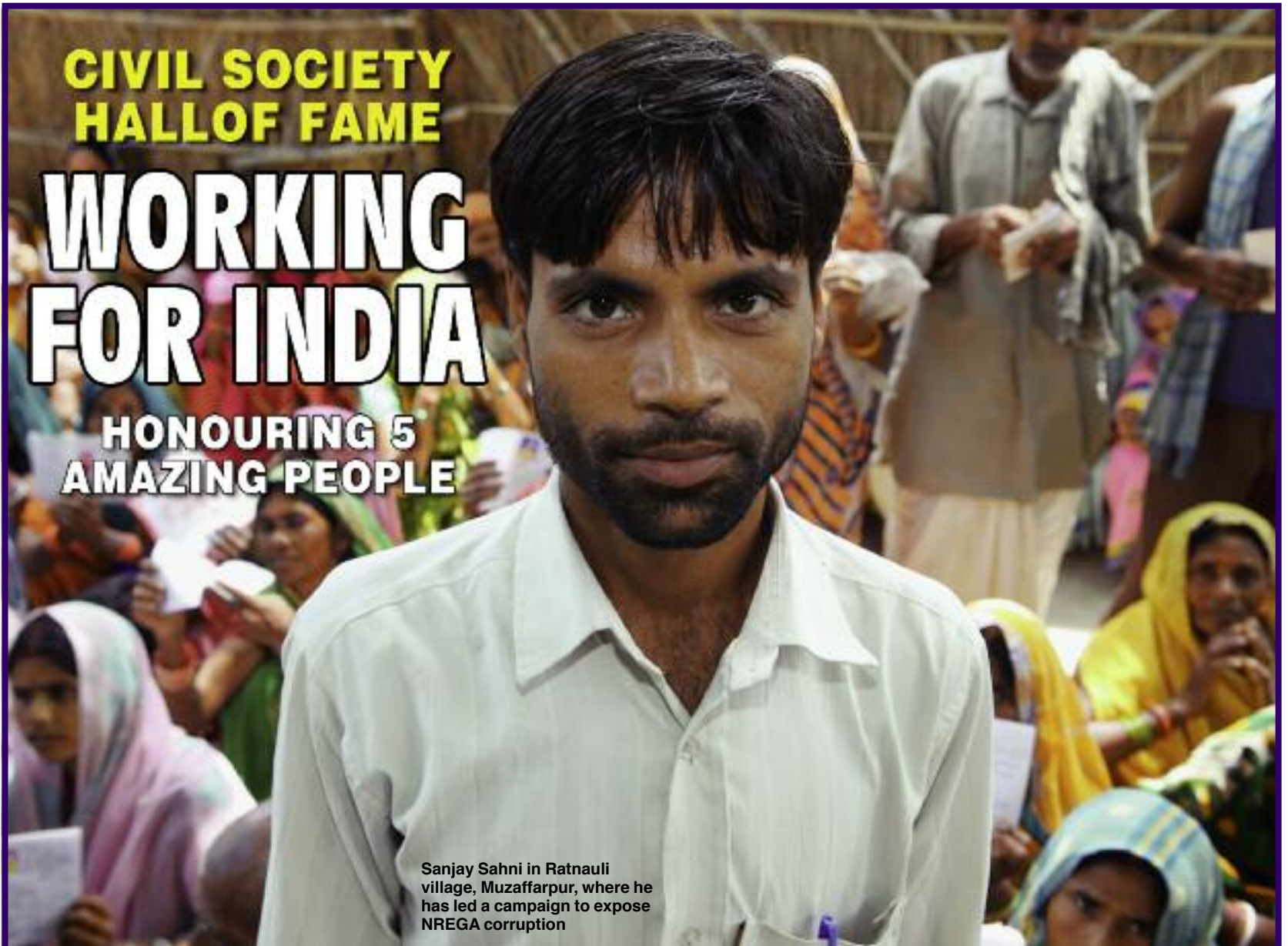


# Civil Society



**CIVIL SOCIETY HALLOF FAME**

**WORKING FOR INDIA**

**HONOURING 5 AMAZING PEOPLE**

Sanjay Sahni in Ratnauli village, Muzaffarpur, where he has led a campaign to expose NREGA corruption



**'WE WANT EQUAL PAY FOR EQUAL WORK'**

Veteran union leader D. Thankappan on Maruti, contract workers and unions

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**9<sup>th</sup>**  
Anniversary  
**SPECIAL ISSUE**



LEAD SPONSOR

**KOLKATA SEES ARSENIC**

Pages 8-10

**FREEDOM FROM BARRIERS**

Pages 12-13

**UNILEVER'S TRIVIAL CONCERNS**

Pages 14-15

**BEST OF CIVIL SOCIETY**

Pages 36-42

**PRODUCTS**

Pages 44-50



Corporate Marketing & Communications, Jubilant Life Sciences - July 12

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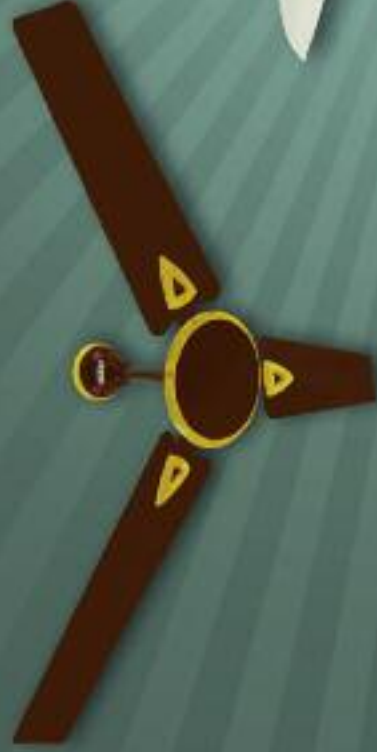
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## IN THE LIGHT

by SAMITA RATHOR



## LETTERS



### Saina

Your cover story on Saina Nehwal, 'Homegrown Champion' was really inspiring. Her parents too are remarkable. The sacrifices they made to ensure their young daughter becomes an achiever is a lesson for all parents. In most middle class homes, parents do not invest in their

daughter's career as much as in their son's future. Kudos to Gopi, Arif and all her coaches who have helped India's most iconic badminton player become a world champion.

*Sarla Lal*

I bought your book on Saina Nehwal. It is really very well written and interesting. I could read the full book without putting it down. Not a single boring moment. Congratulations to TS Sudhir and to Nimby Books for their fine editing and display.

*Srikanth Reddy*

### Natural learning

I am a Delhi-based Uttarakhandi associated with the development sector. As I was out of the country, I saw the July issue of your magazine recently. I really enjoyed the story, 'Learning the Natural Way' by Rakesh Agrawal on the unique and holistic education being practised at Anjanisain by the SMBA.

We need this kind of holistic education that focuses on the overall

development of young minds and keeps them out of the rat race. It also introduces them to the 3Rs seamlessly since they learn from their immediate environment.

*Suresh Thapaliyal*

The story on the Ashram Paryavaran Vidyalaya was really inspiring. Teachers in the government school also need to use these methodologies. I salute Anand Mani Dwivedi, the principal of the school.

*Gokaran Bamrara*

### Mediation

Thanks for the interview on the Mediation Centre being run in New Delhi. What I most appreciate is that lawyers have taken the lead. Mostly, lawyers accumulate cases and hang on to them, though it may not be necessary. They don't generally encourage mediation as a way out. As a result, courts get clogged with cases that could be settled amicably without wasting the honourable judge's valuable time.

Lawyers should be as accountable as judges.

*Sheila Rai*

Sometimes there is so much antagonism between warring parties that it is difficult for lawyers to suggest mediation. Only a bitter court order after a long drawn battle makes them come to their senses.

*Anil Dhawan*

### Nuclear plant

In response to Tanushree Gangopadhyay's investigative piece on Mithi Viridi, I would like to say nobody wants to live next to a nuclear plant. Safety is a big concern. People do not understand nuclear technology and believe what they are vociferously told. There is also a veil of secrecy surrounding whatever happens in nuclear plants. So issues concerning workers, safety and operations should be openly discussed with villagers on an ongoing basis. The villages must benefit and they should have the first right to electricity.

*Asha Sachdeva*

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COVER PHOTOGRAPH: LAKSHMAN ANAND

### ANNUAL DOUBLE ISSUE

This September-October issue of *Civil Society* marks completion of nine years of the magazine.

The next issue will be in November.

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# Civil Society

READ US. WE READ YOU.

## Nine years and standing

WITH this issue, *Civil Society* completes nine years. It is a great feeling. Ours has been an exciting journey for the reasons that we cherish. It is wonderful to see the magazine reach remote parts of the country. It is also fulfilling to report on an India that gets overlooked. The zones we enter absorb us as journalists, making us eager to know and enthusiastic about telling. The high has only got better over the years.

In the starting-out years, we would often be referred to as niche. We still are sometimes. But in our minds we have always been mainstream – the new mainstream. The fact that so many of the stories we do end up in the so-called 'big press' is perhaps the best evidence of our work being ahead of time. And of course there is a big thrill in having got there first.

As in previous years, the focus of our anniversary issue is the CIVIL SOCIETY HALL OF FAME. It is an initiative we took up a long time ago to recognize those citizens among us who quietly make a difference. It is a simple mechanism for citizens to honour citizens without governments and other power centres piling on.

The CIVIL SOCIETY HALL OF FAME is very matter of fact. There is no sentimentality here, no moist eyes, no bleeding hearts. The people we honour are difficult to find and close to the ground. They aren't seeking fame. But each of them is a wonderful example of how we can live in ways that strengthen society. They deserve to be known so that they can inspire others and be emulated.

The five individuals selected this time – Sanjay Sahni, Naurti Bai, Dr Chiranjeeb Kakoty, Boya Pedda Rajanna and Dr Evita Fernandez – come from different corners of the country. They will be in Delhi on 11 October for a recognition ceremony.

Our lead interview this month is with D. Thankappan, who is a veteran trade union leader. Thankappan has tried to cut a different path in the trade union movement, asking both workers and managements to change their thinking. So, his criticisms of industry and the breakdown of relations in Maruti are not just interesting but deserve to be taken seriously. Indian industry needs to invest in significantly more meaningful ways in the workers it employs. It needs to train and integrate them with corporate goals. The rampant use of contract workers is not only a sign of shortsightedness, but a slur on managements. It shows they lack in vision and haven't come to terms with contemporary challenges. Maruti is clearly one such company and Suzuki is doing in India what it wouldn't dare do in economies which are better regulated.

We take great pleasure in introducing you to Dr Dipankar Chakraborti an environmental scientist based in Kolkata. Dipankar is a very old friend and so in one sense you could say we are biased. But to him must go the credit of having done the first serious air pollution tests in India. He was also the first to raise an alarm over arsenic levels in West Bengal's groundwater. It has taken more than 20 long years for the authorities in West Bengal to accept his findings.

As we step into our tenth year as a small and independent media initiative, we thank you for reading us.



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## INTERVIEW D. Thankappan on the Maruti episode

# 'If managements are reasonable,

Civil Society News  
New Delhi

In the past two decades, Damodar Thankappan has had a very special place in the labour movement in India. A champion of workers' rights, Thankappan has also urged workers to learn to engage with managements. When the big trade unions reigned supreme he questioned their lack of vision and predicted their decline.

In the late eighties, he led workers of Kamani Tubes in a takeover of the company's management after it was declared sick. The experiment ended in failure, but Thankappan believes it need not have had banks and financial institutions been more innovative and helpful.

Thankappan is currently president of the National Trade Union Initiative (NTUI), a federation of unions from the organized and unorganized sector. It helps workers in the unorganized sector demand their rights.

Civil Society spoke to Thankappan on the recent violence at the Maruti factory at Manesar in Haryana and the growing trend of using contract workers for perennial employment.

**The recent violence at the Maruti factory in Manesar demonstrates the breakdown of relations between the management and workers. To what extent is the hiring of contract workers responsible for this?**

An impression has been created that the workers at Maruti are entirely to blame. This is very unfortunate. There is not a single word about the management's policies, its violations of laws and its suppression of trade union rights.

This situation cannot be resolved with the state government saying it will deal with workers severely. The government talks about restoring industrial peace with the use of force by the police. Industrial peace cannot be restored by repressing workers. That is my experience.

Secondly, industrial peace is not the peace of the graveyard. It is achieved by harmony, which depends on a conducive environment.

The Haryana government thinks that it can create a good climate for investment by putting pressure on workers. It is bad thinking.

On the contrary the government will have to stand up for workers' rights and say it cannot allow their ill-treatment. That it cannot allow such a difference in wages between contract workers and regular workers who are performing similar tasks.

Workers are not intrinsically violent. I have been in the labour movement for 55 years, but I have not indulged in violence.

**In your opinion, what happened at Maruti?**

According to our information the management was not ready to have any negotiation with the workers and wanted to penalize those who, with great struggle, formed a union. That they were Maoists is wishful thinking by the management. Bouncers were employed, the police looked on, the private security guards were given no instructions. The bouncers attacked the workers and the reaction was violence. The management thought the bouncers would teach the workers a lesson.

**How widespread is the hiring of contract labour by large companies?**

Before the onset of globalization policies in the 80s,

**'In the automobile sector one-third may be the regular permanent workforce, 40 per cent contract labour and the rest will be trainees and apprentices who are paid even less than the contract labour.'**

contract labour was not more than 10 per cent in an industry. Thereafter, surveys indicate that on an average around 40 per cent of labour employed is in the contract category. But in certain sectors it goes up to 70 per cent. For instance, in the automobile sector one-third may be the regular permanent workforce, 40 per cent contract labour and the rest will be trainees and apprentices who are paid even less than the contract labour. This is by and large across the automobile sector whether it is Gurgaon or Chennai or Nasik. There is a big gap between the regular workforce and the other employees that needs to be sorted out.

Contract labour is one issue. But the other is unionization. If workers form a union and submit their application for registration the labour



Damodar Thankappan

department immediately informs the employers and the company begins to dismiss the workers.

**Clearly the larger trade unions have a responsibility as well. What do you have to say about that?**

Till 15 or 20 years ago the organized trade unions were least bothered about unorganized labour or contract labour. Employers were also keen that they should not take up this issue. But in the last 20 years, the situation has changed. In many places organized labour is also demanding higher wages for the unorganized contract workers.

The strength of organized labour is continually reducing. The unions realize their bargaining capacity is getting eroded. If they don't take up

# and the use of contract labour unions have no choice'



the cause of unorganized labour their own existence will be affected. The situation is changing.

The point is the Haryana situation is being repeated in other states also. In Coimbatore a similar situation happened in one of the companies. Recently a union leader was murdered in police custody. If workers form a union there is repression and the government supports the employers.

In Yanam in the Regency Ceramics Factory case (workers formed a union after a long struggle) a well-intended IAS officer was taking steps for a dialogue with workers. A powerful MLA went to Delhi and got him transferred as punishment to the Andaman and Nicobar Islands. Money power can influence anyone.

Employers are arrogant. Companies have large cash piles. They think they can do anything, buy anyone.

## How difficult has it been for NTUI to reach out to contract workers in companies?

In Maruti we don't have any union or anything. But we are organizing contract labour all over the country and setting up a Contract Labour Forum. We don't have any organization in Manesar or anywhere in Gurgaon.

## But in which sectors have you managed to mobilize contract labour?

In the engineering sector, the auto sector and the steel industry and we are trying to reach other sectors also.

## What are the key grievances that contract labour have against the companies that hire them?

The first is that employers don't want people on contract to have any contact with permanent workers. Second is the employers don't allow contract labour to get organized. If they get organized then registration of the union is delayed and they get sacked on flimsy grounds. They cannot raise their voice.

Contract workers are not given the same health and safety benefits as the other workers. On an average, a contract worker gets just one-third of the wage that a regular worker gets.

## When these issues are raised what is the response by the companies?

To get employers to discuss these issues in a cordial atmosphere is difficult. The workers have no choice but to fight it out.

## If the corporate sector does not want to get involved in these issues who should address them?

The government must play a role. People in government need a new orientation. Officers need training. They should question the big auto companies whether it is Maruti or Honda about their performance. The union leaders should be invited for discussions. What happened at the Maruti plant involved 3,000 workers. How can you treat it as a mere incident?

## Can there be any other mechanism outside government?

There are laws in this country which the government must enforce. For instance, perennial labour

is not permitted for contract labour. Yet companies are using contract labour in perennial employment. I don't see the problem in stopping this, but the government does not want to do it. When the government doesn't enforce the law, employers are encouraged.

If a management has a positive approach, the union will have no choice but to have a positive approach as well. It is easy to blame workers. But I can tell you with my experience that workers will not set fire to a factory. It is beyond their imagination.

Multinationals have one code of behaviour in their own countries and another here. In India they go against the Minimum Wages Act, they go against the Contract Labour Act. In fact they are violating every labour law in this country.

## In the Maruti factory were these contract workers perennial?

Yes, of course, they were perennial. If they were regularly in production activities or in core employment, as they say, they were perennial. If 3,000 workers were employed, casual workers should not have been more than one or two per cent, but at the Maruti factory the casual workers accounted for 40 per cent. Why is the Haryana Chief Minister, Bhupinder Singh Hooda, unaware of this?

## Can the minimum wage be applied to contract workers?

It cannot. There should be equal pay for equal work.

## There is a view that if labour laws were more flexible, companies would be able to hire people they need and release surplus employees. Then employers would not hire contract labour the way they do now. What do you think?

If there is no work then they should be allowed to reduce the labour force. But what managements want is the right to fire anybody.

## If a company sees a shrinking market and it cannot employ so many people any more are you open to a law which allows companies to let people go?

If there is a genuine problem it can be discussed openly and the situation can be resolved through mutual discussion. The existing law also provides for this. Why aren't managements using it? But instead they will not show the correct balance sheet. They want the government to be a mute spectator and endorse whatever they are doing.

## So it's a problem of regulation?

Yes. The problem is lack of regulation and mutual trust. Employers don't show respect for workers who are creating wealth in this country. Managements have productivity on their agenda, but not workers' rights.

Indian companies will have to create the space for workers to participate in management. Give some space for workers participation in management. Established trade unions will have to similarly prepare themselves for these new realities. A great social change is needed. ■

# Kolkata finally sees arsenic in

*After years in denial, civic body admits it's not fiction*

**Subir Roy**  
Kolkata

**T**HE risk of arsenic poisoning, faced by those who imbibe groundwater in south and south-east Kolkata, has become a major issue again and the city's municipal authorities have gone through yet another cycle of denial and grudging acceptance of the fact that a problem exists.

The city has been sensitised to the problem mainly as a result of the pioneering work done by the School of Environmental Studies in Jadavpur University under the leadership of the school's director of research Dipankar Chakraborti.

Arsenic has chronic toxicity but there are no known medicines to treat it. Those affected, at the least, suffer from a lack of energy and feel debilitated. Earlier it was thought arsenic could lead to skin cancer but now it is considered capable of causing virtually every type of cancer. Not much is known beyond this about the effects of arsenic, perhaps because it does not affect water sources in the world's rich countries.

Geologically, arsenic has been washed down from the Himalayas and is prevalent in groundwater in the Ganga-Brahmaputra-Meghna basin which stretches across India and Bangladesh. The human body has its own way of fighting arsenic poisoning and a diet rich in vegetables like carrots, which the poor cannot afford, can help. So arsenic poisoning is a sort of orphan disease, affecting the poor in some of the poorest areas of the world and could deserve attention from global philanthropies like the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation.

The latest provocation that pushed arsenic again into the headlines came earlier this year when the Kolkata Municipal Corporation allowed tubewells to be bored in 10 wards of the Jadavpur Assembly constituency of south Kolkata in response to the initiative taken by the local MLA, power minister Manish Gupta, to find a solution to the water scarcity in the region. Digging tubewells needs official permission as groundwater is diminishing.

Seeing this the media extensively reported the position taken by Dr Chakraborti and a controver-



Dipankar Chakraborti in his laboratory

## PROFILE

# 'Arsenic runs in his blood'

**T**HE arsenic research unit of the School of Environmental Studies at Kolkata's Jadavpur University is housed in a nondescript *sarkari* type building with grey walls and dusty furniture. But the world changes as soon as you climb the stairs and face the entrance.

You are asked to take off your shoes, the floor is spotlessly clean and there is a profusion of potted plants all around. The fine cracks that have appeared on the antique floor have been painted over in bright coloured strips creating an appealing pattern.

Obviously, unusual spirits reside in the labora-

tory and the one that drives it can be seen in one corner of a large room filled with scientific equipment, and of course potted plants, seated cross-legged on a backless stool before a sleek Dell laptop and framed pictures of Rabindranath Tagore.

Dipankar Chakraborti, director of research at the school, does not look his 69 years. The only habit forming stuff he imbibes is a cup of tea and coffee a day and confesses that has a weakness for coffee which smells good. He is mostly a vegetarian and has a bit of fish only when his daughter insists he taste some prepared by her. He eschews allopathic medicine.



# its groundwater

PRASANTA BISWAS



He is usually up at four in the morning and spends two hours doing yoga while listening to Rabindrasangeet on FM radio. Then begins his workday which leaves him no more than two to five hours of sleep and precious little time for his family.

He regrets that for much of his daughter's childhood, he had only seen her asleep. He would be in after she had gone to sleep and up and out before she was awake. His wife first snorted when he told her that he remembered her at least 100 times a day, and wasn't amused when he explained that he had made her name the password for his e-mail ID.

For over 20 years now Chakraborti has been a kind of single issue fanatic – mapping the presence of arsenic in the groundwater of the Gangetic delta, recording the havoc that it has wrought on unsuspecting people and trying to sensitise multiple governments to the dangers of arsenic poisoning and the need to mitigate

and prevent it.

After spending around a decade overseas in various research capacities he decided to return to India in 1988 to devote himself entirely to the study of arsenic. During the first few years, till 1994, he faced endless insults as he banged on closed doors. Then in 1995 he organised a conference of scientists from all over the world who endorsed his method and findings. In a sense, the cat was out of the bag.

Chakraborti turned down a request for an interview to do a profile of him as, he explained over the phone, he did not want to project himself personally. His work would speak for itself. In keeping with this he had recently declined a personal recognition from a local chamber of commerce and had agreed to go and receive the award only after it was given to his school. So this piece relies on all the media coverage that his work has attracted – and there has been a lot of it – and what is part of folklore.

One of the stories is either apocryphal or wholly true. A man came to see him in 1996 and told him that he was ending his one year assignment of trailing him, having been put on the job by the state agencies to find out what exactly he was up to. The Left rulers of West Bengal were paranoid that he was a foreign agent set up to create panic and spread social unrest. The man said the final report would say that Chakraborti was a "mad man, a workaholic and arsenic runs in his blood."

Not satisfied with working in West Bengal, he took his work to Bangladesh in the early nineties and there initially met with the same disbelief and hostility. People from there attended his 1995 conference, only to say there was no arsenic poisoning in the country. Then in 1996 he was offered a small window of opportunity to do field work in Bangladesh. At the end of his work when he presented his findings to the media in Dhaka it made national headlines.

He has passed on to Jadavpur University all the money that he has earned through consultancy in the last 24 years on the understanding that the interest income from it will be used to help arsenic affected people and pay for the upkeep of the greenery that is present in and around his laboratory. The corpus now totals ₹1.08 crore.

He retired in 2008 but was allowed to carry on till 2013, the cost being met from the income of a grant of ₹50 lakhs which was also passed on to the university. It is clear that Chakraborti will never retire in mind and spirit, irrespective of his official status, driven as he is by his all-consuming passion for his work. ■

sy erupted with the municipal corporation denying that government agencies had corroborated what Dr Chakraborti had unearthed through his school's investigation.

Prominent among those who were unmoved by the research school's findings was the member responsible for groundwater in the city mayor's council, Tarak Singh, who said that Dr Chakraborti had no "authority" to conduct the tests on water samples. The mayor Shovan Chatterjee added his voice to the denial and claimed that he would take note of the risk of arsenic poisoning in the Jadavpur area only if this was established by government agencies.

Dr Chakraborti has revealed that as recently as late May, six of the 30 samples taken from Kolkata and adjoining areas examined by the school were found to contain arsenic above the safe level of less than 10 micrograms per litre set by the World Health Organisation. In fact, one sample, taken from Bikramgarh in the heart of Jadavpur, was found to contain 190 micrograms per litre of arsenic, with five others in the range of 20-60.

PRASANTA BISWAS



Symptoms of arsenic disease

Public outcry, however, soon led to a change of stance by the municipal corporation and in late June it decided to send a team of officials to the affected area under the guidance of Dr Chakraborti to collect samples. Tarak Singh in particular changed his position to that of having an open mind and a willingness to be guided by the findings of tests. He wanted the controversy to be resolved and now conceded that arsenic had been found in large areas of Behala, also in south Kolkata, where the affected wells had been sealed. This prompted Dr Chakraborti to comment that this was the first time in ten years that someone from the municipal corporation has responded to his warnings.

Most recently, the state's water investigation directorate has in a report submitted to the Kolkata Municipal Corporation said that of the 96 water samples collected from Kolkata and adjoining municipalities, 13 have been found to contain arsenic above the safe level. Of these, eight are from the Kolkata municipal area. Mayor Chatterjee has denied such a report being received though

*Continued on page 10*

**Continued from page 9**

Tarak Singh has admitted that tubewell water from different Kolkata municipal areas has been found to contain arsenic above the safe level.

Dr Chakraborti, who began working on the subject in 1982, recalls that for 13 years, till 1995, the system was in denial and his warnings went unheeded. Since he had secured grants from all over the world for his work, Left Front politicians, then in power, had called him an agent of western multinationals and threatened to put him in jail.

He has a multilayered solution to the problem. Water from all the tubewells in the area should be tested and fresh tubewells sunk only in areas which show no trace of arsenic. Then the boring should go up to roughly 500 ft to the third aquifer to get to arsenic free water. Thereafter the water extracted should be tested every three months and the local people trained to keep a vigil over both water quality and report first symptoms that may appear in anybody affected.

Arsenic toxicity was first detected in a Jadavpur resident in 1993 and the first arsenic patient with cancer also detected in the same year. In 2001 the Kolkata Municipal Corporation admitted to the presence of arsenic in the city's drinking water. In 2003 tubewells were sealed in the campus of the state's foremost public hospital, SSKM, presumably because arsenic was detected in their water. In this process of denial and acceptance municipal corporation sources again accepted the presence of arsenic in the city's drinking water in 2007.



A tubewell with arsenic in its water at Lake Gardens in Kolkata

**Most wards in the south and southeast of Kolkata are affected by the arsenic menace. Some tubewells which were earlier supplying good water have now been affected.**

The history of denial and subsequent turnaround is as long as it is star studded. In 1999, the current chief minister of West Bengal Mamata Banerjee, then union railway minister, complained to the Planning Commission that the West Bengal government was not taking proper care of arsenic contamination in the affected districts of the state. After much controversy in 2001 the then minister for water investigation admitted to arsenic contamination in West Bengal. Subrata Mukherjee, who as mayor in 2000 denied that there was arsenic in

drinking tubewell water may not remain safe in the future.

But there is little attempt to tackle the problem with the future in mind. No water charges are levied in the city, not even for the better off. Forty per cent of piped treated river water is wasted through leaking public taps. Rainwater harvesting is mandated only for very large buildings. As the water table is going down its quality at a given level is deteriorating and it is becoming necessary to go deeper and deeper to find safe drinking water. ■

## SAMITA'S WORLD

by SAMITA RATHOR



# Divisions in food security

**Bharat Dogra**  
New Delhi

**D**IFFERENCES persist over the provisions of the National Food Security Bill tabled in the Lok Sabha and a Plan B suggested by a group of 36 economists seems to have led nowhere for the time being.

The bill seeks to provide subsidized food to the poor. It divides the population into 'priority', 'general' and 'excluded' households, but it is unclear how it will manage to identify people in these categories.

Activists, economists and officials have discussed the provisions of the bill threadbare. But no consensus seems to have emerged.

The Right to Food Campaign, for instance, is demanding a universal public distribution system (PDS). The government, they say, has huge stocks of foodgrain, which it must immediately offload into a universal PDS. "As a compromise, we may agree to a start being made in 200 of the poorest districts in the first year. But ultimately the entire country has to be covered," said Kavita Srivastava, coordinator of the campaign.

On the other hand, the 36 development economists, including Jean Dreze, Reetika Khera, Kirit Parikh, Abhijit Sen of the Planning Commission, and Vijay Vyas, a member of the Economic Advisory Council to the Prime Minister, have written a letter to the Prime Minister pointing out that exercises in identifying the poor invariably end up in their exclusion. They have serious doubts whether a practical, fair and effective method can be devised for identifying the groups envisaged in the bill.

The economists' fears are not unjustified. The data and methodology used for identifying people below poverty line (BPL) and above poverty line (APL) has been widely questioned.

Till date no foolproof method of identifying the truly poor has been found. Currently, a 'Socio-Economic and Caste Census' (SECC) is underway. But it has been checked out by activist groups and found to be as faulty as the earlier BPL surveys.

In their letter to the Prime Minister the economists have said that identifying sections of the population would undermine a more positive approach

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Jean Dreze

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Kavita Srivastava

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Right to Food campaign at Jantar Mantar

of having a universal public distribution system, which should be the goal of a food security programme.

The economists point out that the current framework is confusing. The food security bill needs to be simple and transparent for it to be implemented effectively. They feel the distinction between 'priority' and 'general' households should be abolished. Both should get the same PDS entitlement. It is only essential to identify the 'excluded' category. In other words instead of trying to find out who the poorer households are, it is easier to

identify those who are better off and just exclude them. The risk of making mistakes here are smaller and less costly, socially and economically.

However, the Antyodaya programme meant for the poorest households should continue and receive the same support, the economists have said.

They are in favour of what can be called a Plan B whose basic features are:

- Use 'exclusion criteria' only.
- Merge the 'general' and 'priority' groups into one 'aam' group.
- Give every 'aam' household a national assured minimum entitlement of 25 kg per month at Rs 3/2/1 per kg for rice/wheat/millets.
- Retain and strengthen the Antyodaya programme. The SECC has an 'automatic inclusion' household criteria, for people like released bonded labourers. Such families should be automatically added to the Antyodaya list.

The economists say Plan B has many advantages. It is easy to implement and feasible. It will prevent poor households from being excluded because of errors and the entitlement is simple and transparent. Also, it will put an end to debates over the poverty line.

They clarify that if there are states that wish to provide more than 25 kg to 'aam' households, or would like to give something to the excluded households, they should have full freedom to do so.

The government, however, has interpreted Plan B in its own way and weakened its purpose of reaching the needy. It has come up with a reductionist version of the bill by saying that 33 per cent of the population should be excluded from the PDS.

"Excluding 33 per cent of the population from the PDS will clearly favour the richer states at the expense of the poorer states," says Dreze. "Also the government's present approach ignores the entitlement approach to food security."

The economists are against the government's penchant for 'targeting'. Dreze also clarified that he would like more grain plus pulses and oil to be included in the PDS. The Plan B proposal was only a compromise to reform the existing bill without raising the overall costs or commitment of grain.

But Plan B has dissenters among activists as well. Kavita Srivastava says that the right to food campaign doesn't endorse Plan B. She insists the campaign's demand is for 10 kg per person, which for a family of five works out to 50 kg, double of what the economists have suggested. "Our demand is based on scientifically calculated nutrition norms," she says. "In addition, the special food security needs of children, pregnant and lactating women and elderly people have to be taken care of. Legislation of food security should be in the 'rights' mode, and for this, officials who fail to provide the entitlements must be penalized," she says. ■

## Freedom from barriers

### *Awards to promote access tech and universal design*

**Kavita Charanji**  
New Delhi

**B**LIND from an early age, Dipendra Manocha learnt the hard way that self-sufficiency was his only hope for a better existence. This realisation hit him when a reader who was supposed to help him crosscheck his references for a research thesis didn't show up and Manocha missed the deadline for his PhD submission.

He began to recognise the appalling shortfalls in the lives of the blind in developing countries like India. "There were hardly any accessible text and reference books for the blind. Even basic assistive technology such as screen-reading software was not available in the local language," says Manocha.

He made it his mission to explore, teach and implement new IT solutions that would empower blind people in India.

Today Manocha leads training and technical support and coordinates DAISY (Digital Accessible Information System) Consortium's projects in developing countries. The DAISY Consortium creates standards and open source tools to produce publications in accessible formats for people who are unable to read normal print. Manocha has invented an Indian language Braille translation and screen-reading software, DAISY standards for production and distribution of digital talking and Braille e-text books for South Asian countries among others.

Manocha is also on the executive committee of the World Blind Union. He is the managing trustee of the Saksham Trust which has tied up with the Indian Institute of Technology, Delhi, to develop "smart canes" that can help detect above-knee obstacles for the visually impaired.

On 14 August Manocha was one of the proud recipients of the Universal Design Awards conferred by the National Centre for Promotion of Employment for Disabled People (NCPEDP) and Mphasis. The awards were divided into three categories: persons with disabilities, working professionals and companies/organisations. Each of the 10 winners had made a stellar contribution in improving accessibility and Universal Design, a concept that is still to come of age in developing countries.

As the organizers of the awards pointed out, accessibility is far more than just physical spaces. Rather, it covers information, technology, trans-

port, services, aids and appliances, among others.

Universal Design means design that is usable by a cross section of society, cutting across age, ability or situation and is not confined only to people with physical disabilities.

The speakers at the awards ceremony were Javed Abidi, honorary director, NCPEDP, Shivani Gupta, director, AccessAbility, Shilpi Kapoor, managing director, BarrierBreak Technologies and Dinesh Venugopal, executive vice president & head, New Ventures, Mphasis. The awards were given away by Mukul Wasnik, Union Minister of Social Justice and Empowerment.

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Mukul Wasnik presenting an award

The speakers pointed to the successes and failures in ensuring the rights of the disabled. On the one hand they said the government had taken steps such as the setting up of the Indian Sign Language Research and Training Institute Centre, a separate Department of Disability Affairs under the Ministry of Social Justice and Empowerment, and the accessibility of some government websites for the disabled. On the other hand there remained major loopholes such as the prohibitive cost of importing assistive devices and the lack of coordination between different government ministries.

Javed Abidi pointed out that while there was reason to celebrate the spirit of freedom on 14 August it is questionable whether Independent India had done enough to ensure the access of the disabled to schools, colleges, cinema halls, parks, trains or simple TV viewing.

Wasnik was largely upbeat about government efforts to make India more disabled friendly, quot-



Javed Abidi, director of NCPEDP, with the award winners

ing the example of the Sign Language Institute. However, he acknowledged the government needed to speed up the setting up of a National Centre for Universal Design and Barrier-free Environment.

This is why the NCPEDP-Mphasis Awards are significant. By citing role models who have improved the quality of life for the disabled, the hope is that the awards will encourage others to work in promoting access and Universal Design to make it into a 'movement' as Abidi says.

#### THE AWARDEES

**Abhishek Syal:** Apart from developing two patent pending assistive technologies for blind people to self-learn from maps and diagrams, Syal has founded a charitable trust – Act to Rise for Innovation in Special Education (ARISE). The trust has developed audio-based educational modules for people with disabilities to access educational material on mobile phones for out-of-classroom learning. Another radical initiative is game-based learning for blind users to engage with educational games. All self-learning packages developed by Syal are distributed free to NGOs registered with ARISE.

**Professor Prabhat Ranjan:** A professor and scientist at the Dhirubhai Ambani Institute of

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Information, Communication and Technology, Gandhinagar, he has developed a hand gesture controlled remote that allows a person with restricted finger movements to operate a television. He extended this project and developed an environment control system based on body, voice and brainwave sensors. The use of brainwave sensors to enable severely disabled people has born results in their day-to-day life activities. Persons with no mobility or voice can also benefit from this technology.

**Professor Rachna Khare:** She is a professor at the School of Planning and Architecture, Bhopal, and the coordinator of the Centre for Human Centric Research at the Institute. She has written a book "Designing Inclusive Educational Spaces for Autism" which was published by IHCD, Boston, in 2010. She is also one of the authors of 'Universal Design India Principles'. Rachna has organized many national events such as the Universal Design Workshop and the National Student Design Competition. Her latest event is another design competition in collaboration with the Archaeological Survey of India and UNESCO.

**R.R Joshi:** He is joint managing director of Modular Infotech Private Limited and ACE Infotech. Joshi is also an electronics engineer and

a gold medallist from Pune University. Among his significant initiatives, through his companies, is the Braille-Mitra that can store 2,000 books in Braille for 11 Indian languages and English. With an indexing facility and user-friendly commands it can be used to read a large number of books, without the need to connect to a PC.

**Indian Institute of Management, Bangalore:** IIM-B is the first of the IIMs to have adopted a clearly articulated Equal Opportunity Policy. With the Office of Disability Services (supported by Mphasis) and a Committee on Disabilities headed by a faculty member, the organisation has introduced elevators with accessible features like voice announcement, lowered control panel and Braille in buildings to facilitate the disabled students to use elevators. Blind students receive course material converted into JAWS (Job Access With Speech) compatible text files before classes. JAWS is also installed on library computers. Students with disabilities are assisted by tutors and scribes. Another significant step is the sensitisation of faculty and students.

**Microsoft India:** With its emphasis on inclusiveness in India, Microsoft has undertaken several initiatives to make technology accessible. To ensure that documents within government

departments for public consumption such as annual reports, acts, laws, policies, circulars, schemes, budgets among others are accessible, 40 templates have been created by the IT giant to automate the process. These enable governments and businesses to have accessibility incorporated at the time of creating a document. Accessibility guides for educators, governments and businesses provide information about various types of impairments and the accessible technology available to ensure that the needs of people with all types of abilities are met. Lastly, Microsoft has instituted accessibility learning sessions with special educators, NGOs and special schools to build awareness about accessibility in technology so that they can use these teaching materials and integrate students with disabilities into their classrooms.

**National Institute of Schooling (NIOS):** Many students with disabilities have benefitted from NIOS' flexible approach that has proved to be a real boon for them. With a cumulative enrolment of 2.02 million learners who include over 55,000 students with disabilities, NIOS is the largest open schooling system in the world. To impart quality education especially to students with disabilities, Information and Communication Technologies (ICT) are used. The ICT based on-demand examination system enables learners to do their exams when they are ready.

**Sri Vishnu Educational Society (SVES):** The society, in collaboration with the University of Massachusetts, USA, has established Assistive Technology Laboratories (ATL) at two of its institutes. Students at the ATL have developed assistive technology for people with learning disabilities, speech and hearing impairments and vision and mobility impairments. Among their innovations are the Mind Mouse that can assist people with limited mobility to communicate; an integrated wheelchair that is actuated and controlled by the mere movement of a person's head; an electronic smart walking stick for blind people as well as a voice activated wheelchair and a solar operated wheelchair. Many of these products have been awarded prizes in prestigious contests.

**Travel Another India (TAI):** This organisation was set up in 2009 to work with village communities to set up Responsible Tourism Ventures (RTVs). TAI promotes 'Himalaya on Wheels'. This service was set up in response to a request by the Leh-based People's Action Group for Inclusion and Rights (PAGIR) to ensure livelihoods for persons with disabilities who wanted to be part of the burgeoning tourism economy in Ladakh. TAI has also set up 'Journeys without Barriers' which offers inclusive holidays for people with disabilities. Among TAI's successful projects are holidays in Ladakh with activities for guests in wheelchairs, implemented by a group of people with disabilities and their families with the help of PAGIR. ■

## Youth Parliament's 10 years

**Kavita Charanji**  
New Delhi

THE horrors of 27 February, 2002 remain deeply imprinted on Ishita Chaudhry's memory. Just 17 at the time, she had been jolted out of a family dinner by live footage of children being burnt alive in Godhra. Later, when Narendra Modi tried to justify the violence to the media, it struck her that she lived in a country with "zero accountability". Then a Class 12 student at Shri Ram School, Gurgaon, and preparing for her boards, the riot and its aftermath haunted her.



Members of Youth Parliament

Her participation in a conference organized by the Confederation of Indian Industry (CII) in April that year, where she spoke on the reaction of the young to the 'social and ethical breakdown in India', was another turning point in her life.

It struck her that though there are 315 million Indians under the age of 24, constituting 31 per cent of the population, they had very little say in the policy-making process. It was also a shock to realize that though she was articulate enough in her speech she had no informed opinion despite a privileged education in a scenario where only 54.5 per cent of women and girls have access to primary schooling. "I began to question how we lived our lives and shared power, identity and privilege and my own lack of action. I began my work because I wanted to live in a world where human rights are upheld, where women and young people are recognized as change-makers and equal stakeholders in society, actively involved in making policies and executing programmes that impact our health, rights and lives," she says fervently.

In late 2002 The YP Foundation (TYPF) or the Youth Parliament, as it was then known, was born. Starting out with just three high school students working from Ishita's parents' house, the non-profit TYPF is now one of India's largest youth-run and led organisations. Since it began, TYPF has directly supported 6,500 young people in setting up over 250 projects, reaching out to over 350,000 youth across 18 states with 60 partners that have considerable clout in their respective spheres.

TYPF's recently held a "Ten Years in Ten Days" festival for its 10th anniversary celebrations. The high point was a day called "Reclaiming Our Choices – Celebrating Gender, Sexuality and Rights", held across several venues in hip Hauz Khas Village. Around 400 young people hopped between a condom art competition, a book reading, film screening, poetry reading as well as workshops on clowning, self-defence, public safety, sexuality and disability.

TYPF's workshop on gender and sexuality showcased the organization's flagship Know Your Body, Know Your Rights (KYBK YR) or Shareer Apna, Adhikaar Apne programme, founded in 2002. The advocacy and peer education programme is a breath of fresh air in an atmosphere where silence surrounds young people's sexuality and right to health. "The programme builds young people's technical capacity to access unbiased, information on gender, sexuality, health and rights, enabling them to negotiate cultural and political barriers faced at community and policy level," says Gopika Bashi, project manager, TYPF.

KYBK YR strengthens platforms for young people to link decision makers for Comprehensive Sexuality Education (CSE). "Ensuring the sexual and reproductive rights of young people is critical because it empowers them to negotiate the vulnerabilities of violence, HIV, abuse, climate, gender inequality and poverty," adds Gopika. KYBK YR has now snowballed into a national campaign for CSE, one of India's first youth-led campaigns. Launched in 2010, the campaign ([www.knowyourbody-knowyourrights.com](http://www.knowyourbody-knowyourrights.com)) is supported by UNESCO and CREA.

Other successful programmes are Blending Spectrum (focusing on the promotion of education, health care and life skills among urban and slum children), a Right to Information programme, a Butterfly Project (promoting human rights through digital media, films and community training) and Silhouette (a programme to boost the arts by empowering musicians). ■

## 'Unilever's

**Civil Society News**  
New Delhi

EARLIER this year in Delhi, Hindustan Unilever (HUL) presented a progress report under the Unilever Sustainable Living Plan. The audience was specially invited and consisted of reporters, NGOs and representatives of other companies.

The Unilever plan involves reducing the company's environmental footprint and enhancing the social impact of its businesses. It seeks to reduce the use of water, recycle packaging material and a lot else. Unilever also wants to influence consumer behaviour by promoting sustainable lifestyles.

But how does this initiative play out in India where HUL has a reputation to live down. HUL is remembered here for causing mercury poisoning. In 2001 HUL's thermometer factory at Kodaikanal, in Tamil Nadu, dumped 7.4 tonnes of glass waste contaminated with mercury behind its factory near the Pambar Shola forest. Campaigns by Greenpeace and the Palni Hills Conservation Council resulted in the factory being closed.

The international Dutch trade union federation, FNV Modiaal, says in its report, Erratum, that Unilever has only partially cleaned the site. A large amount of waste continues to lie around. Workers and families exposed to mercury poisoning have been demanding compensation.

Amita Joseph of the Business and Community Foundation (BCF), which works closely with managements across industries, says while HUL is ambitious about its business targets, it is surprisingly modest when it comes to its social concerns. It talks about a few hundred villages here and a few hundred farmers there. For a company its size, making the money it does, surely it needs a bigger vision?

Joseph worries that the mercury pollution and its aftermath does not find mention in HUL's sustainability report.

Joseph attended the presentation on the report and raised several questions. She says the answers she has got from the HUL management are either vague or show that very little is being done.

Joseph spoke to *Civil Society* about the questions she has been raising and why a company the size of HUL needs to aspire to do much more.

**You have been critical of Hindustan Unilever's sustainability report. Where do**

## SUSTAINABILITY X-RAY

## social initiatives are trivial'

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Amita Joseph at her office in Delhi

**you find it lacking?**

The report is a brave exercise given the company's reputation of irresponsibility. Reading the report is indeed an enlightening exercise. While sales and profits have soared, Hindustan Unilever remains rather modest and unambitious with regard to water use, labelling, workplace injuries, livelihood enhancement and agricultural outreach.

**Let's take water. The company says it plans to reduce water usage in its factories, introduce drip irrigation, undertake rainwater harvesting and so on. What's wrong with that?**

Well, given the fact that most of the company's products – soaps, shampoos, detergents – are water dependent, Unilever's Vitality Foundation expects to reach only 180 villages that too by 2015. In 2010 it provided free drip irrigation to just 25 farmers with one acre each! These farmers work with their suppliers. By 2015, Unilever aims to reach drip irrigation to 1,000 farmers in a country that has 550 million farmers.

NGOs do better. A single NGO I know reaches 1,200 villages with 75 mobile health units. Unilever talks of reaching 800 farmers with five mobile health clinics. Compared with their ambitious business targets their CSR targets are really rather modest.

**Unilever's report talks of providing nutritious options to consumers and of promoting health****and hygiene. It is also planning to boost sales of its low-cost water purifier, Pureit. You don't seem impressed?**

See, in providing healthy eating information, Unilever says by 2015 all its products will include energy per portion information on the front of the pack plus list eight key nutrients and percentage Guideline Daily Amounts for five nutrients at the back of the pack. But this statement is actually watered down by another line which states, "where applicable and legally allowed and in accordance with local and regional industry agreements."

Clearly this is an attempt to take advantage of weak regulatory frameworks in the country. The company should be adhering to global standards.

Then, take safe drinking water. Its ambitious plans to sell Pureit are not backed by any after-sales team. I asked them and they said the product was fail-proof and they would be setting up a services team. I have a Pureit that doesn't work. I mean you just sell a product and walk away? Will a family in a rural area know what to do if there is a problem with the product?

HUL has 10,000 trucks on the road daily. By its own admission its biggest challenge in India is to reduce CO2 emissions despite significant volume increase. It claims in 2011 it delivered 17.8 per cent improvement in logistics CO2 efficiency over 2010. But what were emission levels in 2010 or 2008? Those figures are not mentioned.

The company talks about optimizing distance travel, increasing the height of trucks so that they can carry heavier loads. This, in a country where overloading causes serious road accidents. There is no strategy for reducing pollution or road accidents by training drivers. They don't use the railways for transportation.

**HUL has a very successful Project Shakti rural sales programme. It has received awards for this initiative. The Shakti Ammas have become 'micro entrepreneurs' according to the company. What is your analysis?**

I did ask them for more details on this glorified women's initiative. I wanted to know how much the women earned. Nitin Paranjpe (HUL's CEO and managing director) replied that each Shakti Amma earned ₹1,000. That's all! This in a company where 40 per cent of their products are consumed in the 'fast growing markets of rural India,' and their CEO is one of the highest paid with a salary of ₹7.5 crore. They have added 30,000 Shaktimaans or men to this programme to increase distribution and sales of their products. I did suggest that the income of Shakti Ammas be increased instead, for example by including them in selling and servicing their Pureit water filter.

**Occupational health is a concern. The company states they aim for zero workplace injuries. How do you assess HUL's figures according to their report?**

It worries me. They say by 2020 they will reduce the Total Recordable Frequency Rate (TRFR) for accidents by 50 per cent versus 2008. What does that mean? Why by 2020? How many people suffered injuries or fatalities in 2008? They don't give those figures and they are merely hiding behind technicalities. The global target for TRFR is zero per cent.

**Finally, what do you think HUL's report should have included?**

In Kodaikanal the company refuses to take full responsibility for remediation of the contaminated site. In Dharwad, the illegal closure of its factory and dismissal of workers continues to simmer. In Doomdooma at its tea estate it tried to smash the workers' union. All these issues should have been made clear in the report.

HUL should talk of its approach to corporate responsibility and then decide its 'social' aspect. Nowhere in the report is this mentioned. It is not clear what percentage of profits after tax (PAT) the company has allocated to its outreach efforts. ■

# Why Bhutan is smiling

Civil Society News  
New Delhi

**W**E are the happiest people in the world, said Lyonpo Yeshey Zimba, Bhutan's Minister of Works and Human Settlement, amidst enthusiastic applause at the India International Centre in New Delhi.

He was delivering the annual lecture of the Business and Community Foundation (BCF) on his country's Gross National Happiness (GNH) index.

The UN-sanctioned World Happiness Report places Bhutan in the 38th position on account of its lack of economic development, but Zimba did not think it mattered that much. "We feel happier than most," he said.

The reasons for this were that the "state has created most of the required conditions. The country is peaceful and safe. The natural environment is exemplary. Opportunities for self-enhancement have grown and health and education are now free. There exist strong family values and a responsible government," explained Zimba.

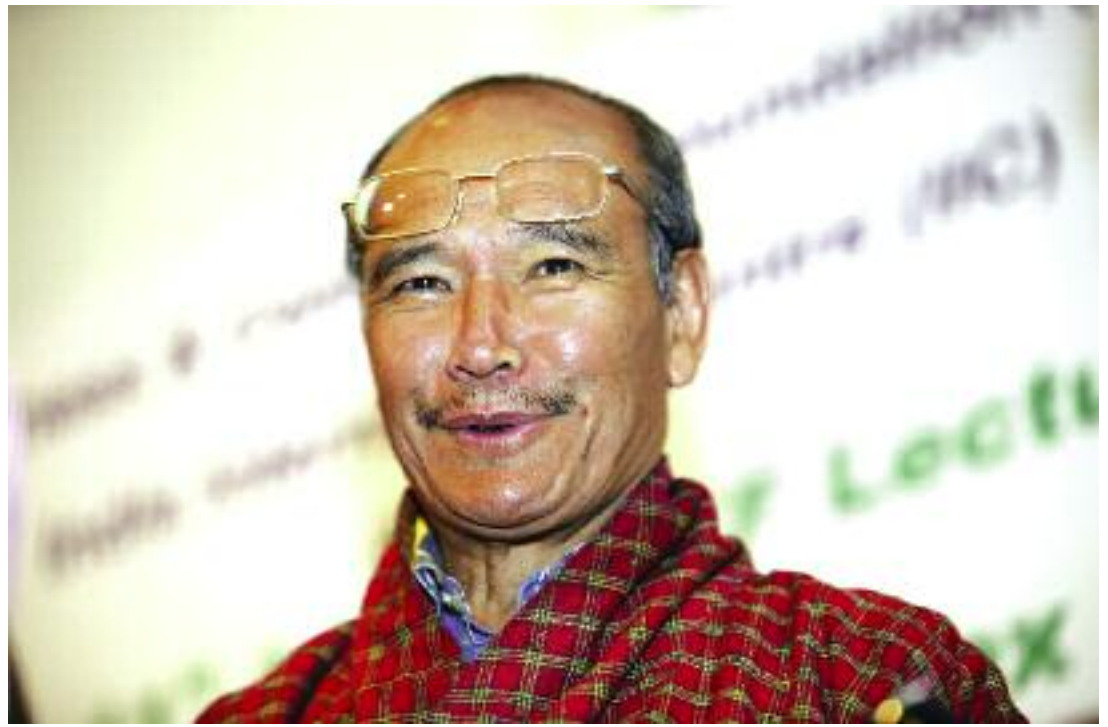
Bhutan, one of the youngest democracies in the world, prioritises GNH (Gross National Happiness) over Gross National Product (GNP) and Gross Domestic Product (GDP). It has given the world a model worth emulating.

During his long and distinguished career as a government official in Bhutan, Lyonpo Zimba has had the opportunity to help implement GNH as a national policy, both before and after the introduction of democracy in the erstwhile kingdom in 2007-2008. First articulated by Bhutan's former king, Jigme Singye Wangchuk, GNH quickly became not only a lodestone for domestic policy but also aroused the interest of economists and social scientists around the world.

In his opening remarks, Zimba contextualised GNH as an alternative to the dominant economic model of maximising production and consumption. This model is no longer viable, he pointed out, since it places great stress on the environment, denudes the earth's resources and contributes to global inequity.

"The richest consume 86 per cent of the world's resources and 60 per cent of energy. They emit 60 per cent of greenhouse gases (GHGs). The poorest generate only two per cent of GHG and yet bear the brunt of climate change," he said.

But Zimba did not want to get into a blame game. He used the example of a boat that springs a leak to stress the need for cooperation. It doesn't matter in whose corner the leak is – everybody must contribute to mending it because if the boat sinks, all will perish. Zimba felt that GDP-oriented economies, focused solely on profit, have failed to address this urgent issue adequately.



Lyonpo Yeshey Zimba, Bhutan's Minister of Works and Human Settlement

**Zimba explained the Four Pillars of GNH, which are sustainable development, environmental protection, cultural values, and good governance.**

The fourth King of Bhutan had suggested GNH as a 'holistic policy' that would address the shortcomings of GDP. Happiness, rather than money or wealth, was recognised as the ultimate goal of human life. Though happiness is a subjective feeling, the state was made responsible for creating conditions conducive for the happiness of its citizens. At the core of GNH is a realisation that, "human beings need psychological well-being along with material prosperity", explained Zimba.

Money is important but it is not sufficient to guarantee happiness.

Zimba explained the Four Pillars of GNH, which are sustainable development, environmental protection, preservation of cultural values, and good governance.

He said cultural values are not only important as markers of a nation's identity, they also help us

access emotional balance and inner harmony that are crucial for well-being and happiness.

"Greed can never be quenched without contentment," he said. "It is the active cultivation of positive emotions that gives life greater meaning." What is interesting is that the philosophy of GNH draws deeply from key Buddhist ideas of interdependence, non-attachment, compassion, and adhering to the middle path in all matters by eschewing extremist positions.

Bhutan's Fourth Pillar is defined as 'an effective, caring and just government'. This means the state makes all efforts to create services and conditions of happiness for its people. Zimba said Bhutan has been able to establish this ambience because it has the "least corrupt governance and access to justice is easy and not lengthy and drawn out." The foundation of good governance is the democratically elected government of Bhutan, which is committed to measuring all its policies against the touchstone of GNH and its parameters.

In order to measure happiness a GNH index has been devised and implemented in Bhutan. Zimba candidly admitted that initially, he did not believe that it would be possible to measure happiness. But when it became evident that the idea of GNH would gain wider respectability and acceptance if it were measurable, an index was devised.

Calling it a "path breaking effort that was the first of its kind in the world", the minister conceded that Bhutan's method of measuring happiness needed to be simplified. In its current form each person was required to spend a couple of hours being interviewed. ■

LAKSHMAN ANAND



Computer Definition :-

computer is an Electronic Data processing machine (E.D.P) It takes the user's data and gives the



## Signalling a new era in teaching through Project Shiksha

Shweta was only 6 months old when she was left severely crippled by spinal polio. While growing up, her choices were never easy, but this didn't stop her from pursuing her dreams. She attended school, got herself a Diploma in Computer Applications and is now a computer teacher at a school for the hearing impaired. Even as she used sign language to teach, Shweta felt it was necessary to further simplify computer education.

Microsoft's Project Shiksha empowered her to make this happen. Under this initiative, teachers are trained to use computer programs like Microsoft Word, PowerPoint and Moviemaker as tools for their teaching. Shweta used her learnings to create her own set of signs and gestures that incorporated computer commands, and helped the students understand computers better.

The result — skills that go beyond the classroom to create a better life for all.

### SHWETA WALISHETTAR

B. D. Tatti Deaf & Dumb School | Lakshmeshwar, Karnataka

### SHWETA'S SIGNS FOR CHANGE

Illustrating concepts with videos and presentations using **Microsoft Office PowerPoint** and **Windows Movie Maker**.

Developing analytical skills with calculations and spreadsheets on **Microsoft Office Excel**.

Nurturing a spirit of enquiry with online research and scanning materials.

### REAL IMPACT FOR A BETTER TOMORROW

This is one of the stories of enabling change in India through IT in education. Partnering with 12 state governments, **Project Shiksha** has helped train over **708,000 teachers** in IT skills, who have impacted over **32 million students** so far.

To know more about Microsoft's initiatives, visit [www.microsoft.com/india/about](http://www.microsoft.com/india/about)



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# Microsoft®

# Kashmir wakes up to corruption

**Jehangir Rashid**  
Srinagar

At a time when anti-graft campaigns have gained momentum across India, unusual people are emerging as pioneers in the movement. Dr Rubina Lone, 36, is one such individual who is waging a war against bureaucratic apathy in Kashmir.

Dr Lone was educated at various reputable institutions in Kashmir before graduating from the Sher-i-Kashmir Institute of Medical Sciences (SKIMS) in Soura with a specialisation in infection control and microbiology in 2003. In 2006 she became the youngest consultant appointed to SKIMS Medical College, Bemina. She is currently an assistant professor at SKIMS and is also the recipient of a fellowship offered by the London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine.

Along with a few friends, she launched the Kashmir Corruption Watch (KCW) last year. Working towards rooting out corruption from various levels of Kashmiri society and governance, KCW is an idea rather than an organisation, stresses Dr Lone.

"There is total apathy among Kashmiri people towards corruption," says Dr Lone. "We have made corruption a part of our lives and have in fact glorified the corrupt."

KCW began with a Facebook page and even attracted some non-resident Kashmiris who joined the campaign. These non-resident Kashmiris offered valuable suggestions for strengthening the campaign. In those early days they did more than the local community.

"I believe people have become self-centred in Kashmir," says Dr Lone, "and they seem to be least bothered about the corruption that has permeated all parts of our society. If this trend continues there will be no space or scope for honest people. The complete erosion of human values seems imminent."

A flashpoint that triggered the formation of the Kashmir Corruption Watch occurred in 2011 when Dr Lone's friend's parents were evicted from their house, despite possessing all legal documents.

Dr Lone explains: "My friend's old parents were living in a custodian flat in the Baghat area with all the legal documents. But a politician began harass-



Dr Rubina Lone



A candlelight protest in Srinagar

MEHRAJ BHAT

ing them, asking them to leave. Soon he had a notice served on them. I did my utmost to resist this notice and decided to fight it out with the politician. Soon after this the KCW was formed with the aim of rooting out corruption from our society," she says.

Although she's young, Dr Lone is a realist agreeing that it will take ages and not mere years to weed out corruption. She seems content enough to get her message across to as many people as she can, hoping they sensitise others in turn. "Someone has to stand up and make a beginning and if I am that one over here, then what better privilege than that," she says wistfully.

Ever since its inception KCW has organised workshops and sensitisation programmes with youth and children to make them aware about the ills and extent of corruption. KCW intends to increase the frequency of these programmes in the near future, focusing specifically on the young, who are its primary target group.

"Last year we planned an essay competition about the ill-effects of corruption but the response was horrendous with very poor participation.

Though this was a disappointing experience, we did not give up. However, we hit another wall with our online survey due to the apathetic attitude of the people. No one was ready to devote even two minutes to complete the survey," she says sadly.

This year seems to have gone better for KCW. A candlelight vigil on the banks of the Dal Lake in May was a great success with the youth, especially students, turning up in large numbers to take part. Subsequent national as well as international media coverage helped raise KCW's profile and spread its message.

Being a victim of domestic violence herself, Dr Lone says people should fight injustice. "I should have reacted to the torment right away, but my cowardice encouraged my husband to inflict more and more torture on me. When I realised that I had been beaten enough, I decided to raise my voice and started speaking out," she says. Her seven-year marriage ended in divorce in 2006 and she now lives with her daughter.

"I am lucky that I am a doctor and can feed myself and my daughter," says Dr Lone, "but there are many women who are financially dependent on their spouses and are subjected to torture by their husbands and in-laws. They should stand up and fight against the injustice so that there is some end to this medieval behaviour."

Life has not been altogether fair for Dr Lone ever since. She has been wrongly accused of trying to convert people to Christianity. But she holds her head high and her voice is strong. She speaks her mind in frequent columns she writes for a Kashmir-based English daily hoping to awaken as many as she can to her cause. ■

Care A TATA ENTERPRISE



Over the years, we've led cross-country vaccination drives. Set up rural housing projects. Pioneered a computer-enabled adult literacy programme. Established the Tata Memorial Centre for Cancer Research and Treatment, the first of its kind in India. And provided employees with maternity benefits, retiring gratuity and the provident fund, decades before they were enacted by law.

The belief:  
"No success...is worthwhile unless it serves the needs or interests of the country and its people..."

- JRD Tata



Leadership with Trust

**9<sup>th</sup>**  
Anniversary  
SPECIAL ISSUE

**A CIVIL SOCIETY  
HALL OF  
FAME**

IN ASSOCIATION WITH THE AZIM PREMJI FOUNDATION

— Sanjay Sahni —  
RATNAULI VILLAGE, BIHAR

— Naurti Bai —  
HARMADA VILLAGE, RAJASTHAN

— Dr Chiranjeeb Kakoty —  
GUWAHATI, ASSAM

— Boya Pedda Rajanna —  
GOLLA VILLAGE, ANDHRA PRADESH

— Evita Fernandez —  
HYDERABAD, ANDHRA PRADESH



**LEAD SPONSOR**

# THE QUIET

RITA & UMESH ANAND

**E**ACH year when we put together a long list for the Civil Society Hall of Fame, we are amazed at the number of individuals and groups we find who quietly pursue the goal of a better India. So rich is the haul that it is difficult to choose.

These are people whose causes are a part of their daily lives. They abhor the descriptions of 'hero' and 'unsung hero'. Instead, they are happy to be doers, people of action whose dreams are rooted in the realities around them.

When we look at the innumerable problems with which we grapple as a country it is easy to feel overwhelmed and pessimistic. There are many among us who say that we would not like our children to plan a future in India. They should go abroad and live in developed economies, which are more sorted and where the quality of life is perceived as being better. Many a privileged Indian considers India to be not good enough.

But for the vast majority of Indians this is a land of opportunity. There is more positive energy than we choose to acknowledge. Look and you will find individuals who are much smarter than the State. It is in unleashing this baseline potential that lies the key to a truly competitive India.

The Civil Society Hall of Fame is our way of honouring such people – Indians who make a difference without making a fuss. They lead in their everyday lives, doing their bit because it is the right thing to do. They could be doctors, lawyers, teachers, accountants, activists. They are mostly invisible people, working at ground level and difficult to identify. But in their quiet efforts are the seeds of real change.

The rules of the Civil Society Hall of Fame are very clear. No one can apply. No one can be nominated. You have to be identified because of the work you do.

A long list then goes to our jury, which makes a selection. It isn't a perfect process, but it is one way of citizens honouring citizens. There should be many more such efforts and the further removed they are from government patronage and corporate branding the more meaningful they will be.

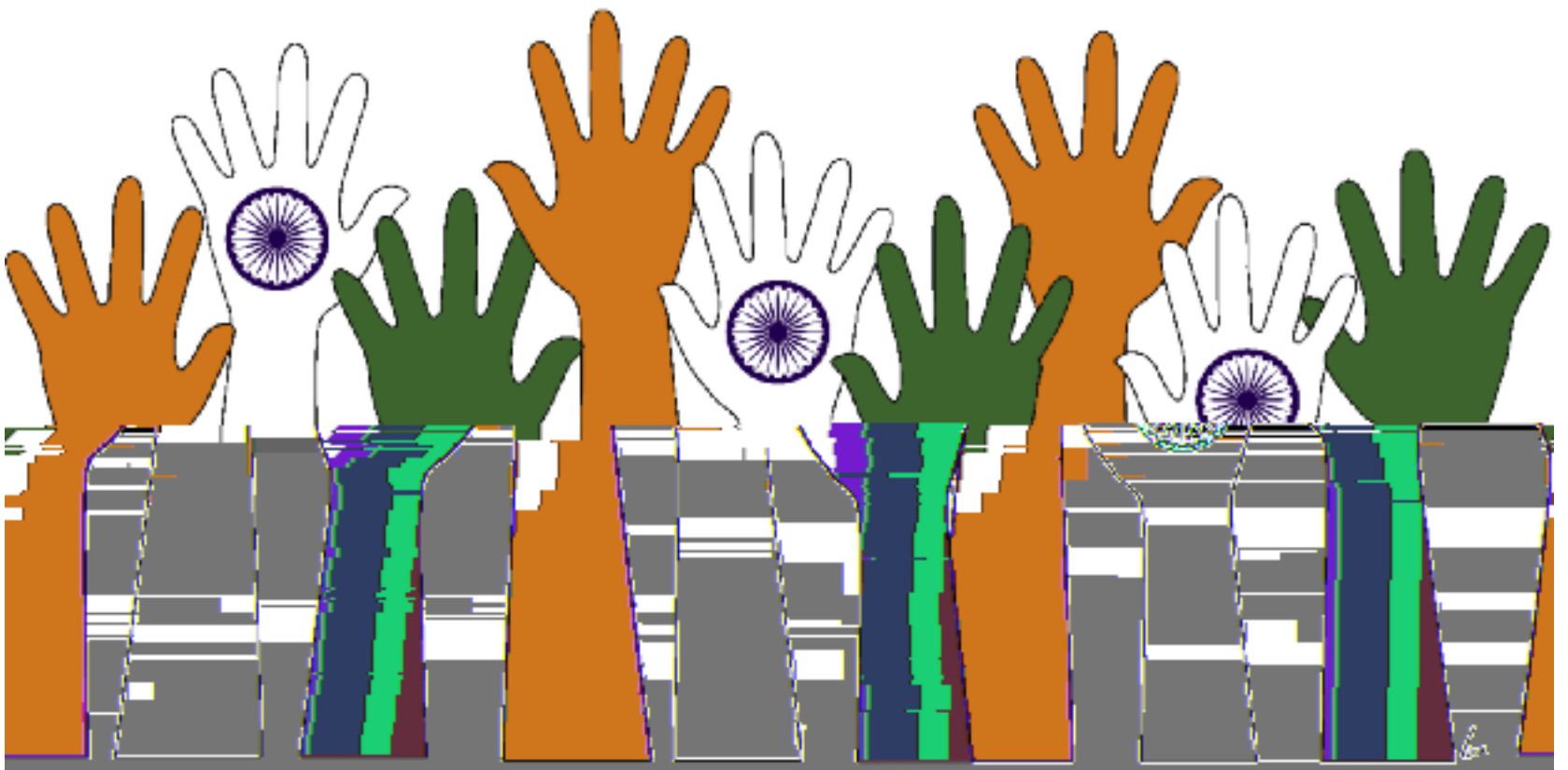
Each year the people we identify wonder how we got to them – 'How did you hear about me?' 'No one knows about me.' 'I don't deserve this.' 'I keep a very low profile.' Responses like these give us a real high. More so because when we go public with the stories of these invisible people they come to be regarded as role models. But that is what they were in the first place – it is just that no one cared to notice.

Take Boya Pedda Rajanna in Golla village in Anantapur district. He has been treating animals with herbs for several decades. People from the surrounding areas come to him when their animals are unwell at all times of the day and night. He turns no one away.

There are several diseases in animals that Rajanna knows to cure. He is good with fractures too. In the absence of veterinary facilities, Rajanna's services are invaluable.

Rajanna's role as a vet leaves him with little time for his family occupation of farming. The result is that the family's finances have suffered. It also worries his wife that he goes off in the middle of the night when

# AND COURAGEOUS



someone turns up asking him to attend to an animal.

Rajanna's knowledge about herbal cures has been handed down to him by his father and grandfather. It goes beyond identifying herbs to a much deeper belief in sustainability and balance in nature and the importance of animals in securing the future of our planet.

In Hyderabad, Dr Evita Fernandez, a gynaecologist, heads a very special hospital, which was set up by her parents who were also doctors.

Fernandez Hospital exists as a private enterprise, but in the best tradition of medicine it is not run for profit alone. No one is turned away because fees can't be paid. So, the poor get a quality of treatment that the rich are happy to pay for.

Dr Fernandez also works with HIV positive pregnant women. She has been doing so since 1994 when it wasn't so common for hospitals to take in people with the virus.

Dr Fernandez's devotion to medicine has given an academic orientation to her work as well. She teaches postgraduate students and doctors of Fernandez Hospital present papers at international conferences.

She believes in giving back to society and in 2008 she started a nursing school for girls from tribal and underprivileged communities. They get free education, board and lodging.

In Muzaffarpur in Bihar, Sanjay Sahni, just 27 and a school dropout, leads a campaign against corruption involving NREGA money. He has challenged entrenched interests and rallied people to demand accountability.

It is an amazing story of empowerment through technology. Sanjay

chanced upon his village's NREGA records on the Internet. It was the first time that he ever sat at a computer.

Taking on a village head in Bihar is not a minor matter. But Sanjay Sahni has done just that because he has a deep sense of what is right and wrong.

In Guwahati, Dr Chiranjeet Kakoty keeps a very low profile but he is immersed in public causes. He initiated AIDS education in schools in 1991. He has been behind projects on child and reproductive health though he himself is a postgraduate in geriatric medicine and hospital management.

He has worked with drug users and truckers and has a keen interest in new ways of intervening with vulnerable groups. Such initiatives through the voluntary sector are needed in the northeast and Dr Kakoty makes an important contribution through the North East Society for the Promotion of Youth and Masses (NESYPM).

Finally, Naurti Bai, the sarpanch of Harmada village in Rajasthan, is the veteran of many battles. A strike led by her in 1983 resulted in the Supreme Court verdict that all workers, including those employed for drought relief, had to get the minimum wage.

Naurti Bai is a Dalit from the Regar community. She taught herself to read and write and then to use computers. She now teaches Class 10 schoolgirls how to use computers. Hers is an inspiring story of how to fight the disadvantages of being born poor and in a lower caste.

This year's jury consisted of Nasser Munjee, Anupam Mishra, Aruna Roy, Nandan Maluste and Darshan Shankar. To them we are grateful for their enthusiastic involvement with the Civil Society Hall of Fame. ■



**SANJAY SAHNI**

## Ratnauli's wired hero

**A**T 27, Sanjay Sahni is an unlikely messiah, but that is what he has become to hundreds of villagers in the Kurhani block in the district of Muzaffarpur in Bihar. It has all happened in the short span of a year, beginning with a chance search on Google for rural work entitlements promised by the government.

Thanks to Sanjay's gutsy initiative, the villagers of Ratnauli now get the 100 days work they have been promised by the government. More importantly, they also get paid – even if the money arrives in their post office savings accounts a few weeks late.

The villagers have job cards and have learnt to ask for their money when earlier they would be given a pittance and turned away by contractors.

Like so many young men in Muzaffarpur, Sanjay migrated to the big cities to earn a living. He went to Jaipur and learnt to be an electrician. He ended up opening a stall on a pavement in Janakpuri in west Delhi.

On his trips back home to Muzaffarpur he would hear people complain that they didn't get work under the National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (NREGA). Some were given work, but were not paid their dues.

Sanjay would listen to these complaints and return to the life he

had moved on to in Delhi. Then one day in August 2011 he sat at a computer in a cyber cafe opposite his stall and typed 'NREGA Bihar' into Google.

It was one of those crazy things done on an impulse. Sanjay dropped out of school in Class 7 and knows very little English. Before that day in August 2011, he hadn't used a computer. But someone had told him, "*Google se poocho aur sub kuch pata chal jata hai.* (Ask about anything in Google and you will find all the information you want)."

So, for the heck of it, Sanjay typed in 'NREGA Bihar' and the search engine sent him to the government's official NREGA website. There he found his district, Muzaffarpur, his block, Kurhani and his village, Ratnauli.

He next clicked on 'Job cards in registration' and out came the official list of villagers who were supposedly getting 100 days work under NREGA and even being paid for it. Amidst 1,200 names he chanced upon the name of Mahendra Paswan, his neighbour in the village.

It was amazing that such records existed and could be accessed. But what was shocking was the information was fabricated. Sanjay knew the truth: the villagers had mostly not got work and those

who had been given work hadn't been adequately paid. Clearly the money had been siphoned off.

"I used to keep my electrician's tools in the cyber cafe overnight because I only had a stall on the pavement. The owner, Jaspal Singh, knew me. But this was the first time that I sat down at a computer and began using it. Jaspal Singh kept shouting out to me to get up, saying I would spoil the machine. But it was all so fast on the Internet that once I was in I kept clicking and looking for more on the NREGA site," says Sanjay.

Sanjay took printouts of the NREGA records and returned to his home at Ratnauli to show them to fellow villagers, who at first couldn't believe what they were seeing.

Ratnauli is steeped in poverty. The majority of people here are scheduled caste Paswans. There is no electricity supply, just the odd TV set, no roads to speak of. People are barely literate and they haven't been near a computer. Let alone accessing the Internet, they can't even imagine what the Internet is and how it works.

NREGA work here mostly involves digging up earth and expanding narrow village roads. It is physical labour of a very basic kind and that is all the villagers are capable of.

The young mostly migrate to cities and towns. Some of them take up jobs in nearby urban areas. It is the ageing villagers who get left behind and have little to fall back on. NREGA is a lifeline for them.

So, when Sanjay showed up armed with his lists, it was difficult for them to comprehend how he could have got hold of the government's records.

Around 1,200 names were listed as recipients of NREGA money. In reality just a couple of hundred had job cards and they too had been given a few days of work and chased away by contractors.

The money was collected and shared among the contractors, the village *mukhia* or headman and petty functionaries of the government.

The village *mukhia* did his best to cast doubt on Sanjay's motives and spread the word that he was bluffing people for his own ends.

Taking on a *mukhia* in the Bihar countryside is not easy. A *mukhia* reigns through a combination of factors such as caste, money power and influence among government functionaries.

Sanjay belonged to the dominant Sahni caste of the village. The *mukhia* was also a Sahni. So, in some senses, given age-old equations in the village they were on the same side. It wasn't like a Paswan challenging a Sahni.

But to question the *mukhia* and ask for accountability was to shake up the established order. A power centre was being threatened and there was also substantial money involved.

However, several older men with nothing to lose egged Sanjay on and soon he had a following.

"At first many people did not believe me. The *mukhia* was successful in misleading them. But when they saw others getting their rights, things began to change," says Sanjay.

These days, people turn up in hundreds in support of Sanjay. They hold up their job cards. The walls of the community centre and panchayat bhavan have names, card numbers and dues painted on them.

"Do you know your rights now? Will you tamely hand your job cards over to people you don't know? Will you allow contractors to chase you away like they used to?" Sanjay asks a large gathering consisting mostly of women. "No," they reply in chorus.

LAKSHMAN ANAND



Women hold up their job cards at a village meeting

LAKSHMAN ANAND



Sanjay points to records now made public on walls

**At every gathering, people affirm that they now get NREGA work and the daily wage of ₹144 only because Sanjay has spoken up for them.**

"Many of these people didn't believe me in the beginning. They thought I was misleading them. But look at them now. It is very heartening," he says.

The role of a leader doesn't come easily to Sanjay. He has programmed himself to talk to a crowd, but he is clearly new to taking up a cause and rallying people around him.

At Mahant Manyari, a neighbouring village and the stronghold of the *mukhia*, he has lately found support. When we get there the *mukhia*'s people heckle him. It gets loud and noisy. The numbers swell and amid the jostling and pushing. Sanjay's claims are questioned. But the men and women holding up their job cards are in majority. It is they who have seen hope in Sanjay's accidental crusade. Their job cards are everything for them.

At gathering after gathering, people affirm that they now get NREGA work and the daily wage of ₹144 only because Sanjay has spoken up for them. But they now demand more of their rights.

LAKSHMAN ANAND



It is all public now: The walls of the panchayat bhavan are covered with NREGA work records

LAKSHMAN ANAND



Sanjay addresses villagers: He is a self-taught campaigner

For instance, they want to know why they don't get food supplies in the ration shops.

"You will have to ask for your rights like you have asked for NREGA employment and got it. You will have to stand up for yourself," Sanjay tells them.

Later, speaking to us at his home in the village, Sanjay says: "I don't know what made me take up this cause. I also don't know what to do next. An injustice was being done and I felt I needed to act. But now I don't know. My wife says we should go back to Delhi. I make up to ₹15,000 a month there as an electrician. My daughter can go to school."

Asked what he thinks has changed, he says, "Nothing has changed. It is the same administration, the same system. The only difference is that people are now aware of their rights and have learnt to ask for them."

On the day Sanjay strayed on to the NREGA website in the cyber cafe in Janakpuri, he also found the mobile number of a certain Sanjay Sharma. "I can't remember which key I hit, but this number and name came on the screen. I called him and asked him if he could help me. He asked me to call Nikhil Dey and gave me his number. It took several weeks to get through to Nikhil and then meet him."

Nikhil belongs to the Mazdoor Kisan Shakti Sangathan (MKSS), which is closely involved in monitoring the implementation of NREGA and helping people get their rights.

Nikhil put Sanjay in touch with Ashish Ranjan, an activist and a teacher of computer science at a college in Patna. He also put him in touch with Santosh Mathew, a senior IAS officer heading the rural development department in the Bihar government.

Both proved to be crucial in Sanjay's campaign. From Mathew instructions went down the line that NREGA had to be properly implemented in Muzaffarpur. Once that message went out it became possible to demand work and money. Records also went public with names

and muster rolls written on the walls of the community centre and panchayat building.

From Ashish, Sanjay learnt how to mobilise people. "Sanjay is a simple person. He had no experience in running a campaign and rallying people together," says Ashish. "He would speak to me on the phone and want to know how to hold a meeting. Would it be illegal? What should the slogans be? He wanted to know what to do if there were disturbances."

Ashish says: "Sanjay had confidence and curiosity. He had that sense of what is right and wrong."

Sanjay comes from the dominant Sahni caste, but he has spoken up for weaker castes in the village. "Caste has transcended caste," says Ashish. "NREGA has this potential to bring in radical change." ■

*Umesh Anand travelled to Muzaffarpur to meet Sanjay Sahnii*



# Sharing A TATA ENTERPRISE



For nearly 100 years, a substantial part of our earnings have supported trusts. Funding primary schools. Educational scholarships. Welfare projects. And institutions of world repute like the Indian Institute of Science, the Tata Institute of Fundamental Research, the Tata Institute of Social Sciences and the National Centre for the Performing Arts.

The principle:  
"...What came from the people has gone back to the people, many times over."  
- JRD Tata



Leadership with Trust

LAKSHMAN ANAND



## NAURTI BAI

# Sarpanch with raw courage

**H**ARMADA is about half an hour's drive from the small town of Kishangarh, famous for its marble and the 18th century school of painting. Blocks of marble line both sides of the potholed road that leads to Harmada, a visibly derelict village, an island of poverty that sits plum in the middle of a sea of marble money.

Here, in this village, lives a remarkable woman – Naurti Bai – who has been fighting for the rights of women for over 30 years. The feisty Naurti, a Dalit from the Regar caste, is now the sarpanch, presiding over a village dominated by 400 upper caste Jat families.

The day we arrive is also the day of the local fair. It's Janmashtami, and there is an air of raucous festivity. If you thought that the Indian village is a place of bucolic silence, punctuated by the gentle tinkling of bicycle bells, then it's time you revised your opinion. A packed Ferris Wheel, powered by a noisy generator spewing black smoke, circles the air. There are no bicycles or rickshaws, only small and big trucks and motorcycles. A *kabaddi* competition is in progress. Young men from surrounding villages wrestle each other in the soft mud bordered by pools of sewage. Villagers sit on the terraces of surrounding houses, cheer-

ing their favourites. The men in tattered vests lunge at each other; the children are crying themselves hoarse; the loudspeaker plays techno remixes of Rajasthani folk music. The lone commentator who's standing on the sidelines of the *kabaddi* pit cannot help but get carried away: "*Tilonia ka mela choti par chal raha hai.*" he shouts, "Everybody join in!" A truck passes by, on its way to a neighbouring fair. It's full of men in turbans and a handful of women in *ghoonghats*, one of whom sways her hips sensually to the beats, her midriff generously exposed.

Four kilometres away, far from the madding crowd, sits Naurti Bai in her spacious and newly built office. The room is bare with five big windows. A stack of durries is piled in the corner. There are two tables with computers, and a blackboard, with something about seeds and sowing methods scribbled across it in white chalk. The room can easily hold 50 to 80 people. The first thing Naurti Bai tells us is that the building was constructed in less than what was allocated in the budget. In the process, she saved more than a lakh of rupees for the village. Naurti might be a widow but she's dressed in colourful clothes, a sign of her independence. Today, she's wearing a pink sari with a gold border and a loose-flowing flowery petticoat; gold-coloured earrings add a glow to her face;

# HALL OF FAME

her hands are adorned with simple patterns in black henna. In a soft, low voice, she begins telling her story.

Naurti says she was never afraid of hard work. She overcame resistance from her father's brothers and started helping out the family, from digging mud to transporting it to the nearest town in a bullock cart. In her younger days she could dig a trench 300 feet long in one day. The wage fixed by the government was a rupee and 25 paise for every 100 feet.

In 1981, she organised 300 women and filed a PIL in the Supreme Court over the low wages being paid for drought relief work. This was done with the help of Aruna and Bunker Roy who had just started working in the area. There was resentment amongst the women folk for the contractors paid them ₹3 or ₹4 rupees, even when they did the most labour-consuming jobs. The men got paid up to ₹7, often for doing nothing more than puffing on their bidis and playing cards. The women workers struck work. In a historic judgment, the Supreme Court ruled that no worker, including those working on drought relief, could be paid less than the minimum wage. A payment below the minimum wage would amount to forced labour.

At the age of 35, Naurti underwent literacy training at the Barefoot College in Tilonia. She ran a night school for women for three years. In 1987, when Roop Kanwar was pushed onto her husband's funeral pyre, she arrived on the scene and sat in dogged protest. The upper caste men threatened to rape and kill her, a threat she would get used to over the years. "What the Rajputs do to their women is wrong. The young widow is not in her senses. There is loud music and general confusion. Before you know it the deed is done. The police, instead of using the law, sided with the Rajputs. It made me furious."

In 2010, she fought elections and became sarpanch. In line with government policy, the seat had been reserved for a woman. Her rival, Pyare Lal Taunk, sarpanch of Harmada several times over, and a liquor contractor, bankrolled three women candidates of his own. He plied the people with free alcohol, food and money. His supporters branded Naurti's daughter-in-law a witch. There were threats of rape. Naurti stuck to her guns. She had no money, she says, but she and her son canvassed door-to-door on foot, visiting each house three to four times. Gradually the women's vote, cutting across caste, swung towards her.

Meanwhile, she learnt to work a computer, a skill that has served her well in her new avatar. As sarpanch, one of her key jobs is to administrate NREGA funds. She makes sure that the money is spent on the right kind of construction work, and that it goes into the right hands. This simple act has liberated the local women who now don't have to depend on their husbands. If they want to buy a sari for themselves, or toys or medicines for their children, they can do it out of their own pockets. "They have self-confidence now," Naurti says. "They know their hard work can secure a good future for their children."

As we talk, Naurti Bai's phone rings incessantly. People from neighbouring villages call her up to fix appointments for meetings and to solicit advice. When she walks down the street, people line up to get petitions and applications signed. She's like a celebrity among her adoring fans. She obliges everyone with her 'autograph', though not before she has scanned the piece of paper carefully. Some villagers are putting up a wall around the local school. She takes us to the site. A woman touches her feet. She scolds her loudly. She turns to me and says, "I tell everyone. I'm a labourer first, then a sarpanch. I'm one of you. Then why fall at my feet?"

As we walk towards her home where she lives with her son and

LAKSHMAN ANAND



Naurti Bai at a NREGA work site

LAKSHMAN ANAND



As sarpanch, Naurti Bai ensures money is spent on development

grandchildren. I ask her about her trips abroad, to conferences in China, Germany and America. After all, she is a bit of a 'celeb' sarpanch even though she doesn't want to be treated as one. She laughs and says she didn't like the food in China so she survived on apples and bananas. It was her maiden trip in a plane. She was scared of the window seat so they gave her one in the aisle. Once she'd landed at the airport, she followed the pictorial signs to get to the exit. This is where she encountered 'bijli ki sidhiyan' (escalators) for the first time. She didn't like America much. "They don't care about their children and throw their parents in old people's homes. Not like here where people wear colourful clothes and are more open to each other."

We sit with her, the family matriarch, in her small courtyard, sipping Pavna Cola. Her daughter-in-law is making chapatis on a choolah. Two of her grandchildren are studying for bachelor's degrees in Kishangarh. During vacations, they pick up work under NREGA. Naurti says it's not easy to feed seven mouths. The cattle also need to be taken care of. Recently they spent Rs 7,000 on sowing. It's difficult but Naurti Bai always tells her brood, "Go out into the world with the self-confidence that you are the best."

As we leave, I ask her where she gets her strength. She replies without hesitation, "My parents, and Arunaji." Then she adds, "And also my mind. My mind is the best computer in the world." I am reminded of Chacha Chaudhary's famous quip, that his mind runs faster than a computer. And why not. After all, Naurti Bai is the 'chaudhury' of her universe. ■

Palash Krishna Mehrotra saw Naurti Bai's work in Harmada



**DR CHIRANJEEB KAKOTY**

## Healing hearts and minds

**A**S news arrives of more than 8,000 children waiting for urgent medical attention in violence hit Lower Assam, an agitated Dr. Chiranjeeb Kakoty expresses anger and helplessness. Local Bodo leaders have told NGOs like his North East Society for the Promotion of Youth and Masses (NESPYM) to stay away.

But Dr Kakoty is not one to hold himself back. He is restless. In his large well-lit office room, the reticent doctor hesitates to recall his journey of voluntary work. As a child, he had one single focus – to become a doctor and that dream didn't fail him.

In 1998 as a medical student in Guwahati, Dr Kakoty recalls how he started working against drug abuse. Along with a dozen medical students he began providing basic education to pavement dwellers under flyovers and people in slums. The funding came from their own pocket. Money provided by their parents to buy new clothes for Durga Puja was funneled into financing their voluntary effort.

In 1991, Dr Kakoty and his group registered NESPYM. They identified the deadly HIV/AIDS virus as a key area to begin work. At that time information about this life threatening illness was just beginning to sink in. Panic was gaining ground. Correlated with HIV was the rising use of drugs in the northeastern states. Children in

Guwahati were already doing dendrite and using injectible drugs.

The medical background of this group of earnest students helped them understand the issue. In 1994 they got noticed. The government approached them to start a de addiction centre. They almost withdrew from the request. The young men were graduating as doctors and taking up practice. They were not sure whether they would be able to sustain a de-addiction centre. Dr Kakoty, however, took a pledge. He became a full time director of NESPYM, the organisation he had founded as a student.

Soon noticed by international funding agencies, NESPYM started collaborating on HIV/AIDS, women's empowerment and even microfinance. As early as 1991, much before the Assam AIDS Control Society (ASACS) came into being, Dr Kakoty started AIDS education in schools in Guwahati. His was probably the first organization in the northeast to realize the significance of spreading awareness of HIV/AIDS.

NESPYM began with schools that they were familiar with. The first school, for instance, was Dr Kakoty's own old school where the teachers and headmaster knew him. But, yes, he says, there was some apprehension that was later found to be unwarranted. He talked to students of Class 9 and Class 10. "Seven or eight years

later those students told me, sir, you were the first to inform us about AIDs," says Dr Kakoty.

NESPYM, which had a head start in AIDs campaigning, shared its knowledge and technical expertise with ASACS and NACO when they began work. They spoke to officials in the education department. The state education boards opened an AIDs Cell. Today, AIDs education is part of a chapter on lifestyle in Assam's schools.

In each of his efforts Dr Kakoty has innovated. In 1999-2000, he started a microfinance project for women in Dibrugarh in Upper Assam. But he soon realized he didn't want to merely push credit to women. He wanted the project to empower them. "We didn't want to be only a microfinance centre," he says.

So they created collectives of women who would talk about reproductive and child health along with microfinance. They identified interested women in one gram panchayat and trained them as health workers. The health workers, in turn, identified women in other villages and trained them too. In this way, NESPYM reached health and microfinance to women and created a network of strong collectives.

"Yes, they made more money doing poultry and piggery but, more importantly for us, the school dropout rate fell and there was no hunger – an issue we wanted to address," says Dr Kakoty.

Bandiya Char, a sandbank in the tumultuous Brahmaputra river near Darrang, is probably NESPYM's most dramatic success story. The people living in Bandiya Char are all Muslims, mostly immigrants, impoverished with terrible health indicators. Infant and maternal mortality were very high. Contraceptive use was just four per cent. The state's average is 34 per cent.

In 2000, Dr Kakoty and his group spent six months identifying a handful of women within the community who were keen to work as change-leaders. NESPYM explained to Muslim religious leaders that nowhere in the Koran is contraceptive use forbidden. Ultimately, religious leaders came around. In the past three years just one or two babies have died and contraceptive use has risen to 44 per cent – higher than Assam's average.

Bandiya mosque also became the first mosque where men and women said their prayers together. Dr Kakoty did not just change Bandiya's health parameters. He changed its society. Bandiya Char illustrates the powerful impact of passionate social work.

When NESPYM started Sathee, a project for sex workers, Dr Kakoty drew upon his experience from a 'Health Highway Project' he had undertaken with the sex workers of Rangiya, a railway hub where trains from Guwahati and Lakhimpur intersect.

"It is an important junction with truckers and a big mobile population," recalls Dr Kakoty. "About 40 to 50 women were selling sex here. The men did not use condoms by paying more. We got the women to form a collective. We explained to them that if they did not use condoms they would surely die of HIV/AIDs."

The women got together. They collectively decided not to have sex with any man who refused to use a condom, regardless of the money offered. Men found themselves going from one sex worker to the next. No condom, no sex, they all said. The women won.

"We didn't just give out free condoms," says Dr Kakoty. "We treated all their health issues. If the collective is strong its difficult for dubious elements to infiltrate."

In 2004, NESPYM's Sathee programme reached out to sex workers living along railway tracks in Guwahati. The women told them frankly, "If we don't work, how will we eat? If men offer us more money to have unprotected sex we oblige."

NESPYM got one of their peer educators to open a grocery shop which now sells rice, pulses and other essentials to sex workers at

## Bandiya became the first mosque where men and women said their prayers together. Dr Kakoty changed Bandiya's health and society.



Refugees from Kokrajhar in Assam

wholesale rates. Condoms are also provided. In turn, the women need to undergo a health check-up once a month. A 'Sathee Card' has been introduced that has details of medical check-ups and acts as an identity card.

Here too, the women have been encouraged to act as a collective.

As Dr Kakoty journeyed through Assam he kept on educating himself with newer skills and he never gave up clinical practice. His latest qualification is in geriatric medicine and that is where he wants to make a huge difference. "I am a geriatrician. There are very few specialists in this line. I did it because I understood the social issues involved."

Prabash, his home for the old, is where his energies are now focused. "Prabash is three years old," he explains. "It is basically a community based geriatric care project. We act as a referral centre. We also inform the elderly about government schemes and other social schemes. Our focus is in two areas in Guwahati and one in a tribal belt 60 km away."

He steps out to his terrace garden to talk a little about his thinking board, his wife, Swapna, an associate professor in community medicine who teaches in a medical college.

A man who wanted to sing, a person who hasn't learnt how to relax, a grassroots doctor who doesn't claim he has achieved anything yet, Dr Chiranjeeb Kakoty is embarrassed to have spent an hour talking about himself.

And then, at the end of the conversation, he shares his most memorable moment. In the conflict of 2008 on the northern bank of the Brahmaputra, he arrived at a Bodo village. An elderly woman asked him where he had come from. People were fleeing villages, homes were on fire and relief camps were full of the diseased. Dr Kakoty told her he was a doctor from Guwahati and had come for her. She patted him and said, "In a place where neighbours don't care, you have come from so far. Sit down and have a meal with me." She had only plain rice, but that was probably his best meal ever. ■

*It took some doing for Civil Society to track down Dr Kakoty*



## BOYA PEDDA RAJANNA

# The 24/7 barefoot vet

A small green home in the sleepy village of Golla never sleeps. Harried villagers come knocking on this poor man's door, often in the dead of the night. Their animal is very sick, they tell Boya Pedda Rajanna as he lets them in. Your healing touch is needed, they plead. Rajanna, Golla's barefoot veterinarian for 30 years, never lets them down. He disappears into the dark, torch in hand, to reach the suffering animal.

The midnight knock does raise the hackles of Rajanna's wife, Lakshmakka. She knows it is a distress call. Somebody's cow or buffalo is seriously ill. But her husband wakes up readily. Sometimes he returns alone at sunrise or a day later.

Golla is 47 km from Anantapur district in Andhra Pradesh. Although this village has a government veterinary clinic with a qualified vet since decades, it is Rajanna whom the villagers turn to. "Why should we go there when Rajanna cures any ailment our animals suffer from?" retorts an old man from a crowd that has gathered outside Rajanna's home.

Identified by the Honeybee Network, Rajanna was honoured by the National Innovation Foundation (NIF) for his unstinting services this year. In March, former President of India, Pratibha Patil presented him the award at Rashtrapati Bhavan. Rajanna also

holds a patent for his cure for mastitis, an illness that attacks the udder of animals.

Rajanna's amazing knowledge of animal medicine is hereditary. His grandfather, B. Narasayya, was a traditional veterinarian and passed his knowledge to his son, B. Madappa, who then trained Rajanna by taking him on his rounds.

He dropped out of school in Class 3. But he can read, write and sign papers. To differentiate him from his younger brother, who was also named Rajanna, his parents added Pedda to his name. In Telugu, Pedda means elder.

Rajanna treats a range of animal illnesses – indigestion, inflammation of the stomach, fever, foot and mouth disease, diarrhoea, mastitis, epilepsy and fractures.

"I treat snakebite also although that is not very common in my area. In fact, I cure all kinds of health problems cows and buffaloes suffer from. But if an animal eats iron nails or other objects, I cannot treat that," he says. The object could get lodged in a dangerous spot and he doesn't want to take a risk.

People phone him too for help. But most villagers prefer to take him to treat their sick animal. Transport is not always available. So Rajanna walks and walks.

On an average, how many kilometres does he walk? Rajanna looks puzzled. "I don't know," he says. "Who would count that?" After much persuasion by his family, he says offhand, "May be around 200 km per month." His family members protest. "No, no, he has walked much more," they say.

"First, he goes to see the ailing cow. If he has a fairly good idea of the health problem the cow is facing, he collects his herbs on the way. If the problem is not clear, he has to search for the herbs after diagnosing the cow," says Sarmas Khan, his neighbour. "All this means walking to and fro for long distances. But he is used to it."

On a rough estimate, Rajanna spends 200 days a year on the road to ensure livestock in and around Golla stay fit and fine. His beat varies from 2 km to 25 km. He covers the neighbouring villages of Gangavaram, Kottala, Konapura, Seerpi, Viroopapally, Dodagatta, Kalyanadurga, Mudigel, Ontimedi, Borampalli, Mallipalli, Varli and Hanimireddypalli.

The most touching aspect of Rajanna's work is that despite investing so much time and effort, he never charges for his services. He accepts bus fare, if he is lucky enough to find a bus to hop on to. "It is not fair to take money for treating the dumb animals that serve us," he says. "This is what my grandfather and father taught me. I can't go against my family's legacy."

His knowledge of medicinal herbs has mainly come from his father. But years of experience have taught him new lessons. For instance, Rajanna doesn't keep a stock of herbs or leaves in his house. "These have to be collected afresh. Only then will they have the desired effect," he says.

To collect his herbs he has to walk into the government's reserved forest area. One such jungle is in neighboring Gangavaram village, 6 km away. Another one is at Vidyakunta village, 18 km away.

Over the years, he has had to walk deeper into the jungle because of deforestation. "Plants are there," he says. "But to get them I have to walk much more. If it doesn't rain in one area, I have to search for the plant in another area where it has rained."

He says mastitis, the swollen udder disease, is of two types. He prescribes a medicine made with a specific herb, mixed with garlic and pepper. It is to be fed once a day for three days to the cow. Most cases get cured in three days. But for some cows, the healing process takes around eight days.

According to *Gyan*, an NIF publication: "Mastitis is an infection of the tissue of the breast that causes pain, swelling, redness and increased temperature of the cow's breast." It affects the quality and quantity of milk. The primary cause of mastitis in cattle, goats and sheep are microorganisms such as *Streptococcus*, *Staphylococcus*, *Pasteurella*, *E coli* and *Klebsiella*.

"The test results of Rajanna's formulation against bacterial mastitis proved very promising. Further work is going on to refine it and make it more efficient," writes *Gyan*.

The publication further states, "Though Rajanna knows a number of good herbal practices, his practice for the treatment of mastitis needs special mention. This practice was documented during a workshop organized with the support of the district administration, Anantapur. The data was processed by NIF and the plant sample verified. After literature review, it was found that the practice was unique. Accordingly, a patent (1013/CHE/2011) was filed in the name of Pedda Rajanna for this practice."

The most common disease in his area, says Rajanna, is a disease he calls kunda. The animal's legs develop pain and it can't move. "There are five types of kunda and each one has to be treated in a different way," he says.

Another treatment Rajanna is very successful with is increasing the milk yield of cows whose milk output has declined. His neigh-

**'It is not fair to take money for treating the dumb animals that serve us. This is what my grandfather and father taught me. I can't go against my legacy.'**

SHREE PADRE



Boya Pedda Rajanna with his family

bour, Dadulurappa, says: "My cow was giving 2.5 litres of milk every day. I don't know why but suddenly my cow began giving less milk. It went down to only half a litre. At that juncture I consulted Rajanna. He prescribed three days of medicine and my cow began yielding 2.5 litres of milk once again." Rajanna also treats the problem of blood oozing with the milk.

Rajanna does not prescribe herbs and plants over the phone even if he has a clear idea of what the animal's ailment is. "Villagers don't have enough knowledge to clearly diagnose an ailment. It could be something different. I have to see. They may not be able to identify the specific herbs I advice over the phone. And finding those herbs in their locality is out of question," he explains. These practical difficulties come in the way of making Rajanna's task easier.

How many medicinal plants can Rajanna identify? He looks mystified. Honestly, he has never counted, he says. "May be 20," he quips. In fact, after conversing with him it is clear he can probably identify at least 100 herbs. Interestingly most of the medicinal plants he is using are uncultivated and available in their natural habitat.

Rajanna's family consists of farmers. He has five acres, 3 km from his home. The fields are rainfed and their main crop is groundnut. "Since he is always on the move, we have to shoulder the responsibility of all farming activities," says his wife. Rajanna admits he doesn't get much time to lend a helping hand. All the women go to work on their field to make up for Rajanna's absence. They have their own herd of cows.

"He is very compassionate to animals," says P. Ganesham, a retired Brigadier and coordinator of the Honeybee Network in Andhra Pradesh who played a big role in identifying Rajanna. "Once he gets news that an animal is ill, he gets restless. An extraordinary norm he follows is to keep track of the health of the animal post treatment. A poor person like him does this at the cost of losing his farming income. Naturally his family is very unhappy about this."

"It is very rare to find such dedicated people," says Ganesham. "There should be some mechanism to help their families financially so that they can carry on their noble work in peace." ■

*Shree Padre took a train and a taxi to meet Boya Pedda Rajanna*



## EVITA FERNANDEZ

# Every baby's hospital

**T**HE warmth of Dr Evita Fernandez's sunny smile has radiated to thousands of newborn babies. Ask any mother who has delivered her baby under Dr Fernandez's care and she will tell you she felt special and safe.

"Be kinder than necessary because everyone you meet is fighting some kind of battle," says a message on a pinup board in Dr Fernandez's office, mirroring her philosophy.

Fernandez Hospital in Hyderabad is her battleground. Through her untiring efforts she has shown how a private healthcare facility can provide high quality service to women from all strata of society and contribute to public health as well.

Dr Fernandez says childbirth is the most beautiful and magical happening in the world and she practices medicine to keep it that way.

She was eight years old when she decided she must become a doctor. At 16, she was sure all she wanted to do was to look after pregnant women who bring babies into this world. "That was the only subject I wanted to study even in college though for some reason I didn't get my highest marks in obstetrics!" she grins.

She also chose to remain single so that her only passion would be work. Evita (she likes to be called only by her first name) says she saw

how her parents struggled to cope as doctors and caregivers to their four children. And yet her mother was her inspiration.

Her parents started Fernandez Nursing Home in 1948, opposite their home in Bogulkunta in Hyderabad, as a two-bed facility. Evita nurtured it into a 225-bed facility. "Not the kind of numbers you would probably be impressed by," she smiles. "But then corporate expansion into a network of hospitals was not our motive. I just wanted to provide honest healthcare. I did not want to run the hospital as a proprietary concern. This is a place where patients come, not for an individual doctor, but because of their trust in the institution. And we achieve that by focussing on standardising procedures and protocols."

Evita and her siblings – two sisters and a brother – were initiated early into the world of doctors. Her elder brother was a surgeon till he died of brain haemorrhage at the age of 36 in 1985. In the same year, Evita took over the reins of the hospital.

She says she inherited not just the hospital from her parents but ethics, the right way of doing everything. "St Johns in Bangalore, where I studied between 1969 and 1975, was one of the few colleges that had a paper on ethical medical care. Internship at St Martha's taught that in practice."



From there to the government-run Gandhi Hospital in Hyderabad was a culture shock, Evita confesses. The numbers of patients there was so large. Resources were overstretched. "When I went to the hospital, my coat pockets used to be stuffed with bandages and syringes from home," recalls Evita. "But numbers need not overwhelm you. You are a doctor and must provide the healing touch. That is what I learnt from Dr Suvarna who served at the government hospital for decades."

A stint at the Royal College in England taught her the importance of systems, protocols and standards. That is what Evita brought back to her hospital in 1985. It wasn't easy. Evita recalls how she checked a pregnant lady for over half an hour and told her she did not need any medicines as she was perfectly fine. The patient's mother got really upset. "What kind of a doctor are you if you do not even write a prescription?" she asked and complained about Evita's 'inexperience' to her mother.

That did not deter Evita. No unnecessary medicines or treatment continues to be her hospital's philosophy. Representatives of pharma companies are not encouraged at Fernandez Hospital. An expecting mother, Shirley, confides this was the reason she chose Fernandez Hospital. "I was told they will let you give birth naturally and a C-section is only carried out if it is an unavoidable option unlike other private hospitals."

Shiv and Karuna confess having their baby girl at Fernandez Hospital was the experience of a lifetime. "My sister in Delhi delivered at a top-notch hospital but her husband was not allowed to be by her side when their baby was born. But Dr Evita encouraged Shiv to be with me," says Karuna. Shiv nods in agreement. "For us it was our first baby so there was a lot of excitement. What amazed me was the kind of interest and positive energy Dr Evita would radiate to her patients. Both doctors and paramedical staff worked in synergy."

Dr Evita credits that to teamwork and transparency. It has earned her acceptance and respect from colleagues and patients.

By 1992 Fernandez Hospital found itself grappling with a rush of patients. Dr Evita had to take the emotional and financially difficult decision of demolishing the old nursing home and building a new hospital in its place.

Raising ₹4 crore rupees to build the new hospital was not easy. But Dr Evita believes in miracles. And she says that is what happened. An ethical bank financed the expansion of the hospital.

A decade later, demand grew even more. This time a decision was taken to start a second, state-of-the-art facility, for high-risk cases. Dr Evita found in Dr Pramod, a paediatrician and colleague for 16 years, a leader who shared her values and beliefs. He helped her set up a full-fledged neonatal facility with an intensive care unit (ICU). The facility cost ₹41 crore and opened in the Hyderguda area in January 2011. It has so far handled 2,000 deliveries.

Fernandez Hospital has patients from all social strata. HIV positive mothers are treated free of cost. The ground floor treats those who can't afford to pay. Those on the third and fourth floors cross-subsidize them. But the quality of care is the same.

"We never want to send away a patient from our hospital because he or she cannot afford to pay. The biggest challenge is to be accessed by the entire spectrum of society," says Evita.

In fact recently, 'paying' patients were turned away from Fernandez's second facility at Hyderguda when two babies, whose parents could not pay, had to be kept on ventilators. The 'paying' patients were referred to other hospitals because the hospital's basic philosophy could not be compromised.

Dr Evita and Dr Pramod share the concern that hi-tech care is neither affordable nor accessible to many in the country although the highest numbers of low-birth weight babies in the world are born in

**The hospital has patients from all social strata. HIV positive mothers are treated free of cost. The ground floor treats those who can't afford to pay.**

P. ANIL KUMAR



Fernandez Hospital is a happy place

India. That is why Fernandez Hospital has taken the lead in implementing the practice of kangaroo mother care (KMC) where the mother's bosom is advocated as the best place for very tiny babies.

Sudha has come from Karimnagar and is at Fernandez's KMC ward. Her baby is a little over 1 kg in weight. After 10 days in the neonatal ICU, the baby is now strapped to her mother, skin-to-skin, virtually round-the-clock. Dr Pramod explains that this does not require equipment or great expertise. There is the added advantage of these babies doing well in cognitive development and parental bonding. "That is why we strongly need to promote KMC," he says.

Fernandez hospital has also evolved into an institute of learning and research. There are regular teaching sessions for post-graduates and workshop programmes for practicing clinicians. Evita says money from such activities is used to fund travel to medical conferences so that dependence on sponsors like pharma companies is avoided. The hospital is recognized for its two-year post-doctoral fellowship in high-risk pregnancies and perinatology.

Evita has invested her time, money and energy in training nurses and midwives. The hospital has a professional two-year midwifery programme introduced in 2011.

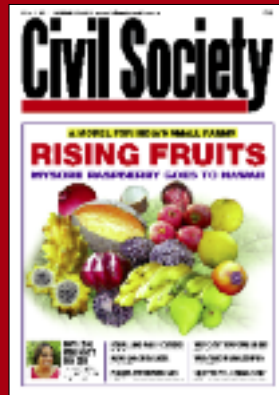
"I want this cadre of midwives to provide their services to urban health centres so that they can reduce the load on tertiary centres by taking care of low risk cases. India needs trained midwives to be part of the health system," explains Evita. She says some of the midwives are as well trained as doctors.

In 2008, the Fernandez School of Nursing began admitting tribal girls from backward areas of Maharashtra and Gujarat. They were given free education, boarding and lodging. Out of 170 students who have been sponsored, 120 are from tribal regions. The first batch of 21 tribal women are now working as staff nurses in the hospital.

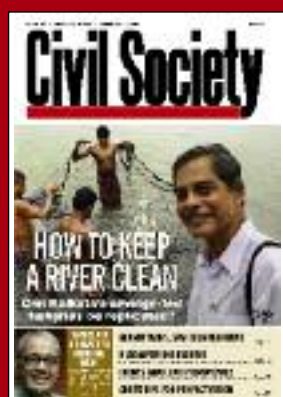
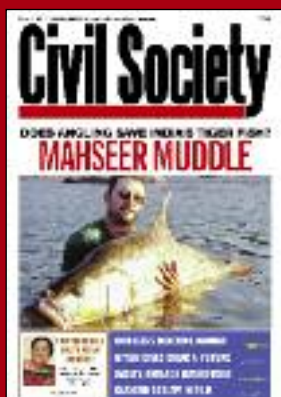
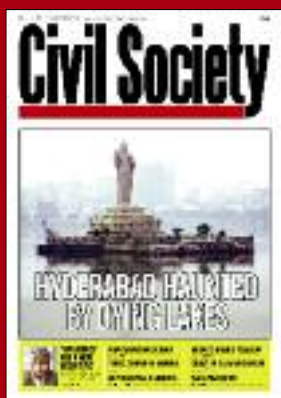
Evita feels strongly about women's empowerment. She has been a vocal voice against sex selection and unethical practices at ultrasound centres and hospitals. In her own hospital, two-thirds of the staff are women. ■

*T. S. Sudhir got Dr Fernandez to open up about her work*

# IN CIVIL SOCIETY EVERYONE IS



# SOMEONE



# 9<sup>th</sup> Anniversary

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## How Arvind Waghela got his drain

**Gautam Singh**  
Mumbai

THERE'S an unmistakable twinkle in his eye as Arvind Waghela sits on the cement slab covering the gutter outside his hut. He's posing for a picture and holding up the national flag. A bit dramatic, but then Waghela's just emphasizing his Constitutional right to life in the narrow, crowded lanes of Dharavi, Mumbai's giant slum. Though he was taking on the formidable bureaucracy of the Brihanmumbai Municipal Corporation (BMC), Waghela won thanks to the persistence with which he kept filing his complaints.

It's a small but hard won victory and the eyes of the illiterate 65-year-old tailor glint like shiny medals. Just a few feet from Waghela's front door, the open sewer would often get blocked and overflow in the monsoons with dead rats and noxious substances sweeping into his living room. This had to stop and thus began his bout with the BMC.

Waghela believes most strongly that the system is meant for people's welfare but one needs to make it work. "From my childhood days in my village in Gujarat, I have seen officials and judges dispense justice. You finally get your due but you have to fight for it," he says.

So, Waghela was ready for a long fight. He has not been to school and so his petitions were drafted with the help of a lawyer. In addition, for more than a year, Waghela has been attending weekly meetings organized by the Society for Nutrition, Education and Health Action (Sneha) which has spent a decade or so working with women in urban slums to reduce maternal and infant mortality, malnutrition and domestic violence.

To create agents of change, Sneha recently partnered with 'We, the People' (WTP), a small group of volunteers devoted to raising an active, engaged and informed citizenry.

WTP works with a range of social groups – Sneha and Magic Bus in Mumbai, Pragati Abhiyan in Nashik, Bhumi in Hyderabad and Literacy India in Gurgaon – to educate the community on the role responsible citizens can play. "The effort is to link up the reality around us, that is a part of our daily lives and connect it to our Constitutional framework," explains Vinita Singh, one of the founders and trustees of WTP.

The campaign began on Republic Day and continued till the municipal elections. It was an appropriate time to make this connection between the citizen, self-governance, corporators and the all-important vote.

In a community centre in Dharavi, around 200 people, divided into three groups, huddle together to discuss their roles as citizens in ensuring corporators and municipal staff perform their duties



Arvind Waghela sitting outside his home

effectively.

"During elections our basic responsibility as citizens is to vote for the corporator and be a part of what happens in those five years that follow," says Vinita. But once a citizen has cast his vote he lapses into amnesia till the next elections. "How do you hold the corporators accountable or inter-

act with them or make them understand the issues you face?" she asks.

'Anchors' plays a crucial role in this process of learning. They are usually volunteers who are mentored by the trustees and other anchors. Most of them are professionals from diverse fields. Sourav Banerjee, 30, who is in human resources at

## covered in Mumbai



GAUTAM SINGH

Sneha volunteers at a community meeting



GAUTAM SINGH

Women listed their priorities

Microsoft, joined the team to design programmes for anchors a few months ago. "The individual has to be empowered, but you have to understand his social ecosystem. What are we doing about his family, his neighbour? It is important to involve the family. We teach the anchors to facilitate, not preach," he says.

Sourav's explains his reasons for volunteering. "How can I use my human resource skills to help organisations that are trying to make a change but have a resource constraint," he says. "My passion

**Waghela believes most strongly that the system is meant for people's welfare but one needs to make it work.**

at work is how to create impact and that is not easy. How do you know that behavior is getting impacted? Can we create something around action?" These were some of the challenges that drove him to bring his skills from the relatively stable environs of the corporate sector to the imperfect world of Dharavi. "There is a strong belief that the individual is powerless. And its very difficult to change this belief," Sourav observes.

In Dharavi, the women told Dr Nayreen Daruwalla, a mental health professional, that they needed help in matters of day-to-day survival – kerosene, food rations and sanitation were crucial priorities for them. "We informed them that there is a connection between you and the ration office. Why is the Public Distribution System (PDS) there in the first place? What is the law behind it? And then we make that connect between their Constitutional rights and the existing structure. The understanding emerges that there are written rules and that every time there is a price change, there has to be a corresponding written order. And the correct place to find this information is in the ration office," says Vinita.

People began to understand that the system existed for them, that they had rights.

In the beginning, many women who questioned the ration shop owner were rebuffed, but then they went in groups and equations began to change. "It requires tenacity because if the store-keeper refuses to comply, one has to approach a higher official and so on, till they get the information," says Dr Daruwalla. "One of our strongest members is a 55-year old housewife called Nirmala who has doggedly confronted the ration shop owner in her locality. Now she has involved women from other areas and is often asked to accompany them to the ration shops."

The Right to Information (RTI) law has been very effective where an initial request for information has failed. "In the citizenship programme, available in modules, we train the anchors to take this understanding of the RTI forward," says Vinita.

One of these anchors helped Arvind Waghela file an RTI application demanding information from the Nagar Sewak of his area about the use of funds allocated to her and how many sewers needed repairs. Waghela also wrote that his Constitutional right to life was being infringed upon.

Those may have been the magic words. The BMC machinery promptly descended upon Dharavi to repair the sewer in front of Waghela's house. "Their top officials, along with the Nagar Sewak's PA, started visiting me daily, promising that the sewer would be repaired and requesting me not to pursue the matter any further. They even offered to repair anything else that I knew of that needed mending," he says laughing.

"If you try hard enough, you can change your locality. This experience has made me know a lot of powerful people and I'm only an ordinary man," he says simply. But then the rotund tailor with a jolly smile sitting on a slab of concrete over an offensive sewer is no ordinary man. He's one of India's most powerful – an enlightened citizen. ■

## A new life at the wheel

**Bharat Dogra**  
New Delhi

**S**HANNO Begum, 36, drives her taxi with ease, weaving her way through Delhi's anarchic traffic. People glance curiously. After all taxi drivers are always men. But Shanno and her tribe have smashed into this male bastion by running a cab service exclusively for women, by women.

Shanno, a widow, says she used to work as a caregiver earning Rs 4,000 every month. She lives in Dakshinpuri, a resettlement colony in south Delhi with her three children. Shanno found it hard to make ends meet. So she tried buttressing her income by doubling up as a cook and tutor. One day, her daughters, Sophia and Gulista, heard that Azad Foundation, an NGO, was training women to become drivers. They encouraged her to apply. Shanno now has a commercial driver's licence and takes home a monthly pay packet of ₹10,000.

"I achieved so much from my training that a new Shanno was born," she beams. "I also enjoyed the training. I will never forget the time when I went out with my trainee friends for a picnic wearing jeans for the first time in my life."

Underprivileged women like Shanno invariably try to earn money by working as caregivers, domestic helpers or by doing stitching and embroidery. Meenu Vadera, founder and secretary of Azad Foundation, points out that these are poorly paid jobs.

She says their research revealed that more lucrative employment did exist for poorer women in 'non-traditional' areas. For instance, Azad Foundation discovered a robust demand for women drivers due to the city's high crime rate. Richer women felt safer with female chauffeurs.

"The Delhi Transport Corporation is also willing to recruit women as drivers," says Vadera. "But our experience shows that many complex problems have to be solved before we can get marginalised women access to these new jobs on a significant scale."

Azad Foundation started its training programme called, 'Women on Wheels' by holding a mobilization campaign in slums and housing clusters. The women who applied as recruits were informed that the training period was for six months and could be extended if their progress was not up to scratch. The trainees were taught day time driving, night time driving, driving in heavy rain, how to read road maps, communication, English, legal knowledge, first aid and computers.

The foundation got Jagori, the well-known

women's rights NGO, to educate the women on gender rights. The Delhi Police Women's Cell was roped in to provide training in self-defence. Maruti Suzuki provided some trainers to teach the women how to drive. The foundation also got its own trainers.

'Women on Wheels' made good progress.

SHAMIK BANERJEE



Shanno Begum (middle) with two of her colleagues

Getting their trainees driving licences was a hurdle since the women had no documents. So these had to be assembled from scratch. Most of the women passed their driving tests with flying colours. They were given a permanent driving licence and subsequently, a commercial driving licence.

Azad Foundation also had to tackle social issues the women faced. They suffered from low self-esteem, poverty and domestic violence. Male members of their family were hostile to the idea of women becoming drivers. But the foundation's training programme took on all these issues.

To provide prompt employment to their trainees, Azad Foundation floated a for-profit company called Sakha Consulting Wings Pvt. Ltd. The company's agenda is to provide safe trans-

port solutions 'for woman by women' in urban India. Sakha offers three services. First, it provides placement services to qualified women drivers with individual women, NGOs and other institutions under an agreed contract. Secondly, the company runs a women's cab service for women and their families, professional women, Indian and foreign women travellers. Lastly, Sakha arranges women chauffeur services for a short duration on daily packages.

The women who underwent training say their personalities have undergone a dramatic change.

Saroj, 23, lives in Sangam Vihar, an unauthorized colony in south Delhi. Her family was facing a lot of financial hardship so Saroj was keen to learn driving at Azad Foundation. But she lacked confidence, lagged behind and often burst into tears during training.

Now she stands near her cab smiling confidently. Saroj credits Azad Foundation for this big change in her personality. "I was also happy to get good employers. They really encouraged me," she says. Saroj is now planning to join an open university course.

Seema, 21, is from a very poor family in a slum called Madanpur Khadar. She was keen to join the driving course but her father opposed the idea. She persuaded her mother to convince her father. Two and a half years later, Seema says proudly that her earnings have helped her family repair their broken home and tide over their financial troubles. One day Seema hopes to buy her own commercial vehicle.

Geeta Kumari, 19, is a trainee. She has three months left to complete her course. Her mother is separated from her father and lives with her two daughters. Domestic violence has left her with a badly injured hand so she can't go out and work. Geeta is all praise for her training and is working very sincerely. Right now her family circumstances are grim, she says.

Trainees have also formed good relations with their colleagues. They support each other during difficult times. Uma Yadav, who learnt driving from Azad Foundation, got a good job. But tragedy struck when she was hit by a motor-cycle while returning from work.

Her colleagues and employer kept up her spirits. "My employer, Shena Damat, was so good. She phoned me many times to ask about my well-being."

Not only do the women have better paid jobs, they are also much more confident and empowered thanks to Azad Foundation and Sakha Consulting. ■

## Consumers get Internet clout

*Akosha shows how to make companies listen*

**Vidya Viswanathan**  
New Delhi

**A**NKUR Warikoo, the CEO of Groupon India, took a car loan from HDFC Bank for ₹4.5 lakhs. The terms mentioned that a processing fee of ₹3,000 would be charged. But he was charged ₹9,000 instead. He wrote an email to the bank asking for an explanation. This resulted in a series of email exchanges but nothing came out of it. An irritated Warikoo put up a status update on Facebook asking if somebody knew anyone senior in HDFC Bank. Someone posted back saying that he should possibly try Akosha, a company which resolves consumer complaints online.

Warikoo went to the Akosha website, filled up a form and paid Rs 499. An Akosha representative called him back, understood his problem and asked him to forward his correspondence with the bank to them so that they could take it from there. The next time he heard from the bank was through an email which informed him that his account had been credited with ₹6,000.

"They know how to write a mail that is a balance between requesting and aggression. Customers tend to be agitated and threatening. Companies don't really respond to threats about taking them to the consumer court any more. They, however, do respond if they can do something to make you a happy customer again. Because of the volume of customer complaints that it gets, Akosha has managed to figure out what works," says Warikoo.

When his wife had a problem with some reservations with makemytrip.com they approached Akosha even before they approached the customer service of the company.

This volume of customer complaints is being handled by a small four-man team, three of whom operate out of the CEO, Ankur Singla's two-bedroom apartment in Nehru Enclave in Delhi. The fourth team member is a stay-at-home mom qualified in law operating out of Mumbai. "We need happy customers," says Singla, who is a graduate from the prestigious National Law School in Bangalore.

"So we spend a lot of time understanding the problem. We talk calmly both to the customer and the brand that they are unhappy with. It is not that the customer is right every time," Singla adds.

Every time Akosha gets a customer complaint they call her back, try to understand the issue, draft a formal letter for the customer and mail it. They make sure that they understand the laws in that industry. "We are not practicing lawyers representing the customer," points out Himani Subramaniam, the researcher who usually drafts the letter after talking to the customer.

"We are just writing the letter for him," she adds.

cases but increasingly since the brands know us, it is becoming easier," Subramaniam adds.

Akosha's goal is to become the intermediary between the aggrieved and the company. Their experience is that many brands want to resolve issues amicably but they do not know how. Harpreet Singh, an IAS aspirant from Chandigarh, is an example. He had paid for a series of aptitude tests at the Chandigarh centre of Career Launcher, a coaching company. When the tests did not happen on schedule, he made a personal visit to the centre and called them up repeatedly for a couple of weeks. He was losing precious time.

He then called up Singla, his former schoolmate, and he had the Vice-President of Career Launcher, located in Delhi, calling him back. Singh was given individual attention.

Singla hopes that one day the brands will approach him proactively. He would like to become an aggregator of complaints. He makes presentations to large companies on the possibilities. But today his company deals with about 10 to 15 complaints a day.

"We spend a lot of time with each unhappy customer. Each issue we resolve creates word-of-mouth awareness about us," says

Singla. Each happy customer also Tweets about Akosha who further re-Tweet it to their friends. So the word-of-mouth multiplies. Singla does not want to increase volume. "I do not want to take 20 complaints about a brand when I do not have the relationship to resolve it," he says.

Currently, the company charges ₹99, ₹299 or ₹499 depending on the complaint. A complaint against a telecom company might cost ₹99 as against ₹999 for an insurance complaint. Singla is not sure how his business will pan out in the future. So far he is running with his savings and ₹5 lakhs that they got from an early start-up funding company called Morpheus. Will they become a free site for the customers? Will they turn activists? Will they influence policy? These are the possibilities that play in his mind.

But for now Akosha is searching for unhappy customers on Twitter – looking for tags that say 'sucks' and such words and forwarding them suggestions or articles on an issue on their website. They are in the process of building a brand for themselves. ■



Nitin, Ankur Singla and Avinash

It takes an average of 45 minutes to an hour each time. In most cases the issue gets resolved at this stage since most companies are also keen to solve the issue. Akosha has developed relationships with many brands.

In case they do not get any response, Singla himself tries to escalate the case to higher echelons in the company. This is also his chance to make a pitch to many companies on what Akosha can do for them. He shows them an image of the dashboard of complaints that he hopes to generate for each brand. At the outset, though, they are content to resolve each customer's issue. If the company does not respond at this stage they resort to a social media campaign.

"We had to resort to Twitter when an airline lost a customer's baggage and even after repeated requests did not respond. When the company's team discovered the Twitter message, the response was immediate," explains Subramaniam. If none of this works, Akosha helps the customer draft a formal complaint and directs the customer to the correct consumer court. "We have done it in a few

SHAMIK BANERJEE

LAKSHMAN ANAND



Special curtains keep the sun out

LAKSHMAN ANAND



The courtyard

## Green building has surplus power

**Palash Krishna Mehrotra**  
Gurgaon

**E**VEN from the outside, the IRRAD building gives you the feeling of tranquillity. Its dull reddish-brown façade looks like it has yachts sailing across it, except they are all upside down. Later I would find out that the sails of these 'yachts' are actually triangular curtains, specially designed to keep the summer sun out and let the winter sun in, one of several key features that makes this a 'green building.'

The moment you enter, you know that this is a very different office space, a category unto itself. We are familiar with two kinds of institutional spaces – the dingy Soviet-style ones which house our nationalized banks and government offices, and the snazzy new MNC types, which came post-liberalisation, and which dominate the Gurgaon skyline. The latter, though happier-looking than their socialist-era counterparts, have a mass-produced factory feel to them.

The Institute of Rural Research and Development (IRRAD), set up under the S.M. Sehgal Foundation, has done extensive work in underdeveloped areas like Mewat. Their headquarters is one of only three green buildings in Gurgaon. It's among the few in the country that meet the Platinum rating requirements of LEEDS (Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design) – a globally accepted standard.

Green buildings aim to reduce our footprint on natural resources. Local and recycled materials are used as much as possible, for the further the materials come from, the more fuel that is consumed in transportation.

Each aspect of the building has been thought over carefully. Photovoltaic solar panels on the rooftop generate electricity, sufficient to run lights, fans and

computers. Insulated double glazed windows reduce transmission of heat from outside to inside and vice versa. Internal courtyards ensure plenty of natural light and good ventilation. I can sense the difference this makes: the claustrophobia and stuffiness that closed air-conditioned spaces often invoke is missing here. Special features, like the

LAKSHMAN ANAND



Jaali work and lots of green

reflective glass used in the inner atrium, allow indirect natural light into workspaces and reduce the use of artificial lights. The light inside has a special filtered quality; there's no glare or heat and yet it's not dingy. The light fittings are equipped with regulation sensors that control the amount of artificial light required to aid natural light.

Green buildings cut down on waste. Water is scarce in Gurgaon. The Aravallis have been sucked dry by the indiscriminate boring of tube wells. The water table, which was at about 90 feet in 2004, has now dropped to an alarming 200. In this green building, used water is treated and recycled for horticulture and for flushing WCs. The urinals are waterless, while an underground storage tank harvests 400,000 litres of water, which is used in the cooling tower of the giant air-conditioning system. Because of the special insulation, the air-conditioner only needs to be run for a couple of hours in the morning and the afternoon, thus cutting electricity bills.

Keeping in mind the costs of environmental degradation, no aluminium has been used in construction. Ramesh Kapahi, director of finance at IRRAD, tells me they've used more wood, but of a different kind. "We've gone in for packing case wood, as well as wood that comes from rapidly renewable plants like bamboo. We got the teak from accredited forests in Nagpur where for every tree that goes down, they plant another two. Every tree comes with its requisite papers: the date it was cut, the day on which it was brought to the *mandi* for auction."

Some of the materials used were by-products of the construction process and freely available on the site. Conventionally, they would have been discarded but here they have been recycled. The pared shavings that come from planing wood have been used to beautify the reception wall, while excavated earth was deployed in making bricks on site.

Since the IRRAD has done substantive work in rural areas, I'm beginning to wonder if there has been give and take between the city and the village. Have they borrowed practices from rural areas? Have they taken some of the technologies used in the construction of the green building into the vil-



# BEST OF CIVIL SOCIETY

lages? Pooja Murada, director of communications, explains: "Yes, most certainly. In the village, they don't cover the ground outside with cement. This allows the rainwater to seep in. We too have used clay tiles and open grid pavers. This allows the water to be absorbed, and reduces the run-off. On our part, we've introduced the villages to solar electricity and water harvesting. Now, many of the villages have solar-powered street lights, and schoolchildren don't have to travel long distances to fetch drinking water." This has had an indirect positive impact on their attendance. Earlier, they'd wander off on the pretext of finding drinking water and bunk school. Now, since there is water in the school, there's no excuse to play hookey!

What is it like to work in an environment like this? While walking around, I catch a glimpse of an employee in one of the courtyards. She is sitting on a bench with her laptop. Her body language is relaxed; she seems at home here, surrounded by ferns, the diffused natural light and the cool air. She seems fully absorbed in her work, but not stressed out. Jane Schukoske, the soft-spoken CEO of IRRAD agrees: "The employees feel inspired here which adds to their productivity. It's a calm and quiet environment which supports creativity."

One of the difficulties faced in putting up green buildings in India is training labourers and contractors. They are used to conventional techniques; it takes them time to change gears. Kapahi says: "There would be times when we'd say we want this done this way, and they'd argue, 'Nahin saheb, ye aise nahin hota hai.' We've had to break down walls because they didn't do it right." IRRAD also followed all the prescribed safety norms for labourers during construction, though sometimes with comical results. For example, instead of putting the helmets on their heads, many preferred to use them as containers to store food.

There is also very little government support at the moment. The IRRAD building produces electricity (35 KWP) in excess of its needs (12 KWP). It asked HUDA if it could feed it into the grid or sell it to the neighbouring offices. HUDA didn't know what to do. They don't have a policy yet. So they said no.

In America, green buildings have

been on an upswing even during the economic downturn. The shift there is from green offices (like the Bank of America tower in NYC) and green museums (California Academy of Sciences), to the hardcore commercial sector: new hospitals, hotels and shopping centres in major cities are

all going the green way.

A rapidly developing India is going to be one of the biggest energy guzzlers this century, and green buildings should be factored in as one of the pivotal components of environment-friendly growth. The IRRAD building is a step in that

direction. The employees here speak of it as a model or a lab from which people can learn. As Kapahi says, "We wanted to show that it's possible to do this, and we have." Now it's for the others to follow. ■

*(The writer's new book *The Butterfly Generation* was published recently)*

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## Fatehpura's radical union

**Tanushree Gangopadhyay**  
Fatehpura (Gujarat)

GOVERNMENT officials and functionaries still shudder at the name of Fatehpura taluka in Dahod, a tribal district in Gujarat. In August 2010, India's first union of the National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (NREGA) workers, called the Rashtriya Rojgar Khatri Kamdaronu Kayda Union (RRKKKU), had exposed a massive scam in which ₹4.18 crores of NREGA money had been siphoned.

The union uncovered misappropriation of funds, fake NREGA job cards, fake muster rolls and fake postal accounts. The collusion of 48 functionaries including taluka development officers, sub-postmasters, sarpanches and talatis was exposed.

It was Disha, an NGO working mostly among tribals for forest rights since 30 years, which organized NREGA workers into a union.

"Had our members not been vigilant, such a massive scam would never have come to light," says Paulomee Mistry, general secretary of the RRKKKU, with justifiable pride.

A year later the infamous Fatehpura taluka wears a brand new look. In the panchayat elections held in January, two RRKKKU members were elected as sarpanches. All nine members in this panchayat are now from the union, says Bajdibhai Burjor, also a union member. He was elected sarpanch of Jagola village.

"The corrupt sarpanch and his cohorts who lorded it over us for 20 years have been booted out," says Bharat Parghi, secretary of the Fatehpura union who through his RTI had exposed the scam.

"All of us won the election without spending any money, while the others spent all the money they looted from our wages and lost," says Burjor with satisfaction.

As many as 27 sarpanches have been elected from Disha's union, says Paulomee. Several gram panchayat and taluka panchayat members have also won.

"By holding the office of sarpanch we will eradicate corruption and make NREGA work better. In fact, this will stop all our workers from migrating. We are confident that we will get 200 days of work, our old demand, at some stage. We shall certainly ensure 100 days of work for all eligible villagers. Our development work will change the face of our

backward taluka," promises Bajdibhai.

RRKKKU was formed in August 2006, soon after NREGA was enacted in Parliament. The union's work extends to tribal and forested areas of Sabarkantha, Banaskantha, Panchmahal, Dahod and Vadodara.

"We have so far managed to get workers ₹4.19 crores of delayed payment wages. The union has also got 80,000 job cards made and other benefits after a lot of struggle. We now have a membership of more than 16,000," says Paulomee.

Disha's union has filed a case in the Gujarat High Court against people responsible for the Fatehpura scam. An inquiry is going on. The union has also filed cases for non-payment of wages, delayed pay-

NREGA Commissioner, N.P. Thaker.

However Shankerbhai and Fatehpura union president, Bharat Parghi, allege vendetta. "We are obviously being singled out by the administration," they say.

The deadline for uploading last year's muster list was 10 April, he says. Shankerbhai explains that payments used to be routed through the local Bank of Baroda where they all had accounts. "Then the administration decided to route payments through ICICI Bank. Tackling ICICI is tough. They don't have an office here," he explains.

Paradoxically Dahod district and Vadodara have been selected for a national pilot project on the Electronic Fund Management System. Thaker said that they decided to shift to ICICI to facilitate uniformity.

The RRKKKU is an independent union. It was the first to file and partially win litigation in the Gujarat High Court for unemployment allowance for 100 workers. Though the workers did not get the allowance, the Court on 23 July, 2008, ordered the NREGA Commissioner, "to examine the grievance of the petitioner for providing the employment for the persons concerned within a period of four months. Compensation for unemployment shall be disbursed within one month."

Indu Kumar Jani is the overall president of the union. Ranchhodbhai Machhar, president of the union in Khanpur taluka, Panchmahal district, says after the High Court order the villagers got to meet an NREGA Commissioner for the first time.

"Just one person, Jalubhai Bhurabhai Dabhi of Jeja, was sanctioned the unemployment allowance which he refused to accept. He said only if the other workers were given the allowance would he accept it," says Machhar.

Wherever unions don't exist people get ripped off. Last year a Right to Information (RTI) application exposed the wrongdoings of a sarpanch in Nijhar taluka in Tapi district. He had cooked up records of nine people who had died three years ago and was happily collecting payments in their name.

NREGA, which provides 100 days of employment under the statutory minimum wage in rural India, operates in the midst of huge vested interests. But fighting the system has had its own spin-offs. It has empowered tribals, peasants and landless workers.

The fact that members of the union have been elected is a significant trend for it changes the dynamics of power at the grassroots. ■



Paulomee Mistry addressing the NREGA union in Fatehpura

ments, non-payment of unemployment allowance, job cards and so on.

However it is a continuous tussel between the union and officials. Shankerbhai Garasia, president of the union in Dahod district is an NREGA worker from Jagola taluka. He has been running from pillar to post trying to get wages for 25 NREGA workers in his village for work they did in April and May 2011. The wages amount to ₹65,000. Garasia has a CD with the muster rolls of the 25 workers.

"Who will do this leg work except me. Our members are all illiterate," he says. "It cost me two months of running around and ₹1,800 to get the CD written thrice by a private computer centre. The taluka centre says it is unable to upload the details to the NREGA server, a mandatory provision for getting the wages."

"If a worker has to get the muster rolls uploaded, he wouldn't be a worker!" responds the perplexed

# Smiles that tell a thousand tales!

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*Miss Sonal Natwarbhai, from the Virpura Village in Sanand, Gujarat. Sonal used to sit on the floor and study. Today she and more than 250 other students benefit from the classroom facility upgradation initiative of Tata Motors. The Company has a holistic approach to improving the access to and quality of education. The company supplements its infrastructural support to schools with training of teachers and extra-curricular activities or students.*



*Mr. Sujit Soren of Gopalpur village in East Singhbhum district of Jharkhand. He was the first in the village to adopt water conservation techniques of the Gram Vikas Kendra society of Tata Motors. Today, the village boasts of perennial irrigation for about 100 acres and about 10,000 fruit and timber generating trees.*



*Mrs. Rohini Bhanudas Wadekar of Pune in Maharashtra. A widow with three children, she was trained to become self-dependent with technical skills by Tata Motors' Grihini Social Welfare Society.*



*Mr. Jowahar Ram Paswan of Baranimdih Mohalla of Chaibasa district in Jharkhand. Today, he is an employee of Nav Jagrat Manav Samaj. It became possible when the Nav Jagrat Manav Samaj, supported by Tata Motors, intervened to manage his leprosy and found him a job with a permanent income. Today, Mr. Paswan intervenes to bring comfort to others.*



*Mr. Man Singh Murmu of Baijnathdih village in East Singhbhum district of Jharkhand. With mostly infertile land holdings, Mr. Murmu and other residents found meeting both ends difficult. Tata Motors helped him lead change by beginning a tree plantation drive. Today, Baijnathdih has a forest of income-generating trees, and a Forest Protection Group to nurture its economic turnaround.*



*Mr. Vinod Pachpute of Vasuli village in Pune district of Maharashtra. A diploma holder in mechanical engineering, he is also a trustee and an alumni of the Bhamchandra High School in the village – the only one in the vicinity covering seven villages. Tata Motors helped set up the school and continues to support it. About 600 students have passed through its portals till date.*

*Tata Motors' Sustainability Programme. Striving for Sustainable Change.*

## PRODUCTS

NGOs, artisans and designers produce items which are organic and green. Here are herbs, jams, soaps, paintings, baskets, solar mobile charger, mats and namdahs. Just try.



## BASKET BONANZA

THE Eastend Handicraft Unit sells baskets of all shapes and sizes. These are made of water reed and woven by women in the villages of Manipur. "The women often design the baskets themselves by leafing through magazines and noting fashion trends," says Sangita Keisham, who helps market the baskets. "The colours used are all natural dyes. That is our speciality."

The baskets sell in Mumbai, Delhi and Bangalore. Keisham says buyers often travel all the way to Imphal to see the manufacturing process themselves. "Then they place an order and the women get busy producing the baskets," says Keisham.

While Imphal remains Eastend's headquarters, they have a branch office in Delhi.

**Contact:** Sangita at Eastend Handicraft Unit, 67A Second Floor, Humayun Pur, Safdarjung Enclave, New Delhi-110029. Phone: 9774352346. Email: eastend\_handicraft\_unit@hotmail.com

## CAMEL CORNER

FOR centuries, the gawky camel has served society, shipping people and goods across stormy deserts. Eulogised in song and prose, the camel is now fading from memory. It is becoming extinct. Pastures have vanished and people have little use for camels. But a group of NGOs in Pali district of Jaisalmer are helping. "The camel population has gone up after the project started," says Dr Ilse Kohler-Rollefson, of the League for Pastoral Peoples and Endogenous Livestock. A Camel Breeders Association, the Lokhit Pashu Palak Sansthan and Camel Carishma are providing healthcare to sick and diseased camels. To boost incomes they are selling camel milk and planning to make camel milk ice cream. "The camel eats 36 different plants. It's milk is medicinal," says Dr Kohler-Rollefson. They are making creamy soap with camel's milk. Elephant Poo, an enterprise which produces paper from elephant dung has helped them to produce Camel Poo or paper made from camel dung.



SHAMIK BANERJEE

**Contact:** Hemant Singh Rathore, Buti Bagh, near Mamaji ki Dhuni, Rajpura via Sadri, 306702, Pali district, Rajasthan. Mobile: 09414818564 E-mail: hsrathore@sify.com, lpps@sify.com

LAKSHMAN ANAND

## SPANISH STYLE GOES DESI

**W**ALK into the Mera Parivar Centre in Gurgaon's Rajeev Nagar and you will realize that Planet Earth is one big family. A group of women are busy making kurtas, dupattas, bracelets, key chains and home décor for sale. The designs are unique for they blend Spanish and Indian styles.

Mera Parivar, an Indian NGO, has partnered Naya Nagar, a Spanish NGO. The two NGOs believe in promoting trade that is based on 'transparency, ethics and self-respect.' Business should promote economics and ethics besides being good for society and the environment, say the two NGOs. So they strive for 'responsible trade.'

To boost the local economy all material is bought locally. And profits are reinvested in projects that benefit poor communities like scholarships for underprivileged children and financial support for the training centre



where women are trained and empowered. Many of their children are now recipients of these scholarships.

If you are keen to help or buy products you can get in touch with Neus Gimeno.

Email: [info@nayanagar.org](mailto:info@nayanagar.org),  
[ngimeno@nayanagar.org](mailto:ngimeno@nayanagar.org)  
 Website:  
[www.nayanagar.org](http://www.nayanagar.org)

PRASANTA BISWAS



## WONDER WEED

**W**ATER hyacinth routinely chokes ponds and lakes. The weed, which spreads prolifically in water, is seen as a nuisance. Earth Craft, a social enterprise, puts it to good use. Working in Kolsur, a village in the North 24 Parganas district of West Bengal, Earth Craft has trained local women to make paper from water hyacinth. This paper is then made into attractively painted folders, writing pads, photo frames, boxes, pen stands, coasters, pulley pads, waste paper boxes, note books and more.

For this enterprise, Earth Craft was supported by NABARD under its Rural Innovation Fund programme.

Earth Craft has also trained women in the East Kolkata Wetlands in partnership with SAFE, an NGO. Earth Craft works with patuas in Midnapore and is in the process of tying up with the National Institute of Design (NID) to create new products and designs.

Earth Craft products are available at Dolly's Collection at 18J, Park Street, at Earth Care Books in Middleton Street and at the showroom of the Crafts Council of West Bengal.

**Contact:**  
 Bikram Mitra at 09231640805  
 Email:  
[earth\\_craft2001@yahoo.com](mailto:earth_craft2001@yahoo.com)



SHAMIK BANERJEE



## VIBRANT GRASS

**M**ONEY grows on grass for villagers of Bhadohi in Uttar Pradesh. They fashion a range of colourful products with a wild grass called sarpat which grows near ponds and rivers. Around 350 women in Kasauli, Bairiparwa, Ramchanderpur and Badiyanikari villages earn a livelihood by weaving sarpat into baskets, dustbins, lamps, table mats, laundry bags and pen stands. The men add the colour.

The villagers were trained by the Dastkar Haat Samiti, says Deen Bahadur. Dastkar has helped them keep up with market trends. His eye-catching products were displayed at Dastkar's annual Nature Bazaar held at Crafts Museum in Delhi and attracted many buyers.

**Contact:** Sarpat Craft, Deen Bahadur: 09451528449, Ganpati: 09005159290.

SHAMIK BANERJEE



## TASTY PANS

**B**LACK and lovely these kettles, pots, pans and ladles have a smooth sheen. Ashim Pearl Shimray, an artist potter from Manipur, produces this handmade kitchenware in Delhi. Shimray learnt blue pottery first and then turned her attention to traditional pottery produced by her community. Black pottery is an art form which was fading away, she says.

Shimray has formed a women's cooperative in Ukhrul district of Manipur which makes these utensils. Both stone and clay are used. The stone is ground into a powder and the blackness comes through traditional technology. Some of it is exported. Shimray says the clay enhances the taste of the food cooked in it. She has also been training young people from Manipur who come to Delhi. They learn, go back home and begin their own workshops, says Shimray who believes it is important to keep tabs on modern trends so that black pottery always has a market.

**Contact:** Ashim Pearl Shimray, 87- B Shahpur Jat, New Delhi-110049 E-mail: ashimpearl@yahoo.co.in

SHAMIK BANERJEE



## WEAVING MAGIC

**F**OR the first time a few people from leprosy affected colonies came themselves to Delhi's Nature Bazaar. They wanted to study current trends in fashion and produce contemporary designs which would attract urban buyers, says Jyodan Singh from Raxaul in East Champaran, Bihar. He says thanks to the Sasakawa India Leprosy Foundation, leprosy affected people are learning all sorts of skills to earn and contribute to society. A weaver himself he teaches spinning and weaving to the leprosy affected people. On display were a range of products like shawls, blankets and mufflers which were bought by middle-class shoppers. In villages too the stigma against people affected by leprosy is subsiding. Jyodan Singh says in Motihari district, Bihar, one such colony is running a dairy and supplying milk to people. The local district magistrate had a meal with the leprosy affected people and that broke the ice.

**Contact:** Sasakawa Leprosy India Foundation, S-260, First Floor, Panchsheel Park, New Delhi - 110017 Phone: 011-26013440 Email: workingmagic@silf.in Website: www.silf.in

LAKSHMAN ANAND

## GREEN STYLE

**L**OCATED amidst the anarchic medley of fashionable shops in Delhi's ethnic Hauz Khas Village is Green the Gap. This little outlet sells recycled products made by Swechha, an NGO. You can browse at leisure.

Designs are smart, young and grunge – perfect for college wear. Look out for sling bags made from old rubber tyres and used fabrics. The sturdy rexin straps add to the durability of the product. These eye catching bags will make your pals green with envy. The bags cost just between ₹600 to ₹800.

Since you have a smart bag, you won't want an awkward wallet to play spoilsport. There are attractive wallets here made from rice sack bags ornamented by old juice tetra packs. Looks unique and young and prices are in the range of ₹350 to ₹450. Printed flower vases made from old wine bottles, floor mats from old rubber tyres and funky T-shirts are also great picks.

*Text by Shreya Gulati*



**Contact:** Green the Gap, 24/3, Hauz Khas Village, New Delhi  
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## NAMDAH VENTURE

SHAMIK BANERJEE

**A**FTER working with the Craft Development Institute (CDI) in Srinagar to redesign and revive namdahs, Arifa Jan has now branched out to start her own namdah business. Arifa, a post-graduate in craft management, creatively developed 300 namdahs while working with CDI. The National Institute of Design provided the blueprint. Artisans were at that time abandoning namdah making since they couldn't find any buyers for their fusty old designs.

"But now with new designs the market has completely changed," says Arifa. "We are getting a very good response. In fact, buyers are confused about which design to choose." Arifa has introduced two innovations — embroidered namdahs in merino wool so you can wash namdahs at home and namdahs with non-carcinogenic colours for the export market.

Twelve namdah artisans work with Arifa. Her company, called Incredible Kashmiri Crafts, has three partners. She started with an investment of only ₹50,000 and has made a net profit of ₹600,000 in one year.

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## SUNNY MOBILE

**G**OING on a trek to dark jungles? Camping? Worry not. Light up your life with Dlight's solar light-cum-mobile charger. Always be in touch with friends and family. This neat product, called S250, illuminates any room as much as a three or five watt incandescent lamp. Since S250 gets its energy from the sun, it is up to five times more energy efficient. It provides 10 times more light than a kerosene lamp. The light can be set according to your needs – high, medium or low. At medium you get six full hours of light.

Moreover, S250 charges the most popular phones on the market whether Nokia, Samsung or Motorola. Pin connectors for popular mobiles are included. If your phone is a rare one, you can buy the connector separately. Phone charge time is just one hour.

S250 is reasonable priced. Light and easy to carry, it bridges the rural-urban divide – perfect for a village hut or an urban apartment stuck in the dark.

**Contact:** CL House, T-95 Fourth Floor, Gautam Nagar, New Delhi-110049  
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LAKSHMAN ANAND



## TRENDY TERRA COTTA

**R**AJESH Roy and his wife Monali design trendy jewellery made from eco-friendly terracotta in Kolkata. There are earrings and necklaces in lovely colours and traditional designs. The jewellery is artistically hand painted. "The colours don't run," assures Rajesh Roy, whose micro business is called Just Terracotta. "We have a small workforce which makes the moulds, bakes them, and then we paint." Monali studied chemistry and you can see the jewellery is a harmonious blend of science and art. The Roys say they love to design terracotta jewellery.

The trinkets are very reasonably priced. But Just Terracotta does not take bulk orders. The jewellery is hand made and needs attention to detail.

**Contact:** Rajesh: 9811034676  
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# 28

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SHAMIK BANERJEE



## MUDDY PAINT

**G**OND art has its own distinctive style. There are trees, animals, plants and flowers painted in a harmony of earthy colours. Nature has made the deepest impact on the Gond mind. "We used to paint these pictures on our mud huts," says Kalabai Shyam, a Gond artist from Patalgar village in Dindori district, Madhya Pradesh. "We now earn part of our livelihood by painting on paper." She says it was J. Swaminathan, former director of Bharat Bhawan in Bhopal, who discovered Gond art and gave it its due. He sent his students to villages to uncover tribal art and in the process Gond art came into the limelight.

"We don't need any training since we begin painting as children. It is part of our heritage. We know how to get naturally coloured mud from the jungle for our paintings," says Kalabai. The colours she uses are black, ochre, red, white and blue. She can also paint pictures according to sizes required by customers.

**Contact:** Kalabai and Anand Shyam at 09424418569, 08989208379.

## NATURAL ART

**N**ANDRAM Bothi and his wife Shanti Bai are Gond artists who paint on papier mache. "Both are eco-friendly techniques," explains Nandram, engrossed in painting a wall hanging. His pictures are engraved with tiny mirrors, making his work look more eclectic.

"My forte are religious paintings," he says, pointing to a painting of Goddess Durga with great pride. Gonds, he says, paint to celebrate weddings, festivals or the birth of a child. Each painting sells for around ₹450. Nandram says his art doesn't earn him enough so he works as a labourer to make ends meet. n

**Contact:** Shanti Bai, 09329591329, 09575503721.



SHAMIK BANERJEE

## *Changing Lives*



### General health care in rural villages by SST

Mrs. Nagama, 70 yrs, a poor widow from Padavedu, has been suffering from headache for months together. Whenever she suffered an episode of headache she was almost blinded, accompanied with vomiting, she used to isolate herself for hours together not able to do any other activities.

Left to fend for herself, she could not find a guardian to take her to any Government hospital, since she had to travel for more than 20 kms, let alone meet the expense of the traveling, She was anguished and helpless. She came to know from some SHG members of the village about the TVS-SST's sub centre in the close vicinity

A routine check up at the hospital revealed that she was

suffering from Hypertension. All other parameters were normal. She was first given a brief account of the nature of her illness and advised about DASH (Dieting Approaches to Stop Hypertension) diet, and prescribed anti hypertensive.

On following a strict dietary regime (cutting down of salt, intake of fatty foods and increasing the intake of fresh vegetables), and medication, Mrs. Nagama has been relieved of her headache. Now she is full of life. She is continually getting antihypertensive drugs from TVS SST hospital every fortnight. In case she hasn't turn up for her routine check up, SHG members in her local area are alerted by SST. They help her to come for treatment regularly.

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