

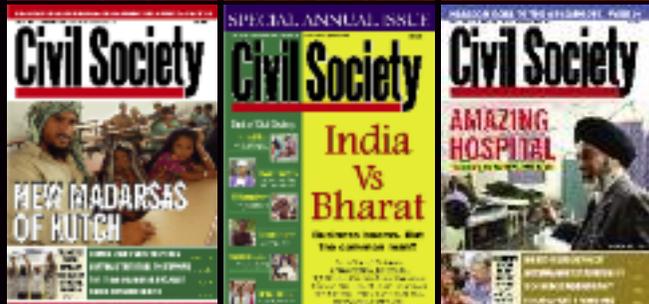
Civil Society

SPECIAL ANNIVERSARY ISSUE



10

EVENTFUL YEARS



10 EVENTFUL YEARS



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Civil Society

HALL OF FAME 2013

WORKING FOR INDIA



Eliazar T. Rose and his wife, Ruth, with a leprosy patient at a facility in Andhra Pradesh



'INCLUSION NEEDS NEW PARTNERSHIPS, INSTITUTIONS'

Nasser Munjee on the past decade and what is holding the Indian economy back

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10th

**Anniversary
SPECIAL ISSUE**

LEAD SPONSOR



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'DARK IS BEAUTIFUL'

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WITNESS TO A DECADE

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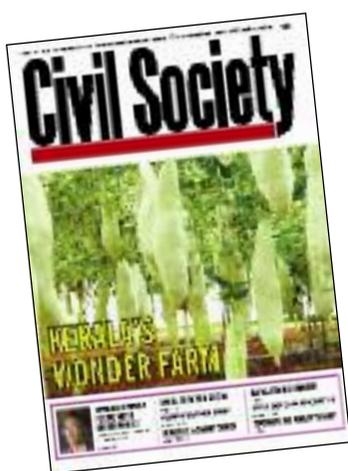
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IN THE LIGHT

by SAMITA RATHOR



LETTERS



Wonder Farm

Your cover story, 'Wonder Farm' was very inspiring. The achievements of Prasanna Rajendran, head of the Agriculture Research Station (ARS) at Anakkayam, speak highly of him. I wish we had many more institutional heads with his vision, passion and

drive. If you look at agricultural research institutions in India, you will find we are far behind in quality and productivity. We are also far behind our Southeast Asian neighbours in horticulture. Since the last decade they are exporting high quality fruits, vegetables and flowers all over the world. **Ahmed Kutty P.K.**

I feel very proud of Dr Rajendran. He has created jobs and incomes. At a time when many government establishments depend on financial aid from the state, Dr. Rajendran has made ARS self-sustaining. Good wishes from a fellow scientist.

Rajagopalan

We had the opportunity of visiting ARS Anakkayam on 4 August. We were really surprised to see the dramatic changes that have been made in the short span of six years. There is a lot to learn at the ARS about rain-water conservation, vegetable cultivation in polyhouses and value addition of agricultural waste. Most of us think banana rhizome and nutmeg

rind are useless. Every farmer and official from various agricultural and horticultural departments should visit ARS Anakkayam.

J.K. Vijaykumar

Life in conflict

I read Varun Suthra's story, 'Living on the Edge.' Varun, you have opened our eyes to the plight of people living in border regions. These people are suffering so much. I think the government must provide at least one job to every family. They need financial support and security.

Dr Naheed Anjum

I also belong to Jammu. I found this article inspiring, informative and an eye opener. Really, people in border villages are suffering so much. At least you are spreading their voice to all corners.

Dr Jyoti Sharma

Highlighting the sufferings of residents in border villages will increase awareness of the difficult circumstances in which our people are

forced to live. That will certainly make our decision makers think about solving these problems.

Pushpender

Posco

With reference to Kanchi Kohli's piece, 'Posco is not a closed chapter,' I would like to say that the fight against capitalism can never be a closed chapter.

Gopi Kanta Ghosh

Posco and other companies need to be strictly scrutinised constantly, because India has to keep a balance between development for the people and the preservation of their natural resources.

Ammu Abraham

Avanti

I read the story, 'Avanti is a smart coach.' India needs committed people like Akshay Saxena and Krishna Ramkumar to assist needy and talented children. Avanti is transforming India's underprivileged youth.

Kalpana Joshie

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REWIND

PRODUCTS

COVER PHOTOGRAPH: LAKSHMAN ANAND

ANNUAL DOUBLE ISSUE

This September-October issue of *Civil Society* marks completion of 10 years of the magazine.

The next issue will be in November.

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Civil Society

READ US. WE READ YOU.

Hello, it's 10 years

IN the life of a small business, 10 years is an interesting stage. Some well-wishers celebrate your existence. Others worry about your future. Like most survivors, we pinch ourselves in disbelief. It feels good to be around and alive, but how did we manage to get so far?

An independent media enterprise like ours does not come out of grand number crunching. A business plan has its uses, but they are limited. Hard work, quality and integrity are of course needed, so is some money. But what makes all the difference is the gut feeling that puts you in the right place at the right time.

As we go over old issues of *Civil Society*, brought out month after month, we realise that each issue was timely and mirrored a post-reforms India exploding with aspirations. We were part of that torrent and were swept along by the currents of a larger India story. New age entrepreneurs, NGOs, people's movements, green architects and a whole lot of others were seeking to push back the boundaries of government. Laws like the one on right to information were being given shape.

In these developments were the intimations of changing preferences and as *Civil Society* reported on them with enthusiasm, the magazine began acquiring its first loyal readers. Over 10 years these trends and the readers have only grown.

From the beginning it was our choice to be an enterprise. We would like to remain one because of the challenges. As an enterprise, we are forced to compete for the attention of readers. We can't take our market for granted. It is a good thing because journalism is about reaching out and connecting. It is about accountability and deadlines. It is about telling stories in ways in which they will be read and understood. It is also about high production standards. These things don't tend to happen unless an outfit is ready to go out and earn its money.

We believe that small media businesses, when skilled professionals run them with sincerity and clear editorial values, raise the bar. They enrich democracy.

The big press, by the very nature of its structure, is predictable. It does not like to experiment. It does what works because that is known to be good for business.

But an independent media enterprise, which does not answer to investors and does not have the burden of big salary bills and marketing budgets, is free to innovate and explore and shape a new narrative. India needs a new narrative.

Civil Society is fortunate to have found companies that advertise in our pages and support our mission. We have also enjoyed the loyalty of our subscribers. We work hard to give them an honest and truly independent magazine.

Often *Civil Society* is referred to as a niche product. We don't agree. We see ourselves as mainstream – the new mainstream. As outliers we help define the future.

In today's viral world, notions of size – circulation and readership figures – have little relevance. These are outdated measures of reach and influence perpetuated for the convenience of space sellers and buyers. We don't acknowledge them because they are not scientific.

People we report on in *Civil Society* tell us they are overwhelmed by the response they get. How do those stories move around? Are they read in our print edition? Are they plucked off our website? Do Facebook friends pass them around? Frankly, we don't know. What matters is that word is getting around.



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Printed and published by Umesh Anand from A 53 D, First Floor, Panchsheel Vihar, Malviya Nagar, New Delhi - 110017. Printed at Samrat Offset Pvt. Ltd., B-88, Okhla Phase II, New Delhi - 110020.

Postal Registration No.
DL(S)-01/3255/2012-14.
Registered to post without pre-payment U(SE)-10/2012-13 at New Delhi PSO
Registered with the Registrar of Newspapers of India under RNI No.: DELENG/2003/11607
Total no of pages: 56

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'Soviet style institutions are holding

INTERVIEW

Nasser Munjee

Civil Society News
New Delhi

WHEN the UPA government was introducing special economic zones (SEZs), Nasser Munjee's was one of the few voices in the corporate sector questioning the merits of the policy. Fairness and inclusion are known to define positions Munjee takes.

As a much sought after independent director, he sits on the boards of several leading Indian companies. His interests, however, extend to realities far beyond the immediate concerns of the corporate world.

He is chairman of the Aga Khan Rural Support Programme in India and an incisive commentator on strategies for tackling poverty and delivering broad-based growth.

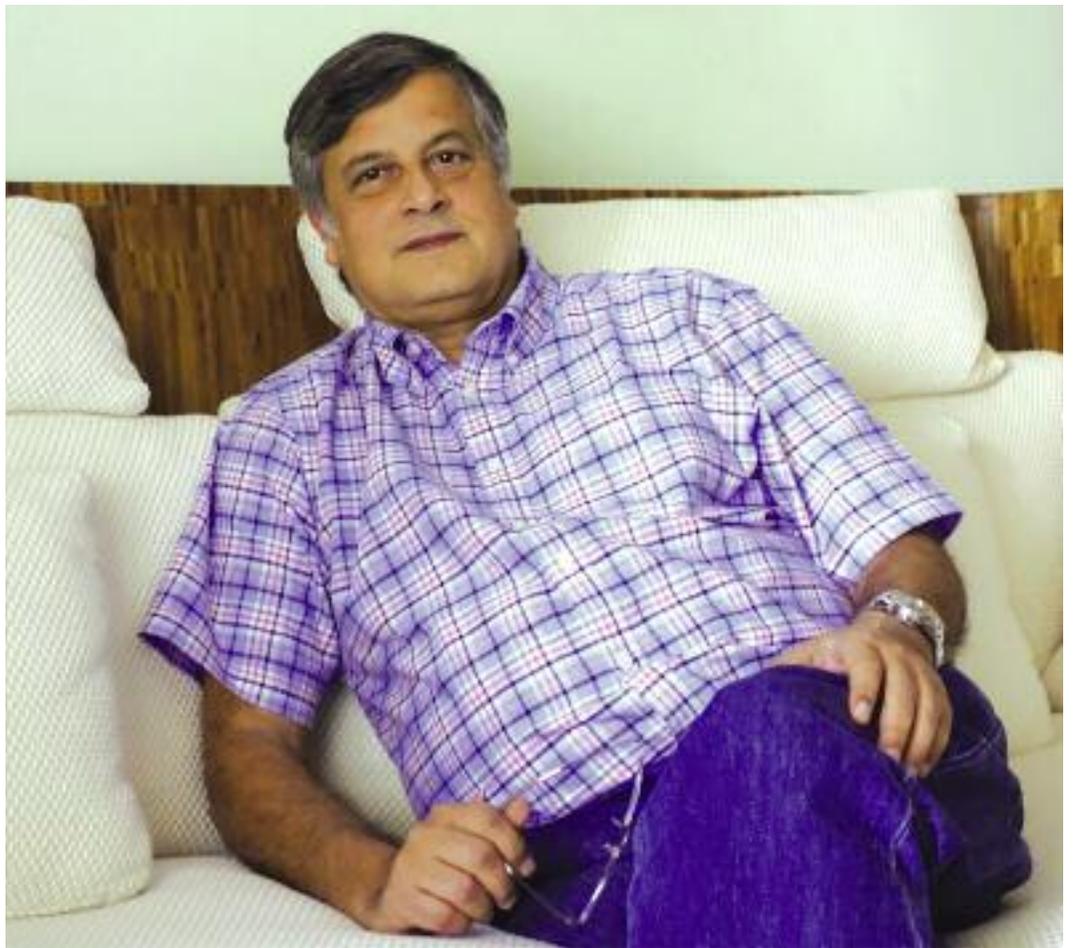
Speaking to *Civil Society*, Munjee argues in favour of new institutions and policies that have contemporary efficiencies. There is a need to move from entitlements to aspirations. Empowerment should flow from simpler access to resources with the government being a nimble facilitator.

Munjee's involvements make him an insider to many spheres. He is chairman of Development Credit Bank (DCB) and has had a long innings in banking and finance. He was the first employee at Housing Development Finance Corporation (HDFC) and went on to be executive director. He was also involved with setting up the Infrastructure Development and Finance Corporation (IDFC) where he served as MD and CEO till 2004 when he had differences with the NDA government and resigned.

There is a sense that in the past 10 years emphasis on social spending and rights has resulted in the downturn in the economy. Would you agree with this?

Certainly not. There is a structural problem in India that straddles the old centrally planned Soviet style economy and the new open capitalist market economy. It was the latter that produced the growth, dynamism and innovativeness that we see in corporate India over the past 15 years. This period of growth was responsible for pulling something of the order of 300 million people out of poverty.

The government, however, has continued its Soviet and centrally planned philosophy and studiously maintained every institution



Nasser Munjee: 'We lack the desire to put citizens first'

'India needs speed and scale in its social development programmes and this can only be achieved through powerful partnerships and the application of new technologies.'

designed to propagate central planning.

It has added to the bureaucratic nature of oversight by creating a new breed of institutions – the regulator – to monitor the market economy. Regulation is necessary but through limited institutions (one energy regulator, one financial regulator rather than a host of different regulators) and with independence of function. Regulators should be experts in the field. If done carefully, adapting the old structure to suit modern conditions and problems would have balanced growth with inclusive welfare.

The slowdown in the Indian economy is the direct result of erroneous economic policy – especially monetary policy pursued in the past three years. Tight monetary policy exemplified

by high interest rates and extremely tight liquidity conditions is the direct cause of our present economic malaise. This has led to slowing growth, falling tax buoyancy, fiscal pressure as well as pressure on the current account in our balance of payments. Combined, this has led to the devaluation of our currency and continued inflationary pressure on the economy.

What we are currently witnessing is an unwinding of the economy and the emergence of stagflation which will require very different policies than we currently have to re-stimulate the economy. Boosting aggregate demand, providing a friendly and predictable environment for both foreign and domestic investment is the key to reversing our current situation.

the country back'

What do you think the priority should have been?

India should have continued with a policy that was designed to stimulate aggregate demand with policies that cooled down specific sectors of the economy that were overheating – real estate, for example, three years ago.

There is no substitute for economic growth to ensure that the burden of poverty is extinguished. At the same time, we need to restructure the institutions of the Soviet economy to be more relevant to the objectives and compulsions of an emerging market economy.

Institutions such as the Planning Commission, the myriad para-statal, development authorities, city governance institutions (we don't have a mayorial system of city governance) need to be thoroughly overhauled to make them more relevant for the re-emergence of India on the world stage.

The era of imperative planning is over – this is an age of indicative planning. We need to steer the economy using powerful objectives and reshape those institutions that get in the way of these objectives.

We may need to design brand new institutions that would support and encourage the small and medium sector of the economy as well as entrepreneurship in general. It simply is not good enough to steer course through a plethora of institutions that have lost their relevance and then to be surprised that the results we achieve are not in accordance with our desires and clearly grossly sub-optimal.

Today there is not a single dialogue taking place on developing a new structure of institutions to support economic management. We are content to use what we have rather than question the efficacy of our existing structure of economic institutions.

The best example is infrastructure. For a country that needs to invest over a trillion dollars in network infrastructure (and an additional trillion dollars in our city infrastructure) we have done precious little to design the framework for this to be achieved or even commenced.

We have different ministries looking after different infrastructure sectors (Railways, Shipping, Surface Transport, Civil Aviation, Ports, Power, Telecommunications) with not a single binding institution made responsible to design an integrated infrastructure development programme.

These ministries have been inherited from the Soviet economy where the "commanding heights" of the economy was to be in public hands – and what a disaster that was! If we are serious about infrastructure development should we not unite these ministries under an

Infrastructure Commission given the task of setting the stage for an integrated, sequenced process of infrastructure investment?

What should we learn from the past decade? How should an inclusive economy be shaped?

The past decade has indicated that, with resolve, India has a huge potential that could be realised for the benefit of all its citizens. This has been demonstrated.

We need to institutionalise our success and our future. The present institutional structure is simply incapable of producing the results we seek. The sooner we realise this the better. Critical to achieving inclusive growth is the concept of "partnerships". We need true partnerships and not simply contracting.

By defining the concept of partnership more closely we can use the enormous resources of the public sector and leverage this with the managerial and implementation efficiency of the private sector to ensure that the impacts on the ground are the results of powerful synergies.

The role of civil society is absolutely crucial in this endeavour. Working together we can formalise synergy where one plus one equals 11. India needs speed and scale in its social development programmes and this can only be achieved through powerful partnerships and the application of new technologies that can make this happen. The mobile phone is an example of a transformational technology, which has impacted the livelihoods of millions of people almost overnight.

Here again to make partnerships work we desperately need strong public institutions that take sectoral responsibility and craft frameworks for investment in such a manner that both public and private investment can combine in a risk framework designed to optimise those most capable of assuming different risks.

Why is it not possible to use existing public infrastructure – schools, primary health centres, hospitals – more appropriately by drawing on private sector skills and management capabilities? We lack the desire to put citizens first and measure our efforts by outcomes to intended beneficiaries. We are more concerned with who does what rather than how effectively a service is delivered to those who desperately need them.

Do you think industry can do more? Or is too much being expected of industry?

Milton Friedman once said that "the business of business is business". I think that is fundamentally true. That said, I think there is an enormous

Continued on page 10

Dam building finally halted

Rakesh Agrawal
Dehradun

THE Supreme Court order directing the Union Ministry for Environment and Forests (MoEF) not to clear dam projects on the Bhagirathi and Alaknanda rivers has been welcomed by anti-dam activists in Uttarakhand.

"The Supreme Court has given us an opportunity to develop a new and environmentally sound outlook on hydroprojects," said Ravi Chopra, director of People's Science Institute in Dehradun.

The Apex Court has given the government a period of three months to prepare detailed assessments of the impact that existing and proposed hydroprojects have on the environment and biodiversity of the region.

"The cumulative impact of the project components like dams, tunnels, blasting, power-house, muck disposal, mining, deforestation etc. on the eco-system is yet to be scientifically examined," the court said.

Meanwhile, Dr G.D. Agarwal, the elderly former professor from IIT who had gone on a fast unto death in Haridwar to demand that all hydro projects on the Bhagirathi, Alaknanda and Mandakini rivers be scrapped, is languishing in Haridwar jail. He was charged under Section 306 for attempting to commit suicide.

On 1 August Dr Agarwal had been picked up by the police from an ashram in Haridwar and shifted to the All India Institute of Medical Sciences (AIIMS) in Delhi. He was kept there for a week. The medical authorities declared him fit and he was shifted to Haridwar jail, where he was at the time of writing.

Earlier, on 12 April, a meeting of the National Ganga River Basin Authority (NGRBA) was convened to discuss Uttarakhand's hydroprojects. The anti-dam activists allege that Dr Agarwal – on fast once again – was supposed to take part in the discussions but he was deliberately sent off to AIIMS by the government.

Ravi Chopra is a member of a larger forum, IITians for Holy Ganga. Last month a delegation of this forum met the Union environment minister, Jayanthi Natarajan, and urged her to stop work on all ongoing hydroelectric power projects in Uttarakhand till a thorough review is done by a technical expert committee to identify the impact these projects had on the June catastrophe.

"We urged the minister to set up a technical group to explore alternative ways of producing hydro power by not storing water on the river bed, but off the bed because the topography of the area does not permit such feasibility," says Yatinder Pal Singh Suri, who is the president of the forum. ■

Continued from page 9

sphere where one could harness the skills and comparative advantages of the private sector to make huge impacts on social development.

Compulsory CSR is not the way to go in my view. We need to set the top five social development objectives for the country over the next five years and by defining partnerships between government and industry drive the systemic solutions to these problems.

Malnutrition of women and children, pre-primary education followed by the entire educational chain, rural livelihoods and social infrastructure in rural India, the urban poor and basic health services for all would be my list for the moment.

High-net worth individuals and companies are now undertaking enormous investments using the foundations they have established: Building schools, protecting tigers, focussing attention on primary education, developing rural livelihoods, developing measures for good governance and the list goes on.

These are contributions of industry and individuals to the broader development agenda of the nation. Partnerships would be about putting this together and developing a new paradigm of inclusive development through inclusive means.

What holds banks back from serving a larger number of people, particularly the poor?

The nationalised banking sector has covered a very large part of India with banking services. The Soviet style imposition on banks to finance the "plans" is firmly in place.

There is not a single banking system in the world where Statutory Reserve ratios of 24 per cent, Cash Reserve Ratios of 4 to 5 per cent and Priority Sector Lending targets of 40 per cent are imposed.

What we need is a robust mechanism for micro-finance partnering poor households over the life cycle (much like Grameen Bank and BRAC in Bangladesh). The latter two institutions have, over the years, had huge impact on social indicators in truly one of the poorest parts of the globe. These social indicators are now much higher than in India despite our tradition of bureaucratic planning and development institutions. We also desperately need a new generation development bank.

India is throwing up millions of entrepreneurs in both rural and urban areas. There is no banking mechanism to support them. The present entrepreneurial class was supported hugely by India's development banks (IDBI and ICICI). They have now all disappeared converting themselves into commercial banks. Who will support our new breed of entrepreneurial talent? Private equity

and angel funding are a beginning but they do not get to where they are needed. Social impact funds are a new breed that is emerging to fill the gap – but we have a long way to go.

How do you see initiatives like the Women's Bank, business correspondents or cash transfer? Is financial inclusion only to be found through such efforts or is something more broad-based and systemic required?

These are all good ideas – widening the scope of services needed on the ground. As I said before, we need a new generational institution that supports entrepreneurial effort not only in terms of finance, but through technical, marketing and managerial support.

We need institutions that will help new businesses get off the ground. We need laws and processes that facilitate the creation of new businesses. It should not require 30 permissions to set up a legitimate tailor's shop.

This ought to be combined with efforts to make

existing government programmes effective. Entitlements are a major issue. While government programmes exist in almost all spheres of development, accessing these programmes through the bureaucratic maze built around them is well nigh impossible. Many NGOs do nothing but help communities access their entitlements. Surely we have the intelligence to design a

delivery system that delivers to those for whom these programmes were designed?

The microfinance sector appears to be foundering. Do you think this sector has outlived its purpose?

Certainly not. We allowed this sector to get out of hand by encouraging greedy entrepreneurs that over-extended the system too rapidly. Microfinance is not about throwing money at the poor, but like a slowly acting medical infusion providing continuing support in small doses for rural livelihoods. Microfinance is about long term partnerships with beneficiaries through good times and bad.

I think microfinance, properly done, has a huge potential for India and should be encouraged. It needs a regulatory framework to ensure that genuine microfinance operates for those who desperately need this support.

Bangladesh is an astounding example of this and we could certainly learn from that experiment. Again it is based on appropriate institutions and an institutional approach guided by inspiring individuals and not by a plethora of small institutions designed to exploit opportunities for the benefit of "investors".

The nature and form of microfinance institutions need to be carefully proscribed in the regulatory guidelines. ■

OpASHA has

Shayak Majumder
New Delhi

AN Android tablet, a modem and a finger scanner – that's all it takes to save a quarter million people from tuberculosis. A simple yet effective biometric technology used by Operation ASHA (OpASHA), an NGO in Delhi, has already given 22,000 TB patients a new lease of life.

Krishnadev Singh is one of them. A resident of Tehkhand village in south Delhi, 60-year-old Singh was diagnosed with drug-resistant TB two months ago. He availed of medication from a local medical centre. "Since I am below the poverty line, I got the medicines at a discount of 56 per cent. Even then, I had to pay ₹450 every month."

He learnt about OpASHA from friends and visited the NGO's Tehkhand centre. "They were very helpful. They provided free DOTS medicine and also tracked my dosage regularly with a finger scanning machine."

Working closely with the National TB Programme, OpASHA follows the WHO approved Directly Observed Treatment and Short Course (DOTS) module. TB drugs trigger side effects like vomiting and slight fever. As a result, patients often don't complete their medication. This gives rise to drug-resistant TB (DR-TB).

According to OpASHA's founder-president Dr Shelly Batra, "India registers the highest number of DR-TB cases in the world, almost twice the number in China, currently positioned second in the worldwide TB count."

OpASHA aims at proper administration of TB drugs among patients. "Initially, we used Revised National TB Control Programme (RNTCP) cards at our centres. Our providers simply marked the dates on the cards that cited that a particular patient has taken his prescribed dosage. But the card system was completely manual, which had its own problems," says Dr Batra. The cards often got misplaced or were miscounted, resulting in the collapse of the dosage system.

It was necessary to find a way to ensure proper distribution and intake of medicines. "With the help of Microsoft Research, we came up with the e-compliance technology that ensures that no patient would ever miss a dose," says Dr Batra.

The e-compliance technology initially used a netbook along with a modem and a biometric finger scanner. Each patient would register their fingerprints on the scanner, which would get recorded in the provider's records and of a controller sitting in the centre, monitoring the entire process. When a patient doesn't turn up for his dosage, the electronic records alert the controller and the provider.

In such cases, the providers visit the patients

'Many NGOs do nothing but help communities access their entitlements. Surely we have the intelligence to design a delivery system.'

tech for TB patient compliance

LAKSHMAN ANAND



OpAsha's e-compliance technology ensures patients don't miss their dose

at home and ensure that they take their medicines on time. "This takes the treatment to the patients and also helps us keep records of accurate data," says Dr Batra. The technical team at OpASHA has made many changes to the system. At present Android tablets are used instead of net-books, which makes the process faster and more reliable.

The Android app was developed in-house by the OpASHA R&D department. Abhishek, the chief technical officer, says, "Switching over to Android helped us cut our costs by 40 per cent. Its easy portability is also a big factor."

"We are also developing a text-free app for the Android, which we look forward to implementing within the next two months. This would comprise easy to understand symbols, so that anyone without a proper knowledge of Android or language can easily use it," he says.

Operating through 210 centres across 19 cities and eight states in the country, OpASHA follows two models of operation to suit both urban and rural habitats. In urban areas, OpASHA sets up medical centres in slum areas. "We aim at accessibility and availability when we set up our centres. We ensure that the patients can visit their nearby centres three days a week for their dosage," says Dr Batra. OpASHA centres are set up at the entry or exit points to slums, near bus stands or factory areas, which are generally highly populated.

In rural areas, OpASHA hires and trains local providers, who travel to distant villages, administer TB drugs to patients and identify active cases of TB. "We train our providers to not only treat

homes of those who miss their dosage. "The money is satisfactory and it is also social work. Everyone recognises me as a respectable health worker," she says, smiling.

OpASHA also operates in Cambodia through 46 centres in Phnom Penh and Takeo provinces. "Owing to the rural outlook of the country, we employ our rural method of operation in Cambodia. One of our providers in the Mekong delta administers drugs by travelling on a boat," says Dr Batra. Since the inception of its first centre in 2010, OpASHA has served a population of nearly 1.03 million in Cambodia.

The effectiveness of the e-compliance model has won accolades for OpASHA globally. It is one of the 20 projects picked by the World Bank for a grant of \$100,000. The biometric model has been successfully replicated and implemented in Uganda and the Dominican Republic by Columbia University.

According to Joan Yao, investment manager, LGT Venture Philanthropy, OpASHA's cost for treating each patient in India is approximately 19 times lower than the nearest other provider. The cost of treatment for each patient works out to about \$2 per day.

However, OpASHA has found it difficult to access funds from the government. "Government funds are only a fraction of our total cost. After six months of providing treatment to a patient, we get the government fund. But it is only a quarter of the total cost," says Dr Batra.

The centres receive medicine boxes for each TB patient from the government. Of late, there has been a shortage of boxes of TB medicines for children. So the centres have to give strips of medicines to patients.

According to Dr Batra, 300,000 children are thrown out of schools simply because they have TB. "We come across cases where patients are driven out of their homes and jobs just because others think that TB is infectious."

Fifteen-year-old Anita, who was diagnosed with serious Stage 2 TB two months ago, hasn't told anyone apart from her family about her disease. "Nobody in my school or among my friends knows about it. They might not want to be near me if they do," she says.

"We are on the brink of a medically drug resistant (MDR) tuberculosis epidemic. As patients immigrate to other countries like the UK, they will be carrying the bacteria with them unknowingly. Sadly, India has turned into an MDR factory. The campaign against TB must be fought on a war footing," says Dr Batra.

She prescribes popularising the e-compliance model, a larger number of active case detections, mass-level education and de-stigmatisation of TB to eradicate the disease from the country, much like polio. ■

LAKSHMAN ANAND



Dr Shelly Batra

existing TB patients, but also to detect symptoms in people that may turn out to be TB. We provide an incentive of ₹150 to each provider for every TB case he spots on his visits," says Dr Batra.

Premalata has been working as a provider in the Tehkhand and Indira Camp centres of OpASHA for over two years. She spends eight hours a day looking after patients at the centres and visits the

CHARKHA



Fiza Banoo's Self-Help Group of women produce traditional garments

CONFLICT ZONE

Spinning for freedom

Azra Khatoon
Kargil (Ladakh)

EIGHT kilometres from the historic town of Kargil, a silent battle is being waged in the village of Akchamal. Led by Fiza Banoo, a 36-year-old housewife, this fight is against societal norms that attribute a lower status to women, and hinder their empowerment.

Fiza is courageously trying to upturn traditional roles foisted on women by helping them to become economically independent. Six years ago, she started a Self-Help Group (SHG) with just Rs 100 and a handful of women. Her objective was to create a lot of employment for them by promoting the use of traditional garments.

Three years later, in 2010, supported by the women, Fiza registered her NGO. Her achievements are remarkable considering she works in one of the most isolated regions in the country. Kargil is located 240 km from Jammu. It is inaccessible for most of the year. This snowbound region is located near the border with Pakistan so it has its share of miseries. It was the Kargil war that made Kargil famous in India. The struggles of people living here is still an untold story.

Fiza's strategy was an intelligent one. She decided to stay active when the rest of Kargil is virtually dormant. During winter, when all other livelihood tasks are at a standstill due to extreme cold and erratic connectivity, this NGO trains housewives and girls in tailoring, knitting and carpet

weaving by using an easily accessible local yarn called *bal*.

The *bal* undergoes a process of decontamination. After shaving it off the sheep's skin, it is buried under a special kind of sanitizing soil called *bal tsa* for about two days to remove a sticky impurity called *tsi*. It is then whisked with a stick called *Drapp Shing* to smoothen lumps on the yarn. A traditional tool called *Bal Shatt* is used to comb the yarn which makes it lustrous and ductile. And finally, threads are spun with a local wooden spinner called *Phang*.

The work is distributed among 75 women, 24 to 50 years old. The older women spin threads out of the *bal* and the younger ones knit and weave. "Fifty kg of wool costs us ₹2,000, from which about 42 sweaters are knitted. Each sweater is then sold for ₹1,200. A pair of carpets is sold for ₹4,000," explains Fiza, whose craft production relies on the orders she receives. Each trainee is given a stipend of ₹300 to spin a kg of *bal* and ₹250 to knit. All profits are shared with the team. Products like seat covers, gloves, mufflers and socks are also produced. Quilts and pillows are made with the leftover wool.

"Many workers approach me because they need to earn money to get their daughters married or for the myriad compulsions of daily life," says Fiza. And since women in the district are good at multi-tasking, they set aside time to spin, knit and weave.

Despite the autonomy and ease that Fiza offers

at her workplace, a few women have been forced to quit, pained by callous allegations of 'wandering in the market unnecessarily' from petty-minded people.

"Earning a livelihood can never be considered unnecessary especially for a lady," says Fiza. She too has faced disdain. Her ideas have been shot down not only by men but also by women for flouting conventional roles ascribed to women. Travelling was declared taboo for women in those days. "My backbone is my family and my husband. It is with their support that I could travel to Jammu to promote my NGO and organise awareness camps," she says with justifiable pride.

Fiza's persistent attempts to bring women together not only to become economically independent but to develop a sense of sorority and mutual understanding, is being supported by the head of her Block, morally and financially. She received ₹20,000 for organising awareness camps on hygiene, girl child education and anti-smoking in Suru, Akchamal and Poen, small villages nestled in the outskirts of Kargil district.

However, her biggest problem is lack of money. Appeals to the government have not had any effect. She doesn't have the capital to run her unit efficiently.

"A girl has a kingdom of dreams. She cannot always ask her father to fulfill them. Therefore, financial independence is a must," says Fiza, whose source of inspiration, she confesses with great joy and amusement, has been women characters in television soaps!

She believes in the notion of hard work. "We must not sit idle," she says. She encourages everyone she meets to work. That is what gives her enormous contentment and a sense of well-being. It is this energetic, inspirational aspect of her character that enables her to run 10 centres as the Block Chairperson of SHGs in Kargil district.

Some even suggested that she should stand for the post of Panch in her village. Fiza declined. She doesn't want to engage in murky politics, fearful that all kinds of accusations will be hurled at her. This mental barrier among women has yet to be removed.

Fiza's dream wasn't fulfilled painlessly. She struggled persistently, persuading village women to join her. Eventually, as many as 75 workers enlisted. She also managed to get some machinery so they could all begin work.

There is no large-scale unit making traditional garments in Kargil district. So her unit became the first of its kind. It has boosted the economy of poor, rural artisans by providing them employment. It has also revived the richness of traditional attire and customs.

"People come, take pictures and do nothing", Fiza bemoans. Visitors, fascinated by her work, make tall promises of help with funds and expertise, but don't fulfill them. But with hope in her voice and a firm belief that her step to emancipate women will not wither and waste away, Fiza smiles resolutely. ■

Charkha Features
(This article has been generated under the
Sanjoy Ghose Media Fellowship)

Kashmir's dose of RTI

Jehangir Rashid
Srinagar

THE tough task of getting the Right to Information (RTI) Act implemented in Jammu & Kashmir (J&K) has had many champions. But no activist has done more to help ordinary people gain access to this powerful tool than Sheikh Ghulam Rasool, a general physician.

Despite his busy schedule, Dr Rasool has been leading an RTI awareness campaign that has, over the years, empowered ordinary citizens to demand their rights and seek answers from politicians.

"The RTI movement has come a long way in Kashmir," says the doctor. "Today any Kashmiri can file an RTI application and ask Chief Minister Omar Abdullah to account for his travel expenses in the state, around the country and abroad. People aren't afraid to demand answers from the political establishment anymore."

Born in Shalteng area of Srinagar city, Ghulam Rasool got his MBBS degree from Ibn-i-Seena University in Tajikistan. He then did his Masters in Medicine before returning to Kashmir. He interned at the Government Medical

College in Srinagar. Thereafter, he started private practice at a clinic in Branwar village in central Kashmir's Budgam district.

It was in Branwar that Dr Rasool became an RTI activist. "The village headman called the shots there. It was he who decided who would get a ration card and who would not," says Ghulam Rasool.

One of his patients told him that he could not get a ration card. Dr Rasool intervened personally and helped him out. "This sparked our campaign to make people aware of their rights. In no time it turned into a movement," he says. Ghulam Rasool is currently chairman of the Jammu & Kashmir Right to Information Movement (JKRTIM).

It was at the Branwar clinic that he first met Dr. Raja Muzaffar Bhat, also a founder-member of JKRTIM. Bhat has since left JKRTIM and joined politics as a member of the People's Democratic Party (PDP).

Ghulam Rasool, who is also co-convener of the National Campaign for People's Right to Information (NCPRI) in charge of North India, says that corruption is the biggest problem in the villages. The nexus between government officials and criminals prevent delivery of entitlements to the poor and downtrodden.

"After managing to get a ration card for a village resident, people sought our assistance for bigger issues. There was a land dispute in the village. We succeeded in restoring the plot to its real owner although the police had put him behind bars at



Dr Ghulam Rasool has emboldened people to ask questions

the behest of the encroacher," he says.

As the RTI movement struck roots in Kashmir, the activists, led by Ghulam Rasool and others, got in touch with R.R. Swain, SSP Vigilance, who gave them a booklet and advised them to read the fine print in order to make the most of the Act.

"We also managed to establish contact with Wajahat Habibullah, who was then Chief Information Commissioner. He asked us to run a campaign for amendments to the State RTI Act. We also sought assistance from the state government and offered our help whenever they needed it," says the JKRTIM convener.

In June 2005, Ghulam Rasool was appointed medical officer under the Border Area Development Programme's (BADP) mobile services. He visited far-flung areas of the Kashmir Valley and got to know about the health problems of the people of Pahalgam, Tral, Kokernag, Wadwan valley, Simthan Top and Gurez, and other areas.

"Once I finished my professional duties, I would interact with the people of these areas. I got an insight into their problems. In 2008, the amended State RTI Act was passed and the then Chief Minister, Ghulam Nabi Azad, promised to get it implemented at the earliest. However, as his government was ousted, we suffered a temporary setback," recalls Ghulam Rasool.

The JKRTIM convinced all the principal political parties – the Congress, the National Conference and the CPI(M) – to include implementation of the JKRTI Act in their election manifestoes for the 2008 Assembly elections. The People's Democratic Party, too, promised to get the Act implemented if voted. The National Conference led by Omar Abdullah came to power and the Act was implemented.

BILAL BAHADUR

"March 20, 2009, is a historic day for the people of J&K. The amended state RTI Act was passed. The state became the first among the SAARC countries to put the draft of a proposed Act on a website for suggestions and comments from the public," says the chairman of JKRTIM.

Ghulam Rasool says that the RTI movement in Kashmir has exposed many scams and scandals, besides almost halting timber smuggling. JKRTIM also works on environmental and tourism-related issues.

"We have managed to stop 95 per cent of timber smuggling in the Pir Panjal range of mountains. This has helped arrest the crisis caused by deforestation," says Dr. Ghulam Rasool.

He admits that many challenges remain. Centrally-sponsored schemes like the Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan (SSA), the Rashtriya Madhyamik Shiksha Abhiyan (RMSA) and the midday meal scheme in government schools need to be monitored by RTI activists as bungling has taken place in several cases. Similarly, health sector schemes like the National Rural Health Mission (NRHM) and the Janani Suraksha Yojana have failed to deliver the desired results and therefore need to be monitored.

"We demand pre-legislative consultation before any new law is implemented. Legislators should visit their areas and make people aware of the pros and cons of any proposed legislation. Our next target is transparency. We also want the government to come out with a comprehensive tourism and environment policy," says Ghulam Rasool.

Thanks to the good doctor, much has been healed in the state. But a lot more remains to be done. ■

‘Young girls fret more about their skin than their skills’

Nandita Das is the face of the ‘Dark is Beautiful’ campaign

Saibal Chatterjee
New Delhi

ACTING, by her own admission, is “only a small part” of Nandita Das’ life. But being a part of the movie industry gives her a degree of clout that most other social activists can only aspire to. Over the years, the actress who has featured in films made in as many as 10 languages of India has lent her name and voice to causes that matter. The ‘Dark is Beautiful – Beauty Beyond Colour’ campaign is the latest of the many petitions that she has signed.

A poster with Nandita’s face on it has since gone viral on social media and attracted widespread attention to the campaign started by the Chennai-based network Women of Worth (WoW) to fight “the toxic belief that a woman’s worth is measured by the fairness of her skin”.

While the campaign is, in a general sense, aimed at changing warped societal attitudes and countering lopsided media messages, its petition is an



Nandita Das: ‘Imagery suggests that only fair-skinned people can be successful’

appeal to a beauty products brand to stop an advertisement featuring Bollywood superstar Shahrukh Khan who tosses a tube of fairness cream to a young man, the subliminal suggestion being that “fair skin is a prerequisite for success”.

In a telephonic conversation, the Mumbai-based actress-turned-director spoke to *Civil Society* about her involvement with the campaign and her concerted battle against an industry that wants women to adhere to a standardised image that unfairly perpetuates an obsession with fairness.

When did you get involved with the ‘Dark is Beautiful’ campaign?

I lend my support to many petitions that come to me. I joined a movement supporting organ donation. I backed a campaign against genetically modified crops and also signed the petition initiated by (former National Advisory Council member) Aruna Roy against the amendment to the Right to Information Act. When the people behind the ‘Dark is Beautiful’ campaign (Chennai-based Women of

Worth) asked me to support them by putting my face on their poster, I said, sure, I’ve been subjected to this all along although not by my parents but by people at large. I have seen many young girls suffer serious loss of confidence as a result of this rampant obsession in our country with fair skin.

Is popular Indian cinema mainly responsible for this strong skin colour bias in India?

This mindset has existed forever. This attitude is constantly reinforced by the print and electronic media, by advertisements, by lifestyle magazines and, of course, by cinema. A lot of film stars have over the years endorsed fairness creams but when somebody like Shahrukh Khan does it, it attracts greater attention. Today, not just fairness cream adverts, but virtually all advertising is about fair women. Advertisements project a certain concept of beauty. They reflect an aspiration and a bias. They suggest that only fair-skinned people can be successful.

It is bizarre. Women are more empowered today,



play real women, many of whom are dark, it is fine. But when I play, say, an educated urban woman from the upper middle class, the class that I belong to, the director suggests that I should look a shade or two fairer. The implication is that only women from the lower classes are dark. It is such a silly mindset. People in the industry know that I am against this. I am very vocal about it, I speak about it at every opportunity in the hope that the attitude will change someday. Why should it be necessary for me to be fair skinned to fit into the industry's standardised image of an educated upper middle class woman?

Have you ever rejected a film on this ground?

I have rejected a couple of films, but have done so right at the outset, during the script reading stage itself. There was this film in which I was to play a fashion magazine editor. They said they would give a glamorous makeover, change my image, and make me another person. I said, thank you but no thank you, and opted out. It is a choice that I've made and I don't compromise. Detractors might say that it is a case of sour grapes, but I stick to my guns.

You have worked in films in 10 languages. Is this attitude more pronounced in the Mumbai movies than in the regional cinemas?

In mainstream Hindi films, the pressure to conform to physical stereotypes in terms of skin colour and body types is far greater. In regional films, because the pond is much smaller, the stakes are not so high. Regional cinema compromises far less, tells more interesting stories, and has more real characters.

In independent regional films, there is far greater freedom. If I play a scientist in a Malayalam film or a big city woman in a Bengali film like (Rituparno Ghosh's) *Shubho Muhurat* or (Suman Ghosh's) *Podokkhep*, there is no pressure on me to look any different. But independent films in Hindi are com-

peting with the big fish, so the makers of these films are often compelled to play by the rules.

Going back in time, wasn't Rekha a top Hindi movie actress of her day despite not being fair-skinned?

She was but she, too, became much fairer in the course of her career. In recent times, Kajol and Bipasha have got many shades lighter over the years. Konkona Sensharma in a Rituparno Ghosh film is different from the Konkona Sensharma in a mainstream Hindi film. Whenever I am written about, I am described as "dark and dusky", as if without that I am incomplete. Other actresses, who are mostly fair, are not referred to as "fair". But when you're dark, because it is seen as such an aberration, it is inevitably mentioned in every write-up.

So, does this irritate you?

No, not at all. I've never said that I hate being described as dark and dusky. Why should I object to a spade being called a spade? My question is: why must it be such a defining factor?

Is this the reason why you have confined yourself primarily to non-mainstream cinema?

Mainstream films deal with stereotypical characters, dialogues and storylines. They do not excite me at all. I cannot fit into the image of women that these films project. Had I not made the choices that I made, I could not have done all the other things that I do. I write a monthly column for a magazine, lecture in schools and colleges and am actively engaged in social work. Acting is only a small part of my life.

In Hindi cinema, the word *gori* (fair-skinned) is invariably used to denote a beautiful woman. What does that tell you?

That is what I am saying: this attitude has been there forever. It isn't only about the movies. This prejudice is a deeper part of our psyche. It probably goes back to the Shastras, the caste system and the colonial era. What is strange is that it continues unabated in this day and age, when women are defining themselves in many different ways. The signals that the mass media sends out are so much stronger, so much more blatant today. It is a case of two steps forward, three steps backward.

Would you blame the cosmetics industry for sending out these signals?

I think it is a chicken and egg situation. The cosmetics business thrives because the aspirations exist. The two feed off each other. As a friend (who has the same skin tone as me) once pointed out to me, all the beauty magazines are designed to make you feel ugly and want to change your features and skin colour. During my field work in Orissa's Kandhamal district, when it was called Phulbani, I went to areas where there was no electricity and people did not even have food to eat, and I saw women using fairness creams that were well past their expiry date. These had obviously been dumped here. So this obsession with fairness cuts across class. The cosmetics companies only capitalise on it. ■

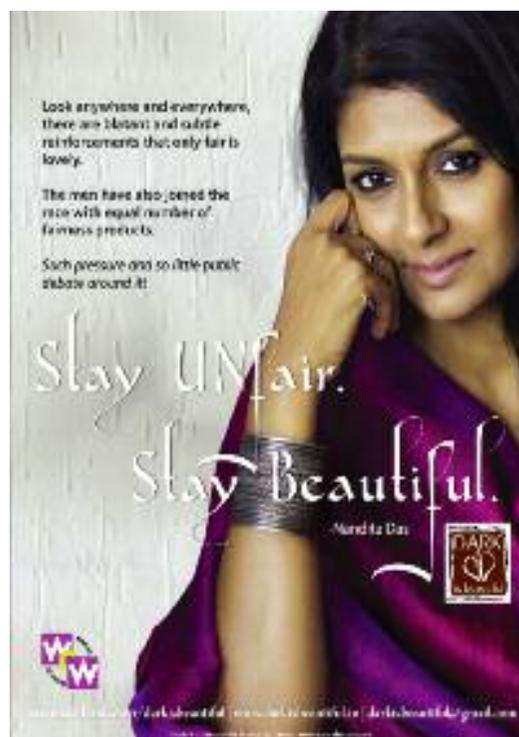
So logically this obsession with skin colour should have declined. But just the opposite seems to be happening. Young girls fret more about how they look than about honing their skills and talents and pursuing their dreams. But it would be wrong to blame the media alone. It is society at large that is to blame. This is the imagery that people want, so this is the imagery that is put out from every available media outlet.

Are you confident that the 'Dark is Beautiful' campaign will make a difference in the long run?

We don't really know, but it is surprising that there has been no conversation, no debate, around this subject for such a long time. Therefore, it is necessary to get the issue out into the open and encourage people to think and talk about it. That is the idea behind the campaign.

As an actress what kind of problems have you faced in the film industry because of your complexion?

Because I mostly do films with real characters and I



Resource Alliance awards for NGOs

Shayak Majumder
New Delhi

THE work of 13 voluntary organisations was celebrated at the India NGO Awards 2012-2013 hosted by The Resource Alliance in New Delhi on 13 August.

To mark the seventh year of the awards, The Resource Alliance collaborated with Rockefeller Foundation and EdelGive Foundation to recognise NGOs in three categories: small, medium and large.

Preneet Kaur, Minister of State for External Affairs, was the chief guest at the awards ceremony.

The winner of the India NGO of the Year Award in the large category was the Socio-Legal Information Centre (SLIC) in New Delhi. The SLIC consists of the Human Rights Law Network (HRLN), the Centre for Constitutional Rights (CCR) and the Independent People's Tribunal, a people's court. SLIC has been providing free legal services to the poor and has filed a number of noteworthy Public Interest Litigation (PILs) cases.

The two NGOs selected in the medium category were Network for Enterprise Enhancement and Development Support (NEEDS) based in Jharkhand and Bihar and Vidya Sagar, based in Chennai.

NEEDS focuses on food security and nutrition for women and children. It provides education and helps people realise their entitlements. NEEDS has developed a mobile application that tags home visits done by Ashas. The app is available in the local dialect and users can interact and ask questions.

Vidya Sagar works with children afflicted with cerebral palsy, their families and communities. It provides a host of services including an advisory and referral clinic, an outstation programme, a home management programme, day care, employment opportunities etc.

Madhuram Narayan Centre for Exceptional Children (MNC), based in Chennai was selected in the small category. This NGO provides early intervention services to children with development delays, autistic tendencies, cerebral palsy and attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD).

The 13 finalists of the India NGO Awards were chosen by a jury from among more than 250 applicants who competed in the three categories based on their annual budgets.

The winners received a trophy and a cash prize of ₹4 lakhs each that they will use to strengthen their internal systems and processes. Two Rising Star Awards were given to Magic Bus, in Mumbai and the Shri Guru Bhajan Samaj Trust, in Bangalore, who provide vocational training to underprivileged youth. ■

English catches on in



A government primary school in Gujarat

Tanushree Gangopadhyay
Ahmedabad

STANDING in a narrow lane in the Devipujak slum, Rami says, "My husband is a daily wage labourer. He has gone to work. But life will be different for my son Sailesh. You see, we have enrolled him in an English medium school."

This slum is in the Shahpur area of Ahmedabad. Several children from here have been admitted to Class 1 of the local Ahmedabad Municipal Corporation (AMC) school.

Like Sailesh, five-year-old Akash Dattani also goes to the school. But today he is at home with a fever. His parents, Mahesh and Konta, who work as casual labour, have left him in the care of his grandparents. They are in a small, dingy room. Akash pours himself some tea and munches on a handful of puffed rice while dogs in the slum eye his humble breakfast earnestly.

"The English medium school is free. They give books, clothes, a bag and shoes. But when Akash joined they had finished their quota so we had to spend ₹500 to buy all these," says his grandmother. Then, she brightens up. "Never mind. Akash officer *banega*, master *banega*..." His grandparents pronounce a string of names of professions they are unfamiliar with.

Susheelaben Dattani is an anganwadi worker who recently got her daughter Kusum enrolled in Class 1 in the AMC school. She had been promoted to Class 2 in the previous school, but her mother says losing a year is inconsequential.

"Kusum speaks English at home!" exclaims her mother with obvious pride. "She will become an IPS officer."

The AMC has recently introduced English as the medium of instruction in the Shahpur primary school.

Jagdish Bhavsar, Chairman of the Municipal School Board, which supervises primary education in the AMC, said that Shahpur school has 35 students in Class 1 who will be taught in English.

"Shahpur is inhabited by the minority community, the lower middle-class and the poor. This school has been a good experience for them. The Shahpur Sewa Sangh, an NGO, has taken the responsibility of running the kindergarten, Class 1 and Class 2 classes with 50 students in each class. They provide school bags to students of Class 1. Additional classes with toys and colourful murals for joyful learning are located on the school's premises."

AMC has allocated merely ₹50,000 for this project. The money is expected to cover the cost of teachers' salaries, says Bhavsar. "We shall extend this experiment perhaps to other munic-

Gujarat

LAKSHMAN ANAND



ed it should not be ignored either.

All these efforts to introduce English medium municipal schools are driven by political compulsions. Gujaratis will not be able to get jobs in industry if they know only their mother tongue and if the quality of education they receive is poor.

Five years ago, the AMC converted five Sindhi medium primary schools into English medium in Kubernagar, Sardarnagar, Thakkerbapanagar and Rakhial, mostly inhabited by Sindhis. They are all a major constituency of the Gandhinagar MP, L.K. Advani.

Girish Patel, a senior advocate and a former principal of the Law College, says, "Introducing English medium in municipal schools, instead of improving educational standards is wrong. Education in the mother tongue influences the child's learning ability. My experience is that children in English medium schools tend to cram their lessons since their power of comprehension gets retarded. Among poor families where no parent has been to school, children will get completely alienated. Besides, where are the English teachers?"

Patel points out that the mandate of the AMC's School Board is to impart primary education for the disadvantaged in their mother tongue. Mostly such families are Gujarati or belong to linguistic minorities.

English should be taught but as a subject. The debate whether it should be introduced in Class 5 or Class 8 was settled in favour of Class 8 years ago. More than 85 per cent of children study in Gujarati medium institutions. Even the language of the courts is mostly Gujarati. Many Gujaratis have settled abroad and they do see English as a tool for upward mobility. Even after living in the West for years, their knowledge of English is poor.

So studying in English medium schools is catching on, especially amongst the middle class. Industry, information technology and mobile phones have changed the outlook of Gujaratis. Those living in slums firmly believe that English will change their children's destiny.

The number of Gujarati schools run by the AMC

has been dwindling. In 2009, the municipality ran 470 schools. That number has declined to 456. The AMC plans to add a few new rural schools from Dascroi tehsil to buttress its list.

Fewer students are enrolling even in reputed Gujarati medium schools. Succumbing to pressure from parents many of these schools have been compelled to switch to English medium.

Himmat Kapasi, 85, a renowned educationist who runs Vidyanagar School, one of the best Gujarati schools in the state, had to convert his school to English medium. Earlier for 200 seats at least 1,000 students used to apply. "Now only students from mofussil areas apply for Gujarati," he says.

"Some Gujarati medium schools have given up and entered the real estate business," laments D.R. Raval, who runs an English medium school. His school charges ₹7,000 as fees annually, the lowest in the city. He says it is very difficult to get good English teachers.

Bhavin School in Naranpura, found it more profitable to become a hostel for women.

"Shahpur is a good location for the AMC's English medium school. It is located near the river front project and has a considerable population of the poor," says Meenakshi Joshi of the Socialist Unity Centre of India (SUCI).

SUCI led an agitation against the AMC when it decided to hand over the Mithakhali school building on a lease of 30 years to some influential people to start the Mahatma Gandhi International School.

Mostly children of police constables, drivers of High Court judges, peons and children from the minority community used to study at the Mithakhali school. Despite protests the school building was handed over. A case is pending in the High Court.

But Bhavsar shrugs when asked if AMC's English medium schools will meet the same fate some day. He says the experience has been good or else all the school buildings would have been given away. ■

ipal corporation schools in Gujarat."

The BJP has time and again denounced the widespread promotion and use of English. Rajnath Singh, President of the BJP, recently repeated such concerns. But Bhavsar creatively interprets Rajnath Singh's statement to mean that while education in English should not be promot-

SAMITA'S WORLD

by SAMITA RATHOR



Skid, Slate and Talking ATMs

Shayak Majumder
New Delhi

SIX individuals and four organisations were awarded the NCPEDP-MphasiS Universal Design Awards on 14 August for promoting true freedom for millions of people with disabilities in the country. Balram Naik, Union Minister for Social Justice and Empowerment, gave away the awards.

"We give these awards on the eve of Independence Day to celebrate freedom from all barriers. Access symbolises the true spirit of freedom," said Javed Abidi, executive director of NCPEDP (National Centre for Promotion of Employment for Disabled People).

Every year, NCPEDP honours individuals and organisations that promote accessibility in the built environment, transport, ICT, services and appliances. The awards are given in three categories: persons with disabilities, working professionals and corporate units/organisations. This year AccessAbility and BarrierBreak also partnered the awards.

"There must be a law on urban development specially designed for the disabled, otherwise we will face problems in implementing accessibility for all," said Balram Naik.

"Our endeavour is to highlight the stories of these role models so that others are inspired. There is so little happening in the area of accessibility and millions of people with disabilities are deprived of freedom and independence," remarked Abidi.

THE AWARDEES

Nekram Upadhyay: As head of the Department of Assistive Technology at the Indian Spinal Injuries Centre in New Delhi, and a visiting lecturer at ISIC Institute of Rehabilitation Sciences, Nekram Upadhyay has played an important role as an active member of the ADIP – Assistive Devices Distribution Scheme Amendment Committee. An alumnus of University of Illinois, Chicago, he has many awards to his name, including the Ford Foundation International Fellowship Award 2003 and the State Level Award 2003 for the Rajasthan Abilympics 2002.

Dr Satendra Singh: Dr Singh is an Assistant Professor of Physiology at the University College of Medical Sciences and GTB Hospital, Delhi. He is also the Coordinator of the Enabling Unit and founder of Infinite Ability – a medical humanities group on disability, the first body of its kind in any Indian medical college. Dr Singh filed RTI applications highlighting the lack of disability policies,

inaccessible post offices and inaccessible ATMs in Delhi. His campaign led to the installation of ramps outside two ATMs, reserved parking areas and ramps at the hostels of the institution he works for. He has also formed an Equality and Diversity Committee with students and staff with disabilities.

Srinivasu Chakravarthula: He is an accessibility evangelist for customer quality organisations at PayPal. Chakravarthula's work includes providing end-to-end accessibility support to organisations, developing and maintaining accessibility automa-



Bhushan Verma receiving the award from Balram Naik

tion tools and framework, spreading awareness, and representing the company in accessibility related activities. Prior to joining PayPal, he led accessibility practices at Yahoo! India Research and Development, where he played an active role in setting up accessibility practices in India, China, South-East Asia and the Middle East. For this, he was awarded with the Yahoo! Ratna – the highest recognition in Yahoo! India R&D.

Arathi Abraham: Arathi is a visual communication designer and alumna of the National Institute of Design, Ahmedabad, where she now teaches. She is also the principal designer at 99 and 1 Design, which specialises in branding, corporate communications and publication design. Abraham has spent eight years researching and developing a software called Slate. It is a picture library for early language learning for children with mobility, intellectual and speech-related disabilities/difficulties.

Dr Arun Mehta: Inspired by Professor Stephen Hawking, Dr Mehta invented eLocutor, a free software for people with severe mobility and speech disabilities. Along with his students at the Jai

Prakash Mukund Lal Institute of Technology, he developed Skid, a software designed for children with intellectual disabilities and the Vibration series of Android apps, for deaf and blind persons. He is currently the President of Bidirectional Access Promotion Society.

Bhushan Verma: Father of a child with autism, Bhushan Verma is an expert in multimedia and animation technologies. He has developed a learning tool, L2L – Learning 2 Life, to empower children with learning disabilities. The programme focuses on learning ADL (Activities of Daily Living), social skills, surrounding objects, expressions, language and communications, etc. He has also started a parents group called Saniyam named after his son. Saniyam helps people, especially young parents and school teachers, understand autism.

Handicare: Handicare in Lucknow has three programmes – Handiresource, which is a disability information-cum-resource and research centre; Handiaccess, an accessibility unit and Handihelpline, a 24x7 helpline to provide information and counselling on disability. Handicare's ambition is to make Lucknow barrier-free. It has filed Public Interest Litigations and complaints with the Chief Commissioner of Persons with Disabilities.

Kriyate Design Solutions: Kriyate has designed the world's first Braille Phone. The phone has a refreshable Braille display where the user can touch to feel the text. The phone has features that cater to the user's everyday needs such as identifying the value of a currency note or the colour of his/her clothing. Two working prototypes of this revolutionary product have been developed so far and many user studies and validation studies have been conducted. The Braille phone has won accolades for Kriyate.

NCR Corporation India: The largest manufacturer of ATMs in India, NCR has developed an exclusive ATM, the Talking ATM or Accessible ATMs for blind people and people with visual impairments. This ATM comprises of accessible keypads, voice guidance, Braille stickers and has multilingual capability. Through headphones attached to the ATM, the user can hear instructions that enable him/her to enter the required data using the keypad. The ATM also gives the user the option of blanking out the screen as a safety mechanism to avoid over-the-shoulder peepers. Today, more than 3,000 truly accessible ATMs are operational across India. ■

10th

Anniversary

SPECIAL ISSUE

CIVIL SOCIETY HALL OF FAME

IN ASSOCIATION WITH THE AZIM PREMJI FOUNDATION

— Chetan Ram and Rawat Ram —

NOKHA, RAJASTHAN

— Dr Yaradi Krishna Murty —

SRIKAKULAM, ANDHRA PRADESH

— Begari Lakshamma —

HUMNAPUR, TELENGANA

— Eliazar and Ruth Rose —

KOTHAVALASA, ANDHRA PRADESH

— Dr K. P. Arjunan —

VELLORE, TAMIL NADU

— Mangal Singh —

LALITPUR, UTTAR PRADESH

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BIG STORY

RITA & UMESH ANAND

EACH year, the search for new entrants to the Civil Society Hall of Fame takes us across India as we meet people who seek to make our country a happier and more inclusive place. These are everyday folks with no agenda to be famous. They are special because of the values and causes around which they build their lives.

For the past five years, the Civil Society Hall of Fame has reached out to such individuals and groups in appreciation of what they stand for and in the hope that their wholesome energy will influence others elsewhere.

As a magazine we like showcasing what works at multiple levels. While we understand the urgent need for scale, we also believe that grand surges should learn from small efforts and the choices they represent. It should be a national goal to carry as many people along as possible.

The Civil Society Hall of Fame tries to facilitate such a process. In its small way, it is a reminder of India's enormous diversity. The learning we have from the Hall of Fame is that the big story is in the small story. There is no single narrative for the whole country.

One would imagine that this should be obvious, but it clearly isn't to policy makers and others in government. Baseline data they work with is seriously deficient, leading to alienation and the breakdown of trust.

Go to Sompeta in the Srikakulam district of Andhra Pradesh and the greenery all around is striking. You can't miss the water bodies and the fields full of crops. Yet in the files of the government this productive and verdant setting is listed as a wasteland!

Based on the assumption that Sompeta is a wasteland, a thermal power plant has been sanctioned in the area. For several years now farmers have been locked in battle with the government over the plant, saying they want their water bodies and fields preserved and permission for the power plant with-

IN THE SMALL STORY

drawn because it will take them off their land.

We went to Sompeta to meet Dr Yaradi Krishna Murty. He is an anaesthetist and one of the respected local doctors, but he also leads the movement against the thermal plant. It is a call he took after much introspection when he realised that more people would be uprooted than benefited by the project. As a physician, Dr Krishna Murty has the education to raise environmental issues and articulate the objections made by farmers. Seeing his example, others who don't have land to lose – professionals and small traders – have joined the protests.

Sompeta is interesting because it underlines the need for homework and consultation before decisions are taken on big projects that change around people's lives. For those who see sustained economic growth in getting people off land and into factories, Dr Krishna Murty is perceived as a hurdle to progress. We on the other hand see in him an unlikely hero who, through the issues raised over a power plant in a distant corner of Andhra Pradesh, has made all of us stop and think, as indeed we should before trampling on other people's lives.

A few hundred kilometres from Sompeta, in the Vizianagaram district of Andhra Pradesh, a couple has taken up an entirely different cause. Eliazar T. Rose and his wife, Ruth, are the healthy children of leprosy patients. Thirty years ago, armed with an education, they had the opportunity to move on. But they chose instead to work for leprosy patients like their parents and for the healthy children of such people.

Eliazar has an entrepreneurial zeal about him – two children's villages, schools, a facility for reconstructive surgery, nursing stations where leprosy patients can have their wounds attended to.

Eliazar has his own definition of what healthcare should be about in a country as poor and far flung as ours. "A health worker should be like a motor mechanic with a tool kit," he says. He and Ruth remind us that the strength of a poor country's health system should be flexibility.

Far away at Nokha, some distance from Bikaner in the middle of the Thar desert, a Soochna Kendra helps people access information from government files. It is run by the Urmul Jyoti Sansthan and helps villagers deal with government departments. After the right to information became law, empowering people to use the law was the next challenge. The Soochna Kendra does that very well. Its users now form the Jagruk Nagrik Manch.

Others in the Hall of Fame are Begari Lakshamma, who saves traditional seeds; Mangal Singh, the inventor of a turbine that doesn't use diesel; K.P. Arjunan, the revered repository of traditional knowledge on Siddha. You can learn about all of them in the following pages.

The Civil Society Hall of Fame is a device for citizens to honour citizens in a non-official way. It does not claim to be a perfect process. These six names this year came off a much longer list, which was sent to the jury. The long list came from *Civil Society's* networks.

Our jury this year was: Aruna Roy, Nasser Munjee, Anupam Mishra, Harivansh, Vir Chopra and Darshan Shankar. We thank them for their spirited involvement. ■

ILLUSTRATION BY VIRENDER CHAUHAN



LAKSHMAN ANAND



Chetan Ram in the centre and Rawat Ram, second from right, examining files at the Soochna Kendra

RAWAT RAM & CHETAN RAM

Information gurus

WHEN the film star Dharmendra was elected to the Lok Sabha as a BJP candidate from the Bikaner seat in Rajasthan in 2004, his campaign speeches consisted of famous lines from his films. He had the constituency charmed. But he did nothing for five years and angry voters vowed never to let him enter Bikaner again!

Rawat Ram tells us the story with a slight laugh in his soft voice as we wait at the Nokha railway station for a train back to Delhi. He is a polite man, dressed simply and with very few needs. He makes no dramatic statements and yet he is every bit a hero – that too in real life.

From a tiny Soochna Kendra of the Jagruk Nagrik Manch in Nokha town, 60 km from Bikaner in the Thar desert, Rawat Ram helps people know about their rights and take on inefficiency and corruption in the government.

It is a challenging role that requires courage and persistence and diplomacy in no small measure. Rawat Ram is a natural at it.

The Soochna Kendra is the creation of the Urmul Jyoti Sansthan whose secretary Chetan Ram is an old warhorse of the right to information (RTI)

movement. In the villages of the Nokha block, he has encouraged people to be 'jagruk nagrik' or aware citizens.

It was in this process that he met Rawat Ram, who decided to work full time with Urmul Jyoti and be mentored by Chetan Ram. The story of Mohan Lal is similar and, like Rawat Ram, he, too, plays an organising role.

The Soochna Kendra is a small room, perhaps 150 square feet. It was started in 2000 when the Rajasthan Right to Information Act was passed. Initially, the room was taken on rent. Later, Urmul Jyoti bought the premises. Slippers and shoes are taken off before entering and everyone sits on a rug that covers the floor. It is located near government offices that serve the Nokha block so that it is easy for people with problems to find assistance.

Not everything that the Soochna Kendra does is adversarial. Very often officials send villagers to the kendra so that applications are filled correctly. Sometimes a bribe has been paid, but the work has not been done. The kendra negotiates a settlement on behalf of the hapless citizen – getting the money

LAKSHMAN ANAND



Mangi Lal Durga Ram with his Jagruk Nagrik ID card

HALL OF FAME

back and the job completed without a formal complaint.

Says Chetan Ram: "Our location here next to government offices is important. At these offices you will see middlemen who offer to get things done for some money. People get taken in. Often they lose their money and end up with their records and title deeds falsified and misappropriated. The Soochna Kendra is the anti-thesis of these middlemen. From here we help people learn how to make the system work for them."

Noticeably, the kendra does not have a computer. But much has been packed into the small room. The kendra is surprisingly well informed and methodical. There are registers with the names of people who come to it for help – they run into a couple of thousand at least. A record is kept of complaints and the progress made in resolving them.

The kendra is also a repository of information on the benefits that should go to pensioners, the handicapped, below the poverty line persons, widows. There are useful lists: names of officers and Gram Sevaks, for instance. There is information on schools and anganwadis.

"It is because of the work of this kendra that the benefits received by people in the Nokha block are equal to those of the four other blocks in Bikaner district," says Chetan Ram.

The government also runs Soochna Kendras to help with implementation of RTI. But they are not successful. One reason for this is perhaps the lack of zeal. Ferreting out corruption and making a bureaucracy deliver results require passion and a sense of purpose.

Nokha's Soochna Kendra draws its energy from the Jagruk Nagrik Manch initiative. It delivers results because it is part of a larger vision.

The government has plans for replicating the Nokha Soochna Kendra elsewhere. But that will mean emulating the spirit in which it was created and finding a mentor like Chetan Ram or activists like Rawat Ram and Mohan Lal.

A day at the Nokha kendra gives some indication of its popularity and the different problems that it helps resolve.

As we sit down in the kendra and get talking, Raj Kanwar, a widow for the past five years, shyly makes her presence felt at the door. She has her *ghunghat* or veil in place and won't speak face to face with Rawat Ram or the other men in the room. She won't even enter the room.

As a widow she gets ₹500 pension. For every child she sends to school, she gets ₹625. Two of her boys are already in school. She now wants to admit the third, Ashok, who she has brought along.

When she approached the government department concerned she was sent to the Soochna Kendra to get the relevant forms and have them filled correctly. She doesn't have a complaint, but only needs help.

A lot of government money has poured into rural areas like Nokha. It has gone into guaranteed employment, pensions, incentives for educating children and so on. There have been investments in infrastructure too with village roads getting built.

With the inflow of money has come corruption. Panchayats have been siphoning off funds. Officials in government see an opportunity for commissions when people claim their entitlements.

Better access has made land more expensive. Remote as it is in the Thar desert, Nokha is seeing the first signs of a real estate boom because a bypass is apparently planned from Bikaner to the highway. The result is that developers have been buying land and selling plots for gated colonies.

As these changes take place, the greed for acquiring land in any

The Soochna Kendra is a tiny room near the govt offices in Nokha. It helps people know about their rights and shows them how to access information.

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Rawat Ram with Raj Kanwar, a widow, and her son

LAKSHMAN ANAND



Joga Ram Garg, whose house and land were made to disappear from records

which way possible is one dominant story. Records are being falsified and holdings sold off without the knowledge of the real owners. Cases abound of people being told suddenly that their houses and lands do not exist.

New laws like RTI empower citizens to fight back. It is possible to get out documents and open up files. But it is not easy and the Soochna Kendra plays an important role in handholding the individual.

Take the case of Joga Ram Garg of Panchu village. He found in 1990 that after a survey by the Settlement Department, 63 bighas belonging to his family was no longer shown as theirs in the map of the area. It had been included under government land designated for grazing.

In 1991-92, after much effort, he succeeded in filing a complaint with the Revenue Department, which said he should go to the Settlement Department, which said the land did not exist.

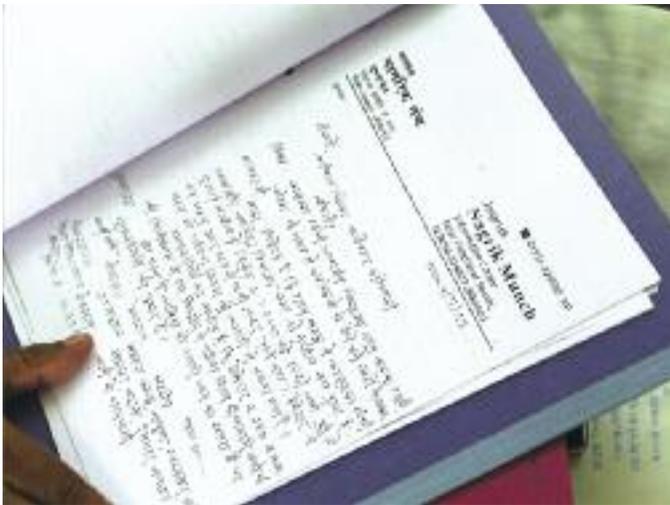
In 2005, he finally went to court. Filing case was one thing. Getting justice quite another. He didn't have the documents on the basis of which the case could be argued. The Revenue Department

LAKSHMAN ANAND



Chetan Ram listens to Nagrik Manch members

LAKSHMAN ANAND



Nagrik Manch letterhead used for applications

LAKSHMAN ANAND



Housing colonies are coming up. This board says bookings are on

and the Sub-divisional Magistrate also didn't have the documents.

It was only the Settlement Department that had the documents and it refused to accept Joga Ram's application under RTI. The application was sent by registered post and yet there was no reply for 30 days.

He then went to the Appellate Settlement Commission in Jaipur. It sent a notice to the Settlement Department. Once more there was no response. Finally, the Chief Information Commissioner in Jaipur sent a notice to the Settlement Department in Bikaner.

At the end of this long process, Joga Ram received a reply this July saying that his family's 63 bighas and some other piece of land had been wrongly merged with 515 bighas of grazing land, inflating it to 584 bighas. Joga Ram's land is currently worth ₹1.2 crores. It is a lot of money in these parts. Joga Ram would like to celebrate, but a cloud of doubt remains regarding when the record will be formally set right.

There are several other kinds of cases that the Jagruk Nagrik Manch takes up. They have to do with schools, health facilities, misuse of railway staff accommodation, ration shops and even the location of electricity poles. One of the applications has unearthed the siphoning off of ₹36 lakhs meant to have been distributed under the rural employment guarantee scheme.

Having laws that require governments to be transparent and accountable is a big thing. However, empowering people to use such laws requires a social movement.

The Urmul Jyoti Sansthan has tried building a can-do mood in the villages of Nokha. It has an innovative programme for getting back bribes. So far ₹70 lakhs have been returned, says Chetan Ram. The trust helps girls get an education and reaches out to the elderly. There is a facility for eyecare where cataracts are also removed and glasses dispensed.

Multiple associations bring people closer to the Urmul Jyoti Sansthan. Involvement with the Jagruk Nagrik Manch then comes quite easily. Members of the manch now have identity cards and proudly talk about the RTI applications they file. Perceptions change and here far in the desert with any number of problems to contend with people have begun to see the impossible as possible. ■

Umesh Anand saw the Sochna Kendra at work

DR YARADI KRISHNA MURTY

Physician and a cause

It is a brilliant countryside awash in green and stretching all the way up to sand dunes and a sparkling coastline. There are paddy fields, water bodies, fisheries, jackfruit trees, coconut trees and vegetable gardens. In all, 18 villages on 5,000 acres make up this resplendent setting in Andhra Pradesh's Srikakulam district. A highway runs through here, but for most part these villages are a world unto themselves and eager to stay that way.

When we showed up on 31 July, voting was in full swing for 16 panchayats. It was a vigorously contested election. But, interestingly, there was just one big issue: scrapping of plans for a thermal power plant in the area. Such is the popular anger over the plant that every candidate had promised to oppose it.

"It is the only issue," said Dr Yaradi Krishna Murty, at his clinic in the Mahalaxmi Nursing Home at Sompeta, the mandal headquarters from where the campaign against the plant has been run by the Pariyavarna Parirakshana Sangham (PPS) along with support from the Teeraprantha Matsyakara Aikya Vedika (TMAV).

Dr Krishna Murty, 50, is an anaesthetist and a respected local physician. But in his avatar as activist he has found his life change dramatically. As the guiding spirit of the agitation for the past four years, he has been helping mostly unlettered farmers and fishermen express their fears and articulate environmental arguments against the plant.

With Dr Krishna Murty's example before them, teachers, lawyers and small traders have joined the agitation.

A short, shy man who speaks in a soft voice, Dr Krishna Murty has the understated and reserved manner of a good physician. He certainly seems an unlikely activist. Yet he has held his ground boldly, braving beatings by the police and a mysterious bomb attack on the Mahalaxmi Nursing Home.

Asked why farmers have opposed the plant, Dr Krishna Murty says: "It is because of the loss of livelihoods. The plant will take away their land and destroy their agriculture. The jobs it will provide will be few in comparison and menial in nature. Right now the holdings are small and the farmers may not have much but their quality of life is good. They know no other life and won't be able to survive without their land."

Dr Krishna Murty questions the benefits from a model of development which impacts the environment, takes away land and pushes out people without preparing them for the transition.

He himself belongs to a farming family in the area and became a doctor because of his passion for medicine. His father had wanted him to be a farmer. Instead, his brother agreed to work on the land so that he could go ahead and study.

Asked how he finds the time for both his practice and a cause as complex as this, Dr Krishna Murty says: "I treat it like an emergency case. It has to be done. There was a time when I, too, thought the power plant would be good for the development of the area. That it would provide jobs and electricity and stimulate economic activity in



Dr Yaradi Krishna Murty with members of the PPS

HALL OF FAME

LAKSHMAN ANAND





Verdant paddy fields

It is thanks to the beela there are two paddy crops a year in the area. It provides various grasses and fish and attracts birds.

the area. But when I realised the impact it would have on the environment and the farmers it would displace, I changed my view and felt I should do my bit for stopping it."

To him and other bravehearts in the PPS must go the credit of making protection of their local environment an election issue.

"After this no politician, be it an MLA or MP, will be able to support the plant or bring such a project here," says Beena Dhillle Rao, 53, a small farmer who was the first to oppose the plant.

Panchayats have an important role to play because their endorsement is needed for projects. Originally, the panchayats in the area gave their approval to the power plant without understanding the implications. But now the farmers are wiser and don't want such costly mistakes to be repeated.

"We want a panchayat leadership which is aware of what the environment means to the local farmers and fishermen and is not misled by a model of development that takes land away from people without offering them sustainable alternatives," explains Dr Krishna Murty.

To ensure this, the PPS put up its candidates in the 16 panchayats. While all the candidates had no choice but to oppose the plant, the PPS put up its own candidates because they understand the issues better and can be relied on not to go back on their word.

The Nagarjuna Construction Company (NCC) has been given the

contract to set up a 2x660 MW plant on 900 acres of a *beela*, a large traditional water body located at Gollagandi village. The company acquired some 500 acres before it ran into a wall of opposition from the farmers.

The *beela* has a very special place in the lives of the farmers and sustains the local eco system. It becomes brimful during the rainy season with runoff from the Mahendragiri hills and it retains water all year round. It is thanks to the *beela* there are two paddy crops a year in the area. It provides various grasses and fish and attracts birds in large numbers.

But so poor is the government's baseline data, that this productive water body has been listed as a wasteland in the government's records resulting in a power project being sanctioned on it.

At public hearings for the plant in 2009, farmers who didn't want the *beela* destroyed, were overruled, forcing them to begin an agitation. A prolonged awareness campaign since then has resulted in ranging popular opinion against the plant. Now it has become a choice between having the plant and losing the traditional way of life in the villages.

In 2010, farmers in large numbers protested against the plant and were fired on by the police. Two of them died and several were injured. A memorial has been erected at the spot just along the highway.

After the firing episode, the National Environment Appellate Authority visited the project site and said the *beela* was a water body and not a wasteland. It cancelled environmental clearance for the project and the company has since appealed against the order.

But rivalries continued to run deep and the panchayat elections in July were marked by high excitement.

Cell phones rang and beeped as voting trends kept coming in on counting day and the mood in the PPS was upbeat. Candidates of the PPS were leading everywhere. The winning trend continued as the day progressed.

But there was one surprising exception: Sompeta, where the PPS was leading at first, but then lost. This was a curious turn of events because the most formidable champions of the cause, including Dr Krishna Murty, belong to Sompeta.

"We lost by a big margin," Dr Krishna Murty said to us the next morning when we met him and other supporters at the proposed plant site.

The arithmetic of elections and politics is clearly different to the championing of a cause. The reason for the Sompeta defeat was put down to a PPS man having switched his loyalty to a political party with a stronger base and better resources for getting voters to booths.

But the panchayat elections and the concerns they mirrored have implications for the long term. Industrial units that want to be located along the highway and near the coast will have to strive hard to win local approval. The Sompeta campaign against the thermal plant has created an awareness of the environment and the rights of the displaced that never existed before.

Beena Dhille Rao became the first to oppose the plant when a relative in Visakhapatnam told him about the experience there with a thermal power plant. That plant had caused pollution and the jobs and money evicted people had got had been poor compensation for the land and the quality of life they had given up. He paid a visit and found these things to be true. Next he took other farmers with him to see for themselves and they came back convinced.

"The *beela* is everything for us," says Beena Dhille. "Even in the height of summer we get water from it. It provides fodder for our livestock, fish and the grass from which we make thatched roofs and the hats which protect us from the sun. We also eat the roots of plants that grow in the *beela*."

Deenna Gavaravah has bullet injuries in his legs. He was right in front appealing to officials to listen to the farmers when the police opened fire. He too has been to Visakhapatnam to see the thermal plant there and come back worried.

"Jobs are of no use in comparison to growing paddy on your own land," he says.

On the fringes of the *beela* we sit with T. Easwar Rao and S. Dharma Rao, both men of the area who have no significant landholdings. They have been to New Delhi and done odd jobs, but come back.

They too have joined the agitation against the plant saying that they are better off with their homesteads and the natural biodiversity of the area.

Easwar Rao says he watches the Discovery channel and many of the birds he sees on TV he spots at the *beela*. "The plant will be very destructive. Why doesn't the government think of developing tourism here? We have such a good coastline as well."

Dr Krishna Murty laments the lack of baseline data with the government. "How can an area so rich in biodiversity be recorded as a wasteland?" he asks.

Equally worrisome is the apparent lack of a process for consultation before a project is sanctioned. The public hearings for the plant did not record the views of the majority of the farmers.

But where the government has failed, the PPS has succeeded by creating the space in which unlettered farmers can understand the science of their environment, express themselves and make a choice in their own interests. ■

Dr Krishna Murty laments the lack of baseline data with the government. 'How can an area so rich in biodiversity be recorded as a wasteland?' he asks.

LAKSHMAN ANAND



Dr Yaradi Krishna Murty (centre) with Beena Dhille Rao (right) and a campaigner

LAKSHMAN ANAND



The *beela* yields useful grasses

Umesh Anand was at Sompeta on polling day

BEGARI LAKSHMAMMA

The keeper of seeds

BEGARI Lakshamma croons softly in a high-pitched voice. Is she singing a Telugu folk song? She laughs. "This song used to be sung by my ancestors," she says. "Its lyrics tell us when the stars are right for sowing millets. I inherited it."

Lakshamma, 45, is a Dalit who lives in Humnapur village in the Medak district of Telengana. A seasoned farmer with five acres, Lakshamma is a single mother. Her husband abandoned her years ago. He used to work for the Border Security Force.

Inside her neat home, Lakshamma has a treasure she nurtures with devotion. It is a rare seed-bank of 60 to 70 varieties of native seeds stored in earthen pots.

The origins of her seed-bank date to the early 90s. At that time the Deccan Development Society (DDS), an NGO, had started working in Andhra Pradesh to restore farming and promote millets. Seeds, manufactured by companies, had begun proliferating in the countryside, replacing native varieties. DDS realised how critical it was to set up seed-banks, conserve biodiversity and inform villagers.

"During a meeting in Humnapur we asked villagers to suggest somebody who could be the custodian of a seed-bank. In one voice all the villagers shouted Lakshamma's name," recalls P.V. Satheesh, director, DDS.

So the NGO began to encourage Lakshamma to start a community seed-bank. Lakshamma was very successful. Over the years she collected an amazing range of native seeds, including millets, oil-seeds and legumes. You can now see 30 types of millets and legumes and six varieties of green gram. She has pigeon pea in five avatars and jowar (sorghum) in six.

All her seeds are tried and tested. She plants them on her land. About 50 families, or half the village, borrow seeds from her. A few farmers from adjoining villages trudge to Lakshamma's home to ask for seeds. And they are never disappointed.

Instead of cold cash, farmers who borrow seeds have to repay with 'interest'. This means that after harvesting their crops, they have to return double or one and a half times the number of seeds they had borrowed from Lakshamma's seed-bank.

HEMGROWN WISDOM: Humnapur, a semi-arid region, receives 800 mm of rain but it faces recurrent bouts of drought. Rainfall is erratic. Sometimes, Humnapur's entire quota of rain falls in one big burst and doesn't spread itself out during the monsoon. So the agricultural schedule of farmers goes awry.

The food people eat here consists of local diverse crops. Each dish is a healthy mix of cereals, pulses and oilseeds.

"The daily meal of a traditional Deccan farmer consists of sorghum roti, pigeon pea dal, uncultivated greens seasoned with oil and powdered spices," explains Satheesh. "The most interesting aspect of this meal is that every single element is grown on



SHREE PADRE

Begari Lakshamma with her colourful pots of native seeds

their own farm, however small. Crop diversity is directly transferred from their farm to their kitchen."

The *thoranam*, for instance, is an indicator of how much people value this diversity. It is a string with earheads of different crops, interspersed with mango leaves, strung across the front door during festivals. Lakshamma's neat home has one. Endlagatte Punnam festival falls on a full moon day that precedes the winter harvest. Men and women collect earheads from their fields, days in advance. The earheads, sweets and cooked rice are offered to the village goddess as a gesture of gratitude for blessing them with a good crop.

Every house owner takes great pride in displaying the diversity of crops on his or her field on the *thoranam*.

CROPS OF TRUTH: Traditionally people here kept hunger at bay by planting crops in the rabi season that 'grow with the wind.' Such plants are called 'crops of truth' by villagers (*satyam pantalu*) and consist of jowar, chick pea, safflower, wheat and flax.

Also included are millet (bajra) varieties like proso millet and little millet. These crops have the added advantage of being resistant to pests and diseases.

Lakshamma's seed-bank stocks several 'truth crops'. She has three varieties of little millet and the rarer Kodo little millet that has now become popular. These millets are close to extinction so Lakshamma is trying her best to conserve them and make them

popular. To maintain a stock of seeds, she keeps 10 per cent of small seeded crops and 25 per cent of big seeded ones.

Lakshamma's seed-bank yields a surplus that she can sell and earn an income. From her home and through her self-help group, (SHG), Lakshamma sells seeds of pigeon pea, green gram, black gram, dolichos lablab, safflower and millets.

Lakshamma lost her parents some years ago. She and her two children live with her brother Gundappa, his wife Shankamma and their four children. Her daughter Geetha has a B.Com degree and her son Narasimhalu works for a chemist.

HEREDITARY PROFESSION: Traditionally, every village in these parts had a seed-keeper. Farmers fervently believed that taking seeds from a seed-keeper would yield a bountiful harvest for they were considered auspicious. So Lakshamma isn't new to the idea of seed conservation. Her grandmother, Sangamma, ran a community seed-bank decades ago.

Seeds stored in earthen pots were placed one on top of the other. Rats and other pests were kept at bay. Lakshamma follows traditional methods to protect her seeds from pests.

"Green gram is very vulnerable to pest attacks," she says. While storing she mixes foxtail millet in green gram and black gram to protect the seeds from pests. The foxtail millet fills up all the airy space between the green gram and black gram. So even if weevils find their way in, they will die of suffocation. When the seeds are required, the millet is strained out. Mixing seeds with cow dung ash and neem leaves also protects them from pests.

"During my grandmother's time, we had many more seeds," recalls Lakshamma, "We have lost forever two or three varieties of jowar and wheat."

Lakshamma's parents were very poor so she never had the opportunity of going to school. But she is intelligent, cheerful and has a pleasing personality.

Dalits like her used to be landless. A few had bits of land they didn't cultivate. Mostly they spent all their time slaving on the fields of landlords leaving them with no time to plough their own fields.

As a result of land reforms by late Prime Minister Indira Gandhi, Dalits here were allotted one or two acres each. These lands are called 'Indira bhoomi.' But the Dalits saw their lands as unproductive and didn't work on them.

Things started changing when DDS began an employment scheme in the summer of 1988 uncannily similar to the National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme (NREGS). They offered 75 per cent of wages to people who were willing to do 100 days of work on their own field.

"In a decade's time, about 15,000 acres of fallow land was brought under cultivation," says Satheesh.

By then native seeds had started disappearing. Satheesh blames this loss of biodiversity to chemical farming and the availability of rice through the public distribution system.

At that time DDS relied on Lakshamma's excellent communication skills. She reasoned with neighbouring farmers and addressed village meetings explaining why native seeds were so important. DDS employed her at their seed-bank at their headquarters at Pastapur.

Over the years with awareness of native seeds increasing, farmers have started preserving their own seeds. Fewer people approach Lakshamma for her seeds. But she doesn't worry about shrinking demand.

"That's fine," she smiles. "I will simply sell all my produce and keep only the seeds that I need." Private companies manufacture hybrid pigeon pea and jowar seeds. Lakshamma says none of the

farmers in her village or the adjoining ones buy from seed companies.

SEEDING FILM: Seed-keeping isn't Lakshamma's sole skill. She is also a proficient film-maker, wielding the camera with as much passion as she nurtures her seeds.

DDS has trained about 12 women in film production. Lakshamma is among them. None of the women know English or any other link language. Yet, apart from producing short local films, they have undertaken a number of film assignments abroad.

Lakshamma began filming around 20 years ago. Till date she

Lakshamma's seed-bank stocks several 'truth crops'. She has three varieties of little millet and Kodo millet.

SHREE PADRE



Lakshamma filming a documentary on traditional farming

has contributed to more than 250 to 300 documentaries. As a filmmaker she has travelled to Bangladesh, Cambodia, Senegal, Mali, Canada, Thailand, Germany and the UK.

In India, during the annual biodiversity festival, Lakshamma and her colleagues made a number of films on successful award-winning farmers. They have also taken part in film festivals held in Delhi, Pune, Bangalore and Thrissur.

How does a rural woman who is not literate learn how to handle a camera? The question irks Satheesh. "Why do you think English is necessary to ideate an issue and transfer it to film? Its only when the women travel abroad that they need a translator." Satheesh, a visual communications expert, rates Lakshamma's skills as a film-maker pretty high. "I would give her seven out of 10," he says.

Ask Lakshamma how many documentaries she has made and she replies that she can't remember. "The first one I did was on anganwadis," she recalls. "But I wasn't satisfied with it. I prefer to film seeds and crops since that's very close to my profession."

She says seeds are her first priority. The second is filming. Glancing at a calendar she says she will be shooting a film on farming a day later in a nearby village.

It is her seed-bank that is always on her mind. "Now that it is raining it is time to sow seeds like horse gram. Farmers in the village I will be going to have asked me for seeds. I will take them along with my camera," she says, thoughtfully. ■

Shree Padre took a flight and a taxi to meet Lakshamma

ELIAZAR & RUTH ROSE

Business of smiles and hope

NOTHING prepares you for the New Hope Children's Village. It is at Kothavalasa in the recesses of Andhra Pradesh's Vizianagaram district. Scruffy roads lead you there through dismal surroundings. There are no signboards, no grand statements, no intimations of any kind of what is in store.

The village itself begins unannounced: a cluster of single-floor structures on 13 acres without a significant gate or wall to seal them off. Entry is by turning off the road – just like that. But when a large number of children, their faces radiant with excitement, emerge almost from nowhere for a rousing welcome, it becomes quite clear that this is a place awash with special energy.

Since 2000, New Hope Children's Village at this location has been home to hundreds of children who have had nowhere to go. These have primarily been children whose parents have been afflicted by leprosy.

There are also children who don't have the stigma of leprosy to live down but have other troubled histories. They could have either strayed from home or been dumped somewhere or simply got lost on a railway platform.

At the New Hope Children's Village they find an extended family, get to go to school, wear clean clothes and are assured three wholesome meals a day. Life begins afresh for them. With education and skills, they find employment, get married, have children and generally move out of the margins.

The village is also home to destitute women, some of them HIV positive, who regain their confidence and health and discover a new existence by being mothers to the children. A nourishing emotional balance is thereby restored.

These are remarkable things to happen. But the specialness of the New Hope Children's Village is in its movie script like history.

This village is 13 years old. However its story begins 30 years ago when Eliazar Tumati Rose and his wife, Ruth, founded the New Hope Rural Leprosy Trust in Orissa, not far from here.

Both Eliazar and Ruth, now 51 and 49, are the healthy children of leprosy patients. Their parents gave them an education in the belief that they should move on to a better life.

Instead, Eliazar and Ruth chose to dedicate themselves to helping leprosy patients and putting their children into the mainstream of society.

As children they had lived with their parents in the squalid Bethany Leprosy Colony at Bapatata in Guntur district and knew what it was to be ostracised and despised. People with leprosy are



The New Hope Children's Village at Kothavalasa: One big busy family

HALL OF FAME

LAKSHMAN ANAND





Ruth and Eliazar Rose: 'We have to turn negativity into positivity'

'It is not a question of helping one child. This child we help today may help 100 other children. Like us.'

shunned and forced to inhabit secluded areas, often near railway lines, far from mainstream habitation.

They watched their parents beg for food, as leprosy people did in those days (and in many places still do) for want of options.

"Children of parents with leprosy are thrown out by society. We have to put them back and help them work for society. We have to turn negativity into positivity," say Eliazar and Ruth. "It is not a question of helping one child. This child we help today may help 100 other children. Like us. We were just two of us. But over the years we have benefited perhaps 10,000 children. A lunch over a day or a month or 10 years. It varies but we have been able to help."

Eliazar, a restless man who is on his feet all day, believes a life of action is not just important, but also therapeutic. In the village there is always lots to do and everyone is busy. There is no time to brood.

"I don't know if we are social workers. I say we are a business community. Our profits are the improvements in a child's life, the smile of a child, children walking towards positive goals. It is the business of smiles and hope," says Eliazar.

"The child comes from a railway platform with nothing. Today she is studying in an English medium school, speaks English. Tomorrow she is going to be different. This is how we measure our success. Our profitability."

Leprosy patients are known to use their children to beg. But Ruth and Eliazar were fortunate their parents had vision and wanted them to build new lives.

Eliazar was sent to a hostel where he was paid for by a charity. Ruth went to her uncle's house in New Delhi.

He finished school and trained to be a fitter at an institute for technical training. She studied till Class 8.

Since the two fathers were friends, it was decided that Eliazar and Ruth should get married. They now have two healthy grown up children, Asha and Ranjeet.

But 30 years ago when they had the chance to move on, as indeed their parents had wanted, they chose instead to live a life devoted to helping leprosy patients and putting the children of such families back in society.

It began with Eliazar doing a laboratory technician's course in observing the changes leprosy bacteria go through under multi-drug treatment, which was being introduced in the 1980s.

He then moved to Muniguda in Orissa's Raigada district and with a few hundred rupees started the trust, which over the years was to result in the two children's villages, in Orissa and Andhra.

In Orissa he began by reaching out to leprosy patients in the colonies who were in need of care. Long-time patients need their sores to be dressed and attended to.

"At that time in Orissa, no one was working with leprosy patients. They were completely shunned," explains Eliazar. "Even we used to be turned away by local tea stalls when we would come out of a leprosy colony. People thought we were contaminated and would infect them."

Over time Eliazar set up in Munigada a facility for reconstructive surgery where some of India's finest surgeons would visit. He also began initiatives in the early detection of leprosy so that it can be cured with medication.

The trust took in elderly patients of leprosy who needed to have

their wounds dressed and attended to. The reconstructive surgery centre has been shut down for want of funds. It may reopen, perhaps this time in Andhra.

But the work with children, in early detection and care for the elderly has grown.

In Vizianagaram district, the government has given New Hope the status of a nodal agency.

New Hope provides sentinel services in the district and has taken over a facility at Chilakalapalli previously managed by the Gandhi Memorial Leprosy Foundation.

This facility is some distance from the village. Here we meet aged men and women who have come to get their wounds attended to. They have beds in separate wards. But if the children's village is full of cheer, these wards are depressing and unsettling. There is hopelessness written across the faces of the patients.

Ruth and Eliazar and their colleagues like Shrirama Krishnan, the project officer, move easily among the patients, hugging them, touching their wounds. This is perhaps the only human warmth these patients ever get to experience.

But just who are these leprosy patients?

There is Veerayya, a 60-year-old watchman, who has come from 40 km away. Appala Naidu, also 60, is unemployed and single. He is from Terlam, 10 km away. Then there is Y. Parvathi, 62, a barber by profession, also from Terlam. Pothiseti, 70, lives in a leprosy colony in Visakhapatnam.

Among the women, there is Lakshmi Palla, 60, from Bobbili, whose feet have ulcers. Nakka Narayanamma is just 45 and also has problems with the ulcers on her feet. She uses special sandals made of rubber.

Leprosy is caused by bacteria which attack the tissues and the nerves, resulting in deformity. As tissues degenerate and the nerve ends go dead, limbs like the hands and feet fail to withstand pressure and friction. This is what leads to the ugly sores.

Patients like the ones we meet at the Chilakalapalli facility need regular attention. But they can't find it at most government institutions.

For Eliazar and Ruth, who come from inside the world of leprosy, the answers lie in changing popular perceptions, reforming the public health care system and looking ahead.

Leprosy is curable, so it is important to diagnose cases early and give patients the multi-drug treatment that works. New Hope reaches out to about 3,500 patients in Andhra Pradesh and 1,200 in Orissa.

New patients have great chances. For instance Ramu, who is eight or 10, has been fully cured because he was identified by New Hope and given medication. He is now back in school.

Ramu had some rashes, which refused to go away. When an extension worker with New Hope saw the rashes, Ramu was sent for a thorough examination and tests. It was leprosy.

"At first we were shattered," says Ramu's mother at their tiny home in the very dirty Pedapanki area where cases of malaria and filaria abound.

"We didn't know what to do. As a family we sat down and cried. But then these people told us it was fully curable if Ramu took his medicines regularly. He is well now."

New Hope seems to manage on modest resources. The village in Andhra is exciting for children because of the activities and the

For Eliazar and Ruth, who come from inside the world of leprosy, the answers lie in changing popular perceptions and reforming the public health care system.

LAKSHMAN ANAND



Every child gets a nutritious meal

LAKSHMAN ANAND



Children are made to feel they are part of a large family

open spaces. There are goats to tend to and farming to be done. But it is sparse and offers only the most basic of amenities.

Eliazar, Ruth, their daughter Asha and son Ranjeet live simply in a few rooms strung together as a cottage of sorts.

If there is a single big donor, Eliazar tells us, it is the Damien Foundation which puts in ₹14 lakhs a year. The Andhra government gives ₹3.5 lakhs, Eliazar brings in another ₹4 lakhs from friends. For the rest there are individual donors from Japan, Australia and Europe who have discovered Eliazar and Ruth and helped them in their mission.

"I don't think about money. I think about what I need to do. The money comes," says Eliazar. ■

Umesh Anand spent time with Eliazar and Ruth



Dr K.P. Arjunan blesses two graduates who have recently got their degrees in Siddha medicine

DR K. P. ARJUNAN

Master of the pulse

ONE morning four fresh graduates from Government Siddha Medical College in Chennai came to pray at a tiny shrine in the lower reaches of Vellore's Fort Hill. The shrine is dedicated to Puttu Maharishi, the first guru to start a *gurukulam* (school) in the 15th century to teach Siddha medicine.

After praying the graduates sought the blessings of a middle-aged man standing nearby. They bowed before him and respectfully asked him to bless their degrees.

The man they approached is Dr Kalyani Parasuraman Arjunan, 58, an outstanding practitioner of Siddha medicine and a guru to hundreds of Siddha students. According to historical records, Dr Arjunan is the 47th guru of the Puttu Maharishi Tradition.

"We learn mostly theoretical knowledge in college. To gain practical knowledge, including how to make medicines, we approach Dr Arjunan's *gurukulam*. I spent around 60 days there to update myself," says Dr B.V. Thiyagarajan, a BSMS (Bachelor of Siddha Medicine and Surgery).

Siddha medicine dates back to 2,500 years. It is one of the oldest systems of medicine known to mankind. The land of its birth is Tamil Nadu. The basic concepts of Siddha medicine are similar to Ayurveda. Both advocate 'food as medicine and medicine as food.'

The difference between the two lies in their methods of diagnosis and use of herbs.

"Over the last 30 years, Dr Arjunan must have provided medical services to 30,000 to 40,000 people in Vellore. He has conducted 3,700 medical camps and treated about 500,000 people free," says G. Hariramamurthi, Assistant Director and Head, Centre for Local Health Traditions, Institute of Ayurveda and Integrative Medicine at the Foundation for Revitalisation of Local Health Traditions (FRLHT), in Bangalore. "I have travelled to 18 states in the country. I have yet to find another person who has done such extensive work in healthcare," he says.

HISTORICAL ROOTS: Arjunan inherited his medicinal knowledge from his family. His father, Parasuraman, and mother, P. Saroja Ammal, were well-known Siddha healers. So were his grandparents and their ancestors.

Born and brought up at Sathuvachari in Vellore, Arjunan dropped out of school after Class 8. But his initiation into the world of plants and medicines started when he was just four years old.

Arjunan vividly describes Vellore as it was 50 years ago. "There

were only three streets in a radius of 18 kms. The population was sparse. There was a forest in Sathuvachari, surrounded by farmers' fields. After 6 pm people stayed indoors since wild animals like cheetahs and bears used to roam freely."

Young Arjunan's training was rigorous. "If patients arrived at night, we had to run to the hill to get medicinal plants. We had to identify these herbs in the darkness of the night."

Is that possible? Arjunan replies, "My father taught us. He would first introduce the herb to us and then teach us how to identify the plant and its medicinal properties. This training would end when we became adept at fetching plants at night. We were able to recognise the plant by feeling its physical properties: its shape, thickness, size, texture and smell."

Arjunan's parents owned 27 acres. In 1970, their land was acquired by the government and sold as residential plots. Life became tough for the family. They received no compensation, not even the promised government job. After a lot of struggle the government gave them some rocky land.

On this land, Arjunan's family built a *gurukulam* with a unit that makes medicines. In 1974, an unprecedented flood washed away all their valuables, including a priceless collection of 160 palm leaf scriptures. One had 400 to 500 pages. Inscribed on these was knowledge of Siddha medicine, astrology and vastu.

Only one palm leaf scripture, 500 years old, was spared. It is the family's most treasured asset. The script is in Tamil but only an expert would be able to decipher it. The family hasn't tried to get it read, fearing it might be copied.

Arjunan began his career as a traditional bonesetter at a clinic in Sathuvachari. He taught his brothers, Palamuthu and Dambachari, his skills of collecting plants and bone setting. Finally, he handed over his clinic to Dambachari, who treats about 50 to 100 patients every day.

In 1980, Arjunan started the Sri Puttru Maharishi Social and Medical Service Centre (SPMSMSC), a voluntary organisation, to heal people with Siddha medicine and spread awareness. Helped by his brothers, the government and NGOs, his voluntary organisation works with missionary zeal.

PULSE GURU: Dr Arjunan is a master at pulse reading (*nadi pariksha*), an intrinsic part of Siddha practice. It takes him 30 seconds to a minute to read your pulse and diagnose your illness.

Dr T. Sivakumar, Field Publicity Officer in Puducherry knows Arjunan for more than a decade. He recalls that some weeks ago, he was suffering from fever. Arjunan came to know. He rushed to Puducherry with medicines for fever. "But after he started reading my pulse, his face turned pale. He told me, "This is not an ordinary fever. It is a sign that you have higher *pitta* in your bone marrow. As a result it is malfunctioning. The medicines I brought won't work for you."

Arjunan returned without even drinking a cup of coffee. He sent his youngest brother Selvam, a botanist, with freshly prepared medicines. The next day Sivakumar's blood test showed his white blood cell count was a low 4,500. A week later it rose to 6,000 and after seven days, it was 7,000.

Arjunan explains that modern diseases like dengue, HIV, chikungunya and cancer can be diagnosed by pulse reading. He says he

'If patients arrived at night, we had to run to the hill to get medicinal plants. We had to identify these herbs in the darkness of the night.'

SHREE PADRE



Dr Arjunan is an expert in pulse reading

SHREE PADRE



A 500-year-old palm scripture on Siddha is his family's treasured possession

can't get rid of HIV, but he can contain it and enhance the patient's quality of life. Arjunan has travelled to Sri Lanka, Thailand, Germany, Turkey and the Netherlands to share his knowledge on reading the pulse.

Earlier patients with a variety of diseases would approach him for a cure. Today he gets patients with serious ailments like paralysis, hemiplegia, paraplegia, orthopaedic problems, lung and kidney disorders and cancer.

To meet him, a prior appointment is needed. Arjunan practices in his clinic for half a day if he is in Vellore. He sees between four to 20 patients a day. His cases have now narrowed down to cancer and kidney failure. On an average, 60 to 100 cancer patients approach him every month.

Arjunan has patients with serious ailments in Andhra Pradesh,

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Mangal Singh has invented a turbine that is a boon for small farmers

MANGAL SINGH

Mangal's turbine

IN 1987, Mangal Singh, a marginal farmer, invented a turbine that could lift water from a stream flowing through his village, Bhailonilodh in the Lalitpur district of Uttar Pradesh. Through a network of pipes the water was directed to farmers' fields ensuring they could irrigate their crops if the rains didn't turn up.

Mangal Singh's turbine is an amazing invention because it doesn't need a drop of diesel or a spark of electricity to run unlike conventional lift irrigation systems that depend on diesel pump sets.

Mangal Singh isn't an engineer. He is a simple farmer who saw a problem and decided to resolve it. Lalitpur in Bundelkhand is a drought-prone district and farmers like him face crop failure if it doesn't rain as scheduled. The region has plenty of rivers and rivulets. But farmers who want to tap this water have to spend money buying diesel pump sets. Such expenses hike their cost of production. Mangal Singh's turbine that can be rigged up with local material is the answer.

His turbine is a giant wheel mounted on a steel shaft. Two bearing blocks fixed on the ground support the turbine. The steel shaft has a gearbox that can increase or decrease the speed of the wheel. It also has a pulley and a centrifugal pump that can lift water. The machine is easy to operate. There is a valve made of wood or steel

that can open or close the turbine. It can be made in different sizes.

The turbine has other uses too. It can crush sugarcane and wheat, besides doing threshing, winnowing and other agricultural tasks. By tweaking it, electricity for a small village can be generated, says Mangal Singh. But, in India, the land of small farmers, the true worth of the turbine, is in irrigation.

Mangal Singh named his turbine after himself. In 2004, he got a patent for his Mangal Turbine. Scientists and experts have examined the Mangal Turbine and found it truly inventive. Mangal Singh has been praised as a grassroots innovator.

Yet, today he is a heartbroken man. Mangal Singh's invention became the object of envy. Many tried to appropriate it for their own ends. He has been cheated and victimised. He produces a mountain of documents to illustrate his plight. Even his family land was auctioned. Yet Mangal Singh has continued to work, travelling to different states to install his turbine for the benefit of small farmers.

WATER WHEELS: The Mangal Turbine is simple, easy to rig up and it harvests surface water from rivers and rivulets.

If water in the river is in full flow, the turbine turns smoothly and doesn't really require a check dam, though a dam would improve

its efficiency by increasing the speed of the water. For small streams and rivulets, a check dam is needed to create enough force to turn the turbines.

"The Mangal Turbine saves on electricity or diesel and is ecologically completely benign," says B.K. Sinha, former chief secretary of Madhya Pradesh who went to examine it.

The Centre for Rural Development and Technology (CRDT) in IIT, Delhi, and the Vigyan Shikshan Kendra researched the potential of the Mangal Turbine. Their report identified 500 hydro sites where it could be installed. These sites could then generate up to 25 MW energy and irrigate 0.1 million hectares.

"Mangal Singh's device offers great promise. It can lift river water for irrigation, fisheries, forestry and drinking purposes," said Dr T.P. Ojha, former deputy director-general (engineering) of the Indian Council of Agricultural Research (ICAR) after he travelled to Lalitpur to inspect the turbine.

The Mangal Turbine can also reduce India's oil bill. If one unit of the Mangal Turbine runs for 11 hours a day, it saves 44 litres of diesel, if four litres of diesel are being used per hour by a 25 HP diesel pump. It also reduces greenhouse gas emissions, more so if it is used alongside for agricultural operations.

"Bundelkhand is a drought-prone area. Its main problem is lack of irrigation. Unfortunately our policy makers and planners prefer big and extravagant projects which allow pilferage," says Dr B.P. Maithani, former director of the National Institute of Rural Development.

FETED AND DUMPED: So what went wrong? Mangal Singh says he was at first praised and feted by government agencies and NGOs working in agriculture and watershed management. International NGOs invited him to five star hotels and said they wanted him to work with them. But they also wanted ownership of his invention and the right to advertise it in their brochures and publicity material. When Mangal Singh tried to protect his interests as an inventor they turned against him. Government agencies, on the other hand, wanted bribes or 'commissions' to release money sanctioned for him to install his turbines in Bundelkhand.

But Mangal Singh is not only a grassroots inventor. He is also an activist and a crusader against corruption. He began to openly complain about bribery and file right to information applications to expose officials.

Government officials in the Council for Advancement of People's Action and Rural Technology (CAPART) who couldn't get bribes out of him began to devote their time trying to find loopholes in the projects that had been sanctioned for him.

Mangal Singh is not an accountant. Neither did he have the means to appoint one. These officials tried to stop his funds so that his projects could not be completed. Eventually, the government auctioned Mangal Singh's family land to recover funds that had been released by CAPART.

Mangal Singh protested repeatedly against this injustice. Finally, the Department of Rural Development appointed Dr B.P. Maithani to prepare an evaluation report on what went wrong with Mangal Singh's CAPART projects.

Maithani's report states unambiguously that the allegations made against Mangal Singh were completely wrong. It was officials 'with their own selfish agenda' who ignored the directives of the Director-General of CAPART to 'inflict injustice after injustice' against this humble inventor, according to Maithani.

The story that emerges from Maithani's report is indeed a sordid

Mangal Singh's turbine is an amazing invention because it doesn't need diesel to run unlike conventional lift irrigation systems that depend on diesel pump sets.



The Mangal Turbine on location

one. An international NGO, CIMMYT (International Wheat and Maize Improvement Centre) with an office in India got Mangal Singh to be part of its R&D collaboration with IIT on his turbine. The International Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD) was sponsoring the partnership.

Mangal Singh found that he had serious differences with the way CIMMYT India was doing its research. He wanted R&D work done in his workshop and the turbine tested on site in the rivers of Bundelkhand. Instead his turbine was being taken to Haryana for testing its efficiency in a drain there. So Mangal Singh walked out of the collaboration.

CIMMYT India then lured Lal Singh, Mangal Singh's assistant, to work with them. At the NGO's behest, Lal Singh began installing his own turbine at Dhanu Ghat, just half a kilometre downstream of Kanji Ghat where Mangal Singh had installed six turbines financed by CAPART a year earlier in 2002.

Mangal Singh objected. He pointed out that installing a turbine downstream would affect his turbine upstream. Besides Lal Singh did not have the requisite permission from the administration for installing his turbine. But Lal Singh allegedly went ahead egged on by CIMMYT and with the support of the local administration. The net result was that Mangal Singh's turbines got submerged and CAPART's investment at Kanji Ghat became infructuous.

B.P. Maithani and S.M. Singh, a technical expert, visited Lalitpur in February 2011. This is what they saw: "When we reached the site at Kanji Ghat on the Sajnam river we found that (Mangal Singh's) project was inoperative. Six water wheels had been installed at the site but, unfortunately, the huge check dam and the turbines installed in a row were submerged in the backwaters due to the construction of another check dam and installation of a turbine just about half a km downstream of the same river." It was Lal Singh's wrongly placed turbine that had destroyed Mangal Singh's entire effort. Maithani repeatedly said that it wasn't Mangal Singh's fault at all.

He said the submergence problem being faced by the six Mangal

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Mangal's turbine

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turbines could be resolved by relocating Lal Singh's turbine just below the CAPART project. CAPART should request the district administration to remove or relocate Lal Singh's turbine, said Maithani.

Mangal Singh's CAPART-financed project had the potential of irrigating about 100 hectares in semi-arid Bundelkhand. In contrast, Lal Singh's turbine would barely irrigate 20 hectares, pointed out Maithani. "Mangal Singh was harassed and harmed while trying to implement the project," Maithani remarked. "This has happened not only in connection with this project but with all projects sanctioned by CAPART to Mangal Singh earlier too."

Mangal Singh had installed turbines in around six sites in Bundelkhand. All of them were functioning at one point of time. Dignitaries and experts had visited those places. "But the turbines were destroyed by vested interests with the help of anti-social elements who did not like his innovation, especially his low-cost construction of check dams. The comparison was exposing their misdeeds," states Maithani's report. He said if the turbines were

restored they would be of immense help to farmers who were spending huge sums buying diesel pump sets.

Maithani says that apart from CIMMYT India, several NGOs like NEDA, Development Alternatives, and District Rural Development Agencies joined the Mangal Turbine bandwagon. "However, another round of deception, desertion and depreciation started soon all aimed at subverting the rising popularity of Mangal Singh...."

He said that there was no case against Mangal Singh at all. In fact, he needed to be compensated for the damage inflicted on him by officials in CAPART simply because he did not 'please' them.

Maithani said the UP government must withdraw all false cases against Mangal Singh, defreeze his bank account and restore his land through an out-of-court settlement. "Mangal Singh needs to be suitably rewarded for his invention and contribution to society," said Maithani.

Meanwhile, Mangal Singh soldiers on. Apart from Lalitpur, he has installed his turbines in Uttarakhand, Jammu and Kashmir, Madhya Pradesh, Gujarat and UP. "I am not a capitalist. I work according to my principles," says Mangal Singh, whose invention has found its way into a science school textbook. ■

Bharat Dogra tracked Mangal Singh for this piece

Master of the pulse

Continued from page 39

Chhattisgarh, Odisha and other states. He doesn't hesitate to catch a flight to see them. But he remains stationed in Vellore for 25 days a month. "The entire family is devoted to Siddha healing. Arjunan never seems to tire," remarks Hariramamurthi.

Arjunan doesn't prescribe over-the-counter medicines. A team of five to six people prepare 300 essential medicines, supervised by the family. These are not branded or sold to outsiders.

Vellore's old jungles have vanished. Arjunan says that although medicinal plants can't be found near the foothills, climbing uphill yields results. "Fort Hill has about 250 herbs now. Whatever is not available, we get it from other parts of the state through our network of contacts," he explains.

He says there is reference to cancer in old Siddha texts. "Cancers of the throat, eyes, breast, penis and brain tumours are clearly dealt with. Even in ancient literature, there is mention of *puttru*, which means an extra growth. Cancer is similar."

Each cancer requires a distinctive line of treatment. Generally he prescribes seven types of medicines for internal and external use for three to five months. Arjunan says that doctors from well-known medical institutions who know the limitations of allopathic treatment send terminal patients to him.

HEALING HANDS: Arjunan also works with the Union government, the state government and NGOs to spread knowledge of Siddha medicine. Tamil Nadu is the only state to offer post-graduate degrees in Siddha medicine apart from one college in Kerala.

Although Arjunan is very busy, he spares time to spread knowledge and heal people for free. He spends money that he earns from his practice in organising free medical camps.

A few traditional healers and doctors are taken along to his medical camps. Every patient is kept track of and given free medicines for the entire length of treatment. Each patient's medical history is carefully noted down and documented into a spiral bound book.

That's how Arjunan can tell you that he has held 3,878 medical camps, not just in Tamil Nadu, but in Andhra Pradesh, Karnataka, Pudusserri, Kerala and in the Andaman and Nicobar Islands.

If the patient needs more medicine he has to just send a simple

request along with a photocopy of the prescription. Any change in medicine or dosage is discussed over phone. In general, patients require medicine for three to six months.

At the one-day herbal awareness camp, about 100 local herbs were exhibited. Instructions were given on how to use about 50 fresh plants to make medicine at home. The use of 20 herbs was explained in detail. The workshop concluded with a demonstration of essential home medicines.

The SPMSMSC and the Field Publicity Office of the Union Ministry of Information and Broadcasting have organised about 100 herbal awareness programmes in Vellore and Pudusserri districts in the last 10 years.

Arjunan also reaches out to remote areas where it is difficult to get healthcare. He has organised 232 camps with Tamil Nadu's Forest Department in the Kalvarayan Hill in Viluppuram district which has a significant population of Scheduled Tribes. The SPMSMSC is also collaborating with FRLHT.

His brother Selvam has helped the forest department set up 80 herbal gardens with 110 plants each to educate people. These are in Vellore and Tiruvannamalai districts. Each plant has the same number and nameplate in every garden.

Selvam explains why. "Even if forest department employees are transferred to another garden, they can easily identify every plant because it has the same number. If a plant dies they know where to get a replacement." These herbal gardens are becoming popular with children, students of Siddha and Ayurveda, forest staff and local communities.

Arjunan has also helped traditional Siddha physicians come together and form the Tamil Nadu Parambariya Siddha Vaidya Maha Sangham. He is the founder-president of the Sangham. Around 13,000 traditional healers in 126 taluks have enlisted and their work has been documented.

What motivates him? He replies that he wants to help poor people in remote areas who don't have access to medical facilities. He also wants to create awareness of Siddha medicine. "Our hard earned knowledge shouldn't vanish with a few senior healers like me," he says. Arjunan dreams of starting a Siddha Medical College and a hospital. Several well-wishers have assured help. "We should be able to start in a few years," says Arjunan, hopefully. ■

Shree Padre went to Vellore to profile K.P. Arjunan

10th Anniversary

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on trust

WITNESS TO

RITA ANAND

IN September 2003 when we started *Civil Society* we were happy to have brought out a magazine on a shoestring budget that told stories of change-leaders and their efforts to resolve India's myriad problems.

Our first cover story was on a right to information campaign in the East Delhi slum of Sundernagari led by Arvind Kejriwal, now a leader of the Aam Aadmi Party. No one in the media was talking about RTI in those days, but we could see a movement in the making. There were other stories too on a postal service for the homeless, middle-class anger, activists impacting politics and low-cost healthcare.

We were cautioned that our magazine would attract very few readers: 'no market for this kind of thing', we were told. People liked reading about politics and the world of glamour, not about people's movements and initiatives that addressed India's problems of development.

The advice was well intended and came from friends. How right they were and how wrong too.

The next decade witnessed a burst of activism. Jantar Mantar became India's protest street. NGOs and people's movements converged here to agitate for laws. The somnolent middle class joined street protests against corruption and electricity tariffs. The young expressed their rage against injustice and violence against women. The candle became a symbol of protest.

Corruption took centre stage like never before. It assumed the proportions of a major national issue – the high point being when the demand for a Lokpal took to the streets under the leadership of Anna Hazare and Arvind Kerjriwal. It captured the imagination of the people and had politicians of all parties on the defensive.

Wherever protestors went, the media followed. Films by young directors mirrored some of this angst. Newspapers and TV channels vied with each other to present awards to India's change-makers. The mainstream suddenly wanted to be

A DEMANDING DECADE

LAKSHMAN ANAND



part of what was dismissed as the fringe.

So what ushered in this open season for protests?

Nine months after *Civil Society* started publishing, the National Advisory Council (NAC) under Sonia Gandhi was formed to implement the UPA's National Common Minimum Programme. It promised employment guarantee, tribal rights, food security, education for all, social security and a host of issues activist groups had been fighting for since years.

The NAC was the political response to this discontent, this anger that the benefits of economic growth were not being evenly distributed.

The first NAC consisted of Aruna Roy, Jean Dreze, N.C. Saxena, Madhav Chavan, Dr M.S. Swaminathan and others, each an expert in the issue they represented. The NAC became a sounding board for activists, a door they

could knock on.

And they didn't let this opportunity go waste. Protests on the street were followed by consultations with sympathetic members of the NAC. A series of landmark legislation followed via the NAC: RTI, NREGA and the new Forest Rights Act (FRA).

The second term of the reconstituted NAC drafted a Jan Lokpal Bill, a grievance redress law, a whistleblowers protection law, and a land acquisition and rehab law that are all rusting in Parliament. The Right to Education (RTE) became a law too. Interestingly, the NAC looked more active than Parliament in drafting laws.

Mainstream observers have been scathing, with economists in particular questioning the costs of food and employment entitlements.

But new legislation and policies came out of the experience of people's movements working in villages fighting for the rights of Indians whose interests have been ignored. These were the people who made up the poverty figures of the country.

So the RTI movement grew out of the experience of the Mazdoor Kisan Shakti Sangathan (MKSS) in the villages of Rajasthan where public money meant for village development was being blatantly siphoned. The demand for universal employment guarantee and the right to food came from the severe drought of 2002 when poorer people in rural India were left to starve. Since Independence millions of villagers and tribals have been evicted most cruelly to make way for dams and factories.

Ironically, the agitation for a Jan Lokpal Bill is also traceable to the NAC. The Jan Lokpal Bill was being discussed by the National Campaign for People's Right to Information (NCPRI) for the NAC. Arvind Kejriwal was a part of this process before he walked out. *Civil Society* reported extensively on these developments.

Legislation of this period has had an impact. About two million RTI applications have been filed and people feel empowered to ask questions on how public money is being spent. Indians are uncovering corruption even at the risk of their lives and we have a roster of RTI heroes.

Activists who fought for new policies are now struggling to have them implemented by creaky and inefficient systems of governance. This decade has seen the emergence of a consensus that systems of governance and delivery mechanisms need to change. The big question is how. ■

JOURNEY TO REMEMBER

Our stories were on people and trends that others in the media were not reporting. When we look back we realise our coverage was often prophetic.

LAKSHMAN ANAND

1 Early days of RTI

SEPTEMBER 2003



It was September 2003. On the cover of our first issue was the then unknown Arvind Kejriwal. The story, Taxman's Burden, was on the right to information (RTI), which hadn't yet become the powerful law it is today.

Arvind's outfit was Parivartan, which consisted largely of young people. Their chosen base was the slum of Sundernagari in east Delhi, which we visited several times for public hearings and audits. Those were early and heady days when, except in *Civil Society* magazine, RTI didn't have the status of news, let alone cover stuff.

Arvind and Parivartan drew on the experience of the Mazdoor Kisan Shakti Sangathan, (MKSS). Shekhar Singh and Aruna Roy played the role of mentors. Beginning with our first issue, we tracked RTI month on month as it passed through the National Advisory Council (NAC), hit hurdles in government and finally became law. ■



Arvind Kejriwal in Sundernagari slum in east Delhi

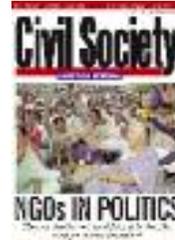
MKSS



Aruna Roy at a rally

2 Activism and politics

NOVEMBER 2003



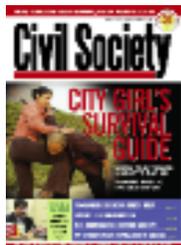
Should NGOs be involved in politics? It has been an old debate in the voluntary sector. But slowly the two worlds have been coming closer, resulting in the Aam Aadmi Party and Loksatta and activist groups engaging with the political class. *Civil Society's* third cover story, NGOs In Politics, in November 2003 captured the beginnings of this trend. It read the pulse of people's movements like the Narmada Bachao Andolan (NBA) and MKSS. Issues of land rights, displacement and accountability were fast becoming the new politics. To be more effective, activists like Madhusudhan Mistry in Gujarat were crossing over. We had an interview with Mistry.

The Association for Democratic Reforms (ADR) raised the bar for cleaning up politics. It petitioned the Supreme Court and won an historic order making it mandatory for candidates to disclose criminal records, financial assets and educational qualifications. ■

LAKSHMAN ANAND

3 Safety of women

JANUARY 2006



The safety of women has always been an issue in Delhi. For those who chose to listen, the complaints were growing to the crescendo they now are at. *Civil Society* took a close look at what women were experiencing in the capital with its cover story, City Girl's Survival Guide.

The report not only focussed on the many challenges women face in the city but also highlighted the steps that needed to be, and were being, taken.

Featured in this issue was the Smile Foundation's Swabhiman programme, which helped girls with practical tips and taught them self-defence.

Jagori's safety audit of Delhi revealed that 90 per cent of women felt unsafe in public transport and nearly 50 per cent generally felt unsafe in the city.

It was not as though the police were insensitive: Sagar Preet Hooda, then Additional Deputy Commissioner, organised street plays to spread awareness.

But, as our cover story pointed out, more was needed to be done by the police and the government. ■



Delhi residents protest a hike in electricity charges

4 Middle class anger

SEPT-OCT 2005



Signs of the middle class waking up were evident in September 2005, three years after the Delhi government handed over distribution of electricity to two private companies, BSES and NDPL. The handover wasn't smooth. Bills were inflated, complaint centres insensitive and Chinese electricity meters were unreliable. At that time Resident Welfare Associations (RWAs) came on to the street and forced the government to annul a 10 per cent hike in electricity charges. High tariffs and inflated bills have since become sore political issues, a rising middle class is more visible than before across cities expressing itself on price rise and public safety. But the first signs were back then in 2004. ■



Dr Devi Shetty at Narayana Hrudayalaya in Bangalore

5 Hospitals for all

DECEMBER 2005



Dr Devi Shetty, India's iconic heart surgeon, had made heart surgery affordable and we featured him on the cover of *Civil Society* – the first serious coverage of his model.

He talked of the 'Walmartisation' of healthcare. Dr Shetty had set up the Asia Heart Foundation, which helped start the Narayana Hrudulaya in Bangalore, the largest children's cardiac care unit in the world.

A combination of technology, efficient human resources, subsidies and insurance made it possible to reduce costs. Dr Shetty was a major change leader.

Taking a leaf from his book, more hospitals are now inventing ways of bringing down costs. Some of these initiatives found space on the pages of subsequent issues of *Civil Society*.

In March this year, we reported on Glocal Healthcare Systems, a Kolkata-based social enterprise that had set up five low-cost hospitals in a span of just 20 months. ■

6 SEZ fiasco

MAY 2007



The UPA government's Special Economic Zone (SEZ) Policy was announced in 2007. We could see from the very start that it was doomed to fail because the policy came out of the blue

without any consultations with the stakeholders on the ground.

As news of impending acquisition of forest and agricultural land in different parts of the country spread, anger rose among farmers and fisher folk. They began making it known in no uncertain terms that they wouldn't be parting with their land.

The stage was thus set for a bitter confrontation even as some SEZs were hurriedly approved and as many as 83 notified.

The National Alliance of People's Movements (NAPM), led by veteran activist Medha Patkar, organised a significant protest rally in Delhi in May 2007.

Farmers from Raigad, street hawkers from Kolkata, forest people from Jharkhand and Orissa and fisher folk converged in the national capital to protest against the SEZ policy and privatisation of natural resources. ■



Wilderness, an eco resort in the Western Ghats

7 Organic lifestyle

SEPT-OCT 2009



When Navdanya opened its first organic café and store in Delhi, it was a novelty. Over the years small organic food stores have mushroomed and you can buy organic food products in nearly every shopping mall. Healthy lifestyles have become an aspiration, creating demand, and encouraging entrepreneurs to source products for an organic lifestyle. There is today growing interest in green buildings and water harvesting. Small businesses in eco-tourism and organic textiles have become financially viable. Organic farming has taken off with Sikkim likely to be declared

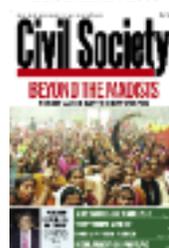
India's first green state. ■



Women protestors demanding implementation of the forest rights law

8 People's forests

DECEMBER 2009



The National Forum of Forest People and Forest Workers (NFFPFW) campaigned for a law that gave forest communities rights over land and forest produce, instead of regarding them as encroachers.

In December 2006, Parliament passed the historic Scheduled Tribes and Other Traditional Forest Dwellers (Recognition of Forest Rights) Act.

The Maoist insurgency, forest activists point out, is the result of tribals and forest people being evicted from their traditional areas. Implementing the new law is a challenge in itself, but things have begun to change. In UP and Jharkhand, activists have succeeded in getting some tribals and forest people land rights and impoverished villages are now getting government schools and health facilities.

In Niyamgiri, Orissa, for the first time, gram sabhas took a collective stand and said a firm no to Vedanta's bauxite mines. ■

LAKSHMAN ANAND



Arvind Kejriwal addresses an anti-corruption rally in Delhi

9 Jan Lok Pal



Corruption came to dominate the headlines because of the high voltage campaign by India Against Corruption (IAC). The demand for a Jan Lok Pal was taken to the streets. It was an unprecedented upsurge but died down almost as rapidly as it had begun. The political class soaked up the demands of Anna Hazare, Arvind Kejriwal and others. The Jan Lok Pal Bill never got passed. *Civil Society* reported the movement from the beginning. But on the Lok Pal we also pointed out that the National Campaign for People's Right to Information (NCPRI) was doing important work. A low-key approach on a complex issue had its merits. In the end, neither IAC nor NCPRI succeeded. ■

11 Social enterprises



Social enterprises are catching on in India. Idealistic young people are starting small, unconventional businesses that provide goods and services to villages and urban areas.

Since 70 million households are not connected to the national electricity grid, solar energy is a huge business opportunity. Enterprises like Selco and d.Light have tapped into it and are beginning to make a difference.

Agriculture too is attracting enterprise of late. Digital Green, for instance, educates farmers on best practices. Apps are also being developed to benefit peasants around the country.

In urban areas, waste management and skill training for needy youth has become fertile ground for enterprises.

In a new trend that is quickly gathering momentum, forward-looking venture capitalists are now investing in social enterprises rather than in microfinance. ■



Digital Green at work in a farm

10 Reaching mothers



The Union government's National Rural Health Mission (NRHM) has, in the past few years, created a cadre of Ashas (Accredited Social Health Activists) in nearly every village across the country.

Although rural medical infrastructure is generally in a shambles, many NGOs have achieved encouraging results by training committed groups of Ashas and boosting the health system by creating demand.

Path's Sure Start programme in Uttar Pradesh and urban centres in Maharashtra resulted in babies being delivered more safely and more women taking tetanus shots and iron tablets.

In Seraikela Kharsawan, which is one of the poorest districts in Jharkhand, Tata Steel has achieved major breakthroughs by training Sahiyas and strengthening rural medical infrastructure, especially in the fields of maternal healthcare and childbirth.

In pretty much the same manner and just as effectively, TVS, the auto company, has implemented amazing nutrition sensitive programmes – sanitation, drinking water and drainage systems – in Tamil Nadu. ■

PRODUCTS

NGOs, artisans and designers produce items which are organic and green. Here are paintings, baskets, saris, puppets, toys, jewellery, mats and namdahs. Just try.

LAKSHMAN ANAND



« SARI MAGIC

THE Bishnupur Handloom Cluster, started by the West Bengal government, is a cooperative of 500 weavers who manufacture Baluchari and Swarnachari saris. The designs retain their traditional appeal. There is a range of colours to choose from. The Baluchari sari is famous for its delicate weave. It is Bengal's pride and as essential to the Bengali bride's trousseau as the Benarasi sari.

"The West Bengal government has helped us in every way," says Pradip Nandi, a member of the cluster. "We get a grant and we are being helped to construct a building for our weavers in Bankura." He says the government has been helping them find markets by sending them to other state capitals when fairs take place. Nandi says the traditional Baluchari could be altered to current fashion trends. The weavers want more sales and they say fashion designers, aggressive advertising and marketing would help them greatly. ■

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LAKSHMAN ANAND



» WARM RUGS

ARIFA Jan's small business is poised at a take off stage. This young entrepreneur from Kashmir first worked with the Craft Development Institute (CDI) in Srinagar to redesign and revive namdahs – those woolly mats which were passing into oblivion because of their fusty designs and poor remuneration for weavers.

After a successful stint with CDI where Arifa helped revive modern designs for namdahs, she left to start her own business called Incredible Kashmir Crafts. She now has a logo with a tagline: Revolution in Craftsmanship.

Arifa's business in namdahs now employs 25 artisans. She has added embroidered bags to her product range. These are made with suede, velvet and organza and each piece is exclusive. "We are also planning to teach women, mostly widows, the art of making namdahs and bags so that they can earn an income," says Arifa. She said the response to her products was very good at Dastkar's Nature Bazaar held in Delhi. Just a few namdahs were left, she said, pointing to a modest pile.

Arifa continues to be an idealistic entrepreneur. She will always sell directly to buyers, she emphasizes, so that money earned flows back to the artisan. ■

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SHAMIK BANERJEE



« PUPPET LOVE

IN years gone by, recalls Vinod Bhatt, his father would walk through the lanes of bucolic villages with his puppets strapped on his back. "Come watch my puppets perform," was his cry. Children would scamper down and his father would set up an impromptu stage for his eager little audience. All that has changed, sighs Vinod Bhatt who has inherited his father's profession but not his rustic ways. Bhatt has a mobile phone on which he takes 'orders.' But he makes more money than his father and that helps his craft to survive.

Bhatt sells attractive handmade puppets. Children love to have a few, he says. Each puppet, made of wood and cloth, costs around ₹150. He also performs puppet shows at birthday parties and weddings, merging popular Hindi movie songs with Rajasthani folk music. Puppets help 20 members of his family earn an income. Bhatt's traditional craft has not been completely diluted by modernity, he says. The Indian Council for Cultural Relations (ICCR), for instance, helps puppeteers perform in countries like Spain and Dubai. That earns them good money. ■

Contact: Vinod Bhatt at 09811990222

10th Annual Issue

» TEMPLE ART

DRESS up your walls with Kerala's bold and bright temple art. Bhaum Murals, a group of 20 artists in Wayanad, Kerala, are painting temple art on cloth using natural dyes. In the old days temple art adorned temples and palaces. It was meant for the sublimely powerful. Now you can own it too. The paintings are striking with intricate lines and colours. "We use just five basic colours – red, yellow, blue, green and black," says Sujith, one of the artists in the group. The colours, extracted from minerals and leaves, have been blended so well, it appears as if the artist used a palette. Each painting costs around ₹2,200 but you can ask for smaller or bigger sizes.

The artists have also painted temple art on bamboo. These can be hung on your wall like masks. Also, available are hand painted necklaces, bangles and earrings which are very pretty and reasonably priced. ■

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LAKSHMAN ANAND



LAKSHMAN ANAND



« LEATHER ART

ABOUT 50 to 60 families in Anantapur district of Andhra Pradesh specialize in the art of Charma Chitrakari to earn a living. This is their hereditary profession. Leather is pounded till it is fine like paper. Pictures from the Ramayana and Mahabharata are then painted on this leather. Finally, cutouts of the pictures are made and strung together. Dalavai Kullayappa, a Charma Chitrakari artist, says in the old days these pictures were used as puppets. Artists went from village to village and performed shows based on the two epics. With demand for such performances dwindling, Charma Chitrakari artists are now making lampshades, paintings and wall hangings for the urban market. The lampshades are waterproof. Some of their paintings are hundreds of years old.

Prices vary from ₹150 for a small wall hanging to ₹20,000 for a large cutout of Ravana with his arms swinging. Kullayappa said the state government has stepped in to support them. He has visited several countries to sell his pictures and perform puppet shows. ■

Contact: Dalavai Kullayappa, Nimmalakunta, Anantapur District, Andhra Pradesh, 515 651. Phone: 09959309029

LAKSHMAN ANAND

» BOBBING TOYS

MAHESH Kumar Murtikar's clay toys with bobbing heads take you back to an era when Indians dressed so differently. In the 1930s men mostly wore dhotis, shervanis and lungis. The women wore saris wrapped in different styles with long sleeved blouses. "This is all history," says Murtikar. "People, especially foreigners, want to see how Indians dressed a century ago. They get a good idea from my clay statues."

Nestled among his clay toys is the icon of Air India – the famed maharaja with his walrus moustache. So is that also history? Murtikar laughs. "Maybe," he shrugs. He hasn't added Kingfisher Airlines as yet, he says!

Murtikar's stall also displays delicately made miniature clay statues of freedom fighters, Hindu gods and goddesses, historical personalities and so on. A 10- piece set costs just ₹450. He can also make statues on request. Murtikar has received an award from the Uttar Pradesh government for his clay models. This is his traditional profession. ■

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✓ SHELL BOWL

A colourful salad looks its tastiest best in an attractive bowl. Toss yours in a seashell. Anil Giri of Digha Sea Shell Emporium specializes in making attractive round containers from seashells and wood just for salads. You can buy matching spoons as well. Giri's bowls have an earthy feel and look almost as if they are made of clay. He says his products are made in Digha, a small seaside resort near Kolkata. The raw material comes from the Andaman and Nicobar Islands.

You can't cook in these bowls but they are unbreakable and the patterns etched are natural. The seashells are melded into the wood. The glossy finish comes from applying heat. No artificial colors are used, assures Giri. He also manufactures photo-frames, bangles and other jewellery from seashells. A large salad bowl costs ₹850 and a pair of spoons is for ₹450. The salad bowls and spoons are smooth to touch and easy to clean. ■

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LAKSHMAN ANAND



✓ GARDEN DELIGHTS

LAKSHMAN ANAND



If you have a garden that doesn't attract wildlife don't worry. Buy green frogs, tadpoles, birdbaths and ladybirds made of clay by Sunderlal, a potter from Alwar district of Rajasthan. He has set up a little factory in Delhi which manufactures all the artifacts your green space will approve of. And so what if your wildlife is made from mud. There are pretty flowerpots too and small planters for your little verandah if you aren't blessed with a garden or a lawn.

Sunderlal says he thought up the designs himself. After all, he reasons, what else can a garden love apart from the birds and bees.

"Observing the gardens of the rich has been a learning experience for me," he explains. "In Delhi I get customer feedback and that helps me design better." ■

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✓ GOLDEN GRASS

IN the forests of Balasore district in Odisha grows a wild grass called sabai that is helping 300 village women earn a living. The women collect the grass, colour it and weave it into attractive baskets, mats, magazine stands, coasters, laundry boxes and chairs. The women have been organized into a cooperative called the Rural Active Women's Traditional Handicrafts Association (RAWHAA) by Arati Patra. It was founded by her 12 years ago.

According to Rajesh Patra of RAWHAA, they were displaying their products for the first time at Delhi's Nature Bazaar. Sales were good, he said smiling.

"A new product we have launched this year is a box which can be used for storage and to sit on," said Patra. "One hallmark of all our products is that our colours are fast. You can wash them with soap and water."

Prices vary from ₹450 for a magazine stand to ₹2,800 for a large mat. The sabai has a smooth feel. The Odisha government has helped with developing designs and local marketing, says Patra. ■

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LAKSHMAN ANAND



» IKAT WEAVERS

SURROUNDED by heaps of ikat material, Vijaylaxmi, president of the Gani Mahila Weavers Mutual Cooperative Society, smiles and says sales have been improving steadily over the years. Their society even exports ikat products to five countries, she says with pride. Ikat is a weaving and dyeing technique that produces unique geometrical patterns in many colours and shades. This weaving method is mostly done in villages of Andhra Pradesh.

Vijaylaxmi's society weaves the ikat fabric and then makes it into bedsheets, bedcovers, cushion covers, salwar-kameez suits, scarves and dupattas. You can also buy only the fabric. The colours don't run, she assures. The Andhra Pradesh government helped the women set up the cooperative, sent a master weaver to train them and pays for their travel to different states. Her cooperative has 200 women members and it has taken them 15 years to reach so far. ■

Contact: Vijaylaxmi Ikka Fabs, Village Koyyalgudum, Mandal Choutupall, District Nalgonda, Andhra Pradesh. Phone: 09866264058, 09866085248

LAKSHMAN ANAND



LAKSHMAN ANAND



« WARM WOOLLIES

ANKURI, a women's cooperative based in Dehradun, knits sweaters, scarves, caps, stoles and socks of all shapes and sizes. There is a range of colours and designs. Some are rather fashionable and could compete with fashionable factory made knitwear available in cities.

The woollies are hand knitted by village women in rural Garhwal, Uttarakhand. Ankuri or the Agency for Non Konventional Urban Rural Initiatives was founded by Rachna Dushyant Singh, an avid designer-knitter herself. "Ankuri is into employment generation and village welfare," explains Rachna's young son, Manoviraj. "We wanted to create livelihoods for women using skills which they already had. And knitting comes almost naturally to them."

Ankuri is currently providing an income to around 100 women in 50 to 60 villages. "Currently you could say we are a small cottage industry," says Manoviraj. ■

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LAKSHMAN ANAND

» PUNJABI STYLES

PUNJAB's fine art of phulkari is now available in a range of designs and colours for everyone. Traditionally this intricate needle-work was done by Punjabi women for themselves. Phulkari was stitched on odhnis or long scarves and worn during festive occasions. Now 14 self-help groups (SHGs) of women in Badshahpur village of Punjab have been taught to stitch phulkari by Punjab's Department of Handicrafts. The state pays each woman ₹2,000 as subsidy while they undergo training, says Harshpreet Singh of Sabby's who sells their products all over India. It takes each woman 15 days to embroider one salwar-kameez set.

There are colourful odhnis too with embroidery and sequins. The suits are in cotton and silk. Prices are very reasonable. "We keep only a 10 per cent margin," says Harshpreet who is scouting around for bulk orders. ■

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