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Civil Society

MANGOSTEEN BONANZA IN KERALA VILLAGE

FARMER STRIKES IT RICH AND OTHERS FOLLOW

M.K. Marlin with his fruits

Harvesting Rain for Profit

Name: Shri Muniraj,
Village: Muthur, Krishnagiri district, Tamil Nadu

Muniraj, a marginal farmer with seven acres of land from Muthur village of Krishnagiri district, had a greenhouse where he practiced floriculture. However, a falling water table meant that irrigation became a problem – especially during summer months even for drip irrigation.

To overcome the problem of insufficient water, Srinivasan Services Trust (SST) encouraged Muniraj to save every drop of rainwater falling on his green house. SST provided technical information and engineering support for creating a pond, next to the greenhouse, large enough to collect six lakh litres of rainwater. To prevent loss by seepage, the pond was lined with a polythene sheet and a shade net was used as cover to help arrest loss by evaporation. The pond gets filled up with 3 days of rain. The water saved in this pond is sufficient for the crop needs for one season.

IMPACT: Muniraj is now financially secure and earns more than ₹30,000 per month. He has built a pucca house and also bought a car. He has become an expert on rainwater harvesting and offers advice to several villages in the area.

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COVER STORY

Mangosteen bonanza in Kerala village

Set farmers free and they will find their way to prosperity. Mangosteen came to a village in Kerala by chance from Malaysia and is now a moneyspinner being sold directly in Chennai. 18

COVER PHOTOGRAPH: SHREE PADRE

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Civil Society
READ US. WE READ YOU.

Delhi with dread

IF the quality of life in Indian cities is to be measured, one must begin in Delhi. When the country's capital doesn't have its systems in place, what can one say about the other cities? Three months of dengue, chikungunya, malaria and whatever passes as a viral fever have come on top of flooded streets, uncleared garbage, endless traffic jams and runaway crime. Now, as winter approaches, deadly air pollution and respiratory problems are round the corner.

None of these problems is new. They have been around, but the worrisome thing is that they are getting worse. It would make sense to learn from cities elsewhere in the world and adopt solutions. But that isn't happening. It raises questions about leadership. For sure, municipalities must be strengthened, given access to finance and allowed a higher political status. But first a vision is needed at the level of the states and the Union. Cities have to be recognised and supported as drivers of prosperity and growth, which they are. Housing, healthcare, sanitation, transportation — governments have their work cut out for them. Large parts of Indian cities need to be re-engineered. It requires commitment and political will to be able to do this.

There seems little effort to aspire to the global best. But when the effort is made the results are just great. We have an interview with Ratish Nanda of the Aga Khan Trust for Culture. Nanda has led a programme for the restoration of Humayun's Tomb and the revival of the Nizamuddin Basti together with open spaces. The project is an outstanding example of how partnerships and the pooling of talent can lead to significant transformations.

It was frightening recently to see fogging ordered to deal with mosquitoes. The smoke from fogging machines contains very harmful chemical pesticides and diesel. It is a lethal combination and, as our pictures show, smoke was being pumped into the faces of ill informed people, among them children, in slums and low-income residential colonies. It is widely accepted that indiscriminate fogging is not just bad for humans, it does not solve the mosquito problem either. Delhi is also one of the most polluted cities in the world and residents of congested low-income housing suffer the effects of pollution the most. To expose them to a toxic cocktail is hardly what one would expect a caring and forward-looking government to do. Worse when Delhi buys hundreds of fogging machines everyone else wants to follow.

From Hyderabad we have a story on an irrigation innovation that goes beyond drip in ensuring just the right amount of moisture at the roots of plants and fruiting trees in dry areas. It is a technology developed by K.S. Gopal at the Centre for Environmental Concerns. We have also profiled Samarth, an interesting start-up for providing services to the elderly.

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EMPOWERING DIFFERENTLY-ABLED

THE ASSOCIATION OF PEOPLE WITH DISABILITY

Himalaya has partnered with **'The Association of People with Disability (APD)'**, a not for profit organisation based out of Bengaluru to support and empower people living with disabilities.

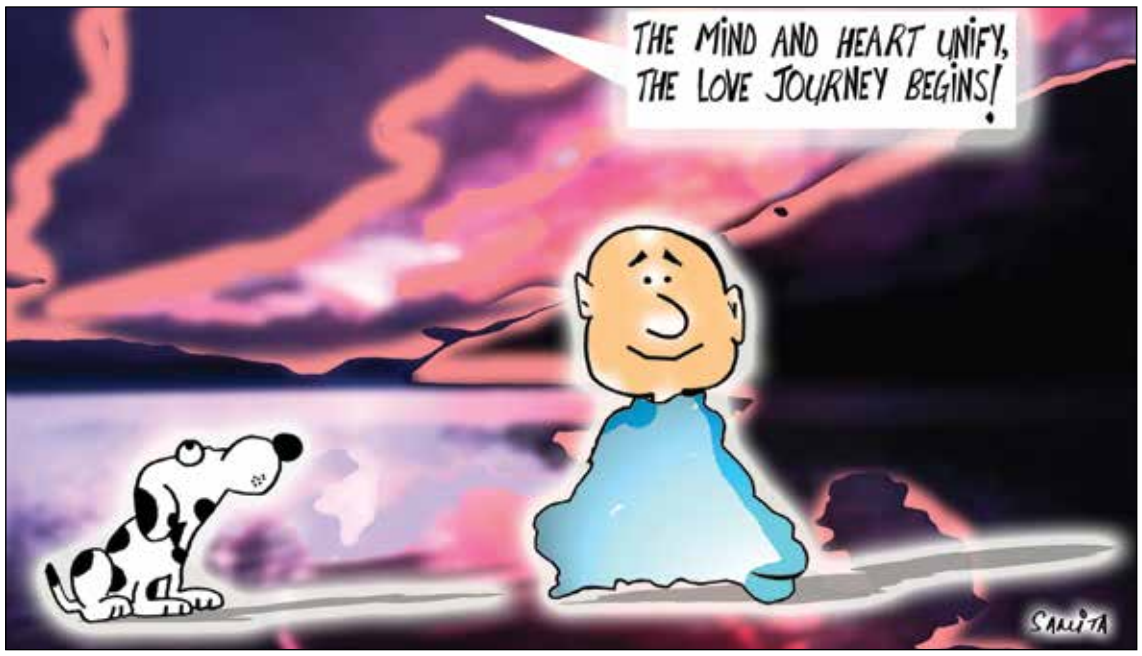
Too often people who are differently-abled are barred from the public sphere, pushed to the margins of society and end up living in deplorable conditions with little or no income. Every year, 70 associates who are differently-abled are trained on a 'medicinal plant program' which enhances their knowledge and know-how on select medicinal plant cultivation.

This program is not just limited to classroom concepts, but Himalaya also provides quality seeds to the associates and imparts best practices on how to increase yield. Additionally, cost of packaging materials and transportation is borne by Himalaya.

Himalaya is also raising funds for other rehabilitation programmes for APD through campaigns and tie-ups including our employees. We are hopeful that through this program, differently-abled person will gain self-confidence and build their self-esteem.

IN THE LIGHT

SAMITA RATHOR



LETTERS

Hall of Fame

Congratulations for your Hall of Fame issue. I read the entire magazine from end to end. The profiles of all the new entrants were very well written. I especially enjoyed reading about Uncle Moosa and the Lohit Library Network. But, again, I would say it is tough to make a choice. I also appreciated your selection of two government schoolteachers, Ramesh Gharu and Gautam Sharma.

Shikha Singh

Your story, 'Parent as Therapist', was inspiring. I am very glad that Kim Chadda's work has been recognised and she has now entered the Civil Society Hall of Fame. The world needs more people like Kim.

Marlene Laporte

Kim Chadda's story is one of the most inspiring I have read. I admire her for her hard work and determination to face all odds in a very ethical manner.

T. Rao Ippili

New politics

I read your interview with Dr Jayaprakash Narayan of Loksatta with interest. In my opinion it isn't the political system that needs to be changed but the way people think. Voter registration has improved but how many people vote without taking money, gifts or favours from politicians?

Manjunatharao Alluru

Changes in the political system are happening because of civil society activism. Political reforms will be accelerated only when citizens stop tolerating the inefficiencies of the system.

Manoj

NGOs vs govt

Apropos your article, 'Govt says NGOs are public servants'. I think the government's perception of NGOs is seriously misplaced. Many NGOs are doing good work and, in fact, complementing the work of the government.

Prabhakar Reddy

The NGOs should lobby for a separate law and stop populating the Societies Registration Act. Why do they want to share space with all kinds of entities registered under this law? Instead, they could compile a list of work that NGOs do, ask for separate registration and come up with their own regulations which they could all comply with.

Ritu

Water doctor

I thought your cover story on Dr Avinash Pol, 'Satara puts its water systems back', was absolutely fabulous. He is akin to God for farmers in the district. I want to be part of his great team and work for the country.

Pravin Yadav

Dr Pol and his team have launched a water revolution with people's participation in one of the most drought-affected districts of Maharashtra. We, in Rajapur village, 20 km from Jakhangaon, connected with him and under his able guidance started water works.

In just one year we have achieved a big milestone.

Ankush Ghanwat

Street vendors

About your story, 'Vendors feel let down by AAP', I would like to ask, are all street vendors in Delhi members of these 10 to 12 associations?

If there are vendors who are not members, how will they be represented if nominations to the Town Vending Committees (TVC) are invited only from existing associations? What prevents internal politics and conflict among associations and within associations from fielding names in a transparent and unbiased manner? There has to be a fair mechanism by which vendors are selected for TVCs else these too will become corrupt and powerful bodies.

Kulwinder Kaur

Letters should be sent to response@civilsocietyonline.com

‘URBAN HERITAGE SHOULD

Ratish Nanda on the Nizamuddin Urban Revival Initiative and its relevance for Indian cities

Ratish Nanda:‘The restoration of Humayun’s Tomb has added 200 acres of green space to Delhi’

Civil Society News
New Delhi

AS urbanisation spreads, how can heritage be saved? In the rushed transformation that Indian cities are undergoing can traditional homes, monuments, old engineering, rare water systems be conserved?

One such effort in New Delhi has produced outstanding results. Humayun’s Tomb has not just been restored, but now serves as an important historical landmark of the city. Tourists and schoolchildren in tens of thousands now visit the tomb, its splendid gardens and adjoining smaller monuments as well.

The tomb is part of a larger urban renewal initiative for the once-neglected and crumbling Nizamuddin Village area, which has got back its historic sites and status as the cradle of Hindustani culture.

The Aga Khan Trust for Culture (AKTC) has worked closely with the government to make all this happen through several years of meticulous work.

Ratish Nanda of the AKTC, who has headed the programme, spoke to *Civil Society* about what has been achieved for the rest of Delhi and the possible takeaways for other Indian cities.

What have been the spin-offs of the Nizamuddin Urban Renewal Initiative for the city of Delhi?
Across the world, wherever we work, the Aga Khan Historic Cities Programme looks for three critical components: one, a grand site, second, an urban situation in which the community can benefit, and three, ecological considerations or green space.

The Nizamuddin Urban Renewal Initiative, which includes the Humayun Tomb, like all our Aga Khan Development Network (AKDN) projects worldwide, aims to improve the quality of life.

We started with garden restoration at the site of the tomb. That led to a significant increase in tourist numbers. But, apart from restoration of Humayun’s Tomb, we did conservation work on 45 monuments. Since Independence I think this is the only privately undertaken restoration effort in India. We believe it has influenced conservation thinking. Also, everybody in Nizamuddin Basti has benefitted from what we do.

But the larger spin-off for the city is that we have walked more than 100,000 children through Humayun’s Tomb. We have created awareness. We have demonstrated that conservation and development can go hand in hand. Once the project is over, Delhi will have an additional 200 acres of green space. Delhi is very rich in green space. The challenge is to manage it and create spaces for a lot of things that are not there like street performers or an arboretum. You know, Delhi has 17,000 parks but not a single arboretum. As a result, children don’t even know their city’s trees.

So we want Humayun’s Tomb, Sundar Nursery and Nizamuddin to become the green hub, brown hub and cultural hub of Delhi. That would be the eventual success.

Is there ownership of these ideas?
India has liberalised in every sector: healthcare, education, universities, utilities…yet somehow, there is this general perception that conservation of built heritage is the responsibility of the government. I think steps need to be taken by the government to involve a large number of civil society organisations in urban conservation.

The government has started doing that. The Ministry of Urban Development (MoUD) has started the HRIDAY (Heritage City Development and Augmentation Yojana) in 13 historic cities. They are trying to improve infrastructure keeping conservation in mind. But there isn’t much attempt by the Archaeological Survey of India (ASI) to replicate this and form additional partnerships.

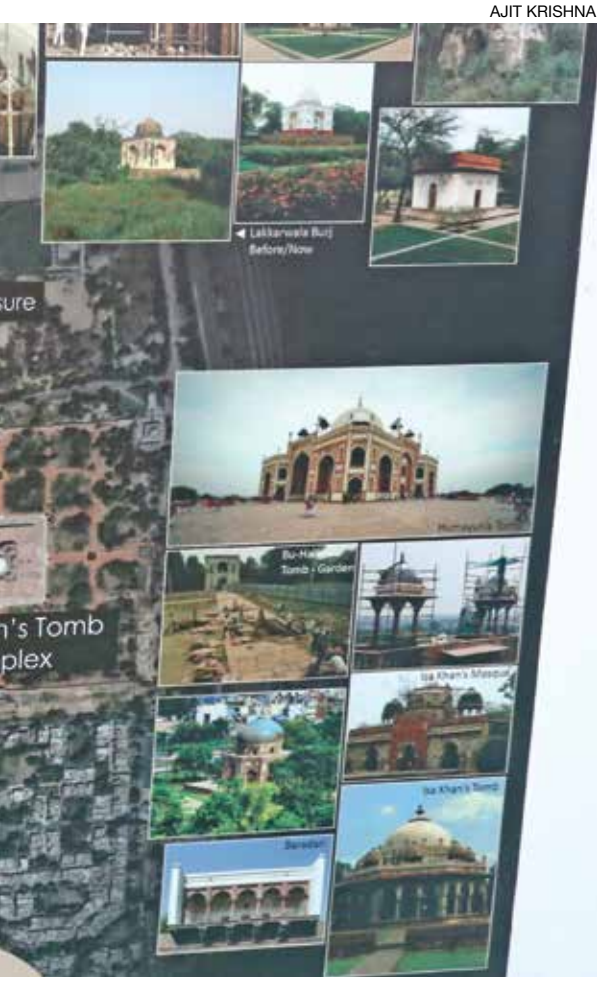
Is that because of policy or because of inadequate knowhow?
I think it’s a bit of both. The ASI and other cultural organisations are hugely under-staffed. We employ 300 people full-time on this one project. It’s a multi-disciplinary team. I am working with teachers, health workers, designers, archaeologists, engineers, historians…everybody. That’s what makes decision-making in conservation well-informed. But policymakers in India see conservation as a burden and not as an economic asset. Unlike the environmental conservation movement there isn’t any demand for greater people’s involvement.

Is that why most urban development projects leave out heritage conservation?
HRIDAY has a major heritage thrust. Heritage is a subject on the concurrent list. The ASI is responsible for monuments, the state department for locally important monuments, the municipality for heritage buildings. There needs to be a lot of coordination among them. There is talk but very little action.

I mean, one of the biggest problems is a law like the National Monuments Authorities Act. It marks 300 metres around a monument as a prohibited zone. You get no incentive, no transfer of development rights, change of land use, abolition of conversion charges, or tax incentive grants for conservation. You can’t convert your home in this restricted area into a bed and breakfast place. You have to maintain it.

HAVE WIDE OWNERSHIP'

AJIT KRISHNA



If conservation has to succeed you need incentive. You need recognition. We are trying to demonstrate that conservation and development can go together. We have to be flexible. Our historic cities will be richer for it.

The project also led to restoration of old skills. But why are skills like water-harvesting, building of lakes, tanks or traditional eco-friendly techniques not inculcated into present-day urban planning?
I think we need to look at what is becoming of our cities rather than at what they once were. We revived craft because we did not have a choice. The principal purpose of any conservation effort is to ensure long-term preservation of the site.

At Humayun's Tomb we had to go back to the same craftsmen whose forefathers built the tomb using the same tools, techniques and building material. Inappropriate alterations in the 20th century had severely accelerated decay.

In India we have been building for 3,000 years. You know, the moment you build your house, you need to start repairing it. So if we have been building for 3,000 years we have also been doing conservation for 3,000 years. Kings like Feroz Shah Tughlaq in the 13th century were repairing the Qutb Minar. They proudly proclaimed that they had restored the previous Sultan's building.

We adopted a Make in India approach and that's where craftsmen came in. I think one of the biggest reasons for our success is that we involved craftsmen in the decision-making process. They sit with our

> **'Our project is a model that can be replicated by any foundation, RWA or academic institute.'**

engineers and decide what the correct approach would be. It is difficult. For the last 200 years our craftsmen have been so badly treated that advice has to be cajoled out of them.

Fortunately we now have a master stone carver, a master mason, a master carpenter, and a master plasterer on our payrolls. They are employed. They are not engaged on a per day basis. That's really made all the difference to our work.

But to revive historic cities you have to revive those crafts?
Absolutely. If we have to revive historic cities like Varanasi or Ajmer, we have to go back to the same principles that were employed in building them. It is today very easily possible to introduce modern services in historic cities without disturbing their historic fabric. Conservation needs to be built into every city's planning process just like transport. It takes both incentives and enforceable laws.

Do we have the people with expertise to include heritage in urban design?
In recent weeks I have been quite aghast to realise what we were as a culture till 200 years ago and what we have become. Historically, the craftsman was the designer. He was familiar with material and worked closely with clients. That's how we got these beautiful buildings — till things started getting mass-produced.

This has affected the quality of our buildings because architects design for just 5 percent of India's population. The rest 95 percent live off the *mistri* using materials right out of a bag. Where are the opportunities? There is no lateral entry into the government for a craft-builder.

Does academia produce enough conservation experts?
Unfortunately, in India conservation is taught only in a Master's programme. There are no multi-disciplinary universities teaching conservation. Conservation is not the domain of architects alone. You need historians, craftsmen, archaeologists, designers and engineers. The biggest problem is that conservation training is limited to architects.

Second, there are very few opportunities for mid-career training for people in conservation. I used to work in Historic Scotland. Every technical employee had to go through a week of training in any field of his or her choice. You could choose from 100 courses. In our field, new developments, new ways of thinking take place. Training opportunities don't exist here. But then, the opportunity for employment is also not there.

Would you replicate this project elsewhere in India?
We are replicating this project in Hyderabad. We are doing the Qutb Shahi tombs, a site spread over 100 acres with 75 monuments. We don't have such a large social and economic programme there because the community is not so needy. But we are trying to engage people through conservation.

What is important for us is to demonstrate that projects can be replicable. Any foundation, a Residents Welfare Association (RWA) or academic institute can do it. Our projects are models and show how things can be done.

Take Hauz Khas in Delhi. It has 15 monuments. It has an RWA and probably has a slum too. The RWA should be able to conserve the monuments and carry out social and economic development. Funds are available. Every colony has people willing to give money.

What is critical is a Public-Private-Partnership. Neither the government, the RWA or the NGO can do it alone. They need to do it professionally, using a multi-disciplinary approach.

In Gurgaon historical sites and waterbodies have been built over. The historic Guru Dronacharya tank, after whom the city is now being named, is full of garbage. What should be done?
That can be fixed. Everybody needs water. In Hyderabad, we found that the Qutb Shahi site has six *baolis* (stepwells) and all were dry. We needed water so we spent a lot of time trying to figure out where the water came from in the past.

Then we realised the *baolis* were tanks that held water. They were empty because the ground slopes had all changed. We spent six months before the rains trying to fix the *baolis*. We cleaned the stepwells before the monsoon. Just one *baoli* collected 33 lakh litres of water. Outside the site, there is a tank. It remains empty. Do you know how much this cost us? Just ₹2,000. All we needed to do was figure out where the collection point was and connect that with an underground pipe.

When the *baoli* filled up, we investigated further. We then realised that historically there was a terra cotta pipe that took excess rainwater from this *baoli* into the next *baoli.* We found the terracotta pipe. Instead of repairing it we put in another pipe. All the *baolis* are interconnected.

I don't need 30 lakh litres of water. All I am doing is conservation and irrigation. These *baolis* were constructed to irrigate the orchards. We have managed to throw away hundreds of years of wisdom.

So why aren't these techniques inculcated in modern-day planning?
You can't cut a tree because people have realised its value. People have yet to realise the value of tanks, lakes and monuments. These are just seen as worth the land they are built upon. We work in partnership with the government. Our job is to assist and demonstrate. ■

Srinagar wants its smart city tag

Jehangir Rashid
Srinagar

WHEN both Srinagar and Jammu were left out of the central government's smart city scheme, there was widespread disappointment and politics was blamed. Jammu & Kashmir is probably the only state in India where politics is attached to every development plan. So the exclusion of the two cities from the smart city list was also perceived as a result of politics.

Logically, one of the two cities should have been selected. Now, both Jammu and Srinagar are trying hard to measure up to the Smart Cities Challenge.

Srinagar, the summer capital, is falling well short of the basic parameters stipulated to get on the list. The quality of life is not up to the mark and people continue to suffer on multiple fronts.

"I really wish that Srinagar becomes a smart city but it is a fact that our city lags behind in many aspects of daily life. Basic necessities like clean drinking water, round-the-clock power supply and good roads are missing. Given this reality, how can Srinagar be included in the smart city list?" says Gulzar Ahmad, a resident.

The state government seems to have slept on the issue. It was only in the last week of August that the Ministry of Housing and Urban Development organised a meeting and impressed upon the heads of various departments that they had to prepare Srinagar to get on the list.

Jammu & Kashmir's Secretary for Housing and Urban Development, Hirdesh Kumar, said that the Srinagar Municipal Corporation (SMC) has been mandated to prepare a blueprint so that Srinagar is included in the next round of the Smart Cities Challenge. He said that SMC would make a comprehensive plan and the process would be taken forward.

"The SMC has been asked to prepare a Detailed Project Report (DPR) and the heads of various departments have been asked to give their valuable suggestions. Since the next round of the Smart City Challenge is going to be held in January 2017, it is important that we make all the preparations well before the deadline. The government is committed to improving Srinagar so that it can qualify," assured Kumar.

SMC has of late issued advertisements in the local press and sought feedback from the people for making the city in tune with modern-day demands. However, the unrest in Kashmir has dealt a severe blow to the preparations.

"A smart city should have modern means of transport so that people reach their respective destinations well on time. I am afraid transport in Srinagar is obsolete with people suffering like anything. Srinagar is probably the only city where condemned vehicles continue to run on the roads with nobody talking about their replacement," said Mohammad Irfan, another resident.

Passenger vehicles dating back to the late 1980s and early 1990s are running on major routes in Srinagar. Although Tata Sumos have been introduced on some of the routes, they too are not up to the mark.

"Drinking water is the basic prerequisite of daily life. A huge population of Srinagar district is deprived of round-the-clock water supply. People have to wait for hours to get a little potable drinking water. Filtration of water is also not up to the mark with people complaining that they are being supplied filthy water," pointed out Shahid Ahmad, an angry resident.

People have always complained that the roads in Srinagar are in a dilapidated condition with the drainage system also in shambles. Ditches and pot-holes make up most of the roads in Srinagar. It becomes very difficult to move around specially in winter.

"Road connectivity is very important in modern life and more so at a place which is frequented by tourists. Some of the roads in Srinagar get macadamized every year but the macadam gets uprooted in no time. The condition of the other roads is pitiable and very little concern is shown for their development. Many tourists voiced their concern over the condition of the roads but very little was done to improve the roads," said Abdul Rahim, also a resident.

New colonies that have come up in Srinagar are unplanned and lack even basic facilities. The government has failed to develop some of its own colonies. Lack of drainage systems has become a huge challenge and the government has failed on this front as well.

"In Srinagar a proper drainage system can be seen in the old city while the new colonies are without drainage systems. There are some colonies where the drainage system has been put in place but it is defective. During the rains the drains overflow and the water spills over to the main road. Commercially important areas in the city centre get submerged when there is good rainfall," said Mushtaq Ahmad, a resident.

The cities on the Smart City list or those going to fight it out are equipped with electricity meters. But round-the-clock power supply is virtually a dream in Srinagar where there is load shedding for several hours a day. "More than half of Srinagar is non-metered and the progress on this front is not satisfactory. Even in the metered areas there are power cuts of three to four hours, more so during winter. In the non-metered areas there is an evening cut on two days and there is curtailment in the morning or afternoon as well. The situation is worst when winter is at its peak," said Manzoor Ahmad, a resident.

Residents of Srinagar are also quite upset about the lack of solid waste management. Garbage and other stuff collected from the city residents is dumped on a huge expanse of land at Achan-Eidgah on the outskirts of the city. There is no scientific disposal of the waste. So Srinagar fails on this front as well. ■

The living room in one of the apartments

SEWA's homely project

Tanushree Gangopadhyay
Ahmedabad

FOR over 50 years Shantaben Hiraghar furtively used a clump of shrubs as a toilet. She lived in Kailashnagar, a dirty slum in Ahmedabad. "I used to team up with other women to go," she explains. "It was most distressful."

Life changed dramatically when she moved into Gokuldham Cooperative Housing Society in Meghaninagar. Shantaben now has a small flat with a bathroom and kitchen. "Sister, our homes are a real blessing," she says. "We even have running water. SEWA Bank lent me money to set up my small shop selling snacks. Our lives have changed."

In 1992, SEWA (Self Employed Women's Association) Bank noted that around one-third of loans taken by their women workers in the informal sector were used for housing. Nearly 80 percent of these loans was spent on building toilets and drains and getting an electricity or water connection.

"The first demand of our SEWA Union, almost four decades ago, was for housing. We realised its importance for the women who slogged all day on the streets," recalls Ela Bhatt, SEWA's charismatic founder. "However, we did not have the resources then, nor the clout for such an ambitious project. Besides, we were involved in bettering our members' status."

Realising this need, in 1994 SEWA Bank set up the Mahila Housing SEWA Trust (MHT) to help the women improve their homes and surrounding infrastructure. It is today the biggest provider of loans and assistance to low-income women in the housing sector.

"We have managed to change the quality of lives of over 300,000 families across the country," says Bijal Brahmbhatt, MHT's enthusiastic director and

PICTURES BY MAYUR BHATT

There is a kitchen and an open verandah as well

The apartment blocks have trees and spaces for children to play

the moving spirit behind this transformation.

"My father, an academic, introduced me to Renana Jhabwala of SEWA in 1998. She immediately invited me to join the three-year-old Mahila Housing Trust. It was an honour," beams Brahmbhatt.

A civil engineer, Brahmbhatt realised she would need to diversify her skills. Providing housing and infrastructure to women living in slums transformed her into an architect, an empathetic social worker and a skilful negotiator.

Bijal Brahmbhatt, director of Mahila Housing Trust

Women in the SEWA Union were keen to improve their homes so that they had space to keep their goods and could work from home. Mostly, they were *agarbatti* workers, garment workers, street vendors, domestic workers or construction workers. MHT began talks with the Ahmedabad Municipal Corporation (AMC). After a lot of back and forth, the municipality agreed to upgrade slums under the state government's Slum Networking Project for the urban poor.

The project was for slum-dwellers living below the poverty line (BPL) on public land that belonged either to the government or the municipality. The AMC floated tenders for building three- to four-storied housing blocks and offered extra Floor Space Index (FSI) and Transfer of Development Rights (TDR). This attracted builders.

Meghaninagar, where SEWA's 12,000 members lived in 50 slums, negotiated with the AMC. "This was where we began. I was exposed to multiple actors," says Brahmbhatt. "Providing primary civic amenities including water connections and toilets to individual homes, and basic infrastructure were a great challenge indeed."

But what sort of homes did the women want?

"We held several meetings with Bijal and officials from the AMC," says Shantaben with considerable pride. The women finally settled for apartments with a carpet area between 36 square metres and 50 square metres. Each apartment has two rooms, a kitchen, bathroom, toilet and a *chokdi* — a small open space outside the kitchen where utensils and clothes are washed.

The slums they were living in were demolished. The builders gave each of the families between ₹2,000 and ₹10,000 per month as rent until the project was completed.

The apartments cost approximately ₹5 to ₹7 lakh. Under the state's slum development policy of 2013, in exchange for enhanced FSI and TDR, the apartments were given without charge to the women. The government provided ₹8,000 to each of the women which they could use for building toilets, drains or getting an electricity or water connection. Around ₹2,000 of this amount was given as loan.

Around 3,600 such units are being built across Ahmedabad. Each family pays the annual maintenance cost plus their water and electricity bills.

The AMC built the infrastructure — sewage connections, paved roads, storm water drains and all other civic facilities including running water and dedicated electricity.

The three-storied buildings built on the demolished slum have trees around and space for children to play. "My building complex has 66 members and is located on the main road near the bus stand. Even the schools are close by," says Shantaben.

MHT insisted that housing titles would be given to the women. "They asked for them. But titles will be transferred to the women after five years of occupancy, according to government rules," clarifies Brahmbhatt. All the housing complexes have the names of the women on a board.

With shining eyes Roshanben, Harshaben, Kanta and Ayesha say they have their own toilets and running water. "I am more productive now," says Roshanben. "I finish my work quicker and send my children to school on time. Guests are very comfortable in my house."

"Working with SEWA I saw liberation of women in practice," says Brahmbhatt. "We have a development approach combined with activism. It works as a wonderful bridge between the government and poor people."

An added advantage for the women was that SEWA introduced a six-month course on basic construction skills. Those women who were already working as construction labour were helped to upgrade their technical skills and become masons.

"Starting with housing in Ahmedabad, we have upscaled to 5,467 women with housing titles in seven states: Gujarat, Rajasthan, Delhi, Madhya Pradesh, Bihar, Jharkhand and Odisha. We have reached 300,959 households and served 895 slums, installed 45,000 toilets and trained 9,027 construction workers. Among public finances, we accessed ₹180 million for poor women. We have got ₹4.3 billion worth of registered property titles," says Brahmbhatt who has received international recognition for her dedicated work. She was awarded the Women Change Makers Fellowship in 2015 for three years by Switzerland's Womanity Foundation. The MHT is part of the Clinton Global Initiative.

"I was amazed that our housing project for women received the Dubai Best Practices International Award in 2006 and CNN aired it in their International Transformation series," says Brahmbhatt with all modesty. ■

Fogging's dark truth

Civil Society News
New Delhi

AS dengue and chikungunya cases flooded hospitals in New Delhi, a fogging blitz was unleashed on the capital city's slums and poor neighbourhoods in a belated attempt to contain the *Aedes aegypti* mosquito.

Fogging machines mounted on cycles spewed smoke in crowded bylanes, engulfing residents, among them children. The Aam Aadmi Party (AAP) government deployed 100 machines and promised several hundred more.

But was fogging really the answer or was it just a display of government action after an epidemic of vector-borne diseases had overtaken the city? What did the fog contain and should it have been unleashed from close quarters on residents without an advisory?

The fog contained chemical pesticides and diesel — both carcinogenic in the long term and hardly the things people should have been breathing in. Fogging also causes breathing problems and triggers asthma attacks. It irritates the eyes.

PICTURES BY AJIT KRISHNA

A sanitation worker fumigating a low income colony in East Delhi

The smoke is a toxic cocktail of chemical pesticides and diesel but most people don't know

Public health specialists have called indiscriminate fogging a health hazard. At best it can be an emergency measure targetted at specific locations where mosquitoes need to be contained. The impact on mosquitoes is transitory, knocking them out for a bit, but not killing them. Much more damage is done to human beings inhaling the noxious fumes.

But Delhi's residents seemed to be trapped in a political crossfire with the AAP-run state government out to discredit BJP-run municipalities. The annual drive to stop mosquito breeding didn't seem to have been done. There has also been a mounting garbage problem.

New Delhi already has the dubious distinction of being among the world's most polluted cities. It is common to use firewood for cooking in slums. Virtually nothing has been done to improve living conditions in slums though much has been promised at election time. Fogging in such conditions is doubly harmful to health.

"It is much more important to deal with the larvae of mosquitoes and prevent them from breeding than to try and smoke out adult mosquitoes," said Dr Ravikant Singh, President of Doctors for You. "The best way to prevent vector-borne diseases is through prevention by draining out stagnant water, removing garbage and so on."

The World Health Organisation (WHO) has also emphasised the ineffectiveness of fogging citing the example of Southeast Asian countries, where it hasn't had an impact on diseases.

At least two doctors of the All-India Institute of Medical Sciences went on record in newspapers to say that there was a need to be cautious on the use of fogging.

"Fogging is harmful and should not be done indiscriminately. It is an emergency measure when all other measures have failed," said Dr S.K. Sharma, head of medicine at AIIMS.

"The smoke is harmful to people suffering from respiratory health issues. It can cause breathing difficulty even among healthy individuals," said Dr Sanjeev Sinha, another AIIMS professor.

At the Centre for Science and Environment (CSE), Chandra Bhushan, Deputy Director-General, said: "The direct inhalation of diesel fumes, combined with insecticides, can exacerbate asthma or bronchitis among those with respiratory ailments while pregnant women, small children and old people are most susceptible to aggravation.

"We looked into the issue when community members approached us and shared their observations and experiences. We found that fogging is ineffective in containing dengue and has a harmful effect on the health of people."

An alternative to chemical pesticides like malathion is to use pyrethrin, which is naturally found in chrysanthemums and believed to be effective as an insecticide and less harmful to humans and the environment.

But there seemed little attempt to look at alternatives. In fact, as Delhi plunged into fogging it set a trend for neighbouring cities like Gurugram, where ill-informed citizens began demanding fogging as well — unaware of the implications for their health or the poor effectiveness of fogging.

As the weather changed in October, cases of chikungunya and dengue began reducing. The *aedes* mosquito doesn't like cold weather. But next year, what will it be? Fogging or prevention? ■

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Pros are pelting stones

PICTURES BY BILAL BAHADUR

Stone pelting has undergone a change. It is no longer the harmless protest it used to be

Jehangir Rashid
Srinagar

PELTING of stones in the Kashmir Valley is not just widespread but increasingly becoming an organised activity with professional pelters apparently up for hire to lead the way and then leave innocent young agitators to face pellets and bullets when the security forces are compelled to respond to bring a situation under control.

Stone-pelting used to be a way for the young and hot-blooded to vent their anger against the security forces. After Friday prayers at the Jama Masjid at Nowhatta-Srinagar stones would routinely be thrown at the men of the Central Reserve Police Force (CRPF) on duty.

This stopped when curfew was imposed in Old Srinagar on Fridays. But with the death of Burhan Wani, there has been an escalation of hostilities. It is generally felt that stone-pelting has gone out of control with even some Hajis being stoned in north Kashmir.

"Stone-pelting is a way for us to convey our unhappiness with the government. If we pick up guns then we will be labelled terrorists. But it is a shame for the people at the top that the police and security forces are firing pellets and resorting to direct firing although we just pelt stones and not fire bullets," members of a group of stone-pelters told this correspondent.

During the summer agitation of 2010 separatist leader Syed Ali Shah Geelani had castigated the youth for resorting to stone-pelting. Geelani, after being released from jail, said that stone-pelting gives licence to the security forces to fire on innocent people.

But a stone-pelting group named the Kashmir Sangbaaz Force came down heavily on Geelani and said that the Kashmir issue had got new attention thanks to stone-pelting. Geelani was forced to modify his statement. He then said that stone-pelting is the only weapon available to Kashmiris in the present situation.

The response from security agencies has also undergone a change over the past few years. Previously, security men would chase the protesters away by wielding sticks. If the situation remained volatile then tear gas was fired.

But now, with stone-pelting becoming an organised form of protest and part of a larger strategy to have an escalation of violence, security forces no longer display the earlier patience. Instead they open fire with pellets, which cause serious injuries, and on occasion with bullets, resulting in deaths.

A group of boys chucking stones

Allegations have surfaced that stone-pelters are being paid for creating trouble in their respective areas in the Valley. During this summer's agitation some reports have emanated that activists of mainstream parties like the National Conference, the Congress and the Peoples Democratic Front have also been involved in stone-pelting.

"It has been observed that the people who start stone-pelting are given money to do so. They take money and start pelting stones at the forces personnel. As others join, the people who started the stone-pelting and who have taken money make an exit. It is due to this reason that professional stone-pelters are seldom harmed and it is the innocents who face the music from the police and security forces," said a Srinagar resident who has witnessed innumerable such incidents.

A stone pelter with his face covered

> **'The people who start stone-pelting are given money to do so. As others join they make an exit.'**

During this year's summer agitation hundreds of stone-pelters have been arrested by the security agencies. While the majority of them are lodged in jails in Jammu & Kashmir, some have been shifted outside the state.

Elders in Srinagar and elsewhere are seriously concerned. Pellets fired by the security forces have left many young men blind. Chucking stones is no longer the harmless protest that it used to be. It has instead become a means of escalating situations and adding to the distress of the people of Kashmir. ■

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‘The SC order is about women’s empowerment’

Poonam Muttreja on the ban on sterilisation camps in India

AJIT KRISHNA

Poonam Muttreja:‘The judges clearly saw the gravity of the situation’

Civil Society News
New Delhi

ON 14 September the Supreme Court banned mass sterilisation camps in India, putting an end to a system that had become synonymous with medical callousness.

Every year, young women have died in sterilisation camps because of unhygienic conditions and poorly performed procedures. Around 113 women are officially stated to have died after tubectomies in 2015-2016. But it is believed that the actual figures are several times higher than those conceded by the government.

Devika Biswas, a health activist, petitioned the Supreme Court after she witnessed a single surgeon, without gloves, doing tubectomies on 53 women in a school compound in Araria district of Bihar in January 2012.

Two years later, on 10 November 2014, 16 young women died at a mass sterilisation camp in Bilaspur district of Chhattisgarh. A fact-finding team uncovered chilling details: 83 women had been operated on by a single doctor. The same gloves, injection needle, syringe, and suture needle were used. There was only one laparoscope.

A Supreme Court Bench, led by Justice Madan B. Lokur, has now given the government three years to shut down such camps. In its 51-page judgment it has called sterilisation camps “perverse products of the Centre’s population control campaigns driven by informal targets and incentives”.

Instead of holding camps, says the judgment, the government must strengthen health centres, empower women and provide access. The order puts the onus on the Centre to ensure reproductive health services and frame a National Health Policy.

Civil Society spoke to Poonam Muttreja, director of Population Foundation of India, on the significance of the Supreme Court order. Muttreja has for long been in the vanguard of those demanding more scientific family planning measures and the availability of choice. She was part of the team that investigated the deaths of women in Bilaspur and published a damning report, “Robbed of Choice and Dignity: Indian Women Dead After Mass Sterilisation”.

What is the significance of the Supreme Court order?
The Supreme Court’s order is very significant because it takes a comprehensive view of sterilisation and all that’s been wrong with sterilisation camps for the past 60 years. The order doesn’t just talk about having fixed-day services. It also asks the government to treat women with dignity and provide quality health services. It places the responsibility of ensuring such services on the Centre. It is now incumbent on the Centre to ensure that states and districts follow quality guidelines and protocols. This is a central government programme.

So the order is about women’s empowerment and a range of issues.

The order questions why the responsibility of sterilisation is on women. What is the government going to do to bring about a balance between male and female sterilisation? It asks the government for a National Health Policy. Why is it that the government has a draft health policy for the past one-and-a-half years?

Second, the government has to report to the Supreme Court every six months. It has to inform the court what it has done along with figures and data. All this means that the government has no choice but to act. I believe that the central government is interested and committed. But states too don’t have a choice of not reporting. In fact, understanding how India functions and governance takes place, the judges have asked for this order to be sent to the Chief Justices of seven or eight states which have high sterilisation rates and the poorest quality of health services. These are the same states where other HDI indicators are poor.

Finally, I think the order is very significant because it puts women’s empowerment, dignity and family planning — which became a political hot potato after the Emergency — on the agenda of the Government of India.

What do you think led to this order?
They were able to do this partly because they had the Bilaspur report that we did. The report was submitted as part of the PIL. I think the judges got an understanding of the history, current status and in-depth details of the issue. Population and family planning are full of myths and misconceptions.

I have not seen an order on any development issue so perfect. The judges saw clearly the gravity of the situation. The government’s perspective was also considered. They interacted with the Ministry of Health and Family Welfare too and asked for a lot of information. A citizen’s report is, I understand, not enough. Tragic as the deaths of 16 women in Bilaspur was, it has led to a huge potential and possibility of improving sterilisation services.

The women are really martyrs.
Exactly.

So what is the way forward?
Civil society groups will have to step in and work closely with the government at district level. They will need to hand-hold and provide technical support. For instance, we have drawn up a plan. We have been working on family planning at the district level.

See, the order doesn’t just talk of sterilisation but is asking for temporary methods. At district level, the problem is you don’t have trained ANMs (Auxilliary Nurse Midwife) or counsellors who can meet the demand for such services at district level.

Project Implementation Plans are supposed to be based on village-level planning. But when you draw up plans at village level you don’t know whether such services and infrastructure are available at district level. So we have to do an assessment at district level, identify the gaps and strategise on filling them. Budgets have to be allocated. Then monitoring mechanisms have to be put in place at district level. Otherwise you won’t see a change. We are a coalition of 170 NGOs. We have offered full

support to the government. We have to work at district level with a range of partners. This can't be done sitting in Delhi.

What are the resources you need?
You need people — surgeons for sterilisation and doctors in the public health system. There are retired gynaecologists in the public health system who could be brought in on contract. You can also have contracts with the private health sector for sterilisations on fixed days at community health centres.

You have to ensure that you have all facilities at the community health centre or district hospital. You can provide services on fixed days and share this information with the community. They can be informed in advance that such services will be provided, say, every Monday. The ASHA can register the women in advance. You should be able to register over the phone. We don't want to replicate the methods of the camp. If the facility is for 10 or 20 women we don't want 80 women coming in. If the facility is fully booked the ASHA should be informed via SMS so that she can reschedule the women for the next week.

We need counselling services for contraception. We must provide a mix. A long-lasting contraception method should be introduced. For instance, the Indian Council of Medical Research (ICMR) has done a study on implants and if these are feasible they should be introduced.

It is shocking that women who are so young opt for sterilisation.
A lot of women at a very young age — some as young as 20 — opt for sterilisation. The women who died in Barwani were all in their twenties.

The reason is that no other method is offered to them. They don't want more children. See, wanted fertility, according to NFHS (National Family Health Survey) data, is 1.9 in India. So what do you do? We have to ensure that condoms and pills, which are supposed to be distributed by ASHAs, are made available in the village itself. We have to step up services for IUCDs (intrauterine contraceptive devices).

We also need a mass campaign to dispel myths around vasectomy. Men must take more responsibility for family planning. A lot of people have more children than they really want in the hope of having a son. Women who don't have male children are treated very badly. So we need to tell people that it is the male chromosome that determines the sex of the child. Blaming women for daughters or remarrying for a son is totally wrong and unscientific.

You would do away with incentives?
India is the only country in the world that gives incentives. If we start providing good quality

> **'Women, some as young as 20, opt for sterilisation because no other method is offered.'**

services we won't need incentives because people want to reduce family size. There is huge unwanted fertility and a huge unmet need for family planning. The money we spend on incentives can be spent on better services. Budgets for health aren't increasing. Then there is our demographic dividend. So we should be providing temporary methods because young people don't need sterilisation.

Incentives are to blame for the careless, callous numbers game we have been playing. The doctor gets incentives, so does the nurse, and so it goes down the line. As a result, doctors do 80 sterilisations instead of 30 because they earn more money. Wherever there are incentives, a numbers game begins. There is corruption. Numbers are also deliberately exaggerated.

What changes did the report bring about?
The Chhattisgarh government took our report seriously. They strengthened the infrastructure and improved systems. We had asked for a help desk managed by an NGO to help the most underprivileged women and those in serious condition so that they are treated immediately. A large number of women come in. Those who died were tribal women.

So they set up help desks?
In Bilaspur. I don't know about the other districts. The NRHM director used to convene a meeting every three months of all the chief medical officers, doctors and people involved with infrastructure and they would report to us.

So you would say the court judgment marks a turning point. It represents an opportunity to rethink and reorient health services?
We must make sure we don't only support the government but we put in mechanisms for monitoring. The judgment will have to be implemented on a scale that is rather large. There doesn't seem to be a model by which it can be implemented. We are developing a pilot for the districts, starting with Bihar and UP. We hope to scale it up with the government. We would like it to be an innovation within the government. Jehanabad is one of our high-focus districts in Bihar.

We also drafted the population policy for the UP government. It has been approved by the cabinet secretary and has now gone to the cabinet. The UP government asked us to include all the points made by the Supreme Court judgment. We have developed it as a model policy. We are keen to develop a similar policy for Bihar. ■

Samita's World

by SAMITA RATHOR

An orchard in the desert

PICTURES BY AJIT KRISHNA

Chhogalal Soni's orchard of fruit trees in the sands of the Thar desert in Rajasthan

Civil Society News
Barmer

AT 68, Chhogalal Soni has the gruff ways of someone accustomed to taking on challenges. A tall man, with gnarled hands and a burly manner, he has a diehard demeanour. In the first few minutes when we meet him it becomes clear that he is someone who likes to go the distance.

For 12 years now, he has been achieving what many thought would be impossible — growing an orchard of fruit trees in the sands of the Thar desert in Rajasthan.

We link up with Soni in Barmer town. But 12 km away at Marudi village is the theatre of action where Soni's soul belongs. Here he has a 14-hectare farm, which was originally just sand, but now also has innumerable trees growing, almost impossibly, in the sand.

Locally, Soni has come to be known for his unusual passion to green the desert in ways that hadn't been imagined before, not in Barmer at least.

Soni seems very much a man caught up in his own world as he enters his farm through two small crudely built rooms on the periphery.

Yet in his own taciturn style he lets it be known that he does like the attention he gets. Journalists like us, from Delhi, stopping by to meet him, are all part of a private high.

"I want the world to remember me for something I have done. Something impossible. So I decided to grow fruit trees in the sands of the desert," he tells us.

But what is the secret of his success? How does he grow fruit trees in conditions where almost nothing else grows and rainfall isn't in plenty though the occasional deluge does strike Barmer?

Soni poses with one of his fruit trees

"It is hard work. It means spending long hours tending to the plants. Watering them, giving them nutrients. I've laboured here every day for weeks and months together. It is 12 years now," he says.

Constant tending together with drip irrigation taking moisture to the roots of the plants seem to be the secret of Soni's success. A network of pipes runs across the farm carrying water from a tubewell. There are a couple of farm-hands, but it is really Soni who puts humungous effort into maintaining a balance of moisture and nutrients and keeping pests away.

> **'I want the world to remember me for something I have done. Something impossible.'**

On our visit to the farm in summer, we find the fruit trees have been withered by two consecutive scorching summers. There are limes, some berries, *karondas*, a few coconuts and some struggling pomegranates. But it is evident that the trees are under enormous stress.

In good times the orchard's list of successful trees has been impressive — mango, custard apple, guava, pomegranate, lime, coconut, *jamun, chikoo* and *amla.*

Soni has also managed to grow neem and gulmohar trees and some others too which we have difficulty identifying.

"They have been burnt by the sun," says Soni. "The water table has fallen because we have had poor rainfall. If we pump out water for a few hours, the level falls so low that we have to stop," he says.

It was July then and Soni was hopeful that after two bad years, it would rain this time. The farm is ringed by hills and so when it rains the water comes flowing down. The government had created two bunds and Soni has built three to slow the flow and let the water percolate into the ground.

This year the rains have been good — by expectations in the desert, of course. Soni tells us in October that the bunds have helped raise groundwater levels.

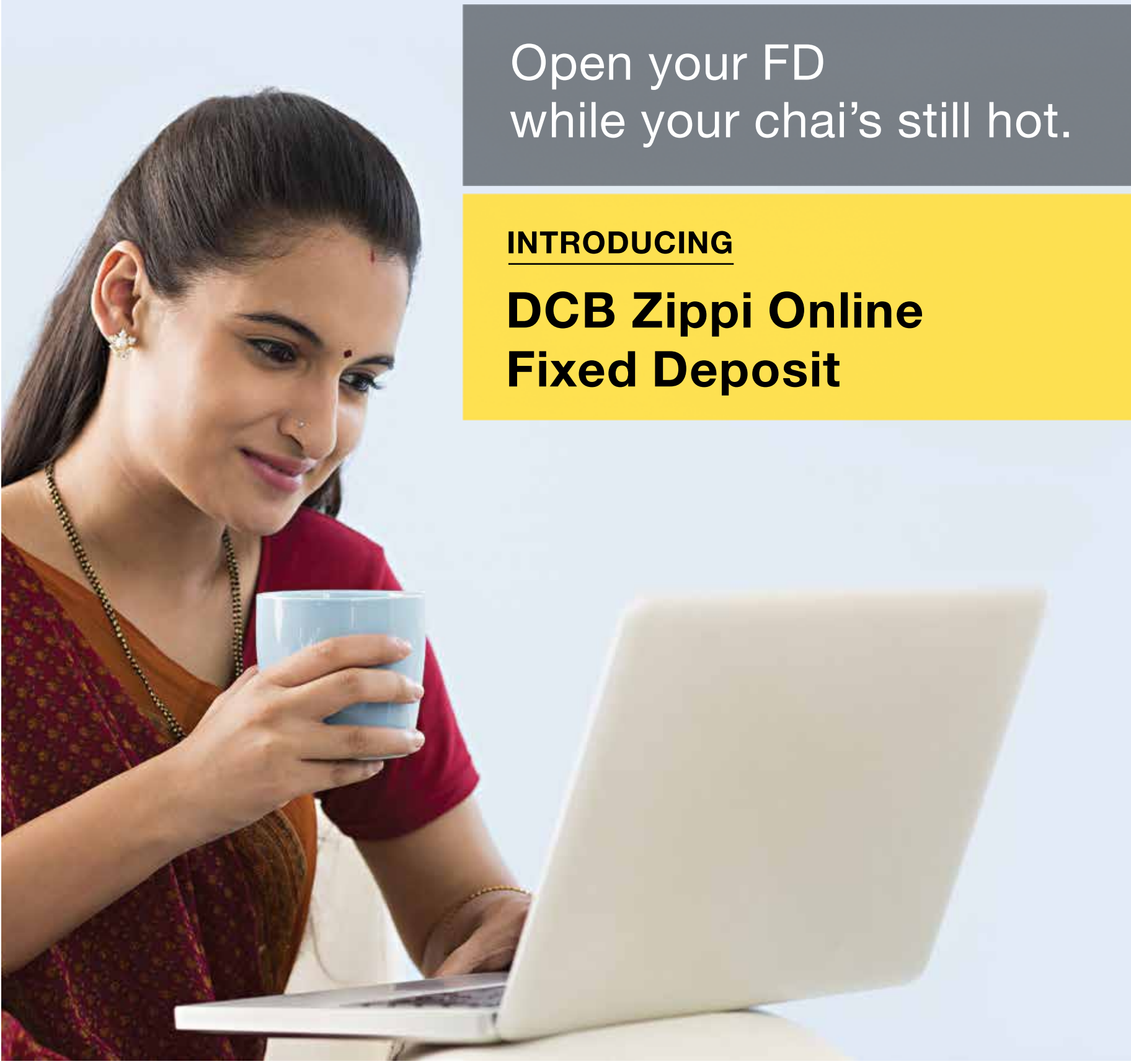
But Soni is now seriously looking at the commercial opportunities that his farm offers. He doesn't want it to be a mere private passion, a boutique activity anymore.

He sees a great opportunity in *amla* or the Indian gooseberry, which has medicinal properties and enormous demand if cultivated to standard.

He indicated his *amla* cultivation plans when we went around his farm with him in July. But now he is taking them up in full swing. He has got high quality *amla* grafts, which he expects will give him robust returns in coming years. He similarly hopes to benefit from other trees with medicinal value.

Soni had a clerical job in the revenue department. When the post came to be abolished he set up a small business, which did well initially but then ran out of luck as the debtors increased and he finally never paid up.

It was then that he decided to work on the land that belonged to his family but was not being put to use. ■



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MANGOSTEEN BONANZA IN KERALA VILLAGE

FARMER STRIKES IT RICH AND OTHERS FOLLOW

Mangosteen is neatly packed in boxes

Shree Padre
Chalakudy

THE road to the spectacular Athirapally Falls passes through Pariyaram, a little known village near Chalakudy town in Thrissur district of Kerala. Tourists don't stop here. There is no reason to except one — mangosteen, a fruit of Indonesian origin, is grown so successfully in Pariyaram that it is called 'mangosteen village'.

Pariyaram earns more than ₹1 crore annually from this fruit. The village has struck an unusually farmer-friendly deal with a buyer in Chennai. The fruit is assessed while it is still growing on the tree and the farmer is paid in advance. Only then are harvesters sent in to pluck the fruit, pack it and load it on a bus going straight to Chennai, avoiding random middlemen.

No government subsidy exists for mangosteen. Nobody promoted its cultivation. Not a single folder has been printed about it. Yet mangosteen cultivation is spreading just by word of mouth. Neighbours first noted the tree's progress in adjacent fields and then decided to plant their own mangosteen trees. There is probably no house in Pariyaram that doesn't own one or two mangosteen plants. A few have five or 10 trees. A sizeable number of households have a coppice of over 50 trees.

It isn't as if mangosteen *(Garcinia mangostana)* is grown only in Pariyaram. Many parts of Pathnamthitta and Ernakulam districts grow it too. But nowhere is the crop grown as abundantly as in Pariyaram village. Nowhere is the fruit tastier. Yet, strangely, there is no local demand. The people of Kerala don't know about this small money-spinner that is thriving in their midst.

M.K. Marlin, a 58-year-old farmer, is the architect of the village's marketing strategy. Marlin pioneered mangosteen cultivation in Pariyaram.

For two months, from April 25 every year, Marlin's shed is a hive of activity. Almost the entire mangosteen crop of the village is pooled here. Action begins at the crack of dawn. By 7 am, on alternate days, Marlin sends out 38 harvesters and 10 villagers to each mangosteen household in the village to collect the fruit and bring it to his shed.

Neighbours first noted the tree's progress in adjacent fields and then decided to plant their own mangosteen trees.

Mangosteen is a climacteric fruit. This means once the fruit is plucked, it undergoes rapid changes resulting in a short shelf life at ambient temperature. The fruit grows on the tree singly and not in bunches. So locating each fruit nestled amid dark green shiny leaves needs a sharp eye and patience. Harvesting the fruit also needs a tender touch. Although mangosteen has a thick skin, it gets damaged if it falls and broken fruit doesn't sell.

That's why Marlin picks youngsters to harvest the fruit. They don't have to go beyond a 20-km radius. The young harvesters climb the trees with a long stick fitted with a net at one end. The ripe fruit has a paler green colour, tinged with violet.

Once the fruit arrives it is packed into cardboard boxes by a team of five. The buyer in Chennai, who pays a wholesale price for the fruit, supplies the 10-kg boxes. The packing work continues uninterrupted as loads from nearby areas come in intermittently after 10 am. By 4 pm, the packing is completed.

Then Marlin's shed buzzes with a different set of activities. The fruit crates are unloaded and some fruit is rejected. The boxes are weighed and stacked. The packers have a deadline so everything is done with clockwork efficiency.

Every evening a private bus from Ernakulam bound for Chennai picks up these fruit boxes. It stops in Chalakudy town to collect some more boxes of mangosteen. The next morning, by 7 am, the fruits reach the wholesale market at Koyambedu in Chennai. The fruit is unloaded, auctioned and supplied to different buyers in nearby towns and cities. In fact, the fruit reaches the end consumer the very next day after being harvested.

The season begins with two or three quintals of the fruit being collected. At that stage mangosteen fetches a high price of ₹400 per kg in Chennai. During the peak season every day two tonnes — 200 boxes — are sent to Chennai from Pariyaram. The price is lower during this time.

Joshua Daniel, a trader from Pathnamthitta, has been consistently buying mangosteen from Pariyaram for the past 50 years. Marlin partners him in coordinating the sale, procurement, packing and transport of the fruit to Chennai.

When the mangosteen trees begin to flower, Daniel's son, Siby Joshua, arrives in the village. He lives in Chalakudy for four months to initiate the business of selling mangosteen.

Marlin and Sibi visit mangosteen farmers. They assess the crop and quote a price. The buyer in Chennai pays for harvesting and transport. If a deal is struck,

PICTURES BY SHREE PADRE

Mangosteen boxes being sent to Chennai

a token advance is paid immediately to the farmer. The balance is paid before the start of the first harvest. This year, ₹80 lakh was paid in advance to all mangosteen farmers. Five years ago, the initial money paid was ₹20 lakh.

"I am very satisfied with mangosteen," says K.C. John, 75, a retired teacher. He has about 60 mangosteen trees and an equal number of nutmeg trees on his land, which is a little more than an acre. A few tall coconut trees, standing like umbrellas, complete the picture.

Last year John earned ₹1.75 lakh from mangosteen and ₹1 lakh from nutmeg. He estimates that his annual yield of mangosteen is about four tonnes. This year he got ₹3 lakh from mangosteen and around ₹1.5 to 2 lakh for nutmeg. He also has a few fecund rambutan trees which fetch him an income.

Another farmer, A.D. George, has only five mangosteen trees in his compound. These have been yielding fruit for the last five years. His one-acre homestead has 50 nutmeg trees around 20 years old. George says he earns ₹1 lakh from nutmeg and around ₹30,000 from mangosteen.

"From the farmer's point of view I feel mangosteen is a far better crop," he says. "We have to harvest nutmeg ourselves every two or three days for about six months in the year. Its peak output is during the rainy season. So we have to dry it artificially. Now look at mangosteen. The buyers themselves harvest the fruit. Its main fruiting time is over in just two months. Most of the crop is harvested before the onset of the monsoon."

Like John and George, each homestead has a mix of crops. Nobody grows mangosteen as a monocrop — in an orchard. This is because initially everyone started planting mangosteen for their own consumption. Once they realised its commercial potential, farmers started planting more and more trees.

The mangosteen tree grows to a height of six to 25 metres. The whitish fruit pulp is sweet and juicy with a very pleasant aroma. Its deep reddish-purple rind is not edible. Once ripened, the rind turns soft. The fruit contains five segments, two with seeds and the rest seedless and wholly edible. The seeds are used for propagation.

THE FIRST TREE

So how did mangosteen, an unknown fruit in India, find fertile ground in Pariyaram? Marlin says that, nearly a century ago, his great-grandfather, Moothedan Varghese, went to Malaysia for higher studies. When he returned to his village, people would address him as '*beeyekkaran*' — one who has studied up to BA level. At that time, just six people had college degrees.

He also brought some mangosteen seeds from Malaysia. From those seeds came the village's first mangosteen tree. It is now 90 years old and still yields around 600 kg of fruit. This tree, whose progeny brought prosperity to the village, now stands on Kevin Nicholas' land. He bought the tree from a member of Marlin's family a few years ago.

The first saplings of the mother tree are now about 60-70 years old. About three or four Moothedan households own 50 old trees. Since the tree is rare and its fruit tasty it was gifted to Moothedan girls when they got married. Soon, 40 households were growing mangosteen.

In 1991 Marlin planted 100 mangosteen plants in his coconut garden. "It wasn't because I was disappointed with my coconut trees," recalls Marlin. "Everywhere in cities I used to see truckloads of grapes, oranges and other fruit arriving. All these fruits used to be sold sooner or later. It wasn't as if the fruit turned rotten because there were no buyers."

Marlin concluded that fruit always had a bright future. So he decided to try out mangosteen. Moothedan families were sentimental about the fruit since their renowned forefather had introduced it. The first batch of trees Marlin planted began yielding fruit in four years although he cautions that it is best to give the tree a five-year gestation period.

Marlin didn't sell the fruits his trees yielded the first time. Instead, he presented the fruit to friends and relatives. It was the second year's fruit that he took to Ernakulam to sell. "I got ₹30 per kg, but it was a good price in those days," he says. This initial success prompted him to plant mangosteen in a big way. He now has 600 trees interspersed between his coconut trees on his 5.5-acre coconut garden. All of them yield fruit. In all probability, Marlin's farm yields the most mangosteen fruit in Kerala and in all of India.

Mangosteen requires light shade and good irrigation. Perhaps because Pariyaram is a water-rich area, all the households we visited had opted for flood irrigation that requires a huge amount of water.

PLANTS AND SEEDS

Marlin invested in a nursery 15 years ago. Every year, the nursery produces 40,000 to 50,000 plants for sale. Apart from seedlings he has plants that are two, three and four years old too. Many buyers prefer to purchase older plants since their gestation period is lower.

In fact, Marlin wanted to keep the entire mangosteen crop of one year just to raise plants. "But the kind of demand we had for the fruit didn't permit me to do so," he says. So he settled for injured or broken fruit for seed selection. Mangosteen seedlings perform much better than grafts so they are in high demand.

Pariyaram village has witnessed many ups and downs in the past 50 years. For a long period, coconut was the main crop here. "Our foundation was coconut. My father, Kurien, built this house and developed assets only with income from coconut," recalls Marlin. But the coconut trees got afflicted by root wilt and other diseases. Labour became scarce. The coconut trees are still there but coconut isn't seen as a lucrative crop anymore.

In the mid-Nineties nutmeg began winning the hearts of farmers. And then mangosteen began attracting attention. From the farmer's point of view, mangosteen is easier to harvest and can withstand a few days of water-logging. Nutmeg cannot. It is fragile and prone to fungal disease. Mangosteen trees are

Harvesters bring the village's mangosteen to a collection centre

The 90-year-old mangosteen tree that changed the fortunes of the village

The fruit has to be harvested delicately since it grows in singles and is prone to breakage

M.K. Marlin whose great grandfather planted the first mangosteen trees

more hardy.

"Nutmeg fetches a price of ₹200 per kg. Even if you get half of that for mangosteen, it is still a better crop for us," says Marlin, "From a unit area, we get three times what we get from nutmeg."

K.C. John's garden clearly illustrates the farmer's priorities. He has grown mangosteen trees between nutmeg. In fact, both compete for sunlight. John has heavily pruned his nutmeg trees to ensure that mangosteen's yield doesn't decline because of lack of sunlight.

Why does mangosteen from Pariyaram fetch such a high price? "In this village the fruit matures a fortnight before other mangosteen-growing villages. In other words, just when the temperature rises in Chennai in summer and demand for fruit increases, our mangosteen fruit is ready. Besides, farmers in Pariyaram take care of their mangosteen trees and pamper them with irrigation and fertilisers," explains Daniel.

RICH SOIL

K. Kumaran, an associate professor of history in a private college and a family friend of Marlin, says: "I have visited Ranni and Konnietc in Pattanamthitta district where mangosteen is widely grown. You don't get mangosteen of the same quality as Chalakudy *taluk* anywhere in Kerala. The reason is the rich alluvial soil here. It's the environment that produces such top-class mangosteen."

But a big drawback is that there is absolutely no local demand. For several years, Marlin would send his consignment of mangosteen to bigger cities like Thrissur and Ernakulam. Unlike mango or pineapple, just a few quintals would be bought.

"If it rains in Ernakulam, demand for mangosteen suddenly goes down," says Marlin.

The marketing opportunity in Chennai, started five years ago, has made a world of difference to mangosteen farmers. "There is no tension now," says Marlin. "No other crop fetches us the kind of income that mangosteen does. A farmer with just one acre of fruit trees can earn up to ₹6 lakh at the prevailing rate."

There are many farmers in Pariyaram who own 50-100 trees. Not all farmers sell their crop to Daniel. About 20-30 percent of mangosteen is now sold to other buyers. Lately, some traders who buy the entire crop in advance, harvest and send the fruit to local markets have made their presence felt.

Daniel's network spreads beyond the revenue boundaries of Pariyaram village. He buys a small percentage of mangosteen from neighbouring areas as well. This year Pariyaram's fruit was worth about ₹1 crore from around 100 farmers. The average weight of one fruit is between 80 and 100 gm. Currently, Marlin does not grade the fruit though it does vary in size. When prices start declining, grading becomes necessary.

The yield of mangosteen in the village has been increasing over the years. "Our Chennai buyer requires only two tonnes per day. But we are on the verge of

K.C. John in his garden with his trees

A.D. George with his mangosteen tree

crossing this figure. Everything is fine right now and returns are good but there is an element of risk. If demand turns sluggish in Chennai, they will ask us not to send maybe for a day. But we can't stop harvesting," says Marlin.

FUTURE DEMAND

Farmers here worry about what future demand will be. In India, mangosteen, a tropical evergreen tree, is being grown only in the south. At 1,000 tonnes, Kerala is India's leading mangosteen producer followed by Tamil Nadu where an estimated 200 tonnes of mangosteen is grown in Pollachi, Upper Palani hills and Coonoor. Karnataka comes third. It grows about 100 tonnes. But no real study has been done and these are just rough estimates. A few farmers in Pune and Thane are also cultivating mangosteen.

"Karnataka will overtake Kerala in a few years," predicts Jacob Chalissery, a farmer. "The overall situation in Kerala is not that conducive for exotic fruits like mangosteen." A few people from Kerala have started growing mangosteen in Karnataka's Dakshina Kannada district.

They know mangosteen cultivation is slowly catching up in Kerala and Karnataka. "The fact that there is no local demand for the fruit puts a big question mark on our future," says Marlin. Currently, the average price Pariyaram farmers get for mangosteen works out to around ₹150 per kg. "Even ₹100 is good for us," says Marlin.

There are two factors that come in the way of creating a market for mangosteen in North India and other regions where it hasn't made its presence felt. First, there is lack of awareness. Many people don't know of the fruit at all.

People who travel to Southeast Asia get to know about mangosteen and create a demand for the fruit when they return. Then, many youngsters from Hyderabad are studying in Ooty. These students and their parents sample mangosteen in Ooty. But when they go to buy the fruit in high-end shopping malls they find the price too steep. This year, it varied from ₹600 to ₹1,200 per kg. Those who have eaten the fruit in Bangkok or Malaysia begin wondering why the price is so steep here.

Farmers say it is the rich alluvial soil of Chalakudy taluk that makes their mangosteen unique. But there is no local demand for the fruit.

"Mangosteen has a good future if we make it reasonably affordable," says Jacob Chalissery, a mangosteen grower. He recently tied up with a mall in Bengaluru and insisted they sell it for ₹199 per kg. "Two stores of the same chain also sold mangosteen at this rate. The result was that demand rose steeply. Initially, around 10-20 kg of the fruit sold. In two or three weeks the figure reached one tonne," he says.

"If we sell directly to the consumer, mangosteen will become a very sustainable crop. We need to sell the fruit at a farm gate price of ₹50. Then we won't face any market crisis," says Chalissery.

Mangosteen has a shelf life of a fortnight under ambient conditions but there are issues. To send the fruit far, trays or boxes are required that would insulate it from damage and from the weather. In the peak of summer, rising temperature and lower humidity tends to dehydrate the fruit.

"It's time the government thought about creating cold storage facilities in rural areas where fruit and flower production is good. Unfortunately, the political set-up here does not encourage such facilities in villages," rues a farmer.

"When I planted mangosteen trees three decades ago, I didn't dream that it would expand so much and change the fortunes of our village," says Marlin with a hearty laugh. Of course, like him, most households planted mangosteen initially with the simple objective of getting enough fruit for the family. It didn't strike them that they had been blessed with a cash cow. ■

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The market beyond drip

SWAR takes moisture to the roots

PICTURES BY P. ANIL KUMAR

K.S. Gopal in the terrace garden above his office and home where he has installed SWAR

Civil Society News
Hyderabad

WHEN plants and trees need water how much are they really asking for and when and how should it be delivered? Figuring that out can mean a good chance at cracking a diverse customer base in rain-fed, water-starved parts of India where orchards, flower beds and vegetable gardens all cry out for more efficient irrigation.

K.S. Gopal of the Centre for Environment Concerns (CEC) has designed a system that is more efficient than drip irrigation because it is subterranean and delivers moisture to the roots of plants.

He says he has done it by talking to farmers, using practical science, and, most important of all, by observing what plants communicate about their water needs at different times in their lifecycles.

Gopal calls his technology SWAR or System of Water for Agricultural Rejuvenation. He already has paying customers for SWAR and ₹31 lakh of business has been booked by CEC since January. It expects to do ₹1 crore as turnover in the course of the year.

Gopal has received two significant global awards, which recognise SWAR as an innovation. The commercial possibilities are many. Clients have so far mainly been farms but the government has shown keen interest and entry into the national greening programme could mean exponential growth for the business — for instance the National Highway Authority of India wanting to grow trees along the roads it builds. One of the awards gave Gopal working capital of half a million dollars. It has subsidised the operation and so it is difficult to figure out profits clearly. But as the business grows it will be transferred from CEC to SWAR Technologies. and then numbers will be clearer.

Gopal, 64, is a serial social activist. He is one of the founders of the Deccan Development Society and when he moved on from that there were sundry pursuits until he joined CEC in Hyderabad in 1993. He has a management degree and believes it has given him an orientation that is useful for solving development-related problems.

He was assessing the working of the rural employment guarantee scheme when he saw that the single biggest asset creation was in water. But rainwater harvesting essentially put water back into the ground. There was a need to use it efficiently for agriculture so that it could contribute to rural prosperity.

FRUITING TREES

Gopal began designing a sub-surface system that could take moisture directly to the roots of plants without overwhelming them and also preserve the microorganisms in the soil on which plants draw.

The system needed to be in dialogue with plants. It had to provide an osmotic arrangement of demand and supply from which natural efficiencies would result. It meant rethinking what plants and trees require at different stages of their growth.

"The economic threshold yield of a fruit tree comes from year seven onwards. You can see the yield of the *chikoo* and mango (earlier) but that's not the real yield or the economic yield. For teak the economic yield comes from the 11th year," explains Gopal.

So, as a tree starts growing its demand for moisture keeps increasing. Higher yield is reflected in greater demand. A farmer who digs a borewell to get X amount of water for Y number of plants finds the maths has changed. After a point the farmer is unable to irrigate all the plants and decides to take care of a few and let the rest die from moisture stress.

"Manmohan Singh appointed an ICAR (Indian Council of Agricultural Research) committee to look into the high mortality of the adult fruit bearing trees in Maharashtra," recalls Gopal. "They came up with a report. But the core problem was how do we tackle moisture stress."

"When the tree is fully adult and at its peak performance, it is dying because there is no water. With different species, we ration water by supplying it to the root system. Drip irrigation is on the surface and has no concept of rationing. Our technology serves a dual purpose," says Gopal. "One purpose is to increase productivity when the going is good. And the second one is to keep the tree alive when the going is bad."

"My efficiency is I use one-fourth of the water that drip does. I am happy to say this is the first technology where I can keep the trees alive. I have been doing this since two years and this year we did it on 2,000 trees of different species."

Gopal says he teamed up with farmers and used the knowledge of scientists. The farmers had both the problem and the solution, but they did not know how to implement it.

"The farmers wanted to know how they could look after all their trees equally instead of just saving a few and leaving the others to die. They should at least survive during the summer period so that they have the chance to recoup again. These farmers gave an analogy — if we have less food and four kids to feed what we do is feed each one a little less food. Everyone's stomach will not be full but at the same time no one dies."

The challenge was to design a system for distributing water in much the same

way: each member of a family eats less so that all can survive.

Gopal has used his system in and around Anantapur, Hyderabad, Usmanabad and Bijapur.

VEGETABLE GARDEN

In Hyderabad, the system has been tried in the vegetable garden at Prakash's bungalow. He is Gopal's old buddy of many years. It is on the verandah of Prakash's beautiful, rambling home that Gopal first holds forth on himself and how SWAR works. He is a short, intense and amiable man who talks continuously about himself and SWAR. Ideas, thoughts, experiences, dates tumble out.

In Prakash's garden a little later we get to see how SWAR works. Water stored in an elevated tank flows through a network of pipes to the roots of the vegetable plants.

The water first collects in earthen pots, which are underground at root level. From the pots small, narrow pipes dispense the water in tiny drops into the surrounding soil, making it moist and conducive for microorganisms.

Through the moisture a harmonious relationship grows between the earthen pot and the plant whose roots reach out in search of moisture and nutrients to the extent it needs them.

What is needed is "wetting and sweating", says Gopal, and the earthen pot is crucial to this process. Thin pipes sticking out of it from a little above the lowest level provide the wetting when water flows into the pot once a day.

But once the moisture in the soil dries, the fibrous roots of the plant reach out to the pot where some water remains. This is when the sweating happens as the roots draw the remaining water in the pot.

There is one pot for three or four vegetable plants. But for trees there is one pot per tree.

Pipes carry water to earthen pots which are buried in the ground. From the pots very tiny pipes deliver water into the ambient soil.

The earthen pot with pipes from up close. What is needed is 'wetting and sweating'

A tomato plant survives 120 days and requires just 150 litres during this period under SWAR. But under drip irrigation, 600 litres are consumed.

POTS THAT SWEAT

It is important that pots are baked at between 450 and 550 degrees centigrade. It is enough to tell a potter to make pots that sweat. Quality of soil does make a difference, but only marginally so.

Traditionally, farmers bury earthen pots containing water to create moisture in the soil. A cotton wick is put in a hole at the bottom of the pot. But the wick becomes hard in no time and no water goes out. The result is there is only sweating.

But in the SWAR model the thin plastic pipes deliver water from the pot and create ambient moisture every time the pot is filled. The remaining water then comes out through sweating caused by suction when fibrous roots engulf the pot.

There are innumerable innovations to keep the system working. For instance, tiny bags of sand are used outside the pot to keep the moss from choking the plastic pipes. The purpose of the system is to reduce the consumption of water to the minimum and create ambient moisture, which puts the plant at ease.

"Water should be eased out slowly. It's not just water plus plant, but it is water plus microbes in the soil. This kind of irrigation system — moisture and microbes, wetting and sweating — is ideal in tropical countries," says Gopal.

The savings are pretty impressive. A tomato plant survives 120 days and requires just 150 litres during this period under SWAR. But under drip irrigation, 600 litres are consumed.

Mango at an early stage requires eight litres a day under drip irrigation but under SWAR just five litres a day is needed. As it matures, mango is given 150 litres a day, but under SWAR it is just 30 litres.

Knowing when to irrigate a plant is important. When it is fruiting the demand is more. But there are times, as in the case of the mango, when no water may be needed.

Plants are also wired to draw water during the monsoon. So, if the rains are deficient, it is a good idea to give them water so that they can make up the shortfall. Gopal first noticed this with *sitaphal* or custard apple.

"If the monsoon doesn't give rain, give it some water. And it will transform in yield both in terms of size and more yield," Gopal explains.

It is still early days for SWAR but there are opportunities that present themselves in urban vegetable farming, saving old trees and the growing of orchards.

"Hopefully we will get some people next year who can run it as a business and certain revenues will keep coming to us so that we will continue to have our fun. Because development is more or less fun," says Gopal. ■

The elderly start-up

Kavita Charanji
Gurgaon

PICTURES BY AJIT KRISHNA

Harprasad Bhattacharya and his wife with their Care Manager, Swati Mukherjee, and Bhupinder Sharma, Care Operations Controller

ARNAB Sen lives and works in New York where he leads a clinically oriented physician engagement company. His mother passed away 20 years ago and his 80-year-old father, Professor Arun Sen, who lives in Pitampura in Delhi, has virtually lost his vision. A viral fever weakened him so severely that he needed to be hospitalised.

Prof. Sen, a former teacher of psychology at Delhi University, felt depressed and reclusive. He has an aging, loyal caretaker who helps him with his meals and household chores but nobody to turn to for emotional support.

Far from home, Arnab and his brother constantly worried about their father. "Our chief concerns were how to deal with medical emergencies and, given his eye condition, how to ensure that his routine needs like doctor visits, going to the bank and social engagements were taken care of on an ongoing basis," says Arnab.

It was Samarth, a start-up that provides professional assistance and support to senior citizens, that gave the brothers peace of mind, says Arnab. He is a close friend of Asheesh Gupta, Samarth's founder and Chief Care Officer. They were colleagues at McKinsey.

The Samarth team took care of the hospitalisation process, the logistics of doctor visits, home lab tests and nursing support. They kept tabs on him. Now, says Arnab, a younger group in Samarth is helping his father engage socially and drawing up a long-term plan for his emotional well-being.

Emotional support, like physical support, plays an important role in the lives of senior citizens, says Gupta. He founded Samarth with Anuradha Das Mathur, Gaurav Agarwal and Sanjay Ahuja. While Mathur and Gupta are also co-founders of 9.9 Media, a speciality media company, Agarwal has been a successful banker. The US-based Ahuja is a well-established entrepreneur.

The team carried out a research study before launching their start-up in March this year. They spoke to 1,000 respondents, both parents and offspring. Their findings revealed that offspring were more worried about whether their parents had physical support like security, safety, access to emergency services and home maintenance. However, parents greatly missed emotional support — companionship, people to talk to, socialise with and opportunities to go out and feel productive. They needed someone they could trust.

"We felt we had to go that extra mile. much like a son, daughter or an old friend," says Gupta.

"We combined findings from our surveys with our ideas to create a support structure for elders from affluent backgrounds. Our objective is to bring joy and happiness to elders and concomitantly assist offspring in getting support for their parents without compromising their own careers and family life," adds Agarwal.

The start-up has two components. Samarth Community is a non-profit that runs community programmes for senior citizens while Samarth Care is a for-profit service offered by Samarth Life Management Private Ltd.

Asheesh Gupta, Samarth's founder and Chief Care Officer

Samarth Community has over 5,000 members in 30 cities of India. For a one-time payment of ₹100, members get a card that fetches them discounts of 10-25 percent from restaurants, hospitals, labs, pharmacies, tours, hotels and events, affiliated to Samarth. Members also get a weekly newsletter, a subscription-based quarterly magazine, a list of local events and sporadic job offers for retired people.

Sandeep Sinha, Head of Care Programmes, is responsible for community development, partnerships and alliances. Sinha is constantly expanding Samarth's network of members, partners and affiliates. Samarth has tied up with Max Healthcare, Columbia Asia and Apollo Pharmacy. They offer additional discounts or services to Samarth members. Max Healthcare assures free ambulance services within 30 minutes to members anywhere in the National Capital Region (NCR).

Similarly, Samarth has connected with Delhi Pain Management Centre and More Supermarket. It is in talks with Cafe Coffee Day, chef Sanjeev Kapoor's The Yellow Chilli chain of restaurants and Chaayos. "It is a win-win situation for everybody. Our partners and affiliates get additional footfalls while our members get discounts and benefits," says Sinha.

Samarth's for-profit company, Samarth Life Management Private Ltd, offers subscription-based care plans. Starting at ₹2,000 a month, senior citizens in Delhi-NCR can opt for a plan tailored to their needs. Samarth offers a 24-hour emergency response, healthcare support, medicine management, home services, security and safety set-ups, companionship, buying assistance and accompanied travel within or outside town.

Some of these services are outsourced after a thorough check. So Zimmber has been brought in to take care of home maintenance while Silvan provides hi-tech home automation systems like voice controlled fans, lights and air-conditioners for less mobile senior citizens.

These services can be accessed through a call centre, a mobile app or a care manager, a person who needs to be sensitive and be like a close companion. Senior citizens tend to choose the last option.

Take the Bhattacharyas of Gurgaon. Their Care Manager is Swati Mukherjee who has seen them through some hard times. She is an anchor for 76-year-old Harprasad Bhattacharya, a retired academic who worked with the World Bank. Some time ago, the worried couple was completely at sea about a medical intervention that Bhattacharya needed until she stepped in. She helped admit him to Fortis Hospital in Gurgaon where he underwent a bronchoscopy procedure. Now the Bhattacharyas rely on her when they need medical assistance, or to negotiate an ongoing legal case or even shop for groceries.

An important team member (and co-founder) is technology wizard Dinesh Budhiraja, Head of Care Technology. He oversees Samarth's website, app, customer relationship software and leads its operations team. Many times he pitches in as a care consultant to members like Prof. Sen and the Bhattacharyas.

Another enthusiastic team member is Bhupinder Sharma, Care Operations Controller. Like everyone in the start-up he juggles his varied roles with ease. He speaks with pride about his part in Samarth's recent CCTV installation for Prof. Sen. Other achievements, he says, are the setting up of handle support and anti-skidding facilities in toilets for a client.

The Samarth team says things have shaped up better than expected. There is great demand for tours and events by their senior citizen members. Around 20-30 members sign up every day to join the community. Senior citizen associations too express interest. "The most important thing is that there is acceptance for what we are offering and that is what we are most excited about," says Gupta. ■

Don't bore children

DILEEP RANJEKAR

BACK TO SCHOOL

DURING the past three months, I have seen some short educational films prepared around existent examples of certain schools, teachers, head teachers and teaching practices. Almost all the films were made to showcase practices that a larger cross-section of people mostly connected with the education domain could learn from. The production quality of the films was quite good, the illustrations were relevant, the situations were real and some of our team members truly needed to be complimented for what they had done despite obstacles. With the kind of low awareness and low expectations that society in general has with regard to school education, some viewers were bound to get carried away by some of the films.

While the films were generally good to watch, they disappointed me for the very base level messages that they were conveying. Some of the pedagogical processes had the potential to even convey or re-enforce wrong examples/methods/ principles.

STIFLING EXPRESSION

One of the films captured a school event — well attended by parents, community members and some government dignitaries like the district collector. The film depicted children in Class 1 and Class 2 presenting a dance with a patriotic song playing in the background. The actions suggested a well-choreographed sequence with no "tolerance for error". This was evident because there were some children who went out of step and were visibly terrorised (through body language) by their teachers. In the same film, there was another action sequence with the teacher singing a nursery rhyme ("Baa, Baa, Black Sheep" followed by "Twinkle, Twinkle, Little Star"). These were Class 1 students and some children were doing their own actions rather than syncing with the rest of the group. However, the teachers would not tolerate that — since that was not how they had taught the children. The children had no freedom to interpret the songs in their own manner — they could only follow what was told to them.

Several thoughts came to my mind. The overriding thought was: "How is this different from normal rote learning?" Another thought was: "Why couldn't we find other songs in local languages, why resort to the usual 'Twinkle, Twinkle'?" Third thought: "What is wrong if a child expresses 'Twinkle, Twinkle, Little Star' in his or her own way rather than strictly conforming to what was taught?" Fourth: "Could the teachers have done something else that had the potential to make children think and do something more creative?"

The district collector in his longish speech praised the school and the teachers for disciplining the children well and ensuring that even the younger children in Classes 1 and 2 followed the instructions of the teachers. While he was well-meaning and supportive of good-quality education, his speech smacked of traditional thought on discipline, rote learning and the like.

Another film celebrated a teacher who ensured 100 percent children being able to read and write. The teacher spoke eloquently about the importance of language, reading, understanding and so on as the basic foundation for learning. However, his teaching methods bordered on rote learning. He was reading loudly in the class and the children were repeating what he read. There was a lot of learning material visible in the classroom. The film could have dealt with how he used multiple learning material and methods to develop reading with understanding. There was practically no focus on understanding by the children.

Another teacher explained the concept of zero by saying "zero means nothing". He demonstrated this by shifting a piece of chalk from one hand to another. He explained, "When the chalk was in the left hand, there was something there. The moment it was shifted to the right hand, 'nothing' was left in that hand." This was a highly debatable example and the teacher also missed the opportunity to mention how zero, when placed at the right place, enhances the value of a denomination. One was left wondering how the children would interpret the concept of zero going forward in their lives.

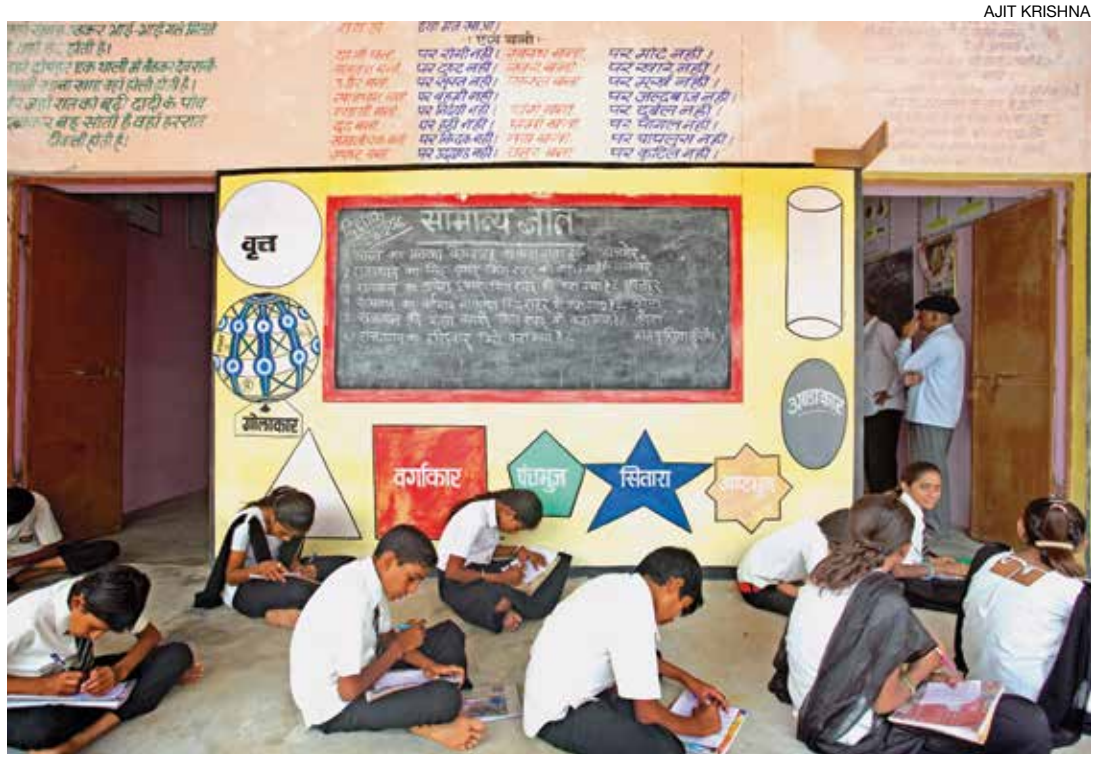
There were several other examples in the films that either reinforced rote learning practices or conveyed acceptance of some of the infrastructure and other access inadequacies.

Will I stop the usage of these films? The answer is a resounding "No"! At best I will suggest a few modifications in them.

Why am I discussing all this?

Continued on page 26

AJIT KRISHNA



While the films were generally good to watch, they disappointed me for the very base level messages that they were conveying.

Continued from page 25

While any improvement in teaching-learning methods is welcome, it should not celebrate and inadvertently propagate processes that are not consistent with the goals of our policy and curricular framework. I visit a lot of schools which try to showcase good practices. They enforce a lot of discipline which is threatening for the students. Schools are kept clean by deploying additional resources or forcing children to clean them. There is very little focus on explaining the importance of hygiene and clean habits.

I am confident that if students understand the importance of keeping their surroundings clean, they will not create dirt. And there is no rote way of learning cleanliness. While the end result is important, the method to achieve the end result is at the heart of the education process. That is the reason I found it rather unique when the principal of a school explained to me how every child in the school was taught basic sanitary and toilet habits that have kept their toilets clean without further effort. Using the toilet the right way and keeping it clean has become second nature for those children and they also take these habits home.

While the end result is important the method to achieve the end result is at the heart of the education process.

It is some simple habits like turning off the water tap completely, stopping leakages in time, understanding and discussing what every drop of wasted water means to the world, providing suitable dustbins on the premises and not throwing the mid-day meal leftovers all around inside the school that have a huge potential for developing the future personality of a child. And involving children in understanding the reasons for doing all this would go a long way.

All this may appear very non-educational but is so important in the education process. It is the approach that is critical.

The moment we stop merely "telling" our children what to do and begin explaining, allow them to be themselves and accept their different interpretations of what they learn, we will begin real education. It would also help us move away from expecting children to follow just the one way that we teach them.

Capturing better teaching-learning practices and spreading them is necessary. However, before we do that, we must examine whether they are conveying some wrong principles. More specifically, any possibility of people misunderstanding the message must be eliminated. In a nation where the deeper understanding of education is seriously missing, any tokenism leading to the promotion of existing mediocre educational practices must be studiously avoided. ■

Dileep Ranjekar is CEO of the Azim Premji Foundation.

INDIA FIGHTS OVER WATER, BUT NOT FOR ITS RIVERS

HIMANSHU THAKKAR

IT's natural for rivers to be in the news during the monsoon or a drought, but that is not the only reason why rivers are being discussed these days. It seems, most of the time, rivers are in the news for all the wrong reasons!

For example, the Cauvery is in the news for the never-ending dispute between Karnataka and Tamil Nadu on sharing of its waters, a conflict that keeps rearing its head whenever there is a deficit year. The Cauvery Disputes Tribunal award remains unimplemented, since the Special Leave Petitions of Karnataka and Tamil Nadu are pending in the Supreme Court for nine years. Meanwhile, the apex court ordered water to be released on a rather ad hoc basis on 5, 12, 20 and 27 September. Finally, an expert committee was sent to assess ground realities. Unfortunately, the dispute is about the Cauvery, but the poor river's condition is on no one's radar. Everyone is only talking about its water!

Similarly, both the Mahanadi and Mahadayi are in the news for interstate water disputes. In the case of the Mahanadi — considered a surplus water river by the Government of India — a dispute has broken out between Odisha and Chhattisgarh. Odisha is accusing upstream state Chhattisgarh of building barrages and dams to store and divert so much water that Odisha will face a crisis. In fact, Odisha has also been diverting water for industry and urban areas, to the detriment of farmers. Neither state is particularly worried about the condition of the river.

In the case of the Mahadayi, the dispute is between upstream Karnataka and Maharashtra, who are building dams to divert water, which is opposed by downstream Goa. Here again, the states seem least bothered about the river itself, with Goa planning to allow navigation on it without any assessment of its impact on the river. The only bright spot of this episode is that the Mahadayi Water Disputes Tribunal, in an interim order of 25 July 2016, actually said that water flowing to the sea is not waste.

Telangana and Andhra Pradesh are locked in Krishna and Godavari water-sharing disputes, which are bound to spill over to Maharashtra and Karnataka, among other basin states.

The river Indus featured in front-page headlines and breaking news for several days, but in the context of Indo-Pakistan tensions and some elements talked about shutting off water flow to Pakistan. The prime minister declared that water and blood cannot flow together. Blood should not be flowing under any circumstances and terrorist activities must come to an end, but it is not possible to shut off the flow of water from the Indus, Chenab or Jhelum, the three western rivers flowing to Pakistan under the 1960 Indus treaty. An attempt to hurry up projects in Kashmir, without an informed or participatory process, will only affect the people, rivers, environment,

The Cauvery river flowing through Karnataka

biodiversity and landscape of Kashmir. The people of the state have been suffering for over two decades and they are being asked to suffer more for questionable projects and objectives.

As feared, China promptly declared that it has diverted a tributary of the Yarlung Zangbo (the Siang river, one of the main tributaries of the Brahmaputra) in Tibet for building the Lalho multipurpose storage project on the river. Many saw it as a Chinese threat to India for suggesting that India could review the Indus water treaty with China's ally, Pakistan, to reduce or stop water flow to Pakistan. No one, unfortunately, is thinking of the sustained existence of the rivers in this whole episode.

RIVER-LINKING

The river-linking fundamentalism of the current Union government has recently led to the wildlife clearance recommended for the Ken-Betwa River Link project, by the Steering Committee of the National Board of Wildlife, chaired by Union Environment Minister of State (Independent Charge) Anant Madhav Dave. This clearance will lead to the destruction of the Panna Tiger Reserve, the habitat of tigers, vultures and other wildlife, the Ken river and its catchment, the Ken Ghariyal Sanctuary downstream and large parts of Bundelkhand itself.

The project does not even have a proper Environment or Social Impact Assessment, nor the landscape management plan that was supposed to be part of the Environment Management Plan. The project was being sold for the benefit of Bundelkhand, but would in essence facilitate export of Bundelkhand's water to outside Bundelkhand's area in the Upper Betwa basin. It will not solve any of the problems of Bundelkhand. For whatever little benefit is claimed for Bundelkhand, there are much better alternatives. Here again, rivers are in the news for projects that will destroy them.

Unfortunately, the dispute is about the Cauvery, but the poor river's condition is on no one's radar. Everyone is only talking about its water!

During the monsoon, the Ganga crossed its highest recorded flood levels at a number of places including Patna and its upstream and downstream areas. Closer scrutiny revealed that two dams played a major role in creating this avoidable flood disaster. Sudden and avoidable water release of over 10 lakh cusecs from the Bansagar dam on the Sone river in Madhya Pradesh upstream was the primary trigger for these floods.

As Bihar Chief Minister Nitish Kumar highlighted, the Farakka dam downstream worsened the floods as it has been doing for several decades now, creating drainage congestion in the Ganga basin in the upstream. Nitish Kumar has rightly advocated that we need an independent assessment of the usefulness of the Farakka dam, prior to taking a decision about its decommissioning. That will certainly help the cause of the Ganga much more than all the dredging and other navigation-related work that is ongoing. But, clearly, the Ganga's cause is not close to the heart of the current government.

It is clear that, in all the news about rivers, there is little concern for the rivers themselves.

NO ROADMAP

That is not how it was supposed to be. In a glittering ceremony on the banks of the Ganga in Varanasi, which is also his parliamentary constituency, Prime Minister Narendra Modi promised rejuvenation of the Ganga. He changed the name of the Water Resources Ministry to the Ministry of Ganga Rejuvenation, River Development and Water Resources and put Uma Bharti, supposedly known for her commitment and zeal for the Ganga, in charge of this rechristened ministry.

So the Modi government, which is reaching its term's half-way mark, had come with the promise of a better deal and future for India's rivers. Unfortunately, not only does the promise remain unfulfilled, there seems to be no roadmap in sight, no light for our rivers. There is nothing in the policies, plans or projects of the current Union government that would provide any ray of hope for the Ganga, now or in future. The government is pushing for more funds, more infrastructure, more technology, the same path that has been followed for the past three decades and which failed to achieve any improvement in the condition of the Ganga. Even now there is no attention to democratic, transparent, participatory and accountable governance, without which there seems no hope for the river.

In all this melee, the organisers of India Rivers Week 2016, to be held in Delhi over 28-30 November, are focusing this year on "The State of India's Rivers". The meeting hopes to come out with a clearer picture of the state of our rivers. There are bleak stories and then there are glimmers of hope, which need to gain strength and be highlighted as well. Some individuals and organisers who have done exemplary work in river protection will also be honoured with the Bhagirath Prayas Samman during IRW 2016.

Meanwhile, we all await some real good news for our rivers. ■

Himanshu Thakkar (ht.sandrp@gmail.com), SANDRP

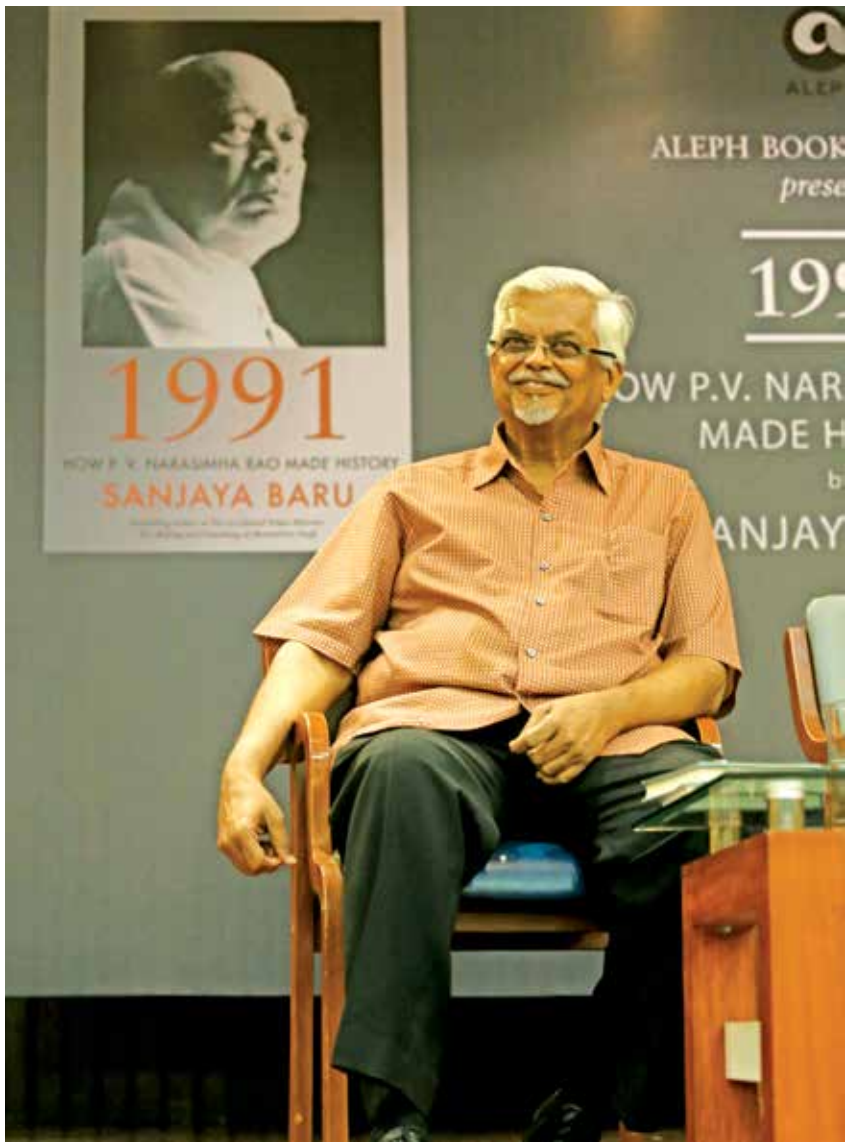
BOOK EXTRACT

PV's middle way

A few years before P.V. Narasimha Rao passed away a former official of the finance ministry asked him how much credit he would like to take for the reforms of 1991-92, and how much credit would he give to Manmohan Singh. PV praised Singh and acknowledged his loyalty and his contribution to reforms. Then, in his characteristic deadpan manner, he said to his interlocutor, "a finance minister is like the numeral zero. Its power depends on the number you place in front of it. The success of a finance minister depends on the support of the Prime Minister."

By taking charge of policy in the summer of 1991, PV made history. But, he made sure he took no individual credit for it, claiming that what he did is what Rajiv Gandhi would have wanted to do. He told the Tirupati session of the All India Congress Committee (AICC), in April 1992, "In the past ten months, our Government has initiated far-reaching fiscal and financial reforms. This was done in conformity with our Election Manifesto of 1991 which gives the main features of the reforms."

AJIT KRISHNA



Sanjaya Baru at the launch of his new book

SELF-RELIANCE

Suggesting that there was no deviation in his policies from Nehru's vision of a 'socialist India', PV projected his initiatives as ensuring 'continuity with change'. A country of India's size "has to be self-reliant", PV told the AICC, but self-reliance did not mean the pursuit of import substitution as a dogma. "The very level of development we have reached has made us independent of the world economy in some respects, but more dependent on it in others."

Self-reliance in 1991, PV believed, could be defined as being "indebted only to the extent we have the capacity to pay". Reducing foreign debt, being able to avoid default, promoting exports and liberalising the economy so as to attract foreign investment and earn foreign exchange were all elements that would define the path to self-reliance. In the past, self-reliance had been defined as securing 'independence' from the world economy, now self-reliance was being redefined as creating 'inter-dependencies' that would give others a stake in India's progress.

Next, PV went on to redefine the role of the public sector, reminding his party that both the profits and the losses of public enterprises were in fact the profits and losses of the people of India. Making the public sector more efficient, so that it would cease to be loss-making, was in the interests of the people. Further elaborating the role of public and private sectors in the economy, PV claimed his policies "do not represent the withdrawal of the State altogether, but a reconsideration of the areas in which it must be present".

Finally, PV went on to redefine yet another Nehruvian idea that had been reduced to a shibboleth by Indira Gandhi's diplomats. Non-alignment was not just about remaining outside antagonistic military alliances. It was not about being 'neutral'. Non-alignment is "an urge for independence in judgment and action, in exercise of the sovereign equality of nations". As a non-aligned nation India could be on one side or another in international relations, depending on the issue. While India chooses to be outside any alliance, it retains the freedom to work with one or the other alliance depending on its own national interest.

This was a pragmatic, not ideological, view of non-alignment. After all, in 1962 Nehru was willing to seek US military help to deal with China and in 1971 Indira sought Soviet help to deal with the ganging up of the US and China on the issue of the future of East Pakistan. The Polish economist, Michel Kalecki, described non-alignment as "a clever calf sucking two cows", drawing attention to the policy's pragmatic rather than ideological basis.

FINE BALANCE

Linking his economic policies to his foreign policy, PV concluded, "This self-reliance must consist in trying to find solutions to our own problems primarily according to our own genius.... We reject nothing useful for its plainness, we take nothing irrelevant for its dazzle."

PV called it 'The Middle Way.' PV's 'Middle Way' is not to be confused with a 'middle path'. It was not a mean or a median, a compromise between extremes. It was a path unto itself. "To interpret Nehru's middle way as being valid only in a bi-polar situation is not to understand our ancient philosophy of the Middle Way", PV told the AICC.

Writing a few years later, in 1998, to be precise, British sociologist Anthony Giddens called it the 'third way' in his politically influential book, *The Third Way: Renewal of Social Democracy.* It was said to have inspired the politics of Prime Minister Tony Blair who was himself battling the Right and Left within the Labour Party. Rejecting top-down bureaucratic socialism, and its emphasis on public investment and controls, as well as rejecting *laissez-faire* 'neo-liberalism', PV's 'middle way' sought to "strike a balance between the individual and the common good", as PV put it.

"The Middle Way was meant to be a constant reminder that no assertion or its opposite can be the full and complete truth. It meant that we looked for Truth in the interstices of dogmas. It means today that we will accept no dogma even if it happens to be the only dogma remaining in the field at a given moment."

It was the best expression of a liberal principle that in a different world a very different man summed up as "seeking truth from facts". ■

Book extract from 1991: How P.V. Narasimha Rao Made History, Aleph Book Company, 2016.

A glimpse of SwaSwara, a wellness retreat in Gokarna, Karnataka

Discover Earth in the south

And experience luxury, peace, nature…

Saibal Chatterjee
New Delhi

RESPONSIBLE tourism has been the buzzword in Kerala for nearly a decade. But well before the term entered the travel industry's lexicon, Jose Dominic, CEO of the CGH Earth Group of Hotels, had already demonstrated the benefits that the sector could reap from the concept of sustainability.

CGH Earth Group was one of the key exhibitors at the ninth edition of the three-day biennial Kerala Travel Mart held in Kochi over 27-29 September. "Our story revolves around environmental protection and local community involvement," says Dominic, explaining the guiding principles of his company.

In early October, at the inaugural Bharat International Tourism Bazaar in Delhi, an event powered by ITB Berlin, the world's biggest travel fair, Dominic won an award for his contribution to the domain of experiential hotels.

The hotels run by CGH Earth (an abbreviation of the erstwhile Casino Group of Hotels, it now officially denotes Clean-Green-Healthy) offer guests an inimitable combination of food, spaces and experiences that is perfectly in tune with the environment in which the properties stand.

Sample the official website of Chittoor Kottaram, a part of CGH Earth's chain of 17 properties across south India. It tells you exactly what to expect from one of its eco-friendly hotels: "Chittoor can accommodate a mere six people. You need to enter barefoot (and stay that way). And the menu features a choice of one. Yet if you're open-minded enough to consider luxury a feeling rather than a shiny object, you may be in for an experience of a kind you're unlikely to encounter anywhere else."

Located in Kochi amid a maze of backwater channels and palm trees, Chittoor Kottaram was built in the 14th century by Raja Rama Varma near the royal family's Guruvayoor temple. Today it is a single-key palace hotel that caters to one occupant at a time. It serves traditional pure vegetarian meals and offers a guest something that no hotel in the world can — the luxury of solitude.

"For us," says Dominic, "luxury lies not in built ostentation but in the quality of the experience that we offer. Sustainability is a key ingredient of luxury. If you aren't sustainable, you cannot be luxurious."

In pursuance of that philosophy, CGH Earth hotels, as a rule, acquire all their kitchen supplies from within a radius of 50 kilometres. "We source all our food from what the locals grow in season. We encourage them to cultivate their traditional crops and empower them by creating a ready market for their produce," he says. "This approach also helps us ensure that our hotel guests are treated to pure, fresh and authentic food."

Continued on page 30

Brunton Boatyard is modern yet retains its old-world charm

AJIT KRISHNA

A room in Chittoor Kottaram where luxury is an experience

Jose Dominic, MD of CGH Earth

In other words, "grow it healthy and eat healthy" is Dominic's dictum. This, of course, is of a piece with the group's core values: environmental sensitivity, local community involvement and adoption of the ethos of a place. These principles translate into touching nature with sensitive hands and paying back the ecosystems in kind, providing employment to local people and drawing them into the CGH Earth fold, and gleaning inspiration and wisdom from cultures that surround each property.

The recipes in all of CGH Earth's hotels and resorts in Kerala are drawn from the state's traditional cuisine. In the Kochi properties, however, the group offers recipes that celebrate the cosmopolitanism of the city, with Anglo-Indian and Jewish influences thrown in for good measure. "We take the help of kitchens that are owned by the Jewish people or of those who have worked with them in the past. They come in and train our kitchen staff," reveals Dominic.

The foundations of the family business, which is today overseen by five brothers and their progeny, was laid in the mid-1950s, when Dominic's father bought the iconic Malabar Hotel in Willingdon Island, Cochin, from its English owners, Spencer & Company. In 1965, he bought out the stakes of his partners in the enterprise and named the property Casino Hotel and Restaurant.

Dominic, who began his professional life as a chartered accountant with AF Ferguson & Company in Mumbai, responded to his father's repeated summons and joined the hotel business in 1978. A decade later, having learnt the ropes, he began his experiments with what was then called eco-tourism.

He set up the Bangaram Island Resort in Lakshadweep. "It represented a new model in the hospitality industry," he says. "Though defined by the absence of newspapers, telephones, television, air-conditioning, room service, hot water, swimming pool and multi-cuisine eatery, the resort was targetted at premium clients."

Dominic adds: "We wove an experience around the space sans any extravagance that could harm the island's delicate ecosystem. It drew tourists in hordes. Back in the late 1980s, guests paid as much as $180 a room a night to savour the beauty of unspoiled nature."

The success of the Bangaram Island experiment enthused Dominic to extend the norms of responsible tourism to all his subsequent developments, including the Spice Village Thekkady, a 40-room property that he opened in the Periyar wilderness in 1991. Built on the lines of a village, it drew inspiration from the traditional architecture of the local Mannan tribal community.

Kerala's entry into the tourism scene in the present format was in the early 1990s, says Dominic. "The Kerala model," he adds, "was a disruptive innovation that took some of the focus away from the 'golden triangle' (Delhi, Agra and Rajasthan) and Goa. Kerala offered tourists glimpses of modern, everyday Indian village life and the idea caught on quickly."

Communist rule, he says, was indirectly responsible for the direction that tourism in Kerala took. "The red flag scared away investors but ironically it was red that kept Kerala green," Dominic quips. "With the big players staying away from the state, small local entrepreneurs did what they could to develop the many destinations. As a result, indigenous and small became Kerala's trademark."

"Today, intelligent travellers," says Dominic, "are attracted by the distinguishing factors of Kerala." So, as it has expanded rapidly, CGH Earth has always been mindful of not tampering with the environs of a location, whether it builds afresh or incorporates heritage structures into its plans. That holds true of all the 17 properties that the group runs today — 13 in Kerala, two in Puducherry, and one each in Tamil Nadu and Karnataka.

From a single hotel, CGH Earth has grown to an entire bouquet of properties to which several new additions are on the way. Besides the big-city Casino Hotel, the group owns spacious resorts like Coconut Lagoon and Marari Beach Resort, boutique hotels like Palais de Mahe and Maison Perumal (both in Puducherry), Visalam (Chettinad, Tamil Nadu), Eighth Bastion (Kochi) and wellness retreats like SwaSwara in Gokarna (Karnataka) and Kalari Rasayana in Kollam.

In Coconut Lagoon, built near the Vembanad Lake in Kumarakom, the living spaces possess the austere grandeur of traditional Kerala homes, while the Marari Beach property in Alappuzha resembles a fishing village.

The Brunton Boatyard showcases the many influences — Portuguese, Dutch, British, Arab and Jewish — that have made Fort Kochi what it is today. While being a modern hotel catering to travellers from around the world, it retains the old world charm of the boatyard of Geo Brunton & Sons.

Of even older colonial vintage is the 19-room boutique hotel, Eighth Bastion, in the ancient Dutch quarter of Fort Kochi. It blends cherry-picked contemporary elements with a stunning range of antique furniture and artifacts.

The Beachgate Bungalows, not very far from Eighth Bastion, is a compound housing colonial-style residences, each with three rooms and a dining space overlooking a private pool. These bungalows were built in the 1950s for officials of the Sterling companies in Cochin.

The past and present, utility and sustainability, elegance and simplicity dovetail seamlessly into each other in the unique hotels and resorts that Dominic has developed over the past three decades. What sets these properties apart is that the interest of the planet takes precedence over creature comforts. Thanks to Dominic's inspired touches and the group's persuasive delivery of services and experiential riches, the customers have only kept coming back for more. ■

‘Allow Indian states to explore South Asia ties’

Civil Society News
New Delhi

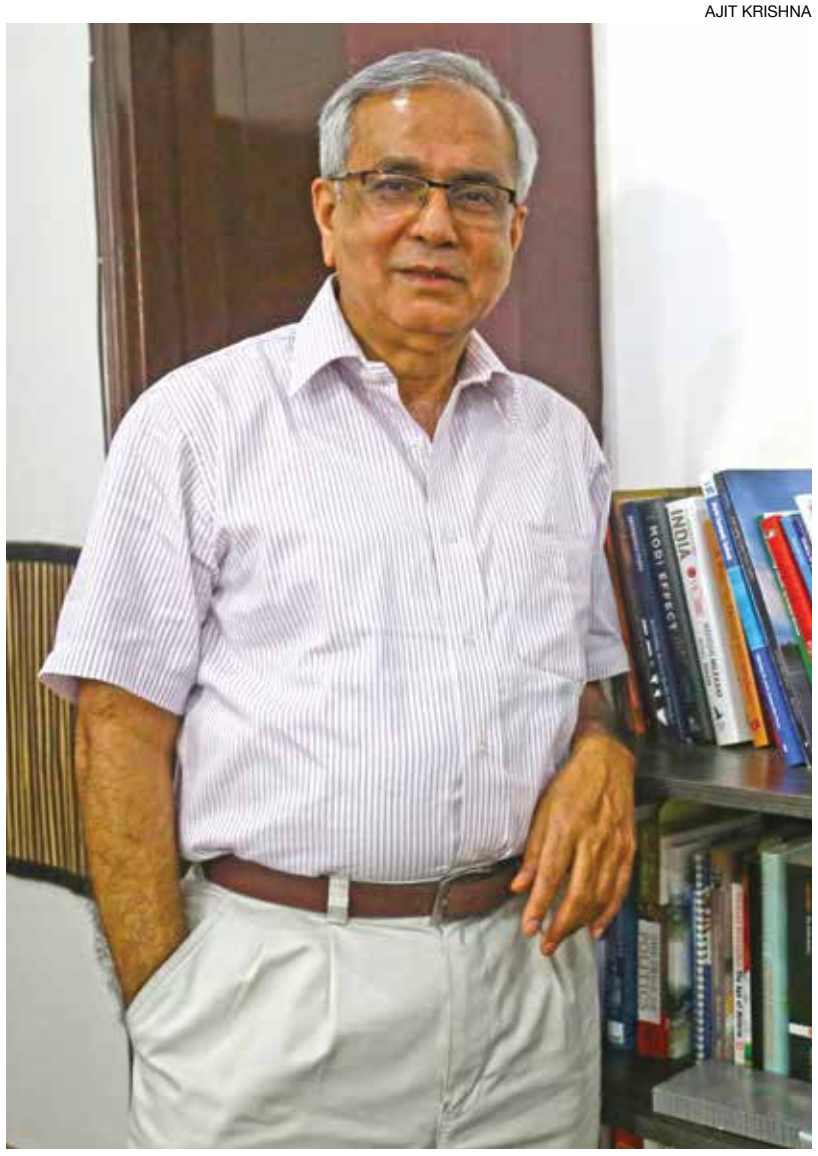
ALTHOUGH SAARC (South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation) has been around for over three decades the general perception is that it hasn't made much headway. Economic integration hasn't happened. Despite cultural affinity tourism and business haven't boomed. Literary festivals have brought writers from South Asian nations together, but not much else.

The aspirations, possibilities and constraints that present themselves to SAARC are spelt out well in, *Thirty Years of SAARC: Society, Culture and Development.* The volume is edited by Rajiv Kumar, Senior Fellow at the Centre for Policy Research in New Delhi, and Omita Goyal, Chief Editor of *IIC Quarterly,* a journal of the India International Centre.

What we get from them is a collection of papers written for the IIC journal by journalists, diplomats, economists and academics from the SAARC region. A sample: Haroon Mir and Habib Wardak write on how SAARC could help Afghanistan, Shyam Saran's piece is on the common ecological challenges facing South Asia, Kanak Mani Dixit writes on Nepal and connectivity, Bina Sarwar's paper is on people to people contact and Reema Nanavaty writes on SEWA's work in Afghanistan.

Civil Society spoke to Rajiv Kumar on the challenges facing SAARC and what could be done.

AJIT KRISHNA



Rajiv Kumar:'SAARC has remained trapped in bureaucratic procedures'

Does the recent cancellation of the SAARC summit in Pakistan represent the end of SAARC?

The cancellation of the SAARC summit is unfortunate. It brings to a head the problem that has forever plagued the SAARC process. This is the fraught nature of relations between the two biggest members of SAARC, India and Pakistan. The mistrust between the two has affected the working of SAARC to the extent that there is not even a single truly SAARC-wide regional project as yet.

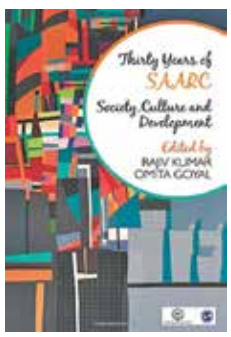
The optimists amongst us would argue that this cancellation may help convince the 'deep state' in Pakistan that it is in their interest to encourage regional cooperation as that will allow Pakistan to exploit its comparative geographical advantage of being a 'bridge' between South Asia and Central Asia.

On the other hand, if Pakistan's attitude towards regional cooperation does not change and the 'deep state' persists in being obstructionist, other members could push forward with regional projects without Pakistan's participation. This has already happened, for example, in the case of the South Asia Motor Vehicles Agreement that will permit issuance of multi-country permits for road transport vehicles.

What have been SAARC's really noteworthy achievements over the years?

Unfortunately, there have not been too many tangible achievements. SAARC has provided a platform for bringing together diverse stakeholders from civil society, which has hopefully contributed to developing a more conducive environment for regional cooperation in South Asia.

The most noteworthy development has been the implementation of some bilateral and single-country projects within the framework of the Asian Development Bank's programme called SASEC (South Asia Sub-regional Economic Program). These projects have been conceived in a regional framework and hold out the prospect of being easily converted into regional infrastructure assets once member countries come on board.



Thirty Years of SAARC Society, Culture and Development
Editors: Rajiv Kumar & Omita Goyal
SAGE, ₹695

‘Tourism and cross-border management of water resources hold out substantial promise for employment.’

Unemployment, as you write, is the biggest issue facing SAARC nations today. In which sectors could they cooperate?

All SAARC member countries have a young population that, on one hand, promises a demographic dividend and on the other, poses the risk of rising social unrest if the aspirations of their young population are not met.

Tourism and cross-border management of water resources are two sectors which hold out substantial promise for employment generation for all South Asian economies. Regional cooperation in tourism can generate positive externalities for all member countries as they could come together to offer multi-country packages to foreign tourists. This could increase tourist inflow substantially as tourists from major source countries in Europe, North America and Japan could maximise the return on their travel cost, which can be quite high.

A good example would be South Asian Buddhist and Mughal architecture circuits that would be jointly offered by SAARC members. Regional cooperation would also facilitate intra-regional tourism by making visa conditions easier for SAARC citizens. This is already being implemented by Sri Lanka to great advantage.

Continued on page 32

Continued from page 31

India is also seen as an attractive destination for higher education. But even the South Asian University (SAU) has yet to find its feet. What could be done?

The South Asian University has floundered because of the perpetual mistrust between Pakistan and India and the stifling protocol that has to be followed in any multilateral institution like SAU. For example, students from Pakistan are not allowed to travel outside Delhi, not even to areas within the NCR because of the pernicious visa regime that exists between the two countries. Multilateral protocol requires that faculty composition follow some 'national quotas' that are not always conducive to engaging the best talent available.

Therefore, I have been an advocate of offering preferential admission to students from SAARC countries in Indian institutes of higher learning. This would be far more attractive for South Asian students who would appreciate the opportunity to study in some of India's globally recognised institutes. At the same time, this scheme could also be used to allocate additional resources for some Central universities to improve their facilities and engage reputed scholars of South Asian origin on their faculty.

If Indian states were permitted by the Centre to form their own alliances with SAARC nations how would you pair some of them and why?

Indian states must be given a far bigger role in South Asian regional cooperation than at present. In fact, given India's vibrant federalism, successful regional cooperation in South Asia can hardly be visualised without active participation of Indian states that border other SAARC countries. Moreover, our neighbours, who are significantly smaller than India both in economic and geographical terms, may find it far easier to deal with individual states across their borders rather than having to deal only with Delhi, which is often perceived to behave imperiously towards its smaller neighbours.

Some natural pairings that suggest themselves are: Tamil Nadu and Kerala with Sri Lanka; Mumbai with Karachi; Gujarat, Rajasthan and Punjab with Pakistan; Uttar Pradesh and Bihar with Nepal; and Assam, Meghalaya, Tripura and West Bengal with Bangladesh. These sub-regional formations could be encouraged to have their own projects and cross-border arrangements.

Why is there very little cooperation in grassroots development — like, say, agriculture, rainwater harvesting, maternal and infant mortality — under SAARC?

SAARC has remained trapped in bureaucratic procedures and diplomatic protocols. There has hardly been any real effort on the part of its secretariat, located in Kathmandu, to take up real grassroots development projects. The secretariat needs to be strengthened with technically qualified personnel, be given some autonomy and empowered to undertake development projects.

A way forward could be to establish an autonomous, and non-government SAARC Development Centre within India with the mandate for designing regional development projects and advocating for regional cooperation. At present there is neither the technical capability for grassroots projects nor effective advocacy for SAARC. This must change. ■

Antarvedi Beach with its old lighthouse and the new one in the background

ADRIFT ON THE KONASEEMA BACKWATERS

Sailing in the backwaters of the

Susheela Nair
Konaseema

DRIFTING down the Konaseema backwaters in East Godavari district of Andhra Pradesh is an amazing experience. The little-visited territory of the scenic Konaseema delta, where the river meets the sea, is Andhra's best-kept secret. Mythology, history, religion, temples… there's plenty to unravel beyond these silent emerald waters.

But what is enchanting about the backwaters is the stunning scenery. As the boat passes down the mighty Godavari river, past coconut groves, mangroves and hamlets, the scenic charm of this magical green land unfolds. We stumbled on a kaleidoscope of pastoral delights – lush paddy fields, clumps of towering bamboo, water meadows, fish traps, banana plantations and hyacinth-filled fish ponds. The coconut palms fringing the backwaters reminded me of Aleppey in God's Own Country.

Konaseema means 'land's corner'. East Godavari district is also known as the rice bowl of Andhra Pradesh. The delta is the source of a veritable feast with waterside activities like fishing, shrimp fisheries and rice farming. We cruised past the occasional open boat with sails aflutter, fishermen casting their nets for a haul, and locals crossing the river with their bikes aboard boats. As our boat sped along the mighty Godavari, the droning of the engine and the swish of the water kept us company. The shoals of fish flipping momentarily out of the river added to our delight.

As we sipped coffee, the boat made its way downstream. We savoured the beauty of the unhurried, quaint rural life on the banks of the

SUSHEELA NAIR

SUSHEELA NAIR

Godavari area

Godavari. It's hard to run out of places to explore along the backwaters. Our boat cruised past the Coringa mangroves lining the banks of the Tulya and Athreya, both tributaries of the Godavari, which together are said to form the second largest delta in India after the Sunderbans. The mangroves are a haven for different species of winged beauties like kingfishers, storks, egrets, and cranes. Lazing in the boat, we watched fish darting in the water and the fascinating birdlife of Konaseema. Also to be spotted here are the jumping shrimps that race along the boat and can almost be caught in your palms.

After a 10-km ride, we reached Narasapur. We saw hordes of villagers waiting to be ferried across. Narasapur was an important European trading post, but there are no visible remnants of the Dutch, the French or the English. As in the past, small ships are built here. Narasapur is also an important centre for lace-making. The place where the Vashishta river pours into the ocean is about 10 km by boat from Narasapur. The boat does not enter the sea as the river widens and becomes shallow. Instead, the boat docks at Antarvedi on the left bank and fishing trawlers and boats with their hauls of fish loom into view.

SUSHEELA NAIR

The languid Konaseema backwaters

SUSHEELA NAIR

The Dindi Backwater Resort

Antarvedi is a mandatory stop on the river cruise. The place where the Vashishta meets the Bay of Bengal is called Sapta Sagara Sangam Pradesam. Antarvedi is the last and most important of the seven sacred bathing places in the Godavari delta, sometimes known as the Dakshina Kashi or Southern Varanasi. The brightly painted entrance tower of the Narasimhaswamy Temple, visible along the sands, caught our attention. It is dedicated to Lord Narasimha.

A large number of pilgrims visits the Lakshmi Narayana Temple from February to March to attend the wedding festival of the god, identified as Narasimha. According to local legend, Narasimha manifested himself in an ant-hill, where the existing stone image of the deity was discovered. This was originally kept in a shed and installed in the temple, which was erected in 1823. An interesting feature of the temple is that, on the day of the Ratha Sapthami (in January-February), the rays of the setting sun fall on the feet of the deity. The Vashishta Ashram is worth a peek.

After the temple sojourn, we headed to the deserted, windswept Antarvedi Beach, which is one of the best along Andhra Pradesh's incredible coastline. We strolled along the black wavy patterns left behind on the sands. The new lighthouse is just a hop away from the old one which extends into the sea. We clambered up its seven floors to get a bird's-eye view of the patchwork of fields and fishing vessels surrounding it.

The delicious cuisine of the Godavari belt complements the scenic beauty of the place. We feasted on tangy *pulusu*, the region's culinary delight. It is akin to the *hilsa* that Bengalis swear by. We tried out the Andhra *thali* served with varieties of fish. A trip to the Godavari belt is not complete without sampling the spicy *pesarattu*, a *moong dal dosa.* ■

FACT FILE

By air: The nearest airport is at Rajahmundry (80 km away).

By rail: The nearest railhead is Narasapur (15 km away).

By road: Narasapur, the nearest town, is well-connected with Rajahmundry to the east and Vijayawada to the west. Dindi is an hour and a half's ride from Rajahmundry.

Where to stay: The Andhra Pradesh Tourism Development Corporation runs the Coconut Country Resort in Dindi, which is again an hour and a half's ride from Rajahmundry. Konaseema Tourism, a group which provides travel packages in the region, also has a beautiful resort. The Konaseema Resorts, managed by them, has rooms that kiss the banks of the Godavari. The APTDC also has two-room houseboats which can be booked for 12 hours.

PICTURES BY AJIT KRISHNA

All that glitters

A small group of women in west Delhi are making wonderful jewellery and jewellery boxes with clay, glitter, paint and a touch of imagination.

"The boxes are as exquisite as the jewelry they contain. And each box is an individual work of art," says Patricia Montalto, the inspiration behind this feisty venture.

It all started when Montalto, a writer, volunteered at the Development Research and Action Group (DRAG), an NGO founded by Gautam Vohra.

DRAG runs a school, the DRAG Vikas Kendra, for marginalised children and a vocational centre for poorer women that offers courses in tailoring, computer skills, English and maths.

Montalto began working at the women's centre four years ago. She noticed that the women would crowd around her when she wore attractive jewellery. They wanted to learn to make jewellery, they said. So Montalto bought 60 kg of clay. "Enough to build a house," laughed the women and their manufacturing unit got going. "I showed them the jewelry that others had made from clay on the Internet to indicate the type of items they could produce," says Montalto. Paint, glitter, varnish and more were added as bangles, pendants and earrings tumbled out. The boxes were inspired by fashion magazines. Montalto's small team recently exhibited their jewellery at Good Earth in Delhi's Khan Market. ■

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Stitches of love

Devotion is an apt name for a shop that sells products lovingly made by rural women in Haryana. You can buy sheets, towels, curtains and table linen for your home, beautifully hand embroidered and neatly stitched. For babies there are frocks, quilts, sweaters and more, all soft and cuddly. For women there are attractive kurtas, nightwear and saris with stylish embroidery and patterns.

Devotion is a unit of the Arpana Trust which works to improve health, education and the livelihood of marginalised people in Haryana, Himachal Pradesh and Delhi's slums. Over 2,000 women have been organised into Self-Help Groups (SHG), trained and linked to banks. Arpana markets their products and Devotion provides a steady source of income to thousands of families.

Arpana runs a multispecialty hospital in Karnal. In Molarbund slum of Delhi, a team of Delhi's best doctors provides healthcare at its clinic. Arpana is committed to providing selfless service to all, as propagated by its founder and inspiration, Param Pujya Ma. ■

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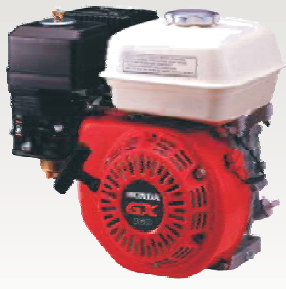

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