsewhere. We aspire for better lives and far greater economic well-being, especially with a rapidly growing middle class, which currently stands at around 400 million. We also aspire for a safe and secure environment and the rule of law. Elected representatives need to be accountable to the people who have hired them. Have you delivered on my aspirations is, thus, the fundamental question that the electorate asks today.

This second box – accountability – is ensured through elections. In other words, if the elected representative has not delivered on your aspirations, you no longer need to give him the job the next time around. However, what the system does not permit you to do is to terminate the contract midway for failure to deliver on your aspirations and their stated promises. Nor does the system permit you to be consulted on policies or policy changes. What you have done effectively is delegated how your aspirations will be met.

Accountability or the ability to deliver on your aspirations is the critical second box. Essentially, accountability is a measure of performance. It is hugely difficult to tick this box. Most certainly, India is performing much better today than it did in 1947. Our GDP has gone up, our literacy levels are much higher than they were, people are living much longer, our agricultural and industrial productivity are considerably higher, and people are, by and large, living qualitatively better lives than they did in 1947. However, the knowledge that we are better off today than our grandfathers were in 1947 is simply not good enough.

Continued on page 26

Reinventing rural India

BHARAT DOGRA

THE time has come to reform and strengthen panchayati raj so that it can take forward rural decentralisation in a creative and constructive way.

The current state of affairs in rural India is not at all satisfactory. In some villages the sarpanch/ pradhan is a dictator who dominates the entire panchayat system. In other places the panchayat secretary becomes the big boss. And in yet some other rural pockets the sarpanch and the panchayat secretary in cahoots rule the roost.

Instead, each ward member should be appointed as a pradhan/sarpanch for about six months in rotation. Ideally, 10 ward members can serve as pradhan/sarpanch over a period of five years but then that would depend on the size of the panchayat. Reservations for women and weaker sections can be provided at ward panch level.

Local educated youth from within the panchayat area should be appointed for doing secretarial work. They can be trained to function as panchayat mitras and the practice of appointing secretaries from outside the panchayat area can be abolished.

Various panchayat committees and ward sabhas should play a more active role with continuity. This will help gram sabhas be more effective. Gram sabhas and ward sabhas should get more power to decide critical survival issues, bringing them at par with the more empowered gram sabhas in Scheduled Areas. At the same time, it should be made clear to gram sabhas that they have to function in conformity with India's core constitutional values of social justice, democracy and secularism and uphold the integrity and unity of the country.

At the block level panchayati raj has not found a solid position. So the block-level structure can be eliminated and the district level strengthened. This will make the concept of district government a reality. During panchayat elections, villagers can elect their ward panch and villagers of about five panchayats can elect one district member.



A gram sabha meeting in progress

Panchayat elections should be completely without any political party affiliations. However, district elections can be held with the participation of political parties. But the role of money power and criminals has to be opposed very strongly else all other achievements will be negated. Systems should be in place to check any possibility of corruption and social audits should be conducted regularly and properly. An effective system of grievance redressal and transparency should be an integral part of panchayati raj.

Panchayati raj institutions should get adequate powers and control over local resources so that they can take over the functions and areas of work designated for them.

All ward sabhas, gram sabhas and panchayats should carefully prepare their own development plans. The district plan should be a reflection of all such plans in the district. Planning should proceed from bottom to top and not the other way around.

Alongside it is important to ensure that even the remotest village has access to the latest information and knowledge. This will enable people to meld their traditional wisdom with new knowledge while deciding on the kind of development they want.

This knowledge can be delivered not just through the printed word but through audio-visual media,

folk theatre and well-organised training programmes. Corporates and vested interests should be firmly kept out.

Issues that affect more than one panchayat or district can be decided by consensus. Rules and regulations enacted to provide protection from pollution, toxicity and dangerous industries must be respected by panchayats to ensure safety.

It is equally important to ensure sustainability and equity in development. The entire village community must be involved enthusiastically in local development plans, in ensuring the environment is protected and that the needs of the poorest are given priority.

Decentralisation will open up new opportunities of linking food security with the prosperity of the local farming community. All cereals, pulses, oilseeds,

spices and other foods needed for the local public distribution system and nutrition programmes should be procured at a fair and remunerative price from local farmers.

Efforts should be made to make even backward areas at least self-reliant in meeting their own needs. This can be done by using natural resources judiciously, ensuring sustainable development of agriculture at low costs, protecting indigenous seeds, biodiversity, enhancing greenery and ensuring water conservation.

Consumers in urban areas can be linked directly to local organic farmers and dairy farmers. Cooperatives should be encouraged. Efforts to protect indigenous breeds of cattle and other farm animals should be encouraged.

For energy we can think of a mixed decentralised system based on renewable energy sources like solar, wind, micro-hydel, bio-mass, biogas and the Mangal Turbine. Panchayats can pick and choose the kind of energy they want, depending on their needs and their local ecology.

Such creative decentralised work is possible only when over-centralisation and the domination of big corporate interests (including huge multinational companies) are challenged and checked. ■

Continued from page 25

For countries like North Korea, for instance, where information is denied, such statistics might impress its citizens but when the information gateway is opened, people tend to compare their lives with those of others. What they find is that today we are at the bottom of the pile as far as the Human Development Index goes but are world leaders as the most corrupt and thus, corruptible people. It is this that distresses people acutely because it is seen as an aspirational failure and thus a major accountability lapse. It is not just the fact that promises made have not been delivered upon but rather the sheer arrogance and impunity with which people have been taken for granted and rendered irrelevant that has shaken our faith.

This brings us to the third and final – what I would call the most important – box: the role of peo-

ple. At one level, whom we elect as our representatives is vitally important. A political analyst had once said, if we vote like sheep we are sure to get wolves. In a similar vein, it has been argued that people get the government they deserve. But at another and more critical level, the principal tenet of democracy is the continued participation of and by the people in the realisation of their aspirations. It is this participation that ensures the functioning of democracy. If we were to remove people's participation, democratic governance would fail. In other words, we have a continued responsibility in the realisation of our aspirations and this cannot cease simply because we have delegated the task to our elected representatives. Indeed, when we take comfort in delegation as our sole responsibility, we connive with the wolves in creating a flawed democracy. In

other words, we actively conspire in making ourselves irrelevant. We become collaborators in our own demise. It is the ultimate betrayal of the people by the people. If, on the other hand, we seek not simply change but transformational change in the quality of our lives, we have to become active participants in the process. Was it not Gandhi who said, be the change you wish to see? People will matter only if people wish to matter.

What this means is that we re-cast the manner in which we see our role. Unless we think differently about what democracy truly entails, we will continue to run with the wolves. Is our future not important to us? ■

Amit Dasgupta is a recently retired diplomat, currently living in Visakhapatnam, who aspires to become a full-time writer. His book, 'Lessons from Ruslana: In Search of Alternative Thinking,' is due for release next year. He may be reached at amit.dasgupta2013@yahoo.com.

Global evidence not for dams

HIMANSHU THAKKAR

THE establishment likes to equate large dams with development. But those who suffer the adverse consequences of large dams associate them with displacement, deforestation, deprivation and debt. While the pro-dam lobby sees dams as drought-proofing measures, critics have for long associated dams with drying up of rivers, destruction of biodiversity and depletion of groundwater in downstream areas. This debate has been going on for long, but we have seen little change in the way decisions about dams are taken. There is little democracy there. Dissent is invariably dealt with repression.

So there are a lot of d-words associated with dams. Two new words have joined that list: deception and delusion. The negative conclusions about dams have come in recent weeks from two reputed international forums: Oxford University Research and the Report of the Inter-governmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC).

Oxford University's Atif Ansar, Bent Flyvbjerg, Alexander Budzier and Daniel Lunn have published this year a research paper titled, "Should we build more large dams? The actual costs of hydropower mega-project development. Energy Policy." The paper incorporates evidence-based research and an "outside view, applied to large dams for the first time here."

After analysing data from 246 large dams commissioned between 1934 and 2007 from all over the world and looking at all kinds of dams and their objectives, they have concluded that there is inherent, systematic, psychological delusion and political deception on the part of officials in deciding to build large dams. This results in underestimating the costs and construction periods and over-estimating the benefits, putting a question mark about the selection of correct options. They suggest that the forecasts of decision-makers and hence ex-ante judgement, are often adversely biased, leading to mega dams typically facing adverse outcomes.

The authors suggest that there is a need to "create transparency on risk profiles of various energy alternatives, from not only the perspective of financial cost and benefit but also environmental and social impact – hard evidence is a counter-point to experts' and promoters' oft-biased inside view."

This is exactly in line with what we have been suggesting here in India in the functioning of various decision-making forums. The authors, in fact, conclude, "Projects with a poor cost and schedule performance are also likely to have a poor environmental and social track record. A greater magnitude of cost and schedule overruns is thus a robust indi-

cator of project failure... This result suggests that developing countries in particular, despite seemingly the most in need of complex facilities such as large dams, ought to stay away."

This phenomenon of delusion and deception is best illustrated in India by the Sardar Sarovar Project in Gujarat. The project, that started with cost estimates of ₹6,406 crore, is far from complete although close to ₹50,000 crore have already been spent. The corruption involved in this project will be known only when there is a credible independent scrutiny of the expenses. The current regime is totally against even an independent Lokpal or use of



the RTI. The full social and environmental impacts of the project are still not known. The most touted benefit of the project – drought-proofing Kutch, Saurashtra and North Gujarat – is now not even part of the Gujarat government's agenda and, mind you, there was no agitation against building canals in these regions. Instead, water is being taken away for unplanned and unjustified utilisation for urban and industrial use. And now the project is being used to push the political agenda of constructing the world's highest statue.

There are many other instances that exemplify the delusion and deception in decisions on dams in India. The Maharashtra irrigation scam and its whitewash by the Chitale Commission is one recent example. The non-transparent, non-participatory and unaccountable functioning of the Advisory Committee in the Union Ministry of Water Resources for consideration of the techno-economic viability of Irrigation, Flood Control and Multi Purpose Project Proposals (TAC in short) is a perennial problem.

The Khuga and Thoubal irrigation projects in Manipur, both initiated in 1980, are still ongoing and have seen cost escalations of 28 and 35 times the original costs, but the TAC has been clearing all such claims without any questions! The same is the case of the Dhansiri irrigation project in Assam, started in 1975, still ongoing with costs having gone up by over 36 times from original estimates!

In fact, it is not a secret even for the Planning Commission that Major and Medium Irrigation Projects are not delivering any benefits for over the last two decades to the net irrigated area. In the case of hydropower projects, the installed capacity has gone up twice in the last two decades, from 20,275 MW in 1993-94 to 40,524 MW in March 2014, but generation per MW installed capacity has gone down by over 16 per cent during this period. But no questions are asked!

The second significant adverse comment on dams came from the IPCC's second working group report of the Fifth Assessment, made public on 31 March

this year. The report has a number of significant references on how large dams perform in a changing climate. This led to the conclusion that dams and infrastructure projects contribute significantly to "non-climate impacts" which, after interacting with changing climate, exacerbate the overall impact on human societies and ecosystems.

Climate change and dams together affect a greater eco-region: sediment trapping by reservoirs exacerbates the impact of sea level rise. In the case of flood protection, dams and embankments may do more harm than good and ecological measures would fare better. Dams and hydropower projects affect biodiversity, which is critical

in facing climate change challenges. In the tropics, the global warming potential of hydropower may exceed that of thermal power. Dams increase the vulnerability of weaker sections to climate change and hydropower itself is vulnerable to climate change.

This again is not exactly breaking news. We have been raising these issues with the Union Ministry of Environment and Forests, its Expert Appraisal Committee and others. Now that IPCC has said this, the official agencies will take note.

In the face of such clear evidence of the role of big dams and big hydropower projects in a changing climate regime, there is no dearth of proponents selling hydro projects as clean, green, cheap and renewable, including some environmental groups like the Centre for Science and Environment.

As India goes to the polls, the least that one can expect the election manifestoes and promises of the political parties seeking the mandate to rule would be to take a hard look at the performance of big dams in India and step up corrective measures. Instead, we have statements from Narendra Modi, the BJP prime ministerial candidate, saying that northeast India is heaven for hydropower development and they would take up inter-linking of rivers in a big way. The Congress has no different agenda. Even the Aam Aadmi Party (AAP), unfortunately, has refrained from taking any clear stand on this issue. It seems the people have a long road of struggle ahead. ■

Himanshu Thakkar is with SANDRP

Language of politics is changing

VIR K. CHOPRA

IN the run-up to the elections, it is easy to miss something significant that has been happening below the surface of the media noise; something that is remarkable and potentially a big gain for Indian democracy and its future.

A democracy is at a very basic level “people power”. But the concept of democracy, especially the concept of a liberal democracy of the kind that India professes to be, means a lot more.

For the first time, seriously, in these elections, we can see the language of politics in India undergoing a noticeable change.

The implications are hugely positive in the long term.

Universal themes like economic development, combating corruption and women’s empowerment appear to have been embraced by the major players. Even the Congress, which presided over scandalous corruption during recent times, has put the tackling of corruption high on its list. Something that was never seriously on any political agenda is now suddenly occupying a prominent position in the political discourse.

The key reasons for this appear to be:

- The qualitative demographic change that has been quietly taking place in India
- The role of information and communication technology (ICT) in spreading awareness
- The bigger inroads that media including social media has made into our lives
- The recent success of the Aam Aadmi Party that originated from the anti-corruption movement of Anna Hazare

Economic development, which was never stated in universal terms, has risen to the top of political agendas. For the first time India is witnessing the

dominance of what I might call “a universal language” over the “sectorial language” that has thus far been the accepted norm.

Till now, if there was any talk of development, it was always one sector or the other. Handouts were promised, subsidies were flashed, reservations and benefits to minority status were thrown about, but no one talked of any form of universal development that would benefit all. We see a different motif emerging now.

The reason why I think this is particularly significant is that the wheels of democracy have now moved forward to where universal language is becoming necessary. The new political language has incorporated terms like economic development, education, electricity, infrastructure, anti-corruption, public accountability, transparency in governance and health for all. This is a high point and a great silver lining.

The leaders of both the major national political parties, Rahul Gandhi and Narendra Modi, have adopted the twin universal themes of development and fighting corruption in a big way. From Modi there is also talk of public accountability and people-centric governance. These are again strong universal themes.

From various opinion polls and election surveys, it is increasingly looking likely that the BJP and its allies will form the next government. If that is so, I do believe that Narendra Modi as PM would find it very difficult not to deliver on these poll promises.

By making this election a presidential kind of election, Modi has introduced a sense of personal accountability. This was entirely missing from the Indian political scenario till now. More importantly, if Modi wins this election for the BJP and the NDA, one of the reasons would be that the electorate, especially the middle class which counts for something now, would have identified with his message

of economic development and of eliminating corruption. He will find it near impossible not to deliver on these. This is good news particularly where corruption is concerned. I have long held a belief that if there was one single affliction the removal of which would change India, it is corruption

It may be unrealistic to expect that corruption will suddenly disappear from the system. But it is quite realistic to expect that corruption may not pervade the system any more. Mostly because people have now experienced that they are empowered by technology, by print and electronic media and more importantly because of the change in the mindset of a significant portion of the Indian population by which the people would not be willing anymore to accept openly corrupt practices.

I believe these universal values are here to stay because they are finding roots in our democratic culture and associated political language. If the NDA digresses, others will get ready with the same message, only more effectively and with a better plan. So, at worst, India may find itself still on the downhill side of a “J” curve. But the upside should not be far behind.

For democracy to be meaningful, it must encompass the ideas of freedom, equality, inclusiveness, human dignity and citizen participation. It must deliver a just and fair society with equality of opportunity for all, irrespective of gender or economic and social status.

Furthermore, the idea of “people power” nurses within it the notion of public accountability. The citizens become true stakeholders.

So far India has been a democracy in which people have voted but not had a real sense of participation. It is like being literate because you can write your name!

Now that is changing for the first time and intimations of a transition are in the new political language that is gaining currency. ■

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Jal's appeal as a film is that it is neither masala nor arthouse

Jal goes to untamed Kutch

The powerful story of a water diviner

Saibal Chatterjee
New Delhi

DEBUTANT director Girish Malik's recently released *Jal* unfolds in the strikingly beautiful but exceedingly inhospitable Rann of Kutch. Like its dramatic backdrop, the film is both heady and harrowing.

Jal narrates a never-before-told tale of an over-reaching water-diviner who is doomed to battle the untamable elements and his own increasingly sceptical flock. The film's epic construct has multiple plots and skeins. It addresses a range of social, ecological and moral themes in one sweep.

But while being completely non-formulaic in terms of substance, *Jal* isn't what could be regarded as an activist film made with the sole purpose of highlighting a pressing problem. It does convey a message but it employs recognisably mainstream storytelling methods to make its point.

A saturated colour palette, heightened emotional conflicts, dizzying camerawork and an elaborate background score (composed by singer Sonu Nigam and celebrated percussionist Bickram Ghosh) add up to an immersive and often unsettling movie experience.

At the heart of the plot is a larger-than-life protagonist, a man named Bakka who is blessed with the ability to find water in the desert. He is up against all the frailties that the human spirit is heir to and falls prey to circumstances beyond his control.

Jal, at one level, is a love triangle in which jealousy,

betrayal, greed, sacrifice and tragedy play out in an unforgiving milieu where life hangs by a thread.

The film blends the principles of simple human drama with the nuances of complex environmental issues without losing sight of either. "I was absolutely sure from the very outset that *Jal* would be neither masala nor arthouse," says Malik, who has co-scripted the film with the author of the story, Rakesh Mishra. "I did not want to either impose my views on the film or be preachy."

So, *Jal* is an entertainer that also happens to be dark and disturbing. "A docu-drama approach to the subject would not have worked for me. I could see the potential that both the story and the setting had of yielding a larger, dramatic film," he adds.

Jal made it to the multiplexes in early April on a Friday that also saw the release of a David Dhawan comedy (*Main Tera Hero*). "It certainly wasn't easy convincing the distributors that my film has the potential to appeal to a wider audience," says Malik. It is perfectly understandable why he is enthused as much by the positive reviews the film has garnered as by the strong response it has received from audiences.

In October last year, the film was selected for the 'New Currents' section of the Busan Film Festival, which is widely regarded as Asia's premier cinema showcase.



Girish Malik

"The version screened in Busan," says Malik, "was much starker and it was shorn of much of the humour that is an integral part of the film."

Although *Jal* is only his first feature film, Malik has been in the business long enough to be aware of how it works. For over a decade, he has acted in films and television shows, besides producing and directing serials and music videos.

It was way back in 2003-2004 that he first toyed with the idea of making a film about the ramifications of the water crisis in the Rann of Kutch.

"The Rann of Kutch landscape is such," says Malik, "that it tends to play tricks on one's sense of what is real and what isn't." For a professed admirer of the writings of Paulo Coelho, that element of blurred perceptions had to be an integral part of the narrative.

Jal was shot at the peak of summer, when the parched Rann of Kutch is at its most oppressive.

The actors that were signed up for the project – Purab Kohli, Tannishtha Chatterjee, Kirti Kulhari, Yashpal Sharma, Saidah Jules, among others – were told that filming would take place in the cooler months for fear that they would pass up their roles if they knew the harsh conditions they would be working in.

"Shooting in Kutch was a colossal challenge," says Malik. "The heat that comes out of the earth and the

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miles and miles of nothingness that one confronts in the area can be disorienting. But it creates a mystical atmosphere that is difficult to express in words," says the director. "That is exactly what I wanted to capture on the screen."

Malik says that the making of *Jal* was very tough but it was "a great life-altering experience." He adds: "I have changed as a human being in the process of putting this film together."

The film dramatises the everyday struggle of the people in this part of Gujarat against the elements. Water is severely scarce here; the migratory pink flamingos are dying; and the efforts of a group of conservationists to save the avian visitors from the salinity of the desert pits the villagers against the birds. The locals ask: why must the winged creatures get water when we humans are struggling for access?



Shooting in Kutch was a big challenge

Through the tale of the rise, fall and eventual redemption of the over-confident water-diviner, what *Jal* lays bare is the dehumanisation that inevitably happens when people are pushed to desperation over the fight for a commodity as essential as water.

At the centre of the film are two warring villages – one has water, the other doesn't. Residents of the latter have to depend on the diviner to find the spots in the desert where water might be available.

Three separate developments push the plot forward. The water department sends a machine to the village to do the work that the diviner does. His turf under threat, he goes all out to reclaim his pre-eminence as the villagers' only hope.

Matters get more complicated as the diviner falls in love with a girl in the 'enemy' village, in the process breaking the heart of a woman from his hamlet who has a crush on him.

The bird watchers, led by a Russian girl, trigger consternation among the villagers by appearing to accord greater importance to the cause of the flamingo chicks than the obvious needs of the humans who survive in this rain-starved terrain. The eventual consequences of the growing distrust are disastrous.

Jal, which also made the Indian Panorama cut last year, has created just the kind of ripples that Malik needed in order to push ahead with his fledgling filmmaking career. He is already working on a slew of new ideas, including a fiction film about three Punjabi folk musicians. "It will be a mix of emotions, philosophy and humour," he says.

Also on Malik's anvil is an international film about the lives of honey collectors. He is close to finalising a co-production deal with players in Korea and France for the project. ■

LIVING HERITAGE

Susheela Nair
Udaipur

I watched an amber sun sink behind mountain tops as I sat in the Sunset Terrace of the Fateh Prakash Hotel in Udaipur, the fairytale city of lakes, *havelis*, marble palaces, impregnable forts and resplendent maharajas in Rajasthan.

As I savoured the restaurant's Mewari delicacies, I could see in the distance the Taj Lake Palace Hotel glimmering in the aquamarine waters of Lake Pichola and gradually acquiring a spectacular glow with the illuminations at twilight.

The hotel is just a boat ride away. It has archways embellished with intricate carvings and scenic courtyards filled with lily ponds and fountains. Taj Palace was also one of the filming spots for the James Bond movie, *Octopussy*.

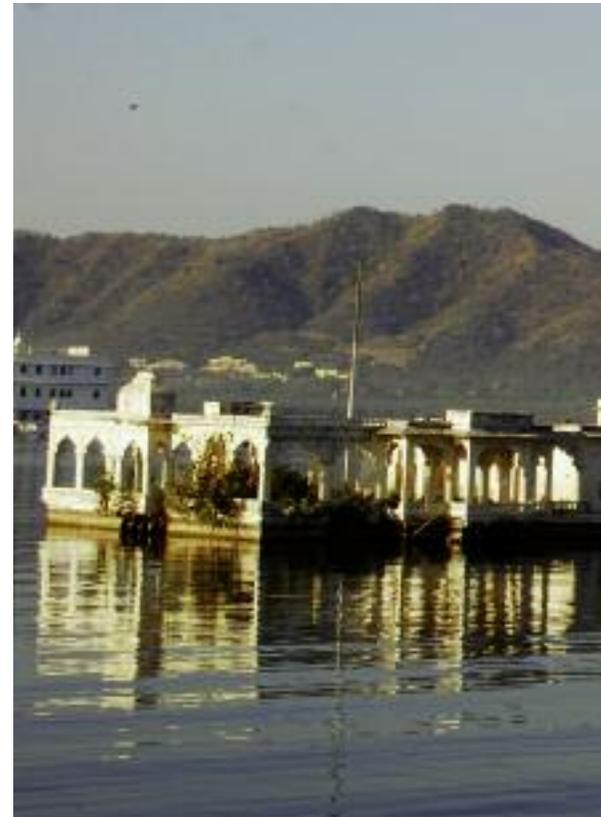
Encircled by temples, family mansions, bathing ghats and palaces, Lake Pichola is the star attraction of Udaipur. Equally fascinating is the Jag Mandir Palace, the first island palace of Lake Pichola and the inspiration behind the world-famous Taj Mahal in Agra.

I was in Udaipur to attend the World Heritage Living Traditions Festival, jointly organised by UNESCO in New Delhi and the Maharana of Mewar Charitable Foundation (MMCF) in Udaipur, at the City Palace Complex. Apart from thought-provoking talks by dignitaries from global and national organisations, NGOs, educational institutions and foundations, there were craft workshops, music concerts, a photography exhibition, and a Heritage Walk through Unnoticed Udaipur.

After the conference I embarked on a tour of the City Palace Complex which is dotted with art galleries, museums and award-winning heritage hotels. Equally spectacular is the City Palace, a masterpiece in marble and granite with massive gates, a maze of corridors and inter-connected courtyards and rooms. A quick tour of the City Palace Museum provided me with a sense of Mewar's history. I saw rooms extravagantly decorated with mirrors, tiles and paintings and a large, myriad collection of artifacts.

The arched windows with coloured glass panes and sculptured *bas* relief embellishments held me spellbound. Other highlights include the Kaanch ki Burj which, as the name suggests, is decorated with glasswork from the floor to the ceiling. There is also a gallery here embellished with Dutch and Chinese tiles.

The palace, however, is best known for the Mor Chowk with its splendid blue-green convex mirror inlay and mosaic



Lake Pichola

reliefs of dancing peacocks. Manek Chowk, the ornately landscaped palace grounds, comes alive during festivals, ceremonies and the breathtaking *Holi ka Dahan* ceremony when age-old rituals are performed and the holy bonfire lit.

The Crystal Gallery, located in the Fateh Prakash Palace, boasts of an exquisite collection of European crystal cut-glass furniture and vases and mirrors dating back to the 1870s. Many other items are also on display. The gallery houses dinner sets, perfume bottles, furniture and the only crystal bed in the world.

Don't also miss seeing the imposing Surya Gokhda, the emblem of Surya, the Sun God.

The walls of the Moti Mahal are inlaid with bits of glass and mirrors, creating a magical interplay of reflections.

SUSHEELA NAIR

Dilkush Mahal (Palace of Joy) is embellished with magnificent miniature frescoes and two splendid chambers – the Kaanch ki Burj (Turret of Glass) and the Chitran ki Burj (Painted Turret). Manek Mahal (Ruby Palace) has entire walls inlaid with ornate mirror work and coloured glass. The Music Gallery, where musical instruments belonging to the House of Mewar are on display, is worth a peek. The Sculpture Gallery is equally interesting.

During our Heritage Walk, we strolled down



Shriji Arvind Singh Mewar of Udaipur

IS WHAT UDAIPUR OFFERS

SUSHEELA NAIR



winding cobble-stoned streets lined with old crumbling *havelis* and passed art and handicraft shops spilling onto the street. We climbed up to the magnificent Jagdish Mandir which has a spire that is 80 feet high and is richly decorated with friezes of *apsaras*, dancers and elephants. From there, we headed to Jagdish Chowk, which is filled with dozens of small and colourful shops.

Another interesting stop in my itinerary was the Vintage & Classic Car Museum. For automobile junkies it can be overwhelming to see the Maharaja's gleaming collection of cars. There are grand limousines, automobiles, a magnificent Rolls Royce, Cadillac open convertibles, rare Mercedes models, a 1936 Vauxhall and a 1937 Opel which belonged to the House of Mewar and are still in perfect running condition.

During our Udaipur sojourn, we learnt that this heritage city is globally renowned for promoting tourism, the visual and performing arts, education, sports and spirituality. It has emerged as a city with 'centres of excellence' exemplifying how powerful a catalyst living heritage can be in fuelling new ideas for the future.

Wherever we went, we could sense the pride the people of Udaipur took in their heritage. The painstaking efforts of the custodians of the City Palace and the MMCF in conserving their city is commendable.

Shriji Arvind Singh Mewar of Udaipur, the 76th Custodian of the House of Mewar, is passionate



The Fateh Prakash Hotel lit up at night

about heritage conservation. He says, "Heritage conservation is the heart and soul of our work in Udaipur through the MMCF. It is not about protecting buildings and monuments. Heritage is a much wider concept and it encompasses the ecology, way of life, cultural mores, language, cuisine, music and traditional crafts of the people. Architectural conservation, though demanding, is not the only facet of heritage conservation. That is why we have been propagating the concept of living heritage in the context of Mewar and Rajasthan."

Explaining what he means by 'living heritage', Shriji says, "It is a constantly evolving model of managing heritage and keeping it alive, dynamic and relevant to changing times and covers both the tangible and intangible forms of heritage. I firmly believe liv-

ing heritage has the inherent dynamism to trigger development of modern facilities in ancient environments."

In espousing 'living heritage', Shriji has provided heritage management a contemporary perspective for contemporary audiences. "This sustains the ancient perennial values of the House of Mewar. Living heritage has the power to transform regional economies, inject pride in our heritage and enrich our societal fabric. This is a unique case of lateral thinking, of tradition remaining connected with the real world of today."

The MMCF has remained committed to supporting the goals and objectives held sacred in the 1400-year history of the family tradition

of custodianship. The 'living heritage' of the House of Mewar encompasses a wide range of activities: environmental protection through water resource management, extensive medical and healthcare aid, providing pension to ex-employees, promoting self-reliance among women and encouraging financial support to education and cultural endeavours. These have cumulatively transformed the ethos of Udaipur, the capital city of Mewar, to emerge as a centre of excellence in every aspect of present-day life. ■

FACT FILE

How to reach: Udaipur is well connected by air, rail and road

Where to stay: Fateh Prakash Palace
Taj Lake Palace, Jagmandir Palace
Shiv Nivas Palace Hotel

GREEN CURES / Dr G.G. Gangadharan

Absorb nutrients



ONE of the challenges before modern medical science is to get the human body to absorb nutrients so that tissues are regenerated.

After middle age the rate of degeneration is quicker than regeneration. Supplements of iron, calcium and Vitamin B aren't

absorbed either.

Ayurveda offers an answer in Rasayana. The agni in the body facilitates assimilation through 13 metabolic fires. These are present in all tissues and digestive centres, are semi-liquid in consistency and are part of the bodily fluids within the endocrine and exocrine systems. The most important of these digestive juices are in the gastro intestinal tract, starting from saliva in the mouth to the gut microbes' interaction in the large intestine.

Ayurveda explains that the body needs to go through a process of cleansing to absorb nutrients. Ayurveda draws a parallel with fabric dyeing. For dyeing a cloth, it has to be first washed by appropriate methods to remove dirt from the weave of the fabric so that fresh colours can adhere fast.

Sroto-śodhana – cleaning of the micro channels – is the first stage in Rasayana-chikitsa or nutritional therapy. Through this process all the 13 agnis get revitalised so that the chemical chain mechanism of the body's absorption from gut through tissues takes place effectively. Rasayana-chikitsa follows such Sroto-śodhana, and as the body is now receptive to the desired effects, treatment becomes fruitful and effective.

Describing the effects of Rasayana, the classical texts of Ayurveda say that from Rasayana one attains longevity, improved harmony and intelligence, freedom from disorder, youthful vigour, excellence of complexion, pleasantness in voice, optimum strength of physique and senses, command over language, respectability and brilliance.

Broadly, Rasayanas are of two types – Vātāpika and Kuṭipraveśika. The first is more common because it is easy to administer. The second is much more rigorous and remains a textual marvel.

Rasayana therapy is particularly useful in treating the aged. It is good for functional and degenerative disorders that are of a chronic nature.

WONDER PLANT

Lemony Lemon



THE lovely lemon has extraordinary cleansing, detoxing and refreshing qualities. It is loaded with vitamins especially Vitamin A and Vitamin C. This little powerhouse is also used to make many herbal and min-

eral preparations.

The lemon tree needs sunshine, water and preferably organic compost to grow. Plant it along the side of your garden since it is a bushy tree.

The lemon plant can be propagated by the air layering technique or through seeds. In air layering, the mother plant is selected and the outer cover of a mature branch is peeled an inch or two with a sharp knife to expose the inner heartwood. A commercially available rooting hormone is applied to the exposed area. Once it roots, it is sliced off the mother plant and planted in the soil.

In the seed route method, seeds are collected from the matured fruit and washed thoroughly with water to remove any oil coating on them. Bold seeds are then selected for sowing in the nursery mother bed. Water is sprayed twice a day in the morning and evening for the first two weeks. After that the plant requires watering once a day. The sprouting of the seed takes place within two to four weeks. The

germinated seedlings are transferred to poly pots and taken to the shade house where they are kept for months. The seedlings are then planted in the garden.

Self-help: Refreshing lemonade: mix lemon juice with water, honey or sugar for a cooling drink.

Jambiradi panaka: Mix two parts of fresh lemon juice, one part of fresh ginger juice and one part of sugar and make a syrup. Allow to cool. Take 5-10 ml of this mixture with water 30 minutes before food twice or thrice a day. This drink is an effective remedy for indigestion and heartburn. It also improves the perception of taste in anorexia.

Lemon juice mixed with water, sugar and coconut gratings strengthens the body and is an aphrodisiac.

Lemon juice combined with honey mixed in warm water helps one sleep well if taken at bedtime.

LOOK GOOD

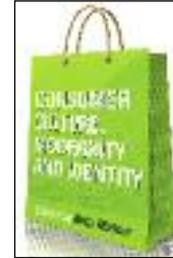
Right size

IF you are thin and need to gain weight here's how: Have regular meals at least three times a day. Do not skip breakfast.

- Eat food which is rich in protein and vitamins, for instance, moong dal cooked with ghee and a little pepper.
- Avoid junk food and foods that are dry, fried and spicy.
- Exercise regularly. Yoga and pranayama help body and mind to be in harmony and improve mental health.
- Eat ghee, butter, milk, cheese and curd in adequate quantities. But correct your metabolism before you consume such foods.
- Banana, musk melon and dry fruits help weight gain. Eat 30 gm of raisins daily.
- Herbs like ashwagandha (*Withania somnifera*), Amalaki (*Embolica officianalis*) boost immunity.
- Chyavanaprasham is an excellent herbal tonic.
- A warm oil massage daily with dhanwanthara tailam or balaswagandha tailam tones muscles and improves blood circulation.
- Sleep a few hours every day.
- Drink water in adequate quantity.
- If you are suffering from worms or metabolic disorders seek medical advice. ■

RANDOM SHELF HELP

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



CONSUMER CULTURE, MODERNITY AND IDENTITY

Nita Mathur
Sage
₹ 895

THE urban young consume more than their parents did. They spend on clothing, electronics and eating out. This is part of a global trend. Across the world the rise of consumer brands and slick advertising is changing the way people spend their money. By buying particular brands and commodities the rootless young seek identity and social acceptance. People, on the whole, consider themselves modern if they acquire certain goods.

Nita Mathur's book, *Consumer culture, modernity and identity*, consists of 13 essays that analyse people's articulation of consumer culture in five countries: the US, India, Turkey, the Czech Republic and Russia. Although some of the essays are a tough read, there are others that are insightful and interesting. The essays cover a wide range of topics: the lifestyle of the rich and famous, advertising, media, fashion and subaltern concerns. Interestingly, the 'mall culture' and the rise of BPOs have given a level of freedom to middle class women and economically empowered young girls from small towns. The example that stands out is Gurgaon and the social change taking place there among young working girls in BPOs. ■



WOMEN'S AGENCY AND SOCIAL CHANGE ASSAM AND BEYOND

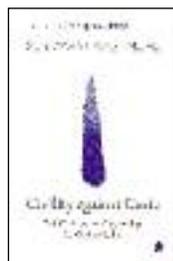
Meeta Deka
Sage
₹ 650

ALTHOUGH much has been written (mostly by men) about politics in the Northeast there is a paucity of contemporary feminist research. Meeta Deka's book, *Women's agency and social change*, tries to fill this gap. Her research is couched in theory but the book isn't boring. It contains a wealth of information on women in Assam, mainly in the Brahmaputra valley during the colonial and post-colonial eras. Women from all classes have been covered. She touches on some aspects of tribal women but this remains a dark area.

The book's four chapters dwell on the interface between women and society, the law, economy and patriarchy. The first chapter is about the amazing range of marriage customs in Assam and about Assamese society as seen by contemporary women writers. Women also worked awfully hard in farming and other forms of production. The clash between customary law and British law is analysed. Women in Assam were active participants in the freedom move-

ment. They were mobilised by Subhas Chandra Bose for his Rani Jhansi Army. In fact, 19-year-old Joya Thaosen raised her own army and laid down her life for India's freedom.

The book, says the author, is written with the hope that it will encourage more research on women in the Northeast. ■



**CIVILITY AGAINST CASTE
DALIT POLITICS AND
CITIZENSHIP IN
WESTERN INDIA**

Suryakant Waghmore
Sage
₹ 750

SURYAKANT Waghmore's well researched book, *Civility against Caste*, based on an ethnography of Dalit movements in Beed district of the Marathwada region in Maharashtra, examines Dalit activism, the role of NGOs and of political parties like the BSP in mobilising Dalits to fight for their rights. Discrimination, writes Waghmore, can express itself loudly through violence or through what he describes as 'the paradox of high democracy and low civility' in Indian politics – the rude behaviour towards Dalits by upper castes who continue to block their presence in public spaces. Discrimination can also be chillingly silent like the discrimination a Dalit student might face in college.

Waghmore's research is contemporary and offers a fresh perspective. He examines the culture of caste, politics and economics in villages in Beed. At the grassroots, Dalits are asserting their rights and facing a backlash of violence. But the reaction of state institutions is tardy and it's tough to get justice without protests. The Manavi Hakk Abhiyan (MHA) and the BSP have played a salient role. So have NGOs. The book also writes about the land rights movement in Beed and how international NGOs and MHA have played a very positive role. ■

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The site will feature initiatives in the fields of sustainable agriculture, pastoralism and fisheries, community health and learning, decentralised governance, social justice, dignified and sustainable livelihoods, decentralised water and energy production, equitable access to social services, producer and consumer control of the market, creative media and arts in the service of sustainability and justice, and democratic conservation.

Please contribute stories, perspectives, events, resources, and provide links to this site. You can upload your contribution on the site or send it on alternativesforum@gmail.com.

Kalpavriksh, Shikshantar, Bhoomi College, and Deccan Development Society



Café Lota

Café Lota is almost as good as it sounds

Civil Society News

New Delhi

IN recent years, celebrity chefs have been exploring India's ethnic cuisine, and rustling up delightful dishes you would expect from your grandmother's kitchen. Café Lota is the outcome of one such effort. Its menu is refreshingly *desi* and reflects India's amazing food diversity.

Located inside the Crafts Museum near Pragati Maidan the café has a surprising air of tranquility. The afternoon sun peeps through wooden beams and stray leaves glide on to our table. Most of the diners seem to be of a type. "Is this an offshoot of the India International Centre?" enquires a lady at a nearby table in a loud enough voice. Actually, no – though there are ex-bureaucrats around and some well-known faces from TV chat shows as well. The café premises are, in fact, part of the Crafts Museum, which is run by the Ministry of Textiles. The restaurant is evidently managed on a lease.

"We serve regional Indian food and a mix of traditional and contemporary dishes," says Rahul, the café's chef, emerging from his kitchen. "Housewives have contributed recipes and we've kind of played around with them – like the beetroot patties and Amritsari fish."

The starters are very good. We try the *paalak chaat*. It's crisp and tangy. The beetroot patties, the chef's take on a popular Bengali street food item, are served with a blob of cream cheese. Pretty good. But the best starter was the Amritsari fish topped with amaranth and served with tasty sweet potato wedges.

The main meals are equally eclectic. Some items on the list are jackfruit biryani, Kerala vegetable stew, Bihar's *baingan chokha* with *sattu parantha* and Sindhi *kadhi*. We also spotted quinoa, the new

power food, rustled up as an *upma*.

Non-vegetarians can dig into dishes from Goa, Kerala, Bengal and Maharashtra. Chef Rahul recommends the Parsi *salı boti*. We settle for the Kerala stew and Konkani fish curry. Both were, well, okay. After the delicious starters, our expectations were higher. The Goan *galinha cafreal* – pan seared chicken with chilli coriander rub and spinach pao – did sound interesting. We will have better luck next time, perhaps. The *aaj ki sabzi* with *roti* was homely and satisfying, though.

You can also choose the breads you want. The café offers a wholesome variety: *ragi roti*, Kerala's red rice, the homely *phulka* and more. Next, we turned to the shortlist of desserts. The apple *jalebi* with *rabri* was amazing. Crisp outside, gooey inside. The cool *rabri* matched it perfectly. The *kala gajar ka halwa*, a Café Lota invention, was so-so.

The Café also offers a range of artisanal coffees and teas from all over India. Don't leave without trying some. The coffee is very aromatic. In tea, Assam and Darjeeling are both soothing and fragrant.

The café changes its menu with the season. The vegetables served are always fresh and indigenous. "We are experimenting with *karela*, *tori* and *parwal*," says Chef Rahul. "We will be introducing a new menu with lots of fruits and dishes like raw banana *kofta*, raw mango and prawn curry, cucumber salad, *chaats* from Benares and pineapple *rasam*."

Chef Rahul plans to introduce a range of Anglo-Indian dishes. "Like railway mutton and dak bungalow curry," he grins. The young chef is also keen to reinvent foods from the Northeast so he's been experimenting with bamboo shoots, he says, as he tucks in his apron and returns to his kitchen. ■

Address: Bhairon Marg, next to Pragati Maidan; Tel.: 011-7838960787.



Toy joy

MANIMARAN makes eco-friendly wooden toys for children similar to the ones Chennapatna in Karnataka is famous for. Manimaran's workshop is in Puducherry. He says becoming a craftsman was a career choice. He liked working with wood and noted that there was a robust demand for such toys. He did a one-year course, he says, through the Handicrafts Development Corporation and also got a start-up capital of ₹25,000 from the government. He employs five people. His toys are very reasonably priced. They are made from silver wood. There are cars, parrots, tortoise, flying birds and so on. But Manimaran's own-favourite toy is the spinning top, he says. ■

Contact: Manimaran
09944637670.



Copper art

PRAMOD Patil studied engineering and worked for a company in Mumbai for several years. He says he found it hard to make ends meet and life in the city was a daily struggle. Patil thought wistfully of his life back home in his village in Raigad district. He owned three acres but he knew farming would not earn him enough to support his family. So he became a

craftsman some 25 years ago and learnt how to make pretty products from copper. Patil now makes jewellery, boxes, bowls, puja thalis, candle stands and more. The boxes and bowls, he says, find a good market abroad and the puja thalis and sindoor boxes sell locally. He says he has fulfilled his secret desire to be an artist. He earns enough from farming and crafts and describes himself as a self-taught craftsman. ■

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Phone: 09850170115, 02141-202086

