

Civil Society

SOUTH ASIA BONDS ON STAGE



Thoiba Saeedh, 20, director of the Maldivian play Dhonyala-Alifulhu with members of her



WORLD BANK DOES ITS OWN RTI

From 1 July a new disclosure policy will give access to the working of the World Bank

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SOUTH ASIA BONDS ON STAGE

Theatre groups from across South Asia took part in Leela, a festival on women's empowerment. Lively performances followed on peace, girl power, culture and democracy.

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Civil Society

READ US. WE READ YOU.

The South Asian stage

THE South Asian women's theatre festival, Leela, held in Delhi recently offers welcome relief from an atmosphere of politics and suspicion. It is often said that there is greater need for people-to-people contact in the region. Theatre works well for promoting understanding. It puts different communities on a single page of human concerns. What does peace mean to Pakistanis? How do Afghan women value cultural diversity and freedom? There is a spontaneity and freshness about theatre that cinema perhaps lacks. It is a bottom-up medium that reflects how people think and feel. It catches trends and aspirations as they manifest themselves. It reveals more than it hides. For a region caught up in conflicts and often trapped in elitist policies, exchanges that take place through a theatre festival are very valuable. It was wonderful to see all South Asian countries represented in Delhi and that too on the theme of women. The Indian Council for Cultural Relations must be complimented on this. We tend to forget that South Asia is more than just India and Pakistan.

It would be a good idea to build on the experience of holding this event. We would suggest widening and deepening of the process of identifying troupes and plays. The more subaltern the interchange, the more valuable will it be. A theatre festival does many things all at once. The plays tell the stories of other societies. Performers, directors and stagecraft practitioners from different countries get to meet and talk and build creative links. A festival also introduces audiences to troupes. Further exchanges on a one-to-one basis are likely to follow. But perhaps there is a need to be more structured. For instance, can theatre from South Asian countries be promoted on campuses? Can it be introduced into curricula? Is there scope for workshops and training programmes? We are told that people from Pakistan have difficulty in getting admission to the National School of Drama. Is this true? Having done a first lap well, the ICCR, whose role is essentially international, should perhaps encourage other entities to take over and develop the good work in a domestic context.

Theatre across the world is a resurging medium. Plays have been opening to packed houses and making money in London and New York. Perhaps this is a reaction to the dominance of the digital experience. In South Asia, because of its inequalities, theatre allows neglected communities to preserve their traditions and also get their concerns across. It should be seen as a means of showcasing diversity and promoting inclusion.

A significant interview in this issue is with Isabel Guerrero of the World Bank who has been one of the key promoters of transparency in the functioning of the Bank. A new World Bank disclosure policy takes effect from 1 July. You could call this the World Bank's own RTI! But how much it opens up will depend as much on the commitment within the Bank as well as the demands made on it.

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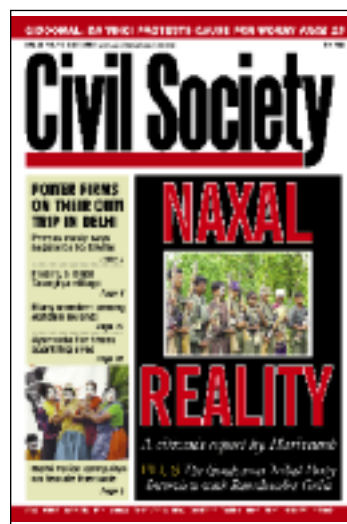
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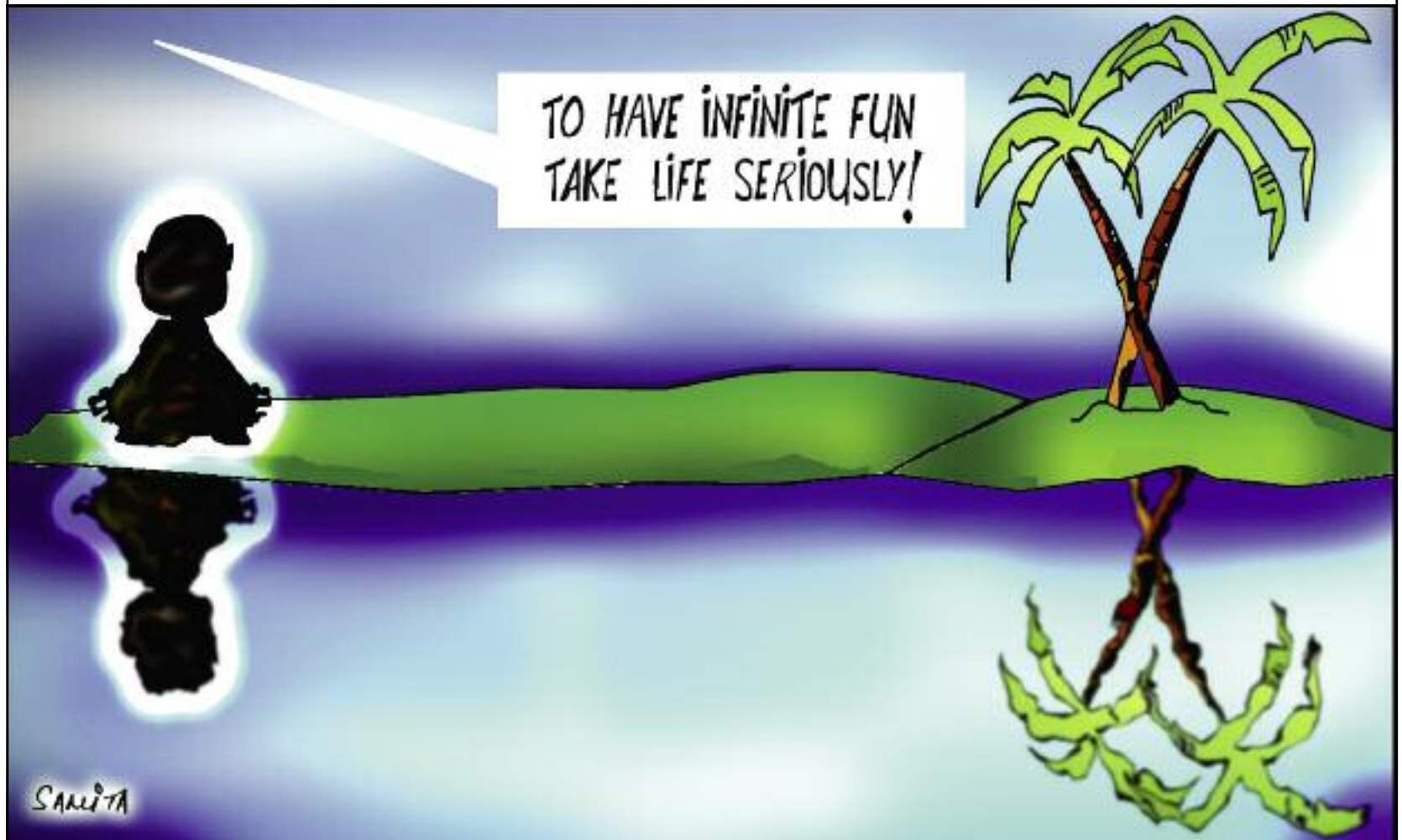


UNDERSTAND DEVELOPMENT
UNDERSTAND POLITICS

Civil Society
RIGHT PLACE FOR POLITICS

IN THE LIGHT

by SAMITA RATHOR



LETTERS



Bt brinjal

People living in villages understand and relate to issues like Bt Brinjal better than the middle class. This is because such decisions affect their lives deeply. While making policy decisions on agriculture the opinion of farming communities should be gauged first. They know more about seeds and related issues than even the scientific community.

Asha Nath

Keep up the good work Shree! Not so long ago, there was this purple coloured variety that otherwise looked like the Mararikulam Brinjal. Have we lost it?

Soumya Bhat

Congratulations to the brave people of Mararikulam for protecting their indigenous variety and fighting off Bt Brinjal. Your village deserves an award. You should go ahead and apply for protection for your variety.

Padma Kuber

The scientific community in public sector research organizations does not interact with the farming community. If they go to villages, find out the problems of the farmers and then conduct research to resolve those issues, agriculture will pick up.

Thiru Ranga

Government agricultural scientists are only interested in attending conferences in foreign countries, talking big with foreign scientists and introducing foreign seeds in India. They have no respect for the great indigenous knowledge and wisdom of India.

Shyama Bains

Jairam Ramesh is one of those rare politicians who places the good of

the nation above everything else. He understood the issues concerning Bt, attended public hearings which were noisy and rude, listened to all parties concerned before making a very fair and informed decision. He is our most pro active environment minister to date.

Meenu

When we have such a rich variety of vegetables why should we opt for a mono variety like Bt Brinjal? All over India people have the advantage of picking and choosing which variety they want. Go to any market and you will see different types of tomatoes, brinjals, cucumbers, potatoes, onions. Imagine being offered just one variety of vegetable with a dubious gene in it. Indian food is tasty and wholesome. A lot of it is organic by default. We want to increase productivity without sacrificing variety.

Dr DK Singh

Waste pickers

Your story, 'Waste pickers rally against company,' highlights how the urban poor are being marginalized. The idea is to make the city inaccessible and unattractive for the less well-off people by taking away livelihood, services and housing.

What municipalities don't realize is that waste pickers are the most efficient in recycling garbage. It is better to hire them on contract basis than to hand over such operations to a private company who will never do the job as well as the waste pickers.

Chetan Sayani

Private companies will dump large amounts of garbage in landfills. We don't want huge landfills to come up. Better to help waste pickers organize and give them access to facilities. All recycling, composting and management of landfills, if required, should be handed over to them.

Krishnan V

Anu Solar

I think TJ Joseph's idea has the potential to revolutionize the solar geyser market. He has come up with a very simple but effective strategy. He should be supported in every way.

Riya Sengupta

Anu Solar's story shows that policy on renewable energy has to create an enabling environment for entrepreneurs. It is the entrepreneur who can come up with creative ideas to sell alternative energy products.

Shahji Mehta

World Bank does its own RTI to keep in step

‘To open up is a very healthy thing for any institution’

Civil Society News
New Delhi

THE World Bank is declaring a new openness. Beginning 1 July, details of projects, minutes of board meetings and a whole lot else will be made public under a disclosure policy.

“India’s right to information law is an inspiration for us,” says Isabel Guerrero, the Bank’s Vice-President for South Asia and one of the architects of the disclosure policy.

The policy itself is new, but the process has been on, with voices like Guerrero’s within the Bank pressing hard for transparency in keeping with the times.

Guerrero believes that by being accessible it is possible to end the mistrust and suspicion that the World Bank attracts from activists and communities affected by projects financed by the bank.

But in so many ways, a policy is just a beginning. Within the Bank itself, staffers have to feel easy about taking contrary positions and owning them. To sponsor this change, the “deliberative process” within the Bank will initially remain outside the purview of the disclosure policy.

Guerrero explains this by saying that it is important have the “time and space” for handling difficult questions and helping people in the Bank evolve to a different threshold of interaction and candour.

Guerrero spoke at some length to *Civil Society* at her apartment in Vasant Vihar in New Delhi. Excerpts from that conversation:

What has prompted the World Bank to specifically define a new policy on openness and transparency? Has this come out of a trend within the bank?

Well, this goes back to the 1980s when we started with the disclosure policy. The Bank was secretive before that and there was a lot of pressure from civil society for openness. We started to disclose things little by little. Over the years when we started to look at this with new eyes we realised that

more than a disclosure policy what was needed was to provide access to information. Meanwhile, a lot of countries had begun to evolve right to information policies. India has a good right to information law. Mexico is one example, the US was one of the first. What I have seen in Mexico can be really transformational. To open up is a very healthy thing for any institution. It makes us more accountable, and people get to see how we operate inside, including people who are affected by our projects.

Are you saying it’s a push both from inside and outside?

It’s a changing world, no? For me this has been one of the best developments. I am very happy. You know there are 185 countries which are in the

‘It makes us more accountable and people get to see how we operate inside, including people who are affected by our projects’

board of the Bank and there might be some countries which feel this is too much. So there has been the politics of the Bank to work through. But a big majority in the Bank is very happy with it.

How have governments reacted?

Well different governments have taken it differently. Earlier you know, the project appraisal part, the famous part, would go to the board, be disclosed and then we would not know anything till the project was at completion stage, till it was...finished. Now everything is being made public – all the aide



Isabel Guerrero, World Bank’s Vice-President for South Asia

memoirs, the restructuring of the project, the implementation of the project... for some countries that is a lot, given that some countries are not as open as others. But I do know that at the board discussions there was a consensus. It was decided to go ahead, including disclosure of minutes of board discussions. After July, it will be public which governments oppose what.

So, minutes of board meetings will be available on websites?

Yes.

What is all the information you will now disclose?

As of now we have a positive list of what is disclosed. From 1 July we will only have a negative list of what will not be disclosed. So everything will be disclosed except for a list of a few things which will remain confidential. After a period of time say five years, 10 years, as in the US, even those will be made available.

How long really is the list of exceptions?

I am happy with the exceptions. Exceptions have to do with things like personal e-mails of staff, protecting the debate within the Bank before reaching a conclusion on project design and things like that. Also under exceptions are investigations into corruption, which is right because people are not regarded as corrupt till the investigations are over, if they are at all to blame that is. Then there are the

INDIA



internal financials of the bank which need to be kept confidential. Those are the three categories.

How exactly are you going to address the deliberative process?

Oh, could you enlighten us! You have been implementing it. We haven't so we need to learn as we go. We don't have everything sorted out and we have had consultations in 23 countries for a year now. We are learning and we will continue to learn. We have the launch on 1 July and that will not be the end of learning. (As for) the deliberative process per se, the reason I am happy this has been kept confidential is because in the bank we need to promote a culture of honesty and we don't always have that. People tend to think that the project has been taken care of. I don't think this is the right culture for the Bank. We should be much more upfront about the risks and that some of those risks are not managed. I will be promoting in my region a culture of real open debate.

But development is a messy business, it is really complex, many things go wrong and I think it is necessary that we have time and space for the difficult questions.

Any specific things you would like to mention about the deliberative process which you have debated within the bank and decided to put this away for the time being?

Yes, one of the things we debate a lot is our energy



World Bank funded social project

policy. Should we be investing in coal? Should we be investing in large hydro-power projects from the experience which we have had? All these are really complex questions for which we do not have an answer right now. And then there are many political groups which have different views and want to push us one way or another. I just think we need the space to do the right thing. And to do that a lot of real debate/deliberation is needed before we get there. We cannot do it openly because there are so many interests out there.

Information which will be made public includes project design, the project appraisal document, board discussions, supervision reviews in the mid-life of the project. The supervision review which calls for management attention will be left out since these are recommendations which we don't know if the management will accept. But eventually in the next supervision mission what they rec-

ommend will be made public.

While the entire deliberative process may not be completely open at this stage we are trying to make more documents at different stages of the project available (implementation, appraisal, project concepts, design will also be public) ...for anyone keen to follow on the process, they will have more documents to understand how the project moved from one stage to the other. While all the views may not be captured that way but progress from one document to the other will be public.

How are people going to access this information?

The most important part is dissemination which is why I am having an interview with you because I really want people to know that this is going to be available from 1 July. We are going to start going out with this information in June. Our information centres will be accessible and we will give some support to libraries across the country. I am going to be doing a lot of interviews across South Asia.

If a guy on the street wants to know how is he going to access this information?

That will be through the website or the public information centre here in New Delhi.

I was in Mexico when the RTI Act was done there. We gave a grant to the commissioners who were actually implementing this and provided them technical assistance which was a real key to the success of RTI. We also have to do that.

But you do have a multiplicity of stakeholders. There are so many languages, so many tiers, you are really reaching out to the last man, to the poor. How do you cope with this?

India is vast and it is challenging in terms of reaching out to everybody. First of all I think we should learn from the experience of RTI here. How did the RTI here cope with this exact problem you are talking about? On the translations we are actually working right now how we will handle the translations and that is a big challenge. We don't have the answer as yet but we are going to be seeing how to work on that. There is a time lag of action. For instance, training people in the communications teams so that they go out is part of the time lag. So I don't want to give you the impression that we have everything sorted out. We don't but I think as we go, we will have to work it.

Would you be using civil society groups to do this?

Yes, we already have in the consultations.

Do you think there will be an overload?

I don't think we are that interesting. What is of concern to me is that staff should have the ability to respond to requests. People are so busy with projects that when you give a request they don't answer in good time. And that's why it is really important for us to develop standards in quick response so that people have to reply within a certain time.

If someone is not satisfied with the information asked for, then do you have a grievance redressal system in place?

There is a two-stage appeal process. One is internal and the second stage, if the person is still unhappy, is a panel which has three external members, a sort of ombudsman.

The path to friendly roads

LAKSHMAN ANAND

Saibal Chatterjee
New Delhi

AS traffic congestion on the streets of India grows at the rate of knots, Professor Murray Mackay, one of the world's leading experts on transport safety, can clearly see the roadblocks that lie in the way. He warns that these speed-breakers could get bigger and worse unless something is done before it is too late.

"The pace of growth in India has been tremendous. You are doing in 10 years what Western Europe took 60 to 70 years to do," the Professor Emeritus, University of Birmingham, said on the eve of a lecture at the Indian Institute of Technology (IIT), Delhi, in early March. "India is recording an 8 per cent increase in vehicles each year, but the highways and roads have not grown at the same rate."

As a result, Professor Mackay pointed out, the conflict areas between motorised and non-motorised traffic have multiplied as have fatalities in road mishaps. He said: "It is imperative to build separate tracks for bicycles and pedestrians to bring down road accident casualties."

In India, where 100,000 lives are lost in traffic accidents every year – the figure is rising by 5 to 10 per cent a year – three-fourths of those that die are road-users. In the US, an identical percentage of fatalities involve vehicle occupants. "In England, it is half and half," revealed Professor Mackay, who ran the Birmingham Accident Research Centre from 1964 to 1996.

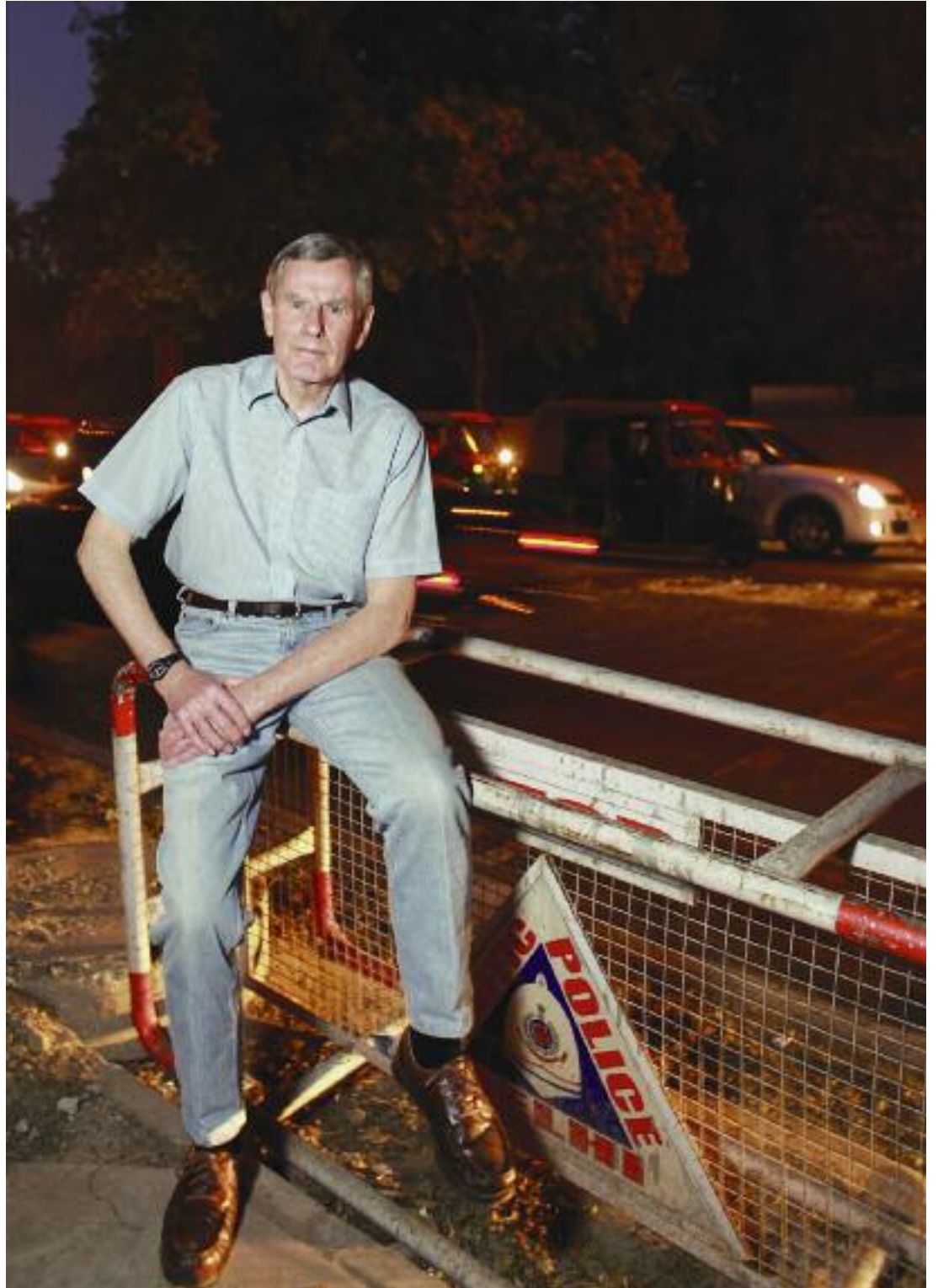
He is currently the chairman and one of the eight founding members of the Zurich-based International Research Council on Biomechanics of Injury (IRCOBI). He is also a director of the Brussels-headquartered European Transport Safety Council (ETSC).

Professor Mackay's work in the area of identifying and formulating requisite policy interventions through in-depth research into crash safety issues has earned him worldwide acclaim. The subject of his IIT lecture was "The Future of Traffic Safety and Sustainable Transport". In the course of this interview, he touched upon many of the issues that formed the crux of his lecture.

Talking about this country's typical traffic mix, Professor Mackay said: "Three-quarters of vehicular traffic in India is made up of motorcycles and scooters. These two-wheelers are likely to remain the dominant modes of transport in the country for at least the next 10 years."

Because of the economic realities of the nation, India's vehicular distribution is very different from that in the West, he says, adding: "Western solutions aren't applicable here. Consultants come here and recommend western approaches to eliminating problems. They will never work here."

Professor Mackay's own suggestions hinge on the principle of long-term sustainability. "While separation of motorised and non-motorised traffic is already beginning to happen, it is important for



Professor Murray Mackay

'The gains of low-speed vehicles would be dual - better safety and lower carbon emissions,' says Professor Mackay .

Indian planners and policy-makers to concentrate on creating an appropriate public transport system that is cheap, comfortable and revolves around buses that run on dedicated lanes," he said.

He recommended that the Indian government must formulate an aggressive policy "to discourage car use through fiscal measures, steep parking fees and devising alternative modes of transport". "There is a specific need for low-speed, low-cost, fuel-efficient cars in India," he said. "It is an option worth spending time and money on."

"If India can develop an indigenous low-speed

Women vendors get political support

Shreyasi Singh
New Delhi

AROUND 500 women vendors from Delhi and nearby states congregated in the capital to raise their voices against repeated harassment by the police and to demand protection of their livelihoods.

The protest was organised by the National Association of Street Vendors of India (NASVI), before Women's Day on 8 March. The women vendors are members of NASVI.

They got a sympathetic hearing from Harish Rawat, Minister of State for Labour and Employment, Brinda Karat, CPI (M) Politburo Member, Sandhya Bajaj, Member-NCPCR (National Commission for Protection of Child Rights) and Barkha Singh, a Delhi MLA and Chairperson of Delhi Women's Commission.

"The upcoming Commonwealth Games are deeply impacting vendors," said Geeta, secretary of SEWA's Delhi cooperative which has a membership of almost 10,000 women vendors. "The Purana Qila street bazaar has been suspended for over a year. The Qutub Road bazaar which has been running for over 40 years is not allowed anymore. How can we raise our children like this?"

Many of the women vendors fearlessly went up on stage to recount tales of exploitation and harassment. "Police constables keep harassing us for bribes to allow us to put up our stalls, and ply our carts. Sometimes they ask for Rs 1,400 as bribe. It takes us months of hard work to save such an amount. If we are challaned for Rs 5, the police constable takes Rs 10 from us," said a woman street vendor from Delhi's Narela locality.

"There is a need for collective action against the atrocities suffered by women vendors," said Arbind Singh, Coordinator, NASVI. "Most women vendors are migrants and subjected to harassment from their male counterparts, police and municipal authorities. Their vulnerability is further exploited by loan sharks as there is a lack of institutional credit. Our National Women's Cell is putting in place safeguards to protect women vendors."

With over 400 street vendor organizations and more than 300,000 members, NASVI has brought street vendors across India on a single platform to fight for macro policy changes crucial to the livelihoods of around 10 million vendors in India.

NASVI's National Women's Cell has created a charter of demands. They are asking for separate vending space or markets for women vendors because many of them have been removed in the name of the urban renewal. They want to be



Women vendors from Delhi and nearby states at the meeting

ensured basic needs in the workplace like drinking water, toilets, crèches. They also demanded social security schemes.

A NASVI delegation presented the charter of demands to senior officers at the Delhi Police headquarters after the meet. NASVI says the police there have promised action within the next 10 days.

CPI (M) Politburo Member Brinda Karat said the charter was a "desperate struggle for life". "Street vendors constitute around 2.5 per cent of our urban population and a huge proportion of this includes women vendors," she said. "The national street vendors' policy must be implemented immediately, starting in the Capital, to provide adequate safeguards for women street vendors and to put a stop to harassment by the police."

She also suggested 2.5 per cent of urban space be earmarked as markets for vendors and assured the women that their cause will not fall on deaf ears. Karat said she was heartened by the multi-party support the issue received when she brought it to Prime Minister Manmohan Singh's notice in Parliament minutes before coming to the NASVI meet.

Harish Rawat, Minister of State for Labour and Employment, said the government is trying to deliver mechanisms for social safeguards like insurance, institutional credit and registration to help women vendors. "We would like to work more closely with NGOs like NASVI, increase interaction and work on the implementation of schemes that are beneficial for all street vendors, especially women vendors and their children," the minister said. He also told women vendors, "Your work is very important for the country since it is associated with common people. You provide everyone with affordable goods at their doorsteps and there isn't a corner in the country that does not have your services."

The women vendors said a united stand would yield results. "We need unity. If we are together we will manage to do this. A handful of us cannot put up a show of strength, a show of solidarity. We need to nurture these associations, build unions," said a street vendor from Jaipur.

urban vehicle, it can be a world leader because the West has been rather slow in developing the right kind of vehicle exteriors," he said. It is, he added, a technological challenge that is "worth developing appropriate solutions for".

The gains of low-speed vehicles would be dual – better safety and lower carbon emissions. "They actually go hand in hand. You cannot have one without the other," Professor Mackay felt. "At the moment, it is a complete mismatch – unleashing 200-kilometre per hour cars on roads where traffic signals and snarl-ups force you to stop at every intersection. In the US, every vehicle is grossly overpowered and 20 per cent of the time, cars are stationary. It's a huge waste of fuel."

He is, however, hopeful that things will gather momentum on this front because arresting climate change and curbing carbon emissions by introducing clean, renewable energy top the agenda of most nations. "How do you use this opportunity to put in place sustainable transport technologies while ensuring enhanced traffic safety – that is the challenge," he explained.

He pointed out that road accidents are not merely about people losing their lives. "Survivors of road accidents are far more numerous. For every person who is killed in a traffic mishap, four people survive with serious permanent spinal, brain and limb injuries. Hospitalisation of the injured is also a huge drain on people and the nation," he explained, emphasising the need for urgent initiatives to minimise interaction between fast-moving vehicles and slower modes of transports on India's teeming roads.

"Crossing a road in India," said Professor Mackay, "can be a nightmare, especially for the elderly, the physically challenged and women with children. The idea should be to take the fear out of traffic. That should be the philosophy underlying all measures that are adopted to make roads a safer place."

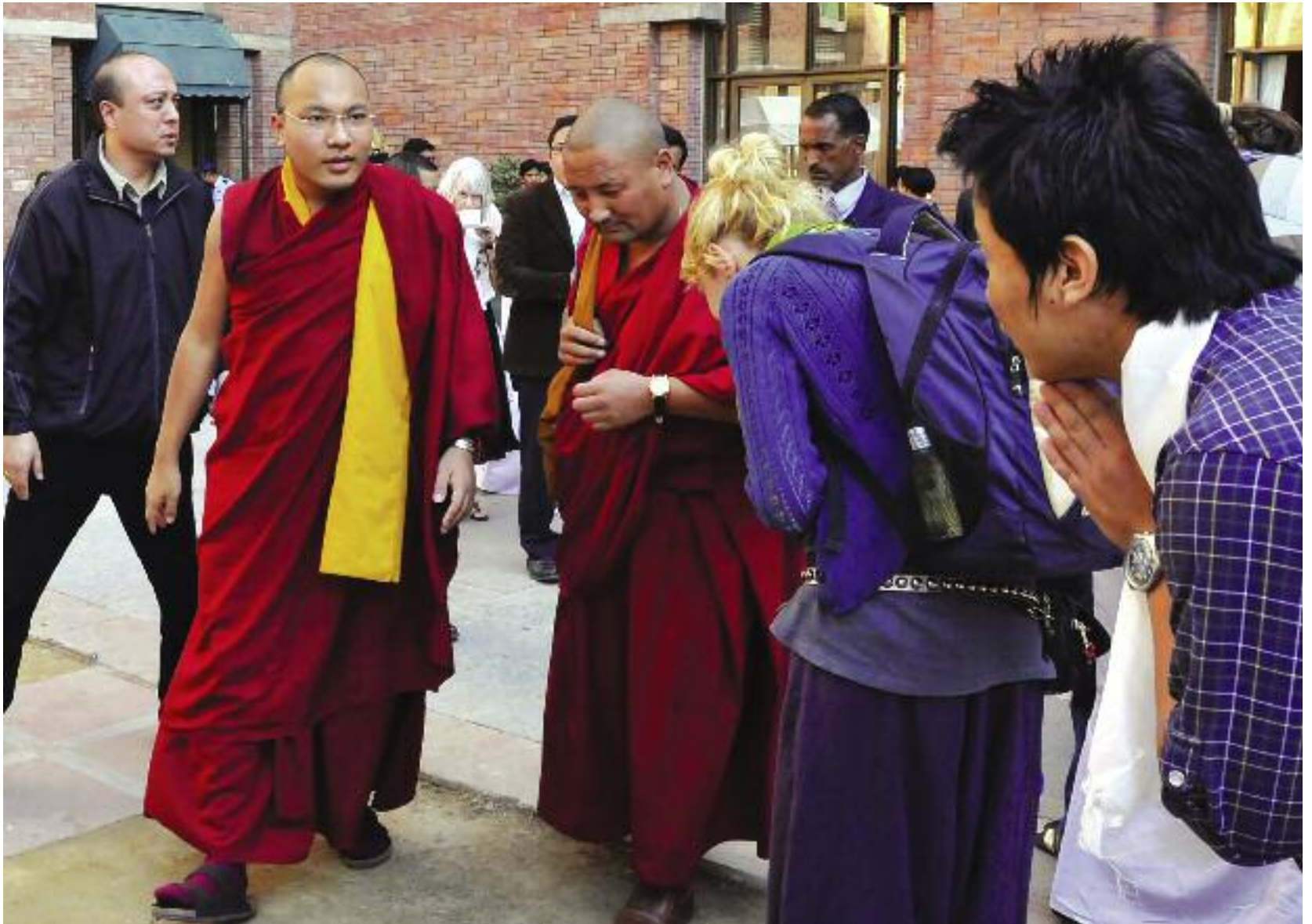
One of the problems with tackling traffic safety, he said, was that much of it still stems from 'folklore and pre-scientific notions.'

"It is all very fine to launch propaganda programmes, organise safety weeks and run awareness campaigns. But these generalised methods do not work anymore. What we need are effective ways of controlling speed and protecting vulnerable road users. A lot of such counter-measures have been shown to be effective in different parts of the world," he added.

He suggests electric vehicles as the way forward. "Today batteries are better, have longer life and are easier to charge. Battery charging facilities, like gas stations, could also come up in the near future," he said. "Countries like Denmark and the Netherlands, which are small, wealthy nations with a good network of roads, are likely to be the first to go in for electric vehicles. Maybe Germany and France too would follow suit. But the UK would be slower to make the shift."

As for India, if it were to begin implementing Professor Mackay's sustainable transport blueprint now, it wouldn't be a day too soon.

Young Karmapa steps into



The 17th Gyalwang Karmapa Ogyen Trinley Dorje

Samita Rathor
New Delhi

THE powerful mantra, *Om Mani Padme Hum*, played softly in the background. Buddhist Thangkas adorned the walls. Yellow and maroon cushions were neatly laid out on a row of white mattresses. Tibetan flags in blue, white, red, green and yellow fluttered around. And the fragrance of incense and fresh flowers filled the hall at the Indian Habitat Centre.

This serene ambience was created to welcome and usher in the teachings of the 17th Gyalwang Karmapa Ogyen Trinley Dorje to New Delhi. The meeting was organised by The Foundation for Universal Responsibility of His Holiness The Dalai Lama, which is managed by his personal student, Rajiv Mehrotra.

After the Dalai Lama and the Panchen Lama, His Holiness the 17th Gyalwang Karmapa is the third most important spiritual leader in the Tibetan Buddhist hierarchy and the person who

many believe will carry that tradition forward into the 21st century.

After offering prayers to his teachers the first sentence uttered by the 17th Karmapa was: "Love and compassion is what I want to discuss today." He explained that love and compassion are used to express things familiar to us. It is not simple and requires effort.

The core of Buddhist teachings are based on

After offering prayers to his teachers the first sentence said by the Karmapa was: 'Love and compassion is what I want to discuss.'

developing love and compassion.

All the attendees were initiated into the practice of compassion and the mantra *Om Mani Padme Hum*. The Tibetan Buddhists believe that saying this mantra loudly or silently to oneself, invokes the powerful benevolent attention and blessings of Avalokiteshvara (Tibetan Chenrezig), bodhisattva or personification of compassion.

His Holiness, the Dalai Lama, personally presented the overjoyed participants with a rosary and a copy of his, 'Heart Advice' book for the Karmapa.

WHO ARE THE KARMAPAS: "The one who carries out Buddha-activity" or "the embodiment of all the activities of the Buddha" is called the Karmapa. It is believed that enlightened spiritual teachers can consciously arrange to be reborn as teachers to carry on the teachings of a predecessor in a prior life according to Tibetan practice.

Following this tradition, Karmapas have been incarnated in the form of nirmanakaya or a man-

limelight

ifestation of the Buddha for 17 lifetimes. The nirmanakaya is the earthly, physical body of a Buddha, which manifests in the world to teach dharma and bring all beings to enlightenment. The historical Buddha is said to have been a nirmanakaya Buddha.

So far all Karmapas have played an important role in preserving and propagating the Buddhist teachings of Tibet.

Prior to the birth of the first Karmapa, the arrival of a Buddhist master who would be known as the Karmapa had been prophesied by the historic Buddha Shakyamuni and the great tantric master of India, Guru Padmasambhava. Throughout the centuries, the Karmapas have been central figures in the continuation of the Vajrayana lineage in general and Kagyu lineage in particular. They have played a very important role in the preservation of the study of Buddhism.

EARLY DAYS: In 1985 a male infant was born to a nomad family in the Lhatok region of Eastern Tibet. In the months prior to his birth, his mother had wonderful dreams. On the day of his birth, a cuckoo landed on the tent in which he was born, and a mysterious sound similar to the blowing of a conch shell, was heard by many throughout the valley in which the family of the infant lived.

In Tibet, such events are considered auspicious portents of the birth of an enlightened teacher.

The young nomad was called Apo Gaga. While his early years seemed to his family to be full of blessing, Apo Gaga did not talk of any connection to the Karmapas. However, in 1992, he asked his family to move the location of their nomadic home to another valley, and told them to expect a visit from traveling monks. Soon after setting up their home at the new location, followers of the 16th Karmapa came to that valley pursuant to secret instructions of the 16th Karmapa, contained in his letter of prediction. The birth and other details of Apo Gaga's life matched the predictions of the letter. Apo Gaga was discovered to be the 17th Karmapa, Ogyen Trinley Dorje.

In addition to his letter of prediction, the 16th Karmapa wrote many poems or songs, predicting that though he would leave his traditional main seat in Tsurphu, Tibet, he would soon return to Tsurphu, that his root teacher would be Situ Rinpoche, and that he would study in India. After the death of the 16th Karmapa, it became clear that these predictions applied to his successor.

THE MONASTERY: The 17th Karmapa did in fact return to Tolung Tsurphu Monastery in Central Tibet in 1992, where he was

enthroned on 27 September, 1992, with the permission of the Chinese government. At Tsurphu, over 20,000 supplicants assembled to witness the return and sought his personal blessings the next morning.

At Tsurphu, the Karmapa studied the Buddhist sciences of mind, learned ritual and practised sacred arts, such as dance. Every day he received hundreds of visitors who came from throughout Tibet and around the world. He eventually began to offer empowerments and participated in various rituals at the monastery.

At the age of about 10, His Holiness recognised the rebirth of reincarnate teachers, including eminent teachers such as Pawo Rinpoche, Jamgon Kongtrul Rinpoche and the Dabzang Rinpoche.

The 17th Karmapa sought to receive the empowerments and transmissions of the lineage but was unable to do so fully because many of the Kagyu lineage teachers remained in India. To fulfill his spiritual duty he and a handful of attendants left Tibet for India by making a spectacular escape that caught the world's attention.

JOURNEY TO INDIA: After months of careful planning, on 28 December, the 14-year-old Karmapa, pretending to enter into a solitary retreat, instead donned civilian attire and escaped out of a window. Leaving Tsurphu Monastery with a handful of followers, he began a bold journey by car, foot, horseback, helicopter, train and taxi, an heroic escape which was to become the stuff of headlines throughout the world.

On 5 January, 2000, he arrived, to the immense surprise and overpowering delight of the world, in Dharamsala, where he was met by His Holiness the 14th Dalai Lama. He received refugee status from the Government of India in 2001.

The 17th Gyalwang Karmapa, besides his interest in environmentalism, vegetarianism and role of women, loves books, art, music and computers and has written numerous songs.

At 24, he has deep concern about people his age and what they are inheriting. He stresses on planting trees and is concerned about declining levels of oxygen, the rise of toxicity on the planet in the name of civilization and industrialization.

All Karmapas have adapted to the circumstances of their current environment to ensure that the teachings remained fresh. But the 17th Karmapa has an immensely challenging task ahead of him with the onset of the digital revolution, global warming and confusion of cultural identities that his predecessors did not experience.

Finally, some respite from mining

Amit Sengupta
New Delhi

IN a morale booster to the relentless struggle against mining, land acquisition, deforestation and ecological destruction all over the country, a moment of relief has arrived in the pristine land of clouds in India's northeast – Meghalaya.

In a significant move, the Supreme Court, responding to a petition filed by 21 local tribals and the Shella Action Committee (SAC) on 5 February, stayed the mining of limestone by Lafarge Umiam Mining Pvt Ltd (LUMPL) in Meghalaya. Even while the protracted struggle in this ecological hot spot heats up, the apex court has fixed the next hearing on 19 March.

The tribals have been protesting against polluting limestone quarry mining in a huge area spread over 100 hectares near the critical Indo-Bangladesh border for supply of raw material to Lafarge Surma Cement Project at Chhatak in Sunamganj, Bangladesh. The petition categorically states that LUMPL had obtained environmental clearance by 'falsely' declaring precious forest areas as wasteland and non-forest terrain, even while the project displaces the indigenous people, often using "dubious means", locals say. Besides, this precious ecological zone might get completely devastated, its water bodies poisoned, and its forests ravaged by mining.

The company has, the petition reiterates, 'illegally' transferred tribal land protected under the Sixth Schedule of the Constitution to itself and mortgaged it in favour of foreign banks to secure a loan of \$153 million (around Rs 713 crore), according to the action committee. Lafarge has claimed to have obtained relevant clearances from the MoEF, the state government, the autonomous hill council and the chief conservator of forests for limestone quarrying.

Said BM Roy Dolloi, legal advisor of the action committee, in a press meet in Delhi: "The local forest officials concocted documents to prove that the land is barren and wasteland, whereas the truth is, according to the inspection by the Union Ministry of Environment and Forests, the land is virgin, densely forested and fertile. The permission granted to the mining company is fraudulent." He said despite this brazen violation of the ecological sanctity of this forested land, the state and central governments are backing the mining project.

The action committee "has reasons to believe that the Congress spokesperson and senior advocate Abhishek Manu Singhvi appearing on behalf of Lafarge constitutes a clear conflict of interest" in what is apparently a direct violation of the principles of Indian Constitution by a foreign company, and that too in protected tribal land.

The French cement corporation Lafarge runs the cement project at Chhatak in Bangladesh – a massive \$255 million project – in collaboration with a Spanish firm. LUMPL has been mining the Shella region, adjacent to the beautiful Shella river, in Chirapunjee (Sohra) in the environmentally sensitive East Khasi Hills district since 2006. The project is dependent on uninterrupted supply of limestone – as promised by the Indian government.

BILAL BAHADUR



BILAL BAHADUR



Kashmir orphanages get norms

Jehangir Rashid
Srinagar

TWENTY years of conflict and turbulence have led to a disturbing situation in the Kashmir Valley. Thousands of women have lost their husbands. Many women have become half widows – their husbands have either gone missing in custody or have disappeared. Alongside, a huge number of orphans have been created and the rehabilitation of these vulnerable children is a big challenge for society.

Relatives of orphans tend to get them registered in various orphanages thinking that their responsibility is now over and the onus of nurturing these hapless children lies in the hands of caretakers at the orphanages. However, due to lack of facilities and the absence of a proper monitoring system it was noted that no proper development of orphans took place.

Due to this revelation, it was felt that there was need to evolve a mechanism and prescribe certain guidelines for orphanages. Experts believe that this will put an end to poor standards being followed by orphanages and help the children get a more normal childhood.

NGOs working for the welfare of orphans in the Kashmir Valley carried out many brainstorming sessions to develop the guidelines. It was only last month that a breakthrough was finally made.

Omar Abdullah, Chief Minister of Jammu & Kashmir released the guidelines at a function held at Sher-e-Kashmir International Conference Centre (SKICC). Titled 'Quality Standards of Care for Orphanages in Jammu & Kashmir', the document has been developed by the Department of Social Welfare, Jammu & Kashmir with support from Save the Children in collaboration with ECHO.

The quality standards have been classified under 15 categories and they aim to cover every sphere of activity in an orphanage.

First, an orphanage has to conform to a set of policies and procedures for registration or to have registration renewed. Transparent procedures should be in place in relation to admission and

length of stay. The orphanages should have a clear policy and carry out agreed procedures relating to the planned and unplanned conclusion of their work with children to ensure appropriate after-care and/or follow-up.

Secondly, the orphanages have to comply with the monitoring mechanisms of the Department of Social Welfare, community and civil society to ensure the welfare, care and protection of children. The guidelines call upon orphanages to ensure privacy and confidentiality of children's personal details. Orphanages are expected to maintain records of the daily affairs of children admitted there.

Thirdly, principles and practices should be in place to ensure that children are not discriminated against on the basis of caste, class, gender, religion or ethnicity in an orphanage. The guidelines say children are to be helped to maintain linkages with their families and communities. Orphanages should be safe spaces for children with security provided at all times through effective implementation of safety measures, rules and regulations.

Fourthly, the orphanages should provide a safe and protective environment and the staff should have good child protection practices. Methods of controlling and redirecting children when their behaviour is challenging are to be balanced with care, respect for the law and children's rights and maintenance of the child's dignity. Good health and hygiene practices must be ensured through supportive services and a clean environment, says the document.

The document says that children must have access to quality medical care and psychosocial or counseling support services. Also, there should be quality education and development opportunities according to the child's gender, age and needs. Children must participate in all activities and decisions affecting their lives. The orphanage is to be adequately staffed by professional caregivers.

In his message, Omar Abdullah hoped that such quality standards will help in guaranteeing a fair, accountable, development-oriented system for the care and protection of children with inadequate parental care. "The document gives a con-

structive insight into the affairs of residential institutions run by the government and private agencies. The best part of the standards elucidated by this report is that it links the care of orphans and marginalised boys and girls with a long term rights based perspective rather than the existing needs based approach," said Omar Abdullah.

Mohammad Sharief, State Manager, Save the Children, said the child's perspective should be the guiding force for any institution working for the welfare of orphans.

"A 15-member task force group will be set up to look into the role and responsibility of an orphanage in the development of children admitted there. This needs to be done while setting some deadlines. Going by the keenness as well as interest of the chief minister, I believe that this whole process will be taken up seriously," said Sharief.

Children are safest and most secure with their families, said Sharief. His message to the people was that orphans should be looked after by their relatives and admission into an orphanage should be the last option.

"We should look into the reasons responsible for the rapid growth and mushrooming of orphanages. It has been observed that not all the children admitted in orphanages are orphans, but children of poor people. This points to a serious discrepancy in the system which needs to be removed. We want orphans to be looked after by their near and dear ones," said Sharief.

Save the Children has helped form child protection committees in various villages in different districts of the state. They have covered 196 villages under child protection committees in all three divisions – Jammu, Kashmir and Ladakh.

Monitoring indicators have been included in the quality standards document and the aim is to ensure that a sound system is in place for orphans. It includes the necessity of having a valid registration certificate in favour of the orphanage and its mission statement as well.

Conveying her appreciation to the Department of Social Welfare, Jammu & Kashmir and Save the Children, Sakina Itoo, social welfare minister said that her department is taking care of destitute,

'Public trust is the key'

Civil Society News
New Delhi

AS Managing Director-Asia, The Rockefeller Foundation, Ashvin Dayal heads its regional office in Bangkok. He was in Delhi for a roundtable conference on "Accountability in Non-Profits: A Donor's Perspective", organised by The Resource Alliance, headquartered in the UK, and The Rockefeller Foundation. Speakers shared their insights on effective and ethical ways of raising funds for the social sector. In an exclusive interview, Ashvin Dayal shed light on various issues confronting NGOs in India.

How far do you think NGOs have been affected by the economic downturn?

It's hard to generalise as we do not yet have reliable statistics on this issue, though there are clearly many signs of stress in this regard. The Rockefeller Foundation has protected its overall programme expenditure while being conservative about making future commitments given the ongoing uncertainty in the economy at a global level.

What new ways of funding would you suggest?

There is enormous potential for NGOs to raise funds through a multiplicity of channels in India.

Part of our excitement in partnering with The Resource Alliance to support the India NGO Awards is to demonstrate that there is a vibrant NGO sector that is capable of reaching out to individuals and corporates. We are seeing a lot of innovation in terms of direct marketing, fund-raising events and the like. The key is to grow awareness and trust in the NGO sector in order to build a long-term cohort of committed supporters, and we hope that showcasing high quality, accountable and transparent NGOs will help move us in that direction.

The NGO sector has grown rapidly in India. Do you think it is essential for NGOs to be listed on a national database? What would you suggest?

What we need is a rationalisation where we see government regulators deal decisively with unaccountable organisations, while at the same time rewarding those that do perform by simplifying and streamlining some of the policies and procedures. At the same time it must be stressed that this is not just a matter for government.

We must see the sector itself take the lead in setting standards and strengthening their umbrella organisations. This is why we feel that supporting the Indian NGO Awards is such an important way in which we can contribute to strengthening accountability and impact in the

sector in India.

Should it be mandatory by law for NGOs to be certified?

If you look at the experience of other countries, what has worked well is a combination of strong legal enforcement of basic compliance requirements, while allowing a range of credible voluntary rating systems to flourish. Once a particular rating system gains momentum, it will generate a climate in which it will be in the interest of good organisations to see themselves qualify for a rating. The key here is public trust, and it is quite possible to have a compulsory rating system that is not trusted so we need to be careful before considering mandatory requirements such as this.

How can foreign funders be made more accountable? They are sometimes criticised for imposing their own agendas on NGOs, for not evaluating projects carefully and so on.

Funders need to also do more to explain their strategy to potential grantees, and to be accessible through tools such as the website so that we minimise the sense of time being wasted by local NGOs who have precious few resources to develop proposals. The Rockefeller Foundation has recently invested quite a lot to upgrade its website with this goal in mind. In terms of imposing agendas, I think this is a question of whether relationships are sub-contractual in nature, or if we



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Radio looks for more muscle

Tanushree Gangopadhyay
Bangalore

DURING turbulent times in Nepal, radio stations gave voice to the aspirations of the people. Its fiery broadcasters played a key role in the overthrow of the monarchy. This small Himalayan state has over 100 community radio stations with names like Radio Gorkha, Ramaroshan, Runaru, Sungava and Lumbini.

Living up to its image as a trendsetter in community radio, Nepal sent the biggest contingent of 63 delegates to the second regional conference of the World Association of Community Radio Broadcasters (AMARC) in Bangalore held in collaboration with VOICES, India. Over 300 community radio broadcasters, activists, academics, government officers and representatives of multilateral institutions from 20 countries in the Asia Pacific region participated.

Ashish Sen of VOICES, who is also president of AMARC Asia Pacific, outlined the significant role played by community radio, the cheapest medium of communication and a life support for marginalized communities particularly in disaster prone areas. The floods in Java in 2009 drowned six community radio stations which were brought back to life with AMARC Japan's financial help, he informed delegates.

Technology is emancipation and it is being embraced by marginalized groups. But community radio's role in providing people with authentic information rouses the ire entrenched interests, keen to maintain the status quo.

For instance, women in rural Afghanistan have virtually captured the airwaves. Mobile phones have become the most popular vehicle of communication in Taliban country. Community radio stations broadcast their voices live in a region where mobility is restricted. The Taliban would like to shut them up.

"How can we close down our radio? The women need to talk about their problems even to the oppressive Taliban," said Shahla Shaiq, a petite and courageous journalist. She is a mother of four and runs the all women Nargis Radio station in Jalalabad.

"We are virtually underground as the Taliban could close our radio station. They bombed a three-storied building next to our office. One man was killed. We are certainly their next target as we educate our women against un-Islamic practices. Islam has empowered women with a lot of rights," she said.

Uva Radio in Sri Lanka, which is supported by UNESCO, was compelled to close down before the elections of 2004. The radio used to run programmes on farming and education. The vibrant broadcasters organised, collected money and made representations to President Chandrika Kumaratunga but in vain. "We had to give up," says Lasantha de Silva, a media activist. "We then organised the farming community in Ratnapura district and trained them to run a newspaper called Bolaththa." A nearby temple which owns considerable land there has been threatening them, but the group has not given up.

"Our fight for the radio license is still on," says Lasantha.

India, the first country in South Asia to announce a policy on community radio, does not allow news broadcasts. "Isn't atrocities on women, Dalits, mowing down of tribals in Operation Green Hunt and Bt Brinjal news?" asked Aruna Roy, noted RTI activist and member of the Mazdoor Kissan Shakti Sangathan (MKSS), Rajasthan. She felt that such information should be relayed to the people.

Deccan Development Society in Medak district of Andhra Pradesh was the first to get a license in 2008. They have focused on food security and food sovereignty. Farmers, their main constituency, were earlier connected through narrow casting. "We need to synergise freedom of information with community radio," said P Sathesh, director.

SR Esther, Additional Director-General, All India Radio, agreed community radio should be a people's movement. He voiced the concerns of the Home Ministry in giving licenses to certain NGOs. India has room for 4,000 radio stations, according to Ambika Soni, Union Minister for Information and Broadcasting, but only 63 licenses have been given and several are for campus radios.

The Bangalore declaration issued at the end of the meeting asked for technological initiatives that boost community broadcasting and more spaces on the airwaves for diverse and marginalised voices.

Delegates demanded full recognition of the might of community radio in the realm of disaster preparedness, poverty reduction, inclusion, human rights and climate change adaptation and mitigation.

Mahila Umang



The Umang shop

Rakesh Agrawal
Ranikhet

THEY are 1,500 simple hill women who have never heard of a stock market and have little idea how a company works, but they are thrilled to be shareholders in the Mahila Umang Samiti (MUS) in Almora district in Uttarakhand.

MUS began as a cooperative of SHGs and is now registered as a company. It produces and markets honey, processed fruit, woollen clothes and organic manure. The products come from the SHGs which represent some 2,500 women in the villages around Almora town.

Mahila Umang Samiti dreams of being a big company, "Like the legendary Amul one day," says Sunita Kashyap, Kalika village, Almora district, chief secretary, MUS.

That dream may come true. Within a year of registration, MUS is poised to cross a sales figure of Rs 1 crore. All shareholders have a say in management. Profits are distributed in the ratio of shares and there is a bonus for those whose contribution to the business has been greater than that of the others.

"I earned the highest bonus of Rs 2,250 in 2009 apart from the profit I earned by selling my products – woollen garments, jams and jellies," says an ebullient Basanti Panwar of Kalika village, Almora district. Deciding the prices of products is a collective process, since all board members take a joint decision.

MUS has come a long way since it started in 2001. It was set up as a collective of SHGs to support and facilitate the growth of micro-enterprises. "There were more than 160 SHGs in 130 villages producing several products. Since mid-2008 we began to remodel our groups as a remunerative, commercial enterprise to pool our resources and skills," says Puja Pande, Lamgarh village. She is the sales manager of the Umang Shop in Naini village.

In eight years, MUS has been able to link over 2,500 women in rural Kumaon producing and selling hand-knitted woollen gar-

wants to be another Amul

ments, fruit preserves and pickles, natural honey, beeswax candles and natural spices.

"We felt it was time to emerge from being an NGO with a narrow approach of targets and achievements and become a company instead," explains Anita Paul of Pan Himalayan Grassroots Organisation, the parent organisation of MUS.

The women's collective of SHGs was therefore registered as a company, the Mahila Umang Samiti, in January 2009.

"At Grassroots we believe the promotion of pro-poor business ventures in this way helps to balance the economy, the ecology and equity concerns for rural communities," says Paul. "So, while we are a company today and have to look at profits and losses, we also remain committed to a larger vision of creating a just and equitable society."

MUS has revolutionised the lives of women. Kashyap, who is currently chief secretary, UMS, began her career as an SHG worker in 1996. She had passed Class 10. Her mother died and she was married off.

Despite stiff opposition from her in-laws, she decided to look for a job and began to work as a community facilitator for Grassroots.

"Today, I'm not just a graduate. I am also working with the 2,500 women in the Umang network. In the next three to five years that figure will rise to 5,000," predicts Kashyap.

Kashyap is not alone. Most office-bearers of MUS and women associated with MUS are from downtrodden rural communities of Kumaon.

Pande, who confidently manages the Umang shop, says sales figures touched Rs 10 lakh last year. "When I joined the group eight years ago, I couldn't even count," recalls Pande. Or, take the

case of Basanti Panwar, the highest bonus earner in 2009. She was married off at the tender age of 15. Being a Dalit, she and her children were treated as social outcasts. "Education and money have changed peoples' attitude. Now they respect my family in the village as I'm a graduate and earn good money, my own money," says Panwar.

school. It would not have been possible without MUS," says a confident Mehta.

Radha Devi, the leader of the Nagaun SHG, which comprises 14 members, has her own story to tell. Her confidence was boosted by joining the SHG. She is now the chairperson of the Dusad Gadhera Bachao Manch, a coalition of 14 villages in the area. "For us, our relationship with nature remains sacred. That mustn't be broken," she says.

She is a confident speaker and an advocate of the needs of her village at Manch level, where village leaders across the Dusad Gadhera region meet to discuss agricultural and hydrological issues.

In 2008, MUS launched its Himkhadya range of grains, pulses and nuts to promote traditional organic farming. Currently, walnuts and processed fruit preserves like jams, jellies, and pickles are sold under the Kumaoni brand name which are made with natural ingredients and free of artificial additives and preservatives. Puja Pande says she plans to scale up production and sale of Himkhadya products from the current 10 tonnes to 50 tonnes in three to five years time.

MUS is learning to do business without diluting its vision of empowering women. "That's why all 10 board members are women, so that management remains in their hands," says Paul.

MUS uses the Internet to reach a wider clientele. It has started 45 shops with franchise partners in tourist places like Bhimtal and Nainital. MUS also has presence in Delhi, Mumbai and Bangalore. The women participate in trade fairs in Uttarakhand like the Virasat Fair and Saras Mela.

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Women members processing fruits

Women who are members of the various SHGs have seen their lives improve. Gita Mehta is one such woman. She was widowed with a small son in 1996. To help make ends meet, she started knitting for Umang and rose to become the leader of the Majkhali SHG formed in 2000. Mehta now heads the Majkhali Umang training centre which teaches knitting and stitching. She also runs a village shop which sells Umang products. "Today, I have my own house. I have expanded my business and my son goes to an English medium

SAMITA' S WORLD

by SAMITA RATHOR



SBI teaches smart skills to girls

LAKSHMAN ANAND



NK Gupta, Principal, State Bank Academy, with faculty members

Shreyasi Singh
Gurgaon

WHILE learning how to do *mehendi* (henna) patterns at SEWA's Gender Resource Centre in east Delhi, Farhana Faruqui didn't know her career too could take an interesting turn. A resident of Sundernagari in east Delhi, Farhana graduated in arts through correspondence. But this gave her life little direction. Things have dramatically changed since. Farhana can now solve tough questions in maths and she wants to be a bank officer. While she waits to take the entrance examinations, Farhana helps a Japanese researcher who is collaborating on a project with SEWA. Her new-found confidence is due to a skills training programme she has been attending at the State Bank Academy, Gurgaon.

The State Bank Academy is the apex institute for officers of the State Bank of India's (SBI). The academy is conducting this programme for 31 underprivileged adolescent girls with well-known women's cooperative, SEWA. The academy's aim is to provide the girls with skills that build on their education and give them a foothold in the job market beyond tailoring and embroidery.

"This workshop has changed my life. I didn't have an aim. I never thought of a good future for myself. So many opportunities have opened up for me now. I am looked up to in my neighbourhood. I want to become a banker in State Bank now," says Farhana.

SEWA Delhi tied up with the State Bank of India Academy in April 2009. In their eight month pilot programme, 45 girls from the slums of Rajiv Nagar and Sundernagari in east Delhi enrolled in the course. They were taught basic accountancy, computer application and spoken English during weekly Saturday classes by an experienced facul-

ty at the State Bank Academy. All the girls were over 14 years old, had a minimum educational qualification till Class 8 and were daughters of SEWA members. Since the academy is nearly 35 kilometres away from their homes, SEWA organised transport for the girls, many of whose parents are daily wage labourers, domestic workers

The academy's aim is to provide the girls with skills and give them a foothold in the job market beyond tailoring and embroidery

or street vendors.

But, the real distance covered has been much bigger. "This was completely a new experience for the majority of the girls. Some of them had stepped out of their homes for the first time. The training programme has not only helped these girls raise their confidence but has also enabled them to dream big. Parents who were earlier hesitant to send the girls for training now encourage their aspirations," says Banishree Asit Das, Programme Coordinator for SEWA Delhi's Capacity Building initiatives.

Buoyed by this success, the State Bank Academy and SEWA began the second round of the programme in February 2010. Feedback, learning and experience from the pilot have been inculcated to make this programme even more job-oriented. "In the first batch, training was confined to English,

computers and basic communication skills like sending emails, etc. In the second batch, we have focussed on preparing the girls for competitive examinations, especially bank entrance tests. So now we teach them mathematical aptitude, English and logical reasoning. We are gearing them for multiple type question exams," says Saroj Wasan, Faculty, State Bank Academy.

The learning material has been prepared by the faculty at the Academy. The girls are taken through sample-type questions on a white board in a classroom well-equipped with computer peripherals and other learning aids. They are taught tips and tricks to handle competitive examinations. Their enthusiastic involvement in class and rapport with the team of faculty members indicates the approach is working.

Twenty-six year old Rabita Upadhyaya can vouch for the benefits. She was part of the pilot programme and enrolled herself again because she says she realised opportunities like this don't keep coming. "We are moving ahead because of SEWA. I am a graduate but my parents couldn't afford this kind of education for me. I had never worked on a computer before. Now, I am trying to clear the bank exams. And I am determined to pass. We have such amazing people teach us here. Saroj ji is almost like a mother to us. She can get down to our level, talk to us, guide us," says Rabita.

Wasan returns the compliment saying, "I am impressed by their ability and willingness to learn. These girls are extremely hard working. On the day of the class, some of them get up at 4 am or 5 am to finish their household chores to come here."

"This course has given me so much confidence. I am a Master's in English and I want to go into teaching. But, before this course, I didn't know how I would make that happen. In just four or five classes, there have been so many changes in each one of us," says Razia, who signed up for the programme after Farhana and a SEWA volunteer came to her house to tell her family about the course during a door-to-door enrolment campaign in Sundernagari. "We all have a purpose now, to do something good with ourselves, to become somebody important," she adds.

This is precisely the change the State Bank Academy is determined to catalyse. "We want these girls to achieve something, to stand on their own feet, to earn a livelihood. It is the responsibility of the corporate world to return to social causes, to realise they can play a tremendous role," says NK Gupta, Principal, State Bank Academy.

"State Bank of India is committed to the girl child. Our Chairman, O P Bhatt, has launched an initiative wherein each SBI branch must adopt two girl children. At the Academy, we felt we could do even more. We could make a larger impact because of the nature of our institution. We are committed to this programme. As long as our collaboration with SEWA goes on and they can gather a group for us, we will carry on," adds Gupta.

Microsoft



Photo by Illustration p. pose 019

I had a dream.

My first job was with a factory making bindis. Little did I know, that there was something else out there that would take me much further. That would allow me to nurture my dream and bring it to life.

An NGO supported by Microsoft under Project Jyoti, opened up its doors for me. I was given the opportunity to learn computers under Microsoft's Unlimited Potential IT training program. I knew technology would eventually do wonders for the dream I had kept safe with me for so long.

My instinct was right. My learning took me places. I got a job with a leading financial services company as a Customer Care Executive. This experience gave me tremendous confidence. I worked hard and got promoted. My dream felt real now. Today, I run my own insurance agency and employ two people. We use computers to manage our business and it has increased our productivity. I am thankful to Microsoft for having helped me discover the fact that I can achieve a lot more. And that I can carry on dreaming.

For more on our efforts to unleash India's unlimited potential, like Project Jyoti, visit www.microsoft.com/india/unlimitedpotential/

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SOUTH ASIA BONDS ON STAGE

Focus on women at festival in Delhi

Saibal Chatterjee
New Delhi

THEATRE as a tool for dialogue between nations could not have received a more dramatic fillip. The varied and engaging fare presented by the troupes that participated in Leela, the South Asian Women's Theatre Festival, was marked by a rich vein of creativity. The eight-day event, mounted by the Indian Council of Cultural Relations (ICCR) in collaboration with the National School of Drama and Jamia Millia Islamia, showcased a broad spectrum of theatrical offerings from across the region.

On show were a Maldivian version of a 'Romeo and Juliet'-like love story; a pacifist Pakistani adaptation of a classic Greek comedy; a lively, music-laden Sri Lankan play; a Nepalese reworking of Henrik Ibsen's 'A Doll's House'; and a Bangladeshi take on the female protagonist of a popular Hindu myth, among many other remarkable productions.

The festival was inaugurated on 8 March, the centenary of International Women's Day. It laid out a spread of 14 plays from nine nations, including six from India. Also represented in the mix were Myanmar and Bhutan. The plays were staged in Delhi, Mumbai, Kolkata and Chandigarh. The success of the festival underscored the power of theatre to demolish divides.

Many of the plays were in languages that the audience wasn't familiar with, and yet, thanks to their mesmerizing blend of traditional music and vibrant narrative modes, they did not fail to communicate their thematic essence to the spectators. "Language doesn't matter if the play is powerful enough and the synopsis is clear enough," says Syed Jamil Ahmed, professor in the department of theatre, University of Dhaka, and director of the Bangladeshi play, *Behular Bhasan*.

"Given the response to the festival, it seems a bit odd that an event of this



Scene from
Colombo,
Colombo

nature had never been attempted before," says Virendra Gupta, director-general, ICCR. "Theatre is an integral component for broad cultural connectivity."

Although ICCR hasn't taken a call yet on whether Leela is a one-off event or the first of many more such festivals to come, Mr Gupta says that "it isn't an activity that we see in isolation". He adds: "It is part of a broader bouquet of initiatives to promote cultural exchange among nations of the region."

The festival's theme was women's empowerment. As elsewhere in the world, women constitute a crucial half of the region's population. But nowhere are their lives as riddled with problems as in South Asia. Glaring gender inequities are compounded by grinding poverty, low literacy, poor healthcare and domestic violence. Worse, in parts of South Asia, women have to bear the brunt of war and political extremism. The most eloquent articulation of this was understandably in a play from trouble-torn Afghanistan, *Salsal and Shahmaama*, in Dari-language, directed by a gutsy young woman, Monireh Hashemi. "The worst victims of war are women," she agrees.

However, while several of the plays were indeed helmed by women and addressed issues concerning their gender, they were by no means constrict-



ed in their scope and impact. They went beyond the immediate social dimensions to take in larger questions of peace, solidarity and humanity. Besides being hugely entertaining, most of the plays had strong socio-political underpinnings. In the words of Anuradha Kapoor, director, NSD, "The festival is part of a dialogue through theatre with our neighbours... it isn't only by and for women, but about issues about women that connect with everyday life."

"It is an excellent idea," says Anwer Jafri, co-writer of the Pakistani play, *Jang Ab Nahin Hogi*, "to organise a festival of this kind because it provides participants from different cultures a platform to interact with each other and exchange ideas of common interest."

The Indian contingent at the theatre festival had five of the nation's most admired theatre persons - Nadira Zaheer Babbar from Mumbai, Amal Allana from Delhi, Neelam Man Singh from Chandigarh, Sohag Sen from Kolkata and Poile Sengupta from Bengaluru.

A play directed by Allana, *Nati Binodini*, which traces the life of a legendary Bengali theatre actress who was born out of wedlock in Calcutta in the mid 19th century but went on to live life on her own terms, was staged on the

opening night of the festival. With its pace, tonal qualities and innovative approach, the play set the tone for the week.

The other participating Indian plays touched upon various shades of the feminine experience. Babbar staged the one-woman, self-authored play *Sakubai*, while Neelam Man Singh presented a Punjabi adaptation of Girish Karnad's celebrated play, *Nagamandala*. Sohag Sen contributed *Sonata*, an English-language rendition of a Mahesh Elkunchwar play that explores the travails of contemporary city life for three single women. Poile Sengupta turned to mythology for inspiration in *Thus Spake Shoorpanakha*. *So Said Shakuni*, which is a provocative retelling of tales of two 'symbols of evil' from the great Indian epics that moves fluidly between past and present.

Leela had something for everybody. For theatre enthusiasts, it proffered glimpses into fresh streams of experiments in South Asian drama. For serious social observers, the plays provided an opportunity to delve deep into and rediscover, often in a new light, issues of political and social import. And even for those looking for nothing more than only an evening out, ICCR's theatre festival was clearly an idea whose time had come.

INTERVIEW

'It is part of a wider bouquet'

LAKSHMAN ANAND



Virendra Gupta, director-general, ICCR, talks about the theatre festival and its many dimensions

Do you intend to make this theatre festival an annual affair?

We haven't taken a decision yet. Moreover, the theatre festival isn't an activity by itself – it is part of a broader bouquet of initiatives to promote South Asian culture. This region is a priority area for us and that is why we chose to devote an entire theatre festival to it.

What is the essence of your cultural diplomacy initiatives?

For us cultural diplomacy is part of our overall foreign policy construct. Strengthening relations between nations is obviously one of the top priorities. We seek connectivity with not just Pakistan, Sri Lanka and Bangladesh, but also the smaller nations of South Asia. It isn't easy getting a troupe out of Myanmar. And having an Afghan group is great.

Do you plan to do something with other cultural forms?

We are very keen to do something with folk music and devotional music. This region has a great tradition of devotional music. We also intend to do a dance festival.

How did you source the talent pool for the theatre festival?

For any event of this nature, we work with institutions that have core competence in the area. In the case of the theatre festival, we partnered with the National School of Drama (NSD) and Jamia Millia Islamia. NSD not only conducted the festival they also actively participated in it.

How did you select the plays? Do you have a database for the region?

We had a steering committee headed by me. It had two representatives each from the participating institutions. It had experts like Anuradha Kapoor (director, NSD), Kirti Jain and Sohaila Kapur. The embassies abroad are one of our principal resources. The embassies are our hands and feet. They help us with their inputs about the cultural scene.

The smaller nations of South Asia also occasionally organise festivals of this kind. Do you have any provisions to help such events by sponsoring Indian troupes?

A large part of our mandate is to send Indian groups overseas. We participate in festivals abroad and help people get there. But it is also important for us to expose people within the country to various cultural streams from abroad. Everybody cannot travel out of the country.

What else did the theatre festival achieve for you?

Just as important as the performances is the fact that a festival of this nature is an interactive forum for the artistes. They not only get to meet members of the audience and receive feedback through media coverage, they also interact with people from their fraternity.

Do you believe as the biggest country in the South Asian region, India is in a unique position to take a lead in driving such cultural exchanges?

The scenario is asymmetrical in the region. Therefore, the obligations, too, are asymmetrical. But we have to tread with care. We do not want to dominate. We go the extra mile to make everybody feel comfortable.



PAKISTAN

Women of peace

Saibal Chatterjee

New Delhi

THE title of the Pakistani play, *Jang Ab Nahin Hogi* (There will be no war), said it all. Adapted by poet Fahmida Riaz and theatre activist Anwer Jafri from *Lysistrata*, Aristophanes' 411 BC comic satire about the Peloponnesian War, the text of the play does not specifically mention India and Pakistan. But this tale of two warring tribes halted in their tracks by the sheer will power of their women makes no bones about what it is driving at.

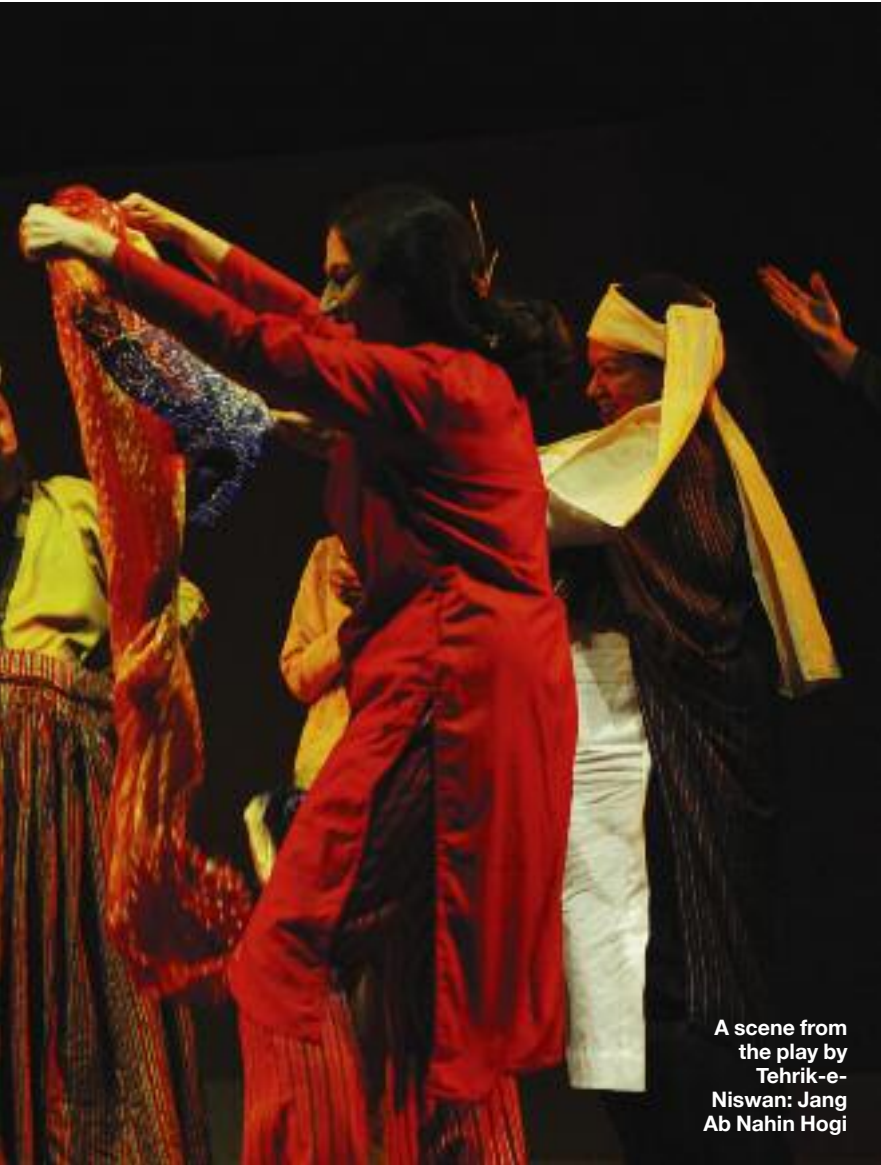
"War-mongering can solve nothing," says actress, danseuse, theatre director and founder of Tehrik-e-Niswan, Sheema Kermani. "And it is women who can take the lead in stemming the bellicosity." The message inherent in the theme of Aristophanes' classic play, she says, is still relevant.

In *Lysistrata*, the women of Athens go on a 'sex strike' to force their men to end the war with Sparta and negotiate for peace. In *Jang Ab Nahin Hogi*, although the sexual innuendoes and the hilarious tone are intact, the mythological references have, for obvious reasons, been done away with.

"This is the first full proscenium performance of the play in India," says Kermani, who studied art in the UK before training as a Bharatnatyam, Odissi and Kathak dancer in India. "We performed snatches from *Jang Ab Nahin Hogi* as a street play at the World Social Forum in Mumbai in 2004. The response was tremendous."

Karachi-based Tehrik-e-Niswan, which literally means women's movement, was formed in 1979 with a view to using theatre and dance as a tool of social change and empowerment of weaker sections of Pakistani society. Forty years on, the organisation, which began its theatrical journey with *Dard Ke Faasley*,

LAKSHMAN ANAND



A scene from
the play by
Tehrik-e-
Niswan: Jang
Ab Nahin Hogi

a play that Kermani adapted from Amrita Pritam's stories, has so far produced and performed nearly 50 plays. The group has also worked with directors from India, Bangladesh and Germany.

One of Tehrik-e-Niswan's recent plays, *Zikr-e-Nashunida* (Discussing the Unheeded) emerged in 2005 from a collaborative workshop held in Karachi by Chennai-based director Prasanna Ramaswamy. The play dealt with the aftermath of war, drawing inspiration in part from Euripides' *Trojan Women*. Over the years, Tehrik-e-Niswan has adapted the works of writers and playwrights like Henrik Ibsen, Samuel Beckett, Anton Chekhov, Somerset Maugham and Ismat Chughtai, among many others.

"The audience has grown in Pakistan, but it is still a struggle for our kind of theatre to survive," says Kermani. "There is political instability and the problem of fundamentalism. As a result, we have no institutional support. We do not have an ICCR or an NSD. Socially conscious theatre is a private enterprise and funding is always a major issue."

Says Anwer Jafri, co-writer and set designer of *Jang Ab Nahin Hogi*: "There was no theatre worth the name when we arrived on the scene 40 years ago. Tehrik-e-Niswan was a response to the repressive anti-women, anti-minority measures adopted by the Zia-ul Haq regime."

Tehrik-e-Niswan now has a core group of about 15 members, but because they have day jobs they are not always available. "So we have to fall back on others and train them for specific productions," says Jafri, who has been with the group since its inception.

According to Kermani, Tehrik-e-Niswan, despite all the odds that it has faced over the years, manages to do at least one play a year. "We use theatre as a means of alternative education. We perform in schools, drama workshops and marketplaces to spread awareness about issues concerning women and the minorities," she says.

The troupe's latest trip to India was a short one – after Delhi, they performed in Chandigarh before returning to Pakistan by road. "We have to rush back because our own dance and theatre festival is only a week away," says Kermani.

NEPAL

Dolls no more

Shreyasi Singh

New Delhi

BASED on Henrik Ibsen's *A Doll's House*, Nepali play *Putaliko Ghar* got its 181st outing at Leela. Sunil Pokharel, 46, the director, admits to a slight twinge of boredom during some performances but says the timelessness of the story, its relevance in contemporary, urban settings, and its popularity in Nepal since its debut in 2003 have made a curtain fall unlikely. It's also been to India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Norway and Denmark.

Written in 1870, Ibsen's play sparked a big discussion on women's liberation in Europe with people even prohibited from uttering its name. In its adapted form, the story revolves around a middle-class married couple, bank manager Hemanta Karki, and his spendthrift, enthusiastic, seemingly child-like wife, Nora, at a time in their lives when things are finally looking up.

But misunderstandings due to money and a neighbour lead them to have a massive fight with Hemanta accusing his wife of being a liar and a hypocrite. But, on finding out the truth, he cajoles her to forgive him. Nora though has had enough. She accuses her husband of treating her like a "doll" to be played with, admired, and when convenient, discarded. In what was surely a blasphemous ending in the 19th century, Nora walks out on her husband to free herself from the constant validations that marriage requires of her.

LAKSHMAN ANAND



The Aarohan Theatre Group from Nepal

"Men tend to get very uncomfortable and restless towards the end of the play. You can see many not wanting to meet their spouse's eyes," says Nisha Sharma Pokharel, the actor who plays the main protagonist, Nora Karki.

"People in cities really identify with the characters in the play. Many have faced similar issues. And a lot of young people come to watch it. But we have not faced protests the way Ibsen probably did. Thankfully, it's become quite politically incorrect to openly speak out against women's independence and their right to choice," says Pokharel, an NSD alumnus.

Unaided by transcripts, the performance at the Shri Ram Centre could truly only be appreciated by people who understand Nepali. The synopsis did help with the story, but the humour and the interplay between characters couldn't really be put down on paper. Although Pokharel agrees that's possible, he says, "Theatre has its own language. It should be done in the mother tongue."

Pokharel's impact on modern Nepali theatre has been remarkable. He established the Aarohan Theatre Group in 1982. But it's really been active in the last seven years. The 30-member group, much of which has remained unchanged over the years, has brought classics from other parts of the world to Nepalese audiences, sometimes in their original form and sometimes adapted to the country's cultural sensibility. They have done 15 productions so far. They also organise a biennial international theatre festival. Despite working through tough political times in Nepal, Pokharel says such issues don't dominate his inspirations. "I don't want to preach, to have overt mes-

AFGHANISTAN

Bamiyan memory

Saibal Chatterjee
New Delhi

THEATRE is no leisurely walk in the park for 24-year-old Monireh Hashemi. Her group, Simorgh Film Association of Art and Culture, is engaged in a constant struggle for survival. The lady receives frequent anonymous calls threatening her with dire consequences if she does not quit. She knows who they are and what they want. But she refuses to budge. "It isn't easy, but I simply cannot give up the fight," says the actress-director on her third visit to India.

The last time she was here with the troupe from Herat in west Afghanistan, they staged *Letter of Suffering* at NSD's Bharat Rang Mahotsav. The performance struck an instant chord. And India, on its part, left a deep imprint on Monireh's heart and mind.

"It is really wonderful to be able to perform on a real stage in front of a real and appreciative audience," says the former film actress who is today spearheading an attempt to revive theatre in her war-ravaged native land.

Simorgh's latest play, the 75-minute-long *Salsal and Shahmaama*, written by the group's manager Abdul Hakim Hashemi and directed by Monireh, was performed twice as part of Leela, the South Asian Women's Theatre Festival, once in Jamia Millia Islamia and then in Sangeet Natak Akademi's Meghdoot Open Air Theatre. The play used a variety of musical compositions of Iranian origin to heighten its emotional impact.

The Dari-language play homes in on two little sisters who live near the now-destroyed Buddha statues of Bamiyan. One of the girls goes back in time and an old man narrates to her fascinating stories behind *Salsal* and *Shahmaama*, the two statues that are an intrinsic part of their cultural identity. It is a tale of loss and suffering; but even as it expresses deep anguish, it is also a brave attempt to reclaim the cultural heritage of a people.

"By destroying the Bamiyan Buddhas, the Taliban, in one fell swoop, demolished an integral part of our culture," says Monireh.

The Persian-speaking Hazara community of north-western Afghanistan were subjected to a wave of terror attacks when the Taliban was in control of



Monireh Hashemi with her troupe from the Simorgh Film Association of Art and Culture

the country. After the fall of the Taliban in 2001, Herat began rebuilding itself, and the resurgence of its theatre, however tentative, is part of that process. Monireh received formal education in Iran before she returned to the land of her birth.

"Afghanistan is seen by the outside world as a land under siege, as a country of terror and violence. We want to show another face of Afghanistan. We want to show that it is a land of art and culture that are alive in the face of grave danger," she says.

The Simorgh group that travelled to Delhi has 15 members, including nine girls who made the trip defying indignant relatives and religious leaders. The need to express themselves has brought them here, says Monireh. She adds: "When violence erupts, it is women who suffer the most. It is we who lose our husbands and brothers. It is the women of Afghanistan who must come forward to end this atmosphere of terror that our beautiful country is in the grip of today."

Simorgh Film Association of Art and Culture was set up in 2007. It has a total of 25 actresses. On her return from Delhi after performing in last year's Bharat Rang Mahotsav, one of the girls was attacked. She quit acting.

But the rest of the troupe is hanging in there, determined to make a difference in the long run. Says Monireh: "We have to defend and nurture our art

BANGLADESH

Daring Behula

Saibal Chatterjee
New Delhi

AS Bangladeshi theatre veteran Syed Jamil Ahmed, 54, rises to his feet to return to the rehearsal room in Delhi's National School of Drama (NSD) after a brief but animated tete-a-tete, his parting shot is a firm, 'Remember, Bangladesh is not an Islamist state.'

That assertion isn't without basis. *Behula Bhasan*, the play that he staged, is drawn from the pages of Hindu mythology. "The legend of Behula and her

husband Lakhinder is still very much an integral part of the lives of the people of Bangladesh, much more than it is in India, even Bengal," says the theatre activist and academic who graduated from NSD in 1978 and went on to set up the department of theatre and music in the University of Dhaka in the mid 1990s.

Jamil's troupe of theatre students had earlier performed the same play in an open-air arena in NSD's Bharat Rang Mahotsav in early 2006. This time around, the performance, cast in the mould of a traditional Bengali *pala gaan*, was mounted on a proscenium stage.

"We are trying to occupy the proscenium, removing the wings and performing on a bare stage," says Ahmed. "We are trying to show that we can use indigenous theatrical mechanics in a western proscenium."

Behula Bhasan is about the mythical Behula, an embodiment of feminine grace, beauty and tenacity who literally journeys to the end of the world to save the life of her beloved, who has fallen prey to the ire of Manasa Devi,

SRI LANKA

Four stories from Colombo

Civil Society News
New Delhi

THE play staged by Sri Lanka's Theatre Plus troupe, *Colombo, Colombo: the story of your coffin* was a blend of tragedy, comedy and foot-tapping music. There were eight actors, six men and two women, who played guitar, sang, danced and acted.

It couldn't have been easy to multi-task on stage like this but the actors went through their performance with ease, music, dance and acting perfectly synchronised.

The play was avante garde, experimental. Instead of a linear story, there were four separate episodes which happen in four different locations in Colombo.

"The play is linked by a theme, the characters and the similarity of situations," explains Indika Ferdinando, director, sitting in the darkened auditorium, looking a little anxious as his troupe readies for the evening's performance.

The choice of a disjointed script was deliberate, says Ferdinando, a lecturer at the College of Visual and Performing Arts in Colombo. "I wanted to move away from Aristotle's theory, a kind of formula which has been superimposed on the history of theatre. It says one single story with start, development, cli-

max and denouement is required for theatre. That's a reflection of patriarchal thinking," he says dismissively.

The storyline works for the play is passionate, energetic and visually appealing. The music and lyrics too were catchy.

"I try to explore magic in theatre," says Ferdinando. "Anything is possible on stage. I don't like dialogue plays. People come to theatre to see their lives as engaging, magical. The play is reflective of women's aspirations. But it is for the audience to interpret. I'm not preaching."

In the first episode, Ajantha waits for his girlfriend, Vyanga, at a lover's park. But they can't find a bench to sit on. Characters like an old man with a romantic book and another with a wreath drift through. There is a struggle to get the bench and the episode ends with Vyanga noting a newspaper clipping announcing her death and Ajantha's.

In the second episode, it is Vyanga and Kumara's first anniversary. As they go to see a movie, Vyanga spots a bomb in the subway. She tells Kumara he could earn a reward by alerting the police and realise his dream of being a success. But Kumara leaves, dejected. She tries to alert people but nobody takes her seriously.

In the third episode, it is Vyanga and Rohan's first anniversary and they are catching the last bus home. In the last episode two old men wait for the arrival of the corpse of a young woman – Vyanga herself.

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Indika Ferdinando, left, with Anusuya, centre and Saumya, extreme right

Vyanga, the shadow of death and the old man are a constant in all episodes. Anusuya Subasinghe, who plays Vyanga, handles four different characters in the four episodes with ease. It hasn't been easy though, says young Anusuya who learnt acting in New Zealand, to play different characters in a single play. "The rehearsals helped. I had to learn guitar too."

Saumya Liyanage, the lead actor, who plays the old man and also narrates the story, is a well known star in Sri Lanka with a considerable fan following. He has powerful stage presence, a certain body language, and you can see he is an experienced actor.

Ferdinando gives centre stage to his actors. He believes it is the actor, his or her voice, physique, presence, which make or mar a performance. In this play Ferdinando picked young actors and paired them with a seasoned actor like Saumya Liyanage.

Colombo, Colombo, Ferdinando's first play, premiered in July 2009. It caused a stir for the style was new, the play captivatingly young with some attributes of box office cinema.

the goddess of snakes. "It is a reversal of a conventional narrative plot. A rescue act is usually a man's preserve. Here we have a woman who plays the pivotal figure. She has the courage and determination to undertake a perilous voyage by boat with the aim of reviving her lifeless husband. It is a journey towards self-realisation."

Dr Ahmed, whose doctoral research was on "Indigenous Theatrical Performances in Bangladesh: Its History and Practices," is obviously unambiguous about the source of his inspiration. He does not believe that theatre needs to serve the purpose of spreading awareness about anything. But he admits that the motive behind *Behula Bhashan* is "very political."

He says: "Bangladesh is perceived as a moderately, if not rabidly, Islamist country. I want to disavow the people of that notion." Because no support system is in place, theatre in Bangladesh, he reveals, is driven more by people who have passion and commitment. "Theatre in my country isn't commercially oriented. It is primarily non-professional and is kept alive by

those who have ideological commitment."

Dr Ahmed has directed over 20 plays to date, including an adaptation of *A Thousand and One Nights* in collaboration with Karachi's Tehrik-e-Niswan and Selim al-Deen's *The Wheel*, jointly directed with Danny Partridge at the Antioch College, Yellow Springs, Ohio. He attributes his own growth curve to his stint in NSD.

"This school taught me everything I know, if not in terms of technique, certainly by way of passion," he says. He fondly remembers his teachers – Ebrahim Alkazi and BV Karanth, among others. "They were great personalities under whose tutelage I was exposed to theatre from around the world and learnt the ropes," recalls Dr Ahmed, who obtained his Master's degree in Theatre Studies from the University of Warwick, UK.

Dr Ahmed reveals that theatre in Bangladesh took wings post-1971 as a "group theatre" culture arrived from Kolkata. It has flourished ever since. *Behula Bhashan* provided a vibrant glimpse of that happy reality.

LAKSHMAN ANAND

Thoiba Saeedh
in a scene
from her play



MALDIVES

Girl power unplugged

Shreyasi Singh
New Delhi

IT'S a scene right out of a college green room or the backstage of an annual school festival as a group of boys and girls prepare for a big night. Dressed in jeans, T-shirts and shorts emblazoned with irreverent messages, the Encore Theatre Productions, an amateur group from Maldives, infused the theatre festival with a burst of youth. The group's director, 20-year-old Thoiba Saeedh, gave it an image of girl power. Diminutive, talkative and enthusiastic, Thoiba is clearly in charge. But she's also just one of the gang.

When her costume designer Mizna Waheed walks in, holding fabric, cardboard sheets and reams of thread, Thoiba hands her what's really top currency here, a box of snacks. Thoiba's easy calm is enviable and surprising considering this is the group's first performance out of Maldives, and with less than an hour to go onstage, many of the props needed, a large, green alligator monster, swords and spears, are far from ready. "Some of the props got left back in the hotel," says Mizna.

Dhoniya-Alifulhu is described as an evocative tale of passion, obsession, greed, jealousy, love and lust in festival brochures. Thoiba, who adapted the play from folklore along with Ahmed Tholal, a friend, and also wrote the script, puts it simply, "It's really the Maldivian Romeo and Juliet".

The 45-minute play, performed in English, begins with the hero, Alifulhu, falling in love at first sight with Hawwaifulhu, a beautiful, haughty young woman who enjoys his attention. But Alifulhu's proposal of marriage is rejected by her. After his heartbreak, Alifulhu imagines an ethereally beautiful nymph, dressed all in white in his sleep. They both fall

love it is because it talks about love. Every woman wants love. Go for love. It is very important. Don't worry what you need to sacrifice for it. If you love something or someone, go ahead. It will show you a way."

She should know. As an English literature student at Male's Centre for Higher Secondary Studies, Thoiba fell in love with literature and theatre reading Tennessee Williams and Lord Byron. She now nurtures her passion even as she juggles twin jobs, one as a radio jockey and another at an animation studio. With her troupe she has taken on the challenge of introducing the concept of live theatre as a new form of entertainment in Maldives, no easy task with little funds and no mentors.

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task with little funds and no mentors.

Their first production 1166, directed by Thoiba and a friend, Faathmath Raabia, and also inspired by Maldivian folk culture, got a tremendous response. "We didn't think we would. We in fact handed out free tickets thinking nobody would want to come. But everybody loved it. They thought it was very different," recounts Thoiba. One of the boys from the crew adds saying "People in Maldives would rather go and watch a rock performance."

Dhoniya-Alifulhu is their second production put together especially for the South Asian Women's Theatre Festival which they all know is an opportunity, and equally importantly, a great chance to see India! The troupe is looking forward to performing it in their mother tongue Dhivehi for the Maldives Independence Day in July.

Raising awareness about Maldivian culture is something that drives Thoiba, more than playing environment watchdog to a nation often in the news for being a hapless victim to climate change. "I am not an environmentalist. All I know is that even if I knew Maldives was going to go under in 20 years, I'd want to spend that time living there, soaking in its culture, doing theatre. Theatre is not for handing out messages. Politicians talk about stuff like that."



Business

- Enterprise
- Inclusion
- CSR
- ICT
- Go Green

Latlong hopes to get you there

A business to help people find their way in cities

LAKSHMAN ANAND

Civil Society News
Bangalore

FOUR software developers who were formerly with Infosys are building a business in helping people on the move find their way around in Indian cities with a minimum of fuss.

Founded in September 2007, Onze Technologies' first product is Latlong SMS. It is operational in Bangalore and Chennai. If you happen to be lost in either city you can SMS the word "help" to 9008890088 and Latlong will tell you how to get to your destination.

The service is free. It is also available on Internet at www.latlong.in and through WAP. "We have 180,000 registered users," says Sudarshan HS, Onze's CEO. "They are all people who have got to know about us by word of mouth."

Onze wants to be India's best location-based services company. Navigational devices are nothing new. But Onze's founders see an opportunity in shaping products which are specifically designed to meet Indian needs and cope with Indian realities.

"We realised that all the devices in use in India have actually been designed for developed markets and then brought here. The result is that you have something fancy installed in the car but when was the last time that you used it?" says Sudarshan.

Apart from Sudarshan, Onze's other founders are Pavaman Athani, Sairam R and Rahul RS. They wear white Latlong sweat shirts and bond in the spirit of most early start-ups that have had a whiff of success and have a sense of their big idea taking shape. At their modest offices on the first floor of a residential building in Jayanagar, they crowd into a small conference room for a breathless interview



At crossroads, from left: Sudarshan, Sairam, Rahul and Pavaman strike a pose with a traffic policeman

about their hopes and ambitions. The room crackles with energy and though no one has taken a salary for almost three years now, there is general agreement they are having a great time and Onze should have been born a few years earlier.

While working for Infosys, they would develop software for companies in the US, Japan or Europe. There was a lot of innovation, but the end products belonged to clients and not the developers.

It was this lack of ownership that made them think of becoming entrepreneurs while they are still in their mid-thirties and able to take the risk. An angel investor who put up Rs 1 crore helped

them get going.

But it was the realisation that Indian cities are rapidly changing and need new services linked to technologies like the mobile phone which gave them their first business idea.

"When I lived in the US I would tell my friends there that in India one did not need navigational devices. You just asked people and found your way around. But it is not like that any more. The Bangalore of today is vastly different from what it was in my student days. The population has increased and is now around eight million. There are a whole lot of people who are new to the city and they don't know their way around," says

Sudarshan.

"I belong here but when I relocated here I found I hardly recognised the city. One day I was going to a house warming party and I just didn't know how to get there," he says.

One idea led to another and soon Latlong began to take shape. With telecom changing lifestyles, it was a no-brainer to put Latlong on SMS. It was cheap, conversational and readily accessible. After all, no one sets out without a mobile phone. And ask yourself how many calls get made just seeking directions while on the way to an appointment or just meeting up with someone.

But how does Onze hope to make money from a free SMS service? The answer lies in the typical-

ly Indian style in which directions are given. There is money to be made from mining the information hidden in the chaos of the streets. As one goes from corner to crossing and so on, Onze hopes to be able to get various commercial establishments to pay for being mentioned.

Advertisers are yet to come in, but Onze's founders are upbeat. If they could 180,000 registered users without any formal marketing, chances are that they are heading for usage levels that advertisers won't be able to ignore.

Perhaps a bigger challenge for Onze is getting its maps right and stringing together location details that are easily recognisable. It is also necessary to say it all in 80 words so as to stay with-

in a single SMS. With Latlong easy communication is the key.

So is validation. People on the move want advice they can trust. Latlong's business model could collapse if it is not careful about the kind of detail it puts out.

It is not easy finding your way in an Indian city. Either the house numbers are chaotic or the street names are not in place or the auto and taxi drivers have no clue. As cities get bigger and more people drift into them, there is less sense of belonging. It is tough getting around – sometimes even over very short distances.

In Bangalore, you could be on Brunton Road First Cross and find it difficult to get to the State Bank on St Mark's Road even though it is just minutes way. Worse still if you want to go to 264, 6th Main, 6th Block BEL Layout, Vidyanarayanpur. Or what do you do if you need to get to the 5th Cross 7 B Main 4th Block Koramangala?

The addresses are enough to make your eyes glaze over. Whoever thought them up? Why can't they be simpler? Amid the teeming anonymity of our cities like Bangalore, there is need for directions that can reduce the agony of having to struggle through traffic and then bumble from lane to lane?

As the name Latlong suggests, the Onze founders promise to figure out your latitude and longitude. But it is not quite so clinical. There is really much more that goes into leading someone to the right address. There are shops, hotels, schools, cafeterias, clinics, temples and so on which you need to spot as you go along. Latlong gives them all to you as a journey in much the same way as someone who knows the way very well would give directions.

For instance, the SMS that tells you how to get to the Onze Technologies office reads like this:

"To reach ONZE from shopping complex ... START- Jaynagar Bus Stand ON LEFT, Jain temple on RIGHT go on 9th main road towards Jaynagar BSNL telephone exchange for 0.7 km cross Sathya Sai Tourists ON RIGHT, turn RIGHT at Samskruthi Banquest Hall in 37 Cross Road, end ONZE technologies on Right. Phone: 08041307394. Onze Technologies is number 351, last building on right first floor, close to Good Shepherd School."

There were several phone calls back and forth before we discovered Good Shepherd School. But we finally got there faster than we would have without Latlong and chances are that Onze and its four founders are on the road to something big.

So if you are in Bangalore or in Chennai and you don't know your way around the city, just SMS your guide, Latlong.



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Empower the city

V RAVICHANDAR

THE last Bangalore City Council election was held in mid 2001. Post that Council's tenure in 2006, the state government had a convenient amnesia about the need to hold local council elections. Needless to stress, a slew of reasons were given for the delay, the major one being setting up of a Greater Bangalore Corporation with 198 wards. The Courts were not amused and repeatedly pressured the state government to hold local body elections. That has taken four years to fructify with a Sunday, 28 March election day to meet a 31 March deadline irrespective of school exams!

No marks for guessing, but clearly the state government was unwilling to pass on even a minuscule part of its considerable powers with respect to the city. This is the case across our cities that remain shackled entities with the State lording over their wealth and determining their fate. The power to notify and de-notify land tracts, sanction building plans, determine land use, award project tenders are akin to the proverbial iceberg of visible powers. And we have this travesty of the Chief Minister of the State having to hold forth be it a case of city flooding or a boy washed down the city drains. One wonders why we can't be in charge of our own destiny in our cities?

So what am I getting at? The basic architecture and 'plumbing' of city government needs to be done right. This is essential if the media's civic headlines across the country do not sound like flop show repeats from the 1980s, 1990s or this decade. Local civic elections, however welcome as a democratic mandate, are a pointless exercise unless this is done. There is a strong point of view that local body elections are akin to pouring liquid into a broken bottle since the city corporation has no real, necessary powers and cannot deliver on the aspirations of citizens. The third tier of city government has to be empowered by a directly elected mayor, citizen participation laws, disclosure laws and other enabling provisions. Since this is wishful thinking, it would be great to be able to recall your Corporator too!

One can think of a zillion reasons why all of this is extremely difficult. For starters, there is no reason why a state government, city MLAs, city MPs or ministers in charge of the city accept a joker in the pack in the form of a directly elected



For better cities, greater devolution of powers is needed

mayor to call the shots. When the issue of more powers for the city is discussed, a frequent party pooper is that the Corporators are 'no-hopers' and can we trust them with our city? They are 'no-hopers' because they are designed to be so by the powers that be. Change the design of city government appropriately and watch the best and brightest of our political leaders choose the

Change the design of city government and watch the brightest of our leaders choose the Corporation over the Assembly.

Corporation building over the State Assembly! The road to state and national politics will be through the City Hall.

The State Finance Minister ought to welcome greater devolution of powers to the city government. With enabling legislation by the State, cities have a chance to be self-reliant and access capital markets with municipal bonds. This is a trillion dollar market in the US while it is virtually non-existent in India. Consequently, scarce state resources can be used for rural and underdeveloped regions. However even the limited JNNURM reform implementation programme adopted by States does not augur well for a change in mindset. Nearly all States have indicated a seven year implementation on conditions related to Disclosure laws, Citizen Participation laws and the local bodies being accountable for civic services in every sense of the term.

We must do what is necessary to be fully

Continued on page 28

Decisions which reek of bias

KANCHI KOHLI

INDIA's socialist democracy is accustomed to the politics of representation. Committees of experts, widely regarded as being able to understand complex situations better than others, have historically occupied decisive spaces of power. It is through this model that priorities are determined, plans assessed and road maps for growth, chalked out.

What is interesting is that over the years such decision making practices have found their way into policy formulation and from there into the sphere of law making. In more recent years, professionals have been vested with recommendatory functions for regulatory enforcement of laws.

One clear example of this is the tremendous increase in the number of professional and scientific bodies that have been set up to steer the implementation of a range of environmental laws. They are set up with the goal of bringing in neutrality and efficiency in the decision making space, even as they are expected to be guided by the primary objective of protecting the environment.

Even as we continue to debate whether the current set of environment laws are designed to realise ecological principles, cracks have begun to emerge. The presumption that the institutions and experts at the disposal of the state will operate outside their social and political contexts is naive. How does one expect an ex-secretary of the Ministry of Power who is on the governing board of hydro-power developers to leave his bias behind when a decision on environment clearance of the hydro-power project is being decided? When the head of a leading NGO, who is also a representative of an industry association, sits on an environmental committee, which affiliation/interest comes first?

In the last few years several examples of conflict of interest have surfaced from expert decision making committees. It is not uncommon any longer.

Take India's Biological Diversity Act, 2002. It has under its National Biodiversity Authority set up a committee which is screening applications for access to biological resources from national and international bodies. The members of the present Committee have met five times since its constitution. During this period the Committee has screened various applications from government affiliated bodies such as the National Bureau of Plant Genetic Resources and the National Research Centre on Medicinal and Aromatic Plants. Each of these bodies had a representative on the Committee while the applications were approved. In the meetings, which had an Emeritus Scientist of the Council for Scientific and Industrial Research (CSIR) on the Committee, 126 approvals for Intellectual Property Rights (IPR) of CSIR were considered and approved.

On 26 July, 2007, an environment clearance was granted to Panduranga Timblo Industries by an Expert Appraisal Committee on mining chaired by ML Majumdar, a retired IAS official. At the time of grant of clearance, Majumdar was a director of four mining companies namely, Uranium Corporation of India Limited, RBG Minerals Industries Limited, Hindustan Dorr-Oliver Limited and Adhunik Metaliks Limited. These mines might not have had anything to do with the clearance of Pandurang Timblo directly, but surely brought out the lack of neutrality in Majumdar's appointment.

In October 2009, the Genetic Engineering Approval Committee (GEAC) gave its nod to the introduction of the first genetically modified food crop to be introduced in India: Bt Brinjal. Prior to its decision the GEAC had set up an expert committee for their considered opinion. The GEAC's decision was largely based on the recommendations of this committee. The expert committee included Dr Mathura Rai, Director, Indian Institute of Vegetable

Research (IIVR) an agency involved in the USAID's ABSP II project under which Bt Brinjal was developed and the assistance for getting approval was assured. Amongst other people, the committee also had Dr Ananda Kumar from Indian Agricultural Research Institute (IARI) who is a Bt Brinjal developer himself. Mind you this committee was to assess the data received after field trials of Bt Brinjal and biosafety.

These are cases of serious conflict of interest. In many other instances the determinants are subtle, often suave, as when judges condone illegalities with the justification that a project is important to plug the power distribution gap.

There is a long list of powerful bodies on the anvil. The Government of India has plans for a National Environment Protection Authority (NEPA), a National Biotechnology Regulatory Authority (NBRA) and a Western Ghats Ecological Authority which are at different stages of negotiation. At another level, judicial remedy in the environmental circuit is being projected through a critical reform, the National Green Tribunal. What is interesting is that some of these authorities are stemming out of demands made by civil society groups themselves. In other instances, some proposals have met with severe critique and rejection. What is also intriguing is that for the acceptable proposals the search is on for unbiased and uncorrupted individuals to occupy power structures.

The question to ask before stepping into an authority bandwagon is: can these expert and exclusive spaces of power remain uncorrupted from the subjectivity of their structure? Can we really have individuals who can be free from their social and political realities? Do we as an amorphous civil society have an answer for this?

Kanchi Kohli is a member of Kalpavriksh Environmental Action Group

Continued from page 27

informed about the stakes involved in any Corporation election and what needs to be done. 'Jaago Re' needs to become 'Jaagte Raho'. Come local elections, we are exhorted to exercise our right to vote as a visible demonstration of our democratic DNA. And the incumbent system hopes we fall for the ever noble 'one person, one vote' trick where the gullible public think not of asking the variant of the basic kid question – "Papa why are you bothering to vote.... the Corporator has no powers"!

The problem may be the way our politics operates but the answers too, dear reader, lies in politics. It is time that during local civic elections, citizens embrace and vote for an idea. We need candidates who in the short term are willing to be 'strategic losers' in the cause of truly empowered local government. They should stand on a platform that will lobby the State government and mould public opinion for the relevant enabling legislation transferring powers to the third tier of

government. They should be willing to quit if not done within a one or two year time frame.

If such candidates can garner five to eight per cent of vote share in the local elections, it would politically signal an idea whose time has come. The differences between winners and losers in local elections are often miniscule and such candidates can create 'havoc' on the incumbent system of sharing the spoils. No major political party can afford to ignore this constituency in the future. Sans political pressure of this kind or a mass citizen mobilisation for the cause on the ground, there is no chance of the State letting go of its vice like grip on cities. Our cities could do with a Gandhian equivalent of a 'storming the Bastille' movement.

In party conversations we tend to romanticise about cities like Shanghai and Singapore that do not have democratically elected governments. Perhaps people have become so disillusioned with politics and its practitioners here in India that we find folks yearning for a 'benevolent' dic-

tatorship as a panacea for our ills. This is an oxymoron. As Dr Ashwin Mahesh, an urbanist notes "In Beijing and Kuala Lumpur, people sometimes hold demonstrations asking for more freedom – in effect, they still want to be like New York or London! And remember also that Londoners never hold rallies demanding to be like Kuala Lumpur or Dubai".

The real goal post is an urban governance system in which the people have a strong say and are not just peripheral actors. There is a tendency to brush all this aside by saying, "But this is India. We have the parliamentary system, and we don't work like the rest of the world." We forget that the parliamentary system we refer to came to us from London, which has a mayor directly elected by millions of people and with significant decentralised powers in the City Council. It is time we throw out a legacy whose creators have themselves abandoned it.

V. Ravichandar is CMD Feedback Consulting in Bangalore. He is waiting to vote for candidates with the right ideas about city governance.

India's groundwater challenge

AMITANGSHU ACHARYA

IN 2009, reports from NASA, based on data from its Gravity Recovery and Climate Experiment (Grace), caused much alarm in India. The reports showed that groundwater levels in Northern India have been declining at the rate of 33 centimetres per year over the past decade. The reports estimated that a staggering 108 cubic kilometres (26 cubic miles) of groundwater had disappeared from aquifers in areas of Haryana, Punjab, Rajasthan and Delhi, between 2002 and 2008.

Such empirical evidence of groundwater over extraction was a follow up on a large number of studies which had highlighted the same issue earlier. It was clear that within three to four decades, India was witnessing both its groundwater 'boom' and 'bust' phase. From being the largest user of groundwater in the world (more than 25 per cent of the global average), India was heading towards groundwater deficit.

The story of groundwater development in India is a unique one. This 'democratic' resource generated rapid agricultural growth in areas which had little hope of irrigation from surface water sources. As a result, 2.48 million hectares in India are now being irrigated with groundwater extracted through 16 million wells. However, there have been no scientific management systems in place to guide users towards sustainable extraction. The impact of unregulated use, low crop water efficiency and poor demand management now stand documented by NASA. But even before NASA's revelations, the Central Ground Water Board (CGWB) had been demarcating administrative blocks as semi-critical, critical or overexploited. It was four per cent in 1995. In 2005 it stood at 28 per cent.

Scarcity is just one side of the coin. Quality is emerging is another concern. Nearly 85 per cent of rural drinking water schemes in India are dependent on groundwater. In 2009 the Planning Commission acknowledged that almost 60,000 rural habitations were affected by arsenic, salinity, fluoride and nitrate.

Regulatory approaches to sustainable extraction and management of groundwater for quality and quantity issues don't seem tenable. The context specific nature of the resource increases the cost of monitoring and regulation. Monitoring 20 million wells is not an easy task. However, if this state of affairs continues, then according to the World Bank, 60 per cent of India's administrative blocks will be in a critical condition by 2025.

But there is a silver lining. Over the last two decades, several civil society initiatives have taken place to build a case for people-centred groundwater management. Such initiatives have their roots in regions witnessing acute groundwater scarcity.

The earliest took place in Maharashtra, in Naigaon village in Purandhar Taluk, Pune district. Vilasrao Salunkhe, having witnessed the plight of

farmers in Maharashtra during a severe drought in 1972, instituted village level water management institutions called Pani Panchayats for improved water availability and wise use. This was a revolutionary institutional model which recognised water as a common property resource which had to be equitably shared between stakeholders. It helped delink land rights from water rights by extending irrigation rights to the landless. Most importantly, it ensured that cropping patterns matched annual water availability.

Salunkhe also started an NGO known as Gram Gaurav Pratisthan (GGP), to facilitate the forma-



tion of Pani Panchayats. GGP, now headed by late Vilasrao's wife, Kalpana Salunkhe, has forged an interesting collaboration with Advanced Centre for Water Resources Development and Management (ACWADAM), a groundwater research institution based in Pune. ACWADAM is generating accurate hydro geological data for 12 villages in Purandar Taluk. While earlier calculations on water availability were based largely on rainfall and local weather data, ACWADAM has provided true estimates of groundwater availability. This has given Pani Panchayats a clearer picture of water availability in their area and they are adjusting their cropping patterns accordingly. GGP's work remains exemplary as it is a perfect marriage between equity and efficiency, the two most critical goals of sustainable and participatory groundwater management.

Another path breaking endeavour has taken place in Andhra Pradesh, a hotspot of groundwater over extraction and resultant agrarian crises. Numbers illustrate the crises. Three hundred out of 1227 groundwater blocks in the state were declared as critical or overexploited. Two hundred and eight were deemed semi-critical.

Response to this problem was attempted through the Andhra Pradesh Farmer Managed Groundwater Systems (APFAMGS), a project that has been implemented by the Food and Agricultural Organisation (FAO) from 2004 to 2009 through 10 NGOs. This project, within a span of five years has managed to create 555 groundwater

management committees in 303 panchayats in seven drought prone districts. The uniqueness of this approach is that it has concentrated on non formal education tools to demystify hydrology and geo hydrology.

Once the complex processes were made simple, farmers took to it with gusto. Improved understanding of groundwater processes have led to its wise use. Approximately 4,800 farmers have adopted water saving methods and technologies (such as drip irrigation) to reduce groundwater pumping. In some cases, villages have restricted drilling of new bore wells and also prevented tankers from tapping water from existing wells. The scale of APFAMGS' success has led to renewed interest in government circles on community based groundwater management. Recently the World Bank published a detailed study of the programme and a number of visits from the states of Orissa, Tamil Nadu, Gujarat and Maharashtra have taken place.

Though not as high profile as APFAMGS or as well recognised as GGP, Arid Communities and Technologies (ACT), an NGO based in Bhuj, the headquarters of Kachchh district, Gujarat, has managed to carve its own niche. ACT specialises in geo hydrological studies and groundwater management. Given the semi arid landscape of Kachchh which receives 312 mm of average

annual rainfall, the criticality of groundwater management was more in the area of drinking water. ACT, to its credit, mapped aquifers in 135 villages in Abdasa Taluka in Kachchh district and developed a drinking water resource management plan for each. When Water and Sanitation Management Organisation (WASMO), a government institution in Gujarat, came forward to use these maps and develop decentralised water resources in the area, ACT took another step forward. It developed a team of rural youth called 'Parabs' (meaning a local water point in Kachchhi) who would work with village institutions to help them demystify groundwater management and develop technical plans. These plans were then submitted to WASMO for approval.

To their credit, 30 technical plans prepared jointly by Parabs and village based Pani Samitis won approval and were implemented. This is a major feat for a group of individuals most of whom haven't even completed their schooling. Yet, they acquired understanding not only of complex geo hydrology but also mapping with GPS and presenting and interpreting data on GIS platforms. Bolstered by this success, ACT has now initiated a training programme on geo hydrology for rural youth and the first batch recently received their certificates.

Amitangshu Acharya is a Development Analyst working with Arghyam, a water sector specific non-profit foundation based in Bangalore. The author would like to thank Dr KAS Mani (APFAMGS), Dr Himanshu Kulkarni (ACWADAM) and Dr Yogesh Jadeja (ACT) for sharing information on their projects.

The havoc of GM crops

BHARAT DOGRA

STRONG pressures are being exerted to somehow get approval for genetically modified (GM) crops. High-powered efforts are on to get the moratorium on Bt brinjal lifted, so that the path can be cleared for subsequent approval of several other GM crops, including staple crops like rice.

In this context it is important to broadcast a timely warning that GM crops can lead to mass distress and discontent. This will become evident to anyone who follows the available scientific literature and all other reports on the performance of GM crops and genetic engineering.

Let's first look at what GM crops can do to farmers. An eminent group of scientists from various countries who constitute the Independent Science Panel have said in their conclusion after examining all aspects of GM crops: "GM crops have failed to deliver promised benefits and are posing escalating problems on the farm. Transgenic contamination is now widely acknowledged to be unavoidable, and hence there can be no co-existence of GM and non-GM agriculture. Most important, GM crops have not been proven safe. On the contrary, sufficient evidence has emerged to raise serious safety concerns, that if ignored could result in irreversible damage to health and the environment. GM crops should be firmly rejected now."

How can our government ignore such clear scientific opinion on the hazards of GM crops provided by an international group of eminent scientists? What this statement says very clearly is that GM crops are not safe and these can contaminate other normal crops as well. In other words all farmers will be affected by these hazardous crops.

This threat becomes very serious and of a permanent nature when we remember that it is almost impossible to fully recall GM crops once they have been released. As Professor Susan Bardocz noted, "GM is the first irreversible technology in human history. When a GMO (Genetically Modified Organism) is released it is out of our control. We have no means to call it back.... Since GMOs are self-replicating, releasing them might have dire consequences for human and animal health and for the environment and can change evolution."

The USA is the leading country growing GM crops. Several alarming stories of the distress and harassment farmers have suffered due to GM crops and the companies promoting these crops have been pouring in. But this is nothing compared to the mass distress that can result in India where nearly 60 percent of the people are involved in farming. One can well imagine what will happen when so many farmers are exposed to the threat of genetic contamination, apart from being squeezed into a situation when they will have no option but to regularly buy expensive seeds from a few companies which control the market.

Vested interests have spread the entirely wrong

notion that genetic engineering holds the promise of greatly increasing farm yields. According to a report by eminent scientists comprising the Independent Science Panel:

"The consistent findings from independent research and on-farm surveys since 1999 is that GM crops have failed to deliver the promised benefits of significantly increasing yields or reducing herbicide and pesticide use. GM crops have cost the US an estimated \$12 billion in farm subsidies, lost sales and product recalls due to transgenic contamination. The instability of transgenic lines has plagued the industry from the beginning, and this may be responsible for a string of major crop failures."

Dr Jack Heinemann, of the School of Biological Sciences, University of Canterbury, Christchurch,



New Zealand, has over 10 years experience in reviewing safety information from companies on their genetically engineered crops. He writes: "the 'Bt trait does not increase yield, it just is becoming nearly impossible to source the best varieties without the Bt transgenes."

Why is this so? Dr Heinemann answers, "The yield benefit (in Bt cotton) comes from the use of high yielding hybrids that are only available as GM varieties because genetic engineering companies like Monsanto control a large proportion of the seed supply and only offer them as GM cotton varieties."

In the context of India this is confirmed by P V Sathesh, Convener of South Against Genetic Engineering, "The final nail in the coffin of non Bt cotton cultivation was hammered in 2006 when the industry - by forming a corporate seed cartel - successfully threw out all non Bt cotton seeds from the market firmly shutting out all options for farmers except the cultivation of Bt cotton."

Above all, if GM crops are widely believed to be hazardous, won't people try to avoid them? This

will certainly affect the domestic market and the export market.

In his widely acclaimed book *Genetic Roulette* Jeffrey M Smith has summarised the results of a lot of research on the health hazards of GM crops/food: "Lab animals tested with GM foods had stunted growth, impaired immune systems, bleeding stomachs, abnormal and potentially precancerous cell growth in the intestines, impaired blood cell development, misshapen cell structures in the liver, pancreas, and testicles, altered gene expression and cell metabolism, liver and kidney lesions, partially atrophied livers, inflamed kidneys, less developed brains and testicles, enlarged livers, pancreases, and intestines, reduced digestive enzymes, higher blood sugar, inflamed lung tissue, increased death rates, and higher offspring mortality."

Michael Antoniou, molecular geneticist, King's College, London, says, "If the kind of detrimental effects seen in animals fed GM food were observed in a clinical setting, the use of the product would have been halted and further research instigated to determine the cause and find possible solutions. However, what we find repeatedly in the case of GM food is that both governments and industry plough on ahead with the development, endorsement, and marketing (of) GM foods despite the warnings of potential ill health from animal feeding studies, as if nothing has happened. This is to the point where governments and industry even seem to ignore the results of their own research!"

In addition there is the ethical dilemma faced by vegetarians who may find it difficult to select food when animal genes are introduced into plant genes. The choice becomes even more difficult (and not just for vegetarians) when even human genes are introduced into food crops. This dilemma is most difficult to resolve when GM foods are not specifically labelled, and in fact, GM food companies try their best to avoid any legal requirement of specific labelling of GM food.

As genetic engineering is all about transferring genes from one species to another entirely unrelated species, these are all sorts of possibilities of playing havoc with the religious sentiments and emotions of people. There has been an obnoxious example of transferring human genes into pigs, but there are other equally weird examples.

The extent to which genetic engineering is playing havoc with nature is evident from this quote from *Genetic Roulette*:

"Spider genes were inserted into goat DNA, in the hope that goat milk would contain spider web protein for use in bullet-proof vests. Cow genes turned pig skin into cowhides. Jellyfish genes lit up pigs' noses in the dark. Potatoes glowed in the dark when thirsty. Human genes were inserted into corn to produce spermicide. Pharmaceutical companies inserted genes into bacteria, turning them into living factories to produce drugs."

Living

- Books
- Eco-tourism
- Film
- Theatre
- Ayurveda

Weekend in animal kingdom

Susheela Nair
Bannerghatta

It was a big relief to leave the din and bustle of Bangalore and arrive in Bannerghatta Biosphere Park (BBP) after an hour's drive. The BBP, adjoining the Bannerghatta National Park, is where the Forest Department has rehabilitated lions and tigers (rescued from circuses and elsewhere) in semi-wild environs that are similar to their natural habitat. This has become an area of tourist interest and more than 11,00,000 visitors throng this park every year to have a glimpse of the big cats.

We headed into the herbivore area, located a few kilometres past the zoo. We cruised past lotus laden ponds, huge anthills, black boulders of all sizes, and arrived at the Bannerghatta Nature Camp, run by Jungle Lodges & Resorts Ltd (JLR), an organisation which has spearheaded eco-tourism in India. Situated within the herbivore section of the Biological Park, the camp is an oasis of calm, sprawling amid lush deciduous vegetation.

"As a leader in eco-tourism, JLR believes in low impact tourism and quality, not quantity. We have therefore adopted a strategy of low capital investment, local employment, use of locally available materials and visitor education for conservation of nature and wildlife," explained ND Tiwari, managing director.

The camp has accommodation to suit the budget of different categories of guests. Tucked into a shady grove, the camp has two ethnic huts on stilts and eight rustic twin-bedded tents, all without TVs and air-conditioners. Behind the tents, there is a backpacker's dormitory with aesthetic murals done by the students of Chitrakala Parikshat. Toilets with shower facilities are provided in all rooms. A package deal offers a night's stay preceded by a buffet lunch, a Grand Safari and a camp-fire buffet dinner. Trekking trails are organised for the more energetic ones. There's also a conference hall equipped with audio-visual facilities. One can dine at the Gol Ghar, a thatched-roof dining hall, a signature design component of all JLR resorts. Some of the deer come close to the gazebo when guests dine.

As we were ushered into the camp, a sambar sprinted across our tracks. Spotted deer, sambar and black buck stray into the premises and ramble



A snarling tiger in the white tiger safari enclosure



Butterfly Park

SUSHEELA NAIR

SUSHEELA NAIR

SUSHEELA NAIR



The camp offers clean and comfortable tented accommodation

Just a hop away is Butterfly Park, the first of its kind in India. We walked through the glass dome to view the fascinating, colourful winged creatures.

around very often. We were warned to keep our tented cottage door closed to avoid Minchi, a sambar deer from straying inquisitively inside. Relaxing outside the tent, we observed bonnet macaques frolicking in the trees and winged beauties of all hues flitting from one branch to another.

The programme at Bannerghatta Nature Camp is leisurely and relaxed. Soon after refreshments, we headed to the zoo, with its canopy of shady and sturdy trees. The BBP comprises a zoo with many mammals, reptiles and birds. There's also a small museum and auditorium. We found a quiet resting spot beside a pond, and watched water fowls frolic. The zoo boasts of an amazing reptile collection. At the snake park, you can get personal with scaly, slithery creatures. A children's corner provides an added attraction. Just a hop away is the Butterfly Park, the first of its kind in India. We walked through the glass dome to view the fascinating, colourful winged creatures resting on the innumerable plants and lush foliage. The adjacent museum showcasing myriad butterfly specimens and interesting tidbits of their life cycle is worth a peek. The park also runs a very successful breeding in captivity programme and has the largest Rescue Centre in India for lions and tigers.

At 3pm, after coffee and biscuits, we embarked on the Grand Safari with other guests, in the safari van. The Grand Safari includes the Lion Safari, the Tiger Safari, and the Bear Safari. The safaris are stage-managed

and make the Bannerghatta sojourn fully worth the time and money. We started with the Herbivore Safari enclosure. It was a delight to watch a herd of gaur, sambar deer, barking deer, spotted deer and black buck, grazing peacefully on clumps of grass. When the vehicle halted, they looked up and we went on a clicking spree.

The bear enclosure is inhabited by bears rehabilitated from circuses. We saw some of them taking a snooze behind some huge boulders while others were busy fighting for a morsel of water melon. The Lion Safari was the next highlight. While most lions are confined to cages, a lucky few sit dazed in the open. In the tiger zone, a white tiger sniffed our safari van and sped off while another chased our van and growled in anger.

Next morning, after my wake-up cup of tea, we were escorted on a 40-minute walk through the Herbivore Safari grounds. The walk yields sights aplenty and provides an excellent opportunity to observe and photograph animals at close quarters. Sambar, gaur, antlered deer all stopped to stare at us, a little disturbed at our intrusion. The kids in our group were all excited when a nilgai made a rare appearance. A naturalist helped us identify herons, kingfishers, jungle fowl, spotted owl, purple sunbird, Brahminy kite, woodpecker and an array of birds which charmed us with their rare beauty. Back at the camp, we were treated to a wildlife movie and bonfire. As we helped ourselves to hearty portions of food in the warmth of the Gol Ghar, the dozing jungle was coming to life and it was time to head back to the warmth of my tent.

FACT FILE

Address: Bannerghatta Nature Camp, Bannerghatta Biological Park, Bangalore- 560 083
Tel: 080-6575 7124 **Mobile:** 98451 78207

Getting there: The Nature Camp is 25 km from Bangalore city and 60 km from Bangalore International Airport.

When to go: Throughout the year but the park is at its greenest between mid-June and August. March to May are the hottest months.

Culinary heritage attracts crowds

Civil Society News

Kozhikode (Kerala)

LUNCH at the Annam Festival was an elaborate affair, reminiscent of bygone days. The meal comprised 56 dishes served on a banana leaf. This royal repast was called Aranmula Valla Sadya. It consisted of an endless variety of foods including pickles, six types of chips, several snacks, five kinds of payasam and several pappadams, some big and some small.

Like last year, this year too the Annam National Food and Agro-biodiversity Festival displayed India's rich agro-biodiversity and its culinary and cultural heritage. Organised by the Centre for



Vandana Shiva inaugurates the Annam festival

Innovation in Science and Social Action (CISSA), the Annam Festival took place at Kozhikode, Kerala. The United Nations' Secretariat of the Convention on Biological Diversity (SCBD) has selected CISSA as their partner organisation to celebrate 2010 as the International Year of Biodiversity.

Crowds thronged to see high yielding domestic cattle breeds brought there by Niravu of Vengeri. Traditional rice varieties from Wayanad were on display. Pickle-sellers from Rajasthan arrived to sell their wares. Their pickle varieties were exotic. There were pickles like honey with mango, date and mango, Shimla stuffed chilly, Punjabi mango and mango with rice and gooseberry.

Another highlight of the festival was the exhibition of Geographic Indications in food. These



An oath to consume organic, traditional food

include Marayoor Sarkara, Navara Rice, Ramasserri Idli and Vazhakkulam Pineapple.

The festival was inaugurated by Dr Vandana Shiva, founder and director of Navdanya. Lashing out at corporate and multinational giants, she said these firms were 'thrusting' junk food habits on people leading to complex diseases.

"The increasing affinity for fast food is a deliberate effort by multinationals to capture India's food processing sector by spoiling our biodiversity," she declared. "Food processing units must be set up in rural areas to safeguard our rich bio-diversity and protect people from diseases. The 'toxic and pesticide laced' food marketed in India will spoil the health of future generations." She warned people about the misinformation campaign being spread against highly nutrient coconut oil under pressure from

multinational companies. She said it was all linked to getting people to switch over to edible soya and palm oil. Coconut growers were now the hardest hit.

"The quality of food, and not just its quantity, ought to guide our agriculture," said Professor P S Ramakrishnan of Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi.

The Annam Festival highlighted the urgent need to focus on lesser known food crops to achieve sustainable food production and nutritional security. It also emphasised the need to integrate biodiversity with all development and poverty alleviation programmes.

Although agricultural development has increased yields, it has reduced the genetic diversity of crop and livestock varieties and agro-ecosystems. India has lost plant genetic

ANNAM DECLARATION

- Withdraw all subsidies to junk food and carbonated soft drinks
- Advertisements of such products be banned
- Sale of junk food and soft drinks be banned from schools and colleges
- Food and agriculture should be part of school and college syllabus
- Scientific studies be undertaken to assess health risks of junk food and drinks
- Good food restaurants be established for making quality food available
- R&D institutions should do research on improved processing of Indian food and its quality.
- Lesser known food crops should be used.
- Food processing, storage facilities, community seed banks should be established. Self help groups should manage these facilities.
- Genetically modified crops and foods be totally banned.
- Food and agro-biodiversity festivals be organised in every village.

resources, livestock, insects and soil organisms.

Our agricultural biodiversity is being threatened by globalisation of food markets and tastes, intellectual property systems and the spread of unsustainable industrial food production.

But agriculture is the basis of food security and livelihood security for billions of people. It is vital for food production, industrial agriculture and biotechnology industries. It is the first link in the food chain, developed and safeguarded by farmers, herders and fishers throughout the world.

The gradual shift to new trends in eating, especially fast food, is destroying this vital food culture. By educating and inspiring consumers, the Annam Festival is helping to change eating patterns. Reviving traditional food and sources of good food in the minds of people is a big step for reinforcing the food security.

RECIPES

Olan (Kerala stew)

Olan is a tasty, mild and nutritious side dish which is eaten with the main thali fare in Kerala. This recipe is especially good for people with weak digestion and irritable bowels. The combination is so tasty that you will always ask for a second helping.

Ingredients:

Ash gourd: One medium size

Green chilli: Six (slit)

Coconut milk: One cup

Black eyed beans: Quarter cup

Coconut oil: Two tablespoons

Curry leaves: To taste

Procedure: Remove skin and seeds and cut ash gourd into very thin pieces so that it looks almost transparent. In a pressure cooker boil the black eyed beans with salt as required. To this add the ash gourd slices, slit green chillies and boil for 3-5 minutes. Add coconut milk and bring to boil. Switch off the fire. Add curry leaves and fresh coconut oil and mix well. Add salt as per taste.

Moru (buttermilk curry)

This is also good for your tummy. It is especially soothing during convalescence. Moru is an appetizer and helps in the digestion of food.



Ingredients:

Curd: Two cups

Pepper powder: ¼ tsp

Fenugreek powder: One pinch

Turmeric powder: ¼ tsp

Ginger (sliced): One tsp

Garlic (chopped): Two pods

Green chili: Two

Coconut Oil: 1 tbsp

Mustard seeds: ½ tsp

Red chillies: Two

Curry leaves: One stem

Salt: To taste

Procedure: Blend the curd without water. Add pepper powder, turmeric powder, ginger, garlic, fenugreek powder, salt, then keep on fire and stir. Stir well and remove from fire when heated. Do not let it boil. In a pan pour coconut oil, put mustard. When the mustard starts popping add red chili (cut into three) and curry leaves. Then pour the entire mixture into a dish.

Women can mend lives

Shreyasi Singh
New Delhi



**WOMEN,
GENDER AND
DISASTER
GLOBAL ISSUES
AND INITIATIVES**

Edited: Elaine
Enarson, PG Dhar
Chakrabarti

Rs 850
SAGE

The book provides a comprehensive overview of the role gender plays in various disaster situations. Divided into four parts – Understanding Gender Relations in Disaster, Gendered Challenges and Responses in Disasters, Women's Organised Initiatives, and Gender-Sensitive Disaster Risk Reduction, the book analyses the failure to implement inclusive and gender-sensitive approaches to relief and rehabilitation work.

While examining positive strategies for change, the collection focuses on women's knowledge, capabilities, leadership and experience in community resource man-

agement. The authors emphasize that these strengths are frequently overlooked.

"Women have many capacities. Disaster management officials need to understand how to use these skills better to rebuild communities," says co-editor PG Dhar Chakrabarti who heads the National Institute of Disaster Management and the SAARC Disaster Management Centre in New Delhi.

"Even in search and rescue operations, management of relief camps, women often play a more crucial role than men. But their contributions don't get recognised," adds Chakrabarti who was a member of the Expert Group of United Nations International Strategy for Disaster Reduction (UNISDR) on Gender and

Disaster.

It was on the sidelines of this meeting that Elaine Enarson, an independent sociologist specialising in disaster, gender, vulnerability and community resilience, and Chakrabarti decided to collaborate on a book. Co-editor of *The Gendered Terrain of Disaster: Through Women's Eyes*, Enarson was also a founder member of the Gender and Disaster Network (GDN), a valuable resource inventory on the topic.

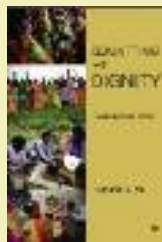
The book begins by looking at gender, and how different it is from sex and sexuality. In Part Two, it focuses on specific challenges, drawing from various case studies including Hurricane Mitch in Nicaragua, floods in New Zealand, and Hurricane Katrina in the US. In Part Three, specific initiatives by women's groups are looked at, and Part Four brings these shared stories together to provide two action plans for mainstreaming gender in disaster risk management.

Toilet talk

The book provides an analytical view of the successes and challenges of the rural sanitation movement in India. Written by Kumar Alok, an IAS officer who served a five year tenure as Director, Rural Sanitation, in the Department of Drinking Water Supply and later as a sanitation specialist with UNICEF, the book delves into the implementation of the Total Sanitation Campaign that was launched in 1999. With a special focus on the last decade, the book outlines a vision for the future of sanitation programmes in India, and offers innovative ideas for second generation sanitation initiatives.

The author says the book is also an attempt to break the sanitation taboo in the country, to begin to talk about issues we have never discussed before.

"People defecating in the open form the majority in India. Persons and institutions who question this practice have been subjected to mockery," writes Kumar Alok, "Very few politicians, administrators and even development professionals consider it important to even discuss the ill effects of poor sanitation and hygiene on human beings and environment."



**SQUATTING
WITH
DIGNITY
LESSONS
FROM INDIA**

Kumar Alok
SAGE

Line that divides

For India borders represent a maze of issues. Surrounded by neighbouring countries with whom we share common pasts but troubled borders, historian Paula Banerjee's book is probably a relevant read.

Banerjee's book contends that borders are, by definition, lines of inclusion and exclusion established by the State. It analyses how the State constructs borders and tries to make them static and rigid, and how those whose lives revolve around these borders, such as women, migrant workers and victims of human trafficking destabilise these rigid constructs. The 253 page book lays special emphasis on the gender dimensions of borders. It explores the political conditions that have made borders problematic in post-colonial South Asia and how these borders have become regions of extreme volatility.

Banerjee, currently, Head of the Department of South and South East Asian Studies, University of Calcutta, and a member of the Calcutta Research Group, says she first understood that borders evoke deep sentiments at an academic seminar in Delhi.

"In a paper I wrote for this seminar, I made the argument that historians shy away from working on the problems of borders as borders are always evolving and remain in the realm of present history. A historian was extremely angry with my argument. I tried to calm him down stating that even I am a historian. But he would not be mollified and kept seething. I thought then that borders need to be explored further. I am grateful to that historian for provoking this response in me," says Banerjee, who is also vice-president of the International Association for Study of Forced Migration.

She says her upbringing helped tremen-

dously while doing research for this book.

"Even though I am a city girl I was enormously familiar with the margins. As the coach of the Indian football team, my father travelled the length and breadth of the country and I travelled with him. When most people hardly knew about the northeast or Kashmir I was familiar with these regions. In most of Bengal and the northeast, I was treated as an insider because of our contacts."

Borders, Histories, Existences contains new research data and original theories, and can be a valuable resource to those studying colonial and post-colonial history, politics and international relations, South Asia studies and sociology.

The book adopts a critical feminist history angle and argues that women living near borders are especially vulnerable as they have to negotiate complex security and border issues. The conditions of migrant women, women peace campaigners, and victims of human trafficking and mobile diseases are presented as the markers of bordered existences. Their history is characterised by insecurity, subversion and endurance.

Banerjee explains that most border perspectives are neither totally generic nor supremely particular. Each border has one thing in common – a penchant for turning into a zone of excruciating violence often against the most vulnerable.

"No one in South Asia has associated borders with endemic violence against women and other marginalised the way I do, so this is an original theory. I have worked with data such as those culled from hospices and brothels in the regions and this I think is the strength of the book," says Banerjee who is a recipient of the WISCOMP Fellow of Peace Award in 2001.



**BORDERS,
HISTORIES,
EXISTENCES:
GENDER
AND
BEYOND**

Author: Paula
Banerjee
SAGE
Publications

Amrita on a new canvas



AMRITA SHER-GIL

A SELF-PORTRAIT IN LETTERS AND WRITINGS

Vivan Sundaram

Tulika Books

Rs 5,750

It was a very long process dating back to 1972. The materials are quite extensive and rich. There's the entire process of gathering material. It is a book that I imagined 20 years ago, but I had no idea the text would expand in this manner.

It has got vivid animation of text and paintings by Amrita Sher-Gil and other people. To make it easy to read and uncluttered, I have put the pictures and the notes on the left side and the letters on the right side. The book is expensive, but then it also allows the uninitiated reader access to Amrita through multiple entries: a rich texture of her family relationships and intercultural relationships.

What is the material that is covered in the book?

The book covers Amrita Sher-Gil's early diaries at the age of seven and the letters start on her departure to Paris. It has also got her letters to her mother, Marie, which were written in Hungarian, where she has to explain to her mother why she is spending so much money. The letters talk about money matters. Money becomes a very big issue in this book. There is talk about making money, buying things, she talks about selling herself as a portrait painter. Amrita had a very intense relationship with her mother. In many ways, Amrita had to mother Marie, who attempted suicide and then finally committed suicide after Amrita's death. She was close to her mother but her emotional make-up was more deeply structured and influenced by her father, including her nationalism.

Then there are also her letters to art historian Karl Khandalvala in which she wishes to have a dialogue and voice her artistic frustrations. She was often at times hugely impatient and dismissive, but also very attentive, for example, she really thought that all the work being done at the JJ School in Bombay was trash. And she thought that some of the Gujarati painters influenced by the Bengal school were really bad, but then she pointed out those whom she thought were not bad. Amrita admired Jamini Roy, Khandalvala did not like Tagore, but she tried to counter that.

The book also looks at Amrita's time in Hungary, where she created a lot of work that is relatively unknown. It ends with her last unfinished painting. I have also included a prologue and epilogue.

Is there new information in the book?

Well, one of the things that emerges is that her father, Umrao Singh, was closely connected to the revolutionary Gadar Party. His brother was knighted by the British, but he was deeply nationalist and was close friends with the poet Mohammed Iqbal. Amrita was quite influenced by her father's nationalism, but it is not true that as soon as she left Europe and came to India she became very nationalist. And there is also this concept that Amrita did very academic

work in Paris. But I think it is not true. She set up her own studio in her last three years there, and emerged as a serious young artist in her own right.

Does Amrita Sher-Gil influence your work?

Well, quite a lot of my own work has dealt with what I call the Sher-Gil family: as painting, as installation, as photomontage, video, so...there's a whole 25 year old history where, in my work, I've dealt with the family with different media, so the family influences me deeply.

Shreya Sanghani
Kolkata

EXPECTATIONS naturally run high when Vivan Sundaram puts together a book in two volumes on Amrita Sher-Gil. Sundaram is a well-known artist in his own right. He is also Sher-Gil's nephew. The two volumes do not dissappoint. They are stylishly designed and provide new nuggets of information about India's most iconic painter.

Titled *Amrita Sher-Gil: a self-portrait in letters and writings*, the volumes were launched in Kolkata on 13 March at the Seagull Bookstore and released in New Delhi on 16 February at the National Gallery of Modern Art. "The book," said Vivan Sundaram, "allows the uninitiated reader access to Amrita through multiple entries: a rich texture of her family relationships and intercultural relationships."

What has been Amrita Sher-Gil's influence on contemporary Indian artists, especially female artists?

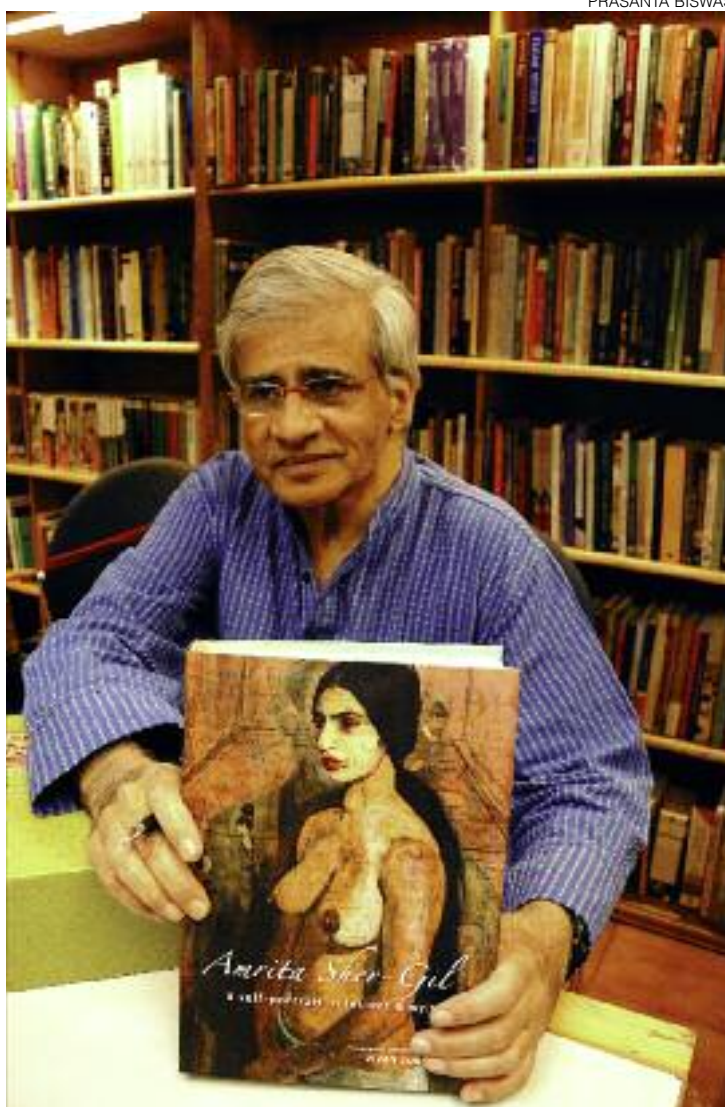
The influence is not there today in any way. I would say it was there within the artists of the 1970s and 1980s. They identified with her, her projects, her artistic explorations of the body, sexuality, but now I would say, no.

When you think of her career span as a professional artist, it is relatively short, only between 1933-1941. Many would say that she is an incomplete artist and still had to make her statement.

There's so much talk about how she represents rural Indian women and how sad they are and she really focuses on that.

There was a phase, an early phase when she did represent women, where they were always sad. But then later on, it became more complex and melancholy. They are sad in the sense that they are not jubilant, but later on they are different in composition and portrayal.

Can you tell us about the process of writing this book?



Vivan Sundaram

'The book covers Amrita Sher-Gil's early diaries at the age of seven and the letters start on her departure to Paris. It has got her letters to her mother, Marie.'

Tackling high blood pressure

Dr G G GANGADHARAN



A condition in which the pressure exerted by blood on the arterial wall becomes high or elevated is termed as hypertension or high blood pressure. Blood pressure is termed as normal at 120/80 mmHg. Blood pressure between 120/80 and 139/89 is called "pre-hypertension" and a blood pressure reading of 140/90 or above is considered high.

In 2000, the estimated number of adults living with high blood pressure was 972 million. This is expected to increase to 1.56 billion by 2025. Hypertension is a major health problem as people with the condition have a higher risk for heart disease and other medical problems than people with normal blood pressure. Hypertension is usually asymptomatic but may also be present with symptoms like headache, dizziness, fatigue, burning sensation, facial flushes (perspiration), tinnitus and blurred vision.

Ayurveda believes imbalance in the three doshas, that is, vata, pitta and kapha is the root cause for manifestation of altered health conditions in the body. Hypertension is the result of such an imbalance especially in vata and pitta dosha.

Diet, emotional and lifestyle factors are reasons for this malady. Smoking, obesity, sedentary lifestyle, stress, excessive use of salt, consumption of alcohol and emotional factors like anger, anxiety, worry, tension etc are the main causes of hypertension. Due to these factors there is an imbalance in the prana, vyana vayu and sadaka pitta and sometimes even avalambaka kapha which in turn leads to vitiation of the rasa and the rakta dhatus due to which symptoms such as brahma (dizziness), daha (burning sensation), sweda (perspiration), etc are seen.

If high blood pressure is not controlled then this can lead to risks such as stroke, renal damage/kidney failure or even myocardial infarction. Proper lifestyle with good exercise, healthy diet and effective medication will definitely help patients of hypertension to lead a better life ahead.

High blood pressure is not controlled then this can lead to risks such as stroke, renal damage/kidney failure or even myocardial infarction. Proper lifestyle with good exercise, healthy diet and effective medication will definitely help patients of hypertension to lead a better life ahead.

DIET TO FOLLOW:

- Salt is kledakara which means it causes retention of water which leads to increased cardiac output, increase in blood flow to various organs therefore auto-regulation takes place. With this, peripheral resistance increases which leads to increased blood pressure. Hence, salt should be reduced or can be avoided totally.
- Spicy food should be avoided as it will increase the pitta dosha leading to hypertension symptoms.
- Hydrogenated fats lead to cholesterol which in turn leads to atherosclerosis as a result of which hypertension occurs. These are Ama and Kapha promoting factors which can block the micro and macro channels of the body especially plasma and lymphatic systems. Thus instead of hydrogenated fats, polyunsaturated and monounsaturated fats can be used. These include oils of sesame, olive, flaxseed, mustard and groundnut. Coconut oil is traditionally used in India. This too is not harmful if taken moderately.
- Ghee and butter made from cow's milk is beneficial. Buffalo milk



should be avoided. Ghee made in the traditional way by converting cow's milk into curd, butter and then ghee is fine. If made directly from milk it can cause fat deposition.

- Use of garlic in the daily diet is advantageous as it has kapha decreasing qualities and is thus beneficial for tackling obesity and in turn, hypertension. It is considered a boon for people suffering from hypertension. Garlic is very helpful in maintaining normal levels of blood pressure. It also facilitates the proper circulation of blood throughout the body. Garlic is helpful in cleaning plaque formation that occurs in the arterial walls of the body which is the root cause of heart attack/ myocardial infarction. But garlic is contraindicated in people with pitha vitiation and acidity and pitta prakruthi.

- Fresh fruits such as gooseberry, grapes, banana, guava can be taken.
- Include fibrous roots and vegetables in your daily diet. Dietary fibre helps to lower blood pressure.
- Red meat should be avoided as it has high salt content.
- White meat can be consumed in less quantity.
- Avoid coffee as it has caffeine which leads to hypertension.

BENEFICIAL HERBS :

Sarpangandha (Rauwolfia serpentine): One of the best medicines for treating hypertension.

Arjuna: It is a powerful antioxidant, anti-angina, hypolipidemic and has cardio-protective properties.

Gokshura: It is a diuretic.

Punarnava: This herb is also a diuretic and brings freshness to the system. It improves the quality of blood. This is as per Ayurvedic understanding of Raktha guna.

Praval Bhasma: It provides necessary calcium and magnesium.

Dhara therapy: It is a Panchakarma therapy considered good for hypertension.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- Brisk walking and jogging
- Regular exercise
- Yoga practice and meditation
- Sound sleep
- Avoid anger, tension, worry, anxiety
- Proper breathing is very essential
- Avoid smoking and alcohol.



E-mail: vaidya.ganga@frlht.org. Dr GG is a senior physician with FRLHT, Bangalore.

Indian cities before and after



Kabutarbaaz on a roof in Nizamuddin, Delhi



Claire Arni

Forty years ago if you wanted a special pair of shoes you would look for a Chinese shoe shop with its whiff of leather. Today, the mere idea sounds quaint. After all you can take your pick from endless rows of shoes at any glitzy shopping mall.

Older businesses are becoming history. The familiar architecture of Indian cities is vanishing giving way to high rises and emptier streets. Alongside, many traditional occupations are disappearing.

Claire Arni, a British photographer and Oriole Henry, a British travel writer, are traveling all over to different cities in India to photograph dying professions and landscapes before they vanish altogether.

Arni, who lives in Bangalore, says exhibitions on India's fast changing urban landscape made her realise that many of the professions she had photographed earlier had disappeared from the streets of Bangalore.

She then decided to "see whether the same

shift was occurring in other Indian cities." Along with Oriole Henry, who had been researching the social and labour histories of Indian cities, Arni set off to capture and document vanishing city landscapes and professions.

The two have already finished photographing Kolkata, Bangalore, Delhi and Chennai. She and her colleague are now taking pictures of Mumbai, Jaipur and Hyderabad. "This is an ongoing long term project in which we are updating cities that we have already documented with more material," explains Arni.

Her photographs were displayed at the Seagull

Arts and Media Resource Centre in Kolkata. Each picture was accompanied with details of the individual photographed, the training and skills needed for each profession and what the work meant to the lives of the people involved in it. "I discovered that many professions I had seen thriving at the outset of my project were on the wane over the years and some had nearly faded away," she said.

The crafts and professions which are becoming history include hand-made jewelry which is being replaced with machine made jewelry since it needs less gold.

Digital technology and mechanisation have overtaken professions like book-binding, wig-making, hand-dyeing and poster painting.

Older professions continue if alternatives do not exist. So, Urdu calligraphers have work since the Urdu font is not yet available on the computer.

Professions like kabutarbaazi which thrived as a leisurely preoccupation of laid-back aristocrats have died a natural death. The kabutarbaaz in Old Delhi, who was patronized by the Mughal court, flies his pigeons in the evening as an amusing hobby.

Arni's documentation of how Chinese hand-made shoes and Chinese drycleaning units gradually moved out of Kolkata is an interesting study in social anthropology.

Her photographs capture the ambiance of shoe-making and dry-cleaning as they existed in Kolkata. Distrust and persecution of the Chinese after the Sino-Indian War of 1962 and decades of hostility by Indians resulted in a large part of the Chinese population moving to Canada and other countries.

Arni and her colleague are now in talks with a publisher to bring out a book on India's changing urban landscapes and fading professions.

Reported by Rina Mukherji



A lone wig maker's shop in Kolkata

For peace within

SAMITA RATHOR

WHEN someone asks us who we are, what is our identity, the answer typically is: "I am a doctor or a chartered accountant or a writer or a dancer or a politician or an actor."

Has it ever struck you that who we are is not about what we do professionally and academically? Those are merely skills and abilities. Who we are narrows down to a very in depth study of our real selves. A wholesome and meaningful understanding of who we are leads us on a journey of becoming aware of our positive and negative emotions.

To make this 'who we are' journey a fruitful one we need to do some self contemplation. One pathway that guides us to our emotional dissection is the Srimad Bhagavad Gita. It gives us the wisdom to understand life in synchronization with who and what we really are. The essence of all the Upanishads lies in the Srimad Bhagavad Gita and it is called the 5th Veda. So powerful are its teachings and wisdom.

According to the Srimad Bhagavad Gita, "Man is made by his belief. As he believes, so he is."

The first word of the Bhagavad Gita is Dharma, meaning nature. The last word is Mama which means the mind. The Bhagavad Gita, through self contemplation and self analysis reveals the true nature of our minds.

When the mind is calm, it acts as a receiver. When it is not, it blocks all positive energy and lies in a state of confusion and unrest. In a state such as this there is only failure and grief.

Arjun, the son of Kunti, represents us. He was a very talented and able human being from many aspects. In spite of that, just before the

Mahabharata began, he was in an utter state of confusion. Confusion leads to great unhappiness. We all have experienced this many times in our lives. The wisdom of the Srimad Bhagavad Gita is life transforming, helping us to differentiate between our material self and real self.

"The mind is bewildered by delusion.

SOUL VALUE

Reasoning is destroyed when the mind is bewildered. One falls down when reasoning is destroyed."

The three most important teachings of the Srimad Bhagavad Gita are to have a balance between:

1. Goodness of heart
2. Complete wisdom
3. Efficiency in action

Goodness of heart develops automatically when we follow our dharma, the path of compassion and kindness. Our duties as a human being are to imbibe qualities of compassion, freedom from ego, pride, anger and greed.

Complete wisdom helps us to see the world in a different light. It gives us the vision of a new eye to look at the world not just from our point of view but from that of others too. Wisdom is not to be mistaken for information or knowledge. Use of knowledge in an intelligent manner, is wisdom.

Efficiency in action is necessary because an inefficient person is like money in a bank not being utilized. It is important to put into practice what we study and learn.

"No work stains a man who is pure, who is in harmony, who is master of his life, whose soul is one with the soul of all."

If a good hearted person is insufficient in action then sorrow and pain will be experienced. Similarly, an efficient person with an impure heart will also drown in anguish and regret. Therefore it's important to have all three qualities in equal harmonious proportions in order to maintain a healthy emotional balance.

"Action is greater than inaction. Perform therefore thy task in life. Even the life of the body could not be if there were no action."

In ancient times more importance was given to dharma and duties and less to rights. The logic was that if everyone performed their duties there would be no question of rights. For example, why do we have animal rights today? It's only because people are not doing their duty of practicing compassion and kindness. If people had empathy for animals then there would be no need for any animal rights activists whatsoever.

Real happiness lies within and not in any profession or fame. Happiness or sukha without peace or shanti, is incomplete happiness. Prosperity without peace is like a bird without wings. Anything incomplete leads to the unrest of the mind. So if a profession gives us satisfaction and happiness but no peace it can cause a great deal of mental and physical stress.

The teachings supported by the Srimad Bhagavad Gita give us an opportunity to discover the true meaning of internal peace and external prosperity to enable us to live life to our fullest abilities and talents.

samitarathor@gmail.com

LAKSHMAN ANAND

PRODUCTS

KING OF KITES

Asif Mian and Shavez Mian make decorative kites. It is their traditional profession. Asif Mian says his father, Chanda Sahib, who was in the British Indian army, was fond of flying kites so he began to make them himself.

In 1985, the government honoured Asif Mian with a national award. The kites the two brothers make have birds, plants and animals etched on them.

Asif Mian has taken kite making to new heights. He can make kites out of cloth and put 50 kites on a single string. The kites are supplied to exporters and sent to different states in India.

Asif Mian says he has over 6000 kite designs. Take your pick and fly high.

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