

Civil Society

**SHEILA DIKSHIT
MAKES THE PDS
WORK IN DELHI**

Page 4

**Tiger task force
perfect: Narain**

Page 5

**Mumbai land Rs 1.40
per sq foot!**

Page 19

**A whole world on
board ORBIS**

Page 7

**Baluchari sarees
destroy weavers**

Page 8

**Getting over the
East India Company**

Page 17

**Maira: Let's talk
about talking**

Page 18

**Govt to liberalise
community radio**

Page 6

Mr EDITOR

HARIVANSH'S GUTSY JOURNALISM SELLS



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COVER STORY



THE PEOPLE'S DAILY

With Harivansh as editor, Prabhath Khabar in Ranchi finds its circulation grows as it does stories of corruption, oppression, falling civic standards, water shortages.

9

Sheila Dikshit cracks the whip and gets the PDS to work in Delhi 4

Community radio soon for RWAs, NGOs and other groups 6



People from all over the world provide quality eye care aboard ORBIS ... 7

In Orissa, neem gets mosquitoes, cuts malaria 8

Microfinance meet in Delhi throws up the new Indian banker 14

Gidoomal's column: Getting over the East India Company 17



Rebirth for Red Curtain. Sumit and Katy bring back the magic 21

Essay: Water is always life, says Rajendra Singh 22

Civil Society

Why Harivansh and Prabhath Khabar?

BEING a part of the media and writing on it is a tough thing and best avoided. In this case it was doubly difficult. Harivansh is a friend and Prabhath Khabar an editorial ally, which offers our magazine, Civil Society, to its readers in Hindi twice a month. But the story of Harivansh's success is unique. We felt we should tell it (with a all our biases) so that it could serve to inspire others in times when it has become fashionable to drift from journalism's core concern of being an honest spectator.

So completely taken up are we by the big Indian cities that people who make a difference elsewhere are invariably overlooked. Harivansh has done some remarkable work in Ranchi since 1989, but how often do you find mention of him or his paper? In the midst of the eastern region's decline, he has built a modern organisation, which uses new technologies and seeks to be global in its outlook. He employs young people and, unlike some other Hindi dailies, actually pays them a decent wage. He takes great pride in the cleanliness of Prabhath Khabar's offices. The bathrooms are spotless. There is drinking water. Journalists are required to follow a code of ethics.

Prabhath Khabar is proof that there is no substitute for connecting with the reader. Journalism must have immediate relevance. It is often forgotten that the Page 3 culture and tabloidish stories in today's broadsheets are a reaction to boring, even incompetent and corrupt, journalism.

Harivansh's contribution is that he has built up Prabhath Khabar and made it a viable business through straightforward journalism. People want information, they want their problems highlighted, they need entertainment, they want access to the world. Get the mix right and you will have a Prabhath Khabar, which has held on to its market share with limited resources in the face of stiff competition from national players like Hindustan and Dainik Jagaran.

In this issue we also cover the microfinance conference held in Delhi. The conference was an eye-opener for us in several ways. It is a new field for us and we learnt a lot from the people we met and talked to. In our search for a peg on which to hang the microfinance debates, we zeroed in on Nachiket Mor, executive director of ICICI Bank. Of course we did not have much zeroing in to do because Mor was the star of the conference. He is a measured man in dress and speech, true to his calling as a banker. But listen to him carefully and you will discover the zeal of an activist. As microfinance settles down to a more mature phase, we see bankers like Mor providing vision and stability. Finally the goal should be to bring the country's poor into the banking system. For that you need bankers whose business sense goes beyond the ordinary.

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Sheila Dikshit gets the PDS to

Civil Society News
New Delhi

In the past two months Sheila Dikshit's state government in Delhi has shown how ration shops can be used to successfully serve the poor. In Sundernagari, a ramshackle neighbourhood full of slums and open drains, people have been allowed to scrutinise food grain supply records. Officers of the government have been put on duty to ensure that stocks arrive and are accounted for.

The Sundernagari effort will be undertaken in the whole of east and northeast Delhi - parts of the capital known for slums and high density of population. And thereafter it will be replicated in other areas. If this happens, it will be an administrative success not matched by any other state government because nationally the public distribution system (PDS) has been given up for being a dead loss.

The commission of shop owners and transportation charges are also being increased. Insignificant commission was seen as one of the reasons for corruption.

Not long ago, the Dikshit government was under embarrassing fire for the shoddy performance of ration shops in the Sundernagari area. Parivartan, an



'We've told officers to go into the field'

Chief Minister Sheila Dikshit spoke to Civil Society on how the public distribution system is being made to work in Delhi.

What are the critical measures that you took in Sundernagari? Can these be replicated?

In Sundernagari, Parivartan made the people aware. We are working with Parivartan. We told them, all right what are the issues, what is it you want to point out. We got together with the food department and decided to try out this experiment to see that the loopholes in the PDS are absolutely minimised.

For a month we had video cameras keep watch and to know exactly what was happening. We also told the fair price shop owners that they have to display their daily stocks. This is mandatory but it wasn't being implemented because nobody was bothered. After a month there was a lot of satisfaction. Parivartan wrote to us saying it was very good. Now we have to replicate it in other parts of Delhi.

This was for one circle. We have nine districts. The area is huge. The number of ration shops is over 3000. It is not possible for us to have video cameras for all these shops. We have taken certain steps, for instance, we have acted against food inspectors.

Why was the experiment in Sundernagari so successful? It teaches you one thing - that it is the community that can help.

Parivartan complained against certain corrupt officials. Has action been taken?

They wanted registers to be examined to see if signatures are there and so on. The food department has allowed it. We all know the system is not what it ought to be, at a particular level. If we could



have NGOs, enlightened citizens or civil society to come forward it makes our task much easier.

The right to information act is something we brought about because we were keen to clean up the system. There were advisors who told us we would be inviting trouble. But we went ahead because there is in us a desire to see where we are remiss so that we can improve the situation. We have also told officials to go into the field and see if some things are being done.

Will you raise the commissions of ration shop owners and the charges paid to transporters?

We are looking into the commissions paid to the fair price shops and the payments made to the transporters. For us it means the subsidy goes up. It's not as if we raise the commissions by one or two percent and they will become more honest because they may be making more than the commission we may be able to raise.

Will ESMA or some other laws be used against the corrupt officials?

There are service rules. They have been informed about them. It's my perception that accountability should be pinpointed. One way to bring about reforms is to make the system more open. We have the Public Grievances Commission (PGC). This has come out of a resolution. We are trying to give it statutory power so that it gets more teeth.

Earlier there was complete rejection of Parivartan by the government. Now you have reached a point of collaboration. How has this come about?

The Indian Administrative Service, with all due apologies, is more used to saying 'this can't be done'. Then we shifted officials around and we changed the Food Commissioner. The message we sent was we all know there are things that are wrong. Are we going to do something about it or not? I think it's that change that made it possible. I admire Parivartan for their persistence though sometimes I felt they were going overboard.

Are you planning to increase the time limit for Antyodaya ration cards?

We can make it longer. Migration has made it very difficult. In my own house out of 50 people who come about 10 are at Antyodaya level. When I ask them where have you come from, they say Bhubaneswar, Kalahandi, Chattisgarh, Bihar, Azamgarh, Bengal. I add on half a million people every year. Out of that there would be a miniscule number who are middle or upper class.

On the right to information law will you be including a system of penalties?

We are. But we have to make a system. We have to look at the rates also. As for the fee for a right to information application, we have already lowered it to Rs 5. We are open to suggestions. We would like the system to change and to work.

work in Delhi

NGO whose work we at Civil Society have been extensively documenting, used the right to information law in Delhi to show that food was being siphoned off from the ration shops.

Grains would arrive at the shops and then vanish. Often stocks were diverted from the godowns and never reached the shops. People who wanted their rations were told that there were no stocks. When they sought information and wanted to see registers they were turned away.

Parivartan organised public hearings and insisted on records being disclosed. It was bitter spat. First the government refused to listen, though Chief Minister Dikshit was always sympathetic.

Food department officers, unaccustomed to being questioned and for long in cahoots with ration shop owners, resented Parivartan's work. The officers covered up for widespread corruption in the food department. When Parivartan persisted and found support among local people, violence was unleashed upon its activists. Santosh, a young woman, was attacked and her throat slit with a razor. She narrowly survived.

Arvind Kejriwal of Parivartan was called to a meeting with Chief Minister Dikshit. Aruna Roy of the MKSS, who is a part of Sonia Gandhi's National Advisory Council, was also present. Roy and the MKSS are supportive of Parivartan and have helped the fledgling organisation find its feet. But the meeting with Dikshit seemed to yield little immediately.

In February, 5,500 card-holders in Sundernagari decided to protest by declaring a boycott of the ration shops. If the government could not enforce its laws, they did not want rations. This seems to have been the turning point.

Kejriwal was called to another meeting with the chief minister and asked to state what exactly he wanted the government to do. He said the records of the ration shops should be thrown open to the public and immediate action taken against shop owners and officials for irregularities. There was no substitute for the government enforcing its own laws.

These developments coincided with the appointment of a new food commissioner. KS Mehra, a senior officer with 30 years of service and a can-do manner. His predecessors had all been chair bound file-pushers who actually took offence at being told to go out and check what was happening at street level.

Mehra had no such hang-ups. He began by implementing the government's rules and insisting on accountability in his department. Then on March 5 he threw open the ration shops of Sundernagari for inspection by people who had not taken their foodgrains in protest. They could see that stocks had been received and accounted for. This gave people faith in the system and its ability to deliver.

Video cameras were deployed to record what transpired at the shops. Officers of the food department were also put on duty and told to report on the arrival and distribution of stocks on a daily basis.

"It just shows that in matters of governance transparency works better than anything else," says Kejriwal, who founded Parivartan by taking leave from his job as an income-tax officer. He remains on sabbatical as he pursues the working of right to information laws at ground level.

Food Commissioner Mehra agrees: "The rules were already written. The only requirement was and is to ensure compliance. The most important thing, to my mind, which can serve as a check, is allowing public scrutiny."

In Sundernagari now the fair price shops display the stock position, the rates of commodities, the samples of sugar, wheat and rice and the shop timings. A register for complaints is available.

"Now these are mandatory. There is a law for this. They are duty bound to do it," says Mehra. "Stocks and sales are verifiable."

The sales register has been revised. What is now provided is the ration card's registered number, the quantity of specified food grain articles issued, the amount he received and the signature or thumb impression of the person who received the stock. If the person collecting the rations isn't the card-holder, the relationship with the card-holder has to be mentioned.

The government has made it compulsory for a shop owner to inform the food supply officer within three hours of receiving stocks from the Food Corporation of India (FCI). The food supply officer is duty bound to send an inspector who verifies how much stock has been received. Unless he certifies the information that was given to the FSO, sales cannot take place.

Beginning 1 April, in 16 circles records will be thrown open to people on alternative Saturdays. There are penalties prescribed for violations. If it is a matter of variation of stock up to 50 kg, a penalty of Rs 5000 will be levied on the FPS owner. If the variation is more than 50 kg for all the articles combined, the licence is to be suspended for three months. It can end in cancellation of the FPS a decision which is at the discretion of the judicial authority.

Tiger task force perfect, says Sunita Narain

Civil Society News
New Delhi

SUNITA Narain, director of the Centre for Science and Environment (CSE) was recently appointed by the Prime Minister's Office (PMO) as head of the task force to save the tiger. Her appointment surprised many since Narain is not known to be an arch conservationist. Civil Society learns that the PMO's decision stems from an urgent need to rethink management of forest and wildlife particularly with respect to the tiger. The 'guns and guards' approach of conservationists is widely regarded as having failed with the tiger on the verge of becoming extinct.

Sunita Narain spoke to Civil Society.



There is a controversy about your appointment. What do you have to say about it?

I don't think there is any controversy. There is some concern. I respect that concern. These are people who have worked for long years in the field and feel passionately about saving the tiger. I don't believe there are any intrinsic differences between us. We all share the common objective of saving the tiger.

The committee is an excellent composition because it includes all points of view. We could not have hoped for a better committee.

forests.

But your committee consists of at least two arch conservationists. This will not be an easy position to take.

It is not an easy position to take in any circumstance. There are no easy positions at all when it comes to these issues. The conservation imperative has not been found adequate. The solution is in resolving differences.

The committee is an excellent composition because it includes all points of view. We could not have hoped for a better committee. We have a person who is extremely knowledgeable about the tiger (Valmik Thapar). We have a person who is extremely knowledgeable about managing a tiger reserve (HS Panwar). We have a person with wide experience as an administrator (Samar Singh). And we have India's foremost ecologist (Madhav Gadgil).

Do you think three months is too short a time for offering a solution?

No, I don't think three months is too short a time. In fact people would have been justified in asking questions if we had been given more time when the situation is so urgent and the tiger is facing extinction.

Everyone turns up at Amlasole

Rina Mukherji
Amlasole

IN August 2004, there were reports of starvation deaths in Amlasole, West Bengal. The Lodha-Sabars, denotified tribes, were dying of hunger and illness. The state government began relief work, spending money on Amlasole and other villages in Binpur-I and Binpur-II blocks. The changes are now palpable though not everything announced by West Bengal's chief minister Buddhadeb Bhattacharjee under a three-year tribal welfare scheme, has come through.

Under the Indira Awas Yojana, bamboo and *babui* grass shelters, used as homes by the Lodha-Sabars, have been replaced with mud and tin houses. Government largesse has granted each landless Adivasi family Rs 10,000 plus a tin roof.

The Lodha-Sabars are to build a metalled road costing Rs 3.10 crore from Odalchua to Kankrajhore under the Pradhan Mantri Gram Sadak Yojana. They will also be given the work of constructing a non-metalled road from Amlasole to the Jharkhand border. Two tubewells have been sunk in Binpur-II and a dam is being built to harness water.

"Self-help groups have been started to initiate the Lodha-Sabars into various vocations. We plan to train them in occupations like animal husbandry and weaving, which they have an aptitude for," says Subhashis Bej, Block Development Officer (BDO).

Restrictions on the movement of tribals into the forests has been lifted, easing access to *kendu* leaves, *mahua* and other forest produce.

These moves are aimed at isolating the MCC- People's War Group. But is it that simple?

For one, the Jhargram-Belpahari-Kankrajhore stretch resembles a garrisoned fortress. Every outsider is under suspicion. There is no electricity or telephone link beyond Belpahari and any movement attracts investigation.

The Forest Department maintained two bungalows at Kankrajhore. A few weeks ago, both buildings were blown off by the Maoists, scaring away all tourists. As a result, the local economy is floundering. Government generosity to the landless Lodha-Sabars is rousing the ire of other Adivasi groups like the Mundas, Santhals and Mankis who own small plots of unproductive land that yield a poor income. "Whatever is being given is to the Sabars. We are not getting anything," grumbles Vibha Manki.

Locals in Amlasole, Amjharna and Kankrajhore also complain of nepotism and unchecked profiteering by suppliers of tin, bricks and other building material. "In Jharkhand, people can build brick houses easily out of the money given under the Indira Awas Yojana. But not here," points out a local. "Prices of cement and sand are exactly twice as much. Three thousand bricks cost Rs 3500 in Jharkhand. Here one pays Rs 7000."

The area, long forgotten by politicians, is now attracting political parties and NGOs. Belpahari, the closest road-head to Kankrajhore and Amlasole, has gleaming new boards announcing the presence of political parties keen to make a mark.

Govt to liberalise community radio

Indrani Dey
New Delhi

THE process of liberalising radio licensing has begun and government policy will be announced as soon as the Union Cabinet passes its approval.

The Information and Broadcasting Ministry (I&B) had appointed TRAI as an advisory body to look into the framework of community radio policy. TRAI invited civil society organisations, development agencies and individuals to voice their concerns, based on which a draft policy was submitted to the I & B Ministry. It is believed the ministry is favourably inclined to TRAI's draft policy.

Once government policy is announced, local communities, NGOs, voluntary associations, Resident Welfare Associations (RWAs) will be able to provide content for radio programmes and own the airwaves. There will be no need for a separate programming code. AIR and private sector norms will apply. The bank guarantee will be reduced from Rs 50,000 to Rs 25,000. The license duration is to be increased from three years to five. Current guidelines do not permit commercial activity. In the revised scheme, commercials will be allowed but only for five

minutes in an hour-long programme. NGOs will be allowed to accept donations from foreign funds, based on the Foreign Contribution (Regulation) Act.

Many bottlenecks exist in the current policy of gaining licenses. Applicants had to run to the ministry for HRD, Home, Defence, External Affairs and the WPC wing of the Ministry of Communication. But in the revised scheme, a single-window clearance is being proposed. Since December 2002, the government had restricted the ownership of radio airwaves to established educational institutions. Despite such stringent policies, local communities in association with NGOs and self-help groups, started radio programmes in different parts of the country. Community radio proved to be a powerful tool of change. Villagers easily learnt its techniques. It was cheap to run and cut across barriers of illiteracy and language apart from having extensive reach.

The government is finally taking note of the Supreme Court (SC) judgement of February 1995 which had clearly stated that 'the airwaves or frequencies are public property'.

Charkha Development Communication Network

Healthy vegetables on arid tribal land

Rina Mukherji
Kankrajhore

IT was on a visit to Kankrajhore that Dr Shantanu Bhattacharya got to know the ills that plagued tribal hamlets in the area. There was no water, electricity or medical facility. When tribals got sick they went to *Jaangurus* (tribal witch doctors).

In 1998, his organisation the Bengal Rural Welfare Service (BRWS), set up a clinic here. They trained locals as village health workers and paramedics. BRWS regularly provides immunisation and other medical services. Recently, they came to an arrangement with the Belpahari Hospital authorities for a weekly clinic at Kankrajhore.

After 16 years of work, health awareness has increased. Maternal mortality rates have declined from 12/14 per 1000 live births to 5/6 per 1000. Similarly infant mortality rates have come down. The number of births has dropped from 35 per 1000 to 24 per 1000.

Dr Bhattacharya also noted the rapid denudation of the forest by contractors and locals. The aridity of the rocky soil prevented more than one crop being grown.

There were mountain streams and rivers that needed to be harnessed. Using the labour of the community, BRWS built two dams in and around Kankrajhore. The Mundas and Santhals began to think of cultivating more than one crop a year. BRWS encouraged them to grow vegetables on their little plots of land.

Last year, BRWS distributed vegetable seeds and organic manure to farmers in Amjharna, Amlasole and Kankrajhore. "We spent a total of Rs.1.5 lakh on this agro-environment project of ours and the profits have been three times over," claims Dr Bhattacharya.

The bigger landholdings have done well, while smaller farms have yielded enough to supplement the nutritional levels of these small farmers. For instance, Lalmadhab Soren of Kankrajhore owns 2.5 bighas of land. He is extremely happy with his crop of ladies fingers, gourd, tomatoes, onion, potato and cauliflower. Output from his field doubled this year. Bibhuti Manki of Amlasole got 1.5 quintals ladies fingers from her little strip of land. She sold her crop in the market. Krishnapada Mura of Amjharna who grew just a few kilos of onion and *pui* (a green leafy vegetable) had enough only for his family.

Right to work yatra on May 13

A country-wide '*rozgar adhikar yatra*' (right to work convoy) will be launched from Delhi on 13 May 2005. The main objective of this yatra is to consolidate the campaign for a full-fledged Employment Guarantee Act (EGA).

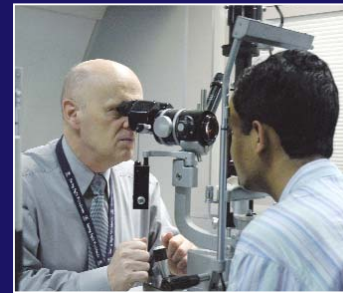
The yatra is a follow-up to the 'display of banners' of 21 December 2004, when thousands of banners from all over the country, bearing about 10 lakh signatures demanding a full-fledged EGA, were displayed in Parliament Street, New Delhi.

The banners will travel with the yatra and be displayed in various places on the way. The yatra will go through Haryana, Rajasthan, Gujarat, Maharashtra, Madhya Pradesh, Chhattisgarh, Jharkhand, Bihar, West

Bengal and Uttar Pradesh before returning to Delhi end June. Public meetings, cultural activities, training workshops, press conferences and other activities will be taking place on the way. All organisations committed to the right to work are invited to take part in these activities. For details contact Annie at 9811553633 or Navjyoti at 9811087811

Activists may please note that the Secretariat of the Right to Food Campaign is moving to new premises, located in Siddiqui Building, Bara Hindu Rao, 6122, Bahadurgarh Road, Delhi-110 006 Phone: 2351 0042

The new Secretariat badly needs furniture and equipment such as computers, printers, shelves etc. If you are able to help, please send a line or call Navjyoti.



A whole world on board ORBIS

Civil Society News
New Delhi

THE famed ORBIS flying eye hospital stood on the tarmac, basking in the sun at New Delhi's Indira Gandhi International Airport. Housed in a DC-10 aircraft, the hospital has a bunch of smiling medics, dressed in hospital gear. They are volunteers from 13 nationalities, taking the gift of sight round the world.

"This is globalisation at its best," remarked Dr Gordon Douglas, senior medical advisor with ORBIS. There were docs, nurses and staff happy to share skills with fellow medics from developing nations.

Surgeries are performed on the aircraft which serves as a hospital and teaching facility. But the aircraft itself is just apart of the ORBIS story. Much of the imparting of skills happens at partner institutions in small towns and big cities. A telemedicine programme provides consultancy the year round.

Since 2002, ORBIS has helped set up 12 out of 14 paediatric ophthalmology units in India. There are partnership programmes with 24 hospitals including Dr Shroff's Charity Eye Hospital in Delhi, Sankara Nethralaya in Chennai. Orbis

has an e-mail consultative programme. Continuing medical education provides society with better doctors. And on board the flying hospital are some of the best teachers in the world.

"I feel sorry for clinicians who never leave their room," says Dr Douglas. "To pass on knowledge - balls of light - influencing others in the process, gives me a huge sense of satisfaction and that is my reward." He is from Vancouver in Canada. The ORBIS experience has enabled him to 'think out of the Anglo-Saxon box' by understanding patterns of disease in different parts of the world. It has helped him relate to patients from diverse nationalities, transcending barriers of class, religion or politics.

ORBIS is a learning experience. Doctors examine patients, mostly children with complicated eye problems. Paediatric ophthalmology is a specialised area and there is a lacuna in skill sets. India has only 150 paediatric ophthalmologists for a population of over one billion. By concentrating on the young, Orbis does its bit to ensure they lead a normal life. The flying hospital therefore has a child friendly ambience. The pace is unhurried. There are toys and teddies to make children

comfortable.

Surgery is conducted in a spick and span OT located near the wings of the aircraft, the most stable area on board. Each stage of the operation can be observed in detail by doctors who want to improve skills in a lecture theatre located in the front area of the aircraft. This classroom can seat 48 doctors. The OT has six cameras that project images to the lecture theatre. The doctors can ask questions and get answers immediately. The surgery is therefore an interactive session with local doctors.

"I learnt a lot," says Dr Manisha Acharya from Dr Shroff's Charity Eye Hospital in Daryaganj, Delhi. "I got a chance to take part in surgery and I picked up small tips not included in textbooks."

Rommel from the Philippines is a computer engineer who ensures that communication flows smoothly from the OT to the lecture theatre. His corner is equipped with an array of flashy gadgetry. He used to work for CNN Hongkong. "In 15 months I've been to 15 countries," he says with a smile, "Sure I miss my family. But there is a miracle happening in here."

That miracle is the gift of sight, restored deftly by skilled surgical hands.

Neem gets mosquitoes, cuts malaria

Biswajeet Padhi
Khariar

AN anti-malaria campaign led by the People's Rural Education Movement (PREM), an NGO in Berhampur, has brought down the incidence of malaria in Orissa's Gajapati district. The NGO trained 'social doctors' to educate tribals and introduced low cost prevention methods, which have become very popular.

For instance, mixing neem oil and kerosene to a glowing lamp keeps away buzzing mosquitoes. Another method is to rub neem oil on the body or use a medicated mosquito net. A new festival called 'Anti-Mosquito' day has been introduced and festivities include removing stagnant pools of water.

"The strategy worked after people were convinced that managing malaria was that simple," says Jacob Thundyil of PREM. No incentive was required. "Tribals were losing wages and spending a fortune getting treatment," he says.

PREM launched the anti-malaria drive in 2001. Supported by Plan International, the NGO targeted 1000 villages. The strategy was carefully worked out with Dr. Johnny Oomen, head of department, community health, Bisam Cuttack Hospital and a consultant for the Rural Orissa Malaria Control Programme.

The illness is a major public health hazard and

responsible for high infant mortality and indebtedness, explains Thundyil. In tribal areas of south and west Orissa, *Anopheles fluviatilis* is the chief vector.

The region's dense forests and streams are a fertile breeding ground. Medical institutions find it hard to reach tribal villages since these are spread over a large forested area and there is a dearth of roads. Under these circumstances, Dr Oomen wisely designed a programme which would help tribals stave off malaria themselves.

At the end of the campaign, it was hoped, at least 75 percent of households would be able to state the cause, mode of transmission, prevention and treatment of malaria. Fifty percent, it was felt, should be using personal protection measures and 75 percent of fever cases taking presumptive treatment with chloroquine. At least 75 percent of project villages should be spraying insecticide and undertaking environmental methods to prevent mosquitoes breeding.

The anti-malaria campaign identified 139 Malaria Resource Persons (MRP) and trained them as 'social doctors'. The social doctors are young locals, committed to the programme since malaria could kill them too. For instance, Jayanti, a social doctor, is a tribal girl. She visits 25 villages with contagious zeal educating SHGs, school children, elders and youth clubs.

A volunteer in each village makes sure chloroquine is available. Before any complication arises people are

advised to swallow chloroquine. Since most villages have no electricity, they burn kerosene lamps. They now add five ml neem oil to 100 ml of kerosene in those lamps and get freedom from mosquitoes.

The *Anopheles culicifacies* variety is very active till 8 pm. But people are seldom inside their mosquito nets at this time. Traditionally they oil their bodies. PREM's social doctors advised them to add a few drops of neem to repel mosquitoes.

Since *fluviatilis* is active till dawn, mosquito nets are foolproof protection. To maximise results nets are dipped, by the social doctor on request, into a solution of deltapyrithine. Mosquitoes die immediately if they come into contact with the medicated net. These nets are very popular with women since they also kill lice, says Kalidas Patnaik, project coordinator, PREM.

The Gajapati experience is being replicated by Orissa's malaria control programme, currently covering 3500 villages in Koraput, Rayagada, Nabrangpur, Malkangiri, Ganjam, Kandhmal and Nuapada through 140 social doctors. The aim is to reduce the prevalence of malaria by 50 percent. The government's Drug Distribution Centres (DDCs) provide chloroquine. SHGs will market neem oil.

"It has worked in Gajapati and should work in other villages," asserts Dr Oomen with a chuckle. His peers once rebuked him for making combating malaria so simple.

Baluchari sarees destroy weavers

Milindo Chakravarti
Dakshin Telenaopara

TAKE a bus from Nabadwip to Katoa. In about 40 minutes you will reach Parulia Bazar. Now walk four kilometres or take a cycle rickshaw to a village called Dakshin Telenaopara. The Dakshin Telenaopara Sindurpur Weavers' Co-operative Society was set up here in 1977, with an initial membership of 31 artisans operating 10 pit looms. Their number has now increased to 172 with around 60 looms in operation.

The weavers, however, are no longer in a comfortable situation. Meet Becharam Debnath. He has been an active member of the weavers' co-operative for the last 14 to 15 years. Head of a joint family comprising nine members - seven adults and two children - Becharam earns an average monthly income of Rs 1100 through weaving. Other members of his family earn Rs 1500 per month from weaving. They spend almost all that they earn on two square meals a day. There is no money for the education of children, clothing and medicine. Becharam has already accumulated a debt burden of Rs 7500, forcing him to sell ready-made garments in nearby village *haats*.

It was different a decade ago. Becharam used to weave *lungies* and *gamchhas* (inexpensive cloth made of cotton and used as towels) and earned a decent living. The arrival of power looms put him in a tight corner and he is gradually giving up.

Dakshin Telenaopara is located in the district of Bardhaman in West Bengal. Fifteen percent of the two lakh odd weavers in the state reside in this district. It has 95 registered weavers' co-operative soci-

eties. Sadly, many of them have become non-functional, while others are gasping for breath.

It was felt by the powers that be - and rightly so - that weavers required support to market their products so that they could corner a larger share of the consumer rupee. Producer co-operative societies were set up backed by apex cooperatives at the state level. The apex co-operative in West Bengal is called Tantuja. It was set up to supply raw materials - yarns and dyes - to the weavers and collect the produce for onward sale through its network of showrooms in West Bengal and elsewhere. The necessary working capital was routed through the district cooperative banks.

However, over the years, Tantuja failed miserably in its objectives. Since the early nineties, products were picked up from the societies but the weavers were not paid on time. By 1995, Tantuja ran up arrears of over Rs. 10 lakh with Dakshin Telenaopara Sindurpur Weavers' Co-operative Society alone. After a lot of persuasion by the weavers, the amount was finally settled in full in 2001.

The society used the receipt to settle their interest dues with the cooperative bank. The principal is still lying unpaid and the debt burden is growing daily with accrued interest. An 'interest subsidy' scheme was introduced in 1997 to provide some relief to the weavers in respect of the interest payments made to the banks.

Ironically, Dakshin Telenaopara, Sindurpur Weavers' Co-operative Society is yet to receive about Rs 4.5 lakh lying outstanding with the state government on this account. The state government owes another Rs 13 lakh to the society on account of the

Marketing Incentive Scheme (MIS) and Market Development Assistance (MDA) programme. It is often alleged that the state-run Tantuja has been surviving at the expense of the poor weavers. Experiences from Dakshin Telenaopara obviously add credence to such allegations.

It was felt that weavers should be provided training so that they acquired skills to produce high value added products and raised their income. Development Commissioner (Handloom), Government of India, designed a 'Decentralised Training Programme' (DTP) to arrange training programmes for the weavers near their homes. The weavers of Dakshin Telenaopara were now trained to weave expensive *Baluchari* saree, a high value added product, under the DTP. *Gamchhas* and *lungies* could be sold locally, but the expensive sarees had to be sold in other markets. In the absence of a simultaneous effort to create a supporting marketing channel, DTP could not help weavers raise their incomes and instead put weavers like Becharam into larger difficulties. It should be noted that Becharam does not have any other productive asset to enable him to shift to another economic activity for sustaining his livelihood.

Now that most state-sponsored measures have failed to improve the condition of weavers, should they be encouraged to give up their traditional occupation and join the 'free' labour market? Or, should they, as producers, be empowered in the real sense of the term to control the entire marketing channel that takes their products to the consumer? We require urgent answers to these questions before it's curtains for the handloom sector.



Winning team: Harivansh flanked by KK Goenka (right) and RK Datta

THE PEOPLE'S DAILY

Prabhat Khabar keeps growing by speaking up for the citizen

Civil Society News
Ranchi

IN 1989, a small and unknown newspaper in Ranchi called *Prabhat Khabar* was up for sale. Its reputation was mostly mud. It was all of eight pages and it had a print-run of just 500 copies which came off an outdated press. The Usha Martin Group was interested in buying *Prabhat Khabar* if it came cheap and, more importantly, if professional journalists could be brought in to revive it. The group had business interests in Bihar and a newspaper is always a nice thing to own, particularly in a state so prone to tumultuous politics.

At the same time in Kolkata, an assistant editor by the name of Harivansh in the Hindi weekly *Ravivar*, was getting impatient with the quality of journalism that he was doing. *Ravivar* had gone from being a respected magazine under its first editor, SP Singh, to being a mouthpiece for the Congress. Harivansh was known within the profession for his skills and objectivity. He hadn't joined journalism to be anyone's mouthpiece. He was restless and eager for a change that would put his own idealism to test.

So, when the Usha Martin Group, after asking around, offered him the job of reviving the defunct *Prabhat Khabar*, he said yes at the first meeting. It did not take more than a minute for him to make up his mind. He was attracted to

Ranchi even though he had never been there before. In South Bihar's well-known contradictions Harivansh saw the perfect laboratory for an experiment in journalism. If a modern and independent newspaper could be built here, amid runaway corruption, violent politics, huge wealth, abject poverty and collapsing infrastructure, then it would surely be the achievement of a lifetime.

Fifteen years later that dream is a reality. *Prabhat Khabar* prints 300,000 copies and has 1.1 million readers across all its six publishing centres.

It is of course Jharkhand's largest daily, having knocked out the Ranchi Express and *Aaj*. But, more significantly, in the past four years it has got the better of Hindustan, the Hindi avatar of the Hindustan Times, and *Dainik Jagaran*. Both national media houses were eager to muscle their way into the region.

Far from succumbing to the might of the two big titles, *Prabhat Khabar's* circulation and revenues have continued to grow. Hindustan sold 161,942 in Jharkhand in July-December 2004. *Prabhat Khabar* did 218,380 for the same period. This is significantly higher than the 168,000 copies that it did in 2000 when Hindustan and Jagaran began making an entry. Jagaran has not subjected itself to ABC scrutiny in this market.

The result has been rapid spikes in the profitability of *Prabhat Khabar*. Advertising revenues are expected to touch Rs 25 crore in the coming year. In 1996-97 advertising revenues were just Rs 2 crores and in 2000 Rs 7 crores.

The paper rolls out 11 editions from Ranchi alone. It has four publishing



Only in Ranchi?

COULD Harivansh have built *Prabhat Khabar* the way he has in a metropolitan city like Mumbai or Delhi? Is *Prabhat Khabar* merely a Ranchi phenomenon, which will also have to modify itself as middle class aspirations and levels of prosperity change in the newly founded Jharkhand?

All businesses need evangelism to succeed initially. In the case of a media company that spirit is closely identified with content. Ranchi needed a paper it could trust. Harivansh delivered one. Now what?

Harivansh does not have an answer. He realises that tastes vary. Had he to craft a newspaper for Delhi or Chandigarh or Pune it might have been very different in character. Technology doesn't merely deliver information. It shapes aspirations. Ranchi itself is changing.

Prabhat Khabar is not the eight pages in black and white that it used to be. It is 16 pages with front and back pages in

colour. You will find beauty queens and film stars popping out of the pages. Cricket can be a big draw. It has a colour weekend tabloid called *Ravivaria* which covers beauty, fashion and lifestyle. *Awsar* is for jobseekers, Grihaswami is a women's section. *Rozgar* helps students prepare for competitive examinations.

The tyranny of numbers also defines editorial content. It is one thing to be a struggling paper and quite another to be chasing Rs 25 crore in advertising and trying to improve on a circulation number of 300,000.

The market in Jharkhand and Bihar has grown. *Prabhat Khabar* does 218,380 copies daily. Hindustan does 161,942. The advertising pie is Rs 50 crores and climbing. In *Prabhat's* case 49 per cent of the advertising is national. This growth has come in recent years with statehood for Jharkhand and the heat is clearly on.



centres in Jharkhand and one each in Patna and Kolkata. The Kolkata edition does 60,000 copies. A vast rural network has been created and it has been linked through computer and modem.

The Usha Martin Group invested Rs 6 crores between 1989 and 1994 in reviving the defunct *Prabhat Khabar*. It now has a brand and fixed assets which can be valued at several times the initial investment. Ironically, it is a business which has grown out of providing complete freedom to Harivansh as editor. This is rare in times when independent minded editors, who insist on telling a story as they see it, are widely regarded by proprietors as a liability.



What is the secret of *Prabhat Khabar's* success? The paper has relied primarily on the quality of its journalism. It has zealously guarded the sanctity of its editorial columns, keeping them free from the influence of political and commercial interests. It has become fashionable for publishing houses to depend on pricing and marketing initiatives for their growth, but *Prabhat Khabar* is priced at Rs 3.50 and its management is unwilling to give out copies free.

Hindustan and Jagaran have offered colourful, tabloidish content. But *Prabhat Khabar* has stuck to serious issues with soft features pages and supplements to provide balance and completeness. Though tucked away in Ranchi, Harivansh has worked to inculcate a worldview among his young journalists and readers. He has encouraged them to look for modern and efficient answers to problems of social equity and poor governance.

The newspaper's commitment to the common citizen has been constant. It exposed the massive corruption in Bihar's animal husbandry department in 1992, four years before national media woke up to it. *Prabhat Khabar* did 70

investigative reports, which finally cost Laloo Prasad Yadav his job as chief minister.

Prabhat Khabar also broke the news of starvation deaths in Palamau. The government denied the deaths and tried to browbeat the newspaper, but the reports finally became a part of the Supreme Court's ongoing intervention on the question of the right to food and the working of the public distribution system in the country. The court vindicated *Prabhat Khabar*.

Harivansh's staff have been relentlessly reporting land scams and fake drug rackets, campaigning against the government over the shortage of power. They have delved deep into corruption by politicians and government servants, going to the extent of naming officials and printing the amounts charged as kickbacks in various departments.

The paper has associated itself with mass movements such as the one for Jharkhand, which was created out of South Bihar and of which Ranchi is now the capital.

Prabhat Khabar has raised an alarm over the flight of capital from the region because of poor governance. It has campaigned for land rights and community access to forests. Stories done by its reporters have helped tribals get back property usurped from them.

It has taken up women's rights on a sustained basis.

It is important to understand that the variety of emotional bonds that *Prabhat Khabar* has built with its readers and its image as a courageous champion

of the truth have been important ingredients in its commercial success. At a time in the country, and particularly so in Bihar, when journalists are seen as being a part of the power structure, Harivansh and his team are seen as brave hearts.

So just who is Harivansh and what makes him so special?

Harivansh's chosen hallmark is simplicity. It needn't have been so because he is easily one of eastern India's most influential editors. But he has none of the self-importance that powerful journalists like to give themselves. He doesn't want to be a celebrity. A short man with a greying stubble and a quiet, polite demeanour, you would miss him in a room full of people.

When he is late for lunch and finds we have left to complete our work at the *Prabhat Khabar* office, he dissolves with embarrassment. At his spacious but modest flat in the core of the Bengali quarter in Ranchi, breakfast is a leisurely affair amid light-hearted banter among local friends. The pace is easy, homely. But the phone rings for him every now and then.

Harivansh, who has just turned 50, grew up in a village in Uttar Pradesh.



Resident Editor Bajjnath Mishra (left) and News Editor Vijay Pathak (above) are key to the operations.

School was under a tree. "There was nothing there. When people fell sick, they died," he tells us in his office in Ranchi.

Since he knows what it is to be poor, he genuinely feels for issues which affect the poor. When we arrived in Ranchi he was away in Hazaribagh where women had come together to demand a ban on alcohol. Harivansh was impressed. "There are uneducated women but they have managed to organise huge protests," he tells us. The next day *Prabhat Khabar* had a detailed story done by Harivansh himself.

But while he cares for the poor, he isn't boring. He does not wear his heart on his sleeve. He can be as blunt and combative with unreasonable trade unions as with people who believe that the media's only role is to celebrate the lifestyles of the rich.

Just as *Prabhat Khabar* investigates politicians, so also it scrutinises Naxalites and their lawlessness. Harivansh has uncomfortable questions to ask of NGOs.

Thanks to his father's foresight, Harivansh managed to go to Benares Hindu

University to study. He did an MA in economics. He began writing letters to publications on the Jayaprakash Narayan movement. He then happened to take the examination for Times of India's trainee journalist programme and after his training began working for *Dharamyug*.

When life in Mumbai and work at the magazine did not appeal to him any longer he took the bank officers' examination and moved out. A few years later he was back in journalism, at *Ravivar*, and from there he made the ordained journey to Ranchi.

Rebuilding *Prabhat Khabar* has meant mostly working round the clock. "For a very long time we would be here in office at nine in the morning and leave at two the next morning," says Harivansh. Resources were scarce and at times there was not enough money for paper. In 1996, the Usha Martin Group felt that the *Prabhat Khabar* team was ready to fend for themselves.

Harivansh remains grateful for the advice in running the business that came from DS Sharma, one of the directors on the board.

The *Prabhat Khabar* management also has two key players who have grown with the business. KK Goenka and RK Datta had been appointed as managers by Usha Martin in 1989. Datta originally handled only personnel, but then took over circulation. Goenka is a chartered accountant who looks after finance and marketing. It was first-time employment for both of them. They were as stunned by the rundown condition of the paper as Harivansh was. But they were small town boys - Datta from Ranchi itself and Goenka from Bankura in West Bengal - and they decided to make a go of it.

"We have worked together as a team. Decisions are taken collectively. It is management and editorial together. No one side dominates. There is no all-powerful brand manager or marketing head," says Harivansh.

Harivansh, however, is clearly the boss. It is he who has given *Prabhat Khabar* its soul and public presence. In addition to being editor he functions as the CEO.

In his 14 years of editorship he has taken on politicians of all hues. He is hated equally by the BJP and Laloo Prasad Yadav. Ask him how many cases of defamation he has against him and he has to check with his lawyer. There are 30 cases against him.

Prabhat Khabar has come to be regarded as a watchdog for the ordinary citizen. But it hardly crows about its successes, unlike several national papers, which get all excited when they make even a small impact. At *Prabhat Khabar*, it all happens in the course of a day's work. One of the few extravagances the paper permits itself is its chosen slogan: "Not a newspaper but a movement."

Prabhat Khabar's success has come out of Harivansh's unique vision for the

paper as a modern product. So, while it has sharply focussed on corruption and poor governance, it has also built up features sections, colour supplements and a career guide. There is sports and foreign news.

He travelled to *Malayalam Manorama* in Kerala and *Eenadu* in Andhra Pradesh to see how these publishing empires have been built and are managed today. He learnt from them the need for connecting with readers and replicated their use of multiple editions so as to be able to highlight local stories for targeted audiences.

Books like *The Death of Distance* made him aggressively pursue connectivity and computerisation. "I realised we had to move to more efficient arrangements by which any of our journalists would have to know how to file a report, edit copy and make a page," says Harivansh. "We also had to ensure accuracy with speed."

An important strategy has been to stay in touch with readers. *Aap Ke Dwar* (At Your Door) and *Pathak Manch* (Readers' Forum) have become popular



PHOTOGRAPHS BY SANJAY

Harivansh has stocked his pond carefully. He has chosen young people and empowered them to take decisions. The average age of Prabhat Khabar's staff would be under 35. The paper runs a training school from which it draws fresh talent. There is a code of conduct for journalists.

devices for knowing what is expected of the paper. These devices have bridged the gap between the people who buy *Prabhat Khabar* and the journalists who produce it. When people hungry for information they can trust see young and idealistic faces their faith in the paper becomes unshakeable. Harivansh's own reputation is truly awesome.

Repeated interventions to ensure better governance, such as the campaign on Jharkhand's power shortages and the exposure of corruption at all levels, has positioned the paper as a sentinel.

Stories which help poor tribals get back their land may have no immediate relevance to the middle class, but they reinforce the perception of *Prabhat Khabar* as a weapon individuals can use against a callous state machinery.

The strategy of reaching out has paid off repeatedly. For instance, when *Hindustan* and *Jagaran* enticed hawkers into not distributing *Prabhat Khabar* readers would wake up early and insist on *Prabhat Khabar* being delivered.

Harivansh is especially proud of two projects: A social audit conducted with the guidance of Yogendra Yadav and Sanjay Kumar of the Centre for the Study of Developing Societies (CSDS) a professional study undertaken by Indicus on where Jharkhand will be 20 years from now. Just in case you are interested, if governance does not improve and the current levels of corruption continue, Jharkhand will be no better off than what Zimbabwe is today.

Similarly an entire edition highlighted corruption as Jharkhand's biggest

industry. It spared no one, not even Naxalites, detailing how much money they loot.

Harivansh's endeavour has been to make his staff and his readers look beyond Jharkhand much in the same way as he travelled to *Eenadu* and *Malayalam Manorama* to learn. Or for the same reason that he ensures he gets the latest copy of *The Economist*.

So it is that *Prabhat Khabar's* edit page has writers like Ramchandra Guha and Prof Arun Kumar, Chaturanan Mishra, Narayan Dutt. Prabhat Kumar as governor of Jharkhand did a column on governance. Occasional writers have been Jean Dreze, Prabhask Joshi, Ajit Bhattacharya and many others.

Similarly, *Bharat Kidhar* (Whither India) has become an event, attended by eminent people from elsewhere, at which the future of India is discussed.

Harivansh has also stocked his pond carefully. He has chosen young people and empowered them to take decisions. The average age of *Prabhat Khabar's* staff would be under 35. The paper runs a training school from which it draws fresh talent.

Prabhat Khabar pays its journalists reasonably well and expects them to adhere to a strict code of conduct. Seminars, workshops and an active notice board, at least at its Ranchi office, are intended to be windows on the best in the world.

All that Harivansh aspired for did not prepare him for the shock that he would get when he turned up at the office of *Prabhat Khabar* in Ranchi. It consisted of four dilapidated rooms, unhappy journalists, a *Bandhu M20* printing machine, which produced eight pages in smudgy black and white, and an army of 250 employees.

"To tell you the truth I was stunned by what I saw and wondered where I had gone and landed," says Harivansh. *Dharamyug*, the bank and *Ravivar* had all been modern establishments with many facilities. *Prabhat Khabar* in 1989 by comparison seemed like a bottomless pit.

But having made his choice, Harivansh got a few young journalists from Kolkata to join him in his adventure. He began focussing on reshaping *Prabhat Khabar's* content and get-up. The new team began searching for stories and with help from many friends the look of the paper underwent a change. Several scoops followed and with each one the circulation grew. The going was

painfully slow but as word went out of the new force at *Prabhat Khabar*, the paper began to gain credibility.

Journalists have come and gone over the years. In most cases they have gained valuable experience and been snapped up by publications in the big cities. Two years ago, *Hindustan* took away 20 journalists in a single swoop, hoping to cripple *Prabhat Khabar*. Harivansh responded by bringing in a whole

lot of youngsters and setting up a training school together with the Bhartiya Vidya Bhavan. Now he recruits from the course.

The Ranchi office is always buzzing with activity. People work incredibly long hours. The news editor and resident editor arrive at 11 am and leave after putting the Ranchi city edition to bed, which is at two the following morning.

These are punishing hours. But there is unquestioning loyalty to Harivansh and the paper. The Ranchi edition's editor, Baijnath Mishra, came from the *Ranchi Express* when the 20 journalists deserted *Prabhat Khabar*. The news editor, Vijay Pathak, has grown from being a district correspondent and a desk hand.

"What keeps people like me working here is the complete freedom that we enjoy," says

Pathak. "If you have an idea you can implement it. There is a sense of ownership. We are also free from internal politics and bickering because Harivanshji won't allow it."

Pathak is going to be 40. Mishra, at 52, is an older man but full of the verve that a job at *Prabhat Khabar* requires. "There is little or no hierarchy here. Of course people have to be pulled up when they come in late and there is accountability at every stage. But there is no hierarchy in the old fashioned sense. There is a lot of work to be done and it has to come from a willingness to slog," says Mishra. "Harivanshji is the boss. Without him there would be nothing. But finally, we are friends and work like that."

Harivansh's message to his journalists has always been not to take their salaries for granted. He expects them to face the market. A newspaper cannot expect to be around for long unless it is commercially viable. On the flip side, a newspaper that is only a business does not deserve to be around either. The big challenge he took up in 1989 was to build a newspaper that could make money without playing games with its content. In 2005, he can say he has succeeded

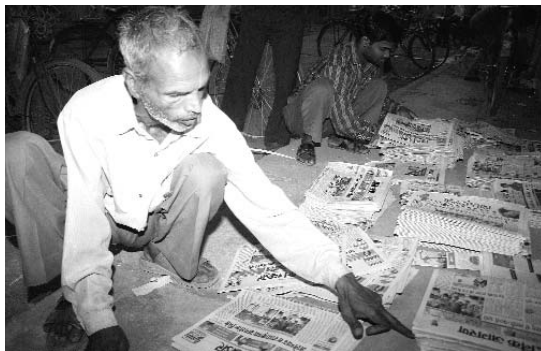
***Prabhat Khabar* rolls out 11 editions from Ranchi alone. It has four publishing centres in Jharkhand and one each in Patna and Kolkata. Kolkata does 60,000 copies.**



Scoop after scoop after scoop...

It is tough to find another Indian newspaper that has such a stack of great stories in its archives and has yet worked in obscurity. *Prabhat Khabar* has been the target of politicians of all hues. Its editor, Harivansh, has some 30 cases of defamation against him. He has had to face the anger of both Laloo Prasad Yadav and the BJP.

It was 1992 and Laloo Prasad Yadav was in full flow in Bihar. A small newspaper, *Prabhat Khabar*, published from a hole of an office in Ranchi, reported how huge sums of money were being siphoned out of the animal husbandry department. Threats and blandishments followed, but the



paper persisted and did 70 investigative reports over four years. Finally, the national media woke up and Laloo Yadav had to step down as chief minister. Hardly ever is mention made of those brave hearts in godforsaken Ranchi who had stuck their necks out to be true to their calling as journalists, but were it not for their courage perhaps one of the most important stories in recent times may never have been told.

In 1993, income-tax officers swooped down on a plane taking off from Ranchi airport for Delhi. They seized from the passengers jewellery and bundles of cash. Reporters who turned up to cover the raid were chased away by armed musclemen. Newspapers were told not to publish anything. *Prabhat Khabar* decided to go the whole distance and use the story with pictures. The musclemen took to the streets next morning, grabbing copies of the edition and intimidating hawkers. There were death threats to *Prabhat Khabar* staff as well. But the paper persisted and such was the support it got from its readers that even the mafia backed off.

In 2002, as the well-heeled in Delhi discussed reforms and India's impending status as an economic superpower, news came from Palamau of starvation deaths. People were not getting food to eat. Government denials followed and a stern letter from the Bihar Cabinet secretary told *Prabhat Khabar* to apologise. It refused and finally its reports came to be included in the Supreme Court's intervention on the right to food and the working of the public distribution system in the country.

Prabhat's barefoot news force

It doesn't matter if you are a petty trader, a lawyer or a college student. *Prabhat Khabar* gives you a chance to double up as a rural reporter. The newspaper relies on a motley band of 170 young men, mostly between 25 and 35 years of age, to pick up local stories. It could be about water, electricity, school uniforms or a collapsing bridge. If it's important to the people, it's a story for *Prabhat Khabar*.

The paper has offices in 33 areas. Among them are Garwa, Daltonganj, Latihar, Gumla, Simdega, Bokaro, Giridih, Kodarma, Hazaribagh and Chattra. It is the first newspaper to take rural reportage seriously by providing training, computers, modems, faxes, digital cameras and mobile phones.

Strong local coverage boosts circulation and connects people with the government. The newspaper's barefoot reporters have picked up stories which have shaken the corridors of power—the Palamau starvation deaths, the murder of respected CPM (L) leader Mahendra Singh, the Naxalite insurgency, to name a few. They have done social audits. They even know how much 'commission' is paid to Naxalites.

Besides, reporters provide social service.

"A journalist is more than just a newsman," says Ramanand, a reporter who covers Giridih for *Prabhat Khabar*.



Jivesh Ranjan Singh

Reporters are chosen through trial and error. They garner local advertisements and market the newspaper. Editorial, circulation, marketing and financial heads brief them. Every reporter is told how much money was collected from advertisements and circulation, how much was spent and what the targets for the coming months are.

"There is complete transparency," says Harivansh.

The reporters understand that their responsibility is to contribute to the health of the newspaper. Targets for advertisements and circulation are fixed by consensus with each rural outpost. While some exceed theirs, others lag behind.

There is no clash of interests. "We never approach politicians for ads. Advertisers cannot impinge on editorial space and each reporter must abide by the Code of Conduct," clarifies Jivesh Ranjan Singh. Based in the Ranchi office, Jivesh connects with reporters on a mobile phone, explaining stories, issuing guidelines and editing copy. He studied journalism at Ranchi University and works as a news-reader for Doordarshan and as an announcer for AIR.

"We believe an emotional or a personal touch helps in getting advertisements," says Jivesh. "Shopkeepers sometimes place their advertisements in advance. On 15 August, 26 January and 15 November we run a special edition of some 70 to 80 pages. People insist their ads be printed. They say good things are being done by the paper."

Most rural outposts border Chattisgarh, Madhya Pradesh, Bengal and Bihar. These are dangerous areas, infested with Naxalites. "In my area," says reporter Deenbandhu of Simaria, Chattra, there is only one police station for 98 km." Reporters are sitting ducks for criminals. The newspaper steps in when things get tough, says Jivesh.

"Our modus operandi is straight forward," say reporters, "We write small development stories.

It could be about a dry tap. See, government officials don't attend office. We took a picture of their empty office and printed it. They were red-faced. Ration shop owners tell lies about their stocks. We noted how much rations each ration shop owner was picking up and published every figure. So, people knew and could demand their entitlements." Ajay, a reporter from Ramgarh, reported on the murder of a four-year-old Harijan girl called Dolly. The newspaper persistently chased the story and solved the case.

The reporters take the newspaper to remote villages on cycle, on foot or by bus. "*Prabhat Khabar aap ke dwar*," becomes an occasion where villagers tell the reporter what is going on in their area. Since most villagers are not literate, the reporter identifies a young person who can read the newspaper to the community. In some villages, 10 kg rice is given as payment for the newspaper. The reporter locates a person, preferably somebody who is disabled, an orphan, or an elderly person who can be a hawk for the paper. Totally 25 percent commission is paid out of which 5 percent is deposited as savings in the post office for the hawk's rainy day.

"People complain if the newspaper doesn't reach them," says Ramanand.

How Dalits got back their land

FAME rests lightly on 32-year-old Kavalash Kumar Baitha's shoulders. One of *Prabhat Khabar's* star reporters, Baitha assiduously tracks land rights and oppression of Dalit tribals. His stories have resulted in 85 acres, belonging to Dalit tribals, being returned to them.

"All over Jharkhand, Dalit tribal land is illegally occupied by powerful castes like the Mahatos and Sahus. The Dalits end up as daily wagers. A newspaper can play a big role. It can give social status to such communities," he says.

Baitha is from the *Dhobi Harijan* community. His village is in Ghetasur block, Angada district. He studied in local government schools and graduated from Ranchi's Marwari college. Baitha grew up a mute witness to oppression. His village is dominated by the Bhumihars, an upper caste community. His father died of cancer. One day, a socially conscious block development officer (BDO) Sunil Kumar put him in his jeep and brought him to *Prabhat Khabar's* Ranchi office.

Baitha's stories on land grab cases sparked a campaign by the Hul Jharkhand Kranti Dal to return land to adivasis. It led to inquiries by the Circle Officer (CO) who got the land returned to their rightful owners. "In Mohini Tungri, Sikirdirdi Rajwar, 35 acres belonging to Dalit women was grabbed by one Krishna Kumar Mahato. The women were mercilessly beaten. My story was printed on the front page of *Prabhat Khabar* and the land was returned by the CO to the women," says Baitha. The women are now cultivating that land.

Upper castes have not taken kindly to these efforts. Baitha was beaten by a mob of over 1000 when he was carrying passengers injured in a bus accident to hospital. He filed an FIR under the Prevention of Atrocities Against Tribals Act. When no action was taken *Prabhat Khabar* took it up.



Kavalash Kumar Baitha

Business

BEYOND PROFIT

Rethink money with us. What should the entrepreneur of the future be like? How can you get rich and still serve society? Do causes need bottom lines?

The new Indian banker

Umesh Anand
New Delhi

WHO would you expect to find at a conference in Delhi on small loans for the rural poor? NGO activists out in full force, of course. Mandarins of the finance ministry put on compulsory duty. A politician or two testing the waters. Some other luckless souls ordered to go and serve in the trenches.

But what if you found the executive director of India's second largest bank camping at the conference for all its three days, speaking in session after session, pursuing points of policy with evangelical zeal. Now that would really surprise you, wouldn't it?

Nachiket Mor of ICICI presides over more money than ordinary folk can imagine. A pantheon of big-ticket clients keeps him really busy. And yet when it comes to a conference on microfinance, held by CARE India and partners from April 12 to 14, Mor drops everything and turns up. He has all the time in the world.

What makes Mor so interested in mechanisms for lending tiny sums to the poor? What drives him to enter debates on policy with so much seriousness that he puts social sector types in the shade?

The answer lies in ICICI's growing interest in the Indian countryside. In recent years, its rural exposure has run into several thousands of crores of rupees, of which tiny loans given out mainly to self-help groups of women account for a minuscule Rs 500 crores.

But Mor sees these numbers growing along with ICICI's increasing engagement with the rural sector. "It is very much part of our overall business," says Mor.

Not only will rural incomes have to keep pace with the overall growth of the economy, but India has the potential to be a major global player in agriculture.

"The sense we have is, in that build up, there is a lot of opportunity for our bank," says Mor. "Not just at the level of individual financing, perhaps micro-finance, but also in infrastructure, supply chain, warehousing, electricity."

ICICI is not the only bank with an eye on the sector. There are SBI, Canara Bank, ABN Amro and Citi. Corporation Bank's chairman and managing director, VK Chopra, was also at the conference. But the spirit of aggression and competitiveness, which can speed up rural banking and make it quickly reach more people, is perhaps best seen in ICICI.

Public sector banks, despite their huge rural networks, are as yet a long way from waking up to the possibilities that ICICI sees for itself. They were con-

spicuous by their absence at the conference.

"As a bank we have played the role of a shaper if you look at retail finance and even housing," says Mor. "We think we can do the same thing in microfinance."

Most banks may be slow to get started, but they are uniformly attracted by the high rate of return on small loans. The payback is an amazing 95 per cent. And intermediaries called microfinance institutions (MFIs) do all the messy work of checking out antecedents and ensuring collections.

For banks like ICICI, the MFIs serve as trapdoors that provide access to millions who currently live beyond the pale of the formal economy. It is estimated that 500 million Indians do not have bank accounts. Naturally there is great opportunity here.

As aspirations in the rural sector rise, there is a need for not just micro-finance, but micro-enterprise and a range of financial services. These are new

customers who also buy insurance in some form or the other. Getting to know their earning and spending patterns better can be the key to defining viable user charges in future infrastructure projects.

To the banker with vision it is a package. You don't just want someone to take a loan. You want the customer to prosper and face up to ill-health, natural calamities and so on.

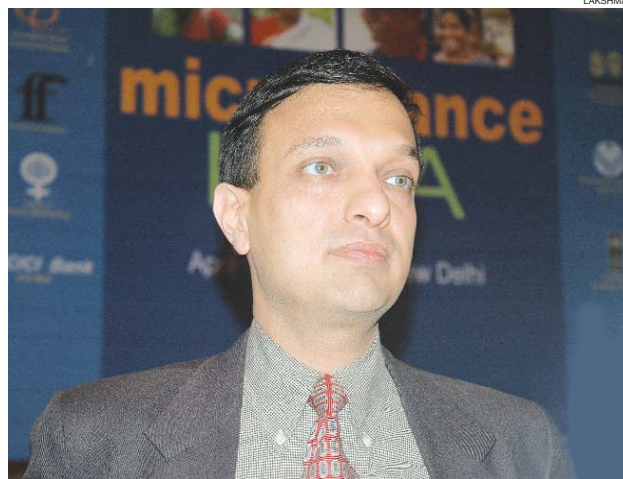
Mor cites the example of a woman in the south who was on the street. She started a small tea stall with a loan of a few thousand rupees. Over time she has expanded the stall and now has a cigarette counter, which her husband runs. Her asset base has gone from zero to Rs 1 lakh. Tomorrow it could be Rs 5 lakh.

Working with the rural poor also forces banks to innovate and

create new efficiencies, which they can use in other markets. ICICI, for instance, offers health insurance, including heart surgery, for an annual premium of Rs 130. It insures farmers against poor rainfall. It has an insurance product under which it pays up when certain diseases strike. Hospital bills are not asked for because hospitals hardly exist in the rural areas. There is big learning in all this for a bank.

There are some 100 MFIs and 1.5 million self-help groups (SHGs) consisting of poor rural women. The SHG movement has grown over the past 10 years and is already far ahead of the target of one million set for 2007. The MFIs, which are mostly NGOs or registered societies, can claim credit for the spread of microfinance.

The question now is where to go from here. Should there be a regulator for MFIs? Should MFIs be allowed to raise deposits like non-banking financial



Nachiket Mor, Executive Director, ICICI Bank

LAKSHMAN

institutions (NBFCs)?

The number of SHGs has grown exponentially, but there are serious concerns over their quality and real sense of purpose.

ICICI has an operational understanding with CARE India under the CASHE programme to deliver credit to the poor through MFIs. CARE works with MFIs and SHGs to give them systems that ensure accountability. It rates them as well. In addition to CASHE, ICICI works directly with 48 MFI partners. CARE works with other banks like ABN Amro and SBI as well. The well-established MFIs also evaluate SHGs and are thorough in their assessments.

But the big picture is nowhere near being as healthy as it should. The urban poor have received no attention. Transaction costs are high. Loans are available at 24 percent and upwards. The small sums doled out help borrowers tide over personal crises, cash flow problems and so on. They don't necessarily create assets.

In his budget speech Union Finance Minister P Chidambaram said Rs 200 crore was being set aside to strengthen the microfinance sector. He spoke of the important role played by MFIs. Chidambaram wondered whether MFIs could be given the role of banking correspondents.

Says Vijay Mahajan of Basix, a well respected MFI: "We as MFIs should insist on a place at the policy table. Of the Rs 5000 crore of cumulative disbursement, just four MFIs in Hyderabad have together disbursed Rs 1400 crores."

The MFIs worked on Rakesh Mohan before Chidambaram's budget speech. Mor, too, has in committee meetings been a proponent of correspondent sta-

tus for MFIs.

Mor believes that banks cannot do without MFIs because of their local expertise. Efficient MFIs can do what banks cannot. Banks on the other hand can manage deposits and take loans on to their books. MFIs, according to him, have to go deeper into their local customer bases so as to link the extension of banking services to development.

Finally, the goal is to take banking services to the vast majority of Indians. Prof Malcom Harper of Basix argues that the poor much access banks directly. Public sector banks must wake up this challenge because they alone have the reach.

Mahajan believes that the extension of bank infrastructure should be achieved, as in telecom, by levying a charge on those who don't serve the less attractive segments of the economy. Year after year banks take deposits from the east and northeast and put them on the money market. "We have to hold the regulator responsible not only for ensuring monetary stability but also near universal access to the banking system beginning with savings," says Mahajan.

Mor, too, believes that the Reserve Bank needs to show greater creativity. Very few banks meet their social targets. The question whether their profits come from treasury operations or from strategies that are in consonance with the benefits of larger economic development is never really asked.

Vipin Sharma of CARE sums it up best when he says banks and corporate houses must see business sense in engaging with the rural poor. The rest will follow. Meanwhile, the new Indian banker has served intimation of his arrival.

'500 m don't have bank accounts'

Nachiket Mor, executive director of ICICI Bank, spoke to Civil Society on his bank's plans for the rural sector and its involvement in microfinance.

How important is microfinance to ICICI?

It is very much part of our overall business. Our belief is that the rate of growth of the income of the rural population will have to keep pace with the rate of growth of the economy, in fact exceed it, because we are starting from such a low base. Secondly, there is no reason for us to believe that India, given all its natural advantages, cannot be a world power in agriculture. The sense we have is, in that build up, there is a lot of opportunity for our bank at the level of individual financing, perhaps microfinance, but also infrastructure, supply chain, warehousing, electricity.

While microfinance is important to you, it's still a tiny part of your rural interest. Where do you think it's going in the next five years, in terms of the volumes you are going to do, in percentage terms?

The fact is that 500 million people don't have a bank account. As a bank we have always played the role of a shaper. Even a somewhat mature sector like housing finance was not growing as it should have till we got into it. Today you call a bank and people turn up at your door and the pricing is competitive. We think we can do the same thing in microfinance.

Do you see yourself going directly to the microfinance borrower?

We can respond well to salary slips and centrally we can make a decision that if somebody has an X mobile bill and a Y salary slip he is eligible for a Z housing loan. But for somebody who does not have a salary slip or a mobile bill or does not even have a home or an address he can call his own, a local player, who has an understanding of how all this can be unravelled, is needed.

Maybe for a larger project of Rs 25 crore or Rs 100 crore a different approach is called for. Even there local institutions could play a very important role. Why are infrastructure projects not getting done? One of the problems is the capacity to pay. Where do I put up a power plant? How do I pay for it? It's not possible to commit much without some confidence that over a 15-year period I will get a steady stream. A public good cannot be priced like toothpaste, it's not possible. You can sell a toothpaste for Rs 400 if you want with the right brand, but not electricity. So there is a limit to how much can be charged. You need a certain de-risking of the underlying revenue flow, which I think a local institution can provide.

There is the example of a Gautemalan MFI that actually became the principal paying institution for a rural electrification project. And we think that's a real model of how capacity to pay can be built for clients who need the power.

Do you have priority sectors you lend to through MFIs?

We are guided a lot by our partners. We worked quite a lot over the past two years in understanding what were the issues. Last year we launched a fairly large insurance programme. Our product costs are per individual Rs 130 a year. It covers any surgery, medicines, outpatient, any hospitalisation. This is

based on the dialogue we had with our partners, which said routine illnesses people can take care of. The problem is when a big catastrophe hits the family. Then all of 20 years of coming out of poverty goes in one shot. Can you design a cheap product? Now you might argue Rs 130 doesn't sound too cheap. It's the cheapest we have seen. We'll see. As we work hard at it we might be able to bring it down. This is the first year.

In Orissa people said your health insurance works at a hospital. But there is no hospital here. So we got an agreement with our partners on the important diseases. We said OK here is the price for these 10 diseases. If you get any one of them, this is what we can give you. So we charge something like maybe Rs 100 per year and if you get any one of them you get something like Rs 8000 or Rs 10,000 in cash.

Similarly we discovered crop insurance is a very difficult product to manage because how do I know why the crop failed? So we said we will give insurance based on the daily value of rainfall that occurs. We looked at 25 years of data and we said OK for soyabean this is the amount of rainfall that you need to see on a daily basis. If you get more we pay you, if you get less we pay you. Currently our service standard gives a one month turnaround. If rainfall fails today, you will get your money one month later. We are trying to move it to 24 hours.

Fortunately we have 48 very combative and demanding partners. It keeps us on our toes and in many ways builds our competitive requirements. Nobody knows how we got our costs so low. We got them down because our customers put pressure on us to deliver a product at a price which initially we thought was impossible. Rs 130 for health insurance which covers open heart surgery? People don't know how we did it. Now we are going to swamp the market with many of these products.

Are we moving beyond providing money for just small livelihoods to micro-enterprises?

When I went to Andhra Pradesh for the first time I got the impression these were very poor people, till I went to Uttar Pradesh. There were people there who could not get 2000 calories per day for consumption. The Andhra customers are the ones who are next generation. The first thing they do when they get microfinance is to put children back in school. You ask what is driving them? They see education as an investment for boys and girls. Many of them entered, especially in Andhra Pradesh, into smaller enterprises.

In fact our Microfinance Research Centre is trying to understand in a very systematic way the precise impact of microfinance. How does it show up? All of us have stories. We don't really have analytical data on how it operates at household level.

We are also growing a base we can track. In a bank once you acquire a customer you don't want to lose her to default, to ill-health. Clearly the bank is very interested in the well being of customers because the better off they are the more business we do. We are working on smokeless chullahs, water filters, solar power...We are also working with big companies to see how we can increase a buffalo's milk output. All of these mean business for us and value addition for our clients.

'See the poor as good business'

Civil Society News
New Delhi

CARE India's Credit and Savings for Household Enterprises (CASHE) programme is the largest aggregator of microfinance institutions (MFIs) and clients and of quality. It is this that has attracted ICICI Bank, which wants to penetrate deep into the rural market, but does not have the network of branches to facilitate such growth.

CASHE also works with the State Bank of India (SBI) and some rural banks. It has been training MFIs, evaluating and rating self-help groups (SHGs) and helping state governments. **Civil Society** spoke to Vipin Sharma, Programme Director, Microfinance of CARE India.

Tell us about your partnership with ICICI.

We have got into an operational understanding with ICICI. They need people who can aggregate demand for them. They are looking at all our partners, to see what the demand is and approve loans to them on that basis. ICICI will be our partners in any programme we have on microfinance. We do the technical capacity building. We provide a sustainable interface between our partners and ICICI. The entire portfolio sits on the books of ICICI. For this reason, our partners don't need to bring their own capital. They can charge a margin, about four percent, for their services.

We have a similar partnership with ABN Amro Bank. We are in the process of partnering the State Bank of India (SBI). So we are giving our MFI partners and clients a choice and a voice. We are saying it's now 26 partners, approximately 300,000 clients and we want the best deal.

We are trying to attract SBI to mutually aided cooperative societies (MACs) particularly in Andhra Pradesh. We have ratings for them. We have a two million US dollar revolving fund with which we help build track records. We help MFIs get used to handling large volumes of financial transactions and on-lending.

What has been the overall impact on communities?

Those evaluations will happen more towards the end of the project. We did have major studies in Orissa and in Andhra Pradesh. The third one is going to happen in West Bengal. Although we were doing impact assessments early in the project, I would say my programme was doing well on many counts including income per capita and loan sizes.

The girl child was being sent to school. There was a higher level of spending on consumption, shelter and health. In Orissa some 82 SHG members stood for panchayat elections. Eighteen actually won. The entire programme is with women. In Andhra Pradesh we did a housing loan for them. It was good to see women saying homes were theirs because ownership was in their names.

Is microfinance placing the burden of removing poverty only on women?

These programmes were started in early 1992. There was a good diagnosis done on whether the poor were getting banked. While men could still get some loans, women were not getting anything. For investment credit it is usually the men who get it. Men do get agricultural loans. There is the crop loan scheme and there are cooperatives in which mostly men are members.

If you look at the average size of loans of say Rs 2000 you can't say they will create assets. The money tends to help people tide over cashflow problems and off-season requirements or be used for critical needs like health.

We are also cutting the vulnerability of our client base through micro insurance products. We have co-branded non life insurance products with Royal Sundaram and tied up with Max New York Life for life insurance.

Is the moneylender now extinct?

In my own programme, which is a successful programme, we find 36 percent of clients are still borrowing from moneylenders. Banks are responding to small needs against the total demand. If per capita income is Rs 1700 and the demand is for Rs 10,000, where is the balance going to come from? Despite 95 percent recovery, banks are not moving beyond what Nabard or the RBI says. It's only when banks look at microfinance as business that they will be able to meet the demand that exists.

SBI is setting up microfinance cells in their head offices and not leaving it to branch managers. Things need to be supported by operational policy.

Private sector banks want to come in. They don't have rural branches so they need higher levels of aggregation. How can we create appropriate operational models? We are also not looking enough at technology to cut transactional costs and interest rates. There is no policy to get banking to the urban poor. In future,

the percentage of urban poor will be more than the rural poor.

Is the quality of SHGs a concern?

That's a huge concern. A lot of investment has gone into loans to the SHGs. And you know what happens. Ten SHGs in a locality say we don't want to repay. That spreads to 100 in the district. There is no security. Nobody is going to get into collecting Rs 5000 or Rs 10,000. Since large numbers of people are involved the politicians get in and say we have to bail them out. In my programme all the SHGs are rated every six months and we keep tracking them. But nationally or at state level this is just not done.

How far have you been able to influence the rural banking network?

We did six months of organisational development (ODs) with two difficult regional rural banks in Orissa. One of them was in Bolangir. We were looking at orienting banks to see lending to the poor as a profitable proposition and not just as social sector responsibility. Those two banks have become a case study for 44 RRBs which SBI has sponsored.

In Andhra Pradesh we set up a resource centre which is going to do one RRB's backend work. We have assisted the governments of Orissa and Rajasthan with their SHGs. We helped them in institutional modelling for setting up SHG cells. We also tried to get them professionals who can work independently and link them with banks. In Andhra Pradesh we already have an excellent model called APMAS (Andhra Pradesh Mahila Abhivruddhi Society)

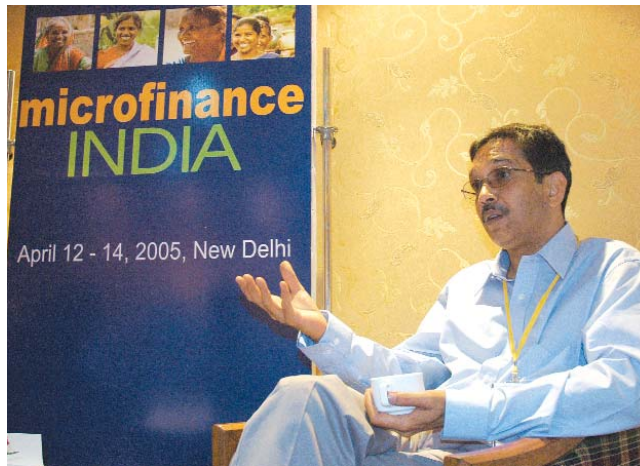
We also bring stakeholders together to discuss policy. We are campaigning for a MACs Act in West Bengal. We have developed a bill that's lying with the state's law commission. We are trying to popularise cooperative banking in six other states. In each of the states we work, we help to set up networks of MFIs so that when we fade out, they take over.

Where do you see this going?

The moment you see it as a big market, you will innovate. You are talking about Rs 50,000 crores, which is the market outlay. Private banks will not wait for the government to tell them, they will find solutions within their own processes. There are those who are waiting for external commercial borrowings. Every month I get two social venture capitalists to talk about how they want to collaborate with us. They see an opportunity that our public sector banks don't.

Are we moving to micro-enterprise?

You cannot create assets unless you allow certain types of investments to flow into the rural economy. CASHE has been able to involve the private sector. We have tied up with Hindustan Lever's Project Shakti. We are trying to create rural entrepreneurs from our SHG networks through this partnership. If they want to sell their products in rural areas they have to create channels and to make those channels they have to invest at the community level.



Vipin Sharma, Programme Director, Microfinance, CARE India

LAKSHMIAN

Perspectives

CATCHING TRENDS

Have an idea?
Perhaps a lost
cause? Tell your
story or just
express an
honest opinion
in these pages.

Getting over the East India Company

RAM GIDOOMAL



Through NR Eyes

London's memory. The Company's history appeared to have been embarrassing-ly consigned to the archives, leaving any discussions and debates to academics and those besotted with the days of the Raj.

But the increase in trade between Britain and India has brought about a renewed interest in the East India Company with some arguing that it was a pioneering force for world trade. Exhibitions at the British Library and the Victoria & Albert Museum plus a string of popular histories, have sought to revive the reputation of the "Honourable East India Company".

Nick Robins, whose book *Imperial Corporation: reckoning with the East India Company* (due to be published later this year), comments that "Its founders are now hailed as swashbuckling adventurers, its operations praised for pioneering the birth of modern consumerism and its glamorous executives profiled as multicultural "white moguls". Yet the East India Company, romantic as it may seem, has more profound and disturbing lessons to teach us. Abuse of market power, corporate greed, judicial impunity, the "irrational exuberance" of the financial markets, and the destruction of traditional economies (in what could not, at one time, be called the poor or developing world) - none of these is new. The most common complaints against late 20th- and early 21st-century capitalism were all foreshadowed in the story of the East India Company more than two centuries ago.

As a non-resident Indian born and brought up in East Africa I remember the history lessons (taught to us from a British perspective) recounting the daring exploits of the East India Company and its significant role in the conquest and colonisation of the Indian subcontinent. Yet when I came to live in London with my family (refugees from East Africa expelled as part of the process of Africanisation) and eventually began working for an international bank in the City of London I was struck by the absence of any visible reminder of the East India Company. There was no plaque marking the site where its headquarters had stood in the City of London for more than two centuries. It was almost as if there had been a deliberate ploy to erase any visible reminder of the Company's existence from the City of

Jawaharlal Nehru, in *The Discovery of India*, the final and perhaps most profound part of his "prison trilogy", written in 1944 from Ahmednagar Fort, described the effect of the East India Company on the country he would shortly rule. "The corruption, venality, nepotism, violence and greed of money of these early generations of British rule in India," he wrote, "is something which passes comprehension." It was, he added, "significant that one of the Hindustani words which has become part of the English language is 'loot'".

And this accusation of 'loot' appeared to be the gist of a complaint I heard during a recent business trip to India. I was invited by a European MNC (multinational corporation) to help them resolve problems that had arisen with their Indian subsidiary. Relationships had fallen to an all time low and communications between both parties were decidedly cool.

Upon visiting the factory in India, I discovered that the underlying reason, though not openly articulated, was a growing suspicion by the Indian senior executives (and many local citizens) that all that the MNC was interested in was the profit share due to their European shareholders. There appeared to be little genuine social concern for the local community and the MNC's claim of bringing in better social standards was perceived as mostly a sham.

The need for civil society links between India and Europe as the industry and trade relationship grows could not be greater. A friend of mine in India tells me

how in the past week alone he has been contacted by representatives of MNCs from France and the UK who are pursuing people-to-people links as a precursor to their business initiatives.

The challenge, though, that needs to be urgently addressed, is how do we get beyond the 'East India Company syndrome' - the fear that foreign multinationals only come to 'loot' the economy and 'control' the state? A challenge that is further intensified when we see increasing numbers of MNCs being found guilty of corporate malpractice, bribery, corruption and poor governance.

My reason for saying so is simple: the Indian economy will have to absorb more global private investment if it is to grow. What is happening now is that the Indian debate on MNCs appears to be divided between the people who will not touch them and those who put blind faith in them. Clearly, neither position is good. I believe that both views are out of date. The goal should be to identify future meeting points, and pathways for getting to those points. The Indian experience with MNCs in the past decade has not been wholesome. I have already alluded to the comment that I picked up during my recent visit to India: 'MNCs pay lip service to genuine



(Continued on page 19)

Let's talk about talking

ARUN MAIRA



Let's Talk

WHEN Rita and Umesh Anand asked me to write six pieces for Civil Society, they proposed to call the series, "Let's Talk". I liked that title. In my first article I expressed the hope that I would get a response to what I write so that I could enter into a conversation with readers of Civil Society through these columns as the series progressed. I am very glad that Ram Gidoomal wrote in the last issue, "I agree with Maira that dialogue is important, but talking will not in and of itself achieve results." He also says that Chinese people have a greater predilection than Indians to act rather than talk.

I am a very strong advocate of action. I have written many times that, rather than any more, brilliant, six, seven, eight, or nine point plans for accelerating the country's growth and development and we have such plans aplenty, we need a single point plan-action! But I have also gone beyond merely calling for action, to analysing why we do not act, or why when we act we do not get the results we want. And my analysis shows that we must talk before we act if we want results. And, more importantly, that we must improve the quality of the talking. Let me explain these two recommendations by using two metaphors.

Strong foundations that suit the soil. A big house needs a deep and strong foundation. Building above the ground is more exciting. The results are visible. Rooms to live in are created. But if the foundations are not strong, and built to suit the ground in which they are made, not only is it difficult to ensure the stability of the structure, but often it is difficult to keep the structure aligned as it is being built, making the process of building more complicated. The ground on which Indian economic development is being built is different to the ground on which Singapore, Korea, Malaysia, and China-Asian miracle economies built their accelerated economic growth. These economies were built on the foundations of strong states: single party if not totalitarian, and highly interventionist.

In contrast, India has a throbbing, multi-party, grass-roots democracy. (Moreover we want to get the state out of intervening in the economy even before we have attained the levels of economic development these other countries have reached.) Every time a ruling government moves too fast or too far into action without binding the coalition and aligning public opinion behind its plans, it stumbles and has to make adjustments. The foundations of our democracy have to be strengthened, and they have to be strengthened through democratic processes. Democracy cannot be suspended while we accelerate the building of the physical infrastructure, rebuild our cities, and accelerate economic growth. India is the first, large, underdeveloped, democracy, and a country with great diversity also, that is aiming to rapidly grow its economy. Therefore India needs processes by which people voluntarily choose to align with goals and with each other. They cannot be commanded or coerced to do so. Their hopes and views have to be heard. Therefore they must talk.

Which brings me to the second point: the quality of the talking and listening. We talk a lot in India, perhaps even too much, as Ram Gidoomal says. In spite of talking so much we do not create the required commitment and alignment. Therefore, we must improve the quality of the talking-of the debates, discussions, and conversations. The productivity of any activity is the ratio of the amount of activity to the useful output. The productivity of our talking is miserably low. The productivity of an activity can be improved by reengineering it. Reengineering means changing the approach, redesigning the steps, and using better tools. We have to reengineer our approach to talking in India and use better tools if we want the talking to result in greater commitment to shared goals, and more alignment on the journey towards them.

More traction for acceleration

This brings me to my second action metaphor. I love action, as I said at the outset.

When I lived in the USA I indulged myself with the fastest car I could buy, a BMW 3-series sports car. It could go from zero to sixty miles an hour in less than six seconds. The catch was it did not do this automatically. First, I had to buy a manual-shift version since the automatic shift version was slower. Secondly, I had to learn how to move through the gears effectively to obtain the potential acceleration. I learned that to start from standstill, or when I approached a hill, I should downshift to a lower gear rather than merely press harder on the accelerator. That is how I would obtain the acceleration required.

I believe that if we want to accelerate change and growth in India, the time has come to take our conversations into the first and second gears, rather than pressing on at the level in which we are presently having our discussions about our future. A shared vision of the future is the equivalent of the first gear. The more passion there is for this vision, the more power there is in the process of change. We do not have a shared vision of what we want India to be. Some of us want to be like China in some respects, but even these people do not want other features of Chinese polity. Others want to be like the USA, but again not in every way. A few cite Singapore as their model though they are also quick to admit that it cannot apply without modification to India. What quality of country do we want to be? What are the essential characteristics of this nation that we aspire to have? What is the place we want to occupy in the community of nations? The more this is a shared vision; the more we will align in our efforts to make the changes necessary. Shared visions cannot be created by presentations of numbers and intellectual debates. Nor are they shaped by political negotiations. They require deeper dialogues. Moreover these dialogues must include the wants of diverse stakeholders in the future of the country, rich and poor, North and South.

Creating a shared vision is a first step but not enough. We have to move into second gear. Which is to challenge our underlying 'theories-in-use' of how we can accelerate change towards our vision. It is widely accepted that two important areas in which we must implement better approaches are the governance of our large, democratic country, and the process of economic development. However, as I listen to the debates on these issues, I realise that deeper underlying beliefs shape the nature of solutions that are being advocated. And it is the clash of these underlying beliefs that prevents alignment about solutions. For example, many have the belief that the only way that people can be made to change is through strong sticks along with economic carrots. This belief leads to a requirement of a strong, central authority, as the means to produce

change. However, others believe sticks and carrots only produce compliance and not commitment, and that transformational change requires commitment that comes from caring for a deeper cause. Their belief suggests that the process of change has to be built around the creation of shared visions and honest dialogues. These different beliefs suggest different approaches to governance of large organisations and societies. Whatever may be our underlying beliefs, we have to find a solution that will work. Therefore we have to understand the reality in which our solution must apply. Maybe a strong central authority is a valid model in some situations and the approach of democratic dialogue is valid in others. An insightful examination of the key characteristics of our present reality may be a better way to come to an agreement about which is the best approach for our situation, rather than hurling examples at each other of the approaches that we intuitively favour.

From these two steps of Know-Want and Know-Why, which are the first two gears to generate acceleration of change, we can step back into the third and fourth gears. These are the debates of the Hows and Whats, viz. the regulations and policies that need to be changed. These latter subjects feel more concrete. Like the rooms in the house (to revert to my earlier metaphor of building and mix my metaphors in my conclusion), they are the artefacts we know how to use; they look like fruitful action. However, I fear that if we do not downshift the subjects as well as the mode of our national conversations to obtain deeper levels of alignment, we will not get traction in our actions for faster change.

(Arun Maira is chairman of the Boston Consulting Group in India.)



LAKSHMAN

Mumbai land Rs 1.40 per sq foot!

ARVIND KEJRIWAL



The Right To Know

USING the Right To Information Act, Shailesh Gandhi has discovered a huge scam involving doling out of public land in Mumbai by successive governments to various private bodies for purposes other than that of public interest.

The total land given on lease by the Mumbai Collector, the Mumbai Suburban Collector and the Municipal Corporation is about 2 crore sq m. It fetches an annual lease rent of about Rs 28 crore, which works out to Rs 14 per sq.m. ie Rs 1.40 paise per sq.ft. per year! At market rents, these should fetch us over Rs 4000 crores each year. Information on MHADA and the Bombay Port Trust lands is not available.

The information shows a completely bizarre picture of nepotism and corruption. There is evidence of a complete lack of accountability in the way public properties are being mismanaged to the point of exploitation. Properties are being rented to beneficiaries at throw-away prices. To top it all, some beneficiaries are being allowed to sell these properties with official complicity!

A few examples illustrate the huge plunder of our money. The Mumbai Collector has provided a list of 386 lessees who continue to occupy the lands though their leases have expired. A few examples:

The Mumbai Suburban Collector admits to 25 cases of expired leases. He writes they are not encroachers, but are 'unadhikrut kab-jedar' (unauthorised occupiers). The case of the Khar Gymkhana is quite intriguing. It paid a lease rent of Rs 60,801 in 1970. This was increased to Rs 1,03,836 in 1984 and it was further decreased to Rs 55,812 in 2004!

In the last three years, a total of 3,05,757.62 sq. m. of public land in Mumbai was either granted fresh lease or the old leases were renewed for a total lease rental of Rs 3.24 crores, which means an average lease rental of Rs106 per sq.m. In one case, the rent charged is as low as 30 paise per sq.m. A garden has been leased out at Rs 333.8 per sq.m. The lease of Khar Gymkhana was renewed at Rs 6.7 per sq m.

Similarly, the Municipal Corporation of Mumbai has a large number of expired land leases. The RWITC was given land on lease to run the Mahalaxmi Race Course or Turf Club. The first lease deed was made in 1914 for a period of 30 years, followed by another one for 30 years. However, no lease deed was prepared in 1974. However, a lease deed was signed on 7 April 2004 for a 20-year period from 1994 to 2013, at an annual rent of Rs 40 lakh. In September 2003, RWITC, in complete disregard of the lease terms, advertised to give a part of the land to a subcontractor. By March 2004, a deal was agreed with a company called Pegasus,

which would have given RWITC an interest free deposit of Rs 135 crores and an annual rent of Rs 6.25 crores with an escalation clause. This would mean an effective rent of over Rs 17 crores in the first year! By contrast for 2004, the revenue for BMC would be Rs 40 lakh. This means it was signed after the Pegasus deal had been negotiated.

There is also enough evidence to show that lands given on lease on behalf of citizens are being sold. It is beyond comprehension as to how a lessee or tenant can sell the land, which he does not own. Citizen's properties, including mill lands, are being sold off by lessees with the active concurrence and knowledge of public servants. Their conduct now borders on criminal misconduct. The amount of annual revenue loss appears to be a few thousand crores only due to these

Name of Lessee	Area	Date of expiry	Rate of Lease (Rs per sq metre)
S R Poddar	3087	1/12/91	3 paise
D R Jaikar	9553.59	1/5/1971	Less than 1paise
Simplex Mills	7836.18	22/4/1983	Less than 1paise
Khushaldas Vallabhdas	16238.48	31/12/1985	2 paise
Sterling Investment	1024.26	1/10/1982	Less than 1paise

In one case, the rent charged is as low as 30 paise per sq.m. A garden has been leased out at Rs 333.8 per sq.m. The lease of Khar Gymkhana was renewed at Rs 6.7 per sq m.

three authorities in Mumbai. There is a possibility it could be around Rs 10,000 crores for the whole of Maharashtra.

A similar situation prevails across the whole of India. Governments should initiate prosecution proceedings against all defaulting public servants. All public servants should be directed to draw up a list of expired leases and publish them. They should publicise the process of auctions to fix future lease rents. Public servants, who are entrusted with respective properties, must certify that the lands are being used for the purpose for which they were given. If there is a change of usage, eviction proceedings must start.

Please sign a petition to the Chief Minister of Maharashtra at:
<http://www.PetitionOnline.com/Commons/petition.html>

(Continued from page 17)

social concerns'. All this has resulted in the hostility and suspicion shown towards them.

Their claim of bringing in better standards needs to be proven and demonstrated by more than words. Well-defined parameters need to be established and agreed within which MNCs are expected to perform. Indian regulatory mechanisms leave much to be desired. For all the criticism of MNCs in India, very little, if anything at all, appears to have been done to bolster Indian laws as they relate to MNCs.

Clearly MNCs also have to evolve. Nick Robins points out three main areas for reform that flow out of his analysis of the East India Company.

First, the insertion of a director duty of care for social/environmental impacts:

Second, an assertive global competition policy to break up corporate concentration (particularly acute in commodity markets):

Third, global systems of justice to match global trade - there must be clear means of redress for MNCs in home courts.

On this last point, the effectiveness of local courts in achieving redress for global injustices has been amply demonstrated by recent high profile actions in the UK. UK courts were used to place the Peruvian dictator Pinochet under house arrest, leading eventually to his trial in Peru. A human rights activist performed a citizen's arrest on Robert Mugabe during the Zimbabwean leader's

recent trip to Europe.

Perhaps fear of a similar type of court action caused the chief minister of Gujarat Narendra Modi to cancel his planned trip to Britain to lead a rally of thousands of his supporters at the Albert Hall. The US State Department also banned him from entering America, accusing him of violating religious freedom. Narendra Modi's supporters have hinted that he may fly to Antwerp next month to inaugurate a new Indian Airline. But these plans also appear to be in jeopardy because of fears that protesters may try to use local courts to seize him there too.

Suresh Grover, who heads the UK National Civil Rights Movement, the Muslim Council of Britain and Imran Khan, a human rights lawyer, together believe that they had amassed enough evidence - as required by the 1998 British Criminal Justice Act - to persuade local magistrates to issue an arrest warrant. According to Suresh Grover, the cancellation of the London visit was "a victory for human rights activists - in the UK and India - because the victims of the Gujarat massacres have not been able to express themselves".

This reminds us that accepting the rule of law has always been one of the fundamental pillars of freedom. It was the rule of law that (belatedly) began to check the injustices of the mighty East India Company. India will need to strengthen this pillar in order to respond effectively and creatively to the challenge of the MNCs if it is to ensure that history (even from an Indian perspective!) does not repeat itself.

Stress burns your body



Stress: From Burnout to Balance
Vinay Joshi
Sage Publications India
Rs 185

Deepali Gupta
Mumbai

AN increasing number of vaccines and medicines treat the physical ailments of the human body. But the mind, particularly that of the urban corporate worker, is often plagued with a psychological decay that we term 'stress'. We ignore stress once the physical symptoms disappear. But it plays havoc with hormones in the human system. Vinay Joshi, Chairman, Medstream Pharmaceuticals and the author of *Stress: From Burnout to Balance*, explains the nature and degree of damage stress hormones can do and how to control stress in his book.

Despite being the chairman of a drug company Joshi says, "Most cases of stress cannot be treated by medication." In his book, he recommends exercise, deep breathing, yoga, massage, control on food and a balanced approach to life. The recommendations are a small section of the book. The rest deals with the causes of stress and the biological phenomena that result from it. In fact at certain junctures the book gets a little technical in its dealings with scientific names and functions of the human body. But when asked why he chose to explore the finer biological details Joshi's reply is simple. "If someone told me to run a mile everyday I wouldn't do it unless I knew exactly why I was doing it and how it would help." His book therefore explains what happens inside the body and perhaps goes unnoticed.

If you are on the lookout for explanations of how and why stress causes heart attacks, or why stress can result in the onset of diabetes or stomach ulcers, this is an ideal book. Simplistically the statement made by the book is that the brain rations the hormones and stress causes the brain to send the wrong signals. It prepares the body for a 'fight or flight' situation. Imagine your state of mind if you were standing in front of a hungry lion. That is the state an average person today lives in all the time.

The book also deals with sickness due to an immune system weakened by stress and the impact of such strain on memory and aging. Joshi asserts that stress can bring the onset of depression and lead to suicide.

An interesting point that Joshi brings out in the book is that uncertainty induces more stress than predictable stress situations. A small commonplace example of stress triggered by uncertainty is the traffic light. In Mumbai, you see cars inching well before the light goes green. Ask yourself, does your foot twitch or do you start tapping your car with your fingers when you stop at a traffic light? "They have now started putting timers on traffic signals to prevent road rage. That is pure psychology at work," says Joshi.

Some amount of pressure is a necessity for good management, but in the proportions it is being experienced today, stress is a silent killer that hits people past 30 the worst. It cannot be diagnosed by a medical test and is often overlooked. Take proactive measures to keep trouble at bay.

Slums celebrate village bonhomie

Tonusree Basu and Shailey Hingorani
New Delhi

RESIDENTS of resettlement colonies, Sundernagari in east Delhi and Bhalaswa in north-west Delhi, celebrated the spirit of spring and their village roots at a cultural fest organised by Ankur, a Delhi based NGO.

The festival, "*Patjhad ke Baad*" was held at the Gandhi Smriti near Rajghat on 23 March. The women and children who took part belonged to the 27,000 families whose homes along the Yamuna were demolished by the government. The festival was organised as a village mela and portrayed the community life that these people left behind. Instead of sadness, hope and optimism was in the air.

Children managed stalls selling *bandhini dupattas*, paper mache cups, masks, jewellery, watercolour paintings and even school science projects. Women and children danced to the beat of popular Bollywood songs and enacted skits.



Women doing business at the mela

Folk stories were narrated and folk songs sung in chorus. Women merrily chatted among themselves.

Arun Bhandari of Ankur said, "This is one day that they can forget their worry of struggling to make ends meet. This is also one day they commemorate their village roots - the community culture, folk dances, the colour, songs, music and the spirit of togetherness."

16 video CDs on love and tolerance

Tonusree Basu and Shailey Hingorani
New Delhi

ANHAD released a set of 16 video CDs in Hindi called "*Un Sapnon ki Khatir*" in New Delhi on 23 March. The CDs contain lectures on different facets of secularism by Kuldeep Nayyar, Nivedita Menon, Harsh Mander, Prashant Bhushan, Amar Farooqui, Shubha Mudgal and other concerned citizens.

"People have to be taught the message of love and tolerance," said Gauhar Raza, film-maker and an activist with ANHAD.

The CDs were launched by Shabnam Hashmi, historian KN Panniker, Harsh Mander and Gauhar



Shabnam Hashmi launching the video CDs

Raza. Actor Nandita Das with husband Saumya Sen, socialite Nafisa Ali and theatre personality Javed Naqvi were there to show solidarity.

The lectures are the outcome of 25 political camps organised by ANHAD in eight states to educate people about secularism. ANHAD had released the lectures in English in March last year. The CDs were translated into Hindi to reach a bigger audience. "This is a means of propaganda and of love," explained Hashmi.

ANHAD and Youth4Peace had put together the CDs with hardly any financial support at a time when communal frenzy was at a peak. But, as a banner outside the ANHAD office reads: "In times of barbarism, our choices, however limited, are clear."

Craft maps with a difference

Civil Society News
New Delhi

STATESMAN House in New Delhi's Connaught Circus is a titanic building. It took years to build and now sticks out like a sore thumb. But inside this humungous structure, up one flight of stairs is located the Oxford Book Store. It's smart, cute and arty. There are books galore of all shapes, sizes, topics and subjects. The smell of coffee wafts through. You can also get great *chai*.

Jaya Jaitly of the Dastkari Haat Samiti chose to launch Craft Maps of India from here. Good choice. Except the dazzling environs of the book shop tended to distract her small audience. The VIPs were also missing.

So the limelight fell gently on artist Arpana



Jaya Jaitly and Arpana Caur (left)

Caur. She'd designed the craft map of Punjab in her evocative style and filled the space abandoned by VIP politicians. And Jaitly looked happy, beaming at her small audience.

Rebirth for Red Curtain

Sumit and Katy bring back some of the old magic

Shuktara Lal
Kolkata

IN 1969 Arjun Chaudhuri, Paul Lopez, Katy Lai Roy and Sumit Roy were fresh-faced youngsters just out of school in Kolkata when they decided to stage a play. It was called *A Little Bit of Fluff* and it marked the birth of a theatre group called The Red Curtain (TRC). In the next 14 years, TRC became a trail-blazer, promoting English language theatre in Kolkata and India.

The repertoire of TRC included light-hearted comedies (*George Washington Slept Here*), contemporary tragedies (*Look Back in Anger*), classics (*Richard III*) and naturalistic texts (*Miss Julie*). TRC showcased several eminent thespians and theatre artistes – Jayant Kripalani, Rustom Bharucha, Deena Ardesheer and Shashi Tharoor to name a few.

Then in 1987, TRC closed shop. The reason was Katy Lai Roy and Sumit Roy shifted to Mumbai. Fourteen years later in 2001, the Roys, then 49, returned to Kolkata and TRC made a dramatic comeback.

"Part of our plan to move back was motivated by our desire to revive TRC. In Mumbai, we noticed that the thought provoking atmosphere, which is such an integral part of Kolkata, was conspicuous by its absence," explains Sumit.

They didn't encounter any hurdles. "We were told it would be difficult to locate potential theatre artistes. Instead we found a city brimming with talent. But it was not that easy to fund the production," says Roy. In 2002, they staged their first comeback play with Terence Rattigan's *Harlequinade* - a play that explores the trials and tribulations faced by a theatre troupe during the dress rehearsal of their upcoming performance.

The production, which featured Zarin Chaudhuri, Kabir Seth and Punam Singh among others, was received with effusive warmth and nostalgia. For many spectators, it was a trip down memory lane. The younger audience was curious about TRC. Some had never seen a TRC performance, but heard so much about them. This explains why so many members of the audience readily filled forms, distributed by Sumit, to join the extended TRC family. Some of them would take part in assorted roles in more recent TRC productions.

After the enormous success of *Harlequinade*, TRC collaborated with Seagull Foundation to put up *Peacewards* - a series of monologues written by Manjula Padmanabhan on the stealthy manner in which violence has seeped into society. This was directed by Jayant Kripalani and performed by students. The production toured various India cities. Last year saw two TRC productions - *The Importance of Being Stoppard* and *Rhinoceros*, Ionesco's treatise on social conformity and the lack of individuality in society.

Dana and Ronaan, Generation Next of the Roy family, have played a vital part in TRC's rebirth. Both acted in *Harlequinade* and Ronaan is involved in forthcoming TRC presentations. In *Rhinoceros*, Dana was the production stylist, co-stage manager and co-sets designer - an astounding feat considering the large canvas of the production.

Rhinoceros saw the emergence of a new generation of TRC. While *Harlequinade* introduced new faces, *Rhinoceros* was unique because Sumit Roy insisted that every member of the team should be under 25 years of age. He wanted to 'encourage young talent to learn by doing theatre'. Sumit was willing to advise youngsters. But final decisions would have to be taken by them, he insisted. This instilled in the young group a spirit of independence and, once the play was staged, confidence in their abilities to pull off a professional production. In fact, Tanaji Dasgupta, who scouted for sponsors, had just completed his Class XII exams.

"The dearth of sponsors for English theatre is the most serious problem we face," says Sumit. Pradip Mitra, a founding member of Spotlight, another well-known English theatre group agrees. Aniruddha Maitra, who was a first year post-graduate student when he produced *Rhinoceros* says: "It is very difficult to find financiers for theatre. You have to knock on all doors. But there will be some people who will support good theatre for good causes". Since its revival, TRC stages 'good plays for good causes'. Proceeds of their newer productions have gone to The Little Sisters of the Poor, Children in Pain (CHIP) and PeaceWorks.

So is TRC very different from its earlier avatar? Katy Lai Roy doesn't think so. "The students practicing theatre today are as enthusiastic and professional as we were," she says. "We were not just working for TRC shows then. There were other groups coming up, and we were working for many of them. This is identical to the current situation".



A scene from *The Importance of Being Stoppard*



Sumit Roy



Katy Lai Roy

Theatre groups have mushroomed in the city. One possible reason is the encouragement TRC has given to young theatre lovers. The artistes work for multiple groups and this is one of the greatest assets of recent young English theatre. "Each group helps out other groups, unlike in Mumbai where you won't find this kind of cooperation," observes Sumit.

But Katy Lai Roy does note one difference: "Earlier, we had much larger audiences and so we organised many more shows of a single production. The audience is smaller now."

Other theatre groups concur. Tathagata Chowdhury, who established Theatrecian, a group that consists almost entirely of young people, thinks there are two reasons for a smaller audience. "Because our plays are in English, we immediately begin with a disadvantage. Language plays a role in determining the strength of an audience. Often the audience in one play will comprise friends and relatives of the unit. These people will not see a play which features a different ensemble. Similarly, members of one production will not watch plays performed by others. How can we build a market for English language theatre under such circumstances?"

Tathagata, who believes theatre can be a viable profession, pays everyone involved in his productions. "While it is commendable that so many youngsters are doing theatre, we should ask ourselves some questions. Are all these people genuinely interested in the form? Are they doing it just because they enjoy seeing their pictures in the newspaper and reading press releases that include their names? If this is the case, we shouldn't expect performers to see plays staged by other groups," he says.

Some feel that the infusion of young fervour has affected the quality of performances. The post-revival challenges TRC confronts are akin to those faced by all English language theatre groups in Kolkata. But TRC members are mature and experienced enough to overcome these obstacles. As Tathagata puts it, "TRC should be a role model for all English theatre groups in Kolkata". TRC is educating youth about theatre and thereby building an audience. Money should follow.

Water is always life

RAJENDRA SINGH

THE Vedas are the best source of knowledge of ancient civilisations and they are replete with instances of how learned men in those times devoted their lives to understanding the bond between nature and man. The very last volumes and annexures of the Vedas, which are also known as the Upanishads or Aaranyakas, also stress on the importance of prayer.

For instance, the Mundakopanishad states that meditation and deep thinking expands the human consciousness, and that increases our productive capabilities. Thus we have more food, the food keeps our minds healthy, we live in harmony with the five elements and we preserve our culture and our values. It implies that by adhering to these dharmic principles, we uphold virtue and move closer to immortality.

The Brihadaranyopanishad describes the creation of the cosmos. It says, "In the beginning, there was water everywhere. It is from this water that Life originated. Lord Brahma guided all creation and anointed Prajapati the King of all Gods. It was this Prajapati who then created the other gods, who in turn moulded the life force into various shapes, colours and textures." This description is carried forth in the Taittiriya Upanishad, where the verses state that the Universal Consciousness created the sky, the natural environment and Man, and that this one singular soul was imbibed by every single creature created. Therefore we are all one.

But perhaps the most significant verse, for the purpose of our present discussion, is one from the Brihadaranyopanishad that clarifies that this Universal Consciousness that is responsible for all creation, is none other than Nature.

The age of Upanishads was followed by the age of the 'Brahmanas', texts which elucidated aspects of human nature like the thirst for knowledge, wisdom, respect for others, gratitude and other conduct within human society. Once again people began directing all their energies towards social intercourse and the pursuit of happiness, and became far removed from their natural surroundings.

But the more people pursued pleasures, the more society was afflicted with violence, unhappiness, hurt, pain and general degradation. Power structures fell into the hands of people who had no respect for nature, and saw it merely as a source of personal riches. People, entrapped by greed and arrogance, began competing for these resources. And the age-old conflicts were reborn.

Once more, God came to the rescue of the Earth He had painstakingly created, in the form of Lord Buddha. Lord Buddha spread the message of peace, non-violence, universal brotherhood and reminded people of the righteous path that they should follow to attain enlightenment.

Lord Mahavira also spread the same messages and wrote, in his book entitled 'Ayaro', that mountains, trees, rocks, flowers, rain, soil and man are all made up of the same constituents. We share the same spirit and must, therefore, treat all other living creatures like we treat ourselves. He wrote that we humans must be kind to all other residents of this miraculous planet and preached true non-violence. This great book contains the essence of all modern environmentalism, yet even those who proclaim themselves 'nature lovers' today do not adhere to the principles enshrined within this tome. Perhaps only the Jain community upholds Lord Mahavira's ideals, but with time even this community has developed factions and sub-sects, thereby diluting the tenets in this great tome.

As was the case with all the other avatars, the period that followed these holy men briefly saw a reinstatement of human values and virtue in socie-

ty. People once more regarded nature as a powerful and eternal force. This was the period of the 'Saankhya' culture, which believed that it is nature that is the source of all progress, and which has ushered man from one great age to another. This philosophy instructed man through its twenty-five tenets that all knowledge and prosperity is the product of nature, 'just as cream is the product of milk'.

An ascetic named Kanaad Rishi studied atoms and molecules, and wrote down how it is these very building blocks that created every single component of the earth. He said that everything on earth is made up of combinations of water, fire, air, sky, spirit, time, space, soul and mind. He demonstrated that atoms are not stable, and that matter cannot be created, nor destroyed. His attempt at dividing all material substances into an elementary table preceded Mendeleev by many centuries. His division was simplistic, yet it demonstrates how ancient Indian culture possessed rich traditions of science and scholarship. What is central to our analysis here is that he included the human soul in his list of the nine all-pervasive elements, and thereby laid a theoretical foundation for the intrinsic relation between man and his environment.

The age of Kautilya [Chanakya] saw the development of ideas of justice and law. Despite the Arthashastra's emphasis on material wealth and societal relations, it also mentions that the five elements of water, fire, earth, wind and sky are immortal and all-pervasive. The Arthashastra stressed that it was these natural elements that made up the entire cosmos, and that it was natural processes, not God, which were responsible for life on earth. Towards the end of his life, however, Kautilya did modify his views and make room for the role of the creator.

The Indian tradition of yoga also accords immense importance to the natural world around us. The essence of yoga is to concentrate and meditate on certain slokas or prayers

that help purify the mind, body and spirit. Over the years, yoga has emerged the most powerful mode of disciplining one's body and adhering to a natural lifestyle.

In conclusion, it is clear that the Indian consciousness has always recognised the power and supremacy of nature. While things have changed for the worse over time and contemporary society is far removed from the environment, ancient India is a splendid contrast. Ancient civilisations respected nature, as reflected both by their lifestyles and the complex web of mythology and legends that have been passed down to us from those days. This love for nature coexisted with a deep reverence for God. At regular intervals in history, societies grew more complex, and less intimate with nature. Yet each time that humankind forgot the power of nature, it was only divine intervention that prevented certain apocalypse.

Today's society, unfortunately, is neither nature loving nor God-fearing. We worship only material wealth, and think nothing of exploiting our natural surroundings in order to increase this wealth. Today we are standing on the verge of another great cataclysm, but it is unlikely that God will intervene this time to rescue a people who have forgotten him and have discarded their traditions so completely. It is the need of the hour that we look back into our past and adopt the rich traditions that will enable us to live in harmony with nature. We must rediscover our roots, value morality and strength of character more than we value money and we must strive to follow the ancients' path of virtue and righteousness, which will lead to God.

(Rajendra Singh is secretary of the Jal Biradari, India's largest network of water activists.)



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