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Nonviolent Communication & Sociocracy

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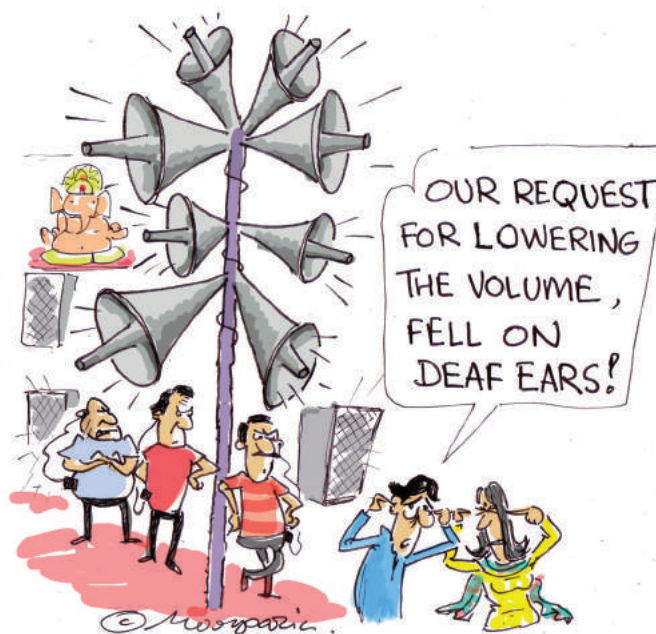
The fairytale world of Orkney

FACE TO FACE

Oeishik

Guest Editors: M. Vivekananda / L.L. Sen, J.P.R. Jacob / Sharda Dattani

MORPARIA'S PAGE



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OCTOBER 2016

VOL.20/3

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Printed at:

Graphone (India) Pvt. Ltd.

A1 /319, Shah & Nahar

Industrial Estate. S. J. Marg,

Lower Parel (W)

Mumbai - 400 013

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LETTER TO THE EDITOR

“Terrorism a major problem”

Terrorism is a major problem not only in India, but also across the world. The roots of terrorism are very deep and are growing day-by-day. While we cannot eliminate terrorism completely, we can restrict it to some extent. Terrorists have no religion nor are they soft-hearted. They don't even spare children and infants. They just want to sow the seeds of fear in people. Since terrorism is a global problem now, every country should come forward and fight against it. We should take a cue from Israel and learn to fight terrorists and prove that we are a strong and vibrant nation and are capable of giving a bloody nose to the enemies of our country; we cannot take everything lying down, nor are we a toothless giant.

Every time a bomb blast takes place, it is always the common man who is injured or dead and put into a lot of inconvenience, while our ministers are hale and hearty roaming about in air-conditioned cars and dining in five-star hotels on the common man's hard-earned money, which they pay as taxes.

Pakistan, since the time of independence is the main cause of terrorism. Pakistan sends its terrorists into India

to cause heavy destruction to life and property every time they find a chance to do it. They have used the young boys of Jammu and Kashmir and also Afghanistan in the name of brotherhood and jihad to help them in their cruel activities. They kill people so barbarously for no reason at all.

In order to stop all these terrorist activities, we must live in harmony and be friendly with our neighboring countries, especially Pakistan, and not fight in the name of religion. Only then we will be able to rid our nation of terrorism and all such corrupt activities. In my opinion, terrorism is nothing but fight for something in a cruel way. I hope our ministers are reading this.

– Jubel D'Cruz, Mumbai

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WHO AM I?

*I am a proud Indian,
citizen of the world community,
inhabiting this lonely ...
but lovely little ... ★
planet ...*



Earth...



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Naan-violence it is!

Indians practicing non-violence and empathy, did you say? Nivedita Louis has nightmarish visions of how it will come about in real life!

WHEN Marshall Rosenberg developed Nonviolent Communication, he might not have imagined how we mundane beings might put it to practice. I shudder to think of how his three principles of empathy, self-empathy and honest self-expression work these days. Imagine what happens when every one of us propagates 'honest self-expression' and mouths whatever we feel honestly to the whole wide world. Every time the wife looks at the mirror and turns around with that prodding on how her beauty has enhanced, the husband voicing his 'honest self-expression' would find his voice box plucked and discarded in the dust bin.

Self-empathy did you say, Marshall? When that obviously states putting oneself in other's shoes, our wedding halls and prayer halls have literally these empathetic souls who rob us of our shoes - the newer, the better. Self-empathy is what we imagine as self-pity where we dig a hole and stay there wallowing, worse than a hibernating country mouse. Speak of empathy that translates to understanding and caring, we do care. We care about all things monetary and understand how to survive the rat race. All things material matter to us, all that should matter like other people's lives go down the drain. We can be empathetic--so much that 452 cars and 300 trucks can cross a dying man on road, without even a slightest brake. Our already squeaking brake-pads matter more to us than the poor guy on the road. After all it is his *karma* that has come to claim.

We keep making excuses that beat the length of our grocery bills. "What will the police ask?", "What if he dies on the way?", "What if he is already mugged?", "What about my meeting?", "What about my car backseat?" and above all, "Why should I, when everyone moves away?" As the proverbial sheep that follow the herd, we keep moving.

Needs are never in conflict, courtesy, nonviolent communication. Try feeding chicken biryani to the lost soul of a three-month-old baby, but beforehand arm yourself with protection shield to avoid the 'puke'lear bomb! Do the

needs vary? So long as it is not ice-cream and chocolates, I do agree. At forty, I would give away the whole wide world for my cup of vanilla ice-cream. I was 'chocolate-toothed' when I was six, am so at 40 and you can bet I shall be the same when I hit 80. There was a person by name 'Maslow' who propagated a theory of needs. I still shudder at his accuracy when he places basic needs at the lowest of his pyramid model. Non-violence is our social need and naan-violence is our basic need. Food always forms our 'lowest' need! By the time I had come to memorise the list of 'self-actualisation needs', I felt a big void. Why do we always miss that bus?

Why ever did communication got violent? Habits of thinking and speaking that lead to the use of violence are learned through culture. Ah! Now we are talking. Our culture is influenced by Gandhi on one side and *Gangs of Wasseypur* on the other. We still are a confused lot when it comes to deciphering our speaking and thinking. To us, they both are two different channels of communication. We think like complete morons and speak our words that drip with honey. When I say to my neighbour that her 'sari is so beautiful', all I am imagining is tearing it to shreds with my brand new scissors, or better still, testing my toilet acid on the silver zari.

So the big question is, are we ready for Nonviolent Communication? Yes, we are – so long as the world is flat and the sun rises in the West. As a society we need to really 'listen' and 'feel'. If Gandhi were here today, he would have shook his head and wished he was still the barrister in Africa,

not fasting for the sake of *We the people* to understand naan-violence, oops...non-violence. ■



Nivedita Louis is a writer, blogger and social activist by choice. Bitten by the travel bug, and smitten by nature, she loves travelling and cooking. She blogs at www.cloudninetalks.blogspot.com.

Our culture is influenced by Gandhi on one side and *Gangs of Wasseypur* on the other. We still are a confused lot when it comes to deciphering our speaking and thinking. To us, they both are two different channels of communication.

Living in nonviolence

*There is a small community in Jaipur called AhmisaGram, which lives the values of Nonviolent Communication (NVC) and Sociocracy, experimenting, teaching and delving deeper into these concepts. Its initiator **Shammi Nanda** is convinced that these concepts are needed by the world today as never before. He describes AhimsaGram and the premise on which it has been founded.*

I have always loved being with people. As a 12-year-old, I enjoyed creating a Janmashatami temple outside my house. I would get together with friends to collect money and set it up. I was active in environmental groups in college, and we also did some work to mobilise our fellow students to work towards drought relief work. I was also the president of the students' body in FTII (Film and Television Institute of India) when I was studying there. While organising a strike there, initially there had been fear of punishment, but coming together gave us immense power and things changed.

There have been many moments when I have joined and lived in community spirit with groups, and I have realised that there is some unknown energy and power that comes when we work collaboratively, and the impact is more than the sum of the parts. Since I've also always questioned things around me and enjoy when things change to enrich people's lives, I gravitate towards doing social transformation change work, either individually or with community.

The energy of collaboration

I experienced that sometimes things worked and there was synergy, while at other times things didn't work out, when I worked in groups and communities. Sometimes it was so bad that after organising a programme or gathering in one of the community or an event in a community, either I didn't want to see the face of some people or some of them didn't want to work with me anymore. I would be surprised that how sometimes even when working with 'nice' people, or with whom I saw alignment in our politics, we ended up miles apart during and after working together. I assumed it as a problem of the people and blamed them, and did not look at the system or the context in which we were working. It was much later that I realised that systems are designed and not given, and sometimes, a given system or design may not serve our purpose, and we may need to shine the light on the structures and systems if we want fundamental changes in our lives.

For example, I had volunteered for two years in Pune to make and lead an organic kitchen for a 100 students at the

FTII around seven years ago, and by the end, some people were unhappy and angry with how I was managing it, while some loved the food. There were a lot of aggressive arguments to make me leave the kitchen, and it made me question as to why things were not working? It was a painful experience, almost as if I was thrown out of a community.

After this incident and many such before, I was dejected and wanted to almost stay away from community work, and that's when Nonviolent Communication (NVC) came my way. That's when I looked at my experience of the mess differently. I saw that even those about whom I held enemy images from that time, had needs, and that they had good enough reasons to be put off with me and my ideas and project. I also had some guilt from the way I had chosen to end my marriage and the way I blamed myself for the pain my ex-partner went through. One of my first NVC guides, Farrah, made me see my guilt differently. She made me understand that I was just looking at my unmet need for my care for my ex-partner, and wasn't able to look at the needs I had met by my choice of breaking up. When I connected with my own needs, there was more compassion within myself along with sadness and mourning for my partner. I understood that I could hold celebration for the met need and mourning for the unmet need at the same time. It did not have to be this or that, one person right or wrong, but a complex situation can have both celebration and pain. This gave me lot of lightness and understanding.

The genesis of AhimsaGram

These learnings inspired me to dive deeply into NVC. I learnt about interpersonal relationships, how to have difficult conversations with people, how to mediate with two or more people and engage with other ways of conflict resolution. I soon jumped into sharing and have been doing so for the last five years. While working on organising NVC events, I came across another amazing process – Sociocracy, which was about bringing these values of transparency, equivalence and efficiency in an organisation or a group working together. This process also allowed each person to be able to contribute

and have agency to impact the decisions of the community, while staying in alignment with the shared vision, mission and aim of the group.

When I experienced its power, it reassured me that we can work together; it's not that people are bad, but we have some practices, which come in the way of our understanding and contributing collectively. I searched for people who could teach me in India, and since I didn't manage to find any, invited James Priest to organise his workshop in India, and for the first time learnt it systematically. After a year, seeing that John Buck, who had done pioneering work in Sociocracy, was coming to India, I approached him and offered to organise workshops on Sociocracy for our community, and he agreed. We did four workshops with him and it gave me a deeper understanding of Sociocracy and created more and more appetite to learn and practice it deeply.

I had heard and dreamt of collaboration, but never experienced a genuine one. There was no one in India that I knew of, who was doing it, and my growing hunger for practicing it made me look at the possibility of creating a space where we can live and learn Sociocracy, actually do it hands on. I thought let's see if there are others who are excited, and create a community with them. Besides, I had been moving around for the last 12 years with my bag, picking up skills around sustainable living and community action for social change. My circles had grown and there were people wanting me to be present in different places to offer trainings and do mediations and support them in consent-based organising. I realised that I could not be in all the places. Thus, I decided to be in one place and invite other like-minded people to make a community to live, learn and share NVC, consent-based organisation process, and conflict transformation system.

I decided to make my base in Jaipur, my home town, more so because there had been different circles that I had been a part of when I was growing up or visiting, and I had seen a sense of care with these groups and individuals, that made me feel safe. I had some savings and decided to take a place on rent and invite those who were on the same search. NVC and Sociocracy became our aims. Some came because they wanted to learn NVC or Sociocracy, some came to experience community living, some were interested in food, and one by one in three months we are now a community of 11 people, and amongst us is a family with a nine-year-old son. I believe that we are growing fast, as well as we are growing robustly.

I would say AhimsaGram is a living laboratory. We are seeing if we can create spaces where there is equivalence and each voice matters. Some things are working and we still have some challenges, but we are willing to walk this path and see what it leads to. Maybe we can one day tell the

world that it's possible to live collaboratively, have collective ownership and move on to achieve common vision and aims.

Since it's a place to live Sociocracy, it is organised sociocratically, where we have collective ownership of decision-making as we work with consent. From deciding about the daily menu to the decisions around financial remuneration, it's all done by consent in our respective groups or circles, and within that process each member of the circle has the time to speak, listen, contribute, object, modify the proposal and consent.

I am sometimes amazed at the amount of effort the team members are putting in to run our space and our projects. More so, I see a sense of ownership in all of them, and even though I am the initiator, if I don't keep up with our agreements of the processes, others point it out to me. I have seen the community growing and accessing more and more inner resources to make our offerings to the world more diverse, deep and rich. In other words we are a fast growing community and that too with a very robust growth, it's not just a crowd who just votes, but a group of committed people who have gathered on a shared vision and are willing to take initiative. I now see that the group is much more than my initiative or for that matter more than any of us, yet we are all contributing to make it happen. I can see that it takes a whole group to create a community or for that matter a business too. I am surprised that in the business models that we have, the credit is mostly taken by the bosses or owners. I began as the initiator and now as an active steward, see that it's a result of collective effort, and I fully see that this community is owned by everyone because what we have created has each person's head, heart and action in making it. I am surprised that our society has a blind spot by not acknowledging the credit and ownership to all those who make it, and that can create unmotivated people who just learn to obey orders and stop putting in their creative best.

The way I see the spirit of leadership growing in the people at AhimsaGram, I would say we are a leadership institute in disguise. I am seeing people who didn't earlier speak, are now willing to say no, and that too with care. We have leadership in Sociocracy, but it works in the framework decided by the group with each person's consent. The group not just votes, but participates in policy making which the leader can execute with the support of the team. This structure is allowing many of them to exercise leadership and their creativity flows in designing the policy along with the team and executing it.

I also believe that when we create a community we can hold the vision sacred, but allow the form to emerge. Each day we are modifying what we are doing and what we want to do and creating a new community. We began with NVC and Sociocracy, while now wellness is also coming on top of our list.

(Continued on page 11)

Collaboration, the way to go

*Around the world, more and more individuals and organisations are embracing collaborative approaches to decision-making, resource allocation, and attending to differences and conflict. **Miki Kashtan** talks at length about this approach and the traditional, emotional and systemic changes required for this approach to work most effectively.*

THE scope of global problems, the increased challenges to sustainability, the growing heterogeneity of groups and teams, and the unprecedented access to information through the internet are all rendering centralised, command-and-control approaches ineffective. Collaboration is emerging as an attractive alternative because it increases flexibility and trust through participation, because it provides access to more wisdom through synergistic processes, and because the commitment to a solution that works for all attends to more variables, which creates more robust outcomes.

Challenges to collaboration

Although collaborative approaches are gaining ground, historical and continuing cultural and systemic challenges remain. Knowing the challenges helps us face and transform obstacles to effective collaboration within and around ourselves. The first layer is internal: our emotional attitudes and beliefs. These are inner obstacles that arise from growing up in our current society, and from continuing to be exposed to certain frames of reference all around us. On the emotional plane, many of us experience fear of conflict, leading us to avoiding conflict or coercion and control in an effort to reduce the chances of conflict by “forcing” agreement. Conversely, many of us feel powerless and agree to outcomes that don’t really work for us just to maintain peace. Instead, we can aim, emotionally, to focus on the intrinsic benefit of disagreement, knowing that everyone’s wisdom is needed for a solution that truly works for all, the hallmark of a successful collaboration. To become better collaborators, then, we can learn to flex our muscle of willingness to engage with and even invite dissent.

Quite apart from our emotional tendencies, though clearly related, we all carry beliefs about people, life, and what is possible for humans. Because of a long period in human history in which we have all been trained to believe that collaboration is both impossible and ineffective, we come into collaboration with skepticism. This skepticism emerges from either/or thinking which prevents us from seeing how to attend to all needs, especially under conditions of disagreement or stress. It is no surprise that we see the world this way, because for



A workshop by Miki at the West Bank, 2015

millennia now, humanity, in more and more places around the world, has been committed to separation and scarcity. Today’s modern version of this belief system is that we’re each on our own and there isn’t enough for all. To move closer to embracing collaboration, we will need to educate ourselves to transform our views of human nature; discover the vast literature and practices of managing resources as commons; and educate ourselves on the many successful collaborations that remain invisible in their seamlessness (think Wikipedia, for example).

Lastly, centuries of competition and command-and-control have made our collaboration muscles atrophy. Our habits lag behind our intentions, and we lack skills and imagination about how to collaborate effectively. This is because collaboration requires specific actions we don’t learn growing up, and are not available to us when needed. In addition, even when we are able to acquire and sustain a collaborative know-how, we interact with others who may have not done the same work of liberating themselves. We often need to do more than our own work if we are truly committed to an outcome that works for all.

Simply and bluntly: If we want to make collaboration work, we need to offer and encourage dissent; to learn to say no, to hear no, and to encourage others to say no. This is hard in any circumstances, and even more so when power differences enter the picture.



Miki (in centre), with Victor Barrantes, the Deputy Minister for Peace in Costa Rica, and others, at a presentation at the Presidential House in 2016

Collaboration and power

When power differences exist within a group, they add a level of challenge in terms of creating a solution that attends to everyone's needs. Power differences interfere with information flow because they introduce fear and mistrust. This reduces the capacity to engage with differences, a vital ingredient of effective collaboration.

Power differences can be structural or social-structural. In a structural power difference (e.g., boss and employee, foundation officer and grant seeker), it is the nature of the relationship that creates the power differences, and they do not exist as such outside the relationship. Social-structural power differences, such as those of gender, race, and class, emerge from legal, historical, and/or cultural conditions that affect the individuals in question and persist beyond the relationship itself. Because of how societies are structured, the two forms of power differences tend to reinforce each other. For example, bosses are more likely to be lighter skinned, male, and of a higher birth class, thereby expanding their power.

Whatever the source and form of power, the person with less power is less likely to advocate for their needs. In the case of social-structural power differences, the system as a whole is not favourable to people with less power advocating for their needs. In addition, cultural norms tend to prioritise the behaviours and needs of the dominant group, making it even less likely that the person with less power would advocate for their needs fully.

In these kinds of settings, extra attention is needed to create the conditions for including all needs. Without such extra attention, what tends to happen is people saying “yes” without engaging their full wisdom, or withholding important truths and information for fear of consequences from those in

power, or because of internalised oppression. In parallel, people sometimes say “no” without considering needs, either as rebellion (from below) or as control (from above).

Despite all these challenges, more and more people find the strength and the skills to move towards more and more collaboration. In the remainder of this article I offer a basic framework and some skills for supporting collaboration, especially across power differences.

A basic framework for collaboration

In support of collaboration, four core perspective shifts can serve both as an internal roadmap on the path of liberation from the legacy of separation, and as guideposts to gauge our success in collaborating.

From positions to principles: Even in the midst of significant disagreements on *positions*, it is surprisingly and reliably possible, often easy, to find agreements on *principles*.

From compromise to integration: Instead of settling for compromise, where everyone gives up something, we can reach integration. When people trust that their needs and concerns matter and understand others' needs and concerns, they often experience an authentic shift into creative win-win options that feel expansive rather than narrowing.

From preference to willingness: While the range of solutions that fit within our *preference* can be quite narrow, we can almost always embrace a wider range of solutions on the basis of *willingness*.

From either/or to solutions that work for everyone: When people are invited to take seriously the needs and concerns of all as the basis of solutions that work for everyone, they become amazingly creative.



A workshop retreat conducted by Miki in the US

The practical building blocks of collaboration

To operationalise the overarching principle of basing a solution that works for everyone on complete understanding of what's important to everyone, we need to develop some core capacities.

Key among these is the capacity to hold and attend to multiple needs. This means shifting from conflict, in which the problem is between us, to dilemma, in which we hold the problem together. In a conflict, the problem obscures our ability to see and care about each other. In a dilemma, we see each other, and know that only an unwavering commitment to attending to all the needs sustains the generative tension from which creative possibilities arise. With this commitment, a “no” becomes nothing more and nothing less than a pointer to new needs. Identifying and naming the needs hidden in the “no” releases opposition and leads to an even deeper collaboration. Knowing this also teaches us to express our own dissent with the intention to find solutions that include others' needs, thereby making it easier for others to integrate our input.

Collaboration also means attending to relationships, not just the specific issue at hand. Overall, lack of attention to relationship erodes trust, while only attending to relationship results in loss of effectiveness. As we learn, gradually, to attend to both short and long term goals, we discover, sometimes through failure, that although unilateral processes sometimes produce faster results, they tend to erode effectiveness and trust over time. Lastly, the focus and clarity that come from defining and sustaining a purpose for each collaboration and each conversation within it unleash more stamina and creativity.

Engaging with the challenge of power differences

Creating effective collaboration in the context of power differences amounts to enabling all needs to be on the table and all input to be given and considered, despite the power

difference. From a position of power, it means encouraging people to participate and contribute fully by reducing fear as much as possible. This means nothing less than encouraging dissent from those who habitually say “yes”; soliciting input even when you are confident of your solution; and listening with care to whatever input is presented, taking it seriously even when you disagree. It means letting go of the illusion and practice of control.

To collaborate with someone with more, say within an organisation, your task is to create sufficient trust and alliance that the person in power will *want* to collaborate with you. This requires some inner work to engage with and transcend your fear to access more choice. How? By doing the difficult work of seeing and engaging with the full humanity of the person in power, even when you don't like their choices. You get there by identifying, naming, and aiming for a shared purpose with that person, and by positioning yourself as an ally to that person in service of the shared purpose rather than to challenge the person in power.

Embedding collaboration in systems

Many of today's organisations and institutions are based on either/or, competitive, or command-and-control systems, where conflict resolution systems are either lacking or rely on adversarial, win/lose methods. It takes consistent effort to sustain a collaborative orientation without support, and many of us simply don't have enough inner resilience or outer support. If you are an employer, for example, aiming to solicit true input from employees who are used to going along and don't expect anything different to ever happen, can be an uphill struggle. Conversely, creating an alliance with a boss who believes in controlling outcomes may well fail even if you are profoundly committed to sharing power.

These are just two small reasons why I believe that the global challenge of collaboration will not be solved by individuals or even individual organisational leaders, even though the movement in this direction is gaining rapid ground with the catalysing work of people like Otto Scharmer, author of *Leading from the Emerging Future*, who's been holding online classes for many thousands of people around the world through the Presencing Institute at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. Ultimately, collaborating without systemic support requires each of us to be a saint. Moreover, even when an institutional leader embodies the spirit of collaboration in full authenticity, the entire project is vulnerable because of depending on one individual. In the end, shifting organisations and institutions towards maintaining resilience in collaborative functioning requires systems that embed the principles of collaboration across the board.

The systemic approach begins with collaborating on

identifying and naming a shared purpose as well as the values that guide operations, effective collaboration being one of them. From then on, the shift entails aligning every organisational policy, process, procedure, practice, structure, or operational guideline with the organisational or team purpose and values. Sooner or later, it means examining every aspect of the organisation to see if it supports or hinders collaboration.

There are no predefined collaborative templates, although more and more is known, especially since Frederic Laloux documented how collaborative organisations function. Each organisational system is a set of agreements that address specific questions. Each system can be clarified and made both more efficient and more collaborative: decision-making, resource allocation, information flow, feedback, and conflict resolution.

Consider these initial ideas. A collaborative decision-making system doesn't mean that everyone participates in all decisions. Rather, it means that guidelines exist for when and how to involve others in decision-making to maximise efficiency and collaboration. A collaborative resource allocation system might mean a periodic budget marketplace resulting in agreements by all units. Collaborative information-flow might mean guidelines for true transparency without fear. Collaborative feedback systems generally mean that feedback flows openly in all directions, not just downwards, and is designed for learning, not reward and punishment. A collaborative conflict resolution system transcends the "badness" associated with conflict and focuses on shifting conflicts to dilemmas in which all parties are, together, on the lookout for solutions that will work for all.

A process similar to what I just described has been underway in one global organisation I am part of: the Center for Nonviolent Communication. Since 2014, a New Future Process launched by the organisation's board has engaged hundreds of

people from around the world to learn what the community wants to see happen, and then about 45 carefully selected volunteers, including myself, worked for over a year, in full transparency, to create a plan for a new version of the organisation ambitiously aiming to be fully collaborative, containing blueprints for all the systems necessary. In the process, we took the principles of collaboration as far as we know how to address the immense challenges of bridging across lines of previous colonisation or language barriers. (See www.cnvc.org/future for information and links to the plan.)

Creating collaborative organisations from the ground up is easier than transforming authority-based organisations. Luckily, there is no need to do it all at once. The initial re-orientation towards collaboration is likely to unleash an unprecedented amount of energy in the form of goodwill that can be harnessed for incremental movement towards an even more collaborative future.

One more key to success in this area is growing our capacity to accept where things are. Given the legacy of thousands of years, our capacity to reach truly collaborative functioning will likely be partial. For the foreseeable future, we will likely experience a combination of celebrating our movement, accepting where we are, and seeking inspiration and energy to keep aiming for even more transformation. Let us start now. ■



Miki Kashtan is a practical visionary pursuing a world that works for all, based on principles, tools, and systems that support true collaboration without compromising efficiency. Miki co-founded the 'Bay Area Nonviolent Communication' and the 'Center for Efficient Collaboration', and has taught and consulted with individuals and organisations on five continents. She is the author of *Reweaving Our Human Fabric* and she blogs at The Fearless Heart.

Living in nonviolence

(Continued from page 7)

We could one day invite other people to make offerings or workshops here and serve the community through that. I am open to it becoming a wellness centre, while working on consent-based governance and with NVC consciousness and practices.

This idea of emergence increases your trust in what it is and what could come in the future. It makes you free to further experiment. Combined with a team which is inspired, our journey is going to be very fast and deep. I already see that so many who come to us for a few days want to join us for long. I see so much hunger for authentic living and a desire to contribute collaboratively. I am glad that we grew from 3 to 11 in three months and now we are open to more joining us. We believe that it's magical when people come

together with a shared purpose and vision. It's amazing for us to be with them and they can make magic. We are here setting up systems and structures and invite those with our shared vision to join us. If you are one of them, come and visit AhimsaGram; also, read more articles from some of our team members in this issue to have a greater sense of our space and its offerings. ■

Shammi Nanda has been a film maker who studied at the Film and Television Institute of India (FTII). He began to associate with communities working on sustainable life



practices, and has been on organic farms and with home schooling communities all over the country. Lately, he is working on Nonviolent Communication (NVC), restorative justice practices like Restorative Circles and consent decision making processes like Sociocracy. To know more about NVC see www.cnvc.org and to know about Shammi and his work, see his blog at www:courageouscommunication.wordpress.com

Just breathe

*In the journey of Nonviolent Communication (NVC), **Hema Pokharna**, a US-based Jain practitioner, has experimented with its various facets. In a candid chat with **Shammi Nanda**, she explains how Jainism supports her in connecting with NVC and how the learning of NVC reinforces her connection with Jainism. She is also the person who brought Marshall Rosenberg, the founder of NVC to India for the first time.*

I will start by explaining what attracted me to Nonviolent Communication. Upon completion of the Ph.D. programme, I received a postdoctoral fellowship at Case Western Reserve University. Then I had a certain lighthearted attitude towards life and research. I was to work on a research hypothesis which I had designed as a graduate student. With good fortune, I was in a position to collaborate with a skillful biochemist and an excellent researcher, whose guidance I very much wanted, yet, in one of our discussions he was so frustrated that he said, “Are you sure you have a Ph.D, you don’t seem to be bright”. I felt very sad and scared because I was considered to be a good scientist and productive researcher, so far. My identity was in jeopardy. In that moment I considered myself a failure since he was a very renowned scientist; his words were the truth to me. This was a very painful experience. After spending three hours of crying and breathing, I returned to his office renewed with compassion and said, “Can I spend a few moments in your luminous presence so that I can brighten myself?” By then I think he was aware of what had happened and was very kind to me ever after.

Particularly rewarding at this time was the reminder to breathe. At this point I found and understood that the best antidote to any violence was to breathe. This has been one of the most exciting and major turning points in my development. Towards the end of the fellowship we had published three papers together. And my continued association with him has meant a great deal to me. After that day, my “Ph.D” stood for “Psychologically healthy and Delightful”. In those three hours of breathing, I was aware of the suffering caused by unmindful speech and inability to listen to others. I affirmed my own convictions to cultivate loving speech and deep listening in order to bring joy and happiness to my fellow beings and relieve them of their sufferings if possible. After understanding that words can create happiness or suffering I am now much more conscious to learn ways to speak truthfully, with words that inspire self-confidence, joy, and hope. The principle of nonviolence had a newer and much deeper meaning.

As a biochemist, the words the professor said had a physiological effect on me. I sensed a disturbance inside me

at mental, spiritual and emotional levels and also stimulate fear and anger. I got very curious of the impact of words on our wellbeing. I was already introduced to NVC in the course on Alternative to Violence which I was enrolled in at the University of Akron. After this incident I was fortunate to meet NVC advocate Marshall Rosenberg, who would come to Cleveland frequently then. I also enrolled at the Gestalt Institution of Cleveland and Focusing Institution to deepen my understanding of violence caused by words, and how psychology used words and verbal therapies for healing.

For personal growth I found NVC very valuable, and in the exchange of empathy I found myself feeling internally very peaceful, learnt to be able to focus on the present moment and that led to me gradually becoming less fearful of life, people and places and specially being alone in the USA. I enjoyed being with people different than me. I learned to truly connect with them and understand what mattered most to them. It was magical to maintain connection and compassion in spite of people being diagonally different than me in their beliefs and practices. This led to more curiosity of the magic of empathy and the growing fearlessness of conflicts. The more my sister and I studied with Marshall, the more we got clear about the HOW TO of being Jain. We understood what was prescribed that Jain is one who refrains from *Rag* (likes) and *Dwesh* (dislikes or aversion), and NVC gave us tools and practices to actively navigate through our reactions and good and bad thinking, and right and wrongness of actions and behaviours. We became clear that by using NVC we were not in agreement, but we got deeper in understanding the principles of *Anekantwad* (relativity of viewpoints) and how not accepting of people’s viewpoints was violence, and deepened our clarity of the Jain Motto ‘Live and Let Live’.

Jainism’s precepts v/s NVC

I am not sure how different each is from the other. Ahimsa according to Jainism is to stay in your *svabhav* or *atma* in any situation. And what is expected is IF you are in that place then you will respond to life and circumstances versus REACT. So NVC gives the mechanics of how you make sense of what

it means to be in your *atma* or divinity. For me what that translated into was when I am in values/needs focus or awareness I am in *svabhav* and or at least oriented towards *svabhav* and my chances of reacting out of fear, shame or guilt are much less. Of course, this has taken years of practice, given our reactions are very habitual and NVC takes practice and much heightened awareness.

The process of self empathy is crucial in being able to be compassionate to the world around, so as practice NVC becomes very powerful to arrive closer to what Mahavir, Gandhi and Jesus spoke about practical nonviolence. NVC has made my Jainism practice richer. The '*pravachans*' or religious discourse I have been listening to for a long time, I can't hear anything but the NVC and vice versa. I can hear the principles and commitments aligned to the goal of connection, and integrated existence or interdependence.

Bringing Marshall to India

We visited India once a year for 3-4 weeks, and friends and family were always curious how we maintained our Jain values so much more closely than the local Jains. They praised our *shanti* and lovely, caring ways, and were curious about what we ate, and we would get to sharing NVC, and with time, friends arranged small gatherings where we shared the basics of NVC etc. Then I was invited to serve on the board of Parliament of World Religions, and because of that I got to meet many religious leaders from different religions, which led to invitations to their organisations and schools etc., to share NVC.

We always came back excited and rejuvenated to share the growing hunger for NVC in India, which led to conversations with Marshall and his willingness to bring NVC to India and Asia. In partnership with Fr Chris, who is an NVC trainer from Sri Lanka and has been committed to make NVC accessible to the people in Sri Lanka, my sister and I organised the first NVC convention in Bangalore in 2004, which was very well attended and people wanted it to happen again. In the meantime my friends in Pune where I am originally from got really excited and were eager to support my passion and dream to bring Marshall to Pune, my home town. My oldest brother still lived in Pune then and so the excitement to bring Marshall to our home where we grew was very exciting. So in 2006 we organised the second NVC convention in Pune.

My dad was a freedom fighter and he had friends in India who adored him for the nonviolent life he led, and how he raised his seven kids and educated them, despite my mother's very early demise. One of the freedom fighters and industrialist N.K. Firodiya and his son Abhay Kumar Firodiya (of Kinetic Honda), owned a beautiful resort for corporate trainings, and were willing and enthusiastic to support bringing Marshall to Pune and train 100 people in their facility at no charge, as a

gift for my passion and a YES to my request. Other friends stepped in and shared their vehicles to pick people from the airport and train stations etc., and bring them to the resort, which was a bit remote from downtown Pune.

My dream was to make this accessible to anyone who could attend and wished to be in Marshall's presence and also make it sustainable and an ongoing process. People who were touched by our skills and compassion were eager to meet and learn from Marshall, and were willing to hold the Pune end of organising the event. Many favourable factors got aligned, sponsors to host and people eager to attend. Also, Jains in general contribute to the upliftment of people through spiritual and nonviolence trainings etc. Not necessarily religions alone, so that was a good fortune.

NVC – the American experience

In the US I find a lot of people, who are committed to nonviolence, and they are more Jain and more nonviolent than me.....I really appreciate all the books on spirituality, nonviolence and so much more that promote and advocate nonviolent living. So I find it very exciting to be in the US and live my values and be celebrated for them. It is much appreciated by those who don't have that depth and breath of what NV or NVC is about. But in the last few years, my NVC practice group of 21 years is flourishing, and people from all walks of life take advantage of the free and open class, which happens every Monday.

A few years ago, the challenge was not getting enough vegetarian food, but that is changing very rapidly. Now that we are on a Jain diet (no onions and potatoes and other root vegetables, honey, spinach etc.,) it's harder to find Jain food, so we are committed to eat mostly home cooked food and not eat outside. Other than that, I think life has been wonderful where ever we go....India or USA. And having giraffe ears makes a wonder of a difference, every step of the way.

I love everything about America as much as I enjoy India, especially the people and places I hang out and associate with. I think being a minority has allowed me to deepen my learning and align to my values. Not that life is easy. We have challenges every step of the way....what's exciting is we come out of it stronger and bolder. ■



Hema Pokharna, PhD, is a scientist, writer, speaker NVC certified trainer with more than 20 years experience coaching clients toward wholeness, collaborative communication, and resilient leadership. Hema is also an interfaith peacemaker and mediator, and has served on the board of Parliament of World Religions. Together with her physician sister Mandakini, also NVC certified trainer, inspire and educate people around the world to make healthy, harmonious life choices.

Finding my space

*A young girl who found Nonviolent Communication (NVC), marvels how she got on so far without this resource. **Uditima Mehrotra**, an ardent believer of NVC and Sociocracy, talks about the practical side of practicing these life values at AhimsaGram in Jaipur.*

THE following is an amalgamation and elaboration of tiny notes I found written to myself, that tried to save little revelations I came across during days and weeks of living and working at AhimsaGram, a community space where we're trying out the concept of building our own custom-families, with whom we work, cook, learn, share and so much more. Here we're trying to construct an environment infused with consciousness of ourselves, the ripples our existence and actions create, and how they affect the world and the beings in it. The people of AhimsaGram are a feast of diversity, coming together from various, contrasting and complementing backgrounds, to pursue their passions, be it for food, Nonviolent Communication (NVC), nature, to see a change, or be one, or just because they enjoy having a space where it's okay to dream alone and sometimes together.

The skeptic

Having left a liberal arts college within a year, after disagreements with their philosophy and its actual execution, I was grappling with my own disappointment and wariness with anything that sounded idealistic or alternative. So at a time like this, when a friend of mine reached out to me to attend a workshop done by a guy, she claimed, I could really hit it off with, given his lifestyle choices and philosophy related to gift culture, community building, and many other things that sounded too good to be true, I was obviously skeptical of her optimism and judgement. Meeting Shammi Nanda and hearing him out, my first observations led me to believe, here was a guy who's all talk, no play. His claims, ideas and dreams, were big and beautiful, but I wasn't very sure if there were people out there who could actually come together through a shared ideal and then stay together.

My favourite shape is a circle

A circle has come to signify so much more for me, than it did back in my geometry classes in school. Sitting in a circle now implies sharing, inclusion, equivalence, and a togetherness where people have gathered for a mutual cause, they feel for or are affected by and wish to do something about it. I was really frustrated in the beginning about the emphasis laid on following the steps and rules of Sociocracy.



The writer (front and extreme right) at the first Sociocracy workshop at AhimsaGram

It felt like a strangulation of impulsive creativity and the need to be heard. We move in a circle to listen to everyone, than just letting everyone contribute as they wish, different from the 'open discussions' I was used to. It took me a while to realise that I had gotten so scared of never getting a chance to talk, that I was ever ready with opinions, wherever and whenever I could put it. It was and still is hard work, to accept that you'll get your chance, that everyone will be heard, no matter what.

I have experienced an environment where after a voting, the majority wins and it's completely natural to disregard the minority's opinion and in some cases, even the minority population feels it's a fair decision and live with it. And now I've experienced a 'leave no man behind' environment, where exists an agreement that all of our opinions, ideas, objections matter equally. Everybody will be heard. Any decision taken will emerge out the people's' collective wisdom. In such circles, I've seen a person say that here they learned that sometimes it's okay to shut up, and another where a person said they enjoyed contributing, that they could contribute because they felt safe to share their ideas. Often these past few months, I'm reminded of the story of six blind men standing at different points around an elephant touching respective parts, and declaring they know what they're touching. Once in a while, a synergy can flow, when in a circle, everybody has accepted that there'll be times when they're privy to some information, and blind to some.

Alive and fighting

I'm still running on the great ruins of structural fuels that I've lived with for the last 18 years, that have always presented fights as undesirable situations that should be avoided at all costs, and in case they do arise, to become an ostrich, who thinks that if you can't see the predator, it can't see you. So, I still avoid many sticky conversations that might lead to stickier fights, but in the past five months, at least I've gotten aware of this habit of mine, of the blames and stories I dish out, and how I just hadn't been fighting the right way. Fights are no longer the monsters I run from, I have come to try and see them in the same way as the flashing bulbs in the car panel, that tell you something's up with the machine, the tank might be empty, or the engine might not be doing well, and it needs your attention, so something can be done about it. Objections, arguments, screaming matches, disappointed sighs, are what shook me out of my ignorance and pushed me to look deeper and to work towards the transformation of my ongoing way of living and dealing with things. Fighting with our community member Kunal, for a while became something I looked forward to. I waited for the wisdom, and the newfound closeness and understanding that emerged out of it. On a human level, it felt amazing to glimpse the seas and mountains, the world that exists in another person and guides their actions and words.

How, when my mother tells me in varying levels of volumes that I should be home before dark, it isn't a scheme to control my life; it's just her concern over my safety, speaking. Now, that was something I could understand, accept and find ways to accommodate in my life. The conflict resolution system of Restorative Circles (www.reatorativecircles.org), that we've set up for AhimsaGram, follows the belief that a conflict is never between only two parties as there is always the third or the community that is also involved and is impacted by it. Everyone gets affected, and therefore the system allows an opportunity to anyone to share their grievance about a hot or cold war going on between other people and call a circle, so the situation can be addressed openly, thus clearing away the mists of gossip and suspicion.

Neon signs

In the last five months, my head has turned into a waiting room for questions, big and small, immediate and long-term. Things that never registered before now stand out like neon signs I cannot ignore. Walking down a tourist place, I wonder will these plastics on the street be our legacy, surviving long after our species is barely a haze in history. Why we think suffering is character-building, when someone is not enjoying what they're doing in life, be it a child or man, they're told that's how it has always been and will be, so just live with it. I've seen enough of little kids crying that they do not want to go to school, they don't like it, their stomach hurts, that I now live with a sensitive rock, built through years of collective sediments of pain. Formal

education has become a touchy subject for me.

Having a life of dignity for all is something paramount to me. No wonder, it boggles me that the subordinate cannot question the boss's judgment, just as the child cannot talk back to the father, even when they might have something genuine and helpful to contribute. What structures have we surrounded ourselves with? Gender, age, class, colour, power are some I recite off the top of my head, every time the discussions turn these ways.

I risk here sounding very skeptical and disappointed, but I'm actually glad that I'm more aware of age-old, man-made structures. That I no longer assume them to be *normal*, that I ask questions that make even me uncomfortable. Sometimes I wonder about the blissful ignorance in which I had lived a life of 'normalcy'. When I had not even heard of homeschooling and unschooling kids, let alone, interacted with the vast opportunities and results it can provide children with. When I didn't even imagine I could've had a choice in deciding if I wanted to find the x and y of algebra, or just strum a guitar all day long. Where freedom could nurture purpose and vice-versa.

It's magic

It's actually amazing, the future is not all figured out for our community. We're young and clueless in what we've set out to do. The successes are as exciting as the mistakes. As we go along, we grow, people come and go, we learn about ourselves and question what's around us. We argue, we laugh, we question, we discuss, we plan, we celebrate, we dream big and then are blown over by how much bigger it can get.

I've experienced first-hand, the magic of what can manifest when people are given the space and support, to try things they enjoy, to contribute. The wisdom and energy a community can harbour, when everyone believes their ideas and opinions matter as much as the person. When I can plan opening a library-cum-café with eight-year-old Adi, or have impromptu storytelling sessions with NVC-crazy Astu.

But once in awhile, reality compels me to take off my rose-tinted glasses. When the doubts sneak up and the uncertainty snuggles, because the failures are as new as the discoveries, no instruction book for either. I question my choices, is this the right path? Will it even work out? Working at AhimsaGram, I've marvelled many a times, about how easy it is to criticise what you live in, and how hard it is to live what you believe in. ■



Uditima Mehrotra, a Jaipurite, was in Bangalore for a year, pursuing a liberal arts degree. Having a desire to be in spaces which were in alignment with her values and dreams, she decided to walk out and explore the world for herself. She is currently contributing at AhimsaGram as a host to the friends and co-travelers visiting the space. She's fascinated by the infectious soul of the space and believes you can get addicted to living with a purpose.

A bridge called NVC

*When **Aparna Pallavi** discovered and accepted Nonviolent Communication, she thought she had learnt the language of empathy, only to discover that it was a tougher process than envisaged. She writes about her journey and how it helps her in her ecological work too.*

I was alone in the house. The *dawakhana* (hospital) is very far away. I could not take him there. He kept having *dast* (diarrhea), and finally he died.” Budhia was saying. “Next time,” I butted in, “Remember that a thin soup of *kutki* (a local millet) is useful in *dast*. It could have saved your son’s life till help came.” “But I had no one to help me,” She said, her stricken voice rising, “No one was in the house!” “Yes, but did this happen in summer?”

“Yes.” She was obviously irritated at the interruption.

“A thin sherbet of green mango can also be given, ok?”

“There is no doctor near here,” she continued, as if I had not spoken at all, picking up her six-month-old daughter, “And no road either. It takes three hours on foot to reach a doctor.”

“Can you listen?” I was getting impatient, “What happened to your son need not happen to your daughter, or any other child. You can save their lives with things you have in your house, do you understand?”

“Yes,” said the pretty young mother, her eyes sad and her tone disappointed, and fell into a sullen silence. She had not registered a single word I had said, and I could see that when I left, she was glad to see me go. Once again, I had failed to be of help.

I was in village Sirijhont in Patakot, Madhya Pradesh, home of the once fiercely self-sufficient Bharia tribals, and one of the most difficult to access tribal areas in the country. And as I left Budhia’s house, I could have cried in frustration. For God’s sake I was trying to help that woman! Why couldn’t she listen?!!”

It was very late that night, in a state of half sleep, that a counter-question came to me – why couldn’t I listen?

I jerked bolt upright in bed, all sleep gone. Of course! The woman was in pain over the loss of her first child, and sad that she could not do anything to save him. Maybe she was blaming herself for his death! If only I had listened



Budhia, the young mother who lost her son; pictured here with her daughter

empathically instead of rushing in with advice, she could have emptied her heart and felt some relief. Maybe afterwards she could even have listened to the helpful suggestions I was making.

But damn! WHY COULDN'T I LISTEN?

After having run a weekly NVC (Non Violent Communication) practice group for nearly a year, and practicing empathy at least two to three days a week during that time, why couldn't I still remain in empathy?

How it all started

When NVC entered my life, it entered with some force. After almost two decades of passionate environment journalism and activism, I was utterly frustrated with both, and didn't quite know why. Unknown to myself, I was in depression.

The breakthrough came in the form of a question posed by my NVC teacher Shammi Nanda, when I was struggling to express my dilemma to him. “Do you feel the pain of mother earth in your body?” he asked.

My own answer, a simple ‘yes’ that came gushing up like a volcano, literally pulled the carpet from under my feet. I did not quite know why just an affirmative felt so earthshaking, but I was suddenly quite clear that neither my job nor my current mode of activism – both of which I had been passionate about – were serving a crying inner need to do something to heal the earth.

With this much clarity, but with very vague ideas about what I wanted to do, I quit my job about two months later. It was an intuitive leap into the unknown.

But the tables turned on me. I had thought to start some meaningful ecology-related work, but here I was, hooked to NVC. I started a practice group in my hometown of Nagpur, and ran it for almost a year, deepening my practice, and sharing NVC with others. I started translating Marshall Rosenberg’s book on NVC, *A Language of Life*, into Hindi, a job I am still at.

In the process, I felt my communication patterns change. I felt more space within me to hold the perspective of the other person in empathy, and the grip of the old pattern of rushing into judgments began to loosen. I was also learning to communicate my own side of the story by using the NVC tools of 'Observation, Feeling, Need and Request'. My conversations became both more effective and more harmonious. Interpersonal conflicts and anger began to recede from my life and my respect for boundaries – both mine and others' – increased.

My inner space was growing clearer, and it was growing more and more possible for me to clearly define what I needed, and why, and to make my choices in accordance with that.

As a writer and poet, I had always had an intimate connection with words. However, with NVC practice, I began to discover a new dimension to the use of words, and their power. Simple changes in my diction – for instance, saying "I think this is...." or "This comes across to me as...." instead of simply, "This is...." gradually began a shift in my perceptions, and I began to be less attached to my own viewpoints – seeing them as what they were – viewpoints, rather than the absolute truth.

For a long time in life, I had had a deep desire to make peace, and had this trust that dialogue could make it happen. I had long fought a losing battle trying to bring into action broad adages like "Be positive", or "Try to stand in the other person's shoes," and so on. As a Buddhist practitioner, I had struggled with 'right speech' and gotten nowhere. But at last, I had found a set of very doable, or as my Buddhism teacher described them, nuts and bolts, tools, with which to put my beliefs into practice, and at last I felt I was getting somewhere.

I was also putting together a little collection of NVC success stories of my own. Once I was invited to an art residency, which, I later found out, was hosted by an orthodox right-wing organisation whose rules I found restrictive. To my own surprise, I was able to hold a harmonious conversation with the organisers and was not only allowed exemption, but also invited to come back and work with them again.

But excited as I was, at the back of my mind the question of what I 'really' wanted to do was drumming away. NVC had touched a deep chord inside me, but no insight was coming on the other deepest concern in my heart – ecology and its healing. The mysterious term 'mother earth' kept coming



The writer (in centre) cooking mahua at a workshop in Vanvadi

back to me with varying intensity, and for the life of me I could not translate it into anything doable or even logically graspable. Why do I identify so intensely with mother earth? I had no answer.

What did I want to do in that area? More precisely, where did I want to start? And how was it going to connect with my newfound passion for NVC?

After many months of pondering, I decided to make a start with my most direct passion – uncultivated forest-based foods. I decided to undertake a country-wide journey in gift culture – another idea I had picked up from Shammi's life – studying the forest food traditions around the *Mahua* flower – at one time a staple food among the indigenous, but now

demonised for the liquor made from it.

What was to become of my practice group? The little community I had built around NVC? Again, I did not know. I just had to go.

My Mahua Yatra

The journey, which I have called Mahua Yatra, brought me much joy, because I was doing my dream work – staying with tribal families and learning about their food first hand. But along with the joy, it also brought back to me all the pain I had accumulated in 20 years of activism. I went from one to another indigenous community, staying in tribal homes, and noting with pain and sadness how these communities had lost faith in their own nature-connected lifestyles.

The incident with Budhia brought up the same pain – of seeing her helpless to the extent of losing her child to a simple health issue, that her tribe had easily handled before concepts of 'modern' health care trashed their knowledge as superstition.

I faced the same pain and anger while trying to study the pivotal subject of my journey – *mahua*. Everywhere I heard this curiously paradoxical story about this once much-loved food – that it was very nutritious and health giving, and also that it was food meant for the poor and starving. In the same breath people told me that they, or their elders, had been very healthy when they ate *mahua* regularly, and that they did not like to eat this 'inferior' food now that they had enough grain to eat.

Suddenly, it was as if I had never practiced NVC and never learned empathy. I could not listen for a single minute. The moment these stories came up, I was madly triggered and tried to counter them with facts or logical argument. And

that is where the conversations ended.

On my teacher's advice, I started practicing self-empathy around these triggers, and unearthed huge areas of pain and anger inside myself over the pressures of modernity that had decimated ancient and wise food cultures. The Budhia incident had brought in a lot of self-criticism over my 'ineptness' at NVC, but I now started connecting more and more deeply with my own pain and my intense desire to do something positive.

After two full months of sifting through this pain, during which I traversed indigenous communities from Maharashtra, Madhya Pradesh, Rajasthan and Uttar Pradesh, I was finally able to remain untriggered enough to ask the question that should have been obvious. "Why should a food that is so nutritious be considered poor food?" I asked tribal leader Rabi Purti from village Kurkutia in Jharkhand, who had just given me the same story I had heard elsewhere. Rabi fell in deep thought, and I saw him struggle. After a long moment, he offered softly, "Because it takes longer to cook than rice?" "Are you saying that foods that take longer to cook or demand harder work are considered inferior?" I asked

To my surprise, Rabi was utterly taken aback, and burst out in surprised laughter. "Yes!" He cried, "You know *Didi* (sister), this is what is wrong with our thinking! Our ideas of superior and inferior are totally skewed!"

And before I knew it, he was telling me about all the health problems a rice-based diet had brought on his tribe, which were never known in the days when *mahua*, wild roots and millets were the staple foods.

Somewhere in that moment, my pain fell off, and from that point on, travelling through Bengal, Odisha and Chhattisgarh, I was able to listen deeply to food stories of tribals, hold nuanced conversations, and received surprising insights into the kind of cultural influences that had shaped their perception of food.

Abundant food, a reality?

Throughout my journey, NVC helped me connect more and more deeply with the dream that had made me start out in the first place. Once, after witnessing a painful incident around a little child stealing a bit of an expensive, coveted packaged food, I was catapulted into similar painful incidents from my own childhood and those of my parents. After several rounds of self-empathy, I came upon my deeper need for this world – abundant and freely available foods – an abundance I have only seen among the forest dwelling indigenous people.

Another time, I was reliving a lot of angst after I visited a village displaced out of the Kanha National Park, which was reduced to abject poverty. I was angry with the Forest Department and the rich tourists for whose benefit the poor

had been evacuated from their primal home. Several rounds of self-empathy did nothing to relieve the blackness that had descended on me. And then one evening, I burst out crying after I realised that I did not like to hate anyone – not even those whom I considered responsible for creating pain for the tribals I love.

I think it was this moment of connection with my need to love people, that brought me, over time, to a realisation of the common ground between NVC and my ecology work I had been searching for. I need to heal the earth's body, and I also need to heal the earth's heart, which is the collective heart of humanity.

As a journalist and activist, my way of contributing to the protection of ecology was through the path of bitter, hate-filled political battles, which tried to heal the body without healing the heart. Without realising it, I had accepted hating a section of humanity – those whom I saw as wielding political and economic power – as a natural part of the process I was in. It took NVC to help me reach the side of me that does not like hate – that needs a better way to serve the earth than one that turns it into a battlefield of good against bad.

A continuing journey

I don't know where my journey will take me from here. My life purpose is yet to unravel fully – the 'mother earth' puzzle is still unsolved. And I am aware that NVC by itself might not be sufficient to bring me to where I want to get – I may need more intuitive tools. But I know that practicing empathy and self-empathy has contributed a lot to the new turn my life has taken.

Many people tell me that they find NVC too analytical and cerebral. For me, however, NVC has formed a crucial connecting link between my strongly analytical mind and my intuitive side that I often find it difficult to connect with. It has facilitated many an intuitive leap that I needed, without actually being an intuitive tool.

I know I will take NVC along on whatever path I travel in future, because not only will it help keep me grounded through the intuitive journeys, but also help me translate its fruits into something palpable and doable in the practical world. ■

Aparna Pallavi, a former environment journalist, is currently exploring multiple areas of earth healing, including indigenous wisdom, forest foods, NVC, mysticism and energy work. Currently, she is travelling across the country in a gift culture journey she calls 'Mahua Yatra', learning about tribal food traditions around the *mahua* flower directly from tribals themselves. You can find out more about her work on her facebook pages Mahua Yatra and Wild Food Diaries: <https://www.facebook.com/Mahuayatra/> and <https://www.facebook.com/Wild-food-diaries>.



Only one life

Astu, a practitioner of Nonviolent Communication (NVC), belongs to Manjond Gaon, Dhulia district of Maharashtra, and is currently a community member of AhimsaGram, Jaipur. He has a farming background and a pharmacy degree. He worked in marketing in Pune for a year and a half, before giving it up as he felt a need for nourishment and purpose, which he couldn't fulfill in that mechanical living. His eight-year-long journey with NVC brought him to AhimsaGram, where he's enjoying living, learning and sharing with a community. In conversation with **Shammi Nanda** of AhimsaGram.

What was it that attracted you to NVC?

When I was studying Pharmacy in 2010, I was staying in a house with eight friends in Nandurbar, and we had a challenging relation with our house owner. He had issues with every one except one of our housemates Rajesh, who I saw was having connecting conversations with him. I asked Rajesh, how come our house owner talks to you more cordially and can understand you better. He said, that he had been learning Nonviolent Communication (NVC), which helped him to talk effectively, without it being difficult for the other person to hear. He shared more of NVC in the coming days and invited me to go for an NVC workshop with Aniruddha.

The first time I walked into an NVC training facilitated by Aniruddha, I understood that everyone has feelings and needs just like I do, at the same time anger or hurt arises when these needs are not fulfilled. Our emotions are actually reflections of our needs. It was this realisation, coming through NVC, that helped me connect with myself and look at others



Astu (right) with Shammi Nanda, at the inauguration of AhimsaGram

in a different way. I got insights into the pain that could be caused to others whenever I acted violently towards them. Like if I'm not getting my father's love, I feel angry. If I'm not getting a girl's love, in order to get it I'm doing different things that are violent.

Now that I look back at my past, I've realised that I had been burying my needs inside me, but the pressure got to me and resulted in my aggressive nature. I didn't get a lot of things in my childhood, which everyone should. As a child, I didn't get my father's love. He used to beat my mother. This violence that I repeatedly saw impacted me, made me resentful, and at times aggressive.

So you're saying there were reasons for your anger. What were your experiences when you acted out that anger.

When I hit someone out in anger, in that moment I believed I was protecting myself and felt myself to be stronger and my response didn't seem very problematic to me. But then the way my relationships fell apart, it was even more painful for me, I wondered why weren't people understanding of me.

So the first training actually helped me understand myself. I understood that there exist different ways and strategies, that I can ask, express myself and my needs, in a better, more connecting way, and that relationships do not necessarily have to fall apart.

The training thus gave you clarity about your past behaviour, and allowed you to empathise with yourself and see their humanity. That your anger was a way for you to express yourself, but instead it had been having the complete opposite effect, leading to you to judge yourself and others.

Yes, and now I try to understand people too. When, in a



Astu engaged in gardening at AhimsaGram

conflict now, I check with myself what are my needs, and those of the person in front me.

What were the challenges and support you received in your NVC journey?

After I started practicing NVC, making changes in my behaviour was challenging. My earlier pattern was to get angry when I failed to understand people. I would get very upset, and sometimes also beat myself up. Sometimes I would hurt myself in my attempt to control my anger and not hurt the other person. Initially it was very difficult for me to pay attention to my own feelings, and if I am feeling angry, then how could I control it or bring it down?

When now when you have doubts, and you're not able to be who you want to be, how do you deal with these experiences?

I feel guilt, shame, I experience a disconnection in the relationships, when we're unable to communicate, during a situation of conflict. In the past though, before NVC I would've had an indifferent attitude, if I wanted something, that's it. I wouldn't really care about anyone else, just do things my way, whatever they may be.

Now though, I try to work internally, dig deeper into met and unmet needs, and focus on the challenges we're facing, rather than just judging and blaming.

I had been living a life of no dreams and aims, no sense of direction as to where I was going, but after attending NVC trainings for a few years I realised how beneficial it would be to share NVC with my Marathi community.

Even in the interactions we have in AhimsaGram, few times when I was triggered and raised my voice with you, I remember you trying to understand where I was coming from, you reflected my statement, empathised and at times, instead of just blasting your point, you even expressed to me that you want to be heard too. That gave me some empathy and I was inspired by your skill and capacity to be grounded in such a difficult moment.

I feel since starting NVC practice, my ability to hold understanding for other people has gone up. I would rate it at 7 out of 10. Now if I feel angry, instead of bursting out directly, I find it possible to first consider the needs and feelings of the other person, and my own, and then state my request. But if I can't compose the request that meets the needs of the situation, then my anger starts growing. Managing my anger is still a huge challenge in my life. But I'm working on bridging the gap between who I am, and who I want to be.

Where would you like to take your NVC journey in the future?

I would like to devote my life to NVC. My whole life has changed because of NVC. My dream in life is to find a way to adapt NVC to the Marathi language and share the fine points of how it works, and how it helps you understand yourself and others, with Marathi speaking people. My dream is to take it to the Marathi community.

Can you elaborate on how NVC was life-changing for you.

I had been living a life of no dreams and aims, no sense of direction as to where I was going, but after attending NVC trainings for a few years I realised how beneficial it would be to share NVC with my Marathi community. I became aware of the violence that was building up when I was doing a job I didn't enjoy and how I was moved enough to take a step. Before coming to AhimsaGram, I was questioning what to do with my life. I had been getting advice from my uncle, about getting a job, earning some money. This one time, I asked him that let's sit together after having our dinner and figure out solutions. During this conversation I was able to tell him that I'm irritated with my job, there is no understanding in the relationships I have with people in the



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Labouring together at AhimsaGram

office, which is leading to anger and I didn't want to be living a life like this. I want to do something alternative, something that nourishes me, right now it's NVC. I don't want to do a job and I'm leaving it.

So he asked me what exactly was I doing, what was my purpose in life, plans for future. I told him openly that I want to learn NVC, get certification, take it to the Marathi community. In this conversation, I expressed my observations, my feelings and needs of peace, sustainable life and I made a request. In the past, before NVC, I would've had an indifferent attitude and would've just declared that I was leaving the house and walked out.

While your previous strategies to express yourself, that involved anger hadn't been working out, you now realised it was possible to communicate with people, while holding care for them and sustaining the relationship.

Yes, and this motivates me to take NVC forward, for people like me, to empower people to have more control over one's life.

What inspires you to stay in AhimsaGram?

I have been connected with AhimsaGram since the first moment of its inception, when Shammi and I broke the coconut to inaugurate it. I feel I have contributed to starting it from the scratch. I have lived AhimsaGram's every moment. This is what inspires me to live in AhimsaGram. Here we

have our fights. When my needs are not met, I fight for them with the community, but I also solve the issues. This really inspires me, and holds me to this space. AhimsaGram is like my family - I have sisters and brothers here. It is a space where I can fight, share, cry. I can share my whole life with this family. Here you find everything you need, even without asking.

Which things would you prefer to be done differently in Ahimsa Gram?

At this point, for the most part I feel that I am okay with whatever is happening. In a community, fights and resolutions are both necessary. I would like a few small changes in a few areas. I find that I am needing more understanding between community members than what is currently there. I feel the gap in understanding needs to be reduced.

How do you see your future in this community?

In the future I want the needs of everyone in the community to be fulfilled, everyone's feelings to be respected, each person to feel love. The community should have so much trust that if I am going through some problem in life, if I am sad, then there should be acceptance from the community. When I

think of the future, I think about the ways in which we can connect so that we can share our whole lives with each other open-heartedly, give and receive what is needed freely. I dream of a time when there is so much love in the community.

I want to share an incident about why NVC continues to hold me. Recently, I had no money to attend the Nonviolent Communication International Intensive Training(IIT), in Bangalore. Shammi suggested that I raise funds through people. The way I was able to ask, the support that emerged, now that I'm here at IIT, the way I have received love, the trust, the sense of belonging... these are the things that keep me connected to NVC. I just live in that flow, and want to move with it. The way my life has changed, in the last

eight years, the way I have learnt self-control and the way I have learnt to connect with others, all this is the gift of NVC. It has connected me with myself. My dreams are all about taking NVC forward and I live Shammi's dream of having one million NVC trainers in India in ten years. We AhimsaGram members are living this dream and helping Shammi fulfill it.... and yes, we will surely do it. ■

(With inputs from Kunal Kankhare and Uditima Mehrotra)

So he asked me what exactly was I doing, what was my purpose in life, plans for future. I told him openly that I want to learn NVC, get certification, take it to the Marathi community.

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The fairytale world of *Orchha*

There is this enchanting little world in central India called Orchha, where time has stopped for all good reasons. Once shrouded with forests, it was re-discovered for its fine monuments and temples, and splendid tales of Lord Ram's nocturnal visits. Those who have visited this little town, come back again and yet again, to experience the magic of Orchha.

Text & Photos:
Gustasp & Jeroo Irani



Domes of a palace in Orchha, framed in an arch

It was a peaked and folded land of green glades and palaces rearing forbiddingly on sun-baked mountains. At dusk, the town of Orchha seemed blanketed in secrecy as we strode down the narrow main street to the Ram Raja Temple, skirting trundling bullock carts bringing villagers back from the fields.

Somewhere in the sky, Lord Ram must have also been making his way to Orchha, as the little town has a special place in his heart. For, there he is worshipped not as an *avatar* of Lord Vishnu, but as a warrior king. It is also believed that the lord resides in Ayodhya during the day and he comes every night to Orchha to sleep. So unlike most temples, the Ram Raja Temple stays closed during the day and opens only in the evening to receive the hero of the epic *Ramayana*.

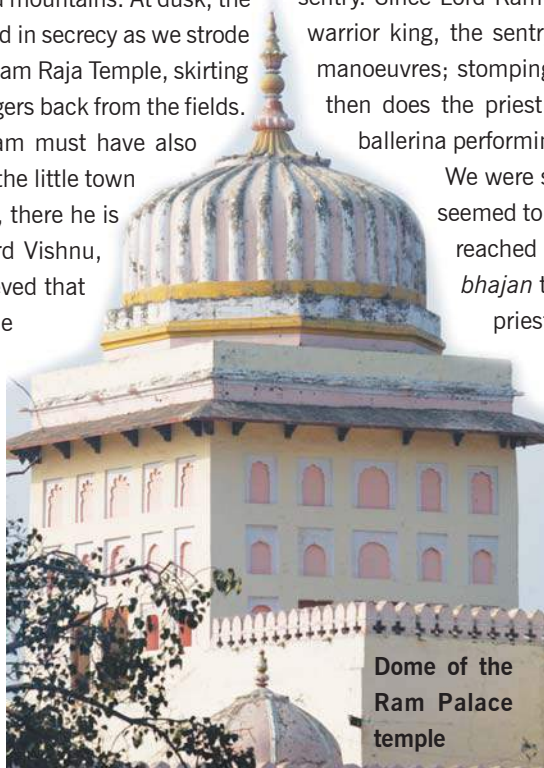
The visit of Ram, the warrior king

The welcome ceremony is conducted with much pomp and pageantry when the heavy silver

doors of the sanctuary are flung open at 7 pm by an armed sentry. Since Lord Ram comes to Orchha in the *avatar* of a warrior king, the sentry greets him with dramatic military manoeuvres; stomping his feet and twirling his rifle. Only then does the priest start the *aarti* with the grace of a ballerina performing a choreographed ballet.

We were sucked into the swirl of devotion that seemed to swell and fill the temple, as the *aarti* reached a crescendo. As the last notes of the *bhajan* trembled on the fragrant night air, the priest passed around holy water, which people smeared on their heads. Suddenly, a woman with the strength and build of a German tank, pushed her way through the crowd with her newlywed son and his bride behind her. The diminutive groom clad in silk with an elaborate turban and a string of pearls around his neck looked sheepish, while his pretty bride blushed into her silks.

The matriarch's strident march had a domino effect on the crowd





The enchanting world of Orchha framed!

and people virtually tumbled into the priest's arms. The priest took a while to regain his composure, and as he looked up at the source of his discomfort, a smile cracked his stern face. He bestowed the trio with a special blessing and a generous helping of *prasad*, as those around him looked on with indulgent smiles. Yes, all the world, including Lord Ram, loves a lover.

As darkness enveloped the sky, we walked down the dimly-lit main street of the town, back to our Betwa cottages overlooking the chuckling Betwa River. The air was fragrant with the aroma of wood smoke. We cast furtive glances at the brooding palaces wrapped in mystery, and the almost impenetrable dark of the night; and avoided the groups of locals sitting on their haunches as they gossiped in the shadow of a flickering paraffin lamp.

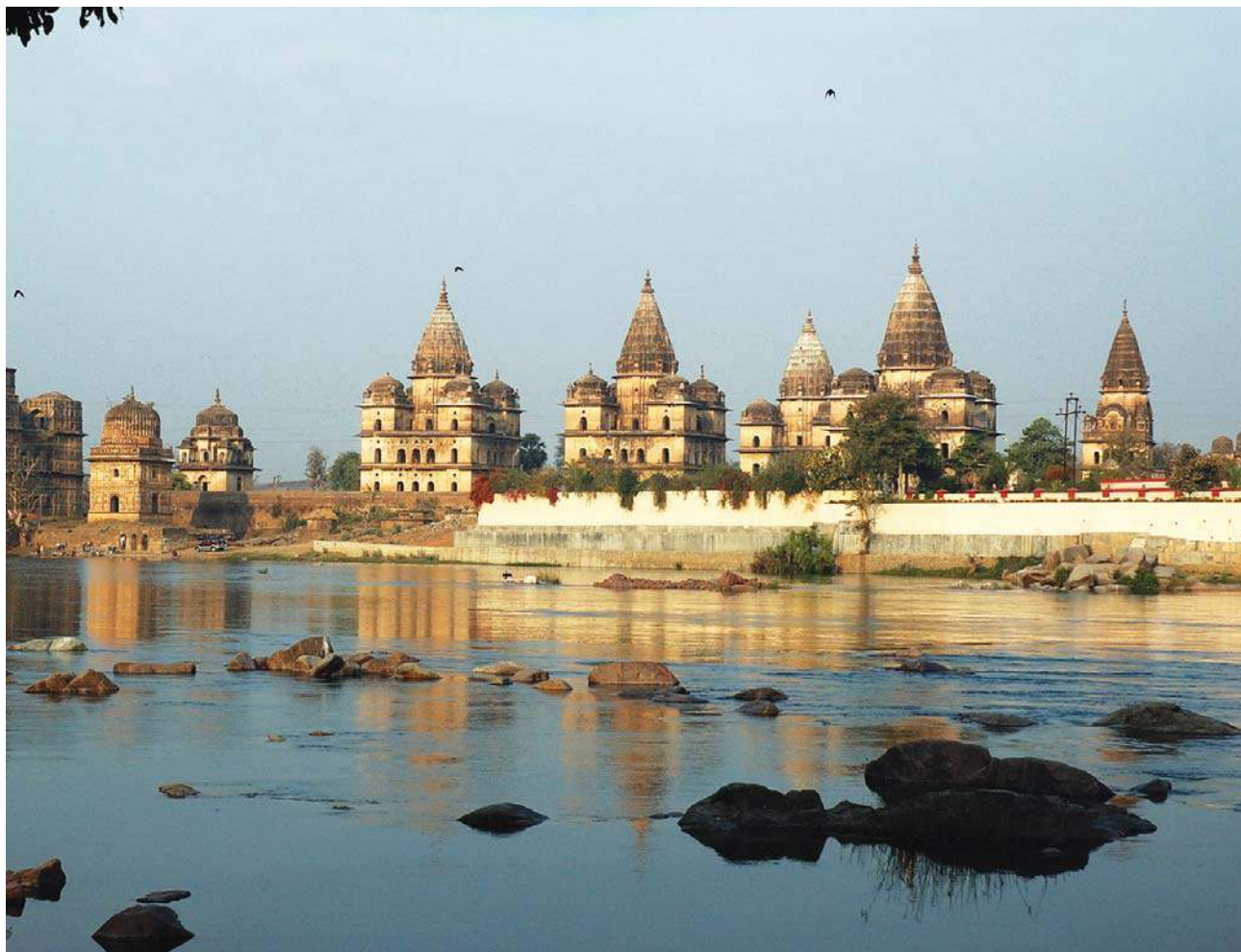
Exploring the hidden treasures of the town the next day, confirmed our growing suspicion that Orchha had fallen out of a gingerbread world. Its startling beauty and

awesome architecture made it more than just another pretty place. Though a mere 12 km south of Jhansi, and within striking distance of Gwalior, Orchha seems almost cut off from mainstream India. Some two sq km in area, it had been virtually swallowed by the dry deciduous jungle surrounding it when it was re-discovered as a tourist spot.

The town seems to have an almost dual character – illusions of grandeur drawn from a royal past combine with the rusticity of a tiny hamlet of 5,000 people. The *halwai* and the *bania* ply their trade in the shadow of weathered and mysterious monuments, and we got a strong feeling here, in the lanes and by-lanes that little has changed over the eons. Orchha is a beguiling town which seems to be almost proud of its isolation and relative obscurity, mused a French guide Jean Christophe Benghabrit whom we met while he was shepherding his tiny flock, some of whom had made as many as seven trips to India, around



The brackets of a support pillar



A stretch of land along the Betwa River

Orchha. As we spoke, a yokel accosted us, and with the simplicity of his ilk told us that he would like his picture taken with us. When he heard that we were from Mumbai, he pumped our hands in welcome and asked us if we knew Shah Rukh Khan and Aishwarya Rai.

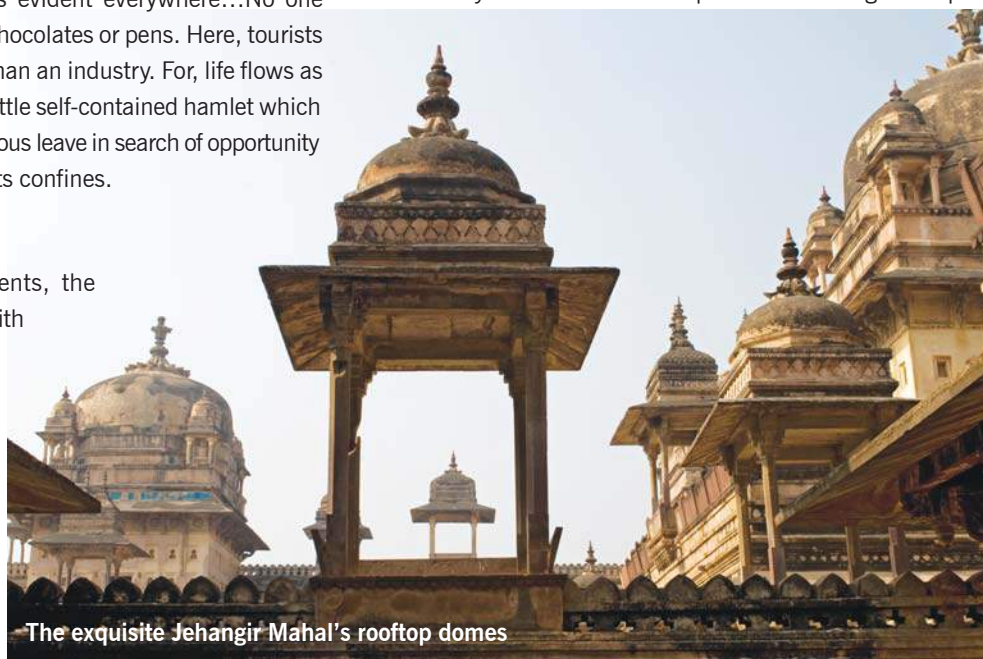
This rustic simplicity was evident everywhere...No one pursued us around for alms, chocolates or pens. Here, tourists are treated as guests, rather than an industry. For, life flows as serenely as the Betwa in this little self-contained hamlet which only the restless and the ambitious leave in search of opportunity in the big bad world outside its confines.

Origin of Orchha

Dotted with 32 monuments, the medieval city wears its years with the aplomb of a blue-hair-rinsed dowager who has aged gracefully. And each of these monuments has its own story to tell; stories that don't get jaded with repetition. Orchha was founded in the sixteenth century by the Bundela Rajput chieftain Rudra Pratap, who

fell in love with this stretch of land along the Betwa River. He considered it an ideal site for his capital as it was situated in countryside so scenic, it made his heart sing.

Of the succeeding rulers, the most notable was Raja Bir Singh Ju Deo who built the exquisite Jehangir Mahal in the 17th century to house the crown prince of the Mughal empire



The exquisite Jehangir Mahal's rooftop domes



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The Jehangir Mahal, which once housed Jehangir, who would later become the fourth Mughal Emperor of India

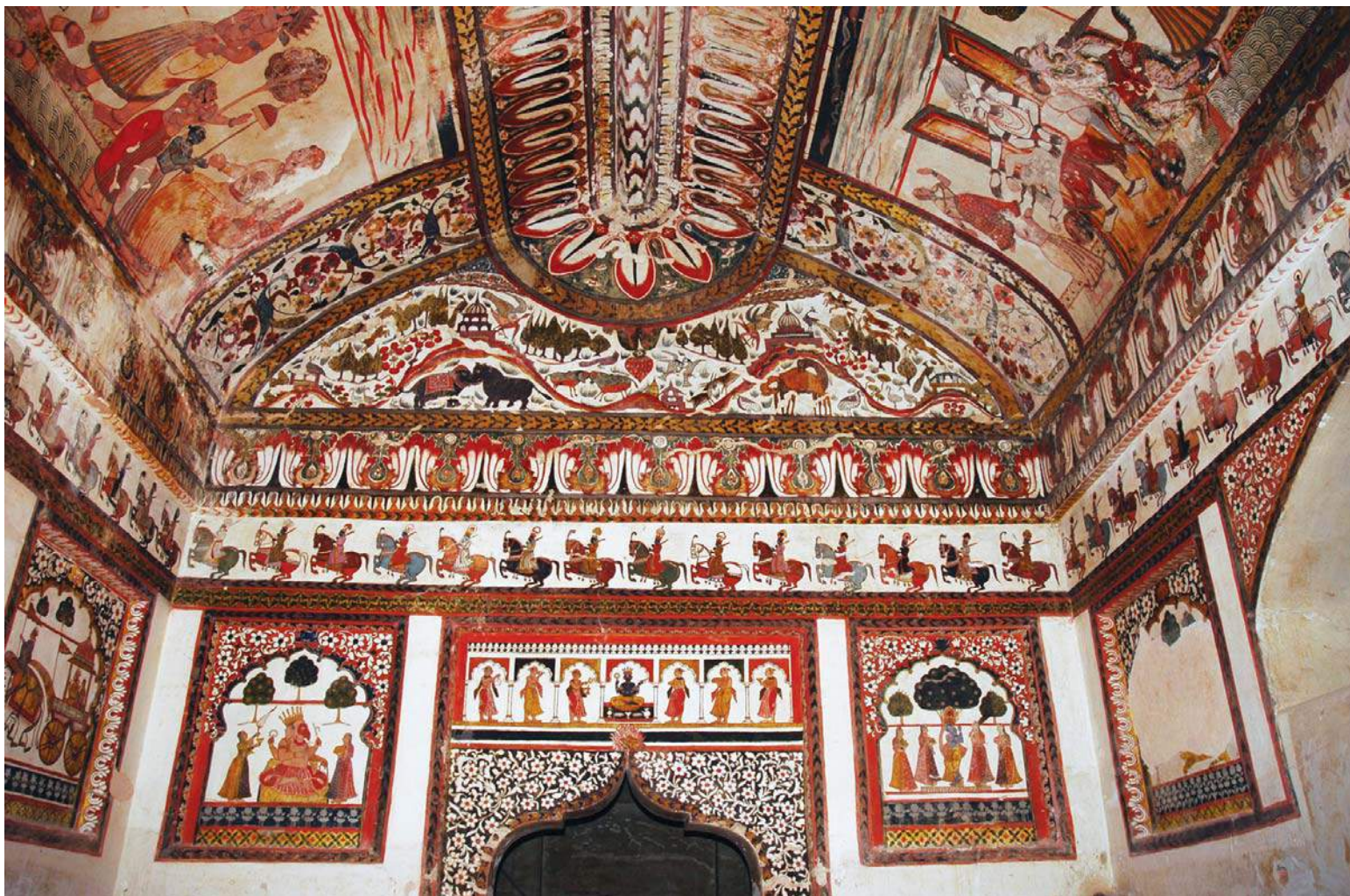
and his entourage. The man who would later become the fourth Mughal Emperor of India had an army of 12,000 in tow, and his task was to impress upon his host the need to swear lifelong allegiance to his father Akbar. After the royal guest checked out, the three-tiered palace crowned by graceful *chhatris* was abandoned and left to languish in the sun like a jilted lover.

We strolled through the sad and lonely palace that loomed above us, its balconies, grilled windows and stone elephants exuding a sense of stolidity. The strong lines of this rectangular structure were counterbalanced by delicate *chhatries* and trellis work before screeching bats chased us out of what was once a princely oasis.

Imposing Raj Mahal which rises across a yawning courtyard was built by Madhukar Shah, the deeply religious predecessor of Bir Sing Ju Deo, and it was here that all the kings of the Bundela dynasty lived. The palace that saw a succession of kings and queens preside over Orchha was the heartbeat of the little kingdom. It was a hotbed of political intrigue, unbridled ambition, treachery, lust and love...The plain façade of the monument contrasts with the rich murals within. A ceiling resembles a carpet of flowers; bedrooms vibrant with frescoes of Krishna with his *gopis*; vignettes of daily life of kings and



A *chhatra* at Orchha



The beautiful murals inside Raj Mahal

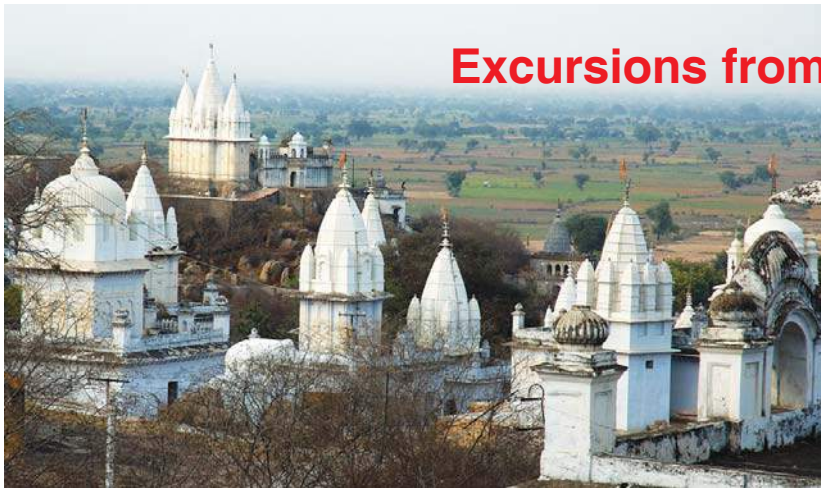


commoners...A *zenana* filled with memories of gorgeously clad, blushing princesses, while negotiations for their marriages to distant princes were being firmed up. And we could imagine rebellions being ruthlessly stamped out and wars being plotted, even as long-widowed great-aunts peeped out from far-flung turrets.

It was easy to believe that ghosts haunted this unreal fairy tale world of bejewelled princes and princesses, *nautch* girls and pampered concubines. Our guide fed our fantasies when he told us about a resident ghost who still wanders around the palace disconsolately. A *chowkidar* had claimed that his throat had been clutched in a vice-like grip by a hand that appeared out of thin air. The apparition is believed to be of a two-timing dancing girl who had been caught by one of her lovers and killed in a moment of rage. We felt like we were strolling through a haunted house.

The Rai Praveen Mahal completes the group of palaces in this complex. This petite two-storied structure which blends seamlessly with the surroundings was believed to be built by Raja Indramani (1672-76) for his beautiful mistress Rai Praveen.

When Emperor Akbar heard about her legendary beauty he wanted to possess her and summoned her to Delhi. Raja Indramani was torn between wanting to comply with the Great



Excursions from Orchha

Sonagiri: The divine goal

We were caught in a rural traffic jam on the last leg of our journey to the Jain temples of Sonagiri, some 45 km north of Orchha, in Madhya Pradesh. The narrow little village road was blocked by a flock of sheep and their shepherd seemed to be in no hurry to move them to the embankment and let us through.

In the distance, a cluster of white temples beckoned through the false dusk created by the cloud of dust thrown up by the jostling animals. By the time we reached the entrance of the complex, the 77 temples

Above and below: Jain temples of Sonagiri

that sprawled out across the face of the holy hillock glowed gold-orange in the warm rays of the setting sun.

Soon we were trekking up a paved pathway that wound past shrines and temples, some delicate and small and others, grand and imposing. Suddenly, a flock of wild peacocks fluttered by and perched themselves on the higher reaches of the monuments as though to catch a more compelling view of the sunset; their long graceful tails draped like elegant ornaments across the spires and domes of the temples. It was almost as though the gods had conspired to arrange an appropriate welcome for our visit to Sonagiri or the golden peak.

Sonagiri is an important pilgrim stop on the Digambar Jain circuit as it is where King Nanganag Kumar, along with 15 million of his followers, is believed to have attained *nirvana*. Ever since, ascetics and pilgrims have flocked here in the hope that it will speed them on to their final release from the cycle of life and death. The first temple to be built here dates back to the 12th and 13th centuries and, over the years, members of the Jain community have added new monuments to the hill - either as an expression of their devotion, or as a token of thanks for favours granted.

Sculpted elephants trumpeted a silent welcome as we walked through this chorus of piety expressed in stone, and we could not help but notice that a few of them had been scarred by time and the elements.

Closer to the summit, we came upon a sprawling courtyard encircled with marble shrines that blushed with the kiss of the dying rays of the sun. In the middle, a sculpted pillar surged towards the heavens like a silent prayer. Finally we reached the main temple – number 57 – within which an 11 ft statue of Lord Chandraprabhu, the eighth Tirthankar who visited Sonagiri 17 times, is enshrined.

After making our offerings and invoking divine blessings, we retraced our steps, stopping briefly to tap on a slab of stone that is called Bajani shila for the simple reason that when struck it produced a metallic resonance.

Before proceeding on our journey back to our base in Orchha, we took time out to visit the Sheesh Mandir or glass temple which is the most striking of the 24 additional temples at the foot of the hill. Judging from its outer walls, there was nothing to suggest that this place was special. The inner sanctum of the shrine, however, was surreal: a mosaic of colourful glass reflected the flickering flames that danced on the lips of clay *diyas*. The fact that we spent more time here than we had budgeted for did not matter, for we felt we were truly blessed to have been enveloped in an aura of divinity.

Fact File

Sonagiri lies 45 km north of Orchha and 5 km from Datia. It has its own station, but few trains stop here. Jhansi, 31 km to the south, is a more convenient railhead. By way of accommodation one can stay at a number of Jain *dharamsalas* at Sonagiri, but must adhere to their strict religious requirements that include no smoking, no alcohol and no meals between sunset and sunrise. There are no tourist class hotels at Sonagiri. ●



Soulful and beautiful Datia

Datia did not figure in our Madhya Pradesh itinerary. And when we first saw it framed in the window of our compartment on the train – a small settlement with a grand palace like building – none of our co-passengers could identify it. We dismissed it as another of the many heritage and cultural gems lost in the vast Indian landscape. However, when we ran into French tourists staying at our hotel in Orchha and heard them raving about the palace in Datia – ‘exquisitely beautiful,’ they said, kissing their fingers in appreciation – we knew that we had to fit it into our schedule.

And we were thankful we did. Our first stop was at the Madhya Pradesh cottage complex built along the banks of a lazy river which had a grandstand view of the seven-storey Datia palace, which straddled a little hillock like an all-conquering monarch.



Above and below: The Datia Palace

However, we first had to navigate a network of small alleyways that eventually led us to the entrance of the palace complex. Here we recruited the services of a local guide and set out to explore a grand monument that by a quirk of fate was never occupied except by the legends that still reside within its limestone walls.

The story goes that Prince Salim, the eldest son of Mughal Emperor Akbar and later known as Emperor Jahangir, had a falling out with his father thanks to the scheming of Akbar's right hand man, General Abul Fazal. So when the young and ambitious prince heard that the troublemaker Abul Fazal would be passing through Datia, he leaned on the ruler of the region Raj Bir Singh Deo to eliminate the general. The local ruler duly obliged and had Abul Fazal killed.

When Salim eventually ascended the throne, Raj Bir Singh Deo invited the newly crowned emperor to visit his kingdom. But first he built a 400-room palace that embraced Hindu, Islam and Mughal architectural styles to accommodate his royal guest. But the Emperor knew that the price of gratitude for a favour done would be high. So he found some excuse or the other not to make the journey. Later, of course, he was way too intoxicated with opium, poetry and his queen Noor Jehan (who anyway ruled the empire by proxy) to care.

As a result, the 16th century palace lay empty, waiting for a royal guest who never arrived. Time and the elements took its toll, and today the hint of turquoise blue tiles on the filigreed bands that run around blackened domes, corridors of ageing pillars, tired brackets under jaded balconies and the broken-tooth smile of damaged screens, hint at the past splendour of the building. We walked through this sad and lonely structure, admiring its ornamental ceilings and the few graffiti scarred murals and frescos that an ungrateful emperor never came to admire. Our guide drew our attention to the nodes atop the fretted screens of the balconies that had been sawed off. According to him, Raj Bir Singh Deo had embedded a diamond in each of these posts so that the womenfolk accompanying his royal guest could entertain themselves playing treasure hunt; the winner being the one who found the largest gem. Over the years other treasure hunters roamed through the palace breaking off the nodes; whether they found diamonds or not no one knows for certain.

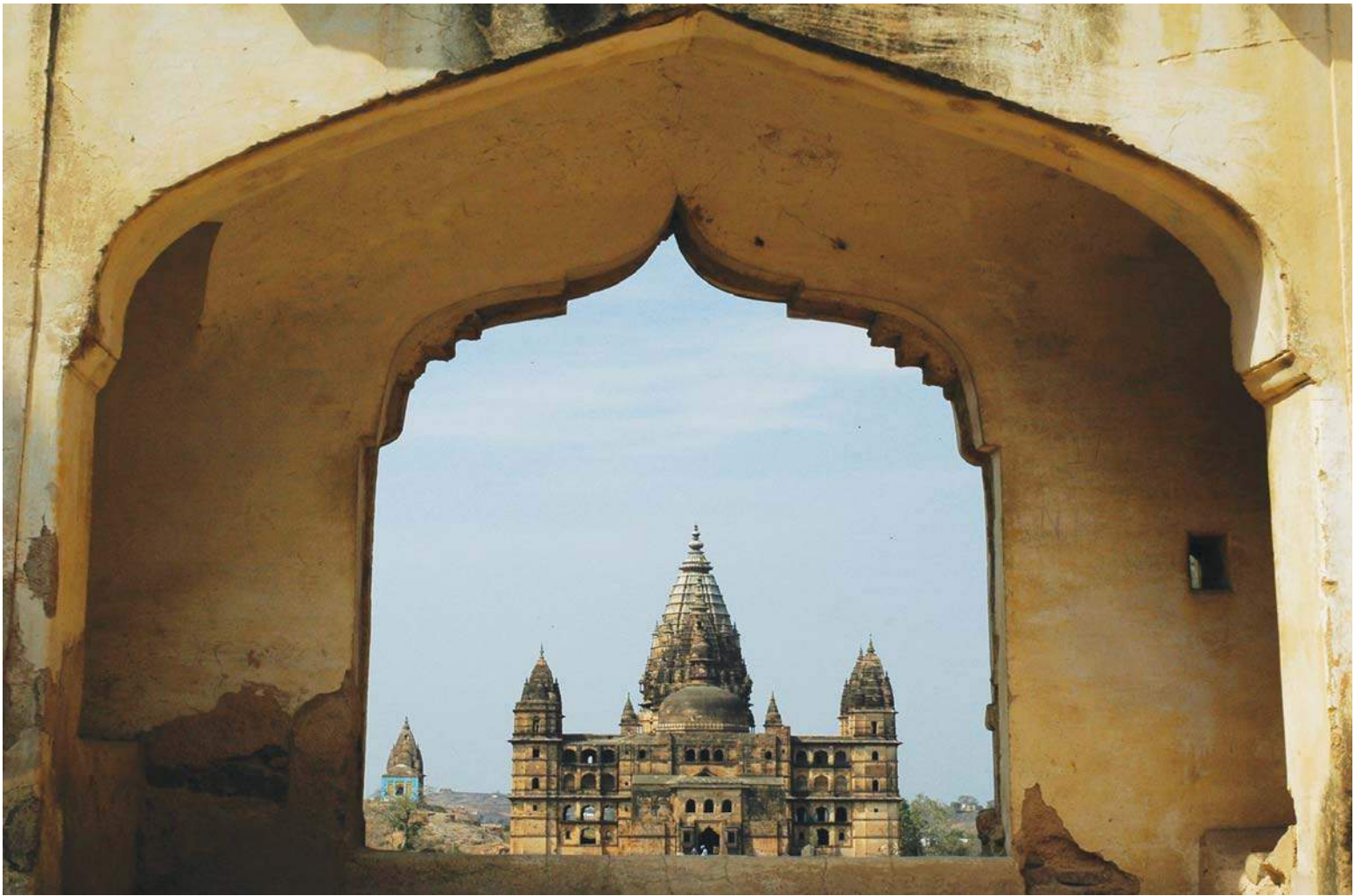
Unlike other palaces that are filled with the ghosts of the past, here the footsteps of visitors echo through the hallways disturbing the wraith-like spectres of the thousand labourers who toiled over the construction of a monument, that eventually served no purpose.

Across the town, the spires of *chhatris* or memorials to past rulers of the region rose in silent benediction, towards the heavens. We finally returned to our vehicle and set off for our base, in the more touristy town of neighbouring Orchha. Behind us, the Datia palace leaned against the horizon: empty but for a sad story of broken promises that fills it like an exclamation mark!

File Facts

Datia lies 40 km north of Orchha, and 5 km south of Sonagiri. Jhansi, 26 km to the south, is the closest station. By way of accommodation, Madhya Pradesh Tourism runs Datia Tourist Motel – with an attached restaurant – on the river banks opposite the Datia palace. There are a few other options, but most of these are of indifferent standards. ●





The Chaturbhuj Temple



The domes of the Laxminarayan Temple

Mughal's wishes, and his love for his prized concubine; our guide related the story with the air of one who knew the lead characters of the story personally. She convinced her king that if he let her go, she would return untouched by the emperor. So the beautiful damsel went to the court of Akbar with great pomp. There, the Mughal who had heard that she had both beauty and brains asked her to recite a poem. She obliged with a poignant one which conveyed her dilemma. Tell me Emperor: who but a dog or a crow eats someone's leftovers? The emperor got the message and let her return to her king and lover – untouched.

Orchha's temples

Leaving behind this world of royalty and *nautch* girls, we crossed the Betwa River and strolled past the Chaturbhuj Temple which broods over the town's bustling marketplace. The temple is an imposing structure all right, but what makes it unique is that it stands empty and forlorn, grieving over the fact that the divine guest for whom it was built never graced its altars.

The story told is that many centuries ago, Rani Kunwar had set off on a pilgrimage visiting all the sites that were linked to the life of Lord Ram in the hope that the lord would

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Murals inside the Laxminarayan Temple

one day reward her devotion with his presence. Distressed that Lord Ram was proving elusive, she attempted suicide by jumping into the Saryu River. Luckily she was pulled out of the water by one of her maids. The next day an idol of Lord Ram mysteriously appeared in her room. The same night she had a dream in which the lord told her to ferry the idol back to Orchha. However, he cautioned her to be careful: the idol had to be carried at all times, and the moment it was put down it would not budge, and that would be its final resting place.

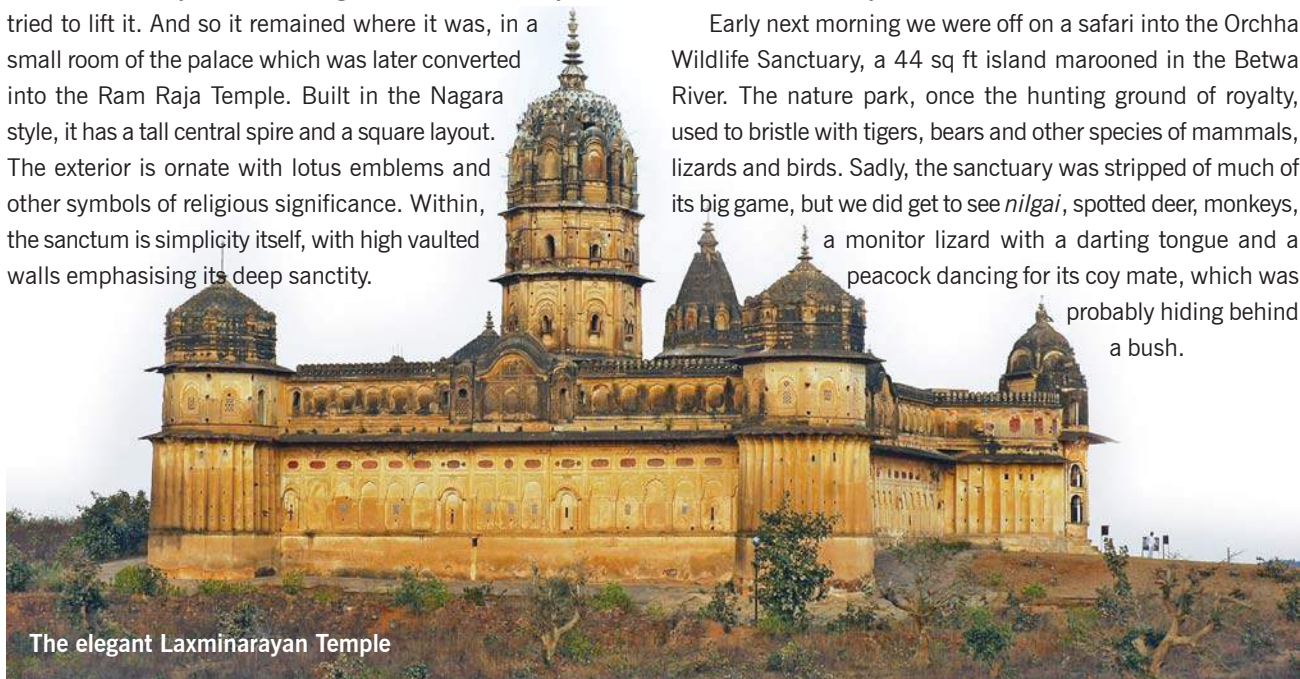
Immediately the queen set off on her return journey, which in those days took eight months. Meanwhile, her doting husband King Madhukar Shah started to build the Chaturbhuj Temple to receive Lord Ram when He arrived. However, the temple could not be completed in time, and on the arrival of his wife's entourage, the king ordered the idol of Lord Ram to be placed in her bedroom till such time it could be enshrined in the temple. When it was time to shift the deity to its new home, the idol stubbornly refused to budge no matter how many hands tried to lift it. And so it remained where it was, in a small room of the palace which was later converted into the Ram Raja Temple. Built in the Nagara style, it has a tall central spire and a square layout. The exterior is ornate with lotus emblems and other symbols of religious significance. Within, the sanctum is simplicity itself, with high vaulted walls emphasising its deep sanctity.

Whatever happened to the Chaturbhuj temple? It stands forlorn and empty, probably brooding over its sad *karma* and what might have been.

We left behind the market place buzzing with life, in an autorickshaw. We headed for the imposing hilltop Laxminarayan Temple that stands on the outskirts of the town like a sentinel keeping a watchful eye on the town. Here, the interiors were alive with colourful murals that artists had plucked out of the holy scriptures as also the everyday life around them. Gods and goddesses frolicked, decimated demons and battled mythical monsters. While the colours retain their vivacity, many of the murals have been defaced by graffiti.

By the time we emerged on the balcony of the temple, the scattering of clouds in the sky above us were painted orange and gold by the setting sun. The sprinkle of ancient monuments across Orchha took on an ethereal glow. This little historic outpost could well have existed in a fairy tale world, almost divorced from reality.

Early next morning we were off on a safari into the Orchha Wildlife Sanctuary, a 44 sq ft island marooned in the Betwa River. The nature park, once the hunting ground of royalty, used to bristle with tigers, bears and other species of mammals, lizards and birds. Sadly, the sanctuary was stripped of much of its big game, but we did get to see *nilgai*, spotted deer, monkeys, a monitor lizard with a darting tongue and a peacock dancing for its coy mate, which was probably hiding behind a bush.



The elegant Laxminarayan Temple



Ruins by the river at Orchha

After the close encounters with native wildlife, we stopped by to pay homage to the dead: 14 cenotaphs of the rulers of Orchha, wrapped in quietude as they contemplated their reflections in the twisting Betwa River. They somehow exuded a haunting quality that suggested that Orchha is a huge open-air museum full of architectural masterpieces. Gazing across the plains, the stones seemed to speak and we wondered about the secrets they guarded.

It was our last evening in the hamlet and we sat by the chortling Betwa River, watching a herd of goats being shepherded across a picturesque little bridge by a cherubic little boy. The hills in the background were flecked with the gold of a setting sun. The breeze carried with it the melody of chattering crickets — the most evocative sound in the world. Couples and families had spread picnic hampers by the river

and seemed locked in circles of love. The night slammed down quickly and we retreated to the shelter of our Betwa cottages.

The next day when we travelled to Jhansi railway station, we felt like we had been catapulted into the real world with



A nilgai at the Orchha Wildlife Sanctuary



A room with a view; the Orchha Sheesh Mahal Palace Hotel

all its uncertainties, suffering and pain. Waiting for our train to chug into the platform, we remembered Orchha, its proud history and weathered monuments, and the warmth of its welcome. The longer you stay in Orchha, replete as it is by the ghosts of royal lovers, the more difficult it is to remember that you are living in the 21st century.

Fact File

Orchha is one apex of the Madhya Pradesh tourist triangle which includes Gwalior and Shivpuri. Gwalior, 124 km away, is the nearest airport. Jhansi, 16 km, is the nearest railway station. Pre-paid autos (available at a stand outside the station) charge a fixed amount for the 40-minute ride to Orchha. State Transport buses are also available.

Madhya Pradesh Tourism runs two hotels in Orchha: Betwa Cottages and Sheesh Mahal Palace Hotel. In addition, there

are a number of other options in the 1 to 3 star category. For more information visit MP Tourism at: <http://www.mptourism.com> ■

Gustasp and Jerroo Irani are travel companions for whom life is a never-ending journey. Over the last 25 years they have travelled extensively across India and the globe, taking the rough with the smooth; sampling different cultures and cuisines. In the process they have trekked in the Australian Outback, slurped snake soup in Hong Kong, have danced with the Samburus in Africa,



stayed with a local family in a Malay village, cracked the Da Vinci Code in Paris... For them, writing and photography are more than just freezing moments of that journey; it's a passion.

Our Last Six Issues

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“I was a slow reader with little patience, and was mediocre in academics. The only thing that brought me pleasure at the time was sketching on any and every available surface I could sketch and draw on”



Oeishik is 34, and lives life differently because his creativity has sustained him in life as an artist and a writer with a difference. He does not have the drop-dead looks of a screen hero, but his charm and his smile are charismatic, added on by his lucid command over articulation and expression. He is, in a manner of speaking, a repatriate from beyond Indian shores, and recently held his first solo exhibition in Kolkata. What is it that changed the life story of this dyslexic child? **Shoma A. Chatterji** spoke to Oeishik about his childhood and his influences.

Let us hear about your childhood.

I had a fiercely sheltered and over-protective childhood, and hardly ventured out of home alone. I do not blame my parents because firstly, I was dyslexic, and secondly, I suffered from ADHD that in full, spells out as Attention Deficit Hyperactive Disorder. I was a slow reader with little patience, and was mediocre in academics. The only thing that brought me pleasure at the time was sketching on any and every available surface I could sketch and draw on. Pens were not allowed anywhere near me because of this very bad habit of drawing on walls. It was mythology that inspired me in my drawings because my father had nourished in me a love for mythological stories. I had a very good visual memory that made me recall each story in pictures, which I would then translate and transform to make my own drawings.

How and when did the transformation begin and proceed?

I went to different schools in Kolkata as a child. Then, I was packed off to Mt. Herman School in Darjeeling for a year. My life changed dramatically in every way. It shocked me into accepting life in a dormitory with 60 other boys, after the sheltered and protected life back home where I could get whatever I asked for, be it ice-cream or rolls or whatever. I had to teach myself to share a single shower with the other boys, and this learning experience changed me forever. I stayed there only for a year, but that year played an extremely crucial role in my life.

Tell us about your living experience in the US.

I was sent to a public school at Danville, a small village in east central Illinois. Then I went to the University of Illinois in



A thought-provoking painting by Oeishik
(Photo credit: Oeishik)

Urbana-Champaign (UIUC), followed by Thomas M. Cooley Law School in Lansing, Michigan, and finally to DePaul University in Chicago, Illinois. Life was quite tough though, and one had to work one's way through academics. I worked as a bank teller, nightclub manager, library technician, teaching assistant, victim's counsellor, county prosecutor and an AmeriCorps member, and grew up along with these experiences.

What was the turning point?

In 2011, I began my writing platform and called it The Tribute Projects at www.tributetosam.com and over the last five years, this endeavour has evolved from an experiment on introspective exploration, to an art and writing medium that explores what I term "intersectional identity." It began as part of my curriculum at De Paul, but grew even after I left the University. Somewhere along the way my learning disabilities turned into developmental enhancements. I wrote for fifteen minutes, skipped over to sketching for thirty, and back to writing for twenty. I wrote and drew what came naturally, from memory, and never used an eraser. In fact, I inadvertently began sketching with ball-point pens.

What do you mean by 'intersectional identity'?

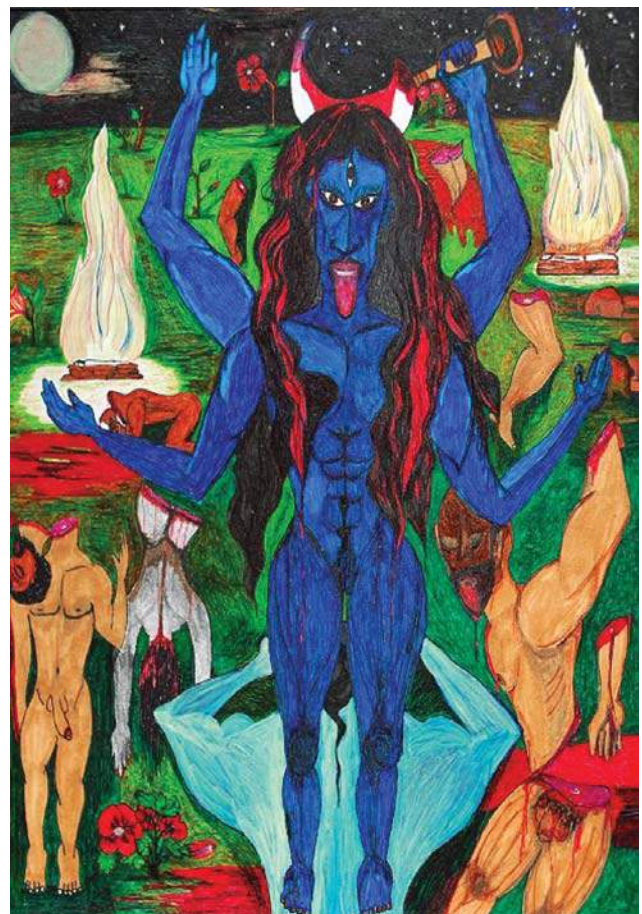
Intersectional Identity to me means a singular human identity built as a result of one's personal response to all competing social paradigms (sex, race, sexuality, nationality, etc.) within one's life. That is to say, I am not denying the presence of these paradigms and imbibe them into my art and my writing, but I refuse to be negatively

influenced or dominated by them. In other words, they must reflect in my art and writing, but not overpower these forms of self-expression.

Who would you consider your mentors and sources of inspiration?

My father nurtured my habits, sometimes beyond reason. He gave me the pleasure of the company of his most sacred influence – his friend and mentor, Suchitra Mitra. A surrogate grandmother and the linchpin of my understanding of myself, my voice and my creative potential, I remember her gifting me clay Durga idols until I had broken too many, and eyed her bronze figurines; and who instructed me to never use an eraser while drawing – make mistakes, learn from

them; have faith in what you draw. Her teachings became the foundation of my faith.



Kali, the Mother Goddess by Oeishik
(Photo credit: Oeishik)

(Continued on page 47)

SociocraZy!

*Sociocracy is a relatively new concept in India, but it has a growing base of passionate practitioners. **Sonal Kothari** and her family entered sociocracy with some trepidation, but found it to be just what their family needed at that point in time.*

I first heard about Sociocracy from a dear friend in early 2015, in passing reference, as a form of governance and conflict resolution for interdependent community living. He wasn't too clear, but it made me curious about it. A year later I received an email from the said friend about a workshop on Sociocracy happening in Bangalore the following week. I liked what I read in the flier. This friend and his partner were going and urged me to come too. It seemed an impossible task for me to attend. The fees seemed steep and I wanted to bring the kids along with me for the three-day event on the other side of town – commuting everyday was out of the question, I was recovering from an illness. Then there was the dog and cat and garden to take care of while we would be gone. With no backup, it was a big deal!

Nevertheless, I felt compelled to find out more. I wrote in to the organisers, asking if the kids could attend with me. I was put in touch with Shammi Nanda and John over email. Shammi called back several times, till we connected. This was heartening. I don't remember much about our conversation, what I remember is feeling like I was important and it mattered that the children and I had a fair chance of attending the workshop at a level of comfort that suited us. This felt promising. Everything fell in place for us to attend without much effort – this itself was an indication to me of alignment of the universe!

It started with acceptance

The three days of the workshop flew by in a flurry of activity and learning. The children were completely accepted by the community of 30 adults, including facilitators, as equivalent (more on that later) participants with full membership to all that transpired in spirit, thought and action. I understood later that this was as much a function of the Sociocratic process as it was of accepting adults.

The learning was intense. I have worked with the Gordon Model of Communication for many years. There was a lot that was common and familiar. There were some new names for things that I already knew, for example, the terminology of Equivalence vs Equal. Consent was a big deal at every stage. I revisited these concepts in a new context, with new energy, and deepened my understanding of them. It felt wonderful.



The writer with her family, who joined her on the Sociocracy journey

What I experienced as new was the idea of "rounds". Everyone gets an opportunity to speak in turn. When one person speaks, others listen without interrupting, and no one speaks out of turn. We go round and round the circle. This ensures that some that speak more and tend to take over are restrained, and are made to listen to others too. And those that never speak are provided a safe platform and space to voice their thoughts. This way everyone is heard. Each is responsible for his/her contribution, even if it is a pass.

This is the one thing that I feel our family has benefitted the most from in the weeks following the workshop. As a parent, I considered that our children had an equivalent say (though I may earlier have used the word "equal" instead) in matters that concerned them and the family as a whole. I was wrong. I realised during rounds how mistaken I was. My son who is an articulate (at that time) nine-year-old in tune with his thoughts and feelings, takes time to get his idea out there. In a family with three others who are strongly opinionated, older and impatient, my nine-year-old was constantly being cut off by his sister, myself and his dad. The impatience in us became apparent while doing rounds. We would fill in words for him or plain hijack the conversation from him, finishing his sentences and moving on. Looking back, I wonder how he stood it all. We also did this for each other, without really listening to the end.

I remember the first family meeting where the four of us were problem solving around chores. My husband, who hadn't till this point understood Sociocracy, was speaking over both the children constantly. My daughter fourteen and half years

was facilitating this meeting. She was quite solid in her insistence of sticking to rounds. "It is not your turn Daddy. Let him (her brother) finish. You can speak when it is your turn. You will get a chance later." I remember it taking several forceful back and forth between the two of them before Binay decided to comply. We finished the round, it took several minutes, with Rahul taking his time about saying what he had to say. When Binay's turn came, I was ready for deluge of objections, arguments and thoughts from his side on all that had gone on before then. I was utterly surprised when he said, "I am good. I have nothing to add." When I asked him how come? His response was, "My questions got answered already." I don't think I shall ever forget the lesson I learnt that day for as long as I live.

Learning to listen

Witnessing this episode while being cognisant about my own struggle with giving my children a patient and fair hearing, has stayed with me. I remember struggling with keeping to the rounds and not speaking out of turn, only where my kids were concerned. Holding my peace with adults came easier. With all of my training, reading, workshops - ones that I take and those that I facilitate - I was still not listening to my children enough. A huge wake up call for my husband and I, as parents. We don't know as much as we think we know about our children: their thoughts, ideas, feelings and aspirations. And this is knowing that both Binay and I are more connected with our two than most parents are - this I can truthfully say. The better I listen, the more astounded I am at the grasp of life they have and their ability to navigate the world around them. The more I listen, the less I worry about them and their future. This is a gift that Sociocracy has given me.

We started using Sociocracy the very next day after the workshop. We were blessed that Shammi stayed a day with us and helped us work through some long standing knotty issues that we had been struggling with. The children homeschool and so we started having a circle and operations meeting every morning. It lasted for several weeks and things were getting done smoothly. And as things go, at some point it all tapered off.

This article was to be written by the children and I together, as a dialogue about the impact of Sociocracy in our lives. After about a week, my daughter shocked me by telling me, she didn't think Sociocracy worked because we hadn't really solved anything with it - not strictly true, since we then thought of several things we had resolved sociocratically. However, she is still not convinced that it was a working method, and clearly stated she was not comfortable writing about it since she didn't feel it worked.



The writer with her son

This brings me full circle to my main difficulty in the practice of Sociocracy, and really any practice of this nature. The magic in the method is as good as the madam (or sir) holding space in which the process takes place. In other words, I find myself falling short on ability to keep the process front and centre. Having seen Shammi and John in action many times and having watched them closely, I know that it works. I also know that their experience and ability to really listen, their commitment to the process and not to fixed outcomes, counts for a lot. With my children, I still find myself married to rigid outcomes and having a set agenda. The times when Sociocracy has worked for us is when I've been able to flow with the process. The times it has broken down is when I can't be true to it. It is my own personal limitation. One that is begging closer scrutiny and letting go. I am hopeful though, because my kids keep me real and accountable.

So when my almost 15-year-old reckons that Sociocracy does not work, I put it down to teenage lofty idealism - an all or none thing approach. My 10-year-old is too busy building things to really give me a serious thought about it. My husband and I have seen big changes in our communication patterns. Even with my half-baked listening, there is a distinct before and after Sociocracy scenario in our home. The conversations flow smoother, the bonding is stronger than ever before. We talk more, we are heard more and we have a language in which to get our needs met.

Having the children do the Sociocratic workshop with me was one of the best decisions that I have taken, and I can't thank everyone enough who made it possible. ■



Sonal Kothari's family consists of two adults, two children, a cat and a dog, several fish and a small garden of fruit trees. Their vision as a family is to live as sustainably as possible, and in harmony with each other and their surroundings. They keep trying different things in order to unlearn what isn't working, and expand their skills and understanding of the world they live in. Effective communication is therefore an integral part of their journey, both with self and with the other.

Our blind spot

John Buck is an internationally recognised sociocratic consultant and CEO of the international firm, Sociocracy Consulting Group. He specialises in organisational structure, decision-making, meeting and retreat facilitation, and conflict resolution. He was the first sociocratic consultant outside The Netherlands certified to do training in the United States. Earlier this year, Shammi Nanda co-organised a Sociocracy Yatra with John that travelled all over India, and AhimsaGram is organising a Season of Sociocracy again in October this year. John Buck in conversation with Shammi Nanda.

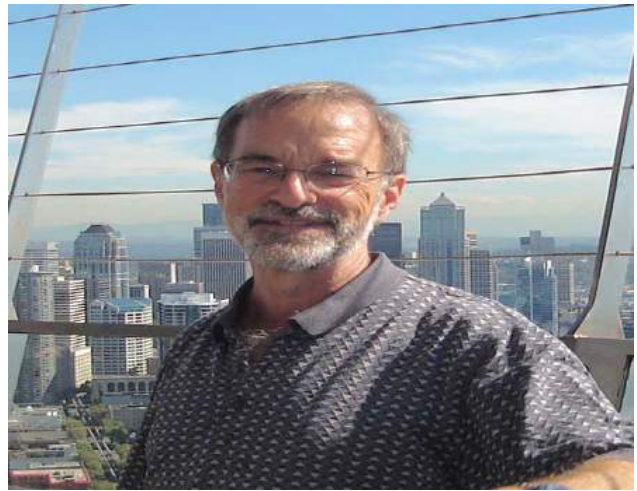
What inspires you to spend most of your time living and sharing Sociocracy?

This topic has been important for me for a long time. I deeply want to contribute to the idea of living democratically. Businesses and organisations are a whole field of human activity that have not let us to be equals. We've had movements in the USA about women's rights, rights not to be slaves, voting rights, and so on, but the right to be enfranchised in what you're doing at work is not there. We have a whole ownership structure controlling work.

So, it's interesting. Are you saying that there is a blind spot of this civilisation right now, that we're not able to see that we're not creating equal opportunities for everybody to contribute?

Right. Originally the insight came to me when I got out of college and got my first job at Boeing as a tactical writer. I remember coming back to work on election day after voting for the Mayor of Seattle. It occurred to me that I could vote for the Mayor of Seattle, because we're in a Democracy, but I couldn't vote for my boss. Given a chance, I would've voted for him, because he was a great boss and I liked the job, they paid me well. But I was upset at a pretty deep level, that, hey, if democracy is so good how come they're not using it at the Boeing Corporation? And, it really hit me deeply, in ways that I couldn't understand for quite some time, that I did not have an equal voice at my job.

And what was the cost of not having a voice or the



perception that you didn't, when you were working?

It's a little bit like what's the cost of somebody being a slave, not that I was a slave exactly, but later on, I got laid off from that job and literally a hundred thousand people got laid off at the same time because Boeing sold no airplanes that year. The layoffs were so bad that they ended up closing down the building I was working in. A 300-person department shrunk down to about 10, and my boss fought like crazy to keep me; another worker even volunteered to be laid off in my place, but they couldn't do it. And despite all of that respect and message, that actually, I was doing fine, I still felt like I was worthless. I'd been told I was worthless by the system and I just felt, not valuable. So it was clear to me, that as much as you might want to think you're an individual, you internalise this message from your society, that your voice is nice, but you're just a servant, you're not really a part of the business, you're expendable, we have machines that we can sell off, we can take your job, you're just another piece, and we don't see you as a full human being.

So how would that change if people were able to elect or select their boss?

Electing their boss is just one aspect of it. Being able to actually be an entrepreneur within the system, is even more fundamental. Being an entrepreneur requires that you are able to make decisions, that mean something in some sphere of activity. People who are used to thinking for themselves, used to being true partners are able to think much more creatively and have a different sense of self and self-worth, that brings more dignity to life. In the US, when the country was formed, nine out of ten people, were independent farmers. Their economic and political status was on an equal basis and they could truly be said to be independent, free and responsible for their own well-being. Of course, I am ignoring slaves and women of that time; I'm only talking about the white males.

Over time, that changed. By about 1900, 50% were farmers, and now, it's less than 1% who have their own farms and live independently. All those other independent people had to go work for somebody and are not in charge of

their own destiny. To me, that loss of independence undermined the idea of liberty, the independent spirit, the pride and self-respect that comes with it. Why can't we develop a way for people to be enfranchised as opposed to being a servant.

Is it that when you talk of dignity, it's how can we be seen as full human beings?

Yes, if the system doesn't see you as a full human being, if it sees you as a servant, then you internalise that message. And, of course, there are other reasons – when people are actually working together with equal voice, they become much more productive. Interestingly, Google did a study recently, where they asked what really makes an effective team. They went through all kinds of data since Google loves data. They looked at differences in age, gender background, etc. They finally did come down to two factors that makes a team really effective. One is everybody spending an equivalent amount of time speaking in the group and the other is that they have high emotional intelligence and interpersonal skills. When you put those two things together, they're actually related. And Sociocracy does provide structures and functions that support equivalence. So, when you follow sociocratic processes, you're probably going to get a lot of effectiveness and productivity - wonderful capitalist outcomes. But, my primary motivation is to live in a system that treats me as a full human being.

Do you see it in some way connected to a deep spiritual practice also?

I'm a Quaker, and they've always run around causing trouble in society, for example, insisting on women having the right to vote. In Quaker terms, this kind of advocacy probably grows from a divine leading. God may speak to you in the form of a leading, a spiritual leading. Sociocracy is such a leading for me.

Have you seen Sociocracy work in some organisations, and can you give examples?

When an organisation internalises Sociocracy, really starts to use it, they inevitably start performing very well. Yesterday, I had lunch with my friend Richard Heitfield, who runs a factory that makes speciality plastics parts, as well as some mass production items such as skateboard wheels. They've been using Sociocracy for a long time and have managed to withstand Chinese competition. A dramatic thing happened back during the Great Recession in the US, a few years ago. Many of their customers went out of business. They would call up and say something like, "We've been your customer for 15 years, we're going out of business, cancel our order." Richard was really despondent. He was ready to close down the company. But his general circle, which at that point was very well trained in Sociocracy, said, "Richard, please go sit in the corner; you're not able to help right now. It's OK, we'll solve the problem". They sat there and had a very transparent

conversation about who's going to get laid off. At one point somebody said, "George, you're about to have a new baby. I can stand the economic shock of layoff better than you can. Let's lay me off and I'll apply right away for state unemployment insurance." What a contrast to my layoff experience at Boeing! The General Circle also looked at their scrappage rates. That had been meaning for some time to make that effort. By reducing materials scrappage rates they were able to drop prices. They were creative in other ways and managed to pull the company through. In other words, leadership came from someplace other than the regular leader. The company's doing fine today.

How is Sociocracy different from Democracy?

Sociocracy is a subset of Democracy. Democracy is ruled by "the demos," the general mass of people, who may or may not have a relationship with each other. Sociocracy is ruled by people who know each other. "Socios" means partner in Spanish. It means people who know each other and have a common aim, common purpose.

What's bringing you back to India, in less than a year's time.

I had a wonderful time in India the first time. I had reverse culture shock coming back to the USA. It seemed strange to sit in a chair, eat rice with a fork. I feel like India is a very vibrant place and is full of people who're thinking entrepreneurially, questioning things, it's a very creative time in Indian culture. My hope would be that people in India grow both their economy and their society. I think India could lead the world in showing how to have a creative and cultured society, rather than just people who're mechanically going to work, pursuing money. Gandhi's vision of equality and respect for all, has the power to also increase economic productivity.

And you think Sociocracy can support that culture here?

I think it can help keep the beautiful culture that India has vibrant and diverse, while it undergoes the radical fast transformation that is being driven by the technological explosion happening throughout the world. It could help prevent India from losing her soul to the machines.

I hear from you that Sociocracy will be able to integrate the complexity and diversity that is there in India. It's a space where bullock carts and cars run on the same road, so how can we take in all of these voices in this country, and I've experienced myself that Sociocracy has the answers for it.

The reason you might run a society sociocratically is that the current governance systems we have are very linear, and they are not designed to cope with the kind of complexity that we're dealing with right now. The technological explosion has rocked everyone back on their heels. We have to have new ways of governing that are able to handle the incredible complexity.■

Looking beyond words

*How do Nonviolent Communication and Sociocracy help us in our personal relationships, be it with the spouse or with our children? **Sanjeevani Pandit** writes at length about her own experiences and explains how these tools have helped her to connect, first and foremost, with herself, in a deep, meaningful way.*

“But it is not what I am saying that is hurting you; it is that you have wounds that I touch by what I have said. You are hurting yourself. There is no way I can take this personally.”

– Miguel Ruiz, *The Four Agreements: A Practical Guide to Personal Freedom*

I love words. Words can make or break a relationship. For me words and the manner in which they were said mattered for the longest time. If the right words were not being used, my triggers around them were immense. Why cannot people just say what they want to instead of saying “but that’s not what I meant” as an after thought. My judgments surrounding the lack of vocabulary in a person, more so in the English language was a cause of lot of heart-burn for me and still is sometimes my pain around communication.

My education had taught me how to have a good vocabulary, a good diction and a good understanding of how to put the two together to form coherent sentences.

What I was missing was the ability to go beyond the words, understanding what’s deeply important for others in the words they use, or the feelings and needs behind them. More so I could miss it even more when I was in conflict with some one. I was also not having words in my vocabulary that helped express what mattered to me deeply and which could have made my connection better with others.

Learning with my partner

I am grateful to my relations with my close ones, which helped me understand my patterns and gave me an opportunity to work on them and grow along the way. My marriage has been a wonderful learning space for me and has helped me move towards a more holistic understanding of human connectedness. In my journey with my partner I experienced a big shift from assuming that only one person’s needs can be met at a time to recognising that each one’s needs are equally important and can be held and met in the same space. For example, my partner and I had an understanding that whenever he was going to be delayed at work, he would call me up and



The writer with her family: NVC and Sociocracy have helped them to communicate with respect

inform. Somewhere this agreement got lost and there were a couple of times when he did not inform. My reaction was of judgment and blame and I felt exasperated and angry. In that moment I thought that I was not important enough for him. We had just begun dabbling with NVC and taking some responsibility for my feelings, my needs, my concerns, my desires was still an uncharted territory. As I walked into NVC, not blaming my partner for how I was feeling helped me move away from the judgmental space of he does not care and opened up the space to hear his concerns in making the call. To see each other in conflict and to see the beauty of need of the other person has taken time, but well worth the loss of the paradigm of right and wrong. It’s a journey which can be challenging, but is still worth the effort.

I have developed my muscle for looking and digging deep under words after I became a mother. NVC is a wonderful tool that has helped me grow leaps and bounds in this direction. NVC helped about observations without interpretation. When I observe, it keeps me grounded in the now. It has taken some amount of practice to keep interpretations at bay or I am some times able to differentiate between my interpretations and observations. An example of

an observation is a spilled glass of juice on the carpet. The interpretations can lead to a lot of judgment about how my child is clumsy and is not being careful. But staying grounded in the observations keeps it at spilled juice and does not take it as a character defining action for the person who had no intention of spilling the juice.

Now my four-year-old is very clear with his words and 'yeses' and 'nos'. He has a lot of big emotions and even at this age acknowledges that there are sometimes he cannot explain it in words but has some form of feeling in his body. But when he says "I hate you mom.", for not giving him a knife to play with, I have tools like NVC that help me look beyond these words to the loss of choice that my child might be experiencing. Now I am able to hold both my need of safety and my child's need for choice together without having to make anyone right or wrong. This helps us in creating more compassionate and effective strategies.

Embracing guilt with self-empathy and mourning

Guilt is a free boarder in most of us. There have been times when I have yelled at my children and felt a tinge of guilt. One afternoon I was involved in a one-sided shouting match with my older son. I was on my way to the guilt trip, till my friend Shammi who is a NVC trainer and practioner, very gently asked me if I could recognise and hold my need behind my actions...I was stumped for a second before I gathered myself to debate the topic in my head. It was a new profound way of looking at my beautiful need of care, even in an action that looked challenging to me or I was feeling guilty about. I have found that feeling guilty and self-bashing lead me to no place other than depression and loss of self-esteem. But seeing myself through the beautiful process of self-empathy gives me the space to come to a more connected understanding and newer awareness. The very same incident also taught me the power of mourning. Mourning the fact that my need for connection with my child was not being met when I was yelling at him. It did not make me a bad mother. It was just a strategy that was not working for me.

Trying to live with word awareness each day....

I have grown up in an environment where words have meant a lot specially those that were spoken harshly.... Some of those hurtful words have lasted a lifetime for me, created deep wounds that I have still not healed from. This has caused a lot of damage and bitterness even in my relationships. After developing this awareness, I decided to lead my life with connection parenting. I am deeply conscious of the choice of words, and wish to be respectful in my conversations with young people, even as young as three-year-old is very important to me, as trust and respect comes at the top of the list. I do

this as I also don't want them to experience deep wounds from my unconscious use of language, as I have picked up growing as a child. Besides, as my own NVC skills grow, I wish one day I am able to full understand the needs of those adults who said harsh words so I can come to peace with those challenging experiences.

Living together with consent

Another beautiful communication setting for our family is consent-based decision making circle, which is inspired by Sociocracy. In this process an idea is presented and all our opinions are heard. The understanding is that if someone has an objection to an idea, it is looked upon as wisdom. We all enjoy the beautiful inclusive process, a part of Sociocracy and are gifted with a wisdom that is magical. This is a magic of having individuals who feel safe and valued irrespective of their age and experience. We had one such beautiful process we followed to talk about my 10-year-old's birthday celebrations. My boy decided that he wanted his birthday a little different. As gifts, he requested his friends to bring in something hand written to share like their favourite poem, story, joke, anecdote anything that is precious to them. The whole experience of planning the party was very heart warming as all of us worked towards hearing and understanding each others perspective specially when it was a concept that was different from the norm.

It has been relatively easy to make a move to communicate with respect and non-judgment with children and strangers. When it comes to my other intimate relationships, parents, husband, siblings, it is a completely different ball game. Initially NVC sounded very alien and very inauthentic to say the least. The process got me entangled as I was not able to stay and sound authentic inside as well as outside while still staying integral with the process. What has helped with this is a step-by-step approach of first connecting with my own self and my needs and then if comfortable enough in my own shoes connecting with the other person. In this journey, the awareness of looking at the humanness, of the other person as well as my own, is grounding and has helped me look at conflict with a renewed interest and understanding. ■



Sanjeevani Pandit is an unschooling mother of two boys aged 10 and 4. She explores various facets of life through NVC, Connection Parenting, Bach Flower Essences, Sociocracy. She has been using these tools actively with friends and family. She and her partner Shekhar use the principles of NVC to connect as parents to their two children as well as partners in their relationship.

The drama of Mahasweta Devi

The legacy of Mahasweta Devi's literature lives on, though she is no more.

Shoma A. Chatterji reviews at length the dramatisation of her most famous short stories – *Draupadi* and *Rudali* and finds out why they are even more powerful in their dramatic re-telling.

TRANSLATING, interpreting, re-reading, questioning and critiquing literature from the printed word into the world of the proscenium theatre, is truly a daunting task. It becomes a veritable challenge specially when one decides to dramatised the works of Mahasweta Devi that seem to be extremely difficult to bring to the stage considering that they occupy a world that is distant from the direct experience of the people who stage the play, who are urban and modern, sophisticated intellectuals. Few of Mahasweta Devi's works have been turned into stage plays. This article revolves around two of her most famous short stories, *Draupadi* and *Rudali*.

Draupadi

In her short story *Draupadi* (which first appeared in *Agni Garbha* (Womb of Fires, a collection of loosely connected short narratives) Mahasweta Devi rewrote an episode from the great epic *Mahabharata*, and as a feminist response to the myth of *Draupadi* (the icon of womanhood in Hindu mythology), re-invented cultural history that deconstructs the representation of women, cultures, images, stereotypes and archetypes. The politics of interpretation has most often been the politics of gender.

No one ever made a film based on *Draupadi*. But it was made into a play and a brilliant play, that ought to be archived in the history of Indian theatre. *Draupadi* was



A scene from *Draupadi*

directed by Heisnam Kanhaiyalal, and enacted by Sabitri Heissman from Kalakshetra, Manipur. *Draupadi*, or *Dopdi* as her name appears in dialect, is a rebel, hunted down by the government in their attempt to subjugate these groups. The government uses all forces available to them, including kidnapping, murder, and rape, and any tribal deaths in custody are invariably 'accidents'. But *Dopdi* is not easily cowed. After continuous days of rape and abuse, deprived of food and water, the story ends with a magnificent finale in which she faces her abusers, naked and bloody, but fiercely strong.

Kalakshetra Manipur, is an Indian theatre group situated in Manipur. It was established in 1969 with Heisnam Kanhaiyalal as founder director. Sabitri

Heissman is his wife. Besides *Draupadi*, the group has been performing very unconventional works across the board such as *Khsudita Pashan* (Hungry Stones) based on a Tagore short story and *Lajja* based on Taslima Nasreen's radical novel.

Draupadi is included in the collection *Breast Stories* (Seagull Books) translated and researched brilliantly by Gayatri Chakravorty-Spivak. "Mahasweta's fiction aims at inverting such hegemonic, over-privileged, ever-signifying system of relationships, and attempts to bring low what were high, through the strategies of subversion and reversal. Her stories come across as the post-colonial, subaltern, gendered responses that serve to topsy-turvy such hierarchical structures, generating



Another scene from *Draupadi*

aesthetics of opposition in the process,” writes Vandana Beniwal Anup (2007), in her thesis *Aesthetics of Activism: A Study of Mahasweta Devi’s Fiction*.

Kalakshetra Manipur first staged *Draupadi* in 2000 followed by many performances across India and abroad. Sabitri Heissman Kanhaiyalal as *Draupadi*, uses her body on the stage both as text and as context. She topples the rape script completely by disrobing and standing naked in front of her rapists, rubbing her body against them filling them with terror and fear they had earlier instilled in her, but which she triumphs over in her own way. It is a classic instance of an actress disrobing completely on a public platform. The meaning and purpose of the disrobing undercuts any sensual suggestions like it does in the story. Sabitri mesmerises her audience, holding them in thrall, speechless at her powerful expression of revolt against patriarchal, administrative and political forces. Sabitri transforms the proscenium space into a space of rebellion against the violation of human rights, in which a personal action mutates to become a strong political statement. Mahasweta Devi’s *Draupadi* is an attempt to deconstruct and

reconstruct the episode of “Draupadi’s Cheerharan by Duryodhan”, from the great epic Mahabharata.

Rudali

Usha Ganguly’s *Rangakarmee*, that has spanned four decades of Hindi theatre in Kolkata and beyond had staged *Rudali* in Hindi the first time in 1992. Ganguly used a lot of black and when asked to perform extracts from the play, she would perform solo, putting her heart, soul, body and loud voice entirely into the act for the audience to sit up and take notice. Perhaps for the first time, Mahasweta introduces the urban reader to the world of professional mourners, women from the lowest cultural and economic hierarchy who are called when a male member of an affluent family dies, and is paid for crying loudly to express grief over the death.

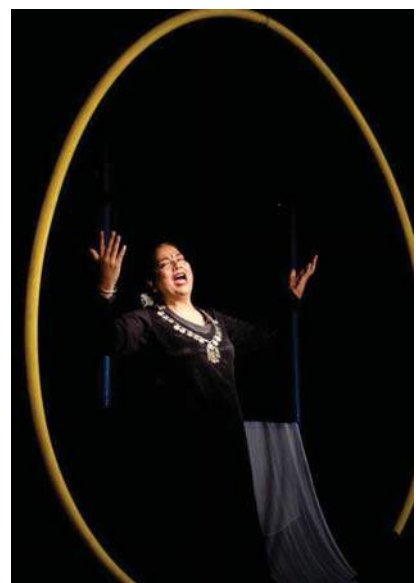
Rudali is a powerful short story. Revolving around the life of Sanichari, a poor low caste village woman, it is an acidly ironic tale of exploitation and struggle, and survival. In 1992 it was adapted into a play by Ganguly, a leading theatre director of Kolkata, and instantly became one of the most acclaimed productions of its time. In both incarnations of *Rudali* – the text and the play, it is a woman who has constructed and deconstructed the text, and each version can be read and seen as an important feminist text in contemporary India. The text also leaves it open to different interpretations, liberating the context from its purely feminist message. The men in the story are no less victims of their caste, class and social status than women.

Sanichari, a woman from a small tribal pocket lives with her mother-in-law, her son, her daughter-in-law and grandson Budhua. Her mother Bhikni has left her with another man when she was very small. Sanichari belongs to a group of professional mourners who

are called to cry loudly and beat their breasts when someone big, powerful and rich dies in the neighbourhood villages. This powerful story covers so many important topics. From abject poverty to the caste system and Indian funeral practices, as well as the role of women in a strongly patriarchal society, this story challenges readers on their ideas on poverty and feminism. A time comes when she cannot shed a single tear, nor can she beat her chest in fake grief, the money for which determines where her next meal will come from. She draws upon her inner sources of ceaseless grief and lets out a loud, heat-rendering cry.

Rangakarmee’s Rudali ran to packed houses for several years, appreciated equally by critics and audiences. Both the novelette and the play, in performance, have been created by women auteurs in command over their medium, their language of expression and their art – literature and theatre respectively. This has brought about two completely different texts with one feature in common – they offer a feminist, a sociological and a Marxist reading of each text.

Said Usha Ganguly: “I feel that



Usha Ganguly performing the play *Rudali*

I differ from the way people tend to use the term feminism. This term has nowadays become a fashionable one, and I don't believe in a particular brand of feminism. Therefore I don't want the play (*Rudali*) to be labelled as feminist. On the other hand, I believe in the liberation of women and their freedom, and I'm trying my best as a person, as a teacher and as a theatre worker, to work towards that."

In a detailed article in *Seagull Theatre Quarterly*, Issue 1 (*The Metamorphosis of Rudali*), she said: "Sanichari and Bikhni don't appeal to me simply because they belong to a different class. There is something very human in them, and that breaks the class barrier.

Everybody is able to communicate with them, their struggle becomes everybody's struggle ... I strongly believe that *Rudali* is a women's text. I believe that the Indian woman, whether it's Sanichari or someone from the middle or upper class, is highly exploited in our society. Somehow in *Rudali*, I see Sanichari protesting against society as a whole. Somebody told me that *Rudali* is a play about a village. I don't agree. It is not about a particular village or a city or even about a particular character, but about all of us: Sanichari represents women in general. It is the humanistic element that makes it acceptable to all of us"... But Mahasweta Devi, who wrote the story, firmly rejected the idea that

her text could be exclusively identified with women because she believed that "gender is subsumed into the discourse of class." ■

Shoma A. Chatterji is a freelance journalist, film scholar and author. She has authored 17 published titles and won the National Award for Best Writing on Cinema, twice. She won the UNFPA-Laadli Media Award, 2010 for 'commitment to addressing and analysing gender issues' among many



awards. She is currently Senior Research Fellow, ICSSR, Delhi, researching the politics of presentation of working women in post-colonial Bengali cinema 1950 to 2003.

FACE TO FACE *with Oeishik*

(Continued from page 38)

You came back to India in 2014. Why?

I had already decided to turn my life around while I was there. I did not want to practice law, and decided to follow my creative instincts in fine arts and in writing. No matter what I sketched or wrote, I always came back to my roots. Memories of the past haunted me.

For over a decade, through heartbreaks and fallouts, challenges and failures, victories and lessons, I had locked away my foundational identity behind the curtain of social conformity. I had forced myself to go with the grain despite being the outsider. And I could no longer keep that up. By 2014, I had written hundreds of pages and produced dozens of sketches – but I could not reach my potential. Something was lacking; I was still just staring at the Kanchenjunga when what I really needed was to sit in the stillness of its gleaming peak. I decided to come back to Kolkata in July 2014.

After eleven long years of absence, was it another culture shock for you?

I suffered from a strong case of westernisation the first year; remnants of battles of bygone eras that upended my childhood, burdened me; and the humidity and pollution made breathing hard. But my creativity matured by leaps and bounds. By the end of 2014, I produced another few dozen pieces of short prose, expanded *Shorbomongol*, my first collection of art from the original six to thirty-four pieces, and started *Nature*, the second collection.

Tell us something about Alo and Lalon.

In the summer of 2015 I adopted two bullmastiff puppies named Lalon and Alo, and my life changed in ways I could have never imagined. I went back to meditation and prayer. I devoted myself wholly to the puppies. As I do a bulk of my work at my desk, I have the pleasure of watching them grow before my eyes. This led to my third collection of sketches called *Sleep*, inspired by watching Alo and Lalon sleeping contentedly beside me, oblivious to everything and everyone. Over the past year, I have done more than 40 life sketches of Alo and Lalon, and these were part of my first solo show in Kolkata called *Alo, Lalon and Others*.

What other things does your art reflect?

I have produced three new pieces for *Shorbomongol*, four additional ones for *Nature*, and introduced *Mélange*, homages in collage, the fourth collection. These became my entire exhibition which, thanks to my friend, mentors and organiser, Shounak Chacreverti, a noted art collector and curator, has been a thundering success in terms of footfalls, and also in terms of sales.

What does "others" stand for in the exhibition you held?

"Others" stands for my tribute to the Mother Goddess in brilliant primary pen-and-ink paintings. Alo and Lalon are line drawings in black pen-and-ink while the "Others" are in brilliant colour, offering an enlightening male perspective of the Goddess from the Hindu pantheon. They were the ones that captured the attention of the visitors and some bought some of these right away. ■

Young and angry

*There seems to be a lot of anger and bullying in our society, and it's getting younger, says **Gauri Kedia**. Where does this anger come from? She analyses our young generation's seemingly deep anger and display of violence.*

Sgt. Bosco 'B.A.' Baracus: "Victory attained by violence is tantamount to defeat, for it is momentary."

Col. Hannibal Smith: "Gandhi", (nods) "It is better to be violent, if there is violence in our hearts, than to put on the cloak of nonviolence to cover impotence."

Baracus: Who said that?

Hannibal: Same guy
(from the film *The A-team*)

It might as well be blasphemy to not mention the fact that this is from a movie about four military guys. Ironically, the most aggressive of the four turned to religion and nonviolence in prison. The above dialogue is one of the most resonant in an otherwise light hearted, quite hilarious movie. It rather succinctly puts across the conflict we still feel today when it comes to violence.

On one hand, we're holding a rainbow coloured flag decorated with peace symbols, but on the other, we sport a *katana*, or a broadsword, or a light sabre, or a pistol, or a grenade, or... well, you get the idea. We've become increasingly tolerant of some things, but at the other end of the spectrum, there are those who are increasingly intolerant of others - it seems odd, doesn't it, that we can accept homosexuality, (which is great), but not someone who has an old model of a laptop, or out-of-fashion clothing. Why does it matter so much that my spectacles are the simpler, more practical kind, rather than the large, in fashion, 'nerd specs'? The irony isn't lost on me, that I'm the 'nerdy' one



Angry Birds or Angry Kids?

(And proud of it!), while the others are the ones rampant on Instagram and Tumblr and whatnot.

Bullying, the norm

In the case of younger children, there is nothing short of outright bullying. The kid with the Star Wars backpack and the extensive vocabulary is definitely not the cool kid whom everyone loves. That would probably be the football star. If the quiet guy decides to come out of his shell and make a joke, he's laughed at, not with, or just ignored. But if a certain popular person makes the exact same joke a minute later, he's automatically voted class clown. The metal head girl is a basket case, while the 'Swiftie' is the most popular girl in the grade.

And it's not enough that the different

ones are also the uncool ones, but they're also teased and bullied, just because they're that way. Whatever happened to being different, but equal? That philosophy probably went out of fashion around the same time flip phones did.

But we conform, because it's obviously the safer option. And what's the alternative? Being on the bad side of a bunch of teenagers is right up there with 'locked in a cage with hungry lions' on the list of top situations you'd much rather avoid. Discretion is the better part of not getting your lunch money stolen.

A chilling thought is that these popular and explicitly hostile kids are the ones who are going to be running the country a few years from now. Are these type of people really the ones we

want in charge of things? What if their parents aren't around to tell them that passive aggressive, snarky comments are not going to work? We'd get hit by a nuke just so the enemy country could have the satisfaction of shutting them up. We could always hope that they'll mellow over time and realise the world doesn't revolve around them, but can we guarantee it? Is that enough to make your blood run cold? It's alright, they'll probably get mature when they grow up a bit. Probably.

We live in a generation in which we're exposed to violence in the most innocuous of ways. Take Tom and Jerry; is there a teen alive, who hasn't envisioned the expression on their friend's face enshrouded in pie? The image still incites chuckles in the mind of everyone who imagines it (whether they admit or not). Actually, it's not even the teenagers anymore; there are plenty of grade school bullies who aren't being kept in line, because they're just so cute. We've gone from moody teens to moody twelve-year-olds to moody primary schoolers. As we grow up, the violence becomes not only more extreme, but also more diverse. From Game of Thrones to Assassin's Creed, we see violence just about everywhere. I wonder how the aliens would feel if they came here and saw the hundreds of movies we have of us killing them.

The idea of violence

Bottom line, everyone needs violence, or at least ideas of it to vent their frustration. From nerds to jocks, to the popular girls to the invisible kids or the knuckleheads of the class, everyone needs their rants or their venting sessions – which ranges from throwing your favourite childhood stuffed toy against the wall, to punching your pillow, or just annoying your younger sibling.

Most of these are normal, even healthy, but there's always someone who'll replace the pillow with a person...



Do games like Assassin's Creed fuel violence in our young?

Though it may be inaccurate to assume that children become more violent themselves if they see or are exposed to violence on television or in books, all that anger has to come from somewhere. It seems entirely possible that we get it from each other. The smallest of things can start a chain reaction of anger, forming an endless cycle of anger and misunderstanding. Take, for example, a student. Let's call her 'A'. Now, A is a good kid- smart, decent grades, doesn't get into too much trouble. But A has a problem-student B. B considers every moment not spent making A's life miserable a moment wasted (sound familiar?) Usually, A can deal with this and tries to stay out of B's way. But one day B gets to her. A goes home angry, and takes it out on her unsuspecting mother, who's only trying to help; needless to say, that does not go well. A's mother, frustrated and angry herself, vents her feelings by yelling at the housekeeper. And so on, and so forth. It seems almost amazing how one person's immature teasing could affect so many others. A little goes a long way, and somehow people don't seem to realise that that is true for negative things as well. While, all the people involved were probably justified

in their anger, it could also have been easily avoided.

Maybe it's time we understood how to deal with this kind of thing. Maybe it's time we took the Zen approach, and just decided to not retaliate. It takes just one person to break the cycle, just one person to stop a projectile hate pie. Though sometimes, you can't avoid confrontation, sometimes it is even necessary. In these situations, the smartest thing to do would be to pick your battles; and let's face it, you can't win every time. And even then, a little humour can never go amiss. In fact, it may be the best way to handle the problem. But mainly, just remember that the next person in the proverbial chain probably doesn't deserve the anger you can cause them. You probably didn't either, but that's not something you can help anyway. Just inhale, exhale, and go to your happy place.

Elsa said it right- Let it go! ■



Gauri Kedia is a 16-year-old student living in Mumbai. Her passions are reading and writing.

Sleep, beautiful sleep

Sleep is the most underrated health routine. When we sleep is when the body repairs and rejuvenates itself, says A. Radhakrishnan. He tells us ways to get a good night's sleep.

I guess I have led a charmed life. For years now as a journalist, I have slept for only about four hours, and that has enhanced my life. It is cool to wake up early, jog and do all your chores and still see the sunrise. As a short-sleeper, I thank my genes for this, as my metabolism is okay with it. People who work a lot of hours are much more prone to be short sleepers. But then we creatures are the exceptions.

Sleep is very essential; at least seven hours at a stretch. When late meetings make you feel you are starving, it's because you trained your body when to eat. The same can't be said for the time we hit the sack. Getting to bed at a consistent hour every single night can help. "The body loves regularity," says Michael Grandner, Director of a Sleep and Health Research Programme. "We are creatures of habit." Just like our body prepares itself and relies on food at the same times each day, the body does the same for sleep.

Some have mastered the art of efficient sleeping. A lot happens during sleep. Your body recharges its energy and growth hormone is released, repairing and building tissue and muscle. Levels of cortisol or the stress hormone fall during the night, so they can rise to a reasonable level in the morning and keep us alert. Immune function is bolstered, and levels of *ghrelin* and *leptin* are regulated to keep our feelings of hunger and fullness in check.



Sleep is the most underrated human activity!

Why sleep matters

According to a sleep study, 35 percent of adults say their sleep quality is only 'fair' or downright 'poor'. One out of three adults don't get enough

According to a sleep study, 35 percent of adults say their sleep quality is only 'fair' or downright 'poor'. One out of three adults don't get enough sleep—less than seven hours per night, which has been linked to several chronic health condition, including heart disease, kidney disease, and high blood pressure, as well as mental health issues such as depression and anxiety.

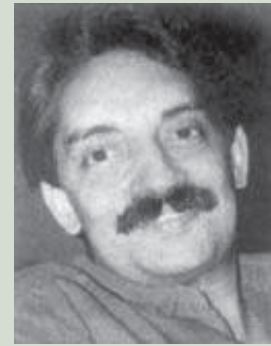
sleep—less than seven hours per night, which has been linked to several chronic health condition, including heart disease, kidney disease, and high blood pressure, as well as mental health issues such as depression and anxiety.

The importance of sleep cannot be stressed enough. The amount and quality of sleep really impacts our health. It is very frustrating when one cannot fall asleep. Some toss and turn, flip pillows over and over and readjust the blanket endlessly; the madness seemingly eternal till they go into a fitful sleep. This, friends, is what you call the RLS or restless leg syndrome.

Though millions suffer, there is no cure for this overwhelming tendency to move their legs, often waking up in the middle of the night with leg cramps, although it could affect the head, arms and the torso too. But there is a natural treatment unofficially recognised...an unscented but fresh bar of soap placed under the sheets every night before bed! It is believed that as fresh soap dries, it

Passing the baton

When we pass on the green baton to our children, what are the messages we want to convey? Are we proud of the environment we are leaving them?



Bittu Sahgal
Editor, Sanctuary magazine

PERHAPS the closest an adult human can come to the feeling of being in a mother's womb is when he or she chooses to descend into the depths of the sea. With no noise, no conversation, no nothing, except the sound of your own breathing, a sense of calm and belonging washes over you.

Once while surveying the corals of the Nicobars, a school of over 100 spinner dolphins appeared as though from nowhere and stayed with our little boat for almost 15 minutes. Ducking my head underwater, I was able to see a baby dolphin swim circles around its protective mother as the pod kept pace with our boat. It is such sights that I believe our children need to see and experience if we wish to pass on the protective baton of wildlife to them.

Children are ostensibly the purpose of our lives, but even a cursory glance at the attitudes that have governed India over the past six decades will reveal that we have been more than merely thoughtless about their future. Frankly, when future generations write about us they will probably say that we discovered and institutionalised inter-generational colonisation. Not a very comforting, or happy thought.

Sanctuary is attempting to activate the psyche of the nation to this situation in different ways. In a sense, to our lot has fallen the unpopular task of pooping the party for those who shout from the rooftops, "We do this for our children."

A key way to achieve our objective was to publish a children's wildlife magazine, *Cub*, that goes beyond communicating the need to study and respect nature into the realm of reminding them of their environmental and ecological rights. Cub kids are aware of the environmental damage we inflict upon our planet, but clearly we must not allow them to be traumatised with the responsibility of 'fighting' their elders. Expectedly, one refrain I constantly hear from children is: "But what can we do to make a difference Bittu Uncle? We are only children." It is difficult to address

their fear... without playing God, therefore what many of us who work with children do is get in touch with parents and talk to them about their children's concerns for the future. Then, with the help of parents and teachers, we carefully put out ideas that we encourage the children to debate.

Here are some of the value systems, which we find ourselves talking about in the presence of our children. I share them in the hope that some may actually take the trouble to write back to us with reactions, suggestions and offers of involvement:

- Saving wildlife is not merely a matter of animal rights, it is one of survival, for the animals are the only ones that know how to plant forests.
- Saving forests is not an act of 'kindness' to the earth, but rather one of survival. For without forests we would probably die of thirst, because the forest is the mother of the river.
- Poverty is not the greatest pollutant. Wastefulness of the rich is. Slum-dwellers are not the ones that dirty our cities. We who live in comparative comfort throw much more garbage out than they do. We also waste more water, consume more power, throw away more toys, clothes and food. Thus, we hurt the earth more than them.
- Planting trees during wildlife week will do less good than saving paper, not using disposable materials and conserving energy every day.

The hope and trust of children shines like a ray of light in a sea of environmental darkness. They breathe new life into our collective optimism. With far more environmental commonsense in their minds than we ever had, they are perfectly poised to accept the green baton that is rightfully theirs to carry forward.

To be a part of the conservation movement, or to introduce a child to the wonderful world of nature, log on to www.sanctuaryasia.com ■

An Olympian debacle

India's dismal performance at the recently concluded Rio Olympics needs to be introspected deeply. Will Prime Minister Modi be able to change India's fortune by the next Olympics?



C. V. Aravind

is a Bangalore-based freelance journalist.

WE are fast turning into a nation of cribbers. We crib about everything: shortages, corruption, poor governance, poverty, communalism etc. etc. And once every four years, we inevitably wear sackcloth and ashes and mourn our abysmal performance at the Mecca of all sporting events, the Olympics. Our athletes who returned battered and bruised from the London Olympics in 2012 winning just six medals, two silvers and four bronzes have fared much worse this time around at Rio De Janeiro, with just a silver and a bronze to show for our efforts, despite the fact that we had sent the largest ever contingent of 118 this time.

There is a palpable sense of shame that a nation of 1.2 billion could win just a couple of medals, while much smaller nations manage to do much better. However, all those who follow Indian sports closely would aver that the large Indian contingent consisted mostly of mere qualifiers where the track and field events were concerned, and one does not have to be a rocket scientist to gauge that those who huff and puff just to reach a qualifying mark, which incidentally is the minimum required to board the flight to the Olympics, can hardly be expected to reach anywhere near the podium.

We had realistic chances of winning medals only in a handful of events like shooting, boxing, wrestling, badminton, gymnastics and archery, and in the rest we were hardly in with any chance considering the level of the competition. The Target Olympic Podium Scheme (TOPS) which aims to finance athletes for international events like the Olympics had set apart funds for the purpose, but due to the limited budget available, most of the funds were utilised for just a handful of sports disciplines.

The two medals that India won were in badminton singles where P.V. Sindhu who ousted even higher ranked players in the earlier rounds, finally bowed out in the final, losing to World No. 1, Carolina Marin after putting up a

tough fight. Unfortunately, India's number one player and a former world topper Saina Nehwal, who was the main medal hope however, was a pale shadow of her real self as she was burdened with a knee injury. The gritty wrestler Sakshi Malik won a bronze in wrestling, though the promising gymnast Dipa Karmakar and the winner of India's only individual gold at the Olympics, Abhinav Bindra ended up fourth in their events. The only other silver lining was that India's men's hockey team entered the quarter finals in their event and this could be interpreted as a resurgence in the country's fortunes where the national game is concerned. The hopes that were pinned on ace wrestlers Yogeshwar Dutt and Narsingh Yadav were dashed as Yogeshwar crashed out in the first round, and Narsingh who had been initially cleared despite a failed dope test, was later banned from participating.

But all is not lost and we can take heart that Prime Minister Narendra Modi himself has taken the initiative to set up a task force that would be given a mandate to chalk out a comprehensive blueprint for success in the three Olympic Games to follow the one held at Rio. But what is imperative is that all the sports bodies in the country should be revamped and reconstituted and the likes of Milkha Singh, P.T. Usha, Viren Rasquinha, Prakash Padukone and Pullela Gopichand, and those who had worn the country's colours in various sports disciplines with distinction, should be brought in as consultants. The task force too should be packed with sportspersons and coaches who have intimate knowledge of sports and management, and the government would do well to appoint someone with a background in sports like Olympic silver medalist in shooting, Rajyavardhan Rathore, presently Union Minister of State of Information & Broadcasting as Sports Minister. If concerted efforts are put in by all concerned, the Olympic debacle at Rio can be forgotten as a bad dream. ■



SPOTLIGHT

YOUNG

Bapu Beyond India

Glimpses of places in England and South Africa which have the honour of being associated with the Mahatma

Gandhiji's experiences during his early years in England and South Africa had a great impact on his life.

Years in London

Gandhiji was barely nineteen when he sailed to England in 1888 to study law. He lived at 20 Baron's Court Road in London. During the first few months, he tried to adopt 'English' customs. He took lessons in French, dancing and public speaking. However, he soon realised the foolishness of his ways and gave up the needless pursuits. The building today bears a blue plaque indicating its historical significance.

Life was not easy for a vegetarian in a cold foreign land, but Gandhiji firmly adhered to the promise he had made to his mother to abstain from meat and wine. He sought out vegetarian restaurants, even if they were far from his home. At one such restaurant, Central, he bought a copy of *A Plea for Vegetarianism* by H. S. Salt. After reading it, he decided to become a committed vegetarian and joined the Vegetarian Society.

Efforts are on to get the London Corporation to recognise the restaurant's Gandhi connection.

SA Platform

When Gandhiji took up a job offer in South Africa in 1893, little did he know that it would be the turning point in his life. The stint was meant to last only a year, but he ended up staying back for 21 years, emerging as a champion of civil rights for Indians in South Africa.

Within a few days of his arrival, Gandhiji suffered the indignities of racial discrimination. The most cited incident is that of him being unceremoniously thrown out of a first class carriage at Pietemartzburg station just because he was not white. Today, a memorial plaque on Platform No-1 at the station marks the historic spot and a bronze statue of Gandhiji stands tall in the city centre.

Indian Settlements

During his stay in South Africa, Gandhiji founded two colonies for Indians outside Johannesburg — Phoenix Settlement (1904) and Tolstoy Farm (1910). Here, he put his principles of simple living and high thinking to the test. The families

living in the settlements laboured together to produce their own food, make their own clothes and construct homes. Gandhiji's newspaper *Indian Opinion*, which created awareness about inequality, racism and other human rights issues, was printed at the Phoenix Settlement.

The Phoenix Settlement continues to highlight Gandhiji's undying legacy through its library and museum. The Settlement and the immediate surrounding area are presently collectively known as Bhambayi (Bombay). In 1993, it celebrated the centenary of Gandhiji's arrival in South Africa.

The Tolstoy Farm was originally gifted to Gandhiji by one of his ardent followers, Herman Kallenbach. Once abuzz with activity, the settlement fell into disuse in the 1970s and all that remains today are its foundations. The Gandhi Centenary Council in South Africa is trying to restore it.



- ◆ During the freedom struggle, Gandhiji travelled abroad only once to England in 1931 to attend the Round Table Conference. At the time, he refused to stay in a posh West End hotel, choosing instead to stay among the working people at Kingsley Hall in East London for 12 weeks. The room in which Gandhiji stayed, famously dubbed as his 'cell', is preserved as a part of English heritage.
- ◆ Gandhiji lived in Johannesburg for 12 years in various suburbs. One of his homes was 11 Albermarle Street, where he lived with his family and lawyer-friend, Henry Polak. It was declared a national monument in 2009.
- ◆ He later lived in a house called The Kraal for two years at the height of his political activism. It is being restored and turned into a memorial named Satyagraha House.

Bell of Shame



A woman once owned a dog that had an annoying and nasty habit. He would run quietly behind anyone passing by and nip the ankle. The passer-by would yelp in pain and astonishment and complain to the woman.

No amount of disciplining by the owner could cure him of this habit. She got so fed up of the complaints that she tied a bell around the dog's neck. The sound of the bell would warn people that the dog was approaching and they would have time to turn back and shoo it away.

The dog, however, felt that the bell was some kind of reward for his behaviour. He became very proud. He turned up his nose at all the other dogs in the street and would not speak to them.

Finally, an old dog called him aside.

"Do you know why you have a bell around your neck?" he asked gently.

"It's because the owner values me!" he replied.

When the truant was told the exact reason for the bell, he felt



so ashamed that he slunk away with his tail between its legs.

Moral: A clap on the back is sometimes a slap on the face!

CURIOSITY

Who is a matinee idol?

A matinee idol is a good-looking male movie star whose (mostly female) fans adore him to the point of madness. They see every movie featuring their idol multiple times, collect his pictures, and wait for hours in screaming hordes to catch a glimpse, or for an autograph.

Since a matinee used to be the afternoon show of a film or play, when the tickets were cheaper, to be called a 'matinee idol' was not very flattering! Matinees were generally attended by college-going teens and others who could not afford the price of a ticket to an evening or night show.

In addition, matinee idols were known more for their classic good looks than for their acting ability, though this was not true of all of them.

The term was widely used between the 1930's and 1960s in Hollywood for Clark Gable, Gary Cooper, and Rudolf Valentino. Yesteryears' Hindi movie stars Dev Anand, Dilip Kumar, and Raj Kapoor were referred to as matinee idols in the press.

In the 1970's and 1980's, actors such as Rajesh Khanna and Bengali star Uttam Kumar were matinee idols whose fans were legion. They attracted the same adulation as the Beatles in Britain and Elvis Presley in the US.

Today, 'teen idol' has replaced 'matinee idol' and refers to singers who are popular with youngsters; Justin Bieber, for example.



SPARKLER

Eloquent Bihari



A debate on the situation in Bihar was about to commence in the Lok Sabha. The Speaker announced that only Bihari members would be allowed to speak. Mr. Atal Behari Vajpayee suddenly stood up and started speaking. The speaker called him to order and asked him to sit down. Said Mr. Vajpayee in mock seriousness : "Sir, you said the Bihari members could speak. I am a member of the house and my name is Atal Behari." The house was rocked with laughter.

M. VISVESVARAYA

An engineer with foresight (1860-1962)

SIR M.Visvesvaraya once said, "The curse of our country is laziness. At first sight everyone seems to be working. But in fact, one man works and the others watch him. As someone said with contempt, 'It looks as if five men are working. But really only one man works. One man will be doing nothing. One man will be resting. Another man will be watching them. Yet another man will be helping these three.'"

Mokshagundam Visvesvaraya, born on 15 September 1860, into a Telugu speaking family in Chickkabalapur District, Mysore State, sadly lost his father, a prominent Sanskrit scholar, when he was just 12. With the family plunged into poverty, Visvesvaraya financed his education through tuitions.

With a Bachelor of Arts from Central College, Bangalore, in 1881, he went on to do civil engineering at the prestigious College of Engineering, Pune.

After a stint with the Public Works Department (PWD), Bombay, he joined the Indian Irrigation Commission, where he implemented an extremely complex irrigation system in the Deccan, and also designed and patented a system of automatic dyke water floodgates that were first installed in 1903 at the Khadakvasla Reservoir, near Pune.

After opting for voluntary retirement in 1908, he worked for the Nizam of Hyderabad. Celebrity status arrived when he designed a flood protection system for Hyderabad city, under constant flood threat by the Musi River. He also developed a system to protect Visakhapatnam Port from sea erosion, and supervised the Krishna Raja Sagara Dam construction across the Kaveri River, the biggest reservoir in Asia.

In November 1909, Visvesvaraya was appointed as Chief Engineer of Mysore State and in 1912, he became the Diwan of the princely state of Mysore, a post he held for seven years. With the active support of Wodeyar IV, Maharaja of Mysore, he made good contribution to the all-round development of Mysore state. He founded many institutions and industrial ventures, and also commissioned

several new railway lines. He was given the honorific title of the 'Father of modern Mysore State'.

Visvesvaraya was appointed a Companion of the Order of the Indian Empire (CIE) in 1911. In 1915, while still the Diwan; he was knighted as a Knight Commander of the Order of the Indian Empire (KCIE) by the British for his myriad contributions. After Independence, the Bharat Ratna, was conferred on him in 1955.

The Engineering Community across India incidentally celebrates 'Engineers Day' on 15 September every year, as a remarkable tribute to this greatest Indian Engineer. He

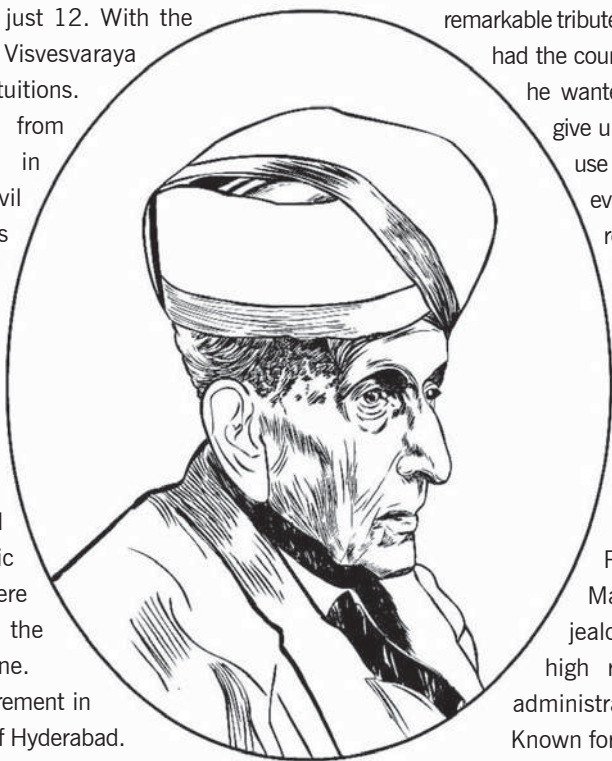
had the courage of his convictions. Far-sighted, he wanted education to spread, people to give up blind beliefs and make the fullest use of science and technology. Modest, even at the age of 95, he rose to receive and send off visitors. He had self-respect without arrogance. He was a very honest person who valued cleanliness, and was impeccably dressed even when he was well into his 90's.

He had to face constant opposition in plan implementation from the Madras Presidency, criticism from leading Madras newspapers, as also jealousy and opposition from a few high ranking officers in the Mysore administration.

Known for sincerity, time management and dedication to a cause, his memory was amazing. "A man should do any work he undertakes methodically", was his firm faith. He didn't favour relatives or friends, carried his resignation letter in his pocket as he was principled, and used his own car and stationery for private work. This great Indian engineer died on 14 April 1962, at the ripe old age of 102 years. The Visvesvaraya Industrial and Technological Museum, Bangalore, is a sterling tribute in his honour.

He once said: *"Remember, your work may be only to sweep a railway crossing, but it is your duty to keep it so clean that no other crossing in the world is as clean as yours."* ■

– A.Radhakrishnan is a Pune based freelance journalist, poet and short story writer.



LT. GEN. J.F.R. JACOB

A celebrated war hero (1923-2016)

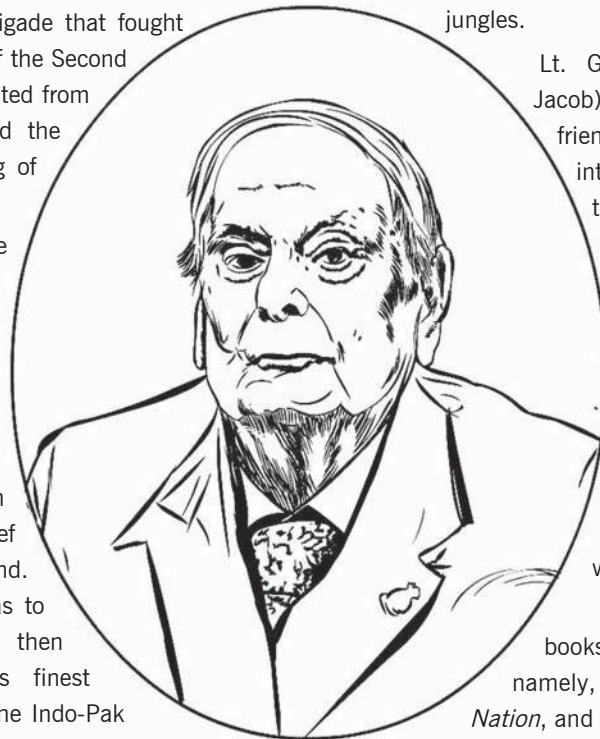
LT. Gen. J.F.R. Jacob, hailed as the hero of the 1971 war with Pakistan which ended in the liberation of Bangladesh, was born in Calcutta (now Kolkata) in 1923 in a family of orthodox Baghdadi Jews, and had his schooling and collegiate education in the city and elsewhere.

He was commissioned into the British Indian Army at the age of 19, a career he opted for despite his father's reservations. After graduating from the Officers Training School, Mhow, in 1943, he was posted to northern Iraq, and thereafter to North Africa to reinforce the British Army and was part of the artillery brigade that fought the Japanese Army till the end of the Second World War. He thereafter graduated from artillery schools in England and the US, specialising in the handling of advanced artillery missiles.

On his return, he rejoined the Indian army and rose rapidly from the ranks to become a Brigadier in the year 1963. In the war with Pakistan which broke out in 1965, Jacob commanded an Infantry Division. He was elevated to the rank of Major General in 1967, and designated as the Chief of Staff of the Eastern Command. One of his first assignments was to quell the insurgency that had then gripped North-East India. His finest moment however came during the Indo-Pak war in 1971 where as a Major General and Chief of the Eastern Command, he played a pivotal role in bringing the curtain down on the war by engaging in negotiations with the Pakistani army under General A.A.K. Niazi, and in organising the surrender of 93,000 Pakistani troops to the Indian Army. His meticulous preparations and adroit moves along with those of his immediate boss Lt. Gen. J.S. Aurora during the war and his role in the surrender, won him many admirers not only in India, but in the newly liberated country of Bangladesh as well. In fact, he continues to be revered in Bangladesh and was even honoured during the country's 41st Independence Day celebrations. The Government of India felicitated him for his stellar role in the war by awarding him a Commendation of Merit. Lt. Gen. Jacob was also a

recipient of the Param Vishisht Seva Medal. He hung up his boots in 1979 after serving the army for 37 years, rendering distinguished and highly meritorious service that won him a lot of accolades.

Thereafter, he had a successful stint as a businessman before he joined the Bharatiya Janata Party as a security adviser and had two gubernatorial stints in Goa and Punjab. His stint as Governor of Goa was marked by a clampdown on corruption and for the steps initiated by him for the protection of the state's water resources and huge swathes of its jungles.



Lt. Gen. Jacob, (Jack Farj Rafael Jacob), Jake to his close circle of friends, always displayed a keen interest in the development of the country's youth and their empowerment and held the firm belief that they should be trained to take over the mantle of leadership of the nation. He also stressed the need for good governance that could ensue only if the country's political class remained dedicated and the bureaucrats too chipped in with their contributions.

Lt.Gen Jacob also authored two books both of which were best sellers, namely, *Surrender at Dacca – Birth of a Nation*, and his autobiography, *An Odyssey – War and Peace – An autobiography*. He was a keen votary of improved relations between India and Israel and campaigned actively for the purchase of military equipment from Israel. Handsome tributes were paid to Lt. Gen. Jacob on his demise, with Prime Minister Narendra Modi averring that India would always remain grateful to him for his impeccable service to the nation at the most crucial moments. The Chief of Army Staff General Dalbir Singh mentioned in his message that General Jacob personified the best qualities of a soldier and a statesman and will be remembered as one of the most prominent leaders in the annals of India's military history. ■

– C. V. Aravind is a Bangalore-based freelance journalist.

SHARDA DWIVEDI

Tireless chronicler of Mumbai (1942-2012)

WHEN souls are conjoined, be they people or, a person and a city, the bond of the spirit remains unshakable and unbreakable; so it was between Sharda Dwivedi, historian and writer, and her city. Born in Bombay in 1942, she schooled at Queen Mary's High School for girls, graduated from Sydenham College of Commerce and Economics, and obtained a degree in Library Science from the University of Bombay. Her training, coupled with her passionate love affair with the city, made her delve into library archives. Soon, her knowledge of the city and its transformation through the decades was unmatched.

Daughter of a civil servant who had served as Chief Secretary to the Maharashtra Government, Sharada reserved her greatest angst for the current generation of public officials, whose lack of spine and scruples, she opined, were playing a significant role in historic Bombay's destruction. So, when she served on the civic Mumbai Heritage Conservation Committee, she took on the politicians and withstood their pressures on issues of conservation, never mincing words.

Back in time – I had just graduated. Those were the days when every evening, quite religiously, I would walk down to Mulk Raj Anand's home at Cuffe Parade, to sit by him and gain some *gyan*. On one such evening, I walked a dignified lady, unannounced, elegantly dressed in a *salwar kameez*, her silver hair coiffured. "Ah! Sharda" said Mulk Raj, rising to greet her, "Come in" and as he seated her there were introductions.

Sharda Dwivedi, regal, gracious and warm, her friendly smile immediately made me feel comfortable. They launched into a conversation that soon became animated and centered around the haphazard development and consequent destruction of Bombay. The politician-builder nexus, unabated monetary greed and the bending of laws, was a sore point with both Mulk and Sharda, and came through strongly in their discussion. I listened with rapt attention.

In the 1980s, Sharda had begun researching the history of South Bombay's Taj Mahal Hotel and had come up with so much material that she, along with architect Rahul

Mehrotra, began a newspaper column on the city's history. This led to the idea of a full-fledged book. The result was, *Bombay: The Cities Within*. An encyclopedia to the city's transformation, from a group of nondescript marshy, malaria ridden islands in pre-colonial India, to a pulsating city of the 21st century. Today, this book is synonymous with Sharda Dwivedi herself. She was one of those, who made many Mumbaikars realise the worth of their city.

The publication of *Bombay: The Cities Within*, launched a prolific period of publications co-authored by Sharada.

Her works took you back in time along the town's familiar bends. In her book *Fort Walks*, co-authored by Rahul Mehrotra, she re-created the old city and peppered it with local lore. Just such a story is of the Ghoga Street that owes its name to a family nick-name that was born out of a quarrel. Histories of the Banganga Tank in the Walkeshwar Temple complex at Malabar Hill titled, *Banganga, Sacred Tank*; the Chatrapati Shivaji Rail Terminus or Victoria Terminus - *Anchoring a City Line: The History of the Western Suburban Railway and its Headquarters in Bombay*, and the city's Art Deco buildings titled, *Bombay Deco*.

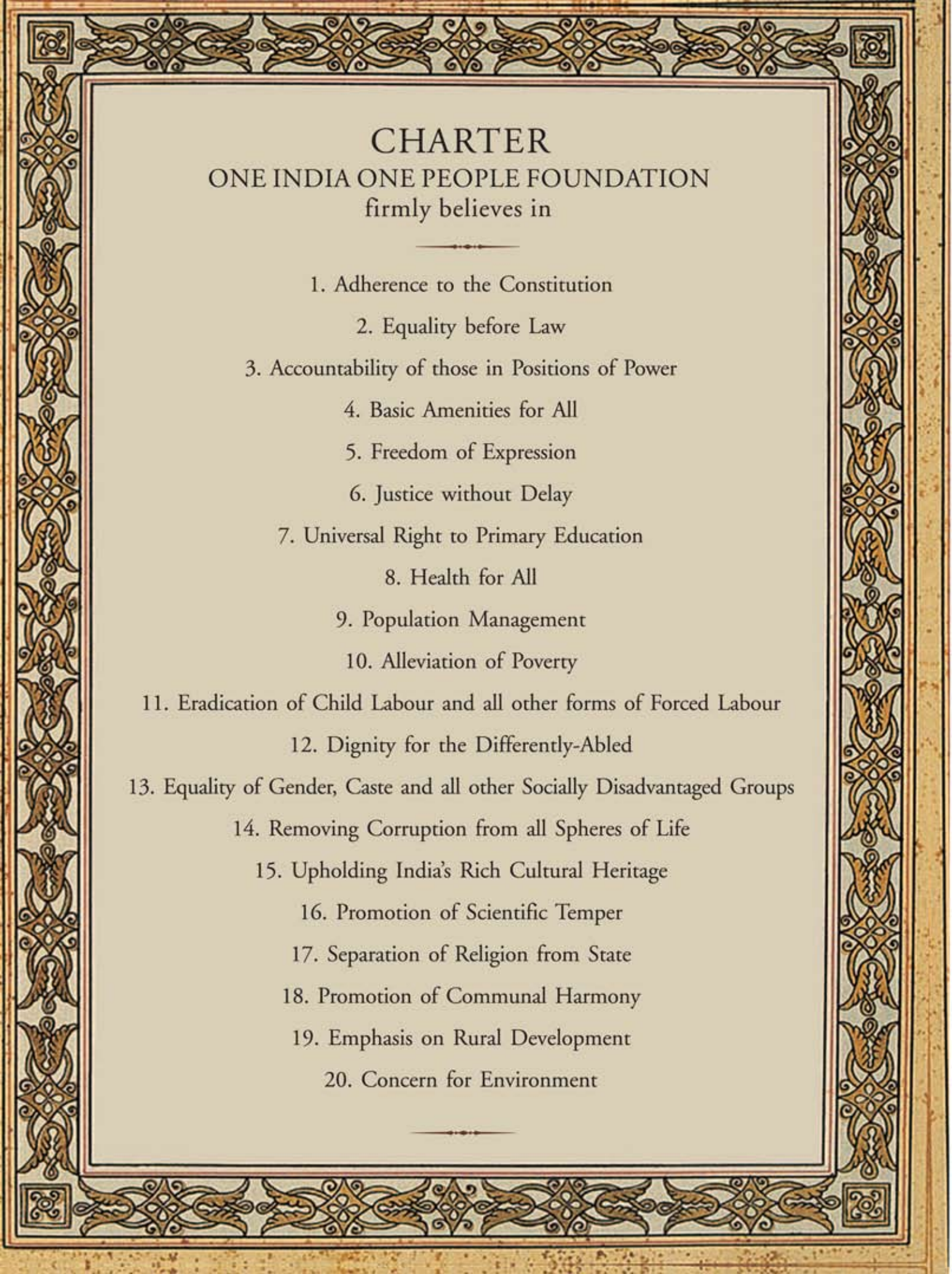
In the preface to *Fort Walks*, she asks her readers to keep their eyes open for any desecration of landmarks and raise it with the authorities. She urged, "Your opinion, suggestion or objection—however minor it may seem, will go a long way in ensuring that the government safeguards and protects this cultural heritage of the citizens of Bombay."

A stickler for presentation, Sharda got involved in book production, setting up her own publishing house, 'Eminence Designs', in 1996, as she found few publishers who could do justice to the magnificence of the historical material, in particular, the array of archival images she dug up to buttress her texts. Her end came after a brief illness on 6 February 2012. A staunch guardian of Mumbai's heritage, she will always be remembered fondly and respectfully. *Salaam Sharda!* ■

– Katie Dubey is the author of three coffee-table books and writes for various newspapers and magazines on nature and environment.

(Sketches of Great Indians by C.D. Rane)





CHARTER

ONE INDIA ONE PEOPLE FOUNDATION

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 2. Equality before Law
 3. Accountability of those in Positions of Power
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 5. Freedom of Expression
 6. Justice without Delay
 7. Universal Right to Primary Education
 8. Health for All
 9. Population Management
 10. Alleviation of Poverty
 11. Eradication of Child Labour and all other forms of Forced Labour
 12. Dignity for the Differently-Abled
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 14. Removing Corruption from all Spheres of Life
 15. Upholding India's Rich Cultural Heritage
 16. Promotion of Scientific Temper
 17. Separation of Religion from State
 18. Promotion of Communal Harmony
 19. Emphasis on Rural Development
 20. Concern for Environment
-

WHO AM I?

- Am I a Hindu first or an Indian first?*
Am I a Muslim first or an Indian first?
Am I a Christian first or an Indian first?
Am I a Buddhist first or an Indian first?
Am I a Brahmin first or an Indian first?
Am I a Dalit first or an Indian first?
Am I a South Indian first or an Indian first?
Am I a North Indian first or an Indian first?
Am I the President of India first or an Indian first?
Am I the Prime Minister of India first or an Indian first?
Am I the Commander-in-Chief first or an Indian first?
Am I a supporter of any 'ism' first or an Indian first?
Am I a white-collar/blue collar worker first or an Indian first?
Am I a youth/senior citizen first or an Indian first?

*In all cases you are Indian First, Last and Always.
Be a Proud Indian. Make this country Great, Strong and United.*



Sadanand A. Shetty, Founder Editor

(October 9th, 1930 – February 23rd, 2007)

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