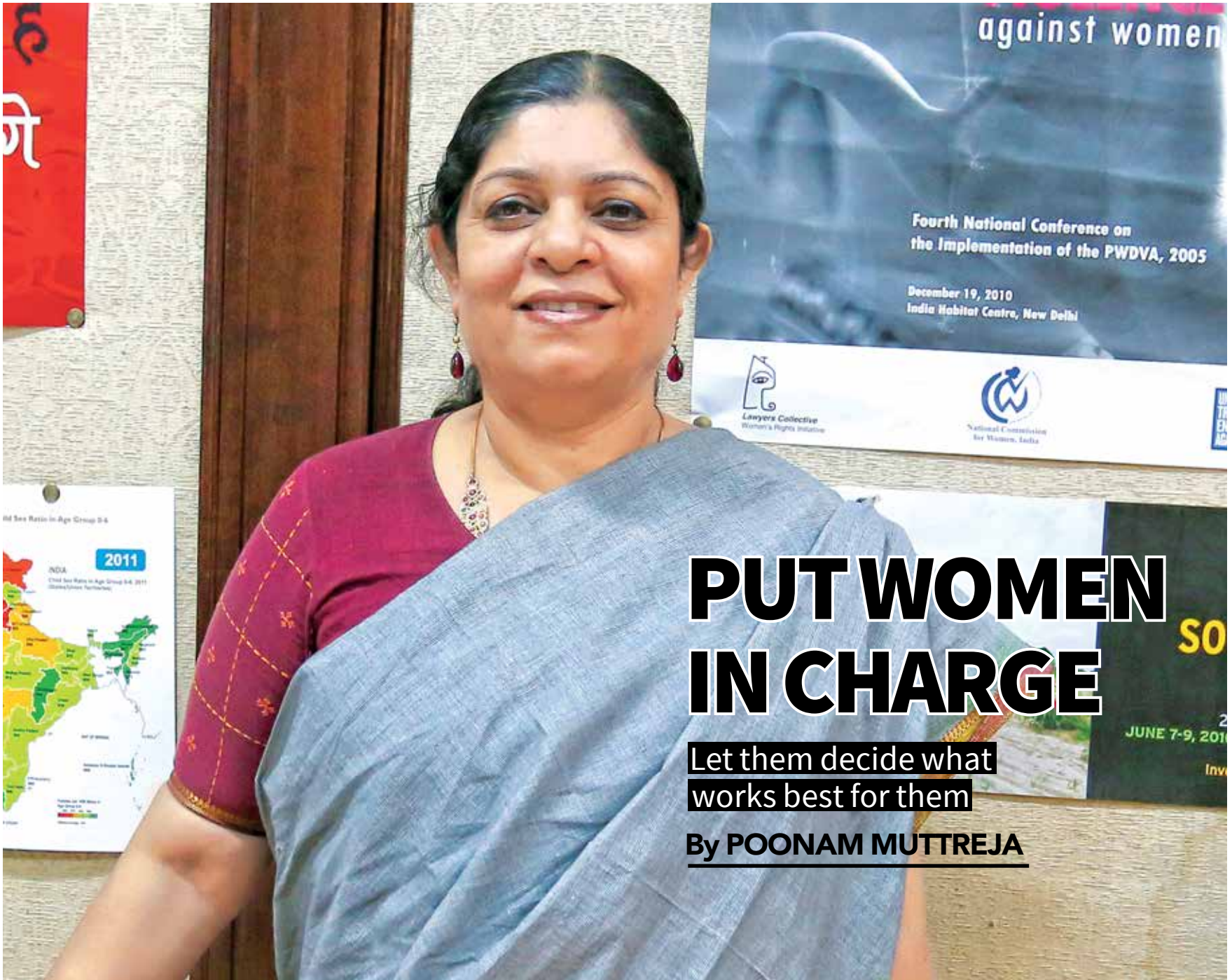


Civil Society



PUT WOMEN IN CHARGE

Let them decide what works best for them

By POONAM MUTTREJA

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IN CIVIL SOCIETY EVERYONE IS SOMEONE



Civil Society
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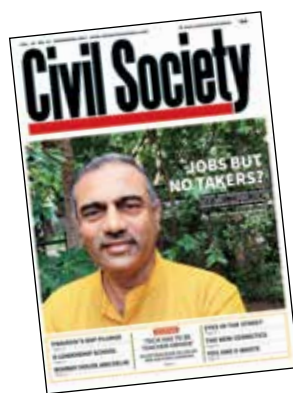
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IN THE LIGHT

SAMITA RATHOR



LETTERS



Worker rights

Thanks for the cover story, 'Jobs but no takers?' One reason why manufacturing is of poor quality in India is precisely because of extremely low wages which aren't even paid on time, and unsafe, unsanitary workplaces. We will never achieve high-quality production of goods if we do not value labour. Other developing countries have done better than us.

Anant

Why doesn't the impoverished and malnourished condition of our migrant workers embarrass the industrialist? Or the ruling class? CSR funds must be spent on workers and not on sundry welfare schemes. It is the duty of the industrialist to pay fair wages and ensure safe working conditions. The State must step in and provide quality health services, education and housing.

Nilesh

Online education

I read your interview with Dileep Ranjekar, 'Tech has to be teacher driven.' The most influential sources of education for children are their parents and teachers. But both associate education with stress and not inspiration, passion, fulfilment or joy. Educating children for them is, at best, an obligation. If we want them to consider education as the most important and rewarding opportunity of their lives, children must be officially declared special citizens. The whole country, starting with parents and teachers, must mobilize the best knowledge and imagination to figure out how our special citizens should be treated and supported.

Raghunath Padmanabhan

We need to understand how we can

support innovative and collaborative learning and teaching activities, utilizing emerging instructional technologies regardless of the medium of delivery. A less addressed challenge is "not whether online courses will replace classrooms, but whether technology will drive the redesign of teaching and learning". There is a surging need for developing and implementing adaptive teaching, learning environments and incorporating innovative remote technologies and digital networks into course design.

Javed Mirza

Goa politics

With so many players against taking on one formidable BJP with its large resources, money power and allegiances, it may be a difficult task

for opposition parties in Goa if there is no seat sharing arrangement among them and they decide to contest against one another. It will lead to division of votes and though the Sawant government faces corruption charges and anti-incumbency, the BJP will sail through. Mamata Banerjee can provide formidable opposition. But will our leaders step aside and sacrifice their ambitions for the common good? Goans can govern themselves without central dictates.

Francis Almeida

Political star

Your interview with R.S. Praveen Kumar, 'The oppressed classes don't know their power,' was wonderful. You have captured his uncompromising attitude towards the upliftment of the poor. Telangana needs Praveen Kumar as its chief minister without delay. Your article should be translated into Telugu and distributed among the common people of the state who will surely vote for the BSP. Praveen's ideas and commitment should reach the people through ways in which they can understand clearly. I will do my level best to reach this message to them.

Dhanunjay

Pandemic kitchen

Thank you, *Civil Society*, for writing about the kitchen set up by the transgender community in Chennai. It feels so reassuring to know that one of the most discriminated and excluded communities of our country showed us what empathy, inclusivity and generosity of spirit can achieve. They have shown us the light during a time of divisive politics.

Dr Anita Patil-Deshmukh

Letters should be sent to response@civilsocietyonline.com



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Gender rights and family planning are intertwined. Women must have the agency to decide what is best for them. Poonam Muttreja on a tragedy in Bilaspur and the need for better policy.

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Umesh Anand

Anil Swarup on being less visible and more effective

‘Officers who seek publicity will find they land in trouble’

Civil Society News
New Delhi

GOVERNMENT officers have been in the news recently for what many would consider the wrong reasons. There is a growing sense that officers are succumbing to the temptation of being seen and heard instead of talking softly and carrying a big stick. In the process they also find themselves in inconvenient situations.

The redoubtable Vinod Rai, former Comptroller and Auditor General (CAG), has had to eat his words and apologize to Sanjay Nirupam of the Congress.

Sameer Wankhede has been in the limelight for arresting Shah Rukh Khan's son on drug charges though no drug was found on him. And the former Mumbai Police Commissioner, Param Bir Singh, has been on the run with extortion charges levelled against him.

Did these officers overreach themselves? Would it have been better if they had merely done their jobs quietly? How should government officers conduct themselves when performing their duties?

With these questions in mind we spoke to Anil Swarup, a distinguished IAS officer now retired. Swarup has many achievements to his name. He was in the PMO, coal, education and grew the footprint of the Rashtriya Swasthya Bima Yojana (RSBY). He has never been shy of being interviewed, but in the many years this magazine has known him, we have never found him to speak out of turn or court controversy.

You put out a tweet in which you said that in the examples of Sameer Wankhede, Param Bir Singh and Vinod Rai there is a big lesson for civil servants — don't seek publicity, your just rewards will come. In these three disparate cases is it just publicity that is of concern to you or is there a deeper disquiet?

I was only commenting on the very limited subject of the visibility of an officer. Thanks to social media, and even before that, there is a tendency amongst some civil servants to go to town with what they're doing. 'Become visible' is the term that I use quite often. The civil servant has to be careful. It is not necessary to toot-tom what you have done. Instead, you can and should try and do your work quietly.

Let me cite the example of Vinod Rai, which I have elaborated on in both my books. As the CAG he should have submitted his report to Parliament and, at best, held a simple straightforward press conference and not tried to present it as a scam. That was for somebody else to take a call on. So, had he done his job quietly he would not have got into the limelight so much and now, it appears, that people are after him. One has got the better of him, and this may not be the end of it. So, publicity is counterproductive in his case.

Sameer Wankhede couldn't help raiding a high-profile person — even assuming it was required. But how did the video that was shot on the ship get leaked? That is what created the problem. Actually, had that video not been leaked people would have just spoken about a high-profile person being caught. So, the officer has to be extremely careful, especially when he is handling high-profile cases.

Photo: Civil Society/Ajit Krishna



Anil Swarup: 'The bureaucracy is part of society'

‘Many officers do their jobs, reap rewards and become high profile without any conscious effort. If a good job gets done, sometimes it is noted and sometimes it is not.’

There are many officers who do their jobs professionally, reap rewards and become high-profile without making any conscious effort. If a good job gets done, sometimes it gets recognized, sometimes it is not even known.

For example, take Julio Ribeiro. He never sought exposure. Yet, people got to know of his good work and it got publicized, which is very fair. Nothing wrong with that.

But if you look at Twitter, you will find officers tweeting about inaugurating a shop or holding a meeting. What is the purpose? To me there is a two-fold objective for using social media: one is to disseminate information, the second is publicity. Social media should be used to disseminate information because it really helps.

When it comes to publicity there are two ways of going about it. One, you publicize what you're doing. Or you can use social media to publicize the good work done by others. Let someone else pick up that story of what you're doing rather than you going to town with it. There is a subtle difference between the two and that doesn't seem to be understood by some of us civil servants who go on publicizing what they are doing. And that's where the problem arises.

So again, going back to both cases, Vinod Rai shouldn't have gone to town over his report. There's a difference between information dissemination and publicity. He went in for publicity. In the Sameer Wankhede case that video leak should have been avoided.

People join the services with a lot of idealism. Many do good work. But there is a growing sense that the bureaucracy is compromised and not able to deliver. What exactly is your take on this?

You know, I carried out a survey myself on Twitter, asking people who they were most dissatisfied or satisfied with, including, amongst a broad category of people, politicians, media, the judiciary and civil servants. Overwhelmingly, people said civil servants were the best of the four. They may not be that good, but they are the best.

There was an *India Today* survey conducted by the Azim Premji University 10 years ago along similar lines. There may be disenchantment with the civil service on account of the exposure that civil servants have with the common man. But if you go to villages, where most of our population resides, they still have faith in the civil servant who comes there, and not so much in the politician or the media or anybody else. So it's not that they don't have faith in the civil service.

Yes, there is a lot wrong with the bureaucracy that needs to be corrected. But the bureaucracy is a part of society. They don't live in a zoo. Most civil servants carry with them the aspirations and infirmities of the common man to the civil services. Ironically, what gets to be known to the public are mostly negative stories because we are very fond of masala, you know.

I tweet both positive and negative stories. Twice a week I write positive stories and also some of the criticism. The traction that the criticism part gets is many times more than the traction the positive stories get. I don't blame anyone because that's how we are. We love negative stories.

Bad news sells.

Yes, it's very unfortunate, but that's how it is. We blame the media for all those gory stories on TV channels and in newspapers. Media gives us what we like. If there are no scams, you'd like to have those scams going. We have situations where the media is shy of putting out positive stories, because very rarely do positive stories get the traction which a negative story does.

I'm not saying that everything is hunky-dory with the civil service. Certainly not. There's a lot wrong with it. But what gets portrayed is primarily the negative part. When I tweeted about these three guys, Sameer Wankhede, Vinod Rai and Param Bir Singh, almost 700,000 viewed it. None of my positive stories got that kind of viewership. It's really crazy. I was quite aghast to see the traction this tweet got.

That tweet was primarily a wakeup call for civil servants to beware, and not unnecessarily try to hog the limelight with what they've done. Because they are likely to face the same consequences as these three gentlemen are facing at this point in time. That was my objective. But look at the traction it got.

When I speak to civil servants I tell them to look at some of the civil servants who have evolved as efficient and honest officers. They have been recognized by society over a period of time. My book, *Ethical Dilemmas of a Civil Servant*, is a message that ethical behaviour is key in the long run. That's what I'm trying to convey. But, as I said, it takes all types to make this world and so it is with civil servants.

Is there a need now to pause, 75 years after Independence, and perhaps look at the bureaucracy and its role a little differently and in a more uniform way?

Absolutely correct. I think we should all evolve. If we don't, we become not only irrelevant, we become a nuisance. In my book, there is an entire chapter in which I talk about this evolution.

My concern, and I will limit myself to the IAS where I spent some 37 years, is that right through the process, beginning from selection to postings, we are not looking at evolving. We should be looking at the leadership qualities of a civil servant. Because, ultimately, an IAS officer has to first be a leader. I've often said that expertise can be outsourced, but attitude cannot. And that's where leadership qualities become very important.

Let me explain. I have absolutely no doubt that the Union Public Service Commission (UPSC) is one of the finest institutions in the country. It's absolutely above board. You can't point a finger at it and say that a person has been wrongly or rightly selected. You can't attribute motives. But the problem is that the officers we select are not based on leadership criteria.

They're selecting people who are good at writing answers. They're good at expression. Their written articulation is very good. They present their case well, which are also attributes of leadership. But this is not the only attribute required of a leader. They don't even test their aptitude or attitude. A paper on ethics does not help you understand whether that guy's ethical or not.

Today, the world over, there are tools available to assess the aptitude and attitude of the person you're selecting. You can also assess whether this chap has

leadership qualities. It takes a slightly longer time, but it is well worth the effort. Because, imagine selecting officers who go on to become joint secretaries, additional secretaries, secretaries to the Government of India, who are in charge of districts — and they don't have leadership qualities.

Some of the IAS officers do evolve as leaders. But that's an exception. If you start from the time of selection and use those tools to select leaders, you may still go wrong in 20 percent of cases. But 80 percent will be those who have basic leadership qualities and that is step number one.

Secondly, the training imparted at the Lal Bahadur Shastri National Academy of Administration is more knowledge-oriented. I mean, these people are knowledgeable already. They don't develop leadership qualities during the course of training. I think the total focus has to be on group activity and leadership, rather than imparting more knowledge. Knowledge can be acquired by anybody individually. You don't have to tell them more about the Constitution of India, or the Indian Penal Code.

Third, contrary to general belief, the IAS does not have an ethos of its own. You can recognize an Army officer, even if he's not in uniform, by the way he walks, talks, or his disciplined manner which makes him different. You don't have that ethos in the IAS. I can't think of a single quality which can describe an IAS officer as an IAS officer. Unless that IAS officer tells you that he's an IAS officer, you'll never get to know. That ethos needs to be developed both at the academy and otherwise. By ethos I mean it in terms of general qualities, leadership, ethical behaviour, conduct. It has to be visibly distinct from others.

The fourth point is mentorship. There is no system of institutionalized mentoring of civil servants. There should be as there is in the Army and in the private sector. I remember when I was a young IAS officer, I didn't really know whom to talk to if I ran into some trouble.

‘We should be looking at the leadership qualities of a civil servant. An IAS officer has to be a leader. Expertise can be outsourced but attitude cannot.’

Now, I'm personally mentoring hundreds of IAS officers but that's not the issue. The question is, whether there's an institutional framework to mentor and guide an officer towards a particular ethical behaviour or ethos.

In my book, I talk about an ombudsman within the service to guide officers into a particular behaviour. If they are doing something which is not considered to be correct, it should be pointed out. No one does that today. An officer gets caught, but before getting caught, he has been moving in that direction. So I talk of mentorship. This can be done very easily.

The difficult part is how the officer is treated when he gets into the service. His efficiency and honesty are the primary criteria for posting him. But servility, liability, malleability is the primary message that the government gives to officers. Whether you are efficient or honest or not is not material to me, you have to be totally beholden to me, you have to do what I tell you to do. If that is the signal that is going to the officer, he will ultimately say, okay, to hell with everything else, I will do this.

There are not many steps that need to be taken. I think there has to be a relook at what's going on, and then see what needs to be done. Not in terms of fulfilling the requirements and desires of a limited set of politicians, but in the larger context of the development of the country.

You know, this whole thing of looking at the bureaucracy differently seems to have gotten narrowed down to lateral entry. How do you, as someone who has been for a long time a successful IAS officer, see the question of lateral entries?

See, personally, I have nothing against lateral entries so long as it is done in a transparent manner by an institution which is above board, and not as somebody's choice. But that doesn't solve the problem.

Everyone talks about expertise. I can tell you from my personal experience, when I was Coal Secretary, I was not an expert in coal. But I outsourced expertise. I got in SBI CAP, MSTC Ltd, all experts. As a leader, I knew how to get them.

What is required is attitude which, let me assure you, cannot be outsourced.

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But a lot of expertise can be outsourced. People mistake specialization and expertise with the capacity to deliver. Capacity to deliver is not based on specialization or expertise. It is determined by your attitude. I keep using these words attitude and aptitude. These are very, very important and they don't and can't come overnight. And you can't outsource them.

I mean, to me lateral entry is too small an issue to even be discussed. Out of a cadre of 5,000 people, if you are going to give lateral entry to 500 people, how does that make a difference? Because you are not assessing the attitude of people you are getting in through lateral entry.

Even in the private sector, most CEOs are not experts in the areas they manage. They are leaders and managers. And when you talk of expertise, what expertise are you talking of?

If someone has the right attitude, and he has come through a UPSC examination, it won't take more than two to three months to acquire a reasonable understanding of the subject that he's handling. And then he'll be able to get the experts to do the job.

'I'm assuming politics may become worse. I won't be able to do much about that. But I can certainly change how I respond to it.'

I did that throughout my career. As an expert you can have a blinkered vision. You have to be a visionary — the quality of a leader — and get the overall picture. You don't have to be an expert. You have to create the space and environment for an expert, a specialist to work in.

Creating space is not the attribute of an expert. It's the attribute of a person with an attitude, a leader. So, to me leadership attributes, the right attitude are extremely important for a civil servant. We should get experts. But I think leadership is different from expertise.

How do you change the relationship between the IAS and the politician?

I don't think you need to change anything. You know, there are so many IAS officers who are performing extremely well in this political environment. Changing politics is an academic discussion. You and I cannot do it.

But how do I change the IAS is not an academic discussion. That can be done and should be done. And that's what I'm concerned about.

I'm assuming politics will remain what it is. I'm assuming it may become worse. I won't be able to do much about that. But I can certainly change how I respond to politics as a civil servant. During my career, I came across all sorts of politicians. I came across outstanding, honest politicians. I came across absolutely dishonest, nasty politicians. It takes all types to make this world. I would be more concerned about how I am and what I can do, because I can't do anything to a politician in any case. ■

Big district with many problems that need small solutions

Civil Society News

New Delhi

CHANGLANG has a size problem. It is one of the biggest districts in Arunachal Pradesh and the second most populous too. But its people live in such small clusters of villages, far apart from each other, that taking government services to them can become an intricate challenge.

The district has an area of 4,662 sq. km, which is roughly three times the size of Delhi. It has a population of around 200,000, which is big by Arunachal's standards, but a tiny number for the huge area of the district.

Being a lot in the plains, the district's roads are better than those in the other districts of the state. But then it rains six months in the year and there are floods. Connectivity becomes a problem.

Changlang is also a border district and abuts Myanmar. It is adjacent to Nagaland as well. As a result, it has experienced insurgency and has received people of the Chakma tribe in large numbers. There are doubts over the status of the Chakmas and a question mark over whether they should be recipients of government schemes.

Dealing with these multiple big and small challenges is the Deputy Commissioner, Dr Devansh Yadav. He is all of 31, and a physician by training. Changlang is his first posting as a Deputy Commissioner (DC).

Dr Yadav has plunged into running the district with the enthusiasm of someone who has joined the Indian Administrative Service (IAS) with the idealism to serve. He gets a thrill from making the wheels of governance move.

In the past one and a half years that he has been in office, Dr Yadav has come up with innovations in healthcare, school education, de-addiction and waste-recycling. He has shown that he can measure up to the unique and seemingly intractable circumstances that prevail in Changlang.

Dr Yadav took the civil services examination after he had done his MBBS from the All-India Institute of Medical Sciences (AIIMS) in Delhi. He got through in the first try and decided to make the switch.

A DOCTOR AS DC

Has being a trained doctor helped him in his role as a Deputy Commissioner? It has, he says, in



Devansh Yadav has plunged into running the district

several ways. But he has also learnt a lot and perhaps got back as much as he has given. It has been a reality check for him.

"The background has been beneficial. It is not just health but public health," he says. "The MBBS course, apart from a knowledge of basic medicine, teaches you to identify a problem and solve it."

"When I go to any health facility and ask a doctor about the problems there, I know what the cause can be. It is difficult to bluff me," he says.

In this respect, Changlang is lucky to have him. The district desperately needs better health facilities. Well-trained physicians and surgeons aren't willing to go there because they see the district as being troubled by insurgency.

"I have issued an advertisement for a gynaecologist and an anaesthetist at a salary of ₹1.5 lakh and not found takers. My district comes under the Armed Forces Special Powers Act (AFSPA) and though doctors haven't visited here they think it is dangerous. They don't want to come," he explains.

Dr Yadav hopes to meet doctors and personally persuade them to serve in the district. But, even if

well-trained specialists were to be appointed, there is much that remains to be done by way of creating infrastructure so that ordinary health requirements are taken care of and medical personnel agree to go purposefully to remote health centres.

"The challenge is that when you have such a vast and thinly populated area how do you provide health services in every nook and corner. There is a set-up, but you will not find anyone there because there are no facilities. Nurses won't get the basic facility of a mobile network, so why would they stay there?" he says.

The solution Dr Yadav has found, is to focus resources on four or five key locations where the population density is relatively high and it is possible to have an impact and produce results in a short period of time.

"In this way our health indicators will shoot up. We are sending health and wellness officers there and providing infrastructure. With this we expect our institutional deliveries will increase to 40 percent. The idea is to optimize resources because you can't cover everyone. It is a fact," he explains.

"There is the problem of day-to-day monitoring

In the past one and a half years, Dr Yadav has come up with innovations in health, education, de-addiction and waste recycling.

as well. For instance, my district has 52 percent of pregnant women and children who are anaemic. The supplies of folic acid tablets don't arrive on time," he says about an important but less visible health issue.

"So, as a district, we are going to be tackling anaemia head on. If we can't deal with anaemia there is no point of going ahead and trying to tackle hypertension and diabetes."

Technology has made many things possible. Dr Yadav has used his personal networks to piece

together solutions. For instance, telemedicine facilities have been provided at three centres after roping in some of his batchmates and getting a start-up in IIT Kanpur to help with a solution.

"At these centres we don't need doctors to be physically present. Nurses can be in charge and coordinate the consultation with a doctor who is far away. We have an e-prescription issued by the doctor and the medicine is given. We try and find such solutions. It is *jugaad*, as we say," Dr Yadav explains.

The COVID-19 vaccination drive has been successful. Roughly 90 percent of the population has taken the first dose and 60 percent, the second dose. There is not much resistance to taking the vaccine, but the rains have been a problem. Now with the dry season coming in, he hopes the entire population of the district will be vaccinated.

There are many things that he has learnt from being posted here. One of them is the role played by practitioners of traditional medicine in public healthcare.

"Without the AYUSH (traditional medicine) doctors my strength of doctors would be reduced by 40 percent. This is completely contrary to what one learns in an MBBS course — that an allopath is the main doctor and that there should be no dilution with other forms of medicine."

"So, one realizes in the field that outside your idealistic world there are a lot more difficulties on the ground," he explains.

UNCLE MOOSA'S LIBRARIES

How did we come across Dr Devansh Yadav? Uncle Moosa introduced us.

Satyanarayanan Mundayoor (which is his full name) is the architect of a unique community library movement in Arunachal Pradesh. Over several decades he has helped young people discover books and find meaning in life.

Several years ago, Uncle Moosa was in the Civil Society Hall of Fame and we visited him and his libraries in Arunachal to document his work. Our headline for him was: 'Life coach in the library'.

This year, Uncle Moosa was given the Padma Shri. He was in Delhi in early November to receive his award. The next day he was over at our office for tea and amidst our banter about Arunachal, he mentioned Dr Yadav's work in Changlang.

Dr Yadav has taken help from Uncle Moosa to set up 12 village community libraries in the district. For this task, 12 young people have been chosen.

More than being a source of books, the libraries serve to bring people to a common space from where they can access the world at large. Young people get mentored, discover their talents through book readings and elocution, are introduced to social issues of the day and generally find purpose in life.

In August, Dr Yadav held what he calls a 'school preparation month'. He estimated that schools

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would reopen in September. There was a need to help students who would be promoted to the next class a year and half after schools had been closed.

“During the pandemic, when schools were closed, children fell behind in their learning. With schools likely to reopen in September children would be perhaps going to Class 3 completely ill-prepared. Distance learning mostly hadn’t worked because of the lack of smartphones or connectivity or very simply the inability to cope,” says Dr Yadav.

In a concentrated way the month of August could be used to catch up and perhaps young people, unemployed and with Class 12 degrees, could help coach primary schoolchildren who missed out on formal classes.

More than 700 young adults applied out of which 500 were chosen to serve as friendly tutors. In this way children came prepared for school in September. The idea of having community libraries in the district came out of this experience and he reached out to Uncle Moosa.

DRUG DE-ADDICTION CENTRES

Arunachal has a noticeable drug addiction problem. Poppy has been traditionally grown in parts of the state. Poppy is not cultivated in Changlang, but the district is close to the Golden Triangle and opium comes in from Myanmar and Assam.

“In medicine we learn that if you take opium even twice you go back to it because the withdrawal symptoms are so severe,” he says.

Treating three or four youth does not lead to long-term gains. They tend to go back to their addiction no matter what is done for them. The district administration’s approach has been to work through the community. Instead of treating individuals the strategy is to work with the entire village.

“We are trying to identify villages where people are coming forward on their own and we are establishing community level de-addiction centres. We feel there is no point in treating one or two people at a time. It is better to take care of the entire village. Making an entire village de-addicted has a much bigger impact,” Dr Yadav says. “This is where we need women’s groups and the kind of volunteers that we have for the community libraries.”

So far, eight villages have been made drug-free and four more are on the way. It is a slow process and daunting too considering there are more than 300 villages in the district.

But the idea is to create examples of success and through them demand for de-addiction services. Support groups have been set up to help reformed drug addicts. They have also been given help with poultry farming and piggeries and fisheries. Sports facilities have been created. But it is a long haul.

PLASTIC WASTE

Among the multiple innovations that the district administration has been able to come up with, has been the handling of non-recyclable plastic waste.

There has been no waste processing facility in eastern Arunachal Pradesh. Waste is picked up and carried away to landfills.

Setting up a processing unit would also not be feasible because the plant’s capacity would be much higher than what a small population would generate.

Instead, what has worked are units in four districts for shredding non-recyclable plastic into



Sports facilities have been a way of making villages drug-free



Uncle Moosa with his Padma Shri

small pieces of 2 to 3 mm, which can then be used along with bitumen for road building and carpeting.

“We basically wanted a small solution. A solution which caters to our needs. When plastic is used for road construction it improves the life of the road. We started this in 2019,” says Dr Yadav.

“The important thing is that we did not take any government funding for this. It is funded under Extended Producer Responsibility. Companies like Pepsi and Parle, which generate plastic waste, are required to invest in technology and solutions that take care of plastic waste,” he explains.

The costs of transportation, wages of people running the units and all other expenses are met by companies which channelize the funds through a start-up called Recycle.

MEDICINE TO THE IAS

With a good medical degree to his name, what prompted Dr Yadav to make the switch to the IAS?

“AIIMS has a discussion-based environment,” he

‘We feel there is no point in treating one or two people. It is better to take care of the entire village and make it completely de-addicted.’

says. “Many of my seniors have joined start-ups. Many have gone abroad. People do different things. I applied for the civil services. It was a complete change,” he says.

Dr Yadav first came to Changlang as an Additional Deputy Commissioner, a role in which he worked at the block level. It allowed him to get a grasp of how things are at the lowest levels of the district administration.

“It was valuable experience,” he recalls. “Usually, we get posted directly as Deputy Commissioners and don’t have an idea of what goes on much below. I was lucky to begin at the bottom.”

Changlang is a world apart from Mathura in Uttar Pradesh where he grew up as a small-town boy and went to school. His father runs a guest house there. His brother is in the family business.

For Dr Yadav, getting to study at AIIMS was an opportunity to be in Delhi and explore an India he didn’t know about first-hand. He was curious about politics and life in a big metro and the shift was in many ways transformational.

But if Dr Yadav took himself out of Mathura, he doesn’t seem to have let his small-town past be taken out of him. He can understand the needs and aspirations of people in Changlang. He has quickly become a part of their lives. He is at ease in the district and eager to deal with the problems that come with its remoteness. ■

Many sides to Sweepers’ Lane

Patricia Mukhim
Shillong

A housing colony called Sweepers’ Lane for Mazhabi or Dalit Sikhs who have for generations been municipal workers in Shillong has been under constant surveillance by the Central Reserve Police Force (CRPF). The reason? An altercation between a young Sikh woman and some Khasi young men over right of way to a water tap.

In Meghalaya, every incident that involves non-tribal residents and tribals — who feel they are indigenous to the land and have first claim to everything — quickly turns into a communal conflict and an “us” versus “them” tug-of-war.

Sweepers’ Lane or Them Meteor, in the local language, is adjacent to Iew Mawlong or Mawlong Hat which houses hardware stores, and the like. It is crowded and dirty and adjoins the biggest market, the Iewduh or Bara Bazaar. The Iewduh is where all farmer-producers converge to sell their products at wholesale prices.

Close to Sweepers’ Lane there used to be a parking lot for city buses. But due to perennial traffic jams, the place is no longer feasible as a parking lot for vehicles carrying passengers to and from Bara Bazaar. This place has been out of bounds since May 2018 and barricaded on two sides from where people can enter or leave the colony.

The Mazhabi Sikhs were first brought into this region by the British after they entered here following their victory over the Burmese in the aftermath of the Treaty of Yandaboo in 1826. The British, who entered from Sylhet, now in Bangladesh, set up their administrative centre at Cherrapunjee but soon shifted to Shillong and made it their headquarters since they could not endure the constant rain in Cherrapunjee and its gloomy weather.

In those days there were only dry latrines and the locals would not agree to work as manual scavengers. The Mazhabi Sikhs were brought in precisely for this work and settled as municipal workers in Sweepers’ Lane or Harijan Colony sometime after 1863.

Land ownership among the Khasi-Jaintia people of Meghalaya is a very tenuous idea. The State does not own land and claims ownership only over four percent of reserved forests. Some revenue land was acquired by the British from Khasi chieftains and handed over to the Indian establishment after Independence. For every other requirement, such as road construction and building various institutions, the State has had to acquire land from the community, clan or from a few rich members of the tribal elite who learnt early the value of land as a capital asset.

Community land is in the custody of the chieftains or syiems and in other cases under the clan elders. Normally, community land is distributed to every member of the community who has married and has to set up an independent establishment or for farming. If such land is not used or developed for three consecutive years it reverts to the community.



The state government’s move to shift the Sikh residents of Sweepers’ Lane has become a contentious issue

The number of Sikh municipal workers is only a handful while the number of residents is now over 300 in the colony.

But because Khasi society has not codified these traditional land ownership/custodianship practices, it became an unwritten code which allowed village heads and chieftains to barter land for money. The chieftain of Myllemat had given permission to the British to use the land at present called Sweepers’ Lane to house the manual scavengers.

With time, their population grew but the space in which they resided remained the same. This writer visited one such home to speak to an elderly Sikh lady. To my utter surprise, I found that what was earlier only a two-roomed house had become a maze of rooms with steps going up to other floors to house additional members of the family. The rooms were tiny and the family could hardly move around. No wonder they spent much of their time in a common courtyard around the colony.

After the skirmish of May 2018, the government set up a high level committee headed by Deputy Chief Minister Prestone Tynsong to carefully analyze what future action could be taken to relocate the residents to a better location. Earlier governments, too, had proposed shifting the residents of this colony to a more spacious location, but they had rejected the idea.

The reason is that the number of Sikh municipal workers is only a handful while the number of residents in that colony today is over 300. The vast majority of these 300 residents are carrying out small businesses in the Sweepers’ Lane area and have become comfortable there. The new location would only house legitimate municipal workers,

thereby leaving out a large chunk of their family members. It is this issue which has pushed the Sikhs to resist the government’s relocation plan. They have succeeded in making an emotional appeal to their brethren across the country and even abroad. This is fraught with serious consequences because different Sikh organizations have started meddling with what is Meghalaya’s internal affairs.

On September 28, the high level committee submitted its report and recommended shifting of employees of the Shillong Municipal Board from Sweepers’ Colony. The committee suggested that the government should take ownership of the land by paying the chieftain of Myllemat a certain amount. The government is clear that after taking an inventory of the number of municipal workers residing in Sweepers’ Lane, it will house them in a location where homes have already been built for them. It is, however, silent on what would happen to those residents who are not on the payroll of the Shillong Municipal Board. This is the bone of contention.

Unfortunately, the media has pitched this issue as a Sikh versus the government of Meghalaya one and turned the former into some sort of victims. Sweepers’ Lane is today one of the biggest slums in a commercial area. By no stretch of imagination can there be residential colonies in such an area without serious health and law and order consequences.

It is the considered view of most local Khasi residents that this cannot be turned into a communal issue and that the Sikhs are only being relocated and not “evicted” as is being made out by a section of the media parachuted from outside the state.

The Harijan Panchayat Committee representing the Sikhs of Shillong has also opposed the move of the state government. “We will die for our land but will not allow any unlawful, illegal and unjust action by the government of Meghalaya,” said Gurjit Singh, secretary of the panchayat.

But do the municipal workers have the right to claim the land at Sweepers’ Lane? ■

Will global tag help Srinagar's artisans?

Jehangir Rashid
Srinagar

THERE IS MUCH excitement over Srinagar being included in UNESCO's Creative Cities Network in Arts and Crafts, but it remains to be seen how much artisans will actually benefit from this new global positioning.

In the past, nine products have received geographical indication (GI) tags but the artisans associated with them haven't seen their fortunes change significantly.

Traditional livelihoods, in fact, have been steadily going into decline and it is not uncommon to find artisans becoming labourers just so as to be able to survive.

Rauf Ahmed Punjabi, a local business leader, points out that Srinagar's listing as a creative city won't serve much purpose unless the government takes measures for promoting traditional products and rehabilitating artisans.

In the case of the GI tag, for instance, there was a need for vigorous branding and promotion of both the producers and the products. It hasn't been adequately done.

Nine products have been issued GI tags. These include the Kani Shawl, Pashmina, Sozani Craft, Papier Mâché and Walnut Wood Carving.

Will the creative city status end up being another missed opportunity? Mohammed Ahmed Shah, director, handicrafts and handlooms, says the government won't let the opportunity pass.

He says: "The idea is to recognize all artisans and not merely one or two sectors. The government will be working on a multi-pronged strategy to create a vibrant brand. It will promote a mix of products which are authentic and have the GI status."

Mohammed Salim Beigh of INTACH also held out hope: "We have made various commitments which we will fulfil and there will be continuous assessment."



Photos: Civil Society/Bilal Bahadur



Samita's World

by SAMITA RATHOR

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Why rain ravages hill towns

Rakesh Agrawal
Dehradun

THIS year rain became a killer for the people of Uttarakhand. Bridges, roads, homes and fields were washed away as the rain gods unleashed their fury. In Nainital, on October 19, the lake overflowed its shores for the first time in living memory. Water gushed through roads and lanes as people struggled to find their way to safety. Officially, at least 28 deaths were reported in three days.

The rain destroyed public utilities too. A bridge over the Gaula river near Haldwani and the railway track connecting Kathgodam to Nainital were just two such casualties.

While climate change has been blamed for the unprecedented deluge, environment activists point to the inappropriate construction being carried out in popular hill stations and still-pristine towns. To make money from the flood of tourists who visit the state every year, people are building multistoried buildings with no thought given to drainage, tree cover or the delicate ecology of the hills. The role model for hill stations is Delhi. The result has been disastrous.

“Travelling from Haldwani to Ramgarh, I could see piles of debris, broken homes and torrents of overflowing *gaderas* (rivulets) with people crying and shouting for help,” recalls Trilochan Bhatt, a Dehradun-based writer and YouTuber, who went to the region to record the devastation caused by the rain on October 19.

Deepa Devi, 28, of Talla Ramgarh village, says her little home got washed away and her apricot orchard of 0.3 hectare was completely destroyed.

The rainfall was also unexpected. Lav Kumar, 36, says he was sitting on the small stony porch of his double-storied home at Ramgarh village, enjoying a cup of tea with his wife, Priti, when a torrent of rain arrived. “We almost toppled over, it was so sudden. It was almost as if a truckload of stones had fallen, destroying not just our home, but the entire village,” recalls Kumar.

In the neighbouring village of Chukum, 93-year-old Diwan Singh says he was utterly shocked. “In my entire life, I have never seen such massive rain, that too, after the monsoon is over,” says Singh.

As much as 580 mm of rain fell in Champawat, the district bordering China. The entire Kumaon division received rainfall above 200 mm to 300 mm, and a few areas got more than 500 mm, a figure that is way above normal.

An analysis by the Council on Energy, Environment and Water (CEEW) in 2020 found that 85 percent of districts in Uttarakhand were vulnerable to extreme flooding.

Officially, the rain was the result of a western disturbance, but at least three important scientific reports by the Ministry of Earth Sciences, the International Centre for Integrated Mountain Development and the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change have warned of dire consequences for the Himalayan region which is vulnerable to climate change. Erratic precipitation could take place and it is local people who will bear the brunt.



There is no urban planning of hill stations

To make money from the flood of tourists who visit the state, people are building multi-storied blocks with no thought given to drainage.

“Rainfall patterns are changing and temperatures are increasing along with extreme weather events. There is no denying that development is needed but policymakers should be well-versed with the geology of the region,” says Professor Y.P. Sundriyal, head of the department of geology at the HNB Garhwal University.

“Uttarakhand used to host around 600,000 tourists per year. This figure has now increased to 1.5 million per year,” says Atul Satti, a local environment activist. “As a result, there has been an increase in vehicular pollution, river pollution, unabated construction activities, and commercialization. Moreover, road widening projects and hydropower project construction have had a major impact on the region.

“All these factors have contributed to an increase in temperatures and a change in rainfall patterns. We now see incessant rain that goes on for two to three days at a stretch, while several days are dry.”

There is no urban planning of popular hill stations. No guidelines seem to have been set to help construct eco-friendly infrastructure which could accommodate tourists visiting the hill state.

Instead of cottages and low-rise structures, multi-storied apartments are mushrooming even in new

tourist hotspots like Bhowali, a small hill town 2,000 m above sea level, just 10 km from Nainital. Not only has Nainital become a concrete jungle, so has Mussoorie, another popular hill station.

“This building craze has blocked natural drainage, resulting in water entering residential areas. Mountain crevasses have been weakened thanks to relentless blasting by JCB machines, road widening and dam construction,” says Tarun Joshi, a social activist in Bhowali.

Builders have bought land in picturesque sites like Ramgarh, Satbunga, Bhowali and Bhatelia. Mukteshwar is another town which now proliferates with hotels, resorts and apartment blocks. People escape to these places to avoid the intense heat in the plains in summer and end up switching on fans and ACs at a height of more than 2000 m.

The blockage of natural draining systems has caused small *gaderas* to swell, flooding the Shipra river which originates near Bhowali and Shyamkhet since scores of buildings have come up close to its banks. The builders have altered the natural flow of this river and caused it to flow into a rivulet. When it rained on October 17-18, it was the rivulet which flooded the entire region, something unheard of.

This flood hit Nainital as the hills around it have become concretized and drainage blocked. Water gushed down to its famed lake and crossed over its gates since the irrigation department failed to open them. The attached sensors, it is said, failed to function at this crucial time!

Uttarakhand is losing its forests and acquiring hotels, resorts, holiday homes and apartment blocks instead. These structures are not resilient to earthquakes, flooding or landslides. Roads are constructed using JCB machines and debris is dumped into river valleys, resulting in floods.

Disaster is going to strike Uttarakhand again and again due to climate change and the unthinking actions of people. ■

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Some of the women who survived in Bilaspur

Put women in charge

Let them decide what works best for them



POONAM MUTTREJA

THE 137 WOMEN who were herded into derelict healthcare facilities were given a choice: more babies or sterilization. It was really no choice, but, as always, they took what they could get.

If you are a woman in a remote village in Bilaspur, in the largely rural state of Chhattisgarh, chances are you are far removed from a world full of modern options in contraception that allow you

to space out babies. You are also taught early in life not to say no and to accept the decisions taken on your behalf — even if they are about your own health.

So, when the women registered their consent to be sterilized, they didn't know, and were too fearful to ask, what they were getting into. What they hoped for was freedom from a life of unwanted pregnancies. In fact, they were being robbed of their autonomy by getting them to put their thumb impressions on consent forms they couldn't read.

But with their 'consent' taken, the women were rushed through surgeries performed at high speed. A single surgeon did as many as 84 sterilizations, each in a minute and a half, as though out to set a record.

The conditions were unhygienic. There were just three laparoscopes employed after perfunctorily being dipped in Betadine solution. The same syringe and suture needle served for all the surgeries.

At the end of this bizarre exercise, they were all given tablets of Ciprofloxacin and sent home. But, hours later, 16 women were dead and another 80-odd were seriously unwell with septicaemia.

They were mostly in their twenties and some were lactating mothers who

should never have been subjected to sterilization. What had been perpetrated on them was nothing short of a crime which cut short their reproductive years.

It was 2 am when my mobile phone rang and I got the news. I was in New York for the release of the UN's Social Development Goals (SDGs) report. *The Wall Street Journal's* correspondent in Delhi was calling, thinking that I was in India. Soon, the *Financial Times* got in touch as well. Calls followed from Indian publications.

In a networked world, news travels quickly. But what does connectivity by itself really do for empowerment? In death these women had in a flash become news. Yet, while they lived, it seemed, they hadn't mattered.

For all the seamless connections between Delhi, New York and Bilaspur, their lives had remained steeped in patriarchy, obscurantism and poverty. They never got the agency they so desperately needed. Perhaps now, with the spreading stench of this tragedy, that would change.

Awake in New York, I thought about the babies the women must have left behind. Who would take care of them? I recalled innumerable conversations I had had in rural India with men blithely saying they would marry again if their women died. Would this be the case here too? Perhaps.

Once back in Delhi with my colleagues at the Population Foundation of India (PFI), we decided to not let this terrible tragedy pass. They were as angry as I was. We decided to put together a fact-finding team and quickly visit Bilaspur to document what exactly had happened.

Such an intervention was a departure from the role PFI has historically played. The PFI was founded in 1970 by J.R.D. Tata and Dr Bharat Ram to support policy research and programme planning and generally sponsor a better understanding of India's changing demographics.

Over the years, we have evolved to promote gender rights and work with

communities on holding the government accountable. Since 2005, PFI has been helping the government in implementing Community Action for Health — a programme under the National Health Mission — which places people at the centre of the process of ensuring that the health needs and rights of the community are being fulfilled, thus 'bringing public into public health'. But our approach has essentially remained a sedate one of gathering information and sitting with people in authority to talk things through.

By going off to Bilaspur, we were taking a more strident stance and plunging into a form of activism which didn't usually come from our corner. Nevertheless, we felt it was an intervention we just had to make.

We decided to reach out to other NGOs as well. So, when the fact-finding team was put together, it consisted of Dr Alok Banerjee of the Parivar Seva Sansthan, Dr Kalpana Apte of the Family Planning Association of India and Dr Subha Sri of Common Health. From PFI there was myself, Sona Sharma and Bijit Roy.

As it turned out, it was one of the best decisions we have ever taken. The team's inquiry resulted in a report (*Robbed of Choice and Dignity: Indian Women Dead after Mass Sterilization*) that finally became the basis for a landmark judgment by the Supreme Court in 2016 and transformed the way family planning services are provided in India.

It was not we who went to the Supreme Court. We just put our findings together and gave them to the government and the media. But since our report went into great detail and provided evidence based on facts, it was included in a public interest litigation which had been filed two years earlier before the Supreme Court on the standard of family planning services and government-run health facilities in general.

A DREAM VERDICT

When Justice Madan B. Lokur's judgment came, it drew heavily on our report, which sought a stop to all sterilization camps and asked the government to invest instead in fixed-day services. He also sought a shift of focus to spacing and temporary methods of contraception.

Importantly, the judgment emphasized that family planning services were ultimately the responsibility of the Union government, which couldn't disown what was happening in the states.

Justice Lokur asked the government to report back to the Supreme Court on a quarterly basis and thereby put in place a cadence for the much-needed process of reform.

With the Supreme Court focusing on the government and the Bilaspur tragedy becoming a major international embarrassment, results followed quickly. Officials didn't want to be out of line for fear of being hauled up by the highest court in the land.

Everything NGOs involved in family planning had ever asked for came together in this one judgment. I would like to say that, as a result, family planning services have indeed improved, though much more needs to be done.

IMPARTIAL, PROFESSIONAL

The decision to send a fact-finding team to Bilaspur was in some ways an emotional one. It came spontaneously and even, if you like, out of considerable anger and frustration with the problems of the public healthcare system in India.

However, as we got down to our serious task of uncovering the truth in Bilaspur, we firmly contained these initial responses. We knew that to be successful in our mission we would have to be impartial, empathetic and professional.

The team was put together keeping in mind the seriousness of the purpose for which we were setting out. We had on board competent physicians who understood family planning and the complexities of public healthcare. It wouldn't do to be mere rabble-rousers. This was not the time for slogans.

The state government had told the prime minister that the deaths were the result of spurious Ciprofloxacin. We knew instinctively that this was not so. To prove otherwise we would have to be uncompromising in our search for information. Only a well-documented counter narrative would succeed.

GOOD PEOPLE IN GOVT

As NGOs we tread a difficult path. We need to confront governments and also work with them. Speaking truth to power can't be a visceral response. A good cause deserves a good case. It is important to identify and call out wrongdoers, but bravado alone won't do.

It was adventurous to go to Bilaspur. But once there we had to be calibrated and methodical and earn the confidence of the people we would be interacting with. It was important that we inspire respect and faith.



A survivor with her family



Relatives mourn with the mother (holding her baby) of one of the women who died

The decision to go to Bilaspur was in some ways an emotional one. But in the fact-finding team we had competent physicians who understood family planning.

Our exposure to government in PFI, as well as the experience of seasoned colleagues from other NGOs in the team, had taught us that no system is wholly bad. There are always enough good people within the system who feel upset when things go wrong.

Bilaspur was no different. We found and happily reported that the district administration, under Divisional Commissioner Sonmoni Borah, had done an outstanding job in saving lives once the tragedy unfolded. If not for him many other women would have also lost their lives. He acted with speed and dedication. We saw in him a great officer and said so.

Several officials in the state health ministry shared information and spoke

frankly to us. As did the doctor who did the autopsies, which was crucial because we needed to know how exactly the women had died. Was it really from spurious Ciprofloxacin? The autopsies showed that it wasn't so.

It was heartening that our concern over the deaths was shared by many as was our overall purpose of finding ways to repair the system.

We were unable to speak to Dr R. K. Gupta in jail. He had performed the serial sterilizations and had been subsequently arrested. We spoke to the women who survived and families of those who had died. We also went to the derelict health facility, the Nemi Chand Jain Hospital, where the operations were performed. We were able to photograph the scene, including the cobwebs in the makeshift operation theatre, which was not sterilized.

FOLLOW THE MONEY

A crucial part of our report was related to the government expenditure on family planning. We had taken a health economist on board at PFI to analyze expenditure when we found that budgets for family planning and other health programmes were not available in the public domain or clearly demarcated.

I asked Gautam Chakraborty, our health economist, to do an analysis of how much the country spent on sterilization as well as other aspects of family planning, including spacing methods.

It turned out that 86 percent of the expenditure was on sterilization. Of this, 70 percent was set aside for incentives, which explained why women in hundreds were being sterilized. Also, doctors and government health teams were paid additionally for each sterilization. There was money to be made.

By comparison, just 1.5 percent of the budget was being spent on temporary methods like spacing. And for the rest the expenditure was only 13 percent.

While on the money trail, we found that 40 percent of the state budgets for family planning went unspent. This could be the primary reason why expenditure on family planning has not been increased.

When we pointed this out to Dr Arvind Subramanian, the then chief economic adviser in the Union Ministry of Finance, he asked us to send him the details of numbers and for the first time we had two pages on family planning in the Economic Survey of 2014-15.

TWO NEW CONTRACEPTIVES

With growing disclosure has come momentum. Two new contraceptives have been introduced. One of them is an injectable, which women, whose husbands are migrant labour, find easier to rely on. It can be accessed and taken discreetly and it offers continuous protection. There is no having to get the man to put on a condom or remembering to take a pill.

For close to 30 years no new contraceptives were introduced in India, partly because of genuine concerns raised by women's groups. But had the women of Bilaspur been given better options than sterilization they undoubtedly would not have died or had to suffer. Often, causes pursued with the best of intentions tend to ignore reality.

But even if other options had been available in Bilaspur would the women in those villages have had the awareness and confidence to make a choice in their best interests?

The success of family planning initiatives grows out of an awareness and acceptance of gender rights. Women have to learn to assert themselves and men have to yield space.

But social and behavioural changes depend on effective communication. At PFI we have immersed ourselves in television, the internet and social media to reach out, particularly to the young who have the capacity to lead change.

New information technologies offer opportunities to reach out to millions with additional possibilities of customizing messaging in terms of content and language. Online chats provide direct communication and privacy which allow meaningful conversations on sensitive subjects like masturbation and choice of contraception.

Since April 2019, we have used our chatbot, SnehAI, powered by artificial intelligence, to provide safe spaces for adolescents online. There have been, to date, over 8.6 million conversations with approximately 150,000 active users. Recognizing its potential, the Ministry of Health and Family Welfare linked its population stabilization fund helpline to the chatbot.

PFI is expanding the chatbot to include content on digital safety, safe online behaviour, online child sexual abuse and exploitation.

AI holds tremendous potential to expand healthcare efforts, including much-needed access to accurate information to under-served populations and in remote parts of the country.

On the flip side, we have found television a useful medium for creating role



One for all: Adolescent girls at a workshop in Rajasthan

Social and behavioural changes depend on communication being effective. At PFI we have used TV, the internet and social media. Online chats provide the privacy to deal with sensitive issues.

models. Launched in 2013, our flagship television programme *Main Kuch Bhi Kar Sakti Hoon* (MKBKSH) or A Woman Can Achieve Anything, challenged regressive socio-cultural norms, practices and behaviour around family planning, sanitation and gender equality.

Main Kuch Bhi Kar Sakti Hoon knits together all of PFI's programmes and priority concerns around the single theme of women's rights and empowerment.

The programme was telecast on Doordarshan over 183 episodes and three seasons. It was also adapted for radio and broadcast in partnership with All India Radio on over 200 radio channels across India.

An Interactive Voice Response System (IVRS) received approximately 1.7 million calls from 400,000 unique callers from across 29 states of India, with nearly an equal share of men and women callers.

The serial was watched by close to 150 million viewers across the country and continues to be watched on OTT channels and digital platforms such as Hotstar and YouTube.

The last 26 episodes of MKBKSH's Season Two introduced and branded 800,000 peer educators under the Rashtriya Kishor Swasthya Karyakram (RKSK) as Saathiyas.

The name Saathiya inspired the Ministry of Health and Family Welfare to work in partnership with PFI and the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) to create the Saathiya Resource Kit to equip 800,000 peer educators to work with adolescents.

We have also found that celebrities serve as powerful influencers when it comes to social messaging. A digital media campaign called #BASABBAHUTHOGAYA or Enough is Enough was one of India's first evaluated digital campaigns aimed at ending violence against women and girls.

The campaign reached an average of 4.2 million viewers online every month while it ran. It consisted of six short films — three of the films were with everyday people and three with celebrities: actor Vidya Balan, tennis ace Sania Mirza and journalist Barkha Dutt.

Celebrity support for the campaign was showcased at a concert in Mumbai, which was led by Farhan Akhtar along with other popular film and music celebrities. The concert was a live event and was watched on Facebook by 4.8 million viewers.

A video anthem for the campaign, *Chulein Aasmaan* or Touch the Sky, penned by Javed Akhtar, was released on March 8, 2018 on the occasion of International Women's Day.

WORKING WITH THE STATES

In family planning, the Union government has an important role in providing scientific direction, framing policy, designing programmes and allocating resources. But implementation happens in the states where governments need support in setting their local level priorities and farming policies.

For PFI, these partnerships come with their own challenges when governments feel compelled to sway in directions which we may not feel are advisable.

PFI has drafted the state population policy of Uttar Pradesh. We led the research and stakeholder consultations and after an exhaustive process the



Girls find hope and a role model in the TV serial *Main Kuch Bhi Kar Sakti Hoon*



Dr Sneha and her family in a scene from *Main Kuch Bhi Kar Sakti Hoon*

policy was adopted and released on July 11, 2021. It was an inclusive and comprehensive approach to protect the health and well-being of all citizens across their life stages.

But even as the policy was being released, the UP Law Commission announced a population bill proposing stringent measures for population control in the state, which ran counter to the policy. Having shaped the policy, PFI has had to oppose the bill.

In Bihar, too, PFI has helmed the drafting of the population policy of the state and it has been submitted in its final form for acceptance to the state government. It remains to be seen how it gets implemented.

As states compete for investment and seek to deliver the benefits of development to people, how they deal with gender rights, population and public health will decide their success.

For all the challenges that remain, there is also good news on the population front. Over the years the growth rate of the population has been slowing. India's total fertility rate (TFR) has fallen to 2.2 — very close to the replacement rate of 2.1. The TFR has reached replacement levels of 2.1 in 24 states. India's urban TFR at 1.8 is less than the replacement rate, and close to the European average of 1.6.

Fewer girls are getting married below the age of 18 and maternal mortality deaths are 130 for 100,000 live births, which is half of what it was in 2004-06. More institutional births are therefore happening.

But there is still a long way to go in correcting an adverse sex ratio. More young girls and women are coming out to study and work and showing that they can be successful. Yet, as we can see from any day's newspaper or TV news show, their freedoms are precariously placed.

We take heart in the message of *Main Kuch Bhi Kar Sakti Hoon* resonating with millions of viewers. But as realists we have to admit that there is much to be done so that the kind of tragedy we witnessed in Bilaspur never visits us again. ■

Poonam Muttreja is the Executive Director of the Population Foundation of India

The outward bound



**DELHI
DARBAR**

SANJAYA BARU

WHEN news of business billionaire Mukesh Ambani acquiring a massive 300-acre estate in England was flashed in the media, it was widely assumed that India's wealthiest individual had also decided to join millions of other citizens in relocating overseas. The Ambanis were quick to clarify that they were merely acquiring property overseas and would continue to remain Indian citizens and divide their time between their high-rise vertical home in Mumbai and their horizontally sprawling estate in England.

Acquiring a second home abroad is now commonplace for India's wealthy. Many also have a kind of semi-dual citizenship, since full duality is not yet permitted by Indian law. Some hold green cards offered by the United States that permits them to own property in the US, some have Singaporean permanent resident status and some have Dubai's business visa. There are other forms in which one can remain Indian and yet be global.

When bright young students graduating from Indian institutes of engineering, technology and management began going abroad for higher studies in large numbers it was assumed they would return home to contribute to India's development. This was generally true until the 1970s. A new trend took root in the 1980s when these non-resident Indians (NRIs) became 'never-returning Indians'.

After 2000 the outward trickle became a flood. Over the past decade billions of dollars have been remitted out by Indian families paying for the education of their not-returning offspring. Most of these young Indians came from middle-class families for whom foreign education and employment offered a huge status boost and a qualitative improvement in their standard of living. Once they discovered attractive overseas employment and business opportunities, most of them stayed back.

The introduction of the Liberalised Remittance Scheme (LRS) in February 2004 allowed Indians to take out their savings and pay for education, travel, acquisition of property and maintenance of close

relatives abroad. Initially, one could remit out \$25,000 during a financial year; this was increased over time to \$250,000 per financial year. In other words, a million dollars in four years.

The LRS outflow apart, an increasing number of Indian companies have acquired businesses abroad, and are allowed to retain profits from overseas operations abroad. Many businesspersons have taken up foreign citizenship and run their business in India from overseas offices. All this is legitimate. While the media keeps splashing news about illegal transactions overseas, they now pale in significance compared to legal ones. As a consequence, it is no longer just middle-class families that wish to send their children overseas but business families also do so.



The Ambanis were quick to clarify that they were merely acquiring property, not migrating

Over the past few months I have participated in discussions, given interviews, answered questions and read reviews of my latest book, *India's Power Elite: Class, Caste and a Cultural Revolution* (Penguin Viking, 2021). What stood out for me in all these was the fact that the least commented upon chapter of my book was the last chapter, titled 'Secession of the Successful', in which I draw attention to this phenomenon — best described as the 'flight of the elite'. India's talented, her wealthy, her socially better-off and her politically powerful are increasingly either migrating or setting up a second home overseas.

No reviewer nor any journalist has thought it fit to highlight the argument of my book's last chapter, focusing instead mainly on the political arguments of the first couple of chapters. This blindness to what I regard as an important chapter of my book has puzzled me. Even when I bring the issue up in interviews or conversations, my interlocutors quickly move on to some other topic. To prove that I am not being judgmental towards others, I assure

my interlocutors that I too come from a family where many who have been successful have seceded or many who have seceded have been successful. The point is not to point fingers, but to come to terms with an important social phenomenon. Namely, that the Indian elite are migrating in larger numbers.

There is an important distinction in the out-migration of talent and wealth of the past and of the present. Until the 2010s, and perhaps even now, a dominant part of the out-migration has been in search of opportunity. This 'pull-effect' was significant given limited opportunities in the slowly growing India of the past. Though, even in the past, upper caste Indians would claim that they were compelled to go overseas for education and employment because the policy of increasing the share of reservations for socially and economically backward sections of society was depriving them of adequate opportunities at home. In other words, there was also a 'push-effect' contributing to out-migration.

Even as the 'pull-effect' remains relevant, the nature of the 'push-effect' is changing. Apart from inadequate opportunities at home, the growing sense of unease about future prospects and the trajectory of future development — economic and political — is increasingly worrying a wide cross-section of Indians. From urban chaos to pollution to law and order issues to communal politics and hate crimes, the rising authoritarianism of the

executive, concerns about competence and corruption in the judiciary are all creating an environment that makes young Indians today less confident about their future than was the case even a decade ago.

I know many will disagree with my inferences. However, it is useful to know that data does not invalidate my hypothesis. The outward flow of foreign exchange through LRS for education and residence abroad continues to increase, as does outward investment by Indian firms. It is not surprising that the first form of travel to be permitted and restored after the COVID lockdown was the travel of students and businesspersons. Anyone willing to spend money overseas is now welcome abroad. The Indian passport may be classified as 'weak' because of the number of countries that require Indians to secure a visa. But money talks. The more that one is willing to spend, the easier it is to secure a visa. ■

Sanjaya Baru is a writer and Distinguished Fellow at the United Service Institution of India



**TECH
TALES**

KIRAN KARNIK

THIS last edition of Tech Tales revisits the past 20 columns which described the myriad applications of technology, the exciting possibilities that are emerging as well as the challenges and issues posed. As the column signs off, we emphasize the two very different faces, the Jekyll and Hyde characteristic, of technology applications. Note that it is not technology per se, but how it is used, and in what context, which determines whether or not it is a force for general good.

From agriculture to zoonoses, science and technology (S&T) is now the major factor driving change. Precision farming, a technique which reduces inputs and increases productivity, is one example. It uses a host of new technologies: satellites for imaging and data collection; drones that do the same and also spray precise quantities of fertilizers and pesticides; sensors or IoT devices that collect and transmit field data; computers that process and analyze inputs, using advanced data analytics, machine learning and artificial intelligence; genetic engineering for increasing nutritional value and improved seeds.

Yet, these same capabilities are leveraged for more questionable purposes. High resolution imaging is a tool for spying and surveillance. Data collection through various devices can infringe on privacy, and data analytics — in conjunction with artificial intelligence — is being used to predict behaviour, possibly even shape it. On the other hand, a similar combination of technologies helps oncologists to prescribe the most effective, individualized treatment for patients.

Drones carry medicines to inaccessible areas, but are also used to drop arms shipments to terrorists. Face recognition software, using footage from ubiquitous CCTV cameras, can screen through thousands of faces and spot a criminal or terrorist. But, it can also identify and trace you, making anonymity impossible and taking away your privacy.

In a horrifying sci-fi scenario, a specific car is identified and tracked via satellite. When it stops at an intersection, one passenger is identified through face recognition software. A truck, parked earlier at the spot, carries a remotely-controlled gun. A

sniper, sitting a thousand miles away, uses satellite imagery to aim at and kill the target with such precision that his co-passenger survives. The truck is then blown up via satellite command, leaving no evidence. This scary, but technologically-feasible scenario, may sound like something from a thriller movie. However, it is the commonly accepted account of a real-life incident: the unfortunate murder of a key nuclear scientist in Iran, using satellite, imaging, tracking, face-recognition and robotic capabilities.

The previous edition of Tech Tales discussed the Pegasus spyware and its astounding ability to access all the information stored in your phone and listen to your conversations; also to turn on your microphone and camera. More frighteningly, it can be installed in your phone without your knowledge.



Drones can carry life-saving medicines. Drones can also be misused by terrorists

Governments say they use this to fight terrorism and crime, but it can obviously be used against dissenters or political rivals too. Also, the fact that such spyware is developed by private companies throws open the possibility of blackmail.

The capabilities developed by tech mega companies and their global dominance (think of Facebook/Meta, Amazon, Google, Microsoft) has made them enormously powerful. Soon, they may be quasi-countries, in terms of financial resources and influence. What does this mean for the present global order? Do their massive databases on individuals and their ability to cleverly mine them compromise your privacy and agency? Will their power multiply further as they foray into broader fields of technology: from transportation and communication to energy and virtuality (on-surface electric vehicles to underground tunnels and hyper-loop trains to space, in transportation; broadband communication through constellations of thousands of satellites; battery storage; and the Metaverse)?

Even as applications of IT spread across the

economy, hackers are having a field day. Despite continuous improvement in measures to prevent and detect cyber crime, they continue to be a step ahead. Now, it is not only individuals who are targets: increasingly, it is organizations and large systems that are attacked. Motives too have moved beyond direct theft and ransom, and include terrorist attacks aimed at disrupting public systems and utilities, to cause chaos or even destruction and deaths. Hacker groups indulging in this are known to include state-sponsored ones, and possibly state agencies too. While the growing sophistication of computer software has resulted in many greatly beneficial applications, these capabilities are also leading to advances in hacking capabilities. The increasingly complex battle between hackers and protectors will go on.

Rarely has the general populace experienced the benefits of science so personally and immediately as it did through the COVID vaccines. Countries worked in partnership with companies to develop, test, produce and use the vaccines at amazing speed. This was the result of scientists from various disciplines working with software experts to accelerate the development process through computer simulations and data analytics. Yet, alongside these wonders of sci-tech is the distinct possibility that the COVID virus — or another like it — is not a zoonotic one that has jumped naturally from bird/animal to humans, but could well be lab-developed, as part of a nation's biological warfare armoury. More terrifying is the thought of a terrorist group developing a

destructive virus or stealing it from a lab. Another example of the two sides of scientific progress.

These and many other new developments highlight, as never before, the need for ethics in developing and deploying technology. Many applications have also brought home the need to avoid a technology-driven approach to solving problems, and adopting a more holistic or total-system view. The most important element of what S&T brings us is the method of science: to hypothesize, observe, analyze, theorise, validate — and yet, to always question and be willing to change. This translates not only into new theories and products, but also into "scientific temper": a rational approach that is not based on dogma, blind or unquestioning faith, but adopts the method of science. This learning, this mantra, for use even in day-to-day life, is the most important message of Tech Tales. ■

Kiran Karnik is an independent strategy, public policy analyst and author. His recent books include eVolution: Decoding India's Disruptive Tech Story (2018) and Crooked Minds: Creating an Innovative Society (2016). His latest book, Decisive Decade, is on India in 2030.

Think big, think systems



LET'S
TALK

ARUN MAIRA

INSTITUTIONS must learn how to produce outcomes on scale much faster. The climate is getting hotter faster than our collective ability to reduce global warming. Scientists can point to solutions, such as the need to reduce carbon emissions to net zero. The problem is how to implement the solutions. All countries, all states within countries, and all their citizens must cooperate to find ways to meet the universal goal.

The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) list a more comprehensive agenda, beyond only reduction of carbon in the atmosphere, to improve the well-being of the planet and all human beings. The lives and livelihoods of people in many countries have been greatly harmed already by the dwindling of clean water resources. Poverty persists, despite economic growth, even in many richer countries. Inequalities of income and wealth are increasing in all countries. All these problems must be addressed simultaneously to improve well-being. Racing to meet a carbon reduction goal, with solutions that hamper the achievement of the other goals for universal well-being, may cause more harm. Solutions must be systems solutions for all-round improvement, not for any one outcome on scale. Moreover, solutions must be customized to fit local conditions. The solutions will have to be developed and implemented by partnerships, as the 17th SDG states. Partnerships are essential between local communities on the ground, local governments, and business actors too.

India's ability to produce outcomes on scale will determine how fast the world can achieve the SDGs. India and China, with well over a billion citizens each, have the largest numbers of humans on the planet (the next largest country, the US, has a little over 300 million). So far, China is much further ahead than India on several goals such as reduction of poverty and the quality of public services. Therefore, faster achievement of large-scale outcomes by India will help its own citizens and the world the most.

Can India deliver on scale? It depends on what is to be done. India has a remarkable ability to conduct elections on scale: over 600 million persons voted electronically in the last national election. Votes were gathered even in remote mountain villages high in the Himalayas and in the dense forests of central India. No other country can match this ability. 1.2 billion Indian citizens have been given

Aadhaar cards. A massive country-wide drive was successfully conducted to take their photographs and get their signatures (or thumb prints). India has administered over one billion doses of the COVID vaccine so far, and the pace has picked up with more vaccines becoming available. (China has given about 2.2 billion, and the US about 430 million.)

India has demonstrated that, when something standard must be delivered on scale, even in very tough 'last mile' conditions with poor infrastructure, it can get it done. Civil society organizations and private businesses have been valuable partners of the government to run widespread supply chains, with civil society playing a vital role in the last mile. However, the SDGs are not about delivering things to citizens. Achievement of the SDGs requires the



Akhshay Patra's kitchens cook millions of midday meals for school children

SDG outcomes will be produced on scale when conditions of communities are changed in ways that fit their needs and resources.

change of systemic conditions within the communities. SDG outcomes will be produced on scale when the conditions of communities everywhere are changed in ways that fit their needs and resources. Indeed, if their conditions do not improve faster, the need to deliver more relief on scale will increase as the conditions of local systems deteriorate further with climate change.

Changing complex systems on scale requires different capabilities and orientations than those that deliver standard products on scale. Private sector organizations are masters of producing and delivering products efficiently on a large scale. That is how they increase their revenues and make profits. Changing the systemic conditions of communities is not their responsibility: that is the responsibility of governments, to their mind. While the government must provide relief on scale when there is distress because citizens will turn to it, its primary responsibility is to improve the resilience of communities, by ensuring their environment is not harmed, and providing public services for health, education, and so on. So, the government must be an effective systems changer, not only an efficient deliverer.

Civil society organizations fall into three broad categories. There are those whose role it is to stand up against governments and against business organizations too for the rights of communities. Then there are those who deliver relief and services on the ground. Often, these roles are in conflict: in one role, NGOs are partners of governments and private businesses in delivering; in the other, they must stand up against them for the rights of citizens.

Civil society organizations also play a third role. Which is to be catalysts of systems change in the communities. That way they can help the most in accelerating India's progress towards achieving the SDGs.

All three roles — to stand up for rights, to deliver in the last mile, and to be catalysts for change — are honourable roles for civil society organizations. However, they require different leadership orientations and different types of capabilities. Protesting against government apathy is necessary, but by

itself does not produce results. Systems change is required for that, and civil society organizations can help. Their catalytic role empowers communities the most; it makes communities less dependent on the charity of others, including the civil society organizations themselves.

India and the world need more catalytic civil society movements. Catalysts require different capabilities than demanders and deliverers. Catalysts must have the ability to draw others together to see the whole system they must facilitate change in, and not just fill holes in it with their services. They require systems thinking, and the ability to facilitate partnerships amongst others to stimulate systemic action for the benefit of the community. Trust of all the partners is essential for good catalysts. They must not compete with any of them to claim credit for the outcomes. Catalysts are leaders with more humility and less ego. ■

Arun Maira is author of *A Billion Fireflies: Critical Conversations to Shape a New Post-pandemic World*

Children of a lesser God



JUSTICE
MATTERS

NANDITA HAKSAR

MAHDI Basheer Hasan al Badri is barely 30 years old and the product of three wars as well as a victim of two deadly conflicts, one involving the dreaded Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS). These circumstances forced him to leave his country, Iraq, and take refuge in India where he is caught in the rising tide of Hindu communalism, attacked by goons and finding it difficult to rent a place because he is Muslim.

Mahdi has no legal right to work so he cannot earn an honest living; he has been given no financial assistance by any agency and has lived for days without anything to eat.

He is now living in a tiny tent along with his elder brother, Mohammad, outside the gates of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) which remain shut to him even though he is a recognized refugee under the mandate of the organization. The two brothers came to India from Iraq thinking the UNHCR would help them but now all they have is a card stating they are refugees recognized under the mandate of the UNHCR. All they want is to be resettled in a third country.

According to the UNHCR, "Refugees are identified as in need of settlement when they have particular need or vulnerabilities in their country of asylum and cannot return to the country of their origin"... and when they need legal protection and there is a "lack of foreseeable alternative durable solution".

Refugees are not statistics. They are people, each one with his or her particular story rooted in war, conflict and personal tragedy.

This is the story of Mahdi and his elder brother, Mohammad.

Mahdi was born on April 17, 1991 in Falluja in Iraq. The name of the city is synonymous with war and conflict.

He was born barely four months after the first Gulf War began. A war called the video war. But for Iraqis it was a war that began with aerial and naval bombardment by an array of nations who joined the coalition, forming the largest military alliance since World War II. The objective of the US-led war was to expel Iraqi troops from Kuwait.

It was no coincidence it was the same year that the Soviet Union collapsed formally, ending the Cold War. Iraq had been an ally of the Soviet Union.

Mahdi says he remembers having an "amazing childhood, in the midst of a loving family, going to school, having meals with family and relatives, attending birthday parties of friends and playing football and video games before Play Station".

But his childhood was cut short with the coming



Camping outside the UNHCR office in Delhi

The two brothers came to India thinking the UNHCR would help them but all they now have is a card stating they are refugees recognized under the mandate of the UNHCR.

of the Iraq War in 2003 and the invasion of Iraq by the US-led coalition which overthrew the Iraqi government of Saddam Hussein. That war formally ended in 2011 with an estimated 151,000 to 1,033,000 Iraqis dying in the first three to five years of conflict.

The United States became reinvolved in 2014 at the head of a new coalition; the insurgency and many dimensions of the armed conflict continue. The invasion occurred as part of the George W. Bush administration's War on Terror following the September 11 attacks despite there being no connection of the latter to Iraq.

Mohammad and Mahdi did not see the war as much as they experienced it and heard it behind the closed doors of their home. The electricity was cut off and so were their phone lines. They sat still inside their home in the dark and heard the bombs, the rocket launchers, the crunch of boots of the US soldiers and the blasts of bombs by the Iraqi resistance.

Mohammad says his mother was worried sick about her parents who lived in Baghdad so one day she and their father and two baby brothers went in a taxi to Baghdad. They said they would return the next day. It was in 2005.

Mohammad remembers the day, though not the date, as memorable. He was in charge of the house and his little brother, Mahdi. "I was the man of the house!" So, Mohammad decided to make the most

of his freedom and played football all day and invited his friends to spend the night at his home. They cooked themselves a hearty meal, made juice and black tea.

It was already dark and the boys were enjoying themselves when suddenly their parents returned.

They did not embarrass Mohammad by scolding him. But the friends decided to return to their homes. Mohammad went with his friends a short distance and walked bouncing back. When he pushed open the door of his home, he found his parents standing just behind it, looking deathly pale. His father handed him a piece of paper, asking, "Mohammad, did any of your friends do this as a joke?"

The paper had a chilling warning to the father. It stated in Arabic: "To Basheer Go Away Foreign Agent. Or we will eliminate you."

Mohammad describes his father as a gentle person who was an engineer by profession. Basheer could not believe that anyone would want to harm him. But just a few days earlier a man who delivered gas cylinders had not heeded such a warning and had been shot by the Mujahideen Army (MA); Mujahideen was the Sunni Iraqi militant organization and they were killing Shias.

Basheer decided to stay on. But then another warning was stuck to his door. That day Basheer and his wife bundled their four boys into a taxi

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and drove off to Baghdad. They were now, in the terminology of the UNHCR, “internally displaced persons”.

From 2005 to 2014 the family struggled to survive in Baghdad. They lived in a temporary shelter with little to eat. Mohammad and his father worked in shops as salesmen; Mahdi became a barber working in a salon. Then in 2013, the ISIS entered Baghdad. They declared that it was haram to shave and trim beards. The barber next to Mahdi's salon was shot dead. The ISIS continues to attack Shia villages and sectarian tension is still high in Iraq.

Mahdi and Mohammad remember the fear. It enveloped their lives at all hours. But the family managed to survive, drawing comfort from one another. Then one day in 2014 Basheer disappeared from the shop in Mustansiriya market where he worked. It was the Mujahideen again. And they came for Mahdi and Mohammad.

Mohammad and Mahdi went into hiding; and their mother told them not to return home because there was a car parked outside their house with men on the lookout for Basheer's two sons.

In August 2014 Mohammad and Mahdi were given passports and flight tickets for India. It was their aunt who worked for the US Army who advised them to go to India and seek the protection of the UNHCR.

The two left without even being able to embrace their mother. Mahdi put his head on Mohammad's shoulder and cried all the way till the plane landed in Hyderabad.

It took the two brothers several days to discover that there was no UNHCR office in Hyderabad. They then took a flight to Delhi.

It was the Afghan refugees who helped the Iraqis find their way to the UNHCR office. The two brothers looked at the office in awe — it was a part of the UN, surely they would now get some help. They were recognized as refugees. The two brothers joined the English language classes organized by the UNHCR and passed the course. But they were given no financial assistance.

Mohammad worked as a waiter in Lajpat Nagar. Mahdi would come quietly to the back of the restaurant and Mohammad would manage to smuggle a bowl of rice for his little brother. But a time came when they ran out of money completely.

Mohammad found work translating for Iraqi



A refugee's anguish

Mohammad and Mahdi too dream. It is a simple dream: to live in a decent home, earn an honest living, have a family and, above all, feel safe.

patients in hospitals but an Indian threatened him, saying he was taking his job. Mahdi found work in a barber's salon but someone reported him to the police. When he confidently showed the police his UNHCR card the police said the card did not accord the right to work. The police even took away his implements.

On Diwali in 2018, Mahdi went out and joined a group of people in Safdarjung Enclave who had firecrackers. He was enjoying the Diwali celebrations when some people came and beat him and told him he had no right to join Diwali celebrations. Mohammad was shocked to see Mahdi's face bruised and his clothes torn.

Mohammad said they were not able to rent homes because they had Muslim names. They had no financial assistance from the UNHCR, they had no home and they could not earn a living because it

was illegal. Since 2017 India had stopped giving residential permits to refugees and so they had no legal protection at all.

By this time the UNHCR had also shut their gates to the refugees. No one spoke to them. They got no assistance. In their desperation Mohammad and Mahdi decided to sit in protest in front of the UNHCR gates.

It was outside the UNHCR office in Vasant Vihar that I found the Iraqi brothers. They had one tiny tent which a local had given them. Refugees are not mere statistics enclosed in glossy UNHCR reports. Each refugee has a story to tell; each is dealing with trauma and they are victims of wars and conflicts which are not of their making.

Like other refugees, Mohammad and Mahdi too dream. It is a simple dream: to live in a decent home, earn an honest living, have a family and, above all, feel safe.

The Iraqi brothers have no legal or physical protection at all. Apart from the fact that India does not have a refugee law, it has a law that gives preference to non-Muslim immigrants. Mohammad and Mahdi have no chance of acquiring Indian citizenship and they cannot go back to Iraq where the only job they will get is in one of the many militias known as Popular Mobilization Forces, or in Arabic as al-Hashd al-Shaabi. They do not want to earn a living by killing fellow Iraqis.

The UNHCR has a mandate to find permanent solutions to the refugee problem. For the Iraqi brothers their best hope is resettlement in a third country where they could study and earn a livelihood and have their own families. They have an uncle, their father's brother, in the US and they wonder whether they will be able to unite with some member of their family.

I am always inspired by the way refugees can keep alive a flame of hope for a better future despite being in a situation which seems so utterly hopeless. But, most of all, I find it truly amazing that they are able to preserve their humour and humanity. I invited the Iraqi brothers to my home for Diwali, and they turned up with a box of Iraqi sweets. “It is for you, Jidatee.”

I am now their Indian Jidatee, grandmother. And like all grandmothers I want to see my grandchildren safe, happy and with a future to look forward to. I want to fight for their right to live a full life. ■

Nandita Haksar is a noted lawyer and human rights activist

WHERE ARE WE BEING READ?

Civil Society is going places...

Kutch, Porbandar, Chamoli, Bhavnagar, Ahwa, Tiswadi, Amritsar, Sabarkantha, Valsad, Sirsa, Hamirpur, Aizwal, Kinnaur, Dhanbad, Dumka, Palamu, Chamarajanagar, Haveri, Madikeri, Malappuram, Jhabua, Amravati, Kolhapur, Osmanabad, Bishnupur, Dimapur, Rajsamand, Mokochung, Mayurbhanj, Bathinda, Fatehgarh Sahib, Barmer, Hoshiarpur, Jhalawar, Auraiya, Farrukhabad, Lakhimpur Kheri, Pratapgarh, Burdwan, Murshidabad, Pauri Garhwal, Cuddalore, Nungambakkam Sivaganga, Kancheepuram, Varanasi, Bellare, Erode, Ramanathapuram, Kanyakumari, Lohit, Perambalur, Pudukkottai, Shahdol, Goa, Tiruvannamalai, New York, Nalgonda, Domalguda, Tezu, London, Telengana, Itanagar....

Civil Society

The caregiver too needs care

SHUBHA NAGESH & PHEBA MATHAI

HEALTH WORKERS need to be at peace with themselves even as they work with people who have problems. October is traditionally the month when we recognize the importance of mental health and perhaps it should once be dedicated to the health worker.

Just how important and meaningful this can be Sunita Singh will tell you. She is the head of Latika Roy Foundation's Child Development Centre. The kids she works with have multiple disabilities and complex needs.

“When we are stressed ourselves,” she says, “we can't be there for the children. If our own mental health is strong, we can respond appropriately to the child's needs. Our work is really intense! We need to be positive and calm to do it. Otherwise, our own stress gets reflected in the child.”

As October passes, the articles written, hashtags generated and special events held all over the world are soon forgotten.

We forget at our peril. Suicide, domestic violence and child abuse are just a few of the inevitable outcomes of ignoring mental health concerns, concerns the pandemic has only worsened.

The World Health Organization (WHO) theme for the year is Mental Health in an Unequal World — appropriate given the extreme inequities in accessing mental health services. Among the many groups that have difficulty with mental health services, the disabled are at the top of the list.

Disability is a well-accepted risk factor for many mental health conditions. Parents and caregivers often experience the same isolation, loneliness and lack of support as the disabled themselves and their risk for depression, anxiety and other mental health problems is also high. Good Community Based Organizations (CBOs) make mental health support a priority when working with families.

Disability organizations support parents in many ways outside the therapy and education they provide for their children, including school inclusion, social inclusion, government certification, employment, awareness, and advocacy programmes. Staff worry and think about the children they work with and their families, far beyond what their job descriptions require. But the staff and professionals who provide those services are often forgotten.

During the pandemic, most CBOs have not only continued therapeutic and educational services for children but have also been pillars of support for parents, siblings and extended families at a time of great stress — with staff visiting homes to share their gadgets where smartphones were not available, setting up systems for grocery and medical supplies, setting up counselling sessions, and so on.

CBO staff experience stress on a daily basis as they provide therapy, do physically and emotionally demanding work with children, host group meetings and listen empathetically to parents facing multiple issues due to their children's disability.



A teacher tutors a child during the pandemic

Often parents and caregivers feel the same isolation, loneliness and lack of support as the disabled and are prone to depression.

And, of course, during COVID, staff not only helped families cope, they were coping with the pandemic themselves.

“We are mostly at the giving end, not the receiving. Our job is to constantly motivate and encourage others. Also, the progress we see in children is slow. Sometimes the effort that we put in and the result we see are not proportionate and that can be demotivating,” said a psychologist.

This raises important questions. Can staff recognize the signs of exhaustion, burn-out or being overwhelmed? While taking care of others, do they remember to care for themselves? How can management support junior staff to invest in their own mental health? How can organizations establish a milieu that encourages staff to share their mental health concerns? Awareness, understanding and strong support systems are crucial.

Rekha assists professional staff and helps with child transport. She says, “I go every day in the van to pick up and drop the children. I try to make them laugh if they are sad, and calm them if they are upset or shouting. Everyone takes care of one another.”

Such human connections are essential for mental health. “When we talk to our supervisors, we get support. We feel heard and understood. The psychologists help us if we need it. We also have very clear and friendly protocols,” said Sunita, a child development aide.

“Before COVID, we had outings, get-togethers for staff and with children, which helped to de-stress. We also used to attend workshops outside,” said Rajnish, a therapist.

Although health professionals are aware of mental health difficulties and the importance of addressing them, challenges remain. CBOs and any company that cares about staff well-being could explore these simple ideas:

Overcome stigma: Ask people how they are coping. Call them after hours if they seem to need extra support. Share personal stories, particularly from senior staff members, to normalize mental health. Personal accounts are powerful and can shift attitudes.

Invest in mental health: Train staff, build a team, integrate mental health and emotional well-being into the organization's calendar. Foster empathy and encourage staff who are making efforts. Integrate and incorporate mental health in the training calendar. Provide safe and comfortable spaces within the organization's premises for people to meet one-on-one. Employ social workers and counsellors and keep mental health in focus when making decisions about timings, transfers and leave policies. Mental health days make good economic sense.

Make self-care a priority: Staff should be aware that their own mental health affects others (at home and at work) and that this is especially true for children. Staff can be trained and supported to understand good mental health and recognize the warning signs of difficulties so they can seek help, knowing that their organization will support them.

Health is more than just physical well-being. Mental health is more than just one day in October. CBOs are already leading the way by creating positive places to work and more and more people are trading higher salaries for deeper satisfaction. CBOs can also lead by creating the systems and structures that good mental health support requires. ■

The authors work at Latika Roy Foundation, a community-based organization for disabled children and their families in Dehradun



Manisha from Sangolda boiling paddy to make Goan red rice



And in the lab, experiments to make a beer

Beer revives lost Goan rice

New brew is a tribute to counter culture

DEREK ALMEIDA

WHEN Suraj Shenai launched rice beer in the Goan market in June this year, it was more than just another beer. It was a distillation of the grain culture of a region infused with a complex history and cultural ethos that even predates the arrival of the Portuguese over 500 years ago.

It was also the culmination of a process to document paddy farming and identify 'heirloom' varieties of rice which have been progressively replaced by the more robust 'Jyoti' variety.

"Every region has a grain culture. Like some areas have a wheat or bean culture, ours is a rice culture. That is why Goa is always associated with rice and curry. For instance, the village Assagao gets its name from the Asso rice variety that is grown there," explained Shenai, who in 2017 quit his job at Pernod Ricard, a French liquor company, to start Goa Brewing Company in Sangolda village which is around five km from the world-famous Calangute beach.

Before taking the plunge into the world of beer-making, Shenai had picked up extensive experience in the alcohol-beverage market, having worked with several larger companies. "Large liquor multinationals have a brand narrative that is colonial. The focus was not on anything Indian. The flavours were foreign and the approach was of a big company looking down at us. I thought we needed to

challenge the status quo with high-quality products that are rooted in the geography of India," he said.

He returned to the place he called home, Goa, and literally went down to its roots. But before that he made a stopover at Pune where he worked with smaller micro-breweries which were willing to collaborate and even allow him and his team of brewers to manufacture small batches to test in local brewery pubs.

Shenai's approach to beer-making embodies a pint of the counter culture mixed with a dash of risk and a gung ho spirit to challenge the status quo.

"We are not a manufacturing entity with a huge footprint in an industrial estate," he said, "Everything about us is local. We consciously decided to set up shop in a heritage house because that way we add value to old Goan heritage homes which would have otherwise fallen into disuse."

The idea, he explained, is to be local, generate employment for locals and source as much material as possible from the village. For instance, the spent grain is sold locally to dairy farmers and the yeast is picked up by fish farmers.

To launch his first batch of rice beer Shenai sourced rice from eight farmers in Sangolda and the neighbouring village of Saligao at a rate higher than the minimum support price (MSP) offered by the government. Hops, which is a key ingredient, is imported.

The beer is more than a product. It is the culmination of a journey through

rice fields and documentation of varieties that were once grown here but phased out in favour of higher-yielding ones.

"In the old days there were about 28 to 30 heirloom varieties of rice grown in Goa and tracing them was part of our process," he explained with the enthusiasm of a researcher rather than an entrepreneur. "Most people are not aware that a variety called 'Jiresal', which is more aromatic than basmati, was grown in Goa."

The search for this aromatic variety took him to the neighbouring states of Karnataka and Maharashtra. The search paid off and Shenai and his team discovered that the variety was being grown in Davangere in Karnataka and Azhra in Maharashtra by Goan communities.

"This variety was taken from Goa to these states by farmers who migrated centuries ago to avoid the hardship unleashed by the Inquisition during Portuguese rule," he explained.

Shenai and Hansel Vaz, an entrepreneur from South Goa who is deeply involved in rebranding indigenous feni brands, put their hands together to restart planting of Jiresal in the state.

"This planting season, about nine acres of land was set aside for Jiresal which is being grown in Goa after a break of 40 years," said Shenai, quite aware of how important this is to reviving the ancient grain culture of Goa.

"All credit for this goes to Hansel who identified the farmers and convinced them to grow the variety in their fields," he said. This is a 120-day crop and the first harvest should be out anytime now. They christened it the 'going against the grain' project.

The experience has made Shenai passionate about paddy farming and discovering the problems that have gradually reduced cultivation. "Farmers in the North have larger farms but the returns are negligible. Paddy farming for all practical reasons is a loss-making endeavour. Nonetheless, people continue to grow the grain because it's a tradition and they do not want to leave their field fallow."

The flip side of this situation is that paddy fields are being filled up and sold to builders for a hefty sum. "Is selling of paddy fields then, the only exit available to farmers?" he asks. Shenai believes that we could be looking at the last generation of paddy farmers and one must make an effort to add value to it or it will die.

"By launching a rice beer, which we also call the people's lager, we are actually telling this story about our farmers and our rice culture," explained Shenai. And the response has been good.

Quite early in the day, Shenai decided to be part of the craft beer movement and join what he calls 'the geek economy'.

So, what does craft brewing really mean in the present context? These are small indigenous breweries which give importance to the human element in the brewing process. The aim here is to keep everything local. The international norm is that any brewery which has an output that is less than 1,000 hectolitres per year is generally classified as craft. This is roughly one-fiftieth of the output of giant breweries.

"Craft brewing has been an anti-establishment movement where small breweries in America decided to take on the large multinationals," said Shenai.

He had the story and after a year of experimentation he had the beer. So it was not surprising for Shenai to find two venture capitalists — DSG Consumer Partners, Singapore and Saama Capital, Bengaluru, keen to invest.

If rice beer has a story that is indigenous, the first beer launched by the company has a story that goes back to a time when tourism was in its infancy. It's called Eight Finger Eddie, which is an odd name for a beer or a liquor, or anything for that matter.

The story goes that Eight Finger Eddie was one of the first of the hippie band to discover Goa. Having liked the place, he advertised it extensively and he is probably the one man who did a lot to make Goa visible at a time when it was relatively unknown. When he passed away in 2007, there was a move by old-timers to raise a memorial in his name, but the panchayat was reluctant and the matter was not pursued.

By launching a beer named Eight Finger Eddie, Shenai is paying tribute to the counter culture movement that grew in the US out of opposition to the Vietnam war.

"We wrongly look at hippies as people outside the system. In reality, it is this counter culture that made San Francisco what it is



Hansel Vaz



Suraj Shenai: 'Everything about us is local'

More than a product, the beer is the culmination of a journey through fields of rice varieties that were once grown here but phased out in favour of high-yielding ones.

today and played a huge role in the birth and growth of Silicon Valley. Goa became part of this counter-culture revolution," said Shenai.

Today Eight Finger Eddie is rated as one of the top four craft beers in Asia by international magazines and craft beer forums, claimed Shenai.

"The style of beer that we create is non-conformist. We do not follow the established beer-making tradition," he said. "Ours is a process steeped in research and development and we have a laboratory on the premises which is constantly upgrading and refining new brews."

Goa Brewing Company is constantly adding new beers to its brand list. Some time ago it came up with a French-styled pineapple based brew which was made from locally sourced fruit and during Christmas it launched a Belgium-styled beer that was close to 'the Goan plum cake'. "It is like dessert in a bottle and we brew it every Christmas," Shenai said.

In many ways, Shenai and his craft beer dream are not out of place in Goa which has been a melting pot of cultures for centuries. Being an important port, Goa has been home to people of various religions and races from Europe, the Middle East and Africa. Recently, the relics of St Queen Ketevan were returned to Georgia, 400 years after she was killed in Iran.

"Goa accepts and assimilates," he said.

Goa Brewing Company is not just a manufacturing unit. It embodies the principle of learning and teaching and is open to allowing others to learn the process and experiment. "I am part of the Copy Left movement," he proudly declares.

Returning to his central story, which is about rice beer, Shenai said, "We are not only celebrating the idea of Goa but also taking the narrative back to farmers. We want to make rice the hero and use beer to tell this story." ■





Rakesh Gupta conducts a workshop on beekeeping in Sunder Nursery

A Sunday with bees

Beekeeper shares his world

SURMAYI KHATANA

YOU may have heard of bees migrating with the changing seasons but a person migrating with his bees is surely a rare occurrence. Rakesh Gupta, a 62-year-old beekeeper from Lucknow, travels with his beehive-boxes across India. He migrates with them to orchards in Kashmir, the coasts of Gujarat, the high altitudes of Himachal Pradesh, to Uttarakhand and to Rajasthan. Recently, the bees and Gupta visited floral fields in Lahaul and Spiti valleys in Himachal Pradesh.

The wooden beehive-box is a ventilated and layered box with frames for bees to make their hives. An entrance reducer protects the bees from intruders.

Gupta, who has an MBA, decided to leave the corporate world in 2002 and took up farming around Lucknow instead. It was in 2004 that he began beekeeping. After a lot of experimentation — understanding bee behaviour, taking care of his own hives — his commercial effort changed into a passion.

“I hope to raise awareness about the bee, who is a very misunderstood insect. I also want to meet like-minded people who might want to start beekeeping

too,” says Gupta. His wife, Poonam, set up the Golden Hive Foundation, a trust, to help spread awareness about saving the bee through workshops, like the one we attended at Sunder Nursery, and to mentor responsible beekeepers.

Golden Hive Foundation and Gupta are working with the Aga Khan Trust for Culture at Sunder Nursery to help keep the bees in the nursery safe and thriving. They are creating a healthy bee ecosystem with artificial hives and natural hives below the ground. Gupta highlights the need of abundant flora for bees. The foundation manages a small demonstrative apiary and creates awareness about the depleting population of bees.

Responsible beekeeping includes ensuring that nectar flow is available for the bees. Maintaining the right type of flora is key. While migrating, in case pollen or nectar are scarce, it is important to help the bees access places where such resources are abundant, which is why Gupta travels with his bees far and wide.

Travelling with the bees can be tricky. You can't catch a flight or hop on a train. You have to travel by road in a car or truck. Making sure that all the bees return to the hive before it is packed for travel is crucial. The beehive-box can only travel during the

night. As soon as it's morning, the bees need to be released. Gupta and his team halt their journey during daytime and wait for the bees to return before continuing.

In October, Gupta held a workshop called 'Know the Bee' at Sunder Nursery to raise awareness on the vital role played by bees as pollinators in the ecosystem.

To understand the difference between flavour-infused honey in markets and the natural taste of honey from nectar collected by bees, everyone attending the workshop was given a small jar of lychee honey with a sweet and fruity aftertaste.

The taste of honey depends on the flowers the bees flit among. Some honey can be multi-floral honey while others may be sourced from a single type of flower or be mono-floral. The Asiatic bees or *Apis cerana* is the honey bee native to India.

The nectar collected travels in a pouch inside the bee's body called the 'crop'. There the enzymes of the bee act on the nectar till it is transferred to a younger receiving bee at the hive.

The group discussed the type of honey sold in the market and the unsustainable practices of sourcing honey. Mainstream honey from big brands is usually heated or boiled before packaging, which

weakens the enzymes inside. Instead, leaving it in the sun for a while helps.

Honey in the market also goes through moisture reduction units and vacuum filtration, both of which reduce the existing nutrients. This is because raw honey is extracted from the hive early, and is high in moisture. Honey should be allowed to age inside the hive before harvesting for the best taste and nutrients.

Depending on the flower, honey can turn solid in colder temperatures or become white. Gupta showed us crystallized mustard honey as an example. Harvesting honey from the hive without destroying the comb and ensuring that enough is left for the bees is also an important practice in sustainable apiaries. With diagrams, the anatomy of the bee was explained: where the pollen is collected, the nectar stored, and how the honey is made. The various enzymes in the bodies of worker bees help make the honey.

Gupta explained bee hierarchy in the hive and the making of a queen bee. Worker bees feed royal jelly to a larva to make it a queen bee. The royal jelly changes the larva and allows it to grow with reproductive organs as a queen bee instead of a female worker bee. The process usually takes 16 days. The queen, with a long life span of three to five years, rarely leaves the hive and has a smooth stinger. The queen decides whether the hive needs more worker bees, resources, or drone bees.

Bees can migrate up to twice a year, usually with the changing seasons. Some bees only leave the hive at an exact 18 degrees Celsius.

Bees have interesting behaviour too! Worker bees leave the hive themselves if they are not contributing much and work from their first to last day. They can also choose to create a new queen with their royal jelly if they are dissatisfied with the existing queen — in a way, democratically electing a monarch. Usually, multiple queen bee larvae grow in a hive. The first queen to emerge from the sealed cell sends out a signal to the workers to kill the other queens. Most workers follow orders, but some bees may leave as factions with their new queen bee. “Mother-daughter queen bees can co-exist for a short while before the daughter creates another colony, but sister queens rarely survive in the same colony,” explains Gupta.

Drones (male bees) do not collect pollen or nectar. Their role in the hive is of reproduction, and they depend on the worker bees for survival. Drones usually mate with a queen bee of another hive mid-air in what are known as 'congregation areas' away from the colony. In these areas multiple drones, ranging from five to 19 in some species, mate with the queen and die directly after. Drones are also the first to be kicked out of the hive in case there is paucity of food and resources.

A quick look into a beehive-box helps to understand the busy settlement. You can see pollen baskets being filled, nursing of larvae, and sealing of the hive taking place rapidly in a maze of narrow corridors. Any points of entry are blocked off by resin, allowing only bees to enter and



The wondrous beehive

A quick look into a beehive-box helps to understand the busy settlement. You can see pollen baskets being filled, nursing of larvae, and sealing of the hive taking place rapidly in a maze of corridors.



blocking other insects.

Rock bees or *Apis dorsata* make their hives in the open. They are the ones you often see on trees or under bridges. *Apis mellifera* or European honey bees prefer building their hives in confined spaces, making them perfect for beehive-boxes.

Bees have a sharp memory. They remember nectar routes and the location of their hives. “If you move the beehive-box a few feet to the left, the returning bee will wait at the previous spot of the hive,” says Gupta.

Hoping to provide mentorship in beekeeping, Gupta took it on himself to facilitate responsible beekeeping. “When I began, I had little to no guidance. In theory, beekeeping is very different from the practicalities,” he says. So far, he has helped five individual honey brands set up sustainable beekeeping.

While widely known for their honey, only 10 or 11 species out of thousands of bee species produce honey. The others are integral to the ecology as pollinators.

“The bee is the best pollinator out there,” says Gupta, who explains that some beekeepers are hired by orchards to help with pollination.

If you find yourself near the small amphitheatre



There was a honey tasting session too

at Sunder Nursery, pay a visit to the goldenrod flowers nearby. From afar you will see a beautiful set of yellow flowers. Get closer and the bush buzzes with activity by small stingless bees with the classic yellow and black stripes. They collect millions of orange pollen grains on their hind legs which quickly turn into pellets that are visible to the eye. The stingless bee is approximately 80 million years old and plays a key role in pollination.

On the walk back to the small amphitheatre, Gupta tells us about 'floral fidelity'. A bee will visit only one type of flower on a foraging trip to collect nectar and pollen due to high sugar nectar and pollen preferences.

Not only do you learn all about bees and beekeeping at the workshop, you also acquire a more sophisticated taste for honey. There was a honey tasting session too. According to Gupta, wild thyme honey is an acquired taste but everyone chimed in to declare it had a lovely minty flavour.

A diverse audience of 20 people attended the workshop. They ranged from people who study insect behaviour and volunteers interested in apiaries from Give Me Trees Trust to bankers, engineers, and writers.

“We come to the organic market at the nursery on weekends, so we decided to pay a visit to the workshop after we saw the poster on Instagram,” says Joseph, who does marketing for a start-up and attended the workshop with his father who works in the IT sector.

Some decided to stop as they were passing by, including a family with two young girls excited to see bees in action.

The workshop closed with an activity — participants made foot cream with beeswax, camphor and oil, which they took home.

Gupta ended his session with an appeal to save the bee from the dangers of exploitative honey harvesting, deforestation, and pesticides. “Bees are perfect indicators of a balanced environment. To ignore them or remain silent observers to the systematic massacre of bees is a catastrophe waiting to happen,” he says. ■

You can reach Rakesh Gupta at goldenhivefoundation@gmail.com to talk about bees. You can also get a jar of honey from him on WhatsApp or call +919415081718. We strongly recommend the lychee.

Arab voices by the Red Sea

Despite the pandemic, a full house

SAIBAL CHATTERJEE

THE El Gouna Film Festival (GFF) is half a decade old but nothing it does suggests that it is only a fledgling event. The meticulously curated annual event launched in 2017 is now well on its way to becoming “an important, cosmopolitan hub of culture and cinema,” in the words of entrepreneur Samih Sawiris, founder of the Red Sea resort town of El Gouna.

In 2020, a year that saw many pandemic-induced festival cancellations, the organizers of GFF went ahead with a physical film festival. This year, GFF, held from October 14 to 22, returned rejuvenated but with COVID-19 protocols still in place. It had a full complement of films, many of which reflected the current mood of the world.

The festival’s industry segment CineGouna Platform, too, has emerged as a strong platform for the discovery of new voices in Arab cinema as well as for the overall development of filmmaking in the region. While programming the latest films from around the world, GFF places special emphasis on the works of both established and first-time Arab directors.

In the festival’s latest edition, cineastes were treated to Mohamed Diab’s *Amira* (Egypt) and Nabil Ayouch’s *Casablanca Beats* (Morocco), besides the films of three debutants — Ely Dagher (*The Sea Ahead*), Ali El Arabi (*Captains of Za’atari*, which won the El Gouna Star for the best Arab documentary) and Omar El Zohairy (*Feathers*, which won the Grand Prize in Cannes Critics’ Week). In El Gouna, *Feathers* won the award for the best Arab film.

Several of the most-discussed narrative features, documentaries and short films in the GFF 2021 programme dealt with communities, families and individuals negotiating unsettling developments and adversities, both socio-political and environmental.

One significant addition to the GFF repertoire this year was the El Gouna Green Star Award for the best film on environmental issues. Five titles from the festival’s wider selection were eligible for the award. The prize was won by *Costa Brava*, Lebanon, the only narrative feature in contention: a drama about a family that is sucked into a battle against pollution and corruption.

Directed by Lebanese debutante Mounia Akl, who divides her time between Beirut and New York, *Costa Brava* is a drama about a family battling pollution and administrative corruption, two sides of the same coin. “The environmental crisis in Lebanon is not just about the environment,” says Akl. “Everything is interconnected.”

Costa Brava stars Nadine Labaki (director of the critically lauded *Capernaum*) and Saleh Bakri, acclaimed Palestinian actor, in key roles. The two play a couple who move to their idyllic mountain



The venue of the El Gouna Film Festival



Costa Brava is about a family fighting corruption and pollution

home to escape the environmental degradation of Beirut. An illegal landfill comes up next door, and with it comes the very garbage and malfeasance that the family is fleeing.

Another film that would definitely have been on the radar of the Green Star Award jury was Dutch cinematographer-director Pieter-Rim de Kroon’s wordless, exquisitely crafted *Silence of the Tides*. It is a visually stunning observational documentary that dwells on man’s fragile, problematic relationship

with nature. It celebrates the marvels of the Wadden Sea, one of the world’s largest and most varied intertidal areas that extends along the coasts of The Netherlands, Germany and Denmark.

Silence of the Tides captures the natural processes in and around an ecosystem that still continues to be pristine. Employing a hypnotic and immersive soundscape — it is made up of the music of the waves, the clatter of machines and the reverberations of the living presence of humans and animals — the

The El Gouna Green Star Award was won by *Costa Brava*, a film from Lebanon and the only narrative feature in contention.



Life of Ivanna profiles a nomadic reindeer herder in the Russian Arctic



Ostrov-Lost Island is a portrait of privation



Animal dissects man’s predatory relationship with animals



Invisible Demons is about air and water pollution in Delhi



Silence of the Tides focuses on man and nature

film captures the rhythms of the seasons.

The Green Star competition included a film from India — Rahul Jain’s *Invisible Demons*, an unflinching dissection of the reasons and consequences of air and water pollution in Delhi. It is a hard-hitting, disquieting cinematic essay that examines the fallout of rapid and indiscriminate urban expansion on vulnerable segments of the city’s population.

Invisible Demons premiered at the Cannes Film Festival earlier in the year (in a special section called Cinema for the Climate) before making its way to El Gouna. In an interview with this writer ahead of the film’s world premiere in July, Jain had said: “It is high time that films about the realities of climate change are given a platform.”

The focus of *Invisible Demons* is squarely on Delhi but the alarming truth it communicates is of universal relevance. Jain grew up in Delhi and acquired an MA degree in Aesthetics and Politics

from the California Institute of the Arts. On his way to school as a six-year-old boy, he would pass the river Yamuna. “Is this a *nadi* (river) or a *nullah*, I would ask,” he recalls.

“After *Machines* (Jain’s Sundance award-winning debut feature documentary), I seemed to have run out of inspiration. I felt worthless. I wondered if anything I was going to make would be of any use at all. I took a break and went to Bhutan. And when I returned to Delhi, I collapsed, strangled by the pollution,” the filmmaker recalls. That is what triggered *Invisible Demons*.

The other two films that vied for the El Gouna Green Star Award were French and, like *Invisible Demons*, arrived in the Red Sea town after premiering in Cannes. One of them, Flore Vasseur’s *Bigger Than Us*, showcases the initiatives of seven young environmentalists to bring about change in their respective countries — Indonesia, Malawi, Uganda and Brazil among them.

Bigger Than Us, produced by French movie star Marion Cotillard, demonstrates that positive change is possible if young men and women decide to take a stand against the global disregard of environmental concerns and push for a reversal of activities and decisions that threaten the planet.

Taking a completely different route to articulating essentially the same idea, French writer-filmmaker-activist Cyril Dion’s *Animal* follows two young environmentalists, Bella Lack and Vipulan Puvaneswaran, as they travel the globe to look for substantiation of their belief that man’s predatory relationship with animals is unsustainable. The film asserts that co-existence of all species is the way forward for a world hurtling towards an ecological disaster.

GFF, which had in its out of competition selection an array of films that played in the world’s top festivals, also had titles that showcased individuals struggling to come to terms with the loss of their old ways of life. Two such documentaries, both set in remote regions of Russia, stood out — *Life of Ivanna* and *Ostrov-Lost Island*.

Ostrov is an island in the Caspian Sea that was once the site of a thriving collective fishery. After the fall of the USSR, the farm was destroyed and black caviar extraction was banned. *Ostrov*’s population has since dwindled from 3000 to 50.

Ostrov-Lost Island, directed by Svetlana Rodina and Laurent Stoop, is the story of 50-year-old fisherman Ivan, who refuses to leave the only home he has ever known. He lives off illegal fishing because the island has no jobs. If he does not go out to sea he starves. But he is still proud of being a Russian — his love for his nation offsets the crushing misery of his life. The documentary is a sobering portrait of privation in a part of the world that has been left to fend for itself.

In *Life of Ivanna*, Guatemalan-born filmmaker Renato Borraro Serrano, trains the spotlight on a 26-year-old nomadic reindeer herder in the Russian Arctic. The climate is changing and her reindeer are dying. Ivanna, a single mother of five, is forced to move to the city of Norilsk in Siberia.

The film follows the Nemets woman for four years as she labours to make the transition from her life on the tundra to subsistence in a city. Ivanna is no pushover and despite the hardships she faces, the hardy young woman soldiers on. That is what director Serrano focuses on upfront in his film.

Ivanna’s story is told through letters written by her, which she herself reads aloud. An alcoholic, violent husband, the raging of the elements and the uncertainties of fate aggravate matters for her but Ivanna continues regardless. *Life of Ivanna* is an ode to tenacity. The beauty of the film lies in the nuanced manner in which it turns a singular story into a larger story of humanity. ■

Small producers and artisans need help to reach out to sell their wonderful products. They can't advertise and they don't know to access retail networks. *Civil Society* happily provides information about what they have on offer, their skills and how you can get to them.



TANGY SHRAM FOODS

IN 2008, Piyusha Abbhi, a young MBA graduate, decided to put her management skills to use at the grassroots by helping the women of Batamandi village in Himachal Pradesh, become economically and socially independent. She organized them into a Self-Help Group (SHG) called SHRAM — Self Help — Recycling, Altering and Manufacturing Group. They began by making handcrafted items for sale. SHRAM has now ventured into food processing. The women make a range of healthy organic foods from traditional recipes passed down generations.

Place an order and buy pickles, candies, and chutneys. Fresh gooseberry, mangoes and strawberries are used in small batches so it's all freshly made. Try their peanut butter: it is solar roasted and ground. Also available are low-calorie dry roasted snacks and puffed snacks made from millets and forgotten grains.

For trade enquiries:
SHRAM SHG Village Batamandi, Paonta Sahib, Himachal Pradesh
Email: piyusha4@gmail.com
Mobile: 09318911011

CRAFTS AND FREEDOM

THE WOMEN of Batamandi village always worked hard in their homes and fields, but their labour was unrewarded and unrecognized. Their SHG, SHRAM, has given them an identity, income and status. Unity and their mentor, Piyusha Abbhi's encouragement have helped the women overcome male hostility and social constraints. SHRAM provides them access to technical and vocational training in handcrafted products and food processing. The women make eco-friendly baskets and planters from natural fibres. Also available are handcrafted stationery products, hair accessories, bags, wallets, and natural soaps — their bestselling products — made with pure oils and herbs. SHRAM also takes orders and can design custom-made gifts for a bridal shower or wedding.

SHRAM SHG is not supported by the government or any funding agency. When you buy a product from SHRAM, the money goes to the women who invest it in their children's education and their community.

For trade enquiries:
SHRAM SHG Village Batamandi, Paonta Sahib, Himachal Pradesh.
Email: piyusha4@gmail.com
Mob: 09318911011



FUSION FABRIC

THE KAMLA Mahila Handicraft Udyog & Vikas Society (KMHUVS), an NGO in Dehradun, organizes rural women into Self-Help Groups (SHGs), teaches them crafts and then markets their products. About 300 women in Garhwal, supported by NABARD, have been organized into 35 SHGs.

The women make wall hangings, cushion covers, table runners, embroidered bags, bedcovers, baby quilts, scarves, sweaters, folders and *potlis* in eye-catching colours. Also available are reversible bedcovers and dress material in block prints.

"Our society imparts training and organizes SHGs of girls and women. We create an enabling environment and that helps them earn a regular income," says Manjusha Tyagi, director of KMHUVS.

The society has been experimenting with a medley of crafts like Aipan, Chikankari, Madhubani and Jaipur block prints and trying to merge them to create unique patterns. It is also promoting Aipan, a ritualistic painting technique originating in Uttarakhand. "Kumaon is well known for Aipan art, but not Garhwal. We decided to fuse Aipan with other art forms," says Shikha Tyagi, associate director.

Prices are reasonable. A *potli* costs ₹250, a reversible bedcover ₹1,200 and a baby quilt ₹1,500.

Contact:
Kamla Mahila Handicraft Udyog & Vikas Society, 6 Arbind Marg, Old Sahastradhara Road, Dehradun-248001; Mobile: 992786617, 992786620 E-mail: kamlamahila@rediffmail.com, kamlamahila1948@gmail.com; Website: www.kamlahandicraft.com



So you want to do your bit but don't know where to begin? Allow us to help you with a list especially curated for *Civil Society's* readers. These are groups we know to be doing good work. And they are across India. You can volunteer or donate or just spread the word about them.

DAY CARE FOR THE DISABLED

KHUSHBOO Founded in 1995, Khushboo Welfare Society helps physically and mentally challenged individuals become self-reliant by maximizing their potential. Khushboo runs a day-care centre for people with disabilities in Gurugram. The non-profit works with children, adolescents and adults with cerebral palsy, autism and Down syndrome.

The non-profit's Life Skills Development programme includes training in routine activities, vocational training and social skills. Khushboo offers physiotherapy, speech and hearing therapy, psychiatry counselling and recreational activities like yoga, sports, and pottery. They also train caregivers and families. You can partially or fully sponsor an individual.

www.kwsindia.org | ushboowelfaresociety@kwsindia.org | Contact: +91-124-4140885

AID MENTAL HEALTH

PARIPURNATA Paripurnata, an NGO, is involved in rehabilitation of marginalized mentally ill women. It runs a 'Halfway Home' which provides residential facilities to patients. Based in West Bengal, Paripurnata provides psychosocial and mental health care services to women and tackles societal challenges associated with mental health, psychosocial well-being, and stigma associated with mental illness through advocacy, social and community-based interventions.

Their rehabilitation programme includes occupational therapy to skill young women for economic independence along with cognitive and psychological therapies.

They also provide social and cultural therapy that includes yoga and meditation.

You can donate to their efforts and pay for medicines and resident expenses.

Or join them as a volunteer, member, or assist with fundraising.

www.paripurnata.org | paripurnata@gmail.com | Contact: +91 (33) 2432-9339 / 8824

'AT TFI I BECAME A BETTER TEACHER AND HUMAN BEING'

FIRST PERSON

Sameer Ahmed, student

I WAS A volunteer-teacher at Teach for India (TFI) from June to August 2020, when the first wave of the pandemic was at its peak. Students from low-income families were facing a tough time. Studying in government schools and unable to meet the expenses of buying a smartphone, tablet, laptop or an internet connection, it was impossible for them to continue their education.

I started volunteering to gain some real-time work experience. I had always been inclined towards teaching. I wanted to pass on the knowledge and attention which I had either received or wanted to receive in school and college. I believed being a teacher would help me express myself as a person.



as a human being. I can say that I was a person who took things for granted before volunteering.

I had to try and get accustomed to the online set-up and it wasn't easy. My colleagues at TFI were very understanding and would help me out. The best part about working with an NGO is that people understand how difficult things can be. I also realized that there are things greater than monetarily benefitting from a situation. Putting in effort and time to share something I had was fulfilling. I can say that my achievement through volunteering was to go from barely any online presence of my students to about 50-60 percent attendance.

www.teachforindia.org | apply@teachforindia.org | +91 11 65658666

TEACH STREET CHILDREN

LAKSHYAM Lakshyam works on child education, development and women's empowerment in slums in Delhi, Madhya Pradesh, Uttar Pradesh and Jharkhand.

Under their Butterfly Program Remedial Education Centres have been set up for street children and dropouts to help them enrol in the formal education system. They also work on menstrual awareness and provide solar lamps to young girl drop-outs.

Lakshyam has a toy library for the children. A Rooh Program educates and trains women. So far they have helped 4,000 women achieve economic independence.

You can volunteer or intern with them to teach young children or help them in communications, data management, arts and sports. Lakshyam also accepts clothes, electronics and stationery as donations.

www.lakshyam.co.in | support@lakshyam.co.in | 9540790002, 9431100761

WORK IN BIHAR

DIKSHA Diksha Foundation is primarily involved in improving education for children from socially and economically marginalized communities in Bihar. They run a Knowledge Hub for Education and Learning (KHEL), a free after-school supplementary education programme in Nalanda and Patna which has imparted computer training to over 1,000 children.

Diksha Foundation also helps with life skills training to prevent early childhood marriages as a part of their project My Life, Mere Faisley. Around 105 adolescents and youth completed their course in 2019.

Their project, Community, engages 30,000 adolescents in Bihar to enhance their participation in society and be responsible citizens.

You can donate to support a child's education or to their general fund and volunteer with Diksha Foundation in Bihar.

www.dikshafoundation.org | contact@dikshafoundation.org | +91 612 2595151

SET UP A LIBRARY IN SLUMS

AASHAYEIN Project Aashayein builds small community libraries in slums. They have set up libraries in districts of Uttar Pradesh and in Delhi-NCR. The project aims to help educate slum children and inculcate the habit of reading in them. Project Aashayein began during the pandemic to help bridge access to books for slum children at home due to lockdown.

The initiative has book collection spots across Delhi-NCR where they collect books ranging from novels to school books. Project Aashayein is a small initiative looking for volunteers to help them with collection drives, sorting through donations and building libraries.

You can also donate old books that may be collecting dust on your shelves at their collection centres across Delhi NCR. Or donate to their cause monetarily and help set up libraries for slum children.

www.instagram.com/projectaashayein/ | projectaashayein@gmail.com | +91-9718124117

PLANT POWER

Flowers and plants almost always capture our attention. We wonder what their names are, where they originate and what they could be useful for. There are rare plants we may never see. Ganesh Babu, a botanist, is our guide.



Kalahari Christmas

The Kalahari Christmas tree or *Dichrostachys cinerea* is a Christmas tree for desert areas. It grows from a shrub to a small tree, four metres tall. Kalahari Christmas is also popularly known as Princess' Earrings and Painted Thorn Bush. The flowers of this tree are white and yellow or pink and yellow and are born on cylindrical spike inflorescences that resemble lanterns. The flowers blossom for more than six months.

Hence, this species is ideal for any garden or landscape. The tree bears thousands of mildly fragrant flowers in numerous inflorescences. The aroma that floats in the air is enchanting. As it is a handy tree 12 to 15 feet high, it is suited to small spaces and can also be grown in larger containers outdoors. Kalahari Christmas is a well-known medicinal plant used in the Siddha system of medicine. Its leaves and pods are used as fodder and its wood is used to make simple agricultural implements.

In Hindi it is called Khairi, in Kannada, Yedathaari, in Malayalam, Vidathala, in Oriya, Khoiridya, in Tamil, Vidathalai, and in Telugu, Nallajammi.



Fire Flame Bush

In summer the Fire Flame Bush is swathed in crimson red flowers and looks aflame hence its name. The plant is also called Dataki. Its scientific name is *Woodfordia fruticosa* (L.) Kurz.

Dataki is a deciduous shrub up to 10 feet tall with a surfeit of branches. Flowers can be seen in groups of six to 16 in the axils, two to three cm long, with conspicuously exerted stamens and styles. Its corolla tubular is distinctly toothed, alternating with long floral appendages. Stamens are orange-red. Dataki grows throughout India in deciduous forests, at an altitude of 1500 m above sea level.

The roots are known for their curative properties against rheumatism. Dataki is a dye-yielding plant species. Yellow dye is extracted from its twigs and red dye from its petals and used as paint and to dye silk. This species has appeared in the Red List of IUCN due to its high-volume trade.

The plant is called Datiri in Malayalam and Tamil, and Dhataki in other languages.



Bitter Oleander

Bitter Oleander or *Holarrhena pubescens* is a small, latex-bearing, deciduous tree with mildly fragrant white flowers, reaching 12 to 15 feet. Bitter Oleander is called Kutaja in Sanskrit and also Conessi. A small tree, it is ideal for urban gardens because it understands its boundaries. It is also a brilliant patio tree with many branches and a little broad crown.

Bitter Oleander flowers profusely from April to July. It has bright white flowers with a mild fragrance. Though the tree is of wild origin, it performs well in the urban environment. It can also serve as an effective screen or taller hedge if it is planted in a continuous row.

The tree is well known for its bitter bark which is used to treat skin problems like psoriasis, eczema, blemishes, rashes and skin infections due to blood impurities. Bitter Oleander grows in open deciduous forests along hilly tracts up to an altitude of 1250 m. It is also found in mixed forests and clearings.

The tree is called Beppale or Kodasige in Kannada, and Kotakapala and Kuda in Malayalam and Marathi, respectively. In Tamil it is called Karuppalai and in Telugu, Tella Pala.



Queen Sago

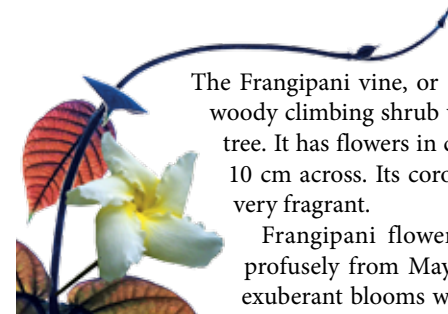
Gymnosperms are one of the oldest groups of plants on earth and fondly known as living fossils. Queen Sago or *Cycas circinalis* L., is one such cycad of gymnosperms well known for its medicinal properties mentioned in our traditional medicine heritage. It has aphrodisiac properties and is considered a symbol of longevity.

Queen Sago is a handsome, palm-like, evergreen tree which grows up to 12 metres. Its unbranched trunk is cylindrical with persistent leaf-scars. The plant has a large crown of compound leaves which are one to three metres long. Leaflets are about 60 to 100 pairs and arranged oppositely.

It is a dioecious plant which means it has separate male and female plants. Both male and female cones are strikingly beautiful and therefore this Cycas can be used in almost all landscaped gardens.

Owing to its medicinal properties, Queen Sago is traded in high volumes. The tree is endemic to southern India and confined to the Western Ghats. It is an endangered tree. According to the IUCN, 70 percent of its population has vanished due to habitat loss and high-volume trade.

Queen Sago is known as Madana Kama poo in Tamil, Madan mast ka phul in Hindi, Madan kamakshi in Telugu and Hintalah in Sanskrit. In Kannada it is called Goddueechalu and in Malayalam, Eanthapana.



Frangipani vine

The Frangipani vine, or *C. fragrans* (Moon) Alston is a large, woody climbing shrub which can reach the top of the tallest tree. It has flowers in cymose clusters, bisexual, large, up to 10 cm across. Its corolla is white with a yellow throat and very fragrant.

Frangipani flowers almost throughout the year but profusely from May to July. The vine sports clusters of exuberant blooms with a rich aroma that will make your garden fragrant.

Even without its showy flowers, this climber is eye-catching with large shiny, velvety-hairy leaves and prominent, raised veins. It is a glorious, greenish-white beauty that can light up a dull garden. It is also a great backdrop for lawn gardens. In the wild, this species prefers to grow in the moist deciduous to semi-evergreen forests of the Western Ghats and northeast India.

The roots of the plant are primarily used to treat intermittent fevers, skin diseases, leprosy, constipation, cardiac debility, bronchitis, jaundice, cough and diabetes. In Sanskrit, Frangipani is called Murva or Morala, in Hindi it is known as Garbhedar. Its Kannada name is Chandra hoovinaballi.



Kans grass

Exotic species of tall grasses are often used by Indian horticulturists and landscape architects as focal points, screens and accents. The best among them is our native grass *Saccharum spontaneum* L., popularly known as Kans grass or, in English, as 'wild sugarcane'.

Kans is a tough and tolerant grass that can withstand any weather and grow up to 12 feet tall. It flowers almost throughout the year with its wispy good looks intact. A large grouping of this tall grass effectively blocks an unpleasant view. Its long inflorescences, whether during flowering or in fruiting, form a shiny silver cascade against the landscape. Kans grass can be grown along water bodies or walkways or as a huge clump on lawns. It can also be planted to prevent soil erosion. In south India, it is considered sacred. Leaves of Kans are used for thatching and making brooms. It grows wild along the banks of streams and canals, on sandy soil, in paddy fields and marshy areas throughout India. ■



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