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INDIAN START-UPS

SOAR & HOW !

Food start-ups on a success spree

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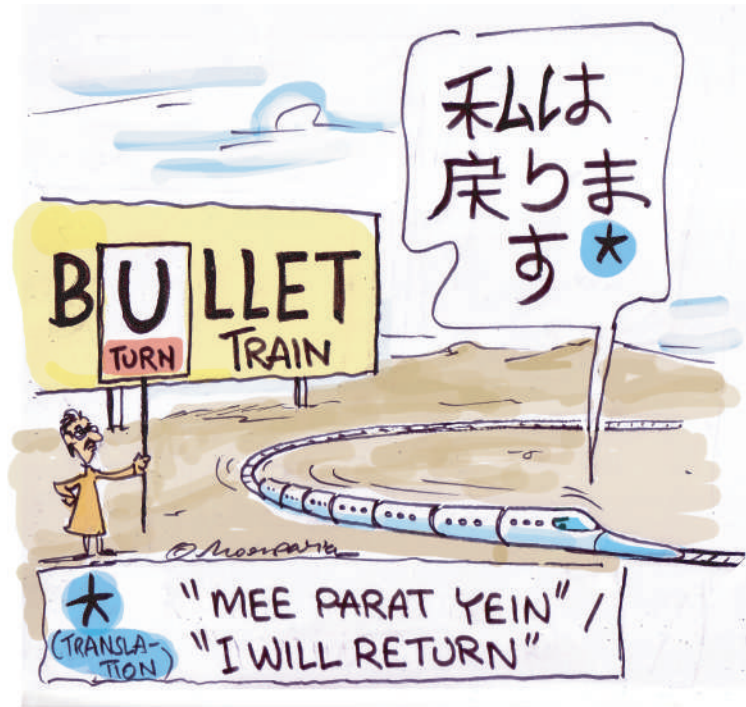
Small businesses, big dreams

Know India Better

On a sweet trail in mishti land

Face to Face

Bijaya Jena



CONTENTS

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THEME:
STARTUPS

Morparia's Page 02

Start-ups soar and how! 04
Manu Shrivastav

Food start-ups on a success spree 06
Swati Sharma

For out-of-the-box travel experience 08
Sagarika Sen

Where stays are the finest 10
Nehal Patel

Boomtime for AgriTech startups 12
Hiren Kumar Bose

Small businesses, big dreams 14
Kiran Raut

Media start-ups grow in sync with net access 16
Renuka Goel

Know India Better

On a sweet trail in *mishti* land 17
Manjira Majumdar

Face to Face

Bijaya Jena 27
A. Radhakrishnan

General

Three Malayalam films on elder abuse 31
Shoma A. Chatterji

Under the vast sky 33
Prof. Avinash Kolhe

We Came Before You and Other Poems 35
Jawahar Nidamboor

Great Indians 36



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Start-ups soar and how!

*India has witnessed the emergence of over 40,000 start-ups in the last five years, which have created more than \$130 Bn of value. As start-up initiatives get a boost from the government, and penetrate into Tier 2 and 3 cities, India's start-up ecosystem is scaling new heights, writes **Manu Shrivastava**.*



The Happy Place Cafe in Koregaon Park, Pune is a café cum coworking space started by Vamsy K and Anvi M to build a community via different events and workshops.

That India has a colossal start-up ecosystem in the world, and is all braced to witness year-on-year growth of 10 per cent to 12 per cent; and of the total number a fourth are technology-led start-ups, and almost three to four tech start-ups are born on an average every day, is phenomenal to say the least.

There are a series of factors that make India appealing as a start-up nation and these include: Cost of doing business, size of domestic market and proximity to customers and vendors. Following a survey of 150K young Indians, it was revealed that for a nation having a whopping seven million college graduates per year, 55 per cent of its youth prefer to work in start-ups over corporates. Not surprising, the median age of start-up founders is 31 years.

With 462 million internet users of which a whopping 80 per cent are mobile-based, India is the second largest consumer internet market in the world and offers the best opportunities for start-ups.

Start-ups that are thriving

There are a string of modest, easy start-ups viable in India and available to all and sundry. Top of the list is the quintessential 'Tuition Class' that doubles up as the first low-cost business and works well across genres. Besides

being a great business idea to fetch decent income, all one needs to do is buy a white board and marker pen. A tuition class can be offered to an individual or larger group, and all it requires is some basic knowledge on the subject being taught and a passion to teach. Advertising can be done through social media or by word of mouth. And then, there's Multi-level marketing (MLM), also called pyramid selling, network marketing and referral marketing, which is a marketing strategy for the sale of products or services where the revenue of the MLM company is derived from a non-salaried workforce selling the company's products/services, while the earnings of the participants are derived from a pyramid-shaped or binary compensation commission system.

Here, you need to sell a product of network marketing company by making a new member directly through you. You get commission for selling the product and making members as you go along. MLM is a great module to ensure good earnings. Products like Amway, Tupperware, Herbalife, Avon and others work on these models and are huge hits.

A Travel Agency remains a great business idea and one with low investment too. The industry thrives without being affected much by the vagaries of economics and political scenarios. People across the world need to travel for various reasons. To help them with lodging, boarding and travel, one can start a travel agency, and run it from home.

And, if you have a camera -- better still a DSLR, you could initiate a professional photography calling. Professional photographers are in big demand. For this, you just need a high-definition camera, invest time in learning professional photography and, then, marketing your business. With social media providing the perfect platform for photographers to showcase their work and seek clientele, what better and easier start-up then provide a professional photography service.

For the common man, the best start-up remains the 'Tea-Coffee Shop', which almost tops the list of low-cost business ideas. For this one, all you need is to rent a small place or stall to sell tea-coffee. Apart from the basic stove, you will need raw material for tea and coffee. Proximity to a college or a place of business can get you guaranteed business and swift success.

And, close on the heels of a tea-coffee shop is the 'Fast Food Joint' that is almost always spilling over with customers. Today, a lot of people love snacking on fast food, whether it's vada pav, idlis, bhajias sandwiches or momos. This start-up if managed well is almost always a success. In order to start a fast food outlet, one needs to have a place of their own or rent a place. The rentals in metros, especially in a city like Mumbai are high. Then, you need to procure permissions from the local authority to start your business. You also need to budget your raw materials and groceries before drawing up a menu for customers. It's always a case of trial and error before you hit success in this as in most start-up business.

Among easier start-up business is 'Candle Making' that's a home-based low investment business. Candles are used by everyone for religious purposes as well as decorative items. And, it's extremely easy to make candles at home. All you need is paraffin wax and colours. And, nothing like it, if you have some fragrances to boot.

With the surge in migration of students and work personnel across India, particularly in urban zones, and good home-made food being the ultimate casualty, 'Tiffin Services' have grown to become a promising business model. Most working professionals and students have little time and lesser inclination to cook food at home. They prefer home-made food, and if you have expertise to make good food and at low cost, you can start a tiffin service. All you need to do besides cook the food is to invest in a person

to deliver the tiffins.

The earliest start-up that may come to one's mind in India remains the 'insurance agency', which is the best low-cost, low-risk part-time business solution. All insurance agents need is to possess adequate information about their product, communication skills and convincing prowess which can earn a fortune depending on the number of policies sold, amounts insured and types of policy.



Chaayos, which serves customized tea and snacks is run by Sunshine Tea House Pvt Ltd. It operates 50 cafes across the country

In the last decade, hand-made gifts as a start-up initiative has gained popularity. With a tradition to gift something to someone on some occasion or the other, and the preference for handmade or customised gifts, this start-up has thrived like no other. For those creative and capable of making gift items at home, you have a start-up from home itself which, once established, can be converted into an online store.

Start-up India Learning Programme is a free online entrepreneurship programme initiated by start-up India. The aim here is to help entrepreneurs get their ideas and ventures to the next level through structured learning. The programme covers lessons on key areas of starting up by 40plus top founders of India, in an extensive four-week programme.

It may be mentioned here that start-up-friendly promises were a major part of the ruling government's manifesto. In just five years, India has witnessed the emergence of over 40,000 start-ups, which have created more than \$130 Bn of value from January 2014 to September 2018.

The start-up India scheme has penetrated Tier 2 and 3 markets as well. With a number of initiatives from the central and state governments, start-ups and early-stage businesses have been given every encouragement and incentive to grow and innovate.



Manu Shrivastava is a Media Legal Researcher with Draft Craft International, and co-convenor of 'The Woman Survivor' initiative that documents abuse of women and children within families.

Food start-ups on a success spree

*Foodtech start-ups have been changing the way we eat. Hot meals, savouries, drinks and desserts reach our homes at the click of a button. And as food aggregators promise quick deliveries and compete with each other to offer huge discounts to customers, it is the latter, who is spoilt for choice, says **Swati Sharma**.*



experienced chefs making a variety of world cuisines. Meals are delivered within 45 minutes since they want their customers to eat only 'fresh'.

And then there's InnerChef, founded in April 2015 by three entrepreneurs and located in Hyderabad, Noida, Mumbai, Delhi, Bangalore, and Gurgaon. Today, it has become one of the fastest-growing food companies in India offering a variety of cuisines including Indian, Asian, European, and Mediterranean. Also, on offer here are detox cleanses and diets with salads and soups to boot.

With a presence in 15 major cities of India with 200 plus locations, Faasos allows customers to order food online even after midnight. It is a perfect example of a food chain that went online from offline. Faasos Food Services Pvt. Ltd., commonly known as Faasos, is an Indian 'food on demand' company incorporated in 2011 and re-branded as Rebel Foods Pvt. Ltd., in 2018.

Faasos has its own kitchen with expert chefs, and offers a great range of meal options and combos delivered right at one's doorstep in no time, on all days

of the year.

Food is now a widely available commodity, and in forms tweaked to the 't' and delivered at your doorstep. Foodtech start-ups have been changing the way we eat. And food being a basic need that one simply cannot live without, it's only inevitable for the product to sell widely.

With the rise of food-tech and the sea of suppliers promising and delivering at the click of a mouse, hot meals, savouries, drinks, desserts, and even ice creams reach our homes within moments.

Spoilt for choice

There are a host of other food start-ups too across urban India. Founded in 2014, FreshMenu operates in Mumbai, New Delhi, Bangalore and Gurgaon. This entity focuses not just on good food but fresh food as well. The menu is changed daily and curated by a team of highly

Another emerging start-up is 'Biryani By Kilo' (BBK) available in a few cities that include Mumbai, New Delhi, Chandigarh, Gurgaon, and Noida and across 14 locations in these cities. 'Biryani By Kilo' offers authentic Hyderabad, Lucknow and Kolkata Biryani that's a big hit with people. Having received an overwhelming response from Mumbai's food connoisseurs and celebrities, 'Biryani By Kilo's' biryanis and kebabs make for the most fresh, hygienic and convenient takeaways for the home as well as corporate parties.

Competition heats up for food aggregators

And, on the pan-India front, now armed with a whopping \$500mn (Rs 3,500 crore), Amazon is all set to take on Zomato and Swiggy in the food delivery business.



There are all indications of a head-on confrontation, like Amazon's rivalry with Flipkart in the online retail. The war will be fought on several fronts. And, why not? After all, the business is a formidable one too.

It was in 2013, that the Seattle-headquartered company launched its India operations, entering a market where the country's most successful start-up Flipkart was busy fighting Snapdeal and the e-commerce arm of Paytm. Today, Flipkart has been sold to Walmart, while Snapdeal and Paytm are not formidable too.

To break into the market, Amazon is expected to charge restaurants one-fourth of what incumbents bill as commission. Swiggy and Zomato charge up to 20 percent from restaurants. For subscribers of its loyalty programme – Prime, food will be delivered for free.

Flexing its e-muscle, Amazon will set up cloud kitchens (for delivery-only and no option to dine in), hire delivery agents and reduce the time for food delivery. Lower prices and cash-backs through the Amazon Pay wallet are set to make the competition tougher.

According to Pune-based Market Research Future, the Indian food delivery market is forecast to be worth \$17 billion by 2023.

Swiggy, on its part, has raised \$1.3 billion so far including a billion-dollar round in December 2018 when it was valued at \$3.3 billion. South Africa's Naspers is the key backer of the Bengaluru-based company founded by Sriharsha Majety (CEO), Nandan Reddy and Rahul Jaimini.

And, so far Zomato has raised \$750 million at a valuation of \$2 billion and has China's Ant Financial as its main investor. The Gurugram-headquartered company and Swiggy are on the lookout for more funding.

Besides the world giants, the Indian foodtech and services industry itself has been quite hot. Reports suggest, Swiggy and Zomato make up 63 per cent of the total market share in food delivery as per app installs.

Issues such as traffic, parking problems and time constraints have worked to boost food delivery for convenience. That apart, consumers want to have access to quality and variety at the same time. And, even as the demand continues to increase, India faces a big supply gap where consumers in metros and especially tier 2/3 cities not having a wide range of cuisine options.

Running a cloud kitchen is often considered a 'cheaper' option than running a dine-in, in terms of costs such as furniture, decor and space management. Yet, these costs get swiftly substituted to lofty expenditure on cooking equipment, chefs and extra shifts. A huge advantage of the cloud kitchen is the capital-light and cost-effective model. Low risk, rentals and workforce requirements for cloud kitchens along with easy access to customers through online aggregators like Zomato help provide the right ingredients for success.

There are huge issues when it comes to online delivery. For one, the food cannot be delivered late; it cannot be cold; the packaging has to be good and there should be no leakage. Simply put, there is no time to recover from a delivery error.

Also, with most ordering happening during lunch and dinner times, agents are underutilised during the rest of the day and stretched beyond limits during peak times.

So, the leader Amazon has opted for predictive technology to help solve the problem of uneven demand for delivery. Also is being examined the option of putting delivery agents to the tasks of delivering parcels for the retail business when they are not delivering food, providing Amazon a colossal advantage simply not available to others.

Swati Sharma works with DraftCraft International as a Consumer Rights Activist and writes mostly on issues affecting consumers, trends and the law. She has a keen interest in global trends and relief processes in India.

For out-of-the-box travel experience

*Mundane bulk touring is now a passé. The quintessential traveller today, wants to explore off-beat destinations, and experience life, food and culture of unknown people in India's hinterland. **Sagarika Sen** gives us the lowdown on some of the new-age travel start-ups in India that offer unique travel experiences.*



Sarayu Kamat, a passionate traveller, who feels she needs many lives to experience all that India has to offer, is seen with the Naga tribes at the recently held Hornbill festival in Nagaland.

There are two ways to gain knowledge. One is to read – relatively boring, and the other is to travel – a lot preferred. And, although India continues to reel under an economic slowdown, travel and tourism industry statistics could surely mislead. The market is set to become a whopping \$9 billion industry by 2025. And providing the perfect boost is the surge in new-age travel start-ups and challenging trends driven by the millennials.

Suddenly, the demographics of the quintessential traveller have changed. He is mostly in his 20's or early 30's and prefers personalised, carefully curated processes and chooses his destination and modes to the mundane 'bulk touring' of the past.

"I've travelled extensively all over India and would hate to do it with a travel and tour company simply because they'd take you to places with everyone together and do the 'checklist' and you simply do not have the time or space to explore finer nuances or aspects of a place or its people," feels amateur photographer Yashasvi Menon. "It's only of late that there are a host of sites and online

options where you can join in a tour hosted by a travel start-up that holds the promise of a good holiday – one that leaves you with fond, niche memories," she adds.

Also, the ways in which one travels have changed. Moving away from the regular reviews are apps like Ithaka where a potential traveller connects to a matching traveller over a chat conversation. The influencer helps the traveller discover the country; identify places to visit, suggest things they could do and other finer aspects.

Off-beat destinations, niche experiences

Deviating from the uber luxury promised and provided by the usual suspects are a string of travel start-ups offering offbeat accommodation, out-of-the-box trips and interesting treks. Look at The Unhotel Co launched by Manish Sinha and Shilpi Singh in 2016 which includes finer local nuances to their getaways. Focusing on authenticity of the zone, its people, places, culture and food, this start-up provides a vast array of offbeat adventures.

Tales & Treasures takes excursions to rural India where tourism is not prevalent. Urbanites are shown the lifestyle, culture and heritage of the villagers.



"I had made myriad trips to Gujarat in the past, with friends and family but the one I did with a social justice tour start-up I found on the EventsHigh portal simply blew my mind," says businessman Rajesh Gada. It was a week-long trip to Ahmedabad and from there to Lothal, Balasinor, Dwarka and Alang that left Rajesh speechless. "I had simply no idea that there was so much in Gujarat that was of global interest (dinosaur eggs in Balasinor) in general and of national interest (the discovery of the underwater city in Dwarka) so close by yet undiscovered," felt Rajesh who "learned everything anew," with his equally-ecstatic teen daughter Vaishnavi seeing it all, for the first time too.

India's travel industry has indeed arrived and with new entrants set on carving their own niches, the billion-dollar industry has an enviable future.

Among start-ups here, in the travel and tourism industry is TraWork. For the present-day entrepreneur and executive, disconnecting from work is an impossibility. It's now that work tends to treacherously sneak into one's personal space, in living rooms and within the confines of your bedroom. No longer are jobs nine to five and they tend to convert into a huge price for the pleasure of comfort and money.

"The best way to travel remains, by foot and with locals," offers Mumbai-based law student Ayushi Zoman whose recent month-long trip to Goa with a local start-up tourism entity taught her "invaluable lessons in travel."

"I stayed on an island with monkeys, swam with dolphins by my side, had Feni at a local bar, even helped local bakers make *podì* at a bakery," says Ayushi. And all, thanks to the local start-up that had been initiated by a Goan NRI who wanted to "pay back" to Goa, India's smallest state and his 'home'.

So now, Ayushi plans to start regular trips to Goa with her friends on Facebook after receiving overwhelming response to a suggestion post she placed on Social media. "I have become an Ambassador for the Rodriguez family that initiated the start-up and on the basis of my personal experience. I feel that there's so much that Goa has to offer

to the rest of India and the world beyond the regular beaches and churches," says Ayushi.

Launched in May 2018, Pune-based travel start-up TraWork aims to provide just the perfect blend of work and travel. TraWork has conducted two international trips for its customers and has several other international and domestic trips in the pipeline, for this year. The punchline here is simple yet powerful: Travel as you work, work while you travel.

Gone are the days of bulk travel and tours with most urban tourist/travellers who are keen on availing more personalised experiences. Mumbai-based Taxidio (which means travel in Greek) attempts to offer just the perfect recipe to the discerned traveller. An online DIY (Do-it-Yourself) trip planner offers users the opportunity to enter a few details about their travel style and preferences and, in return, Taxidio generates a list of destinations that matches their preferences.

The start-up provides users with 19 interest parameters, based on which it offers choices, recommendations and a suggested list of activities and To-Dos to indulge in during the trip. For stay, Taxido has an affiliated partnership with Booking.com and GetYourGuide.com.

Just about every market segment has been undergoing a radical transformation particularly impacted by technological disruptions. With healthcare, education, trade directly hit, travel and tourism sector, plagued by budgeting issues and time constraints, problems simply couldn't be left behind. Bengaluru-based MeTripping uses Artificial Intelligence (AI) search engine, to provide recommendations for each individual user's needs. It has a team comprising technologists and data scientists, who help potential travellers make the perfect decisions by scanning mass data.

Sagarika Sen works with DraftCraft International as a Travel Laws Analyst. She helps bridge the gap between the law and needs of the industry through research and strategic intervention.

Where stays are the finest

*The boom in tourism sector, the worldwide penetration of internet, the innumerable stay options available for modern-day travellers, the subsequent rise of hotel meta-search engines, etc., are contributing to a robust growth of the hospitality industry in India, says **Nehal Patel**.*



The hospitality industry has emerged as one of the key growth drivers in India in the service sector. It is a sunrise industry and a significant player in terms of economic growth, job provider – directly and indirectly – and a huge source of foreign exchange through FDI and tourism. The sheer diversity and scale of hotels and lodging options in the hospitality industry ensure penetration of numerous start-ups every year and several newer companies and groups foray into this sector with fresh ideas and innovative marketing strategies.

The hotel industry in India is a direct result of the booming tourism sector. There is a sharp rise in the number of budget hotels catering to the increased number of domestic and foreign ‘budget’ travellers and backpackers looking for basic and affordable stay. The booming Indian middle-class with an increasing disposable income are contributing significantly to the growth of the hospitality sector that accounts for 7.5 per cent of India’s GDP and is expected to grow at 16.1 per cent CAGR (Compound annual growth rate) by 2022.

Besides, the industry contributes significantly in terms of revenue to the nation at state and central levels through direct and indirect tax revenue – GST, VAT, luxury tax, service tax, etc.

Also, with increased FDI and growing economic

ties with nations all over the world, India is set to become a global business hub. This translates to lucrative business opportunities for luxury and economy hotels across India. Several international hotel chains are also foraying into the domestic market in a bid to ensure a piece of the pie - the hotel industry in India is second to China in the Asia Pacific region.

Hotel start-ups in India are diverse and varied. Some are backed by renowned and reputed venture capitalists and angel investors, while others look for innovative ways to set a foot in virgin territories and leave a mark. Investors are driven by technology-driven models and India, the most digitally-advanced traveller nation (e.g. digital tools used for planning and experiencing travels) and with an ever-increasing internet penetration is a natural draw for serious investors from all over the world. These investments have given a big boost to the hospitality industry and several start-ups are now able to procure funding from international venture capital firms.

Some successful start-ups in India

Of start-ups with phenomenal growth, MakeMyTrip was founded by IIM-Ahmedabad alumnus Deep Kalra in 2000, primarily to cater to the overseas Indian community for their US to India travel needs. In September 2005, MakeMyTrip started Indian operations offering online flight

tickets to Indian travelers, and began to focus on non-air businesses like holiday packages and hotel bookings. Within ten years of its inception, on 17 August 2010, MakeMyTrip Limited was listed on the NASDAQ after its initial public offering. In 2016, MakeMyTrip and Ibibo Group, India's largest travel booking portals, merged through a stock transaction - one of the biggest acquisitions in India's online travel space.

Among hotel start-ups in India is Lemon Tree Hotels – said to be India's largest hotel chain in the mid-priced hotel sector and the 3rd largest overall, in terms of controlling interest in owned and leased rooms, according to the 2017 Horwath Report. It was founded by Patanjali (Patu) Keswani and opened its first hotel with 49 rooms in May 2004. Today it operates under seven brands: Aurika Hotels and Resorts (upscale), Lemon Tree Premier (upper midscale), Lemon Tree Hotels (midscale) & Red Fox by Lemon Tree Hotels (economy), Keys Prima (upper midscale), Keys Select (midscale) and Keys Lite (economy).

Its hotels in India are located in major destinations such as Ahmedabad, Alwar, Aurangabad, Baddi, Bandhavgarh, Bengaluru, Bhiwandi, Chandigarh, Chennai, Coimbatore, Corbett, Dehradun, Delhi, Gangtok, Ghaziabad, Goa, Gurgaon, Hyderabad, Indore, Jaipur, Katra, Kerala, Manesar, Noida, Patna, Pune, Siliguri, Srinagar, Tiruchirappalli, Udaipur, Vijayawada and Vadodara. (can delete if space constraints.)

There are plans to operate 105 hotels with 10,500 rooms, across 66 cities in India and abroad. Lemon Tree Hotels went public in early 2018, and got listed on the National Stock Exchange of India (NSE) on 9 April 2018.

OYO is the world's third-largest and fastest-growing hotel chain of leased and franchised hotels, homes and living spaces and India's biggest success story in the hotel industry. The chain that started with one hotel in 2013 now marks its presence in more than 800 cities with more than 23,000 hotels, 8,50,000 rooms and 46,000 vacation homes, world-wide. OYO's success lies in its ability to generate a list of pocket-friendly hotels and good booking deals.

OYO quickly expanded to Indonesia and difficult global markets such as UK, USA and China where it is the largest single hotel brand with a presence in 337 cities across 10,000 hotels. The rapid success of the hotel chain has attracted huge investments from Japan's SoftBank, China Lodging, Airbnb, etc., and since September 2017, the start-up has raised USD 2.5 billion.

Bengaluru-based seed venture, Colive is an aggregator offering fully-furnished, fully-managed and budget-friendly service apartments. Colive provides an online platform for people to search serviced homes in specific areas in proximity of IT parks and business hubs. Other perks include amenities, professional housekeeping, secured premises, high-speed internet, etc. The technology-enabled network now provides 'home' to more than 20,000 single professionals and young couples.

Zostel, founded in 2013 in Jaipur, started as a chain of backpacker hostels and managed to raise a significant sum in capital investment. The motto behind this start-up was to 'promote travelling as a way of life', particularly for budget travelers, so they could avail safe, clean and economical social accommodation. By 2017, Zostel had top-rated hostels at 38 locations in India and Nepal.

The start-up is now venturing into international partnerships in the South East Asia region and aiming to strike 'deals' in at least ten cities in Thailand, Vietnam, Indonesia, etc. The USP of this chain is that it is service-oriented and promotes picturesque locations, authentic local experiences, all for a backpacker. The founding team see themselves as 'pioneers of travel' and not 'hostel operators'.

Another technology-driven, traveler-friendly start-up is Room On Call that allows business travellers to book hotels online, across Indian cities and offer several deals and discounts in the process. Founded in 2015 in Gurugram, the start-up raised USD two million in its first year itself in a round led by CASHurDRIVE.

Gurugram-based start-up Fabhotels, a budget hotel aggregator founded in 2015, raised nearly USD 35 million through investments from Accel Partners and Goldman Sachs, a huge amount for an early-stage start-up. In the last couple of months, Fabhotels have witnessed a significant increase in sales growth.

US-based company Airbnb started operations in India in 2016, and has collected about 45,000 listings in India since. The major share of its listings, about 6,000, are in Goa also the most popular market. Airbnb has announced new measures to penetrate further in the domestic market such as including Hindi and other vernacular languages for its users and interfaces. The number of guests using Airbnb has doubled since its launch and almost two million Indians have used Airbnb so far.

There are many young professionals who have donned roles of budding entrepreneurs in the hospitality industry. B-school graduates are venturing into the industry as full-time professionals, freelancers and even starting their own ventures with innovative ideas and strategic marketing to draw the 'new traveler', a market with huge potential.

Nehal Patel works with DraftCraft International as an Inclusive Tourism Researcher and works extensively with policy material on the industry. She helps break down the official jargon for the benefit of state players and stakeholders.

Boomtime for AgriTech start-ups

*With over seventy percent Indian households still dependent on farming, the agriculture sector holds a huge potential for AgriTech start-ups. Modern technology, availability of good quality farm data, a better regulatory environment for startup funding, and cheap internet connectivity are some of the crucial factors leading to a thriving startup ecosystem, writes **Hiren Kumar Bose**.*



have a 40 per cent lower yield than irrigated farmlands. Then there are issues like fragmented land holdings, decreasing groundwater levels, and poor quality of seeds. The list seems endless if you include factors like lack of price transparency and a poor supply-chain process. Interestingly, the AgriTech startups have brought a breath of fresh air to the sector.

However, countries like Israel, China, and the US have demonstrated that an assortment of technology such as the introduction of hybrid seeds, precision farming, big data analytics, artificial intelligence, geo-tagging and satellite

India's agriculture tech startups are undergoing a boom, with funding in the first half of 2019 jumping over three-fold compared with that in the previous year, a recent report mentioned elaborating on the coming of age of AgriTech.

Applying modern technologies to the agricultural sector with the aim to enhance produce, efficiency and revenue is the idea behind AgriTech. The concept may also be applied to the associated sectors of aquaculture and horticulture.

With over 70 per cent Indian households still dependent on farming, the agriculture sector holds a huge potential for AgriTech startups. Digital transformation and the start-up ecosystem are playing a significant role in bringing innovation and disruption in the country's agriculture sector. Technology firms are trying to break into the agricultural landscape using newer business models.

India can learn from Israel, China and US

Before we venture further let's understand what ails the agriculture sector, and more importantly, why farmers' kids are shying away to become one. Farmers still rely on manual labour – from sowing to harvesting; there is over-dependence on monsoon, and the rain-fed farmlands

monitoring, mobile apps, and farm management software can be applied at every stage in the agriculture process to increase productivity and farm incomes. If these countries can do it, why can't India?

According to the United Nations, the world will need to produce 70 per cent more food in 2050 to meet the growing demand, and technology can help in increasing agricultural output. Several global organisations are developing new solutions for agriculture. The global precision farming market is estimated to cross US\$5 billion by 2023 and grow over 10 per cent per annum during the period 2016–2023. The global agriculture robot market is estimated to grow at a Compound Annual Growth Rate (CAGR) of 21 per cent and touch US\$11 billion by 2023. In tandem with these global trends, several startups have recently emerged in the AgriTech space in India.

The sector holds tremendous potential for technology adoption, considering the sheer size of the population involved. According to McKinsey Global Institute, the application of various digital and agronomic technologies can have an economic impact of US\$45–80 billion annually by 2025. Not just that, 90 million farmers could potentially raise their incomes, 200–250 million Indians could benefit from better nutrition from abundant harvests and as many as one million Indians could find decent job opportuni-

ties as computer-equipped farm-extension workers.

AgriTech startups in India are working on an assortment of issues like enhanced supply chains, using big data analytics and artificial intelligence to optimise farm management, focusing on the financial aspect of farming, providing actionable insights to farmers, image sensing for quality assessment, storage monitoring based on the Internet of Things (IoT) and digitisation of local markets.

Presently, the country hosts more than 450 start-ups in the agriculture sector, according to the NASSCOM report. The sector is growing at a rate of 25%, year on year, and has over the recent years witnessed some of the global and sector-focused funds directly investing in AgriTech start-ups.

What AgriTech start-ups can offer

A few illustrations will help what AgriTech start-ups have to offer:

- FIB-SOL Life Technologies develops low-cost bio-fertilisers that help farmers to improve crop yield and soil quality. It also aims to improve product shelf life for manufacturers, help suppliers stock inventory efficiently, and boost farmers' income as well. They offer three products under GEL and DROPS which contain microbes that provide nutrients to make farmland more fertile for cultivation.
- Bhopal-based startup AgriGator is building a platform directly connecting grain traders, food processors, wholesalers and logistics providers for efficient and transparent trade and transport. It is presently doing business with 200 local traders in nearby 11 mandis (markets), 15 food processors and more than 500 carrier providers. They plan to expand their operations to 10 cities in next one year.
- Launched in 2016, ViFresh provides village-fresh agro and milk products to people in Coimbatore. It also supports the livelihoods of small-holder farmers and rural youth. So far it has provided employment opportunities to over 2,000 individuals. ViFresh has identified its priorities as the three Es - enriching farmers, empowering rural youth, and exciting urban customers.
- Mumbai-based FreshVnF founded in 2018 uses machine learning (ML) to optimise a farm-to-fork supply chain by connecting farmers with hotels, restaurants and cafes. Claiming to have delivered more than 15 tonnes of fresh produce per day to more than 300 clients, it is now aiming to provide fresh farm produce to the end customer within 16 hours of harvesting.
- Fruit Box & Co, an e-commerce platform based in Delhi with B2B and B2C verticals, provides healthy alternatives to snack on fruits. So far it has tied up with over 500 farmers, wholesalers and importers. Their fruits are sourced from different countries across the world. While bananas, mangoes, oranges, grapes and strawberries are mainly produced locally, they import apples from the US and New

Zealand, guavas and passion fruit from Thailand, avocados from Mexico, and pears from the US.

- Founded in 2010, Ecozen Solutions develops technology-enabled products to strengthen the farm-to-fork value chain of perishables, with a focus on renewable energy and sustainable development. Based in Pune, Ecozen has developed two products so far – Ecofrost, a portable cold room that maintains a low temperature, and Ecotron, a pump controller for irrigation. Both are solar-powered. Approximately 20,000 farmers in India have used their products, the company says.

- Jaipur-based FreshoKartz aims to integrate farms, farmers, vendors, traders, and customers on a common platform to structure the agricultural sector. Founded in 2016, it provides agri inputs to farmers through all crop cycles and claims to augment their income by 50 per cent. Apart from soil data-based crop and fertiliser recommendations, it also delivers quality seeds, pesticides and fertilisers through its network of physical centres. It is targeting one centre for every 10,000 farming population.

- Chennai-based Aquaconnect's AI-powered platform is helping India's shrimp farmers fight diseases and cut losses. Its app, FarmMOJO uses big data and AI to advise farmers on their pond operations. In addition to the inputs, the application also takes into consideration the data captured by IoT or smart farm management platforms. In the two years since inception, Aquaconnect claims to have brought 3K farmers on board and has generated a revenue of Rs 2.4 Cr in FY18.

- Founded in 2016, AutoNxt envisions a tractor-sharing platform to reach more farmers and make its tractor more affordable. The Mumbai-based company's prototype autonomous electric tractor has been developed for a range of farming operations including tilling, spraying pesticides, ploughing, sowing seeds and more. AutoNxt wants to first sell to grape cultivators in wine-producing regions such as Nashik and Karnataka.

Availability of good quality farm data, a better regulatory environment for startup funding, and cheap internet connectivity are some of the crucial factors leading to a thriving startup ecosystem. The increasing penetration of budget smartphones, cheap access to high-speed internet, and the growing regional online content are helping B2F (Business to Farmer) companies with direct access to farmers. With the given pace of investments, AgriTech sector may soon take the centre stage of India's transformation.



Hiren Kumar Bose is an independent media professional who writes on development issues.

Small businesses, big dreams

*Hundreds of small enterprises such as bakeries, convenience stores, day care centres, and a host of traditional and new service providers, comprise a formidable component of India's start-up eco system, today. These businesses are not only growing remarkably, but contributing significantly to the country's economy, says **Kiran Raut**.*



Sisterhood Co., a weddings and events full coverage start up with an all woman team shooting photography and video. The company was founded by its two partners, Natasha Hemrajani and Labony Kaushal, two talented women photographers who wanted to bring the softness and nuance of the female perspective into the business (Image copyright : Sisterhood Co.)

The small traders segment in India has been expanding constantly and contributing to the country's economy. It is the generic boost registered by start-ups across India that is the reason for most sectors, both traditional and new, to have registered significant growth. Small traders comprise a formidable component of India's start-up ecosystem.

A small trader, by definition, is an investor who owns or trades a set of options or futures whose value is lower than the requirement for registration and reporting. Consequently, small traders are exempt from several requirements that large traders have to fulfill normally. Less relaxed regulatory norms offer higher flexibility and leverage to run small trades. Also, handling lower volume of orders or investments as compared to larger enterprises guarantees more freedom to set up a strong foundation in the beginning.

If you look around, there are hundreds of small trading enterprises or businesses in your vicinity - grocery

stores, restaurants, photographers, travel agencies, bakeries, hairdressers, convenience stores, guest houses, day cares and even small-scale manufacturing units.

Regulatory requirements vary for each category of small trading entities. Some may require just a license to operate while others are more heavily regulated and even need inspection and certification from regulatory authorities.

Clothing and apparel, an evergreen industry, is one of the largest in India and spawning numerous start-ups that are striving to gain more market share and increase visibility. The Indian fashion industry is a fertile ground for producing big and small start-ups in the ready-made and self-made clothing categories. In cities such as Delhi, Kolkata and Mumbai, there is a ten-fold increase in demand for good tailors due to increase in the popularity of self-made designs. Fashion-conscious customers are constantly in search for unique styles and designs.

Many young professionals are moving out of their daily jobs to start something of their own, and the garment industry is a big draw. Clothing stores, small-scale garment factories, sub-contracting works, fashion consultancy, printing and embroidery units and garment wholesale business are mushrooming even in Tier-2 and Tier-3 cities in India owing to reasonable investments such as rental space, electricity, stitching and sewing machines, semi-skilled labour, etc.

Food, fashion and accessories

With the growth of fashion industry, subsidiary areas of business have increased simultaneously - jewellery, footwear, handbags, etc., to name a few. Ethnic and fashion jewellery, both traditional and customised are in huge demand. Many jewellery brands have set shops. Young men and women after undertaking courses in jewellery design often open their own stores and build their client base gradually. It is important to strike good deals with the manufacturers of raw materials to increase profit margins.

Everyone who has panache for cooking or baking, dreams of having one's own outlet at some point. Many youngsters are taking up cooking as a full-time profession and do not mind starting from the scratch. The flurry of food delivery services and apps have made the job much easier, as they can list themselves on these apps and ensure regular business. Food trucks are also quite popular that have witnessed several rags-to-riches stories.

Prem Ganapathy, who started off by selling idlis and dosas on a hand cart in Vashi, Navi Mumbai, now owns a chain of luxury restaurants. In the restaurant business, the investment is small, sometimes requiring just a license to serve food and the returns are high considering the growing appeal among urban masses. Breakfast and tea shops, fruit juice stalls, fast food joints are also lucrative options to set a foot in the industry.

Bakery is one of the largest food-processing industries in the country as the products are popular all over. To start a bakery business is easy - in rental spaces, shared spaces and even at homes. There are several big names that have taken years of persistence and hard work to make a name for themselves. The market is ripe for such enterprises and the future lies in online food-based services, especially for baked goods.

"I started my bakery business at home, and with cakes particularly as that's my specialty," says Pune-based Sana Merchant who receives multiple orders everyday only by word of mouth and has also ventured into other bakery items. "Eventually, with more liquidity, I could invest in additional items such as boxes, bakery decors, etc." she says.

Besides making and selling, it's the demand for teaching how to bake and cook that's also on the rise and many passionate individuals have turned this around as well. It is probably one of the best ways to present yourself

as a brand and establish your name in the industry as a chef, food writer, cookbook author, cooking show host, food blogger, etc. Sanjeev Kapoor, Nita Mehta, Ranveer Brar, Saransh Goila are some of the names that rule the roost.

Event managers and service providers

One of the most popular start-up ventures is event management and as an extension to that - wedding planning. The foremost requirement of this industry is networking and managing. Online networking and marketing through social media apps, websites, event listing portals have increased the potential of this industry and also the competition. The clientele has to be built carefully as it is service-oriented. Event managers and wedding planners are mostly outdoors scouting for venues, meeting sponsors, pitching to clients, arranging vendors for different parts of the event or wedding. The cost to start the business is almost negligible as it only needs a sharp, creative mind-good with good social and managerial skills and marketing strategy. Wedding planners especially are always in demand and the biggest investment for a consultancy is an impressive website showcasing previously-arranged weddings, memorable photo-shoots, testimonials, etc.

Service providers are a new segment in the Indian small trading and small businesses segment. Day-care services for children are much sought after. However, similar services for pets, elderly and the disabled are slowly getting popular. Working couples are always looking for facilities where their loved ones can stay while they are away at work --- a niche need for urban life and nuclear families. Such facilities need trained care-givers and properly supervised staff and premises.

India is presently the world's second-largest telecommunications market with a formidable subscriber base of 1.20 billion people. Increased mobile phone penetration of the scale translates to consumers subscribing to mobile services, data services, etc. Consequently, many new 'recharge shops' that are primarily agencies have cropped up, both in urban and rural India, to provide services to mobile phone users. The 'agency' is a profitable venture given the ever-growing number of subscribers and requires only an investment in space. Many people even carry out the agency work from the confines of their homes.

Small businesses form the backbone of our economy and our society. With supportive regulatory machinery and reach of internet in homes, many more are coming up everyday touching all aspects of our lives. And, they're here to stay.

Kiran Raut works with DraftCraft International as a Trade Laws Activist and researches on industry trends and legal issues. She is presently working on a paper dealing with Perception and Trade.

Media start-ups grow in sync with net access

*The digital media journalism start-ups in India are aiming to seize the huge opportunity represented by explosive growth in internet use across the country in recent years, writes **Renuka Goel**.*



The rise of internet and social media has forced many print media entities to adopt digital formats

Over the last decade, the traditional media has been hit like never before. With soaring costs of production, distribution and other associated functions of the industry, print media was hit the worst. Viable and cost-effective options like digital media and online entities only hastened the process. It was only inevitable for traditional media entities to shed their sluggish avatars and adopt digital miens.

It was the rise of mobiles and internet in India that kick-started a surge of digital start-ups curating and covering news on social media and mobile apps. According to Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism, Indian news start-ups have been prioritising mobile-optimised websites and rightly so. To boost their India presence, lofty brands such as *Buzz-Feed*, *Quartz*, and *The Huffington Post* too began to make their local presence felt. And, in keeping with the trend, many Western media brands have been forming partnerships with Indian media players too. *The Quint*, for instance, has partnered with Bloomberg and created an entity called *BloombergQuint*.

With the internet in India growing at a rate of 40 per cent year-on-year and the rest of the world tapering off at

a paltry nine per cent growth, the going is indeed incredible for India and particularly so, its media startups.

In order to attract overseas players, the government is considering relaxing foreign direct investment (FDI) norms in several sectors, including single-brand retail trading and digital media. Also, the Union government is looking at a clarification on applicability of FDI policy in the digital media sector. This is needed as the present FDI policy is mum on the fast-growing digital media segment.

Through the government approved route, in all, 26 per cent FDI is allowed in the print media sector. Also, in broadcasting content services, 49 percent FDI is permitted through government approved route.

FDI is hugely useful in improving the nation's balance of payments situation and strengthens the rupee value against other currencies, especially the US dollar. India possesses the fastest growth in the number of internet users in the world, and a diverse legacy of news media sector in both print and broadcast.

(continued of page 30...)



ON A SWEET TRAIL IN MISHTI LAND

Besides the staple rosogolla, sandesh and mishti doi, Kolkata is well-known for its array of desserts that come in a variety of shapes, sizes, textures, colours and flavours. Even as the old ones sustain, new delicacies have evolved, with the traditional sandesh getting a great deal of makeover.

Text & Photographs : Manjira Majumdar



**The newly opened Bangla Mishti Hub offers a variety of sweets under one roof (above);
Sitabhog resembling rice and chana pulao (right)**

S ometime back, the West Bengal Tourism Corporation came up with the tagline, “Welcome to Bengal, the sweetest part of India”, with Shah Rukh Khan as its brand ambassador. Perhaps the idea behind this was to promote its cuisine alongside, known for its array of desserts, or *mishti*.

One can avail of a number of sweet trail walks and customised tour packages to visit places where a particular *mishti* has its origin. The city of Kolkata, however, ultimately showcases a variety of sweets through innumerable *halwai* or confectionary and the latest addition to this is the Mishti Hub set up at Eco Park in Rajarhat, a new township flourishing on the eastern part of the city. Under one roof a variety of specialities of various sweet confectionaries are on offer here.

Bengali sweets are not just about *rosogolla*, *sandesh* and *mishti doi* (sweet curd). These are the staple made of cottage cheese or *chhana*, a trick learnt from the



Portuguese. Hybridised into such an extent that we have had strawberry and kiwi flavoured *sandesh* to even cocoa flavoured ones. The slightly chocolate flavoured *sandesh* is today fused with so much chocolate that it is hard to tell it from a real chocolate. We will come to why this happened. In addition, we have tarts which are pastry crusts holding certain traditional sweets which are baked instead of fried or steamed. Not to mention a certain brand that has perfected the *sandesh soufflé*.

The origins of Bengal sweets

But start at the beginning we must. In ancient texts, we have a mention of milk based desserts but it was not until Bengal learnt the art of making *chhana*, that is, curdling milk with an acidic agent like lemon and separating the milk solids that *chhana*-based sweets emerged; a positive outcome of Portuguese influence. The *khoya/kheer* or thickened or dried milk-based sweets are more popular elsewhere in the country; namely the north.

Bengal too has its range of *khoya/kheer* based sweets. In fact there are broadly four categories of sweets in this state. In addition to *chhana*-based sweets, there is '*kheerer mishti*' or sweets made with *kheer*; the third category would be variants of north Indian sweets, some of which

are derivatives of Turkish and Iranian delights such as *balushahi*, *sohnpapri*, *gulab jamun* to name a few.

Fourth, the local ethnic communities have added their touch with *besan* or *moog ka laddoo*, *barfi* and even a seasonal winter delight *ghewar*, very popular in Rajasthan. Chains of *halwai* ending with, Ram such as *Ganguram*, *Haldiram*, *Bhikaram*, *Bancharam* dot the cityscape, and stock a mix of sweets, in addition to savouries. However, even if some sweets of Bengal may have its origins outside the state, a whole lot of shops in North India go by the name of Bengal Sweets. On the other hand, the creative *moira/modak/halwai* or sweetmeat maker in Bengal, under the patronage of several rulers, perfected the art of sweet making. They innovated and tweaked several styles to come up with some presentations and even if these are not original per se, they are definitely unique to this region.

The sweet spongy *rosogolla*, made with *chhana*, is said to have been a discovery of Nobin Chandra Das, a famous sweetmeat-maker in the 19th century at his north Kolkata residence. He boiled the cheesy balls in sugary syrup to give us this sweet, now made popular by the K.C Das chain of shops, named after his son. Now *rosogolla* comes in all sorts of flavours – strawberry, pineapple and its bigger cousin is the pale yellow *rajbhog*, meaning fit for the kings.





Baked mihidana tart

In 2016, the WB government applied for the Geographical Identification (GI) tag for the *rosogolla* and a bitter battle was waged over the tag by Odisha government, which claimed the sweet to have originated much earlier in the latter state. But ultimately, WB received the GI tag because it was established that the sweet from Orissa was different in colour, texture and somewhat taste.

Red and black in colour

Likewise what is *gulab jamun* (plum) in most other states is known as *pantua* in Bengal. Reddish brown in colour, it is deep fried but the filling is again made of *channa*, sometimes mixed with semolina and flour, instead of *khoya*. Rose water and cardamom are added to the filling and when fried to a deep black, it assumes the name of *kalojam* – or black *jamun*. The *channa bora* – a speciality of Murshidabad district is like the *rosogulla* inside and very crusty black *pantua* outside!

The story behind the *pantua*, served in weddings, is that it is also known as the 'ledikeni'. Confectioner Bhim Chandra Nag, another famous eponymous sweetshop in north Kolkata, renamed the *pantua*, Lady Canning on the occasion of the birthday of Lady Charlotte Canning, wife of the Governor General of India, Charles Canning. Over time, Lady Canning was corrupted to 'ledikeni'.



Sweet samosa or shingara

Similar in colour – that is, reddish on the outer side – is the bolster-shaped *lyangcha* or *lengcha* of Bardhaman district, which is made up of flour and milk powder and soaked in syrup for a longer time to give it a melt-in-the-mouth quality. Visitors to Shantiniketan prefer going by road so they can stop at Shaktigarh known for its *lyangcha* hub, along the way. There are rows of shops, each claiming to offer the best! There are different variants of this type of red fried sweets called, *nikhuti*, popular in Nadia district; the diamond-shaped *chitrakoot* is another.

Gradual make-over

It was a matter of time before traditional sweets received a make-over in the state. The sweets making industry that falls under cottage industry is plagued by problems, which are quintessential to several such small scale industries: labour, raw materials and lack of demand of traditional sweets in place of western desserts served at wedding and celebrations. As the wedding dinners went international, so did the desserts. In several weddings, there is multi-cuisine on offer these days, with desserts from several countries as well.

Lyangcha or lengcha of Bardhaman district (above)
Sandesh hidden in chocolates (below)



With a proliferation of cakes, pastries, patties, sandwiches, pizzas and burger shops, the urban food habits have long been changing. The first noticeable signs were that the decrepit shops selling sweets and *samosa*, known locally as *shingara* started getting a smart look. Various sweet shops switched to the decor of a western cake shop, with the wares displayed attractively. Often, traditional and 'fusion' sweets share space with cupcakes!

From all the sweets, the *sandesh* has received a great deal of makeover. There is a range of *sandesh* already existing depending on the area of its origin. In winter, when date palm jaggery or *gur* is in abundance, the 'nolen gurer sandesh' which is flavoured with this *gur* flood the market. Just like the very rustic Joynagar (in South 24-parganas district) *moya*, a sweet made with this jaggery and flattened rice or *khoi*, becomes a seasonal delicacy.

The best known date palm *sandesh* is the *jolbhora* (water-filled) *taalsansh*, which replicates the sugar palm fruit known as *taalshansh* in Bengal region. A thin skin, which is to be peeled off, reveals a fleshy jelly part, while the fruit holds watery fluid inside.



Sandesh hidden in chocolates



Various moulds are used to craft sandesh into different shapes



The white rosogollas (above)

Chocolate sandesh topped with colourful gems (right)

The *sandesh* is moulded in the shape of this fruit and a hole is made in the centre to hold the liquid *gur*, before it is sealed. It is best eaten fresh for the *gur* subsequently dries and is comparable to liqueur chocolates. Perhaps the art was learnt from the French who once ruled Chandanagore in Hooghly district, which is particularly noted for this delicacy. Similar to chocolates, various moulds are used to craft sandesh into various shapes – fish (earlier part of the wedding cuisine as it is a symbol of fertility); pots, flowers, leaves, and even small figures of bride and groom in traditional wedding attire! But now these shapes have become rare and *sandesh* comes topped with a tiniest slice of kiwi fruit or lime, when not dry fruits.

Kheer kadamba (*kadamba* is a round flower with white spiky petals) is another exotic Bengali sweet consisting of grated *khoya* and powdered sugar and this ball-shaped sweet comes in two layers. *Lobongo* (*laung* or clove) *lotika* is shaped to resemble a tiny envelope, which is then sealed with a single clove. The envelope is like a flour pastry but deep fried in *ghee* and the filling comprises *khoya*, grated coconut, raisins, cardamom and sometimes, with a touch of nutmeg.



Seasonal and festive fare

Bengalis as a rule have a sweet palate, even the curd served here is sweet and *mishti doi* and *rabri* are huge in their popularity. But the white rice lookalike *sitabhog* takes the cake! *Sitabhog* and *mihidana* resemble fluffy rice grains, the former white in colour and the latter with a yellowish tinge resembling a *pulao*. The *sitabhog*, made with *chhana* and powdered rice, is fried in *ghee* and soaked in sugar syrup. When coloured yellow, it is known as *chanar pulao*. The *mihidana*, its faithful companion, is made by mixing rice powder (usually *Gobindo Bhog*, or even *Kamini Bhog*) with *besan* and saffron. The mix is then fried in piping hot *ghee* through a large ladle with holes.

So many sweets are disguised as savouries. Thus, visitors will discover *kheerer shingara* when not stumbling upon the pale green *patal mishti* (the vegetable gourd *parwal* boiled and soaked in syrup holding a *channa* filling and decorated with silver foil). *Paan* shaped betel leaf lookalike *sandesh* is available selectively.



Potal or parwal sandesh



Strawberry flavoured pink rosogolla



Monda, made with coconut and jaggery is speciality of Bhardhaman

Shorbhaja is a delicacy made with milk cream and fried. It is a local speciality of Krisnanagore in Nadia district known as the birthplace of Shri Chaitnaya, and the Vaishnav cult. Therefore milk and milk products are very popular here and non-vegetarian items are often frowned upon.

Sitabhog, mihidana, malai chom chom, steamed *mishti doi* are again very typical of the various regions or districts; from the south to the north. A random sampling will be *monda*, made with coconut and *gur*, a speciality of Bardhaman, to *kachagolla* of Shantipur, again located in Nadia district, known for its handloom saris and milk-based sweets. The city shops have come up with new names for old sweets such as *Abar Khabo* (will eat again); Paradise, Rainbow (streaked with various colours), et al.

There has been a marked change in dietary habits of the younger generation. Fast food synonymous with junk food is a quick fix of snacks for the younger generation. No longer are lunch boxes packed with homemade savouries and sweets. For a range of mishti used to be also prepared at home and typically during festive times.



Kalo Jaam



Traditional sandesh flavoured with gur (jaggery)

But newer trends and innovation in mishti-making is taking over. The butterscotch *sandesh* has been edged out by various *sandesh* hiding timidly inside solid chocolates, white and dark. *Mihidana* in small portions are baked and held inside pastry crusts. And baked *rosogolla* and *sandesh* are huge hits at weddings.

So take your pick. Here are some broad seasonal and festive specialities. During Shivaratri and Doljatra (Holi) *kalo jam* and *kheerer chop* are popular; Saraswati puja: *tilkodombo* (white *kadam* flower looking garnished with sesame seeds) is offered as *prashad*; Sonkranti: *pathisapta* (crepe), *dudh puli* and *pithe*; Lakshmi and Kali puja: *sitabhog*, *jolbhora*, *darbesh*, *malai chop*; Durga puja: all types along with *naru* (made with coconut therefore auspicious); Janmashtami: sweet items made from *taal* (another variety of sugar palm fruit). These are *taal bora*, *taal kheer* to name a couple; Rakhi Bandhan: *boondiya*; Rathayatra: dried *khaja*, *jilipi* or *jalebi*; Poila Boishakh or Bengali New Year when Lord Ganesha is evoked: *mihidana laddoo* and *modak*,

with its typical flour coating. And when sons-in-law are feted, the table groans with not only a number of vegetarian and non-vegetarian items, but also a platter of the best sweets available.

Bengali sweets are all-encompassing, smacking of inclusivity and carrying a tag of rich heritage. The patronage of past rulers combined with foreign influences are made perfect with local, refined sensibilities.



Having worked as a full-time journalist, Manjira Majumdar today is an independent journalist combining writing with part-time college teaching and media advocacy. She is also the author of 3 children's books: *Ten of Us*, *The Story of Anjana* and *Ghost Stories from Bengal & Beyond*.

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“My passion is to orient people to artistic cinema. I get to do this by being on the jury and evaluating films.”

Blessed with an infectious smile, Bijaya nee Dolly Jena has climbed rapidly as a veteran actress, producer, director, script writer and juror at many national and international fests. She served on the Governing Council of FTII from 1992 to 1995.

Bijaya Jena in a tete-a-tete with A. Radhakrishnan.

Tell me about your journey as actress, director, film juror, etc.

I was born in Cuttack, Odisha, in a family of aristocrats and academicians, the youngest of three children. After school, I joined FTII, Pune for a two-year acting course, despite parental opposition.

My debut film, *Jagga Balia* in Oriya language won me the state award for best actress. Another Oriya film, *Hakim Babu* also got the National Award for Best Film.

I later met the legendary film maker Kamal Amrohi who liked my voice and face and wanted to sign me for the lead role for his script *Kumayun Tees Mile*, but I did not agree to an exclusive contract. So he created a fictitious role, especially for me in his historical magnum opus *Razia Sultan*, which was already on the floors and casting had been done. Though the film flopped, many noticed my character, Laila, but as I was in Odisha, a few interested directors could not contact me.

I also did Hindi television serials like *Ek Kahani*, *Vikram Betaal*, *Param Veer Chakra* and TV plays like Gogol's *Inspector General*, Mahesh Elkunchwar's *Aks Aur Aina* and Hindi films include K.A. Abbas's *The Naxalites*, and Ketan Mehta's *Holi*. I also appeared in Ismail Merchant's British film *The Deceivers*, directed by Nicholas Meyer.

I faced the scourge of the casting couch in Bollywood, and most art film makers like Shyam Benegal, Govind Nihalani and few others had their own muses, so I just could not break into their coterie. I therefore yearned to produce a low



budget film with myself in the lead role.

I then signed one of the best script writers of India, Bimal Dutt (National award winner for his film *Kasturi*). I assisted him on the script and translated his dialogues into Odia which helped me immensely understand the script writing process. I was also exposed to his private library which had all the works of Tagore, Tolstoy, Camus, Sartre, Kafka, Brecht, Zola, Chekov, Hugo, Dostoyevsky, Turgenev, Flaubert, et al.

As a young producer with very little resources, by the time I got the Odia state fund, Bimalda was ailing and did not want to do a low budget film outdoors. He suggested that I myself direct the film, as I had understood his script very well and was exposed to international cinema.

So, I debuted as a director and made my first Odia film *Tara* in 1992, a sensitive study of a woman's betrayal and disillusionment, which went on to receive a national award for best director. I was also nominated for the best actress in India and also at The Women's Film Festival in France.

My second directorial venture was *Abhaas* (Prologue) in Hindi, in 1997, a poetic parable and a realist drama in rural India, where I had the honour of having Hungarian maestro Istval Gaan as my script advisor. Earlier, I was to produce a film titled *Konark* in 1984, and had approached Feroz Khan's assistant Wasi Khan to direct it, but the film was eventually shelved.

I then took a sabbatical, first to raise my daughter and write few scripts, and then another to look after my ailing mother who passed away in 2007.

Why the change in name from Dolly to Bijaya?

My pet name is Dolly and passport name is Bijaya. Kamal Amrohi thought Dolly Jena sounded like Gina Lollobrigida and suggested that name for *Razia Sultan*. But when I directed *Tara*, I thought people would take me more seriously as Bijaya Jena, as Dolly sounded too dumb. Mira Nair in fact saw a video of my TV play *Aks Aur Aina* and thought I was too glamorous to play the role of a poor prostitute in Salaam Bombay.

What makes a good film?

Film is a synthesis of many art forms. It has to have all the aspects properly like storytelling, visuals, sound and performances. In our Natya Shastra, we learn all about the elements.

What makes a good actor?

When you act and people believe that you are that character and forget your real identity.

What makes a good director?

A director is like the captain of a ship who has to oversee all the aspects of film making, and understand the social context of the story and its history to connect with the audience.

What are the benefits of film festivals?

I had gone to Cannes in 2006 to pitch my English film and gave the DVD of my film *Abhaas* to Farabi Foundation, Iran for sale. They saw the film, loved it but could not buy it because its content included seduction and abortion. Instead, they invited me as juror for the international competition in their main film festival, along with noted Majid Majid.

What do you feel about being a juror?

This country has 3-4 good film critics while the rest have merely a command over the language, but not cinema. The older critics understand cinema technique of the 50s. That's why we can never make films for Cannes or Oscar.

My passion is to orient people to artistic cinema. I get to do this by being on the jury and evaluating films. I do take up a juror assignment only if the festival is of some international standard. I recommend and analyse films to cinephiles. As a juror, I can contribute to artistic cinema by recognising them.

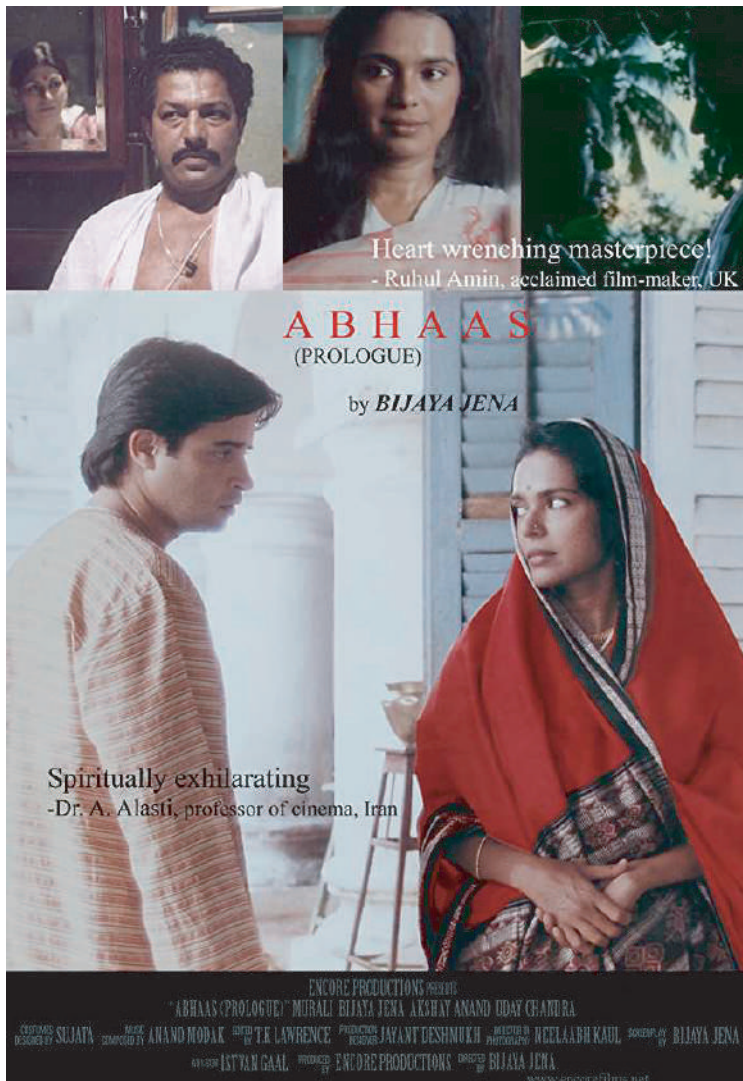
The films we picked up in Kolkata are brilliant films. The best film award we gave to a Guatemala film *The Weeping Woman*, has legend combined with magic realism and current politics. The best director award went to a Czech film *The Painted Bird*, adapted from a famous novel. The violence used here is in an artistic manner depicting the violence of the war and its effects on people.

Which are the film festivals you have been a juror at?

I have done jury duty at the Fajr Film Festival, Iran in 2007, Kish International Film Festival, Iran in 2011, Roshd International Film Festival, 2012, Golden Apricot Film Festival in 2015, Indian Panorama, Goa in 2015, Aswan International Women's Film Festival, Egypt, 2018, the Dhaka International Film Festival in 2018 and the 25th Kolkata International Film Festival.

What qualities should a juror possess?

I feel an ideal juror should be one who understands all the aspects of film making such as dramaturgy, performance, painting, sound which surrounds us and the silence, and can evaluate a film. Exposure to international cinema is very important as cinema as an art form evolved in Europe.



What is it like to serve on a film festival jury? Is there an emotional build up and perceptual exhaustion? Do you have to see all the movies entered? How do you then enjoy the festival?

It's good if one has experience as a juror. Polanski said 'your award is as good as the jury.' You can't have a maker who makes only gangster films, evaluating a film like the Marathi film *Court*. Yes, it is an onerous task and hard work to watch a minimum of 3 to 4 films or even more a day, stretching into 6 or 7 hours. The festivals shortlist 15-20 films from the submission of 50-100 films they receive.

When you are on the jury, it's difficult to find personal time, but then if you love cinema and want to interact with the makers from different parts of the world in the evening, then you will enjoy it.

Are jurors buddies? Do they acknowledge and respect diversity. What about ego hassles?

It depends, but then most members take their job seriously and work towards a common goal to award the best film. There may be one or two members who may have different views but then democracy works. The Chairperson convinces you sometimes with his experienced view and you may rethink. Ego hassles can come up, but then voting helps. A good jury or evaluator is important for the growth of any art form.

As a jury member, do you become a mentor, a friend or even a collaborator on a future project?

Yes, sometimes, one discovers a talent and recommends them to other film festivals. I met Hungarian maestro Istvan Gaal at the Delhi film festival and discussed cinema. Many years later when he visited FTII as a guest professor, he enquired about me and advised me on the script of my film *Abhaas*. Right now my film *Abhaas* is restored and people abroad are loving it.

What is the basic difference between film festival jury in India and abroad?

Comparatively, we have to be little liberal while judging Indian films. Indians are influenced by escapist films with Bollywood parameters and it's difficult for them to make anything different. Now with the internet, the makers and audience are oriented to appreciate good content without songs.

Do only good films make it to the festivals? Do films of unknown makers make it too?

Yes, there are many festivals like Cannes, Berlin, Venice, and Taliinn who have a section dedicated to first films. If your film gets an award, then you get it distributed like it did for Mira Nair, Murali Nair, and Ritesh Batra at Cannes.



Bijaya Jena in one of her films

Which film festivals have earned the most reputation? Why?

Cannes, Berlin, Venice have got their reputation by getting high quality films and expert jury, besides a good market place and attendance by a good press. The Kolkata Film Festival has an award money of 51 lakhs, the highest in the world for the international competition section, but did not have the foreign press presence at all this year.

How good a forum is the film festival for the film, filmmaker and distributor?

Some festivals help in recognising the work of a good filmmaker. For instance, the career of an artiste like Satyajit Ray was appreciated in Cannes and Venice or else we would never have had his works. Appreciation encourages an artiste.

What are your future plans?

I am working on a low budget film with Neeraj Kabi and myself in Odisha about roots, culture, migration, and also a very big budget English film set in the backdrop of Goa liberation with Oscar winners.



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

Media start-ups grow in sync with net access

(continued from page 16...)

Contentious issues

For the last decade, India has been battling with concerns that certain news media outlets are compromised by their pursuit of short-term profit combined by weak professional ethics, external pressures and conflicts of interest related to their owners' other business and political activities.

This has also contributed widely to the slump in readership of print models and the current surge in digital media where apart from the speed at which news is delivered, the takeaways are higher. There is a lot of involvement and potential to exercise choice by way of endorsing or de-bunking reports available across the online fora.

Media start-ups in India aim to build on the opportunity afforded by rapid growth in internet use while navigating between news media competitors and international technology companies increasingly expand their online activities, and on the other hand the economic, professional, political and publisher-linked pressures most journalists in India have to contend with.

Today, digital online entities compare with the reach and editorial prowess of leading legacy news media like the Times of India, NDTV or Dainik Bhaskar, which have been swiftly losing credibility owing to their political stance and posturing that is for all to see.

However, in India, as elsewhere, the established media continue to dominate digital news provision and employ the vast majority of journalists. Yet the scope for the fringe and the few to put their views down in digital hemisphere is huge. Now, just about anyone can start a blog or a website and write news, views or whatever may be the case and publicise it. Why, they can even avail advertising support for their content either through the publishing platform itself, through Google AdSense or other monetising methods.

The digital media journalism start-ups in India are aiming to seize the huge opportunity represented by explosive growth in internet use across the country in recent years. In 2015, India overtook the United States and became the second largest internet market in the world in terms of number of users, second only to China.

At the end of 2014, an industry association estimated India would reach 400 million internet users by the end of 2017. According to Internet and Mobile Association of India (IAMAI), that figure was reached a year later by December. IMAI figures indicate that, in India, about 30 per cent are internet users well under the global average of

over 40 per cent and pervasive and persistent poverty means that India continues to have a deep digital divide between the poor and the rich, and between rural and urban areas. Internet use in major metropolitan areas is estimated to be well over 50 per cent whereas the figure is closer to 10 per cent in many rural areas.

Yet, the digital growth in the last few years has been astonishing. Cheaper smart-phones are increasingly found even in very poor rural areas. In the 15-year period, from 1995 to 2010, internet use in India grew from nearly a naught to a mere eight per cent, even as global access reached 30 per cent. Yet, from 2011 to 2015, the Indian figure grew to over 30 per cent, the bulk of it being from 2014 and 2015.

In absolute numbers, it took 15 years to get the first 100 million Indians online, three more years to reach 200 million, one more year to reach 300 million, and then another year to reach 400 million.

Driven by the spread of mobile internet access, the growth in internet use in India has been phenomenal. While in 2012, a third of internet users in India were mobile users, by 2015, according to IMAI estimates, the figure is more than 60 per cent and most of these being mobile-only users. The Indian internet environment is far more mobile-centred than that of high-income democracies, where 80 per cent to 90 per cent of internet users have both desktop access at home and mobile access via their phone. In 2015, in India, almost two-thirds of its internet users were estimated to be mobile traffic and most of it mostly 2G and 3G access.

Major telecommunication providers have been investing in expanding their infrastructure to provide better access and apart from the government's initiatives, and large international media players like Facebook and Google have each presented their own initiatives to get more Indians online.

Media start-ups now include a flurry of entities both private and public, self-financed and crowd-funded, and continue to grow by the second. It's only a matter of time before they completely offset the influence exerted by traditional media houses which have, on their part, swiftly changed tracks from print to online and jumped on the digital bandwagon lest they be left behind.

Renuka Goel works with DraftCraft International as a Media Researcher and writes mostly on issues affecting the Fourth Estate. She likes reading contrarian literature and analysing sources of news.

Three Malayalam films on elder abuse

Shoma A. Chatterji reviews three Malayalam films which expose the shocking ritual of killing old parents, when children feel the latter are a burden. All three films juxtapose the true beauty of nature against the brutal nature of human beings.



M.S. Baaskar who portrays the strong protagonist Munuswami in Jalasamadhi

In the last two years, three Malayalam films have thrown up three shocking realities of elder abuse in some pockets of Tamil Nadu.

Two of these films, namely, *Jalasamadhi* (Death By Water) directed by Venu Nair and *Pani* (Fever) directed by Santhosh Mandoor, underline the killing of old parents by their adult children. This is murder that is kind of institutionalised under the pretence of a ritual custom everyone knows about, but no one complains to the police.

The third film *Idam* (Abode), the directorial debut of Jaya Jose Raj is different, but it also deals with the subject of killing a parent who refuses to submit to threats by her adult sons to sell off her house and property and hand over the proceeds to the sons.

The films were screened at the recently concluded Kolkata International Film Festival, 2019. The first two films are based on the practice of *Thalaikoothal* or “death by water.” The offenders choose from a range of 26 different methods to kill. The movie is based on Sethu’s novel *Adayalangal*, dealing with the practice of killing

elders in the family when they become a liability.

Jalasamadhi

The film by Venu Nair, based on the little-known practice of *Thalaikoothal* (senicide), is set in a fictional village in the Kerala-Tamil Nadu border. Senicide is also practised in some other parts of the world. In Japan, for instance, it is known as *ubasute*. Those who practice it or back it call it “voluntary euthanasia” but it is neither “voluntary” nor “euthanasia” because whether the old parent wants to die or not or is terminally ill or not or is in pain or not, is not considered at all. “When the most senior person in the family becomes a financial liability, they are killed by their family members. Sometimes it is carried out after making the person unconscious. Sometimes it’s forced,” explains Venu.

“*Jalasamadhi* was shot in a small colony of Tamil-speaking people in the interiors of Karuvakulam (26 km away from Kumily, Idukki district of Kerala). There are just 100-odd houses, a lake and a temple. The

colony is surrounded by forests on all sides. It is an isolated place and suited the atmosphere we wanted to create in the film,” adds Venu.

The film’s shocking exposition rests almost entirely on the shoulders of M. S. Baaskar who portrays the strong protagonist Munuswami whose wife and wayward son want him out of the way, so that the son can get the father’s job in the sugar factory which is the rule set down by the newly established sugar factory.

“*Jalasamadhi* focusses on the inhuman attitude adopted by the people towards the older generation in general. Respecting one’s elders is a part of Indian culture. However, that is fast changing. One reads about senior citizens being abandoned due to various reasons, especially when the family experiences a financial crunch. Even children are being abandoned on the streets; mothers killing their children ... This ‘throwaway’ culture is one that is influenced by the rise of consumerism. I am cautioning against this throwaway culture that gripped human beings,” sums up Venu.



A scene from Pani directed by Santhosh Mandoor

Pani

The second film Pani (Fever) directed by Santhosh Mandoor was screened at the International Film Festival in Kerala last year. The story follows the journey of Raghavan, a septuagenarian who at an early age after marriage relocated from Palak-

kad, a district in Kerala with his wife Janaki, to a lesser known barren hillside village on the outskirts of Madurai in Tamil Nadu. He loves his small forest of trees, fruits and plants, as if they are his own children and teaches his school-going grand-daughter about the utility of plants. He is constantly disturbed after seeing his

sick friend being ritually killed by his own son, who openly says that he is fed up of taking care of his father. Another cancer-ridden mother who is given shelter by Raghavan's wife, walks away in fear and is never found. She was constantly abused by her children for 'refusing to die'.

Raghavan's son who works in a stone blasting quarry is lured by his boss to persuade his father to sell the forest. The father refuses but when he leaves to visit his daughter, the son forces his mother to undergo the severe oil bath till she gets fever followed by forced feeding of tender coconut water. In her unconscious state, he steals the documents of their land and places her thumb impression on it. When he finds she does not die, he forces milk into her mouth. When the father returns and finds that his wife is still breathing, he carries her in his arms and walks into the forest he has created himself. He walks away in the midst of the huge bulldozer reducing his forest to stone and dust. M. R. Gopakumar gives a stunning performance as Raghavan.

(continued on page 34...)

WHO AM I?

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



Earth...



Under the vast sky

'Constellations', a brilliantly crafted play that raises philosophical questions about free will was recently staged at the NCPA, as part of its golden jubilee celebrations.

Prof. Avinash Kolhe reviews the play.



A still from the play

The National Centre for Performing Arts (NCPA), a Mumbai-based cultural body engaged in promoting art and culture, is celebrating its golden jubilee year. As a part of its celebrations, it has organised various outstanding events, including some excellent plays. One such play *Constellations* directed by Bruce Guthrie and written by Nick Payne was staged in the last week of November.

The young British playwright Nick Payne has written plays like 'If there is I haven't found it yet' in 2008 and 'Wanderlust' in 2010. *Constellations* won him accolades at globally. Very recently, the director of *Constellations* Mr. Bruce Guthrie has taken over as the Head of Theatre and Films at the NCPA. This seems to be his first offering to the connoisseurs of theatre in Mumbai.

As viewers walked into the Experimental Theatre of NCPA complex for the play, they were treated to the sight of bulbs gently hanging from the roof, an obvious

metaphor for the stars and our universe. The idea perhaps was to drive home the point that the theme which was going to soon unfold on stage has an universal appeal.

The play is about Roland (Jim Sarbh), a beekeeper and Marianne (Mansi Multani), a cosmologist who meet at a barbeque and fall in love. The play then takes on philosophical tones about the possibilities of life, and what happens or does not happen when one makes a choice, and the consequences of that choice. Marianne often waxes poetic about cosmology, quantum mechanics and yes, string theory too. Once the couple moves in together, the age-old issue of fidelity crops up that finally leads to their separation. Later, they bump into each other at a ballroom dancing class and expectedly resume their relationship and end up marrying each other. In due course, Marianne comes to know that she has a tumour in her frontal lobe and has only a year to live. She finally decides to seek assistance with Rolland's support. The play ends with few flashbacks in which Roland and

Marianne revive their relationship. The play has multiple narratives taking place on stage, and actors Jim and Mansi switch moods effortlessly. The play raises philosophical questions about free will. Is there a free will or are we playing a pre-determined plot in this universe?

At first, the play may appear to be a run-of-the-mill story about man-woman relationship, but goes on to address the unresolved issues about free will of human beings. The 70-minute play, leaves the audience feeling that they are alone in this vast and perhaps, cruel universe. This is also perhaps the reason why Roland and Marianne cling to each other despite the fact that they do not want to see each other's face. Though they are with each other, they merrily cheat on each other. This makes them so real, and the audience ends up accepting them for what they are.

Constellations is a wonderfully crafted play that seriously employs other dramatic elements like dialogue, costume, lighting and set design. A special mention of light

design by Akshay Khubchandani has to be made, as it leaves the audience spell-bound. The way the bulbs hang on the stage all through the play, glow bright and dim as the situation demands, add to the drama. The set design by Andrzej Goulding is stunning. The two actors Jim and

Mansi are full of energy and effortlessly switch moods, lending credibility to their roles. And last, but not the least, the way director Bruce Guthrie has assembled all the dramatic elements to mount this play makes it truly exceptional and worth watching.



Prof. Avinash Kolhe retired as Associate Professor in Political Science from D.G. Ruparel College,

Mumbai.

Three Malayalam films on elder abuse



Seema Biswas as the 70-year-old widow Bhanu in Idam

(continued from page 32...)

Pani is Mandoor's debut feature film which received him the Special Jury mention for direction at the Kerala State Film Awards 2019.

Idam

Idam (Abode) is the first feature film of Jaya Jose Raj where he is the script writer, director and producer. He is an alumnus of Film and Television Institute of India (FTII), Pune, in screenplay writing.

Idam is about a 70-year-old widow, Bhanu, (Seema Biswas) who, after her husband's death, raises her two sons all by herself. She now lives alone in the ancestral bungalow with a huge garden filled with fruits, vegetables and flowers which she

looks after with the help of an old retinue. Her two sons live in the city but the younger one who is a good-for-nothing, often visits to ask for money and even stoops to stealing from the home. Bhanu is on the verge of being sent to an old age home. "What makes this mother different is that instead of wilting on hearing this news, she takes a decision that shocks all of them. It is meant to be a plan to test her sons' love for her. Whether she succeeds or not is the story," says Seema Biswas who won the Best Actress Award at the Ottawa India Film Festival in Canada in June.

The two sons keep forcing her to sell the entire property and divide the proceeds between the two brothers, but she staunchly stands her ground and refuses to bend. The younger son says that his only child has cancer but

Bhanu thinks it is a ploy to extract money from her. They hatch a plan to do away with her. When the sons feel the answer to her living alone is to put her in an old-age home, she retorts with a 'shocking' idea. She says she will marry again to continue living in the ancestral house.

The sons come to the ancestral home with their families under the ploy of celebrating Bhanu's 70th birthday. Their real purpose is to mix poison in one of the dishes Bhanu has prepared for the feast. What happens in the end is a strange twist in the tale.

The very enlightening undercurrent in all three films is the role nature, greenery, forests, the sky and water play in them. This juxtaposes the true beauty of nature against the brutal and cold-blooded nature of human beings who are prepared to murder their old parents when they feel the latter are a burden. The greenery and the water bodies also add to the visual beauty of these films set against stories of human's cruelty against fellow humans.



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.

We Came Before You and Other Poems

It goes without saying that our ancients thought of animals, as also ecology, as something distinctive: to feel part of, love and revere, and not insatiably exploit. Their profound respect for all living beings was founded on simple logic, not any fixed doctrine. What's more, they directed their energies to maintain that delicate, natural balance.

The trouble in our troubled-world today is our dogged misconception about the natural world, especially its animal inhabitants. Add to this ecological (im)balance, and there emerges a new perspective – the 'unsteady' state of nature.

Venkatesh Govindarajan's anthology of poems 'We Came Before You and Other Poems' – 31 in all, with subject illustrations by the author – details the idea of natural sustainability and its scientific basis. It highlights the equation that gave rise to the growth of a given population under constant conditions, starting with a small number of organisms and multiplying to a higher limit. It recounts how human greed has led to a gloomy case of a paradise lost, including the slipping fortunes of certain animals, which are yet to rebound to their 'pre-crash' levels, following human intervention. Questions – for example, 'what do we hope to protect?' or 'what is nature per se?' – as Govindarajan puts it – are but paradoxes of animal as also human (co)existence.

The author's analysis of this woeful, alarming crisis is simple, also insightful — no matter how 'green' our thumb, or technological advantage, the Homo sapiens cannot 'rejig' animal life, yet they can destroy it at the drop of a thought, thanks to excessive greed, selfishness, insensitivity, and so on. He argues that the best thing each of us could do is manage and usher in

the recurrence of desirable, natural conditions — this isn't, of course, easy, but isn't impossible too.

Author:
Venkatesh Govindarajan;

Format: E-pub, Lulu

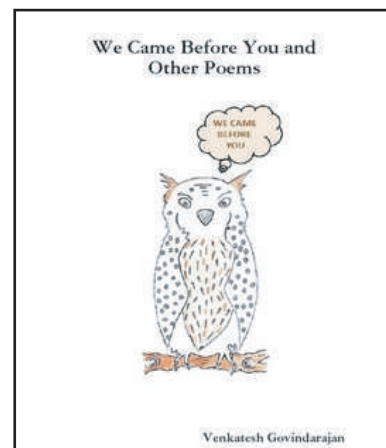
Price: US\$10.00

Govindarajan's poems speak of our changing thought process, the environment, the (re)cycling of chemical elements, the distribution of species and ecological communities and the rate of extinction of certain species. His 'verse-like-stories,' with a meaningful message highlight the pressing need for us to reject the possibility of inconstancy on planet earth. Placed in summary, Govindarajan's bottom line is: our ecosystem is a complex, dynamic network, composed of a vast spectrum of interdependent organisms. If one element changes its position, even marginally, the whole system could go awry.

To 'cull' one poem, "Sow and reap:"

I eat and eat and get plumper,
Food is all I can think about.
My mother did that, and so did hers,
And both surely were very stout.
Ham or bacon is my end of life,
I eat and make merry as much as I can,
For those that devour me also do so,
Modern woman, or educated man.
I cannot change, God made me so,
I eat so that I may be eaten.
But man who eats, drinks and makes merry,
Surely has some better option?
Well, well, I am just wasting my time,
It is time now for a hearty meal.
The look, the smell and the taste,
To all my senses, endlessly appeal.

Govindarajan's poems also contend that man lives in nature and



culture at the same time. Yet, one cannot, as he explains, generalise the context and say that 'nature is culture.' His summation, in the process, implies that change today is more than a tad uneasy compared to the frequency and gradation of change in the past. Animal population, he explains, should and need not be changed; it has to be managed to be sizable enough to minimise the chances of extinction. This, in other words, corresponds to managing change for the return of appropriate conditions – a prerequisite that depends on nature's regenerative capacity and human co-operation, not intervention, in the natural world and upholding the letter and spirit towards maintaining such a capability for nature, with all life in it, to flourish.



Jawahar Nidamboor, MSc (UK), in Industrial Pharmaceutics, PG Diploma in Drug Regulatory Affairs, and BPharm, is a researcher, teacher, life coach, writer, and co-author of four books on natural health and wellness. When he is not working, or writing, he prefers to unwind with music and books.

RAM MOHAN

Father of Indian animation (1931 - 2019)

Ram Mohan was a veteran Indian animator, title designer and design educator, who in 60 years made the industry a billion-dollar one. Known for creating animation sequences for feature films, he worked across government and private sectors, and nurtured a generation of top-notch Indian animators.

A humble, smiling, down to earth, fun-loving person, he was passionate about creating original content. A true storyteller, he created magic with his in-depth storyboard, beautiful characterisation, seamless animation – all integrated with his very own flavour of humour. Cartooning was his hobby and he freelanced for publications like the Illustrated Weekly of India, and also created a cartoon strip called *Buddhu, the Impossible Pump Attendant* for Burmah Shell's in-house magazine.

He dropped his plans for post-graduation in Chemistry, after a newspaper announcement that Walt Disney animator Clair Weeks was to conduct animation training at Films Division in 1956. He landed a job at its Cartoon Films Unit, where he went on to learn animation principles. Starting out by doing character design and storyboards for 'This Our India', an animated film adapted from a book by Minoo Masani, from 1960 to 1967, he scripted, designed and animated many of its productions. Social communication films being unexciting, in 1968, when the Chennai-based Prasad Studios, was looking for a person to run its animation division, Ram moved on, specialising in using animation for advertising, in theatres.

More advertisers started using animation, thanks to television and Ram Mohan, with over 100 films in classical two-dimension (2D) and 3D animation in 1972, established his own production company, Ram Mohan Biographics, which worked on animated commercials, sequences, titles, and advertising shorts. The big break came in the early 1990s, when he co-produced and directed with Nippon Ramayana Films producer Yugo Sako, *Ramayana: The Legend of Rama*, a 135-minute, award-winning animated feature. In April 1997, he partnered with United Studios Ltd., and formed RM-USL

Animation, India's leading post-production studio. In 1998, Ram Mohan Biographics merged with UTV to form UTV Toonz, the animation arm of United Studios Limited (USL). He was Chairman and Chief Creative Officer at Graphiti Multimedia, a Mumbai-based animation company in 1995, and later also established the Graphiti School of Animation in 2006, hoping to redress the quality of animation education. His body of work included social communication animation work for Johns Hopkins University, and content like the animated series *J Bole Toh Jadoo for Nick*, as also animated sequences for mainstream Hindi films.



In 1974, he directed a series of educational films on population and environment, *Down to Earth* for the International Planned Parenthood Federation (IPPF) and the Family Planning Association of India (FPAI). In 1989, he directed *Taru* for the Children's Film Society of India, on man's exploitation of nature and its grim consequences, and in 1995, he did the animated three episodic TV series *Meena* (1995), commissioned for the decade of the girl child in South Asia, for UNICEF. He later did the 13-episode *Sara* series on AIDS for UNICEF in East and Southern Africa, dealing with the problem of the African adolescent girl; an animated two, 24-minute episodes of *Adventure of Oliver Twist* for Saban International, and a 13-part serial of 24 minutes each, *Jo Killat*, for Singapore Television.

His awards included two National Film Awards for Best Non-Feature Animation Film, *You Said It* (1972) and *Fire Games* (1983) and the Dr. V Shantaram Award for lifetime achievement at the Mumbai International Film Festival in 2006 and the *Padma Shri* in 2014. The Amul girl, the Air India Maharaja and the famous Strepsils openmouthed MGM lion who squeaks in an advertisement for a throat lozenge, were mascots he brought to life.

He died in Mumbai at the ripe age of 88 years.

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

T.N. SESHAN

The most dynamic Election Commissioner (1932 - 2019)

The Man who said he had Politicians for breakfast!

Former Chief Election Commissioner TN Seshan nee Tirunellai Narayana Iyer Seshan is best remembered as the man who cleaned up elections in India and ushered in electoral reforms. Born in Palakkad, Kerala, the youngest of six siblings, his father was a district court lawyer. Obtaining his Bachelor of Science Honours degree in Physics from the Madras Christian College, he passed the Indian Administrative Service exam from the 1955 Tamil Nadu cadre. He did a Masters' in public administration at Harvard University on an Edward S. Mason Fellowship in 1968.

After serving in various positions in then Madras State and in various ministries of the Central Government, he was promoted as the 18th Cabinet Secretary in 1989. He was appointed the 10th Chief Election Commissioner of India in 1990 and held the post till 1996. Elections in India at the time was all about money and muscle power, and the Commissioners before him could not ensure adherence of the Model Code of Conduct, happy to just announce election results.

He redefined the status and visibility of the Election Commission of India, by largely ending malpractices. He appointed special election observers in all States to watch the election process and 'check for incendiary campaign speeches, voter intimidation, vote-stealing and other tactics often associated with electoral violence. He fixed election schedules in a staggered fashion to help station security forces and rule out then-infamous 'booth capturing'. He also clamped down on election spendings. He prohibited ferrying people to vote, bribing, and liquor distribution. He introduced Voter IDs for all eligible voters, and cracked the whip on the use of government funds and machinery for campaigning and appealing to voters' caste or communal feelings, use of places of worship for campaigns, and use of loudspeakers and high volume music without prior written permission.

Seshan's slew of initiatives tamed politicians and

and proved to be a nemesis for political parties, by throwing the rule book at violators. He proved that he was nobody's pet. He had asserted "I am only doing what the law wants me to do. No less or more. If you don't like the law, then change it, but till the law exists, I will ensure it is not broken". However seen as too much of a hurdle by the political class, it was during his tenure that two additional Election Commissioners were appointed by the Centre to clip his wings. In July 1997, a year after he retired as CEC, he unsuccessfully contested the Presidential election against K.R. Narayanan, and two years later, again lost the Gandhinagar parliamentary constituency, as the Congress candidate against the then BJP Union Home Minister L.K. Advani.



For "his resolute actions to bring order, fairness, and integrity to elections in India, the world's largest democracy", Seshan received the 1996 Ramon Magsaysay award. He also got the 5 Lakh Sulabh Honest Man of the Year Award which he sunk into the Deshbhakt (Patriot) Trust he set up with like-minded people for social reforms. He was transparent, articulate and incorruptible, though his style and action were somewhat controversial. It earned him many detractors, who thought of him as a dictatorial, megalomaniac, authoritarian, egotistic, eccentric, publicity-hungry, ambitious man with fascist tendencies.

To the public he was a hero. And he revelled in that status. A polyglot, Seshan lived a quiet retired life, devoting most of his time to the Internet, and to his library of over 1,000 books. On the hard disk of his computer rested Seshan's autobiography. "I have written it. But I am not planning to publish it since it will hurt many people. I wrote it just for my satisfaction," he had said.

He passed away, aged 86, at his Chennai residence, following a cardiac arrest. A widower, he is survived by his adopted daughter Srividya and family.

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

CAPTAIN DEEPAK SHARMA KC

Young, gritty officer who led from the front (1983 - 2010)

Born in Bidhlan village of Sonapat district in Haryana, Deepak Sharma was the only son of Indu and Naresh Kumar Sharma. His grandfather had taken part in World War II, and Deepak had grown up listening to his stories of valour. These stories inspired him to join the army.

Deepak passed his senior secondary education from Shiksha Bharti School, Rohtak, and later obtained a Bachelor of Technology degree from Maharishi Dayanand University. During his final semester, he was offered a well-paid job in an upscale corporate house but for his love for the Army, he declined the offer. He told his father that he wanted to join the Army where he will get salutes, and will get an opportunity to render service to the nation. His father felt proud of his son.

He joined the Officer's Training Academy, Chennai, and was commissioned into the SIGNALS on September 16, 2006. In March 2008, Deepak, as a young Captain, was sent on a two-year attachment with 42 Rashtriya Rifles (Assam) operating in Pulwama district of Jammu and Kashmir. During his short leave in January 2010, Deepak got engaged to a serving lady officer from the Signal Regiment itself at a simple ceremony, and the marriage was scheduled sometime in June the same year. His friend Amardeep Malik recalls that he was thrilled about it. But no one knew he had a different kind of date with fate three months before that.

Pulwama district, located between the Pir Panjal Range and the Greater Himalayas, though geographically not close to the Line of Control (LoC) in the west, has the dubious distinction of being one of the hotbeds of militancy in the Kashmir valley. Due to a false notion of being alienated by the state, Kashmiri youths had covertly been assisting militants from Pakistan.

In March 2010, a group from Hizbul Mujahadeen group was reported to be hiding in a house in village Dadsara in Pulwama district. The house was in a densely populated area and there was a mosque nearby.

The security forces had to be careful in order not to create ill will amongst the local population. On 4 March 2010, Capt. Deepak Sharma and his troops were ordered to clear the house.

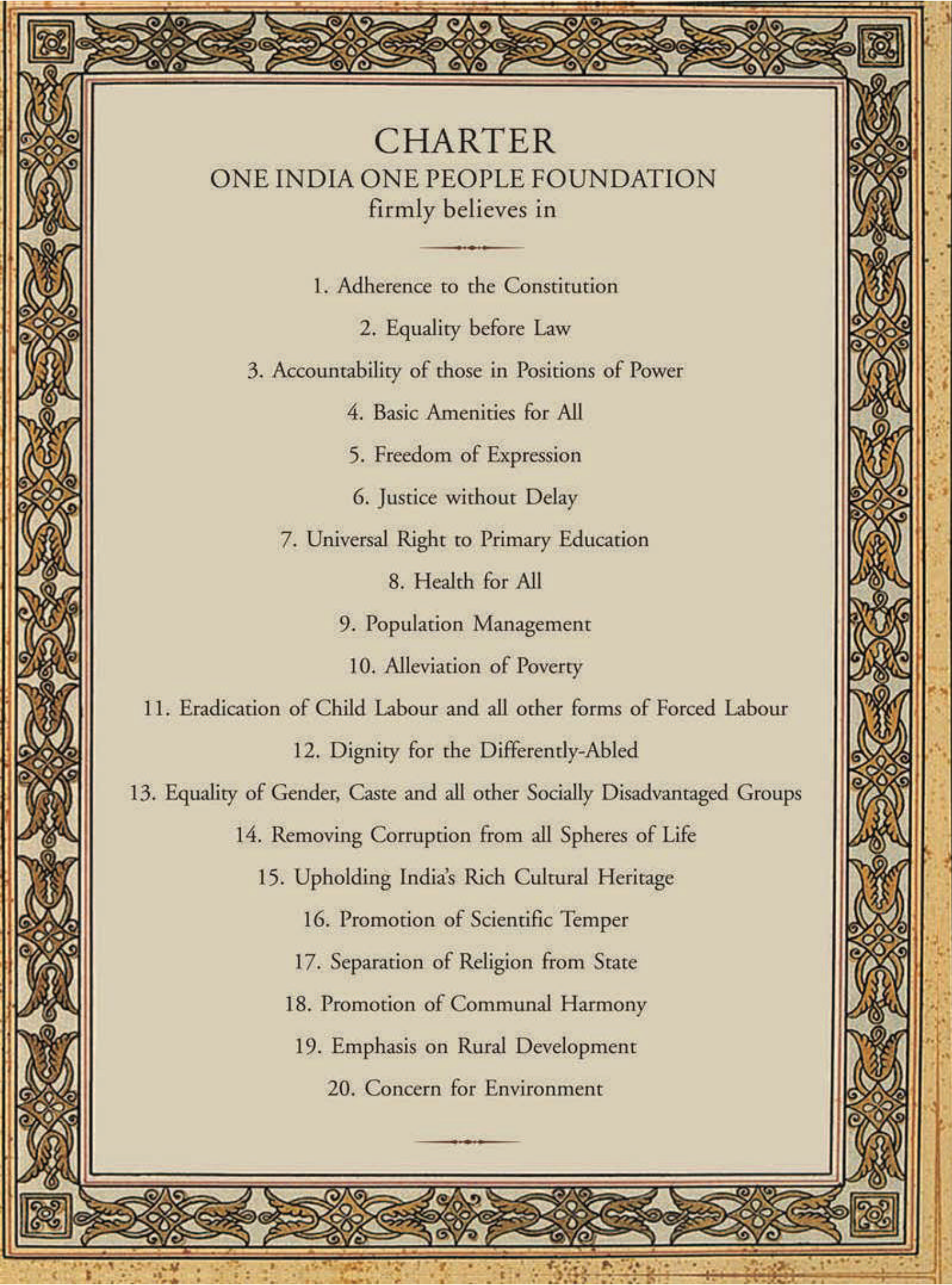
Deepak realised that the situation was sensitive and did not use heavy fire. He tossed a few grenades into the house and entered through a window along with his companion. He encountered one terrorist hidden in the first room that he entered. He fired at him at point blank range and killed him. Unmindful of the heavy fire at him, he crawled over to the next room and spotted two militants under a staircase. He did not care for his own safety and attacked them. He killed both of them in the fire fight, but unfortunately suffered a bullet injury in his own neck. He later succumbed to the wound. He displayed exemplary courage, leadership and determination. He gave his life to serve our motherland by killing three terrorists on the spot.

His mother was inconsolable and said that her son was too young to die. He never told his parents that he was working under dangerous conditions. He was committed to his duty. The last time, his father spoke to him, he had said that he was busy in an operation and did not mention that the location was Kashmir. The gun battle had lasted 30 hours and had claimed the lives of four militants, and one captain. Soon after the encounter a search operation was launched to trace the remaining militants. It had to be suspended due to darkness and resumed again when security forces were fired upon. The area was cleared of militants. Deepak's body was flown to New Delhi and taken on to Rohtak, where he was cremated with full military honours. The entire town appeared to have concentrated around his house. A large number of men in Army fatigues had lined the street leading to his house.

Deepak had displayed outstanding courage, leadership and commitment for which he was awarded Kirti Chakra.

- Brigadier Suresh Chandra Sharma (retd.)





CHARTER

ONE INDIA ONE PEOPLE FOUNDATION

firmly believes in

1. Adherence to the Constitution
 2. Equality before Law
 3. Accountability of those in Positions of Power
 4. Basic Amenities for All
 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
 13. Equality of Gender, Caste and all other Socially Disadvantaged Groups
 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
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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
(Mayoer 9th 1930 – February 23rd 2007)
ONE INDIA ONE PEOPLE