

Civil Society



BRINJAL IS KING



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A messy spat unfolds in New Delhi over a Hyderabad-based company's role in garbage collection

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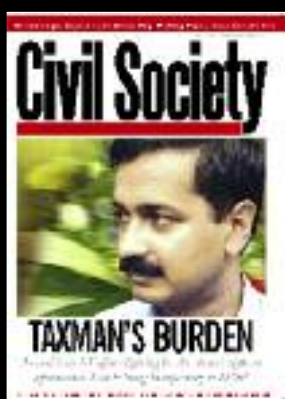
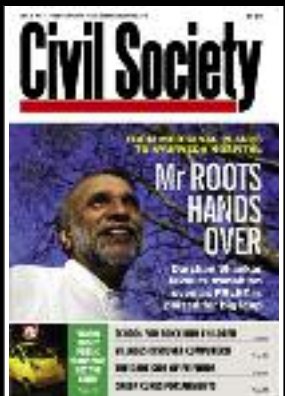
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SOMEONE



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IN THE LIGHT

by SAMITA RATHOR



LETTERS



Regional cinema

Saibal Chatterjee's cover story on the rise of regional cinema captured the trend of regionalism which is getting more intense today. More people are re-examining their roots. Maybe this has to do with a feeling of loss, of trying to recapture vignettes of the past. People are trying to carve out an identity which is both national and regional.

Shanti Singh

What is heartening is that young talented directors are finding an audience and thereby attracting mainstream movie outfits. Do keep us posted on the ongoing film directors are working on.

Shikha Varma

It is comforting to hear that contemporary cultural Indian expressions are finding their own style, commercially and aesthetically.

George Jacob

Dementia

Gautam Singh has provided excellent coverage of the conference on the burning issue of dementia in India. Media involvement will help the cause. Silver Inning Foundation supports media for its effort.

Sailesh Mishra

Brilliant article. The thoughts of various experts have been brought out well. I sincerely hope that people in the government, media and the corporate world take note of this major public health public problem. Once again your magazine has proved its unique ability to high light important social issues, normally not taken up by mainstream journalists.

Dr Jacob Roy

Green buildings

There is already a consciousness amongst people in the building industry to use energy efficient designs and materials which is exemplified by the efforts of companies like BCIL. I really appreciate these initiatives. However, radical changes in the building industry can happen only if people demand the sensible option of green homes or energy efficient homes. Kudos to BCIL and its dedicated team for their exemplary efforts.

Virendra Verma

Hindu reform

India, indeed, has suffered immensely on all fronts due to caste divisions. People discriminating or exploiting the lower castes are not really Hindus but enemies of their own faith. In fact, the way such people have discriminated with even upper caste widows, including child widows, has no parallel elsewhere. Hinduism is urgently in need of transformation so that all its followers are treated equally. Can this great and liberal religion rise to the need of the hour?

ML Pandit

This is a realistic view of the problem that India faces due to the Hindu caste system. I came to India in 2009 to look into the situation from ground level and I was shocked at the appalling conditions and attitudes to sub-caste people of which Dalits comprise a very large majority. I am actively campaigning against injustice and the DFN- UK has been recently formed to raise awareness in the UK of the Dalit issue. We are committed to bringing an end to thousands of years of injustice and degradation of Dalits.

Alex Morgan

Paddy farming

Shree Padre's article on mechanisation of paddy farming in Kerala was very inspiring. With this type of commitment, Kerala could become the rice granary of South. The work culture which these experiments nurture will bring Kerala youth back to main stream productivity.

Dr E Shaji

This story should reach ordinary people and farmers. Please try to print a Malayalam version of this article and circulate it in Kerala.

Anantharaman

CONTENTS



WHERE BRINJAL IS KING

Mararikulam, a village in Kerala, is home to a traditional variety of brinjal which its panchayat now grows and propagates with great pride.

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Civil Society

READ US. WE READ YOU.

The lessons from Bt Brinjal

THE moratorium on Bt Brinjal is very welcome. Jairam Ramesh has made a laudable and well-informed decision. The issue is not merely whether Bt Brinjal is safe, but also how we have exercised our choice. The working of the Genetic Engineering Approval Committee (GEAC) leaves much to be desired. There has been conflict of interest and lack of relevant expertise. Ramesh had the courage to see this and say so.

Bodies such as the GEAC have a huge responsibility because their decisions have a bearing on public health and the future of the country. The seeds business has the potential to compromise our freedom of choice and tether us to interests that are far too narrowly defined by their need to generate quarterly profits. Instead seed research should remain dominantly within the public sector because the food security of the country is involved and there is enormous poverty in the countryside. Corporate ownership of seeds is the wrong way to go.

The fact that 13 states rejected Bt Brinjal and people came out in large numbers for Ramesh's hearings across the country is evidence of the huge gap that exists between people and the scientific establishment in India.

While government scientists and bureaucrats have clearly allowed themselves to be seduced by Monsanto, ordinary folk are not willing to be so trusting of corporate science. It is a good trend with far-reaching political implications as well which the UPA government would do well to recognise.

What are people asking for? They want local and wholesome solutions over which they can exercise control. They worry about ownership because seeds, crops and land are just about the only things that a majority of people in this country have. Naturally, they expect the governments they elect to make them feel secure on these counts.

Why didn't GEAC tune into these voices earlier? Our scientists seem to lack social consciousness and prefer to lock themselves up in sarkari ivory towers. The way forward is to work at the grassroots and in the case of agriculture to understand the needs of farmers in the field.

AV Balasubramanian of the Centre of Indian Knowledge Systems makes an important point when he says the search for a solution to a problem must first of all take into account the state of the art. Had this been GEAC's approach, it would have looked at biopesticides and methods of integrated pest management for brinjal which have been extensively validated and documented by the Indian Council of Agricultural Research. Sensitising Indian scientists and government officials to such realities urgently needs to be done.

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Judicial accountability goes a

With public debate on appointments, dismissals CJAR believes the tide is turning

Saibal Chatterjee
New Delhi

IN recent times, India's higher judiciary has often been in the news for the wrong reasons. It has been rocked by a series of corruption cases. Its collegium system of elevation of judges to the Supreme Court (SC) bench is under a cloud. Many of its verdicts have been perceived by activists as elitist and anti-poor. Besides, it has lurched from one crisis to another over its dilly-dallying on the question of bringing the assets of SC judges, as well as the functioning of the Chief Justice of India (CJI), within the ambit of the Right to Information (RTI) Act.

The heat and dust that certain actions of the higher judiciary have raised of late demonstrates two significant things. One, the rot runs really deep and, therefore, there is an urgent need for a clean-up of the nation's legal system. And two, the debate on the need for the superior judiciary – the Supreme Court and the high courts – to be as accountable as the other organs of the Indian republic is now on the national agenda.

As experts point out, the fact that a debate is on is itself a huge step forward for the cause of judicial accountability in a country where the office of a judge has been outside the purview of public discourse for decades. Although, for all practical purposes, the judiciary still isn't accountable to anyone, and the dreaded provisions of the contempt of court law are still very much in place, the media has lately been openly discussing issues related to misconduct by judges and the absence of an effective and credible mechanism to bring them to book.

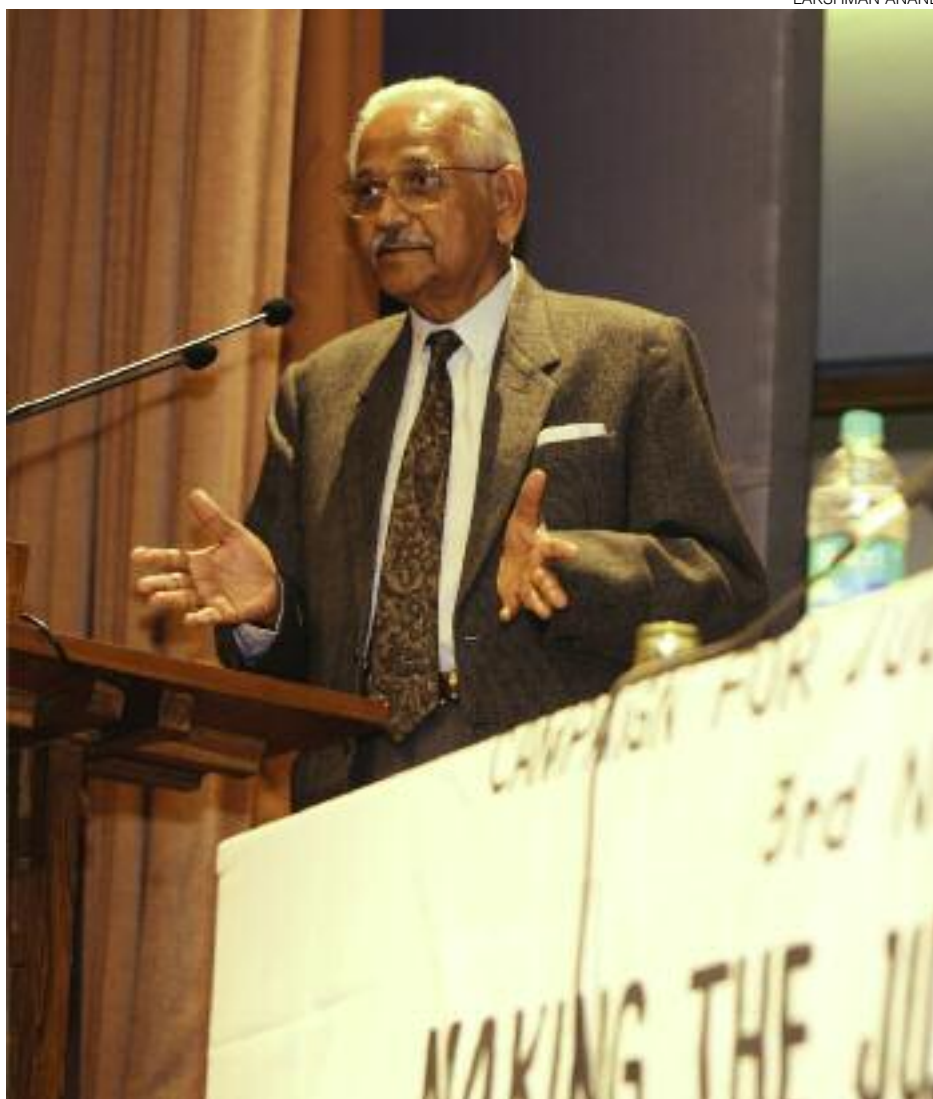
Says Prashant Bhushan, Supreme Court lawyer and convenor of the Campaign for Judicial Accountability and Reforms (CJAR): "We have travelled some distance in three years. We are hoping the tide will turn. The issue is now in the public domain, and the government and the judiciary are being forced to respond. Some noises are being made. Hopefully action will follow."

For one, the government has promised to introduce a comprehensive Bill to enforce judicial accountability. However, the proposed Bill, according to CJAR, falls way short of what is desired. "The government is only tinkering with the existing system that has been evolved by the judiciary itself, instead of recommending measures that would entail Constitutional amendments," says Bhushan.

He was one of the many distinguished speakers at CJAR's 3rd National Convention, a two-day conference organised in New Delhi on the first weekend of February, who underscored the numerous anomalies that have crept into the functioning of the higher judiciary, not the least of which is its often anti-poor skew.

Another senior advocate, Anil Divan, who also spoke at the National Convention, asserts: "The campaign for judicial reforms is being described by its opponents as 'judge-bashing'. Nothing could be further from the truth. A vibrant, non-corrupt and accountable judiciary that can stand up to the executive and protect the rights of the people is an absolute must for our democracy."

In his landmark September 2, 2009 judgement in the judges' assets case, Justice S. Ravindra Bhatt of the Delhi High Court said: "All power – judicial power being no exception – is held accountable in a modern Constitution. Holders of power too are expected to live by the standards they set, interpret, or enforce, at least to the extent their office demands."



Former Chief Justice of India JS Verma

Hailing the judgement, former Chief Justice of India J.S. Verma, had said: "These principles are unexceptionable. It would be a pity if the judgement is not accepted in good grace and it is challenged in appeal by the Supreme Court, ultimately before itself!"

The Supreme Court did appeal against the Justice Bhat judgement. Earlier this year the Delhi High Court not only upheld its earlier ruling but also asserted that the provision of the RTI Act applied to the office of the Chief Justice of India as well. There is now speculation that the SC will be appealing to itself in the matter!

In a signed article, Justice Verma, who had an exemplary stint as CJI before going on to head the National Human Rights Commission, has written: "In the current environment of waning credibility of the higher judiciary, with specific allegations of corruption based on prima facie authentic materials even against a few of the highest, it is in the judiciary's own interest to be fully transparent and above suspicion."

The SC's current official line is that exposing judges to all-out scrutiny under the RTI Act would undermine judicial independence. But those in favour of accountability argue that 'independence' means independence

LAKSHMAN ANAND

little forward

from the executive, and not freedom to indulge in corrupt practices and other forms of misconduct.

The campaign for a more responsive judiciary is steadily gathering steam. CJAR's first convention was held in March 2007 and it resolved to "encourage people's organisations and movements all over the country to initiate a sustained public campaign to reclaim the judiciary for 'we the people' of this republic".

The 2nd National Convention, held in February 2008, focussed on "the judiciary and the poor". It deliberated on the ways and means in which the judiciary could be made more responsive to the rights of the poor and the common citizens of the land.

The latest National Convention embraced a far more comprehensive agenda – "Making the Judiciary Accountable and Responsive to the People" – in the light of many well-publicised developments of the last two years. The Rs 7 crore Ghaziabad provident fund scam that benefitted successive judges of the district court, the cash-at-judges-door case involving Justice Nirmal Yadav of Punjab and Haryana High Court, the impeachment of Justice Soumitra Sen of Calcutta High Court for misappropriation of funds, the contentious issue of disclosure of judges' assets, and the row over the move to elevate Justice P.D. Dinakaran, Chief Justice of Karnataka High Court, to the SC have raised serious questions. Finding the right answers to these vexed questions has become inevitable.

The CJAR's 3rd National Convention was attended by over 200 people representing various organisations and movements from across the country. Among those who spoke over two days were former Chief Justice of India J.S. Verma, senior Supreme Court advocate Shanti Bhushan, CPI leader A.B. Bardhan, leader of the Opposition in the Rajya Sabha, Arun Jaitley and RTI activist, Arvind Kejriwal.

Interestingly, Bardhan and Jaitley, who are at opposite ends of the political spectrum, spoke in the same voice. "I agree fully with the views expressed by Mr Jaitley as well as the remedies suggested by him," AB Bardhan said as he got up to address the gathering immediately after Arun Jaitley had wrapped up his talk on the opening day of the convention. "This issue is above politics."

Jaitley, who served as the Union law minister under Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee, shared his personal and official experiences with the problems inherent in the Collegium system of appointing Supreme Court judges. "The discretion of the collegium of judges should be curtailed," he said. "The in-house system of appointment of judges has failed. At least two eminent citizens whose integrity is beyond doubt should be inducted."

At the conclusion of the convention, CJAR passed a resolution on the twin issues of judicial accountability and reforms dealing with various aspects of the judiciary. "The present system of appointments by the collegium of judges suffers from nepotism, arbitrariness and lack of transparency," the resolution said. CJAR suggested the setting up of a full-time Judicial Appointments Commission that "should not comprise merely retired judges but should also include other eminent members of civil society".

"Any proper system of appointments needs serious deliberation and a comparative analysis of the merits of the contenders," Bhushan argued. "The Collegium of five senior Supreme Court judges is hard-pressed for time, as are the Prime Minister and the law minister. Therefore, a full-time commis-

sion manned by people from outside the judiciary is a must."

In the context of growing cases of misconduct by judges, the CJAR resolution said: "The present system of impeachment has proved to be totally impracticable and ineffective for disciplining judges. There should be a similar Commission for dealing with complaints against judges. This must have its own independent investigative machinery and should be empowered to examine complaints and recommend action against errant judges, which would include removal and registration of criminal cases against them."

In the present system of impeachment, which is the only recourse available under the Constitution if an errant judge is to be removed from his position, the process can begin only if 100 members of the Lok Sabha or 50 members of the Rajya Sabha put their signatures on the motion.

In the case of Justice Dinakaran, the impeachment motion was admitted by the Vice President and ex-officio Speaker of the Rajya Sabha Hamid Ansari after it was signed by 75 RS MPs cutting across party lines. No member of the

Congress party, however, signed the motion. A three-member inquiry committee set up by Hamid Ansari to probe the charges against Justice Dinakaran includes two men who have had active close links with the latter.

Prashant Bhushan, as convenor of CJAR, has written a letter to the Vice President, requesting him to ask the two members, Justice V.S. Sirupurkar and jurist P.P.Rao, whether they would like to recuse themselves from the inquiry committee to avoid any controversy in the future.

Justice Sirupurkar was a colleague of Justice Dinakaran's in Chennai High Court from 1997 to 2003 and sat with him on several benches and administrative committees. PP Rao was consulted by Justice Dinakaran on the allegations levelled against him. The inquiry committee was set up on the recommendations of the CJ, Justice K.G. Balakrishnan. In his letter to Hamid Ansari, Prashant Bhushan has pointed out that "there is no requirement under

the Judges Inquiry Act 1968 to consult the Chief Justice in the appointment of the Inquiry Committee".

The CJAR resolution raised several other crucial points that go beyond just the appointment, misconduct or removal of individuals and relate to broader issues, including the contempt of court law. "We feel there is no justification for retaining 'scandalising the court or lowering the authority of the court' in the definition of criminal contempt and this should be deleted. Respect for or public confidence in the judiciary depends upon how the actions of the judiciary are perceived and not on preventing people from making any (including harsh) criticism. The laws of civil and criminal defamation are adequate to protect judges from scurrilous abuse."

In its resolution, CJAR also levelled serious criticism at the higher judiciary's elitist slant and its tendency to be used in order to serve the interests of the incumbent government. "The Campaign finds that the judiciary has of late rendered many decisions displaying gross insensitivity to human rights and civil liberties, particularly of the weak and the poor," the resolution said.

It also noted that "the current judicial system is getting far removed from the needs and rights of the poor and deprived sections of society in substantial deviation from the directive principles of state policy as enshrined in the Constitution of India and even restricting the interpretation of 'right to life' as delineated in earlier pronouncements of the court. In fact the common people have virtually no access to the judicial system being unable to afford lawyers and also often because the language of the court is alien to the culture."

The gap between the spirit behind the codified laws and the actual situation on the ground has widened to such an extent that the judicial system has probably reached a point of no return. The only way out, as CJAR has repeatedly asserted, is to take the campaign for accountability and responsiveness to its logical conclusion.

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Prashant Bhushan

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Shyam Divan

'A vibrant, non-corrupt and accountable judiciary that can stand up to the executive and protect the rights of the people is an absolute must for our democracy.'

Plans but no action

Civil Society News
New Delhi

HUMAN development indicators for India tell us that much remains to be done. It seems pretty apparent that the strategies and schemes of the Planning Commission have failed.

A new beginning is needed. To make the Planning Commission more effective what could be better than to hear what peoples' groups, activists and academics have to say.

The Centre for Budget and Governance Accountability (CBGA) in New Delhi has been working to put together a People's Mid Term Appraisal (PMTA) of the 11th Five Year Plan.

The CBGA with National Social Watch Coalition and Wada Na Todo Abhiyan, supported by the UNDP held national consultations to find out from peoples' groups their assessment of the Plan in achieving development targets. The sectors they inquired about were health, education, nutrition, social safety, drinking water, sanitation, agriculture, rural development, employment and social exclusion.

On 4 and 5 February the CBGA presented its PMTA to coincide with the Planning Commission's own Mid Term Appraisal. NGOs, activists, academics and others from across India interacted with Planning Commission members.

There is broad agreement that the Plan has become more inclusive over the years. Up to 1991, the disabled were not included even in the Census. A transgender representative in the audience asked for inclusion also. The emphasis on human development was welcomed. But there is, in general, a sense of exasperation because of the absence of meaningful outcomes.

Copious money is showered on states with no results. "Roughly Rs 3.5 lakh crores are given to states," remarked NC Saxena. "If we send that by money order to every poor person he will get Rs 100 per day and take care of his own development. We should find out where the money is going and where it is not being spent."

The Planning Commission is accused of not being innovative enough. It does not use its financial muscle to withdraw funds when states do not perform.

Speaker after speaker accused the Commission of being remiss in evaluation or monitoring of money and schemes. "Link funds to performance," said Saxena. "If a state reduces child mortality, increases forest cover or literacy rates, increase its allocation."

It was also pointed out that some schemes were designed to fail since they did not reflect grassroots realities. NREGA has worked because it created rural assets and jobs both sorely needed in rural areas.

But take a scheme like the Janani Suraksha Yojana, which gives an incentive to women who opt for hospital deliveries. Rural health infrastructure is very poor. Even if the hospital building exists there are no medicines and medical staff. So alongside building health infrastructure, it would be useful to have a scheme for traditional midwives. There is also need to increase state spending

on health, said Amit Sengupta of the Jan Swasthya Abhiyan.

A universal public distribution system (PDS) has been a long-standing demand of the social sector. PDS off-take was worst in the poorest states and highest in states with better HDI like Kerala. Right to food campaigner, Kavita Srivastava said oil and pulses should be included in the PDS basket for improved nutrition.

The number of anganwadis has increased to 130,000. But these are not functional. Some are mere 'daliya' centres and anganwadi workers often report to local bigwigs instead of the gram sabha. Though allocation per child has increased from Rs 2 to Rs 4, it still falls short because of high food prices. Kavita Srivastava suggested such allocations be linked to the consumer price index, that anganwadi workers be trained, their work conditions improved, and that a second worker be hired for the pre-school component.

There was in fact urgent need to train all lower level functionaries.

Government schools were equally dysfunctional said Dr Vimla Ramachandran, director, Educational Resource Unit. Very little teaching went on. Teachers often reported to local goons. There was a need to re-look at transfer and posting policies. Maybe it would be better for teachers to be posted in one village for a longer time. Monitoring and testing were not being done in schools. Also, patterns of migration and education have not been adequately examined. And data on education differs widely in various surveys. Some of it was 'too optimistic' she said.

Paul Divakar from National Campaign on Dalit Human Rights said 'current day advancement' was important. There were many Dalit graduates and post-graduates but what they wanted was employability, to be at the 'cutting edge'. Some education schemes for Dalits had no meaning. For a school scheme for 'children in unclean professions' in 2007-08 around Rs 25 crores was released, just Rs 3 crores spent on 7.3 lakh children so each child got only Rs 3.45 paise! From a 'post-matriculation' scholarship too, each student finally got a meagre Rs 198 per month.

A representative from the National Forum for Forest Workers and Forest People (NFFPFW) pointed out that Adivasis were categorised as Scheduled Tribes in one state and as Scheduled Caste in another. Smaller communities continue to be left out altogether. The Ministry of Tribal Affairs got less revenue and was stuck with decrepit plans for tribal development. A national tribal policy continues to languish.

He asked for convergence of the tribal ministry with the Ministries of Environment and Forests, Human Resource Development, Rural Development and more say for Adivasis on development projects, schools and health facilities.

Javed Abidi, director, National Centre for Promotion of Employment for Disabled People said 98 per cent of children with disability were not in school. Not even one per cent of the disabled were employed. Promises made in the Plan had not been implemented. People with disability badly needed barrier free access for education and employment.



The public hearing: Shashi Bhushan Pandit is standing

Delhi waste

Civil Society News
New Delhi

WASTE pickers in New Delhi have made a business proposition that the municipal authorities should find difficult to refuse. They have said that they can generate more than Rs 12 crores a year from composting biodegradable wastes and save Rs 3 crores in transportation costs if their traditional role in garbage collection and segregation is recognised.

The offer comes from the All-India Kabari Mazdoor Mahasangh (AIKMM), a fledgling organisation of waste pickers. It is an effort to ward off privatisation and save the traditional employment of more than 100,000 unorganised workers. Currently these workers segregate about 20 per cent of the capital's garbage. They provide this service free and earn from the recyclables that they take away.

The municipal authorities, in reforms mode, have been handing over waste collection and disposal to private companies.

The AIKMM offer follows a messy tussle over recyclable waste in the most posh parts of New Delhi under the New Delhi Municipal Council (NDMC). Waste pickers say they are being pushed out by a Hyderabad-based company, Ramky Energy and Environment Ltd.

Ramky has since 2006 been under contract with NDMC to transport 250 tonnes of waste daily to sanitary landfills. NDMC looks after civic services in the core of New Delhi. Other areas of the national capital come under the Delhi Municipal Corporation (MCD).

The Ramky contract is worth some Rs 4.5 crores a year. But the waste pickers say that what the company really wants is control over roughly 80 tonnes a day of recyclables generated in the NDMC area,



Waste workers at a public hearing in Delhi

workers rally against company

which at an average price of Rs 5 a kg could be worth as much as Rs 14 crores a year.

The recyclables don't figure in the contract between the NDMC and Ramky because they are taken out by waste pickers. Any money made by the company from the recyclables would therefore essentially be outside the contract.

The waste pickers allege that they are being intimidated by Ramky and its agents. They complain that money is being extracted from them every month. Many have been chased away because they are illiterate and the company's agents pretend to be acting in the name of the local government. Ramky has, without any authority, issued to a certain M/s Santosh Traders, asking it to take over the recyclables at the depots and bins.

After initial confusion, the waste workers have learnt to be organised in their resistance. With their mobile phones buzzing, AIKMM members turn up at depots and confront Ramky representatives. They have used the Right to Information (RTI) law to get out a copy of NDMC's contract with Ramky.

The AIKMM also organised a public hearing at the Constitutional Club on 17 February. It got support from the Hazard Centre, Bandhua Mukti Morcha and Human Rights Law Network among others.

Civil Society spoke to Shashi Bhushan Pandit of AIKMM on the waste workers' demands.

What is your complaint against the NDMC?

Traditionally waste pickers have made a livelihood out of the collection, segregation and recycling of waste in the NDMC areas. But for the past three years since 2006, a company by the name of Ramky has been harassing ragpickers at depots. The company has been given a contract to pick up waste from the depots and transport it to the landfill sites. But instead it has been laying claim to the recyclable garbage, which is the only source of

income for waste pickers.

Company representatives regularly visit the depots and threaten our people, who are simple and mostly uneducated. They try to chase them away from the depots. Several have been forced to run away. When Ramky is not successful in doing this, its representatives demand money from the ragpickers. At present individual ragpickers are paying representatives of the company between Rs 6,000 and Rs 15,000 a month to buy peace. The amount varies depending on the kind of garbage that comes to a depot.

There have been several incidents. On 6 March last year, for instance, the Parliament Street police station had to intervene at a depot behind the Planning Commission. Ragpickers collected to protest when Ramky representatives tried to take over the depot and chase away Jhavar Bhai who had been at this depot for more than 20 years.

The police asked the Ramky representatives for proof of the depot being handed over to them. When they could not furnish it, they were told to leave.

What is the exact arrangement that Ramky has with NDMC?

What we now know thanks to the copy of the agreement we have got hold of is that Ramky gets from the NDMC Rs 4.60 crores every year for picking up the garbage at depots and depositing it at landfill sites.

But how does this affect your interests?

It should not but the company is trying to take over the role of the waste pickers because of the money it believes it can make over and above the contract by selling the recyclable garbage.

Ramky has in fact issued a letter to a certain Santosh Traders asking it to collect recyclables and

pay Rs 2 lakhs a month. Ramky is not authorised to issue such a letter. The Rs 2 lakhs is also an arbitrary amount. The purpose seems to be to create a document which will confuse the issue. The letter is being repeatedly being used to browbeat the waste pickers, who are illiterate.

How much recyclable garbage is generated in the NDMC area?

It is our estimate that every day 80 tonnes of recyclable garbage is generated in the NDMC area. At an average rate of Rs 5 a kg this works out to Rs 4 lakhs a day. In a year it works out to Rs 14.4 crores. It is this money that the company is after.

How should the role of the waste pickers be recognised?

The Supreme Court has ruled that waste pickers have a role in maintaining the cleanliness of a city. They have traditionally played this role and need to be included in the plans of municipalities.

What are you suggesting to the NDMC?

The NDMC says its areas generate 250 tonnes a day. We say the figure is 250 tonnes plus the 80 tonnes of recyclables that waste pickers remove. Of this 170 tonnes is biodegradable garbage which can be turned into compost. If waste pickers are given the space, they can turn this biodegradable garbage into compost. The NDMC can earn more than Rs 12.24 crores a year from selling the compost at Rs 2 a kg.

This will also mean that 170 tonnes of garbage a day will not go to landfill sites. There will also be a saving on the cost of transportation. The NDMC currently pays Ramky Rs 511 per tonne of garbage that it transports. If 170 tonnes in the daily garbage are reduced through composting, the annual saving will be Rs 3.13 crores. This means, the NDMC will only have to pay Ramky Rs 1.46 crores a year.

Medicinal plants under stress

Civil Society News
Bangalore

THE United Nations has declared 2010 as the Year of Biodiversity to encourage nations to conserve their plant and animal species. The Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD) was signed more than a decade ago, but species continue to disappear worldwide at a rapid rate.

Local communities who have used medicinal plants for generations say that these species are becoming hard to find. They say climate change is a factor.

To find out which medicinal plants are becoming extinct and if climate change is really the only reason we spoke to DK Ved, director of the Foundation for the Revitalisation of Local Health Traditions (FRLHT), in Bangalore. FRLHT has done pioneering work on medicinal plants and Indian systems of medicine.

How has the CBD worked? What have been its gains?

The CBD embedded three main goals into the national biodiversity strategies of all countries who signed it. These were sustainable use and the fair and equitable sharing of benefits of genetic resources. In respect of wild Indian medicinal plants, Article 8 of the CBD relates to in situ conservation. In particular clause 8(j) and 8(d) are very relevant to medicinal plants. However, as far as implementation is concerned much remains to be done.

As a direct consequence of CBD, the Biological Diversity Act was enacted in 2002. A National Biodiversity Strategy and Action Plan (NBSAP) was prepared and subsequently a National Biodiversity Authority (NBA) was constituted. However, one is not aware of any significant initiative under this Act by NBA as far as the conservation and sustainable use of medicinal plants is concerned or, more importantly, as far as the preservation of traditional knowledge, innovations and practices of indigenous and local communities or their wider application is concerned. The NBA appears to have restricted itself only to regulatory functions.

The Ministry of Environment & Forests (MoEF) in partnership with UNDP has however taken the bold initiative of creating a network of 41 Medicinal Plants Conservation Areas (MPCA) across six states in India. These MPCAs, along with 34 established earlier in southern India with bilateral aid from DANIDA, constitute the largest

medicinal plants conservation effort in the tropical world. It is not clear if this bold programme is seen by the ministry as a part of India's commitments to CBD because the NBA is not involved.

Is there a big loss of medicinal plant species in India?

An institutional mechanism needs to be put in place to systematically assess and enlist the decline and loss of medicinal plant species and to

Threatened, Vulnerable, Endangered to Critically Endangered. Eighty-four of these species of conservation concern have been recorded in high volume trade.

There is a need to put in place a long-term systematic threat assessment programme for important biota, including medicinal plants, which can be anchored in a network of institutions who are have the competence to study different groups of plants and animals.



DK Ved

'Once lost, these species will not be reproducible through any synthetic means. It will be a huge loss for our future generations.'

monitor and assess threat to wild populations of prioritised species.

Article 8 d of CBD specifically states: 'Promote the protection of ecosystems, natural habitats and the maintenance of viable populations of species in natural surroundings.' The MoEF, however, has no long-term programme, strategy or dedicated funding for monitoring viable populations and undertaking assessment of medicinal plants.

On a relatively small scale, some efforts have been undertaken by NGOs using IUCN Red List Categories and Criteria. According to such studies, 335 wild medicinal plants of India have been identified as being under various categories of threat of extinction ranging from Near

What are the most significant losses in your opinion?

There are six plant species of high conservation concern. These are *Aconitum heterophyllum*, *Coscinium fenestratum*, *Decalepis hamiltonii*, *Picrorhiza kurroa*, *Saraca asoca* and *Taxus wallichiana*.

These six plant species are valuable medicinal plant species which are currently being used in high quantities by India's herbal industry. They are of extreme conservation concern because of the rapid decline of their wild populations. The plant materials of these species are obtained entirely from the wild. They represent

different life forms ranging from herbs to shrubs, climbers and trees. Their medicinal uses are described in the codified Indian systems of medicine, namely Ayurveda, Siddha and Unani.

What impact will the decline of these plants have?

These six species are used to treat many disease conditions, namely as anti-inflammatory, analgesic, anti-diarrhoeal, antipyretic, anti-diabetic, anti-cancer, in liver diseases as well as gynaecological disorders.

Their decline will adversely affect the current usage for health care and treatment of disease conditions. The extinction of such plant species will be an irreparable loss of the wild gene pool which has evolved over several millennia. Once lost, these species will not be reproducible through any synthetic means. It will be a huge loss for our future generations.

Are these losses because of climate change or because of over extraction?

The decline and loss of wild populations of valuable wild Indian medicinal plants is due to the combined impact of habitat loss and degradation as well as over-exploitation. Climate change is also cited as a reason but there are no serious studies that have exposed this relationship. A few

Let everybody read

Shreyasi Singh
New Delhi

ON 30 January, the opening day of the World Book Fair in New Delhi, over 300 disabled and visually impaired people gathered at Pragati Maidan's Lal Chowk amphitheatre to demand their right to read. Organised by the Centre for Internet Society and the Daisy Forum of India, the protest was part of a national Right To Read campaign for people with disabilities.

The protest meet started with a skit performed by children. There was a panel discussion, moderated by senior journalist Sagarika Ghose, on the challenges of enabling 70 million disabled Indians to read.

"Industry statistics reveal that there are about 80,000 to 100,000 books published each year in India. Out of these, barely 700 books are made available in an accessible format for people who cannot read print," says Nirmita Narasimhan, Programme Manager, Centre for Internet Society, a Bangalore-based non-profit working on digital pluralism. "India has more than 70 million people who cannot read print because they are blind, dyslexic, have cerebral palsy or other forms of physical, cognitive or sensory disability which prevents them from holding or turning the pages of a book," she adds.

The campaign's primary objective is to expedite changes in the Indian Copyright Act 1957. Currently this law has no provisions for permitting conversion of books into accessible formats for those who cannot read. In fact, in India, it is still illegal for a print-impaired person to scan a book into a computer and read it using a screen reader.

Technologies like screen readers and alternate formats like Braille, e-text, audio, large print, make it possible for people with disabilities to access the written word. Chris Friend, a World Blind Union representative, and Chair of the Global Right to Read campaign, suggests doing this also makes prudent business sense for publishers.

"It's important that we treat people not as a niche, a ghetto, but see them as an added layer of an audience segment. Such books open up gates of knowledge not only for the visually impaired or disabled, but also for the elderly, for people with poor vision. People with poor vision, low vision, are four times the number of blind people. Recognise them as a powerful market segment," said Friend.

"People insinuate that the World Blind Union wants free books. That's not true. The world's blind people just want access to books in a marketplace like everybody else."

Javed Abidi, Convenor, Disabled Rights Group, said Indian publishers were taking advantage of the shortcomings in the law. "Our publishing industry is getting away with it because there is no law right now to govern this. The print-impaired is a significant community. Denying access to books is a violation of our fundamental rights. All books should be available in minimum two formats, a CD format, and an audio book."

Since the publishing industry has a crucial role to play, the Right to Read campaign is trying to talk to them to help take things forward. Some publishers like Cambridge University Press (India) and SAGE Publishers have been forthcoming. But they concede more can be done. Manas Saikia, Head, Cambridge University Press (India) says that can only happen with continued dialogue, not adversarial positions.

"Many of our front list titles are available online which can be accessed using speech reading soft-

LAKSHMAN ANAND



An electronic magnifier



Braille calendar

ware. But there are a lot of functionalities of various formats we need to understand. We are willing to listen. And if our tweaking one format or another a little can help so many people, we want to do that," he says.

A Bill to propose amendments in the present Copyright Act is likely to be tabled before Parliament in the budget session. The Centre for Internet & Society is worried changes will be limiting.

In a press release in December 2009, the Ministry of Human Resources Development, stated conversion of books would be possible for physically challenged persons only in specialised formats like Braille or sign language without permission. All other mainstream electronic formats like MSWord or PDF will be allowed only after specific permission from the Copyright Board.

Right to Read activists say these amendments would have been useful 20 years ago but today they do little to help disabled people who do not know Braille. They are hoping the campaign will build public opinion.

Delhi is the third stop for the nationwide campaign that was launched in September 2009 with events in Chennai and Kolkata. The Indian effort is seeking support for the Treaty for the Blind proposed by the World Blind Union at the World Intellectual Property Organization.



Aconitum heterophyllum



Taxus wallichiana



Coscinium fenestratum



Decalepis hamiltonii



Picrorhiza kurroa



Saraca asoca

recent studies, outside India, have speculated about the fragmentation and decline of wild populations of some plant species in the mountains ecosystems due to climate change.

You have been working with community groups. What do you think should be the national agenda for medicinal plants conservation in this Year of Biodiversity?

Medicinal plants constitute around 40 per cent of the known diversity of vascular plant species of India. Conservation of Indian flora merits high priority. A national agenda for conservation of medicinal plants should have three major commitments:

First, an in situ conservation network of around 300 Medicinal Plant Conservation Areas (MPCAs) should be established. These MPCAs should be formed across different bio-geographic zones and biotic provinces in order to ensure protection of wild gene pool of species of conservation concern. So far only around 87 MPCAs have been established. The highest priority should be to establish MPCAs in the well known hot spots of bio-diversity: the northeast, the Western Ghats and the northwestern Himalayas. These MPCAs should be managed, wherever feasible, under the Joint Forest Management framework, so that local communities and institutions can gain livelihood and health benefits.

Secondly, reliable regional pharmacopias of medicinal plants for primary health care should be published including through multilingual websites. Also, promote millions of home and community herbal gardens through decentralised nurseries established by Self-Help Groups, Community Based Organisations and NGOs to ensure community access to medicinal plants and their health care applications.

Thirdly, an institutional network for assessment of threatened medicinal plant species and their recovery, through well designed participatory species recovery interventions involving scientists, foresters and local communities must be established.

Prices hurt poor in Delhi

Bharat Dogra and Reena Mehta
New Delhi

THE steep rise in food prices is leading to a rise in malnutrition levels in the nation's capital. This is the conclusion that emerges after interviewing several families in different parts of Delhi.

Food inflation has affected the poor as well as the middle class. But, as nutrition levels were already low among the poor and they were consuming minimum amounts of vegetables, pulses and milk, they have been the worst affected.

Sunita Devi's husband is a gardener. She lives in Motilal Nehru Camp Jhuggi. Speaking about her difficulties in feeding a family of four, she says that their consumption of pulses has come down by half in the last few months. Their daily vegetable consumption has been reduced to just 250 grams. Milk worth only Rs 3 is bought to make tea once a day.

How is milk purchased for just Rs 3? It is done by sharing. Sunita and her neighbours say that a shopkeeper here opens a one litre milk packet and divides this into several small parts, each measuring less than half a cup. This half-cup or less is then sold for Rs 3. Several families buy this small amount of milk so that the family can enjoy tea with a little milk just once a day.

Sharbati Devi's husband is a mason. She says that to feed her six member family earlier she would buy one kilo of vegetables a day but now she can afford only half a kilo of the cheapest available vegetable. Pulse consumption has come down considerably and arhar and moong have been given up. No milk or fruits for her children.

Manju Jadav's husband is a taxi driver. She says whereas earlier she cooked half a kilo of potatoes for one meal now she puts in just two or three

potatoes with a lot of water for the curry.

Hashmi Begum said that her elder son, who was doing very well in school, is now forced to take up some work as otherwise the indebted family – borrowing at 10 percent per month interest – can't survive.

Bharat Singh, a mess worker living in Munirka Gaon, says, "Dal consumption has reduced in my family from four kilos in one month to two kilos. We are primarily using channa dal. We cannot provide milk to the children who have now shifted to drinking tea. Vegetable consumption earlier was one or half a kilo per day. Now we consume not more than 250 gms. No fruits for the children and we eat non-vegetarian food very rarely. Earlier rice consumption was 20 kg a month now it has been reduced to 15 kg. I always look for places to purchase things where you can save even Rs 1."

Saraswati Lekhwari of the same colony says, "Our vegetable intake has reduced considerably. Vegetables are cooked only once a day. Fruit consumption is very less. Eggs and non-vegetarian food has almost stopped. We are reaching a stage where we will have to take a loan to run our household."

From interviews in the government quarters of Gole Market area it was clear that middle class families have also been affected.

Santosh Chaudhary, whose husband is a government assistant, says, "Now I'm forced to put so much water in dal that slowly we are forgetting the taste of real dal. Our intake of vegetables and fruits has been reduced by half. Chicken earlier was cooked five or six times a month. Now this is possible only once a month. This high price rise has created an environment of tension in the family."

Poor nutrition and increasing frustration can be a dangerous combination.



Girls attend classes at the library

Read, learn,

GAUTAM SINGH



Amrita Pritam, Manto, Qurratulain are popular

Activists praise IPCC

Rakesh Agrawal
Dehradun

ON 13 February, Jan Jagriti Mission organised a seminar on climate change in Dehradun in which environmentalists showed solidarity with RK Pachauri's IPCC report which has been under a cloud for its inaccuracies.

Rajendra Singh of Jal Biradari said the government of Uttarakhand should halt dam construction and opt for community water management through small check dams. He agreed with the IPCC findings that the Ganga is in grave danger.

Vandana Shiva, founder of Navdanya also supported the findings of the IPCC. "These findings are unquestionable," she declared. "There could have been a mistake about dates in the report, but the rest of it stands up to scrutiny."

Noted environmentalist Sunderlal Bahuguna called upon people to work more, talk less. "Individuals have to do their bit to save the environment by planting trees and not polluting rivers."

Social activist Swami Agnivesh also addressed

the gathering. He blamed the rich for causing pollution in the world. "Excessive consumerism and flawed outlook have put humanity in danger and that's the reason for global warming."

A large number of students attended the seminar along with the MLA from Tehri, Kishor Upadhyaya. The ex-vice chancellor of Garhwal University, Professor Surendra Pratap Singh, blamed America for the climate crisis, "America was behind the failure of the Copenhagen Summit. But the people of the Himalayas are not perturbed by its attitude. One day its dictatorship will end," he declared. Anil Joshi, founder of HESCO, an NGO, pointed out shortcomings in defining the GDP. "Contribution of forests, water and soil must also be added," he demanded.

The seminar adopted a Dehradun Declaration that demanded all Himalayan rivers be declared national rivers and humans be barred from coming close to glaciers. It asked for planting of broad leaved trees, water harvesting works under NREGA and for community forestry to be promoted in government forests.

GAUTAM SINGH



laugh at Rehnuma

Gautam Singh
Mumbai

In a small apartment above a shop is a library. Not unusual, you would say. But this library is in Mumbra, in suburban Mumbai, an area which is predominantly Muslim.

The library is exclusively for women. It is called 'Rehnuma' which means guide and it's named wisely because it's more than just a library.

Rehnuma, which now has around 5,000 books and 150 members, was founded in 2003 by Aawaaz-e-Niswaan (AeN) or Voice of Women, an organisation that fights for women's rights. But its story and the reasons for its birth have their roots in more violent circumstances.

After the Mumbai riots of 1992, a large population of affected Muslims shifted from Mumbai to Mumbra and this neighbourhood of Hindu-Muslim farmers and fishermen became a refuge for the victims. Though the population has grown from two lakhs to nearly eight lakhs, the facilities haven't and Mumbra has just two municipal schools which offer education only up to primary level.

The shift to Mumbra meant the discontinuation

of education for women. AeN realised that a lot of women who approached them for help at their office premises in Central Mumbai came from Mumbra, which is almost 40 km away. The women were in a state of neglect and needed a voice. And so, to fill this void, AeN set up Rehnuma.

The library is a small room lined with shelves with titles mostly in Urdu, though Hindi and some English books are represented too. Open five days a week and with a yearly membership fee of Rs 100, it is visited by women of all ages. "Mostly members choose Urdu titles and books by progressive writers like Qurratulain Hyder, Saadat Hasan Manto and Amrita Pritam. The books have been donated but we do acquire titles which members recommend," says Khan Aquila, the librarian who's been with Rehnuma ever since its inception.

"We feel comfortable here and it has become a place for social interaction," says Sheikh Shabnam, one of the members. "It's the only place where we feel at ease. Other reading rooms have only men."

Classes in basic and higher education are held for the women. The library also organises book readings, picnics to Mumbai, workshops in photography and drama, and interactions with other

NGOs. Around two years ago the members staged Safdar Hashmi's 'Aurat', an event that is still remembered. "We wanted to experience Mumbai, but earlier we never felt confident. Now we can even go alone," says Khot Sabiha.

Burqas hang behind the door in another room where a cheerful mural beams down at a class of young women writing a composition in English. "Most of the girls are drop-outs," explains Khan Aquila. "The private schools are too expensive and the municipal schools are only up to the primary level."

There is also a lack of economic opportunity in Mumbra. Most residents go to Mumbai for work. "We want to complete our education and we would like to work," says Talat Sheikh, from Azamgarh in Uttar Pradesh, now settled here.

The irony of the mural suddenly becomes clear, its sunny landscape with bright flowers in sharp contrast to the world outside the library. Mumbra isn't in any shape at all. It has open sewers and garbage dumps and broken roads with dingy buildings. Electricity and water supplies are vastly inadequate. There is just one government hospital with only seven beds meant for maternal needs. "According to officials, Mumbra is geared to cater to a population of 200,000 whereas there are close onto 800,000 people living here today," says Farhat Jahan, an activist with AeN. Mumbra is no longer a quiet suburb with clean rivers and green hills. Its now a ghetto.

The apathy of the government is apparent and there is an unmistakable air of despondency. "The people feel that government officials don't listen to them. Moreover they don't think they have any rights," says Farhat. "They don't want to speak out."

This became clear after a Jan Sunwai, (public hearing) was held in early January. A combined effort of five NGO's, including AeN, the hearing invited government officials, representatives of the minority commission and local municipal functionaries. Members of Rehnuma helped distribute pamphlets, put up photographs of Mumbra's civic problems at public places and spread the word about the hearing.

The Jan Sunwai was held at a school auditorium and attended by around 800 people. Problems relating to electricity and water supply, general health facilities and lack of livelihood were discussed. "The officials were surprised because nobody had ever asked them these questions before," says Farhat. "The people who attended praised our work though the local newspapers were conspicuous by their lack of support."

This initiative has somewhat changed the impression people had about Rehnuma. "Now they think that Rehnuma is doing something good," says Sheikh Sumbun another member. There are plans to participate in local mohalla committees, if they are formed.

"We're also putting together a group to bring out a newsletter that can be a source of information on Rehnuma's activities and connect the people of Mumbra," says Khan Aquila.

There's a knock on the door and I see an elderly gentleman with three burqa clad women waiting outside. "They've probably come to discuss some marital problem," Aquila says. "Even though Rehnuma does big things, it is after all a very small place."

But then, isn't small beautiful?

Adivasis overjoyed with land rights

Rakesh Agrawal
Sonbhadra (UP)

THOUSANDS of Adivasis living in the hinterland of Sonbhadra district in Uttar Pradesh are finally getting land titles under the Scheduled Tribes and Other Traditional Forest Dwellers (Right to Forests) Act, 2006. For decades the sword of eviction hung over their heads. Now the Adivasis look forward to a life of dignity.

"An open meeting of the villagers was held in November last year and claim forms were deposited on 11 December with the sub-divisional magistrate," says Ramashankar Bharati, president of the Forest Rights Committee (FRC) in Basauli village. "In less than two months, all 12 people who submitted claims, got land titles."

Says Rambali looking happily at his 1.5 bighas (about 0.4 ha) tucked into the plateau of the Vindhyan hills. "Now I don't need to depend on anyone to feed my children."

However, the process of allotting land hasn't been free of discrepancies. Five people got much less than they claimed and were in possession of. "I've been cultivating more than 16 bighas (4 ha) since generations, but after my claim was filed and duly verified, they gave me only 12 bighas (3 ha)," said Deenanath Katwaru.

There are other shortcomings. Basauli is a big village. Only 12 people got land rights. Some tribals here have been wrongly classified as Dalits. "The problem is many Baigas who are Adivasis were categorised as Bhumihars who are Dalits by the district administration. Now, they have to prove they have been on this land for 75 years. We have submitted petitions to the authorities. We have also requested them to look into how less land was allotted to claimants," says Bharati.

In neighbouring Baghuari village, 15 people got land rights, though 67 households had submitted claims. Those who got rights are all Adivasis and they are overjoyed. "I claimed for six bighas (about 1.5 ha) land and got it," says Vishwanath Rajgod, a marginal farmer. They say this is the result of their



Prem Narayan, principal secretary, giving title deeds

ongoing struggle. "We learnt that unity is power. Our group forced the officials to yield. They never listened to us earlier," said Ramlakhan Rajgod, a marginal farmer.

The group he is talking about is the Kaimoor Kshetra Mazadur Kisan Sangharsh Samiti, a constituent group of the National Forum of Forest People and Forest Workers (NFFPFW), a national coalition of peoples' groups fighting for the rights of forest dwellers and tribals.

The Samiti has been organising forest people and putting pressure on government officials by holding demonstrations and rallies and submitting memos ever since the Forest Rights Act was enacted in January 2008 in the Bundelkhand region of Uttar Pradesh.

"Our fight has born fruit as more than 54,000 claims have been filed in Sonbhadra district, the maximum filed so far in any district of UP. However, we have not achieved our goal as yet," said Roma, a key worker of the Samiti.

The most challenging job is to ensure all claims filed are executed. The progress in many villages is far from satisfactory. In Bahuar village, 104 claims were submitted, but only one person got land. "I got what I claimed for, that is about six bigha (1.5 ha), but others are still waiting. This has created a divide amongst us that is very unfortunate," said Devlal Agaria of Bahuar village.

The second challenge is to get people real land as

in many villages people have got land only on paper. In Gurda village, for example, only 26 Adivasi households actually got land. Sixty four have only papers to show. They say they got much less than they claimed.

"I claimed for eight bigha, but I was given much less. It is not enough for our needs," rues Bharat Lal, a marginal farmer. Others are equally dismayed. "Out of 16 bigha I claimed, all that I got are peanuts, just 0.1 ha," said Narsimah, another marginal farmer.

Discrepancies in filing claim forms and allocation of land prevails in a few other villages. In Barana village, people complained that their claim forms have been put in cold storage. However, they are determined to keep cultivating the land they possess. "We'll not leave the land. We will keep on farming. We don't know if we will get land," said Shivkumari, who has submitted a claim for 16 bigha (about 4 ha).

This, clearly, is a victory of the people who have fought a long battle against the forest department. "We're not scared of them anymore. We will keep fighting for our rights," said Daulat Devi, 58, Basauli village. This tenacity is seen in Bahuar village too which has people belonging to Garede, a backward caste.

The Samiti has had to work hard to change the mindset of people who still view the allotment of land to them as a concession by the forest department and not as a right.

When more than 200 people gathered outside the district magistrate's office to raise their voices to a team of National Human Right Commission (NHRC) members, Bharati, president, FRC, Basauli village, said, "We'll fight till the end to get land patta (lease)."

Roma immediately corrected her: "Never say patta as this is at their will and mercy. You must say *adkikar-patra* (land rights deed). The Forest Rights Act talks about patta and getting land is our right." However, this message has yet to be understood by forest dependent people since they have been living like slaves for generations.

SAMITA' S WORLD

by SAMITA RATHOR



ZAHOOR AHMAD



Dr Mohammad Maqbool Lone (left) prepares a patient for radiotherapy

Cancer rises in Kashmir

Syed Basharat
Srinagar

CANCER in Kashmir is on the rise. More cases are being detected especially in south Kashmir's Pulwama district. In fact, medical experts believe Kashmir is likely to have the highest rate of certain types of cancer in India.

Doctors here say the reasons for this rise in cancer cases includes genetic predisposition.

"Kashmiris are genetically predisposed to certain types of cancer. Environmental factors act as inducing agents," says Dr Showkat Zargar, a leading gastroenterologist who heads the department of gastroenterology at Sher-e-Kashmir Institute of Medical Sciences (SKIMS).

According to Dr Zargar, the incidence of stomach and food pipe cancer in Kashmir tops the rate in India. "Although not perfectly understood, this dreaded disease is in the genes of Kashmiris and gets activated by factors including diet," he explained. "Stomach and food pipe cancers in Kashmir constitute around 60 per cent of total cancers which is the highest in India."

Dr Mohammad Maqbool Lone, head of the department of radiotherapy and regional cancer centres at SKIMS, seconds the opinion of Dr Zargar.

He says the majority of cancer patients (70 per cent) approach doctors at the late stage of the disease, when their curative treatment is not possible. Both doctors said that the rate of the stomach and food pipe cancer found in Kashmir is followed by lung and breast cancer. "The rate of rectum, colo-rectal, ovarian and blood cancers follow breast cancer in this part of the world. In the 1980s we would diagnose some 50 cancer patients at SKIMS in one year but this number has swelled

to around 300 per year," he said.

Dr Zargar, said that the reasons for this high incidence of cancer is not perfectly understood. But diet is a factor. Kashmiris consume food which is rich in fats and proteins and contains less fresh vegetables and fruits. There is excessive salt intake especially consumption of salt tea and dried vegetables. The bacteria H-Pylori, is also prevalent.

Dr Zargar said salt tea, which is consumed by Kashmiris early morning and in the afternoon, contains nitrosamines which are co-carcinogens. "Kashmiris take hot salt tea which is the main cause of burns on their food pipe. The hot salt tea burns the mucosa which covers the upper lining of the food pipe. This causes cancer," he said. Such types of cancers are found along the Silk Route belt in Asia.

Dr Zargar said that figures of cancer in Kashmir are at par with regions having the highest incidence of gastric and food pipe cancer in the world. "Countries like Iran, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan, Japan, and even parts of China have similar incidence of cancer. The only difference is that this dreaded disease is killing our young people," he said.

Doctors dealing with cancer cases said that since detection facilities have improved particularly in the Valley, the number of cancer patients may show an increase. Interestingly, the tests conducted by medical experts in association with Cancer Society of Kashmir (CSK) in Tangdhar, a border area in district Kupwara adjacent to the Line of Control have shown amazing results. "We screened more than 1600 people there. We conducted endoscopy on 150. No case of stomach or food pipe cancer was found in these 150 people," said Dr Zargar.

This finding, he said, has motivated doctors at CSK to work on a project in remote Kupwara. CSK

is an NGO working on cancer in Kashmir. Dr Zargar who is also chairman of CSK, said that South Kashmir's four districts top the list of areas where cancer cases are on the rise. The people of North Kashmir have slight variation in their dietary habits from those in South Kashmir which, doctors said, is responsible for less number of cancer patients in Kupwara.

Doctors at SKIMS said that their findings show that Kashmiris are getting cancer 10 years earlier than patients with the same disease in the rest of the world. Dr Maqbool believes that there is a gross geographical variation in terms of the spread of cancer in Kashmir. "For example, district Kupwara in north Kashmir has reported the least number of cases while South Kashmir's district Pulwama has the highest number. But this data is based on SKIMS registration and not on any population based survey. Unfortunately we have no data base of such patients. The data we have of the last five years shows that the number of stomach and food pipe cancers has retained number one position in Kashmir. But lung cancer is rapidly increasing. It is expected that lung cancer may surpass other cancers in a decade or so. So far we detect six patients of cancer every day at SKIMS," he said.

In 2008, at SKIMS the number of patients diagnosed with cancer was 2465. The number of food pipe cancers was 395 and the number of lung cancer cases detected was 265. Stomach cancers were 177 and 148 women had breast cancer.

Giving district wise details of cancer patients, Dr Maqbool said that in 2008, district Srinagar registered 570 cases of cancer in SKIMS, the highest. Ganderbal reported 107 cases, Budgam, 257, Baramulla, 270, Anantnag, 273, Kulgam, 126, Kupwara, 106, Pulwama, 236 and Bandipora, 92. In the same year, 15 patients with cancer from Ladakh and 15 from district Ramban in Jammu were registered at SKIMS.

Dr Maqbool said that out of 2465 cancer patients registered in 2008, there were 1467 male patients, 922 females, 44 male children and 32 female children. From July 1, 1986 to June 30, 1989 Dr Zargar said that in a study in Kashmir, he along with other doctors found 1515 cases of food pipe and 966 cases of stomach cancers were registered in SKIMS. "The figures of cancer patients in those years suggested we were three to six times higher than those recorded by cancer registries in Bangalore, Madras, and Mumbai. But now unfortunately, our figures top the figures in the entire country," he said.

Dr Zargar attributes the high intake of salt tea, meat, dried vegetables, spices, to the high prevalence of gastric cancers in Kashmir. "Unless we change our dietary habits and exercise regularly, things will not change. The higher incidence of cancer has forced us to earmark Rs 20 crores to upgrade our infrastructure in the Regional Cancer Centre in SKIMS. We will shortly have Linear Accelerator and Brachy Therapy in the institute. Treatment is available but precaution is a must," Dr Zargar suggested.

Dr Maqbool suggests that besides having a population registry to build data base, there should be legislation to bring coordination among various departments. Both the doctors believe that cancer incidence in Kashmir is a concern and needs to be addressed with a positive response from the government as well as people.

Why saffron is declining

Jehangir Rashid
Srinagar

THE state government is invariably blamed for the decline in saffron production in Kashmir but people tend to forget other reasons for this disturbing trend. Although the onus of resolving this crisis rests on the political leadership, citizens too should shoulder some responsibility.

The lack of irrigation facilities, particularly sprinklers, has been cited as the main reason for declining yields. But there are social causes too.

Families that have worked hard to produce quality saffron find that the young now are no longer interested in continuing the tradition.

"We would toil hard in the fields and give all our time to this trade. That effort used to give great profits and benefits in the long term. But this is not the situation today. Youngsters don't look upon the saffron business with dignity and pride. They believe government jobs are the ultimate solution and it is here the problem starts," says Haji Mohammad Subhan, of Kranchoo-Pampore in Pulwama district. He is an old hand in the saffron sector.

"We should understand that the government cannot provide jobs to all and more so to those who have some sort of ancestral business. This should be understood by our youngsters. If they understand, then things will look up for the saffron sector. If they don't, then I am afraid you will not find



BILAL BAHADUR

Women work on declining saffron fields

many people engaged in the saffron trade in the near future. This disturbs me all the time but I am helpless and can't do much," he shrugged.

Echoing his concerns, Abdul Karim, a resident of Lethpora in the same district, cites more reasons for the low production of saffron. He hopes that the disturbing situation in Kashmir is put to rest at some point of time so that the state does not lose the glory of being a producer of quality saffron.

"Over the years the trend of constructing hotels and guest houses has increased in Kashmir. This is happening here as well. People have constructed more and more houses on saffron lands and then leased out rooms to others. This has shrunk the percentage of land available for saffron cultivation," says Karim.

This Lethpora resident says that joint families have given way to nuclear families and this too has led to more and more construction on saffron lands. "For instance, a particular plot of saffron was the joint property of a single family but as the undivided family got divided into smaller units the benefits too got divided and more houses came up naturally on saffron land," he says.

Other elders put forth yet another reason for the diminishing market value of saffron produced in Kashmir. They say that many saffron traders are not 'sincere' and the results of their insincerity have been disastrous. Very few people trust the quality of saffron produced and then sent to markets within the state and outside.

"There are many who mix corms with the saffron and earn a bad name in the market. This defames the entire trade and every saffron farmer is viewed with a suspicious eye. If we were sincere in our dealings, there would have been great demand for the saffron being produced in Kashmir," says Ghulam Qadir, a resident of Konibal.

The younger generation, however, says that the government should not allow construction on saffron lands. The government knows about its value very well. They say by turning a blind eye, the government is displaying its negligence towards the saffron business. Things will not get better in future, they say pessimistically.

"The revenue records are tampered with and permission is granted to people for constructing a house on the saffron field. This is usually done by revenue officials. If action is taken against even one such official, tampering of revenue records would have been stopped. This shows the government is not serious. So how can things get better?" asks Shabir Ahmad, a resident of Chandahar.

Nodding his head in agreement, Mohammad Shakeel, a youth of the same area says that since there has been a change in Kashmir's climatic conditions, production of saffron now depends more on sprinkle irrigation facilities than on rainfall.

"It is important that difficulties being faced in the present context are viewed with seriousness. Sprinkle irrigation facilities are a necessary requirement for saffron farming. Without it we should not expect wonderful results," says Shakeel.

Pirzada Imran, design engineer with Jain Irrigation, says that his firm is ready to provide subsidy to saffron farmers for digging bore-wells provided they approach them. He says that a group of saffron farmers can pool their resources and dig a bore-well so that sprinklers can be used.

"If you feel that the government is not serious in helping you do your job, you have to find other alternatives. If the sprinkle irrigation facility has not been provided up to this time, then the saffron farmers should come forward. We are ready to help them in the form of subsidy and hopefully there will be some change in future," says Imran.

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BRINJAL IS KING IN KERALA VILLAGE

Royal variety pitted against Bt

Shree Padre
Mararikulam (Kerala)

IN days of yore, the Mararikulam brinjal was much favoured by the royal families of Travancore and Amabalapuzha in Kerala. Slender, long and green, this variety has been grown in Mararikulam on the Kerala coast for centuries. The village would supply its choicest brinjals to royalty.

Mararikulam knows its brinjal is very special in flavour and character. It has saved its brinjal from extinction and boosted its popularity. It takes pride in being the home of this brinjal.

So, even as the debate over Bt Brinjal rages in the rest of the country, Mararikulam has already figured things out and has an action plan in place. It is clear that it will not accept seed company Monsanto's genetically modified version of the brinjal. Instead, it is considering applying for a Geographical Indicator to protect the uniqueness of the Mararikulam brinjal, just as has been done in the case of the Alphonso mango and Darjeeling tea.

In December, the village panchayat of Mararikulam North organised a week-long brinjal festival that attracted leading lights of the anti-Bt brinjal movement – activists, scientists and others from all over India.

"The Mararikulam brinjal has been silently handed from generation to generation. Like scores of other native varieties, it has withstood adverse conditions and developed levels of tolerance. No one has studied its nutritional aspects and other characteristics," says PC Varghese, a local entomologist and retired scientist.

Brinjal is a part of the culinary tradition of Mararikulam. It is cooked in a variety of ways. "We make *theeyal*, a Travancore special curry,

chutney, *thoran*, *bajji* and a host of side dishes. We cook brinjal at home at least two or three times a week," says Sridevi, a housewife.

RESCUE MISSION: Long before the controversy of Bt Brinjal erupted, Mararikulam had started building community efforts to revive their native brinjal variety.

The story goes back three years. This panchayat has 8,000 families. More than 50 per cent are in the BPL category. There are very few landless people. But individual holdings are small, starting from five to 10 cents and going up to an acre. Some families have around 40 to 50 cents. Being very close to the sea, the soil is sandy.

There was a time when people here earned their livelihoods from fishing, coir work and a few from small farming. The intrusions made by foreign mechanized fishing trawlers dealt a blow to the livelihood of fisher folk. Root wilt caused a decrease in coconut production making life difficult for coir workers. The younger generation lost interest in farming. People also thought that it was not possible to grow vegetables in sandy soil.

Recalls Priyesh Kumar, the young and dynamic president of this CPI(M)-led panchayat: "Since our state is dependent on other states for vegetables we have been giving priority to homestead organic vegetable farming. To boost cultivation, our Panchayat Development Society gives small incentives for growing vegetables and has built up a good marketing system."

The panchayat began to discuss which vegetables to grow. It was reminded that Mararikulam has a brinjal variety of its own. The plant grows big and yields brinjal through the year. It is a perennial. With pruning and manuring, it yields

Mararikulam is considering applying for a Geographical Indicator to protect the uniqueness of its brinjal, like the Alphonso mango.



Omana and husband Haridas with their brinjal plants

fruit for three to four years.

In the old days this brinjal was known as the Karappuram brinjal. With the introduction of high-yielding varieties, this traditional variety began fading away. Kerala Agricultural University (KAU) had itself released four varieties – Neelima, a hybrid variety and three bacterial resistant selections - Soorya, Haritha and Swetha.

But the panchayat selected the Mararikulam brinjal and jumped at the idea of popularizing it. "Promoting our brinjal would, we hoped, give a special status to all the vegetables we painstakingly grow here organically," they thought.

As the lowlands are marshy, cultivation of vegetables is possible only in summer. Another traditional alternative was to plant on raised bunds in the fields. In the old days almost every household had a few brinjal plants in their homesteads with a sprinkling of other vegetables.

Families had stopped growing the traditional variety, but when the members of the panchayat suggested that it be revived the response was enthusiastic. People saw the Mararikulam brinjal as their 'own variety'. They wanted to bring it back and assert their ownership over it.

While searching for more information, the panchayat came across Vasudeva Pillai, 96, who had cultivated this brinjal since the time he was a boy. He was the last in a chain of Mararikulam brinjal farmers.

Pillai had a small paddy field. In his youth, the marketable surplus of vegetables was carried as headloads to Alleppey town which is 17 km away. The choicest brinjals were sent to the royal families.

Pillai passed away a few weeks before the Mararikulam brinjal festival. His daughter-in-law, Kusumam Gopalakrishnan, is a teacher. She remembers: "Not a year has passed without growing brinjal in our fields. Even at the ripe age of 96, he used to do some physical work on the farm."

The first urgent task was to mass produce the seeds. Last year, the panchayat identified 25 farmers who were cultivating the brinjal. A cash incentive of



Priyesh Kumar, president, Mararikulam panchayat



Kerala finance minister Dr Thomas Issac visiting farmers



Brinjal plants for homesteads



Kusumam Gopalakrishnan holding a plaque given to Vasudevan Pillai for brinjal conservation



Rs 1,000 each was given to them. In turn, they had to plant selected local varieties and produce seeds in bulk.

Haridas and Omana of Panakunnu are two such seed producers. They have been cultivating this brinjal since a decade. The family grows more than they require. Their 30 plants permit them to sell a few kilograms every week to the Panchayat Development Society which pays them Rs 14 per kg. "We like this variety because it is fleshier. The seeds start some distance from the stalk. It is tasty and a wide range of preparations are possible," they say.

BRINJAL BOX OFFICE: Mahesh Bhatt's documentary, *Poison on the Platter*, on the dangers of genetic modification of food crops was a catalyst in the Mararikulam brinjal movement. The premiere of the film was held in March 2009 at Kochi. Priyesh Kumar, along with Vasu Pillai, the grand old brinjal farmer and Viswan, a retired agriculture development officer, attended.

It was then that the outside world came to know about the Mararikulam brinjal. Mahesh Bhatt, Ajay Kanchan, director of the film, and Devinder Sharma, noted agriculture writer, were present. They were impressed to see a panchayat present a variety of brinjal they had conserved for centuries. Vasu Pillai, the brinjal saver, and Viswan, the motivator were honored on this occasion.

At the premiere the Panchayat expressed apprehensions that the very existence of this heritage might be threatened by Bt Brinjal. They knew how every variety of cotton that India had was wiped out by Bt Cotton, how Bt Cotton led to farmers losing control over their seeds, as well as choice of seeds. Traditional seeds and non-GM hybrids in cotton farming have become history in less than a decade!

The film and the association of like-minded activists gave considerable encouragement to the panchayat. As the Bt Brinjal controversy snowballed, they decided to hold a brinjal festival at Mararikulam. This mass awareness programme would be backed by producing brinjal seedlings in bulk.

Recounts Viswan: "It was a challenge. We had to keep the plants ready for distribution during the festival. There was only one month's time. Some experts said it would be impossible without building a greenhouse." Drawing courage from his past experience, Viswan decided to get the plants produced in simple raised beds under shade, using NREGA funds. Much against warn-



Krishna Kurup with his now famous brinjal pickle



PC Varghese with his tricho card

ings, they got very good germination rates. By spending Rs 50,000, they could raise 40,000 plants – and within time.

MONEY PLANT: News of the upcoming brinjal festival inspired cooking enthusiast Krishna Kurup. A retired person, he has traveled all over India. Trying out new recipes is his passion. Within a week, he prepared half a dozen pickles from the Mararikulam brinjal.

The news reached the panchayat president who tasted the products. He was impressed. The SHGs attached to Marari Marketing Ltd started making three types of brinjal pickle. "During the festival, we sold 2000 packets and bottles that we prepared in a hurry," says MS Sajith, general manager of Marari Marketing Ltd, a company owned by the Kudumbasree units of Aryad and Kanjikuzhy Block Panchayats. Kudumbasree is a women's empowerment project of the state government of Kerala.

During the festival NSS (National Service Scheme, the community service wing of students under Central Ministry of Youth Affairs and Sports) students planted two brinjal plants in every house in five out of 17 wards of this one-village panchayat. The panchayat plans to cover the rest of the area very soon.

"We can't create awareness about vegetable production or love for native varieties by speeches, demonstrations or seminars alone. What we need is grassroots action. Our panchayat has coined two slogans and believes in them. The first one is 'Farming all over, farming for all.'

The second is 'Farming for health, pleasure and income.' This is what made it necessary for us to build a good marketing arrangement for the vegetables grown by our villagers."

The 'grow more vegetables' campaign is going on throughout Kerala. Mararikulam has gone an important step further – to promote only organic farming and to give buy-back support at panchayat level. Two seasons ago, for the first time in the state, the panchayat started announcing floor prices for vegetables. Barring the adjacent Kanjikuzhi panchayat, no other panchayat in Kerala has done this.

Explains panchayat secretary Kalesh: "Our support price for popular vegetables like amaranthus, long beans and brinjal is Rs 8, Rs 12 and Rs 8, respectively. Even if the market price falls further, we pay this minimum price. If the

market price goes up, we give the existing market price. For example, the present purchase rate for brinjal is Rs 14 as against the floor price of Rs 8."

An expert committee of university scientists and officers from the horticulture department fix the floor price once a year. To decide the selling price, there is a farmer's committee at panchayat level that meets every week. A van does the rounds to two collection centres of the village where farmers pool their produce. Each registered farmer is provided with a pass book that maintains transparency in deals. Cash payments are promptly made to farmers.

Though there are many vegetable shops near the Panchayat Development Society's office, it has done considerable business. The total turnover during 2008 and 2009 was Rs 21, 60,000. The declaration of floor price in May 2008 did so far resulted in a loss of Rs 2, 50,000 to the society in two seasons. The panchayat has requested the state government to reimburse this amount.

FARMING PROJECTS: The success of vegetable production doesn't lie only in prices and marketing. Priyesh Kumar, the panchayat president, has smart strategies.

One such plan is to do time-bound farming projects.

The local Kanichukulangara temple needs 600 Palayankondan variety of bananas for the feast it organizes during an annual festival. The temple authorities used to buy chemically grown bananas from Tamil Nadu. The panchayat talked to the temple authorities and offered them a deal. The village itself would supply them organically grown bananas.

Once the agreement was clinched, the panchayat had to make sure the bananas were grown in time for the temple's festival. It convened a farmer's meet and presented an action plan. The farmers agreed. Sixty farmers were involved in the project. Temple authorities were only too happy to pay a good price. The project benefited both.

The panchayat then went full steam ahead with other plans in the pipeline. It implemented a People's Colocasia project, it got villagers to grow *Amaranthus* for a temple and to grow *nendran* to make chips during Onam. The panchayat set a deadline for each farm project, adhered to by farmers. It built their confidence. More and more families joined part-time farming.

But what happens if there is over-production of the Mararikulam brinjal? "No problem," smiles Priyesh Kumar. "We will request HortiCorp (Kerala State Horticultural Products Development Corporation Ltd, a public sector undertaking) to buy the excess. We did this successfully when our villagers produced yam in bulk."

BRINJAL PROTECTION: Shortly after the news that the Genetic Engineering Approval Committee (GEAC) had given clearance for Bt Brinjal was announced, Mararikulam villagers under the leadership of their MLA, Dr Thomas Issac, who is also the finance minister of Kerala, got together and took an oath to "Stop Bt Brinjal and save Mararikulam brinjal."

"Many of our villagers might not know the intricacies of genetically modified foods," said Priyesh Kumar. "But one reality has to be noted. Even a lesser known panchayat like ours debated it. The discussion that was confined to the intelligentsia has percolated down to common people here."

Now that the threat of Bt Brinjal has been removed, villagers are debating how to preserve the identity and quality of the Mararikulam brinjal.

"In one way, the Bt issue was a blessing in disguise," says PC Varghese. "Now the ball is in our court. We have to get our brinjal variety studied and then pass on the details of its good character. That way, our responsibility and the panchayat's has grown bigger."

Impurity of the typical Mararikulam brinjal is an issue that is top of the mind. The slender long variety has got mixed up or naturally pollinated with another brinjal variety which is slightly shorter and stouter.

"Purification of variety is essential. If we get funds, we can do that in two years. By selection and hybridization, the prickling thorns present in the plants can also be eliminated," says Dr TR Gopalakrishnan, associate director of research in Kerala Agriculture University's (KAU) Vegetable Mission.

"Mararikulam brinjal performs well even under slight shaded condition unlike the hybrids. Though we haven't studied it in detail yet, it looks as if it is somewhat tolerant to pests," he said.

Priyesh Kumar thinks scientists need to come up with better management methods and improve the yield of this variety. "This is where we require the intervention of science and not in bringing us a type of brinjal whose safety is not established."

Dr RR Nayar, agronomist and a former director of research, KAU, advocates trying for a Geographical Indicator for the Mararikulam brinjal.

"Though the Mararikulam brinjal is present in the gene pool collection of the university it has not been given due attention by plant breeders," he says. "It is a fecund plant and can go on bearing fruit. The hybrids, on the other

hand, have bearing and non-bearing phases. The total average production of fruits this plant gives in three or four years has not been quantified."

PC Varghese points out that Bt Brinjal was being introduced to fight the fruit and shoot borer pest. But the truth is that it is not as big a pest as it is made out to be.

"If our native varieties didn't have tolerance abilities, they would have been wiped out long time ago. The fruit and shoot borer can be easily controlled through eco-friendly methods like tricho cards." These cards, pasted with thousands of eggs have to be put to use before a pest attack. It is best to tie the cards during transplanting of seedlings and repeat the procedure once a fortnight.

Varghese, who runs a nursery, sells these cards for Rs 40 each. Two cards would be enough for one acre. "With a little training, farmers themselves can



Women farmers attended the brinjal festival

Now that the threat of Bt Brinjal has been removed, villagers are debating how to preserve the identity and quality of the Mararikulam brinjal.

make these cards. Paddy farmers in Palakkad have already learnt the method," he says.

RISING POPULARITY: The popularity of the Mararikulam brinjal is spreading. A resident's association in Ernakulam has contacted Mararikulam panchayat to advise them how to grow these brinjals in their terrace gardens. A few farmers from other villages have placed orders for seeds and sent money orders. The Alappuzha town panchayat has bought 300 plants from here.

Ajay Kanchan, director of *Poison in the Platter* visited Mararikulam to make one more documentary on its brinjal.

"See, we have a brinjal variety that is being cultivated since centuries. It's unfair to impose a new variety here whose character you don't know for sure. Basically this is a bio-diversity issue," said Dr Thomas Issac, local MLA and Finance Minister of Kerala. He has been taking active interest in the issue. Added he: "Over 100,000 people visited our brinjal festival. No other panchayat has taken so much trouble to preserve a vegetable variety of theirs."

"The brinjal festival was a direct challenge to the Government of India," says Sridhar, an activist from Thanal, a Thiruvananthapuram based voluntary organization which took part in it. "The people asked the Union government, are you with us to protect our traditional varieties or are you with Monsanto to promote their proprietary seeds and enslave farmers? This festival and the decision to grow the Mararikulam brinjal in every village home ensures that everybody knows about the Bt Brinjal issue. Where else can we see such empowerment?"

"This is not Mararikulam's voice in solitude," he said. "It is the voice of thousands of such villages and millions of farmers."

Traditional knowhow was ignored

Civil Society News
New Delhi

A genetically modified variety once released for use cannot be recalled. It is not like a car which can be taken back by the manufacturer," says AV Balasubramanian of the Centre for Indian Knowledge Systems (CIKS) in Chennai.

A GM variety goes on to have far-reaching consequences. It influences other varieties. Not enough is known about the effect it can have on the health of human beings. Finally, consumers are denied a choice because labelling in the case of a brinjal is impossible.

"Scientists looking for solutions must therefore first of all be aware of what is state of the art," says Balasubramanian.

The problem in the case of brinjal is a pest, the fruit and shoot borer. Bt Brinjal's performance in dealing with this pest has been evaluated against the use of chemicals and pesticides.

But Bt Brinjal should really have been compared to the practices under indigenous technical knowledge which has eco-friendly solutions for dealing with the fruit and shoot borer.

Balasubramian says the Genetic Engineering Approval Committee (GEAC) suffered from an obvious lack of members with thorough knowledge and expertise. There was also a lack of continuity as well as bureaucrats appointed to head it kept changing.

Had it been more thorough, the GEAC would have looked at the indigenous practices that have been documented by the Indian Council of Agricultural Research (ICAR) in 2000.

Under ICAR's National Agriculture Technology Project, indigenous practices were collected and compiled in a total of five documents in seven volumes. There were 4,879 practices which were then validated and cross-validated.

Of these 111 were subjected to experimental testing and validation by ICAR institutes, state agriculture departments and universities. They pertained to pest control, crop protection, farm implements, weather forecasting and so on.

Among these were two practices for controlling the fruit and shoot borer in brinjal. Tests showed that these practices were as effective as chemical pesticides and of course much safer.

Balasubramian says that given this experience there is no need to use technologies involving genetically modified crops with all their attendant dangers and risks.

'If seeds are in foreign hands, India is not free'

Dr Pushpa M. Bhargava has strongly criticised the way in which genetically modified (GM) crops are being introduced in India. He has said that there is reason to be concerned about the control that corporations like Monsanto will have over Indian agriculture. His views matter because he is an internationally respected scientist who was involved in the setting up of the Department of Biotechnology and was its director.

When activists petitioned the Supreme Court against how approvals were being given to GM products, the court appointed Dr Bhargava as observer on decision-making in the Genetic Engineering Approval Committee (GEAC).

Civil Society spoke to Dr Bhargava in Hyderabad on what he thought of Environment Minister Jairam Ramesh's decision to put the introduction of Bt Brinjal on hold till concerns over public health were addressed.



Dr Pushpa M. Bhargava

How do you see the functioning of GEAC?

In my view the functioning of the GEAC has been an absolute disaster. Half its members don't attend its meetings. There is conflict of interest. The secretary in the department of biotechnology, MK Bhan, is not even a scientist. No one has ever heard of him. The Indo-US Knowledge Initiative on Agriculture is not in the interests of India. We should be addressing organic agriculture and the advance of hybrids so that we do not depend on multinational companies for our seeds.

There have been umpteen scientific papers on the adverse effects of GM crops. None of these papers, written by eminent scientists, has been discussed at the GEAC. Except for one or two members the rest don't even read. There is a nexus in the US between multinational companies, their government and our own political, scientific and bureaucratic circles. Decisions taken are in the interests of the companies. You can see this in the reaction to the moratorium on Bt Brinjal.

Jairam Ramesh has said the GEAC should move from 'approval' to 'appraisal'.

Jairam Ramesh is aware, intelligent and certainly not corrupt. He is genuinely committed to the welfare of the country. For him to take such a decision, despite some important members of the Union cabinet being in favour of Bt Brinjal, shows tremendous courage. He is competent and logical. The minister recognises that we need a new independent authority with proper terms of reference. For instance, for 84 crops we have developed sound integrated pest management and bio-pesticides. The 2001 Agricultural Policy Resolution in Parliament said we must use integrated pest management. It would work for brinjal as well. I have research papers. Why do we not do it? Because we do not get anything out of it in terms of money.

Secondly, do we really need GM? If there is no alternative, then what are the tests to be done? I have suggested 30 tests. Only five or six were done. There should be an independent testing mechanism. You need to set up an institution for that and compare the results independently. If tests are positive and approved then you need to carefully monitor. GEAC is neither competent nor independent. It is incredible the way Bt Brinjal was approved. There were amazing mistakes. The chairman of the expert committee, Arjula Reddy, told me over the phone at that he was under tremendous pressure to give approval. I said, 'follow your conscience'. But approval was given. It is now a matter of public record that he was under pressure. Why wasn't this looked into? What kind of pressure and from whom?

The minister has also called for a greater role for the public sector in agricultural research.

Greater public sector involvement is essential for the seeds business. Whoever controls agriculture controls India. Seventy per cent of our people live in villages. Food security and farmers' security are at stake. To control agriculture all you have to do is control seed production. If seeds are in foreign hands, then India is not a free country. There was a general consensus that if Jairam Ramesh said 'yes' to Bt Brinjal, a lot of other crops would follow.

Business

- Enterprise
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Anu Solar unplugs huge market

Civil Society News
Bangalore

EVERYONE worries about rising electricity bills. But go to buy a solar geyser and what puts you off is the price. It is Rs 38,000 for a 200 litre one. The government does give a 10.5 per cent interest subsidy but that doesn't set the market on fire. So, how do you buy a solar geyser and cut down your electricity bill?

Anu Solar has created a buzz in Bangalore with a business model which could be a solution to installing affordable solar geysers. It already has 8,000 customers. The company is close to showing how the use of solar energy can be scaled up by breaking through the price barrier.

Anu Solar, set up by TJ Joseph, manufactures a range of solar and LED products and you can see various models of lamps, lights, inverters, batteries in his factory located down a bumpy road in north Bangalore's Peenya Industrial Area.

But it is with solar geysers that the company breaks new ground. Anu Solar will fit a solar water heating unit in your home for as little as Rs 3,900 – Rs 2,000 as installation charges and Rs 1,900, which is refundable, for the unit.

It then meters your consumption and issues a bill every two months. For instance, if you consume 200 litres per day, you pay just Rs 160 a month. Conversely, a single ordinary geyser consumes at least Rs 450 worth of electricity to deliver the same amount of hot water.

The service is called i-Hot. Like any utility, his company prints bills and collects payments.

It is, as Joseph says, an irresistible offer. He has over 4,120 applications for the i-Hot service still pending.

"It is simple economics," says Somanna, a trade union leader and employee of Bharat Heavy Electrical, a public sector company. "I have had no problem with it. Ah yes, there was once a minor air block which my plumber repaired."

Bangalore's cool weather means people require hot water for bathing through the year. The city has 1.4 million homes. Weather patterns are similar in south Karnataka. Unless the temperature drops below 18 degrees Celsius for two consecutive days, the consumer is assured of hot water.

There are other cities, like Pune, where i-Hot could expand, says Joseph. Suddenly, a huge mar-



TJ Joseph at his factory

Unless the temperature drops below 18 degrees Celsius for two consecutive days, the consumer is assured of hot water. There are other cities, like Pune, where i-Hot could expand. A huge market for solar geysers, the stuff of green dreams, is waiting out there.

ket for solar geysers, the stuff of green dreams, is waiting out there.

But Joseph cannot meet this demand. His finance company, the Nagarjuna Credit and Capital Private Ltd is going broke. It has been financing i-Hot at a low rate of interest assuming that the government's interest subsidy was available to it.

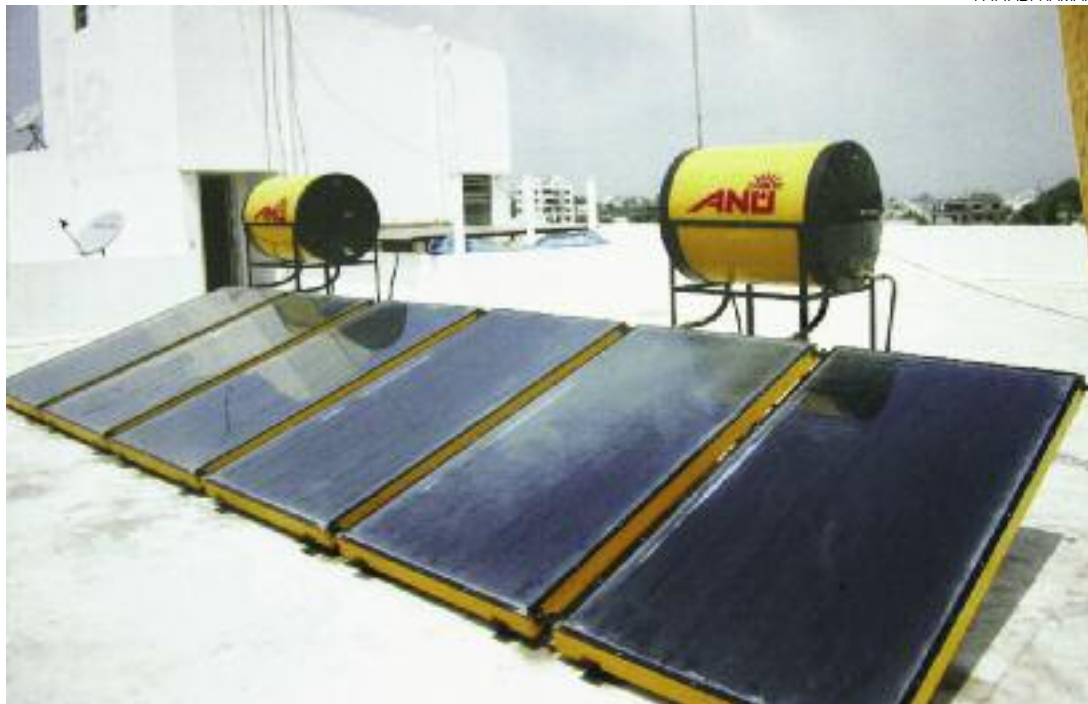
But, according to guidelines, say government officials, only the person who is buying the solar geyser for his own use is entitled to the interest subsidy. So Joseph has had no choice but to borrow money at 14.5 per cent interest to get i-Hot

going. He says he has invested his life's savings into his venture.

From existing customers i-Hot has earned around Rs 17 lakhs from collection of dues. "I am using this money for pending orders of 100 units when the demand is really in thousands," he explains. "Recovery of money is not an issue when you give a priceless service."

His finance company has written to IREDA saying as an energy saving company it is perfectly eligible for subsidy which it should get at zero per cent interest. It has refuted any risks would accrue to IREDA. "We have been told verbally we

PATTABI RAMAN



Anu Solar's heating unit

PATTABI RAMAN

There wasn't much enthusiasm for the five per cent interest scheme. In 2005, the interest subsidy was further reduced to two per cent. Anu Solar then took over Nagarjuna Credit and Capital Private Ltd and began disbursing loans to customers at their doorstep. That worked and business began to grow. Anu Solar sold around 4000 to 5000 units per year.

Then in 2006, the price of copper worldwide increased so much that the cost of solar geysers shot up by almost 80 per cent. Anu Solar's sales figures sank like a stone.

Things began to look up in 2008. New technologies like the Evacuated Tube Collector were introduced and Anu Solar readily inculcated them. The new technologies made the unit 30 per cent cheaper and sales began an upward climb. The number of geyser units sold has increased to 10,000 since 2008.

Anu Solar's flat plate collectors also have a film of black chromium coated copper which is more efficient as a conductor of heat

Each home in Bangalore, he says, should be using a solar geyser. But the solar industry's offerings are not found attractive by people.

Joseph figured that owning a solar heating unit was not something which made people feel proud. You go to a house warming and the family will take you around to show off their new home. You will be shown all the expensive fittings in the bathroom. But which owner takes you to the terrace to admire a solar water heating unit basking in the sun, he asks.

So he tried to make the solar heating unit look more attractive. He points to the picture of a solar panel next to a water tank, painted in matching colours with a little pump in between. The idea flopped since people didn't want to use a pump. It consumed very little electricity a 'mere circulation pump,' says Joseph but people did not like it.

With i-Hot, Joseph has finally broken the price barrier and unlocked a high volume low price market for the solar geyser business. In terms of profit, though, his accounts would look grim.

The minimum charge for i-Hot is Rs 160 per month and the present average billing is Rs 180. Even at zero per cent interest his finance company will recover its investment in six years time only if each consumer pays Rs 200 per month.

Would it not be wiser then to just raise the monthly tariff for hot water? Joseph does not agree. He says at this price and rate, he has caught people's attention.

His company is eligible for benefits under CDM (Clean Development Mechanism) but that money is just loose change, he says.

"In Apollo Hospital we installed our solar heating units at a total cost of Rs 40 lakhs. The investment was done by us. We are saving the hospital Rs 44,000 per month. We reduced carbon emissions by 640 metric tonnes per year and we will probably be paid only Rs 25,000 per annum under CDM," he points out.

"The cost of my venture has been Rs 32.86 crores," he points out. "I have reduced carbon emissions to the tune of 53,644 metric tonnes per year in Bangalore city. I have saved the government from the hassle of investing in 5.79 MW of conventional power by installing solar geysers."

Technologies like the Evacuated Tube Collector were introduced and Anu Solar readily inculcated them. These made the unit 30 per cent cheaper.

will get the interest free subsidy from April 2010. But it will not be from retrospective effect," he says.

The non conventional energy business sinks or swims according to government policies and global trends. So, Anu Solar's fortunes too have swung from boom to bust over the years.

Joseph is a chartered accountant from Travancore who got interested in alternative energy through his interactions with professors at the Indian Institute of Science. In the early 1980s Dr HS Mukunda was experimenting with biomass gasification. He got Joseph involved and the two came to Delhi to seek funding from the Department of Non Conventional Energy. But biomass-related energy failed to take off for many reasons.

Instead in 1989 Joseph began testing the waters for thermal solar energy. He was an early bird into a sector where there were just three players. He changed the name of his family held company, Peenya Alloys Pvt Ltd into Anu Solar and began selling solar water heating systems.

At that time, the government gave a 40 per cent subsidy on solar geysers. A solar geyser which cost Rs 10,000, was available to the consumer for just Rs 6,000. So Anu Solar's sales pitch was "Buy a solar geyser at the cost of an electric geyser."

In those years not many consumers were interested. A lot of explaining had to be done. If a customer couldn't get it, Joseph would turn up him-



Joseph pointing to areas covered by i-Hot

PATTABI RAMAN

self to explain. Business was chugging along and Joseph recalls he had 300 buyers the first year.

But in 1993 the government suddenly withdrew the subsidy and Anu Solar found itself in hot water. "For two years there was no growth," recalls Joseph. "The government's inconsistent policies are done with no evaluation."

Instead, the government introduced an interest subsidy scheme. You could take a loan from a nationalised bank to buy the solar geyser and you would need to pay only five per cent interest. "But a credibility gap gets created. People don't understand why the earlier subsidy was withdrawn. Bank managers find it a pain to process small loan applications. It is not liberally given," he says.

Govt CSR guidelines too timid

Shreyasi Singh
New Delhi

IN December 2009, the Ministry of Corporate Affairs released a four-page document, *Voluntary Guidelines on Corporate Social Responsibility*, a set of principles aimed at helping Indian companies shape their CSR programmes.

The document which has sections on core elements, fundamental principles and implementation guidance for CSR initiatives, has attracted considerable flak.

The ministry is apparently keen on feedback and open to reviewing its document for further improvement. To start this process, the Business and Community Foundation (BCF) held a panel discussion with experts in conjunction with the India International Centre.

"The last thing companies will do is to follow a government note on voluntary guidelines," said Professor Sri Ram Khanna who chaired the discussion.

"A fragile and loosely-tied document like this is unlikely to have any real impact," said Dr Aqueel Khan, Association for Stimulating Knowhow (ASK), a capacity building institution which enables companies to achieve sustainable socio-economic development. "The document has no flavour of accountability. It need not have been prescriptive. It should have had detailed principles and a core operational framework which is missing. There should have been standards to measure performance, set accountability."

"What's worse is that the guidelines are more oriented to traditional CSR and welfare programmes like building schools and community infrastructure around company operations. Even the use of terms like care for stakeholders, respect for worker's rights, is questionable. I don't understand why there is so much fear in this document," said Dr Khan.

The ministry's voluntary guidelines say a company's CSR policy should normally cover the following core elements – care for all stakeholders, ethical functioning, respect for worker's rights and welfare, respect for human rights, respect for environment, activities for social and inclusive development.

Khan says these terms tend to confine CSR to public relations, or at best, charity targeted at keeping the company's immediate community satisfied.

S Sen, Deputy Director General, Confederation of Indian Industry (CII) said the ministry's voluntary guidelines were a crucial tool for inclusive growth and for forging Public Private People Partnerships. CSR is still an evolving concept, he said,


and we should recognise that.

The ministry's document has also been criticised for not even attempting to define parameters of how to test the success and impact of CSR programmes.

Viraf Mehta of Partners in Change, a non-profit, said the voluntary guidelines must be read in context with ISO 26000, an international standard that aims at developing a global consensus on what social responsibility means and the issues

that need to be addressed. ISO 26000 will provide guidance on translating principles into effective actions, refining best practices and disseminating this information.

"We need to understand how our guidelines will be aligned to such international standards. In its present form, the guidelines are light, non-substantial. It's very much a work-in-progress," said Mehta. "But it does offer us opportunities."



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Jatropha spreads as debate continues

Civil Society News
New Delhi

Is the growing of jatropha for the extraction of biofuel a solution or a problem? This long-standing question once again dominated discussions at the 7th International Biofuels Conference held in Delhi in the second week of February even as cultivation of jatropha has been increasing and issues such as availability of seeds, marketing opportunities and technical support have been sorted out.

Proponents of biodiesel are all for the promotion of non-edible oilseeds as a substitute for fossil fuels. They feel this would reduce India's reliance on conventional energy sources as well to curb greenhouse gas emissions. But sections of civil society do not buy the claim that cultivation of jatropha will necessarily bolster rural employment and income. They argue that production of biodiesel will seriously jeopardise food security and lead to agricultural land grab by corporate investors hankering after profits.

The biofuels conference was organised by Winrock International India (WII), a New Delhi-based NGO working in the area of clean and renewable energy, natural resources management and climate change, in partnership with Indian Oil Corporation Limited and the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN).

Dr Ashok Khosla, president, IUCN, who delivered the inaugural address of the conference, struck an unambiguous note of warning. "In our quest for short-term optimising of the energy demands, we should not focus just on one alternative as it would mean sub-optimising bigger systems," he said. And that, indeed, was the dominant theme of the debate that unfolded at the conference.

AK Mukerji, WII vice chairman and former director-general (forests), Government of India, placed the scenario in perspective in the course of moderating one of the sessions at the two-day conference: "One has to tread carefully. The pros and cons should be weighed with care and due

diligence. Taking into account the long-term impact of biofuel cultivation, let us start small scale and proceed step by step. Let's not rush in."

The conference was held against the backdrop of the recent announcement of the Indian Biofuels Policy by the ministry of new and renewable energy. Besides a slew of significant measures – a National Biofuel Fund to encourage the development and utilisation of second-generation biofuels, setting up of a National Biofuel Coordination Committee under the chairmanship of the Prime Minister and creating a Biofuel Steering Committee under the Union Cabinet Secretary – the policy envisages a 20 per cent blending of biofuels in diesel and ethanol by 2017 to cut carbon emissions and combat climate change.

The current stage of production technology incorporates lessons from past failures, latest advances in plant science and innovative farming methods. Today, there are farmers around the country who cultivate jatropha on wasteland in the fallow season and then return to their regular crops in the growing season. India has 50 million hectares of culturable wasteland.

Yet, the question of food security remains because the scenario is still far from being ideal. Fertile farmland and open forest areas are being encroached upon by jatropha cultivators. As Neil Bird, an international expert on biofuels, pointed out at the conference, even if India were to meet its biofuels targets in the near future, it would most definitely need to expand agricultural land and significantly step up farm productivity. In this context, Balakrishna Gowda, professor of forestry and environment science in Bangalore's University of Agricultural Sciences, emphasised that "agricultural production has decreased due to impoverishment of the soil".

Gowda, who is also the project coordinator, Biofuels Park, Hassan, added: "We must use traditional methods to replenish the land, develop the value chain at the grassroots level, in the villages." Under the project that he runs, 2,500 vil-

lages in Hassan district of Karnataka are to be brought under jatropha cultivation. "We started two and a half years ago. We have already covered 2,000 villages, 50 of which are 100 per cent biofuel villages. They contribute to the feedstock to ensure that supply of oilseeds is available round the year," he said.

But the experience isn't even across the country. Ramesh Sharma of Ekta Parishad, focussing on the situation in Chhattisgarh, warned that the small central Indian state was being transformed "from a rice bowl to an industrial grazing ground". Chhattisgarh has 1.87 million hectares of wasteland, but is, according to him, losing large tracts of open forest land to the greed of those who want to make a killing from jatropha.

In his presentation, Sharma said: "Common property land is being targeted for jatropha cultivation even as the tribals are being denied their claims under the Forest Rights Act. People are being sent to jail for opposing jatropha cultivation."

The question to be asked is: isn't this unseemly hurry a sign that all is not well on the ground. Y.B. Ramakrishna, chairman, Biofuel Task Force, government of Karnataka, said: "In the din of the debate, we are losing sight of the fact that there are alternatives to jatropha and they should be actively pursued."

BB Choudhary, general manager – biofuels, IOC, said: "All the stakeholders should be involved actively in this discussion. The success or failure of biofuels will depend on how effectively all the stakeholders – policy-makers, investors, farmers, oil companies and various government departments – come together to make this work. A long-term engagement and view are of utmost importance."

Biodiesel is an urgent necessity, said Choudhary, because "there is no immediate replacement in sight for transportation fuels, which account for 25 per cent of the world's greenhouse gas emissions". He added: "The current challenges are the lack of sustainable business models and the absence of credible organisations across the value chain."

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Insights

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Stay awake citizens

V RAVICHANDAR

If you peruse the city papers over the last decade or more, the same set of woes tend to befall our cities with monotonous regularity. Water and power shortages, poor sanitation, mounting garbage, health scares (remember the plague panic, swine flu, dengue), gridlock traffic, insufficient public transportation, road accidents, lack of pedestrian sidewalks, city scams, building violations, lok ayukta raids, shrinking green spaces, citizen apathy, land grab and street crime continue to be part of our urban landscape and our way of life.

Come monsoon and like a bad record, it is about some poor folks getting washed down drains, flooding of low lying areas, potholes galore and roads not fit even for the cattle class. The official response is to mention a slew of intended projects often running into meaningless crores. This is supposed to be the panacea for fixing our problems and the system wishes us to believe that this time it will be done in a manner dramatically different from the past. We are a country that spurs into action only when faced with a crisis with no option except one. Think liberalization. Think Surat during the plague. One was hopeful that the Mumbai deluge of 27 June, 2005 would have spurred citizens and the administration into systemic improvements. But this has not happened. Our cup of woes, it would seem, will continue to overflow.

Why, you may ask, don't politicians and administrators learn from the past and prefer to adopt the route of official pronouncements of action and stern intent that rarely fructify? And why do we citizens never learn not to be taken in by these promises while woeful events in our cities keep repeating?

Put it down to the *Men in Black* effect. If you recall the *Men in Black* movie franchise, the Tommy Lee Jones and Will Smith characters put on their sunglasses and 'zap' hapless citizens who had witnessed aliens prowling around into a blissful state of individual amnesia about the existence of aliens. Similarly, our government agencies, seem to have discovered a 'zap' gun that knocks us all into a collective amnesia about what we had experienced and wanted done. This normally is in the form of project announcements in



Bangalore city

hundreds of crores, commissions of enquiry and the 'law will take its course' pronouncements.

Then there is the convenient loss of institutional memory with the passage of the torch from one set of leaders and administrators to another. This would be akin to a laptop computer that has two memory elements, the interim memory, the RAM, that is initially blank when switched on, and the permanent memory storage in the hard disk. One can't help but remember that the surface transport minister at the Centre in the UPA-I was surely 'switched off' about the existence of the ongoing Golden Quadrilateral and National Highway project during his tenure. Further, though officers and politicians may be loath to admit, their metric of personal achievement often lies in being different from their predecessor! There is no glory in continuing an initiative that was conceived by someone else. Further, there is the 'not invented here' syndrome. Though the World Bank and other bodies talk of cross pollinating best practices from other cities (as in say what Johannesburg did for water supply to the

slums or what Singapore did for land transit), local leaders and officials do not feel that they have been ordained to execute other's ideas!

This amnesia malaise extends to us citizens too. For starters, we conveniently forget that we have a rule of law. So whether it is in say violating building bye-laws, not paying the appropriate taxes, ignoring rights of fellow citizens or in the way we drive on the road, we continue to act with impunity. We throw garbage anywhere, anytime and get annoyed with the civic body if any garbage is visible on our daily paths or the storm water drains are clogged. Our voter turnout in our local elections is below 50 per cent, a sign that we have already forgotten that our relatively infant democracy was won on the back of many sacrifices by our predecessors.

So what is the way out of this institutional, individual and collective amnesia? The change will have to start with each of us. The basic building block will have to be better civic behaviour, respect for the law and greater civic engagement.

Continued on page 28

Learning from Haiti

BHARAT DOGRA

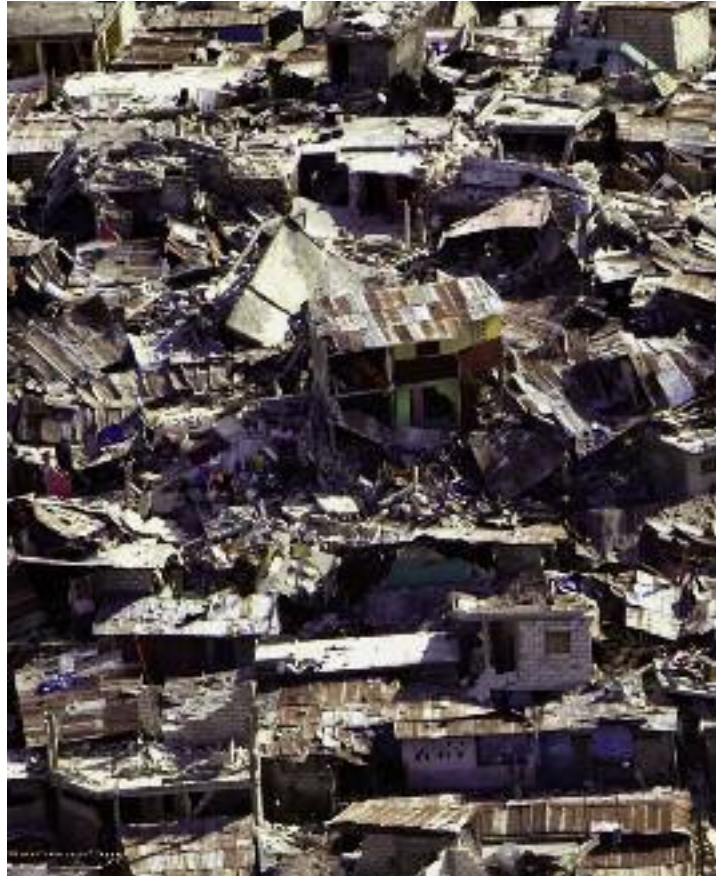
HAITI has been devastated by an earthquake of seven magnitude on the Richter scale. The extremely high death toll and collapse of buildings reveal how existing vulnerabilities and lack of preparedness can prove extremely costly. It is true that this earthquake was a natural disaster, but the reasons why it caused so many deaths are largely man-made.

The devastation of rural livelihoods had forced a very large number of people to crowd into urban areas where they were forced to live in extremely vulnerable conditions on steep hillsides. In fact, almost one-fourth of the country's population has been living in a single city, Port-Au-Prince. Due to poverty most of these people were forced to live in very precarious housing settlements perched on slopes. Trees on these hillsides had been destroyed on a large scale, so the threat of collapse was always real.

Highly corrupt dictatorships have flourished in Haiti (frequently with the full support of their superpower neighbour, the USA). At the same time, the efforts of democratic leader Arstide to help poor people were frustrated by American intervention. Distorted trade policies led to the loss of livelihood of many farmers in Haiti. The policies imposed by the IMF were also harmful to the poor. All this led to high levels of poverty in Haiti and the denial of basic needs including medical care to most people.

It is therefore poor people living in highly vulnerable conditions with very little access to medicine, sanitation and other basic needs who perished in such high numbers in the recent earthquake. The high death rate was caused by the extreme vulnerabilities of people and the extremely poor state of preparedness for facing such a disaster. In better conditions of housing and preparedness, tens of thousands of lives could have been saved.

An important lesson of disasters like the Haiti earthquake for other countries is that despite all



Haiti after the earthquake

the unpredictability that still surrounds earthquakes, it is possible to save thousands of lives.

In all high risk areas, an effort should be made to find practical and cheap modifications that can be made to existing homes and other buildings. As for new construction, people should be educated about safer designs.

Earthquakes are known to cause higher damage in heavily eroded and landslide prone areas. So, special care should be taken to check ecological ruin and especially to heal slide-prone hills. Construction of high dams, nuclear power plants and other hazardous industries should be avoided in areas where high intensity earthquakes are more likely.

The people of high risk areas should be trained to look out for signs which are known to generally precede an earthquake - changes in the behaviour

of domestic animals, wildlife, bubbles in wells, unnatural fog and other abnormal phenomenon. Past experience shows that even effective monitoring of such phenomena followed by quick warning can save thousands of lives.

People should be trained to rescue others trapped under the rubble and some basic equipment should be provided for this in advance. Doctors of high risk areas should be trained to handle specific injuries which are most likely to be caused to trapped people. If all this can be done, then despite the notorious unpredictability of earthquakes, the death toll can be greatly reduced.

The 48 hours after an earthquake are the most important for saving human lives. Since it is difficult for outside teams to reach the affected places and start doing effective work so soon, it is local people who can best save the trapped people. According to a study of the rescue effort in the Armenia earthquake of 1988, 95 percent of trapped people were saved by local people and only 4.5 per cent were saved by the special high profile international rescue teams which had flown in specially for this purpose. Therefore, what is most

important from the point of view of saving human lives during the immediate hours after an earthquake is the prior preparedness of local people.

Where outside help is needed more is in the long-term rehabilitation of people. Depending on the extent of the damage, help has to be made available for a long time after the earthquake so that houses can be rebuilt and people can get their livelihood back to normal. Unfortunately, the tendency of outside relief is precisely to ignore this long-term need. People tend to donate when the tragedy of the earthquake is uppermost in their minds; they tend to ignore the continuing after effects as the affected people struggle hard to rebuild their shattered lives. It is important to remember the long-term needs of the quake victims.

Continued from page 27

To get the outcome we desire in our cities, namely a better quality of living, eternal vigilance and staying the course by not forgetting what needs to be done is required. The third tier of city government needs more powers (that the State has usurped) and the city ward leaders need to be accountable to the citizens. Understandably, this is easier said than done. The system has little or no incentive to change the status quo. The lot therefore falls on us and to do this we need a more responsible and enlightened citizenry. One can make the case that if a city does not work, we

all (and this includes the urban poor) suffer in terms of lower livelihood opportunities, health and safety issues. Some corporate firms are realizing that ensuring a city works is as important as its focus on talent, raw material and processes. They may not currently have the tools or know how to engage but they are beginning to realize that engage they must.

The City matters! We can make a difference if we are collectively clear about the right things to demand of ourselves, our leaders, the system and how to go about getting them. Normally we spend a lot of time in causal analysis and the more aca-

demically inclined come up with elegant system theories of what needs to be done. This needs to be overlaid with principles of game theory if we are to navigate the complex urban landscape and find alignment of diverse interests to get favourable outcomes. Many moons ago, our World Chess champion Viswanathan Anand used to promote a herbal memory plus brand. We need that in large, regular doses to ensure we do not suffer future memory loss about our civic issues and their solutions.

V. Ravichandar, CMD, Feedback Consulting is an incurable optimist about fixing our city woes whenever he remembers it!

How an EIA got rejected

KANCHI KOHLI

"The project will help meet the demand for electricity in Chhattisgarh state. It will strengthen the regional power supply system, stimulate industrial development and improve the living standards of the people." This is the concluding statement of the Executive Summary of the Environment Impact Assessment (EIA) Report for a thermal power plant in Janjgir-Champa, Chhattisgarh.

Year after year, in different locations with diverse actors one finds the same pattern recurring – of working around systems, taking short cuts and completely disregarding peoples' processes. The EIA, which is meant to assess the environmental and social impacts of a project and ascertain its viability, continues to be driven by the agenda of the project authorities that fund its preparation.

On 15 January 2009, the mandatory public hearing for Athena Chhattisgarh Power Pvt Ltd's coal based thermal power plant was underway in the Janjgir-Champa district of Chhattisgarh. Such a hearing is mandatory as part of the environmental clearance procedure prescribed for projects like thermal power generation. This legal requirement and its procedures are spelt out clearly in the Environment Impact Assessment Notification, 2006.

The hearing progressed under the chairmanship of the Additional District Magistrate (ADM) Janjgir-Champa. There were arguments for and against the project. The Regional Officer, Chhattisgarh Environment Conservation Board (CECB) was present and observing the proceedings. At some point Ramesh Agrawal, a social and environmental activist of Jan Chetana based in Raigarh district, began his arguments. There had been no critique as yet of the EIA document or evidence of any past violations by the company.

The legally required procedure for public hearing was not being followed.

There were several faults with the public hearing which were pointed out. The most critical included:

- The law mandates that a public hearing should be arranged in a "systematic, time bound and transparent manner ensuring widest possible public participation at the project..." Agrawal in his oral and written submission contended that most of the people who were likely to be directly affected were unaware of the public hearing and no effort had been made to inform them.
- It is the responsibility of the concerned officials including the District Magistrate, officials of the Ministry of Environment and Forests (MoEF) to widely publicise the EIA report. This is critical if the public hearing process is to have any meaning, else local people and concerned citizens remain uninformed. Members of Jan Chetana argued that

this had not happened in Athena's case.

- The public hearing should be held only after it is ascertained that the EIA report has been prepared as per the Terms of Reference (ToR) specified by the MoEF. It was highlighted that this had not been done, and further the CECB did not verify it before the public hearing.

- The notification clearly mandates the conduct of public hearing only after preparation of the EIA report as per the TOR and submission of the same



Protestors at the public hearing

The NEAA has in its 12-year stint never functioned with full composition and never had a chairman who has presided over a hearing.

to the SPCB. It was the obligatory duty of CECB to ensure if the draft EIA Report submitted by the project proponent had been prepared with compliance of the TOR finalised by the MoEF before the announcement of the public hearing. For instance, the TOR required a study covering an area of 10 km radius around the plant site, but it was instead limited to only seven km. In fact, the most affected village, Singhitari, was not part of the assessment.

The ADM paid heed to these issues and made a public announcement cancelling the public hearing. As per the law, unless the public hearing is reconvened, the environment clearance application cannot be processed, leave along granted.

Yet, things got murky. The Expert Appraisal Committee (EAC) on Thermal Power within the

MoEF went ahead and recommended the project for environmental clearance. The MoEF letter stamped its approval to the project with an estimated cost of Rs 5,700 crores.

But this story took a positive turn. Ramesh Agrawal, with the help of pro-bono lawyers who are part of the Legal Initiative for Forests and Environment (LIFE) challenged this clearance before the National Environment Appellate Authority (NEAA). Given the reputation of this authority a positive outcome was not expected. The NEAA has in its 12 year stint never functioned with full composition and never had a chairman who has presided over a hearing. The NEAA has quashed the environmental clearance of only one project, and mind you, this is not because the other appeals did not have substance.

By the time it was Athena's turn, there was only one member sitting in judgment, JC Kala, a retired Indian Forest Service officer. The video recording of the public hearing was played at the NEAA hearing which brought to light the Additional Collector's statement. The authenticity of this compact disc was verified from the CECB officials, and what followed was a one page order of the NEAA. The environment clearance was stayed and the project was sent back to the table of the Expert Appraisal Committee (EAC) for reconsideration.

This time the EAC thought differently, or perhaps conceded its 'blunder'! At a meeting on 11 and 12 January, the EAC recorded: "After examination of the written reply submitted and the clarification given during the EAC meeting by the Additional District Collector, Janjgir-Champa and public hearing recording received from Chhattisgarh Environment Conservation Board (CECB), Raipur, and the observations made by NEAA in its order dated 17 November, 2009, the Committee is of the view that there are many inconsistencies in the versions of the Additional District Collector's reasons for cancellation of the public hearing." The clearance is thereby kept in abeyance.

There are several "What ifs" that my mind reels under: if the clearance was never challenged, if there existed no video recording, if the NEAA had stuck to its dismissive trend, if the EAC did not reconsider? Each one of these is an example of how power rests with only a few officials. Their decisions can ruin the lives of so many people. There is still a lurking fear. What if the new public hearing follows all procedures and the project lands up in MoEF's proud listing of numbers granted clearance in 2010.

The author is a member of Kalpavriksh Environmental Action Group and is based in Delhi

Cancer haunts women

HARMALA GUPTA

SARLA was 32 years old when she was diagnosed with breast cancer. She lived with her mother, her brother and his wife along with their two children in their family home. Her father had died a few years earlier. She spent most of her time looking after the needs of her mother and playing nanny to her nieces and nephews. The family's main concern was her unmarried status. They never failed to remind her of it. More recently, Sarla had a new anxiety of her own – she had discovered a lump in her breast.

To cut a long story short, two months later Sarla was in a cancer hospital diagnosed with breast cancer. She had a partial mastectomy and then received chemotherapy. She had been warned about the temporary hair loss that would follow chemotherapy.

But what about the other more permanent losses? How were those going to impact her life? She was just about to find out.

When I met Sarla she had fallen into deep depression and felt nothing but sadness and lack of worth. At night she lay awake, haunted by morbid thoughts, crying into her pillow. She confessed that she could not see a way out. On further probing it became clear that the reaction of the immediate members of her family and her circle of friends had contributed to her sense of isolation. She had not realised that the disease she had carried such a stigma.

Sarla's mother had taken to her bed after hearing of her daughter's illness. For her this was the final nail in the coffin as far as her daughter's chances of marriage were concerned. For her brother and sister-in-law she had now become an unwelcome, life long liability. They expelled her to the servant's quarters as they now wished to put as big a distance as they could between her and the rest of the family. They did not want to spend any more on her treatment and feared that she might infect their children. Sarla was also under pressure to hand over her share in the family home to her brother. Some instinct of survival told Sarla not to give in.

Every year, an increasing number of young women living in metropolitan cities in India find themselves facing a similar predicament as Sarla. There is nothing to protect them under the law. Succumbing to family and societal pressures, they reconcile themselves to an existence with little expectations. For them the fact that they have a disease that when detected in time is completely curable is of no consequence. They wear the scarlet letter, the big "C" in this case. The question is: What can be done for women like Sarla?

To begin with, cancer needs to be included in the 'Persons and Disabilities Equal Opportunities, Protection of Rights and Full Participation Act, 1995'. This may sound strange as cancer is not really a disability in the strictest sense, but as was argued convincingly by the cancer support networks in the US, it is a 'perceived disability' that is, people see you as a disabled person and dis-



Succumbing to family and societal pressures, they reconcile themselves to an existence with little expectations.

criminate against you.

Thousands of families every year in India are forced to beg and borrow if a loved one has cancer because of the exorbitant cost of treatment. The government needs to ensure that these drugs, which are life saving drugs, are made available at affordable rates. At present medical assistance is available to patients who can produce a BPL (below poverty line) certificate. In some ways, it is middle class patients who are the hardest hit as not only are they unable to afford the cost of treatment, but there is a real danger that they will be laid off or forced to quit their jobs. Those working in small private establishments are particularly vulnerable.

There is also a need to rehabilitate people with cancer and help them continue to live a life of dignity. In the case of Sarla, for example, providing training or micro-credit so that she could become financially independent would have gone a long way in helping her regain her self esteem in her own eyes and in that of her family. She would no longer have felt that she was a burden on the family and neither would she have been perceived as one.

We need to note that in India the majority of

cancer patients are between 35 and 64 years old, their most productive years. For many of these families it is not cancer that kills, but the prejudice and apathy of members of their family, their employers, colleagues in the workplace and the public at large. If given an opportunity, these are people who have the potential of becoming model employees. Records in the US show that attendance rates of cancer survivors are higher than those of the 'normal' population, exploding the myth that they are likely to ask for more sick leave. The pressure mounted on the US government by cancer survivors' networks has also resulted in the right of people when seeking employment to refuse to answer questions that pertain to their health status if this is not directly pertinent to the requirements of the job. At present, in India, most survivors have no recourse while applying for a job than to lie and hope that they will not be found out.

Cancer survivors in India are not considered eligible for marriage or for health or life insurance, no matter how many years away they may be from the end of their treatment. With almost 50 per cent of children with cancer likely to be cured, the injustice we are doing to them is incalculable.

It is high time the government spelt out a policy which protects the right to livelihood and dignity of people with cancer. Survivors are not asking for any special privileges, all they want is the right to be treated as equals and as people who have something useful to contribute to society. It is also high time we educated ourselves about cancer and shed prejudices which sap the will of people with cancer to live a fruitful life.

Harmala Gupta is president of CanSupport, an NGO that runs palliative and supportive care services for people with cancer and a telephone helpline.

Living

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

Dive into deep sea magic

Susheela Nair
Port Blair

As we approached Port Blair, passengers jostled to peer through the windows of the aeroplane. The view below was dramatic. An expanse of water glistened in hues of green, turquoise and blue. The islands looked like emeralds splashed with crystal blue waters. There was something magical about the stunning beauty of these islands.

You could see hills and valleys with the sea lapping at their shores. Coral beds shimmered. The view was breathtaking. These extensive reefs abound in sea cucumbers and shells, both tortoise and ornamental. And in the clear, blue waters of the lagoons enclosed by reefs you can discover an amazing underwater world full of colour and adventure and fish of every possible variety. Scuba dive and see what lies beneath.

Fringed by beaches filled with powdery sand and a sea of translucent aquamarine water, the Andaman and Nicobar Islands promise action-packed snorkelling and scuba-diving opportunities for the adventurous. Many of the islands are surrounded by fringing reefs, often several hundred metres wide and separated from the shore by a lagoon of similar width. There are plenty of steep, sloping and shallow reefs, coracle pinnacles and knolls suitable for scuba diving and snorkelling. Swimming with sea urchins, sea cucumbers, fish, sea grass, corals shells and weeds for company is a journey of revelation.

Several dive sites have been identified and more are waiting to be discovered and titled in the Andamans. Some of the dive sites are as interesting as their names. The underwater seascape seems untouched, almost virginal. Cinque Island, rated as one of the best dive destinations on the island, offers a stunning variety of marine life, including black coral. It is ideal for the experienced diver. The marine life in Jonny's Gorge, a large rocky outcrop skirted by sand at 30m, is spectacular. You can spot white-tip reef sharks lazing in the sand and large schools of barracuda hanging around in the current near the surface.

Dixon's Pinnacle, with prolific glassfish, is a shimmering display of constant movement. The blanket of fish, visiting schools of batfish, green and hawksbill turtles and the occasional Napoleon



DAVID LOH

DAVID LOH



wrasse could present you with some of the finest marine photography opportunities. South Button, best reached by a journey through the beautiful mangrove-lined channels between Ritchie's Archipelago, is a coral paradise. South Button's charm lies in its shallow sun-swept reefs.

Havelock, the largest of these islands, is an unspoilt piece of paradise shaped like a teardrop. It offers incredible diving options.

About 50 km east of the South Andamans are a group of nine islands that form Ritchie's Archipelago. Havelock, the largest of these islands, is an unspoilt piece of paradise shaped like a teardrop. It offers some incredible diving options. Most diving operations take place from and around Havelock. The clear waters at Havelock host incredible numbers and varieties of marine life from moray eels to manta rays. You can explore the underwater coral gardens with schools of rare and unusually coloured fish for company. With the largest concentration of the most marvelous diving sites in the Andamans, a variety of coral and fish life, and a choice of nine diving schools, Havelock has become the hub of diving in Andamans.

The underwater world around Havelock has plenty to offer divers of all skill levels. Havelock is a great place to get PADI-certified (Professional Association of Diving Instructors). For beginners, the safe open water dives are thrilling face-to-face encounters with swaying coral, fish coloured in bright striations, orange sea whips that wrap around your legs, soft sea kelp and thriving ocean life.

Seduction Point, a huge submerged rock with stag horn coral and prolific aquatic life, including Napoleon fish is a prominent dive site. The diving is sublime at Aquarium with its fringing reef, hard corals and lots and lots of fish. Lighthouse with its hard and soft corals and night-time diving possibilities is a hit with

divers. Peppered with the usual bannerfish, angelfish and schooling fusiliers, this site has some interesting marine life suitable for snorkellers. If you are lucky, you can spot dugongs (sea cows) at Mac Point, Barracuda City, Turtle Bay, Pilot Reef,

Minerva Ledge and Turtle Bay are other potential areas for diving.

Scuba diving as a sport is still in its nascent stage. The slow growth can be attributed to the lack of certified trainers. Fear of water and marine life keep Indians away from this sport. "Realising the tremendous potential and growing significance of the billion dollar aqua tourism industry, and also the need for several Indian dive instructors, I set up Andaman Diving Academy (ADA), India's first and only Instructor Development Centre," says Madhava Reddy the feisty managing director of Planet Scuba India which has many firsts to its credit. He chucked his journalist's job and his father's business to take a plunge in scuba diving and started Planet Scuba India which is India's first Inland Scuba Training Institute offering professional dive education in the comfort of classrooms and subsequent training in a pool.

The first batch of six diving instructors from ADA graduated recently. It was incidentally awarded a five-star rating by PADI, a globally recognised certifying body which reportedly controls around 80 per cent of the world's recreational scuba diving. Five years ago, there were only five dive centres but now there are 23 in the country. The numbers will definitely swell up to 50 in another few years. Reddy said that Divestock, India's first diving festival will promote and showcase India as a scuba diving destination to the world and give a boost to tourism in the islands.

Iranian pupp



An Iranian family of four sisters do the puppet show

Shreyasi Singh
New Delhi

YOU know a performance is a super hit when children try to scramble on stage to get close and personal with the actors. The star in demand this time was Pahlevan Kachal, a moustached Iranian hero who takes on horned ghouls to rescue the young and beautiful daughter of Sultan Salim Khan, the king of India. Pahlevan has all the qualities of a strapping, brave movie hero except that he is a baby palm-sized glove puppet with a shiny bald head.

'Pahlevan Kachal – The Bald Hero' is one of the oldest puppet shows in Iran. The recent rendition, performed by Apple Tree Group, an Iranian family of four sisters, at Delhi's India Habitat Centre, was part of the Ishara International Puppet Theatre Festival 2010, an annual event that brings puppet companies from across the world to Delhi.

Set to live music, the traditional glove play begins with the sweeper, Jaro Kesh, coming to sweep and wash the stage. The crier, Jar Chi, announces the arrival of the king of India who is distressed that his daughter has been kidnapped. He announces a reward of half his wealth and his daughter's hand in marriage to anybody who brings his daughter back. Pahlevan, who loves money more than anything else, is persuaded to rescue the princess.

et is box office superstar

LAKSHMAN ANAND



the force behind Ishara.

In 'A Touch Of Light', by Israel's Train Theatre, based on the life story of Louis Braille, director-designer Patricia O'Donovan deploys minimalism, using paper, inks, books, pencils and light as another object which is manipulated to set the mood. But 'In Animals from Brazil', the theatre group puts up a festive and colourful performance using larger than life inflatable puppets. Set to a soaring soundtrack of catchy Brazilian rhythms the show delivered a warning about the dangers of extinction.

"I personally prefer celebration, light, song and dance. Our purpose is to give people enjoyment. Our audience should have a good time. We don't like to talk overtly about social problems. In Brazil, we believe in a big party, a carnival. But, every country has a different puppetry tradition," says a cast member of Pia Fraus, the theatre group that performed the animal show.

Pudumjee says traditionally in India puppets were used to broadcast direct messages. Modern puppeteers have kept that ethos, he says, and the inherent purpose of their art form to talk about issues. But, these messages are now more creatively, more subtly put.

LAKSHMAN ANAND



Holding up the ghouls. Pahlevan on the right

Pahlevan, who loves money more than anything else, is persuaded to rescue the princess. As his small figure fights the ghouls, he is cheered on by enthusiastic children in the audience.

And, as his small figure fights the ghouls, he is cheered on by enthusiastic children in the audience. Eventually, he marries the lovely princess.

"It's fantastic to be in India, and perform here. It's great that something so much a part of our culture finds resonance here too," says Fahime Mirzahoseini, the play's director, and the eldest of the four sisters.

"My mom says she can help me make a puppet at home too. I will make my Pahlevan, my own hero," says Sahir, an excited fourth grade student.

It's this kind of response the Ishara Puppet Theatre Trust, India's foremost contemporary creative puppet company works hard to achieve. Founded by Dadi Pudumjee, the trust is committed to creating awareness, exposure and education to the multifaceted traditions and techniques of puppetry in India.

Their annual international festival, now in its

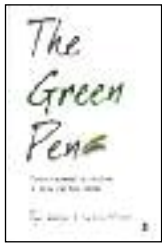
eighth year, has helped popularise modern puppetry in the country, and created a platform for exchange, learning and sharing of technique and styles between puppeteers and audiences across the world. This year's festival brought six productions from Israel, Iran, Switzerland, Brazil and Italy to India. Each of these performed at the India Habitat Centre and at the famous National Centre for Performing Arts in Mumbai between 11 and 18 February. Some plays also performed at Gurgaon's Epicentre.

"What is wonderful about the puppet festival is that the stage has no barriers. We had Iran today, and just yesterday on the very same stage, an Israeli group performed. This is the only annual international puppet festival in India. And every year the response is growing. We imbibe things from each other. Every country has different flavours to their puppetry," says Dadi Pudumjee.

"Most traditional puppeteers perform on the streets where subtlety does not really work. Puppets have helped us talk about tricky topics in a non-offensive but effective way. For our HIV awareness programmes, we use a condom puppet with great effect. Using a real condom might not have worked as well. Puppets make it that much easier," he says. India still has a lot of traditional puppet theatre, remarks Pudumjee, but there are pockets of modern puppet theatre too in Kolkata, Mumbai, Delhi and Bangalore.

Ishara runs a programme on HIV awareness and substance abuse in partnership with UNESCO and the EU using puppetry for communication. It has conducted workshops in several cities in India, for students, teacher and non-profits. They use various styles ranging from simple rod puppets to larger than life figures and object puppetry, processionary figures, shadow, glove and mixed media.

Vanishing breed of journos



**THE GREEN PEN
ENVIRONMENTAL
JOURNALISM
IN INDIA AND
SOUTH ASIA**

Edited: Keya
Acharya, Frederick
Noronha
Sage
Rs 395

Shreyasi Singh
New Delhi

As an anthology of essays by environmental journalists, *The Green Pen* is an important resource. The book looks at this specialised genre of journalism through the years, examines the dilemmas facing environmental journalists, and the impact of the changing nature of media in India.

"Economic liberalisation, the influx of big money in the media means that editors and managements are less keen to focus on environmental issues today, as compared to what they once were. Environmental journalism saw its heyday in India perhaps around the 1980s. After that, it has been in decline. It is ironic that we have less media

space and attention for it as the crisis has got worse," says Frederick Noronha, co-editor of the book, a Goa-based journalist and founder of the India-EJ, an environmental journalists' cyber-network.

"Before we completely forget this category existed and the impact it made, I think it's important to capture it and share it with younger, idealistic people entering the field. The new orthodoxy in our journalism, that people don't have attention spans to read anything more than 400 words is likely to lead to environmental reporting being confined to scary dates and figures reporting," Noronha adds.

Noronha and Keya Acharya have ensured a wide range of realities are reflected in the book. There are essays by Darryl D'Monte,

the late Anil Agarwal, Sunita Narain among others. The editors say environmental journalism in the Indian subcontinent continues to be spearheaded by a few activists and publications. "The mainstream media still has insufficient, inadequate background knowledge to deal with the issue. What is of even more significance is that because of this lack of background, reporting has not been able to include environmental aspects into everyday reporting," says Acharya, an independent environmental and development journalist-researcher.

Divided into ten sections like Wildlife Journalism, Environment and Water, Reporting on Disasters and Gender and Environment, the editors hope their book will encourage more authors to think of similar attempts. Although they concede that book publishing at its core is an environmentally hazardous activity, it will be worth it, they say, if "a single drop of ink makes a thousand people think".

Poison in comic form

Shreyasi Singh
New Delhi

Our Toxic World, is a non-fiction book which uses an upper middle class Delhi family to inform and educate readers about environmental hazards. The Sachdeva family is like many others. There is a father with a government job, his homemaker wife, a son starting a career and a daughter in high school. Like other families in a big city, the Sachdevas are surrounded by a cocktail of toxic substances they are barely aware of.

Using their lives, and of others in their circle of friends and acquaintances, *Our Toxic World* takes a close look at these hidden perils, and at what we can do to make our own lives, and the world around us, a little cleaner, a little safer. Interestingly, the book is modelled on the graphic novel format. The narrative is supported by over 800 visuals much like a comic.

Annirudha Sen Gupta, who conceived, structured and scripted the book, hopes the offbeat format will lend itself to an expansive dialogue with a larger audience.

"The format, where stories are set around a typical family and their acquaintances, allowed me to express some of the diversity of views that exist around these issues, and bring in subjectivity through the opinions of the different characters," he says.

In fact, the first ideas on the book came up in discussions Annirudha had with Toxics Link, the Delhi-based environmental rights group. Annirudha, a development communications expert, and his colleague Salil Chaturvedi, suggested Toxics Link mobilise its immense information resources gathered over 13 years to create "knowledge products". Although Toxics Link has largely been aimed

at those who make policy, Annirudha and Salil felt the information the non-profit had could be of tremendous use to a rapidly-growing breed of eco-conscious people who often don't have the information to deal with these concerns.

Using visuals was part of this strategy. "I think a visual medium such as this will help students and others connect the dots and retain ideas more easily. Visuals aid understanding. And, naturally understanding an issue gets people more interested in them," says Priya Kurian, the book's illustrator.

An animation film-maker and illustrator, Priya has directed educational films for the Sesame Street television show in India. She has also illustrated a number of children's books.

"I guess my earlier experiences with illustrating for children helped me simplify certain concepts visually and has hopefully made the book more receptive," she says, adding that the visuals took over eight months of work. She admits it was

difficult at first to illustrate for a subject that could often get grim, especially for someone used to creating fantastical worlds for children.

But it's this pushing of boundaries that will leave an impact. "I knew a very accessible format was required to broaden the potential audience. One of the big problems of the environmental movement is that it is often too extreme, or seen as too extreme. By taking a pragmatic approach, setting it in context of an everyday level, and if solutions are suggested within this framework, it's much easier for people to adopt them as opposed to making widespread and sweeping changes. Eventually, the effect is cumulative, with many people making a series of small changes," says Annirudha.



**OUR TOXIC
WORLD
A GUIDE TO
HAZARDOUS
SUBSTANCES
IN OUR
EVERYDAY
LIVES**

Toxics Link
Sage
Rs 395

NGO watch

Foreign aid for NGOs rouses controversy. Critics complain that such money creates a dependency syndrome, that it imposes foreign agendas and that it takes away from the spirit of voluntary work. Pushpa Sundar analyses these issues in a detailed and factual manner.

The book is divided into two sections. The first, 'Setting the Stage' gives us an overview of the NGO sector, the various sources of funds that are tapped into, foreign donors, government funding and strategies used to get finance. The second section, 'Aid in Action' analyses the donor-NGO relationship, sustainability, whether agendas are really donor driven and some insights into the future.

What appears clear is that some criticisms are valid, others overblown. Funding and sustainability problems which NGOs face have a lot to do with the vagaries of donors who are often themselves tied to the policies of their own country.

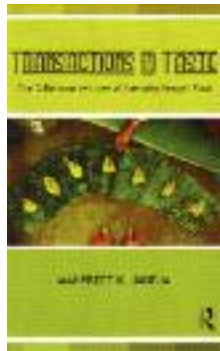
If governments and panchayats get serious about development issues, the function of the NGO will change. They may not be needed that much for service delivery but their role will be critical as watchdogs.



**FOREIGN AID
FOR INDIAN
NGOS**

Pushpa
Sundar
Routledge
Rs 795

Food and its symbols



TRANSACTIONS IN TASTE

THE COLLABORATIVE LIVES OF EVERYDAY BENGALI FOOD

Manpreet Janeja

Routledge

Rs 695

You don't know how things work out eventually. Perhaps there is a design in everything. It shapes you and your perceptions. You end up doing things which you may not have ever dreamed of in the past!

You have concentrated on families where women don't do the cooking or have full-time cooks. This is not the case in many Bengali families. Even rich families like the Tagores had their women doing the cooking.

It was not a conscious decision. It just happened

ration shop. Where else do you think it gets recycled into? It is a parallel economy which is in operation. Of course, the episode described got clubbed with a host of other things.

You relate this incident where the mistress in a Bengali Muslim middle-class household decides to throw out one of her maids because she made you a tamarind sherbet. But the reasons the mistress cites are that the maid wasted time chatting and shopping, she ate chillis and was suspected of being a lesbian. How do you define this relationship?

The actual affront was the tamarind sherbet made for me that I had mentioned to the lady. "You have never made one for me," she had immediately frowned at the maid. But she could not throw out any maid on the basis of this. It would seem strange to her husband, to me and to the maids. Her outpourings to her husband hence hinged on notions of what was normal and acceptable to middle-class notions of respectability. Eating hot chillis, which are considered to trigger sexual arousal, is all right with the lower classes and rural folk. It is not done in middle-

class, urban households.

As I mentioned in my book, she did not have any proof of a lesbian relationship between the two maids, even though she had spied on them. Taking too much time shopping was a hint at indulging in flirtatious relationships outside the home, which was against what was perceived as 'normal.' Of course, the servants had their own notions of what was decent. You have one maid telling the other, "A person does not become decent just by possessing a house, a car and a refrigerator." The refrigerator stood for the ownership of surplus food. The maid then goes on to tell the other how the mistress' irritable behaviour is not decent at all.

Food is here a window through which I have observed the relationships that the middle-class have with the poorer classes whom they employ.

You talk of the way street food influenced you in Kolkata. What did you notice about street food in Dhaka?

In a city, street food thrives in a 'walking around' culture. In Dhaka, you hardly have people walking around. There is hardly any middle class there. You either have the very poor or the rich. Even those whom I term middle-class, would be termed affluent here. The middle class drive around in cars, they do not walk around. There are a few places where street food is available in Dhaka, say, around the university. But there is no street food on the scale you find in Kolkata.

Rina Mukherji
Kolkata

MANPREET K Janeja grew up in Kolkata surrounded by the sights and smells of Bengali food. Living in a traditional Bengali neighbourhood she observed that a lot of social life revolved around food. Years later, as a Eugénie Strong Research Fellow in Social Anthropology at Girton College, Cambridge University, Janeja returned to her roots to do a serious study on Bengali society and its cuisine.

Based on her doctoral thesis in Cambridge, "The Agency of Normal Food: Performing Normality in Contemporary Calcutta and Dhaka", this recent book examines food transactions and the light these shed on trust, power and conflict in middle-class society. Janeja incisively notes the different foods and concomitant cultures seen and savoured in the streets, homes and restaurants of Kolkata and Dhaka.

Extracts from an interview:

What made you opt to study the Bengali middle class for a serious work on food?

I chose the Bengali middle-class because the Bengali white-collar intellectual, the *bhadralok*, is quintessential to the Bengali identity.

As for preferring to focus on Bengalis rather than any other Indian community, I guess it has something to do with what you are exposed to. Having grown up in Kolkata and closely observed how a lot of social life revolved around food, it was but natural for me to want to study the phenomenon.

Besides, I grew up in north Kolkata. We were the only Punjabi Sikh family living near the Sovabazar Rajbari, a Bengali neighbourhood, with Bengali friends for company.

I had Bengali as my second language in Loreto School, Bowbazar. In Lady Brabourne College, I was the only non-Bengali in a class of Bengali girls. That was when I got to read a great deal of Bengali literature. It was very tough...but it was so rich and enlightening. I ended up with the second highest score in Bengali.



Manpreet K Janeja

that I came into contact with people who had cooks doing their cooking. Most were total strangers to me. For instance, the Dhaka family I refer to in my book was totally unknown to me. But they let me stay with them, extended their hospitality to me with open arms and I had the good fortune of observing how their household was run.

I am sure there are many families where women continue to do the cooking. But this was not meant to be a statistical study of those who did the cooking and those who did not. I would say this is one facet...another dimension, which cannot be overlooked.

I must point out that full-time cooks are generally the norm in Dhaka. In Kolkata, it is part-time cooks that middle-class households have. They would do the cooking and leave. The cook does not do the rest of the work. As I have mentioned in my book, Kolkata cooks may no longer be Brahmin but the term has stayed. In Dhaka, the full-timer was generally the one doing the rest of the work and the actual cooking was done by the part-timer. Of course, there were some who had two full-timers. Both, though, were termed *bhuiyans* in Dhaka.

There are some things that seem peculiar. Your reference to the cook leaving with a container of broken rice, stones and waste (*khud*) for the ration shop, for example...

I wanted to tell my readers that the *khud* is never thrown away. It is sold by these women to the

Improve your mind with food

Dr G G GANGADHARAN



LIFE is a homogeneous combination of Shareera (body), Indriya (sense organs), Satva (mind) and atma (soul). Ayurveda considers Ahara (food) as one of the three supporting pillars. Diet plays a very important role on the mind and body even before birth and continues till death.

In the fourth month of pregnancy the desires of the foetus are expressed through the mother. Hence the mother feels like eating a particular taste or food of a particular choice and so on. This shows that food and the mind are dependent on each other. It is believed in Ayurveda that if these desires of the mother are not fulfilled then the foetus will develop some abnormalities.

Physical health, mental well being and spiritual progress all depend on food. Ayurveda says the sthula (gross) particle of the food which is consumed becomes the body parts and the sukshma (subtle) part becomes the mind.

Food as per the Bhagavad Gita can be categorised into three based on their action on the mind:

These are:

Satvika Ahara – Satva Guna

Rajasika Ahara – Rajo Guna

Tamasika Ahara – Tamo Guna

SATVA GUNA: Satva refers to that which is beneficial to all creatures in the world and denotes goodness. Joyfulness, contentment, nobleness, enlightenment and cheerfulness along with absence of stinginess, absence of fear, forgiveness, courage, abstaining from injuring any creature, self-control, truth, straightforwardness, absence of wrath, absence of malice, purity, intelligence, dexterity - these pertain to the quality of Satva or the Satva Guna (goodness).

Foods that increase the above mentioned qualities are known as Satvika Ahara. Food should be fresh and as natural as possible, preferably organically grown and not genetically modified. Food must be devoid of preservatives or artificial flavouring.

Examples: Juicy fruits like mango, pomegranate, coconut, figs, peaches, pears, fresh vegetables that are easily digestible, fresh milk and butter, whole soaked or sprouted grains, beans like mung dal, yellow lentils, kidney beans, lima beans and nuts, many herbs and spices in the right combination with other foods.

No animal flesh products should be consumed by those wishing to cultivate Satva Guna.

RAJO GUNA: Rajo Guna means pas-

sion. Harming others, concentrating on beauty, toil, pleasure and pain, cold and heat, lordship (power), war, peace, disappointment, endurance, valour, pride, wrath, exertion, quarrel, jealousy, desire, malice, battle, protection of others, slaughter, bonds, and affliction, cruelty, vilifying, pointing out the faults of others, thoughts entirely devoted to worldly affairs, anxiety, animosity, false speech, false or vain gifts, hesitancy or doubts, boastfulness of speech, praise and criticism, prowess, defiance, attendance (as on the weak and the sick), obedience (to the commands of preceptors and parents) are some characteristics.

Other qualities of Rajo Guna are – dexterity of conduct, possessions and diverse decorations that prevail in the world among men, women, animals, inanimate things, grief, incredulousness, vows and regulations, actions with the expectation of good results, diverse acts of public charity, auspicious acts, affection generated by the merits of the object, treachery, deception, disrespect and respect, theft, killing, desire of concealment, wakefulness, ostentation, attachment, devotion, contentment, gambling, indulgence in scandal, attachment to dancing, instrumental music and songs.

Foods that are bitter, sour, saline, excessively hot, pungent, dry and burning are known as Rajasika.

Examples: Foods that have been fried in oil or cooked too much or eaten in excess, specific foods and spices that are strongly exciting. Sour fruits like oranges, grapefruit, lemons, apples, banana and guava, Vegetables such as cauliflower, broccoli, spinach, tamarind, winter squash and pickles, fresh fish, shrimp, white meat chicken.

A person should consume food of his choice. The quantity and quality of food depends on the individual himself.

TAMASIKA GUNA: Tamasika Guna depicts darkness. Complete delusion, ignorance, indecision in respect of action, sleep, haughtiness, fear, cupidity, grief, censure of good acts, loss of memory, absence of faith, violation of all rules of conduct, want of discrimination, blindness, vileness of behavior, boastful assertions of performance when there has been no performance, presumption of knowledge in ignorance, being unfriendly, evilness of disposition, absence of faith, invalid reasoning, incapacity for association, sinful action, senselessness, absence of self-control, degradation, – all these are the gunas of Tamas.

Food which is stale, tasteless, rotten and impure is known as Tamasika food.

Examples: Foods that have been strongly processed, canned or frozen or are old, stale, or incompatible with each other. Fruits such as avocado, watermelon, plums and apricots. Vegetables like mushrooms, pumpkin and all genetically modified products. Urad dal, black beans, pinto beans, pink beans. Pork, beef, lamb, dark meat chicken/turkey, bottom feeder fish and lobster, canned, dried, frozen or old flesh products, factory farmed products like five chickens to one small cage, de-baking – meat, fish, eggs are especially tamasika.

From the above it is clear that these three kinds of food affect the three doshas of the mind.

Charaka says that a substance conducive to an individual is called as satmya and the use of such substance results in the well-being of that individual. A person should consume food of his choice. The quantity and quality of food depends on the individual himself.

This means that if a person likes to eat food in less quantity and likes sweet and dry items then that is his individual taste. If a person consumes food which he does not like then the nutrient value of the particular food is not completely utilised by the body even if the food given to him is highly healthy. Digestion and the effect on the body depend upon the state of mind. A wholesome diet may be incompatible if the state of mind is not proper. Food does not come to us merely by our mouths. It comes through all our senses and through our minds.

So, diet and mind are inter-related. Diet is essen-



Aila at night

ONCE the sun set, villagers in the thick mangrove forests of the Sunderbans would scurry home. Lanes would be deserted as shops and stalls locked up for the night. It didn't make sense to hang around. Ninety per cent of villages have no electricity. The only dim light they had came from kerosene lamps.

But this year light glows in villages, long after sunset. Solar lamps and panels light up villages which never had electricity.

The state government appointed the West Bengal Renewable Energy Department (WBREDA) as the nodal agency for its solar power project for the Sunderbans.

You can now see solar panels perched on thatched roofs and lying on mud floors. Solar energy runs the



local doctor's chamber, shops, video parlours, homes and telephone booths, bringing a sea change to the lifestyle of the people.

"It was really difficult for me to treat and diagnose my distressed patients in the dim light of my traditional lantern. Now I have good, accessible solar lights. It has made my practice much easier," said Dr Madhab Halder, a resident medical practitioner in Amlamethi village.

"Our children couldn't do their homework after sunset," said Gour Mandal, a villager.

"I could not even afford kerosene. But now with the help of the solar lantern, they study late into the night."

The solar lanterns have been named 'Aila' after the devastating Cyclone Aila which hit the Sunderbans last monsoon and caused widespread destruction. After the cyclone, school children here who are mostly SC/ST were gifted the solar lamps by the government.

Solar energy provides light only for five hours in the evening. During the monsoon months light availability can go down to just two hours. Villagers in Amlamethi, Bali-Gosaba, Ranigarh and others are happy. "I have never ever seen such lamps. I am now 79 years old. Everything can be seen at night with these lamps," exclaimed Renubala Devi, a widow who lives in Bali-Gosaba village.



tial for a healthy mind. In other words, a healthy mind is responsible for proper digestion and utilisation of its nutrients in the body.

The link between food and mind has been proved by modern science. Our brains produce chemicals, called neurotransmitters that regulate our moods, emotions and even how we experience pain. Nutrients in the foods we eat trigger certain amino acids that, in turn, produce or decrease production of emotional neurotransmitters such as dopamine, epinephrine and serotonin. In modern science, the way food affects moods is completely new but this concept has been there since ages in Ayurveda.

Rules for consuming food:

- Food should be warm as it makes food delicious and helps in proper digestion.
- It should be unctuous as it promotes strength and enhance complexion.
- Food should be consumed in proper quantity else there will be impairment

in the power of digestion.

- One should consume food only after the previous meal has been digested properly as it may lead to instantaneous impairment of the doshas.
- Incompatible food should not be consumed.

Examples:

- Fish with curd should not be consumed as it acts like a poison.
- One should consume food in a proper place equipped with all the accessories so that one does not get afflicted with factors that would result in emotional strain which occurs when one eats food in an improper place.
- Food should not be consumed in a hurry or too slowly.
- One should consume food with due concentration meaning a person should not talk, laugh or be distracted.
- One should take food in a prescribed manner with due regard to his own self.

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The power of patience

SAMITA RATHOR

"One can rectify the mistakes made in the past with the help of fearlessness and patience."

Rig Veda

IN today's world everything seems to be going up including real estate, prices, the temperature and stress levels. What is going down are primarily patience and tolerance levels. From impatience and low tolerance, rises negativity – the root cause for hatred and unrest in the world.

Patience and tolerance levels represent a person's state of mind. They are a measuring rod for the condition of the inner well being of an individual. Patience does not cease the stream of life growth. It gives rise to another dimension of tolerance and strengthens the mental faculties. It only gives us more choice in handling situations. It is what we need now at this very moment constantly and consistently if we want to build a favourable and positive environment around us.

A patient and tolerant mind is in a state of relaxation and always leaves adequate room for serenity and calmness to reside. Decisions taken impatiently and aggressively may not have a beneficial outcome.

A mind in control is patient and tolerant.

How to acquire patience and tolerance

- Think twice before you say anything negative. If we can control our tongue, we can control ourselves. The same principle is applicable to excessive eating. Eat the right food, in limited quantities, not for the tongue but for the stomach. Remember the tongue and heart are related. So what we say and eat is a reflection of our emotions. A conscious effort can be made to filter negative words. If this is done then

automatically the heart does not face the brunt of harsh words.

As Lord Buddha says: "The tongue is like a sharp knife... kills without drawing blood."

- Laugh and don't hold on to any negative emotions for too long. Humour is a state of mind. If you have the genes to be funny, you will find

SOUL VALUE

something to laugh at, whether it is your angry husband, your naughty pet, or your failures in life. It is vital to look at the amusing side of things if you want to take pleasure in life each day. Holding on to a situation can cause physical ailments and symptoms like high blood pressure and diabetes. So why enter those dark territories? Humour can be used as a very effective tool to enhance your tolerance and patience levels.

- Don't let the environment have an effect on your inner being. By staying constant and not letting the external nuance penetrate your mind beyond a certain degree, you will experience feelings of happiness and sheer joy. Patience and tolerance will rule and prevail in this state.

- By looking at the macro aspect rather than the micro aspect of situations will make you an all-time student of life. Being such a student is one the greatest gifts because in these lie new destinations, opportunities and great discoveries.

- Respect and treat people the way you would like to be treated. You are then allowing yourself to live in the moment and making the best use of your time and space.

- Control of emotions through daily prayers and contemplation trains the mind to see beyond regular and everyday events. Listen to what

people say without reacting immediately. By this practice, your emotional tolerance levels can reach an amazing height. You will be surprised how much the mind can handle if you allow it too. Negative emotions always block that 'expansion' aspect of the mind.

"God speaks in the silence of the heart. Listening is the beginning of prayer." Mother Teresa

- Any negative experience has to have a positive outcome. If we slowly open our mind to this concept then we can enjoy the benefits of experiencing greener pastures and avenues. By doing this we are automatically enhancing our degree of tolerance and patience.

"The positive thinker sees the invisible, feels the intangible, and achieves the impossible."

Tolerance and patience are gifts of the highest attribute. Build, nurture, enhance and expand them for meaningful and simple living.

Benefits of patience

Practicing patience and tolerance has loads of advantages mentally, physically and spiritually.

- Healthier choices and decisions in life can be taken by practicing patience.

- Tolerance helps us to understand the significance of development and relevance of thoughts.

- Patience aids in strengthening associations and interactions in daily life.

- Empathy levels of a person with patience are much higher than someone who is not.

- A mentally sound person is always patient and tolerant.

- Regular practice of patience can remove stress, anxiety and fear levels in a person as these are the root causes for unstable emotional behaviour.

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LAKSHMAN ANAND



PRODUCTS

SISTERS OF STYLE

The Qasab-Kutch Mahila Vikas Sangathan is a large cooperative of rural women from arid villages in the Kutch district of Gujarat. The cooperative has 12,000 members out of which 1,200 are traditional craftswomen. They have organised themselves into several 'producer groups'.

The women have amazing craft skills. They embroider, design, innovate, produce and market together as 'artisan entrepreneurs' and not as lowly-paid piece rate workers.

The range of products you can buy from the Qasab Kutch Mahila Vikas Sangathan is remarkable. On offer are quilts, bedspreads, cushion covers, bags, purses and much more. The cooperative specialises in eye catching and intricate embroidery. The colours are vibrant. Products from the sangathan never go out of style since they are rooted in tradition.

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