

Civil Society

ASHISH GANJU AND THE GARDEN OF THE GREAT ARC AT DOON

The Survey of India's memorial to its founders is an inspired blend of history, ecology and architecture

Page 8

Suman Sahai writes an open letter

Page 21

Rajendra Singh ends his Jal Yatra

Page 4

Ram Gidoomal: Let the diaspora serve

Page 19

Rural Reporter: 100 nominees by MKSS

Page 17



SHOWDOWN IN MANALI

A 192 MW hydel power project, with 45 government clearances to its name, runs into trouble but NGOs find a solution in impartial public hearings

COVER STORY



TALKING DOES WORK

An independent public hearing clears the air at a hydel power project which ran into trouble with local people at the villages of Prini and Jagatsukh in Himachal Pradesh.

12

Rajendra Singh ends his two-year Jal Yatra with a Delhi hearing **4**

Cause and effect: Councillor ready to get talking with Parivartan **5**



Congress MP is lawyer from New York and wants to save Nizamabad **6**

Bhopal meeting decides to go national with right to food agitation **7**

Rural Reporter: It is time to hunt for Kashmir's wetlands **16**

Perspectives: Razia Ismail Abbasi on children in govt policy **22**



Offtrack: The Vilayat you need to know and listen to **24**

Essay: Mahasweta Devi on tribals and the CPM **26**

Civil Society

The public hearing

ENVIRONMENTAL disputes come in many weaves. We chose the story of the Bhilwara Group's hydel power project in Manali because we felt that it went way beyond the ordinary passion play of an earnest NGO taking on a worldly wise corporate house. No one is being displaced by the project, very little land is being acquired and hydel power is as clean as you can get. If you can't build a power plant under these conditions, you can never build one. And yet the project has become mired in problems with the company being accused of not giving villagers a fair deal and taking away their water. Just as the project was set to take off, a flag of concern was raised before the World Bank by Himanshu Thakkar of the South Asia Network on Dams Rivers and People (SANDRP). Thakkar rightly pointed out that the process of public consultation was flawed and several issues of social and environmental concern had not been addressed. The company on its part said it had met every condition set by the government. But nevertheless, Thakkar's objections, though belated, have had several beneficial outcomes.

What aroused our interest in the story was the chance information from Arvind Kejriwal that he and Shekhar Singh would be visiting Manali to hold a *jan sunwai* or public hearing in the two villages affected by the proposed power project. Even more interesting was the fact that they were doing this at the instance of the World Bank. The babus in the Government of India showed no sensitivities in the matter. Now if you have been reading Civil Society, you will know that we have for several months been tracking Arvind and his use of the public hearing as a tool for greater transparency in governance. His work has been in the midst of the squalor of east Delhi, but the model could work just as well in the sylvan surroundings of Manali. The public hearing is based on the simple principles of consultation and availability of accurate information.

If there is one hurdle in the development process in the country it is the unwillingness to proceed through consultation. The government always knows best. Private sector companies have invariably acted as impenetrable fortresses. About public sector companies, the less said the better. The ordinary citizen, as it happens, is left in the lurch. The public hearing, practised with fairness and pragmatism, as shown by Arvind and Shekhar, is an important device for bridging the gulf between those who want to be heard and those who just don't have the training to listen. Every project of some size requires an environment and social impact assessment. This includes a public hearing, but it is conducted by the company and its consultants. Experience shows that more often than not it lacks in impartiality. What is sought to be achieved in Manali is much more valuable. It could have been done in the first place and thereby saved a lot of time. The Manali model, if we may call it that, should be replicated all over the country. A methodology should be allowed to evolve. Impartial hearings should begin from the time a project is announced so that people know what to expect. For NGOs there is the additional challenge of empowering affected people with information they can understand. Merely translating a complex project report into a local language is not enough.

Our second big story is on Ashish Ganju's Garden of the Great Arc being developed in the Doon Valley. This memorial tries to accomplish the difficult task of combining architecture with ecology and history. Ganju has shown how, by thinking out of the box, memorials can be full of positive energy.

By comparison see the plunder and neglect at Tagore's once-beautiful Shantineketan. It should make every Indian shudder. We bring you in this issue Mahasweta Devi's criticism of the CPI(M)'s governance in Bengal. The old Left has never shown any great sensitivity to environmental concerns. But that Somnath Chatterjee, now the Speaker of the Lok Sabha, should have presided over the grabbing of tribal land makes one really wonder. Tragically, it places him in the league of other notable political personalities like Om Prakash Chautala. Finally, mention needs to be made of the second instalment of Ram Gidoomal's column from London and Suman Sahai's open letter to MS Swaminathan. Both are full of ideas. And we hope someone is listening.

Rita Anand

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2-YEAR JAL YATRA ENDS IN JAL

Civil Society News

New Delhi

ON 23 December 2002, Rajender Singh had set off on a Jal Yatra to create awareness among people about water. In two years, he travelled to 50 states and visited 144 river banks. On 21 May the Jal Yatra completed its long journey at Jaipur. "A strong network of dedicated people has been created," says Singh.

A *jan sunwai* (public hearing) in Delhi on the existing national water policy follows the *yatra*. Its purpose: to tell the new government not to repeat the mistakes of the NDA.

"The mandate of the people is quite clear," he says, "they rejected the former government's proposals on river linking and water privatisation. It led to corruption, unemployment and violence."

His Rashtriya Jal Biradari wants the new government to set up plans anew. "We reassert rivers and water do not belong to any individual or company. They belong to the people and the environment," says Singh. "Clean water must be provided to the poorest person. It is the moral responsibility of people and the government."

The Jal Biradari wants society to slow down water by stopping deforestation, build small earthen dams like *johads* to capture the water and make it seep into the earth and replenish rivers as Rajinder Singh has done with the Aravari river. Since water is everybody's right, the Rashtriya Jal Biradari wants people to put an end to bottled water and to pledge they will try to put back into the earth as much as they consume. They are also planning to protest against the Ken Betwa link in Bundelkhand and to involve women more closely with water.

What purpose does a *jan sunwai* in Delhi serve?

A new government has been elected in Delhi. The previous government lost the elections because people did not agree with its agenda to privatise water and link rivers. The people want the government to provide clean drinking water to the poorest child and treat water as a common property resource. Water activists from all over the country have this message for the government.

What makes you so sure the government will listen?

I think for the first time in Indian elections even smaller political parties like the Samajwadi Party, have included the issue of water in their manifestos. The Congress and the Left too took clear positions. In Kerala, for instance, the Congress state government actively endorsed the Plachimada's panchayat's point of view on the extraction of groundwater.

Do you think politicians think differently on water today?

I do have hope. I agree that state governments in Karnataka and Rajasthan probably lost because of three years of drought. In Karnataka some good work was done by DL Patil in his constituency and he won. I think this election was fought over the issue of water. It certainly affected the outcome.

So what did the Jal Yatra achieve?

See the *yatra* was not just an *andalon*. It was meant to help each one of us realise our moral responsibilities. In over 200 new places we went to, the work of rescuing water started. About 40 lakh young people in 90 universities I talked to said, "When the water on this earth is ours, then why should we buy bottled water? If water is polluted then it is our duty to make it pure". I don't think this kind of awareness among the young will just disappear.

Right from the start, I had decided I would sleep anywhere and eat anything. If I didn't get food, I would do without it. People had to feel this is not just Rajen's *yatra* but our journey. Only then does the community



First of all, people and the environment have the right to water above everything else. Unless we uphold this, we will not be able to give water to everyone in India. Our society is different from the US. Even in the US there is a struggle against privatisation of water taking place in nearly every state.

join hands with you. Society sees how creative you can get. Everywhere I went we never made arrangements for food, water or shelter. People looked after us. There was this feeling that we were one of them and that what we were talking about concerns them. It is their story. They then begin to find their own solutions. *Vatavaran ban jata hain*. This is what this *yatra* was about.

Water is not just a political or social engineering issue but something that concerns all of civil society. Civil society has a right over water and has to save it. The people who have joined this *yatra* want to seriously do things.

I wrote to people first. I told them I am working on water and building *johads* since 20 years. I want to talk to you, so should I come? I did not put up a network I just wrote like a friend. I am not a network *wallah aadmi*. I am a *bhaichara* sort. So those people wrote back and said yes you must come and they drew up plans for me. I

travelled to drought affected areas whether in Rayalaseema or Mehboobnagar. I went to flood prone regions in north Bihar as well.

So can you say that a network has been created?

I can say that after two years, a very strong network has been created throughout India right from Ladakh to Dibrugarh. In any place, any *zilla*, if you want to talk to civil society about water, I can tell you talk to this friend. And this is a network of dedicated people, not just a bank *khata* one.

What is your agenda now, after the Jal Yatra?

First of all, people and the environment have the right to water above everything else. Unless we uphold this, we will not be able to give water to everyone in India. Our society is different from the US. Even in the US there is a struggle against privatisation of water taking place in

NETWORK



nearly every state. If we do not put in place community driven water management systems, we will not be able to give water to all our people.

Secondly, the people of India and the government will have to chase water. I have composed a poem on this:

*Jahan paani daure, usse chalna sikhaye
Jahan paani challey, usse baitna sikhaye
Jahaan paani baite, usse dharti mein dale.*

(When water runs, teach it to walk

When water walks, teach it to sit

When water sits, help it seep into the earth)

If we do this we can tap water whenever we have drought or a scaity.

Thirdly, we have a rich tradition of water management systems. Even if we don't replicate the old system completely, we can combine the perspective civil society has today with the old systems. We should have a traditional water conservation mission.

As far as conservation of water in urban areas is concerned, I think our laws and policies are deficient. Communities provided water to the people when they felt it was their water. But that right has gone to the government. So society feels it is now the government's duty to provide water and people cannot do anything about it.

The government on its part has made a mess of water management. To hide its sins, it now it appeals to people for help. I would say it is the moral responsibility of people and the government to agree that this water belongs to society and we all have a share in it and chalk out plans accordingly.

Councillor ready to get talking with Parivartan

Civil Society News
New Delhi

THE Right to Information campaign run by Parivartan in east Delhi has had three notable successes in recent weeks.

First, the Delhi government has worked out details of how money will be deducted from the salaries of recalcitrant officials who do not provide information on time or give wrong information.

Secondly, the Delhi High Court has instructed the police to investigate charges of corruption against municipal officials based on revelations made at a *jan sunwai* (public hearing) held by Parivartan a year ago. The public hearing revealed that of Rs one crore worth of development work, Rs 70 lakh had been lost through defalcation.

The government did nothing to punish the guilty despite repeated reminders by Parivartan.

The third success comes laden with the promise of major gains for Parivartan's campaign. The councillor of Seemapuri area, Ajit Singh Choudhary has told Parivartan he is willing to have plans for civic works vetted by them and by local people. This political endorsement could be a turning point for Parivartan's campaign.

Singh is keen that smaller public hearings take place in every lane and bylane of Seemapuri. He is opposed to larger *jan sunwais*. "All kinds of people turn up from different localities. Only the local people should speak. I would prefer people in every lane understand civic works being carried out in their area: this is the material, that is the ratio and here is the length of road or drain being built. I would like Parivartan especially to examine everything."

He has asked the executive engineer of Seemapuri to provide copies of estimates and sketches before any work starts. After completion, he will offer each work for inspection by people in the area, including Parivartan. Any objections would be acted upon immediately. Payment would be made only after local people are satisfied the work has been done properly.

Ajit Singh says the *jan sunwai*, the Delhi govern-

ment's order and the recent order of the High Court have shaken up contractors and engineers. "The *thekedars* are running away and engineers are going slow. As a result, work is coming to a standstill. The contractors and engineers are afraid of their works being subjected to a postmortem of a *jan sunwai*," he says.

A postmortem does not suit the people either. It's hard to start breaking up civil works once they are done, albeit shoddily. Singh's offer to let locals and Parivartan find fault, before work begins has been welcomed by Parivartan. "If this arrangement succeeds, it could offer solutions for other areas as well," says Arvind Kejriwal of Parivartan.

The Delhi government has passed an order outlining how an official's salary could be deducted if he or she did not provide information on time or gave wrong information. This clause was always there in Delhi's Right to Information Act but could not be imple-

mented because the process of salary deduction was not known. As a result many violations took place.

Now, the Chairman of the Public Grievance Commission, at the time of hearing the appeal, can also quantify the amount to be deducted from the officer's salary. He will forward this to the guilty official's head of department who can then initiate proceedings under Conduct Rules for deduction of this amount.

On a petition filed by Parivartan, the Delhi High Court has directed the Delhi police to investigate all allegations of corruption made by Parivartan and file a report before the metropolitan magistrate within six months. The court directed that such enquiries should not be conducted by an officer below the rank of an ACP. During the hearing, the Municipal Corporation of Delhi (MCD) claimed they had already carried out investigations and found them all to be baseless. The court observed how could a thief be made to investigate against himself?

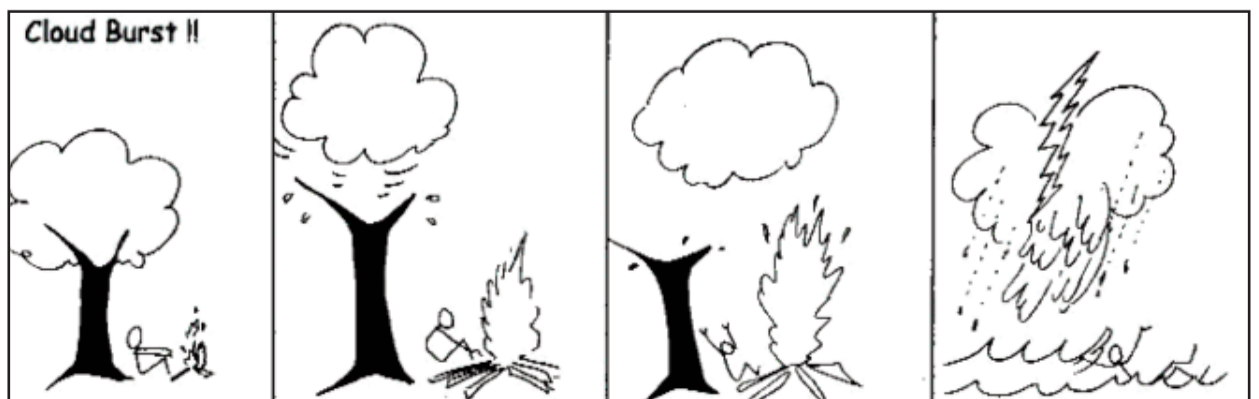
Now that the councillor, the Delhi government and the High Court are endorsing Parivartan's campaign, residents of Seemapuri can, at long last hope proper drains and roads will be built and a long lost sewage line finally traced.

CAUSE & EFFECT



DEVELOPMENTOON

BY



'I want to change the face of Nizamabad'

Congress MP is a saviour for Andhra farmers and a lawyer from New York



Manisha Sobhrajani
New Delhi

FOR the impoverished debt-ridden farmers of Andhra Pradesh who were killing themselves in desperation, Madhu Yaskhi came as a saviour. He won by a record margin from Nizamabad in Andhra.

Yaskhi is a 43-year-old immigration lawyer in New York, who mingles with the rich and famous. But he grew up in a poor family. He was the second son of a farmer in Andhra Pradesh in a family of six sisters and four brothers.

"We were very poor and after my father died, we had to mortgage the family jewels to pay back debts," he recalls. "I was the lucky one to have studied and come this far."

After schooling and college in Andhra, Yaskhi was lucky to study law at Delhi University. He was determined to make it big one day and help his family out of its turmoil and daily grind.

After completing law, he started practising in the Andhra Pradesh high court. The big break came when he got a scholarship to go to the United States to study further. "I wanted to do a doctorate but it was too expensive so I dropped the idea. I started working part time at the Indian embassy in New York apart from the odd jobs in stores and things like that." This was his first interaction with the huge and struggling NRI community of New York.

After a brief stint at a law firm, Yaskhi teamed up with a few friends and founded International Legal and Trade Consultants (ILTC), which he said is one of the biggest

firms serving immigrants in the United States. The firm has branch offices in New Jersey and Chicago and occupies "the entire 10th floor" of a building on pricey Fifth Avenue, Yaskhi said with a hint of pride in his eyes.

His plush and placid life in Manhattan was soon disturbed when reports about farmers committing suicide in his home state began making headlines in the US papers. "I was deeply pained. I could not come to terms with this reality. So many farmers -- many in my own district -- were killing themselves. It was just too much to bear," he said.

In his district of Nizamabad, in one area alone, Machareddy, 52 farmers committed suicide in two years as rains failed and they could not pay back the loans they had taken from banks. It was difficult to take a decision on what could be done for these farmers, sitting thousands of miles away. The most obvious proposal that came was to give money to the victim farmer's family.

And as a modest beginning, Yaskhi began giving Rs 10,000 per family. He could reach about 43 families but realised this was not enough. He interacted with the farmers, listened to their sad stories, holding their sweaty hands and promising them hope when they had lost all. "I also began counselling the families and the farmers, telling them not to take this dire step. I provided psychiatric help to the children," he said.

Very soon, word spread through the vast arid rural landscape of Andhra Pradesh about this young man from New York. Some came running for his money, others just to clasp his hand and beg for help. But there were limits to his personal philanthropy. The state and the system

had to intervene. And one of the ways that the system showed its presence was when the Congress party spotted his growing charisma and offered him a ticket to contest the parliament elections.

Startled was his first reaction. With no political background or experience for generations, Yaskhi had little idea what he was getting into -- the grind of Indian politics which is laced with muscle and money power.

"But I did not have to use any of this. I didn't have any of this. I just went to the people and told them my life story. Plain and simple: I told them about how we had no money, a large family, how my father died and we were in debt, how I worked in stores and sent money home to get my sisters married. All this fascinated the people."

People listened to him in rapt attention. Here was a man who had left his plush office and lifestyle in New York and was down here, mingling with ill-clad farmers and spending time with them, listening to their saga. He was different. Different from the run-of-the-mill politician that the farmers had got so used to.

Yaskhi won by a whopping margin of over 1.30 lakh votes and created history of sorts in Nizamabad -- the once opulent fiefdom of the illustrious Nizam of Hyderabad.

In between campaigning on dusty rural roads, Yaskhi also made calls to New York and spoke with his clients assuring them their interests would not suffer.

His victory was hailed on his 10th floor office. Since then, he has gone back only for a weekend of celebrations with friends, colleagues and clients.

"The NRI community in New York is thrilled. Many have written to me saying, 'You have shown us the way'," he says. "I want to act as a bridge between them and these people. Lots of work has to be done here. I want to change the face of Nizamabad."

Demand to scrap saffron text books

Civil Society News
New Delhi

THE HRD ministry's strange plans to detoxify communal history textbooks by deleting and altering existing books, instead of dumping them, are being roundly criticised.

Concerned citizens point out the books are scrap anyway and question why the government is dithering. At a convention on secularisation of education, organised by the Safdar Hashmi Memorial Trust (SAHMAT) on June 11, historians, economists and lawyers demanded immediate withdrawal of these books.

They urged the government to restore the earlier national curriculum framework of 1988. The older textbooks, they said, should be updated and reissued. Speakers at the convention wanted these

changes to come into effect from the current academic session. They asked the government to act immediately.

Professor Irfan Habib said the NCERT textbooks were a total negation of our past, our nationhood and our struggle for nationalism and they should not be taught in schools a day longer. He urged the government to rectify the damage done to institutions like the NCERT, UGC, ICHR by the previous government, which had disrupted and undermined them. Habib said, "Struggles for secularism must continue because only such movements can teach the government some wisdom".

Economist, Prabhat Patnaik said history should be best left to historians. Instead the previous government had allowed all and sundry to meddle in it. He did not

agree that by withdrawing these books the government would only be repeating the BJP strategy.

The academic world was in danger of destruction from the Vajpayee government due to its arbitrary classification of professional historians as Communists and others. He said academic writing must be freed from political intervention.

Rajeev Dhawan, noted lawyer, felt if the new government adopts the kind of leisurely attitude exhibited by the HRD minister, then these textbooks will continue into the next academic year, which was dangerous. Since NCERT was a state publication house, the government can definitely issue a directive withdrawing these books since they were not only communal but also substandard and plagiarised. He explained how the

Supreme Court had never endorsed these textbooks. By withdrawing the books, the government would be fulfilling the mandate of the Supreme Court and the Constitution itself, he said.

Dhawan also demanded that the government set up an enquiry to probe how an important semi-government publishing body like the NCERT was allowed to be hijacked by the former HRD minister, Murli Manohar Joshi.

Bhopal meeting decides to go national on right to food

Aasthi Bhartia
Bhopal

ACTIVISTS from eleven human rights networks met in Bhopal June 11-13 and resolved to spread the right to food movement nationally by integrating smaller campaigns in villages with the legal struggle going on in Delhi.

The right to food campaign started during the three-year drought in Rajasthan. While people starved, the government sat on mountains of food and recited the Famine Code. On April 2001, activists, fed up with official indifference, got together with the People's Union for Civil Liberties (PUCL) and submitted a writ petition to the Supreme Court demanding that the Food Corporation of India's massive food stocks of 30 million tons prevent hunger and starvation.

The petition caught the attention of the Supreme Court. Over the years, significant interim orders have been passed. These include directives to governments to introduce mid-day meals in all primary schools, provide 35 kg of grain per month at subsidised prices to 15 million destitute households and double resource allocations for Sampoorna Grameen Rozgar Yojana, (SGRY) India's largest rural employment programme.

In April, the court's orders gave priority to SC/ST as cooks for the midday meal scheme and for meals to be served to children in drought hit regions during their summer vacation. The court sought to strengthen the ICDS by increasing *anganwadis* to 14 lakhs and stopped the use of labour-displacement machines to

bolster the SGRY.

"The real struggle to get the Supreme Court's orders implemented would have to be carried out by people's *andolans*," remarked Colin Gonzalves, the campaign's legal advisor, at the convention.

Participants at the session on the public distribution system (PDS) said the procedure for determining below

The real struggle to get the Supreme Court's orders implemented would have to be carried out by agitations conducted by people.

the poverty line (BPL) families was misleading. They suggested that the PDS be open to all except the rich and with grains purchased from local farmers so that they get a market.

The right to work session proposed finalising a draft Employment Guarantee Act, (EGA) based on Maharashtra's EGA of 1977 and presenting it to the government. Local groups plan to ask for it at tehsil level. Meanwhile, they will register names of workers with the panchayat to gauge unemployment.

Economist and activist Jean Dreze's research has shown that the midday meal scheme increased school attendance, especially among girls. Participants were clear that the objective was to improve health and nutrition. They recommended the money spent per child be raised from Rs 1 to Rs. 2. External sheds are needed to cook the meals, so that studies aren't disrupted. Dalits are still made to sit separately and this should be stopped, they said.

The session concluded that the ICDS be strengthened and *anganwadis* increased from 600,000 to 1.4 million with preference given to Dalit and Adivasi bastis.

Participants at the meet on drought and survival discussed the process for the declaration of drought. Currently, as per the Famine Code, drought is declared on the basis of crop-cutting exercises. They argued that the process takes too long and ignores marginal crops grown by tribals.

Participants examined how the Famine Code could be altered for timely and comprehensive drought declaration. The government often does not recognise starvation deaths. The process for determining hunger deaths needs to include oral autopsy besides medical autopsy. The Relief Code needs rectification. At present, fodder arrangements were for cattle only but need to include goat and sheep owned by poorer farmers. Relief work during drought should be done on water-related projects by the gram sabha with women and dalits getting preference.



2004 - 2005 BHARAT RATNA C. SUBRAMANIAM FELLOWSHIP PROGRAMME

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Mid Career Voluntary Sector Workers**

The National Foundation for India has a fellowship programme for Mid Career Voluntary Sector Workers particularly those working at the grass-roots level for a period of 8-10 years in the areas of Food Security, Sustainable Livelihood and Natural Resource Management as well as for Community Level Leaders who are working at the community level in the areas of sustainable livelihood and natural resource management.

The fellowships would allow them to upgrade their skills and deepen their leadership qualities.

The Foundation offers two fellowships of Rs. 1,00,000/- each under each category. Women candidates are encouraged to apply.

The last date for receipt of application is September 15 2004.

For application form contact:

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Email: info@nfi.org.in, roy2000@nfi.org.in
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10th National Media Fellowships Programme, 2004-2005

"Giving Voice to the Unheard"

For Print and Photo Journalists

The National Foundation for India has a programme for young (upto 40 years), mid-career (5-7 years experience) and sensitive journalists, to research and publish articles / photo essays on issues of importance to ordinary Indians, their battle for a better life and to cover diverse aspects of development work viz., the working conditions of people, environment related matters and other social concerns.

The foundation offers eight fellowships of Rs. 1,00,000/- each. Women journalists from small newspapers with demonstrated capacity to publish well-researched articles/photo essays are encouraged to apply. One of the fellowships will be awarded to a photojournalist.

The last date for receipt of application is August 12, 2004.

For more information contact:

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ASHISH GANJU BLENDS ARCHITECTURE AND ECOLOGY TO



Ashish Ganju with team members at the site of the Garden of the Great Arc.

The Great Arc comes alive in garden at Dehradun

Civil Society News
Dehradun

If you'd like to take a walk into the past, welcome to the drawing board of the Great Arc Garden.

Deep inside its Hathibarkala Estate in Dehradun, the Survey of India is recreating natural forests and gardens across acres of degraded land to pay tribute to William Lambton and George Everest, its founding fathers. Together the two doughty souls undertook the mammoth task of mapping India for the first time. They literally walked across the subcontinent to measure the length of a degree of latitude along a longitude in the middle of peninsula India to figure out the curvature of the earth's surface. It came to be called the Great Arc.

In 2002, the Survey celebrated 200 years of its history and wanted to build a monument to honour Lambton and Everest. It began fishing around for ideas and had some dry and stony land to offer. The Department of Science and Technology (DST) helpfully suggested a garden. An architect from Delhi, Ashish Ganju, was called in. He saw the site and designed an urban park which would truly capture the epic spirit of the effort it was intended to honour.

Ganju is a man of different ideas, a gentle thinker whose house-cum-office at Ayanagar in Delhi is full of architectural innovations. He can take an insipid government proposition and turn it into a mission. The garden in Dehradun, when it is completed in 2008, will tell the story of the Great Arc and simultaneously bring back to life

the Survey's degraded forest land.

The garden will recall the route Everest and Lambton took, from the tip of southern India to the Himalayas in the north. Visitors will begin their journey from the south park of the planned garden and end in the northern forest. They will walk up triangular paths through replicas of India's natural forests, gardens of aromatic and rare plants and bamboo groves. They will cross a wetland with a gushing stream and a lily pond. Within a thick belt of trees there will be an open air theatre, a restaurant and a conference centre.

"We want to invite people in, not shut them out," says Ganju. "We want to restore degraded land as a lesson in ecology."

Acres in Delhi are used to build *samadhis* for departed leaders. Once a year their followers assemble to pay tribute. As memory fades, the flock begins to shrink and the *samadhi* becomes as silent as the grave

Ganju wants to blend the brick and mortar of architecture with the local ecology. When people visit his park it will not just be to clamber out of buses and struggle through exhibition halls, but to drift under the trees and experience the real squelch of a wetland underfoot.

"You know, every idea is embedded in the soil. Like an archaeologist you need to unearth its mysteries," says Ganju. "I had read John Keay's book on the Great Arc before I saw the site. When I sighted the land I knew what I should do."

Ganju's architecture comes with inspiration. "For ecological reasons, I think it's a heroic thing to do," he says. Intensive landscaping has been confined to the pond and

CREATE A RARE MEMORIAL

the herbal gardens. "If I had to design a municipal park, armies of gardeners would have been needed," he says. "Excluding the gardens, the rest of the area requires very little maintenance."

Dehradun's Forest Research Institute will green the land. "It should be a natural restoration," says PP Bhojvaid, director of FRI. "Basically this is a sal area and after 70 to 80 years, should become a sal forest. We are introducing species which are consonant with sal. What we envisage is a multi-storied, thick and closed forest." The garden will use compost and avoid pesticides.

Mekon, a public sector unit engaged in mining, is undertaking the construction work. Erdas, a private software company based in Hyderabad, has agreed to pay the architect's fee and support the project.

A leaf from history: In 1802 Colonel William Lambton and later George Everest embarked on a mission to map India from the south to the dusty north with the blessings of the East India Company.

The Company desperately needed maps to understand Indian terrain. Without them it might have been tough to conquer India or exploit natural resources. As the British army advanced into India, Lambton and his men followed, cutting through thick forests to map the landscape.

On an intellectual level, Lambton sought to measure the length of a degree of latitude along a longitude in the middle of peninsula India, to figure out the curvature of the earth's surface.

Lambton first measured a baseline at St Thomas' Mount in Madras and then began to map the landscape in triangles using a clunky telescope called a theodolite and measuring chains. Lambton and Everest risked their necks, climbing watch towers, peaks and domes for a better view. After Lambton died, Everest doggedly pursued his work. He finally landed in Hathipaon, near Mussoorie above the Doon Valley, and as Surveyor General transferred the offices of the Survey to Dehradun from Calcutta.

The Great Trigonometric Survey, as it was called, mapped 1,600 km of the subcontinent, inch perfect. For the first time, the Himalayas were accurately measured, an achievement which was acknowledged by naming the world's highest peak in honour of Everest.

The Great Arc laid the foundation for future topographical surveys. It has been hailed as "one of the most stupendous works in the whole history of science." The survey defined the idea of India and advanced scientific knowledge about the shape of the planet. It took 50 years to complete and cost more lives than most contemporary wars, it is said.

The Himalayas were measured by Everest's disciples. It was Andrew Scott Waugh, Everest's successor as Surveyor-General, who spied the world's highest peak from Darjeeling while he was measuring the Kanchenjunga. He named it Gamma and then Peak XV. Waugh decided to name the peak after Everest. "...in testimony of my affectionate respect for a revered chief..."

In England, after being feted for a while, Lambton and Everest were forgotten. Lambton's research papers find mention here and there. Everest is remembered as a mountain. According to historians, he never saw the world's highest peak, leave alone attempt to climb it.

The Survey is paying its own tribute to the Great Trigonometric *yatra* and the courage and dedication displayed by its founding fathers.

Architecture amid the trees: The Survey's land is linear in shape, sloping gently from north to south. A forest still exists in the northern stretch. Fifty acres in the south are littered with rocks, lantana, parthenium and shrubs. Hathibarkala village overlooks this patch and its residents have been using the land as a grazing ground. There is hardly any soil cover to speak of. A dry stream called the Bindal Khala runs through. During the monsoon it becomes a torrent.

Ganju wants to create a wetland by capturing the waters of the stream. By making the stream perennial, water will flow north to south through the garden and feed a pond with lilies and lotus. So you can hear the water gurgle and cross the stream since the triangular path runs over it.

The path will take strollers to a tropical moist evergreen forest which will symbolise southern India. Sub-tropical pine forests will represent the Himalayan region. There will be bamboo groves and theme gardens within each triangle. An aesthetic placard placed here will explain the history of

the first survey, as it happened.

A conservation garden will have rare and endangered species. There will be a garden with aromatic plants and another with plants to help you meditate.

In the northern forest, the triangular path becomes a meandering path. This is because the forest is thicker with greenery and Ganju does not want to clear trees. Instead, he is using trees as they stand to define the triangles.

Gardens grown in the north will represent plants from India's many religions.

Since the National Institute for the Visually Handicapped shares a boundary with the Survey, an aromatic garden for the blind is being raised.

A visitor's centre, as you enter, will offer a bird's eye view of the south park. There is a restaurant overlooking the garden, a conference centre and an open air theatre ringed in by trees. The architecture will bring revenue for the Survey.

Wetlands and foliage: FRI has experts who have greened areas which were blackened by mining and left with no topsoil. "This is one notch above that," says Dr Prafulla Soni, head of Ecology and Environment at FRI.

The first step has been to fence off the land. Since villagers continue to jump the fence, Dr Soni is planting a garden of plants associated with Shiva close to the boundary to "make the area sacred."

LILY POND, MEDITATION GARDEN, THEATRE



1. Lily pond and picnic garden 2. Entrance, visitors' centre, restaurant 3. Open air theatre 4. Herb garden 5. Flower garden 6. Oval garden 7. Meditation garden 8. Garden for the visually handicapped.

To create a wetland, FRI's scientists will need to capture water hurtling down from the Bindal Khalla during the monsoon months. Check dams are being built along the stream to slow down the water's speed and make it seep into the soil. A drain will catch water from the amphitheatre and empty it into the pond. Water loving plants will be grown in the pond and all along the stream.

FRI has a list of shrubs and grasses that can be grown in areas without any topsoil.

Nearly 50% of the south park is badly eroded with deep gullies and gorges. These will be plugged by building contour trenches and by planting wild grasses and shrubs.

"This layer is extremely important when you talk about stabilising the slopes. The herbaceous layer conserves soil moisture and gives it nutrients. All that's needed is a good monsoon," says SD Sharma, Forest Soil and Land Reclamation division, FRI.

He will be planting a 2,400 metre green belt of trees round the park. Since the land is degraded, pits will be prepared in advance and filled with manure. Rainwater will seep in. After two months, tree saplings will be planted. Sharma's choice of foliage includes perennials, annuals and climbers. "We will make sure, the trees lend colour to the garden every season," he says.

To make sure the garden gets a supply of good quality saplings, FRI is raising these in their nurseries. "Thirty-five per cent of the success rate depends on a good nursery. On a one-hectare plot we are already nursing 30 to 40 cm seedlings which we will



This degraded land will come back under forest cover.

transplant only when they are four to seven feet tall. We are pre-empting losses by growing them in a nursery first," says Bhojvaid. As for rare plants, FRI has a store of them, collected from all over India.

"Fertiliser is a problem in this area. We have spoken to the military dairy farm and they will be supplying us with compost."

Bhojvaid says the restoration of just 80 acres of forest land will not alter the ecology of the Doon Valley. "It will change the microclimate in the immediate area. But the Garden of the Great Arc can be a model for others who want to restore degraded land."

The Doon Valley's ridge separates the drainage area of the Tons from the Yamuna. It is an important catchment for the Yamuna after it tumbles down from the receding Yamunotri gla-

cier. Apart from the Tons, streams from the Shivalik hills feed the river. Tree roots store rain while limestone supplies water to the aquifers. But quarrying during the 1970s and 1980s ruined aquifers, uprooted trees and dried up streams, resulting in shortages of water, although the area receives 1600 mm of rain between June and September.

The people of Doon11 protested and brought India's first environmental case before the Supreme Court in 1983. The famous limestone quarries case was fought by the Rural Litigation and Entitlement Kendra (RLEK) based in Dehradun. It resulted in a verdict which closed down 101 limestone quarries in Doon.

Ganju's garden of the Great Arc will be an emblem of the need for ecological revival.

'The Garden will serve as a model for restoration of degraded land'

The Forest Research Institute (FRI) is India's top-notch centre for forestry. Its colonial architecture and campus of trees, bamboo and plants attracts not only scholars but busloads of school children and tourists as well. In an office, full of flavours of the Raj, **Padam Parkash Bhojvaid**, director FRI, spoke to *Civil Society* about the institute's vision for the Garden of the Great Arc.

Is it possible to grow different types of natural forest in Dehradun?

We are trying to restore the site to its natural vegetation. Basically this is a sal area and after 70 to 80 years it should become a sal forest. We are introducing species which are consonant with sal. What we envisage is a multi-storied thick and closed forest. It is a decorative garden. It should be a natural restoration, assisted by an outside agency.

Where will you get rare and endangered plants from?

We already have several rare and endangered species of plants in the FRI which we can plant in the theme gardens. We also intend to raise ten or twenty plants of rudraksh

and lots of other trees.

Will such species manage to survive?

Each and every tree in FRI has been planted. It's different now after so many years they have rejuvenated, regenerated and are natural. The climate here is excellent. We are planting species which are compatible to the Doon Valley's ecology. Thirty-five per cent of the success rate depends on a good nursery. On a one-hectare plot we are already nursing 30 to 40 cm seedlings which we will transplant only when they are four to seven feet tall. We are pre-empting losses by growing them in a nursery first. Fertiliser is a problem in this area. We have spoken to the military dairy farm and they will be supplying us with compost.

What is the significance of the restoration work you are undertaking?

Fifty hectares of restoration may not make an impact on the Doon Valley, but it will change the microclimate in the immediate area. FRI for instance is cooler because of the vegetation. The Garden of the Great Arc can serve as a model for others who want to undertake restoration of degraded land.

Is it at all possible to re-grow natural forests?

Restoring large degraded areas would pose several problems. It may not be possible.

'Every idea is embedded in the soil'

Architect **Ashish Ganju** is an unusually quiet man. You can hear a pin fall at his house-cum-office at the Eco Options amidst farmland in Ayanagar, up from Mehrauli on the way to Gurgaon from Delhi. But when it comes to the Garden of the Great Arc, Ganju is happy to get talking. He spoke to *Civil Society* over several sessions.

How did the idea of an urban park, which would tell the story of the Great Arc, occur to you?

You know, every idea is embedded in the soil. Like an archaeologist you need to unearth its mysteries. I had read John Keay's book on the Great Arc before I saw the site. When I sighted the land I knew what I should do

But the idea of a garden was first mooted by the Department of Science and Technology (DST). The Survey of India wanted to honour the Great Trigonometric Survey by reviving degraded land on its campus. I drew up a concept note. The DST liked the idea and so did the Survey.

How will natural forests and gardens survive the multitudes of people who might like to visit?

We want to invite people in, not shut them out. The garden has been designed to cater to schoolchildren, researchers, ordinary people and tourists. If I had to design a municipal park, armies of gardeners would have been needed. Excluding the gardens, the rest of the area requires very little maintenance.

How natural is the garden? Haven't you done a lot of landscaping?

Intensive landscaping has been confined to the pond and the herbal gardens. The FRI is using eco-friendly organic methods. We want to restore degraded land as a lesson in ecology.

How much will the park cost and who will pay for its maintenance?

A cost of some Rs 7 crores has been estimated but I think we will do it for less. The open air theatre, restaurant and conference hall will bring in revenue for maintenance.

How can other architects replicate your work here? You have the FRI helping you.

I agree. It is hard to bring together a pool of scientific opinion like this one.

Why are you reviving degraded forest land?

For ecological reasons. I think it's a heroic thing to do.

Just look what it takes to fix a road in Gurgaon

Civil Society News
Gurgaon

EVER heard of advertising to get a road repaired? Well come to Gurgaon, the city of shining shopping malls but rotten civic amenities. It took the residents of Hamilton Court in DLF in Gurgaon 18 months of ceaseless conflict and finally inspired hoardings to get the Haryana Urban Development Authority (HUDA) to act

All the while the only approach road to the apartment complex continued to be in a mess. Instead of a road what the residents had was a stretch of potholes and heaps of large-sized stones. The stones were ostensibly meant to repair the road but they just lay there, making it difficult and even dangerous to drive.

Now the the road-rollers have finally arrived and work is under way. But the residents' welfare association members have had to really sweat it out. They made an endless number of visits to officials.. Initial requests to the chief engineer met the usual dithering response. He promised to have th road repaired but promises remained just promises. Rumour had it that the contract had gone to someone very politically powerful and close to the chief minister. No one would dare to act against him

It was then that the residents decided to launch a novel campaign to make a noise and embarrass HUDA. They decided to put up banners at their gates and run a series of slogans like "Road missing; Finder will be rewarded" and "Potholes under construction." The slogans came from residents of Hamilton Court who happened to be working for advertising agencies.

Madan Mohan Bhalla, secretary of the Hamilton Court rResidents' Welfare Association, said they resolved change the banners every week and come up with embarrassing slogans till such times as the HUDA officials took some action.

"Nothing else helped", says Bhalla, "every time we would go to the authorities, they would tell us to give them fifteen days. We have had maybe a thousand such 'fifteen days'".



Smile can work wonders for your NGO

Colin Fernandes
New Delhi

SANDEEP Bhatnagar is a fabricator in Lucknow. Every evening at six, his small factory closes and a serpentine queue of neighbourhood children assembles outside books in hand. They're getting ready for school. Bhatnagar along with a few other volunteers teaches these children basic math and other subjects.

Without aid from the Smile Foundation, Bhatnagar would have found it extremely difficult to sustain his little paatshala.

Formally established two and a half years ago by a group of philanthropic businessmen, the Foundation has been active in aiding and supporting NGOs that are involved with educating children, especially the girl child. Change the child; change the system...that's the organisation's slogan.

Anupama Puri, executive director, says that there is a very simple reason behind this agenda. "Almost all the trustees come from modest backgrounds and what they are today, their position in society, the salaries they earn, they attribute to their education", she says.

"They believe that if others can get the same kind of opportunities for education that they were able to take advantage of, it will pull them out of their poverty".

Smile's founders had been involved in philanthropy earlier. But that was in their individual capacities. What they have now managed to do is streamline their efforts

and focus of results.

In simple concise terms, the Smile Foundation is a facilitator. It finds support in cash and kind for NGOs. Most often the support is in providing infrastructure, training, management systems, reporting, filing for



Smile helped teachers from the Amity School in Noida to set up systems for the Tara Educare Academy where poor children from Jalvayu Vihar go

grants. Smile also helps NGOs by introducing them to other individuals and groups who can help them with their work.

"What happens with other organisations like ours is that after they've given what was asked for, they sit back and ignore the NGO", says Puri. "In our case it is different. We literally hold the hand of the NGO."

But Smile does not help every and any NGO.

Credentials are in work done. Puri says that though their selection process is highly informal ("we don't ask for paperwork and most of our projects didn't even have proposals submitted") it is extremely stringent. Recommendations are made, usually through word of mouth, or if mention has been made in the media.

Thereafter a trustee or Puri herself visits the project site to verify the situation first-hand without announcing themselves. And they don't talk just to the folk running the project, they also interview beneficiaries, as well as various segments of the community.

Post this, the course of action is decided upon and support could follow. Puri says that Smile never gives full monetary support.

"We want them to find alternate sources of income", she says. "We cannot support them forever and when we move out of the project, we want them to be self sufficient."

Most of the aid that the Smile Foundation gives its partner NGOs is through training programmes for teachers, getting them recognised by the media, organising teaching aids and helping them prepare credible reports.

The Foundation currently has over 40 projects and 16,000 children benefit from them. The projects are all over the country, a good many of them in the backward districts of poor states.

Contact Smile Foundation: info@smilefoundationindia.org

Photos: COLIN FERNANDES



Shekhar Singh (standing right) conducts the public hearing. Sitting from left: Arvind Kejriwal and Dr Shailja Vohra who served as observers.

TALKING DOES WORK

A hydel power project in Himachal gets stuck despite government clearances, but a public hearing by NGOs clears the air

Civil Society News

Manali / New Delhi

WHEN the Bhilwara Group won the contract for a 192 MW run-of-the-river hydel power plant in Himachal Pradesh in 1996, it believed it had reason to celebrate. There wasn't much land to be acquired and small hydel projects are widely regarded as being friendly to the environment. But eight years down the line, having got 45 clearances from the government, the company has found itself locked in an intricate dispute with the two tiny villages of Prini and Jagatsukh in the district of Kullu in the sylvan Manali Valley.

The villagers and an NGO called the South Asia Network on Dams, Rivers and People (SANDRP) have raised important questions about water availability, the number of people who will be impacted and how, the loss of pastures and biodiversity, the effect of transmission lines and the need for reforestation of catchments areas.

Ironically, it is the much-reviled World Bank, and not the Government of India, that has stepped in to ensure that local voices are heard. And salvation has come in the shape of the fairly rudimentary device of an independent public hearing at which the company has had to face the concerns being raised by the villagers and the NGO.

After hearings held late in May, all the key concerns are out in the open. The company, to its credit, is eager to answer and pay as well. The villagers have been able to use the open interface to talk up the price of their land to Rs 87,000 a *biswa*. Since 100 *biswa* are equal to one acre, this is almost as much as the price of land in Delhi!

How is it possible that a company, which plodded through 45 clearances from the government, did not manage to get these basic issues figured out? The answer lies in the

looseness of government regulation. The environment and social impact assessment (ESIA) done for the project is now being taken apart and its flaws are being revealed.

The ESIA, undertaken by consultants Environmental Resource Management (ERM) and passed by the government, included a public hearing two years ago. But this hearing seems to have only satisfied the government and not the villagers. It did not have independent observers. The company had the acquiescence of the two panchayats, but it is doubtful how much the villagers really knew about the project and its implications.

The World Bank responded to the complaint lodged by Himanshu Thakkar of SANDRP by getting Shekhar Singh of the Centre for Equity Studies in New Delhi to anchor a fresh public hearing and ensure fairness. Shekhar Singh has worked on right to information legislation and helped with its implementation in Delhi. He put together an independent panel consisting of Arvind Kejriwal of Parivartan and Dr Shailja Vohra, a consultant ecologist. Kejriwal has developed considerable expertise in holding the *jan sunwai* or public hearing. He has shown how public hearings can work in difficult municipal settings in Delhi.

The public hearings conducted by this team helped bring the issues raised by SANDRP into focus. The village of Jagatsukh was parting with very little land, but it was in danger of losing its water. It wanted hard evidence that flows would not diminish. There was concern over the safety of women once labourers for the project arrive in substantial numbers. People needed to be reassured that catchment areas would be reforested. There were cultural issues too.

The hearings also showed that the villagers were hugely interested in the price of their land going up. One view is that they have used environmental and other concerns as an excuse to renegotiate better compensation from the company. But even if

they have, what is wrong with people affected by a project getting the most they can out of it?

Shekhar Singh's report after the public hearings has recommended that the company respond with seriousness to the points raised by SANDRP. Only this would enhance the viability and integrity of the project. He has also recommended a grievance redressal cell, an independent team to communicate with the villagers and a compliance mechanism to ensure follow-up.

In all these suggestions lie the seeds of a better system of public hearings in which people should be educated about the implications of a project. The hearings, to be meaningful, should also be conducted by independent professionals instead of being held by the project management and its consultants.

The story is all the more interesting because Prini, one of the villages, is where Atal Bihari Vajpayee has his summer getaway. It is a pampered village which was only recently the recipient of Rs. 73 lakh for a facelift. It can tell the company where it wants it to get off. Jagatsukh is similarly a relatively well-off village. Both villages have considerable earnings from tourism. People are literate and mostly self-employed.

FACTS AND FIGURES: A year ago, Himanshu Thakkar of SANDRP came to know that the Rajasthan Spinning & Weaving Mills Ltd (RSWML) of the Bhilwara Group was constructing the Allain Duhangan Hydropower project (ADHEP) near Prini, three kilometres from Manali. The waters of the Allain and Duhangan, tributaries of the Beas, would be harnessed. While Allain flows through Prini, Duhangan passes through Jagatsukh. Water from the latter will be diverted into the former where the power plant will be constructed.

Thakkar sent an activist to find out whether villagers had details about the project.

"They told us there had not been any public consultation and that they did not know the contents of the ESIA," says Thakkar. "I looked up the International Finance Corporation (IFC) website and noted the project was going to the World Bank board on 31 October. Immediately, some of the villagers wrote a letter to the World Bank. The ESIA claimed to have undertaken public consultations, which it hadn't. I was amazed," he says. A second letter was posted to the ombudsman of the World Bank. Thakkar also tipped off the International Rivers Network, which likewise wrote to the IFC.

"The ESIA had not done basic research or surveys," says Thakkar. "If you don't have baseline information, you won't know the impact. They've not carried out an assessment of transmission lines and roads or a hydrological survey. Demand and supply figures are old and some are wrong. They haven't even done a proper social survey."

"We are told to compromise and take the compensation being offered or the money will be deposited in a government account," states the letter to the World Bank which is signed by a long list of villagers under the banner of the Prini Jan Vikas Evam Adhikar Manch.

One of the main requirements to get a loan from the IFC is to have public meetings held with the people of the region that will be affected by the project. The IFC classifies projects into three categories based on their environment and social impact from considerable (A) to moderate (B) to negligible (C). The ADHEP is an A category project.

The IFC requested RSWML to carry out public hearings with the villages and to update their ESIA, which had been cleared by the MoEF in 1996. In January, the company began talking directly to the villagers. SANDRP pointed out public hearings should be conducted by an independent panel. The villagers asked for project reports in Hindi and time to study them. The company agreed and gave them two months.

IFC requested Shekhar Singh to conduct the public hearings with the villages. "It is a real pity that the IFC and not own MoEF had to ask us to conduct a *jan sunwai*," says Shekhar Singh.

Kalpavriksh, along with company representatives and the Environmental Resources Management (ERM) held meetings at Prini on 30 April to explain the project to the villagers. So before the public hearing took place, villagers were well informed about its details.

The public hearings were finally scheduled for 20 May at Prini and 21 May at Jagatsukh. Apart from Shekhar Singh, Arvind Kejriwal and Shailja Vohra, Richard English from the IFC, was present as a senior specialist in environment and social development.

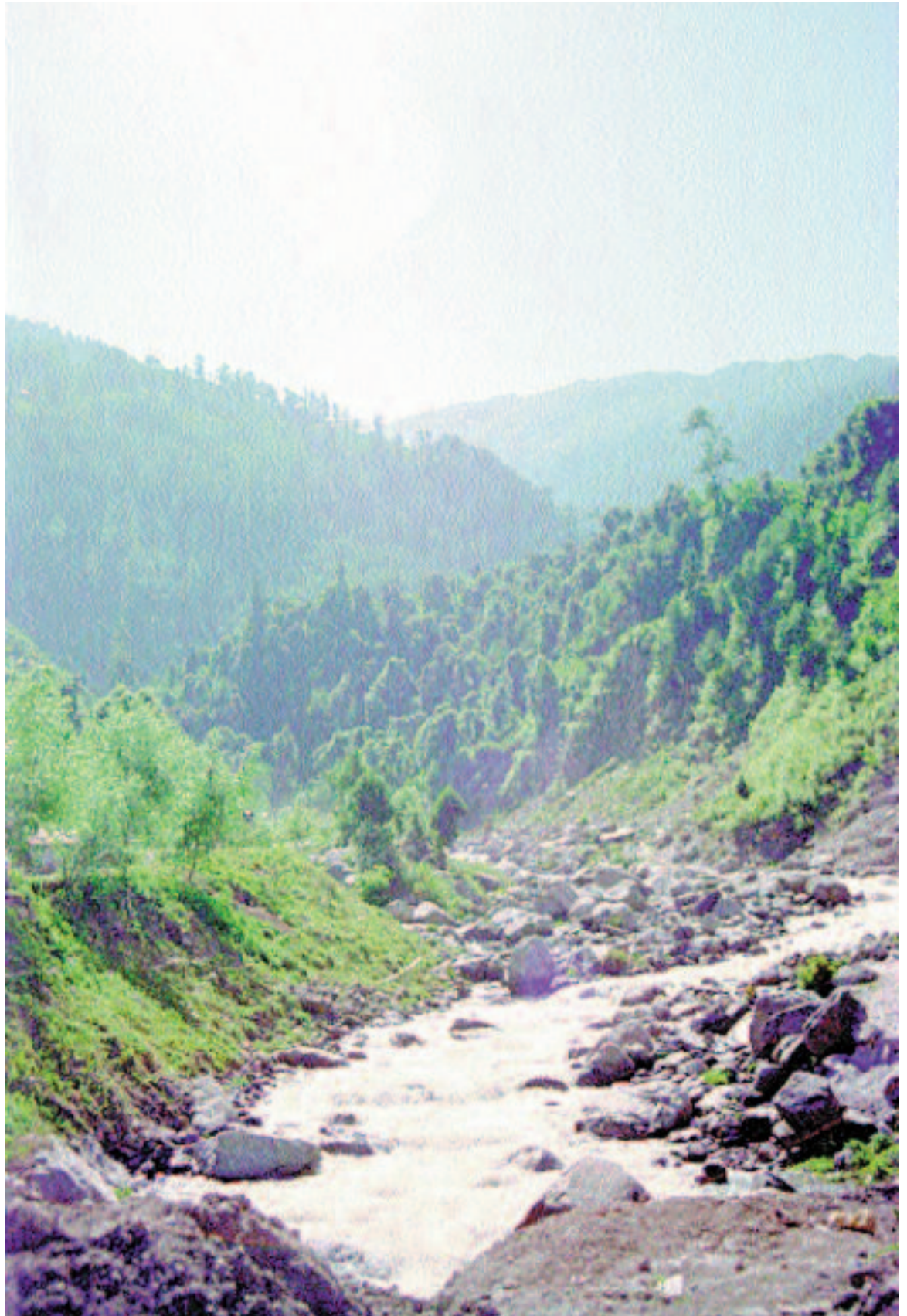
LAND IS NOT CHEAP: The topic of discussion at the *jan sunwai* held in Prini centred around the price of land and villagers wanted to be assured they would be amply compensated. Prini is not willing to accept merely market rates for its land. Most of the 32 hectares required would be taken from here. Jagatsukh, in

comparison, would be giving up only three to four hectares.

Villagers demanded to know if the company had correctly identified the number of families likely to be affected and how they would be given compensation and benefits. It transpired that such an assessment had not been done. The company was relying on the village panchayat to tell them.

Prini pointed out that access to pastures on higher reaches would be disrupted once road construction began. A representative of the consultants hired by the company said an alternative route could be worked out but the villagers said there were no options, since safer routes cut through apple orchards and their owners would object.

As for the price of their land, the villagers said that on 29 August, with the deputy



The village of Jagatsukh was parting with very little land, but it was in danger of losing its water. It wanted hard evidence that flows would not diminish. There was concern over the safety of women once labourers for the project arrive in substantial numbers. People needed to be reassured that catchment areas would be reforested. There were cultural issues too.

commissioner (DC) as witness, the company had agreed to pay Rs 75,000 per *biswa* (100 *biswas* is 1 acre) for the best land by November 2003. But a year later no money had been paid to them.

Meanwhile, a 1 MW project in nearby Aleo bought three hectares of villagers' land for Rs. 82,000 per *biswa*, raising the bar as far as real estate goes in this part of the world, (the market rate is closer to Rs. 40,000).

Company sources say the government sat on the files and so they couldn't pay the villagers on time. Incensed, the villagers now wanted Rs. 1,50,000 per *biswa*. After some haggling, the company got it down to Rs. 87,500 per *biswa*. The villagers agreed, but asked for a flat rate, irrespective of the productivity of the land, which the DC refused as it is illegal. This was when talks broke down, barely 20 minutes into the discussion with the villagers walking off with the chairs.

But Shekhar Singh reacted cautiously to the emphasis on land prices. "Focusing on the land issue would be unjust especially to women and other poorer sections that have critical and legitimate concerns," he said. "These issues will not disappear but haunt the project in the long term."

WATER WORRIES: At the public hearing held at Jagatsukh, the villagers absolutely refused to have any project in their area and unanimously refused to participate in the discussion. As moderator, Shekhar Singh seemed to be at his wit's end to have the company's side heard.

After several cries of "*Khoon denge paani nahin denge*" (We will give our blood but not

Shekhar Singh's report after the public hearings has recommended that the company respond with seriousness to the points raised by SANDRP. Only this would enhance the viability and integrity of the project. He has also recommended a grievance redressal cell, an independent team to communicate with the villagers and a compliance mechanism to ensure follow-up.

our water) the villagers outlined their reasons for being apprehensive.

The single biggest factor that underlined their refusal to cooperate was over water. The villagers said with the diversion of the Duhangan, there would be insufficient water for the people.

The company representative answered that they were legally bound to release 150 litres per second irrespective of the flow upstream throughout the year. Hence the village would always have a supply of water. According to the company's consultants, a survey done on the basis of government data, conducted over a period of 22 years, the lowest water levels in the Duhangan stream were in the month of February in 1974-75. At any given time, as per the consultants, the actual water needs for Jagatsukh is 130 litres per second.

The villagers, however, begged to differ. They said the driest period wasn't February but from October to March. Besides, 22 years from 1974-75 is 1996-97, so the data on which the research was based on was at least eight years old. The company would be building roads near Chor Pani, an important water source. Construction and blasting could very well affect the aquifers below.

ID Sharma, a professional mountaineer said the Hamta glacier where the Duhangan originated was receding anyway. The company did not know anything about the Hamta glacier and neither had the company's environmental consultants done any assessment.

As former pradhan Jograj Rana succinctly put it, "*Tum yeh pani de kaise sakthe ho, yeh to hamara pani hai*" (how can you give us this water, this is our water).

Former pradhan Ramnath Purohit focussed on the religious sentiments attached to the stream, which he said was sacred for the village.

VPS Chauhan, project manager, assured villagers that no water would be diverted till after construction of the plant, post which, they would be ensuring a steady supply of water anyway. He also gave a verbal assurance to the DC (with a written assurance to follow) stating that if the plant were to adversely affect the villagers – if the water level were to fall below 150 litres per second – the company would either release more water or shut down completely.

The women of Jagatsukh had their own point of view. Current pradhan Meera Sharma said the safety of the women was at risk with the invasion of labourers. The total population in the area is around 4,800. The number of labourers expected is close to 2,000, increasing the population by almost 50 per cent. True, the villages are adjacent to the bustling tourist hill station of Manali which is more often than not packed to the brim with tourists; but not on a permanent residential basis.

Company officials said the labourers would be housed away from the village. But ghettoising the labourers is not an option and villagers worried about tuberculosis and HIV spreading in their area.

A tunnel to carry water will also be constructed over Jagatsukh. Himanshu Sharma of Mountain Ecosystem Rejuvenation Urge (MERU) gave the instance of a tunnel leak at a Malana project, built by the same company, which flooded six villages. Although various reports were in discordance with each other, the DC stated that no lives were lost.

The people asked how the company would deal with the huge increase of dust and

pollution during blasting. Villagers wanted to know how they would protect their livestock and themselves during the explosions. The company's representatives assured them new technology including detonator delays would be used to minimise blast impacts and no leakages would take place. Blast timings would also be provided.

The villagers were concerned about the debris that construction would generate. Tunnel excavations alone would accumulate 10, 35,000 cum of muck. The company officials said 30 per cent would be used for road construction and 70 per cent would be dumped in three disposal sites at the Hamta potato farm.

Ram Krishan Sharma, a village elder said unique flora and fauna would be lost, while farmer and part-time trekking guide Yogi Mahant said that there would be a loss in revenue from the precious apple crop and medicinal herbs and plants. But the company's data on these losses was not adequate, they said.

The electricity generated from the project will be fed into the northern grid. The company has yet to work out the route transmission channels would take. One view, endorsed by villagers, was that a separate power project be constructed for the Duhangan stream.

The company presented a No Objection Certificate (NOC) signed by former pradhan Amarnath allowing it access to the land. Amarnath said he issued the NOC thinking it was for a routine survey and not for land acquisition. The NOC was summarily dismissed by the District Collector and the people.

MISTRUST AND SUSPICION: "They are protesting without even listening to reason," said project manager Chauhan, about the villagers at Jagatsukh. "They should at least listen to what we have to say".

He spoke of the company's other hydel plant in Malana – the infamous one that leaked - and said they had done a lot for the villages in that area. RSWML had rebuilt the boundary wall at the temple, built a primary school, roads and six public toilets in the village of Chowki, whereas Jerigaon got a Red Cross building and some roads. The company constructed a footbridge over the Parvati river and donated Rs. 11 lakh toward aid during the Manikaran flood in 2001. Chauhan offered to take the villagers free of cost to Malana to see things for themselves. But the villagers were unimpressed.

The villagers say they know from other hydro-electric projects in the state that people did not get what was promised. The company representative told them that the IFC would withhold funds, if they did not comply. The villagers retorted that the IFC too was unreliable. It had dawdled over replying to letters which they had sent. They demanded that the agreement with the

company should be signed by its Chairman.

A committee was proposed to monitor the project and ensure that the company complied with all its claims. The committee should also be empowered to stop operations if any violations are detected, pointed out Vimalbhai from SANDRP.

Though the people of the villages presented a united front, they did not have any data to counter the company's ESIA. They asked for a fresh ESIA and separate research on the Hamta glacier, to find out if it was receding.

"I would like dialogue to continue between the company and the villagers. That's the only way we will be able to resolve the issue," said Richard English from the IFC.

He said pulling out of the project would be entirely up to the board of the IFC and they would be consulting with the government.

If the IFC pulls out of this project, RSWML will find it very hard to find another financier. Most lending institutions will be wary of a project that has been dropped by the IFC. For the company, time is money.

SMOOTHER SOLUTIONS: Shekhar Singh thinks it's important for the company to communicate better with the local people. "They need to build in-house capacity of trained and competent people who can interact with the people and provide them information and understand their concerns."

He recommends the company identify an independent agency to do this for them.

He also suggests the company put together a grievance redressal cell with trained people and above that an independent appeal mechanism to make sure the cell works. "It should consist of people of standing, independent of the company, representatives from the local community and administration."

Instead of a large public hearing he recommends talking to people in small groups with an independent facilitator so that consensus on sticky problems can be reached.

"A larger public hearing can be organised only when there is confidence that workable and acceptable solutions have been found."

To deal with Jagatsukh's water worries, Shekhar Singh says a joint team should be put together with the villagers, technical representatives and the environmental consultants of the company to verify water figures. Also the company should explain its point of view about setting up a second power station in Jagatsukh to the villagers.

Shekhar Singh is clear that the company must respond to all issues raised by SANDRP and the villagers. "They cannot ignore SANDRP's comments as 'one of many', Those comments influence the villagers and reflect on the integrity and viability of the project.

He has also backed suggestions on a committee to ensure compliance. "It should have representatives of the company, the local people, the IFC, the state and district administration and independent people of repute." He would like two technical monitoring agencies, one for environment and the other to gauge social parameters.

(With reports from Colin Fernandes in Manali)

THE NGO AND THE COMPANY

'Figures are old, social survey is very sketchy'



As head of South Asia Network on Dams, Rivers and People (SANDRP) in New Delhi **Himanshu Thakkar**, has information on water at his fingertips. "We need electricity. But what is the optimum way of producing it?" he told **Colin Fernandes** in an interview.

How did SANDRP get involved in the Allain Duhangan project?

In October last year, we sent one of our members to find out details of the project. We then came to know the villagers hadn't been given any documents. They told us there had not been any public consultation and that they did not know the contents of the ESIA.

I looked up the IFC website and found they were taking the project to the World Bank board on 31 October. Immediately, some of the people affected by the project and SANDRP wrote a letter to the World Bank. The ESIA was claiming to have undertaken public consultations. I was amazed. But this is typical of the World Bank.

Why was the ESIA not acceptable?

The ESIA had not done basic research and surveys. If you don't have baseline information, you won't know the impact. They've not carried out an impact assessment of transmission lines and roads or a hydrological survey. Demand and supply figures are old and some are wrong. They haven't even done a proper social survey. The ESIA was biased in favour of the project. An ESIA is supposed to be an objective assessment. It is primarily a decision making tool.

If the company thinks the current ESIA is only an updating exercise, then they should attach the previous ESIA's too. Only then can it become a complete document.

Are you against the project?

We need electricity, there's no doubt about that. But what is the optimum way of producing it? In examining that question, the decision-making process, the ESIA, is very important. It gives us a proper picture of what the total impact is going to be and what can be compensated for and what can't.

Cultural impact can't be compensated. Even if the people feel the Duhangan stream is sacred, it will be destroyed. The ESIA has to accept this and mention it. Compensation can be in cash or kind. A World Bank document of 2003 acknowledges that cash compensation is insufficient and the people must be given an option of land

If the project is approved, how will a monitoring system be applied?

This is a premature question. We don't have a basis for deciding, first of all, whether the project is acceptable. The ESIA doesn't have a mechanism for monitoring and compliance. They say that 150 litres of water per second will be released once the project starts. How will this be monitored and how can we be sure it is being done? Then the catchment area should be reforested during construction. If the project construction continues but compensatory afforestation does not, what should be done to the project? The ESIA needs to have a compliance mechanism in which local people and independent agencies are involved.

Why did the MoEF clear the project in the first place?

There is a clear process, but our ministry clears projects without credible impact assessments. People should first get the ESIA. A month later a public hearing should be held. A panel of independent observers should attend it. The panel's report can be then sent to an expert committee. They should decide whether the project is acceptable or not. Based on their recommendations the MoEF can take a decision.

But none of this has happened.

This notification came into play only in 1997. This project had applied for clearance before 1997 so the reason the company is giving and the ministry is accepting, is that since the application came before the notification, this project doesn't have to follow that mechanism.

This is a run of the river project so aren't the adverse impacts limited?

In the Beas valley, there are a number of existing projects, projects under construction, and projects at the planning stage. Supposing one project has 'A' impact, another 'B' and a third, 'C'. The cumulative impact of those three projects is not A+B+C. It is much more than that. What has to be assessed is the carrying capacity of the valley. No study has been attached to the ESIA to examine the cumulative impact of all these projects.

The people of Jagatsukh fear that the overhead tunnel and the drilling will lead to landslides. This is a feature of every hydropower project. They don't do catchment area treatment or even a geological assessment.

'There should be public hearings, it's a good model'



Ashok Joshi, vice-president, hydel, of the Bhilwara Group has been nursing the project in Manali for almost a decade. Excerpts from an interview with **Umesh Anand**

Do you plan to go ahead with the project?

We don't intend to forego the project. We have been working in that area for the past seven years. Giving up this project would be harmful for the entire sector. We think this is one project that is ideal. There is no displacement of people or rehabilitation or submergence of a large area. You have no other projects in this category of 200 MW to 400 MW. It should not be given up.

How are you going to deal with the land issue?

The land issue has been resolved. The amount of land to be acquired for the project is very small. We are giving very good compensation. The villagers of Prini have agreed Rs 87,000 per *biswa* for the best land a day after the public hearing. In fact, the villagers were keen that more land should be taken up by the project. We have got forest clearance. Some land was needed from the agricultural department. In Jagatsukh too things will be worked out in consultation with the people.

What about the issue of water?

In Prini, nothing will happen to their water. They have another stream called Pani that they use for irrigation and other needs. Employment is an issue, so we have said all landowners whose land we have acquired, will get a job guarantee. We are also giving out contracts locally. The villagers of Prini have passed a resolution that the work should go ahead and they have written to the IFC saying it is on.

At Jagatsukh we have assured the people that water for irrigation that they need now, and later, will be released even at the cost of generation. We are willing to sign a written agreement with them. The minimum amount we will release is 150 litres per second from the barrage. We have explained to them that there will be in the river four or five times their requirement of water. The other issue they have is employment for which we have said the same terms as in Prini will apply. Out of 75 contracts we have awarded nearly 54 are for the two villages.

There are complaints that your figures on water availability are old and wrong.

All information is available. The government is always collecting data-figures on wildlife, air quality and so on. There should be a definition of what kind of data is needed. Figures on water are the basic data required for taking up construction. Data on water is being collected by the government of Himachal Pradesh since 1971 on a daily basis. The industrial growth of the state, our whole business plan are based on it. We cannot afford to be incorrect. All hydro-power stations in India have to be based on correct data. If the data is wrong they will not be viable. If the NGO thinks our projections are not correct there are many ways they can check it themselves.

About 2,000 labourers will descend into the village.

At the most it will be 1,500. Security is an issue. We have told them the project has provisions for making a police station at our cost. We feel this is an administrative issue. They have said we should also hire security guards from their villages.

Questions are being raised about the thoroughness of your ESIA?

We have carried out a complete ESIA with social survey, full impact, mitigation measures even impact of trucks coming into the area, water availability, everything. It has been done by Environment Resources Management (ERM) based in Gurgaon and they have a clean reputation and are internationally recognised. We have received some 45 clearances.

What do you, as a corporate, think of this model of public hearing?

The model is good. Basically all projects should be done like that. This corporate believes we should enter into an understanding with villagers. But the *jan sunwai* has been hijacked by certain people.

We have made a big compromise, I am telling you. The initial hearings were organised by us with the help of the Development Board. Then this demand came for public hearings. We were told to translate the ESIA into Hindi. We are not required to do so by law. We did not hesitate and did it in four months. Then people said the public hearing could only take place after one month since time was needed to study the ESIA. We gave them two months. Now these documents in Hindi have technical terms some of which I cannot understand, though I am a Hindi speaking person.

The NGO should have been with us right from the beginning. NGOs should actually be devising methodologies for dissemination of data to people in easy ways.

Manipur walks in the shadow of death

Reena Mukherjee
Imphal

A SILENT killer is stalking Manipur and its victims are the young. About 10 per cent of children between 0-5 years of age are estimated to be HIV positive in the state. Unlike other regions, the method of transmission in Manipur is mostly through intravenous drug use. One and a half year old Nemphiling is as pretty as a picture. But her joy will not last long. She is HIV positive, infected at birth by her mother who contracted the virus from her intravenous drug user father.

With parents dead and grandparents unable or reluctant to look after them, boys are joining the ranks of street-children, while girls become free domestics in the homes of relatives for a roof over their heads.

There are no exclusive homes to care for HIV positive children and existing government orphanages are unwilling to accommodate them.

The spread of HIV is due to many reasons. Manipur has a large number of unemployed youth and is located near the 'Golden Triangle' of Thailand, Laos and Myanmar through which several drug cartels operate. There is also a dearth of successful anti-drug programmes for the youth.

According to the Manipur AIDS Control Society, the HIV sero-prevalence rate in the state is 15.74 per cent per one million people. This is six times higher than in Maharashtra, and 20 times above Tamil Nadu. More alarmingly, the largest percentage are people between 21-30 years (56.97 per cent) and 31-40 years (25.29 per cent). The HIV sero-prevalence rate among female spouses of intravenous drug users is as high as 44 per cent.

And yet, not even half the effort being made in Tamil Nadu or Maharashtra is being put in Manipur, especially in the Kuki tribal populated hill districts where low literacy, lack of awareness and the absence of AIDS-related health services make matters worse.

Even the church and NGOs are disinterested. "There is a studied silence on their part," says Anthony Haokip, founder of the Good Shepherd Mission. "While there are several American sponsored church projects operational here, none of them involve care and treatment of AIDS patients."

Haokip and his friends use their personal savings and spare time to educate peasants in 41 villages of the Saikul-Molkon area on the dangers of using intravenous drugs, the importance of condoms and prevention of AIDS. They run a school and clinic. Medicines to tackle AIDs and health services are also provided.

Many parts in Manipur badly affected by the disease lie in the agricultural outskirts of Imphal. If peasants die, by the droves, Manipur will face a food crisis.

(Charkha Development Communication Network)



The Hokersar wetlands near Srinagar

It is time to hunt for Kashmir's wetlands

Haroon Rasheed
Srinagar

IN the old days, hunters would trample into Kashmir's lush wetlands in search of water birds. Hunting was a royal pastime then, indulged in by the elite. Hari Singh, the maharaja of Kashmir and assorted kings, found it amusing to aim their guns skywards.

"But those days are over", sighs 75-year old Mukhta Dar an avid environmentalist and wetland watcher. Forget rajas, even low ranking officials don't visit the wetlands. Tourists should be flocking here in droves, but there is hardly anyone in sight.

As a result, nobody knows what is happening to this gift of nature. In the past 50 years, two-thirds of Kashmir's wetlands have vanished.

The Rakh Haigam wetland located 50 km north of Srinagar, has shrunk from 725 sq km to 445. The Hokersar wetland, 15 km from Srinagar, has diminished from 14 sq km to 11.

The government banned hunting to protect birds, but many more are dying because of disease. Officials from the Wildlife Department are questioning the wisdom of the ban. Birds are still being hunted on the quiet, they say.

"Hunters used to bring down many old and sick birds," says forester Ghulam Mohammed Bakshi who oversees the Hokersar wetland. "Birds are not being killed and this is causing diseases to spread. If a hunter shot 100 birds, today 300 are dying because of illnesses." By splashing around, hunters would aerate the water and thereby control weeds. Instead the wetlands are being strangled by an overgrowth.

Every September, thousands of aquatic birds flock to Kashmir's wetlands from Siberia in search of warmth and food and to breed. The birds are now finding it hard to find food because of silt and encroachments. "Earlier, *singhara* would be grown especially for them," remarks Mukta Dar.

This year about 4,50,000 water birds arrived at Hokersar, so the state government is pretending everything is hunky dory. Mukta Dar disagrees. "The birds have no choice," he says. Bakshi says Hokersar will die in the next five or six years if the government does not watch out.

The Rakh Haigam wetland, 50 kilometres north of Kashmir, is in an equally pitiable state. Mukta Dar says its shallow water is only two feet deep. Earlier it used to be 10 feet. "The government is aware of the ailment and the remedy," says Ghulam Hasan Butt, an official posted at Haigam. "Not doing anything is the biggest weakness the government suffers from."

Officials blame three *nullahs* called the Balkol, Nangli and Dodhganga for being the root cause of the problem. "These carry a lot of silt which has reduced the depth of the wetlands and increased compactness at their bottoms," says Mohammed Ramzan Dar, assistant conservator of the Wildlife department. "We are virtually shouting, nothing much needs to be done. Just change the direction of the *nullahs* and construct a few small dams to catch the silt."

He says three or four floods will make the wetlands part of history. But an embankment constructed at the Hokersar wetland has done more harm than good. Traditionally, floodwaters replenish wetlands and are beneficial. By diverting the *nullahs* the wetlands can only dry up.

The Sportsmen and Conservation Club, an NGO formed in the '70s to promote conservation of wetlands and wildlife, is disappointed with the government's indifference. Club members say if the wetlands continue to be neglected, they will begin to disappear in the next five years.

"We are ready to offer our services on a voluntary basis to save the wetlands, but the government's attitude is frosty," says Khizar Mohammad Kotru, a member. The club has presented the Ministry of Environment and Forests (MoEF) with a memorandum with practical steps to save the wetlands but they have not received any reply.

"People who are totally ignorant about wildlife and wetlands are heading the department," says Kotru. It has 600 officials who have not been properly trained. The department has a billboard, which says frankly: "Two-thirds of the wetlands of Kashmir have vanished in the past 50 years."

If nothing is done they may have to hang up a second notice: "All the wetlands of Kashmir have vanished in the last 55 years."

(Haroon Rasheed is a Charkha Fellow.)

MKSS ready to field 100 nominees

Aasthi Bhartia
Rajasamund

AFTER four years as sarpanches, Tejvir Singh of Toddgadd village and Narayan Singh of Kushalpura, Rajasamund district, in Rajasthan, have squeaky clean reputations. Their panchayats worked honestly and transparently. They raised the water table, removed social evils and ensured minimum wages. All through the drought, food for work programmes in their areas, worked without a hitch.

Tejvir and Narayan are members of the Mazdoor Kisan Shakti Sangathan (MKSS). In 1999, the MKSS had backed them for the post of sarpanch. Panchayat polls are on the horizon once again and encouraged by their star performers, MKSS is fielding 100 candidates for the post of sarpanch, this time.

MKSS entered politics in 1999, after deep thought. A field visit to Kerala's nicely run panchayats inspired them. Besides, the sarpanch does not contest under any political party banner. "Fighting elections is not the duty solely of the Congress and the BJP. It is also the people's right," explains Narayan.

Last time, the MKSS election manifesto pledged to "put the panchayat's power in people's hands." It said all panchayat records would be open for inspection. The manifesto promised regular meetings of the ward sabha and gram sabha and correct minimum wages. Also, it said candidates from the MKSS would spend minimal money on fighting elections.

So Tejvir Singh spent only Rs. 860 and Narayan Singh's expense was a mere Rs. 1,600. Since they got their

symbols a day in advance their campaign lasted just seven hours. Their opponents spent around Rs 40,000 and lost.

Both have done good work. Tejvir ended scavenging in Toddgadd. Jain houses had employed 16 Harijan families to clean their latrines. Tejvir broke social taboo by eating with the Harijans and broached the subject tactfully. Finally, the panchayat banned scavenging on grounds that it was inhuman. It gave 15 days notice to the Jain families to change their toilets. A notice was served to the Harijan families to stop work.

Money spent on development work is accounted for. Muster rolls are displayed prominently. In Kushalpura, five broken talabs were repaired, four new school buildings built and six anicuts constructed. During the

drought, 1,200 workers got work every month, under the food for work programme.

In Toddgadd, the water level has risen and wells have been replenished. For the first time in two years, commercial water tankers bypass the village in summer. Toddgadd panchayat is also the first to carry out a 500 hectare watershed project successfully in Ajmer. "Earlier plans were made by the sarpanch, the watershed committee and a junior engineer. We held gram sabha meetings every month and chalked plans based on their recommendations," says Tejvir. The project has created pasture lands for the villagers.

"In most panchayats, people are not allowed to sit in on the quorum's meetings. We allow anyone to attend because we don't have any conspiracies to hide," he says.

But the sarpanches have grievances. The minimum wage in Rajasthan is Rs. 1,800 per month yet a sarpanch gets only Rs. 400 as a stipend from the government. MKSS is paying both sarpanches Rs. 1,800 a month. As the number of sarpanches, backed by the MKSS goes up, raising money to pay all of them could be difficult. And a decent salary does encourage a sarpanch to remain honest, feel MKSS activists.

A second grievance say Tejvir and Narayan is that development decisions are based on political considerations. "What should really happen is that the MLA and MP should give priority to the panchayat and gram sabha's recommendations," explains Narayan. Strengthening grassroots democracy has been the primary aim of MKSS's successful foray into politics. After examining their sarpanches clean and meritorious report cards, MKSS is considering diving into assembly polls.



The MKSS election manifesto pledged to "put the panchayat's power in people's hands."

Season's over again at Jambudwip

Reena Mukherjee
Kakdwip, West Bengal

THE Supreme Court's order in February clarifying that fishermen could fish at Jambudwip island in the Sunderbans provided they did not use trawlers or mechanised boats came too late. The fishing season starts in October and ends in February. The delay was caused because officials could not correctly interpret an earlier Supreme Court order and the court had to be approached again.

This makes it two seasons in a row after the Ministry of Environment and Forests issued a directive on May 2002, asking forest departments to remove illegal encroachments on forestlands before September that year. Jambudwip is a reserved forest area.

"With two years of slack fishing, production has dropped by 40 per cent," says Shanker Bera of Bera Marine Traders. "Our advance credits are affected." The town's economy is in shambles. Some like Rajen and Bishu Dar are trying their hand at farming but the land is unyield-

ing. Rajen's elder son died in 2002 when forest officials refused him shelter at Jambudwip during a cyclone. Their surviving son is malnourished. Bishu's son has fever, but his father can't afford medical expenses.

The MoEF's directive, on the surface, is aimed at implementing the Supreme Court order of 1996 which stated that encroachments be removed from reserved forests, in keeping with the Forest Conservation Act (FCA) of 1980. The court had set up a Central Empowered Committee (CEC) in May 2002, to examine implementation.

Jambudwip's transient fishermen have customary rights to fish on the island since 1955, according to a study by the Anthropological Survey of India.

FCA Act and guidelines provide for regularisation of use of reserve forestlands, if activities began prior to 1980. But the state government had not done this.

So in July 2002, the forest department closed the island and set fire to all the storage sheds the fishermen used. In August, the department stopped issuing

or renewing passes to fishermen.

The fishermen united under the Dakshinbanga Matsajibi Federation (DMF) and agitated for their rights. They were joined by the National Fishworkers' Forum (NFW). The state fisheries minister, Kiranmoy Nanda, backed them but the forest department did not. Finally, after a meeting with the MoEF it was decided the fishermen could use the char area of Jambudwip.

Yet when the fishing season opened in October, the fishermen were denied entry. Forest officials erected cement pillars on the island in contravention of Coastal Regulatory Zone (CRZ) specifications. In November, over 40 fishermen died when the forest department denied them shelter during a raging cyclone.

After a 32-day dharna by fishermen, the CEC visited the island in early December.

Their report recommended shifting the fishermen to an alternative site called Haribhanga. It described fishing as a non-forest activity, not permissible under the FCA. Harikrishna Debnath, chairman of

NFF pointed out the forest department had been recognising customary rights by issuing passes.

"Unlike Jambudwip, Haribhanga has a good amount of wildlife. Fishermen cannot sail from Haribhanga to the Sandheads because of the topography," he said. The fishermen redeemed part of the season but were warned that they would not be allowed to next time.

Debnath filed a writ petition in the Supreme Court challenging the CEC report. In August 2003, the court stated that pending resolution of the issue, no trawler or mechanised boat could enter the waters adjoining Jambudwip.

Chief secretary S N Roy translated the order to mean that there was no scope for fishing at all in the Jambudwip area although trawlers are not used for fishing.

"Mechanised boats are only used to transport the fish caught in the sea to the island for cleaning and drying. They can be easily dispensed with," explained Debnath.

(Charkha Development Communication Network)

Roma groups to discuss culture, language

Valeriu Nicolae
Brussels

ROMA groups are organising a two-day conference at the University of Hamburg in July to promote Romani language and culture. Out of 800,000 Roma in Europe, more than half deny their origins. Only 100 Roma students study their mother tongue. There are no textbooks or curricula to teach the language.

Roma groups are protesting recent remarks by the EU Commission's ambassador to Slovakia, Eric van der Linden. During an interview to a TV channel, he suggested that Roma children should be forced to get an education. "I'll say it in quotation marks: force Roma children to stay in boarding schools from Monday morning until Friday afternoon, where they will be subjected to the system of values which is dominant in our society."

The ambassador's suggestion means separating children from their parents. Linden agreed families would resist but added that giving them money could persuade them to change their minds.

"You can imagine that families get money - the amount will need to be defined later - in order to make them send their children to school. But the generation that will be educated then and raised in the same time, will fit better into the dominant society, they will be able to cooperate truly productively to the growth of the economy."

Advocating the forced separation of children from their parents so that they are "educated" according to the "system of values of the dominant society" to whose wealth they should later contribute in a more productive way is not a new idea. Policies of forced assimilation were practiced by Empress Maria-Theresa in Austria and in Switzerland till the beginning of the 1970s and aimed at eradicating Romani culture and identity.

The "dominant societies" promote at different times in their history "values" which form the basis of their wealth, but lead to deprivation and annihilation of other societies and cultures.

Europe continues to imagine its history and prosperity as being glorious and the result of a hard working population. The reality is much of Europe's wealth was based on looting and extermination of entire civilisations. Roma, as European latecomers, have repeatedly been the target of such attempts and paternalistic talk about the need to be "educated" are considered "normal".

There is much to be done within the Roma communities, but as the ambassador's blunt statements prove, much more needs to be done about the "dominant" society.

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Guess who is at the G8's low high table

THIS week I had 'Georgia on my mind,' not merely because Ray Charles, my favourite Soul Jazz singer passed away but also because five European Heads of States from UK, France, Germany, Italy and Russia were breaking bread with George Bush and the Canadian and Japanese Prime Ministers on Sea Island in Georgia, deciding how to better control their fate and thereby, the fate of the world. That Japan has wrangled its way into the white man's club begs the question of how economic and technological merit is determined. There is the case of the famous Atlanta golf course that admitted one black member to give it face and comply with the new PGA rules. If it is technological and economic merit then don't China, India and Brazil merit admittance? One must note here that leaders from Afghanistan, Algeria, Bahrain, Jordan and Yemen were invited - and worn as carnation.

But looking closely at its workings what exactly does this yearly meeting signify - apart from finding a remote location, turning it into Fort Knox, arranging a bacchanalia for the 'monarchs,' issuing a high-sounding statement to which all have agreed and which tries hard to convince a highly sceptical world that they have solved or resolved to solve all the problems of the world, and promising a repeat performance the following year? Very little. For the world that is. For these leaders it is an opportunity to realign policies and ensure that they are not stepping on one another's toes. In other words to keep the squabbling and the loot within the family.

If there are differences of opinion among the leaders the rule is to avoid issues which are otherwise screaming for attention, i.e. environmental issues, Palestinian- Israeli conflict, the global water shortage, the African issues (AIDS, famine, refugees, debt-burden, etc.)... But it does provide an opportunity to display any achievement, real or imagined. Bush and Blair were bent on using the new UN resolution of the Security Council on Iraq to convince the world, and their own constituencies, that the War and all related policies were fully vindicated now that the world has endorsed it post facto. We must forgive them their ignorance in their Olympian retreat, far removed from the realities on the ground. But can we forgive the supercilious lecturing that followed?

After all these years (almost 30) all that G8 has really proved is that their interests are inextricably linked to those of big business and not necessarily with those

of the people they represent. Fortunately for democracy the people are gradually waking up to the fact and cracking open some of the myths of democracies. As in India, parties that statistically jotted 8 per cent national growth can be thrown out when people realise that they have been lied to and the benefits were accruing merely to the rich and powerful, thanks to their 'leaders'. Spain, and now the UK and Italy are following suit. Labour in the UK is horrified by the local election results this week. They must have been sniffing glue because everyone else knew it was going to happen.

The same gang had tried to upstage another event - a far more historic and truly memorable one: the 60th anniversary of D-Day or Le débarquement as the French call it. The anniversary of a day that saw the death of more than 10,000 soldiers on the coast of Normandy. Here again the 'monarchs' got together and took the

podium to commemorate a truly memorable event. Had the Nazis been around they would have surely envied the security arrangements that wouldn't let an ordinary Frenchman through to the staging area. This time however the people did not grudge them the pomp and show which accompanied the celebrations, though many would have preferred the real heroes to have mastered all the ceremonies instead of corrupt politicians and warmongers.

It was a balmy day as I strolled on the beautiful Chateau grounds with thousands of others before going to vote for the European Parliamentary election and our share of the 732 MEPs. I was surprised by the low turnout. The level of indifference was partly due to the vague public perception of what these elections were all about. Most of the voters (only 45.3 per cent - which is about 155 million of the 350 million eligible European voters) were showing their anti-government sentiments by voting against the ruling parties. Here is a sample of what some of the ruling parties got: Labour in UK (22.3 per cent), UMP in France (16.6 per cent), Social Democrats in Germany (21.5 per cent), Forza Italia in Italy (21 per cent), Left Party in Poland (9 per cent). Only in Spain did the ruling Socialist Party get 43.7 per cent. The turnout was truly dismal in the 10 newest members whose average was 26.4 per cent. Merely goes to show that human beings continue their quest for rights and entitlements while ignoring the very obligations that make those rights possible.

LETTER FROM EUROPE



Riaz Quadir in Versailles

Aerobics is a promising therapy for AIDS

Dr Veljko Velkovic

AEROBIC exercise training has been shown to be a promising, non-toxic, non-drug adjunct therapy to improve physical fitness, increase quality of life, and potentially improve the immune status of HIV-positive individuals.

Unfortunately, despite enormous scientific and financial resources being deployed worldwide over the past 15 years, no vaccine candidate is on the immediate horizon.

It so happens that aerobic exercise training stimulates the formation of anti-VIP/NTM antibodies in both normal and HIV-positive individuals, and perhaps both could benefit from such exercise.

Several studies on aerobic exercise training in HIV-positive individuals have demonstrated that it is safe,

effective, and has a number of beneficial outcomes.

The aerobic exercise fitness improvements include a 10-25 per cent improvement in lactic acidosis threshold (a sign of fatigue) and 5-10 per cent increase in maximal oxygen uptake depending on the exercise training intensity. In addition, despite concerns about the stress of aerobic exercise on already damaged immune systems (specifically, increases in infections, morbidity, or mortality), there have been no documented adverse effects of aerobic exercise training in HIV-positive patients at either moderate or heavy exercise training levels.

With regards to immunologic improvement with aerobic exercise training, CD4 counts or viral loads may or may not improve during the exercise intervention in exercise although skin test reactivity to Candida antigen has been shown to improve with moderate exercise.

The quality of life outcomes, however, were found to have improved significantly with aerobic exercise training relative to a non-exercising control group.

There are indications that exercise can stabilise the CD4 cell count in HIV-infected individuals. Studies showed that people with CD4 cells between 200 and 500 seemed to benefit the most from an exercise program. A pilot study performed by Olson and co-workers found that the mean change in CD4 percentage over the 24 months interval for weight lifters was -3.1 per cent compared with -5.9 per cent for runners.

In a large study involving 415 individuals demonstrated that exercising 3 to 4 times a week had a more protective effect than daily exercise.

Institute of Science in Society
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Civil Society

PERSPECTIVES

Have an idea? Perhaps a lost cause? Tell your story or just express an honest opinion in these pages.

Diaspora is eager to serve

RAM GIDOOMAL



Through NR Eyes

DIASPORA observers of Indian affairs have had a roller-coaster ride in recent weeks. The departure of Mr Vajpayee and his administration took most people by surprise, but the twists and turns of the Indian Post-Election Epic that followed were edge-of-the-seat stuff. Sonia Gandhi's decision not to take up the post of Prime Minister disappointed many people's expectations, and the appointment of Mr Manmohan Singh as India's first-ever minority Prime Minister was a further historic development.

Those of us who had anticipated the appointment of Sonia Gandhi as the obvious resolution of a hung Parliament were curious to see what Mr Singh's first moves would be. For many of us who, as I explained last month, would like to see the diaspora taking a role in the resolution of the ethnic conflict that has torn parts of India apart in recent years,

his first statements were heartening. He moved swiftly to dissociate himself from the previous government's one-sided tolerance of situations like Gujarat in 2002. Choosing words that tacitly acknowledged that communal riots have happened under all governments, he nevertheless called for a national determination that such riots should not happen again - a determination in which the government should be the prime preventive agent, not a body that turns a blind eye.

Adroitly avoiding a demand for revenge on previous state and government officials involved in past cover-ups, he set out his stall as a government of reconciliation, promising, for example, to continue Mr Vajpayee's peace initiative with Pakistan, and to explore ways of resolving the troubled issue of Kashmir. It's still early days, and we wait with great interest to see what develops.

JUSTICE AND RIGHTS: One detail of the new government has intrigued many diaspora observers. India's first non-Hindu Prime Minister has appointed a committed Christian to his cabinet: Mr P. R. Kyndiah becomes Minister of Tribal Affairs.

The satisfaction many of us who are Christian believers feel at this news is not a matter of head-counting - Christianity getting a toe-hold in the cabinet. It is much more a matter of social justice and human rights for all. Religious persecution in parts of India has been increasing in recent years, and Hindus, Muslims and Christians have all suffered in various ways, as have smaller groups. Anything farther from the vision of Mahatma Gandhi is hard to imagine. The appointment of a member of the Christian community to Cabinet rank is a clear reversal of the previous BJP nationalist influence in New Delhi, and can only facilitate the prevention of communal riots: after all, religion has been a major factor in most of them. The new Prime Minister appears to be willing to back his government philosophy with practical measures.

ELECTIONS: In London, we have just completed our own elections: for London Mayor,

the London Assembly, and the European Parliament - the latter, a national poll.

The elections have been widely seen as a verdict on two key government policies - the Iraq War and our membership of Europe, both opposed by parties fighting the elections. Add to that the British National Party, whose key policy is to repatriate Britain's ethnic minorities, and you have three political parties, all focused on single issues, and all catching the mood of large sectors of the British public. Standing as Mayoral and Assembly candidate for the Christian Peoples Alliance, the swing to the right meant that my share of the vote fell. I was nevertheless encouraged that as many people voted for us as did in 2000. We gained just under 3 per cent of the vote, saving our deposit - a respectable showing, especially for a party fighting only its second major election - and not insignificant, with an approaching General Election and a narrowing differential between the major parties.



SAAB PICTURES

AMBASSADORS: One key policy from our campaign has relevance to the role of the diaspora in regard to the subcontinent, and vice versa. We proposed to appoint honorary trade and investment ambassadors from London's 300 plus minority ethnic communities, charged with generating trade links and investment opportunities with their communities in their mother countries. We proposed giving the ambassadors free access and transport passes to trade and industry events.

The advantages of such a system are many. Few British businesses, and indeed not many government departments, fully understand and exploit the wealth of cultural, trade and business capital that our ethnic communities represent. Businesses often spend huge amounts of money to buy services from abroad that are available, but unrecognised, literally a few doors away.

I am of course disappointed that the project will now have to wait, unless the government picks up the idea. However, I do offer it to the new Civil Society in India as something worth pondering. Could not the pressure to create such trade initiatives come from the subcontinent? Indians with diaspora relatives and business and other links overseas would be well placed to launch formal trade relations. Prime Minister Singh, my manifesto is at your disposal!

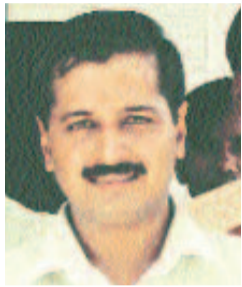
This is not just a trade matter, however. Trade does not happen in the abstract. People trade with people. Networks, personal contacts, the apparently casual interaction of people that leads to new business developing - these are at the heart of business. I remember sitting in a *souk*, a market place in Kuwait and discovering that my acquaintance came from the same part of India as my family. Much more than business was talked that afternoon.

The Indian diaspora is a young one. It largely took shape after Partition, in the post-war years and afterwards. Trade will not only enable the diaspora and the subcontinent mutually to prosper. It will help develop those links of friendship, providing continuity across generations, talking, interacting and being in human fellowship, without which any community, however large or small, cannot flourish for long.

(Ram Gidoomal is a businessman of Indian origin settled in Britain. He belongs to the Christian People's Alliance and was a candidate for the Mayor of London E-mail:ramgidoomal@blueyonder.co.uk)

The law works, Triveni and Nannu will tell you how they got their rations

ARVIND KEJRIWAL



The Right To Know

RIGHT to information is redefining relationships between the government and citizens. Triveni is a matriculate. She was shocked to discover that her ration shopkeeper was siphoning off rations meant for her by making false thumb impressions on cash memos in her name. Actually, she didn't receive any grains for six months. Whenever she would go to the shop, it would either be closed or the shopkeeper would say that there was no stock.

Triveni is a poor woman, who lives in a slum colony in East Delhi. She holds an Antyodaya card issued by the government to the poorest of the poor. However, it isn't easy to get ration from a ration shop. In February 2003, Triveni filed an application under the Right to Information Act asking for the quantity of ration issued to her as per records and also copies of cash memos purported to have been issued to her. After a month, she received a reply stating that she had been issued 25 kg of wheat at Rs 2 per kg and 10 kg of rice at Rs 3 per kg

very month in the previous three months. The cash memos showed thumb impressions having been made in her name. She is a literate woman and always signs. Naturally, the thumb impressions do not belong to her.

This shows that the shopkeeper had been diverting her ration by faking thumb impressions in her name. Triveni was shocked. But now she was equipped with evidence to proceed against the shopkeeper. But before she could take any action, the shopkeeper came to her house and pleaded with her not to take any action and that he would mend his ways in future. Since then, for the past year and a half, Triveni has been getting the right amount of ration at the right price.

Nannu is a daily wage earner. He lives in the Welcome Mazdoor Colony, another slum habitation in East Delhi. He lost his ration card and applied for a duplicate one in January this year. He made several rounds of the local Food & Civil Supplies office for the next three months. But the clerks and officials would not even look at him, leave alone attend to him or bother to tell him the status of his application. Ultimately, he filed an application under the Right to Information Act asking for the daily progress made on his application, names of the officials who were supposed to act on his application and what action would be taken against these officials. Within a week of filing application under Right to Information

Act, he was visited by an inspector from the Food Department, who informed him that the card had been made and he could collect it from the office. When Nannu went to collect his card next day, he was given a very warm treatment by the Food & Supply Officer (FSO), who is the head of a Circle. The FSO offered him tea and requested him to withdraw his application under Right to Information, since his work had already been done.

These two incidents are not exceptions. They are daily occurrences in different parts of Delhi since the Right to Information Act was passed. Right to Information is redefining relationships between the government and citizens.

Ordinarily, what are the options before poor people like Triveni and Nannu? They could have complained to government officials. But no one would have listened to Nannu. No one would have listened to Triveni either.

Through the use of Right to Information, a poor person suddenly gets equipped with evidence against the ration shopkeeper.

There are no effective systems within governance, which hold government officials accountable. The officials know very well that nothing can happen to them. The chances of their inefficiency and corruption being detected and questioned are almost negligible. Hence, they thrive. Mr N Vittal, former CVC, once remarked that corruption is a business for corrupt government officials. The risks involved in this business are very low. If we have to make any dent, we would need to increase these risks.

Through the use of Right to Information, a powerless and poor person like Triveni suddenly gets equipped with evidence against the ration shopkeeper and the power equations between Triveni and the shopkeeper alter dramatically. If she wished, Triveni could have had the shopkeeper's license cancelled. When Nannu asks for the daily progress report made on his application, the Department ends up admitting its officials' inefficiency on paper. Nannu is asking them to furnish the names of the officials responsible for not doing his job forcing the Department to fix responsibility. Now, the chances of action against guilty officials or vested interests increase substantially.

This is precisely what the right to information does. The evidence of corruption and inefficiency, which was hitherto buried under red tape, comes under public scrutiny.

Missing the wood for the trees

KK SOMANI

THE article "The Missing Wood" in the last issue of Civil Society rightly questions the efficacy of state ownership of forests as nationalised forestry has failed to provide necessary services to society or even to protect the forest by rejuvenating them. The question is not merely supplying wood to any particular industry but utilising one of the largest available non-productive forms of degraded land for all round development of the country. It can provide millions of jobs to the unemployed and also create wealth in the form of wood for various industries like paper, furniture, construction, packing, matchsticks and others. It can not only meet the firewood requirement of the poor but by growing non-edible oil seeds from *Jatropha* and *Karanj* trees, it can also meet automotive fuel needs. Finally it can also stop further degradation of the environment and help absorb carbon-dioxide emissions of polluting vehicles and industries.

In an earlier issue of Civil Society, an example was cited of Nepal where ownership by the government resulted in rampant deforestation, followed by entire hills becoming barren, which led to flash floods, land slides and deterioration of the environment. Once it was agreed to hand the forests over to "forest user groups", almost 25 per cent of the country's population became involved in their upkeep. They were free to plant and harvest according to their will ushering in prosperity for villagers and simultaneously increasing the forest cover of the country.

Compare this to the Saxena report - a bureaucratic delight without any benefit to the country. Millions of saplings are planted every year in forest areas at great cost only to be washed away in the monsoon or to wither away in the heat of summer. There is no effort to guard, tend and look after these saplings. The government does not have either the will or the huge manpower required for the job. Hence like all other public sector industrial units, the whole exercise is a diversion of public funds in wasteful expendi-

ture. The report speaks of 100 million people dependent on this forest; it only means 100 million people starving due to government apathy. Instead of regular employment, they have to depend on whatever is left over from degraded forest area.

Both the centre and state governments promise to create more employment, yet this one source of large-scale employment is continuously overlooked merely to placate the bureaucrats. It is wrong to view the industry and the local population as competitors for the same land. Instead what is required is a combined effort utilising the resources of the industry, the manpower of the local population and available degraded land, either public or private. A specific ratio can be fixed for development to benefit all. Thus the industry should be asked to plant a certain minimum number of trees per hectare but cut not more than 15 to 20 per cent every year, always maintaining a minimum of 50 large trees standing. In fact every hectare must be developed as a "Panchavati", with at least five varieties of trees in the area. Perhaps 50 per cent could be fast growing trees for industry and fuel wood, 20 per cent can be for oil seeds from such trees as *Jatropha* and *Karanj*, at least 10 per cent for herbal medicine, another 10 per cent for slow growth trees like teak and finally some indigenous trees.

Even private lands which are degraded either in forests or as ravines near river banks should be taken over by the government and handed over to a group comprising the industry and the local population for development on similar lines. Since individual farmers or land holders don't have resources to reclaim such land, this results in further degradation.

The work done by the Mysore Paper Mills should be an eye opener and the system should be replicated in one form or the other at all places. It is beneficial not only to human beings but also to the local wildlife.

DEAR DR SWAMINATHAN...AN OPEN LETTER BY SUMAN SAHAI

Weed out babus, bring in real talent

To
Dr MS Swaminathan,
Head, Farmers' Commission,
Govt of India

Dear Dr. Swaminathan,

Those committed people who work in the field of food and agriculture and have followed the fate of farmers in these last difficult years have chafed at the neglect of the farm sector in an agricultural economy like ours. It simply did not make sense to neglect our most valuable asset and exacerbate our greatest vulnerability. Was there no shepherd to guide the fortunes of the 100 million farm families that are both the nations' greatest strength and also constitute its soft underbelly?

When the news was announced that you would head the Farmers' Commission and would be entrusted the task of making a plan to improve the lot of farmers and ensure their livelihoods, as also the nation's food security, many were pleased. Your formidable experience in India and your understanding of the global dimensions of the problems associated with agriculture in food sensitive countries across the world, have as always, raised a lot of expectations. I daresay you will be flooded with suggestions and recommendations from the worthiest in the land who, if they haven't done so already, will be jamming your mailbox with how to get it right. Far be it from me to tell you how to do your job in the Commission; but I do want to tell you of our expectations. We at Gene Campaign have had a long and close association with you and we have the right to tell you what we want from you now.

For starters, could you please have a lot of really good community organisations, field workers, people (especially women) from farming and tribal communities, homemakers who feed their families, academics, NGOs and those who fit under the umbrella of 'civil society' organisations, as members on the Commission. Please also try to keep the number of babus really small and pick those ones who not just understand agriculture but who have a track record of trying to do the right thing for farmers and adivasis. There are many like that, only they get left behind in the sycophancy race in Ministries. At any rate, please make sure you keep out the creeps who have been hanging around the Agriculture Ministry forever and have a proven record of opposing the rights and interests of farmers, in favour of the big corporations.

It would be good to do a large multi-stakeholder consultation to hear the suggestions of people living in various parts of rural India, associated either directly or indirectly with farming. You could constitute groups of people headed by a member of the Commission, who could interact with farmers and pass on the problems, expectations and desires of those in their region, who would find it difficult to reach you. NGOs working in the field can also be entrusted this task. This way, you would get the views of many different kinds of people and decisions the Commission members take incorporating these views would have legitimacy and the support of people.

There is little you do not yourself understand about farming and food production and there are enough technically outstanding people in our agricultural research system to make a superb team. I only want to caution that the outstanding people have somehow fallen by the wayside, transferred out of the mainstream, to little outposts, their talents unutilised. In the formal mainline system, it is really the scum that has risen to the top; it will take some doing but try to keep this lot out. Please send out emissaries who can bring back those keen thinking scientists that are working in tandem with farmers, tucked away in little known research stations and put together your scientific team. The Farmers Commission under your guidance must glow with fervour and brilliance so that the country can repose its trust in it.

There are a few substantive issues I would like to point out as well. You are witness to the controversial entry of genetically modified crops into this country, shrouded in secrecy, defying the peoples' right to information and unable to shrug the charges that it was Monsanto's interest, not that of farmers that was being served. The former Secretary of the DBT (Department of Biotechnology) doggedly refused to allow a national biotechnology policy to be formulated even when all shades of opinion were demanding one. Using political connections, this official (now retired after five extensions) took ad hoc decisions almost unilaterally and pushed all manner of GM crops in the absence of a policy and a national consensus. I hope you and your team will use your influence to put

an end to this kind of arbitrary high handedness and ensure that there is a policy in this country. Please ensure that farmers and other stakeholders are the ones to formulate policy through a dialogue with technical experts.

I hope you will put an end to the nonsensical research programs that were sanctioned by the DBT. For example, the research on inserting the insulin gene into groundnuts to find a cure for diabetes. Insulin is a protein. Once the insulin-carrying groundnut was eaten, the insulin would be digested by the gastric juices in the stomach just like all the other protein in the groundnut and lose its identity. Proteins are broken down in the digestive tract into amino acids, which are then absorbed by the body as nutrition. The same thing would happen to insulin. For this reason, the insulin dependent diabetic can only be treated with injections since this is the only way that insulin retains its integrity when it reaches the bloodstream. So this nonsensical research is conceptually flawed, headed nowhere and a waste of the taxpayers' money.

Can I point out another disastrous piece of research supported by the redoubtable DBT?



Jamia Hamdard in Delhi has been given a grant to develop genetically modified medicinal plants! It is difficult to get crazier than this. Medicinal plants produce very special chemicals (many of them have to be used with extreme care), under certain specific conditions. Tampering with these conditions is likely to change the properties of the plant making it useless medicinally. That is why no chemical fertilisers and pesticides are used when medicinal plants are cultivated. The impact of introducing a foreign gene into a medicinal plant can be potentially disastrous since these plants can produce dangerous chemicals like toxins or allergens.

The famous case of a GM corn, Starlink, produced in the US should be remembered for the fact that allergens can be produced in GM crops, the natural versions of which had none. A potentially life threatening allergenic property was found in a GM soybean variety bred by using a gene from the Brazil nut. Fortunately this was detected in time, before harm could be done and the GM Soya was withdrawn. This project on medicinal plants reflects the mindless way in which the DBT is promoting GM research, without any regard for relevance, appropriateness or even plain common sense. Could your Commission lay down strict strictures that such nonsense is not repeated?

There is so much more that I have to say, but space, as always, is a constraint. Perhaps when your Commission is listening to the views of stakeholders, Gene Campaign will get its chance and we will have the opportunity to come and tell you all about our work in the field with farmers and the views we have formulated collectively.

With regards and good wishes,

Suman Sahai,
 Gene Campaign,
 New Delhi

When it comes to children, why is the government so fuzzy?

RAZIA ISMAIL ABBASI

MAHATMA Gandhi offered a talisman for us to use whenever we had doubts about an impending choice: "recall the face of the poorest and weakest man you have seen, and ask yourself if the step you contemplate is going to be of any use to him..."

If the authors of the UPA's newly floated Common Minimum Programme had ever thought to ask the Mahatma's spirit now, perhaps he might have said: "recall the children." Indians aged below 18 constitute more than 44 per cent of our population, but the CMP has little to offer them. It does pledge to 'protect the rights of children', but it is fuzzy on what needs to be done, and how.

Plenty needs to be done. India's overall infant mortality rate has moved from a three-digit to a two-digit figure in deaths per thousand live births, but disturbing variations mark the great divides of rural-urban, rich-poor, and upper caste-lower caste, progressive states and the backward heartland. A third of all babies born are seriously underweight; newborn mortality levels are high and stagnant; two-thirds of young children are anaemic because they are under-fed and prone to sickness, and 46 per cent of all children under three are stunted. Half the children of school-going age are not in school; no one has the right count of child labour, but child trafficking and child bondage persist; one in 10 children has some form of impairment, but barely 5 per cent of children with disability have access to any kind of services and just 2 per cent of them have access to any kind of schooling. The 2001 Census has confirmed that girl children are vanishing from the population because they are either denied birth or denied survival. Child marriages are banned, illegal, all of that - but they happen. The Government has recognised the importance of birth registration, and allowed coverage levels to slump from a modest 47 per cent in 1990 to just 35 per cent in 2000-2001. Not a pretty picture after 57 years of independence and 10 Five Year plans.

What can the UPA do to change it? Not much, if it sticks to the present provisions of the CMP. Much more, if it adheres to its own declaration that the CMP is not a comprehensive agenda but a starting point.

NGOs who joined forces as a Citizens' Coalition on child rights and crafted a "Children's Manifesto" to call attention to children's needs and rights in the Lok Sabha election process are now seeking the Government's commitment to add in essential actions to benefit children. For this, they have carried out a child impact assessment of the CMP commitments. It raises some timely questions.

The CMP begins by listing the Congress party's 'six principles of governance,' and owning them as the frame for the programme. Women figure in one principle; children are nowhere to be found. There is great need for a seventh principle. It could read something like "To identify, protect and uphold the rights of all our children up to the age of 18 years, according them equal worth, and ensuring them the care, protection and opportunity to realise their full potential." Surely, 44 per cent of the population deserves at least that much.

The CMP goes on to detail 23 areas for action. In this, it inexplicably clubs education with health, and predictably lists 'women and children' as a composite. Somewhere, some time, the State and Society must recognise that the child is a citizen and an entity in his or her own right, not only an adjunct of the mother-woman, or an element within a family. The route to a child's well being may well be the mother or the parents, but the child's rights cannot be seen as a by-product of women's empowerment or of family stability. The CMP needs more than a seventh principle: it requires a separate section on the child, setting out priority actions for children all the way from safe birth to 18 years.

An essential focus of these commitments must be to give the children of the least-served communities first call on resources and attention. In one of its principles, and one of its key sections, the CMP promises a better deal to workers in all sectors, 'particularly those in the unorganised sector,' and assures 'a secure future for their families in every respect.' Would this include the abolition of child labour, and the recovery of children from the workforce, particularly in that unorganised sector? The CMP promises to 'strive for' elimination of child labour - but what does this weak language mean? The State must do more than merely strive. The breakdown of livelihood security among the poor jeopardises children's prospects in many ways. The UPA plans a National Employment Guarantee Act, to provide a legal guarantee for at least 100 days of employment 'for at least one able-bodied person in every rural, urban poor and lower-middle class household.' How will this tie in with eliminating child labour?

The CMP promises to 'provide for full equality of opportunity, particularly in education and employment for the Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes, OBCs and religious minorities.' But equality of opportunity is not limited to education and employment; the whole issue of dignity of identity must be addressed, and access handicaps in other spheres merit equal attention. The existing provisions for SC/ST and BCs do not focus on the rights of their children, who are among the most marginalised and deprived. As for the children of religious minorities, they have been specifically targeted in communal hostility and violence; this trend must be addressed.

The CMP promises protections in agriculture, food security and nutrition. But it does not say enough about external market pressures on land use. What does the Andhra cotton farmer's child eat? What is the effect of cash-crop agriculture tied to market demand as opposed to land use attentive to local food needs? The agriculture perspective cannot be about production and market sales alone. Changes in land use patterns and in the marketing of farm produce have a direct effect on food and water availability and consumption among the rural poor, and their children.

The UPA proposes a cess on Central taxes to raise funds for education, and also pledges to commit 6 per cent of GDP for education, promising half of this for schooling. Half is not enough. India's children deserve a common school system, with well-trained teachers delivering quality education; this is a national investment priority. The inequitable, classist Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan deserves to be scrapped. And what about the learning rights of the below-6 age group? It is not enough to sustain or expand the ICDS programme; it does not cover all children or all settings of children, and if ICDS acts like a pre-school service, what can it do for the 0-3 age group, which should be its main concern?

The CMP promises to raise public spending on health to at least 2-3 per cent of the GDP over the next five years, with focus on primary health care. What is the planned focus? Children would be the first to benefit from health care that rises above just disease-specific campaigns and brings about a radical upgrade of holistic general health and preventive public health standards.

The UPA pledges 'special care' for the girl child, but mentions only nutrition and education. What will it do about the frightening and growing deficit of girls in the 0-6 age group? That is India's worst gender justice problem.

The CMP underlines its commitment to building the required infrastructure for development. It lists roads, highways, ports, power, railways and water supply. It

promises to review the Electricity Act. What about infrastructure for social development? Children deserve better mechanisms and efficacy for survival, protection, development and participation: could the UPA examine what it could do to improve or establish these? What would be the infrastructure and mechanisms set in place to ensure that the poorest and least-served get priority attention and investment?

As the UPA Government tries its wings, children's rights are probably not in its top ten list of non-negotiables - but they should be. Budget allocations for the child have been grossly inadequate for years, and are declining. Government performance in utilising even the scant allocations is very poor. These are two serious mistakes for which India, not just its children, will pay heavily. Why is no one held accountable? Prime Minister Manmohan Singh in a previous 'avatar' brought into the Indian political vocabulary the concept of 'adjustment with a human face.' He has now reiterated that principle as a key element in the UPA's emerging 'mantra' for policy and governance. The 'human face' in India is that of a person aged below 18 years, from the poorest community, landless, possibly migrant, probably a girl. The CMP must rise to acknowledge this.

Perhaps it sounds cynical, but it might be prudent for the new government to consider that - if it lasts its five-year term in office - many of today's 14 and 15-year-olds will be of voting age when the 2009 general elections come around again. The new dispensation needs policy and measures to ensure that the child is recognised as a citizen and that child rights are not an option but a national obligation undertaken with genuine political will and social commitment. From Nehru to Rajiv Gandhi, Congress leaders have been advocates for children; now their successors must act. To spell out the CMP, the Tenth Five-Year Plan mid-term review must address the changes that need to be made for children - and make them.

(Razia Ismail Abbasi is convenor of the India Alliance for Child Rights, New Delhi.)



PEACEWORKS

Conflict classes for teachers

Civil Society News
Kolkata

As part of its on-going programme, PeaceWorks had invited PRAVAH, a Delhi-based organisation working towards self-development and social responsibility to run a teacher training workshop. One of the key components of PRAVAH's intervention was to equip teachers with conflict resolution skills and to help young people integrate this process into their lives.

The workshop was held at the Seagull Arts and Media Resource Centre from 17 to 22 May. 18 young women, fresh Bachelor of Education graduates from Shri Shikshayatan College, a well-known girls' college in Kolkata, participated in this workshop.

The workshop was conducted by Meenu Venkateswaran and Rita Mishra of PRAVAH and focused on transferring the conflict positive process to students and parents - a process that would enable them to walk the thin line between firmness (looking out for one's own needs) and caring (looking out for other's needs) towards a resolution that would result in a win-win situation.

The trainee teachers participated with great enthusiasm in the six-day workshop. During this period they were taken through a process that enabled these teachers-in-waiting to clarify their values and enhanced their understanding of conflicts and the attitudes, behaviours and skills that are intrinsic to resolving conflicts positively.

At the end of the workshop each of the trainees designed a lesson highlighting and reiterating the need for peaceful co-existence, communal harmony and tolerance.

Only time will tell how well they translate these workshops into their classrooms.

Theatre for the neighbourhood

Colin Fernandes
Gurgaon

CHIRANJIV Bharati School in Palam Vihar, Gurgaon on the southwest border of Delhi has always attempted to inculcate a love for the arts in the students.

The school, based as it is on traditional Indian values features music, art and dance classes, and also hosts inter-school music and art competitions, as well as a play for every occasion - several students have gone on to represent the state in dramatics...some even to star in documentary films.

With a large contingent of students living in and around the school, it was only a matter of time before the school stepped up activities for the betterment of the neighbourhood.

Now, their two-year-old Chiranjiv Bharati Kala Pratishtan looks at developing interest in the arts among the citizens of Gurgaon (or Delhi for that matter). You needn't be a student at the school to be a part of it...you needn't necessarily be a student either. All you need is a willingness to nurture your creativity. This is a fine example of a school not only cognisant of its social responsibility but also inspired enough to act on its ideas.

There is a wide area of creativity to be explored as well. From various forms of dance to various musical instruments to be learnt as well as art classes and you have pretty much the perfect way to enjoy an enriching summer vacation.

According to principal Narendra Mohan Bhatia, quite a forward-thinking man himself, the venture is not a moneymaking racket, as most times the school has had to subsidise costs. "Our main purpose in starting the Kala Pratishtan was to popularise the classical Indian arts, be it music, theatre, dance or art per se", says Bhatia adding that all the instructors at the Kala Pratishtan are legitimate experts in their field.

The task of keeping cultural and classical music, dance and art alive in Gurgaon is the responsibility of a dedicated team of gurus led by Dr. Bharati Singh, a national gold medallist in music.

The classes of the Chiranjiv Kala Pratishtan are recognised and affiliated to the Prayag Sangeet Samiti and all those who complete the three-year course receive certification from the latter.

The CBKP frequently organises cultural shows where students are given an opportunity to perform on stage. Accomplished artistes are also invited from time to time to conduct workshops. The school recently put together a four-day inter-school art festival in which more than 260 budding Picassos from 16 schools competed.

Gautam and Shuchi glide across the floor with graceful, ballet like movements mimicking each other's actions under the watchful eyes of Mahesh Vashisht.

This workshop is the first of its kind in Chiranjiv Bharati School. Under the 'Rang Parivartan' banner, a workshop that is part of an ongoing initiative at the Kala Pratishtan, Vashisht's motley crew performs various



The NSD workshop in progress at Chiranjiv Bharati.

exercises to enhance and develop their latent theatrical abilities.

Vashisht, a postgraduate from the National School of Drama is Bhatia's former colleague from their Sardar Patel days and conducted this workshop in collaboration with the NSD.

The workshop culminated in an enactment of a play staged at Chiranjiv on the 27th of June.

The cast was a mixed lot of school and college students as well as a few working professionals with the odd unemployed youth thrown in.

The script was fairly simple...it didn't exist. All the dialogues and scenes were evolved during the workshop with a fair bit of improvisation adding *masala* to the mix.

Loosely based on college life, the actors decided what scenes they wanted to play and how they wanted to go about it.

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Literary sisters of the Northeast

MANISHA SOBHRAJANI

THINK Northeast and the first thing that comes to mind is militancy and border disputes. The seven Northeastern states of India are largely overlooked as a region. Other than the overwhelmingly beautiful landscape, which is quite evident, the Northeast is a treasure trove of many, many things, right from cultural heritage to literary richness.

All the seven states (Meghalaya, Manipur, Assam, Arunachal Pradesh, Mizoram, Nagaland, and Tripura) differ from each other in that they have different spoken dialects, cultural traditions, written and oral folk tales etc. But one of the many things that unites these sisters is the Northeast Writers' Forum - an association of people who write; mostly in English as the language is the link between the states. The forum was formally incepted in 1997. "The forum was formed with the purpose of bringing together the writers in the Northeast", said Mona Zote, a young member who is a tax officer by profession. "I believe it began with coffee sessions among friends, in Guwahati, and they decided to expand the base. But yes, essentially, it's a forum for writers, budding and otherwise. It has no terribly defined purpose other than fostering English writing and making the literature of the region on the whole better known outside".

It was felt that the Northeast, though so heterogeneous in so many aspects, did have a vacuum as far as a common platform of this kind was concerned. It began as a mutual admiration society, literally, "as many of us were friends, who appreciated each other's writings," said Mitra Phukan, editor of the forum's journal NEWFrontiers, who is also a journalist and a classical singer. She added that the need for this forum was felt because there were a lot of writers here writing in English, though not necessarily only in that language. "There was no platform for writers working in this language, across the region," she said.

How does the forum operate? "We meet regularly and have our annual general meetings at the various state capitals. We have an annual journal, which publishes members' contributions. The editorship of this, too, rotates from state to state in a democratic manner," explained Mitra. "From its modest beginnings and humble ambitions, the forum has grown. Its aim is not to make its members rich and famous but to bring together the Northeast and to make its literature noticed. It's been through a few rough patches but I think it's only just begun thriving. As an organisation, there probably are others that are better run and more professional, but it has a camaraderie, a joie de vivre, that makes us return to meet each other every year. I say quite seriously that it's a fine expression of the spirit of the Northeast!" says Zote.

The achievement of the forum in getting members from all the Northeast states to interact with one another is something very unique. Though the member states share regional affinities, there are also areas of potential conflict. In such a scenario, the forum has been a neutral place to examine issues and viewpoints as also a source of strength, consolation, and rationality, especially when issues of ethnicity, spill over of militancy, border disputes and territorial integrity make state governments blame one another.

"There are many writers in the region who work in conditions of violence and risk; many forum members are journalists, heads of departments in educational institutions, playwrights and administrators. I believe that networking through the forum does help overcome barriers of distrust, misunderstanding, anger and anguish, and one hopes that through our writings, we can give each other a piece of the beauty and shared human



From left: Mona Zote, Arupa Patangia Kalita and Mamang Dai.

From modest beginnings and humble ambitions, the forum has grown. Its aim is not to make members rich and famous but to bring together the Northeast and to make its literature noticed. They have an annual journal, which publishes members' contributions. The editorship of this rotates

values of our states," said Mamang Dai, vice-president of the forum and a journalist who gave up her job as an IAS officer.

"Whenever we go out to the rest of the country, we are always unpleasantly surprised by the little that others know of us here. We hope that through the writings that the forum showcases, through its many translations, as well as by efforts to be noticed by Delhi-based publishers, a fuller and more correct picture of this region will emerge to those who are interested," says Mitra in conclusion.

From the heart of Amritsar

COLIN FERNANDES



The Sari Shop
Rupa Bajwa
Penguin
Rs 295

AT first glance, you can't help the unbidden groan from escaping, "another wannabe English August"; but a couple of chapters into *The Sari Shop*, Rupa Bajwa's first novel will have you thinking otherwise. A tautly written piece of fiction, *Sari Shop* impresses with colourful characters that brings alive the complexities of the plot.

The novel was in the long list for the Orange Prize 2004; quite an accomplishment for 28-year-old Bajwa's first attempt. She lives in Amritsar and is terribly shy of media

exposure. She sold her manuscript abroad first and then found acceptance in India.

The book uses the life of the rural immigrant as a backdrop and switches with ease between life in a claustrophobic one-room apartment and a palatial mansion of the city's rich.

Written with a sense of humour, the book reflects typical Punjabi customs and traditions

in Amritsar of the '90s - small town society and how the lives of a few affect those that seem to have absolutely no connection with them.

The protagonist, the innocuously named Ramchand is an assistant in a sari shop in Amritsar. Though at times tardy and untidy, Ramchand manages to eke out a living in satisfactory fashion. That is until he gets to go to the Kapoor household to display his store's saris to the soon-to-be married Rina Kapoor.

His glimpse into the life of those whom he serves wakes in him a desire to better himself, leading him to purchase several elementary language books to teach himself English.

Bajwa takes you through a roller-coaster ride of emotions as Ramchand discovers the cruel reality of his life when he snaps out of his rut of everyday existence.

Bajwa's Amritsar is brought alive through an imaginative and vibrant landscape of characters and sub-plots. You can literally smell aromas that waft through Amritsar's old quarter as you walk with Bajwa and Ramchand down the narrow lanes of the Walled City.

The *Sari Shop* announces the arrival of a writer who blends an intense sensitivity with humour and frank honesty. Rupa Bajwa's story is both heart-warming and heartbreaking.

The book leaves you feeling a little unsatisfied; a gentle reminder that for most people, life doesn't flow on happily ever after.

Tribals civilised, but CPI(M)?

MAHASWETA DEVI

NEVER went to tribal areas thinking I would write about them. I just knew that I loved them and I have a lot to learn from them. I went there as people go to meet each other. It is my good luck that they accepted me. Tribals and the underprivileged never find anyone from our class to be with them. I have stood by them through thick and thin.

I was in Palamau in the 1970s. This region's beautiful forests were being cut and trees taken away for pulp mills. I was deeply saddened. Tribals and non-tribals got so much from the forest. I remember going into the interiors of Hazaribagh and Singhbhum.

No, the people did not own land but they survived because of the forest. There were tribal uprisings and demonstrations, but then outsiders would arrive and recruit local women to act as agents for the brick kiln owners and small miners. The tribals lived off the forest, but they did not have saris. The agent would approach them with a new one and say they could organise fantastic working arrangements. If you go there, you will eat plenty and come home with a lot of money, they would say. But it never happened like that.

In 1981 I formed the Bonded Labour Association of Palamau. For the first time, thousands of bonded labour came to the district town of Daltongunj. Their *roti* and *rozi* was linked to the forests. They didn't have anything else. They worked for big farmers, got very little and debt kept them in bondage for generations.

I talk about forests because tribals could not even survive there since they were encroached upon. They became shelterless and migrated to the cities. I have walked miles through West Bengal's districts. Everywhere I have seen nature attacked and the condition people live in, turn miserable.

Before Rabindranath Tagore died, he wrote a frantic letter to Mahatma Gandhi asking him to protect Shantiniketan. Gandhi promised he would do his utmost but he died soon after Independence. Shantiniketan was entrusted to Maulana Abul Kalam Azad. Parliament passed the Vishwa Bharati Act. Shantiniketan's area was demarcated and could not be encroached upon. Its undulating landscape has a *khoai* through which every year during the monsoon water from nearby rivers fills ponds and lakes.

From 1936 to 1938, I studied there. It was a small place, but we thought Shantiniketan had no boundary. Prantik areas, belonging to Santhals and other poor non-tribals, came under the Sriniketan and Shantiniketan Development Authority (SSDA), headed by Somnath Chatterjee of the CPI(M), presently the Speaker of Parliament.

Legally, you cannot buy tribal land. But if you are a tribal and you want to sell your land to me, I can buy under the name of a non-existent tribal. So I cut a deal with you and we go to the local land revenue office, where it is done.

So the tribals and poor non-tribals became landless and suffered great economic distress. Buildings started being constructed. A 300-year-old natural water body, with 18 acres of natural forests filled with bamboo, was destroyed. Migratory birds would flock here for three months to lay their eggs. People treated them as honoured guests, making sure they were never molested or teased.

SSDA have introduced big promoters and contractors. They have dredged the water tank dry and they are going to build an amusement park. In March this year during Shantiniketan's spring festival I spoke to the media. I told them, Birbhum is a dry district. To rob nearby villages of their only source of water and replace it with a park that will have grasshoppers in crystal to amuse children and an artificial sandy beach is wrong.

Somnath Chatterjee vehemently protested. We filed a PIL in end April in the Calcutta High Court. We don't know what its result will be because, don't forget, Somnath Chatterjee belongs to the ruling party in West Bengal. He is a veteran Parliamentarian.

Garbage and plastic bags are strewn around Shantiniketan. The SSDA has done nothing. Permits for buses to ply through the heart of the town were issued. Two years ago, a fantastic car rally route was mapped. There are licensed bars outside the area. The pollution control board till date has not exercised its authority and sides with the builders.

We are afraid. We have approached the President of India and KR Narayanan, our former President, to visit Shantiniketan or send an expert team. I read that the environment minister of West Bengal says natural water bodies, if they are not used for

fish cultivation, should not exist.

All over West Bengal huge areas of water bodies have been sealed off. If there is a devastating fire, even in Kolkata, it will be very difficult to extinguish it. When we filed this case, local people who were fighting against this devastation of nature began to approach me with details.

In Habra, North 24 Parganas, the municipality dredged a water body and built a house. That water was being used for an annual swimming competition, emersion of idols after *puja* and for washing and bathing. West Bengal is full of poor people in rural and urban areas who don't have water connections. In Kolkata too, where are the huge tanks we used to see?

I have travelled to universities in Europe and America. Nobody can even think of encroaching on land or building amusement parks in Cambridge or Sussex. Yet our local

papers say that land given to peasants for agricultural development has been bought by the owner of a cinema hall so that he could launch Geetanjali, an entertainment centre. How does it benefit the local people?

I am asked what I have done to bring tribals and denotified tribes into the mainstream. I do not believe in bringing them to the mainstream. It has nothing to offer them. Tribals are much more civilised, it's true. They are tolerant and scientific. They understand nature and there is no superstition among them.

When the solar or lunar eclipse takes place, the Hindus don't eat or cook. But the Kheria Sabars of Purulia are of scientific temperament. During the last solar eclipse they congregated on a big open ground to view the eclipse. They carried rice, lentils and their cooking utensils, lit fires and celebrated. Why not, they said, the eclipse is part of nature's routine and we honour it. Animals and birds in the jungle will eat and drink water. Trees are getting nourishment. So why should we not eat?

The Sabars sang and danced. They brought their children to see the eclipse, because it is a rare phenomenon. Afterwards they placed small boulders near the tree where they had cooked so that their children, would one day recall that they had come here, long time ago, when the sky turned black.

I have been working for the Lodhas, the Sabars and the Dhikaru, the so-called criminal tribes. I believe in helping them organise, making the administration listen and give them what is promised on paper.

In 1983, Gopi Ballabh Singh Deo, then a school-teacher who is close to the Sabar community, formed a small organisation. He wanted to arrange melas where other Sabars could come and intermingle. I was invited and in November 1983 we formed the West Bengal Sabar Kalyan Samiti in Maldi village.

We organised our mela to which 30,000 tribals and non-tribals came. It became an annual feature for a while. We did not want our Samiti to be an FRCA one. Ordinary people contributed. We started schools, which became a nucleus. Balmer Lawrie helped us get a big tank for fish cultivation.

Money from the UNDP helped our Samiti recover land for tribals, build hostels, schools and community huts. We own a tractor and have made rocky land cultivable. Today they cultivate two crops and their purchasing power has increased. Nearly 21 to 23 lift irrigation schemes are operative. The West Bengal government has done nothing for the tribals.

Their settlements need roads, drinking water, irrigation, electricity, schools. In the Samiti's hostel, a new generation of Sabar youngsters are being educated. Children cultivate vegetables in the hostel area, its very new for them. The Sabars have no dowry system or bride burning all the social ills of mainstream society. They are an independent and liberal people. Young people are free to marry whom they love, what is a house without children and love?

In 1998 we formed the Denotified and Nomadic Tribals Rights Action Group (DNT-RAG) at Baroda after the death of Budhan Sabar, tortured by the police. We managed to get compensation for his family but I realised we would have to fight for the rights of DNTs and nomadic tribes all over India.



Somnath Chatterjee vehemently protested. We filed a PIL in the Calcutta High Court. We don't know what its result will be because, don't forget, Somnath Chatterjee belongs to the ruling party in West Bengal.

Read us. We read you.



Suresh Sharma's mission is to rescue snakes from people. Here you see him introducing his snakes to children. *Civil Society* found him in Chandigarh.

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