

Civil Society



BHUTAN'S GUIDE TO HAPPINESS

365 proverbs to manage life



'MOTIVATION CRUCIAL FOR GOVT SCHEMES'

Ved Arya on finding the right talent for the grassroots

Pages 6-8

48 DAYS OF AAP

Pages 8-9

SPLASH OF STREET ART

Pages 12-13

FROM SNAKES TO BIRDS

Pages 14-15

IRON BAR FOR WOMEN

Page 24

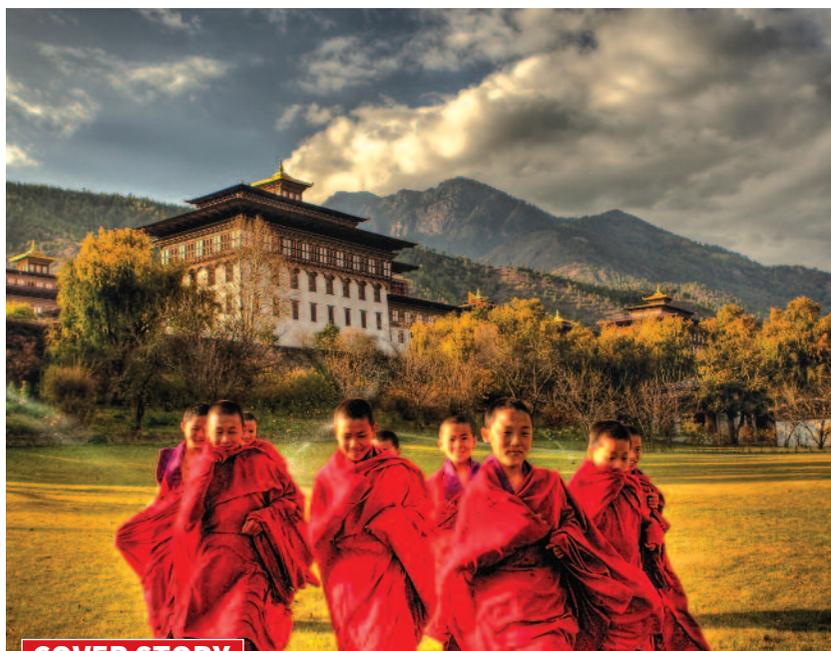
A DAY WITH DEAD POETS

Pages 25-26

3 ACTIVIST FILMS

Pages 29-30

CONTENTS



COVER STORY

BLISS AS STATE POLICY

Bhutan has redefined the idea of development, measuring it not merely in terms of economic growth, but as happiness too. We take a spiritual trip with the world's happiest nation.

18

How AAP got schools to perk up..... 10

Bishnah's deadly brew 11

Healing touch for Bamhni 16

8 napkins for just ₹20! 22-23

Kandla's lost beauty 27

Parliament isn't green..... 28

On board the Nilgiri toy train 30-31

Sounds that heal 33

Woody skills & wispy kites 34

Civil Society

READ US. WE READ YOU.

Be happy, don't worry

WITH lots of high voltage stuff flying around these days, we thought we would give our readers a break: Bhutan! *The Bhutanese Guide to Happiness* is a collection of wonderful proverbs. You can open it at any page and find something to take away – the ultimate quality test for soul food. Try some of the proverbs that we have reproduced in our pages and we are sure you will be hooked. But our reason for this cover story goes beyond the book.

Bhutan is a reminder that there are different ways of understanding this world and journeying through it. Bhutan's philosophy of gross national happiness or GNH may come naturally to the traditionally peace-loving and centred people of Bhutan, but for those of us who aren't like that, and don't live in the midst of such resplendent natural beauty, GNH should be a standard to aspire to.

As a large country, we would do well to look with genuine warmth on our smaller neighbours. What is there in them that we can admire and celebrate? In Bhutan's case there is its unique worldview. What can we learn from it and what can we give to Bhutan in return from our experience of being a bustling democracy of vigorously competing interests? As an enlightened monarchy withdraws and democracy takes root in Bhutan, civil society will offer the most interesting spaces in which we can connect and find honest reasons to bond into the future. Civil society initiatives in India are varied and rich, ranging as they do from the use of innovative technologies to new-age enterprises and organisational efforts that sponsor inclusion and transparency.

For the rest of the issue we have two outstanding social entrepreneurs featured in our business section, an interview with Ved Arya on the HR challenges in getting good people to work for the government's development programmes, book reviews, exciting travel and of course a window on the politics of the day. We've tried to understand the Aam Aadmi Party a little better based on its very brief and extremely tumultuous 48 days in office.

Do read our business section carefully. Big companies that wonder why they are viewed with so much suspicion need to look at how social enterprises define their relevance to society and end up being admired and even loved. It is happening across the world.

When someone comes up with a low-cost nutrition bar for women suffering from anaemia or redesigns a sanitary napkin, important businesses are born. Significantly these businesses come out of society and give back to it. Big corporations that don't manage to do that are asking to be reviled no matter how robust their bottomlines might be today. If the citizen is asking for clean and accountable politicians, the consumer is demanding relevant companies that have nothing to hide.

Contact Civil Society at:

response@civilsocietyonline.com

The magazine does not undertake to respond to unsolicited contributions sent to the editor for publication.

Publisher
Umesh Anand

Editor
Rita Anand

News Network
Shree Padre
Jehangir Rashid
Rakesh Agarwal
Susheela Nair
Shayak Majumder

Photography
Sandeepa Veeramachaneni

Layout & Design
Virender Chauhan

Cartoonist
Samita Rathor

Write to Civil Society at:
D-26 Basement, South
Extension Part 2,
New Delhi - 110049.
Ph: 011-46033825,
9811787772

Printed and published by
Umesh Anand from A 53 D,

First Floor, Panchsheel Vihar,
Malviya Nagar, New Delhi - 110017.
Printed at Samrat Offset Pvt. Ltd.,
B-88, Okhla Phase II, New Delhi - 110020.

Postal Registration No.
DL(S)-01/3255/2012-14.
Registered to post without pre-payment
U(SE)-10/2014 at New Delhi PSO
Registered with the Registrar of
Newspapers of India under
RNI No.: DELENG/2003/11607
Total no of pages: 36
www.civilsocietyonline.com

Advisory Board

ANUPAM MISHRA
ARUNA ROY
NASSER MUNJEE
ARUN MAIRA
DARSHAN SHANKAR
HARIVANSH
JUG SURAIYA
SHANKAR GHOSE
UPENDRA KAUL

Get your copy of Civil Society from

Delhi: Bahri Sons, Central
News Agency, stalls at Green
Park market, South Extn Part
II, Aurobindo Market, R. K.
Puram, Vasant Vihar, Vasant
Kunj, J.N.U., S.D.A. Market,
Saket, Kalkajee, C. R. Park,
New Friends Colony, Lajpat
Nagar, Defence Colony, Hauz
Khas, Moti Bagh, Sector 62
Noida.

Gurgaon: DLF Phase 1

Market, Galleria Market,
Qutab Plaza, Sector 14
Market, Sector 17 Market,
Sector 54, Sector 44.

Kolkata: Oxford Bookstore,
Classic Books.

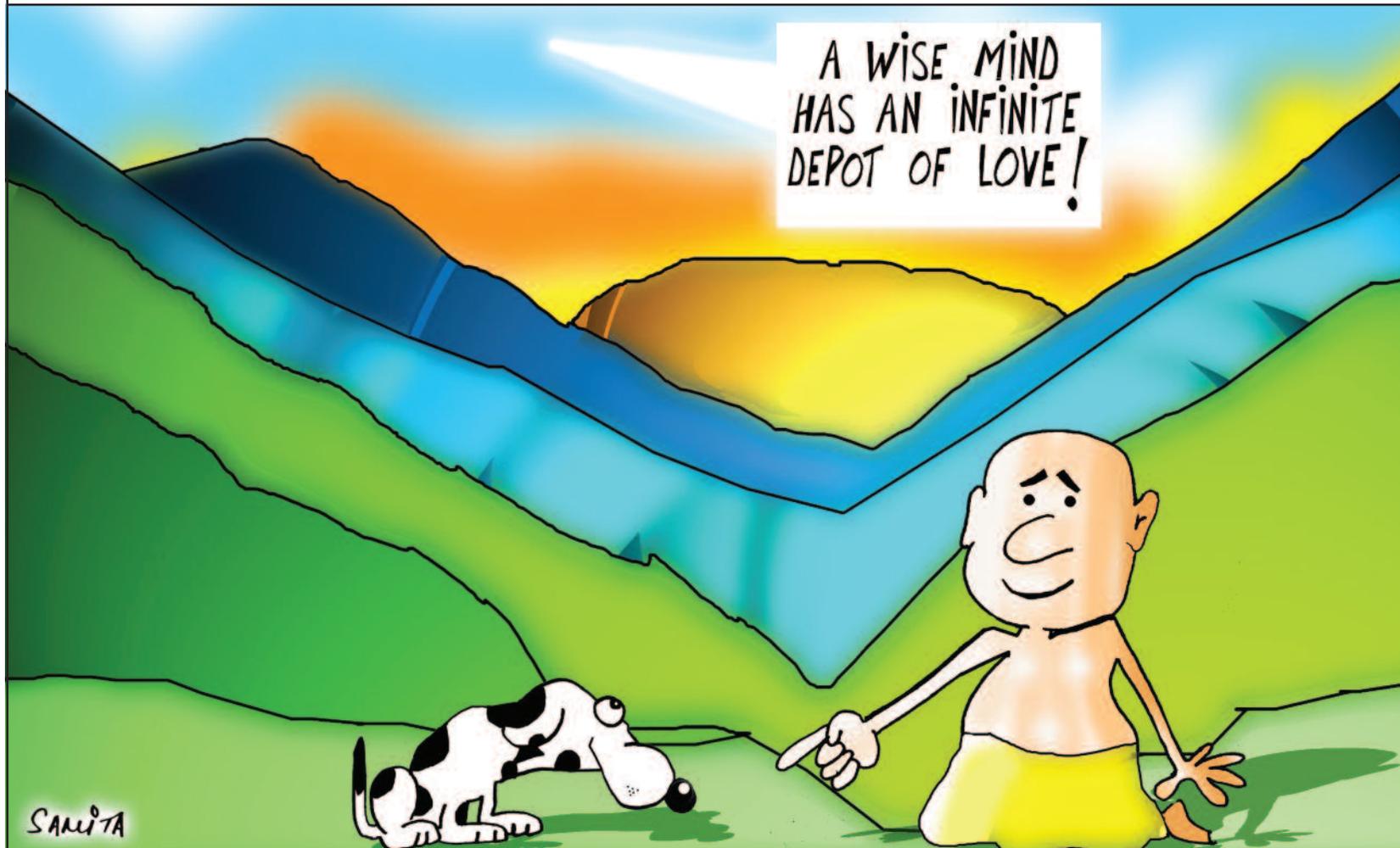
Bengaluru: Variety on
St Mark's Road.

Lucknow: Ram Advani
Bookseller at Hazratganj.

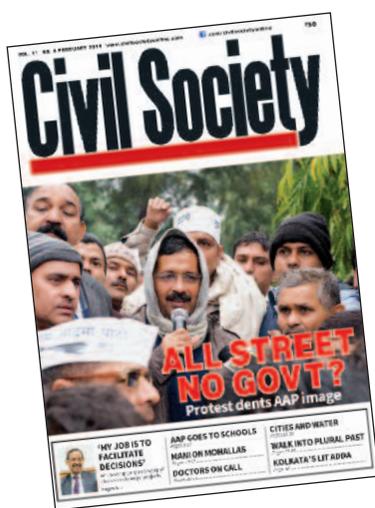
Chandigarh: The Browser.

IN THE LIGHT

by SAMITA RATHOR



LETTERS



AAP protest

Your cover story, 'All street, no government,' was unfair. It is a fact that the elected representatives of the Delhi government do not enjoy the powers that other state governments have. Yet whatever goes wrong in the city is blamed on them. Delhi should have a police force that is under its government. The centre can easily bifurcate the police force. I think Arvind Kejriwal had got the issue right.

Rama Jain

Excellent write-up. Well written and unbiased. I agreed with every word you wrote.

Populism and protests are not new politics. We want serious governance.

Joseph Fernandez

AAP in schools

Your write-up, 'AAP goes to schools,' highlighted an excellent initiative by AAP. I agree with Manish Sisodia's initiative to provide tuition and extra classes to children in government schools.

J.B. Singh

Thanks for taking up the issue. This coverage shows that AAP and its volunteers are here to make constructive changes benefiting society and they are setting an example of good politics for other political parties to follow.

Ranjhu Minhas

RTI in Kashmir

Your story, 'Villagers begin to use RTI' inspires all of us to involve and engage the services of government employees and hold them accountable and transparent before the community. Mohammad Akbar is a hero and has proved to be a real asset for his respective area. Please continue publishing such stories.

Showkat Hussain

Greedy cities

The write-up, 'When cities guzzle water' by Himanshu Thakkar and Parineeta Dandekar was very good. The authors have shown time and again that big dams are not the solution to water scarcity. What is needed most is an integrated water resources management plan in the context of watersheds, where all stakeholders will have a say in planning and managing water resources.

Md Khalequzzaman

DDA and Yamuna

With reference to Himanshu Thakkar's article, 'DDA chokes the Yamuna' I would like to point out that people living in Jaitpur and Meethapur are not able to repair their houses for the last five years although their homes are located three to four km from the Yamuna. No one is thinking about them. The Delhi Master Plan has many flaws. Some places are not in Zone O although they are situated less than one km from the Yamuna and some places are placed in Zone O in spite of being located more than three to four km from the river. Isn't this injustice?

Rahul Kumar

Brazil farms

The interview, 'In Brazil we need a

new farm model' by Shobhan Saxena was excellent. The misuse of pesticides, Monsanto, the corporate media, a new ruling class – all these ring familiar in far away countries like India.

Srinivas Ghantasala

If MST wants to strengthen their movement they must get support from the middle class. You need to create awareness among intellectuals, opinion makers and most of all the youth.

Anita Saxena

Rapist's wife

The story, 'Rapist's wife,' was really great. It brought forth a totally new perspective. Very refreshing to read a story which propels one to think about themselves and their society. Thanks Nighat.

Amol Nagpure

Muslim OBCs

Your story, 'Muslim OBCs are powerless' is correct. The Union government and the states have never made serious efforts to improve the socio-economic condition of the minorities, especially OBC Muslims.

Ansar Husain Khan

Letters should be sent to response@civilsocietyonline.com

‘Leadership, motivation are

INTERVIEW

Ved Arya

Civil Society News
New Delhi

TRAINED and dedicated people are needed to make development programmes successful at the grassroots. There is talent within government, but the numbers are not enough. Personal attitudes are also a problem, as is the inflexibility of structures within government.

With money pouring into national schemes, governments have had to quickly innovate and find inventive ways forward. To reach out to communities and nurture their involvement, they have had to opt for organisational structures that make it possible to hire staff with the required motivation and training. It has become necessary to give up suffocating departmental dominance for a more adaptable mission and project based approach. The setting up of societies has also delivered results.

People in large numbers have been taken on board to make programmes successful.

In the National Rural Livelihoods Mission (NRLM), for instance, there are 14,000 people at different levels who have been brought in through open market recruitments in the states of Bihar, Tamil Nadu, Jharkhand, Gujarat, Maharashtra and Jammu and Kashmir.

Schemes for rural employment, healthcare and school education have similarly been soaking up trained people wherever they can be found.

With this influx have come the challenges of providing higher compensation packages and creating frameworks within which committed professionals can deliver results and feel fulfilled.

SRIJAN (Self-Reliant Initiatives Through Joint Action) has been helping governments with the complex task of identifying talent within and making recruitments from outside.

Ved Arya, a social entrepreneur and Ashoka Fellow, founded Srijan and also promoted Srijan Infrastructure and Development Services (P) Ltd, an international development consultancy organisation credited with bringing the focus on quality human resources for the development sector.

Arya used to be with PRADAN (Professional Assistance for Development Action) before he branched out on his own specifically to work with government. He is an aeronautical engineer and has a management degree from IIM Ahmedabad.

Arya and Tejinder Bhogal have recently written, *Building Effective Institutions to Empower the Poor: A Policy Makers' Guide for Human Resource Strategies*. Edited excerpts from a long conversation with Arya:

Is the government overstaffed?

I have heard secretaries of several state governments say when a World Bank project is proposed to them that they don't have 'committed' staff –



Ved Arya: 'There are many civil servants who have managed to crack the human resource issue on their own'

employees who are community oriented and who can ask for participation from poor people. You need a certain attitude. You need to go out, listen to what people want, formulate a scheme and then fund it.

For example, when we started working in Madhya Pradesh in 1999 in the community driven development (CDD) projects, the government said they would create a pool of money for, say, horticulture, dairy, check dams. Communities could decide the assets they wanted. The government would facilitate. The community would implement. The question that we raised was what was the level of confidence that the Secretary of Rural Development had in his own staff to help facilitate the CDD projects?

They don't have enough people for the kind of roles that are needed as government evolves?

Exactly. You can extend this problem to education. There is the Right to Education (RTE) Act. It has, for instance, Activity Based Learning (ABL). A tribal boy or girl in Churu district of Rajasthan would want an empathetic teacher. Then children will flower. Now what kind of people would you need in the education department to fulfill the RTE dream? It is the same with other programmes. How do you

facilitate the aspirations of the community? How do you change the nature of the bureaucracy?

You are saying this is the big challenge and it impacts the viability of programmes?

Yes. I would applaud the government for allocating financial resources. But as the Prime Minister, Dr Manmohan Singh, said there is a big difference between outlay and outcome. Skill may also be an issue. For example, some ANMs (Auxiliary Nurse Midwives) did not even know how to measure blood pressure, but they learnt. Skills can be learnt.

So what is the problem?

It is attitude.

How do you change attitudes?

Agricultural departments have huge extension staff. But does the extension worker go to the farmer's field or does he go to have *chai* at the sarpanch's house? Does it occur to him what his job is? See, in the 1950s the assumption was to give public servants lifetime security. Is it time to question if that assumption is no more true. Is the public servant giving his best? Is there enthusiasm and motivation from the secretary downwards to the extension

crucial for govt schemes'

SANDEEPA VEERAMACHANENI



realised that apart from the Collector there were other heroes within the government. So our hypothesis was that we would select people from across departments in Madhya Pradesh and bring them over for the District Poverty Initiative (DPI) project.

How did you select them?

A lot of people applied. We got a circular passed that people who joined would be given a slightly higher remuneration. Now our screening method for candidates was attitude, motivation. We came up with some tests that could be tried on guinea pigs within the government. We took 96 candidates and 16 succeeded. We had selected people from within the departments. One hundred and fifty teams were set up in 14 districts with four to six people from the government.

We eventually selected 1,000 people. They were from different departments – veterinary care, the oilseeds corporation and there were engineers. We formed this whole cadre into Process Facilitation Teams that would be located in a block or sub-block office. They would be asked to visit the villages regularly and make their micro plans. This is one

'Don't demoralise the government. There are good people at all levels. You must invest in training in skill development. Pick people from within on the basis of track record.'

worker who is supposed to help the poor farmer?

What can be done to correct this?

There are many civil servants who have managed to crack the human resource issue on their own. In Madhya Pradesh, the World Bank came up with a new project in 1998-1999 of \$100 million. Community participation is the key so they assumed that NGOs would implement the project.

We were asked to facilitate a workshop in Bhopal with NGOs. So we called those we knew. But we realised in the course of the workshop that it wasn't possible to do a large project with NGOs. So we began to analyse what we could do.

There are good people in government. At that time there was Gopalkrishnan, secretary to Digvijaya Singh. He was working on a watershed project in Jhabua. Success was happening within the government. Gauri Singh was a young IAS officer. So we said to her there must be good people in government. In Jhabua and other places the Collector was the leader of the programme and he was free to pick the best people from various departments for the watershed project team. They were having 20 per cent success, 30 per cent success. We made a trip to some of these watershed projects. We

example where the SRIJAN team and the government team worked together and it resolved the HR issue for a large project.

For whom was the project meant?

It was meant for very poor communities in the 14 northern districts of Madhya Pradesh. A social assessment had been done by NGOs to identify the poorest blocks. The community would decide the projects. They were formed into CIGs or Community Interest Groups of five or ten people. They would ask for a small check dam a small stream passing by, roads, agriculture and so on. There was 93 per cent retention even in the fifth year of the project.

You have such rich experience of taking people from within government. Is there really a need to take people from outside?

That model should certainly not be debunked. There are good people within government. But the option of taking people from outside has come up in a very specific context with respect to the government's flagship programmes. When NREGA came to be implemented, the chief secretary of Madhya Pradesh opted for open market recruitment. In

Tamil Nadu when Vijay Raghavan, Secretary, said he doesn't have staff we kept in mind that the state has a very vibrant civil society. Tamil Nadu was the first to give open market recruitment a green signal and we won the national bid. We found there were lots of people in NGOs who had done much work in the community and who were looking to do something on a bigger scale for their own growth. So they came over and joined the Tamil Nadu project. They went through the assessment and finally we had a good pool.

The same thing happened in Bihar. The chief secretary told us to poach people from anywhere and the government would give whatever it takes in terms of salary. Nitish Kumar had just taken over and there was this enthusiasm to develop the state.

We had no interference from political leaders, whether it was the Congress, the AIDMK, the JD (U) or the BJP. This is in contrast to the recruitment scams that take place. Political leaders do want a good project to happen.

Two principles about recruitment are objectivity and transparency. In the government everything is out in the open. It is not just about RTI. Objectivity is a cornerstone policy you have to have in your tests. Also speed. By evening the results are declared. We ensure transparency.

But how do you ensure people hired from the open market on contract stay motivated within the government system?

The people recruited are proud of being selected objectively and fairly. Contract is not the only issue. The first issue is parity with the existing government staff. Is the treatment equal? What are the tasks given to them? The person on contract who is a professional in his own right with maybe 10 or 15 years experience can feel, why am I not valued? That is one of the issues facing employees on contract.

He may wonder why the permanent government employee is given easy permission to travel by air while he is not. He comes from an NGO environment where people are valued and the system is more horizontal.

The government is able to address the salary issue when it employs people on contract through UNDP or World Bank. At those scales they would be paid perhaps more or close to what the IAS officer would get. If the contract employee gets around ₹2.5 lakh per month he's not an officer but part of the programme team of National Rural Health Mission (NRHM), he then feels compensated. A high salary is a symbol of value.

This has happened also in the NRLM in Bihar where the state sensed these people were valuable and revised salaries four times in two years.

In Tamil Nadu, where their field people were all from open market recruitment, they were conscious of measuring performance every two years and identifying star performers. They would put in place annual increments. Contract employees felt recognised and rewarded.

Wherever the rural development secretary has

Continued on page 8

Continued from page 7

been able to argue with the finance department that human resources are not an expenditure but an investment, it has been possible to get higher benefits. If you treat people on contract as expenditure you have lost the battle.

By now you must be having a body of people who have entered the government through open market recruitment to implement government projects. How significant is this trend?

We recruited around 7,000 people. But our efforts have also given birth to a new sector of HR agencies. So now there are 12 agencies which are working for just the rural livelihood missions in this country. Around I think 14,000 people are working in the system as soldiers or generals providing support to the CEOs of the rural livelihood mission in Jharkhand, Tamil Nadu, Bihar, Gujarat, Maharashtra and Jammu & Kashmir. It is an ambitious project that wants to reach tens of millions of people.

Is it giving good results?

Yes, it is. In every project they start with the resource blocks. Here they put their best quality staff, create a hub and a buzz, and then fan out to other blocks. It is early days because NRLM is only three years old. But you are seeing results. In Bihar, Tamil Nadu, Andhra Pradesh, Madhya Pradesh, Kerala they have good staff. The proof is the high level of acceptance by other governments.

When governments or political parties come up with schemes and projects what is the advice you would give them?

Don't demoralise the government. There are good people at all levels. You must invest in training in skill development. Pick people from within on the basis of track record and good work. It is another reflection of achievement, motivation and extension motivation – doing something for others. If you see these traits in officers, whether it is agriculture, rural development, health or education, recognise them and handpick them.

You have the National Institute of Rural Development in Hyderabad. You have state institutes of rural development, you have DIETs for education (similar set-ups for) health and family welfare and so on. They have to be given higher budgets. You can take outstanding people from the private sector for these positions. And invest in training. Invite people for leadership positions. If you want to implement the RTE at the district level, then the District Educational Officer should feel excited about implementing it. Leadership matters most. In fact it is most critical at district level because day-to-day work happens there.

We need to create motivation. If the teacher is not willing to go to a backward area or the doctor to a village we need to see what are the mechanisms that can incentivise them. I am told in Thailand people who work in rural areas are paid five times more. Why can't we do this?

How important is political will?

Most important is political will. When Amartya Sen was asked in Harvard what is ailing India, he said it is the attitude of the elite. Political leaders also wait for the elite to push for change. So the attitude of the elite needs to change. ■

48 days: What AAP

Has its short stint in office helped or hurt the new party?

Shayak Majumder
New Delhi

SOON after becoming the Chief Minister of Delhi on 28 December 2013, Arvind Kejriwal said his Aam Aadmi Party (AAP) government would not last more than 48 hours. It lasted for 48 days, which was also too short, but long enough for questions to be raised about performance.

As Kejriwal stepped down, the jury was out on AAP's brief, tumultuous tenure in office. Had he let voters down? Did his ministers show lack of maturity? Kejriwal's own demonstration for two full days was regarded by many as a sign of immaturity and the party, it seemed, remained hooked to the tactics of a movement.

On the specific issue of the Lok Pal and Mohalla Sabha bills, many felt that AAP was protesting too much. The bills should first of all have been put in the public domain. Secondly, they could have been passed if the rules were followed.

There are serious question marks over the promises AAP made on water and power rates. In hindsight it seems that both promises were made expressly to bring in votes in much the style of old parties. The water policy has been severely criticised for being populist. It is also not quite clear how the power rate can be brought down.

Responses suggest that AAP has lost some support with the middle class. The enthusiasm for the party seems to be missing. But it is also true that many would give the party a second chance. It has also managed to strike a chord among the urban poor.

"AAP promised free water and electricity," says Gautam Vohra, activist and former president of the Vasant Vihar Residents' Welfare Association (RWA). "There is nothing new in that. Also, the politics of agitation has been practised from the time of Mahatma Gandhi. Such a shortsighted, street approach will not be enough to bring good governance."

Pankaj Agarwal, general secretary of the RWAs' Joint Front, says, "AAP promised to be a pro-people party. They said that before taking any major decisions, public referendums would be sought. Sadly, none of that happened when they tried to table the Mohalla Sabha or the Jan Lokpal bills in the Assembly. They moved away from the people, just like any other political party."

But Agarwal and many others would agree that AAP enthused people by bringing in candidates with a clean image. "AAP did prove that a new



Arvind Kejriwal and AAP leaders

'AAP proved that a new party could form a govt without illegal money or corporate support. This is their biggest contribution to national politics and probably the only 'new' thing that they have exhibited.'

party could form a government without illegal money or corporate support. This is their biggest contribution to national politics and probably the only 'new' thing that they have exhibited," says Agarwal.

Vohra says, "AAP is determined to fight corruption. They have the courage to do so, and they are

did, didn't and couldn't

LAKSHMAN ANAND



'You cannot ignore the good things that the AAP government has done – the school helpline, cleaner hospitals and so on. They picked up issues which the previous government chose to ignore.'

cleaner hospitals and more efficient service.

Ashok Agarwal, member of AAP's national executive, says, "Sure, AAP's street style of politics may not be a sign of good governance. But you cannot ignore the good things that the AAP government has done – the school helpline, cleaner hospitals and so on. They picked up issues which the previous government chose to ignore and delivered what the people wanted."

"AAP made sure that party leaders and ministers were approachable. Each member of the cabinet would hold daily meetings in their offices and homes to listen to people's problems and rectify them. They helped put an end to the VIP culture," says Minhas.

AAP's attempts to ensure accountability and transparency in the functioning of Delhi's discoms have been appreciated. According to Chetan Sharma, the CAG audit of power distribution companies is one of the best things that AAP did. Soon after assuming office, Kejriwal had demanded an audit of the three power distributors in Delhi.

Says Sharma, "The CAG audits will expose the discoms. They were indeed overcharging consumers."

Ashok Agarwal says that Kejriwal knows how to connect with people. "I met some farmers in Alwar, Rajasthan, who were in complete awe of a chief minister who slept on the streets on a cold winter night doing a *dharna*. They could relate to it."

He added, "There are many who oppose such behaviour, but, then again, there are many at the grassroots who would want such a leader. Kejriwal's stepping down may increase support for his party."

Chetan Sharma feels Kejriwal could have avoided his two-day protest. A more restrained manner of handling the situation could have been tried. "Instead of sitting on *dharna*, AAP leaders could have met the Commissioner of Police or written to him demanding action against the police officers in Khirki Extension."

Also, he pointed out that the draft of the two bills – for Mohalla Sabhas and for a Lokpal should have been put in the public domain for discussions with the people and other political parties.

Minhas feels AAP has set an example for other political parties. "Today, you see the Congress asking for support from the grassroots, or you see BJP's Vasundhara Raje travelling in the general compartment of a train." ■

not obsessed with positions of power. They are not corrupted by the system. This aspect is new and it still gives us hope. This is one party we should support no matter what."

Before coming into power, AAP had promised electricity at half the price and 700 litres of free water every day per household. "They have failed to deliver on these promises," says Chetan Sharma, president of the Greater Kailash 2 RWA. "Once you come to power, you should deliver on your promises. Failing to do that will result in loss of people's faith."

Himanshu Thakkar, coordinator, South Asia Network on Dams, Rivers and People (SANDRP), points out that AAP had to work under immense pressure and constraints. "First of all AAP was a minority party when they assumed power. The party had to join hands with the Congress who are eventually their competitors in the Lok Sabha elections. They were allowed to form the government by the BJP, which was the majority party. Given the circumstances, AAP had very little time to show so many results."

Ranju Minhas, AAP women's wing coordinator,

agrees with Thakkar. She says, "There was very little time to do a lot of things. The promises that were made were huge and it takes time to deliver. But, the opposition didn't give us enough time to perform."

According to Thakkar, Kejriwal's resignation was perfectly justified. "The Congress and the BJP tried to push AAP into a corner. Arvind's decision to resign was the only way he could protest. It will now give them time to launch fresh protests."

Not everything AAP did was wrong. Under the guidance of Education Minister Manish Sisodia, the party's education volunteers launched an energetic campaign to repair ramshackle government schools and improve the quality of education.

They also campaigned in slums to inform people about the 25 per cent quota for the Economically Weaker Sections (EWS) in private schools under the Right to Education (RTE) Act. They helped parents file applications and ensured transparency in the admissions procedure. (See story on Page 10)

Health minister Satyendra Jain visited government hospitals with teams of volunteers to inspect the level of hygiene and medical services. The visits resulted in

How AAP got schools to perk up

Shayak Majumder
New Delhi

IN the 48 days that the Aam Aadmi Party (AAP) was in power, its team of education volunteers worked tirelessly to spruce up dilapidated government schools and improve the quality of education. They also carried out a campaign to ensure that poorer children get admission into private schools under the 25 per cent Economically Weaker Section (EWS) quota reserved for them.

In January, 140 volunteers carried out a survey of around 700 government schools (see *Civil Society* February issue). They found schools were ramshackled and basic facilities like drinking water, clean toilets and a healthy learning environment were missing.

A report was submitted to Manish Sisodia, Minister for Education. He immediately sanctioned ₹100,000 to each school to upgrade its infrastructure. In February, the volunteers did another survey to find out if the money had been spent well.

The results of the survey were mixed. Some schools, especially in Greater Kailash and Chittaranjan Park, made excellent progress, while a few others failed to match up.

“When we visited these schools the first time it was hard to even approach the toilets since they stank so much,” says Anoop Tagore, an AAP school volunteer from Chittaranjan Park. “But when we revisited the schools, we witnessed an incredible transformation. The toilets were spic and span. Faulty doors had been fixed. New taps had been installed for the children to use.”

However, Anita, another volunteer from Malviya Nagar, had a different story to tell. “I visited 11 schools in Malviya Nagar. We found that only three or four schools had done some repair work. All the others were in the same state as before.”

The results of the survey were submitted to the education ministry. Ranju Minhas, AAP education volunteer and survey coordinator, says, “We definitely saw some positive changes in the schools. Repair work in some schools was a little shoddy. In future we will try to ensure that the quality of work done is better.”

The AAP volunteer force also tried to implement the EWS facility provided under the Right to Education (RTE) Act 2009. As per this law, private schools that have taken land from the government at subsidised rates must reserve 25 per cent of their seats for children from EWS families. Any family with an annual income less than ₹100,000 can avail of this entitlement and ask the school to enroll their child in either the nursery section, the preparatory

section or in Class 1. They need to produce proof of income. Children belonging to SC/ST category or children with disability can also apply. An income certificate isn't needed for them.

“The problem with most schools is that they want to be seen as elitist. Therefore, they admit children from well-to-do families and weed out poorer families by not following norms regarding the EWS quota,” says Ashok Agarwal, a member of AAP's national executive and a well-known education activist.

To ensure that poorer parents get their children admitted, AAP volunteers launched an awareness campaign. They visited schools in their constituencies and informed families about the EWS quota in detail. They also assisted families who were facing problems submitting admission forms in schools.

Around 70 AAP volunteers underwent training to understand RTE norms. Minhas says, “The training sessions began around 1 February. We had to act fast as the last date for submitting admission forms in schools was 5 February. The volunteers had around three days to help the parents who were facing problems.”

AAP volunteers stationed themselves in front of schools every day, talking to poorer parents and trying to solve the problems they faced. As word spread, concerned parents also approached AAP volunteers for help.

Kumkum Singh, a volunteer from Rajender Nagar, says, “We received complaints that a school in Narayana Vihar, which falls under the Rajender Nagar constituency, was charging ₹200 per form instead of the stipulated ₹25.” Singh asked the parents to demand forms at the right price. “When everyone made this demand the school had no option but to comply,” says Singh.

The RTE Act states that each school should give forms to families within a radius of six km. But most schools gave preference to families who lived around one km from the school.

“When we heard this, we stepped in. We spoke to the school authorities and asked them to follow the rules of form distribution. After that, the schools gave out forms in an unbiased manner,” says Jagdish Arora, a volunteer from Malviya Nagar.

There are other ways in which schools flout RTE norms. “We met frustrated parents who were asked to show income certificates by some schools even though they belonged to the special category,” says Chauhan. When the volunteers intervened, those schools accepted

the forms readily.

The government provides funds for each child admitted through the EWS quota. “In Delhi, the cost per child in the EWS quota is ₹1,190 per month. This covers everything from uniforms to books. It does not include the cost of conveyance,” says Agarwal.

He says government schools are not equipped with nursery or preparatory sections. Out of around 3,000 schools in Delhi, only 350 government schools and 300 MCD schools offer one year of pre-primary before the children are promoted to Class 1. ■



AAP volunteers examining new taps that have been installed in schools

AAP volunteers stationed themselves in front of schools, talking to poorer parents and trying to solve the problems they faced. As word spread, parents also approached AAP volunteers for help.

CONFLICT ZONE

Bishnah's deadly brew

Akshay Azad
Jammu

THIRTY-eight year old Neena Kumari lives a life far tougher than women her age. She is a widow, a mother of six and works as a maid in several homes to make ends meet. Her entire family lives in a single dilapidated room with an old colour television, a broken fan, three cots, two quilts, two steel boxes, a few clothes and an old bicycle that belonged to her deceased husband. This is their only wealth.

Life wasn't very different a year ago when her husband, Baldev Raj, was still alive. A barber by profession, Balraj was an alcoholic undergoing treatment as his health had been ruined due to alcoholism. For his medical treatment Neena sold the only four kanals of land they possessed and invested all her efforts into saving his life. But nothing could change her misfortune. Balraj died leaving her alone to shoulder the responsibility of bringing up their four daughters and two sons.

Neena and her family live in Pandori village in Bishnah tehsil barely 20 km from Jammu, the winter capital of Jammu and Kashmir. They are not the only victims of alcoholism. The entire tehsil is facing its consequences. Many have died due to excessive consumption of liquor.

Septuagenarian Kaushala Devi of Chak Hasal village who lost her elder son Shri Niwas, 42, last year to alcoholism deeply regrets his demise. She says she tried her best to persuade him to stop drinking



Kaushala Devi with her son Prem Nath and her daughter

but in vain. After witnessing the death of her elder son, she is now worried that her younger son Prem Nath, 38, who too is an alcoholic, may meet the same fate as his elder brother.

"*Khud to chale jate hain, maa reh jati hai,*" choked Kaushala Devi, who blamed her society for the growing menace of alcoholism. In many ways, Kaushala Devi is correct in blaming her local society. This tehsil is notorious for the production of illicit liquor since several decades.

Twenty-seven-year old Kewal Krishan's father had also become an alcoholic. He says most families here are considered low-caste. They are poor because the local economy is not robust.

To support their families, young boys drop out of their schools and start working in small industries. Soon after gaining economic independence, they start consuming liquor which is being produced in

several villages and is easily available at cheap rates.

"Initially they start drinking alcohol just for fun or to experiment but fun becomes addiction even before they realise it," says Kewal.

Makhanpur, Deoli, Laswara, Chak Avtara, Kheri, Krel Brahmana, Chak Hasal, Shekhpur, Ala, Nandpur Tibba, Bullende Kothe are among several villages which are infamous for production and sale of illicit liquor.

Avinash Bhagat, a local journalist, says 76,000 people out of a total population of 160,000, living in Bishnah are Scheduled Castes with little or no land, surviving in extremely deprived conditions. Poverty compels adolescent youth of these families to search for employment. "In every village of Bishnah, there are 10-20 people who have died of liquor consumption," said Bhagat. "A liquor addict hardly crosses the age of 50."

Former Superintendent of Police, Shailender Singh, invested a lot of hard work in eradicating the liquor menace during his three-year tenure here and achieved some success. He says that the Sansian community are the main producers of illicit liquor in the tehsil as

a large chunk of their population resides in Bishnah.

"The Sansian community is boycotted by society since they are considered untouchables. Despite being extremely poor, they have no BPL cards or any other support from the government. After working for three years to stop them from producing illicit liquor what we have understood is that the only reason forcing them to do this is poverty," he said.

Singh explains that the only way to eradicate production of illicit liquor is to bring the Sansian community into the mainstream of society and eradicate untouchability. They should be rehabilitated and provided alternative livelihoods so that they don't need to produce this dangerous brew. ■

The writer is a Sanjoy Ghose Media Fellow
Charkha Features

SAMITA'S WORLD

by SAMITA RATHOR



SAMITA



The Mahatma Gandhi mural on the police headquarters



Hanif Kureshi: 'Street art is for everyone'

Street art festival makes a

Shayak Majumder
New Delhi

DELHI has been struck by street art fever. Artists are changing the city's landscape with vivid passion – a massive mural of Mahatma Gandhi has been painted on the walls of the Police Headquarters, there is an illustration from the Ramayana on another wall, and even trash bins in the Lodhi Gardens sport a splash of colour.

St-Art Delhi and Delhi St. Art have brought Indian and international artists together to promote street art and set up a platform that supports collaboration among artists. St-Art Delhi has organised the Street Art Festival while Delhi St. Art is holding regular trash bin painting sessions in the Lodhi Gardens.

The Delhi Street Art festival is the first of its kind. The 50-day festival is being held at Shahpur Jat, Khirkee Extension, Malviya Nagar and Hauz Khas village. Fifty artists will be painting 80 walls in the urban villages of South Delhi.

Street art is a very different genre of art, explains Hanif Kureshi, creative director of the festival.

"Art exhibitions are always held indoors, in closed spaces. Those who visit them know basically what they will see. But the magic of street art lies in its surprise element. You just get on to the streets to do your daily chores and then suddenly you see a bright mural painted on a wall. This makes street art unique."

Street art is also very egalitarian. "You don't have to pay to see or appreciate street art. Be it a minister or a rickshaw puller, street art is available for everyone," says Hanif.

The mural of Mahatma Gandhi is the biggest draw. At 150 by 38 ft. it is the largest handpainted mural of Mahatma Gandhi ever made. "Although we

have to validate this, our research has not yet spotted any handpainted Gandhi mural bigger than this," says Arjun Bahl, the festival's managing director.

The police appear to be happy with it. When the idea was pitched to B.S. Bassi, Delhi's Commissioner of Police, it was passed around to various departments for approval. The police were keen to deliver the right message. Finally, they approved. It took Hendrik from Germany and Anpu from Delhi five days to finish the mural. "It was inaugurated on Gandhi's death anniversary and well received by everyone, including Delhi's Lieutenant Governor, Najeeb Jung, who inaugurated the mural, and the police commissioner," says Bahl.

Hendrik has painted the tallest wall art in Asia, a 230 ft mural of a fisherman in Busan, South Korea. This is the first time he has painted the portrait of a revered figure. "Artistically it's a challenge to work from a photograph of a well-known personality like Gandhi," he says. "It limits the space to add your own artistic characteristics to it, but I really feel we managed to master the task on this one." The mural's visibility from surrounding roads and the metro is an added advantage.

Anpu too is no stranger to larger than life wall murals. Her signature 40 feet by 35 feet Cat Mural in Khirkee Extension is proof of her artistic prowess. She says Delhi's youth are opening up to street art culture. "I get invited to talk on street art in colleges," she says.

St-Art Delhi spots blank walls and then asks its owner for permission to paint on it. "Initially it was hard to get walls to paint on. But as word spread, more and more people approached us and asked our artists to paint their walls," says Hanif.

Anpu says, "The best part of street art is that once you have finished painting, the owner of the wall feels like he owns that piece of art. Unlike other

paintings, street artists paint a wall and move on to the next one, giving the work of art to the people."

The artists feel there is a lot more appreciation of art in India than in other countries. "In India, people easily relate to art and appreciate it," says Foe, an artist from Germany. "I was painting a cat holding kites at one place. The owner of the wall came up to me with his child who was holding a kite. He said he wanted to help me by showing me what a kite looks like. It was fun and friendly."

At times the artists did face objections. But they didn't find it hard to win over hostile people. Yantr, an artist from Delhi, recalls: "When I was painting my rendition of a mechanical Pushpak Vimana from the Ramayana, some people from a nearby temple objected. They said only pictures of gods and goddesses could be painted near a temple," he says. But Yantr explained that he was actually drawing the Pushpak Vimana from the Ramayana.

"Amazingly, the same group of people then gathered around to watch me work and discuss the art and its relevance. It was incredible to see how people readily accepted something new and started relating to it," says Yantr.

"We try to collaborate with the community when we set up wall art. After all, the art is meant for them," says Bahl. "We even saw people helping artists while they worked, holding their material and bringing tea for them. It was amazing to experience such a warm reception."

It's not necessary that street art always has to be on walls and look larger than life. It can be small, subtle and yet make a big difference. Delhi St. Art's initiative to paint and beautify trash bins is an example.

The Lodhi Gardens have always attracted runners, walkers, birdwatchers and nature lovers. Now they have one more reason to go to the gardens –

artistic trash bins. Delhi St. Art's quirky bunch of street artists have transformed each trash bin into a work of art.

Some are designed in perfect harmony with the surrounding green, while others make a social statement. One bin reminds you to save the girl child, another asks you to eliminate child labour, and yet a third says please save sparrows.

The man behind this initiative is Yogesh Saini, a photographer who is a regular at the Lodhi Gardens.

One day he spotted new bins being placed beside the older ones. It struck him that the new bins looked just like the old ones. "I figured why spend money buying new bins when we can beautify the old ones?" He photographed the bins and digitally superimposed his own design on them.

He took his designs to the New Delhi Municipal Corporation (NDMC). "They were apprehensive that the repainted bins may not look good and visitors to the gardens might disapprove," says Yogesh. But he persisted and finally got permission to paint six bins.

"Now, I didn't have any references or contacts with artists who might be interested in painting trash bins," he says. So he created a Facebook page under the name of Delhi St. Art and put out an advertisement looking for artists. "At first I could

only gather three artists. On 17 November, we began our task."

They soon realised that painting on a trash bin was different from painting on canvas.

The glossy fibre glass body of the bins proved to be a challenging surface. The group eventually zeroed in on acrylic paints. But choosing the right paint was just the first of many hurdles.

"Although I asked NDMC to clean the bins before we painted them, they didn't do it. So we cleaned the bins ourselves with water and cloth before we began painting" says Yogesh. They stuffed the tops of the bins with newspaper to prevent them from emitting a stench while they painted.

At the end of the day, Yogesh and his group had painted seven bins. "Somehow word spread and the

then Chief Minister of Delhi, Sheila Dikshit, came to know," recalls Yogesh." NDMC now requested him to hold a trash bin painting event and agreed to fund it.

This time he managed to attract 30 artists. Sheila Dikshit inaugurated the event and painted a bin herself. Now painting trash bins has become a regular event at the Lodhi Gardens.

Painters are provided with new brushes, palettes, water mugs and a set of basic colours. "In terms of materials provided, the cost roughly works out to ₹800 per artist," says Yogesh.

Both professional and amateur artists offered their skills. Some joined because they wanted to do a good deed while others came out of their love for art. Roopchand, one such painter, calls himself a 'social artist.' His bins stand out for their strong social messaging. "If it was up to me, I would paint the entire city and fill it with colour," he says.

Yogesh and his team have painted 110 bins in the park, so far. There are still some 40 bins left. One more event will take care of them. But just painting trash bins is not enough, points out Yogesh. "There is a need to maintain the artwork. The bins are subject to wear and tear every day when they are emptied. Over time, the pai

GREEN CAREERS

'400 cobras and it's not new'

How Rahul Alvares went from snakes to birds

Abhinandita Mathur

Panjim

RAHUL Alvares, 33, was born in a small farm in Valpoi, Goa, to illustrious parents. His father, environmentalist Claude Alvares, is one of Goa's most important voices and his mother, Norma Alvares, is an environmental lawyer. Rahul's unconventional upbringing introduced him to the environment at an early age. He wrote his first book at the age of 16 when he took a break from school. He is a photographer, birder and herpetologist. While snakes remain his first love, he recently published a book of photos about the birds of Goa.

Civil Society spoke to Rahul about his initiation into the fascinating world of ecology, his experience as a snake rescuer, why snakes are misunderstood and his thoughts on the changing environment around us.

When and how did you get interested in snakes? And how did this relationship develop?

I was born on a farm in a remote part of Goa. Apparently, I was crawling after snakes that lived in and around our house when I was still a toddler, before I learnt to walk. I was scared of other animals like dogs and cats. This relationship with snakes I was perhaps born with. As I grew up, we moved away from the farm. People told me scary stories about snakes that instilled fear in me. But I remained interested. I realised that some snakes are venomous and I learnt to keep a safe distance.

Your parents are well known for their commitment to environmental issues. How did that influence you?

All our summer vacations were spent in the most beautiful forests and jungles of Kerala or Tamil Nadu. I would get most excited when our parents took us to a croc farm or reptile park. Most snake parks would typically have a docile snake that one could touch or hold. I was always the first kid to hold the snake.

On one such vacation, my parents took us to the Pune Snake Park. I could not believe how the experts there handled cobras. I was finishing high school and my father suggested I take a year off after my boards to spend time at the snake park and learn to handle snakes. That is, if I did well in my exams. And I did. So I spent the next year doing life-changing things.

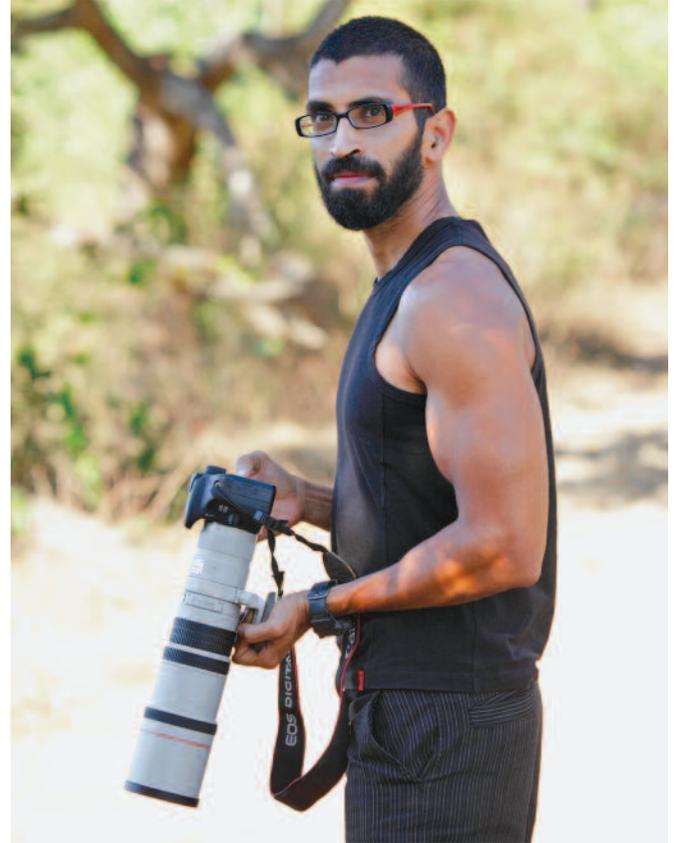
This was not common practice but my father, perhaps because of his work, managed to easily convince the concerned authorities. It obviously helped to be my parents' son.

That year was extraordinary. I learnt snake handling, got bitten by non-venomous snakes and learnt composting with earthworms, using spiders to control cockroaches and mushroom cultivation.

RAHUL ALVARES



ABHINANDITA MATHUR



Rahul Alvares: 'Snakes are always in balance'

'I would get most excited when our parents took us to a croc farm or reptile park. Most snake parks would typically have a docile snake that one could touch or hold.'

I also spent two months at a croc farm in Chennai where I learnt a lot about crocodiles and cobras. It was here that an expert from the Irula community taught me how to handle venomous snakes.

When I returned to Goa, I realised I could use this knowledge to rescue snakes. Word spread and soon I became a full on snake handler.

What is it like to be a snakehandler?

When people saw I could catch snakes, word spread quickly. I was soon doing this full-time. It had to be unpaid of course.

In 2002, after graduating in zoology, I took another year off. This time, I went to Thailand where I learnt how to handle the King Cobra.

When I returned, I got a call from a hotel in South Goa. They wanted me to work with them regularly as they would often spot snakes in their property. They needed an expert to not only handle snakes but to make people aware about snakes.

That was the peak of my career, you could say, as a snake rescuer. I would do as many as four calls a week. I would go all over on my motorcycle and pull out snakes from wells, cupboards, store-rooms... and then put them back into the forest.

What are the challenges of such a job?

Snake handling and rescuing is a thankless job. You are on call 24x7. It is not like a plumber who can set

a date for next week. You have to drop everything and go. There have been many challenges.

First, it was not so exciting anymore. In the beginning when I went to rescue snakes, every experience was new. After you have handled 400 cobras, you are not learning at the same pace as when you started.

Secondly, I was not charging a fee and I needed to make money too. There was no way I could have charged people for this job, surely not more than ₹200 rupees, because then they would rather kill the snake than pay someone to rescue it. For them, the idea was to get rid of the snake. They couldn't care less about it.

Thirdly, you also end up putting yourself at high risk. It is dangerous not just because you are dealing with snakes but also because of the situation you find yourself in. It is not easy to be hanging from the ceiling, or standing on a ladder 20 feet above the ground, trying to get my hands on a cobra. The cobra could easily swing to my neck and there is nothing I would be able to do. Sometimes, the snake is in a water tank. As you go down to reach it, it is likely to come swimming towards you.

Why did you stop doing rescuing work?

I realised I was not changing anything. All that people wanted from me was to get rid of the snake. For me, I was rescuing the snake not them. Why would I go through all that trouble if I wanted to

kill the snake in the first place? For people, my job is like pest control. They need to realise that snakes have always been around without causing any trouble. Why would you want to displace them? If a snake has come to your house, help it go back to the garden. It has no interest in sitting in your wardrobe. People want me to release the snakes in some far away jungle. It's like saying oh there are too many Indians in India lets dump them in Antarctica. Would they be able to cope? Forests are perfectly in balance. Snakes are territorial and it is cruel to dump them in a new environment.

When I started rescuing snakes there were only four or five snake handlers in Goa. Now we are 50 at least. Sometimes, people try and give me a guilt trip. I often hear things like: "If you don't come and get this snake, we will kill it. Or it will kill us and you will be responsible". I didn't do this to be emotionally blackmailed. But thankfully now I can refer them to other people. Frankly, this is the main reason why I can now say no and focus on other things. Of course I still go now and then, but it's much less.

I am keener to change people's attitude through books and films. I want to make people aware of snakes.

Have you had any close calls?

Yes. Once I was trying to rescue a viper that was badly entangled in a fishing net. I had to cut the net. The viper broke free and there was venom all over my hand. A snake had once bitten a colleague whose finger had to be amputated. I have had a long run for over 12 years. There were close calls. I was bitten several times but luckily never by a venomous snake.

Tell us about the snakes of Goa. How do you think the changing environment has impacted them over the years?

In UK there is a saying – no matter where you are you are not more than 10 meters away from a rat. You could use it in the case of Goa and snakes. The average person in Goa sees at least two snakes every year. For every snake that you see, there are probably 100 around that you will never see. But they are not there to bother you. And they don't cause a mosquito or rat infestation. Snakes have never caused a plague. Snakes are always in balance.

Most of the snakes that you find around people's houses are thriving in that environment. A good example of this would be pythons that eat rats and rodents. And we attract rats, so pythons are inevitably going to be around.

There are several varieties of snakes found in Goa. We are in an ecological hotspot.

What about the traditional knowledge of dealing with snakes? How do you think that could be used?

Frankly, I am not sure about that. One would have to go back several generations. People may have been more connected to their ecology back then, but I would think that for several generations they have been out of touch. I don't see any signs of a great relationship. Before I started rescuing snakes, whenever there was a snake what would they do? I wonder.

I remember as a child, a snake entered our neighbour's house. The person who came to rescue it did his job with much façade and drama. The snake was defanged, force fed milk and everyone prayed. So

instead of removing fear in people, he scared them all the more. How would this help the cause in any way? Perhaps he wanted to ensure he remained in business. The show was designed to keep people scared of snakes.

And there are so many myths around snakes. There is a strange relationship with snakes in that sense too?

Yes, absolutely, on one hand people are petrified and would be happy if all the snakes disappeared from the face of earth. On the other hand, they pray to the snake god.

There are certain communities in India who even protect them. They live in harmony. In the olden times they possibly had more encounters with snakes and perhaps could tell one from the other. But I am surprised to see how badly people react to snakes. I can understand if a city person finds it difficult. But people in Goa? I don't get it.

And then, of course, myths about what should be done are snake bytes. Most of the things people list when I ask them this question are not only untrue but in fact more dangerous.

It is surprising that people from India, in my experience, are more terrified of snakes than people from Europe. And there are hardly any snakes in Europe. Perhaps these myths have something to do with this fear.

Tell us about your work on birds?

I started birding very seriously in 2008. I travelled around in India and abroad observing and photographing birds. This year, we published my book. I am very fascinated.

Tell us about the snake tours and bird tours you conduct?

I don't do many snake trips. In the monsoon we do a snake trip where we drive to the jungle in heavy rain. Then we go looking for snakes between 9 pm till midnight. You can imagine it is not really a great holiday plan.

The bird trips are, of course, more popular. There too, I charge a lot, so only the serious ones get interested. I am not keen on taking a loud big group who will disturb the environment and hustle with me for discount.

What are your plans? Are you working on new projects?

I feel I already have 30 per cent new material for a revised version of my book on birds. And then a solid photo textbook on Goa's snakes is long over due.

You have all this experience and knowledge. How do you plan to reach out to people or the government to help protect the environment?

This is something that to be honest I have still not resolved. I obviously do want to make a difference. My parents are well-known activists. It should happen. But at the moment I am working on my knowledge. I use media as a tool to educate people. I think awareness of how great, diverse and incredibly rich our ecology is might make people want to protect it. And, I know for sure, no matter how many snakes we kill, they will be in balance. They are not going to go extinct. They will always be more in sync with their surroundings than us people. ■

'Ignorance of northeast a dangerous epidemic'

Kavita Charanji
New Delhi

RECENT incidents of violence against young people from the northeast in Delhi have shocked the entire nation. But such incidents are not new. According to a study by the North-East Support Centre & Helpline, since 2005 there have been around 96 cases of violence including rape and murder against people from the northeast.

"The lack of information about the northeast has become a dangerous epidemic. As a result, natives from this region are viewed as outsiders and ridiculed," says Gayatri Buragohain, executive director of Foundation for Social Transformation (FST) based in Guwahati.

Decades of conflict have worsened the economic and development indices of the northeast. But there are grassroots crusaders here working silently to uplift their community and emerging as role models. Highlighting their achievements could bridge the gap between the northeast and the rest of India, believes FST.

FST has launched the North-East Rising Campaign to raise funds from individuals to provide fellowships to seven changemakers from the seven northeastern states: Assam, Arunachal Pradesh, Manipur, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Nagaland and Tripura. The fellowship will be for one year. FST hopes to raise ₹17.5 lakh. It has started an online campaign: www.northeastrising.org

Gayatri Buragohain said the objective of the North-East Rising Campaign is to bring people from the northeastern states together to support changemakers in the region.

"We complain about our problems all the time. Many of us want to do something but aren't able to. But there are changemakers at the grassroots who have been working tirelessly within their own community to bring about change with the limited means that they have. The North-East Rising Campaign aims to bridge the gap between those who want to see change but are not able to do anything themselves and those who are working on the ground but do not have the resources they need."

FST is planning to reach out to people online and offline. The website www.northeastrising.org has been launched and a Facebook page, www.facebook.com/northeastrising. FST is also sending out emails and making calls to the people they know.

"No contribution is small," said Gayatri. "Our initiative is quick, transparent and focused on specific outcomes." ■

Healing touch for Bamhni

Bharat Dogra
Bilaspur

IT is a hot afternoon at the medical sub-centre in Bamhni, a remote village in Bilaspur district of Chhattisgarh. Two doctors are busy attending to patients. A middle-aged woman from a potter's family walks in. She looks very weak. Her records reveal she is suffering from cervix cancer. The doctor tells her she should report immediately to a bigger hospital. She protests. "I can't go. The furnace to heat my earthen pots has been lit. I can go only after all those pots are ready for sale."

Why can't her family help out? Further inquiries reveal that her daughter-in-law suffers from rheumatic heart disease and her grandson from sickle cell anaemia.

The Bamhni sub-centre is run by the Jan Swasthya Sahyog (JSS), one of the most talked about health initiatives in India. JSS was started in 1998 by a group of young, idealist doctors from the All India Institute of Medical Sciences (AIIMS) in Delhi. They were Yogesh Jain, Raman Kataria, Anurag Bhargava, Biswaroop Chatterji, Sathyamala, Rachna Jain, Anju Kataria, Madhuri Chatterjee, Madhavi Bhargava, Pramod Upadhyaya and B.R. Chatterjee.

The young doctors shared their dream of starting a hospital for the rural poor with friends in the Christian Medical College Hospital in Vellore. They went to many states searching for the most backward region they could find. Finally, in 1998, they picked Bilaspur, a district with a tribal and backward caste population and abysmal human development indicators (HDI).

Several years later they have established a reputed hospital in Ganiyari village in Bilaspur. Equipped with 50 beds, two operation theatres, a labour room, radiology and pathology facilities, the hospital provides medical, surgical, paediatric and obstetric care to 2,000 remote villages. There is an outpatient clinic as well. Three sub-centres are linked to the hospital and serve more than 150 villages in forested areas. Trained health workers, elected by their villages, provide preventive and curative services in about 60 villages in Kota and Lormi blocks inhabited mainly by the Baiga and Gond tribal communities.

Bamhni, near the Achanakmaar Game Sanctuary, is so remote that during the monsoons doctors have to trek one kilometre over mud, wade through the Maniyari river and then trek another two kilometres to reach the sub-centre. It is manned by two health workers. The doctor comes in once a week.

The patients who arrive here have a mind-boggling range of illnesses.

A father comes in with his four-year-old son who has suddenly stopped walking. An initial examination reveals this to be a likely case of spine TB. Why



Standing: Dr Raman Kataria, Dr Biswaroop Chatterjee, Dr Anurag Bhargava, Dr Yogesh Jain
Sitting: Dr Anju Kataria, Dr B.R. Chatterjee, Dr Madhuri Chatterjee, Dr Madhvi Bhargava, Dr Rachana Jain

has the boy been brought here so late? The father says he took his son to the local quack who administered over a dozen injections. The child's condition worsened.

Next comes a father who has travelled over 70 km in a very crowded bus to bring his baby suffering from sickle cell disease for treatment. Then, a middle-aged TB patient, so weak that he has the weight of a child, walks in.



A basic pathology laboratory

Meanwhile, a health worker rushes into the clinic from a nearby village to report an outbreak of scabies in several families. Another worried health worker reports a case of acute psychosis, a man who has turned violent towards his family members.

All this in the span of about half-an-hour.

Dr Yogesh Jain, one of the doctors examining patients, remains unruffled.

"At our rural hospital in Ganiyari about 270 to 300 people attend each OPD after waiting on an average of four days to get into the queue. Another 25 emergencies are also seen. Each day is a veritable mix of complex problems. There are diverse communicable diseases, nutrition related problems, non-communicable diseases and diseases which could have resulted from poor and delayed access to healthcare. Under-nutrition underpins all these conditions making us question several myths about the health status and the burden of problems of the rural poor. The astonishing numbers and complexity of these illnesses explodes this huge myth that people in small places have small problems."

Despite these serious healthcare challenges, there

is an acute shortage of doctors in rural areas. While nearly 70 per cent of India's people live in villages, only 30 per cent of doctors serve there. Children in Indian villages die due to denial of basic healthcare, while about 90,000 doctors from India serve in Britain and the US. The absence of doctors is a big reason for India's low health and human development indicators. It also stymies the training of village health workers.

At JSS there is a steady stream of doctors who come to provide healthcare. The doctors who founded JSS have inspired junior doctors with their relentless hard work, impeccable integrity and great dedication. JSS also ensures that doctors who work here are provided with basic facilities and a living wage.

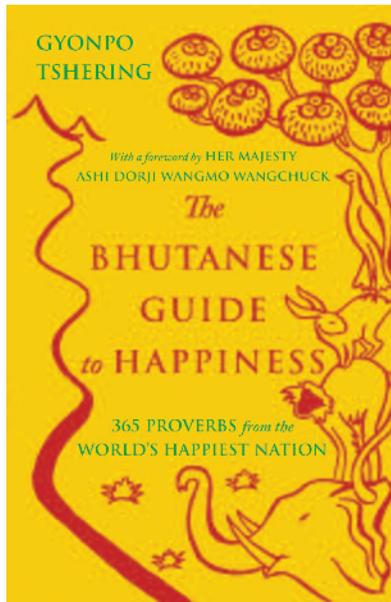
Dr Anju Kataria, a paediatrician, has never regretted her decision to leave her high profile job in a Dehradun hospital to work in the villages of Chhattisgarh. "We did face some problems but the contribution one can make in these remote villages to save children's lives more than makes up for them," Her main regret is that the existing health infrastructure in villages is not being used optimally to serve people's needs, again substantially due to the shortage of qualified doctors.

Dr Rachna Jain, a gynaecologist, says that only after working in remote villages does one understand how important it is to meet the health needs of women. Many of them got a chance to get serious illnesses attended to only when the JSS started working in this area.

Sachin Barbde is a young doctor from Maharashtra. He was looking, he says, for a deeply humane approach to patients and a holistic approach to healthcare. He found it in JSS. Sagar Kabra, another junior doctor, says, "We should work where we are most needed. And in India this is best accomplished by working in poor and remote villages." Dheeraj Deshmukh, also a junior doctor, says what is most important for him is to make people smile. And he gets an opportunity to do this in remote villages where the poor have been deprived of healthcare for so long. Ashwani Mahajan says for her working with high ethical norms is very important.

These young doctors, just out of college, are themselves an inspiring example. ■

Bharat Dogra is a freelance journalist who has been involved with several social initiatives and movements.



In a world weighed down with the problems of economic growth and the working of democracy, Bhutan's inward search for happiness and balance is a breath of fresh air.

From the day the Bhutanese Guide to Happiness with its 365 proverbs arrived at our office, we knew we just had to do something more with it than a review.

It is a beautifully produced book. Each page offers wisdom and solace in these days of shrill and competitive public life in India.

To go beyond the book and tell the deeper story of Bhutan and Gross National Happiness (GNH), we commissioned our friend and fellow traveller, Siddharth Shriram, to do an opening piece.

Siddharth comes from a privileged class of Indians. But Bhutan's approach to wealth has left a deep impression on him. His article leads to a sample of the proverbs in the book.

We suggest you take a deep dive.

Published by Penguin Ananda ₹399

BLISS AS

What we can learn from Bhutan's GNH

SIDDHARTH SHRIRAM

THE world was shocked, surprised and of course extremely cynical when the Kingdom of Bhutan announced that its key measure of success was to be "Gross National Happiness" (GNH) as different from Gross Domestic Product (GDP). Why so?

The main reason for this is that the world has accepted that discontent is the first necessity of progress (who defines progress, by the way?) as its basic thesis and that the foremost yardstick of progress is GNP/GDP. "GNH" would argue that contentment is the basic thesis of happiness, particularly for a small country such as Bhutan. It is not that the monetary measures of GDP and other macro and micro economic measures are not important for Bhutan; it is simply a matter of a basic different emphasis.

There are many spurs to progress, of course.

The most important acknowledged spur is of continuous improvement in the "Quality of Life" (QOL) and, of course, there are fairly accurate, internationally accepted, measurable, determinable elements of QOL on a comparative scale with other nations. Citizens value this hugely as it directly affects their family lives as health, family welfare, schooling nutrition and so on are covered in this.

Another, and a connected measure, is the purposeful preservation of the environment. In the late 1800s, in a resource-rich country such as the US, the government created national forest parks to keep commercial interests from denuding age-old forests. Much later, lessons forgotten, scant respect was given to the environment until they found that an uncaring, or maybe ignorant, mainly business oriented attitude had led to a "Silent Spring" (a 1960s book by Rachel Carson) when no birds sang! Now, lessons forgotten yet again, the climate change/global warming threat is hanging over our collective heads by only a slender thread and the world is neglecting the issue by caving in to business and commercial concerns. Air and water quality in several urban agglomerates are worsening through excessive carbon emissions, populations with their ever-increasing demands are burgeoning and the consequential changing weather patterns could cause untold unhappiness for generations, mainly to the not so well-off.

So what is GNH?

The Government of Bhutan distilled this concept of GNH, not only through the wisdom of the reigning monarch, but also from his personal interactions with all of the 700,000

STATE POLICY



residents of this magical land. He discovered that the people wished to preserve the environment which was the source of all the blessings for this nation and he rediscovered that this wish was in consonance with the teachings of the Buddha. With the GNH programme, the mantle of public happiness would fall, equitably, on the Bhutanese people. The Buddhist faith espouses basic contentment as an essential ingredient for peace and happiness and the idiom of the spiritual messages in Bhutan are often gleaned from nature, from the wealth of the untouched wilderness with its trees and forests, rivers and water, hills and mountains and assorted animals and other sentient beings. These “public goods” are to be saved and made available to this and all succeeding generations.

The King transferred the huge responsibility for perpetuating this natural heritage directly to the people themselves by abdicating and creating a democracy. GNH was permanently enshrined in the Constitution of the newly democratic country.

And therein lies the challenge.

Judging from the experience of its neighbours such as India, Bangladesh, Thailand and so on, the democratic process is often raucous and seeks to cater to the ultra high and growing aspirations and expectations of all of the people all of the time. All of the people in the country are seeking to be better off monetarily and, because candidates make so many promises, sometimes the fulfilment of those promises can turn into an attack on GNH. To protect against this, in Bhutan, the Ministry of GNH judges the extent of violence that can be inflicted on the forests, minerals, water resources, hills and mountains, and sentient beings by every major enterprise, or even minor ones, and appropriately modifies the proposal to strictly comply with GNH. This increases the cost in terms of investment and lays open the door for the unleashing of the kind of demons, for instance, that bedevil India’s democracy. India is now discovering, through the Aam Aadmi Party, that it is only the force of a strong civil society that ultimately compels compliance with the Constitution. Mature civil society development needs to be

encouraged and it must be understood that sometimes their actions may embarrass the ruling elite.

A comparison with much larger India is necessary. Democracy and rapid growth can generate enormous personal wealth, sometimes so large that one has to virtually get “rid” of it by spending hundreds of crores of rupees on things like weddings, thousands of crores on even a single home and also keep on growing this wealth by any possible means. “MORE” is the only mantra, no matter how. Financial scams and ill-used privilege shift the ancient “culture” into an “unholy” mess and this too in a land that boasts of a huge spiritual heritage. India has forgotten that there are future generations, that we are all merely human and, therefore, we should not aspire to overtake the wealth of celestial beings. The skies, forests, rivers, mineral wealth and environment are despoiled to feed the ever-growing maw of “public demand.” Foreign investors are sought to help do it. India often seems to be teetering on a treadmill as the pace is inevitably increased.

GNH must save Bhutan from all this. Bhutan must learn from the lessons of India, and use democracy to moderate the roused expectations and aspirations of the people so that continuous competition and conflict are democratically contained even as the traditional professions of agriculture/cattle rearing/rural activities and the like are giving place to urban living.

Democracy means the nurturing of a free media as one of the key protectors of the Constitution; democracy means the pursuit of happiness; democracy also means an increasing flow of grasping and avaricious persons looking to make a killing in any way at all. Smooth as silk snake oil salesmen will offer guns and fancy projects; real estate activity will need huge quantities of lumber, untold riches in the minerals under the forests can be exploited, liquor can flow as fluently as the rivers. All of these can adversely impact GNH, while making the provider and the intermediary enormously wealthy monetarily. The system of civil society and democracy and administrative rigour must guard against these.

The pursuit of endless riches only demands that one get richer and richer and richer until one is not normal anymore. One ceases to be free in nature and is caged by these very riches. One’s closely guarded houses, private aircraft, expenditure to express one’s richness, exclusive schools for one’s children where they don’t mix with the hoi polloi and full show-off spreads in society magazines make one like a caged animal in a zoo, watched and viewed as a rarity. And having got there, try to conquer nature, having conquered everything else, forgetting that one will leave this world only as one came in, that is, with nothing. Old age, poverty, sickness and death are inevitable, but the “ultra rich” seek to conquer even this natural process.

It is in this context that the spirit of GNH needs to be seen.

The Bhutanese Guide to Happiness has all the thought processes that lead to the creation of the policy of GNH. The concept of GNH is not only derived from the king but also from the hills and mountains, forests and other flora, from sentient beings of all kinds and from the sages of this magical land – these truths are delivered to you as gifts from your father and mother, the gods. ■

Siddharth Shriram is a concerned businessman from a well regarded business family with roots in supporting education, classical music and dance and national studies. He is on the cusp of retirement from routine commercial activities.

We reproduce below some of the 365 proverbs from *The Bhutanese Book of Happiness*

If you have a calm mind, your body will be tranquil. If your body is calm then it will help to calm your mind.



Life is like footprints in the snow. Every step will show.

Suffering always ends and so does happiness.



If you search for happiness you will not find it. If happiness searches for you, it will always find you.

A white lion can be famous but only a loyal guard dog can protect your house.



A rich heart is better than money in the bank.

Like there is no beam without a supporting pillar, there can be no education without a strong teacher.



The frog in the pond is doomed if he only dreams of swimming in the ocean.



A king can only do so much to protect a lawbreaker, as a Lama can do to protect a sinner.



If you find someone who loves you as much as your parents, you are sure to have a happy family.



Cold weather doesn’t care if your coat is old or new.



A human’s happiness is in its mind, a dog’s happiness is in its tail.



A flea springs up from a cosy blanket, a hero springs up from a rocky ledge.



Anger is a golden opportunity to practise patience.

COVER

If you are happy in your home even when you are away, you will never feel homesick.



Even though an ant appears to be small and weak, it has the strength and determination of a buffalo.



Truth is medicine, lying is poison.



People who are mean with money are usually mean with their love and friendship.

If there is no harmony at home, you will not be successful in the outside world.



Money doesn't make people happy, but neither does poverty.



If you have no debts, you are rich, and if you have no quarrels, you are happier.



What is more beautiful than the sun illuminating a mountain top with a pink and orange glow, or a bird singing happily in a treetop?



One lie will vanquish a hundred truths.



A muddy sty is a palace to a pig.



Too much food can be poisonous to your health and too much anger can poison your friendships.



Be like a tree: sway and bend but never break.

Don't throw mud into someone else's polluted stream.



Sometimes the poorest people are the most generous, and the richest in spirit.



Every man or woman has their own way of thinking, and every village has its own traditions and customs.



If an ordinary man holds his head high, it is hard for an official to put him down.



Explain things to people who ask, and teach to those who yearn to learn.



A man may be buried in the ground, but his words will still be carried by the winds.



A human without faults is a Buddha. A Buddha with faults is a human.



Don't let your disagreements outlive you.

When arguments are settled with money, everyone is impoverished.



Army chiefs almost always live longer than their soldiers.

A single terrible lie may cost you someone's lifelong trust.



Live simply. Leave only footprints and carry only your shadow. This is the way.

BUSINESS

ENTERPRISE | CSR | ICT | GREEN TECH

8 napkins for just ₹20! Aakar's low-cost sanitary solution

Arjun Sen
New Delhi

FOR five days every month Ameena Khatun, 15, wouldn't go to school although she loved to study. She lives in Tuljapur in Maharashtra and belongs to a backward community. Ameena tearfully skipped school even if there was an exam. The reason was her menstrual cycle. Ameena was very uncomfortable. She had never heard of sanitary napkins.

"It's the result of sins I have committed," Ameena believed about the monthly discomfort she suffered due to menstruation.

That was in 2012. Today, Ameena not only goes to school during her periods, she also knows the scientific reason for her menstrual cycle. Delhi-based Aakar Innovations, a social enterprise that uses for-profit and not-for-profit delivery models, conducted a health awareness campaign in Tuljapur. Ameena now uses Aakar's Anandi brand sanitary napkins that cost only ₹20 for a pack of eight.

"Our product is affordable but we have not compromised on quality even a bit. Anandi sanitary napkins is also Bureau of Indian Standards (BIS) compliant," say Jaydeep Mondal and Sombodhi Ghosh, two middle-class social entrepreneurs who are co-founders of Aakar and close friends. While Jaydeep heads technology and operations, Sombodhi is in charge of marketing and sales. Both are in their twenties.

Just 12 per cent of India's 355 million menstruating women use sanitary napkins according to a survey by AC Nielsen and Plan India titled, *Sanitary Protection: Every Woman's Health Right*.

"The problem is extremely acute in India," explains Anshu Gupta of Goonj, a Delhi-based non-profit that has devised hygienic napkins from used cloth to distribute free among the poorest of the poor.

"In both rural and urban India, poorer women use a jumble of unhygienic methods such as soiled rags, ash, mud and tree barks to avoid soiling during menstruation," he says. And this leads to diseases like cervical cancer, urinary tract and reproductive tract infections. It also deprives poor women from earning during menstruation.

The pioneer of inexpensive sanitary napkins in India is Arunachalam Muruganatham who re-engineered a standard sanitary napkin making machine used by multinationals such as Procter & Gamble,

Johnson etc and launched a company in 2006 to sell them. He soon won several awards and became a celebrity. But his machines were hard to use and produced uncomfortable sanitary pads.

"The feedback from users was so bad that most women stopped using them after trying them out a few times," says Sonia Suryavanshi, regional educational consultant of Honeybee Network, who set up one such unit with women.

Aakar has resolved these issues through trial and error.

Jaydeep and Sombodhi first came together in 2007. Before they met, both had dabbled in social work. "After graduating in microbiology from Maulana Azad College in Kolkata, I realised academics was not for me. So I did a diploma in software engineering from CMC and then I was thinking of acquiring a foreign degree. At that time in 2007, on social media site Orkut, I came across an



Sombodhi Ghosh at his office in Delhi

organisation called Association for India's Development. I reckoned that some hardcore social work would help me get a scholarship for my studies abroad. I applied and the very next day I was called for a meeting at Jadavpur University. There I met Jaydeep," says Sombodhi.

"The meeting was a very animated one," he recalls. "Jaydeep talked about grassroots innovations and the National Innovation Foundation (NIF). He was doing an IT engineering course at a technical institute in Kalyani, about 50 km from Kolkata."

Sombodhi says he got hooked to the idea. The two became friends and decided to draw up a business plan to produce and sell aloe vera products. They wanted to commercialise a grassroots innovation by a farmer. It had won several awards including one from the NIF.

Jaydeep and Sombodhi got a chance to meet the then President of India A.P.J. Abdul Kalam and Prof Anil Gupta of the Centre for Innovation, Incubation and Entrepreneurship (CIIE) in IIM-Ahmedabad.

"We decided to start a social enterprise and call it Aakar Innovations that would focus on commercialising grassroots innovations," says Sombodhi. Aakar means 'shape' in Bengali.

Decision made, the two friends parted ways for some time. Brought up by his mother, Sombodhi was living with his maternal uncles. He felt he needed to take

up a job to ease the financial burden on his mother. At an interview on campus at CMC he got recruited by consultancy giant, Accenture, in 2007.

"I rose fast in Accenture and by 2010 I was reporting directly to the Vice-President. Meanwhile, Jaydeep had finished his engineering degree. He took up an MBA programme at a management institute in Greater Noida," Sombodhi says.

While completing his MBA in 2010, Jaydeep joined a project with students of Sheffield University, UK, to help an NGO set up a sanitary napkin production unit using a Muruganatham machine in Khatima block of Uttarakhand.

"We started Aakar in March 2010 just before Jaydeep completed his MBA. Thanks to his Khatima project we were approached by the Uttarakhand government in August 2010 to help revive an NGO unit producing sanitary napkins at Devprayag, using Muruganatham's machine. So, Jaydeep got involved

with both projects while I was still with Accenture in Bangalore,” recalls Sombodhi.

He began visiting the production units being run by Jaydeep in Uttarakhand. By August 2011, the two friends concluded that Muruganatham’s machine needed improvement. In Uttarakhand, Aakar was working with Sonia Suryavanshi who headed the outreach efforts while Jaydeep studied the machine and its operational difficulties.

They found Muruganatham’s machine ergonomically ill-designed. When women worked on it they ended up with backache within a couple of hours. This brought productivity down in a big way and made it unviable. Secondly, the quality of the napkins was not good – they were rectangular shaped with single-line sealing leading to discomfort and leakages.

“Most production units that bought any of the 600 odd machines that Muruganatham has sold so far have shut down,” says Sonia. Her own production unit using a Muruganatham machine downed shutters.

“In August 2011 we went and met Muruganatham to tell him that his machine needed improvements. But by then he was already a celebrity and he dismissed us quite arrogantly saying there was no need for improvements,” said Jaydeep.

“Muruganatham’s biggest problem is that he refuses to improve his product based on customer and user feedback,” complains Sonia. Jaydeep then decided to develop an improved machine.

Meanwhile, during his many trips to Uttarakhand in 2011, Sombodhi realised he had no understanding of the perspective of people in villages. He decided to take up an ICICI Foundation Fellowship for 18 months on rural projects. He began with a project to find alternative livelihoods in Sangamner, a remote village in Ahmednagar district of Maharashtra in August 2011.

“I was heady with my success at Accenture. I had begun to think that I was Superman. I will go to villages and change everything in six months, I thought. That was my attitude.” But his livelihood project didn’t go as he thought it would.

“Very soon I realised that nobody in the village listened to me. They had their own lifestyle and they didn’t care for all my big shot ideas. Life was tough in the village with no lights or water. But it was during that time I realised the big problem of menstruation. I used to get food from a lady next door. Suddenly, I found no food was coming. When I asked the men of the house whether the lady was ill, I just got a silly grin. Then I realised that during menstruation women were confined to their rooms, they could not cook, could not go out, and so on,” says Sombodhi.

Earlier Aakar had planned to commercialise 17 grassroots innovations. That was shortlisted to three: food processing, energy and sanitary napkins. But by August 2011, Sombodhi and Jaydeep decided to concentrate on improving Muruganatham’s machine and producing sanitary napkins.

While Jaydeep tinkered with the machine, Sombodhi spent time honing his understanding of rural markets through the ICICI Foundation Fellowship’s two livelihood projects in Maharashtra and Odisha. It was in October 2012 that he joined Jaydeep in Delhi.



‘The sealing, the shape and the pattern makes our product equivalent to any commercial brand in the market.’

By March 2013 the first prototype of the improved machine was ready. Aakar’s sanitary napkins are now produced in six stages. First, pinewood pulp or locally available agricultural and pulp waste is crushed in a crusher to make the filling of the napkin. There was no change here from the process used by Muruganatham’s machine or from well-known brands – the basic process and ingredients are the same.

In the second stage, the crushed pulp is pressed in a pressing machine before filling it in the napkin. Aakar introduced key improvements here. First, Muruganatham’s machine required pressing with a foot pedal. This led to backache, tiredness and variations in the thickness of the pad. The foot pedal was replaced with a hand-held rotating press that is easier to use. Secondly, the rectangular moulds in the pressing machine were replaced by S-shaped moulds so that Aakar’s napkins look exactly like those of the well-known brand, Whisper.

“Consumers don’t even think that the rectangular pads are actually sanitary napkins,” says Dr Meera Singh, Executive Director of Aakar’s non-profit, Aakar Social Ventures. She retired from the Indian Council of Medical Research and got involved with Aakar in April 2012.

The third stage of napkin production involves filling up and creating the pad. Muruganatham’s machine used single line sealing for three sides of a rectangular pouch made from thin paper-like fabric. The pulp was pumped into the pouch through the fourth side and then sealed using an ordinary single line sealing machine that is used for closing plastic packets for potato chips or salted peanuts and so on.

Jaydeep, with the help of Dr Singh, developed a new sealing machine that ensured an eight to 10 mm sealing on all four sides of the napkin simultaneously – again through a pressing mechanism that also adds a pattern to the absorbent side. This pattern increases diffusion throughout the pad and makes it leak-proof.

“This is our key innovation,” Jaydeep explains proudly. “The sealing, the shape and the pattern on the absorbent side makes our product equivalent in quality, looks and efficiency to any commercial brand in the market.”



Jaydeep Mondal



Dr Meera Singh with the rotating press

The most important innovation from the health point of view is the way the product is sterilised before being packed. “Muruganatham’s machine stacks the napkins and puts them in an UV chamber for sterilisation. As a result only the top layer of napkins in any stack gets really sterilised. The lower levels don’t as the UV rays don’t penetrate,” says Jaydeep. Aakar has developed a sterilisation chamber that solves this problem even while handling a larger number of pads at one go.

By August 2013, Aakar’s Anandi brand sanitary napkins “were good to go to market,” says Sombodhi. The first commercial order came from a Netherlands-based NGO called Woman on Wings which found the product as good as any commercial brand available in Western markets. More orders have followed and now Aakar has signed a contract with the Gujarat Livelihood Promotion Company (GLPC) to set up 600 production centres in the next five years that will reach out to 50 lakh women, create 11,000 direct jobs and 9,000 indirect commission agent jobs.

“Orders and enquiries are coming in from Kenya, South Sudan and, in India, from Bihar, Jharkhand as well as many others,” says Sombodhi.

Anil K. Singh, a former IAS officer and now chief executive of Network of Entrepreneurship & Economic Development (NEED), based in Lucknow, was at Aakar’s office in the Dwarka area of Delhi, watching carefully how sanitary napkins were being made. “We are looking at buying these machines to help women Self-Help Groups (SHGs) produce and market sanitary napkins,” he says.

One production centre can provide employment to at least 10-11 women and serve 10-15 villages. “We are developing a hub and spoke model. For every five units we will have one salesperson to coordinate raw material and final output logistics. We will identify one woman from each village to stock and sell the napkins in that village on a commission basis,” says Sombodhi. Aakar’s machine not only provides a healthy and comfortable product to poorer women, it also empowers them by providing a livelihood.

But innovations don’t stop in Aakar. “Recently, we tied up in principle with IIT Kharagpur to develop fillings from agricultural and pulp waste – for example, banana skins, water hyacinth plants, bamboo etc. We have already checked out prototypes. But further research is needed to make such pads ready for the market and that requires funds,” says Jaydeep. ■

GudNeSs is full of iron

Arjun Sen
New Delhi

A bar made from jaggery, nuts, seeds and multiple grains and available for just ₹10 could be the low-cost solution to the problem of anaemia among Indian women.

Produced by Rajvi Mehta, 20, the bar is inspired by the *chikki*, a tasty and popular confectionery. Just five bars a week can provide anaemic women with all the iron they need in their diets.

In 2010, Mehta, a Mumbai girl studying biochemistry at Brown University in the United States, found that she couldn't walk up a flight of stairs without feeling exhausted. She began to experience multiple episodes of fainting and chest pain. Back in India during her long winter vacation in December of that year, she discovered that she was suffering from *Thalassemia Minor*, a genetic disposition to anaemia.

"When I discussed my blood test results with physicians, I realised that I was one in over 900,000 million people in India who experience these consequences of anaemia on a daily basis and are unaware of their condition," Mehta told *Civil Society*. That was when she decided to do something about it.

"I wanted to do something to help the situation and so I thought of Let's Be Well Red (LBWR), initially as a project that filled gaps in previously failed government programmes. A market scan of government health programmes found that some had neglected nutrition completely in their treatment regime. Others distributed iron-fortified flour and rice, but these programmes were unsuccessful due to the lack of awareness about the optimal dosage needed to satisfy the daily iron requirements," Mehta said.

In fact after spending thousands of crores of taxpayers' money, the actual incidence of Indians suffering from the debilitating effects of anaemia has gone up. According to the National Family Health Survey-3 (NFHS-3), the percentage of children aged 6-35 months suffering from any degree of anaemia (low, moderate or severe) has gone up from 74.2 per cent recorded by NFHS-2 in 1998-99 to 79.2 per cent in 2005-06.

Among ever-married women in the age group of 15-49 years, the rise is from 51.8 per cent to 56.2 per cent in the same period. And in the case of pregnant women aged 15-49 years, it is from 49.7 per cent to a whopping 57.9 per cent. In absolute numbers, the number of anaemic Indians varies between 600 and 900 million, depending on how you define such people.

Back at Brown post vacation, Mehta launched LBWR. "LBWR is a non-profit social venture that aims to combat the widespread prevalence of iron deficiency anaemia in India through the manufacture of iron-rich nutritional bars. It's a pun on the word well-read emphasising the role of creating awareness about anaemia, while the phrase "well red" focuses on the need to raise the red blood cell count," Mehta explained.

She put up her project to the Swearer Centre at



Rajvi Mehta with GudNeSs

Brown University which supports promising student initiatives that aim to bring about social change. She received initial funding of \$3,000.

Armed with her funding, Mehta was back to Mumbai in May 2011 during her summer vacation. "I designed and conducted anaemia testing and treating camps in the urban slums of Mumbai wherein I partnered with different NGOs (Family Planning Association of India, Kotak Mahindra and Nargis Dutt Charitable Trust) to spread awareness, conduct blood tests, explain patient reports and provide nutritional guidance. Through these camps we tested and treated over 5,000 anaemic women.

"During these interactions I found that while most women were enthusiastic about adding iron to their diet after understanding the consequences of anaemia, they were looking for a simple solution to their problem – they were looking for one iron-rich food supplement that contained the required daily dosage of iron. When I surveyed the Indian market, I found no such product," Mehta said.

Now her focus shifted to creating this product. "From September, 2011, we began experimenting to develop a product that would not only be able to provide the daily dosage of iron and folic acid needed to counter anaemia but would also be tasty to ensure compliance," Mehta said.

"I got the basic idea from *chikkis* – a confectionery made out of nuts and jaggery – and based on discussions with nutritionists at Brown University and Mumbai-based Dr Sejal Doshi, now our head nutritionist, we developed a recipe for producing a *chikki*-like product called the GudNeSs bar. Each capital letter in the name stands for a separate ingredient in the bar. 'Gud' stands for the Hindi word for jaggery, or sugarcane extract. The 'N' stands for nuts and *nachni*, an Indian grain, and the 'S' stands for the seeds in the bar, including sesame seeds and flax seeds," Mehta explained.

In the meantime, Mehta had roped in a few volunteers. One of her early articles on her project

published in a Brown University publication in 2011 inspired another graduate student Carlota Pereda Serras to join her. In India, Mona Shah came on board for product development and is now head of Customer Relations and Director of Operations, while her parents – father Dr Hemant Shah, a practicing physician in Mumbai, oversees the medical claims and reach of LBWR, and her mother, an educationist, helps out with devising educational and awareness programmes.

While Mehta provided the basic recipe, it was Mona Shah in India who actually and literally cooked up the GudNeSs bars. "After nearly a year's experimentation, in August, 2012, we managed to develop a marketable product," Mehta said. To help start production, she received another round of funding of \$3,500 from Swearer in 2012.

One GudNeSs bar contains 14 mg of iron – an amount that exceeds the daily requirement set by the WHO for both adult males and menstruating females. The WHO recommends 60 mg of iron per week to treat anaemia, and eating five GudNeSs bars weekly fulfills this

requirement with the potential to make a drastic difference in an individual's outcomes.

Since September 2012, LBWR has adopted a two-pronged approach to combat anaemia in India.

- Under its Health Scouts Programme, high school students in India are trained to spread awareness about anaemia in their neighbourhoods. This programme currently runs in three different states in India. There are 200 Health Scouts in Mumbai, 50 in Surat and the programme has also recently been launched in Chennai. Additionally, it conducts anaemia testing and treating camps in the slums and rural areas by collaborating with different NGOs.

- It provides an easy nutritional solution to anaemic individuals by making its iron-rich GudNeSs bars available to them. LBWR has sold over 90,000 GudNeSs bars through schools, NGOs, retail and individual orders. LBWR is a non-profit organisation and GudNeSs bars are sold at the cost of manufacture (₹10) and are further subsidised in rural areas and slums as needed.

"We have student teams in India and in the US (Brown University and Duke University) where dedicated and enthusiastic volunteers help expand LBWR's impact on field and organise our fundraising efforts. We are also working on expanding our product line (introducing more flavours of GudNeSs bars), improving supply and distribution, and are in the process of recruiting more volunteers and staff in India to aid LBWR's rapid and accelerated growth," Mehta said.

"Recently we have raised \$11,000 through crowd sourcing so as to expand our operations. Our goal is to make our simple solution (GudNeSs bars) available to every single anaemic Indian. We are currently working to make our services more accessible, our efforts sustainable and impactful. Our goal for 2014 is to spread our movement to three additional states (Karnataka, Uttar Pradesh and Rajasthan)," Mehta said by way of signing off. ■

Email: letsbewellred@gmail.com

INSIGHTS

OPINION | ANALYSIS | RESEARCH | IDEAS

A day with dead poets

NIGHAT GANDHI

THERE are three must-do things for a visitor to Lucknow, said the cab driver: ‘*Tunday kabab khaen, Imambara dekhien aur chikan khareeden.*’ (Eat *tunday kabab*, visit the Imambara and buy *chikan*.) Not heeding his sound advice, a group of four writers at the Lucknow litfest decided to spend a day with Lucknow’s dead poets.

I was in Lucknow to attend the literary festival. Apparently I was. The not-so-apparent purpose of my visit unveiled later. I had emailed the organisers asking about Mir Taqi Mir’s mazar. The search for Mir Taqi Mir’s grave, perhaps the greatest Urdu poet of 18th century Mughal India, manifested only at the very end of my visit. The day after the litfest ended, Atif Hanif, the marketing director of the lit fest, took us out on a heritage walk. An expert who knows his city like the back of his hand, Atif guided us through the morass of traffic-choked lanes of old Lucknow. A quest for mysticism in Urdu poetry and mystical love that makes no distinction between love of God and love of humanity had led me to explore Mir Taqi Mir’s poetry last summer.

And here I was, searching for signs of Mir in the city where he breathed his last. However, we were told that Mir’s grave no longer exists. He was buried 200 years ago near Lucknow’s railway station, in a locality called *Bhim ka Akhara*. But his grave has been built over because land-grabbers acquired the cemetery some decades back. A mosque, flats, a railway platform, who knows where lies Mir beneath these? Who dare demolish a masjid or mandir? The poet Bulleh Shah wrote that if forced to choose between places of worship and the human heart, it was preferable to destroy places of worship, but never the heart. God, in Bulleh’s opinion, lives in the heart, making the heart the ultimate site of worship. The loss of a grave is not such a loss because Mir continues to live in the ghazal-lovers hearts. Mir’s legacy is infinitely larger than his grave. Many have well-marked graves, but how many leave behind six diwans filled with 13,000 couplets?

We walked around *Bhim ka Akhara*. The peanut sellers in the market eyed us with bemused curiosity. A man leaned out over his balcony in the waning winter morning to look us over as we photographed the street named after Mir. We searched for signs of Mir like pilgrims excavating a vanished kaa’ba. My heart filled with a sense of gloom, grief, disappointment and something bordering on fear. What becomes of a people who don’t revere their poets?

Close to Mir Taqi Mir Marg is a plaque in honour of Mir. It’s the Nishan-e-Mir. On its railings the locals had hung their washing to dry. On the marble plaque, in elegant, elegiac verse are inscribed

Mir’s words, a poet’s prescient epitaph about uncarving, irreverent future generations:

*mat sahal jano hamen, phirta hai falak barson
tab khaak ke parde se insaan nikalte hain
Do you think it effortless, the fashioning of humanity from clods of clay?*

The cosmos wanders restlessly for eons before poets/humans are born.

*Dilli jo ek shahar tha aalam mein intikhab
rehte they muntakhib hi jahan rozgaar ke
jis ko falak ne loot ke veeran kar diya
ham rehne waley hain usi ujre dayar ke
Dilli the best city in the universe
Where once dwelt the most distinguished
I am a denizen of that ravaged realm
Devastated by Fate’s excesses*

NIGHAT GANDHI



Nishan-e-Mir in Lucknow

Mir’s legacy is infinitely larger than his grave. Many have well-marked graves, but how many leave behind six diwans with 13,000 couplets?

Mir’s heart-weariness as a luckless poet is poignant. In his last days he lost favour with the Nawab and also the elite of Lucknow. He was too gifted, too dignified, and somewhat temperamental, unable to bow to more pedestrian tastes. Had he been more of a people-pleaser, he would’ve won himself royal patronage and an impressive tomb. Even though he spent three decades in Lucknow until his death in 1810, he remained an unsettled immigrant in the state of Awadh. He moved there in 1782 from invasion-ravaged Delhi on the invitation of Nawab Asif-ud-Daula, but he never stopped yearning for his beloved Delhi:

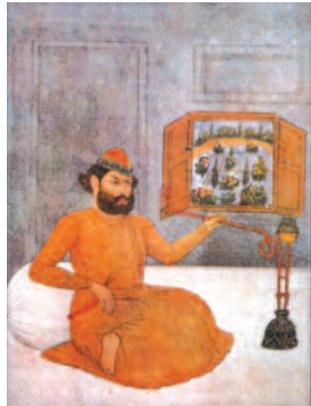
Across the street from Nishan-e-Mir is the run-down edifice of the Rafa-e-aam Club, the *aam aadmi’s* club – the Hindustani rebuttal to the exclusive, No-Indians-Permitted clubs of the *angrez*. Yet another reminder of the ravages of time and neglect. In this ramshackle building’s spacious grounds now thrive despondency, stray goats and a second-hand doors business. The first session of the Progressive Writer’s Association was held here in 1936. What’s undeniably progressive about it is its seemingly unstoppable dilapidation. We clicked pictures, mouthed a few platitudes about blithe disregard for priceless cultural heritage, and moved on to Majaz, the next dead poet on the day’s agenda. We were unwilling to linger too long at any one place lest some inconsolable sadness pervaded the heart.

The rest of the day was spent in visiting Majaz, Mir Anees, Sauda, Yagana and Hasrat Mohani. Some have well-preserved graves in comparison to Mir’s but nowhere is neglect absent. As if to recover from an unnamable grief, I sat and stared at passers-by when others went in to visit Yagana. A group of

Continued on page 26

Continued from page 25

aimless young men loitered near a street vendor. They stared at three burqa-clad women as they alighted from a crowded tempo, holding fast a child's hand. A woman in a headscarf was trying out trinkets from a cart full of glittering stuff. Which of them grieved for Mir? The sky was clear. The late afternoon sun was beaming down benevolently.



Miniature of Mir Taqi Mir

Winter seemed almost over. Life in Lucknow, as elsewhere on the planet, was doing what life does: hurtling on.

Dusk was falling as we approached our last stop. Along the labyrinthine narrow *galis* off Hardoi Road, we had to ask several shopkeepers the way to Begum Akhtar's mazar. A shy moon was now peeping out from above the brown, winter-stiff foliage of trees stuck between narrow houses. Traffic and rain-filled puddles slowed us down. We skirted past them. Finally one man gave us precise directions: when you reach the big transformer at the fork in the road, take the left fork, and follow it to the mazar.

AT Begum Akhtar's mazar, Suraya Bano and Achanda greet us cheerfully. They are the caretakers and keep the place clean and cared for. Understated elegance in marble inlay work adorns the graves of Begum Akhtar and Mushtari Sahiba, mother and daughter, lying side by side. The lighting is subdued, the surroundings clean, and the ethos undeniably reassuring, thanks to the devoted efforts of the Sadbhavana Trust and Sanatkada. So grateful am I that I ask for the visitor's book to record my gratitude.

The day spent with dead poets ends on an unanticipated, positive note. It started with misgivings for the missing grave of an 18th century poet, but ends at a well-tended, legendary ghazal singer's resting place. I muse over my mental notes and the possibility of Mir's remains under a mosque seems ludicrous – Mir who mocked ritualistic religion and the literal-minded ulema in his sardonic, yet delicate couplets. The heart feels uplifted. I've been saved by a song. I hum Begum Akhtar's rendition of this well-loved Mir ghazal under my breath:

*ulti ho gayeen sab tadbeeren, kuch na dawa ne kaam kiya
dekha is beemari-e-dil ne, aakhir kaam tamaam kiya
Mir ke deen-o-mazhab ko ab puchte kya ho, un ne to
Qashqa khencha, dair main betha, kabka tark Islam kiya
All remedies failed, none succeeded
The ailing heart ended Mir's existence.
Why speak of Mir's creed?
He abandoned Islam long ago,
Resides in a temple, a tilak on his forehead.*

May Mir forgive me for trying to translate his exquisitely crafted couplets. ■

Villages that bond

Dr SANDEEP SINGH

GOD has no religion," believed Mahatma Gandhi who lived in a country that has been the nurturing ground for several religions since time immemorial. This unique feature of our country – of different religions co-existing – is our strength and our weakness, a paradox that has been proven time and again on various occasions. However, while an attack from a foreign country brings us together, a domestic conflict wipes out decades of community relationships within seconds – a reflection of our complex social fabric.

In August last year, the entire nation witnessed two such incidences of communal clashes, one in the district of Kishtwar in Jammu and Kashmir (J&K) and the other in Muzafarnagar in Uttar Pradesh. Both caused bloodshed and left behind scars.

Yet, even in these tough times, there are people from both Hindu and Muslim communities who continue to invest their efforts in sustaining communal harmony and discarding the concept of polarisation after such riots. Such examples become even more inspirational when they come from the remote hamlets of J&K, a land burdened with tragic memories and simmering anguish.

In 2011, the people of J&K voted in the panchayat elections with enthusiasm, expecting change through devolution of panchayati powers and functions. But it was not to be. Their hopes have been dashed by the state government's incremental devolution policy. Despite these shortcomings, in many panchayats, there are lessons to be learnt.

"Our families (both Hindu and Muslim) have always shared a cordial bond. In the melee of 1947, my grandparents saved the lives of our Muslim brethren and our entire family retains similar respect for them till date," says a humble Naranjan Singh Katoch, sarpanch of Panchal-B Panchayat, Block Ramsoo in Tehsil Banihal.

In these villages, life has stayed above the politics of elections as the magnitude of mutual respect is immense. This makes it difficult for vested interests to take root or for miscreants to divide and polarise village life. In fact, the harmonious relationship being shared by these two communities becomes even more evident during the sensitive election periods.

Arshad Hussain, elected second time as the sarpanch of Danesar village, Tehsil Nowshera in Rajouri District, explains how they share an age-old relationship. "I take care of them like my family – irrespective of the religion they follow and, in return, they treat me with the same love and care. In 2008, during the land agitation, recognising that it involved the sentiments of my Hindu brothers, I

took the onus of leading the protest in my village. And, a year ago, when my shop was burnt down due to a short circuit, I was glad to see each one of them standing by my side collecting ₹100,000 to rebuild my shop. This is our strength," says Arshad with great pride.

What brings these villagers together is that the socio-economic landscape of rural Jammu is different from rural areas in the rest of the country. This is primarily because of land reforms that took place particularly in the 1950s, pruning economic extremes and changing the situation in rural J&K from "land ownership of a few and agricultural engagement of others," to one of "land ownership to all and engagement of all." It also redefined agrarian life and the texture of inter-community relations.

As Nazir Hussain of Bhattan village in Ramban



District put it, "In the village everyone requires each other's help and assistance. This evokes love and harmony amongst us."

Working together bonds the community. Abdul Rahim Sohail of Bhattan panchayat explains the tradition of *kumer*. "This is a community act of working together mostly during the time of sowing, harvesting and where group work is required." He cites more such institutions of agrarian society which create and shape inter-community relations in rural areas.

Often tagged as traditional and backward, such villages have manifested the true sense of democracy. These elected sarpanchs, sometimes from the minority community, have won the elections with a sweeping majority, clearly receiving the whole-hearted approval of the majority community.

Sohail, Naranjan and Arshad are not the only examples. There are many villages tucked away in remote locations nurturing communal harmony, upsetting the commonly talked of and acknowledged phenomenon of polarisation. These villages of Jammu are the visible icons of secular polity who respect the opinion of the voters. Should others continue to hold on to their ego instead of learning from them? ■

Charkha Features
(This article has been generated under the Sanjoy Ghose Media Fellowship)

Kandla's lost beauty

KANCHI KOHLI

THE scene was surreal. I thought it was because it was that time of the evening and long travel hours were telling on all of us. The sun was setting and the light was dim. Exhausted after the entire day, all I could think was of spending some quiet time at the fishing harbour in the company of artisanal fishing, a conversation over the day's fish catch and flamingoes for company. But the road took a different turn.

We decided to drive around Kandla port near Gandhidham in the Kutch district of Gujarat. Kandla, located in the Gulf of Kutch, was constructed in the 1950s as a public sector port. My colleagues insisted that we get a first hand account of what the last six decades had meant for the area. Fishing communities have been living around the cargo handling terminals, oil and petroleum facilities as well as hazardous chemical industries for generations. With pipelines running alongside these coastal villages, flooding was a consistent nuisance. Life around Kandla was not happy, they said.

Kandla is considered one of India's largest ports. The website of the Port and Special Economic Zone proudly announces it as Asia's first Export Processing Zone (EPZ). It is also deemed India's largest multi-product functional SEZ encompassing 1,000 acres with 142 performing units.

For a while now the Kandla Port Trust (KPT) has been inviting bids for expanding the port's liquid and dry cargo handling facilities, construction of new jetties and a railway line. Leading this bid is the Adani group located formidably in the adjoining Mundra block. KPT is already in an agreement with the Adani Port & Special Economic Zone Ltd to Built, Operate and Transfer (BOT) the proposed dry bulk cargo-handling terminal at Tuna, off Tekra near Kandla port. Ironically, Adani Port and SEZ Ltd is the leading private sector competitor for Kandla.

Understanding the history of issues related to displacement, legal violations, ecological destruction and livelihood loss in the area was more critical than ever before. On 18 December 2013, the district administration and the Gujarat Pollution Control Board (GPCB) organised a public hearing for the construction and expansion of integrated facilities within the existing Kandla port at Tuna. With this approval, the KPT under the Adani group's leadership will expand into the coastal ecosystem of Kutch where land use is yet to be transformed for industrial use.

Many representations were made and objections raised at the public hearing held near Nakti Bridge on the Tuna-Kandla Road. They ranged from concerns about the timing of the public hearing, which was bang in the middle of the fishing season, to the location not being conducive to ensure participation. It was highlighted that the Environment Impact Assessment (EIA) report had severely underplayed the fishing, pastoral and other artisanal livelihoods in the region. The existence of over 37 functional saltpans in the area did not find a mention in the EIA report.

There was a call to cancel this public hearing on all these related grounds, as it did not meet the



The fisherman's lifestyle and livelihood is vanishing



Flamingoes will be displaced from Tuna

requirements of the EIA notification, 2006. Neither the district administration nor the GPCB obliged. The 371 page document now uploaded on the GPCB's website lists them all.

These regulatory formalities seem a sham especially when one gets a brief first hand experience of the unresolved issues that continue to face fishing villages around Kandla since decades. People have been displaced three times. The fish catch has drastically reduced. And living next to hazardous chemical facilities has become an everyday reality.

Reading the Coastal Regulation Zone Notification (CRZ) 2011, makes the contradictions appear even more evident. The notification has declared the entire Gulf of Kutch as a 'Critical Vulnerable Coastal Area' due to its ecologically sensitive nature. Kandla's expansion plans are awaiting the opinion of the Gujarat Coastal Zone Management Authority, which is also entrusted

with the task of implementing the provisions of the CRZ notification in the state.

The sun was setting and the lights came on. Ships were docked not far away and the main gate of KPT was standing tall. Was I really witnessing what I was, I asked myself? Was this what will become of Tuna village where I had hopped on to a fishing boat just a year ago? Where would the mud flats where the flamingoes tapped go? How will the day's catch of Bombay duck fish be dried and packed for export?

I felt a tap on my shoulder even as I was lost in thought. It was time to return. With Kandla's past behind us, the present was reaching out for urgent attention. I wished that the next wave would bring in a turbulent tide and turn back the clock. Maybe we could have set things right along the way, as the past cannot be undone. The sun had set, but hopefully Kandla's future has not. ■

Kanchi Kohli is an independent researcher and writer based in Delhi

Parliament isn't green

HIMANSHU THAKKAR

IN the run-up to the next general elections, political parties are under scrutiny. What matters more than their words are their deeds. On the most crucial issue of the environment, which necessarily includes governance of natural resources, rivers and other water resources, forests, mountains, biodiversity and climate, all the political parties represented in our current Parliament have performed abysmally. Let us take the example of the main political parties and their recent deeds.

The appointment of Union Petroleum Minister Veerappa Moily as Union Environment Minister (additional charge) by the Prime Minister Dr Manmohan Singh on 21 December 2013 shows how poor is the understanding of the UPA government on environmental issues and governance of natural resources. The fact that this happened after Rahul Gandhi spoke at a FICCI meeting on that day shows that this was done to cater to the lobby that had no interest in environmental protection. Moreover, the UPA leadership has clearly failed to understand that there is a conflict of interest with Moily holding both the Petroleum and Environment portfolios. Moily is also known for his bias towards specific industrial houses, which is coming to light now.

Congress Vice-President Rahul Gandhi said at the FICCI meeting: "Many of you expressed your frustrations with environmental clearances, that they are delaying projects unduly. There is excessive administrative and judicial discretion. The loopholes are so big that you can drive a truck through some of them. Environmental and social damage must be avoided, but decisions must also be transparent, timely and fair." Rahul Gandhi, you are right! The loopholes in our environmental regulations are in fact so huge that entire dams, mines, mountains, valleys, the Western Ghats, the Ganga and other rivers can be driven through them.

Rahul Gandhi's statement that environmental regulation in India has huge loopholes is true. This requires tightening environment governance, not making it further lax as is being done by Veerappa Moily now. What Moily is doing in the MoEF is neither transparent nor fair. From day one in his office at Paryavaran Bhawan, he has earnestly started to dismantle whatever little and poor environmental regulation exists in this country.

This is disastrous for the people, for the future of India and for the future of the UPA. Veerappa Moily has given clearances to over 70 projects in a short span of three weeks in most cases bypassing the due process. The foundation stone for the Yettinahole Nethravathi diversion project that he announced in his own constituency on 31 January without any social or environmental assessments and without any of the statutory clearances further substantiates

this. Moily's decisions also undermine the very pieces of legislation that his party routinely showcases as their big achievements, for example, the Forest Conservation Act and the Forest Rights Act. Such violation of environmental norms and legal stipulations shows the worst kind of corruption.

The BJP is no different with its flippant statement on a 'Jayanti Tax.' While the UPA has shown its mindlessness on this score, the BJP's prime ministerial candidate, Narendra Modi has done no better. While his own track record on environment governance in Gujarat is nothing to crow about, his loose statement at a public rally in Goa about a 'Jayanti Tax' show how non-serious the BJP is about environment issues. Narendra Modi had alleged that former Union Environment Minister Jayanti Natarajan was taking bribes to clear the



The flippant and frivolous behaviour of the BJP and the UPA shows how little they have understood how agitated people are about corruption and that it affects the poor the most.

projects. This is a very serious charge. Instead of making only political statements, he should have given evidence to support his claim, gone to court with it, and demanded an investigation into the functioning of the MoEF under Jayanti Natarajan. That he has not done anything of the sort shows how non-serious and flippant he and his party are about such crucial issues.

At the same time, the Congress Party's response to these serious charges by Mr Modi borders on frivolousness. If the charges were untrue, then the Congress leadership and Jayanti Natarajan should

have taken Narendra Modi to court. By not doing so, the Congress has indirectly accepted the charge. It is clear from this whole episode that both parties use environment only as a political football. They have no clue as to what is at stake for the common people of this country.

Narendra Modi was accusing the UPA of the worst kind of corruption. However, the flippant and frivolous behaviour of the BJP and the UPA only goes to show how little they have understood how agitated the people of this country are about corruption and that it affects the poorest people most directly.

Prime Minister Dr Manmohan Singh said at his press conference on 3 January: "There were bottlenecks in terms of timely clearances of the projects from the point of view of environmental-forests clearances." But the Expert Appraisal Committee appointed by the UPA on River Valley and Hydropower projects has not rejected environment clearances to a single project in the last seven years.

Even when all the members of the Standing Committee of the National Board for Wildlife unanimously rejected the wildlife clearance for the Lower Demwe Dam in Arunachal Pradesh for its disastrous impacts on communities and ecosystems in downstream Assam, Jayanti Natarajan, as the chairperson of the Committee, sanctioned it. On forest clearances, the story is almost the same.

When the statutory Forest Advisory Committee (FAC) rejected the forest clearance for the 300 MW Alaknanda Badrinath Hydropower project twice, Jayanti Natarajan overturned the FAC decision and gave the clearance. In another instance, when the FAC said no to the Kalu Dam near Mumbai in April 2012, a more pliable FAC was put in place. When the Congress' Chief Minister from Maharashtra wrote to the FAC to clear it, lo and behold, in April 2013 it was cleared!

The Prime Minister has laid the foundation stone for the 3000 MW Dibang Hydropower Project in Arunachal Pradesh on 31 January 2008, when the project did not have statutory environment and forest clearances. It still doesn't have these clearances, since basic studies haven't been done.

If the UPA has the slightest concern for the common people and environmental governance of this country, it must immediately remove Veerappa Moily from Paryavaran Bhawan and replace him with a more credible person, without bias or conflict of interest with respect to the environment.

All this highlights the poor understanding of the BJP, the Congress and other political parties about the signals that the *aam* people of this country have been sending. This was apparent in what happened in the Assembly elections in Delhi late last year. These parties are ignoring these signals at their own peril. While both the UPA and the NDA have shown their lack of concern and understanding of such an important issue, we hope voters in the coming elections will have a better, third option. ■

The middle path

3 activist films that entertain

Saibal Chatterjee

New Delhi

THE Mumbai movie industry works with safe narrative templates. It rarely, if ever, tells real stories that are crying out to be told. As a norm, it opts instead for saleable feel-good yarns or crowd-pleasing thrillers aimed at maximizing box office returns.

It is therefore never easy for a Hindi film director working within the mainstream parameters of the industry to take up uncomfortable themes.

The challenge is two-fold. One, producers do not see 'activist' films as commercially viable. And two, the multiplex audience usually views with suspicion any film that contains a 'message'.

It is this undeniable reality of Indian cinema that makes it imperative for non-conforming filmmakers to look for ingenious ways of employing familiar storytelling devices to articulate contemporary social concerns.

Nila Madhab Panda's just released *Babloo Happy Hai*, Soumik Sen's upcoming *Gulaab Gang* and Nagesh Kukunoor's *Lakshmi* are three current Hindi films that are seeking to bridge the gap.

Each of these films deals with an urgent social issue of the kind that star-driven Bollywood productions usually turn a blind eye to.

New Delhi-based Panda is an old hand at this game. He made his directorial debut in 2010 with *I Am Kalam*, a National Award-winning and commercially successful children's film that went well beyond the genre.

It tells the story of a village boy who works in an eatery off a north Indian highway and dreams of going to school one day.

Panda followed it up with the critically acclaimed *Jalpari – The Desert Mermaid* (2012), a children's adventure tale that critiqued the skewed gender ratio in parts of India.



Juhi Chawla and Madhuri Dixit in *Gulaab Gang*

Babloo Happy Hai, his third film, is a breezy comedy targeted at the youth. At first blush, it seems far removed from the spirit of social activism that underlined his first two ventures.

Yet, this film about barely-out-of-their-teens city slickers on a life-altering voyage isn't all that different from Panda's past work.

Babloo Happy Hai is the tale of three affluent Delhi boys who go on a road trip to a snow-wrapped Manali ahead of the impending wedding of one of the friends.

The coming-of-age story contains an AIDS awareness message, but the film conveys it without making heavy weather of the exercise. Says Panda: "I wanted to tackle a serious issue but in a lighter vein."

In fact, the Odisha-born filmmaker asserts that he could not have made the statements that he does in *Babloo Happy Hai* had he adopted a straightforward and sombre documentary approach to the theme of young people confronting a harsh fact of life.



Soumik Sen

"When I first came to Delhi, I found it very tough to blend in, so I tried to enter this world of the young and restless and see it from close quarters," says Panda. "I realised how awfully hollow it was."

Babloo Happy Hai, which provides a refreshingly non-judgmental portrait of the bubble that a certain segment of the urban

young exists in, was released across the country on 7 February to largely positive reviews.

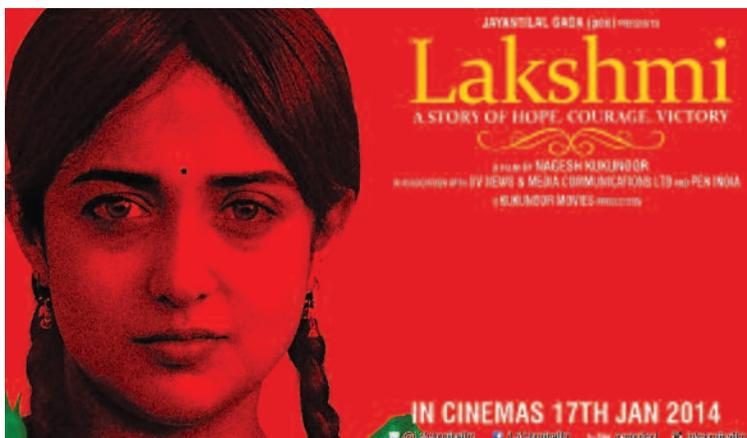
Babloo Happy Hai has all the trappings of a mass entertainer. However, given Panda's filmmaking moorings, it inevitably veers into dark narrative terrain in the second half.

No matter how laboured the conscious effort to strike a balance between frothy romance and social relevance might seem, the film does succeed in getting its point across.

Critical judgment on *Gulaab Gang* will have to wait. The film is due for release on 7 March, a day before International Women's Day.

Gulaab Gang, produced by Anubhav Sinha (whose directorial credits include the Shahrukh Khan starrer, *Ra.One*), is a commercially-oriented film that deals with the theme of women's empowerment.

Continued on page 30



Continued from page 29

The makers of *Gulaab Gang* are alleged to have drawn inspiration from the real-life story of Bundelkhand vigilante Sampat Pal Devi, who leads a band of pink sari-clad women in a crusade against domestic violence in a male-dominated rural community.

In fact, a documentary film titled *Gulabi Gang* and made by Nishtha Jain, is being released two weeks ahead of *Gulaab Gang*. But first-time director Sen denies that his film is a fictionalised account of Sampat Pal Devi's campaign.

"I am aware of the Sampat Pal story, but *Gulaab Gang* is not at all about domestic violence," he asserts.



Still from *Babloo Happy Hai*

"It is about women's education and empowerment and is located in a larger socio-political context."

"My film tells a story of confrontation between good and evil set in a vast, wide, beautiful landscape," says Sen, a screenwriter who is an alumnus of St Xavier's College, Kolkata and the Delhi School of Economics.

"*Gulaab Gang*," he adds, "is the closest Indian contextualization of the Hollywood western. It is just that both the protagonist and the antagonist in the film are women."

In fact, *Gulaab Gang* has no major male character. The cast is led by Madhuri Dixit, while the role of the 'villain' is played by Juhi Chawla. The film also features Tannishtha Chatterjee, Priyanka Bose and Shilpa Shukla.

Gulaab Gang revolves around an activist who runs an ashram where she trains a group of rural women not only to weave their own cloth but also wage a battle against the scourge of gender oppression.

"Although I do say things that I want to through the film, the primary aim of *Gulaab Gang* is to entertain the audience," says Sen, who made his screenwriting debut in 2006 with *Anthony Kaun Hai*.

He then penned several more scripts (*Rubaru*, *Meerabai Not Out* and *Hum Tum Aur Ghost*). But none of the films made a mark. "When you start out

in the industry, you have to write what the market wants. But once you establish yourself, you begin doing the kind of work that interests you," he says.

In *Gulaab Gang*, both Madhuri and Juhi have been cast against type. "Juhi is pure evil in the film," he says. "Madhuri, too, projects a new screen persona. But while she does her own stunts, she also sings and dances."

The appeal of veteran filmmaker Nagesh Kukunoor's next release, *Lakshmi*, the story of a girl who is kidnapped at the age of 13 and sold into prostitution, is likely to be more emotional than visceral.

The film's release has been delayed on account of its disturbing theme – human trafficking and the



Nila Madhab Panda

sex trade. *Lakshmi* was due to open in the multiplexes on 17 January following its world premiere at the Palm Springs International Film Festival, where it won the Audience Award.

But the Central Board of Film Certification (CBFC) has found certain portions of the film 'objectionable' and sent it to the revising committee. So the release of the film featuring singer Monali Thakur in the lead role has been put on hold until the censorship hurdle is cleared.

The cast of *Lakshmi* includes Ram Kapoor, Shefali Shah and Satish Kaushik, who doubles up as a co-producer.

Censor trouble is an inevitable occupational hazard for filmmakers who deal with the ills of society – another reason that often dissuades the mainstream movie industry from attempting films like *Lakshmi*.

But those that dare carry on regardless. Nila Madhab Panda's next film, *Kaun Hai Kitne Paani Mein*, set in drought-prone Kalahandi district, focuses on the themes of sanitation and access to potable water. "It is a satire that will be positioned as a regular commercial release," says the director.

Much of course will depend on whether distributors respond enthusiastically enough to the film. And that can never be taken for granted. ■



The Nilgiri Mountain Railway chugging up a hill

On board the Nilgiri toy train

Susheela Nair

Ooty

OUR toy train journey on the Nilgiri Mountain Railway to Ooty from Mettupalayam was spectacular. Tagged as a World Heritage Train, this tiny narrow-gauge railway puffs up the hills with its two steam engines leading the way. It has been puffing up and down these hills for over a century.

The Nilgiri Mountain train is the only one of its kind in India as it has a special rack running between two tracks to help it go up the steep climb. As the train chugs comfortably through the middle of small hill hamlets, it provides a scenic thrill at every twist and turn. The tiny toy train's wheezes and whistles echo across the valley as it pushes its carriages forward, across ravines, through tunnels, bridges, hugging mountain slopes and rushing past streams and sparkling waterfalls.

It is possible to saunter alongside the train as it crawls up. On the way, we pass dinky stations with quaint names like Adderley, Hill Grove, Runnymede and Ketti where famous actor Shah Rukh Khan gyrated to '*Chaiyya, chaiyya*' atop a train...

The view was undoubtedly stunning especially



Boating on the Pykara dam

SUSHEELA NAIR



A Toda temple

along the steepest sections of the Hulikal ravine. At Coonoor, the steam engine was replaced by a diesel one for the remaining part of the journey.

We decided to skip the mandatory tourist attractions of Ooty. Instead we included in our itinerary, a visit to an old tea factory where we learnt the nuances of production from picking 'two leaves and a bud' to the drying, selection, packaging, and more importantly, tasting.

From there we headed off the beaten path with a picnic hamper. The drive out of Coonoor was refreshing. We passed towering eucalyptus and cinchona trees rising from hill slopes, their mingled fragrance teasing the senses.

Lamb's Rock, a sheer precipice which drops several 100 metres into the heart of a dense jungle, provided a stunning view of the Coimbatore plains. It used to be a favourite picnic spot during the days of the British with paved pathways and a dramatic view of the plains below. Dolphin's Nose, a rock resembling a dolphin's snout, is another 10 km away. From there you can see Catherine Falls, a silver cascade of water on a clear day.

We came across busloads of boisterous tourists

making a beeline to key locations that have been immortalised in many Bollywood dance sequences. Law's Falls is another popular picnic spot, just seven km from Coonoor on the road to Mettupalyam. Sixth Mile and Ninth Mile, two designated film-shooting areas near Ooty, are a must-see on the itinerary of tourists and tour operators.

We soaked in the fantastic vistas of luxuriant tea gardens, waterfalls, and streams dotting the Blue Mountains. We spotted villages nestled on distant slopes. An interesting spot for outdoor enthusiasts is the Droog, an erstwhile military outpost of Tipu

Sultan. A favourite haunt of trekkers and birdwatchers, the four-km trek is arduous. It takes you through tea estates to the ruins of a 16th century fort that was once used by Tipu Sultan. Located some 6,000 ft above sea level, this spot offers a panoramic view of the plains. Also known as Bakasura Malai since a story links it to the tale of a local demon, the fort is now in shambles and all that can be seen now is a wall.

The Sim's Park in Upper Coonoor is adjacent to the military establishment of Wellington where the Madras Regiment is stationed. Located on the slopes of a ravine it flaunts a rolling woodland, stretches of manicured lawns, a miniature lake, varied species of rare trees including a *rudraksha* tree, a lone conifer, Spanish cherry, Burma teak and an ornamental bed of flowers. The park is named after J.D. Sim, a secretary to the Madras Club who took great pains in laying the public garden and park in 1874-75. Just opposite Sim's Park, we spotted the colonial-looking building of the century-old Pasteur Institute, renowned for its amazing research on rabies. It also manufactures the polio vaccine.

Coonoor is also a research centre with several experimental fruit farms. Tea auctions are held in

the nearby cantonment town of Wellington which is the home base of the Madras Regiment, the oldest unit in the Indian Army. It also houses the Staff College of the defence forces. Both have fine libraries and museums along with two immaculate campuses with magnificent buildings and clubs that boast a fine table. A stroll around the two campuses is an enjoyable experience.

The best part of our trip was the exhilarating drive from Kotagiri to Kodanad, past sprawling tea plantations, rolling hills, sparkling waterfalls, thatched Toda temples and undulating valleys of lush greenery. Kotagiri, it is claimed, is the smallest and oldest of the three hill resorts in the Nilgiris. This is now tea plantation territory, and the region offers splendid walks.

We watched women tossing tea leaves into bags slung over their backs and tea pickers at the weighing stations, accounting for their day's pickings at the tea estates. The highlight of the trip was the Kodanad Viewpoint at 6,400 ft, 18 km from Kotagiri, from where the view of the Rangaswamy Pillar and Peak are simply awesome. The stunning view of the Moyar River snaking its way and emptying into the Bhavani Sagar Dam will remain vividly etched in our memory. ■

FACT FILE

Getting there: Nearest rail, road & air from Coonoor is Coimbatore – 71km

Tourist office: Tamil Nadu Tourist Office, Wenlock Road, Ooty Tel: 0423-2443977

What to shop: Handmade fudge, aromatic oils and spices, honey, Toda shawls and silver jewellery. Do ensure that you buy homemade chocolates and tea which is sold in dust, leaf, organic and white varieties and in different flavours.

Best season: April to June and from September to October

Where to stay:

● **Kurumba Village Resort:**
www.kurumbavillageresort.com

● **The Little Earth Group:** www.littleearth.in

● **Hotel Tamil Nadu:** www.tamilnadutourism.org

Beeline for books

Kolkata's fair has the highest footfalls

PICTURES BY PRASANTA BISWAS



Crowds throng the Kolkata Book Fair

Subir Roy
Kolkata

THE annual Kolkata Book Fair, which kicked up a lot of dust, will be turning 40 in a couple of years and has morphed over time the same way as a human would. Middle age does not commence at 40 any longer and the fair is anything but jaded. In a way it is at its prime, having passed the impressionable and impetuous years. It is like a successful professional who is firing shots across the bow at the top level of his organisation in an attempt to conquer it.

The world's biggest non-traded (for the individual, not the trade) book fair and the one with the largest footfall of over 2.5 million is a matter of immense pride to the people of Kolkata who like to think of themselves as intellectually and artistically inclined. But unbeknownst to themselves, the fair is changing in the same way the city is – falling in line with the rest of the world where size, organisational efficiency and catering to the young consumer matter the most.

In 1976, when the fair got going on the Maidan in the heart of the city, it had 56 stalls. Now it has well over 10 times that number. Thrown out of its earlier venue by the courts on environmental grounds (it was destroying the green lung of the city), in the last five years it has shifted to Milan Mela on the outskirts of the city.

Over the years the infrastructure at Milan Mela has improved enormously. Freshly done up approach roads and police deployment for crowds and traffic control make the book fair a key item on the city's annual official agenda. The West Bengal

Chief Minister, Mamata Banerjee, inaugurated the fair, calling it a multi-vitamin pill that rejuvenates you when you are down.

But something else has also happened. The launch of a book *Parijaye Naree* (Displaced or Migrant Woman), dealing with critical women's issues, was cancelled by the organisers as they said violence against women is a “debatable and sensitive issue.” Published by the Nari Nirjatan Pritarodh Mancha (Forum to Fight Violence Against Women), it dwelt around a lecture by Jashodara Bagchi, former chairperson of the West Bengal Commission for Women. An activist of the Manch recalled that they had been outspoken against the Left Front regime as well on women's issues. Their aim has been to highlight issues, not politicize them.

Some recall how during the 2011 Book Fair, ultra-left publications, some on the killing of the Maoist leader Azad and the then jailed doctor and activist Binayak Sen, had a free run. Officialdom then, both at the state and the centre, was fighting the Maoist uprising in central India whose ripples had reached West Bengal.

Some see a big change in the DNA of the book fair. Pointing to the huge crowds that throng the fair, particularly on weekends, Samir Goswami, a regular who fronted the communications effort of the railways in eastern India for long, feels it has become a sort of festival for an outing, a place for young people to go to, just the way they would add

to the footfalls of a shopping mall. Food has become very important and much time was spent in meetings to put in place an elaborate food court.

What is happening to books? In this atmosphere, says Goswami, the best publishers are saying their sales are “just about recovering costs.” Book lovers hunting for the odd book are getting overwhelmed by the crowds, he said, adding pungently, “*Hujjut barche*” (the hullabaloo is growing). Food has become more important than books. He relates what a young person has told him, that at the fair she bought a particular type of stitching needle after seeing a demonstration of how it works.

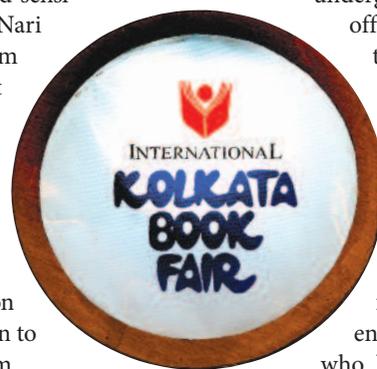
Subir Mitra, managing director of Ananda Publishers, the book publishing arm of the leading media house of the city, the Ananda Bazar group, has a somewhat different and more positive take. After Durga Puja, the Kolkata Book Fair is now “the next big thing,” with people coming from really far to visit it. The infrastructure has improved enormously and Milan Mela has become like Delhi's Pragati Maidan, he notes appreciatively. “I love biographies. I come every day, buy a lot of books, search for some which may not actually be available.”

He is comfortable with people coming to see and be seen. And since they come, they mostly go away with a book or two. He also finds nothing wrong with food taking up a lot of space. His sense is that there is space for all and the genuine book lover is not getting turned off and staying away.

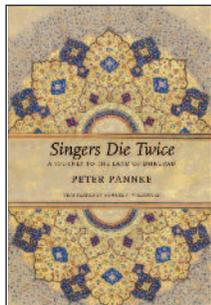
Between these two perceptions, ask some old timers, where is the original people's litfest, minus the blah? Where are the quirky stalls, the pamphleteers, the soapbox orators telling the truth as they see it? The regret is the “alternative” happening has undergone “gentrification” and what is on offer is a kind of *tamasha* or opiate for the masses, including keeping out politically sensitive stuff that may displease the current dispensation.

There are yet others who do not want to be too judgmental. They say you can still get to hear the soapbox orators at the Mukta Manch, there is a large area set aside for little magazines, you still see entire families with children in tow who have come because they think it is good to grow up with books. The most endearing visitors are some elderly couples – in one case the lady bemused that her husband should still want to take photographs of her against the backdrop of the book fair.

Without a proper guide map for the fair, I failed to find Subarnarekha, the famous second-hand book shop of Santiniketan. But I found a little corner stacked with used books all priced at ₹50. It was mostly pulp fiction but I spotted what looked like a reference book on the ‘wealth’ of Himachal, my favourite state. But the Daryagunj based publisher mentioned a series editor, not the author of the particular title. I decide to come around on another day. ■



Sounds that heal



SINGERS DIE TWICE

Peter Pannke
Translated by: Samuel P.
Willcocks
Seagull Books
₹ 570

Amit Dasgupta
Vishakapatnam

I first met Peter Pannke sometime in 2003 in Berlin. It intrigued me that a German had been a student of *dhrupad* music for over four decades. We got talking and became friends. The last time I met him was in 2006. We gradually lost contact, apart from the occasional email and Facebook posts. When I was invited to participate in the Hyderabad Literary Festival this year and was still debating whether to attend or not, I noticed that Peter was one of the invitees as well. I got in touch with him on email and we agreed to meet. For the three days of the festival, Peter and I caught up everyday and tried to bridge, as much as we possibly could, the years that had gone by since we last met.

For Peter, 2006 was a difficult year. He suffered a severe brain haemorrhage that affected his recognition of words and language. He would see letters of the alphabet but did not know what they meant or how they could be strung together to form words or even what the words might mean. His memory had been affected. One morning, two other patients, who had also suffered a brain haemorrhage, were wheeled into his room. Their situation was far worse than his because, while he could still sit up and look around and speak, they, on the other hand, were barely able to move their fingers. They were, as a result, totally reliant on the assistance of others for all their needs and requirements. For all intents and purposes, they were like vegetables. This was not how he wanted to live. He closed his eyes and remembered the faces of the many *sadhus* and mendicants, whom he had come across, and who at the age of 80 or 90 years of age, continued to look serene, happy and healthy. He told himself that he was not willing to die in a hospital bed or in his apartment in Berlin, ensconced in some kind of concrete jungle. He wanted to see the blue sky and pine trees, and breathe in the fresh, pure air in his final moment, just like the holy men he had met in his journeys would do.

Four weeks later, he returned to his apartment and remained under heavy medication. Unsteady on his feet, he had to be careful about his move-

ments, as a fall could have resulted in serious injury and irreparable damage. As he looked around his apartment, he found it full of his book collection on music, his audio recordings and extensive music collection, and a variety of musical instruments. He knew instinctively that they must mean something but what? He tried hard to remember but nothing came back to him. In despair and not knowing what the next step might be, he immediately clutched at the invitation from a friend to accompany her to Uttarkashi for a few weeks, where she would be conducting a course on homeopathy. Taking very little along with him, other than his medication and an electronic *tanpura*, Peter set off.

The next few weeks were idyllic, Peter tells me. Where they were staying was just beside the Bhagirathi river. All you could hear was the sound of the river and of birds. I need to tell you that after

ic *tanpura* and as the music began, he decided to open his heart and to sing to the river, recollecting the ragas he had learnt over the years from his gurus. From the very first note, as the *sa* flowed out of his deeply sonorous voice, quite miraculously, the ragas began to flow, as if they had been suddenly unchained. He cannot recall for how many hours he sat on the rock, singing. Peter tells me that after that singular experience, he progressively became better. When I met him in Hyderabad, it surprised me that he had been so unwell. He was just as I remembered him during my Berlin days. For Peter, the healing through *dhrupad* was something that he had personally experienced. A few months ago, in a Berlin hospital, a panel of doctors huddled together, baffled at his recovery.

When he returned to his apartment in Berlin and looked around at all that he had accumulated over the years, he found it a senseless kind of collecting. So, he got rid of all his books and CDs, which he gifted to the Berlin Museum. With just a fraction of what he earlier had materially, he moved to a small apartment to begin life anew. He tells me that as he was discarding his possessions and giving them away, he came across a box of photographs. Each photograph took him on a journey to the past and he found it an unnecessary exercise. He now had no further use for the past and so, he threw the box in the dustbin. He kept only two photographs – one of his father and the other of his mother, “so that I can remember what they looked like.” It was a total break from the past, even emotionally. Now, only the present mattered.

Over the next few days, we spoke about his extraordinary life and his relationship with India. By the age of 15, he was already a published poet in Germany. He was drawn into blues music – Lightning Hopkins, Johnny Lee Hooker, Muddy Waters and Big Bill Broonzy. He dabbled in alcohol and psychedelic drugs. But his mind was wandering and he decided to trek to India, which he did. He studied music in Benaras, lived alone for weeks in a cave in Jogeshwar – waking up at four in the morning so that he might look at the full range of the Himalayas. He slept with a fire burning, so as to keep away panthers and tigers. With a tape recorder as his companion, he recorded the sounds of what it felt like to live in a cave – the incessant chatter of crickets at dusk and the first birds at dawn. He met with *sadhus*, mystics and Sufis, and believes that through them, he had found the meaning to life. With a hearty laugh, this Jack Nicholson lookalike, complete with his dark glasses and unruly hair, gave me a big hug, as we took leave. “I am becoming a *fakir*!” he said. ■

Amit Dasgupta is a former Indian diplomat and author presently living in Vishakapatnam. He is writing a book of long short stories and his last book 'Lessons from Ruslana: In Search for Alternative Thinking' is due for release next year. He may be contacted at amit.dasgupta2013@yahoo.com.



Peter Pannke

For Peter, the healing through *dhrupad* was something that he had personally experienced. A few months ago, in a Berlin hospital, a panel of doctors huddled together, baffled at his recovery.

years of studying and recording *dhrupad* music, Peter had started losing interest in it. “It was doing nothing for me,” he said, “I was simply recording and collecting for others. It stopped making sense.”

He sat on a rock and looked around, soaking in the beauty that was all around him. The air was crisp and clear. The river seemed to pay attention to no one, as it raced passed furiously. A strange and wondrous silence seemed to fill the air. Even the birds had stopped to listen. He put on his electron-

Woody skills

TARKASHI is a method of artistically embossing strips of brass on wood. This craft originated from Mainpuri in Uttar Pradesh but Pilkhuwa too is catching up. Sardar Hussain is famous here for being a master craftsman of Tarkashi. His Sajawat Handicrafts produces an amazing jumble of trays, glass boxes, planters, lamps, frames, mirrors and candle stands with Tarkashi work. All his products are made from sheesham, beech or mango wood. The designs are surprisingly neat and modern. Eye-catching colours like bright pink and turquoise blue have been liberally used.

The wood is smooth to touch. "We use wax polish to heighten the beauty of the wood," says Faraz Aqeel, a partner in the business. "Its all hand made and very time consuming to produce." Prices are reasonable. ■



Contact: Sajawat Handicraft, 231 Chhipiwara, Pilkhuwa-245304, District Hapur, Uttar Pradesh
 Phone: 0122-2323581, 09412619380, 09358637400
 Email: sajawat.handicraft@gmail.com, info@sajawathandicraft.com
 Website: www.sajawathandicraft.com

Wispy kites

UMAR Daraj is a traditional kite maker. "My father used to make kites and before that my grandfather. Now I have taught my children," he says proudly. His kites are embellished with all kinds of designs from animals and birds to modern dance and traffic. Where does he get his ideas from? "I think them up," replies the feisty craftsman.

Daraj has found other uses for the paper he uses to make his kites. He converts it into envelopes,

boxes and bookmarks. Kites are also made on order. Daraj is a widely travelled man, thanks to the Government of India, he says. He has been all over Europe and Russia and he proudly presents an album of pictures showing him posing in various countries. He teaches kite making to schoolchildren too. "Schools organise craft workshops with many activities. But it is kite making that children flock to," he beams. His little grandson nods solemnly. ■

Contact: Umar Daraz Kite Maker, House no 171, Gali Malan Wali, Gali no 5, Khureja Khas, Delhi-110051
 Phone: 9990549420, 9990957592

