

Civil Society



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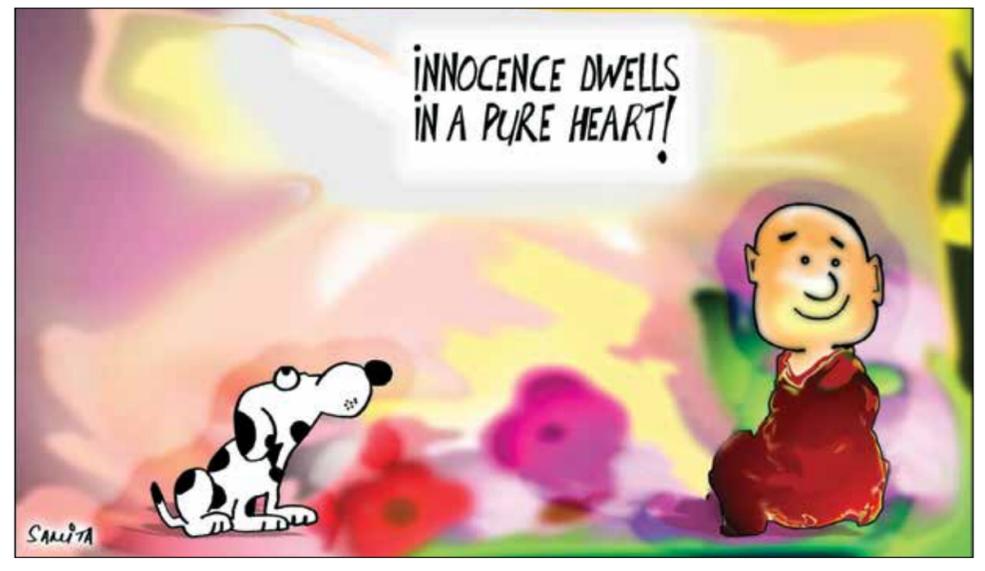


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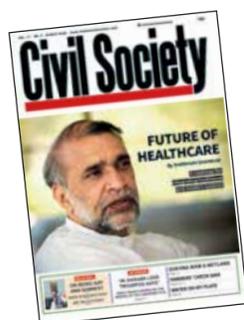
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IN THE LIGHT

SAMITA RATHOR



LETTERS



Integrative medicine

Thanks for your cover story, 'Future of healthcare'. This is an important subject for our healthcare system and your writer Darshan Shankar has indeed made very valid suggestions. Teaching medical students about alternative systems will widen their horizon. It can also help them offer patients more options than pills. Mainstreaming research into Indian systems of medicine is also critical. It will help us come up with a range of new effective herbal formulations and methods of treatment.

Srinivas Ramanathan

NGO logjam

I read your story, 'Govt tightens rules for NGOs, again.' I fail to understand why the government keeps coming up with new rules for NGOs. Many of them are doing excellent work and have invented role models in health, education and environment which

are globally appreciated. NGOs also provide jobs and skill people. Much of the work they do, in fact, seamlessly fits in with the government's own objectives.

Ashok Gulati

Farmers' dam

Shree Padre's story, 'With dream dam farmers show what is possible' was great! Farmers, out of their experience, need and sheer common sense, can do so much for the public good. The story is also a case study of government projects and their overblown estimates of public infrastructure which drain the public exchequer.

Mneme George

The Union government should encourage farmers to build inexpensive check dams under its water mission programme. Publicizing good examples, like this one, would also be helpful. Small loans by public sector banks should be given for such projects. Farmers should be encouraged to set up water user groups and manage the dam themselves.

Asha Thiagaraj

Many tongues

With reference to Sanjaya Baru's 'Language and opportunity', I would like to say that many attempts have been made to translate works into regional languages. The problem,

apart from resources, is that we have very few language experts.

Sheikh Nizamuddin

We inherited the colonial system of education and made no changes to it. By giving so much credence to English and not translating the best books from the world we kept the masses steeped in ignorance. State governments now feel the best way forward is to simply accept the situation and teach children from marginalized communities English from primary section.

Sushmita Ganguli

Rural teachers

Thanks for the review of S. Giridhar's book on teachers as heroes.

Kudos to the teachers and the author who has painstakingly profiled them. Also, to the Azim Premji Foundation which is bringing out the stories of true heroes.

Prabha Manjunath

This is an important book especially at a time when government school teachers are being vilified by the media and many educationists. Great work by Giridhar and the Azim Premji Foundation.

Vimala Ramchandran

The Kothari Commission report in 1968 wrote: "The destiny of India is being shaped within classrooms." Lovely to read about the sincere efforts of rural teachers to improve their schools. I am so glad they are being appreciated and honoured.

Kusumlata Gosain

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COVER STORY

BOLD NEW MUSIC

Talented young musicians with niche followings are getting more widely known thanks to Azadi Records. Their music is original and their concerns are contemporary.

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Civil Society
READ US. WE READ YOU.

Fringe to the fore

CONSUMERS invariably end up taking what they are given. Someone somewhere shapes their decisions even as they may live in the belief that they are making their own choices. New entrants to the party either have to bide their time till they get noticed or they should know to muscle their way in. Ask us at Civil Society.

Azadi Records, which is our cover story this month, has enriched the Indian music scene by identifying little known musicians, singers and other performers like DJs and connecting them to audiences. It has helped some great talent find wider notice.

Is it important? We think it is because the music and personal histories of the performers add up to give us a picture of India we are perhaps not exploring enough or may be missing out on altogether. The songs, lyrics and singing styles reflect the angst, beliefs and hopes of a new generation.

Azadi Records therefore plays the very useful role of taking us beyond Mumbai, Delhi and the other big cities to help us discover an India we tend to ignore. The use of Azadi in the name invites controversy. But the founders tell us a political slogan is the last thing they have in mind. In fact, they would like to reclaim the word for the wider meaning it has in relation to the freedom of expression and the rights of performers and audiences to explore new choices. This *azadi* reshapes the market.

Our opening interview this month is with Poonam Muttreja of the Population Foundation of India. Poonam is one of the veterans of the social sector and she has been featured before in our pages. It is always good to interview her. But this time the occasion is special because it is 50 years of the Population Foundation of India. Poonam went to the foundation from an earlier assignment and revved things up there, as is her style.

Stories of successful community action come from Punjab and Karnataka. In Ludhiana, residents have intervened to ensure that public money is properly spent on improving the Buddha Nullah, which is a tributary of the Sutlej, but has been reduced to a drain. The government had awarded the job to a contractor. The residents have insisted that scientists and engineers of a certain standing be consulted.

In the Dakshin Kannada district, a zilla parishad member has rallied college students to build a series of temporary check dams at low cost. The idea is to catch the rain before it flows off and thereby raise groundwater levels.

The medical profession tends to get more public-spirited these days. Check out our interview with Dr Prabhu Prasad of Manipal Hospitals who has set up a voluntary organization to promote palliative care in pulmonology. It is a great effort in a country choking on pollution.

We also have our regular columnists whose popularity among our readers has grown with every issue. Kiran Karnik reminds us that the Indian space programme was primarily intended to promote development. Sanjaya Baru tracks Suresh Prabhu's use of "the rootless are ruthless" to the Iranian rap performer Nadia Tehran! R. Balasubramaniam continues his insightful journey into rural India. Jagdeep Chhokar explores the issues around electronic voting machines.

Shankar Anand

Picture by Shrey Gupta



Poonam Muttreja: 'If women don't have agency, there is no way you can have population stabilization'

'The people have done better than govt in family planning'

Poonam Muttreja on the need to go beyond slogans

Civil Society News
New Delhi

A useful voluntary organization should be ahead of its time. The Population Foundation of India was one such when it was founded by industrialists JRD Tata and Bharat Ram all of 50 years ago.

But issues pertaining to population are complex and don't get resolved easily. Changes have arrived, but even so women don't have the same say as men. The poor lack access and awareness. Conservatives set restrictive boundaries for society. A communal divide results in unfounded fears.

Finding ways forward requires the ability to build new equations. Tact and forthrightness are

needed in equal measure. The Population Foundation of India has held its own as a beacon for new ideas, and noticeably so in recent years with Poonam Muttreja as executive director.

Muttreja comes with the experience of founding and managing diverse social sector organizations. She knows a thing or two about advocacy and nudging the processes that finally bring transformation.

Under her, the foundation has worked aggressively but happily with government. She has also been the driving force behind *Main kuch bhi kar sakti hoon*, a popular television serial on women's empowerment, now in its third season.

We spoke to Muttreja on the state of reproductive health services in India and what needs to be done to live up to the challenges of the times.

For a large and diverse economy with aspirations, how well has India done in family planning? What is the picture that emerges?

Well, I would give India six on 10. But I won't give that ranking to the government but to the people of India. Despite poor quality services and limited choices, and key elements like counselling missing, the people have done better than the government.

India has had, for the past 50 to 55 years, only five methods of contraception, while the rest of the world, even neighbouring small countries, have gone on to eight or nine contraceptives. The government could have done better although family planning is the oldest programme in India.

I think it's fantastic that population stabilization is taking place in 22 states. But even with services improving, if women don't have agency, the

education, or the freedom to decide, there is no way you can have population stabilization. And if you look at Bihar, UP, Rajasthan, Odisha and Assam, indicators for women are very poor in these states for literacy, agency and education. They lag behind the rest of the country. Also, if you don't have good governance you are not going to have good public health systems that are responsive to people's needs. In other states where women have had better opportunities, they have done well.

The tragedy is that we have let down the poorest women who have the maximum number of poor indicators starting with nutrition, health, education and poverty. So, family planning for the poorest and most marginalized has not worked yet. But it has worked for the better-off and it has certainly worked for educated women. Education is the best family planning method. And women who are educated even if they are Class 12-pass, opt to have fewer children. Women who are graduates and postgraduates are likely to have just one child.

India's population is fast declining not just for one community but for all communities. And in the last census we had a huge decline amongst Muslims in terms of numbers and the percentage increase was less than in the past because, again, I think women are just exercising agency.

The one shame India has is the huge number of abortions that take place. We have 15.6 million abortions every year which are, by and large, a proxy for contraception. While abortion is a right for women, abortion as a proxy for contraception is a bad idea.

Another area where we really need to do something drastically for future demographic decline is to put in place more spacing methods and not rely so much on sterilization. Seventy percent of our population momentum is fuelled by the young. They don't need family planning. They need access to contraception, especially those who aren't married because sexual debut is getting younger and younger.

Empowerment of women and access to services are clearly linked. How much of this is the domain of the government and what has been the outcome of your own outreach to women?

The government has successfully shared information on family planning methods. *Hum do hamare do* is a slogan that reached people. But that didn't give people the agency, choice, quality or access to those services. And even if women know about family planning methods, they need counselling to decide what's best for them.

The government has done nothing to change social norms on early marriage. Anaemic young girls take the risk of having a child. The baby may die or the young girl herself. Nor have we changed the social norm that a girl has to prove her fertility at the age of 15 as soon as she gets married. Where have we seen anything done on that? We have this slogan *beti bachao, beti padao*. But slogans don't get converted into practice in the absence of changing behaviour and social norms.

Changing social norms is not easy but we haven't even attempted it. Thanks to the Emergency, family planning became such a hot potato, it got politically neglected. We took leave of family planning and women's reproductive rights for a very long time.

There is no funding for behaviour change. The

government has money for communication. It relies on non-evaluated things like posters. Global research evaluation shows that they don't work.

Interpersonal communication does not work when it is done by people from the same community with the same regressive social norms. For example, an Asha worker gets her own daughter married at the age of 13 or 15. How can they convince people in their community not to get their daughters married at this young age? They put pressure on their daughters-in-law to prove their fertility as soon as they get married. How will they convince others?

There are so many myths and misgivings about male sterilization, which is a much easier method. We have done nothing to blow that myth. Men are totally out of the family planning circuit. Women have the privilege of giving birth to children, but they also bear the burden of family planning. Family planning is a men's issue and a society issue.

'Family planning for the poorest and most marginalized has not worked yet. But it has worked for the better-off and it has certainly worked for educated women. Education is the best family planning method.'

There is no counselling. Every contraceptive has side-effects. Even abstinence has side-effects. We don't manage all this. One contraceptive may work for one woman, but not for another.

You did try to change social norms through your TV serial, *Main kuch bhi kar sakti hoon*. What was the impact?

We were told that changing social norms and behaviour is a slow process. But in Brazil we found that due to a similar programme like ours on TV, fertility rates came down from seven to four in just five years.

We thought in India it won't happen but we were stunned. In the evaluation of Season 1 not only did eight percent of women who never negotiated family planning pick up the courage to convince their husbands, mothers-in-law began to talk family planning to their daughters-in-law.

So a massive relentless campaign can change social norms. Is that what you are saying?

Totally. In India we were able to make huge changes in Seasons 1, 2 and 3 because there was a readiness for change among young girls and women. People's aspirations have changed with access to mass media. It has penetrated even remote parts of the country. People don't want to be poor and with little education. They want their lives transformed.

To take credit, our serial was brilliantly done. We got a Bollywood director. The quality was fantastic so people enjoyed watching it and they related to it. But we also did it so that people who were ready for a change could cash in.

We were nervous that a title like *Main kuch bhi kar sakti hoon* wouldn't attract the men. But guess what? Forty-eight percent of the people who watched the show on TV were men. Fifty-two percent were women. Of this 40 percent were young people who said they could start a conversation

with both parents after the episode.

So I'd like to say we haven't given our men an opportunity to think better. I would give 50 percent credit to our programme and 50 percent to the men for their willingness to change.

How did the government react?

They have been very supportive. We get free airtime on Doordarshan and All India Radio. The health ministry used to send an SMS to every Asha, ANM and woman registered for pre- and post-natal care to watch the programme. We used to give a little background on every episode and SMS it to everyone we could.

We now have an artificial intelligence chat bot which is embedded in *Main kuch bhi kar sakti hoon* to reach out to young people on their sexual and reproductive health. The government requested us to share it with them and it's now connected to their

national helpline. Government officials also requested us to normalize use of the condom. So we did a 'condom rap' which has gone viral. The health ministry doesn't have the creative ability to do a *Main kuch bhi kar sakti hoon*.

But politicians keep talking about punitive measures like the two-child norm and threatening to withdraw benefits to people who have more than two children. A law is being drafted.

The two-child norm has come from a political ideology. They don't know the data and they don't want to understand it either. They think Muslims are going to overtake Hindus in demographic numbers. The motivation behind it is this misinformed thinking. Hence they want to enforce punitive measures.

So we are trying to get the right information out through the media to Parliament and to all those who want to make this Bill. I think we have made huge progress. But if the government still wants to take this political decision, our work will go to waste.

What is the downside?

First, it's against the rights of the unborn child. We are not going to provide free education to him or her. We are going to deprive that child of rations and everything he or she needs. It's anti-woman. You don't give the woman the choice, the services or the freedom to decide. How can you penalize her for having more children than she wants? Also, the government's own data shows that India's desired fertility rate is 1.8 percent. I mean, why not learn from Kerala, Andhra Pradesh and Tamil Nadu?

Are there partnerships between government and NGOs working on reproductive health and family planning?

Yes, but the government's partnership is mainly

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with international organizations. Changing behaviour and social norms and working at the grassroots with women on this complex issue, which is full of myths, misconceptions and regressive norms, is not easy. You need people who are grounded in Indian realities. There are a lot of international NGOs that have come to India in the health sector and begun to engage in family planning because there is funding for it. But I think we need to look at their impact.

Your organisation has been working at the grassroots both in UP and Bihar. What is your learning from those experiences?

A big learning is that family planning is a preventive measure. It isn't only about not having more children. It also prevents maternal and child mortality and intergenerational anaemia which results in young girls being anaemic.

You need family planning at the doorstep. People are not going to go for an injectable to a district hospital. You need to make it available at the primary health centre or the sub-centre. You need counselling in the village on which method to use, management of side-effects and, secondly, you need convergence. Panchayats, those in education, everyone should work together.

Convergence doesn't happen at national or state level but at district level. Service providers need to change their behaviour. We have done convergence in many districts of Bihar and UP. Then family planning, services, demand, supply, everything works together.

So, priority states for you are...

Bihar, UP and now Rajasthan. Governance, especially in healthcare, is very poor in those states and we feel we should be working where people need the most help.

You did a report on deaths due to sterilization in a medical camp in Bilaspur in Chhattisgarh some years ago. What has been the response to that?

It was phenomenal. First, we brought out the truth because the country was being misled to believe the deaths were due to medicines. No. It was poor services that led to those deaths. We brought out the technical and other evidence. So truth prevailed.

That led to the health ministry taking our top 10 findings and recommendations and issuing a memo to every state to follow them.

We have been screaming for years that we don't need camps that treat women in this inhuman manner and do 80 to 100 sterilizations.

By a stroke of luck a PIL that had been filed by a human rights group came up for hearing soon after our report came out. Colin Gonsalves, their lawyer, included our report in the PIL. The bench, headed by Justice Lokur, heard the PIL. And Justice Lokur took all our recommendations and asked the government to implement them over three years. We had recommended doing away with the medical camp approach, providing women with a choice of contraception, services and so on. The judgment stipulated that the government will report every quarter on the progress made. I could have retired after that. ■



Paljal Dharanendra Kumar is leading a movement to rebuild kattas or traditional check dams

Zilla man, students revive check dams

Shree Padre
Venoor (Karnataka)

FOR the first time in decades this February, Sundara Gowda, a 55-year-old farmer in the Dakshina Kannada district, doesn't have to spend ₹6,000 to mine water. In the past he has had to hire an earthmover to do the digging because the rivulet that runs by his farm would dry up.

This year, to his surprise, the rivulet, a tributary of the Phalguni river, didn't dry up. Miraculously, it had plenty of water. A check dam had been built upstream at Paldyaru.

The check dam was one of many such structures built by Paljal Dharanendra Kumar, a zilla parishad member from Venoor village, with the help of student volunteers.

The check dams have resulted in water in the river rising six feet for a distance of 2.5 km. The river now has 90 million litres of water and rivulets which used to run dry have come back to life.

Dharanendra and his student volunteers have been zealously building check dams, called *kattas*, from December to February. The dams have been built at absolutely no cost to the exchequer.

Dharanendra's check dam movement has benefitted about 20 families of farmers. Lokayya Gowda, a farmer with nine acres of areca plantation, says the water table in the river bed had been declining year on year. He used to hire an earthmover twice after February. That worry doesn't exist any longer.

RAIN AND SHINE: No zilla parishad member in this district has worked as hard as Dharanendra for water conservation. In December he set himself a

target of 50 check dams and completed them in two months flat.

"My area gets plenty of rain but it was short of water," explains Dharanendra. "If villages like mine deteriorate to such an extent that water has to be brought from outside, what must be the fate of villages elsewhere in my district? That's why I thought it isn't good enough to talk about water conservation. I needed to illustrate my advice through real action. I'm an elected representative. I have a certain responsibility towards the community."

Although Dakshina Kannada and its adjoining districts get annual rainfall of 3,500 mm — last season it was well over 4,000 mm — the region suffers acute drought every summer. The causes are man-made. A significant one is the decline of the *katta*. Till 50 years ago, each village had hundreds of *kattas* built with people's participation after the monsoon.

But with electricity available, the irrigation system changed. Instead of water flowing naturally from *kattas*, motors were introduced to pump water. Instead of bringing neighbours together to set up *kattas*, farmers found it easier to dig bore-wells. The traditional knowledge of building *kattas* vanished and the use of the *katta* soon became history.

A traditional *katta* is an invaluable but inexpensive structure built with soil, stones and areca nut stems. It gently slows the flow of the river. So, water levels in the river rise and replenish groundwater all around. If a series of *kattas* are built across a river, its water flow increases for a considerable period and seeps into the surrounding landscape. A temporary structure, a *katta* has to be built again after a year.

Pictures by Shree Padre



College students pass on sand bags to put in place a check dam



A katta across the Phalguni river

Dharanendra has vivid memories of a large *katta* near his ancestral home in village Thorpu in Venoor in Bethangady taluk. The Phalguni, which flows past the village, is 100 metres wide there. Around 100 villagers would get together to construct this *katta*. It was voluntary labour or *shramdan*. In the old days, water would overflow from the river for 7 km due to gravity and recharge hundreds of open wells, ponds and earthen tanks.

It was Dharanendra's childhood experience that prompted him to select the *katta* as the only method for his water conservation movement. Since the topography of Venoor is mostly flat, the riverbed slopes very gently. So check dams raise water levels for a considerable distance.

The check dams have been constructed in five or six panchayats across six of the rivulets feeding into the Phalguni.

The way of making a *katta* has changed. Instead of stones and soil, discarded cement bags filled with sand from the river shore are used. Each sandbag *katta* would cost, on average, around ₹20,000 if constructed by paid labour. Instead, local college students are being mobilized to build them.

In December Dharanendra set himself a target of 50 check dams and completed them in two months flat.

Altogether, 15,000 bags have been filled with river sand and used for 50 *kattas*. Small *kattas* were built with 500 to 600 sandbags. The biggest one at Paldyaru required 2,000 bags.

Dharanendra organizes meetings with the local panchayat. A unanimous decision on building *kattas* is taken. The date of *katta* construction is decided only after the local college gives its consent.

It was officials from the NSS unit of Alva's College in Moodabidri who requested Dharanendra to arrange community work for their students during their annual camp. In 2018, Dharanendra used the help of some students to build 10 *kattas*. Their work

was appreciated by villagers. So, Dharanendra went ahead and set a target of 50 *kattas*.

Alva's College in Moodabidri supported him wholeheartedly. "Whenever required, they send their students in a bus to the villages. Once, we constructed three *kattas* in three different locations on the same day successfully," says Dharanendra. The villagers organize a sumptuous feast for the volunteers during dam construction.

Dr M. Mohan Alva, president of Alva's Educational Institutions, was all praise for Dharanendra's movement. "Whatever his political party, he is a sincere and dedicated social leader. We are very happy to collaborate in his *katta* movement."

Mostly private colleges send their students. These include Aloysius College, Mangalore, Dhavala College, Mahaveera College and SNM Polytechnic College in Moodabidri. Government colleges like the First Grade colleges in Belthangady, Vamadapadavu and Poonjalakatte have also participated.

The *kattas* were constructed mainly on holidays and didn't take more than a day. Funds were raised to organize a bus for the students, if it was a government college. Sometimes 100 students would work together.

The students quickly learn what has to be done. Bags are filled and then passed on by students standing in a queue. "A small briefing before we begin work suffices though they are inexperienced," says Dharanendra.

In reality, it is a one-man show. At 8.30 am, when students arrive by bus, Dharanendra is already at the site. A week before, he checks whether the road leading to the site is in good condition. If it isn't, the local panchayat is requested to repair it.

The day before work begins, he drops off a few bundles of empty bags and convenes an informal meeting with students and local villagers. Even the rope for tying the bags is supplied by him. His vehicle and driver are on standby to help with *katta* construction.

Unlike other political leaders, Dharanendra doesn't leave once the work is inaugurated. He stays, giving suggestions and attending to shortcomings till the end of the day.

He started collecting empty cement bags last summer for this year's construction. "Vishwas Jain of Arihanth Constructions in Hosangadi gave me the most bags. Generally, they cut the cement bags longitudinally. Such bags are of no use for check dam construction. We had to specially request them to cut the bags horizontally so that we can reuse them," said Dharanendra.

He doesn't have a list of the *kattas* he has built or the money he has spent from his pocket. There are incidental expenses as well. All check dams require fresh soil for filling between the rows of sandbags. This has to be brought in a tipper from a nearby site. This year, in the midst of hectic construction, a shortage of bags slowed down work. Keeping this in mind he is now asking volunteers to collect empty bags in advance and keep them ready at respective sites.

SCARCITY TO PLENTY: Villagers across the district say that by February most rivers either dry up or have a meagre flow. But this year there is water, thanks to Dharanendra's *katta* movement.

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At Khandika, he got a check dam constructed for the second time across the Phalguni river by students of Alva's College along with 25 to 30 local villagers. The river is about 60 metres wide here. Jayaram Shetty, a 70-year-old farmer, says last year's *katta* increased water levels to a distance of 1.5 km and ensured there was water till end-April. This year the height of the *katta* was increased by adding an additional layer of sandbags. Water levels have risen for a distance of three km.

Shetty says that two years ago, this region suffered a terrible drought. He had dug a ring well in the riverbed about 10 years ago to irrigate his farm. People took water from that well even for drinking, he says. "People should forget politics and join hands to build *kattas*," says Shetty.

Panchayats have also cooperated. Andinje panchayat, for instance, worked with Dharanendra to build six *kattas* on a five-km stretch of the Andinje river. One broke after construction but the villagers rebuilt it.

"Two months ago we didn't even have drinking water," recalls Prabhakara Acharya, 49, a local farmer. "Housewives were fetching water from afar." Last year they built a few small *kattas* with soil and stones and found their water scenario had improved. So this year they requested Dharanendra to build six *kattas*.

In Kuthlooru village, Dharanendra's student volunteers built just a small *katta* but it raised water by five feet in the river for a distance of 1.5 km. "We hadn't constructed any *katta* for many years. We have been facing a shortage of water for irrigation for long. Last year I spent Rs 8,000 and got a pond dug with a JCB. But this year we won't face any water problem," said Santhosh Kanthabettu, member of Naravi panchayat. The river here is 30 metres wide and this year a *katta* with five layers of sandbags has been made.

"My dream is to make five *kattas* in a row on this stretch of river to resolve all our water shortages," added Kanthabettu.

Last year, in Marodi village, six *kattas* were constructed by Dharanendra's team. This year he had to just give them sandbags. The panchayat approached NSS College on its own and with students built 14 check dams. Some *kattas* have been constructed without student power. In Kashipatna, 60 women came together and built two *kattas*.

"Panchayats, colleges, the Rotary and Lions Clubs have given me wholehearted support, cutting across party lines. Next year I will extend my movement across Belthangady taluk. Our target will be 100 *kattas*," said Dharanendra.

There have been some failures too. A few *kattas* broke after construction, perhaps due to faulty construction or sudden rain. Mohan Andinje, president of Andinje panchayat, feels that since students aren't really *katta* builders, involving experienced elderly villagers would improve *katta* design and construction. "But, no doubt, this is a great idea and much needed," he added.

"It's really refreshing to see a political leader being concerned about our natural resources," said Dr Yathish Ullal, assistant commissioner of Puttur. "I hope he creates a new trend among elected representatives." ■

Contact: Dharanendra Kumar - 90089 82341

In Ludhiana, clean-up with scrutiny by residents

Raj Machhan
Chandigarh

AFTER getting the Punjab government to allocate funds for the cleaning up of the Buddha Nullah, residents of Ludhiana, supported by activists, have insisted on and got close public scrutiny of the project.

The Buddha Nullah has been an embarrassment for prosperous Ludhiana. It carries sewage and industrial effluents. It endangers the health of the residents in the city and pollutes the Sutlej lower down.

Efforts to have it cleaned came to naught till recently when finally ₹650 crore was allotted for its rejuvenation.

But lack of transparency in the implementation of the contract and absence of community and professional oversight in its execution prompted citizens groups to object.

Citizens asked for the involvement of environmental scientists and other specialists while framing the detailed project report, which has now been agreed to, instead of the contractor having a free reign.

"Without scrutiny, the contractor will act in his own interest and try and maximize his profits instead of taking an approach that provides a comprehensive solution," says Jaskirat Singh, an entrepreneur with a keen interest in urban management and transparency in government.

Voluntary organizations have also demanded that the government make efforts to sensitize and educate citizens about the need to ensure the cleanliness of the Buddha Nullah.

The nullah covers a distance of 14 km across Ludhiana city. "It has been a source of misery and death not only to the city's residents, but also to over 10 million people, who live in areas along the Sutlej and utilize its water for drinking and irrigation in the states of Punjab and Rajasthan," says Jaskirat Singh.

Voluntary organizations belonging to Naroa Punjab Manch and neighbouring Rajasthan's Dooshit Jal Asurakshit Kal met the Union Jal Shakti minister Gajendra Singh Shekhawat and urged him to ensure proper utilization of the funds.

Investments have been made in improving the Buddha Nullah in the past, but in the absence of the money being spent without oversight, there have been no improvements. Residents don't want the present contract to go the same way.

It was thanks to voluntary groups in Ludhiana that ₹650 crore finally came to be allotted for cleaning the nullah.

Punjab Finance Minister Manpreet Badal announced the allocation of funds in the state budget for 2020-21.

Pollution caused by the Buddha Nullah has resulted in unusually high number of cancer cases and other diseases, apart from crop loss, along the course of the Sutlej. This impact is most pronounced in south-west Punjab, particularly in the Malwa district, and districts of Rajasthan bordering Punjab.



Jaswant Zafar (in saffron turban) with residents at the banks of the Buddha Nullah demanding that the government clean the dirty nullah

The success of the govt's endeavor will depend a great deal on the leadership that is provided to the Buddha Nullah restoration project.

organized protest marches, but no action was taken. Now, at least, the government has begun doing something that benefits us all."

Buddha Nullah, known as Buddha Dariya in the past, was a clean stream at the heart of social life in Ludhiana. But with increasing industrialization and population growth, pollution levels rose manifold resulting in the highly toxic water body of today.

Says Dr Ashwani Kumar, "Nothing much had been happening since the last 40 years, though the authorities have been spending regularly to clean up the nullah. The success of the government's present

endeavor will depend a great deal on the managerial leadership that is provided to the project."

The project is being implemented by the Punjab State Water Supply and Sewerage Board (PSWSSB). Activists noticed a high level of secrecy in the entire exercise and decided to demand greater scrutiny.

"The detailed project report proposes to mix 20 per cent of effluents from industries with sewage for treatment in the STP. This defeats the very objective of the entire exercise as it gives room to industries to mix up their effluents with the sewerage as is happening currently. Moreover, the STPs are

generally not equipped to handle industrial effluents and will be rendered ineffective," said Jaswant Zafar, an activist who has been at the forefront of the local movement.

Ludhiana has over 300 dyeing and electroplating units. These are responsible for the highly carcinogenic effluents discharged into the city's sewerage system which ultimately end up in the nullah. It is mandatory for such units to set up effluent treatment plants, but most of them lie idle.

Subsequent to concerns raised by voluntary groups, the state government held a meeting on March 17 of the Special Task Force (STF) it had constituted for cleaning up the Buddha Nullah.

The STF, headed by Namdhari sect chief Satguru Uday Singh, raised strong objections over keeping civil society groups at bay. Even the Mayor of Ludhiana and elected representatives from the city had not been involved.

At the meeting, Ludhiana Mayor Balkar Singh Sandhu rued the fact that elected representatives weren't aware of the details of the project.

The civil society representatives who attended the meeting included Jaskirat Singh, Jaswant Singh Zafar, and Jatinder Manchanda of Sambhav.

Interestingly, Kahan Singh Pannu, who is Secretary, Agriculture, and also heads the Punjab government's Mission Tandrust Punjab expressed surprise at the meeting over the fact that nothing was being done to shift the dairies, which discharge effluents into the Buddha Nullah resulting in much of the pollution.

"The dairies must be shifted as per orders passed by the Chief Minister before we go ahead with the project. This will lower the cost of the project by at least ₹100 crores," he said.

The shifting of dairies outside city limits has been a contentious issue given that a number of senior politicians, including a cabinet minister in the Punjab government, own some of the larger units. Despite efforts made by the Municipal Corporation's Commissioner Kanwalpreet Brar over the past year the owners have refused to budge on one pretext or the other. ■

Samita's World

by SAMITA RATHOR



LGBTI jobs from Pride Circle

Sidika Sehgal
New Delhi

PEOPLE with different sexual orientations are finding employment opportunities easier to come by thanks to the Supreme Court striking down Section 377 in September 2018, declaring it to be unconstitutional, and decriminalizing homosexuality.

Pride Circle, a diversity and inclusion consulting company founded by Sridhi Ramaswamy and Ramakrishna Sinha, held their second job fair for the LGBTI community in February 22 at The Lalit in Delhi.

The LGBTI community consists of people who identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and intersex.

The event was attended by at least 1,200 job seekers armed with their CVs. There were MBAs looking for work in the finance sector, others seeking executive level jobs in general and those who wanted positions as consultants. There were jobs for skilled, semi-skilled and unskilled workers. American Express, HSBC, Uber, KPMG, Accenture and Microsoft were among the 21 companies present.

The job fair, called Reimagining Inclusion for Social Equity (RISE), is now Asia's largest fair for the LGBTI community. The first job fair was held in Bengaluru in July last year. It was a success.

A lot of this has been possible because Section 377 was deemed unconstitutional. "With 377 gone, there is no holding back by companies. Earlier, they still had an excuse. But now they can't say it's against the law or unconstitutional," said Ramaswamy.

The job fair connected progressive companies with those searching for inclusive environments. Ten job offers have already been made and other recruitment processes are underway.

Job seekers felt they were in a safe space. They emphasized the importance of being open about one's sexual orientation at the workplace. "You can ask for leave if your husband or wife is unwell. But if I'm a homosexual and not out at work, I have to say, 'a friend is unwell'. In the eyes of an employer, a friend is not as important as a spouse," a job seeker explained. Or if a company offers health benefits to spouses, a homosexual partner should also accrue those benefits. These daily experiences are not insignificant.

Recruitment processes have had to change to foster inclusion. Nita Baluni, general manager of human resources at The Lalit Delhi, said that there are questions they no longer ask during interviews. Questions about marital status or about parents' profession are not considered acceptable.

Workplaces need to have gender-neutral washrooms for those who don't identify as male or female. Companies should allow for people to specify the pronouns they prefer — he/him, she/her or they/them. At RISE, everyone's badges specified their pronouns.

Running parallel to the job fair was a conference where industry leaders and diversity and inclusion professionals discussed best practices for companies



1,200 job seekers attended the LGBTI job fair on February 22



Sridhi Ramaswamy, co-founder of Pride Circle

Job seekers felt they were in a safe place. They emphasized the importance of being open about one's sexual orientation at the workplace.

to follow. Other employees at the workplace have to be sensitized so that those from the LGBTI community feel welcome and safe at work. Companies need to make changes by way of policies. There has to be a non-discrimination policy and a zero tolerance policy for sexual harassment.

At the event, there was also a marketplace for LGBTI-owned businesses to display their products and services. There were tattoo artists, publishers, product designers, fashion designers and tourism companies who participated.

Pride Circle also introduced a Workplace Equality Index for India in collaboration with Stonewall, a UK-based LGBTI rights charity, and Keshav Suri Foundation. The index will be a tool for employers to measure their progress on lesbian, gay, bi and trans inclusion in the workplace. The first index will be out later this year or early next year.

Efforts to include LGBTI in workplaces started in 2017. Before Sinha and Ramaswamy started Pride Circle, they used to organize informal discussions with other diversity and inclusion professionals in 2014-15 in Bengaluru so that people could come together and discuss best practices in their companies on LGBTI inclusion.

The company, founded in 2017, has worked with nearly 150 firms to train and sensitize them on LGBTI inclusion in the workplace. Pride Circle also works with civil society organizations and NGOs

who work in the community on skill building.

"Companies started reaching out to us. They had gone through the training and felt they were ready to hire. NGOs began to ask us if we could help them place their trainees. So a job fair was a platform where the demand and supply could come together to interact," said Ramaswamy. The job fair was a natural next step.

Leanne Macmillan, director, global programmes, of Stonewall, said, "In our work with both civil society and employers globally we see how LGBTI people are excluded and discriminated against simply because of who they are!"

More needs to be done by way of policy. "Marriage equality, adoption law, inheritance, these things are yet to happen," he said. Housing remains a big issue — landlords don't want to give their homes to homosexual couples.

Ramaswamy, who is 41 years old and has nearly 20 years of experience in human resources, believes that the push for equality at the workplace is coming from millennials who are joining the workforce and want workplaces that are inclusive and celebrate differences. Access to information has allowed people to keep up with global trends and shed old prejudices.

Multinational companies like American Express and Microsoft have set a good example by participating in the event. The job fair shows that things are changing, slowly but surely. ■

Gandhians honour Gandhigiri

Tanushree Gangopadhyay
Ahmedabad

FIFTEEN Gandhian activists working in remote regions of India were honoured for their selfless contribution in improving the lives of marginalized people at a function held at Gujarat Vidyapith in Ahmedabad.

They were awarded a shawl, a certificate and a cheque of ₹51,000 by Ela Bhatt, founder of SEWA and chancellor of Gujarat Vidyapith.

The Gandhian Society, US, and Gujarat Vidyapith jointly organized the programme. Gujarat Vidyapith was founded by Mahatma Gandhi in 1920. This is its centenary year. Last year was also Gandhi's 150th birth anniversary.

Bhadra Butala, president of the Gandhian Society, said, "I decided to celebrate Gandhi's philosophy on his birth anniversary by encouraging people working in far-flung areas of India under difficult circumstances and enthusing them by giving an award and recognition."

Among the awardees were Sailesh Singhal, Anand Malligaavad, Bharati Odedara and Parul Dandikar.

Singhal, founder of Youth of India, has been leading a campaign against plastic. "The United Nations declared September 17 Global Unplastic Day due to our sustained campaign," he says with pride. "Last year on June 5, International Environment Day, I organized a run for 12 km in Siliguri. Five hundred youth collected 350 kg of plastic bags and pledged not to use single-use plastic or plastic water bottles."

Inspired by the anti-plastic campaign, North Bengal Medical College also pledged to phase out single-use plastic by 2022. Singhal's campaign has mobilized 30,000 young people across India and around 90 institutions wrote to the prime minister to stop usage of plastic in July 2019. He now plans to reach two million people in India with his message. His group in Siliguri contributed ₹1.50 lakh from their pockets for the rehabilitation of earthquake victims in Nepal.

Malligaavad, popularly called 'Lakeman', is rejuvenating Bengaluru's degraded lakes. He took on the task of reviving the 150-year-old Kyalasanahalli lake in Anekal in south Bengaluru and completed it in 45 days. He says the company he worked for funded the rejuvenation of the lake for ₹1.15 crore. People from the village volunteered, keen on seeing water in their lake. With the help of architects and engineers the lake was cleaned, desilted and transformed into a wetland.

Malligaavad went on to rejuvenate four lakes in Kyalasanahalli, Vabasandra, Konasandra and Gavi village. "We have started work on a lake in Hadositapura. We dug the dry lake and are close to completely cleaning it. For the lake in Nanjapura village, we had to construct a dam."

Malligaavad has left his job and plans to devote his time to restoring lakes in Bengaluru and other parts of Karnataka. "I plan to rejuvenate lakes in other parts of the country," he said.

Odedara works in Dantewada district in Bastar

division of Chhattisgarh, an area well known for Naxalite activity. She is a postgraduate in social work from Gujarat Vidyapith and comes from a farmer family in Junagadh district of Gujarat. "They say Dantewada is a Naxalite-ridden area. But I have never feared this area or its people. The Naxals don't trouble schoolteachers and social workers. They do trouble villagers, though," she says. A gram sabha of 250 people invited her to work in their area.

"I work with Bachpan Banao, a group that provides education to tribal children. We have a primary school in Chandaner village called Sapnoki Shala (School of My Dreams). I teach art, craft and football." The school uses cinema and songs to teach children. The tribal community also loves to learn bead work.

Odedara organized a medical camp here. Sickle cell anaemia is rampant in the community and a

qualified doctor has been roped in to provide services. She is currently familiarizing herself with tribal farming practices.

Dandikar is from Dandi, famous for Gandhi's Salt Satyagraha. Her parents are both Gandhians who took part in the Sarvodaya movement. She is a qualified artist who has been designing and publishing books for Yagna Prakashan Samiti which runs an open library and depends on book donations.

She is also a trustee and a joint editor of *Bhumiputra*, a Gujarat Sarvodaya Mandal publication from Vadodara. Dandikar coordinates with writers to bring out books on environment, human rights, citizenship, spiritualism, public campaign, art, social harmony, interlinking of rivers, global warming, etc. Dandikar has also joined development efforts for the rehabilitation of nomadic communities and sex workers. ■

APPOINTMENT



विकास प्रबंधन संस्थान
Development Management Institute

Transit Campus, Udyog Bhawan, East Gandhi Maidan,
Patna -800004, Bihar, Phone: (0612) 2675180, 2675181

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Picture by Ashwini Kamat

‘For lung patients, oxygen gets too expensive’

Ashwini Kamat
Panaji



Dr Prabhu Prasad

Our objectives are to promote the advancement of palliative pulmonary care, coordinate a uniform and consistent growth of the discipline on the basis of scientific research in keeping with international standards, standardize palliative care interventions as well as provide recommendations for clinical management of patients receiving such care.

How does the Alliance intend to make it easier to access such services?

If you take home oxygen therapy, which most terminally ill patients with chronic pulmonary

‘Our objective is to promote palliative care in keeping with the best standards internationally.’

disease end up requiring, in a government setup, it is easy. The government or the insurance provided through a government scheme as we have in Goa, foots the bill for the duration of the hospital stay. But most patients are put on oxygen therapy at home since they need it for longer durations. This entails a cost and there is no financial assistance provided for it. This is where our Alliance intends to step in.

What are the costs we are looking at?

Oxygen is one of the most expensive and recurring ‘drugs’. Since it is charged on a per hour basis, even in hospitals, be it government or private, the costs incurred by the patient are immense. In government hospitals, this cost is borne by the government. But once the patient is discharged and is at home for three to six months or even longer, a large majority cannot even afford to come back to the hospital. Most don’t return as they feel that there is no point in going back to hospital as their case is terminal. We want to work on making it simpler and affordable for patients to receive such basic palliative care.

What is the palliative care being prescribed?

Generally, such patients are advised to buy their

own oxygen as per their requirement. For instance, if the patient wants home oxygen therapy on a long-duration basis, they have to purchase different oxygen-producing devices such as oxygen concentrators. Such devices, which draw in oxygen from the surrounding environment and concentrate it, generally cost between ₹60,000 to ₹1 lakh per piece. Otherwise, patients opt for pre-filled cylinders. Each refill costs around ₹500 depending on where you are and if such a facility is even available. A refill lasts for around 15 days to a month. It is a mounting financial burden on the patient and the family. We have seen people struggling to provide oxygen to their loved ones even when they cannot afford it.

Does the Alliance have a plan of action to help patients who need oxygen therapy at home?

Right now, we have not formulated a concrete action plan to deal with home oxygen therapy requirement. We are in the process of identifying such hurdles in treatment and care for patients with chronic pulmonary disorders. Eventually, we hope to associate with charities, non-profits and possibly even the government in raising funds, getting subsidies, identifying needy patients and other activities that can help us reach out more effectively. The government is providing assistance to dialysis patients and cancer patients needing chemotherapy. But focusing on home oxygen therapy has proven tough so far.

The number of COPD patients is rising in India. What should be done?

COPD is one of the leading causes of disease and morbidity in India and in the world. It is the second or third leading cause of mortality in India. In fact, India’s COPD mortality rate is among the highest globally. COPD is not merely a smoker’s disease anymore, especially in India. In rural areas, we have people being exposed to smoke from biomass fuel and in urban areas people inhale polluted air and fumes all the time. These things pose a great threat to our respiratory health. We have suddenly started seeing quite a lot of such patients as well as pulmonary fibrosis patients, who need home ventilation and home oxygen therapy. ■

Contact Dr Prabhu Prasad on +917774014097 or email docprasadmaximus@gmail.com

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Mo Joshi and Uday Kapur, founders of Azadi Records

Picture by Shiv Ahuja

BOLD NEW MUSIC

Azadi Records mainstreams the fringe

Sidika Sehgal
New Delhi

HOW to know what young India is thinking? One way is to listen to its contemporary music. Bollywood's hits tell their own stories. But far from the limelight of commercial success, in small towns and inner cities, also spring up songs and rhythms that have a pulse of their own.

Making their presence felt as performers are a number of young talents. They are rising stars in a hip-hop world of raw Indian realities. Infused in their lyrics and music are their personal histories. They are passionate and bold and flaunt a unique fusion of many influences. Their concerns are caste, communalism, the environmental crisis, free speech, identity, politics and more.

Bringing them out of their social enclaves and into the mainstream is Azadi Records, an independent music label started in March 2017 by Uday Kapur and Mo Joshi.

Kapur, who is 28, used to be a journalist who wrote on South Asia's underground music scene for *VICE India*, *Sole DXB*, *Rolling Stones* and other magazines.

Thirty-eight year old Joshi was a vocalist in a hip-hop band in the UK and worked with Grammy award-winning labels Ston'd Records and Illa State. He moved to India in 2014 and in 2015 took over *deshiphop.com*, the world's largest platform dedicated to South Asian hip-hop.

Once they had met they knew that the one thing they wanted to do together was build a music label that truly represented India. When Kapur was working as a music journalist, he felt that what was being defined as 'Indian independent music' was really only being tapped from Mumbai, Bengaluru and Delhi. "That's not India. So I thought, how do I play my part rather than just be cynical about it? How do I make this change happen?" he says.

They invested their own money and started Azadi Records. Three years down the line their roster has 10 musicians from Srinagar, Calicut, Surat, Delhi and Mumbai. Azadi Records' musicians sing in Punjabi, Kashmiri, Marathi, Gujarati, Bengali, Hindi, English and Tamil, and across genres of hip-hop, R&B and electronic music.

"We have eight languages across the label. This didn't happen by chance, we worked to make it

happen," emphasizes Joshi. They have 103 tracks, 27 music videos and 20 million streams to their name.

Why a controversial name like Azadi? "First of all we wanted to give artistes the freedom to put out the music they want to put out. It's important to provide everyone the access to say what they want to say and deliver their message," says Joshi.

Kapur explains that the word *azadi* got stigmatized after Kanhaiya Kumar was slapped with a sedition case in February 2016. He was accused of using the word to demand freedom for Kashmir though he was, actually, talking of *azadi* from hunger and poverty.

"Any individual who said *azadi* then was thought to be useless. They might not be talking about Kashmir. They could be talking about farmers' rights or parking issues, for all you care," remarks Kapur. Naming the label Azadi Records was an attempt to restore its status.

The idea was also to produce music that was politically conscious and progressive. "Music should evoke thought in people, especially considering the time and space we are living in," remarks Joshi.

SEARCH FOR TALENT: Finding unusual musicians means searching for authentic stories. It means looking where no one else is looking. Kapur and Joshi go to lesser-known music festivals like Haflong in Assam to find talent. Crawling through SoundCloud and their inboxes has also led to some discoveries.

As a result, Azadi Records now has a diverse portfolio of artistes. There is Prabh Deep and Seedhe Maut from Delhi, Ahmer Javed and Ali Safuddin from Srinagar, Swadesi, Tienas, Rak and DJ Blunt from Mumbai, DJ Uri from Surat and Sharan Jayan from Calicut.

Their songs get to the nub of current concerns. "The Warli Revolt", a song by Swadesi, a hip-hop collective, spoke for the Warli Adivasi community living in the Aarey forest where hoary trees were being axed to make way for a Metro car shed. Environment groups protested. The Supreme Court stepped in and restrained authorities from tree felling in October 2019.

Swadesi went into the Aarey forest and got Prakash Bhoir, the tribal chief of the Warlis, to collaborate with them. The song that emerged has a rhythm and beat that is distinctly tribal. It says:

*Hold your development dreams
Back off from our forest
You tempt us with money
To make us your slaves*

"Azadi doesn't make you into a yo-yo rapper," says 25-year-old M.C. Mawali, aka Aklesh Sutar, of Swadesi. His inclination to music came from his family – Sutar's father used to play the harmonium. As a young boy in school, he wrote rhythmic poetry. His friends introduced him to hip-hop and rap.

Through their music, Swadesi hopes to challenge the way people are made to think. "We have become like machines blindly believing in so-called facts," he says. "Art is political first, and a form of entertainment later."

Swadesi also runs Swadesi Treks, an initiative which organizes camps and treks around Mumbai. Their love for nature and for communities that live in harmony with the environment inspires many of their songs and lyrics.

Prabh Deep, a 26-year-old Punjabi rapper from Tilak Nagar in Delhi, is one of Azadi's rising stars. Apple Music recently featured him as their spotlight artiste of the month. His song, "Suno", is about rampant drug abuse in his locality. The video features a boy who bunks school and instead helps a drug dealer. Prabh Deep raps:

*Be your own man
Don't follow the herd
You sold your education
Bought a book
Educated yourself
And learnt nothing*

"Suno" is one of 12 songs in Prabh Deep's debut album, *Class-Sikh*. His lyrics talk of growing up in Tilak Nagar, a locality with a significant Sikh population. Prabh Deep's grandfather died in 1984 in the anti-Sikh riots, and his third album will explore the trauma that passes from one generation to the next.

So lyrics also reflect the personal histories of music performers. Ahmer Javed from Srinagar relates stories of his childhood in Kashmir. His



The atmosphere is electric at performances by Azadi Records

Picture by Samarth Shirke



Ahmer Javed, rapper from Srinagar, sings about life in a conflict zone

Picture by Swaraj Sriwastav

Finding unusual musicians means searching for authentic stories. It means looking where no one else is looking. Kapur and Joshi go to lesser-known music festivals to find talent.

song, "Elaan", a *jugalbandi* with Prabh Deep, is a searing indictment of the powers that rule Kashmir. "My whole childhood has been at war," he sings.

*You know where I come from
The most dangerous place on earth
Justice they deny it
Violations bring them joy*

Prabh Deep hits out at the media in "Elaan".

*Ask yourself
Who created this hate in your heart?
By depicting half-truths.*

Javed's album, *Little Kid, Big Dreams*, is partly

autobiographical. *Little Kid, Big Dreams*, is a heartfelt song about his journey as an introverted child in school to a rapper. He sings:

*How are we to feed our families
We are out of business
Our schools don't open
We were sold by our own
Whom you vote and elect.*

Javed came to Delhi when he was 16 and now divides his time between Srinagar and Delhi, so that he can pursue music. Being away from home and missing family events and celebrations is not easy, he says.

When Javed first met Kapur, he felt that talking about Kashmir might not sell. But Kapur encouraged him to speak about his family's experiences. "I wanted him to rap in Kashmiri and create something for his people first, rather than think about what others might think," said Kapur.

Javed, who is only 25, believes music and politics are inextricably linked. "If you know people follow you, you can change their minds, educate them, or make them aware. This becomes a responsibility. If someone loves hip-hop, they'll respond to your message because they love the medium," he says.

He turned down offers from other music labels and opted for Azadi Records. The two are in sync. "Money is not what I started this journey for. Money will fade away. But I know when I listen to my music when I'm old, I won't regret it. It's satisfying to make the music I do."

Sharan Jayan, 28, is from Calicut in Kerala. His debut album, *Triangles*, combines classical music with hip-hop and multifarious sounds. The classical influence comes from his family. With Azadi Records he has been able to connect with other singers and music producers. "Creative freedom is everything for an artiste," he says.

CREATING LEGENDS: At Azadi Records, Kapur spends months with his musicians to produce an album. It takes time to create music that sounds fresh. Sometimes it means spending time with the musician's family and understanding where they come from so that the music can truly reflect their story.

Kapur and Joshi's own sensibilities about the role of musicians define the way they run their venture. "We're looking for artistes who want to create a legacy through their work rather than those who just want three minutes of fame. We want them to create something that will stand the test of time. Having 20 million views on a music video is one thing, but are people listening to that song after a year?" asks Kapur.

"Fifty years from now, if someone looks back at this era, they will wonder, 'What were the arts and culture saying? What idea of India did artistes have?'" says Kapur.

But they are careful not to impose any sameness in their range of music. "We don't treat it like a formula. Each artiste has a different sound."

Sez on the Beat, aka Sajeel Kapoor, a 25-year-old music producer, played an integral role in producing Azadi's music. He brought the artiste's vision to life, and Kapur credits him for enhancing the music their artistes produced. Sez parted ways after working with them for two years.

Right now, Kapur is working with Ali Safuddin, a singer from Srinagar. It took him months to get Safuddin on board and reassure him that his story would be put out as it is. Safuddin's album will come out this year. At the moment, he has a day job at Red FM.

"We're not asking them to be someone they're not," says Kapur. This freedom is invaluable to performers, who turned down other offers to be part of Azadi Records.

While Kapur works with performers to help develop their music, Joshi handles the bookings and operations. Till a few months back, Azadi Records was a two-person company. They expanded their team recently.



Picture by Samarth Shirke

Prabh Deep is one of Azadi's most popular performers



Picture by Meghan Katti

Seedhe Maut, the Delhi-based duo, pose with an exuberant crowd at the end of a performance



Picture by Samrat Nagar

Seedhe Maut: Encore ABJ and MC Calm

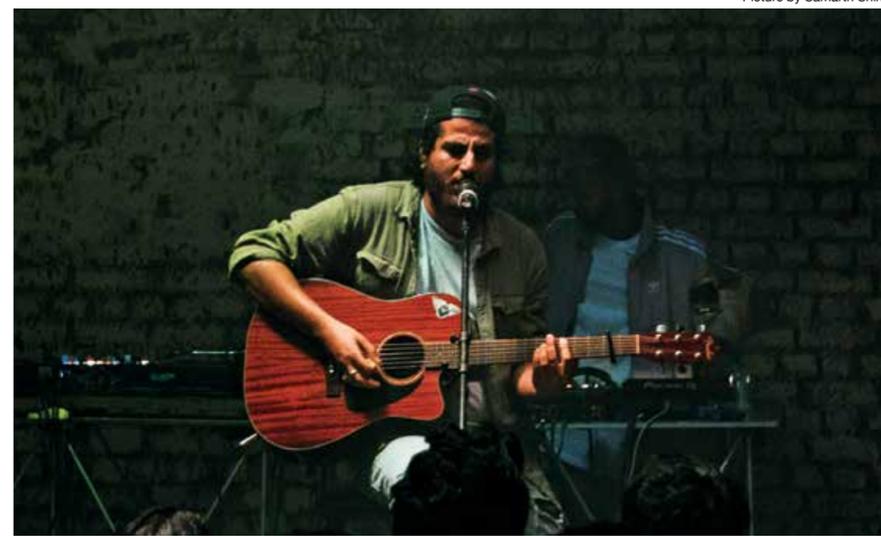
THE STRAIGHT PATH: In the spirit of building an ethical music label, Kapur and Joshi have upturned some norms of the music industry. The general rule of thumb is that singers relinquish their rights over their music when they sell it to a label. But at Azadi Records, singers own most of their music while the label takes only a small percentage.

"We don't own any of the music. We publish it, so we lease it from the artiste for, say, five years. If they're happy with us, they can continue leasing it," explained Kapur.

This is unheard of in the music industry. Azadi Records is redefining the rules of the game and showing that a music label can do well without exploiting performers.

But producing music isn't cheap. Azadi Records does not have a fat marketing budget to promote their musicians. None of their artistes have verified accounts on social media despite an impressive body of work.

"We're growing our enterprise which means we're investing more than we're earning," says Kapur, who jokes they are always short of money. Both he and



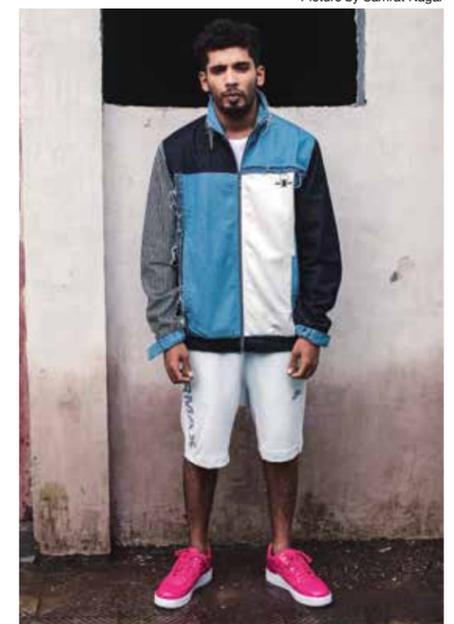
Picture by Samarth Shirke

Ali Safuddin, Azadi Records' latest discovery



Picture by Samarth Shirke

Swadesi, a hip-hop collective, sings for the environment and communities who live in harmony with nature



Picture by Samrat Nagar

Sharan Jayan fuses classical music into his compositions

will take away audiences from popular venues," says Kapur.

YOUTHFUL FOLLOWERS: Azadi's singers — cool, intense and so contemporary — appeal to the more discerning youth. They offer an attractive alternative to popular rappers like Badshah, Raftaar and Honey Singh, whose songs are mostly about alcohol, women or club culture.

Shamik Gupta, a 22-year-old law student at Gujarat National Law University, recently saw a short documentary by *VICE* on Azadi Records and now plans to listen to each artiste one by one. Prabh Deep is among his favourites though he doesn't always understand the Punjabi lyrics. "It's the tone that comes through and draws me towards his music," says Gupta.

Seedhe Maut's rhythmic gangsta rap about small town aspirations has appeal for many reasons. "Their songs are full of *josh*, they are also great gym songs. They get you going," says Karan Shinghal, 25 and an entrepreneur.

Shinghal also enjoys Swadesi's music. He likes the band because they talk of sustainability and environment through their music. "Music has the potential to push people to think about important things."

Azadi's shows attract large numbers and the atmosphere is electric. It is mostly people below 35 who attend. This has a lot to do with the genre of their songs — hip-hop and electronic music tend to appeal to a younger audience. Many among their audience are also students who spend a lot of time online searching for new music and others who follow the underground rap scene.

"It's a unique show because of the variety. And it's amazing because they all support each other on stage and you can see that," said Alexander Toppo, a recent graduate from St. Xavier's College, Mumbai.

Azadi Records has paved the way for socially conscious music and given it space in mainstream music. You could say Azadi Records realized the time was right for an enterprise like theirs. ■

Joshi haven't taken a salary for three years.

They earn through a unique 360-degree model. The label manages the singer and the band's bookings and endorsements and takes a commission. That money is then used to run the company and produce their music.

But getting endorsements is not easy because Azadi's musicians hold a mirror to Indian society and speak of things that a brand may not like to be seen as promoting, although they attract droves of young fans.

When Kapur was working as a journalist, he noticed that a lot of singers were in fact writing music with a brand partnership in mind. Music labels were seeking such partnerships. An artiste would bring a track to a label and they would begin thinking about which brand could sponsor it.

Kapur and Joshi were determined to change this revenue model. That means they have to work harder at getting endorsements for the kind of music and lyrics that Azadi Records promotes. Sometimes they end up losing money.

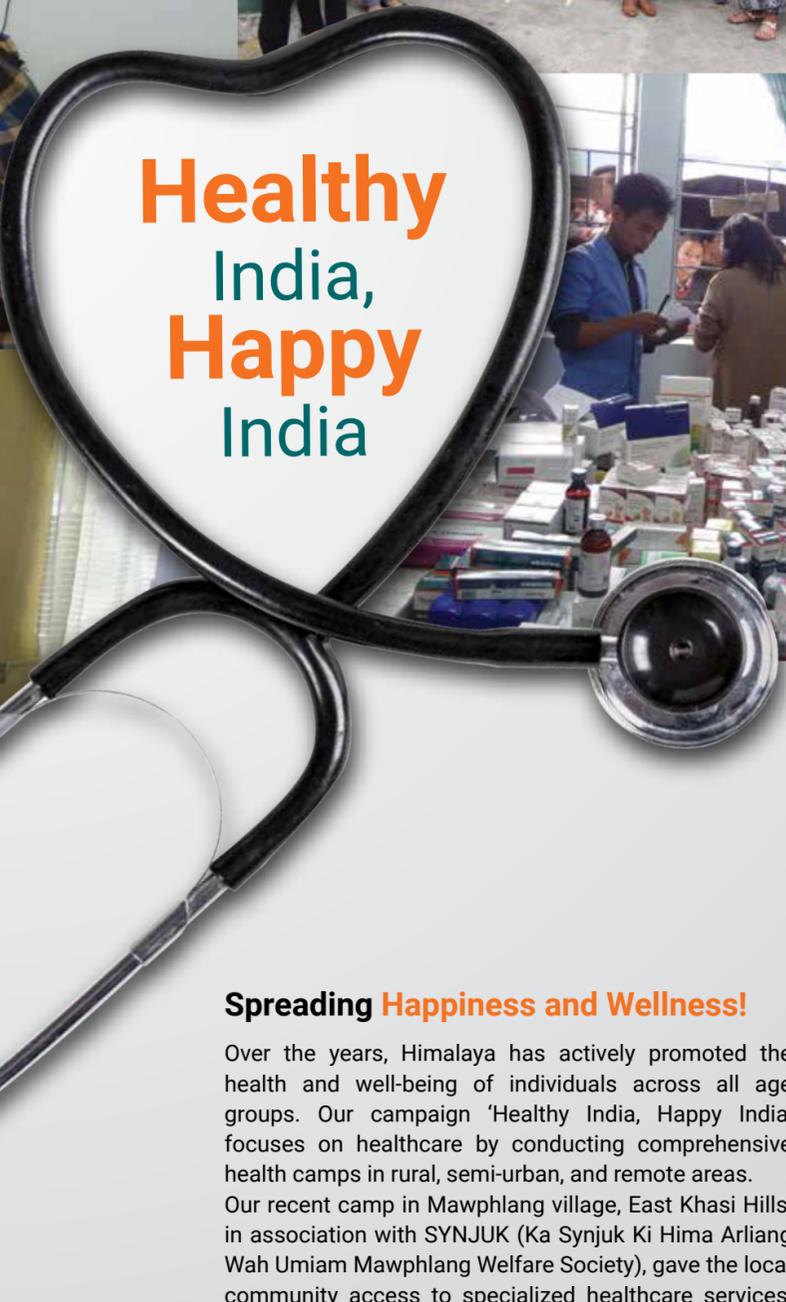
Azadi Records finds sponsors among beer brands because their concerts attract a young, club-going

audience. Budweiser, Simba and Bira have sponsored their concerts in the past. Others like DC Shoes and Adidas come on board as lifestyle partners, and *VICE* as a content partner.

Sticking to principles also means they do forgo an opportunity at times. Their musicians were booked to perform at the Pune NH7 Weekender Festival in December 2018. But when organizers of the festival were accused of sexual harassment, Azadi Records decided to pull out of the festival. The music festival attracts large numbers and could have given their performers visibility. It could also have got some brands interested.

Kapur feels they haven't disrupted the music industry enough. Venues, for instance, remain accessible only to middle and upper class crowds. When rappers like Divine and Naezy, the real life gully boys, perform, children from their low income community aren't allowed to enter. This kind of profiling happens at their shows too, and there's not much they can do about it.

"We will disrupt the industry only when we get funding to physically own a piece of real estate and have a venue. The hope is that we



Healthy
India,
Happy
India

Spreading Happiness and Wellness!

Over the years, Himalaya has actively promoted the health and well-being of individuals across all age groups. Our campaign 'Healthy India, Happy India' focuses on healthcare by conducting comprehensive health camps in rural, semi-urban, and remote areas.

Our recent camp in Mawphlang village, East Khasi Hills, in association with SYNJUK (Ka Synjuk Ki Hima Arliang Wah Umiam Mawphlang Welfare Society), gave the local community access to specialized healthcare services, such as Dental, Ophthalmology, Gynecology, Pediatrics, Orthopedics, and General screening. Awareness sessions were conducted on health and hygiene, and free medicines were distributed during the camp. Through this initiative, we reached out to over 1000 individuals.

Similar camps have also been conducted in Rajasthan and in more than 378 schools in Bengaluru.



INSIGHTS

OPINION | ANALYSIS | RESEARCH | IDEAS

The citizenship paradox



I was amused to read a tweet from Indian external affairs minister Subrahmanyam Jaishankar in which he quoted former Union minister Suresh Prabhu approvingly to say, "The rootless are ruthless." He was speaking at the annual Ideas for India Conclave near Vadodara. The tweet enthused the supporters of the ruling Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP). It elicited 1,500 likes and 577 retweets. I wondered in what context Prabhu had deployed that catchy phrase. The BJP enthusiasts thought he was referring to 'left, liberals' — their pet hate. One of them tweeted, "Those who forget their past, loose their future. Vedas have sustained our civilisation."

So, I googled. Guess what? Prabhu was plagiarizing either from an Iranian rapper's song or from the 1996 Human Development Report (HDR) of the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) written by Pakistan's Mahbub ul Haq. The HDR quote is as follows: "Human development is the end — economic growth a means. Economic growth, if not properly managed, can be jobless, voiceless, ruthless, rootless and futureless, and thus detrimental to human development. The quality of growth is therefore as important as its quantity; for poverty reduction, human development and sustainability."

The UNDP's HDR, as many readers of *Civil Society* would know, triggered a global debate in the mid-1990s on the quality of growth and forced the Indian government, centre and states, at that time to pay greater attention to public investment in education, healthcare and social welfare. The HDR's reference to rootlessness and ruthlessness of growth was a left-liberal critique of what is referred to as 'neo-liberal' economics that places greater emphasis on growth per se, neglecting its welfare consequences.

My Google search also revealed another, more recent, potential source of Prabhu's inspiration. It's a song called "Jet" sung by an Iranian rapper, Nadia Tehran. Tehran voices the alienation of the Iranian expat. "Luxury refugee / Apology? Not from me / Dior head to toe / Yeah, I came in on a boat /

Rootless and ruthless / Smiling, I'm toothless / Catch me at the airport / Fly like a jet." Talking about her song, she told a journalist, "This is the diaspora life."

Of course, Prabhu was not the first to deploy that idea in the service of nationalism. Britain's former prime minister, Theresa May, put it eloquently when she said at her party's annual conference in 2016, "If you believe you are a Citizen of the World, you are a Citizen of Nowhere." However, there is a difference between an expatriate and an emigrant. Expats become globalized out of choice. Emigrants, often out of necessity.

For Nadia Tehran, enforced emigration is the cause of rootlessness. The emigrant then becomes

The celebration of the Indian diaspora and the seeking of more visas for Indians to go overseas in search of a better life sits uncomfortably with the desire to define who is an Indian and who is not. To identify the other and to privilege the US against *them*. It is odd that even the ministers of commerce (Prabhu) and external affairs (Jaishankar) should be thinking of the rootless as the ruthless when their day job has been one of finding employment opportunities overseas for Indians. India's commerce ministry has elevated to the status of High Principle the demand for employment outside India for Indians. In the language of the World Trade Organization (WTO), it is called Mode 4: Movement of Natural Persons.



Iranian rapper Nadia Tehran

Under the WTO's General Agreement on Trade in Services (GATS), "The movement of natural persons is one of the four ways through which services can be supplied internationally. Otherwise known as 'Mode 4', it covers natural persons who are either service suppliers (such as independent professionals) or who work for a service supplier and who are present in another WTO member to supply a service."

I have nothing against India seeking easier overseas access for employment opportunities for Indians. After all, if there can be rules for trade in goods and for movement of capital, why should there not be rules for trade in services and movement of people? The point, however, is that the pursuit of this trade agenda and the celebration of the Indian diaspora of globally dispersed Indians sits incongruously with the nationalism of the BJP that seeks to privilege citizenship, the

rooted over the rootless, and defines who is an Indian in narrower and narrower terms. The other paradox of the Citizenship (Amendment) Act (CAA) is that it implicitly defines a 'global Hindu' community entitled to Indian citizenship and thereby creates a Hindu equivalent of the Muslim Ummah. The CAA's definition is not yet 'global' since it restricts itself to a few immediate neighbours. But once the principle is accepted it can be applied globally — a Hindu anywhere in the world can become entitled to Indian citizenship on the plea of persecution. Incidentally, while the concept of Ummah creates a global Muslim community, few Muslim countries are willing to offer citizenship as a right to Muslims of other countries. The CAA has opened many closed boxes and it remains to be seen how the controversy around it evolves. ■

It was equally incongruous to see hundreds of thousands of Indians cheer US President Donald Trump at a 'Namaste Trump' rally in Ahmedabad, when Trump is the one who is building walls to keep immigrants out of his homeland. What has Trump done for India that so many cheered him so enthusiastically? He gets a higher approval rating in India than in the US!

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Sanjaya Baru is a writer and Distinguished Fellow at the Institute for Defence Studies & Analysis in New Delhi.

Cut out the space tech drama



TECH TALES

KIRAN KARNIK

MILLIONS of Indians stayed awake all night on September 6-7, 2019, eyes glued to their TV sets. It was not, as one might imagine, a thrilling cricket World Cup final featuring India; what had them transfixed was something equally exciting — the descent of a lander on the Moon, as part of India's Chandrayaan-2 mission. The real-time relay from ISRO's control room in Bengaluru showed the path of actual final descent matching the planned path, and excitement built up in homes across the country. With just a few minutes to go for what promised to be a perfect touch-down, a few noticed an apparent deviation. Millions of hearts missed a beat as no news of a safe landing came at the appointed hour; instead, they saw worried faces in the control room. All desperately hoped for the best. But that was not to be: despite possibilities of a safe landing despite loss of communication, the lander had, in fact, crashed.

As those connected with it are aware, space missions are risky, with failures not being uncommon. This, despite design reviews, rigorous testing and every possible precaution. All space-faring nations have seen failures and these are accepted as part of the inherent uncertainties of the very complex equipment and operations that space technology entails. India's policy-makers and leaders have been very understanding of this, accepting occasional failures as part of the process — beginning from the first major failure in 1979, when the country's first satellite launch vehicle ended up in the Bay of Bengal instead of outer space, to the Chandrayaan lander's crash landing.

In this context, raising public interest — as Mangalyaan, the Mars orbiter mission, and Chandrayaan-2 did — is a double-edged sword. While there are undoubted benefits, there is also a downside. The former includes getting young people excited about careers in science and research. It is also an opportunity to create scientific temper amongst people at large, with extensive media coverage on the project and what it entails providing a means of expounding the basic principles of science behind such a mission. On the other hand, excessive publicity and (as its cause and effect) the presence of top political figures at the live-viewing

makes these “prestige projects”, and raises expectations. This can cause undue pressure on the mission leadership. While few will admit to it, such high-level “presence” surely lurks at the back of the mind and may well tilt the balance if a split-second decision has to be made on postponing or aborting a launch.

There is another factor too at play. Media coverage and attention are inevitably focussed on events: a rocket launch, a Moon landing. The fact that they also provide great visuals — a rocket taking off, a tension-filled control room with multiple large screens and a backdrop of anxious faces — adds to their attractiveness for audiences/readers, and hence for media.

In the process, elements of the space endeavour that lack such instant appeal draw little media attention. Yet, it is these programmes that bring true



The Chandrayaan-2 take-off

Elements of the space endeavour that lack such instant appeal draw little media attention. Yet, it is these programmes that bring true benefit to the people and country.

benefit to the people and the country. These include satellite communication, encompassing broadcasting, telecommunication and disaster warning; remote sensing, with its ability to monitor crops, identify and plan land use, water-shed mapping, urban planning, helping fishery and oceanography; weather forecasting and meteorological applications. These and a whole host of other applications make space technology an invaluable accelerator of development. However, these are on-going processes, not events; therefore, they are hardly amenable to the same type of media-driven mass attention. Such applications have been the mainstay of India's space programme — efforts that have not only contributed to the country's development, but have also won

wide acclaim world-wide.

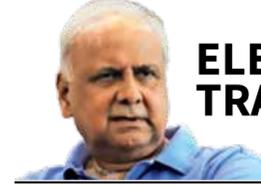
India's space programme was conceived and has been executed with the philosophy that it must aid the country's development. Accordingly, it has been applications-led, with possible uses being the main determinant of which technologies are developed. Unlike space programmes in almost all other countries, which have their origin in military (missile) development, in India it is the reverse, with civil and development needs being the genesis.

An interesting indicator is that in its formative years, ISRO had well over a hundred social scientists on its rolls — uniquely amongst global space organisations — to ensure that its application programmes met the real needs of the country. One of its arms looked at technological feasibility, analysed economic viability and assessed social desirability, so as to identify applications that would be at the intersection of these three sets. Ideally, programmes would ensure development or use of technologies that made economic sense and met social goals. An example from 1975 is the use of a state-of-the-art high-power satellite to take TV programmes on agriculture, education and health to villagers through an ISRO-developed reception system (the precursor to today's DTH). Another example is the use of satellite communication to take health services to remote areas: tele-medicine. These instances from ISRO's early days are indicative not only of its focus on the development challenges facing the country, but also on its sensitivity about “inclusion”, of using technology for services for the disadvantaged.

This application-orientation was a great motivator for the scientists and technologists, as it gave relevance and meaning to the development of technologies. One hopes that this focus and commitment have entered into the DNA of ISRO, and that it does not get carried away by the hype or publicity of high-profile events. With Moon landings and human flight programmes (like Gaganyaan), justified as they may be, there is a danger — and nascent signs — of organisational effort and direction being mainly concentrated on such prestige projects at the cost of applications that support development. In this centenary year, ISRO may like to heed the words of Vikram Sarabhai, the visionary regarded as the father of India's space programme: “...we must be second to none in the application of advanced technologies to the real problems of man and society, which we find in our country... (this is) not to be confused with grandiose schemes, whose primary impact is for show...” ■

Dr Kiran Karnik is an independent strategy and public policy analyst. His recent books include *eVolution: Decoding India's Disruptive Tech Story* (2018) and *Crooked Minds: Creating an Innovative Society* (2016).

Are EVMs and VVPATs reliable?



ELECTION TRACKER

JAGDEEP CHHOKAR

ELECTRONIC Voting Machines (EVMs) were first conceived by the Election Commission of India (ECI) as a replacement for the ballot paper and the ballot box in 1977. The design and development of the machine was entrusted to a public sector undertaking, the Electronics Corporation of India Ltd (ECIL) in Hyderabad which developed a prototype by 1979.

After this prototype had been tested by the ECI to its satisfaction, it was demonstrated to representatives of various political parties on August 5, 1980. Following a broad consensus, EVMs were first used in the North Paravur Assembly Constituency in Kerala in May 1982 in 50 out of 85 polling stations.

In the result, announced on May 20, 1982, the winner was declared to have secured 30,450 votes and the runner-up 30,327 votes. The difference between the two was only 123 votes. Of the 30,450 votes that the winner got, 11,268 were cast manually, “according to the conventional method provided in the Conduct of Election Rules, 1961”, using ballot papers and ballot boxes, and 19,182 votes were cast through EVMs. The runner-up challenged the result in court and the case finally landed up in the Supreme Court.

The challenge was based on the argument that the Conduct of Election Rules, 1961, specifically mentioned that “ballot papers” will be used in “voting by ballot”, and describes the “Form of ballot paper” as “Every ballot paper shall have a counterfoil attached thereto, and the said ballot paper and the counterfoil shall be in such language or languages, as the Election Commission may direct,” and didn't mention any other kind of voting. Therefore, voting by mechanical process, such as EVMs, was not permissible. The Supreme Court “set aside the election of the respondent with respect to the 50 polling stations where the voting machines were used” and directed “a repoll to be held in these 50 polling stations”.

Subsequently, the Representation of the People Act, 1951, was amended by Parliament in December 1988, empowering the ECI to use voting machines. A general consensus was finally reached in 1998, and EVMs were used in 25 legislative assembly constituencies across the three states of Madhya Pradesh, Rajasthan and Delhi. This restricted usage was gradually expanded till the final frontier was crossed in 2004 when more than 100,000 EVMs were used in all 543 parliamentary constituencies in the country in the general election to the 2004 Lok Sabha.

EVMs have been embroiled in some controversy or the other almost since their introduction. The first really serious objection came up in 2009 when LK Advani expressed doubts on the credibility and reliability of EVMs and demanded a return to paper ballots. The ECI countered these views saying that it was “absolutely satisfied that EVMs couldn't be manipulated” and that a technical committee headed by former IIT Madras director P.V. Indiresan had been set up to ensure this. The Indiresan Committee subsequently certified that the machines were fully reliable.

In 2010, GVL Narasimha Rao wrote a book titled, *Democracy At Risk! Can We Trust Our Electronic Voting Machines?* Despite continued criticism from diverse quarters, one fact stood out: every political party criticized EVMs when it lost an election but the same party seemed quite satisfied when it won. This was confirmed in a series of assembly elections when different parties won or lost in various states. Criticism continued, and so did the use of EVMs.

In 2010, at an all-party meeting held in the ECI, a proposal to introduce a Voter Verifiable Paper Audit Trail (VVPAT) for further transparency and

EVMs, it can be said, with some confidence can malfunction, like any mechanical-electrical equipment, but the possibility of manipulation seems very far-fetched. The VVPATs are however, another affair.

verifiability in the poll process came up. The Technical Expert Committee on EVMs, appointed by the ECI, in consultation with the manufacturers of EVMs, ECIL, Hyderabad and Bharat Electronics Ltd (BEL), Bengaluru, political parties and members of civil society, oversaw the development of a prototype in 2011. A large number of trials and field tests were done followed by changes in the design, and a second version of the VVPAT prototype was made. It was again subjected to rigorous tests and the Technical Expert Committee recommended use of this version of VVPATs on February 19, 2013.

The Conduct of Election Rules, 1961, were amended on August 14, 2013, enabling the Commission to use VVPATs with EVMs. VVPATs were used with EVMs for the first time in a by-election in 51-Noksen (ST) assembly constituency in Nagaland. Thereafter, VVPATs have been used progressively in various elections.

Doubts continue to be expressed about both

EVMs and VVPATs. As far as the EVMs are concerned, it can be said with a fair degree of confidence that they can certainly malfunction, like any mechanical-electrical equipment, but the possibility of their being manipulated seems very far-fetched. The VVPATs are, however, another affair.

Just before the 2019 Lok Sabha elections, 21 Opposition parties petitioned the Supreme Court that at least 50 percent of VVPAT slips or 125 polling booths in each constituency be counted for verification, instead of one EVM as the ECI was planning to do. The Supreme Court increased the number to five instead of one.

During the 2019 Lok Sabha elections, held in seven phases from April 11 to May 19, 2019, the ECI launched a new initiative in the form of a new application called the “My Voter Turnout App” (later replaced with “Voter Turnout App”) which “is used to display real-time voter turnout details of each Assembly Constituency/Parliamentary Constituency including the number of men, women and third gender”. As the election progressed through various phases, the data displayed by the app, for constituencies in which the polling process was over, seemed to change from one day to the next. In addition, serious discrepancies were found between the number of votes polled and the number of votes counted.

When this was brought to the attention of the ECI, it issued a clarification via a press note on June 1, 2019, saying inter alia:

“Also, Index Card in use since last over five decades, is prepared by the Returning Officer to furnish the voting data (including postal ballot data), polled and counted, after the declaration of the result, which becomes the final authenticated data for all purposes including analysis and research... For General Elections 2019, Commission has already directed all the Returning Officers on 26 March 2019 to send the Index Cards within 15 days of the declaration of the Result.”

“In earlier elections, it used to take months to collect such authenticated election data from all the ROs. Even in 2014, it took between two to three months after the declaration of results to collect and collate such data in authenticated form. Due to the innovative IT initiatives taken by the Commission this time, the final data on votes counted has been made available within a few days of the declaration of results.”

A simple reading of the above excerpts shows clearly that “the final authenticated data for all purposes including analysis and research,” is prepared and is available only “after the declaration of the Result.” It seems very strange, actually defies imagination, that the result is declared before the authenticated data is available!

Since satisfactory explanations were not available, these issues are now in the Supreme Court. It is hoped that the Court will be able to get these resolved so that people's confidence in the electoral process is ensured. ■

Jagdeep S. Chhokar is a former Professor, Dean, and Director In-charge of the Indian Institute of Management, Ahmedabad (IIM-A), and a founder-member of the Association for Democratic Reforms (ADR). Views are personal.

Learning by doing



VILLAGE VOICES

R. BALASUBRAMANIAM

YOUNG Mara came rushing to me in a very disturbed frame of mind. He was then studying in Class 3 in our tribal residential school. Mara was carrying his Kannada language textbook which had a lesson titled 'Jenukurubas of Karnataka'. The lesson began with the photo of a half-naked child clad in leaves sitting on an elephant.

Mara emphatically said that neither he nor his friends covered themselves in leaves nor had they ever sat on an elephant. He wanted to know whether the description of Jenukurubas (honey-gathering tribes) in the textbook was erroneous or whether he had to now change his dress habits and find an elephant to sit on!

I found myself angry and confused about what to tell young Mara. This incident also got me to go through all the prescribed textbooks. I found the content in most lessons to be very urban-centric. It was evident that not much attention had been paid to the needs of children in rural areas. Homogenous content across the state is a severe limitation.

Though this incident happened in the late 1980s, the state of affairs has not changed much. Apart from stereotyping our rural and tribal communities, the content in textbooks continues to revolve around urban contexts and needs. Despite numerous committees, the confusion and debate on what is relevant and how learning-teaching needs to be transacted endures. Despite the passage of several years, I continue to struggle with making the learning process joyful and experiential and the pedagogy contextually relevant and culturally appropriate.

More than a century ago Swami Vivekananda spoke about how education cannot be the mere aggregation of information running riot in the brain. He had wanted it to be 'man-making' and 'character-building'. His famous quote of "education being the manifestation of the perfection already inherent in man" was something that deeply resonated within me.

All that I had at that time were these inspirational words of Swami Vivekananda and the urge to make schooling interesting. Added to this was my inexperience and complete lack of understanding of pedagogy, classroom techniques or educational psychology.

To make life interesting for children like Mara, I

decided to try a small experiment. It was driven more by the need to keep the children engaged rather than ensure any pre-determined learning outcomes. I knew that I was facing the challenge of getting a child used to a free life to move away from his traditional learning eco-system into a more structured learning space amidst four walls. Children like Mara were learning constantly from their elders and here I was trying to tell them that a school with qualified teachers was a more interesting option.

The experiment with these seven- to nine-year-olds began with the only resources that we had — land and the children — and my limited understanding of experiential and joyful learning methods. The children were divided into small groups of four to six. Each group was allotted plots of land measuring eight feet by 15 feet. Each group had students from all classes. All that they needed to do was grow vegetables that they could eat, once harvested.



Students in a school in Kerala learn how to grow vegetables and fruits

I grew up in Bengaluru with no idea of how to grow vegetables. So I had to leave it to the children to find their own teaching resources. They turned to their parents and elders in their families apart from intuitively knowing the right things to do. Whether it was advice from elders or getting seeds, implements and organic manure from home, suddenly this schooling activity turned into a community-owned one. And, along with the children, I was also getting schooled on how to prepare the soil, how preparation was different for different vegetables, how to de-weed and how to space the seedlings. It was amazing how each day unfolded with a new task, new learning and a more engaged collective enterprise. Allocation of work happened seamlessly with older children doing harder tasks while the younger ones contributed in their own way.

What started as a fun activity soon evolved into learning much more. The weighing and counting of vegetables and pricing them meant that the children

now had to learn simple maths. The notional selling of vegetables to the school kitchen meant costing and pricing them. They also learnt how to haggle with the kitchen supervisor and get a good rate. Some children sketched and painted pictures of what they grew and used them as promotional material. Talking about what they had grown and its nutritive content during the lunch hour was also part of the activity. They learnt that working together meant disagreements, ego challenges, arbitration and dealing with conflicts. It was fun to see the children beam with pride when things went their way and struggle with their emotions after wild boars raided their little plots.

It was as though maths, arts, business management, emotion management, leadership, market dynamics, food and nutrition, economics, biology and human-animal conflict were all rolled into one continuous learning experience. More importantly, this education was a collective enterprise with no age differentiation, with community participation and with no learning-teaching hierarchies. The process was fun and what made it more fun for these children was my ignorance bordering on stupidity when it came to understanding nature and its vagaries.

Whether it was managing the ants and not using pesticides or exchanging vegetables amongst themselves, one could see how values, traditions and community narratives of different anthropological groups were being shared with ease and aplomb.

Looking back, I can now see how these children were learning much more than what one had intended or anticipated. They were learning at their own pace from their peers and building up knowledge that could actually help them negotiate the complexities of adult life in an economically demanding world.

We talk today about learning 21st-century skills and understanding how children should learn to be creative, think independently, work in groups and have skills that enable them to constantly learn. Beyond the semantics these little tribal children were learning in ways in which their own traditional knowledge was celebrated and not seen as something to be ashamed of.

As the divide between our rural and urban areas shrinks and as pressure mounts for people to be part of the economic food chain, we now need to ask ourselves how to prepare our children with the knowledge and skills to thrive in this modern economy. We also need to ask ourselves how we can retain centuries of traditional knowledge, embedded human values and the life skills that children receive generationally to ensure that they are well prepared for the demands of modern life. ■

Dr R. Balasubramaniam, founder of the Swami Vivekananda Youth Movement, Mysuru, is a development activist and author. www.drbbalu.com

LIVING

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Will the Kunbi weave survive?

With Goa govt help, the skill begins to return

ASHWINI KAMAT

BABURAO Babaji Tilve's face lights up as he takes down the tarpaulin covering his loom and weaving tools. "I closed this loom down in 2015. A mild paralytic stroke weakened my legs, otherwise I would have gladly continued to weave till my last breath. This is the sacred legacy of my father that I served honestly for 68 years," says the 85-year-old master craftsman.

Baburao and his eldest daughter-in-law, 56-year-old Anuradha, now run a small grocery shop from their humble home in Paliyem, a laidback village 39 km north of Panaji. He began apprenticing at the age of 18 in 1952. When his father set up the handloom unit in a shed adjoining this house, around 450 to 500 looms were operational across Goa. Baburao's father taught him how to identify strong yarn and good quality natural dyes in Belgaum market and how to use these to create the checked Kunbi weave indigenous to Goa.

For almost eight decades, the Tilves sold their Kunbi loincloths, *gamchas* (cotton towels), handkerchiefs and bedsheets to shops in the famed textile market of Mapusa. A few locals, agricultural workers and even foreigners bought Kunbi products directly from Baburao's home.

"All this changed after Goa's liberation in 1961. Power loom fabrics from other states began to flood Goa's textile markets. These were cheaper, more colourful and hence more appealing. One by one, all our handlooms had to be closed down since we couldn't compete. I think I was the last to call it a day. There aren't any independent handloom weavers left in Goa anymore," Baburao says with his gaze fixed faraway on the horizon.

As income from weaving hardly made ends meet, none of Baburao's four children took it up as a profession despite being trained by him. Baburao's cousin, Umakant Sabaji Tilve, is the only other family member who pursued weaving. After acquiring formal training at the Indian Institute of Handloom Technology in Salem, Tamil Nadu, in 1979, he was employed at Goa's Department of Handicrafts, Textiles and Coir for 40 years until his recent retirement. "Mechanized factories located in the neighbouring states and elsewhere still dominate the textile market. Over the years, younger generations have been forced to move away from the looms for better income," says Umakant.

Dr Pratima Kamat, head of the Department of History at Goa University, confirms that, according to several records, Goa had a vibrant handloom industry at the time of liberation. Apart from the Tilves of Paliyem, there were several prominent



Baburao, the last Kunbi weaver, trains other weavers under a Goa government programme



families who operated handloom units.

"There was Narcinva Shankar Camotim in Candolim, who is known to have brought natural dyes from Japan in the 1930s. His son, Ranganath Kamat, who is now in his early 90s, continued the business. There were the Shettigars in Rasquinhas, Satardekar in Bardez taluka, Chafadkars in Ponda, to name a few," she says. Margao, the commercial capital of Goa, was well known for its textile markets. Exquisite Goan handloom fabrics, including the indigenous Kunbi weave, were sold there.

"What is at present being sold as Kunbi weave is not the original weave traditionally used by the Kunbis. The original Kunbi sari is 4.5 metres long and is woven using earthy colours to signify vitality," Dr Kamat explains.

Baburao speaks of how he was taught by his father to develop the pinkish red dye used for these saris with natural ingredients such as iron oxide and rice water. Sometimes,

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stripes of white, green, purple and indigo were added near the *pallu*. A 2.5 to three-inch wide dobby border in streams of white or gold ran along the sides of these saris.

The traditional Kunbi drape is known as *dethli* (knotted) due to the peculiar knot on the right shoulder which secures the *pallu*. The folds of the sari skirt flare out on the right, instead of the usual left. The sari is worn at least a foot above the ankle to enhance mobility while working in the fields. The garment is an identity marker of the Kunbi community, a Scheduled Tribe of Goa. The term "Kunbi" is derived from the Konkani words "kun" (people) and "bi" (seed). "Kunbi", therefore, literally refers to people who sow or germinate seeds.

This Kunbi weave shot to international fame in 2011 when acclaimed fashion designer Wendell



Arvind Bugde



Baburao Tilve

'This is not a revenue generating activity. Our intention is to revive the original weave and to position ourselves as a weaving cluster.'

Rodricks collaborated with Baburao and a gifted textile designer, Poonam Pandit, to design a collection of saris inspired by the traditional weave. But, notwithstanding its fame and popularity, it is still difficult to find the traditional Kunbi garment in Goa.

With no government support since 1961, the cottage handloom industry in the state had a near-death experience when Baburao stopped weaving. Fortunately, in 2016, Goa's Directorate of Handicrafts, Textiles and Coir began making targeted efforts to revive the handloom industry, especially the Kunbi hand-weave. As a result, the number of trained handloom weavers in Goa has steadily increased from zero to 37 in the last four years. Of these, 10 weavers have received advanced training to weave 100 thread-count checked Kunbi saris measuring six metres.

Arvind Bugde, director of the handicrafts, textiles and coir directorate, has been overseeing the formal plan of reviving Goa's withering handloom tradition. "This is not a revenue generating activity for us. Our main intention is to revive the original weave and to position ourselves as a handloom

weaving cluster of 200 to 300 weavers. Eventually, we will look to secure Geographical Indication (GI) for the Kunbi weave. We have identified certain focussed areas where the profession once flourished," he says, adding that by regenerating skilled labour in the sector, the directorate hopes to develop employment opportunities for women belonging to Scheduled Tribe and Scheduled Caste communities in rural parts of the state.

With this in mind, the directorate roped in Baburao and others to train its first batch of 10 weavers on two looms at the first training centre set up in 2016 at Madhlamaaj in Mandrem, Pernem taluka.

The handholding support programme spans six months or 75 hours of weaving practice. Having undergone a few tweaks since its initial batches, the programme now covers five training centres in North Goa. Two are located in the village of Korgao and one each in Harmal, Alorna and Mandrem. A total of 12 wooden looms and other instruments stationed at these centres have been crafted especially at the Directorate's Woodcraft Centre in Siolim.

Bugde says attracting students to the centres posed a mammoth task in the initial months. "Full-day training meant that the students had to give up other sources of income for six months. So, we began offering a monthly stipend of ₹1,000 for those wishing to be trained. But it was a totally new vocation and there was no guarantee of earning a comfortable livelihood. We have now reduced the training to half a day and the monthly stipend to ₹750," he explains.

At present, all fresh recruits are taught spooling, warping, using the loom to weave durries, towels and bedsheets during the first four months of their training. Batches are then sifted through for further skill upgradation and training to weave the Kunbi sari. Highly skilled weavers are offered employment as trainers and assistants at the handloom training centres.

While Kunbi fetches a good rate, Bugde admits that weaving it is a costly affair. Kunbi saris handwoven at these centres are sold at ₹2,500 each, of which around 70 percent goes to the weaver. Each sari takes anything between two days to a week to weave painstakingly and these saris are sold directly at the training centres. Around 600 to 800 gm of yarn is needed to produce one Kunbi sari. The directorate buys the yarn from neighbouring states where the rates are less volatile.

"Over the last six months, around 300 towels and a few dozen saris were produced in the five training centres. The production capacity is growing very gradually as more weavers are being trained. Eventually, we will employ a more economical way of training," he says.

For now, the directorate has decided not to waste its resources on weaving generic fabrics and saris in a market where it can't compete. Instead, its game plan is to focus on weaving Goa's own iconic Kunbi sari and to cater to the overwhelming market for this age-old piece of handloom. ■

A cathedral in Madurai! Not just temples

SUSHEELA NAIR

AS I approached the temple town of Madurai, the lofty *gopuras* of the Meenakshi Sundareshwar temple loomed into view in the distance. The temple is best seen at twilight when its lamp-lit halls and corridors acquire an air of quiet sanctity. I spent endless hours gazing at the tall towers with gold-plated *vimanam*, the musical pillars, the 1,000-pillared hall, *yali* sculptures with stone balls rolling in their gaping mouths, the 470-carat diamond crown of the goddess and the priceless exhibits in the Temple Museum.

Ambling around the pillared corridors surrounding the historical golden lotus temple tank, I marvelled at the architectural splendour of this temple. After the temple visit, I browsed through the exhibits relating to Tamil culture, featuring outstanding bronzes, in the Temple Museum.

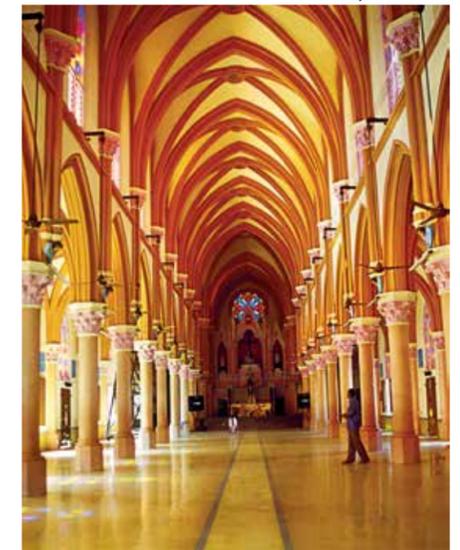
Outside the temple area, across from the east gate, is another architectural marvel, the Pudhu Mandapam, a large rectangular hall supported by 124 intricately carved pillars. It was built in 1623-45 by Tirumalai Nayak, and is also known as Tirumalai's Choultry. Built for Sundareshwar, it is said that the god appeared in the hall for 10 days each year, seated on the pedestal installed for him. His sojourn took place in the spring, which explains the hall's third name, the Vasantha Mandapam. Ten of the hall's columns are carved to represent life-size members of the Nayak dynasty; the canopied figure denotes Tirumalai.

The Tirumalai Nayak Palace is equally impressive. Its most striking feature is a courtyard surrounded by galleries supported by massive columns and ornamental arches. Built circa 1636 in the Indo-Mughal style, its 15 domes and arches are adorned with stucco work while some of its 240 columns rise to 12 metres. The Swarga Vilasam (Celestial Pavilion) is a rectangular courtyard, flanked by 18-metre-high colonnades and an arcaded octagonal structure, and is constructed in brick and mortar without any supporting rafters. The original complex had a shrine, an armoury, a theatre, royal quarters, a royal bandstand, a pond and a garden but only a quarter of all this survives. The original Ranga Vilasam was destroyed by Muslim invaders. Sound and light shows organized in the courtyard unfold the glorious period of the Nayaks in Madurai's history.

Yet another Nayakar legacy is the Vandiyur Mariamman Teppakulam, an enormous tank where the great Ganesha in the Meenakshi temple was found during the excavation to provide bricks for the Tirumalai Nayak Palace. At the centre of the tank is a small temple to Mariamman, a manifestation of Shakti. It was once full with a constant supply of water through underground conduits connected to the Vaigai river. The spectacular Teppa floating festival held here annually is a sight to behold when idols of Meenakshi and Sundareshwar are taken on highly decorated and illuminated floats in the gentle waters of the tank to the romantic pavilion in the centre of the island in the tank.



Temple with a tank and a towering gopuram



St. Mary's Cathedral

Built in 1795, the St Mary's Cathedral is the second biggest in Tamil Nadu. It is a spectacular example of French and Gothic architecture.

Proceeding to the southern outskirts of the city was a welcome respite from the frenzy of Madurai. I reached the Pandiyan rock-cut shrines of the eighth century, and the much later Nayak Hindu temple at Tiruparankunram with a wide range of Hindu gods carved on its walls. The Subramanya cave temple has a shrine dedicated to Durga, with the figures of Ganesh and Subramanya on either side. Other carvings show Shiva dancing on a dwarf on the right-hand side and Parvati and Nandi with musicians on the left. Its temple, built around an eighth-century shrine cut into the rock 35 metres above the town's rooftops, comprises a series of huge terraces and halls. A 20-km detour from Madurai took me to the ancient Alagar Temple located on a hill in the forest. Two forts surround the massive temple complex, the outer Azhagapuri and the inner Hiranyapuri. Its Anna Vahana Mandapam has beautiful sculptures depicting mythical scenes.

When temple fatigue set in, I visited St Mary's Cathedral, the second biggest cathedral in Tamil Nadu. Built in 1795, it is a spectacular example of French and Gothic architecture. The façade of the church is an amalgam of various forms of European and Continental styles.

A trip to Madurai is not complete without a visit



The Gandhi Memorial Museum is housed in the old palace of Rani Mangamma

to the Gandhi Memorial Museum housed in the old palace of Rani Mangamma of the Nayak dynasty. During British rule it was known as Tamukkam Bungalow, and occupied by successive district collectors of Madras. In 1955, it was taken over by the government and now displays vignettes of Gandhi's life and work. It charts the history of the independence struggle from 1800, and the Quit India movement. We came across a reference collection of 15,000 books, periodicals, letters and microfilm material relating to Gandhi. It also houses an art gallery and offers an overview of the Mahatma's life through paintings and a variety of memorabilia. Some of his minimal personal belongings are preserved here. This includes a replica of his bed and other furniture but what catches the eye is a model of the hut in which Gandhi lived in Sewagram. It has other interesting displays, including the cloth that the Mahatma was wearing when he was shot (the blood stains can still be seen).

We visited the streets famous for the bright tie-and-dyed cotton Sungudi saris and we looked for *golu* dolls – idols of gods and goddesses – at the temple's curio shops. The flower market is a riot of colour and fragrance. We also passed huge mounds of the famous Madurai *malli* (jasmine).

The range of eateries in Madurai is interestingly varied. We stopped by Murugans' Idlis and relished the legendary 'soft-as-jasmine idlis' served with spicy chutney accompaniments and rounded off with scalding-hot filter coffee. We culminated our culinary jaunt with *jigarthanda*, a famed cool drink of Madurai. ■

FACT FILE

Getting there

Air: Madurai airport is 10 km from the city.

Rail: Madurai Junction is connected to all big cities.

Road: Well-connected by road to major cities.

Where to stay: Heritage Hotel, Regency Madurai (GRT), The Gateway Hotel, Pasumalai.

PSBT films at Berlin

SIDIKA SEHGAL

FILMS from Public Service Broadcasting Trust (PSBT)'s stable consistently attract a global audience at film festivals along with awards and appreciation. This year, one of their films, *Gumnaam Din*, a short documentary by Ekta Mittal, was selected for the 70th Berlin International Film Festival which began on February 21.

Last year, *Rang Mahal* by Prantik Basu was chosen for the Berlinale. Both films were made by small teams with budgets of just Rs 5 lakh each.

Since 2008, eleven films produced by PSBT have been selected for the Berlinale. The trust has for decades been mentoring films on social issues by filmmakers passionate about telling such stories.

Gumnaam Din is about the lives of migrant workers in Bengaluru and their families back home. The film explores the angst of separation and loss when a family member leaves in search of work in the city.

Rang Mahal, on the other hand, is based on folktales by Thakur Jivi and Marang Buru. The film was shot near Purulia in West Bengal where the Santhali community lives in close harmony with nature.

Mittal and Basu are among the younger crop of filmmakers who are pushing the boundaries of documentary filmmaking.

Mittal wanted to make a film about the human experience surrounding migration and loss, rather than a film that presented facts in a linear fashion. What happens when a family member leaves? How do families react? Mittal found that people move on. They wait. There is love and longing but life goes on. "Enough articles have been written about the factual realities of migrant workers. What are we going to do with these facts? What we need to meditate on is what kind of effect it has on people who are traversing through extremely difficult lives," says Mittal.

Gumnaam Din mirrors the urban-rural divide in India, although it doesn't take the issue head-on. The intelligent viewer will wonder: why are young people moving out of villages? And why don't they return?

Mittal was working on a longer, feature-length film on the life of migrant workers when she thought of making *Gumnaam Din*. She was inspired by the Punjabi Sufi poet, Shiv Kumar Batalvi, known for his poetry on passion, pathos and separation. *Gumnaam Din* is the title of one of his poems.

Treating his poem as a visual essay and a reference point, Mittal let herself be guided by the migrant workers in Bengaluru. She had built strong



A still from *Gumnaam Din*



Ekta Mittal, director of *Gumnaam Din*



Prantik Basu, director of *Rang Mahal*



Mentored by PSBT 11 directors have found their films selected for the Berlinale since 2008.

relationships with them, and they let her go to their villages, where she often lived with their families.

The film was in the making for almost five years, because she didn't want any defined agendas to dictate what she should be doing while she lived with the workers' families. It was often a challenge to communicate with her crew about what she wanted.

Basu's film, *Rang Mahal*, is an amalgamation of striking visuals and Santhali folktales. He was shooting another film in Purulia when he came across a chalkstone hill that had red, blue and pink rocks. The Santhali community that lives nearby extracts colours from the surface of these rocks and uses the colours to mend cracks in the walls of their houses. Basu shot this annual ritual in his film while the folktales were narrated in the background.

"My filmmaking practice has been associated with folktales for many years now. I read a lot of folktales. I am very interested in portraying the lives of people who are living in tune with nature. We have moved away from that lifestyle and folktales serve as reminders of that. Of what life used to be like," said Basu.

It took him nearly two years to make the film, of which five months were spent in editing the film. Basu did the editing himself. But the main challenge in shooting the film was the ethical one. "I didn't want to intrude into the personal space of those I was shooting. At the same time, I did not want the film to be too obtuse and detached." The balance

between objectivity and intimacy with the subject never comes easily, he said.

But despite such critical acclaim, PSBT survives on grants and their future remains uncertain. Selection by an international film festival reassures them that they are doing something right.

It is also deeply satisfying to let filmmakers make the film they want to make. "Filmmakers are human beings first. So the fear of failure holds them back. We tell them that if their film fails, we'll give them another film. By creating this space to fail, we allow them to make the film they want to make," explains Rajiv Mehrotra, managing trustee and commissioning editor at PSBT.

Once the fear of failure is vanquished, filmmakers experiment and Mehrotra believes that this is why they end up producing films that get selected at reputed film festivals and win awards.

At PSBT, filmmakers are mentored and guided as much as they want to be. Mehrotra, Ridhima Mehra and Tulika Srivastava, executive producers at PSBT, offer filmmakers feedback at each stage. "But they don't have to make a film that any one of us has to like," emphasizes Mehrotra.

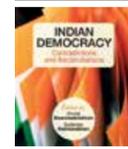
PSBT nurtures the filmmakers they work with. In fact it was the team at PSBT that applied for the Berlinale on Mittal's behalf. It is this encouragement that makes many filmmakers return to them despite the low budgets.

"We have made a virtue out of low budgets. What it ends up doing is that the filmmaker has to extract maximum value out of each day they spend on location," said Mehrotra.

Of course, technology has made filmmaking less expensive and daunting. Films are also being shot on phone cameras. But PSBT could do wonders with a little more money. "Can you imagine what we could do if we had, say, ₹10 lakh per film? That would still be one percent of what our competition spends," says Mehrotra. Still, PSBT soldiers on. ■

India's bumpy democracy

JAGDEEP S. CHHOKAR



Indian Democracy: Contradictions and Reconciliations
Arvind Sivaramakrishnan & Sudarsan Padmanabhan
SAGE
₹1295

The concept of democracy seems to be at a crossroads almost all over the world. While there seems broad agreement about Brazil, the Philippines, and Turkey being erstwhile democracies moving progressively away from democratic principles, even India, the UK, and the US are widely considered to be on a similar path. It is this thought that the editors of the book, Arvind Sivaramakrishnan and Sudarsan Padmanabhan, express when they

write, "Almost inevitably in democracies, strong tendencies occasionally emerge which in effect reduce democracy to electoral politics as the only form of political activity. Major political parties seem to do this very often...."

In an attempt to "outline the ways Indian democracy has shaped and reshaped itself in the last six decades, in the light of the Indian republic's theoretical foundations, institutional mechanisms and certain kinds of political processes", the editors have got 13 contributors to write essays on different facets of Indian democracy.

Starting with the origins of democracy in Athens and referring to the writings of Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle, Padmanabhan reviews the broad sweep of the history of the Constitution of India, focussing on 'procedural versus substantive' democracy, concluding that "the Indian Constitution became the crucible of negotiation and contestation between antinomic interpretations of the Indian democratic experiment".

N.L. Rajah also takes a deep dive into the constitutional, legislative, and judicial history of the Constitution, pointing out that "Elections in this country owe their origin to the elections to the Provincial Councils of 1937." The status of the Election Commission of India was decided in the Constituent Assembly where Ambedkar said:

"Therefore, so far as the fundamental question is concerned that the election machinery should be outside the control of the executive Government, there has been no dispute." Two other important issues dealt with by Rajah are that democracy was made a basic feature of the Constitution, with "free and fair elections" being an integral part of democracy, and the right to vote "a constitutional right" even if it is not a fundamental right.

The next chapter in this first broad theme is by S.Y. Quraishi and describes a successful attempt by the Election Commission called the Systematic Voters Education for Electoral Participation (SVEEP), to increase voter participation. Sivaramakrishnan and Chris Terry present a case for considering replacing the first-past-the-post system by a proportional representation system.

The theme, "Political Processes", consists of four chapters. In the first one, N. Gopalaswami

The book outlines the ways democracy in India has shaped and reshaped itself in the last six decades.

chronicles the success of the Election Commission of India over the years. Next, M.G. Devasahayam describes the movement led by Jayaprakash Narayan against the proclamation of emergency in 1975 by Indira Gandhi. Five landmark cases on different aspects of electoral reforms are described by myself, showing that "the road to reforming politics and elections through legal changes is long and tortuous". Following the dictum that "governance is too important an issue to be left only to big Government," Trilochan Sastry describes a nationwide survey of voter perceptions. Results of the survey unambiguously show that the issues that voters considered very important do not find mention in what the candidates and parties talked about during election campaigns.

The theme, "The Practice of Democracy", consists of six chapters on the interplay of democracy on various aspects of social functioning. Two of the chapters, by Wendy Singer, and by Josephine Anthony and Padmanabhan, deal with women and gender issues. A.V. Balasubramanian highlights the importance of organic agriculture. The chapter contains very useful information but its connection with democracy does not come across. R. Azhargarasan presents a thought-provoking evaluation of how effective Indian democracy has been in emancipating the traditionally depressed classes in Indian society. C. Kuppuswamy makes an interesting case that India has exercised only "passive sovereignty" in its approach to intellectual property legislation.

The authorship of the last chapter is attributed to a civil society organisation, Arappor Iykkam, set up in 2015 when Chennai experienced unprecedented floods. The experience of dealing with the Chennai floods of 2015 resulted in valuable insights: "An enlightened and active citizenry is key to saving democracy and making it participatory, making it functional, making it real, making it work," and "One of the key ways in which Governments of the day subvert democracy is by making institutions of democracy non-functional."

Given the size, complexity, and diversity of Indian democracy, it is impossible for any volume to deal with all of its "contradictions and reconciliations." The volume under review does a reasonably good job of what the editors set out to do. The topics included in the volume appear to be quite disparate. It is not easy to decipher any common theme running through them. The volume would have benefitted from a concluding chapter which could have tied together the disparate issues covered. This does not, in any way, reduce the informative and thought-provoking value of the book. There are a number of observations spread over various chapters that appear uncannily relevant to the specific situation that Indian democracy finds itself in. Any student of Indian democracy or anyone interested in getting a peep into Indian democracy will find it of immense value. ■

Full disclosure: This reviewer is one of the 13 contributors.

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Civil Society



AYURVEDA ADVISORY
Dr SRIKANTH

Brain power

A strong memory depends on the health and vitality of our brain. People of all ages want to preserve and enhance their grey matter — the student studying for final exams, the working professional trying to complete all tasks, or the ageing individual. There are some simple measures that can be adopted to improve memory and intellect.

Genes do play an important role. So does a disciplined lifestyle, a healthy diet, sound sleep, and regular physical exercise.

BOOSTING MEMORY: Memory, creativity, problem-solving and critical thinking are all compromised if there is sleep deprivation. Research findings show that sleep is necessary for memory consolidation, and key memory-enhancing activity occurs during the deepest stages of sleep.

Go to bed at the same time every night and get up at the same time every morning. Try not to break your routine, even on weekends and holidays.

Even a single bout of moderately intense exercise can improve memory. For a more lasting impact, exercise on a regular basis with the same intensity. Exercise increases oxygen to the brain and reduces the risk of disorders that lead to memory loss, such as diabetes and cardiovascular disease. Exercise also enhances the effect of helpful brain chemicals and reduces stress hormones.

Lead a mentally active life. Consistent mental exercises tone mental skills and memory. Any brain exercise is better than inaction. Impactful activities are those which make you come out of

your comfort zone. Playing endless rounds of a mentally challenging game on your mobile or reading an epic may sound good, but may not be enough.

Brain games, such as crosswords, chess, Sudoku, bridge, and creative activities like painting, playing a musical instrument, have not been proven to protect against memory loss. Yet, these pursuits can help with everyday thinking skills and can indeed increase a person's cognitive reserve.

The more your brain works out, the better you will be at processing and remembering information. But not all activities are equal. The best brain exercises break your routine and challenge you to use and develop new brain pathways. You need to keep learning and developing new skills. Learning a new language, volunteering, and activities that strain the brain may be better.

Humans are highly social animals. Relationships stimulate our brains. In fact, interacting or socializing may be one of the best brain exercises. Join a club, see friends more often, or reach out over the phone! And if a human isn't handy, keep a pet.

Stress is one of the brain's worst enemies. Chronic stress destroys brain cells and damages the hippocampus, the region of the brain which is involved in forming new memories and retrieving old ones.

Remember these two simple tips:

- Set a healthy balance between work and leisure time.
- Focus on one task at a time, rather than multi-tasking.

We all agree that laughter is the best medicine. That is true for the brain and memory as well. Listening to jokes and working out punch lines activates areas of the brain vital to learning and creativity.

Several researchers have highlighted that the three Ms — mindfulness, meditation, and mantras — sharpen work-related soft skills and

improve one's memory.

Meditation can improve focus, concentration, creativity, memory, learning and reasoning skills. According to a recent study, meditating for 20 minutes daily can help people recognize mental mistakes and, perhaps, avoid them in future.

DIET AND MEMORY: A study of nearly 28,000 men found that those who consumed around six servings of vegetables and fruit per day were less likely to develop poor thinking skills than the men who consumed the fewest (about two daily servings or less). Fruits and vegetables are packed with antioxidants.

Drink green tea. Green tea contains polyphenols, powerful antioxidants that protect against free radicals that can damage brain cells.

Cow's ghee is known to improve memory. Grape juice, cranberry juice, fresh grapes, berries, and peanuts contain a flavonoid that boosts blood flow to the brain and reduces the risk of Alzheimer's disease.

Fish is a particularly rich source of omega-3. If you're not a fan of seafood, consider omega-3s sources such as almonds, walnuts, flaxseeds, kidney beans, spinach, broccoli, pumpkin seeds and soybeans.

AYURVEDA REMEDIES: Ayurvedic herbs, like Brahmi, Ashwagandha, Shankhapushpi, Yashtimadhu, etc., are all known to have medicinal properties that impact one's memory positively.

Drink one to four teaspoons of fresh Brahmi juice every morning or take one gramme per day in capsule or tablet (Himalaya) form for daily rejuvenation. You may have a cup of Brahmi/Gotu kola tea with honey.

Mentat tablets/syrup (Himalaya); Sarasvatarishta (Kottakkal) are beneficial for children and adolescents. Mentat DS syrup (Himalaya) is suggested for senile dementia. ■

Dr Srikanth is a postgraduate in Ayurveda and has been a consulting physician for the past 19 years. He is currently National Manager, Scientific Services, at The Himalaya Drug Company

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