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Civil Society

CHOKING IN DELHI

HOW AAP FAILED THE CAPITAL AND THE CENTRE LOOKED ON

CONTENTS

COVER STORY

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Civil Society
READ US. WE READ YOU.

Clearing the air

AIR pollution is playing havoc with the health of people, but you would be hard-pressed to find a politician who can have an informed conversation on the subject of clean air. No one is willing to take the lead on the issue. Instead, it has been left to the courts and environmental groups to push governments in the direction of serious action. Then, too, they move with reluctance. It is almost as though people don't need to breathe!

Delhi is a case in point. With the courts watching and any number of environmentalists on call, the air in the Indian capital has gone from bad to worse. There were high expectations that the Aam Aadmi Party (AAP) would be different and see the need to act on pollution, which impacts the poor in urban slums the most. But it has done virtually nothing. In fact, it has sat on a perfectly good action plan provided to it — which if implemented over the past year or two would have resulted in significant improvements.

Our cover story looks at the many things that the AAP government could have done but didn't. Some 15 years ago, Delhi dealt with pollution by introducing CNG for public transport. It was after the intervention of the courts and a successful campaign led by the Centre for Science and Environment. Quite frankly, the current inaction is difficult to understand considering this history and the good name AAP would have got for effective governance. It is also strange that the Union government led by the BJP hasn't pushed to improve environmental conditions in the capital though the world is watching. Pollution is not just bad for a country's image, it imposes huge health costs on an economy.

Our interview of the month is with the Akshaya Patra founder Madhu Pandit Dasa. The midday meal programme for government schools is a game-changer. We have used the opportunity of the interview to understand the innovations that Akshaya Patra has come up with in the course of the organisation's exponential growth across India.

We consider it our strength that we know to identify and report on new-age businesses. In this issue we have two. One is about how an enterprise in jackfruit farming has been developed by two Indians in Malaysia. The other is Antim Yatra, a hugely innovative idea to provide funeral services to families distraught by a near one's passing away. Antim Yatra steps in to serve them. The best and most satisfying businesses we have found are those that have a clear social relevance.

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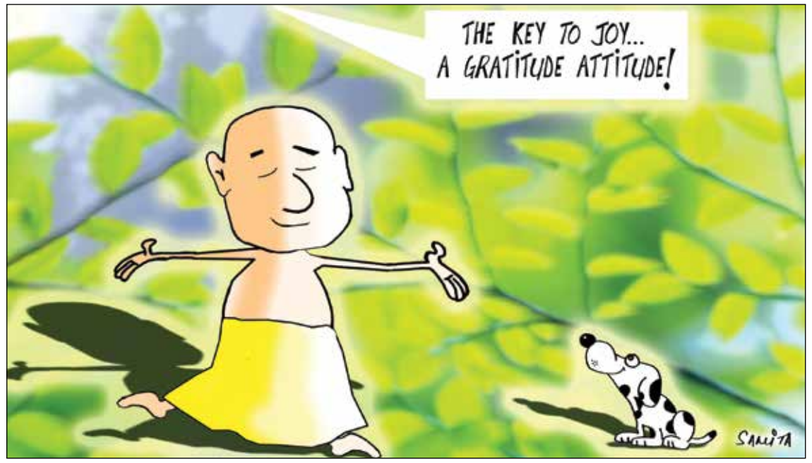
IN THE LIGHT

SAMITA RATHOR



LETTERS

Mangosteen village

Your cover story, 'Kerala's bonanza from mangosteen,' was well written and most unusual. We rarely get to know of enterprising initiatives by our farmers. Most news about agriculture is bleak and disheartening. The lesson from Shree Padre's story is that the government should create an environment that will empower farmers.

K. Chalakudy

I read your cover story on your website. It is a first class post. Our farmers must be encouraged to grow high-value fruits and vegetables. Processing facilities, cold storage units and good transport can increase incomes even further.

P. Swamy

Start-up for elders

Your business story, 'An elderly start-up,' is a great initiative to provide comprehensive support to the elderly. This will go a long way in filling the gap created by urbanisation and the break-up of the joint family.

Tarun Harnathka

I am 69 years old and I still want to do some work from my residence especially in marketing of paper and stationery. I congratulate the Samarth team for their much-needed start-up.

Subir Kumar Sarkar

I am a retired entrepreneur based in Kolkata. I am most impressed with what Samarth is doing. I am keen to explore the opportunity of tying up with Samarth for a Kolkata and regional unit.

Sunando Sen

Urban heritage

The interview with Ratish Nanda on the Aga Khan Trust for Culture's restoration of Humayun's Tomb in Delhi was an inspiring read. The importance of conserving our heritage in urban areas is lost on the middle-class for whom high-rises represent progress. Ancient structures, quaint markets and unique old localities give cities character. But in India, by and large, such places are neglected.

SVR Krishnan

River wars

So much time and effort have been spent on the sharing of river water. Isn't it time to devote more time and effort to the sharing of responsibility for protecting our rivers? Look at how many details were worked out for sharing the water of the Narmada river. The only concern missing in all the river wars taking place appears to be protection of the river. The tragic consequences are there for all to see.

In the context of the Cauvery, instead of a commission for water sharing, let the four states involved in the dispute, along with a representative of the Union government, get together to form a commission for the protection of the river. The aim of this commission should be to protect the river and to plan all water use in accordance with the norms of sustainability.

Bharat Dogra

All our rivers are in bad shape but no government agency has learnt any lessons. We need to see rivers as ecosystems in need of protection and not as infinite streams of water. We all know why we shouldn't cut forests. But do we understand the devastating impact of ruining rivers?

Shanti Dev

Drip irrigation

Thanks for the story on drip irrigation titled, 'The market beyond drip.' I think this method has a lot of potential all over India especially in water scarce areas like Bundelkhand and parts of Maharashtra.

Dr LM Reddy

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NEWS
INTERVIEW

‘MIDDAY MEALS FOR CHILDREN ARE A NATIONAL INVESTMENT’

Madhu Pandit Dasa on Akshaya Patra, its impact and rapid expansion

Civil Society News
New Delhi

MADHU Pandit Dasa oversees the world’s biggest midday meal programme. He is chairman of the Akshaya Patra Foundation. The figures are stupendous. Every day, rain or shine, freshly prepared midday meals are delivered to 1.6 million children from poor families studying in 13,210 government schools across 11 states. Not only is the meal nutritious and hygienic, it has been adapted to the culinary preferences of children in north and south India.

Akshaya Patra began sending out meals in 2000, before the landmark Supreme Court order of November 2001 in the Right to Food case mandated that all government and government-aided schools serve midday meals to children.

The Akshaya Patra midday meal programme is a massive, efficiently run operation. It is undoubtedly a lesson in what commitment and leadership can achieve and is the subject of business school case studies.

Shri Dasa is a devout follower of Shri Prabhupada and heads ISKCON (International Society for Krishna Consciousness) in Bengaluru. He also has a B.Tech degree in civil engineering from IIT-Mumbai. He has used both technology and compassion to put in place the midday meal programme.

Shri Dasa spoke to *Civil Society* on Akshaya Patra’s amazing growth and how he hopes to take the programme further.

Tell us how you began the Akshaya Patra midday meal programme in government schools?
The government spends crores building infrastructure, paying teacher salaries and so on in government schools. But children are sitting hungry in the classroom. That’s why educating the children, giving them knowledge won’t be effective.

So in 2000 we thought of starting a midday meal programme for 1,500 children in five government schools. The response was tremendous. Mind you, at that time the government midday meal scheme hadn’t started.

We just wanted to do a few hundred schools. But within two months we were flooded with applications for 100,000 children. That fat file of applications would stare at me every day I got to office. I didn’t know what to do. Providing midday meals is a recurring cost and a big commitment.

One day I came across an anecdote of our leader, Swami Prabhupada. He had seen some street children fighting with dogs for remnants of food. It moved him deeply. He called all his leaders and said no one within a 10-mile radius of the ISKCON temple should go hungry. I was very inspired by this direction of Shri Prabhupada. I thought let me go ahead. God will help us. So I picked up that file and decided to scale up the midday meal programme.

We began with 1,500 children. Our midday meal programme expanded to 150,000 children before the government midday meal scheme started.

How long did it take to get to 150,000 children?
It took till 2003. We found it very tough because providing midday meals is a recurring cost and most of our donors were individuals. In those days the corporate sector wasn’t confident about giving money. They got involved in 2008. Somehow, with God’s grace, we tided it over.

The government midday meal scheme, when it started, was a big boost for us. It helped us expand. Still, the government covers only 60 percent of our cost. We collect the remaining 40 percent from donors. The second boost for us was the CSR policy in 2008. We could then get money from companies for setting up kitchens.

Midday meals are a practical intervention and add value to the taxpayer’s money. For many children this is the only meal in the whole day.

It’s a great long-term investment in the nation.
Exactly. Usually, people talk about our population being a burden but we are converting it into an asset. If these children are fed and educated they will be very productive for themselves and for the country.

Madhu Pandit Dasa: ‘The number one impact of midday meals is the elimination of classroom hunger’

> **‘The moment we saw all those requests for our midday meal we realised we could only do this through technology.’**

Your kitchen is almost like a factory. What innovations did you introduce and how critical were they for expanding your programme?
The moment we saw all those requests for our midday meal we realised we could only do this through technology. The basic method we used was steam cooking. Our first kitchen was in south India so the main item was rice. We had huge stainless steel cauldrons and steam boilers. Steam was sent through the rice and the cauldron would cook rice for 500 children in 10 minutes. We used to have many shifts.

Then we had bigger cauldrons of 1,400 litre capacity for *sambar*. We brought in the best people from the industry in those days. But we found that what they were doing was not that cost-effective. They weren’t dealing with huge numbers.

They were using stainless steel cauldrons that were double jacketed which means steam doesn’t enter the food. This is fine if you are cooking for smaller numbers. We tried it out and found it inefficient for our purpose. Then we thought, why not purify the water and let the steam touch the rice. We use the single wall method and send the steam directly to the food. We found this method 50 percent more efficient. The food cooked faster. We learnt as we went along.

When we went to north India we confronted another challenge. With the same machinery we set up a rice and *sambar* kitchen. The schools were very happy for one week. After that they were dissatisfied. They said, We want *chapattis*.

In Vrindavan we were feeding 100,000 children. We thought, my God, how do we make 200,000 *chapattis*?

So our devotees went to Punjab to find out. We finally found a *sardarji* who said he would make them. The military did have a *chapatti* making machine but it made only 2,000 *chapattis* in one hour. I needed 20,000 *chapattis* an hour. But see how innovative our people are. Our *sardarji* was not even an engineer. We gave him ₹5 lakh. The first machine that was invented produced 10,000 *chapattis* per hour. It wasn’t very professional and our *sardarji* had to camp in the kitchen. But he learnt how to improve it. Nowhere was serving of meals ever stopped. If something went wrong it was quickly repaired. We kept making improvements on the machine. Finally, after a year we produced a machine that makes 40,000 *chapattis* per hour.

Wow. Is that what you produce?
Yes, that is what is going on in our north Indian kitchens. It is amazing. Of course, if you ask us to make *puris* we can’t. We don’t know how to cook them.

So is rice completely out in north India?
No, we give *pulao* for two days and *dal* and some days we also give a sweet. The other challenge was to alter the menu every day. Even in south India the *sambar* is altered. We have different types of masalas. Every day we use different masalas and vegetables. If the vegetables and masalas are different, the taste is different.

So the children have something to look forward to?
Yes, and we get continuous feedback from schools. The children are raving about the food we give them in every part of India.

Does the menu change every day?
The overall menu is basically the same. In south India we give *sambar*-rice and *bise bele baath*. In the north we give *chapattis*, *dal* and vegetables. During festivals we are particular about sending sweets.

What is the calorific value of a meal that you serve?
As per government rules the midday meal for children in lower primary is 450 calories and for upper primary it is 700 calories. Protein content for children in lower primary is 12 gm and for upper primary it is 20 gm per child.

The menu is designed so that children automatically get their daily intake of fresh vegetables, dairy products, cereals, legumes and oil which is imperative for increasing nutritional levels. We also make a conscious effort to modify the menu on a timely basis so that there is variety. The menu is customised for north India and south India. We get continuous feedback.

Have you assessed the impact of midday meals in government schools?
Number one is elimination of classroom hunger. We don’t just give children one serving. They can eat as much as they want. According to headmasters the food quantity is sufficient and it has significantly helped in countering classroom hunger.

The second is social equity. This has been maintained almost universally according to government officials and headmasters. Children eat together regardless of caste, religion or economic class in all states. Parents too did not object. So the midday meal really promotes social equity at childhood stage.

Of course in the beginning there was some inequity. So we used to stress that the children sit in a line. Sometimes we would ask older students to serve the food and a child would say if he serves the food I don’t want to take it. We educated the teachers and emphasised that they must all sit together and eat.

Third is nutrition and health. The food served is healthy and hygienic. Almost all nutritional experts who have evaluated the meal feel that the midday meals we provide have the right nutrition and calorific content. They recommended that this programme should continue.

The next impact is on enrolment, retention and attendance which were highly irregular across all states. During interviews most headmasters mentioned that enrolment and attendance had increased significantly and so did government officials.

Are you planning to introduce breakfast?
We are open to it. We are willing to expand provided we get adequate funding from donors, stakeholders and the government. We can do it. We have invested in setting up kitchens. They are not fully utilised. It’s not difficult for me to serve *idlis* in the morning. I have steam cookers. We have to just start three hours before. Now we start at 4 am. If I start cooking at 2 am I can make a set of *idlis*. I only have to order more machines for *idli*-making and we can serve breakfast also. There are logistic issues but those can be worked out.

The meal has to reach hot. We don’t have thoroughly insulated vehicles but heat can be retained for four hours.

How much does the midday meal cost per child?
By the end of March 2016 our national average per meal was ₹9.51. The government subsidy meets ₹5.7 per meal. The balance is met by donations, corporate funding and so on. There is capital cost expenditure for which we don’t get anything from the government.

Besides subsidy, the government guarantees timely procurement of foodgrain which is very good. Foodgrain is delivered to us. The commitment of the government has to be commended along with our donors and funders.

How replicable is your model?
Akshaya Patra has two models. One is the centralised kitchen model. The second is the decentralised model. We are feeding 20,000 children in Baran district of Rajasthan. It was a big challenge because vehicles can’t deliver meals there. Only two-wheelers can go. As a result, the centralised kitchen model doesn’t work.

So we engaged local women for one village. We rented a small house and employed five or six women to cook. We trained them on hygiene. Every week a person goes on a two-wheeler and delivers all the provisions to them. The women not only cook, they walk to the school and deliver the food in containers. Each school has about 50 to 100 children. We are doing this decentralised model in Nayagarh in Odisha and in villages in the interiors of Vrindavan. This model is scalable.

Our centralised kitchen model can only be scaled up in urban areas.

Can the government midday meal scheme do this?
It is difficult. They have one cook in the school and the headmaster has to procure the provisions, get cooking gas and so on. Will he manage the school or focus on the midday meal? There is a problem with the government model. Everybody cribs. You lose study time and administration time. We employ women as cooks. They are paid ₹3,000 to ₹4,000. In the government midday meal scheme the cooks are casual labourers.

Does the cost per child change in a rural area?
The cost per child increases in a rural area because there is no economy of scale. You are cooking for 100 children in one household. The unit cost goes up like anything. For instance, it costs us ₹16 per meal per child in Baran as against ₹9 or ₹10 in other places. We have to provide meals to small batches of 100-200 children.

Is the menu different in rural areas?
It is not different. In Odisha we serve rice. But it is difficult to control quality and accountability of materials. It’s a challenge we haven’t been able to crack. We are thinking of trying out a hub and spoke model. We will provide semi-cooked food so that locally minimum cooking needs to be done. If there are roads in rural areas, it’s not a problem. ■

SAMRAT BANDODKAR

The Wanarmares are a primitive tribe that settled in Goa

Beaten, threatened tribals find succour

Swift action by citizens' groups

Gauri Gharpure
Ponda

ABOUT half an hour from Ponda in south Goa, an undulating road leads to a village called Nirankal. Here, on a hilltop, Wanarmare tribals settled around four years ago. They made flimsy huts propped up on bamboo poles. The floor was plastered with cow dung. With no walls, it was the roof covered with tarpaulin sheets that saved them from Goa's torrential monsoon.

On 16 October, when most Wanarmare families had left to find work, a mob from a nearby village ransacked their huts. The FIR report, filed on the night of 18 October, alleges that all tarpaulin sheets were pulled off, solar light panels donated by the state government were broken, some huts were pulled down, water barrels were emptied and broken, and that large amounts of rice gruel boiling on twigs in makeshift *chulhas* were overturned.

The villagers threatened the tribals with eviction. One woman was injured in the mayhem. The FIR names two people, a man and a woman. The man was taken into custody and granted bail the next day. The police did not arrest the woman, saying that nothing was to be recovered from the site under Section 41A.

The Wanarmares are a tribal community originally from remote parts of Maharashtra. They were expert hunters especially adept at catching monkeys, and hence the name. Some groups of Wanarmares settled in Goa decades ago — in Bicholim and nearby northern regions, apart from Niranka in Ponda, south Goa.

Trouble was brewing in Ponda for a long time. On 2 October, some villagers came to their settlement and ordered them to leave. On 8 October a few Nirankal villagers met the district collector and the industries minister and local MLA, Mahadev Naik, with demands to evict the Wanarmares, calling them 'dirty' and 'a nuisance'. About a year ago, the Bethoda panchayat had passed a resolution to evict the community from the village.

Last year, ration cards were issued to these 17 households. Some families also obtained Aadhar cards and they were in the process of getting registered for voter cards. This, many people say, is the chief bone of contention.

The Nirankal panchayat stands on an uncertain majority and the slightest change in equations may result in a change of political leadership at the panchayat level. Others are of the opinion that a builder is eyeing the prime location on which the Wanarmares now live and is being backed by a local politician.

SAMRAT BANDODKAR

They have been living in flimsy, makeshift huts

The 17 Wanarmare families with 44 children and six infants have faced the brunt of the attack and live in fear. The incident has all the elements of conflict that still trouble many parts of India: bullying, criminal intimidation, forceful eviction, social boycott, land-grabbing and political motives.

However, something stood out this time — the outreach of civil society. A small group of people on a WhatsApp group brought the issue onto the front pages of local Goan dailies. Through an unusual mix of persuasion, dialogue and coordination between different sections of bureaucracy, the group is ensuring that the administration and political authorities are held accountable and extend help within their jurisdiction.

Advocate Satish Sonak has been at the forefront of this movement. On 1 November he brought this case to the attention of the Human Rights Commission. The commission passed an order to the district collector of Ponda, stating that solar panels be fixed, food provided as well as clothing and security, as quickly as possible. A compliance report has to be submitted in a fortnight.

Swift action followed these directives. The same evening, a water tanker was sent to the Wanarmare settlement. On 2 November, in accordance with the Human Rights Commission's order, the deputy collector and SDO, Ponda, directed the civil supplies inspector to provide immediate relief ration. Four officials reached the site around 5 pm and distributed 380 kg rice and 30 kg sugar.

Donations in kind were sought at once after the attack and a list of items for immediate relief was compiled. Vaman Bhate, owner of Panjim's Varsha Bookstall, agreed to collect items and his shop became the first drop-off point for donations. People began pledging items from the list and dropped cardboard boxes at Varsha Bookstall. Every day, cars would collect the items, drive down to Ponda and deliver them to the Wanarmares.

Not all was rosy, however. Some people allegedly started spreading rumours that too many used clothes had been collected and the tribals were burning them. There were whispers about cash being solicited. The collector sought information. Journalist Prakash Kamat clarified that both rumours were wrong on 3 November.

The same day, a group of 10 eminent artists including Harshada Kerkar, Shridhar Bambolkar, Ajay Kothavale, Prashant Nageshkar and others took part in an art camp in Ponda on the theme 'Goa — Land, Life and Legacy' and spent time with the community. They painted at Nirankal all day. They plan to hold an exhibition and donate all the proceeds to the Wanarmares.

SAMRAT BANDODKAR

A medical camp arranged by volunteers found the children were malnourished

On 4 November, representatives of the Wanarmares met the Women's Commission, the Child Rights Commission and the Commissioner of SC/ST Rights. They submitted a letter requesting speedy justice and relief. There is confusion regarding the legal status of Wanarmares as SCs/STs. This results in several loopholes and delays by the bureaucracy. The police argued that since they were tribals, the FIR had to be routed through the DYSP, Tribal Affairs, and sorting this out took time till the night of 18 October. The chairperson of Goa SC/ST Commission, Anant Shirvoikar, said that he would do all he could on humanitarian grounds since the Wanarmares are not officially notified as STs.

The Wanarmares' makeshift settlement is interspersed with marigold plantations. Orange floral blobs are the only blob of colour on this rocky hillock. When asked if they planted flowers to sell them, Sugandha replied in a broken mix of Konkani and Katkari that they did, but most locals refused to buy the garlands they make. "And the police asks, where is your licence? If we don't work they say we are dependent and if we try to be independent they don't like it," Sugandha said, rolling her eyes more in sorrow than criticism.

GAURI GHARPURE

Supplies being unloaded for the Wanarmares

The women walk a kilometre every day to fetch water. Their children are being sent to school for the first time. The eldest kids are studying in Class 3. They walk about five miles every day to reach school. One child wanted a school bag, another asked when the solar lights would be fixed so he could study. They don't have electricity connections. Their settlement is crawling with red ants. At night there are snakes and scorpions around. Yet, most of the children are barefoot. Gopal, a Wanarmare man helping with coordination, said that most families buy one pair of *chappals* that are shared by four or five children.

Yet the Wanarmares accepted help with great restraint and dignity. The women hesitantly stated what they needed. One woman moved her shoulders nervously and said: "We want old clothes to use during our periods. The ones we have are too tattered." She refused sanitary napkins, saying they won't be able to afford them later. An elderly woman then cleared her throat and asked for "blouse, petticoat and a saree". Sugandha immediately interrupted her. "But we have that," she said, pointing to the faded, tattered clothes she was wearing.

Volunteers also arranged a medical camp. A series of health complications in children and women were revealed. Medical vans were quickly arranged for preliminary check-ups, diagnostic tests and follow-ups. One child was diagnosed with a heart murmur, another showed signs of an enlarged liver. A few children suffer from cold, fever and malnutrition. Three women suffer from severe post-partum problems. Two prominent medical stores in Ponda and Panjim offered free medicines. Government aid of ₹4,500 per family has been deposited in their bank accounts.

But civil society groups say this amount is insufficient and are negotiating for more. There are plans to embed two social work students as part of their college projects with the Wanarmares for at least two months. Their travel and accommodation arrangements will be taken care of by volunteers from civil society.

The flood of goodwill was such that civil society groups decided to withdraw help in kind and closed all collection points in Panjim, Ponda and Mapusa on 6 November. Now, the focus has shifted to health, with some children diagnosed with serious ailments that need immediate intervention. On 11 November, the electricity department began work to instal streetlights in the area; water and electricity connections for the Wanarmares are likely to be given soon if social and political will prevail. ■

Village women get a helpline

Swapna Majumdar
Gorakhpur/Deoria

IT was a hot and humid August afternoon so Babita decided to take a short-cut to Sirsia Mishra, a neighbouring village in Gorakhpur division of Uttar Pradesh. She walked down a narrow pathway between two lush green paddy fields. Just as she was wondering why the fields, usually dotted with farmers, were so deserted, she was accosted by a man. Although Babita was taken aback by his sudden appearance, she wasn't afraid. After all, as a community volunteer with the Rajiv Gandhi Mahila Vikas Pariyojna (RGMVP), a non-profit in UP working to empower women and alleviate poverty, she had traversed this path many times to visit the village to organise meetings with women. But when the man started making lewd remarks and harassing her, Babita knew it would be risky to deal with him alone.

Instead of panicking, she quickly dialled Helpline, a special number designated for emergencies by the RGMVP self-help groups (SHG), saved on her mobile phone. Within minutes, five women, all SHG members, reached the spot. When the man saw them approaching, he fled.

With nearly 11.4 percent of crime against women in India being committed in UP, the state ranks a dubious first on the national list, according to the 2014 National Crime Records Bureau. In fact, in 2013-14, UP, which has a 16.8 percent share of the country's female population, saw an increase of 73 percent over the previous year of cases of assault on women with intent to outrage modesty.

But rural women's collectives in the villages of Deoria district in Gorakhpur division are combatting this with an innovative idea. They have developed their own helpline so that it can be used by all the SHG members in moments of dire need and to protect themselves and others from sexual harassment and domestic violence. The 240 SHGs, each with a membership of 10-15 marginalised women, know that a chain of support is in place the moment they dial the Helpline.

"Since we formed SHGs with the help of RGMVP and understood the importance of collective strength, we have gained the confidence to tackle sensitive cases of sexual harassment and domestic violence. The decision to create a helpline came up during our meetings when we discussed how members could access help in an organised manner. Now they all know that instead of becoming distressed or frightened, they can get the support of the collective with one phone call. Just this knowledge gives them the confidence to fight for their rights," said Rita Devi, president of the Bhatparani block cluster of 240 SHGs.

This growing self-belief has led them to take on the police and perpetrators from the higher castes in their bid for justice. In Babita's case, the women

The helpline, started by women in villages of Deoria district, can be used by SHG members to protect themselves by asking for help.

marched into the village and tracked down the culprit. Even on finding that he was from an upper caste, they were not cowed down and demanded an apology. By this time, thanks to the Helpline, the news had reached all members. Over 100 women arrived to lend support and sat in solidarity outside the house of the culprit. Several hours later, when he tried to sneak out disguised as a godman, a vigilant Babita and Rita nabbed him. They called the local police and ensured he was arrested and put behind bars by following him to the police station.

But the drama didn't end there. Strings were pulled by the family and the pradhan was called to use his clout to free him. To build pressure on the women to give up, pradhans from adjoining gram panchayats were also called. But the women didn't buckle under this pressure. They knew that if they did so, others would also become emboldened to misbehave under the influence of alcohol. Finally, when everyone realised that the women were not going to give up, an official letter signed by four pradhans stating it was now their responsibility to ensure such an incident would not be repeated was given to the women. Only then did the women call a truce.

"This was a huge victory for us. Now everyone is aware that we will not tolerate any harassment and we can fight to bring the culprits to book," said Babita.

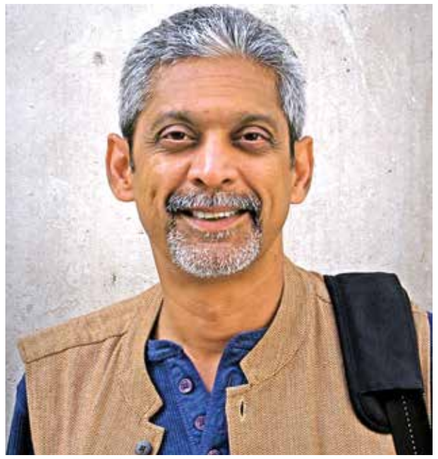
It was the Helpline which came to the aid of Kamlawati, an SHG member in Narainpur Tiwari village. When members rushed to her house following her call, they found that Kamlawati was abused and beaten by her husband whenever he consumed alcohol. But this time, he had gone too far and they had to hospitalise the battered Kamlawati.

A larger meeting of the SHGs was called and a decision was taken not just to counsel the husband but also to ensure the closure of the alcohol shop. This collective effort paid dividends. "My husband has not raised his hand since then," said Kamlawati.

The Helpline has also been used to save women outside the groups from the clutches of moneylenders. Tears run down the face of Kamala Devi of Mandanchak village even today when she remembers her ordeal. When she was unable to pay the loan instalment, the moneylender ordered her to carry out a humiliating task with cow dung at his house. When her neighbour, an SHG member, heard about it, she called the Helpline even though Kamala was not part of the collective. "An immediate decision to lend the amount needed was taken by the group and my dignity was restored," recounted Kamala. Now an SHG member, she has freed herself of debt. ■

Samita's World *by SAMITA RATHOR*

‘Mental illness can shorten your life by 20 years’



Dr Vikram Patel: ‘Psychiatry focuses on the person, not the disease’

Gauri Gharpure
Panaji

THE 2016 Pardes Humanitarian Prize in Mental Health was awarded to Dr Vikram Patel, psychiatrist and researcher, on 28 October in New York. The award is given every year by the Brain & Behaviour Research Foundation for pathbreaking work in mental healthcare in developing countries.

Dr Patel is known across the world for his innovative and integrated approach to mental healthcare. In India he has been part of the Mental Health Policy Group which drafted the country’s first national mental health policy in 2014.

Dr Patel is also the founder of Sangath, an NGO that works for child development, adolescent health and mental health. Based in Goa, Sangath trains local health workers to tackle mental health issues faced by adults and children.

In 2008, Sangath was awarded the MacArthur Foundation’s International Prize for Creative and Effective Institutions. Affable and approachable, Dr Patel spoke candidly about mental healthcare in India and his personal experience with depression.

Do you think in India we continue to underestimate the seriousness of mental health needs?
Of course we do. I would say we don’t just underestimate mental health needs, but a lot of people just dismiss such people rightaway. Like anxiety and hypertension can have the same devastating symptoms but, if untreated, those with mental illness are more likely to die about 20-25 years earlier than others. Think about it from the perspective of gender. Say, a man and a woman visit a doctor in a rural setting with the same problems. The man is more likely to be treated and the woman might be simply sent home. I would say similar things happen with mental health patients. It is actually a human rights issue to get them the help they need.

Mental illness is the third leading cause of disability. Can you explain how exactly it disables a person?
The nature of mental illness is just as devastating. Symptoms vary from constantly hearing voices, poor concentration, aches and pain, fatigue and in the worst cases the thought that life is not worth living which leads to suicide. Our well-being is deeply entwined with our functions.

Think about it this way — imagine you have had a bad day and how low you feel. Now, imagine that day in and day out. I reject the Western bio-medical perspective, largely made popular by French philosopher Descartes, that the mind and the body are separate. Mental health and physical well-being are deeply interconnected. When I am miserable, it can have an effect on my cardiac functioning, blood sugar, brain control...

> ‘Exercise regularly, engage in activities even when you don’t feel up to it, go out. Seek help — there is no shame.’

There is a huge gap in providing mental healthcare in India. You emphasise ‘task shifting’. Please tell us what you mean by this term and how Sangath works.
Task-shifting — we now like to call it task-sharing — is a very central idea of community healthcare movements across the world, especially in India and China. Essentially, people from the grassroots are trained in providing healthcare, like vaccination, delivery, diagnosis and treating certain diseases.

We have tried to use the same approach in mental healthcare. We, at Sangath, don’t have volunteers, because we don’t think providing mental healthcare can be a voluntary activity.

We train people from the community and offer them incentives to work. Sangath is primarily involved with innovation and designing intervention programmes. We mostly partner with the government to see how these mental healthcare innovations can be delivered and integrated in the primary healthcare system. Some projects are in an advanced stage, for example our intervention plan in Madhya Pradesh has been scaled up throughout the state. But for autism intervention, the project is still at a very early stage.

Why did you choose to study psychiatry at a time when it wasn’t a profession that people thought much of?
I found psychiatry the least biomedical of all streams. After five years of study, I realised I was not drawn to the very technical focus on medical perspectives. Psychiatry focused on the person rather than on the disease. Each case was unique because each person is different. I found it very exciting, challenging and holistic.

Psychiatry must be a stressful profession. How do you deal with it?
Yes, stress is much more of an issue for mental health professionals. The key element is acknowledging it as a reality and understanding that burnouts can happen. We need supervision for our community healthcare workers as well. At Sangath we try to ensure that they are identifying their own problems from time to time, not taking their worries home. The approach should be preventive rather than reactive, that’s what we believe at Sangath.

Have you ever been depressed yourself?
Absolutely. There are times when my mood is low. Plus, there is family history — my mother was diagnosed with severe depression late in her life. So, I have developed simple strategies to identify and control it. I also share this with people — exercise regularly, engage in activities even when you don’t feel up to it, go out. At such times we are more vulnerable but the key is to not isolate yourself from your environment.

Break the cycle of withdrawal and talk to people, do the activities you enjoy, engage in something that stimulates the brain. These are also the techniques that psychotherapists recommend. Most people can control their symptoms with such techniques, but many also need professional help. Seek it — there is no shame.

Deepika Padukone has spoken frankly about coming out of depression. When a celebrity takes up such a cause does it help to create awareness and acceptability?
There is definitely greater awareness than about two decades back. What Deepika has done is commendable. To declare you had a mental illness is still considered risky by some and to come out and talk openly about it is admirable. What’s more, not to have a backlash is a tremendous boost for mental health awareness. But my only concern is that mental health should not be misconstrued as a celebrity problem. She happens to be affluent and famous, but it can happen to anyone. When people like her are the only voices you hear opening up about mental illness — that can be dangerous. ■

Celebrating Hall of Fame

SEVEN new entrants to the Civil Society Hall of Fame were celebrated at the Amphitheatre of the India Habitat Centre on 12 November with a large and diverse audience from different walks of life in attendance.

Dr R.A. Mashelkar, National Research Professor and head of the National Innovation Foundation of India, presided and gave away the citations.

The selection for the Civil Society Hall of Fame was made from across the country. Ramesh Gharu and Gautam Sharma are government school teachers from villages in Barmer district in Rajasthan.

Satyanarayanan Mundayoor, popularly called Uncle Moosa, has been the moving spirit behind a library network in Arunachal Pradesh. Kim Chadda teaches profoundly deaf children in Hyderabad. Beeram Ramulu takes up the rights of farmers in Warangal district in Telangana. Sachidanand Bharati has shown how forest fires can be averted in Uttarakhand by reviving small water bodies and growing local species of trees. Honnesara Paniyajji Manjappa is an LIC agent who used his meagre resources and some donations to set up the Vanashree Schools in Sagar in Karnataka.

Their work has been showcased in *Civil Society's* 13th Special Anniversary issue and on our website www.civilsocietyonline.com. The event, however, is an opportunity to meet the Civil Society Hall of Fame entrants and hear their stories as only they can tell them with simplicity and passion.

The event is just the concluding part of the Civil Society Hall of Fame. The process begins by identifying people, putting their names on a long list and placing it before the jury to frame a shortlist. We then visit each of the candidates to see their work and document it. The final list comes out of this extensive effort, which involves travel, journalistic probing and, finally, selection.

Each year, as it happens, most of the people on the final list haven't visited Delhi before and those who may have aren't exactly familiar with the capital. They invariably belong to remote parts of the country where they have distinguished themselves by the work they do. So this isn't a search for 'unsung heroes' or mere 'good news' stories. Individuals and groups selected to be in the Hall of Fame aren't known in Delhi but held in high regard in the places they belong.

The large audience at the Habitat's Amphitheatre each year comes to celebrate good work being done elsewhere in the country. It is an occasion for Delhi to pause and think. And, for the entrants to the Civil Society Hall of Fame there is special meaning in being feted by a Delhi audience.

As in previous years, Indian Ocean played in the Everyone Is Someone Concert, which followed the presentation of citations and narration of personal accounts in the Hall of Fame segment. With Indian Ocean there is a special bond because of their deep connection with the kind of journalism *Civil Society* magazine represents and our choice of bottom-up stories. In much the same way, we admire their music. It has now become a warm and enduring association between band and magazine. ■

PICTURES BY AJIT KRISHNA

Gautam Sharma, Umesh Anand, Rita Anand, Dr R.A. Mashelkar, HN Manjappa, Sachidanand Bharati, Beeram Ramulu, Uncle Moosa, Ramesh Gharu and Kim Chadda

Gautam Sharma

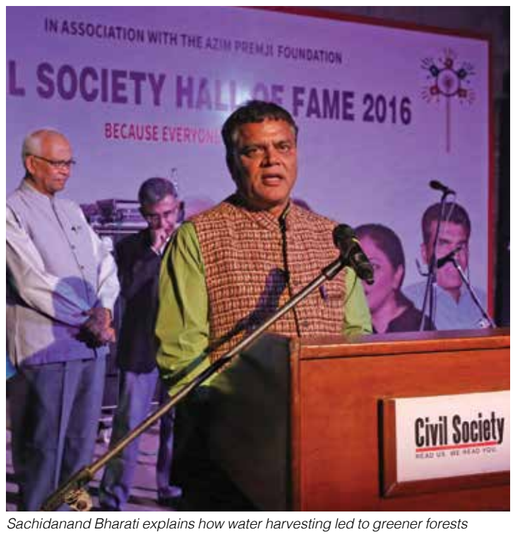
Honnesara Paniyajji Manjappa

Dr R.A. Mashelkar with members of the Lohit Youth Library Network

Ramesh Gharu captured the attention of the audience with his inventive teaching aids

Dr R.A. Mashelkar presents the citation to Kim Chadda

Beeram Ramulu talks of his work with farmers



Sachidanand Bharati explains how water harvesting led to greener forests

Indian Ocean played some great music

It was a packed hall of people from all walks of life

Back to school, say parents

PICTURES BY BILAL BAHADUR

Jehangir Rashid
Srinagar

Children studying in an informal teaching centre run by volunteer teachers

MORE than 95 percent of students appeared for the 10+2 examination in Jammu and Kashmir, completely negating the claim by separatists that children would boycott the exam.

For the past four months, the separatist leadership in Kashmir has been putting forth a protest calendar that people have followed. They had opposed the holding of examinations.

Separatist leaders Syed Ali Shah Geelani, Mirwaiz Umar Farooq and Mohammad Yasin Malik had taken a dig at the education department for announcing the exam schedule for Classes 10 and 12. These leaders had said that as educational institutions had been closed since July there was no logic in holding examinations.

"According to the authorities in the Jammu and Kashmir State Board of School Education, almost 95 percent of students appeared for the two examinations," said an official spokesman. About 484 centres were set up for 32,000 students appearing in the 10+2 examination across Kashmir division. Ninety-nine per cent of students appeared for the Class 10 exam.

Parents had repeatedly underlined the importance of education to the separatists. A meeting was convened at the residence of Geelani on 8 November. This group of stakeholders stressed the significance of education and demanded that the separatists consider this aspect while issuing their weekly protest programmes.

"We can compensate for economic losses with the passage of time but what about education. Students have virtually lost one year of their academic career and I don't see any alternative. At many places, children instead of carrying books in their hands could be seen carrying stones. This is disturbing and all stakeholders should think about it," said Zubair Ahmad, a parent.

Though schools have been closed since July, they have been replaced by community-type schools in some areas of Kashmir. Students of different classes are being taught by youth in these community schools. In most cases no fee is charged. Marriage halls and community centres have been converted into makeshift schools.

"Children have been the worst sufferers of the present agitation. I along with some of my friends have begun teaching the children of our area. We are not charging any fees and our aim is only to help students catch up with the studies they have missed. We feel satisfied at the end of the day even though the schedule is hectic," said Irfan Latif, a teacher.

Over the past one month or so yet another worrying situation has emerged in Kashmir as government schools are being set afire by antisocial elements. More than 30 schools have suffered damage due to arson across Kashmir with some arrests being made by the J&K Police.

"The burning of schools concerns every Kashmiri. People especially the youth have to come forward and save school buildings. It is important that the persons responsible for burning schools are exposed so that the truth comes out loud and clear. Kashmiri society is aware and conscious and nobody can drive us to illiteracy," says Jagmohan Singh Raina, Chairman of the All-Parties Sikh Coordination Committee (APSCC).

> **'At many places, children instead of carrying books in their hands could be seen carrying stones. This is disturbing,' said Zubair Ahmed.**

More than 30 schools have been burnt

Raina says that the separatist leaders should ask local people to keep watch on antisocial elements who are out to cause irreparable damage to the education sector in Kashmir. He said children of the Valley, irrespective of religion and area, have suffered and corrective measures need to be taken.

While the government blames the separatists for gutting of schools, the other side accuses government agencies of carrying out such acts. The state government has of late issued directives to teachers to stay in schools at night so that the safety of the buildings is ensured.

Naeem Akhtar, education minister of the state, had at end-July announced that all government and private schools would reopen very soon. But, given the situation on the ground, it was not possible.

"The state government, more so its education minister, faced flak for announcing that schools would be thrown open so soon. In the absence of public transport how could students and teachers reach their schools? The principal of a higher secondary school was beaten ruthlessly by youth when he tried to reopen his school in North Kashmir's Bandipora district. Given this situation, how safe is it to throw open schools in Kashmir?" asked Rameez Ahmad, a teacher.

Much confusion prevails and requires intervention by the government. For instance, private schools in Kashmir are asking for tuition fees for the period for which the schools have been closed. They are also demanding bus fees, saying drivers and conductors have to be paid. Parents are at a loss and say they don't know how to cope. But they are hopeful that schools and colleges will reopen and children will return to their books and classrooms. ■

CHOKING IN DELHI

HOW AAP FAILED THE CAPITAL AND THE CENTRE LOOKED ON

Umesh Anand
New Delhi

FOR several days after Diwali, a cocktail of life-threatening chemicals hung over Delhi and its adjoining areas. An orgy with fireworks, despite Delhi's already foul air, had pushed pollution levels to the highest they had been in almost two decades. Some of the pollutants scaled such peaks that they couldn't even be measured!

In conditions like these, major cities elsewhere in the world would declare a health emergency and swiftly take steps to bring down pollution. But in Delhi, the state government run by the Aam Aadmi Party (AAP) did nothing even as the situation worsened. Nor, for that matter, did the Central government under the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), though the national capital was involved and deadly toxins were engulfing it. The Congress and other opposition parties also did not bestir themselves.

The need to contain pollution and ensure clean air for citizens was clearly not among any party's priorities despite the damage being done to the health of millions of people and the shocking deterioration in the quality of life in Delhi. Even more worrisome was the plight of other Indian cities, which are equally and at times more polluted than Delhi every winter. If Delhi's air quality didn't matter to the very powerful would anyone come to the rescue of lesser cities?

"I don't think the political leadership in India understands the urgency of this issue. I am yet to find a politician who is serious about air pollution. They will say, '*Haan bahut* problem *hai*'. But their answers are so shallow that it makes me feel that they are not serious about the issue. They have not understood the gravity of the situation," says Chandra Bhushan, Deputy Director-General of the Centre for Science and Environment (CSE).

When AAP came to power in the Delhi state assembly with a brute majority, the expectations were that it would be different. People elected the fledgling party because it was born out of social initiatives. The hope was that it would address issues like air, water, transportation and public health with the seriousness they deserve and from the perspective of the common man. New politicians would find new and innovative solutions to old problems. They would go beyond slogans.

But after two years in office AAP has shown it has little inclination to be radically different. Even as pollution levels continued to grow in Delhi, placing it among the most polluted cities in India and the rest of the world, the AAP government didn't seem to find the time to address the issue. Election-time promises to put out more buses were also not kept. Around ₹400 crore was collected as a green cess that was to be spent on controlling pollution, but wasn't utilised.

NOT ONE MEETING

"I am very disappointed with the AAP government. The political leadership of AAP, by which I mean Chief Minister Arvind Kejriwal and Deputy Chief Minister Manish Sisodia, for the past six to seven months did not hold a single meeting to address the air pollution problem of the city," says Chandra Bhushan.

"All the records that we have show that there was not one coordinated meeting called by the Chief Minister to take stock of how to reduce air pollution," he says. "This government was absolutely not prepared and did nothing to deal with the issue of air pollution during and post Diwali and in winter."

But it could have made a serious difference had it wanted to. To begin with, there was the money: around ₹40 crore a month, totalling around ₹400 crore, coming in from the court-imposed cess on trucks entering Delhi.

PICTURES BY AJIT KRISHNA

A thick blanket of smog, filled with pollutants, hung all over Delhi

A group of girls wearing masks and protesting air pollution at Jantar Mantar

Morning walkers in a Delhi park

Then, there was an action plan provided by the Environment Pollution Control Authority (EPCA). The plan called for removal of dust from the roads, but the AAP government bought just two dust suction devices in the entire year and even they were not working.

The action plan also called for the shutting down of the Badarpur thermal power plant, which is highly polluting. But the power plant and its fly ash dumpsite continue to contribute 10-15 percent of the pollution in Delhi.

"All that is needed is a transmission line and a transmission station which can bypass Badarpur and supply electricity to south Delhi," explains Chandra Bhushan. "Closure of the Badarpur thermal plant is the responsibility of both the state government and the Central government and neither has done anything about it."

Another element of the action plan was to increase public transport so as to discourage people from driving. It was also a promise made by AAP at election time. But the AAP government has not been able to put more buses on the road despite parking space being made available by the courts.

There were other measures like preventing the burning of garbage and ensuring that construction sites keep dust levels down. There was also a need to reduce congestion and improve roads. Biomass as a cooking fuel was to be replaced.

Much has been made of the burning of crop stubble in the fields of Haryana and Punjab. But the impact it has on Delhi's air accounts only for a small portion of the overall pollution.

The fact is that burning of stubble in agricultural fields has been happening for decades and is also seasonal. Pollution in Delhi extends into many more months. Containing pollution in Delhi involves a host of administrative measures for dealing with multiple other sources. There was also the need to work with neighbouring states to contain stubble burning.

"I am especially disappointed because a lot of people in AAP come from civil society, the community of activists to which I belong. A group of us decided to get into politics, which is very good, because we all crib about politicians. These people were brave enough to enter politics but I never expected them to play the kind of politics that they are playing right now. Instead, they should have been addressing the issues which civil society addresses," says Chandra Bhushan.

ROLE OF THE COURTS

When CSE went to court 15 years ago, asking for the use of CNG as the single fuel in public transport, it was a long and lonely battle waged by Anil Agarwal, CSE's founder. There was disagreement over a single fuel for public transport. Bus operators and petroleum companies resisted change. The Congress state government under the leadership of Sheila Dikshit was at first reluctant, then cautious and finally threw its weight behind the idea. Ajay Maken, the young transport minister in the state government at that time, took the lead in bringing in CNG.

It was the Supreme Court then that mandated the CNG switchover. CSE continued to play a vigilant role under Agarwal's successor, Sunita Narain. But this time around, too, in the absence of government action, it was once again left to the courts to speak up. The Delhi High Court equated government inaction with genocide on citizens. The National Green Tribunal wanted to know if the Centre and state governments were waiting for people to die. The Supreme Court demanded an action plan.

THE COST OF POLLUTION

The cost of pollution to an economy is estimated at between three and four per cent of GDP. It translates into the loss of productive work, health bills, reduced lifespan and serious physical impairment. Health insurers are already considering charging higher premiums for people living in Delhi because the risk factors have mounted.

At its best, Delhi's air is unhealthy — which means pollutants are three or four times above normal levels. In winter months, the pollution gets worse because the air does not rise in the cold and pollutants stay low. There is a massive increase in particulate matter, some of it so fine that it passes through the lungs into the bloodstream and sticks to organs, becoming the cause for inflammation in the body.

Health insurers are already considering charging higher premiums for people living in Delhi because the risk factors have mounted.

Where does Delhi's pollution come from? The sources are automobiles, the Badarpur thermal plant, dust from construction sites and kicked up along roadsides, *tandoors* and kitchen fires that use biomass, and diesel generators. In October and November, burning of crop stubble in the fields of Haryana and Punjab sends smoke in the direction of the city.

The emissions from diesel vehicles put into the air highly toxic polyaromatic hydrocarbons like benzene and xylene. There are oxides of nitrogen that come out of tailpipes. From the thermal power plant come mercury, chromium, cadmium and sulphur.

When all these and other pollutants come together with particulate matter they cause long-term harm to health. Anyone living in Delhi is taking in smoke the equivalent of several packets of cigarettes a day and together with it an array of toxic pollutants.

THOUSANDS OF DEATHS

Thousands of deaths each year can be linked to air pollution, which affects the heart and lungs and is known to be the cause of different cancers. Yet establishing the exact correlation is difficult and so politicians and policy-makers continue to duck the issue.

In 1952, in the London fog some 4,000 people died within a short span, forcing a cleanup. In Delhi and other Indian cities, deaths in perhaps larger numbers are taking place, but they are disaggregated, taking place over time and, therefore, overlooked. There is also an absence of medical sentinels tasked with establishing the correlation between a death and pollution. This is particularly so with regard to the poor, who are affected the most because of inadequate nutrition and direct exposure to sources of pollution in slums and at road level.

Dr Upendra Kaul, the well-respected cardiologist who was formerly at AIIMS

Children are the worst sufferers

Dr Upendra Kaul

Traffic jams add to air pollution and distress

Chandra Bhushan: 'Politicians don't understand the urgency of this issue'

and is now with Fortis, says exposure to pollutants from an early age increases the wear and tear in the body.

"Very fine particulate matter passes through the lungs into the bloodstream and attaches itself to different organs. Those with diabetes and high cholesterol are particularly vulnerable because they have sticky insides. Particulate matter that attaches itself causes inflammation, which is a known cause of heart attacks and strokes," says Dr Kaul.

"A young person exposed to air pollution may not experience a problem straightaway, but over time the damage to the body adds up, leading to that heart attack at 30 which would otherwise have been at 70," says Dr Kaul.

> **'A young person exposed to air pollution may not experience a problem straightaway, but over time the damage to the body adds up,' says Dr Kaul.**

AIRTEL HALF MARATHON

In the absence of the government highlighting the danger from pollution and issuing health advisories, there is widespread ignorance among people. Even the empowered and educated community of running enthusiasts has difficulty in understanding how high levels of pollution could be harmful.

As the date for the Airtel Delhi Half Marathon (ADHM) on 20 November neared, it was left to runners, aware of the dangers, to caution others. Thousands of people take part in the half marathon each year, but there was no advisory from the state government. Airtel and its associate sponsors didn't act in the public interest either despite the overwhelming evidence that running in very polluted conditions is extremely harmful.

Instead, the organisers publicised a statement by Dr Tamorish Kole of Max Healthcare and Medical Director of ADHM, claiming that pollution levels had come down and regular runners had inbuilt resistance to particulate matter!

"There is already a 33 percent reduction in PM 10 and 25 percent reduction in PM 2.5 levels as of today, 16 November 2016. Participants who have been training regularly have higher immunity/resistance to combat the adverse effects of airborne pollutants. Our medical opinion is that a normal trained participant should have no difficulty in completing his or her chosen distance," said Dr Kole.

He also said there would be battery-operated nebulisers and inhalers available for runners who developed breathing problems.

Clearly, Dr Kole's statement was a command performance on behalf of Airtel, which didn't want the race cancelled at any cost.

Finally, it was Rahul Verghese, the well-known runner and founder of *Running and Living*, who sought to create awareness among runners. Two days before the half marathon, Verghese posted that he wouldn't be running because pollution levels hadn't come down. He also advised others not to run in such conditions.

Earlier, he advised runners in the NCR not to train outdoors. Instead, he suggested using a treadmill and doing yoga and muscle toning exercises. Outdoors he recommended an N95 mask, saying: "No bravado and no machismo here — the fine particles when you run without a mask and are inhaling deeply go deep into your lungs and lodge themselves there which will have an adverse impact over time, and in some cases sooner rather than later."

Another post on the *Running and Living* website by Ina Jolly accused Airtel and sports companies Nike, Adidas, Reebok and PUMA of not warning runners of the dangers of running in pollution. "Do you really think that lungs can sustain hours of long distance running? Particles will go deep into your lungs. Some might fall two years down the line and some maybe immediately. At least cigarette companies put a warning and graphic images on the pack. What do these companies put out to let you know how damaging it could get for your lungs?" she posted.

Airtel showed an unwillingness to listen to runners' concerns. A change.org petition by Ranjan Soni, a regular runner, urging Sunil Mittal to do the right thing and call off the Airtel Delhi Half Marathon because of pollution received no response from him or Airtel. Attempts by Soni to post the petition on the half marathon's official website were repeatedly rebuffed.

So, even as Delhi wallows in another smoky winter, politicians and businessmen who call the shots, prefer to live in denial. It is as if clean air just doesn't matter. ■

Jackfruit quest in Malaysia

2 Punjabi PIOs become farm entrepreneurs

Shree Padre
Kasaragod

JACKFRUIT isn't prized in Punjab. It doesn't have the status of the aromatic basmati rice or the tongue tickling *sarson ka saag*. Yet two Punjabis, Manmohan Singh and Harvinder Singh, whose families migrated to Malaysia decades ago, are running a successful 30-acre jackfruit farm in Pahang district of Malaysia.

They started their farm in 2012 and named it Barqat, which means 'blessed' in Punjabi. In just four years they have become seasoned jackfruit farmers.

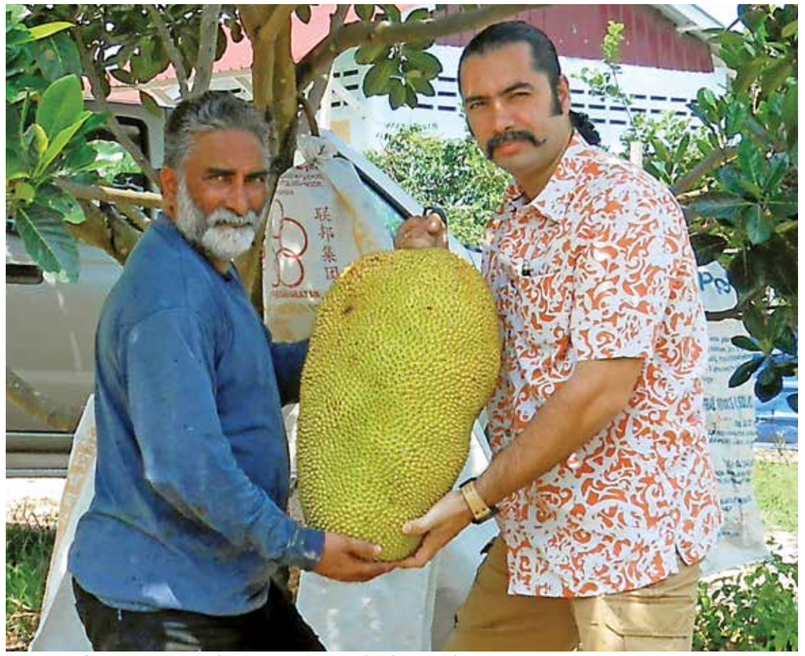
When Malaysia's agriculture department recently held a jackfruit competition in Sarawak, many senior farmers sent their jackfruits to compete. Barqat Farms' jackfruits walked away with the second prize.

"We started jackfruit farming accidentally," say Manmohan and Harvinder. "We began with 'zero' knowledge, but now, after five years, we are happy to say we have learnt and we feel very content."

While 38-year-old Harvinder Singh belongs to the third generation of Indians who settled in Malaysia, 55-year-old Manmohan Singh represents the second generation.

Harvinder's grandfather, Gajjan Singh, came to Malaysia in the early 1900s and joined the police force. Harvinder works in a financial investment company. Manmohan's father, Saun Singh, left India in the early 1950s. He too joined the police initially and then went on to join the IT sector before becoming a jackfruit farmer.

Both of them have reason to be proud. India doesn't have a single state-of-the-art jackfruit orchard like the one they have in Malaysia.



Manmohan Singh and Harvinder Singh with a prized jackfruit from their farm

HOW IT BEGAN

Five years ago Manmohan, while attending a meeting with his boss, came to know that the Malaysian government was giving land on lease for agriculture. The idea of farming appealed to him. His close friend, Harvinder, also showed interest.

Decades ago, Harvinder's grandfather had started rubber farming in Malaysia. "I recalled accompanying my grandfather on his rounds of the farm with some nostalgia," he says.

In 2002 the Malaysian government started a Permanent Food Park project named Taman Kekal Pengeluaran Makanan. Areas were identified that would grow only fruits and vegetables consistently. Planting rubber or palm oil was not allowed. Till date the Malaysian government has developed 54 such Permanent Food Parks. A new one started recently has set aside 3,600 hectares for food crops.

The land is given on lease to people keen to farm at 100 ringgits per acre per annum. Permission has to be renewed every year. The government has the right to take back the land if any terms of the agreement are violated.

The main crop most farmers have selected is jackfruit. Orchards of jackfruit cover roughly 52 percent of the area. The most popular jackfruit variety is J-33. Some farmers have planted J-37 (Mastura) and J-35 varieties.

Manmohan and Harvinder got down to work as soon as land was allotted to them. All wild growth was swiftly cleared and a fence was built. Barely two months after getting possession, they completed planting.

How did two greenhorn farmers know what to plant and how? "The agriculture officers in Malaysia are quite knowledgeable and very cooperative. Whenever you approach them for guidance, they help you," says Manmohan.

They also approached experienced farmers for advice, whenever required. One farmer, for instance, advised them on bud grafting or patch budding, a system that helps a sapling yield jackfruit in just two years.

"In addition to these two resources, you have another friend too — the internet," quips Manmohan.

SEASONED MARKETS

Manmohan and Harvinder planted 1,300 trees on their 30 acres. While Manmohan looks after production and management of the farm, marketing is Harvinder's responsibility.

They opted to plant the J-33 variety, popular in Malaysia. It is also called Tekam Yellow. J-33 sells for the highest price. Unlike India, Malaysia is very quality conscious about jackfruit.

Some Malaysian farmers grow varieties like Mastura and Subana too. "Our country has the saffron fleshed variety as well," says Manmohan. "But customers don't like it because it is not very crispy and tastes slightly sour. This variety sells for about 80 cents per kg, whereas the best quality fruits fetch thrice this price. Farmers who have planted the saffron variety are quite disappointed."

Manmohan and Harvinder have invested equally. Each has spent 57,000 ringgits or about ₹919,720. One great advantage Malaysia has is that jackfruit grows throughout the year though production declines in March and April.

Generally, trees start yielding jackfruit in three years. Barqat Farms got its first harvest in August 2015. Till last December, they were collecting 80 to 100 fruits per month. In the third year their trees yielded 330 fruits and they earned 6971.30 ringgits or ₹112,485. Yields usually increase from the fifth year onwards. Manmohan and Harvinder are hoping to break even by then.

At present only one-fourth of the trees have started fruiting. Some trees grow fast and others slowly in the initial years. The two farmers are trying to boost the growth of slow-growing trees by giving them an additional quota of fertilizer. "Next year, almost all our trees will bear fruit," they hope.

Jackfruit that weighs more than 10 kg is categorised as an 'A grade' fruit in the market and sold for about 2 to 2.60 ringgits per kg. Jackfruit below 10 kg is listed under 'B grade' and fetches around 1.50 ringgits per kg. If the fruit weighs 9.5 kg, it is still categorised as B grade.

Wholesale jackfruit traders in Malaysia are of two kinds — those who buy fruits for making vacuum dried chips and those who buy fresh fruit for consumption. The first category isn't finicky about variety. The second buys only A grade fruit.

The carpels of B grade fruit aren't big and thick enough. But weight doesn't necessarily mean quality. "Jackfruit between 15-22 kg are considered the best," says Harvinder.

For an orchard of jackfruit, Malaysia's department of human resources has fixed a norm of two farmhands for 20 acres.

Manmohan and Harvinder have employed two permanent farmhands. Apart from monthly salary, they are provided accommodation, water, gas, electricity and an insurance coverage of 25,000 ringgits. Once production improves, more labour will be required.

Jackfruit trees provide good commercial yield for about 25 years, beginning from the fifth year. After that, yield starts declining.

Farmers then identify the old trees for replacement. The entire orchard is not replanted but replaced in a staggered way so that the farmers' income doesn't decline drastically.

Barqat Farms' jackfruit plantation

Manmohan Singh loading jackfruit for the market

Most Malaysian jackfruit plantations are irrigated, enabling fruit size and productivity to increase by about 20 to 30 percent. The Singhs haven't started irrigating their farm though water is available. Irrigation infrastructure including pipelines requires considerable capital investment.

Manmohan visits the farm at least five times a week and spends a minimum of three hours. If required, he joins his workers in spraying, harvesting and other operations. During the weekend, he spends 8 to 10 hours working on the farm. Every week, the farm requires 40-50 hours of his time.

RAISING JACKFRUIT

Jackfruit farming is very advanced in Malaysia. Farmers decide not only the height of their trees but also the number of fruits the trees will yield and what their weight will be.

Six to 18 months after planting the grafts, farmers begin canopy management of the young trees. If two branches are growing too close together, they pull them apart and tie them. Or they tie a stone or any weight to one branch to keep it away from the other. A wider gap makes it easier to carry out agricultural operations once the fruit is ready for harvesting.

When the plant grows to a height of four to five feet, farmers cut branches at the lower level to increase ground clearance. A gap of two feet is created between the branches at the lowest level and the land.

The tree is pruned when it reaches a height of 12-15 feet. This technique prevents the tree from growing vertically and induces it to grow laterally. The tree is generally permitted to grow up to 12-15 feet. This restriction helps to harvest the fruit by standing on the ground. You don't have to climb the tree.

"Since we have limited labour, we harvest fruit twice a year," explains Manmohan. "The height of an average man is between five to six feet. His hands can reach another two to three feet. We create a situation whereby our staff doesn't have to climb the tree at all. So tragic incidents of people falling from jackfruit trees don't happen here."

Pruning serves many purposes. It contains the height of the tree and ensures branches spread out in different directions so that the entire tree gets air and sunlight. Productivity increases and so does the quality of fruit.

Thinning is another important agronomic practice. That means removing excessive fruit. Every month farmers here cut off young fruits that sprout at the top of the tree so that they don't need to harvest fruits from that height.

Also fruits growing at the top can break branches. Sometimes if branches are weak, farmers use props to hold them up.

Thinning has many advantages. The fruit grows bigger and carpels too turn thicker, bigger and tastier. Since thinning prevents fruits from overlapping, the likelihood of an insect attack is lowered.

Certain norms are followed. Only two fruits per month are harvested from a tree. Not more than two fruits per branch are grown to ensure quality and prevent the branch from breaking. Keeping tree health in mind, farmers prefer to grow fruits in a layered way on different branches. This management practice ensures fruits of uniform size too.

To control fruit fly menace, the fruit is bagged when it is tender. The date of bagging is painted on it so that the farmer knows when the fruit should be harvested. In areas where there is theft, instead of writing the date, a code is used to confuse the thieves.

Generally, jackfruit takes 120 days to ripen. The bags are opened exactly 110 days after bagging. To check if the fruit has ripened, the fruit is tapped with fingers. A hollow sound means the fruit is ready for harvesting.

"Jackfruit can be harvested within 100 days," explains Manmohan. "But it's better to wait for 115 days. Transport and reaching the end consumer takes another four to seven days. So when the fruit reaches the final buyer, it is just ready for eating."

DEMAND AND SUPPLY

In the Pahang Food Park, five people with roots in India are cultivating jackfruit. In Malaysia, jackfruit plantations are extending in a big way. Currently it is a very popular and remunerative crop. But is the proliferation of jackfruit orchards a matter of anxiety for these partners?

"Right now, demand is exceeding supply. We don't need to worry for a decade. What will happen after that, we don't know," says Manmohan.

Since there is good demand for fresh jackfruit, Malaysia hasn't tried value addition apart from making chips. Reassuringly for farmers, jackfruit hasn't witnessed a market crisis or production failure so far. Systematic thinning and permitting only a limited number of fruits to grow have ensured that the market is not flooded with fruits.

Some Malaysians use tender and raw jackfruit as a vegetable. Harvinder says you need a 20-acre plantation to make jackfruit cultivation a viable financial proposition.

But, for the two Punjabi families, jackfruit still isn't a fruit they feast on.

Although they grow tonnes of jackfruit they don't consume even one full jackfruit a month. "Jackfruit isn't a popular fruit in both our families. Maybe because it grows bountifully on our own farm, even our children don't eat it with interest," says Harvinder. "They do eat jackfruit chips, though, and they love farming." ■

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A helping hand with funerals

Harsha Sai
New Delhi

AJIT KRISHNA

Daljit Sean Singh, actor, model and entrepreneur

IN 2003 Daljit Sean Singh had a near death experience in America. Lying half-conscious on the road, he fervently hoped his body and soul would find their way home. He didn't want to die in an alien land. "I thought of *Gangajal*. I thought, Why can't I return to the place of my choice," he recalls.

The idea of starting a service that would help people undertake their last journey just the way they might have wanted to, with dignity, struck Daljit once he was back on his feet.

India suffers from a paucity of funeral services. When a person passes away it is left to grief-stricken relatives to somehow organise the cremation, last rites and ceremonies like the *chautha* and *terahvi*. Support services are mostly sloppy, ham-handed and insensitive, though the funeral industry is probably worth hundreds of crores of rupees.

Hearse vans are generally ramshackle and cremation grounds — owned by the state government — are dirty and unkempt. Priests tend to haggle. The paper work for recording the death and getting the death certificate is organised but help is needed to fill forms correctly. The entire experience can be distressful and challenging for an already traumatised family.

Daljit saw the need for such a service and yet hesitated to start one when he returned to Delhi. Instead he began Event Décor, an event management company, and discussed his plan with friends.

But the idea kept visiting him. He noticed how disarranged funeral arrangements were when a few members of his family passed away. Relatives were on the phone, trying to figure things out. "A hearse van arrived and broke down before the body was placed in it. The replacement van was ramshackle as well. The door wouldn't close, family members couldn't sit inside and it also reeked," says Daljit. In this melancholic chaos there was no time to grieve.

Daljit wondered if trying to provide a humane funeral service would stigmatise him. Lean and athletic with a luxuriant beard, he works as a model and an actor in the Hindi film industry. He acted in *Kill Dill* and is now awaiting the release of his next, a Hansal Mehta film, *Omerta,* starring Rajkumar Rao. "I play a bad, bad, guy," he says, his face crinkling into a smile.

In reality he is the good guy. Models are great at messaging, he says, and he would like to be a role model for society. He admires Richard Branson whose philosophy is that a business must benefit society. So in 2007 Daljit cautiously started antimyatra.in. "It took a lot of courage to actually begin services," he says.

He finally took the plunge in 2014 and registered Antim Yatra as a company. "I wanted it to be a legit company following rules and regulations, honest and upfront. We have had our hurdles in putting it together. I didn't want to advertise. First, we didn't have money. Second, I always thought word of mouth is better. Let our work do the talking," says Daljit.

Antim Yatra provides all funeral services under one roof. So you don't have to deal with a whole lot of people. "Whenever a customer calls, we ask for their requirements, check for pundits, cremation grounds, provide the death certificate and if someone dies abroad we make arrangements to shift the body to their home."

Antim Yatra provides all funeral services under one roof. 'We are like an invisible family,' says Daljit

Three services are available: Shanthi, Shraddhanjali and Sahayatha. Shanthi takes care of cremation and last rites. Shraddhanjali consists of *chautha* and memorial services. Sahayatha helps the bereaved family with post-cremation rituals like immersion of the ashes in the Ganga or getting the death certificate.

"We have an ethos, a mindset. We look after everything so that the bereaved family can be together and grieve, recall and celebrate the life of their loved one," says Daljit.

A new initiative that Antim Yatra is working on is tree memorials. Families or individuals can plant a tree in the name of the person who has passed away. And they will take care of your tree for you. Parks in Delhi and spaces in UP and Rajasthan have been identified.

Antim Yatra is being deeply appreciated. When an 80-year-old lady living on the eighth floor of a building passed away, her 60-year-old daughter didn't know what to do. It was Antim Yatra's six-member team who carried her mother's body down gently and cremated her honourably. The daughter told Daljit that Antim Yatra had played the role of her own family. "We are like an invisible family. It is this appreciation that keeps us going," says Daljit.

For a dignified last journey the larger ecosystem also needs to change. Delhi has just three electric crematoriums, out of which one is not working. According to statistics, 96,000 people die in Delhi every year. Daljit does a quick calculation. "So 263 cremations, using mainly wood, take place every day. Imagine the smoke that they emit in an already heavily polluted city." The burgeoning city of Gurugram does not have a single electric crematorium.

Cremation grounds should be landscaped and spruced up with trees, benches and fountains. "I want to make places where your loved one leaves you less morbid. It can be done quickly. You should be able to go, meditate and feel connected there. Right now that's not possible," says Daljit.

Daljit has invested his own money in Antim Yatra but he hasn't broken even as yet. Most of his clients are from the middle class. Services don't cost very much and begin from ₹21,000 upwards.

"I want to take a 500 million dollar industry from under the carpet and put it where it belongs. The way we do our last rites makes a difference to our culture, to the people we leave behind."

Antim Yatra provides services in Delhi and NCR. Daljit does intend expanding. "I believe our dreams should be in tune with our bank balance. So once we are financially stable, we will start providing services in other cities as well," says Daljit. ■

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The power of loyalty

SANJAYA BARU

DELHI DARBAR

THE Indian sub-continent has had several capital cities of successive kingdoms and empires, but Delhi occupies a special place. Mohammed bin Tughlak tried to get away to Daulatabad but was drawn back and even the British had to move inland from Calcutta and build a whole new capital. Indraprastha / Dilli/Delhi/New Delhi is akin to Rome, Paris, London, Moscow, Beijing and Washington, DC — all capital cities that are a world to themselves and are generally viewed by the people they govern as centres of intrigue, deception, corruption and, oddly, even wit and wisdom.

It is, therefore, not surprising that politicians, businessmen, media and power brokers of republican India still regard the power centres of New Delhi as the 'Delhi Darbar'. Something of the medieval, feudal and colonial darbar of the past has seeped into the consciousness of Republican India.

Everyone in the capital city, courtiers and citizens, imagines that one or the other attribute of the darbar has rubbed off on them. Those who live outside are either in awe or hold the darbar in contempt. Sometimes they even fear it. During Indira Gandhi's Emergency years of 1975-77, those who feared Delhi tried to stay as far away as possible so as not to attract the attention of the darbaris.

GOING UP THE LADDER

One of the defining attributes of a darbari in Delhi is 'loyalty'. Not loyalty to a principle, much less a cause, but to an individual of importance in the darbar. Everyone regards 'loyalty' to a higher-up a minimum and necessary qualification for entry into and then elevation up the ladder of the darbar. Such loyalty is offered up the ladder, from one rung to another above until it reaches the top. Favours are then dispensed in reverse order.

Few believe that one can enter, not to mention move up, the darbar purely on the basis of one's qualifications. Depending on the nature of the job, qualification is an attribute that could be regarded as necessary but certainly not as sufficient. Mr So & So got that important post because he was also loyal. Qualification is incidental. At best a necessary, not sufficient, factor.

When P.V. Narasimha Rao became Prime Minister of India in 1991, most political analysts believed that 'loyalty' to the Nehru-Gandhi darbar had paid off. Few believed he got the job because he was better qualified than available competition — the likes of Arjun Singh and Sharad Pawar. However, we now know from Congressman M.L. Fotedar (as I have quoted in my recent book, *1991: How P.V. Narasimha Rao Made History*) that sometime in the early 1980s Indira Gandhi identified Narasimha Rao, along with R. Venkataraman and Pranab Mukherjee, as Congressmen 'qualified' to head a government.

PICTURE COURTESY PRAVEEN JAIN

Few believe that one can enter, not to mention move up, the darbar purely on the basis of one's qualifications.

In May 1999 I had written a column in the *Times of India*, making the case that if a Congress or Congress-led government were to come to power, the most qualified person for the PM's post would be Manmohan Singh. But, when Dr Singh finally became PM in 2004, most believed that he got the job because of his loyalty to the Nehru-Gandhi family and not because he was qualified to be PM. In his first term he managed to convince many that he was well-qualified to be PM. That is why he won a second term. But during that second term many came to believe that he remained in office due to his loyalty to Sonia Gandhi.

TELLING THE TRUTH

What I have found most amusing about this idea of loyalty as a qualification for membership of the darbar is that it is an idea that has been internalised by many outside the darbar, including in the media. When I wrote a book on my four years on the edges of the darbar (*Accidental Prime Minister: The Making and Unmaking of Manmohan Singh,* 2014) some, even in the media, viewed its plain-speaking and truth-telling as an act of 'disloyalty'. It's 'kiss and tell', they said. Mercifully, most readers judged the text on its veracity and style.

More recently, a political gossip columnist of an English daily referred to my using a quote from Prime Minister Narasimha Rao that gives the credit for leading the economic reforms of 1991 to Rao rather than Singh, the finance minister at the time, as an act of 'disloyalty' to Singh. It did not matter to her that I knew both Rao and Singh and I was merely underlining the fact that it was the PM who led the reforms rather than the FM. What seemed to

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The limits of best practices

DILEEP RANJEKAR

BACK TO SCHOOL

DURING 2001-02 the Azim Premji Foundation launched a programme, the Accelerated Learning Programme, to support the academic achievements of children who were enrolled in government schools after a bridge programme conducted by the state government. Before enrolment, the children were to be assessed for their competencies in order to be placed in the appropriate grades. However, the last-mile execution did not follow the pre-determined path and the children got enrolled simply in their age-appropriate grades. Illustratively, if a child was 10 years old, he/she got enrolled in Class 4 — whether or not he/she possessed Class 4 competencies. This created the risk of children not understanding what was happening in the classroom and dropping out. Therefore, in collaboration with the state government, the Accelerated Learning Programme was launched in 1,016 schools across 46 blocks of seven districts of the state.

The programme involved a rigorous teaching-learning process with identified children with the help of an additional teacher appointed by the Foundation. The teacher was well-equipped to bridge the competency gaps of such children. The programme succeeded in demonstrating that almost 75 percent of the students achieved the expected grade-appropriate competencies in nine months. There was an explicit understanding with the state government that once we established the principles and the process, the government would implement the same in all schools across the state. The government even printed large numbers of copies of the work-books designed by us. But then the leadership of the State Education Department changed and there was no progress.

The Accelerated Learning Programme provided us with a lot of learning and insight into the realities of government schools.

One of the important learnings was that, while constraints such as inadequate number of teachers, multigrade teaching-learning, poor infrastructure, the highly disadvantaged socio-economic background of the children, absence of toilets and drinking water facilities and so on were common among the schools, children in some schools were

LAKSHMAN ANAND

learning very well. In order to understand this further, we launched another programme in collaboration with the state government titled Learning Guarantee Programme (LGP).

While the initial programme objective was to assess the learning, share the results of assessment and publicly felicitate schools that are doing well, it was based on a solid assumption that once we demonstrated a method of competency-based assessment that points to classroom reforms, the state government would implement best practices across the state in its own ways.

We decided to do this by assessing the enrolment, attendance and learning levels of the schools (Classes 1-4) that volunteered to participate in the programme. A massive exercise ensued wherein we communicated the programme details to all the 9,200+ government schools in the seven districts, in a flat 45 days. To voluntarily participate in the programme, the schools were required to send their consent after obtaining the signature of the head teacher and the president of the school management committee. Over 6,500 schools sent their consent in writing. The next step involved the schools doing self-assessment with the help of the assessment tools provided by us. After this step, about 2,000 schools remained in the programme and communicated to us the period during which they would be ready for assessment by us.

In the three years of the programme (2002-05), we assessed over 600,000 students. At the end of each assessment, child-wise, grade-wise and subject-wise results of the assessment were shared in the most transparent manner with teachers, head teachers and members of school management committees. This was a gold mine of data for schools to act upon since the results threw up the strengths and weaknesses of the students' learning. Schools where more than 60 percent students possessed expected competencies were publicly felicitated in the presence of dignitaries such as the education minister, the education secretary and the chairman of the Azim Premji Foundation.

OUTCOME AND FALLOUT

We hoped that the schools that did not get felicitated would make an effort to reach out to schools that performed well — to learn from them and improve the learning in their schools. In many places, the performing school was a mere half-kilometre from the non-performing one. We realised and learnt many things. The two most significant things we learned were (a) very few schools (if any) really made efforts to learn from other schools (b) very few schools acted upon the data they received from us of the competency achievement analysis of their students.

The programme did not envisage any intervention by the Foundation but expected the schools and the government education department to act, using the data. Overall, the teachers realised (a) they could not simply teach and move on, they had to ensure that a majority of the children developed the expected competencies (b) competencies could not be achieved by using the rote, memory-based teaching practices (c) focus on children who did not perform well in the assessment was necessary.

Some schools began special coaching for the students beyond the school hours. However, some schools did not use the assessment results at all. In extreme cases, we found the assessment results simply dumped inside the school toilet without even being opened. The state government found the programme very useful to promote competency-based learning across schools and even established an organisation to evaluate all schools using the competency-based assessment tools. This lasted about two years; with the passage of time and changes in education leadership, it faded away.

The fact that practically no school made an attempt to learn from a nearby school that was performing better, once again established that 'best practices sharing' is an ineffective procedure. This is despite the fact that the performing schools were publicly felicitated and were known to all other schools.

Repeated joint programmes with the state governments that succeeded in establishing robust principles did not lead to sustained follow-up action by the State. Thus, the theory of demonstration at scale did not work.

Both at the central and state government level, several programmes have been launched to promote such demonstration. Illustratively, there are about 600 Jawahar Navodaya Vidyalayas and 1,100 Kendriya Vidyalayas that are mostly of very good quality and are sought after by guardians to admit their wards. Besides, close to 15 percent of total government schools are of good quality. However, the remainder do not usually make any effort to learn from these schools.

Learning from best practices and implementing them in an organisation/ institution is a complex exercise. Every best practice has a social, economic, cultural, ecological and human setting. Unless these settings are thoroughly understood and contextualised, best practices often fail. It is in this context that centre-promoted concepts such as 'model schools' that are resourced differently than an average government school, fail to serve their purpose. If we want best practices to be scaled, we have to create level playing fields, understand differences and similarities, and create enabling conditions to address the 'not invented here' syndrome among people. ■

Dileep Ranjekar is CEO of the Azim Premji Foundation.

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matter to her was the fact that during Rao's time I was a mere outsider while it was Singh who gave me entry into the Delhi Darbar. How can one be critical of one's mentor in a darbar?

Thus, for those in the media who fancy themselves as members of the darbar, loyalty to the darbar is a higher attribute than a commitment to truth and facts. Make no mistake, in the darbar 'loyalty' is not viewed in ethical terms. It is not a moral attribute. It is an investment made by the loyalist and it is an asset secured by the dispenser of power. Loyalty is a political and an economic asset. It is not a quality to be respected, but to be valued. A political boss 'values' your loyalty, rarely does he 'respect' it.

In many democracies around the world, those who have been members of the 'power elite', so to speak, have written books to educate the general public about how power is wielded, how it is acquired and dispensed, and what the consequences, good and bad, have been. Those outside the darbar usually thank such writers for offering them a peek into the corridors of power. Those inside and those hoping to gain entry do not approve of such truth-telling. They call it an act of 'disloyalty'. What they really resent is that it robs the darbar of its mystique and, in so doing, of both its power and its prestige.

It is understandable that members of the State should feel so. It is disappointing when members of civil society also think so. The media in a democracy is an extension of civil society. Even if members of the media and academia occasionally enter the institutions of the State, indeed as I did when I worked in the Prime Minister's Office, they are essentially there to safeguard the interests of civil society within the institutions of the State. Not to become apologists for the State.

Those who seek to empower civil society should, therefore, celebrate the recent trend of more and more individuals who have been functionaries of the State opting to write books on policies and personalities that define the State.

Such books should of course be judged on the basis of their factual veracity and, by the more aesthetically inclined, the quality of prose. A writer ought to be questioned about what she has written and how, not why. ■

Noise was never part of Diwali

MURAD ALI BAIG

THIS Diwali, many Indians avoided buying Chinese firecrackers out of an exaggerated sense of patriotic jingoism. If they were really concerned about Indian traditions they would boycott all firecrackers because they were never part of Indian tradition.

Gunpowder was a Chinese invention that Babur brought to India when he exploded his cannons at the Battle of Panipat in 1526. As fire, especially accompanied by loud explosions, makes horses and elephants panic, the Mughals adopted another Chinese practice — of firing rockets at their enemies. Later, Tipu Sultan made his rockets so effective that the British copied them when making their Congreve rockets that eventually evolved into the rockets used for space exploration.

The bursting of crackers or the firing of guns to celebrate victories or at marriages or other celebrations soon became a Muslim custom. Later, the British would honour the Indian maharajas with gun salutes. The latter were ranked by the number of guns that were fired in their honour; 21-gun salutes were for the major maharajas. Paradoxically, this custom seems to have evolved from another Chinese tradition that loud noises like the bursting of crackers would drive away evil spirits. A few Mughal paintings show firecrackers, which were also reportedly let off at grand weddings like those of Nurjahan and Dara Shikoh.

The Buddhists and Jains also had *Ramayana* traditions and their own versions of Diwali. The Jains believe that the festival of Diwali has nothing to do with the legendary Ram's triumphant return to Ayodhya after defeating Ravana. They believe the custom was derived from an older tradition of theirs. Jains believe that when Mahavira, the 24th Tirthankara, died, all the lights of the universe went out and people had to illuminate their homes with lamps. This illumination with lamps is far more preferable than the noisy and polluting celebrations with firecrackers.

The association of the goddess Lakshmi with Diwali may have originally been a Buddhist tradition. The earliest representation of Lakshmi is found in the *toranas* or gates of the Buddhist stupa at Sanchi, which date back to the second century BC. Diwali was for long a trading class, or 'Bania', festival and only became a general Hindu festival fairly recently. People, especially the extreme Hindutva fringe of the Mahasabha, RSS, BJP, Bajrang Dal, VHP, Shiv Sena and so on, should know this. If they agitated against firecrackers instead of Pakistani actors it would be much more nationally beneficial with the reduction of atmospheric pollution.

Apart from ancient customs, there is also an important commercial aspect. In 1923 two brothers, Ayya and Shanmugan Nadar, from Sivakasi in Tamil Nadu went to Calcutta to seek their fortunes and set up a match factory. In 1940 they returned to their native town of Sivakasi and set up another match factory. At this time the Indian Explosives Act was amended so they diversified into the manufacture of firecrackers as well. With a stroke of marketing genius they began to market their firecrackers during the festival of Diwali, called Deepawali in south India. It was an explosive success with the result that there were 189 cracker factories in Sivakasi by 1980. Increasing education and the high cost of labour in a seasonal industry made many cracker factories guilty of widespread employment of child labour. These factors also made the Nadars set up cracker factories in China in 2005.

Their success was similar to that of the Coca-Cola Company that produced beautiful calendars of a smiling, white-bearded Santa Claus in 1928 and 1929, clothed in Coca-Cola's red and white. They were so popular that Coca-Cola began massive Christmas promotions and Santa was henceforth always associated with Coca-Cola. Later, the De Beers company did a very successful promotion linking diamonds with weddings and engagements with their immortal slogan, 'Diamonds are forever'.

For their marketing success the Nadar brothers are worthy of a place in the commercial hall of fame but their huge impact on India's pollution makes them deserve relegation to the hall of shame. ■

Flyover will kill Bengaluru

V. RAVICHANDAR

CITY LIFE

SINCE mid-September, Bengaluru's civic news has had saturation coverage about a 6.7-km, ₹1,791 crore proposed steel flyover from the heart of the city (Chalukya circle, next to the Governor's residence and Vidhan Soudha) to Hebbal flyover en route to the airport. It has seen unprecedented citizen protests resulting in over 6,000 citizens lining the flyover route for over two hours in mid-October. Both the government and the protesters have dug their heels in about the project's future. The National Green Tribunal (NGT) has weighed in, asking for an environment review and a PIL is pending in court related to due process not being followed for this project.

A quick background about the road traversed. The previous government suggested this project in 2012 and commissioned a Detailed Project Report (DPR). It did not go ahead with it. The current government announced this project in its budget, revised the DPR and in September 2016 the cabinet cleared the project at ₹1,791 crore against a budgeted cost of ₹1,350 crore. As for citizen consultations, the government claimed that over 70 percent of 299 responses in 48 hours to their ad (which had a wrong email id) wanted the project and a mention of this project to the Bengaluru Vision Group drew no adverse comments.

Citizens were concerned at the haste with which this was pushed through and observations by city planners in the press about the unsustainable project quickly snowballed into a citizens movement #steelflyoverbeda (*beda* means no in Kannada) online. The protesters initially banded under Citizens Against Steel Flyover (CASFO) and after the 6,000+ street protest under Citizens for Bengaluru (CfB), an apolitical group formation.

First, the politics. Understandably, the opposition cried foul about the project and alleged kickbacks, a charge that was also made by other social commentators and citizens. The government struck back, saying this project was okay in 2012 but had become suspect in 2016 when it wished to do it. Makes one wonder whether a smart government does look at the previous government's projects that were not taken up as a starting point for their projects so that any opposition criticism can be thwarted.

It took the opposition three weeks to say, 'But we did not go ahead because it was a terrible project!' Allegations of kickbacks are common in public projects and the ₹430 crore premium over budgeted costs did give cause for concern. The Bengaluru minister went on record, asking folks to prove the alleged ₹400 crore kickbacks.

As news of the unsustainable flyover spread, the protests snowballed into a citizens movement

NO ADVANTAGE

The government's case rested primarily on the need to ease traffic congestion to the airport and the fact that it was taking up a project of the previous regime. It said there was full transparency and no leakages. The citizens' opposition to the steel flyover made multiple points — there was no pre-feasibility study done; over 812 trees were to be cut down in the city centre; token, fraudulent citizen consultation had been done; no response to RTIs; the flyover promotes private vehicles over public transport; it will just shift the congestion to another point; alternatives like commuter rail, Metro, alternative road routes to the airport were not being pushed; steel has maintenance issues and is unproven over this length in city-centre environments; and, most important, Bengaluru would be the only city in the world that would have elevated roads, underpasses, up/down ramps next to the legislature and the Governor's official residence. As one journalist put it, this was akin to sticking a steel dagger into the heart of the city.

This issue is a tale of two competing visions for the city locked in contest. One vision (that of the government) is that the only way out is to build more infrastructure (unfortunately, a lot of it mindlessly), whatever the cost. If the route is unsustainable environmentally, it's a necessary price we need to pay for growth and development. Anyone who mocks this vision is branded anti-development and while it is easy to be armchair critics, the government needs to finally bite the bullet and take decisions, however unpopular. An alternative vision (that of informed citizenry) is that while growth and development are necessary, we can address it by being more sensitive to nature, scarce resources and core citizen views on what makes a city liveable.

In this vision, citizens expect that they will have roadsides to walk safely, a mix of sustainable commute alternatives, be it public transport, private vehicles, cycling and, most important, walking, enabling road infrastructure, garbage-free surroundings, open public spaces, and the like. That is, growth and development with a heart and inclusive thinking. The alternative vision is mocked at as being too utopian, idealistic and its proponents positioned as unrealistic environmentalists, tree-huggers, impediments to development and whathaveyou.

What has been foisted on citizens is a very poorly conceived engineering project sold as a solution for traffic congestion. This became apparent when the government overnight put up a Phase 2 to this project between Esteem Mall and Hebbal flyover, the biggest choke point on the stretch. This Phase 2 needed to be the first fix on the stretch.

TREES AND GARDENS

There is a callous attitude about shrinking public spaces and cutting 812 trees in the city centre. Our trees define who we are. Bengaluru was a 'garden city' because of its green cover and open spaces that an earlier generation generously bequeathed to us. Now we are brazen about doing away with our legacy and leaving the next generation with a concrete-cum-steel jungle connected with elevated structures. All for a claimed time saving of 10 minutes which is unlikely to materialise according to the Indian Institute of Science transportation experts.

Enlightened global cities are moving towards more open green spaces, walking paths and emphasis on public transport. We seem to be headed the other way to doomsday. In a symbolic sense, if we persist with this flyover project in its current form, it will be the death of Bengaluru as we know it. The city is at an inflection point and the turnout of middle and upper class citizens (who use private vehicles) gives hope that the rot in our public policy decision-making can be halted and made to change course for a sustainable mobility approach. ■

V. Ravichandar is a self-described Civic Evangelist turned Town Crier

Ritu Sarin and Tenzing Sonam. Launched in 2012, the film festival has taken off

Hill town emerges as film hub

Festival attracts global entries

Saibal Chatterjee
Dharamshala

WHEN filmmaking couple Ritu Sarin and Tenzing Sonam launched the Dharamshala International Film Festival (DIFF) in 2012, it was an act of conviction driven by boundless hope. The leap of faith has paid off.

But in year one, nobody would have been assailed by as much doubt about the event's efficacy and longevity as the adventurous but clear-headed duo.

However, the very first edition of DIFF, given the sheer passion and excitement that surrounded it, offered a glimpse of the experiment's innate potential. Five years down the line, much of it has been realised. The festival has created a niche for itself.

DIFF stands out owing to its emphasis on independent cinema from across the world. It showcases both documentarians and narrative filmmakers in an ambience designed for a free flow of ideas. The festival is small in size but big on intent.

Film screening facilities in the hill town better known as the exile home of the 14th Dalai Lama and the epicentre of Tibetan refugees in India is still pretty rudimentary, but that hasn't stopped Sarin and Sonam from soldiering on.

Thanks to the cool efficiency and firm commitment that the twosome bring to the table, DIFF has worked its way up steadily, without having to huff and puff. In the first edition, future Oscar-winner Asif Kapadia (in Dharamshala with the much lauded documentary, *Senna*) conducted a masterclass after Hansal Mehta's *Shahid* kicked off the festival.

DIFF 2016, a four-day affair held on the first extended weekend in November, hosted celebrated Korean director Jeon Soo-il (*A Korean in Paris*), Singaporean filmmaker Boo Junfeng (*Apprentice*), British documentary maker Sean McAllister (*A Syrian Love Story*) and Iran's Rokhsareh Ghaem Maghami (*Sonita*), among others.

Now an important fixture for lovers of alternative cinema, DIFF has always gone for substance rather than size. "We are happy with what we are doing," says Sarin. "This is just the size that we want for DIFF."

As filmmakers, too, Sarin and Sonam have been uncomplicated in their approach, which has obviously rubbed off on the festival and given it character and profile.

The couple began making films together in the 1980s with the documentary, *The New Puritans — The Sikhs of Yuba City,* one of the earliest films to explore the Indian immigrant experience in the US. They have made several acclaimed documentaries since then, including *When Hari Got Married* (2012), an entertaining and illuminating portrait of

Continued on page 30

Victoria, a 140-minute thriller shot in a single take

a Dharamshala cabbie, and *The Sun Behind the Clouds: Tibet's Struggle for Freedom* (2010). They have also directed the critically acclaimed fiction feature, *Dreaming Lhasa* (2005).

"DIFF has made improvements, thanks to the learnings of the first four years," says Sonam, a first-generation Tibetan exile born and raised in Darjeeling. "But the nature and composition of the film festival remains constant."

He adds: "The participation of people from outside Dharamshala has increased but local involvement is still less than satisfactory." To address that gap, DIFF organises outreach programmes to draw more people, especially the young, into its fold.

But that doesn't mean that DIFF makes concessions to popular predilections. It is an eclectic festival that does not receive submissions. Its programme is personally curated by Sarin and Sonam, who track the best of world cinema from India and the world, throughout the year. This year, they also roped in veteran festival programmer Raman Chawla, who stepped in as DIFF's associate director.

A still from A Syrian Love Story

A still from Umesh Kulkarni's Highway

DIFF 2016, as in past years, screened a rich array of narrative features, short films and documentaries, besides organising several conversations (Saeed Akhtar Mirza, Naseeruddin Shah, *et al*) and sidebar events.

In addition to hosting international and Indian directors, DIFF had in its lineup as many as four films that were set in, or were about, Himachal Pradesh. These were Prabhjit Dhamija's 34-minute short fiction, *Asmad,* the story of a boy dealing with his mother's death in a small Palampur village; Himachali director Sanjeev Kumar's *Mane De Phere* (Circles of the Mind), about a man confronting schizophrenia; Shimla-based Siddharth Chauhan's darkly humorous 28-minute film, *Papa*; and German filmmaker Steffi Giaracuni's *Didi Contractor: Marrying the Earth to the Building,* a documentary about the legendary American-born architect whose work has left an indelible imprint in Kangra Valley.

The curtains went up on DIFF 2016 with the screening of debutant Raam Reddy's award-winning Kannada film, *Thithi*. "This is a film festival like no other," he said before presenting his film to a packed house. India's Oscar submission for the year, Tamil director Vetrimaaran's *Visaaranai*, a disturbingly stark portrait of police brutality, was the festival's closing night film.

DIFF screened several other fictional features from across India: Umesh Kulkarni's *Highway* (Marathi), Bauddhayan Mukherji's *The Violin Player* (Hindi); Kochi-based cinematographer-director Rajeev Ravi's *Kammatipaadam* (Malayalam); and Mangesh Joshi's *Lathe Joshi* (Marathi).

German director Sebastian Schipper's *Victoria,* a 140-minute thriller shot in a single take, became a favourite talking point at the festival. Other fictional features screened were the Kazakhi film, *The Wounded Angel,* directed by Emir Balgazin, Jeon Soo-il's evocative *A Korean in Paris,* Boo Junfeng's powerful prison drama, *Apprentice,* and Thai director Pimpaka Towira's *The Island Funeral.*

Sonita is about a young Afghan refugee in Tehran

A still from The Violin Player

DIFF's documentary lineup is always formidable. This year was no different. Among the non-fiction films was American director Mickey Lermie's *The Last Dalai Lama?* The documentary presents an intimate portrait of the spiritual leader as he contemplates his principal preoccupations at age 80. The film uses footage from Lermie's 1991 film, *Compassion in Exile: The Story of the 14th Dalai Lama,* and fuses it with recent interviews.

Also in the DIFF 2016 screening schedule were the visually lush *The Shepherdess of the Glaciers,* a film by Stanzin Dorjai Gya and Christiane Mordelet that follows a woman's movement with her flock of 250 sheep in the Himalayan region of Ladakh over the period of a year and Rokhsareh Ghaem Maghami's *Sonita*, about a young Afghan refugee in Tehran who fights for her dream of making it big as a rapper despite the constraints placed on her by her conservative family.

Bringing cinema to the hills of Himachal Pradesh could not have been easy. Back in 2012, there wasn't a single screen in Dharamshala. Today, the town has a two-screen multiplex. Not that DIFF depends on the new facility yet, but we cannot but think that the emergence of the festival might have hastened the setting up of the multiplex.

The Tibetan Institute of Performing Arts (TIPA), the festival's principal venue for the first four years of its existence, wasn't available this time around. It was closed for renovation, forcing a shift to a location farther away in McLeodganj — the Tibetan Children's Village.

The move, however, is only temporary. Once TIPA is back in business with full-fledged film screening facilities, DIFF is slated to return to the venue and aim for bigger and better things.

This year, DIFF's local outreach plans included a film appreciation contest for schoolchildren in two categories — junior and senior. The participants, drawn from local schools, were shown a short fiction film and asked to review it. Judged by a panel of three, the competition yielded two winners and two runners-up and helped boost awareness among the young.

For the third straight year, DIFF also hosted a Film Fellows programme for talent from the Himalayan region. It was conducted by National Award-winning Pune-based filmmaker Umesh Kulkarni and documentarian Anupama Srinavasan.

"The Film Fellows programme sharpened my idea of cinema," says participant Abhijeet Phartiyal, a graduate of Delhi's Ramjas College whose roots are in Almora, Uttarakhand. "It exposed me to tools and concepts that I wasn't aware of."

Although DIFF is by no means focused on films about Tibetan issues and Buddhist themes, Sarin and Sonam are active campaigners for the rights of the exiles. While this does reflect in a few of the films that make it to the programme, it does not overwhelm the selection. "The idea is not to focus on any particular theme, but showcase quality cinema, both fiction and non-fiction," says Sonam.

The festival, which demands a lot of time and effort, has compelled the two filmmakers to put their careers on hold. Says Sarin: "We are itching to return to filmmaking with our second narrative feature. It will be shot in Majnu Ka Tila in Delhi and in Ladakh. It will roll as soon as the funding is in place."

With that in mind, the couple has been working from year one to create a structure and a team that could take DIFF forward even if the festival's founders are forced by their filmmaking commitments to take a backseat. They are almost there. ■

Nature and the balance sheet

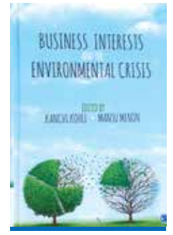
Ravi Agarwal
New Delhi

WHAT cannot be measured cannot be valued, and does not exist — at least for the market. The economic valuation of nature has been around since the 1980s and there is a wide range of literature on it. *Business Interests and the Environmental Crisis,* edited by Kanchi Kohli and Manju Menon, shows how the field is evolving in specific sectors.

The growth project of modernity, which advocates exploitation of nature as resource, has laid in its wake a trail of environmental devastation to an extent that this is now being called the age of the sixth extinction and the Anthropocene. The valuation of nature, as a new conservation strategy, has followed the trajectory of neo-liberalism, and aims at generating public and private investments for conservation by monetising it.

This increasingly dominant (but reductionist) policy approach is not without pitfalls, especially when examined through the lens of environmental justice or an understanding of nature as a complex interactive and irreducible ecosystem.

This book covers a wide range of topics with contributions by diverse practitioners and academics. They outline in detail the multilayered processes in play in key international and national environmental policy formulations and implementation. Consequently, the book re-inserts the idea of the 'political' into the notion of 'value', which is critical to understanding its real gainers and the losers. Kohli and Menon are well-known environmentalists, who have been tracking such processes in India closely for over a decade. They sum up their concerns in the introduction to the book, "(the) nucleus of the business interest in the environmental crisis is the commodity, the pricing, the ownership and the regulation (of nature)".



Business Interests & the Environmental Crisis; Edited by: Kanchi Kohli and Manju Menon
SAGE, ₹845

The volume deals with the idea of 'nature' as a commodity, and its governance in the real world.

The volume consists of 10 contributions divided into two sections dealing with the idea of 'nature' as a commodity, and its governance in the real world. Jeremy Walker critiques the well-known TEEB (*The Economy of Biodiversity and Ecosystems Services*) report which had set the tone for financialisation of ecosystems and coined the term "natural capital" as utopian in a world where markets are imperfect, non-transparent and do not provide a platform for equitable trade-offs. Shalini Bhutani, a long-term analyst and researcher in bio-diversity and agricultural intellectual property rights issues, details the outcomes of the UN Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD) and the dangers inherent for local communities owing to vague benefit-sharing protocols, even as they benefit large pharmaceutical companies or research organisations.

Vinuta Gopal, a senior campaigner with Greenpeace in India, raises fundamental issues of tying in coal with energy security and the powerful corporate interests which gain through the auctioning of forests as 'coal blocks'. Energy and dependence on coal in India led to massive allegations of corruption in the recent coal scam. Speaking of urban spaces, Himanshu Burte evokes Lefebvre's idea of non-spaces as ecological landscapes which have become repositories of capital. Citing three recent examples of ecologies transformed into landscapes of economic value, he outlines the contentious cases of the Sabarmati Riverfront Development in Ahmedabad, the township hill station of Lavasya near Pune and the dedicated Delhi-Mumbai Industrial Corridor (DMIC). Expert "scientific" and "managerial" knowledge backed by capital created these landscapes as abstracted from their surroundings, with the resultant exclusions of local communities and other species.

Water is a conflict issue today in India. From the technology-oriented approach of 'governing' rivers by building dams and barrages to the destruction of floodplains and catchment areas, it is a part of nature that is sensitive not only politically but also ecologically. The well-known water activist, Sripad Dharmadhikary, writes about the commodification of water for hydro power in the Indus basin, the Narmada project as well as the fanciful idea of river linking. Laying out the difficulties in capturing the multiple functions which water plays, he bemoans the approach which downplays ecological systems of water for justifying such projects and makes a case for creating 'value' as a community idea and not a corporate one.

Simone Lovera outlines Payment for Eco Services (PES) schemes such as the REDD+ regimes as the

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way to conserve forests in the climate change mitigation regimes, and the problems posed through 'offset' initiatives which do not mitigate impacts in existing locations. Soumitra Ghosh, in a well argued chapter on the colonial history of North Bengal forest villages and *begaru* work, raises the impact of new market approaches on the ongoing forest movement there.

Nature as a set of distinct 'values' has other difficulties. How does one value memory, belonging and identity? Sanjay K. Bavikatte and Daniel F. Robinson locate their arguments in South Africa regarding the commercial sale and patenting of traditional knowledge but assert that this needs to affirm 'personhood' or the personal relationships one has with intellectual property.

As is evident from the writings, the market valuation approach inadequately addresses the idea of social and economic hierarchies, to the disadvantage of local communities and environments. Often, profits accrue to large business interests. Alongside, even with regulatory

The conversations triggered in the book are evolving ones. For example, 'value' itself can become a commodity in the era of big data.

structures in place, their governance and implementation are caught up in the same structures of societal power, making them selectively effective. Even within communities, the impact of change is not equally borne, and often women pay a higher price for it. Large international conservation organisations have been supporting ecosystem services-type approaches in the light of the failure of earlier approaches. The record of success is mixed. In the short run, there could be benefits in some areas but in the longer run, the fragmentation of complex ecosystems can have dire consequences. Caution is warranted.

The conversations triggered in the book are evolving ones. For example, 'value' itself can become a commodity, especially in the era of big data. There is evidence of this. A large volume of trade in global currency markets is carried out through unmanned, automated computerised algorithms, which determine exchange rates and carry out transactions. Here 'value' is just a number. In such a 'technosphere' value can be separated from the commodity it represents and circulated through a synthesis of markets and technology. If the commodity is the planet itself, the stakes cannot be higher. Nature valuation is still an unravelling field, and its outcomes are uncertain. Perhaps this could be the moment when we need to revisit a basic question: "What is nature, what does it mean to us?" ■

Ravi Agarwal is director of Toxics Link

SUSHEELA NAIR

Sail down the Vembanad lake in a languid country boat

TOURISM MAKES KUMARAKOM SMILE

Susheela Nair
Kumarakom

WE zigzagged amidst a cluster of tiny picturesque islands around the Vembanad lake in a languid country boat, intrigued by the landscape unfolding before us. We were in Kumarakom, known for its lake, its pearl spotted fish (*karimeen*) and the scenic beauty of its lush, dense landscape.

Sandwiched between the immense lake and its network of backwaters, this small water world forms part of the Kuttanad region. As the boat weaved its way through a maze of canals, we enjoyed the gentle pace of life and soaked in the stunning view of nature. The innumerable resorts, hotels and homestays have transformed this once sleepy settlement into a much sought after destination.

We were there to sample the Village Life Experiences (VLE) package, which took us right into the heart of Kerala and gave us an insider's perspective of the land. The package offered us a slice of rural life and culture and a chance to explore, observe, discover, interact and learn from villagers. We watched Ajeesh clamber up a coconut tree to tap toddy, Sati make screw pine products, Latha spin coir strands, Gowri weave coconut leaves, a fisherman demonstrate traditional fish catching methods, a skilled artisan deftly craft country boat models, and villagers share their life experiences.

Also included were interesting packages like 'A day with farmers' and 'A day with fishermen', all of which are part of the Responsible Tourism drive in Kumarakom. We felt elated to be part of these packages which encouraged conservation of natural and cultural heritage, protection of traditional livelihood and shared 95 percent of earnings with the local community.

Explaining the genesis of this mammoth project, Rupesh Kumar, State Responsible Tourism Field Coordinator, said, "Realising the detrimental impact of over-exploitation of natural resources,

SUSHEELA NAIR

Toddy tapping in action

SUSHEELA NAIR

A bridge across the backwaters of Kumarakom

the shrinkage of the Vembanad lake, the environmental degradation and the dissatisfaction with the socio-economic benefit generated by tourism in that area, the state government announced a pilot scheme in 2008 for Responsible Tourism in Kumarakom. Before this project was launched there was no purchase of local products, and the local people had no role in tourism packages and decision-making. Subsequently, the Grama Panchayat, Department of Kerala Tourism, the Kudumbashree, the tourism industry, local Self-Help Groups, NGOs and farmers became actively involved with the implementation of our responsible tourism initiatives."

Escorting us around the village, he explained how Kudumbashree, an active arm of the Kerala State Poverty Eradication Mission, plays a significant role in Responsible Tourism by ensuring participation of women through a myriad entrepreneurial innovations. This motivates them to play an active role in mainstream social and economic activity and governance. Promotion of local cuisine is one of the important aspects of responsible tourism. At the Samrudhi Ethnic Restaurants run by Kudumbashree, we had a taste of the ethnic food which is a big hit with local people as well as tourists.

The Samrudhi shop was established to procure locally. It buys all its vegetables and other requirements from villagers. The SHGs and local units of Kumarakom arrange the supply of vegetables to hotels. Special attention is paid to women from disadvantaged sections so that they are included in the supply chain. The cooperation of homestead farms and local farm groups has helped sustain procurement.

SUSHEELA NAIR

Samrudhi, an ethnic food restaurant, is run by Kudumbashree

Realising that bonding with the local people is a good thing, the majority of resorts in Kumarakom also procure local goods for their daily use from the community and provide them with employment opportunities. "Currently more than 48 locally produced items are purchased by the tourism industry and the turnover is a minimum of ₹1.5 crore a year. MICRO enterprise was formed to collect farming produce. Regular supply is ensured by preparing a farming calendar and fixing the share of produce for each farmer. It helps a family to sell their produce. All these assure local people a thriving market and reasonable prices," emphasised Kumar.

With the objective of making idyllic Kumarakom a 'zero waste destination', the Responsible Tourism project launched an ecosystem regeneration programme, mass awareness campaign, clean drive and conversion of fallow land to cultivable land. As an alternative to non-degradable products, the Responsible Tourism Cell promotes cloth bags, paper bags, areca nut plates, bamboo products, screw pine products in the destination. Other commendable achievements of responsible tourism are — declaration of the Kumarakom bird sanctuary as a plastic-free zone, promotion of bicycle trips around hotels and resorts, organic farming, mangrove protection and control of backwater pollution with the help of the local community.

Considering the importance of mangroves as an integral part of the ecosystem, special attention was given to plantation and regeneration of mangroves. Other successful ventures are an awareness drive against excessive use of pesticides and insecticides, filling of paddy fields and promotion of organic farming at Kumarakom.

Kumarakom is now a living example of how tourism becomes meaningful in the lives of people by creating several lessons on people's participation, grassroots leadership, women's empowerment, sustainable livelihood, agriculture, destination management and environmental preservation. Hence the new mantra in the field of destination management is that the quality of a destination has to be defined by the quality of life of the local population.

In recognition, the Kumarakom Responsible Tourism project has been conferred the UNWTO Ulysses Award for innovation in Public Policy and Governance. This is the highest honour given by the UN to government bodies for shaping global tourism policies through innovative initiatives. This is the first time India figured on the list of UNWTO Award winners. It has also bagged the National Award for Best Responsible Tourism Project 2011-12, Ministry of Tourism, India, and the PATA Award, 2011. ■

FACT FILE

How to reach:
By air: Nearest airport is Kochi (72 km); nearest railhead is Kottayam (15 km); connected by road from Kochi and Kottayam.
Best time to go: September to February.
For Village Life Experiences contact Rupesh Kumar at 08111805554.

PICTURES BY AJIT KRISHNA

Basket blend

THE baskets at Om Prakash's stall catch the eye. Neatly piled, they are a riot of colours: blue, green, red, orange or a happy blend of many shades. He sells baskets of all shapes and sizes for every need. There are wastepaper baskets, boxes, trays, and more.

Om Prakash says for many years he was making ordinary *tokris* and selling them in Varanasi's bazaars. People would buy them for storing foods like grains and during weddings. But, then, plastic bins replaced his *tokris.*

Om Prakash was at a loss. His father, Ranji Bhind, had won a national award for weaving. He put his son in touch with the Dastkari Haat Samiti. "They sent me for training. I learnt how to make designer baskets," says Om Prakash.

The baskets are made from two grasses — *moonj* and *khus*. "I collect these grasses every October," he says. "Then I give them to women in villages near Bhadohi. They weave them into baskets during their spare time." He then dyes the baskets and sells them.

Not only does Om Prakash earn enough for his family, his tiny business provides an income of about ₹2,000 to ₹3,000 to 360 village women, he says with considerable pride. ■

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All Naturals

TWO years ago, Ankur Grover and Harleen Verma started All Naturals to market natural products at reasonable prices. It all began when they stumbled upon Holy Lama Naturals while holidaying in Kathmandu. Struck by the purity of Holy Lama products and intrigued by the name, they set out to find out more. They discovered that Holy Lama was based in Kerala and that it was run by women.

All Naturals now represents Holy Lama in Delhi and helps other micro enterprises producing natural products get a foothold in the north Indian market.

Their stall at Dastkar's annual Nature Bazaar sold wonderful spice drops — cinnamon, nutmeg, vanilla, tea masala along with personal care products like handmade soaps, shower gels, bath salts and hair oils. They also had natural *agarbattis,* teas and air fresheners with no trace of chemicals.

The enterprising couple has started their own manufacturing unit. They make around 70 essential oils for hair, skin, joint pain, nasal congestion and more. Some of the oils are exotic: like amber and pink lotus and *Helichrysum* which soothes burns.

Prices are remarkably reasonable and vary from ₹250 to ₹400. "We seriously believe that everyone should be able to afford natural products," says Ankur with sincerity. ■

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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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