

SPECIAL INTERVIEW ISSUE

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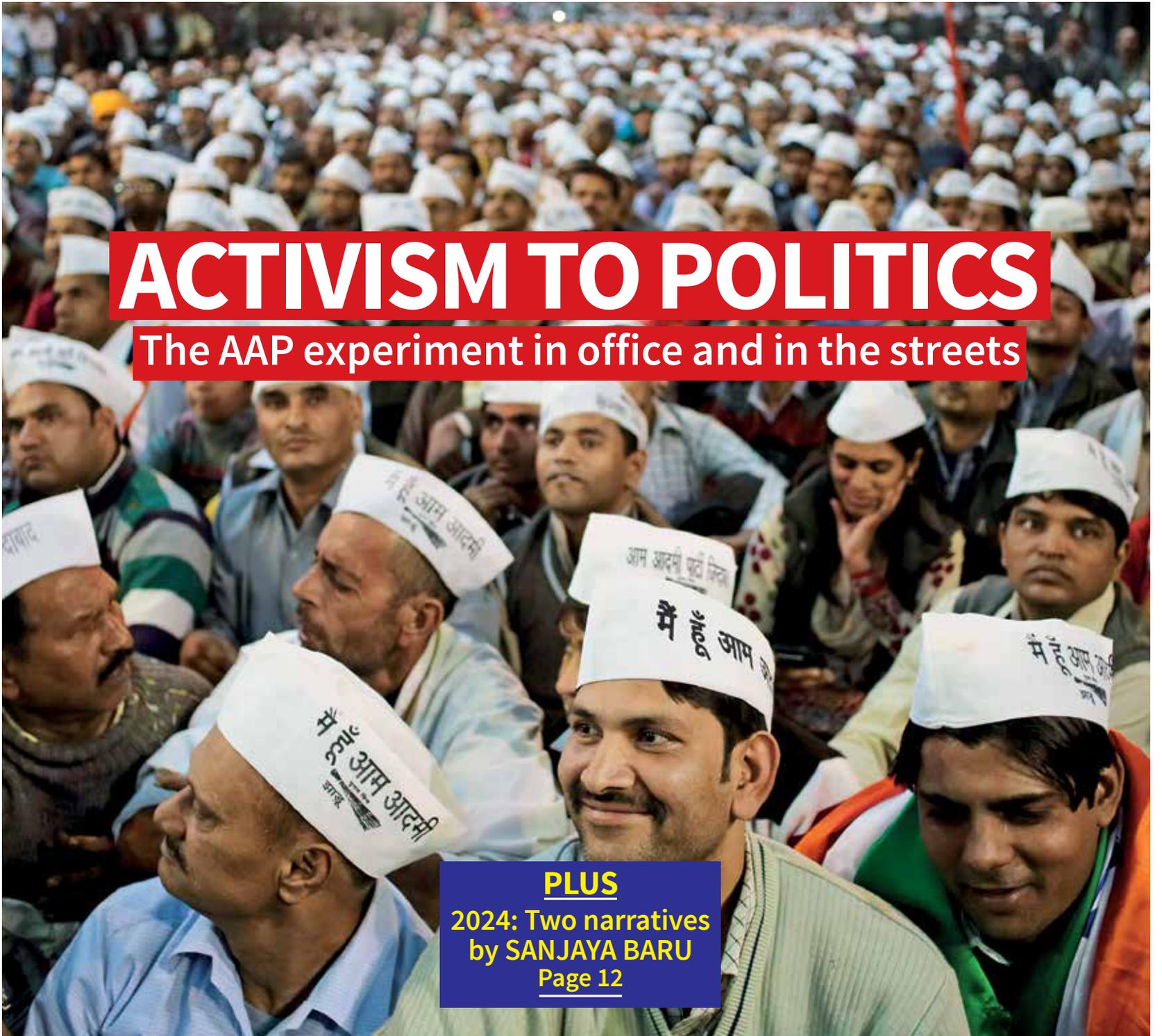
Civil Society

ACTIVISM TO POLITICS

The AAP experiment in office and in the streets

PLUS

2024: Two narratives
by SANJAYA BARU
Page 12



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In search of new politics

THE more politicians talk of change, the more similar they seem to become. Politics is in a rut. But a new orientation is needed if India is to be a modern and competitive country. It is not every day that new parties are launched and manage to acquire power. The Aam Aadmi Party has been an important initiative. It was fashioned by activists and raised hopes that it would cleanse politics and in an inclusive way meet the needs of the less privileged. AAP's coming to power in Delhi was unexpected. So also its gains elsewhere, particularly its victory in Punjab.

The crossover from activism to politics is, however, fraught with challenges. Even if there are early gains, the glass ceiling that the political system imposes on new entrants is not easily broken. Entrenched interests come in the way. The system is also designed by and for the established parties. They don't want disruption. Similarly, the corporate sector feels far safer with the status quo. It wants continuity and perhaps understandably so. But no reform of the system will be possible without big business' involvement.

Our cover story looks at these concerns in the context of AAP's sad decimation. The young party is not without its shortcomings, but its demise, if it were to happen, would be a setback to reform in the country as a whole.

How should new politics and with it a better development paradigm be ushered in? Political parties obviously need to attract new talent. Young and educated entrants with professional degrees make a difference whether it is as party workers or elected representatives. The quality of political life will improve when there is a level playing field, particularly in equal access to funds. Right now, the system is skewed such that new entrants either exit or are forced to compromise. This is the best description of AAP's woes.

Robust social activism is also needed to bring in change. Activists, without getting into politics, have the capacity to drive new ideas across the spectrum of interests in the economy and political system. We have seen this with the passing of many important laws in the past two decades. There is an opportunity in the courts where activist organizations like the Association for Democratic Reforms can doughtily fight on and ensure transparency and accountability in public life. It is not easy but, as we can see, it has been done.

In this special issue we also bring you a collection of interviews which have retained their value over time. As journalists we speak to people all the time. Our best stories come from people.



COVER STORY

ACTIVISM TO POLITICS

Social activists have to work with politicians to bring change in society. But what does it take for them to cross over into politics and seek power? What is the learning from AAP's experience?

8

Cover photograph by Lakshman Anand for *Civil Society*

Q&A

HEAR THE PEOPLE WE TALK TO IN A RARE ARCHIVE OF VOICES

LISTENING POST

Interviews that go beyond the news on the issues of our times

Jagdeep Chhokar | Anil Swarup
M.S. Swaminathan | Devinder Sharma | Soumya Swaminathan
Kabir Vajpeyi | Dileep Ranjekar
Ajay Mathur | Ritwick Dutta
Ravi Chopra | Ankit Srivastava
Abhijit Prabhudessai
Ravi Chellam | Amitabh Kant
Zakia Soman | Dr Vijay Anand
Ismavel | Dr Taru Jindal
R. Balasubramaniam
A.V. Balasubramanian

13-51

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52

PRODUCTS

54

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IN THE LIGHT

SAMITA RATHOR



LETTERS



Water woes

Your cover story, 'Dry run in Bengaluru', put the spotlight on India's urban mess. All our cities, including the much-hyped Millennium City of Gurugram, have failed to tackle basic issues like water, trash, flooding and sewage. Bengaluru, of course, invited this disaster on itself. The dismal state of its water bodies has been raised by many organizations over decades. But who listens?

Ananda

Such a big city and such mundane problems. I was surprised to read about the way groundwater is being handled in Bengaluru. I had expected better. We need to stop taking such issues so lightly. The city's tall buildings and IT hubs will be of no use if we run out of water completely.

Joshita

I hope not just Bengaluru but all other cities listen to people like S. Vishwanath so that we can take

much more informed decisions on a precious resource like water.

Shivendra Mohan

I found it disturbing to read that we have only 210 lakes left and just 186 actually contain water. I had no idea that our lakes were in such a grave state. Worse, S. Vishwanath points out that we are doing absolutely nothing about it. This needs to change if we want to lead longer and healthier lives within our existing ecosystem. There should be strict action against encroachment of lakes and dumping of construction debris in and around them.

Karthik M.

Metro smiles

Subir Roy writes in his piece on the newly inaugurated Kolkata Metro: "In one sense, the Howrah Maidan-Esplanade service is a symbol of a once great city, after a decline, having a rebirth." As someone who has lived in Kolkata, and away from it, for several years, I could really relate to this observation.

Sangeeta Dixit

The first Metro in India to go underwater! I had no idea of this development until I read this. It made me think of how many firsts we have had here in our country. There are lots of people who will rip the new Metro line to shreds, saying there is nothing to stay back in Kolkata for. But when one

looks around, it suddenly becomes clear as day that this country is special. We have passionate citizens ready to enjoy every development. We have meticulous planners and organizers who make it happen. We have engineers and architects and support staff. Each one is doing their bit to make India the buzzing, colourful, chaotic and beautiful entity that it is.

Lalit Mediratta

I loved how the staff presented commuters with roses. Such a sweet gesture, bringing smiles to their faces and ours. Kolkata will always be the city with the deepest soul. The next time I visit my favourite city, I will definitely travel under the Hooghly in the Metro.

Manisha Kandpal

Robots and humans

As Kiran Karnik points out in his article, 'Innovation is the buzzword', humans are creating futuristic technology but what if it's too much? What if there is gross misuse? There is, as he writes, the threat of false identity and other types of vicious misuse. While innovation is important, we must as a society be conscious of the hold tech gadgets and mechanized devices have on us and the repercussions that will arise as a result.

Mিনny Singh

Where are we headed? Robots making food, drones bringing our groceries. AI will make all of humankind redundant in no time if the current trends carry on.

Atin Mittal

River rights

As Venkatesh Dutta writes, rivers are at the heart of a healthy environment in every country. We have constantly overlooked this so we are paying the price now. More urgent action is needed. I am appalled at the way in which the majority of our citizens take this matter so lightly. They brush it under the carpet. Cruises, transport, ecology, water will be completely obliterated if ecological restoration to undo the damage is not done immediately.

Mayura Sharma

What good is a long cruise if there is no water left in the river? Encroaching on river banks, depositing garbage, pollution and overall apathy have caused havoc to our rivers and environment. A national restoration plan is needed.

Kavya Saluja

Women power

Sumita Ghose's piece, 'Growing the rural start-up', was well articulated. She has been able to capture all the relevant issues faced by rural entrepreneurs. The example of the comradeship of rural women in providing a seed loan to the poorest woman in their group was really heart-warming.

Sumana Chakraverty Datta

This is a succinct summary of what must have been a long, hard journey with several ups and downs. A very modest telling of a heroic tale. The story of Rangсутra has the potential to become a bestseller book.

Sehjo Singh

Rangсутra is a noble enterprise. I believe more such endeavours in India for rural women will help them achieve independence and stability.

Nitya Seth

The words rural and start-up are juxtaposed because one hints at a village set-up and the other is linked to modern, fast-paced cities. Seeing the two words together as ideas and as the very

fabric of enterprises like Rangсутra really changed my perspective. Very impressive work.

Kanish Menon

I would like to add here the strength, commitment and leadership that Sumita Ghose has provided, her perseverance, and dogged focus on achieving a shared vision, despite all the barriers in her way. She works with wonderful groups of artisans, shareholders, and support teams. I would like to wish her the best for the future.

Mayeen Pereira

Bespoke Ayurveda

I used to have many misconceptions about Ayurveda. But I found Jyoti Pande Lavakare's article, 'When a Vaidya comes home', very informative and a most interesting read.

Tanvi Arora

It was so intriguing to read this article. I learnt a lot from it and I will surely plan a visit to Vaidyagrama soon. Thank you for inspiring me to choose Ayurveda. From all that I have heard from friends, the experience has a joy of its own.

Dhruv Tiwari

Ayurveda has helped many members of my extended family tackle illness and it has also promoted genuine well-being. It was good to read Lavakare's piece and her well-rounded perspective free of bias. I wasn't surprised at some of the stereotypical responses that came from her neighbours.

Sunaina Khaitan

South cinema

Saibal Chatterjee's informed, succinct and creative analysis, 'Kannada's new films go places', was a pleasure to read. Personally, I agree that bleak commercial prospects for unconventional films does not mean this is not a battle worth fighting.

Janvi Hegde

Reading about the increasing number of self-taught filmmakers made me ponder my passion for the craft. Every part of our country has so much talent. Always a pleasure to know more about them all.

Kavitha Subramaniam

Making films about people, ideas, notions and lives that truly matter is what cinema is about, in my opinion. And that is just what these new filmmakers in Kannada cinema are doing with such finesse.

Jaya Banerjee

Champa Shetty's work makes me proud. We need more women in the filmmaking sector. Kudos to women like her. *Koli Esru's* visuals are absolutely heart-rendering.

Sarita Raheja

Love travel

Susheela Nair's article on Khajuraho, 'Love and life in the temple city', used vivid pictures and imagery. The description of temples, stories and lively dance painted an overwhelming picture. I hope I get to visit the place one day.

Shobhit Moyal

Really enjoyed reading this travel piece. I think Khajuraho is one of India's lesser-known gems. It also made me realize how little I know about it, especially the fact that it is a UNESCO World Heritage Site.

Radhika Krishnamurty

All the finer aspects of the temple complex were brought out in a clear and attractive manner. Enjoyed the entire piece.

Parvathi Das

I found this piece well written and researched.

Asha Nambisan

One of my parents is originally from Madhya Pradesh but I have never lived in the state so this was even more special to read. I am keen to revisit my roots.

Shivani Chaturvedi

Such a wonderful read, I especially enjoyed Nair's descriptions of Khajuraho's beautiful temple architecture. It transported me right to the place.

Shivam Mehta

This made me lock in on Khajuraho as my next travel destination. I'd love to see the carvings up close. Reading this taught me many new things about the heritage site.

Shubham Goel

Tiger tales

Even though I've been to Corbett twice, I never knew the extent of its diversity. I'd love to travel with this guidebook when I go next.

Thanks to Sukanya Sharma's review on the ecosystem of the tiger in Corbett, I found out that it's possible to spot otters there. I couldn't be more excited about it! Love the diversity in our wildlife sanctuaries. Only hope we don't destroy the habitat of these incredible creatures and cause more damage than has already been done.

Mohit Tiwari

Anniversary issue

The article on Primary Health Centres and the need for a better work culture, by Dr Pavitra Mohan and Dr Sanjana Mohan, was inspiring for many young and experienced doctors to serve the people who need it the most.

Dr Anurag Goyal

A wide gamut of subjects was covered, both contemporary and recent history, over the past two decades in your special issue. The human interest stories *Civil*

Society publishes tell us about ordinary people doing extraordinary things.

Naintara Bose

Your anniversary issue was truly impressive and interesting to read. It was a fascinating spread and it contained content that was relevant for contemporary India.

Medha Jaishankar

What I liked about this special issue was how it portrayed India in transition over the past two decades as well as the magazine's 20-year journey of original and honest journalism. Rare to see these days.

Rachna Jain

As an artist I was greatly impressed by the Artability section. It was a visual delight. It is heartening to see you promote art by people with disabilities.

Chandana Mathur

I found the visuals particularly impressive in your anniversary issue, especially those in your cover story. The article that resonated with me the most was 'People's movements have been losing their voice' by Aruna Roy. In the current scenario, where there is hardly any semblance of participatory democracy, articles like these are of immense value. I have always been inspired by Aruna Roy. Another aspect of this voluminous issue that caught my eye was the gifting guide. It is such a lovely idea to give smaller and lesser known producers a chance rather than the big brands that get the limelight anyway!

Shalini Dixit

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Thousands turned up at the INDIA alliance rally organized by AAP to protest against Chief Minister Arvind Kejriwal's arrest on the eve of the Lok Sabha elections

ACTIVISM TO POLITICS

The AAP experiment in office and in the streets

By Umesh Anand

IT was a chilly January morning in 2014. People were converging on the secretariat in Delhi, the seat of power of the state government that runs the capital city and its peripheries. A Janata Darbar, or public assembly, had been scheduled. Citizens would get to meet ministers and elected representatives of the Aam Aadmi Party, which had just days earlier had its first taste of electoral success.

From being activists in the streets, the AAP leadership had been catapulted into office. They wanted participatory governance to be their hallmark and the Janata Darbar was meant to show that they were up for an open and responsive administration. Citizens could meet their leaders with complaints and suggestions and be assured of a hearing, if not solutions.

People arrived at the Janata Darbar in droves from far and wide, Delhi being a city of 20 million with a large and varied urban footprint. From the very poor to the middle-class, they were all there. They brought with them a

deluge of concerns ranging from a missing child to inflated electricity bills, water shortages and bad roads.

Despite the best of intentions to make it productive and useful, the Janata Darbar quickly descended into chaos. Arvind Kejriwal, then chief minister for the first time, was in the midst of the action, commendably meeting people and looking at files. But it soon became apparent that the Janata Darbar was going nowhere.

As the pressures mounted, Kejriwal suddenly withdrew from the open area where people were milling and went inside the secretariat. He emerged only much later to address the crowd from atop the building and assure them of follow-up action.

It has been a decade since that adventurous Janata Darbar. Over these years, AAP has become seasoned in office. Its activist ambitions have been tempered by the realities of governance. Remaining in power has become a priority as it must for people in politics. How good is that is the question.

A case of corruption in issuing liquor

licences has landed both Chief Minister Arvind Kejriwal and his trusted deputy, Manish Sisodia, in jail. AAP's image as a party with a difference has been dented.

A day of reckoning confronts AAP's leaders unlike anything they could have imagined. The liquor licences are the focus of attention. But there are additional problems brought on by an unfriendly and powerful Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) regime at the Centre.

Despite big electoral victories and a decade in office, the AAP-run state government in Delhi has been rendered dysfunctional. Kejriwal's arrest on the eve of elections, though the liquor licensing case is two years old, is also seen as vendetta by the BJP.

PARTY OF ACTIVISTS

In politics, there is always the rough and tumble to contend with. But there is much more attached to the rise or decline of AAP. It is a party of social activists who have made the crossover to politics. They have come to power by raising the issues of inclusive development and transparency.

The question now being asked of AAP is whether it has done enough to live up to its promise of ushering in new politics or whether it has betrayed the goodwill it received and become just like any other party.

In Delhi, AAP has a clear record of improving government schools and hospitals, taking very basic healthcare to neighbourhoods by way of Mohalla Clinics, putting electric buses on the road, reviving water bodies. The AAP government is credited with reducing local-level corruption and the use of speed money. Its giving of free water and electricity can be criticized as populism instead of genuine development. But the fact is that it has had three terms in office in Delhi with many of its MLAs getting repeatedly elected.

On liquor shop licences, the allegation is that there have been kickbacks. But it is complicated and contradictions abound. Though they face charges, no one would accuse Kejriwal or Sisodia of personal corruption. There has been no trace of the money that is alleged to have changed hands.

For the longest time NGOs and activists have flirted with politics. Some have stood for election themselves with dismal results. Others have tried to put up their own candidates. Under Sonia Gandhi's National Advisory Council (NAC), they had their say. The RTI, MGNREGA, disabilities, forest rights, food security and street vending laws were ushered in.

But it is only AAP that has made the big leap directly into politics, getting elected three times in Delhi. It is also in power in Punjab. There are votes to its name in Gujarat, Madhya Pradesh, Goa and elsewhere.

Further proof of AAP's success in politics is seen in larger parties in opposition seeking to ally with it. Efforts by the BJP to script AAP's premature demise also indicate its growing political footprint. Why else would efforts be made to put the party down?

FRESH TALENT

AAP came out of an anti-corruption movement which questioned telecom licences and Commonwealth Games contracts. It captured the imagination of people with its message that stopping corruption would lead to better development and quality of life.

It brought new faces into politics — middle-class talent which had earlier shied away from political involvements, considering them to be messy and difficult to handle. Since the beginning, several AAP members have come

and gone as might happen in any organization. Three of the AAP co-founders were shown the door by supporters of Kejriwal and Sisodia in a messy episode in the early days.

But AAP's hallmark was and remains the talented, well-educated and public-spirited people it attracts in leadership roles. The clean faces that represent it have much to do with the image that it enjoys.

Added is the fact that Kejriwal and Sisodia have been known to live and conduct

the ruling BJP's efforts to finish the party, AAP has a reservoir of goodwill that will take some time to deplete. Only a vote will finally tell how much support AAP has after the current allegations against it. But the party's capacity to enthuse people even in the absence of its top leaders was on full display at an opposition rally in Delhi. Thousands of people filled the Ram Lila Ground and seemed to have showed up willingly. It proved AAP's connect with its voters in Delhi.

Civil Society picture/Sandeepta Veeramachaneni



Arvind Kejriwal at the Janata Darbar in 2014 wearing his trademark muffer of that time

Civil Society picture/Lakshman Anand



Arvind Kejriwal and Anna Hazare at Jantar Mantar

themselves simply despite the positions of power they have held. Kejriwal gave up a career as an income tax officer and has an engineering degree from the Indian Institute of Technology. Sisodia came with a media background.

When it was launched the party stood out with its opposition to the VIP culture in Delhi such as the use of red lights on cars and flaunting of privileges. It was this that provided an immediate connect with voters fed up with the high and mighty ways of India's politicians. It remains at the heart of the party's identity. After the first election success, the slogan at the victory rally was: "Desh ka neta kaisa ho. Aam aadmi jaisa ho. (A leader should be like an ordinary man.)"

Despite the imprisoning of its leaders and

they were bringing out so as to reach their message to people all over. It seemed they were indefatigable.

They were, however, not without support from more seasoned campaigners like Aruna Roy, Nikhil Dey, Shankar, Jean Dreze, Shekhar Singh and others. At its height the anti-corruption movement projected Anna Hazare. So effective was this that middle-class people would come to protests with their children, saying they had come to see a second Mahatma Gandhi! Such was the mood in those days that Hazare acquired that kind of aura.

Seen in this way, the foundational blocks of AAP have been fashioned over 20 years. Embedded in its DNA are the social concerns that were highlighted through multiple

agitations. As a party, however, it is new in an organizational sense. It also shoulders the burden of an adverse equation with the established parties.

Elections cost money, for instance. Getting one's message across is also challenging because of the Indian media's obsession with size and its eagerness to protect the interests of the establishment. There is no level playing field and the big parties have an unfair advantage. If today AAP is visible, it has had to fight for every inch of space it gets.

It is to AAP's credit that it has survived and persisted with its efforts. AAP has managed, despite ups and downs, to retain its identity, if not the old aura, as a party with a difference — an alternative to the established parties. Now, with its teaming up with the Congress, perhaps that will change even if it is for their shared goal of reining in the runaway dominance of Narendra Modi.

START-UP CULTURE

The avowed purpose of AAP has been to cleanse politics and improve public life. To achieve that it has had to cause disruption but also play the game as it is played. It is interesting how much support it has received from ordinary folks who have been donors to its cause. AAP has a natural constituency of people who want to set the system right.

We meet Somnath Bharti in his lawyer's office up two flights of stairs in a tacky building just off Malviya Nagar Market in South Delhi.

Bharti is a first-time politician who has won the Malviya Nagar Assembly constituency three times as an AAP candidate. His voters love him because he is always at hand to help them with matters big and small. He is articulate and friendly and has none of the repulsive trappings that many politicians tend to flaunt. He will be contesting the New Delhi Lok Sabha seat in the coming parliamentary elections.

It is a much bigger constituency than the Assembly seat he represents, but Bharti has built a reputation for himself. He will be drawing on an enormous reservoir of goodwill.

Asked why he didn't join an established party instead of going with AAP, Bharti says there would have been no space for him. AAP gave him the opportunity he wouldn't have otherwise got. There was also the heady experience of being part of a unique effort to bring change in the country.

"In the bigger parties it is difficult to come up. You won't get a ticket. There are several interests involved. Being educated and honest and driven by higher values aren't the best qualifications in those parties," says Bharti.

He concedes it is a huge challenge to raise funds to fight elections if one is not involved with wheeling and dealing. Bharti finds his way around it by raising small donations. In



Kejriwal and Sisodia acknowledge supporters after their first electoral victory



Saurabh Bhardwaj, a software engineer who joined AAP and became an MLA

this way donors don't have expectations because small amounts get written off. There are well-wishers who print his posters as a contribution or provide him transport. Others will volunteer to campaign and be in position at booths. Bharti's strength is the bond he has with his constituents.

"I am for state-funded elections," says Bharti. "The BJP has hundreds of crores of rupees to spend on social media and AAP has a paltry budget. There should be equal access to resources. A level playing field is needed."

COMPULSION OR CHOICE?

Bharti is perhaps a good example of how to beat the system while being part of it. But his is just one seat. As the national ambitions of AAP have grown, the curve has gotten steeper. The need for resources has multiplied while trying to make its presence felt across states.

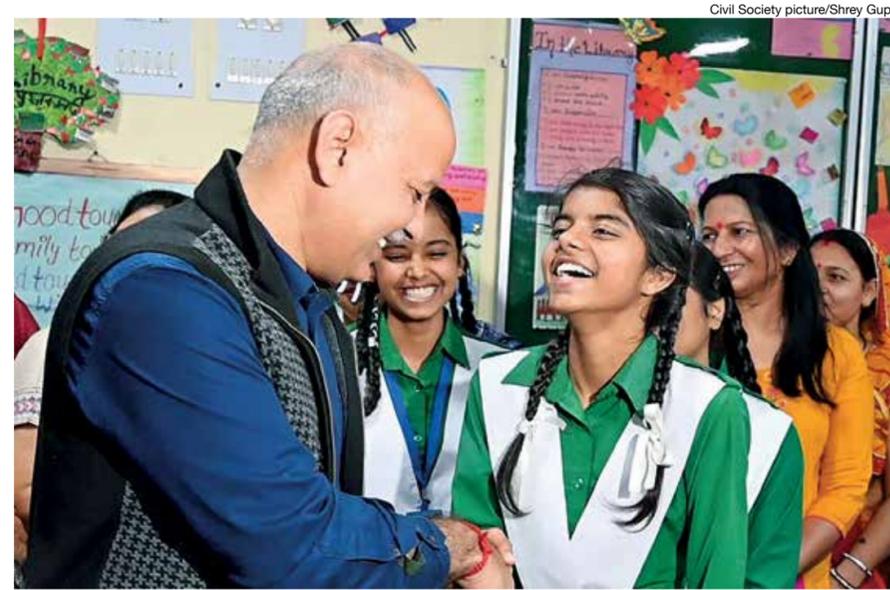
How does a fledgling party manage to survive in such adverse circumstances?

Prof. Jagdeep Chhokar of the Association for Democratic Reforms says compulsions of a bad system cannot be an excuse for doing things like other people do.

"I would not agree to the word compulsions. These are choices people make. Nobody forces anybody to get into politics, and once in politics nobody forces anybody to do things that people do. I very strongly disagree. I think these are choices people make," says Chhokar.

Dr Jayaprakash Narayan set up Jansatta in Hyderabad in 2006 because he believed politics could be reformed. Politicians needed help to be honest and genuinely serve people. It was important to engage with politicians, trust them and give politics a better standing in the public eye.

Jansatta has been consistently funded



Sisodia at a refurbished government school with happy children



Somnath Bharti, a lawyer by profession and AAP star, successfully represents Malviya Nagar in the Delhi Assembly

through donations. While it initially evoked public interest, it has steadily languished over the years. Its mission of improving politics is far from met.

"A level playing field is needed," says Narayan. "The answer is in state funding of elections and transparent support from donors. There is enough money in the country. to fund good parties."

EFFECTIVE FROM OUTSIDE

Getting into politics is fraught with problems, fundraising being just one of them. On the other hand, NGOs and social activists with political beliefs, but no direct engagement as politicians, are also effective.

Chhokar recalls meeting Aruna Roy in his office at IIM Ahmedabad in 2000 and saying to her: "Look, politics is a very dirty game and I have nothing to do with politics. And she

competitive politics and being a political activist. But there is no difference between being a social reformer and a political activist because politics is part of social activity.

He says it is "theoretically possible" to reform the system from within. The challenge comes in making those choices that don't perpetuate the system.

"Today, Indian politics is such that anyone who has entered politics, competitive electoral politics, gets swept away. Once you are in the fish bowl you have to rely on the same feed that everyone else uses," he says.

ADR is an example of a voluntary organization bringing change to politics without being in politics itself. It has successfully fought its way through the courts to ensure declaration of assets by candidates, their criminal records and most recently it had the electoral bonds put in the public domain.

Being politically engaged but not in politics comes with its advantages. Compromise is not required. It also becomes possible to deal with players across the political spectrum.

DEALING WITH ALL

Nikhil Dey of the Mazdoor Kisan Shakti Sangathan (MKSS) believes that many of the issues and the groundwork done by activists and people's movements has been used by AAP to launch itself in politics. RTI and the need for transparency in government is of course the key one.

Dey says: "As a social activist you are outside and connect with everyone. You don't have to be partisan. I'd say we have a very strong ideological position. We state that. In a democracy, it is the job of the government in place to talk and engage. We engage regardless of which party sits in government. We will try and make sure that in the role that we play as social movements, as social activists, governments do not overstep the Constitution."

"The right to information allows citizens to engage officially every single minute. On every single decision, all the time, not once in five years," says Dey.

"I think as activists we have really played out a new kind of very important politics. But I don't want to make this sound as if we've got all the answers," says Dey, "because it is eventually the party in power that decides the agenda of what will go to Parliament, how it will come through Parliament. Often we see issues we have decided on getting diluted."

Being a politician in power, says Dey, may in fact be less of an advantage than being an activist because of limitations and compromises that come from being in office.

The story of AAP mirrors many of these observations. Leaving the heady days of raw activism behind, the party from its very early days had to contend with the realities of being in office. It has survived, despite the odds stacked against it, so far. ■

The hallmark of AAP remains the talented, public-spirited and educated people it attracts and appoints in leadership roles.

said : You cannot say you are not in politics. You are in politics even if you don't vote. You are in politics because you are allowing somebody to vote for you."

Says Chhokar: "You may not be in competitive electoral politics, but you are in politics. Every citizen is in politics."

Chhokar says there is a difference being in

2024: Two narratives



**DELHI
DARBAR**

SANJAYA BARU

RESPONDING to the 2024 election manifesto of the Congress party, titled *Nyaya Patra*, Prime Minister Narendra Modi said it bears the imprint of the Muslim League. That more or less sums up the political platform of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) under Narendra Modi's leadership. As the major opposition party, the Congress draws attention to all the inequities and injustices that have come to characterize the development process in India. As the main ruling party, the BJP defends its record in the name of religion.

What is striking about the political narrative around the elections is that there is so much in common between the Congress and the BJP when it comes to economic, foreign and national security policy. Both criticize each other for their acts of omission and commission. Both can be accused of promoting crony capitalism when in power. Both have, by and large, pursued a similar foreign policy. Wherein lies the difference? It revolves around three central issues.

First and foremost, their approach to religion is fundamentally different. For all its faults and the many compromises it made with communal politics, the Congress remains a political party of all religions. The BJP under Modi has made it clear that it is first and foremost a party of the Hindus. Citizens of minority faiths will live at the mercy of the majority. So, there will be a token Sikh in the Union Council of Ministers, but no Muslim minister. A token Muslim, that too from Kerala, and a token Christian will figure in the list of close to 500 members contesting in these elections. Gestures of goodwill will be made towards minorities but the message is clear, Bharat belongs to the Hindus and minorities will live at their sufferance.

The second issue that sets the BJP and Congress apart is that the latter has come to terms with India's federal character after its

decade in office as the head of a coalition, the United Progressive Alliance (UPA). The Congress manifesto devotes an entire chapter to 'federalism', declaring that "Federalism is the foundational principle of an India that is a 'Union of States.'" India's "fabric of federalism", says the Congress, "has been systematically destroyed by the BJP/NDA government. Congress affirms its belief that India cannot be administered by the central government alone. In most matters concerning the daily lives of the people, it is the state government that is close to the people and, in some matters, it is the local government (panchayats or municipality) that is closer to the people." Modi's BJP rejects this view of the Indian Republic and



The Congress manifesto emphasizes federalism

nationhood. 'India is Bharat', for the BJP. A unitary formation defined by Hindutva.

A third issue that distinguishes the Congress from the BJP is language. While in the past even the Congress tried to impose Hindi, attracting a defiant response from the Tamils, it soon backed off and allowed Hindi to spread quietly and slowly across the country through popular use. Hindi/Urdu/Hindustani cinema played its part, so did the education system and finally large-scale migration of labour from Hindi states to the non-Hindi ones. There was a light touch to the Congress approach to the adoption of Hindi across the country. The Modi-Amit Shah-J.P. Nadda BJP has pursued an 'in-your-face' imposition of Hindi. Look at the language of the Bharatiya Nyaya Sanhita (BNS), the Bharatiya Nagarik Suraksha Sanhita (BNSS) and the Bharatiya Sakshya Adhinyam (BSA).

On most other issues one could say that the views of a political party in power and those of one in opposition are bound to differ but

their approach to policy may not differ as much. In office the BJP has proved to be no different than the Congress. Of course, there is a difference between the Modi BJP and the BJP we saw during Atal Bihari Vajpayee's term in office. Vajpayee governed with a light touch. Modi does so with a heavy hand. Those of us who lived through the Emergency period of 1975-77 have seen what unaccountable governance means. Modi has, of course, gone several steps beyond Indira Gandhi in using the official instruments at his disposal to deal with political opposition.

Some critics have pointed to the fact that the Congress under Rahul Gandhi's leadership has moved far too much to the political 'left', abandoning Manmohan Singh's more business-friendly approach. This is a superficial reading of the Congress's renewed socialist rhetoric. In a deeply unequal society like ours it is quite natural for the ruling class to mouth socialist rhetoric to gain public support. Every political party speaks that language. One must go beyond rhetoric and see how actual policy is implemented. In power, the BJP's economic policy preferences and priorities have not been very different from the Congress, rhetoric apart. The language in which they are wrapped and marketed may be different, but the direction of policy is no different.

So what then constitutes the essential difference between the two national parties? Some say the Congress is dominated by one family. But the BJP too is today dominated by two persons. If Sonia Gandhi and Rahul Gandhi are the final arbiters in the Congress, Modi and Shah are the final arbiters in the BJP. So this '*parivaarvad*' argument no longer sounds very convincing. We see a centralization of power in all political parties. Perhaps the Communists are the only exception to this rule.

In the end the choice is between the 'Hindu-Hindi-Bharat' view of the BJP and the 'India is a Union of States' and 'Unity in Diversity' view of the Congress. These are larger issues of national identity that cannot be easily translated into winnable agendas in an election. So the electoral rhetoric will be along familiar lines. The voter has to go beyond the rhetoric to understand and secure the nation's future. ■

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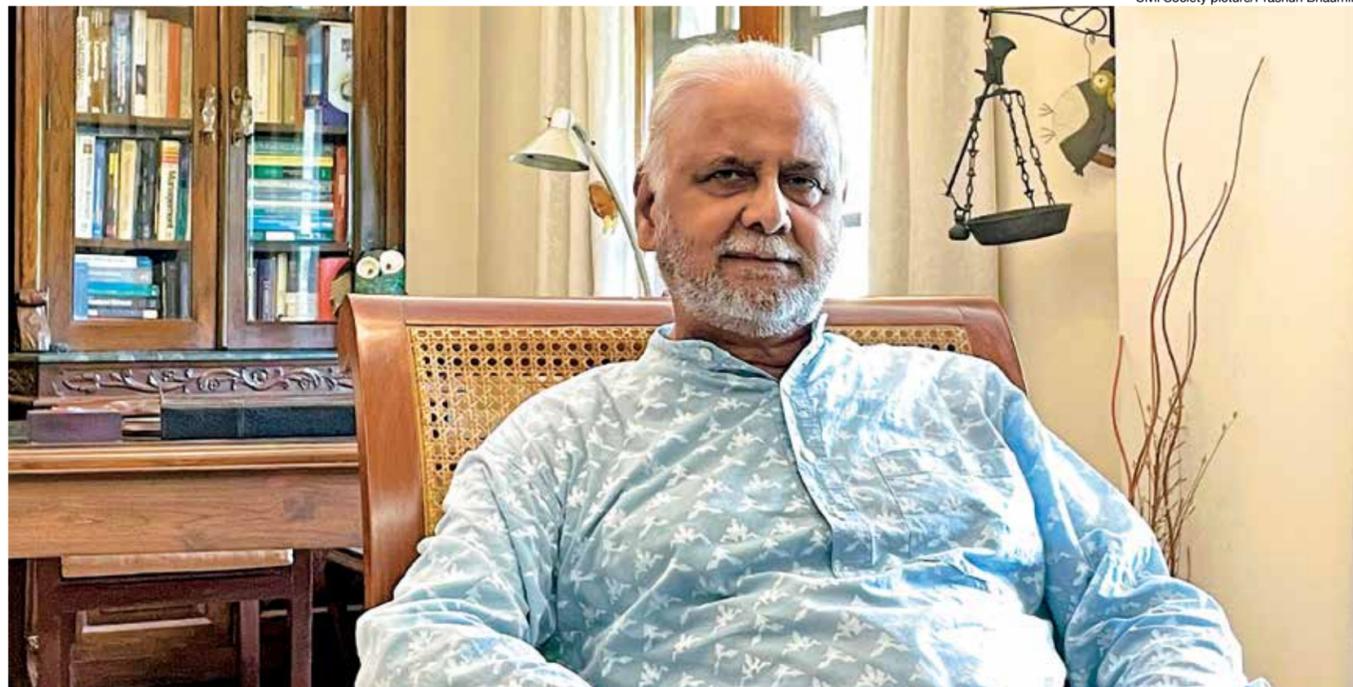
LISTENING POST

Q & A

HEAR THE PEOPLE WE TALK TO

IN A RARE ARCHIVE OF VOICES

Pages 14-51



Prof. Chhokar: 'I would say we should be very sorry that we are looking for the cheapest possible democracy'

JAGDEEP CHHOKAR

'Elections aren't the property of parties. Citizens have a stake'

Published in October 2023

A COMMITTEE UNDER former President Ram Nath Kovind is setting out to examine the feasibility of holding elections to Parliament and the assemblies simultaneously every five years. It is being said that money and time will be saved if elections are held together, perhaps within a single timeframe if not on one day.

How realistic is this proposition? And even if it were to be possible, what does it do to the functioning of democracy in the country? Does it undermine the spirit of the Constitution which envisages a federal structure?

This is not the first time that the proposal is being floated. Arguments have gone back and forth. Among those who have made an important contribution to the exchange of views has been Prof. Jagdeep Chhokar, formerly of the Indian Institute of Management, Ahmedabad, and a founder of the Association for Democratic Reforms (ADR). *Civil Society* spoke to Prof. Chhokar for a better understanding of an issue that has many long-term implications for Indian democracy.

Q: How do you see this demand for one nation, one poll? Is this the most important reform we should be dealing with?

I don't think this is either the most important reform, or a reform at all that we should be concerned with, at least at this point. You say that the government seems to have indicated that this is something that can't wait. I am actually surprised at all this brouhaha because this thing was discussed almost to death from 2016 to about 2019.

In 2018, if I remember right, I wrote an issue paper for the Hindu Centre for Politics and Public Policy wherein I dealt with this issue at great length and in great depth. My impression was that this issue was kind of more or less gone, but it has been resurrected and resurrected as if this is the most important and burning issue in our country today, which surprises me at one level and doesn't surprise me at another level.

Q: How do you see the timing of its resurrection?

Well, it's the timing. I really don't know what is behind this timing, but I have said this before and say it again: nothing is going to come out of this. We have wasted two or three years of public time and public resources in discussing this issue, which is not going to see the light of day in the foreseeable future.

I was asked once, if all political parties were agreeable to doing this, what was the problem? My problem is that as a citizen, I have a stake in the electoral process. The electoral process is not the sole property of the political parties in the country. As a citizen, I have a say and I will not let it go by without challenge given the fact that they just require something like five or six Articles in the Constitution to be amended. Even if they were to be amended, I believe this is violative of the principle of federalism, which is part of the basic structure of the Constitution as enunciated in the Kesavananda Bharati judgment.

Of course, it is true that no less than the Vice President and a nominated Member of Parliament (MP) who was the former Chief Justice of India, have both commented that the basic structure doctrine is not legal or tenable. The tenability of the basic structure doctrine was determined by

the Supreme Court in a 13-judge bench judgment and a legal luminary, Fali Nariman, has written that it has been tested and debated more than once in the Supreme Court, and it is found to be constitutionally valid.

Now, unless that is actually put aside, one nation, one election cannot happen. Of course, we are in a situation where a leading member of the Prime Minister's Advisory Committee has written that we need a new Constitution. So, if we are thinking of a new Constitution, so be it. If we are thinking of dispensing with the basic structure doctrine, so be it. But let us first do that. We cannot assume, or, at least in my opinion, I cannot assume that the basic structure doctrine will be set aside and we can do one nation, one election.

Q: What is the process of consultation that needs to happen for a mega reform like this?

Well, number one, the so-called mega reform cannot be against the Constitution. Number two, if we want to talk about amending the Constitution, there is a process that the Constitution provides. It has to be brought into Parliament. Obviously, there are necessities such as pre-legislative consultation, which several members of civil society have been talking about for years on end, but nothing seems to have happened. A draft bill to amend the Constitution should be prepared. It should be put in the public domain for discussion for a reasonable length of time.

Such an important amendment bill should be in the public domain for something like six months for wider public discussion and debate. After that, and considering all the feedback that comes in, then that bill needs to be perhaps recast, perhaps not recast. That only time will tell. And then the bill arrived at should be introduced in Parliament in the normal way.

Members of Parliament must be given the bill several days ahead of time. They must have time to read the bill, to reflect on the bill, to discuss the bill with constituents, and so on. And then the bill should be back in Parliament for discussion. Only then we will see what happens depending on the composition of Parliament and the opinions of various Members of Parliament. I am open to this.

Parliament has the right to amend the Constitution, subject to the limitations placed on it by the basic structure doctrine. And Parliament is free to do that. Of course, the requirements are two-thirds majority ratification by states, etc. All will come into play in the normal course.

Q: You have a committee which is headed by a former President who himself is a lawyer of some standing. You have a lawyer like Harish Salve on that committee and a whole lot of other people. Do you have problems with this committee?

No, I have no comment on this committee. But let me say that the process of wider discussion and debate has happened over a three-year period, at least from 2016 to 2019. That input should be available. It is in the public domain. NITI Aayog also put out a paper, I believe, to form a committee like this. I don't readily recall the terms of reference of the committee. But, if I remember right, its terms of reference are something to the effect of, you know, study this issue and make recommendations on how it can be done, which always gives the impression that this will be done.

In my humble or irreverent opinion, the issue has been discussed ad nauseam. There is no need for further discussion. Let the government bring out a bill to amend the Constitution. And let's discuss that rather than whether one nation, one election is needed or not.

Q: One of the points which are highlighted the most by proponents of this reform is that to save money and time on elections, have them all in one go. You know how expensive elections are?

I don't know. Ask people who fight elections. All I will say is that, in the 2019 election, there was an estimate by the Centre for Media Studies that the expenses were about ₹60,000 crore. If one looks at the details of the report, it leaves out a whole lot of things. The accuracy and veracity of those estimates are open to interpretation.

The basic issue in election expenditure is not the money that is spent by the Election Commission or the Government of India to conduct the

elections, including the cost of all the security forces that move around the country. The bulk of the expenditure in an election is done by political parties and candidates. And that is an amount which, at least to the best of my knowledge, nobody in the country knows. Because no political party and no candidate has ever given the true explanation of how much they have spent, and I say this with all responsibility.

In the 2009 Lok Sabha elections, we analyzed the election expenditure affidavits of 6,753 candidates, and only four said they had exceeded the limit and 30 said that they had spent about 90 percent of the limit. The rest said they spent only about 45 to 55 percent of the money. But this flies in the face of the fact that every political party and candidate, with some very minor exceptions, keeps demanding an increase in the expenditure limit. A former chief election commissioner had said at that time that if they are spending only 50 percent, then the limit should be reduced and not increased.

Number one: The expenditure on elections is done mostly by politicians and political parties and they have never complained about the election expenditure. Number two: Even if the cost of conducting elections is very high, the question that arises is, are we looking for the cheapest possible democracy? Or are we looking for an effective and working democracy? Are elections considered to be a necessary evil that they have to be done with the least possible cost and as infrequently as possible? Well, then, why have elections at all?

'On the question of time, how long do elections take? Fifteen days, three weeks, one month, two months? I mean, are polls some monster preventing the country from developing?'

I find this argument that having one nation, one election, whatever that means, will save money which can be used for development, extremely distasteful and hurtful. Is democracy something that has to be traded off against so-called development? And I'm deliberately saying so-called development because development has various definitions. What I consider development somebody may not consider development. And we may or may not have a national consensus on development, but do we want a functioning and effective democracy or not? If we do, then I would say we should be very sorry that we are looking for the cheapest possible democracy. And on the question of time, how long do elections take? Fifteen days, three weeks, one month, two months? I mean, are elections some kind of monster which is preventing the country from developing? For heaven's sake, the country has gone to the moon despite elections.

Q: Do you think it is feasible in a country as diverse and large as ours?

Well, look, nothing is not feasible. Today, if we want to do something, we can do it. Technology exists and every wherewithal exists. But the question is, is it desirable? And what exactly does it mean? The nation has a national legislature, the Lok Sabha. And there is one election for that in five years. Yes, there is one election. One nation, one election.

There are 29 state legislatures and so there are 29 elections every five years. Twenty-nine elections don't happen every year. Every five years there is one. A Lok Sabha election and one state assembly election in every state is what we have. How does this translate into an election happening every day?

Democracy has a cost. Democracy is about people's participation, people's commitment to the nation, people having a sense of ownership of the nation. It requires some investment. And that investment is the electoral process. ■

ANIL SWARUP

‘Officers who seek publicity will find they land in trouble’

Published in December 2021

GOVERNMENT OFFICERS HAVE been in the news recently for what many would consider the wrong reasons. There is a growing sense that officers are succumbing to the temptation of being seen and heard instead of talking softly and carrying a big stick. In the process they also find themselves in inconvenient situations.

The redoubtable Vinod Rai, former Comptroller and Auditor General (CAG), has had to eat his words and apologize to Sanjay Nirupam of the Congress. Sameer Wankhede has been in the limelight for arresting Shah Rukh Khan's son on drug charges though no drug was found on him. And the former Mumbai Police Commissioner, Param Bir Singh, has been on the run with extortion charges levelled against him.

Did these officers overreach themselves? Would it have been better if they had merely done their jobs quietly? How should government officers conduct themselves when performing their duties?

With these questions in mind we spoke to Anil Swarup, a distinguished IAS officer now retired. Swarup has many achievements to his name. He was in the PMO, coal, education and grew the footprint of the Rashtriya Swasthya Bima Yojana (RSBY). He has never been shy of being interviewed, but in the many years this magazine has known him, we have never found him to speak out of turn or court controversy.

Q: You put out a tweet in which you said that in the examples of Sameer Wankhede, Param Bir Singh and Vinod Rai there is a big lesson for civil servants — don't seek publicity, your just rewards will come. In these three disparate cases is it just publicity that is of concern to you or is there a deeper disquiet?

I was only commenting on the very limited subject of the visibility of an officer. Thanks to social media, and even before that, there is a tendency amongst some civil servants to go to town with what they're doing. 'Become visible' is the term that I use quite often. The civil servant has to be careful. It is not necessary to tom-tom what you have done. Instead, you can and should try and do your work quietly.

Let me cite the example of Vinod Rai, which I have elaborated on in both my books. As the CAG he should have submitted his report to Parliament and, at best, held a simple straightforward press conference and not tried to present it as a scam. That was for somebody else to take a call on. So, had he done his job quietly he would not have got into the limelight so much and now, it appears, that people are after him. One has got the better of him, and this may not be the end of it. So, publicity is counterproductive in his case.

Sameer Wankhede couldn't help raiding a high-profile person — even assuming it was required. But how did the video that was shot on the ship get leaked? That is what created the problem. Actually, had that video not been leaked people would have just spoken about a high-

Civil Society picture/Ajit Krishna



Anil Swarup: 'The bureaucracy is part of society'

profile person being caught. So, the officer has to be extremely careful, especially when he is handling high-profile cases.

There are many officers who do their jobs professionally, reap rewards and become high-profile without making any conscious effort. If a good job gets done, sometimes it gets recognized, sometimes it is not even known.

For example, take Julio Ribeiro. He never sought exposure. Yet, people got to know of his good work and it got publicized, which is very fair. Nothing wrong with that.

But if you look at Twitter, you will find officers tweeting about inaugurating a shop or holding a meeting. What is the purpose? To me there is a two-fold objective for using social media: one is to disseminate information, the second is publicity. Social media should be used to disseminate information because it really helps.

When it comes to publicity there are two ways of going about it. One, you publicize what you're doing. Or you can use social media to publicize the good work done by others. Let someone else pick up that story of what you're doing rather than you going to town with it. There is a subtle difference between the two and that doesn't seem to be understood by some of us civil servants who go on publicizing what they are doing. And that's where the problem arises.

So again, going back to both cases, Vinod Rai shouldn't have gone to town over his report. There's a difference between information dissemination and publicity. He went in for publicity. In the Sameer Wankhede case that video leak should have been avoided.

Q: People join the services with a lot of idealism. Many do good work. But there is a growing sense that the bureaucracy is compromised and not able to deliver. What exactly is your take on this?

You know, I carried out a survey myself on Twitter, asking people who they were most dissatisfied or satisfied with, including, amongst a broad category of people, politicians, media, the judiciary and civil servants. Overwhelmingly, people said civil servants were the best of the four. They may not be that good, but they are the best.

There was an *India Today* survey conducted by the Azim Premji University 10 years ago along similar lines. There may be disenchantment with the civil service on account of the exposure that civil servants have with the common man. But if you go to villages, where most of our population resides, they still have faith in the civil servant who comes there, and not so much in the politician or the media or anybody else. So it's not that they don't have faith in the civil service.

Yes, there is a lot wrong with the bureaucracy that needs to be corrected. But the bureaucracy is a part of society. They don't live in a zoo. Most civil servants carry with them the aspirations and infirmities of the common man to the civil services. Ironically, what gets to be known to the public are mostly negative stories because we are very fond of masala, you know.

I tweet both positive and negative stories. Twice a week I write positive stories and also some of the criticism. The traction that the criticism part gets is many times more than the traction the positive stories get. I don't blame anyone because that's how we are. We love negative stories.

Q: Bad news sells.

Yes, it's very unfortunate, but that's how it is. We blame the media for all those gory stories on TV channels and in newspapers. Media gives us what we like. If there are no scams, you'd like to have those scams going. We have situations where the media is shy of putting out positive stories, because very rarely do positive stories get the traction which a negative story does.

I'm not saying that everything is hunky-dory with the civil service. Certainly not. There's a lot wrong with it. But what gets portrayed is primarily the negative part. When I tweeted about these three guys, Sameer Wankhede, Vinod Rai and Param Bir Singh, almost 700,000 viewed it. None of my positive stories got that kind of viewership. It's really crazy. I was quite aghast to see the traction this tweet got.

That tweet was primarily a wakeup call for civil servants to beware, and not unnecessarily try to hog the limelight with what they've done. Because they are likely to face the same consequences as these three gentlemen are facing at this point in time. That was my objective. But look at the traction it got.

When I speak to civil servants I tell them to look at some of the civil servants who have evolved as efficient and honest officers. They have been recognized by society over a period of time. My book, *Ethical Dilemmas of a Civil Servant*, is a message that ethical behaviour is key in the long run. That's what I'm trying to convey. But, as I said, it takes all types to make this world and so it is with civil servants.

Q: Is there a need now to pause, 75 years after Independence, and perhaps look at the bureaucracy and its role a little differently?

Absolutely correct. I think we should all evolve. If we don't, we become not only irrelevant, we become a nuisance. In my book, there is an entire chapter in which I talk about this evolution.

My concern, and I will limit myself to the IAS where I spent some 37 years, is that right through the process, beginning from selection to postings, we are not looking at evolving. We should be looking at the leadership qualities of a civil servant. Because, ultimately, an IAS officer has to first be a leader. I've often said that expertise can be outsourced, but attitude cannot. And that's where leadership qualities become very important.

Let me explain. I have absolutely no doubt that the Union Public Service Commission (UPSC) is one of the finest institutions in the country. It's absolutely above board. You can't point a finger at it and say that a person has been wrongly or rightly selected. You can't attribute motives. But the problem is that the officers we select are not based on leadership criteria.

They're selecting people who are good at writing answers. They're good at expression. Their written articulation is very good. They present their case well, which are also attributes of leadership. But this is not the only attribute required of a leader. They don't even test their aptitude or

attitude. A paper on ethics does not help you understand whether that guy's ethical or not.

Today, the world over, there are tools available to assess the aptitude and attitude of the person you're selecting. You can also assess whether this chap has leadership qualities. It takes a slightly longer time, but it is well worth the effort. Because, imagine selecting officers who go on to become joint secretaries, additional secretaries, secretaries to the Government of India, who are in charge of districts — and they don't have leadership qualities.

Some of the IAS officers do evolve as leaders. But that's an exception. If you start from the time of selection and use those tools to select leaders, you may still go wrong in 20 percent of cases. But 80 percent will be those who have basic leadership qualities and that is step number one.

Secondly, the training imparted at the Lal Bahadur Shastri National Academy of Administration is more knowledge-oriented. I mean, these people are knowledgeable already. They don't develop leadership qualities during the course of training. I think the total focus has to be on group activity and leadership, rather than imparting more knowledge. Knowledge can be acquired by anybody individually. You don't have to tell them more about the Constitution of India, or the Indian Penal Code.

Third, contrary to general belief, the IAS does not have an ethos of its

‘Many officers do their jobs, reap rewards and become high profile without any conscious effort. If a good job gets done, sometimes it is noted and sometimes it is not.’

own. You can recognize an Army officer, even if he's not in uniform, by the way he walks, talks, or his disciplined manner which makes him different. You don't have that ethos in the IAS. I can't think of a single quality which can describe an IAS officer as an IAS officer. Unless that IAS officer tells you that he's an IAS officer, you'll never get to know. That ethos needs to be developed both at the academy and otherwise. By ethos I mean it in terms of general qualities, leadership, ethical behaviour, conduct. It has to be visibly distinct from others.

The fourth point is mentorship. There is no system of institutionalized mentoring of civil servants. There should be as there is in the Army and in the private sector. I remember when I was a young IAS officer, I didn't really know whom to talk to if I ran into some trouble.

Now, I'm personally mentoring hundreds of IAS officers but that's not the issue. The question is, whether there's an institutional framework to mentor and guide an officer towards ethical behaviour or ethos.

In my book, I talk about an ombudsman within the service to guide officers into a particular behaviour. If they are doing something which is not considered to be correct, it should be pointed out. No one does that today. An officer gets caught, but before getting caught, he has been moving in that direction. So I talk of mentorship. This can be done easily.

The difficult part is how the officer is treated when he gets into the service. His efficiency and honesty are the primary criteria for posting him. But servility, liability, malleability is the primary message that the government gives to officers. Whether you are efficient or honest or not is not material to me, you have to be totally beholden to me, you have to do what I tell you to do. If that is the signal that is going to the officer, he will ultimately say, okay, to hell with everything else, I will do this.

There are not many steps that need to be taken. I think there has to be a relook at what's going on, and then see what needs to be done. Not in terms of fulfilling the requirements and desires of a limited set of politicians, but in the larger context of the development of the country. ■

M.S. SWAMINATHAN

‘Future belongs to nations who opt for grains and not guns’

Published in July 2010

DR M.S. SWAMINATHAN, who passed away on September 28, 2023, was a scientist ahead of his time. Even as he helmed the Green Revolution to save India from hunger and external dependence, he cautioned against its downsides: pesticide dependence, groundwater overuse and escalating input costs.

His voluminous report on Indian agriculture has gathered dust under successive governments, including the current BJP regime. But the report remains today the most influential and insightful document on reforming and strengthening the rural economy.

When new farm laws were rushed through Parliament and bitterly opposed by farmers, it was Dr Swaminathan who was remembered for his suggestions on compensating farmers adequately and making farming more viable for small farmers instead of abandoning them to the manipulation of powerful market forces. Corporations weren't his answer to better farming. Empowering small farmers was, as also making farming sustainable and protecting biodiversity.

An exhaustive interview he gave *Civil Society* in July 2010 covered many of the concerns of today. He was clear that the small farmer should be the focus of an agricultural/food policy. At the time the right to food bill was being drafted, he welcomed the shift to a rights-based approach but pointed out the mere handing out of foodgrains would not achieve much. A law would have to “look at the totality of what needs to be done”.

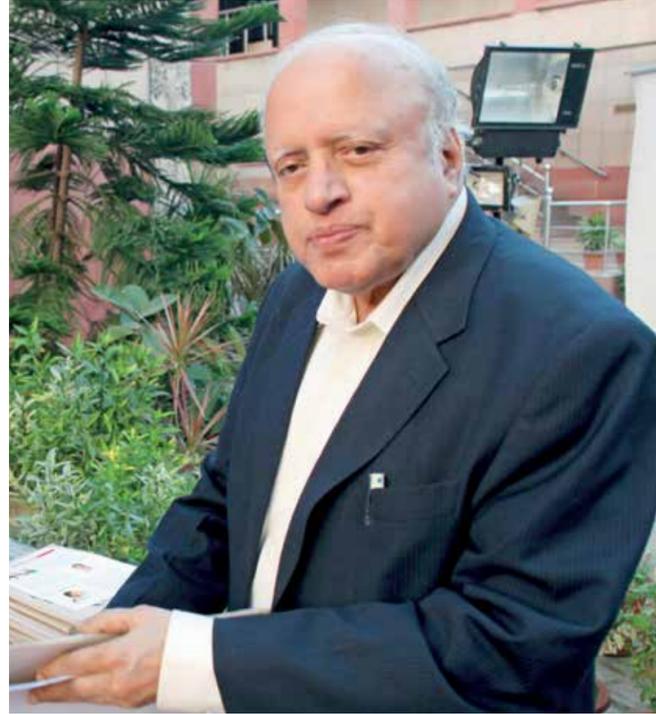
Q: Are you in broad agreement with the Food Security Bill? What are the key issues you think it should contain?

The Food Security Bill is the culmination of Mahatma Gandhi's desire that independent India should give the highest priority to mitigating hunger. Since the last 60 years we have been doing many things starting with the Integrated Child Development Services (ICDS). The Tamil Nadu government went further and began a universal midday meal programme in schools. The food for work programme was started in 1974-75. It has culminated in the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA) which is to ensure purchasing power in the hands of the people. even the Bengal Famine was not due to a famine of food, but to a famine of purchasing power.

Where there is work, there is money, where there is money, there is food. And therefore purchasing power is important. MGNREGA was designed to provide at least ₹10,000 a year in the hands of the poor.

In the last five years we have seen a paradigm shift from a purely patronage approach to a rights approach — the right to education, the right to information, the right to employment, the right to land for tribals and forest dwellers. The charity approach has been replaced by a rights approach. This shift is very important. The Food Security Bill is a continuation of this rights-based approach.

Civil Society picture/Gautam Singh



M.S. Swaminathan: 'The producer of food is malnourished'

Q: How should this right be defined in the Food Security Bill?

Food security implies social, economic and physical access — a balanced diet, sanitation, clean drinking water and primary health care. Both food and non-food requirements are involved. For example, if you don't have good drinking water, you will have stomach ailments and poor health.

On the other hand, if we don't produce more, we can't have food security for two reasons. One is that unlike Europe or America where hardly two or three percent of people are involved in farming, in our country over 60 percent are engaged in farming. Intelligent people in cities think the consumer is in the city and the producer is in the village. But the producer is the consumer.

Actually, producer consumers form the largest segment in India. Over 60 percent of producers are consumers. However, the producer is malnourished. Or, in other words, the producer does not have money to buy. Sixty percent of our area is rain-fed, just 40 percent has irrigation. Only 16 percent of our crops are pulses, oilseeds, sometimes horticulture. Now if the producer wants to buy other commodities he needs money. So the first step in food security is to improve the productivity and prosperity of small farm agriculture. Only then will small farmers have money to buy a balanced diet.

We have three components of food security. First, availability of food in the market which is a function of production and that means enhancing the productivity of small farms, dryland farms. Secondly, absorption of food in the body, which is a function of safe, clean drinking water, sanitation, primary health care. And thirdly, access to food, which is a function of purchasing power or jobs. With food inflation being high, money is important for food security.

Food security therefore means availability, access and absorption. These three are critical. A Food Security Act should look at the totality of what needs to be done.

Q: Are you supporting universal entitlements?

Any act of this kind can have two components — common, but differentiated entitlements. Even the Climate Convention talks of common but differentiated responsibilities. Similarly, in a Food Security Act common entitlement means common to all the people in this

country, or a universal public distribution system, availability of food in the market at reasonable prices, availability of drinking water, sanitation... for everybody, for 110 crore people.

But differentiated entitlement will be for those who are really poor, who have no purchasing power. Various numbers have been cited. I would say one-fourth of our population is poor. For them you need to provide food at an economically accessible price, say, ₹3 per kg, but Tamil Nadu prices rice at ₹1 per kg of rice.

Q: So you are for universal entitlements?

Overarching it should be a universal entitlement. (But there should also be) legal entitlements. And it is important to ensure effective enforcement and implementation, what you call governance. That cannot be legislated. The future belongs to nations who have grains, not guns. Guns you can purchase, grains you cannot. Because of climate change, food will be very highly priced. Therefore, we need to improve availability of food from homegrown food. This has two advantages. One, we can be sure of our food, and secondly, by increasing the productivity of small farms you will increase the purchasing power of producer-consumers and mitigate hunger now prevailing among them.

Q: How can you legislate on this?

Some are legal entitlements. Some are enforcements. The Supreme Court takes the right to life with the right to food and water. You can't have the right to life without food and water. The Supreme Court has been giving instructions. It is not necessary for an act to be all about legal entitlements. But some enforcement and coordination has to be prescribed. For example, I have been pleading for a long time for national grain storages. Today, in Punjab and Haryana grains are put in gunny bags which are left lying around. Then the rains come. Now you can't discharge a Food Security Act without food.

They say we can have a food security fund. If we don't have grains we can give money. If you do that prices will go up. In the Sixth Pay Commission, when government servants got more money, the cost of living index went up almost immediately. Giving money therefore means prices will rise.

India is home to the largest number of malnourished children, women and men. In September, next year, there will be a big summit in New York to review the achievement of the UN Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). The first goal is reducing hunger and malnourishment by half by 2015. And we will present a poor picture there. I hope the Food Security Act will not take a narrow view of just providing some wheat and rice at an affordable price. That is important, I agree. But it does not constitute food security.

Economic access to food, at affordable cost, is one important element of food security. That's important. But if you don't have enough food in the market, prices will go up. If you don't have safe drinking water, sanitation and so on, calorie intake alone won't help you.

So this is a great occasion for our country to overcome the stigma of malnutrition, maternal deaths and low-weight children. In my view the food security law should start with children, 0 to 3 years old in particular, for that is when 80 percent of brain development takes place. In a knowledge era, unless you can give children the opportunity for expression of innate genetic potential, intellectual and physical development, we will not be a great nation. Take a lifecycle approach to food security. Start with pregnant women, babies and then go up to old and infirm people.

The government has so many schemes. Some are legal entitlements. The other aspect is to have enforcement of schemes, some kind of monitoring mechanism, so that whenever the Supreme Court calls, you can say this is being done. Both prescriptive and mandatory measures are possible.

Q: Is it actually possible to deliver 35 kg at ₹3?

It is possible. You have to provide money and planning for this. Even

now 50 to 60 million tonnes are available to the government. Some grains are rotting. Because they are rotting, grains are being exported. If we increase consumption in this country, there will be no food surplus. You need to improve your storage. You go to an average American/Canadian/Australian farm. They have beautiful silos where they store food without any loss. Here our farmers produce food with so much difficulty and then you put it in some gunny bags and allow it to rot. Now this is not on. We can't have food security without attention to production, food safety and safe storage of grains.

Q: You have often talked of decentralization of storage. Could you tell us more about this?

I suggested a minimum of 50 locations, ideally 128, in different agroclimatic regions where climate risk management research and training centres can be set up all over the country and in particular in rain-fed areas and tribal areas. You will find that next month, the media will report starvation deaths. Even in a district like Thane, close to Mumbai, there will be starvation. You should give visibility to grain storage so that prices can be tamed. In a country of 1.1 billion people which will become 1.5 billion by 2040 or so, the government should remain at the commanding heights of the food security system. That

‘The Supreme Court takes the right to life with the right to food and water. You can't have the right to life without food and water.’

can only be possible if you have national grain storages. People will then know that around one million tonnes of grain are there. And if there is drought or a flood or a disaster, the food can be rushed to them.

Q: You have emphasized water a lot for food security.

There are five major sources of water. We have high density rainfall which comes in 100 hours a year. We need to harvest and store every raindrop. In MGNREGA, emphasis has been rightly given to water harvesting, watershed management and soil conservation. I would say we need to utilize the enormous labour available. June must be monsoon management month.

Professors in agricultural universities, students, those with knowledge of water-harvesting should go to villages and see what preparations have been done. Have farmers got seeds? Do they have fertilizers? Is the water-harvesting structure alright? They will learn much more than sitting in classrooms. In MGNREGA we should give dignity to the work being done. I would say institute a water saviour award for the MGNREGA group which saves the most water. MGNREGA workers must feel they are doing something nationally important. The beneficiary approach should change to a participatory approach.

Apart from harvesting rain, use water more efficiently. Some years ago the Ministry of Water Resources started at my suggestion a programme called 'more crop and income per drop of water'. We have farmers participating in this programme across the country. We can augment supply of water, manage our demand better and use new technologies. There is rain water, river water, groundwater, recycled sewage water and effluents from industry. Nearly 80 percent of water which industry takes can be given back in a pure form.

Finally, there is sea water. Ninety-seven percent of water is sea water. As Mahatma Gandhi said when he started the Salt Satyagraha, sea water is a social resource, not a private resource. We should use sea water farming, or agri-aqua farms in the Andaman and Nicobar Islands and the Lakshwadeep islands. ■

DEVINDER SHARMA

‘It is stupid to take people off farms and use them as cheap labour’

Published in July 2023

WHEN FARMERS BLOCKADED Delhi for more than a year in 2020-21, right through the pandemic, it seemed that they had compelled the government to think afresh on agriculture. Three pro-free market laws that had been rushed through Parliament were scrapped, but many of the long-pending issues that bedevil the farm sector were brushed under the carpet and remain unattended.

Farmers had come together out of fear of losing their lands to corporations. Their protests warded off this danger, but achieved little else. Once the new laws were scrapped and the agitation called off, disparate unions that had united under pressure from ordinary farmers soon fell apart.

It has been two years now, but demands such as legally guaranteed minimum support prices, *mandis* in easy reach and investments in rural infrastructure remain to be addressed. The more complex goals of preparing farmers for the effects of global warming, reducing chemicals in farming and widening the basket of crops so as to promote sustainability and nutrition have also not got the attention they deserve.

For a better understanding, *Civil Society* spoke to Devinder Sharma, senior journalist and researcher based in Punjab, who works at field level and is an insightful voice on Indian agriculture.

Q: The historic farmers’ agitation against the Central government’s farm laws seems to have been forgotten. Are there any outcomes from it at all?

The iconic farmers’ protest was historic, but the outcome that people were expecting, by way of fundamental changes in farming laws so that agriculture becomes economically viable, has not been addressed.

The agitation, however, did result in the withdrawal of the three contentious farm laws (which opened up agriculture to corporations and a free market). The withdrawal of the three laws is very, very significant for the future of India. When it comes to farmers’ incomes, bringing agriculture under the control of corporations has not worked anywhere in the world. So, if Indian farmers were also forced to come under a corporate yoke, I’m sure agriculture would have been further devastated. And, as the farmers feared, their lands would have been taken away.

You know, we have this cut-and-paste policy tradition. The three laws were based on what American or European agriculture is talking about. And, as usual, our lazy economists in India thought that they were suitable for India. But if you go around the world you will see distress in agriculture all over. Corporatization has not worked.



Devinder Sharma: ‘Agriculture can be our second powerhouse of economic growth’

Secondly, in the name of climate change, there is now a war against farmers. And it has begun from Europe. Holland has already asked 3,000 farmers to get out of agriculture. They are saying that no farmer can keep more than two cows. Three thousand farmers quitting from Holland’s 11,000 farms is quite a blow to agriculture.

The UK is also telling 5,000 farmers to plan to get out of agriculture. New Zealand is a dairy country. Because of increased emissions from cows, they are going to impose a tax on the cattle wealth of New Zealand.

So everywhere there is a clear message — more corporate control is coming up in agriculture. And this is where all eyes are fixed. Indian agriculture is also under attack unless our farmers are able to stand up and demonstrate that agriculture can be viable without the help of corporations.

Q: Wouldn’t the role of the state be crucial at such a time?

Let’s say there have been efforts to marginalize the role of the state for quite some time. From 2003 onwards, there has been an increasing understanding among Indian policymakers that we must move towards a market economy. Whether it is this government or previous governments, they have always been telling us that markets are the best judge, they can provide a better price, they can also tackle the supply chain or logistical questions that agriculture is going to be confronted with. So, in their understanding, farm incomes will go up substantially if this process is adhered to.

But look at what has happened in America. One of their agriculture secretaries, during the Nixon years, said ‘grow big or get out’. At that time about 15 percent of the American population was involved in agriculture. Today, it is just 1.5 percent. According to Indian economists the smaller the number of people in agriculture, the more their income. By that logic, if the population of American farmers has come down, their income levels should have gone up.

But that didn’t happen. Which tells us that Indian economists are still far behind what is happening globally. I’m saying this because in America, the rate of suicides on farms is 3.5 times the national average. And if American agriculture was economical, or viable and markets were paying the right price, there is no reason for the US government to be providing ₹79 lakh per year per farmer as domestic support just to keep them on the farm. The American government is providing so much

subsidy. That cannot be a model for India, let’s be very clear.

About 50 percent of our population or 600 million people are involved with agriculture, directly or indirectly. To push them out of agriculture is a stupid idea. I think economists all over the world must admit that this stupidity has to now stop. I remember one of the former governors of the Reserve Bank of India saying that the best reform or the ‘big ticket’ reform for India would be to move people out of agriculture into urban areas because cheap labour is needed there. That thinking has to go.

We are now witnessing increased ruralization. That is the way forward. Agriculture can sustain more people. Make agriculture viable and profitable. In fact, agriculture should have been and can be the second powerhouse of economic growth in India. Why do we have to follow cut-and-paste policies from America and Europe? And then you brand these economists as great. There is a question we need to ask: how relevant are these economists today?

Q: The viewpoint that agriculture can be the next big powerhouse is gaining resonance. A sustainable lifestyle, all biodegradable materials will come from agriculture...?

I think what you are saying implies that agriculture has tremendous potential to resurge. The world realizes that 34 percent or one-third of global greenhouse gas emissions come from agriculture globally. That means agriculture has a significant role in climate aberrations.

That also means that we need to transform agriculture. You don’t do more of the same. You get out of that trap. Look at countries like Brazil, Argentina, America, the European Union. These countries are actually devastated by the kind of farming that was prevalent all these years — intensive farming, exhaustive farming which has led to climate change. So we need to first reframe or redesign agriculture by providing farmers with a living income and by moving to agroecological farming. The world is talking about it.

I’m glad that in India there is increased understanding that we must move from chemical to non-chemical agriculture. There are some positive signs. More importantly, we need to have a guaranteed income prescribed for farmers. They too have similar aspirations as people in cities. We have all these years deliberately kept agriculture impoverished by denying farmers their rightful prices. This has to change. Farmers need to get their rightful income. And I look forward to a kind of reverse migration taking place in India in the years to come, if we really make agriculture economically viable and profitable.

Q: What has happened to farmers’ demands like minimum support price (MSP), more *mandis* in rural areas, better road connectivity? Have the states acted on these demands?

The simple answer is no. The government has set up a committee but its terms of reference do not include talking about MSP in a manner that farmers have been demanding, which is to make it a legal obligation.

But let me illustrate why MSP is a significant tool to bring back pride to agriculture. If you buy a pen, it has a price tag. If you buy a computer, it comes with a price tag. So does a motorcycle or a car. Why is it that only agricultural produce does not have a price tag? That is what we need to understand. Because our country’s economic design was woven such that to keep economic reforms viable, you had to sacrifice agriculture.

This is what America and Europe did. Now the push is that India should do it too. That is why those contentious laws were brought in. The only way to fix a price tag for agricultural produce is by MSP. India has a built-up debt system. We are a role model. Everywhere I have travelled in the world, people have been talking about guaranteed prices.

Even in America. In 1979, a massive tractor protest was held in Washington, DC, by farmers who came from across the country. They were demanding income parity, or guaranteed price. Jimmy Carter, who claimed to be a farmer, was the president. But he couldn’t do it because he came under pressure. The result is that the movement failed.

The same movement began in 2020 in India. It has ‘succeeded’. We need to make MSP a legal right which means nothing can be purchased

below the MSP. Nobody, whether it is the government or companies or private traders, can buy below that price. That should be the reform we should be aiming at to make agriculture viable and productive.

Q: But why has the farmers’ movement gone silent?

It was basically pressure from their constituencies that kept the leaders of the agitation together at that time. The average farmer was convinced that once companies came in, their land would be taken away. So that fear brought them together. The leaders, due to pressure from farming populations, had to give a semblance of solidarity.

But it wasn’t really there. We all know soon after the laws were withdrawn, they split. Some wanted to fight the upcoming elections, some wanted to oppose it. Even if they make an effort now, I don’t think they can come together and be a strong visible opposition or an alternative voice in this country for the 2024 election.

But nevertheless, I think that particular year itself gave a tremendous boost to farming populations. They now realize that they can, if they get together, form a political powerhouse in India, which is required. If a man who was a *chaiwallah* can become the prime minister I see no reason why a *tractorwallah* can’t become the prime minister.

‘We have deliberately kept agriculture impoverished by denying farmers their rightful prices. This has to change. I look forward to a kind of reverse migration.’

Q: What was also brought into focus during the agitation was the *mandi* system and the need to strengthen it. Also rural infrastructure. Have any states done this?

You know, if you look at infrastructure development, the unwritten rule that we follow is to sacrifice agriculture for industry. The first rule is to deny farmers an income so that they have no option but to quit on their own. The second rule is to reduce public sector investments in agriculture.

Over the years, public sector investment in agriculture has come down drastically. A study by the Reserve Bank of India tells us that between 2001-02 and 2011, public sector investment came down to 0.4 percent. That’s 0.4 percent of GDP for 50 percent of the population. If you look at the corporate sector, their share of tax concessions in the GDP is 6 percent. That kind of tax concession is also an investment for companies.

The government announced that real *azadi* for farmers is when they can sell their produce anywhere in the country. No. Real *azadi* for farmers will be when there are *mandis* closer to their farms across the country. Roughly, we have 7,000 *mandis*, the Agricultural Produce and Livestock Market Committee (APMC)- regulated *mandis*. What we need are 42,000 *mandis* if you have to ensure there is a *mandi* in every five-km radius. For this you have to invest in roads and not just highways.

Second, of course, are storages. Recently, the government announced that they are going to use primary agricultural societies to build 700 storages. This is what the Grow More Food campaign had demanded in 1979 — build godowns across the country so that the burden is taken away from Punjab and Haryana, and it becomes easier to distribute food stocks locally.

It didn’t happen because priorities were different. The focus is on corporations, corporations and corporations. I’m happy about godowns being built, but I think efforts should be made to build 42,000 *mandis*. That would bring farmers closer to *mandis* and there would be less distress sales. That is the kind of infrastructure we need. ■

SOUMYA SWAMINATHAN

‘Shifting from monoculture is needed for better health’

Published in June 2023

IN THESE TIMES of climate change and an increasing burden of metabolic disorders, what gets grown and eaten matters more than ever before. Science can make a difference, especially so when it promotes sustainability and reaches farmers in the fields.

The M.S. Swaminathan Research Foundation (MSSRF) was launched in Chennai in 1988 with such a vision. Dr Swaminathan had been the father of the Green Revolution but with India achieving self-sufficiency in food, he foresaw the need for balance, conservation and diversity.

The foundation's work is extensive and covers coastal systems research, biodiversity, biotechnology, ecotechnology, agriculture, nutrition and health, climate change, gender and grassroots institutions and science communication.

MSSRF works across states in tribal areas and with rural women and fisherfolk. Amongst its many achievements are the numerous small farms it has helped diversify through its propagation of nutrition gardens to combat hunger. It has done extensive work in Koraput, a hunger hotspot for decades in Odisha. The foundation is also well-known for regeneration of mangrove wetlands, protection of biosphere reserves and more under its coastal research programme.

Soumya Swaminathan, Dr Swaminathan's daughter, recently began leading the foundation as chairperson. She is probably more widely recognized for her regular briefings on Covid-19 as the chief scientist at the World Health Organization (WHO). She is a paediatrician and clinical scientist known for her work on TB and HIV. Now back in Chennai, *Civil Society* spoke to her on the work of the foundation and what she sees as the road ahead.

Q: As the new chairperson of MSSRF, what would be your priorities?

I am most worried by the ongoing and future impacts of climate change on our health. Such impacts will manifest themselves through direct and indirect routes. Many of those pathways are issues that the foundation does work on. What we haven't had in the past is a direct focus on those impacts. I think it needs to be added.

One example is the impact of our diets on health. Globally, as well as in India, it is recognized that dietary risks are the number one risk factor for death and disability. Data from the Global Burden of Disease has established all the risk factors.

What is driving the huge increase in non-communicable diseases is unhealthy diets. This is where the link between agriculture and health becomes very important because for a healthy diet, you have to start with agriculture.

My father used to say nutritional maladies are related to agriculture and horticulture. We understand what the malady is. So, we need to find the remedy. We have to find a way of moving away from monoculture.



Soumya Swaminathan: 'Expand the basket of foods under the PDS'

Q: What has been the impact of the pandemic on the health and nutritional status of the communities you work with?

There hasn't been a proper survey for me to give you proper data, though this is an important question. What we do know is that there was an impact on livelihoods. The agricultural sector was less affected. The fishing community was impacted since they could not go out fishing for several months but later it was allowed.

The children suffered greatly. Most of them were out of school for nearly two years and did not have access to online education or had patchy access to online teaching. Children found it hard to catch up. Many children in tribal areas just dropped out of school and they are not able to catch up and clear their exams in Classes 9 and 10. So their future options are very limited. There are states like Tamil Nadu that have started schemes for remedial coaching but it's not across all states.

We have also seen that there are still issues of access to basic health and education services as well as government assistance for livelihood opportunities in tribal areas. In some cases where tribals have been displaced, they have not yet received their rights as per the Forest Rights Act and have to rely on rural employment schemes like MGNREGA.

I think the impact of climate change on coastal communities is becoming acute. They have been telling us that they go out to sea for longer and longer timespans for the same amount of catch they used to get in three or four days. They are out on the high seas for 15 days at a stretch and this is having a physical and mental impact. For the women there is the added burden of getting less catch and then spending more time to go out and sell it.

There is also the issue of marine pollution and fish catch being depleted since fishing nets are catching juveniles. The foundation is working with fishermen, in a participatory way, to come up with a voluntary code of conduct to avoid overfishing and catching of juveniles in fishing nets.

We are going to have a programme to deal with marine pollution and develop a circular economy around it. We will also do a study to quantify the physical and mental impact of climate change on our coastal communities.

Q: The impact of climate change on our coastal communities has not been studied.

Exactly. Tamil Nadu now has a Climate Mission, and a governing council of which I am a member. We will get an opportunity to take a deeper dive into issues like bio-shields as well as marine pollution and health. We will research these issues to find solutions and mitigating measures.

Q: The foundation works with small farmers, encourages kitchen gardens and homestead farms. Is there a change in how you will approach these due to climate change and other factors?

The most important issue for me is — how can we improve the dietary diversity of small farms and their quality of produce. Surveys indicate that Indians are not getting adequate servings of fruits and vegetables for a healthy diet which means a lack of micronutrients. Protein content is also lower than it should be. It's a very cereal-based carbohydrate diet.

One factor is affordability and access. Also, awareness, nutritional literacy and how to cook. The foundation has worked on nutrition-sensitive agriculture and integrating nutrition into agricultural practices. This depends on prevailing agro-climatic conditions. One has to carefully select the plants that can be grown and that is the idea behind the setting up of nutrition gardens.

In the nutrition gardens we have set up, there is a range of fruits and plants that can be grown in different agro-climatic zones and each will give you specific micro-nutrients. The gardens are labelled so you know which plants give you which nutrients. Alongside, diversification or multi-cropping, growing pulses, millets and so on is important.

During my field visits I noted that the key to mixed farming is water. In Gopalpur district of Odisha there have been many watershed development programmes and multiple check dams, depending on the terrain, to find the best solution for rainwater harvesting.

It can solve the problem in a district like Koraput which gets a lot of water but doesn't save it. The poor quality of drinking water is causing water-borne diseases. Water for consumption, sanitation and health is obviously very important. Because of the lack of water, toilets are not being used although toilets have been constructed in all those villages.

We have over 1,500 community nutrition gardens now in Koraput. In two villages, people have come together and set aside plots of land where they grow a variety of green leafy vegetables and fruit trees.

The crops are for consumption and sale. So the produce is fetching farmers an income and improving their diet. Awareness was created through our community hunger fighters.

We trained men and women in nutritional concepts. They explained it all to me beautifully, the different food classes and which produce gives you what type of nutrients. I think our work showed that diet can be improved by this type of intervention.

More community-based interventions which complement government efforts in *anganwadis*, school mid-day meals and the public distribution system (PDS) would help address nutritional challenges. The PDS is basically taking care of calories. We hope to help expand the basket of foods available through the PDS.

Q: Koraput has been a hunger hotspot for decades. Would you say even without data, perhaps anecdotally, that hunger has been mitigated in Koraput though under-nutrition perhaps remains?

I think we do need to look at data available from the National Family Health Survey (NFHS). It still shows a high prevalence of under-nutrition in Koraput. So, I wouldn't say nutrition has been completely addressed though acute hunger and starvation are extremely rare now. But under-nutrition and deficiencies are caused by water and sanitation as well. Inadequate attention to these two can stymie the nutrition outcomes we would like to see.

Q: Did the state government help out?

Yes, the state government has been a partner. The Odisha Millets Mission has also been a success story. It has successively increased procurement of millets which is important for incentivizing farmers.

Women are playing a key role. In Bolangir, a woman farmer heads the

Farmer Producer Organization (FPO). In fact, the FPO's board consists entirely of women. They grow millets and are linked with the Odisha Millets Mission. The women check the quality of millets at the weekly *mandi*. It's very professionally done. This year they will be doubling procurement so the tie-up with the government has been crucial. The women have also conserved a number of strains because in millets you have a lot of diversity.

In the south, mostly *ragi* is consumed whereas in the north it is *jowar* and *bajra*. You also have a number of minor millets in the Kolli hills. We have been promoting minor millets and helping farmers promote value-added products like *dosa* mix and *upma* mix made from millets.

Tribal communities have told us that their children are no longer used to eating millets because their hostels don't cook them. It's a cultural shift. Changing diets takes time. Also, forest foods are no longer really consumed by tribal communities. The government can encourage and promote millets by including it in the PDS.

We also overlook women's time and labour required to cook and process foods. The reason we see so much processed and ready-made foods, particularly in urban environments, is because it is convenient for women.

‘I think the impact of climate change on coastal communities is acute. They go out to sea for longer timespans for the same amount of catch they used to get in three or four days.’

Women told me they used to spend an hour or two pounding *ragi*. We have now provided them with millet processing machinery. They say it helps them to consume *ragi* as well as sell it.

The entire food chain is important — from cultivation to commerce to consumption to conservation. The human angle is often overlooked in agriculture. We need to reach out to cultivators in a participatory way. Working with SHGs and FPOs is the way to go. There is also opportunity in tribal areas to grow and promote medicinal plants. Local traditional healers are still the first port of call for many villagers. But procurement of medicinal plants is becoming harder, and they have to go deeper into the forest to find them. There is a livelihood opportunity here in the cultivation of medicinal plants for own use and for commercial purposes.

Q: Is there also a need to disseminate weather related information to remote rural pockets so that they can cultivate homestead farms with more safety and efficiency?

Absolutely. Very local advisories on agro-met on impending storms, rain or heat days for small farmers are essential.

We have efficiently done a Fisher Friendly Mobile Application for the fishing community with Qualcomm and INCOIS (Indian National Centre for Ocean Information Service). It is used by over 120, 000 fishermen, mainly on the east coast of India. The app provides advisories on sea conditions, tells fishermen where they would find more fish and gives weather warnings. It even warns fishermen if they are approaching a turtle nesting site. The app works offline as well so it can be used even if fishermen are out at sea. It has been tremendously successful and adopted by state governments.

We have an app for agro-met advisories and a plant clinic app as well. A farmer can upload a picture of his sick plant and seek advice on whether the plant is suffering from an infection or a nutritional deficiency. We can use AI and recent technologies to deliver such information to farmers. ■

KABIR VAJPEYI

'We have not grasped the value of child development'

Published in August 2022

FOR THE PAST seven years, Kabir and Preeti Vajpeyi have been involved in bringing architectural and design changes to *anganwadi* centres so as to make them more child-friendly and inclusive.

With the New Education Policy's emphasis on early childhood development, their work acquires yet greater significance. More than ever, *anganwadis* now need to be vibrant and creative places where pre-school children begin the process of learning and development.

The Vajpeyis are public-spirited architects who have in the past used their training to transform government schools through low-cost solutions. All of 26 years ago they were involved in a programme in Rajasthan to enhance learning in government schools at minimum cost. From that effort came BaLA or Building as Learning Aid, a programme widely adopted by state governments.

As in BaLA for schools, the Vajpeyis have explored design solutions for *anganwadis*, which are mostly neglected and lacking in infrastructure.

To understand the challenges involved in improving *anganwadis*, *Civil Society* spoke to Kabir Vajpeyi in an extensive interview, an extract from which appears below:

Q: You have been working for several years on the infrastructure needs of *anganwadis* across states. In what condition do you find *anganwadis* in general?

I am first going to talk about the state of *anganwadis* as an institution, based on my experience. The *anganwadi* centre is the dissemination point of the Integrated Child Development Services (ICDS) scheme.

The ICDS programme is a very important programme. It has been conceived more holistically than many others. It looks at child development in connection with so many critical aspects.

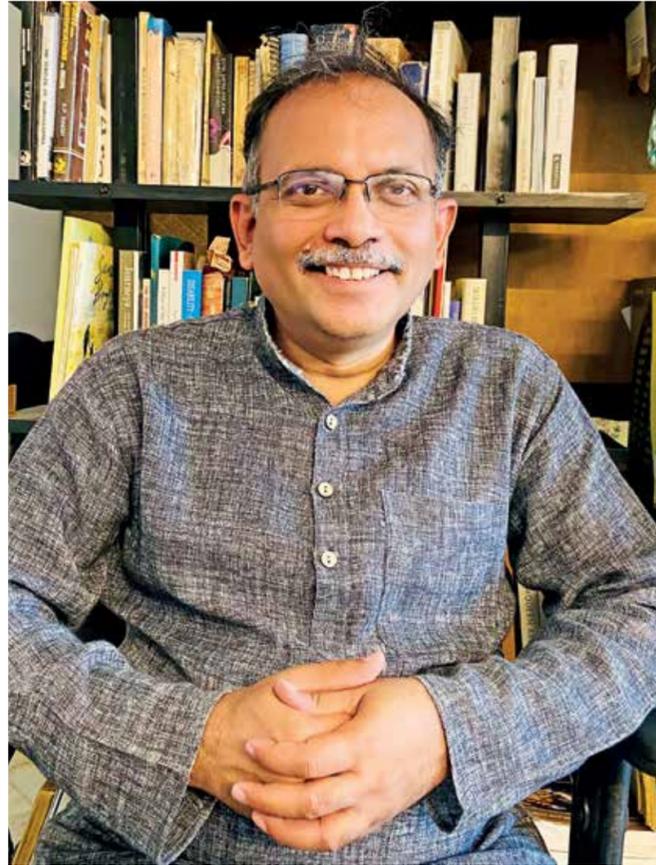
It addresses the early-age child, the infant, the mother, the caregiver, the family, and, even before that, the adolescent girl who might become a mother later.

But the focus and attention such a well-conceived programme deserves is lacking. You don't often see focus in the programming or in the financing or on the ground.

Q: So what do you think is lacking in the implementation of the concept?

I think it is the intent to engage with the issue of child development holistically. We have not really understood the value of child development and what it means in the later phases of life for everyone.

There are studies which show that if you invest wisely in the finer details of implementation and monitor quality, the returns are nine to 15 times for every rupee spent. Good programming translates into effective childhood development, education, health, employability, livelihood and



Kabir Vajpeyi: 'Rudimentary facilities for making the *anganwadi* worker effective are lacking'

so many things. So it has a huge economic spin-off.

Q: What are the three or four things that you think must be quickly done in terms of implementation?

I think engagement is needed to really develop a child. The capacity of our *anganwadi* workers needs to be enhanced and augmented.

Q: So are you saying they're not trained enough?

They come with experience, but they need more systematic knowledge which they can use to transact with children on the ground. For instance, they may often think children are supposed to be very disciplined and sit quietly. I mean, at the pre-school stage children are meant to explore their environment and not sit quietly and be disciplined.

Rudimentary facilities for making the *anganwadi* worker effective are lacking. Often, she fights a lone battle. At times, for days together, she may be bringing food from her home. There might be several things she might be doing out of sheer dedication and affection for the children. The state of *anganwadis* is the culmination of several shortcomings in the system. Unfortunately, the blame and focal point is on the *anganwadi* worker.

Nutrition is key to the programme, but if you look at the kitchen and where the food has to be stored you will often find rodents, dampness and all kinds of things percolating there. Why? Because nobody in the system ever thought of securing it properly.

Take the simple example of water. We did a study in Rajasthan, West Bengal, Bihar and Maharashtra. We found that the local panchayat or municipal authority was not fulfilling its responsibility of providing water to the *anganwadi*. As a result, the *anganwadi* worker or her helper had to fetch water from her personal resources. She's supposed to be a voluntary worker who gives four to six hours of her time every day. But 25 percent of that time is spent in organizing water instead of being focussed on the core activities of the *anganwadi*.

Under the national curriculum framework for early childhood care and education, outdoor activities are given high importance. They involve play, engaging with nature and so on. They're so critical at that stage. Such activities are not just about physical development but about social, emotional, cognitive development. You develop self-confidence. You develop social engagement by way of playing. You learn to negotiate.

Now, the significance of that outdoor space is just not understood. It is not for the *anganwadi* worker to first understand it. It is for the system, for the people who are sanctioning, financing and planning the *anganwadi* to understand it and then only can it percolate.

Q: You are saying that the programme needs to be better conceptualized and managed?

It is well conceptualized. But, yes, management needs attention. There's another aspect to the *anganwadi* story which is alarming. It is corruption and it is across states. Every *anganwadi* worker is supposed to pay the higher-ups and the money comes from the food they buy. Imagine, we are stealing from the very food that is meant for the youngest members of our society! This is outright shameful and outrageous. How do we stoop to such a level?

Q: In which states is this happening?

I mentioned Bihar, West Bengal, Rajasthan and Maharashtra. From the overall ration amount that she gets, the *anganwadi* worker is supposed to pay a cut to the higher-ups. I feel it's the system which is responsible for this, and not this lady, the *anganwadi* worker. She is forced to do this.

Q: What is the relationship between infrastructure, which is your domain, and the successes and failures of this programme?

What we're trying to do in different states has to do with the infrastructure at an *anganwadi* level. But, yes, certainly we try to look at the linkages. We are adapting and augmenting existing *anganwadi* spaces so that all services under the Integrated Child Development Services programme are delivered more effectively.

I'll give you an example. If we find that there is severe malnutrition in a particular district or block or project area, we try to identify deficiencies from the infrastructure perspective.

My take would be, what can we grow on the *anganwadi* premises to take care of some of this malnutrition? What nutrients are deficient which can be grown at home and on the *anganwadi* premises using whatever minimal resources are available?

Q: Do you get to connect larger health concerns with the lack of infrastructure?

Not always, but I'll give you an example from Rajasthan. We discovered that many of the adolescent girls who were also going to an *anganwadi* for counselling and other support were experiencing urinary tract infection.

There were two reasons. One was that the *anganwadi* was located in the school, where the sanitation facilities were not good. So these girls were either not coming to the *anganwadi* when menstruating or, when they were, they were holding their urine because the toilets were so bad. They couldn't go back home to use the toilet because that would mean having to cover one or two kilometres.

There was a toilet there, which was part of the *anganwadi* system. But it was not designed for use by multiple users such as mothers, very young children and the adolescent girls. An investment had been made in the toilet but it was dysfunctional. So while the programme is clear that toilets are needed for children, adolescent girls and mothers, in fact they are designed for none of them!

Q: It is claimed that water is reaching a whole lot of schools and *anganwadis*. What would you say about water quality or the manner in which it reaches the schools?

There are a lot of issues around getting water. In most cases the direct source of water itself is not there or if it is there, it is often dysfunctional.

The quality of water is supposed to be tested by the PHED (Public Health Engineering Department) at every *anganwadi*. But, invariably, when we asked for the report, the schools and the *anganwadis* said they had never seen a report from the PHED about the quality of the water they were drinking. And when we asked the PHED about it, we never found that report anywhere. Somebody must have conducted the test for sure, but we could never see it. That's our finding.

So, in Dungarpur and Barmer, two districts in Rajasthan where we could not get PHED reports, we decided to conduct tests ourselves. Fortunately, there was some old data prior to 2014 which was available on the website of the Central Groundwater Board and some other sources about the quality of water in every gram panchayat. So some of our team members dug up that data and they discovered high levels of fluoride and chloride.

We conducted tests ourselves and involved the school functionaries, children and their science teachers. We also invited some of the people from the local village community.

Our tests showed alarming levels of fluoride. We then drew samples and asked the PHED to conduct tests in its laboratory. As per the results, all the parameters matched our findings, except for fluoride. The fluoride level was shown by the PHED as normal when, in fact, it was very high. The ground evidence of this was showing up clearly in the deformed bones and teeth of children in these areas. How can we allow this?

'From the overall ration amount she gets, the *anganwadi* worker has to pay a cut to higher-ups. It's the system which is responsible for this.'

Q: When it comes to the quality of food, are we faced roughly with the same kind of problem?

There is more than one model under which the *anganwadi* provides the supplementary nutrition. One is where there is a centralized

kitchen somewhere, perhaps run by a Self-Help Group (SHG) or some central entities who are making the food and then supplying it, perhaps at the village level, the cluster level or even at city level. So it is not really being cooked within the *anganwadi*.

Another model is when food is cooked at the *anganwadi*. In that case, funds are provided to the *anganwadi* worker to procure the raw materials. Some food is provided by the department through the Food Corporation of India (FCI), for instance, oil and cereals. But the *anganwadi* worker has to procure vegetables and the like on her own. In some cases, they are doing a very good job. I've tasted the food myself, sitting with them. It was very well cooked and very well served.

But, in many cases, there's a numbers game. They would show a figure on the register and say this is the number of children who are enrolled (and present). But actually those children do not ever come to the *anganwadi* because nobody actually invites them there. Meals are being prepared only on paper, not in reality.

So the ingredients for the meals are all procured and then sold. The *anganwadi* worker gets part of that money and the rest goes up as part of that corruption process I mentioned.

Another kind of food distribution is pre-packed foodstuff meant for distribution to malnourished and undernourished children in the *anganwadis*. These orders are bagged either by SHGs or by some central agency and provided to the *anganwadi* centres.

I don't think there is much pilferage happening in this model. I haven't gone into the nitty-gritty of how pre-packed food is procured. I have seen some of the packing units in rural areas by SHGs and they were quite meticulous. ■

DILEEP RANJEKAR

‘Tech in schools works when teacher-driven’

Published in November 2021

MUCH STORE IS being placed by online learning. Companies in the business of tutoring children are now being valued at billions of dollars. Word has been getting around that digitized learning is the way to bridge huge backlogs in education. But transforming the classroom through technology may not, however, be so easy.

In fact, going by experience, bringing in technology by itself probably yield few benefits. Teachers are needed to use technology well and provide the human touch in the learning process.

There is also the possibility that clumsy attempts to push technology without adequate preparation may actually have the opposite effect by further weakening an already inadequate school system. It could result in widening of the gap between the rich and the poor who don't have access to the required infrastructure or the resources to invest in devices.

Previous experiments show that for technology to deliver a better quality of education, it needs to be first espoused and comfortably used by the teacher.

To find out more, we spoke to Dileep Ranjekar of the Azim Premji Foundation (APF), which introduced digital learning resources as an attempt to provide alternative learning experiences for schoolchildren 20 years ago with limited results. Edited excerpts from the interview:

Q: The Azim Premji Foundation tried putting digitized lessons in government schools, but it didn't seem to work out to satisfaction. What was the learning from that initiative?

To begin with, they were not digital lessons but “digital learning resources” (DLR) to provide a learning experience which was interactive and self-paced. This was initiated in 2000 and continued till 2007 in the 10 percent of government schools which already had computers.

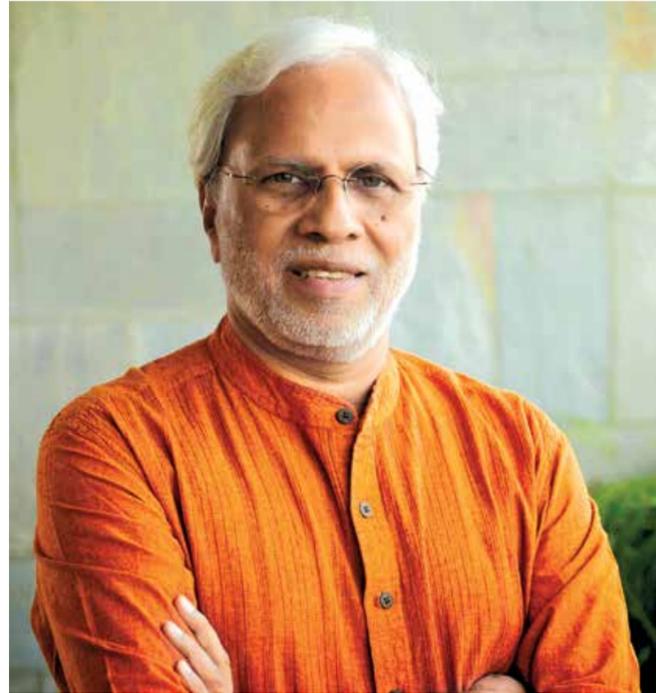
We were continuously taking stock of the effectiveness with which these schools were using the DLR. In 2007, we evaluated the programme through an external agency and got it researched for outcomes in four or five states. What we found was that in terms of learning there was no difference between the schools that had our digitized resources and those that did not.

There were some exceptions where there was a perceptible improvement in learning. But we found it was because teachers had understood the digital content and they were choosing to use it to supplement their pedagogy. Among the gains from the programme were better attendance and enrolment. There was community support and we found children being shifted from private schools to government schools.

So for the three important goals of enrolment, attendance and quality of learning, there were some positive results for two, but not for the third, barring exceptional cases.

The research revealed that 57 percent of the schools couldn't use their computers either due to lack of electricity or maintenance issues with computers including things like a CD getting stuck in the computer.

By 2007, the focus of school education had shifted from attendance and enrolment to quality of learning. So we decided to probe further.



Dileep Ranjekar: 'There has never been a national vision to deploy technology in schools'

Was the problem with the content of the DLR or the way it was getting deployed? Those were years when CDs were still in use and internet penetration was almost non-existent in schools.

To understand the real issues, we decided to do further research for a period of about two and a half years in three states: Odisha, Puducherry and Chhattisgarh. We said in some schools we would have no intervention. In some others we would focus on capacity building of teachers. And in a third category of schools we undertook both capacity building of teachers as well as letting them choose whatever digital learning resources they wanted to use as part of their teaching-learning.

Obviously, after two and a half years, the winner was the third category in which the capacity of teachers was enhanced and the technology they used was an integral part of their pedagogy.

So, the findings were very clear that the teacher is the pivot. The teacher's capacity and understanding of what is education and how it should be carried out to get the best results with the children is most critical. And unless the teachers integrated technology as an integral part of their pedagogical process, technology alone would not work.

One problem of the digital learning resources used by government schools was that teachers were not fully involved. There was a room, there was a computer and the classroom bell would ring and that period was a computer-aided learning class. But that was it. The teachers almost used it as relief for themselves.

Q: How many states came on board for the computer-aided learning programme?

Eighteen states came on board as the DLR was available in as many as 21 different languages, including four tribal languages. Many of them were Hindi-speaking states. We had initially done a pilot in Mandya and Kolar districts of Karnataka. The government liked what it saw in the pilot and asked the Foundation to help implement the programme in over 500 schools across the state that already had computers.

We did not ask a single state to buy computers. The programme was for those government schools that already had computers but did not know what to do with them. Because, as far as we were concerned, it was not just about technology or computers but about an alternative experience of learning.

Much effort went into developing the DLR through visuals and

storytelling so as to attract children. We must have invested around \$2 million in the programme.

Q: That was in 2007. We are now in 2021. Is the teacher better equipped to use digital learning tools today?

The majority of teachers are still hesitant and have apprehensions about using digital technology as a part of the educational process. It is because most of the teachers were not born in the technology era. The exceptions are the young teachers who got infused into the system during the past 15 years and who are comfortable with technology.

Infrastructure in the form of investment in technology, the availability of internet with the appropriate speed and bandwidth, etc is a very real issue. Electricity supply continues to be a problem. It is very unpredictable, especially in rural, semi-rural and many urban areas too. These constraints were more acute earlier, but they continue substantially.

Budgets for electricity and internet broadband are non-existent in almost all schools — it's important to note that budgets provided by the government for teaching-learning material in many states is merely ₹500 per teacher per year — and that too has been discontinued by some states in the recent past.

Availability of high quality content in the local language is a big challenge. A few English-speaking elite schools are able to go in for something the parents can afford to provide the required technological solutions to their children. A very minuscule percentage of students use content provided by only commercial organizations, not by organizations which are dedicated and focused on quality of education alone.

Q: Are you saying that we don't have a national strategy?

Absolutely correct. There has never been a national vision for deployment of technology in education — nor is it a part of teacher education. As a member of many government committees, I get amused when some very senior people, including ministers and bureaucrats, claim to have improved the quality of education in their states by merely providing computers. This is a very simplistic view. What do you do with that computer? How have you transformed the process of teaching and learning? How has the understanding of teachers improved in using these computers? What are the children allowed to do on the computer? What kind of technology are you using? There is no mention of all this.

It is all very simplistic and, unfortunately, even educated people who are not aware of the education process glibly speak of deploying technology to improve quality of education without reference to teachers. The reality is that there is not a single country where you have a valid example of technology in education being deployed on a mass scale to improve quality of education. We have observed education (including usage of technology) in many countries, including Australia, France, Japan, Singapore, the UK, US, etc and not found any experiment at scale.

Q: The teacher can't be replaced by the computer, but the computer or your digital learning can reinforce what the teacher does in a lead role? Is this what you are saying?

Exactly. I saw very interesting usage of technology in Finland. A real flower was projected as it is in the classroom. The parts of the flower could be magnified. That is the kind of technology we need to put in the hands of the teacher. In our own government schools, at some places where our digital learning resources were being used, I saw some fantastic innovations. But they had nothing to do with the vision of any particular government.

Q: These are outliers.

Outliers that will fade away if not systematically encouraged.

Q: In the past few months, because of many aspects of the pandemic, divisions have grown between the elite and non-elite sections of society.

Let me quote the findings of research carried out by the Azim Premji

Foundation across five Indian states, close to 26 districts and more than 1,500 public schools. This covered about 90,000 students or so. And the study brought out the non-effectiveness of online education.

An overwhelming majority of teachers and parents suggested that the online mode was inadequate and ineffective for education. And this has nothing to do with Byju's and others, this is online education. Teachers shared their professional frustration with conducting online classes. More than 80 percent of the teachers expressed the impossibility of maintaining “emotional contact” with their students during these classes, thus eliminating the very basis of education, which is an emotional connect with learners. And more than 90 percent of teachers felt that no meaningful assessment of children's learning was possible during online classes. It was just not possible.

Parents echoed the same sentiment with almost 70 percent being of the opinion that online classes were not effective for imparting learning to their children. They wanted the schools to reopen. The study also highlighted the massive, absolutely massive, digital divide. More than 60 percent of children could not access online education opportunities because of the non-availability of smartphones and difficulty in using apps. The issue of access was further exacerbated for children with disabilities. Ninety percent of teachers expressed their inability to deal with the problem of disability online.

‘Teachers shared their frustration with conducting online classes. More than 80 percent expressed the impossibility of maintaining emotional contact with students.’

Q: What is it that you feel can be done to get teachers to utilize digital resources more effectively?

One thing I want to clarify is that, per se, we are not against technology. I and some of my colleagues really come from technology backgrounds, technology companies. What we don't agree with is the glibness with which technology is deployed in schools. There has to be a national vision for implementing technology. It has to be mapped on the National Education Policy and the National Curriculum Framework. Anything detached from these two will have no future and no meaning.

Q: It has to be designed for the last child.

Exactly. Including providing for ever-changing technology. Having done this, the number one priority is improving the competence of teachers. Their outlook for overall education, their perspective of education, their alignment with the national policy documents on what education should achieve and how it should be transacted. We have to have very developed and very capacitated teachers who will look at technology as an additional, supplementary tool for making teaching-learning far more effective. So it has to be an integral part of the teaching-learning process and not be a standalone. It cannot be used in an ad hoc manner.

Q: So you first need a functioning educational system with a vision. And the biggest resource within the education system is the teacher.

Absolutely, absolutely. The government has opened schools to reach 97 percent of the population at the middle school level, and almost 99 percent at the primary level. Similarly, if the government thinks that technology is an integral aspect of education, it must provide for it in a meaningful manner, not just by placing computers and smartboards. It must provide for technology at its own cost — like it currently provides textbooks, mid-day meals and other facilities free of cost. ■

AJAY MATHUR

‘Solar is now the cheapest power you get in India’

Published in November 2022

WITH GLOBAL WARMING, pollution and wildly unpredictable fossil fuel prices, renewable energy is the answer. India has played a leading role in the International Solar Alliance, but how successful has it been in facing up to the challenge of increasing solar power production capacities and bringing down the cost of solar power for consumers?

Ajay Mathur, CEO of the International Solar Alliance, says rapid strides have been made and that there is much to cheer about. Big-ticket investments changed the scale on which solar electricity is wheeled through the distribution system. Small producers have also been making solar power locally available. On the grid, solar power at ₹1.99 per kilowatt hour is the cheapest power available at its sunshine price. The price when locally produced and distributed is higher but still lower than the price of fossil fuel power.

Q: India is pledged to installing 100 gigawatts of solar energy by 2022. Are we on course?

Actually, as a country, we have done relatively well. In 2012-13 we had zero megawatts of solar power. Today, we have crossed around 60,000 megawatts, or 60 gigawatts. This is a huge jump.

In 2015, we had committed that 32 to 35 percent of our electricity installed capacity would be from

non-fossil fuel sources: hydro, nuclear, solar. We are already at about 38 percent. Solar and wind together account for something like 11 percent of the electricity that is fed into the grid. In 2015, solar was about zero percent and wind was about 4 percent.

This has happened largely because we got one thing right and that is how to add large-scale solar capacity into the grid. What we did was to move to a regime where new solar capacity is auctioned again and again.

We learnt that investors find it risky to invest in a project where land and PPAs (power purchase agreements) are not there. So, as much as possible, we try to put these issues in place before the tendering occurs. As a result, in 2015, the price of solar electricity was around ₹12 per kilowatt hour. Today it is ₹1.99 per kilowatt hour and is the cheapest form of electricity in India, obviously available only when the sun is shining. But it is the cheapest.

Q: But what are the challenges?

One of the challenges we have faced is how do we get investments in solar and reduce the risks. The second challenge is what happens at night. In India, demand for electricity is increasing, whether it is day or night. The question asked is: Do I set up a solar facility and also a coal facility? Right now we have excess coal capacity which takes care of what is needed at night.

But the problem is that the contracts that distribution companies have with generators is that they pay a certain amount of money, irrespective of whether they buy electricity or not, because the person who has set up the generation plant has to pay the loan for that plant. He's not going to set it up until he's got some confidence that some money will be repaid. So that capital cost is repaid, no matter what.

And then if you buy electricity, you pay additional money for every kilowatt hour of electricity, which is essentially equal to the coal cost. So, because these people are paying the fixed cost, as it is called, they're paying the fixed cost anyway.

Therefore, the real challenge is to bring down the cost of solar electricity to being less than the variable cost of coal power. The total cost of coal power is about ₹3.5. Now, at ₹1.9 per kilowatt hour it is in the range of variable cost. Generally, the variable cost varies between ₹1.5 and ₹2.1 or ₹2.2 per kilowatt hour. We are now in that region.

Q: Who is buying solar power? You don't have multiple choice suppliers at the domestic level as yet. So who are the big bulk users buying solar at a cheaper cost and therefore being able to bring down other costs of production as well?

There are two categories of buyers. One are the distribution companies. Some are buying more, others are buying less. For example, Karnataka, Maharashtra, Rajasthan buy a lot of solar electricity. These are also states where solar electricity is generated. So they have greater confidence that they will get the electricity when they want. But then you have a second category, the large users: for example, the Delhi Metro which buys electricity from a solar plant in Madhya Pradesh.

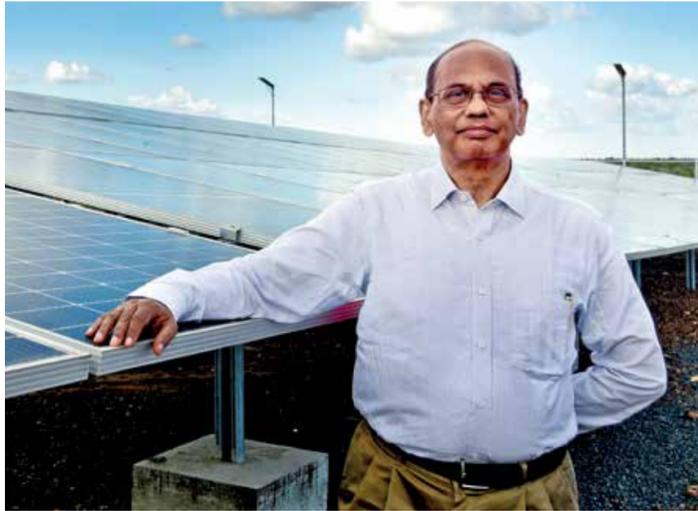
Q: And wheels it through the normal system that prevails?
Absolutely.

Q: Who are the key producers of our solar electricity?

The tendering route has gone in for large-scale plants. And as we've gone for larger and larger plants, we've got cheaper and cheaper prices. Who wins the tenders? It is a range of solar producers who compete and win these tenders. For example, ReNewPower and Greenko. They are in the business of producing solar and renewable electricity, setting up the plants and selling the electricity to potential buyers.

Q: Are there more big investments coming in?

Last year, around \$8 billion worth of investment went into the Indian solar sector. This is large. Many investors we have spoken to have said that the greatest challenge they face is fear of depreciation of the Indian



Ajay Mathur: 'Last year, around \$8 billion worth of investment went into the Indian solar sector'

rupee versus the US dollar. They, therefore, have all kinds of mechanisms to hedge it. But, till now, India has not faced a problem in getting external or internal resources.

Q: Are you saying there are both borrowings as well as FDI in these projects?

Yes, there is borrowings, FDI, and equity. In India solar has become a very mature financial market.

Q: So, in seven years from 2015 to 2020, there has been an enormous maturing of the solar industry in how it produces, distributes, invests and funds itself?

That's right and in the number and size of players in the market.

Q: Is there more competition happening as well?

A much greater degree of competition is happening between large-scale suppliers. You have a large number of players and the procurement system is open, transparent and based on lower and lower prices. The price declining to less than ₹2 per kilowatt hour is a reflection of that.

We have not seen an equivalent growth in the rooftop market. It is estimated today that some 40 percent of commercial consumers who have put up solar panels on their rooftops own the property. They want to make sure they use it. They can't get into the business of selling to consumers because the law says only the electricity company can sell it. Or I have to get permission from the electricity company to sell it.

There are third party companies putting up rooftop solar and selling at a price lower than what the consumer would get from the grid. For example, there's a company called Fourth Partner Energy which has set up plants right next to us here in Gurugram. They sell electricity at ₹4.4. If you buy from the grid, it's ₹7.5. Again, this is during the day. For commercial users, this is absolutely fine. In all these cases, the total electricity produced is less than the total demand. So the consumer buys from the grid as well as from the solar seller.

Q: Are we getting solar electricity to remote villages in India?

It comes into the grid so it goes everywhere. There's no separate electron which is a renewable energy electron versus one which is a fossil fuel electron. The electricity distribution companies buy solar because it's cheaper and then it goes everywhere, including to the villages.

The second answer is that in specific cases, for example, in Maharashtra, they gave land in rural substations to a company called EESL or Energy Efficiency Services Limited, which set up solar plants and supplies electricity during the day particularly to the agricultural sector. So, those villages are getting solar power during the day and the reliability is much higher. The electricity company, by their own accounts which they submitted before the regulatory commission, say when they got it from the grid, to the rural substation, it used to cost ₹7.38. EESL sells it to them at ₹4 per kilowatt hour.

So you can imagine the huge difference. What the Maharashtra electricity board said is, if I get this, I will make no losses. So we see both electricity and solar electricity coming in through the grid and going to all users as well as in this case being generated for the agricultural sector.

Q: What is holding us back from using this kind of distributed power more in the agricultural sector? Also, say, solar pumps.

There are two problems. The first is that the cost of a solar pump set is much higher than of a diesel pump set. So, while the electricity is cheaper, as far as the farmer is concerned, it is money out of his pocket.

That is why the government introduced the KUSUM programme to support farmers who invest in solar. They have various categories under which the farmer can buy the solar pump or several farmers can get together to set up the solar pump.

Remember, our farmers typically have small holdings. Therefore space going to solar implies that there is less space for farming. Because of the high price, it becomes very difficult for them to invest. Large farmers have

been investing in solar. We have seen that happening across the board.

I'm a marginal farmer too. I put up a solar pump about seven years ago. It's been working beautifully. I have now tried to get into the business of selling water to my neighbours. This is wonderful because everybody doesn't have to dig a bore well.

Secondly, I will sell water through a pipe, because then I'm reducing the amount of transpiration. And my neighbour will also want to distribute it through a pipe because he also wants to get the maximum use out of that water. So it helps in the efficiency of water use. It's happening, but very, very, very slowly.

An added problem is the lack of maintenance people. The government has launched a programme called Surya Mitra, in which they are training mechanics who can travel to villages and repair solar pumps. But this is a chicken and egg situation. You need a large number of solar pumps for the mechanic to make a living. And you need an adequate number of solar lights to make it financially viable for the mechanic.

Q: How can distribution be made more competitive and efficient and thereby bring down costs?

One of the key issues is that the price of the electricity that a distribution company buys from the generator has to be linked to time. Between 6 pm and about 10 or 11 pm, there is an increase in the load because lighting and air conditioning are switched on at that time. We need to ensure a higher price for peak demand.

‘Solar and wind together account for something like 11 percent of the electricity that is fed into the grid. In 2015, solar was about zero and wind was about 4 percent.’

Generators of hydro-power will need to invest in creating tail-end storage and the solar energy generator will have to spend on setting up batteries. They will invest only if there is a higher price available at times of higher use. So the first issue we need to address at the generation level is to make the prices time-dependent.

Q: Globally, we've had the COVID-19 pandemic, then there is the ongoing Russia-Ukraine war. How have these developments and the fluctuating price of oil affected the International Solar Alliance and its partners?

Irrespective of the pandemic, the addition of solar electricity and the money that has gone into the sector have kept increasing at a relatively fast pace. Last year, for example, approximately \$200 billion was invested in solar energy, a very large amount. It is approximately the amount of money that was invested when a lot of fossil fuel energy installation was happening. What the pandemic did was to show that countries needed to create as much indigenous capacity as possible. Russian gas export restrictions impacted global trade and fossil fuels, more than anything else, and therefore, we have seen a fast increase in solar and in batteries.

Q: But hasn't disruption in supply chains affected manufacture?

You're absolutely right. What has happened is that the price of a solar panel is higher now than it was three years ago. What we're looking at is a future where two things are very clear. Number one, by 2030 solar with batteries will be the cheapest form of energy in most geographies of the world. By 2050 it will be the cheapest with no competition. If this is so then demand will increase in each country across the world. And if supply chains are going to be a challenge we will need to create manufacturing facilities across the world. ■

RITWICK DUTTA

‘We approach environmental litigation like criminal lawyers’

Published in January-February 2022

TAKE A GOOD cause to court and what can you hope to get? Only as much as the law can give you. Even as concern over the environment has continued to grow, winning verdicts against offenders needs clever lawyers as much, or perhaps even more, than activists with heart.

Ritwick Dutta, 47, and Rahul Choudhary, 47, have the distinction of being both activists and savvy lawyers at the same time. They have won several landmark verdicts, one of the most significant being against the mining rights given to Vedanta in Odisha. The secret of their success in court is that they are diligent about separating the cause from the case. Using the fine print in rules and regulations, they have got the better of highly paid counsel and powerful companies.

Dutta and Choudhary were recently recognized with the Right Livelihood Award, or the ‘Alternative Nobel Prize’ as it is also popularly known, for defending the rights of people whose livelihoods and traditions are affected by projects.

When not in court, Dutta and Choudhary are campaigners who create awareness in communities about their legal rights in relation to natural resources. In this role as activists, they work through their trust, the Legal Initiative for Forest and Environment (LIFE).

We spoke to Dutta in a long and freewheeling interview when they returned from Stockholm after receiving their award. Here is a small and edited part of that insightful conversation.

Q: You are one of the country’s leading environmental lawyers. But very little is known about you, your partner, Rahul, and LIFE, your trust.

Let me be very frank, I had no great interest in law. I graduated in sociology from Delhi University and studied law so that I could get more time to think about what I wanted to do in life. An LLB gives you breathing space. Personally, I didn’t see myself becoming a litigation lawyer wearing a coat and gown and standing before judges. In fact, I didn’t enrol as a lawyer till 2001, which was all of two years after I got my law degree.

My core interest was, and remains, nature and wildlife. I started going to wildlife sanctuaries across India. As I moved around, it



Ritwick Dutta (right) with Rahul Choudhary, winners of the Right Livelihood Award

became clear to me that love for wildlife is linked to keeping the habitat intact. The animal is at risk due to poaching but the wild animal’s home is at greater risk due to habitat destruction whether in the form of mines, dams and highways among other projects.

A lot of wrong things were happening across the country, at that time, since people weren’t going to court out of fear — not of courts or judges — but of lawyers. They are more afraid of lawyers than of the courts. The first thing they worry about is how much the fellow is going to charge. With lawyers, even a cup of tea costs money. As a result, even when violations take place in front of people’s eyes, and they are aware of them, they are reluctant to take legal recourse.

Q: So, that prompted you to set up LIFE?

LIFE was a result of the realization that there is need for a specialized environmental law group in India — one that takes up different environmental issues across the country.

However, it is important to clarify that none of the litigation we undertake is funded through LIFE, which is a trust for creating awareness among people about their environmental rights and undertaking research in areas concerning environmental law and policy.

We also decided, as a matter of practice and principle, that we would only represent others. We would not file cases in our own names and never in the name of LIFE. That remains our basic motto.

There was hardly any organization on environmental law. We felt there was need for an environmental lawyer doing general practice in environmental law. We had lawyers doing tax matters, family matters and then 10 percent would be environmental law cases.

There were individual lawyers but very little specialization in the field of environmental law. You had people doing forests, pollution, wildlife and so on. We must have done close to 1,000 cases.

Q: How do clients approach you?

Multiple things are at work. There is a huge civil society network in India. A lot of them are aware of our work. They bring issues directly to us. There are networks that exist on forest rights, on mining and wildlife among others. Our many cases give us visibility irrespective of whether we win or lose.

One of LIFE’s core activities has been training and capacity building of communities and NGOs across the country. We make people aware of their legal rights vis-à-vis the environment. We don’t ask them to come to us, but this is one way in which cases do come to us.

We take fees in our individual capacity as lawyers but as an organization we only take funding for training and research. For litigation we urge communities to pay as per their capacity. If they don’t have the capacity to pay, then we subsidize them or, in some instances, do it pro bono.

Q: How do you subsidize them?

We don’t quote any fees. We leave it to the community to decide. If they don’t have money, they give a declaration.

We give them three options. One, to pay the fees as they deem fit. Second, for those who cannot afford to pay professional fees, we expect them to pay for at least the cost of litigation — court fees, photocopying charges etc. Finally, those who cannot afford to pay anything, we ask them to give a declaration.

In my early days in Odisha I told the community I would appear for free. Their condition was such that I felt bad taking money from them. The villagers insisted on paying and, when I asked why, they said it was their experience that a lawyer who appears for free gets bought out by the other side! By paying they felt I would pick up their call and they would have the right to question me.

We have managed to change the domain of environmental litigation from being the exclusive domain of NGOs or human rights groups to one where affected individuals are the petitioners. We believe in the power of the individual. Whether you look at the POSCO steel plant or the Vedanta bauxite mine in Odisha or the hydropower project cases in the Himalayas, it is in most instances, the individual farmer, fisherman or pastoralist who is the petitioner.

The nature of litigants has also changed. It is not always poor people struggling to eke out their living that need our help. Many a time well-off farmers involved in agribusiness or aquaculture also approach us since they fear loss of business due to environmental degradation.

For example, we represented the Alphonso mango growers of Ratnagiri in Maharashtra. They are well-off farmers, mainly exporters. They said their exports would be affected if a

coal-fired power plant came up within 15 km of their orchards. WTO standards say no exports to Europe if you have a power plant next to it. They gave us fairly good resources.

We also represented one Ali Hussain, a large aquaculture guy in Tamil Nadu who feared that a power plant would affect his business. At the same time, a lot of traditional fisherfolk were also opposed to it. The fees we get from a person who has greater financial capacity are used to subsidize those who are unable to afford the cost of litigation.

Q: Your Vedanta case was a landmark case. Tell us about its significance.

The Supreme Court’s judgment is significant because, for the first time in the Indian system, the aspect of referendum was applied. The court actually directed that it is for the gram sabhas in the Dongria Kondh tribal areas to decide whether mining should take place or not.

‘We have managed to change the domain of environmental litigation from being the exclusive domain of NGOs to one where affected individuals are the petitioners.’

What is very important is the chief minister of the state approved the proposal for mining, the environment minister approved it and, finally, even the prime minister approved it. Yet the Supreme Court, relying on the Forest Rights Act (FRA), held that it still had to be placed before the gram sabha for its consent. This is democracy at work.

The judgment is significant for this issue. It places decision-making in the hands of the people to be affected most by mining. What is unfortunate is that the precedents of this case have not been followed in subsequent cases on mining, dams or other projects. Our learning was that environmental cases need to be fought on specific points in the law and not emotive issues. We argued that proper procedure had not been followed in the EIA.

The entire EIA did not mention the sacred nature of Niyamgiri. The EIA process requires cultural aspects to be taken into consideration, which are unfortunately ignored the most.

Q: You managed to halt a hydropower project in Tawang in Arunachal Pradesh. Stopping a hydropower project is tough to do.

In the Tawang case we basically used administrative law principles. We approach environmental litigation like a criminal lawyer would approach a case. What are the finer details that are missing? What is the critical omission that would render the whole project void?

In Tawang we found it in the EIA report which did not take into account the black-necked crane which was sacred to the Buddhist community at Tawang. There is a clear requirement in the EIA forms to state if the area is important from a cultural point of view. We had enough documentary evidence to show that this area is regarded as sacred because six or seven black-necked cranes, considered the embodiment of the Dalai Lama, come to the site for wintering in December.

The scientists who did the EIA in summer could not have noticed the black-necked cranes because the birds come for wintering from China. They don’t come in summer. The scientists, on the other hand, found December too cold to be in Tawang!

We said this was an instance of concealment of information. In the form they filled up for Tawang the project’s developers said there was no sacred place and no endangered species in the area. And they signed it. Above

it was written that the information provided is true and correct and if it is found to be incorrect at any stage the approval granted should be revoked at the project proponent’s risk and cost. It was signed by the managing director of the company. We invoked that provision.

In most environment cases we do not approach the case as an environment sustainability issue. We look for a violation of the process and a point in law. In the case of Tawang, we said the omission was a case of misrepresentation. The law says submission of wrong, false and misleading statements is a ground for revocation of approval already granted. We applied those principles.

The NGT said in its judgment that both the project proponent and the consultant did not disclose the presence of the black-necked crane which they ought to have. It said to do a fresh study looking at the concerns of the black-necked crane.

The NGT did not say that there should be no dam in that area. It directed the Wildlife Institute of India to do a fresh study keeping the black-necked crane as the focal point. It further directed that the result of the study should be placed before the local community who will then decide whether the impact of the dam will be positive or negative and if they should go ahead with it. I am happy to state that the Wildlife Institute of India, in its study, has said no to the project. ■

RAVI CHOPRA

‘All good advice on Joshimath was ignored’

Published in February-March 2023

THE RELIGIOUS TOWN of Joshimath is sinking and making headlines. Buildings have developed cracks and people are being moved to shelters. It is not every day that a mountain reclaims a whole town, but in Joshimath's case the signs were all in evidence. It is just that they were ignored.

Prescient votaries of careful development in the fragile ecology of the Himalayas have been cautioning against the building of wide roads and hydropower dam projects. But both have been happening on a scale that mountains can't cope with. Ravi Chopra's has been one such voice over the past 34 years.

An engineer with an IIT degree, he set up the People's Science Institute in Dehradun in 1988. More recently, he was on an expert committee appointed by the Supreme Court to study the impact of hydropower dam projects in the Himalayas. He finally chose to resign from the committee in 2021 because he felt the government was impervious to scientific advice. *Civil Society* spoke to Chopra, 77, in an extended interview, excerpts of which appear below:

Q: Why is Joshimath sinking? What is your assessment?

My assessment is that a number of factors are causing Joshimath to sink. This phenomenon has a history and an immediate cause. If you look at the history, this is old landslide debris left behind by glaciers which has stabilized over centuries. The first major assault on this location begins after the 1962 war with China after which roads were built. An army cantonment was located here later, which is necessary.

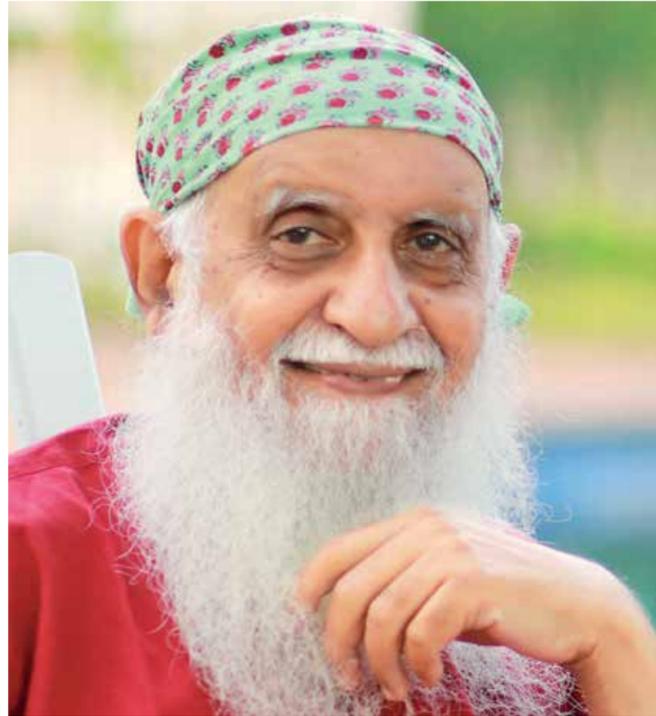
In the building of roads, however, the kind of care that was needed to be taken, it appears, has not been taken. That can also be excused. In those days there was no experience of building roads in such mountainous areas. Thereafter, cracks began to develop in different parts of the town and the UP government appointed the Mishra Committee — Mishra was the divisional commissioner at that time and Bhure Lal, the famous IAS officer, was the DM.

The committee cautioned against unplanned urbanization. It cautioned against deforestation and, most importantly, it cautioned that the toe of the hills should not be disturbed because the slope above is sensitive and prone to sliding. Now this is in 1976.

The tunnel construction goes back to 2005 or so. That's when construction of hydro projects began. I was just reading a paper, published in 2006, which talks of the development of cracks, particularly in Ravigram in Joshimath — the area most affected now.

After the state of Uttarakhand was formed, to boost tourism, infrastructure was enhanced, and the population of the town increased to around 20,000-25,000. The care that mountain towns and cities require was not given. The Mishra Committee's recommendation not to deforest was forgotten.

To make the slopes attractive to skiers in Auli, which lies above Joshimath, the slope was 'designed' and a ropeway was built. In 2009, I think, the first signs of a major disaster occurred — the sudden leakage of



Ravi Chopra: 'We need to devote deep thought on how to plan mountain cities'

water from the hillside which is traced to the tunnel boring machine of the Tapovan-Vishnugad project that seems to have punctured an aquifer.

There are reports that several of these kinds of ingresses in aquifers have occurred. So, 700-800 million litres of water was being discharged per second and the aquifer was discharging 60-70 million litres per day. At that time a report by two scientists from Garhwal University says: "This sudden enlarged descale watering of the strata has the potential of initiating ground subsidence in the region."

As a member of the Expert Committee set up by the Supreme Court in 2013, we also looked at this issue of dams being built in the higher regions of the Himalayas. The Vishnuprayag hydropower project had been destroyed at that time. We came to the conclusion that this is a paraglacial zone, that there is a lot of glacial debris left behind in this zone which during heavy rain can be mobilized and brought down with devastating effect.

We said that at roughly 2,200 m elevation, dams should not be built. Later we revised it to beyond the main central thrust. That means beyond Helang in this valley, dam construction should not take place.

Of course, the government does not listen to all this.

Q: Then you have disasters?

You have the 2021 disaster. It results in a lot of debris and water coming into the tunnel. The tunnel work is then suspended. But that water is sitting there. Local residents have said that there have been blasts in the tunnel thereafter.

It can be that during that blasting some new fissures opened up. The mass of water was trying to push its way forward. And ultimately it finds a route and in finding that route it weakens the soil cover above it. That is what we saw on January 2 or 3 when water leakage started appearing below the Jaypee (Vidya Mandir) campus.

I should add that the heavy release of underground water in 2009 may have also led to subsequent subsidence.

The final straw came when the Helang-Marwari bypass was to be built. The people of the town were apprehensive about the road. They thought their economy would suffer because tourists would just bypass the town.

We were not too keen on sanctioning this particular project because of the Mishra Committee's recommendation that the toe of the hill should

not be disturbed. The BRO (Border Roads Organization) was adamant about building the road.

In the course of discussions, we undertook a field visit. The BRO pointed out that their road, from Helang to Marwari, a stretch of five and a half km or so, would be constructed along a hard rock portion of the hill and not the debris portion of the hill.

So, given its importance for defence purposes, which the government put forward, we made a compromise suggestion. We said that the traffic going to Badrinath should go through Joshimath so that people's businesses are not affected but for the returning traffic this bypass can be opened up. There are traffic jams in the town during the tourist season, so returning traffic can come via this road. In which case you don't need a 10-metre tarred surface road. You need to cut (the hill slope) less.

So, we approved the Helang-Marwari bypass with the additional caveat that before any work starts there has to be a very thorough geological, geophysical and geotechnical analysis. Locals tell me there has been blasting for that road. This should have been avoided as far as possible.

This is the history, and the immediate cause of subsidence is dewatering of the tunnel, I suspect.

Q: Is Joshimath doomed? Can it be saved?

It is too early to say until I make a field visit and talk to senior geologists whom I can trust. I would say what appeared in October 2021 was dismissed as a localized phenomenon. Even a year later, people were thinking this is a localized phenomenon happening in one or two wards.

By December 2022, some 500 houses were in trouble. And now it appears houses through a large part of the town are damaged. The Experts Committee sent by the state said that an area of about 1.5 square km is affected. The chief secretary has informed the PMO that a strip about 350 m wide in that area has crashed. Dr Piyush Rautela, director of the Disaster Mitigation and Management Centre of Uttarakhand, says that the slide is affecting the whole town.

We have friends who live close to Auli and they are saying their houses have developed cracks. So, I suspect a large part of the town is threatened by the slide. We are fortunate that we are not in the monsoon season. We still have time to do a careful study and see how much of the town can be saved and retrieved.

Q: Isn't there any urban planning specific to hill towns?

There isn't. But there is a very serious need to devote deep thought on how to plan mountain cities. You look at Shimla, Mussoorie, Nainital. Buildings are precariously located. Trees are chopped down. The green cover drastically reduced. Vegetation has disappeared.

Most of these cities are unfortunately located on old debris. We have seen problems in Dharchula in the east, and in Uttarkashi district in the west. We need a completely new understanding of how to build mountain cities, based on carrying capacity studies.

Q: Do you see many more towns and villages in this region getting similarly affected? What has been the effect of the Char Dham road building, for instance?

If you see the report of the high-powered committee, you will see a list of vulnerable zones that have been created as a result of the Char Dham Pariyojana. There are certain zones that may be described as being permanently affected. There will be landslides there. It will be difficult to stop that.

As I said, the kind of care that was needed to be taken was not taken. It was clear to many of us in the committee that the ministry had given a certain deadline and engineers were working according to that deadline. All caution was thrown to the wind.

Q: Is this entire pilgrimage route now subject to landslides, subsidence, flooding and so on?

I would say there are vulnerable zones. There are landslide zones on all the highways and government officials now recognize that. To give you an example, a little while ago, they agreed to build the last 25 km of the highway to Yamunotri on an intermediate width design. We had been arguing that the full road should be built according to that design. Now they've concluded that it is a very vulnerable stretch, and they will use the intermediate width design.

We did a preliminary calculation which included a few factors for the carrying capacity of Gangotri. We concluded that most likely the carrying capacity of Gangotri has already been reached or is about to be reached in the near future, in this decade.

The current road from Uttarkashi to Gangotri, about 100 km, has a tarred surface of about seven or eight metres and traffic is moving on it. We do not think it is necessary to expand the width of that road. But the BRO and the ministry are bent on making a 10-metre road. Now to do that you will have to do substantial cutting of the mountain slopes which, at many locations on that stretch, have a very high degree of slope. The official recommendation is that more than 35/36-degree slopes should not be cut. But on the Uttarkashi-Gangotri stretch, slopes are 50 degrees, 60 degrees and 70 degrees. But they are pushing ahead.

There are treasures on that route. If you go to the Char Dham today I can guarantee you will get a sensation when you travel on the Uttarkashi-Gangotri stretch. You will think, *Yeh elaka kitna sundar hai*. You will get this sensation because it has been declared an eco-sensitive zone and haphazard construction has been restricted.

Beyond Uttarkashi there is the town block headquarters of Batwari where the slope is sinking just like Joshimath. The river cuts past it below and from the town the earth is sliding down. In 2010-11, the road just sank. Several shops on the side of the road cracked. These are not new things. We know where the vulnerable zones are, but we have no plans on how to handle them.

Q: Why are people not objecting? Uttarakhand has a history of protests against ecological destruction.

If Joshimath can't be a turning point *phir toh halat bahut kharab hai*. Then only the Almighty can save us, though I'm not a believer in God. Because a number of warnings that have been given, have come true.

It is not as if there haven't been protests but the construction lobby and the dam lobby are the strongest lobbies in the country. They are not stupid. They deploy their intelligence to safeguard their business. Therefore, they have learnt ways of breaking up society into people for them and against them. Just like the dam lobby, the government too has its scientists who are worried about their jobs, if they don't toe the government line. I've seen this in the Char Dham committee.

Q: Have any dams been cancelled?

Three projects on the Bhagirathi were cancelled after Dr G.D. Agarwal's fast. The Wildlife Institute of India had recommended that 24 projects on the Alaknanda-Bhagirathi basin be removed. The court had asked us in 2013 to review those projects. Our recommendation was that 23 out of the 24 dams should be cancelled.

We wanted to cancel all of them but one of our members, a representative of the Central Electricity Authority, refused to sign. Since much of the damage on that stretch had already been done by the Tehri Dam and the Koteshwar Dam, we agreed he could build one dam but we gave him a series of conditions. We were confident it would be hard for them to meet those conditions. But all those 24 dams are still stuck in court. ■

ANKIT SRIVASTAVA

‘Water bodies are coming back in Delhi’

Published in August 2019

IN DAYS GONE by Delhi used to be dotted with water bodies. Many have disappeared under roads and buildings and the ones that remain are just sad relics filled with garbage and sewage. Meanwhile, groundwater levels in the city plummet as citizens continue to bore deeper for water.

The Aam Aadmi Party (AAP) government in Delhi has now launched an ambitious plan to improve groundwater levels by reviving defunct water bodies and constructing lakes to harvest water. An initial pilot project in Rajokri by the Delhi Jal Board (DJB) is going to be the template for this rejuvenation. Rajokri, on the Delhi-Gurugram border, had a pond filled with sewage from an unauthorised colony adjacent to it. The DJB cleaned it up, put in a sewage treatment plant, constructed a wetland and landscaped the area. Local residents were thrilled. The ecological benefits from the project are likely to be considerable. One offshoot could be a cleaner Yamuna.

Ankit Srivastava, technical adviser with the DJB, spoke to *Civil Society* about their plans for water bodies.

Q: How many water bodies is the DJB planning to revive?

The DJB is working on 159 water bodies and the Irrigation and Flood Control Department is working on 95. We are also creating six large new lakes from flat land. Additionally, the DJB will also be working on nine lakes and 10 water bodies owned by the Delhi Development Authority (DDA).

Q: What is DJB's plan?

In Delhi we have three kinds of water bodies and lakes — those which are dry, those which are contaminated with sewage, and those which have mildly contaminated rainwater.

Based on water quality, topography, location — whether the water body is in a rural area, urban area, urban village or in an unauthorised colony — as well as the source of water, rejuvenation plans are drawn up. A customised plan is made largely for the arrangement of water for the water body.

In our definition, a water body needs to be filled with water throughout the year. It should not be a civil engineering exercise where you construct a wall around the water body and wait for rain to fall into it.

In our case, we are focusing more on using treated sewage as a source of water for water bodies as it is the only perennial source of water in Delhi. It rains only 15 or 16 days annually and the pattern of rain, especially its intensity, has changed. We get 600 mm of rain. But you will get 100 mm of rainfall in an hour or within a day. That is one-fifth of your rainfall quota.

Much of that water spills onto roads. Even if it falls into water bodies, it is too much to handle. The water will overflow from the water body.

Considering all these constraints, there is no general solution for rejuvenation. That is why customization for each water body and lake revival is required. Typically, 80 to 90 percent of water bodies in any city are contaminated with sewage. We are creating a small Sewage Treatment

Civil Society picture/Shrey Gupta



Ankit Srivastava: 'Customization for each water body and lake revival is required'

Plant (STP) for the colony adjoining the water body. This will also push us into setting up a sewage management system in that area. The STP will act as a source of water for the water body.

We will polish the water enough so that it can go underground into the water table. We are also creating rainwater harvesting structures and recharge pits in areas adjoining water bodies so that rainwater plus any overflow that happens down the line can go into the recharge pit and percolate into the ground.

Secondly, we are removing the historical waste in water bodies. That is a major reason why percolation is not happening. In this way, the water body will have water throughout the year.

The third component is that every water body has certain flora and fauna associated with it. We have included the cost of environment conservation in all our budgets so we can replant native species.

Lastly, social ownership. We are creating green spaces and putting up benches, open gyms and, wherever there is space, amphitheatres and a Chhath Ghat to connect people to the water body.

At the Timarpur lake, we have made provisions for medicinal plants, a butterfly park, an amphitheatre, a small refreshment centre and so on.

We also have certain set-ups where creating STPs is not feasible. In such cases, we will be bringing water from the nearest STP. The DJB has 36 big STPs where we already have cleaned water as part of the Yamuna Action Plan and the Ganga Action Plan. This water will be brought through a pipeline.

Some guidelines are still open-ended, like what kind of water should be put into the water bodies when you are bringing in treated sewage. We are going a step further and putting in an additional polishing pond. We will double check to ensure no contaminated water goes into the water body.

The main purpose remains groundwater recharge. Our definition of water body rejuvenation will be different from what the NBCC (National Buildings Construction Corporation) has done in old Delhi. They have put in a liner and filled up a water body with water. It's more of a swimming pool because there is no percolation of water. We won't go down that path. We will be taking the environmental route.

Q: How much water do you think will percolate from these water bodies and lakes?

Historically, there are variable rates of percolation within Delhi. The

Yamuna floodplain area, for example, has sand beds up to 40 to 50 metres. Sand beds have a very high percolation rate. In those areas, you have percolation rates of nine to 10 metres a day.

Then you have areas like Sangam Vihar, which are on hilly terrain with hard rock beneath the soil. There are no thumb rules here. Percolation would be based on the cracks. We have all sorts of percolation rates in Delhi from one mm to nine metres per day. But since our main focus is on groundwater recharge, we have been creating harvesting pits.

Right now, we are targeting percolation rates of 15 percent to 40 percent. If there is natural percolation, it is beneficial for us. Where there isn't, we will be making harvesting pits with precaution so that we can maintain the percolation rate and there is no contamination.

Q: How much water will be captured in these water bodies?

On an average, these 255 water bodies are between 0.5 acre to 1.5 acres. A one-acre water body with a depth of one metre has the capacity to hold almost one million gallons of water. Right now, we're calculating on the basis of a depth of one metre or three feet because we don't want anyone to drown in it.

So one million gallons of water with a 15 percent rate of percolation works out to 680,000 litres of water per day per water body. Multiply that with 255 water bodies. The capacity of lakes, however, is huge. For example, one lake in Rohini is able to hold 30 million gallons of water. So 15 percent of that is a huge amount. Similarly, the lake in Dwarka will be able to hold 33 million gallons of water.

So from six new lakes, about 30 million gallons of water will percolate to the underground water table, maybe a little more. From the smaller water bodies which number around 255, around 40 million gallons of water will percolate. Roughly, it will come to about 80 million gallons. This is about the same amount of water that the DJB pulls out of the ground.

Q: Water bodies come under the jurisdiction of a multiplicity of agencies. Are they keen on handing them over to the DJB for revival?

Irrespective of the landowning agency, the beneficiaries will be the population of Delhi. We took approval from the chief minister. On that basis, we requested the DDA to give us permission to rejuvenate their lakes. DDA has given us an NOC (No Objection Certificate) on condition that the DJB will pay for rejuvenation.

Other agencies tell us that they don't have the expertise to revive water bodies. We have volunteered to provide them technical expertise. But, largely, the response has not been very good. Meanwhile, we have taken over nine major lakes from the DDA, including the lake at Bhalaswa, which is 150 acres and has the capacity to hold 150 million gallons. Fifteen percent of percolation from that lake would be around 22.5 MGD.

If you rejuvenate all small water bodies you will save about 35 MGD. Then you have a lake at Tikri Khurd which is 70 acres and Sanjay Lake in east Delhi. Reviving Sanjay Lake will vastly improve water supply in east Delhi. The groundwater there has been severely depleted and has a high amount of TDS (totally dissolved solids).

I don't know how much the other departments are doing. I understand the DDA is trying. In fact, these 155 water bodies we are rejuvenating don't come under us. They belong to the Revenue Department. We do have an ample budget, but we can't take over all the water bodies.

Q: How do you deal with encroachments?

At the Rajokri site we faced this problem. Three or four slum dwellers were a real hindrance. They would throw stones at our contractors while they were working. Besides, such settlements are also a source of pollution. They have cows and buffaloes, which produce dung. We have written to the appropriate departments to remove encroachments but we are not going to let that stop us. We are redesigning the STP and the architectural part and assuming that the encroachment will remain.

If four or five households are encroaching on the land and putting sewage into the water, we will place intercepting lines, which go to our STP. So their sewage is still diverted to us. We are also including

operational and maintenance costs in our budget.

Q: Have you talked to resident welfare associations (RWAs)?

Yes. In Rajokri, our original plan did not have any provision for a Chhath Ghat. We got inputs from the RWA and nearby communities who celebrate Chhath Puja, that they want a small bifurcation of the water body exclusively for their religious activities. We constructed a small, natural wall in the water body. It cost us around ₹20 lakh to 30 lakh but we ensured their inputs were included. Now they maintain it. Of course, the government is doing its part. But once the water body was completed, the people took responsibility for its maintenance as well.

Q: Some water bodies have historical significance. Do you plan to revive their legacy with the ASI or maybe another organisation?

Right now, we have not thought in that direction. Restoring archaeological sites requires a different sort of expertise, which is not available with the DJB currently. We have divided our work into different components — water conservation, beautification and community engagement.

The ASI is a very specialized agency. INTACH (Indian National Trust

‘In our definition a water body needs to be filled with water throughout the year. It should not be a civil engineering exercise where you construct a wall around a water body and wait for rain to fall into it.’

for Art and Cultural Heritage) and the Aga Khan Trust have done such work in Humayun's Tomb. But actually we have only four or five water bodies of historical significance. It is only two to five percent of the work. If the Delhi government's archaeological department takes it up, we can easily get approval. The chief minister, who is also the chairman of the DJB, proposed that we rejuvenate *baolis* as well. Within the Delhi government, no extra permissions are required.

Satpula is a DDA lake. We took an NOC from the ASI for the lake, not the park. The monument ends at the beginning of the water body. There is a very clear-cut boundary. In the case of Hauz Khas, which also has a DDA lake, there is a monument adjacent to it. We had to change treatment mechanisms a bit because it was falling in the 100-metre boundary of the monument. Hauz Khas had waste from unauthorised colonies coming in. That water body is actually fed by the DJB's STP.

Q: Does Delhi need stricter laws to protect urban water bodies?

I think we have sufficient laws. The issue is enforcement. Out of 1,200 unauthorised colonies which dump sewage into water bodies, 400 have sewer lines while work is going on in another 400. It takes time because sewer lines are eight to 10 feet deep. The rest don't even have sewer lines.

Civic facilities need to be provided. It was part of AAP's manifesto. The first thing the CM did after coming to power was to promote decentralized STPs so that all the colonies could be covered immediately. So you treat sewage where it is created instead of putting it into kilometres of pipelines. This water body rejuvenation project is a combination of both. It is a challenge.

Sewer lines have to be connected to households. So in 2017 the DJB approved a plan to connect all households to sewer lines. Again, because of the political scenario, that plan is pending. Once it is approved it will be implemented. The deficit of unavailability of sewer lines in the colonies will be catered to. ■



Abhijit Prabhudessai: 'The government completely disregards the well-being of the people'

ABHIJIT PRABHUDESSAI

'Big projects won't last if Goa's ecological balance is destroyed'

Published in February-March 2023

THE GREEN AND lovely state of Goa with its sandy beaches and forests might soon become a shadow of its former self if no curbs are placed on real estate projects. Everywhere construction is in full swing. Apartments, bungalows, hotels, highways are all coming up at breakneck speed with no thought, or so it would appear, given to groundwater, green cover or coastal zones.

Environmentalists have for long been warning that this kind of development is unsustainable. Moreover, it is destroying a way of life built on ecological sensitivity, community ties and livelihoods in farming and fishing. Instead of giving priority to people's concerns and their traditional livelihoods, the government is allowing the state to be taken over by the wealthy from all over.

There is no study yet of the kind of ecological damage being done and the displacement of local people taking place. But there are local voices that capture the Goan angst.

Abhijit Prabhudessai, social activist at Federation of Rainbow Warriors, has been fighting court battles and been part of people's protests to prevent Goa from being taken over by real estate companies and commercial interests.

"Basically, what you are seeing are large entities being permitted to

take away the land and resources of local communities. That's where the fight is," he said in an interview to *Civil Society*.

Q: During the last Assembly election, land was an issue. What has happened post-election?

Unfortunately, we have a government that completely disregards the well-being of the people of Goa. The policies that have taken us to this point are being aggressively pursued. Across the board, whether it is legislative actions, development programmes or even the judiciary, people's wishes and the necessity of leaving a sustainable world for our children are being disregarded.

Q: You had taken up conversion of orchard land, settlement land and construction on hillsides. Where do these issues stand right now?

Development projects in Goa are sanctioned through regional plans which is basically demarcation of zones across Goa of permissible land uses. In ecologically sensitive zones like orchards, paddy fields, slopes, forests and so on, development activities are not permitted if they are contrary to agriculture or forestry.

But once lands are demarcated and shown as settlement zones, irrespective of present land use, they can become tourism projects or commercial projects. Similarly, the regional plan is supposed to

demarcate a number of things which it does not. Like groundwater resources, community lands, prime tenanted agricultural lands. These are often shown as settlement zones in regional plans.

The land use struggle started in 2005 when the first regional plan was put forward by (Babush) Monserrate when he was minister of Town and Country Planning (TCP). It showed huge areas in settlement zones and led to a people's protest by the Goa Bachao Abhiyan. The regional plan had to be scrapped.

But the 2021 regional plan has gone through the same procedure. People are asking for a sustainable plan while the government shows crores' worth of land in settlement zones. So, the struggle challenging the regional plan is going on in the courts. On affidavits the government has said it will look at projects very closely and not permit large projects. But on the ground, we see huge projects being passed across the state — projects on groundwater recharge areas, on slopes, in forests. Half the forests here are not identified and protected.

We are seeing massive projects on the Kadamba Plateau which should be conserved and, of course, in Bardez and in Salcette. This is leading to protests which are not reported and therefore not in the public eye. These protests are by local communities who feel responsible for protecting and defending the environment. It is closely linked to their own survival.

Such development is resulting in the destruction of our environment, displacement of our people and loss of culture caused by the local economy being destroyed. Basically, what you are seeing are large entities being permitted to take away the land and resources of local communities. That's where the fight is. It's an economic struggle. The government is unresponsive.

Q: What is its ecological impact?

The State Action Plan for Climate Change prepared by the government of Goa frighteningly shows 50 percent of the state's land is under severe threat from floods and sea-level rise in the next few decades. It also says the regional plan must be reconsidered in view of these flood-prone areas and to protect the land and people.

Water is a serious issue. We are, on one hand, saying Karnataka is taking away our water and therefore we need to fight. A free-flowing river is a principle we should follow. The Mhadei wildlife sanctuary and the tiger reserve are not recognized. Both are under severe threat if our water is diverted. But, at the same time, we are looking at the reckless destruction of our own water resources and that is inexcusable.

Goa was always self-sufficient in water. The water in Goa is in the laterite zone which is in the hills. It permeates through springs and emerges as surface water. What we see now is the concretization of plateaux and the destruction of hill slopes and groundwater recharge areas. If you concretize the hill, you destroy its water springs.

There is the issue of forests which are not identified and therefore not protected. But the government is not willing to even respond to scores of letters with scientific studies. Eco-sensitive areas in the Western Ghats have to be protected but they say they don't want to because there is scarce land for development. The entire way the government looks at it is that forests, water resources and agriculture are not development. That's where the government needs to correct itself.

They are not able to unfold the regional plan and execute it because of opposition from people. People are fighting in gram sabhas and panchayats. The powers of the panchayats and gram sabhas are being taken away circular after circular, amendment after amendment. People are fighting back, but they keep losing battles and irreversible change and loss are taking place.

Q: Are most projects real estate ones?

Mostly real estate projects in different forms. Large agricultural land is divided into plots and sold to individual owners to build upon. Or developers build several apartments, bungalows and gated communities. Then there are large tourism projects which are worrisome since they

are mostly in coastal areas. Sand dunes are protected in low-lying fields. These are actually flood protection infrastructure. If we lose flood retention areas then you will have floods across those particular areas.

We have real estate projects on hills and slopes which threaten us with environmental disaster in terms of water, soil erosion and vulnerability to landslides. When you lose a large patch in the midst of a microscopic ecological system, its impact on everything else has not been assessed. It's clear from the disappearance of biodiversity that we are in trouble.

Q: Has any study been done of the loss of Goa's forest cover, biodiversity or coastal areas?

The scientific community is completely under the control of the government. It is, therefore, not in a position to do the work it needs to do. For example, the Mopa airport project or any large project where the government or a large real estate owner is involved — you will not see the scientific community coming forth with facts and science. We understand even circulars have been passed that they should not divulge facts to the public.

'We have real estate projects on hills and slopes which threaten us with environmental disaster in terms of water, soil erosion and vulnerability to landslides.'

The national water policy says that all water recharge areas must be conserved. But in Goa groundwater recharge areas have not been mapped at all. If the aquifers and recharge areas were mapped none of these developments would have been allowed. Science is being crushed and subverted to allow all this. You have huge interests in mining, real estate, tourism, industrial estates, and the infrastructure to support this.

This infrastructure is not at all studied. But we have seen with our own eyes its impact. If you build a small road in a forested area in the village, the first monsoon year you will see scores of reptiles and animals dead. In a few years the number will be less and in another few years there will be none. You actually end up killing everything that needs to cross the road.

Q: Is it because the government sees only tourism and not agriculture, forests and fishing as livelihood generators?

The first step is for the government to accept and acknowledge the existence of these economies. The GDP doesn't show it. If you grow your own food or share it or barter it the government doesn't consider that to be an economic activity. The huge *khazan* lands are all sustainable farming systems. Some 400 or 600 families live off that paddy the whole year. These are economic activities that sustain life in Goa. And, yes, a self-sufficient village has to be the way forward.

At liberation Goa had a population of 600,000 which sustained itself on local resources. Large tourism projects will not sustain the moment you start losing the ecological balance. And agriculture, fishery, and forestry give more employment than anything else.

Our water bodies, lakes, rivers and *nallas* are by policy being concretized. Contractors spend crores to build concrete walls replacing an existing laterite structure already there in mud. Instead, you can employ thousands of people to use the existing material and restore it. Pay them handsomely and you will save more than half the money you are at present spending. But these proposals are not what the government would go for because there is an existing system of contractors who make big profits which fund political parties. This is, though, one way we can change the system. ■

RAVI CHELLAM

‘Cheetahs are for tourism. Not conservation’

Published in September 2023

THE KUNO NATIONAL Park in Madhya Pradesh was meant to receive the growing number of Asiatic lions from Gir in Gujarat. The plan was to have a second population of the Asiatic lion. But, with African cheetahs now being flown in, it appears that the transfer of lions from Gir will be deferred for several years till the cheetahs settle down.

The decision to bring in African cheetahs has been mired in controversy. Keeping them in fenced enclosures in Kuno will be costly and difficult. The claim that they will bring back grasslands and boost the endangered Great Indian Bustard is being questioned.

We spoke to Ravi Chellam, one of India's leading experts on wildlife, on the cheetah project and its implications:

Q: What is your opinion of this plan to introduce African cheetahs to India? What do you make of it?

I have variously called it a vanity project and a glorified safari park. Why the rush? I mean, the monsoon is not the right time to be moving large mammals through our national parks.

The underfoot conditions are not great. Heavy vehicles churn up the earth at this time. These are not your national highways through which you need to move animals. Most national parks in north India are closed to tourists during the monsoon months.

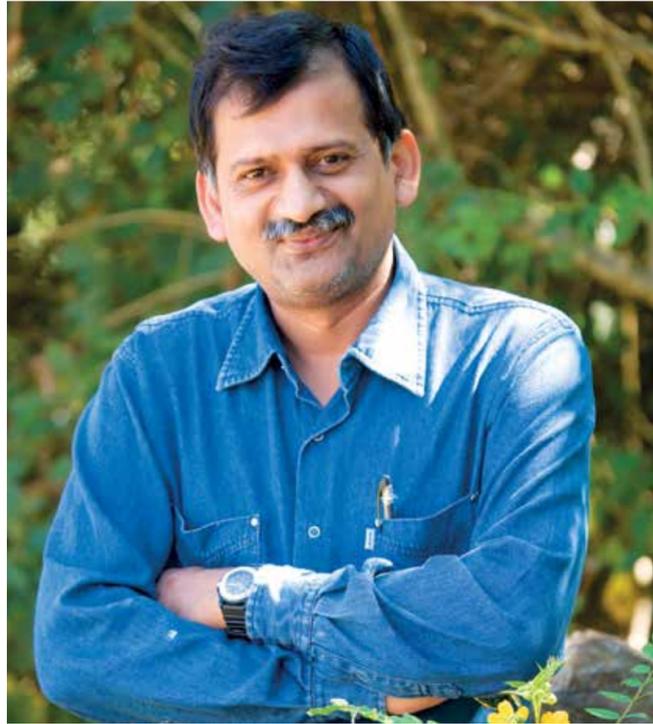
While they try to make it sound scientific and give it a veneer of conservation respectability, I go by the facts. We have the National Wildlife Action Plan. This is supposed to be the guiding document for all conservation action. It is a 15-year plan so there will naturally be some exceptions. The most recent plan was written for the period 2017 to 2031. It does not mention a ‘C’ of cheetahs. It is not a national priority, assuming that the plan does set national priorities. I see this disconnect.

Q: So how have cheetahs suddenly become a national priority?

I can share an article in *The Signal*. It basically says this is driven by the need to leave a legacy. At another level, this is the 75th year of our independence and it is going to get a lot of media attention. But there are insidious implications. It effectively, at the very minimum, delays the translocation of (Asiatic) lions from Gujarat to Kuno which was ordered by the Supreme Court in April 2013.

I first encountered this in court when I was present as an expert adviser in 2012. The counsel for Gujarat stood up and said, We hear the Government of India is going to introduce cheetahs from Africa. Ecology tells us lions are more powerful than cheetahs. Let the cheetahs come and settle down. Once they are settled, we can begin the discussion on translocation of lions from Gujarat. The court saw through that. In extremely clear terms, the judgment quashed the order of the Government of India to introduce African cheetahs in Kuno.

In 2013 it was a complete no to introduce African cheetahs to Kuno. In 2016 the National Tiger Conservation Authority (NTCA) filed an appeal or a review petition on the plea that while the court's order focused on Kuno it was being interpreted as a blanket ban on getting cheetahs into



Ravi Chellam: 'The translocation of lions to Kuno was ordered by the Supreme Court'

India. It sought permission to survey additional sites. Eventually the court passed an order on January 28, 2020, and we all know what is happening since then.

The 2013 order had very clearly said that translocation of Asiatic lions to Kuno has to take priority over introduction of African cheetahs. While hearing the NTCA petition the court observed that the NTCA had sought permission to survey additional sites and permitted these surveys. The court sought reports every four months and also directed that the matter should be listed after four months, that is, in late May 2020. After January 28, 2020, this matter has not been listed or heard. I have information suggesting some reports were submitted. But the key thing is that they surveyed six sites, I think, in 12 days out of which Kuno took four days. So, the other five sites got eight days in total. To me, it's like a *fait accompli*. It looks like it was already decided it's going to be Kuno.

If the NTCA was to be consistent with its review petition, which sought permission to survey other sites, the court does not seem to be keeping track of this. And it is also on record saying it will not affect the translocation of lions. Now the Action Plan says after the cheetahs have settled, we can bring the lions. And as per the Action Plan the most optimistic time frame is 15 years for the cheetahs to settle down.

In 2012, this was the plea the Gujarat government brought which was struck down by the Supreme Court and look at where we are 10 years down the line. People ask me questions about ecology and conservation. But to me, fundamentally, this is a rule of law issue.

Q: But Indira Gandhi also wanted to bring cheetahs from Iran.

Look, if you really think you can make it work, then make it work. But why Kuno? Why subvert a standing order of the Supreme Court? Why continue to stall lion translocation? Why divert attention from much more urgent conservation issues? Why waste scarce conservation resources? The South Africans are advocating a completely different model of conservation. They are advocating the fencing of sites where cheetahs are to be introduced to improve the chances of success. There is a lobby saying that there should be no wildlife outside Protected Areas.

That means literally doing away with many endangered species including tigers, lions and elephants from areas outside our Protected Areas — 30 to 40 percent of the populations of these species at least use

if not being resident in these areas. Such an approach will sever genetic connectivity and greatly increase the risk of isolation and the resultant inbreeding.

The minute an area is fenced, it becomes even smaller. Then there is no movement and no genetic connectivity. It's extremely expensive and, in India, try fencing anything to keep people out. Barriers have failed miserably. We are willing to spend several crores of rupees for one kilometre of fencing. Imagine if we had invested that in the welfare of the local community.

Cheetahs are for tourism. Conservation is a smokescreen. No cheetah is going to save the grasslands of India. Great Indian Bustards are critically endangered. The cheetah is not going to the habitat of the bustard. How is it going to save the bustard? India has a very diverse set of grasslands spread right across the country.

After introducing 50 cheetahs we will end up with 21 cheetahs after 15 years, according to the official best-case scenario. And with 21 cheetahs will we be able to save grasslands all over India? Where is the science or logic in this? Thirdly, why are we again messing with lion translocation?

Q: Are you saying the Kuno National Park is not suitable for the cheetahs?

No, I never said that. For habitat assessment you need four parameters assessed: habitat structure, area available, prey availability, level of protection or level of risk.

I don't think there is a habitat structure problem. I think there is a problem with the prey not just in terms of density. These are African cheetahs and they are not used to deer. I don't know how easily they will adapt to the additional complication of a fairly high density of the leopard population in Kuno. They are focusing on a national park that is only 748 sq. km. It is set in a larger matrix of forest that does not have an adequate prey base. Cheetahs, by their normal ecology, exist in low densities. A tiger or a lion can exist in a density of some five to 10 animals per 100 sq. km. Cheetahs normally exist in one to two per 100 sq. km.

Cheetahs need much larger areas to survive, it could be up to 10 times the area needed by other large cats. Where are such areas available in India today? It is impossible to find suitable habitat extending into thousands of sq. km. That's the prevailing reality.

To me the question is not of habitat structure but of area, prey, protection from things like dogs, they can get disease and get into conflict. If you are going to keep them in 750 sq. km, how are they going to play this larger role of being an apex predator? If the full complement of large carnivores is present, the cheetah is not the top predator. It is way down the totem pole — after the lion, the tiger and the leopard. That's ecology, not a personal opinion.

Q: But won't this focus on cheetahs improve our national parks?

How many national parks are the cheetahs going to be in? Do we lack in charismatic animals that we need an African animal to raise the conservation profile of our wildlife and their habitats? What prevents us from focusing on our national parks today? Look at the money we are going to be spending and will have to continue to spend. These animals will have to be treated like they are constantly in an ICU, needing constant and intense attention.

Q: You are saying conceptually it makes no sense.

Yes. We are not focusing on, say, the Great Indian Bustard. We all know its status. Do we need a cheetah to focus on it? Grasslands are even today categorized as wastelands in India. If we want to save grasslands, first we should change the category. We will then show a more positive attitude towards it.

Nature can take care of itself if left alone. The problem is, we say grasslands are useless and grow trees and place all our massive solar projects on them. Those are the problems we need to address.

The Supreme Court passed an order in April 2021 which said that a significant cause of the mortality of the Great Indian Bustard was that

they are colliding with overhead power lines and to please bury the power lines in one or two key areas for the bustard. Till April 2022 no action was taken. The court asked for a report. The government then said, It's expensive, we don't have the money. Where did the money come for introducing African cheetahs?

You say the cheetah will save the Great Indian Bustard which is getting killed by overhead power lines. You have money to bring cheetahs, but not to bury the power lines. So, how is it going to be saved?

Q: What will the cost per cheetah be?

I don't know if there is an actual financial cost in purchasing the cheetahs. The MoU India has signed with Namibia may have the details of what we have committed to Namibia to get these animals. Namibia wanted us to support them in removing the CITES ban on the ivory trade.

South Africa is on record saying it has not as yet (early August) signed the MoU while (their) conservationists are saying the cheetahs will leave mid-August.

This cuts across political parties. The justification given is that the cheetah is the only large mammal that's gone extinct since Independence. There is very limited science here, definitely no conservation, and we are also in breach of the law.

‘Look at the money we are going to be spending and will have to continue to spend. These animals will have to be treated like they are constantly in an ICU.’

Q: Can you tell us about fencing?

In India all kinds of barriers have been tried and most have failed. This is a rather special form of fencing. It is fenced habitat in the heart of the national park. It is not a barrier abutting human settlements and wildlife habitat. This is a small area, 10 sq. km or so, in the heart of the national park.

The other challenge with fencing is water courses. How do you fence a river? I hope they have avoided streams. Fencing is extremely capital intensive. They have done it but now they are facing a peculiar challenge — leopards have come in. Cheetahs will be badly affected by leopards in an enclosed space. They are trying to catch the leopards, but it's proving to be very challenging.

Q: They don't want any animal to come in or go out. But that's like a zoo.

No, that is good practice. Cats have homing behaviour. When you move them artificially, they have an innate ability to go in the general direction from where they were brought.

As per best practices, they are localized in a largish habitat between four to six weeks, not a typical zoo-size cage. You need to manage them carefully so that they don't get imprinted on people because you want them to maintain fear of people so that they don't walk up to people and treat them with familiarity.

At the same time, you have to feed them. In Africa they shoot wild prey and the whole carcass is dropped through a hook and pulley system. The animal does not see human beings and connect them with food. In India they are saying they will stock the enclosure with prey. Before the cheetah arrives, they will release deer into the fenced enclosure.

It means the cheetah will have a tremendous advantage. Cats learn quickly that you can run your prey into the fence. The prey is only worried about the predator chasing it. It doesn't look ahead into the fence. Even if it does, what can it do? ■

AMITABH KANT

'It is not about bigger spends but governance based on data'

Published in May 2022

VISIBLE IMPROVEMENTS IN government services are being reported from 112 backward districts in India under a special initiative involving the Centre, state governments and local administrations.

Called the Aspirational Districts Programme, the initiative seeks to develop some of the worst-off parts of the country. It promotes data-based governance by assessing the performance of a district on a month-to-month basis, giving district officials feedback and helping them meet their challenges.

The programme looks at 49 indicators across health, nutrition, school education, agriculture, water, financial inclusion, skill-building and basic infrastructure. District administrations are encouraged to improve on their own scores, thereby recognizing that they have unique problems. But a spirit of competition is also engendered through a dashboard of scores that shows who stands where.

To find out more, *Civil Society* spoke to Amitabh Kant, Chief Executive Officer of NITI Aayog, who leads the programme at the national level.

Eloquent and energetic, Kant took us through various aspects of the programme at the renovated offices of the NITI Aayog in New Delhi which are well-lit, upbeat and process-driven. Below are edited excerpts:

Q: The Aspirational Districts Programme has three overarching goals of Convergence, Collaboration and Competition. In broad strokes, could you tell us how successful you have been in achieving these? What are the mechanisms that you feel you have gainfully employed? These are 112 of the most underdeveloped districts in India. We don't call them backward. We call them aspirational. They are geographically far-flung and very difficult to access and so on. Historically these districts have not done well. Not from a lack of resources, but because of lack of adequate staff, lack of morale and basically lack of governance.

Since Indian states are very large, state-level competition hides intrastate variations. That's why we looked at the district. It was the Prime Minister's idea to pick up the most poor districts and improve governance there.

We launched the programme in January 2018 and the Prime Minister personally told district collectors to take it as a challenge, a rare opportunity, to transform these districts.

So our objective was to ensure that there is better governance. And how do you improve governance. When I was a collector in Kerala in the late 1980s and early 1990s, I did not know whether my district was going up or coming down because data used to come in five to six years later. But today it is possible to get data on a real-time basis, analyze that data and put out rankings of performance.

(For these 112 districts) we have 49 indicators across health, nutrition, school education, agriculture, water, financial inclusion, skill-building



Amitabh Kant: 'There is transformation on the ground'

and the creation of basic infrastructure.

After getting data right from the grassroots, we monitor it, analyze it and put out the rankings of the districts on a monthly basis so that everybody knows how they are performing. It is not a historical ranking, but how they have performed during the course of the month on each one of these indicators. The 112 districts compete with each other. And every month we have been announcing a winner.

The best performing district gets an award of ₹10 crore and the second, ₹5 crore. And on each one of these indicators, we give ₹5 crore to the best performing district. The collector can do anything good for his district with that money.

So, the objective is it should be based on data. It should be put out in the public domain and actually lead to transformation on the ground.

This competition has led to transformation of these districts. Two different studies have been undertaken, one by UNDP and another by Michael Porter of Harvard. Both these studies have highlighted how transformation has taken place in these districts.

We've been requesting the state governments to ensure that young collectors are posted to these districts. We have asked that they remain there for a long time and not be transferred regularly.

Our objective is to be focussed on development around 49 indicators, real-time monitoring, sharing of best practices and the creation of effective teams for transformation at the district level.

And lastly, we want to make all this development which we have done into a very big mass movement, a *jan andolan*, at the grassroots level. At the field level.

The Champions of Change platform (on which the scores of each district go up) is a great tool for the districts to pay special attention to some of the critical indicators. It brings to light issues as to why movement isn't happening in indicators, or, if it is slow, what are the potential reasons behind it. This process by itself is complex and differs from district to district.

Q: So a mass movement looking at certain development solutions.... Every district has done something unique, something different. And all

these best practices are documented today. The best practices of one district have been replicated in others.

Q: How have you managed to make the collaboration part work?

Collaboration is based on several factors. One is the team of officers there. We have said keep the team of the district medical officer, district education officer and collector intact.

Two, state governments were asked to have a *prabhari* officer so that any assistance required by the district should be made available there.

The central government also added a *prabhari* officer for these aspirational districts and therefore we assisted them from the Centre in all this. We try to work in regular partnership with the districts and the state governments.

We have been able to push state governments into allocating the necessary teachers and doctors so that the district would go up. And because these are aspirational districts, we have been constantly monitoring performance.

It is data-based governance. Government never works on data. Government never works in real time. It never works in competition. Government never works on naming and shaming. Government never puts data in the public domain. All these have become the hallmarks of good governance under this programme.

Q: How did the states respond? What are the problems with funding?

See, this programme is not about funding. It is very important to understand this. It is not that these districts do not get funds. They get the same amount of funds as any other district. But the utilisation of funds is very poor. Outcomes are not there. There is lack of morale, lack of teachers, lack of doctors.

So the challenge is not of funds. It is a challenge of good governance. How do you bring in good governance was the challenge. How do you say that this district has performed badly, when the district didn't even know that it was performing badly. Our job was to see that in four years' time it is able to come up to the average of the best performing district in the state and in seven years' time become the best performing district in the country.

So, the majority of these aspirational districts have become better performing. They have become better performing than the best performing districts of the state. They have jumped up substantially. If they become better performing than the best district of the state, that means they're going up. There are various examples. And now our job is to ensure that these districts actually become the best performing districts in the country.

Q: Is there inertia at the state level? Has this been an issue?

No. Since data is being put out, in everybody's face, if you're a non-performer, the state chief minister would come to know about it. If a district is performing well, the chief minister would also come to know about it. This is data-based governance with all the data put in the public domain whether the state likes it or not. A state has no other option but to show that its district is able to compete with others and ensure that it does better than the others.

Q: So states are not left with much option here?

I wouldn't say that. I would say that we regularly met the chief secretary and we sent the performance of these districts to the chief secretary. We regularly made presentations to the chief secretary in Jharkhand, Chhattisgarh, Bihar, so that they could come to know how their districts were doing, how they were performing. Whether they're going up or down. So we kept the chief secretary fully informed.

Q: But the states must have required some handholding....

All the central ministries have their own action plan for implementation in these aspirational districts. All of them utilize their own resources for transforming these aspirational districts. It is a programme that was

launched by the Prime Minister.

The central government quite often gets very far removed from the grassroots. The intention also was that the government should understand the challenges of the *anganwadi*, understand the challenges of school education, understand the challenges of health. In addition to that our own officers have been regularly visiting the districts.

Q: So you feel this programme has in four years made a big impact?

Yes, it has had a tremendous impact.

Q: It is visible to you?

Yes, it is visible and it is a transformation.

Q: You must have used the private sector.

We have used civil society organizations.

Q: Mainly NGOs?

We've used a whole lot of NGOs. We are strong believers that it's not possible for government to transform everything. It's not possible without working in partnership with civil society organizations. So we have the Piramal Foundation, Tata Trusts and a number of foundations working with us for doing this transformational work. We are strong believers that civil society organizations at the cutting edge play a very critical role and do a lot of development.

'We've used a whole lot of NGOs. We are strong believers that civil society plays a critical role and it is not possible for government to transform everything.'

Q: The Piramal Foundation or the Tata Trusts have a certain presence. We see them and we see the others as well. There are a lot of others.

We welcome anyone who wants to work in the Aspirational Districts Programme. Many organizations have associated with this programme as development partners to share their resources in terms of technical expertise and human resources.

The Piramal Foundation has positioned a team of three to four fellows in each aspirational district and they are working closely with the administration in education and health.

Similarly, ITC is working in the agriculture sector. The Bachpan Bachao Andolan and Save the Children are involved in child health and education. TRIFED is working for tribal development. CSBC for behavioural change. And there are many more.

Q: What are the interesting districts that catch your eye?

There are a lot of interesting stories. For example, Lohardaga district in Jharkhand, an LWE (Left-Wing Extremism)-affected area, has raised registration of pregnant women within the first trimester from just four percent in 2018 to 95 percent in 2022.

Districts such as Karauli in Rajasthan, Namsai in Arunachal Pradesh, Dhalai in Tripura have increased the percentage of institutional deliveries from an average of around 40 percent to more than 90 percent. Many districts like Sukma, where less than 50 percent of children were immunized until 2018, the immunization rate has now gone above 90 percent. Almost each of the 112 districts has shown extraordinary achievement in at least one of the themes of the programme in the past four years. ■

ZAKIA SOMAN

‘UCC is right to ban polygamy but wrong on moral policing’

Published in October 2022

SOCIAL REFORMS HAVE for long eluded Indian Muslims because of an obdurate clergy. Among the few willing to take them on has been Zakia Soman and women activists of the Bharatiya Muslim Mahila Andolan working with her. But their efforts have met with little success and the established order has been able to brush them off.

Now, a law ushering in a Uniform Civil Code (UCC) in Uttarakhand does away with polygamy, sets 18 as the marriageable age for girls and, in addition to the earlier abolition of triple *talaq*, outlaws unilateral divorce.

Soman says she has no option but to welcome the UCC in the absence of voluntary reforms within the Muslim community. But she worries about social issues being used for political ends by the BJP. Moral policing is also a matter of concern. The UCC is both good and bad in parts, she says in an interview to *Civil Society*. And it would have been so much better if it hadn't been drafted for just one state but been brought in nationally with more consultation.

Q: How do you see Uttarakhand's Uniform Civil Code?

Over the years the UCC has become a political idea. That has its own implications. The sad part is that I'm forced to sort of welcome it because our community is not going to reform our personal law. At least not in my lifetime. So, the next best option is to have codified and just laws.

Q: Which aspects of Uttarakhand's UCC do you welcome and which do you find troubling?

Firstly, the age of marriage being legally announced as 18 for girls and 21 for boys is very welcome because the broad understanding in the Muslim community is that the age of marriage is puberty which can mean 14 or 15 or even 13 years. It's basically child marriage by another name.

There have been judgments by different high courts. If I remember correctly, four or five judgments from the Delhi High Court and the Punjab and Haryana High Court held the marriage of a 14- or 15-year-old girl to be valid because she happened to be Muslim.

There can be several dimensions to such cases. I am not saying underage marriages should be criminalized. Not at all. What should be addressed is this whole concept that because you are Muslim you are legally entitled to claim that your age of marriage is puberty. Actually, even 18 is too early for marriage.

Our realities are that out of poverty, or lack of any other options, or whenever a 'good match' comes along, parents are always in a hurry to marry off their girls. It's mainly out of helplessness. But we have to take society forward and it is high time we started building awareness that the age of marriage should, at the very minimum, be 18 for girls.

Q: How do you deal with it without criminalizing it? If you have a law



Zakia Soman: 'Our community is not going to reform our personal law'

which says the age of marriage is 18 or 21, anything below that becomes an offence.

Even the provisions of the Child Marriage Act regard any marriage under 18 of a girl as not void, but invalid till she attains the age of 18. So here is where the political aspect kicks in. In the current climate, it will become a licence to go after a Muslim man if he marries a girl who is not yet 18 and put him behind bars. These are the inbuilt contradictions or gaps.

But I still welcome it. It is a beginning. Perhaps some will pay a price for having married an underage girl. But it will signal to the community that you have to wait till the girl is 18 and the boy is 21.

Like we have seen in Assam, men who married girls who were underage when they married them were jailed. The women now have three or four children and with the husband behind bars they are destitute. The purpose of law is to bring about a just and fair society and not vigilantism or a punitive kind of mindset. You can't score political points by weaponizing the law.

Then, disbaring bigamy and polygamy is a very good provision, although the latest survey of the NFHS (National Family Health Survey) shows that there is not a very big difference between the rate of polygamy among Hindus and Muslims. Among the Hindus it is something like 1.3 or 1.4 and amongst the Muslims it's 1.8 or 1.9.

But polygamy and bigamy amongst Hindus are disbarred by law. Bigamy attracts a seven-year jail sentence. Among Muslims, the common understanding built by the clergy is that if you are Muslim you can have four wives and it's legal.

Whereas I'm very clear that the Quran does not permit polygamy. Even when it is permitted, there are strict conditions and it is the context that is important. So, in today's context, there is no justification whatsoever for polygamy.

Q: When you raise these issues with your own community and religious leaders what is the response?

The response is good from the community *per se*, from women and their families, from those who have no vested interests. But from the clergy the response is, Who are you? You are just women. We don't have to learn from you. You are nobody to teach us.

Then they start saying, You are women who aren't even in Islamic dress. First of all, nobody knows what is Islamic dress. Is there something

called Islamic dress? They'll go after me personally, saying that I'm married to a Hindu so I have no right to speak up, that I am acting on behalf of the RSS. This is patriarchal and misogynist.

Q: Do you think that the complete lack of willingness to reform on cultural and quasi-religious matters is entirely patriarchal?

It's a combination. A patriarchal mindset is a key reason, but there are other reasons as well such as poverty, backwardness, lack of education, lack of any awareness, lack of any options within the Muslim community.

In the past several decades the condition of the Muslim community has been going from bad to worse. The social-economic status and all the human development indicators signify this. And, of course, there is politics. The few leaders who are in politics don't really care to empower the community. They perhaps even prefer to let the community remain as it is so long as they keep voting for them.

It's a combination of all these factors. But the deadly aspect about patriarchy masquerading as religion is that when you oppose polygamy, they say you are going against Islam. After that nobody is willing to stand up. Because nobody wants to be told they are going against their religion.

Q: You have a Muslim elite. People at the highest levels of the judiciary, people who are scholars, who've been teachers, professors, vice chancellors.... Why have they not taken up reform of personal law?

This is a very, very important dimension. If we look at some other communities, say, the tribal community, there has been a whole process of building a critical consciousness before and after Independence. There has been a process of democratization within the community. There was Ambedkar. There was Mahatma Gandhi. Savitri Phule.

There are several Adivasi leaders who have engaged with the community and given back to the community. Inspired by them, even post-Independence, a lot of Dalit and Adivasi leaders worked within the community. This is singularly lacking in the Muslim community.

By and large, 99 percent of Muslims give back to the community in the religious sense. It can be *zakat* or donating to a *madrassa* or building a *masjid*. Basically, giving some kind of material help to those in need. But building a democratic consciousness in the community to make them aware about their citizenship rights, discuss social harmony and participation in a multicultural, multi-faith society have been neglected.

The Muslim middle class is also very, very small. The large mass of Muslims is poor. Maybe just one percent would be rich. Typically, post-Independence and after Partition, the number of Muslims belonging to the middle class became very small and it is shrinking because of the kind of challenges they face — political challenges, communal challenges, a discriminatory environment. The Muslim community does not have a sizeable or even a noticeable middle class which could contribute to community well-being and thereby nation building. The nation is, after all, built up of all communities and they are supposed to build bridges, reform and educate.

Q: What about divorce, inheritance and adoption?

The next good provision of this bill is that it is ruling out unilateral divorce. It's virtually making divorce mutual because it calls for the participation of both husband and wife.

Even after abolition of instant triple *talaq*, unilateral *talaq* is taking place under the Hasan method. Under this method divorce is not pronounced in one instance but over a period of three months without consulting the wife at all or without the wife having any say. So that gets ruled out with this provision.

The provision on sharing property and inheritance does not discriminate between sons and daughters and mothers and fathers. That is also a welcome provision and an important aspect. The Uttarakhand law does not discriminate between mother and father regarding guardianship of children. It talks about the best interests of the child and provides for mother's sole custody for a child under five. These are good provisions.

What is problematic are the provisions on live-in relationships. Those provisions are based on some kind of moral policing of young couples, people who have fallen in love. It has been in the air for some time now. We have been seeing moral policing for quite a few years.

The provisions are draconian and violative of the right to privacy, even of the right to freedom. I'm sure people will challenge them. It's virtually the state deciding who will fall in love with whom. That's deeply problematic.

You can vote at 18. You can get married at 18. But you can't decide your own life at 18. You can't live with somebody you want to live with. There's a contradiction here. Why, then, keep 18 as the age of marriage if you think it's not good enough to live together? I hope there is outrage against this live-in provision.

Q: If every state is going to make its own UCC, we will have some 28 UCCs. Then how is it a 'uniform' civil code?

Exactly. If we look at Article 44 of the Directive Principles in the Constitution under which it is said the state shall endeavour to bring about a Uniform Civil Code, that spirit is about the whole nation. It's not saying 28 states will have 28 different UCCs. Again, I would say it's all about politics.

‘A patriarchal mindset is a key reason for the unwillingness to reform among Muslims. But there are other reasons as well such as poverty, lack of any awareness, lack of any options.’

Q: Were you consulted at any point of time by the Uttarakhand state?

No, we were not consulted when the Uttarakhand law was coming about. But they are saying that they received over 200,000 responses from the public in Uttarakhand and they've held face to face consultations with about 10,000 people who attended other consultations organized by the National Commission for Women in Delhi. That was on the overall question of reform in law and the Uniform Civil Code. I have attended those consultations but not at the state level.

Q: You would, however, support the idea of a Uniform Civil Code?

In itself a Uniform Civil Code is about gender justice and gender equality. If we take it forward with genuineness and the right spirit, it can be a really progressive law which can further women's equality in our society. That is why it was pushed by Ambedkar and Nehru and supported by women freedom fighters at the time of Independence.

Q: What do you think should be the process of drafting a UCC?

The goal should be gender justice and not scoring political brownie points or consolidating your own political position. We have enough jurisprudence in our country. If we want to look elsewhere, we can look at some of the countries in the West where live-in relationships are regarded as dignified and respected as marriage. There is no clause that says you have to register in a month or you will be sent to jail.

Instead, their law says that if any two people are invested in each other on a long-term basis, they can voluntarily register their relationship. They can have children also. There is no illegitimacy attached. We can even follow some of the jurisprudence by the Scandinavian countries. We have so many legal luminaries who have thought about the UCC, written and researched it. We can get some of them together, task them with this, and they will come out with a very good, genuine UCC that can be implemented across the country. ■

DR VIJAY ANAND ISMAVEL

‘Small hospitals need visibility, and should be funded for their potential’

Published in November 2023

FAR FROM THE limelight, several small hospitals meet the basic healthcare needs of people in remote areas. Often, the services they provide are really not so basic. Much-needed surgeries get performed. Diseases are diagnosed early and dealt with. Institutional deliveries happen. Awareness-building improves community-wide health parameters. How can such efforts be supported so that they don't peter out because of the great challenges they face?

Dr Vijay Anand Ismavel has partnered with volunteers of the Wharton Business School to devise a rating tool which seeks to give public-spirited initiatives in healthcare visibility so that they have a chance to qualify for funding and also attract volunteers.

Called the Transformational Impact Rating System, it allows small hospitals to be identified, objectively assessed and funded when they are most in need of support.

Dr Ismavel knows what it takes to be one of those doctors out there. He and Dr Anne Miriam, his wife, ran the Makunda Leprosy and General Hospital for 30 years at the trijunction of Tripura, Mizoram and Assam.

Under them the hospital went from being defunct to sustainable. But their journey was full of ups and downs before they succeeded. Even as they served growing numbers of patients, their hospital lacked basic infrastructure because funds weren't available. For 14 years they went without power supply!

Dr Ismavel hopes the Transformational Impact Rating System, once adopted, will help small hospitals, like the one at Makunda, find support, especially at crucial junctures.

Edited excerpts from an interview with Dr Ismavel who is currently at the Christian Medical College in Vellore:

Q: Many rating tools exist and serve as guidance for donors. What was the need to have one more rating tool?

We saw the need partly because of our experience at Makunda and partly based on what I saw on a visit to Africa. Small hospitals need visibility and the support they get should be available based on the transformational impact they can have. The world of philanthropy and volunteers is mostly subjective and based on word of mouth.

Small hospitals require support at crucial junctures in their journey. There has to be a better understanding of the role they are playing.

Q: Could you explain that a little further?

At Makunda, we needed just ₹10 lakh to improve the hospital



Dr Vijay Anand Ismavel: 'I was doing operations without a cautery machine'

infrastructure but couldn't get it.

We really struggled through the early years. For the first 14 years from 1993 we lived without electricity. Just something like ₹10 lakh would have made life so much simpler. We got electricity only in 2007.

I was doing operations without a cautery machine, which is used to stop bleeding. So, I had to keep pressure on the wound and use stitches.

Similarly, my wife had her MD in anaesthesia, but we were working without oxygen. We didn't have an oxygen plant. The oxygen had to come from 12 hours away.

All these struggles, both in our personal life and professional life, made it a tough first 14 or 15 years. And not only for us, but for other people who worked with us.

We didn't really need a lot of money. We just needed a little bit of money for things which would have made a major difference in the way we lived and worked. But the problem is nobody knew about us. We were invisible.

Like ours at Makunda, many small hospitals are located at places where they have the potential to make a transformational impact. But donors don't know about them. At Makunda we didn't take our earned leave for 20 years. No one was willing to replace us — such were the conditions.

Q: What kind of money were you looking for in those early years?

The entire hospital's budget in 1993 was about ₹10 lakh. The salary budget was a paltry ₹30,000 per month for the whole staff. We were getting just small bits of money.

There was an aid agency which said they would support all our expenses but on the condition that we would do only leprosy work. But we felt that leprosy was not a major problem in Assam. The real problem was mothers dying in childbirth and things like that.

Then in 2004 we started an English-medium school for the local people, in 2005 we started a branch hospital in Tripura and in 2006 we started a nursing school.

All these additions took up all the money. We didn't have money for electrifying homes of the staff and things like that.

If we had received ₹10 lakh or some amount like that at that time we would have been able to have a generator in the hospital. And electrical lines to all the staff quarters. It would have made a huge difference.

The other problem was doctors and nurses did not want to come and join our hospital. When we would approach somebody, the first question would be where exactly is this hospital? And we didn't have a good answer to that. And the second question would be how much money will you give? And again, we didn't have a good answer to that either. And on top of that, if you said there's no electricity then....

When I visited Africa in 2016 there was an Indian doctor trained at CMC Vellore similarly struggling and making improvisations. His life would have been made so much easier if he had had a little bit of money.

What I saw in Africa was the triggering factor in thinking of developing this transformational impact rating system.

Q: And what kind of surgeries were you yourself doing at Makunda?

We were doing very complicated surgeries because I was a paediatric surgeon. Way back then, I was the only paediatric surgeon for Manipur, Mizoram, Tripura, Meghalaya and the southern half of Assam. It was a very large area and we were getting patients from all over.

We operated on a lot of babies who did not have a connection between the mouth and the stomach. If they swallowed milk, it would all go into the lungs. When such babies are about five or six hours old you need to open the chest and disconnect the oesophagus and then reconnect it in the normal position. It's a bit of a complicated operation. And after that, these babies cannot breathe for the next four or five days. But we didn't have a ventilator. So, my wife would be ventilating these babies by hand for four or five days till they became alright. All of these babies recovered and we have met some of them who are 20 years old now.

Q: And your work was going unnoticed and there weren't funds?

All we needed at that time was a little bit of a push. But this is the story of small hospitals: they don't find support when they are most vulnerable. When they grow very strong and they're able to become self-sufficient, that is when they become visible to donors. And people start funding them because they're creating a lot of impact.

But they are at their most vulnerable at the time when they are not visible, when much may not be happening, but the potential for transformational impact is great.

We wanted to create a sort of tool that would make such hospitals visible not by measuring impact because impact has not yet occurred, but visible because of various factors and their potential impact.

Q: What exactly is lacking in current rating systems?

Briefly, many of these will only rate you if you are above a certain turnover. Some of the larger rating agencies will only include hospitals whose turnover is more than \$1 million a year. Others will only rate you if you fit into certain categories. Most of them are rating large hospitals which are already doing good work.

There is no rating system which will rate unknown hospitals, which are just starting up. They don't attract the attention of philanthropists.

Q: Is it a problem that rating agencies decide who they will rate?

Yeah. So many of them don't rate people who apply to them. They rate people who are invited. Not everybody can get rated by them.

And the other thing is some of these ratings are extremely complicated and you might have to hire people who will be paid to come and verify. It is not affordable for a small set-up.

Q: Are notions of sustainability a problem?

Yes. Just take the location of a hospital. Kerala already has excellent health facilities. Putting money there will not make much of a change. But if you take some place in Bihar, where the maternal mortality is about 300, just starting a facility which can do Caesarean sections might bring maternal mortality down to 200 very easily and without much effort.

There are risks and benefits the donor should consider.

Q: How would the kind of system you are proposing change the thinking of donors?

It basically looks at three sets of factors. The first set involves the impact in the community. Hospitals located in poor areas where there are no other hospitals nearby and government infrastructure is poor will have a bigger impact.

The second set of factors are best practices. Does the hospital have a good auditing system? Is there a management and governance mechanism which holds people accountable? The third group of factors is how the management takes care of people who work there, like human resource practices.

When we did this study, we got about 120 factors from all the interviews and discussions. Those were narrowed down, I think, to about 74 factors which come under the categories I have mentioned.

Q: So, do you feel this kind of information would be enough to convince donors?

They would still want to do due diligence. This is a screening tool. It was devised for the whole world. Suppose someone wants to put money into a hospital working with leprosy patients in East Africa. They put in leprosy and East Africa as filters and get the names of 20 hospitals.

‘Donors tend to be subjective. Small hospitals lack visibility and don't get support when they need it most. They should be assessed on their potential impact.’

Q: How can you be sure that the information a hospital has provided for the rating is accurate?

What we thought of is that the first level of rating will be done through self-assessment. The hospital has a questionnaire into which they put in information and that generates the score. That is a casual level of rating.

And then when somebody actually visits the hospital, they confirm that what was reported was correct. Now it becomes a verified level of rating. For example, a donor is invited to rate the hospital and agrees with whatever the hospital has claimed. Or volunteers and staff endorse it. As time passes, more and more people will give their opinions. And then it will become a more accurate assessment.

Q: You have said that sometimes having volunteers supporting a hospital is more important than donations.

Volunteers and staff. Volunteers means they are unpaid, but there is also staff. The same rating can be used to attract staff who get a salary.

Q: Do volunteers work well? What draws them to small hospitals?

Makunda had a partnership with the Royal Tropical Institute in Amsterdam. We would get two to four residents who came to Makunda for six months to complete their MD in Global Health and Tropical Medicine.

Many of them were interviewed to understand what would motivate them to consider a hospital. And what would put them off.

They weren't interested in the money. They were looking for adventure and an exciting sort of place. Disparities bothered them — like some members of the staff being treated differently to others. A great motivation was to work in a poor country and to learn things they had never seen, perhaps only read about in books. ■



Dr Taru Jindal: 'When you truly want something, the universe conspires to make it happen'

DR TARU JINDAL

'I knew things were bad in Bihar, but then actually seeing it...'

Published in March 2021

HAVING EARNED HER medical degrees in Pune and Mumbai, it was in a district hospital in Motihari in Bihar that Dr Taru Jindal first chose to work. Her assignment was to train nurses and doctors in adopting better practices. Her second assignment, too, was in Bihar, in the village of Masarhi, where she helped set up a community health centre.

Both opportunities came through Doctors For You (DFY) and its founder, Dr Ravikant Singh. She had made up her mind that the big cities didn't need her skills. Her motivation came from exposure as a student to the work of Dr Abhay Bang and Dr Prakash Amte in tribal areas. Even as the Masarhi health centre took shape, Dr Jindal, 39 years old, sprang a cancer. Between sessions of chemotherapy, she now spends her time running a breastfeeding network and helpline. She also has a helpline for a lesser known affliction called vaginismus.

Q: You studied in Mumbai and then went to practise in a government hospital in Motihari in Bihar's East Champaran district. What made you do this?

What took me there were my dreams. Dreams that my boyfriend and later my husband dreamed during our days in medical college of

working where we were really needed. Though we both belonged to Mumbai, we felt the city didn't really need us. We were inspired by people who had done amazing work at the grassroots like Dr Abhay Bang and Dr Prakash Baba Amte in Gadchiroli district. We were constantly in touch with them. We were 29 when we graduated and got married.

Q: How were you in contact with them? Most doctors go in the direction of high-earning careers.

We had a student organization in BJ Medical College in Pune called Prachiti which in Marathi means self-realization. Without them I wouldn't have thought of these things.

They used to take MBBS students to Baba Amte's Anandwan and to Dr Bang's SEARCH in Gadchiroli district. Students were also taken for volunteering to disaster-prone regions of Gujarat. Actual exposure is what made the difference. We were also part of student youth movements in Maharashtra. Conviction came from seeing all this.

Two visits I made after my MBBS transformed me. For my internship in 2007 I went to Melghat, a forested region inhabited by tribals and infamous for malnutrition deaths during the rainy season. I went for 14 days as a health worker for an NGO. I didn't even

know such a world actually existed.

Q: How did your association with Doctors For You happen?

When you truly want something with all your heart the universe conspires to make it happen. I believe that. I had two months left to complete my rural bond. Everyone was ready with what they were going to do. Someone was going to start a clinic, or going to do post-graduation, or apply for a fellowship. I was like, I want to go to a village.

Just at that time, Dr Nobhojit Roy, head of the department of surgery at Bhabha Atomic Research Centre Hospital, met my brother and told him about this project in Bihar which was being run by CARE India, the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation and Doctors For You. They were struggling to find doctors to work at the Motihari hospital. I spoke to Dr Ravikant Singh. It was a 10-minute call. I was familiar with his participation in the reservation campaign and I knew he was a good person. I wanted to work in a rural area so I just signed up for it.

Q: What was your impression of the Motihari hospital?

I knew things were bad in rural Bihar. Dr Ravikant Singh and Dr Nobhojit Roy had told me everything. But actually seeing it... it was a lot worse.

I arrived there at 10.30 am. I stepped into the labour room. I saw dogs all around, rusted cots and blood on the floor everywhere. The labour room was stinking like a toilet. A woman was delivering a baby with bare hands. It was a total shock for me. More shocks followed. The baby came out. The woman tore the mother's sari and wiped the baby. The baby now had to be wrapped. The woman tore the mother's petticoat and wrapped the baby in it. And then I realized the woman wasn't a doctor or even a nurse, she was the sweeper.

Day after day I watched babies dying, not being revived. I saw mothers with ruptured uteruses being referred to other hospitals and going away in auto-rickshaws. The doctors who should have been responsible for the maternity ward were not around. I also found out that there was a five-km line of private nursing homes across from the district hospital. Clearly, there was something going on between the district hospital and the nursing homes. They were proliferating at the cost of this dysfunctional hospital.

I had to take a call whether to stay or leave. I had been sent as a trainer to train the doctors of that hospital. But there were no doctors to train. I didn't know what to do. But I thought, I made a commitment to be here for three months. I won't go back on that even if it means all that I will be able to do is clean up the labour room with a broom, I'll do that.

I started by building rapport with the nurses. I began a *shramdaan* movement to clean up the OT, a place where people would do surgery in a *baniyan*. That kind of shifted things in their minds because they began to think, if a doctor can sweep the OT with us then we can also do things.

They started taking ownership. I began working with the nurses, assisting them in difficult deliveries late into the night. They knew if the baby or mother died they would have it because the crowd could literally do anything at that time and there was no security. But now there was a doctor standing with them, saving their necks day in and day out. It made them think: this is what the doctors of this hospital were supposed to do but were not doing.

They saw my skills even though I was half their age. They began to respect me. Then they began to get interested in improving and we started working on their skills. By the time three months were over, I had already helped in improving their skills and changing their attitude. But, of course, the overall infrastructure of the hospital needed a bigger helping hand. I was too small to work on that.

Q: How did the hospital's decrepit infrastructure get rebuilt?

The universe conspired once again. A new collector was sent to that district, Jeetendra Srivastava. We used to call him Singham. The movie had just released at that time. I approached him and he listened. He said to me, Taru, tell me what needs to be done and I'll do it. I used to go to his office at 7 pm every few days and brief him. Sir, this is what we need, this is what is happening at the hospital. He began to do midnight inspections of the hospital and he started suspending people who weren't doing their jobs.

Things began moving at such speed that people couldn't believe it. In six months the labour room, the OT, everything was reconstructed. Doctors who were never seen at the hospital were there at 9 am. New young doctors from medical colleges were recruited and the old ones were thrown out.

This kind of overhaul could only be done by someone as big as a collector. Nobody else could do it. I left after six months when our project was over. I joined as a lecturer at the Sevagram Medical College in Wardha. In 2017, the Motihari hospital won the Kayakalp Award, instituted by the Modi government. Nobody could believe it. It won the same award again, I think, in 2018.

Q: So, the changes you made proved to be permanent?

I was just one of the catalysts. There were five or six people in that hospital for the past two decades who wanted to improve things but never got any help or support. I probably just sparked that light in them again. There was, of course, Jeetendra Srivastava and from the hospital side there was Vijay Jha, the hospital's administrator, a few nurses like Anju Sinha, and Dr Ravikant Singh, myself, and people from CARE India. It is a beautiful story of how people came together to do something amazing, instead of one person in isolation.

Q: But you went back to Bihar once again, to Masarhi, one of its poorest areas. Why?

I had to come back. I didn't want to leave Bihar

at all. I felt I was born to be there. This, Bihar, is my *karmabhoomi*. I began teaching at Sevagram but I would think, anybody can do this job. Every day I used to tell my husband that I had to go back.

Dr Ravikant Singh wanted to build a small health centre in his father's house in their ancestral village in Masarhi, about 25 km from Patna. He had studied in Mumbai and on a visit to his village after 12 years, he came across a man who died in his hut because of an ailment which was easily curable. That shook him. He decided to convert his father's house into a health centre. He got a donor from Mumbai and he asked me if I wanted to handle the new centre. I was itching to go back. We decided to set up the health centre together.

Working in Masarhi was totally different from working at the Motihari Hospital. I did not know how to mould the minds of people in the community towards healthcare. I had to do a lot of innovation. We started a nurse assistant programme, celebrations like *godhbharai*, a self-help group for agriculture and farming to combat malnutrition.

Q: But the community eventually accepted you?

Initially they shunned me at times. I tried a forceps delivery to save a baby and there were a few lacerations on the face. Word spread in the community that doctor *ne sar phodh diya* (doctor has damaged the head) and they stopped coming to my health centre for a month. I couldn't believe it. But it forced me to grow up overnight. There were a lot of ups and downs. But we stayed on. The average age of my team was between 25 and 30. There was a lot of dedication and energy and experimentation. We did a lot for the community and eventually it worked. ■

R. BALASUBRAMANIAM

‘Investors and NGOs must be aligned in an exchange’

Published in March 2022

WHAT EXACTLY IS a Social Stock Exchange and how should a social enterprise be defined? Are investors ready to support good ideas for ‘low’ or ‘no’ returns? Are NGOs able to transit to this new mechanism?

Much before the Social Stock Exchange became a reality, Dr R. Balasubramaniam did a detailed report for the government on the concerns and opportunities that emerge from such a stock exchange. He is a physician by training and is the founder of GRAAM (Grassroots Research and Advocacy Movement) and of the Swami Vivekananda Youth Movement (SVYM).

He understands only too well the strengths and frailties of voluntary organizations. His report goes much beyond finance to explore the possible boundaries and internal dynamics of a Social Stock Exchange in India. It is also particularly useful that he looks at the experience in other countries like Britain, America and Canada. We had a long conversation with him at his base in Mysore:

Q: What exactly is a Social Stock Exchange?

Let’s talk about why people get into business — to get good returns. That is the normative understanding of business. And when they list their company on the stock exchange the intent is to access resources from the public to build their company. In return, the investor gets dividend. To ensure these companies are regulated and transparent, a regulatory body validates their declarations. That’s how the concept of a stock exchange came in.

The concept of a Social Stock Exchange (SSE) is very different. The essential difference is that companies on such an exchange don’t exist for the profits of any person. Instead their purpose is a larger social good. But the exchange plays a role similar to that of a stock market regulator. It gets entities listed, the investment, financial instruments validated whether it’s a debenture, an equity investment, or a debt instrument. The companies transparently disclose if they are making profits and the investor’s interest is also protected. While the investor can expect near market returns, the intent and primacy of the listed entity is social change and development.

Over time stock exchanges have been evolving due to the difference in thinking amongst companies. Companies started coming under pressure to mitigate harm they were causing to the planet. Investors began looking not only at profits, but also at how good the company’s environmental obligation was or its social obligation or its governance in terms of disclosure. And so companies moved to what is traditionally known as ESG (economic, social and governance) thinking. In the world of business, they call it the triple bottom line — people, planet and profits.

Based on these understandings, the United Nations proposed the idea



R. Balasubramaniam: ‘We need a new breed of assessors who can measure social impact’

of the Social Stock Exchange Initiative (in 2009) where such disclosures would be mandated, and companies would get returns along with declaring the social good they were creating. So private gains began getting merged with the notion of social gains. Different companies have attempted this, essentially creating social enterprises whose primary terms of existence is to create social good and also ensure that the investor gets some fair returns.

Q: Are you saying like in a conventional stock exchange people would be able to buy and sell shares and so on?

Ideally yes. But let me also provide a caveat. There are close to 14 Social Stock Exchanges globally in several countries in different stages of evolution. Not a single one can be called fully functional and successful.

The ideal is if you can list, declare and trade. Let’s say you invest in the Swami Vivekananda Youth Movement and we give you shares and a certain amount of dividends. Tomorrow say someone is interested in buying those shares from you. If they can do it then that’s a well-functioning stock exchange. It’s only in the Canadian Stock Exchange that a reasonable amount of trading is being transacted. Most of the other stock exchanges haven’t fully evolved to this stage.

In my report I have classified five Social Stock Exchanges in the trajectory of reaching a stock exchange. Six are in different stages of evolution. Many are just matchmaking portals. You can’t call them a stock exchange in the real sense of the word.

Q: But the idea of a Social Stock Exchange is to attract investment in causes which are crying out for funds and support?

The world of social sector development is always starved of funds but let me put things in perspective. India is a signatory to the UN’s Social Development Goals or SDGs. We have 17 goals we have to achieve by 2030, as a member country. The reality is it will require an expenditure of a trillion dollars annually on the social sector. Right now, the resources of the government, PSUs, civil society organizations all put together come to around \$440 billion — which means there is a huge deficit of \$560 billion, and that you just can’t generate unless you seek private resources.

Q: How do you attract money? A conventional stock exchange market runs on excitement, bubbles, bull runs, profits...

The working group at the Securities and Exchange Board of India (SEBI) has come out with a report but it has not taken into consideration the issues you are trying to raise. They are talking about the Social Stock Exchange as a single entity. I think there are three components. The stock exchange itself is the regulatory bit. To make it functional a lot of work needs to be done first.

One bucket is the supply side: would I as an investor be keen to invest in an entity where I would see no returns or little returns or lower-than-market returns? There should be a reasonable amount of incentive for me to even think of investing.

The second is regulation: SEBI is focusing on the stock exchange itself. But you need people to assess the company’s work, its impact. Somebody has to make those disclosures measurable to convince the investor and bring in transparency guidelines.

Third is the demand side: I’ve been on the demand side for more than three decades. I know that we in the social sector only know our social commitments. We never tend to think of profits. In our DNA, it doesn’t exist.

You need to work on creating the ecosystem first before you can even launch a stock exchange.

Q: A social enterprise is a hybrid of social plus enterprise. How will it be valued on a Social Stock Exchange if it comes in with an IPO?

How do you even define a social enterprise? We use this word so casually. The social enterprise is an entity which hasn’t been described by law in India. I know a lot of companies that say they are social enterprises but scratch under the surface and they are formal for-profit companies.

Honestly, every company can say it is doing social good. A car manufacturer can say I am enabling transportation of people, which is a social good. There has to be a legally mandated understanding. Different countries have defined it differently. There are currently 62 different connotations of social enterprise being used around the world.

The closest I would recommend is the British definition. The entity generates profits and ploughs it back into the work it is doing without any dividend to the investor. But it may not be practical in the Indian context. What we are proposing is that the promoters don’t get any returns, but the investor may get less than market returns and get to see social good.

It can be a dicey situation. No NGO says it’s not doing social good. I’ve been in the sector for 40 years and we all declare we are doing good. But how do we measure good? These are uncomfortable questions, which we in the social sector have not asked. One is to measure a social obligation in a way in which it becomes a monetizable commodity for an investor. That is the journey we NGOs have to take first.

I would say define the social enterprise and set out its legal boundaries and obligations. My nervousness is SEBI in its report has deliberately refused to do so.

Q: Is it a challenge to set a value on social enterprises?

A challenge, yes. We have not defined what is social and what is enterprise. We need to put in place a legally mandated obligation of that entity. For example, as a non-profit we run hospitals, schools, charge fees, and charge patients. Our returns are pathetic. If I spend ₹100, I get back ₹40. So ₹60 is still donor dependent. I am allowed to raise revenues because these are health and education activities, permitted by law. But I also run a training institute and a research programme. The current law is very clear: we cannot generate more than 25 percent of our total revenue as user income as an organization.

India’s definitions are so very suffocating because of tax laws. If I generate the 26th rupee I have to shut down as a non-profit entity. Now

you say I have to become a social enterprise and give dividends. How do I do it when the legal framework doesn’t permit it?

Q: You need a new and universally acceptable definition of what a social enterprise is?

Which is legally valid and a lot of changes in policy and taxation laws to match up to it. All this has to come first before we set up a stock exchange. A lot of homework has to be done on the social ecosystem before the system is ready to absorb a stock exchange.

Q: How would you value social and enterprise together? Which would take predominance and how would an investor be enticed by a company like this one?

Valuation principles exist globally. There is GRI, IRIS, Buffet’s impact rate of return, ESG disclosure, SASB, BESPOKE, etc. Certain standards have been established. When you say social enterprise, is the primacy of its existence social? You try not just to balance the profit logic with the social logic but affirm the primacy of the social logic. That valuation is very critical.

So, we need a new breed of assessors who can measure social impact. What SEBI and for-profit stock exchanges have today are market valuers, who understand the enterprise part of the system. Either they need to be trained or we need a new brand of assessors and valuers who are actually trained in social impact and then deputed to measure before the enterprise comes into an IPO. Tools to do this exist.

‘I’ve been on the demand side for more than three decades. I know that we in the social sector only know our social commitments.’

Q: What happens to a social enterprise which is hugely successful beyond its social goals and has multiplied its commercial possibilities? Take the example of Body Shop.

You know, these questions have to be tested as we go along. I don’t have a ready answer, but these are troubling questions. That is exactly the reason why we have to get this whole concept clear in the first place. As much as I am a votary of the Social Stock Exchange, my fear and concern are that it is being used as an instrument possibly to have two or three kinds of impact.

The first is: does it mean that it absolves the government of its social responsibility? Just

because I get private sector investment does it take away the mandate of any government to serve its citizens and reduce its social sector investments? Or become an excuse to reduce spending on the social sector?

The second challenge is that the ecosystem is altering rapidly. If the proposed changes to the draft CSR Act are actually implemented, it will virtually eliminate societies and trusts from the ambit of receiving CSR grants. There is a huge effort to promote Section 8 companies as a vehicle for social sector development. If the stock exchange is going to be defined and framed to promote only Section 8 companies, it could become a vehicle for re-channelizing funds from a profit-making company to itself but declared as a non-profit entity. It may not really need the social sector space at all. It may just become a way of transacting within your own ecosystem.

The third fear I have is of investor pressure on social sector enterprises to just generate dividends and profits. Over time, we may lose the very mandate we started out with. Currently, the way the SSE is being structured only large global NGOs or social enterprises with the DNA of enterprises will be able to move into that space. It will virtually kill off small and medium NGOs.

The exchange has to be so designed so as to provide space for everyone. We mustn’t forget that philanthropy in our country is a cherished cultural process. Small NGOs will have no way of understanding what a financial instrument is. ■

Watch the video of this conversation on Speaking to Civil Society episode 1 on YouTube channel

A.V. BALASUBRAMANIAN

‘In India there were 100,000 rice varieties till the 1980s’

Published in March 2022

THIS IS THE International Year of Millets and millets are everywhere. But far removed from all this high-voltage action, enjoying a quiet spotlight of their own, are traditional rice varieties. Belatedly, they are being recognized for superior nutritional and medicinal values as well as their organic character and the natural agricultural practices by which they are grown.

Communities have over generations grown strains of rice that are red, brown, white or black, but, as consumption goes, they have lost out to the high-yielding and mass-produced white varieties such as Basmati that have come to dominate markets. Long grains are the craze, not short or round ones even when the aroma may be better.

Many traditional varieties would have been lost forever if it weren't for family homesteads that have preserved them. Such conservation efforts, too, would have remained obscure and scattered but for initiatives to document the properties of the strains together with the folklore and traditional practices that surround them. The government, too, collects traditional varieties but doesn't promote them or encourage their cultivation — and for traditional strains to flourish they must primarily exist in the fields.

Now, having acquired some visibility, traditional rice strains are also finding niche markets which are appreciative of their unique attributes. They are generally healthier than high-yielding white rice because they don't pile on the calories and spike blood sugar as much. There are also strains which are known to communities for their medicinal properties. In a health-conscious world it is a matter of time before global buyers show up in significant numbers.

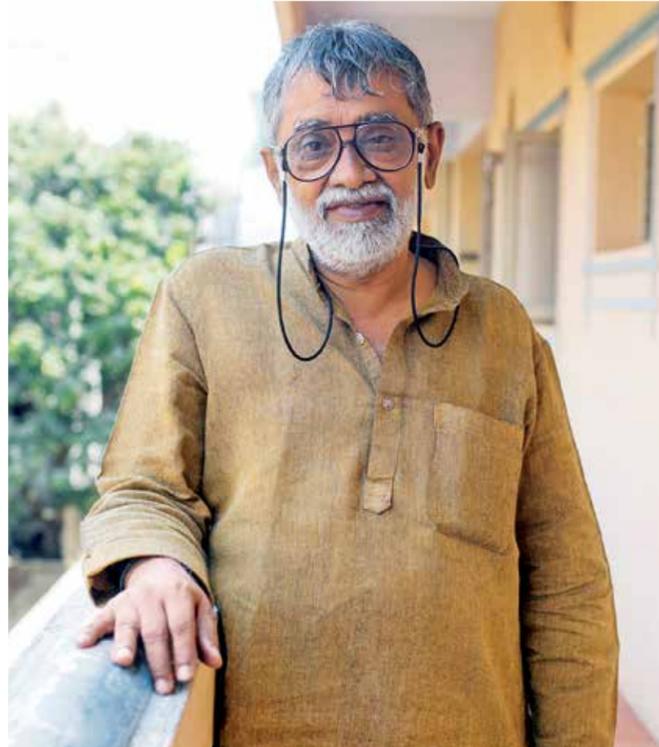
Among those salvaging this natural wealth is the Centre for Indian Knowledge Systems (CIKS), a non-profit, which has for over 40 years been working with farmers to learn what they know, help them save seeds and scientifically document dietary advantages they offer.

A.V. Balasubramanian is the founder-director of CIKS. He has an MSc in chemistry and an MSc in molecular biophysics. But it is in understanding traditional knowledge and the study of plant life that he has immersed himself. Additionally, he has been helping farmers set up producer companies.

Civil Society spoke to Balasubramanian on traditional rice varieties, CIKS's work and the opportunities he sees in farming. Edited extracts from an extensive interview:

Q: You have been working on reviving and promoting traditional rice varieties for several years now. How many rice varieties are out there and why do they need to be revived and conserved?

About 25 years ago, we started by wanting to help farmers cultivate crops, particularly rice, a major crop in our area, sustainably and organically.



A.V. Balasubramanian: 'There is a growing market for traditional rice varieties'

So we did workshops and capacity-building. Soon farmers got back to us and said, look, until a few decades ago we had a lot of indigenous rice varieties. If only we could get them back it would help us in organic cultivation.

We asked the farmers why. They said there are many rice varieties which have resistance to particular diseases or pests or broad spectrum resistance to various diseases and pests. There are also varieties suited to cultivation in various soil types. Some varieties grow well in sandy soil or clay soil or in saline soil where modern seeds and hybrids don't perform.

We asked how those seeds disappeared. They said until 30 to 40 years ago, they saved part of the rice they cultivated and there was also across-the-fence exchange. The department of agriculture used to provide some traditional rice varieties to farmers.

With the emphasis on high-yielding Green Revolution varieties, the department stopped giving farmers any of these traditional rice varieties. There is a big push for hybrid and modern rice varieties. So traditional varieties have disappeared from the public scene.

We undertook research and we found, like so many things in India, certain things go dormant but very few things disappear completely. We found that a few farmers continued to cultivate some traditional varieties because they either had a saline tract or alkaline soil or sandy soil, or a patch that was susceptible to some pest. So the seeds were available but scattered in different locations.

When we looked into literature we found a remarkable piece of work by Dr R.H. Richharia, one of India's greatest rice scientists who was at one time director of the Central Rice Institute in Cuttack. He said that in Vedic times India probably had about 400,000 varieties of rice. He estimated that even in the late 1970s and in the 1980s we perhaps continued to have 100,000 rice varieties.

Dr Richharia had a personal collection of close to 15,000 to 20,000 rice varieties in Madhya Pradesh where he retired. Darshan Shankar of the Academy of Development Studies worked closely with Dr Richharia and he helped them collect and nurture 600 such rice varieties.

Q: Why are these rice varieties important?

Because of agronomic reasons. Some are drought-resistant, pest-resistant

or resistant to certain diseases or suitable for particular soils. They are also very important for resistance against climate change and disasters.

For example, in (December) 2004, when the tsunami hit Tamil Nadu, thousands of hectares in southern Tamil Nadu went under salt water for 20 to 120 minutes. Once the salt water receded, these lands became unfit for cultivation of modern or hybrid varieties. However, there is a traditional rice variety in coastal areas called Kalar Pallai which grows in saline soil, and gives a modest yield.

We also found another interesting thing. There is a rice variety called Kala Namak, native to the Gorakhpur region of UP. It's an ancient aromatic rice variety that grows well in salty soil. We got samples of Kala Namak from friends in the Gorakhpur region and we started cultivating it. We found it did quite well in tsunami-affected coastal Tamil Nadu. This variety is important for resilience against climate change and for disaster management.

Kala Namak, by the way, is a very tasty variety. It is superior to Basmati except for grain length which is important for global marketing.

Also, while collecting rice varieties, farmers would talk about the nutritional and therapeutic value of such varieties. They would say, this is good for pregnant women or lactating mothers or for convalescence.

But such claims did not have the backing of modern science attestations, though many Ayurveda, Siddha and traditional medical texts corroborated what they said.

So about 10 or 15 years ago, we started modern nutritional testing of some traditional varieties. For example, Neelam Samba is considered good for pregnant women and lactating mothers. We tested it and found its calcium content was very high, consistent with the traditional claim. There are also other anecdotal references that are very important.

There is a *mota* red variety cultivated in Ramanathapuram district of southern coastal Tamil Nadu. People stuck to this variety even though its yield was low and it was *mota*, which in Tamil means coarse. They said it is hardy and will grow even in soil where nothing else grows. Secondly, it is good for lactating women.

A young woman from Kerala who had joined us three months after having a baby used to come to office with a breast milk pump. She tried this *mota* rice and said the quality and quantity of milk she produced was much better and she could assess it.

In terms of culinary properties, some traditional varieties are excellent for making fermented foods like *idli*, *dosa* and *puttu*, a tasty breakfast from southern Tamil Nadu. There are varieties suited for therapeutic uses as well.

Q: How many rice varieties have you identified, conserved and researched so far?

We have been able to preserve 160 traditional rice varieties on our farm. By that I mean they have been cultivated for at least three years or more continuously. We ensure that these seeds are conserved in more than one location so that a tsunami or flooding does not destroy all the seeds in a freak event.

We widely distribute varieties which are becoming popular with consumers. We have a programme where we scale up cultivation of these varieties with farmers and help them reach the market. Last year we scaled up to 5,000 metric tonnes of about 30 traditional rice varieties.

Q: How many acres are you working on?

CIKS has an experimental farm of 11 acres where we conserve, document and research. We also work with 5,000 to 7,000 families of farmers in nine districts of Tamil Nadu. Sometimes, a farmer takes a variety from us, scales it up, and ties up with a local miller to reach the market. We are fine with that. Our work has momentum. If he has a problem he may come back to us and that's fine too.

Q: Aren't 160 varieties a mere drop compared to what we have lost? You mention a figure of 100,000 varieties. That's a huge loss to the natural wealth of the country...

When I say we are focused on conserving 160 varieties, it doesn't mean 100,000 are lost. We are focusing on certain varieties which are important for their nutritional properties, agronomic properties, therapeutic properties and, most important, there is rising consumer interest.

Over the years the National Bureau of Plant Genetic Resources (NBPGR) has collected paddy samples or accessions from thousands of locations across the country. But these seed samples are not available to the ordinary farmer. They are only available to scientists of the ICAR (Indian Council of Agricultural Research). We did say it was unfair.

They said that if you want to deposit some samples of rice varieties with us we can place it in a railway station locker kind of system. We will preserve it with a code number and when you want it you can take it back. That was 15 years ago. They have still not notified the procedure.

So these collections are out of the reach of the farmer. There are also doubts globally and in India about the viability and health of seeds that are stored for long periods in cold storage like liquid nitrogen. Do they evolve naturally? Actually, there is no substitute for maintaining the seed by planting it every season and harvesting it. It must exist in nature.

There are other varieties that farmers have and use. I can go on record and say what the official agency is doing is unethical. A few years ago the editor of *Current Science*, the official journal of the Academy of

‘Paddy samples collected by the NBPGR from thousands of locations are not available to the ordinary farmer. They are available to scientists.’

Sciences, sent me a paper for review saying that a group of scientists had collected dozens of rice varieties from farmers in Karnataka.

After screening they found some of them were drought-resistant. They said they would research and develop varieties which could get intellectual property rights. I asked if they had sought the informed consent of farmers when they collected such samples. If there are commercial benefits how will you ensure they go back to the farmers? There was no reply so this is a grey area.

Q: Are farmers able to find a market and a higher price for their traditional rice like other organic produce?

There is potential but some crucial links need to be re-established. There is a huge growing consumer market in urban and semi-urban areas and rural areas. People feel that there is value to food that is cultivated organically. And there is value for traditional varieties. The gap is that the consumer wants a steady supply and, secondly, the quality has to be assured. The rice can't have stones and pests and be broken.

Farmers need access to quality seeds, or seed quality material. Some handholding is needed for cultivation. Secondly, processing, storage and post-harvest facilities are important. The era of hand-pounded rice is over. But when you take traditional rice varieties to the mill, it has equipment that is calibrated for modern varieties. The machinery has to be recalibrated to take in traditional rice varieties. The millowner may ask for 200 or 300 bags to make it worthwhile for him. The farmer faces a challenge if he has to cultivate to scale.

Also, a whole lot of claims are made about organic and traditional varieties. There is fact, fiction and exaggeration. You eat this, your cancer will go away or your kidney disease will disappear. We are trying to do some research based on authentication and documentation to see what we can say with assurance. Wild claims are made by modern science and also by organic and traditional practitioners. ■

So you want to do your bit but don't know where to begin? Allow us to help you with a list especially curated for *Civil Society's* readers. These are groups we know to be doing good work. And they are across India. You can volunteer or donate or just spread the word about them.

COMBAT THE STIGMA OF DISABILITY

 Prabhat, an NGO in Panchkula, next to Chandigarh, is dedicated to the well-being and reintegration of individuals with disabilities and mental health challenges. By providing affordable care, therapy, vocational training and job fairs, it creates a stable support system which empowers people with disabilities.

This enables them to seek affordable healthcare and generates stable employment. Prabhat also conducts awareness campaigns aimed at parents, guardians, educators, students, community leaders, and local officials to combat the stigma associated with mental health and physical disabilities.

Contributions can be made online through their website or you can volunteer to be part of their awareness campaigns. <https://prabhatngo.com/|opasija1940@gmail.com> | +91 98159 80032

GIFT TOYS TO TOYBANK

 Toybank spreads smiles and helps children develop holistically through play. Founded in Mumbai in 2004 by Shweta Chari and Omeima Ataya, Toybank collects used toys in good condition from donors and distributes them to children in need.

Toybank recognizes the transformative power of play in a child's life. It fosters creativity, social skills and emotional well-being.

The NGO also works in urban slums and rural areas of the NCR. One can donate toys or contribute financially through their website. Volunteers play a crucial role by lending time and skill by organizing play sessions, conducting workshops, and facilitating educational programmes. Through its various initiatives, Toybank spreads

FIRST PERSON

SATYA DIXIT, 25, PHARMACEUTICAL MANAGING CONSULTANT

'TEACHING OLDER STUDENTS WAS TRANSFORMATIVE'

IN 2017, I decided to set aside some time to serve those in need. I came across Teach India that is committed to empowering youth through enhancement of their soft skills and English skills, thereby bolstering their employability.

I was curious about how I could do my bit. As someone who had the privilege of being educated in a public school and being an avid reader, I felt I could contribute to teaching and honing spoken English skills among youth belonging to underprivileged sections of urban Indian society.

My journey began with an immersive training programme led by the British Council. There we delved into effective teaching methodologies, learnt and developed through role-playing techniques, workshop facilitation, and guidance on deftly managing



classroom dynamics. Following the training, I was assigned to a vocational training institute in Mandi House, New Delhi, where I engaged with students ranging from 21 to 25 years of age. The experience of connecting with individuals older than myself and assisting them in refining their English proficiency was truly

transformative. I realized the importance of the language in today's world and noticed how keen they were to develop a skill that I had taken for granted so far. After successful completion of my tenure as a volunteer, I received two certificates jointly from the Times Group and the British Council, one for training completion and one for delivering the course curriculum carefully.

Through this endeavour, I believe I contributed to the growth of my students and also experienced personal growth myself. Interacting closely with my students fostered a sense of empathy and commitment to social work within me, enriching my understanding of others' journeys and perspectives and encouraging me to devote my time whenever possible to more such initiatives in years to come.

happiness amongst children. <https://toybank.in/|info@toybank.in> 011-2378 2233

REJUVENATE THE ENVIRONMENT

 Founded by Arun Krishnamurthy, the Environmental Foundation of India (EFI) is a wildlife conservation and habitat restoration group. Their priorities are water, wildlife, waste management and compassion for all life forms. The focus is on scientific revival of freshwater bodies through community-based collaborative efforts. Some of their key water restoration projects include lake and pond restoration in Chennai, cleaning up urban water bodies in Delhi, Kolkata, Mumbai and Pune and restoration

of rural reservoirs. EFI is currently working in 18 states, extending their work to several villages. The group welcomes volunteers and offers three-month internships as well as senior citizen volunteering opportunities. arun@indiaenvironment.org | <https://indiaenvironment.org/> | +91 9940203871

BE A MENTAL HEALTH SOLDIER

 Founded in 1993 by Vandana Gopikumar and Vaishnavi Jayakumar, The Banyan, a non-profit, believes that mental health is a fundamental human right. It seeks to address barriers that prevent access to quality care.

They offer a range of services, including psychiatric treatment, counselling, shelter, vocational

training, and community outreach.

Through their Mobile Outreach Program, they extend their services to individuals living on the streets, providing them with mental health support and linking them to further resources. They also run a residential rehabilitation centre called Adaikalam, which offers long-term care and support for those with severe mental illness. The idea is to reintegrate patients into society through skill development and financial help.

The Banyan welcomes donations online and also offers internship and volunteering opportunities during select months in the year.

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PRODUCTS

Small producers and artisans need help to reach out to sell their wonderful products. *Civil Society* happily provides information about what they have on offer and how you can get to them. Here are some fascinating products from the Dastkar Mela.

NAGA WEAVES FOR YOUR HOME



Venkuvolu Dozo is a weaver and trainer who specializes in backstrap loom, a method of weaving in which a lightweight mobile loom made of wood and a strap is wrapped around the back. You can attach it to a post or even a tree for stability.

Dozo, who is based in Dimapur, Nagaland, started her brand, Viko Ethnic, in 2020 during the Covid-19 pandemic. Her weaving unit, over time, has become an important source of livelihood for women of Nagaland who spin and weave.

She learnt her craft from her aunt at the age of 18.

Women in Naga culture must know how to weave on a loom. Her tribe, Chakhesang, has a ritual that requires the bride to gift her groom a shawl she has woven herself. So most Naga women learn to weave.

Viko Ethnic offers apparel, table linen, cushion covers, handbags, pouches, cotton *mekhelas* and more. Her brand, says Dozo, is using Naga motifs to weave stories of Naga land, culture and people.

Dozo has recruited widowed women from her village too, enabling them to earn their livelihood using a skill familiar to them. Her team consists of 13 artisans in total — apart from widows there are homemakers, mothers and college drop-outs too.

Contact: +91 6386117328 | Instagram: @vekuvoludozo
Email: dozovekuvolu@gmail.com



SPECIAL MORNING BREWS

Founded by Gauri and Raahuul in 2021, Dolshyne began as a boutique brand choosing and selling aromatic coffees and a range of teas. The couple is self-professedly, “driven by quality and inspired by nature”.

On offer are black, green, herbal, tisane, chai and white teas. Also filter and black coffees with exotic names. There's Southern Gem Peaberry Coffee, an Arabica blend, Rum and Raisins Roasted Coffee, Dolshyne Vanilla Flavoured Coffee, a hazelnut variety, and an original filter coffee.

Prices range from ₹400 to ₹1,100. You can also gift a box of tea or coffee. The Pine Wood gift box has 12 herbal teas priced at ₹1,100.

Raahuul thought of the name Dolshyne when he heard a judge at one of his favourite cookery competitions pronounce *dalchini* (cinnamon) as 'dol-shae-ne'. “Since *dalchini* was one of the spices that I added to morning tea, the brand name stuck,” he explains.

“Whether you prefer the champagne elegance of Darjeeling, the bold taste of Assam, or the balanced and brisk flavour of Nilgiri, exploring India's tea regions offers a world of delightful and distinct tea experiences,” says Raahuul. You can place your order via their website or just phone.



Contact: +91 9289273758,
+91 8587079688
Website: www.dolshyne.com
Email: info@dolshyne.com

SOFT SHAWLS FROM HIMACHAL



Bodh Shawl Weavers was founded in 1972 by Paljor Bodh in Lahaul and Spiti to produce fine-quality weaves and generate employment for local women. More than 150 artisans are supported by the enterprise, 100 of whom are women.

Paljor was not always a weaver. For almost a decade, he served in the Indo-Tibetan Border Police (I.T.B.P.), after which he followed his longstanding passion of weaving and spinning, inspired by his father. Since 1972, he has dedicated himself entirely to mastering this craft with passion and joy.

Products on offer include their best-selling handwoven shawls, ponchos, suit sets, stoles and jackets — all made from a variety of wool, merino, yak, angora, silk and bamboo wool blends, to name a few. The origin of these woollen shawls can be traced to the Kullu region. They are best known for their vibrant colours and geometrical designs. There are narrow borders which are called '*patti*'. These are woven on a low-standing loom that is made especially to weave these intricate strips.

While their showroom is based in Shamshi, Himachal Pradesh, they too are regular sellers at Dastkar Bazaars and at Pragati Maidan in Delhi. Contact them on phone or via email for specific enquiries about shipping pan-India.

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Skilling programmes at the **Foundation**, are poised to **Reimagine** and unlock potential

Our journey of partnering the nation's aim to build a technically skilled youth base, is now in its 10th year. Our Industrial Technical Institutes of Tamar (from 2012) and Jagannathpur (from 2017) have ushered a rigor in this vocation among rural youth and in particular, girls from tribal belt in Jharkhand. The need is strong, and so is the appetite to create more bases (the third at Chandil, from 2022), to provide many more trained hands for a resurgent India.

**More than 650 youths
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journey continues!**

