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Civil Society

OFFICERS AND POLITICIANS

What are the boundaries and how should they be preserved?

By ANIL SWARUP

Ziro, Tirap, Rewa, Shivpuri, Morbi, Panna, Nalgonda, Baksa, Anini, Yingkoing, Washim, Sahibganj, Visakhapatnam, Prakasam, Umaria, Yupia, Yelmudi, Wokha, West Godavari, West Garo Hills District, West Champaran, Wayanad, Zunheboto, Wardha, Udupi, Tumkur, Surguja, Alirajpur, Satara, Tiranpur, Sagar, Bardez, Sabarkantha, Patna, Rudraprayag, Araria, Vadodara, Reasi, Mau, Raxaul, Angamaly, Udham Singh Nagar, Ramagiri, Asifabad, Sehore, Ranga Reddy, Faridabad, Angul, Wanaparthy, Purnea, Fremont, Satna, Trivandrum, Pratapgarh, Akola, Changlang, Sri Potti Srinamulu Nellore, Mainpuri, Satara, Barabanki, Uttarkashi, Secunderabad, Ranchi, Malda, Pathanamthitta, Alirajpur, Ujjain, Palghar, Seoni, Auraiya, Tawang, Ottapalam, Baghpat, Bagalkot, Midnapur, Ananthapur, Bahadurpura, Manikonda, Osmanabad, Surendranagar, Tuensang, Saivakasi, Rohtas, Saharsa, Porvorim, Jageshwar, Saharkot, Nuh, Bareilly, Chikkmagaluru, Rampur, Nizamabad, Shechar, Alipurduar, Palavakkamm, Namsai, Uttar Dinaipur, Mysuru, Dahod, Surat, Bagpat, Bagpat, Bagalkot, Murshidabad, Trichhi, Parpanangadi, Porbandar, Kiphire, Bantwal, Roorkee, Amravati, Mokokchung, Shivamogga, Brisbane, Tenneru, Mehsana, Ramban, Prashanthnagar, Mayurbhanj, Asansol, Chittaurgarh, Mathura, Shrirampur, Belagavi, Sonipat, Palanpur, Margao, Rajsamand, Aurangabad, Shirdi, Kurnool, Mangalore, Anand, Pasighat, Almora, Chandrapur, Panaji, Patan, Alwar, Dehradun, Nalanda, Hawaii, Manipur, Porbandar, Bargarh, Arwal, Sasaram, Bathinda, Madhubani, Lunawada, Patiala, Manvi, Lower Dibang Valley, Tonk, Poraiyahat, Nirmal, Mon, Lohit, Chikodi, Nanded, Latehar, Ramanagara, Sultanpur, Sangli, Rajouri, Kheri, Amroha, Bankura, Simdega, Laitumkhrah, Shorapur, Nainital, Kushinagar, Vapi, Panipat, Amaravathi Basti, Chhindwara, Belonia, Kulu, Tehri, Kudal, Saraikela, Mohali, Kozhikode, Kovilpatti, Kottayam, Ontario, Yavatmal, Lohardaga, Yadgir, Poonch, Yadadri Bhuvanagiri, Mallapuram, Kothagudem, Mahabubabad, Koppal, Neemuch, Kohima, Rohtak, Bastar, Junagadh, Kodmbakkam, Chittoor, Adyar, Mandya, Koderma, Saproon, Kodaikanal, Sitamarhi, Manali, Valsad, Kodagu, Barwani, Damoh, Tucson, Avittathur, Kochi, Mancherial, Navsari, Jiyawan, Balam, Latur, Kishanganj, Panchmahal, Bellary, Tiswadi, Khowai, Bemetara, Chamarajanagar, Mahasamund, Alleppey, Ludwa, Nagpur, Banka, Palamu, Sheopur, Varanasi, Khammam, Pondicherry, Khamdhalia, Amreli, Khagaul, Mungeli, Parbhani, Tarikere, Palulugu, Uttara Kannada, Burdwan, Khagaria Ponda, Adilabad, Medak, Kalimpong, Kaimur, Jyothinagar, Sutton, Bhind, Mudigere, Sullia, Banda, Chicago, Jind, Tikamgarh, Kolar, Jhabua, Jaunpur, Jangaon, Pollachi, Sirsi, Munger, Kawardha, Jamui, Madhepura, Jamtara, Shimoga, Nagarkurnool, Barmer, Moradabad, Ramgarh, Jamnagar, Chamoli, Kolathur, Hyderabad, Muzaffarpur, Sidhi, Begusarai, Khonsa, Jaisalmer, Bhavnagar, Itarsi, Hungund, Kondgaon,

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Civil Society

EVERYONE IS SOMEONE

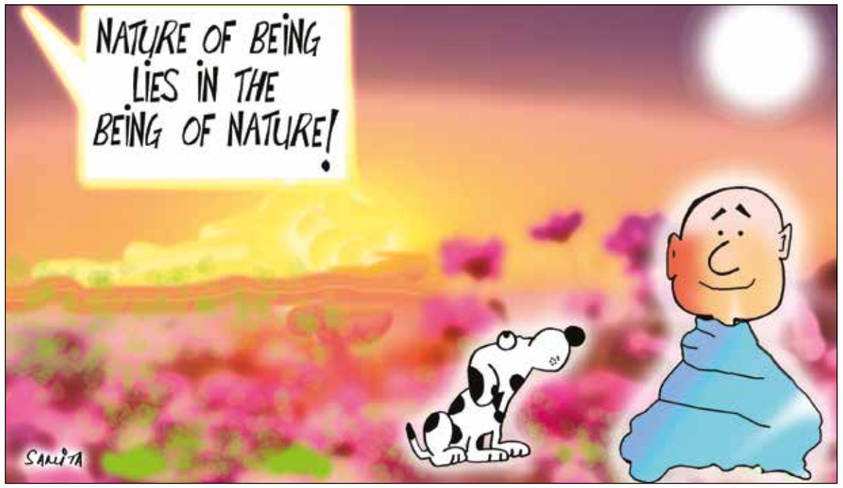
WHERE ARE WE BEING READ?

We have been going places.

Come join the dots with us.

IN THE LIGHT

SAMITA RATHOR



LETTERS

Quiet haven

Thanks for your cover story, 'Healing at Vaidyagrama'. Your writer, Jyoti Pande Lavakare, has described her experience in detail so readers know what it's like to stay at an Ayurvedic centre. Most of us are intrigued as to what the daily regimen is. I like the fact that she did not claim any miracle cure but just felt a whole lot better.

Mahima Uppal

Thank you for this article. As I am getting ready for my first visit to Vaidyagrama, this write-up and the insight provided are really helpful.

Ruchi Gupta

Great read. I look forward to visiting the place.

Raghunath

Bottom-up growth

Your interview with Amitabh Kant, CEO of NITI Aayog, 'It is about governance based on data', was a very interesting read.

I could connect to every word he spoke, as an achievement of the Aspirational Districts Programme. We at JM Financial Foundation have been working for the last five years in Jamui district of Bihar and the only measures that work are data, systemic change and complementing district efforts. We have a long way to go but data-driven measures will expedite the transformation.

Puja Dave

A great initiative by the Modi government. This will force governance and delivery of schemes at the grassroots. It could also help to restructure the local administration so that they can serve the people better. By now all the roadblocks to good governance must have come to light.

Ashita Biswas

Either the government is turning a deaf ear to NITI Aayog's suggestions and recommendations or this institution is also a puppet. I don't think there has been any change in the life of poor people. They are hit by inflation, unemployment and the decreasing value of the rupee.

Subhash Soni

The litmus test of clean and efficient governance is to fund the working of municipal corporations, public works departments and local authorities. It is there that the maximum reform is required. Bureaucrats are never able to trace the truth.

Virendra Lal Wadhwa

Who is in charge of aspirational districts and who creates the aspirations of those districts? Is the state administration cut off from this process? Why choose only a few districts if the whole state is misgoverned? Can't there be a holistic approach to a state as an aspirational state instead of creating a few oases of better governance in a desert of misgoverned states despite having the electoral legitimacy to govern? What is the accountability of state governments in the context of aspirational districts?

Jayaraj Chinnasamy

India is a union of states. Four or five states are already behaving like princely states. They do not believe in the Centre's powers. NITI Aayog has identified 112 most backward districts in the country and is working in a focused way for their development.

Ramesh Jain

Just chatter

Sanjaya Baru's column, 'The decline of debate', pinpoints an important issue. The last good debates in Parliament that I remember were when the Congress brought a no-confidence motion against the humble farmer, H.D. Deve Gowda, and, second, when Atal Bihari Vajpayee resigned after his 13-day government collapsed but that was all a long time ago.

Rohit Sen

Sanjaya Baru is right. Noisy TV debates have replaced sensible parliamentary debates.

Aranjit Patra

Letters should be sent to response@civilsocietyonline.com

COVER STORY

OFFICERS AND POLITICIANS

An increasing number of government officers have been joining politics. What are the rules that govern such switchovers and what are the implications for the services? 16

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The magazine does not undertake to respond to unsolicited contributions sent to the editor for publication.

Civil Society
READ US. WE READ YOU.

Summertime and the living isn't easy

OUR June issue goes to press with an intimidating summer upon us. It is not just the heat but power cuts too. If getting around is challenging, working indoors is not easy either. Journalistic endeavours are hardwired to deal with adversity. Resources are always short and conditions can have you standing on one leg. But you need to be especially weatherproof to meet deadlines for writing stories, making pages and ensuring that the nuts and bolts of a media enterprise are intact.

If the growing trend of government officers joining politics is something you have been thinking about, our cover story done by Anil Swarup on invitation by us will offer you some perspective. He discusses the formal rules and the unwritten boundaries as few understand them. Anil spent a long career in the services and acquitted himself honourably in different roles. We have known him across ministries and now in his retirement. He is dignified, pragmatic and straightforward — all traits we need in public discourse on contentious issues.

Summer is a good time to remember our rivers. Our opening interview is with Venkatesh Dutta, professor of environmental sciences in Lucknow's Babasaheb Bhimrao Ambedkar University. He pleads for a vision for our rivers that goes 50 to 100 years into the future and places them in our cultural, historical and urban landscapes. In the absence of a vision, India's rivers have been downgraded to drains and then flawed technological solutions such as large sewage treatment plants are used to try and keep them clean. Instead, we should be looking at the dynamics of water systems of which rivers are a crucial part. Prof. Dutta has the title of Waterkeeper of the Gomti, a troubled river he has spent a considerable time studying. The Gomti is an example of "too much extraction and too little restoration", says Prof. Dutta. We need to see water as nature's gift to us to be used wisely and replenished. What we take from a river or put in it should depend on the river's capacity to rejuvenate itself.

Similarly, arsenic in groundwater is a public health issue that has to be addressed through respect for the compositeness of nature. The presence of arsenic deep below the surface is a geological phenomenon, which wouldn't be a problem but for the overuse of tube-wells. It is now in drinking water and the food chain in general. Millions of people are affected in the Gangetic belt. But it has taken decades of campaigning by scientists and activists for governments to even accept that there is a problem. We are as yet a long way from addressing it. Once again, a lack of vision comes in the way of meaningful action. There is little realization that the sourcing and availability of water should be at the heart of development planning. In the case of arsenic poisoning that translates into use of surface water in rain-rich areas. It is as easy or as difficult as that.

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Venkatesh Dutta on understanding water systems

‘Every river must get recognition’

Civil Society News
Gurugram

Venkatesh Dutta: ‘River cleaning is not river restoration’

INDIA’s once-splendid rivers have long been in decline. Traditionally, rivers were managed as part of larger water systems. Ponds, tanks, streams and smaller rivers worked seamlessly to retain water. Present-day governance doesn’t know to envision such harmony.

As a result, rivers like the Yamuna dry up in summer. In Lucknow, the Gomti is practically a dead river. When the river does have water, it is polluted and smelly. The focus of most governments is on cleaning rivers by spending copious funds on Sewage Treatment Plants (STPs) and long pipelines. In Lucknow, a riverfront was built to pretty up the view of the half-dead Gomti. It ended up throttling the river.

“We have to see the river in its totality,” says Venkatesh Dutta, professor of environmental science at the Babasaheb Bhimrao Ambedkar University in Lucknow.

A passionate campaigner for waterbodies, Dutta undertakes field work to unravel ecosystems to which rivers belong. For instance, he took his students on a 10-day *yatra* along the Gomti during which they lived with villagers and mapped river restoration plans with them.

“The best solutions are usually nature-based and don’t require concrete, metal and cement. We also don’t require unlimited funding and resources,” says 43-year-old Dutta, a staunch believer in the strength of community action.

As Waterkeeper of the Gomti, a designation conferred on him by the Waterkeeper Alliance, a global network of people fighting for clean water, Dutta is spokesperson, researcher and activist for the river and its wiry territory.

He works with government agencies, including Namami Gange, to restore rivers including much-ignored small rivers. Government officials don’t always share his zeal and there is the bane of frequent transfers to contend with.

“I have a love-hate relationship with the government. It’s not easy but we have to be vocal,” he says. Dutta has campaigned in Lucknow too with schoolchildren. ‘My river, my pride’ got children involved in cleaning up stretches of the Gomti.

He is an admirer of India’s historic tradition of building waterbodies and views the Chandela rulers who built 100 waterbodies in Bundelkhand as an inspiration. “We don’t have such vision,” he says.

Recently awarded the Neer Foundation’s Rajat ki Boonden National Water Award, Dutta is also a Fulbright Fellow and a British Chevening Scholar.

He spoke to *Civil Society* on why our rivers continue to languish.

Q. Why are rivers like the Yamuna and Gomti filthy and polluted? STPs have been built at considerable cost. Why has nothing changed?

Such changes are merely cosmetic. The problem is we have a short-term view of river rejuvenation. There is no long-term planning, no vision. Nobody asks how our rivers should look in 50 or perhaps in 100 years. No one is asking this question, be it in a metropolis or a small city. The river is seen as just a small stream lost in the background, not very prominent and not as part of our cultural and historical landscape or even our urban landscape. The river is seen as drainage, which is there to ease our sewers.

After the Ganga Action Plan Phase 1, the focus was on construction of STPs. We haven’t looked at the design or technical aspects of running STPs. It is a highly energy-intensive process. In a typical urban area, it is very difficult to connect everyone with the sewer system. There are squatter settlements, informal colonies, unplanned areas, rural areas…. We haven’t looked at where the energy will come from to run these STPs. I have examined many STPs. But I haven’t found a single STP which is giving you water of sufficient quality that can be released back into our rivers.

Q: That is a startling statement.

Yes. On paper it looks like we are following all norms and protocols. But rivers are still polluted especially in urban stretches and from the outlets of STPs to two km downstream. You can see a huge amount of foam floating on the river and the smell is so foul, you can’t even stand there. We haven’t looked at the circulation of water. Water should be used, reused and returned to nature. We must understand the sanctity of waterbodies, their carrying capacity and the entire fluvial dynamics of water systems. They are like living entities.

To what extent can the river rejuvenate or heal herself? This we have not examined. We are good at the science of extraction. But we are really bad at the science of restoration. We haven’t invested in restorative science or restorative principles. You hardly come across scientists working on river restoration using nature-based principles.

Everyone loves cement and concretized riverfront development. You can take a selfie by the river but you can’t hold its water in your hands because it is so dirty. This is happening everywhere whether it’s the Yamuna or the Gomti, the Hindon, the Kali or the Krishni river.

We have so many regulatory bodies — the Central Pollution Control Board, the State Pollution Control Boards, municipal authorities, Namami Gange…. But can you show me any stretch of a river which got healed due to STPs? We have built so many STPs for rivers like the Yamuna and Ganga in Kanpur, Allahabad.

But smaller rivers are not on anyone’s radar. A river is a river whether it is a small stream or a large channel. Every river must get recognition. Every river must get due importance. They are part of our cultural history, its tapestry. But due to lack of sound ecological principles there is heavy emphasis on the STPs. River cleaning is not river restoration.

Q: What exactly do you have in mind when you say river restoration? You also went on a Gomti *yatra*. What did you find?

I’ll make it very simple. Two things are required for the river. First, the river must flow. And second, the river must flood. So if you stop the pathway of the river, you are killing the river. The immediate river banks or the flooding pathway of the river, its fluvial corridor or terrace have to be protected. It is part of the river. We think the river is merely the channel through which it passes. We don’t consider the lateral connectivity of the river with wetlands or its vertical connectivity with groundwater. We have to see the river in its totality.

During my 10-day *yatra* along the Gomti, I found that wherever the river was protected by a vegetative corridor, a forest on both sides, even sandbanks or grasslands, it was in good health. Wherever there was space for the river to spread sediments, it was in good health. The river’s relationship with the local habitation must be maintained and not alienated by a concrete project which makes it very elitist.

A river can’t be called an urban river. Its catchment can be urban. Or its watershed could be urbanized. It should not be fragmented, over-allocated, or diverted through canals, dams or barrages. Whenever there is need for water, natural designs and principles should be given first priority. We also found the Gomti connected with its old paleo-channels, its lakes and waterbodies, ponds, smaller streams or its tributaries which fed its main channels and gave it fresh water.

Q: You are saying the flow of the river depends on its surrounding habitat?

The habitat is very important. The Gomti is a groundwater-fed river. Rivers like the Ganga, the Yamuna, or the Gandak and Bagmati coming from Tibet or Nepal, are snow-fed. But even those get groundwater in huge quantities during the lean seasons. The snow melt quantity could range from 15 to 60 percent only. The rest is groundwater supplied by base flows through the river’s channels because the water table is high and keeps contributing to its main flow.

The Gomti gets groundwater even during the lean season. During the monsoon it gets rainwater through its tributaries and connective waterbodies. Good rain is confined to only 18 to 20 days. Nine to ten months of the year, the flow is contributed by groundwater. If you lose the groundwater, you lose the river. Somehow that connectivity has been lost.

But this was known to our ancestors. They built waterbodies. The idea was to make these streams perennial. If you could hold large amounts of water through surface impoundments, like ponds, the recharge would contribute to the flow of the river system. But today we are losing those historical waterbodies. We are converting them into built-up areas in Lucknow, Kanpur and Allahabad, or most of the upcoming towns. Land revenue departments are not serious about protecting them.

Q: Those waterbodies should be protected as a matter of policy?

There is no dearth of policies. Seriousness is lacking in the lower levels of governance. You might have a beautiful policy document and it really looks like you are going bottom up. But the person responsible for its implementation will be transferred after a few months or years. So his focus is on short-term goals. He muddles along and this is the way it goes from one person to the next.

Secondly, there is conflict between the land revenue department, the irrigation department and other local bodies like the municipalities. When you ask who owns the pond or the waterbody, you won’t find an easy answer. Their area is shrinking even in revenue records.

The Gomti passes through 16 or 17 districts. Since 1976 — when I first made a land use map (of such waterbodies) — to 2021, using satellite pictures, we have lost almost 70 percent of waterbodies in the catchment of the Gomti. The land revenue department, which has the database of waterbodies, doesn’t seem serious about looking after these areas. Anyone can encroach, fill up the waterbody or build an apartment block. If anyone complains, he gets threatened. There is no security for the whistleblower. There are no groups which complain, just one or two isolated persons.

Q: You have mooted the idea of water sanctuaries. Can you explain that?

We have wildlife sanctuaries, national forests and protected areas. Waterbodies have beautiful landscapes with turtles, otters, frogs, and birds surviving in those isolated patches. Such landscapes should be declared as water sanctuaries. Nobody should be able to change their land use. Secondly, you could store rainwater in those areas and you would have a year-round supply of fresh water. Nature has designed these areas as natural storehouses of water.

The origin of the river — whether small or big — must be declared a water sanctuary, an eco-fragile zone. It should be demarcated and the river’s fluvial terrace on both sides must be protected just like the railways protect their land on both sides with pillars. The river should be zoned and nobody should be able to change land use. Water sanctuaries are the need of the hour. They can protect you from extremes of climate whether it is flooding or drought. Look at the IPCC [Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change] sixth assessment report. The weather is so unpredictable.

Q: Have you identified such stretches along the Gomti river?

We did and we submitted our report to the government way back in 2011. We identified 25 streams or tributaries which contribute to the flow of the Gomti. They all originate from a small forest patch or a wetland. These are critical landscapes. They are being threatened by intensive farming, or being levelled up. The very origin of the Sai river, a tributary of the Gomti, is threatened today by a highway which cuts the Sai into two parts. This year that area is almost dry. If you don’t protect the origin of the river, how will you ensure *nirmal dhara*?

The Sai has around 50-odd tributaries which contribute to it and it then is a tributary of the Gomti. UP alone has more than 1,000 smaller rivers. And there are thousands of kilometres of smaller channels. It’s very disheartening to note that these rivers have not been scientifically mapped. If you examine older satellite maps you will find many channels braiding, meandering or changing their course. These areas should be mapped and protected and not used even for farming. When you start farming you lose the river banks. There is a tendency to encroach. The edge of the farm and the terrace of the river intermingle and there is so much threat to the eco-zone — the transition zone from the wet ecosystem to the dry eco-zone, from a running river to a dry landscape, which is a refuge for turtles, birds, frogs and all sorts of diversity. A river is not mere water. It includes the biodiversity which flourishes in and around it.

> **‘During my 10-day *yatra* along the Gomti, I found that wherever the river was protected by a forest, a vegetative corridor, sandbanks or grasslands, it was in good health.’**

Q: Would reviving waterbodies within the city, creating a wetland ecosystem and flowing in treated sewage water help improve groundwater levels?

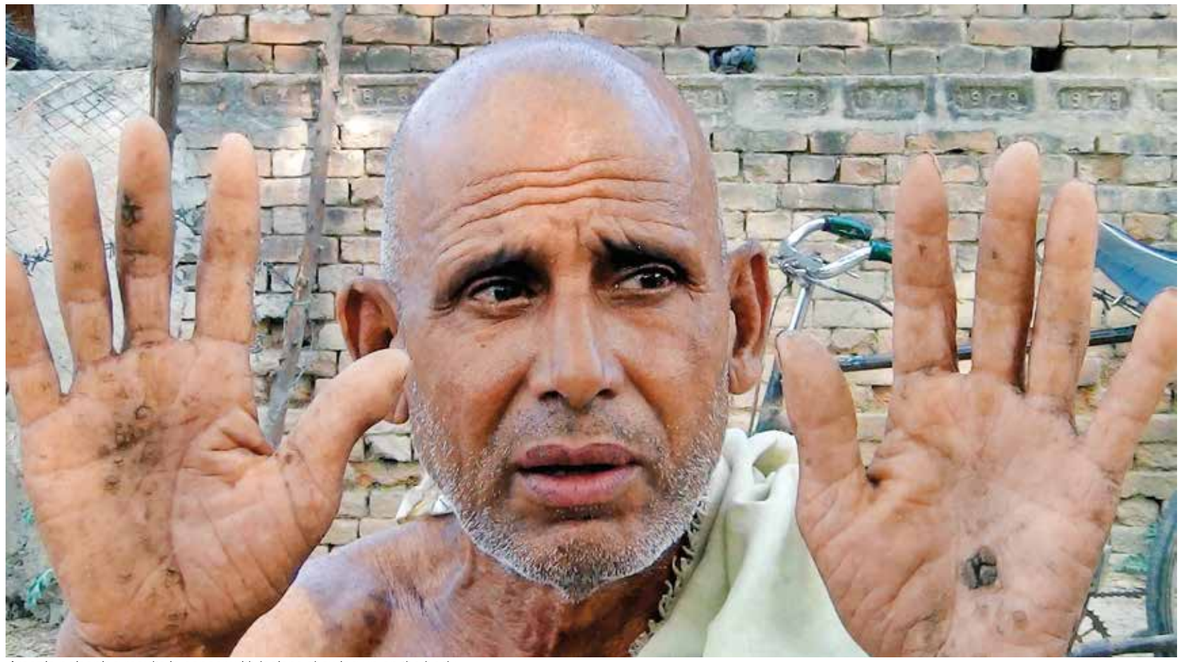
Cities should have a decentralized system of water management. Water should be used and returned to nature at the colony or zonal level. The water should be treated so that it is of sufficiently good quality to be returned to a wetland or a pond. If you compromise with water quality you lose your groundwater quality and then there is no way to treat it. There are examples of bioremediation with aquatic plants. It’s a good approach but the quality of water is very important. It must conform to regulatory standards.

Q: But STPs are not the solution, you said.

I was talking about the large STPs. STPs should be decentralized and small. My thumb rule is: the STP should not be more than 10 MLD (million litres per day). More than that entails heavy costs of pumping, transport and conveyance. A lot of pipelines need to be laid. Ideally, you should divide your city into many zones and pockets and have a series of STPs. You could even make an STP below a park and use the water for gardening or irrigation or construction purposes.

We should not opt for the large STPs of 300 MLD or 100 MLD which they are putting across rivers. These are difficult to operate and costly. It costs ₹40 to 50 to treat 1,000 litres of wastewater. We must invest in the science of treatment and in economies of scale and for that the small STP at colony level will work better than the large STP near the river.

Large riverfronts are not for our rivers. Our rivers swell during the monsoon. They need space to spread their sediment. Rivers make their own natural riverfronts. Our rivers, particularly in the Ganga plains, meander a lot. You can build *ghats*. That was more rooted in our culture. Those are natural riverfronts. ■



Arsenic poisoning results in cancer with lesions showing up on the body

LINGERING CURSE OF ARSENIC

Gangetic belt villages suffer as before

Civil Society News
New Delhi

MORE than 15 years after it was first identified, arsenic in drinking water remains a serious danger to public health in villages across the Gangetic basin.

Inner Voice, an NGO which has been participating in research on the problem, says recent surveys undertaken by it in Bihar and Uttar Pradesh show that nothing much has changed.

Communities continue to drink water that contains unacceptable levels of arsenic in the absence of safer sources of supply. Tests have revealed that children are exposed to arsenic-contaminated water not just in their homes but also in schools where the problem could be more easily addressed.

Arsenic as a toxin is instantly fatal in large doses but when ingested in small quantities in water and food it manifests in diseases over time. This is especially so in people who have poor nutritional levels. Children who are being exposed are being affected for life.

Incremental ingestion of arsenic causes cancers of the liver and gall bladder. It results in cancer of the skin, visible as lesions. It triggers neurological disorders such as the deadening of nerve ends or sensory neuropathy. Motor functions also get affected.

"A civilizational crisis is brewing because millions of people are at potential risk of arsenic poisoning. Nearly 200 districts are affected in the Gangetic belt. Major areas that have been contaminated are 30 districts of Uttar Pradesh, 18 districts of Bihar, four districts in Jharkhand and 14 districts in West Bengal," says Saurabh Singh of Inner Voice.

Inner Voice has twice been to the National Human Rights Commission (NHRC) on the issue of arsenic poisoning and also won compensation for children who have been exposed to it.

But Singh laments the lack of administrative will at the state government level to deal with the problem. Political parties prefer to live in denial rather than roll up their sleeves and look for solutions.

> **'At the state level contracts awarded to make the switch to piped water are mired in corruption and nepotism,' says Saurabh Singh.**

Containing the problem requires vigorous awareness building, testing of water samples and a switch from groundwater to piped supply of surface water. Community engagement and action are needed.

Unfortunately, awarding of contracts to make the switch to piped supplies has at the state level been mired in nepotism and corruption. Few efforts, if any, are made to rally people around for the sake of their health.

"We have tracked the functioning of the Department of Drinking Water and Sanitation (DDWS) in every state. There is inadequate evaluation and monitoring of the work that is supposed to have been done," says Singh.

At the central level, however, there is a greater sense of resolve and purpose after Prime Minister Narendra Modi announced the Jal Jeevan Mission (JJM) from the ramparts of the Red Fort in 2019, saying there would be a tap in every home.

In the arsenic-affected areas, many measures long proposed by NGOs have been adopted. There has also been consultation with activists to have a better understanding of ground realities.

"When we used to talk of water harvesting and use of dug wells as opposed to deep tube-wells, district and state officials would laugh at us," says Singh. "But now these very measures have been adopted. Water testing kits in villages and awareness campaigns have also been introduced."

"We complained about the poor performance of Bihar and Uttar Pradesh under the Jal Jeevan Mission. We asked for a White Paper. But if the authorities kept silent it was not as though they weren't listening. On many occasions, when we reported false information in official campaigns in social media, those campaigns were withdrawn. They requested us for a copy of the NHRC order of monetary compensation and sent it to chief secretaries in the states," says Singh.

"When our second NHRC order was out about children drinking poisonous water from school taps, they immediately passed an order to install ROs (reverse osmosis water filtration systems) in all schools and *anganwadis* in the country. When the mission director of JJM engaged with us in a conversation about ground realities, I told him about the absence of water testing facilities. Soon they sanctioned 2,200 laboratories."

"We have travelled to arsenic-affected areas in Bihar, West Bengal and Uttar Pradesh. Everywhere it's the same story. There are many 'widow villages' in arsenic-affected areas where the men have died. But there is hardly any concern shown by the government for those families," says Singh.

On the whole, he is cynical about government initiatives. Earlier DDWS initiatives were left to contractors and poorly supervised for meaningful results. Now under JJM, public-private partnerships for providing piped water to homes are creating assets that no one really owns, he says. He wonders what will happen to the piped water facilities after 30 years when the PPPs expire.

"It is important to make water a community asset in arsenic-affected areas," says Singh. "People need their own shallow wells, water harvesting systems and testing facilities that will not only save them from arsenic but also reinforce a central role for clean water in their lives."

In the absence of community efforts and inadequate government reach, people are forced to fend for themselves with whatever they can get.

"I visited a village near Basirhat in North 24-Parganas district in West Bengal after 10 years and found villagers buying water to drink in nearby markets. You could say that is the only change I saw in their lives," says Singh.

Why is arsenic showing up in drinking water in these parts of the country? Geological changes over centuries have resulted in bands of arsenic deposits in the Gangetic basin.

Overuse of groundwater with tube-wells going deep in search of reserves has resulted in disturbing settled geological structures and caused arsenic to leach into aquifers.

In the 1960s and '70s the World Health Organization (WHO) and UNICEF propagated the use of groundwater in their quest to make water used for human consumption safer. As a result, tube-wells came to be installed in ever-growing numbers. Use of groundwater became rampant for agriculture and human consumption.

Singh's interest in arsenic poisoning arose when he returned to his village in Ballia district in Uttar Pradesh. It was particularly badly affected.

Saurabh Singh, centre, and his wife Merra, left, with residents of Karkatpur village at Ghazipur in Uttar Pradesh

The late Dr Dipankar Chakrabarti

He went on to work closely with Dr Dipankar Chakrabarti, head of the School of Environmental Sciences in Jadavpur University, Kolkata.

Dr Chakrabarti made a seminal contribution by identifying arsenic in drinking water as a major public health issue in West Bengal — something the state's political class pilloried him for and refused to accept for a long time.

Dr Chakrabarti also expanded his research to other states in the Gangetic basin. A study led by him in 2014 in five blocks of Patna district showed levels of arsenic beyond the acceptable 10 parts per billion (PPB) in water samples taken from 1,365 hand-pump tube-wells.

Of the 712 villagers examined by the study's medical team, 69 had skin lesions as did nine of the 312 children screened. All the biological samples collected had arsenic levels above normal. Arsenical neuropathy was observed as were obstetric problems.

Dr Chakrabarti, who died in 2018, was an iconic figure in environmental research in India. A tall and dynamic chemistry professor, for all the gloom uncovered, he was cheerfully disposed and did yoga twice a day.

He conducted the first serious urban air pollution tests in the country in the 1980s, collecting samples on the streets of Kolkata and testing them at advanced labs in universities in Europe where he would teach in those years. He was way ahead of other pollution control scientists in identifying diesel and other automobile emissions as a public health issue.

Dr Chakrabarti had the courage to take on the establishment and ring alarm bells where required. For Patna district, his study recommended safe sources of surface water for drinking and cooking, and a rigorous campaign to make people aware of the dangers to their health.

Such measures remain the only real ways forward. But they require governments to galvanize large efforts. NGOs can raise flags of concern and create some awareness. But to make a real difference, governments must intercede and deploy the enormous resources at their command. The arsenic problem needs to be seen as a national public health concern. Right now, despite the scientific data available and efforts of activists, it isn't getting the scale of attention it merits.

One reason is that governments don't have the empowered expertise to deal with environmental problems that have public health implications. Ministers and bureaucrats fail miserably when they try to wrap their heads around such scenarios and scientists employed in government either don't know better or lack the agency to speak up.

An example is air pollution, the cause of innumerable illnesses in urban India. It has taken years of lobbying and fighting of court cases for air pollution to be seen as the hazard that it is. The challenge is even greater with arsenic in drinking water because the people affected are poor and in villages in remote parts of the country. They are easily overlooked. Activists and scientists who speak for them therefore do a great service. ■

A mango feast under the shade of a large mango tree in the village

This is India's mango village

Tiny Kuruvakkavu has 102 different varieties

Shree Padre
Kannapuram

EVEN in Kerala's scorching summer, Chunda Kuruvakkavu, a hamlet in Kannapuram of Kannur district, is surprisingly cool. Huge mango trees shield people from the blistering sun, forming a lush green canopy over rooftops. This picturesque little village is a treasure for Kerala and for India. Twenty middle-class families living here have conserved 102 local mango varieties on small pieces of land in a radius of just 300 metres.

Two years ago, on July 22, National Mango Day, the Kerala State Biodiversity Board recognized Kuruvakkavu as a Mango Heritage Area and Kannapuram panchayat as a Mango Heritage Village. Such an honour has been bestowed for the first time on a village and its panchayat.

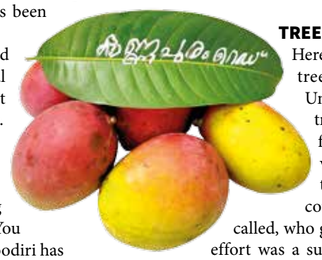
Indigenous mangoes are called *nattumavu* in Malayalam and each house in the village has many varieties, some with unusual features. Take Parthasarathy's Kaitha Madhuram mango. It smells like a pineapple. Kaitha in Malayalam means pineapple. "When this fruit is at our home, we can't fool visitors by saying we don't have it. The mango's aroma tells the truth," jokes Parthasarathy, who has six varieties on his half-acre. R. Gopalan Master's mango, Pavizharekha, is another outstanding specimen. It's delicious and has an unusual orangish colour. You can find this mango only in two houses. Unnikrishnan Namboodiri has more than 30 varieties on his small plot.

"We have documented these 20 houses thoroughly. The other houses also have local mango varieties," assures 42-year-old Shyju Machathi, the enthusiastic crusader behind this community conservation effort. He is a senior civil police officer, a designation in the Kerala State Police, posted in the nearby Valapattanam Police Station and he lives in Kuruvakkavu.

For six years, Machathi and his neighbours have been identifying and documenting mango varieties in the village. Every household now has a signboard with the names of the mango varieties it grows. A map depicts where the trees are located with serial numbers. Machathi has also compiled a book with photos of 150 mango varieties, listing each variety's features in detail: colour, pulp, shape, taste, fibre, use, bearing habits and so on. He has added a few mango varieties from neighbouring areas too.

In 2021, Machathi received the National Plant Genome Saviour Award for his efforts at documenting and conserving native mango varieties across Kerala. His group, called Nattumanchottil — which means 'under a local mango tree' — has been organizing exhibitions and meetings at Kannapuram on native mango varieties since 2017.

In six years the Nattumanchottil group with no infrastructure, funding or even experts has managed to achieve what no other group, perhaps in all of south India, has done. It has placed Kerala firmly on the mango map of India.



TREES AND GRAFTS

Here's how it all began. Six years ago, a 200-year-old mango tree, of the rare Vellathan variety, was cut down on Unnikrishnan Namboodiri's premises. Everybody liked the tree and its luscious fruit. "Whoever ate that mango would find it hard to forget its taste," recalls Machathi. The villagers felt bad about losing the tree. Avid discussions took place on what could be done. Someone suggested it could be conserved by simply grafting it. An expert was called, who grafted many scions of the felled tree on root stocks. The effort was a success and the variety was conserved. The local media picked up the story.

The incident sparked interest among the residents of Kuruvakkavu regarding their native mango varieties. How many did they have? At the time Machathi was running a Facebook page named Nattumanchottil. It became the main platform for disseminating information on mango varieties and a group congregated around it. In the first year, Machathi and his group exhibited 35 mango varieties and 65 the following year.

Machathi says that the Nattumanchottil movement has three objectives. The first is locating mango varieties, the second is identifying varieties, the third is disseminating selected varieties to interested groups.

In 2017, his group organized a get-together, inviting nearby relatives to a *sadhyam* (feast) of dishes made with mangoes. All 35 mango varieties were displayed. The event was a success. Subsequently, Nattamanchottil began organizing exhibitions which evoked considerable interest. In the following two years the exhibitions became bigger, more people took part and the group's knowledge also grew.

For their third exhibition they invited Dr Joseph John, then principal scientist of the National Bureau of Plant Genetic Resources (NBPGR) in Thrissur, as a guest. They had, by then, collected 100 mango varieties. Dr John advised them to do things more scientifically by documenting, propagating and planting each variety. "Dr John's participation was the turning point," says Machathi.

After a few months Dr John visited Kannapuram with a graftsman. Over two field visits NBPGR identified 100 varieties with Machathi and his friends. The scions were taken to NBPGR who grafted them and included them in their gene pool.

Machathi spends all his spare time in local mango research. It has become his life's passion. He has been identifying mango varieties across Kerala and, in the process, has learnt grafting too. If he gets a reliable tip-off, he rushes to the spot, collects all details and documents the mango. If the variety looks promising, he takes its scions home. At home, he always keeps root stocks ready so that he can graft without delay.

NAMELESS AND UNIQUE

After a two-year hiatus due to the COVID-19 pandemic, Nattumanchottil organized an impressive exhibition and meeting on May 2 under the shade of a large mango tree in the village. Over 170 mangoes were displayed, mostly collected by Machathi and his group. A few were from elsewhere in Kerala. For instance, Sureshkumar Kalarcode, a progressive farmer, brought as many as 30 varieties from Alappuzha.

Collecting mangoes for the exhibition was challenging, admits Machathi. "Harvesting from tall trees is impossible. We had to make do with fallen fruits. To prevent the fruit from over-ripening, we got friends to keep the mangoes in their fridges and bring them out on the day of the exhibition," he says.

The varieties on display were amazing. There were mangoes slightly bigger than a gooseberry. There were fruits so large you couldn't hold them in one hand. The colours and aromas were overwhelming. Volunteers needed 90 minutes to name and arrange all the exhibits on a table. Each mango's name, used by villagers, was written on a mango leaf. Some were tentatively named by Machathi and his team.

Shyju Machathi, the enthusiastic crusader behind this conservation effort

Each house has many mango varieties, some with unusual features. Every house also has a signboard with names of the mangoes it has.

The names went: Madhura Cheriyan (sweet and small), Manjal Tolikkatti (yellow, thick-skinned), Kovilakam Green (temple green), Thenga Mangam (coconut mango), Soap Manga (soap mango) and so on.

"The problem for us in conserving mango varieties is that the same variety has different names in different areas," says Dr Suma A., a scientist at NBPGR. "Proper documentation, identification and awareness are a priority for indigenous mango conservation. The State Biodiversity Board should bring out authentic publications listing all the mango varieties to rule out confusion."

The exhibition was an exclusive affair to which scientists and mango conservationists were invited. There were two panel discussions: one on coordination between scientists and farmers to conserve mango varieties and the second on preventing wastage by marketing and value addition of local mango varieties.

The event was organized on the premises of Karunakaran M.P., a senior member of Nattumanchottil. After the discussions, participants went to visit small plots brimming with mango trees and full of fallen fruit. Everyone picked up the mangoes and gorged on them.

More feasting was in store. At A.V. Jayachandran's home, women had been busy since early morning preparing an elaborate lunch of 20 dishes, mostly made with mangoes. The menu was unusual and mouthwatering.

Two types of mango juice were served followed by lunch. There was green gram gruel and several mango curries, a rare combination. Raw mango *pal payasam* was a special attraction.

"Many neighbouring housewives cooperated. Each one knew a few preparations. We drew up a list, cooked separately, and then brought all the dishes together," said Vaniram V., who hosted the guests.

The sad reality is that most of these excellent mango varieties go waste. Each compound has bags full of fallen mangoes. Locals aren't very keen to consume their own fruit. "Decades ago, traders used to take a few trees on contract. Though the returns were peanuts, at least the fruits were used. But nowadays harvesting fruit from tall trees is tough and risky. So traders don't turn up," says Dineshan Cheriyandi, a schoolteacher and group member.

Such mangoes would have good demand. But no one is marketing them. At a session post-lunch, this issue was discussed. Would online marketing help? But harvesting is difficult so the number of mangoes they could sell might be too small to get buyers interested. Half the trees are more than 50 years old and very tall. Their owners are either middle-aged or elderly. So the first hurdle is to harvest the mangoes. Then an adequate number would need to be collected for sale. As for value addition, it is easier said than done.

RAISING ORCHARDS

Machathi, however, is unfazed by such difficulties. He has set his sights elsewhere. After documenting all the mango varieties in Kannapuram and the adjoining panchayat of Cherukunnu he decided to disseminate the best varieties across Kerala. He discussed his idea with former Agriculture Minister V.S. Sunilkumar. Why not spread the best Kannapuram and Cherukunnu varieties in all 14 districts of Kerala, he suggested. The minister was impressed and ordered mango orchards to be set up in 100 panchayats in and around Kannur.

The project, named Sugathakumari Manthopp, after the late environmentalist, Sugathakumari, was implemented last year. The government spent ₹3 lakh and the District Agriculture Farm in Karmbam in Kannur district produced 10,000 grafts which were duly distributed to 100 panchayats last year by Sunilkumar at an inauguration ceremony held in Kuttanellur Government College.

But nobody got to know the fate of those precious grafts because in a government project there is no feedback mechanism. Unsure about the result of his efforts, Machathi changed his approach. Nattumanchottil now offers grafts to those with land who are keen to raise small mango orchards. They named their initiative Cheru Manthopp which means small orchard.

So far, in three districts Cheru Manthopps have been established — in Police Academy, Thrissur, in Kannapuram by a teacher, Dinesan Cheriyandi, and in Alleppey by a group called Team Thanakulam.

Cheriyandi is an expert at climbing big trees. He helps Machathi by harvesting fruits or collecting scions from selected trees. A teacher in Kendriya Vidyalaya, Kannur, his wife, Jyothi C.U., owns half an acre in Moraza, three km from Kannapuram. The couple has planted about 50 Kannapuram mango trees here. The gene pool is only a few months old. "We have no commercial purpose in mind. This is just to conserve some of the best varieties for future generations," explains Cheriyandi.

Sureshkumar Kalarcode, a farmer in Alleppey district, has raised a beautiful gene pool in his neighbourhood on a vast stretch of land with a tank. The land belongs to a temple. It used to be covered with thick undergrowth and was the haunt of antisocial elements. Sureshkumar and his friends formed a social group called Team Thanakulam. After getting permission from the temple, they cleared

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Continued from page 11

the wild growth, built a boundary wall and planted 80 Kannapuram mango varieties provided by NBPGR, Thrissur. The group meets every week. It has arranged for drip irrigation. The grafts are growing well and a few plants sprouted flowers in the first year itself. They hope the trees will fruit next year. Machathi says he is proud of this effort.

PROTECT AND PROPAGATE

Although no blueprint has been drawn up to commercially exploit this treasure of mangoes, it is still important to protect and propagate them. "So far there is no government effort or scientific effort to conserve native mango varieties. Rubber plantations have resulted in high genetic erosion of native mango varieties," explains Dr Joseph. "When a person starts rubber cultivation, the Rubber Board insists that one acre of rubber trees shouldn't retain more than eight to 16 trees of other species. So trees which are not rubber have to be felled. This rule has forced farmers to cut down many local mango trees. More than 90 percent of the state's genetic wealth of native mangoes has vanished."

An elaborate lunch of 20 dishes made mostly with mangoes

Dr Dinesh M.R., former director, Indian Institute of Horticultural Research (IIHR), says, "Some local varieties might be pest or disease resistant or resistant to waterlogging and salinity. Such qualities can be utilized successfully as root stock in grafting. Only a few native varieties adapt to all environments. Most varieties are micro-climate specific like the famous *appe midi* of Karnataka. They don't adapt to other areas.

"We did advise farmers in Kolar, a few years ago, to brand and sell local mango varieties in makeshift stalls on the sides of highways. It got a good response. In the Sirsi area, there is an excellent native variety called Varate Giduga. Its pulp is like butter. It can be promoted as a table variety, but quantity is the issue."

His opinion is endorsed by Dr Murugan Sankaran, principal scientist, IIHR. "Out of over 1,000 mango varieties, we commercially cultivate only 20 to 25. We don't know the traits of other varieties," he says. "They might have farmer-friendly qualities. For example, using the root stock of Vellaikolumban, an indigenous variety, if we graft varieties like the Alfonso, we can end up with a tree with a smaller canopy. If we can organize supply chains and promotion, selected native mango varieties will also find markets. Lal Baba, a variety of Chittoor, was branded Babu Reddy Mango and became popular. Sakrekutty, a small local mango, is popular not only in Karnataka but in Tamil Nadu and Andhra Pradesh as well."

"Conducting diversity fairs of indigenous mangoes in different areas is a good way to bring native mangoes into the limelight. This strategy worked well for jackfruit. Hundreds of jackfruit festivals were held in Kerala and Karnataka," says Dr Dinesh M.R. "Success lies in offering people a taste of such fruits."

The village could also select 10 to 15 of its best varieties from Kannapuram and Cherukunnu panchayats and popularize those. Their special features can be published in a booklet with photos and made available to people.

"We have at least 15 varieties that can be commercialized," says Machathi. He cites the Kula Nirayan mango. Its name means 'bunch full'. The fruit is very large, around 800 gm. Each bunch has 12 to 18 fruits. The tree yields fruit regularly through the season and isn't prone to fruit fly attacks. Right now, there is only one tree of this variety, a 70-year-old one at Machathi's mother's house in nearby Pappinasseri.

Machathi is attracting media attention. People from different areas call him to find out about grafts, fruit varieties and so on. But, apart from conservation, he has no commercial objectives. "We haven't accepted any financial contributions from anyone. I don't want money to be an attraction in this mission. I have managed all incidental expenses of the movement. But if families get some additional income, it will be a great incentive and help our efforts. Maybe they could sell grafts of their own mother trees. That will strengthen our movement."

He says that in subsequent studies they identified about 208 native mango varieties in Kannapuram panchayat. "There may be around 300 if you comb further," he says.

But mango varieties aren't limited to Kannapuram. "If locals develop a keen eye and start intensive surveys, there are other panchayats like Pattuvam near Thaliparamb which also have rich diversity," says Cheriyandi.

Sureshkumar Kalarcode's suggestion is to make the movement sustainable through sale of grafts by families. "At Mannuthy in Thrissur, near the KAU, hundreds of houses have learnt grafting. They are looking for regular assignments. If selected variety grafts are made available to them, on an agreement basis, they can produce and supply grafts on a regular basis. The individual households of Kannapuram can re-sell them later."

Well-wishers and fruit lovers who have been watching the Nattumachottil movement since its inception say it is a one-man show led by Machathi. "I too realize that," he admits. "I do the major work of identification, documentation and propagation. But my teammates support me in every way when we organize exhibitions and get-togethers. They accompany me on my survey trips and help me with so many tasks. Lately, many more people are getting interested in our movement."

He has saved his award money of ₹10 lakh from the Genome Saviour Award to buy a small plot and develop it as a gene pool and learning centre. His second ambition is to organize a heritage walk in Kuruvakkavu to show its natural beauty and mango diversity to visitors and encourage them to buy mangoes and plants from the homes which have conserved this treasure for so many years. ■

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Samita's World *by SAMITA RATHOR*

Textbook solution at book bank

Rakesh Agrawal
Dehradun

HOLDING a piece of white paper in her left hand and clutching her 10-year-old daughter's thin wrist with the other, Urmila Semwal, a vegetable vendor, went to a bookshop in Dehradun's popular Paltan Bazaar to buy textbooks. Her daughter, Kamla, had just secured admission into Class 6 in the local government senior secondary school. Urmila was looking for inexpensive NCERT textbooks for maths and science.

She got a rude shock when the shopkeeper handed her an entire set of books, by a private publisher, of all the subjects and told her she would have to buy the whole lot. Urmila couldn't afford it. She left the shop without the textbooks for her child, feeling despondent and close to tears.

She told her friend, Salma Khan, who plies a vegetable *thela* (push cart) in the city, about her problem. Salma had a solution. She told Urmila about a book bank in Kaulagarh, a residential colony nearby, from where she had got second-hand books for her son, who was studying in Class 7.

Without delay, Urmila went there and returned elated, carrying the books. "With these NCERT books, Kamla will now *pucca* become a good student," she beamed.

This useful book bank is being run by the National Association for Students' and Parents' Rights (NASPR), a Dehradun-based NGO, working to safeguard the rights of students and parents.

"In March 2018 I saw a video of a poor father in Kotdwar, a town about 120 km away in Pauri district, trying to buy four books for his son. The shopkeeper forced him to buy the entire pack. The video went viral. I saw it and I thought, I must do something about this," says Arif Khan, who is president of NASPR.

He started a book bank with just four books and a table in Dehradun's Nehru Colony. "I did it so that poor and deprived parents could borrow and exchange books. It would also save the environment as less paper will be needed, so fewer trees will be cut. We also fought with the schools. We insisted that schools must recommend NCERT books. Those books last for four to five years and can be easily shared," says Khan.

From that one book bank where books were shared between four students, NASPR now has 14 book banks with tens of thousands of books. It has a repository of not just school textbooks but books for a range of competitive examinations, literary works, fiction, religious and mythological books. Ten book banks are in Dehradun, one in Guwahati and one in Kumarpada in Kamrup district, Assam.

Thousands of low-income parents have used these book banks to access books for their schoolgoing children. Many young adults have cleared tough competitive examinations, thanks to the books they borrowed from the book banks.

Mahesh Varma, son of an auto driver, is one such student. His father couldn't afford to buy him books for the science stream. Mahesh loved studying physics and chemistry and he aspired to become a scientist. "Then, I heard about the book bank in our locality. I borrowed all my essential books from it and I stood 11th in class and then 12th in the next class, "*bahut acche numbero ke saath"* (with very good grades), he says. He dutifully returned the borrowed books after he finished studying.

Says Sudesh Uniyal, who is general secretary of NASPR: "The problem we faced was that sometimes people would not return the books. So we thought of a strategy. All borrowers must deposit 50 percent of the price of the books. Parents who are categorized as below poverty line or those who simply want to exchange books are exempt from this rule. Borrowers are now returning books."

Arif Khan at a book bank in Dehradun

As word spread, people began donating used books to the book banks. When a three-day book fair was held in May 2019, many individuals, groups and NGOs donated books, school bags and uniforms to NASPR's book banks. Amanu Tripathi of Astitva Women and Child Welfare Trust says they donated since they know the book banks are very convenient for poor and deprived students. "Doon Global International School in Harbartpur gave us about 1,000 books in 2017. The Neetu Lohia Foundation gave us 500 books in 2021," says Deepchand Varma, national secretary, NASPR.

Using such books, many aspiring students, after passing their school exams, have also passed competitive examinations and now have a promising future to look forward to.

Twenty-three-year-old Ramesh Valia's father is an auto driver. Two years ago he passed the chartered accountancy exam and he is now all set to join a major company in Delhi on a salary his father couldn't have dreamed of. Pradeep Kashyap, son of a small-time farmer, passed the banking recruitment test last year and is now working in a nationalized bank. And Abrar Ali, who operates a couple of Vikrams — three-wheelers which run on diesel — says both his daughters are studying to join the IAS.

Apart from running book banks, NASPR's mission is to ensure implementation of the Right To Education (RTE) Act and make sure that students, especially girls, are not harassed in any way.

"We found that private schools have employed many ineligible candidates as teachers. I pointed this out to S.P. Khali, additional director, elementary education, in the Department of Education, Uttarakhand. He took note and has promised to take appropriate action," says Khan.

NASPR also fights against unjust closure of schools. When the Ministry of Defence issued an order to stop admissions at all schools aided by the Defence Research and Development Organization (DRDO) in the country for this academic session, it meant DRDO schools would be shut. The principal of Central School, DRDO, in Dehradun meekly followed the order.

"We didn't take it timidly. NASPR raised this matter with the manager of the school. He tried to justify it by citing losses. I pointed out that even if there are just 10 students, you can't shut the school since it's not a business but a social enterprise. I have lodged a petition in the Uttarakhand High Court against such closure," says Khan.

NASPR has also been working against sexual harassment of girl students. "The chairman of the Indian Academy, a premier private educational institute, was allegedly sexually exploiting three girl students. We intervened in September 2018. He was arrested and imprisoned for a year, but was released since after a year the parents of these students backed out," says Khan. "Similarly, the swimming coach of Pestle Weeds, another premium private boarding school, was arrested as he sexually molested a girl student from Punjab in January 2019. The school management wanted to 'settle' the matter for ₹25 lakh!"

Government schools aren't better off. In September 2017, Parvesh Kumar, a history teacher of Sardar Singh Rawat Inter College in Nainbag, close to Mussoorie, reportedly raped a 15-year-old girl student over several months. "We contacted the police and that teacher was immediately arrested under the POCSO Act and imprisoned," says Khan.

During the COVID-19 lockdown, when all schools were shut and children were confined to their homes, there were no bookshops or libraries to go to. "We converted our car into a mobile book bank in May 2020 and we went all over Dehradun, supplying books. We got requests not just from the city, but also from nearby towns like Rishikesh and Haridwar, for books that we happily provided," says Puja Garg, who works for NASPR.

"Even the police helped us," says Kavita Khan, Arif's wife. "They would stop us for breaking lockdown rules, but when we told them our mission, they permitted us to go ahead."

Their mobile book bank was noted by the media and Red FM, a popular FM channel, interviewed Khan in its morning programme, *Ek Pahari Aisa Bhi*, by Kavya, a popular radio jockey in Dehradun. ■

How hybrid mediation got workers their dues

Surmayi Khatana
Mumbai

WHEN the sudden lockdown during the pandemic put unorganized sector workers out of job, Aajeevika Bureau was flooded with calls for help on their Labour Line. The NGO usually uses mediation to settle disputes. But bringing workers and employers face to face during the lockdown was impossible.

So instead it went in for what it calls "hybrid mediation" in which matters were settled on the phone and using email. Employers were contacted and informed of the consequences of not paying up. Many of them settled workers' dues almost immediately and there were others who needed some persuasion.

As factories, offices, workshops closed overnight, workers were left in a limbo. Many were stuck and needed help to get home or money to buy food. Wages had not been paid, some of them had been suddenly retrenched, or not paid during their notice period and more.

At that time the phone-based Labour Line became a saviour for workers in distress. As many as 1,000 to 1,200 calls were received daily. In Rajasthan, Aajeevika Bureau operates the Labour Line in partnership with the state government's department of labour. It is part of Aajeevika's Legal Education and Aid Cell (LEAD). The helpline provides legal aid, interventions, mediation and registers complaints. It also connects workers to appropriate stakeholders like the police and labour departments.

Between April and June 2020, LEAD helped to resolve and recover, through hybrid mediation, approximately ₹1.36 crore by way of compensation for workers.

The Aajeevika Bureau has been working for the rights of workers and labour communities since 2004. Based in Rajasthan, they work closely with the labour markets of Gujarat, Maharashtra and Rajasthan to fight for the rights of workers in the informal economy.

Labour Line is now an all-India service. On July 16, 2021, Aajeevika Bureau, in partnership with the Working People's Coalition, set up an India Labour Line (1-800-833-9020) to provide legal aid and mediation services to workers across the country. Labour Line now has offices in five states — Maharashtra, Delhi, Uttar Pradesh, Karnataka and Telangana — and provides free help to workers. The helpline is headquartered in Mumbai and works like the Rajasthan Labour Line. Since it started functioning, the all-India Labourline has registered 2,800 cases and recovered compensation of ₹1.6 crore.

Informal work is less secure. Little of the labour law in India applies to informal workers. They are also unaware of their rights and entitlements. LEAD conducts legal literacy programmes and awareness programmes on the legal rights of workers. Since 2011, LEAD has been doing physical mediation and providing legal aid to workers for formal legal processes and litigation. LEAD scaled up their work in 2014.

"For physical mediations and interventions we were limited to the areas around us, but the problem is widespread and everywhere. Which is why we gave hybrid mediation a shot," says Santosh Poonia, programme manager of LEAD. Poonia has been working on labour issues with Aajeevika Bureau for 15 years and holds degrees in sociology, political science and law. Most of their cases come from Rajasthan, Delhi-NCR, Maharashtra, Gujarat, Jammu and Kashmir, Uttar Pradesh and a few other states.

A mediation camp run by Aajeevika Bureau

CALLS, TEXTS, EMAILS

Hybrid mediation includes mediums like phone calls, text messages, WhatsApp and emails. Telephonic mediations would involve conference calls with the concerned parties.

The mediation is usually in matters pertaining to unpaid wages, service-related issues, retrenchment and unfair dismissal. There may be situations where workers complete assignments but are not paid due compensation or there is a delay or deduction in the promised wages. Since informal work is unorganized, documents, written records and contracts are hard to come by. Whatever documentation is available is communicated through email and messaging. Physical mediation and intervention are used as and when needed, or if telephonic mediation is not working, making this a hybrid form of mediation.

"While we had been doing some telephonic mediations earlier, from 2020 we did it on a much larger scale," says Poonia.

Most workers that Aajeevika Bureau helps are employed in the construction sector. Many are also service providers like truck loaders and security guards. Some are employed as factory workers and others as manual labour. Hybrid mediation works as an accessible dispute resolution for workers who have limited resources.

The mediations are carried out only for civil matters like wages and dismissal. For cases pertaining to injury in the workplace, bonded labour, abuse, and hazardous workspaces, LEAD helps workers file FIRs and provides legal aid for further action and interventions.

COUNSELLORS, VERIFICATION

A call on the Labour Line to file a complaint is answered by counsellors trained in labour law. They collect the details of the complaint, information regarding the employer and relevant documents. Details like the promised wages, the rate applicable for the work they were performing, measurements or any other metrics to understand the nature of work are collected. Documents are sent across using WhatsApp and email. The counsellors use this information to understand where the dispute is arising, what the nature of the dispute is and what kind of intervention is required. The Aajeevika Bureau team has five counsellors and an on-ground team of 15.

Within three days of the complaint being filed, the counsellors reach out to the employer to verify and cross-check details. The employer is also informed about the complaint against them.

Poonia explains that since the workers are often recounting from memory, there are chances they miss out on some details so the verification process becomes important. Not all employers cooperate rightaway. "Experience has taught us that they are likely to deny everything, but the counsellors are trained to get the required information," he says.

After this the mediation process begins. LEAD has some eight to 10 advocates along with the counsellors. Both parties are brought onto a conference call where the dispute and entitlements are explained. "We let employers know what the worker is entitled to as compensation and what charges and penalty the employer would face if the matter was to go to court," explains Poonia. Most cases are resolved with mediation. Some mediation processes can be as short as just two sittings. An average mediation for Aajeevika Bureau takes two to three months.

If the mediation fails then Aajeevika Bureau provides legal aid to the worker to take the matter to court. They have 20 advocates, practising in the courts, and advocates who are part of their team. .

In two years, from April 2020 to April 2022, Aajeevika Bureau has recovered over ₹11.47 crore in compensation for over 30,000 workers. They registered 7,000 cases and resolved 4,839 cases. ■

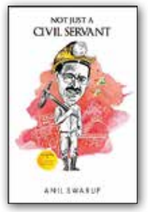
COVER

OFFICERS AND POLITICIANS

What are the boundaries and how should they be preserved?

Government officers are meant to perform their roles at a healthy arm's length from their political bosses. In reality, associations and loyalties develop from working together.

Several officers go a step further and make a successful transition to politics with dignity, enriching public life with their administrative experience and expertise.



But what are the rules that govern such crossovers? What are the safeguards and what is the cost to good governance when they are breached?

Anil Swarup, who retired as a celebrated IAS officer, takes a close look at these questions. He is a prolific writer on the subject of the bureaucracy and a passionate believer in the need for protecting its independence and integrity.

Swarup's books include: Not Just a Civil Servant, Ethical Dilemmas of a Civil Servant and No Longer a Civil Servant.

By Anil Swarup

WHEN a serving officer of the Enforcement Directorate who had been pretty active in enforcing the writ (read the will) of the government took voluntary retirement and joined politics to contest elections, I tweeted, "Joining any political party is a democratic right but a civil servant resigning to join a political party raises ethical issues. Shouldn't there be a 'cooling' period prescribed as in case of joining any private entity." This tweet caught the fancy of a large number of people, some of whom raised some more questions relating to this vexed issue of civil servants joining politics. It is difficult to debate such issues on Twitter or even to provide an explanation but the issue is a serious one that is impacting the functioning of the bureaucracy, more so in the recent past.

At the outset it needs to be clarified that there is nothing illegal about an officer joining politics after quitting his job. It is, indeed, his legal right to do so. What we are discussing here is the impact of such decisions on governance and the ethical aspect of such a move.

Let us look at the levels/stages at which civil servants can possibly join politics or indulge in political activities or both:

- Joining politics while in service or indulging in political activities.
- Aligning with a political party while in service though not formally joining it.
- Taking voluntary retirement before the due date and joining politics.
- Joining politics immediately after retirement.

Why would a political party give a ticket to a civil servant who opts for voluntary retirement even though he still has years to go before superannuation? It would be only on account of 'services' rendered in service.

The first option of joining politics while in service goes contrary to Rule 5 of the Central Services Conduct Rules, 1964, that lays down that :

(1) No Government servant shall be a member of, or be otherwise associated with, any political party or any organisation which takes part in politics nor shall he take part in, subscribe in aid of, or assist in any other manner, any political movement or activity. (2) It shall be the duty of every Government servant to endeavour to prevent any member of his family from taking part in, subscribing in aid of, or assisting in any other manner any movement or activity which is, or tends directly or indirectly to be, subversive of the Government as by law established and where a Government servant is unable to prevent a member of his family from taking part in, or subscribing in aid of , or assisting in any other manner, any such movement or activity, he shall make a report to that effect to the Government. (3) If any question arises whether a party is a political party or whether any organisation takes part in politics or whether any movement or activity falls within the scope of sub-rule (2), the decision of the Government thereon shall be final. (4) No Government servant shall canvass or otherwise interfere with, or use his influence in connection with or take part in an election to any legislature or local authority.

Similar provisions exist for the All-India Services as well as the State Civil Services. Hence, action can be initiated against an officer if he joins a political party and/or is found indulging in political activities. There are hardly any instances available.

The second option of aligning with a political party is also contrary to the Conduct Rules but there is a huge grey area. It is difficult to conclusively prove such an alignment and that perhaps is the reason why a number of officers align with a particular party but are not "discovered". It is more prevalent in states like Tamil Nadu and Uttar Pradesh where political lines are clearly drawn. Such alignments impact the officers concerned as well as governance. The officer appears to "benefit" when the government he is aligned with is in power but suffers when it is not in power. In fact, there are instances when such officers have been hounded by the "other" political alignment when it comes to power. The biggest damage, however, occurs to governance. One of the necessary attributes of a civil servant is objectivity in approach while assisting in formulation of a policy or its implementation. The allegiance of the officer has to be to the Constitution and the laws and rules made thereunder and to nobody else. A large number of officers who adhere to the constitutional provisions benefit in the long run even though in the short run they suffer by way of frequent transfers or, on occasion, even suspension or initiation of departmental

proceedings. There is perhaps an equal number of officers who go for short-term benefits and don't perform their duties under the law as they follow the ideology or practices of a political party. Their decisions are not based on objective assessment of the ground reality but coloured by the "demands" of the political party in power. Thus, you have situations like Hathras where the district magistrate and the superintendent of police allowed (some say facilitated) hasty night-time cremation of a girl who was allegedly raped. Similarly, in the case of rioting at Jawaharlal Nehru University a couple of years ago wherein a large number of students were injured, the police looked the other way to please their political bosses. In all such cases it would be difficult to prove political alignment (even if the government of the day was interested in doing so though in the instances mentioned, the government was apparently driving such misdemeanour). All such instances impact the credibility of the governing machinery. Hence, such latent alignments are not good for governance.

The third option of joining politics after voluntary retirement is perfectly legal. The key question to be considered is whether such a step impacts governance and whether it is ethically above board.

Why would a political party give a ticket to a civil servant who opts for voluntary retirement even though he still has years to go before superannuation? It would be only on account of the "services" rendered while in service. This clearly implies that the officer was doing the bidding of a particular party and not doing what he was supposed to as an officer. The case of the Enforcement Directorate officer falls in this category. Similarly, another police officer who was in a senior position also resigned and contested the state elections recently. The problem here is not a legal but an ethical one and the damage it does to the bureaucratic ethos. The signal here is that you do the bidding of a political party beyond the call of duty and get "rewarded". The commitment being encouraged here is not to principles of good governance but to the political dispensation.

This logic applies also to the fourth option when the officers join a political party immediately after retirement. The lure of post-retirement "reward" impacts decision-making while in service.

The recent trend of political "rewards" for civil servants is a dangerous one. It extends to those occupying constitutional posts as well and, in this sense, it is much worse. Ironically, these rewards have gone on to impact the judiciary as well. How else do you explain a sitting Supreme Court judge holding a press conference against the incumbent Chief Justice of the Supreme Court and, instead of being hauled up for contempt of court like any other citizen of the country, is made the Chief Justice himself when the occasion arises? He then attends to some sensitive cases. There is also a sexual harassment complaint against him. Quite intriguingly, there is a compromise in the case even though it is difficult to fathom how a compromise can take place in such a situation. If the complainant had made a false complaint against a person occupying such an august position, strict action should have been taken against her. However, if the complaint was justified, action should have been taken against the judge. Despite such credentials, the concerned judge was "rewarded" with a nomination to the Rajya Sabha after he had done what was "expected" of him.

It is difficult to imagine how an Election Commissioner can conduct elections in an objective manner if he has his eye on benefits accruing from joining a political party on completion of his tenure. Yet, we had an instance of a Chief Election Commissioner not only joining a political party on completion of his tenure but also going on to become a minister in the government. In another instance, the government amended the concerned legislation to "enable" an officer to occupy a crucial position as the extant provisions prohibited "re-engagement" of those who had occupied posts such as his.

COOLING-OFF PERIOD

The situation is becoming increasingly serious and, unfortunately, there are no easy solutions for the simple reason that there is nothing illegal about what is happening now. And, as the beneficiaries are those who matter, it is difficult to address issues that are ethical in nature even though they impact governance.

According to the existing dispensation, there is a cooling (waiting) period of a year before a retiring civil servant can take up a job in the private sector. This is primarily to prevent him from favouring any private entity while in service and then benefitting immediately after retirement. This hasn't really served the purpose entirely as a year is too short a period for the favour to be forgotten. However, it does delay the inevitable. For joining a political party, even this token cooling period is not provided for. Civil servants who want to seek political "rewards" for favours bestowed upon a political party while in harness can get them almost immediately after retirement or even after voluntary retirement.

So, what is the way forward? As mentioned earlier, there are no easy solutions but a beginning (even if not perfect) needs to be made by way of introducing the following provisions:

Provide for a cooling period of two years after retirement for a civil servant to join a political party. He may still work for a political party but will not be an immediate beneficiary of the favours rendered while in service. If private sector engagement post-retirement has to be kept at bay for a year (this also needs to be increased to two years), why shouldn't formal political engagement be treated as "sensitive"?

There is an old saying that justice should not only be done but should be seen to be done. Accordingly, those occupying constitutional positions like judges, election commissioners and so on should be barred from formal political affiliations and "benefits".

There needs to be public debate on the issue to create an environment to dissuade officers in sensitive positions from joining politics as well as to evolve mechanisms to prevent such an occurrence amongst those holding responsible positions where objectivity in decision-making is key.

Apart from political rewards, there are non-political post-retirement awards as well. The late Arun Jaitley was at his eloquent best when he said in Parliament, "The desire of a post-retirement job influences pre-retirement judgements." The statement was made in the context of judicial officers. It is perhaps equally relevant in the context of civil servants.

There needs to be public debate to create an environment to dissuade officers in sensitive positions from joining politics as well as to evolve mechanisms to prevent such an occurrence.

A large number of civil servants opt for post-retirement jobs in government itself. Most would have already worked in government for three decades or more. Yet, they still prefer government assignments.

This raises a number of questions, some of which are ethical in nature: Should a government servant, post-retirement, 'apply' for a job in government? Should a government servant, post-retirement, accept an assignment in government? Should a civil servant 'apply' for such assignments after having held a top assignment like secretary to the government? Will it not affect his conduct, attitude, objectivity and performance if he has a post-retirement carrot dangling before him?

Having seen the functioning of the government from very close quarters, I have no doubt that in a number of cases it does. There is indeed a plethora of post-retirement jobs on offer. The incentive of a post-retirement job distorts the conduct of a senior civil servant. He starts toeing the line of those who can help him obtain a post-retirement assignment in government. It prevents officers from airing their views freely and frankly in the interest of their organization under the apprehension that their personal interests could be adversely affected. Their lack of objectivity (in some cases collusion) results in enormous loss to the organization, though they benefit personally and climb the bureaucratic ladder, reach the top and even end up getting post-retirement assignments.

There have been some cases where even such civil servants as have enjoyed a reasonably sound reputation begin to change as they approach superannuation. Every government is only too willing and happy to reward those that play ball. The signal to other civil servants is clear: Toe the line and get rewarded. On a number of occasions, these rewards are bestowed irrespective of the experience or competence of the officer concerned. These are rewards for services rendered, not very different from a *bakshish*.

However, bureaucratic talent can't be allowed to be wasted. It needs to be harnessed post-retirement. There is a large number of civil servants who deserve to be and are indeed engaged by the government post-retirement. Only the methodology of post-retirement engagement needs to undergo a change. An institution like the Union Public Service Commission (UPSC) can be tasked with shortlisting candidates for post-retirement assignments. The officer will then not feel beholden to the government for the assignment. It will virtually eliminate a quid pro quo attitude, which is currently the order of the day. ■

The other divide

DELHI DARBAR

SANJAYA BARU

AMITAVA Ghosh's recently published book, *The Nutmeg's Curse*, exploring the historical roots of global warming and ecological destruction, tracing them back to the impact of colonialism on pre-colonial societies and global territorial aggrandizement by Europe, is an excellent reminder for a globalized elite of the ecological legacy of colonialism and imperialism. At a time when so much media attention at home and overseas is once again focused on the 'East-West' divide of the 20th century, due to the Russian invasion of Ukraine, it is important to remind ourselves that the 'North-South' divide of the past three centuries is still here with us.

Once again Western powers have deployed the term 'evil' to describe Russia

Historically, the East-West divide has had many dimensions. The arrival of European colonialists in Asia created one sort of consciousness about the 'occident' and the 'orient'. "East is east and west is west, and never the twain shall meet," wrote Rudyard Kipling. Then came the Russian Revolution and the East-West divide acquired a new ideological dimension that defined the 20th century. With the implosion of the Soviet Union, the winding up of East European communism and the launch of a new globalization defined by what has been called 'neo-liberal' economics, this East-West divide became blurred and was slowly forgotten.

The fact that most of the rapidly industrializing economies of East Asia, including China, maintained good political and economic relations with the developed economies of the West created the illusion of an East-West reconciliation. American historian Francis Fukuyama wrote about the 'end of history' as if geopolitical conflict was a phenomenon of the past. Economic integration through trade, investment and financial links created a globalized economy that many imagined would blunt the edge of geopolitical rivalry.

The Russian invasion of Ukraine has woken the world up to the reality of not just an enduring East-West divide, but has also drawn attention to North-South divisions. The Western response to Russia has been to unleash what has been called a 'battle of narratives' in which Western media, its intellectual elite and political leadership have once again sought to impose their point of view on the rest of the world. Former United States President Ronald Reagan had deployed a Biblical metaphor, dubbing the erstwhile Soviet Union the 'evil empire'. Once again Western political leaders have deployed the term 'evil' to describe Russia and its president, Vladimir Putin. A geopolitical conflict is sought to be defined in terms of 'good and evil'.

In this binary 'us vs them', 'good vs evil' black-and-white view of the current conflict, nations are being asked to take sides. India has come under particular attack in the Western media and from Western intellectuals for not falling in line with the West. What Russia has done is wrong, but it is not the only country to cross borders and attack another country. The United States and some of its allies have repeatedly done so across Asia over the past three-quarters of a century.

Geopolitical conflict has been around for a long time and will not go away as long as nations choose to use force to secure their interests. However, what worries developing countries like India is that they have to address their basic livelihood challenges while taking care of such geopolitical challenges. While Western nations talk about adherence to a 'rules-based order' the fact is that they are the ones who end up making the rules and these rules have almost always favoured the rich nations. When such rules no longer favour them, the rich nations find ways to dump the 'rules-based' system. Thus, the United States has threatened to walk out of the World Trade Organization, even after ensuring a system of trade regulation that has benefitted the rich nations. In international relations, as in any society, the rich do what they want, the rest are expected to do what they must.

The emerging discussion on the 'rich-poor' North-South divide may not have occurred, or may have got blurred by the East-West narrative, but for the fact that the US chose to use an economic weapon aimed at Russia but one that has woken up the world. By imposing financial sanctions and breaching the trust on which the global financial system has been built, the US has warned the rest of the 'dollar-dependent' world that it can hurt any of them if they do not fall in line with its geopolitical interests. Even US-based economists like Raghuram Rajan and Arvind Subramanian have warned against what is increasingly being called the 'weaponization of globalization'.

However, the 'weaponization of globalization' began much before the imposition of economic sanctions on Russia. It began with the imposition of intellectual property rights on rules governing trade and then the linking of trade to social, labour and environment standards, all of which aim to perpetuate the dominance of the developed economies over the developing. The entire climate change discourse, with pressure on developing countries to reduce carbon emissions, has been described as 'carbon imperialism' that aims to thwart industrial development in developing economies.

When Western powers refer to the need to adhere to a 'rules-based order' they ignore the fact that many of these rules have not only been framed by developed nations but in fact have been constructed to benefit them and preserve their existing dominance. For developing economies the North-South divide is a far more worrisome threat than the return of East-West antagonisms. However, by forcing countries of the 'global South' to support the West against the East, the countries of the 'global North' implicitly seek to perpetuate North-South inequality and inequities.

These issues should be taken up for a free and frank discussion at the Group of 20 summits this year, in Indonesia, and next year, in India. Indeed, Indonesia and India should work with countries of the global South, like Brazil and South Africa, to articulate the concerns of developing economies, launching a "battle of narratives" of their own. While the US, Europe and Japan are promoting a global narrative defined by their economic and geopolitical interests, the major developing economies of the South should promote a global narrative of their own, much like what they did in the 1970s when the idea of a 'new international economic order' (NIEO) was promoted by developing countries. ■

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Demography-driven migration

LOOKING AHEAD

KIRAN KARNIK

DEMOGRAPHY has, for some years now, been recognized as a driver of various key parameters of a nation. A country with rapid population growth, for example, could benefit for many years from a "demographic dividend". This is because the ratio of working age people to dependants (the non-working age groups) begins to increase and can trigger faster economic growth. China and other East Asian countries experienced this; now, India too is very well-placed in this regard. Of course, deriving the full benefit requires that workers have the necessary education and skills: something that we need to ensure.

A large youth population can also be a source of entrepreneurship and innovation, as the young are known to be less risk-averse and more likely to break new ground. Therefore, in the tech era, when start-up enterprises are a catalyst for economic growth and jobs, having so many youngsters is a huge advantage: one more demographic dividend. In India, we are already seeing the fruits of this through the upsurge in start-ups and the success of so many innovative ideas.

Looking ahead, though, there are other aspects of demography that we need to be aware of and to plan for. The latest data (from the fifth round of the National Family Health Survey, NFHS-5), collected over 2019-21, shows that the country has reached a total fertility rate (TFR) of 2.0, just below the replacement level of 2.1. In simple terms, the implication is that we are now headed towards zero growth. However, past momentum means that the total population will continue to grow for some years yet, and we might stabilize only at about 1.6 billion, overtaking China in the next two years to become the most populous country. Thereafter, with lower TFR, the population will begin to decrease and is estimated to reduce to one billion by 2100. So, the many who worry about the problems of an ever-growing population can sleep easier.

Worries about a burgeoning population may be greatly allayed by the figures from NFHS-5, but in the short to medium term — as the population continues to grow — there is a need to focus on livelihoods and job creation, healthcare, education, skilling, and infrastructure. A more granular look at the data reveals that while some states have had a low TFR for some years, in a few others it is still high. For example, while all but five states have a below-replacement-level TFR, the figures for Uttar Pradesh and Bihar are yet as high as 2.35 and 3, respectively. Given that these are populous states with an already-large base, high growth there translates into huge absolute numbers. These states are continuing to add many millions to their population each year, and the number of job-seekers is exploding. Already, the lack of livelihoods in most of the eastern states has led to large-scale labour migration — first to farms in Punjab, and now to urban job hubs (Delhi/NCR, Mumbai, Bengaluru, etc.), as also to other areas, including distant Kerala (special trains from Kerala to Assam are but one indicator). Figures apart, further visual evidence of this was seen in very tragic scenes of return migration in the early days of the pandemic.

Juxtapose the demographic data of population growth with economic data and one foresees a growing problem. Data for a 25-year period shows that in 2018-19, the relative per capita income (per capita state GSDP as percentage of the national

The AAP government in Delhi encourages students to become entrepreneurs

The young are known to be less risk-averse. In the tech era, when start-ups provide jobs and growth, having so many youngsters is a huge advantage.

average) was a dismal 32 percent in Bihar and 53 percent in UP, both being marginally lower than their relative figures for 1993-94. On the other hand, the figures for Tamil Nadu and Kerala were 153 percent and 162 percent, both being higher than 25 years ago. Karnataka was as high as 168 percent, from just 88 percent (i.e., below the national average) in 1993-94. Again, figures apart, on-ground visibility provides the stark contrast between some of the eastern states and the southern ones.

In spite of their efforts, the low base and other problems indicate that the eastern states will continue to lag for many years yet. On the other hand, with continuing robust growth in the more prosperous states, given their better infrastructure and existing industrial-business base, the absolute disparity with the east may well increase. As a result, job opportunities will be far greater in the "advanced" states. At the same time, given the demographic dynamics, the working population in these states will begin to decrease, leading to shortage of workers. As a result, the demand-supply imbalances in both regions will lead to even greater migration from the east.

Large-scale migration, that too on non-seasonal (unlike that related to farm labour) and long-term bases, will change the population composition in many a town and city. This will have deep implications for the socio-cultural arena. Many—especially blue collar and semi-skilled workers—are likely to be males who come alone, leaving the family in the village or town of origin. This has both social and economic impacts. Those living without the anchor of a family are known to be more prone to temptations: alcohol, drugs, and crime being amongst the negative ones. Of equal consequence may be the effect on the home village — especially on families and neighbours — of the migrant worker: as money and experiences flow from the migrants to their homes, they will have both economic and socio-cultural effects. One other impact of large-scale migration will be on the political scene. Indicative of this is the wooing by political parties of "*purabiyas*" (from east UP and Bihar) in Delhi. On the other hand, there is also an "othering" or demonizing in some cases (e.g., of Biharis by a party in Mumbai).

Whatever one's perspective, we cannot ignore the impact that future large-scale migration — a result of demography and economics — will have on the social, cultural, economic, and political fabric of the nation. ■

Kiran Karnik is a public policy analyst and author. His most recent book is Decisive Decade: India 2030, Gazelle or Hippo.

Hindi and cow belt politics

INSIDE TRACK

NILANJAN MUKHOPADHYAY

AMERICAN journalist Robert Lane Greene's much appreciated book, *You Are What You Speak: Grammar Grouches, Language Laws, and the Politics of Identity,* explores why language, ours as well as other people's, moves some of us to anxiety or even rage. His central thesis or argument is — claims people most often make about 'their' specific language, or what we hear about language, are mostly essentially about the politics of identity and establishing the hegemony of a dominant linguistic group over others.

The book was added to my 'to read' list in 2019 shortly after that year's Hindi Diwas on September 14. The trigger for reading beyond the ricocheting controversies in the dailies and on television was provided by Union Home Minister Amit Shah's problematic assertion at the 'Rajbhasha Award Ceremony' that day. He asserted that Hindi had been "the heart and soul of the freedom struggle".

Although he did not state this explicitly, he implied that Indians speaking other languages did not contribute in equal measure to the national movement. He added that India required a 'national' language so that "foreign languages do not overpower our own". On reading this, I recall, a thought flashed through my mind — the BJP has an innate capacity to pin a 'foreign' label to just about anything. Opposing reactions and supportive assertions Shah's statement generated are still fresh in memory; in any case it would not take much effort to imagine those.

Greene's book was not acquired because the second half of 2019 and early months of 2020 witnessed much 'action' that demanded the attention of journalists. Abrogation of Article 370, enactment of a law against triple *talaq* and the Citizenship (Amendment) Act, resulting in protests, the Delhi riots and then, of course, the COVID-19 pandemic followed one another at breathless pace, making most forget India's unresolved language 'problem'.

At the 37th meeting of the Parliamentary Official Language Committee last month, Shah served a reminder: he and his party remembered their objective of installing Hindi as the national language. In the words of politicos and people of non-Hindi speaking states, this goal translates into 'imposition of Hindi', its study and use in daily life, official as well as any transactional communication. Of the several contentions that Shah made, the most incensed responses were to his thesis that it was now time "to make the Official Language an important part of the unity of the country, when persons from States which speak other languages communicate with each other, it should be in the language of India".

Leaders from the geographical belt of India where the BJP's core constituency resides historically aspired to 'foist' Hindi as India's 'national' as well as 'official' language despite it being the language of less than 50 percent of Indians.

It was not always like this. Even after the national movement gained support, several leaders were disinclined to view the language question from the prism of Hindu-Muslim tension that increased from the 19th century. By the early 20th century, in north India, there were three distinct languages — Hindi, written in the Devanagari script and drawing heavily from Sanskrit; Urdu, written in a 'modified' Arabic (or Perso-Arabic) script; and Hindustani, the *lingua franca* of most people and a blend of Hindi and Urdu. People wrote it in both scripts, depending on their choice, shaped by larger community identity, not always religious in nature.

Several leading Hindu writers who wrote in Hindi then, stuck to the Urdu script. For Mahatma Gandhi, Hindustani was a "sweet mingling of the

Language remains an emotive issue. People of non-Hindi speaking states prefer multiple options and make a choice depending on necessity, and not being dictated to.

two" (Hindi and Urdu), and for Jawaharlal Nehru, Hindustani was a "golden mean" between the two languages. Before Independence, leaders like Purushottam Das Tandon started mobilizing support to rid Hindi of 'foreign' elements.

Unsurprisingly, language was the most controversial subject in the Constituent Assembly debates. In a House from which the BJP draws its lineage from within the Congress and not from leaders who went on to become part of the Jana Sangh, the words of R.V. Dhulekar, Congress member from the United Provinces, are most pleasing. "People who do not know Hindustani have no right to stay in India," he raged on December 10, 1946 and continued in the same vein for the rest of his intervention, stopping only when the chairman denied him permission to speak.

Surprisingly, one of the BJP's icons, Syama Prasad Mookerjee, did not back Hindi as the 'national' language. On September 13, 1949, in the same chamber where the Dhulekars advocated Hindi as the sole language of official communication, Mookerjee unhesitatingly stated: "I do not share the views of those who speak of the day when India shall have one language and one language only.... Unity in diversity is India's keynote and must be achieved by a process of understanding and consent."

With the Constituent Assembly precariously divided, the Constitution makers chose an easy way out — postpone the decision on language for another day, for a different set of lawmakers. It was finally agreed that the Constitution's Article 343 would read: "For a period of fifteen years from the commencement of this Constitution, the English language shall continue to be used for all the official purposes of the Union."

Violence in the then Madras state in January-February 1965 ensured that no national party thereafter governed the state. That ferocious episode, however, did not end ambiguity in our law books. These still enable Hindi zealots to continue advocating for its imposition on non-Hindi speaking states.

Hindi is certainly spoken by the largest group of people in the country. According to the 2011 Census, 528 million or 44 percent of Indians listed Hindi as their mother tongue. Fifty years prior to this, in the 1961 Census, only 30 percent of Indians had listed Hindi as their mother tongue. Increase in Hindi speakers emboldens the BJP and its leaders to ask for a complete switchover to Hindi in all transactional and official communication. It puts other parties in a bind and we have seen soft-Hindutva's re-run as Hinditva.

The case for or against Hindi is as thorny as parliamentary delimitation, now on hold till after the 2031 Census. Just as citizens in southern India and other states that stabilized population growth fear reduced parliamentary representation, the demand for Hindi makes them worry for one of their basic features of distinctiveness — language. Be it on matters of religious and culinary choices, shrines, educational institutions, matters of identity or even language, it is the minority that faces the prospect of being numerically outnumbered, a far cry from the ethos at the dawn of Independence. This is hardly conducive to furthering a culture of civic peace. That its absence hampers growth and development is well known.

Language remains an emotive issue. In the past 75 years English is notionally 'less' foreign and Hindi is used 'more' to navigate daily communication and interactive needs. Yet, the rooting for 'own' or mother language has not diminished, especially as identity has become central to politics. People of non-Hindi speaking states prefer multiple options and making a choice depending on necessity, not being dictated by a hegemonic leadership. Because the BJP continues to electorally depend on maximizing its core constituency, it incessantly conveys to them success in 'subjugating' the other — Muslims in most cases but when its leaders make pronouncements like that of the home minister, linguistic minorities too grow anxious. ■

The writer is a NCR-based author and journalist. His latest book is The Demolition and the Verdict: Ayodhya and the Project to Reconfigure India. *His other books include* The RSS: Icons of the Indian Right and Narendra Modi: The Man, The Times. *He tweets at @NilanjanUdwin*

Local food supply has benefits

BHARAT DOGRA

HOW about an idea which can improve nutrition in ways that will also reduce costs significantly? Such a win-win situation can be realized if the food procurement system is decentralized in significant ways.

Over the years, India has built up an elaborate food security system based on procurement mainly of wheat and rice and its allocation for subsidized food rations under the public distribution system (PDS) as well as for nutrition schemes like mid-day meals and for the *anganwadi*.

The existing system relies to a large extent on procurement from a few limited surplus areas like Punjab, Haryana and Madhya Pradesh. Due to this, food has to be transported long distances. This leads to high transport and storage costs, and frequent delays in foodgrains reaching more remote areas.

Another problem is that mostly surplus wheat and rice get distributed while many local foods with high nutritional value are not included. In particular, the exclusion in most places of highly nutritious millets from the PDS is harmful.

It would be much more useful if the existing centralized food security system were to be replaced by a decentralized system of procurement and allocation. Under such a system, decentralization would go down to the level of a large village or a cluster of small villages included in a panchayat. Such a cluster can also be formed on other bases, depending on local conditions.

In this decentralized system, a significant share of the food crops would be procured by the government directly for use in government schemes within the village. This would be estimated on the basis of the food requirements of the PDS ration shops, the mid-day meal scheme, the *anganwadis* and any other nutrition scheme. This kind of procurement emphasizes local staple foods, which may not be predominantly wheat or rice.

A food security committee of representatives of all sections of villagers including farmers, landless farm workers and so on, and well-represented by women, would be formed to guide this process.

The procured food would be safely stored within the village (or a cluster of small villages). Safe storage adequate for the village would be arranged. This should have a component of emergency and disaster relief as well. Allocations can then be made from time to time to PDS and nutrition schemes using transparent and participative systems.

The procurement and allocation of foodgrains (including pulses and millets) and oilseeds can take place three or four times a year depending on cropping patterns. On the other hand, the procurement and allocation of perishable food items like vegetables (for nutrition schemes) would probably have to be on a twice-a-week basis, while for milk it can be on a daily basis.

Of course, procurement by the government can also be in excess of this, depending on the extent of surplus available, to meet city needs and for bigger storages. The needs of cities must be met as far as possible from nearer villages. The needs of bigger storages must be met from more surplus districts with favourable conditions for various main food items.

It would be useful if the centralized food security system were to be replaced by a decentralized system of procurement and allocation.

There are several advantages of this decentralized system. The costs of transporting food across long distances will be greatly reduced. The energy and greenhouse gas emission costs (or the carbon footprint) of the food system will also be reduced alongside. There has been increasing discussion in recent years on the miles travelled by the food we consume and the need to reduce this for environmental reasons. The decentralized system will be very appropriate for this. Packaging costs will also be reduced, including avoiding polythene packets of milk.

Another gain is that it will be possible to include local preferred foods (for example, millets and local oils) which will add to nutrition, diversity and taste. Several local foods, including millets, which have been stagnating or even declining despite their great nutritional value, will experience a revival. Also, it will be possible to get more fresh vegetables and fruits for nutrition programmes in such a decentralized system. In addition, it will be possible to have more transparency and local participation in the food security system.

There has been a worrying tendency in recent times to accord less importance to the quality and health aspects of food. Once it is known that a more significant share of procured food will be consumed within the village and also served to local children and mothers in mid-day meals and *anganwadis*, there may be more commitment to the quality and health aspects of food. Farmers in most regions will benefit from procurement of more diverse crops. This will encourage eco-friendly mixed farming which has been given up in recent years in favour of monoculture.

On the nutrition front, several problems have arisen because of the increasing dependence on a less diverse diet, dominated by what is available in the PDS shops which in turn is dominated by rice or wheat. Often there is a shortage of proteins, and perhaps even more so of micro-nutrients. In a decentralized system there is more possibility of sorting this out, keeping in view the diversity of local farm produce.

Of course, such a local system is not possible in areas where staple food crops have been replaced almost entirely by plantation or commercial cash crops. However, even in these areas, efforts should be made to continue growing staple food crops on at least some land and the availability of a decentralized food security system can be an encouragement and a highly motivational factor for this.

These changes will be even more far-reaching if this decentralized system of food security is closely tied to a major increase in village-based processing of food by setting up small and cottage industry-scale rice milling units, oil milling units (*kolhus*), milk processing units and sugarcane processing units (for making jaggery), in addition to cottage industry-scale wheat milling units or *atta chakkis* that already exist in most places. This will add greatly to nutrition for people as well as for farm and dairy animals (for instance, by making available more residuals and oilcakes for animals). What is more, the potential of food processing units can also be improved in several places by making use of recent innovations like Mangal Turbine and other sources of renewable energy. Water mills or *ghrats* in hilly areas can also experience a revival with this. ■

The writer is Honorary Convener, Campaign to Protect Earth Now. His recent books include Man Over Machine *and* India's Quest for Sustainable Farming and Healthy Food.

The fad diet could be killing you

Beware of instant options on the internet

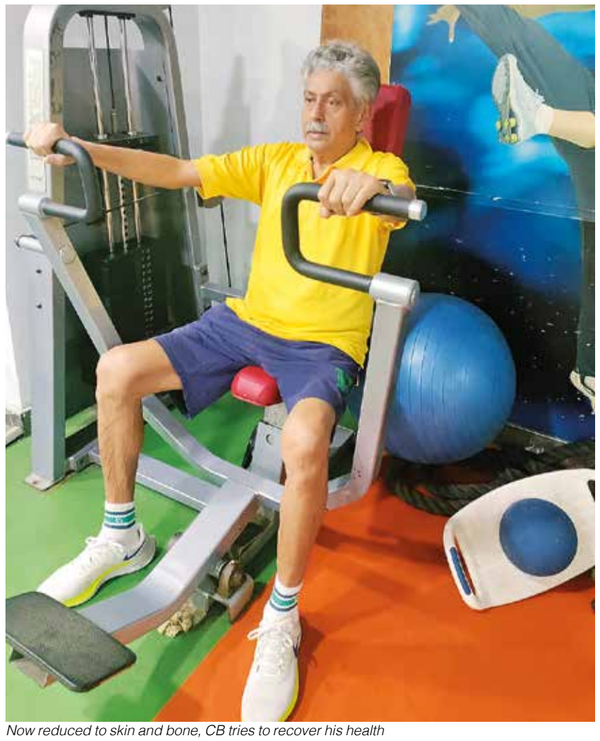
UMESH ANAND

A tall and strapping man since his youth, nothing about CB was even remotely frail — not until recently when a stringent diet meant to bring his diabetes under control reduced him to skin and bones in a matter of months.

The diet made him obsessive about his food, sent his digestive system out of whack and so shook his self-confidence that he has had to turn to a psychiatrist to deal with his anxieties. He has been reduced to a shadow of his former self.

"All your organs are in shock because of the way you have starved your body," a doctor he finally turned to said. "You have to give them a chance to recover."

As CB strives to restore his body's balance, he is sheepish about how his world has turned upside down because of his own choice of a regimen on the internet without direct in-person medical supervision.



Now reduced to skin and bone, CB tries to recover his health

It was a Facebook post by an acquaintance that prompted CB's decision to go on the diet, which finally cost him dearly in terms of his health. He opted for it on impulse.

Hooked by the diet's immediate results in the first few weeks, which were a dramatic loss of weight and a decline in his blood sugar levels, he was not willing to listen to words of caution from anyone.

He even fobbed off a friend who surfaced and narrated her own experience of being on the diet and ending up in an intensive care unit. "I thought hers was a one-off case," says CB.

But his resolute adherence to the diet lasted only until he found his own body packing up. By then he had spent three months on the diet. What he regarded as gains were misleading. In reality, much damage had been done.

CB is 65. He was diagnosed as being diabetic at the age of 54. For most of the 11 years in between, life went on pretty much normally.

There was some medication, regular moderate exercise and the usual dietary controls. He was cheerfully non-vegetarian in his choices and didn't shy away from the evening drink or two.

But then came the pandemic, which meant he began eating and drinking a lot more than the calories he was expending in his daily activities because he was cooped up at home in his flat in Bengaluru. He was accustomed to a daily brisk walk in the compound of his apartment complex, but gave that up as well for fear of getting infected by other walkers or catching the virus in the lift.

Once the pandemic finally eased, he decided to go in for a health check-up at a hospital and found his blood sugar levels had risen worryingly. His weight and BMI had gone up too. His blood pressure was steady, because of the medication he was on, but the extra weight and higher blood sugar were cause for concern.

While heading home from the hospital, he saw on his phone the Facebook post extolling the benefits of the diet. Instead of going to his general physician for advice, CB plunged into the diet programme. It was in keeping with his personality of being a quick decision-maker.

In accordance with the stipulations of the diet, he went vegan overnight. No meats, no dairy, no grains, no alcohol, nothing sweet. He was only permitted millets and quinoa, vegetables and smoothies made from an amalgam of healthy green leaves.

After meals, even as frugal as these, he found himself climbing up and down stairs as suggested by the managers of the diet programme.

SHEDDING WEIGHT

In barely a week, CB's blood sugar levels came down to normal. He shed weight and his clothes began hanging on him. In two months, he went from 86 kg to 73 kg. His BMI fell from 26 to 21. He is six feet tall.

CB was overjoyed. He congratulated himself on making a brilliant choice and transforming his life. Pockets of fat he had struggled to get rid of for years he could now see melting away. His sugar stayed down, which was like salvation from diabetes.

"I became obsessive about my food. Just how obsessive, let me describe to you. When my wife and I went to Kolkata for a break, we stayed at Tollygunge Club. Before leaving Bengaluru, I hunted on the internet for restaurants from where I could source a vegan meal," says CB.

"I finally found that Peerless Inn in Kolkata could provide vegan food. So, while we stayed at the Tolly, my meals came from Peerless Inn. I also persuaded the Tolly's chefs to cook millets and quinoa for me. Those were the extremes to which I was going," recalls CB with a shudder.

But his enthusiasm for the diet was soon to be dented. He began noticing a lack of balance in his system. He felt his body was wasting away. Instead of a sense of well-being he began feeling stressed and anxious. He felt concerned when his BMI went below 21.

He began having gastrointestinal problems. His bowel movements changed and he went to the toilet multiple times a day. Such was the frequency that he even stopped meeting people for fear of having to rush to the toilet in between conversations. In addition, he suffered from flatulence, which once again deterred him from making appointments. He didn't want to embarrass himself.

"When I sought a change in diet and pleaded that a one-size-fits-all approach was perhaps not suiting me, the dietician given to me under the programme refused to listen," says CB.

After repeated requests the dietician was changed, but to no great benefit. All of CB's interactions were over the internet. He never once met his caregivers and there was no physical exam to better understand what he was experiencing.

Finally, he asked to speak to the physician who had created the programme — the founder. He never got to meet him.

"Feeling abandoned, I went back to my general physician, who connected me with a dietician and a diabetologist. Among other things, they told me my gut flora had probably got rearranged. My GP also sent me to a psychiatrist, who after a long consultation gave me medicines to calm me. The medicines have helped and there are fewer trips to the toilet," says CB.

He has begun adding rice and wheat and small portions of fish and chicken to his meals. The occasional evening drink is back. He feels more cheerful.

He is also going to the gym to bring back some muscle mass and improve his metabolism. His blood sugar levels have stayed down thus far, but there is no certainty that they will continue to be so.

LIKE PONZI SCHEMES?

The internet is flooded with personal health programmes offering miraculous solutions to metabolic disorders such as diabetes or promising weight loss and muscle gain.

As with Ponzi schemes that promise unbelievable financial gains, these diet and exercise programmes raise expectations of results in very short periods of time.

There is no record of the number of people who drop out dissatisfied with the programme or, worse still, fall ill as in the case of CB or his acquaintance who ended up in intensive care.

Their hard-luck stories never get told. Instead, testimonials of people who say they have benefitted are propagated prominently. In the absence of public scrutiny or third-party verification it is difficult to put the testimonials in context.

People demur from calling out such programmes for fear of reprisals. So they stay silent and move on. Despite being prodded several times, CB refuses to name the doctor and the programme that has messed up his health. He would, however, like his story to be told.

Advertised on the internet, a diet programme can reach millions of inboxes and even if a small percentage of people sign up, there are windfall profits to be made. CB signed up by paying ₹36,000. If 10,000 people like him joined, ₹36 crore would be made.

What prompts educated and socially empowered individuals to act so gullibly? CB, after all, is a former banker and currently runs his own consultancy. Why wasn't he more circumspect?

It perhaps has something to do with the way choices are made on the internet in a fast-moving world. Everything happens so quickly and recommendations fly thick and fast. Social media tends to amplify benefits and testimonials in a style that they seem undeniably true.

CB got introduced to the programme on the day he went to the hospital for his check-up for the first time after the easing of the pandemic. He left the hospital with his head full of disquieting news about his health. As he headed home in the back seat of his car, chauffeur-driven, he saw the Facebook post extolling the virtues of the diet plan.

It was one of those coincidences in a networked world that the message should have reached him when he was most vulnerable.

What followed was a willing suspension of disbelief. No further click bait was needed for CB to follow a link and arrive at a page which promised freedom from diabetes through severe changes in diet. He never once thought of getting back to his general physician to double check.

A BALANCED DIET

What kind of diet should be given to a diabetic? CB was put on a spartan vegan diet which was devoid of meat and dairy and extremely low on carbohydrates. In one stroke, he was denied the foods his body was accustomed to.

A medically proven diabetes diet, on the contrary, is well-balanced. It includes carbohydrates, proteins and fats. It restricts calories consumed in a day. But it isn't too low-calorie either. For instance, an average Indian diet tends to consist of 65 percent carbohydrates. For a person developing diabetes, this would be restricted to 55 percent. The protein intake of Indians is low at 10 percent. A balanced diet could seek to raise this to 15 percent. Fat usually accounts for 30 percent of what Indians eat. There should be fat, but a good diet would typically reduce saturated fats to 10 percent of the 30 percent.

So, everything in a normal diet would remain. It is just the composition and the quanties that would to make meals halthier and bring down the number of calories consumed.

"For the past 40 years, in treating diabetes, the diet has been calorie restrictive, which means overall low calories, but not too low, and with balanced macronutrients and foodstuff. This is the diet for diabetes. There's nothing great about it. There is no diabetic diet as such that you have to cook something else for a diabetic patient. Everybody can eat the same diet," says Dr Anoop Misra.

Dr Misra is a diabetologist of high standing who is chairman of the Fortis-C-DOC Centre of Excellence for Diabetes, Metabolic Diseases and Endocrinology in Delhi.

Asked if he has ever removed a basic food from the diet of a patient, he says: "I have never taken away something and put it at zero. People go for the gluten-free diet, people go for a dairy-free diet. I never have unless the patient is gluten-sensitive or has some allergy to milk."

"On the other hand, if you want to make carbohydrates more complex, you can by adding *besan* or *bajra*. That's fine. We do it all the time. In this way, we are changing quality, but we are not putting it at zero. I never take away rice, but I change it to brown rice if possible. And, similarly, I say eat potato, but take a small amount of potato with plenty of vegetables. So I mix and match several nutrients," Dr Misra explains.

Treating a diabetic patient involves finding a new balance for the body from which also derives weight loss. For instance, if a diabetic is consuming 1,600 calories a day, a diet could reduce that by 200 calories to 1,400. An hour of walking could mean another 300 calories consumed. Together that would mean a reduction of 500 calories in a day. Such a regimen could hope to achieve a reduction of one kg in body weight over 15 days.

The long-term consequences of low-calorie diets have not been adequately studied. In the short term, they invariably lead to nutritional deficiencies.

The ketogenic diet, which has been a fad globally, does away with carbohydrates and replaces them with protein and fat. It brings down body weight rapidly in a few months. So also with intermittent fasting in which people don't eat for 14 hours or more.

The consequences of such low-calorie diets have not been adequately studied. Their impact on the body in the long term is not known. In the short term, they invariably lead to nutritional deficiencies which cause imbalances in the body.

A rise in ketones, as induced by the ketogenic diet, could be good for weight loss in the short term, but results in raising cholesterol levels and putting pressure on the heart.

A recent study that compares people on intermittent fasting and others on a balanced but calorie-controlled diet shows that there was no real difference in the outcomes.

Another direct study done in Britain found that diabetes reversal was possible through a diet of 800 to 1,000 calories which resulted in a loss of 10 to 15 kg. But this was for a sample that consisted of people who had not been diabetic for more than five years, were not on insulin or too many other medications and had no complications from other diseases. It remains to be seen if they become diabetic again over the years.

While going on a diet, how important is the advice of a doctor who knows your case well? Dr Misra says he advises weight-loss diets for only 10 to 15 percent of the patients he sees. These are patients who have recently become diabetic, are obese and do not have liver, kidney or heart problems. In the case of a 65-year-old, he would move extremely cautiously. Diabetes reversal through rigorous dieting alone doesn't happen in people who have had the disease for a decade.

Clearly, there is more to being on a diet than signing up for a programme on the internet. If, like CB, you are 65, have been diabetic for a decade and also have hypertension you are perhaps better off being in the care of a physician who knows you well and knows to deal with diabetes beyond fad diets. ■

Alwar's magical fort palaces

SUSHEELA NAIR

THE Tijara Fort Palace dominated the landscape for miles around as we approached it from the Alwar bypass highway. Strategically perched atop a hill, the palace is an imposing building harking back to the days of its erstwhile royalty. This majestic bastion of history has been the seat of political intrigues and public audiences, bristling with memories of hunts and battles, skirmishes and family feuds.

From crumbling ruins, the Tijara Fort Palace has been painstakingly restored to its present graceful and royal state by the Neemrana Group. The ingenuity and workmanship that have gone into this transformation are commendable. As we walked into the portals of the palace we could sense its regal elegance, which transported us to the royal luxury and hospitality of princely times.

The palace shot into prominence after it was featured in the Netflix series, *The Big Day,* as a destination for a fairy tale wedding. Refurbished with contemporary comforts, this exquisite palace reflects the grandeur and luxury of Indian royalty, attracting guests from across the globe.

The Tijara Fort Palace complex is a marvel of three structures, built in the Rajput-Afghan style with colonial influences. Accommodation comes in different categories: the Mardana Mahal for the royal men, the Rani Mahal for the maharanis which has balconies or terraces with superb views, and a pleasure palace on the edge of a plateau, overlooking a water-body called the Hawa Mahal, or palace of the wind. In all, there are more than 60 rooms and suites named after India's leading artists. The palace has rooms decorated by India's finest artists and designers and named after them. Each of the Mardana suites is named after the male artist who designed it, and the Rani Mahal showcases the creativity of the women artists. Behind the impeccably designed interiors, the fairy tale fantasy is discernible.

Each room has antique furniture, artefacts and discreet electronic comforts. Refurbished with contemporary comforts, this exquisite palace is a true reflection of the grandeur and luxury of Indian royalty, attracting guests from across the globe. The lofty entrance archways, imposing pillars, soaring ceilings, ramparts and terraces, nooks and cranies, and labyrinthine corridors hark back to the days of royalty.

Another gem restored by the Neemrana Group is the 14th century hill fort of Kesroli, one of the oldest heritage sites in India. Realizing the commercial potential of such sites, a few enterprising entrepreneurs like Aman Nath, chairman, Neemrana Group, pioneered the concept of heritage hospitality and transformed several heritage properties into hotels. "From a complete crumbling ruin, inhabited by civets and bats, the erstwhile heritage properties have since become synonymous in India with architectural restoration-for-reuse. The word 'Neemranification' has now come to symbolize viable and sustainable heritage tourism involving the participation of local communities," says Aman Nath.

Photos: Civil Society/Susheela Nair

The Tijara Fort Palace has been restored to its graceful royal state

The 14th century hill fort of Kesroli is enchanting and comfortable

Once upon a time, the hill fort was a strategic checkpost on the high road to Alwar, set on the only hillock for miles around. Situated atop the rare, dark Hornstone Breccia rocks, it commands a splendid agrarian view from its ramparts which rise 50 to 65 metres.

The origins of the seven-turreted Kesroli hark back to over six centuries ago. It is reputed to have been built by the Yaduvanshi Rajputs, who claimed to be descendants of Lord Krishna. A few decades later they converted to Islam and came to be known as Khanzadas. The hill fort subsequently changed hands. It was conquered by the Mughals and the Jats before reverting to the Rajputs in 1775 when the princely state of Alwar was founded. It witnessed its golden period under Ranawat Thakur Singh (1882-1934), renowned for his equestrian skills.

Kesroli fell into disarray again after India gained independence. It was eventually taken up for restoration by the Neemrana Group in 1995. The fort welcomed its first guests in 1998. All Neemrana properties are non-hotel hotels, because they were originally built for other purposes. Mammoth efforts have been made to maintain the old charm of Kesroli while ensuring basic comforts that have come to be associated with changes in lifestyle since the 14th century. There is nothing ordinary about this unbelievably enchanting fort, which has a riveting history and a luxurious present!

Kesroli offers a unique experience of seeing and 'living' history along with a range of activities that help guests unwind and rediscover themselves. From my room, I could peep out and gaze at mustard fields and camels from where guns were placed to shoot at the enemy! I simply enjoyed the space itself: its courtyards, winding stone pathways and turrets, the quiet of its rooms, a long breakfast or a protracted lunch by the swimming pool, and the sight of the colourful mustard fields. The food is simple and tasty and there are always some local specialities like *laal maas* on offer. Eating in the open under a star-studded sky with a lavish spread is indeed an unforgettable experience.

Kesroli makes an ideal base to visit neighbouring palaces, museums and temples as it is located in the heart of the 'Golden Triangle'. On your return journey, you can cover Bala Quila, City Museum, Neelkant Temples, Jaisamand Lake, Moosi Maharani Chhatri and explore the Sariska National Park. Before you end your trip, stop by at one of the sweet shops in Alwar town and sample kalakhand, a sweet milk cake which the locals claim was invented here. ■

FACT FILE

The nearest airport is Delhi (140 km) and the nearest railhead is Alwar (12 km).
Kesroli is almost equidistant from the tourist sites of Delhi, Agra and Jaipur.
For bookings contact:
reservations@neemranahotels.com

RANDOM SHELF HELP

A quick selection from the many books that turn up for review

Tracking UP's decline

From Lucknow to Lutyens / Abhigyan Prakash / HarperCollins / ₹595

When India gained independence in 1947, Uttar Pradesh wasn't the worst-off state in the country. It wasn't tagged with Bihar. UP was actually marginally better off than Tamil Nadu, since the British had invested in the state's infrastructure. As India's politically most important state, it had everything going for it. So why did the state fall off the development map? Abhigyan Prakash tries to search for some answers in his book, *From Lucknow to Lutyens*.

A journalist with NDTV and currently a senior consultant with ABP News, Prakash was born in Banaras and brought up in Lucknow. As a son of the soil, UP's backwardness perturbed him. There were other reasons too: the slight prejudice he felt working in Mumbai, the allusion of being a '*bhaiya*', Raj Thackeray's violent campaign against north Indians and the heartrending migration of workers to their home states in UP and Bihar when the COVID-19 lockdown started.

Prakash examines UP's many maladies: politics, caste, polarization, criminalization and communalism. There is a chapter on important constituencies held by powerful politicians — Amethi, Rae Bareli, Varanasi and Saifai, and another on the 'switchers', and the lack of any loyalty or even ideology amongst politicians. There is an analysis of development issues in the last chapter.

Much of this is known but Prakash puts it together skillfully. What emerges is the portrait of a state wracked by turbulent politics and an absence of regional pride. UP's political importance and its proximity to Lutyens' Delhi, sealed its fate.

Since it was politically significant, parties in the north jousted, through fair means or foul, to acquire as many seats as they could. The Congress high command appointed chief ministers according to their own perceived wisdom. Merit or aptitude wasn't considered. Chief ministers came and went. The party was afflicted by factionalism. So local politicians underlined their caste affiliations to gain favour, making caste the primary consideration. Ganglords were brought into politics to counter rival caste groups and thus began the era of criminalization. It's a story of splits, mergers and the right caste formula. Each twist in politics threw up new leaders. From Mandal emerged Mayawati and Mulayam Singh Yadav and from *mandir-masjid* politics emerged the BJP.

It's not as if nothing was done. Infrastructure has been built and some vanity projects as well. But, unlike Tamil Nadu or Kerala, no investments were made in primary healthcare or basic education.

Every year, UP reports deaths from malaria, chikungunya and dengue. People in UP (and Bihar), the poorest in India, spend the most on private healthcare. Villages are dirty with no drains, sewage or waste management systems. If UP invests in its skillful and hardworking people, they will invest in their own state.

An actor's life

Stories I Must Tell / Kabir Bedi / Westland Publications / Rs 699

If you are up for a summertime page-turner, try Kabir Bedi's autobiographical *Stories I Must Tell*. Bedi, now in his seventies, has had a colourful and eventful career in cinema, to begin with in Mumbai and then internationally.

This book is about what he calls his 'emotional journey' as an actor. An especially poignant part is about the passing of his son, who struggled with depression. But mostly the book is about his tumultuous marriages and affairs beginning with the irrepressible Protima Bedi and followed by the tragically unstable Parveen Babi. And then other relationships till what seems the most stable of them all with Parveen Dusanj.

Should we be interested? It is always fun to read about the world of films and Bedi is sensitive, insightful and writes well. But the surprisingly nice part of the book is not about his women and stardom, but his childhood and his parents. They had a role in nationalist politics and associations with the leaders of those years of the freedom struggle, among them Nehru. Bedi's childhood friend was Rajiv Gandhi. His parents' subsequent spiritualism also makes interesting reading.

Bedi's enormous fame in Italy because of the serial *Sandokan* and his work in Hollywood are the stuff dreams are made of. His memoir puts in perspective the risk he took with his career and the many challenges that he had to face up to. It wasn't easy to carve out a space for himself when there was no real recognition for his creative work in Hindi cinema. He was in fact reinventing himself again. And then together with the success was the ephemeral nature of such stardom. All this makes for a great read and if there is one drawback it is that we are compelled to meet Bedi the actor in the context of his relationships.

A Northeast reader

In the name of the nation / Sanjib Baruah / Navayana / Rs 599

The northeastern states have been in the news a lot recently and if you would like to bone up on them, let us recommend this particularly interesting volume from our shelves. It has been around for a bit, but no better time than now to go back to it. The promise of doing away with AFSPA, opening of a string of cancer hospitals to strengthen healthcare or efforts to promote local entrepreneurship are intimations of change. But the complexities of the northeastern states remain. Tribal cultures run deep as do the challenges of transitions and aspirations across the region. Traditional societies caught up in the processes of emigration are difficult to understand. Barua's book puts much in context. Transformations in the northeastern states will depend on going much beyond governance through handouts and policy changes.

Another vision of farming

India's Quest for Sustainable Farming / And Healthy Food / Bharat Dogra & Kumar Gautam / ₹495 / Vitasta Publishing

If you want to know the alternative view of agriculture, then this is the right book for you. It gives you the complete picture of what activists in India and globally have been saying about conventional agriculture and their vision for more sustainable farming systems. Bharat Dogra and Kumar Gautam also include their own ideas on making farm-to-fork systems workable.

What they say is not startlingly new. They bring together the thinking and practices of the proponents of natural farming in India. They bust all myths about the benefits of the Green Revolution, question the utility of genetically modified crops as a serious threat to India's agricultural biodiversity and assert that multinational companies and free trade agreements are injurious to small farmers. Ditto for farming inputs like fertilizers and seeds which are now produced by rapacious companies.

The authors also take up the cause of the landless farmer, and strongly speak for the small farmer, the backbone of Indian agriculture. They passionately propagate the need for an alternative approach to farming which would restore the land, provide wholesome food to the nation and an income to small farmers. The book is very comprehensive and includes food processing, crop procurement, climate change, urban farming and the issues the recent farmers agitation raised.

What they say is valid. Natural farming is inexpensive and eco-friendly and in India we have several examples of such sustainable practices, some led by the state and others by NGOs or communities themselves.

The point is, why has organic farming not taken off across India? Organic is endorsed by the Indian state. Yet, the only shining example we have is Sikkim, India's only fully organic state. Natural methods are well suited to mountainous regions but even hilly Uttarakhand has not been able to replicate the Sikkim example. Going organic requires careful micro-planning and handholding. It needs experts to go out and help farmers. It needs farmers to be organized and for *mandis* and pricing to be structured differently. We don't have fertilizer companies which can produce organic fertilizers in bulk. Most of all, organic farming has to yield food in bulk to feed millions of people.

The book does not look into these issues. But it is a good reference book, simple and readable. It tells you why agriculture should change and how things should be. It doesn't tell you how to get there. ■

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.

Himalayan treats

In September 2021, Jennifer Gazmair started Inari by Jeana to spread awareness of Kalimpong's unique dishes and flavours. Kalimpong is an old colonial town in the foothills of the Himalayas, midway to Darjeeling in West Bengal. Gazmair makes and sells flat noodles, glass noodles, prawn crackers, pickles, shrimp paste, tamarind chilli sauce, dry momo chutney and more.

All her products are home-made and hand-made in small batches for freshness and to preserve flavour. No artificial flavouring, colours or preservatives are used. A bag of sundried prawn crackers costs Rs 170 and can be delivered anywhere in India. Crunch those crackers with a jar of dry momo chutney or dalle paste for just ₹280 and you'll find yourself in foodie heaven.

Contact: Jennifer Gazmair 9052272374
Email: inaripcs@gmail.com
Website: https://www.inaribyjeana.in/

Farm to plate

Hans and Naman Bhurani founded Vediko in 2015 to initiate farmers into organic farming and help them become debt-free. Naman Bhurani began with two farmers and now around 50 farmers across north India work with them. Vediko helps farmers by integrating cow-based farming and beekeeping into their existing farming practices. They describe themselves as a community-led endeavour. Vediko sells amla *murabba* made with raw sugar and *amla* which is priced at ₹339. Their *gulkand* is made with sun-cooked damask rose petals and raw sugar and costs ₹254. Vediko's catalogue consists of cold-pressed oils, ghee and raw honey.

Contact: Naman Bhurani 9810624624
Email: vedicfarmer@gmail.com
Website: https://vediko.in/

For a healthy head

Pracheen Vidhaan is a plant-based natural products start-up by Chaitra Kunal and Kunal Mysore, based out of Bengaluru. All their products are handcrafted and biodegradable and generate zero waste. They specialize in herbal hair washes and packs ranging from ₹85 to ₹145. Their Premium Herbal Hair Pack is made with 16 herbs and plants like curry leaves and hibiscus. Pracheen Vidhaan's catalogue also includes objects for daily use like stationery and scrubbers made from hard palmyrah bristles and neem wood. You can also buy unrefined beeswax and curry leaf powder from Pracheen Vidhaan.

Contact: +91 7204558473; Email: praacheenvidhaan@gmail.com
Website: https://www.praacheenvidhaan.com/

Pickles and jams

Suniti Dhindsa's inspiration for her micro-enterprise, Sue's Homemade Preserves, came from her organic orchard in Pauri Garhwal in Uttarakhand. She sells homemade jams, chutneys, pickles and preserves. Jams which are available year-round are orange marmalade, silver lemon marmalade, and apple and cinnamon preserve, each priced at ₹380. Her catalogue includes pickles and chutneys like tomato *kasundi* packaged in a colourful jar. Sue's Homemade Preserves also sells Himalayan Malta Squash priced at ₹450. Most of her fruits and vegetables are sourced from her own orchard.

Contact: Suniti Dhindsa 99582 15553
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Website: http://www.sueshomemadepreserves.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.

HELP MIGRANTS, WIDOWS AND CHILDREN

Maitri is an NGO based in New Delhi which works for the rights of migrant workers, destitute widows and underprivileged children. It also combats violence against women and runs a victim support programme and a victim-to-survivor programme. For migrant workers, like rickshaw pullers and the homeless, Maitri helps them access citizenship rights, healthcare, financial inclusion and improved living conditions. For elderly abandoned widows in Vrindavan, Maitri has constructed old age homes. The NGO also helps children in slums to cope with school education and provides opportunities to young adults and women to learn skills and stand on their own feet.

Set up in 2005, Maitri has worked with over 45,000 individuals on issues of social and health inequities and public health concerns through education, community outreach, networking and legal advocacy.

You can volunteer or donate to Maitri. College students can intern for their research projects.

https://www.maitriindia.org/
maitri.india@maitri.org.in
+91 11 24122692

THERE IS HOPE FOR STREET CHILDREN

The Hope Kolkata Foundation (HKF) was established in February 1999 to protect and nurture children living on the streets of the city in difficult circumstances.

HKF works for the all-round development of children by providing them shelter, nutrition, education, medicines and healthcare, counselling, awareness, life-skills training and sports activities.

The non-profit runs a Holistic Education Project in North Kolkata, South Kolkata and Howrah. They also run five protection homes for adolescent children, along with crisis centres and rehabilitative homes.

The NGO has set up Hope Hospital for the underprivileged and a Skills Training Institute for garment making, tailoring, computer training, as well as beautician training units. You can donate to Hope Kolkata Foundation or volunteer with them.

https://www.hkf.ind.in/Home/Index
info@hopechild.org | +91 33 24546488

NIGHT SCHOOL MAKES A DIFFERENCE

Tarang, a non-profit, works on providing education to children. They organize night schools, facilitate sponsorship of education for children whose families cannot afford schooling and support children in accessing facilities which help them complete school and become self-reliant. Their project, Daayitva, looks after their night and evening school which is equipped with a library and laboratories.

Project Lakshya trains children living in slums in English, maths and computer skills. Tarang also offers study material and other resources to children at their Powai centre in Mumbai. You can donate to Tarang to help their efforts or be a volunteer with them.

http://www.tarang.org/

HEALTH, HYGIENE AWARENESS

Abhilasha Foundation, a non-profit in Mumbai, is run by a team of social workers who specialize in health, education, sustainability, vocational training, and women and child development. The foundation reaches out to migrants, women, children, senior citizens, school dropouts and self-help groups. It organizes awareness programmes on health and hygiene for slum communities.

The foundation provides financial support to indigent people for critical surgeries by working with local hospitals. It runs an orphanage and offers shelter to street children. There is livelihood training and counselling for women as well. Training programmes include mattress making and leather bag making. You can donate to Abhilasha Foundation to help their efforts or volunteer for their programmes and awareness drives.

https://www.abhilasha-foundation.org/
info@abhilasha-foundation.org
+91 98702 34440

CONSERVING HERBS AND MEDICINAL PLANTS

Uthaan, an NGO based in Gurugram, specializes in vermiculture, organic cultivation, herb-planting, animal welfare and conservation of non-renewable fossil fuels. They create awareness and initiate concern among citizens in Gurugram about the need to conserve the environment and be kind to animals.

Uthaan has been trying to conserve medicinal plants including the *guggal* plant which is becoming extinct. It is helping schools set up herbariums of medicinal plants.

The NGO runs an Animal Rescue Centre in Kotputli. Part of its mission is to promote solar power and for this it reaches out to schools to encourage them to switch over. In an especially innovative effort, Uthaan has introduced the Solekshaw in Gurugram. It is a battery operated rickshaw. You can volunteer or donate to Uthaan.

https://uthaanngo.org/index.php
info@uthaanngo.org
+91 9811175332

FIRST PERSON

HIBA NAQVI, 19, STUDENT

'I LEARNT TO SPEAK TO PATIENTS' FAMILIES'

I BEGAN volunteering with Genesis Foundation in October 2021. I was inspired by the work that my mother did as a volunteer for the Rotaract Club so I began to search for an organization I could volunteer for.

Genesis Foundation helps in the medical treatment of underprivileged children suffering from congenital heart defects. I am a student of cardiovascular technology at Sushant University in Gurugram, which is why I became interested in Genesis.

Hiba, with a black mask, in a hospital

The process of applying as a volunteer for Genesis was fairly simple. I filled in a form on their website and they reached out to me in a few days.

I am an introverted and shy person, but an important part of my role was to speak with the parents, the patients and their families. I remember vividly my first visit to a patient's family. The families would be very emotional and overwhelmed. On field visits I was motivated to speak to them and make sure they were comfortable. To be able to communicate clearly and optimistically in order to help patients and their families was a learning experience for me. My responsibilities also included documentation and communication. The smiles of the patients and their families boost your spirit and keep you going.

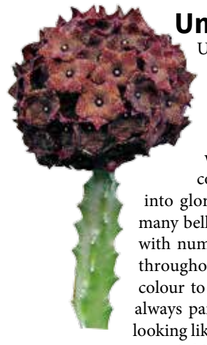
Working with Genesis gave me a sense of satisfaction that I was helping the community in my own capacity. The kind of work that Genesis Foundation is doing is extraordinary. And the feeling of serving the community brings a level of satisfaction and contentment I find hard to describe in words. I love that feeling!

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.

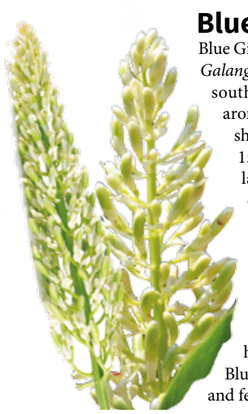
Wild Guava

Wild guava or *Careya Arborea* Roxb. is a tree species native to India. It is dry, deciduous in nature, reaching a height of 20 metres. Its leaves are very large, spathulate and beautifully red before they fall. Wild guava is visually interesting. Its flowers are large and numerous and cover all its branches and branchlets. The gleaming white of the flowers is created with millions of stamens. The base of the stamens changes into deep red after pollination. These red-based white stamens are a joy to look at during the dry summer months. Wild guava is a gorgeous tree that can decorate gardens, avenues or townships. Its Sanskrit name, Kumbhi, refers to the shape of the fruit which looks like a water-pot. The tip of the fruit is crowned with persistent sepals. Ayurveda uses this species to treat various types of coughs and colds. Wild guava fruits are very aromatic and edible. This tree grows throughout India, from dry forests to the semi-evergreen forests of the Western Ghats.



Umbelled Caralluma

Umbelled Caralluma or *Caralluma umbellata* Haw is a succulent plant (not a cactus), which reaches 60 cm in height. It is endemic to South India. The plant's stems are four-angled, almost leaf-less. This species has the unique ability to store so much water that it can grow in and withstand desert conditions. In summer, the tips of its stems transform into glorious, globose flower-heads, densely packed with many bell-shaped flowers. These flowers are reddish-brown with numerous transversions of yellow and purple streaks throughout the corolla, providing a wealth of intriguing colour to gardens or containers. The fruits too are unique, always paired and cylindrical, tapering towards apices and looking like miniature horns of animals. The green stems may turn pinkish-red in the summer heat. Umbelled Caralluma can spruce up the house and be used as a wonderful houseplant. This species can be used to decorate even a tiny space. Medicinally, the plant is known for its antibacterial and antioxidant properties.



Blue Ginger

Blue Ginger, also called Greater Galangal or *Alipnia Galanga* (L.) Willd., is a perennial shrub native to southeast Asia. Its rhizomes and stalks are aromatic. Shoots of this shrub are very long, shining and bear erect inflorescence of 10 to 15 cm dense spikes. Blue Ginger's flowers are large, leathery, greenish-white to yellow, occasionally streaked with pink. Its breathtaking blooms are long-lasting and look wonderful against its large and shiny foliage. Hence, it is considered a good choice for yards and gardens. This shrub can also be used to highlight a semi-shaded landscape. It is useful as a tall informal hedge or as a screen or backdrop. Blue Ginger is used to combat cough, asthma and fever.

Asian Bush-beech

Gmelina asiatica L., popularly known as Asian Bush-beech, is a much-branched, spiny shrub reaching 10 metres in height. It is native to India and East Asia and grows naturally in India's tropical thorn forests and other warmer regions. Its leaves are strikingly small, dark green above and glossy green beneath and look beautiful against sunlight. The shrub's flowers are showy, bright yellow in colour, nodding in terminal clusters. The flowers attract pollinators and birds. Its numerous branches and flowering twigs make it a focal point in a garden. It can be planted as a single specimen. Asian Bush-beech is a compact shrub with dense foliage. Hence it can be maintained as a clipped hedge. Even its pear-shaped fruits, which turn yellow from green on ripening, add gleam to landscapes. Its roots and leaves are traditionally used as blood purifiers.

Indian Laburnum

The Indian Laburnum, or *Cassia fistula* L., is a semi-deciduous to evergreen tree with spreading branches, reaching 15 to 20 metres. It is native to India and Sri Lanka. Indian Laburnum is known for profuse flowering, therefore it is also called golden shower. The flowers are showy and bright-golden yellow. The fruits are dry pods, elongated and rod-shaped, hanging from pendulous stalks. This tree is very attractive and adjusts to many climatic conditions ranging from semi-desert to high rainfall. Adding this tree to your home is worth the effort as it is considered highly auspicious. Golden shower trees are loved for their dazzling display of golden blossoms that burst forth ahead of their leaves in mid-summer. Planted near a patio, the tree creates a beautiful summertime ambience for visitors. Its flowers attract various butterflies too! The root, bark, leaf, flower, fruit and seed of the tree are said to have medicinal properties which treat fever, constipation, jaundice, ringworm, dysentery, urinary disorders and cardiac complaints.

Kleinia

Large-flower *kleinia*, scientifically known as *Kleinia grandiflora* (Wall. ex DC.) N. Rani, is a (sub-) succulent subshrub growing upto two metres tall. Its stems are usually leaf-less below with the leaf-scars lending it a 'cactus look'. It is one of the wild ornamental species least used in gardening. The leaves are fleshy and known as Muyalkaathu in Thamizh and Kundeluchevi in Telugu which means 'ear of rabbit', alluding to its shape. The flower-heads are three cm across, arising from the top of the branches. The florets are white, and turn golden-yellow on maturity. This bloom makes the garden look cool with its white flowers during the scorching summer and is ideal for desert landscaping and drought-tolerant gardens. It can be used as the focal point of a drought-tolerant succulent garden due to its height. In the wild, it tends to be seen hanging down from rocky slopes, hence planting on slopes will give it a natural look. It is also a good choice for xeriscape and rock gardens. Single specimens are eye-catching in containers. Medicinally, the leaves are used for earache. It grows almost throughout the drier regions of India. ■

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