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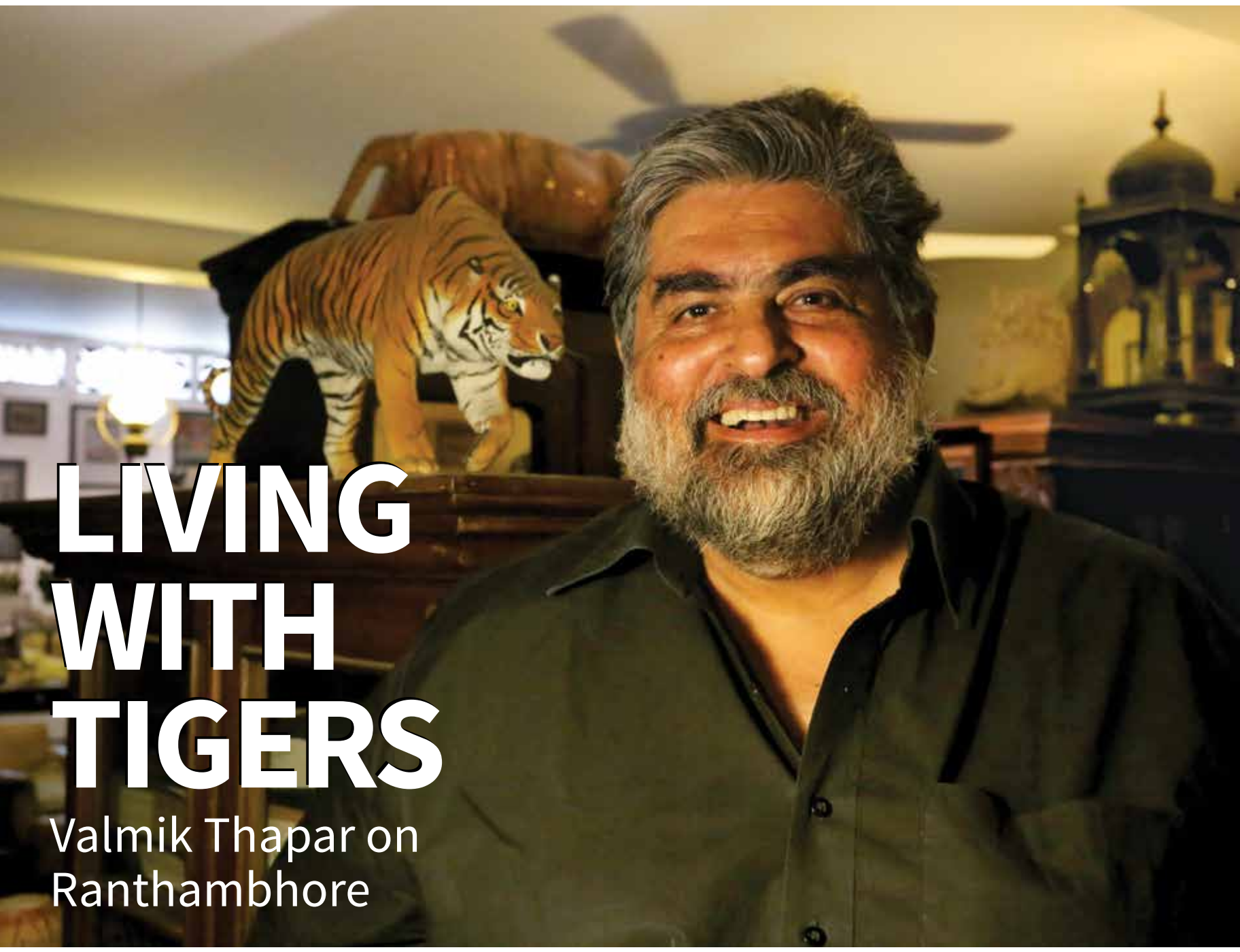

LIVING WITH TIGERS

Valmik Thapar on Ranthambhore

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COVER STORY

Living with Tigers

A rare journey into the heart of Ranthambhore with Valmik Thapar who has been closely observing tigers from the time he was a young man. Thapar tells us about the tigers he came to know. 18

COVER PHOTOGRAPH: AJIT KRISHNA

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Civil Society
READ US. WE READ YOU.

The tiger story

WE have featured Valmik Thapar before and when his book, *Living with Tigers*, landed in our office our first response was to do an interview or a review. We finally decided to carry an extract and put Thapar on the cover. He has a great story to tell about his lifelong involvement with the tigers of Ranthambhore. The book is well crafted and warmly written with the tigers coming to us with names and personalities of their own. Thapar is involved in their world in a way which goes much beyond the passion of a wildlife enthusiast. He seeks to be and becomes an insider and as readers we have an opportunity to join in that nuanced and privileged position. We felt the best way we could take the book to the readers of our magazine would be through an extract to bring out the true flavour — and as one thought led to another, it got positioned on the cover.

There are any number of reports and learned treatises on the challenges of conserving India's wildlife. There has been a lot of interest in the tiger and ways of saving it. These are all significant contributions in their own ways. Thapar's impact comes from appealing to the imagination. You begin to see tigers differently, even lovingly, as Thapar does.

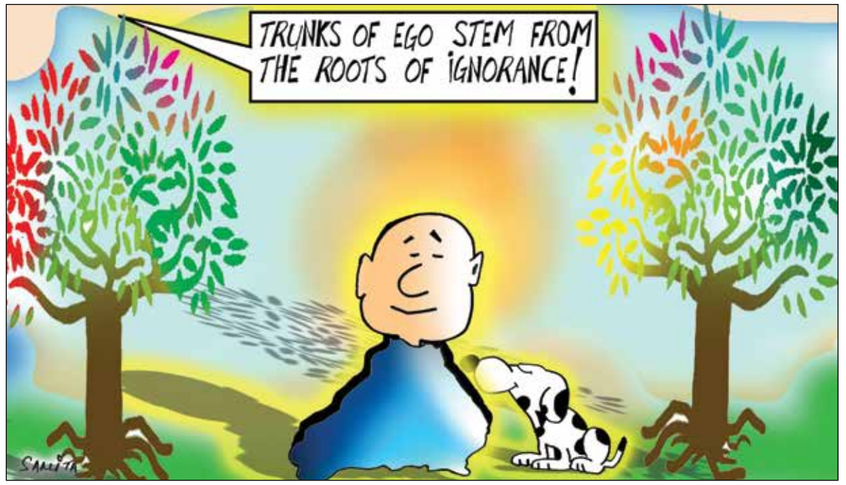
How do organisations that experience a crisis get back their mojo? We thought we would find out by interviewing Ajay Mathur, who succeeded R.K. Pachauri as director-general of TERI. Mathur has got awesome credentials in energy and as a changemaker and is therefore a great choice for TERI. A year after he took over, we had a session with him in his office at the Habitat Centre for the opening interview of this issue.

We consider it our forte to be able to find and engage with new-age companies that seriously make a difference to the way we live. If you look through our back issues you will find any number of examples of innovative enterprises that deliver significant social value through what they do. This issue features Zonta Infratech in our business section. The company is into cleaning up cities, turning dumps into what it calls drop boxes. Using technology and adaptive revenue models, Zonta Infratech is making it possible to not just clean up but also bring systemic change. Check out our interview with the founder and MD, Raj Kumar, whom we spoke to in his Bengaluru office.

Some years ago, we went out and reported on reverse mortgage and the many possibilities it offered to help the elderly be financially independent. It is a great scheme but unfortunately it has been left to languish by the government, the National Housing Banks, and banks and institutional lenders. In this season of financial inclusion, we felt we should revisit the story to see what is holding up an important initiative.

IN THE LIGHT

SAMITA RATHOR



LETTERS

GI hunters

I read Shree Padre's cover story, 'Kerala's GI Hunters', with great interest. I think if all agricultural universities in India replicate the work the IPR Cell in Kerala Agricultural University (KAU) is doing, it will reveal a huge treasure of crop biodiversity, most of it unknown even to the citizens of India. Such an exercise will help us identify traditional food crops and add a new range of fruits, vegetables and cereals to the Indian diet.

Sridhar Ramesh

KAU seems to be the most innovative in the country. While the IPR Cell is doing its work, could it also undertake research on technical issues which prevent housewives from buying certain nutritious crops. Take Kerala's famous black rice variety, or even some nutritious varieties of brown rice. They take an extremely long time to cook so housewives opt for quick cooking basmati. We could also improve some of our fruit and vegetable varieties. If we keep the consumer in mind it helps the farmer too because the crop sells.

Shelley Kalra

Crocs on offensive

I read Shyam Bhatia's well-written piece, 'Crocs do their number in Andamans.' I fail to understand why the forest department allows the crocs to run wild and doesn't cull them. Culling is practised the world over and it does help to bring down the population of wild animals which become pests. The Andamans are a tourist attraction and the local administration must keep its beautiful beaches safe for tourists and citizens.

Sarah Oraon

Since leather is in short supply we can make bags and slippers from crocodile skin. Such items can also be exported.

Abha Bains

Private schools

I was glad to note SEED's work in improving private schools. Most of our domestic workers send their children to such schools because they believe government schools don't provide quality education. Very often they are disappointed. So it is great to know that these schools are also getting attention.

Meena Kumari

The teaching in most low-cost private schools is below par. In some ways their standards are worse-off than government schools. Teachers in government schools are pretty well paid in comparison and there are some chances of hand-holding. Money is earmarked for infrastructure. Inexpensive private schools are treated with disdain and tend to be ignored.

Prasanta Sinha

Mayors and cities

Aparna Sundaresan's analysis of the recent municipal polls in Maharashtra is timely. The Delhi municipal elections are also attracting attention. The reason isn't politics alone. Citizens are fed up with the three municipalities Delhi has. I agree that mayors need to be empowered but what do you do in a city which has three mayors without a dedicated tenure? We need one strong municipal body with one strong mayor. It doesn't matter if the city is too large. Technology can easily bridge distances. But don't divide and not rule.

Ritu

In this era of corporate media nexus with a grand design of eroding the last traces of ethics and humanity in favour of an all-out consumer culture, *Civil Society* is a refreshing breeze which talks about hope.

Dhrubajyoti Ghosh

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‘India is on the cusp of complete change in using electricity’

Ajay Mathur on TERI’s agenda and how it has been looking within

Civil Society News
New Delhi

AJAY Mathur took over as Director-General of TERI (The Energy Resources Institute) about a year ago. He came with a formidable reputation. As Director-General of the Bureau of Energy Efficiency, he brought in rating of appliances for energy efficiency and a building code to promote energy conservation. He has also served as a key negotiator for the Indian government on climate change.

Mathur inherits a legacy of organisational stress. He took over after a flashpoint at which the previous Director-General, R.K. Pachauri, stepped down in the face of charges of sexual harassment. Mathur is faced with both an opportunity and a challenge. He has put in place systems to ensure work ethics are maintained. The strategic direction for TERI under him is to engage with efforts to help India make the transition to green energy. TERI is involved in creating new green technologies especially tailored to Indian conditions and disseminating them. The organisation is working with municipalities and industry. It is also involved in public transport and drawing up plans and policies for cities to go electric.

We spoke to Ajay Mathur in his office at the India Habitat Centre.

What is the direction TERI is taking under you?
We face a large number of sustainable development challenges in India. We need to use energy much more efficiently. We need to use more renewables, improve water efficiency, decrease the amount of pesticides and fertilisers we use in agriculture and so on.

It is TERI’s goal to help the country achieve sustainable development through resource efficiency. Therefore, our research creates three kinds of products — policies, technologies and services. For example, how do you transit to a future that has lower greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions.

This kind of policy work is at the heart of what we do. What policies do we need to help India to achieve greater resource efficiency in the construction sector? What technologies can help small-scale industries like foundries to be more efficient?

Today 40 percent of new foundries use the TERI double blast cupola which we developed. Very recently, we developed a consortia of bacteria which can clean up soil contaminated with oil. All our refineries face this problem. In Kuwait since the first Gulf War there are large patches of land soaking in oil. So this consortia of bacteria can clean up such soil in three to four months and then you can grow plants on the land. Our goal is also to ensure such technologies are affordable.

The third is services. We have been developing energy audits for industry and rating buildings for their greenness. All this helps people, industry and governments move towards a more sustainable future.

How would you measure TERI’s impact over the years? What would you do to large-scale it?
The challenge is to use cutting-edge technologies to achieve a transformation. In a nutshell, it is about partnerships — working with other organisations to ensure policies are disseminated, that there are buy-ins from people and the media writes about it.

We are also looking at industrial partners. When we develop a technology we can do a few pilots but it is industry that large-scales it. How do we work with them and transfer this knowledge? We also work to ensure that concomitant changes, for example, financing, come into play. Therefore, we work with banks too.

What is TERI’s strategy under you?
Briefly, it will be different strategies for different things. For example, one of our challenges is to move the electricity sector off coal. We believe it is possible.

We generate so much coal that it can meet all our needs for the next 10 years. Post that, when we add capacity, we would like it to be from renewables plus batteries that produce electricity that is cheaper than from coal.

> ‘The consortia of bacteria we developed can clean up soil contaminated with oil in three to four months.’

It means getting in batteries, testing them, telling electricity boards about those batteries and making sure the private sector can make them. Also, ensuring that regulations are in place so that batteries fulfil technical and commercial requirements and create a market in which battery performance improves and prices fall. We would look at a policy that would enable such an outcome.

In technologies we are looking at a ceramic membrane for sewage treatment. We will do a pilot but after that we need people who can work with ceramics and have an all-India marketing network for membranes. We also need management professionals who know how to work with municipalities. We will get all stakeholders involved at an early stage so that we can develop a product that is of use to them rather than having to tweak it later.

How do you propose to work with so many stakeholders?
We have roundtables where we bring in people not just from industry but also the municipalities and the pollution control boards. This provides us with a reality check. It also tells them what is happening early on. Making change happen is a two-way street.

AJIT KRISHNA

Ajay Mathur: ‘The challenge is to use technology that is cutting-edge to achieve a transformation’

> ‘We have roundtables where we bring in people not just from industry but also the municipalities and the pollution control boards. This provides us with a reality check.’

Are you on the same page with them? Municipalities and pollution control boards lack capacity.
The problem is in getting their time. When you say they lack capacity the reality is that there are probably three people who have 300 things to do. We reach out and tell them how important the initiative is. They understand and list it in their own order of prioritisation.

At the end of the day large-scale replication always occurs through governments. The change model I have seen work is one in which there is a technology that works and a business model that works and makes it easier for people to adopt. Once you have demonstrated a business model it is easier to convince people of policy changes.

You work with government to ensure policy changes and that in turn seeds a large number of entrepreneurs who can large-scale the technology.

A classic example is the LED bulb programme. There was a business model. It aggregated demand through the consumers of electricity companies and looked at bulb procurement as a means of bringing down prices. Prices reduced from ₹360 for a bulb in January 2014 to ₹38 in September 2016 and in the process 2,020 million bulbs were sold. So this is a country where scale just has to be part of the equation of making change happen.

Feeding excess solar power into the grid is an ongoing issue.
There are two issues. First, regions where we can develop solar energy aren’t the areas where demand is high. So you need to build transmission lines. Solar energy is available for six-eight hours a day. That means for the rest of the time, transmission lines are not transmitting any electricity and that becomes expensive. We have been innovative and used money from the National Clean Energy Fund, a cess on coal, to do a viability gap funding for these transmission lines.

Second, electricity generated in power plants flows one way into our homes. If I set up a solar plan that generates more electricity than I can use I should be able to put it back in the grid. Several states have enabling provisions to do this. But the grid should be able to absorb it. That is not so straightforward. Grids have to invest in making that happen. That will take time particularly in urban centres congested with people, wiring and high demand.

What do you see happening in the near future?
I see three things happening in the energy business. The first — and we are already seeing this happen — is increasing energy efficiency in lighting, air-conditioning and industry. Consequently, demand for electricity is not increasing as fast as we had thought.

In about 10 years all new additional electricity generation capacity will be solar, aided by batteries. That means we are on the cusp of a complete change in how we deal with electricity, where it comes from and how we use it.

Second, since we will have more power stations and electricity than what the electricity companies are buying, we will start seeing a lot more electric vehicles, for the simple reason that using electricity will decrease the country’s oil imports.

Third, as we make the transition to more renewable energy, the transport system also becomes less carbon-based. You can make internal combustion engines as efficient as possible but you can never make them zero carbon. But with this strategy it is possible. I believe economic forces will drive this change.

Is TERI getting involved in the public transport sector or in setting up charging stations?
We think the transition to electric will happen in two-wheelers and buses. The vast number of vehicles in India are these two. The other area could be led by the government. It could mandate that, say, from 2018 or 2020 all cars that the government buys would be electric. That would give a signal and create a demand.

We are deeply involved in regulations for two-wheelers and three-wheelers. For buses we are looking at financial modelling and policy.

For charging stations, we are looking at two different models. First, how do you have charging stations across the city. Second, what is the kind of regulation and business model that will make it attractive for electricity companies to set up charging stations everywhere including in residential areas so that a person on the third floor can charge his or her vehicle.

We are also examining whether batteries can be easily swapped. So the old battery in my car can be quickly taken out and a new one put in. What could be interesting is to see if batteries can be taken to a

Continued on page 8

Continued from page 7

large space out of the city and charged through solar energy. We would like policies and technical regulations to move us in this direction.

What can we learn from technological innovation abroad?
There is so much. Lithium ion batteries, Elon Musk's work… but the country we are learning the most from is China. The number of electric two-wheelers in China is immense. Your chances of being run over by a two-wheeler in Beijing are very high because they are soundless. The largest number of electric buses anywhere in the world are in China. That's where the lithium ion batteries are also happening.

TERI has seen ups and downs in the recent past. Your organisation's processes, workplace ethics, decorum and many other things have been questioned. How have you dealt with all this?
We have put in place a multi-tiered set of interventions. As soon as I came in I asked a very respected colleague who left TERI 10 years ago to come in and talk on a confidential basis with anybody who wants to talk to figure out what are the

> 'Four sets of organisational changes have been brought into place. There is a grievance and conduct process.'

concerns. That provided us a roadmap for the first set of interventions which were largely an HR process. We have also put in place a disciplinary code including rules for misconduct.

The second issue that became important to us was the way work was done. In a sense, people took the initiative and did things. Unfortunately, such a process became unstructured in many ways.

So we asked colleagues within TERI and outside to again meet people across the organisation and suggest how we could come up with an institutional structure that is impactful and more reflective of people's own ambitions and professional growth.

Four sets of organisational changes have been brought into place. There is a grievance and conduct process. An HRD structure alone might not solve the problem, neither would an organisational structure alone. But both together can address the kind of issues that stymied us in the past.

Going forward, would you say the level of transparency being institutionalised now would preclude any such situations from happening easily?
What is clear is that in future people will feel more comfortable. If they don't there are processes to handle it. The other issue is that the processes in place today apply to everyone, including me. ■

Tamil farmers take cry for help to Delhi

T.S. Sudhir
Thanjavur

BAISAKHI, the harvest festival of Punjab, is an occasion of boisterous celebration by the state's farmers. Which, perhaps, is why their 'Madrassi' brethren decided not to indulge in their usual show of near nudity at the Jantar Mantar in Delhi. Instead, the male protesters draped themselves in saris, yet another way to tell the powers-that-be in the capital that all is not well.

A few hours earlier, they had protested in the nude outside the prime minister's residence, much to the shock of all. This had followed their act of shaving half their heads and moustaches, and clutching live rats and parts of dead snakes in their mouths. But it was their decision to carry the skulls of farmers who had died in the last six months that finally caught media and public attention.

"Why not?" asked Karthikeyan, reacting to the gimmicky nature of the protest. His brother, Ganeshan, died in Thanjavur district on January 5, traumatised by the drying up of the paddy crop on his four acres of land. There was no way he could repay the debt of ₹2.75 lakh. Karthikeyan says the macabre nature of the protest is intended to reflect the deep agrarian distress in Tamil Nadu.

"Do you think anyone will even look at us if a few of us just sit there and raise slogans? Today the media is reporting on the protest only because of the skulls," said Karthikeyan. Death, sadly, is the only way to give life to a desperate cry for help. The drought of 2016-17 is statistically the worst Tamil Nadu has seen in 140 years. It started with Karnataka's refusal to release sufficient Cauvery water in September despite the order of the Supreme Court. That resulted in *kuruvai*, the summer crop, drying up.

The J. Jayalalithaa regime had waived cooperative bank loans. The struggle in Delhi is to get the centre to waive the loans from nationalised banks and also set up a Cauvery Management Board so that Karnataka, from whatever little water it has, releases proportionate water for Tamil Nadu. State officials say their focus now is on ensuring drinking water in all districts, including Chennai.

The state's demand for drought relief came a cropper as the centre gave just ₹2,000 crore against the sought after ₹39,000 crore. Many believe this is also linked to politics as the BJP is not comfortable with the Sasikala camp-led AIADMK government that is ruling Tamil Nadu.

The current AIADMK regime has also been found to be more engrossed in petty power games than lending a helping hand to farmers and the people at large. Disenchantment with the political establishment in Tamil Nadu is at an all-time high.

"They were paying money to buy votes in RK Nagar," says M. Subbayan, a farmer in Mavoor. "When they can win elections like that, they do not need to care about people like us."

But the question everyone asks is whether by the time some help is given, it will be too late. In DMK chief M. Karunanidhi's Tiruvarur constituency, Karnan is unsure if anyone from his family would or should return to farming. Not after they saw agriculture getting its hand bloody with Karnan's wife, Manimeghalai's blood. Manimeghalai, who helped him on the farm, reached for the noose on the night of January 18. This was after their crop on two acres of land, on which the couple had sown paddy and pulses, dried up. She simply woke up at midnight, let loose the goat and used that rope to hang herself from a tree outside their hut.

Another issue is that a large part of the loan is taken from private moneylenders at exorbitant rates of interest — ₹5 for every ₹100 every month. A loan waiver does nothing to help these tenant farmers.

PICTURES BY AJIT KRISHNA

The farmers say their situation is so hopeless they may have to eat rats to survive

Farmers from Tamil Nadu sit at Jantar Mantar with skulls and rats to catch public attention to their sad plight

> Much of the crisis is of Tamil Nadu's own making. Very little effort has been put into rejuvenating farm ponds and minor irrigation tanks under MGNREGS.

But much of the crisis is of Tamil Nadu's own making. Very little effort has been put into rejuvenating its farm ponds and minor irrigation tanks under MGNREGS. Had it done so, like Telangana and Andhra Pradesh, it would have buffered the drinking water crisis to an extent. The Cauvery is practically dead in the state, reduced to filth and garbage dumps.

The state's inability to farm when it gets excess water is another factor. "No attempt is made to desilt the water bodies in the cities. As a result, they have no water carrying capacity left," says Chandra Mohan, a social activist. "In the 2015 mega floods in Chennai, 300 TMC of water went into the sea. If the government had taken care, we would not have had to worry about water for the next four or five years because Chennai's water consumption is 12 to 15 TMC a year."

Another mistake is to treat the drought as only a farmer issue. Jayaprakash Narayan, founder of the Foundation for Democratic Reforms, calls it a rural crisis to which a lack of governance has contributed in significant measure.

"There is nothing more disgraceful for a country. Even in this day and age, people are so desperate that they are forced to take extreme measures," says Narayan. "What is the farmer's biggest expenditure outside of agricultural operations? It is healthcare and education. Officially, you have free education but why are the poorest people from rural areas compelled to spend a lot of money on private schooling? Because the government has abdicated its responsibility and the people no longer believe that the government needs to provide quality education free of cost. Likewise, no one believes that quality healthcare will be available at a government health facility."

"If the government does not help, the next generation will see no agriculture in Tamil Nadu," predicts Karthikeyan. Fellow farmer Mani agrees, "If it was a lucrative profession, I could ask my sons to take it up. But when I am myself rethinking whether to continue with it, how can I ask them to take up farming?"

Many of them are looking to sell their land and find there is no pot of gold underneath. Like Arulanneelden, whose father died, leaving behind a debt of ₹3 lakh. Selling the two acres of land is not an option because the parched land in rural Tamil Nadu has no takers in the realty market.

Tamil Nadu will be on test in 2017. Not many will be able to take another monsoon failure. ■

PICTURES BY AJIT KRISHNA

Colonel Surendra Pal Chauhan outside his house in Noida

Whatever happened to reverse mortgage loans for the elderly?

Civil Society News
New Delhi

COLONEL Surendra Pal Chauhan is 76 and is the owner of a house in Sector 37 in Noida. Like innumerable retired defence personnel, the house is all he really owns, and located as it is in the National Capital Region, close to New Delhi, it is not without value.

But 10 years ago, when Col Chauhan wanted to do a reverse mortgage on the house because he desperately needed ₹30 lakh, he went from bank to bank and finally gave up.

At that time (we are talking about 2007-2008), the reverse mortgage scheme had just been launched in the Union Finance Minister's budget speech. It was meant to be a social security measure to protect financially vulnerable senior citizens like Col Chauhan.

There are around 100 million senior citizens in the country and invariably the house or flat in which they live is the only asset they have. How do they leverage it when they desperately need cash to meet a medical emergency, retire an existing loan or just to keep meeting their living expenses?

Reverse mortgage is meant to allow a senior citizen to continue to live in a residential property while getting money against it from a bank or a housing finance institution. After the senior citizen's demise, the lender is free to sell off the property and recover the money or the property can be inherited and the heirs can pay off the loan.

The scheme seems simple enough and Col Chauhan felt it was just what he needed to pay off a ₹30 lakh loan against his Noida house, which could have been valued at about ₹1.8 crore. But he made no headway because of lack of clarity over guidelines and lack of interest among banks.

Ten years later reverse mortgage continues to exist only on paper. Banks, housing finance companies and the government do nothing to make it easier for the elderly to access funds when they most need them.

Col Chauhan discovered to his dismay that the banking system was awash with confusion over the scheme's conditions. He went to a number of banks — the State Bank of India (SBI), the Punjab National Bank (PNB), Axis Bank — only to find that the staff at each was ignorant about eligibility criteria and took obdurate positions instead of handholding him through the process.

He went to the National Housing Bank (NHB), which is the apex institution responsible for promoting reverse mortgage, and got a patient hearing but no help. Nor did he make any headway when he enlisted with Helpage India, the NGO which works with the aged and was trying through counsellors to make reverse mortgage operational. Finally, in 2009, Col Chauhan wrote a letter about his plight to then Finance Minister Pranab Mukherjee and gave up.

Col Chauhan says he was turned down because he had already taken a loan against his house. The guidelines issued by NHB say the property should be 'unencumbered' and this was taken to mean that there should be no loan pending against it. But the guidelines also say that reverse mortgage can be given in a lump sum to pay off an existing loan. So, is this a contradiction in the guidelines or is it wrong interpretation of the term 'unencumbered'?

Col Chauhan wanted to pay off the earlier loan which had been taken to help his son. The son's enterprise had failed and ICICI was aggressively asking for the money back.

Col Chauhan says the guidelines allow the lender under reverse mortgage to use its discretion to pay part of the proceeds to the previous lender, thereby freeing up the senior citizen from that burden.

It wasn't done in his case because there was lack of clarity and it was left to the discretion of the bank. Staff at the banks were not familiar with the basics of reverse mortgage. They did not know how to address his need.

The rules say that the money can be given either in tranches or in a lump sum. And that it can be used for medical emergencies, renovation and upgradation of the property and paying off an earlier loan against the property.

"Most senior citizens, perhaps up to 90 percent of them, would have some loan or mortgage standing against their house," says Col Chauhan. "If the purpose is to only have reverse mortgage for medical emergencies, the government may as well scrap the scheme."

He finally found other sources for raising the money, but he bitterly recalls: "My experience was really, really bad. There is hardly any bank I didn't approach. Most of them were not even aware of the scheme. They have made things so complicated and they ask for so many papers that a senior citizen cannot cope."

"I met the NHB chairperson and told him that I had a loan of ₹30 lakh outstanding with ICICI but my property was worth ₹1.8 lakhs at that time. So why couldn't they clear the ICICI loan and give the remaining amount to me? He agreed in principle. He also spoke to a few banks which gave me a verbal assurance, but didn't do anything," Col Chauhan recalls.

"The biggest stumbling block is banks first ask senior citizens to clear their existing loans, which senior citizens can't do without the money coming from reverse mortgage. So, the point is this scheme is misconceived and unless it is thoroughly revised and made user -friendly it is bound to fail," says Col Chauhan.

The scheme hasn't been designed to serve as a social initiative and an instrument of social inclusion. Bankers haven't been trained to meet the special needs of the elderly, who in turn don't know how to engage with the banking system.

Valuing a property in market terms and getting the documentation right can be complex. So also, understanding how collateral works. It is also tough for the elderly to deal with potential heirs who feel that a reverse mortgage agreement may deprive them of their inheritance.

In the absence of social marketing of the idea, no one is quite sure how to overcome these hurdles even with the best of intentions. Bank staff aren't encouraged to be flexible and adaptable and therefore can't measure up to the challenges they face in such contexts.

The elderly, on the other hand, apart from lacking savvy in banking matters, are also challenged by ill-health, family pressures and the insecurities of raising funds against the only fixed asset they have.

Mathew Cherian, CEO of Helpage India

Rajendra Prasad of the State Bank of India

Bankers have not been trained to meet the special needs of the elderly or to be flexible.

It isn't as though efforts aren't made. Rajendra Prasad of the State Bank of India recalls that he and his team tried hard in the NCR to close reverse mortgage loans, but managed only the odd successful case.

"Invariably people who came to us had an inflated notion of the value of their properties. They also found it difficult to understand why they couldn't get the entire value instead of a percentage of it," says Prasad.

"There was also the problem of documentation. Many customers didn't have clear titles to the property. Some didn't have the original title deeds. In other instances, the ownership was shared," recalls Prasad.

At Helpage India, the NGO's Chief Executive Officer, Mathew Cherian, produces a bulging file of papers on reverse mortgage from 2008 to 2011.

Helpage held workshops and appointed counsellors across the country to help the elderly on reverse mortgage. The NGO also kept up a stream of missives to the government and the NHB to iron out problems. But the impact was limited. Clearly, a bigger effort at the level of the government and involving banks was required but didn't happen.

"Some of the issues had nothing to do with banks, but were social and cultural in nature," explains Cherian. "Many elderly people who wanted to take a reverse mortgage were dissuaded by their children who feared losing control over the property. In the Indian context, the elderly haven't been free to be independent and act in their own best interest."

The result is that reverse mortgage has languished even as the elderly increasingly look for ways in which they can be economically independent. Banks don't advertise the scheme and inquiries at multiple branches of different banks reveal that there aren't staff available who can understand its nuances and offer advice. ■

RTE stocktaking says it is time for more schooling years

AJIT KRISHNA

Children at the government school at Bhool Gaon in Barmer district of Rajasthan

Civil Society News
New Delhi

THE Right to Education (RTE) Forum, a network of child rights activists and NGOs, held a National Stocktaking Convention in Delhi to discuss implementation of the RTE Act which completed seven years in April. The RTE law makes it mandatory for the government to provide free and compulsory education to all children between six and 14 years. A draft assessment report on the RTE Act was also released.

Shantha Sinha, former head of the National Commission for Protection of Child Rights (NCPCR), said there was huge trust in government schools by parents of very poor children. She said the RTE law was working, teachers and *anganwadi* workers were trying to do their job despite paucity of funds and a large number of School Management Committees (SMCs) had been formed.

Most of all, at this year's stocktaking, child rights activists asked for the RTE Act to be extended to pre-school children and to children between 14 and 18 years. In brief, they are saying that children from poor families must get a full school education from nursery to Class 12.

Pre-school is especially critical for poor children between three and six years old. Holistic curricula — early maths, language, motor skills and nutrition — for three to four hours a day would give tiny tots a solid foundation to transit to formal schooling. *Anganwadis,* primary schools and creches could implement early childhood education.

Also, extension of RTE to children between 14 and 18 would further prevent girls from dropping out, getting married and having babies. It would encourage them to opt for higher education and find jobs apart from preventing child labour. Very poor parents find it hard to keep their children in school for a longer time.

Officially, 98 percent of children are now enrolled in school. The emphasis has shifted to improving the quality of education because enrolment figures mask the inefficiencies of the schooling system.

"No child should be out of school and working," said Sinha. There were children still doing child labour, she said. Some children were enrolled but also worked after school. During cotton or chilli picking season children vanish from classrooms. Around 100,000 street children in four cities aren't in school. There is need to link the RTE Act with the Child Labour Act and make the Child Protection Act functional, said Sinha.

According to the draft report, significant gains have been made by the RTE Act. The number of primary and upper primary schools have increased so that children have schools in their neighbourhood to go to. But, while government schools increased by less than 2 percent, private schools increased by 24.28 percent. Enrolment in government schools declined by 8.5 percent. But enrolment in private schools rose by 24.42 percent.

The government has also been closing its schools in remote hilly areas which have a small number of children. Uttarakhand closed down 368 schools last year. More than 4,000 schools are likely to be closed or handed over to the private sector in Andhra Pradesh, Rajasthan and Odisha. The growth of private unaided schools is very high in Delhi (46.02 percent).

Thanks to the RTE Act, 94 percent of schools have School Management Committees (SMCs). West Bengal has the fewest. However, most SMCs don't know what authority they have.

The SMCs weren't inclusive either. Sometimes the head teacher chose members of the SMC or they were dominated by powerful people. There wasn't much synergy between SMCs and panchayats or wards except in Gujarat, Maharashtra, Andhra Pradesh and Tamil Nadu.

However, sometimes SMCs are able to assert themselves. One SMC in Karnataka carried out an enrolment drive in the village, got funds for the school's boundary wall, built toilets, organised drinking water and made an auditorium. There is also a trend of SMCs forming federations, as in Karnataka and Manipur. Efforts at federating are also happening in UP, Jharkhand, Odisha and Bihar.

A huge number of teacher vacancies exist with UP and Bihar topping the list. About 105,630 schools are single-teacher schools with Madhya Pradesh being the worst offender. More teachers are attending school — they need to be there for just 25 to 40 hours per week — but the quality of teaching is poor and they do duties extraneous to their teaching jobs.

Teachers still follow the 'chalk and talk' method. They struggle with their jobs and are blamed for each and every problem. Half a million teachers are unqualified to teach. But where do they go to learn? The National Council for Teacher Education is a somnolent institute. Teacher training colleges are outdated. The District Institutes of Education and Training (DIETs) are mostly bereft of teacher educators and budgets. Good institutes at sub-district level are required to provide in-service training to teachers and support them.

A few states have improved teacher quality. In fact, if the quality of teaching improves the debate over doing away with the no detention policy will die down. Better teaching leads to better grades. According to the report, the quality of education could improve if teachers were monitored for their performance in improving the grades of their students.

Infrastructure seems to have improved in schools. But only 24 percent of schools have electricity and a computer. Schools also need storage for drinking water, hand washing facility, libraries and not many are serving midday meals.

Also, children with disability continue to be out of school, the highest number being mentally retarded girls. The report recommends barrier-free infrastructure, employing teachers with disability and synergy with the RTE and the Rights of People with Disability Act.

Activists demanded that the child labour law be amended once again. The child labour law permits children to work in 'family' occupations. So they get employed in cottage industries and home-based labour. The definition of the family includes the larger family and children who are 14 to 18 years old can work too. The activists also roundly condemned requirement of Aadhaar cards for children for midday meals. ■

Poor RTI access in J&K

Jehangir Rashid
Srinagar

JAMMU and Kashmir was one of the few states to introduce the Right to Information (RTI) Act for bringing transparency in government functioning. However, 13 years after its introduction, most public authorities are wanting in implementation of the Act.

A study by advocates Bilal Ahmad Bhat and Syed Iram Quadri reveals that the public authorities are not complying adequately with Section 4 (1) (b) of the Jammu & Kashmir Right to Information Act.

Under this section they are supposed to proactively reveal information about the functioning of departments. This includes detailed organisational information such as listing of the functions, powers and duties of their officials.

The public should also be informed about the rules, regulations, norms and manuals that must guide the work of officials. Other disclosures include details of decision-making processes, budgets and expenditure, subsidiary programmes, permissions issued and a list of all records held in paper or electronic form.

The websites of the administration are meant to provide such information but don't with the exception of Kargil. The websites aren't user friendly and links don't open. They are also in English, which is alien to most ordinary people in Kashmir.

"The administration in both Jammu and Kashmir divisions of the state has dedicated official websites. Both websites have an RTI link displayed on the homepage. However, they do not contain all the information mandated to be displayed under Section 4 (1) (b) of the J&K RTI Act," says the study.

The survey was conducted as part of the internship programme hosted by the Commonwealth Human Rights Initiative (CHRI) in New Delhi during February 1 to 28. Both Bhat and Quadri are members of the Jammu & Kashmir Right to Information Movement and the School for Rural Development and Environment.

Under the programme, the two lawyers compiled basic data regarding compliance with proactive information disclosure requirements after surveying the websites included in the study. John Mascrinaus of CHRI cross-checked the data. Venkatesh Nayak, Programme Coordinator, CHRI, was also part of the study.

"The website of the Divisional Commissioner, Kashmir and Ladakh, displays only the text of J&K RTI Act and the 2012 RTI Rules under the RTI link. It also connects to the Jammu & Kashmir State Information Commission (SIC) website. However,

> **Three-fourths of the district websites do not display any information about their annual budgets.**

details of Public Information Officers and First Appellate Authorities are not available at this link or under the links Contact Us and Key Officers. Similarly, the Section 4 (1) (b) Manual Handbook is also not displayed on the website," says the study.

The website of the Divisional Commissioner, Jammu, fares much worse in terms of compliance with Section 4 (1) (b) of the J&K RTI Act. The 'RTI' link does not open on any internet browser. As a result, it is not possible to access Section 4 (1) disclosures or the list of PIOs and FAAs.

"More than half, that is, 59 percent of the districts (13 of 22) have not uploaded Section 4 (1) (b) information to a reasonable degree of compliance on their official websites. In several cases Section 4 (1) (b) information has simply not been drawn up and displayed on the websites or where they have been drawn up they are often incomplete," the study says.

Three-fourths of the district websites do not display any information about their annual budgets. Only the district administrations of Bandipora and Budgam have displayed the latest budget information for 2016-17. While the Budgam district website displays Section 4 (1) (b) information in a limited manner, the Bandipora website does not display either Section 4 (1) (b) information or details of PIOs and FAAs.

"The Kargil district website is by far the best website among all the districts surveyed in Jammu & Kashmir. It contains Section 4 (1) (b) information not only in relation to the Deputy Commissioner's office, but also about 42 departments and other public authorities that have operations in the district," reads the study.

All the other districts that have complied with the requirements of Section 4 (1) (b) have displayed information only in relation to a small sub-set of the 16 categories of information that must be proactively disclosed.

All information on the websites of Divisional Commissioners of Jammu and Kashmir is in English without any accompanying Urdu version, making it inaccessible to the large segments of people in J&K who are not familiar with English.

"There are several good practices in Jammu & Kashmir regarding proactive disclosure of information. However, these practices need to be codified and issued in the form of comprehensive guidelines for improving the compliance of the public authorities at different levels of the state government with the proactive disclosure requirements under the J&K RTI Act," suggests the study.

The study also suggests that the General Administration Department should examine the detailed implementation guidelines issued by the Department of Personnel and Training, Government of India, since 2011 for adoption at the Secretariat, district, *tehsil* and *halqa* panchayat levels of the administration and develop assistance programmes in consultation with civil society actors, universities and the Institute of Management and Public Administration for ensuring implementation. ■

Samita's World *by SAMITA RATHOR*

Craze for cracked fruit

Juice of snap melon is being snapped up

Shree Padre
Kodungalloor

IN summer, hundreds of makeshift stalls appear alongside National Highway-47 from Chavakkad to Kochi, selling the juice of snap melon to thirsty travellers. The fruit has become so popular that enthusiastic young farmers have started growing snap melon every two weeks to ensure an uninterrupted supply.

The commercial success of snap melon juice might seem strange at first. The fruit has hardly any shelf life. In just six hours, its skin begins to crack. So it is called '*pottu*' which in Malayalam means cracking.

But, in actuality, there is nothing nutty about its rising popularity. "*Pottu Vellari* is 90 percent water. It has many minerals. Drinking its juice is like drinking Electral," says Dr Narayana Kutty, professor of horticulture at Kerala Agricultural University (KAU) in Mannuthy.

The juice is refreshing and easy to make. Just mash the fruit and mix in a little jaggery powder. New versions of the drink have also been invented and the juice is now blended with coconut milk or cow's milk.

The cucurbitaceous fruit, botanically called *Cucumis melo variety momordica*, is mainly cultivated in the southern districts of Kerala, in Ernakulam, Thrissur and, to a lesser extent, in Alleppey. Thrissur is its home turf. The fruit first started being grown here. Today, roughly 500 acres are devoted to raising snap melon.

Unni Parakkote, 61, a farmer of Edavilang panchayat in Kodungallur taluk, has been cultivating snap melon for 30 years. "This is the only crop that can be harvested in 45 days. It's remunerative too," he says proudly.

Many farmers keen to grow the fruit arrive here, seeking seeds. Unni keeps some seeds to sell to them. The price of snap melon seeds has risen to ₹6,000 per kg.

Farmers plant snap melon after the second paddy crop. Being a coastal region, the soil here is a little sandy. Depending on rainfall, the sowing schedule varies from the first to the last week of January. Farmers grow crops organically using cow dung slurry, ground nut cakes and so on.

Ranjit with his harvest of snap melon, grown with precision farming

"We earn about ₹60,000 from one acre of snap melon. If we cultivate the fruit ourselves we can earn up to ₹1 lakh," says Unni.

One advantage of cultivating snap melon is that after the plant grows a little, it doesn't require irrigation. Soil moisture is enough. "Though the field looks very dry, its sub-soil is invariably moist," explains Unni.

> **Snap melon juice is refreshing, easy to make and contains many minerals. It is also blended with coconut milk.**

Once the fruit matures it begins to crack rapidly. In fact, it cracks so much that it is difficult to transport. Interestingly, the fruit is most aromatic when it cracks. "There is a difference in taste a few hours before cracking and after the skin has cracked. Knowledgeable consumers prefer cracked fruits," says Ranjit, a snap melon farmer.

Farmers transfer snap melon to an arecanut leaf to take it home. "In the old days, snap melon used to be packed in arecanut leaf (*pala*) and gently transported in boats as if it was a baby. So it acquired the name '*palappulli*' which means baby child on areca leaf," recalls Unni. At shops selling snap melons you will find even cracked ones being packed in areca leaves to safeguard them.

At the start of the season the fruit is sold for ₹50. The farmer gets ₹30. Once the season sets in, the price drops to ₹30.

Untimely rain just as the fruit begins to ripen can destroy the entire crop. Land is becoming scarce. Paddy fields are being converted to homes. There is also labour shortage. All these factors were causing a decline of this crop in its traditional belt.

BOOSTER DOSE

But in recent years snap melon is witnessing a revival thanks to the efforts of a farmer and a scientist. Four years ago, Ranjit, a progressive vegetable farmer from Ashtamichara in Mala, approached KAU. He wanted to know whether snap melon could be grown in the laterite soils of the inland areas, slightly away from the coastal belt.

Until then it was strongly believed that the fruit would grow only in the sandy paddy fields of coastal Thrissur. A few attempts to raise snap melon outside its traditional region failed.

At KAU, Dr Kutty took interest. After visiting the laterite belt, he told Ranjit to go ahead but to use new agronomic practices like open precision farming with plastic mulching, drip irrigation and fertigation. Ranjit complied with these instructions and planted snap melon on one acre at Ashtamichara. The crop turned out to be a thumping success.

Ranjit's success drew his neighbours, two vegetable farmers, to trying to grow the fruit. They too experimented with precision farming and got a bumper crop. These farmers now make as much as ₹1 lakh from one acre. They sell the crop to middlemen by permitting them to harvest the melons. A lot of investment is required but the profits made are attracting youngsters to snap melon cultivation in non-traditional areas.

Thanks to open precision farming, farmers like Sinoj, also from Ashtamichara, are raising two crops a year. "Between Joseph Pallan, myself and Ranjit,

PICTURES BY SHREE PADRE

Snap melon tenderly wrapped in areca leaf

Snap melon milkshake, an innovation

we grow 500 tonnes of this fruit. We get 10 tonnes per acre. We sow seeds every 10 days to keep up an uninterrupted supply to the market. We are the only farmers who are growing snap melon for six months a year."

Notably, snap melon is being cultivated on leased land. So these farmers are unsure about getting the same land on lease again. They use the same mulching sheet, drip pipe, PVC pipes and so on to reduce investment.

"Irrigation is very crucial," warns Ranjit. "If it's excessive, the fruit starts rotting. If it's not enough, it withers." Ranjit and his friends had tried cultivating snap melon the traditional way some years earlier. They splashed water from channels to irrigate the crop. "On some days it would be past midnight when we completed irrigation. It was so tiring and cumbersome. Now all that seems like a bad dream," says Ranjit. Water is now provided through drip irrigation. Agronomic duties after initial preparations have been reduced to sowing, harvesting and irrigation by running a motor pump.

Sinoj and his two partners grow snap melon on land taken on lease

The crop is now cultivated on 100 acres and it has spread to Nedumbassery in Ernakulam district.

The spread of snap melon cultivation to non-traditional areas has resulted in competition. Farmers in the traditional areas claim that their crop is tastier and has better shelf life since they use organic methods. Those in the non-traditional belt retort that their melons, grown with precision farming, are more in demand. "Just by looking at our snap melons you can see their quality. Since we provide all nutrients, including micronutrients, our melons have more aroma," they say.

Generally, snap melons vary in shape and size. The ones grown with precision farming are certainly better looking. Ranjit says about 55 to 70 percent of their fruit is uniform.

The leading wholesaler for snap melon in Kodungallur town is Gafoor. He says snap melon cultivation has been going on for quite some time. This is his traditional family business. "Of late, many more people, especially the employed middle class, are becoming aware of the nutraceutical values of this fruit. The marketing network has also widened. Snap melon now goes to five districts. But for its very short shelf life, it would have spread still farther." He endorses the statement that he gets more melons from Mala than from the traditional belt.

It's common for hormone levels to fluctuate for women who have had a hysterectomy. One symptom they face is sweating even in winter. Says Joseph Pallan, "My wife, who has this problem, gets great relief by drinking two glasses of snap melon juice every day." According to Jissy George, a home science specialist at Krishi Vijnana Kendra (KVK) in Aleppey, the fruit heals intestinal ulcers and helps those suffering from arthritis.

MAKESHIFT STALLS

Yahya, a small trader in Kodungallur, recalls the early years when *kakkari* stalls (*kakkari* is another local name for snap melon juice) started appearing alongside highways. He too runs one. These makeshift stalls that begin operating from February offer fruit and freshly pressed juice or milk shakes. "Half a decade ago, there were only a few stalls here. Now, in an 80-km stretch of the NH-47 from Chavakkad to Kochi, you have around 150, almost a couple of stalls per km," he says.

However, of late, some farmers have suffered by growing snap melon. According to Ranjit, these new farmers had grown it this year with the precision farming method. But, they failed to get a buyer for the crop. This might have happened because of market saturation.

Snap melon is also grown in other states. In Karnataka, it is called *ibbadla* and *kakkarike*. In Goa and Maharashtra, it is called *chibud*. In Maharashtra, the fruit is grown during the monsoon to be sold during the Ganesh festival. In Rajasthan it is used as a vegetable. Farmers dehydrate it and sell it. But only in Kerala is it aggressively marketed as juice.

Hotels in Thrissur and Kochi are yet to introduce snap melon juice on their menus. Those in Mangalore in Karnataka serve *chibud* juice — which is actually musk melon and not snap melon — round the year.

Unfortunately, agricultural scientists haven't taken snap melon's rising popularity very seriously. Training farmers or local entrepreneurs to make ready-to-serve (RTS) juices from snap melon would have been a real contribution. Those who enjoy the juice at roadside stalls could then take a few bottles for their family members.

KAU sources say that years ago they did develop a method of producing RTS products from snap melon. However, no details are available. ■

The subaltern music fest

Bharat Dogra
Chitrakoot

ONCE again the unusual Lok Laya festival was held in Chitrakoot in Bundelkhand on 17 March. A celebration of folk music, Lok Laya is truly a people's festival. Musicians, unshaven and tired from a night spent in crowded buses, dressed so ordinarily that you wouldn't glance twice at them, suddenly grab your attention as they get onstage. Their voices are deep, sonorous and rhythmic. Their traditional musical instruments are rich with sound. There is never a dull moment. Performers and audience are in perfect sync.

The performers walk to the stage through the audience, singing and dancing. The audience claps and joins in. In group performances, a singer often gets up and begins to dance. A musician might get down from the stage and begin playing his instrument in the midst of the audience. *Dhrupad, tanpura, dafla,* the *balma* dance create a rhythm and energy that is infectious.


Farmers are the most talented dhrupad singers in the region


A folk dance at the Lok Laya festival

Lok Laya, which means People and Rhythm, has been taking place on and off for the last 15 years. "It depends on funds," says Gaya Prasad Gopal, of the Akhil Bhartiya Samaj Sewa Sansthan (ABSSS), the man behind the festival. "We try to organise one in March and the other in October. The March one is slightly more devoted to dance and folk music and the October one to *dhrupad.*"

Bhagwat Prasad, director of ABSSS, says that when the Lok Laya festival is delayed because they don't have money, folk artistes begin calling them persistently, asking why the festival isn't being held.

This year Lok Laya was dedicated to the memory of Martha Farrell, a senior activist with PRIA (Participatory Research Institute of Asia), an NGO in Delhi. She was killed by terrorists when she visited Afghanistan as part of a delegation in 2015. Farrell was passionate about protection of folk art and had helped organise past editions of Lok Laya. Her husband, Rajesh Tandon, director of PRIA, said he was keen to convert Lok Laya into a dedicated event.

The musicians, artistes and audience are rural folk from the toiling classes. Kamta Prasad Kushwaha, 85, a noted *dhrupad* singer from Bigahna village in Banda district, and Saubhagya Dutt Tiwari, a well-known *tabla* player, were honoured.

Kushwaha, a farmer, has spent his life toiling in his field. But he is also an accomplished *dhrupad* singer who sings *Kabiri* — Sant Kabir's compositions — with aplomb.

He told the audience that since age was catching up, he had sent a message to Avadhesh Kumar, a locally renowned music teacher, that he wanted to hear him play his *pakhawaj* (traditional drums) before he died. So Avadhesh arrived with his drums and the two created rhythm and melody that enraptured the village.

Avadhesh said the old singer was very careful about his *sur-tal* and couldn't be faulted on a single note. Lallu Kumar Shukla, also a senior teacher of music, remarked that Kushwaha's proficiency in lesser known forms of *dhrupad* was very impressive.

Gopal says folk music has a lot of relevance. It forms the basis of much that is rich in classical music. Kushwaha, for instance, isn't the only dhrupad singer in Bigahna. The village has many more *dhrupad* singers. All of them are farmers and versatile in *dhrupad*. They also sing *Kabiri.*

Their traditions in music, dance and the performing arts may be rich but the artistes live in penury. It is unlikely that this heritage will survive unless it is provided patronage by the government. Recent research in several villages reveals high levels of distress among many talented folk artistes. Old patronages have dried up and new ones haven't sprung up as yet. The artistes are very talented but they have been unable to earn anything.

Government funds are largely cornered by middlemen in cities who have only pretentious links with performers at the grassroots. Instead, the government should establish direct links with folk performers by listing their contact numbers on a website. This way folk artistes can be linked to tourism circuits and other events which are patronised by the government.

Dassi Manshah, a Dalit from Bharkhari village in Hamirpur district, is a fabulous singer of *Kabiri, phaag* and other folk genres. He comes from a family of bonded labourers and had to endure great hardship to become a singer and musician.

Ramjeevan, also from Bharkhari village, faced similar hardship. His education was interrupted because a local landlord forced his father to send him for cattle grazing. Ramjeevan had to accept this work but at night he trained himself to become a singer and dancer. He is today recognised as an accomplished *tanpura* player, a talented singer and dancer.

Naurangi Lal was born into a Dalit family that had to do manual scavenging. When his father tried to arrange for his education, he was chased away by the local school teacher. Naurangi was attracted to the *dafla* and became an accomplished *dafla* player.

Fadla Dom is another accomplished *dafla* performer from the Dalit community but he left for Gujarat as a migrant worker and not much has been heard of him since.

Babulia, a folk dancer from Patha region of Chitrakoot district, has caught the eye of even urban audiences but she struggles to make ends meet when she returns to her village.

Anand, a young singer, attracted attention for his *balma* dance at Lok Laya. He became a bonded worker in Meerut and special efforts had to be made by the ABSSS to rescue him.

These, then, are the tragic circumstances of many folk performers of great potential in Bundelkhand. That's why Lok Laya is so relevant to their lives.

Folk music also forms the basis of classical music. "There is a school of thought which believes that even classical music owes its origin to folk music," says Lallu Ram Shukla, former head of the department of music in Gramodya University in Chitrakoot. "The grammar of folk music was informal and unwritten. It was related to the sounds of nature like the blowing of the wind, the rustling of the leaves, the falling of raindrops, the sounds of animals and birds. Later these sounds were codified with *matras, chhand* and so on.

"It is in this context that we can understand why farmers like Kamta Prasad are able to sing some of the lesser known forms of *dhrupad* so immaculately even though these are hardly sung in urban musical concerts. This increases the urgency of saving folk music and dance." ■

COVER

At the age of 23 Valmik Thapar bumbled into the Ranthambhore National Park and met Fateh Singh Rathore, the legendary wildlife warden of the park. He saw his first tiger and was completely captivated. Thapar had found his mission in life. He was destined to study the jungle, its wildlife and its most alluring animal, the tiger.

For the next 40 years Thapar would get to know 200 tigers in Ranthambhore. His recent book, *Living with Tigers*, published by Aleph, is an engaging tribute to the tigers he got close to, the ones who became really special to him in Ranthambhore.

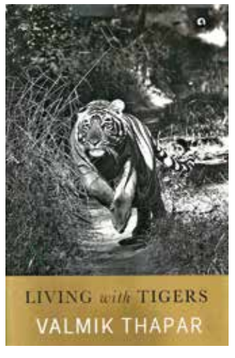
He describes Padmini, the queen mother; Genghis, the master predator; Noon, the daytime tigress; Broken Tooth, the gentle male; Laxmi, the devoted mother; Machli, a famous tigress; and of course T-19, the controversial maneater.

Thapar's tigers have character. They have names and not numbers that the forest department now gives tigers to keep track of them.

"Tigers are like my larger family, so I humanise them," explains Thapar.

Thapar's writing is vivid. His descriptions linger. He brings alive Ranthambhore and its landscape, steeped as it is in history. Thapar takes you there to meet tigers on the same personal terms as he has known them.

We publish here an extract.



SANJANA KAPOOR

Nur with her cubs at the Ranthambhore National Park

LIVING WITH TIGERS

VALMIK THAPAR

WHEN I first went to Ranthambhore in early 1976, seeing wild tigers was the most difficult of tasks. You could roam the forest for days and nights without ever encountering even a sign of a tiger. If we saw a fresh pug mark it was a moment to celebrate and a glimpse of a tiger even for a second was like witnessing a wonder of the world. The park then was full of villages and bullock carts that plied the tracks. Agricultural fields dotted the landscape and even near Jogi Mahal a crop field surrounded the huge banyan tree. There were no tourists and no rules.

Our first glimpses of tigers were always at night and the tiger was completely nocturnal, keeping far away from the daytime activities of man. Therefore, to encounter a tiger I had to lead a nocturnal life, sleeping most of the day and waking at sunset to explore this land of the tiger. Most of the night and sometimes until dawn we would criss-cross the forest waiting for the alarm calls of deer to signal the movement of tigers. At the most, once or twice a month, we would feel excited and exhilarated as a tiger would flash across the road, caught momentarily in our jeep's headlights. These sightings lasted only for a few seconds and we had to rub our eyes in disbelief to absorb what we had seen. Most of 1976 rolled by in this way and I slowly got to know and trust Fateh, who became my tiger guru. We became good friends and our friendship lasted for thirty- five years.

The period 1976-77 was a busy one for Fateh. He was in the midst of shifting and resettling villages as part of an enormous effort to prevent human disturbance in the core area of the park. My first trips to the park were full of encounters with village carts and people moving from Berda to Lakarda to the Ranthambhore Fort and then back up to Anantpura. Crops grew on the edges of the lake of Jogi Mahal, and Ranthambhore Fort boasted a village at its base. Lakarda and Lahpur were full of human activity and there was not a scent of a tiger for miles. Today all these places are the best locations for wild tigers.

Fateh always said that tigers and people cannot coexist and until the villages were resettled tigers would never come into their own. He believed that this was the single most important mission to breathe life into Ranthambhore and from 1976-79 he resettled twelve villages. He was convinced that this process alone would put Ranthambhore on the world map for tigers and make it a prime destination for viewing them. He firmly believed that once the fear of man was removed the tiger would shed its nocturnal habit for a more diurnal one.

I would argue about this but in the end he was proved right. Ranthambhore began to change and in those early years, tiger sightings increased proportionally to the villages being resettled. On my third trip to Ranthambhore in 1976 the village of Lakarda had gone and the entire area had started regenerating with new grass following the monsoon. The deer and antelope were back. Herds of nilgai or blue bulls grazed on the fresh grass.

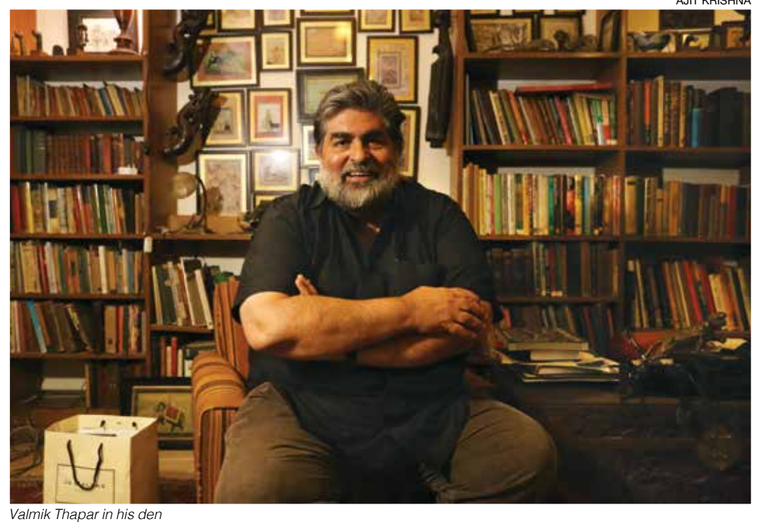
It was at the end of the first year that we became aware of the regular presence of a tigress around Jogi Mahal and in an area of 45 square kilometres up to Lakarda and Berda.We had never seen her. Tigers then were very shy and ran off if they detected the slightest human presence or the sound of a jeep. But Fateh was hopeful that one day the tigress's pug marks would be accompanied by those of her little ones. I never thought that I would have the privilege of seeing the pug marks of cubs but Fateh was an optimist. He even believed that with cubs we would actually have a better chance of seeing the mother.

Early in 1977, while I was in Delhi, I got a telegram. 'Come soon. Tigress with five cubs spotted.' I couldn't believe it. There were few records of a tigress with five cubs from anywhere on the planet. I immediately made plans to leave for Ranthambhore.

When I arrived at Sawai Madhopur station early that afternoon I found a jeep waiting for me. Fateh's driver Prahlad informed me that the boss was sitting on a tree looking at a tigress. We sped off to find him. When we reached Lakarda we found a beaming Fateh sprawled across a branch of a tree. Bursting with excitement, he slowly made his way down the branches. He had been watching a tigress and her five five-month-old cubs in thick bush as they feasted on a buffalo that had turned feral, left behind by the villagers of Lakarda after their resettlement. He had already given the tigress a name — Padmini, after his daughter. Padmini was a slender and elegant tigress — her pale colour was offset by very calm eyes that seldom turned angry. She was rarely ruffled by anything. Because she was so easy and relaxed in the presence of humans all her cubs developed the same trait. This was then passed on to new generations of tigers in Ranthambhore.

The next day I had my first glimpse of Padmini from the jeep as she dragged away the remnants of a carcass into thicker bush. I will never forget that moment with Padmini. It was the first time in nearly a year that I had seen a tiger in daylight hours. Tears of joy rolled down my face and I knew this was only the beginning of a lifelong engagement that would be all-consuming in my life.

AJIT KRISHNA



Valmik Thapar in his den

Ten days later, in the same area at dawn, we heard a cacophony of sambar alarm calls coming from deep in a valley. Fateh suggested that we crawl to the edge of the hill to see what was going on in the valley below. We left the jeep and crawled for a hundred metres. As we looked down we saw Padmini walking across the Lakarda grassland followed by her five cubs. She glanced upwards and saw us on the skyline but we were lucky to see the entire family for a full minute.

As we looked down we saw Padmini walking across the Lakarda grassland followed by her five cubs. She glanced upwards and saw us on the skyline but we were lucky to see the entire family.

Short glimpses like this over the next month and we knew for sure that there were three male and two female cubs in the litter. We gave them names. The males became Akbar, Babur and Hamir; the females Laxmi and Begum. Akbar was the most confident and curious of the five cubs and clearly the dominant cub of the litter, followed by Babur and Hamir. Laxmi spent most of her time following her mother's every

step and little Begum was the shyest and also the last to eat as her siblings would push her away at a kill. We worried that Begum might not survive. A brood of five is very rare amongst tigers and she was getting the least to eat. A month later our worst fears were realized. Begum was no more. Nature had eased her out.

At this time in Ranthambhore live baits of small buffalo were used regularly by the park management to sight tigers and to record tiger numbers. Fateh decided that this was an opportunity to see Padmini and her family for longer spells, so baits were placed once a week for two months depending on Padmini's whereabouts. I was under tiger training and my job was to walk out at dusk with the tracker Badhyaya and a bait and tie it wherever the tiger's presence was the freshest.

During these risk-laden journeys on foot Badhyaya and I became very close and I learnt much from his instinctive knowledge of the language of the forest. He remained my favourite forest guard until his death in the mid-1990s. Slim and diminutive he had no fear of tigers. One evening Fateh said to me, 'Let's see how fearless you are.' At about 10 p.m., after a couple of drinks, we got into a jeep and Fateh told Badhyaya to load a small buffalo in the back of the vehicle. He then turned to me and said, 'If we find Padmini you are going to pull this buffalo out and tie it to a tree in front of her.'

My heart thudded in panic. I did not come from a 'buffalo tying in front of a tiger' background or family. But with Fateh you could never say no. I remember breaking out in a sweat and wishing we would never encounter Padmini. But no such luck and soon in the valley of Nalghati the searchlight encountered a row of glinting eyes. There, dazzling us, was Padmini with her four cubs, now nearly eleven months old. Fateh turned off the engine of the jeep and the lights. Silence

I saw Padmini watching us intently from 40 feet away. Paralysed by fear, I stumbled forward in a stupor and tied the buffalo to the tree trunk and fled back into the jeep where Fateh had the searchlight focused on Padmini. She was already stalking the buffalo, her muscles rippling.

and darkness descended. The buffalo groaned and Padmini knew that a feast awaited her.

Fateh literally pushed me out of the jeep and asked Badhyaya to push out the buffalo and hand me the rope with which it was tied. He turned the light on to the trunk of a tree and told me to tie the rope to the trunk. I saw Padmini watching us intently from 40 feet away. Paralysed by fear, I stumbled forward in a stupor and tied the buffalo to the tree trunk and fled back into the jeep where Fateh had the searchlight focused on Padmini.

She was already stalking the buffalo, her muscles rippling. When the buffalo saw the tigress it freed itself with a great pull of the rope. In my panic I must have tied a loose knot. As the buffalo fled Padmini raced in and walloped it, disabling its rear leg. Not only was Fateh training me to lose my fear of the tiger, but Padmini seemed to be training her cubs in the art of hunting. Padmini went and lay down behind a bush. Akbar and Babur moved in. For thirty minutes the three-legged buffalo defended himself valiantly, charging the two young tigers who kept retreating.

It was fascinating to watch. It was like boxers in a ring sparring without touching each other. Then suddenly Akbar leapt on the buffalo forcing it to the ground and struggled with it — much like a wrestler — until he finally found a grip on the neck. Babur joined the fray and jumped on the hindquarters. The buffalo died a slow death.

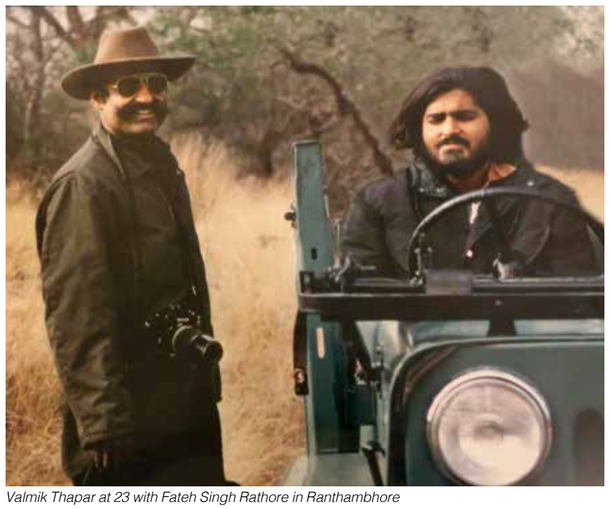
The cubs had much to learn. Soon they were feasting but after about forty minutes Padmini came up and coughed at them, forcing them to retreat. Then Hamir slowly made his way to the kill followed by Laxmi. Padmini controlled the feeding carefully. In between she helped herself. I was watching mesmerized and all fear of tigers had vanished. The hours rolled by. In front of us the secret lives of tigers were unfolding. In the next months as the cubs grew their feeding would be closely managed by their mother so that each cub ate alone, the first feeder being the most dominant. This prevented aggression and conflict amongst the cubs.

Most of my nights were spent watching the cubs in the Nalghati Valley. Many of these were full moon nights that made the scene around surreal. Silver, bluish light struck the forest and reflected off the tiger's coat. Where in the world could you find this kind of natural beauty? How many had the opportunity to soak it in? I lived as if in a dream.

Padmini would go off and leave the cubs sprawled on the black rocks on the

VALMIK THAPAR

Tigers in the marshy waters of the park

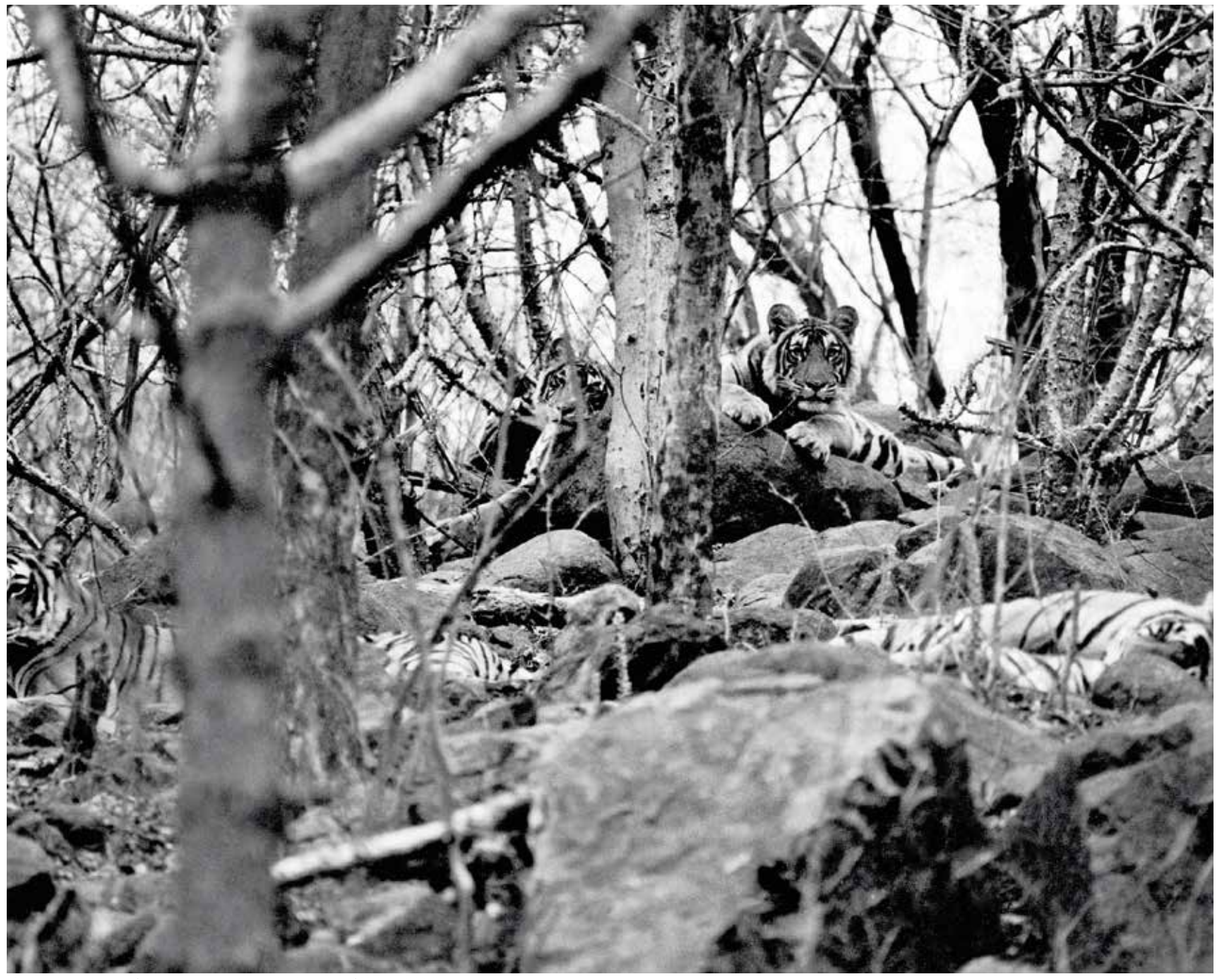


Valmik Thapar at 23 with Fateh Singh Rathore in Ranthambhore

slopes of the hills. I used to watch them with a searchlight and a torch waiting expectantly for first light and a glimpse of them before they moved upwards. Akbar, the dominant male cub, would jump on these rocks to pose for us and get really close. The rest would watch from a little distance above. The setting was splendid and I got what I then considered were unique portraits of these young ones as they draped the black rocks of Nalghati. They were still basically nocturnal and wanted to vanish from our presence at first light but slowly each day they would spend a little more time watching us. Even forty years later, Nalghati is a place I frequently visit and play back incredible memories of those unforgettable times.

I think of 1977 and 1978 as the Padmini years during which we played a game of hide-and-seek with her. Our observations increased as the family slowly became comfortable in our presence. They were becoming less elusive and evasive and were shedding their nocturnal cloak just like a snake sheds its skin. This change indicated that they were reposing their trust in those who managed these areas.

Padmini was a most devoted mother and was now hunting non-stop to feed the ever growing appetite of her cubs. Her dominant cub Akbar was the most curious and always approached us first. He was also the last to leave in the mornings. He was easily recognizable, with a V-shaped mark on his cheek, and was fearless compared to his siblings. He initially associated the jeep with buffalo and food, but Fateh had slowly phased out baits from the diet as the months went by. There were plenty of night excursions to look for Padmini and her cubs



Padmini and three of her cubs amidst the black rocks of Nalghati Valley

and on one of these we encountered four tigers feeding on the remnants of a spotted deer. We watched them with a searchlight that was connected to the jeep's battery.

Fateh did not realize that the battery was getting discharged. When we were ready to go the jeep did not start. Fateh tried everything but in vain. Finally, he suggested that we walk back. We were 2 kilometres from Jogi Mahal. With our hearts in our mouths, the four of us left the jeep in pitch darkness with tigers just 20 feet away and feeding. Fateh told us not to look back and sang film songs and ghazals for more than a half hour until we arrived at Jogi Mahal. It was an experience that I can summon up effortlessly to this day. Tigers lurking in the shadows behind us and Fateh singing, '*Yeh raaten, yeh mausam, yeh hasna hasana, mujhe na bhulna bhulana?*' But it was experiences such as this one that helped in my understanding of tigers. Our challenge was to watch the family over a natural kill in full daylight, something that we had never seen until then.

It happened one day late in 1977 in the Semli Valley when we pulled over on a grassy verge and found Padmini grooming herself close by. In the grass two cubs were engaged in a tug of war over the remnants of an enormous spotted deer stag. It was our first sighting of them on a natural kill. The male cubs were aggressive and Akbar was at his best, getting the lion's share. Babur and Hamir awaited their turn and even tried a tug of war with the carcass to break it into bits. Laxmi was the calmest, eating last but able to fend off her brothers.

It was an experience that I can summon up effortlessly to this day. Tigers lurking in the shadows behind us and Fateh singing, 'Yeh raaten, yeh mausam, yeh hasna hasana, mujhe na bhulna...'

Tigers still had memories of man and cowbells — with their association to livestock and food — attracted them. I had a bell in the jeep and one evening in Malik Talao, while waiting for Padmini's cubs, I started ringing it. Nothing happened for a few minutes. Then suddenly Badhyaya, who was sitting next to me, said, 'Tiger.' I got a shock. I was outside the jeep and there was Laxmi approaching us. She was slouched low as if ready to stalk and pounce. I still remember the grass moving under her feet as she paced forward. I clicked a few photographs — they are some of my favourite ones even today — and leapt back into the jeep. She walked around the jeep to check if there was a buffalo inside!

On another occasion I was walking in Nalghati looking for a missing bait. We couldn't see either bait or tiger and for some ungodly reason I started ringing the cowbell believing if there was a tiger it would show itself. From a few feet away a tiger leapt out of a ravine and raced over the hill. I stood petrified. The driver later told me that he thought that would be the end of me.

Our tiger sightings at this point came from hard work in the day and sometimes at night to track tigers down. In the light of what happens today the process in 1979 was unbelievable and difficult even to explain to someone who encounters tigers soon after they enter the park and believes that this is the way tigers are. What they don't realize is that it was Fateh's hard work over the years that created the conditions for this to happen. ■

How a dump can be a drop box

Zonta Infratech helps civic bodies clean up

Umesh Anand
Bengaluru

IT takes more than civic sense to get a city into shape. The best of intentions won't make garbage disappear. But when technology, entrepreneurship, governance and citizen participation coalesce, the impossible begins to happen.

Zonta Infratech, a company specialising in disposal of urban wastes, was launched three years ago. Its timing could not have been better. Now, as city administrations in India compete with one another in cleaning up, the company is well poised to offer advice, systems and technologies which make their task easier and sustainable.

A good example of what Zonta Infratech can do is available at Bengaluru's Victoria Layout, where it has converted an open dump into two partly submerged bins, which it calls drop boxes, for wet and dry garbage. The garbage now no longer lies around but goes into the bins and is collected regularly by Zonta Infratech by mechanically lifting the bins and emptying them into a truck or compactor. A splash of street art completes the picture.

Drop boxes are of two types — either partly or fully buried. Garbage that doesn't get picked up from homes and establishments, which could be as much as 20 percent of a city's garbage, goes into the bins and is out of sight.

There are other examples at locations as diverse as Dharamsala, Paonta Sahib, Jabalpur, Chennai and Tirunelveli. Jabalpur is a particularly big success thanks to a visionary commissioner in the municipality.

Zonta Infratech offers a complete solution beginning with the drop boxes and ending with conversion of waste into energy. It has the advantage of focus and superior technology from a German partnership. Its founder and managing director, Raj Kumar, is also passionate about the business. A corporate lawyer till recently, he became an entrepreneur because of his fascination with changing social equations and the urban opportunities they present.

Civil Society spoke to Raj Kumar at Zonta Infratech's corporate office in Bengaluru.

Raj Kumar:'You need good places to put waste and they should be available round the clock'

'Our drop boxes, even in cities where door-to-door collection is happening, add one step above your current practices. You are not leaving any stone unturned.'

You have found the need for creating large-sized bins. Most cities are moving away from bins. But you think they work. How?
For us these are not bins at all. They are waste drop boxes which are available to the public. At the administrative level in cities there are different thoughts on bins. Some think we can create a bin-less city. But the concept of a bin-less city involves a different kind of mindset. In our country, the bin-less concept exists because there is low-cost labour always available to pick up garbage.

We expect there is somebody out there to carry our waste. It's like you expect somebody to carry your bag outside the airport. That parochial mindset needs to be changed.

We feel that when the economy of the country and the city move forward, this parochial way of thinking will completely change. Today you can afford to get your servant to carry your garbage. Tomorrow it may not be the case.

So, you need good places where you can put waste and segregate waste — and they should be available round the clock. That is the mechanism we are creating through these drop boxes.

Are these both dry bins and wet bins?
In Bengaluru and Chennai we have created dry bins, wet bins and hazardous household bins. Invariably, in projects where we are involved we insist these two dry a bit.

What happens after that? Are the bins of the same size? Is there a size you have found which is a useful size?
Yes. There are different models of bin size and bin types. We look at what the city needs. In most cities, we find that wet waste is more and needs to be emptied every day or every second day. We have kept a 1.5-cubic-metre bin for that. But in the case of dry waste you can keep it for two days. The drop box size can be bigger, 2.5 cubic metres. The volume of the bin for dry waste can be more and you need not empty it every day.

The bins can be partly underground or fully underground. The city of Dharamsala in Himachal Pradesh has bins fully underground because those bins look ergonomically very good. The city is a tourist hotspot so they were looking for bins with a large volume and fully underground. We have got the facility to manufacture the bins and we supply them.

To empty bins we use a crane fitted on a truck. The bin is picked up, emptied into a compactor and then put back in the same pit.

Transporting the garbage is also part of your operations?
Yes, in most cities they would like us to do the collection because they feel that it reduces the burden on the city and we are ready to take the responsibility.

In Bengaluru you had black spots where garbage gets thrown and you have placed these bins there. What has been the impact?
We find that in some areas of the city where these so-called black spots had been in existence for 15 to 20 years, when we put the drop boxes there, the change in that vicinity or in the nearby captive area was significant. People had been suffering there for years. For example, in Victoria Terrace.

Zonta's attractive drop boxes for wet and dry waste in Bengaluru

A woman empties her garbage into a drop box

What is happening here in terms of a system is that you would anyways have segregation in the household.
Yes.

So your drop boxes are meant for those people whose garbage does not move from the house because they are late in having it picked up?
In Bengaluru we have some sort of door-to-door collection happening. The city is very fast-moving. Family members might all be working. If you are not able to achieve 100 percent door-to-door collection and you leave, say, five, 10 or 20 percent uncollected, then you are going back to square one. Twenty percent of the waste can be very visible litter in your city.

Theoretically, you should do 100 percent collection. No one can achieve that unless it is something you are going to do round the clock. So, with that perception in place, this kind of variation can make your system collapse.

Our drop boxes, even in cities where door-to-door collection is happening, add one step above your current practices. You are not leaving any stone unturned. Your commercial and residential areas have this as an add-on even if you have a collection system in place.

One of the big challenges in the Indian urban context is to get rid of the landfill. It is an outdated concept. This drop box concept reinforces the landfill. Am I right?
No. As far as the waste cycle is concerned, collection is the first step. After collection, what do you do? That is where processing comes in. In our organisation we have a solution for processing. The landfill is the last stop in the chain. If you are not able to process the waste, then you put it in a landfill or dumping ground.

Jabalpur, for instance, is probably one, or perhaps the only, city in India which has taken care of all three stages. Four years ago, when we first engaged with that city, there wasn't much of a system in place. Fortunately, the commissioner, a very dynamic person, listened to us and was open to many ideas. We find today that the city has a robust collection system. It has got door-to-door collection, underground bins, semi-underground bins for commercial and residential areas, plus it has got a very good waste processing plant, a one of its kind in India. It's got a landfill where only residual waste from the waste-to-energy plant is placed. In that way, Jabalpur is a model.

The waste is suitable for generating energy?
Yes. Basically, the rationale for waste-to-energy in our company technically and logically is to burn everything other than metal, stone or sand. Technically, if you have more calorific value, you get more energy.

But what about air pollution from waste-to-energy plants?
You need to have investment for the flue gas

Dharamsala has a city wide automated waste collection system

treatment. In a typical waste-to-energy plant we also supply, erect and commission 30 to 35 percent of the project cost goes into flue gas treatment. There are established norms. You really need to outfit your system to make it capable of treating the dangerous gases.

The key is in the design?
In the design and cleaning of the flue gas.

Does the setting up of a waste-to-energy plant in India entail higher investment?
In fact, Indian waste-to-energy plants cost the lowest. If you want the same kind of plant that has been put in Jabalpur, or which we are building in Chennai, for example, if you want to do it in any other geography, the cost will be much higher. Being a new and emerging area, companies like ours at least in the initial new projects are willing to absorb even a loss to pick up projects to showcase. Compared to India, China came late to the waste-to-energy market. We had a waste-to- energy plant in Timarpur in the 1990s but we failed because of the way the project was structured and the technology. This is now the norm in China. Chinese waste is not very different from Indian waste.

The production of electricity is an add-on. It is possible for it to be a viable business model. Large companies are now willing to invest in such projects and the government is promoting them under the Swachh Bharat Mission.

When you went to Jabalpur, nothing much was happening?
When we went there it was like any other city. I should praise the commissioner there. A strong officer can make a big difference to a city. Singlehandedly, in Jabalpur, the commissioner has made a big change. We have seen real change and also in other segments like water and roads.

Can you explain the waste management model that Jabalpur is following?
We have semi-underground bins, then there is the waste-to- energy plant built by a Japanese company with investment from Essel Infrastructure. Then there is the landfill where only residue from the plant goes, the bottom ash, and for that too efforts are being made to utilise it.

How much waste is Jabalpur generating?
About 420 tonnes per day and they are getting waste from nearby towns like Khatni and Narsingpur. They are using the old dump site which is behind the plant. That waste is also being put into the plant.

What is the capacity of the plant?
About 11.5 MW.

How much waste can it handle?
About 580 tonnes daily.

So if Jabalpur grows a little more, you will need another plant?
Not for the next 10 to 20 years.

What did it cost the Jabalpur municipality to put this system in place?
It depends on the number of bins the city wants. In phase one they took 50 bins and in phase two 200 bins. The waste-to-energy plant initiative has come from my company.

But municipalities don't have the money.
Jabalpur is a good example where investment has come from the private sector. Waste-to-energy is from the private sector and the city is investing only in bins and collection. Cities are increasingly going to invest in modernising their collection system because that is where cities see an immediate requirement. Everybody wants to see streets clean.

The company investing in the plant probably has a model for selling the power.
Yes.

If the municipality is investing, what does it have to get together to clean a city like Jabalpur compared to what they were spending earlier in a less efficient manner?
We see that the operation cost for a collection system like our system is less than what they were spending under a crude system. The reason being that you are creating large drop boxes and you are emptying every second day or third day. Your daily collection cost comes down. This is a USP for introducing our products in most of the cities.

Out of our 10 clients we find most are under the Smart City programme. They have a requirement to do smart collection. They have funding for that. We manufacture under the Make in India initiative. Earlier, we were importing waste-to-energy plants.

How much does an average bin cost?
It depends on the volume and whether it's fully underground or semi-underground. In Bengaluru we started with a pilot project under CSR funding from Embassy Office Parks. The city has now floated a tender for a larger number of bins. ■

UP still BIMARU while other states progress

MACRO VIEW

SANTOSH MEHROTRA

IN basic health indicators, Uttar Pradesh (UP) continues to lag behind not only India but even other BIMARU states according to the latest health statistics that recently became available. This is the conclusion we arrived at after analysing the National Family Health Survey (NFHS)1998-99, Annual Health Survey (AHS) 2012-13 and Rapid Survey on Children (RSOC) 2013-14.

The three surveys provide an insight into the performance of BIMARU states in health indicators over time. The recent RSOC was commissioned by the Ministry of Women and Child Development (MWCD) in 29 states during 2013-14 with technical and financial assistance from UNICEF India.

The Infant Mortality Rate (IMR) was 42 per 1,000 live births for India, but for UP the figure was 68 in 2012-13. The corresponding figures for Bihar, Madhya Pradesh and Rajasthan were 48, 62 and 55, respectively.

DOWNWARD TREND

But was UP improving faster over time to catch up, at least with the other BIMARU states? Not really. In the other BIMARU states basic health indicators improved at a much faster rate than UP. The rate of change in Bihar is better. During 1998-99 to 2012-13, the IMR came down from 89 in 1998-99 to 68 in 2012-13 for UP. The improvement is 21 points. The corresponding figure for Bihar is 30 points while MP and Rajasthan stand at 25 and 26 points, respectively.

It is not just that the rate of improvement over a 15-year period has been much faster in all the poorer states of India than in UP. It is also that when the base level of the health indicator (i.e. the IMR) in the initial year is high, it is easier to reduce it than when it is lower. In other words, it was easier to reduce IMR in UP.

The Under-5 mortality ratio (U5MR) too has improved slowly in the state. The U5MR stood at 132 in UP in 1998-99 and came down to 90 in 2012-13. The corresponding figures for Bihar are 112 and 70, respectively. So the reduction is the same, 42 points, in both states. But it came down from a much higher level in UP.

Similarly, both Madhya Pradesh (MP) and Rajasthan have done much better than UP. The respective U5MR figures for MP are 145 and 83 and 125 and 74 for Rajasthan for the same period. The reduction for MP is 62 points and 51 points for Rajasthan.

HEALTH IN A SHAMBLES

The fact that the most important indicator of child health has remained consistently worse in UP across two decades than in the other poorest states of India shows beyond any doubt how little policy


Yogi Adityanath, the new chief minister of UP, will need to improve health indicators

priority has been accorded to the health sector in the past two decades.

UP continues to lag behind the other states in other key Reproductive and Child Health (RCH) indicators as well. Ensuring safe motherhood and raising contraceptive prevalence rates (CPR) are considered the topmost priorities of an RCH programme. The percentage of women using any contraceptive method was 59 percent in UP in 2012-13 which was higher than Bihar but lower than MP and Rajasthan (in fact, the 2012-13 rate in UP is just marginally higher than the national figure of 56 in 2005-6).

The corresponding figure for Bihar is 41 percent while it is 63 and 70 percent for MP and Rajasthan, respectively. It is the responsibility of the public health system to bolster CPR, but a poorly functional public system is unable to cope with the unmet demand for family planning emanating from households.

The place of delivery offers an insight into how functional a public health delivery system is perceived to be by citizens. While those who can afford to pay can access private clinics, the vast majority cannot. However, the percentage of deliveries in a proper health facility for UP is about 57 percent while the corresponding figures for MP and Rajasthan are 83 and 78, respectively. For Bihar it is 55 percent.

However, what is significant is how the other states, MP and Rajasthan in particular, have improved their health system in a short span of time. The percentage of deliveries in a proper facility stood at 22 in UP in 1998-99, which was the same as in MP and Rajasthan nearly two decades ago. MP improved by 61 percentage points while Rajasthan gained by 57 percentage points between 1998-99 and 2012-13. Bihar too gained about 41 percentage points in the same period. But UP improved by just about 35 percentage points.

As an alternative to giving birth in a public health facility, delivery could be safe if assisted at home by a trained health professional. The percentage of deliveries assisted by health professionals too is lower in UP than other BIMARU states. The figure is 29 percent for UP in 2012-13 while for MP and Rajasthan it is 38 and 36, respectively.

POOR IMMUNISATION

But what happens to the child after birth? Generally,

Continued on page 26

The biodiversity riddle

FINE PRINT

KANCHI KOHLI

IS the law facilitative or regulatory? asks a representative. Regulatory, replies another, with conservation and sustainable use as its focus. Two others across the table seem to think that they have been given clear instructions to implement the law in a facilitative manner, so as to incentivise industry to participate in the process. I sit there wondering what really happened. This difference of opinion was emerging from representatives of the institutional framework that was set up under the Biological Diversity (BD) Act, 2002.

The discussion centred around the Access and Benefit Sharing (ABS) regime that many countries have or are in the process of formulating. In simple terms, this means that country governments, including India, who are signatories to the Convention on Biological Diversity (1992) are to have legal regimes for conservation, sustainable use of biodiversity and related people's knowledge along with ensuring equitable sharing of benefits arising out of that access.

In response, India enacted the BD Act in 2002 and corresponding rules in 2004. With this law in place, no international entity could access biological material and related people's knowledge for research, biosurvey, and commercial utilisation unless they took permission from the Chennai-based National Biodiversity Authority (NBA).

If an Indian entity wants access then the intimation needs to go to Biodiversity Boards (SBBs) to be set up in all states. If, subsequently, an Intellectual Property Right (IPR) in the form of a patent or trademark is applied for, the NBA's prior approval is needed, for both Indians and foreigners. In all cases of access, a village or urban ward level Biodiversity Management Committee (BMC) needs to be consulted.

The biodiversity law in India has several other aspects, but as its designers and their implementation priorities would have it, it is ABS that has been the prime focus. The global push through international agreements like the Nagoya Protocol of 2010 have put additional pressure on signatory countries to have a functioning ABS regime. While the aim is to check theft of bio resources and associated knowledge, the real push comes from the life sciences or bio-based trade industries, who would like a clear process by which physical material and knowledge can be accessed and used.

THE THREE TANGLES

As we have written in our paper, "Can Benefits be Shared: Three Tangles for Benefit Sharing", there are at least three clear tangles for the ABS regime, including in India.

First is the challenge of binding the dynamism and spread of biodiversity and related knowledge into a legal framework. Taking permission for access and sharing benefits requires establishing a clear owner. With knowledge and species cutting across national and international borders, whom do you call the owner with whom you can get into an agreement? Are others with the same knowledge or use not to be asked and don't deserve the benefits?

> **Discussions on the biodiversity law have so far been the domain of experts. People are only involved when there are awareness campaigns.**

Second, are there limits to what is a bioresource? A BMC approached the National Green Tribunal (NGT), indicating that coal is a bio resource and that large coal mining companies should pay the communities a fee for this access. The claim was eventually not accepted by the tribunal. There are also cases pending before various benches in which the bio-based trade companies argue that the ABS regime should not be applicable to them and SBBs are pushing the limits of the legal system to regulate.

Third is the ongoing concern of enforcement. The legal framework regulating all of the above relies heavily on disclosure by the accessing party at the time of seeking permission, if at all permission is sought. Once an agreement is signed, the enforcement infrastructure is weak. This is also because there is no formal mechanism of making the communities or their representative BMCs allies in the enforcement process, albeit with checks and balances.

PEOPLE OR EXPERTS

There is a larger point to be made about the popularity of this law. Discussions on what the law should look like and what should be its focus have been the domain of experts, be it scientists, lawyers, officials or NGOs. The only time it goes to the people living in and around biodiversity is when there are awareness programmes on the importance of biodiversity or when biodiversity is being showcased in festivals and exhibitions.

So when we sit with a group of people who have been living by using and often conserving biological diversity for generations, they ask, What does this law offer us? Do we have the power to decide or the power to enforce against illegality? Or are you saying that the benefits we will get from this process (either monetary or non-monetary) will far outweigh all other associations we have with the place we live in: be it through local trade or through unhindered access for livelihoods? The biodiversity law and the ABS regime currently offer little, even though there is scope for more.

Notwithstanding the inherent inter-community conflict and without romanticising the local community's commitment to conserve or use biodiversity with care, it is time the biodiversity discourse leaves the experts and the meeting rooms.

The discussion in ABS today has become much too focused on licensing and contracting, so as to ensure some monetary benefits reach a few communities living around or dependent on natural resources. The implementers can approach the issue from a facilitative or regulatory lens, at any given point of time. But three questions stare at all of us: first, is this really what the law requires and international protocols demand? Second, is the access ethical and benefits equitable? Finally, where does democratic decision-making hang in this ABS balance? ■

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India's most BIMARU state is UP

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the nutrition status of a child depends on the quality of care he or she gets during the first two years of life. The child immunisation rate (or the share of children who receive full immunisation) is one such indicator of care. Among the BIMARU states, it is the lowest in UP. The number of children receiving full immunisation (which covers all preventable diseases) for UP stands at only 53 percent in 2012-13 while it is as high as 70 percent for Bihar.

The corresponding figures for MP and Rajasthan are 66 and 74 percent, respectively. Poor immunisation coverage means that the case load in hospitals for preventable diseases increases, since un-immunised children land up in hospitals after contracting a disease.

However, what is equally significant is the rate of improvement in the coverage. It improved by about 58 percentage points for Bihar during the period 1998-99 to 2012-13. The corresponding improvements for MP and Rajasthan are 44 and 57 percentage points, respectively. But UP gained just 33 percentage points in the same 15-year period.

Why is the situation in UP so distressing? The centre initiated the National Rural Health Mission (NRHM) in 2005, to address, among other issues, mother and child health concerns, particularly in the poorest states. Clearly, other poor states, where governance was better, did far better than UP in achieving the goals of the NRHM.

To make matters worse, only a third of the physician posts in the Provincial Medical Service get filled. Worst of all, Provincial Medical Service physicians continue to resist rural postings. Alongside, the shortage of para-medical staff with a modicum of competency remains an issue. Unsurprisingly, at least half of all public health facilities cannot function 24x7. ■

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Every dog has his day!

DELHI DARBAR

SANJAYA BARU

THERE is delicious irony in the fact that on the one hand it was a former maharaja who recently ordered an end to the *'lal-batti'* (red light atop a car) VIP culture while it was a small town college lecturer who hit the headlines by throwing his political weight around, slapping an airline employee with impunity to make the point that he is a VIP — a Very Important Person. There is nothing surprising about this paradox.

India's feudals have long learnt to adapt themselves to life in a democratic republic. In private they yearn for kow-towing by the lesser mortals, but in public they are politically correct. It used to be said of the late Madhavrao Scindia, a Congress party Member of Parliament from Madhya Pradesh, that he expected to be referred to as "Maharaj" and "Samanta" in his realm while in New Delhi he knew he would only be Mr Scindia.

So the new chief minister of Punjab, Amarinder Singh, who had ordered an end to *lal-batti* on government vehicles in Punjab, prefers to be referred to as "Captain" — the rank he rose to in the Indian Army — even though he is the son of a maharaja — Maharaja Yadavindra Singh of Patiala. His feudal attributes stay at home — in his palatial palaces. In public he wears a crumpled *kurta* and *churidars*. Ravindra Gaikwad of the Shiv Sena, a college lecturer from Osmanabad in the Deccan and now an MP, however, insists that he be treated like a VIP.

Ravindra Gaikwad, Shiv Sena MP, who was recently banned by airlines for bad behaviour

> **Status consciousness is a more generalised Indian failing and within the institutions of the State it gets reinforced by protocol and the privileges of power.**

That India has far too many VIPs is established by the fact that the Delhi Darbar had to come up with a new term — VVIP — to distinguish the real VIPs from the pseudo ones. But, with the proliferation of regional political parties the central government has found it very difficult to impose any discipline at all on state governments in restricting the number of VIPs. When Kumari Mayawati became chief minister of Uttar Pradesh she would insist on driving into New Delhi from across the Yamuna in a motorcade of no less than 20 vehicles, most of them empty. She had to let the Dilliwallahs know that she too was a VVIP.

The Union Ministry of Home Affairs has what is called a 'Table of Precedence' that spells out in great detail the hierarchy of VIPs. (available at http://mha.nic.in/hindi/top). The top 10 in that list are: 1. President; 2. Vice-President; 3. Prime Minister; 4. Governors of States within their respective States; 5. Former Presidents; 5A. Deputy Prime Minister; 6. Chief Justice of India & Speaker of Lok Sabha; 7. Cabinet Ministers of the Union, Chief Ministers of States within their respective States, Deputy Chairman, Planning Commission, Former Prime Ministers, Leaders of Opposition in Rajya Sabha and Lok Sabha; 7A. Holders of Bharat Ratna decoration; 8. Ambassadors Extraordinary and Plenipotentiary and High Commissioners of Commonwealth countries accredited to India. (Chief Ministers of States when outside their respective States & Governors of States when outside their respective States); 9. Judges of the Supreme Court; 9A. Chairperson, Union Public Service Commission, Chief Election Commissioner & Comptroller & Auditor General of India; 10. Deputy Chairman, Rajya Sabha, Deputy Chief Ministers of States, Deputy Speaker, Lok Sabha, Members of the Planning Commission, Ministers of State of the Union.

An ordinary MP like Mr Gaikwad, figures at No. 21. So his insistence that he ought to be treated like a real maharaja by Air India is a bit much even within the protocol-obsessed system of republican India. But the clutch of institutional privileges given to MPs and live TV coverage of Parliament and the 24x7 newsy entertainment has given many such Gaikwads a larger than life view of their own importance. Time was when an MP would not be recognised even in his own district. The local political VIP is almost always a minister in the state government from that district, rarely the MP.

But then, MPs have become a sort of trade union. When any one of them is in a spot, every one of them unites in the name of parliamentary privilege. The same goes for diplomats, as we witnessed during the infamous Devyani Khobragade episode. All for one because that one could be all!

Why blame the likes of a Gaikwad alone? Status consciousness is a more generalised Indian failing and within the institutions of the State it gets reinforced by protocol and the privileges of power. An airport is a good place to observe how VIPs seek to differentiate themselves — getting someone else to carry your hand baggage is the most visible sign of such privilege mongering. Even retired diplomats and officials like to pre-arrange some VIP treatment for themselves. Junior officials still in service and waiting for their promotion wait eagerly for such entitlements of office.

One symbol of importance in Delhi's competitive world of VIPism is the number of entry permits and parking stickers stuck on a vehicle's windshield. The real VVIPs have none at all. Then begins the proliferation. I have often wondered whether these stickers are not a traffic hazard. Can the driver get to see the traffic on his left or is he blinded by all those stickers? Fast-moving VIP vehicles have, in any case, become a traffic hazard in all state capitals and other cities.

Captain Amarinder Singh's republican gesture will not begin a social revolution. Before him even Arvind Kejriwal declared that he would end Delhi's VIP culture. There is only one law that operates as far as India's VIP culture goes — governments may change but the privileges of governance remain and get transferred from one lot to another.

Many MPs of the Bharatiya Janata Party who became ministers in May 2014 have, with time, transformed themselves from being normal, civil and decent human beings to becoming VIPs. That look on their face often says it all. On the other hand, yesterday's arrogant VIPs are now today's humble and friendly souls, yearning to be recognised in public and wished warmly. Every dog has his day! ■

Pitfalls of assessment

BACK TO SCHOOL

DILEEP RANJEKAR

MILIND was one of our most reliable Factory Personnel Managers for several years. In a particular year, when we rated his performance better in our performance appraisal system, I congratulated him and expected him to be happy. His response baffled me. With practically no expression on his face, he said, "Look, I perform in the same way every year. It is you people who rate me differently each time." His comment set me thinking. During 2000, following intense discussion on the issue of performance management, we re-positioned our performance appraisal purely as "development-oriented" and merely one of the many inputs for making decisions about people. We went out of our way to communicate to employees that performance rating was not a pronouncement of the organisation's judgement on the employee.

During the past few years, a number of large and leading corporates have dramatically changed their performance management process. Some have abolished the entire process, some have positioned it as purely a "development process" and some have completely re-structured it. There have been several complex triggers for such a change in approach. The triggers include inability to establish a robust performance management system, inability to build capacity within the organisation to manage performance, sociological and generational changes among employees and the ever-changing, extremely complex business environment.

Almost 20 years ago, when I visited some government schools that had a large number of tribal children I found them struggling with language and mathematics. Their teachers were rather frustrated since the home environment of these children did not help much. What the teachers ignored was that these children were extremely talented in climbing trees, physical activities, playing certain musical instruments, and so on. They could catch butterflies and chase certain animals with an ease that was not possible for other children. They were fiercely independent and could bear with extreme risks. However, the school assessment process did not have any scope to factor in the differences in the abilities of children.

Unanswered questions: As I became more associated with the school education system, I realised there were serious difficulties in applying common learning measurement yardsticks for children, at least in the early years of their education. I had more questions that I did not get answers to. What is the scientific basis of determining the learning levels for different standards? Who has decided how much the child should learn in a period of 10 months? Why do we insist that all children must learn the same subjects within the same time spans? Why have we structured school education almost like an assembly line in a manufacturing unit as if the child is a product and at each phase the teacher keeps adding learning levels — like manufacturing parts — expecting a ready product at the end of the assembly line?

Do we recognise that, unlike a product in an assembly line, the learner is able to contribute to him/herself? Why do we have a 50 or 100 marks paper that the students have to write in two or three hours? Are we testing what the learner knows or how much the learner can answer within a certain stipulated period? At least in the first two years of schooling, while the child is struggling with several challenges like medium of instruction (which is often different from the home language of the child), and acquiring basic skills such as reading and writing, why don't we assess the child verbally? Do we factor in the home environment of the child sufficiently while assessing? I entered Class 1 at the comparatively late age of seven. However, due to my home background, I was able to fluently read and write even before I entered the school.

Quality of education won't improve without a sensitive system of assessment

Probably the most important question is, 'How strongly is the assessment process aligned to the curricular objectives?'

Due to the current Indian socio-economic situation wherein almost 65-70 percent of the people are below the international poverty line, the first priority of most families is ensuring their child begins contributing economically to the household. The unspoken equation in their mind is education leads to a better job and therefore better money. Given this expectation, education has become entirely examination-oriented. Examinations are significantly divorced from the objectives of education envisaged by the National Policy on Education. The assessment of learning does not even attempt to evaluate critical issues like acculturation, developing sensitivity, empathy, respect for others, constitutional values like socialism, secularism and democracy, as well as development of life-skills and vocational skills to contribute to the national development agenda.

Exam failure: In my simple understanding, assessment ought to be a credible process to provide feedback on children's learning in the context of the overall objectives of learning. However, if the current education deals with only a very limited part of such preparation, our dream of enshrining constitutional values in developing responsible citizens will continue to be a pipe-dream. And this despite the presence of a highly stressful, competitive and threatening examination process that even leads to a number of suicides among students every year.

I get seriously distressed when teachers highlight the non-achievement in Hindi language of my grandson in Class 3, ignoring the fact that he scores very highly in maths and computer science. They fail to recognise that he is able to do several additions and multiplications of even two-digit figures without using pen and paper.

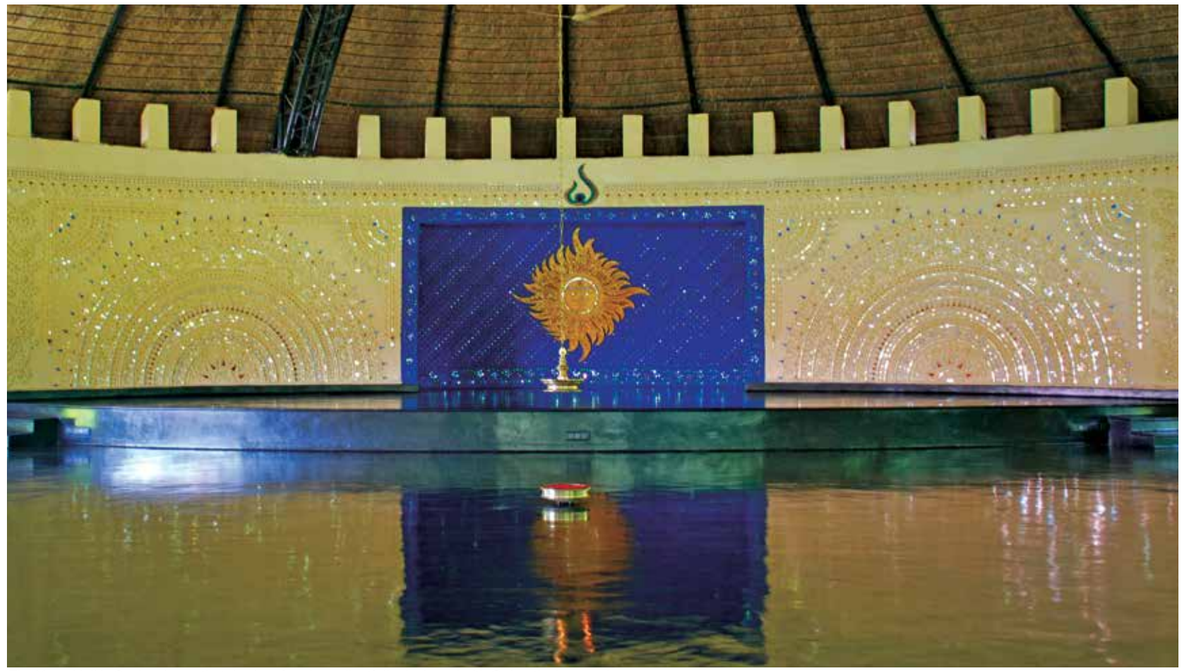
Even more distressing is the fact that cultural aspects such as sensitivity to others, participative (versus authoritative) approaches, team work, respect towards children from other cultures, religions, castes, creeds and so on are not assessed at all. When we have repeatedly researched the Class 10 (board) examination papers for several years together, it clearly emerges that the examinations are almost entirely focused on knowledge retrieval and very little on application of such knowledge or being required to synthesise various knowledge aspects in an integrated manner.

As mentioned in the NCF, all efforts to improve the quality of education would come to nought if we don't have an assessment system that holistically assesses whether the goals of the curriculum are achieved. Teachers, parents and learners — the three most critical stakeholders — need to deeply understand and align their views on assessment. And this cannot be achieved by requiring teachers to superficially fill some formats under CCE or mandating a 'no detention policy' without taking the stakeholders into confidence. It is imperative to incorporate 'assessment' as a vital part of pre-service and in-service teacher education.

Holistic assessment of learners is not only important to achieve the education goals for learners, it can also serve as a powerful tool for teachers for their own professional development. The results of learning assessment can provide pointers to teachers on what teaching strategies are effective and which strategies need to undergo change. ■

Dileep Ranjekar is CEO of the Azim Premji Foundation

SUSHEELA NAIR



The Yoga Hall in Soukya has a thatched roof and a wall artfully designed with Gujarati mirror work

Soukya, the swish global healer

SUSHEELA NAIR

Susheela Nair
Bengaluru

WITH its endless water bodies, fragrant gardens and a myriad colours the Soukya International Holistic Centre calms you as soon as you enter. You will find yourself surrounded by a profusion of trees, plants, herbs, flowers, fruits and vegetables in this pastoral paradise, all used for treatments and for delicious vegetarian cuisine.

The Soukya International Centre, tucked away from the din and bustle of Bengaluru city, is a haven of peace. Conceived and started by Dr Issac Mathai, Chairman and Medical Director, Soukya means wellness in Sanskrit. The global elite come to relax and calm their jangled nerves in this 30-acre oasis.

The décor in this super-luxurious healing retreat is of traditional Indian style with inner courtyards, a handcrafted roof and floor tiles with extensive use of local granite, thatched roofs and Gujarati mirror craft. The Yoga Hall, designed for quiet meditation and *asanas*, is a masterpiece. The circular roof of grass lends a rustic touch.

"I have treated all segments of society the world over, from local tribes of Wayanad to Hollywood

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Dr Issac Mathai with his wife, Suja and daughter Anna

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celebrities," says Dr Mathai. The integrated medicine exponent treats the who's who of world celebrityhood like Sarah Ferguson, Archbishop Desmond Tutu, Steven Spielberg, Tina Turner, Rajinikanth, the Ambanis, Ravi Shankar, the Dalai Lama, Deepak Chopra and others who have spent time at Soukya, soaking in the peaceful and serene atmosphere and reconnecting with the mind, body and soul. Camilla, Duchess of Cornwall, comes to Soukya for her annual quota of rest and recuperation. Mathai's friendship with the British royal family goes back to the 1980s when he helped organise an international conference for the British

SUSHEELA NAIR

The entrance to Soukya

Holistic Medical Association, of which Prince Charles is a patron.

From an unknown homoeopath to a globe-trotting holistic physician, Dr Mathai has traversed a long way. He hails from a family with a tradition of practising homoeopathy for five decades. When he was around 12 years old, he started packing medicines for his mother, a homoeopathic doctor who dedicated her life to healing the tribes living in the scenic hills of Wayanad. Subsequently, he did a course in homoeopathy before moving to London. His childhood enchantment turned into a concrete career option.

He studied and practised in Europe's largest holistic clinic and his career as a homoeopath and holistic physician took off in the London of the 1980s. Besides being a medically qualified homoeopathic physician, Mathai studied Chinese pulse diagnosis and acupuncture in China, trained at the mind-body medicine programme at Harvard and started his practice in London where he also taught yoga and meditation. As a visiting consultant, the doctor has a network of patients from over 60 countries.

He returned to India to establish his own Holistic Health Centre which treated the person and not the disease. Subsequently, 25 years of treating patients from over 60 countries culminated in his dream, the Soukya International Holistic Centre, in Bengaluru. With his vision and diverse background, it seems that he manifested his dream at Soukya, with his wife Suja, who is the nutritional consultant. She dons differing caps — as an administrator, a landscape designer, mom to three kids and a life coach to many. She also takes care of the hospitality side of the business.

With vegetarian meals, and smoking and alcohol strictly prohibited in this sylvan paradise, and with relaxing reflexology and *shirodhara* routines, one is ensured there is very little that cannot be conquered, including ailments. In all, it's back to the basics — a sort of return to nature — that this place ensures.

"I treat the mind, body and spirit of a person in the context of their surroundings. This is the first healing centre of its kind where integrated medicine with a holistic approach is administered. Ayurveda, homoeopathy, naturopathy, allopathy and over 30 complementary therapies like yoga, acupuncture, acupressure, mud therapy, hydrotherapy, reflexology, counselling and nutrition are combined, not only to treat medical conditions but also to promote general health and wellbeing. We offer the natural way to find the mind-body equilibrium," explains Dr Mathai.

"Apart from Soukya, I have established Sahaya, a sister concern, to deliver the same treatment and approach sans the Soukya environment and trappings at 40 percent less cost." Speaking ecstatically about his current projects, Dr Mathai says, "Soukya Foundation has signed a pact with the Royal College of Integrated Medicine, London, of which Prince Charles is the founder, to provide clinical training in Bengaluru to European and Western doctors in Ayurveda, homoeopathy and traditional forms of medicine to integrate them in their practice. The second campus of the Royal College of Integrated Medicine, London, will be in Bengaluru."

Another interesting project is the Rural Holistic Health Centre established at a government primary health centre. It provides integrated medical healthcare to seven villages through a host of programmes, including school and *anganwadi* health check-ups, and preventive medicine among other things. Soukya's integrated medicine model and the rural holistic model take care of 30,000 people in 46 villages on the outskirts of Bengaluru. Several households are given a medical kit to treat minor ailments. The households and some schools here have lush medicinal/herbal gardens for their daily medicinal requirements.

The Soukya Foundation Charitable Trust, along with the National Medicinal Plants Board, Ministry of AYUSH, Government of India, has planted medicinal plants to treat ailments ranging from building immunity to treating coughs, colds, skin disorders and acidity.

An elitist tag has been associated with Soukya, but Dr Mathai easily explains it away. "We treat not only the richest of the rich, but also the poorest of the poor," he explains. Sharing his vision of making 'complete healthcare' accessible to the common man through Ayurveda, naturopathy, homoeopathy and yoga, Dr Mathai says, "The focus at Soukya Foundation is prevention, early intervention and cure." ■

Akshay Kumar in Rustom

Strange choice of Rustom

Are National Awards losing their weight?

Saibal Chatterjee
New Delhi

THE National Film Awards (NFA) and controversy have been inseparable in recent times. Until the mid-1990s, the central government-mandated awards were widely perceived as recognition for cinematic excellence, pure and simple, no pulls and pressures entertained. Instituted in 1953, these awards were reserved for filmmakers, technicians and actors working outside of popular Indian cinema.

The scenario is no longer the same. Bollywood biggies, who once pooh-poohed these awards as elitist and of no particular use to them, now hanker after them, seduced by the great prestige in receiving trophies and certificates from the President of India. Intense lobbying, helped along by prejudices of the government of the day and the resultant political interference, direct and indirect, is an integral part of the jury process today.

Priyadarshan, chairman of the jury for the 64th NFA, has dragged it down a few notches by favouring his friends in the industry, two of them, to be precise — Akshay Kumar and Mohanlal. While the Bollywood star, has received the Best Actor nod, the Malayalam cinema icon has been given a Special Jury Award for his performances in three films (*Pulimurugan, Janatha Garage* and *Munthirivallikal Thalirkumbol*). Both actors have frequently collaborated with Priyadarshan. Akshay has led the cast of many of the director's Hindi crowd-pleasers. Mohanlal was the mainstay of his Malayalam box-office hits of the 1980s and 1990s.

Manoj Bajpayee in Aligarh

Still from Aaba, winner of the Best Short Fiction Film

Still from Loktak Lairembee, adjudged the best film on environment conservation

"Bias is the biggest bane of any jury," says a multiple National Award-winning filmmaker who has presided over several NFA juries. "Until we can get the composition of the judging panel right, the process is bound to be flawed and plagued by favouritism and unfair decisions." Fixing the problem is, of course, easier said than done because it is difficult for the Directorate of Film Festivals (DFF), the information and broadcasting ministry wing that organises the NFA, to find enough good men and women who have a genuine passion for good cinema and have no personal stakes in any of the 200-plus films that are in contention each year.

One crucial clause in the NFA rules and regulations disqualifies from jury duty any person "related by blood or marriage to any of those whose work is to be judged". The rules also bar any person who is connected in any way to any of the films entered for the awards. But there is no way that the DFF can spot and weed out prejudice propelled by professional or personal proximity.

It isn't that Priyadarshan does not possess the credentials to head the NFA jury. He is a prolific filmmaker who, in a career spanning three decades, has directed more than 90 films in Malayalam, Hindi, Tamil and Telugu, many of them blockbusters. His fame and popularity rest primarily on his rip-roaring comedies, but his richly layered period drama, *Kanchivaram,* won the National Award for the Best Film in 2007. So, there can be no questioning his stature.

But some of the debatable decisions made by Priyadarshan's jury and the specious arguments that he has trotted out in defence have cast a shadow on this year's National Awards. Asserting that Akshay was "brilliant" in both *Airlift* (eminently watchable) and *Rustom* (insipid), Priyadarshan tied himself in knots trying to justify why Aamir Khan was ignored for his performance in *Dangal*. "Aamir," he said, "has made it clear that he doesn't attend award functions… He was given an award for *Taare Zameen Par* in 2007 but he did not attend the ceremony."

The presumption that the jury was amiss in awarding Akshay is strengthened when Priyadarshan says: "In recent times, we have seen people return their national awards. So we did not want to take the risk (of the award not being honoured by the winner)." Why didn't the jury, then, give the prize to Manoj Bajpayee for his outstanding acting in Hansal Mehta's *Aligarh,* which was streets ahead in terms of complexity and quality of Akshay's single-note performance in *Rustom*, a pedestrian thriller inspired by the Nanavati murder case? The suspicion that personal bias was also at play here, therefore, cannot be sidestepped.

Several people in the industry have taken to Twitter to slam Priyadarshan for tilting towards his friend, Akshay. Tamil actor Arvind Swami tweeted on the day the awards were announced: "The Nanavati case was one of the last of the jury trials in India. There seems to be other good reasons to do away with the jury." Chennai-based director A.R. Murugadoss, who directed Akshay in *Holiday: A Soldier is Never Off Duty,* also called out the jury without naming anybody. "Can clearly witness the influence and partiality of people in the jury. It's biased," he wrote.

While *Dangal*, by far the best reviewed and most commercially successful Hindi film of 2016, had to settle for a single award — Best Supporting Actress for Zaira Wasim — *Aligarh*, the tragic true story of a gay professor sacked by Aligarh Muslim University because of his sexual orientation, had to go empty-handed.

The maker of *Aligarh,* Hansal Mehta, who won the Best Director National Award in 2014 for *Shahid,* has said: "I've got to respect the decision and move on. What hurts is that in some statement the chairperson (who I respect and whose films I've often enjoyed) says that 'while watching films, we realised that a lot of Bollywood movies were themed around homosexuality. The movies are not highlighting social problems whereas regional cinema are themed around fantastic social issues'. This statement makes you wonder and worry about LGBTQ rights and their absence in the current mindset as 'social problems'."

To be fair, Akshay isn't the first Bollywood star to win a National Award in questionable circumstances. Nor will he be the last, given the fact that in these celebrity-driven times even the National Awards, once deemed to be the preserve of films of outstanding artistic pedigree, integrity and excellence, have succumbed to the temptation to up the glamour quotient.

Despite the distortions, the NFA is worth fighting for because these are the country's only awards that recognise the work of independent filmmakers, and technicians. Among others, the Best Non-Feature Film award for Chandrashekhar Reddy's *Fireflies in the Abyss*, the well-deserved nods for such remarkable efforts as Haobam Paban Kumar's *Loktak Lairembee* (Lady of the Lake) and Amar Kaushik's superb short film *Aaba* and the best production design and cinematography awards for the Tamil film *24* are reminders that NFA serves a very important purpose. ■

RANDOM SHELF HELP

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

Social Entrepreneurship
Working Towards Greater Inclusion
Rama Krishna Reddy Kummitha
₹795
SAGE

THE book is a study of the emergence of social enterprises in India, the environment they work in and the constraints they face. It also has chapters on four well-established Indian social enterprises — Goonj, Enable India, Gram Vikas and Barefoot College.

The driving force of social enterprises has been NGOs who morphed into for-profit enterprises and idealistic youngsters educated in the West who returned to India keen to combine social good with business. The inept State provided many opportunities. Governments failed to provide essential services like health, education, financial inclusion, electricity or water. Finance was available from entities like the Ashoka Foundation, one of the early birds in this sector, impact investing and venture capital.

Several NGOs, especially in microfinance, energy, traditional crafts and so on, opted to become enterprises. NGOs also gained expertise in technologies like rainwater harvesting, which they export to other developing countries after becoming social enterprises. A 2009 study found around one-third of social enterprises succeed.

Social enterprises have also benefited by partnering the government, especially in agriculture, health and education. However, in India social enterprises lack an identity. They don't have any specific legal status. But the business environment today is an enabling one. The book is a timely study and worth reading. ■

Social Economy of Development in India
K.S. Chalam
₹995
SAGE

K.S. Chalam, a well-known political economist, educationist and a former member of the Union Public Service Commission, dissects liberalisation and its impact on India's social and economic landscape in his recent book. In the age of de-globalisation, Chalam's dim view of liberalisation will definitely find resonance.

The book is comprehensive in the range of sectors it analyses — the marginalisation of agriculture, the impact of liberalisation on politics, caste, culture, social inequality and so on. The author also takes up contemporary issues like crony capitalism, corruption, and the high cost of health and education — all offshoots of liberalisation.

The tone of his book is sad. He rues the reality that India's political and industrial elite, as well as economists, have always looked to the West for inspiration instead of the East which has done well and bonds with India. The Western model, he writes, camouflages a hidden agenda of economic exploitation. As an example, just five percent of FDI inflows are for manufacturing, mostly from Mauritius. Such money has crushed the small and medium industrial sector that provides jobs. Rising unemployment and failing agriculture are resulting in agitations for reservation. Chalam examines alternative philosophies that could have guided India's growth — Gandhi, Ambedkar, M.N. Roy, Ram Manohar Lohia. He concludes that we need to rethink our development philosophy. ■

Science Tales
Lies Hoaxes and Scams
Darryl Cunningham
₹499
Speaking Tiger

THIS is a wonderful comic book with lovely graphics and engaging text. Darryl Cunningham, well-known cartoonist, debunks dubious beliefs, myths and misgivings which people cling to with a big dose of scientific logic. But he does so with a touch of humour and great visuals and not just by marshalling data and facts.

Like a careful investigative journalist he tells the scientific truth behind electroconvulsive therapy, chiropractic, fracking, climate change, vaccines, the moon, homeopathy and science denialism– all 'hot button' issues. Cunningham has chosen topics which are very contemporary across the world.

Perhaps Cunningham's experience, before he became a writer and cartoonist, as a health care assistant in an acute psychiatric ward gave him a deeper insight into how people's minds work. His cartoon stories move seamlessly and logically sifting fact from fiction like a psychologist calmly reasoning with an obdurate patient on his couch.

The book is great fun and would be snapped up by adolescents and adults. It is thoughtful, and combines investigative journalism with serious education and talks of issues that not everybody wants to listen to.

Try talking of climate change today to ordinary people in developing countries. Most often it sounds like a moral science class. But in Cunningham's book a penguin talks of climate change to a human and suddenly the story behind the changing weather touches the heart.

Some of his stories like, 'The facts in the case of Dr. Andrew Wakefield,' are almost reminiscent of Sherlock Holmes. 'The Moon Hoax' combines history with science and uses photographs with graphics. Every chapter is original and eyecatching.

In his foreword Cunningham writes, "The level of misunderstanding among much of the general public not just on the issues themselves but about just how the scientific process works, never fails to amaze me. This book is my attempt to rectify that problem." He succeeds. ■

The pull of a past life, other reality

By Anita Anand

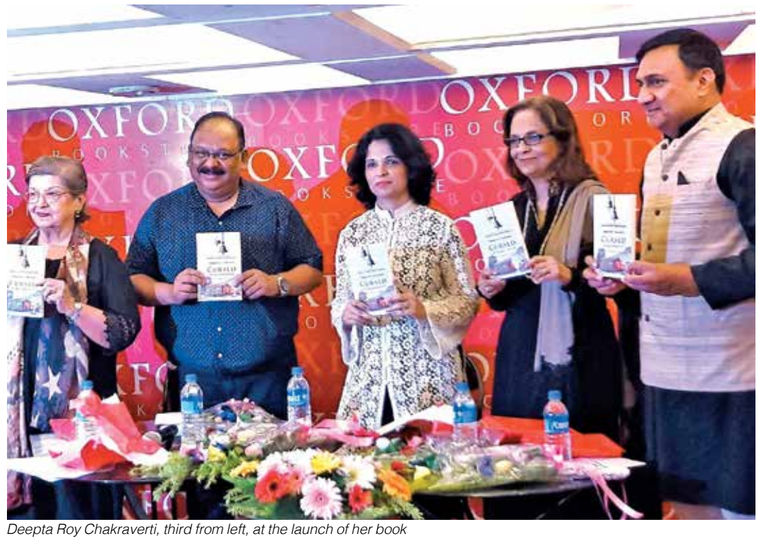
IN the 21st century the world is often divided between believers and non-believers of one kind or another — be it religion, spirituality, the occult or the divine, there is something for everyone. Often science and the occult clash, but at other times, not.

In the case of the author of *Cursed at Kedarnath*, Deepta Roy Chakraverti, there is no clash because she is a mathematician, lawyer and a practising Wiccan. How does this come together?

According to Chakraverti, "Law and Wicca have similar traditions of in-depth study and research – the tradition of a senior-junior in law is akin to the teacher-student tradition in Wicca. Mathematics brings with it a certain analytical skill which is also required in psychical research. There is logic and reason in both areas, otherwise every gust of wind becomes a 'ghost' and every missed call 'spirit communication'!"

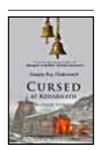
For the uninitiated, Wicca is a contemporary Pagan movement developed in England during the first half of the 20th century. It draws upon a diverse set of ancient pagan and 20th century hermetic motifs for its theological structure and ritual practices.

Chakraverti grew up in and inherited the Wiccan tradition of her mother, Ipsita Roy Chakraverti, a well-known Wiccan, who in an



Deepta Roy Chakraverti, third from left, at the launch of her book

interview to the *Times of India* in May 2016, said: "Originally, in the 10th century or thereabouts, we find Wicca to be a worldwide phenomenon. It was embraced in Britain, France, Italy, Japan, India, Egypt and Tibet. Gradually, the power of a witch became a threat to men and organised religion and that's when the inquisitions, the witch burnings and the badmouthing started. It is interesting to note that the Greek goddess, Diana, a patroness of Wicca, became a '*Dayan*' in India. The witch was called a '*khandroma*' in Tibetan Buddhism and she was a deity. In Japan, she was a '*dakini-ten*' and she was compared to a goddess."



Cursed at Kedarnath and Other Stories
Deepta Roy Chakraverti
₹250
Life Positive Books

Cursed at Kedarnath is Chakraverti's second book in which there are six stories in the first person, about people and places she has encountered. There are instances of men, women and children plagued by past life memories, spirits that hover around and affect their lives, and a visit by the author to the Yogini temple at Hirapur, Odisha.

Chakraverti has been influenced greatly by her mother. She says, "I learned that the two greatest drawbacks in delving into the realm of the unknown are prejudice and apprehension. As a child, I would see extreme reactions to her. On the one hand there would be people queuing up to meet the Beloved Witch, as she was known. There would be women writing in, wanting to be like her, and mothers naming their daughters Ipsita, so that they may grow up to be strong and fearless."

But it wasn't always like this. "On the other hand, various lobbies would try to attack her. Men in village panchayats would try to stone her. Wives of Cabinet Ministers in the UPA would tell her that if she weren't beautiful, she would have been burnt. Ageing CEOs of multinationals would creep into our living room, oily grins on their faces, asking if she could help them get an extension," says Chakraverti.

In *Cursed at Kedarnath* each story is followed by a Diary section which highlights the research to substantiate the supernatural happenings with the protagonists in the story. It is in direct contrast to the narrative of the stories, and a bit jarring, but Chakraverti has her reasons.

"The Diary sections give the reality and research of legend, lore and science. I have brought in the very latest global research, on subjects such as out-of-body experiences, life after death, survival of the soul and human consciousness. Universities in the UK, US and Germany are delving into these areas of study, even while in India, we remain steeped in superstition and fear."

Is the Wiccan tradition relevant in today's world? And if so, how? Chakraverti believes it's a tradition which grounds people and dispels the notion that the supernatural is either a gimmick or something bizarre.

"Wicca is a *gurukul* tradition, which brings back a return to values. Those who are part of the Wiccan Brigade are stronger in themselves, in their psyche, and are better equipped to tackle whatever life brings their way," she says.

For those interested in the supernatural the stories are fascinating, as is the subject, but need better conceptualisation, writing and editing. There are repetitions and the flow is often interrupted. The Diary section of the book could be better written, to match the flow of the stories. Till then, for a spine-chilling experience you can delve into the book! ■

Anita Anand is the author of, most recently, Kabul Blogs: My Days in the Life of Afghanistan and Cholo Kolkata, an illustrated book for young people.

The bitter marriage

By Anjana Basu

MALIKA Amar Shaikh was the daughter of the Marathi Communist trade union leader and folk performer, Shahir Ahmed Shaikh, and his wife who came from one of the original communities of Mumbai. The child of an inter-caste marriage, Malika grew up in an atmosphere of activism and music and instinctively turned to poetry.

Into this turbulent life burst the poet, Namdeo Dhasal, famed for his raw, smouldering verse that scorched the world of Marathi literature and for creating the Dalit Panthers based on the Malcom X model. Something flared between them and the young, naïve Malika succumbed, despite her family's misgivings.

Malika would, years later, write her searing autobiography, *I Want to Destroy Myself*. The book was a huge success when it came out in Marathi and swiftly disappeared from bookshops. It also caused a scandal. Jerry Pinto took on the task of adding her story to his roster of translations. And it is quite a story — poet falls in love with poet and disintegration follows.

Dhasal's life conformed to the typical turbulent excess of certain male poets and Malika found herself leading a life of confusion with her husband disappearing for days or vanishing from their bed in the middle of the night. He visited prostitutes, he drank, he squandered money and his party workers came before his wife.

I Want to Destroy Myself; Malika Amar Shaikh
Translated by Jerry Pinto
Speaking Tiger
₹399

Malika tears her marriage into shreds with utmost candour, describing her first sexual experience with Dhasal, the way she gave birth to her son with the ward boys walking in and out as she lay exposed on the gurney and her brush with venereal disease given to her by her husband. She describes her marriage as unpeeling a fruit and is well aware that what she is doing is not what women are expected to do.

What she lays bare are the differences in gender behaviour — men have certain stereotypes where women are concerned, mainly the adoring handmaiden ready to serve at all times. Women, for the most part, conform at the cost of their own happiness. She gives her own example and that of Dhasal's mother — who was even willing to consent to her husband sleeping with another woman — while wondering where her so-called femininity went.

Malika points out that the activists had little or no concept of feminism and compromised their own ideals when it seemed appropriate to do so — like setting up a statue of the Buddha when a party worker suggested it to Dhasal. She also describes domestic violence at the hands of her husband, which the police chose to ignore when she took her bleeding nose to the *thana*.

Where her husband compromised, Malika was unflinching and she found few to support her. The motto of their world was 'behind every successful man there is a woman', a phrase she hated with a passion.

In the end, reflecting on everything, she admits that Dhasal respected her as a poet and was responsible for getting her work to press. She also points out that he could be a good human being. However, in the face of her searing indictments and the gritty underbelly of life that she describes, those admissions quite fall by the wayside.

Pinto's translation brings in Marathi slang and cuss words and captures the vivid bitterness of the original. Those interested in Marathi poetry will certainly read the book but it has a wider audience — lying in wait are all those women who wonder why they conform to patriarchal ways and how love can suddenly explode into rage. ■

AYURVEDA ADVISORY

Dr SRIKANTH

Curing prickly heat

I am 42 years old and I work with a grassroots NGO. We do field work in villages, collecting data and monitoring our project. Since we need to visit our beneficiaries even in summer, I suffer from prickly heat, mainly on my back. Applying various powders has not helped much. As a result, my work suffers since I feel physically uncomfortable. Do tell me what I could do.

Richa Samuel

WHY WE GET PRICKLY HEAT: Prickly heat rash can develop anywhere on the body, but most commonly it occurs on the face, neck, back, chest and thighs. It usually appears a few days after exposure to hot temperatures. Prickly heat is typically associated with a tingling, stinging and prickling sensation. It might also trigger a desire to scratch constantly. Prickly heat usually develops when a person sweats more than usual, especially during hot or humid weather.

In medical terms, prickly heat is known as Miliaria rubra — a condition in which sweat glands become plugged and sweat is released into the surrounding skin.

In individuals with excessive perspiration, it becomes easier for dead skin cells and bacteria on the skin to block the sweat glands, forming a barrier and trapping sweat beneath the skin, where it builds up, causing the characteristic bumps. As the bumps burst and sweat is released, there may be a prickly or stinging sensation that gives this condition its name.

WHAT YOU CAN DO: Prickly heat actually isn't a serious condition and rarely requires any specific treatment. The rash usually disappears after a few days. However, if the symptoms persist for more than two or three days, the following methods may be adopted for quick relief:

Avoid situations that can lead to excessive sweating. Avoid exposure to harsh sun, excessive humidity and strenuous physical activity as much as possible.

Wear lightweight, loose-fitting clothes (ideally, cotton) and avoid synthetic fabrics.

Take cold water showers and baths.

Cold water, cold atmospheric conditions should be preferred. Sitting in the shade, under a fan or in an air-conditioned room will be helpful.

Avoid spicy, irritant food and alcohol.

APPLICATIONS: If rashes are the only symptoms, apply any of the following and leave it on for around 15-20 minutes and wash off. This should relieve the rashes and associated symptoms.

A fine paste of any of the following may be applied locally to the affected parts and washed off after it dries completely:

Multani mitti in rose water.

Fine powder of sandalwood and khus khus grass in equal parts in rose water.

Paste of fresh neem leaves.

Calamine lotion.

After washing, please remember to air dry your skin.

Himalaya's prickly heat baby powder is quite effective in relieving as well as preventing heat rashes.

COOL FLUIDS: Intake of fluids will be helpful. Drinking tender coconut water, lemon juice, kokum juice, fresh fruit juice (orange, sweet lime, watermelon, sugarcane) helps to reduce the burning sensation caused by prickly heat.

Lemon juice or kokum juice (5-10 ml) should be added to 200 ml of water. A little cardamom powder may be added. Jaggery/sugar may be added, if desired.

EXTERNAL MEDICATIONS: However, if the symptoms of prickly heat are severe — the rash persists even after 4-5 days and/or there is development of infection in the affected area — the following medicaments will be helpful:

Generally, oil-based products aren't suggested in prickly heat. However, in my personal experience I've seen good results with these:

A tablespoon of coconut oil mixed with half a teaspoon of turmeric powder relieves the itching instantly.

Himasagara taila/Chandanadi taila locally applied gives relief from the burning sensation.

INTERNAL MEDICATIONS: The following internal medications will help to reduce the burning sensation:

Sarasaparilla juice concentrate (BV Pundit/SN Pandit Pharmacy) — 3 tbsp in 1 cup of cold water or milk, twice daily

Gulkand (Sandu Pharmaceuticals Ltd.) — 2 tsp twice or thrice daily

Sheetasudha (Dhootapapeshwar Ltd.) — 25 ml mixed in 200 ml water, twice or thrice daily

Sarivadyasava 2 tsp and Usheerasava 2 tsp (Baidyanath Ayurved Bhavan/ Kottakkal Arya Vaidyasala/Vaidyaratnam Oushadhasala) — mixed with 4 tsp water, twice daily after meals. ■

Dr Srikanth is a postgraduate in Ayurveda and has been a consulting physician for the past 17 years. He is currently National Manager, Scientific Services, at The Himalaya Drug Company.

PRODUCTS

Spice of Kashmir

AJIT KRISHNA

SHEHJAR Spices is a tiny shop in Kashmiri Haat, a small market in Delhi run by Kashmiri Pandits displaced from the Valley. You can find all the spices, herbs and condiments that go into making an authentic Kashmiri meal in this shop. Three types of kahwa are available. There are packets of the famed Kashmiri red chilli, garam masala, sonth, dried ginger and masala tikki which is sprinkled on a dish once it's done. The shop also has packets of dried vegetables like turnips, apple, tomato, brinjal and gourd which are cooked in Kashmir during the long cold winter. You can also buy honey, saffron, dried fruits and dals.

If you don't know how to cook Kashmiri food this is a good place to ask. The shop stocks books on Kashmiri cuisine, with recipes written in an easy style. Siddharth Kaul, who owns Shehjar Spices, says most of his clients are local Kashmiris but caterers and restaurant chefs turn up too. He does home delivery as well.

Kashmiri Haat is lined with shops selling shawls, stoles, jewellery and other items- from Kashmir. In the heat of summer, many shop owners seek relief in Kashmir. But Shehjar Spices is open through the year. There is also a restaurant here called Samovar that rustles up Kashmiri cuisine. ■

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