

Civil Society

A CIVIL SOCIETY HALL OF FAME **WORKING FOR INDIA**

IN ASSOCIATION WITH THE AZIM PREMJI FOUNDATION

Invisible people make our world a happier,
more inclusive place

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Anti-corruption crusaders: Matilda Suting, Acquiline Songthiang and Fatima Mynsong of Jongksha village in Meghalaya



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INDIA'S
HERO BUT
THEN WHAT
COMES
NEXT?**

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8th
Anniversary
SPECIAL ISSUE



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IN THE LIGHT

by SAMITA RATHOR



LETTERS



Child labour

It is most unfortunate that child labour continues to exist. We are very slack as a society in obliterating it. One reason is that we tend to justify it - the child is poor, he is learning a skill etc. We have to condemn it unequivocally.

Suhasini Sen

Unfair to Anna

Your cover story, 'Limits of street power' does grave injustice to Anna Hazare. He is surely not using random street power. He has a long and glorious career in the socio-political field, a well designed method of organising agitations. Thus far he has been instrumental for six people-oriented legislations in the Maharashtra Assembly. Please note it was Anna who campaigned and won the right to information (RTI) law in Maharashtra long before the NCPRI got it at the Centre. To him RTI is a tool to eradicate corruption. He has a special organisation built for the campaign and a group of dedicated workers.

Anna is also the architect of the Rural Reconstruction Model which has been the object of social- scientific research for quite some time. Is the writer ignorant of India's long and noble history of hunger-strikes and fast unto death - a well-defined and recognised way of showing dissent as well as testing one's own conviction? No one is Gandhi today but there are honest, practising Gandhians and

Anna is one among them.

Why is your story so spiteful of Anna and his way of campaigning? Is it due to an elitist mindset?

Prabha Tulpule, Mumbai

Thanks for the story on the agitation against corruption. You are mistaken if you think people are joining the agitation because they support the Anna Hazare version of the Lokpal Bill. The issue here is corruption. We have come to accept corruption as part of our existence. We are sick of it. We want to voice our anger to the government. You can buy a seat in a college, get good marks, a good job all through corruption. Corruption is cruel and unfortunately, lucrative. It carries little risk.

Neha Kohli, Delhi

Download book

We thank you for providing the review of the four volumes on "Livelihood augmentation in rainfed areas (LARA)". The review very aptly covers the main issues described in these four volumes. These volumes

can be easily and freely downloaded from Development Support Centre's website: www.dscindia.org

Sachin Oza, Ahmedabad

Lanka jackfruit

In Karnataka we make sambar and chutni from jackfruit. If minimal processing machines are introduced and raw jackfruit is made available, it will become a table-favourite dish. We wait for that day.

Anusuya

Jackfruit has very good potential for commercial sale in Indian markets. The key issue, as the article has rightly said, is to make it ready-to-use. A nice article about processing and packaging will be of much use. How to add preservatives to the package?

Subrahmanya Bhat

In South Kanara, majority of people use jackfruit as a vegetable but not as in Sri Lanka. We use it as curry, pickle or chips. Jackfruit is used less here because we do not have minimal processing facility.

Ganesh Mallya

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COVER PHOTOGRAPH: TARUN BHARTIYA

ANNUAL DOUBLE ISSUE

This September-October issue of *Civil Society* marks completion of eight years of the magazine. The next issue will be in November.

civil_society@rediffmail.com
subscriptions@civilsocietyonline.com

Civil Society

READ US. WE READ YOU.

Eight great years

OUR magazine completes eight years with this issue. We have appeared every month since September 2003. Our second Civil Society Hall of Fame hopefully captures some of the huge diversity that we have so enjoyed reporting on in these years. The six initiatives that have been chosen by our jury are not just locally relevant but also have national value. It is by creating such linkages that a valid bigger picture of India and the many challenges we live with can emerge.

Funded as we are with small change, our survival as a magazine is proof that someone somewhere is reading us. Nothing gives us greater joy and satisfaction to find *Civil Society* being sought by individuals and institutions across the country. It instills in us a respect for local identities and the vastness of India.

As we go press, Anna Hazare is at the Ramlila Ground fasting for a Lokpal and an end to corruption. We have over the years seen Indian civil society organisations multiply and develop. People's movements at the grassroots have become more assertive. Well-meaning NGOs have tried to fill gaps in governance. There have been efforts to cleanse electoral politics and force governments to open up. We remember somewhat wistfully that our first cover story was on the right to information which has been used to expose many of the recent scandals.

But in sharp contradiction corruption during this time has grown and engulfed us all in unimaginable ways. Economic reforms have created an oligarchy and made disparities stark. The access ordinary people have to quality health care, education and natural resources like water has diminished. Politicians and businessmen have openly cavorted together and flaunted their wealth.

It is against this backdrop of rising aspirations and collapsing governance that the Congress-led UPA gets egg on its face and Anna Hazare becomes a hero. People are fed up with the loot they have witnessed – be it during the Commonwealth Games or the cornering of land by companies.

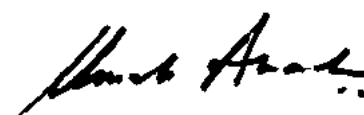
However, even as public anger boils over, the challenge before civil society is a much less glamorous one. Protests in the street are needed to shake up the system, but new laws and policies aren't framed from slogans alone.

Anna Hazare's right to protest cannot be denied to him and his arrest is condemnable. But his insistence on a Lokpal Bill based only on a draft put forward by his supporters is also difficult to accept.

Civil society is sharply divided on what a Lokpal law should contain. There are also senior judges, lawyers and serious-minded politicians who find the Anna Hazare group's version of the Lokpal Bill unworkable.

The problem with both the government and the Hazare group is that they are equally intolerant of other opinions. They don't leave space for debate or the right to disagree. The task before activist groups, as we see it, is quite the opposite: to be inclusive and promote consultation.

A big thank you for reading *Civil Society*.



Publisher
Umesh Anand

Editor
Rita Anand

News Network
Shree Padre, Jehangir
Rashid, Syed Basharat,
Susheela Nair

Photographers
Gautam Singh, Lakshman
Anand, Shamik Banerjee

Layout & Design
Virender Chauhan

Cartoonist
Samita Rathor

Write to Civil Society at:
E-2144 Palam Vihar, Gurgaon,
Haryana 122017. Ph: 9811787772

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ANNA IS INDIA'S HERO BUT

Umesh Anand
New Delhi

IT was two in the afternoon at the Ramlila Ground. Anna Hazare lay on stage with a Gandhi poster as a backdrop. This was the fifth day of his fast unto death for a law to have a Lokpal to fight corruption. Barely 20 per cent of the ground was occupied. But a hot and humid Saturday afternoon is perhaps the wrong time to judge an agitation's support.

Admiration for Hazare currently borders on worship. After four months of a determined and often aggressive initiative, Hazare and his team have succeeded in gathering a wide range of followers across the country.

The campaign has captured the imagination of

professionals, school and college students, homemakers, film stars, models and sections of the business community. It has become necessary to be seen as taking up cudgels on Hazare's behalf. Using the Internet and mainstream TV channels and newspapers – who have gone the extra mile in the hope of getting middle-class viewers and readers – the Hazare team has shown how a present-day campaign can be unleashed.

A big achievement of the campaign has been to put corruption in focus. It has also brought out on the street young people from the middle-class. Some of them will no doubt increase their involvement with public causes and perhaps in the long term change the character of Indian politics.

Most of the supporters of the Hazare team

haven't read the Jan Lokpal Bill and don't understand its implications. But so fed up is everyone with corruption and the arrogance of politicians and the bureaucracy that they are happy to be counted and turn up for candle-lighting ceremonies and other protests. Some arrive in a carnival mood to have their pictures taken or be seen on TV.

The campaign has also ignited expectations. Many people have begun to believe that having a Lokpal in place will solve all their problems. The unemployed think they will find jobs and retirees believe they will be able to get their pensions on time.

The campaign does little to lower such expectations. Instead it fuels them. Kiran Bedi, one of the core members of the Anna Hazare team, address-



WHAT COMES NEXT?

ing the people gathered at the Ramlila Ground says: "When someone asks you what kind of a Jan Lokpal Bill you want, what will you say? Say 101. Say you want a Lokpal which will rush to your house when you dial 101."

The previous day, Bedi had declared, "Anna is India. India is Anna." She repeated it thrice in what seemed part of a coordinated effort to deify Anna Hazare with the crowd being exhorted to chant "Anna, Anna".

Both Arvind Kejriwal and Prashant Bhushan – the two most important members of the campaign – have distanced themselves from Bedi's slogan, but perhaps not strongly enough.

As people's hopes soar on the small things, the bigger positions taken up by the campaign are also beginning to gain currency. Kejriwal and

Bhushan believe that it is the right of people to draft laws and insist that Parliament pass them. They also say though MPs are elected for five years people should be allowed to hold referendums on laws and government initiatives.

It is not clear how this will work. If 100,000 or even a million people take to the streets, should that be a basis for paralysing a democratically elected government and derailing parliamentary procedures? The question now being asked is whether the Hazare team's agitation is a cure or the first symptoms of a worse disease? If mob actions are the only measure to go by, can democracy function? How inclusive will it be?

Strategies used by the Hazare team are being questioned. Are SMS and free phone calls authentic ways of judging support? Has their campaign

been reinforced and given momentum by TV cameras which can make 5,000 people look like 50,000 and a 100 rallies like 500?

There is concern over the role played by the media because there has been very little reporting and debate on alternatives to the Hazare team's draft Lokpal Bill. Bhushan and Kejriwal have never been ready to come face to face with others who also believe in a pre-legislative process but don't agree with their methods or their vision of a Lokpal.

The concern for corruption has also not been bipartisan. There has been a lot of Congress and UPA bashing. Anna has banished politicians from his fasts. But the campaign gains hugely from the support it gets from opposition parties like the BJP who want to pull down the UPA government.

TEAM HAZARE	NCPRI
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Govt must table only Hazare bill ● People on street proof of support ● MPs must pass laws that people want ● All-powerful Lokpal ● PM/Judges under Lokpal 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● No single view, consensus needed ● Protests fine, but street power not a solution ● Parliament is supreme, convince MPs ● Don't overburden Lokpal ● PM in, judges out

"No one can claim to be completely correct. We have our own version but we could be wrong on certain things. We could all be wrong. Democracy involves discussion and consensus. It is Parliament which has to take a call," says Singh.

The NCPRI press conference was also addressed by Harsh Mander, Justice A.P. Shah and Nikhil Dey. They similarly expressed disquiet over the provisions of the Hazare team's draft and, more importantly, its methods for having it adopted.

In past weeks, a few attempts have been made to heal the rift. But they haven't been successful because the Hazare group believes it is riding a wave and has the government cornered. What is meant to be a civil society effort seems to have become power play.

For instance at a meeting called to debate provisions of the bill with other activists, Kejriwal packed the audience with his supporters who proceeded to shout others down and then stormed



'The standing committee is an important institution and we should use it as much as we can. Our argument is that democracy is the people's right in a system so we must make these democratic institutions work for us,' says Aruna Roy.

An open rift now exists between the Hazare team and other groups of social activists. The differences go beyond the Lokpal Bill's provisions to a much more fundamental question about what is the role of civil society and whether it should through agitations seek to replace the functions of Parliament.

The question being asked is: If Anna is India and India is Anna, as is being claimed, then what comes next?

If a campaign through demonstrations and influence over the media can insist on a particular version of a law being passed, then what is there to stop another set of people from getting up and saying that they want Parliament itself dissolved or the Supreme Court replaced?

Fundamental differences with the Hazare team surfaced at a press conference held in Delhi even as the Ramlila Ground hunger-strike and sit-in continued.

Aruna Roy, speaking on behalf of the National Campaign for People's Right to Information (NCPRI), said Hazare was "ill-advised" in seeking to dictate terms to Parliament.

Civil society she emphasised could not usurp the powers and role of Parliament. The Hazare team needed to place their version of the Jan Lokpal Bill before the standing committee of

Parliament.

"The standing committee is an important institution and we should use it as much as we can. Our argument is that democracy is the people's right in a system so we must make these democratic institutions work for us," Roy said. "If they are being hijacked then people who hijack these institutions must be taught how not to hijack these institutions. We must assert our rights. But to get rid of these institutions would be a great disaster for all the people in this country."

Roy pointed out that the NCPRI would go before the standing committee with its own suggestions of the Lokpal. In the past it has done that for the right to information (RTI) and employment guarantee.

When the RTI Bill went to the standing committee 155 amendments were made to it based on representations made by activists.

"It is finally the right of Parliament and the people we elect to represent us there to decide what shape the law will take. As activists we have to get our point across and do our best to convince them," she said.

Shekhar Singh, a founder member of the NCPRI, said it was incorrect and dangerous for the Hazare team to insist the government pass only the Hazare team's version of the Jan Lokpal Bill.

out along with him. Bhushan is similarly seen as trivialising issues and scoring debating points to suit his own arguments.

Such tendencies are regarded as being fascist and intolerant of the give and take that should be at the heart of a democratic process.

Critics of the Hazare team have accused it of:

- Wrongly seeking to represent all of Indian civil society.
- Pushing a law which is unworkable in practice.
- Raising public expectations beyond all limits.
- Hurting democracy by questioning the right of Parliament and elected representatives to pass laws.
- Deifying Anna and unleashing a moral dictatorship.
- Holding a government to ransom by putting Anna on a fast unto death.

GOVT'S FAILURE: The root of the problem has

been the government's failure to deal with corruption firmly. The Commonwealth Games contracts and telecom scams are just some of the bigger examples of what is wrong.

The Congress-led UPA government hasn't been the first to face corruption allegations. The BJP-led NDA was hardly better. But the expectations from the UPA and Dr Manmohan Singh as an honest Prime Minister were high. The result is that the middle-class feels let down and the UPA faces the brunt of their anger.

Putting people belatedly in jail hasn't helped set right the government's image. On a daily basis, citizens face harassment from minor officials in the government. There has been little effort to reform government and make it more transparent.

There has also been a growing divide between rich and poor after economic reforms began. Industry has by and large revelled in a corrupt system and has been happy to use policy to usurp

SHAMIK BANERJEE



land and other resources.

The first Lokpal Bill drafted by the law ministry under Veerappa Moily was shoddy and meaningless. The message that went out was that no one in the government really cared about corruption – which may well have been the case.

Faced with Hazare's fast at Jantar Mantar, the government hastily convened a joint committee to draft the Lokpal Bill with five members chosen by Hazare to the exclusion of a whole lot of others who could have made an important contribution to the drafting process.

Then, after a series of acrimonious exchanges with the Hazare team the government drafted its own bill with which no one is happy. Now there are three bills: by the Hazare Team, the government's and the NCPRI.

THE ALTERNATIVE LOKPAL DRAFT: The NCPRI has serious problems with too much power being vested in the Lokpal and expectations that a single institution will police corruption at all levels through a network of officials whose numbers could touch 15,000. The Hazare group's draft also has sweeping provisions which could make it difficult for decisions to be taken in government. It considers it necessary to bring the higher judiciary under the Lokpal.

The NCPRI on the other hand proposes a Lokpal which is leaner and more effective. It suggests that the Lokpal's energies be reserved for dealing with grand corruption such as the 2G scam or Commonwealth Games contracts. In this way, senior bureaucrats and politicians could come under it.

But for other forms of corruption at lower levels of the bureaucracy it suggests strengthening the Central Vigilance Commission (CVC) and giving it investigative powers. It also wants grievances, which could be about delays and inefficiency, dealt with separately.

On the higher judiciary, the NCPRI takes the view that the Judicial Accountability Bill which is already before Parliament needs to be strengthened. There has been a separation of powers under the Constitution and making the judiciary answerable to the Lokpal will tamper with this structure.

Justice Shah points out that many eminent legal minds, who are also in favour of greater judicial accountability, have expressed themselves against the higher judiciary coming under the Lokpal.

"An ombudsman like the Lokpal exists in several countries," says Justice Shah, "but nowhere does the judiciary come under the ombudsman."

The NCPRI serves as a forum for discussion and a think-tank where diverse views can be heard out in the search for consensus. It played a key role in shaping the hugely successful right to information (RTI) law.

Both Kejriwal and Bhushan have been a part of the NCPRI and it was here that discussions began on a Lokpal Bill. It was while being a part of this process that Kejriwal and Bhushan took off with their own version of the bill.

INTERVIEW Satish Magar on how a world-class city

'We took the best ideas from

Civil Society News
New Delhi

FARMERS wearing green caps hung on to every word Satish Magar spoke at a presentation on Magarpatta City at the India International Centre (IIC) in New Delhi recently. Braving the city's chaotic traffic, the farmers came from Bhatta-Parsaul and Gautam Budh Nagar in Greater Noida, taking a respite from the gritty battle they have been waging against the Uttar Pradesh government over land acquisition.

Satish Magar has become a guru for farmers because he is the creator of Magarpatta – a state-of-the-art green township near Pune built by farmers who chose to urbanize their own lands instead of letting them go to developers.

In the early 90s the Magars, traditional farmers, saw the city of Pune expanding towards them. The Pune Municipal Corporation was eyeing their fields. For the Magarpatta farmers, land was not just land, it was a priceless heirloom. Rather than agitate for more money which would inevitably be frittered away, some 120 farmer families decided to become developers themselves. They banded together under the leadership of Satish Magar and began building their own township. "It was our identity which we wanted to keep," explains Satish.

The Magars started their own company – the Magarpatta Township Development and Construction Company. They built an ultra modern green city, collecting the best ideas from around the world. The Magars are now well-off professional urban developers. They have learnt all the nuances of green construction. The value of their land has increased by nearly 10 times. Magarpatta doesn't need services from the Pune Municipal Corporation. Instead the municipality earns crores from Magarpatta.

A delegation of farmers from Noida is now traveling to Magarpatta to study how this city was built from scratch by farmers. The model is spreading with another Magarpatta coming up at Nanded. Satish Magar has become a hero and a beacon of hope for farmers. "You can do it too," Satish assured them apologizing for his awkward Hindi. "Stay united, be organized."

How did the decision to develop your own lands come about? What were the initial steps that you took?

The land tilled had been under the Pune municipal jurisdiction since 1960, though it was an agricultural zone. In 1982, the Pune Municipal



Satish Magar speaking at the IIC in Delhi

'I travelled to several countries with my architect to study how modern cities were planned. We consulted experts for each and every aspect.'

Corporation marked it as a zone for future urbanization in its draft development plan, which meant that the government could easily acquire our land under the Urban Land Ceiling Act.

The Magar clan and immediate neighbours comprising over 120 farmer families with their ancestry going back to three centuries had through the 1960s and 1970s clung together to oppose the municipal administration's plan to urbanize their land, content with the steady income afforded by farming.

By the late 80s, realization dawned that Pune city, already bursting at the seams, would eventu-

ally claim the land for development and that we were fighting a losing battle against rapid urbanization. In 1993 we decided to develop land ourselves and formed a company, the Magarpatta Township Development & Construction Co. Ltd, wherein each family is a shareholder in proportion to their land-holdings. We decided not to skip any steps and waited till the year 2000 to get all clearances. We met many senior officials and it took us around seven years to convince the government that Magarpatta City was possible.

I travelled to several countries with my architect to study how modern cities were planned. We consulted experts for each and every aspect. We had a lot of time on our hands since the project was taking its own time to get all the clearances and funding in place. We met many people and attended all sorts of seminars. We went around looking at townships and city centres. We visited planning departments and saw how space was organized. We decided that we would not reinvent the wheel. We took the best ideas from all over and created a plan that was best suited to our needs.

Do you think Magarpatta can be a model for farmers elsewhere in the country? At a presentation you gave in Delhi recently the farmers of Noida

PICTURES BY SHAMIK BANERJEE

was built by farmers on their own land around the globe'



Farmers from Noida listen attentively

were present. How replicable is the Magarpatta model?

Yes, it can be a model for farmers elsewhere in the country and we have done it at Nanded village in Pune located on the southwest tip of the city. It is spread over 700 acres circumvented by hills and water bodies. It happened when farmer family landowners approached us to convert their collective holdings into a real estate project that would not only give them lump-sum cash, but also a continuous source of income.

The project will eventually house over 20,000 residential units, commercial complexes and institutions. The model remains the same: revenue sharing for the cost of the land and a shareholding in the (developer) company – Nanded City Development & Construction Company Ltd.

Magarpatta represents cutting edge ideas in green technology. Was it easy to find the people with the expertise to do all this for you?

We have used all local talent and expertise to build Magarpatta City. To ensure a smooth transition of our next generation from an agrarian based economy to an urban one, we carried out an aptitude test of the second generation of our farmers to understand what they were good at.

Based on these results, we got them trained in various skills at the National Institute of Construction, Management and Research (NICMAR). Once the training was complete, we arranged to get them loans from banks and the company stood guarantee for the same to start construction based businesses here. It became a matter of pride for them to be involved in building their own township, Magarpatta City, and we fondly called it the Pride of Pune.

How did green as an idea find acceptance? Most developers, even highly educated ones, do very mundane and conventional buildings. What did it take to inculcate such ideas?

We, as farmers, are very passionate about Mother Earth. In Magarpatta City, life revolves around Ritu Chakra – the Eternal Time Wheel of Nature. The entire city blooms into a rhythmic splash of colors based on the six seasons - Vasant (Spring), Grishma (Summer), Varsha (Rain), Sharad (Autumn), Hemant and Shishir (Winter).

As a sustainable development model, we have introduced eco-friendly development with almost 30 per cent of the area reserved for greenery. Implementation of waste management and solar energy systems ensure further enhancement of

the environment. Sincere efforts of Magarpatta City are perpetually on to conserve the environment – like solar water heating, garbage segregation at source, biogas, vermi-culture, rainwater harvesting, tree plantations, cleanliness and maintaining the roads.

The eco-friendly practice of segregation of over 280 to 300 tonnes of household and commercial garbage, trash and waste per month is done at source of which 280 tonnes of biodegradable waste is used for vermi-culture and bio-compost. Over 120 tonnes of non-biodegradable waste is recycled in a way not hazardous to nature, disposed of safely and the re-usable scrap is sold. A two tonne capacity biogas plant is installed here wherein biodegradable waste goes through a process and the non-polluting biogas which is generated is used to generate power to operate a major percentage of the garden pumps.

To save electricity, Magarpatta City makes use of solar energy via solar water heating panels; every residential unit has panels erected on the terrace, which are connected to water storage tanks thus ensuring hot water usage in each and every home. Fly-ash bricks, crushed stone sand are used for construction.

Footpath and landscaping pavers are designed with cut-outs which aid in absorbing water into the ground. Mounds are created out of the earth excavated to increase the surface area leading to more water retention. Even the compound wall has got interlocking blocks installed instead of concretizing to enable rainwater to be absorbed instead of being drained away. This goes a long way by assisting the soaking up action of earth, preventing flooding situations and raising the groundwater table. Water and sewage treatment plants supplement conservation practices. Since its inception the rainwater from terraces is channelized to the ground in specially designed soak pits for it to be recharged instead of letting it flow off in drains.

Who financed the project? Was it difficult to get clearances and approvals from various departments?

HDFC has been very supportive right from the initial stages. When we approached them for an ₹100 crore loan for the project, Deepak Parekh gave us ₹2 crore. He prevailed on us to start small, which was the best advice we got on the project. This model is inclusive, allowing farmers rather than developers to benefit from their land holdings. Seeking government approval proved to be an uphill task as applications and files moved from one department to another at snail's pace. It took us seven long years to convince the government we could do it. Now I can say it was a great learning process.

What can government do to promote the Magarpatta model among farmers?

It can be a facilitator for the process.

5 NGOs get awards for best

Raising the bar to promote philanthropy

Civil Society News
New Delhi

THE India NGO 2010 awards were given to five NGOs for adopting good standards and practices while implementing their programmes on 5 August at the India Habitat Centre in New Delhi. The awards have been instituted by the Resource Alliance, an international charity which helps NGOs mobilise resources, in partnership with the Rockefeller Foundation. The aim of the awards is to boost the non-profit sector by promoting high standards.

"In the last five years we have, through the awards, endeavoured to set benchmarks and best practices in the country," said Neelam Makhijani, CEO, Resource Alliance. "With the growing profile and popularity of the India NGO Awards we hope to see a more dynamic and sustainable sector in the coming years."

She said fundraising and philanthropy were two sides of the same coin. The Resource Alliance is keen to 'create the right framework to inspire philanthropy for the well-being of people,' said Makhijani.

The winners of the India NGO awards under the small-scale category were Development Association for Human Action (DEHAT) and Madhuram Narayanan Centre for Exceptional Children (MNC).

The Pardada Pardadi Educational Society (PPES) won the award under the medium-scale category. Akanksha Foundation was the winner under the large-scale category. And the Durbar Mahila Samanwaya Committee (DMSC) got special mention.

The finalists had been divided into three categories. Small-scale NGOs, with an annual budget below ₹50 lakh, medium-scale NGOs with an annual budget between ₹50 lakhs and ₹5 crores and large-scale NGOs with a budget of over ₹5 crore.

An eminent jury consisting of Subodh Bhargava, Chairman, Tata Communications, Nick Langton



Poorvi Shah from Akanksha Foundation, Renuka from PPES, Suparna Mody from Akanksha Foundation, Bharati Dey from DMSC, Jaya Krishnaswamy from Madhuram Narayanan Centre and Jitender Chaturvedi from DEHAT.

Country Director, The Asia Trust, Arun Maira, Member, Planning Commission, Elizabeth Kurian, Regional Director, SightSavers India and Venkat Krishnan, Founder, Give India, chose the winners.

Here are snapshots of the NGOs who won the awards this year:

Village rights: The Developmental Association for Human Advancement (DEHAT), works in 773 villages of Bahraich, Shravasti and Sonbhadra districts of Uttar Pradesh for child rights, citizen rights, women's rights, health and environment conservation.

DEHAT has been successfully implementing the Scheduled Tribes and Other Traditional Forest Dwellers (Recognition of Forest Rights) Act, 2006. As a result of the NGO's efforts, Dafadaar Gaurhi, a forest village in Gokulpur was officially recognised as a revenue village on 15 April, 2010. In August, last year, the village was given the right to vote in panchayat elections for the first time. Villagers have used the Right to Information (RTI) to fight

for basic rights. They now have access to government schemes and entitlements like widows pension, handicapped pension, subsidised solar lights, BPL/APL cards, job cards for NREGA etc.

The NGO runs two non-formal schools for tribal children in the forest villages of Bhawanipur and Nishad Nagar. These have now become government primary schools. Jamunaha block of Shrawasti district has the lowest female literacy rate in India thanks to DEHAT's Girl Child Education Centres. DEHAT has boosted immunisation to 94 per cent, got all births registered and got ICDS centres sanctioned for forest villages. It has helped protect local forests from poaching, planted lots of trees and one of its villages has given the Nirmal Gram Puraskar. DEHAT has many more notable achievements to its credit.

Special children: The Madhuram Narayanan Centre for Exceptional Children (MNC) in Chennai provides early intervention services to every child with disability. All forms of disability

SHAMIK BANERJEE

practices

be it autism, mental retardation, Down's syndrome or visual, hearing and physical impairments are tackled. The NGO has developed a special software called Upaneeta to keep close track of the progress of a child under its care. Around 4,500 children have been treated effectively. Every year at least eight to 10 children are placed in mainstream schools and they cope well with their studies and other children.

Girls' education: The Pardada Pardadi Educational Society (PPES) is based in Anupshahr in the Bulandshahr district of Uttar Pradesh. Anupshahr has 40,000 BPL families. PPES wants to enrol at least one girl from every BPL family into their school to improve the economic and social status of women. Currently PPES has enrolled 1,150 girls from 53 villages in Anupshahr. As a result, this region now has 90 graduates, mostly first generation learners. Eleven graduates have travelled to the US on an exposure visit.

English education: Amongst the large-scale NGOs, the Akanksha Foundation, based in Pune and Mumbai, has been helping slum children get a high quality education. It is one of the first NGOs to run English-medium municipal schools. Akanksha brings together slum children who want to learn and enthusiastic college students who want to volunteer. Akanksha helps to improve the quality of learning in the formal school system. After school, children go to Akanksha to learn English and math and improve their self-esteem. They also get a chance to take part in sports and learn dance and computers. Akanksha spends as much as the government

spends per child in a municipal school. Its popularity has helped it spread from 15 children in one centre to over 4,000 children in 47 centres and nine schools.

Collective might: The Durbar Mahila Samanwaya Committee (DMSC) is a collective of 65,000 sex workers – male, female and transgender in Sonagachi a redlight zone in Kolkata. It works to improve the image and self-esteem of sex workers, empower and network them with other groups. Over the years DMSC has extended its work from West Bengal to Orissa, Jharkhand,

Due to DEHAT's efforts, a forest village in Gokulpur was officially recognised as a revenue village and it took part in panchayat elections for the first time.

Bihar and Tripura. It runs clinics which treat sexually transmitted diseases. It implements the CB-DOTs programme to treat tuberculosis. DMSC runs the largest targeted intervention for prevention of HIV among sex workers and their clients in 12 redlight districts of Kolkata and 30 redlight districts of West Bengal.

Finalists: The other NGOs who made it to the final list include the Children Toy Foundation based in Mumbai which has set up an impressive network of 273 toy libraries in 11 states and two Union territories in India. Children can play with toys and take what they fancy home.

Under the medium category the Association of People with Disability (APD) in Bangalore was

selected in the final list. APD rehabilitates people with disability totally.

There is also Ashadeep, based in Guwahati, which helps people with mental illness in the north-east. Such has been their impact that not a single woman with mental illness can be found on the streets of Guwahati, says the NGO. Ashadeep is now working with the Assam government to implement a programme for men suffering from mental health disorders.

CanSupport which works in the Delhi-NCR region is well known for pioneering palliative care in India for people suffering from terminal cancer. Patients have reported less pain, better personal relationships and a sense of well being thanks to CanSupport services.

The Gujarat State Network of People Living with HIV/AIDS (GSNP+) in Surat and Ahmedabad has been formed by people living with AIDS. It helps positive people have a better quality of life by making accessible schemes available for them. A major impact of its work has been the breaking down of barriers and stigma attached to HIV and AIDS.

Sense International is the first NGO in India to provide services to deaf and blind people. It is acknowledged as a knowledge leader in deaf, blind and multi-sensory impairments. Sense has successfully lobbied with the Union government to include deaf and blind children in its Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan programme.

In the large-scale category Save the Children and SAATH made it to the final list. While Save the Children works for the education, protection and survival of children, SAATH works with more than 10,000 slum-dwellers in Gujarat and Rajasthan. Under its Udaan Youth Employability Programme, 29,000 young people have been trained and 23,000 have got jobs. Its Slum Electrification Project has provided metered connections to the residents of Juhapura in Ahmedabad.

Finally, Aide-et-Action (AEA), also a finalist, is based in Chennai and provides services for women, children and the youth in education and leadership training.

SAMITA'S WORLD

by SAMITA RATHOR



Top Indian firms score low on CR

Civil Society News
New Delhi

INDIAN companies have a long way to go in declaring what they do by way of corporate responsibility and linking it to their business strategies. A study done by KPMG, the management consultancy, of 100 listed companies by revenue shows that just 31 of them report on corporate responsibility and of them only 18 file sustainability reports.

Most companies refer loosely to their involvements in education, health care and community development. They prefer to talk of success stories and are mostly silent on their shortcomings. A mere 16 companies in the survey have a corporate responsibility strategy in place.

Climate change is a global concern, but just 23 companies report on the business risk associated with it. On the other hand 26 companies talk of the business opportunities related to climate change.

Companies are expected to extend their corporate responsibility concerns to their supply chains. But just 13 of the companies surveyed mentioned the business risks of the supply chain associated with corporate responsibility. Only 10 companies discussed how corporate responsibility issues are integrated into their supply chain management.

Arvind Sharma, KPMG's director for climate change and sustainability services, discussed the report's methodology and findings. Excerpts from the interview:

What is the context for this report?

This report is about Indian corporations, how they are communicating with their stakeholders on their non-financial performance. At KPMG, once in three years, we do an international corporate responsibility survey. As an extension to that, we thought we would do this report for India. We have never done such a report specifically for India. Nobody has done this kind of a report before this.

The idea was to understand how these companies are reporting, on what issues they want to communicate, whether their reports are really balanced or just taken out of the box or yet another PR exercise.

We surveyed the top 100 listed companies in India by revenue for the financial year 2009-10 and not market share. They are all big private and public sector companies.



Arvind Sharma

'The companies talk about HIV/AIDS, blood donation, eye camps and what not. But they do not talk about impact or how they conceive of these programmes.'

The ability to examine these companies, the kind of questions to put them – was this based on some experience in dealing with them?

Yes, partly it was experiential and partly we wanted to gauge their different styles of communication and managing their stakeholders and also to understand their business strategies. We referred

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to various international frameworks for assessing companies on their non-financial performance. We developed a comprehensive questionnaire which was 50 data points. Within the data points there were sub-indicators so that in all there were 250 data points.

It was not a questionnaire that we went to the companies with. What we did was to look at their public disclosures, websites and annual reports. It was more of desk research on these companies. The intention was to understand what is available in the public domain about these companies. So that is what is captured in this report.

So you had no direct communication with the companies and only used public domain information?

In this survey there is no direct communication. But we did reach out companies to get information on some things...

And you benchmarked them to global standards....

Yes, to global standards.

What does the survey show?

The survey shows that 31 of the 100 companies are reporting on non-financial performance very specifically. The rest are qualitatively reporting. And the focus is on corporate social responsibility (CSR), but it is not very clear why they are implementing CSR initiatives. They talk about HIV/AIDS, blood donation

camp, eye camps and what not. But they do not talk about impact or how they conceive of these programmes or what is the business agenda.

So right now we are talking about the 31.

Yes. Out of the 31 companies 24 have sustainability reports. The rest of them have some kind of reporting as part of their websites, annual reports or a communiqué going to the stakeholders or environmental health and safety reports. They do not have sustainability reports per se.

These companies talk about how they decide on their sustainability agenda, what are their key priorities, how their performance has been over three years or five years. For some companies it is six years. They talk about how they are governed for sustainability and are trying to connect with stakeholders as a part of business strategy and not a one-off agenda.

Interestingly, 18 out of the 24 reports are externally assured. If you take an optimistic view, it is

Continued on page 16

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Continued from page 14

an indication that they want some kind of an input coming in from a third party in terms of how they can improve upon their sustainability performance. The pessimistic view of assurance is that they may be looking at having a third party certificate to enhance trust among their stakeholders. There are some loopholes in that as well because nobody knows the scope of that assurance – what was included and excluded. The story which goes out in public could be very different from the story they may have. So, there are different levels of reporting happening.

Have you been able to narrow down on the 18 who got assurances and figure out the quality of the assurances?

There are 11 reports where you could say the quality is good and where they clearly write that this was covered in the scope and these were the exclusions. So, whoever is reading the report knows what is written in the report. But many of the reports are contradictory in nature. Something not given in the scope is covered in the conclusion.

The reports are as poor as that?

As poor as that. There are some reports where assurances statements are the same word to word, sentence to sentence. It is just the company name which is changed from ABC to XYZ. And the assurance provider has not even realized that one company is a fifth year reporter and the other a first year reporter. Or that one is a mining company and the other a chemical company.

So what does this tell you about the top 100 companies?

The good side is that the companies are willing to reveal something more than their financial or traditional profit and loss account. Reporting in a way is also an indication that they are progressing because they are daring to speak about themselves in the public domain, even if what they have to say is only positive. These reports talk about where the company is going, its vision, projected growth, the vision in terms of say carbon reduction.

ITC, for example, says it is the only company in

the world which is carbon neutral and water positive. Now if you look at the assurance provider's comments they don't cover this. It is possible that it was not included as part of the assurance scope, but my point is that if it is upfront on the first page, the external assurance has to cover it or at least refer to it.

'Reporting in a way is also an indication that they are progressing because they are daring to speak about themselves in the public domain, even if what they have to say is only positive.'

Now let us get this right. ITC claims to be water positive and carbon neutral. And the assurance report says...

The assurance report is silent on these two points. It talks about other things.

So, there maybe overarching claims that look good but can't really be justified?

Or it could be that the company is really doing something but the assurance provider is not getting enough confidence based on the reports/record to write it in the assurance statement.

But isn't it also the job of the assurance provider to say that visible claims are not borne out?

It is. It is also for the company to ensure that the assurance provider looks at the significant things it has done. In the case of ITC it would have added value to the report if the assurance provider had said that there was nothing in the records and reports which had come to its atten-

tion to suggest that the company was not water positive or carbon neutral. ITC has been coming out with an A+ report every year, which is the highest you can get in disclosures.

What is an A+ report?

If you report on all the core indicators like energy and water consumption, you get A status. If you are externally assured you get the +. It is basically the level of disclosure, but A,B, or C says nothing about sustainability. The level just refers to the disclosures that the company has done.

One company in oil and gas sector could be A+ and another company also in the oil and gas sector could be C+, but for all you know the C+ company may have a better performance. But companies are in the race for being A+. This is a matter of concern because they may not be reporting on key issues which are really critical for their company as well as their stakeholders.

What do you think Indian companies are losing by ignoring this aspect?

They are losing out by not realising the benefits of long-term initiatives. You could be innovating with products which may initially be costly for consumers to buy but become cheaper over time. Five star rated refrigerators and air-conditioners are an example. Or through recycling you could be saving on emissions.

One of the findings of this survey is that the top drivers for corporate responsibility reports are ethical considerations and brand enhancements. Cost savings, economic considerations, innovation and employee motivation rank very low. Nowhere is it mentioned that there has been a business advantage because of a shift from a traditional process to a more sustainable one. Most companies don't treat reporting as a performance enhancing tool. When they do, as in the case of JSW Steel, there is a lot of improvement after reporting. And if you have been tracking their advertisements, you would have found them overboard earlier but now they reach out to their stakeholders and are much better informed.

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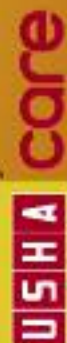
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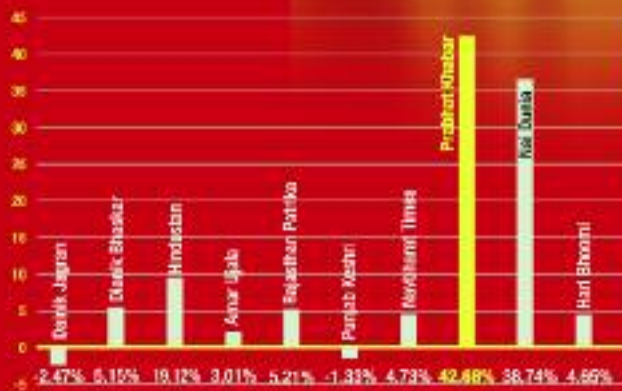


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Lest Kalmadi forget...

Gautam Singh
Mumbai

BEING diagnosed with dementia is a watershed event in one's life. Currently there is no treatment to stall, cure or reverse dementia. The prognosis is grim and it is a tragic moment for the victim and his/her family. There is social stigma attached to this affliction as well.

Which is why when Suresh Kalmadi's lawyer declared that his client suffers from dementia, the news took everyone by surprise. It was felt that a serious disease which destroys the human mind was being used as a gambit to escape criminal prosecution.

Kalmadi is former chairman of the Organising Committee of the Commonwealth Games, now in Tihar Jail for his alleged role in scams pertaining to the Commonwealth Games.

"The good thing that the Kalmadi case has done is that it has brought publicity to the cause," says Dr K Jacob Roy, Chairman of Alzheimer's and Related Disorders Society of India (ARDSI). "Dementia is emerging as a major health challenge in India. Around 3.7 million people suffer from the illness in the country. This figure is set to double by 2030. A lot of legal issues are involved in the Kalmadi case. But everybody has the right to get a proper diagnosis and receive optimum care," he said.

Dementia is the gradual deterioration of mental functioning, such as concentration, memory and judgment, affecting a person's ability to perform normal daily activities. There are eight kinds of dementia, Alzheimer's being the most prevalent. Although dementia affects mainly the elderly, the onset of the illness in about two per cent of cases starts before the age of 65.

"Dementia was thought to be a normal part of ageing, a neurological disorder, so it did not come under the purview of diminished responsibility as per McNaughton's Rules for psychiatric disorders," explains Dr Charles Pinto, Professor of Psychiatry, BYL Nair Hospital, Mumbai. "The law is not clear on dementia. It is considered to be a decrease in the competency and capacity of the brain. Psychiatric disorders presume the brain is normal but the mind is unsound, so the person is not knowledgeable about the nature and consequences of his act," he says.

But what is an unsound mind? "It's one of the conundrums of the legal system but the term 'unsound mind' has not been defined," says Dr Soumitra Pathare, Consultant Psychiatrist at Ruby Hall Clinic and Course Coordinator at Centre for Mental Law, ILS Law College, Pune. Importantly,



Suresh Kalmadi

'The good thing that the Kalmadi case has done is that it has brought publicity to the cause. Dementia is emerging as a major health challenge in the country.'

Dr Pathare was one of the experts who helped draft amendments to the Mental Health Act (MHA) of 1987.

"Unsound mind has become synonymous with mental illness, but it does not necessarily mean that. In fact, the juxtaposition of the two is the biggest cause for stigma, since people equate mental illness with an unsound mind," he says. "The new MHA, in the way it defines mental health, will probably cover dementia."

A team of doctors at AIIMS have subjected Suresh Kalmadi to a series of tests to ascertain if he is suffering from dementia. They will submit their report to the court. Dementia by itself cannot protect him from enquiry committees or trials, since the law has no view on the illness.

But if Kalmadi's intention is to plead that his actions resulted from loss of memory or ignorance about his actions, then his case may be seen as that of an unsound mind. How does the law treat an accused it deems to be of an unsound mind?

"In case the court finds that a person is of unsound mind, then Sections 328 to Sections 338 of

the Criminal Procedure Code will apply," says Anupam Gupta, senior lawyer of the Punjab and Haryana High Court. "Judicial satisfaction is ultimate and will determine whether the accused is in a position to understand the nature of his actions. And if he is found unfit, then the trial stands vitiated and postponed."

A chain of events may be put into motion if Suresh Kalmadi is found to be of unsound mind. "If he is so incapable of defending himself, then the question arises if he can continue as a Member of Parliament. His wanting to attend Parliament totally destroys his plea and medical report. They are both mutually irreconcilable," says Gupta. In fact, forget about attending Parliament, Kalmadi may even lose his seat.

But there's more. "Unsoundness of mind is also a ground for divorce. There are other implications on the civil side," says Gupta. Under Sections 52-54 of the Mental Health Act, 1987, the court can appoint a guardian to take care of the mentally ill person or a manager to take custody of his property.

Rahul Mehra, a lawyer at the Supreme Court, whose Public Interest Litigation (PIL) in 2009 in the Delhi High Court seeking greater transparency and accountability in 13 sports bodies, set the cat among the pigeons says, "Kalmadi and his lawyers think that India is a nation of idiots. They should run the tapes for the past four to five years when he was leading an active life to ascertain whether he was suffering from dementia then."

But can dementia be faked? A combination of tests is necessary to arrive at a diagnosis. These include an MRI, CT and PET scan along with clinical tests like the Mini Mental State Examination. But basically, the diagnosis is made clinically.

"There is no one litmus test for dementia," says Dr Amit Dias, member of ARDSI and an epidemiologist and geriatrician. "And yes, there are possibilities of faking dementia, though it is very difficult to do so." Since scans are not a definitive criteria, one can, if one has the knowledge, skew the clinical tests by giving incorrect answers. But specialists aren't fooled so easily.

Meanwhile, Suresh Kalmadi has appealed to the court to refrain from disclosing the contents of his medical reports to the media. Apparently the courts were rather amused by his change of stance since it was he himself who had brought his health matters into the open.

Maybe he's realized that he's better off having a healthy mind, and staying in jail to face the consequences. And though he doesn't have much public sympathy, nobody would wish him to suffer from dementia either.

Open Frame has India focus

Kavita Charanji
New Delhi

EVERY year in September as the leaves begin to fall, the Public Service Broadcasting Trust (PSBT) offers film lovers an eagerly awaited eight-day festival of documentaries called Open Frame.

This medley of films tackles a long list of contemporary topics which can make you laugh, cry, smile or sigh. Sexuality, schizophrenia, feminism, dysfunctional cities, morality, all come under the lens as film-makers explore a variety of topics.

This year too, from 9 to 17 September at the India International Centre (IIC), the 11th edition of Open Frame will present some 35 documentaries on India's changing social, political, environmental and cultural landscape. On offer are workshops and discussions, which are an integral part of the festival.

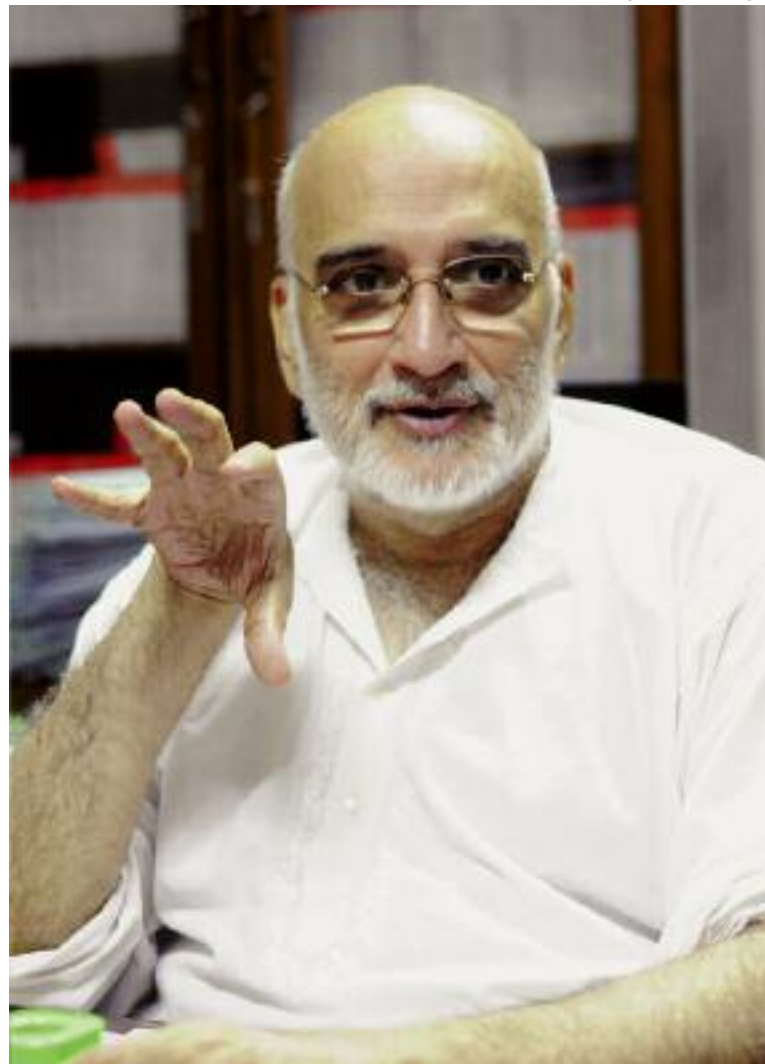
But unlike previous years there is no central theme to Open Frame. The focus is on PSBT films, on celebrating their richness and diversity over the years. There will also be films which have been recently produced over the last one year. These films will be screened for the first time. Many of the selected films have been given awards at prestigious film festivals around the world in Chicago, Kerala, London and Sheffield.

"This time the festival is really like a pause button," explains Rajiv Mehrotra, managing trustee of PSBT. "I think a larger perspective is being served through that process. After 10 years of work it is time to review ourselves, it is time for other people to review what we are doing."

The festival will showcase PSBT films by well-known names in the documentary stratosphere like Paromita Vohra, Pankaj Butalia, Avijit Mukul Kishore, Sameera Jain, Ajay Raina and Pankaj Rishi Kumar. There will also be mid-career and fresh faces that have recently worked with PSBT which include Harjant Gill, Nirmal Chander, Samreen Farooqui and Shabani Hassanwalia.

The film titles and themes are attractive. 'Morality TV and the Loving Jihad' (2007) by Paromita Vohra, which won the best documentary award at the Kerala Film Festival, looks outside the box at breaking news, love and sexuality.

Sameera Jain's short film 'Mera Apna Sheher' (My Own City) which has been selected for the festival in Yamagata in Japan this year, probes



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relate to space, with how much freedom and under whose surveillance? And can observing this surveillance free one's gaze in some way, free oneself?"

Harjant Gill's 'Roots of Love' (2010) which was an official entry in film festivals in Kerala, Chicago and Vancouver, explores the growing chasm between the older and younger generation of Sikhs in their attitude to the turban.

Gill says the subject is close to his heart. "I can relate to the topic because I was born in Chandigarh. I grew up there in a traditional Sikh family and I had unshorn hair. I didn't cut my hair until I was 14 when my family was getting ready to migrate to California. Because I was so young when I cut my hair, for me personally, the transition was not as emotionally traumatizing. But my grandfather who is a turbaned Sikh felt betrayed by the act. He never fully forgave me and my brother for cutting our hair. In his mind, we are no longer full Sikhs. But my parents knew that we would have problems assimilating in high school in California and we might get bullied if we kept our turbans."

Aparna Sanyal's 'A Drop of Sunshine', also an official entry in Kerala, tackles the issue of schizophrenia and turns conventional theory about the illness on its head. "My

research for the film – the books I'd read, the stories I'd heard, the people I'd met – convinced me that there was more to schizophrenia than what mainstream psychiatry would have us believe, that the stories of real recovery could lie outside the predominant medical paradigm," says Aparna.

Workshops and discussions will help audiences to "move beyond the passive viewing of films to engaged viewing," says Mehrotra. The Documentary Film Appreciation and Fiction Film Appreciation Workshops by Professor Suresh Chabria from the Film and Television Institute of India are likely to be a popular draw. Aspiring film-makers will benefit from intensive workshops on film-making by Paromita Vohra on script writing, Avijit Mukul Kishore on using the camera, Suresh Rajamani on sound and Sankalp Meshram on film-editing.

But be warned that Open Frame will be less accommodating this year. The festival is moving to the India International Centre which has smaller venues. Be an early bird.

For more information: www.psbtt.org

This year Open Frame will present some 35 documentaries on India's changing social, political, environmental and cultural landscape. Workshops and discussions are included.

what it means for a woman to be in the 'gendered urban landscape' of Delhi.

"When one grows up in a place, one knows it from the inside, from under its skin. And it gets under one's skin too," says Sameera Jain explaining the theme of her film. "How are city spaces negotiated by a woman who lives in the city and how do those spaces define her? How does one

From a village classroom to a virtual education experience

Raghavendra Rao, a post-graduate teacher from Andhra Pradesh, had a vision of bringing biology lessons to life. He dreamed of imparting quality education to his students at the residential Jawahar Navodaya Vidyalaya school for rural children. Using simple multimedia tools that he learnt during his training with Project Shiksha, he now makes videos that help bring the wonders of the local flora and fauna into the classroom.

Rao's learning experience with Project Shiksha has extended the borders of his classroom to the entire learning community. His brainchild www.biology24x7.in is now a means for students to delve into the world of biology and access learning resources like reference materials, question papers and discuss ideas. Even visually challenged and physically challenged students who cannot come to school, now learn through podcasts and the interactive virtual classroom.

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ENABLING CHANGE

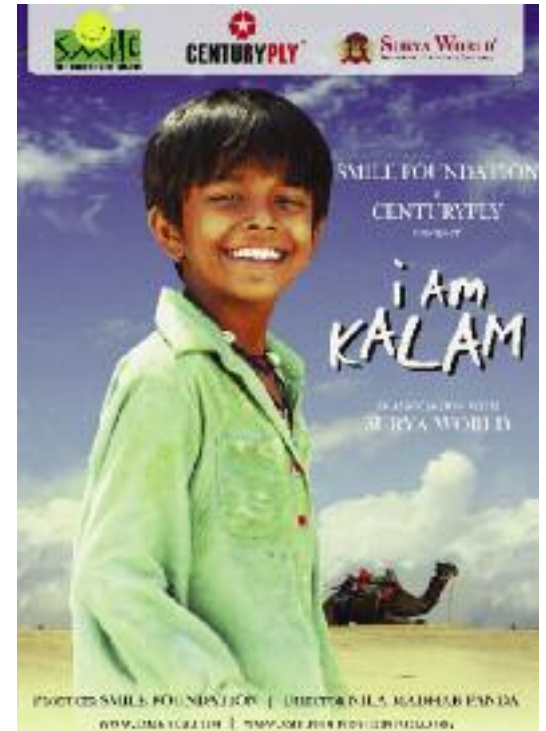
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Bhatti (Gulshan Grover) with Chhotu (Harsh Mayar) in a still from the film



'Kalam' by Smile first of its kind

Kavita Charanji
New Delhi

SMILE Foundation's feature film, 'I am Kalam' has become a box-office draw for schoolchildren. A big chasm separates well-off children from Chhotu, the protagonist played by 12-year-old Harsh Mayar who comes from a slum. Yet richer children thoroughly enjoy Chhotu's antics and clapped at each of his small triumphs.

'I am Kalam' is the first mainstream feature film ever to be produced by an NGO. Santanu Mishra, Smile Foundation's executive trustee and producer of the film, says there were compelling reasons for the NGO to venture into the feature film medium to convey a social message.

"Even today 50 percent of Indian children remain out of school," says Mishra. "One way to make a larger impact is to sensitise the privileged class about the need to help less fortunate children get a good education."

A feature film seemed the perfect medium. "If we made a documentary that lay forgotten in some library it would have made no business sense. A feature film which addressed change makers seemed the best route. The message was that anyone could make a dent in the problem by, say, sending the maid or driver's child to school," he says.

The story is a heartwarming one. Young Chhotu labours in a roadside dhaba by day and at night pores over his precious books. There seems to be no escape for the ever-smiling Chhotu from his daily drudgery. But he is fired by a humble dream

SHAMIK BANERJEE



Santanu Mishra

– to wear a tie, go to school and become a successful 'big man.' A TV talk on education by APJ Abdul Kalam, then President of India, inspires Chhotu to change his name to Kalam and set off on a quest for knowledge.

Chhotu's razor sharp intelligence applies itself to every subject under the sun. He thinks up an ingenious way of attracting business to a roadside stall. He learns a foreign language from a friendly tourist. He writes prize-winning essays for his only friend the bored, lonely prince, Ranvijay, played by Hussan Saad. All through this, Chhotu never loses his optimism.

The film reflects the plight of every underprivileged child like Chhotu. Condemned to earn money to keep his family afloat, Chhotu's life is a stark contrast to the luxurious life of his friend Ranvijay. But with perseverance and determination, the young boy manages to change his fortunes and in the process overturns the theory of

his benign employer Bhatti – played by Gulshan Grover – that poverty is a matter of fate.

'I am Kalam' could have degenerated into a preachy and boring film. Instead it conveys a serious message with humour and poignancy – that all children should have the chance to go to school, that they must not be forced to earn money at a tender age.

Neither does the film indulge in melodrama by pitting Chhotu against a wicked employer or abusive co-workers though Laptan (Pitobash) does play the bad guy now and then. The plot of the film too is relevant. It has been produced and released at a time when the Right to Education Act has been passed and there are efforts being made to implement it.

"In eight years since Smile was founded we have reached out to 200,000 underprivileged children and youth across 22 states in India through more than 150 welfare projects on education, health, women's empowerment and advocacy," says Mishra. "Even if we extend our reach to 300,000 beneficiaries in the future, organically we can't send more children to school because huge resources are involved." But if the middle-class and rich of India lend a helping hand by trying to get marginalised children into school, the problem could be resolved quicker.

A major slice of credit must go to the film's director, Nila Madhab Panda who makes his debut with this feature film. Although the film has been directed keeping children and adult viewers in mind, to attract children especially, Panda has given it the touch of a contemporary fable.

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Anniversary
SPECIAL ISSUE

A CIVIL SOCIETY
HALL OF
FAME

IN ASSOCIATION WITH THE AZIM PREMJI FOUNDATION

— **Chintakindi Mallesham** —

SHARJIPET VILLAGE, ANDHRA PRADESH

— **Fatima, Aquiline & Matilda** —

JONGKSHA VILLAGE, MEGHALAYA

— **Gyarsi Bai** —

BARAN ZILLA, RAJASTHAN

— **Bashir Ahmad Mir** —

BARAMULLA, KASHMIR

— **Urja Ghar** —

SABARKANTHA DISTRICT, GUJARAT

— **Kaithally Raman Jayan** —

THRISSUR, KERALA



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WE are what we do. The Civil Society Hall of Fame this year proudly presents six amazing initiatives led by Indians who have chosen to live their lives in action and make a difference by engaging with their immediate realities. They don't claim to be changing the whole wide world. You won't find them in TV studios. Nor are they networked in the viral ways that have come to define instant fame and glory.

You might be tempted to call them 'unsung heroes'. But allow us to clarify that, as we know them, heroism is not their number. Instead, they are quite happy being everyday and below the line. You could say that it is from not wanting to be regarded as special that they get their vision and mission and the space to be effective.

In fact, one of the preconditions for being in the Civil Society Hall of Fame is an aversion to being famous. You can't apply and you can't be nominated. But if our networks throw up a name, it goes before our jury.

The jury this year consisted of: Aruna Roy, Anupam Mishra, Nasser Munjee, Darshan Shankar, Rajeev Mehrotra and Nandan Maluste. None of them needs any introduction. They have all been agents of change in their own individual ways.

As is the case with most such selections, we can't claim to be perfect. But the aim of this exercise is to show that we need to discover newer ways of recognizing the contributions of fellow citizens, especially those who make a difference without wanting to be noticed. Each year, so many of us regard the choices made for the national awards with dismay. Clearly, there is a need to change the rules and raise the bar.

Should we be making a fuss about six initiatives led by 10 Indians in a billion? Well, if our magazine can identify six initiatives and connect with 10 remarkable individuals, then there must surely be many, many more. Also, the obsession with measuring size and impact perhaps needs to be tempered so as to value small initiatives and understand how they can be the triggers for wider change.

Each of the winners has cracked a local-level challenge with larger implications. Their successes deserve to be replicated. In their examples there is also a message that goes out to governments and legislators – that of creating the environment in which such efforts can flourish.

A country as large and complex as India needs multiple solutions and a sea of innovation. The centralisation of authority and resources, as we know it today, is holding us back. The truly big reforms challenge is to get governments to do what only they can in health care, education, a justice system and infrastructure. And empower citizens to do the other things that can make their lives more productive.

What people need more than ever is inclusion in the financial system, access to markets and technologies and the right to audit the use of natural resources and public money.

In our Hall of Fame this year are three Khasi women from the village of Jongksha in the East Khasi Hills of Meghalaya. Fatima Mynsong, Aquiline Songthiang and Matilda Suting have shown how widespread corruption is and how complex it is to fight it at local levels.

They found that they were not receiving the money due to them under the rural employment guarantee scheme. They were being made to sign for the money but it was being eaten up by members of the Jongksha village council.

PEOPLE AS LEADERS

When they wanted to know what had happened to their money they were told not to ask. When they persisted, they were ostracised by the village elders. But they have continued with their demand to know and found growing acceptance of their cause in their village. At each stage they have used the right to information law and now their appeal is pending before the deputy commissioner.

At the other end of the country in Nalgonda district of Andhra Pradesh, Chintakindi Mallesham has revolutionised the weaving of the Pochampalli sari. Mallesham barely managed to get a school degree. But he has mechanised the Asu, the traditional contraption on which the thread for the sari is processed.

Till Mallesham came up with his mechanised Asu, women had no option but to wind the thread by hand. He saw his mother steadily lose the use of her right shoulder and go partially blind in her right eye after years of working on the traditional Asu for 10 hours at a stretch in a day.

Mallesham's machine, called the Laxmi Asu after his mother, not only cuts short the time for making a sari, it also saves the health of women weavers. There are some 30,000 weavers in Andhra Pradesh who could benefit from using the Laxmi Asu, but they don't get bank finance to buy it for the ₹13,000 which it is now priced at. Nor does Mallesham get financial support to upscale his workshop.

In Baran district of Rajasthan, Gyarsi Bai has for several years now been working with people of the Sahariya tribe, to which she belongs, to make them aware of their rights. Bonded labour still exists in these parts of Rajasthan and Gyarsi has been instrumental in getting many of her fellow tribes people freed.

The Sahariyas are nomads who are neglected and exploited. They have been pushed off their lands because they have no proof of ownership. Gyarsi, like the three women of Jongksha, shows us how corruption needs to be fought at the grassroots.

For social change to become a reality, effective leaders are needed. It takes a Gyarsi to rally Sahariyas together and show them that another life is possible. Governance works for everyone when it finally involves everyone. A Gyarsi can achieve with a little support and orientation what the best and most well-

meaning IAS officers cannot. A framework which includes people like her gives government the activist edge it needs. Better governance finally requires an activist spirit.

We have been happy to report on jackfruit more than once in our magazine. The jackfruit has some amazing properties and health benefits. It is eaten from north to south. But in the absence of it being promoted it hasn't been grown in an organised way. Sri Lanka and countries in south-east Asia which do so have made it into a big earner in the farm sector.

Plav Jayan in Kerala's Thrissur district has made it his personal mission to promote the jackfruit because he grew up in poverty and knows what a single jackfruit tree meant to his entire family. He has already planted 10,000 jackfruit trees and hopes to reach the figure of 100,000.

Jayan's mission is a personal one. But the sight of him moving around with his plants for a few years now has already attracted widespread attention. Some local TV programmes have featured him and who knows what the new status of jackfruit will be in Thrissur thanks to him.

From Gujarat and Kashmir come messages of peace and communal harmony.

Urja Ghar is a team effort. Govind Desai, Sachin Pandya and Shital were the founders. Waqar Qazi, Razzaq and Sonal Solanki now make important contributions.

Urja Ghar brings dominant and marginalized sections of society together. Its mission is to promote questioning and learning and creative expression. When people from different backgrounds explore their world together they understand each other better.

In Kashmir, Bashir Ahmad Mir runs the Human Aid Society to achieve reconciliation through faith. Bashir has lost his father, brother and uncle to militants. He was attacked himself and shot in the face. But for him the way forward is through forgiveness. He helps educate the children of dead militants.

If there is one thing common in all these individuals and initiatives, it is that they all work for a better, stronger India. You can be sure that the odds they face are truly awesome and at times very depressing. But they share a belief in our democratic systems and look for ways of reinforcing them even as they question the established order.



PICTURES BY ANIL KUMAR



Chintakindi Mallesham with his mother Laxmi

CHINTAKINDI MALLESHAM

Self-taught invent

CHINTAKINDI Mallesham, 39, has revolutionized the way the famous Pochampalli silk sari is made in Andhra Pradesh. He has invented and patented a machine which has cut to one-third the time needed for processing the thread needed for weaving a sari on a loom.

Women of the Padmashali caste traditionally spend a whole day processing the thread by hand using a device with 42 pins called an Asu. It involves the right hand going back and forth as many as 9,000 times for a single sari.

Mallesham has mechanized the Asu and replaced the woman's arm with a mechanical one which winds the fine silk thread on the pins and offers a choice of settings.

The result is that the thread needed for three and even four saris is now processed in the time that used to be taken for one. The thread is then dyed and put on a loom. A sari can now be completed in three days with the help of the machine compared to four or five days earlier.

With more thread processed it is possible to invest in a greater number of looms and increase production.

There are health benefits too. Repetitious use of the right arm results in irreversible damage to the shoulder. Women also lose

their sight because the right eye has to track the rapid movements of the arm and the fine thread looping on to the pins.

Mallesham was motivated to make the machine because of the plight of his mother and so he has named the machine Laxmi Asu after her. After 30 years of using the Asu, Mallesham's mother can't see with her right eye and has a severely damaged shoulder.

"I saw what my mother was going through and wanted to help her end her suffering. That is why I thought of designing a machine. Of course I didn't know what shape it would take or how I would do it. But I thought I should try," says Mallesham.

Like many men of his village – Sharjipet in Andhra Pradesh's Nalgonda district – Mallesham too would have been a weaver. But his mother's condition and her advice that he choose a different livelihood made him think of devising a machine.

"I told him and my other son to do something else, find another career. There was no future in being a weaver," says Laxmi.

However, Mallesham attended formal school only up to Class 6 and then somehow worked his way through the Class 10 exam. It didn't qualify him for anything much better. But he dreamt up the automated Asu and figured out through trial and error ways of rigging it together.

For someone with as little education as he had, it was a heroic effort. Perhaps it was the desperation to escape from the impoverished life of a weaver that kept him going. But the machine got finally made.

He is now a small entrepreneur with a workshop and a company called Shanker Engineering Works. An IC board which he has designed for the latest model of the Laxmi Asu has 'Chintakindi Brothers' stamped on it.

The Laxmi Asu costs ₹13,000, which is ₹3,000 cheaper than a few years ago, thanks to refinements that Mallesham has introduced. His first machine was made in 1999 and since then he has improved it twice, the latest being in 2005 when he managed to put together an IC board to vary speed and choose the number of times that the thread needs to be taken around one of the 42 pins on the Asu.

He makes four or five machines a month though the market is huge considering there are 30,000 households where the Pochampalli sari is made in Andhra Pradesh. But these families are poor, banks aren't forthcoming with loans and the Andhra Pradesh government has not done anything significant to help.

Mallesham's own family has gone from making ₹400 a month as weavers to the ₹15,000 to ₹20,000 a month that he now earns from the Laxmi Asu. Their house is a two-storey structure, with tiled floors. There is a colour TV with a satellite connection in the drawing room. He owns a Pulsar motorcycle, mobile phone of course and laptop on which he shows a video of how his machine is an improvement over the traditional Asu.

Mallesham's two daughters both go to school. They will never be weavers working for a pittance. The elder one is in Class 9 and the younger in Class 5.

None of all this came to him easily. The decision to design a mechanical Asu was fraught with uncertainties. It often seemed a very foolish and hopeless endeavour which stretched over seven years. He spent his meager savings and borrowed from relatives. But he stuck to his idea and finally managed to produce the machine.

"People would call me lazy, saying that I was tinkering around because I didn't want to work hard as a weaver like the other men. There was a time when everyone I had borrowed from was after me to give their money back. They would say I was illiterate and didn't know what I was doing, that making machines was the job of engineers and people with a science education," says Mallesham.

Faced with this, he went off to Hyderabad, where he worked as an electrician and continued to perfect his machine. His problem was to get the thread to come on to the pin in exactly the way required by the design.

One day when out on work he found a machine which, though used for a different purpose, had a mechanism that could help him get the thread on to the pin. He bought the part and fitted it and the Asu became functional.

Mallesham is self-taught. At first he made a crude contraption with wood which was heavy to move. He then developed a steel frame. The control box based on an IC board was developed by reading the books of engineering students.

His fortunes really turned when he came to the notice of the Honeybee Network and the Innovation Foundation of India. From them he got help to formalize his design and file for a patent.

The traditional Asu is still used widely for the Pochampalli. But those who can put together the finances for the Laxmi Asu know what a difference it makes.



Chintakindi Mallesham with his invention, the Laxmi Asu



Weavers using the traditional Asu

The decision to design a mechanical Asu was fraught with uncertainties. But Mallesham stuck to his idea and finally managed to produce the machine.

In Warangal district, some 15 km from where Mallesham lives, is a cluster of weavers in what has come to be called Weavers' Colony. There are looms in every home here. Some of the families have the old-style Asu and some the Laxmi Asu.

Chandrakala, about 35, has been handwinding thread on the old Asu since she was 16 or 18. The Laxmi Asu has liberated her from that drudgery. Her family owns the latest model with a control box based on the IC board.

Chandrakala says: "This machine helps us do more than three saris a day. We have more looms now." More than 16 years of using the old Asu has taken its toll. Her shoulder gives her trouble and she finds her vision stressed. But with Mallesham's machine she feels she can keep working "till I die".

Umesh Anand, photographer Anil Kumar and Apoorva Dhammam documented Chintakindi Mallesham's story.

PICTURES BY TARUN BHARTIYA



Matilda Suting, Acquiline Songthiang and Fatima Mynsong

FATIMA, ACQUILINE, MATILDA

Jongksha s 3 angel

KONG Fatima Mynsong is a teacher. Kong Acquiline Songthiang is also a teacher. Kong Matilda Suting is a housewife. These three women and a village named Jongksha in Meghalaya have a remarkably gutsy story to tell of countering corruption.

It all began in 2008 when the implementation of the NREGS (National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme) had begun in Jongksha. The scheme entitled each household in the village up to 100 days of work each year. Any member of the household who is above 18 years of age can get work using the job card issued to each household. Villagers here refer to the NREGS work as 'hynniew-phew' meaning '70', the reason being that the daily wage under this scheme had been fixed at that time at ₹70.

Kong Fatima was the community coordinator of the NREGS in the village. As soon as the implementation process began, Fatima found that someone had fraudulently withdrawn money for the purchase of materials and payment of wages by forging her signature. This made her question the secretary of the VEC (Village Executive Committee) but all she heard from the secretary was, "It is none of your business to know. The village heads know what they're doing and what they should do, you have no say!"

Kong Acquiline, who also had a role to play in the implementa-

tion process, had to face a similar fate. These, however, were just cracks that were starting to surface. The three women first tried to solve the problem through negotiation. They thought that by talking to the people responsible for the corruption the dispute would be resolved and the workers would be paid their rightful dues.

However, all their pleas fell on deaf ears. In the meantime, some people of the village who figured out that their complaint wasn't without basis and that there was indeed some misappropriation of funds, started supporting the three women. On finding such support, and after having weighed the pros and cons, the women zeroed in on one last resort – using the Right to Information (RTI) Act, not just to expose but also to counter corruption. It was their first big leap.

When asked if they (the women) ever felt afraid of fighting against village heads and other top rung officials, all of them unanimously said: "We know we are on the right path. We are not fighting against our village heads and other officials. We are just fighting against their misdeeds and to give our children a better future. We sometimes felt afraid, but we trusted each other's support and believed that God will not turn a blind eye on us because we are on the right path."

HALL OF FAME

The RTI application filed by the three women proved to be a segregation tool which divided the village into two groups. The locals describe one group as the 'RTI Party' (group supporting the RTI filed) and the other as the 'Village Party' (consisting of village heads and other supporters that were against the RTI Party).

The ever-smiling faces of these women were never troubled even though a series of hurdles came in their way. Their rations for rice, sugar and kerosene were stopped, they faced ostracism from the village and were even physically assaulted. However, all of these attempts to refrain them from countering corruption proved futile. The search for justice continued. Slowly but steadily they moved to higher levels of the administration. They started filing their complaint to the Block Development Officer (BDO), then the District Rural Development Authority (DRDA), then the State's Chief Information Commissioner (CIC) and finally the Deputy Commissioner (DC). It is at the DC's level that the final verdict can be given. The DC's official machinery has slowly started to chug and the chargesheet against the Chairman and Secretary of the Village Employment Council has been filed.

"Our victory is nearing," exclaims a local resident when asked about how their fight for justice has taken shape. As for the three women RTI users, one can see their passion for what they're doing in the way they remember past hearing dates, dates of filing appeals and other important dates, in much the same way as they remember the dates on which their children were born.

These women and their supporters don't know their way through the system. They are merely ordinary citizens who are well aware of their rights and the need to preserve democracy. Most of their supporters are not literate but definitely intelligent.

The efforts of Fatima, Aquiline and Matilda remind us that we are our own shield and sword against those who try to subvert democracy.

It has been three years now and the village as a whole hasn't had any real benefit out of the NREGS and the villagers are longing for it to start right away again because they know the wages have been increased from ₹70 to ₹80 and now ₹100. This time around, they refer to it as 'shi spa' meaning '100' -- that is way better in all aspects than the previous 'hynniewphew.'

The RTI application has yielded good results because of the extensive public support that the women had gathered much before they filed the first RTI application to pressurize the authorities and to ensure that justice is done to their pleas.

In fact, the women's fight has, to some extent, brought about some change in the prevailing social system too. Meghalaya's is a matrilineal society. However, earlier women were not allowed to speak in the 'Dorbar'. Only men had the right to such things. But in this case, they had to be given a chance to speak and address the 'Dorbar' on what they claimed to know.

Recalling this, Aquiline says, "Even if they don't give us the microphone to speak and address the people, we make sure we get the microphone... and now, after seeing us speak, almost everybody wants to come up and speak about the injustice done to them on the microphone."

The two teachers and a housewife-labourer are indeed bravely leading by example!

Film-maker Tarun Bhartiya camped at Jongksha to document this story of courage.

Their rations for rice, sugar and kerosene were stopped, they faced ostracism from the village and were even physically assaulted.



Supporters of the 'RTI Party' in Jongksha village

PICTURES BY SHAMIK BANERJEE



Gyarsi Bai with freed bonded workers behind her

GYARSI BAI

Baran's freedom fight

GYARSI Bai belongs to the Sahariya community, one of the most primitive tribal groups in Rajasthan. Mostly settled in Shahbad and Kishanganj blocks of Baran district in Rajasthan, the Sahariyas used to own a fair amount of land. But they had no records to prove their ownership. As a result, over the years, educated and influential people managed to corner land that traditionally belonged to the Sahariyas. This tribal group eventually became landless in their own homeland.

The government recognized the Sahariyas as a primitive tribal group and sanctioned entitlements and benefits for them. But the Sahariyas, living on the edge, did not know how to avail any of these schemes. They remained hopelessly poor, many of them serving as bonded labour.

Gyarsi Bai's emergence as a grassroots leader from this bleak landscape is significant. She symbolized the aspirations of her community and their longing for a life of justice and dignity. Gyarsi fought for the right to work, the right to food, the right to know. Most of all she is noted for her tough struggle to free poor and exploited communities from bonded labour.

Gyarsi Bai says she is 48 but she can't be sure. She was born into a Sahariya family with a very tiny patch of land in Faldi village in

Baran district. There weren't any schools she could go to. Her family married her off as a child to a man in Bhanvargarh village of Kishanganj block. His family was even poorer than hers. Her father-in-law had to take loans just to survive. He couldn't pay back those loans and ended up working as a bonded labourer. In the midst of these troubles, Gyarsi's mother-in-law died and she had to shoulder the responsibility of running the family at a tender age. Her husband started working as a farm labourer. Gyarsi supplemented the family's earnings whenever she could find work.

This routine grind began to change slowly. One day two social activists, Charumitra Mehru and Moti Lal, arrived in Gyarsi's village and began to speak about how they could change their lives. Charumitra Mehru and Moti Lal were coordinators of Sankalp, a voluntary organization fighting for justice for the Sahariyas, Khairwas and other marginalized communities in Rajasthan.

"For the first time we began to dream of a better life," recalls Gyarsi.

Charumitra was a passionate campaigner for the education of girls. She motivated Gyarsi Bai and other Sahariya women to start sending their girls to school. The government had started schools and hostels for girls but these were lying empty.

Talking to Charumitra proved to be an eye-opener for Gyarsi. She became aware of the issues surrounding struggles for justice. Sankalp was fighting for land and forest rights and for the regeneration of degraded forests. These were issues which touched a chord amongst the landless Sahariya community. Gyarsi Bai started taking a deep interest.

Sankalp found Gyarsi Bai's ability to communicate very useful. They called her to the Shahbad block where the need to mobilize people was even greater. In fact Gyarsi's skills were found very useful for reaching out to the Sahariyas and other impoverished communities. Gyarsi was one of them. She understood and spoke their language. More and more marginalized women were drawn to Gyarsi Bai.

Sankalp then felt the need for an organization of Sahariya, Khairwa and other deprived communities. In 2002 they helped to form the Jagrut Mahila Sangathan. Gyarsi Bai became treasurer, Yashodha Khairwa became secretary and Kalyani Bai was chosen as chairperson.

"Our mobilization became really strong when Gyarsi Bai and Yashoda joined. But what we really learnt in the course of our struggle is that these women with their emotional strength, courage and commitment are our biggest asset," says Moti Lal.

Gyarsi was an enthusiastic activist for the Right to Information. She understood what it meant for primitive tribal communities like hers who were not being able to access their entitlements. She took part in several *dharanas* all over Rajasthan including in Beawer and Jaipur. This was also the time when the nationwide campaign for the right to work and for a rural employment guarantee law was gathering steam. Gyarsi realized the significance of an employment guarantee scheme for landless and impoverished communities like the Sahariyas. She passionately took part and joined a *yatra* for taking this message to as many people as possible.

When the National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (NREGA) was passed by Parliament activists like Gyarsi rejoiced. But soon they became painfully aware that it was not an easy scheme to implement. There were flaws which needed to be identified and corrected.

So Gyarsi and her colleagues put time and effort into examining the finer details of the scheme. Improper measurement, underpayment, delays in payment came to light. They networked other state level groups fighting for proper implementation of NREGA and they shared their concerns with officials at district and state level. The result was that the implementation of NREGA improved significantly. Baran district became one of the success stories of the rural employment guarantee scheme.

During the Rajasthan drought of 2002, Gyarsi and her colleagues worked tirelessly to draw the government's attention to the plight of the people. There was widespread hunger and malnutrition. Her campaign for food entitlements had impact. A provision for supply of free grain to primitive tribes was implemented. The Khairwas were recognized as living below the poverty line (BPL) and so became entitled to obtaining grain at ₹2 per kg.

Although Gyarsi's fight for all these issues is significant, it is her work to free bonded labour which has become most noteworthy. She began to devote herself to wiping out the scourge of bonded labour later in life, once her children had grown up. Identifying, releasing and rehabilitating bonded labour was to become the toughest phase in her life. Local influential landlords turned hostile. People who had earlier been sympathetic to her movement now became antagonistic.

Her experience helped her. As an active participant in a movement to ensure minimum wages to workers she had travelled to dozens of villages in a truck. During the course of this campaign

Identifying, releasing and rehabilitating bonded labour was to become the toughest phase in Gyarsi Bai's life. But she soldiered on.



Members of the Sahariya community at a discussion on their problems

she came across people who had been forced into slavery.

The initial phase of her work was relatively easy. Gyarsi and her colleagues were simply demanding the release and rehabilitation of a few workers in a village. The local administration found these demands easy to comply with and ordered the workers released. But when Gyarsi asked for the release of many more workers in several villages, the administration got cold feet. They felt they would not be able to cope with the hostility of landowners.

At this critical juncture Gyarsi's community came to her assistance. The relationship she and her colleagues had built with the Sahariyas was now reciprocated. Traditionally, the Sahariyas had never spoken openly about their exploitation. They had always maintained silence. But now they took the decision to speak up. They accompanied Gyarsi to distant hamlets and spoke at public meetings clearly and openly about their exploitation. They gathered as much information as they could about bonded labour. So when landowners questioned their campaign and tried to quiz them, the Sahariyas could answer back. At public meetings Gyarsi spoke with confidence. "We ourselves explained everything to the people, including the landlords," she says.

When information was sought about bonded labour in Rajasthan, it was Gyarsi and her colleagues who could provide it. The state administration had little option but to acknowledge the presence of bonded labour in several villages and take action. A rehabilitation package is being implemented.

Gyarsi is already a proud grandmother and owns 10 bighas of farmland. As a result of the growing mobilisation of the Sahariyas and other weaker sections, the government programme for distribution of land among Sahariyas has picked up and Gyarsi's family is one such beneficiary. Earlier hostels constructed for Sahariya girls in school used to be empty. Now they are asking for more hostels since they need more space for all the girls who are going to school.

Bharat Dogra and photographer Shamik Banerjee met Gyarsi Bai and members of Sankalp and the Jagrut Mahila Sangathan.

PICTURES BY TAUSEEF MUSTAFA



Bashir Ahmad Mir

BASHIR AHMAD MIR

Pacifist in a war zone

A family tragedy became a turning point in Bashir Mir's life. The story of this former truck-driver, now an ardent peace activist, dates to 28 September, 1993. On that fateful day his father, Kabir Mir, a civil contractor and an active political worker of the National Conference, was gunned down by a militant outfit in his village Vizer-Wagoora in North Kashmir's Baramulla district.

His father's murder became a prelude to a spate of violent incidents. The militants shot and injured Bashir and killed his uncle and his brother. Bashir, now 46, could have resorted to hatred and revenge. Instead he chose to forgive. He now runs Human Aid Society (HAS), which he funded by selling his apple orchard.

Bashir's compassion and generosity has made him an icon for those who know him. His life is a saga of courage, dedication and a strong will to serve. It also provides a picture of the challenges ordinary folk experience in Kashmir.

Bashir says he is committed to faith-based reconciliation. In fact, he has sponsored the education of some of the children of the militants who died after they devastated his life. "I am at peace with myself because I have devoted my life for the poor, the sick and the destitute," he says.

Bashir dropped out of school after passing Class 11. He wanted

to become an entrepreneur. His father gifted him a truck in 1982 to give him a start. Bashir drove the truck himself and began earning for his family. His father resigned from the National Conference when militants began threatening him. His only 'sin' was that he was a worker of the 'pro-India' National Conference.

Bashir sold his truck to finance a small grocery shop for his father and keep him away from active politics as militancy was then at its peak. Being a worker of the National Conference was perceived as being 'anti-movement' in the eyes of the 'mujahids.' Bashir got himself a job as a driver in a transport company. But little did he know that avoiding politics would not save his father's life.

"I was in complete shock. Here I was, young, earning a good livelihood and living a peaceful life and then suddenly tragedy struck," says Bashir. As news of his father's killing spread in the area, Bashir's younger brother Mushtaq, who was then studying for a B.Sc degree, could not control his anger. Overcome by strong feelings of revenge, Mushtaq left college and joined another militant outfit opposed to the one that had killed his father.

Bashir too was simmering with rage. But he realized he needed to take care of his mother, youngest brother, sisters, wife and children. One day when Bashir was away on work, the militant outfit

which killed his father raided his home after receiving a tip-off that Mushtaq had arrived with a group of militants and was planning a retaliatory attack.

The militants cordoned Bashir's home and resorted to indiscriminate firing. Mushtaq was severely injured. The militants left Mushtaq in a pool of blood. Bashir was informed about the attack while he was on his way home.

He tried hard to reach his family but his relatives, fearing for his life, advised him not to visit his home. Finally, he was escorted by his cousins to a nearby village, four kilometres from his residence.

Braving all odds in the dead of the night he managed to reach his home escorted by his cousin and a few friends. When he opened the door to his house, he found Mushtaq bleeding profusely from his thigh. Bashir and his cousin appealed to his neighbours to provide a vehicle so that they could take his injured brother to hospital. But they refused. Running out of patience, Bashir and his cousin smashed the window panes of one of the vehicles and took the injured Mushtaq to a hospital in Srinagar.

After Mushtaq recovered, the family settled in his paternal aunt's home. But on 6 May, 1994, Mushtaq quietly returned to his home in Baramulla to take revenge on the militants responsible for attacking his family. He did not take Bashir's permission. "He knew I would not allow him to go back and resort to violence," says Bashir.

The next day, Mushtaq was killed in a fierce gun battle. Bashir returned to his village to bury his brother. "The locals told me that the militants had not allowed them to bury Mushtaq for he had fought against 'mujahids'," says Bashir.

At the funeral of his brother a shocked Bashir was forced to apologize to the militants. People now thronged to his home to offer condolences. In the evening his relatives urged him to spend the night in a safer place. "I could not grasp the situation. My relatives kept imploring me to join them but I did not relent," recalls Bashir.

That same evening, two gun-wielding masked men entered his home and asked for him. Bashir was sitting amongst his relatives including his maternal uncle, Abdul Ahad Pala. "Just to avoid harassment of my relatives and mourners, I introduced myself to them. They asked me to accompany them outside my home. I stood up and followed them. But I sensed that they were going to kill me. I bowed low and pleaded for forgiveness hoping against hope that I would be able to snatch their rifles and kill them. Meanwhile, my maternal uncle followed me. He pleaded for my life but the two gunmen started abusing him. I became furious and began shouting at them. They pointed their guns towards me. I chanted special verses of the Holy Quran loudly. My maternal uncle hugged me. He asked the militants to fire at him and leave me alone. But the militants fired a volley of bullets at my face. Then they fired heavily at both of us. My maternal uncle died on the spot," says Bashir with tears rolling down his face.

Bashir was left to bleed the whole night as relatives and friends could not muster the courage to take him to hospital. Next morning, some relatives assembled at Bashir's home and took him to a hospital in village Kreeri where the doctors referred him to SKIMS, the state's super specialty hospital.

The doctors at SKIMS found that bones on the left side of Bashir's face had been completely damaged. One eye, which had been hit by a bullet, was destroyed. "They immediately performed major surgeries on my face and head. I was not in a position to talk. The tragedy was that we had no money with us even though we owned apple orchards worth lakhs of rupees in our village. I came to know later that my younger sister had to beg in the hospital to collect Rs 265 which just about fetched us some tea and snacks," says Bashir.

Bashir's compassion and his generosity has made him an icon for those who know him. His life is a saga of courage and a strong will to serve.



Bashir Mir talks to members of Human Aid Society

When Bashir came to know his sister had been forced to beg and his family was in a sorry state, he contemplated suicide. He thought he was a burden on his family.

But in SKIMS he witnessed the courageous struggle of people who were suffering even more than him. "While I was being treated at SKIMS my family introduced me to a patient lying on a bed next to mine. That was when I truly began to grasp the magnitude of violence which the entire population of Kashmir was living through. The patient I was introduced to had faced a similar attack as I had from militants. He had lost six members of his family. Both his legs had been amputated. Yet he was eager to recover and go home. I asked him why. He said he wanted to return to see how God will punish the killers of his family. This was the turning point in my life," says Bashir.

While he was in hospital, his children were expelled from school since his family could not pay their school fees. Bashir underwent medical treatment for one and a half years. Nine major surgeries were performed on him. He lost vision in his left eye and has difficulty moving his right hand. These surgeries cost him ₹4 lakhs. The money was donated by his friends and relatives. His facial bones were replaced with artificial bones.

Bashir realized that there were many people in Kashmir who like him were living a life of pain. He wanted to help. He began the Human Aid Society (HAS) in November 1999. To raise money he sold his apple orchard for ₹7 lakhs. He donated this money to HAS and began to reach out to victims of violence in Kashmir – orphans, widows and the destitute. HAS sponsors the education of needy children and helps provide skills and assistance to widows and the destitute. It has undertaken rehabilitation work for those hit by the 2005 earthquake. Over the years, HAS has rendered tremendous services in conflict-torn Kashmir. The NGO has helped 1,107 victims of violence.

Syed Basharat traced Bashir Ahmad Mir's amazing personal story in Baramulla.

PICTURES BY GAUTAM SINGH



Govind Desai

URJA GHAR

Community healers

THE terrace of an innocuous two-storey house in a twisted lane offers a splendid view of the 300 houses that make up Lambadiya in Sabarkantha, a district in north Gujarat. It's quiet and peaceful and you are tempted to think that life here couldn't have changed much even in 100 years. But then from downstairs comes the sound of laughter and you realize that this is no ordinary house – it's Urja Ghar, or Power House and there's a little revolution brewing here.

Urja Ghar started as a model project sponsored by Oxfam and Manav Kalyan Trust in 2004. The 2002 communal riots in Gujarat had deepened divisions between the Hindu and Muslim communities. Urja Ghar was envisioned as a space where different communities could mingle and talk. Lambadiya, around 175 km north of Ahmedabad, and Karawada in Udaipur, Rajasthan, were chosen.

"Urja Ghar was conceived as a space where one would interact with the youth and women without speaking directly about communalism," explains Govind Desai, 32, who along with Sachin Pandya and Shital made up the team. "We formed three groups: one for children from eight to 15 years, another for the youth from 15 to 25 years and a third for women. Our strategy was to engage them in activities like watching films, news, reading and writing

stories, photography etc to develop a culture of pluralism. Urja Ghar became a space where one could speak one's mind, debate, knowing that one's identity and thoughts would be respected," says Govind.

Waqar Qazi, 36, who joined in 2007 says, "We restarted a dialogue process. By introducing ourselves as a group offering extra-curricular activities to the children of Lambadiya, and with attractions like computers, we were able to convince parents to allow their children to interact with us."

Issues were introduced for discussion innovatively, like gender sensitivity through photography. Waqar explains: "We gave the children cameras and asked them to photograph hands of people engaged in activity. They came back with pictures of men holding money, children carrying books, women with brooms, etc. Then we all analysed what they had shot and initiated discussions on gender stereotypes."

"Watching 'Sholay' became a learning exercise when we discussed why Amitabh Bachchan was conveniently bumped off in the end. Maybe widow remarriage was a difficult question to tackle at that time. There were no holy cows. We facilitated the exchange of opposing views and this process of unlearning and

resolution happened in front of everybody. What emerged from that democratically shared space was a person who could think on his or her own," says Waqar.

"An agent of change was created that would act like a virus, unfettered by geography, proliferating in the space it inhabited," adds Govind.

Lambadiya is a small town with a population of around 2,500 people consisting of Hindus and Muslims. It's a market for 40 to 50 surrounding villages mostly populated by tribals who sell their produce here and buy what they need. Riots had taken place here in August 2000, in response to the killing of pilgrims on the way to Amarnath. But surprisingly in 2002, it was peaceful. The riots of 2000 affected both communities economically. Perhaps in 2002 it was good economic sense which prevailed and bloodshed was avoided.

But the culture of communalism runs deep in Gujarat, and this was going to be the elephant in the room. "When we came here, we realized we could not confront communalism directly, nor take the 'Hindu-Muslim Bhai-Bhai' kind of route," explains Waqar. "Our strategy was clear. We would not appease any community. In fact youth from both religions were questioned about fundamentalism within their communities. They had to examine the conflicts within. Their identity was recognized and respected, nothing was forced upon them."

Some youngsters were members of the Bajrang Dal, like Sanjay Raval. Convincing them to accommodate an alternate view was the biggest challenge. It took two years of involvement with Urja Ghar's theatre group before Sanjay decided to leave the Bajrang Dal. Later, along with Robin Soni and Razzaq, Sanjay became part of a fact-finding team sent to Nasik, Malegaon, Allahabad and Hyderabad to investigate cases of Muslims who were charged under TADA. Sanjay even campaigned for Mallika Sarabhai in the 2009 elections.

At least one communal clash was averted due to Urja Ghar's active presence. In early 2006, a Hindu boy eloped with a Muslim girl. Trouble began brewing. The girl's brother was part of Urja Ghar's youth group. A dialogue was initiated with Urja Ghar's mediation which helped defuse the tension. It was agreed that the boy and girl would not be harmed when they were found. Getting the affected parties to enter into a dialogue and negotiate was the achievement. A few weeks later the couple was located and brought back. Eventually they were separated, but a clash was averted.

Urja Ghar's philosophy of creating agents of change starts with efforts at the individual level. It is these success stories that Govind is really proud of. "Atul was a school dropout because he had been beaten by a teacher. He was reluctant to go back to school. After he joined Urja Ghar we helped him regain his confidence. On Teacher's Day, some two or three years later, he delivered a lecture to his former class. It was a great victory for him and for us," Govind says with pride.

These successes have built close relationships and broken barriers between communities. "It isn't unusual for a Muslim boy to visit a Hindu home. But it is unheard of for a tribal to visit a Muslim home. Now Shaqeel and Sakkabhai are great friends and go to each other's homes," says Govind. "This journey of questioning and realization has built strong bonds across caste and religion. Urja Ghar is a way of life, a liberal space without a hierarchical structure and we are all *sathidars* or fellow travelers in it," he says.

Across the room a young man in his twenties looks on attentively. Razzaq was an early participant in Urja Ghar. He is one of the leaders who emerged from the youth group. "Razzaq was very involved in the theatre group we formed with the youth," says Govind. "Theatre gave them a lot of exposure to the outside world and to progressive ideas. Plays based on the riots were performed

'This journey of questioning and realization has built strong bonds across caste and religion. Urja Ghar is a way of life, a liberal space.'



A meeting of the Vistar Vikas Samitis

across Gujarat along with NGOs like Anhad as part of a campaign against communalism before the 2007 Assembly elections."

Razzaq remembers people crying after a performance in Juhapura, a Muslim ghetto in Ahmedabad, and residents of some Hindu villages openly admitting that they had killed people and would do so again. "It was unnerving to be confronted with such emotions," he says, a little shaken by the memory. This unique exposure had its dangerous moments too when their group was beaten up allegedly by activists of the BJP.

Other members of the youth group travelled to Kashmir and lived with families affected by terrorism. Sonal Solanki, another of Urja Ghar's bright sparks, remembers her stay with the family of a terrorist and the bond she developed with his children. "Shahzeen, one of his daughters, liked the *bindi* I use and asked me to put one on her forehead. We still remain in touch," she says.

A meeting of the Vistar Vikas Samitis (VVS) is in progress on the ground floor. These samitis consist of two to three leaders from 30 to 35 villages where Urja Ghar works. The samitis meet on the eighth of every month and plan how they will solve problems their villages are facing. Collective action has resulted in a much delayed road being built, errant teachers being brought to book, timely disbursement of a nutrition allowance for pregnant women and less lavish expenditure on rites and rituals.

Govind, Sachin and Waqar have now restricted their roles to being mentors. Youth leaders like Sonal, Razzaq, Robin, Dinesh and Gautam Dabhi, an activist from Ahmedabad, are in charge.

"We haven't received funding this year, and none is expected. Even the rent of our premises is unpaid for the last six months," Govind says worried. "We want to expand our activities to other villages and perhaps to semi-urban areas but without funds all our plans have been kept on hold. We have worked so hard on Urja Ghar, it breaks my heart to just let it go."

Gautam Singh went to Lambadiya in north Gujarat to interact with Govind Desai and the feisty Urja Ghar group.

PICTURES BY SHREE PADRE



Kaittally Raman Jayan setting out with his plants

KAITTALLY RAMAN JAYAN

Jackfruit evangelist

VILLAGERS used to call him crazy. But now a growing number call him *mashe* or teacher. Kaittally Raman Jayan, 46, like the jackfruit tree he campaigns for, maintains a dignified silence whether he is ridiculed or praised.

"I don't understand why people neglect the jackfruit tree. It has the capacity to feed the whole family. It is an excellent tree. Like the coconut, the jackfruit too is a *Kalpavruksha*, a wish-fulfilling tree," says Jayan passionately. "In fact, India should declare jackfruit as our national fruit, just as Bangladesh has done."

Jayan was born into a poor family in the village of Avittattur, in Kerala's Thrissur district. He was the seventh of nine sons. His father had to feed his big family with his meager earnings as a newspaper vendor.

The family's food security came from an age-old jackfruit tree in front of their house. "The jack tree wasn't just our saviour," reminisces Jayan. "We had many goats. As a child I was assigned the job of cutting jack leaves to feed our goats. We literally lived under the shade of this jack tree. Just imagine how many quintals of food a single tree gives us so effortlessly."

Memories of his childhood made Jayan very attached to the jackfruit tree. His hobby in school was to collect sprouted jack seeds

and plant them here and there. The plants grew into trees and started yielding fruit. Jayan was filled with wonder. This was an exciting experience for the teenager. Noting his love for the jackfruit tree, people nicknamed him *Plav Jayan* or *Jack Tree Jayan*, when he was studying in Class 7.

Jayan couldn't go to college since his family didn't have the money to finance his higher education. For a while he drifted from one job to another. Finally, he found a good job in the Gulf.

Jayan spent 11 years in Dubai. He says he had a pretty good job in a supermarket. The money was good. He had luxuries that couldn't be dreamt of in his village. "But a sort of discontent started building inside me. My jack trees were calling me back to my motherland," he says in a rare display of emotion.

"In fact in my place of work they were offering me a hike in wages. But money is not everything. What is the point of earning money and then coming back home in your twilight years, old and unhealthy."

When he returned he found people were cutting jack trees for timber, for constructing homes and so on. But nobody was planting new trees. This made Jayan very sad. He decided to rectify the situation.

The seeds of starting a campaign to plant jack trees began to grow in his mind. His small house in the village of Avittattur is just

five km away from Irinjalkuda railway station. Every year, Jayan raises a large jackfruit nursery in front of his house under a thicket of coconut trees.

He looked for a job which would match his mission. Finally, he decided to distribute products like candles and soaps produced by local Kudumbashree units which are cooperatives run by women.

He bought himself a tempo with his name, Plav Jayan, inscribed on the front. It fulfills two purposes. He sells Kudumbashree products and alongside he plants jackfruit trees. Apart from soaps and candles, Jayan's yellow tempo carries jack plants, a spade, sickle and a watering can.

As he drives down streets and lanes Jayan looks out for suitable spots to plant jack trees. If he finds one, he stops his tempo, takes out his spade, digs a pit, plants the jack, erects a fence, waters the plant and then zooms off.

If his chosen spot is in a school or church, he approaches the authorities for permission to plant. Once he gets the green signal, he plants the jack tree himself.

"On my subsequent visits, I look up my plants. If a plant shows signs of withering, I water it. If necessary I go to the nearby house and request them for a pot of water."

Initially some of his plants were uprooted by vagrants. People used to make fun of him. "Our society has a strange inferiority complex about jackfruit. I really don't understand why so many people look down on it. I would be mocked for carrying jack plants. People wanted to know why I didn't plant banana trees instead."

SEEDS AND SCHOOLS : Strangely, Jayan popularizes only seedlings, not grafts. "If you wait for just seven years, this plant will also give you a bountiful yield, no?" he says. Every year, he raises a nursery with a few local varieties like Muttom Varikka, Then Varikka, Thenga Varikka, Tamara Chakka, Neelathama Chakka, Singapore Varikka, Paduvalam Chakka, Pattamuttom and so on.

Eco-clubs of various schools often invite Jayan. He always takes a few jack plants with him when he accepts an invitation to an eco-club. First, he shows the children a documentary film of his activities.

"I tell the children, the jack tree is not only for us human beings. It gives food and shelter to birds, squirrels, monkeys and many other animals. It is a habitat for a host of small animals and birds." He then takes the students to the playground and helps them dig pits. The children enjoy planting the seedlings and watering them with their own hands.

There is an activity called 'cluster study' for high school students in Kerala. Teachers are permitted to choose books which are not part of the syllabus and encourage students to read and discuss those books.

Jayan wrote a booklet on jackfruit two years ago. He has been adding information to it with each subsequent edition. His book is one of the books selected for Class 8 students.

JACK VILLAGE: Jayan wants to convert his village Velukkara into a jackfruit paradise. 'One house, one jack tree' is his dream. The village has more than 1,000 houses. About half of them have a jackfruit tree thanks to Jayan.

"I prefer to plant the seedlings in these homesteads with my own hands. This is not because I mistrust anyone. Just for my own satisfaction," says Jayan.

Of late, institutions, clubs and groups of people request Jayan to supply them jack plants. They have been organizing meetings to sensitize people about the importance of the jackfruit for local food



Jayan examining jackfruits



Jayan plants jackfruits wherever he finds a good spot

Jayan wants to convert Velukkara into a jackfruit paradise. 'One house, one jack tree' is his dream. About half the homes in his village have a jack tree.

security. During one such programme, 500 jack plants were planted in the Thrissur Medical College campus. Even the Irinjalkuda police station has grown a herbal garden with a few jack plants.

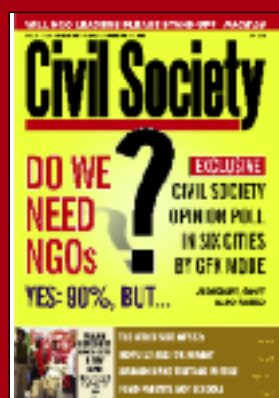
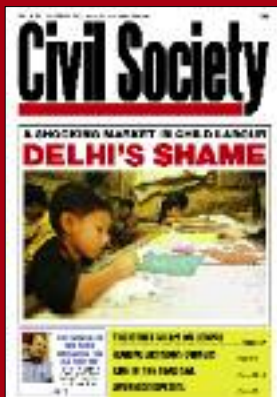
Jayan's family of four is slowly getting involved in his mission. Says his wife Smitha, "Initially, I used to feel embarrassed. Now I have realized the importance of what he is doing. All this sacrifice is for the development of the village." Jayan's son, Aditya, studies in Class 7 and his daughter Alamelu, is in Class 3. They help in the nursery and other activities.

Jayan has been receiving recognition for his selfless work. He has caught the attention of local TV channels and small magazines and he has been honoured at jackfruit festivals.

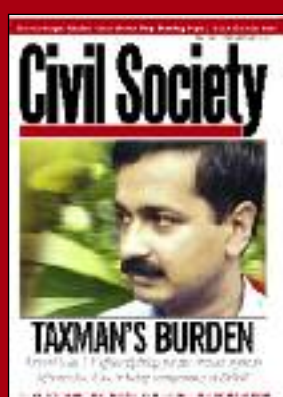
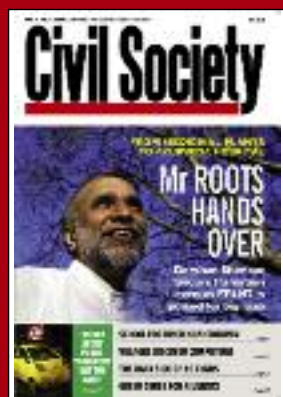
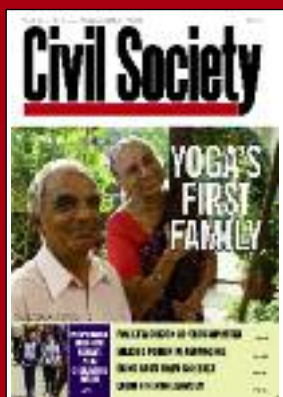
Recently, he was awarded the Vanamitra prize by Kerala's forest department. He received a cash award of ₹25,000. Such recognition has also raised awareness about the importance of the jackfruit.

Shree Padre met Jayan and discussed the many virtues of the jackfruit tree and Jayan's passionate mission.

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Mumbai's night schools find a

Mobile science lab, short syllabus and job training are offered

Gautam Singh
Mumbai

It is late evening and a Marathi class in under-way at the Adarsh Nagar Night School in Worli. I watch Jiten Parab, 16, engrossed in reading from his textbook. Just an hour ago, he was intently checking out the innards of an old Maruti car.

Jiten, son of a farmer from a village in Malwan district, says he's been fascinated by machines ever since he began living in Mumbai, seven years ago. So he works at a motor workshop from 9 am to 6 pm, Monday to Saturday and half of Sunday trying to figure out what makes machines tick. He then attends school after work, six nights a week and does his homework before he sleeps.

That's a lot of hard work but with simplicity and honesty he says: "I want to do a course at an Industrial Training Institute (ITI) so that I can get a good job."

It is this passionate aspiration of students for a better life that inspired Nikita Ketkar to resign her government job and set up Masoom (Innocence) in January 2008. Her NGO now runs an intervention programme for night schools.

"It is sheer self-motivation, a desire to do something with their lives that brings these youngsters here. But they receive a very poor quality of education. Notebooks, textbooks, access to scientific laboratories and in some cases, even chalk, are not provided. I felt they deserved better," says Nikita.

Mumbai has around 150 night schools for students from Class 8 to Class 10. They cater to more than 15,000 students. The oldest night school was set up almost 100 years ago. Funded by charitable trusts, some of these night schools receive aid from the government in the form of teachers' salaries. The Brihanmumbai Municipal Corporation (BMC) rents out classrooms in their schools to the night schools. But it doesn't allow them use of facilities



Nikita Ketkar



Masoom team helping out at a night school

guru in Masoom



Masoom decided to improve infrastructure, enhance the quality of education and lobby with the government, trustees and other stakeholders.

During one of her first visits to a night school, Nikita found students had negligible exposure to understanding science by doing practicals. Students were permitted entry to the science lab once, usually just before the board exam.

Masoom created mobile science lab kits which are taken to night schools on scheduled days so that students can participate in practicals. Similarly, access to a library, computers, free notebooks and textbooks have been provided by Masoom.

Ashok Jadhav, principal of the R M Bhat night school, feels that much more can be done for students but there is a lack of funds. "Some children need financial help. We teachers sometimes pay for their board examination fees. We wish we could expose them to computers. But we don't have a teacher," he says.

Masoom provides a meal to students in night schools it works with. Jadhav's school isn't part of Masoom's intervention programme, so his students don't get nutrition. He strongly feels it's important to provide children with an evening meal.

"The Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan should be extended to secondary education," says Nikita. "If day schools are being provided midday meals, then night schools should also be given evening meals. The night school's student is at a disadvantage compared to the student who can afford to attend day school. The night school student is at times the sole breadwinner of his family and has to work."

It is also a huge challenge for teachers and students to cover the entire syllabus in a short time. To tackle this problem Masoom put together a 'research and development team' with academic experts. The team brainstormed with the night school teachers and managed to bring out a condensed version of the syllabus which they are now following for Class 10.

"Masoom is also working with the Night Schools Headmasters Association, an umbrella organization which sets the preliminary papers, and they have agreed to focus their question papers on the minimum essential syllabus that we have worked on," Nikita explains.

But there's more that Masoom is trying to do for night students. It offers them extra-curricular activities, life skills training, psycho-social counseling and vocational guidance.

"We have seven or eight students who are enrolled in vocational courses. That is motivation for the present batch to attend school regularly. We have counselors who help students with learning disabilities or those who are slow learners during our one to one sessions with them," Nikita says.

Prashant Kokate, 24, a former volunteer, now heads the Career Cell. "We find out where the student's interest lies through questionnaires. But it doesn't stop there. We do one to one counseling and see where their interest really lies. Some of them could just be writing what their parents want them to do. Some might be good at drawing. We make them aware of the possibilities."

Masoom sponsors meritorious students above 18 years for courses in soft-skills development, English conversation and grooming, says Prashant.

Amol Pashelkar, 21, is one such student. Weak in math and science, Amol didn't really believe he would be able to pass Class 10. But the persistent efforts of a volunteer teacher helped him overcome his fears and four years after his first attempt

he scored 74 per cent, a record of sorts for a night school student.

"I feel proud to have won the scholarship and I am more self-confident now," he says. Amol has enrolled himself for further studies at a night college which he attends after his day job at the Bombay Stock Exchange.

Masoom's intervention strategy is being implemented in 10 night schools. The NGO is constantly monitoring its impact. Ganesh Naik, 29, a former volunteer is now the Education Coordinator. He collects data from schools on attendance levels, response to English conversation classes, extra classes and teachers' training.

"There is awareness amongst night schools about Masoom's initiatives," he says proudly. "Attendance has improved and the pass percentage for Class 10 has gone up by 10 to 15 per cent." Attendance is still a major issue. Perhaps this is because students feel their part time teachers are disinterested. "The teachers need to be motivated too," says Naik.

The night schools are an orphaned lot. They were set up even before the BMC schools and no specific department takes responsibility for them. "The education department is sympathetic, but they say they don't have the budgetary allocation. And night schools don't even exist in the reports of the Planning Commission!" says Nikita.

Finally, I ask her, why did she name her NGO, Masoom? But this is best answered by Vaishali Aiwale, 19, a student and a homemaker. Married for less than a year, she sits comfortably behind a desk, immaculately dressed in a golden sari, in a classroom full of trendily-clothed teenagers. "I have a great desire to learn. I'm not concerned about getting any job. I just want to keep on learning," she says simply and with innocence.



Jiten Parab

like science laboratories or computers. The trusts pay the rent and running expenditure, but it is only "five or ten percent of the trusts that take an active interest," says Nikita.

In 2006, Nikita and her team of volunteers researched the problems night schools faced and what could be done. Their findings revealed that around 60 per cent of night school students worked during the day, doing small jobs in can- teens, offices and shops. Some helped with the family business or at home. The children, tired from work, found it difficult to concentrate on their studies. They were also hungry.

Most teachers work part-time in night schools, teaching in schools during the day. They cannot give their best. Perhaps the biggest handicap is the duration of the classes. Night schools are open for just three hours. Day schools work five to six hours. Yet night schools are expected to complete the entire year's syllabus. School results were naturally poor. The average pass percentage of Class 10 students was only around 20 to 30 per cent.

In 2008, after Masoom was founded, it adopted two schools for an intervention programme.

Lalaram knocks down feudal lords

Bharat Dogra
Banda (UP)

ABOUT three years ago a hunger death was reported from Lalaram Prajapati's home in Nahri village. Several people came to condone with him. Nowadays, people are again streaming into Lalaram's house. But the reasons are different – Lalaram is now pradhan of this village. He stood for panchayat elections in October 2010 and won. One of the poorest men in Nahri is its leader.

How did this transition come about? Lalaram says the visit of Rahul Gandhi to his home proved to be a big morale-booster. He says, "I started telling myself – if such a big leader from Delhi can come to sympathize with me, why shouldn't I work hard to come forward and do something?"

This determination could be translated into reality due to the significant work done by the Vidyadham Samiti, a voluntary organisation working in Nahri and nearby villages. Nahri is located in Naraini block of Banda district in Uttar Pradesh. The Vidyadham Samiti works in about 45 villages of this block for the rights of weaker sections, for implementation of the government's pro-poor schemes and for improvement of education.

During the worst phase of Bundelkhand's drought, Raja Bhaiya, founder-director of the Vidyadham Samiti, worked day and night to draw the attention of the administration to the survival threats villages here faced. His investigations revealed that as many as nine starvation deaths had taken place in Nahri. When news of these hunger deaths appeared in several newspapers and journals, Rahul Gandhi accompanied by Raja Bhaiya visited Nahri village and Lalaram's home.

When panchayat elections were announced for October 2010, the Vidyadham Samiti began working intensively to ensure they were free and fair. Some of these villages are in the clutches of feudal interests. They do not leave any stone unturned to ensure they dominate local politics

and self-governance. During panchayat elections feudal lords use money and muscle to make sure that they or their proxy candidates win the coveted post of village pradhan.

On the opposite side of the fence voluntary groups like the Vidyadham Samiti strongly believe that the real objectives of panchayat raj can only be achieved if genuine representatives of the weaker sections contest and win these elections. So the voluntary group tried to encourage persons



Lalaram at a work site

of integrity and clean reputation from weaker sections to contest the panchayat elections.

Since the Vidyadham Samiti and its sister organization, Chingari, have done a lot of sincere work among the rural poor, people listen carefully to what its activists say. This time it was clear that their campaign for free elections was making people think.

Vidyadham Samiti's campaign was further boosted by the Association of Local Governance of India (ALGI) which was also leading a campaign for free and fair elections. ALGI made available to Vidyadham useful literature and posters for their campaign. These booklets and posters explained, in a language the villagers could understand, why it is so important to elect persons who are honest and will stand by the poor in the toughest of times.

In Nahri village this campaign proved so effective



Lalaram outside his hut

that poor people not only spurned offers of money by rich candidates, they even collected small donations for Lalaram once he decided to contest.

Lalaram could fight the election only due to these small donations. When election results were announced, the poor people of this village were very happy to know that Lalaram had won by a substantial margin of 130 votes. Now people have high hopes from Lalaram.

In Naugavaan panchayat of Naraini block another poor person, whose name by a strange coincidence is Lalaram, was able to defeat a candidate backed by feudal forces. So arrogant were these feudals that some time back they

told social activists that they won't be allowed to enter this village.

In 2005 the feudal forces of Ragauli Bhattpur had won the panchayat elections by calling in several gunmen to ensure that their candidate got most of the votes. But during the October 2010 elections, a person called Rajaram who had toiled in stone quarries was able to win the panchayat poll.

In 2005 in Bilharka panchayat of Naraini block the seat was reserved for Dalit women. The feudal forces found a Dalit woman dependent on them to stand as their proxy candidate. Then during the next five years they merrily controlled panchayat affairs using the name of the hapless Dalit pradhan. The Dalit woman pradhan was not even allowed to speak to outsiders. But this time Mangal Singh, a humble worker opposed to feudal might, won the election.

Bright school from nothing



Shanta Sharan, second from right, with her colleagues

Civil Society News
Gurgaon

SCATTERED here and there in Gurgaon's colonies are buildings called community centres built by the Haryana Urban Development Authority (HUDA). Most often they serve no purpose and lie abandoned in a derelict state. One such building caught the eye of Shanta Sharan when she moved to Palam Vihar.

Sharan had worked as a teacher for many years in Loreto School, Ryan International and Amity International. She had also done a stint with Vidya, an NGO dedicated to educating children in slums and with Udayan Care where she had volunteered for a while. She saw how education and love helped orphaned children to blossom.

Sharan wanted to run a school for poor children. All over Gurgaon you can see little ones playing in the dust and grime as their parents slave away in India's Millenium City. So she wondered if she could house her school in the government's empty building.

KC Johri, 80, a retired bureaucrat came to her aid. With the infectious enthusiasm of a young man on his first job, Johri submitted applications and chased various government departments with vigour. Finally, one Dr G Anupama, an IAS officer in HUDA, agreed a school was a good idea and under a Public-Private-Partnership agreement the building was handed over to Sharan.

But the building was in poor shape. Window panes were broken, there was no electricity or running water and the backyard looked like a left-

over jungle. There was no boundary wall either. Termites had chomped through the doors.

Sharan named her school Diksha. It is registered as a society. She decided it would cater to tiny tots from pre-nursery to Class 2. "I was quite clear that I wanted to provide them a very high quality of education," she explains.

As she set about fixing the building and scouring nearby slums for students, residents of the colony turned up at the school to offer their services as volunteers. By a curious twist of fate, they were exactly what Sharan was looking for.

Indira Dayal was walking her dog one morning and noted the activity at the building. She inquired from Sharan what was going on. The two got talking. It turned out Dayal was a social worker who had served as a medical counsellor with GB Pant Hospital and with Vidya the same NGO Sharan had worked with. Dayal offered to help and she became headmistress.

Neelam Jain, an expert in early childhood education, had shifted to the colony after working for 30 years as a teacher in various Delhi schools. A gentle, soft spoken lady, she had converted her backyard into an informal school for poor children. One bedraggled child told her about Diksha. Jain came to take a look. She now works as academic coordinator, designing the syllabus, innovating learning methods and training teachers. Sushma Hurria, a neighbour, looks after the kitchen. RP Singh, who retired after working for many years with an NGO, now handles the school's sparse accounts.

Diksha opened formally on Gandhi Jayanti in

2008. Sharan managed to get 13 children to join. At that time, parents saw Diksha as a convenient crèche where they could drop off their child before going to work. In six months, 75 children had enrolled. Attrition rates were high. But soon things changed. Parents saw their children being transformed. Their little ones were now going to school in proper school uniforms, speaking a smattering of English and learning computers. Attrition rates began to tumble. And now parents synchronize their trip to their villages with school holidays, says Sharan.

A year later Diksha has 100 children. On a shoestring budget Sharan, a staunch Gandhian, has managed to stick to her vision. The education being offered is as good as a child would get in an elite private school. The teacher-student ratio is 25:1. The school is clean and cheerful. There is a red classroom for pre nursery children and a yellow classroom for nursery children. Computers for the children have been donated by SAP Laboratories.

Best of all the children are brimming with joy and energy. They come from all corners of India and every festival is celebrated. In sing song voices they recite poems with gusto. The school follows the play-way method of learning. Learning evolves naturally from activity and observation. So children begin with colouring and then make strokes and finally shape letters. Neelam Jain explains that care is taken to relate the classroom to home life. Poems too have been invented so that they are pertinent to the child's reality.

The backyard now is a neat playground with swings and slides. Two classrooms have been added. Sharan plans to increase classes. A mid-morning snack of a banana and biscuits plus a midday meal of rice, lentils and vegetables is served to each child every day. Every child is also given a winter uniform and a summer uniform. The children take care to come neatly dressed but it hasn't been easy turning them angelic. "They were quite wild at first," recalls Sharan. "They would jump out of the school's low windows."

As for the parents the impact has been immense. Slightly better off parents want to get their children admitted here. The debate within the school is whether they should charge a small fee or not. Opinion is divided. So far no money is charged and the poorest children get preference. But its tough making ends meet and the school is looking for donors. So far Sharan has relied on small donations and her own resources. Her faithful group of volunteers keep the school going.

But money is a constant problem. The school's expenses are a modest ₹60,000 a month. It costs ₹500 per month to sponsor a child and Sharan is thinking of how to get more people to pitch in.

Contact Diksha: sharanshanta@gmail.com

Water, peace, power, health, education are the issues

Kashmir's new

Syed Basharat
Srinagar

THE results of the panchayat elections in the troubled state of Jammu and Kashmir turned out to be surprisingly unexpected. People took part enthusiastically. Those who eventually won include a software engineer-turned-actor, a law graduate, an IT expert, a right to information (RTI) activist, a schoolteacher and a Kashmiri Pandit, amongst others. Villagers in Jammu and Kashmir can look forward to dynamic leadership at the grassroots.

All the winners appear determined to help their villages achieve a better quality of life. What they ask for is state support so that they can get on with doing their jobs. There is impatience over lack of development. People are giving politics a backseat. Their vote goes for roads, better education, health, drinking water, jobs and peace.

WUSAN'S PRIDE: One election result which made headlines was of Asha Devi's. A Kashmiri Pandit, Asha Devi, was voted as Panch by the predominantly Muslim residents of Wusan village which is en route to the famous health resort of Gulmarg in Baramulla district. Asha Devi is popularly known as 'Mummy' in her Muslim neighbourhood.

Asha Devi works as a peon in a school. She is the mother of two children and she originally hails from Doda – the home town of Union Health Minister Ghulam Nabi Azad. In 1984 she married Radha Krishan in Wusan. She says she has never ever felt like an outsider.

"In fact, relations between our two communities are so strong that we never felt the need to migrate from the Valley," she told *Civil Society*. People from her village and adjoining areas flocked to her house to greet her on her victory. Wusan village, which had 10 Kashmiri Pandit families before their mass migration, now has only five Pandit families. "Our Muslim brethren assured us that we would be as secure as they are and they would tackle any problem coming our way," she said.

Did the militants threaten her? "I am a firm believer in destiny," replies the spirited Asha



Asha Devi, newly elected Panch of Wusan, with members of her village



Ruby Bashir



Ghulam Mohammad Mir

Devi. "Life and death are in the hands of God and a person dies only once. If I die for truth and I am on the right path, I have no regrets," she replies.

Asha Devi says she was never inclined to politics but local leaders egged her on. "A lot of people asked me to contest. Initially, I was a little nervous but I decided to contest after more support poured in," she says. Out of 98 votes polled in her constituency, Asha Devi got 54 while her opponent, Sarwah Begum, got 43. One vote was rejected.

"We have lived like a family all these years in this village and I have never felt different from the other families. The people have reposed trust in me. Now it is my turn to serve them," she added. Her neighbours are jubilant. "We supported her because we felt she can serve the area better. We will continue to support her efforts to serve the people," says Halima who campaigned for Asha Devi.

Abdul Hamid Wani, Numberdar (village head) of Wusan, believes that electing Asha Devi was a conscious decision of the village as they wanted to send a message to the entire world that the people of Kashmir want the Pandits to return to their homes in the Valley. "We wanted to tell

them that we miss you. Without you Kashmir ceases to be the centre of pluralism and age-old communal harmony," says Wani.

Asha Devi's neighbours helped her get her job regularized in the education department. "I work as a peon in a government school. My monthly wages are ₹70. And I have been working in this school for the last 27 years," she says.

Ghulam Mohammad, a former political activist and Asha Devi's neighbour, takes a more cynical view. He says people are aware that Asha Devi will find it difficult to make a difference because corruption runs very deep in the system.

"She is a very poor lady," says Ghulam Mohammed. "The government has so far not given her son a job in the police though he is from a non-migrant Pandit family. So, what can she do for us? But we still love her and we don't expect anything from her."

Asha Devi has an agenda all the same. "First, I want to provide some relief to a few families of Wusan who have disabled children. Then I want to improve education facilities, provide safe drinking water and ensure round-the-clock power supply. We also need better roads."

Was she worried about impediments? "If the government does not empower us, then there is no fun in being elected to this post. Rather, we will feel humiliated. I think the government should support us in our honest and sincere efforts for the development of this state." And Asha Devi's message to her own Pandit community is: "We want all

village leaders



Raja Parvez Mir, software engineer-turned-model, is Sarpanch of Lachipora

Pandits to return to Kashmir...not to the camps or colonies set up by the government but to the places which they called home."

MODEL TEACHER: Every day Ruby Bashir wakes up early and prepares for her class. The difference between Ruby and other teachers is that she works hard to educate the people of her village without taking any compensation.

A full-time volunteer, Ruby has done a Bachelor's in Science from a college in Budgam, a central Kashmir district. She also did a one-year special course in computers. She got married to a bank employee, Bashir Ahmad Dar, in Badipora Chadoora in Budgam immediately after she finished her computer course. Ruby says she was motivated by her neighbours to fight the panchayat elections. She got 120 votes out of 150. She never thought she would join politics, she says. She was nervous and hesitant when she was asked by her people including her in-laws to contest.

"My immediate priorities would be better roads and fencing for my village which is in a flood-prone area. I have other work which I will try to complete in due course," says Ruby.

She says she will try never to be cowed down by political elites who have always neglected the people who elect them. "I will try to fight all forces who try to downplay our panchayat recommendations," she says. Asked if more women should overcome social taboos and join politics, Ruby says that she would like the women of the

entire country to change with the changing world. "I want women to be really empowered. Otherwise, we will continue to be dominated by the male world," she believes.

LACHIPORA'S HERO: On 21 April, villages along the Line of Control in North Kashmir were abuzz with the news that Raja Parvez Ali Mir had been elected Sarpanch of Lachipora in Baramulla district, a two-hour drive from Pakistan Occupied Kashmir.

Mir is a 27-year-old software engineer-turned-model who left Mumbai's film industry to contest the panchayat polls as an independent candidate. This political novice aspires to give a new look to his village. Mir talks of building roads, providing safe drinking water, education, health and hygiene.

Returning after 10 years in Mumbai to his village surrounded by steep hills, Mir says he wants to serve his community which comprises Gujjar and Pahari peasants and labourers who rear livestock.

"I want to bring some change to my entire community," he says. "My priority will be to end corruption, provide basic amenities and improve employment opportunities," Mir said in an interview to *Civil Society*. Son of a police sub-inspector, Mir has a degree in software engineering from a college in Maharashtra. He completed his schooling at the Modern Public School in Srinagar. In Mumbai, after completing his degree, he turned to modelling.

He has appeared in commercials for sauna

belts, suitings and shirts. In 2003, he got a break when he was selected for the role of Amit in Ekta Kapoor's *"Kyunki Saas Bhi Kabhi Bahu Thi"*. Later, Balaji Telefilms production offered him a role as Prem's friend in *"Kasauti Zindagi Ki"* and a negative character, Sameer, in *"K Street Pali Hill"*. In Rajshri Productions' *"Woh Rehne Waali Mehton Ki"*, he played a character named Prem.

But at home he faced stiff opposition from his father who, says Mir, felt that public life was a waste of time. However, Mir had made up his mind. "The post of Sarpanch is the least corrupted position where you must strike a chord with people you represent," he says.

Mir, who braved a boycott call by separatists and militants to contest the polls, believes that false promises won't yield anything. "I believe in pragmatism. I never promise what I can't fulfill. I have never promised my people that I will turn them into models. No. I want to provide my village better roads, good schools, health institutions and some employment," he says. Elected by 542 out of 1,100 voters, Mir says different political parties can act as barriers. "I hope I can achieve almost everything on my agenda. To do that I have decided to support whichever party is in power because that is how I can deliver results to my people."

DOHAMA'S TECHIE: Ghulam Mohammad Mir, 36, is an Information Technology (IT) graduate who studied in Shimla. The people of Dohama, a village in district Kupwara, have elected him as Sarpanch. He got 287 out of 740 votes. "This is the only way I can work for my people at ground level. My agenda is to make my village a model for education, health care and roads. I also want to do something for the unemployed youth here," says Mir.

Mir has worked in Meltron, a multinational company. He believes that if he works hard nothing will stand in his way. "One can achieve everything provided one is serious and sincere," he says. "I could have earned ₹60,000 a month working for any company in India. Here, as Sarpanch, I will earn nothing but I will bring some change to my village. My wife, who is a teacher and a big support for me, will run our family and I will look after my people," Mir says.

REPORA'S ACTIVIST: Shahnawaz Sultan, 28, is a founder-member of the Jammu and Kashmir Right to Information Movement. He has a small travel business. He was elected as Sarpanch by his village, Repora Namthal in Chadoora district, Budgam, Central Kashmir.

Sultan, an RTI activist, is a trustee of an educational trust running a school for orphans in Chadoora. "I have found that people at the grassroots don't have big dreams and ambitions," he says. "What they need is a simple ration card without hassles, roads, safe drinking water, electricity and fair distribution of rations. I have day-to-day development programmes in my agenda. From now onwards, I have pledged to my people that I won't allow anybody to do any development work in a fishy manner. All such works will be done in an open and transparent way."

Farm films on tap

Shreyasi Singh
Gurgaon

RIKIN Gandhi has great faith in the power of good story telling. Dressed in scruffy jeans and sneakers with a distinct American accent, Gandhi, 29, doesn't look as if he could connect in any way with rustic Indian farmers.

But surprise, surprise, he is the founder of Digital Green, an agricultural non-profit which makes videos to get information to small farmers. Around 850 videos have been produced since he started his outfit in 2007. The films tell farmers about agro-related programmes ranging from government subsidies, pesticide use to innovative water harvesting techniques. Over 30,000 farmers across Karnataka, Madhya Pradesh, Jharkhand and Orissa have benefited from watching or filming Digital Green's videos.

His non-profit trains local people in the 450 villages it works in to use simple hand-held camera recorders and basic editing software to make local videos.

"These videos are of the farmers, by the farmers and for the farmers," says Gandhi, who last year was one of three Indians chosen by the Massachusetts Institute of Technology's (MIT) Technology Review magazine as a top global innovator below 35.

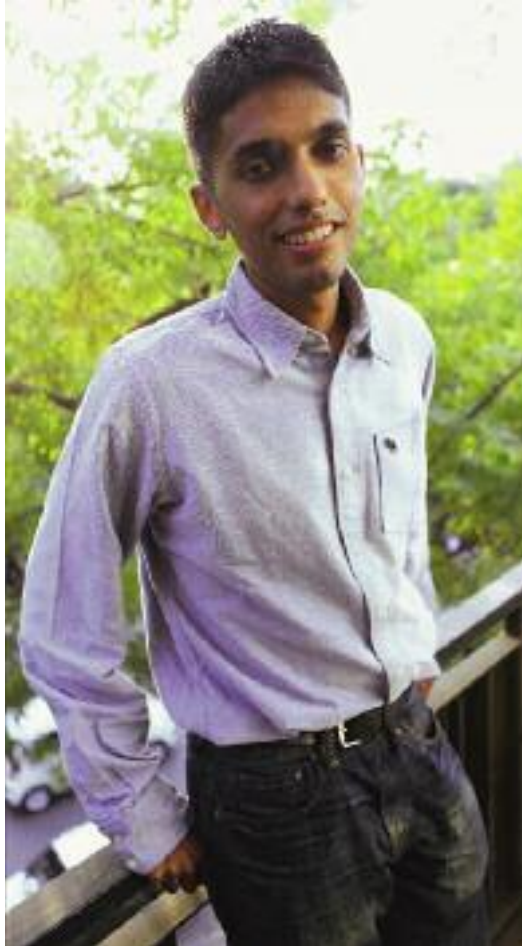
Doordarshan, India's state-owned broadcaster has a similar television programme, Krishi Darshan aimed for the eyeballs of the country's 600 million people dependent on agriculture. But Gandhi says agricultural practices must be localised down to a few villages to have real impact. He cites the example of *azolla filiculoides*, a fern which the government has been encouraging farmers to grow as fodder for cattle since it increases milk yield. *Azolla* grows well in swampy patches of land.

"A video we did in Karnataka on *azolla* became very popular. One of our Madhya Pradesh partners tried it out in western MP. People were excited about it. But the culture of *azolla* dried there. They had introduced it in summer. It was not going to work," he explains.

Digital Green, which is supported by the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, employs three to five local people per district and trains them to make inexpensive local videos. "Amortized cost is pretty low. The video camera we use costs around ₹6,000. Each camera produces around 10 videos a month."

Locals who are chosen for training earn around ₹2,500 for each project. They are trained to identify topics of interest, how to work out a storyboard, shoot the video and do basic post production. Digital Green partners with seven non-profits like Pragati, BAIF and ASA. All of them are devoted to agriculture and livelihood enhance-

LAKSHMAN ANAND



Rikin Gandhi



ment. Subject matter experts from the non-profits vet the storyboard for accuracy before it is shot and distributed.

"We amplify and support the objectives of our partners. The videos should supplement their interventions," says Gandhi. Partners are chosen if they can demonstrate what Gandhi calls the "three pillars" – domain expertise, scale of operations and sustained community rapport in the regions they work in.

Gandhi has attempted to bring scientific rigour to a sector beset with outdated policies and inef-

ficient yields. Digital Green's ingenuity does not end with democratic production output. It has detailed standards on how the videos must be screened and how feedback must be collated.

"These videos are watched by self-help groups in intimate settings of 15 to 20 people where give and take can happen," he says. While the videos do serve as community entertainment, catalysing action is critical. "We want people to actually follow through, take concrete action. It has to go beyond passive curiosity. Human facilitators do that." Each of the nearly 12,000 video screenings, Gandhi says, has followed the procedure.

Thirty to fifty people per district are trained to show these videos and act as facilitators. Screenings take place once a week with the help of mobile projector devices in school buildings, panchayat offices or other common meeting points. Metrics like adoption rate and average attendance per dissemination are analysed to evaluate impact. Digital Green claims the adoption rate is 21.73 per cent.

Born and brought up in the United States, Gandhi had his heart set on joining the US Air Force after his Masters in Aeronautical and Astronautical Engineering from MIT. He was even selected for NASA's space program.

But a few weeks spent helping a friend set up a biodiesel venture in rural Maharashtra changed his path for good. Using technology for economic development in rural areas became his new navigator. He 'reverse-migrated' to India to research at Microsoft's Technology for Emerging Markets lab in Bengaluru in 2006. "It was really exploratory, to see if technology had a role in improving agriculture."

His six-month pilot in Karnataka's Kolar district demonstrated that community-produced videos persuaded seven times as many farmers to adopt new ideas as opposed to an existing programme of training and visits that the non-profit they partnered with was then running.

With his findings now validated, Gandhi is in scale-up mode. In the next two years, Digital Green wants to expand to 1,200 villages both within and outside the four states they work in currently. There are active discussions on with possible partners in Africa.

In October last year they launched an automated, pre-recorded message helpline that routes agricultural queries to local or district experts in Madhya Pradesh. They are also exploring if this community level media exchange can be extended to other verticals like healthcare and education.

When he moved to India, Gandhi's puzzled parents hoped he would get his new rural fix out of his system in six months or so. Four years later, Gandhi is digging deeper for a bigger harvest.

Online bazaar for artisans

Shreyasi Singh
Noida (UP)

MUCH like the unique handicrafts he sells, Sudip Dutta is fashioning his own life with rare strokes. Just last year he was living out an Indian expatriate engineer's dream, handling IT sales at a technology firm in the Silicon Valley for the US and Asia Pacific region. Now he spends nearly seven days a month visiting small villages in Karnataka, Andhra Pradesh and Tamil Nadu, discovering talented artisans to put in place a supply chain for Aporv, the website he co-founded to facilitate linkages between Indian artisans and the global community.

Launched in June 2010, Aporv, which means 'unique' in Sanskrit, wants to go beyond providing artisans a decent market to sell their products. Dutta, who moved to Bengaluru last year after five years in the US, says the richness of their venture lies in the stories woven around each handicraft on sale. The storytelling, he says, helps renew interest in neglected crafts, and creates a socially conscious customer base that will help preserve our craft traditions.

Aporv already retails a range of crafts – leather paintings, Madhubani art, black pottery, wood parquetry – from across India. Its product range includes home accessories, decorative items and jewellery. Dutta points to the immense opportunities available. "Some research reports say that handicrafts are a \$28 billion industry globally. The handmade products market is a \$ 200 billion market worldwide. China has 30 per cent of this market, India just 2 per cent," he says.

"Indian creativity is not appreciated enough abroad. We have a lot to offer and we need to showcase that. After agriculture, handicraft is a huge employer in India. The potential to align all of this is tremendous," he adds excitedly.

Unfortunately, most artisans have little idea of the markets available to them and even less of the prices they can command. Educating artisans, Dutta says, is a key mission although he is quick to add Aporv is firmly a "for-profit" enterprise.

"We never bargain with our artisans. We give them the price that they ask for," says 33-year old Dutta. And, before you can ask if those rates are really the fair trade price Aporv guarantees, he rushes to explain. "On their price, we factor in our logistics, marketing and other costs to arrive



Sudip Dutta

Launched in June 2010, Aporv, which means 'unique' in Sanskrit, wants to go beyond providing artisans a decent market to sell their products.

at the sales price. A percentage of the difference between our sales price and the price they sold to us goes back to them. This enables them to understand the true 'value' of their product."

Eventually, Aporv wants its artisans to log in to the website directly and put up products for sale. "It's important that the sale prices are not a secret to our crafts people. It helps build trust," says Dutta, who says he was always creatively inclined as a child but engineering won over in the choice of a lucrative career. An engineer from BITS Pilani, he worked with Infosys and Larsen & Toubro before going to the US. He co-founded Aporv with his partner, Subhra Banerjee. They are supported by two key team members, Shashikant Khandelwal, a BITS Pilani-Stanford alumni who created the IT infrastructure, and Deepak Kumar, an IIML-Wharton graduate who helps strategise

on the business outlook. They continue to live in the US and work for Aporv part time.

Dutta quit his job to move back. His passion is catalysing results. In the five months Aporv has been in business, it has gotten over 45,000 page views. It already has 75 registered customers. He admits they are looking at breaching break even on their "some tens of lakhs" of investment, mainly self-funded, within the next 12 months, ahead of schedule.

They have also signed up Infosys as a customer and are working to expand the corporate customer base. The response has been encouraging, Dutta says. "Companies like us because we help them meet their CSR objectives. And, our products, all handmade, are genuinely green."

Aporv also offers its customers the bells and whistles of a modern, retail experience – a seven day, no questions asked return policy, gift packing and home delivery facilities across

India as well as detailed product specifications complete with multiple picture views to help make an informed choice. Plans are afoot to start shipping internationally by November 2010.

But, challenges abound. Dutta confesses corporate bulk orders will not be a cakewalk. "Because we are fair trade, our products are priced higher. The corporate range begins from ₹200 to ₹250. We need to educate our customers on why they pay higher, why they do more than just buy a product. And how they might be playing a role in preserving a 16th century art form."

Finding interesting products has been easy, says Dutta. Each village has a different craft with unique differences. But convincing artisans to partner with them was more difficult than they had initially thought. Artisans are hesitant to talk for themselves because they fear bypassing the middleman or the broker. Despite this, Aporv has grown its community of artisans to nearly 500 across Karnataka, Tamil Nadu, Andhra Pradesh, Mizoram, Uttar Pradesh, Bihar and other states. They also work with self-help groups and NGOs to broaden their supply chain.

"Artisans don't need sympathy or pity. We need to give them work, appreciate their skills. They are capable and willing. If we don't give them work, we are killing our art," says Dutta. Fortunately, though, Aporv has spotted the riches that can flow from keeping Indian crafts alive. It's a fortune likely to throw up more than just great profits.

Mallanna saves farmers from the

The Nagaral family propagates traditional ways of drought-proofing



Mallanna Nagaral near a drop inlet spillway. Run-off from the upper fields will bring topsoil and fill the land around this structure.

Shree Padre
Bagalkot (Karnataka)

IN 2003, when Hungund taluk in the Bagalkot district of Karnataka was hit by a severe drought, farmers did not have to buy food grain from the market. Nearly 90 per cent of them had built bunds and conserved topsoil using traditional techniques of drought-proofing which have their roots in this district.

Three generations of the Nagaral family have diligently and magnanimously educated farmers in an ancient method of drought-proofing. They are the repositories of this knowledge, which they not only willingly share with farmers but propagate innovatively.

"If fields don't have bunds, we won't have money in the country," says Mallanna Nagaral, 60, breaking into poetry. He is a third generation Nagaral and is much sought after for his expertise in conservation even though his formal education is only upto Class 10.

On an average, Mallanna spends two months a year helping fellow farmers with his expertise.

Though he spends long hours under a scorching sun out in the fields, he doesn't charge for his services. He doesn't even ask for reimbursement of his travel expenses.

"If I ask for money, then that is not service. This year I got a bumper crop in groundnut. Mother Earth is giving me, no? If I get a few bags more from my field, I feel I have been compensated," he explains with a carefree laugh.

Mallanna was supervising construction of a *dundavarthi* (drop inlet spillway) on a farmer's field when I met him. "I have spent 15 days here. We need another 10 days to complete this work," he says.

The saga of the Nagaral family's remarkable knowledge of soil and water conservation goes back to Mallanna's grandfather, Sanganasappa. He happened to read a manuscript written by a seer 175 years ago.

Moved by unprecedented drought, named *davagi bara* (skull drought) because thousands of people had died from hunger, the seer wrote a manuscript on agriculture and drought-proofing for drylands titled, *Krishi Jnana Pradeepike*. This

handbook contained many practical lessons.

Sanganabasappa started testing the drought-proofing practices prescribed in *Krishi Jnana Pradeepike* sometime in 1913. Impressed by the results these experiments yielded, he started popularizing them. His son, Shankaranna Nagaral, made it his life's mission to spread this knowledge. By the time Mallanna took up the mantle, in addition to the written knowledge he had, he also acquired knowledge that came to him by word of mouth from two generations of his family.

The seer's manuscript was eventually published as a book. It became very popular and has seen eight editions.

LITTLE RAIN: Bagalkot district receives less rain than other regions of Karnataka. On an average, the district receives 543 mm. The soil is black with patches of red earth. In a span of five years, a farmer can expect an average crop yield for just two years. One year

will definitely be a drought year with no yield. For two years rainfall will be scanty therefore crop yields will be thin.

Mallanna's methods tackle the rainfall deficit. He has been constructing field bunds and doing soil and water conservation since the seventies. He was just 20 years old when he started working in his own fields.

The system followed sounds simple but is in fact very intricate. Two kinds of interventions are carried out. First, a *thala oddu* is built. This is a broad-based bund placed at the lowest elevation of a field. Second, the field is levelled, divided into portions and additional bunds are built on their lower elevations. A spillway is constructed in the middle of the bund. The purpose of all this is to catch enough rainwater and, at the same time, not allow any topsoil to erode and wash away to lower fields.

"We won't allow the topsoil to run away from our fields. As for the rainwater, it has to take our permission before running," explains a local farmer humorously.

It is complex to understand, judge and imple-

cruel sun

ment such a system. First, one has to assess the runoff from the upper fields down to the lower fields. The height of the broad-based bund should be just enough to check the outflow of water. The mouth of the spillway has to be positioned such that it does not permit any topsoil to escape. At the same time, it should not permit the water to pass through without holding it for sometime to facilitate percolation.

Mallanna has perfected the art of assessing the gradation of the slope. By just looking at the site he can tell you which portion of the field is slightly low-lying and which is above the average height etc. He makes his estimations accurately without any technical gizmos, a feat which has amazed university graduates and professors.

The Nagaral family's own fields are the best examples of what academics call 'inter-plot rainwater harvesting.' Mallanna recalls that he has never had to buy food-grain from the market. This is an achievement because total and partial crop failure is very common in the district.

He says his two most challenging assignments have been Sarangimath's fields in Banahatti in Hungund Taluk and Pattanashetti's fields in Basavanabagewadi in Bijapur district.

Sarangimath's fields receive a huge runoff from around 400 acres. Pattanashetti's fields receive runoff from only 100 acres. But since the water originates from a steep hillock it comes down at great speed. Both were challenges which Mallanna dealt with.

ODE TO SOIL: Long before the phrase 'drought-proofing' got popular with rural development experts, the Nagaral family was popularizing the concept with innovative methods. Their first slogan was, *Ara baradaaga entaane bele*, which means 'the eight anna crop.' They were telling farmers that during a drought or scanty rainfall year they could still get at least 50 per cent of their average crop yield by drought-proofing.

Shankaranna wrote catchy *vachanas* or prose texts to market this technique. *Vachana* means 'that which has been said.' Mallanna has published a book of selected *vachanas* of Shankaranna. He has inherited the art of writing impromptu *vachanas*. In fact, what most of these *vachanas* preach is soil science.

LR Mali Patil, a retired Deputy Superintendent of Police (DSP) of Hire Otageri in Hungund Taluk, got Mallanna to drought-proof his 28 acres three years ago. The work cost him ₹2.5 lakhs.

"We constructed the broad-based bund and spillway only," he explains. "Another two years are required for the runoff from above to fill the lower areas of our field. But our yields have already increased by 30 to 35 per cent."

Guru Ganiger of Kandagal village has only four acres. He got two acres treated three years ago. It cost him ₹30,000. "The money I had invested is already giving me returns," he says. "Mallanna offers free service without differentiating between class or community. He is great."

"One has to think 10 times before investing big sums in dry lands like ours," says Dr MD Kachapur, a retired agronomist. Nevertheless, he got his 14 acres treated by Mallanna. "Once these measures are implemented, our farmers are able to reap a crop even with timely rain of just six to seven centimetres."

In 2005, under the dynamic leadership of District Collector KS Prabhakar, a water awareness programme, *Jaljatha*, was organized. The 12-day event covered 120 villages. In the course of this programme, Prabhakar came to know about the Nagaral family.

Mallanna was at once invited to be a resource person. He became much in demand at village



A bountiful crop in the Ramavadagi fields

meetings. Prabhakar planned to put on video Nagaral's techniques and introduce his drought proofing methods in other areas as a best practice. But he was transferred before he could implement his ideas.

RECOGNITION: In 2006 the University of Agriculture Sciences (UAS) in Dharwar conferred on Mallanna an honorary doctorate in recognition of his contribution. After this, Mallanna became even more popular. He finds it difficult now to meet the demand for his services.

Though the university's watershed department is active in these areas, it has a paltry budget of Rs 6,000 per hectare. They can raise only field boundary bunds with that amount.

"The inter-plot rain harvesting Mallanna is advocating would require an average of ₹50,000 per hectare for the first stage of work – that is, construction of the broad-based bund and spillway. For the second stage of drought-proofing, which is division and levelling of land, much more money would be required," says Dr MB Guled, Principal Scientist, Regional Research Station (RRS), Bijapur, who is working for the All-

India Coordinated Research Project for Dryland Agriculture at the UAS in Dharwar.

Dr Guled says that if just the first stage of the Mallanna method of drought-proofing is done, a family gets enough to sustain itself even with very low rainfall. The Karnataka government has announced crop loans with one per cent interest through the cooperative sector.

"If a long-duration loan scheme for drought-proofing in drylands is introduced, it would help to catalyse drought-proofing work and thereby ensure livelihoods here," says Dr Guled.

Summer is the right season for soil and water conservation works. But because money is needed, farmers get the job done in a phased manner.

HISTORICAL RESEARCH: For nearly 100 years, the Nagaral family has been perfecting its techniques through ongoing research and development on a 28-acre field called Ramavadagi.

Mallanna's grandfather, Sanganabasappa, started his experiments on these infertile lands a century ago. At that time, his fields were so severely damaged that a person standing in its eroded furrows wasn't visible from outside! Mallanna hasn't stopped experimenting. Levelling, bunding, incorporation of organic material, in situ sheep manure and other activities continue. This land used to yield hardly a quintal of crop per acre.

Now the yield is eight to nine quintals, equal to the best fields of the area.

Mallanna calls his family's drought-proofing techniques, *hola tidduvudu*, which roughly translated means 'correcting the fields.' He says despite the crisis in farming interest in drought proofing is on the rise.

"My taluk spends approximately ₹50 lakhs of the farmers' hard-earned money every year for this purpose. Out of this, around ₹5 to ₹6 lakhs of work is executed under my supervision," he says.

According to Dr Guled, this method of drought-proofing is relevant for eight Karnataka districts that have 80 per cent of black soil like Bagalkot, Bijapur, Gadag and Koppal, parts of Raichur, Bellary, Dharwar and Chitradurga. All these areas together form the northern dry zone of Karnataka.

Since the last three to four years, machines have replaced labour in soil and water conservation work. This has speeded up the process.

It is over several decades that the Nagaral family's drought-proofing formula has spread in Bagalkot and Bijapur districts. Now it is making inroads into Raichur and other belts. Mallanna, during his discussions with farmers, keeps telling them the dos and don'ts for soil and water conservation.

"Show me a bund done by the government department that has lasted more than five years. But hundreds of bunds built with traditional knowhow have remained intact for centuries," says Mallanna

Dr.Mallanna Nagaral – 094483 07656
Dr MB Guled – 094818 41249 guled_mb2000@rediffmail.com

PRODUCTS

NGOs, artisans and designers produce items which are organic and green. Here are herbs, jams, paintings, saris, soaps, mats and namdahs. Just try.

NAMDAH MAGIC



NAMDAHS from Kashmir are no longer staid. Those warm, woolly rugs have gone wild with a range of sizes, patterns and styles. You can now buy namdahs in zany geometric patterns. Or with floral designs.

The Craft Development Institute (CDI) in Srinagar, Kashmir, has given the namdah a makeover. While the National Institute of Design (NID) provided the blueprint, around 300 namdahs were creatively developed by Arifa Jan, a postgraduate in craft management. She got namdah weavers to go through a refresher course and learn anew. The weavers had stopped making namdahs since they had lost their market.

"In CDI we focus on design interventions which can improve sales," says Yasser Ahmed, a lecturer at CDI. There is a craft management course and a programme in entrepreneurship. The artisans are given a stipend while they train. "All three aspects – design, management and computer aided tools - are combined," says Ilyas Wali, a lecturer who oversees the IT section at CDI.

The namdahs were displayed at Dastkar's annual Nature Bazaar on the lawns of the Indira Gandhi National Centre for the Arts in New Delhi.

For sales and other enquiries contact: Craft Development Institute, Baghi-Ali Mardan Khan, Srinagar-190011, Jammu and Kashmir
E-mail: yaseer@cdisgr.org; arifa@gmail.com
Website: www.cdisgr.org

FROM A HILLTOP

THE Shram Self-Help Group (SHG) consists of women from Batamandi village in Himachal Pradesh. They have been making products from industrial waste, recycled material and natural fibres like palm leaves and grass.

The SHG specialises in producing bags, coasters, waterproof satchels, raincoats, crochet and embroidered products. Shram can also manufacture customized products if you place an order. The group has now diversified into food processing. They are making pickles, candies, sauces, chutneys and other products from Indian gooseberry, mangoes, strawberries and other organic fruits and vegetables. Roasted snacks from organic brown rice and organic wheat are also being produced and packed for markets.

Shram or Self Help-Recycling, Altering and Manufacturing Group was started by Piyusha Abbhi, a young MBA, on 1 June 2008. She mobilized women from Batamandi to bring out their latent talent and skills. The women, who were financially dependent on male members of their family, now earn their own money. Each and every product is made with great care.

The products are liked by everyone for their rich colors, designs and quality. Shram SHG does not get any financial support from the government or NGOs. It helps itself.

Contribute to a noble cause and buy a product made by Shram.

For trade enquiries contact Piyusha at:
SHRAM SHG Village
Batamandi, Paonta Sahib
Himachal Pradesh.
Email: piyusha4@gmail.com
Mob: 09318911011



WONDROUS SARIS



PICK any sari from Berozgar Mahila Kalyan Sanstha and you'll be elated with its blend of colours and weaves. These wondrous saris are spun in villages near Bhagalpur, India's silk hotspot. Woven in tussar and matka silk, the saris are eye-catching. They drape perfectly, the pallu's lovely pattern enhancing the overall effect. You can also buy scarves, dress material and shawls.

The Berozgar Mahila Kalyan Sanstha comprises 500 members out of which 400 are women. It provides employment to men and women doing hand-spinning and weaving in Bihar and Jharkhand. The women prepare the threads, a crucial task, and the men weave the cloth. Dastkar has helped with design, vegetable dyeing and marketing.

Started in 1993 by Niranjn Poddar in Kajrel village to provide a livelihood to 75 women who used to work as bonded labour, the sanstha which started with a seed capital of ₹1,50,000 now has an annual turnover of over ₹1 crore.

Contact: Niranjn Kumar Poddar

Phone: 0641-2610559, 2610775, 09431214259

Address: Shila Bhawan, Vikramshila Colony, Tilkamanjhi, Bhagalpur, Bihar

E-mail: weave17@rediffmail.com

Website: www.berozsilks.com

TANGY HERBS

BUY parsley, rosemary, thyme and oregano in attractive bottles from Aarohi, an NGO which works with 100 villages in Almora and Nainital districts of Uttarakhand. Just a pinch of fresh herbs will enliven your soups, casseroles, grills and bakes. A cookery booklet by Aarohi will tell you how to conjure up divine dishes.

Aarohi's headquarters are in Satoli village, high up in the Himalayas. Under their Apricot and Herb Growers Initiative, hundreds of small farmers in remote villages have graduated to growing herbs and apricot and thereby boosting their income.

You can also buy apricot oil, scrub and soap. The oil is handpicked and crushed in the traditional cold press way. It's good for your skin. The soaps come in five fragrances: rosemary, geranium, orange, cinnamon and vetiver. The ingredients used include apricot scrub, coconut and other vegetable and essential oils. The soap is recognized for its exfoliating and moisturizing benefits. Peppermint and chamomile tea are also available.

Aarohi is well known for its health, education and natural resource management programmes.

Contact: Aarohi, Village Satoli, PO Peora, via Mukteswar, District Nainital-263138, Uttarakhand Phone: 09758625455 E-mail: aarohi2000@gmail.com Website: www.aarohi.org



MAT MANIA

DRESS up your home with woven grass mats in a range of unusual colours and designs. Green Earth has reinvented the Bengal mat, making it chic and fashionable. You can buy mats for your dining table, larger ones for your floors, windows or as screens and runners.

Green Earth has three varieties of mats: thick, medium and fine. The thick Do Hara mats are also great for a session of yoga. The fine mats are called Masland after Bengal's famous Muslin and true to their nomenclature, are as smooth as silk.

Green Earth was started by Bashobi Tewari, a graduate from the National Institute of Design (NID), Ahmedabad. Bashobi wanted to help the crafts people of Midnapore find a market for their products. She has introduced quality and aesthetics. The mats are now exported.

Marketing and business development is done in Delhi, says Mayank Mansingh Kaul, a textile designer from NID who helps in marketing the mats. "While researching textile policy in the Planning Commission we realized there was a lot of export demand but hardly any innovation in our products. We needed to innovate and feed into fashion and crafts groups. Every two and a half months new designs are invented. So the summer collection of mats is designed and ready."

Contact: Bashobi Tewari: 033-40087414/9830010351

Address: 2N2 Brajdharm, 33 Ballygunge Park, Kolkata-700019

E-mail: greeneearth@gmail.com info@greeneearthindia.com

STRAPPY SLIPPERS

PRAHLAD Regar, a cooperative of leather workers, produces strappy slippers in a range of colors and styles. Ideal for a summer day these chappals are pretty comfy. You can wash them too. Prices are reasonable. The leather retains its natural quality. There are jhootis too in tiger stripes and in smaller sizes for children.

Prahlad Regar is located near Rajasthan's famous Ranthambore Tiger Sanctuary, in village Kundera. This artisanal group consists of 20 families who earn a living by making slippers in between the rabi and kharif seasons. They have small fields which don't yield abundant crops. Water is scarce and there isn't much to do once the harvesting season is over. Each family earns a decent income and the work ensures they don't need to migrate to cities or kowtow to upper castes. The Regars are Dalits, historically oppressed with low incomes. They would like more bulk orders for their slippers which Bhagwan Das, a senior member of their outfit, assures they can pack and send you.



JINGLE PAINTINGS



PATA Chitras are religious paintings in bright colours. Each painting tells a story mostly gleaned from the Ramayana, Mahabharata or from a folk tale. Pata Chitras are painted in Orissa and West Bengal. In Naya village of Mednipur district of West Bengal, 250 families do this form of art. They are called Chitrakars. The paints are of vegetable dyes. It takes around 15 days to do a large size painting. Some are scrolls, some rectangular or square in shape.

The painter sings the story etched on the paper once he or she has completed the painting to explain it to his audience. Karuna Chitrakar says the paintings have become more popular over the years and very contemporary. Paintings today talk of communal harmony and ecological conservation. The style too has undergone subtle differences with some pictures being done in more somber hues.

"We have better knowledge of changing styles and tastes since we now sell in cities. We cater to the middle-class and not rural folk," says Karuna Chitrakar.

Contact: Karuna Chitrakar. Phone: 9749393417 Mantu Chitrakar. Phone: 9733521335

Shyamsundar Chitrakar. Phone: 03222241018 Address: Village Naya, PS-Pingla, District Paschim Medinipur, West Bengal

PURE DEVOTION

PRETTY frocks, soft towels, embroidered bedsheets and a lot more is available at Arpana's shop in Delhi. Lovingly made by hand just for your baby, Arpana's products sell under the brand name, 'Devotion'. They are comfortable, durable and eye catching and available in a range of colours and designs.

Over 2,500 women in Haryana and Himachal Pradesh have been trained to embroider on linen. They are from poor backward communities, unemployed or agricultural workers who are usually paid only in kind. The money they earn helps them to pay for their basic needs.

Arpana is a charitable organization which provides healthcare to marginalized communities in 200 villages in Haryana, Himachal and western Uttar Pradesh. It runs a dedicated hospital in Madhuban, Haryana, which provides maternal and child care. Arpana also works in Molarbund, a large slum resettlement colony in southeast Delhi where it runs a hospital and has helped transform the place.



Arpana: E-22 Defence Colony, New Delhi Phone: 011- 41550798, 41550612. Email : handicrafts@arpana.org



POULTRY REARING

I am Muniammal wife of Rajini residing at Pallakollai, Ananthapuram Panchayat at Tiruvannamalai district. My family condition was very poor and we don't even have a land to cultivate or earn for our daily expenditure. We worked as a

laborers in others land and the income from that was enough only for our daily expenses. We can't even avail loan from bank or any finance companies because we don't have any assets to show as a proof and they didn't trust me to give loan.

At this point I saw some of the women from our village member joined in a self help group which was started by SST. They insist the habit of saving in the concept of SHG and motivate and train them to contribute economically to their families by engaging in various income generating activities. I was interested to join in the group but my income was not enough to save even Rs. 10 for a week.

This in turn, motivated me to join in a group and now I also became member in a group called Isaikuyil. After joining in a group I was in need of money and approached my group for internal loan but they hesitated me to give due to my family's poor condition. Then some of the members in my group recommended and gave me a loan amount of Rs. 1000/-.

After a period of Six months we received a loan amount of Rs.60,000/- from the bank. Then all the fifteen members of our Self Help Group discussed in our weekly meeting, in what way we can productively use this loan amount. Since traditionally we have good knowledge of raising sheep, goat and backyard poultry, we were decided to use some of the loan amount for the same.

At this stage, SST staff informed us about the training programme for raising poultry as it gives good income for our sustainable income. We all discussed in our group meeting and planned to attend the training programme which has been conducted for three days. Due to the impact of the training programme which we attended we decided to start a Poultry unit, we approached SST and got the initial amount of 50,000 from Ananthapuram Panchayat Level Federation (PLF). Finally we started the poultry unit with 1000 birds, and the variety named Corp- 6.

In the initial stage of 35 days it has grown well and have got 15 thousand as profit. From the initial profit we have bought some equipments needed for the unit. We have also bought 50 cent of land. We now cultivate groundnut there I am very proud to be a part to help my family economically. It's my privilege to thank Srinivasan Services Trust and Ananthapuram Panchayat Level Federation to assist me in my income generation.

DETAILS OF ACTIVITIES	UOM	Performance up to July 11
Villages covered	Nos	1000
Population covered Nos		717928
Families	Nos	154776
ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT		
Activities		
Self help group formed	Nos	2690
Families enrolled in SHG	Nos	42540
Results		
Families income increased through IGP	Nos	40932
Additional income ranging per month / person	Rs	Rs 1000 to Rs 2500
Activities		
Veterinary camps conducted	Nos	610
Number of animals treated	Nos	313158
Results		
Number of animals increase by milk yield	Nos	48713
Increase in income from milk yield	Rs	Rs.2000

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