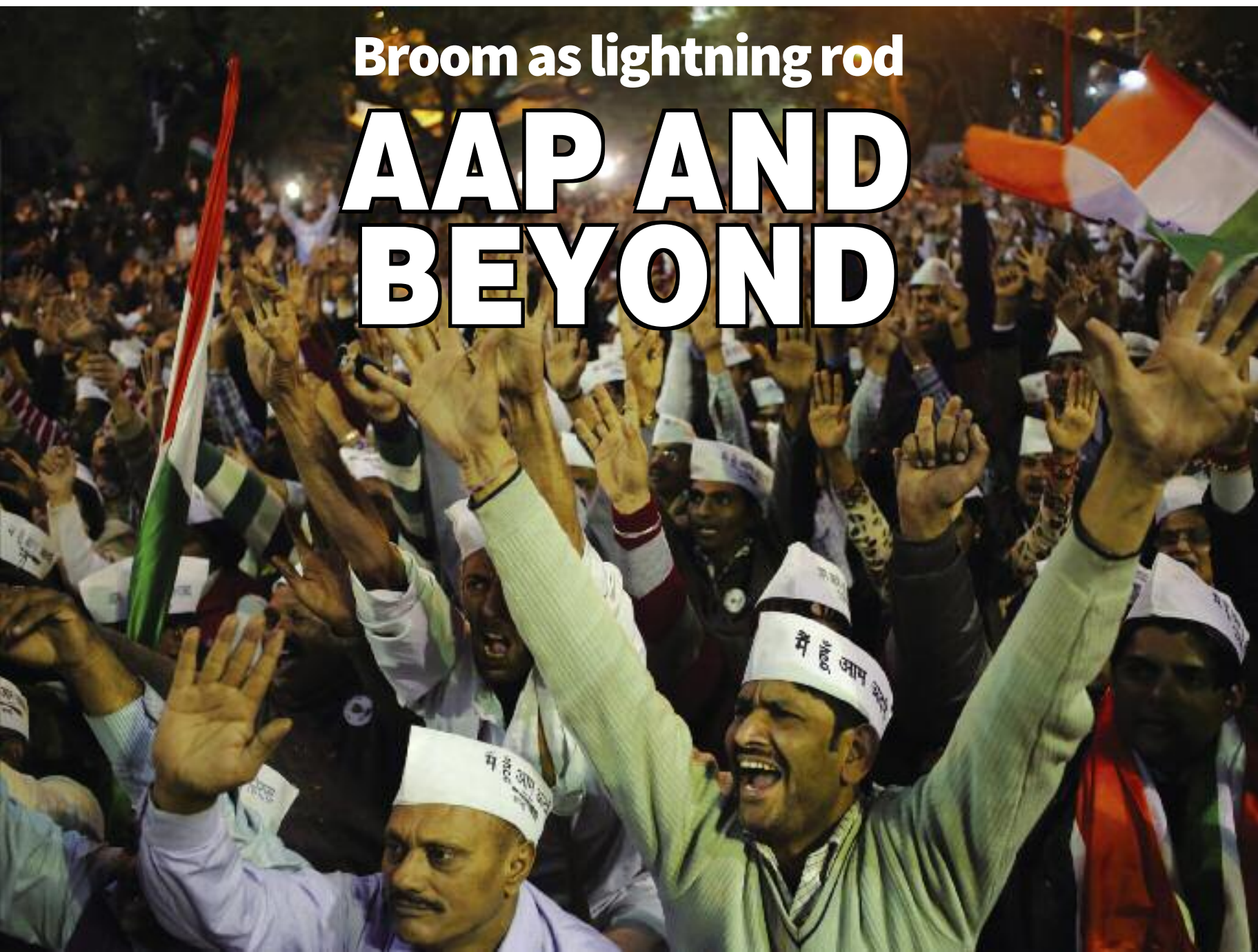


# Civil Society



Broom as lightning rod

## AAP AND BEYOND



### ‘LAWS ALONE CAN’T STOP HARASSMENT’

Indira Jaising on the Justice Ganguly case and more

Pages 6-7

### MEWAT’S FEISTY RADIO

Page 9

### JUGGLING HIV NUMBERS

Pages 10-11

### A PEOPLE’S MANIFESTO

Pages 12-13

### MOBILE VAANI TALKS

Pages 26-27

### RISE OF CLEAN POLITICS

Pages 29-30

### THE OTHER GOA

Pages 33-34

# CONTENTS



COVER STORY

## AAP AND BEYOND

The Aam Aadmi Party's spectacular performance in Delhi heralds changing trends in Indian politics. Is this a movement or a party? Is it a quick fix or a long-term solution?

20

COVER PHOTOGRAPH: LAKSHMAN ANAND

Flood victims bitter over relief .....	6-8
Tribals say no to tourism .....	15
MAD inspires a cleaner city .....	16-17
Lighting up India .....	28
Milestones in the water sector .....	30-31
The rapist's wife .....	32
Pollachi has a green resort .....	34-35
Kolkata's unreal world .....	37
Arty terracotta & garden toys .....	38

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# Civil Society

READ US. WE READ YOU.

## The new politics

As a magazine we have been keenly interested in efforts to clean up politics and improve governance. Our first issue, in September 2003, was on RTI and it had the then unknown Arvind Kejriwal on the cover. Our second issue, in October 2003, was about Sheila Dikshit and how she was using RWAs to reach out to the middle class. Our third cover story, in November 2003, was titled 'NGOs in Politics' – it was about activists trying to influence politics and impact election outcomes.

When we recall those issues, now 10 years old, we can't help patting ourselves on the back. We had caught a trend much before anyone else had. The civil society space had begun taking shape in India and it was clear that important beginnings were being made in transforming politics. Aruna Roy, Medha Patkar and a whole lot of others were not only speaking for the weak and powerless, but also trying to change the agendas of political parties.

Then there were those who had already taken the plunge. We remember Madhusudhan Mistry, who had then just joined the Congress in Gujarat, telling us in an interview that, after years of fighting for forest workers' rights, he had realised it made better sense to be in active politics. There was also Jayaprakash Narayan of the Lok Satta party in Andhra Pradesh, who stressed to us the need for better people in politics.

The Aam Aadmi Party has emerged out of these trends over the years. The stunning success it has had in the Delhi Assembly elections can be attributed to the timing of its launch being just right. But AAP's success is also because of a combination of factors that have been maturing at their own speed. Rising aspirations have resulted from the RTI, cellphones, the Internet and economic reform. Dipankar Gupta, professor of sociology, tells us that the breakdown of the village economy has had a significant role to play.

AAP's victory will compel all political parties to wake up and read the writing on the wall. Jayaprakash Narayan predicts that established political parties will change as they set out to discover the new voter and leader. There is talk of revisiting the Constitution and making democracy more participatory – though the use of neighbourhood *sabhas* and SMS polls will most likely be junked as being impractical.

These straws in the wind give us some idea of current concerns. It is a new mood but it is focused on the present. It will become seriously transformational when the leaders brave enough to pitch for India's tomorrow arrive on the scene.



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## IN THE LIGHT

by SAMITA RATHOR



## LETTERS



### Kashmir films

Your cover story, 'Films from the Valley,' highlighted a positive trend. Kashmiri Muslims are now talking to Kashmiri Pandits who were so cruelly forced to leave their homeland. I hope that the Kashmiri film festival is screened in Srinagar. It will help promote better understanding between the two communities.

Ashish Raina

The rise of regional cinema is a growing trend. People want to see films about their own society. So I hope the Kashmiri film festival travels to Srinagar and that movie halls are renovated. Movies are successful when people relate to their themes.

Shiv Pandit

### DMIC

Your interview with Amitabh Kant on the smart cities project and the Delhi-Mumbai Industrial Corridor provided the reader with a lot of information. It is true that we need more cities. The only issue I have with new cities is that they lack that ephemeral quality called 'character.' But I guess with time every city will develop its own special identity. Architects could create some heritage sites, like an ancient looking water tank or an iconic bustling bazaar, or an old clock tower.

Shama Varma

### Vapi workers

Tanushree Gangopadhyay's excellent article, 'Vapi's Victims' makes it clear that this so-called development has put many lives at risk. People do not know the other side of development. No one listens to the poor labourers, at least not the government.

Sagar

### Kobad Ghandy

I am an old friend of Kobad Ghandy. I teach at Nagpur University and I have been active in the human rights movement. I really appreciate the efforts of the Doon School batch mates. I hope that Kobad gets some rights as a political prisoner.

Shoma Sen

### Tobacco risks

Lakshman Anand's interview, 'Tobacco tears you apart' cites very compelling reasons for the government to step up its mass media campaigns and warn tobacco users in India of the health risks and the enormous personal and financial costs to be paid. We just cannot afford a further drain on the health system from totally avoidable diseases caused by tobacco.

Tahir Turk

### Home remedy

With reference to your story, 'Charming screw tree,' I would like to know if home medicine made from this tree has any side effects? I gave it to my baby of about two months, two weeks ago since she had bad colic pain. However, her stool still is very green even two weeks after I stopped using it.

Johanar

### Tree saviour

Rakesh Agrawal's article, 'Muturkhan's tree soldiers,' confirms the truth that women are the real soldiers who protect biodiversity and forests, a lesson that Gaura Devi of the famous Chipko Andolan in Uttarakhand taught us. Jamuna Tuddu is the unbroken link in the same chain.

Suresh Thapaliyal

It is very unfortunate that the women saviours of the forest in Muturkham handed all the poachers to the forest department. That will mean business as usual!

D.K. Oza

### Correction

There were two errors in the story, 'Vapi hellhole gets worse for migrants.'

- It was wrongly stated that S.R. Gaundar worked in a power company. Gaundar worked in a cement roofing sheets manufacturing company.
- Out of 51, and not 26 workers, at the Gandhinagar thermal power plant, eight suffered from asbestosis, eight had hearing loss and one was afflicted with pneumoconiosis.

The errors are regretted.

Letters should be sent to [response@civilsocietyonline.com](mailto:response@civilsocietyonline.com)

# Flood victims bitter over relief, rehab

**Rakesh Agrawal**  
Dehradun

**N**EARLY seven months after the floods in Uttarakhand, villagers in the hilly regions continue to suffer. Roads haven't been mended, homes are still piles of rubble and jobs have vanished. The state government has not been able to provide speedy relief and rehabilitation and angry villagers complain bitterly that it has turned its back on them.

Kalami Ram, a Dalit labourer from Urgam village in Chamoli district, accuses the government of caste bias in disbursing relief. "About 142 of us, all Dalits, are left without a roof. Now winter is here and we will freeze. But who cares?" he says bitterly. His village lies at an altitude of around 2,100 m and receives heavy snowfall in winter. "Officials reached here after the media," he says. "They gave us just one instalment of the compensation money to rebuild our homes and nothing for our ruined farmland."

In Indiranagar colony in Kalsi block of Dehradun, around 71 Dalit families were washed away in the June disaster. "But only 21 of us were provided houses by the government," adds Shyam Lal, another Dalit villager.

While the state government was quick to evacuate pilgrims from other states, its record in providing relief and rehabilitation to its own people has been lacklustre. Toilets and schools, essential for women and children, are yet to be built. "In winter, the absence of toilets is going to be a real problem for us," says Kiran Lekhwar of Jaunpur village in Tehri Garhwal district.

No accurate evaluation of the disaster has been carried out, but a few NGOs have conducted studies in their working areas. Jandesh, an NGO based in Joshimath, found that more than 500 mules, plus uncounted cows and buffaloes, were killed, 1,000 m of roads destroyed, 15 connecting bridges washed away and several schools ruined in Urgam Valley of Chamoli district.

"The Ghuttu Hydro-Electricity Project and the Vishnuprayag Hydro-Electricity Project (VHEP) worsened the disaster by throwing debris and releasing extra water from their reservoirs," alleges Laxman Singh Negi, secretary of Jandesh.

"Our farmland got submerged and our homes developed cracks when the dam authorities released water. But they have not paid us for the damage they caused," says Uma Bhandari, President, Painkhanda Mahila Mangal Dal, a women's group in Padkeshwar village, Chamoli district.

Jandesh has also carried out a study of nine villages in the worst-affected Kedar Valley. "Fifteen villages are still cut off from the main highway and they have a serious scarcity of food," says Negi.

Arpan, an NGO based in Askot, surveyed nine affected villages in Pithoragarh. "The situation is

*Continued on page 8*

# 'Laws alone can't

## INTERVIEW

Indira Jaising

**Civil Society News**  
New Delhi

**I**S the law on sexual harassment in the workplace in India effective? Is it easier today for women to get justice? Recent instances have shown how challenging and even messy it can be for women who decide to complain even though the law is now tougher and less ambiguous.

When a committee of the Supreme Court found merit, *prima facie*, in an intern's complaint against Justice A.K. Ganguly, the retired judge declared that he was being framed and refused to resign as Chairperson of the West Bengal Human Rights Commission. The girl was like his daughter, he said. Several luminaries spoke in his defence. The committee did not act against him because the episode took place after he had retired and the intern was not registered with the Supreme Court.

But if there was any doubt in anyone's mind, it was soon put to rest by a signed article by Indira Jaising which appeared on the front page of the *Indian Express*. Jaising, who is the Additional Solicitor-General, provided in great detail the damning testimony of the girl, shaming Ganguly and strengthening the demand that he should resign.

Jaising is known for her forthright views and for consistently defending the rights of the marginalised. Over a long career, she has been known to speak her mind and stand by principles. *Civil Society* spoke to her about sexual harassment and the challenges facing women in getting legal and social justice.

### Why did you go public with the affidavit of the intern? You have been criticized for this.

I felt compelled to disclose the contents of the information conveyed to the committee of three judges since Justice Ganguly was persisting in his denial of any misconduct and the intern's voice was not being heard. Many people asked: "What exactly did he do?" and there was no answer to this question. The gravity of the misconduct could not be appreciated without a disclosure. He was hiding behind the presumption of innocence under criminal law, but I was asking for his removal for misconduct on a Presidential Reference. Whatever I did was with her full knowledge and consent.

No confidentiality attaches to a document after the proceedings are concluded, in any case. Hence I have done nothing wrong. The public has a right to know about the conduct of a judge inside and outside the court. A judge is expected to maintain high standards of morality.

In this case, he had committed a misconduct and it was no longer a question of morality, but of



Indira Jaising: "The public has a right to know about the conduct

violation of law.

Women cannot be treated as playthings at the workplace, least of all by judges who are charged with the duty of protecting human rights.

He was found *prima facie* guilty of having committed a misconduct by a committee of three judges after looking at her statement which I disclosed. He was given an opportunity to be heard by the judges and hence he cannot say he was not heard.

In my opinion, he should resign and if he does not do so, the process for his removal should be initiated.

**The Supreme Court committee also said it could not take action because the judge had retired at the time of the incident and the intern wasn't on the rolls of the court. Do you agree with this? Or should the committee have referred the matter to the police?**

It is true that the incident occurred after he had ceased to be a judge and she was not an intern at the Supreme Court of India, and hence the court may not be able to take action against the judge in question. The court, in order to maintain its own credibility and to deal swiftly and effectively with the issue, did conduct an administrative inquiry

# stop sexual harassment'



of a judge inside and outside the court"

**'It would be preferable for disciplinary action against the harasser to be dealt with by a tribunal, which has participation from NGOs. The tribunal can also decide compensation. This tribunal should also deal with wrongful dismissal.'**

and I consider this an extraordinary step to send a message that the court will not give its moral approval to any sexual harassment of women, be it by retired Supreme Court judges or sitting judges.

It is up to other institutions of society such as the government, that appoints and removes chairpersons from human rights commissions, to take steps for removal. In this case, the outcome was what was expected of the court. My concern, however, is with cases where sitting judges may harass women. In such cases the law is grey. They need to have a complaints procedure in place. It is not clear to me whether, in such cases, the Chief Justice of India will follow the same procedure of appointing three judges and conducting an in-house inquiry. It would be advisable for the court to have an outside NGO member for such inquiries as well as to

inspire confidence in the process.

**How would you rate the laws to protect women from sexual harassment at the workplace in India? Do they need to be made stronger?**

Sexual harassment is perverse at the workplace and laws alone cannot stop it. It is corporate irresponsibility that needs to change in India. This is in relation to the formal sector. As you may be aware, the same multinationals that operate in India address the issue squarely when they are in the US. But in India, they take advantage of their dominant position and the fact that they are not made accountable, to ignore sexual harassment, tolerate it and, sometimes, materially and otherwise support the perpetrator.

Insofar as the unorganised sector is concerned,

we have not even begun to address the issue. This is tragic. The solution suggested – of a Local Complaints Committee – has not been tried and tested. But having regard for the fact that their conditions of lay-off are so insecure, one cannot even expect them to complain without losing their jobs. There is no one to monitor their conditions of employment or the security of their jobs, leave alone the sexual harassment they face. Laws have no meaning for them most of the time.

**Justice J.S. Verma had recommended independent employment tribunals where women could report sexual harassment. What is your opinion?**

I agree with the suggestion of the Verma Committee that there should be a tribunal which looks at complaints of sexual harassment and not an internal committee. No doubt an internal committee has the advantage of being accessible and the woman does not have to spend any money on legal aid. Moreover, it puts the responsibility on the employer to deal with sexual harassment of the employee. All these advantages can be maintained by these committees but they cannot effectively take on the role of taking disciplinary action against the harasser nor can they decide issues of compensation according to law.

In corporate structures the workplace is heavily loaded in favour of management. There is no equality of bargaining power at all. It would therefore be preferable for disciplinary action against the harasser to be dealt with by a tribunal, which has participation from NGOs. The tribunal can also decide compensation. This tribunal should also deal with wrongful dismissal. The internal committees must undertake the task of sensitisation and monitor implementation of the policy of no tolerance of sexual harassment, but they should not be given judicial functions.

**Does mediation have any role to play?**

Mediation goes counter to the principle of zero tolerance of sexual harassment. It is preferable to have a clear policy of no compromise or no mediation in sexual harassment at the workplace.

Also, the law has a very dangerous provision in Section 14 – it threatens women with criminal prosecution for making a false complaint. This deters women from complaining. It is difficult enough to prove sexual harassment, without being suspected of being immoral. The threat of prosecution will make women not want to complain and defeat the purpose of the law.

**When the court is a workplace, how should a complaint of sexual harassment be handled?**

The Supreme Court of India has two committees framed in accordance with the Vishaka guidelines, one for the employees and one for women who visit the precincts of the Supreme Court as lawyers or litigants or workers. I am not sure that this committee can also entertain complaints against judges. The court needs to clarify this for us. ■

# Carpets boom but artisans sink

**Jehangir Rashid**  
Srinagar

CARPET sales are on an upswing in Kashmir with exports having jumped in the first two quarters of this year, compared to the corresponding period last year, according to Mushtaq Ahmad, Assistant Director, Export Promotion, with the Directorate of Handicrafts, Kashmir. However, the living conditions and wages of carpet weavers have not improved and the newly-elected Kashmir Chamber of Commerce & Industry (KCC&I) President, Sheikh Ashiq Ahmad, has called for the state government to provide basic facilities for them.

Ashiq says the state government should provide clean drinking water, quality healthcare, better connectivity and, in general, improve the standard of living of the weavers. He also says they should be referred to as artisans or master craftspersons. He points out that it is due to their skills that Kashmiri carpets continue to be the most in demand globally after Iranian carpets.

"The health condition of these artisans is very poor and this can be set right by the government. KCC&I cannot do it as we are not mandated for it. A team of doctors can be sent to check the health of the artisans and their family members. A weaver



BILAL BAHADUR

can only produce wonderful carpets when he or she is in good health," said Ashiq, who is also co-owner of Ferozsons Exports, a leading carpet exporter.

He proposed that the government provide soft loans to the artisans to help them improve their standard of living, pointing out that the loan facility had been extended to craftspersons in other trades. He added that the government could tie up with financial institutions to provide loans with a low interest rate.

"There is a huge gap between demand and supply. Kashmiri carpets are in tremendous demand in the international market. As production is not up to the

mark, we are unable to meet the demand. Production is low due to lack of interest among the artisans. They need to be encouraged to excel more and make a further impact globally," said Ashiq.

Mohammad Rajab, a carpet weaver, said their lack of interest was due to the fact that they earn less than ordinary workers. Rajab said weavers wanted an affordable and respectable lifestyle so that they are not pushed to the wall, given the ever-increasing prices of essentials.

An ordinary worker earns ₹400 per day while a carpet weaver does not make more than ₹250 per day. This was why the next generation was unwilling to enter the trade, said Rajab.

The KCC&I President said that, with government support, the artisans could make carpets of their choice with design inputs from exporters. This would lead to world-class products that would fetch good prices for both the weaver and the exporter.

"The government had announced that carpet clusters would be formed in areas where carpet-making is common. This project has made no headway so far. There are areas in Srinagar and in Bandipora district in north Kashmir where we can have carpet clusters.

There is a need for this initiative," said Ashiq.

Quoting a survey carried out by a Swiss firm, the KCC&I President said that working conditions of artisans in Kashmir were much better than those of their counterparts in Badaun, Uttar Pradesh. However, he added, this should not make the stakeholders complacent.

"The demand for carpets is rising in emerging markets. Our market linkages too have grown better over time. Production has witnessed a decline with carpet artisans switching to more remunerative professions. This shifting has badly hit the production of carpets," said Mushtaq.

## Flood victims bitter over relief, rehab

*Continued from page 6*

truly pathetic there. In Mori and Ghattabarah villages, almost every house has been damaged and farmland destroyed. The victims have been given a pittance," says Renu Thakur, Secretary of Arpan. A study of 92 villages, covering nine blocks in four districts, done by the Uttarakhand Jan Caravan Manch (UJKM), a group of social workers, activists and NGOs, confirms Arpan's findings.

At a one-day public hearing in Dehradun for the victims, almost everyone complained of having been paid much less than announced, "The Chief Minister, Vijay Bahuguna, announced he would give us ₹5,000 per *nali* [about 200 sq m] as compensation, but we got only ₹2,000 per *nali*," said Chandra Devi of Askot village, Pithoragarh district.

In Tehri Garhwal district, the same situation prevails. "We have not yet been provided proper rehabilitation. We have no houses to live in. The people are facing acute hardship since basic facilities like toilets and water supply are not available in their villages," said Kumari Kiran of Parodigaon village.

Villagers are also concerned about the lack of job opportunities. "We were given rations by NGOs in June. It will get over soon and what will we do after that?" asked Ramesh Thapaliyal of Tharali village in

Chamoli district. The main source of income is agriculture and cattle farming. Both have been disrupted by the disaster, forcing them to seek help from others. Earlier, the state government had promised to provide each villager at least 100 days of work but this too has not materialised.

Rural infrastructure – connecting roads, bridges, schools, primary health centres and *anganwadi* centres – lie shattered and broken. "In the absence of link roads and bridges, we have to walk four to six times the distance to go from our village to the main road," says Puran Singh Gosain of Indrula village in Tehri Garhwal district.

Many young women have become widows. They are looked down upon by the insensitive, casteist and tradition-bound hill society, said one activist. "Many young girls who were just married have become widows. They find it very difficult to survive in this patriarchal society," says Mohan Singh of Chilaundh village, Rudraprayag district.

As for children, the psychological impact of the disaster remains unaddressed. "They see nature as a destructive agent in their drawings and paintings, and there is no psychiatric treatment to help them forget," points out Suman Varma, Dharchula village, Pithoragarh district.



The villagers continue to dutifully pay their electricity bills, though their villages don't have electricity since power lines were destroyed. "The Chief Minister announced with much fanfare that our electricity bills would be waived, but he forgot his promise," says Rekha Devi of Tanganimali village in Chamoli district. The hapless villagers have also been issued notices to repay their loans, though their farms and businesses have been ruined.

Many villagers are contemplating moving to the plains. "We just want to leave behind the death and destruction. The Chief Minister promised to shift us when he came to Dharchula in June. We are still waiting. Now it's winter," says Mathura Devi of Gangbali village in Pithoragarh district. ■

# Radio speaks up for Mewat

**Shayak Majumder**  
Mewat (Haryana)

**S**OHRAB Khan gets up at six every morning. After some breakfast, he quickly checks out the vegetables growing in his farm. Then he leaves for work on his bike, riding quite a distance from Nothi to the village of Ghaghas. Once in his office, he settles into his chair, fiddles with a few knobs on his audio mixer, turns on the microphone and says in the local Mewati language, “Good morning and welcome to 107.8 FM Alfaz E Mewat.”

Sohrab is a Radio Journalist (RJ), who, for nearly two years, has been presenting radio shows on Alfaz E Mewat (Voice of Mewat), a community radio channel which reaches out to around 150 villages in Mewat district of Haryana.

Set up by the Institute of Rural Research and Development (IRRAD), an initiative of the S.M. Sehgal Foundation and with support from the Ministry of Agriculture, the community radio station is run by a team of six RJs – three men and three women. Every day of the week, from 10 am to 2 pm and again from 7.30 pm to midnight, Sohrab and his colleagues present shows on education, health, agriculture and many other issues.

Like any typical community radio, the signal reach is limited to a radius of 15-20 km. “We cover most villages in Mewat district and a few villages on the Rajasthan border, wherever our signal can reach,” says Sohrab.

Alfaz E Mewat’s RJ team comprises a bunch of young journalists, none of whom has any background in radio or other media. Most were farmers or had recently completed schooling. But that doesn’t stop them from striving to improve with each show.

Manish Kumar, the core trainer and programme developer, handpicked the RJs. “When we were auditioning for RJs, apart from the essential qualities we were looking for one thing – craziness. I wanted journalists who wouldn’t back down from hard work or responsible journalism. For that, you need a little bit of the crazy in you,” he says.

Sohrab and another young man, Fakat, have worked with the station since it started on 28 February 2012. Kumar has trained them in all aspects of radio journalism – from collecting news stories through field visits and interviews, to editing on software like Adobe Audition. They are also trained to operate an audio station as they present live radio shows. “We had excellent training sessions. With more and more shows, editing, audio recordings or operating audio boards became much easier,” says Fakat.

Mamta, Varsha and Saroj joined the team in March 2013. “A friend told me that they were hiring RJs for a local radio channel. I love listening to radio shows. I thought I would give it a try and now I am doing shows on the radio,” says Varsha.

Mewat is mostly inhabited by Meo Muslims. Conservative and patriarchal, Meo families do not even allow their women to be photographed, forget letting their daughters work in a radio station. But the female RJs have a different story to tell. Saroj says, “I come from Kherikela village, which is almost 20



Varsha, Mamta and Saroj of Alfaz E Mewat

**Alfaz E Mewat’s RJ team comprises a bunch of young journalists, none of whom has any background in radio or other media.**

km from where I work. My parents don’t complain. As a matter of fact, they listen to my show every day and say that they love hearing my voice on the radio.”

Tapping into such an orthodox community might have been a problem for any other national media. For a community radio station like Alfaz E Mewat, it hardly posed a challenge.

“In a community radio, the RJs themselves belong to the community. They are not outsiders. Listeners relate to them, some even recognise them. That’s the key to Alfaz E Mewat’s mercurial growth,” says Kumar.

During its test transmission period, between January and February 2012, the station received around 150 calls each day, with requests and suggestions pouring in from all over the district. According to Sohrab, at least 50 people connect with the station through phone-ins and messages every day.

“We present shows with colloquial language and accent. When we are presenting radio plays and recorded songs and announcements, we do it completely in Mewati. This helps the audience connect with the station better,” says Kumar.

On the channel’s female audience, he says, “Initially, we didn’t get calls from women on our show. Whatever few we got, they didn’t wish to reveal their names. So I thought, instead of announcing ourselves as ‘Aapka dost, Manish (your

friend, Manish),” we started saying, “Aap ke saath hoon main, Manish Bhai (I am Manish and I am here with you as a brother).” Incredibly, soon after that we had calls from women pouring in. It’s these small changes that really matter in connectivity.”

Alfaz E Mewat presents a variety of shows that provide infotainment in its truest sense. There are interviews and live discussion sessions with doctors and ministry officials, radio plays on issues troubling villagers, agricultural news, employment news, sanitation, health, rural heritage, education, forestry and rural governance. Also, there are light doses of entertainment with Sufi songs and Mewati folklore.

All the shows are devised and scripted by the RJs. Some songs used in plays and shows are performed and recorded by the RJ team itself. “The reason community radios fail,” says Kumar, “is because they start forcing information upon the audience, regardless of demand for it or its usefulness.”

To understand what the audience wants, the RJ team goes into villages regularly and organises narrowcasting of their shows. Narrowcasting is a process where one or more presenters radiocast a show to a small live audience. They provide the audience with headphones, and present a 20 or 25 minute live show. The audience feedback is immediate and is recorded to improve the shows.

“Alfaz E Mewat’s RJs make the listeners feel that the channel belongs to them. It’s open to their suggestions, needs and demands. That’s essential for any community radio to succeed,” says Kumar.

Haroon Khan of Malab village is a regular listener. He says, “Being a farmer myself, I especially look forward to their *Krishi Khabar* (agricultural news). My family loves their educational *Gali Gali Sim Sim* and the melodious *Sufi Mehfil*.”

“I want to help people, that is why I am here. I still have a lot left to learn,” says Sohrab. ■

# ‘WE HAVE BEEN JUGGLING HIV STATISTICS’

Civil Society News  
New Delhi

IS the spread of HIV/AIDS in India on the decline, as some official reports suggest, or do the numbers tell only part of the story? Should the Indian health authorities be congratulating themselves or worrying about ground realities, which don't seem to be coming to public notice? Several issues are involved. There are entrenched social taboos when it comes to sex and there are the poor systems of a creaking and neglected healthcare system. It is also not known how efficient sentinel services are, even if they are in place.

Civil Society spoke to Dr Chiranjeeb Kakoty, Director, NESPYM (North East Society for the Promotion of Youth and Masses), and Area Convener, NNCRC (National NGO Child Rights Coalition), who has rich field experience, particularly in the northeastern states.

Dr Kakoty pioneered the campaign against HIV/AIDS in the northeast. In 1991, when information about AIDS was just beginning to sink in, Dr Kakoty and NESPYM had already begun educating schoolchildren in Guwahati, Assam, about HIV/AIDS. He shared his knowledge with the Assam State AIDs Control Society (ASACS) when it was formed and was instrumental in the Assam government introducing AIDS education in schools.

Dr Kakoty has worked with a range of people vulnerable to HIV/AIDS – from the impoverished migrants of Bandiya Char, a sandbank in the Brahmaputra river, to sex workers at a railway junction in Assam. Dr Kakoty has also integrated his work on HIV/AIDS with nutrition, microfinance and gender justice.

**India has recently been praised for reducing the incidence of HIV/AIDS. How significant is this? What do the numbers mean?**

It appears there was some basic misunderstanding about the extent of HIV affliction in the initial phases. That was where, I feel, opportunities and resources were lost in checking it in a better way. In 2006, India was regarded as one of the worst-affected countries with an estimated six million people infected with HIV. However, in 2007, there was a revision of the estimates and the figure came down by nearly half to two-and-a-half million. If we had worked with this estimate from the beginning, efforts would have been much better directed. It is a pity that we should be wasting resources which have to be repaid to lenders.

**Is the reduction in numbers the same thing as reduced vulnerability?**

I have always maintained that HIV is not just about numbers. We seem to have been juggling with statistics. Statistics tell just part of the story. Even if just one person in India is not covered by the anti-retroviral therapy, we need to label that as a gap. Our experience with malaria and TB should have taught us some lessons.

Is the common man or woman really empowered enough to prevent himself or herself from being infected with HIV? How many of us really have the courage to question our to-be spouse or our present spouse about any high-risk practices – sexual or otherwise?

The HIV Sentinel Surveillance 2010-2011

**‘Statistics tell just part of the story. Even if just one person in India is not covered by the anti-retroviral therapy, we need to label that as a gap. Our experience with malaria and TB should have taught us some lessons.’**

Technical Report states that the HIV epidemic in India is concentrated and heterogeneous in its geographical spread. The impact of interventions could be noted in places where HIV was visible and where interventions were started earlier. However, emerging epidemics are observed in some low and very low-prevalence states. Pockets of high HIV incidence and greater vulnerability continue to exist in the general population as well as in high-risk groups, which require focused attention.

The spread of HIV is primarily due to personal behaviour. Unfortunately, we continue to treat sex as a taboo. But the desire to have sex can be overpowering. If safe sex is to be promoted, the social attitude to sex has to change in India. It is a shame that we have not been able to let young people grow up with an understanding that sex and love, even though they are not necessarily synonymous, should be consensual. The current ostrich-like attitude will not help.



Dr Chiranjeeb Kakoty: "Social attitudes to sex have to change."

I am not at all comfortable with the term 'sex education.' Like a newborn baby who does not have to be taught how to suckle, an individual need not be taught how to have sex. It is innate. But how to indulge in healthy and responsible sexual behaviour should be articulated loud and clear.

When I interact with people not only in the northeast but in other parts of the country, they ask me when should sex education start. I maintain that it should be from the time a child learns to brush his or her teeth. We teach children how to brush their teeth and how to wash their hair and clean their nails, why do we falter when we need to tell them that they also need to take care of their genitals? Parents must provide this awareness.

**What is the picture like in the northeast where you have been working and HIV/AIDS has been a big problem?**

"Getting to Zero: Zero new HIV infections. Zero discrimination. Zero AIDS-related deaths," is what international and hence national and local state players have been shouting from the rooftops. While, on the one hand, much seems to have been achieved, it would be inappropriate to label this slowdown as a reversal. The total number of people living with HIV reduced from 2,106,227 to 2,088,642. States which were labelled low-prevalence and were considered unable to pose serious threats, are showing a rising trend though statistics may show that the all-India trend is one of slowing down.

Since we are obsessed with the high-prevalence





**‘There has been a hue and cry about making pre-marriage HIV testing for couples compulsory. That just cannot be a solution in the Indian context where even the date of birth can be changed.’**

of people away. It is still a fact that people have the ‘it cannot happen to me’ perception in spite of being involved in practices that increase vulnerability to acquiring the infection.

Even state government players had and still have this attitude – this can happen in other states, but not in my state. This is a normal human defence mechanism but as long as it persists the fire will continue to smoulder. There has been a hue and cry about making pre-marriage HIV testing for couples compulsory. That just cannot be a solution in the Indian context where even the date of birth can be changed and all possible records doctored. Parents want to marry off girls under any circumstances, so chances are high that consenting parties will prevail on each other – invariably at the cost of the girl.

**What is it that we can learn from the efforts to control HIV/AIDS in India?**

It would be wrong to look at HIV in isolation. It has to be looked at against a wider canvas of access to information and education, economic status, religious beliefs or disbeliefs, the present global situation, access to medical and health facilities (not only the therapeutic ones), power dynamics among people and, most important, the mindsets of people about members of the opposite sex, sexual activity and life overall.

There is a need for multiple approaches in our effort to contain HIV. There has been much talk of bringing about a convergence of various stakeholders and government departments, but the reality is that HIV/AIDS is seen as the responsibility of only the health system. There is a lot of lip service but no real broader action. Perhaps the large amounts of money pumped into fighting HIV are a deterrent to effective action. ■

states and the priority given to them is much higher, states that have not been given this priority appear to be showing a steeper rise.

It has been highlighted that the spread of HIV through blood transfusion has nearly stopped. The reality seems different. The plans and guidelines may be in place, but there are gaps.

Just a few months ago, infected blood transfusion, flouting all guidelines, in one of the district hospitals in Assam made the headlines. It showed systemic failures. The judiciary had to intervene. Professional blood donors exist by the hordes and they are selling blood at a hefty price. The attitude of staff working in blood banks towards non-remunerated unlinked

voluntary donors keeps these type of people away from the noble act of donating blood.

**How good are India’s sentinel services? How much do we reliably know about prevalence?**

India has about 1,500 HIV sentinel sites – 700 for antenatal women, 200 for people with sexually transmitted diseases and about 500 for ‘high-risk groups.’ It is not about the number of sites. It is more about how effectively the sites are being used and how efficiently they are able to deliver. There are numerous centres where any individual can walk in and get tested for HIV. But the fear of lack of privacy and breaking of confidentiality keeps a number

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**Civil Society**

READ US. WE READ YOU.

# A people's manifesto for the

Civil Society News  
New Delhi

THE Pension Parishad was held once again at Jantar Mantar in early December to demand that decent pensions be sanctioned for the aged by the government. Under the canopy, the elderly listened quietly, sometimes bursting into slogans.

The agenda of the Pension Parishad included drawing up a 'People's Manifesto' that could be given to political parties ahead of the general election. A range of people's movements participated to ensure that the issues they were fighting for – the right to education, health, water, food, shelter, gender rights and employment – were included in the manifesto.

"The People's Manifesto will be given to political parties as an agenda for the general election," said Nikhil Dey of the Mazdoor Kisan Shakti Sangathan (MKSS). "Our week-long dharna is for political parties to revert to the principles enshrined in the Constitution, in the Preamble and the Directive Principles of State Policy, and the vision of Indian society as laid down by the Constitution."

The country has 14.29 crore elderly people above 54 years and 70 per cent of them live in rural India. The aged, who have spent their lives slaving in the informal sector as construction workers, domestic workers, rickshaw pullers, labourers and so on, are left with no money when they become too old to work. But they have built India's economy, its infrastructure and services sector and the government should pay them a decent pension.

Currently, the Central government gives only



The elderly are willing to fight for a decent pension

₹200 per month as pension to persons above 60 years of age classified as BPL (Below Poverty Line). Pension is a concurrent subject and the amount the states pay varies greatly. Goa pays the most (₹2,000) and the northeastern states the least (₹50).

The Pension Parishad demanded that all widows above 18, single women above 40 and those with

disability above 40 per cent should also receive pension. Pension should be universal and not confined to BPL persons.

Also, pensions should be indexed to inflation and paid every month. A transparent delivery system should be put in place and the list of recipients posted on a website and at the pension office. A grievance

# RTI hero wanted his village to

Civil Society News  
New Delhi

STEPPED in the white sands of the Thar desert, Jaisla village is arid and backward. It has just one main road and a sparse bus service. This village of 8,000 people is in Jodhpur zilla in Phalodi tehsil of Rajasthan. It would probably be hard to find on a map.

But Jaisla has created history. It is the first village in western Rajasthan to file as many as 250 Right to Information (RTI) applications – thanks to two valiant activists, Budha Ram Bishnoi and Shambhu Ram.

On October 7, Shambhu Ram paid the price for taking on the powerful sarpanch of Jaisla, Soda Ram, and his cronies. He was battered to death with rods and died on the way to hospital.

His brother, Bhanwar Lal, and friend, Budha Ram Bishnoi, attended the Pension Parishad. They explained how Shambhu became an RTI activist. "I have a PhD in Political Science," said Budha Ram. "I was studying in MDM College in Ajmer. I always wondered why my village, Jaisla, was so poor. I went home and began to file RTIs, enquiring about government schemes for our village. Shambhuji had



Bhanwar Lal and Budha Ram Bishnoi

studied up to Class 10. He was inspired by what I was doing and we decided to team up."

In 2008, Budha Ram filed an RTI enquiring about job cards issued in his village. He received no reply. So he logged into the National Rural Employment Guarantee Act's (NREGA) website and downloaded the list of job cards that had been given out. He found that Soda Ram had issued job cards to people who had either migrated or were dead. Next, he

downloaded muster rolls and found those too were full of fake names. At the job site, the male mate did not have the requisite qualifications. "The male mate should have studied up to Class 10 and the female mate up to Class 8. But the mate who was there had taken someone else's marksheet and inserted his name," said Budha Ram.

Shambhu complained to the anti-corruption bureau in Jodhpur and filed a case in the High Court. The two activists confronted Soda Ram but no action was taken despite their strenuous efforts.

"We also found out that the sarpanch runs our village ration shop. Through our RTI application we discovered that the BPL and APL ration cards were all fake. The sarpanch himself was collecting the rations. Another RTI application revealed that Soda Ram had changed the route of a road being built in the village under the Pradhan Mantri Sadak Yojana to suit himself. We uncovered a tubewell scandal too, that he was heading. Under the Swachha Dhara scheme he was supposed to sink tubewells for drinking water. The central government gives 90 per cent of the money and the state government gives 10 per cent to the local NGO implementing the scheme. The sarpanch floated his own NGO, Marudhar Vikas

# elections

redressal mechanism should exist so that the elderly do not have to deal with red tape. Activists are asking for a single window clearance mechanism.

“The Central government has agreed that the elderly should get proper pension. But, to implement it, the government must sanction money. The National Social Security Board has a budget of only ₹1,000 crore. The onus has been put on the states,” said veteran unionist, Baba Adhav.

Apart from pension, a number of significant demands were also flagged.

Jagdeep Chhokar of the Association for Democratic Reforms (ADR) said that political parties must be declared public authorities and be brought under the RTI.

Paul Divakar of the National Coalition on SCP-TSP Legislation (NACSTL) demanded that the Special Component Plan and Tribal Sub Plan Bill be passed by Parliament.

Annie Raja of the All India Women's Federation asked for 33 per cent reservation for women, land rights and implementation of the Child Marriage Act. Anjali Bhardwaj of the National Campaign for People's Right to Information (NCPRI) demanded that Parliament pass the whistleblowers protection Bill and the grievance redressal Bill. The Jan Lokpal law alone will not bring down corruption. It must be accompanied with a law that ensures smooth delivery of public services and entitlements, she said.

Other demands included quality education, affordable healthcare, water, voting rights for the homeless and land rights. ■

## PENSION PARISHAD

**N**IKHIL Dey of the Mazdoor Kisan Shakti Sangathan (MKSS) spoke to *Civil Society* about framing a people's manifesto and the need to forge a union of people's movements.

**You are putting together a people's manifesto. What is its significance?**

Many people's movements have contributed significantly to how policy should be framed, sometimes as a countervailing force, and sometimes as the voice of the voiceless. Often, they

have bettered technical understanding and put forward a more holistic perspective on these issues. As a result, India has become well-known for having single-issue people's movements. The critique is that these are uni-dimensional and do not take the larger picture into account. That is a false notion.

We realise that, to take an issue to its conclusion, you have to spend a lot of time understanding it and overcoming vested interests. I may not work on the Bhopal issue. But people who have been fighting for the Bhopal victims know this issue inside out and I know their credentials are perfect. They come and speak, and I very quickly understand and extend my support as I would on caste oppression, communalism and gender issues. So when I do that, then we are offering a holistic alternative. We are coming together to support each other, not to compete with each other.

We have now started dealing with a lot of cross-cutting issues like governance and democracy. So you have a framework that is holistic and when you put it together it begins to take the shape of an alternative manifesto.

**The MKSS has been known for its work on the right to information and employment guarantee. But, for over a year, we see the MKSS taking a keen interest in varied issues. Are you building a rainbow coalition?**

It is our effort to build a rainbow coalition. Everyone tells us, you are not the mainstream. But if you add Dalits, tribals, women, the disabled and children, we are the mainstream. Our country is made up of many pluralities. If you are part of those pluralities then you are the mainstream. So a rainbow coalition is but a natural progression. Yes, if there is an attack on the RTI the MKSS will certainly spring to its defence. But the MKSS and every other group here realises that we need to build these alliances in an open, inclusive fashion and give each other strength. We need to make sure that people who are fighting for Dalit rights have the support of those fighting for tribal rights and they have the support of those fighting for women's rights. Only then will a rainbow coalition truly get its strength.

**Are there plans to convert this coalition into a federation?**

There is already great cooperation. We do not want to force anything. Things may emerge on their own.

# 'We are building a rainbow coalition'

LAKSHMAN ANAND



Nikhil Dey

But this loose coalition is functioning quite well.

The draft document for a people's manifesto will be available for anyone to use and change as they like. The document will make no claims. We will take it to state level and try to hold a Jan Manch. We will give the document to political parties. When they draw up their manifestoes they can include our people's manifesto as well.

**Are political parties more sensitive now to the issues you are raising?**

Yes, there is no doubt. Finally, we acknowledge that it is the political system that has to pass laws. We want to engage with Parliament. We want consultative processes. We don't want to replace them. We want political parties to be strong, accountable and transparent. We don't want them weak, which is why we engage and have dialogue with them all the time. The expertise that we have is not theoretical but grounded in realities.

**Is there anything you would like political parties to take up on a priority basis?**

Everything, actually. But, yes, there are two important issues. One is the pre-legislative consultative process because that puts in place a sound, mature system of involving people in the process of making laws and policies. It doesn't replace Parliament or parties in any way. It just tells Parliament and political parties that you have to talk to those affected by such policies. So that is a kind of generic measure that would deepen democracy greatly.

The second is this paradigm of growth at the cost of the people. We certainly want to change it because unless you look at the environment, at people, at equity, you cannot have a sound development framework. ■

# prosper

Samiti, and pocketed ₹45 lakh," said Budha Ram.

Soda Ram got four tubewells dug on his own fields. He was supposed to sink a tubewell for the benefit of the villagers whose water is brackish. Shambhu confronted him and was killed soon after. Soda Ram has now disappeared. His brother and son, who were arrested, are now out of police custody.

Shambhu was 35 and categorised as BPL (Below Poverty Line). He leaves behind four children, two boys and two girls. "We would like the government to declare him a martyr and help his family with compensation. My brother had just two *bighas* of arid land," said his grieving brother, Bhanwar Lal.

The epicentre of corruption in Jaisla, as in many villages, is the sarpanch. Since panchayat elections are not closely monitored, it was through RTI applications that Shambhu and Budha Ram learnt that the sarpanch had submitted false information in the nomination form. He did not disclose that he has 13 criminal cases against him and is a history sheeter.

The government sanctions huge amounts for welfare schemes. This money attracts criminals to the post of sarpanch. Once elected, the gains are huge. Budha Ram said around ₹3 crore had been siphoned over the years by the gram panchayat. ■

# Tribals say no to tourism

**Tanushree Gangopadhyay**  
Ahmedabad

A scenic tribal village beside the Narmada river, in Gujarat's Narmada district, has erupted in protests. Tribals from 70 villages around the Sardar Sarovar dam in Kevadiya colony have been agitating in Indravarna village against the government's move to acquire their land for tourism. "Let them first rehabilitate our kin from six villages, including Kevadiya, who were evicted four decades ago," they say.

The Kevadiya Development Authority (KADA) is set to acquire 70 villages around the dam, 29 of which lie in densely forested areas. Plans are on the anvil to develop the area for 'world class tourism' with hotels, a golf course, camping grounds and trekking trails, among other infrastructure.

The Statue of Unity, a 597-foot statue of Sardar Patel, is proposed to be built on Sadhu Tekri, a hillock 3.2 km from the dam. Billed to be the world's tallest statue, it is slated to be a major attraction. The project also includes a garden, museum, research institutes and so on.

The statue will be built under the Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel Rashtriya Ekta Trust which has given the mammoth project to a consortium of Turner Construction under a PPP. The statue will take 56 months to be completed and will cost ₹2,063 crore. The Gujarat government has allocated ₹100 crore. The rest will be collected from the people.

But the tribals don't want any of it. "We will rule our villages. We want development, not destruction. We will give up our lives but not our land. We will fight and we shall win," they chant.

Ramesh Tadvi, a tribal leader, says, "Our ancestors are buried on these sacred lands." And the women cry out, "How can we tolerate the destruction of Ma Narmada and the trees, our gods?" The tribals are upset as the statue will be located on a hillock that they regard as sacred.

Garudeshwar Weir, 13 km downstream of the Narmada dam, which will engulf seven villages, including Indravarna, Garudeshwar and Gora, has become the hub of the protest. There is anger against the displacement that will be caused by both the weir and the tourism project.

The Gujarat government is adamant on continuing with the tourism-cum-statue project despite no social and environmental clearances. The Environmental Sub-Group (ESG) of the Narmada Control Authority (NCA), headed by Shekhar Singh, has written to N.D. Rajgopal, Secretary of the Union Ministry of Environment and Forest (MoEF), reiterating that the project should be stopped as there were far-reaching environmental, ecological and social impacts involved which required study. Since the colossal statue will be built on the riverbed in a seismic belt, its ecological aspects cannot be undermined.

Activists allege that the Gujarat government has been trying to prevent them from holding public meetings here. Rohit Prajapati and other activists from the Paryavaran Suraksha Samiti, Vadodara, were arrested and prevented from reaching

Kevadiya when the foundation stone for the statue was laid on 31 October. Earlier, on 2 October, there was heavy police bandobast for a meeting and tribals were not allowed to enter Indravarna while the bridge in Garudeshwar was cordoned off.

"Women from Indravarna, Piparia and Garudeshwar go to the weir site and stop the run-

**The Statue of Unity, a 597-foot statue of Sardar Patel, is proposed to be built on Sadhu Tekri, a hillock 3.2 km from the dam.**

ning of JCBs regularly," said Susheelaben Tadvi, a tribal leader. "We have been protesting against the Garudeshwar weir which will evict us. The foundation of the weir is on my field."

KADA chief executive officer D.B. Rahevar says that they sought the consent of the panchayats but did not receive any reply. The government plans to use the Town Planning Act for developing the project. The CEO of the Sardar Sarovar Narmada Nigam Ltd. (SSNNL), J.N. Singh, in Gandhinagar refused to speak to this correspondent.

The panchayats want development under the Panchayat Act and not under the Town Planning Act. They do not want to give up their traditional livelihoods of farming and fishing to get the urban tag, says Lakhani Musafir, a member of the KADA Virodhi Samiti. Bhailalbhai Tadvi, sarpanch, exhorted the people, "With one voice we proclaim on Hiraji Tekri on Gandhi Jayanti Day, that we shall not bequeath our fertile lands for hotels. We don't want our children to become slaves on their own lands."

Medha Patkar of the Narmada Bachao Andolan (NBA), who has worked in these areas, says, "₹2,063 crore allocated for the Sardar statue is more than the rehabilitation package for 250 villages (submerged by the Narmada dam) and a township." She points out that attempts to urbanise forest-dwelling communities without sensitive socio-economic and ecological planning could

have adverse impacts. Installing a mammoth statue in a densely forested area would affect downstream villages.

As for the size of the statue, reputed sculptor Ashish Das is overwhelmed by its size. "A sculpture of 597 feet is beyond my imagination. I have never heard of or visualised such a colossal height, hence I cannot comment. It requires a multi-pronged approach. The participatory approach of collecting metal (from each of India's villages) is a fascinating idea but mere scrap steel will not suffice. The quality of the metal is of utmost importance. Infrastructure for purification and processing, and visualisation of the distance are very important factors."

Foisting urbanisation and tourism in a primarily rural and tribal area has its own share of problems. Domestic tourism is age-old in the Narmada area, as this is the only river in the country where pilgrims perform *parikrama* through the year. There are many ancient temples along the river, says Rajni Dave, editor of *Bhumiputra* who has lived on the banks of the river for many years. "However, we have noticed that many people are now encroaching on these temples. I have also heard of rampant land-grab during the past 10 to 12 years." He is concerned with plans to force tourism here and likened it to the perversions it has caused in Goa. ■

## APPLICATIONS INVITED

For

### GIRISH SANT MEMORIAL YOUNG RESEARCHER FELLOWSHIP 2014

Prayas and several friends and well-wishers of Girish Sant, a pioneering policy researcher and public interest advocate in the energy sector who passed away unexpectedly in February 2012, have set up a Young Researcher Fellowship (YRF) to encourage young researchers to imbibe his values and approach of high quality analysis, commitment to social equity and emphasis on policy impacts. The objectives of the fellowship are to encourage young Indian researchers to take up public interest oriented research and advocacy in the Indian energy sector, and to provide some financial and professional support to youngsters at an early stage of their career.

- Applications are invited from interested candidates to avail of the fellowship for 2014.
- The fellowship is open to all Indians below the age of 35.
  - The last date for submitting fellowship applications is **January 31, 2014.**
  - Please visit <http://tinyurl.com/yrf2014> or write to [gsmryf@prayaspune.org](mailto:gsmryf@prayaspune.org) for more details on the fellowship and how to apply for it.
- Please visit [www.prayaspune.org/peg](http://www.prayaspune.org/peg) for more information about Prayas (Energy Group) and the work of Girish Sant.

# Talking rights, duties

**Shayak Majumder**  
Gurgaon

IT was an encouraging gathering of people that took place on the front lawn of the Marriott Hotel, Gurgaon, on 1 December, with some of them having biked to the venue while others had strolled over from their homes nearby. They had come together for Citizen Café, a meet facilitated by We, The People – an NGO that brings together people from various backgrounds to evaluate their role as citizens and to discuss civic issues.

Citizen Café, in turn, is part of Constitution Connect – a nationwide campaign aimed to bring the Constitution of India back into the mind of the middle class, which can discuss its efficacy, flaws, and the extent to which it is being adhered to.

Forty such Citizen Cafes are being held all over the country, in Mumbai, Gurgaon, Delhi, Lucknow, and other places to mark the second season of Constitution Connect, from 26 November (marking the day the Constitution was enacted) until 26 January (the day it was enforced).

The Gurgaon Citizen Café saw around 30 citizens, comprising corporate executives, journalists, activists, students and others. Vineeta Singh of We, The People explained, “We were inspired by the World Café model and adopted it for Citizen Café.” In the World Café conversational process, groups of people discuss a topic at several tables, with periodic switching of individuals between tables.

At a Citizen Café meet, the facilitator sets off the discussion by reading out the Preamble of the Constitution. After that, three questions are put to the participants, which launches the discussion process.

This year, the three questions were: How important is it for me to engage with my community? Which civic issue do I most identify with? What action can I commit to, especially in the civic issue that I identify with? The issues raised by the participants varied from garbage disposal and the state of government schools to the building of an Appu Ghar near the Huda City Centre.

Nisha Singh, Councillor, Municipal Corporation of Gurgaon, also attended the Café. She said, “The Café is very effective in making citizens learn the roles of the elected representatives. It also helps them learn the proper procedures of filing a complaint or accessing the right authority.”

Vineeta Singh says, “The Café helps in spreading knowledge of proper governance and the Indian Constitution among the people. During introductory rounds, some people would fail to answer what a preamble is. But, at the end of the session, people walk out with a drive to make a change for the better.”

The awareness promoted by Citizen Café doesn't end with the session. Volunteers of We, The People stay in touch with the participants, helping them to put their thoughts into practice and connecting them to responsible authorities and citizen groups. ■

# Youthful MAD tries

**Rakesh Agrawal**  
Dehradun

HEAPS of garbage rise at almost every corner of Dehradun, Uttarakhand's capital city. On a recent Sunday, 24 November, a particular eyesore – the huge trash heap just behind the Congress Bhawan – became the setting for a unique press conference, organised by a group of youngsters who have been earnestly trying to clean up the city for more than two years.

Making a Difference by Being Different (MAD) was formed in June 2011 by a group of students, barely out of school, who decided to join hands to tackle the garbage problem. Like other residents, they were fed up with the mounting garbage while politicians and officials of the Dehradun Municipal Corporation (DMC), simply passed the buck to a private, profit-oriented company, the Doon Valley Waste Management Association (DVWMA). This firm had undertaken a public-private-partnership agreement with the DMC for door-to-door collection of garbage, segregation of biodegradable waste and recycling.

However, it failed to do this owing to a longstanding dispute with the DMC over payment. In October 2012, though, it claimed to go high-tech by introducing gadgets in door-to-door collection. Its solid waste processing plant at Shishambara in Selaqui, about 22 km outside the city, has failed to start as the land transfer could not take place.

When MAD was set up, the young members' readiness to dip their hands into mounds of garbage stirred the consciousness of citizens, authorities and politicians alike. As Ahijay Negi, 20, coordinator, MAD, recalls, “A young lady asked us, you look educated, why are you soiling your hands in trash?”

The youngsters conduct a clean-up drive every Sunday – removing garbage dumped by people and choosing the dirtiest spots with the largest mounds of trash. Initially, people were amused to see well-dressed boys and girls, wearing gloves, using shovels and buckets to remove garbage. Slowly, their work began to be appreciated and then people also began lending them a helping hand. In October 2011, an elderly gentleman and a middle-aged woman in a posh colony worked alongside them.

In December 2011, MAD prepared a report based on a survey of 16 garbage-prone areas in 45 wards of the city and on the 1993 Planning Commission report. The youngsters also proposed a massive campaign jointly with the DMC in every ward, coupled with sustained awareness programmes, and met politicians and officials with the proposal. It was in vain. The Chief Minister, Vijay Bahuguna, met them only after repeated requests and simply ignored the issue, including the garbage report. The Mayor, District Magistrate and Chief Health Officer, Nagar Nigam, took no notice of their cause.

Between December 2011 and September 2013, they submitted their report about 15 times. Meanwhile, the situation in the 16 pinpointed areas has deteriorated manifold.

The group has hardly any resources as they are



MAD volunteers picking up trash at Neshvillia Road



An elderly man joins MAD in cleaning up

not an NGO and use their pocket money for this cause. So, rather than attempt to keep the entire city clean, they have chosen a few pockets and conducted more than 80 clean-up drives so far.

One such pocket is Bihari Basti, a slum dominated by Bihari migrants who are largely daily wage labourers. “We were very disappointed with the apathetic attitude of the Uttarakhand government towards keeping the city clean and the abject poverty in the *basti*, so we tried our best to make the lives of these people a little better,” says Negi.

Bihari Basti has been MAD's *karmabhumi* where it has conducted over 40 campaigns. And, as the group realised, trash was not as big an issue for the *basti* residents as poverty, hunger and lack of education. The youngsters decided to address these issues first, so that the slum dwellers could be involved in keeping the area clean.

They first called a meeting of the children and offered sandwiches, biscuits and toothpaste along

# to clean up Dehradun



PICTURES BY RAKESH AGRAWAL

Volunteers teach children in Bihari Basti

**The youngsters conduct a clean-up drive every Sunday – removing garbage dumped by people and choosing the dirtiest spots with the largest mounds.**

with books and stationery. Both the children and adults in the *basti* were drawn and slowly MAD started holding informal classes and teaching them reading, writing and math after identifying those most keen to learn.

After three Sundays of classes, the group found it was getting a positive response from the parents. “The tuition by these bright youths will help our children cope with their studies in school where masters (teachers) don’t teach them at all and will also encourage those who don’t go to school,” said Bimala Yadav, a rag-picker.

At the same time, MAD volunteers are happy to be putting their own education to this use. “While we have the best of tuition, these poor children

don’t even have competent schoolteachers. Maybe we can make them functionally literate,” said Soumya Sharma, who studies at Convent of Jesus and Mary, Dehradun.

Now, the clean-up drive in the *basti* has been streamlined and its residents come out in hordes to help MAD volunteers every Sunday. “If these rich kids can soil their hands in our garbage, why shouldn’t we?” commented Govind Singh, a *basti* resident and a casual labourer.

Another area where MAD works is Neshvilla Road, a centrally located residential and commercial locality – a single-lane road that joins Rajpur Road, a posh commercial area. “We chose Neshvilla Road as upwardly mobile residents live here and the

locality has many fancy stores and offices,” said Sarayu Vasan, a MAD volunteer. For months, the group gathered here every Sunday, cleaning the area and putting up posters and distributing pamphlets. To make it a long-lasting and sustainable effort, the youngsters established a committee of local residents, shopkeepers and homemakers who now meet regularly and plan future activities.

“We not only join them in the cleaning drive, but also take care not to throw muck on the street,” said Anjali Sethi, a homemaker and member of the MAD-Neshvilla Road Samiti. And another member, shopkeeper Lal Chand Sharma, added, “We help them as it is in our own interest. If the locality is clean, it will attract business.”

Yet, unlike these citizens, the DMC officials whose job it is to keep the city clean remain unmoved by MAD’s work. “Our small practical suggestions like shifting dustbins a little farther, erecting fences on either side of the narrow road and providing gloves to *safai karamcharis* were ignored by the DMC,” rued Aakash Bhatia, a MAD volunteer. This negates their efforts as people keep throwing garbage into these dustbins from car windows and it often lands on the street instead. This is one reason why the huge garbage dump behind the Congress Bhawan does not diminish.

Happily, the local media has supported the youngsters. After its coverage, Pritam Panwar, Urban Development Minister, Uttarakhand, held an emergency meeting and took away the responsibility of collecting garbage in 20 of the city’s 60 wards from the DVWMA, while ordering the DMC to clear the blocked payment of ₹11.5 lakh. M.H. Khan, Principal Secretary, Urban Development, was seen picking up garbage from the street with other employees and he lambasted the DMC for mismanaging the garbage problem.

So, while the authorities are ready to pay lakhs of rupees to a private company to carry out what is essentially their task, it is left to some forward-looking youngsters with a vision in their heads and a dream in their hearts to make a difference. ■

## SAMITA’S WORLD

by SAMITA RATHOR



# Where marriage is simple

**Shree Padre**  
Kasaragod

**L**AST November, as happens every year, a mass marriage ceremony took place at a temple in Perne in Kerala. Over 10,000 people attended. This temple is the only place where couples belonging to the Ganagu or Patali community living along the Kerala-Karnataka border can get married. Marriage ceremonies at home are taboo for them and so couples wait for the temple to hold its mass marriage ceremony twice a year – in November and March.

“There are two fundamental principles behind this custom,” explains Mahalinga Patali, Secretary of the Vaniya-Ganiga Samaja Seva Sangha. “The first is to maintain a sense of equality between the haves and have-nots. The other is to ensure that marriage is not a financial burden for any family.”

The Perne Muchchilot Bhagavathy temple, 20 km from Kasaragod in Kerala, draws a huge crowd from far and near for the mass marriages. All the married elders who come are extremely nostalgic – because each got married here several years ago.

The rituals are simple, lasting just half an hour. The groom’s family pays ₹600 to the temple while the bride’s family pays ₹400. The two families have to bring their wedding clothes, *thali* (wedding necklace) and other paraphernalia. The marriages are solemnised on an especially constructed dais, 10 couples at a time. This year saw 39 couples getting married.

Though no documents or historical details are easily available, it is believed that the custom is a few centuries old. Every octogenarian at the ceremony recalled, “Even my grandfather used to say that he got married here and the custom was prevalent since his childhood.”

The community, which has surnames such as Patali, Ganiga, Vaniyan and Saphaliga or Saphalya, used to make a living by extracting oil from coconuts. Gana, the traditional wooden extracting system, gave it the surname of Ganiga. With the advent of rotary mills and their innovations, the community no longer has a hold over oil extraction. A 100-year-old *gana* has been kept in a room at the Perne temple, in memory of their old profession.

Until 25 years ago, the Perne mass marriage used to be conducted only once a year, in March – on the auspicious day after *vrischchika sankramana*. Since the day is fixed, the entire community knows of it and wedding invitations are not printed.

Also, no registration or booking is done at the temple. The couples and their families arrive at the temple the previous evening. So the precise number of couples to be married is known only on the morning of the day itself. In March this year, there were 40 couples.

With the community spreading out and following various professions, a single wedding day in the year made things difficult. So, 25 years ago, another *mahurat* was created – on the full moon day of *meena masa* in November.

Meals are served to all those who attend with volunteers cooking and serving food from 8 am to 5 pm. Over the years, the temple authorities have built a massive hall after buying adjacent land.



Newly wed couples being blessed by their elders



Flowers being presented to the bride's mother

The temple goddess, Bhagavathy, is believed to have come from Karivellur, located on the southern bank of the Chandragiri river that flows in Kasaragod district. Though there are families of this community in areas south of Chandragiri and in Dakshina Kannada district, this unique custom of mass marriages is observed only by the 2,100 families of Ganigas who live in a smaller area.

Each family pays a ‘house fee’ of ₹200 to the temple annually. *Pattekkaras* are assigned to collect the fee from a specific area. The expenditure for a mass marriage comes to around ₹6 lakh. Apart from this fee, visiting members offer money and other contributions during the occasion.

“Despite affluence or social status, no family breaks the rule. Everyone comes here to get married,” emphasises Jayantha Patali, a panchayat member and community leader. According to him, it is fear of the goddess’ wrath that makes every family observe the custom. “Though thousands of people gather, there are no quarrels. Even for our Kaliyata Mahotsava, a still bigger event conducted

every 12 years, policemen come but they have never had to intervene,” he adds.

However, second marriages and inter-caste marriages are not entertained. Asked if such couples had come and been turned away by the committee, Mahalinga Patali says, “If there are some stray couples, they don’t venture to come to the temple.”

Manoj, a groom, works in Dubai for a private company. He came to India twice for his marriage – for the engagement a few weeks earlier and then

for the wedding. “Our friends and contacts circle is quite big. Everyone is not able to come to the temple for the marriage. We host a reception at home after the marriage,” he explained. His family spent ₹5 lakh for the reception and a lakh for the engagement.

So, despite the principle of simple rituals, rich and poor sharing the same hall, dining room and stage, many grooms like Manoj invariably host receptions befitting their financial status. In many cases, the cost of the photos and video of the engagement is several times the actual wedding expense.

Asked about dowry, Jayantha Patali says, “By and large, dowry is not prevalent. The bride’s family giving gold to their daughter voluntarily doesn’t amount to dowry. This reception or tea-party hosting is also a development of the last two or three decades. It has become a necessity as a result of growing social contacts and status. What is really important is that for an estimated 50 per cent of poor families, the mass marriage is a boon because it spares them the extra financial burden.” ■

# AAP AND BEYOND

## Broom as a lightning rod for people's anger

Civil Society News

New Delhi

IT was the day of counting and with the trends trickling in anonymous men and women, waving brooms, danced joyously in the street outside the office of the Aam Aadmi Party (AAP). As scenes go, the spontaneous celebration told the story of the Delhi Assembly elections well. AAP's gains, with its symbol of the humble broom held high, came from votes cast against both the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) and the Congress, the two big parties.

In barely 16 months after it was launched, AAP had demolished the Congress and dented the BJP (by taking away two per cent of its votes) right in the heart of the Indian capital where money, influence and muscle power are known to hold sway.

It was an explosion of pent-up anger and resentment. For ordinary people, this was a victory over entrenched interests. The broom had served as the lightning rod for their frustrations.

So, though in the final result the BJP got 32 seats, AAP 28 and the Congress eight, it was AAP that was really regarded as having won. When it did form the government, after some initial hesitation, there was in vast numbers of people unhappy with traditional politicians a sense of personal satisfaction.

Voters had sent out a significant message to the established parties and AAP's success had proud owners among first-time candidates, volunteers and ordinary citizens with no previous taste of political involvement. They had all contributed and the impossible had happened.

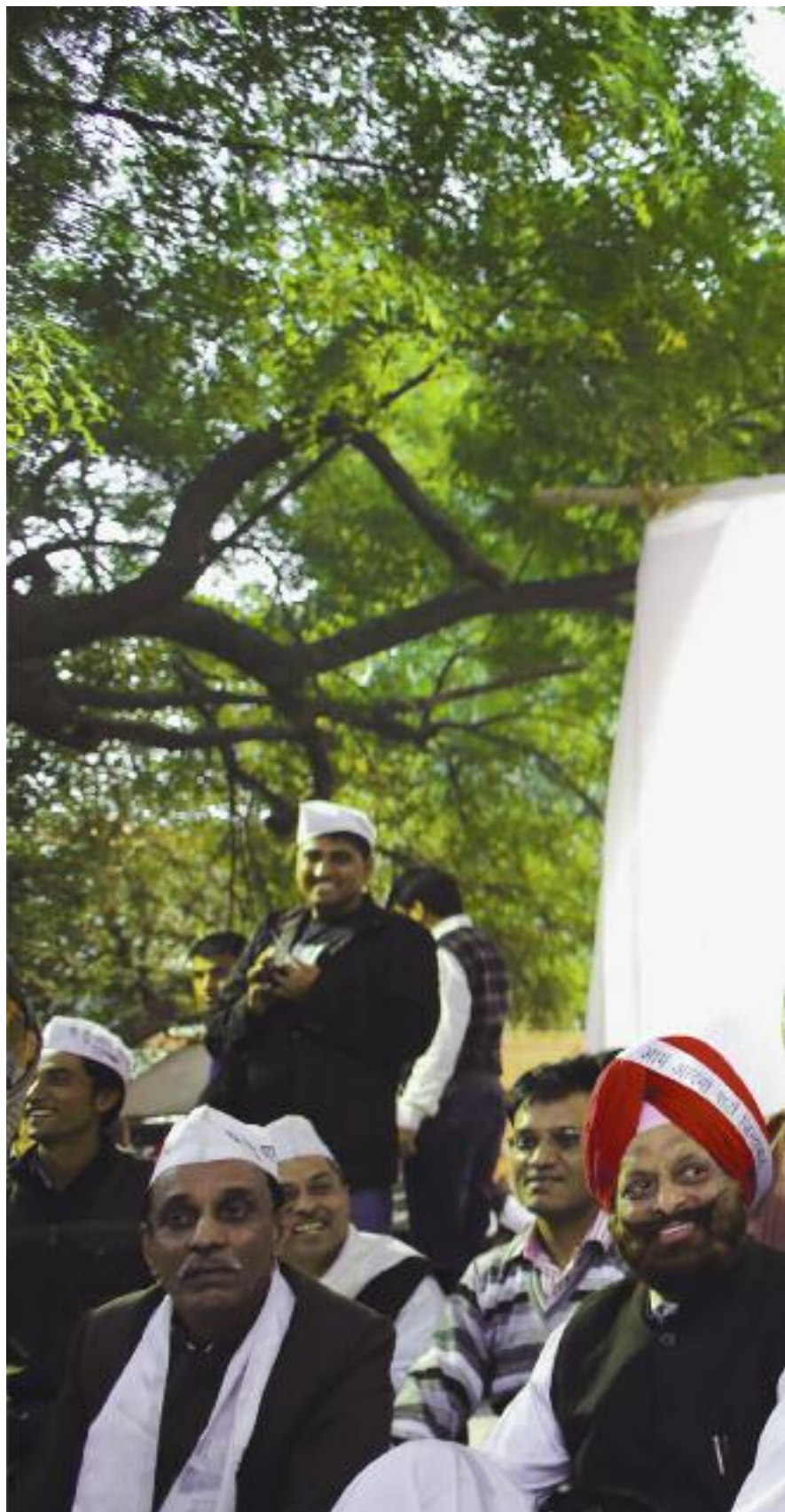
Corruption, runaway inflation and collapsing urban services had sealed the Congress' fate after three terms in office in Delhi. It was set to lose. But AAP's audacious bid for power went beyond this. People saw in AAP an assertion of their own rights and an opportunity to shake a ruling elite obsessed with privileges.

In spirit, this was an uprising not unlike the one witnessed in Tahrir Square in Cairo, with the difference that it was smaller, peaceful and within a democratic framework.

But barely had AAP begun enjoying its success when it found itself coping with the challenges of being in politics. Called upon to form the government, it shied away from the responsibility for two weeks. In a somewhat bizarre development, the AAP leadership decided to hold locality-level meetings and send out 2.5 million letters asking voters what to do. Voters were also told to SMS their advice.

Very quickly AAP began losing its newly earned goodwill. Questions began to be asked. Was it a movement or a political party or merely some kind of protest that had arrived on time to fill a vacuum?

To add to AAP's stress, the Congress saw a Lokpal Bill through Parliament. A Lokpal, or ombudsman, to deal with corruption has been a key (some say the only) point on the agenda of the AAP leadership. But now the credit for creating a Lokpal goes to the Congress and Rahul Gandhi and to the BJP, too, for supporting the Bill's passage through Parliament.



Arvind Kejriwal at AAP's victory rally

Matters seemed to get stickier with Anna Hazare disowning AAP leaders like Arvind Kejriwal, indicating they had been opportunistic and manipulative in their politics. In the same breadth, Hazare welcomed the Congress' Lokpal Bill.

Hazare, a crusader much feared in Maharashtra, had earlier been mentor to the AAP leaders. They had ridden to prominence on his shoulders during a national anti-corruption movement. His decision to disown them was embarrassing and presented a moral challenge.

### DELHI'S DISPARITIES

There are many ingredients in AAP's election victory in Delhi. The city is the centre of political and administrative power. Those who corner influence and wealth think nothing of putting their status on display. For others, there are rising incomes and aspirations. Migrants turn up here to earn more, but they don't





necessarily live better. The disparities in civic services are in fact stark. Even the middle class finds it tough to gain access to water, housing, schools, healthcare and transportation. The very poor have been picked up from slums and dumped in squalid resettlement colonies on the fringes.

Where reforms have worked, such as in electricity distribution, bills have shot up. Private power distributors are accused of inflating costs in underhand deals and burdening the consumer.

AAP has succeeded in being the timely voice of people struggling to cope with urban problems. The party has succeeded in resonating the anger of people. Its votes come from both the middle class and the poor because both were fed up of waiting for governance to improve.

At a victory rally held at Jantar Mantar a day after the results, emotions ran high. The slogan that truly defined the mood was the AAP cry: “*Desh ka neta*

*kaisa ho, aam aadmi jaisa ho!* (What should a leader be like? He should be like an ordinary person.)”

Till well into the evening, Jantar Mantar overflowed with people who came from all over Delhi. They arrived by choice and when there wasn't space on the road for any more of them, they climbed trees to get a view of the stage.

The AAP supporters were thrilled at having turned the tables on Delhi's powerful. Loud cheers went up as the names of the winning AAP candidates were called out and their humble antecedents emphasised.

But the loudest approval was for the challenges thrown to the leaders of the Congress and the BJP.

“Let Arun Jaitley give up the comfort of the Rajya Sabha and contest any Lok Sabha seat in Delhi. We will take him on,” said Kumar Vishwas, one of AAP's leaders. The crowd roared its approval.

## QUICK FIX OR SOLUTION?

AAP has clearly managed to strike a chord, but can it meet the expectations it has aroused? Is AAP a quick fix or a long-term solution? Have people found the answer to the problem of poor governance or is there a lot more churning coming up? The jury is out on such questions.

The challenge before AAP is to transform itself from a protest movement into a political party with vision and a long-term philosophy.

The anti-corruption agitation with Anna Hazare made headlines even if it delivered nothing substantial. It was certainly a wake-up call for politicians of all hues. A small band of agitators showed how they could rapidly build a big base of support on the issue of corruption and even force the mighty Central government into a corner.

Similarly, the Delhi Assembly election was a David vs. Goliath encounter. The Congress and the BJP were too big to lose. But AAP, led by the redoubtable Kejriwal, changed the rules of engagement. The new party swamped social media and ensured it got coverage across newspapers and TV channels. It sent volunteers deep into neighbourhoods to take its message to voters in their homes.

AAP leaders and candidates were real – they could be touched and felt. They spoke a language people understood and raised concerns everyone easily shared. They were unlike the leaders of the established parties who were aloof and had forgotten what it is like to take a bus or walk on the street.

## COMPETITIVE POPULISM

But while AAP built its special identity by changing the rules of the game in multiple ways, the election promises it made laid it open to the charge of indulging in competitive populism. It offered all that the Congress has not been able to provide in three terms: good government schools and hospitals, free water supply, cheaper electricity, dependable public transport and safety for women.

The question is whether AAP can deliver on these counts or has the party put together an obvious laundry list to swing votes?

Dr Jayaprakash Narayan of the Lok Satta party applauds AAP, but says he worries “about competitive populism at the cost of the long-term public good.”

Lok Satta was launched as a party in 2006 in Hyderabad because Narayan has for long been a passionate advocate of clean politics and qualified people contesting elections.

He says he needs to look much more closely at what AAP is promising the voters, but it is important to remember that the means are more important than the end.

“You have to curb your impulses,” explains Narayan, “because while you may improve the nature of the electoral process, I don’t think you will be able to improve the outcome in our country.”

He sees AAP as having scored high in dealing with money power and hereditary power. But in the promises it is making to voters, there is the danger that it could be overreaching itself.

“That’s the tough thing,” Narayan says. “Lok Satta has never yielded to that temptation. If anything, we spoke out quite vocally about (populist promises). I am sure they (the AAP leaders) will take a close look and review this.”

Narayan questions the wisdom of going back to the voters for approval on issues like forming a government or not. “I can appreciate the anxiety to involve people in decision-making, but beyond a small number, direct democracy does not work,” he says. “As a representative it is your job to lead people and not just give them what they want. Very often what people want is in the short term. As a leader it is your responsibility to think of the long term.”

## MOVEMENT OR PARTY?

Dunu Roy of the Hazard Centre, which works closely with the urban poor, says it is unclear how AAP hopes to keep the promises it has made.

“I am not sure you can bring down the cost of electricity by 50 per cent unless you subsidise it. So I don’t know how they are going to do that. They say they are against privatisation, but they don’t say where the government will find the money to substitute private investment needed for economic growth,” says Roy.

“Whether it is housing, water supply, healthcare or education, AAP’s promises are not matched by strategies,” says Roy.

Roy believes that AAP has benefitted from the breakdown of governance in the country. “It has tapped into widespread disaffection with the Congress and in the process made promises it may not be able to keep,” says Roy.

Roy regards AAP as at best a protest against corruption, which has caught the



*Victorious AAP volunteers and supporters with brooms and caps*



*Women volunteers listening to Arvind Kejriwal*



attention of people. He wouldn't give AAP the status of a movement because a movement is defined by a vision for the future. Nor can AAP be called a party, according to Roy, because it hasn't formulated policies around the ideas it says it stands for.

Professor of Sociology, Dipankar Gupta's assessment is somewhat similar. "AAP is a good idea, but it is built on negativity, which is okay for this round, perhaps. It is a party meant for today, but I don't know about tomorrow," says Gupta, whose book, *Revolution from Above: India's Future and the Citizen Elite*, has recently been published.

Gupta sees AAP as more of a movement than a party. "A movement by definition is suicidal. It works towards its own annihilation when it is successful," he says. "A party continues and this party has a strong movement element built into it."

Gupta finds a lack of vision in AAP. "They are saying they will not be using cars with beacons, will not be corrupt. There is no health policy, no education policy – which the others also do not have."

Gupta draws an interesting parallel between capitalism and democracy. "Whenever capitalism makes a breakthrough it is not out of sheer desire to make more money, but to see something new and adventurous happening," he explains. "Likewise, in democracy, if you see the history of democracy, when things did change it was because people thought differently and that brought them votes. They didn't think votes and then make those changes."

Far-reaching change comes from the citizen elite or "citizens of calling," says Gupta, because they can look beyond the needs of the present to aspirations of the future.

While liberty and equality are important, it is in fraternity and the strengthening of citizenship that democracy thrives. Societies that have made big leaps have invested in fraternity in the long term and created lasting foundations. A citizen elite has led the way.

AAP's leadership seems to fail to qualify as "citizens of calling" because they prefer to mirror today's realities rather than shape the future. In this respect AAP has shown itself to be no different to the other parties.

India's big leap would come from a citizen elite with the vision to usher in universal healthcare, education, housing and so on from which will come a stronger economy. Such a vision needs to go beyond the arithmetic of election victories and annual GDP growth figures.

Anupam Mishra of the Gandhi Peace Foundation is known for his documentation of traditional water systems in India. He has also worked among communities at the grassroots and been a keen observer of movements.

"AAP must first of all understand why people have voted for it," he says. "It shouldn't confuse slogans with vision. You can't run a government on slogans. Fighting corruption, for instance, is necessary, but it cannot be the basis for governance. In fact, sometimes corruption is the fuel that the system runs on."

Mishra says water is an issue on which AAP could have shown it is a party of the future. Instead of promising people in Delhi free water, the party should have prepared them for the truth.

"It is not sustainable to bring water to Delhi from distant locations. What is needed is a culture of conservation and collection. Politicians who wish to make a difference need to lead people to such an orientation."

The Delhi election verdict has raised hopes that politics can change. AAP has shown that people across professions are ready to be actively part of an election process.

AAP's idea of consulting people through multiple referendums may not be entirely workable. But the fact is that *mohalla sabhas* or neighbourhood assemblies have been held in large numbers across Delhi, fostering participation by ordinary people on a scale never witnessed before.

Prithvi Reddy of the AAP National Executive tells us in Bengaluru that AAP has 12,000 registered and engaged members. Asked if AAP can influence an election in Karnataka, he says: "If I crunch the numbers it looks very achievable. In the past few Lok Sabha elections in Bengaluru the winner has got about 350,000 votes or maybe 400,000 votes. This means we need about 1.2 million votes to win the election. Simple math tells me that 12,000 volunteers need to ensure that each gets the support of 100 people. We are saying get one vote for AAP per day. This then has a compounding effect and becomes a bigger movement."

Such confidence would have been difficult to come by earlier. So also the involvement of someone like Prithvi Reddy, who is an entrepreneur. There are innumerable others like him who have come out of the anti-corruption agitation. But whether they can seriously impact Indian politics and make AAP a party that prepares India for the future remains to be seen.

# AAP's candidates inspired

## Four profiles of new leaders with a difference

### SURENDER SINGH

#### ARMY CANTONMENT

Surender Singh is a busy man. After his win from Delhi Cantonment, everyone wants to talk to him. Dressed in military attire, he is holding rallies all over, thanking his voters and trying to address the problems in his area, one at a time.

He is no stranger to a jam-packed life. Having served the Indian Army for "14 years, 3 months and 10 days," he has seen action in the Kargil war, Operation Parakram and Operation Black Thunder as an NSG commando during the 26/11 terror attacks in Mumbai.

Pointing to the hearing device on his right ear, Singh says, "I lost my hearing in a grenade attack during the 26/11 operation. I didn't get any proper medical attention." For over 19 months, he had to run from one ministry official to the other in order to receive his pension. He believes dirty politics was at play behind this. "The ruling Congress party had to face the brunt of the public anger. The recent elections simply reflected that," he says.

Singh is one of the founding members of the AAP. He says, "The AAP has helped reduce the distance between the public and the ministers. There is now a sense of trust and connection between the two."

His army background makes voters trust him, he says. "Indian citizens respect the army. They believe that an armyman can bring about efficiency in the governance system," he says.

During campaigning, he went from door to door in his constituency. "We spoke to them personally, promising to solve all problems once we came to power," he says.

According to Singh, the biggest problem in his area is lease mutation and freehold property. "Due to the actions of corrupt ministers, the houses didn't belong to residents. In order to renew the lease or even for repairing broken roofs, the officials asked for huge sums of money. We will put a stop to this," says Singh.

He adds, "The other major problems are the poor condition of parks, careless disposal of garbage, low availability of drinking water and security of residents. Wherever I am going, I am talking to the responsible authority there and trying to solve the issue as soon as possible."

Asked about the road ahead, his response was like a veteran war hero's. "Once you are in power, it is not hard to accomplish tasks. All you need is willpower."

### AKHILESH PATI TRIPATHI

#### MODEL TOWN

Akhilesh Pati Tripathi came to Delhi aspiring to be a civil servant. Having cleared the IAS mains twice, he failed to crack the interview. However, unlike other heartbroken students, this simple fellow from UP turned his attention to helping out the residents of the Lalbagh slums.

The soft-spoken Tripathi comes from an entirely non-political family; his father is a retired schoolteacher. With his bearded face and simple clothes, he looks an ordinary citizen.

Tripathi volunteered during the anti-corruption movements led by Anna Hazare. When the AAP was formed, he became a full-time member and was selected as the Model Town candidate for the polls. He went on to defeat BJP stalwart Ashok Goel.

But it wasn't an easy win. He lived in the Lalbagh slum to be close to people. "I wanted to have a closer look at the public issues in Lalbagh, Kishorebagh, Kishorenagar, Kamlanagar and Gulabi Bagh areas. So I started living in Lalbagh and centred my protests in those areas," says Tripathi.

The biggest problem was the non-availability of ration items. "The ration mafia made it difficult for the residents to avail of the ration system. I led a movement against them." As a consequence, he was beaten up by the mafia and was in hospital for a week. He says, "The mafia attack somehow helped me gain the trust of the slumdwellers. After that, they rallied behind me."

He launched the Nashamukti Andolan, to get rid of marijuana and alcohol in Lalbagh. "We also went ahead with the ration and oil campaign, along with



Commando Surender Singh standing on stage at the AAP victory rally

a campaign for clean drinking water, which resulted in regular supply of pure water via tankers in the slums," says Tripathi.

He was jailed several times. "I was imprisoned three times during the anti-corruption movement and once when I raised the issue of the rape and murder of a girl in the Rana Pratap Bagh area," says Tripathi. "Opposition leaders alleged that I was involved in the murder and had me arrested along with 18 colleagues of mine." Tripathi and the others were released after 12 days, due to relentless rallies and protests staged by the AAP.

He believes that all those hardships have made him a stronger man. He says, "Having seen the reality up close, I will work for the people by being among the people."

### BANDANA KUMARI

#### SHALIMAR BAGH

A few years ago, at a parent-teacher meeting in her son's school, the principal asked Bandana Kumari, "What do you want your son to be?" She replied, "I want him to be an IAS officer." Her son retorted, "I don't want to be an IAS officer, I don't want to be a minister's servant."

Bandana still recalls her son's response with a shudder. "There is a negative

# trust

impression regarding politics and politicians among the public. It is necessary to change this perception," she says.

Winning from Shalimar Bagh by a landslide, she aims to change the way politicians are publicly perceived.

Even before joining AAP, she had been fighting for poor women's rights. "Whenever I saw a situation where a woman was abused or harmed, I rushed to help in whatever way I could," she says.

Her NGO, Nayi Peahal, works for women's empowerment and awareness of girl child rights and safety. "When we approached any ministry official to release funds for our work, they asked for hefty commissions. If we didn't pay, they simply wouldn't release the funds," she says. She has worked in the insurance sector, in a private lawyer's office and in a book company, and has found

## SAURABH BHARDWAJ

**GREATER KAILASH**

Saurabh Bhardwaj is one of AAP's young faces. Born and brought up in Chirag village of New Delhi, he won the Greater Kailash seat by a landslide. But back in 2005, he was just another software engineer based in Hyderabad.

One morning, while surfing the news on TV, he came across a poor blind man's story. His seven-year-old daughter had been molested by her aunt's brother-in-law in Maharashtra but he couldn't appeal to the authorities because the hospital never gave him the child's medical report. Bhardwaj helped him recover the report by filing RTIs and approaching the State Human Rights Commission.

Even then, he couldn't move the Maharashtra Sessions Court as the lawyers made a fuss over translating the case into Marathi. Frustrated by the lawyers' attitude, Bhardwaj decided to study law. He enrolled in Osmania University, Hyderabad. "My uncle is a lawyer, my grandfather was one too. I always had an interest in the law," says Bhardwaj. His tireless work on the case led the court to convict the accused for a five-year term.



*Saurabh Bhardwaj greets a shopowner during his door to door campaigning*

that, in every sector, it's common for government officials to seek commissions.

"The system is not corrupt," she says, "the people who run it are corrupt." According to her, the police are not irresponsible by choice. "Even they are under pressure from corrupt politicians," she points out.

She has been involved with the AAP since the Jan Lokpal protests in 2010. "I literally lived in the Ramlila grounds during the protests for over 13 days, supporting Anna Hazare's cause and fasting with him."

She could relate to Arvind Kejriwal's saying that the only way to cleanse dirty politics was by getting into the dirt oneself. "I enrolled for candidature from my constituency," she says, "I was shortlisted with a few other volunteers and was selected after the public voted for me as a candidate."

During campaigning, she visited most of the houses in her constituency, talking to the voters, listening to their problems and promising a change for the better.

After winning, she has promised to address the issue of rising electricity tariff and prices of vegetables, groceries, gas cylinders and other consumer items. She says she will continue working for women's safety.

Now that she is a people's representative, has it become hard for her to stand up to expectations? "Not at all. I will continue working hard. There is a slight increase in responsibilities now, but I am ready for it," she says.

In 2011, he shifted to Delhi and started working in a Gurgaon-based IT company. "It was then that Anna Hazare's anti-corruption movement took place. Every day, I would go to the protest site. I could relate to Anna's stand against corruption." Bhardwaj became a full-time volunteer for the AAP on its inception in 2012. "I took part in various AAP protests. But I was just a volunteer and never a party office-bearer," he says. When candidates were being enrolled in April 2013, Bhardwaj registered his name. "I got a lot of help from my party colleagues and volunteers during campaigning. I never even thought I would be selected a candidate, let alone win," he adds.

Now, people are pouring into his house throughout the day. Some are congratulating him while others are keen to tell him about the problems they face. Asked how it feels to be recognised as a political leader, he says, "It feels strange. When I was making rounds of polling booths on voting day, people who didn't even know my face would come and say that they voted for me."

Herein lies the core power of AAP, he feels. "This is not a leader-driven party. This is a party driven by the people."

He identifies traffic congestion and water availability as the two biggest concerns in his constituency. "We will hold town hall meetings in each area. The MLA fund will be transformed into a Janata Fund for public use only." ■

*Reported by Shayak Majumder*

# BUSINESS

ENTERPRISE | CSR | ICT | GREEN TECH

## Rural India knows its mind

### Villagers speak to Mobile Vaani

Chetna Verma  
New Delhi

PEOPLE living in urban areas may not react to “Johar! Mobile Vaani mein aapka swagat hai...” but this salutation is a comforting welcome for nearly 100,000 villagers in the remotest hamlets of Jharkhand. They connect every day to Jharkhand Mobile Vaani, a unique voice-based social platform. Rajiv Murmoo, a 41-year-old farmer from Santhal Pargana, a tribal village, has found a new friend in Jharkhand Mobile Vaani whom he can call anytime to report a corrupt practice or to find solutions to a problem.

Mobile Vaani was started by Gram Vaani (Voice of Villages), a social technology company based in Delhi to reverse the flow of information – that is, make it bottom-up instead of top-down.

Gram Vaani was co-founded by Dr Aaditeshwar Seth in 2009. The idea took shape when he participated in a competition in 2008 as a PhD student in Canada. The competition was organised by the Nike Foundation to explore the potential of community radio in India. Realising that a large chunk of the rural population could be left out of the development process if appropriate steps were not taken in time, the Government of India had started promoting community radio. The Nike Foundation competition invited young minds to devise software that first-time users of community radio could operate easily.

Dr Seth, who was at that time researching Internet connectivity in rural India, won the competition. It provided him a grant that allowed him to set up Gram Vaani. This was his first step into the world of social development.

The first product that Gram Vaani launched was GRINS (Gramin Radio Inter-Networking System), an integrated software solution for running a community radio station that allows programme scheduling and play-out, full telephony and SMS integration, Internet streaming, content management and statistical analysis of play-out history.

The initial plan, to connect rural India with policy-makers, was to have 3,000-4,000 community radio stations across the country. Sadly, this has not happened. Five years on, there are only 125 radio stations, of which 35 use the GRINS platform across 12 states. Stations have used GRINS to do live broadcasts of the National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme (NREGS) and panchayat meetings. Schools have played *antakshari* over the phone and broadcast it on radio via GRINS. A station has even run a reality show on folk music similar to



GRAM VAANI

Children reciting poetry on Mobile Vaani in Ranchi

**A Mobile Vaani user has to dial a number that connects him to the server which then provides a variety of options – to share, complain, learn or seek the content he wants.**

*Indian Idol*, and used GRINS to track votes by listeners. Other stations have used the IVR (phone-based menu) feature of GRINS to record answers to quizzes, comments on problems with NREGS and the Public Distribution System, anonymous reporting of events, and other purposes.

Being a social enterprise, Gram Vaani earns revenues by licensing its technology to other non-profits to run community radio stations, helplines, data collection activities, and so on. Working with non-profits acquainted Gram Vaani with the challenges they face in doing impact assessment and social

audit reports. According to Ashish Tandon, Vice President, Business Development and Strategy, “Often, there is bickering between the donors and the executing agencies regarding impact assessment reports. Donors do not want hand-written reports saying 10,000 families were impacted, they want to know each and every touch point – have you actually met the family? Do you have details of the beneficiaries in these reports? Have they said that you impacted their lives?”

The team realised that even if it was a for-profit company for a social cause, it required a vision and a mission tied to objectives which could be measured in real time. This was the area where they could work to find interesting solutions to address the needs of the non-profits. The challenge gave Dr. Seth the motivation to start working on what is now known as v-Automate Voice Solutions. Under v-Automate, there is a variety of products that can be used for conducting surveys, setting up rural call centres and so on. v-Automate attracted more clients for Gram Vaani, both non-profits and corporate.

There was another issue that the Gram Vaani team thought was important to address – the digital divide. The urban population has easy access to

the Internet but in rural areas, where a family of seven survives on a meagre income of ₹2,000, the question of Internet connectivity does not arise, leaving them behind in the contemporary model of development.

“The way social media was used in the recent election campaigns to make people aware of corrupt politicians has set an example before us. Just imagine, if this happens at the national level, thanks to the digital divide, 70 per cent of our population with no access to the Internet will be left out from being a part of the revolution,” said Tandon.

The team was aware that the Internet cannot be a solution until a certain economic level is achieved. While thinking of innovative, out-of-the-box solutions, they recognised that rural communities already have a technology which they not only possess but are very comfortable using mobile phones. Thus was born Mobile Vaani.

A Mobile Vaani user has to dial a number that connects him to the server which then provides a variety of options – to share, complain, learn or even seek the content he is interested in. At the end, users can leave their comments and participate in ongoing surveys. Unlike radio’s unidirectional bombardment of information, Mobile Vaani engages the community and gives people a platform to voice opinions.

According to Shailendra Sinha, a Dumka-based journalist, “Mobile Vaani has become the voice of the rural people. Villagers, long neglected by the government and media alike, have finally got a platform where they can discuss issues regarding health, unemployment and education without fear and be reasonably confident of receiving a reply



Ashish Tandon: “The perception of villagers has changed”

**The content of the campaigns comes from the villagers themselves, as they participate in the v-survey programme of Mobile Vaani.**

from the concerned authorities.”

A person sitting in Latehar can listen to someone in Ranchi who is more educated and informed. In addition, current affairs programmes are also being generated regularly, with two anchors picking up a newspaper and discussing the national and local news in an entertaining manner yet providing essential information to listeners.

Villagers are now aware of decisions being taken in New Delhi that can affect their lives, directly or indirectly. “One of the impacts of Mobile Vaani is that it changed the perception of villagers. For example, a community meant 100-odd households to an illiterate villager. They were unaware of the

LAKSHMAN ANAND

concept of administrative blocks that together constitute a district and so on. Listening to Mobile Vaani changed such definitions for villagers eking out a living outside the development ambit of the government,” points out Tandon.

The content of the campaigns comes from the villagers themselves, as they participate in the v-survey programme of Mobile Vaani. The most popular issues are then taken up for campaigns. The team uses creative means like theatre and debating sessions to address the issues. The content generated in one programme becomes part of future activities.

In addition to interactions using voice technology, Mobile Vaani has 22 community representatives working in the field in various districts of Jharkhand. They reach out to villagers, organise meetings where they not only discuss social issues but also get a chance to sing folk songs or narrate fables. However, there is less participation from women in meetings and surveys. “That is a challenge we

are facing. Though the situation has improved with programmes being designed specifically for women, we need greater participation of women,” says Tandon.

Now in its fifth year, Gram Vaani has faced challenges such as convincing donors about how technology could empower communities and help deliver the objectives of a project. But, with several impact stories being written on the ground, the team is confident of extending its roots across the country. According to Dr Seth, much has changed in their five-year journey. Though one thing that will never change is their vision of empowered communities. ■

Charkha Features

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# Lighting up India

Arjun Sen  
New Delhi

IN 2010, when Vasant Agarwal turned 62, his only son advised him to return to India and retire. Agarwal listened to him and to his own heart. Life in the US was too hectic. Besides, he had achieved what he wanted to. He had built a business worth \$14 million, selling wine accessories. Handing over his firm, True Fabrications, to his Harvard-educated son, Agarwal came back to his large house in a posh part of Delhi.

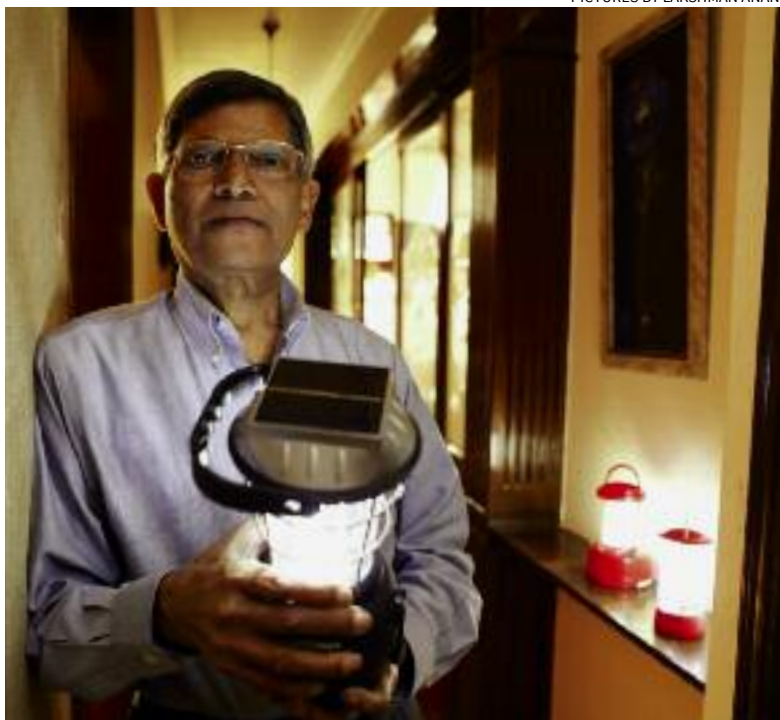
But the rather frail-looking man could not quite retire. His entrepreneurial spirit and energetic mind told him that the only way he could enjoy the rest of his life was by starting yet another venture – this time a for-profit social enterprise catering to rural India.

“I had to do something and I saw an opportunity in producing and marketing products needed by people in rural India. So I researched the rural market and came to two major realisations. One, nearly 50 per cent of India’s over 800 million mobile phone subscribers come from rural India. And, two, almost none of them had electricity to recharge their phones when they returned home in the evening. They used a kerosene lamp. This made me focus on lanterns and mobile chargers based on solar energy,” says Agarwal, founder and managing director of Ecomax.

In just six months, Ecomax has notched up sales of over ₹15 lakh with its products. Currently, it offers four types of lamps and an emergency mobile phone charger. The first lamp is priced at just ₹800. It has an LED lamp and battery that can be charged by AC power – useful in rural areas where there might be some power supply in the daytime. The other three products are lamps with mobile phone charging

options. Two are priced at ₹1,300 each. One of them has an in-built solar panel – so all it requires is to be put out in the sun. It emits 200 lumens of light (a kerosene lantern provides only 20 lumens). The other has a small 6 x 8 solar panel. It can be used as a lamp or as a mobile charger.

The fourth product is a tiny emergency mobile phone charger that can be kept in your pocket or purse. It is excellent for the outdoors, especially where you do not have power supply at all. Charge the battery once and after that for three weeks it can recharge your mobile phone. “It is best for defence personnel, disaster management people, corporate field sales personnel or even busy executives,” says Agarwal. Another useful product is Body Guard – a



Vasant Agarwal with a solar lamp

small patch of eucalyptus oil that can be worn on clothes to fend off mosquitoes for eight hours.

Ecomax’s marketing model is equally interesting. It does not try to sell on a retail basis in rural markets. Instead, it has created a database to identify bulk purchasers who would be interested in its products. “We have identified 10 verticals,” says Agarwal. “These are companies doing CSR, NGOs, disaster management organisations, rural departments of the central, state or district administration, defence personnel, companies getting into rural retail such as ITC’s e-choupals or DCM’s Hariyali stores, people going for hiking and camping, students who need emergency recharging, corporate gifting and promotions and other retailers in rural areas,” says Agarwal. “We focus on selling to people who are already in rural areas and doing some work there instead of building our own marketing and distribution network in rural areas.”

Ecomax already has some big clients such as ITC, NTPC, Americares, and Aajeevika. Agarwal adds, “We are also in talks with Greenpeace, Habitat for Humanity, the Sri Sri Ravishankar Foundation and Samhita.”

Most organisations trying to reach India’s underserved rural population get stuck with building their own marketing and distribution networks. Ecomax has taken a different route by supplying to people who already have distribution networks. What remains to be seen is how well this rural marketing model works. So far it seems to be doing well.

Agarwal has spent his professional and business life of more than 35 years dealing in renewable energy, especially solar energy. He is a globally recognised expert in the field. However, like many Indian children, he obeyed his parents and graduated as a chemical engineer. “I didn’t like chemical engineer-

ing so I chose to get a master’s degree in systems engineering from the University of California in Los Angeles. That was back in 1970 when this subject was just beginning to gain traction,” he says.

After post-graduation, Agarwal joined Ernst & Young. “For eight years I was a senior consultant in their energy conservation and renewable energy practice and I was consulting with some of the top Fortune 500 companies,” he says.

In 1980, he quit Ernst & Young and launched a solar photovoltaic panel manufacturing unit in the US. He called it Urja Solar – an Indian name.

The company soon

earned the highest rating from the Solar Rating & Certificate Corporation in the US. “They rate solar energy collectors and our panels turned out to be the best,” he says with pride. But the solar energy business collapsed when Ronald Reagan withdrew the incentives Jimmy Carter had given to promote solar energy.

Unfazed, Agarwal started another business, E-Tech Heat Pumps Inc in 1986. Then in 1998 he began yet another company after he devised a brush-less motor that could be installed on bicycle frames with a 12-volt battery on the handlebars to motorise the bicycles.

In actuality, Agarwal’s eyes were still on India. Meanwhile, yet another idea hit him from the blue. “It’s the custom in the US that if you are invited to a home or a party, you bring a bottle of wine with you. I found that wine stores had ugly paper bags to carry bottles in. You could never ask for a gift pack.”

It was 2005 and Agarwal was back home in Delhi. He went to Chandni Chowk, Karol Bagh and a few other markets in the city and told shop-owners who made paper bags what he wanted. He took a few samples back to the US and showed them to premium wine stores. Within a day, he had picked up orders worth \$3,000 for paper bags for which he would have to pay only about \$300.

“So I started an export-import business sourcing these paper bags from India and selling them to wine stores in the US. I began to earn some \$3,000 a day,” he says. “My son, who was then studying business at Harvard, told me, ‘Dad, this is a great business,’ and we launched True Fabrications Inc.,” he says. “The name is actually a play of words – true and fabrications. Today it is a \$14 million business and we sell everything to do with wine – glasses, wine storage racks, gift packs, bottle openers – except wine itself,” he says.

Then, in 2010, with his son taking over this “business out of nothing”, Agarwal returned to India. For the first few months he did try to lead a retired life, but then his entrepreneurial spirit got the better of him. And he has been charting a new course ever since. ■

Website: [www.ecomaxproducts.com](http://www.ecomaxproducts.com)



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# INSIGHTS

OPINION | ANALYSIS | RESEARCH | IDEAS

## Clean politics a global trend

RAM GIDOOMAL

**W**ITH the 2014 elections looming, now is a good time to take stock and ask the questions: what can political parties offer civil society, and how do we know they can make a difference?

Under India's system of multi-party democracy, political leaders have the means and the wherewithal to make an impact on society's larger social problems. In May, the people will give their collective

increased social and economic inequalities in recent years, the movement's primary goal is to make economic and political relations in all societies less hierarchical, and more evenly distributed. This is becoming a popular desire.

In the US and the UK, everyone wants to see more integrity amongst their leaders whether they are ministers, senators, bankers or CEOs.

India is no different. Yes, India has made some significant improvements in many areas over past years, including infrastructure developments such as roads and airports. It has also enjoyed strong per-

the history of Indian politics, many say that they have integrity but end up being venal like the rest of them (70 per cent of those re-elected to parliament in 2009 had become *crorepatis* in the preceding five years).

Integrity, sincerity, ethics and justice are what I think should be at the forefront of training in politics.

Another party that I am more acquainted with is the Adarsh Rashtriya Vikas Party (ARVP), which has been trying to do all this for the last five years. The party's focus is on bringing integrity back into the heart of Indian politics.

I was impressed by the grassroots nature of the party's initial campaign a couple of years ago, and the fact that it focused on Uttar Pradesh – the largest state in India with over 200 million people and, on its own, the seventh-largest population of



Women queue up to cast their votes in the recent Delhi elections

mandate to the winning party to take action and make a difference.

But will the winning party actually make a difference? At worst, India could be in for more of the same: more street-level hardship, poverty and joblessness, and continuing political inaction and corruption at the top. The Association for Democratic Reforms, a non-profit, says 30 per cent of MPs (162 out of 543) have pending criminal cases against them; and 14 per cent (76 people) face serious criminal charges.

The groundswell of popular disaffection with mainstream politics is not just in India but around the world. That indicates a rapidly-expanding group of citizens who are willing to give the alternatives a go.

Take the international Occupy movement, for example. You may like it or you may loathe it, but you can't ignore it. Protesting against the massively-

formance in business and finance. (India is currently the most attractive investment destination, according to a survey by professional services firm Ernst & Young, beating China and Brazil. It goes to show that global investors have a long-term confidence in India as a good place for investment.)

Citizens are also well aware of India's shortcomings, with the underlying issues of corruption, social inequality and terrorism continuing to proliferate. Anna Hazare's fast, and the campaign for the Lok Pal Bill against corruption are dramatic examples of widespread unhappiness with such matters.

However, the political class can still come up with solutions, and we shouldn't write them all off. For example, the Aam Aadmi Party (AAP) is making waves in Delhi and can have an impact in other parts of the country.

The question is whether those successful will actually adhere to their alleged integrity; knowing

**In the US and the UK, everyone wants to see more integrity amongst their leaders whether they are ministers, senators, bankers or CEOs. India is no different.**

any country in the world! It is an initiative that has the potential to make a real difference.

The training in politics and ethics it gives its candidates is also impressive, and the selection criteria for candidates are among the most rigorous that I have seen. The party does not allow people to have any level of leadership unless they undertake 'ethical training' at their own expense each month. Talk about putting your money where your mouth is!

ARVP says that a party should comprise leaders respected for their integrity and knowledge and who have a heart to serve the people. I like this approach. It also majors on justice (for example, equitable justice under law for every citizen or resident of a state or a country; and equitable distributive justice without consideration of caste, religion or region).

This kind of ethically-led politics is close to my heart, having campaigned as a Mayoral candidate for London, with a values-led agenda. I believe it's the only way to move forward through an otherwise stagnant political landscape.

The six principles that drove my London Mayoral campaign were principles that ethical campaigners

*Continued on page 30*

Continued from page 29

have struggled for throughout history, with some of the most famous and successful being William Temple and William Wilberforce.

**These values are:**

**SOCIAL JUSTICE:** How do we create a fair society, in which justice is given to all, not just to a favoured few who can secure justice, or even unjust advantage, by power or by wealth?

**RESPECT FOR LIFE:** How do we protect the most vulnerable people in our society – the unborn, the poor, the widow, the orphan, the alien and those who are at the end of their lives? How can we ensure that the value and dignity of every individual is respected? How can we try to enable everyone to become what they are capable of becoming?

**RECONCILIATION:** There is such a need for people to be brought into right relationships with each other! This is the case for neighbours as much as for neighbouring countries. Nations spend millions on weapons and on sending huge armies against each other to dispute ownership of territory for oil wells or other natural resources. Reconciliation is the answer.

**ARVP says that a party should comprise leaders respected for their integrity and knowledge and who have a heart to serve the people. I like this approach. It also majors on justice.**

**ACTIVE COMPASSION:** It is not enough to pay lip service to the need for social justice. We have to do something about it, and that includes the empowerment of people who are denied basic rights by our modern society.

**STEWARDSHIP OF RESOURCES:** A key issue the world over! Famines can be caused by natural disaster, but all food shortages are made much worse by human greed. The facts are bald and simple: there is more than enough for all but some of us want most of it for ourselves!

**EMPOWERMENT:** Many people living in the two-thirds world do not even know that they can set up their own businesses and play their part as full members of the global business community.

One of the business objectives I frequently write about is strengthening the supply chain from the two-thirds world by empowering local businesses. We do this with Traidcraft and initiatives like the FTAK business exchange. As a result, there is a real difference on the ground because the poor become empowered through receiving their commercial worth and benefiting from the fruit of their labour.

Use your vote to move India from corruption and stagnation to meaningful change. Throw out the BJP, Congress and the old regional parties. Vote for and support one of the new national ethical parties. ■

# Milestones in the

HIMANSHU THAKKAR

**T**he beginning of the year is a wonderful time to take stock of last year. If we look at India's water sector, the above average rainfall in the 2013 monsoon would mean good agricultural production. But the water sector as a whole is showing increasing signs of trouble.

Let us take a few examples. The most striking crisis of 2013 was the unprecedented flood disaster in Uttarakhand in June where thousands perished. Experts and media called it a man-made disaster with a significant role played by existing and under-construction hydropower projects and other unsustainable infrastructure. The Supreme Court order of 13 August 2013 directed the Ministry of Environment and Forest (MoEF) to set up a committee to look into the role played by existing and under-construction hydropower projects in the disaster and directed that no further clearance be given to any hydropower projects till further orders. This order was possibly the only hopeful sign since the Uttarakhand government, other Himalayan states and Central agencies including the NDMA and MoEF, seem to have learnt no lessons from the disaster.

Earlier, in 2012-13, we saw a triple crisis in Maharashtra. It had the worst drought in 40 years, the worst irrigation scam in independent India and an agitation against diversion of a huge quantity of water from agriculture to the non-agricultural sector without any participatory process. In Andhra Pradesh too, a massive irrigation scam was exposed by the CAG report. In fact, inequity in the distribution of costs and benefits related to water sector projects lie at the heart of the bifurcation of the troubled state.

In Chhattisgarh and downstream Odisha, thermal power plants of massive capacities are going to impact the water situation so fundamentally that big trouble is likely to erupt, affecting several other sectors. The Madhya Pradesh (MP) government is on a big dam-building spree in all its river basins, including the Narmada, Chambal and water-scarce Bundelkhand. All these projects are for canal irrigation – which has failed to add any area to the total net irrigation at national level for over two decades now. We could see a new massive irrigation scam in MP in the coming years, in addition to agitations and interstate disputes. Gujarat too saw a very bad drought in 2012-13, and the perception is increasing that the state government is by design not building the distribution network to take the Narmada dam water to Kutch and Saurashtra, for whom the project was justified and built.

In the northeast, it is now two years since massive agitations led to the stoppage of work at the ongoing 2000 MW Lower Subansiri hydropower project. This is India's largest under-construction hydropower project on which over ₹5,000 crore have been spent without putting in place basic studies or a participatory decision-making process. A similar fate awaits other hydropower projects in the region if the government goes ahead without learning lessons from this episode. In 2013, the Forest Advisory Committee's (FAC) refusal to grant forest



clearance to the 3000 MW Dibang and 1500 MW Tipaimukh projects in the region was a good sign, so is the stoppage of work at the Maphithel dam in Manipur by the National Green Tribunal.

But we have seen no signs of improvement in environment governance. Last year saw the questionable appointment of the former Coal Secretary as chairman of the Expert Appraisal Committee on the River Valley Committee by the MoEF. In fact, several new appointees to the committee do not have any background in environmental issues. The year also began on the wrong note with the environment clearance to the 620 MW Luhri hydropower project in Himachal Pradesh, designed to destroy the last flowing stretch of the Sutlej river. In April 2013, the FAC took the most shocking decision of approving the completely unjustifiable Kalu dam for the Mumbai Metropolitan Region, without any assessments. The same FAC had rejected the proposal earlier and the reasons for that rejection stand even today.

# water sector in 2013



**The most striking crisis of 2013 was the unprecedented flood disaster in Uttarakhand in June where thousands perished. Experts and media called it a man-made disaster.**

In the Western Ghats, the decision of the Union government to dump the Western Ghats Expert Ecology Panel Report (Gadgil Report) and instead in principle accept the much criticised Kasturirangan Committee report has already led to a full blown crisis in Kerala and is threatening to engulf more areas. This crisis was completely avoidable had the MoEF instead used the last two years to encourage public education on the need to implement the Gadgil panel's recommendations.

While relatively poorer states like Rajasthan, Madhya Pradesh, Chhattisgarh and Odisha have shown a big jump in agricultural growth in recent

years, this has come at the cost of a huge depletion in groundwater levels. As Vijayshankar of Samaj Pragati Sahyog said at a conference in Delhi recently, in Rajasthan, the level of groundwater development (ratio of annual groundwater draft to annual utilisable recharge) increased alarmingly from 59 per cent in 1995 to 135 per cent in 2009, indicating that Rajasthan is now in the overexploited category. Of the 236 blocks in Rajasthan, a massive 164 (69 per cent) were in the over-exploited category in 2009. In MP, while groundwater use has moved from 48 to 56 per cent, about 89 blocks out of a total of 313 (28 per cent) are using unsafe levels of groundwater.

This news of groundwater depletion in new areas is a bad sign in the medium and long range. "Over the last four decades, around 84 per cent of the total addition to the net irrigated area has come from groundwater. India is by far the largest and fastest growing consumer of groundwater in the world. But groundwater is being exploited beyond sustainable levels and with an estimated 30 million groundwater structures in play, India may be hurtling towards a serious crisis of groundwater over-extraction and quality deterioration," said Mihir Shah, Planning Commission member, at a recent meeting in Delhi. The 12th Five Year Plan has started a new scheme of mapping India's groundwater aquifers, which is a useful step, but we have yet to crack the puzzle of how to regulate groundwater use to ensure its equitable and sustainable use for priority sectors.

The state of our rivers, reservoirs and other water infrastructure is deteriorating but our water resources establishment has shown little concern for that. The IIT consortium report on the Ganga River Basin Management Plan is due soon, but if the pathetic interim report is any sign, there is little hope there.

The year 2012 ended with the National Water Resources Council approving the National Water Policy 2012. At the end of 2013 we have yet to see a credible plan in place for implementing the provisions of the policy. The Union Ministry of Water Resources proposed a new Draft National Water Framework Law, Draft River Basin Management Bill and draft National Policy Guidelines for water sharing/ distribution amongst states. None of them has reached finality and all of them are likely to be opposed by states as an encroachment on their constitutional domain. In fact, the interstate Mahadayi river conflict has reached a flashpoint with upstream Karnataka and Maharashtra starting dams in the basin without even statutory clearances from the centre or consent from the downstream state of Goa.

While all this looks rather bleak, increasing agitations and protests all over India on water issues is certainly a hopeful sign. More community groups are challenging inadequately done environmental impact assessments (EIA), cumulative impact assessments, basin studies, downstream impact assessments, concepts like eflows etc, raising very informed and pertinent questions. Most of these studies have been the monopoly of select, fraudulent EIA agencies. Critical questions indicate that such studies cannot be done excluding local communities, their knowledge and their concerns. Among other hopeful signs are some of the decisions of the NGT on the Yamuna and other rivers.

The underlying theme of these events is the increasing trend of the State working for corporate interests to the exclusion of people, environment and democracy. It is a challenge for all of us to see how we can reverse this trend.

The year 2013 also marks the end of the current term of the Union government. While there is little to hope from the two main political parties, perhaps the emerging political alternative in Delhi will grow and move in the right direction. Let us hope for the best. ■

*Himanshu Thakkar (<http://sandrp.wordpress.com/>, <http://sandrp.in/>)*

# The rapist's wife

NIGHAT GANDHI

*You have excellent chances of winning.....if you believe that rape is not the end of your life.*

—Nisha Susan in *navelgazing.net*

She's changing the baby when the news comes on. A call centre worker returning from a party at a friend's house last night has been raped by three men. One of the accused is Satyadev, a married man with two children and owner of the mobile phone shop the 19-year-old visited often.

She stares at the screen. Satyadev? Her Satyadev? He hasn't come home, his phone's been switched off every time she tried. She gives the baby his milk and sits down at the edge of the bed. She feels nothing except exhaustion and emptiness as she stares at the running ticker tape stock market numbers, while the voice of a breathless reporter splutters behind rapidly moving images.

Some months later.  
Knock! Knock!  
Who's there?  
The rapist's wife.  
Silence. She knocks again.  
The door opens a crack.  
Who are you?  
I told you I'm your rapist's wife.  
Is this a joke? What do you want?  
I've come to ask you to come and live with me.

What?  
You heard me. Your rapist is in jail and I want you to come and live with me and my two children.

Why?  
Because both of us could keep each other company. We would be much safer and stronger together.

I'm ok here by myself.  
No, you're not! How haggard you look! Anybody can see you're frightened and lonely. And you hate yourself for what happened to you. I do too. We need each other to get over our hurts.

Whoever heard of a rape victim moving in with the wife of her rapist!

It's time we changed the way we think. I can see so many benefits if we do. We wouldn't have to pay two rents. You can keep your call centre job. We'll share the housework. You can pay half my rent. My boys will love you. I don't have much time to play with them. What do you say?

This isn't really happening, right? This is just a story we're stuck in. And the writer, she's manipulating us into doing things her way.

I wouldn't worry about the writer. She's only trying to imagine things in a new way. First of all, you're not a victim. You are a survivor. Just like me.

What difference does it make if I'm a victim or a survivor? I still have nightmares. I'm still taking sleeping pills but I wake up sweating and crying in the night.

So do I.  
What do you mean?

I was a victim. Now I'm a survivor.  
You? A rape survivor?  
She nods.  
Who.....?  
My husband.  
I'm sorry, I never thought...I mean I always thought...  
I'm his wife, how could he rape me?  
I mean yes. No, I mean no.....  
You could file an FIR against him. Who would file mine?  
If it's any consolation, you were raped by one man, I by three.  
I know. I know why you can't sleep.

myself. I cursed my fate. My years with him were about fearing him and hating myself. How many times I thought of dying or leaving. I felt sorry for my sons. I worried about their future. And then this happened and I felt totally alone. I began to think about you but much later. I felt there was something good in this. God has sent you in my life to help us both walk out of the nightmare. It was like a voice urging me on. I had to listen to it.

What did the voice say?  
The voice said: Wake up. Walk out. You've been stuck in a bad dream for six years but you need not stay stuck forever. Go to her. Her pain is not different than yours. She needs you. Share your pain with her. You can heal each other, together you can build a different life.

And you came to look for me?  
Not immediately. I tried to ignore the voice but it became a nuisance. I thought I was going mad.

You are mad. How did you find me?  
I asked around. I had seen you at the shop. We live upstairs. You used to come there. I knew I would find you. There's something mysterious in all this like it's God's will. I don't quite understand it.

Accha, if I move in with you and he gets out of jail and comes straight home. Then what?

Who says he has a home to come back to? Not anymore. Not with me.

Are you sure? You're still married to him. Aren't you afraid of him?

I'm not stuck in the old dream anymore. If we stay stuck we can't change a thing. So come with me. Help me raise my sons. We'll raise them differently. Think before you say no. We've been given a chance of a lifetime.

And how do you know we won't be stepping into another dream worse than the old one?

All I know is we have to step out of this one first. I'm confused. I'm scared.

Fear gets you nowhere. Trust me.

Can I?

Absolutely. Our pain unites us. I'm with you.

You give me hope. I wanted to die ever since this thing....

Nonsense! I used to think about dying too. Why should we be the ones to die? We haven't committed a crime. Look, if you don't trust me, if you don't step out with me now, we lose this chance.

Ever since that night I've been waiting. For life to end.

No! For life to be different. We'll talk no more of dying. Together we will support each other. And others like us. Looks like you haven't had a good meal in a long time. What do you working girls eat? Your hair looks rough as a broom. Needs oiling. Hurry! Get your things.

I still think it's that writer who's treating us as her puppets.

Stop paying the writer so much attention. She's nothing. There's another writer much greater and better than her – the real puppet master who wants us to get a new life. ■



But you could've done something to stop him when he used to....

Like what? How do you know I didn't? He always got his way. He could hit hard. I didn't mind getting hit but you know what made me give in? Fear.

If you had stopped him, maybe he wouldn't have had the nerve to.....he must have done this to other women too. Did he?

I don't know about others. I know about me. He would get drunk with his friends. He would come home and put on one of those films. Then he would come for me. He would force me to watch the films. The women looked so sad, like clowns, all made up and moaning. I didn't ever feel like that. All the time he would be doing his thing, I would think what must it be like for the women? They have to do it with all sorts of men on camera.

They do it for money. You too....

Yes, me too. I was afraid he would leave me. I was always waiting for it to be over, for him to fall asleep. My mother said isn't he taking care of you and the children? What more do you want? Don't come back to us, there's no room for you here. But I'm not scared any more. It's all been good.

Good?

Yes, good. At first I was really angry. When he went to jail, I cried and cried and felt sorry for

## The other Goa

### New film exposes its seamier aspect



Stills from the film, *Baga Beach*

**Saibal Chatterjee**  
Panaji

IN 2009, Goan film director Laxmikant Shetgaonkar put Konkani cinema on the world map with his critically acclaimed debut effort, *Paltadacho Munis* (The Man Beyond the Bridge), which won a major award at the Toronto International Film Festival.

His second fiction film, *Baga Beach – A Season in Paradise*, a gritty and multi-layered drama set on and around the famed tourist destination in the northern part of the coastal state, has all the makings of another significant step forward for the former National School of Drama acting instructor.



Laxmikant Shetgaonkar

**Although his cinema is clearly global in ambition, Shetgaonkar believes in staying true to his cultural roots.**

Although his cinema is clearly global in ambition, Shetgaonkar believes in staying true to his cultural roots and telling stories that are drawn from his own social environs. “*Baga Beach*,” he says, “is markedly different from *Paltadacho Munis* in every conceivable respect – scale, style and substance. It originated from my own personal experiences. I belong to a village in the coastal belt.”

While *Baga Beach* pushes the envelope way beyond the pale of his maiden film, it does share one important commonality with *Paltadacho Munis*. Like the latter, which touched upon questions of environmental degradation, faith and moral taboos, this film, too, tackles a slew of themes related to Goa, specifically to its tourism industry.

Shetgaonkar’s new film, which premiered at the recently held 44th International Film Festival of India (IFFI) as part of the event’s Indian Panorama section, represents a breakthrough in more ways than one. It is Goa’s most expensive film to date.

With *Baga Beach*, the filmmaker not only seeks to demolish the media stereotyping of Goa as a land of ‘fish, feni, fun and freedom,’ he also provides a push to cinema in his state by pulling off a production that has an ensemble cast of

actors drawn from around the country and the world.

Actors from Goa, Mumbai and Kolkata, besides several from Europe, play roles in *Baga Beach*. The only known faces in the cast are Bengali actress Paoli Dam, FTII-trained Akash Sinha and television star Sadia Siddiqui.

Shetgaonkar hopes that *Baga Beach* will provide a fillip to Goan films by triggering a new cinematic movement in the state and enabling local acting talent to share screen space with professionals from outside. “The fact that none of the actors knew each other when the shoot began helped generate just the kind of air of uncertainty that I wanted to create on the screen,” says the director.

Both the editor (Sankalp Meshram) and director of photography (Arup Mandal) were a part of the crew for Shetgaonkar’s first film as well. But their

*Continued on page 34*

Continued from page 33

inputs into the new work are of a timbre of another kind because *Baga Beach* has a different pace, rhythm and feel.

“*Baga Beach – A Season in Paradise* revolves around six characters who make a living on and off the famed tourist spot,” says the writer-director. “But the beach in the title isn’t strictly a physical location in the film. It is more a metaphor for a complex and chaotic place.”

The film addresses many of the darker aspects of life in Goa – drugs, paedophilia, tensions between locals and migrants – through the means of a quartet of overlapping stories.

Its characters are a varied lot. Shobha (Paoli Dam) is a young bead-seller who falls in love with a French tourist (Cedric Ciotteau). Devappa (Akash

each one of them alludes to an actual problem.

Child abuse, one of the thematic elements in *Baga Beach*, is a disturbing reality in Goa. “Four children are abused in the state every day. These are government statistics,” reveals Shetgaonkar.

Many of the characters in *Baga Beach* are vulnerable to exploitation. They strive to rise above their limitations and seek an escape to a better life. A few of them live in denial, hoping against hope that their tribulations will go away one day.

The confusion that besets the characters is reflected in the deliberately ‘disorienting’ manner in which the film is shot and structured. *Baga Beach* has been almost entirely filmed with a handheld camera, which imparts a feverish pace to the film’s first part. As things begin to settle down in terms of the narrative as well as in the minds of the characters, the



Paoli Dam, Akash Sinha, Pramod Salgaonkar, Laxmikant Shetgaonkar and Sagar Salgaonkar at IFFI

Sinha) works as a migrant motorboat rider who dreams of becoming a lifeguard.

Vishu is a spirited 10-year-old boy who survives as a masseur on the beach, while Brendan is a bright young schoolboy whose family has a German émigré (Jean Denis Romer) as a paying guest.

Says Shetgaonkar: “The film’s multiple plotting is a means to reflect the frenetic nature of life here during the six-month tourist season. The idea isn’t to highlight any single problem but the entire welter of issues that confronts Goa today.”

*Baga Beach* deals with the struggles and aspirations of its many characters as they labour to make sense of what is going on around them. The film underscores how tourists, locals and migrants are necessarily dependent on each other for their existence, economically and socially. But most relationships here are unequal, a fact that leads to simmering tensions.

Says Shetgaonkar: “The film does not take any stand on the problems that are addressed because that isn’t my intention. I only want to draw the attention of the audience to the harsh truth that lies beneath the surface.” He adds that none of the stories in the film is inspired by any real incidents, but

***Baga Beach – A Season in Paradise* revolves around six characters that make a living on and off the famed tourist spot.**

camera slows down to the point of becoming almost stagnant.

“That,” says Shetgaonkar, “is the reverse of how most films are structured – slow to begin with and fast-paced at the end.”

The film has many candid camera situations in which the characters, especially the one played by Paoli Dam, mingle with real crowds on the beach and the market around it.

“Shooting for *Baga Beach*,” says Dam, “was unlike any experience I’ve had as an actress.” She recalls a sequence in which the cameraman follows her as

she walks through a market selling beads. “The entire scene had to be done without alerting the tourists and that was a challenge,” she adds.

Three languages – Konkani, English and Hindi – are heard in *Baga Beach*, but the lines spoken by Dam are all in the national language. “That made things easy for me,” she says. However, the Hindi-speaking Akash Sinha had many Konkani lines as he plays a character who, despite being from Karnataka, has lived in Goa for a decade.

Shetgaonkar expects *Baga Beach – Season in Paradise* to be distributed nationally sometime next year. “I hope it will help tourists see Goa in a new light,” he says. ■



Cottages with thatched roofs

## Pollachi

Susheela Nair  
Coimbatore

IT was a pleasant drive on National Highway 209 from Coimbatore airport to the resort, zipping past the towering Western Ghats and emerald fields of paddy and coconut plantations. Entering the lush premises of the Great Mount Resort Coconut Lagoon (GMRCL), I was enveloped by a pervasive silence broken only by the chirping of birds. I felt a surge of energy and peace as my eyes feasted on the expansive garden with its verdant lawn and carefully nurtured indigenous and exotic plants.

SUSHEELA NAIR



Monkey Falls near Aliyar

SUSHEELA NAIR



with imported teak furniture and enormous paintings gracing the textured walls. French windows and small outdoor patios overlook the garden and an artificial pond with a fountain that exudes a charm of its own. Guests can sit by the balcony and watch the tall fountain spouting water, the sight of which has a natural therapeutic effect. I could not but notice the carved garden furniture.

Juxtaposing modern amenities with maximum proximity to nature, the resort offers a perfect ambience for rejuvenation and relaxation and a setting to reflect, unwind, think, meditate, and recharge your batteries. For those who want to take a stroll around the resort, a cemented pathway meanders through the lush landscape, providing an ideal opportunity to reconnect with nature.

Not many tourists are aware that Pollachi, a back-to-nature destination in the foothills of the Annamalai range, is the all-time favourite haunt of visiting film crews. Scores of veteran directors, mainly South Indian, have captured the magic of the pastoral lifestyle and verdant surroundings of this hamlet. Nature enthusiasts and tourists also come here to savour a slice of rural Tamil Nadu.

On our second day, we set out to explore the green countryside – starting with the Annamalai

Aliyar Ashram. Before the ascent to Valparai, a lesser known hill station in Tamil Nadu, we stopped at Monkey Falls – a popular picnic spot among tourists. The ride along the scenic road, winding along the backwaters of the Aliyar mini-hydel project, was memorable. So were the series of hairpin bends along the meandering road to Valparai and the rolling vistas of manicured tea bushes.

**AYURVEDA:** Vaidya Sutras (a unit of the reputed Vaidyaratnam Group), the resort's Ayurvedic Wellness Centre, offers relaxing massages as well as cures. Tanjore and Mysore paintings, *uruli*, and lamps greet you at the reception and the aroma of medicinal oils wafts through the air while soothing Carnatic instrumental music plays in the background. After a day of hectic sightseeing, a relaxing massage drained away the stress and lulled me to sleep.

**GREEN INITIATIVES:** Since Great Mountain Resort is a wellness retreat smoking and alcohol is not permitted. "Keeping environmental aspects in mind, our thrust is on low-energy and low-impact development. We have retained trees to the maximum and used eco-friendly materials. The Reception Centre and Ayurveda Centre are covered

## resort is uniquely green

Located 11 km from Pollachi town, Great Mount Resort is a boutique retreat dotted with aesthetically designed cottages on more than seven acres of whispering palms. We were welcomed with tender coconut juice. I could not take my eyes off the enormous pitcher, chandelier, vases and other artifacts in the reception area. Sprinkled across the coconut grove are 32 cottages offering varying grades of luxury, two restaurants, an amphitheatre, recreational facilities, an infinity swimming pool and a wellness centre. Stone steps lead to each cottage, standing on landscaped mounds.

All the rooms are uncluttered and minimalist

range, comprising Top Slip in Tamil Nadu and the Parambikulam Tiger Reserve in Kerala. Like all wildlife sanctuaries, chances of sighting are highest early morning and late evening. The sanctuary boasts of the Kannimara, the world's tallest and oldest teak tree, and the first scientifically managed teak plantation besides a variety of flora and fauna, hilly ranges for trekking, and extensive lakes for boating. The bumpy van ride in the forest is forgotten once you sight spotted deer, peacocks, wild boar, and a myriad of avian residents.

Those who are spiritually inclined can stop over at the Temple of Consciousness, also known as the

SUSHEELA NAIR

with palm leaves to reduce heat radiation whereas the cottages have thatched roofs (covered with *vizhal* or hay with medicinal properties) which are not only aesthetically appealing but also reduce energy use with natural insulation," explains T. Sethupathi, Managing Director of the resort.

The entire stretch of the compound wall is bordered with bamboo, which emits oxygen, so that guests strolling in the garden can inhale clean air. The use of natural resources is also discernible in the lighting fixtures, made of coconut bark. Locally-sourced low-energy materials used in constructing the building and its surroundings, water conservation and rainwater harvesting strategies all guarantee an all-round ecological focus. "Eco Pad, a biological cleaning material, is used in the sewage treatment plant to minimise waste and the recycled water is used for irrigation. This is a first in the country. Nothing goes waste in the resort. Food and other biodegradable waste are converted into organic manure for use in the resort's garden and coconut fields by using effective micro-organisms," explains Sethupathi.

Besides their base in the agriculture sector and forays into hospitality, the founders of Great Mountain Resort are also known for their philanthropic contributions to education. They founded the Saraswathi Thyagaraja College. It has educated thousands of economically backward students in Pollachi and its neighbouring areas. ■

### FACT FILE

**Getting there:** The nearest airport and railhead are at Coimbatore (60 km away). It is well-connected by bus services.

**Address:** Great Mount Resort, Coco Lagoon, Meenkarai Road, Pollachi – 642 103

**Email:** info@greatmountresort.com



Aliyar Reservoir and the Ghat Road

# Writers Workshop lives on

Subir Roy  
Kolkata

IT is three years since Purushottam Lal, who founded and nurtured Writers Workshop singlehandedly, passed away. So central and all-embracing was his role that it was difficult to see this unique, successful experiment in alternative publishing survive after him. But it has done so, offering an opportunity to look again at issues as basic to civilisation as the need to facilitate creativity, the role of public goods in the spread of knowledge and how these can be funded.

Founded in 1958 by Purushottam Lal, poet and professor of English in what was then Calcutta, Writers Workshop has published over 3,000 titles of Indian writing in English – mostly poetry but also fiction (novels and plays) and translation. The torch is now being carried by his son, Ananda Lal, also a professor of English, with help from Shuktara, Ananda's daughter.

The material change is that whereas P. Lal, as he was called, used to publish around 30 titles a year, in the three years after him it has brought out an average of 20 titles a year.

The big change in recent times is that Indian creative writing in English is popularly believed to have globally arrived. "Post-Rushdie, the global visibility of post-colonial writing has gone up. It is considered to be good," says Ananda.

Today, many more people in India write in English and mainstream imprints publish a large number of novels and their translations, some even by first-timers. People therefore believe there is a boom in this space. But in a basic way the scene remains unchanged. "The need for something like Writers Workshop is, if anything, more now. Nobody wants to publish poetry, not even short stories," says Ananda, adding a bit ruefully that the main shortcoming of those rejected by these publishers is that they write 'differently.'

What P. Lal wrote five years ago about mainstream publishing still remains true: "Alternative publishing is desperately needed wherever commercial publication rules. ... It is not sad, it is obnoxious, to plead, as publishers do, 'I will not publish poetry because it does not sell.' Most English book publishing today in boom-time India and outside is book-dumping."

Writers Workshop has established that in this kind of publishing, "small is not only beautiful but viable as well." Hence the desire of the next generation and the next to try and carry on with the endeavour.

It is not as if the corner in which Writers Workshop lives has not changed. Till the 1990s writers mostly came from the metros. This has now completely changed. Smaller cities like Coimbatore have come up in a big way, as has the northeast. Assam, Manipur, Mizoram and Arunachal Pradesh have significantly arrived. Writing from the rest of the country remains evenly distributed, except, inexplicably, a decline in offerings from Maharashtra.



Ananda Lal with his daughter, Shuktara

Ananda mentions with some pride that Mamang Dai, a 'beautiful poet' from Arunachal has 'come back to us.' There is also good poetry from Basant Rath, an IPS officer from Odisha posted in Kashmir, who has chosen to call his book of poems, *Own me, Srinagar*. Another distinctive offering is *Different Women, Different Worlds*, a translation of short stories written in Odia by established women writers. There is also a notable travelogue, *Green Islands of the Andaman and Nicobar*, by Pratiba Gupta, which has been translated by her daughter.

The commercial side of Writers Workshop runs

declares Ananda firmly. And once a selection is made the production process remains small-scale with Ananda handling editing himself, helped by his daughter in other functions. Sale remains out of a little shop in Lake Gardens, the Kolkata neighbourhood where P. Lal lived and worked.

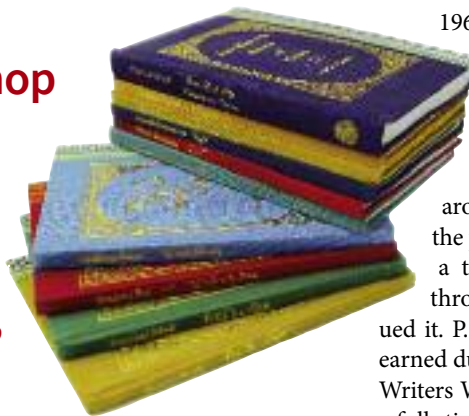
How has life changed in the age of desktop publishing and e-books? Editing is a lot easier but the e-books route has not been explored as the uniqueness of Writers Workshop titles lies in the way the books are beautifully handcrafted, with covers made of Odisha handloom sari material and binding done by the same family that has always handled the job. In

1964, Mohiuddin Khan of Patuabagan Lane won the President's best binding national award for a Writers Workshop title and today, his son Tulamiah Mohiuddin, carries on the work and the relationship.

Financially, life is not easy. Revenue is around ₹40,000 per month which takes care of the payments to four employees. For two years, a tidy ₹25,000 per month came from sales through Flipkart but the portal has discontinued it. P. Lal used his own money, mainly what he earned during teaching assignments abroad, to keep Writers Workshop going. Ananda has to hold on to a full-time teaching job in Kolkata.

How do publishers, be they of independent powerful newspapers or those like Writers Workshop which discover tomorrow's literary stars, survive and grow in a market-driven system? If there is no money in selling poetry then does it mean humanity can only have poetry from after-office hour poets? In terms of what these publishers do for society, they are clearly purveyors of public goods. Their benefits extend far beyond their financial footprints. Rabindranath Tagore's grandfather left behind wealth created partly out of trading in opium so that the poet did not have to worry about earning a living! Can we put a value on discovering tomorrow's great poets? How do you keep this unique discovery channel going? ■

**'The need for Writers Workshop is, if anything, more now. Nobody wants to publish poetry, not even short stories.'**



the way it used to – as an author-oriented collaborative enterprise. An author agrees to buy 100 copies of his book, thus taking care of the ₹20,000 it costs to publish a 100-page title. The print run for a prose title is 500 and poetry 350. There is occasionally the instance of a successful author, sending in a cheque as a mark of gratitude for the break Writers Workshop gave him initially.

There is a long list of well-known writers who were first published by Writers Workshop – Vikram Seth, Ruskin Bond, Kamala Das, Nissim Ezekiel, Jayanta Mahapatra and many others. "There is a very strict process of selection and we are not a vanity press,"



# Kolkata's unreal world

## Personal journey in a complex city



### GRAND DELUSIONS

Indrajit Hazra  
Aleph Book Company

₹ 295

**Subir Roy**  
Kolkata

INDRAJIT Hazra has written three novels and a fourth book, *Grand Delusions – A short biography of Kolkata*, is just out. He grew up in Kolkata and has spent most of the last 15 years in Delhi, working in both cities as a journalist. Thus his view of the city is both of an insider and outsider.

There is a particular geographical advantage that Hazra has been able to fortuitously enjoy. He spent his early years in Belegghata, culturally in north Kolkata but physically on its eastern fringe, that is before Salt Lake and Rajarhat came. Being attuned to the city's north is a must in order to read its pulse and sense where its present avatar comes from.

The book is an exploration of Kolkata. It takes the reader through the city's eccentric neighbourhoods (*paras*) and clubs, its crumbling buildings, its artists, writers, cinemas and its strong political ethos.

Extracts from an interview with Indrajit Hazra:

**Did you find the task of writing a biography of Kolkata daunting as you have grown up there and it is part of your subconscious?**

Absolutely. First, I was terrified. I was formed by Kolkata. Then I decided I would deal with it in a very filtered manner. I was very biased and opinionated in some respects and at the same time I sought to give the reader an idea as to why I was thinking on those lines. By being clear that I would be dealing with my personal myths, buttressed by facts and history, I got the courage to write the biography.

**Did it turn out to be a useful journey of self-discovery?**

Yes and no. These are the things I have been talking about with friends. Once I left Kolkata for Delhi, I was not only thinking about the culture of the two cities but also how you fit in. I gave attention to the self-discovery that I have been talking and thinking about for a long time but I also tried to investigate it a little more. I tried to investigate my self-discovery, if you will.

**Any particular unanticipated challenges you came to face?**

The anticipated part was my decision to avoid writ-

ing on some aspects of Kolkata that has been written about, avoid a structured book, and a conscious decision to avoid clichés.

Mine is a personalised essay-cum-biography. For example, there was a discussion about having the picture of a rickshaw on the cover. Both the cover design artist and I were happy that eventually nobody brought it up. An unanticipated challenge was getting some sense of balance – where do you stop talking about Kolkata's cinema and discuss literature, when to stop talking about Park Street and talk about College Street. The challenge was – which one should I play up and which one should I play down? One can very validly ask why I have written about Mocambo and not Khalashitola.



Indrajit Hazra

**'Kolkata sometimes ends up being a subject rather than an empirical entity. Kolkata remains – less so over the last 10 years but still – very insular in terms of what it sees itself as in the world.'**

**Would you like to justify naming the book *Grand Delusions*?**

One, Kolkata sometimes ends up being a subject rather than an empirical entity. Kolkata remains – less so over the last 10 years but still – very insular in terms of what it sees itself as in the world. For example, the notion that its Bangla writing is superior to the kind of writing happening in Bangladesh is something a lot of people take for granted without wanting to validate it for any reason.

Similarly, the whole business about Rabindranath Tagore and Satyajit Ray. They are understandable registers of recognising brilliance, but there is a very odd way in which the majority of people in Kolkata is fixated in its grand delusions. For example, there is a class in Kolkata who would probably find it more horrible than anything else if somebody speaks English with an accent that is anything less than Queen's English. These are delusions which I do not mean only in a negative sense but sometimes in a clinical sense. Sometimes there are protective gestures.

Kolkata as a city has held itself apart from various other cities but at the same time it has, over the last 30 years that I have been familiar with it, certain understandings about its own people, products and terrain that do not always match with reality.

I call it grand because, if you've seen *Jalsaghar* (the Ray film), the *zamindar* still thinks he is a grand patron of the arts and the guy next door coming in with a generator is *nouveau riche*. The *zamindar* is still hanging on to the notion that it is I who is holding these little soires, there is that great chandelier and I am riding that horse, etc. For me the delusions are like those of the *zamindar*, grand protective devices.

**Looking at Kolkata today, a lot of it seems plainly mismanaged.**

One of the things about Kolkata is that it is not a five, 10 or 15 year thing. For Park Street, despite its glamour quotient, there is the status of its buildings! I passed a place where there was a huge billboard structure but no billboard. Somebody had decided not to pull it down because that would need some extra effort. There seems to be no planning since 1947 except Salt Lake and Rajarhat. Every city is palimpsestic, layered, not only in terms of history but also geographically. There was a fifties Delhi and the sixties, seventies and nineties Delhi.

Six or seven years ago my father took me to Ahiritola where he had lived as a boy and he said nothing had changed since the 1940s except the street gaslights changing to electric bulbs and television antennas giving way to dishes. There are large parts of Kolkata which are in a terrible mess. I am sure there is such a mess in every city but the magnitude! In most modern cities certain things are taken for granted but in Kolkata it is a big thing if a nullah is cleared. Despite Mamata Banerjee's project to make Kolkata like London, these things are delusional as well as tragic. ■

PICTURES BY LAKSHMAN ANAND



## Arty terracotta

HARYANA isn't famous for art so Brajendra Singh Prajapati's small stall at Dilli Haat is a surprise. His family is from a village in Palwal district of Haryana and they make a range of eye-catching terracotta home products. His father, Budhi Ram Prajapati, is a famous potter who received a national award from the Union government in 1996 and was bestowed the title of Shilp Guru in 2010. Prajapati sells lampshades, lamps, vases, lanterns and pots in attractive colours and designs. The lanterns light up with a bulb. "We have chosen the best folk art in India. From Bihar we have borrowed Madhubani, from Maharashtra, Warli and from Haryana our own version of Rangoli. These are all hand-painted on our products," says Prajapati. He says pottery is his hereditary profession. They don't own land. His family of nine members depends on the income earned from pottery. "People who love craft buy our products," he says.

**Contact:** Brajendra Singh Prajapati, Village Banchari, District Palwal, Haryana-121006. Phone: 9991369794, 941613844



## Garden toys

GIRILAL Prasad's colourful stall looks like an animal farm made of terracotta. He makes a variety of flower pots and fountains for home gardens. There are dinky pots shaped into cute cows, fountains with water spouting from a crocodile's mouth, gawky camel and giraffe flower pots and so on. Naturally, his stall attracts mostly little children who poke their fingers into his fountains and pat the animal pots. Prasad is a well-known potter who says with pride that he has taken part in the Republic Day celebrations sitting atop the Delhi installation and turning the potter's wheel. "Terracotta is not very easy to get right," he says. "It is a mix of different types of clay. I buy mine from Haryana and meld it myself." As for designs, Prasad says he relies on his customers. They approach him with a design from some magazine and he copies it perfectly. You can order one piece or 100, Prasad is happy to make it for you.

**Contact:** Girilal Prasad, RZ 29, Uttam Nagar, Prajapati Colony, Delhi-100059 Phone: 9810594197, 9871370017

