

Civil Society

HALL OF FAME 2016

SEVEN CHANGE LEADERS WORKING FOR INDIA



Sathyanarayanan Mundayoor, who is Uncle Moosa to his library volunteers in Arunachal Pradesh

‘NEW POLITICS STILL HAS A LONG WAY TO GO IN INDIA’



Jayaprakash Narayan of Loksatta on new people in politics and the significance of what's changed in the system over the past two decades of reform.

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13th
ANNIVERSARY
SPECIAL
ISSUE

THERE ARE JOBS IN GRASS

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Page 41

A DIRECTOR TO WATCH

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BUNDELKHAND BLUEPRINT

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PRODUCTS

Pages 47-50



Harvesting Rain for Profit

Name: Shri Muniraj,
Village: Muthur, Krishnagiri district, Tamil Nadu

Muniraj, a marginal farmer with seven acres of land from Muthur village of Krishnagiri district, had a greenhouse where he practiced floriculture. However, a falling water table meant that irrigation became a problem – especially during summer months even for drip irrigation.

To overcome the problem of insufficient water, Srinivasan Services Trust (SST) encouraged Muniraj to save every drop of rainwater falling on his green house. SST provided technical information and engineering support for creating a pond, next to the greenhouse, large enough to collect six lakh litres of rainwater. To prevent loss by seepage, the pond was lined with a polythene sheet and a shade net was used as cover to help arrest loss by evaporation. The pond gets filled up with 3 days of rain. The water saved in this pond is sufficient for the crop needs for one season.

IMPACT: Muniraj is now financially secure and earns more than ₹30,000 per month. He has built a pucca house and also bought a car. He has become an expert on rainwater harvesting and offers advice to several villages in the area.

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13th Annual Issue



Civil Society magazine is my constant companion. It reminds me of my capacity as a human being and my duty as a citizen. This magazine has become a leader in raising alternative voices in a large and diverse country like India. Stories featured in *Civil Society* are inspirational and thought-provoking. These stories, I have found, bring out the courage and commitment of change agents among us. It gives me the feeling that I am not alone in this world. It is not surprising that the magazine has gained wide popularity and acceptance within no time among discerning readers. The infallible professionalism shown by the editorial team led by the indefatigable couple — Umesh and Rita — certainly deserves deep appreciation. Articles featured in this magazine are a comprehensive source of information for people from all walks of life. Its design is tastefully distinct. The magazine team's infectious enthusiasm for reporting on voiceless communities should be an example for 'mainstream' media to emulate. *Civil Society* makes an important contribution in igniting hope in the hearts of marginalised people and helping them make informed decisions in this ever-changing world.

Praveen Kumar, Secretary, Social Welfare Schools, Telangana



Umesh and Rita's mission, with their magazine, *Civil Society*, is to bring stories of hope to people. Many journals raise voices for the causes of the most deprived citizens of society—deprived of opportunities, deprived of dignity, deprived of justice, even deprived of hope. Most of these voices of advocacy are angry, as they have good cause to be. *Civil Society* has aimed to, always, propagate stories of hope: stories of people, often with very little resources and with very little power, improving the lives of others. *Civil Society's* heroes are fireflies: tiny creatures, who have an inner light with which they brighten up the darkness around. They are an inspiration to others to find their inner source of light to improve the world for everyone. Indeed, *Civil Society* is a firefly amongst journals for change: smaller, quieter, and intensely bright. Congratulations and thank you for *Civil Society*.

Arun Maira, management guru and former member of the Planning Commission

Feedback

READERS TELL US WHAT THEY THINK



Civil Society is one magazine I wait to read. It has many wonderful columns such as the one Dileep Ranjekar does on school education. I congratulate Rita and Umesh Anand for keeping the magazine going for 13 years.

It is proof that independent journalism, with subscriptions and some advertising, is sustainable if the quality is good. Every issue is refreshing and gives a feeling of hope. It feels great to know about common citizens doing excellent work for the country, in whatever capacity. India will be changed by people who make a difference in their everyday lives. Reading one article of *Civil Society* every day is better than watching nonsensical discussions on news channels, both Hindi and English. This is one magazine which everyone in the family can read from page one to the end. Even the advertisements are meaningful.

Dr Ravikant Singh, Founder, Doctors For You



I would like to begin by congratulating *Civil Society* on completing 13 years of its journey and for always bringing an edge to development journalism. I would particularly like to single it out for giving visibility and recognition to innovators and changemakers who may never have got quality media attention if *Civil Society* magazine hadn't gone to them. India is indeed very fortunate to have this magazine, which has never been afraid of going beyond the beaten path and which is today filling a huge gap at a critical time.

Attention to development issues is clearly on the decline and the role of the voluntary sector is being questioned by some. Not only do we see a decrease in the allocation of resources in the Government of India's budget, but, equally prominent, is the mainstream media's neglect of issues and perspectives that *Civil Society* brings attention to. The media is conspicuous by its absence while this magazine has steadfastly adhered to its course and stood up to the challenges with high editorial standards and skills, independent of all ideologies or political persuasion. The lone journey of the founders is supported primarily by admiration for their work. Going forward, I hope they will receive much more support with financial backing and added reach. It is for civil society and beyond to actively engage in ensuring that *Civil Society* flourishes and reaches the heights it so deserves over the next decade. We clearly need to do so in our collective interest. I extend my best wishes for the future to *Civil Society* and its dedicated team.

Poonam Muttreja, Executive Director, Population Foundation of India



In India, most magazines either cover big business or big government and their small successes or big failures. But *Civil Society* is different. It covers big achievements of small civil groups or poor and middle class individuals against severe odds and great adversity. What it covers now, in a project's infancy, others cover half a decade later.

This is a magazine that doesn't get influenced by big capital or ad revenues. The people who run it come with big media backgrounds and, like ascetics renouncing the world, they embarked on this journalistic pilgrimage for uncovering the karma of hardworking people whose contributions to society would otherwise go unrecognised.

It is refreshing and is somewhere between a serious coffee time read and a light socio-political journal. A good product with distinct looks that set it apart in a big crowd.

Rajiv Verma, IT professional



As a recent subscriber to *Civil Society*, it's great to have found a magazine that brings out the best of India. There are so many amazing stories from across India of people improving the lives of their community and the country, which you would never hear about otherwise. The media is full of negative stories these days and those are really useful so we can improve and fix what's broken. But, at the same time, it's important to recognise many lesser known individuals who do amazing work for us – from innovations in medicine to education, to improving urban spaces and preserving our history.

I hope *Civil Society* becomes regular reading for everyone, especially the younger generation who seek out content primarily online. Awareness, from the stories that come out in *Civil Society*, is step one, and hopefully these stories will spur us to join in and do our bit too!

Niyaz Laiq, Co-founder, BetterButter

Feedback

READERS TELL US WHAT THEY THINK



Civil Society is a very credible source of stories from India's bustling ecosystem at the bottom of the pyramid. It captures the real stuff that gets lost in the buzz of everyday news coverage about the high and mighty. These stories not only inspire readers but also those who may be in similar situations as the people being reported on. The stories energise change leaders. I can personally attest to this.

It amazes me that *Civil Society* manages to crisscross the entire length and breadth of the country to dig out fascinating stories from the dusty hinterlands of India of men and women fighting spirited battles against heavy odds. It requires talent and skills of a high order to tell these stories as well as *Civil Society* does with professional design and packaging.

It is especially heartening to note that there are journalists ready to develop stories on the social side of society instead of choosing more lucrative areas. *Civil Society* is also a great example of social entrepreneurship.

Jaskirat Singh, Founder, Webrosoft



Congratulations, *Civil Society*, on the long journey. I'm sure there will be many more milestones you will cross.

Civil Society represents voices not usually heard in our media. I particularly like the fact that most of its stories focus on solutions to issues and people working on those solutions rather than on opinions or sympathy. This is why I find reading the magazine refreshing and a good forum for encountering ideas and inspiration. Noticeably, there is a social venture angle to many of the stories, proving that solutions to environmental, social, public health and other issues is a positive sum game. This, I hope, encourages us all to reflect.

I can also attest to the sheer diversity in the topics *Civil Society* handles – from a jackfruit cutting machine to weather forecasting. Finally, I must mention the Hall of Fame event. It takes courage and vision to create a forum like that. I look forward to continue reading your magazine.

Saurabh Biswas, Senior Partner, SightLife

13th Annual Issue



I met Umesh Anand at a conference on affordable housing in New Delhi. He spoke to me about *Civil Society* magazine and his endeavour to highlight the stories of people who drive change but don't get serious attention in the big press. His sincere desire to sensitise the public through real stories of improvement in communities impressed me and since then we have subscribed to the magazine.

We find that *Civil Society* covers genuine stories of ordinary people who have taken on leadership roles to address problems facing communities. These stories highlight very well the initiatives, struggles and methodologies of problem solving.

The magazine is uniquely different because it is non-commercial and non-political yet it highlights the real issues affecting the country and how they are being addressed at the local level by individuals, organisations and companies.

I hope the magazine gets as widely circulated as newspapers which reach every home. *Civil Society* has the style and simplicity to influence families and garner support for government decisions in accelerating the development of the country.

Sudhin Choksey, Managing Director, GRUH Finance



When Umesh first told me he was thinking of quitting his job as Resident Editor of the *Times of India* in Delhi and toying with the idea of starting a magazine that would cover an India that mainstream English media largely ignored, I told him not to be foolish, and not so politely either. When he showed me the first dummy of the magazine I told him I thought a publication called *Civil Society* would be dull, drab and very 'NGOish'. The dummy was just the opposite. I subscribed and read the first issue out of loyalty to old, brave friends. I've been hooked since. I still think Umesh and Rita are extremely brave. I no longer think them foolish.

Civil Society keeps me rooted and engaged with issues that are all too easy for an urban dweller to push out of his or her consciousness. It doesn't bring me armchair ideological rants. Instead it gets me hardworking reportage in elegant prose. Who says 'third sector' reporting has to be boring? Congratulations on your 13th, *Civil Society*.

Senthil Chengalvarayan, Journalist and TV anchor

Feedback

READERS TELL US WHAT THEY THINK



What I find refreshingly different about *Civil Society* magazine is that it truly covers society in all its diversity. So there is development, health, business, heritage, art and

much more. The stories are interesting, anecdotal and very personal. It is evident that the person writing them is part of the story and is not merely reporting. I also like its distinctive size and nice heavy pages redolent with colour, reminiscent of the time when magazines were kept and read.

Ratna Vishwanathan, CEO, MFN (Microfinance Network of India)



Civil Society preserves the integrity of classical print journalism that today's mainstream newspapers must emulate to become relevant. It tells us what is good and happening in this country in the midst of political recklessness and social disorder. In that sense, it holds out hope for countless citizens who are trapped in an inefficient and corrupt system that they must negotiate daily.

I have been reading *Civil Society* since its first issue hit the newsstand. And every issue ever since has reported a new story with a new perspective that should have been worthy of the front page of national dailies. What sets each story apart is that they are reported from the field, whether in the outback of Assam or the remotest corners on Kerala in the deep south. In doing so, the magazine has succeeded in discovering and making heroes out of ordinary mortals at a time when Page 3 bling has come to define social journalism.

Civil Society has no hidden agenda. It does not proffer any political opinion, masquerading as social concern. Actually, it champions no cause. It just tells a story. Which is what good journalism must be all about. But more than the written word, *Civil Society* also demonstrates that it is possible for good journalists and good journalism to not only survive, but to stand up and be counted.

Subhrangshu Roy, COO and Editor-in-Chief, Financial Chronicle



From chronicling the disappearing world of surangadiggers to deciphering the policy-speak of TRAI and others

of its ilk in India's public ecosystem, *Civil Society* is a must-read. Going beyond the limitations of mainstream media, it provides much-needed intelligent reportage and insightful opinions about things that matter. It performs a valuable service and if it didn't exist, we would have to invent it.

Nitika Mehta, Head, Development and Communications, Brookings India

IN THE LIGHT

SAMITA RATHOR



Feedback

READERS TELL US WHAT THEY THINK



Civil Society is a phenomenon in the Indian media for many reasons — its colourful get up, grassroots priorities and crisp and sharp storytelling attitude. Its stories won't be longer than necessary and, almost always, will be accompanied with fabulous photos. It brings out the best in society, from both worlds of non-government and government. It is also

ready to critique the powers that be when necessary.

An important reason I look forward to opening every issue of *Civil Society* is the positive stories of change from the grassroots. The stories are from remote corners of India. They give one hope and, at the same time, encourage those who are doing such remarkable work.

Civil Society has been doing this month after month for 13 years now. It is important that it continues to be published and also inspire other such initiatives in regional languages.

Himanshu Thakkar, Coordinator, South Asia Network on Dams, Rivers and People (SANDRP)



A print magazine called *Civil Society* that was born in the third year of this millennium, and has survived to celebrate its 13th anniversary, is a dual wonder. First, who cares for print in this world where everyone's mind space is digitated (a phrase I use to mean digitally agitated!)? Second, who cares for civil society, in this world dominated by Capital and the

State? Indeed who cares for civility, in an era where one can be lynched merely for having a different look, language or life-view? Under such conditions, here is this unlikely sized, always cheerfully coloured, contrarian bundle of optimism, which lands on the newsstands month after month. But what makes it more than just a preachy journal is that it writes about real people doing real things on the ground, fighting against the 'evil spirits' in a hundred different ways and building (or rebuilding) lives and livelihoods. I can only quote Dylan Thomas and exhort the Anands: "Do not go gentle into the good night; fight, fight against the dying of the light."

Vijay Mahajan, Founder and CEO, BASIX

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COVER PHOTOGRAPH: LAKSHMAN ANAND

ANNUAL DOUBLE ISSUE

This September-October issue of Civil Society marks completion of 13 years of the magazine.

The next issue will be in November.

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Civil Society

READ US. WE READ YOU.

How lucky to be 13!

IT was in a crazy moment sustained by much exuberance that *Civil Society* came to be launched. There was no business plan, no grand strategy and no money, except for the ₹4 lakhs we took from our savings. What we wanted was the ultimate thrill that diehard journalists can get — of crafting an editorial offering from scratch with only our skills to speak for us. We also chose to be an enterprise, which was a kind of grand thing to say because there was just one PC, one Santro car and our study as an office. We felt if we could succeed with such bare essentials it would be worth it and if we didn't it wouldn't really matter.

Well, a magazine has a life of its own. Once you decide to put it out there for readers, you go from story to story, deadline to deadline, issue to issue. If you are enjoying yourself and believe in what you are doing the magazine keeps coming out despite the odds.

With this September's issue we complete 13 years. The one thing that keeps us going is feedback that our journalism makes a difference. We have refused to be obsessed with numbers and money. A business must be sustainable and pay its bills, but to be obsessed with making money out of journalism is to shoot yourself in the foot. The numbers come and the money follows, but they can't be reasons for writing and publishing stories.

Our magazine has in the natural course found subscribers across India and in different parts of the globe. For the record, and to make an impression on you, a copy of the print version goes to a farmer in Hawaii and he pays. So you see we get around quite a bit!

On a more business-like note we would like to state that we are read in companies, NGOs, government offices, schools, colleges, public libraries and so on. There are doctors, lawyers, judges, management consultants and senior bureaucrats who have been taking us regularly. The list is a long one.

But truth be told, we don't really know how we are being read. We learn that there are organisations where 10 or 15 or 20 people get to see a copy of *Civil Society*. Doctors who subscribe inform us that patients walk away with issues. While in Arunachal Pradesh recently, we found government schoolteachers sharing Dileep Ranjekar's column on education in a WhatsApp group. A BJP MP from Delhi called the other day after he read *Civil Society* in the VIP Lounge of Delhi airport. What did he find interesting? A story on the restoration of old buildings in Kolkata!

It has taken us 13 years to get to this point. Could we have grown faster if we had been less higgledy-piggledy in our approach and had more capital? We don't think so. If we had cash to burn we would probably have burnt it along the way but taken as long to get here.

We have, of course, shown perseverance and commitment. But so have our advertisers and subscribers who have kept *Civil Society* alive. They have supported our magazine in the belief that it is what the country needs. Without their encouragement we wouldn't be around today.



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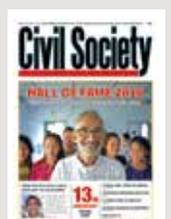
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RITA & UMESH ANAND

WE are often asked how we discover the wonderfully talented and public-spirited people who enter the Civil Society Hall of Fame each year. Our answer is simple — you just need to look around and you will find them everywhere in India. This year, too, we have been out looking in Lathao, Bool Gaon, Siyani, Warangal, Sagar, Ufrainkhal....

If many of these names sound strange to you, it is because of the way we are. An emerging economy encourages people to think about earning more and living better. It adopts only familiar definitions of success. The focus then becomes a few cities, a few neighbourhoods, a few companies, a few think tanks, a few NGOs, a few lawyers, a few doctors, a few entrepreneurs, a few TV studios.

To be outside these charmed circles means not to exist. But trust us, the places mentioned above are hot destinations for the kind of ideas and initiatives that India needs. They deserve better recognition.

Civil Society magazine, in the past 13 years, has tried to look at India differently. We seek out the stories that don't easily gain currency and aren't fashionable to tell. And through the Civil Society Hall of Fame — which is an extension of what we do as journalists — we encourage citizens to felicitate other citizens who may not represent stellar material success but yet contribute significantly to making our country a happier and more inclusive place.

It is a no-brainer that the strength of a country as large as India is in its diversity. No single solution fits all. Innovators and achievers need to be sought out and encouraged where they are least likely to be found. It is through disaggregated efforts, some small and some big, that India can emerge as a powerhouse of ideas and talent.

New technologies like the cell phone and the Internet are already having a liberating influence and are drivers of awareness and empowerment on a scale never experienced before. But much more needs to be done socially to bring people together. Many Indias need to reach out to each other in ways that are non-official and personal.

The Civil Society Hall of Fame tries to make such connections. It identifies remarkable individuals and groups

TO LATHAO TO SAGAR...

from all over the country and celebrates their achievements. At our well-attended event in Delhi each year, the audience gets to see and interact with these invariably self-effacing leaders.

Through the magazine, the stories of the entrants to the Hall of Fame reach other corners of the country and a diverse readership of doctors, lawyers, teachers, students, judges, government servants and social activists. These stories then get told and retold as they leave an impression. It is wonderful to see ideas travel and find new takers.

The entrants to the Civil Society Hall of Fame don't just espouse interesting causes. Their personal journeys are unique and inspiring. They are reluctant heroes, which is all the more reason for appreciating them. They deserve to be icons.

Take the inspiring story of Ramesh Gharu. His parents were *safai karamcharis* or manual scavengers. As a child and then as a young man he would work with them. But he also got himself a school education and college degrees.

He is today a successful teacher with an awesome record in a government village school in Barmer district of Rajasthan on India's western border with Pakistan.

Gharu has developed toys to communicate with his students. His classes receive record attendance and we have witnessed and documented how he holds children in thrall.

In sharp contrast to Gharu, Gautam Sharma is an upper caste headmaster, also in Barmer district. He is a gifted administrator. From the moment he stepped into the Bool Gaon village government school, he began sprucing it up and putting better systems in place. Rooms have been added and the school management committee is deeply involved. Children are no longer sent over long distances to attend a private school. Instead, they go to school in Bool Gaon itself.

Far away in Sagar, in Karnataka,

Honnesara Paniyajji Manjappa is also trying to give children an education. He has been an insurance agent who has used his commissions, other personal funds and donations to create schools where destitute children from anywhere in India can stay, have their meals and get an education. These children have not only found a home with him, but they have gone on to get jobs and be independent.

In Arunachal Pradesh, Sathyanarayanan Mundayoor has created a library network to encourage children to read and express themselves. Known as Uncle Moosa to locals, he has brought new meaning to the role of the library in the life of the community.

The work of Sachidanand Bharati and his fellow activists perhaps has global implications.

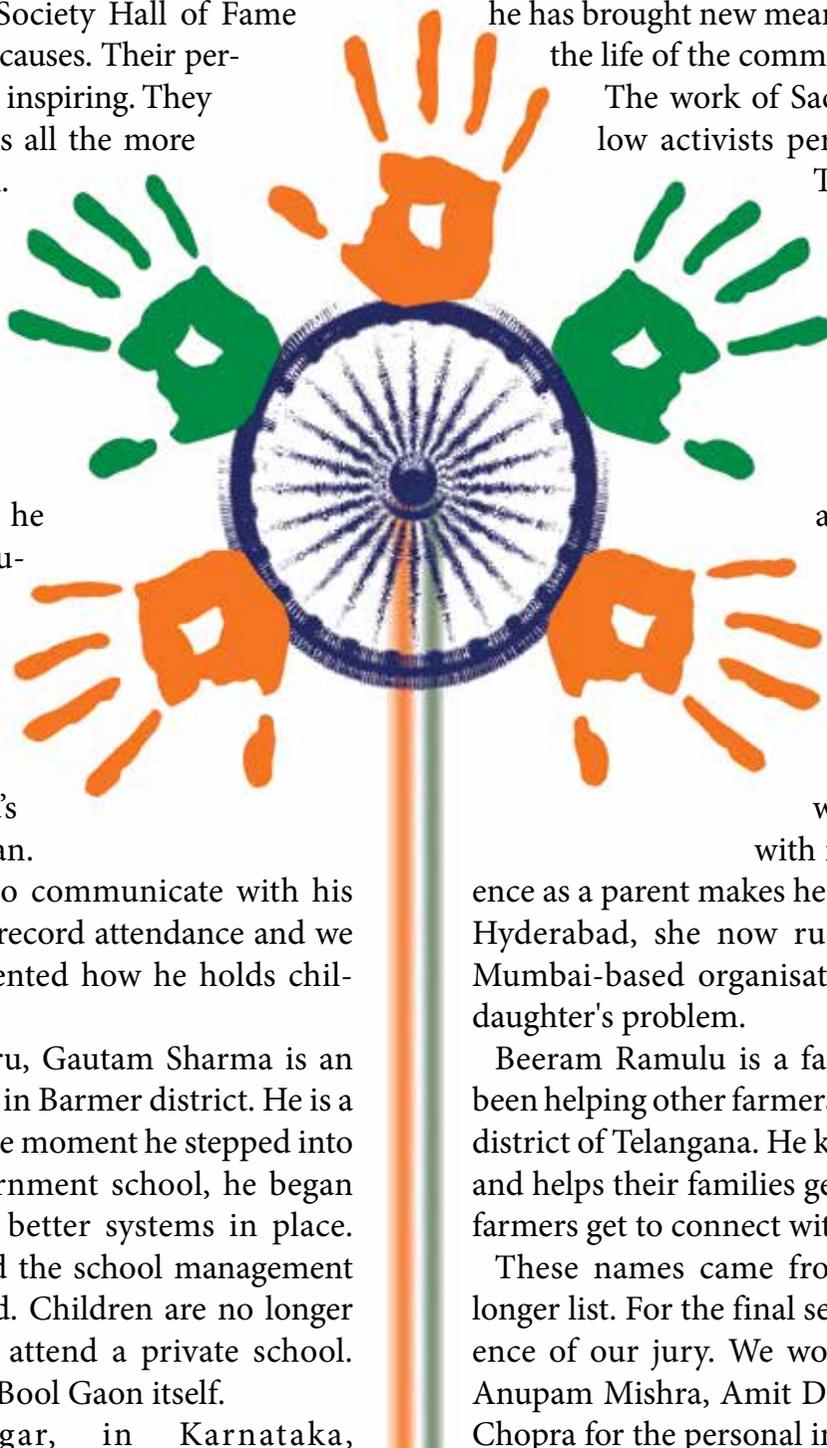
They have been saving forests and water bodies in the mountains of Uttarakhand. This year when fires ravaged many forests, those managed by them went unscathed. It is because they have traditional tree species and small water bodies that preserve moisture in the soil.

Kim Chaddha has gone from being the stressed out mother of a profoundly deaf daughter, to being a therapist who works with other parents with impaired children. Her experience as a parent makes her an accomplished therapist.

In Hyderabad, she now runs a centre for AURED, the Mumbai-based organisation that helped her solve her daughter's problem.

Beeram Ramulu is a farmer and an activist who has been helping other farmers in the water-starved Warangal district of Telangana. He keeps records of farmer suicides and helps their families get compensation. Through him farmers get to connect with government schemes.

These names came from a much wider search and longer list. For the final selection we drew on the experience of our jury. We would like to thank Aruna Roy, Anupam Mishra, Amit Dasgupta, Dr DPS Toor and Vir Chopra for the personal interest they took. ■





At the Calsom Library in Tezu: Uncle Moosa flanked by Rejum Potom and Etalo Mega with enthusiastic student reader-activists

SATHYANARAYANAN MUNDAYOOR

Life coach in the library

WHETHER it was because of a Malayali fascination with the Himalayas or just a young man's urge to do something different and exciting with his life, Sathyanarayanan Mundayoor turned up in Arunachal Pradesh in 1979 and never went back. You could say it was his destiny.

Now 65 years old and known as Uncle Moosa (and sometimes Uncle Sir), he is the cheerful inspiration for the Lohit Youth Library Network, which is a special effort to promote books and a sense of community at the same time.

Schools, such as those run by the Vivekananda Kendra where he was employed, had libraries. But in 1998 Uncle Moosa decided to place them in the midst of communities so that they could be vibrant and impactful in ways beyond the dictates of a school's curriculum.

Young tribal girls and boys could then discover not just the joy of reading but also learn to express themselves through storytelling, staging skits and recitation. In addition, the libraries could create social awareness with special programmes on Women's Day, Environment Day, Forest Day and so on.

The first community library was set up at Etalin in the upper reaches of the Dibang Valley. The Etalin library wound up in two years and the library network grew in Lohit district, which has in

recent times been split into three separate districts. There are now 13 libraries — some dormant, some active, some in between. Resources are short and so these are mostly small setups with a limited number of books and periodicals.

It is not necessary for them to be large. The library network is meant to reach out to villages and towns that dot Arunachal across the rambling and diverse topography of the state. Small works better in such conditions. Different parts of Arunachal are often not readily accessible to each other. There are rivers and valleys and other natural boundaries to be crossed. It is a jigsaw of settlements and the library network's relevance depends on being in many pieces and engaging intimately with clusters of users, at times reaching them in their homes instead of bringing them to the books.

The libraries are modestly funded through donations made to the Vivekananda Trust based in Mysore. Books also come from donors. When the Bamboosa Library opened in Tezu, the headquarters of Lohit district in 2007, it received 1,000 books from Delhi thanks to the Association of Writers and Illustrators for Children (AWIC). It also received books from America — which is why Roald Dahl is a big favourite in Arunachal.

The Bamboosa Library had a biggish presence in Tezu, but the

HALL OF FAME

building that housed it was quite suddenly given to a hospital project. A new building is coming up for the Bamboosa Library and in the meantime the books have had to be stashed away at different locations.

The Calsom Library at Tezu is located at the Calsom School. It is a single room with books on shelves and in cupboards. Sukre Tamang is in charge and is helped by Rejum Potom, who is a teacher. Students in uniform are present when we arrive. Some are reader-activists of the library network and some have been brought from nearby schools to be present only because we are there.

Uncle Moosa addresses the students, switching between Hindi and English, and uses the occasion to fete the students who have been reader-activists.

There is special recognition for Etalo Mega, who spent seven years as a volunteer looking after the Bamboosa Library. Uncle Moosa has a cheque of ₹8,000 for him by way of an award provided by a donor. Etalo currently has a government job in the Department of Gazetteers in Itanagar, the capital of Arunachal Pradesh. He has travelled to Tezu from Itanagar to meet us and receive the award.

There is also a library at Wakro, another small city in Lohit district. Reader-activists for this library come from two private schools, which are up to Class 8. The students then mostly go to Tezu to complete their schooling. Since the students keep moving on, the number of reader-activists fluctuates. There were 12 till last year and now there are around six.

Since 2011, the library at Wakro, in the interiors of Lohit district, has been experimenting with setting up mini libraries at the village level by allowing children to take home books during the holidays to lend them further.

LIBRARY FOR LATHAO

At the village of Lathao, in the newly formed Namsai district, a new library has been added to the network. It is reason to celebrate and the inauguration takes place during our visit. There are presentations and speeches followed by lunch.

T. Ete, principal of the Lathao Government Higher Secondary School, has generously set aside a small building for the library. Konchiwa Namchoon, a junior teacher, will be in charge of the library. The building used to be staff quarters and was to be demolished. It will now house the library, which earlier had just a little space inside the school and couldn't function very well.

It is at Lathao that we meet reader-activists from Wakro and Tezu who have specially made the trip by bus. They are mostly young girls close to completing school. They have been exposed to a range of books from biographies to fiction to fantasies. But the big attraction of the libraries is the opportunity they offer for self-expression by way of storytelling, book-readings and staging of skits.

A frail, bird-like presence with bright eyes and a gentle yet energetic

The library network is meant to reach out to villages and towns that dot Arunachal across the rambling and diverse topography of the state.



Konchiwa Namchoon, Nomita Lungchang and Timita Mungyak



Lathao event: Rohini Kri reads to the audience



Bethem Marai, Basailu Aima, Animai Chikro and Solina Khambrai at Lathao



Staging of skits is a popular activity



Solina Khambrai of the Bamboosa Library explains how reader-activists reach out

The Vivekananda Kendra set up schools to give children in Arunachal a sense of their place in modern India.

manner, Uncle Moosa's goal has been to create an enduring library culture in Arunachal Pradesh. As he ages, he is eager the library movement finds ownership in the communities it has tried to serve.

"I tell people they will have to make the effort to keep the libraries going. They have to take interest and do the work. I can at best provide advice and support," he says.

THE JOURNEY

Former students whom he has known for more than three decades already make a significant contribution. Some of them are teachers. At least one has her own a school. Uncle Moosa has been a life coach to them from the time they were children in the Vivekananda Kendra Vidyalayas. As the years have passed, they have become his extended family. The library movement draws and thrives on such bonding.

Sathyanarayanan Mundayoor went to Arunachal Pradesh as a 'life worker' for the Vivekananda Kendra, which had opened schools to help tribal children get a standard education and learn Hindi.

The schools were meant to give children in Arunachal a sense of their place in modern India. They would learn about the Indian Union, freedom struggle, Indian history and the contributions of Indian thinkers and political leaders. It was especially important to do so after the Chinese invasion of 1962 and the territorial claims made on Arunachal and the military conflicts of 1965 and 1972.

The Vivekananda Kendra's initiative reflected the size and diversity



Lathao event: Kishalu Kri talks to the audience about I Am Malala

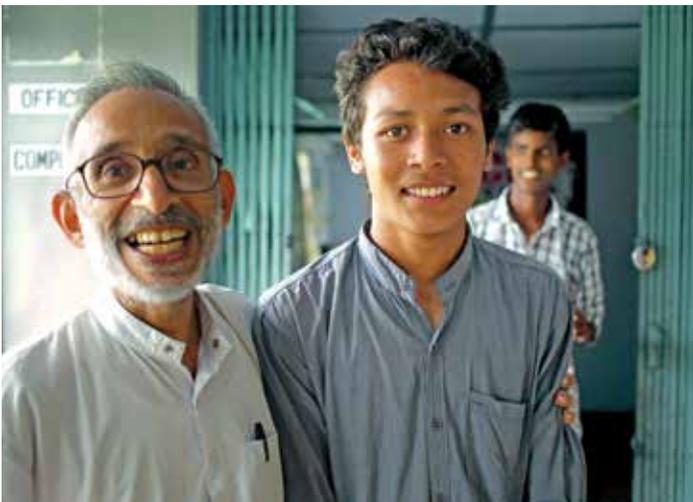


With books around, even very small children try to read

HALL OF FAME



Principal T. Ete (centre holding flowers) has provided a building at his school for the Lathao Library



Dilip Chetri, reader-activist of the Bamboosa Library, with Uncle Moosa



Etalo Mega spent seven years supervising the Bamboosa Library

of India. The kendra was headquartered at Kanyakumari, the southernmost tip of India and it was reaching out to Arunachal Pradesh at the other extremity of the country on the border with China.

The kendra advertised for 'life workers' and teachers ready to live in Arunachal and work in its schools. Sathyanarayanan Mundayoor, then 25 years old, was immediately interested. He knew nothing about Arunachal and was nowhere near being the Uncle Moosa he is today. And yet he desperately wanted to go.

"I don't know if it was because of the kind of fascination my generation of Malayalis had for the Himalayas or whether it was because I wanted to do something completely different. But I felt this was something I wanted to do and so I applied," he recalls.

He was at that time working as an income-tax inspector in Bombay. It was a secure job but not the life for him because he was a man of many parts. He had a bachelor's degree in the sciences and was working on a master's in linguistics. He enjoyed reading widely and had a keen interest in Malayalam and English.

He belonged to Thrissur but had spent his childhood hopping towns in Kerala because of his father's transferable bank job. Employment in the income-tax department brought stability, but what he wanted was to break free and discover the world.

It is a decision, he says, he has never regretted. Arunachal is beautiful and its people are gentle and caring. He has sisters and brothers of his own in Chennai and Thrissur, who are always there for him and send him money. But Arunachal is where he belongs as Uncle Moosa, who is loved and welcomed into innumerable homes.

The Vivekananda Kendra recruited the young Sathyanarayanan as a 'life worker'. He needed two years to complete his master's in linguistics in Bombay and after that it was Arunachal for him. He went from 'life worker' to teacher and then education officer.

The difference that education can make to a generation is seen in Arunachal. It is a strongly patriarchal tribal society, but the girls who went to the Vivekananda Kendra Vidyalaya at Tafragram have all gone on to be achievers. They are now in their late thirties now,

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Students at the Lathao Senior Secondary School



Boys from the Government Secondary School in Tezu at the Calsom Library



Girls sing a Mishmi song at the Calsom Library

mostly married with children of their own, but working and earning. At Timita Mungyak's beautiful bamboo and wood house at Lathao children run happily and noisily through the rooms. This is the family home where her mother-in-law lives.

Nomita Lungchang and Sheelawati Monlai recall the time they were children together in the boarding at the Tafragram school. They remember Uncle Moosa as a young man. Today he stays over in their homes and they take care of him as they would an elder.

Timita has a master's degree and teaches English in the government secondary school at Namsai. Nomita has a Ph.D in veterinary science and Sheelawati a Ph.D in botany.

Sailu Bellai was with them at Tafragram. So were Bapenu Kri and Ibulu Tayang. We meet these women in Tezu. They belong to the same batch and know each other well.

Sailu became a teacher in the Vivekananda Kendriya Vidyalaya but set up her own school because she couldn't take a transfer out of Tezu.

Bapenu Kri works for the government as a deputy director in the department of urban development and housing. Ibulu Tayang is in the agriculture department as a training assistant.

They seem to share a spirit of voluntarism, which expresses itself in the Alumni Education Society and the Kun-Ta-Nau Welfare Society.

Ealto Mega was a young man when he joined the Bamboosa Library as it opened in 2007 in Tezu. "Uncle Moosa had a completely different idea of how a library should function. He told me that books have to be reached to children so that they become interested. We soon began visiting remote village schools, taking them books and organising events like recitations and book readings with them."

Uncle Moosa is the name Sathyanarayanan Mundayoor took when he began writing a column for children in a local newspaper. As names go, it has a comic book quality about it and has stuck. Despite old-age infirmities such as his failing eyesight and weak back, the infectious enthusiasm and idealism with which he arrived in Arunachal hasn't diminished. ■

Umesh Anand and Photographer Lakshman Anand spent time with Sathyanarayanan Mundayoor in Arunachal to understand the world of Uncle Moosa

PICTURES BY AJIT KRISHNA



Ramesh Gharu has students enthralled

RAMESH GHARU

A teacher with toys

WHEN Ramesh Gharu enters a classroom it is packed to capacity. There are students all over — behind their desks, standing at the back, on the floor in front. They are thrilled to be there and the excitement is visible on their faces. Eyes shining, they hold on to each word and try to outdo one another with answers, at times speaking together in noisy outbursts.

Gharu has the appeal of a rockstar. He knows to go live. He can make sparks fly. His personal energy gets a frenzy going. From start to finish, he sets the pace, regulating the highs and lows.

Using a variety of innovative teaching aids, which he has made himself, Gharu can in a single lesson go from maths to geography to language to elementary science to gender. It is a kaleidoscope of information and ideas.

The reputation of government-run schools is generally dismal. The infrastructure sucks. Teachers don't care and lack in abilities. Books aren't available. Children don't turn up and when they do it is questionable how much they actually learn.

Gharu has confronted this ailing system and turned it on its head. He has shown that even in the most bleak of circumstances teaching can be fun and learning a liberating experience. For the past 20 years in a government school at Siyani village in Barmer district of

Rajasthan, close to the border with Pakistan, Gharu has built a great reputation for himself as a perceptive teacher and as a compassionate human being.

“For me teaching is all about involving children. Children finally teach themselves. As a teacher, I see my job as creating an environment in which a child can explore and experiment. What is language after all? The letters of the alphabet remain the same. How you use them is what matters,” says Gharu.

“Children should be given the opportunity to play around with the alphabets, play around with ideas. It is then that they learn quickly and remember what they learn and find the classroom experience meaningful. If I as a teacher can bring mathematics, geography, science alive in ways that don't intimidate the child, a process of learning is begun. The challenge is in getting started in ways that are happy and wholesome and not destructive. A child must get the self-confidence to explore and make mistakes.”

A short, thickset man, who looks kind of muscular because of a big chest, strong arms and noticeable shoulders, Gharu is a natural teacher. He has an MA and a B.Ed and all that, but his success as a teacher comes from his own insights and inventiveness. He has chosen to remain a primary school teacher though he has the

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Ball, rings, bird and plane



Explaining how the Earth moves



Ramesh Ghara with his students

designation and salary of a lecturer.

“I am happiest in the classroom with young children,” says Ghara. “It is where I belong and where I can have the most impact on young lives. I also don’t want administrative posts in which I will sit behind a table and spend my time doing bureaucratic things.”

DEEP COMPASSION

A deep sense of compassion defines Ramesh Ghara. It is because of his humble antecedents. As a Ghara he comes from the lowest rung among Scheduled Castes. Having evolved from there, he has dropped Ghara from his name in the official records. So, Ramesh Ghara has become Ramesh Kumar. But in everyday interactions and for his email, Twitter and Facebook accounts he continues to use Ghara. He is often referred to as Gharuji.

His parents were *safai karamcharis*, which is a euphemism for workers who clean toilets and are manual scavengers. In his boyhood, and even as a young man, Ghara would help his parents when they went out to clean toilets.

The discrimination Ghara has faced could have made him a bitter and angry man. Instead he is gentle and soft spoken. He brims with energy, but lacks aggression even though he admits he continues to face discrimination among his teaching colleagues.

Ghara’s life changed because he managed to get through school and then college. He did different jobs, all of them inconsequential, and his caste followed him wherever he went. He would invariably end up being told to scrub and clean and perform menial functions.

It was his dream to join the Army. In college he was part of the National Cadet Corp (NCC), where he distinguished himself. His NCC success gave him direct access to the round of final selection into the Army, but he never made it.

Ghara began teaching and giving tuitions. As he journeyed along he found employment in the Kendriya Vidyalaya at the Air Force station in Barmer. For the first time he got what he considered a decent salary — ₹2,500. He also found acceptance because the forces are free of biases based on caste.



Classes are full of action and fun

It was around then that someone suggested he teach street children in his spare time. He began doing that and became closely involved with families with very little. It was while helping street children get an education that he got interested in making toys and saw the opportunity in creatively recycling waste.

The next stage for him was a job as a government teacher in 2006. He was posted in the government upper primary school in the village of Siyani. For many years, till he acquired a motorcycle, Gharu would walk the last six kilometres to the school.

He remained posted at Siyani for 20 years because, he says, there are no takers for jobs in a school so far out. Over time the school got upgraded from upper primary to senior secondary. Last year, he was transferred to the government secondary school at Railway Kuan No 3 in Barmer city.

A PERFORMER

It was at the Siyani village school that Gharu's talent as a teacher grew and blossomed. It was here that he became a legend among the students for his novel teaching methods and the passion with which he would conduct his classes. He faced discrimination from other teachers for being of a lower caste, but from the children there was unquestioning acceptance. His success was in integrating his lessons with the lives of the children.

Gharu has cultivated the manner of a performer. He is a teacher but the children could just as well be watching a magician or a juggler. His classroom aids include a soft ball made from waste cloth and covered in plastic. A bird made from discarded X-ray film attached to an old ballpoint pen so that wings can be made to move. A bird made from wedding cards. An aeroplane made from old cardboard. Doughnut rings from waste polythene that can be used to balance loads on the head.

Each aid has multiple functions. The first lesson is in conservation and controlling pollution since all the aids are made from recycled waste. The ball is good for a game of catch. But it can also be used to teach children about the shape of the Earth and its interplay with the

Sun and the Moon.

A polythene doughnut ring, when placed on the head, makes it easier to carry a load. The weight is distributed and becomes more manageable. There is a lesson in elementary science here. Traditionally women put a thick wad of cloth under a pitcher of water or a bundle of firewood carried on the head. It allows them to balance the load and maintain posture.

The doughnut rings Gharu makes come in many colours and sizes. Placed side by side they can be used to teach numbers 10, 100, 1,000 and so on. It is vivid and can be easy to grasp.

The bird with flapping wings made from old X-ray film is used to teach bird calls. What does a myna sound like? What does a crow sound like? It is also an opportunity to talk about gender equality and the rights of girl children. Like birds shouldn't be caged, girls should be left free to discover their potential. Girls are the pride of a family, Gharu tells his students. The message goes down well with the girls in the classroom. They come from male-dominated families.

TEACHING TEACHERS

Over time, Gharu has acquired the reputation of being a teacher's teacher. Other teachers reach out to him to learn his methods. But he will only help government schools, he says. He also trains teachers at the District Institute of Education and Training (DIET) in Barmer.

It has been an amazing journey from being among the lowliest of the low and cleaning toilets to now being regarded as a pundit of inventive teaching methods.

Gharu earns a salary of ₹52,000 a month from the government. He has built a small house where he lives with his wife, mother and six children. Two of them are his own girls, two are adopted and two belong to his younger brother whose wife has left him. The younger brother is still a sweeper.

"We are very happy," he says, exuding satisfaction. "We have everything we need. I enjoy my work as a government teacher." ■

Umesh Anand and Photographer Ajit Krishna visited the village of Siyani in Barmer to meet Ramesh Gharu and watch him take class.



Kim Chaddha working with children at the AURED centre in Hyderabad

KIM CHADDHA

Parent as therapist

IT was a beautiful baby that Kim Chaddha gave birth to. She weighed 3.5 kg and the hospital said she was perfect. The way she looked, everyone agreed. Chaddha was especially relieved. Doctors had cautioned her about a one percent chance that the baby would be deformed because of antibiotics she had taken when she didn't realise she was pregnant. They had in fact suggested an abortion so as to be on the safe side. But Chaddha had decided to go ahead with the pregnancy and now, after the successful childbirth, she was over the moon with joy.

As a year went by Chaddha felt concerned that her baby wasn't walking or repeating words. The paediatrician assured her that all was well. But further checking revealed that the baby couldn't hear — and because she couldn't hear she couldn't find the early balance needed to walk.

It was 1994 and in Hyderabad at that time there was the equipment but not the expertise to test a baby's hearing. To know how deaf her daughter was Chaddha rushed off to Mumbai, where the expertise existed. It turned out that the baby was profoundly deaf.

Soaking in the disappointing news, she returned to Hyderabad and found help from the John Tracy Clinic in the United States which worked with parents. In this way she helped her daughter for four

years. She then found EAR in Mumbai but it refused to take her daughter because she was already four. In 1999 Chaddha found AURED or Aural Education for the Deaf, which had been started in 1986 by Aziza Tyabji Hydari.

AURED provides Auditory Verbal Therapy, which literally means listen and speak. Children like Chaddha's daughter who are born deaf need their hearing supported either with a hearing aid or an implant in the cochlear. When they begin to hear sounds they learn to attach meaning to them and reproduce them.

A child with normal hearing picks up sounds even as a foetus while in the womb. After it is born, it connects to the world around it and begins to pick up language and decipher ambient sounds. Hearing memory develops as it navigates situations and relationships. A child born deaf is denied this seamless connectivity, which begins in the womb. It is cut off. Since it can't hear sounds, it can't reproduce them or understand contexts. The longer it stays like this, the more difficult it is to get the child to speak.

EARLY INTERVENTION

The most successful interventions through Auditory Verbal Therapy happen within the first two years. Chaddha was lucky to have acted

quickly. Her daughter was under two years when she turned up at AURED. Today she is a completely normal young woman studying for a degree in architecture.

Of course it wasn't easy. Chaddha had to work continuously with her baby — and she is also a single mother, having lost her husband early to a heart attack.

The AURED way isn't just about sessions in a clinic. It goes much beyond that and requires parents and others in the family to help a deaf child build new foundations of consciousness. Devices can make sounds audible, but speech develops through interactions in multiple situations.

Chaddha immersed herself in teaching her daughter to speak. She imbibed so much from AURED that she went on to become an auditory verbal therapist herself. It wasn't the way she had planned it. Handling her daughter was tough and she believed that was as much as she could do. But when Aziza, AURED's founder, asked her and then goaded her a bit, she agreed to formally train and be a therapist herself.

Chaddha now runs an AURED centre in Hyderabad. Scores of children have benefitted. But more importantly, Chaddha has shown how a parent who has struggled to restore her own child to normalcy can give back to society. Parents like her have the potential to significantly help others because of what they have been through.

Chaddha has been practising as a therapist since 2004. In Hyderabad now a baby can be easily screened for hearing loss, unlike when Chaddha gave birth to her daughter. However, screening is not mandatory and not always done. But it is a quick and simple process. Clicking sounds are made through an earpiece and monitoring equipment picks up the responses of the cochlear. It is called the automatic otoacoustic emission test. In case this fails, there is another one called the automated auditory brainstem response.

Together with newborn screening, therapy centres have also come up. Cochlear implants are also being done in the advanced hospitals. But since there isn't widespread awareness, babies continue to go unchecked and end up being helped for hearing loss when it is already too late.

"There are hospitals with therapy centres. But there were no therapy centres when I started. When I started, Apollo (hospital) was doing cochlear implants with no therapy centre. So the children had nowhere to go," says Chaddha.

ROLE OF PARENTS

"The first child who came to me had been to the audiologist at Apollo who had referred the parents to Aziza. She asked him to send the child to me. I said the family should go to AURED and Aziza in Mumbai," she recalls.

"When Aziza said why don't you take him, I said no I'm not teaching another deaf child. I have my own. I cannot. I will not because it's a huge task to take on a child's listening and language because I wasn't fluent in Telugu. But I learnt it along the way over seven or eight years. I teach in Telugu. It's all through listening and it's been a wonderful journey."

"In the past 12 years, I've worked with over 150 children on a one-to-one basis, not in a class. As a parent you learn a lot more because you go through the experience of bringing up your own hearing impaired child who is profoundly deaf," explains Chaddha.

Having a parent as a therapist is hugely advantageous because the treatment involves covering a lot of unfamiliar territory for the parents of children who need help. The parents are invariably challenged by the situation they find themselves in. There are tests to be done and the child needs to settle with a hearing aid. After that it is not just a question of picking up sound, but learning to communicate.

"There are tests you do to know what the loss is, what the brain activity is. Once those results come in you are able to say whether the loss is moderate, mild or profound. For profound deafness we definitely advise a cochlear implant for speech development. But before that you can equip the child with a hearing aid," says Chaddha.

A totally deaf child does not know what hearing is. Equipped with an aid, the child needs conditioning to hear six or seven sounds in the speech spectrum.



Chaddha works with children on a one-to-one basis



"A totally deaf child does not know what hearing is. Once equipped with a hearing aid or cochlear implant, the child needs conditioning to hear six or seven sounds in the speech spectrum. These sounds are very important for the child to start off with. Hearing is a foreign thing and the child has to get used to it. The parent has to, all the time, encourage the child to let it become a part of the body just like a pair or glasses or anything that you have to get accustomed to. Children throw off a hearing aid because sometimes it's too loud, sometimes it's irritating." ■

Umesh Anand, Harsha Sai and Photographer P. Anil Kumar visited Kim Chaddha in Hyderabad to understand her work. Chaddha was very reluctant to speak about herself.



Gautam Sharma at the government school he transformed at Bool Gaon in Barmer district

GAUTAM SHARMA

The master headmaster

BOOL Gaon is the kind of place you cannot get to easily. Even Google doesn't lead you there. Its 1,200 residents are so accustomed to their remote life in the midst of the desert that they don't expect visitors.

But distant as they are, and much beyond their own expectations, the residents of Bool Gaon now have an address that puts them on the map — it is the government upper primary school.

Recently, the school was adjudged the best among other schools in its category in Rajasthan's Barmer district. There is a certificate to show for this distinction. But much more important is the transformation that the school itself has gone through in the past six years. Such is its reputation now that Bool Gaon's children no longer 20 kilometres every day to a private school. In fact children from other villages come to Bool Gaon.

The upswing at Bool Gaon's school began when Gautam Sharma arrived as headmaster in 2010. Sharma, 48, had been around a bit in the government school system. He had been a successful headmaster elsewhere and he had a nodal function in the Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan. He has just been transferred again, but the success of the Bool Gaon school is the result of efforts he led.

Sharma came with lots of experience and a worldview that

contrasted sharply with Bool Gaon's own seclusion. A man of few words, he is at heart an organiser. He quickly got down to work by talking to influential residents of the village and activating the School Management Committee.

"I told them together we could do a lot for the school. I immediately identified the need for a new building for the classrooms, which till then were just two cramped rooms. We needed to build three more rooms for classrooms and a room for the headmaster and staff, where we are now sitting. I called a meeting of the school management committee (SMC) and we made a proposal for a new building to the Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan, which provided the funds. It took a year to complete. We also needed tables and chairs for which we went to the panchayat," says Sharma.

EXTERIOR MATTERS

"Infrastructure is very important. I place a lot of emphasis on it. When a school looks good and facilities are in place students want to come to it and take their studies seriously. The teachers also take their teaching seriously," explains Sharma.

He has created separate bathrooms with running water for the boys and the girls. The bathroom for the girls has a mirror outside on the

HALL OF FAME

wall. There are also bathrooms for the teachers. The running water comes from the simple innovation of filling overhead tanks from a tube-well.

“Earlier water had to be brought from elsewhere and filled into our well. I told the committee that it was important that the school have its own source of water. I said we should draw up a proposal for the waterworks department so that we can have our own tube-well. We sent the proposal to the waterworks department. The government passed the proposal and a tube-well was installed. We then spent ₹1 lakh on pipes and overhead tanks. Now there is water for the toilets and for the children to drink. There is no problem of water,” says Sharma.

The school compound is as green as you can get in the desert. So there are trees and smaller plants, which provide welcome relief in harsh surroundings.

The school wall used to be a low one. Sharma has had it raised by three feet to eight feet so that the school is well delineated and the children are secure and aren't disturbed. There is sufficient space to play, but an important addition has been an extended stone patio. It is used for the prayer and yoga session every morning. Sharma calls it a 'manch' or stage. But it is really a rectangular extension from the classrooms.

DRAWINGS, MESSAGING

The walls inside and outside the classrooms are covered with colourful drawings, rudimentary graphics and inspirational messages. In this way the children get to learn about weights and measures, the alphabets in English, the importance of family values, the need for cleanliness and washing of hands, maps and the national anthem.

“We have done all this with funding from the government and panchayat and donations. For good work there is never shortage of money. There are many problems with the school system. There are many challenges. But I believe that if you want to improve things you can,” says Sharma.



Toilet for girls: Basin, mirror and overhead tank



An effort is made to promote family values



The big stone patio of the school is where assembly is held and yoga is done

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Sharma has been getting the teachers to plan how they are going to teach. They also meet once a month for a review.

“When I joined here there were 103 students. Now there are 159. Children who used to travel 20 km to a private school have taken transfer certificates from that school and joined here. I spoke to families in the village and explained to them that there was no need to send children so far. All the local children now come to this school,” says Sharma.

The number of girls attending the school has gone up but slowly because it was important to make people aware. There are two concerns here — one of the need to educate girls and the other of safety.

The building of the additional classrooms made a difference. It has given the school a bigger presence. When they were built, priests were brought from Haridwar to conduct a three-day religious ceremony. At that ceremony the village took a pledge to abstain from alcohol, tobacco and other intoxicants. As could be expected the pledge hasn't held, but Sharma has tried to bestow the school with sanctity in the eyes of the community. He has also sought to emphasise the importance of family relationships through prominent messaging on the school's walls. Some of the messaging is patently patriarchal when it talks of the daughter-in-law pressing her in-laws feet every night. But this is male-dominated Rajasthan and Sharma's is clearly a conservative voice.

Perhaps it is his conservatism that makes him more successful in the leadership role he plays with the teachers, students and the community at large. It also helps that he is pragmatic and understated.

He has the ability to lead without imposing on others.

SYSTEMS AND SERVICES

He has also been focussed on putting systems in place. The morning assembly is important. Children lead the prayer. They read out from the newspapers. There is a children's parliament with representatives who are expected to be involved in the running of the school.

When Sharma came to the school he conducted a baseline survey to understand the capabilities of the students. They were divided into categories A, B and C. Those in the C category get the most attention because they have learning issues and a lot of catching up to do.

For an hour every week, teachers help students with e-learning on a computer at the school. This is for English, mathematics and science. The e-learning is meant to deal with difficult concepts that the teacher may not be able to handle in class.

Sharma has been getting the teachers to plan how they are going to teach courses over the year. The teachers also meet once a month to review how much has been accomplished, the problems they face and the progress of students.

Ram Singh, head of the school management committee, says Sharma has been extremely hardworking. It is because of his unstinted efforts that the school has been turned around.

“We've not known him to take holidays. He's worked round the clock and has always been available. We knew of his reputation as a good headmaster and he has lived up to it,” says Ram Singh.

But turning a government school around is not easy. At this school there have been just six teachers, including Sharma, for the 159 students. Now three of them have been transferred, but the new teachers haven't been posted to the school as yet.

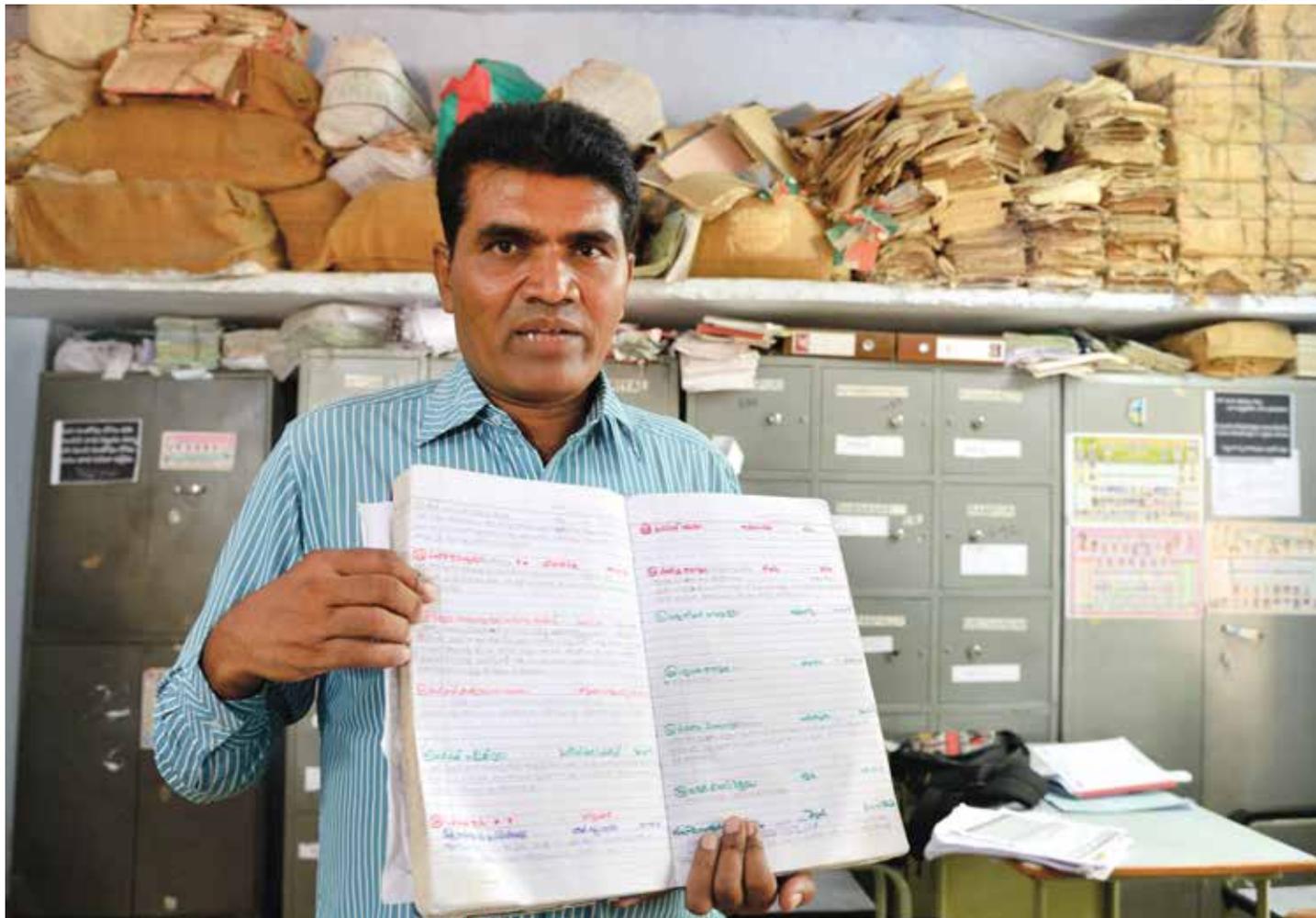
The school's success seems to be more the result of the personal drive and leadership of Sharma than a system that recognises innovations, institutionalises them and provides for succession. The question now is whether Sharma's achievements will endure after him. ■

Umesh Anand and Photographer Ajit Krishna went to Bool Gaon.



Gautam Sharma with teachers and members of the School Management Committee

PICTURES BY P. ANIL KUMAR



Beeram Ramulu holding up a notebook with details of farmer suicides in Warangal district

BEERAM RAMULU

Warangal's rights man

IT is tough being a farmer in Telangana's Warangal district. Water is difficult to come by. The soil lacks in fertility. Middlemen and moneylenders reign supreme. If a couple of crops fail, chances are that you will be staring at a deadend with no one to go to. Banks won't touch a farmer in trouble. The government doesn't have the sensitivity to pick up distress signals.

Beeram Ramulu, 48, knows how challenging life can be for Warangal's farmers because he is one himself. He is luckier than others because he has four acres, a family support base, an education and some money. He is also more savvy because he has lived and worked in Hyderabad. But if the second tube-well he has dug on his land were to fail, he would be in a spot. It is as tricky as that in Warangal. A tube-well fails, the rains don't come, a crop gets hit by pests — and just like that one's world goes topsy-turvy.

Most farmers suffer quietly. Several thousands have, in desperation, taken their own lives over the years. But Ramulu is one farmer who has decided to do his bit to find a way out by campaigning for farmers' rights and highlighting their problems.

It is not easy for a farmer to also be an activist. Ramulu works hard at it with personal conviction and perseverance. He moves around a lot in Warangal district and uses the right to information (RTI) law to access

government records. He has also linked up with civil rights groups.

Warangal's farmers suffer because of their choice of crops and their overuse of chemical fertilisers and pesticides. Cotton brings in money if a crop is successful. But it is not suitable for a rain-deficient area. It also needs to be protected from pests. The use of chemicals has depleted Warangal's soil. It has driven up the indebtedness of farmers who are forced to borrow to pay for the rising cost of pouring more and more fertilisers and pesticides into their fields.

Ramulu tries to convince farmers not to plant cotton because of the many challenges associated with its cultivation in Warangal. He suggests they grow maize and pulses instead as those crops require less water. He also campaigns for organic inputs or at least moderation in the use of pesticides and fertilisers.

MAKING CONNECTIONS

Farmers mostly don't know the way out of the difficulties they find themselves in. They need guidance and role models to make a transition to more sustainable practices. Very often they don't even know what the government has on offer in terms of support schemes and seeds. Ramulu helps them make such connections.

It is not easy. For all the awareness he has Ramulu too seems to be

13th Anniversary



Beeram Ramulu with the family of Kommera Praveen who committed suicide



Children invariably drop out of school when their father kills himself

in transition. On his four acres, he grows wheat and turmeric. A part of his land is set aside for organic practices. If his second tube-well were to fail, he would be in a bind. So, it isn't as though he has his farm sorted out.

After finishing school and acquiring some training as a technician, Ramulu got himself a job in Hyderabad. In 1994 he got married and returned to his family's farm at Thimmapur village in the Hanamkonda mandal.

"I enjoy farming and I dislike working under others, as I had to while doing a job in Hyderabad. My father worked on the farm from childhood. My grandmother was known in our village for her agricultural skills. She has been an inspiration to the other farmers. My family had 14 acres out of which us four brothers were given two acres each. The remaining six acres is still in the family's name and used for grazing. Apart from the two acres I was given, I purchased two more acres and now I have four acres," says Ramulu.

HELPED 130 FAMILIES

Ramulu says around 2003 he was influenced by the human rights activist, Burra Ramulu. A few years later, he came in contact with the Caring Citizens' Collective (CCC) and began making a record of farmer suicides and helping the families of those who had died.

The mandate of CCC is to alleviate the distress of people affected by the deepening crisis in agriculture. In CCC's view it is not just farmers who are suffering, but also those in traditional professions like artisans, weavers, carpenters and so on. Human rights initiatives need to be combined with organised caring efforts to meet the needs of families in ways that go beyond mere charity.

CCC seeks to be a platform for people from all walks of life. It reaches out through volunteers to follow up on cases of starvation deaths and suicides by farmers and weavers so as to help families cope with the challenges they face after these personal tragedies.

Apart from helping families in distress, Ramulu also wanted to do something to prevent farmers from committing suicide. He joined the Raitu Swaraja Vedika in the year 2008. It became the Telangana Raitu Joint Action Committee (TRJAC) in 2014 after Telangana State was formed.

"I can say I have directly helped 130 farmer families in the past four years. There are thousands of others who have been helped by the awareness that our organisation creates," says Ramulu. "If we know a farmer is getting into losses, we provide advice on what to grow, give him subsidised seeds and also try to connect him to banks. I have picked Cherial village, which has recorded the highest number of farmer suicides, and spread awareness amongst the farmers there about the dangers of growing cotton."

SUBSIDISED SEEDS

"The government provides subsidised seeds. We help the farmers in getting access to them because half of them don't know about the procedure or from where to collect the seeds. We have been doing this as an awareness drive over the past year," explains Ramulu.

"We are not affiliated with any of the political parties or leaders. Our main aim is to work for the farmer's benefit. We have succeeded in helping farmers get their input subsidy and better market facilities."

Ramulu has been personally maintaining a register of farmer suicides in Warangal district since 2008. He has a record of 4,000 deaths and says that he has visited 1,800 families. He focuses on the families that haven't got compensation because they need someone to speak for them.

His applications under RTI to the office of the Superintendent of Police have shown that officially there have been around 5,000 suicides between 1994 and 2008.

GOVT IN DENIAL

Ramulu believes there have been many more suicides and that the authorities have been living in denial because they don't want to own the crisis that Warangal district is experiencing.

There is also the question of compensation. Of the 5,000 cases officially recognised as suicides, compensation has been given to only 900 and 4,100 are awaiting relief. He has filed a case with the Lokayukta to help 1,200 families get compensation. Of these 400 are close to being decided.

Asked what he thinks the government should do for farmers, Ramulu says it is important to ensure that they get access to loans from banks. Farmers who take land on lease deserve to be recognised and given identity cards. There should be a fair price for crops. Crop insurance, he says, has not been working and the government should revisit this scheme.

The farmers who commit suicide invariably leave their families adrift. We went to the home of Kommera Praveen, who at 35, had hanged himself from a tree in his fields.

The cotton Praveen planted, taking loans amounting to ₹3.5 lakh, failed in two successive years. He was paying 24 percent annual interest on the loans. It was all too much for him.

The family has eight acres, which is a lot. But with Praveen gone so suddenly, his wife and parents don't know what to do. His daughter and son go to school. The family doesn't know how it will make ends meet.

"We never approached banks as we were ignorant. Praveen would take care of the farming and finances and he too never approached banks. No one from the government came to us. We lack information about taking loans from the government banks," says Praveen's widow, Narkula Sujatha, who is just 28 and doesn't know how to plan her life without her husband.

It is in circumstances such as these that Ramulu plays an invaluable role. He is invariably the only support that the family has. ■

Umesh Anand, Harsha Sai and Photographer P. Anil Kumar went to Warangal.



Sachidanand Bharati in Ufrainkhal's dense and moisture rich forest

SACHIDANAND BHARATI

The people's forester

WHEN forest fires ravaged the hills of Uttarakhand one vast stretch went unscathed. This is Ufrainkhal where communities have grown local species of trees, sculpted traditional water bodies and revived a rivulet.

Ufrainkhal's forests are dense with the majestic silver oak and wispy *khair* trees with deep roots that trap water. The ground below the canopy of trees is thick with humus, the hillsides dotted with small water bodies called *chaals*.

"Ufrainkhal's damp forests and broad-leaved trees aren't vulnerable to fire," says Sachidanand Bharati. He has been the driving force behind the community effort that has combined traditional water sources with trees to make hillsides sustainable.

All over Uttarakhand, pine and eucalyptus trees are planted because those species are commercially valuable. But they impinge on groundwater and do nothing for the village economy. The forest department owns almost all the forests in the state and grows pine widely.

"In Uttarakhand, people don't feel connected to forests anymore. They think it's the duty of the forest department. If there is a fire they don't rush in to stamp it out," says Bharati.

Bharati and his small group, the Doodhatali Lok Vikas Sansthan,

began galvanising villagers in Ufrainkhal in Pauri Garhwal district 35 years ago.

His three spirited comrades who played a lead role in this turnaround are Devi Dayal, a postman, Dinesh, an Ayurvedic practitioner and Vikram Singh, a grocery shop owner.

Bharati teaches in the Ufrainkhal Inter College. In 1982 he returned to Ufrainkhal from Chamoli district after taking part in the Chipko (hug the trees) movement. To prevent their trees from being cut by a contractor anointed by the government, Chamoli's women hugged them. The movement remains a symbol of forest conservation and peaceful resistance.

Bharati came back to find the same sorry tale of destruction being repeated in his own village. The forest department had just granted fresh logging leases in the forests around Ufrainkhal.

Determined to stop this mindless destruction Bharati and his friends went from village to village telling people to resist. The people listened. They knew that the ancient trees standing in their forests were invaluable.

Backed by them, Bharati reasoned with forest department officials. He persuaded them to come and see the value of old forests.

When the officials saw the forests they had to agree with Bharati.

13th Anniversary

Bharati's group has built 12,000 chaals in 136 villages till date. Broad-leaved trees populate the forests. Several patches are dense and biodiverse.



Hills are dotted with small water bodies called chaals



A thick blanket of foliage carpets the forest



A view of the forests of Ufrainkhal

The logging leases were scrapped and the trees survived.

The villagers had won a quiet victory. It struck them if they spoke in one voice they could persuade the government to rescind ecologically disastrous orders. They could work as one to restore the pristine environment they once had, they thought.

So in July 1980 Bharati held a two-day environment camp in the Doodhatoli mountains and invited all the surrounding villages to Ufrainkhal. In those years, the focus was on planting seedlings and saplings and putting back the trees that had been lost.

It was in March 1982 that Bharati founded the Doodhatoli Lok Vikas Sansthan to replant forests. His small people's organisation had no money, no employees not even a signboard. Devi Dayal, Dinesh and Vikram Singh were its first three members.

Devi Dayal the postman treks from village to village and door to door delivering letters and money orders. There aren't any cars or buses here, not even roads for a bike. He is the organisation's eyes and ears for he observes the forests on his rounds and delivers messages of forest and water conservation along with the mail.

Dinesh, the Ayurveda medical practitioner, listens to a range of people who approach him for medical advice. Dinesh examines them, prescribes medicine and dispenses ecological and social messages together with his medicines.

Vikram Singh runs a small *kirana* store in a neighbouring village. It is here that people congregate to gossip and exchange notes. Vikram veers the conversation to ecology.

Bharati realised that culture was a powerful means of communicating. Local hill culture is steeped in ballads and stories about jungles, animals and water. Bharati has a small troupe that winds its way from village to village, from Daund, to Dulmot to Jandriya — singing songs with local musical instruments that tell people to slow down water gushing down the hills, hold the soil together with trees, restore the forests and revive their small terrace farms.

In a region where men migrate en masse for employment a group of 15 girls sing this lyric: *'The water in the springs of my hills is cool. Do not migrate from this land, O my beloved.'*

At Daund, despite the rain, villagers, mostly women young and old, sit around and listen. The village is small and perched 6,000 feet above sea level. The villagers know the rain will collect in a stream and tumble down the hill. It will join the Ramganga river and the silted water will make its way to the Corbett National Park.

This symbiosis of culture and ecology helps people to rediscover their roots, their traditional respect for nature. It brings the village together and creates an ambience that encourages them to restore the environment that sustains them.

SETTING UP NURSERIES

In those days the forest department would hand out saplings of trees that were commercially important like pine, valued for resin, or eucalyptus valued for its oil. But such trees didn't help the women.

As forests depleted, women trekked further and further away to gather firewood, fodder and herbs, sometimes walking 8-10 km a day. "If a woman is stressed and unhappy, the family is unhappy," says Bharati.

He reckoned if he could bring the forest closer to the women he would ease their burden. "I thought could I reduce their distance to one or two kilometres? So we began looking at degraded land in the village and reforesting it."

But they needed seeds and saplings of trees and plants useful for the women, the indigenous varieties. Bharati's group had to set up their own nurseries. Women and children were drafted for the job of collecting seeds.

Then they hit a wall: they didn't have water. The nurseries needed water especially in summer when the seeds germinated. So did reforestation. But Ufrainkhal faced a scarcity of water. In trying to resolve this problem Bharati began searching for solutions.

The answer lay in the village's name. Ufrain is the name of a

HALL OF FAME



Devi Dayal, Dinesh and Vikram Singh: the postman, the Ayurveda doctor and the shopkeeper who have campaigned with Bharati



Trees and paths in the forest

goddess. Many villages and towns in Uttarakhand have either a *taal*, *khaal* or *chaal* as part of their name. These are water bodies of different sizes and villages and towns came up around them. Bharati learnt all this in a book he read.

But with no *khaal* in Ufrainkhal, Bharati and his group decided to experiment with the *chaal*. It seemed perfect for Ufrainkhal's steep slopes. It was small so it would hold some water and it wasn't big enough to cause a landslide.

For a while the Doodhatoli group experimented with various shapes and sizes of *chaals* in the early 1990s. Soon, they found the right design, the perfect fit for their forests.

From 1993 to 1998, Bharati and his group began digging *chaals* along hill slopes. Just a year later after the rains water began flowing in a rivulet called Sukharaula, which had been dry for decades. It stayed for a few months. The next year, water stayed for a longer duration. By 2001 the Sukharaula became a full-fledged river.

Bharati's group has built 12,000 *chaals* in 136 villages till date. Trees like oak, rhododendron, fir and alder populate the forests. Several patches are very dense and biodiverse. In fact, Ufrainkhal's forests are better than the government's reserved forests administered by the forest department.

ROLE OF WOMEN

Women from 150 villages are involved in forest conservation and protection. The Doodhatoli group maintains regular communication with about two dozen volunteers, mostly women, in each village for the men migrate to the plains for work.

The thousands of *chaals* built here and the hundreds of hectares of regenerated forests are their only hope. The women number in hundreds and are a silent green brigade.

They have devised an ingenious system for handing over forest protection duties to the next volunteer— typical of how the women here combine music and rhythm in daily chores.

The woman in charge of patrolling the forest carries a baton with a string of bells tied on top. The sound of the bells reverberates across the silence of the hills.

When a woman is done with her shift, she returns to the village and leaves the baton at the doorstep of a neighbour. Whoever finds the baton in front of her house takes up guard duties the following day.

Forest guards are not needed. The women play that role. Bharati's group has formed hundreds of Mahila Mangal Dals across villages. "Everyone is equal in the group. There is no high caste or low caste, rich or poor," says Bharati.

The Mahila Mangal Dals are evolving, venturing into microfinance for loans with modest interest: ₹1 for every ₹100 taken.

Bharati bridged the distance between women and forests. He believes if the distance between people and ecology is bridged, the result will be a greener environment. ■

The article was written with help from Anupam Mishra



Honnesara Paniyajji Manjappa with students at the Vanashree school at Sagar

HONNESARA PANIYAJJI MANJAPPA

LIC agent builds lives

DRESSED in spotless white Honnesara Paniyajji Manjappa smiles warmly at the children sitting behind a long narrow desk. The classroom is octagonal so that every child faces the teacher. No one can be a backbencher at the three Vanashree schools Manjappa runs in the Shimoga district of Karnataka.

The faces of the children reveal that they are from all over India. Mostly they are destitute children, rescued child labourers, juvenile delinquents, dropouts and children whom other schools turned away.

Vanashree throws its doors open to them. So far since 1990 about 3,000 students have gone through the Vanashree schools. Of them 100 have got admitted into medical, engineering and professional colleges. Some are working abroad. Whenever they come to India, they visit the school that transformed their lives.

Currently, the three schools together have about 1,000 children enrolled. Of them 20 percent are from well-to-do homes and pay fees, which add up to ₹15-20 lakh annually. Manjappa puts the commission he earns from selling policies of the Life Insurance Corporation (LIC) into meeting the costs of the schools. For the rest, he depends on donations.

All the children, regardless of which state they come from, learn

Kannada and speak it fluently. “It isn’t difficult to teach. The children learn in a year. Knowing the local language has many advantages. They can communicate with everyone. Otherwise, they would miss out a lot,” says Manjappa.

Manju Naik is now an assistant engineer in Ambikanagar’s Karnataka Power Corporation in the Uttara Kannada district of Karnataka. He has a home, a job, and a car. In 2002 Naik was a child labourer slaving at a coffee plantation in Chikmagalur. One day, Naik and 30 other children were dramatically rescued by Manjappa and brought to Vanashree.

Some of the boys ran away saying they didn’t like the food. But Naik, a Lambani tribal boy from Bellary district, stayed on. He studied assiduously and eventually graduated from Malnad College of Engineering in Hassan, topping his class.

“I have a decent government job, a place to stay and a car. My mates who ran away are back to where I was as a child — working as labourers. I am what I am because of Manjappa Mama,” says Naik, with gratitude in his voice.

Manjappa’s schools have students from 14 states — Arunachal Pradesh, Meghalaya, Uttaraanchal, Bihar, Uttar Pradesh, Delhi,

HALL OF FAME

Rajasthan, Gujarat, Goa, Assam, Manipur, Nagaland, Punjab and from Karnataka's 30 districts.

Around 30 percent of students are categorised as 'educationally backward.' Yet in the past 16 years, not a single child has failed the Senior Secondary School Leaving Certificate (SSLC) or Class 10 exam.

Fourteen-year-old Bianglin is an orphan from Meghalaya. When she joined Vanashree she was shy, insecure and fearful. She could only speak Khasi, her mother tongue.

Bianglin is now fluent in Hindi, Kannada, and English. She has also learnt music, Bharatanatyam, and yoga. A confident girl, now in Class 9, Bianglin is invariably chosen to be master of ceremonies during school programmes.

"My ambition is to become a doctor," she says. "A person from Sirsi has promised to sponsor me if I do well in my studies," she says, her eyes reflecting hope.

THE JOURNEY

Manjappa is now 61. He is the eldest of nine children in his family. His parents, Lakshminarayanappa and Tharavathi, were farmers and eked out a living. As a child, Manjappa faced a series of health problems. At the age of three, he got polio. One leg became shorter by four inches. His mother would massage his legs for hours trying to correct this deformity. When he was five, a bout of jaundice almost killed him. A local vaid's medicine miraculously saved him. In fact, by the time Manjappa was an adolescent he had already battled several illnesses.

Coping with illnesses had two fallouts. At 15 he learnt yoga that made him stronger psychologically and physically. He also acquired a strange confidence in himself to make the impossible possible.

Manjappa joined the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) and became an activist. He says it gave him the opportunity to meet people, both rich and poor, and understand issues in education and the environment. In 1979, he organised a summer camp for students, a new concept in those days. "That camp opened my eyes. I had to answer hundreds of questions asked by students. Compared to this what I had studied in college was nothing. I learnt a lesson — education is not about blurting out all that you know. You should be able to reply to questions asked by curious students," he says.

Manjappa started his first school in temporary thatched huts in Bachchodi to provide education to Kudubi tribals. Alongside, he began two more schools one at Varadalli Road in Sagar and the other at Ulavi.

The main school at Sagar and the school at Bachchodi are residential. The school at Sagar has 600 students and classes from lower kindergarten to Class 10. The school at Bachchodi has 200 students and classes from upper primary to Class 7. A third school at Ulavi, also upto Class 7, has 200 students, but isn't residential.

At Vanashree the slogan is, 'My school is my home.' The schools balance education with emotional stability. Parents are given five assurances when they admit their children. Two are worth recounting: students who have studied here for five years will face life confidently and never contemplate committing suicide. They will learn to tackle water shortages.

"Our students are of strong character. They can tackle criticism, harshness, face interviews and emerge successfully. Appreciation of culture is an intrinsic part of schooling," says Manjappa, who is called Vanashree Manjappa in Sagar.

OCTAGONAL CLASSROOMS

Vanashree schools have implemented many innovative ideas. The school in Sagar has 22 octagonal classrooms in little thatched huts. It has 24 teachers. The maximum number of students in a class is 30. The school also has 21 non-teaching staff.

Children are encouraged to ask as many questions as possible. A lot of learning takes place through seminars — which means that students teach other students. Murali, a Class 4 student, is the teacher

Most of the children are destitute children, rescued child labourers, juvenile delinquents, dropouts and children whom other schools just turned away.



The floor is used as an interactive blackboard by a teacher to help learning



Manjappa talks to students. Classrooms are octagonal.



Each hut has lively charts. The school teaches farming as well.



Vanashree's hostel. Children who get admitted to college can continue to stay here

in class today. "Plants are very important in our lives. With the help of chlorophyll, they prepare food," he explains. He has a blackboard but behind the students, there is a whiteboard, where they can write answers or do an exercise assigned by their teacher. "This saves us time. We can evaluate the child's assignment much faster than answers written in a notebook," says a teacher.

"Our school is different from other schools. Teaching in one class isn't heard in the other classes. The surrounding green creates a learning atmosphere," says Krithi, who studies in Class 10.

Bindu, also in Class 10, says what she likes most is that students teach students. "Because of this, we understand things better." Emhiba, in the same class, says, "All are equal here. No one is labeled a dull student or a clever student. We discuss our lessons with each other."

The children are enrolled regardless of their marks. "We start the process of bringing them up to standard," explains Manjappa. A student who is behind the class when admitted is sent to a special class from June to August to catch up.

The school organises discussions with experts in different fields as well as with its old students. Vanashree teaches its students farming. There is a vegetable patch where children plant various crops. The school also has a unit that teaches the children tailoring. The older children learn to cook.

A group of girls after a discussion with Kalavati Mataji — teachers are addressed as Guruji or Mataji — decided to make pulao for us for dinner. It was well made.

Since most of the children are poor, Vanashree meets all their needs including clothing. After Class 10, children who enroll in local colleges can stay on. Currently, 10 such students are living in the school's hostel.

CHILDREN FROM MEGHALAYA

Thirty students from Meghalaya are enrolled here. The Meghalaya connection began 15 years ago when a well-wisher brought a poor boy, Sanmi Biam, to the school. His father had passed away and Biam didn't want to go to school. But Vanashree admitted him

and he blossomed. Noting his progress back home, other parents began approaching Vanashree to enroll their children too.

"The social condition of Meghalaya is pathetic. It is a matriarchal society but the flip side is that in many families the men don't shoulder responsibility. Teenagers acquire bad habits like smoking. Girls are married off very young and become teenage mothers," says Manjappa.

Risa is from Meghalaya. "I don't feel this is a school or a hostel. This is our home. Starting from clothes and slippers, everything is provided by the school. Whenever I need something I ask like I would ask my mother. The school has taught me how to live and tackle difficult situations. When I joined the school in Class 3, I didn't know anything," she says.

Risa's dream is to become a doctor so she is studying science. "Even after finishing school, I'll keep coming here and helping. This is not a second home but my first home," she says.

Students can approach Manjappa any time. "They don't need any permission — no appointment slip. They don't even knock on the door. Even if I am talking to someone influential they can walk in," says Manjappa. It is parental care that makes Vanashree a home.

The walls of the school are covered with diagrams and information that students can use. The school also offers courses in yoga, meditation, music and art.

Bhavya, a physically challenged girl in Class 10 is from Chattisara, a nearby village. None of the schools she went to earlier could provide her an ambience conducive to her needs. Her parents were worried. Vanashree admitted her. Since Bhavya couldn't walk, her parents would physically carry her to the school. Darshan, who is studying in Class 8, had dropped out of half a dozen schools earlier.

Why do students face learning difficulties and find it hard to adjust to school? "They just lack self-confidence," says Manjappa. "They lose self-esteem when teachers abuse them, call them dull and beat them. We taught Bhavya yoga and pranayama and built her self-confidence. Within two months she started walking and is happy in school." ■

Shree Padre and Photographer Ajit Krishna went to Shimoga district to meet Manjappa.

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‘NEW POLITICS HAS A LONG WAY TO GO IN INDIA’

Loksatta’s Jayaprakash Narayan on parties, policies and reforms

Civil Society News
New Delhi

IS politics in India getting cleaner and more accountable? Are more people in the middle class ready to stop shunning politicians and engage with them instead for better results? Is an Aam Aadmi Party (AAP) being in power in Delhi a sign of new politics taking root?

Civil Society spoke to Dr Jayaprakash Narayan, who founded Loksatta two decades ago and was an early voice for reforms in the electoral system, on what he thinks are the real improvements that have been made.

Narayan says it is significant that more professionals and honest people are entering politics. Grand corruption has been addressed. The right to information has brought greater transparency. Voter registration is much higher. Defection is not the curse it used to be.

But established parties have yet to commit themselves to systemic change and give the new talent they attract the authority to lead it. Similarly new parties like AAP have to go beyond being ethical and tactical to being rational and coming up with solutions.

Loksatta has been a frontrunner in promoting cleaner politics and in getting professionals to engage with the political system. What do you think has been achieved over the years?

In the last 20 years the discourse on democratic dissent and the reform agenda has significantly changed from an instinctive opposition to politics to an increasing engagement with the political process. In my judgment this is a vast improvement.

Secondly, I have always argued that the politician is the victim of a vicious cycle and therefore politics is truly a noble endeavour. We have to transform the nature of politics. I don't think we have achieved great success in articulating this. But it is finding increasing resonance. We have to figure out where institutional changes are needed.

Thirdly, there are very specific and tangible gains

in the last 15-20 years. Voter registration has improved dramatically. There is a world of difference from how things were in 1996-98. Disclosure of candidate details has now become the norm.

In political funding, we have an excellent law today, a genuine legal framework. People confuse buying of votes with political funding. The question is — how do you create a system where you don't need money to buy votes.

Political parties legitimately do have honest avenues to raise resources, which I think is a great plus. In 2003 we got this law enacted. I take special pride in making that happen after the Tehelka scam.

Then, defection, while still a continuing menace, is very different from what it was 20 years ago. The anti-defection law has been tightened. It is no longer a dominant feature of our political system.

So you would say defection is more an aberration than the rule now?

Exactly. Limiting the size of the cabinet has happened through a constitutional amendment. The right to information law happened in 2005. The local courts law has not been implemented. The legislative process is over. We do have a law but it's dysfunctional.

The 97th Amendment to the Constitution gives autonomy to cooperatives, very important for the country's future. Civil society organisations and cooperatives can now function without intervention.

Loksatta also helped in getting through the 99th Amendment on the appointment of judges to the Supreme Court and High Court. Of course the Supreme Court struck down the NJAC (National Judicial Appointments Commission) as unconstitutional. But at least the fight is on. You can't gloss over these issues anymore.

Then you have several policy initiatives in the country. One is the cancellation of the 2G licences. Competitive bidding for natural resources like spectrum and coal will make grand corruption a thing of the past.

We fought three years to get the ban on export of



Jayaprakash Narayan: 'We pretend to have local governance in

food grain lifted. Food was rotting in godowns and open silos. We are the biggest exporter of rice in the world today.

If you know what you want and you are precise about it, if you are willing to work with other parties in a non-judgmental way and build a consensus then big things can happen.

Would you say many more people who would not have joined politics earlier are part of the political establishment today?

I entirely agree. More people are interested in politics. Some have been accommodated by political parties. There is fine talent coming in. To some extent, this is making an impact but, and this is an important caveat, traditional parties see new talent as a managerial resource and not as change agents. They need competent people to manage their politics and campaigns, give them credibility or to be in government. But parties are not looking at this talent as a resource for change.

So what would change political parties?

There are three things in my judgment. One is the way parties are structured. We have two types of structures: dynastic like the Congress, and semi-

P. ANIL KUMAR



India, but it's all a myth'

democratic, semi-feudal like the BJP. They are not willing to undergo a fundamental change.

To make parties agents of change they need to attract talented people, allow them to rise and come up with an alternative agenda and make that agenda deliverable once the party gets public support.

Take the BJP in 2014. The public perception was a mandate for change. The party's perception is a mandate for expansion and for displacing the dominant party. So if you look at what they want to do and what they are doing it's exactly what the earlier parties have done or professed they would do. There is no change in the structure and institutions fundamentally in the country.

The other way change will happen is through local governments. That is the easiest and the best way in a large country like ours. Citizens can then play a role and make an impact. We pretend we have local governance in India but it's all a myth.

The third is change in the political electoral process. As long as you have the first past the post system, the Westminster model, and vote bank politics in a poor country like ours, no matter which political party comes into power, the fundamentals of politics won't change.

These are the three trajectories. They are

complementary not exclusive. If all three happen, India is very safe. If one happens, there is hope. If two happen, it's good but we are still not there.

How close are we to a tipping point in politics?

There is great opportunity. But it is dwindling. In the 21st century world we don't have the luxury of deciding our own pace of change. We have to respond to global economic forces.

We have to understand global trends: increasing parochialism in many countries, ultra nationalism, trade barriers and new technologies that make decentralised production in rich countries possible in the next decade. Therefore no country can now aspire to be another great manufacturing giant and solve its problems through exports (the way China did).

In terms of macro economic management and, to some extent infrastructure, I think there is greater cohesiveness and clarity in the country than there was 20 years ago.

But I don't think there is any significant change in the real issues. Local governance, education, healthcare delivery, service delivery, police reforms, judiciary and justice, corruption at the grassroots... I don't think we have moved much on these.

something to aspire for and others must respond to this challenge. While they were rhetorical, they are not rational. The way political parties behave in a democracy is also a function of society's evolution. You would expect a change agent to be also rational besides being ethical. Even with this deficiency I think it's important to hear such voices.

You have the 73rd and 74th Amendments to the Constitution which were supposed to improve governance. Yet there is corruption at the grassroots and municipalities have little power. Why has this happened?

I was born and brought up in a village. But the future is in urban India. In the past 40 years the culture of self-reliance and pride has been destroyed in villages. People have been made mendicants.

In urban India, for the first time, there is awareness about being taxpayers. We hear people say, we pay taxes but nothing happens. This is an excellent beginning to transform our local urban governance.

The two amendments are utterly flawed. I wish they had never happened. As a result we have created over structured and underpowered local governments. We must look at urban governance as

'To make parties agents of change they need to attract talented people, allow them to rise and come up with an alternative agenda which is deliverable.'

Technology has made some things happen but we are not at a tipping point.

In fact there is blindness right now. There isn't even any serious discussion or debate on these issues. We are lulled into a sense of security that all is right in the world.

Has the Aam Aadmi Party raised the bar in politics?

We think we understand the politics of this country but I suspect most of us don't. First, we are not one country. We are politically speaking some 30 or 40 countries. These countries are not at the same stage of economic development and per capita income. They don't have the (same level of) social consciousness and capacity to take risks, volunteer or fight the traditional forces of society.

Delhi gave that opportunity. Unsurprisingly, because Delhi has the highest per capita income in the country and, therefore, has more people capable of understanding, aspiring, volunteering and confronting traditional entrenched forces.

Then the Congress party went and committed suicide. The Congress disappeared and gave space to AAP and Arvind's tactical brilliance made it happen. Third, of course, is media. The media is oxygen for political growth. Political activity is about media time and, because we are a Delhi centric country, enormous attention was given which was good.

AAP did set an example that ethical politics is

a fundamental issue and really give power, resources and flexibility to local governance so that this constitutional rigidity disappears.

The second is about corruption. The best way to tackle it is for people to see the link between taxes, resources and the outcome. If people know these are the resources we have, and this should be coming to us — roads, street lighting, drains, schools ... they can track it.

Once you understand that local governance makes the most difference to your life then you start valuing your vote a little more.

At the same time I am a great champion of the independent ombudsman. Why not create a strong one in each district to oversee elected representatives and officials?

Also, a lot of talent that can't get into the higher level of politics can easily work at local level. There are many people doing great work in health or education in isolation. If given a chance they can make a phenomenal difference. The political process can be dramatically transformed.

Narendra Modi made an important comment in his speech on Independence Day. He said, "if we have lakhs of problems, then we also have one hundred and twenty five crore brains which are all capable of solving these problems." It's a very powerful comment but he never declared any understanding of that comment in the last two years. Really there are problem solvers all over India. ■



Mattathil Devasia Mathew, proprietor of Usheera Industries, which produces a range of crafts, slippers, hats and soaps from vetiver

Usheera's grass sprouts jobs

Shree Padre
Mangaluru

USHEERA Industries is unusual in many ways. A jumble of natural products made of vetiver, an aromatic grass, rolls out of here. Its workers are around 100 uneducated and poor women, plus a few men with disability. It outsources work, creating more employment. And ex-employees start their own vetiver units with the blessings of Usheera's founder and proprietor, the pertinacious 56-year-old Mattathil Devasia Mathew.

"Even if 100 people start units like mine, it doesn't really affect my business. I don't compete with my ex-trainees. I would be happier if they developed new designs," says Mathew.

Usheera means vetiver in Sanskrit. The enterprise produces images, hats, slippers, fans, soaps, oil, incense sticks and a sherbet all made from vetiver (*Chrysopogon zizanioides*), a fragrant grass that originates from India. Mathew is now experimenting with banana leaf and areca nut leaf sheath.

Vetiver is also known for controlling soil erosion and landslides and recharging rainwater. Recent studies indicate that it can help purify contaminated water bodies too. Impressed by its many virtues the World Bank has floated The Vetiver Network

(www.vetiver.org) to popularise this grass.

In the south, the many uses of vetiver are not known although in Kerala oil extracted from vetiver is used in traditional healing. In the north, vetiver is called *khus* and is well known for its cooling effect. It is woven into blinds to keep out the heat and dust of summer.

SHOESTRING BUDGET

Usheera Industries was started in 1992 on a shoestring budget. Mathew, who comes from a very poor family, studied only till Class 3. His family is from south Kerala but had settled in Jadhkal in Karnataka. Mathew says he was attracted by vetiver's fragrance. So, after much thought, he decided to try his hand at converting the grass into *chappals* and hats.

He bought land in Bhatkal with his wife Elamma and purchased a stitching machine plus a few tools. They managed to make slippers and hats from vetiver and began a small unit from their

tiny home on a highway.

But Mathew didn't know how to sell his products. Vetiver was underrated in Karnataka. So Mathew packed his products into gunny bags and headed for south Kerala where he knew a few people. To his surprise, while everyone appreciated his products not a single person bought a hat or a pair of slippers.

Unfazed, Mathew decided to popularise his products by gifting his hats and slippers to friends. His 'free introductory offer' brought him luck. Within a few weeks, he began receiving orders.

Usheera Industries now has its own showroom and takes part in exhibitions but the unit doesn't have to look for buyers. People, like Rajendra Birar who runs a shop in Nasik, turn up to buy. A shopkeeper at Murdeshwar, a pilgrimage centre, stocks only Usheera products. Usheera's products are packed and sent to Chennai, Mumbai, Pune, Bengaluru and other cities in southern India.

The company's best-selling product is vetiver images of Lord



Ganesh. So popular is the Ganesh artifact that Mathew estimates that it makes up 85 percent of Usheera's total production. "Every month we make not less than 1,000 Ganesh artifacts. By now, our Ganeshas must be adorning millions of homes in south India," says Mathew.

He says he has lost count of the number of Ganesh models they have made. Every few years they discontinue the old model and invent a new one.

"Actually, the price of inputs keeps rising. If we raise prices, customers will complain. So we design a new model instead. Besides, people want change and choice. They don't want to see the same design every year," reasons Mathew.

Before the Ganesh Chaturthi festival each year, Usheera Industries displays its new Ganesh artifacts in shops. Depending on the size, Ganesh images are priced between ₹50 to ₹650. Usheera also crafts artifacts of Lord Krishna, Jesus Christ and other holy figures. But it is Ganesh who attracts the most buyers.

Initially, Mathew used to manufacture images of many divine figures but not Ganesh. Then, at an exhibition in Yellapur, a college lecturer asked Mathew why Ganesh was missing from his pantheon. The question prompted Mathew to design a Ganesh idol. It became a bestseller.

Many of his employees who have become entrepreneurs in vetiver are also earning money by producing images of Ganesh.

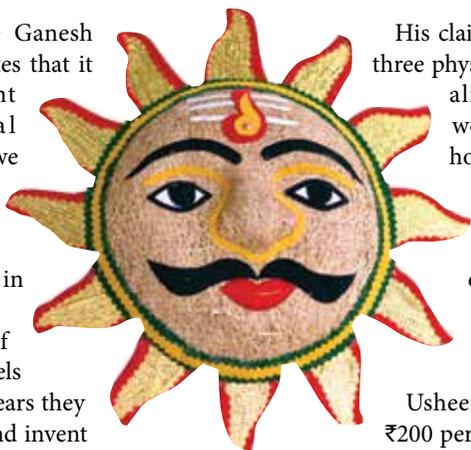
Usheera's slippers and hats are also popular. The indoor slippers are durable. Mathew says customers tell him vetiver *chappals* reduce cracked heels, prevent water retention in the body and keep their eyes cool.

Those who work outdoors a lot buy vetiver hats. Birar buys hats from Usheera. "Farm labourers working in grape orchards buy them because it keeps their heads cool," he says.

Usheera also manufactures vetiver soaps blended with turmeric, aloe vera and sandalwood. The soaps are beautifully packed in another natural raw material — areca nut leaf sheath. Also popular are incense sticks made with vetiver and citronella. The fragrance helps to keep mosquitoes away. Then there is vetiver sherbet. It has no compelling taste, but a gentle aroma. "Vetiver keeps your body cool," says Mathew. "I would like to develop a vetiver soft drink in future." Products made of vetiver last for many years. Sprinkling a little water revives its subtle fragrance once it fades.

GROWTH WITH JOBS

"My focus is always on the poor, not the rich," says Mathew. "Most of their problems are financial. I talk to them and give practical advice. Most of the time what they need is strong moral support."



His claims are not hollow. Apart from three physically disabled men, his unit is almost wholly managed by women from very low-income homes. They are trained to craft a range of products from vetiver.

"Those who work in my unit don't need to be educated. In the first place, I am not educated. They must just want to learn and be sincere," remarks Mathew.

Usheera buys vetiver roots at ₹200 per kg. The roots are very dirty and have to be cleaned,

woven and stitched into rectangular pads. This is a labour intensive job.

"I visited south Kerala to learn a new weaving method that is faster. But our staff didn't take to it," shrugs Mathew. He has five units working in and around Bhatkal. As orders come in, his staff gets busy weaving and stitching.

Nagappa, who is physically challenged, is responsible for stitching vetiver *chappals*. Before he joined 13 years ago he was running a liquor shop that ran into trouble. "I learnt this job in two days," he recalls. "The owner looks after everyone very well. This industry is a boon for hundreds of poor families," he remarks. The other two men with disability are both called Ramesh. They have been working at Usheera for over 10 years. "They have more skills and capabilities than me," says Mathew appreciatively.

Ratnavathy, 49, has studied till Class 5. She used to work as a farm hand before she joined 15 years ago. Now she is a trainer. "I earn ₹6,000 to ₹7,000 a month. I educated my son with the money I earn here. He is now in Bengaluru and has a job," she says proudly.

Girls employed here do get married and leave. But Mathew has found a solution for them to remain employed. He encourages the girls to form a satellite group and train other young girls in vetiver products. He then outsources the work to them.

Komala Narayana Nayak worked at Usheera for six years. She then shifted to Mavinakatte and trained eight girls. Mathew outsources work to them and pays on a piece rate basis. Usheera also pays the rent for the room they work in, their transport costs and so on.

"The girls are earning between ₹4,000 and ₹9,000. We give them a little bonus as a gift when they marry. We care for them and help out with problems. Even without supervision, they maintain

a good pace of production," says Mathew.

Thanks to him, Vasudeva Devadiga, his driver, runs a small paddy straw handicraft unit nearby. Vasu tried his hand at vetiver handicrafts but didn't succeed. But he took to paddy straw handicraft. He was running his unit in a small building when his landlord threw him out. "It was Mathew sir who came to my rescue," recalls Vasu. "He told me to go find a small piece of land. He then arranged for bank finance and stood surety. He helps me market my products whenever I produce a surplus."

Six of Usheera's ex-employees have started vetiver units. Around three women, trained by him have also started manufacturing units that produce products made from vetiver.

NEW DESIGNS

Mathew is Usheera's sole designer. He has fashioned over 150 vetiver products. "When we invent a product we don't rush to sell it. It stays on my desk. We keep looking at it. Then we begin to see its flaws and improve its design," he says.

Earlier, Ganesh idols would be stuffed with discarded cloth. Now embossed areca nut leaf sheath is used which makes the image look better. It has also cut down production time. Exclusive metal dyes to emboss the original figure in vetiver root board used to be made in Mangaluru at great expense. The end result wasn't satisfactory. Mathew learnt how to make metal dyes himself and the job is now done in-house.

He is now focusing on areca nut leaf sheath which is abundantly available. Images have been made of Ganesh and folk forms such as Yakshagana, and Kathakali on a trial basis. Art has been neatly embossed on the images. "If customer reaction is good, we will scale up production," he says.

Mathew has designed a soft hat made of banana fibre. Unlike vetiver roots, banana fibre is soft. Birar has come up with a great idea: a facemask made of vetiver roots for riders of two-wheelers. "Instead of wrapping cloth around one's face, a vetiver mask would keep away dust and keep the skin cool," he says.

Mathew's wife Elamma has been a pillar of support all these years. His daughter Rani is a graduate of visual arts. She makes clay models for new designs and doubles as a manager, dealing with customers and handling correspondence. Prashanth, Mathew's son-in-law, who is married to his younger daughter, Sani, looks after the vetiver soap-section. ■

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‘BRICS bank should be transparent’

Tushar Dhara
New Delhi

VOLUNTARY organisations in BRICS countries have called for greater clarity on the mandate and functioning of the New Development Bank (NDB), or BRICS bank as it is popularly called.

The bank has just completed making its first tranche of loans. It is funding infrastructure and social development projects. But speaking at a consultation in New Delhi on July 27-28, activists said the bank's mandate needed to be articulated more clearly.

“Given that the bank is the most substantial achievement of BRICS, civil society wants greater transparency and accountability,” said Amitabh Behar of the Wada Na Todo Abhiyan, one of the organisers of the consultation. “Its agenda can't be tilted towards just physical over social infrastructure.”

Panellists from other BRICS nations talked about the bank vis-à-vis their own civil society forums. Marianne Buenaventura Goldman, an Oxfam consultant from South Africa, said that there had been minimal discussion outside financial circles about the bank. She found that civil society and elected representatives were ignorant about even the basic functions of the bank. This is because the NDB had not held any consultations with South Africa's civil society groups.

Gretchen Gordon of the Coalition of Human Rights said that the bank had adopted the position that it didn't need a policy framework since it will

be funding ‘non-controversial’ projects in the renewable energy sector. Non-controversial is code for projects that won't displace people. However, that doesn't mean a guiding framework can be dispensed with.

Shashi Tharoor, in his keynote address, said that the BRICS nations all shared a perception of being excluded from the dominant global structures, especially its financial architecture as represented by the Bretton Woods institutions. All five nations think the system is ready for a makeover and the bank is a step in that direction.

In 2001, Jim O'Neill, an economist with Goldman Sachs, coined the term BRIC to denote the emerging

grouping. This was a sentiment expressed repeatedly by civil society delegates at the consultation. They felt that each country was looking at its own economic interests. Questions of social justice had not been addressed.

Lending institutions like the World Bank, International Finance Corporation, ADB and African Development Bank have adopted social and environmental safeguards that establish standards for ‘good practice’. These standards involve accountability mechanisms, consultations with affected communities and norms to assess social and environmental impact. In recent years there has been pressure to make such safeguards more flexible, citing laws in the legal framework of borrowing countries that contain similar protection. In many cases these are weakened or not adequate, as happened with the land ordinance in India in 2015.

The financial crisis of 2008 has produced considerable tumult in the established global order. Funding from development banks is increasingly going to Public-Private-Partnerships, which pave the way for public funding of infrastructure projects. Critics say the private sector reaps profits while the taxpayer ends up bearing the risk of private investments.

The BRICS bank will have its hands full. There are national development banks in BRICS countries. But such banks are increasingly funding export-led growth. Then the sovereign debt crisis in the European Union and weak economic growth in North America has sapped the will of traditional donor countries to loosen their purse strings for developing nations.

It is in such a muddled scenario that the new bank seeks to finance the development needs of BRICS and other developing nations. With 43 percent of the world's population, 46 percent of the global labour force and 25 percent of the world's GDP, the funding needs of BRICS are big.

Nations in this partnership also have nearly 50 percent of the world's poor. Making BRICS bank more sensitive to issues of equity and social justice is, therefore, essential as it gets going with its lending programme. ■



Delegates at the consultation

economies of Brazil, Russia, India and China (South Africa joined later). Since then it has taken a life of its own. In 2008 Russia hosted the first BRICS summit. Leaders from BRICS nations have been meeting every year, although earlier the meetings were more symbolic than substantive.

That changed in 2012 when the idea of a BRICS bank was proposed by India and formalised over the next couple of years. The founding vision of the bank was to do things differently. But the concern now is that it will peddle the same economics and development strategies as the Bretton Woods institutions.

BRICS is increasingly looking like an economic

AJIT KRISHNA

Samita's World

by SAMITA RATHOR



SAHARIYA WOMEN SWING INTO ACTION

Swapna Majumdar
Bhopal

IT is the wedding season in Gugar, a village dominated by the Sahariya tribe in the Lalitpur district of Uttar Pradesh. But Jayanti has no time to participate in the festivities. She has to resolve problems related to the midday meal in the Bhadora primary school, two kilometres from her village. After that, she needs to meet government officials in the block office in Talbehat regarding old age pension cards. This means walking another eight kilometres. But nothing deters Jayanti from carrying out her duties as gram pradhan. She has never shied away from hard work, even when she worked as a daily wage labourer until a year ago.

This change would not have been possible had Jayanti not shown the courage to withstand pressure, particularly from powerful castes in villages here. Jayanti stood her ground despite threats and coercion to withdraw from the elections. Even the announcement that she had lost by four votes did not break her spirit. She exercised her right to a recount and was vindicated when she was declared the winner by a thin margin of six votes.

Jayanti's journey from a daily wage labourer to a pradhan symbolises the growing political empowerment and coming of age of many marginalised women. In feudal and backward Bundelkhand region, these women are now more willing to participate actively in the electoral process.

Being a part of Self-Help Groups (SHGs) has given the women confidence. They have realised that their collectives are their strength. The women are now stepping out of their homes and standing up for their rights. "Had I not been a part of the SHG, I would never have had the courage to contest for the panchayat elections," said 30-year-old Jayanti.

In fact, it took almost seven years for these women to take this big step. When the first SHG was formed in Bundelkhand in 2008 by the Rajiv Gandhi Mahila Vikas Pariyojana (RGMVP), a non-profit working to empower women and alleviate poverty in the state, the women were shy, many having never ventured out of their homes. Even while thrift and borrowing remained a prime objective of many members, information of their rights and entitlements, disseminated in their weekly SHG meetings, helped women learn about the importance of their vote, their gram panchayats and how local political institutions could facilitate development. In 2015, this learning encouraged the 11,435 SHGs in Bundelkhand, each comprising 10-15 members, to play a pivotal role in ensuring members not only voted but stood for elections.

In October 2015, when it was announced that panchayat elections would be held in two months,



Jayanti (third from left) is pradhan of Gugar village

about 200,000 women belonging to SHGs formed by RGMVP, met under the aegis of their federated village organisations to take one of their biggest decisions. Had the time come to test the political waters? The unanimous answer was, yes. The women decided they had to be the change they wanted.

Just how right their decision was would be proven when 23 of the 52 women fielded by the SHGs would emerge victorious, with the districts of Lalitpur and Jhansi leading the way. Of the 16 candidates fielded in Lalitpur, nine won. In Jhansi, 13 of the 21 nominees were victorious.

In Lalitpur district's Rajawan gram panchayat, 10 SHGs decided it was time to plunge into the election fray. "We had been governed by a male pradhan all these years and seen the lack of development. We

'Had I not been a part of the SHG, I would never have had the courage to contest for the panchayat elections,' said 30-year-old Jayanti.

knew Jayanti, our candidate, would do a better job", said Lalita Dubey, the coordinator of the SHG.

The women launched their campaign. Jayanti was the only woman among 10 male candidates. Pamphlets were printed, all from personal contributions made by the women members of the SHGs, and distributed by them. Night meetings were held to review and strategise. Door-to-door visits were also initiated.

The first hurdle they had to cross was in their homes. "When I told my family to vote for Jayanti, my father-in-law refused. He said the family had always voted for the men. There was a lot of resistance. It took some days to convince him that it was time to give women a chance," recalled Lakmi, an SHG member.

The women were frugal and banked on their collective strength to run the campaign. Each member was given the task of spreading the word in

The women who won used their status to get roads repaired, secure job cards and get work under MGNREGA.

their hamlet. The momentum created by the women jolted the male candidates and their supporters, many of whom were from powerful communities. Jayanti was not surprised when she received threatening feelers to withdraw. Backed by the SHGs, she weathered the storm. Jayanti also became her own counting agent to ensure that no tampering or forcible voting took place.

However, an attempt to overwhelm her was made by telling her that she had lost. "The officials told me to sign a paper accepting the results. I came out and discussed this with the SHG members and decided to demand a recount," said Jayanti.

Apprehensive that local officials would not entertain their request, the women went to the district magistrate's office. "Being a part of SHGs had given me the confidence and courage to articulate my rights. I requested the district magistrate for a recount and he agreed. My victory was a collective effort," said a smiling Jayanti.

This fighting spirit was the leitmotif of all the women. Victory in the panchayat elections has been a huge shot in the arm for the women and their communities.

They have used their political empowerment to get roads repaired, secure job cards and work under the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA). Most importantly, they took measures to tackle the perennial drought plaguing the region.

But even where they lost, the women are not disheartened. They have learned the process and are now politically wiser as candidates, campaigners and as voters. ■

The Kerala director to watch

Saibal Chatterjee
New Delhi

INDIAN cinema, even its so-called independent strand, is in the stranglehold of multiplexes in urban areas. Corporate entities that own the screens not only dictate the stories that are told, but also have an indirect say in how films are packaged and delivered. Access to distribution and exhibition is largely dependent on perceived commercial viability. For most filmmakers aspiring for mass acceptance, playing safe is, therefore, the name of the game.

But not so for Sanal Kumar Sasidharan.

Not that the 39-year-old filmmaker from Kerala is dismissive of his audience — far from it — but he brings the zeal of a crusader to the mission of liberating his brand of cinema from mundane commercial exigencies. It is not without reason that he is beginning to earn a cult following and a space entirely his own in Malayalam cinema.

Sasidharan made waves with his first two feature films — *Oraalpokkam* (*Six Feet High*) in 2014 and *Ozhivudivasathe Kali* (*An Off-Day Game*) in 2015 — both of which were unveiled and feted at the International Film Festival of Kerala (IFFK).

With his next film, *Sexy Durga*, nearing completion, the writer-director is set to make it three-in-a-row when the 21st edition of the International Film Festival of Kerala is held in the second week of December this year.

The crowd-funded *Oraalpokkam*, which featured producer and actor Prakash Bare and Tamil writer and activist Meena Kandasamy in the cast, won an IFFK award and marked Sasidharan out as an idiosyncratic filmmaker to watch.

The film was a poetic take on the emotional and environmental repercussions of living for the moment with a reckless disregard for its consequences. It drew a parallel between the lives of its two conflicted protagonists and the severe damage inflicted by the devastating Uttarakhand floods of 2013.

The even more hard-hitting *Ozhivudivasathe Kali*, which goes unflinchingly into the heart of Kerala's social fault lines, has only strengthened the belief that Sasidharan is among the most exciting things to have happened to Malayalam cinema in recent times.

By all indications, his third film is expected to be as uncompromising and provocative as his first two. Its title, *Sexy Durga*, has raised some hackles already, but Sasidharan isn't giving in to pressure from



Sanal Kumar Sasidharan is beginning to earn a cult following in Kerala

Sasidharan's third film, *Sexy Durga*, is expected to be as uncompromising and provocative as his first two.

illiberal quarters.

"As a filmmaker, I retain the right not to respond to blind opposition from conservative sections of society," he says. "The title is essential for the idea that I am seeking to convey in my film and I won't change it simply out of fear of a backlash."

"I have absolutely no malicious intent to misuse my creative freedom or hurt the sentiments of people. For me, *Durga* is the name of a girl living in my neighbourhood, nothing more, nothing less," he asserts.

Sasidharan says *Sexy Durga* will be a sharp social critique of the dichotomous mindset that perceives women as goddesses on one hand and exploits them as sex objects on the other.

Ozhivudivasathe Kali, which also touched upon questionable male attitudes towards the opposite sex, was released across Kerala and in a few theatres in Chennai in Bengaluru. So strong was the response to the film that 10 screens had to be added in the second week of the film's run in Kerala — a feat reminiscent of the heydays of G. Aravindan and Adoor Gopalakrishnan.

It was, of course, a far cry from the fate that *Oraalpokkam* faced. The film was denied conventional distribution. So Sasidharan crisscrossed the state in a cinema *vandi* (cinema vehicle) to screen it in schools, libraries, markets, roadsides and other available public spaces. He

organised over a hundred such screenings of *Oraalpokkam*.

Ozhivudivasathe Kali is a deceptively simple but deeply disturbing film that pulls no punches in laying bare the deep gender and caste prejudices prevalent in contemporary Kerala. It was filmed without a written screenplay, with the actors, most of them amateurs, allowed to improvise their lines even as the camera rolled.

The film examines the vulnerability of both women and Dalits in a society dominated by the forces of patriarchy and the votaries of the caste hierarchy, who are actually indistinguishable from each other. "The response to *Ozhivudivasathe Kali* has been heartening," says Sasidharan. "More people still want to watch the film and they keep asking for it to be released in other cities of India. I think it is connecting with film watchers of all cultures and languages. I would love to take *Ozhivudivasathe Kali* to more centres."

Ozhivudivasathe Kali, which runs 100-odd minutes, has less than 50 shots, with a single 50-minute take constituting the climax.

Sasidharan is poised to take his penchant for formal experimentation further in *Sexy Durga*, which reportedly is composed of only 10 scenes spread out over a runtime of 100 minutes.

Ozhivudivasathe Kali is about five friends who, on an election day, plan a drinking binge in a lakeside lodge. They indulge in booze-fuelled banter that appears harmless to begin with but turns increasingly ominous as deep-seated animosities bubble to the surface in an idyllic setting that induces a sense of complacency, even impunity.

Born and raised in Neyyattinkara village near Thiruvananthapuram, Sasidharan developed a love for cinema early in life. He graduated in both zoology and law and worked in Riyadh for a while, besides being a member of the Kerala Bar Council.

In 2001, the self-taught director began making short films under the banner of the Kazhcha Chalachithra Vedi (Khazha Film Forum), a collective formed with money contributed by friends and film enthusiasts. He came up with one short film every four years until 2012.

Then came the crowd-funded *Six Feet High*, which won an IFFK award and announced the arrival of a rare talent.

Sasidharan's craft is defined by its striking purity, spontaneity and integrity, attributes that spring from it being unsullied by structured film school tutelage. His style is his own, as is his voice. Both are worth fighting for. ■

‘We need a long-term plan with livelihoods in Bundelkhand’

Civil Society News
New Delhi

FOR three years Bundelkhand has been in the news for devastating drought, forcing people to flee their arid land in droves. This monsoon it finally rained copiously. Tanks, ponds and rivers are now brimming with water. The region has received excessive rain this year.

The respite is probably temporary. Inclement weather and the spectre of drought have been haunting Bundelkhand for over a decade. With no jobs to fall back on, migration to the city has become a way of life for villagers.

As a result, Bundelkhand has slipped into being a poor and backward region though it used to contribute 15 per cent of Madhya Pradesh's total food grain production decades ago.

SRIJAN (Self-Reliant Initiatives Through Joint Action) has been working in Bundelkhand since 2002. A non-profit, it promotes rural livelihoods in agriculture, horticulture, dairy and livestock.

SRIJAN recently convened a meeting between NGOs working in Bundelkhand to draw up an action plan that would address the region's chronic water shortages, hunger and unemployment. NGOs have been doing small successful projects with groups of villagers. If they worked together they would probably have more impact.

Civil Society spoke to Ved Arya, CEO of SRIJAN who has been observing Bundelkhand since 15 years.

Bundelkhand has been in the news for three years of drought. Is the problem simply lack of water?

We find that the region has symptomatic problems and deep seated ones. On the surface it seems the issue is an absolute shortage of water. But there is also inequity: access and control to water, the way government funds are distributed and how the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA) is carried out.

But let me begin with water. Years of drought have led to almost entire villages getting emptied out. There is distress migration from Tikamgarh even during normal times but it gets much worse during the *kharif* years of drought.

When there is no water, there is no *kharif* crop. Even rainwater structures we have created — like ponds on farmers' fields to capture rainwater — don't get filled.

People often save water during the monsoon and use it to grow the *rabi* crop after Diwali. But if there is drought at this time people don't have water to grow *channa*, wheat or Bengal *gram*. So round the year people are not getting any crops.

This year after the rains, I was told 40-50 per cent of people have not come back. Sixty per cent returned



Ved Arya, CEO of SRIJAN

‘We are visiting Marathwada and Yavatmal in Maharashtra to see how 150 NGOs worked together.’

because they want to farm and lead normal lives.

So there is an endemic shortage of water?

Yes, because this area is not part of the Gangetic deep alluvial plain. It has a layer of impervious strata below the ground. So water that is captured does not stay. It flows away to the Yamuna and Betwa rivers. Bundelkhand is a catchment area for bigger rivers. It is part of the Yamuna basin.

What can people do under the circumstances?

Water management is critical. You need to capture rainwater from structures above the surface and not below the ground. Bore wells will be unsuccessful. There are no aquifers here. It's best to promote water harvesting on fields like ponds. Thousands of years ago Chandela tanks were built from where people collected water. We have to promote those and use drip irrigation.

You are suggesting ponds on fields, tanks in the village and an interconnected system between them?

That's right. Instead of wheat, grow pomegranate. Grow crops that require less water per square meter. If you want to generate ₹1 lakh from land, pomegranate is better. As a farmer if you get ₹6,000 per acre from wheat you can get ₹30,000 per acre from pomegranate.

The UP government was keen to promote Bundelkhand as a hub for pulses. Is that possible?

Yes, *urad* or black gram is grown here. You can grow pulses and high value crops like pomegranate. Lemon and ginger grows in Bundelkhand and guava does well. So we need to grow fruits too.

How will you take your ideas forward? You spoke of NGOs coming together to help the farmers of Bundelkhand and that SRIJAN would play a lead role.

We organised a meeting between NGOs working on both sides of Bundelkhand, the UP side and the MP side. About eight NGOs came. Two themes emerged.

One, we need a long-term plan that works out food security, water security and livelihood security. So you need water-harvesting structures, crops that give high income and then the savings from that can help people tide over.

Then there is the issue of food security. There are communities that are very vulnerable like the Sahariya tribals of Lalitpur district in UP. They live a hand-to-mouth existence and may not have the best quality of land or access to water. They may need work under MGNREGA.

We will be implementing several government schemes but MGNREGA will be one of the most prominent. We are visiting Marathwada and Yavatmal in Maharashtra to see how 150 NGOs worked together and generated ₹230 crores of wage employment from MGNREGA last summer.

What are the assets that you would like to build under MGNREGA?

We don't just want to dig and fill. We want to create individual assets to secure people's livelihoods. Then they won't have to look for wage employment. If, on a Sahariya tribal's homestead, we can build a pond or recharge his well, then we can hopefully help him grow something.

Putting all this in place are you looking at some kind of concerted action plan? Is the government involved?

We want a concerted plan. We want to make sure

Continued on page 44

Vendors feel let down by AAP

Civil Society News
New Delhi

STREET vendors in Delhi are angry and worried because new rules notified by the Delhi government are making it easy to evict them and take away their livelihood.

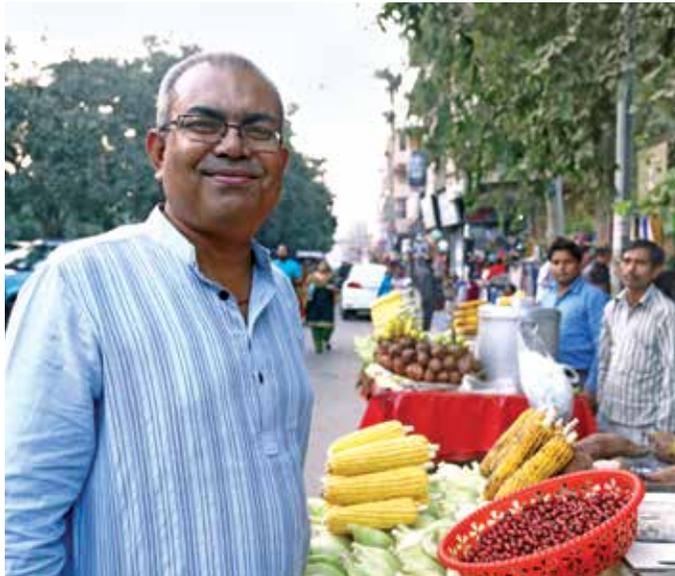
Street vendors' associations say they voted enthusiastically for the Aam Aadmi Party (AAP) in the Assembly elections since they were promised that the Street Vendors' (Protection of Livelihood and Regulation of Street Vending) Act 2014 would be implemented in letter and spirit.

But under the AAP government's scheme, every four wards in the city will have one Town Vending Committee (TVC). So Delhi will now have as many as 72 Town Vending Committees (TVCs) causing utter chaos. "The big question is can we manage 72 TVCs," says Arbind Singh, head of the National Association of Street Vendors of India (NASVI), in exasperation.

In 2009, the Congress-led Delhi government had set up five TVCs: one each for the three municipal corporations, one for the cantonment area and one for the New Delhi Municipal Corporation (NDMC). These were functioning well, according to NASVI, but were not mandated by law.

The TVC is a critical body for street vendors. It gives them a voice among decision-makers and protects them from injustices. Its job is to enforce the law and take decisions. The TVC is supposed to first carry out a survey of street vendors in its jurisdiction and then issue certificates to genuine street vendors so that they don't face eviction or harassment.

The TVC should by law consist of representatives from resident welfare associations, market associations, police, street vendor associations, trade unions, the land owning authority and be headed by the municipal commissioner. Forty percent of members have to be street vendors



Arbind Singh of NASVI with street vendors of Lajpat Nagar in Delhi

elected or nominated by street vendor associations. Thirty-three per cent is reserved for women vendors.

But in Delhi the composition of the first two TVCs doesn't inspire any confidence. Singh says NGOs who had no experience of working with street vendors were included. Street vendors randomly plucked from an old *tehbazaar* list were also included in the TVC.

"A representative of street vendors needs to have some leadership qualities. They could have invited street vendor associations to nominate themselves. They should have used certain criteria for selection. But the Delhi government has taken the whole process very lightly without being sensitive to the street vendors livelihood," says Singh.

If the composition of the TVC is questionable the survey too will be shoddy and street vendors will get left out making them vulnerable to eviction.

Already, says Singh, the NDMC has seized the opportunity. It has set up a pliable TVC and started evicting vendors without doing a survey. Out of 4,000-5,000 vendors just 400-500 will remain, it is feared. NASVI has now appealed to the High Court

and asked for the TVC rules to be scrapped.

Singh points out that courts across the country are referring to the TVC every time street vendors appeal to them for livelihood security.

"When the vendor says there is no TVC the court starts fuming and asks the government when it will constitute the TVC," says Singh. "So municipal corporations are taking the TVC very seriously. Unfortunately the Delhi government only acts under pressure from the court."

The TVC, being a local organisation, knows the city well and can identify street vendors in its area. Delhi has some 10-12 associations of street vendors. NASVI is demanding that the Delhi government hold a consultation with them and discuss how the TVCs should be constituted.

"There is an open, fair and transparent manner of constituting the TVC," says Singh.

In Rajasthan, for instance, the state government has delegated the responsibility of forming TVCs to the district administration. A notification was issued asking all street vendor associations to file their lists of members with the district administration. In Jaipur, four street vendor associations submitted lists of 1,800 street vendors. They have nominated 10 members for a TVC.

In Bihar, street vendors formed federations and nominated their own people to the TVC. The district magistrate interviewed the nominees. In Lucknow, NASVI's suggestions on formation of TVCs were accepted by the administration.

In Delhi politics seems to have crept in. "Many are saying the MLAs in Delhi wanted more say. Those vendors who don't have voter ID cards of Delhi will not be eligible. None of the states have such provisions. You can live outside the state but work in the city," says Singh.

"For the unorganised worker there is no mechanism for resolution of problems. The TVC resolves this issue. It is a good example of citizens participation and doesn't hamper the authority of elected representatives at all," says Singh. ■

Continued from page 43

quality assets get built under MGNREGA and people get paid on time at the end of the day. People have not been coming to work in some places because they weren't getting paid.

We met the Tikamgarh collector, Priyanka Das. She said she would be happy to support the NGOs in implementing MGNREGA and that money wasn't a problem. She asked us to come up with a plan that would tackle drought, water scarcity, land use, promote drip irrigation, high value crops and provide market linkages. She also wanted the Pradhan Mantri Fasal Bima Yojana implemented. We are helping 1,000 farmers to cultivate *urad*. She is keen to include them in the crop insurance scheme.

Which districts will you be working in?

We are planning to work in Tikamgarh, Sagar, Chhatarpur and Panna in MP and Lalitpur and Mahoba in the UP side.

Will you be tackling food security by improving the public distribution system (PDS)?

We will see if rations are available on time and whether we should do direct benefit transfer (DBT). There was consensus among NGOs that we should use the priorities of the government to scale up the programme. So if the Lohia Gram Awas Yojana is a priority for the Samajwadi government, we could tap that. If Swachh Bharat mission is a priority for MP we can draw on that too.

Is there scope for organised employment for the youth? If you start SHGs are there microfinance companies willing to give them loans?

Pradan started a poultry programme years ago and it has been successful. Each farm can be a 300-bird farm or a 500-bird farm. There is an organised poultry system in Bundelkhand.

Six or seven years ago when we started our SHG programme it was hard to give out ₹2 lakh and recover the money. Today Sanghamithra, a microfinance institution set up by Myrada, is working here. It has given out nearly ₹60 lakh as loan.

Tikamgarh alone has 5,000 enthusiastic SHG members. In Damoh and Sagar there is a federation of SHGs. So we have five SHG federations in Bundelkhand and they are all ripe for microfinance. ■

The compassionate writer

Mrittika Bose
Kolkata

"I have always believed that real history is made by ordinary people.... The reason and inspiration for my writing are those people who are exploited and used and yet do not accept defeat."

THIS is how Mahasweta Devi, who died at the age of 90 on 28 July in Kolkata, described her work as a writer who dedicated herself to telling those stories that challenged the established order in India.

Her writing stemmed from her political beliefs and activism. She was fiercely committed to fighting oppression in any form and spent a lifetime giving a voice to the unheard. Mahasweta Devi raised her voice several times against the discrimination of tribal people in India. Her activism resulted in the freeing of the statue of noted tribal leader Birsa Munda by the Jharkhand state government in June 2016. The statue showed Birsa in chains as was photographed by the then ruling British government. Her 1977 novel, *Aranyer Adhikar*, was on the life of Munda.

She spearheaded the movement against the industrial policy of the earlier Left Front government of West Bengal. She stridently criticised confiscation of large tracts of fertile agricultural land from farmers by the government and giving them to industrial houses at throwaway prices.

Old age did not deter her from leading the Nandigram agitation when a number of intellectuals, artists, writers and theatre workers joined together to protest the Left Front's controversial land acquisition policy in Singur and Nandigram. She supported the candidature of Mamata Banerjee in the 2011 West Bengal Legislative Assembly election that resulted in ending the 34-year rule of the Left Front.

Born in 1926 in Dhaka in undivided India to literary parents Manish Ghatak, a well-known poet and novelist of the Kallol movement, and Dharitri Devi, a writer and social worker, Mahasweta Devi's larger family included several culturally distinguished members. Noted filmmaker Ritwik Ghatak was her paternal uncle and noted sculptor Sankha Chaudhury and Sachin Chaudhury, the founder-editor of the *Economic and Political Weekly of India*, were her maternal uncles. After finishing school in Dhaka, Mahasweta Devi moved to West Bengal after the partition of India. She graduated in English Honours from Rabindranath Tagore's Vishvabharati University in Santiniketan and completed her Masters in English at the University of Calcutta.

In 1964, she began teaching at Bijoygarh College — then an institution for working-class women students — affiliated to the University of Calcutta. Simultaneously, she also worked as a journalist and a creative writer.

The tribal communities of West Bengal, the Lodhas and Sabars, women and Dalits interested her keenly. She set out to create her own literary identity. One that transcended gender differentiation and all forms of conservatism, totally disregarding the mellow, romantic tradition of Bengali literature. One that was moulded by awareness, experience and sensitivity towards society. The stark reality in her literary pieces was precisely what mainstream readers would rather avoid. Yet these were too strong to ignore.

Mahasweta Devi's first novel *Jhansir Rani*, published in 1956, was an indication of the genre of her future literary work. She toured Jhansi extensively, collecting facts and myths, from local people and folk songs, on



Laxmibai, the rebel queen. She went on to prove that traditionally recorded history was woefully inadequate as she penned novels like *Aranyer Adhikar*, *Amrita Sanchay*, *Andhar Manik* and numerous short stories often based upon meticulous research, conducted sometimes by unconventional means like oral history and folklore about the people she wrote about.

Bengali readers were jolted out of their comfort zones by *Basai Tudu* and *Hajar Churashir Ma*. In many of her novels and stories she brutally laid bare the inadequacies and weaknesses of Indian society. Mahasweta Devi had the sensitivity of a literary writer and the mind of a keen social researcher. The amalgamation gave her writing its uniqueness.

Critics and a section of readers did not spare her for her temerity to rip the sugar coating off the make believe world of Bengali literature. While they tried their best to deride her creations, the revolution in the Bengali literary scene towards realistic writings continued.

She wrote over 100 novels and more than 20 collections of short stories in Bengali, many of which have been translated into other languages.

The quarterly *Bortika* magazine that Mahasweta Devi edited from 1980 had been a mouthpiece for the most downtrodden in Indian society — the dispossessed tribals and marginalised segments like the landless labourers of eastern India. It was the most natural thing for her to invite a rickshawpuller, Monoranjan Byapari — who asked her the meaning of a difficult Bengali word after ferrying her home in his rickshaw — to write an article about his life in

her magazine. He went on to become a prominent writer in the Bengali literary circle.

She was very fond of her sisters, who were all very talented. I remember her looking with immense pride at an impromptu flamenco performance by one of her sisters at a family wedding.

Mahasweta Devi married renowned playwright Bijon Bhattacharya, who was one of the founding fathers of the Indian People's Theatre Association movement. In 1948, she gave birth to Nabarun Bhattacharya, who became a novelist and political critic. She worked in a post office but was fired from there for her communist leanings. She went on to do various jobs, such as selling soap and writing letters in English for illiterate people. In 1962 she married author Asit Gupta after divorcing Bhattacharya.

I was witness to Mahasweta Devi's softer side twice. The first time she walked across and introduced herself to me. "I have come to make your acquaintance only because of your daughter," she said, pointing to my toddler daughter whom I had accompanied to her friend's birthday. Her friend happened to be the author's grand niece. "She is a lovely child and we have become friends," she chuckled.

A few years later I went to meet her at her residence to request her to conduct a storytelling session for children at a school fair commemorating Satyajit Ray. I was at first greeted with a curt, "Why have you come?" When I explained that I had grown up enjoying her stories about the super cow 'Nyadosh' published in the children's magazine *Sandesh* (co-edited by Satyajit Ray) and had come to request her to regale the schoolchildren with such stories, her face broke into a smile. "You knew I couldn't refuse such a request, didn't you?" she said with a twinkle in her eye.

At the fair, the kids sat glued listening to her tales laced with humour, adventure and a unique grandmotherly touch. Surrounded by the wide-eyed eager little bunch, she answered the strangest questions that only children can ask, with perfect ease. ■

OBITUARY Mahasweta Devi (1926 – 2016)

How a farmer went to market



Jaffer Hussain with his family. They now grow many varieties of vegetables

Shailendra Sinha
Dumka (Jharkhand)

IN the early 1990s, Jaffer Hussain was a worried man. A farmer, he owned just around two acres of rainfed land in Chirudih village of Mudhbhanga panchayat in Dumka. His fellow farmers were migrating in droves because their fields didn't yield much. The land was acidic, buying seeds and fertilisers was expensive and there were no irrigation facilities. The farmers had been growing wheat and rice during the *rabi* season but they found their earnings barely covered the cost of farming. So they began abandoning their hereditary profession.

Forty-two-year-old Hussain wanted to stay on the land. He figured that if he grew vegetables he could earn more. But he didn't know how and there was no one to turn to. Since he had worked on the fields from a very young age, Hussain used his native wisdom. He had an innate understanding of the soil, the seasons, what to plant and when and how to nurture the crop till harvest. He decided to take the plunge.

Hussain took a loan from the local moneylender to buy seeds and fertilisers. He began planting brinjal, cauliflower, tomatoes and red chillies. There were two wells on his land. He used the water judiciously to irrigate his fields.

"Since the soil here is quite acidic I made a mix of lime and cow dung to alkalise my field. It worked," says Hussain. He was delighted to see that his yield was good. Soon he was growing a repertoire of vegetables — *sabudana*, lemon, spinach, onion, cabbage, mustard, potato, radish and bitter gourd.

But a bountiful harvest is only half the battle won. What is crucial is to get a good price. Hussain knew success would depend on where, how and when he sold his produce.

He targeted *haats* (local markets) not only in Chirudih but in nearby Shaharjori and Kathikund as well. A ramshackle Chinese made three-wheeler



Jaffer Hussain taking his vegetables for sale to local markets

was repaired. Hussain piled his vegetables at the back and took them for sale to local markets.

The vegetables sold well and Hussain was soon making profits. The beleaguered agricultural community in this tribal belt sat up. Hussain became a role model and a point of reference. Several other farmers began to grow vegetables taking advice from Hussain.

"Many of our tribal people felt frustrated because their land lay barren and unused. Seeing Jaffer

Hussain's success, they too started growing vegetables. Even though rainfall is sparse here, they are doing well," says Saroj Hajda, *mukhiya* of Chirudih village.

Hussain realised there was a market for vegetable seeds. Seizing the opportunity, he began selling his seeds in the local *haats*. He didn't realise it but he was on his way to becoming an agri-entrepreneur. He took part in Kisan Vikas Melas organised by the district administration in Dumka and won many awards for his vegetables. Most recently, he won an award at the historic annual Rajkiya Janjatiya Hijla Mela for the quality of his produce. He began earning ₹10,000 a month and became a local hero.

Meanwhile, Hussain's son, Mustaq, who graduated from Sido Kanhu Murmu University (SKMU) in Dumka joined his father. Mustaq pitches in with cultivation and brings in hands-on marketing expertise.

Keen to expand sales, Mustaq contacted a wholesaler with a marketing network in West Bengal. The wholesaler has agreed to pick up their produce and supply it to markets in the state. Mustaq is also trying to convert their farm into an organic one. Cowdung is being used along with compost.

Curiously, although Dumka has several institutions of agriculture, Jaffer Hussain was not aware of them. Neither did any of these institutions reach out to farmers in distress in the district.

For instance, there is an Agricultural Technical Management Agency (ATMA) in Dumka that brings together key stakeholders to disseminate technical expertise in agriculture. Also, Jharkhand has a Department of Cooperatives that is supposed to support the economic and social development of small and marginal farmers, artisans and other collectives. To boost agriculture, the department does provide short and medium term production credit through its network. None of these reached Jaffer Hussain or shaped his journey as an agri-entrepreneur. Whatever he achieved was through his own efforts and with his own resources.

Agriculture is the main livelihood in this tribal belt of Santhal pargana and such individual efforts based on local wisdom, need to be supported by the state.

Speaking candidly, Hussain says, "The farmer follows the seasons closely, knows when to plant and what. Not only that, he knows that often wild saplings also take root along with the main crop. He knows how to cope with this. I believe there is no bigger scientist today than the farmer."

A small farmer who, until a few years ago struggled with traditional agriculture and then became a successful agri-entrepreneur, is no small transformation. It is time we not only celebrated the grit and sheer talent of those who work the land and provide food, but ensure that our entire system responds to their needs. ■

Charkha Features. Email: charkha@bol.net.in

In India Self-Help Groups, artisans and crafts people are producing goods that are natural, artistic and eco-friendly. Inventors of useful technologies are resolving issues being faced in our cities and villages. Here are a range of products that caught our attention this year.

KITCHEN ART

ADD a touch of art to your kitchen with rolling pins and spoons from a dusty village in Kutch. The intricate designs and lovely colours make these cooking tools a great buy. The rolling pins come in different sizes. Large ones roll out bigger chapattis and the slimmer ones are useful for making smaller, thinner breads. The wooden spoons include salad spoons and serving spoons and make your dining table look inviting.

The spoons and rolling pins are made of wood from the ba-bool tree (*Acacia nilotica*). "We buy the wood from the market," explains Jayantibhai. "The lacquer work is hand painted by my mother. The colours don't fade or leach. Ours is a traditional family enterprise."

Jayantibhai also manufactures tables, chairs, sofa sets, boxes and bangle stands made of wood with his trademark lacquer work. He says he was discovered by Dastkar around 15 years ago. "They appreciated my work and I was happy to join their network of craftspeople. I have travelled all over India to various exhibitions to sell my products, thanks to Dastkar and the Government of India. We also sell to exporters. But Delhi is our best market because people in the north like their chapattis," says Jayantibhai. ■



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SAFE LIGHT

ONE Child, One Light Mission is an earnest effort by Thrive Solar Energy, a company based in Hyderabad, to ensure that every child living in a village or on the periphery of a town, has a safe light he or she can read with.

Thrive has invented the Accendo Study Light, a solar-powered LED Light and Mini LED Solar, which the company describes as being "the world's most inexpensive solar LED light". Both lights are economical, safe, portable and easily rechargeable. Children of any age can handle these lights.

In India millions of children continue to study under the flickering glow of a kerosene lamp. Toxic fumes released by kerosene adversely affect the eyes and lungs of children. In Bihar and Jharkhand the number of homes without access to electricity is staggering. Thrive Solar seeks to spread the light of learning and promote children's health.

One Child, One Light Mission has been going to government schools in the villages of Andhra Pradesh and Telangana and distributing solar lights. Children are delighted with the lights.

Thrive Solar also offers inexpensive solar streetlights for villages.



The company has invented a Hawkers Light, Fisherman's Light, Torch Light and Flood Light. All their products are reasonably priced.

Founded in 2001 by Dr Ranganayakulu Bodavala, a Harvard alumnus and public health management specialist, Thrive Solar started off as an NGO. But it couldn't find a company to manufacture its innovative lighting solutions. So Thrive metamorphosed into a company. ■

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13th Anniversary

JUTTI JOY

SATYA Narain Dayal from Patiala has received a national award for his tilla juttis. The jutti is North India's famed slipper. The traditional one had an upturned toe. But in recent years these slippers have undergone a sea change. They have become stylish and comfy. Juttis are now made in many shapes, sizes, colours and designs and you can buy a pair to match your outfit.

In winter, juttis can keep your feet warm. They are easy to slip into even with thick socks. Dayal has also invented juttis with a strap at the back that can be tucked under the sole of the slipper. He calls it the 'backless' jutti.

He says juttis have been popularised by the Hindi and Punjabi film industries. The leading lady invariably wears a designer pair to match her salwar-kurta outfit.

The slippers are often embroidered with gold and silver threads so that they are in demand during the wedding season, says Dayal. He also exports his slippers to countries in the Gulf.

Dayal says women in villages near Patiala embroider these slippers and the soles are made by men. The slippers are made wholly of leather. They are waterproof and washable and reasonably priced. ■



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ART HOUSE

AAKRITI Art Creations comprises a group of talented artists brought together by Suman Sonthalia, a national award winner in Warli art. Aakriti manufactures products made of clay, wood and terracotta. Each product is painted with a variety of tribal art forms –Madhubani from Bihar, Warli from Maharashtra and Dhokra from Chhattisgarh.

Mostly household and decorative products are made. There are lampshades and lamps, vases, wall clocks, masala boxes, tableware, photo-frames, lanterns, trays and coasters. For as little as `1,500 you can get your nameplate specially made for your front door. All of Aakriti's products are very neat and painted in delicate colours and designs.

Aakriti has a workshop in Ghaziabad. The basic designs are outsourced to potters in the locality and those who do wood work. Needy women from slums have been formed into self-help groups and trained to paint. Around 100 people now work for this group of artists. You can buy Aakriti's products from their website. ■

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SMART STOVE



THE Applied Environmental Research Foundation (AERF) has developed a stove that uses agri-industrial waste for burning but doesn't emit smoke. It produces a clear blue flame. Named the My Forest Biomass Gasifier, the stove reduces indoor air pollution and saves forests.

In rural India people still cook with wood. So women walk miles into forests and then walk back with a pile of firewood on their heads. A lot of time and energy is spent. The wood is burnt in smoky stoves and harms the lungs of rural women. The forest also suffers. Chopping wood results in deforestation. Cooking should not kill forests, says AERF. It has been conserving sacred groves and trees in the Western Ghats.

The My Forest stove is made of stainless steel, including its burners. The stove and burner have insulating handles. AERF has developed catechu chips left over from small-scale pan-katha units as an efficient replacement for firewood. There is a net made of steel inside the stove for holding the catechu chips. AERF has also developed a supply chain so that women can get a continuous supply of chips. But any wood in chip form can be used as fuel.

The stove costs around `2000. It can be used by individual homes and by village schools to cook the midday meal. ■

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FAB PAPER

KASHMIR's paper mache products are famous. Delicately painted in floral designs, the Valley's paper mache is liked by one and all. Both local people and tourists, buy paper mache products for their homes and offices. Not only are these products useful, they lend an aesthetic touch to your drawing room, study desk or lobby.

The city of Srinagar is crowded with shops selling paper mache products. Among them is Mohammed Abdullah's shop which is ranked high by locals. His products, they say, are authentic and durable. Sitting in his shop located in a tiny lane of the Koker Bazar area, Abdullah can be seen selling his products. His shop is also very popular because he has products to suit every person's pocket.

You can see beautifully designed wall hangings, penholders, shikaras, samovars, flower vases, boxes of all shapes and sizes, candle stands and Christmas décor items.

Sifting through his shop is a relaxing and unhurried experience. You can also buy wood carving items. ■

Contact: Mohammad Abdullah, Koker Bazar, Lal Chowk, Srinagar. Phone: 09796131147.



JACK MACHINE

For the first time a tender jackfruit peeling machine has been invented by Ralak Control Systems, a company in Bengaluru. "Our new machine is designed to peel fruits of up to 500 mm in length and 125 to 250 mm in diameter," says Vasudeva Murthy, proprietor of Ralak.

It took Murthy six months to develop this machine. It has a one-horse power motor and requires a floor area of 1,100 mm height, 1,200 mm length and 650 mm width.

The machine removes 70-80 percent of the peel. To take off the peel from both ends manual effort is required.

"It works three times faster than a man," says B.V. Bhaskar Reddy, senior research fellow at the University of Agriculture Sciences in Bengaluru.

The machine will be useful for industries that have to process thousands of tender jackfruits a day. With interest in jackfruit picking up in South India and more entrepreneurs keen to invest in jackfruit products, this machine, if improved would be really handy for minimal processing of tender jackfruit.

The jackfruit peeling machine costs ₹90,000. "To get maximum edible portion of the fruit, the dancing tool holder has to be redesigned. If we introduce variable speed drive with one more motor for the dancing tool and redesign the safety guards, we can make it compact," explains Vasudeva Murthy.

COCONUT DELIGHT

PAL Coco Jelly is a tasty treat, especially with a topping of cherries, chocolate chips, dry fruits or a tutti-frutti mix. It's a guilt-free healthy dessert best eaten chilled.

George Devasagayam is the creator of Pal Coco Jelly. A mechanical engineer, he wanted to become an entrepreneur. He began searching for an idea and chanced upon coconut jelly. It is made by thickening tender coconut juice till it becomes a jelly.

After research and a two-month field trial, he placed Pal Coco Jelly on the market.

Thailand and Malaysia are the leading producers of coconut jelly. It has a limited shelf life but both countries package and sell coconut jelly very attractively. India has many coconut trees but we haven't converted our nuts into jelly.

So Devasagayam is a pioneer. His coconut jelly gets high grades because he doesn't use gelatin to thicken coconut juice. Instead, he uses seaweed or agar agar. No preservatives are used either.

Coconut jelly is packed in two ways — in paper cups and in natural coconut shells. In paper cups Pal Coco Jelly is available in a small size (70 gm) for ₹20 and in a large size (120 gm) for ₹30. In coconut shells the jelly is available from 70 gm to 300 gm.

Devasagayam has been selling Pal Coco Jelly in bulk for weddings and parties. He markets it on the Internet. A few select retail outlets in Chennai also stock Pal Coco Jelly. ■

Contact: For bulk orders and enquiries contact George Devasagayam: 095977 27517 Email: palcoconuts@gmail.com



Can the same machine be used for peeling pineapple? "We haven't tried or thought of it so far. But it should be possible, maybe with some modifications," says Murthy. ■

Contact: Ralak Control Systems - 90360 25300 (WhatsApp too). Email: ralakv@yahoo.co.in

13th Anniversary



PRETTY BAGS

DILEEP Bhagat and his wife, Rekha, make a range of intricately embroidered bags and purses in all shapes and sizes. The embroidery varies from bag to bag but it is very distinctly Gujarati. Dileep Bhai says his wife is from Gujarat and he is from Delhi. He fell in love with her and then he went to Gujarat to meet her family. There he fell in love again: this time with Kutchi embroidery.

Dileep Bhai learnt how to embroider and became skilful at wielding the needle. He set up a workshop in Delhi with his wife and he now employs four artisans.

“An artisan can work from anywhere,” he says. “I just need my tools. I can do Kutchi embroidery, patchwork, appliqué work, mirror work and so on.”

His purses are ideal for an evening out and can match any outfit, be it a sari or a dress. Most purses are beautifully embroidered with thread. There are pretty ones done with brocade and beads too. Prices are very reasonable. ■

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HEALTHY HONEY



SANJAY Kumar is a post-graduate in sociology but to earn a living he learnt bee-keeping at the Rajendra Agricultural University in Samastipur, Bihar, which, he says, is the oldest agricultural university in India. Kumar initially invested just ₹15,000 and started an apiary.

He now produces his own honey branded as Pusa Honey. “It is absolutely pure and excellent for your health,” he says. Pusa Honey now sells in Bihar, Jharkhand and Delhi. Kumar says he can’t expand his honey business any further because quality would suffer. “I have to travel with my bees to different states to catch the flowering season. Bee-keeping requires a lot of personal oversight,” he explains.

So Kumar has kept his honey-making business small and instead expanded into selling other products. He markets salted soya nuts, flax seeds, amla candy and litchi juice.

“The Pusa Institute in Delhi has the technology to produce a range of agri-products. They offer a variety of courses. You can learn from them and become an entrepreneur straightaway,” he says. ■

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INDHA CRAFT

INDHA Craft has a new range of attractive and useful handcrafted products. Some are ideal as business gifts. There are laptop bags in beige, brown, blue and army green as well as tablet sleeves, pen stands, diaries, folders and lunch box bags. For your home, Indha offers colourful cushion covers, magazine holders, table runners and quilts.

Indha’s products are made by rural women from low income families in Gurgaon.

The expanding city swallowed their fields and offered them nothing in return. Indha Craft trains the women to become artisans. They learn a skill and earn an income.

Joining Indha has changed lives. Meenakshi, mother of three, is from a lower caste. When she joined Indha as a helper the other women wouldn’t even take a glass of water from her. Over the years, Meenakshi became as skilled as them. Caste barriers began to dissolve. She is now respected and accepted as a co-worker. A spirit of sisterhood permeates Indha’s efficient factory in Gurgaon.

Indha is the brand name of the products made by the women. It is an offshoot of Project Karigari, started by Literacy India to train women as artisans. Literacy India, a non-profit, runs a school for children from low-income families. It has been started by Indraani Singh, a pilot with Air India and the first woman commander of an A-300 wide-bodied jet in the world.

You can buy Indha products online as well. ■

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TATA STEEL



SHAPING THE FUTURE

Healthcare - the key to a sustainable future

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

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



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Sahiyas' - Mansi Project Jharkhand
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