

Civil Society



How Koppal's farmers went to market
**FRUIT BOWL BEATS
 THE LOCKDOWN**

CYCLING IN CHANDIGARH

Page 8

GO-TO MAN FOR MIGRANTS

Page 12

CAN MGNREGA COPE?

Page 13

INTERVIEW

'CONNECT FARMERS WITH MARKETS'

N. DAMODARAN ON BOOSTING THE RURAL ECONOMY

Page 6

THE POST-COVID WORLD

Page 27

SPIRIT OF THE FOREST

Page 31

THAT SORE THROAT

Page 34



Dravyavati River Project

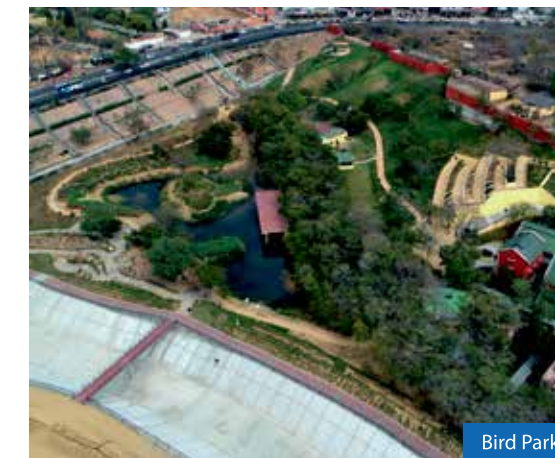
47.5 kilometres of Beauty, Cleanliness & Joy!



DRAVYAVATI RIVER PROJECT

HIGHLIGHTS OF PROJECT

- River Length - 47.5 Kms
- Capacity of STPs - 170 MLD
- No of Check Dams - 103 Nos
- Three Major Gardens - 10 Hectares
- Walkway / Cycle Track - 30 Kms
- Plantation - 17000 Nos



Bird Park



Botanical Garden



Pump house Museum & café



STP - Capacity of 170 MLD

THE SCOPE OF WORK

- Course correction /Strengthening
- Sewerage Interception, Treatment and Disposal
- Improving Water Quality Standards in the River
- Improving Water Availability in the areas surrounding the River
- Master Development Plan along the River
- Develop Open Green Areas where feasible



The Experience Centre



Tree Plantation Under Green Thumb Initiative

DRAVYAVATI RIVER REJUVENATION PROJECT IMPROVES LIVES OF JAIPUR'S CITIZENS

Dravyavati River Rejuvenation Project - Jaipur, executed by Tata Projects Ltd has transformed a 47.5 km long cesspool into a beautiful river through treatment of 170 MLD of polluted water. This project encompasses a green belt which includes about 17000 trees on the river banks and 100000 plants in three different parks. As a matter of fact, the citizens of Jaipur have started using the facilities & space for various activities such as yoga, walking and jogging.



IN THE LIGHT

SAMITA RATHOR



LETTERS



Workers' exodus

I read your cover story, 'Migrants in the mirror' with keen interest. The migrant crisis has shown that just having a mobile and an app isn't enough for the country to progress. People are paid so little for their services and now they are going back to their villages, which have nothing. The government needs to wake up and focus on grassroots growth.

B. Chiramel

If the government had enabled migrant workers to go back to their villages before announcing the lockdown, they would have reached their homes safely and the spread of the virus would not have touched this level. On May 15 the number of new COVID-19 cases was less than 4,000 per day.

Narayanan Anayath

The migrant crisis is akin to the mass

exodus at the time of Partition. We are being identified as Bihari, Jharkhandi and Bengali instead of as Indians.

Ashit Paladhi

Workers must be registered, get social security benefits, timely wages, rations, housing, school admission, health facilities and subsidized travel. Currently, they are assured nothing.

Ritu

E-learning

Your story, 'How can you run a school on TV, internet?', raises a pertinent point.

Teaching through online classes can help children. But technology can also spoil children. They may use their smartphones for other purposes and, as a government teacher, I see many

students misusing mobiles. Our elders say that bad spreads faster than good. If we use technology for good, it can spread knowledge to all of us.

K. Raju

Who says classes can be replaced by online study? An organic get-together of students is absolutely necessary for social interaction and building the qualities and faculties sought to be achieved by education.

Vishwanathan Menon

Apple dilemma

I refer to your story, 'Can Himachal apples survive the big fall?' The Progressive Growers' Association (PGA) does a remarkable job through social media and gives wonderful tips to apple farmers on nutrition

management, pruning and soil management.

Jitender Chauhan

Some apple farmers can be blamed for the present apple crisis. The fact is that we growers traditionally believed in quantity rather than quality, unlike European countries. We have a tendency to increase orchard acreage rather than maintain reasonable acreage with quality produce. We have shunned the practice of mixed cropping which is a sustainable method. The present trend of monoculture has backfired on us.

Shiv Negi

Dr Rajender Jobta's suggestion, that big business houses directly source apples from farmers, is a good one. My suggestion is that instead of packaging materials we should use plastic crates for plucking, carrying and transporting to various mandis of India.

Kailash Manta

Food blues

You wrote about us in your story, 'Restaurants brace for change, seek government help'. We feel our problems are too small compared to what's happening to others. But when a magazine covers us for their business section, we realize that at a systemic level, restaurant owners are suffering. We were shut for two months. But we wanted to reopen because we can't just fade into oblivion. We still have customers who crave our food. Every time you support a small business, actual people benefit and not a faceless organization.

Anusha Pinto & Vijay Giri

Letters should be sent to response@civilsocietyonline.com



COVER STORY

FRUIT BOWL BEATS THE LOCKDOWN

Farmers in the Koppal district of Karnataka were at risk of losing their fruit and vegetable crops during the lockdown. But helped by local officials they found buyers and cut their losses.

22

Street children face tough times 10

Poverty and the elderly in India 18

Helpline, masks, ration kits 18

Cleaning up in the Nilgiris 20

The highs and lows of tech 28

Democracy and the migrant crisis 29

New beginnings for NGOs 30

Dying to get out? 32

Products: Cool masks 34

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Shree Anand

NEED TO DIVERSIFY LIVELIHOODS, SAYS N. DAMODARAN

‘Allow farmers to build their own linkages with markets’

Civil Society News
New Delhi

AFTER their agonizing experience in cities during the lockdown, migrant workers, in very large numbers, are back in their villages. Can the rural economy sustain them? Will they find ways of earning? The rural employment programme, MGNREGA, offers hope. But it remains to be seen whether in the current context it is the solution.

Rural areas have for the longest time been denied the investments which could have generated the economic activity needed to keep people from migrating. The current crisis is an opportunity to have a better understanding of how this can change.

In our search for answers we turned to PRADAN (Professional Assistance for Development Action), an NGO devoted to nurturing rural livelihoods. PRADAN works in seven of India's poorest states — Bihar, Chhattisgarh, Jharkhand, Madhya Pradesh, Odisha, Rajasthan and West Bengal.

It has been behind initiatives for boosting agricultural productivity and linking farmers to markets through cooperatives and producer companies. PRADAN'S work has led to several successful examples of income generation.

It has promoted the National Smallholder Poultry Development Trust (NSPDT) which supports 11,351 women poultry farmers across 23 cooperatives. It has also nurtured the Tasar Development Foundation (TDF), which works with 20,000 farmers to rear cocoons for silk. PRADAN has been at the forefront of organizing women into self-help groups and linking them to financial services.

We spoke to Narendranath Damodaran, executive director, on PRADAN'S journey and what can be done now to deal with the tricky problem of surplus labour in the countryside.

Do you think the village economy can absorb all the migrant workers who have returned?

I don't think it is currently possible. In some of the villages in Jharkhand where we work, we have seen the population increase by almost 30 percent. That's a large number.

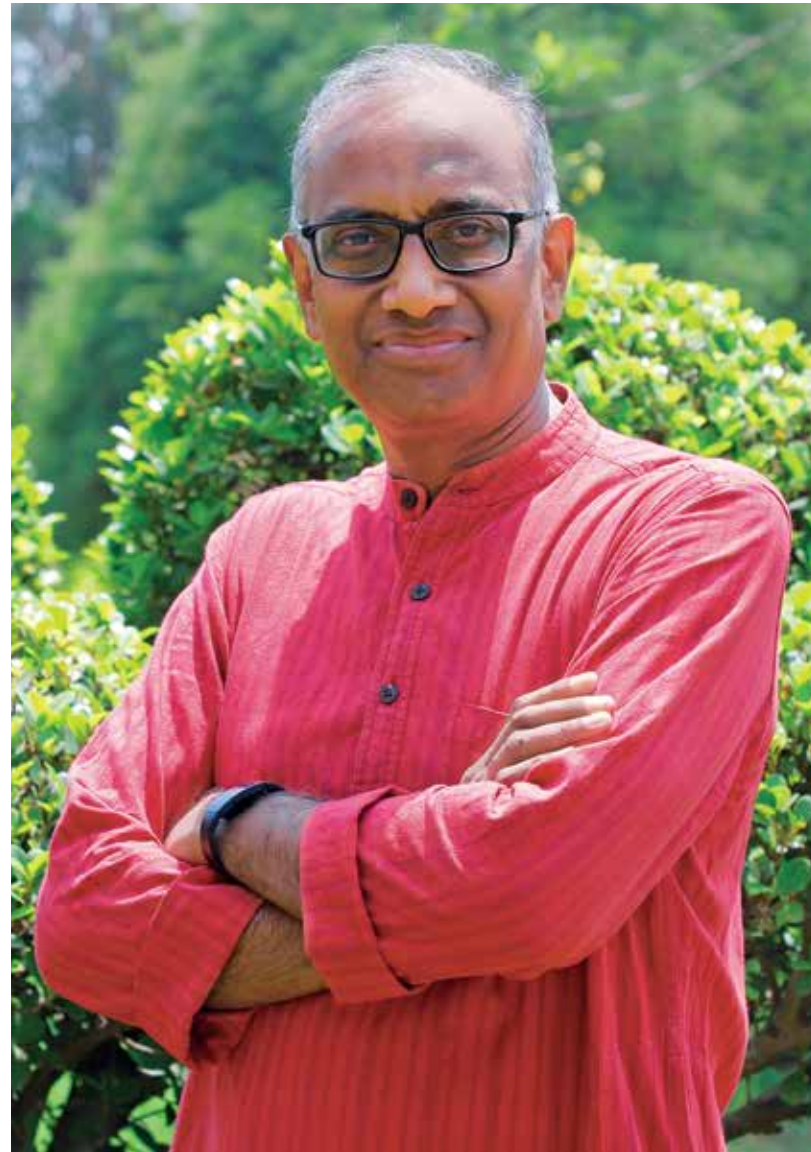
Almost every family has one or more members who have come back so there are many more to feed. One of the things we have been trying to push is MGNREGA. But people who have returned may not have the skills to do earth work in MGNREGA. They haven't been doing hard manual labour for a few years. About 20 to 30 percent don't have job cards. Around 30 percent are able to join MGNREGA work. We find 50 to 60 percent are sitting idle at home. A negligible number has started small enterprises like small shops.

About 60 percent won't stay back in the villages. They are waiting for the lockdown in cities to lift and for shop floors, retailers, eateries, construction sites to reopen so that they can get back to their earlier jobs.

Why do they migrate?

We have been working in villages for nearly 37 years. Our objective has been how to get people to stay back. I know all 100 percent can't be absorbed but

Photo: Civil Society/Shrey Gupta



Narendranath Damodaran: 'About 30 to 40 percent of migrants can probably stay back'

‘Obviously, one focus area is to ensure that people at least have access to food and nutrition. The issue they are facing right now is there isn't enough food. Fifty percent of people have reduced their food intake.’

about 30 to 40 percent of those who migrate and have now returned can probably stay back. They will add to the pressure on existing resources. Our endeavour has been to enhance the carrying capacity of those resources so that this additional 30 to 40 percent of migrant workers can be engaged and involved.

We work in tribal areas. When we did a ballpark study we found 70 percent of migrating people from Jharkhand or Bihar are distress migrants. There are no opportunities in their villages. Only 30 percent are aspirational migrants who go because they have skills or want a better education for their children or amenities for their families. This is a minuscule number from the poorer states. From better-off states, the southern states or Gujarat, migration could be of a different kind. But from poorer states, the purpose is distress. They go out of poverty.

What can be done to create opportunities?

Land and water are not going to expand in our villages. To overcome resource constraints we look at new ways of agriculture, new technologies and market linkages for better realization. These are the rural hinterlands which are not linked to the market. You have to go through layers of middlemen. In the city you pay high rates for vegetables but in the village you hardly get anything.

When the lockdown was forced on the rural hinterland, farmers had grown a large quantum of cash crops like fruits and vegetables for the *rabi* season, due to our interventions. We were expecting excellent returns in March-April, the main selling season. Last year, the cost of production was ₹3 to ₹3.50 per kg and the farmer got ₹8 from buyers. This time they got just ₹2. About 70 percent got a mere pittance. They couldn't transport their produce to industrial towns like Bhubaneswar or Rourkela. And they can't hold on to it either. Transport services and cold storages are the facilitating market linkages we have to create so that farmers aren't short-changed when uncertainty happens. We have to create predictable market linkages for farmers.

Obviously, one focus area is to ensure that people at least have access to food and nutrition. The issue they are facing right now is there isn't enough food. Fifty percent of people have reduced their food intake. There is no cash in the house to buy food. Markets haven't fully reopened as yet.

Most of them are now dependent on the Public Distribution System (PDS). About 70 to 80 percent are also getting rations. But they are getting only wheat and rice and not pulses, oil or spices. About 25 percent of people told us they had food stocks for just one week. And 50 percent of rural families in the poorer states of the country say they have food stocks for two weeks with reduced intake.

Our endeavour this time is to ensure that they grow enough food during the *kharif* season — from June to October — so that it lasts them six months.

And in terms of jobs?

The question is how do we employ this additional labour. We have to remove uncertainties in agriculture by improving market linkages. I mentioned storages, transport and, most important, organizing farmer-producer groups so that people can produce and reach the market in a more coordinated manner. We can provide information on markets. We are trying to build these linkages so people get better realization for their produce.

Secondly, how do we diversify their sources of income. One is farming, the second is livestock. When farming fails, livestock is a life saver. Tribal communities already keep goats, sheep, ducks, backyard poultry.

We enhance the quality and quantity of livestock and provide veterinary support — we have trained barefoot vets called *pashu sakhis* in villages. They can do vaccination and first-aid and reduce animal mortality rates. Better livestock means better income.

Another important area is forest produce. One of our established products is tasar silk. It's a wild silk with a good price in the market. Then there is *sal patta*, *indu patta*, etc. We enhance storage capacity and marketing and ensure people get a better price.

Our fourth strand is to build the skills of people and help them become entrepreneurs. Marketing linkages and transport can provide work. They can also use their technical abilities to get a Mudra loan to set up local village enterprises.

But we need the State, the business community and NGOs to come together to think how opportunities can be created in villages and small towns. That is an advocacy activity which we will be engaging in with others.

Do the government's recently announced reforms in agriculture help?

They are freeing up the market. It's a very good reform for small farmers and weaker communities since their negotiating skills are low. For such communities NGOs like us get involved and try and organize them into Farmer Producer Organisations (FPOs) or cooperatives. If there are too many rules and regulations governing markets then their mobility gets restricted. Many of the existing establishments have been taken over by powerful vested interests.

The only strength small farmers have is that they can come together and sell. Many are first or second generation farmers so they are not so savvy in the marketplace. Less restrictions make it easier for them to get linked with terminal markets.

An interesting experiment we tried during this *rabi* season was to collect the produce in the village, put it in a vehicle and sell it to customers directly. We called it 'veggies on wheels'. It's a producer-to-consumer direct linkage. The farmer herself went to residential apartments or small markets with farm-fresh produce and earned much higher returns. Now this requires a free market.

What about agro-processing units? Why have these not taken off or been encouraged?

Agro-processing needs medium-level entrepreneurs. It's difficult for farmers with a hectare of land or 50 to 200 mango trees to set up an agro-processing unit. But then entrepreneurs don't want to go to small towns, rural areas, the hinterland, because of infrastructure, transport, electricity and perhaps some law and order issues. No bank will finance you either. The dynamics are different. Which is why we don't have that last mile linkage.

The FPOs we have created in fruits and vegetables are not robust enough right now nor do they have the capital to set up and own agro-processing units. But in poultry farming where we have worked for nearly 20 years, we have organized cooperatives of rural women who run poultry farms and they have set up a producer-company. They have been selling chickens in the market and now they have enough capital to set up their own processing units. Once you have enough capital, banks and institutions come in.

It took us years and years of work to set up those backward linkages. We started with the basic poultry farm. Currently we are trying to take these lessons to fruits, vegetables, pulses, oilseeds and other produce. It will take us a few years but we will be able to set up robust farmer-producer institutions which will have capital and the risk-taking ability to set up processing zones.

There is help from the government in terms of soft loans and subsidies. If business people were to come to smaller towns, take the risk and set up processing zones or even small manufacturing industries, a lot of our people can get employed. This will have double benefits: it will create employment and put more money in the hands of farmers.

‘If business people were to come to smaller towns, take the risk and set up processing zones or manufacturing industries, a lot of our people would get employed. This will create jobs and put money in the hands of farmers.’

What you need is domestic investment?

Actually, if some of the bigger processing units downscale their smaller units to towns it will have multiple impacts. It will take the urbanization process into smaller towns. Why shouldn't I aspire to go to Ranchi or Dhanbad for a better life? Everybody in Jharkhand wants to go to Delhi, Ahmedabad or Mumbai. In fact, the maximum migrants have come back from these three cities. They travel 10,000 km to earn ₹8,000 extra in a most undignified manner. If they could do the same thing in Ranchi, Dhanbad, Giridih or Hazaribagh, small towns would become aspirational. The villages will be better places to stay. There will still be migration but that will be aspirational migration, which is what people want.

You mentioned the forest economy. Are tribal communities getting access to forest produce?

Legal provisions exist on paper. There is the Forest Rights Act, a progressive law. But the general attitude is that the forest belongs to the forest department. So it's very difficult for communities to access the forest. People aren't even allowed to plant trees because that is what the law says.

One of our focus areas this year is community forest rights. We have put in applications in 500 cases. In about 100 cases we have had some success, mainly in Odisha. We are working with other organizations on this. We will need to bring in technology to map village boundaries and work with the system.

If each village can have access to 400 to 500 hectares of forest land, they can rejuvenate the forest, replant trees and take minor forest produce.

Forest land has multiple uses. One is its cultural importance for the community, second is that forest produce like *mahua*, honey, *sal patta*, *tendu patta*, silk can be harvested, third is for livestock rearing like goats, and from an ecological perspective, forests can harvest a huge amount of water if you build water harvesting structures. Most forests are in the upper reaches so ponds and

Continued on page 8

Continued from page 7

wells in villages downstream can be recharged. The Forest Rights Act is an attractive law but very difficult to realize because of the red tape involved and because the forest department is reluctant to give away its power over forests.

How much would a person living in a village in Jharkhand need to live a decent life?

About ₹100,000 per year. Of course, this is a ballpark figure for a decent life at current prices. This amount will enable them to have some savings and send their children to schools — private ones, unfortunately. The current families we work with have on average an income of ₹50,000 so we have to double that from all sources. The migrant worker sends home ₹2,000 to 3,000 on average per month and adds to the family income, which is why migration is very important for them.

They would be earning that much in the city?

Yes, but they need to spend it in the city for food

‘About ₹100,000 per year for a family is a ballpark figure at current prices in a Jharkhand village. This will enable them to have some savings and send their children to school. ones unfortunately.’

and rent. From our side we are looking at an income of ₹15,000 to ₹16,000 from all sources. In about 40 percent of families we have been able to increase income to that level.

There are huge opportunities in Jharkhand. One is that landlessness is reasonably limited, unlike in Bihar or UP. In tribal areas you have access to at least one hectare. You can have two crops a year. You can grow fruits like mangoes, and do livestock rearing.

There are upwardly mobile young people who have managed to earn up to ₹1.5 to ₹2 lakh a year. Youth stay back when there is an income.

We work with women SHGs. If a woman is able to get credit and her earnings from agriculture, goat rearing and forest produce increase, the first thing she does is to call the husband back. We have many stories of reverse migration.

I would say we could hold back 40 percent of migrant workers if we intensify agriculture and build market linkages. What we require is irrigation. That means creating water harvesting structures through MGNREGA.

We are helping farmers build ponds, bunds and set up horticulture farms. We also need solar power. All this requires investment which has to come from the government or philanthropy. Lastly, you need human resources of high calibre to work in our villages. ■



India's biggest public bike sharing project is being launched in Chandigarh

Chandigarh wants to be a cycling city, but cyclists are missing

Raj Machhan
Chandigarh

THE honour of being the cycling capital of India could go to Chandigarh. It already has 180 km of cycling tracks along its main roads and it is now all set to roll out India's biggest public bike sharing project.

Chandigarh Smart City Limited (CSCL) is implementing the bike sharing project which has been in the offing since May 2016, when it was listed as a priority for the Smart City project.

“Chandigarh has the potential to emerge as the cycling capital of India. The city has all that it takes to adapt cycling as a means of mass transport,” says K.K. Yadav, Chandigarh Municipal Commissioner and CEO, CSCL.

Yadav is absolutely right in his observations. Chandigarh, the ‘beautiful city’, has a sophisticated network of roads and is small in size (144 square km), which means that most destinations are at a cycling distance. The city's designer, Le Corbusier, made provisions for dedicated cycle tracks to run parallel to the main roads while planning the road system as far back as the 1950s.

Yadav says the topography of the city, which is largely a flat plain, is also well-suited for cycling. “Besides, in the post-COVID environment, people are still not very comfortable about travelling in buses or even cabs. We will be promoting

cycling in a big way.”

One fallout of the coronavirus pandemic is that people across the world are turning to cycling as their preferred means of mass transport. According to a World Economic Forum report, approvals for a cycle to work scheme in the UK are up by 200 percent, with a corresponding decrease of 40 percent in car usage. Governments are implementing policies that encourage use of cycling to go to work. Italy and Colombia have increased cycle lanes and banned select roads for cars in a bid to support active travel.

Indian cities like Bengaluru have seen an uptake in use of bicycles. In Pune, a group of businessmen from Pimpri-Chinchwad has initiated a drive to collect old bicycles and hand them over to schoolchildren after repairs to make them road-worthy.

The trend has multiple advantages. It helps social distancing, reduces air pollution and helps people get some exercise at a time when gyms and health clubs are closed.

Ironically, though the infrastructure is there, the trend is yet to catch on in Chandigarh, India's most bicycle-friendly city.

CSCL is implementing the project in public-private partnership (PPP) mode. The contract is being operationalized by Smart Bike Mobility Limited, a Hyderabad-based company that had earlier implemented a similar project in Bhopal.



The city's topography is perfect for cycling



K.K. Yadav, Municipal Commissioner and CEO, CSCL

The administration has identified 617 cycling docks across the city and will be stationing 10 GPS-equipped cycles at each of these points. A CSCL project manager says that the spots have been identified based on need-guided criteria, with preference given to bus stands, institutions, marketplaces, commercial establishments, gardens and other social hotspots frequented mostly by citizens and visitors to the city.

Under the terms of the agreement, Smart Bike Mobility will be paying ₹12 lakh per month for the next 11 years to the Municipal Corporation. “We are not spending anything on this. The cycles will be acquired by the private company. They will generate revenues on their own through user charges, and advertisements. This is the largest cycle-sharing project of its kind in India,” says N.P. Sharma, Chief General Manager, CSCL.

CSCL, though, took more than two years to finalize the modalities of the project. It finally completed the tendering process in January 2020. “The role of CSCL will be largely to monitor implementation. Each cycle station will have 54 square feet for advertisements and cycle designs will be pre-approved by the CSCL,” says Sharma.

Users will be required to pay ₹5 for half an hour as rental charges. The cycle can be returned at the nearest docking station. The onus will be on the vendor to pick up the bicycle. The company will

Cycling helps social distancing, reduces air pollution and helps people get some exercise at a time when gyms and health clubs are closed.

establish a 24x7 smart control room along with an application and a website, which can be used to make payments and book a ride.

The vendor has signed a service agreement and furnished a bank guarantee to ensure that standards are met. The vendor will ensure that no docking station remains empty and not more than five percent of the bicycles can be given for repair at any point in time.

The company had earlier carried out a pilot run of the project in the Sector 17 plaza, where it established 10 docking stations with 100 bicycles. “Our target market will largely comprise the demographic set between 18 and 50 years of age. The response was more than what we expected. Interestingly, people preferred to use our mobile app and make payments through it. We will be implementing promotion schemes in the initial days to spread awareness and encourage people to take up cycling,” said a project manager of Smart Bike Mobility.

Payment options will include multiple plans. The user will be able to use channels such as PayTM, mobile wallets and QR codes, apart from cash payments. The project is being modelled on the New York City bike project.

“As of now, the COVID pandemic has delayed the project by three months. But work has already begun from June 1 and we expect to launch the first



But cycling needs to be promoted

phase with 600 smart bicycles by November-end,” said Yadav.

Sharma said the company had already started backend work such as software development, importing cycle parts, and customizing GPS systems. The CSCL has given a time-frame of one and a half years for the company to complete the project.

However, the city's attempts at popularizing use of bicycles in the past have failed. “The administration never took it seriously. Even the expansion of cycle tracks was done at the instance of a judgment by the Punjab and Haryana High Court in 1914,” said Navdeep Asija, traffic adviser to the Punjab government.

An overall lack of planning has marred the city's cycling plans in the past. For instance, the Chandigarh Industrial and Tourism Corporation (CIITCO) had stationed 10 bicycles at a cycle shed in Sukhna Lake in 2006. The project, however, failed to find any takers.

The project was revived again in 2016, but with the same results. The reason for failure: the city did not have any other docking station and users were required to deposit the cycles at the Sukhna one at the end of the ride!

“So far, what the administration has done is merely symbolic. There has been no sustained effort to promote cycling in the city,” said Gurjraj Singh, president, Chandigarh Cycling Club.

In fact, Panchkula, a neighbouring city in Haryana, has stolen a march over Chandigarh in implementing the cycling project. Though Panchkula started with only 250 bicycles, according to information available from the municipal corporation of Panchkula, the project has taken off and is attracting an increasing number of users.

Hopes ride high on Chandigarh's present cycling project. “Panchkula has done well to implement the project. I don't find any reason for it not to be a big success in Chandigarh if implemented in the right spirit,” said Vivek Atray, former IAS officer and now a member of the Advisory Committee to the Administrator, Chandigarh. ■

For street children is there anything like being home and safe?

Kavita Charanji
New Delhi

CHILDREN who live on the streets of the city ordinarily have a tough time, but after the coronavirus epidemic and lockdown, their lives have become tougher. Shops and eateries are closed, so if they are wastepickers there is no money to be earned. Their parents too have lost their jobs.

Sixteen-year-old Priya lives in a slum near the Inter-State Bus Terminal (ISBT), at Kashmiri Gate in central Delhi. With the pandemic her studies at the Government Senior Secondary School, Mori Gate, ground to a halt. So did afternoon classes at the NGO, Butterflies' open-air learning centre at Kashmiri Gate. Food became scarce. Priya recalls days when relief food supplies from NGOs and the government were disrupted. When food did arrive, desperate people rushed to edge their way into queues, only to be roughed up by the police.

The shutdown has lifted and rice and wheat are available from ration shops. NGOs too pitch in with dry rations and vegetables. But adequate food remains a challenge for Priya's family. Her mother has been thrown out of her job as a cleaner at Old Delhi Railway Station. Priya has four siblings. It is a hand-to-mouth existence. While many other daily wagers in her area have gone home, her mother is reluctant to return to their ancestral village in Morena district, Madhya Pradesh, as she holds on to the hope that things will improve in Delhi.

That may be a mirage. Rita Panicker, founder-director of Butterflies, which works with street and working children, says that though the lockdown has been lifted parents of children living on the streets or in slums have not recovered their livelihoods. "Casual labour, domestic help, drivers, street vendors have lost their jobs. Street hawkers have not been able to restart their occupation because people are not buying from them due to fear of being infected with the coronavirus."

Likewise, there is a major slump in markets. Adolescents who worked in shops and lived on their own are still unemployed. A few have resumed work but they are unsure they will get their wages on time or their full dues. Child scrap collectors say that demand for waste material has been hit. "In these circumstances children still face difficulties in getting food and safe drinking water. Most importantly, they are afraid that they might get infected with the coronavirus. They are still dependent on relief efforts by the government or NGOs," says Panicker.

According to some estimates there are 70,000 street children in Delhi. NGOs tend to believe that the numbers are much higher. "They live like ghosts," says Sanjay Gupta, founder-director of CHETNA

(Childhood Enhancement through Training and Action), an NGO that works with 8,000 street children in Delhi, Haryana and Uttar Pradesh. They are in an abysmal condition due to the fear of the coronavirus. "The distribution of relief material has reduced with the partial ending of the lockdown. They are at unprecedented risk of poor nutrition and malnutrition, leaving them vulnerable to health complications and even death," says Gupta.

In the course of field trips, the CHETNA team found many children were falling ill. The heat has exacerbated their plight. Besides, commuters don't buy their goods on the streets or at traffic signals anymore for fear of contracting the coronavirus. Nor do children get anything from begging.

The "stay home, stay safe" advisory is a mockery for homeless street and marginalized children. Many live in cramped *jhuggis* where distancing isn't possible. The Salaam Baalak Trust, an NGO for street children, found that the lockdown and loss of jobs forced more families to shelter on the street. Though a large number has gone home, many have

'They live like ghosts. The distribution of relief material has reduced with the partial lifting of the lockdown. Children are at risk of poor nutrition.'

taken refuge in night shelters or under flyovers or on the banks of the Yamuna.

What's even more worrying, say NGOs, is that economic distress may lead to an increase in child labour, physical and mental abuse of children, trafficking, early marriage and domestic violence. NGOs are unanimous that stress levels have built up with extended confinement and limited social contact.

"Mental health issues of the kids in our homes during the lockdown increased by over 30 percent," says Sanjoy Roy, trustee of the Salaam Baalak Trust. While the children were initially receptive to the idea of being confined to shelters and full-care homes with staff living in for a week at a time, "the mental health of our kids at our shelters is cause for concern. Self-harm, fights, a sense of restlessness, anxiety and depression have been evident," says Roy.

The Trust's mental health staff cannot go to the



A child sits disconsolately on a pavement in Delhi



Children face difficulty getting food and drinking water

homes because of minimal public transport. Online media like Zoom or Skype are not always suitable for counselling or group therapy sessions. Growing levels of depression are also seen among many young adults from Salaam Baalak Trust who live in rented or owned accommodation and have lost jobs or have no income.

Indicators of the issues that disturb children surface on Childline 1098, an emergency helpline for children in crisis situations. A programme of the government, the service is run in partnership with NGOs.

Butterflies operates the Childline services in Delhi's South and South-East districts and at Nizamuddin railway station. According to J.B. Oli, head of programmes at Butterflies, phone lines have been very busy in the South and South-East districts. While a lot of the calls were from adults seeking information about food or vaccinations for their babies, children stranded in Delhi wanted to



Begging on the streets

know how they could get passes to go home. The Salaam Baalak Trust recorded 25 percent more calls that were pleas for help or assistance against domestic violence and physical and mental abuse of children.

Children like Priya are upset about the closure of their schools. Priya has difficulty in doing her schoolwork online as she shares a smartphone with her extended family. She also misses Alam "Bhaiya", a Butterflies teacher-social worker, also known as a Child Rights Advocate (CRA), who used to help her with her studies. During the pandemic he is unable to come to her locality in Kashmiri Gate and she has to depend on WhatsApp and phone calls to keep in touch with him. While she has been promoted to Class 11, she says her brothers and sisters do not have textbooks.

To help children like Priya, Butterflies team members have downloaded and shared NCERT textbooks in the groups. The children also receive relief material, including books and stationery, at contact points. "Most importantly, Butterflies' CRAs make it a point to call parents to find out how

they are doing and if there is any crisis that needs support. This has helped as we have heard girls saying that parents are now talking about sending them to the village or pulling them out of school or contemplating marriages," says Panicker.

CHETNA, meanwhile, uses phones to stay connected with children. Team members have daily conversations with the children to keep tabs on their psycho-social well-being. They are then provided necessary assistance and teaching material, while getting updates on the corona situation and precautions they must take.

NGOs are pitching in to support children in other ways. The Salaam Baalak Trust runs a food programme and feeds around 2,400 to 2,600 people in association with Kyassa Farms who provide wheat and fresh vegetables and the Ford Foundation in vulnerable areas and across shelter homes and contact programmes. Children's Hope India has distributed 30,000 meals, 15,000 masks and gloves along with 25,000 sanitizers. Child Rights and You (CRY) provided support and hygiene kits to underprivileged families during the lockdown. Front-liners at CRY and its partner organizations have touched many children's lives and witnessed many moving stories.

Puja Marwaha, CEO of CRY, relates this story from Kolkata. Dolon, 13, and Rintu, 10 (names changed), live with their mothers in Sonagachi, a well-known red-light area in North Kolkata. The two children study in Class 7 and Class 4, respectively. Both their mothers are into prostitution and currently are forced to live in a very vulnerable situation, since they have no income due to the lockdown. Their savings are depleted and now they are fully dependent on relief support, since no local shops are giving food items on credit. They tried to borrow money from some local people, but the high interest deterred them.

Both families have received dry rations for a month along with soap and play materials from CRY, while sanitizers and play materials have been sourced by Sanlaap, a local NGO that partnered with CRY.

This has been of enormous help to their families. Both the girls could use drawing books and colouring boxes to keep their minds occupied. ■

To get in touch with CRY contact: Abhik Bhattacharya, 9051668304

Samita's World



Ratnauli hero now migrants' go-to man in Bihar

Civil Society News
New Delhi

IT is not easy to get through to Sanjay Sahni's phone these days. He is besieged with calls from migrant workers seeking help. They either want to get back to their villages or they need donors to help them hang on in big cities or they are home and helpless.

The gales of the coronavirus storm have left families in Bihar villages shattered. The money that would come from the big city has stopped. Savings have evaporated. The virus has also cast a menacing shadow on the one asset they had always drawn on — the strength of their bodies. Suddenly there are confusing arrangements to contend with such as being in quarantine.

Being a migrant worker himself, Sahni is familiar with the myriad uncertainties in a life lived precariously between city and village.

He has been an electrician in west Delhi, occupying a corner of some anonymous pavement. His earnings have gone back to his family in Ratnauli village, in Bihar's Muzaffarpur district.

Sahni empathizes with the callers. He also tries to help them through the new maze they find themselves in. And from one to the next his number has been passed around so many times that the calls don't stop.

There is also the activist in Sahni. Nine years ago, he shot to fame in his village when he uncovered corruption in MGNREGA, the rural employment scheme there. Local village level officials were pocketing the wages of the people who had done the work.

It was a chance discovery when Sahni sat down at a computer at a cyber café in Delhi where he would leave his toolkit at night. Through Google he got on to the MGNREGA website and found the full record of payments. He recognized the names of his fellow villagers and knew that they hadn't received that money.

He returned to Ratnauli armed with printouts. Soon he was leading an agitation demanding proper job cards and payments. Thanks to his success in galvanizing villagers into action, MGNREGA went through a cleanup not just in Ratnauli but also in surrounding villages and villages in nearby districts.



Sanjay Sahni leading a protest in Ratnauli village

'In a panchayat if there were earlier 200 people getting work, now there are 1,000 looking for work. It is also important that they find work because pockets are empty.'

Much has changed since then both in Bihar and nationally. Money now flows directly into personal bank accounts so there is little chance of being cheated. The importance of MGNREGA in coming to the rescue of people in distress has been recognized. It receives budgetary allocations and is an important instrument for fighting poverty.

The Union government has said that MGNREGA will meet the immediate needs of returning migrants and others locally who might be unemployed because of the lockdown and the slowing of the economy. To what extent is this really happening?

"There isn't enough work for everybody under the MGNREGA (the rural employment guarantee scheme) and the foodgrains that families are getting just isn't adequate," says Sahni.

"People who have returned are now saying that it is better that they go back to cities because there, even if they can't find work, at least they can find food at community kitchens. Someone or the other will come forward to help. In the village there is

nothing to fall back on," he explains.

"There is not a district or a village in Bihar where people haven't returned. In my village of Ratnauli alone there are 300 people who have returned and there are more on the way," says Sahni.

"They are all demanding work. But when people who live in the village barely manage to get work under MGNREGA, how will the people returning find work," he points out.

"In a panchayat if there were earlier 200 people getting work, now there are 1,000 looking for work. It is also important that they find work because pockets are empty. Those coming back have spent their money and people in the villages have either taken loans from moneylenders or sold things," he says.

"Even the 200 people who would get work did so with difficulty. The government would provide work in fits and starts under MGNREGA. So, though in the current context the government has said that everyone in villages will be given work under MGNREGA, I really don't see this happening," Sahni explains.

"It hasn't been easy for people coming back. First they have had to spend 14 days in quarantine in the village. Even after the quarantine, they have faced restrictions on their movements," he says.

Quarantine has prevented people from registering for work under MGNREGA. Sahni says people feel that they were put in quarantine to keep down the number of people seeking work.

"There is some relief due to the foodgrains provided under the PDS (public distribution system), but even this is far from adequate. Each person gets 5 kg for a month when a person needs at least 15 kg. Then again, if there are five members in a family, not all of them get rations. If a ration card has three names, often just two are given rations," says Sahni. ■

'MGNREGA money will run out with rising demand for work'

Civil Society News
New Delhi

AS people pour into villages from cities in a desperate effort to get back home, the only work they can hope to get is under MGNREGA (Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act).

The rural employment scheme was designed to help people in distressful situations like a flood or drought so that they had something to fall back on when there was nothing else. Will it be able to cope with the pressures of the pandemic and economic slowdown when the number of people seeking work in villages is rising like never before?

The Mazdoor Kisan Shakti Sangathan (MKSS) was the lead organization which fought to bring in MGNREGA 15 years ago after Rajasthan was ravaged by drought and people had neither food nor work. Many economists opposed it as a measure to deal with extreme poverty.

But over the years the programme has matured and found wide recognition. Nikhil Dey of the MKSS has been a close observer of this process. Excerpts from an interview with him on what expectations there can be from MGNREGA in these extraordinary times.

MGNREGA is being perceived as the scheme that will provide jobs to workers who have returned to their villages. Is MGNREGA providing jobs to all?

People are desperate for work but I'd like to preface that by saying that people are still leaving cities in a stream after that huge exodus took place. Parts of India are finally becoming aware of how absolutely vulnerable this section of society is, how insecure their so-called jobs are and what conditions of work and living they undergo. They have been the backbone of the Indian economy, its growth story, which clearly benefits one section of society. Migrating workers had modest dreams of a better life in the city, but they were on a precarious footing.

And that explains why this extreme exodus happened. They had nothing to fall back on. The exodus was followed by some state governments saying that labour laws, whatever fig leaf of protection there was, would be removed, indicative of how little we care for the humanitarian concerns of working people.

The only security workers perceive is home. So they will take any job they can get and that's why MGNREGA is getting a huge turnout. This isn't because there is great enthusiasm for the scheme. These are people with a lot of skills. Yes, some of their family members, particularly women, didn't opt for distress migration and took MGNREGA jobs with enthusiasm. But these are people who left home in search of more than what MGNREGA could offer. Nothing else is available so all the pressure is falling on MGNREGA.



Nikhil Dey: 'The fact is we now have 15 years' experience with MGNREGA and a system has been created'

'In Rajasthan some 5.2 million people have enrolled in MGNREGA. The highest number we have had is 3.2 million people.'

Is MGNREGA work available?

There have been many arguments over MGNREGA over the years. The fact is we now have 15 years of experience with MGNREGA and a system has been created. It has saved us from a massive catastrophe. Not just people who have returned, but people (who stay back) in villages seek work under the scheme.

Construction work has ground to a halt, markets haven't picked up and there is very little economic activity. Transportation has still not taken off between villages and with urban centres.

MGNREGA is doing better than perhaps what it was designed to do. It wasn't devised to take this load and influx. MGNREGA's strength is that it has a dedicated process which begins in September

when plans and labour budgets get made, approvals are given and estimates are drawn up. The scheme has been designed to cope with a calamity in smaller areas, like a drought, a cyclone or an earthquake so that the rest of the state or country does not suffer.

This idea that MGNREGA is just about digging pits is a complete fallacy. It is designed to deal with regeneration of land, water resources, greening programmes, building of temporary roads, plantation of trees. MGNREGA has never been properly evaluated. The work has been of great contribution, if not of great efficiency. Yes, it could have been better monitored.

Another factor is climate change and the negative fallout of our model of development which we don't perceive. MGNREGA is one of the best green programmes in the world. It does all kinds of things without the use of machines or fuel for regenerating water and land resources.

In Rajasthan some 5.2 million people have enrolled in MGNREGA. The highest number we have had is 3.2 million. Now we have 40 percent more and still more want work.

Rajasthan has one of the biggest areas of fallow land which can be used for this kind of work.

But UP and Bihar, which have the largest influx of migrant workers, do not have land available. Every

Continued on page 14

Continued from page 13

little bit is occupied. Common property land isn't there either.

MGNREGA's classic definition is to build durable assets which need land. Perhaps the scheme has to look at building community assets in these states. It provides just 100 days per household. Many households have completed 90 days already because two or three people from each household come to the site in a month. They are wondering what they will do next month. So we need to think about increasing the number of days and about the kind of work they will do.

Is the money the government has committed enough?

Before the coronavirus pandemic, MGNREGA had a budget of ₹61,000 crore. It had an expenditure last year of ₹76,000 crore so actually there was a budget cut. There was a ₹16,000 crore wage payment due. You have to minus this ₹16,000 crore from ₹76,000 crore because you need to clear last year's wages and materials' cost first.

The government has put in ₹40,000 crore more in addition to the existing ₹61,000 crore allocation. It is true this is the highest ever in nominal terms though not the highest ever in terms of GDP. We have been saying, look at MGNREGA in terms of need. You have got ₹100,000 crore but you also have massive demand.

MGNREGA is functional because there is cash in the pipeline. People are going to work and payments are being made, even after clearing last year's payments. But that is not going to last. It's going to run out very soon. If MGNREGA in these circumstances does not make payments on time, there will be massive distress once again because people are living hand to mouth.

MGNREGA at least gives people dignity. They bring home a wage. That should be preserved. As far as workers are concerned its three slogans must be upheld: *Har haath ko kaam miley, kaam ka pura daam miley, samay par bhuktaan miley* (Work for all, at the right wages, paid on time). There isn't enough money for this just now. The money will run out and that's what policymakers need to look at. People have nothing else available.

MGNREGA's big advantage is that it has a system in place and a degree of functionality. Work happens and money reaches. That's why a government that was critical of it has turned to it. Both the BJP and

Congress are trying to take credit for who did it better.

Are people getting wages on time?

The unpaid wages of last year have been cleared. Payments are fairly quick now because of Direct Benefit Transfer (DBT). It has many ills — sometimes money doesn't go into accounts because of the Aadhaar linkage and there are a whole lot of rejected payments, but those are large in number and small in percentages. Where the system works, every rupee comes to the person's bank account with the press of a button.

State governments have become more efficient. Closing muster rolls, measuring of work, clearing of accounts, generating the fund transfer order, is

'If you want people to have a sense of confidence, strength and participation, assure them work and food.'

done on time in eight days. The government has another eight days to transfer the money to people's accounts. If there is money it is easily done.

Is the government providing enough rations for the monsoon months and is it universal?

It is absolutely not universal. The slogan people use: *bhuke pet, bharey godaam, anyay hain apradh hain* (hungry stomachs, overflowing godowns, is unjust and criminal).

If there was one activity that carried on through the coronavirus pandemic and lockdown, it was agricultural productivity. They kept this country going. Despite lockdown they were out in the fields harvesting. The markets weren't running so they were storing wherever they could. Productivity did not fall and they carried on in their stoic manner even though their returns were very low.

I think that's something we need to build on. One part is to procure food, the other is redistribution of that food where there is a need. If you want people to have a sense of confidence, strength and

participation, assure them employment and food.

And we have enough food. We need four or five million tonnes for all our NFSA (National Food Security Act) requirements for one month. We have 80 million tonnes and another 40 million tonnes which need to be procured and put in the godowns.

It's amazing they are offering migrant workers five kg each for two months and some *channa*. I mean, this is food produced by their own families. Food has rotted in these months (in government godowns).

The Food Security Act covers 840 million people. We have 500 million people who are not covered. Our selection processes are pathetic. Even in the 840 million there are a good number of exclusions.

Many migrants did not concern themselves with food security because there were all kinds of problems with ration cards. The family was split between the city and the village. They were told, you are earning ₹10,000-12,000 so you don't deserve it. Now 80 million people have been selected out of the blue for five kg of rations.

Aadhaar cards have been given to everyone and the government claims 98 percent have them. So why not allow people to give their number and collect their rations? If someone has already taken it, don't give it again. Why not just make it universal? Anyone who needs food should be able to get it in such times.

Is one-nation-one-ration-card the solution?

It can't work without universal entitlement. Each state has its own schemes. The family is split between village and city. It's a nice slogan but it can work only with universal entitlement. The ration shop gets food based on the number of people it caters to. If I get an influx of people, where do I get the extra food from? If I give them rations from my quota, my residents won't get their rations. And maybe next month the extra people won't turn up. A lot of backend work needs to be done to make this work. In Rajasthan they tried to create a ration card which would work anywhere in the state and they faced these huge problems.

Universalize 10 kg per person all over the country. You can present your ration card or your Aadhaar number. Thirty years ago when we went to Devdungri, there was a terrible drought. People were entitled to 10 kg and the PDS was universal. We have, in fact, reduced this entitlement over the years, due to the targeted system and its mindset. ■

LET'S CONSERVE GO GREEN!

Save water

- Repair leakages
- Install low-flow showerheads or take bucket baths
- Turn off the faucet in between washing dishes, brushing, bathing, car wash, etc.
- Harvest rainwater

Save nature

- Planting more trees help keep the Earth cleaner and greener. More trees mean improved air quality, climate, and biodiversity
- Renewable sources of energy are constantly replenished naturally. Sources such as solar, hydroelectric, or wind energy, to name a few, can drastically reduce carbon footprint

Reduce, Reuse, Recycle

- Say NO to plastic. Avoid using plastic bottled water and carry eco-friendly shopping bags
- Segregating waste and using organic waste as compost helps improve soil quality
- Donating or recycling electronic gadgets helps conserve natural resources, avoids air and water pollution, as well as greenhouse gas emissions
- Purchase reusable items instead of disposable ones

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Poverty and the elderly in India

Sidika Sehgal
New Delhi

ACROSS the world, the coronavirus pandemic has drawn attention to the elderly. India has a considerable population of older citizens and many don't have savings or an income. Out of 140 million elderly Indians, 30 million live alone and 90 million will have to work till they die. Nearly 53 million are below the poverty line.

"There is a lot of talk about age demographics and in the process, there isn't adequate attention to the problems of the elderly," said Mathew Cherian at the web book launch of his book, *Ageing and Poverty in India*, on June 15, World Elder Abuse Awareness Day.

"This day is an anomaly because in India we pride ourselves on looking after our elderly," said Cherian, who was CEO of HelpAge India for 17 years. Currently, 65 percent of India's population is under the age of 35. But by 2040, 14 percent of our population will be above the age of 60 and we won't be a young nation anymore. "It is important to put into the pockets of the elderly enough money for subsistence," said Dr Ashwani Kumar, a former Member of Parliament and a panelist at the webinar. Under the central government's Indira Gandhi National Old Age Pension Scheme, people between 60 and 79 years receive ₹200 per month and those above 80 years receive ₹500 a month.

"This is nowhere near the minimum wage level in any state or payments under the rural employment guarantee scheme," pointed out Kiran Karnik, chairperson of HelpAge India. According to Cherian, the minimum elderly pension should be ₹3,000 per month, and this amount should be revised every three years for inflation.

"We believe that old people are being cared for by their families. But their families are also living in destitution," said Nikhil Dey of the Mazdoor Kisan Shakti Sangathan.

There is no doubt that India has fallen short in ensuring social security for the elderly. The public health infrastructure is far from sufficient, evident in the past few months.

"We spend one to one-and-a-half percent of our GDP on health, whereas the international norm is three percent," said Dr N.C. Saxena, former secretary of the Planning Commission.

There are just 4,500 geriatric beds in rural India. And of 717 districts, less than 200 districts have geriatric wards.

The pandemic has further marginalized the medical needs of the elderly. "We have forgotten that those who have diabetes or heart problems do not have access to medicines," said Dr A.B. Dey, professor and head of the Department of Geriatric Medicine at AIIMS. Since March, 80 percent of his patients have not renewed their prescriptions. "When you are strapped for cash, you first buy food, not medicines," he added.

The pandemic has pushed governments to think about which citizens seem to count more. "We cannot think of old people as dependants. We need to move beyond these dichotomies of who is productive and who isn't," said Kavita Sivaramakrishnan who has researched public health histories in South Asia.

Karnik also drew attention to discrimination against the elderly in his final remarks. "This emphasis on the young is also a form of discrimination. The old are also a resource for the country," he said.

In his book, Cherian suggests a universal pension, a pension for widows, a separate livelihoods mission for the elderly, a national policy for senior citizens and health security for the elderly. His book is a call for an aged-friendly society. At the end of this manifesto, Cherian underlined that neglect too is elder abuse.

Mohini Giri, who has worked with the widows of Vrindavan, and Dr Muthusami Kumaran, professor at the University of Florida, were also part of the panel. Paranjay Guha Thakurta, who moderated the book launch, is also the publisher of the book and reiterated that getting a book published during the pandemic wasn't easy. Cherian's family pitched in. His elder daughter helped edit the book and his younger daughter designed the cover. On the cover is a banyan tree, a symbol of longevity and fitting for a book on the elderly. ■

For copies of the book: <https://www.helpageindia.org/book/>



Ageing and Poverty in India
Mathew Cherian
Paranjay Guha
Thakurta &
AuthorsUpFront
₹495

Helpline, masks, ration kits from Pardada Pardadi

Sidika Sehgal
New Delhi

IN less than a week after the lockdown was imposed, the Pardada Pardadi Educational Society (PPES) set up a toll-free helpline so that people in distress could call and receive help.

The PPES runs a topnotch school for 1,600 rural girls in Anupshahr in Bulandshahr district of Uttar Pradesh. Most people in this largely agrarian community are marginal farmers.

The school was started in 2000, by Virendra 'Sam' Singh after he retired as president and managing director of DuPont, South Asia. His ambition was to start a school for girls in his home town, Anupshahr.

"India can change if we give opportunities to rural girls," is his firm belief.

The school provides its students two meals a day, uniforms and books for free. Moreover, for every day the girl attends school, ₹10 is transferred to her bank account.

"The lockdown was a big setback for women like me," says Lakshmi from Haridpur village. "We grow vegetables and sell them in the market. But the *mandi* was closed and no one was buying from us. If we got buyers, they would pay very low rates."

"They are a farming community and they put food on our table. All of a sudden, they have been pushed into a corner. It is very difficult for them to articulate their needs," says Renuka Gupta, CEO of PPES.

Many people called, mostly for food. They said they had grain but what they needed were other essentials: pulses, sugar, oil, soap and washing powder. So PPES modified its ration kit to include these items. By June 10, 900 ration kits had been distributed.

People also called for information. They had ration cards but when would supplies reach the PDS (Public Distribution System) shop closest to them? So PPES would call up the officer in charge of rations to find out.

Altogether, nearly 23,000 migrants have returned to Anupshahr. "Many of them do not have job cards under the MGNREGA scheme," explains Gupta who is 55 and has been with PPES since the beginning. The staff at PPES is helping them get job cards made. PPES is also informing them about government orders and schemes via phone calls and SMS.

Ten young women in their twenties who recently completed a diploma course in communication held at PPES, answer the calls. The calls are managed from the PPES campus and redirected to the women, who are all working from home.

If people call for medical advice, they are connected to a doctor and nurse. In the early days of the lockdown, the two would answer 15-25 calls a day. But that was when people were scared and wanted to know how COVID-19 would affect them.

Now, only one or two people call every day. Shajan Jose, the administrative manager of PPES, says, "Doctors say that they can do their job better if the patient is in front of them. People also feel the same way. They want to see a doctor." The health clinic on the school campus is running but only three to five people come on any given day.

PPES has a health centre for its students and a mobile health unit that used to provide services to nearly 100 patients every day before the lockdown. Currently, it isn't doing the rounds of villages.

"We are the only NGO working in Anupshahr. It's a lonely battle," says



iVillage makes a range of face masks



Virendra Sam Singh with his students



Renuka Gupta, CEO of PPES

Gupta on video call from her home in Delhi. The NGO first set up the school and then began providing other services.

Around 5,000 women have been organized into self-help groups. Before the lockdown started, PPES anticipated that the need for face masks would spiral. "We found that there were no surgical masks available in the villages," says Arya Singh.

PPES has a for-profit sister organization, iVillage, which employs 150 women. Arya manages sales and marketing for iVillage.

The women were trained to stitch cotton face masks that are washable and reusable. It took them a while to get it right. They first made masks for themselves and then for their family members.

But once they had perfected the technique, they began to supply to the government and some housing societies. They have supplied over 1.7 lakh masks.

Arya Singh remarked that the whole community came together in this initiative. Some men who worked in export houses in Noida and Gurugram had returned to Anupshahr. They understood quality control and offered to help.

Initially, the women were working from home but now about 200 of them come to the iVillage workshop and stitch masks. Usha Devi, 30, can stitch about 80-100 masks a day. She underwent a six-day training programme when she joined iVillage last year.

She now earns ₹200-250 per day and is the only member of her family with a regular salary. Her husband put up a food stall in Anupshahr town but during the lockdown the police would harass him. "My family doesn't have land, neither do we have a cow. I have to work every day to feed my children," she says. She has two sons, 11 and nine, and a seven-year-old daughter.

While the school was closed, part of its premises were used as a quarantine centre for migrants and people who showed symptoms of COVID-19. At maximum capacity, there were 110 people in quarantine, but now the government has handed the building back.

Meanwhile, online classes on Zoom and WhatsApp have been going on. But only 350 girls are attending classes regularly, said Krishna Kumar Sharma, the principal of the school.

"Girls here don't have their own mobile phones, so they manage by borrowing mobile phones from their fathers, brothers or uncles," Sharma says. But that is not all. Since incomes have dropped, many families don't have the money to buy a data pack for internet access.

Gupta fears that when schools reopen, many girls will drop out, setting back years of work. PPES spends ₹35,000 on each student per year. The money is well spent, but not always easy to come by.

In the 20 years since Virendra Singh started PPES, a lot has changed. Around 123 girls from PPES are in university and six are in the US. Nearly 100 girls are working, half of them in the IT industry in Bengaluru.

"The average age of marriage here is 18, but girls who pass out from our schools marry later, at 25 or so. Some girls are also choosing not to get married. They tend to have fewer children," Gupta says. Often, they choose their own life partner, which is uncommon in an area where the *khap* panchayat wields power over who gets to marry whom.

"The only people who successfully face adversity are those with an education," says Singh, who is now 80 years old. While PPES continues its relief efforts in Anupshahr, Singh plans to increase school capacity by adding 200 seats for the session starting in July. ■

Cleaning up in the Nilgiris

Civil Society News
New Delhi



Both villages now look clean and tidy

Three methods were selected: drainage facilities to prevent stagnant water, kitchen gardens to use wastewater and individual soak pits for homes with no space for drainage.

build drainage channels.

The UNCS and panchayat worked together all through 2018. "Panchayats are generally happy and ready to partner with us as we have proved our credibility over the years," says Prem Singh.

Resolutions were passed in the gram sabha and submitted to the panchayat for construction of drainage channels and soak pits under MGNREGA. "There was no difficulty at all in sourcing funds," says Prem Singh. "The panchayats got MGNREGA funds immediately for construction of the drainage system."

The panchayat engineer, supported by a site engineer of UNCS, got down to work. Villagers themselves did manual labour and masons were hired from nearby villages. Every house was linked to the drainage channels and soak pits were constructed in difficult to reach areas.

The UNCS' kitchen garden programme got an enthusiastic response. Village Development Officers distributed vegetable seeds to households. They also demonstrated seed treatment as well as sowing and planting techniques to villagers. "In this way, kitchen water and other household wastewater got effectively used," says Prem Singh. Mostly, villagers are growing greens, radish, beetroot and tomato in

their backyards. They are encouraged to grow their favourite vegetables and make a little money by selling the surplus.

Eventually, wastewater from 23 houses was directed to drainage channels, six houses were linked to kitchen gardens and 23 houses to soak pits. The village is now clean and tidy with no signs of stagnating sewerage.

The project followed a similar trajectory in Kengarai Naduhatti village which is inhabited by 81 families. The village was strewn with solid waste and no means of disposal had been worked out. The villagers were not aware of the health problems being caused by their unhygienic habits.

The UNCS discussed the solid waste issue in the village and possible solutions with the villagers in mid-2018. The UNCS created awareness among villagers about the dangerous consequences of not taking any action in disposing of the waste they were surrounded by. The matter was discussed in the gram panchayat and resolutions were passed to approach the panchayat to create systems of garbage disposal. The result was that village cleaning workers called *thuumai kavalars* were appointed under the *thuumai Bharatham*, a scheme aimed at eliminating open-air defecation and improving solid and liquid waste management in urban and rural areas in India.

In the village, the panchayat placed dustbins on streets for dumping non-degradable waste. The villagers were motivated to separate degradable and non-degradable waste. Houses with open spaces made compost pits for disposal of degradable waste. The *thuumai kavalars* now collect and dispose of the waste regularly. A common compost pit has also been constructed in the village to collect and dump degradable waste from houses without individual pits. Non-degradable waste is collected once a week and disposed.

Both villages now look tidy and clean. No cases of malaria, filaria or dengue have been reported from either as yet. And the air is as clear and sweet as it should be in the Nilgiris. ■

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FRUIT BOWL BEATS THE LOCKDOWN

How Koppal farmers went to market against all odds

Shree Padre
Kasaragod

KANAKAGIRI Gangadharayya was certain he would earn a substantial profit this March by selling grapes. A farmer in Koppal district of Karnataka, he'd pruned his grapevines a little late last year, figuring it would help him reap a bountiful harvest. And he was right. His field was full of luscious grapes. Last year, he had earned ₹12 lakh. This year he thought his grapes would surely fetch him around ₹20 lakh.

Then came the lockdown on March 24. Gangadharayya's dreams turned to dust. Suddenly there were no buyers and no transport. "I was in complete shock. I feared that my entire income would be wiped out," he recalls.

Like him, hundreds of farmers in Koppal, a fertile fruit and vegetable growing district in Karnataka, were in a state of utter panic. They were staring at huge losses. Tonnes of pomegranates, bananas, grapes, papayas, guavas, figs and citrus fruits were ready for harvest. The fate of Koppal's most famous fruit, the mango, especially the Kesar variety, hung in the balance.

What should they do? Gangadharayya and other farmers trooped off to meet the district collector (DC), Sunil Kumar, who advised them to get in touch with Krishna Ukkunda, deputy director, horticulture (DDH), of Koppal since three years.

Ukkunda and his department listened to the farmers' woes and swung into action. Actually, they had been waiting for precisely such a moment. For the past three years the department had tried to persuade farmers to market their produce directly to consumers, adopt new technologies and set up storage facilities. They had even organized fairs and set up buyer-seller meets. But the farmers were indifferent and apathetic.

Now the tables had turned. Farmers were desperately calling officers of the horticulture department. "We have started harvesting, what should we do now?" they asked in anguish.

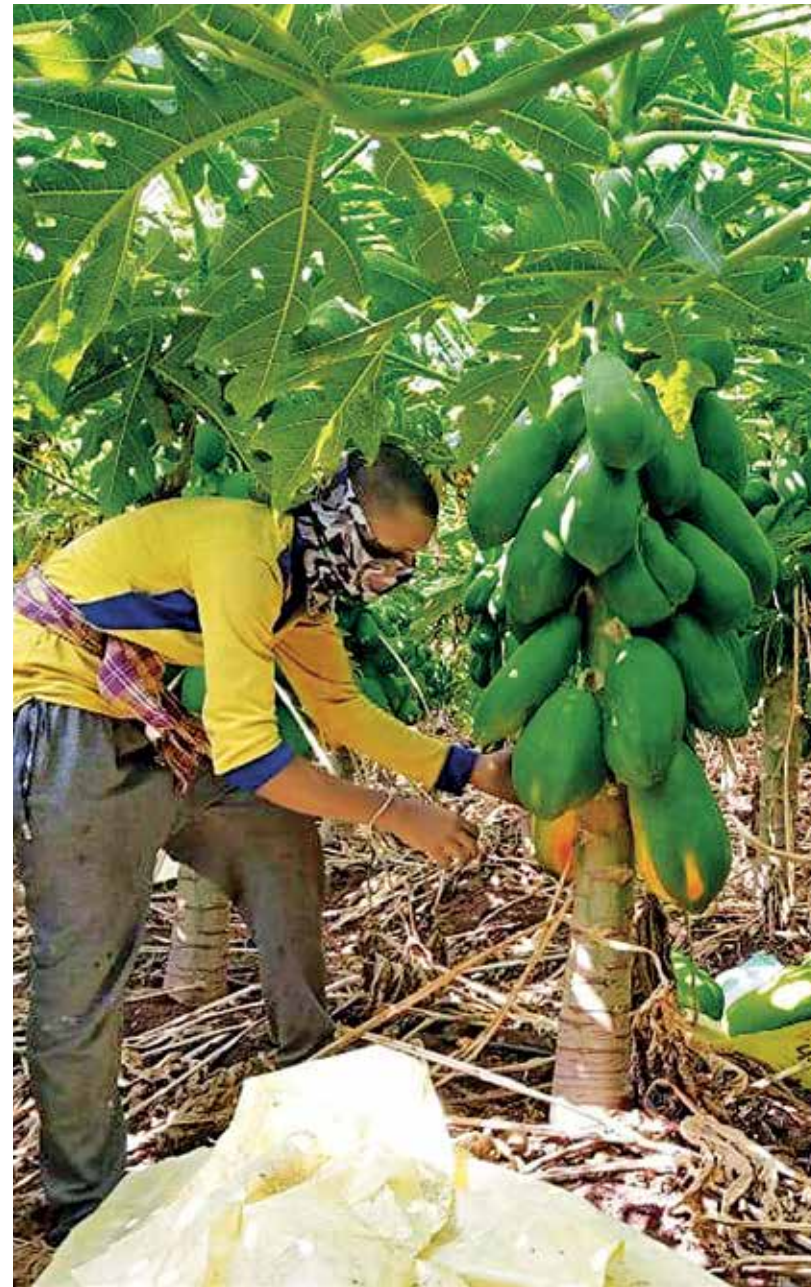
Ukkunda was sanguine. "The moment I heard about the lockdown, I felt happy. I saw this as a golden opportunity to finally realize my dream of linking farmers to consumers — something we have been advocating all along."

Horticulture officers, the administration and the police quickly came together to ensure farmers sold their produce in the shortest timespan possible. Buyers were found, passes issued and storages installed. In the first month of the lockdown, the district succeeded in marketing about 23,000 tonnes of fruits and vegetables thanks to the dedicated activism of the administration, led by the horticulture department.

This department has virtually turned into a 'horticulture produce marketing control room'. Farmers and buyers contact them through the phone, WhatsApp and in person to get their work done.

HARVEST TIME: Although Koppal district gets only 600 mm of average annual rainfall, it is a productive fruit and vegetable growing region. Its main crop is a mango variety which grows on 2,900 hectares. Onion, too, is a major crop.

It has pomegranates growing on around 1,500 hectares, bananas on 1,100 hectares, papayas on 900 hectares, grapes on 780 hectares, guavas on 650



Papayas were harvested and loaded on trucks for transport to other states

Horticulture officers, the civil administration and the police came together to ensure farmers sold their produce in the shortest time possible. Buyers were found, passes issued and storages set up.

hectares and figs on 210 hectares. A variety of citrus fruits grow on 687 hectares.

When the lockdown began, most grape farmers in Koppal had completed harvesting their grapes. Papayas and watermelons were becoming ready to harvest. Mango is harvested in late April. Onions were waiting. Figs had just ripened.

Ukkunda advised grape farmers to invest quickly in raisin-making units. This way the grapes they couldn't sell could be stored and sold later.

He helped Gangadharayya instal one such unit and assured him he would sanction the subsidy at the earliest. Gangadharayya got two raisin-making units of 10-tonne capacity each installed within 10 to 12 days during the lockdown.

Farmers like him were put in touch with grape buyers who were given passes quickly. As a result, Gangadharayya could sell about 30 tonnes of fresh grapes for ₹28 to ₹30 per kg. Prices were hovering around ₹35 per kg prior to the lockdown. He also converted his grapes into one tonne of raisins which he has stored in a cold storage to sell when prices rise. About 10 tonnes of his fruit went waste



Cold storages were requested to buy local produce so that it wouldn't go waste



Passes were quickly issued



Krishna Ukkunda



Sunil Kumar

he will get a subsidy of ₹90,000.

"There is an added advantage. After grape buyers take the best bunches we are stuck with leftovers. By converting the fruit into raisins we can now sell all that we grow," says Deshpande.

He now has three tonnes of raisins parked in the cold storage. "I don't have money in hand but my raisins are like a fixed deposit. I am happy that no portion of my crop has been wasted. All the credit for this crisis management has to go to the horticulture department," he says gratefully. Koppal district now has around 20 raisin-making units.

HELPLINES FOR FARMERS: The horticulture department's first crisis management step was to set up helplines for farmers and publicize them on social media. "Farmers who want to sell their vegetables and fruits can contact these officers between 7 am and 11 pm," said their post. It had the phone numbers of the DDH, all senior assistant directors of the taluks, officers of the APMC (Agriculture Produce Marketing Committee) and of HOPCOMS (the state's co-operative marketing society). The DDH's office had two mobile vending vans lying idle. They had been specially converted by IIHR (Indian Institute of Horticulture Research)

into vending vans to encourage farmers to sell their produce directly to consumers.

After a brainstorming session, the DC and DDH sent word to two young farmers. "We will provide you with two mobile vending vans and a pass to sell directly. Are you interested?" The farmers grabbed the opportunity. Since all fruit and vegetable shops were closed, they did brisk business and made ₹3,000 per day. Word spread.

Suresh Chowdaki, one of the farmers selling from the van, says he had grown a lot of brinjal, which he used to sell for ₹15 to ₹20 per kg. When the lockdown was declared he couldn't find a buyer for even ₹2 per kg. Thanks to the van, he made between ₹12,000 and ₹15,000 per day. He sold all his brinjals and started

during the early days of the lockdown, he says, causing a loss of ₹3 lakh.

"But I have no regrets. If the DC and horticulture officers had not helped me, my entire crop this year would have rotted," he says with obvious relief. "The DC was so kind. I didn't need anyone's help to meet him. He listened patiently and advised remedial measures."

Bheemaroo Deshpande, a grape farmer of Katagalli in Yalaburga taluk who owns five acres, was on the verge of harvesting grapes when the lockdown was declared. Last year, he had harvested 13 tonnes and earned ₹35 per kg.

He too approached the horticulture department in March-end. They helped him find buyers and advised him to also instal a raisin-making unit. With his family members and a few workers, he erected the unit. It cost him ₹1.7 lakh but



A mobile vending van selling fruits and vegetables attracts customers

buying vegetables to sell.

Thereafter, horticulture officers began cajoling farmers to sell their vegetables and fruits themselves to consumers and offered them passes. They pointed to Chowdaki as a shining example of success.

Finally, farmers decided to take the plunge. The officers were careful not to issue passes to two vehicles for the same area. Within a month the number of vending vehicles increased to 200. The administration, consumers, the police and farmers were happy. Citizens didn't need to crowd around markets and social distancing was maintained.

Linganagouda Patil, a Senior Assistant Director Horticulture (SADH) from Gangavathi taluk, talked to the Bhajantris, a community who traditionally earned their livelihood by selling fruits in crowded places, to include vegetables by buying directly from farmers and hawking in residential areas. The Bhajantris were happy to do this, since the lockdown had rendered them jobless. To ensure their areas didn't overlap they were allotted separate areas of operation. About 700 push carts and hundreds of two-wheelers loaded with fresh farm produce now spread across the district.

Confined within their homes, with eateries and bakeries closed, people readily bought fresh farm produce when it sailed past in front of their eyes. "You could say they became sort of captive consumers," says Patil.

One month after the lockdown started, sales of horticultural products in the district came to ₹5,995 tonnes valued at ₹353,80,000. This means every day 200 tonnes of produce worth ₹11,79,333 were sold.

"Many farmers have realized that direct marketing is the key to prosperity. After deducting expenses they had 50 percent more returns," said Ukkunda.

LIST OF BUYERS: The DDH's office also compiled a list of traders who routinely bought vegetables and fruits. A database of 500 buyers of onion and 150 buyers of watermelon, papaya and other fruits and vegetables was put together and widely circulated among farmers.

"Thanks to the various fairs we organized in previous years, we could get contacts of buyers immediately. Details of crops that we have in the district were sent to them," says DC Sunil Kumar.

"We worked overtime for a week to draw up this list," recalled Ukkunda. "Previously, a few farmers wouldn't divulge the details of buyers they had sold to. We made all such details available to farmers."

This database of buyers proved very useful for farmers. Language barriers were overcome. In almost all farmer families there is a second generation that knows English. Local drivers of national permit lorries which were lying idle also know a few languages and they helped farmers converse with traders. There were also some 50 to 60 WhatsApp groups which shared information.

Passes were given without any red tape for transporting horticultural produce. "Farmers acknowledge that our district started this process long before other districts. We issued passes from our office and from the horticulture office. This helped farmers transport their produce not just within the district but to some other states as well," said Sunil Kumar.



Onion farmers set up storage units

"Many times it was tough for farmers to come to our office to collect their passes. Police wouldn't allow them. So we sent passes to the farmers. There were days we delivered 10 to 15 passes to their doorsteps," said Ukkunda.

Nazeer Ahmad, SADH in Koppal, took personal interest in ensuring farmers got a fair price. When Hanumanthappa Katapura, a papaya farmer with three acres in Irkalagada, contacted him in alarm, he quickly put him in touch with a buyer in Chitradurg who agreed to buy his papayas at ₹7 per kg.

However, since temples were closed and all festivals cancelled he couldn't offload the Crossandra flowers he had grown on one acre. All the floriculturists in the district underwent losses.

"Every day we received 20 to 25 phone calls from farmers. Mostly they were worried about selling their produce," said Ahmad. "When a farmer's problem was redressed, it was posted on WhatsApp with a picture. We try to link farmers with buyers and support them in selling. We successfully sent fruits and vegetables to other districts and states. We sent papaya to Delhi. Not more than 10 to 15 percent of the district's horticultural produce might have gone to waste. We started direct marketing to consumers and then the other districts followed."

ROLE OF COLD STORAGES: The lockdown underlined the critical role cold storages play in the lives of farmers. There were four in Koppal. The government-owned one in Kushtangi taluk could store 500 tonnes. The other three were privately owned and their total capacity was 450 tonnes. All were closed.

Till the lockdown struck, the cold storage owners used to store fruits and vegetables from other districts and sell when prices were remunerative in the off-season.

The horticulture department struck a deal with them. If they helped local farmers they would be permitted to be open so long as they observed safety rules. The storage owners readily agreed.

Ramesh K Bannigol, a banana farmer, has a cold storage of a capacity of seven tonnes. He used to sell five to six tonnes of bananas per day. He would buy bunches of raw bananas for ₹5 per kg and sell them after ripening for ₹8 a kg. "During the lockdown I bought about 100 tonnes of bananas from farmers and 30 to 40 tonnes of watermelon. If the officers hadn't taken an interest in reopening my unit, it would have been closed even now and I would have incurred considerable losses."

Farmers also benefited from impromptu onion storages. Onions were selling for ₹1,500 to ₹1,600 per quintal but when the lockdown was imposed prices crashed.

Horticulture officers had often tried to persuade onion farmers to construct storages so that they wouldn't have to sell immediately after harvesting. Demos were also arranged but the farmers showed no interest.

Finally, during the lockdown, the onion farmers decided to opt for it. Six farmers of Odaganala village took a welding unit owner to see how such a storage unit was fabricated and then make a similar one for them. One of the farmers, Mahantha Gowda Mali Patil, has been cultivating onions on his six-acre plot for decades. He spent ₹1,30,000 on making a storage unit with a capacity of 25 tonnes. He will get a subsidy of ₹85,000 from the department.



A unit which dries grapes into raisins



A farmer selling his produce on a cart attached to his bike

The horticulture department struck a deal with cold storage owners. If they helped local farmers they would be permitted to remain open as long as they observed safety rules.

"I believe we can store onions for four or five months in this unit. We sold some stock in between but six of us now have a stock of 100 tonnes. If we hadn't acted quickly none of our crops would have been saved," he said.

His case encouraged other onion farmers to get similar storage units constructed. "Our neighbouring village, Handrala, is far ahead in onion cultivation. They have about 5,600 acres under onion cultivation. They seem to have grown onions everywhere. Even a farmer with one hectare of onion is constructing a storage unit to augment his income," remarked Patil.

"During difficult times, horticulture officers have voluntarily worked overtime to solve our problems. Generally, to get any subsidy sanctioned under any scheme, one has to chase officers. But in our case, it is the officers who prevailed on us to implement all this. They actually tried to compel us," said Patil.

Subrahmanya of Gunnala village in Yalaburga taluk grew figs on 18 acres. This fruit has the shortest shelf life. It can survive just one or two days after being harvested. When the lockdown began, Subrahmanya lost ₹4 lakh worth of figs because the fruit dried up since harvesting was delayed.

The department linked fig farmers to local sellers who have been buying one to one and a half tonnes every day for ₹24 per kg instead of ₹35 which was the earlier price.

"We harvest about five to six tonnes of crop every day. We are ready to send our figs to other districts and states. The officers are also ready to issue passes. Unfortunately, the centres which regularly buy from us are closed so we have no choice," said Subrahmanya who is planning to put up a fig drying unit next year.

MANGO'S RISE: The horticulture department's Mango Fair was an annual affair, held just before the monsoon. Watermelon, grape, pomegranate and musk melon fairs were also held during their peak season. The Mango Fair often went on for over a week and used to net a turnover of ₹1 crore.

Mango is Koppal's main crop, grown on more than 3,000 hectares. Since this year was a rest year in a three-year cycle, farmers feared they would get only 10,000 tonnes or one-third of their regular output. The second blow was that the Mango Fair would not be held this year. So marketing opportunities would be lost.

Moved by the disappointment of the farmers, the horticulture department ideated and arrived at a solution. Proposals for branding the Koppal Mango had been in the air for quite some time. This was the best time to go ahead with it, it was decided.

The department approached the Karnataka State Mango Development and Marketing Board and requested financial help to produce cardboard boxes. The board obliged and 10,000 boxes arrived at Koppal. Each box costs ₹29 and can hold 2.5 kg of mangoes, priced at ₹250.

Keeping social distancing in mind, the department decentralized mango marketing. First, it selected farmers with the best mangoes and trained them in harvesting and post-harvesting practices. Fruits were graded into A, B and C categories. The best Kesar, Apooos and Beneshan varieties were to be sold under the brand name of 'Koppal Mango', in boxes.

Ten farmers grow these varieties. Their names and telephone numbers were listed on a handbill and circulated through social media. Four vans directly sold boxes of Koppal Mango in the city and through doorstep delivery. In a week, about 1,500 boxes were sold.

Three years after the department launched the annual Mango Fair, the Kesar variety began to rise in popularity. An exporter from northern India arrived to assess its worth. The fruit ripens in Koppal by end-April whereas in Gujarat, the prime home of Kesar mangoes, it ripens only by the second week of July. The exporter quickly signed up with a plantation to buy Kesar mangoes worth ₹2 lakh. Other exporters followed and now a few farmers are earning ₹10 lakh each by selling mangoes to them after signing an agreement.

Out of 3,000 hectares, the Kesar variety is grown on about 1,200. Because of the premium it fetches it is becoming the preferred choice of farmers.

The problem was getting good quality planting material. It was available in different areas of the district. To resolve this problem, the department under Ukkunda organized a 10-day Sasya Santhe or plant market where ₹2 lakh worth of plants were sold.

"For our first Mango Fair, we had to compel farmers to participate. But when they saw several varieties of mangoes and managed to sell theirs at good prices, they got interested," said Ukkunda. After that, whenever the department announced the date of the Mango Fair, farmers would immediately book stalls.

"Out of 850 mango farmers, more than 100 have understood the advantages of marketing directly. Three years ago, none of them knew about this concept," said Ukkunda.

"The lockdown crisis has made farmers understand that raisin-making and onion storage are essential for them to withstand the challenges they face in the market," said Ukkunda. "Figs are an example. Farmers grow them on a big scale. But it is the farmers who dehydrate and sell figs who earn much more. They have also understood that direct marketing is the key to success."

The time is ripe for Koppal's farmers to organize themselves into a farmer-producer company or a cooperative society. Delay might dampen the tempo and enthusiasm generated during this period. ■

Krishna Ukkunda, DDH, Koppal - 94489 99237

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The post-COVID world order



DELHI DARBAR

SANJAYA BARU

WHEN COVID-19 becomes history the era of this virus will perhaps be remembered by two words — lockdown and webinar. One consequence of the confinement at home — lockdown — of so many writers, researchers, policy wonks and think-tankers, if you will, has been the proliferation of internet web-based talk shops. A 'webinar', says the Merriam-Webster dictionary, is "a live online educational presentation during which participating viewers can submit questions and comments". The dictionary dates the first use of the term to 1998. Even though the concept of a 'web-based seminar' has been around for over two decades, webinar has become a household word over the past three months. From heads of state and government to budding researchers, everyone interested in ideas, policies and issues has been engaged in one webinar or another.

In the webinar world of analysts studying foreign affairs, geopolitics and international relations the hot topic is the shape of the post-COVID world. The trend set during the pre-COVID decade was the declining weight in global affairs and the world economy of the West — the United States and the European Union — and the rise of the East, mainly China. How will COVID alter this course?

Those who see the US in secular decline believe the pandemic will only accelerate the process, given the messy manner in which the Trump administration has handled not just the outbreak at home but also relations with countries and multilateral institutions. How things will progress depends on whether the fate of the US is seen as tied to Trump or to more fundamental economic and political trends.

Those who see China in secular rise believe the pandemic, perhaps triggered by it, will further empower it, given the superior ability of the Chinese state to handle such challenges and the weakness of the state capacity of most of its adversaries. The mess in the US, Europe and India, compared to China's V-shaped recovery from a severe lockdown, is considered adequate proof. China has already provided grist to this mill with its actions across its neighbourhood, from the South China Sea to the Himalayas.

Taken together, these two views would suggest that, rather than altering the course of history, the COVID pandemic will only bring the future of a 'post-American, Pax-Sinica' world order closer to us. Even if this were true the question still remains, how sooner? After all, the power gap between the US and China is still very wide. Not only is the US economy still one and a half times bigger than China's, the US defence budget is several-fold more than that of China.

However, the real power imbalance between the US and China lies in the quality and range of their respective allies. The US counts the EU, Japan, South Korea, Australia and, increasingly, countries like Vietnam and India among its allies, while China can claim North Korea, Pakistan and perhaps fence-sitters like Russia and Iran on its side. Ranged against each other, the US alliance remains more

powerful, to either take sides or remain neutral in a bipolar rivalry? That was the option given during the US-USSR Cold War. One had to either join a partisan military alliance or the non-aligned movement. There is no reason why history should repeat itself.

For 'middle powers' like Russia, Germany, France, Japan, Britain, India, Australia and other like-minded nations, there is little interest in perpetuating a world order dominated by one or two nations. Rather, their interest lies in a more balanced distribution of power around the world. Which means that even as China becomes stronger, and the US becomes weaker, the Middle Powers must focus on their own and collective strengths that offer a counterweight in the emerging balance of power politics.

In this regard, the initiative taken by the United States to bring major democracies, including Russia, together into an expanded G-7 should be welcomed. Over the next two years India will be a non-permanent member of the U.N. Security Council and will be hosting the G-20 summit in 2022. India's focus in this period has to be to strengthen its external defences against an increasingly powerful China. Equally, India has to invest in building a more competitive economy and a more stable social and political order at home.

How India manages its external relations and its domestic economy and polity will set the terms for New Delhi's ability to deal with a post-COVID world of growing rivalry and tension between the West and China. If India falters at home, neither the West nor China would hesitate to twist its arms to suit their interests. On the other hand, if India is able to stay the course and sustains higher economic growth with political and social stability it could attract considerable support from all those who do not wish to see a world order in which western dominance is replaced by Chinese dominance.

While the post-COVID world will be more challenging for India, how we manage to deal with it will depend entirely on how we recover from the domestic situation we find ourselves in. In the middle of 2020 the Indian economy looks even more challenging than it did in the middle of 2019 and the domestic political situation is no better either. The focus of all policy will have to be on improving the performance of the economy and stabilizing the polity. This calls for mature and far-sighted leadership. The COVID crisis has brought into sharp relief the tough choices India must make at home and abroad to be able to manage the even more challenging post-COVID world. ■



The US has better allies than China

powerful than a potential China alliance.

A question to consider is what would the US do if China chooses not to confront it directly but to nibble away at its periphery and allow termites to eat up the fence? That is precisely the strategy China has been pursuing. It has gradually increased its influence in its own periphery with the aim of first challenging US dominance in Asia — from the South China Sea to the southern Pacific, from Eastern Europe to South Asia and from Africa to West Asia — and simultaneously creating parallel institutions like the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank. However, the decline in western influence in the developing world has as much to do with China's growing clout and appeal as with concerns about persisting western attitudes towards the developing world.

While geopolitical analysts on either side argue about the relative power and influence of the two Big Powers, should other nations simply sit and watch their power games? Is it the destiny of other nations, especially what may be called the 'middle

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The highs and lows of tech



TECH TALES

KIRAN KARNIK

technological research is underway globally for developing a vaccine and finding a cure.

In India, young entrepreneurs are working on a variety of interesting and possibly disruptive technological ideas. These range from quick diagnostic testing to low-cost, quick-assembly cardboard beds for emergency quarantine facilities. Many more ideas will doubtless emerge.

With the sudden lockdown, offices were forced to close, schools and universities had to stop classes before the year's syllabus could be completed, going out to buy essentials became difficult, and social interaction ground to a halt. At this time, technology came to the rescue, making commonplace what already existed. 'Zoom call' has now become a generic name for all video calls and 'WFH' (for work from home) has entered our day-to-day



Amidst all this, if there is a winner, it is technology. It led or underpinned much of the efforts to counter the adversities that beset the nation.

lexicon as working remotely became widespread. 'Virtual' classes became as regular and intensive as being in a classroom. Everything from vegetables, milk and meat to clothes and vacuum cleaners could be ordered online for doorstep delivery. One could "meet" electronically with dozens of friends, practically at the click of a button — and that too at no cost. At the peak of the lockdown, these seemed like wondrous technological solutions to the problems of work, learning, shopping and socializing.

As we move towards the inevitable end of the

lockdown, and life begins to get back on track, a new routine will set in. This is likely, in the near future, to see a continuation of at least some degree of WFH and online classes. Despite the technological ease of enabling these and the additional applications that new technology will create, there are some serious drawbacks.

First, access to devices: how many, even among the urban middle class, have a computer? Many would own one (though data is not quite reliable), but how will a family meet the simultaneous needs of a father or mother (or both) in WFH mode and of children who need a computer to attend online classes? Middle-class households can hardly afford dedicated computers, or even tablets, for each family member at prices of ₹50,000 and ₹30,000, respectively, for a proper model. So, who and what activity gets priority? Smartphones, as an alternative, are hardly realistic for hours of work or classes over video. And what of those who cannot afford any of these devices? Clearly, work and learning from home are easier for the rich and will add greatly to the already-large inequity in society.

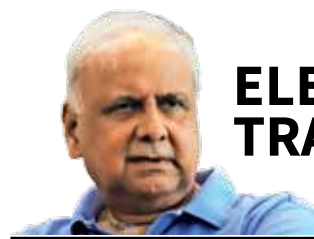
Then, there are the social problems of trying to work or study in a crowded household in a small home, with many activities, noise and disturbances galore: hardly conducive to any degree of concentration. If one magically overcomes all this, there is the issue of unreliable and varying-bandwidth internet connectivity, resulting in sudden interruptions and audio or video that breaks up, even in cities. Pictures of children sitting on rooftops to get connectivity tells the story as far as rural areas are concerned.

Even in the best of circumstances, can WFH ever replicate the casual conversation in the cafeteria which sparks an idea or the serendipitous solution that comes from a water-cooler chat in the office? What about the learning that takes place amongst students interacting in the school bus or the team spirit imbibed on the football field: how will online courses replicate these? If work and study, as also entertainment, are only at home, what about "me time" for each family member? What of the health impact of looking at a screen for hours every day? Will minimal social contact lead to a feeling of deprivation and depression?

The wonders of technology have provided many solutions, but will have to contend with such social, economic, professional and pedagogic problems if we move to a more at-home world. Techno-evangelists and policymakers need to take note of these travails before blindly leaping into a technological era. ■

Kiran Karnik is an independent strategy and public policy analyst. His recent books include *Evolution: Decoding India's Disruptive Tech Story* (2018) and *Crooked Minds: Creating an Innovative Society* (2016).

Democracy and migrants



ELECTION TRACKER

JAGDEEP CHHOKAR

THE tragedy of migrant workers following the nation-wide lockdown, imposed with four hours' notice on March 24, is still fresh in the national consciousness. The lockdown was first extended to April 14, and then to June 8. Thousands of migrant workers in cities were rendered out of work with no salaries and with rent to pay despite the government's instructions to the contrary. With whatever little money they had dwindling rapidly, they decided to go home to their villages. Since public transport such as trains and buses came to a standstill, the migrants were left with literally no option except to walk home.

Instead of empathizing with the plight of the migrants and facilitating their journey, the government came down heavily on them, issuing draconian instructions which said, first, migrants "who are travelling on foot within the district on highways/roads should be picked up, placed in buses and left in localities from where they started". Second, even if travelling on a bicycle or on foot, migrants "should be turned back without exception", and third, migrants walking home could even be "arrested and placed in custody".

This led to the filing of several public interest litigations (PILs) in the Supreme Court. The first two petitions challenged the inhumane treatment of stranded workers and sought assuring of payment of full wages. After four hearings, all that the Court did was to merely call upon the government to look into the materials placed on record by the petitioners, and to "take such steps as it finds fit to resolve the issues raised in the Petition".

Another petition was filed asking for migrants who wished to go home to be allowed to go rather than be forcibly held in "shelters" which could also mean "big indoor stadiums or other similar facilities (declared) as Temporary Jails", and to arrange for their safe travel by providing necessary transportation. In the first hearing on April 27 the Court asked the solicitor-general to submit "the proposed protocol, if any, for movement of migrant workers ..." and asked it to be listed "after one week".

Before the next hearing, the government issued instructions allowing the movement of migrant workers and announcing the running of "Shramik Special" trains with travellers paying 15 percent of the fare. A supplementary affidavit was filed on May 2 requesting that the migrants be allowed to travel free because most of them had already run out of money.

In the next hearing on May 5, the solicitor-general again assured the Court that the government was "taking all necessary steps for the movement of migrant workers who are stranded". On the charging of 15 percent of the fare, the Court ruled "it is not for this Court to issue any order under Article 32 regarding the same".

In conclusion, the Court said, "Taking note of the statement made by Shri Tushar Mehta, learned

the roads in an attempt to reach his/her home towns/villages," and, second, "we are satisfied with the steps taken by the Union of India for preventing the spread of Corona Virus [COVID-19] at this stage".

The significance of the first statement was that thousands of persons "walking on the roads in an attempt to reach his/her home towns/villages" could be seen on TV. The second was acceptance of the bare and unsubstantiated word of the legal representative of the Union of India, not even on affidavit, and to show satisfaction "with the steps taken" by the government by completely ignoring the suffering of thousands of migrants.

This totally uncritical acceptance of a statement which was not true and expressing satisfaction on that basis, is what baffled observers. It has been

Photo: Civil Society/Shrey Gupta



termed acquiescence to the Executive by some commentators. Others have attempted to justify it by saying that dealing with the coronavirus is akin to being at war and therefore the government needs a free hand. However, a 1942 judgment from the UK says:

"The fact that the nation is at war is no justification for any relaxation of the vigilance of the courts in seeing that the law is duly observed, especially in a matter so fundamental as the liberty of the subject — rather the contrary."

On acquiescence to the Executive, another British judge observed in 1931 that "judges should not shrink from deciding such issues in the face of the executive".

Solicitor-General and for the reasons as above the writ petition is closed."

Meanwhile, PILs had also been filed in several High Courts, and many of them took a far more sympathetic view of the plight of migrant workers.

On May 26, 21 senior lawyers wrote to the Supreme Court, urging it to "actively (fulfil) its constitutional obligation of being the guarantor of the fundamental rights of citizens against State action".

Taking everyone by surprise, the Supreme Court took *suo motu* cognizance of the migrants' situation on May 26, ruling, "Adequate transport arrangement, food and shelters are immediately to be provided by the Centre and State Governments free of costs."

What caused the court to order of its own volition on May 26 what it had specifically refused to do on May 5 on a PIL, is a mystery.

Two significant developments took place in the Supreme Court on March 31. One, "The Solicitor-General of India made a statement on instructions that at 11 am today, there is no person walking on

Three possible reasons for the change of heart by the Supreme Court are: (a) a clearly humanitarian stance taken by various High Courts, (b) trenchant criticism and (c) public-spirited individuals who persisted in filing petition after petition despite repeated rejection. There are possibly many more known only to the judges.

The lesson is that in a democracy nothing works on its own, notwithstanding constitutional obligations. As Rajendra Prasad and B.R. Ambedkar said, the Constitution is a mere document — it does not work on its own, it is worked by people. This obviously applies to all organs of the State, including the Executive and the Judiciary.

In the ultimate analysis, the buck stops with "We, the People", and it is for the citizens to ensure that even the constitutional authorities do what they are expected to, and not go by their whims and fancies. As has been said by several people since, possibly, 1790, "eternal vigilance is the price of liberty". ■

Jagdeep S. Chhokar is a former Professor, Dean, and Director in-charge of Indian Institute of Management, Ahmedabad (IIM-A), and a founder-member of the Association for Democratic Reforms (ADR). Views are personal.

New beginnings for NGOs



VILLAGE VOICES

R. BALASUBRAMANIAM

THE unprecedented crisis surrounding the coronavirus pandemic has touched the lives of millions of people and organizations in different ways. Whether it is the MSME owner or the migrant labourer, each has his own share of woes to worry about. People are coping with the crisis in different ways and some are likely to be overwhelmed and get further marginalized socially and economically. While the public systems have responded as well as they could, we have seen the private sector grapple with the crisis in its own way. The Government of India has responded to the post-COVID scenario by announcing a substantial stimulus package for different sectors of the economy, including direct social interventions for several millions of citizens. What is conspicuously missing is a helping hand to civil society organizations, many of whom are left to fend for themselves and are on the brink of closure.

Thirty-six years ago, when I founded the Swami Vivekananda Youth Movement (SVYM), the primary driver for my colleagues and me was the need to respond to rural India's healthcare demands.

Driven by our understanding of the several requirements of the communities we served, SVYM evolved into a development organization focusing on building the human and social capital of people. The support we received — whether it was from the government (both state and central), philanthropists, socially conscious corporates and multinational agencies — helped in ensuring we could continue to do what we passionately believed in.

The past decade saw a shift in the ecosystem and there was a perceptual but confusing pattern emerging. While the CSR Act formalized the support of the corporates, the repeated and regular shift in the laws related to NGOs brought several constraints on how one operated. Whether it is the income tax laws or GST (or its earlier avatar, service tax), amendments to the FCRA and the RTI Act, the welcome inclusion of NGOs within the ambit of the Lok Pal and the decrease in financial support from the government agencies — all these forced a change in how non-profits operated. Many adapted by altering their roles to become contractors and delivering on the government's mandate of

providing citizens with goods and services while several preferred to close down. A few toned down their activist tendencies while many others preferred to be silent and adopted a wait and watch approach. The voice of communities and their economic preferences was another pressure point and several NGOs had to evolve, acquire newer talent and be active respondents to these demands too. The romantic view of migrating from the corporate to the social sector also brought in a newer kind of talent and professionalism with its own attendant issues. As one stepped into 2020, several NGOs had built the capacity to respond to this dynamic ecosystem — whether it was in the realm of finances or government relations; CSR partnerships or impact assessments; talent management or legal compliance. There was a perceptible shift in vocabulary and words like

our roles and relationships and ask the difficult existential questions. Should we continue to be dependent on charity and public funding for ensuring continuity of the several programmes undertaken for public good or explore alternatives that liberate NGOs from these dependencies? Can NGOs rise to the occasion and refashion the development narrative and help facilitate the movement of society towards a development paradigm that is sustainable, inclusive, fair, just and equitable in nature? Can we expand our talent pool with passionate people to move the world from a 'profit maximization' to a 'benefit optimization' approach?

NGOs have a declared purpose of responding to societal demands and for mobilizing communities to participate in the development that affects their lives. This is the moment for NGO leaders to prepare themselves and their organizations with the intellectual and emotional bandwidth to be the initiators of a change that is still in its infancy. They need to grapple with the uncertainties that go with such a situation and not lose hope or faith that they can accomplish this shift. With the government having announced the setting up of the Social Stock Exchange, the ecosystem will eventually move the NGOs in the direction of operating like and competing with the private sector for resources. They have to acquire the capability of generating funds on their own to ensure that they continue to engage in social development without looking to public or private agencies for support.

NGOs should not be silent spectators to the emergence of a new normal in a post-COVID scenario. They have to be engaged participants in shaping this new economic order that draws on the 'for public' DNA of the government, the efficiencies and profit mandate of the corporate world, and the social conviction and commitment of the NGO sector. They have to advocate and seek a seat at the table to reframe the rules of revenue generation and ensure benefit to all stakeholders. While this sounds challenging and a long-drawn process, the COVID crisis has shown that this change is desirable and that it has already begun. What is required is the will and leadership in civil society circles to not only adapt rapidly to these dynamic demands but also be part of a new 'fourth sector' that will make the world more liveable than it is today. And the first step in this direction is to move towards evolving into a Social Hybrid — an enterprise that generates its own resources without sacrificing the original social intent of why an NGO was set up in the first place. ■

Dr R. Balasubramaniam, founder of the Swami Vivekananda Youth Movement, Mysuru, is a development activist and author. www.drbbalu.com



Photo: Civil Society/Shrey Gupta

LIVING

BOOKS | ECO-TOURISM | FILM | THEATRE | AYURVEDA

Spirit of the forest

Shonajhurir Bhoot is strikingly original

SAIBAL CHATTERJEE

INCONGRUITY is woven, intricately and inextricably, into the images, sounds and experiential spectrum of *Shonajhurir Bhoot* (Ghost of the Golden Groves), an independent, strikingly original Bengali narrative feature directed by first-time filmmakers Aniket Dutta and Roshni Sen.

Over its runtime of 90-odd minutes, the film — which does not look like any other cinematic work that has emerged from India in a while — unfolds at its own contemplative pace, pulling us, with a mix of surprising sleights on one hand and the subtle art of suggestion on the other, into a luminous black and white canvas that intermittently bursts into colour towards the end. The ideas and visuals that *Shonajhurir Bhoot* is composed with are shot through with irresistibly hypnotic energy.

Shonajhurir Bhoot is shot digitally but has the feel and density of film. "We would have loved to shoot it on film, but we couldn't have afforded it," says Dutta, a Kolkata-based singer-musician-filmmaker-visual artist who feels the need to "go beyond the 'gritty' reality that many contemporary Indian films set out to do portray." "These films," he adds, "forget to go beyond the reality around us and explore what lies outside of the obvious".

The transcendent quality of *Shonajhurir Bhoot* springs from the defiantly non-conventional methods it employs to state what at first flush look like commonplace facts. But once it defines the parameters of the supposedly real world, it revels in veering away into unsettling dimensions.

An absurdist sensibility drives the experimental film, which taps into Bengal's hoary tradition of ghost stories and fantasies to dwell upon the dual bane of deforestation and displacement caused by an unthinking process of industrialization that has its roots in the mid-20th century, when the world was emerging from the destruction wreaked by World War 2 and India was only beginning to find its feet as a newly-independent nation.

"We felt a dearth of the possibility of free expression in the kind of cinema that dominates in this country," says Dutta. "Breaking away from it and evolving our own idiom was both a necessity for us and a challenge."

Shonajhurir Bhoot is set in rural Bengal of the early 1960s. The film is made up of two distinct yet mysteriously overlapping stories. One, based on a story by Dutta himself and titled 'Polymorph', is about Promotho, a surveyor who arrives in Shonajhuri to prepare a blueprint for a road to be



Promotho, a surveyor, arrives in Shonajhuri to prepare a blueprint for a road through the forest



The film taps into Bengal's hoary tradition of ghost stories and fantasies to dwell upon the bane of deforestation and displacement caused by unthinking industrialization.

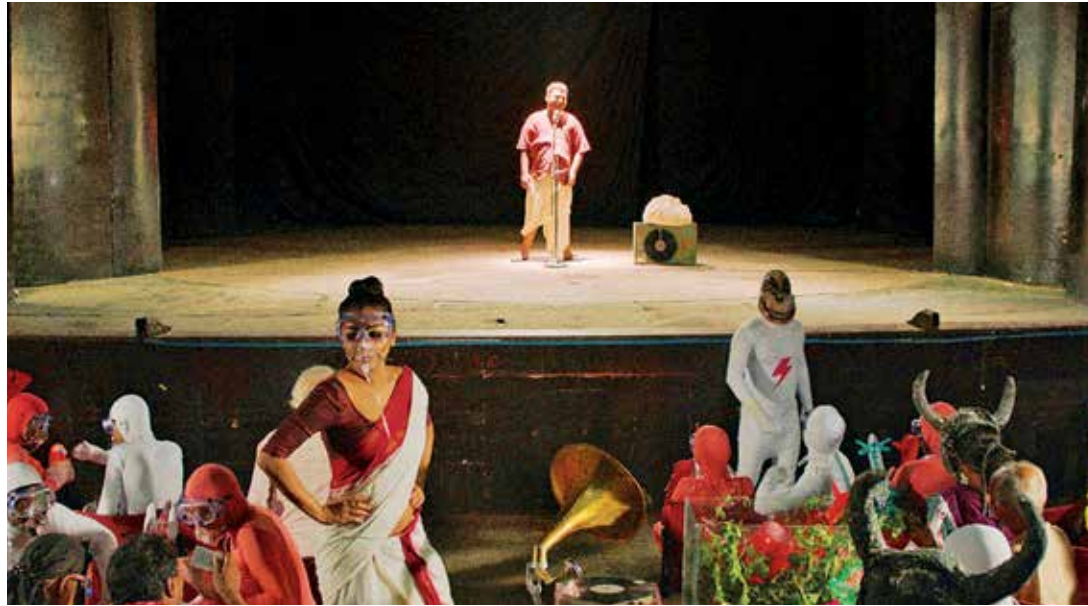
built through the forest.

Promotho reaches the place by train and then takes the only bullock-cart waiting outside the station to be transported, after a long, languorous ride, to the circuit house where a solitary careworn man does the cleaning and cooking. On the way, he sees a light flashing at him from the jungle. He asks the cart driver about the source and meaning of the 'green' light. The latter replies: What green light? Everybody sees in black and white. A little later, as he ambles around in the forest, he hears his name being called almost inaudibly; he finds a woman

wailing outside her dwelling; and runs into a *bohurupee* (polymorph), a farmer-turned-labourer who is in the process of disguising himself as a ghost for a performance at the Saturday fair.

The other story — 'Maya', adapted from a Bibhutibhusan Bandopadhyay short story — is about a genial villager, Bhupathi, who has the looks and demeanour of one who is from around here. He is at a loose end when we first see him. Accused of a theft that he may not have committed, Bhupathi has just lost a job. Luckily, he lands another one as

Continued on page 32



The film bursts into colour towards the end

caretaker of the ancestral house of an ageing man who lives in Calcutta and infrequently visits the property.

But markedly more important than the two protagonists is the forest itself, the golden groves of the title, which asserts itself as a destructive, corrective force in the case of Promotho and as a benign, accommodative, life-altering influence on Bhupathi.

The former is standoffish, rude and insolent. The latter is the exact opposite — completely self-effacing, at ease with the environs, and blessed with the sort of curiosity that allows him to foray into the unknown despite warnings. Nature, represented here by the forest, reacts in different ways to the two men.

As the divergent experiences of the two men play out, the film is littered with disconcerting, sometimes indecipherable sidelines that have little to do with the main narrative but do serve to complete the picture that the two directors are seeking to conjure up. In one scene, unnoticed by two conversing characters, a man buries himself. He digs a grave and lies down in it, a clear referencing to farmer suicides. In the next story, the protagonist comes upon a covered grave with a handwritten sign on it that reads: Beware of farmers.

“We want to go beyond just plot and character development,” says Sen, who worked on films like Anik Dutta’s *Bhooter Bhubishyot* and Aparna Sen’s *Sonata* before directing *Shonajhurir Bhoot*. “People might say that this is a case of style over substance. But style is very important for us.”

Nor is that all. *Shonajhurir Bhoot*, despite being located in a specific time zone, has resonances that stretch from World War 2 to present times to take in the plight of farmers and daily wagers struggling to find work that can sustain them and their families.

Especially intriguing is the film’s disorienting use of sound and background music. We hear contemporary pop in a story set in the interiors of Bengal of nearly 60 years ago. If that isn’t radical enough as a departure from the norm, robust funk

accompanies a scene of violence directed at a man whose intrusion disrupts the rhythm of the forest and unleashes its fury.

Also on the soundtrack are the roar of fighter jets, natural noises emanating from the insides of the jungle, children reciting a nursery rhyme about the war and, amazingly, a new-millennium Stacey Kent song featuring Jim Tomlinson on his saxophone (“So nice”), cranked out by a gramophone in a village home.

Dutta and Sen also factor into the *Shonajhurir Bhoot* screenplay a nod to the great Japanese filmmakers who have influenced the two with their

urgent, intense portrayal of the aftermath of the war, notably Hiroshi Teshigahara (*Woman in the Dunes*, *Pitfall*). Here, past, present and future intermingle seamlessly even as time appears to stand still.

The orchestrated contradictions create magical moments that are enrapturing on one level, baffling on another. Isn’t that how life — an amalgamation of shocks — is?

Shonajhurir Bhoot, as a film, represents a revolt against the reality manipulated by the media to control the minds of the masses. By jumbling up narrative elements in a way that does not make instant sense but demands complete absorption of the images in order to be grasped, partially if not fully, what Dutta and Sen achieve is an effect that separates the wheat from the chaff, the attentive film watcher from the casual one weaned on safe images conveyed through industrial cinema, television and social media.

“By using methods derived from the theatre of the absurd, we are seeking to bypass the narrative and achieve hyper-reality,” says Sen. That is precisely why *Shonajhurir Bhoot* does more than just tell two stories that raise questions. The structure of the film — a provocative pastiche of the real and the imagined, the tangible and the tantalisingly tangential — is itself a full-fledged story that possesses the power to transfix the audience in a way that is, ironically, liberating. ■

Dying to get out? Drive to palaces, a jungle, museums

SUSHEELA NAIR

FROM Bengaluru we embarked along the well-marked SH-17, the main highway to the heritage-rich city of Mysore, driving past Ramnagara, Channapatna, Maddur and Srirangapatna. Situated in the southern part of the Deccan Plateau, Mysore district is a trendy tourist destination, offering a fabulous mix of Karnataka’s major tourist attractions.

You can start your journey in the district from the historical city of Mysore, the royal city famed for its magnificent palaces and imposing heritage buildings, sprawling gardens and tree-lined boulevards, shimmering silks and sandalwood. Keeping Mysore as the base, make day trips to the neighbouring districts of Mandya and Chamarajanagar to explore tourist attractions like the Brindavan Gardens, Srirangapatna, the Ranganathittu Bird Sanctuary and other places.

As we were in a hurry to reach Kabani, our destination, we stopped by only some of the important places on the regular tourist itinerary. We started with the majestic Mysore Palace which is a treasure trove of exquisite carvings and works of art culled from all over the world. With its brass-plated domes, turrets, arches and colonnades, it is a blend of Hindu and Muslim styles of architecture. The Dolls’ Pavilion, featuring a gallery of European and Indian sculpture and ceremonial objects, the majestic Durbar Hall with ornate ceiling and sculpted pillars, and the golden elephant throne will take your breath away. The Marriage Pavilion, adorned with paintings of the Maharaja’s days, glazed tile flooring, cast-iron pillars, chandeliers and multi-coloured stained glass in the domed ceilings, is an absolute masterpiece.

From the Palace we headed to St. Philomena, a beautiful cathedral reminiscent of medieval architectural style. This imposing structure with an underground crypt, lofty twin spires and beautiful stained-glass windows depicting Biblical scenes, is equally impressive.

We then did a whirlwind tour of the Jayachamarajendra Art Gallery which has an excellent collection of exquisite pieces of metal,



The Lalit Mahal Palace in Mysore



A lone tusker in the forest near the Kabini river

ceramics, sandalwood, ivory, stone, antique furniture, ingenious indoor games and ancient musical instruments. We also admired the priceless paintings of reputed artists like Raja Ravi Varma and Nicholas and Svetoslav Roerich, as well as traditional Mysore gold leaf paintings. A series of faded black and white photos of ceremonial occasions share space with elaborately imported clocks. But the prize exhibit is a rare French musical calendar clock.

We lingered awhile at the small Rail Museum near the railway station. With its priceless locomotives, coaches, collection of paintings and photographs narrating the ‘Rail Story’, it is worth a peek. It has other interesting exhibits like the Maharani’s Saloon built in the UK of 1899 vintage coupled with a kitchen-dining car built in Mysore in 1914 and a railway clock dating back to 1889.

From there, we drove 10 km out of town to the summit of Chamundi Hill at an altitude of 3,489 ft.

The summit offers a panoramic view of Mysore’s lakes, parks and palaces. Perched atop the hill is the 12th-century temple, with its colossal pyramidal *gopuram* dedicated to Chamundeswari, the patron deity of the Wodeyars. Close to the temple is the gigantic statue of Mahishasura. Descending the hill, we saw the 16-foot monolith of the seated Nandi, Lord Shiva’s bull.

After a night halt in Mysore, the next morning we set out for Karapur village on the bank of the eponymous Kabini river, close to the Kakanakote range on the southern fringes of the Nagarhole National Park. The dense jungle here was the exclusive hunting preserve of Indian and British royalty who couldn’t resist the lure of the jungle. Now it is a haven for avid photographers.

We checked into Jungle Lodge’s Kabini River Lodge at noon. Built around the hunting bungalows of the erstwhile Maharaja of Mysore, the resort sprawls over 55 acres with a cluster of colonial

bungalows and cottages. An old-world charm still clings to these bungalows with their tiled roofs, high-gabled ceilings of polished wood and long-stemmed fans from days gone by, running verandahs where one can lounge in rattan chairs and thatched-roof dining hall overlooking the Kabini river.

We embarked on a jungle safari at 4 pm after a long siesta. As the jeep purred out of the lodge clearing, we drove past tall trees, swaying bamboos and grassy expanses. The forest was teeming with wildlife. We sighted Malabar squirrels flitting about, langurs prancing on branches of trees, wild boars vanishing into the undergrowth, spotted deer

Keep Mysore as the base to make day trips to Mandya and Chamarajanagar districts and to explore attractions like the Brindavan Gardens, the Ranganathittu Bird Sanctuary and more.

scurrying away at our approach, gaur disappearing into the bushes and herds of elephants ambling majestically. But the big cat eluded us. The forest is also an ideal habitat for avian life, with over 250 species including the racquet-tailed drongo, golden-backed woodpecker, the Indian roller and peacocks and kingfishers.

The evening saw us heading towards Mastigudi which is known for its incredible sunset. From the bamboo-rich fringes we sighted hundreds of Asiatic elephants congregating on the banks of the river to quench their thirst. We spotted some birds resting on stumps of deadwood rising from the lake. Many birds — cormorants, egrets, kingfishers — kept us company.

This place was once famous for its ‘*khedda* operations’, to entertain British viceroys and royalty. The driving of the wild elephants along the Kabini river into the *khedda* enclosure was said to be a fascinating spectacle. This is now only a memory — the sport was stopped in the 1960s. At nightfall, dinner awaited us in the lodge. As we helped ourselves to hearty portions of food in the warmth of the Gol Ghar, the dozing jungle was coming to life not far from us. ■

FACT FILE

Precautions taken: Sanitized vehicle, transparent partition separating driver and passengers, hand sanitizer, wet wipes, etc, provided. Thermal screening done.

Distance: Bengaluru to Mysore – 150 km/3 hrs, 30 mins. Mysore to Kabini – 80 km/2 hrs.

Where to stay: Evolve Back/Kabini River Lodge/Serai
For bookings contact: Arjun Tours & Travels (9901909419).



**AYURVEDA
ADVISORY**
Dr SRIKANTH

That sore throat

YOU can catch a sore throat by getting drenched in the rain or enjoying a cup of your favourite ice-cream or eating a bowl of cold curd taken out from your refrigerator. Any of these activities may give rise to an itchy throat the next day in some susceptible individuals.

The symptoms of a sore throat are an itchy feeling, pain, tenderness, hoarseness and dryness in your throat.

CAUSES

Excessively dry climate: A dry climate tends to remove moisture from the nasal and oral cavity causing dryness — which consequently causes itching or a scratchy feeling, a common occurrence during the winter months.

Colder temperatures make us more susceptible to soreness, which makes activities like swallowing difficult and leads to overall discomfort.

Pollution: Cigarette/tobacco smoke, dust, chemicals and other toxins in the environment may cause throat irritation.

Allergy: Exposure to allergens like pollen and pet dander may cause throat irritation

Infections: Local viral/bacterial infections are another reason for an irritated throat.

Continuous speaking: Talking loudly or non-stop singing may strain the vocal cords and can be a cause of sore throat in some susceptible individuals.

Occasionally, throat irritation may be caused by acid reflux from the stomach.

A sore throat may also be due to inflammation of different parts of the throat — the pharynx (pharyngitis), voice box/larynx (laryngitis) or tonsils (tonsillitis) and must be addressed accordingly.

HOME REMEDIES

Gargling with any of the therapies listed below will provide relief from a sore throat:

Pharyngitis: Lukewarm saline water with a pinch of turmeric powder. Soak two teaspoons of ajwain seeds in cold water. Add a pinch of common salt.

Boil two tablespoons of fenugreek seeds in a litre of water for about eight minutes. Strain this mixture and gargle with it several times a day.

Laryngitis: Decoction of tea leaves with a pinch of table salt can be used for gargling — twice or thrice a day to get rid of a sore throat.

One tablespoon of Triphala powder should be boiled in about 300 ml of water for about five minutes — the filtered extract can be used to gargle for quick relief from a sore throat.

Tonsillitis: Boil one-inch-long crushed fresh ginger in 250 ml water for about five minutes. Filter and add one teaspoon of honey. Use this decoction for gargling.

Boil about three teaspoons of coarse powder of dried neem leaves in 200 ml water for five minutes.

Boil a teaspoon of coarsely powdered cinnamon bark in about 200 ml of water. Strain the extract and add a pinch of black pepper powder and a teaspoonful of honey. Consuming 25-30 ml of this decoction (lukewarm) every three hours during the day cures a sore throat.

One teaspoon of juice extracted from fresh betel (paan) leaves mixed with equal amount of

honey, if consumed twice or thrice a day, will relieve a sore throat.

One teaspoon of juice extracted from fresh basil (tulsi) leaves mixed with an equal amount of honey and a pinch of black pepper powder consumed twice a day is helpful in treating a sore throat.

Regular plain steam inhalation three to four times a day will help relieve symptoms of a sore throat.

Liquorice is a well-known remedy for a sore throat. Chew a small piece of liquorice root (mulethi). Keep chewing till it gives a soothing effect to the sore throat.

Similarly, a small piece of cinnamon/dried ginger can be chewed and sucked; or a couple of dried black peppercorns/clove buds will have the same effect.

MEDICINES

Khadiradi vati / Lavangadi vati / Eladi vati / Vyoshadi vati / Srikara amodini pills — one pill, 5-6 times a day.

Koflet-H / Koflet-SF lozenges (Himalaya) — 4-5 times daily.

Septilin tab: 2-0-2 and **Bresol syrup** 2-0-2 teaspoons.

Talisadi churna / Sitopaladi churna: Three-fourths to one teaspoonful of churna should be mixed with a half-teaspoonful of cow's ghee and one teaspoonful of honey.

Haridra khanda: One teaspoonful with 150 ml of cow's milk — twice daily.

Chyavanaprasha, Agastya rasayana: One teaspoonful, twice daily.

Drakshasava / Vasarishta: 20 ml with equal quantity of water, twice daily after meals. ■

Dr Srikanth is a postgraduate in Ayurveda and has been a consulting physician for the past 19 years. He is currently, National Manager, Scientific Services, at The Himalaya Drug Company

PRODUCTS

Cool masks

FACE masks are your armour against the deadly coronavirus. Buy a few from the Gulmeher Green Producer Company, a women's collective. A range of masks, inexpensively priced, are on offer. Made of cool cotton and cotton blends, the masks cover your face and combine comfort with convenience. Wash, dry in the sun and reuse.

The masks are double-layered and triple-layered and come in two designs. The first style is similar to a surgical mask with pleats and the second has a contoured shape, giving greater coverage to your face. The loops are made of either elastic or cotton. You can choose a mask with a filter pocket or one without it. Take your pick from a myriad of colours and patterns: green, blue, checks, printed or plain white.

A single mask costs just ₹20 and the priciest one ₹60. There are also family packs for ₹180 which have two masks for adults and two for children.

Since 2013, Gulmeher has been providing alternative livelihoods to women who worked as waste pickers by training them in embroidery and upcycling waste products. During the lockdown, 18 to 20 women have been making these masks in their Ghazipur workshop, earning a modest income. ■



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