

Civil Society

**A CIVIL SOCIETY
HALL OF FAME**

**WORKING
FOR INDIA**

**Invisible people who make our
world a better, happier,
more inclusive place**

**7th
Anniversary
SPECIAL ISSUE**

HALL OF FAME

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ANNUAL DOUBLE ISSUE

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

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Civil Society

READ US. WE READ YOU.

Our seven years

In a small media business you learn not to look back. It is much too scary. It can be unnerving to revisit the number of times that you almost went under. Or the editorial challenges you faced in coming out on deadline month after month – each issue having something new and engaging to offer readers.

But having the stamina to stick to the grind has its rewards. Seven years is an interesting benchmark. People seem to get the impression that you are deadly serious. One, two or even five years do not have the effect that turning seven has. Don't ask why. It seems to be one of those crazy things linked to perception. Perhaps it is because seven means you are closer to 10 and a decade is really a long time to hang in with an idea.

Seven years also help to create foundations. In the publishing business if you have been consistent with quality and integrity you will find that you have acquired loyal readers. We can say with some pride that our readers have stayed with us and many new ones join us each month. For a magazine that doesn't advertise and has no money for expensive marketing campaigns, we regard this as an achievement. Our readers get us readers and we like the way that arrangement works. We haven't and never will sell our subscriptions with freebies. We want the people who buy us to buy what we stand for.

Seven years also tell you how much impact you have had. Our first cover story in 2003 was on the right to information. Not too many people bothered with RTI then, but now.... In much the same way we were questioning the validity of the SEZ policy and raising issues pertaining to land rights when it wasn't fashionable to do so. The SEZ policy, as we predicted, turned out to be a blot on the record of the UPA.

There is a whole lot else that we can cite as proof of having spent our time well and produced a magazine that is useful to society. But the bigger point is that a garage operation in the media has the freedom to think differently and inject new ideas into the mainstream. It in fact serves to help redefine the mainstream.

Civil Society was launched to show that it is possible to build small businesses in the media. Our survival is proof of having got several things right. But like all businesses we owe a huge debt of gratitude to society at large. We have been helped by our regular advertisers like the Tatas, Jubilant, Microsoft, Avantha Group and TVS who have supported our mission. There have been our friends and many anonymous well wishers as well. And of course there are our readers.

To everyone we would like to say a big thank you.



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IN THE LIGHT

by SAMITA RATHOR



LETTERS



Jackfruit heaven

I enjoyed reading every bit of your cover story on Panruti's jackfruit. Jackfruits used to grow wild in coffee plantations but due to the elephant and cattle menace the trees were mercilessly chopped down. Today planters buy the fruit from the mar-

ket. What a sad state of affairs. This timely article will help us safeguard the tree and go in for replanting.

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Jackfruit seeds have high nutritional value. But so far nothing seems to have been done to cash in on that. It is said that plants grown from seedlings won't give the same quality of fruit as those grown from the mother tree. How all the trees in that village give top quality fruit seems to be a mystery. All the same thanks for a good article on a neglected fruit.

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The leaves of the jackfruit tree are useful for curing fever, boils and skin diseases. When heated the leaves prove useful in curing wounds. The latex of the fruit can treat dysopia, ophthalmitis and pharyngitis. The latex can also be mixed with vinegar to heal abscesses, snakebite and glandular swellings. The wood of the jackfruit tree is used for making musical instruments and furniture. A word of caution: Jackfruit wood has sedative

properties due to which its pith can result in abortion. Jackfruit can increase coagulation. People who are allergic to birch pollen can show signs of allergy to jackfruit.

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Jackfruit has played a significant role in Indian agriculture and culture from time immemorial. Archaeological findings reveal that jackfruit was cultivated in India 3000 to 6000 years ago. Findings also indicate that Emperor Ashoka encouraged horticulture of various fruits including jackfruit. Varahamihira, the Indian astronomer, mathematician and astrologer wrote a chapter on the treatment of trees. His treatise includes a specific reference on grafting to be performed on trees such as jackfruit.

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Global warming

News about the Kolahai glacier melt is worrisome. Combine that with what has happened in Leh, a rain

shadow area, and the situation looks alarming. It is very apparent the weather is changing drastically and rather quickly. The entire ecology of Jammu and Kashmir is going to be different in the coming years. It may still snow but the character of forests and plants will undergo profound change.

Shyama

Ladakh

Now that reconstruction of Leh has started I think we should encourage people to build more secure and sustainable homes. Those little mud homes will get washed away again. They need to be reinforced. People must also live away from flood prone areas. Lifestyle depends on the weather and Ladakh has been hit by global warming.

Sheila S

CORRECTION

In the August issue, the book review, *Civilians Matter*, had the wrong book cover because of a technical mix-up. The error is regretted.

Editor

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**A CIVIL SOCIETY
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— Rajkumar Sharma —
TONK'S CHAMPION TEACHER

— K Loganathan —
MATHS GURU MAKES IT SIMPLE

— V Ganesan —
WINNING HEARTS WITH WATER

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— Smita Vats —
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— Sachidanand Bharati —
A FIRM VOICE IN THE HILLS

— Zakia Soman —
THE GENTLE FEMINIST

— Parveena Ahangar —
ACTIVIST FOR THE DISAPPEARED

— Onir —
FILMMAKER WHO SAYS 'I AM'

Working

*In celebration of
invisible effort*

RITA & UMESH ANAND

INVISIBLE people keep a society on course. There is mostly no heroism involved. It could be just a day spent sincerely at work or an assignment creatively handled that makes all the difference.

But so obsessed are we with those who may be extraordinarily talented, influential or menacingly well networked that we tend to forget the significance of smaller contributions and how they add up.

An industrialist who puts a miniscule part of his wealth into philanthropy gets all the media attention he wants. But for the headmaster who turns a government school around and earns very little by way of salary, no one seems to have any time.

We launched *Civil Society* as a monthly magazine seven years ago to tell the stories of folks who do their bit and bring change without a fuss.

These are people who work for India. They do things for the sake of doing them. And in their individual achievements, however circumscribed, there lie some of the solutions to our bigger problems.

These are people from all walks of life. They could be doctors, teachers, lawyers, activists, entrepreneurs, managers, farmers, scientists, accountants. You will find them all in our magazine.

Places in the Civil Society Hall of Fame are reserved for those people who are so happily steeped in ordinariness that they don't realise they are special. They make a difference to the lives of others and in doing so take India forward.

There is no room for 'heroes' in the Civil Society Hall of Fame. Not even 'unsung heroes' whom it has recently become fashionable to fete. Here only doers are allowed – people who believe their everyday actions can deliver a happier, healthier, better educated, more inclusive India.

The Civil Society Hall of Fame is being formally launched with this issue and will be an annual feature.

The idea has emerged from our experience of the past seven years. We found that the most interesting stories that we did were about people no one had heard of.

While publications vie with each other to write about famous people, we found ourselves getting drawn to anonymous Indians.

We felt that if we told these stories well they would have a national audience. The fact that we are around after seven years is perhaps an indication that we weren't off the mark.

It is our experience that people are eager to learn, connect and share. There is a great hunger for ways forward. It is almost as though there are two Indias: one with big problems and the other in search of small solutions.

We have found our stories getting picked up in remote parts of the

for India

LAKSHMAN ANAND



country. A doctors' movement in West Bengal has admirers in Uttarakhand and an account of jackfruit growers in the south gets responses from Maharashtra. Delhi lawyers promoting mediation are applauded nationwide because of the widespread dismay over the delays and costs involved in litigation. The list of such examples is a long one.

For the Civil Society Hall of Fame we drew on the experience and wisdom of our friends: Anupam Mishra, Dileep Ranjekar, Darshan Shankar, Ashoke Joshi, Ravi Chopra and Nasser Munjee. None of them needs any introduction.

It was an idea we initially bounced off them and nurtured as we went along in our magazine's preferred style of personal consultation.

The Hall of Fame is our way of demonstrating an alternative process for identifying individuals worthy of national adulation. It is important that we as a society make a greater effort to see the invisible.

Each year when the national awards are announced there is much criticism of many of the names that have been chosen. But little is done to follow up the criticism with some action.

If *Civil Society* magazine with its severely limited resources can identify a few individuals who contribute to making India a better and happier place, then there must surely be 10 million others who exist. We don't get to them because we don't know how to look for them.

With the help of the Premji Foundation we have identified three teachers who work within the government school system. They have each shown in their own ways that it is possible to bond with the local community. They not only provide education, but make the school a hub that improves the quality of life of the children and their families.

V Ganesan, Raj Kumar Sharma and K Loganathan run schools in far-flung corners of the country. Each of them inherited a rundown institution on the verge of collapse, both in terms of infrastructure as well as

academic standards. But in a short while they created centres of excellence and happiness. They didn't seek any extra money or authority to achieve this.

The improvements that they have brought to their schools have implications for national policy. Government schools need heads who are empowered and given the space to function.

When Ganesan put together the funds to set up an RO system for the children at his school in Puducherry, he was taking a decision only he could have taken. Clean drinking water not only improved the health of some 200 children, but it also helped their families because the water went home in bottles. Even more importantly, it gave the school a special place in the life of the community. It acquired a new value.

Ganesan has shown us that a school need not be a mere cluster of classrooms. It can be a means of creating awareness and improving health care standards. It has to be enmeshed in the community so that there is easy access.

If education for all is to be a credible national goal, neighbourhood schools where everyone can go are essential. Headmasters like the three we have identified are needed in tens of thousands. The sooner we begin looking for them the better.

Up in the hills of Uttarakhand, Sachidanand Bharati, a college teacher, has made a contribution of a different kind. The movement which he helped initiate in the 1980s has brought back water-bodies and local species of trees to slopes ravaged by logging. As many as 136 villages are a part of this movement which doesn't take government help or foreign funding but draws entirely on local support.

In Onir the filmmaker we have a new voice in Mumbai. Smita Vats has found meaning in taking children around the monuments of Delhi and introducing them to their history.

From Kashmir, so burdened with violence, come the stories of Javed Tak and Parveena Ahangar. After Parveena's son went missing she began helping other families trace their young men. She is a stern reminder of the reasons for Kashmiri anguish. Javed Tak on the other hand serves the disabled having been paralysed by a bullet fired by extremists.

Nikhil Dey, Joya Mitra and Zakia Soman are activists who like to keep a low profile. They have figured intermittently in *Civil Society* magazine, but deserve to be better understood for how they function and what they believe in.

We learn from them that activism requires being grounded and out of sight. This is because change is complex. It comes slowly and has unspecified thresholds. There is no big leap.

The role of the activist should not be underestimated. In an economy as unequal as ours we need people who dedicate themselves to helping others bridge old gaps. It is a role that has to be played subtly and often silently. Our sense is that activists who come on too strong or think they have all the answers have got it all wrong.

Activists are the foot soldiers that a democracy needs. They play a crucial role in linking the micro to the macro. The laws on the right to information or the right to food or the law on forest rights have been given meaningful shape because of the contribution of activists. Activists also help in implementation of such laws. There is a lot of learning at the time when a law is enforced.

So, as India moves from one tricky equation to the next, we will need individuals with insight and a sense of justice who can help things happen in a way in which the maximum number of people benefit.

Finally, working for India is something that must define what we do daily. It can't be an additional activity, a pastime or some stray act of charity. Such are the deficits that there is much to be done. And the best doers among us will be those who find it better to go unnoticed.

PICTURES BY LAKSHMAN ANAND



RAJKUMAR SHARMA

Tonk's champion teacher

PEOPLE at Rampurabas, in Rajasthan's Tonk district, would mostly stay clear of the government's Upper Primary School in their village. A few would send their children to private schools. But by and large there was little interest in education. Tonk district, remember, is infamous for having the highest number of child marriages in India.

When Rajkumar Sharma joined the Rampurabas school as a teacher in 2007, he could immediately see that the school had no standing in the community. The building itself lay unkempt, its grounds swallowed up by some influential families. There was poor enrolment and a low retention rate.

Some of the children on the rolls had lost their parents and were working as child labourers. These children were not coming to school. The school was also devoid of any greenery, giving it a barren and unwelcome look.

Apart from these problems, a big issue was encroachment on the school's land by powerful families belonging to different castes in the village. It was an issue which no one was ready to take up as the chances of being beaten black and blue were very real.

Rajkumar Sharma had begun his career in 1998 as a government teacher in the Upper Primary School in Ganwar, also in Tonk dis-

trict. Ganwar serves as a kind of hub for a cluster of schools which includes the one at Rampurabas.

At Rampurabas, his job was that of any teacher. But the headmaster had recently been transferred and with a decade of experience, he was the senior-most member of the staff. He was asked to be headmaster in charge till a new person was appointed.

Rajkumar decided to take up the challenge of reviving the school. He decided to address each of the concerns he had identified in a planned way. Though he was not formally the headmaster, the other teachers were young and felt enthused enough to take up the challenge along with him. The results were stunning.

His first major achievement was getting the land which had been encroached upon vacated, a task which was considered impossible to achieve. He is often asked how he convinced those families to return the land to the school.

Sharma recollects that it was really a tough task. The families had taken possession of the land 25 years ago.

"Initially I was hesitant," confesses Sharma. "I was also not sure how to go about doing it. One way was to raise the issue with government officials and get the land back with their help. But I did not choose this option since it could have made these well-

entrenched families hostile to us. I decided to go to members of the community and seek their help."

Rajkumar prepared an action plan in which he took the support of local voluntary groups, women's groups and government officials. He would keep holding meetings and talking to influential people in the village. Alongside, he used the panchayat platform to convince the families to leave the land since it would help children have a playground. Women's groups reached out to other women and played an important role in changing opinion within families. Block-level government officials were called to the village and they had meetings with the villagers.

This multi-pronged approach was very effective. It put immense pressure on the encroachers. At last one of the families relented and vacated the land. That was the tipping point. Slowly the other families followed until finally the school got back its land. Mission Impossible had been accomplished.

By the time the land was freed from encroachment, Rajkumar had developed a good relationship with members of the community. He involved residents of the village in the school's development. He obtained donations and constructed a boundary wall around the school. A great big gate was installed. A garden was grown on the land that was back in the school's possession.

CAMPAIGN FOR ENROLLMENT

Rajkumar adopted the style of private schools to increase enrollment in his government school. He advertised the school with paintings on walls. He printed pamphlets extolling the virtues of the school and undertook a door-to-door campaign.

He advertised all the facilities the school was offering – computer education, midday meals, free books and uniforms plus extra-curricula activities. His advertisement said 80 per cent of students were passing the Class 8 exam. He offered a clean and green environment. There was reservation for some communities.

As for fees, all one had to do was support the school and follow its rules, he said. He gave his mobile number at the end of the advertisements.

All this needed time, money and effort. Rajkumar was fully involved and the support he got from fellow teachers was consistent. Parents were greatly influenced by the teachers' dedication to the school and enrolment improved. More significantly, children who had been sent to private schools began coming back.

A key strategy adopted by Rajkumar was to show that a government school could be as good as a private school. He used the school's funds judiciously and therefore managed to find enough to invest in a makeover.

For instance, he printed diaries for students. Never before had children of any government school received diaries, which used to be only given in private schools. The diaries had a big impact on the community.

Rajkumar also improved the teaching-learning environment. One can find children playing on computers without any fear in his school. He says that computers are for children. "The more they work with it, the more they learn"

The results of the school have significantly improved in the recent years.

There were four working children who had lost their parents. Rajkumar went beyond his brief as a teacher and pursued the matter with the Social Welfare department. With his intervention, these children are now getting a scholarship of Rs 650 per month.

Sharma advertised facilities the school was offering - computer education, midday meals, free books and uniforms plus extra curricula activities.



Girls have fun with computers



A midday meal in progress

This has enabled them to continue their studies.

The school's new garden is the source of joy. Plants and trees have been assigned to students who are responsible for their upkeep.

Rajkumar was recently honoured together with 14 other government school teachers in Tonk district. At the function he appealed to teachers to admit their children to government schools.

"Put your children in government schools and then see how the environment of the school and the teaching and learning process improves. Both my children are studying in the same school where I am teaching. I have full faith in our colleagues, and I am confident that my children will in no way be less competent than the children studying in renowned public schools."

Rajkumar is an MA in Sanskrit. Six months ago, a headmaster was appointed at the Rampurabas school. Rajkumar is no longer headmaster in charge. The new headmaster is appreciative of all that has been done. The school has been turned around and will never be the abandoned school that it was.

PICTURES BY P RAMAN



K LOGANATHAN

Maths Guru keeps it simple

MATHEMATICS is a subject which drives many children to tears. But students of the Government Girls' Middle School at Veerampatnam, near Puducherry, don't have to live with such stress. Their headmaster, K Loganathan, has been an inspired maths teacher for 20 years and knows how to make the subject easy and interesting.

In his long innings, Loganathan's students have been known to mostly clear their maths papers. It is quite an achievement because government school children come from poor homes where there is no money for tuition classes and special attention.

The secret of his success is his ability to bring maths alive. Take the example of Angle Tangle which he created as an interactive software for teaching geometry through body language. Your arms can form a right angle or fold into an acute angle. You can watch nature too. It is full of geometrical shapes and sizes. So are objects we come across every day.

Loganathan, 57, says he always wanted to be a teacher. He graduated in mathematics and did his post graduation in English and psychology. He now has 36 years of experience and never has he regretted his decision to become a government school teacher.

The village of Veerampatnam is around 7 km from Puducherry.

Loganathan was transferred here about a year ago. He arrived with an impressive track record as headmaster of Government Middle School, Nallavadu, another village close to the sea.

Loganathan found the Veerampatnam school was located near a stinking dump yard which locals used as an open toilet. The school's verandah was often reduced to a parking lot. Loganathan acted with vim and vigour. He first made the school safe and secure for children. He had limited resources so he used his imagination and built a natural fence with plants, shrubs and trees interspersed with barbed wire and bamboo. That at once kept out intruders and prettied up the premises.

Loganathan changed the ambience of the school. With the money he had, he converted the school into a clean and green place with spic and span toilets, drinking water and neat classrooms. To spread awareness of sanitation, he held a rally urging residents to construct toilets in their homes.

In 2008, the school launched a 'Green School Initiative Project' not just for its own premises but the entire coastal village. The students planted hundreds of saplings, installed a water meter in the school to check misuse of water and spread information about energy conservation. They began recycling waste and started a

HALL OF FAME

compost yard. The students also documented local biodiversity and wildlife and told villagers to protect turtles.

As coordinator of the Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan, Loganathan has been involved in teacher training, helping other government school teachers to make learning easier for students. The emphasis is on reducing homework and getting children to do small engaging projects. Passing on of skills is crucial to improving the standards in government schools. Teachers often feel no sense of motivation because there is little to aspire to. It is important to raise the bar and create a sense of mission. Training teachers also involves igniting the spirit within them to serve the community.

Teachers at his workshops make a public statement that children should not be beaten or threatened. "When we can reason it out with the children why should we hit them? Most of our students come from poor families and have no one to care for them. Since we understand their plight we don't scold the child and instead give them another chance to complete their work," the teachers declare.

It was as a coordinator of the Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan that he invented Angle Tangle. His Computer Aided Lab in Nallavadu is a role model for government schools. All information relating to the school, including particulars of each teacher has been computerised and displayed.

In 2006 there was a deadly outbreak of chikungunya in Nallavadu. Loganathan's science project on chikungunya fever, explaining the illness, won him a prize at the Make Science International Competition organised by the University of Paris and the Pondicherry Science Forum. Loganathan was given a cash prize of 50 Euros with which he bought a cart which for transporting midday meals inside the school.

He also helped to start a night school for children from the fishing community. Special attention was paid to slow learners. The

With the money he had, he converted the school into a clean and green place with spic and span toilets, drinking water and neat classrooms.



Angle Tangle

Education for All campaign, which goes door to door encouraging dropouts to go back to school, was undertaken by him.

Loganathan has improved the quality of education. He has introduced extra curricular activities, guidance and counseling as well as regular parent-teacher meetings in government schools. You can see gleeful children and grateful parents in his school.



Computer lab for children

PICTURES BY P RAMAN



V GANESAN

Teacher wins hearts with water

WHEN V Ganesan joined his new post as head teacher of the BR Ambedkar Government Middle School at Pichaveranpet, in Pudducherry, he found the school in an utter mess. Every evening a gang of drunkards congregated in the school to make merry.

They came from the surrounding slum. The school is located right in the midst of the 3,000 odd people living in the slum. Head teacher after head teacher had given up in despair, saying it was impossible to run an efficient school with such neighbours. Slum dwellers didn't give a damn about the school or of giving their children an education.

But in just one year, Ganesan, 59, transformed the school. With over 30 years experience as a teacher behind him, he understood intuitively what needed to be done. He hugely improved the quality of learning and changed the relationship of the community with the school into one of mutual respect.

"Ganesan Sir has revolutionized the school," says Krishnamurthy, a mason whose son studies in Class 5. "We never ever had parent-teacher meetings. Now these are mandatory."

Ganesan found that money was not an issue. Funds from the

Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan for the previous two years were lying unused and were on the verge of being returned. He added the current year's grant to this accumulated fund and he found he had almost Rs 65,000 to spend on critical school requirements.

Clean drinking water was a major concern. Neither the slum nor the school had water of drinking quality. Students were often absent because they fell sick drinking contaminated water. Stomach-related ailments were widespread. Ganesan's hunch turned out to be correct when he got the school's water tested. Ganesan too had health problems. He lives in a colony half a km from the school where the quality of water is dubious.

Ganesan installed a reverse osmosis (RO) plant in the school to provide safe drinking water. Now all the children get clean 'mineral' water and what's more they are encouraged to carry water home so that the water they drink at home too is not contaminated.

"My own health was very bad a few years ago because of the poor quality of water I was drinking. I feel proud that we have been able to help these children get clean drinking water," he says.

School attendance has gone up by 40 per cent. This school has

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162 students from Lower Kindergarten to Class 8.

Most parents are very poor. Some are employed in lowly jobs. Ganesan was determined to improve the school's relationship with them. He sent an invitation to all parents to come and meet the class teacher and head teacher. He used this opportunity to talk to them about the importance of cleanliness in the school campus. His ability to communicate and reach out can be gauged from the fact that over 90 per cent of the parents came over to the school for these discussions.

When Ganesan held a science exhibition the entire community participated and their respect for the school and its wonderful leader went up further.

"We organise a mothers' meet periodically," he says. "Then we hold environment awareness campaigns where we talk to parents about climate change, energy conservation etc. Whenever we invite the parents, a special computerised invitation designed by our staff is sent to them." Parents had never been treated with so much respect before.

The school has also held skill development programmes for Scheduled Caste students and their parents. Ganesan says very highly respected people from their own community are invited to address the meeting and interact with the parents. The school offers courses in book binding, phenol preparation and recycling of waste to make products.

"For all our special programmes we order food for the parents", he says. "Our intention is to tell students and parents about the importance of education. It is the only way to earn more and thereby enjoy good food."

Ganesan got a whole lot of data and information computerised, completely eliminating the frustrating need to produce fresh reports every time. Computer education is taught to all the children now. And parents have begun to see the impact of these

A special computerised invitation card designed by the staff is sent to parents. They had never been treated with so much respect before.



V Ganesan with the RO system

measures – a clean school, healthy children and regular attendance.

"Teachers are God's gift to society," he says. "They should work with dedication. I too hail from a very poor background but I never gave up."



Children are encouraged to take clean drinking water home

NIKHIL DEY

RTI's resolute foot soldier

LAKSHMAN ANAND



NIKHIL Dey has done more to fight for the rights of people than he will ever allow the world to find out. Always far from the spotlight, he has worked quietly to shape legislation, lobby governments and politicians and build grassroots campaigns.

Born in 1963 in the city of Bangalore, Nikhil was educated in India and the US. Before the formal completion of his graduate course at the George Mason University, he left to 'follow his bliss' and came to India. His initial work was with the Kheduth Mazdoor Chetna Sangathan in Madhya Pradesh. He then joined Aruna Roy and Shankar Singh in 1987 to go to a village called Devdungri in Rajsamand district, Rajasthan. Devdungri was soon to become the head office of the Mazdoor Kisan Shakti Sangathan (MKSS), a peasants-workers-women organisation founded by the trio in 1990.

Starting with a struggle for community land and payment of minimum wages, the organisation went on to play a significant role in the demand, formulation and implementation of both the Right to Information Act (RTI) and the National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (NREGA). The MKSS also pioneered the concept and practice of social audits and public hearings, which are now adopted by so many government and non-government groups.

Nikhil has also been engaged with other enduring campaigns like those of the Right to Food, Right to Work, Election Watch and a range of human rights issues. He has been working with the National Campaign for Peoples' Right to Information (NCPRI), and has recently been elected its Convener. He has written extensively on RTI and other related matters along with Aruna Roy and other members of the Sangathan.

Like his team mates, Nikhil staunchly advocates the importance of a collective. It is not surprising then, that he rarely speaks about his personal life or beliefs. But the reticent, amiable, gentle exterior he maintains is no indication of the inner strength he displays when pushing forth people's demands relentlessly.

In almost all the campaigns that he has endorsed or participated in, his contribution has been valuable. Apart from being a constant

feature of the RTI movement, he was also one to emphasise the need for penal provisions which the first Freedom of Information Bill lacked.

Five years after the passage of the national Act, he can be found demanding protection for whistleblowers and resisting amendments that threaten to dilute the Act. An advocate of the inclusion of RTI in school curricula, he has also highlighted how the World Bank policy on information disclosure falls through in the light of the Indian legislation as well as international norms.

In the Right to Food Campaign, he used RTI to show how the Supreme Court judgement on this right was facing blatant violation.

Always on the alert for new developments taking place around him, he was quick to interact with the Unique Identification Authority to discuss the importance of public consultation and proactive disclosures on behalf of the Authority and how it needs to be pro-poor and anti-corruption.

In the NREGA primer he co-authored with Jean Dreze and Reetika Khera, he was able to present the law succinctly so it could be accessible to a lay person. He was an active member of the People's Action for Employment Guarantee group which pioneered the demand for the Act and travelled various states with their *rozgar yatra*. Along with his comrades, he has been consistently arguing for an increase in the wages paid under NREGA and for linking wages to the consumer price index. He has been closely involved with the efforts of the MKSS to create model templates for wall paintings and propagate their efficacy in bringing transparency in NREGA. To this end, he has often addressed the issue of the appointment of ombudsmen.

With the help of the Soochna Evam Rozgar Abhiyan (Information and Employment Campaign) of which he is a part, he has opposed the acquisition of common lands being slyly taken over by the SEZ Act or for largescale planting of jatropha. His article on China (*Where is the Red Star, Mainstream*) as an old role model for India in terms of its spiraling growth rate, was an eye-opener. It discussed the worsening conditions of the under-privileged classes in a repressive, 'growth' obsessed regime that had lost count of the number of SEZs it had sanctioned.

Dey's each hour is filled with the pleasure of following his convictions which in turn fuels the action of the next hour. Travelling from remote villages, Nikhil goes from can't-receive-signal hamlets to high tech universities in order to take his various campaigns to as many as possible. When 'at home' in Devdungri, he does what each pledged activist is required to do: cooking, cleaning, fetching water and fixing that slipped tile on the roof. The MKSS does not favour setting rigid roles for its members and encourages everyone to participate in all ongoing activities. Following this cue, Nikhil heads or follows rallies and makes awkward appearances in songs and skits with equal sincerity.

This absent-minded, nail-biting activist is supposed to be the clock that's always ticking. He leaves his bags and phones everywhere he goes and forgets his train timing while he discusses NREGA with you. You then realise he has already charted the plan for the next mate training. He grudges being made a monitor in the control room and prefers accompanying his team on their audits.

The Nikhil Dey who had arrived in Rajasthan barely able to utter his own name in Hindi and searching for his roots, has now grown his own.

JOYA MITRA

From Naxal to pacifist

WHEN Joya Mitra is not at her home in Asansol in West Bengal, you would probably find her at a village in the Birbhum district where she helps run a school for tribal children. The school is called Majorah or "Fun House" – a name given by the children themselves. Two years ago, the school began as a day care centre. It is not much more than that even today though there are six teachers with an assistant to help cook breakfast and a mid-day meal.

Some 50 children between the ages of three and 12 from three neighbouring villages spend the day at the school while their parents work in local stone quarries. The school is one of the rare bright spots in the grim conditions that prevail in West Bengal's tribal belt.

Four decades of unregulated quarrying have wrecked the ecology of tribal villages. Trees have been felled and water sources have been ravaged. Shady businessmen have coerced tribal families into giving up their lands. Stone from the quarries has had a growing market in the construction business. The lack of governance has allowed the mining businesses to get away with plunder.

These are the harsh realities that have forced people to turn to the Naxalites now leading an insurrection across a big chunk of Indian territory – mostly forested areas where indigenous people with their own culture and identities have felt pushed to the edge.

Joya Mitra, who turns 60 this year, was herself a Naxalite in the 1970s when the extreme Left movement first took shape and attracted young, talented and educated people. But that is a life she has long left behind.

Joya is now a writer and a rare grassroots observer of change in the West Bengal countryside. Her book *Killing Days* is about her life underground as a Naxalite in the 70's. It was written in Bengali and translated into English.

Another part of her is a gentle activist who supports initiatives like the school for tribal children or assists tribal women in marketing their forest produce. She works to help people understand their rights.

In Kolkata on 8 August, we ask her if she would be part of Mamata Bannerji's march to Lalgarh. "It is going to be more of a circus," she says with a laugh, explaining why she won't be going.

Two years ago Lalgarh was the scene of a tribal uprising against the Left Front government in West Bengal. The Naxalites are accused of fomenting local disenchantment and Mamata Bannerji and her Trinamool Congress of making political capital out of the situation. There were other flashpoints too at Nandigram and Singur.

Joya has no interest in such politics nor does she have faith in the kind of violent revolution she was once ready to give her life up for.

"Change is a long process. It comes from within and I don't think it can be dictated. In the 70's we set out to tell people what is development. But I think very differently now," she says.

"To empower tribal people we need to first learn to respect tribal identities and learn from their way of life. It is important to understand their culture and traditional knowledge."

A non-violent process of change begins with the individual and embraces Nature. It seeks balance and depends on empathy. It is driven by the need to unravel and not merely assume.

Joya's interest in water has taken her to such Gandhian values. *Aaj bhi kahre hain talaab*, a book on traditional water systems and water harvesting has had a seminal influence on her. *Talaab* is an open source publication brought out by Anupam Mishra of the Gandhi



Peace Foundation.

Even as India debates Naxal violence, a huge non-violent protest by tribal people in Birbhum has brought mining to a standstill for the first time in decades.

The protest has been completely peaceful. Not a stone has been thrown. Naxalites who offered help were turned away by the tribal people. The protest began on 6 February in the village of Talband in the Mohammed Bazaar Block of Birbhum district. Explosions engineered for extracting stone led to the destruction of six houses belonging to tribal families.

Such events have happened many times in the past. "But this was the last straw," explains Joya.

But how could people shake off so many years of oppression? News of Nandigram and Singur has spread. People realise they can defend their rights and refuse to be pushed off their land, says Joya. There are families at Talband who are related through marriage to families in Nandigram and Singur.

The rejection of the Naxalites is significant. Has Talband also learnt from elsewhere that violence is a spiral that no community can afford to be trapped in?

Joya's journey has been a rich one. Her father served in the British Army as a doctor. He was later a government servant in India. Her uncles on her mother's side were in the Calcutta Police. Her schooling was at St Helen's in Kurseong.

But after she completed an Honours course in English Literature at Burdwan University she chose to become a Naxalite. She spent four years in jails between 1970 and 1974. The jail authorities threw her out when they thought she would die because she was vomiting blood.

She went back underground in Bihar. But by the beginning of 1976, she had, among many others, started feeling disenchanted with the Naxalite movement. "There were many things that were wrong. The attitude to women was objectionable. It was no longer the movement we had wanted to give our lives for," she recalls.

JAVED TAK

Crusader for the disabled



JAVED Tak's struggle after a bullet hit his spine and crippled him has changed the lives of the disabled community in Jammu and Kashmir. Though he himself cannot walk, his strenuous efforts have helped people with special abilities lead an independent life.

Javed, 36, is bound to a wheelchair. He is a victim of the armed conflict in Kashmir. On 21 March, 1996, unidentified gunmen barged into his uncle's home at Bijbehara town in South Kashmir's Anantnag district with the intention of kidnapping his cousin who was then associated with the National Conference, the political party currently in power. Family members tried to prevent the gunmen from firing indiscriminately. But their screams went unheeded and they failed to silence those ruthless guns.

Javed, who had gone to his uncle's home to enquire about their well being, got caught in the firing. He was hit by a bullet which damaged his spinal cord, liver, kidney, pancreas, spleen and intestines. He survived after undergoing multiple surgeries in which his right kidney, spleen, part of his liver and intestines were removed. Later, Javed underwent surgery on his spine and finally won the battle for life.

Javed is from a low-income family. He was the only ray of hope for his parents. They expected him to become a doctor and take the family out of penury. "The idea did not displease me," he recalls. "I

was very keen to help others at that age. I was a regular blood donor. During my college days I took part in anti-smoking campaigns, save environment campaigns, the integrated Pulse Polio immunisation programme and many more."

But that tragedy in March 1996 appeared to wash away his dreams. He spent long hours with the children of his locality. "This way I overcame my trauma to some extent. But I was very upset because of the dependent life I was now supposed to live," Javed says.

His doctors encouraged him to overcome his difficulties. One doctor told him: "God helps those who help themselves."

"I decided to see my life as a challenge. I tried to forget my accident and make the most of my present situation. Today, I faintly remember what happened on that terrible night," Javed recalls. He started his new life from his bed by providing free education to children from poor families. "The idea occurred to me when I listened to the chatter of children playing outside my home. For once in my life I realised that society, especially my community was accepting me and needed me despite my physical inability," he reflects.

"Later I started studying and did two distance certificate courses in human rights and computing from the Indira Gandhi National Open University (IGNOU). I got more encouraged and I started working for the rights of physically and mentally challenged people," he says.

Javed felt deeply hurt when he began understanding the problems the disabled faced. He wrote a series of complaints to the State and National Human Rights Commissions. One complaint was about the state government's lackadaisical attitude towards leprosy affected people. The chairperson of the SHRC directed the government to take steps for the rehabilitation of people affected by leprosy.

Passionate about doing social work Javed enrolled in the University of Kashmir for a post graduate degree. "I learnt how to use different techniques as a social worker and how to work for the welfare of the physically and mentally challenged," he says.

Educational institutions almost never build disabled-friendly infrastructure. Javed realised this. While doing his Master's he helped students who were physically challenged to form a union. "That period was an important part of my life," he says. "Our efforts paid off eventually. The university placed ramps at the entrance of seven important buildings including the hostels, administrative block and examination block. For the first time in the history of Kashmir University, World Disability Day was celebrated on 3rd December 2005 and continues to be celebrated," Javed recalls.

After graduating, Javed filed a Public Interest Litigation in the Jammu and Kashmir High Court against the miserable conditions of physically and mentally challenged people. According to the 2001 Census, there are three million people with disability in Jammu and Kashmir. Out of them, 180,000 are visually impaired.

The first outcome of this litigation was that the State government began to implement Jammu and Kashmir's Disability Act. The Recruitment Board was directed to carry out three per cent horizontal reservation for the physically challenged in government jobs and educational institutions. The enforcement of horizontal reservation for disabled candidates started being monitored.

Javed then helped to form the Humanity Welfare Helpline Organisation (HWHO). It runs a computer centre and a school for those with visual disability. Javed is today an icon for the young.



SMITA VATS

Delhi's walking history guide

WHILE Delhi struggles to look like a futuristic city, Smita Vats, 44, wants young people to look at the past. Founder of Itihaas, a non-profit education society, Vats conducts study tours and walk programmes to connect Delhi's students to their history.

Itihaas' study tours to the city's many historic spots like Humayun's Tomb, Red Fort and the Walled City have pioneered heritage education in the country. These walks weave stories, tradition and culture to enable school students connect with what Vats calls their "tangible and intangible inheritance."

"We go beyond dates and architecture. It isn't just about the colour of the marble in Jama Masjid. Our walks take students to the imam's home or the artisan's workshop," explains Smita.

"Schools often stop at showing students just a monument. There is no first person attachment in the way history is taught. We weave relationships, stories and anecdotes into our modules. Urban children from nuclear families don't have elders who were like living libraries in their home anymore," she says. "They need to recognise the richness and diversity of our legacy."

Meeting young people during her travels across India as a filmmaker, she says, showed her just how imminent this danger was. "I'd find young people so alienated from their environment. Many knew more about the Berlin Wall or the Thames in London than

Turkman Gate or Ghanta Ghar in Chandni Chowk," recalls Smita, who did her Masters in Mass Communication from Jamia Milia Islamia University in 1989 after graduating in Psychology from Delhi University.

She knew films, her profession of over 18 years, couldn't bridge this gap. "Change needs to be experienced," says Smita. So, towards the end of 2004, Smita wrote a simple letter to principals of Delhi's leading schools. To her surprise, many showed keen interest even though they were worried she did not have a "historian on board."

Eventually, six schools including Delhi Public School in R K Puram, the Shri Ram School, Vasant Valley and Modern School signed up. Smita took her first group on the walk in 2005. Within the first year itself, 1,200 children, between 12 and 16, underwent the walks. "I give credit to these principals. They immediately saw the value in what we were saying," says Smita.

Now, Itihaas conducts study tours for over 35,000 children from 6 to 17 years of age every year. Nearly 110 schools in the National Capital Region work with it. Schools pay Itihaas Rs 100 to Rs 150 per student for a walk. "We did no selling. I am not good at marketing. So I didn't market. But we have over 30,000 ambassadors for Itihaas now. Our walks market themselves," she says simply.



SACHIDANAND BHARATI

A firm voice in the hills

IN 1982, the Doodhatoli Lok Vikas Sansthan was formed to restore the ecology of villages in the Pauri Garhwal district of the western Himalayas.

It was preceded in 1980 by an environment camp for which a young man by the name of Sachidanand Bharati sought support from the Gandhi Peace Foundation in Delhi.

He received a money order for the princely sum of Rs 1,000. It proved to be enough to bring people from neighbouring villages together to discuss the state of their forests. From that camp was born an effort that now involves 136 villages. Over the years, the Doodhatoli Lok Vikas Sansthan has revived an ancient Himalaya water conservation system called the *khal* to put moisture back into the soil, restore the water table and revive natural forests.

These are all priorities because logging leases have wreaked havoc with nature's delicate balance. With deforestation have come landslides and water shortages. The government's choice of pine over local species has made the forests into tinderboxes.

But the process chosen by the Doodhatoli Lok Vikas Sansthan has been an intentionally slow one. There has been no foreign funding or government support. There has been no great concern over scaling up. For Sachidanand, a college teacher by profession, the willing

involvement of local people has been more important. Just like the Rs 1,000 that came in for the environment camp, small local resources have been enough to keep the movement going.

It has been a journey of more than two decades. First there was the planting of trees. Then came the setting up of nurseries so that saplings of local species could be made available. For that there was the need to collect seeds.

The big need that remained was water. Coming full circle as it were Sachidanand and his fellow activists discovered the ancient uses of the *khal*. In fact they found it in the name of his village, Ufrainkhal.

The *khal* is a medium sized pool that used to exist on the slopes of these mountains. It is smaller than a *taal*, which is a lake. But it is bigger than a *chaal*, which is a series of very small pools.

The Chipko movement in a neighbouring district had stopped the felling of trees by local people literally hugging them to keep loggers at bay. But something far more sustained was needed to bring the entire ecosystem back to health. It meant encouraging people to take their development into their own hands and own their forests and water. It required a cultural reawakening and pride in traditional systems which once provided balance and harmony between people and their natural surroundings.

ZAKIA SOMAN

The gentle feminist

LAKSHMAN ANAND

ZAKIA Soman helped to start the Bharatiya Muslim Mahila Andolan in January 2007 to empower Muslim women fight communal forces as well as fundamentalist and patriarchal elements within their own community. Three years later membership has risen to 22,000 in 15 states. And women from different religions are joining a union meant for Muslim women.

Zakia is an eyewitness and a victim of the Gujarat carnage of 2002. She and her family had to flee to save their lives. It is an experience which turned her from a genteel working woman to an ardent activist for women's rights.

Even before the Gujarat riots her grandmother's house had been ravaged. Her parents' house was burnt and attacked in the frenzied build-up to LK Advani's rath yatra in 1990, before the Babri Masjid demolition in December 1992.

But young Zakia and her family placed their faith in the pluralist, secular synthesis of Gujarat, the tradition of Gandhi and the freedom struggle, and the solidarity of their predominantly Hindu neighbourhood in the Azad Society in Ahmedabad. And Zakia was not even remotely involved in activism or civil society issues.

Zakia has an MA and M Phil in English Literature. Her mother was a respected high school teacher and her father, a principal in a prominent local college in Ahmedabad. Her upbringing and surroundings were typically modern, liberal, secular, without the remotest trace of orthodoxy. Zakia held on to this liberal stream, hoping that fanaticism was nothing but an accidental aberration. But it all changed after the State-sponsored Gujarat riots of 2002.

Before that, Zakia worked as a college lecturer in Ahmedabad, teaching Communication and English till 1997. She then joined as a manager in an educational/teaching programme with Intel. But after 2002, everything changed.

Zakia remembers: "Those days I lived near the National Institute of Design with a considerable Muslim population in the locality. After 28 February, the Godhra killings and the organised hysteria and carnage that started in Ahmedabad by the communal forces, I was really, terribly scared. I thought they will get us in the night: *raat mein hamari baari hain*. It's another story, how we escaped. I called my friends in the police. I was aghast, almost all of them, and all of them Hindus, refused to help point-blank. Then one friend, a police officer, helped us escape to safety— and yes, he was a Muslim. I was shattered."

"In the relief camps, every day, I heard different stories, heart-rending stories. You know how tragic and devastating were the relief camps, and the horror stories, and the abject atmosphere of terror. Almost everyone had a macabre story to tell. Then I realised what it means to be alive, remain alive. My personal life, self identity changed. My social and political life, thus, had to change."

Zakia got involved with Harsh Mander, Shabnam Hashmi and other activists who staked their lives for peace, relief and rehabilitation and to heal the protracted trauma in the collective psyche. Then she worked with eminent lawyer Mukul Sinha, whose Jan Sangharsh Morcha has fought for legal justice to the victims and survivors against all odds, when not one lawyer would stand up to the communal forces. In 2003, Zakia took up the campaign on POTA cases with Sinha whereby 300 innocent boys were put in jail on cooked up charges. She joined a multitude of forces, including exceptional individuals and secular fighters, who chose the tough,



polarised battleground of Gujarat to usher in the healing process.

"I also realised then that Muslim women need to be empowered to combat communal forces and fight the patriarchal, fundamentalist and feudal forces within their community. They must feel from inside the need for gender justice, the need to assert their life-affirmations, their fundamental rights, their dreams and aspirations," says Zakia.

Hence started the Bharatiya Muslim Mahila Andolan in January 2007, with a big conference in Delhi (see *Civil Society*, Feb 2007). A pleasant surprise was that Hindu, Christian and women from other faiths joined this organisation. Majority of them were from poorer sections, many of them young girls and home-makers. "We realised that isolated women were struggling in various parts of the country, without a collective representative and independent body. So we all got together."

At that time Zakia said, "You watch out. By next year this time, we will have 10,000 members. And we will be a crucial force in the social and political space." Three years later, membership has risen to 22,000 and is growing in 15 states with the poor sections of women still holding the scaffolding, but the organisation growing beyond the boundaries of religion, caste or class.

She believes that Muslim Personal Law should be "gender-just and humanity-just" – based on the principles of justice enshrined in the Constitution of India. "There should be codification of the Islamic law and not just random generalities and orders. It should be subservient to the Constitution of India," she says. "All women are equal citizens of this country."

Does this politics and social awareness help in the sexual, political and aesthetic liberation of women? "Yes," says Zakia Soman. "Mobilisation leads to synthesis, for instance, against the burqa, or in the willingness to stand up or fight for your rights."

Has there been male resistance within the community. "Not much and happily so," she says. "Except for some mad mullahs and exceptions, most men have backed us. This is a positive fall-out of the Gujarat experience. Besides, the aspiration levels of Muslim girls and women have gone up."



PARVEENA AHANGAR

Activist for the disappeared

THERE are a few Kashmiri women who have achieved international recognition. Parveena Ahangar, 50, is one of them. Married at 12, without any formal education, Parveena has mobilised women who even after decades of the conflict in Kashmir are yet to know where their missing near and dear ones are.

The night of 18 August, 1990, was a turning point in Parveena's life. On that fateful night her son, Javed Ahmad Ahangar, then a 17-year-old student, was picked up allegedly by the Army who mistook him for a militant during a midnight raid on his uncle's house at Bodhipora in the Batmaloo area of Srinagar City.

"Another neighbour yelled and asked people to assemble. I was informed about my son's arrest the next day after morning prayers. I confirmed his arrest since I saw his clothes in the house from where he was taken along with his wallet with some money and his identity card," recalls Parveena.

She started an agonising search for her son. She informed the local police station about his arrest and staged a sit-in on the road for a full day. She ran from pillar to post but her heartbreaking efforts proved futile.

After a six-month search for her son, she finally approached the

court which ordered an inquiry into her missing son's case. Parveena approached almost all the powerful politicians in the State but in vain.

The inquiry, she says, put pressure on the Army who then offered her Rs 10 lakh and other perks to withdraw her case. The president of the Kashmir Bar Association at that time, advised her to accept the offer. Parveena replied: "I cannot do it. I cannot sell my child. I will search for him as long as I am alive."

For four years nothing substantial happened in her case. The state government's request for sanction to prosecute the accused Army officers was not granted by the central government, she recalls. In 1994, determined to continue her struggle, Parveena formed the Association of Parents of Disappeared People (APDP).

Slowly, people from other villages came to know about APDP's activities and they began to get involved. "People from Handawara, Kupwara, Bandipora, Baramulla and Anantnag also joined and we grew bigger. I then realised that I am not the lone sufferer. There were others in far worse conditions," Parveena says.

Before the APDP was formed, parents of the disappeared would fight their battles separately. Now it is a collective struggle and their voices are being heard, believes Parveena. "Return our chil-

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dren if they are alive! If they are dead, give us their bodies!" the APDP members chant in unison as they sit in protest in a Srinagar park on the 10th of every month, reminding the State of their demands.

For many years APDP has been the only organisation documenting disappearances in Kashmir. On 26 August, 2009, the State government finally revealed its own tally of the disappeared. It said 3,429 have been confirmed missing between 1990 and 1999. No formal tally exists for the last 10 years. The APDP believes 8,000 to 10,000 people are missing. But the State government acknowledges only about 3,000 disappearances in the last 20 years.

Parveena Ahangar's determination to give a voice to the missing turned her from a semi-literate homemaker to an international activist for the parents of missing children. She represented APDP at the Asian Federation Against Involuntary Disappearances (AFAD) in the Philippines in 2000. She has travelled to many countries attending seminars, conferences and workshops. In 2003, she was in Thailand, in 2005 she went to Indonesia, in 2006 to Chang Mai, in 2008 to Geneva and in 2009 she went to Cambodia.

"We are not alone and it feels good when people listen to you," says Parveena. "At such meetings we share our stories, our grief and give each other courage. It helps us to fight on."

"It is no longer a fight for my son. It is a fight for all the disappeared. They are all my sons," says Parveena who is chairperson of APDP. Even 20 years after her son's disappearance, she still searches for him. "The relatives of people killed at least have a last glimpse of their children. The families of the captured know the jails where their relatives are being kept. But the relatives of the disappeared have nowhere to go. Not even a graveyard," she laments.

Parveena remembers in the Philippines she saw a statue in memory of the missing erected in a church. Upon her return, the APDP tried to set up a memorial in Srinagar – a marble plaque with the names of the disappeared. But Parveena says the police demolished the stone and she and an associate were charged with trespassing.

"There is no place where people like me can go to unburden our grief when we are missing our children," she says of the destroyed memorial. "People like me can neither sleep at night nor relax during the day. You just spend your time thinking about your son, wondering if he's alive and where. Is he in jail or in the interrogation centre? Has he gone into the hills? Maybe he is underground? I cannot bear the idea of a person approaching me and saying that my missing son is not alive. I always pray for the well being of all missing persons," she says.

"I must admit that my first reaction after my son's abduction was fear coupled with traumatic shock. Now I have shed all my fears. I go from place to place and town to town to meet other families of the disappeared. Fear is only damaging when you allow it, when you wallow in it. But once you fight back, fear loses its power," she says.

In the course of their struggle Parveena says the relatives of disappeared persons have become psychiatrists themselves. "Most of the victims do not go to psychiatrists for treatment. When fellow victims meet we weep and we even sing songs. That is the 'treatment' we provide," she explains.

An epitome of courage, she has mobilised families of the disappeared in Kashmir to fight impunity laws. In November 2008, she petitioned the United Nations Working Group on Involuntary and Enforced Disappearances, (WGIED) to impress upon India the need to repeal the Armed Forces Special Powers Act, Unlawful Activities Prevention Act, Public Safety Act, Disturbed Areas Act and other laws that enable impunity in Jammu and Kashmir.

She also prayed to the UN to urge the Government of India to ratify and implement the provisions of the International Convention for Protection of All Persons from Enforced Disappearances (2007) and to enact amendments to laws to empower the NHRC and SHRC to investigate crimes committed by the security forces.

On 10 July, 2005, three Kashmiri women who have made a difference to many lives in the conflict-torn valley were nominated for the Nobel Peace Prize. Parveena Ahangar was one of them.



A peaceful protest led by Parveena Ahangar

GAUTAM SINGH



ONIR

Filmmaker who says 'I Am'

FILMMAKERS usually make movies for an audience. Only the truly gifted make an audience for their films. Onir, 41, belongs to the latter group. His fiercely independent streak as a cinematic chronicler of contemporary urban reality sets the Bhutan-born filmmaker well apart from the Mumbai showbiz crowd.

He asks: "Are we artists? Or are we just workers who are paid to create films for the mass palate, and not to guide and make better audiences?" Onir has answered that question emphatically with his steadfast adherence to his avowed creative credo.

At this juncture of his career, his fame rests primarily on *My Brother Nikhil*, his 2005 debut film that brought the issue of homosexuality and AIDS into mainstream Hindi cinema for the first time. He has since made two more features – *Bas Ek Pal* and *Sorry Bhai*, both content-oriented dramas dealing with the grey shades of human relationships.

Runaway box-office success may have eluded Onir so far, but he has continued to push in new directions, helped in no small measure by actor-producer Sanjay Suri. The latter not only plays pivotal on-screen roles in Onir's films but also serves as his rock-solid production collaborator.

It is the extraordinary gumption and perseverance of the duo that

has brought India's first citizen-funded film project to fruition. The *I Am* series has been funded partly by their production company, Anticlock Films, and partly by more than 400 individual film lovers and NGOs that have made contributions ranging from Rs 1,000 to Rs 15 lakh through a social networking site.

I Am (running time: 110 minutes) is a series of four short films, which address ticklish themes that mainstream Hindi cinema steers clear of – child sexual abuse, same-sex relationships, sperm donation and the plight of Kashmiri Pandit migrants.

Apart from individual contributors from around the world – 35 cities are represented on this incredible roster of investors – several NGOs, foundations and agencies came on board to push the project through. "When we put the appeal on Facebook, it was only an experiment, a straw in the wind," recalls Onir, who was born Onirban Dhar. "But the response was so encouraging that we were shooting within a month."

The greatest spin-off from this experiment is that an audience was created even as he was shooting. "All the owners and co-owners of the *I Am* series have a stake in the project. They are bound to drive the film's publicity on their own and draw in people from within their personal circles," Onir points out.

HALL OF FAME

"The paucity of publicity budgets is a problem that I have been living with for five years," says the filmmaker who studied Comparative Literature in Kolkata's Jadavpur University before landing in Mumbai to pursue a career in films.

"Unless you have a big star throwing his weight behind a film, it is well-nigh impossible to pull in the crowds," he adds, alluding obviously to the Aamir Khan-produced *Peepli Live*, a dark comedy about a suicidal farmer which received extensive play in the mainstream media in the run-up to its release thanks to the Bollywood superstar's personal involvement in the promotional campaign.

I Am, on the other hand, has no instantly saleable stars, but that was never an issue. Says Onir: "The investors put their money on the content. They contributed even before the casting was done. They believed in the social issue that each film set out to tackle."

The investment arrangement has broadly been split into three slabs. A contribution between Rs 1,000 and Rs 25,000 entitles the investor to a credit as "co-owner" in the end credits of the film, while a donation between Rs 25,000 and Rs 1,00,000 is returnable post-release. Those who put in between Rs 1,00,000 and Rs 15,00,000 not only get an acknowledgement as "owner" in the opening credits but also a commensurate share in the profits. The exercise yielded nearly Rs 1 crore.

I Am Abhimanyu, which features Sanjay Suri and Radhika Apte, is about a real-life child abuse survivor. The cast of the short film, shot in Bangalore, includes filmmaker Anurag Kashyap, who himself was a victim of physical abuse as a child.

I Am Omar, starring Rahul Bose and Arjun Mathur and shot in Mumbai, deals with a society in the grip of homophobia despite the Delhi high court ruling of July 2, 2009, dismissing Article 377, which criminalised consensual sex between two adults.

I Am Afia, with Nandita Das, Purab Kohli and filmmaker Anurag

Basu in the principal roles, is woven around the theme of a single woman who wants to be a mother and goes out in search of the perfect sperm donor. Filmed in Kolkata, *I Am Afia* probes the festering underbelly of a flourishing racket.

I Am Megha, starring Juhi Chawla and Manisha Koirala and shot in Srinagar, turns the spotlight on the long-drawn conflict in Kashmir and its impact on those who have suffered loss of home and identity. The eponymous protagonist, played by Chawla, returns to the Valley after nearly two decades. She reconnects with a childhood friend Rubina (Manisha Koirala) and realises that the latter is as much a victim of the blood-letting as she is.

"The four short films are organically linked as the characters move in and out of the stories, creating connections in terms of content and structure," says Onir.

Just back from the Locarno Film Festival, where an old script of his, *Shab*, was part of the National Film Development Corporation's screenplay writers lab, Onir is now gearing up for the release of *I Am*. "We are looking at a post-Diwali release," says the director.

As for *Shab*, which was the first screenplay that Onir ever wrote, he is hopeful of getting it off the ground soon enough. "It is a love story about two characters that live on the edge of society. One is a man who arrives in Mumbai and becomes a gigolo; the other is a call girl. The film deals with how they negotiate their relationship with each other and the city," he explains.

Onir, on his part, has negotiated his space in the Mumbai film industry on his own terms. He had written a feature length screenplay, *I and You*, about a girl who recoils from the male touch because of an unpleasant childhood experience. It found no takers for three years. No male star wanted to do the film. No industry corporate was willing to touch it. Onir has, ever since, refused to play by the rules set by the mainstream Mumbai movie industry.

***I Am* addresses ticklish themes that mainstream Hindi cinema steers clear of: child sexual abuse, same sex relationships, sperm donation ...**



Manisha Koirala and Juhi Chawla in *I am Megha*



Rahul Bose and Arjun Mathur in *I am Omar*



Sanjay Suri and Radhika Apte in *I am Abhimanyu*



Nandita Das and Purab Kohli in *I am Afia*

YEAR IN PICTURES

A brief journey through significant events, campaigns and trends in 2010. Twelve months of action. *Civil Society* captured the mood.

INCLUSIVE GROWTH

Second NAC gets going

The revival of the National Advisory Council (NAC) headed by Sonia Gandhi was greeted with relief by grassroots activists and social sector leaders. When the UPA won a second term there was concern that the government was more focused on companies and GDP figures and less on inclusive growth. With the NAC in place, agitating groups feel they can get a sympathetic hearing from a forum which can influence the government.

Members of the NAC seem to have been carefully chosen. The range of expertise available is wide. There are hopes that many issues will be tackled. Two bills are currently being discussed – the Food Security Bill and the Communal Violence Bill. By all accounts it appears that the NAC means business. Sonia Gandhi appears to have a practical, no-nonsense approach. Meetings are taking place in quick succession and, at least on the Food Security Bill, some progress has been made.

Last time around the NAC gave the nation laws like the right to information, employment guarantee and forest rights for tribals and forest dwellers. This time too new laws are on the anvil but the accent is also on implementation and making the system work better.



Sonia Gandhi with a portrait presented to her by Bhimrao Ambedkar's followers on his birth anniversary

NARAYAN



Kavita Srivastava addressing campaigners at Jantar Mantar

RIGHT TO FOOD CAMPAIGN

PDS revival

The Right to Food campaign agitated at Jantar Mantar in New Delhi against the draft Food Security Bill, saying its contents would only cause 'food insecurity'. The bill is now a priority for the National Advisory Council (NAC) headed by Sonia Gandhi.

There is consensus that a universal Public Distribution System (PDS) will be put into operation in one-fourth of the poorest districts in the country. Every household living in such districts will get 35 kg of foodgrain at Rs 3 per kg in the month. But the activists have asked for food entitlements to be given on an individual basis, for pulses to be added, and for people who are socially vulnerable to be included alongside those who are classified as Below the Poverty Line (BPL).

The right to food and work is currently one of India's most successful campaigns. It began as a reaction to drought conditions in Rajasthan in 2002 when the Union government would not release grain nor declare a state of famine despite starvation deaths. Concerned activists from the PUCL approached the Supreme Court to shake the government from its apathy. Since then the court has issued landmark orders resulting in midday meals in schools, a revival of the ICDS amongst others. Politically, the campaign gave rise to landmark legislation: the right to information, the job guarantee scheme and now the food security bill is in the pipeline.

YEAR IN PICTURES

MAGICAL NUMBER

UID becomes Aadhar

LAKSHMAN ANAND

The Unique ID project led by Nandan Nilekani was given a new name: Aadhar. With field-trials under way, the stage was set for giving out the first numbers in 2010 itself.

Nilekani, the former Managing Director of Infosys, is eager that Aadhar be recognised as an instrument of empowerment and inclusion.

People who are poor face two insurmountable problems. Many, like the homeless or nomads, don't count because they don't have an identity. Those who do, find that they cannot access their entitlements from government schemes and programmes because of corruption. There are huge leakages in the delivery of public services to the poor.

The unique identification project holds out the promise of putting an end to such hassles by giving every Indian a verifiable number. To provide one billion people an identity is a massive exercise. Nilekani, as Chairman of the Unique Identification Authority, has set a brisk pace for the project.

The number it is hoped will help poor people get their food entitlements from the government's Public Distribution System (PDS) which is riddled with corruption and inefficiency.

It could also make payments quicker for MNREGA workers, and enable people to access the banking system, pensions, insurance, microfinance and schemes like the Janani Suraksha Yojana. Much will depend on how governments use the number to establish identity and deliver entitlements and services more efficiently.



Nandan Nilekani

FOREST RIGHTS ACT

Giving tribals their

LAKSHMAN ANAND



Adivasi women protesting in Delhi over poor implementation of the Forest Rights Act

The Union Home Ministry's offensive against the Maoists took off under a cloud of controversy. Human rights groups roundly condemned armed action by the State. The Maoist insurgency is raging in the tribal regions of Chhattisgarh, West Bengal, Jharkhand, Orissa and Maharashtra.

Activists emphasise the need to look at the reasons why tribals fill the ranks of the Maoists. Since Independence, forest communities have been driven to poverty and despair. Their forests have been handed over for building dams, roads and other industrial projects or for mining. They have been systematically evicted without any resettlement or rehabilitation. Tribal districts are the poorest regions of India.

Yet a historic law which marked a break from the past, the Scheduled Tribes and Other Traditional Forest Dwellers (Recognition of Forest Rights) Act of 2006, has not been implemented in its true spirit and States are backtracking on it.

The law gives forest communities rights over land they have traditionally occupied and rights over forest produce. It paves the way for community forestry. There is also the Panchayat Extension to Scheduled Areas Act (PESA) which gives gram sabhas in tribal regions the right to decide what sort of development they want. If implemented these two laws could provide justice.

The Ministry of Environment and Forests (MoEF) and the Tribal Affairs Ministry have set up a committee headed by NC Saxena to gauge the status of this law in states. The committee recently denounced the Orissa government for non-implementation of the Forest Rights Act in relation to a mining project by Vedanta.

RURAL EMPLOYMENT SCHEME

Putting social audit in motion



MKSS

Women at a MNREGA site. And below: Work on a water structure in Bhilwara



MKSS

CP Joshi, Union Minister for Rural Development, worked with the Mazdoor Kisan Shakti Sangathan (MKSS) to do a massive social audit in his constituency, Bhilwara, in Rajasthan, to find out how the Mahatma Gandhi Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme (MNREGA) was doing. One hundred and thirty-five teams of social auditors covered 1,000 villages in 381 panchayats in 12 days.

The audit unearthed corruption. There were fake entries in muster rolls, job cards were not handed over, payment given for work done was below the minimum wage. One sarpanch was shamed into returning money he had pocketed. But people were enthused. Awareness and best practices spread.

To curb corruption it has been suggested that all information about MNREGA schemes should be posted on notice boards, as wall paintings, on radio and on worksite boards. People should be able to lodge complaints by SMS, with a phone call or through an email. Also suggested is compulsory inspection by the panchayat and officials and more muscle to the ombudsman including the power to impose penalties on those who cheat.

YEAR IN PICTURES

NATIONAL RURAL HEALTH MISSION

Reaching mothers

LAKSHMAN ANAND

The ambitious National Rural Health Mission (NRHM) seems to have made some headway with the appointment of Ashas or Accredited Social Health Activists.

A mid-term appraisal of the NRHM showed that there was an Asha in place for nearly every village. This is a significant achievement because the Asha spreads awareness about ante-natal care and ensures that women go to hospitals for deliveries.

A lot remains to be done to improve health care centres. But with 600,000 Ashas across the country educating women on safe practices and the importance of institutional deliveries, it is a matter of time before demand results in better services.

Nutrition, safe drinking water and sanitation are part of the NRHM. Its key objective is to bring down India's abysmal rates of infant and maternal mortality.

Civil Society got some idea of how effective the Asha can be while documenting the work of Path under its Sure Start programme. Path is funded by the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation. It connects with the NRHM and works with local NGOs in rural Uttar Pradesh (UP). In Maharashtra, Path reaches slum communities in seven cities.

The pictures above and right show the Ashas at work, reaching out to rural women with instructional toys and games.



A game of snakes and ladders educates women about their health

LAKSHMAN ANAND



Ashas at an anganwadi centre in UP demonstrating safe birthing practices

RIGHT TO EDUCATION

Schooling is free

LAKSHMAN ANAND

The Right of Children to Free and Compulsory Education Act, 2009, came into force in April this year. It is now the fundamental right of every child between six and 14 years of age to receive eight years of elementary education in a neighbourhood school. Private schools are required to reserve 25 per cent of seats for underprivileged children. The cost of the child's education will be subsidized by the State, if required.

The new law was welcomed by NGOs working for child rights. But they wanted the ambit of the law to be widened to include children below six and those between 15 and 18. Child Rights and You (CRY) led a national campaign Sabko Shiksha, Samaan Shiksha (Equal Education for All) collecting signatures from 20 cities and 6,700 slums and villages. The campaign's Charter of Demands asked the government to ensure that there were schools in every neighbourhood equipped with qualified teachers, infrastructure and facilities for underprivileged children. It demanded the government increase its GDP spend on education. The Union government has now increased funding to states for implementation of this law.



The Equal Education for All campaign

GLOBAL WARMING

Rising sea says it all

PRASANTA BISWAS



The sea is swallowing the Sunderbans

Islands in the Sunderbans region of West Bengal are disappearing one by one. The reason is sea rise caused by global warming. Ghoramara, Lohachhara and Suparibhanga islands have already been swallowed by the rising waters of the Bay of Bengal. Cyclones are increasing in ferocity. Last year Cyclone Aila devastated the Sunderbans. The swirling waters of the sea make the land turn saline and unfit for agriculture or for drinking. Millions are expected to become homeless in the coming years. There is no land available for resettling climate-change refugees.

All along India's coast the same sad story is repeated. "Many species of fish have disappeared," says Anto Elias, fisherman and secretary, Kerala Swatantra Matsya Tozhilali Federation. "Bigger fish have dropped in abundance. But the worst effect of global warming has been the collapsing of beaches caused by sea rise and uncontrolled sand mining."

The developed world is mostly to blame. America emits 19.78 tonnes of carbon per person, Australia, 20.58 and Canada, 18.81. India emits only 1.16 tonnes per person. But the effects of global warming are exacerbated by local human action.

CONTINUING TRAGEDY

No justice yet in Bhopal

LAKSHMAN ANAND



Protests erupted in New Delhi over the court's verdict in the Bhopal Gas Tragedy case.

LAKSHMAN ANAND



In June a judgment of a lower court in Bhopal stunned the nation. It gave industrialist Keshab Mahindra and seven others working for Union Carbide just two years in jail for the Bhopal gas tragedy. The court also gave them bail. Warren Anderson, the global chairman and CEO of Union Carbide when the tragedy occurred, has never faced trial and continues to live in the US.

The judgment brought Bhopal into the headlines with questions being raised about how punishment for the world's worst chemical disaster could be so light. There were also questions about Anderson's departure from India and who had authorised it. There were demands that Dow Chemicals, the new owner of Union Carbide, should be held liable.

The Bhopal gas tragedy took place on 2 December, 1984. Thousands of innocent children, women and men died on the spot when the deadly chemical, methyl isocyanate, leaked from the Union Carbide factory. Since then survivors have been trudging doggedly to Delhi, year in and year out, with a few simple demands: clean drinking water, relief and rehabilitation. Even their meagre compensation has not been paid.

The Bhopal gas tragedy is an ongoing disaster. Toxic waste lying in and around the abandoned Union Carbide factory is polluting groundwater and soil. Children continue to be born with genetic defects. Adults suffer from a range of health problems. A lone hospital for victims provides no succour. The condition of the victims is pathetic.

Activists and victims are demanding extradition of Anderson, more compensation, full rehabilitation of victims and clean up of the toxic waste by Dow. The Union government has promised to act, 26 years after the tragedy happened. The Bhopal gas tragedy has finally caught national attention and is now a politically sensitive case.

TOPPER SURPRISE

Making Kashmir proud

BILAL BAHADUR



Dr Shah Faesal (middle) celebrating with the people of Sogam

Dr Shah Faesal, 27, from the Sogam area of Kupwara district in Jammu and Kashmir surprised the nation by topping the prestigious Indian Administrative Services (IAS) exam. Proud of his achievement, Kashmir burst into noisy celebrations. His success made headlines all over India. "It is not impossible to crack the IAS," he told admiring, aspiring youngsters. "The fear of not faring well has to be taken out of young Kashmiri minds."

Behind Faesal's success is a remarkable story of courage and grit. His father Ghulam Rasool Shah, a school teacher was killed by militants in 2002. His death happened just a day before Faesal was scheduled to appear for the common entrance exam to study medicine. But this young man never let his tragic loss deter him. He fulfilled his mother Mubeena's wish and became a doctor. But his heart was in joining the civil services. Always a bright student he studied and came first.

There are many other sides to Faesal. He is a right to information activist and a poet. "I have read Alama Iqbal and Faiz Ahmed Faiz. My father taught me Persian, Arabic and Kashmiri," he says.

Faesal has joined the IAS to work for the people. "I will take people centric decisions and play my role in helping the common masses," says this idealistic doctor.

POLICE REFORMS

Ruchika is a reminder

In 1990, 14-year-old Ruchika Girhotra was molested by SPS Rathore, a senior police officer, who held the rank of Director-General of Police (DGP), Haryana. When Ruchika courageously filed a complaint, Rathore conspired to get her thrown out of school. Her brother a minor was accused of stealing cars and tortured mercilessly by the police. Ruchika committed suicide unable to bear the humiliation she and her family were subjected to.

The case dragged on. Finally, after 19 years in February, Rathore now retired was served a light sentence of just six months imprisonment for his crime. He quickly got bail. The sentence shocked the nation. Thanks to the media and civil society groups, the case is being examined in a more just way.

The Ruchika case also highlighted the need for police reforms. The maximum number of complaints made to human rights commissions are of violation of human rights at the hands of the police. It is also well known that there is needless political interference in the way the police function.

But police reforms continue to be in the doldrums despite Supreme Court orders to states to improve the functioning of the police, insulate them from political interference and set up Complaint Authorities to tackle human rights violations.



Local residents protesting outside the Panchkula district court against former Haryana DGP, SPS Rathore, convicted in the Ruchika molestation case

BIODIVERSITY

Mighty brinjal fights back



Farmer Omana with her husband Haridas and their brinjal plants

The little known Mararikulam brinjal achieved sudden fame as protests erupted over the introduction of Bt Brinjal, a genetically modified variety. Slender, long and green, the Mararikulam brinjal is an indigenous variety which was favoured by the royal families of Travancore and Amabalapuzha in Kerala.

The Mararikulam brinjal was on the verge of extinction when it was revived by the village panchayat to boost organic agriculture and improve incomes. Kerala depends quite a lot on other states for vegetables. Promoting the brinjal gave the village a special status.

A variety of vegetables are now grown here. The panchayat is the only one which gives a floor price for vegetables. If the price falls drastically, the farmer is still paid a minimum price. If it rises the farmer gets the existing market price.

A series of smart strategies by the panchayat have improved incomes for farmers. There is a very high degree of awareness about agricultural practices and the controversy over genetically modified varieties among farmers in this village. Mararikulam is now planning to apply for a Geographical Indicator for its brinjal.

FARM VISION

Jackpot in jackfruit

Panruti in Cuddalore district of Tamil Nadu grows India's biggest and juiciest jackfruit. Everywhere else, the jackfruit tree is ignored. Farmers might grow it around their fields but they don't see it as a lucrative tree. They don't fuss over it.

But Panruti's farmers have a different vision. They have raised jackfruit on orchards big and small. The tree is pampered with manure and irrigation. Best of all it doesn't require an army of labour. Farmers sell their jackfruits to middlemen, yet earn a decent living. In fact, the area under jackfruit cultivation has doubled in just the last two years.

Everybody here loves this humble fruit. The hallmark of Panruti's jackfruit is that it is very sweet. Since this taluk is a low rainfall area the total soluble sugars of the jackfruit are high. A second characteristic is that the Panruti jackfruit is very fat. The weight of a single jackfruit can go up to 61 kg making it a perfect candidate for the Guinness Book of World Records. Currently, a 34.4 kg Hawaiian jackfruit has been crowned the biggest fruit in the world. Panruti's farmers deserve global recognition for growing the fattest fruit.



K Karunakaran in his 6.5 acre orchard which inspired other farmers to raise jackfruit orchards

CULTURE TRAIL

India goes abroad again

LAKSHMAN ANAND



Indian Ocean plays its earthy music

There is a lot of Indian culture which has global appeal – foot-tapping music, vigorous folk dance, spicy cuisine, art, funny puppets, fashion and Bollywood. After a long hiatus the Indian Council of Cultural Relations (ICCR) has revived the Festivals of India which were so popular decades ago.

The Namaste France festival had performances by Mallika Sarabhai and Birju Maharaj's troupe. There was Hindustani classical music too. For the first time there will be an exhibition of Rabindranath Tagore's paintings in France. The idea is to project contemporary India to the world.

The Festival of India in China is moving through 30 cities. Indian Ocean plays its earthy music. There is a dramatization of the life of the Emperor Ashoka, a dance performance by Leela Samson, Hari Prasad Chaurasia on the flute among a lot else. China too started its festival in Delhi with a symphony of Buddhist music at the majestic Purana Qila.

ASIAN DRAMA

Coming together on stage

LAKSHMAN ANAND

A festival of plays from countries in South Asia in Delhi attracted a considerable audience and boosted people to people contact. The eight-day event called *Leela* mounted by the ICCR and Jamia Millia Islamia, showcased plays from across the region. There was a Maldivian version of *Romeo and Juliet*, a pacifist Pakistani adaptation of a Greek comedy, a lively musical, *Colombo Colombo*, by a Sri Lankan troupe and a Nepalese rendition of Henrik Ibsen's *A Doll's House*. There was also a Bangladeshi take, *Behula Bhasan*, on the female protagonist of a popular Hindu myth.

The Afghanistan group, Simorgh Film Association, staged *Letter of Suffering*. The group, led by Monireh Hashemi, won hearts with their poignant performance.

Some of India's maestros of theatre also staged plays: Neelam Man Singh's *Nagamandala*, Amal Allana's *Nati Binodini*, Nadira Zaheer Babbar's *Sakubai*.

Overall there was a celebratory mood. Despite language difficulties, the performances were appreciated. There was a lot of messaging on social issues. Each country had something to say about its own society.



Scene from the Sri Lankan play, *Colombo, Colombo*

CINEMA

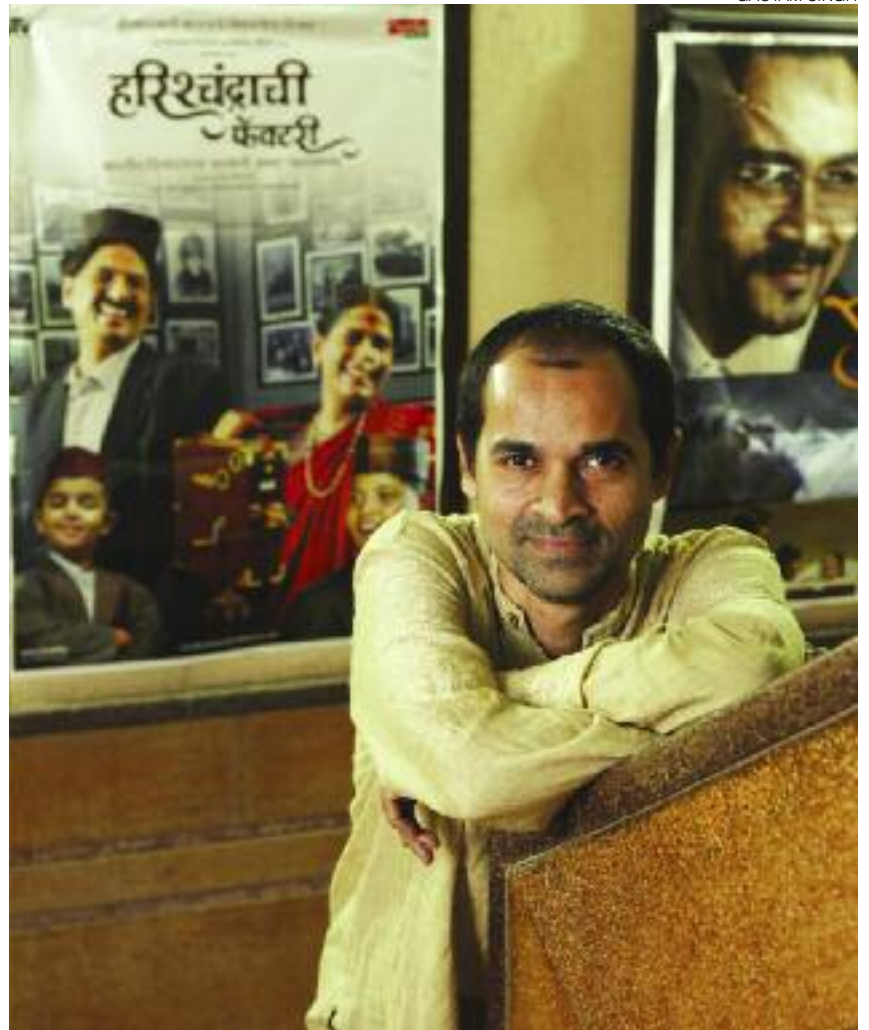
Regional goes global

Regional language cinema stepped into the limelight, attracting audiences and critical acclaim. India's official nomination for the Oscar in the best language category this year was a Marathi film, *Harishchandrachhi Factory*, written and directed by Paresh Mokashi, a young debutant film maker with roots in Marathi theatre.

Like Mokashi, there is a new generation of young directors, independent, free-spirited and fiercely original who are redefining Indian cinema. They are young yet mature, strapped for cash but high on enthusiasm, and they make films that are thought-provoking yet endowed with the power to grab eyeballs.

Indeed, what sets these Marathi, Bengali and Tamil filmmakers apart, is the culture-specific yet universal fare that they deliver in much the manner of the true greats of Indian and world cinema. They tell stories that are derived from their own socio-cultural milieus, and they tell them in ways that are markedly indigenous.

There are Marathi directors like Umesh Vinayak Kulkarni, Satish Manwar and many others. From Bengal, there is Suman Mukhopadhyay and Subhadro Chowdhury. In Chennai, a new breed of 30-something directors have broken away almost completely from the industry's dependence on stars and are yet delivering one box-office hit after another. Among them are Venkat Prabhu, Sasi Kumar and Balaji Sakthivel.



Paresh Mokashi

SPIRITUAL GURUS

Dalai Lama is now 75

The Dalai Lama celebrated his 75th birthday. Charismatic and humorous, His Holiness continues to attract followers among India's burgeoning middle class. Whenever he speaks at a gathering, people flock to listen. He has become one of India's most popular gurus. His clean image, spiritual and practical advice and lack of bombastic claims have made him an icon.

This year the 17th Gyalwang Karmapa Ogyen Trinley Dorge, who will be the Dalai Lama's successor, too stepped into the limelight. He made a rare public appearance in Delhi to deliver a talk on love and compassion at the India Habitat Centre in New Delhi. The hall was decked with Buddhist Thangkas and flags and the fragrance of fresh flowers. The Dalai Lama presented every participant a copy of his 'Heart Advice' book for the Karmapa.

Gyalwang Karmapa Ogyen Trinley Dorge's spectacular escape from Tolung Tsurphu monastery in Tibet in December 1999 caught the world's attention and became the stuff of headlines. Leaving the monastery with a handful of followers he began a bold journey by car, on foot, horseback, helicopter, train and taxi and arrived in India on 5 January 2000. An environmentalist he is concerned about global warming and the decimation of cultural identities.



Dalai Lama

BaLA grows: Lifts schools in

Civil Society News
New Delhi

A few thousand schools in India have undergone a quiet makeover in the past five years. Their exteriors have been repainted in cheerful colours, toilets improved and classrooms made more airy. Playgrounds have been redeveloped – in one case by using discarded tyres.

To make learning less daunting, the walls in these schools are covered with basic lessons in math, geography and general science. Doors are being used as protractors to teach angles. Window grills have taken the shapes of letters of the alphabets.

All this has been possible thanks to BaLA or Building as Learning Aid, an inspirational effort by Kabir Vajpeyi and his wife, Preeti, who are both architects and lead an outfit in Delhi called Vinyas.

BaLA is based on improving the physical parameters of the learning environment. If there are playgrounds and toilets, children tend to go to school. If the teaching comes off the walls and floors instead of being through books, more tends to get learnt.

BaLA is an effort to see the world as a child does. It relies on open spaces, greenery, surfaces on which to doodle and scribble, contraptions to learn from.

Kabir's involvement with education began with the Lok Jumbish programme in Rajasthan. He was among architects chosen to innovate with existing school buildings in rural areas. The challenge was to repair and renovate structures creatively with a budget of Rs 25,000.

After Lok Jumbish, Kabir and Preeti and the team they work with at Vinyas put together some 100 odd ideas which schools elsewhere in country could implement. This was BaLA and it became a book brought out with the help of the World Bank.

Civil Society first covered BaLA four years ago. In this interview we catch up Kabir and Preeti to find out how the BaLA model has spread.

It has been more than a decade since BaLA as a concept originated. What has been its acceptance and spread since then?

There has been acceptance of BaLA in Gujarat, Himachal Pradesh and in Delhi in schools under the New Delhi Municipal Corporation (NDMC). In addition you will find varying interest levels in BaLA in Madhya Pradesh, Chhattisgarh, West Bengal, Tamil Nadu and Karnataka.

It is difficult to say the actual number of schools in which BaLA ideas have been adopted, but there must be a few thousand across the country. Of course Rajasthan was where it all began under the Lok Jumbish programme though at that time it was just taking shape and it didn't go under the name of BaLA.



Preeti and Kabir Vajpeyi at an NDMC school

BaLA has served as an inspiration, prompting people to come up with their own ideas. Innovation, flexibility and local ownership are exactly what we seek. Our model is not based on replication.

Recently, in October 2009, after a workshop in West Bengal, an anonymous participant sent an SMS to us – "I think BaLA is neither yours nor mine. It is perhaps OURS!" We later identified him

to be a panchayat office functionary from Bankura.

As the idea has grown, new stakeholders have also joined in and taken something forward. Just see the range from inception till now – Lok Jumbish, DFID, District Primary Education Programme (DPEP), UNICEF, the Rajiv Gandhi Foundation, the Ministry of Human Resource Development (MHRD), Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan (SSA), the Aga Khan Foundation and the World Bank.

Gujarat, HP, Delhi

LAKSHMAN ANAND



How does the idea come to be adopted? What are the points of entry?

In Gujarat, the Education Secretary championed BaLA. He picked up a copy of our book at a Vigyan Bhawan event in January 2006 and read it through on his flight back to Gandhinagar. He decided to develop 'Dream Schools' for Gujarat thereafter – by using BaLA ideas. But on realising that words like 'dream' don't work in the government, he changed

the name to 'Model Schools'. He asked his SSA state office to get us on board.

The SSA office had learnt about us at a workshop we had held in Pune and were anyway moving towards us. They were very thorough. They applied whatever understanding they had of BaLA in four schools in Kutch. They then took the feedback of the children and the community. It was only when they were convinced that they invited us to do an orientation-cum-design workshop for all their 250 engineers in the state at a place called Mandvi.

It took a year, but sanction was given for Rs 2.5 lakhs per school for 100 schools in Gujarat. Now more than 700 schools are covered, across all districts and blocks.

In Himachal Pradesh, a copy of the BaLA book happened to be passed on to the young State Project Director of the SSA in the state. He was already thinking about making the schools in his state colourful by painting them. He went through the book overnight and called us the next morning, saying: "I want to do this in Himachal. How do we move forward? When can we meet?"

He held a workshop with us in Shimla. District officials, principals, engineers and architects were present. When questions were raised about where the money would come from, he declared that he already had a sanction from the Government of India of Rs 25,000 per school for 1,200 schools. In less than 50 days, he had got this money budgeted and sanctioned.

The workshop must have had an impact. Several districts in Himachal took up BaLA. Solan is one very good example with more than 100 schools adopting it.

In the New Delhi Municipal Corporation it was the Chairperson and Director Education who drove the implementation of BaLA. They got all their departments to buy into the idea. In March 2007, the Planning Commission provided Rs 2 lakhs per school for the 925 schools in Delhi.

What are the processes of working with government, of finding acceptance and so on?

Once the Ministry of Human Resource Development (MHRD) in Delhi was clear about BaLA as a concept it had no hesitation in asking the states to take it on immediately – at their own initiative. It was the ministry which suggested that we do a book which would serve as an introduction for administrators, planners, headmasters, engineers and architects. The book finally came out in Hindi and English in 2005 with the support of the World Bank.

The MHRD distributed the book across states in various forums. We noticed a very senior bureaucrat, (who had been very cool to BaLA initially) quietly carrying about 15 copies of the book from the event at Vigyan Bhawan. He later told us that, bar-

ring two copies which he kept for his office use and personal collection, he distributed the rest.

Our involvement with Lok Jumbish proved to be important. The DPEP that later led to the SSA were both born out of learning from Lok Jumbish.

We understood the process in its true spirit. Just as SSA is conceptualised as integrated and interdisciplinary work, we also looked at funding and the implementation in an interdisciplinary way.

It was a combination of planning, pedagogy, training of teachers, community mobilisation, gender sensitivity, Integrated Education for the Disabled (IED), civil works, research, monitoring and evaluation, project management, etc.

We believe the power of the idea, the prodding of the Rajiv Gandhi Foundation, the support of the MHRD and the book on BaLA along with coming up of the SSA across states with an integrated approach to elementary education – all helped in creating the right environment for initial acceptance.

How do you encourage innovation under BaLA?

Innovation is a need and not a by-product. Frankly, it is ancient wisdom that we have only now come to understand and appreciate. We have employed that wisdom in disseminating BaLA through the government system.

For centuries in our subcontinent, building design and construction practices had a process that allowed each stakeholder to play a creative role. This was true from the shilpi (architect) to the artisan. It not only reinforced the stake but also created ownership in the work. Thus, craftsmanship was ensured in the work at the most minute level.

If BaLA has to go to such a large number of schools, there is no single entity that can control design, construction and supervision. But then BaLA is also about a certain quality and sensitivity. So, the best course of action is to provide a frame of the essential ingredients of BaLA within which each stakeholder has the scope to innovate.

BaLA is about being child-friendly, fun-oriented, using local resources and so on. Within this frame the administrator gets the freedom to innovate with management and monitoring systems. The engineer gets the freedom to improvise and adapt or develop a new idea. An artisan who is making a BaLA element with a new refined process of construction is given credit for that improvement. A teacher has the space to come up with a new use for a learning aid. All innovations get our support in further refining them. But there is tremendous ownership at all levels.

An engineer once told us, "We make buildings worth crores of rupees in our district, but somehow do not want to show them to anybody. Yet we want everyone to see a BaLA school even though we may have only improvised with the structure for a few thousand rupees."

This is ownership. Each school with BaLA is different – in terms of choice of ideas and how they are made or used. It is because of this that our initial list of BaLA ideas in 2001 has doubled. It is not a question of one school being better than another, but each being unique.

Read, learn, laugh at Rehnuma



GAUTAM SINGH

Girls attend classes at the library

Gautam Singh
Mumbai

In a small apartment above a shop is a library. Not unusual, you would say. But this library is in Mumbra, in suburban Mumbai, an area which is predominantly Muslim.

The library is exclusively for women. It is called 'Rehnuma' which means guide and it's named wisely because it's more than just a library.

Rehnuma, which now has around 5,000 books and 150 members, was founded in 2003 by Aawaaz-e-Niswaan (AeN) or Voice of Women, an organisation that fights for women's rights. But its story and the reasons for its birth have their roots in more violent circumstances.

After the Mumbai riots of 1992, a large population of affected Muslims shifted from Mumbai to Mumbra and this neighbourhood of Hindu-Muslim farmers and fishermen became a refuge for the victims. Though the population has grown from two lakhs to nearly eight lakhs, the facilities haven't and Mumbra has just two municipal schools which offer education only up to primary level.

The shift to Mumbra meant the discontinuation of education for women. AeN realised that a lot of women who approached them for help at their office premises in Central Mumbai came from Mumbra, which is almost 40 km away. The women were in a state of neglect and needed a voice. And so, to fill this void, AeN set up Rehnuma.

The library is a small room lined with shelves with titles mostly in Urdu, though Hindi and some

English books are represented too. Open five days a week and with a yearly membership fee of Rs 100, it is visited by women of all ages. "Mostly members choose Urdu titles and books by progressive writers like Qurratulain Hyder, Saadat Hasan Manto and Amrita Pritam. The books have been donated but we do acquire titles which members recommend," says Khan Aquila, the librarian who's been with Rehnuma ever since its inception.

"We feel comfortable here and it has become a place for social interaction," says Sheikh Shabnam, one of the members. "It's the only place where we feel at ease. Other reading rooms have only men."

Classes in basic and higher education are held for the women. The library also organises book readings, picnics to Mumbai, workshops in photography and drama, and interactions with other NGOs. Around two years ago the members staged Safdar Hashmi's *Aurat*, an event that is still remembered. "We wanted to experience Mumbai, but earlier we never felt confident. Now we can even go alone," says Khot Sabiha.

Burqas hang behind the door in another room where a cheerful mural beams down at a class of young women writing a composition in English. "Most of the girls are drop-outs," explains Khan Aquila. "The private schools are too expensive and the municipal schools are only up to the primary level."

There is also a lack of economic opportunity in Mumbra. Most residents go to Mumbai for work. "We want to complete our education and we would like to work," says Talat Sheikh, from

Azamgarh in Uttar Pradesh, now settled here.

The irony of the mural suddenly becomes clear, its sunny landscape with bright flowers in sharp contrast to the world outside the library. Mumbra isn't in any shape at all. It has open sewers and garbage dumps and broken roads with dingy buildings. Electricity and water supplies are vastly inadequate. There is just one government hospital with only seven beds meant for maternal needs. "According to officials, Mumbra is geared to cater to a population of 200,000 whereas there are close to 800,000 people living here today," says Farhat Jahan, an activist with AeN. Mumbra is no longer a quiet suburb with clean rivers and green hills. Its now a ghetto.

The apathy of the government is apparent and there is an unmistakable air of despondency. "The people feel that government officials don't listen to them. Moreover they don't think they have any rights," says Farhat. "They don't want to speak out."

This became clear after a Jan Sunwai, (public hearing) was held in early January. A combined effort of five NGO's, including AeN, the hearing invited government officials, representatives of the minority commission and local municipal functionaries. Members of Rehnuma helped distribute pamphlets, put up photographs of Mumbra's civic problems at public places and spread the word about the hearing.

The Jan Sunwai was held at a school auditorium and attended by around 800 people. Problems relating to electricity and water supply, general health facilities and lack of livelihood were discussed. "The officials were surprised because nobody had ever asked them these questions before," says Farhat. "The people who attended praised our work though the local newspapers were conspicuous by their lack of support."

This initiative has somewhat changed the impression people had about Rehnuma. "Now they think that Rehnuma is doing something good," says Sheikh Sumbun, another member. There are plans to participate in local mohalla committees, if they are formed.

"We're also putting together a group to bring out a newsletter that can be a source of information on Rehnuma's activities and connect the people of Mumbra," says Khan Aquila.

There's a knock on the door and I see an elderly gentleman with three burqa clad women waiting outside. "They've probably come to discuss some marital problem," Aquila says. "Even though Rehnuma does big things, it is after all a very small place."

But then, isn't small beautiful?

Football with a sixth sense

Civil Society News
New Delhi

ANKUR Dhama has magic in his feet. Or at least so it would seem from the way he traps a football, keeps it in control and gets it into the goal after making his way down the centre of the ground. On a good day he has been known to score six times and in the few years that he has been playing, his name has come to be mentioned with considerable awe.

But if Ankur's celebrity status is growing, Dhanna Ram is not far behind. He has got as much grit and likes to pound the opposition. Dhanna in full flow is cause for concern because he can turn a match around. If there is a player who likes to win as much as Ankur does, it is Dhanna.

No less impressive is Ishrafil. Once he gets going, pinning him down is almost impossible. Ishrafil seems to enjoy quiet aggression and has a record number of goals to his name.

Ankur and Ishrafil live in Delhi and Dhanna in Jodhpur. They clash at least once a year. And of course they meet when they are at the same place for a tournament. But there is this one small missing link in their healthy rivalry – they have never set eyes on one another other because all three are completely blind.

As the Sixth National Football Tournament for the Blind got under way in Delhi on 26 December, nine teams from six states took each other on in a robust clash of wills. Not all the players were as skilful as Ankur, Dhanna and Ishrafil. But what they may have lacked in craft they made up in enthusiasm and spirit. They were there to compete and in the rigorous forays across the grounds of the Delhi Blind Relief Association (BRA) (on Lal Bahadur Shastri Marg near the Oberoi) there were plenty of spills. Players sometimes collided with such force that they had to be taken to the medical tent run by Fortis with nosebleeds and bruised limbs.

If the players were in full flow, so were their supporters who cheered loudly from the sidelines. There was wild exultation over goals scored and sighs of disappointment when chances were missed.

Football played by the blind can be noisy. The managers of the two sides stand behind the goal-



A tense moment in the match between the teams from Jodhpur (in yellow) and Madurai

posts and shout out instructions, directing players to the ball, telling them to watch out for opponents. The pace is brisk and tensions run high. It could be just about any match played with enthusiasm anywhere. But the fact is that it isn't. For all the rough and tumble, it is those with a strong sixth sense who prevail.

There are five players in a side. All the players, except the goalkeeper, have to be B1 blind – which means they cannot see anything. The goalkeeper, usually B2 or B3 blind, has some vision. He usually directs the other players and feeds them with the ball. But he has to stay within the confines of the goal box.

The other players wear cotton pads on their eyes with headbands that serve as blindfolds. This ensures that those players with limited vision (except the goalkeeper) are all B1 while playing and can't see at all.

The players wear protection for the knees and shins. There is padding on the goal posts. Nets and buffers along the sides of the ground keep the players from toppling out and straying. The ground at 18 m by 32 m is smaller than a normal ground.

The ball is specially manufactured to make a

jingling sound. So, the really good players are the ones who learn to listen for the ball. In the absence of sight, a player makes judgments on sounds he hears and relies on a heightened sense of direction and surrounding activity. Mobility for the sightless footballer is defined by many things.

This is a different arena with its own priorities. Narain Singh, who is the manager of the team from Netraheen Vikas Sansthan in Jodhpur, says: "Players develop an understanding of the dimensions of the field. They can sense where to go and what to target."

The blind are sharp. The loss of vision seems to give them other advantages. A chat with Narain Singh and his players from Jodhpur is revealing. He says: "The blind learn quickly. These boys come here (to the BRA campus in Delhi) once or twice and they know their way around. They move about as though they can see: up, down, everywhere."

Dhanna is part of the conversation. He says he has been playing for a few years, though Jodhpur is really lagging behind the other centres in football. He has been blind from a small age and is 18 now.

Asked if in a football match players with partial vision have an unfair advantage even after they are blindfolded, Dhanna disagrees. "On the contrary, being totally blind gives you a special perspective," he explains. "A person with partial vision who puts on a blindfold is no match for a totally blind person. In fact being able to see a little and then having to wear a blindfold is to be at a disadvantage. A fully blind person has a heightened sense of mobility, direction and balance."

Better skills come from practice. The two Delhi teams – Jormal Periwal Memorial Senior Secondary School (JPM) and the Equal Opportunity Cell (EOC) of Delhi University – have been playing for six years. Boys from JPM graduate to EOC and so there is continuity.

"They have better planning and understanding. They know to analyse the game," says Absalom David of the BRA who has a significant role in promoting the game among the blind.

Finally, this year's tournament was won by EOC which defeated JPM 2-1 in a hard fought final. Ishrafil of EOC was the top scorer of the tournament with 13 goals to his name.

Literacy India takes children from

LAKSHMAN ANAND



Kutty (left) and Rehana (right) now study in a private English medium school

Shreyasi Singh
New Delhi

EIGHT-year-old Rehana and her elder sister, 10-year-old Kutty, have ambitions. Rehana wants to be a teacher. Kutty dreams of becoming a gritty, tough-talking police officer. It isn't unusual for children to aspire. Except that two years ago, Rehana and Kutty, sunk in poverty, couldn't imagine that such careers were within their reach. They spent all day helping their mother, a single parent, eke out a living picking waste around the posh PVR Cinema in Saket, South Delhi.

Now Rehana and Kutty go to an English-medium school called Little Ones Public, not far from Saket, a journey made possible by Literacy India's Street To School programme. Indraani Singh, India's first Airbus pilot, is the founder and head of Literacy India, a non-profit based in Gurgaon.

"When PVR Nest, the charity arm of PVR Cinemas, wanted to rehabilitate children around their movie halls in Basant Lok and Saket, we

jumped at the chance to do this with them," says Indraani who is passionate about empowering underprivileged children.

"We targeted children who had run away from home, who are orphans or have single parents. We focussed on the ragpicker community, junkies and drug addicts. We wanted to get them off the streets and into classrooms," she explains.

The Street To School programme began in May 2006 with three hours of informal learning organised in a public park near the PVR Cinema with students picked up from the streets. Indraani says each child was identified by programme volunteers. The volunteers counselled children and motivated their parents to grab this opportunity to study and to look beyond street life.

"It was not enough to just provide an atmosphere of learning. Our work began with motivating and convincing these children to come to our classrooms. That was tough to do. Street life is so fluid that they find it difficult to adjust to routine. Some children dropped out too. We try to counter

all this by caring. Often, it's the first time the children have somebody to consistently care for them," she explains. Nutritious meals were also provided as an incentive to encourage the children to stay on in the programme.

The strategy has clearly worked. The Street To School programme has shifted from the park to a full-fledged learning centre in the Said-ul-Ajab neighbourhood in southwest Delhi, complete with classrooms, a computer lab, a play area and an activity centre. Indraani says the need to have a centre with permanent classrooms was imperative. Literacy India wanted children to have a genuine school-going experience, something that was difficult to do in a makeshift learning environment within a public park.

Books following National Literacy Mission guidelines are used to introduce first-time learners to basic Hindi, English and Maths. Children who studied earlier but had gaps in their education are brought up to standard with the aim of enrolling them into formal schools.

street to school

Over 110 street children, mainly migrants from Bihar, Uttar Pradesh, West Bengal, Madhya Pradesh, who are between four to 16 years of age, have benefited from the programme. Forty-five children, like Rehana and Kutty, have successfully enrolled in the formal school system. Literacy India funds their annual fees of Rs 12,000 per annum, and provides them with uniforms and books. The children continue to come to the learning centre after school for tuitions, remedial help and extra-curricular activities.

"Many are doing extremely well in school. They are eager to learn and they are hardworking. We are able to mainstream younger children in a year or a year and a half of working with them," explains Sohail Yadav who manages the Said-ul-Ajab learning centre.

Over 50 children are currently enrolled in classroom study at the Literacy India centre till they are mainstreamed. Yadav says the emphasis is on experiential learning to enable children to enjoy education. "We have seen these children respond very well to extra-curricular activities. They learn so much through dancing, painting, theatre. When we do things creatively, they enjoy the experience."

Arif, who is 17, couldn't agree more. Arif has been in the Street To School programme for nearly two and a half years and is preparing for his Class 10 exams through the National Institute of Open Schooling. A dropout of a mosque school, Arif was working as a domestic help in a large bungalow in Saket where his mother cleaned and cooked, when he first heard about Literacy India from his friend Sonu.

"After I clear my Class 10 exams, I want to be a dancer. I got the chance to learn dance here. My parents are so

proud of me now. My mother was thrilled when all my relatives and friends complimented me on my dancing prowess at a wedding we went to," says Arif after giving us an impressive dance performance to a blockbuster Hindi film song. He has also learnt to play the drums very well, picking up the skill from a foreign volunteer who spent a few weeks at the Said-ul-Ajab centre. He likes to impress fellow classmates and visitors by playing the drums.

Like Arif, his friend, 14-year-old Geeta likes to display her skills. Daughter of a domestic worker and a vegetable seller, Geeta is diligently preparing for her Class 10 exams. She enjoys the edge she has in English, undoubtedly seen as the passport to a good life by all students at the centre.

"After I dropped out of school, I thought my life was over. But now I know we need to build our careers ourselves. I study a lot so that I can be successful," the young girl says. Geeta is doing well in



Arif likes to play the drums

the digital animation and paintbrush curriculum Literacy India runs in its computer lab. She proudly shows us an animation strip she is working on. Geeta has, in fact, become an ambassador for the programme. Two of her friends have enrolled in the programme after seeing her progress.

These stories undoubtedly give programme workers the drive to carry on. But Yadav is quick to point out problem areas too. "Hygiene remains a big concern. It's very obvious in Little Ones Public School, for example, where children of more privileged families come too. I don't blame our children though. There is no water in the settlements where most of them live. We have managed to deal with some issues but several remain unsettled."

To educate mothers on issues like hygiene, Literacy India has taken up literacy and vocational training for women. Many mothers are first-time learners.

Indraani says it's been wonderful to see so many benefits emerge from the Street to School programme. "We have evolved a digital education programme from our experience with teaching these children. I am often surprised that even children right off the streets know how to down-

load music or what a file or folder is. I think being tech savvy is in the India DNA. Our digital learning programme recognises this. Even children who find classroom learning boring are excited about learning digitally. These tools break the monotony of their world," she explains. "A well-rounded digital learning programme can open up education for the urban poor."

Street To School is currently funded by PVR Nest, Tata Consultancy Services, National Basket Association Cares, the philanthropy arm of the American professional basketball organisation, and Encore, a software outsourcing firm. Literacy India is now looking for additional funding to expand the programme and open other centres. They say they have managed to put in place a rehabilitation model that can be easily replicated.

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Civil Society

READ US. WE READ YOU.

Rural BPO trains village women

HarVa aspires to create profits and social impact

Shreyasi Singh
Gurgaon

RIGHT off the busy Gurgaon-Sohna road, with its corporate offices, apartment blocks and unending malls, is the agrarian village of Teekli. You pass small shops and clogged, narrow roads and suddenly the landscape changes. Verdant farms and open skies replace urban dust and chaos.

Surprises don't end there. Right in the middle of one such farm is a small house. Inside, there are over 20 village women, most with heads firmly covered, furiously working away at their computers, oblivious to the summer heat and a noisy generator. They are employees of a rural BPO run by HarVa, a start-up founded in July 2009 to harness the value of rural India. The women are busy fixing classified advertisements in English and mining data for the government of Haryana's Animal Husbandry Department, an important client for this BPO, wholly staffed with women.

"This isn't about women's empowerment. I don't believe women need to be empowered. In any case, how am I qualified to do that? This is about creating true value for everybody," stresses Ajay Chaturvedi, who quit his well-paid, high-flying strategy job with Citi Bank to set up HarVa, a "for profit rural enterprise" that delivers what he calls "double bottom lines" – financial returns and social impact.

HarVa has a simple model – to focus on the intellectual and infrastructure capital available in India's rural areas to develop profitable businesses and help rural communities gain employment and skills. "The purely capitalist model has failed. It negates the human factor completely. And, NGOs can't create real value. Development can't be charity. HarVa is essentially a socio-capitalist model," says Chaturvedi who, with his BITS Pilani engineering degree and an MBA from Wharton Business School, USA, looks like an unlikely rural warrior.

In his beige trousers, green tee shirt and sun glasses, 36-year-old Chaturvedi does seem a little out of place among his all-women team dressed in colourful sarees and salwar kameezes. But his ambitions are

clearly in sync. "During my four years with Citi from 2004 onwards, I travelled extensively across India. I was coming back to India after around 10 years. And, it became clearly apparent to me that the potential in rural India was underdeveloped."

HarVa has identified four main areas ripe for socio-capitalism: community farming, waste management, microfinance and rural BPOs. Chaturvedi intends to focus on Haryana, Bihar and Uttarakhand. But, for now, it's the rural BPO in Teekli that is HarVa's primary concern. "If we perfect the model here, we can easily replicate it elsewhere. We don't see scalability as a big problem," says Chaturvedi confidently.

HarVa currently employs 25 women, each of whom earns between Rs 2,500 to Rs 4,000 per month. They are involved in data entry, data extraction and copy paste services for HarVa's four clients which include a management consulting firm, a recruiting company and a brokerage outfit.

HarVa trained 200 women in Teekli for free, putting them through an exhaustive three-month English and computer skills learning programme. Its cadre of 25 employees has been selected from this pool.

None of this was easy, of course. It was tough convincing villagers to allow their women to step out of their homes and come to work. HarVa began by making announcements in September 2009, asking women who had studied till at least Class 8 to come forward. Chaturvedi also went door to door to speak to women.

HarVa's women feel they have been blessed with an unexpected opportunity. There is a steely resolve to hold on to their newly acquired status. "Education is such a gift. I never thought I would get an opportunity to study again. I had never even seen a computer. My husband is so happy I am doing this. There is so much excitement about being a part of this. I make sure I am here at sharp

LAKSHMAN ANAND



Ajay Chaturvedi at the HarVa BPO

9 am every morning," says 28-year-old Anita Yadav, a mother of two. Chaturvedi calls her 'gifted' telling us how she mastered the keyboard in three hours flat!

"I am so proud that I supplement my household income now. I can buy what the children want. I can buy some clothes for myself," says Suman Devi, who takes home about Rs 2,500 every month, reinforcing the wages of her husband who works as a driver.

"It would never have been possible for me to work outside the village. My family wouldn't have allowed it. But they are supportive now because the BPO is close to home. I want to continue working here. I have no dreams to work in the big offices of Gurgaon. Those are not for us," says Archana, who has studied till Class 12 and had even trained to be a Hindi teacher before she got married.

Since HarVa started, Chaturvedi has seeded the company with nearly Rs 70 lakhs, raising funds from companies, ex-colleagues and pitching in with his personal savings.

"The biggest problem facing our BPO industry today is rising cost and attrition. We need to wrest back the advantage that helped India corner the lion's share. Migrating operations to lower cost destinations and tapping the vast pool of cheap rural workforce can address this," explains Chaturvedi.

Dive into deep sea magic

Susheela Nair
Port Blair

As we approached Port Blair, passengers jostled to peer through the windows of the aeroplane. The view below was dramatic. An expanse of water glistened in hues of green, turquoise and blue. The islands looked like emeralds splashed with crystal blue waters. There was something magical about the stunning beauty of the Andaman and Nicobar islands.

You could see hills and valleys with the sea lapping at their shores. Coral beds shimmered. The view was breathtaking. These extensive reefs abound in sea cucumbers and shells, both tortoise and ornamental. And in the clear, blue waters of the lagoons enclosed by reefs you can discover an amazing underwater world full of colour and adventure and fish of every possible variety.

Fringed by beaches filled with powdery sand and a sea of translucent aquamarine water, the Andaman and Nicobar Islands promise action-packed snorkelling and scuba-diving opportunities for the adventurous. Many of the islands are surrounded by fringing reefs, often several hundred metres wide and separated from the shore by a lagoon of similar width. There are plenty of steep, sloping and shallow reefs, coracle pinnacles and knolls suitable for scuba diving and snorkelling. Swimming with sea urchins, sea cucumbers, fish, sea grass, corals shells and weeds for company is a journey of revelation.

Several dive sites have been identified and more are waiting to be discovered and titled in the Andamans. Some of the dive sites are as interesting as their names. The underwater seascape seems untouched, almost virginal. Cinque Island, rated as one of the best dive destinations on the island, offers a stunning variety of marine life, including black coral. It is ideal for the experienced diver. The marine life in Jonny's Gorge, a large rocky outcrop skirted by sand at 30m, is spectacular. You can spot white-tip reef sharks lazing in the sand and large schools of barracuda hanging around in the current near the surface.

Dixon's Pinnacle, with prolific glassfish, is a shimmering display of constant movement. The blanket of fish, visiting schools of batfish, green and hawksbill turtles and the occasional Napoleon wrasse could present you with some of



DAVID LOH

the finest marine photography opportunities. South Button, best reached by a journey through the beautiful mangrove-lined channels between Ritchie's Archipelago, is a coral paradise. South Button's charm lies in its shallow sun-swept reefs.

About 50 km east of the South Andamans are a group of nine islands that form Ritchie's Archipelago. Havelock, the largest of these islands, is an unspoilt piece of paradise shaped like a teardrop. It offers some incredible diving options. Most diving operations take place from and around Havelock. The clear waters at Havelock host incredible numbers and varieties of marine life from moray eels to manta rays. You can explore the underwater coral gardens with schools of rare and unusually coloured fish for company. With the largest concentration of the most marvelous diving sites in the Andamans, a variety of coral and fish life, and a choice of nine diving schools, Havelock has become the hub of diving in Andamans.

The underwater world around Havelock has plen-

ty to offer divers of all skill levels. Havelock is a great place to get PADI-certified (Professional Association of Diving Instructors). For beginners, the safe open water dives are thrilling face-to-face encounters with swaying coral, fish coloured in bright striations, orange sea whips that wrap around your legs, soft sea kelp and thriving ocean life.

Seduction Point, a huge submerged rock with stag horn coral and prolific aquatic life, including Napoleon fish is a prominent dive site. The diving is sublime at Aquarium with its fringing reef, hard corals and lots and lots of fish. Lighthouse with its hard and soft corals and night-time diving possibilities is a hit with divers. Peppered with the usual bannerfish, angelfish and schooling fusiliers, this site has some interesting marine life suitable for snorkellers. If you are lucky, you can spot dugongs (sea cows) at Mac Point. Barracuda City, Turtle Bay, Pilot Reef, Minerva Ledge and Turtle Bay are other potential areas for diving.

Scuba diving as a sport is still in its nascent stage. The slow growth can be attributed to the lack of certified trainers. Fear of water and marine life keep Indians away from this sport. "Realising the tremendous potential and growing significance of the billion dollar aqua tourism industry, and also the need for several Indian dive instructors, I set up

Andaman Diving Academy (ADA), India's first and only Instructor Development Centre," says Madhava Reddy, the feisty managing director of Planet Scuba India which has many firsts to its credit. He chucked his journalist's job and his father's business to take a plunge in scuba diving and started Planet Scuba India which is India's first Inland Scuba Training Institute offering professional dive education in the comfort of classrooms and subsequent training in a pool.

The first batch of six diving instructors from ADA graduated recently. It was incidentally awarded a five-star rating by PADI, a globally recognised certifying body which reportedly controls around 80 per cent of the world's recreational scuba diving. Five years ago, there were only five dive centres but now there are 23 in the country. The numbers will definitely swell up to 50 in another few years. Reddy said that Divestock, India's first diving festival will promote and showcase India as a scuba diving destination to the world and give a boost to tourism in the islands.

Anu Solar unplugs huge market



TJ Joseph at his factory

Civil Society News
Bangalore

EVERYONE worries about rising electricity bills. But go to buy a solar geyser and what puts you off is the price. It is Rs 38,000 for a 200 litre one. The government does give a 10.5 per cent interest subsidy but that doesn't set the market on fire. So, how do you buy a solar geyser and cut down your electricity bill?

Anu Solar has created a buzz in Bangalore with a business model which could be a solution to installing affordable solar geysers. It already has 8,000 customers. The company is close to showing how the use of solar energy can be scaled up by breaking through the price barrier.

Anu Solar, set up by TJ Joseph, manufactures a range of solar and LED products and you can see various models of lamps, lights, inverters, batteries in his factory located down a bumpy road in north Bangalore's Peenya Industrial Area.

But it is with solar geysers that the company breaks new ground. Anu Solar will fit a solar water heating unit in your home for as little as Rs 3,900 – Rs 2,000 as installation charges and Rs 1,900, which is refundable, for the unit.

It then meters your consumption and issues a bill every two months. For instance, if you consume 200 litres per day, you pay just Rs 160 a month. Conversely, a single ordinary geyser consumes at least Rs 450 worth of electricity to deliver the same amount of hot water.

The service is called i-Hot. Like any utility, his

company prints bills and collects payments.

It is, as Joseph says, an irresistible offer. He has over 4,120 applications for the i-Hot service still pending.

"It is simple economics," says Somanna, a trade union leader and employee of Bharat Heavy Electrical, a public sector company. "I have had no problem with it. Ah yes, there was once a minor air block which my plumber repaired."

Bangalore's cool weather means people require hot water for bathing through the year. The city has 1.4 million homes. Weather patterns are similar in south Karnataka. Unless the temperature drops below 18 degrees Celsius for two consecutive days, the consumer is assured of hot water.

There are other cities, like Pune, where i-Hot could expand, says Joseph. Suddenly, a huge market for solar geysers, the stuff of green dreams, is waiting out there.

But Joseph cannot meet this demand. His finance company, the Nagarjuna Credit and Capital Private Ltd is going broke. It has been financing i-Hot at a low rate of interest assuming that the government's interest subsidy was available to it.

But, according to guidelines, say government officials, only the person who is buying the solar geyser for his own use is entitled to the interest subsidy. The subsidy is for the consumer and not the entrepreneur. So Joseph has had no choice but to borrow money at 14.5 per cent interest to get i-Hot going. He says he has invested his life's savings into his venture.

From existing customers i-Hot has earned

around Rs 17 lakhs from collection of dues. "I am using this money for pending orders of 100 units when the demand is really in thousands," he explains. "Recovery of money is not an issue when you give a priceless service."

His finance company has written to IREDA saying as an energy saving company it is eligible for subsidy which it should get at zero per cent interest. It has refuted any risks would accrue to IREDA.

Joseph says the government will be giving him the interest free subsidy but not from retrospective effect which means his finance company will be stuck with huge losses.

The non conventional energy business sinks or swims according to government policies on subsidies and global trends. So, Anu Solar's fortunes too have swung from boom to bust over the years.

Joseph is a chartered accountant from Travancore who got interested in alternative energy through his interactions with professors at the Indian Institute of Science.

He was an early bird into a sector where there were just three players. He changed the name of his family held company, Peenya Alloys Pvt Ltd into Anu Solar and began selling solar water heating systems.

In 2005, when the government's reduced its interest subsidy to two per cent. Anu Solar took over Nagarjuna Credit and Capital Private Ltd and began disbursing loans to customers at their doorstep. That worked and business began to grow. Anu Solar began selling around 4000 to 5000 units per year.

Each home in Bangalore, he says, should be using a solar geyser. But the solar industry's offerings are not found attractive by people.

With i-Hot, Joseph has finally broken the price barrier and unlocked a high volume low price market for the solar geyser business. In terms of profit, though, his accounts would look grim.

The minimum charge for i-Hot is Rs 160 per month and the present average billing is Rs 180. Even at zero per cent interest his finance company will recover its investment in six years time only if each consumer pays Rs 200 per month.

Would it not be wiser then to just raise the monthly tariff for hot water? Joseph does not agree. He says at this price and rate, he has caught people's attention.

His company is eligible for benefits under CDM (Clean Development Mechanism) but that money is just loose change, he says.

"The cost of my venture has been Rs 32.86 crores," he points out. "I have reduced carbon emissions to the tune of 53,644 metric tonnes per year. I have saved the government from the hassle of investing in 5.79 MW of conventional power by installing solar geysers."

7th Annual Issue

PRODUCTS

Carpets, handmade paper, jam, soap, kites, pottery...NGOs and cooperatives of artisans make a range of organic and other attractive items. Take your pick.

POO PAPER



HAATHI Chaap is a green company which converts elephant dung into paper. Notebooks, coasters, bookmarks, photo frames, clocks, carry bags and

children's games are made from poo paper. The elephant's round bum is the company's logo. The products are as good as any handmade paper product. The paper is attractive and has a distinctive character. No, it does not smell and it is organic.

Mahima Mehra, an expert on handmade paper, is the brain behind this unique venture along with Vijendra Singh Shekhawat.



Contact: Mahima Mehra , Phone: 9811312616
E-mail: pooper@elephantpoo.com
Website: www.haathichaap.com

MAGIC WEAVE

ARTISANS Alliance is a cooperative of weavers in Jawaja, Rajasthan. They make carpets and durries in wool and cotton. The designs and colours are very attractive and prices reasonable. Artisans Alliance started in 1985. At that time the weavers were making saris which nobody would buy. They were living in abject poverty, says Ramlal who is a member of the cooperative. The weavers were trained by IIM and NID, Ahmedabad, provided the designs. Now the weavers are better off. They displayed their products at the Dastkar Nature Bazaar in Delhi.

Contact: Ramlal, c/o Tikam Restaurant, Opp Central Academy School, Ajmer Road, Beawar-305901
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MIGHTY UMANG



THE Mahila Umang Samiti in Almora district, Uttarakhand, an initiative of the Pan Himalayan Grassroots Development Foundation, produces a range of jams, jellies, honey, pickles under its brand name, Kumaoni.



To promote organic farming Mahila Umang markets grains, pulses and nuts under their brand name Himkhadya. The Samiti evolved from being a conglomeration of Self- Help Groups (SHG) into becoming a company. Some 1500 simple hill women are its members. They have ambitions to grow big.

Grassroots has helped set up a shop, Umang, for the cooperative in Naini village. If you go to the hills this summer, visit Umang. You can order online too.

Website: www.grassrootsindia.com
Phone: 05966-221516 E-mail: apaul@grassrootsindia.com



DAILY DUMP

COMPOST your garbage in the comfort of your home with Daily Dump's attractive earthenware vessels. A stacked set of three vessels or a 'khamba' along with a 'leave it' pot is what you need to buy. Prices are reasonable. Daily Dump will explain the procedure.

It is simple and at the end of the process you will get a pile of compost. Sprinkle that in your garden and watch your plants glow green. Daily Dump sells a wide range of very pretty khambas made by artisans. You can buy accessories too like rakes, gloves, aprons and sieves. Daily Dump also offers five disgustingly cool books for children and waste less products for your home. From one outlet in Bangalore, Daily Dump now has many clones scattered around India.

Contact: dailydumpcompost@gmail.com Phone: 9916426661, 9916426661
Website: www.dailydump.org

GREEN GANESH

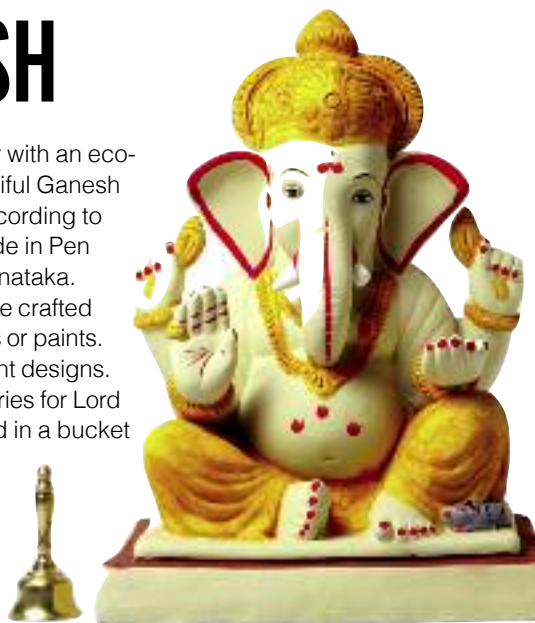
CELEBRATE Ganesh Chaturthi this year with an eco-friendly Ganesh. Ecoexist offers beautiful Ganesh idols hand made by traditional artisans according to religious norms. The Ganesh idols are made in Pen and Satara in Maharashtra and Sirsi in Karnataka.

These idols are completely natural and are crafted without the use of any chemical substances or paints. The Ganesh idols are available in 18 different designs. You can also buy a range of green accessories for Lord Ganesh. The idols can be simply immersed in a bucket of water at home. They dissolve easily and the water can be poured into plants or in a garden.

Ecoexist has been promoting an eco-friendly Ganesh Chaturthi since four years. The group also does environment education activities in schools. It coordinates river cleaning activities in Pune. Waste flowers collected during Ganesh Chaturthi are recycled by Ecoexist to make Holi colours.

So celebrate a happy, green Ganesh Chaturthi.

To place an order contact Lolita Gupta at 09960834066 Or write to lolitaeoexist@gmail.com
To see all 18 designs log on to www.e-coexist.com



KING OF KITES

ASIF Mian and Shavez Mian make decorative kites. It is their traditional profession. Asif Mian says his father, Chanda Sahib, who was in the British Indian army, was fond of flying kites so he began to make them himself.

In 1985, the government honoured Asif Mian with a national award. The kites the two brothers make have birds, plants and animals etched on them. Asif Mian has taken kite making to new heights. He can make kites out of cloth and put 50 kites on a single string. The kites are supplied to exporters and sent to different states in India.

Asif Mian says he has over 6000 kite designs. Take your pick and fly high.

Contact: Mazar Chup Shah Mian,
Rampur-244901, Uttar Pradesh
Phone: 0595-2325590
E-mail: indianfighterkite@yahoo.com



HEAVENLY SOAP

WHEN you wash with Sundaram, your skin feels divine. The soap has lots of lather. Its perfume is heavenly. That's because Sundaram soaps are made with natural ingredients and loving hands. No machines are used. The members of the Arya Vihar Ashram in Uttarkashi, Uttarakhand, make these soaps.

The cold process method is used so all glycerine is retained making the soap an excellent moisturiser. There are soaps made of almond, peach and honey, turmeric and sandal, aloe vera and rosemary, apple and mint, rhododendron etc. There are soaps for summer, monsoon, autumn and winter. There is a face wash in a clay pot and scrubby scrubs.

Just try.

Phone: 9756623826,
E-mail: sundaramsoap@gmail.com,
Website: www.aryamaan.org



MAYA'S FURNITURE

FURNITURE by Maya (Movement for Alternatives and Youth Awareness) brings a bit of the forest into your home. Crafted in a range of woods— acacia, rubber, pine, cedar— Maya's creations are trendily minimalist and socially compatible. Maya Organic works with artisans to improve their incomes by incubating small businesses, big on quality.

You can outfit your entire home. Maya has furniture for living rooms, dining rooms, bedrooms, children's rooms and more.

Maya Organic is a certified member of the World Fair Trade Organisation. It reinvests its earnings into producer community networks.

Contact: getinfo@mayaorganic.com
Phone: Bangalore: 080 2658 0511 / 12
Mumbai: 022 6671 6515
Website: www.mayaorganic.com



WARM IN WOOL

GEETIKAA Kakkar is an entrepreneur based in Dehradun. She has organised 100 women from villages in and around Dehradun and Rajpur into a group which knits sweaters, pullovers, blankets, skirts, tops and dresses. Her outfit is called Gauri International. Each of the women earn around Rs 2,500 from knitting. All her products are hand made and very warm. Geetika says most of this money is being used for education. Prices range from Rs 100 for a cap to Rs 6,000 for a king sized blanket.

Contact: Geetika Kakkar, 24/5 Nemi Road, Dalanwala, Dehradun-248001
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SISTERS IN STYLE

THE Qasab-Kutch Mahila Vikas Sangathan is a large cooperative of rural women from arid villages in the Kutch district of Gujarat. The cooperative has 12,000 members out of which 1,200 are traditional craftswomen. They have organised themselves into several 'producer groups'.

The women have amazing craft skills. They embroider, design, innovate, produce and market together as 'artisan entrepreneurs' and not as lowly-paid piece rate workers.

The range of products you can buy from the Qasab Kutch Mahila Vikas Sangathan is remarkable. On offer are quilts, bedspreads, cushion covers, bags, purses and much more. The cooperative specialises in eye catching and intricate embroidery. The colours are vibrant. Products from the sangathan never go out of style since they are rooted in tradition.

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