



RedInk
AWARDS
HONOURING EXCELLENCE
IN INDIAN JOURNALISM
—
2014



Press Club Back Cover



THE RED INK ANTHOLOGY 2014




**THE RED INK
ANTHOLOGY**
—
2014

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· 2014 ·



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Foreword



The RedInk Awards for Excellence in Journalism, instituted by the Press Club Mumbai, this year have raised the bar of both participation and popularity. More than 800 entries flowed in from all corners, and creating separate awards for news and feature stories – a learning from last year – only added to the excitement. The awards event at the NCPA’s glittering Jamsheyd Bhaba theatre was the final crescendo for the four-month process of receiving entries, constituting 10 categories of juries and going through a rigorous judging and selection; and when the 30 winners walked up to the stage on 7 June, 2014 to receive their awards amidst the clash of cymbals and the deafening applause of over a 1,000 journalists, they could not have asked for greater recognition from their own fraternity.

The big draw this year was a debate on how the media covered the Lok Sabha election: Whether it was fair, or the media stoked the NaMo wave? The tough-talking panellists included celebrity TV anchors Rajedeep Sardesai and Arnab Goswami, senior journalist Kumar Ketkar, ad man Piyush Pandey, with Star TV chief Uday Shankar anchoring the session. The humour and friendly sparring had the audience in splits; and the catcalls from the back-benchers could have even put a Meerut cinema hall audience to shame. Yet it was a lot of fun, and a totally memorable evening.

On a different note, the significance of the RedInk Awards today has become not only the recognition of cutting-edge journalism; but also the creation of a platform which debates issues of concern for the profession. In this respect, our future perspective for the Awards is not just a celebratory once-in-a-year event; but a 365-day process which identifies good writing, and becomes an advocacy centre for journalists and journalism. A website is currently being developed which will perform the role of aggregating and recognizing good writing, great images and path-breaking stories through the year.

It would also be appropriate to flag an issue that repeatedly reared its head during the RedInk Awards event this year – that of increasing concentration of ownership of news media by suspect corporate interests becoming a threat to independent journalism. The merger of ETV with the Network18 Group and the takeover of the media behemoth by a Mukesh Ambani trust has raised serious concerns. Yet the good news is that the growth and proliferation of alternative media, especially online, has ensured that there is always a platform for critical voices.

The RedInk Awards is one such platform that will always stand with journalists everywhere, and we are therefore proud to present this compendium as an example of what the profession can do to showcase its best performers. We have to thank Yes Bank for making this possible, as well as all our partners – Star TV, Zee Entertainment Enterprises (ZEEL), the Aditya Birla group, the Adani Group, Bombay Stock Exchange (BSE), Glenmark Pharmaceuticals, and Eros International who have ensured the RedInk platform marches from peak to peak.

Gurbir Singh

President

Press Club, Mumbai



Rana Kapoor
Managing Director & CEO, YES BANK

This is the third year of YES BANK's association with the Annual Press Club Mumbai Red Ink Awards, Honouring Excellence in Indian Journalism. I am glad to share that in the short period since its inception, the Red Ink Awards has already made a mark for itself and has become a much awaited event, which has received the appreciation and support of not just the media and its stakeholder, but beyond.

After reading some of these winning stories, I truly believe that such sharp narration and insights from across diverse spheres speaks volumes about the talent that exists in the media community today. While this makes the job of the illustrious

awards jury very difficult, it definitely bodes well for the future of print media in our nation.

The winning stories this year reflect the unwavering pursuit of excellence by the journalist, who have displayed ample fearlessness, determination and a passion for their profession by bringing these compelling stories to the readers. I must also congratulate veteran journalists who have been mentors and guides for the new genre of journalists who have exhibited great promise.

YES BANK wholeheartedly supports encouragement of India's abundant and diverse talent across and our association with the Annual Press Club Awards has been the extension of this philosophy. I take this opportunity on behalf of YES BANK, to wish all the winners the very best for their future endeavours. With such talent and experience, I am certain that in the times to come, media shall continue to strongly play crucial and positive part in nation building.

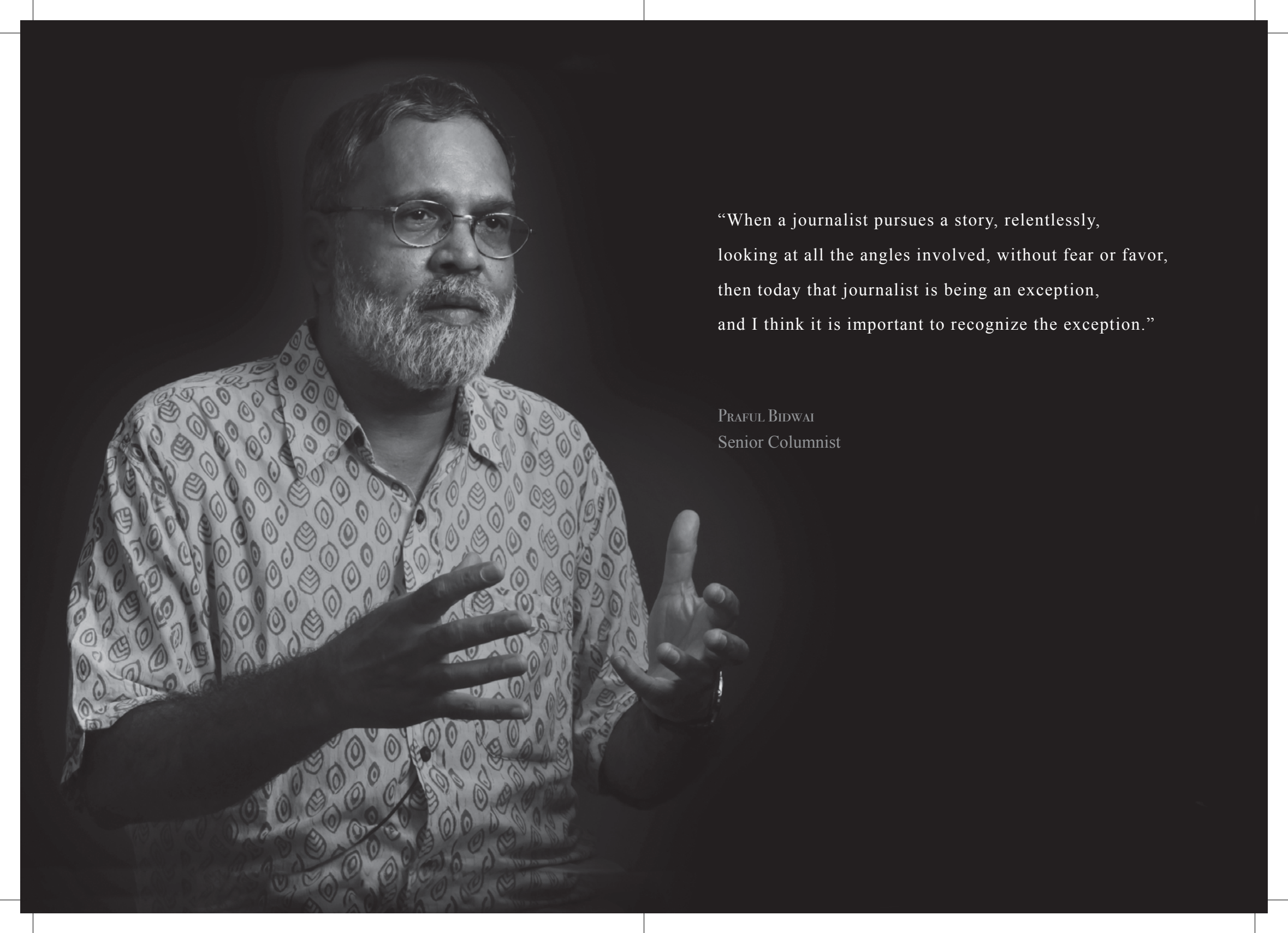


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WINNING STORIES



“When a journalist pursues a story, relentlessly, looking at all the angles involved, without fear or favor, then today that journalist is being an exception, and I think it is important to recognize the exception.”

PRAFUL BIDWAI
Senior Columnist

RedInk

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· 2014 ·

BEST BUSINESS NEWS

BEST BUSINESS NEWS

By

JWALIT VYAS & RANJIT SHINDE

Winner

**OPERATING PROFITS OF BIG COS
LIKE ESSAR, JAYPEE NOT ENOUGH
TO SERVICE DEBT ON THEIR BOOKS**

The Economic Times

17th Jul '13

Jwalit Vyas & Ranjit Shinde



*Operating profits of big cos like Essar, Jaypee not enough
to service debt on their books*

Jwalit Vyas is an IT engineer by qualification, it was his passion for markets that made him pursue an MBA in Finance from Narsee Monjee Institute of Management. As a child he used to love solving complicated puzzles and would not get sleep till he found the answer. It is his this very passion that has drawn him to the equity market which he believes is the most complex puzzle ever invented – one that can beat even the greatest of minds.

Ranjit Shinde finished his engineering studies in the field of electronics and pursued MBA in international business. He has 10 years of experience in industry research and analysis. He has been working with the ET Intelligence Group for the past seven years as a research analyst, writing analysis based articles on IT, telecom, and general stock market and industry trends. When at leisure, he likes to read on personal management and follows international cinema ardently.

Operating profits of big cos like Essar, Jaypee not enough to service debt on their books

Some of India's top industrial groups, whose growth was fuelled partly by debt, are finding the going tough with revenue growth slowing, which in turn is impacting their profitability.

Corporate groups, including Essar, Jaypee, and Adani, weighed down by a debt pile, could feel the pressure more as their current operating profit may not be adequate to service the debt on their books. Although the debt of most of these groups is at the company level, their group net worth will be hit if these companies fail to generate enough cash flows to service the debt.

Among the top industrial houses, the Essar Group, which has interests in steel, oil and shipping industries, has an aggregate debt of ₹68,000 crore, on which its interest outgo was ₹7,900 crore in FY13, while the group's earnings before interest and tax, or EBIT, was only ₹2,927.5 crore. What this indicates is that the group had to draw extra funds from its cash reserves to pay for the shortfall, thereby eroding its net worth.

In terms of weak interest servicing ability, Essar is not alone. Other groups, such as Jaypee and Adani, are also struggling on this front. Jaypee (Jaiprakash) Group companies had a debt of ₹55,377 crore at the end of FY13, with its interest-to-EBIT ratio being 0.83. The total debt of Adani Group companies was ₹61,762 crore and its interest-to-EBIT ratio was 0.7.

The total debt of India's top 17 corporate groups other than banking and financial enterprises rose more than 75% in the three years to FY13 to ₹9.3 lakh crore (approximately \$155 billion).

But profit before interest, depreciation and tax grew just over 25% during the period, which means that investments are yet to generate adequate profits to justify the capital expenditure.

The debt of these business groups is over 17% of India's FY13 GDP at factor cost of ₹55 lakh crore. It is also half of the total borrowing of the BSE-500 companies, excluding banking and finance players, reflecting that a big chunk of India Inc's debt is concentrated on the books of a handful of companies.

A major reason for the stressed balance sheets of some of these groups is the huge investments made over the past few years in anticipation of a recovery in demand. For instance, the Essar Group's debt burden increased by almost 30% year-on-year in FY13, as it incurred capital expenditure, mainly in its oil business. Due to this, the group's proportion of interest outgo rose to one-and-a-half times its EBIT, compared with less than half in FY12.


Considering this, the group's hopes now hinge on the timely commencements of projects. "Upon completion and achieving optimal capacity utilisation across all the investments, the consolidated EBIDTA for Essar will be \$5-6 billion, and accordingly the debt to-EBIDTA ratio will be 2.5-3 times, which is well within globally accepted norms for such capital intensive investments," said an Essar spokesperson. What makes it challenging for the group is that global demand for steel is weak.

For Adani and Jaypee groups, debt has grown at a much faster pace than their operating profits. It needs to be noted that the interest payments these two reported in FY13 was only for part of the entire debt. Interest on the residual debt is capitalised and will be reported only after completion of under-construction projects, which could further deteriorate their interest servicing ratios. Assuming an interest rate of 12%, the interest outgo in the coming years would go up by over 50% for Jaypee Group companies, and double for Adani

Too Much of a Load

Group	DEBT	PBIT	Interest
Tata	1,54,476.8	42,451.0	12,485.4
ADAG	1,05,094.8	11,155.9	7,567.9
Birla AV	93,928.3	16,978.6	4,780.5
Reliance	89,322.0	26,217.0	3,463.0
Bharti	72,960.8	9,366.4	4,384.4
Hinduja	70,241.6	2,035.5	5,354.8
Essar	68,000.0	2,927.5	7,899.4
Adani	61,762.3	5,498.2	3,492.9
Jaypee	55,377.9	925.4	4,661.9
Mahindra	41,482.1	12,307.9	4,232.0
Jindal Om	40,183.9	4,839.3	2,153.9

*As on Mar 31st FY13 (in crore)



companies. This will mean that their operating profits will have to grow at least at those rates or higher in order to maintain their interest servicing abilities.

In terms of value, Tata Group has the highest debt among all. The total debt of their group companies is a little over ₹1.5 lakh crore, of which 80% is concentrated in Tata Steel, Tata Motors and Tata Power. Although at group levels the cash flows are strong due to earnings from TCS and Tata Motors, at the company level Tata Steel and Tata Power are highly leveraged and earnings are not strong enough to service debt.

Within the group, Tata Steel is the most vulnerable in terms of interest servicing. Tata Steel has more than one-third of the total group debt and it incurred a loss at EBIT levels. The Mukesh Ambani-led Reliance Group is the best placed in terms of debt, followed by Godrej and AV Birla. Interest-to-EBIT ratio of the Reliance Group was 0.1 of the total EBIT, while that of Godrej and AV Birla was 0.12 and 0.27, respectively.

Operating profits of big cos like Essar, Jaypee not enough to service debt on their books

Some other groups whose companies reported interest-to-EBIT ratio of over 1 at the end of 2012-13 included Videocon, DLF, Future and ADAG. However, since then, they have sold several assets to lower debt, as cash flows were not enough for interest payments and working capital requirements.

“Videocon has already divested the oil and gas assets in Mozambique, which has helped it to cut down debt by 75%. Once the cash is received, the overall debt will be reduced to below ₹5,000 crore and that is a too small debt given the size of asset base of Brazil oil and gas assets and company earnings,” said VN Dhoot, in an email to ET.



BEST BUSINESS NEWS

By
LOLA NAYAR
Runner-up

**THE GREAT GAS HEIST:
ONE BENEFICIARY, CLEAR AND CORPORATE.
HOW THE UPA PLAYED
FOR POLITICAL POSITIONING.**

Outlook
15th Jul '13

Lola Nayar



The Great Gas Heist

Lola Nayar has been working with the Outlook for the last seven years. Prior to that she was with Indo-Asian News Service. She has also worked with Hindustan Times and Financial Express and also done a stint in the Gulf. She has been covering development, economics, finance, agriculture, energy, health related subjects and issues for over two decades.

**The Great Gas Heist: One beneficiary,
clear and corporate.
How the UPA played for political positioning.**



It's done: PM Manmohan Singh with Mukesh Ambani

In the Niira Radia tapes, there's this one delicious conversation the PR lady has with lobbyist Ranjan Bhattacharya. It was May 2009, and UPA-II cabinet formation was in full swing. Bhattacharya quotes Reliance Industries' Mukesh Ambani as telling him, "*Haan yaar, you know Ranjan, you're right, ab toh Congress apni dukaan hai.*" Apocryphal or not, that earthy expression of ownership is relevant in the aftermath of the UPA's recent decision to raise gas prices for five years, starting at a flexible \$8.4/mmbtu—conceding a long-standing demand by India's most powerful business house and its global partner BP.

This must be said because, apart from the Left parties and AIADMK, few even in the political establishment are raising obvious questions about this deal, of which Reliance, the country's largest private sector gas producer, is the major beneficiary. The

whole pricing exercise has been riddled with conflicts between the ministries of power, fertiliser, finance and petroleum; the formula has invited severe criticism; and there's an attempt by the UPA to airbrush the obvious negative impact of the hike on the common man and taxpayer. Nearly everything will become expensive; or, obviously, the taxpayer will bear these subsidies.

Back-of-the-envelope calculations by Outlook show that the cost of this gas hike on just the power, fertiliser and LPG industries will be in the range of ₹54,500 crore per annum. Also, the costs of industry in general will go up. "It is a massive loss to the nation. Already, fertiliser prices are soaring. Now, they will be increased again. This is a clear case of placing profit above people," says Prof K. Nageshwar, an MLC from Andhra Pradesh. On the other hand, aided by a depreciating rupee, gas producers will rake it in. "Every \$1 increase in gas price means \$73 million profit for Reliance," says Nageshwar. The irony: gas was meant to be a cheap, green fuel.



"Bartering India's interests to the corporate world, the damage they have done is unfathomable."
D. A. Somayajulu,
Member,
YSR Congress
governing council

There's also a political brazenness to the timing. A decision slated for April 2014 has been announced a good ten months before, neatly sidestepping an election code of conduct and buying the support of a crucial corporate. Given that AIADMK has said that it would review the deal if a coalition it is part of comes to power, this pre-emptive pricing takes the decision out of the hands of (potentially, of course) an unreliable Third Front coalition. "With elections around, who'd want to upset a

major source of funding?" says a political analyst.

Given the token response by the BJP, it appears that the national interest will ignite in the principal opposition party only after 2014. It's no secret that, considering the growing (and open) corporate

support for Narendra Modi, the UPA has made a political bargain by keeping Reliance happy. It is not just political parties that are observing a measured silence. Industry chambers, normally eager to put their point across to the media, were also trying to avoid eye contact. Last week, Modi, who normally draws a full house in his meetings, saw only a handful of prominent industrialists attending his session at a CII conclave in Mumbai.

Finance Minister P. Chidambaram and Petroleum Minister Veerappa Moily have rightly pointed out that currently the public-sector ONGC and OIL dominate gas production. But what they have failed to clarify is who will bear the subsidy burden for the power and fertiliser sectors. Going by the track record of the government, the state-owned exploration companies may well have to pick up the tab. That leaves only Reliance. With global energy giant BP as its partner, there is no telling when the incentivised partners may reverse the drop in production to capitalise on the higher gas prices. “They (Reliance) have been waiting for this announcement for a long time. Production will go up,” says a person associated with Reliance’s D-6 block in the Krishna-Godavari basin, declining to be quoted. “The biggest beneficiary is going to be Reliance—eyes closed.”

Against the committed production of over 70 million metric standard cubic metres per day (mmscmd) at the KG basin, output has been as low as 15 mmscmd. Reliance has been in a high-octane war with the CAG, which has said the company is to be faulted for not complying with agreed investment and development plans. “Our production will go up only in mid 2017-18,” a RIL spokesperson says, seeking to deflate the charge that the price revision was orchestrated to benefit Reliance. In some three years, when Reliance hopes to bring its ‘R’ cluster and satellite fields in the KG basin block into production, the gas price in the country may well have

reached \$10/mmbtu. The company has made other finds of gas condensates in recent months. The indications are all in Reliance’s favour. It could well emerge as the biggest gas producer in the country unless ONGC can be stirred to monetise its discoveries, including in the KG basin. ONGC and OIL did not respond to Outlook’s queries.

The government habit of selective picking of recommendations, including from the Rangarajan committee report, has come in for criticism. The new formula (cherry-picked from the report, and approved for 2014-19), is to put it simply, based on the average of European nbp, Henry Hub of US and Japan’s import gas price plus the average of Indian gas import price. The formula is unique to India: no other gas-producing country has devised such a convoluted way to reward exploration companies. Moreover, the government has deviated from the committee’s recommendation of a monthly review, instead opting for quarterly revisions. Thus, the revised price of \$8.4 per mmbtu put out by the government is merely an indicative price.

In another instance, the Rangarajan report spells out that the pricing policy should apply only for future investments. In that case, most of the gas being produced in the country currently should not see any change in price. But that distinction has not been kept. The UPA’s selective adoption of proposals, totally ignoring the concerns of its own ministries, defies logic. “The US economy has turned around essentially due to lower gas price. What is the window for India?” asks Anil Razdan, former power secretary.

What is particularly upsetting is the decision to equate domestic gas price with that of imported LNG, which has additional cost burdens of liquefaction, transportation and regassification. This also



“The cost of power and fertiliser will go up, so the government will have to moderate the impact.”
B.K. Chaturvedi,
Member,
Planning Commission

goes against the panel's recommendation. But petroleum minister Veerappa Moily has been persuaded to believe that the "import lobby" is behind alleged attempts to scuttle India's chance to become self-sufficient in oil and gas production.

B. K. Chaturvedi, a member of the Planning Commission, who was on the Rangarajan committee, defends the formula: "As far as the committee is concerned, it stands by its recommendations. The committee was conscious that the government's contractual commitment under the exploration policy (NELP) had to be honoured; therefore the prices were accordingly recommended." He



"Like with GST, this should have been discussed with the states. The decision seems coarse, arbitrary."

M. R. Venkatesh, CA and Political Analyst, Chennai

does admit that the higher gas price will have bearing on the power and fertiliser costs, so the government will have to find a way to moderate the impact.

The state government-owned Gujarat State Petroleum Corporation (GSPC) is another likely beneficiary—it has also been seeking a higher price to make production from its K-G basin block viable. At the same time, D.J. Pandian, chairman of GSPC says, "Even though GSPC stands to benefit as an upstream company, we will be put to great hardship as power producers, for it will add ₹2 per unit to our cost." Given that a large chunk of power goes to agriculture and industry, the hike in power tariff will hurt end-users.

Experts are critical of the government assumption that higher gas prices will attract foreign investments, as in the last 10 years, despite pegging crude oil prices to import parity and deregulating all petroleum products, inflow of FDI has been insignificant. "The assumption is based on a false premise. What worries me is that the subsidy bill will be humungous if this price goes through," says CPI(M) Rajya Sabha member Tapan Sen, who feels let down by

fellow parliamentarians. "The opposition should have come a long time back."

Unfortunately, gas price seems unlikely to be a major issue in the upcoming elections. So far, only Tamil Nadu chief minister Jayalalitha has spoken against the price hike. Says M.R. Venkatesh, a Chennai-based chartered accountant and political analyst, "Like in the case of GST, this should have been discussed with the states, as they would be affected. The decision looks coarse and arbitrary and is likely to be challenged under Article 14 of the Constitution."

Well, even if the deal is done, it's the post-hike reluctance to discuss its fallout that is the most worrying. "I don't see any political fallout caused by this decision because political parties in our country are not vigilant enough," says K. Keshav Rao, a former Congress Rajya Sabha member who recently joined the TRS. That's when one wonders if a delay in decision-making is actually better than a wrong one being taken-all in the name of reforms.

Primer: Everything You Need To Know On The Gas Price Rip-Off

What is the gas price all about?

It is natural gas produced within the country; unlike imported liquefied natural gas (LNG). This is viewed as a cheaper and more environment-friendly fuel compared to imported crude oil.

Where is this natural gas found?

Both onshore and offshore. Currently Bombay High produces the most gas; Assam, Andhra Pradesh, Gujarat, Rajasthan, Tamil Nadu, Tripura are other states where gas is being produced.

How much gas does India have?

In 2012-13 India produced 47,558 million cubic metres of gas, a drop of 14.5% from the previous year. India's gas imports have been steadily rising, up to 30% of total consumption last year.

Which companies produce this gas?

The biggest players are state-owned ONGC and OIL, and Reliance Industries Limited (RIL). In addition, there are other players like BP, Niko, Cairn Energy working in various joint ventures.

Who do they supply gas to?

According to government allocation, the first priority is to power and fertiliser plants; then for production of LPG or cooking gas; up next is other industries and city gas including piped gas and CNG.

How will you be affected?

Households are obviously impacted as they are the end-users of power, piped gas and compressed natural gas (CNG); if fertiliser costs go up, agriculture produce is bound to reflect it.

Who will benefit from price hike?

Technically, both public and private sector explorers. As ONGC and OIL pay dividend to government and contribute to subsidy bill, the top beneficiary will be RIL, the biggest private producer.

What impact will the gas price hike have every year on tax payers?

- Power plants: ₹46,360 crore p.a.
- Urea production: ₹3,155 crore p.a.
- LPG production: ₹1,620 crore p.a.
- Total: ₹51,135 crore p.a.
- At current \$ prices: ₹54,500 crore*

Sources: power, urea, LPG figures based on estimations made by concerned ministries in the CCEA note on gas price hike. Total cost arrived at \$ value at ₹59.

Inverted Logic

Why the gas price hike doesn't make sense

Government View	Counter View
Need to attract foreign investment	Import parity price for crude oil in past 10 years has failed to woo big foreign investors
Will help to improve domestic production of oil and gas	The hike with prospective effect comes even as gas production has been slipping in recent years
Public sector companies like ONGC and Oil India Limited will be bigger beneficiaries	PSUs pay government huge dividends, also share part of subsidies: moreover, PSU gas production has hit a plateau
Will subsidise gas for power and fertiliser sector	Reversing the efforts to cut down subsidies would put fiscal prudence at risk
Government will earn more through profit and royalties	Sure it will earn more but only lose it through additional subsidy burden

How UPA's Four Petroleum Ministers Have Dealt With The Gas Issue



Mani Shankar Aiyar, May 2004 - Jan 2006

Shunted out for keeping the Ambani brothers, then together, at arm's length. Aiyar, however, also did his best to get ONGC to focus more on improving domestic oil and gas production.



Murli Deora, Jan 2006 - Jan 2011

Known as "Uncle" to the Ambani brothers, he pitched for Mukesh in the legal fight with brother Anil. In the process, he changed the provision for market-determined gas prices.



S. Jaipal Reddy, Jan 2011 - Oct 2012

Took unprecedented decision of not allowing Reliance to recover \$1bn cost incurred on unutilised infrastructure. Paid for not permitting early review of gas price: he was unceremoniously moved.



M. Veerappa Moily, Since Oct 2012

After famously blaming "import lobbies", the minister granted Reliance's demand for high gas prices, ignoring the concerns of power, fertiliser industries and impact on consumers.



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· 2014 ·

BEST BUSINESS FEATURE

BEST BUSINESS FEATURE

BY
ARPIT PARASHAR

Winner

**HOW TO KEEP A CASTLE
UP IN THE AIR**

Fountain Ink
7th May '13

Arpit Parashar



How to keep a castle up in the air

After working in mainstream media organisations like The Indian Express and Tehelka for five years, Arpit Parashar has focused on research-based long-form writing, especially for Fountain Ink for more than two years now as an independent contributor. He also regularly writes for the vernacular media.

How to keep a castle up in the air

The building boom has been winding down for some time, but prices seem to stay up forever. The reason is a cosy collusion between builders, politicians and officials to ensure that the buyer is in a rigged game.

In November 2011, Aparna Goel started getting calls from a soft-spoken woman offering to sell a flat in a prime locality in Noida, just outside Delhi. The woman said she worked for a major construction company based in Noida.

Goel, a divorcee who lived alone in Uttar Pradesh's Muzaffarnagar district, wanted to buy property in Noida and move to the city in search of better opportunities as a school teacher. But the amount quoted to her by the woman— ₹55 lakh for a two bedroom-hall-kitchen (BHK) flat—was way beyond what Aparna could afford.

She told the caller as much. But the woman persisted. “They said they could arrange for me to pay a minimum amount up front and then pay a fixed sum every six months in installments ranging from ₹2-3 lakhs.”

Goel became curious and was eventually interested enough to make a trip to Noida for a look at the model of the flat and decide on the details of payment. She was picked up from New Delhi Railway Station and driven to the office of the consultancy firm in Noida's Sector-16, from where endless calls came. She was treated to a fabulous lunch and then taken to Supertech's Cape Town project in Noida. She liked the model flat shown to her.

The vendors told her to make the first payment of ₹3 lakh immediately so that the flat could be booked in her name. “They just kept saying that you should make the payment to book the

flat first and that formalities could be sorted out later. So I did.”

A month later, Goel received a letter demanding the full ₹55 lakh. Shocked, she called the brokerage which had finalised the deal, demanding an explanation.

The reply she got was: “We are just paid to book flats for Supertech, which we did. Details of your contractual agreement with Supertech have been couriered to you, and from now on the deal is between you and the builder”.

The brokerage got ₹30,000 for duping Goel into paying ₹3 lakh for a deal that was never going to get to fruition. “That girl told me as much to my face later”.

Convinced she could persuade the officials at Supertech's office in Sector-58 in Noida that she had been cheated into investing hard-earned money in their project, Goel approached them in January 2012. They told her that 15 per cent of the amount she had paid—₹45,000—would be deducted. She would only be entitled to the balance.

“What was alarming”, she says, “was that I was not the only one.” Over the next 10 months, Goel met at least 200 people visiting the office for refunds. “It was as if nobody wanted to buy. Everybody who had invested had either been duped or was not interested anymore.”

She is not off the mark. The real estate sector in India, especially in the Noida-Greater Noida-Gurgaon region, the National Capital Region (NCR), has seen a boom that seems to have misled experts as well as buyers into believing that the time to invest in property is now. In the Noida-Greater Noida area in Uttar Pradesh, it started in 2011 after the landmark judgement of the Supreme Court.

The New Okhla Industrial Development Area (Noida) was marked for special development in 1974 as Delhi needed

industries outside the broader residential space of the national capital. To facilitate smooth land acquisition and its development, the UP government in 1976 passed the Uttar Pradesh Industrial Area Development Act. It is an addition to the Land Acquisition Act, 1894, of the Central Government when it comes to acquiring farmers' land in the state. Haryana too has implemented some aspects borrowed from the same Act along with the 1894 Act, without actually legislating it officially.

After the Noida Authority issued the notification in 1974, many villages came under its jurisdiction. Among them was Shahberi, a fateful addition. Back then, land reform had barely begun and farmers struggled to settle disputes among themselves and with the government to mark the land that would eventually belong to them.

By 1976, most land disputes had been settled but the foundation stone for newer, more violent ones had been laid in the form of the new Act.



Shahberi village, Greater Noida

Within 25 years, Noida's freely available land, much cheaper than Delhi, had given the town a crucial place in the Delhi-NCR region. It paved the way for residential projects by the dozen, aimed at the rapidly growing industrial worker population and high-end clients wanting to buy land for bigger houses. Land acquired from farmers was sold to construction companies at rates unimaginable in the present scenario.

By the early 2000s, land in Noida had been mostly acquired and sold off, or rejected by builders for being too far from Delhi. Noida was getting too populated for comfort and so the UP government decided to develop Greater Noida as the new industrial hub.

Industries and companies from every field invested in the new sub-city and gobbled up land for various factories, plants, offices and various other projects. But the motto of the government had changed, as has happened with most expanding cities over the last 15 years. The target group for the Greater Noida Authority became people who would invest in big houses, expansive villas, penthouses, and various other facilities of "leisure", as their website states. The industrial worker and the worker class, for whom the plans had originally been finalised, were conveniently forgotten.

On March 13, 2009, the Greater Noida authority, formed on the lines of the Noida Authority under the UP Industrial Areas Act, declared in a gazette notification that land in Shahberi village was to be acquired for projects under the same Act and the Land Acquisition Act, 1894. Without any notice to the farmers, the authority declared that the urgency clause of the 1894 Act was going to be implemented.

Under Section 17 of the acquisition law, urgency can be cited only if there is a greater public interest involved and that land

cannot be acquired according to the standard procedure of the law.

“There was no need for a railway station, military cantonment, government employees’ housing scheme, etc. here at all,” says Mubassir Hussain, whose land had also been acquired by the Greater Noida authority.

The gazette also announced that the owners would not be entitled to object to the acquisition of their land, guaranteed under Section 5(a) of the 1894 Act, since the urgency clause had been invoked. The reasons for invoking it and denial of the right to object were not given.



Proximity to the Hindon river makes Shahberi a multi crop village

Shahberi was part of Noida till the gazette declared that it had been given away to the Greater Noida authority. But its land, unlike many other villages in the region, had been

well-cultivated, irrigated and fertile over the past century.

“We have records to show that even in 1952 two crops were cultivated here every year,” says Hussain. Under the 1894 Act, no fertile land can be acquired for industrial purposes if it is a multiple-crop land. By the time of the gazette farmers grew three crops a year in Shahberi as well as in some adjacent villages.

“Thanks to comparatively better proximity to the Hindon River we have been better off than other villages even though this region falls in the dry and saline-water area beyond the Yamuna and the Hindon.”

But Shahberi was not spared. The Greater Noida Authority consulted maps dating back to 1983 which showed most parts of the village as unpopulated. The recently built Modern School, where at least 500 children study every year, was also declared unpopulated.

The school administration, which runs many other educational institutes by the same name, bought the land from the villagers at ₹2,000 per gaj (roughly equaling 1.3 square metres) many years back. After the gazette declaration, it was not only going to lose its land, it was also set to make a huge loss of ₹1,300 per gaj as the government only came up with a compensation of ₹711 per gaj-₹850 per square metre. That figure too had been arrived upon after protests by farmers across western UP against the ₹550 per square metre compensation decided upon earlier.

As per the gazette notification, the land was to be acquired for industrial use. However, the authority planned to sell the land to developers and construction companies. The area was named Noida Extension to make investors and buyers feel it was just an extension of the Noida success story. The fact that it lies barely 5 km beyond the old boundary of Noida also helped. Later, when buyers, investors and real estate consultants showed more

interest in Greater Noida the area was conveniently given its original name—Greater Noida West.

Most farmers from the region opposed the plans to acquire their land. But Shahberi stood out as a village from where hardly anyone accepted government compensation. Instead, they approached the courts and challenged the land acquisition.

The case eventually triggered major unrest across north India as farmers chose to keep their land and livelihood and resisted land acquisition for industrial or residential projects. Real estate and property prices in Noida-Greater Noida and, eventually, in most of the NCR, took a hit as a result.

Mujahid Hussain belongs to the family that held the Zamindari rights across three villages in the region—Shahberi, Chak Shahberi (which lies along the Hindon River, hence the name) and Haibatpur. After the land reforms of the late 1960s, however, the extended family was left with barely 1,100 bigha (1 bigha = 884 sq. mt.) across the three villages. They stuck to farming and cultivated wheat, sugarcane and other crops. The returns were good and the family prospered.

The land in Shahberi eventually went to Mujahid Hussain and his brother Sharafat Ali, who together approached the courts against Greater Noida authority's decision to acquire their land and sell it to real estate developers. They were helped by others like Dharampal Arya and Rajpal Arya, who too had no intention of letting their farm land go. On March 28, 2010, they filed a case against the Greater Noida authority and demanded that their land be returned.

“Thankfully, only a few families actually collected the compensation,” says Hussain. “The authority could not touch most of the land in the village after the Allahabad High Court gave a stay order on acquisition.”

But the construction went on. Seven builders—Amrapali, Supertech, Mahagun, Panchsheel, AMS, Shreeji and Gulshan Homes—bought land across villages in the area and much of it fell in Shahberi village.

Even after the stay from the court, the Greater Noida authority, under pressure from builders, continued to develop Shahberi. Roads 60-90 metres wide were constructed. Even a 50-year-old burial ground was not spared as the expansion drive picked up pace.

But the Hussain and Arya families convinced villagers to fight the authority for a better compensation or simply to get their land back so that they could cultivate it as before.

“We had been planning a crop pattern for urban buyers—organic vegetables, fruits, etc. were on the list. Why should the government stop our plans when our land is fertile and their own Master Plan for the expansion of the urban space says that such initiatives should be encouraged?” asks Sharafat Ali.

Master Plan 2001 of the Greater Noida authority said land acquired in Shahberi would be used for industrial purposes. Some other clauses of the 1894 Act were also used to acquire land. In almost every case, the same clauses are used to acquire farm land before the builders get patches in a planned manner for much higher rates than the purchase price. Sections 4 and 6 of the Act, which pertain to acquisition of farm land for public purposes, were invoked in this case, as they are across the country.

Sanjeev Kumar, who works with the real estate consultant Zenith Capital Group in Gurgaon, says, “These sections are so misleading that governments invoke them for practically any purpose. Even real estate consultants work with officials to help them come up with one or the other excuse to acquire prime farm

land, as was the case in many areas outside Gurgaon (where farm land was acquired citing reasons that urban farming would be encouraged)”.

On the pretext of encouraging urban farming, land parcels were sold to buyers as farm houses. They were never used for the purposes cited when the land was acquired. What was worse, farmers did not get many other facilities that the land acquisition law guarantees since their land was being acquired for agricultural purposes and they were guaranteed employment in the same sector and in the same region.

“Nobody ever got a job at any of the farm houses since hardly anybody wanted to get into the urban farming business. Those who actually did never employed any of the farmers from the region since these people did not specialise in the kind of farming they intended to do,” says Colonel (retired) Devinder Sehrawat, secretary of the Delhi Grameen Samaj (Delhi Rural Society), who has worked with farmers across north India.

But Shahberi was different. Prime farm land was acquired citing records from 1983 when only two crops were grown, and which showed that most of the land actually fell under the non-agricultural category. Then as the real estate boom hit, the authority, and the UP government, decided to make Greater Noida a residential hub.

Having already declared that land in Shahberi and surrounding villages was mostly barren and so acquired for industrial purposes, the authority came up with a new tool to dupe farmers. The village’s land use pattern, converted to “industrial use” by 2001, was again turned to “agricultural land” overnight.

The authority then reacquired the land saying it would sell it to builders for residential projects and that farmers would be

entitled to various facilities apart from compensation, like free water, 6 per cent of the developed land based on their original ownership in the area, jobs, healthcare, and other things.

“But not one facility ever reached the villagers. Even today farmers across Noida are fighting for rights as per promises made by the Noida Authority when their land was being acquired but not one case has been resolved or looks like it is going to be in the near future,” says Mujahid Hussain.

By the time the Allahabad High Court passed the stay order, builders say they were suffering losses on their investment. The case got loads of sponsored and unsponsored print and air space and the victims were vilified.

It was claimed that farmers had resorted to hooliganism to push their case and that builders and buyers of property to be developed in the area would suffer. In one case, a news channel declared that farmers had obtained an “illegal stay order” from the HC and that they should be punished for not helping the authority and the builders develop world-class housing projects.

The court eventually ordered that compensation for farmers be raised to ₹1,400 per sq. mt. instead of the ₹850 the authority had decided earlier, and that the quantum of compensatory land be raised to 10 per cent of the original land ownership. The authority was also ordered to deliver on various other promises it made before acquiring the land.

Many other villages too filed cases against the authority. But the farmers from Shahberi were not satisfied. They wanted their land back.

“It had to be getting our land back or we would just have had to settle for what the authority was ready to give us in compensation. We decided to approach the SC thinking whatever

comes out would not be worse than it already was,” says Mujahid Hussain.

During the agitations many farmer leaders also supported the Shahberi farmers. Dr. Rupesh Verma, a social activist from Sadopur village in Greater Noida, sat in dharna along with the farmers and faced lathicharges. To quell the agitation police also arrested Mujahid Hussain and his brother Sharafat Ali on charges of “inciting violence.”

After they spent weeks in jail, Verma spread the rumour among political circles and police officials that Samajwadi Party chief and present UP chief minister Akhilesh Yadav was planning to visit Dasna Jail in Ghaziabad, where the brothers had been lodged, to demand their release. Fearing a major backlash, police released them that very morning and has not troubled the family since.

As the Shahberi case was heating up in the Allahabad High Court, the buyers too formed various unions and groups and approached the SC for appropriate relief and refund of the money invested. The most active of the groups are the Noida Extension Flat Buyers Welfare Association (NEFBWA) and the Noida Extension Home Buyers Welfare Association (NEHBWA).

Sushil Sarin, who bought a flat in the Ecovillage-II project of construction major Supertech, says he was told by the builder initially that if the project suffered, he would too.

“The dispute was between the authority and the builder. What the farmers were doing or demanding was up to them to handle. It was unfair if a buyer suffered loss,” he says.

Sarin joined NEFBWA and the members together tried to get to the root of the problem. Significantly, they earned the support of the farmers and supported their cause in turn, dispelling the media myth that farmers’ protest was the root cause of the problem.

“It eventually became clear to us (at NEFBWA) that the authority and the state government were responsible for the situation while builders who were going to make losses would eventually recover the money from the buyer.”

In a landmark judgement, the SC ruled in May 2011 that Shahberi farmers get back their land in the same condition as when it was acquired. This sparked fears among buyers and real estate developers that other projects could also be scrapped and the land would be returned to the farmers.

Many had approached the courts and many more were going to approach the courts after the Shahberi judgement. So, responding to a petition of buyers’ associations the SC ruled that they be refunded and that the builders and the authority together make sure investors’ interests were safeguarded.

Refunds, however, were either delayed or the investors simply offered homes of the same size, in some cases bigger too. In most cases buyers chose to go for newer homes being offered since real estate prices had been pushed up by builders after they lost their battle in the courts.

“In a way protests by farmers demanding their rights always ends up benefiting builders since they exploit public sentiment and plant stories in the media saying their investments were going waste or that their money was stuck due to the farmer-government dispute,” says Devinder Sehrawat.

The real estate sector, almost without exception, runs afoul of the law and flouts regulations. Kishore Kumar (name changed) is the owner of a major real estate company which is among the seven who invested in Shahberi land. He agreed to talk about it in detail on condition of anonymity.

During meetings with senior officials in the state or in fast

developing cities, developers and their consultants, “basically just high-profile touts”, mention land they see fit for buying and “developing” in the future.

“The Greater Noida and now the Greater Noida phase-II concepts were born in cocktail parties held in Lucknow in the late 1990s,” he says. “The technicalities were handled by real estate touts for the developers, and officials also were hand-in-glove.”

Touts approach every construction major in the country and take quotes on the price they will pay and the amount of land they want to buy.

“Real estate consultants handling different clients are approached one by one and everyone is taken on board. Most real estate firms actually report to the select few hundred touts across the country, who wield considerable influence in political circles,” Kishore says.

The quotes determine the base price at which land will be sold and the touts assure the companies that demand will grow and that they will make sure a fixed number of flats are sold, for which they demand commission from the builder. The woman who talked Aparna Goel into buying the flat worked for one such consultancy.

“She had told me later that she had a salary of around ₹50,000 and that her bosses expected her to recover her salary plus commission for at least one more home—which meant she had to make sure three houses were sold every month and people coughed up ₹3 lakh. What happens later is not their concern,” Goel recalls.

Such touts also quote high rates for flats and then ask buyers to go for instalments; which makes sure that some payment is made right away, ensuring a commission for the company. “It is a regular practice and in many cases if a flat is sold to a buyer for

a higher rate, money (cash) is exchanged between the consultant and the builder equally.”

“The consultant’s job is to make sure the real estate sector keeps working by keeping interest in the market alive and also ensuring that buyers dish out good money for the builders. Tu meri kamar khuja main teri khujaun (you scratch my back and I scratch yours).”

A senior official of the Noida Authority, agreeing to speak on condition of anonymity, describes how the touts approach officials and politicians. “The local property dealers keep the contact with clerk-level and some senior officials in the authority or the departments which deal with house and land allotments. Information on various projects is shared between various dealers on a commission basis.

“For example, a dealer who runs his business in a particular area is approached for a deal there and so he commands a commission for giving information and facilitating the deal,” he said. These dealers mostly have links with local politicians and in some cases are themselves members of political parties. “These politicians in turn keep the information supply to higher-ups in their respective parties flowing.”

The most important link, however, is the consultant, mostly owned by front companies of politicians or big businessmen who are also into construction. Naming a major consultancy firm in north India, the official described its ownership pattern alleging that the firm is “most probably” run by a major politician from UP. These firms, he said, keep in touch with the various chains of property dealers across the region.

“They designate employees for various localities. For example, for Noida Extension alone there could be 20-50 employees, each

keeping in touch with dealers on a daily/weekly/monthly basis depending on the development going on or expected in that particular area.”

These firms, along with local politicians who want “development” in their respective areas to get a share of the pie, together influence the authority’s officials and the politicians to make sure particular areas are marked for special development, coordinating from the ground level to the top of the decision making process—from the local property dealer to the consultants to the politicians.

“It is basically lobbying as in the US, except that it is illegal in India and is done in a very ugly fashion. Sometimes the politicians simply ask us (officials): ‘Naya kya laa rahe hain aap’ (What new project are you bringing to us)? This basically means that the officials have to work overtime to come up with new projects so that the whole chain of consultants, property dealers and the politicians (district-state level) is benefited.”

The official, while not denying that officials too charge huge sums of money from builders and gain from the deals, claimed the money is equally distributed to all the employees and so cannot compare to what the other players get.

After the rates of land in a particular area are decided authority officials and the political party in power fix their commission on the land that will be sold to the builders, an informal but unforgiving levy charged on a per square metre basis for the land in question. Every party has a source or agent in the real estate sector to receive the money from builders. Similarly, the touts take the money for authority officials.

When Greater Noida West/Noida Extension was planned the party in power was the Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP) under

Mayawati. The real estate sector is said to have been run by her brother Anand, who also owns and operates a consultancy in Noida.

“In Noida Extension, for example, all builders paid ₹5,000 per square metre to Anand while the authority/touts, whatever you may call them, got ₹3,000 per square metre,” says Kishore Kumar. In return, the latter make sure that the builder pays the money to the authority much after the project is completed and all his flats/houses are sold.

In Noida Extension, for example, builders were only required to pay 10 per cent of the original immediately and paid the rest in 16 instalments, one every six months, a comfortable eight-year period during which the builder can make huge profits.

The deals worked out in the NCR by the builder-touts-authority nexus have seen banks get it in the neck. They go by the government approval for various projects as the base for sanctioning home loans. While many have seen the number of defaulters increase due to escalation of prices mid-way through construction, others have suffered because of the delays in various projects due to protests against them.

As a result many banks have formulated newer norms for processing loans. Surinder Ahlawat, a retired UP Police Inspector, was baffled when HDFC Bank refused to sanction a loan after initially confirming his application. He had made the initial payment to Supertech when he was informed by officials at Supertech and, later, HDFC Bank, that his loan could not be approved. It had made specific enquiries into the construction process through its inspection agents and had refused to sanction the loan for a strange reason—the floor on which Ahlawat had booked his flat had not been approved for sanction.

“At Supertech they told me that flats on floors with even

numbers (2nd, 4th, 6th, etc.) had been approved while the odd ones above 5th had not been approved. Mine was on the 9th floor and had not been approved,” he says.

After running around for almost six months Supertech finally offered him a flat in a separate building in the same project on a floor for which HDFC bank had approved loans.

An officer of the HDFC Bank’s Home Loan department, speaking on condition of anonymity, said the inspection team had visited the construction site regularly to monitor whether the builder was fulfilling the conditions laid down before work began.

“As per the deal with the bank several construction criteria are fixed and the builder promises to fulfil them to make sure customers get loans from the bank. We have to monitor the construction regularly to keep a check on these aspects,” she said. These measures have been made stricter, she said, after many cases of defaulting on the promises by the builders came to light.

“In this case (Ahlawat’s case) we found that to gain one floor in the building, the builder shortened the height of the floors with odd numbers by one foot each. It was supposed to be ten feet but was reduced to nine feet. And so we sent our report to loan department to not sanction loans for the particular floors.”

The bank suffers a bad investment deal if government inspectors reject a construction site, as has happened in Delhi and Haryana. Once rejected, it is between the bank and the builder to sort out the differences whereas the investor is supposed to get back his money from the bank right away. In the case of investors whose flats fell in Shahberi’s area, the banks had to return the money on many occasions even though the case had not been finalised in the courts.

In many cases banks study disputes or possible disputes on

particular sites and locations before sanctioning loans. While most banks were sanctioning loans for the Crossings Republic project in Ghaziabad, Bank of Baroda refused a loan to Nitin Bhandari, a clerk with the Delhi Government.

“They told me the area did not have a map approval from the Ghaziabad Development Authority (GDA) and the state government yet and so the Bank would not sanction the loan,” he says.

After procuring the maps, Bhandari found that while construction had begun, GDA was yet to receive final approval for the changes it had proposed to the land use pattern of the area, which is what happened in Shahberi where the authority effected a similar change.

“The lawyer from the Bank of Baroda’s legal cell advised me to desist from investing there since in future there could be a dispute. And I did so,” he says.

At times the builders suffer losses too, as in Shahberi. After hefty payments to politicians and authorities, if a project is stalled or shelved it is a considerable setback.

For example, Kishore Kumar explains, going by the land rate in Noida Extension—₹10,625 per square metre—the builder pays ₹106.25 per sq mt up front as the first instalment, ₹5,000 to the politician, ₹3,000 to the authority officials/touts and a separate ₹2,200 as mandatory development charge to the authority. So if a builder buys a 1,000 square metre land parcel, he ends up paying ₹1.03 crore instead of the ₹23.06 lakh that he should actually be paying.

“This obviously results in an escalation of prices. The builder makes as much space as possible in the area that is available to him. He increases the area of the houses so that they sell for high rates and just pushes up for more and more floors.”

If a project is stalled or shelved, the builder suffers losses. During this time the touts and officials suffer the most as they have guaranteed the builders smooth sailing. They then take to the media and police using bribes and every other means to turn public opinion in their favour, as in Shahberi. Even when the decision of the SC in Shahberi came, the media highlighted the “relief to the buyers and builders” rather than calling it a win for the farmers.

But builders and touts have numerous ways to hedge the risk. They push up the prices of properties in a coordinated manner and decide on a base price to be quoted to the end buyer, beyond which it is up to the builder to decide.

“The rates have to be kept up in order to make sure the buyer feels that she is buying property at a prime location. The touts do their work to make sure the projects are well-advertised in advance.” In Shahberi and surrounding villages, the seven builders had quoted a base price of ₹3,200 per square foot. Not one building across the colonies was to be less than 10-storey high. This pattern has been followed across the NCR and the country. “If a profit has to be made, rates have to be inflated,” Kumar says.

Money from the initial bookings, when the rates are comparatively low, is used by the builder to wind up pending projects elsewhere. At the same time, touts keep working with the authorities to make sure the areas to be developed receive maximum attention from the municipal corporations and are connected by good roads, bus services, etc.

“Two major things that count while fixing prices are the status of a project and its location,” says Sanjeev Kumar. In Gurgaon, for example, builders who were initially selling property at

₹6,600 per square foot have, over time, increased the price to ₹8200 - ₹8300. In relatively newer locations like the Dwarka Expressway construction major DLF is still selling at ₹4,200 per square foot.

The problem with this mode of profit-making, however, is that it cannot be sustained. In most cases in the upcoming areas, the flats are targeted at the upper middle class and the upper class. The lower middle class and the lower classes have been ignored.

In Greater Noida, for example, 60-70 per cent of the population travels from Delhi or Noida to the city to work and departs by the evening, leaving a ghost town behind. Even those who stay in the city are mostly on rent.

“In Greater Noida people invest money in property. Very few actually buy the property to live themselves. Barely 10 per cent of buyers stay in the houses here,” says Prakash Tyagi, a real estate agent in Greater Noida. The people who rent houses are usually families or students and bachelor boys/girls who work in the city.

The relatively bigger houses stay vacant; only in rare cases are they rented. But since touts keep the rates up, their prices keep appreciating until the buyer decides to sell and invest the profit in another project a little farther from the city where property prices are still low.

“There are so many houses in the city now that the rates at which houses are being rented are also going down now. The supply has outstripped demand,” says Tyagi.

The economic slowdown has hit builders hard as the upper class and the upper middle class suddenly stopped investing, those who had made the investments are reluctant to encash it in the present scenario. If one compares the present scenario to that

in the United States of America, there would be a striking similarity in the way the US market fared before the depression.

In most cases, people stopped investing in the market after making satisfactory profits. In India too people have slowly stopped investing beyond what is actually the practical boundary of a city. Yet the scenario is different from the US because of a huge population and the stable increase in demand that makes sure supply is sufficiently met, resulting in profits for everyone but the buyer.

Kamini Singh, an assistant professor at the Apeejay School of Architecture in Greater Noida, says that the situation is unlikely to change immediately but that it will eventually change for the worse. Builders will have to lower prices as buyers will either have been duped badly over and over again or they will simply stop investing in areas beyond a certain city limit.

“During the last half century, critical analysis of master plans has focused repeatedly on the mechanical nature ‘will work’ or ‘will not work’ and on the devastation they can wreak because they often encourage rigid and sterile development with limited consideration to majority of the population.

“A different approach of bottom-up planning and design is needed to ensure public participation in decision making, which means development should reflect the needs of people from all age, gender and class.

“Most of the projects in Delhi-NCR target the luxury class. The low income and EWS housing projects have become a mere formality. There is limited correlation between actual demand and that is triggered by the fact that the Noida-Greater Noida region is the second largest destination in the country in terms of rupee value of residential real estate assets,” she says.

“The need is to learn from Kerala and follow a bottom-up approach for development, making properties more accessible to the masses.”

This will, she says, ensure that farmers, lower income groups and the lower middle class too are a major part of the rapid expansion in the urban space. The demand will then sustain itself and the NCR region, in particular, will see stable growth. The economy as a whole will be able to sustain a growth pattern that will cushion any kind of a recession in the international market.

The worst hit due to this rapid expansion of the urban space are the villages. “The process of urbanisation engulfs villages among many other natural features and Shahberi is one such village. This has resulted in the metamorphosis of many rural-scapes into an unfamiliar urban fabric, which was never the case in US,” says Singh. Today Shahberi stands as the lone village in an area where more than 20 builders are constructing housing projects.

Taking cue from the success of farmers in Pune in Maharashtra, Shahberi’s farmers came up with a plan for a housing society on their land with special focus on urban farming. They sought help from Kamini Singh, who came up with a detailed proposal.

But more than a year since farmers submitted their proposal to the Greater Noida authority there has been no official response. Unofficially, however, Mujahid Hussain receives calls from builders and officials asking him to allow the construction companies to buy their land.

“The officials offered me a hefty bribe in the form of a land parcel in the village Bisrakh in Noida apart from the compensation. They simply want to make sure the land goes to the builders. They have not responded to our proposal because

they know we will not pay any bribe to them and because they do not want to let farmers develop their land themselves and sell it themselves,” he says. “If they reject our proposal we will go to court, so they are just sitting on it.”

One of the people on whose behalf calls were made to Hussain is R. K. Arora, chairman and MD of Supertech. He could not be reached for comments despite repeated attempts.

Meanwhile, real estate agents have already started offering huge sums to people from the village and some have sold their land. “They know that eventually there will be housing projects here and simply want to make money when that happens,” says Sharafat Ali. However, no farmer has been allowed any construction on their land. Mubassir Hussain, who built a higher boundary wall at his house in the village, was beaten up by police and the wall razed under the supervision of Greater Noida officials.

The various federations and groups of buyers like NEFBWA and the NEHBWA who suffered because of the Shahberi case have been demanding changes to laws, both for farmers and to make sure that buyers do not suffer.

“Builders must not be allowed to sell projects unless they have at least 80-85 per cent of the requisite clearances in hand. If this is made a blanket requirement, cases like Shahberi can be prevented,” says Rajiv Goel, a member of one such federation in Noida Extension.

“In Shahberi, Section 17 (urgency clause) was implemented mechanically and the authority and builders were cheating farmers and buyers together. Even when the HC gave a stay order on construction the authority and the builders did not stop, a clear case of contempt.” The construction of roads and other buildings stopped after the SC judgement but not one of the land parcels

was cleared and given to the farmers in a condition in which farming can continue on it. Roads reaching deep into the village still exist and none of the builders have cleared their buildings and other material, an important condition laid down in the SC judgement.

Aparna Goel, on the other hand, fought for close to ten months to get her ₹3 lakh back from Supertech in 2012, travelling every week from Muzaffarnagar to Noida alone. She is probably the only one who managed to get back all her money from a builder in Noida; everyone else at Supertech lost 15 per cent of the amount they initially paid. She has decided to invest her money in Muzaffarnagar itself and is finalising a contractor to construct a small house on the land she owns in the city.



BEST BUSINESS FEATURE

By

MEHBOOB JEELANI

Runner-up

**UNDER THE INFLUENCE:
PONTY CHADHA'S POTENT MIX
OF LIQUOR AND POLITICS**

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Mehboob Jeelani



Under The Influence: Ponty Chadha's potent mix of liquor and politics

Mehboob Jeelani is a former staff writer at The Caravan. Between 2009 and 2013, he covered the failure of Indian state to tackle poverty, corruption and inequality. From the implementation of welfare programmes like NREGA to the rise of steel tycoons and liquor barons who amassed vast fortunes by working out the system, Jeelani has extensively covered the mix of business and politics in India. His work has been featured in international outlets like Longform.org and he's won the Ramnath Goenka Award for Excellence in Journalism in 2013. He's currently based in New York City, studying for an MA in Politics at Columbia Journalism School.

Under The Influence: Ponty Chadha's potent mix of liquor and politics



| ONE |

Perhaps there is no better way to divine the significance of a regime change than to observe the reshuffling of courtiers who thrive off and influence power. For many journalists and political analysts, then, the high-profile guests entering the grounds of Lucknow's La Martinière Boys' College on 15th March 2012 revealed a lot about whom the new Uttar Pradesh government would smile upon, and how it would function, in the ensuing five years. Nine days earlier, the Samajwadi Party (SP) had won a majority in the state's 16th legislative assembly elections since Independence, and the scion of the party's ruling dynasty, Akhilesh Yadav, was preparing to be sworn in as the new chief minister. Hundreds of celebrating SP workers in red Gandhi caps danced and sang songs before a stage draped in flowers.

Sitting in a special enclosure were some of the country's most prominent politicians, bureaucrats, police officers, film stars and industrialists. The previous day, the Times of India reported that the Yadav family had "doled out invitations to every celeb known to them". When the billionaire mogul Anil Ambani showed up, SP supporters shepherded him to a seat next to Akhilesh's father, the party patriarch, Mulayam Singh Yadav, who had led the state at three different points.

Ambani was also present at Mulayam's swearing-in ceremony for his third stint as chief minister, in 2003. The following year, Mulayam supported Ambani's successful bid for a Rajya Sabha seat, and granted him the rights to build a 3,500-megawatt power plant in Gautam Buddh Nagar district, where the Uttar Pradesh government had purchased land at cheap prices for "public purpose". The project had been stalled by farmers demanding higher compensation for the 2,500 acres making up the site, 40 kilometres from the national capital, but Ambani and Mulayam remained close.

Another billionaire, Subrata Roy, the chairman of Sahara India Parivar, was also spotted chatting with Mulayam and shaking hands with party leaders. Roy, who rose to prominence in Uttar Pradesh, acquired vast land holdings in the state during the third period of SP rule, which lasted until 2007.

Conspicuously absent from the roster of billionaires paying their respects at La Martinière was the liquor baron and real estate tycoon Ponty Chadha. Chadha had also been close with the Yadavs and, like Roy and Ambani, enjoyed great patronage under Mulayam's third government. But these old ties had been eclipsed by Chadha's subsequent association with Mayawati, the charismatic Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP) leader who ousted Mulayam in 2007.

When Mayawati came to power, almost every top bureaucrat and police officer who had ties to the Yadavs was transferred out, and businesses that blossomed under the previous regime were stifled. Many believed that Chadha's fortunes would also take an ill turn. But he swung things in his favour. While Ambani and Roy saw various projects scuppered under Mayawati's rule, Chadha was awarded a monopoly over distribution for the state's ₹14,000-crore liquor market. In addition, he was given control of 30 per cent of the alcohol retailers across the state, and was allowed to purchase a number of distressed but viable state-owned sugar mills at a price below their fair-market value. He also received a ₹10,000-crore contract for distributing food under the state's midday meals scheme for children and pregnant women—in violation of an earlier Supreme Court order—and landed vast tracts of prime real estate just outside Delhi at a loss to the public, state Congress leaders claimed, of ₹40,000 crore. Both Chadha and the BSP government made enormous sums from the booze trade in particular—excise tax on the 10 million cases of liquor sold every year generated roughly ₹10,000 crore annually for Mayawati's government—and within the state administration Chadha became known as "Mayawati's financier."

With the SP back in power, many believed Chadha would now suffer. After abandoning Mulayam for Mayawati, it was far from clear that Akhilesh would let him back into the SP fold. During poll stops, Akhilesh had frequently expressed his displeasure with the state's liquor policy, which had allowed Chadha to drive up retail prices. At a public meeting in Bhimnagar, he promised the crowds that he would cut the cost of their "shaam ki dawai" (evening medicine) if voted in.

In fact, the pressure on Chadha seemed to begin in the weeks leading up to the election. In January, the Comptroller and

Auditor General issued a report saying Chadha's sugar mills had been auctioned off at a loss to the public of somewhere between ₹1,200 crore and ₹2,000 crore, and recommending that the case be taken up by the Enforcement Directorate. Then, on 1st February—the same day that Mayawati kicked off her re-election campaign at a huge rally in Sitapur—a group of roughly 20 officials from the Income Tax Department arrived at Noida's Centrestage mall, which is owned by Chadha's Wave Group. After flashing their identity cards and gaining access to the 350,000-square-foot building, the officials rushed into the basement, where they reportedly found a secret vault. At the same time, at least a hundred of their fellow officers were raiding 18 other Chadha-owned properties (including farmhouses, malls, and nightclubs) scattered across Uttar Pradesh, Punjab, and Delhi.

While the officials cut into the vault at Centrestage with a high-powered gas torch, 55-year-old Chadha—a tall, corpulent, grizzly bear of a man with close-cropped hair and beard—was having a drink with a friend at the friend's office in South Delhi's Defence Colony. He had been tipped off about the raid. "He was sitting in his office and we were exchanging poetry," the friend, who runs a petroleum business, told me. "I asked him whether he was worried about the raid and he said, 'I have seen such gimmicks long ago. I know where it's going to end.'"

Early news reports claimed that the tax officials had recovered ₹100 crore from the vault, along with various unspecified documents. There were rumours in the papers that the cash had been laundered by family members through various companies in Dubai, where Chadha had properties and investments. If the confiscated paperwork could prove this, it might threaten Chadha's empire, which was valued at somewhere between \$1 billion and \$10 billion. And, intentionally or not, some of the

blowback was bound to catch Chadha's political patron, Mayawati, as she mobilised her party ahead of the polls.

In the end, Chadha's equanimity seemed justified. Two weeks after the raids, newspapers reported that almost nothing was recovered from the mall. "There were only two ₹50 notes in the vault," an Income Tax Department official told the Economic Times. Whatever the truth, the episode was an embarrassment for the department, and Chadha emerged unscathed. The week following the raid, he held a lavish wedding for his daughter Harleen, at which senior politicians from the SP and the BSP, and from Punjab and Delhi were in attendance.

Mayawati fared less well. The BSP lost 126 of their 206 assembly seats (out of a total of 403) and, with them, the chief ministership. There was a growing sense that, as the SP swept into power, those who had prospered (perhaps illicitly) under Mayawati, including Chadha, might be swept out.

Shortly after Akhilesh took the oath as chief minister and left the stage at La Martinière, ecstatic SP supporters stormed the platform and set fire to the dais. Many of the most important guests retreated to a grand after-party at Sahara Shahar, Subrata Roy's 375-acre Lucknow estate. En route to the bash, Akhilesh held a press conference at which he proclaimed, "Organised corruption as happened in the previous regime never took place in the state [before]... UP is now celebrating democracy." At Roy's, senior politicians, serving bureaucrats, stars and business moguls mingled. Imported whiskey was served all night, and several party leaders passed out on white couches spread across the property's lush lawns. They were later escorted home in white Mercedes sedans, the house transport.

At one point, a group of IAS officers gathered on the grass



Mulayam Singh Yadav and Anil Ambani at Akhilesh Yadav's swearing-in ceremony, where Ponty Chadha was conspicuously absent.

began chatting about the people who had vexed the Yadavs when they were out of power, those that had remembered the family and helped them win the election, and the candidates for top ministries and administrative posts. They also briefly discussed Chadha. Because of his closeness to Mayawati, the officers agreed that his ascendancy in Uttar Pradesh was coming to an end. But not all the signs pointed in this direction. It was rumoured that Chadha had, in fact, been invited to Akhilesh's swearing in. Chadha's son, Manpreet, who goes by "Monty", arrived late to the inauguration, but managed to show his face. (According to some reports, Monty had flown in to Lucknow on a private jet with a "well known Mumbai industrialist.")

The auguring of public appearances and celebrity guest lists aside, Chadha was, according to some, too big to fail. "Ponty always had a strange magnetic force that pulled him into relevant

circles,” SAT Rizvi, a former IAS officer who served in Uttar Pradesh for more than two decades, told me. “His ever-rising money and muscle power made him indispensable.” Rizvi wasn’t the only one who thought so. Within the wealthy and politically connected circles in which he moved, Chadha had gained a surpassing reputation for the kind of entrepreneurial success that is born of great intimacy with power. He built the bulk of his fortune in the span of two decades by forming close relationships with north India’s ruling personalities on the promise of benefits that only liquor could bring. Booze dispensed on the campaign trail could more or less be counted on to deliver votes, and liquor sales were the easiest way to pump funds into government coffers. Across north India, excise duties on alcohol are the second largest source of state revenue (after sales tax), since most other taxes go to the centre. Illegal kickbacks from contracts in other industries might line the pockets of individual politicians, but nothing could rival booze for legitimately enriching an entire government—whether or not those funds were later siphoned off for less than official purposes.

All this gave Chadha more ballast against the shifting winds of political favouritism than many other magnates in India. Party leaders, serving legislators and bureaucrats from across the political spectrum wore expensive watches or hung their walls with paintings gifted to them by Chadha. “He even imported Scotch with his name, Ponty, inscribed on the bottles and gifted them to almost every politician, businessman, and friend in town,” Tony Jesudasan, a spokesperson for Anil Ambani, told me. Political rivals would bump into each other when they attended Chadha’s Gatsby-style farmhouse parties, to which they were sometimes flown at his expense on privately chartered planes. The former SP general secretary Amar Singh, who once wielded



Chadha’s son, Monty, who took over the empire’s real estate business, says Wave City will be “something like downtown Manhattan.”

great influence with Mulayam, explained Chadha’s political buoyancy to me in simple terms: “He gives 70 per cent of his bribes to the party in power and 30 percent to the opposition.” If you mattered and could help Chadha expand his interests, then he would throw his weight behind you—regardless of party, identity, or ideology.

Chadha’s friends in public office proved more than willing to help pay him back. By 2012, his empire had expanded into an almost absurd array of enterprises. In addition to being a liquor baron, sugar miller, real-estate giant, and food distributor, he became a paper miller, soda bottler, large-scale poultry farmer, Bollywood film producer, public transport operator, hydroelectric dam builder, mall and multiplex erector, educationist, philanthropist and African-land speculator. He also owned a professional hockey team. “Ponty always saw three

50-paisa coins in one rupee,” Mahesh Gupta, a former excise commissioner of Uttar Pradesh, told me. If in a few of his projects Chadha seemed to turn a profit only after assuming significant risks and benefitting the economy at large, many of his ventures got going through contracts effected by the state on ludicrously favourable terms.

That it was Chadha who eventually leveraged these advantages to obtain outrageous wealth might have come as a surprise. He was a college dropout contending with two brothers and a host of cousins for space in a family business that was itself subject to violent external competition. He was also an amputee—a childhood accident deprived him of his left arm below the elbow and left him with two partial fingers and part of a thumb on his right hand—who had to hold his own in the physically aggressive culture of Moradabad, western Uttar Pradesh, where he grew up. But he was intelligent, and later gained a reputation for his orderly mind. “He planned everything in his head and had this amazing memory power,” Jesudasan said. “He would never forget his meetings or appointments. He had this clock constantly ticking in his head and it always alarmed him about his plans.”

Chadha, who was universally known as Ponty—he once told a reporter that the nickname was given to him by his father, and he liked it because “it was easy to remember and gelled with the trade”—learned early on never to yield an inch. The common perception is that whoever got in his way was either induced into an alliance or pushed out of business. “His strength was that he was brutal on the street and very sober with the government,” Gupta said. By the time he was killed, 10,000 armed men reportedly guarded the family’s many enterprises. Some of Chadha’s rivals had been murdered, and accusations of guilt were inevitably laid at his feet. The president of the Lucknow Sharab

Association, Anil Agarwal, said Chadha had entered “the most outrageous domains of the liquor business”, in which any act of violence was possible. At other times, Chadha showed a willingness to betray his own kin.



Chadha at his Chhatarpur farmhouse. He often compared himself to a lotus that bloomed from the mire.

Chadha often compared himself with a lotus that bloomed from the mire. His closest aide, Sweety Singh, told me a story that he seemed to consider an illustration of this moral decency. One of Chadha’s business rivals had hired a group of contract killers to assassinate Chadha. “The contract killers knew who Ponty was,” Sweety said, brimming with pride. “They called him and revealed the name of their client and asked if Ponty wanted him killed once and for all. But Ponty is such a great man that he said, no, don’t do him any harm. He was very kind-hearted.”

One way or another, Chadha’s interests were enforced. He eventually held sway over significant parts of the liquor business

in Uttar Pradesh, Punjab, Haryana, and Chandigarh; had liquor operations in Rajasthan, Uttarakhand, and Chhattisgarh; and amassed a king's ransom through his other enterprises.

Following Akhilesh's appointment, it soon became clear which way the winds would blow for Chadha. A month after the swearing-in, Mulayam received Chadha for breakfast at his Lucknow home. The meal was dominated by silence: Mulayam spoke rarely, mostly complaining about his insomnia and other health problems; Chadha kept quiet. According to a senior SP leader who has been privy to many meetings between the two men, it was like a "father and son having a usual meal and communicating in hints and codes known only to them". You don't calculate the profits and losses at a meeting like that, the SP leader said. "You just need to convey that you are loyal to the politician—and Ponty had mastered that art."

In the following months, Akhilesh backtracked on his campaign promises, allowing the liquor distribution policy that Mayawati had instituted to Chadha's great advantage—and which she had renewed just months before the elections—to remain the law of the land. He then publicly denied that there were grounds for investigating the sugar mill auctions, effectively blocking an official probe; cleared all the Noida real estate projects that Chadha had initiated under Mayawati (which he had earlier promised to review); and renewed Chadha's monopoly over the distribution of midday meals.

Though Akhilesh's accommodations were a boon, Chadha was anything but complacent. At the same time that the new chief minister was applying more grease to the wheels of Chadha's various enterprises, Chadha and his son, Monty, were working hard to shed the less seemly aspects of the family's reputation, and to achieve a new respectability through enterprises such as

their self-proclaimed "ultra-modern" real estate ventures.

But Chadha was not to see the full fruits of this labour. His attempts to refashion the family image were still underway in mid November 2012, when he was gunned down by his brother Hardeep in a shoot-out at one of the family's many Delhi farmhouses. It was a violent, high-profile end to a life that began rather modestly in post-Partition Uttar Pradesh, and it seemed to fix the liquor baron's reputation as a rags-to-riches gangster. But the killing, and the stories that emerged in its aftermath, also began to shed some light on how Chadha, largely a cipher to the public, had accomplished his remarkable rise.

| TWO |



The light-blue two-storey house in Adarsh Colony, Moradabad, where Chadha grew up alongside his cousins and brothers.

Moradabad is a battered city of small-time brass, copper, and steel producers about three hours east of Delhi. The small district centre of roughly 900,000 straddles a highway that runs from the

capital to Jim Corbett National Park, along with a bunch of hotels, glittering with signboards, have recently sprung up. Once you enter the city, bicycles, scooters, cars and autorickshaws fight slowly through narrow roads. Driving past Moradabad's famous market for brass utensils, you hit dense neighbourhoods such as Adarsh Colony, where Ponty Chadha grew up, in the early years of Mulayam's ascent.

Ponty was born Gurdeep Singh Chadha, in Moradabad, on 22nd October 1958. The town had a history of intense Hindu-Muslim rioting that stretched back at least a century, and many of the people Chadha grew up around had been scarred by the violence of Partition. The Sikh families who migrated from newly formed Pakistan were confined to a refugee settlement in Adarsh Colony. Those I spoke with said their community had always focused on business: they drove trucks, fixed cars and motorbikes, and opened small iron and steel producing units.

During Partition, Chadha's grandfather Gurbachan migrated to Moradabad from Rawalpindi, where he was forced to leave behind his livelihood: a herd of cattle and buffaloes. In the United Provinces, he somehow managed to acquire new stock, and began selling milk. Around the time that the state was renamed Uttar Pradesh, in 1950, he had enough capital to begin producing bhang and country liquor. He was known for his staunch faith in God and his acts of charity, and never turned away beggars desperate for a dram. For a single peg of desi whiskey, he would ask them simply to utter the holy word. A mendicant would shout "Satnam!" and Gurbachan would pour spirits into his cup.

Chadha's father and his two uncles took over the alcohol business in the early 1960s. The family—including the brothers'

respective wives and about a dozen siblings and cousins—lived under one roof. From producing country liquor for a single local shop, they moved into buying alcohol from larger distilleries and wholesaling it to several small outlets. By the 1970s, the family controlled a major proportion of the liquor distribution in Moradabad town. Early on, they decided to restrict the operation to blood relatives. Chadha was sent to boarding school in Nainital along with his cousin Gurjeet, who was known as Teetu. "Ponty was good at mathematics and he enjoyed geometry," 61-year-old Gurdyal Singh, the Chadhas' next door neighbour in Adarsh Colony, said. "The family had great expectations from Ponty and Teetu both, but no one ever imagined that Ponty would go so far."

Teetu and Chadha were family, friends, and fierce competitors. Around the time they were 10, Teetu told me, they both nearly died in the accident that led to Chadha's disfigurement. One evening while the rest of the family was busy with prayers, they went up to the terrace of the house to challenge one another to a rock slinging contest. They tied a long string to a stone and took turns hurling it from the balcony. On his go, Chadha took a great swing, which was followed by a loud thud. Chadha had collapsed. A few moments later, Teetu fell unconscious. The string had tangled in a high-voltage power line and the cousins were electrocuted. "Look at this hand," Teetu said, holding up his left limb, which had only two fingers. "I got crippled, too."

After the accident, Chadha struggled with his handicap. Holding a spoon or holding a pen—he had to clasp his world between two fingers. He learnt to do it well: by his early twenties, he rode a gearless bike around Moradabad, played neighbourhood cricket, and kept guns. "He was a very good

shooter,” Darinder Singh, Chadha’s school friend and neighbour in Moradabad, who is known as Para, said. “He loved hunting musk deer. We would often set up a barbeque and roast the prey.” To hunt, Chadha wore an artificial arm with a sharp tip. He would rest the barrel on this arm and pinch the butt in his armpit. “Then he would pull the trigger with his two fingers,” Para said. “Those two fingers were as strong as pliers.”

After finishing high school in 1978, Chadha and Para enrolled in the undergraduate economics programme at HSB Inter College in central Moradabad. The majority of the students at the college were Hindu Jats. They teased Chadha for being crippled. “They called him *loola*, *tunda*,” Para said. “In the beginning he ignored them but a few days later it started bothering him a lot.” Chadha and Para hatched a plan to beat up the student who antagonised Chadha the most. They ambushed the student while he was having lunch inside a classroom. Chadha locked the door, and kicked the student’s table so hard that he mangled it. Chadha then asked Para to grab the student. Para, who is still tall and muscular, held the young man from behind. “Then Ponty headbutted him a couple times,” Para said.

News of the assault quickly spread, and soon a large group of Jats wielding knives, steel rods, and hockey sticks began searching for Chadha and Para. “We went into hiding,” Para said. They sought help from Para’s older brother, who ran a transport company in town and employed a few dozen Jats, and he negotiated with the leader of the Jat students. The price for Chadha’s safety was that he never went back to college.

If Chadha’s formal education was at an end, a more important one was just beginning. He and Teetu spent much of the 1980s as

enforcers in the family business, raiding retail liquor shops to execute embargoes on bottles smuggled in from the borders of Punjab and Haryana, where alcohol was cheaper than it was in Uttar Pradesh. Shops with which the Chadhas contracted could only stock brands the family distributed, and anyone who infringed this rule soon watched his entire supply dry up.

As the family expanded its distribution network, Chadha’s remit grew. To help carry out his work, he founded a gang of informants, which he earnestly called “the vigilance team”. “He developed a strong intelligence network of spies across the town,” Mahinder Singh, the chief excise officer in Moradabad district, told me. Team members were given motorcycles to patrol the highways for smugglers, or bicycles to pedal from shop to shop as they kept a check on distribution. At the same time, Chadha was learning to use the local administration to his advantage. He was in close touch with Singh and other excise officers in Moradabad, and would tip off inspectors about smuggled liquor. “His team still shares its information with us,” Singh said.

By 1987, Chadha was completely consumed by the family business, which was pulling in significant amounts of cash. Under the guidance of his uncle and Teetu’s father, Harbhajan Singh, Chadha earned a decision-making stake. Chadha’s overriding ambition, a neighbourhood friend named A. K. Khanna told me, was “to bring order to the liquor trade of Moradabad”.

Harbhajan helped school Chadha in the value of political goodwill. He was the first in the family to establish contacts with Mulayam Singh Yadav, who became chief minister in 1989, at the head of the Janata Dal alliance. Since Independence, Uttar

Pradesh had been largely dominated by the Congress party and its Brahmin hierarchs. Mulayam and his contemporaries represented a new breed of identity-based state politics in which muscular party leadership embodied hopes of caste empowerment. Yadavs, a peasant and pastoral caste who were seen by upper castes as uncouth and lacking in respect for the law, soon gained the whip hand in the state. Accusations of bribery, extortion, kidnapping and murder were common.

Chadha was eager to form his own links with these new powers. As a reward for his dedication to the family business, Harbhajan sent him on an important errand in advance of the 1989 elections: delivering ₹8 lakh (worth roughly ₹27.5 lakh or \$45,000 today) to Mulayam. “The elections were close and Mulayam needed that cash,” Teetu’s son chipped in when I asked his father about the incident. When Mulayam defeated the Congressman ND Tiwari, and entered into a coalition with the Bharatiya Janata Party to form a government, Chadha brought him another present. “Mulayam didn’t have a car back then,” a close associate of the Chadha family told me. “Ponty gifted him one.”

After taking over as chief minister, Mulayam enacted a policy of “caste-based business tenders” that gave lower-caste communities living on riverbanks the exclusive right to extract sand and pebbles for resale. Thickets of new commercial and residential buildings were sprouting up along the north-western edge of Uttar Pradesh, where Delhi was expanding eastward into Noida, and the projects (which would soon be fertilised by economic liberalisation) required massive amounts of sand for concrete. Govind Pant Raju, a senior journalist based in Lucknow who was then a small-town newspaper reporter covering the operations of local mafias, said that Chadha “immediately

pounced on this policy” and was awarded a claim. “Everyone wondered how he managed to get this contract from the government,” Raju said. “The policy was meant for lower castes living along rivers and there was no scope for subcontracting.”

The sand mines were a boon for the liquor business. “We made good profits,” said Teetu, who would accompany Chadha to his extraction sites, spread along the Gola river in Nainital district. “In return, we just had to give the government some royalty.” Chadha pumped revenues from the mines back into his liquor distribution network, which needed capital in order to spread to other markets, where the established players were backed by vicious gangs. He also began to cultivate a relationship with western Uttar Pradesh’s most powerful liquor baron, Kishan Lal Wadia. “Ponty was a small-time operator of Wadia in the early nineties,” a senior SP leader told me. “It was from Wadia that Ponty learned to cajole politicians, and it’s because of Wadia’s liquor money that Mulayam managed to influence the politics of western Uttar Pradesh.” Wadia’s backing gave Chadha the confidence to expand into the northern part of the state, which later became Uttarakhand.

Before he could push north, however, Chadha required muscle, and that muscle required leadership. “He first employed a group of notorious criminals,” the senior SP leader said. “Then he needed someone to lead these criminals.” In 1993, a violent dispute broke out in northern Uttar Pradesh between Harbhajan Singh Cheema (a politician who was also in the mining business) and Gurbachan Lal Sharma (a well known and deeply feared gangster) over a few acres of land. For the next two years, the two waged a bloody gang war in which dozens of men were killed. As a politician, Cheema had to appear frequently in public and

needed a bodyguard. Sukhdev Singh Namdhari, a man with a reputation for violence, took the job.

In February 1995, Sharma was murdered by unidentified gunmen. Police arrested Namdhari, but he was quickly bailed out. “The common perception was that Namdhari gunned down Sharma,” Raju, the journalist, said. Here was Chadha’s much-needed man. Later that year, Chadha hired Namdhari—who eventually had 15 cases registered against him for crimes including criminal intimidation, dacoity and murder—to oversee his liquor and sand extraction projects in the north. Under the tutelage of Wadia, and with Namdhari by his side, Chadha expanded his distribution network from Moradabad to 18 districts in western and northern Uttar Pradesh—an achievement that would soon seem modest.

| THREE |

Chadha’s uncle Harbhajan, a stout, turbaned man with a well waxed snow-white beard, is still a wholesaler of foreign liquor in Moradabad. Sitting in his office, a small room with finely polished walnut furniture on the first floor of a two-storey cinema hall that the family built in the 1970s—the first big investment the Chadha family made outside the liquor trade—he seemed to me to be frozen in that earlier era. Devotional songs played from somewhere beneath his desk. (He said he always listens to holy music at work.) The building, now drab, was veined with cracks.

Behind Harbhajan’s desk there was a glass cupboard. Inside, a framed picture showed two young men—Harbhajan and Mulayam. When I asked him whether he was still in contact with

the SP leader, he said he wasn’t: “I lost touch with him because of Ponty. One day he told me that since he and Teetu were taking good care of business, I should stay away from Mulayam. He said, ‘Mulayam doesn’t like to entertain too many people for one purpose.’” Harbhajan then told me how Chadha, as he expanded into northern Uttar Pradesh in the mid 1990s, broke away from parts of the family. “He betrayed me,” Harbhajan said. “He took a 40 percent share from Moradabad and refused to give me anything from Uttarakhand.”

The mid 1990s marked the beginning of Chadha’s decade-long ascension from a small if politically well connected regional player to a shaping force in north India’s politics. This coincided with a period of radical upheaval that threw Uttar Pradesh open to new alignments of power. As the old order of the Congress was overturned by the identity politics of the SP, BSP, and the Hindu-nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party, opportunities arose for local interests that had been outside Congress coteries to gain influence and office. Bitter contests broke out over control of the lucrative machinery of the state. Between 1993 and 2003, there were eight chief ministerships and three periods of president’s rule, all of which were accompanied by intense administrative churning. In 1995, the year that Mayawati first came to power, at least 500 officials were transferred around—or out of—the state bureaucracy; when she came back to power in 1997, after a year and a half of president’s rule, she transferred nearly 800.

In time, Chadha took advantage of many of these new alignments. His first order of business in the late 1990s, however, was to keep expanding his liquor operations, laying the groundwork for the distribution monopoly that he would later achieve.

State policy was to auction off wholesale liquor licenses on an

annual basis. The number of outlets a wholesaler could serve was strictly limited, so in order to bag large numbers of licenses at a single go, Chadha pioneered a system called “playing proxy”: gather as many trustworthy people as possible and load them up with cash to outbid rivals. Through these cartels, which became known as “liquor syndicates”, Chadha snapped up most of the alcohol distribution licenses in western Uttar Pradesh.

More territory meant Chadha could harness his liquor business to forge new political alliances, reaching out not only to Mulayam and Mayawati, but also to Rajvir Singh (son of the two-time BJP chief minister Kalyan Singh), whom he reportedly made a partner in the liquor distribution of Aligarh district (where his father’s constituency was). (Rajvir denied this association with Chadha, telling me, “I have never worked with him. He had his own contacts and people like me never mattered to him. He was better off without the support of my father. He had already gained enough power in previous regimes.”)

Chadha also hoped to push his distribution network and its influence into other parts of the state but, for the time being, he was blocked by equally powerful rivals, such as the Mulayam supporter (and future SP politician) Jawahar Lal Jaiswal. Instead, he found a frontier in Punjab, where a tussle over liquor and politics had erupted between Sukhbir Singh Badal (son of the chief minister, Parkash Singh Badal) and his brother-in-law, Adesh Pratap Singh Kairon. In 2001, with the elder Badal’s five-year term nearing its end and fresh assembly elections around the corner, the family’s Akali Dal party began searching for new candidates.

In business and in politics, Sukhbir supported the Akali Dal old guard, which was affiliated to the biggest liquor distributor in

Punjab, Jagdish Singh Garcha, who also served as the state’s minister for technical education. Kairon, who was the excise and taxation minister, lobbied to get party tickets for business associates who wanted to enter politics, but were frozen out by Garcha’s control over liquor distribution. Kairon’s candidates could only woo voters if he tapped his own booze supplies. “To break Garcha’s monopoly,” said K. S. Chawla, a journalist based in Ludhiana who has covered the Badal–Kairon row, “he brought Ponty to Punjab.”

A couple of months before the elections in early 2002, there was to be an auction of Ludhiana retail liquor shops at which Garcha and Chadha were expected to face off as agents for Sukhbir and Kairon. Chief Minister Badal postponed the auction three times, hoping that he could arbitrate a truce between his son and son-in-law. But the clashes persisted, and the auction was eventually held, in nearby Patiala. It was Chadha’s first foray into Punjab. Bidding liberally, he and his syndicate snaffled up shops worth ₹16 crore per year. “Ponty never cared about the market,” Garcha, now in his late 70s, told me. “For a liquor shop worth ₹10 lakh, he would propose ₹50 lakh.” After acquiring large wholesale licenses, Chadha would then co-opt the small middlemen who connected distributors to hole-in-the-wall shops. “He was loaded with a lot of money and he bought almost every small-time contractor,” said Garcha, who for a while managed to hold on to half the district’s retail stores.

As it turned out, neither Garcha’s liquor and Sukhbir’s votes nor Kairon’s votes and Chadha’s liquor could keep the Akali Dal in power, and Sukhbir’s father was shunted out of office by the Congress politician Amrinder Singh. This didn’t seem to matter much to Chadha, however. He now had a foothold in Punjab and set

about playing the game he had mastered in Uttar Pradesh: massaging politicians' egos while aggressively pursuing market share. He quickly established a strong bond with the chief minister, with whom he socialised frequently. On one occasion, Singh, after disappearing from Punjab without alerting even his own security officers, suddenly issued a press statement from Dubai announcing that he was attending the wedding of someone close to Chadha. But Chadha's influence was also percolating down through the state's liquor apparatus: excise officers overseeing local auctions would hold the bidding for hours if Chadha needed to turn up late. Over the course of the next three years, Chadha poached almost all the contractors from Garcha's network.

In the late summer of 2005, in the middle of Singh's reign in Punjab, Chadha attended golden jubilee celebrations for Dhudial Khalsa Senior Secondary School in Patiala, where he had won his first retail shops. There, a politician from the Akali Dal who was close to Kairon, baited Chadha by accusing him of running a liquor mafia in Punjab. Ponty answered politely, "The mafia doesn't care about generating revenue for the government. In my case, I care a lot about the government. I run this business and add huge sums to the state exchequer." Here, distilled, was the political genius of Chadha's enterprise. Before leaving the event, he announced that he would renovate the school, which was dilapidated, and build it a new storey.

In 2003, as Chadha was taking advantage of his opening in Punjab and raking in cash through his monopolies in Uttarakhand and western Uttar Pradesh, a BSP-BJP coalition government under the leadership of Mayawati, which had come to power following a remarkably close election the previous year, was struggling to maintain its integrity. In late August, the BJP

withdrew its support for the chief minister, and the coalition crumbled. Amid calls for dissolution of the assembly, Mulayam rallied, gathering enough support to stave off fresh elections and regain power in Lucknow.

Shortly afterwards, Mulayam and Amar Singh, the SP party general secretary, began distributing favours to their dearest benefactors. Singh lobbied on behalf of the real estate dealer Ashok Chaturvedi, who was given a large tract of land in Noida. "The arrangement between Singh and Mulayam was that except for [the industrialist] JP Gaur and Chaturvedi, no one would ever enter into the real estate sector in Noida," a close associate of Singh's told me.

In addition to trying to bolster his friends, Singh hoped the agreement would stifle Chadha, who had just begun to funnel profits from his liquor empire into other industries, including real estate. "Amar tried his best to turn Mulayam against Ponty," the former SP leader told me. "He would often say, 'Why are we helping this man? He changes his colour like a chameleon.'" But Mulayam and Chadha went back to the days of NE 1000, and the chief minister soon publicly inaugurated one of Chadha's first real estate projects, the 314,500-square-foot Wave Mall in Lucknow, one of five Wave Malls that Chadha would eventually build.

Singh, his close associate said, was "disgruntled", but the chief minister proved indifferent to his constant grumblings against Chadha. "Mulayam doesn't care a damn about loyalties," the former SP leader said. "All he cares about is his own share—and when it comes to distributing money, Ponty's record was always clean." Singh confirmed this view of Chadha, telling me that Chadha was a "transparent and honest creator, distributor and maintainer of ill-gotten wealth". (When I asked him about

Chaturvedi, he said he knew him and other players from a distance: “Chaturvedi would come and meet me just like anyone would meet me. These guys—Ashok, Ponty and JP Gaur—they had direct contact with Mulayam. I was never part of that circle.”)

Chadha did well under Mulayam, but the real explosion in his wealth took place when Mayawati came back to power. Propelled by a number of convenient decisions by her BSP government, Chadha was able to force out his remaining opponents in Uttar Pradesh’s alcohol distribution market, bag a significant portion of the state’s retail liquor shops, massively extend his real estate ventures, and gather into his ever expanding arms a whole range of new enterprises, including the sugar mills and food distribution contracts. A hallmark of several of these endeavours seemed to be vertical integration: liquor sold in his new Model Wine shops was supplied by his distribution company; instead of small change, Model Wine customers were given little snack packets made by his new food processing plant; and the Bollywood films he produced were distributed through his new film distribution company and shown at his 11 Wave multiplexes. Every link in these chains could be exploited to disguise profits through financial misreporting of one kind or another. For example, Chadha quickly developed a reputation for distributing some of the country’s worst movies (such as *Jism II*); it was easy to claim that such tripe sold poorly at the box office, especially when Chadha was the one collecting the ticket stubs, but a senior SP leader told me that the films earned more than critics or tax collectors ever thought.

If malfeasance fuelled much of this acceleration in Chadha’s interests, scandal was its inevitable by-product. One of the most significant of the improprieties that emerged from Mayawati’s

association with Chadha at this time involved the sugar mills. In 2010 and 2011, her government held auctions of 21 under-performing state-owned refineries, 16 of which were bought by seven firms that turned out to be a cartel controlled by Chadha. Many of these companies had common shareholders and directors, shared a single address, and paid to participate in the auctions using demand drafts with consecutive serial numbers issued by the same bank branch on the same day. This lack of competition alone cost the state an estimated ₹200 crore, according to the CAG report later filed in the case. Although the details are complex, at least a dozen improprieties were identified in the sale of the mills, including undervaluation of the land and other assets, and disclosure of the minimum acceptable bid. In total, the CAG said that the state lost more than ₹2000 crore through its illicit management of the auctions.

In another high-profile case, the Mayawati government violated a Supreme Court ruling in order to permit Chadha’s Great Value Foods to become the sole supplier of lunches for the state’s midday meal scheme. The supply contracts, which were supposed to go to certain kinds of local community groups and feed more than 2 crore children and pregnant women, were worth roughly ₹10,000 crore. Later, it turned out that the food Chadha was providing fell far below the prescribed nutritional standards.

The biggest bonanza to which Mayawati helped Chadha was in the liquor trade. The year after she was appointed as chief minister, the state’s liquor distribution policy was changed to ban wholesalers from directly purchasing liquor from distilleries. Instead, the government handed over wholesale and distribution rights for the entire state to the government-owned Uttar Pradesh Cooperative Sugar Factories’ Federation, which in turn

subcontracted the job to Blue Water, a private beverage company whose ownership ultimately answered to Chadha. “The government did not advertise the subcontracting, and the entire trade was handed over to Ponty,” said SP Singh, the president of the Lucknow Wine Association and a distant relative of Chadha’s, who became a staunch adversary of the baron after Chadha shafted him in a distribution deal. “The lifeline of every distributor was in his hands. It was his wish to choke us, drown us or simply ignore us. He played those games very well.”

Chadha used his new monopoly to add 10 to 15 percent to the maximum retail price of liquor—a levy that became known as “Ponty prasad” or “Ponty tax”. This allowed him to generate his own substantial profits while at the same time pumping money into the state exchequer and rewarding Mayawati for her patronage. Between 2008 and 2012, state revenues on liquor excise increased more than 70 percent to ₹8,139 crore. (One Lucknow liquor distributor who worked under Chadha told me that price hikes always work, because “people need alcohol like cars need petrol.”)

Perhaps understandably, the excise commissioner of Uttar Pradesh during much of this period, Mahesh Gupta, saw Chadha in a somewhat rosier light than SP Singh. Soon after Gupta took up his post in 2008, Chadha came from Delhi to pay his respects in person at Gupta’s official residence in Lucknow, and the two men visited with one another on several subsequent occasions. “He was a very careful human being,” Gupta said. “He would fix an appointment with you, though he could have simply called and met us whenever he felt like it. But he would always follow proper procedure.”

The “proper procedures” became even more lucrative for

Chadha after Mayawati changed the retail rules so that he could corner all the liquor shops in the western part of the state. Chadha could now buy alcohol from distilleries and sell it direct to consumers at his own shops. Allegedly, Chadha also cut a number of backroom deals to boost his profits; according to SP Singh, he made a secret agreement with Vijay Mallya to promote the latter’s Kingfisher beer and McDowell’s No. 1 whiskey over other brands. Before Chadha’s death, Singh said, “you couldn’t find Radico Khaitan in the market. Their 8PM brand had become a dream.”

The takings from these monopolies were a boon for Wave Infratech, Chadha’s real estate business, which initiated three major projects in Noida during the period of Mayawati’s reign, including two commercial complexes of more than 2 million square feet each. A fourth project, Ghaziabad’s Wave City, was officially launched only two months after her tenure as chief minister came to an end. In all of these cases, Mayawati was accused of selling the land off to Chadha at absurdly low rates.

In Moradabad, Chadha’s uncle Harbhajan told me that, to his death, Chadha continued to exclude him from the conspicuous riches that these new projects had brought. “I met him a thousand times over the issue—that my son’s heart burns when he sees your shopping malls and wealth; you should give us our share,” Harbhajan said. “Even his father agreed that we deserved an equal share, but Ponty kept playing with me by delaying the proceedings.”

| FOUR |

Chadha’s dispute with Harbhajan was by no means the most

heated, or the most intimate, of the family arguments that seemed to come to a boil as the Chadha fortune grew. In 2010, Chadha's brother Hardeep began pressuring their father, who was suffering from Alzheimer's disease, to dictate that the family's holdings be evenly split between Chadha, Hardeep, and their third brother, Rajinder, according to a report later published in *India Today*. Chadha bristled: it was his leadership that grew the family's alcohol distribution network from a single small town in western Uttar Pradesh into the largest liquor monopoly in north India; it was his hard graft that pushed the frontiers of their empire into other lucrative industries, such as sand mining and real estate; and it was his influence that seeped behind the lace curtains and into the back seats of cherry-topped Ambassadors in Dehradun, Chandigarh, Lucknow, and Delhi.

Hardeep eventually prevailed on their ailing father, and Chadha felt compelled to accede to his dying wishes. But he did so in bad faith: when their father passed away, in April 2011, Chadha reneged on the deal. For the next 16 months, the brothers argued face-to-face and through intermediaries over what they were each due. According to Balbir Singh Kohli, a close relative of the Chadha family, Chadha felt Hardeep was being manipulated. "Some people are misleading him against me," Chadha told Kohli. "I want him to understand that."

If 45-year-old Hardeep was susceptible to manipulation, perhaps it was because he ached to step out of Chadha's shadow. "Wherever Hardeep went, people always recognised him as Ponty's brother," Ravi Sodhi, a spokesperson for Chadha's largest company, Wave Group, told me. "He wanted his own identity." As a result, he became increasingly imperious. "Hardeep would shout and yell at his servants just to say that he

was someone important in the family," Sodhi said. He had also taken to stroking a cat while sitting in a throne as he received guests at the Chhatarpur mansion he shared with the family and, on a recent occasion, he had inexplicably set fire to carpets worth lakhs of rupees. "After every passing month, the dispute grew bigger," Kohli said.

The brothers' larger quarrel over the family's empire soon began to centre on a pair of farmhouses that Hardeep intended to dispose of against his brother's wishes. Chadha, who was magnanimous with friends and enemies alike but could brook no impudence, was furious. Although the homes were a negligible part of the fortune he had accumulated over his two and a half decades of canny business leadership and oily political lobbying, he had resolved to keep them in the family.

On 15th November 2012, with the brothers' acrimony reaching a fever pitch, family members prevailed on them to meet at a Delhi gurdwara. Remarkably, a second settlement was reached: according to *India Today*, Chadha agreed to buy Hardeep out of the business for something between ₹400 crore and ₹1,200 crore. It must have seemed like a small price to pay to rid himself, and the empire he built, of his brother's meddling. But whatever relief there was didn't last long. The next day, another meeting was called between Chadha and his brother. Hardeep, reportedly hectorated by the people counselling him against Chadha, annulled the payout deal. It was the final nail.

Shortly after 9.50 a.m. on Saturday the 17th, Chadha convened a meeting of armed men at his family's Chhatarpur mansion, on Delhi's south-western outskirts, where he lived with his mother and both his brothers. In attendance was his long-time henchman, Sukhdev Singh Namdhari (who was now serving as



Sukhdev Singh Namdhari, later charged in the murder of Chadha's brother, was a long-time enforcer of Chadha's interests.

Uttarakhand's minorities commissioner), as well as at least 11 others. According to chargesheets later filed in a Delhi district court, Chadha divided his and Namdhari's men into two detachments and directed them to storm the contested properties, forcibly evict anyone present, and seize control, while he and Namdhari stayed back and waited for news.

Arriving at 42 DLF Farms, the squad assigned to the property overturned a white Maruti parked in front of one of the property's several gates, and then set about smashing all the gate locks. They rushed onto the grounds and busted into the house, viciously beating as many of the staff and security guards as they could find, stripping them of their mobile phones, and then forcing them off the property. According to statements made by several of the staff members, there were 30 to 40 men in the raiding party, which carried rifles, pistols, revolvers, hockey sticks, dandas and swords. After seizing the farmhouse, new locks and cans of black paint

were distributed to some of the men. They painted over a "for sale" sign that Hardeep had put up and a plaque outside the house that bore his name, then secured all the gates. But one of the staff members who had been assaulted managed to escape with his mobile phone and get word to Hardeep, who was soon racing to the property from his office in Noida.

Once the house was locked down, Chadha and Namdhari were called. At 12.30 p.m., they reached the locked rear entrance in a dark green Toyota Land Cruiser. Sachin Tyagi, a 27-year-old



Chadha's body being taken for an autopsy after his death. Four bullets were found lodged in his chest and abdomen.

Uttarakhand police constable assigned to Namdhari as a personal security officer was in the front next to the driver, strapped with a nine-millimetre carbine rifle. One of Chadha's aides, Narender Ahlawat, soon arrived to open the gate. Just as he popped the lock, Hardeep charged up in a Mercedes. According to witness statements, Hardeep sprang out of the car brandishing a pistol,

and approached Ahlawat, hurling abuses. Then he shoved Ahlawat, and shot him in the leg.

Chadha began to climb out of the Land Cruiser, but Hardeep was now facing him. Hardeep cursed his brother, then pumped seven shots into his legs, abdomen, back and chest. He then turned towards the open gate. Namdhari levelled his pistol—a .30-bore that he had licensed illegally using a forged ration card—at Hardeep. Tyagi, too, put Chadha’s brother in his sights. Then they opened fire, hitting him twice. A slug that entered through Hardeep’s back tore a track through his lungs, filling them with blood, before exiting briefly through his right armpit and then boring clean through his arm.

Chadha was haemorrhaging wildly, but he was apparently still alive. Namdhari and Tyagi secured him in the Land Cruiser as Hardeep, suffocating with his own blood, took shelter in a guardhouse by the gate, where his body was later found. The Land Cruiser then tore off in the direction of Fortis Hospital, in Vasant Kunj, with Chadha bleeding out in the back seat. At 1.05 p.m., doctors at the hospital declared him dead on arrival.

By that evening, hastily reported accounts of the fratricide were vying for air on prime-time news shows with obituaries of the Shiv Sena demagogue Bal Thackeray, who died in Mumbai that afternoon. As word of the killings spread, Chadha-controlled businesses across north India closed their doors amid uncertainty over what would befall the decapitated empire in the coming hours and days. Wave cineplexes ceased screenings, Wave malls were emptied out, and police officers were dispatched to stand guard by shuttered Model Wine shops across Uttar Pradesh. Allegations of conspiracy soon began to emerge, with some claiming that Namdhari had orchestrated the shoot-out in order to expropriate

millions of rupees that Chadha had invested in his name.

Namdhari was arrested in Uttarakhand two days after the killing, at a press conference where he was pleading innocence in the shootings. In the next two weeks, Delhi police detained 20 more people in connection with the crime. Three chargesheets have since been filed, but the case remains sub-judice, and Namdhari continues to maintain his innocence. For its part, the Chadha family seems convinced that, in effect, brother killed brother. “It’s just two minutes of anger has destroyed a beautiful family,” Paramjeet Singh Sarna, a close relative, told me. He said the fraternal dispute over money and influence within the family was almost resolved.

Two days after Chadha and Hardeep’s deaths, it was announced that Chadha’s son, 33-year-old Monty, would take the reins of the company. A high-school dropout who seems to have passed much of his youth behind the red-velvet cordons of Delhi’s most expensive night clubs, Monty had spent the past couple of years trying to help his father slough off the Chadha family’s notorious reputation. When the Wave City project was conceived, the company made Monty the face of it, and he became the man journalists wanted to interview. Chadha handled the backend operations, keeping tabs on the money and clearing up a million little hurdles the government puts in the way. Following the tax department raids, it was Monty’s idea to hire the spokesman Ravi Sodhi, who had previously worked for Anil Ambani, and to set up the Wave Group’s first public-relations department. Monty now works closely with his childless uncle, Rajinder, who was immensely loyal to Chadha, but Sodhi told me that Monty’s decisions are final.

Earlier this year, I went to the Wave Group’s Noida

headquarters to meet Monty and ask him about his father and the future of his father's empire. As I entered the office, a multi-storied glass building inaugurated a few months after Chadha's death, two big garlanded portraits of Chadha and his late father, Kulwant, welcomed me. Sodhi appeared and shepherded me through a long corridor that led to a thick metal door, where he stopped to scan his fingerprint on a small box. The door opened, and we walked into another corridor, by a meeting room labelled "Chanakya." Suddenly, a door to the room slid open. Inside, Monty, in a maroon turban and plush-looking brown shoes, was sitting at a round table with one of his employees, whose name and job description I never got.


During our conversation, Monty, with his alert eyes and softly rasping voice, discussed the sense of great responsibility with which his father's sudden death left him. At present, the company's main target is to finish its ambitious Wave City project, which Monty pitched to me as "something like downtown Manhattan". The first phase, which is presently under construction, has 1,400 apartments, two office buildings, and a shopping mall. Monty's top priority, he said, is to finish this project by 2016. He then asked me why I was interested in writing about his father, and listened quietly to my response with his head down. When I finished, Monty raised his head and said that he would discuss the matter with his senior officers. "Sorry," he said, offering me a firm handshake. "We want some time to think." He never got back to me.

Although the killing of Chadha and Hardeep seemed to cement the less admirable qualities of Chadha's reputation, it may also have freed Monty from the legacy of his father's corruption. Shortly after Chadha's death, Akhilesh Yadav quashed all

outstanding investigations into Chadha's business dealings, leaving Monty free to pursue greater respectability. But the Uttar Pradesh chief minister renewed the Chadhas' liquor monopoly in early summer, projecting record-high excise revenues for the state. Regardless of where Monty says he wants to focus the family business, the economics of the liquor industry and the political conditions out of which the Chadha empire grew persist, and isn't clear that anyone who finds his hand on the tap and his mouth at the spigot can find the will to let go.

Correction: A previous version of this story incorrectly reported that the car Ponty Chadha allegedly presented Mulayam Singh Yadav had the number plate "NE 1000". This has been changed online.



A black and white portrait of Nikhil Wagle, Editor of IBN Lokmat. He is shown from the chest up, wearing glasses and a collared shirt. He has a beard and is looking slightly to the right. His right hand is raised, with fingers slightly curled, as if gesturing during a conversation. The background is a dark, solid color.

“It is the passion to take that story
to the last man in the world.”

NIKHIL WAGLE
Editor, IBN Lokmat

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BEST CRIME NEWS

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By
ZEESHAN SHAIKH
Winner

DHULE, A TOWN DIVIDED

The Indian Express
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Zeeshan Shaikh



Dhule, a town divided

Zeeshan Shaikh is the Assistant Editor at The Indian Express. He has worked as a journalist for over nine years with newspapers like The Indian Express and Hindustan Times. He started off as a business reporter and over the years has covered several sectors including infrastructure, administration and state politics.

Dhule, a town divided

Last Sunday, a street quarrel in Dhule, 325 km north of Mumbai, escalated into riots, killing six people. Zeeshan Shaikh visits the city that was once a regional trading hub, but where people are now edgy and distrustful of each other.

The street dividing Macchi Bazaar and Madhavpura in Dhule, with its charred houses and strewn belongings, has a post-apocalyptic emptiness to it. But before Sunday's riots that claimed six lives, the largely deserted street was where young people, bereft of a social life, would hang out and bond. Today, the street that demarcates the Hindu and Muslim sides of the city also cuts sharply through the hearts and minds of people from both communities.



The north Maharashtra town of Dhule, 325 km from Mumbai, lies on the cusp of two national highways. Thousands of trucks

laden with goods that fuel the progress of economic centres such as Delhi, Surat and Nagpur zip through its highways, without stopping at the town. “Just as these trucks bypass the town, we have now started feeling that even development and harmony have chosen to give us a go-by,” says Mohammed Jaleel who runs a hotel in Dhule.

Dhule was once a strong regional growth centre, thanks to its position as an important trading centre for the villages around it. It also had a thriving textile industry fuelled mainly by the weaving skills of Ansari Muslims from Uttar Pradesh and Bihar who left their homes after the 1857 uprising and set up bases in areas such as Dhule, Bhiwandi and Malegaon. Dhule is one of the few towns in the country where Muslims account for over 25 per cent of the population. Over the decades, as farming, textile and trading generated enough jobs, the city remained largely peaceful, even when the rest of the state erupted during the 1992-93 post-Babri-demolition riots.

However, the gradual decline of the powerloom industry and the shift away from agriculture meant there was large-scale unemployment in Dhule. The unemployment rate for urban Dhule is as high as 26.17 per cent, compared to 7.6 per cent for urban India. The worst affected are members of the Muslim community, who are mostly without education and have been confined to doing odd jobs. Besides finding work in the declining powerloom industry, a large number of Muslim youth work as skilled labourers in garages that dot the highway. Most Muslims who were injured in Sunday's riots were stragglers doing odd jobs who had gathered at the spot to see what was happening.

“He does not do anything. He just roams the streets because he says

he can't find any work," says Shafiqunnisa Ansari, whose 14-year-old son was injured when a bullet hit him during the riots.

The angst of many such unemployed youth who are forced to rub shoulders in cramped Dhule, which is spread over a mere 46.46 sq km, may have fed the violence.

"The state seems to have neglected the development of the minority community. In the last 20 years, property rates in Hindu localities have increased 20-fold while Muslim areas lack infrastructure and there has been very little increase in rates. Such behaviour by the state has also led to anger amongst the minority community," says Sachin Sonawane, an urban planner who runs an NGO in Dhule.

The politicians of Dhule never managed to make a mark on the state's political scene, with local heavyweights such as Amarish Patel and Rohidas Patil being perpetual bridesmaids in state-level politics. Even if they did not manage to win ministerial berths or Rajya Sabha nominations for themselves, they managed to get approvals for almost all kinds of colleges for the town.

For a population of 3.7 lakh, Dhule has seven engineering colleges, two medical colleges and seven other colleges. These colleges have a total capacity of nearly 18,000 seats. Though Muslims make up nearly 25 per cent of the city's population, only five per cent or 915 Muslim students have enrolled for higher studies.

"Lack of money is one of the major reasons for Muslims not taking up higher studies. Moreover, they think working in a garage and acquiring practical skills is the ticket for a better life," says social worker Raees Patel, who also runs schools in Dhule.

The large population of powerloom workers and the proximity of tribal regions such as Nandurbar had led to the creation of a

strong communist and socialist movement in Dhule, which, for years, acted as a bulwark against communal forces. The communists managed to bring all the socially deprived sections of Dhule district, including Hindus, Muslims and tribals, under a single umbrella. However, the rapid degeneration of the trade unions after the powerloom industry failed was one of the reasons why communal distrust took root in the region.

"You are afraid only of things you do not know about. The communists and socialists had managed to bring together both Hindus and Muslims. People would meet each other and talk," says Tayyeb Ansari, 58, whose father Zia Ansari was a prominent communist leader in Dhule. "Today there is hardly any interaction between members of both the communities. The Hindus choose to be among themselves and so do the Muslims. How can you eliminate the fear of each other if you do not talk," asks Ansari.

"After the 2008 riots in Dhule, many people felt it was safer to stay with members of their own community. It is not a very pleasant thing to say, but we end up feeling increasingly insecure around members of the minority community these days," says Vishwas Sontakke, a resident of the Madhavpura area.

It's this fear and distrust of each other that politicians hope to cash in on. In the last assembly elections, Dhule voted for Anil Gote, an independent candidate who was accused in the Telgi scam. The Shiv Sena-BJP as well as the NCP have set their eyes on wresting the seat. The fact that Muslims make up nearly 25 per cent of the electorate and have largely backed Gote has meant that an attempt has been made to polarise the votes.

"Muslim voters are the deciding factor in Dhule City. Political parties are hoping to gain by polarising the votes in the upcoming

Assembly elections,” says Asif Patel, a social activist. “The Shiv Sena wants all the Hindu voters to cast their votes for them. The NCP's former MLA Rajwardhan Kadambande wants all the Muslims to back him,” says Patel.

Many residents of Dhule, including members of the BJP and the Shiv Sena, claim that the riots were not between members of the two communities but between Muslims and the police.

Members of the minority community have complained that the police selectively targeted them last Sunday and fired shots to kill. “There is a great deal of animosity in the police force towards Muslims. While being beaten up, the police kept saying that they were Hindus first, policemen later. They said that it was time for us to go to Pakistan,” says Kamil Ansari, a Dhule resident who was beaten up by the police at Macchli Bazaar.

Many blame this animosity on the 2008 riots, during which Muslims allegedly targeted the state police force and beat up many policemen. However, Muslims claim that there is an inherent bias within the system.

In a chargesheet filed in the 2008 riots, the Dhule police had, in a controversial statement, said that it was an established fact that Muslims are the masterminds behind all terrorist activities across India. They had also stated that Hindus were merely retaliating to Muslim aggression. “There is complete lack of professionalism among the police in Dhule. It is surprising how they forget standard operating procedures while handling such situations,” says Asif Tamboli, a lawyer in Dhule.

The police, however, say they have always been fair. “There was no bias from the police force. We opened fire (on January 6) only to ensure that things do not spiral out of control,” says

Dhule SP Pradeep Deshpande.

For Dhule's residents, the incident of last Sunday and the subsequent events represent the government's neglect of the region. Though six people lost their lives in the riots and parts of the town have been under curfew for over four days, neither the Chief Minister nor the Home Minister have visited Dhule.

“There is no effort on the part of the government to initiate development in the city. Dhule has been unfortunate—it does not have a leader who will push for the growth of the region,” says Vishnu Phaphat, who did his MBA from Pune and returned to Dhule to start a computer training institute. He says that despite the educational opportunities in the city, not many young, educated people want to stay back.

Phaphat is, however, hoping that the city will see better days. “Look at cities like Nashik. They grew on their own, the government did not do anything special for them. I am hoping the same for Dhule,” he says.

Dhule

- * The north Maharashtra town that's 325 km away from Mumbai lies on the cusp of two national highways.
- * Spread over an area of 47.47 km, the city is also the district headquarters of Dhule district which consists of four talukas that have a substantial tribal population.
- * Fleeing the British crackdown after the 1857 uprising, many weavers from UP and Bihar had made Dhule their home.
- * The 2011 census puts the city's population at 3.7 lakh of which over 25 per cent are Muslims.
- * The city has historically been a trading place where villagers from

adjoining areas, mainly tribals, would come to barter their goods.

* There are four hospitals in Dhule with a combined bed capacity of over 600 beds.

* The average literacy in Dhule is high at 86% compared to the national average of 76%.

* There are over 35 colleges in Dhule with a combined student capacity of 18,000 seats. There are eight engineering colleges and three medical colleges.

* The town has seven theatres and a slew of video parlours where movies are shown in makeshift tents.

The riots of 2008

October 2008—three months before the municipal corporation elections and only a month after the second Malegaon bomb blasts. Dhule had been tense. A few allegedly provocative posters were plastered across the city by the Hindu Raksha Samiti.

Violence broke out during a procession taken out by supporters of Shabbir Shaikh, a Congress worker who had returned from the Haj pilgrimage. One of the posters was damaged during the procession. Members of both the communities targeted each other and the police were assaulted. The violence continued for well over a week, killing 11 people and injuring more than 400. Around 1,117 families were affected. The state had announced a judicial probe into the incident, but nothing has come out of it so far.

In December that year, the city held municipal elections, in which three leaders who were detained for their role in the riots got elected. Despite reminders to the state administration, the posters were allowed to come up.

“I personally told the then SP that he should take down those

posters or at least cover the offensive lines. He said he would consider it but refrained from taking a decision. A few days later, the riots erupted,” social activist Raees Qazi said.

Shabbir Seth, a former NCP corporator accused of instigating the riots, was elected as an independent candidate while Mahesh Mistri and Hiranman Gawli managed to win on Shiv Sena and BJP tickets respectively. Interestingly, all of them managed to fight and win the elections from behind bars.



BEST CRIME NEWS
By
VINOD KUMAR MENON
Runner-up

**BHANDARA RAPE:
COPS MAKE HEADWAY**
Mid Day
3rd Mar '13

Vinod Kumar Menon



Bhandara Rape: Cops make headway

Vinod Kumar Menon is the City Editor of Mid Day Infomedia Limited. Prior to joining Mid Day, He was with Zee Telefilms.

He did his schooling & college in Mumbai. He is a Post Graduate in Mass Communications from All India Institute of Management Studies. He is presently pursuing a Post Graduate Diploma in Criminal Justice from IGNOU, New Delhi.

He is also the recipient of prestigious EPC World Award 2010 and Newsmakers Achievers Award 2011, for his expose on ‘Aarey Land Scam’ and series of articles that he wrote on the dairy industry. In 2013, he received the prestigious Red Ink Press Club Award for his research-based story on drought in Dolara village, 100 kms from Mumbai.

Also, his biggest endeavour as a journalist was when he discovered a 200-year-old secret tunnel under General Post Office (GPO), which hit the headlines and opened a new avenue for historians and archeologists to do their research.

He has a plethora of investigative pieces to his credit – exposes and eye-openers that have been cited as evidence in the court of law during trials.

Bhandara Rape: Cops make headway

On Saturday, police officers investigating the Bhandara triple rape-murder, made a slight headway in the case on Saturday after they were informed that the Diatom test conducted on the three siblings, had returned positive results.

The local police had sent bone samples of the three girls who were raped, murdered and their bodies thrown into a well, for a Diatom test.

Mid Day, in its report on February 28, ‘Will truth be buried under botched forensic investigation?’ had mentioned how the doctors at Bhandara General hospital, instead of sending dry bones, had put the specimens in a jar containing a solution of sodium chloride. The samples were returned to the police on the ground they were not preserved properly.”



The three bodies were found floating in this well on February 16, at a villager's farm, near National Highway 6 in Bhandara

Since the samples were returned from Mumbai, the Bhandara police had sent the samples for testing to the Forensic Science Laboratory, Karnal in Chandigarh a few days ago. On Saturday, a faxed message from FSL, Chandigarh to the Bhandara police confirmed that the test reports for Diatom were positive.

Special Inspector General (Nagpur Range) Rajinder Singh confirmed this but refused to elaborate.

However, even the positive Diatom tests do not necessarily prove sexual assault or rape as mentioned by the doctors at the Bhandara General hospital, where the postmortem was conducted. Also forensics surgeons attached to various Medical Colleges across the State of Maharashtra were not very impressed with the Diatom test results.

When contacted, a forensic surgeon from Mumbai said, “Diatom is just a screening test and not an absolute test for conclusion of antimortem drowning. This particular test in fact, is no longer recommended by forensic science experts. The only option that the police have in this case is get an experienced professor of medicine to analyse the video footage.”

Another forensic expert had similar views and said, “It is difficult to use a Diatom positive test unless it is proved that the water samples collected from the well also contain the same Diatom and in the proportion as found in the body. Only then we can conclude that the victims too drowned in the same water.”

Meanwhile, the mother of the three dead girls refused to entertain talk of compensation on Saturday. “I want justice, I do not want money. I have no faith in the police, who has not managed to nab the perpetrators who took my children away,” she said.

Preliminary inquiries have revealed that the victims’ mother had invested ₹20,000, along with a few other women villagers, in a papad manufacturing company but the woman who was to start the business, duped them and escaped with the cash deposited by them. This led to frequent quarrels between the girls’ mother and their grandmother (her mother-in-law).

The woman, in fact, has complained to the police that she suspects the involvement of her mother-in-law in the murder of her children.

Bhandara Superintendent of Police Aarti Singh, confirmed receiving a complaint from the victims’ mother against her mother-in-law. “We are probing this angle too.”



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BEST CRIME FEATURE

BEST CRIME FEATURE

By
ARPIT PARASHAR

Winner

NAILING THE LIES OF NITHARI

Fountain Ink
1st Mar '13

Arpit Parashar



Nailing the lies of Nithari

After working in mainstream media organisations like The Indian Express and Tehelka for five years, Arpit Parashar has focused on research-based long-form writing, especially for Fountain Ink for more than two years now as an independent contributor. He also regularly writes for the vernacular media.

Nailing the lies of Nithari

How the police and CBI failed the victims of the serial killings.

D-5 in Sector 31, Noida, is the second last house on the street. The white two-storey structure is abandoned, there's a police barricade around it, and a small wall at the entrance to keep the curious away. The compound is overrun by bushes and trees; a police Gypsy is around most times. A "stop" sign, the kind found at traffic junctions, lies junked in the hedge.

At the back of the house is another road, the one that began its life as a storm water drain till construction debris, mud, and garbage—uncleared for a long time—turned it into a lane people today use for commuting. All that remains of the drain is a small channel at the side of the road, uncovered in front of D-5 and covered by other residents of the lane.

This drain-turned-road leads to Nithari, an urban village in Noida, around the corner from the house. There are many stories about the house, grotesque stories, ghost stories, gruesome stories—Nithari stars in all. Nineteen people were killed in that house, all but two of them children. All came from Nithari. Two people lived in that house: Moninder Singh Pandher, the owner, a businessman, and Surinder Koli, his domestic help.

Bandana Sarkar can never forget December 29, 2006. She saw a huge gathering of media, police and other people outside D-5, Sector 31.

“At first I ignored it and went home, where my neighbours said the remains of some children who had gone missing over the previous months had been found. I thought my daughter was not a child, she could not have died here. But my son

dragged me there.

“Reaching the spot, we saw the bright yellow clothes that Pinky (Bandana’s missing daughter) had been wearing that day. She had got those clothes from one of her employers and worn them on Thursday (the day she disappeared) for the first time.” Bandana fainted.

It was the day Nithari killings came to light, even though the people of the village had been trying for more than a year to register complaints of missing persons with the local police. Nineteen victims were identified from the remains found in the drain outside Pandher’s house—eight by the victims’ families, and 11 after forensic tests by a government lab in Gandhinagar. Sonu Sarkar identified his sister Pinky by her clothes, white bangles and anklet, and green slippers.

“The Nithari killings never evoked the mass outrage that the murders of Jessica Lal, Nitish Katara and Priyadarshini Mattoo did. All the children and other victims came from underprivileged families who had migrated to Noida in search for better livelihoods.”

That December, when the police finally acted, they were showing body parts—fingers, legs, arms—and asking parents if they could identify their sons and daughters from it. “As if they were broken dolls or lost household items,” says Sonu.

On February 8, four people turned up to mourn the death of 14-year-old Rimpa Haldhar at the hands of Koli eight years ago. They were kin of other victims, and they gathered at the roadside ironing stall of Jhabbu Lal, whose 10-year-old daughter Jyoti was also murdered. A few weeks earlier on December 29, not more

than 10 people, victims' families and activists, turned up at Lal's shop in an informal memorial for victims of the Nithari serial killings. This was when the country was busy protesting the death of the Delhi gang-rape victim.

The Nithari killings never evoked the mass outrage that the murders of Jessica Lal, Nitish Katara and Priyadarshini Mattoo did. At a candle light vigil organised for Nithari victims on January 19, 2007, the only one ever organised anywhere for them, not more than 100 people turned up.

All the children and other victims of the Nithari killings came from underprivileged families who had migrated to Noida in search for better livelihoods and lived in the urban villages that exist amid the concrete jungles of the cities.

“The first of the killings started in 2004. Some records show that while no formal cases were filed, police did receive complaint letters from the parents of victims.”

When children first started disappearing in Nithari, the local police chowki just outside the village didn't register cases; it actively discouraged and even intimidated complainants.

The first of the killings started in 2004. Some records show that while no formal cases were filed, police did receive complaint letters from the parents of victims. The FIR in the case of Jyoti, Jhabbu Lal's daughter, was registered six months after her disappearance in 2005 because the chowki did not have a Sub-Inspector from February 20, 2005 to May 22, 2005. During this period three children went missing.

The families also approached the police station in Noida's Sector 20 (the chowki is under its jurisdiction), for filing cases

but were not successful.

Records later obtained from the Noida police through Right To Information petitions state that police teams were sent to 34 locations but only after March 2006, a year after the cases of missing children started piling up. They stated that then chowki in-charge KP Singh visited two locations in Delhi in March 2006.

However, in a letter to the National Commission for Women (NCW) Noida police claimed that it sent teams to Meerut and Bihar to investigate the disappearances on August 30, 2005. A letter from then Superintendent of Police (City) [SP(City)] Saumitra Yadav to then Senior Superintendent of Police (SSP) also detailed visits by Noida police to many cities, but these visits find no mention in official record.

There is no record of any police officer claiming expenses for travel, as is the norm, either. Police were aware of the complaints and even claimed to have started investigation, but did nothing for more than a year.

The first reports about the abnormally high number of cases being reported from Nithari came out in August 2006. The first FIR was registered after Nand Lal, whose daughter Payal, 27, went missing, got an order from the Chief Judicial Magistrate (CJM) on October 6, 2006.

“Sub-Inspector Simarjeet Kaur been hand-in-glove with Moninder Singh Pandher. Investigations by the CBI revealed that even when the investigation was handed to a senior officer after media reports started coming out in August 2006, Kaur was in constant touch with Pandher.”

Nand Lal had spent many months begging the police and

telecom companies to trace his cell phone, which was with his daughter when she disappeared, and had been pursuing the matter in court for a month.

“No authority came forward to help despite repeated pleas. Are we not part of this country?” asks Suneeta Devi, Jhabbu Lal’s wife. “We came to Noida in 1983 (from a village in Kanpur in UP, almost 500 km from Noida) when none of this development you see today was even imaginable. We were citizens of this city since before all these people in Noida came here.”

Jhabbu Lal remembers “It was a forest back then; nobody from the cities dared to come here even for a piss! Yet no minister or policeman cared for us; they just care for people living in houses like that,” pointing to the high-end flats in Ram Vihar, right across the road from Nithari.

The families sent letters to the Prime Minister’s Office, then Uttar Pradesh chief minister Mulayam Singh Yadav, the local Member of Parliament (MP) and the Member of Legislative Assembly (MLA) but received no response.

“The CBI’s chargesheet on January 11, 2007 gave a clean chit to Pandher, blaming his “psychopath” domestic help Surinder Koli for the murder of 16 people. Pandher was guilty only of “criminal conspiracy, destruction of evidence and running his home as a brothel.””

A month after the CJM’s order, Noida police gave an example of what it could do when orders came from the “top”. Anant Gupta, son of Naresh Gupta, then CEO of software major Adobe, was kidnapped on November 13, 2006. Mulayam Singh issued an

unofficial do-or-die order which was passed down the brass along with threats of “punishment postings”, said more than one police officer who didn’t want to be named. This case was solved in a day and Anant Gupta was rescued.

Sub-Inspector Simarjeet Kaur was officer-in-charge of the Nithari police chowki from September 18, 2006 till December 30 that year. She was suspended on December 30, the day skeletons were discovered in and around Pandher’s house. Kaur’s four-month reign caused immense damage to the Nithari case.

She did everything in her power to derail the investigation. She threatened the victims’ families to withdraw their cases. She told them to keep their mouths shut. She promised grave consequences for those who persisted.

She visited Nand Lal’s house several times. She went to his native village Pipalia in Uttaranchal and told his relatives that his daughter Payal had eloped with a man to Mumbai.

(The CBI declared Payal a prostitute on the basis of some confessional statements by Nand Lal’s relatives. She was said to be part of an elaborate racket, and often went to Pandher’s house. The CBI did not explain in court how any of this was relevant in a murder case.)

“At every step, police resisted filing cases. They disbelieved parents of missing children, even filed cases against them. They did everything to not investigate a crime which continued with cruel regularity on their watch.”

Pinky Sarkar was 20 when she disappeared from the street where Pandher and Koli lived in August 2006. For two months,

her father Jatin and mother Bandana tried to file a case. Finally, one day Kaur asked Jatin to bring a photograph of his daughter.

“After looking at the photograph, she said ‘Your daughter is good-looking, she must’ve run away with someone,’” says Bandana. Pinky had been married to a man in Delhi when she was 18 and had a four-month old son, Amit, when she went missing.

When her parents told Kaur and others at the chowki that Pinky had a four-month-old son, and asked how they could be so insensitive to allege that she had run away with someone, the cops mocked them.

“Officers at the chowki gave examples to her (Kaur) of how daughters of Bengali and Bihari migrants often ran away with men from the local villages or with men from outside Delhi,” says Bandana.

“They said ‘Tum Bengali logon mein yeh sab chalta hai. Hamne sab dekha hai. Chalo bhaago yahaan se,’ (Such cases are common among you Bengalis. We have seen it all. Get lost!).

“Had they made even one decent effort that day, it is possible that my daughter could have been saved.”

When the case broke, Noida police reacted in the manner they knew best—suspension of Simarjeet Kaur and subsequently of five other officers posted at Nithari for negligence and for failing to act in time on the reports of disappearing children.

The fact is that Kaur and the officers under her had all along been hand-in-glove with Moninder Singh Pandher.

Investigations by the CBI, after it took over the case on January 9, 2007, revealed that even when the investigation was handed to a senior officer after media reports started coming out

in August 2006, Kaur was in constant touch with Pandher.

“I told them that I would fight with them till I got Pandher convicted but that I would not spare them (legally) if they backtracked or changed their statements in the court mid-way. They all swore that they would fight till the end.”
— Khalid Khan, lawyer for the plaintiffs

The CBI also established that at Pandher’s behest Kaur tried to shield Surinder Koli by fabricating eyewitness statements showing that Koli was in Chandigarh from May 5, 2006 till the case broke. Pandher also paid Kaur a bribe of ₹1 lakh and a bribe of ₹70,000 to her junior B P Singh. According to the CBI, Kaur tried her best to prevent the victims from pursuing the case.

Pandher was also found to have funded Kaur’s travel to the Allahabad High Court where he had filed a petition to quash the FIR against him. A sting operation by Tehelka magazine revealed that then SSP R. K. S. Rathore and Circle Officer Dinesh Yadav, who had been handed over the investigation, also colluded with Pandher and tried to help him escape. Rathore was transferred and Yadav suspended from duty, only to be reinstated a few months later.

Kaur was dismissed from duty within a week of the unearthing of skeletons at Pandher’s house. She was, however, reinstated in 2009.

The CBI filed the first chargesheet in the Nithari case on January 11, 2007. Within two months of taking over it gave a clean chit to Pandher, blaming his “psychopath” domestic help Surinder Koli for the murder of 16 people.

Submitting the chargesheet in the first of the 19 cases before the Special CBI Judge in Ghaziabad, the agency named Koli as the main accused, saying Pandher was guilty only of “criminal conspiracy, destruction of evidence and running his home as a brothel”.

The first chargesheet—in Payal’s, Nand Lal’s daughter’s case—charged Koli with kidnap, rape, murder and destruction of evidence. Pandher was charged with criminal conspiracy, destruction of evidence, offering bribes, and under the sections of the Immoral Trafficking Act. The third accused was sub-inspector Simarjeet Kaur, charged with accepting bribes and fudging evidence. The CBI submitted eight boxes full of documents in the court.

In a press conference, then CBI Joint Director (Special Crime Investigation) Arun Kumar said that except “one or two cases” where Pandher’s role was still being probed, he “did not rape or murder” the Nithari victims and was “not even aware” of the killings by Koli till the Noida police started digging up bones at his bungalow. Koli, he said, murdered at least 19 women and children, and each time Pandher was either out of the country or not present in Nithari. Organ trade was ruled out as the CBI recovered 69 bags of “bio-material” from the drain including organs.

“At hearings, Khan and CBI’s lawyers never stand together, even though they are on the same side. The CBI’s lawyers stand with Pandher’s lawyers—8 to 15. To a lay observer it would appear that Khan is the prosecutor and the CBI and Pandher’s lawyers together are the defence.”

Kumar’s history is chequered, his handling of the Rizwanur Rahman murder case in Kolkata and the Arushi Talwar case had at various points come under criticism. He termed both accused “psychopaths” and said Koli’s confession before the Noida Police, later presented in court, did not indict his employer.

Koli’s extra-judicial confession (before the police, not termed a valid confession under the evidence law) indicated that he was single-handedly capable of killing and dismembering the victims.

The chargesheet said Koli was a “psychopath serial-killer with no empathy”. A board of doctors from AIIMS examined him and concluded that he was suffering from necrophilia (sexual attraction towards dead bodies), necrophagia (feeding on bodies), and paraphilia (obsession with unusual sexual practices).

However, his lawyer Subhash Tyagi, who is handling the case at the special CBI court in Ghaziabad, disagrees.

“During the various checks and interviews conducted with his (Koli’s) family and friends it has emerged that he was actually a soft-spoken and well-behaved person. There is no history of him ever indulging in any violent act. It is only the grave charges levelled by the CBI that have prompted the courts to award death sentences.”

After the media reports of the Nithari killings, Koli, a resident of Almora district in Uttaranchal, was disowned by his family. They have since not contacted Tyagi to keep abreast with the developments. “They have accepted that he is guilty, even though I have tried to tell them that he has been vilified so that the case against Pandher can be weakened,” said Tyagi.

Arun Kumar had said in the press conference that Koli strangled most of his victims, then raped and cut the bodies into pieces. He would pack the pieces in polythene bags and throw

them in the drain outside the bungalow.

“He took the bodies to a bathroom on the first floor, which was for his exclusive use, allowed them to bleed, then cut them up with a knife when he had time.

“Pandher never went to his servant’s bathroom. In fact, he was hardly at D-5 for more than two days a week and then too just spent nights there,” Kumar had said at the press conference.

His version didn’t find many takers, especially from the victims’ families. They believed that it was highly unlikely that Pandher as the owner of the house didn’t sense that something wrong was going on. The victims’ families said the CBI presented a case that seemed to go out of its way to defend Pandher while indicting the servant severely. This comment was also made by the Supreme Court in one of the Nithari cases last year.

In 2007, however, the CBI had claimed that though in a confessional statement Koli had said Pandher was innocent, he had initially accused Pandher of direct involvement expecting that it would help his defence.

To prove Koli was the killer, Kumar presented evidence of how Koli reconstructed his killings in their presence at AIIMS. “He gave a live demonstration about how he would cut the cadaver, dismember the bodies and dispose of them. We have videographed it and this is good evidence,” Kumar said.

He also said Koli cooked the flesh of his first victim and ate it, steamed the arm of his second victim in a pressure-cooker. In the case of the third, he tried to eat the liver raw and threw up. Koli reportedly said he never ate flesh again.

“But the medical board (felt) he is mentally stable and committed his crimes in full consciousness and hence was fit to face trial,” Kumar had said. According to Kumar, at the time of

the first two murders—February 8, 2005, and March 15, 2005—Pandher was on an island in Australia.

“In nine other cases, he was not in Noida on the day the victims went missing. In five other cases when the victims went missing, his cell phone (records) showed he was in Noida but not present in Sector 31 the entire day. In all the cases, Koli has admitted to killing his victims within three-four hours of luring them into the house, implying he carried out his act when Pandher was not home,” he had said.

The CBI also said Pandher had tried to bribe UP police officers because he had been called for questioning over prostitution rackets which he thought would dent his reputation. Police records don’t mention that Pandher was ever called for questioning in connection with a prostitution racket.

The victims’ families did not believe this, and they found a lawyer willing to fight till the end with them. Together they would change the course of the case.

While 19 victims were identified, many more from Nithari had gone missing. At every step, police resisted filing cases. They disbelieved parents who had come to lodge complaints of missing children, and even filed cases against them. They did everything to not investigate a crime, which by all accounts, continued to take place with cruel regularity on their watch.

Social activists and parents of missing children repeatedly approached the police to conduct searches along a longer stretch of the Nithari drain. “There were at least 38 instances of missing children from this area. But cases have been registered only in those where some remains could be found or DNA tests confirmed identities. How could police and the Noida authority be so insensitive?” says Usha Thakur, a social activist from

Noida's Sector 31 who has worked with the victims' kin for almost ten years now.

Police were forced to register more cases only after public outrage. Seven such cases are not part of the Nithari case file anymore because no remains or forensic evidence were ever found.

Suresh Kumar, who works as a security guard in Sector 31, says his 10-year-old son Umesh went missing on December 8, 2005 but the FIR was filed only on July 13, 2007, almost seven months after the skeletons were dug out from the drain.

"First, our reports were not registered and later we were driven away by police because they could not find enough evidence that our children could also be among the victims. Is it not their responsibility to help us find our children if they are not dead?"

Soni, a 22-year-old who works as a domestic help, whose 10-year-old sister Anita has been missing since May 15, 2005, claims that a family friend saw her sister around Pandher's house that very night but police refused to file a case. Even from among the 19 cases that are part of the Nithari file, one case was dismissed by CBI as the victim Sheikh Raza's parents left town never to return.

"His father was a poor labourer from Bihar and was fed up with the questions asked by the CBI and the police. He eventually left to find work elsewhere and sustain his family. Nobody knows where he went," says Jhabbu Lal. It was later revealed by Noida police in response to an RTI that compared to 18 in 2005, there had been 40 cases of disappearance of children aged 3-18 in 2006, but FIRs in most cases were registered only in 2007.

The Noida police's response to protests by families and activists was retribution. Satish Chandra Mishra, a resident of Noida's Sector 31, who helped many victims get cases registered

and approached media organisations for help, was, along with Jhabbu Lal, specifically targeted.

Cases of abetment to suicide were filed against Mishra and Jhabbu Lal, and cases for attempt to commit suicide against three other victims' kin on October 3, 2007. The Allahabad High Court later dismissed the cases and lambasted Noida police for registering an "erroneous kind of chargesheet".

"Instead of registering the victims' complaints and helping them, you are making them accused in the case. They have already suffered so much and you are adding to their grief by making them accused," Justice R. D. Khare had said.

Commodore Lokesh Batra was present outside D-5 the day skeletons were recovered from the drain. A question troubled him: How could they remain undiscovered for so long? Wasn't the Noida Authority (NA), the civic body, responsible for periodically cleaning it? A war veteran, Batra had a new weapon in the Right to Information law passed by Parliament a year back in 2005.

Armed with RTI, he asked the NA why the skeletons were not discovered by its conservancy crew. The NA replied that drains in Noida were cleaned every 15-30 days. It said the authority last cleaned the drain outside Koli and Pandher's house between December 23 and 26—days before police found skeletons and "bio materials" from it. "If the cleaning was taking place as usual, then why did not they find anything unusual?" asks Batra.

A committee set up by the Ministry of Women and Child Development to probe the killings also indicted NA. "In the Nithari case, if the administration had cleaned the sewerage system on a regular basis, bodies would have been discovered much earlier and probably some deaths prevented," the report said.

In fact, the drain behind houses D-1 to D-17 in Sector 31 had filled up over the years with so much filth, mud and construction material that it had become a lane. Some boys playing cricket had found body parts much before police discovered them. The matter was reported. Police officers visiting the spot rejected the material found as animal carcasses.

The first ever cleaning of the drain was done at least a year later, say residents.

In reply to Batra's RTI, the Authority said waste from the drain was taken to its dumping ground in Sector 54. Neither the Noida Authority, nor Noida police or the CBI ever searched the dumpsite for remains. "If the authority had indeed cleaned the drain just six days before December 29, it made perfect sense to search the dumping ground," says Batra.

The authority stopped replying to Batra's RTI applications soon after. When he approached the State Information Commission (SIC) in Lucknow, he got an order in his favour. The NA refused to comply. The case was heard by then Chief Information Commissioner of Uttar Pradesh M A Khan, who in 2008 threw out all cases pertaining to RTI applications filed by Batra since 2007, accusing him "and his agents" of "conniving against the Noida Authority".

Batra's RTIs were also successful in nailing the lies of Noida police who were very prompt in replying. The information revealed helped nab the six officers suspended after the killings were unearthed—including Sub-Inspector Simarjeet Kaur.

Six girls had disappeared from Nithari by July 2005 but police refused to register an FIR. The families of the victims approached the NCW, which set up a one-member committee of Nirmala Venkatesh. In reply to the November 9, 2005 letter written by the

NCW on action taken in the matter Noida police said teams were sent to various places like Muzaffarnagar, Faridabad and Gurgaon, but no search had been carried out since no officer ever claimed reimbursements.

In a letter dated January 10, 2007, by Inspector-General of Meerut Zone Jagmohan Yadav to the Additional Director-General of Police (Human Rights), Lucknow, the IG says the NCW letter of November 9, 2005 was never received at the office of Noida SSP Piyush Mordia. But in a letter to the Deputy Inspector-General, Meerut Zone, dated December 12, 2005, Mordia mentions attaching a copy of the action taken report (ATR) on the NCW letter, a copy of which he appended in this communication.

"Clearly, high ranking officers were trying to save each other when questioned by the NCW and even resorted to blatant lying and denial in the effort," said Batra.

In a letter, dated September 9, 2005, to the Noida SSP by then Additional SP Saumitra Yadav, Jhabbu Lal's complaint that, "We suspect that the person responsible for children going missing is from the Nithari village" was quoted.

In a letter to the PMO in September 2006, Shailendra Pratap Singh, then DIG Meerut Zone, said Noida police were taking all necessary action.

"Had he been right the reality would have been different," says Batra.

Moninder Singh Pandher lived alone in D-5 after separation from his wife and family. He was close to his son, who visited him often. The St Stephen's College graduate had inherited a successful family business, and was living the good life. A well-travelled man, he was fond of golf and drink. His family, based in Punjab, is known to be well connected.

Officers at Dasna Jail in Ghaziabad, where he and Koli are lodged, describe him as a quiet man who keeps to himself; he has barely spoken in the courtroom during hearings. The CBI had charged Koli with murder and Pandher for lesser crimes. The families of victims were not convinced. Six of them—Sunil Biswas, Karambir, Jhabbu Lal, Nand Lal, Jatin and Bandana Sarkar, and Anil Haldhar—decided to get legal help. They wanted Pandher charged for murder, and needed a lawyer resolute enough to do that.

Khalid Khan is a soft-spoken man who conveys a quiet aggression in his demeanour. Sometimes he can be forceful too, and easily raise his voice as many in the Ghaziabad courts can testify. In his 40s, Khan looks like a young lawyer going through the paces—confident, and eager to make a name, to “establish” his practice.

The victims’ parents met him in 2007, a few years after he had returned to India. He had quit his practice to work as a Chartered Accountant in the Gulf, and after he made enough money, and was bored, he returned to start lawyering again in India. He was willing to fight for the Nithari victims, but on one condition: he would fight till the end, and he wanted them to do so too.

“I told them that I would fight with them till I got Pandher convicted but that I would not spare them (legally) if they backtracked or changed their statements in the court mid-way,” Khan says. “They all signed the copies of statements and swore that they would fight till the end,” says Khan with a smile on his face inside his chamber in the Ghaziabad court complex.

By the time he became an additional prosecution lawyer appearing for six families, the case had progressed unfavourably for his clients. For reasons known best to CBI officers, carefully

edited video recordings of Pandher’s narco-analysis test at Forensic Sciences Laboratory, Gandhinagar, had been leaked to a select number of Hindi news channels.

The leak came at a time when CBI was under fire from the media—many had reported that Pandher had confessed to being an accomplice in most of the crimes but had been paying off the Noida police and the CBI to save himself. It was also alleged that he had used his family’s political contacts in Punjab to build pressure on the CBI.

After all, it was strange for the owner of a house to go out of his way to protect his domestic help even though he knew gruesome murders were being committed by him on a regular basis, as the CBI claimed in its first chargesheet.

The narco analysis videos showed carefully curated parts of Pandher’s statements. In one, he is saying: “I am not a half-woman to poke my nose in the kitchen and other rooms of my house to find out what is going on... That is why I have landed in so much trouble.” He was also shown talking about Koli’s habits and seen claiming innocence.

“It was nothing but a specific leak aimed at building public sentiment in favour of the murderer,” says Khan.

Within months of taking charge, Khan received a rude jolt. Nand Lal, whose daughter Payal’s case was the first to be filed in court, turned hostile. He had been threatened and troubled so much that he allegedly accepted hefty bribes from lawyers working for Pandher to make statements against the other five families and against his own lawyer.

Pandher’s lawyer Devraj Singh denies the allegations. “It is untrue,” said Singh.

It is a well known fact that by the time Nand Lal turned hostile,

his family was settled at an undisclosed location. Nand Lal's sudden change of heart was ironical: he had played a pivotal part in getting the cases of many of the victims registered in the first place.

Khan says there's a reason behind what Nand Lal did. It is, according to him: "the death of Jatin Sarkar".

On the day that the Noida police team led by Circle Officer Dinesh Yadav raided Pandher's house and interrogated him and Koli, Jatin Sarkar was present with the police, says his wife Bandana. "He had been called by one of the constables (name not revealed on request) whom he knew since he visited the Sector 20 police station often with his employer (at the time) to help trace Pandher and his servant's misdeeds," says Bandana.

What he saw inside never found mention in police records till his death. "Pandher had confessed to his crime with folded hands and begged for help and forgiveness before Dinesh Yadav in the presence of my husband. He had also accompanied the police team to the first floor where Pandher handed them the weapon that he and Koli used to murder our children," says Bandana.

Khan agrees: "He was eyewitness to the confessions and told me as much. But I was late getting his statements recorded on paper before the court and making them public thereafter."

Jatin Sarkar had been a lot smarter than the Noida police or CBI could have imagined. The Sector 20 police station's case diary, an important document where day-to-day proceedings are recorded, would prove crucial in determining Pandher's and Koli's guilt before the court.

Dinesh Yadav had recorded the confessional statements of both Pandher and Koli in the diary. "His friend (the constable) had told him that he should keep a copy of the page in which those statements had been recorded and even helped him get a

photocopy of it," says Bandana.

"He looked disturbed and scared when he came back to the house late that night. He handed over the copy of the document to me and said to keep it safe as it was an important piece of evidence that would help us when the time came."

While neither the police nor CBI knew Sarkar had a copy of the case diary, they were aware he was an eyewitness to Pandher's confessional statement.

"This led to his death. He had to be eliminated to save Pandher," says Khan.

Anil Haldhar, father of Rimpa Haldhar, the first known victim of Pandher and Koli, was a close friend and neighbour of the Sarkars at the time. He says Jatin was visited by various kinds of people claiming to be CBI and police officers.

"The problem was that none wore any uniform or badge and so one could never identify who they really were. It was traumatic," he says. "Two-three visited early in the morning, then another 3-4 people around noon, then another set of people within two hours... it went on like that for months. They threatened him and his family with death all the time. At one point he stopped working and stayed at home to keep his family safe."

"On two occasions," says Bandana, "those people came with bags full of money in cash and said 'apne gaaon chale jao aur aish ki zindagi jiyo' (go back to your village and live a happy life). But we did not accept it."

"We could not—how would we show our face to our daughter after death? Wouldn't she ask us why we sold her to her killers to lead a happy life ourselves? Wouldn't her real killers then be us?"

This was when the beatings started. The Sarkars were visited by "scary men", according to Banadana, between midnight and 2

a.m., and Jatin was thrashed.

He was told to keep his mouth shut, accept money and withdraw the case or face death. On many occasions Anil Haldhar too was dragged into Sarkar's house and they were both beaten up. "Sometimes they used to tie us up together and hit us with sticks on our backs and buttocks," says Anil.

Jatin and Anil approached activist Usha Thakur and narrated their plight. She came and stayed at their house at night on a few occasions. "Strangely, nobody turned up. Obviously somebody was keeping those people informed of all the movements in our houses," says Anil.

"I told them not to leave the village (Nithari) at any cost, no matter how much they were harassed or troubled," says Thakur. It was not to be. Before the Durga Puja that year, Jatin decided to visit his native village in Murshidabad district of West Bengal with his family.

At the village, Jatin's son Sonu used to receive threatening calls from men claiming to be CBI officers, who said Jatin was wanted back in Noida immediately. "We tried to trace the numbers but found that they were all from public telephone booths and not from anybody's home or mobile phone," says Bandana.

Jatin was found dead on September 1, 2007, in a pond next to his village. A regular swimmer who often participated in village competitions, Sarkar was declared to have drowned by Murshidabad police on basis of the postmortem report. It termed the death an accident.

"A person fishing in the pond saw him barely an hour before he was found. How could he have died by just drowning? There was a red mark on the forehead which showed he had been hit with a hard object. His body was swollen at many places too. How could

it all have happened within one hour of leaving the house?" questions Bandana.

She claims a person who identified himself as "Vijay Shankar," CBI ka maalik (owner of the CBI) called on the phone a few days before her husband's death and threatened her with dire consequences if he did not withdraw the case he had filed on April 28, 2007 requesting reinvestigation by the CBI.

Having lost her husband and scared for the life of her grandson (son of Pinky) and her son Sonu, Bandana returned to Nithari in a few days. With the help of Khalid Khan and Supreme Court advocate Shakti Singh Dhakray she filed a case against then CBI chief Vijay Shankar in the Supreme Court, alleging that he was involved in the death of her husband, and had him killed to shield Pandher.

Two others, including Anil Haldhar, also filed cases alleging a threat to their lives. While the SC directed the other two to approach the Ghaziabad court for protection, in the case of Bandana Sarkar it demanded explanations from Noida police, which just said no complaint had ever been registered with them on any threat to the life of Jatin Sarkar. The case is still in the Supreme Court.

"It was probably Sarkar's death that scared Nand Lal and he turned hostile," says Khalid Khan.

On November 15, 2007, Nand Lal changed his statements in the special CBI court in Ghaziabad. He refuted the earlier charge by Khan that Jatin Sarkar had been witness to the confessional statements of Pandher and Koli. He told the court Pandher had never made any confessional statement, no murder weapon had ever been recovered and that Dinesh Yadav, suspended for taking a bribe from Pandher, never took any bribe but had instead been helpful to the victims' kin.

True to his word, Khan filed a case of perjury against Nand Lal in the court of the Chief Judicial Magistrate in Ghaziabad. “Either he lied earlier or he was lying then. Either way, he lied to the court.”

The then special CBI judge Rama Jain, who had been extremely strict with the CBI counsel, appeared before the CJM as a witness in the case. He was sentenced to seven years’ imprisonment in a few months but went absconding.

“His lawyer has now secured a stay on that judgement and approached the Allahabad HC; and so he is back here and not absconding,” says Khan with a wry smile.

“It is strange how the CBI and police have shielded him after he turned hostile whereas he was beaten up and harassed earlier.”

Jatin Sarkar’s death did not go in vain. His wife, Bandana, had the copy of the case diary in her safekeeping. “It was the most important document in the case,” says Khan. By the time Nand Lal turned hostile, CBI had filed chargesheets in six of the 18 cases. The original case diary entry which had details of statements by Pandher and Koli were not part of the evidence. Instead, the CBI told the court that Noida police CO Dinesh Yadav had made the case diary entry on a plain sheet of paper that day and presented it as evidence.

“This page had the exact information that the CBI had mentioned in its chargesheets. Pandher was given a clean chit,” says Khan. To nail CBI’s and Yadav’s lies, Khan first got the case diary page submitted by CBI seized for court records, and in the next hearing presented the copy of the original case diary Jatin Sarkar had given him.

“The original had neatly written details and the exact page number, missing from the diary, could also be seen.” This turned

the case. The CBI court accepted Sarkar’s photocopy as part of the original record and directed local courts to take action against Dinesh Yadav.

Bandana Sarkar’s statements—details about what her husband told her, and how they were harassed—were also subsequently accepted as important evidences. “She made all revelations that Jatin had made to her in detail before the court. There was no way out for the people who colluded with Pandher after that,” says Khan.

Anil Haldhar also registered a case at the Kavi Nagar police station in Ghaziabad against Yadav for threatening him. There were at least ten cases of threatening witnesses registered against him and he was also named by Bandana Sarkar in the alleged murder of Jatin Sarkar.

In a big blow to both the Noida police and CBI, Dinesh Yadav, once chief investigator in the Nithari killings, was prosecuted under the Gangster Act for rioting and threatening witnesses in July 2008. However, the UP police never initiated any action against him.

“Probably he had good political links,” says Khan. “No power can save him; he will surely be in jail one day”. Yadav got a stay order in the case, and is still a serving officer.

The CBI’s conduct during the hearing was perplexing. At hearings before the special CBI court, Khan and CBI’s lawyers never stand together, even though they are on the same side. The state through the CBI is the chief prosecutor (since all crimes are against the state) and Khan is technically assisting them on behalf of some victims’ families.

The CBI’s lawyers stand with Pandher’s lawyers—eight to 15, depending on the gravity of the hearing. To a lay observer it would appear that Khan is the prosecutor and the CBI and

Pandher's group of lawyers together are the defence. Koli's lawyer Subhash Tyagi finds himself rarely heard—his arguments are submitted in writing most of the time.

Finally, in what Khan says was “a slap on the face of the CBI”, special CBI judge Rama Jain pronounced both Pandher and Koli guilty of the rape, abduction and murder of Rimpa Haldhar, daughter of Anil Haldhar, on February 14, 2009. Rimpa, the first Nithari victims, was killed on February 8, 2005.

Pandher was also sentenced to death in the murder of Nand Lal's daughter Payal while he was still absconding after being sentenced to seven years' imprisonment for perjury. The case of Bandana Sarkar is up next in Ghaziabad while those of Sunil Biswas, Karambir and Jhabbu Lal will come up later.

Pandher has been acquitted in the murder of Rimpa Haldhar by the Allahabad High Court but the Supreme Court has taken a strong stand in the matter. It has reserved hearing in the case till the trial is complete before the CBI court in other Nithari cases.

“Let the appeal be kept pending and wait for the outcome of other (Nithari) cases. It is a composite case and all are related to each other. It would have effect one way or other on other pending cases. It is not an isolated case and is about a series of murders.

“You have been charged with serial killings,” a bench comprising Justices Markandey Katju and Gyansudha Misra told Pandher's counsel R. S. Sodhi during the hearing. “How could he be unaware of the serial crimes taking place inside and near his (Pandher's) house?” the bench said.

“If he is acquitted by this court when other cases are for trial, the entire evidence in those cases will go,” the bench said. “What about other cases going against you? You were in Australia only for 15 days out of two years during which murders and rapes were

going on in your building. It is difficult to believe you were not aware of them. It is not a case of one murder but 18 and it might have been done with your approval,” the court said. It also added, “You are living in the house and saying that that you were not aware of what was going on inside your house.”

Postscript

The last six years have been tumultuous for the people of Nithari. They had to come to terms not only with the murders but also the callous police reaction. During former chief minister Mayawati's reign Nithari was declared an Ambedkar Village under the Bhimrao Ambedkar Rural Integrated Development Programme in 2007. It was meant to benefit the village immensely as funds were to be diverted from every state and Central government programme for its development.

“But nothing has taken place in the past six years. Only the politicians have benefited from the funds diverted for development. Not one government officer has visited us since the announcement,” says Bimlesh Sharma, the village Pradhan, elected last year.

The victims' families have spent most of their savings and earnings on court expenses. Jhabbu Lal, whose sons Rajesh and Rakesh quit their studies to make sure they earned for the family while their father was protesting and fighting in the courts, helped fund the payments of two more people – Karambir and Sunil Biswas, who do not live in Nithari anymore.

“All my savings and most of what I now earn goes into making sure I can travel to Allahabad for the important hearings and procure documents related to our case from there and from

Ghaziabad.”

Anil Haldhar, in whose case the first judgement came, says he has spent close to ₹6 lakh in the past six years. “Our lawyers (Khalid Khan and Shakti Singh Dhakray) have been good to us and never asked for any money except for some token amount when the cases were first filed. But there are various other expenditures.

“I am illiterate but have to make sure every document is photocopied and stored with me and that whenever the lawyer needs them I can supply him with the relevant document. At times the photocopying bills run into ₹20,000-₹30,000.”

Bandana Sarkar has left Nithari and has found employment as a domestic help at a house in Noida’s Sector 29. She lives with her son Sonu, his wife and son in the small two-room servants’ quarters provided by her employer. Pinky’s son—her grandson—Amit, now 6 years, also stays with them. Amit suffers from seizures and sometimes all the money Bandana earns goes into his treatment.

Usha Thakur and Satish Chandra Mishra have also distanced themselves. While Thakur is old and unable to move much, Mishra has not taken interest ever since the Noida police filed the case of abetment to suicide against him. An old man, he has to travel to Allahabad once every couple of months to attend the hearings in the case against him.

Apart from appearing for the victims, Khan is also fighting two cases filed by Nand Lal on the behest of Noida police “and the CBI”.

Lokesh Batra, on the other hand, is a well-known RTI activist and often holds workshops on how to use the RTI Act for senior state and Central government officials across Delhi. He too is growing old but says he is willing to fight on. But there is despair

in his voice.

“People’s memory is short. They are no more interested in this case. I might have highlighted lapses on the part of the authorities but they have not changed anything.” The Pandher family still owns the property but their attempts to sell it have failed. Gaje Singh Chauhan, a realtor who owns Utsav Associates and Developers, based in Nithari village, says no buyer has shown interest in the property in the past seven years.

“Why would someone buy a property where so many murders have taken place? Villagers too have spread all kinds of rumours—there are ghosts in the house, and they roam the street at the back of the house.”



BEST CRIME FEATURE

By
ALIA ALLANA
Runner-up

THE PHANTOM OF OPERA HOUSE

Fountain Ink
1st Mar '13

Alia Allana



The Phantom of Opera House

Alia Allana is a freelance reporter, previously working with The Indian Express. With substantial experience of reporting in the Middle East and North Africa.

The Phantom of Opera House

Bank lockers in Mumbai's diamond district were robbed, stones worth ₹9 crore went missing, and yet there was a thief that didn't exist, and safes that hadn't a dent but were broken into. The story of how a few persistent policemen found their men after they stumbled upon a key clue.

A phantom thief, stealing diamonds? The policemen laughed. “*Abe woh to angrezi film mein hota hai.*” (“This happens only in English films.”)

This wasn't some movie plot. News of the Opera House heists had travelled across police stations in South Mumbai: about a thief so cunning that he left no trace; so cunning, in fact, that the police doubt he even existed.

The case landed on the desks of Constable Hriday Mishra and Naik Shubash Mali. A robbery had been reported in the locker room of the Bank of India in Opera House. An officer from Lamington House called Mishra to tell him about the theft. The heist was the type that inspired the birth of legends, he'd said.

That's exactly what Mishra and Mali thought too—that the case was make-believe, too unlikely to be true, nothing more than a legend.

Then Mehrulbhai Doshi, a Gujarati diamond merchant, walked into the Mumbai Crime Branch's Unit II office in Mahalaxmi. A fresh-faced man he, for a strange reason, reminded Mishra of the actor Anushka Sharma. It was Doshi who, after months of trudging back and forth from his offices at Panchratna to Lamington Road police station, had registered the first FIR.

Uncut pavé diamonds had been stolen from his locker. They were valued at ₹1.65 crore. Now dark circles threatened to

disrupt the calm of his face and his receding hairline, he later exclaimed, was edging further backwards.

He'd spent sleepless nights cursing the thief. At least he should have left a dent on the safe, a mark. But this one seemed to be a master craftsman, a professional of the highest quality. Not a scratch. Not a clue to be had from the steel.

Mishra tried to get a handle on the man. What if Doshi was spinning a tall tale? He could have cooked up this implausible story and then filed a FIR just to scam the insurance companies. “This city isn't short on fraudsters,” said Assistant Sub-Inspector Bhaskar Kadam.

Doshi assured the cops he wouldn't claim insurance. He'd said the same thing to the officers at Lamington Road police station. Mishra recalled Doshi as being agitated, his beady eyes sparking with rage.

“I've been robbed and nobody wants to believe me?” he bellowed at the Unit II office. The detectives remembered how out of place he looked in his white kurta-pyjamas.

The Unit II office with its beige walls and spartan furniture looks almost like a two-tier waiting room at a train station. There are no long queues of angry citizens, phones don't go off, and there is no constable at the door, signing in people's names. It looks like a set-up: if the men pack up their belongings and leave, it would look as though nobody had ever occupied this room.

Never have anything you can't walk out on in 30 seconds flat. The only personal effect was a small temple with a red light bulb. God, the detectives said, gave them hope and luck.

“Apunko realty chehti hai. Kya yeh aadmi sach bol raha hai?” (“I wanted the real stuff. Is this man telling the truth?”)

For Mishra and Mali, Doshi was the prime suspect initially.

When had he noticed the diamonds were missing? Why did he take so long to register a complaint? Why was his locker the only one to be looted? He answered the best he could: he'd deposited the diamonds in his locker and sought them out a week later. His younger brother had a spare key. They had checked their homes, the safety box in Dahisar. The key was there, but the diamonds were gone.

He'd spoken to the bank manager. He said he'd never asked what the clients kept in the safe, nor did he ask about what was taken out. It was policy. The bank was only responsible when the lock was broken, which it was not.

Mali and Mishra arrived at Doshi's offices in Panchratna. The Panchratna building at Opera House houses the city's diamond dealers. At any point of time, at least one pair of hands is exchanging the most sought-after rocks in the world. Many of the businesses don't register the diamonds they have. Too many are afraid of income tax. Others operate in black. They asked the dealers about Mehrulbhai. What sort of man was he? Was he respected? They spoke to his employees.

"Hum to ekdum impress ho gaye, clearcut hua ke yeh sach bol rahe the," said Mali. ("We were impressed, it was clear that he was speaking the truth.")

"Ekdum white mein kam karte hai, woh to gentleman-businessman nikle," said Mishra. ("His business is in white, he turned out to be a gentleman-businessman.")

The case had them captivated.

This thief was a master, Mali thought. The detectives had never come across such a case. There had been heists in Bombay before but none where there was no damage done to the safe, or where no insider was involved.

What sort of magician would be able to conduct a heist without leaving a small imprint? That was the question Kadam asked himself.

This was a master thief, better than the Pink Panther thieves who looted the Graff Diamond jewellers in London and later Chopard in Cannes and Dubai. At least they had left a mark of their work behind.

In a world of thieves, Hunter S. Thompson once wrote, "the only final sin is stupidity." This thief was anything but stupid. The police didn't even have a suspect.

It was all I thought about," says Mishra. Other members of the team started working overtime too. They would finish their day's investigations to start afresh on this case, from six to nine every night.

First they would drink copious cups of chai. Then they moved to the stronger stuff: coffee. Constable Pramod Shirke, a techie, huddled in the backroom of Unit II with a giant projector replaying the CCTV footage the bank had provided. He saw the pixelated faces of those who entered the bank and exited. The images were often too grainy. The CCTV would delete footage every 20 days anyway, rendering the footage irrelevant. Still, Shirke looked for clues.

Mali and Mishra did the groundwork. They questioned the custodian who had the master key required to unlock each safe. When they were done with him, they called in the ex-custodians. They questioned the bank manager. They questioned the peon.

"This was a master thief, better than the Pink Panther thieves who looted the Graff Diamond jewellers in London and later Chopard in Cannes and Dubai. At least they had left a mark of their work behind."

Everyone was a suspect. No one was a suspect.

Every action was a shot in the dark. They called in the locksmith from Godrej. They grilled him; he said the same thing time and again: No one can open those safes without the original keys. The locks had already been changed once before, after an incident involving another Gujarati diamond merchant.

A few weeks before Unit II came on the scene, a law and order situation had broken out. Sharmaji, a diamond dealer, had made a sale worth ₹50 lakh. His son had deposited the money in the locker before vacationing in Goa. While he was away, Sharmaji operated the safe and looked for the money. Kadam laughs as he recounts, “The father thought the son had made off with it.”

Seething with rage, Sharmaji called his son.

The son returned with assertions of his innocence. Almost at once, father and son barged into the office of the bank manager. Howls of anger came from the room and Kadam was called in to quell the fight.

That’s when the officers found out that others too had been robbed. That’s when Mehrulbhai brought together a Union of Robbed Diamond Merchants to the officers. Crucially, that’s when the police estimated that around ₹9.5 crore had gone missing.

Most hadn’t registered FIRs but slowly they started coming forward.

Despite Shirke’s best efforts with the CCTV, that lead was a dud. This was mainly because there was no camera in the safe deposit room. The bank allowed its customers complete privacy in the room.

Mali, Mishra and Mehrulbhai stood in a row in the safe deposit room. It was a small room, its stuffiness countered by gusts of air blowing from the air conditioning unit. Both the officers and

Mehrulbhai were over 5’10”, wide-shouldered and therefore cramped for space. Two metallic staircases, used to access the lockers on the top, were pushed to the side. The room was frosty and unfriendly. The lockers ran from floor to ceiling; a white light lit the room.

The locker room offered no leads. Three months into the case, the detectives were as clueless as they had been on day one.

Mehrulbhai and Sharmaji had assisted them with dates. They made a list of dates when they had accessed the locker and when they had suspected the theft had taken place. The bank manager had handed over the ledger that noted all entries and exits, along with a heavy folder that contained all the customers’ biodatas.

Some 16,000 people had entered their names in the ledgers and 36,000 had used the lockers in a three-year period.

In the first two months of investigation, the officers eliminated suspects. They looked for a pattern but none emerged. They profiled the people: reputed businessmen; who was making money, who wasn’t; who might be running into financial trouble; anyone who would give them a motive.

In the first two months they could find no man with a motive. But slowly, the number started decreasing from 1200 to a few hundred, down to 79 people.

A key component of investigation was groundwork. Mali and Mishra would hop on their motorbikes and question businessmen in Panchratna, look for clues, and follow leads. They walked around the area and poked their heads into other banks on Lamington Road.

The case led them from one dead end to another till they came upon a safe in a private vault in the district. A woman in a

tightly-wound sari with streaks of grey in her hair came forth to assist them.

Had there been any robberies here?

There had, but the man who had been robbed wanted the case dropped. Probably black money, she recalled. She handed over a ledger and when the detectives went through the papers, one name stood out.

“*Hamara common factor mil gaya,*” recalls Kadam. (“We found the common link.”)

Shamshuddin Azmi.

On being questioned, the woman recalled a chubby fellow standing awkwardly in the corner of the bank. He hadn’t looked like a businessman. He always wore slippers—she found that odd. He didn’t speak English nor did he know how to write properly. In both biodatas, his form was incomplete.

No forwarding address. No telephone number. A dodgy signature.

Shamshubhai, as the cops started calling him, had opened a locker in 2004 at the Bank of India. On that form, the detectives found a number and finally, a definite trace. It was a landline number that Shirke began to trace with the help of MTNL. The lead took them to Khedwadi, a slum in Bandra.

Why would a diamond dealer live in a slum? Why would a slum dweller have a safety deposit box in the diamond area?

The number belonged to a south Indian, who used it at a small store which doubled up as an STD-ISD-PCO booth. When Mali and Mishra arrived on the scene, the owner had no clue. He recalled a Maharashtrian owning the phone before, and he was tracked down in the small alleyways of Khedwadi.

Frustrated, Mishra asked, “*Yeh phone ka janam kayse hua?*”

(“Who got this connection?”)

The Maharashtrian recalled a Muslim family, but that was in 2003. Ask the streets, he told them, and a paanwala had an answer. There were three Shamshuddins in the area. One was a tailor, the other a mechanic, and the third was a property agent. The officers went with instinct and sought out the property agent.

To be a detective, you don’t need to be educated. There are many IAS officers and they’re very clever, but no book will tell you how to solve a case. No book tells you how to commit a crime. This is something you can sense, you can feel. Or not,” said Mishra.

The first time Mishra was scheduled to meet Shamshuddin, he was nervous, like he was meeting a girl he had a crush on. For hours, Mali and Mishra discussed tactics. What would they wear when they went to Khedwadi? Jeans? Half-pant?

They needed to look believable. They needed Shamshu in their grip.

First Mishra would speak to Shamshu in his local language. With that he would win his confidence. The Uttar Pradesh connection always worked. He would use the “emotional mood” and soften Shamshuddin, and like that he would win him over.

“The first time Mishra was scheduled to meet Shamshuddin, he was nervous, like he was meeting a girl he had a crush on. For hours, Mali and Mishra discussed tactics.”

So they planned. So they executed.

Shamshuddin was chubby, simple and short. He spoke fast and excitedly and back then, he was desperate to move some property.

He was eager to make some money so that he could get his daughter married. Mishra suggested that Shamshu meet Mali, who would pose as a well-connected Maharashtrian in the property game.

Mali was nervous about his role. He spent large parts of the week practising: learning property lingo and speaking to agencies about key slum redevelopment schemes. He memorised the names of bigwigs in the property world and on their first meet, began name-dropping.

Shamshu was impressed and soon the three struck up a friendship. They would travel around Mumbai looking at properties. Shamshu would come to meet Mali and Mishra at any location with copies of property papers. The trio would discuss possible deals. So close was their friendship that Mishra took a photograph of Shamshu with Mali. Later, the same photograph was shown to the woman at the private bank.

This was the man.

Despite the friendship, one thing was for sure: sooner rather than later, they would have to come clean. Pressure from the top, from the office of the Joint Commissioner of Police, was coming down hard. How much longer, the top brass at Crawford Market kept asking.

“Hum ko emotional mood se police mood main jana tha,” Mishra says. (“We had to go back to playing cop.”)

At a chai store, Mali and Mishra hatched another plan. They would introduce Shamshu to a high-flying NRI who wanted an expensive property. This NRI would be their boss, Inspector Patil.

Inspector Patil made a special effort to look like a NRI. He wore gold jewellery, a necklace, and a chunky bracelet. His belt was

flashy and his shirt very shiny. He ensured his phone wouldn't stop ringing, surmising that NRIs are always on their phones.

On Friday, just before the namaaz, the team left for Khedwadi in a Mahindra Scorpio.

They offered to meet at Shamshu's house should he want to pray but Shamshu was embarrassed. He didn't want a big man in his small slum house. Missing prayers for one day was fine, he insisted.

“Lalach mein admi dharma aur sub bhool jata hai,” says Mali. (“Greed makes you forget faith and everything else.”)

Shamshu had made a special effort that day too. His hair, usually creased to the left, was slicked back with Brylcreem. He was sandwiched between Mali and Mishra in the back of the Scorpio, talking wildly about Sonu Nigam's property. This property was fit for an NRI, he kept saying.

By then, Inspector Patil had started talking about possible property in South Mumbai. Did Shamshuddin have anything there?

The Scorpio drove towards the sea link. The officers had decided that the sea link would be calm; it was the quietest stretch of land.

Inspector Patil enquired about office space in South Mumbai and then suddenly started asking about Opera House. He then asked about locker space and as Mali recalls, *“AC gadi mein ekdum pasina pasina ho gaya.”* (“He started sweating in an AC car.”)

“Shamshu to ekdum zero hogaya,” said Mali. (“Shamshu felt deflated.”)

Nervous, he then asked if he could smoke. The car pulled over on the sea link and for a brief moment, Mali feared that Shamshu would jump over and swim away. *“Humne usko out kar diya,”* says Mishra. (“We had outed him.”)

He held the officers' hands, asking them to help. He was a poor man. He was just a mule transporting keys. He didn't know what the scene in the bank was. He knew there was wrongdoing but he wasn't involved.

He cursed Ajay Mehta, a reputed diamond dealer. He wouldn't let go of the officers' hands. He cursed Ajay Mehta some more. Shamshu fell to the ground and crouched, head in his hands.

It wasn't me, he kept saying.

Before Ajay Mehta, before the heist, there was an old family connection.

When Shamshu was young, he lived with an uncle who had a toy store. It was a small shop, one that didn't bring in much money. So his uncle, a pious man, made taweez and sold them at dargahs and mosques. One day in the 1990s, Ajay Mehta chanced upon this man with a full beard and bought two taweez.

One taweez for safety, and one for protection from the evil eye.

From then on, Ajay Mehta became a Godfather-like figure to the family, giving small donations for weddings and meeting monetary demands as the family struggled to get by.

In those early conversations, Ajay Mehta learnt about the family's old business as key makers. They had a storied family legacy as key and lock makers in Aurangzeb's court. So sturdy were their locks that it was rumoured that nobody would be able to break them.

A young man name Fareed Azmi carried forth the family name and tradition. He made locks from his small store next to Bhayandar station and handed them to Shamshuddin to deliver to Mehta.

When the officers arrived at the master key maker's store, he wasn't there and had to be called in. He walked with a limp and

had days-old stubble. Again, the officers had painstakingly manufactured another story. A key had broken in the lock of the car and they asked Fareed to come take a look. He entered the car and the officers shut the door behind him. Through the tinted windows, you couldn't see the man's nervousness.

"Who are you? Where are you taking me?" he asked, over and over. They asked him if he knew Ajay Mehta. Fareed denied everything. They asked him if he knew that about ₹10 crore had been looted and, with wide eyes, he shook his head, gesturing no. They asked him if he knew Shamshu and he gestured yes.

He refused to speak. When he failed to give them any more information, the officers told Shamshu, who was crouching in the back of the car, to show his face. He joined his hands together in apology as his eyes met Fareed's and told him to confess. "*Sorry bhai, sab bata do,*" he said. ("I'm sorry, tell them everything.")

Fareed started talking. He did it for the money. He had many children at home, many mouths to feed. Being a key maker didn't hold many prospects and prices were going up. He never asked what they keys were for, he just made copies.

Who wouldn't, he asked. For ₹5000 per piece, this was good money, money that he sorely needed.

It would take him days to cut the keys without a sample. All that was brought to him was an uncut piece of metal that had been dipped in ink. Close inspection would reveal the fine lines, scratches and indentations on the ink. It was his job to make a key from that sample. For up to two months, Fareed would work on the key. The master key took the longest, over two months. So many keys were wasted. But Fareed never saw big money. He never saw more than a few thousand. Like Shamshu, Ajay would

meet his needs. Thousands for a wedding, or a small loan.

Even he passed on the blame: to Ajay Mehta.

To Mishra, Ajay Mehta looked like Amitabh Bachchan. He had the same salt-and-pepper hair and full goatee. He was a simple man and was always well-dressed.

He was also a deeply secretive man with a strict rule about privacy. If anyone wanted to contact him, they were to call him from an STD-ISD-PCO booth. A call from a mobile phone would never be answered. Callers were not to let the phone ring for long. A missed call would do, and when he had the time, he would call back.

As the case was getting closer to being solved, pressure from the top started increasing. This case would go down as a landmark case and Mumbai police, often tainted, would be celebrated. The officers readied to get Ajay but since the diamond merchant preferred the simplicity of his house in Navsari, Gujarat, he was seldom at his house in Mumbai.

The team filed into the Scorpio and drove to Gujarat one night. On the way, they stopped at a dhaba where they ate and discussed how it would play out but again, this was just chitchat. Officers know that these things can't be planned but they couldn't stop discussing it excitedly, like schoolboys on a field trip. When they arrived at the house, they waited for Ajay. He didn't leave his house. There was a wedding in the area and they thought he might would go for that, but again, he didn't leave his house.

Finally, Mishra came up with a plan. They would call him and say a child had been hurt at the hospital that was a mere 50 metres away, and had given Ajay's telephone number. They called Ajay and his wife answered. Ajay returned the call and rushed to the

hospital to find no child. As he exited, Mali and Mishra called out, "*Ajay bhai, Opera House pe mile the.*" ("Ajay bhai, we used to meet at Opera House.")

Ajay was confused. When did they meet, he asked and then, the rest of the team came forth. Officers surrounded him and they revealed their identity.

Ajay Mehta smiled. He looked at the ground, almost as though he knew this day was coming.

In the diamond business where happiness can be measured in carats, Ajay Mehta was jaded. Nobody cared for the other, nobody helped the other.

Money, money, money.

One day he chanced upon a plan to right the wrongs of the diamond world. By mistake, he inserted his key into another locker and when he yanked his key out, it was covered with lines and cuts. What if other keys could be copied, he wondered.

He was angry with the diamond dealers around Panchratna. If someone needed ₹5000, no one would help. They would need to hear a thousand pleas before they help. Yet when there was a prospective deal, they'd give away ₹50 lakh worth of diamonds without any assurances.

"How small these people's hearts are," he'd told Kadam once.

Ajay Mehta would become the self-styled Robin Hood of the Opera House diamond world. He'd start stealing diamonds and with that money he would help people in need. He made an imprint of the custodian key by pressing it on his palm. He took a picture of the indents and sent it over to Fareed. When the key was ready, he started going through lockers.

He never took all the money: he didn't want to arouse suspicion.

He worked with a man called Chandru Berde who acted as a watcher. Chandru's locker was in the front of the room and he kept an eye out as Ajay went through one locker after another.

It is alleged that Ajay went through at least 16 lockers and walked away with over ₹9 crore.

When the police went to recover the loot, they found most of it stored in Ajay's locker. A small amount was recovered from Chandru's. Most of the money was recovered and returned.

When they asked him what he was planning on doing with the money, he said, he wanted to set up a gaushala (a cowshed) and open a charity.

The four—Ajay, Chandru, Shamsuddin, and Fareed—will face a court on July 25. In the meantime, their lives have not improved drastically.

Shamsuddin still lives in the slum.

Fareed still lives in a rented house in Nala Sopara.

Chandru still has his small 400 square feet house in Bhayandar.

Ajay bought a house: a humble 1 BHK in Goregaon in which he seldom sleeps.

Most of the money has been returned, although ₹50 lakh remains to be collected as the owner of the money hasn't come forth.

"This is the first case where the only person we brought in was the accused."

The first to cry in the Unit II office was Shamsuddin and later, during the two-month interrogation period, all four cried.

"Apne ko target nikalna hai. Sidi ungli se nahin aata to thodi tedi karna hai. Tedi ungli se nahin to pees ke nikalna hai." ("We have to get results. The good, bad or the ugly way.")


No officer raised his hand. There was no shouting because, as

Mali recalls, these were not criminals; they were desperate men in a city where desperation is not frowned upon.

Postscript

Ajay Dubey, counsel for the four accused, says his clients are innocent and have been framed. He has refused to say anything more.



A black and white portrait of Rajdeep Sardesai, Editor-in-Chief of CNN-IBN. He is shown from the chest up, wearing a light-colored, patterned button-down shirt. He has dark, wavy hair and is looking slightly to the right of the frame with a subtle smile. The background is dark and out of focus.

“We need to rediscover the passion in journalists,
and along with the passion, rediscover our moral compass.”

RAJDEEP SARDESAI
Editor-in-Chief, CNN-IBN

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· 2014 ·

BEST HEALTH & WELLNESS STORY

BEST HEALTH & WELLNESS STORY

By

VINOD KUMAR MENON

Winner

**BARELY 150 KMS FROM MUMBAI,
15 CHILDREN DIED OF MALNUTRITION
IN THE PAST 2 MONTHS**

Mid Day
5th Aug '13

Vinod Kumar Menon



*Barely 150 kms from Mumbai, 15 children died
of malnutrition in the past 2 months*

Vinod Kumar Menon is the City Editor of Mid Day Infomedia Limited. Prior to joining Mid Day, He was with Zee Telefilms.

He did his schooling and college in Mumbai. He is a Post Graduate in Mass Communications from All India Institute of Management Studies. He is presently perusing Post Graduate Diploma in Criminal Justice from IGNOU, New Delhi.

He is also the recipient of prestigious EPC World Award 2010 and Newsmakers Achievers Award 2011, for his expose on ‘Aarey Land Scam’ and series of articles that he wrote on the dairy industry. In 2013, he received the prestigious Red Ink Press Club Award for his research-based story on drought in Dolara village, 100 kms from Mumbai.

Also, his biggest endeavour as a journalist was when he discovered a 200-year-old secret tunnel under General Post Office (GPO), which hit the headlines and opened a new avenue for historians and archeologists to do their research.

He has a plethora of investigative pieces to his credit – exposes and eye-openers that have been cited as evidence in the court of law during trials.

Barely 150 kms from Mumbai, 15 children died of malnutrition in the past 2 months

550 kids starving in Jawhar, Mokhada

Young, undernourished women in their teens give birth several times and in quick succession; grinding poverty and rampant unemployment means that their children live in squalor and are denied proper nutrition, safe drinking water, or even breast milk.

Last year, Prime Minister Manmohan Singh labeled the problem of malnutrition as a matter of national shame. Almost a year later, figures obtained by Mid Day indicate that little has been done in the state of Maharashtra to tackle this blight. The talukas of Jawhar and Mokhada alone are ailing with almost 550 malnourished children.

According to doctors attached to the hospitals in these talukas, nearly 400 malnourished children are being treated at various primary health centres and rural hospitals.



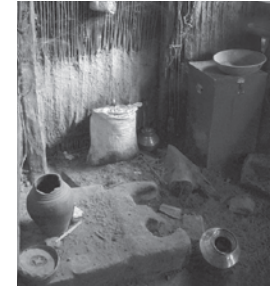
Many of the children are born underweight to undernourished, underage mothers, and the squalid, poverty-stricken conditions that they are born into does not help improve their condition.

Patients with severe ailments including waterborne diseases are referred to Cottage Hospital in Jawahar. Dr. Ramdas Marad, paediatrician and superintendent of Cottage Hospital in Jawhar, said, "At present I am treating 24 malnourished children aged 0-6 years, of whom 23 are moderately and one severely malnourished. They were all referred to me from rural hospitals and primary health centres. Six of them are being treated for diarrhoea and dysentery, and the rest are being treated for respiratory tract infections like cold and pneumonia."

Asked why malnourishment is so pervasive in the areas, Marad

Barely 150 kms from Mumbai, 15 children died of malnutrition in the past 2 months

attributed the problem to two primary factors – unhygienic living conditions and inadequate food which is inferior in quality.



This affects both mother and child, leading to inadequate production of breast milk. These factors are compounded when children are born in

q u i c k

succession with few resources to go around. A cluster of other problems plaguing the villages worsens the situation -- unemployment, poverty, illiteracy and alcoholism are rampant, and the insistence on a male child means that most mothers have several children.



Children of a lesser god? Three-year-old Meena Gare is admitted in Cottage Hospital in Jawhar taluka with lower respiratory tract infection and severe malnutrition.

Thirty per cent of the babies delivered in these areas are underweight at birth, their mothers often below 18 years of age, and unable to care for themselves when pregnant.

"Efforts are being made by the Anganwadi and district child offices to ensure that the children





are fed at least twice a day; these meals are provided under various government schemes including the Integrated Child Development Scheme (ICDS). Sadly, the food is insufficient for the child,” explained Neeta Kothare, assistant child development project officer in Jawhar.

Every day, 5 more patients are being admitted for malnourishment, says doctor.

Dr. Sanjay Kawade at Cottage Hospital speaks of the rise in cases of malnutrition in the region and the lack of nutritious food that leads to the problem.

The atmosphere at the 100-bed Cottage Hospital in Jawhar is that of desperation. Everywhere you look, gaunt, emaciated children stare back at you. They are all victims of different degrees of malnourishment.

According to doctors at the hospital, around 200 to 300 patients visit the hospital on a daily basis for treatment in the outdoor patient department. Additionally, five to six cases of moderately malnourished children are admitted daily to the paediatric ward. However, the number has risen to 24 as of August 4.

On Saturday, a team from Mid Day visited the hospital and were

aghast after witnessing the condition of the children and their family members at the hospital. Many of the children were patients of severe malnourishment, with respiratory tract infection. Dr. Sanjay Kawade, on-duty paediatrician at the hospital said, “Usually there are four to five cases of malnutrition referred daily to our hospital, but the number increases during monsoons. In a malnourished child, immunity is very low and they are contract infections, if they don’t receive proper care.”

“We admit such patients and provide treatment, which includes a high protein and carbohydrate diet with multivitamins, that will help them gain weight. As soon as they are discharged, they lose the weight and fall sick owing to the absence of a balanced diet,” he added.

Saru Budhe, of Sagpani village, mother of two children who are in the hospital agrees that the quality of food provided by the aanganwadi is not of good quality. Other mothers in the paediatric ward agreed that the quality of food is poor.



Pratiksha Shinde: 1 year
Village: Kogda
Weight: 4.78 kg
Ideal weight: 7-8 kg
Category: Severe acute malnutrition
Reason for admission: Respiratory tract infection



Meena Gare: 3 years
Village: Khodala
Weight: 6.7 kg
Ideal weight: 13-14 kg
Category: Severe acute malnutrition
Reason for admission: Lower respiratory tract infection



Starving Saru with her twin sons Nakul and Lahu.

Nakul Budhe: 1.7 year

Village: Sagpani

Weight: 4 kg

Ideal weight: 10-11 kg

Category: Severe acute malnutrition

Reason for admission: Severe anaemia

Lahu Budhe: 1.7 year

Village: Sagpani

Weight: 3.75 kg

Ideal weight: 10-11 kg

Category: Severe acute malnutrition

Reason for admission: Respiratory tract infection



Nisha Mangad: 11 months

Village: Sirsanipada

Weight: 3.5 kg

Ideal weight: 7-8 kg

Category: Severe acute malnutrition

Reason for admission: Respiratory tract infection



Mahima Digha: 10 months

Village: Khandepade

Weight: 3.2 kg

Ideal weight: 7-8 kg

Category: Severe acute malnutrition

Reason for admission: Respiratory tract infection

On August 3, Savitra Ghatal of Ase

village, Mokhada taluka, gave birth to a baby girl weighing only 1.2 kg. This was her first baby, who required an incubator support.

Dr. Ramdar Marad, superintendent at the hospital, said that 30 per cent of the newborns were born underweight -- anywhere between 750 gram and 1.5 kg. In June 2013, 170 newborns were delivered, out of which 10 per cent were below 1 kg.



Netas' visit leads to cleaning frenzy

Hours prior to Rajendra Gavit and Madhukar Pichad's visit, workers at Cottage Hospital in Jawhar were busy scrubbing and cleaning the filthy wards, and installing grills, right next to sick children with low immunity. Children are underfed in their homes, they are no better off at Cottage Hospital in Jawhar.

The hospital floors are strewn with waste as there are no dustbins, the smell of urine emanates from wards, as bed sheets



Clean sweep: On Saturday, workers were seen busy sweeping the floors and fixing grills on the windows at the hospital in last-minute preparations for the ministers' visit.

are not replaced. Medical waste such as syringes, blood stained cotton wads are also thrown in an open cardboard box.

However, the hospital saw a furious clean-up drive on Saturday, with many workers cleaning the windows, grills being put up at windows, floors being swept and medical waste being disposed separately.

The spring-cleaning measures were being carried out for the sake of the ministers, who were scheduled to visit the hospital yesterday. State Tribal Welfare Affairs Minister Madhukar



Children are exposed to infections as workers install grills at the windows. The children were not moved during the entire process.

Pichad and State Minister for Tribal Welfare and Development Rajendra Gavit visited the hospital on Sunday to assess the situation.

According to doctors at the hospital, the measures, though welcome, were causing more inconvenience as work like installing grills were being carried out without the children being shifted. "Malnourished children have very low immunity and are prone to infection, but still no care was taken."

Hospital speaks

When asked about the method of disposing medical waste, Dr. Ramdas Marad, hospital superintendent said, "We have tied



Many patients and their kin are forced to sleep on the floors of the overcrowded hospital.

up with a Boisar-based company to segregate wet, dry and medical waste as per norms. We have such separate collection boxes kept in the emergency and other wards. Additionally, training is given to the nurses and ward boys."



Medical waste such as syringes and blood-stained cotton wads lay in an open box.

When informed about the unsafe practice in the ward, he said, "I will check."

- 258** The number of malnourished children in Jawhar in July
- 291** The number of malnourished children in Mokhada in June
- 400** The number of children being treated at primary health centres and rural hospitals in the region.



BEST HEALTH & WELLNESS STORY

BY
SWAGATA YADAVAR
Winner

WOMBS AND THE WOLVES

The Week
21st Apr '13

Swagata Yadavar



Wombs and the wolves

Swagata Yadavar is working as a senior correspondent with The Week magazine. She is responsible for covering issues related to public health in the western region for the magazine. She is keen to bring often ignored health issues to light. Her story on female foeticide racket by Dr. Sudam and Dr. Saraswati Munde in Beed, Maharashtra, won the Population First National Laadli Media & Advertising Awards for Gender Sensitivity, 2013.

Wombs and the wolves

Pain. Fatigue. Palpitation. Dizziness. Indigestion. Nausea. Numbness. Hopelessness.

“I feel sick.”

“I feel sick.”

“I feel sick.”

These words still echo in my ears. They did not come from a dying man or a depressed woman. They were whimpered by scores of 'normal' women in India's rural hinterlands.

The cause lay in two words uttered by their unscrupulous doctors: *bacchedani kharaab*. These gullible women were told their uteri were faulty, and that they had to be removed.

The Week's journey through some villages in Bihar and Rajasthan revealed the plight of women—many of them allegedly unmarried—whose wombs were removed as “treatment” for everything, from a simple stomach ache to menstrual issues.

Why? The reason, again, lay in two words: *filthy lucre*.

Sunita Devi, a 35-year-old labourer of Latbasepur village in Bihar's Samastipur district, would tell us more. It all started with a debilitating stomach pain, which she had ignored for long. Thanks to the Rashtriya Swasthya Bima Yojana, she hoped to finally get proper treatment at a private hospital.

At Krishna Hospital, one of the hospitals empanelled in the rural health scheme, Sunita was told she needed an appendicitis surgery. And a hysterectomy, too.

She underwent both eight months ago. Today, she is feeble. “I often get palpitations,” she said. “I get frequent headaches and gas trouble.”

The mother of five can no longer work in the fields. She now assists at a small shop in the village. The plight of her two sisters-in-law who also underwent hysterectomies is no different.

Three years ago, the RSBY, which entitles families below poverty line to free treatment up to ₹30,000 a year, was implemented in Samastipur district of Bihar. It was a godsend for the rural masses. But, in the hands of greedy doctors, it became a cruel instrument to siphon off public money.

The Samastipur scam came to fore when District Magistrate Kundan Kumar found an alarming number of hysterectomies conducted by private nursing homes during an RSBY meeting. Of 14,851 procedures conducted under RSBY between 2010 and 2012 in 16 empanelled hospitals in Samastipur, 5,503 were hysterectomies. That is about 37 per cent of all procedures. In some hospitals, more than 50 per cent were hysterectomies, which costs the highest of all procedures under the RSBY scheme.

Kundan Kumar organised a five-day medical camp to ascertain if the procedures conducted were needed. About 2,600 women who had undergone hysterectomy attended the camp. The expert team found 717 cases of unwanted surgery, 124 cases of underage surgery, 320 cases of fleecing and 23 cases of non-surgery.

The magistrate's report clearly pointed to gross unethical practices. For instance, Anita Devi, 23, who complained of abdominal pain and white discharge, had been operated upon. The expert team commented: “Conservative treatment should have done, hysterectomy not justified.” Similar was the case of Ratna Devi, 40, who underwent hysterectomy for appendicitis.

The report noted that many beneficiaries mentioned by the private hospitals could not be traced. In many cases, the hospitals

simply swiped their RSBY cards but never conducted the procedures. There were also instances of procedures being marked against the name of dead people. Worse, some hysterectomy 'cases' reportedly turned out to be men!

It was found that many of the private hospitals and nursing homes did not have the requisite infrastructure for the procedures. Only some of them had well-trained surgeons, and in a few cases, operations were conducted by non-medical practitioners.

Subsequently, 12 of 16 nursing homes in Samastipur were de-panelled from the list. FIRs, too, were lodged against five of these guilty hospitals under various sections.

The involved doctors, meanwhile, were doing their best to cover their tracks. "Dr. Thakur from Krishna Hospital often comes to our house asking for our signature on some paper," said the family of Sangita Devi, 26. Sangita underwent hysterectomy two years ago. Since then, she has been battling frequent spells of weakness, dizziness and headaches. She now weighs just 30kg and can hardly manage any work. She has already spent ₹5,000 on medicine and the frequent trips to the doctors are eating away most of what her husband earns. When The Week contacted, Dr. Thakur refused to meet us.

Next, The Week travelled to Rajasthan's Dausa district, where a high number of hysterectomies was reported recently. Guddi Devi, 27, felt sick, though she technically was not. Her bones and joints ached all day. Fatigue bound her to bed. Food did not interest her. And her eyesight was fading. It was nothing but a clear case of premature menopause, courtesy the hysterectomy and oophorectomy she underwent three years ago.

"I had gone to the doctor, complaining of stomach ache. He told me that my uterus should be removed or I would get cancer," she said. Her family, which owns just a small piece of land, was convinced to go for the "life-saving" surgery costing ₹16,000.

"I feel weak all the time. I constantly fall ill, and the stomach pain for which I sought treatment initially persists," said the mother of three. She has already paid another 110,000 on treatment of these symptoms, often travelling two and a half hours by tractors and buses to the nearest hospital. Now, her 12-year-old daughter, Rinki, takes care of all the household responsibilities. "I am upset about spoiling her education," added a sullen Guddi.

Every village The Week visited had similar stories to tell. "I went to the doctor for excessive menstrual bleeding and he advised hysterectomy," said Angoori Devi, 34, of Sikandara. "She cannot do anything now; she gets easily tired," complained her daughter, Guddi. The family had to sell their buffalo to pay for the surgery, which gave her joint aches, indigestion, dizziness and fatigue as companions.

"When I was admitted in the hospital, there were about 40 women who were undergoing the same operation," Angoori recalled about her stay at Madaan Hospital. Activists in the area said as many as 2,300 women in the region have undergone unwanted hysterectomies at private hospitals in the past two years.

An RTI application filed by advocate Durga Prasad Saini of Dausa revealed that of 385 procedures conducted over six months in three private hospitals of Bandikui town in 2010, at least 226 were hysterectomies. And of them, 185 were below the age of 30.

“Is there an epidemic in Dausa that forces women to undergo hysterectomy?” asked Saini, who is also National General Secretary of Akhil Bharatiya Grahak Panchayat (ABGP). “If there was a suspicion of cancer, why was not a single biopsy done?”

What compounds the issue in such villages is the people have no one else to go to. For instance, the post of a gynaecologist had been lying vacant for many years in the community centre in Bandikui despite repeated requests.

Though the centre got a gynaecologist, it wore a dark and deserted look when we visited. “Tell us how we will manage when such a big centre only has five doctors,” said an employee. On the other hand, there are five big private hospitals in the town, doing well.

“The doctors have an understanding with the rural practitioners, who are promised a commission on referrals,” alleged Dr. O.P. Bansal, who runs a hospital in Dausa. Even employees at government hospitals act as agents who take patients to private clinics.

Hysterectomy was so ubiquitous in the town that some households had three generations of women who had gone under the knife. Take the case of Sushila Devi of Maanpur village who had gone to Katta Hospital to meet a relative, Guddi Devi, admitted for hysterectomy. Sushila, too, got caught in the trap and was operated upon three days later.

Guddi Devi, a mother of four, was advised hysterectomy to cure body ache. Now, she can no longer work as a labourer. “I feel dizzy when I am in the sun, I cannot lift heavy loads and get frequent palpitations,” she said.

Surprisingly, despite protests and frequent media reports, no

action was taken against erring private hospitals. “They have consent papers from the women, so we cannot do anything unless the Clinical Establishment Act is passed,” said O.P. Baherwa, chief medical and health officer, Dausa.

Many FIRs, too, were lodged in the local police stations against the doctors. Mahendra Kumar filed a case against Madhur Hospital and its owner Dr. Rajesh Dhakar, after his 20-year-old wife, Vimla Devi, was subjected to hysterectomy following a failed caesarian section.

The crestfallen childless couple alleged that the police did not investigate the matter properly and threatened 'action' if Kumar pursued the case.

The attitude of officials at Dausa was, indeed, sympathetic towards the doctors. “People here attack the doctors and threaten to destroy the hospital, hoping to get compensation,” said District Collector Pramila Surana. Police Inspector Rohitash Devanda said he had not come across any cases against doctors since he took charge 10 months ago. “These people blackmail doctors to gain money. If some patients die during treatment, it does not mean the doctors are at fault,” he said. A clock bearing Madhur Hospital's name hung on his office wall.

The RSBY triggered a uterus loot in Chhattisgarh, too. Health Minister Amar Agrawal stated that 1,800 hysterectomies were done in just eight months last year. It was estimated that at least 7,000 hysterectomies were conducted in the state over the past three years under the RSBY scheme. The issue, which was noted by the National Human Rights Commission, led to a furore and licences of 22 private hospitals were cancelled.

Down south in Andhra Pradesh, it was the state government's

insurance scheme, Arogyashri, that led to rampant exploitation. Ever since the scheme was implemented in 2007, there was an exponential rise in hysterectomy cases.

Hyderabad-based NGO Centre for Action, Research and People's Development found that 171 women under age 40 in just one administrative block of Medak district had undergone hysterectomy. About 95 per cent of them had gone to private clinics for treatment and 33 per cent had their ovaries also removed.

A survey by the Andhra Pradesh Mahila Samatha Society found that as much as 32 per cent of about 1,000 women who underwent hysterectomy were below age 30.

These case studies and statistics point to deep rot in the health care system. In fact, it is disheartening to see a project like the RSBY—termed by the World Bank as “path-breaking”—being exploited. The RSBY was seen as a prelude to the Centre's ambitious Universal Health Coverage, which is expected to be implemented under the 12th Five-Year Plan (2012-17).

While private health providers bring better infrastructure and quality, they also bring in the risk of greed and exploitation. Without proper monitoring, this kind of public-private partnership is a cause for concern, said Padma Deosthali, coordinator of Centre for Enquiry into Health and Allied Themes, Mumbai. “For instance, there is no mention of quality of care in the empanelment under the RSBY scheme. Not even basic standards like presence of a qualified medical practitioner and nurse,” she pointed out.

“More than treating health problems, the focus is on procedures and surgeries, which was exploited by private nursing homes,” said Dr. A.V. Sahay, medical officer and district head of Bihar Swasthya Seva Sangh. He also stressed on the need for

enhancing the public health care system and improving the “reproductive hygiene” of women in rural regions.

Dr. Yogesh Jain of Jan Swasthya Sahyog said a major flaw in the scheme was that it did not cover out-patient treatment and, hence, encouraged unwanted hospitalisation. Without strict guidelines, doctors cannot be expected to regulate themselves, he added.

Currently, however, the Central government has directed all state nodal agencies of RSBY that approval from the insurance company concerned is mandatory for hysterectomies performed on women under age 40.

But does the issue end there? The brouhaha shall pass. The scam will turn stale. But what about the innocent women who went under the knives for no reason? Sadly, no one, except a few NGOs, has reached out to them.

“The cost of maintaining the health of a woman who had undergone hysterectomy with medicines and supplements is ₹18,250 a year,” said Dr. Prakash Vinjamuri of Hyderabad-based Life HRG, which studied the surgery's impact on women in Medak district of Andhra Pradesh in 2011.

The toll is not just monetary. Loss of vitality and libido affects the psychological and social health of the woman. The study in Medak, for instance, found women whose uteri were removed faced domestic violence over sexual issues, and many husbands had extra-marital affairs. The worst part was the impact on the next generation, as children of these women are forced to quit school to handle household chores.

When and who will compensate for all these losses?

Vital loss

Hysterectomy is the surgical removal of the uterus but may

also involve removal of the cervix. A patient may require 3-12 months for full recovery.

Types

Radical hysterectomy

Removal of cervix, upper vagina, lymph nodes, ovaries and fallopian tube. Recommended in case of cancer.

Total hysterectomy

Removal of uterus and cervix.

Subtotal hysterectomy

Removal of the uterus.

Risks

- * Excessive blood loss, injury to ureter and bladder
- * Cardiovascular disease
- * Osteoporosis
- * Decline in psychological well-being
- * Decline in libido
- * Premature death
- * Affects the functioning of ovaries in 40 per cent of women

Early menopause

The average age of menopause in India is 51 years, and removal of ovaries advances it by 3.7 years. Menopause leads to a drop in oestrogen (female hormone) level, causing calcium loss and bone breakdown.

When is hysterectomy needed?

Hysterectomy should be a last resort in conditions such as

cancers of the reproductive system, severe infections, persistent vaginal bleeding, uterine prolapse, endometriosis and to prevent further conception.

Before undergoing hysterectomy, one should undergo either a hormone test, sonography or a pap smear to test for cancer.



BEST HEALTH & WELLNESS STORY

BY
NEHA BHATT
Runner-up

DARK AS THIS CITY

Outlook
29th Jul '13

Neha Bhatt



Dark As This City

Neha Bhatt has spent the last four years writing features at Outlook magazine, New Delhi. She enjoys writing on women's issues, health, education, and trends in rural/urban society. Previously, she worked with Business Standard and CNN-IBN.

Dark As This City

What makes industrious Jabalpur the city with India's highest suicide rate?



Jeet Sharma, 27, under treatment for depression, he now practises meditation.

On most days, Jabalpur's well-known Tilwara bridge, on the route to Nagpur, makes a fetching picture. The Narmada gushes far below, dark hills rise at one end of the bridge, the other end a sea of green that seals from view the grimy city of Jabalpur beyond. But in 'suicide season', as locals casually call the months between April and July, when exam results are generally declared, this bridge turns deadly, becoming the city's preferred 'khudkushi point', tempting scores of young men and women to go over the rails and into the swirling waters below.

This doesn't raise many eyebrows in Jabalpur anymore, for the phenomenon has been all too routinised. In fact, the National Crime Records Bureau's suicide statistics reveal a chilling fact:

Jabalpur tops the list of Indian cities, with nearly 50 suicides a month and a suicide rate of 45.1 for every 1,000 people in the city, beating 52 other big cities like Bangalore, Chennai, Pune, Delhi and Mumbai. Jabalpur clocked 572 suicides in 2012, up from 351 the year before. Local papers reduce news of daily suicides to single column stories, though recently the local channel, Sahara Samay MP, aired an hour-long special feature on the depressing trend, titled 'Jabalpur: Suicide Capital'. "The local media haven't fully caught on to the gravity of the situation. There are hardly any discussions on the problem, not even among NGOs," says Harpreet Kaur, who produced the show. But what makes Jabalpur such a grim city to live in? Amit Mishra, 17, a student in a private school who tried to commit suicide early this month, has a ready answer: "This is not a city that can support my dreams and my parents don't understand that. I failed my Class XII this year and father wants me to pursue engineering when all I want is to go to Mumbai and try my luck as an actor," says the young man, lying in the ICU at the city's National Hospital, where several beds are reserved under the 'poison unit', meant for treating an overwhelming number of residents who consume poison to try to end it all.

Amit swallowed naphthalene balls on the night of July 1 and was brought to the hospital by his parents the next day. In an eerie reality TV-like dramatisation of his death wish, he tells us about a suicide note he has composed, noting that his case should be featured on Crime Patrol, a TV show. He pulls out his wallet and points to two photos, one showing a dusky, shy-looking boy, the other the grown-up, better-groomed version. "Can you believe this? So dark-skinned and mousy. Look at how I have worked on myself. I have high aspirations, I want expensive phones, a job in the movies, I just need my parents to let me go."



Amit Mishra, 17, Jabalpur wouldn't support his dreams, so he took naphthalene balls.

His father steps in to inquire after his health, but the young boy won't talk to him. Outside, the father, Satyendra Mishra, is in tears: "I'm just a worried father. What did I do wrong? I have a job in a clothing company, but I've tried to give him all he ever wanted. In return, I ask him to focus, not be wayward. But I guess we failed to understand him."

Across from Amit's bed twenty something Meena Kumar lies unconscious. She is in a critical condition. Her husband Naren, a pharmacist, claims she swallowed four unknown antibiotics "by mistake". A few beds down, Dhiren Singh, 28, who consumed Celphos pesticide the day before, writhes in pain and is delirious. He is watched over by his brother, whom doctors have told that Dhiren won't survive the day. Asked why he took the drastic step, his brother Viru shrugs, saying he may have been unhappy as he didn't have a regular job, but couldn't be sure as they weren't close enough.

Jabalpur, the army nerve-centre of Madhya Pradesh, could well

resemble any other Indian small town in the midst of a badly managed transition. As a chaotic traffic system gives way to a regularised bus service, single screen halls make way for multiplexes, local markets compete with the new 'Big Bazaar' mall in town, old and new mindsets battle it out. But below the surface, the city hasn't kept up with the pace of its people, those with big city aspirations. "People are taking extreme measures here at the drop of a hat, and one of the reasons could be the breakdown of the joint family. Petty domestic quarrels become bigger because you have no one to sort things out. Plus, the working population here is solely dependent on government jobs, such as those at the Gun Carriage Factory, Vehicle Factory or Indian Ordnance Factory, with few industries and hardly any avenues in the private sector," says Harinarayanachari Mishra, SP for the district. "Who knows, but reading about suicides everyday in the newspapers could be setting off a chain reaction, becoming the obvious response to any problem, big or small."

A large chunk of the suicide victims are students and young housewives, according to police figures. Dr. Hema Sahu, one of the few clinical psychologists in the city, says, "Most of my patients are aged 16-30, as this is the stage when you want the whole world with as little effort as possible. I regularly have newly-married women whose expectations from marriage are different from what it is in reality, students who feel isolated in this city, kids who cannot communicate with their parents. I'm not surprised I have three times the number of patients coming to me than two years ago, because the opportunities here are sorely missing and dissatisfaction levels are so high."

Worry Not, This Fan Is Suicide-Proof

Dr. R. S. Sharma's invention can save on-the-brink lives



The doctor's assistant demonstrates. The noose is around his neck.



He hops off the supporting stool, but with any load more than 25 kilos...



...the spring-loaded suspension gives way. At worst, he'll be hurt by the fall.

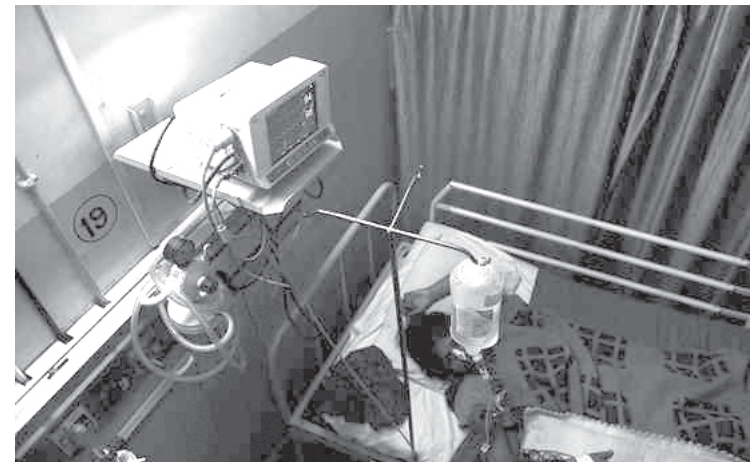
The doctor's assistant demonstrates. The noose is around his neck. He hops off the supporting stool, but with any load more than 25 kilos... the spring-loaded suspension gives way. At worst, he'll be hurt by the fall.

Dr. R. S. Sharma, a cardiologist who is well-regarded in town, says, "If Jabalpur's residents are not inspired to realign their mindsets, at least let's make it tougher for them to take their own lives." Sharma has invented a "suicide-proof fan", struck by the spate of death-by-hanging cases, especially by hostellers. Sharma's assistant uses a stool and a sample fan to demonstrate. It's a simple device, really, where the springs give away if anything heavier than 25 kilos is hung from the fan. "It costs just ₹450-600 more than a regular fan and the idea was that, just as there is a safety device in every machine, why not have one in a fan, which is one of the most common methods of suicide here," says Sharma, who has filed for a patent and received an order for 1,000 pieces from the Union ministry of science and technology.

Gynaecologist Pushpa Pande, who also counsels in her free

time, prefers attacking the root cause, which she elaborates as rising self-esteem issues in an "inferior city". Jabalpur is a city in deep conflict, she says, much more than other metros. "Youngsters want to explore a more experimental life, but the older generation hasn't welcomed change. TV is probably the only source of entertainment here, encouraging artificial expectations, which leads to widespread depression when those expectations are not met," explains Pande, who hosts a batch of medical students every morning in the meditation hall at her home to deal with stress.

One of her patients, 27-year-old Jeet Sharma, under medication for chronic depression, continues to struggle with "small-town boy" image issues. "I used to see my Facebook friends put up posts about travelling all over the world and I used to ask myself, why not me?" Jeet asks. While Jabalpur may be a tier-2 city on paper, it feels far from one.



Meena Kumar, 20+, reason unknown, but she tried to kill herself by swallowing "medicines."

Despite a few well-intentioned interventions, Jabalpur grapples with bigger issues at the moment. In the narrow, busy lanes of the city's Saraafa Bazaar, where Hitendra Srivastava lives in a modest two-storey house, the lack of good medical care continues to haunt the 35-year-old government school teacher. He lost his younger brother, Tijendra, in March this year. He had hung himself from the ceiling fan in his bedroom. Hitendra seats himself on a plastic chair from where he can look out the main door on to the street. "This is where my brother liked to sit the entire day, not saying much. He was diagnosed with schizophrenia in 2006, and I used to take him to the Institute of Mental Health in Agra every month for checkups. If we had better access to medical facilities right here in Jabalpur, he could have been saved."

The city, about 300 kms from the state capital Bhopal, has touristic potential in Bedaghat, the site famous for marble rocks that rise dramatically on either side of the Narmada, the picturesque Dhuandhar falls, and a few important temples. The city also serves as the nerve-centre of many bus and railway lines, with a tiny airport offering daily flights to Delhi and Mumbai. But the joke here goes that only outbound trains and flights go full as everyone only wants to flee.

Yet, not everyone is convinced that there is anything particularly amiss in Jabalpur. Rakesh Singh, BJP MP from the city, says he was surprised to learn about its suicide figures. "There has been a lot of development here in the last 7-8 years, in terms of connectivity, growth, education. Perhaps societal changes are the reason." Indeed, despite its somewhat lethargic functioning, Jabalpur is something of an education hub in Madhya Pradesh, third in line after Bhopal and Indore, with a number of engineering and medical institutions. With a high

student population from smaller districts of Madhya Pradesh and neighbouring states, there is clearly a rising sense of youth disillusionment. Geeta Gupta, a 26-year-old medical student from Rajasthan, has lived in Jabalpur for the last eight years and studies at N.S.C.B. Medical College, located on the outskirts. But increasing pressure at college and no emotional outlet—either in the form of counselling or an ambience of downtime—has led to deep depression. Geeta fights suicidal thoughts, confiding in nobody. "When I was interning last year, I'd come across 4-5 cases of attempted suicide daily. That shook me up, helped me get a perspective, and seek help. I didn't want to end up like that," she says.

Dr. O. P. Raichandani, a psychiatrist, admits Jabalpur is terribly low on medical resources to deal with the rising number of patients. "Awareness of psychiatry and psychotherapy is low, helplines are few, there are no full-time psychiatric wards. All this could build up to such a high suicide rate, but it's also possible the rate of suicide reporting is higher than other cities," he says.

What little counselling facilities the town has are rather arbitrary, with hardly any follow-ups; psychologists often don't even keep records of patients who consult them. "Jabalpur has what you could call an inferiority complex. Compared to Indore and Bhopal, cities that are better planned, Jabalpur is a society in turmoil," says Gyan Prakash, a social science professor at Devi Ahilya Vishwavidyalaya, Indore. What is also missing, adds Mishra, the SP, is a sense of public outrage. "As a society, we are not reacting strongly enough. At the police end, we are planning a seminar on suicides with the help of the Jabalpur Foundation," he says. "Through the initiative, we will encourage students to communicate, and schools and colleges to keep counsellors close at hand."

Meanwhile, Jabalpur could do well to remember these immortal lines by Dorothy Parker:

Razors pain you,
Rivers are damp,
Acids stain you,
And drugs cause cramp.
Guns aren't lawful,
Nooses give,
Gas smells awful,
You might as well live.

[Names of patients have been changed]

Cities With The Highest Suicide Rates

Jabalpur 45.1
Kollam 40.5
Rajkot 30.5

(Annual figures of suicides per 1,000 people living in the city or town.)

Top Causes Of Suicide*

Domestic quarrels
Mental/physical illness
Censure
Affairs gone wrong

Failure in exams
Substance abuse

Top Modes Of Suicide

Hanging
Poisoning
Self-immolation
Drowning

◆◆◆

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AWARDS

HONOURING EXCELLENCE
IN INDIAN JOURNALISM

· 2014 ·

**BEST HUMAN RIGHTS &
ENVIRONMENT STORY**

BEST HUMAN RIGHTS & ENVIRONMENT STORY

BY

VIVEKANANDA NEMANA

Winner

THE GREAT ESCAPE

Yahoo

25th Nov '13

Vivekananda Nemana



The Great Escape

Vivekananda Nemana is an Independent Journalist. He has written for The New York Times, Yahoo! Originals, Al Jazeera, Foreign Policy and other major publications. He is working on his first book, about tribal youth trying to make it in a globalized India. He studied at New York University and is a Merage Fellow.

The Great Escape

On October 12, 2013 Cyclone Phailin lashed Odisha with winds that clocked up to 260 kilometers per hour. But this is not that story. This is the story of the evacuation of a record 984,000 people across 18,000 villages in Odisha to coastal shelters in the face of clear and present danger. The story of an operation on a scale unprecedented in modern times, and one impressive by any standards worldwide. The story of those who remembered a nightmare past and were determined not to repeat it. The story of those who lived it and lived to tell the tale.



A girl runs for shelter in Srikakulam district of AP.

In his office in the Bhubaneswar Meteorological Centre, located within the grounds of the city's Biju Patnaik International Airport, director-in-charge Sarat C Sahu sat staring at some troubling news.

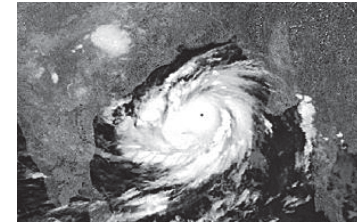
On his computer screen was a satellite image of the spiral-shaped set of clouds that his team of meteorologists had been tracking for a few days now, and which was moving slowly towards the Andaman Sea, off Malaysia.

By comparing their measurements with historical patterns, he and his team had confirmed that the spiral—the visible manifestation of an atmospheric depression—would grow in size and strength and speed, and morph into a full-blown cyclone as it raced across the Bay of Bengal with India's eastern coast in its sights.

Conditions were ideal for the incubation of a full-blown calamity. Cyclones grow over open seas, and the Bay's warm waters would nourish the system over the span of the 1,200-odd kilometers it would traverse before landfall.

It was October 6. By his estimation, potential landfall was at least six days away—but it was time, he decided, to blow the whistle.

He sought a meeting with Odisha's Special Relief Commissioner Pradip Kumar Mohapatra at the latter's office in Rajiv Bhavan, near the state secretariat.



Satellite image of Cyclone Phailin

They had been in fairly regular touch about this system, and Mohapatra had also been checking online updates from the United States Navy's Joint Typhoon Warning Center. The system would become a cyclone headed for

Odisha, Sahu now warned him, and it would probably be the worst to hit the state since the super cyclone of October 1999.

"I was horrified to hear that, and I couldn't concentrate on anything else for the rest of the day," Mohapatra said. "I couldn't even eat." An old memory came back to haunt him: the body of a young woman, her baby still cradled in her arms, crushed by a collapsed wall.

The memory dated back to the 1999 cyclone. He had come upon the crushed woman and child as relief workers cleared debris in a town called Kakatpur. That was 14 years ago, yet the image and all it stood for could still provoke a visceral sadness. Mohapatra, then 34, was District Collector of Puri when the super cyclone had struck, killing the woman and the child and many thousands more.

Although the city was relatively untouched, parts of the district had been completely devastated. In the days after the cyclone, he had waded through flooded slums and villages in a pair of cutoff pants and vest, surveying the damage and helping orchestrate

relief efforts. He had to send the police and army to escort relief convoys because survivors were so desperate that they attacked the convoys and stole their precious cargoes of rice.

The 1999 cyclone—the first ever that India Meteorological Department had labelled a ‘super cyclonic storm’—had ravaged large sections of Odisha’s coast. The official count put the toll at 12,640, though locals insist that over twice that number had died. Many of the deaths had occurred when, in the dead of night on October 29, a storm surge carried eight meters of seawater almost 20 kilometers inland.

Even though there was sufficient advance warning, the Odisha government was “caught with its pants down,” a state disaster management official told me. The devastation of the cyclone was followed by a humanitarian crisis. Once the waters receded, bodies littered streets and paddy fields. The administration struggled to assist survivors who had lost everything.

Back then, few officials had cell phones. The storm destroyed hundreds of telephone poles, severing communication channels between the administration and relief forces. The government had stocks of medicine and food, but couldn’t transport it to the affected areas because fallen trees had blocked roads—and they had no chainsaws to clear them.

Fourteen years on, Mohapatra recalled those experiences with a renewed urgency. He briefly considered going public with the warning—but rather than trigger premature panic, he decided to wait for more information.

He did not have to wait long. Sahu confirmed his suspicions the very next day: the cyclone, known at the time by the innocuous name ‘BOBO4’ and building bulk out there in the Bay, would be a monster, and it would make landfall on October 12 somewhere along the coasts of Ganjam district in Odisha and

Srikakulam in Andhra Pradesh.

Mohapatra decided it was time to alert the collectors of the 14 districts in Odisha that were most severely impacted by the 1999 cyclone, and which lay in the potential path of this one now building.

As Special Relief Commissioner, it was his responsibility to command the state administration during times of calamity. He was determined to avoid a repeat of 1999—and he had just five days to prepare. Working with the respective district collectors, Mohapatra and his team had to accomplish two things: one, conduct a mass evacuation on a potentially unprecedented scale and two, position staff and aid materials strategically so relief efforts could begin as soon as the cyclone made landfall.

Of these two objectives, evacuation was key. Millions of people along the coastline lived in thatched huts that would be easily blown down during a storm or washed away during the ensuing surge—the single biggest cause of death during cyclones. Unless these people were moved into safe, flood-resistant shelters in time, the storm could precipitate tragedy on an unimaginable scale.

Learning from mistakes

The 1999 super cyclone had changed everything about disaster management in Odisha and, to an extent, across India as a whole. Just one month after that tragedy, the government declared that the state was “traditionally vulnerable to disasters”, and created the Odisha State Disaster Management Authority, or OSDMA, the first agency in India to specialize in responding to natural calamities.

OSDMA analyzed everything that went wrong in 1999, and worked with different agencies of government to prepare for

future disasters. Among other things, it built 247 cyclone shelters along the coast, and trained and equipped units of the state police to enable them to rescue stranded people and clear blocked roads.

“After the super cyclone, we learned that preparation is much more important than response,” Kamal Lochan Mishra, a senior official at OSDMA, told me. “We started thinking of disaster management as a proactive thing, and that requires planning and prevention.”

“You learn the most from your own mistakes,” he said.



Harrowing memories from 1999

The logistics of a successful evacuation are far more complex than simply getting people out of homes and into shelters. The administration had to study the meteorological forecasts and make a call on where to concentrate their efforts. Evacuating the entire coast was not feasible, but evacuating the wrong areas could prove to be fatal. And there was hardly enough time to wait until they were sure of how bad the cyclone would be, or where precisely it would hit—they had to act off of what they knew, keeping in mind that a cyclone could veer off its predicted path for any number of reasons, and a swerve of even a mile could open up new areas to threat.

Once the local administration had identified the areas to be evacuated, the real work would begin. In towns and panchayat headquarters, enough people owned strong, concrete homes that could shelter their neighbours. But in the poorest coastal villages or slums, where almost everybody lived in shacks or huts, the government had to provide accommodation for entire communities.

The shelters that the OSDMA had built could hold about 60,000 people – a fraction of what a large-scale evacuation would require. A school or other public building—preferably within two kilometers of each community being evacuated—had to be therefore designated as a temporary shelter. Enough buses, trucks, jeeps, autos and other vehicles had to be arranged to transport hundreds of thousands of people to the shelters. Police and government officials had to be dispatched to supervise the evacuation, and to persuade people to leave their homes.

Once the people had been evacuated, they had to be fed. Rice, dal, vegetables, oil, spices and firewood had to be procured and



Dead cattle in a field. An image from 1999

supplied to each shelter in quantities sufficient to feed the evacuees for up to three days. The working estimate was 300 kilograms of rice and flattened rice for each shelter (1,500 kilograms each for every gram panchayat). Each shelter would also need people to cook and provide basic first aid, as well as someone in charge who could liaise with the district administration.

Lights, first aid kits, a generator, and communications

equipment—all of this had to be provisioned. All block, district and state level officers had to be in a position to monitor the whole thing—meaning that, at the very least, their cell phones had to be charged and their offices needed to have back-up power. And all this had to be done against an inexorably ticking clock.

‘Not even a stray dog...’

The official decision to evacuate was taken during an 11 am meeting on October 9 between the senior disaster management officials and the secretaries of all the state government departments.

Sarat Sahu provided the status update: The cyclone, which IMD had by then christened ‘Phailin’ (the Thai word for sapphire), was expected to make landfall on the southern coast of Odisha by the evening of October 12, with winds as high as 185 kmph.

Mohapatra and OSDMA Managing Director Dr. Taradatt then briefed the heads of the various government departments on the coordinated response that was required. Each department was assigned a role. The food supplies secretary, for instance, would speak with mill owners to obtain sufficient quantities of rice and sugar. The transportation secretary would commandeer as many trucks from the highways as possible. The energy secretary would oversee the acquisition of a sufficiency of truck-mounted generators, test them to see if they worked, and deploy them to planned locations like hospitals and government offices. The housing secretary would, among other things, ensure the designated shelters had



A dog naps outside the damaged huts of fishermen in Odisha.

access to drinking water.

The task was going to put an enormous strain on manpower—a situation complicated by the fact that all state employees would begin their week-long Dussehra holidays the next day. The officials took a spot decision to cancel all vacations with immediate effect.

Mohapatra was still not satisfied. Spurred by the persistent memories of 1999, he made a forceful demand: this time, the government agencies represented at the meeting needed to take complete responsibility for ensuring that every single person was moved out of harm’s way.

“I put the thing in the government’s mind that we should have an objective of no casualties,” Mohapatra told me. “We had never had a zero casualty approach before—but if we made that our stated objective, then we’d reduce the final figure.”

A few officials demurred. A cyclone of Phailin’s size was bound to take casualties, they argued, which the government could not realistically prevent. Mohapatra, backed by a few



Ganja village near Gopalpur before Phailin made landfall

others, stuck to his guns. By that same afternoon, he had briefed state Chief Minister Navin Patnaik, who signed off on the

evacuation order with an official commitment to zero casualties.

Mohapatra called each of the district collectors with that message—and reinforced it with the threat that criminal cases would be filed against them in the event of any casualties in their jurisdictions.

“I even told them to evacuate in such a manner that not even a stray dog should be visible in the sanitised zone,” he recalled, with a grin.

‘We will not let you remain behind’

On the balmy morning of October 10, a group of megaphone-wielding police officers and municipal officials wended their way through the labyrinthine alleys of Penthakata, a sprawling beachside slum on the outskirts of Puri that was home to nearly 40,000 Telugu-speaking fishermen.

“A cyclone is coming,” they announced on their speakers. “Do not venture into the sea. And please, for the sake of your lives, leave your homes by the 12th. We will not let you remain behind.”

They roamed the slum, enlisting community leaders into their effort to ensure that the message spread to every single resident. They had received unambiguous orders from the highest levels of

the state government: Cyclone Phailin, by then building up steam hundreds of miles off shore, should cause no loss of life in Penthakata.

Vasulu Jagalmani, a slim, pretty 22-year-old with large round eyes and high cheekbones and a ready, flirtatious smile, stood outside her home, watching the harried officials



People await relief supplies in Balasore, Odisha. REUTERS/Indian Army/Handout

with a puzzled frown. She knew a cyclone was coming—the Telugu channels had been talking about it for the past two days. Jagalmani had lived in Penthakata for all of her life; this was not the first time she had seen officials warning of impending storms.

This time though, something was different. The officials showed an unusual urgency, and a determination that everybody evacuate. She and her family had never left home for a storm before; she wondered where they would even go.

Jagalmani went next door to visit her aunt Mailubilli Nakaratnam—a loquacious, motherly woman who was happiest when she had people to fuss over and care for. Their conversation turned to the cyclone.

“Do you remember the cyclone in ‘99?” Nakaratnam asked, referring to the super cyclone that had devastated the Odisha coast on October 29, 1999. Jagalmani was just eight back then, and her memories were vague.

“Well, we all stayed home for that one. But once the storm came we wished we hadn’t,” Nakaratnam told her niece. “We thought we were all going to die.”

The 1999 cyclone did not cause as much devastation in Puri as it did in other parts of the state, notably in the port town of Paradip. Nakaratnam, like other locals, attributed this to the intervention of Lord Jagannath, the presiding deity of Puri’s storied temple, among the most sacred of Hindu holy shrines. But talk of an imminent cyclone stirred uneasy memories; Nakaratnam did not want to live through that experience one more time.

Her husband was more ambivalent. Mailubilli Kondalrao was a veteran of deadly cyclones. He had weathered the 1977 cyclone that killed at least 15,000 people at Chirala, in Andhra Pradesh, and he was in Paradip when the 1999 super cyclone had struck with devastating effect.



Odisha Chief Minister Naveen Patnaik (L) inspects relief preparations.

He empathized with his wife's concern, but he had lived through countless false alarms for cyclones that never materialized. With his thick moustache, strong arms and straight posture, Kondalrao cultivated the proud look of a veteran Telugu fisherman. He knew the sea and had learned to trust his own instincts.

Fishermen know that the first tell of an imminent cyclone is when the waves begin to crisscross each other. He gazed out to sea, where the waves continued to roll shoreward in straight, parallel lines—and saw nothing to cause alarm.

He was reluctant to evacuate, because to do so would mean leaving his property unattended and exposed to the risk of theft. His boat and net not only fed his family and put his teenage daughter through school, but also helped support kin like Jagalmani and her mother. He knew what loss or even damage to his boat could entail—the 1977 cyclone had put his boat out of commission for a month and forced him to borrow from a local don.

He decided to wait. For now, there was just not enough information for Kondalrao to act.

Turn on the radio

Information was also on NA Shah Ansari's mind that Thursday

(October 10) morning. As president of the community station 'Radio Namaskar' that operated out of Konark, he had to decide just how much of his station's broadcasts to dedicate to the cyclone.

As early as the morning of October 8, Sarat Sahu and his team had publicly announced that a depression over the Andaman Sea, then located about 1,450 kilometers southeast of Paradip, was building into a major cyclone and that landfall would be along the Odisha coast. Ansari's was among the few news outlets that picked up that early story and relayed it.

News of impending storms was critical to his core audience—the fishermen and their families who lived along the coast around Konark. Working far out at sea where cellphone coverage is non-existent, fishermen tended to rely on FM broadcasts as their primary source of information.

The IMD had not provided any information other than that a cyclone was on its way and that fishermen should return home from the seas within 48 hours, recalled Ansari, a portly man whose kurta masked a slight paunch, and whose deep-set eyes gave him the air of someone always in deep thought.



Ansari in the studio of Radio Namaskar.

The warning seemed routine. Tropical storms over the Bay of Bengal are such a regular feature that the locals refer to October and November as "cyclone season." There was nothing—yet—to set this latest warning apart from the many other routine warnings that are a part of the season, so Ansari's staff settled for interrupting its regular programming every few hours with the latest weather advisory.

"We started informing the fishermen that a storm was coming

and that from the 10th onwards they shouldn't go into the sea, because basically they go into the interior parts of the sea and stay there for one or two nights," Ansari told me. "They just needed to be aware of that."

The story however had blown up in the national media, which framed the narrative against the memories of the 1999 super cyclone, with the impending Dussehra festivities as backdrop. As words like "Phailin" and "devastation" splashed across the screens of national news channels, listeners began frantically calling Radio Namaskar for more detail on how it would affect their community.

To Ansari—who, as head of a community radio station, was by definition an area activist—the sheer volume of calls was a clear indicator of Radio Namaskar's role. "The mainstream media was talking about the cyclone, but wasn't providing clear, up-to-date reports," Ansari said, as he recalled the thinking behind the decision to launch round-the-clock coverage though the cyclone was still more than 48 hours away from landfall.

"The situation was so dangerous that every hour we were getting hundreds of phone calls from listeners about what was happening. That's why we thought, why not start a live broadcast and give people free information, so that people can listen to the radio and preserve the batteries on their cellphones."

'Get out of its path'

By noon October 10, two conflicting mindsets pervaded—and divided—the region.

Hordes of government officials, mandated to ensure zero casualties and threatened with prosecution if they failed, had stepped up effort to get the message out that Cyclone Phailin was

a real and present danger, and that evacuation, at the very latest by the morning of the 12th, was compulsory.

Their efforts acquired an added urgency because of Sarat Sahu, whose team at the Bhubaneswar Meteorological Center had begun tracking the cyclone's progress every hour. Phailin was by then just 950 kilometers away and had grown to roughly the size of France; the prognostication was that it would make landfall on Saturday evening/night, with windspeed around 185 kmph. Sahu had been ordered to report directly to the IMD's main office in New Delhi—the storm had by then assumed national meteorological importance.

In their efforts to spread the message, officials were aided by the likes of Ansari, whose radio station was providing continuous updates, and by a national media that had by then jumped on the

story with both feet. All India Radio had also begun broadcasting special bulletins featuring no less than Special Relief Commissioner Mohapatra himself.

"Don't take chances with your life, because the cyclone's path cannot be changed," Mohapatra announced repeatedly, in Odiya. "Everybody needs to get out of its path and into a safe place."



Evacuees seek safety before Cyclone Phailin makes landfall

None of this was news to the intended recipients of the message. The 1999 super cyclone had caught the coastal residents of Odisha largely by surprise because back then, none of them had televisions and very few had landline telephones, let alone mobiles. Now, however, in a testament to how well connected India was becoming, it was almost impossible to not know about the cyclone. Even if you hadn't heard the news on radio or

television, someone else had—and would have alerted you by word of mouth, or on mobile.

It was not therefore information that the locals—specifically in the southern parts of Odisha, which were relatively spared in 1999 but would be hit first by Phailin—lacked this time, but the impetus to make the decision to move. They heard the warnings, but then they looked out at the calm seas fringing their homes and decided there was no visible urgency, no real reason, to uproot themselves leaving their homes and belongings behind.

“I needed to change the mindset of the people,” Debasis Rath said.

Tall and well dressed, with rimless glasses and an incongruous



NDRF personnel board Airforce IL76 in preparation for cyclone relief.

paan-stained smile, Rath is a Puri-based social worker of some 20 years standing. An easy, articulate communicator, Rath had first heard the news online, realized it would hit his city hard, and recognised the danger.

Experience had taught him that the people of Puri, particularly those who lived in the slums and made up almost 60 per cent of the city's population, had the ingrained notion that their Lord Jagannath would protect them from calamity. This attitude had fostered nonchalance towards impending disasters.

Rath knew that in reality, Puri's 49 slums were exceptionally vulnerable. They had only grown larger since the 1999 super cyclone; today, they were crammed with flimsy dwellings, a section of them below sea level, and no proper drainage. Rath's own home, behind the city's railway yards, was about 10 feet below sea level, so he and his family were sure to be impacted in the event of a storm surge.

“I realised there would be problems because of Phailin,” Rath recalled.

That realisation had also sunk into official circles. By noon, the IMD had updated its forecast and predicted that Phailin would make landfall near Gopalpur, which meant that Ganjam district would be the worst hit district of all.

The local administration of Ganjam got busy creating a ‘micro-plan’ for the evacuation. A list of all villages within five kilometers of the coast—and therefore under serious threat from Phailin—was prepared; 1,060 school buildings capable of housing as many as 500,000 evacuees were identified.

“We had to work in overdrive to create and execute the micro-plan,” said Ganjam District Collector Krishnan Kumar. “Which school building to house the people of which village, who the officer in charge at each location would be, how much food was already stocked and how much more needed, how the people would be evacuated... we had to get our plans worked out.”

The challenge for Kumar and his officials was to ensure that each school was stocked with sufficient food, fuel, medical supplies and money. Before the evacuation could kick in, the administration needed to procure and distribute rice and other essential items. Bureaucracy was forgotten, as was the red tape that is a corollary to all governmental functioning: the official order was to do whatever necessary.

Special Relief Commissioner Mohapatra had already authorised District Collector Kumar to spend what he needed to, and to act freely and at his own discretion without having to file reports and wait for official permission. “So I passed legal orders that my officers could commandeer any vehicles they needed, open up any ration or grocery shop and take whatever materials were required,” Krishnan recalls.

“Just give them a receipt and we will pay them later,” he ordered his staff.



Indian rescue officials check search and rescue equipment before heading to help people affected by Cyclone Phailin.

It never hurt to take precautions

As Krishnan Kumar and his team of officials got down to micro-planning, a group of officials arrived in Paika Nagar Bhashti in Bhubaneswar, with the message to its 700 inhabitants that they had to evacuate by the morning of Saturday, October 12. By way of incentive, they announced that free meals would be served at the shelters.

Prakash Chandraparida had already heard of Phailin on TV. A very fit young man with the beginnings of a beard, he was nicknamed ‘hero’ for his good looks. As one born and raised in

Paika Nagar, he was surprised by the effort the officials were making to get them evacuated. As a general rule, the slum was neglected despite being just ten minutes away from important buildings like the airport and the United Nations Development Program office.

No one had come to help in 1999, when the residents had huddled in their own homes in the face of a nightmare storm. Four feet of water had flooded the slum for days, making a bad situation worse; the local municipality had dredged the drains and cleared the water only after the active intervention of an NGO named Sakar.

Prakash was just a kid then, but he still remembered the pervasive fear of death that plagued the community. He recalled, too, how the force of the storm had blown down all the coconut

trees in the neighboring compound—which was kind of a good thing for the then seven-year-old, because he and his friends could gather all the coconuts they wanted without fear of punishment.



Rescue officials check equipment in Ahmedabad before heading to Odisha.

Now he, along with the rest of the inhabitants, watched the government officials go door to door with their dire warnings. A feeling of dread gripped Paika Nagar. Most of its residents earned daily wages as laborers and vendors of chai, paan and gupchups—“small businessmen”, Prakash, a recent business graduate, called them—and were in no position to absorb any damage/loss to their homes.

The locals would evacuate, he knew, because “our lives are important to us.” But that was not until Saturday; for now Prakash had no work to do, and the weather was beautiful. He

spent the rest of the day outdoors, with friends.

The weather wasn't as nice in Gopalpur, a fading resort town in Ganjam district. It was raining there, but it wasn't coming down particularly hard. Local fisherman B. Jagannath stroked his thick, whiskery mustache, gazed out at the calm sea and wondered what all the fuss was about. He had just returned from a fishing trip earlier that morning and pulled in his boat and nets; the rain was soft and crisp and refreshing and Jagannath had seen nothing to alarm him.

He had heard the news that the cyclone was due to hit Gopalpur first—but he was now 32 and in his memory, no cyclone that had made landfall in Gopalpur had proved particularly bad.

It never hurt to take precautions, however, so Jagannath moved his boat into a canal that wrapped behind the town, where most of



Prakash Chandraparida was just a kid in 1999 but he remembered the fear.

the area's fishermen sheltered their boats during storms. The canal was flanked by a dense, verdant strip of palm trees that would form natural cover for the boats, protecting them from the wind and heavy waves. He wouldn't be able to see his boat from his house, and would have to walk over to the canal if he wanted to check up on it during the storm, but it was still the safest place

for it.

He wasn't enthusiastic about evacuating, however. He lived with his wife and young son in a rented house with a thatched roof—just the sort of home official warnings said was most at risk. He was worried about the safety of his family, but didn't quite see how abandoning his boat and home and moving into a cramped school building would make them any better off. The area school, he knew, could hold a few hundred people at best, and there were over 6,000 people in Gopalpur.

He decided to wait and watch. If it got really bad, he decided, he would take his wife and son to the home of his parents, who lived close by in a much larger home.

There was only one problem: He'd had a big fight with his parents, at the end of which he moved out of their home—and he hadn't spoken with them since.

'Wait till Dussehra'

Family was also in the thoughts of Sunita Behera of Berhampur, the largest town in Ganjam.

When the officials arrived there to spread their warning, Sunita had already left with her husband and two kids for her in-laws' home in the nearby village of Konitheega.

The trip was an annual ritual, timed for the festival of the local goddess Budi Thakurani, which they never missed. For three days around Dussehra time, the village brings the goddess out of the temple to worship her—but like most village festivals, it was also a carnival, a big market, a chance to catch up with the family.

Although her husband made only a modest income as a barber, this year had been particularly good to them. They had moved into a new home, their children were attending an English

medium school, and they had managed to save some money. This good fortune they attributed to their daughter Anita, a sweet-faced 10-year-old they believed was their personal Lakshmi.

Almost as soon as they reached Konitheega, Anita confronted her mother over the new clothes that had been bought for the festival. Anita had indulged in her favorite color—pink shirt, pink bangles and a new pair of silver pattis—and she was impatient to try them on.

“Just for a little while,” she cajoled her mother. “Wait till Dussehra,” Sunita told her importunate daughter, though she secretly wanted to see Anita, with the curly hair and big eyes she had inherited from her father, in the new clothes.



Sunita Behera in Berhampur

Even as Anita threw a childish fit, Sunita was attending a call from her sister Geetha, who lived only a few minutes away from them in Berhampur. “They are really making a big deal about the cyclone,” Geetha reported. “Someone came to our home and collected names; they said it was for getting rice afterwards. Shall I give them your name too?”

“No, it’s okay,” Sunita told her sister. “We can deal with whatever it is after we get back.” The cyclone was far from her thoughts just then—Sunita was more intent on pacifying her daughter. She was not aware, then, of just how much the cyclone would affect their lives.

The sum of all fears

Back in Penthakata, however, Jagalmani was beginning to get very worried indeed. Her uncle Kondalrao and the other area

fishermen kept insisting Penthakata would be fine, and pointing out that the sea remained calm. They dismissed the warnings of government officials as so much hype by city dwellers who did not know what they were talking about.

The fishermen knew best, Jagalmani thought—but then, she had never seen this kind of alarm raised over a storm before. Government officials were blasting their message out over loudspeakers; the TV channels were playing cyclone footage on loop, and the radio was now talking of nothing else.

“The way the police spoke about it and seeing how TV9 was broadcasting, it was hard to believe the cyclone would be a normal one,” Jagalmani recalled.

Kondalrao tried to assuage her fears. If it really got bad, he told his niece, she should take her mother, grandparents and cousins to the shelter while he stayed behind to look after the boat and net and make sure nobody robbed their homes.

Her uncle had been at the epicenter of two major storms, Jagalmani reminded herself as she tried to stifle her unease at the prospect of Kondalrao facing the storm alone; he knew what he was doing.

“The police kept warning us about our lives,” Kondalrao told me. “But we were more scared for our livelihoods.” He and his fellow fishermen, he said, had used their wits and knowledge of the sea to save themselves and their boats when the 1999 cyclone had struck Paradip, and he didn’t think this was going to be any different.



Kondalrao in Penthakata

“The collector had wanted us to leave, but we put our boats in the market building first. Then we went into town and took a room in a lodge. None of the

Telugu fishermen died in Paradip; it was only the Oriya people, who remained in their mud homes, who lost their lives.”

Memories or nightmares?



Keerthwas Das

Kondalrao had no dire memories but even today, Paradip and the surrounding villages are a repository of sad tales and memories that resemble nightmares.

Nearly every home in Padmapur, a small seaside village some 30 kilometers from Paradip, had lost at least one family member in the 1999 cyclone. Most of the residents here made a living not off the sea, but in agriculture. Their endless expanses of lush paddy, fringed by neem, bamboo and eucalyptus, seemed almost too idyllic to be associated with tragedy, except for one very visual reminder: dozens of schools raised up on stilts, meant to double as shelters in case of future storms and floods. Stop any passing villager and he will recall on cue the unexpected surge from the sea, the floating bodies, the mounting panic as they realized there was no place to hide.

Keerthwas Das, an agricultural labourer, had lost his 9-year-old daughter in 1999, when the storm surge swept her from the street even as the family was scrambling for cover. When Red Cross volunteers came to Padmapur on the evening of October 10 to warn of Phailin and ask the residents to seek shelter in one of those schools-on-stilts, Das said, his wife burst into tears.

“We remembered our daughter,” Das said. “We couldn’t save her then, and we were scared at the prospect of facing another cyclone.”

He had reason to worry. As evening morphed into night, Sarat Sahu’s team at the meteorological department had revised its forecast for Cyclone Phailin upwards: it would hit with wind speeds of 190 to 200 kmph, with the possibility of a stronger storm surge.

TV channels, meanwhile, were quoting the US Navy’s Joint Typhoon Warning Center’s prediction that the cyclone would be even worse than IMD was projecting; it was a Category 4 storm, the US centre declared, which would make landfall with wind speeds in excess of 250 kmph.

The varying predictions didn’t really matter, Special Relief Commissioner Mohapatra told me. “After a storm reaches 200 kmph, it makes no difference what the precise wind speed is because it will be devastating no matter what. We had to prepare



Rescue officials check equipment

for the worst—that was our mission.”

By then, he had every government department working round the clock. The health department was busy packing and shipping medicines and other supplies to the hospitals and clinics in the district; the food department was accumulating and deploying grains to the various shelters. BSNL workers were occupied in

filling generators, by now located adjacent each cell phone tower, with diesel so the cell phone network would continue to function after the power went out.

And the Odisha Disaster Rapid Action Force was engaged in checking their chainsaws, making sure they had spare chains.



People seek shelter from Phailin's wrath in a wedding hall in Odisha.

An ominous calm

The morning of Friday, October 11 dawned with sunshine and clear skies. But there was no light in the homes—as a precautionary measure, the government had cut power lines in those districts that were expected to be hit.

Those who did not own inverters or generators—that is, the vast majority of the residents—could no longer get updates from TV, nor charge their cell phones.

The evacuation effort had by then kicked into high gear. As per plan, an army of village-level officials, police officers and community volunteers descended on the villages and towns earmarked for evacuation, directing people towards their designated shelter either on foot or in the vehicles that had been provisioned.

This ground army of officials reported to an administrator, usually at the block-level, who was responsible for a given shelter. The block-level officials updated the district administration on the evacuation's progress, sending real time figures of how many people had reached their shelters. The district administration relayed area-wide updates to state officials like Special Relief Commissioner Mohapatra and Dr. Taradatt, MD of the ODSMA. It was a calibrated web of

constant interaction, designed to ensure that nobody was missed and that any problems were resolved immediately.

In Paika Nagar, Prakash began collecting the things his family could need in the days during, and after, the storm. He knew from experience to be mindful of small details. He bought matches, biscuits, dry fruits and candles; the family packed clothes, money and important documents like bank passbooks and ration cards.

Prakash made sure to include the diploma from Rajdhani College, his alma mater that had now, ironically, become his designated shelter. And just before they left their home, Prakash and his family members stuffed themselves with all the perishable food left in their house, so nothing would go to waste.

The evacuation was proceeding without a hitch in Paradip and the rest of Jagatsingpur district. Keerthwas Das and his family moved into Padmapur's cyclone shelter Friday evening, and found it already packed. Everyone who lived in a mud home had packed up and moved into the shelter.

Because the cyclone was going to affect Ganjam, the government had directed additional resources there, and to the southern parts of Puri. It meant that people residing in Padmapur's shelter had little to eat but plain rice, but it didn't really matter—everyone had brought their own food.

In Puri's slums, though, activist Debasis Rath was dismayed to find the same level of preparedness missing. He had spent most of the day checking on evacuation efforts in the city's slums, including Baliapanda, home to mostly migrant laborers who service the tourism industry. He saw that most of the slum's 12,000 inhabitants were still in their homes, and showed no sign of leaving anytime soon.

"People kept telling me they would be fine," Debasis recalled. "Two or three government vehicles were still there, but I did not

see any eagerness to evacuate the slums, either from the administration or the dwellers.”



People line up at a relief camp

State authorities shared his concern. Officials monitoring the evacuation from the Emergency Operations Center in Bhubaneswar—a control room set up to monitor evacuation and relief efforts in real time—received troubling reports that their field staff was struggling to draw communities out of their homes. On the ground, residents doubted whether an evacuation was necessary, whether the shelters would have sufficient capacity, and whether their property would be safe if they left it behind. This was particularly an issue in Ganjam.

Realising that time was running out, the state government invoked a provision of the National Disaster Act that permitted authorities, in the event of imminent disaster, to evacuate communities by force.

Forced evacuation

The term “forced evacuation” has an ominous ring to it, especially in context of the long history of state brutality against India’s poor.

But to my surprise, the people I spoke with who had been evacuated by force did not mention violence—instead, they described the threat of beating and arrests, and a lot of the rough-tongued talk that Indian police seemed so good at dishing out.

“People were not beaten, but sometimes they were forcibly taken and put into the trucks,” said Kamal Lochan Mishra, the OSDMA official. “They’re not criminals, so it wasn’t a punishment! But if people did not go, we shouted ‘Chalo! Chalo! Either you or somebody will be given two to three shots.’”

In some areas, however, resentful community members clashed with officials. Such clashes were the reason the evacuation in Ganjam could not begin until 4 pm that day. In Gopalpur, where Phailin was now almost guaranteed to make landfall, Jagannath watched some of his fellow fishermen—the poorest of them, who lived in very small huts on the edge of town—revolt against the municipal chairman and police. They pointed to the unthreatening weather and the calm sea, and argued that the police had no idea what they were talking about and refused to listen to either blandishments or threats.

Jagannath liked the chairman, who he believed genuinely cared for the townspeople. But today, that official was not his usual affable self; he did not respond when the fishermen asked what would become of their boats. Many of them had already prepared for the cyclone, stocking food and water and so on—they just did not want to be far from their homes and their boats.



A displaced man carries his children near Gopalpur

With the clock ticking, exasperated police officers began physically carrying a few people to the vans, all the

while apologizing and telling them it was for their own good. But, Jagannath knew, there was no way police could evacuate the 5,000-plus residents in this fashion.

Even as this standoff continued and the evacuation ran behind schedule, the situation began to deteriorate in Ganjam and Puri. Cyclone Phailin was growing steadily in strength, and advance clouds had started lashing the coast with heavy rain. By early afternoon, the IMD had already upgraded its forecast and was predicting wind speeds of around 220 kmph when the cyclone made landfall.

The report from the US Navy's Joint Typhoon Warning Center was even more dire: Phailin, the center said, was now the equivalent of a Category 5 storm, the highest level of its classification system, and winds could be as fast at 270 kilometers per hour, bringing with them a catastrophic storm surge. Some forecasters were already likening it to Hurricane Katrina, another Category 5 storm that devastated the US Gulf coast in 2005 and killed 1,833 people.

The dichotomy between the IMD's forecast and that of the US agencies had already become a preoccupation for TV newscasters and a talking point on social media. By then, the impending storm had also become an international media sensation, with global news outlets and relief organisations heaping criticism on the IMD for low-balling its forecasts. Many doubted if the evacuation efforts would succeed, and expressed skepticism about whether the Odisha government was doing enough.

"In India and Bangladesh, where so many live only a few meters above sea level, the sheer size of Phailin nearly guarantees that hundreds of thousands of homes will be inundated," wrote meteorologist Eric Holthaus on the website Quartz. "A storm surge of 1 to 3 meters could extend for hundreds of kilometers northeast of where the storm makes landfall. In

short, Phailin is a humanitarian disaster in the making."

Officials on the ground, already struggling to cope with an evacuation going slower than planned, began feeling the additional pressure of media criticism. Director General of Meteorology Dr Laxman Singh Rathore of the IMD began holding periodic press conferences to provide status updates—and to respond to critical reporters demanding to know why the IMD was "lowering" its forecasts despite much higher projections by US agencies.

"Meteorology is such a thing that you cannot be final all the time," said Sarat Sahu, the director of the Bhubaneswar Meteorological Center, when I asked why the IMD had stuck to its forecasts despite the chatter. "We constantly modified our predictions based on the data, but we also had some ideas based on past experience."

A deluge of information

At the Radio Namaste office in Konark, Ansari was monitoring the Phailin buzz on Twitter and Facebook and broadcasting translated summaries of relevant bits.

Although not everything on social media was accurate, it was exactly the kind of abundant, real-time information that was so hard to come by during the 1999 super cyclone. Most of the community radio's audience did not have social media accounts or Internet access even on normal days; now, they also did not have power, so radio was their only source of information.

The station fielded hundreds of calls from listeners, answering their questions and relaying some of their reports on air. Ansari realized his reports were becoming an important source of information not only for his regular audience but also for local authorities, who kept calling him for updates on the weather, and even on the evacuation's progress. The station's round-the-clock

bulletins also included tips on what to gather before the storm—drinking water, kerosene, dry fruit, and valuable documents—and encouraged listeners living in kutcha homes to move into the nearest concrete building.

“Shelters were not sufficient,” Ansari said. “So we were advising people to go to their relatives’ places. It was quite pointless to tell them to go to the shelters, because they won’t go.”

At the local administration’s request, Young India, the NGO that runs Radio Namaskar, sent around 100 volunteers to help with the evacuation. Without help from such community volunteers, evacuating one million mostly unwilling people would have been all but impossible for the government. The volunteers organised buses and trucks, and went directly to the communities. “Because fishermen generally don’t believe the government, na?” Ansari quipped.

Some of the field reports from the volunteers disturbed Ansari:



Policemen evacuate people from a beach in Gopalpur

some coastal villages had not been informed and were not being evacuated because village governments did not have the manpower to reach everyone. Although government officials refuted this claim, to Ansari it seemed as if the state government was giving its local branches inadequate support for such an enormous task. Radio Namaskar kept reporting, and urging communities to

evacuate.

What this incessant flood of information accomplished is different matter entirely. Many of the people I spoke with in coastal communities, like the fisherman Kondalrao from Penthakata, admitted that although they heard the repeated

warnings about Phailin and prepared for it in small ways, for instance by stockpiling rice and candles, they did not intend to actually leave their homes.



Villagers ride on the back of a tractor

This mentality seems to be more a function of human nature than of economic circumstance or access to information. Even in advanced countries like the United States, local and state governments struggle to convince people to clear the coasts before a big storm, and rarely succeed in evacuating even half of the population from a vulnerable area.

“Too many people living in the most dangerous locations underestimate their vulnerability,” said Jay Baker, a professor at Florida State University, who has studied how people respond to evacuations. Instead of sending representatives door-to-door, authorities in the United States broadcast evacuation orders using local media announcements and automated calls, which Baker said were ineffective in getting people out of their homes.

“Frankly, people willingly evacuate only when they have suffered in a bad hurricane or cyclone before,” he added, “but there will never be a time when the majority of people have had that experience.”

‘Connectivity is the real power’

A Vodafone mobile charging station let locals charge their phones for a small fee

In Penthakata, Jagalmani was getting panicked calls from relatives in Andhra Pradesh. Get out of there, they pleaded, before it is too late.

Cell phones were ringing all over Penthakata that Friday, and by nightfall most people were scared. The rain was driving down hard by then, and the entire city of Puri had plunged into darkness because of the power cut.

Kondalrao looked out to sea, and noticed something peculiar: the waves had changed shape, crisscrossing each other instead of reaching the shore in straight, parallel rows. The veteran of two cyclones knew this was the sea’s way of warning about a big storm.

He was not the only one to notice the change. The slum’s Telugu-speaking leaders, whose word was highly respected by all of Penthakata, much more so than that of the Odiya government, beseeched the community to evacuate. Kondalrao realised that the police had been right all along: the worst was yet to come, and when it came it would be very bad.

The good part was that people were still in touch, they were communicating, sharing information. The cell phone has become such a quotidian instrument that even defining its significance is a challenge. But the Phailin evacuation showcased how valuable connectivity had become in preventing repeats of past disasters.

The government’s evacuation plan relied on an elaborate hierarchy of calls, text messages and faxes to not only deliver instructions from the top ranks to the ground-level, and for those on the ground to communicate back up the chain. Family members far inland kept in touch with their kin in the coastal areas, and in their own way exerted

pressure on them to evacuate. And Ansari culled valuable field reports from direct calls from his listeners, and rebroadcast them.

“We’re seeing that connectivity is the real power,” said Hemant Purohit, a crisis informatics and coordination researcher who worked on a CrisisMap for relief efforts after Phailin. “It’s a very macro-level phenomenon. You can think about how evacuating a million people was possible. But in order to execute that, mobile technology played a big time role.”

By the end of Friday October 11, authorities in Odisha and Andhra Pradesh had managed to evacuate about 260,000 people from 18,000 villages. Phailin was less than 24 hours away—and they had to find a way to evacuate about 800,000 more.

Shelter from the storm

A multipurpose cyclone shelter in Padampur

In Ganjam district, where a mere 80,000 people had been evacuated by Saturday morning—an insignificant percentage of the half million who needed to be moved—District Collector Krishnan Kumar had authorised the police to employ force.

But passing down instructions is one thing—there was just not enough police to carry them out. The district had only a few hundred police on its force, and they could not hope to forcibly evict more than 400,000 people from their homes and get them into shelters.

“Convincing the villagers to leave their property was absolutely the hardest part of the entire evacuation, because in an empty village you are inviting goons and crooks and everything,” Kumar told me. “The good thing was that because we kept at it for two to three days in

every village, the message got drilled into their heads. At first they thought, ‘Something is coming but it’s not so serious. We’ll survive; not an issue; we need not evacuate.’ But because of that thing that we put into their heads that their lives may be in danger, as soon as people saw the first signs of the cyclone building up, they got out. And then there was a rush to leave.”



Volunteers distribute relief food to cyclone evacuated people in a relief camp

In the end, nothing was more convincing than Cyclone Phailin itself. By noon Saturday October 12 the storm had visibly intensified, and many people along the coast—except for those like Keerthwas and Prakash, who were already in their respective shelters, having breakfast—began to realise that their lives were in danger after all.

The wind by then had picked up along the coast, surpassing 100 kilometers per hour in some places, and the waves had become violent, spraying the air with a thick, salty mist.

It was not that people hadn’t seen such weather before (they had), or that the morning’s weather on its own was life-threatening (it wasn’t). Rather, it was a curious culmination of all the factors: the government’s insistent warnings, the non-stop media coverage, and now the deteriorating weather

itself. During interviews with the locals, even the most skeptical holdouts described that moment as a kind of tipping point, and said that is when they began to truly feel afraid and decided that, even if they lost their boat or their home, it was better than losing their lives.

That moment, when the community decided to get out, was the turning point for an evacuation effort that until then had not succeeded in getting many vulnerable communities out of harm’s way. As the intensifying storm set off panic among coastal communities, the challenge for local authorities changed complexion: where earlier they were struggling to get locals to evacuate, now they were frantically trying to cope with the sudden onrush of people who wanted to reach the shelters before it was too late.

‘Like watching milk boil’



A wave crashes into a breakwater in Vishakapatnam ahead of Phailin making landfall

The rough weather hit Gopalpur first. Around 10 am on Saturday, Jagannath saw the sea become frothy and rise up, much more than it usually did during cyclones.

“It was like watching milk boil, just before it overflows,” he told me. “It looked as if the sea would soon rise up and rush forward.”

Dozens of families were now jostling for a spot in the same vans that authorities were trying to fill by force the night before. However, many dozen more—mostly young men—were at the beach, eager to see a major cyclone unfold. The town chairman kept shuffling

between the bus stand and the beach, simultaneously trying to bring order to the evacuation and chasing the foolhardy away from the shore. He and his staff took command of jeeps, buses, autorickshaws and every other kind of vehicle they could get their hands on, redirecting them towards the evacuation shelters. By their own count, they evacuated another 200,000 people by Sunday afternoon.

Jagannath was not one of them. As he worried about whether his boat, which he had kept in the canal behind the town, would survive the wind, his mother called him, for the first time after his fight with his parents. “Why don’t you bring your family over to our home?” she suggested.

His parents’ home had an asbestos roof and was stronger than Jagannath’s rented hut. “It would be much better than staying in your thatched-roof hut. Your father thinks so as well,” his mother told him.

Phailin was still some distance away, but its power was by then even impacting the coldest family disputes. Literally in the midst of a storm, Jagannath was about to reconcile with his parents. “If anything happens, let’s bear it together, as a family,” his mother told him.

Jagannath took his wife, his son and some valuable documents to his parent’s home where, earlier past grievances buried in the face of present danger, they were welcomed and sheltered.

Not everybody had some place to go, however. By now, more and more people were ready to evacuate to the shelters, but now the authorities were turning them away on the grounds that the shelters were already filled beyond capacity. Find a concrete home to stay in, the authorities told them.

In any case, by Saturday afternoon it was getting impossible to go anywhere. “The sea, the rain and the wind all mixed together,”

Kondalrao said. “You couldn’t see anything. It might as well have been night.”

The first casualty



Rescue workers remove branches from the road on October 13 in Gopalpur

The strength of the winds caught the Penthakata slum by surprise; most hadn’t experienced anything like it before. By noon, nearly everybody had put their most precious belongings—nets, motors, televisions—in the few concrete dwellings scattered through the neighborhood, and got out of there. Those who had a bit of extra money hired rickshaws to take them to one of Puri’s lodges, where for ₹500 they could wait out the storm in comfort with their families. Others took one of the autorickshaws provided by the community leaders to one of five shelters, mainly colleges and government office buildings, which had been earmarked for Penthakata. Police and community leaders continued to roam through the slum, making sure everyone had either left or was getting ready to go.

Kondalrao, Jagalmani and the rest of their family were getting ready to leave. They put their belongings in a concrete house opposite to their shack, which would be strong enough for the storm but was too small to serve as anything other than a storage closet. By afternoon, the waves had grown to heights of 15 to 20 meters—tall enough to be seen over the tops of houses. Luckily, the water did not surge inland, which could have swept the slum and everyone in it away. It almost seemed like divine intervention, a god-given last chance to leave. But it also sparked

a full-blown panic across the slum. There was no more time to think, no time to prepare.

“All that mattered was saving our own lives,” Jagalmani told me. “The waves were spectacular, but we had to get out of there, because there is nothing scarier than seeing the sea rise that much.”



People shelter in a wedding hall as Phailin rages in Odisha.

Hardly 10 kilometers away, Debasis Rath had settled in his home, a lovely and spacious building that overlooks the train tracks and the sea beyond that. His mind was at ease. He had received word that residents of Baliapanda, the slum whose leaders were wondering yesterday where everybody would go, had found shelter in the posh, now-empty hotels where some of them worked. And from his balcony he watched as a special train carried thousands of rickshaw-wallahs, sweepers and other poor laborers from the nearby Balikuda slum to safety.

“In the eleventh hour, many of the most helpless people managed to find safety,” Rath said. “And high-class people, hoteliers, had opened their doors to the slum-dwellers, accepting them in the crisis. Community feeling had won the day.”

His own home was about to become a shelter too. The heavy rains from the day before had already caused his street to flood,

so he invited his neighbors, who lived in single-storey structures that were vulnerable to flooding, as well as children from a nearby home run by his organization, into his own home. He had already stocked up with rice, potatoes, onions and eggs—all bought at exorbitant prices, but enough to feed everyone for a few days. By Saturday evening, over 150 people had gathered in Rath’s house, and the atmosphere was more of a festive get-together than a cyclone shelter.

So far, so good, Rath thought. He had not heard of any casualties yet. Neither had Kondalrao or Jagalmani, Jagannath, Prakash or Keerthwas.

Actually, Phailin had already claimed its first casualty around noon, of all places in the state capital. Jayanti Raul, a middle-aged woman, was plucking flowers near her house in Bhubaneswar when the wind knocked a tree onto her head.

‘Your house may not survive in this wind’



Sunita Behera with a picture of her family.

into safer homes.

Sunita was too ill, too tired, to bother. She didn’t even have the strength to cook lunch; the family would have to make do with

Around noon, Sunita Behera and her family return to Berhampur from Konitheega. They had enjoyed the festival, but now she and her husband were sick, and exhausted because of the long bus journey. Sunita had vomited along the way and contracted a fever. As they entered their very small first-floor apartment, they noticed their neighbors making last-minute preparations to shift

some snacks. The hard-driving rain, the whistling winds and the commotion on the street excited the kids, but Sunita and her husband just napped.

She was still sleeping when her sister Geetha called, to urge her to bring her family to their late father's house, where all of Sunita's siblings were staying. "Your house may not survive in this wind," Geetha said, "and in any case it's better to be with family now."

In her feverish state of mind, Sunita made a decision she was to regret bitterly. She told her sister that she and her husband were too sick to move, and the weather outside was too nasty to move about in and, in any case, their house was strong enough. The building was made of brick and was shoddily constructed in a small town sort of way, but it was nevertheless a pucca home with a solid roof. They would just stay at home, she decided. It was 4 pm and almost dark, but the cyclone did not seem that bad.

Would this be it?



A man and his son in their damaged house in Gopalpur

'The cyclone doesn't seem so bad, would this be it?'—listeners kept calling Radio Namaskar to ask. Callers were eager to know when the cyclone would hit, when the rain would stop, what was the situation like. Ansari and his staff struggled to answer their questions, in part because the weather reports they were receiving was fairly limited in detail.

The latest IMD report, from 4:30 pm on Saturday, was identical to the ones they had been releasing since Friday night: the cyclone would hit Ganjam in a few hours, with winds as high as 220 kilometers per hour, a storm surge of 3 to 3.5 meters, and

heavy rain once the cyclone moved north.



The rain poured like anything in the weeks after the cyclone, making relief work all the more difficult. Here, a police jeep is in call to ensure order

Radio Namaskar repeated its call for evacuation, and relayed reports about people who had been left behind. A tribal couple was weathering the storm alone, in their shack in one of Konark's slums. The entire village of Notura had to walk two kilometers to the nearest cyclone shelter since there was no road to their village and nobody had come to evacuate them. Some cyclone shelters did not receive the food and ₹10,000 in cash allotted to them until the last minute – and by then the money was not of any use, since no one could venture out in the storm to buy anything, assuming there were shops open to buy things from.

Such random instances aside, Ansari found that the vast majority of his listeners were prepared, thanks partly to past experience and partly to the disaster preparedness programmes organised by the government and NGOs. Many of them had found safety on their own, in neighbours' homes instead of government shelters.

"Before Phailin struck, people were gathering their own dry fruits, their own kerosene, their assets, their ornaments and so on," Ansari told me, when I visited his office a few weeks after the cyclone.

“They even preserved drinking water on their roofs, so that it wouldn’t get affected by the storm surge. Even in the interior villages, you will be astonished by how well people were prepared. They went to their neighbours’ houses because they preferred it, since that way they can keep an eye out on their homes and cattle.”

Will the shelters hold?



Evacuees shelter inside a hospital in Srikakulam

There is no precise tally on how many people were evacuated across the state, but there is no doubt the numbers were huge, and that the evacuation was instrumental in saving lives. By Saturday evening, most people in danger were either evacuated to nearby shelters, or had found their own refuge.

In the district of Puri, 102,000 people had been housed in shelters, according to official records; the figure for Khurdha was 185,291, while for Jagatsinghpur it was just over 100,000. Across the state, records say, an estimated 983,642 people had evacuated to government shelters.

In Ganjam district, officials had managed to evacuate 180,000 people, which was less than what they had anticipated. But District Collector Krishnan Kumar was satisfied, because many had evacuated on their own, and the villages along the coast were clear. Now Kumar was worrying about whether some of the temporary shelters – the government schools in particular, which were not exactly pinnacles of construction standards—would hold up in the storm. If a shelter collapsed, it could mean instant death for hundreds of people.

“I was sure that somehow we’d get the people out,” Kumar said. “But suppose the storm was really severe, and suppose one of the buildings that I’d identified to be safe gives way, then I’d really had it. The loss would have been enormous.”

The collector’s apprehensions seemed confirmed when, around 7 pm, the administration started getting calls from frightened people who said their shelters were shaking unsteadily, and demanded to be relocated. Kumar got his officials activated again, and a number of panchayats were, in the face of the storm, relocated to district headquarters.

In the event, none of the identified shelters collapsed.

Alone against the storm



In the aftermath of Phailin.

Jagalmani and her family were not able to evacuate Penthakata until six in the evening. Community leaders had arranged for a convoy of autos to take everyone to either a nearby engineering college or to the Life Insurance Corporation of India office building, but there were only a few autorickshaws on hand to transport almost a thousand people.

By the time Jagalmani, her mother, her grandparents, and her cousins—Kondalrao’s son and daughter—left, there were no other vehicles on the street. The wind by then was so strong it blew the autorickshaw’s vinyl roof right off, and then it pushed the tiny vehicle dangerously along the road.

“The auto driver took us to all the way to the shelter anyway,” Jagalmani told me. “It took only ten minutes to reach there, but in the rain and wind it felt like forever. We were constantly

worried that the auto would tip over.”

Kondalrao’s son Raju dropped everyone off at the shelter and returned home in order to pick up his parents. They could have just left along with the earlier bunch, but something had been nagging at Kondalrao’s mind. All day he had been asking community leaders and the authorities about compensation for his boat. The weather was terrifying, and though Kondalrao did want to evacuate, he also wanted some kind of promise that damages to his boat would be compensated, and that his family would not have to suffer for it.

The authorities told him no; he needed to get out of the slum first, they said, and they could discuss compensation later.

It was not that the officials did not understand his concern and that of his fellow fishermen—but by then, they were responding to the intense pressure to prioritize the evacuation above all else, including relief. To Kondalrao, however, it seemed as though the government would not provide compensation to fishermen—and in a storm of this magnitude, his boat was sure to sustain damage. He considered staying behind to look after it. His wife Nakaratnam stayed with him, so that he would not be alone.

By the time their son Raju came back for them, however, Kondalrao had a change of heart. The sea had risen some 20 feet in height, and the wind became so strong that it knocked him over. He did not want to risk their lives. But when Kondalrao, Nakaratnam and Raju tried to leave for the shelter, at around 8 that evening, it was too late. Everybody was gone, including the autorickshaw drivers and the police.

They would have to weather the storm in the slum.

Landfall

At Debasis Rath’s place, it was a party.



*Brahmapur village after
Cyclone Phailin made landfall*

The winds were by then so strong that it made the windows bend, and over a dozen people had to stand with their backs against them to ensure they wouldn’t shatter from the force. When someone finally opened a window to relieve the pressure, it was as if a million hosepipes were directed inwards, Debasis recalled.

By now the whole neighbourhood was in his home and, secure and sheltered under a strong roof, they thrilled to the cyclone raging outside. Adults challenged each other to walk as far on the roof as possible, and children chased each other through the spacious house. The bathrooms might have posed a problem because the house was not intended to relieve 150 people, but they would manage. There was enough food and drinking water, and everybody knew they would be safe.

The cyclone officially landed in Gopalpur around 8:30 that night, although people who were there said it was just as bad from 6 pm onwards. By then the town authorities had managed to shift about 2,000 people into the hilltop schools, and to see that everyone else has found a concrete home to stay in.

The shelters were extremely cramped, and due to the sheer number of people they would have to ration food carefully, but there were no other options by that point. The tourists and onlookers who dotted Gopalpur’s once-famous beach during the day to “watch the storm” had by then disappeared, driven away by the town chairman and by fear of the storm itself.

Jagannath was thinking of checking on his boat one last time when his parents’ house, where he was staying with his wife and kids, began to shake violently. The walls of the home had been

strong enough to withstand many previous storms, but the way the wind was whipping against them now, they might as well have been made of cardboard. Fearing a collapse, Jagannath, his parents and his wife and son made a hasty run for a neighbour's house, which had a concrete roof and foundation and was much stronger.

Similar concerns were occupying Sunita Behera's mind as well. She had slept through Phailin's landfall; when she woke, it was past 9 pm. The wind was howling outside, and their apartment had begun to shake.

The kids were enjoying the experience; to them the building's rattling was a pure thrill, unconnected to danger. Her husband, however, had begun to be alarmed. Grabbing a few precious items like their bank passbook and ration cards, the family rushed downstairs. Their neighbours had sheltered about three dozen people in their much stronger house, and they called for Sunita and her family to join them. Their landlord, on the ground floor of their building, also asked them in—and Sunita and her husband elected to go there, instead of crossing over in the teeth of the storm to their neighbour's place.

Finding space in the front room of the pitch-dark house, Sunita—with the fever still raging—tried to sleep.

In their respective shelters in Bhubaneswar and Padmapur, Prakash and Keerthwas Das ate a communal meal with their families and hundreds of other people. The shelters were very cramped, and the dinner wasn't very filling, but this was much better than being at home. Everyone from his slum and from another one nearby had come to Rajdhani College; Prakash estimated that there were about 1,400 people present.

Disaster management officials at the Emergency Operations Center in Bhubaneswar, who had been sleeping there since the

past three days, were relieved to discover that nearly a million people had been evacuated by Saturday night. The disaster relief teams were in place, too, equipped with chainsaws and ready to clear roads as soon as the storm passed. In the morning, they would all have to get back to work.

By the time Phailin made landfall, a record 1,123,000 people—984,000 in Odisha, and 139,000 in northern Andhra Pradesh—had been evacuated to coastal shelters. It was an unprecedented effort in India's history, and an impressive one by any standards worldwide.

For now, though, the cyclone had made landfall and all anyone could do was wait and hope for the best.

Nightmare without end



The deserted Donkuru village in Srikakulam district.

Sunita slept on. It was all she could do in the dim, cramped room. And then, at around 10, she was awakened by a loud crash, followed immediately by sharp waves of pain coursing through her.

She felt disoriented; it was too dark to see anything. Her head felt as if it had been split open and, when she touched it, she felt blood. Something heavy—a wall, or part of a roof, something—had crashed down on her and her family. As she slipped into unconscious, Sunita could hear the muffled cries of her husband and children, faint against the howling wind.

The wind raged so loud in Gopalpur that Jagannath could not hear his son screaming in terror from just a few feet away.

Suddenly, he realized that his cell phone and documents were still in his parents' house. He had forgotten to carry them along, during their panicked flight to the neighbour's home. If his parents' home was destroyed, he would have no proof of his fisherman's permit, nor would his family have any official identification.

It is just a few meters away, he told his wife even as she pleaded with him not to leave. He stepped outside—and the wind knocked him down at once. That was when Jagannath began to feel really hopeless. The howling, screaming wind was a nightmare without end.

"I have never, ever heard anything like it," he recalled. "And I never, ever want to hear it again."

To Prakash, sheltering within Rajdhani College, the cyclone sounded like a thousand people ululating at once. "It was like the sound of a thousand ghosts," he said. Although his shelter was crammed, no one was talking—they all huddled together, listening to the wailing storm and praying that it would leave them unhurt and their homes intact.

'Everyone was pale-faced in fear'



A man waits to be evacuated in Srikakulam district

An hour or so later—Jagannath had difficulty recalling the precise time, because who really checks in the midst of such madness—the wind suddenly stopped, replaced by an eerie silence. Everyone breathed easier, thinking the worst was over.

The peace was merely an illusion. Ten or fifteen minutes later, the wind picked

up again and it blew harder than ever—in the opposite direction.

The silence they had heard was the eye of the storm passing over Gopalpur; now the cyclone lashed them with renewed intensity. As the house rattled under the onslaught, those within huddled in fear. Worrying about his boat or his documents seemed irrelevant now; Jagannath just wanted his family to make it out of this alive. Believing that it could be the end, Jagannath and his parents spoke, and resolved their dispute. He promised to move back into his parents' home once the storm was over—if they all made it out alive.

In Debasis Rath's home, too, all was quiet. The festive atmosphere had vanished in the face of the storm's fury, and now they all sat silent and still, listening to the storm and waiting for it to end. The wind came and went in gusts, its howls punctuated by moments of an unsettling peace.

"When there was silence, it was utter silence," he recalled later, as we stood on the balcony of his home. "And when the winds started up again you could not imagine the magnitude of the sound. It was a shrill, high-pitched scream without end."

During one of those brief moments of silence, Debasis thought he heard some people calling out for help in the distance, but the weather was by now too violent to contemplate venturing out to help. Although his home itself was a safe haven, the dimly heard calls were a chilling reminder of all those people who might be braving the storm in far worse conditions.

"By midnight, everyone was pale-faced in fear," he recalled. "I was praying to the Almighty that something like this shouldn't ever hit Puri again."

In their shack in Penthakata Kondalrao, Nakaratnam and Raju did not have the luxury of thinking, "Never again"—they were sure they were going to die that night.

The narrow alleyways of Penthakata formed a kind of wind tunnel that amplified the noise and the force of the wind even further, and their simple home was no match for that fury. Bits of the wall steadily crumbled, as if someone was filing it away. They had not evacuated when they had the chance, and now they believed their fate was sealed.

Kondalrao bitterly regretted his preoccupation with his boat, and the danger this had caused for his wife and son. The veteran of major cyclones realised that this one was worse, far worse, than even the super cyclone of 1999.

“It was sound on a different level, nothing I had ever heard compared to it,” he told me. “We were resigned. We thought, if we die then we’ll die. At least our daughter was safe.”

He didn’t know, then, that his daughter was in as precarious a position. She, along with Jagalmani and the rest of the family, was sheltering in the LIC building—but even that building was shaking in the wind, filling its occupants with fear. There wasn’t much to eat in the shelter, but the family wasn’t very hungry anyway—their minds were full of fear for themselves and even more, for Kondalrao, Nakaratnam and Raju. They believed that by the time the cyclone passed, all of Penthakata would have been destroyed.

At the office of Radio Namaskar, Ansari and his team meanwhile kept up the non-stop bulletins through that night, updating listeners with reports from the field. The cyclone, they announced, was not as bad as was feared, at least in terms of lives lost. The power of the storm, however, was indescribable. Although their office was on the first floor of a concrete building, the construction was of dubious quality, and sometime after midnight the building began to sway. The staff now worried that the whole office would collapse, but by then it was too late to

seek shelter anywhere else.

They faced a fresh problem around 4 am. Nobody in coastal Odisha was getting much sleep that night; everyone seemed to be tuned to the radio, and the listeners began calling in to complain that they couldn’t receive the transmission. Was there a technical problem? Or had Radio Namaskar shut down? How much longer would this storm last?

One of the staffers tried to check the antennae, but the wind was so unbearably strong that it was impossible to even open the door. Ansari called the people living in the floor below, who were also listening to Radio Namaste. They said the transmission was perfectly fine.

The staff decided it was likely some small glitch, and continued the broadcast.

Phailin draws blood



A house damaged by Cyclone Phailin

Sunita struggled back to consciousness, and became aware that rain was falling directly on her and the wind was louder than ever.

She remembered, with a jolt of horror, that the house had collapsed and her family was underneath the rubble somewhere. The shock jolted her back to full consciousness, and she realised that a large chunk of concrete had fallen from the balcony of the house onto the asbestos roof of their landlord’s house.

Still bleeding profusely from a head wound, Sunita frantically dug through the wreckage. She first unearthed her husband and son, guided by their feeble calls in the pitch darkness. She called

out to her daughter, but Anita did not respond. With the strength of desperation, Sunita began pulling out chunks of concrete and asbestos from the spot where she had last seen her daughter.

Sunita finally found Anita lying prone and still, with a bag of chips in her hand, and a few chips still in her mouth. As she picked her daughter up, Sunita felt blood on her hands.

Peering down at her daughter lying still in her arms, Sunita saw to her horror that a long piece of bone, about the length of a person's hand, was sticking out of Anita's skull. Tucking the bone into her sari in the vague hope that the doctors could stitch it back in, Sunita rushed out into the street with her daughter cradled in her arms, in the teeth of the full-blown cyclone, and cried out for help.

Nobody came.

The roads were dark and abandoned; her cries for help were lost in the incessant keening of the storm.

After what seemed forever, her neighbours—sheltering in the stronger house where Sunita and her family had originally intended to go—heard her frantic cries. They opened their door to her and urged her inside. Sunita was desperate to get to a hospital, but even in her panic she realised she couldn't manage that till the cyclone died down.

For the next seven hours, Sunita sat in her neighbour's house while her daughter bled into her lap. In her mind she went over all the things they could have done differently to keep their daughter alive. They could have stayed in her father-in-law's village, like Anita wanted to do. They could have gone to her father's home, like her sister Geetha had urged. They could have stayed in their own apartment, which had remained intact. They could even have come to their neighbour's home, where she was sheltering now, instead of deciding to shelter in their landlord's flimsy home.

Over the next few weeks, Sunita would endlessly replay these various scenarios over and over in her mind. Each time, the outcome was the same: her daughter would be safe, sound, unhurt.

But then she would wake to the bitter reality: Anita was never coming back.

The cyclone abated early on the morning of Sunday October 13, and Sunita finally made it to the hospital at 5 am. It was no use. The doctors pronounced Anita dead on arrival.

The storm had blown down the balcony, which had crashed through the asbestos roof they were sheltering under—and crushed the child's skull.

Living to tell the tale



A woman waits to board a boat to return to her village

Anita was one of just 21 casualties—most of whom died when something heavy, dislodged by the storm, fell on top of them. The expected storm surge—the deadliest part of a cyclone—had claimed no lives this time, a tribute to the efficacy of the mass evacuation.

On Sunday morning, the people of Ganjam came out of their homes and shelters unscathed, to discover that their slums had been devastated. But, those with memories of that time realised, it was nowhere near as bad as in Paradip in 1999, when the streets were littered with bodies.

Ganjam looked like some giant had put the whole place in a jar and given it a vigorous shake. Nothing stood perfectly straight anymore. All the trees were bent to one side, stripped of their leaves, often collapsed together in chaotic green heaps.

As soon as the cyclone passed, 35 units of state and national disaster response forces, already positioned in strategic locations based on the IMD's predictions, set to work clearing trees from roads and restoring communication lines. By 11 am on Sunday, the roads to the district and block headquarters had been cleared, and relief efforts were ready to begin.

"In 1999, there was no communication at all," recalled S Marrich, the special Director General of Police who had been placed in overall charge of all police, fire and disaster response forces during Phailin. "There were no telephones, no mobiles, no satellite phones, and neither did we have the ability to clear roads. So we were literally stranded.

"This time, however, my forces were out on the roads as soon as there was some visibility, trying to restore some semblance of order."



Jagannath inspects his damaged boat in Gopalpur

Meanwhile in Gopalpur, Jagannath and the other fishermen woke to a confusing, slightly comical scene: the wind and the sea surge had moved all the boats around, so that none was where the owner had left it. Two boats had even wound up on the roof of a nearby factory.

A period of chaos ensued as the fishermen raced around trying

to find their own boats—and when they did, they discovered that the equipment was severely damaged, and that they would be out of commission for several months. Jagannath estimated that his own boat, net and motor would need around ₹150,000 in repairs. The Odisha government has announced programs to assist the fishermen, but that will take months to implement—the state needs to rebuild first, and to provide millions of people, whose homes had been damaged, with shelter and relief.

The setback was severe, but Jagannath was in good spirits. When I met him some weeks later, he even laughed heartily at the memory of finding the boats helter-skelter. With his family, he moved back into the home of his parents, the grudges on both sides forgotten in their happiness to have survived.

Compensation



Odisha Chief Minister Naveen Patnaik said that rehabilitation was the biggest challenge

Around 10 in the morning, the Beheras took Anita's body for a post-mortem and then got treated for their own injuries. Sunita needed six stitches on her head; her six-year-old son needed a cast for his foot. Later that afternoon, they returned to Konitheega, the same village where Anita had fussed about her pink dress not 72 hours earlier, for the cremation.

Soon afterwards, she along with her husband and son moved in with her sister Geetha—they just could not bear the thought of going back to their home, where the memories of the laughing, lively Anita lingered to haunt them.

To add to her misery, Sunita found herself unable to obtain aid. The government distributed 50 kilograms of rice and ₹500 to

each family, while other NGOs gave out essentials like solar lamps and bleaching powder. But even though she showed her ration card, Sunita was told that her name was not on any of the lists—because, she believes, she and her family were not home when officials conducted the initial survey.

She thought then of how her sister had called to tell her the survey was on, and asked if she should include the names of Sunita and her family—and how she had casually dismissed it, saying she would attend to all that later.

For about a week, she and her family lived off the generosity of her sisters, until the administration provided her with rice and ₹5,000 in ‘compensation’ for Anita’s death. Sunita is due another ₹4.5 lakh in compensation from the state and central government, although the money hardly compensates for her enormous loss.

“I could save my ration card, I could save my passbook, I could get money,” she said. “But I could not save my daughter.”

‘God saved us’

That same Sunday morning in Konark, Ansari discovered that Radio Namaskar’s broadcasting antenna had collapsed. That explained the calls they had received about the broadcast. He figured that in order for the tower to collapse, the wind must have been much stronger than the 210-220 kmph figures the authorities had announced.

When I mentioned this to Sarat Sahu, the director of the Bhubaneswar Meteorological Center, he explained that the 220 kmph figure pertained to sustained winds. The tower, he said, could have been knocked down by gusts, which surpassed 240 kilometers per hour.

Water was everywhere in Konark, two feet of it around his antennae, although the city—and its famous Sun Temple—remained largely intact.

In Puri, Debasis Rath resumed his work with the city’s slums. Although there were very few human casualties, the cyclone and the heavy rains that followed the week after posed a different kind of problem: many of the slums were flooded, becoming breeding grounds for mosquitoes carrying malaria and dengue.

“The design of the city is such that you cannot drain one slum without flooding another,” he said. “Ten days after the storm, even our door is still flooded.” These were deeper, structural problems that endangered people’s lives, which could not be solved even with the best-planned evacuation.

Jagalmani and her family returned home on Sunday morning, delighted to find that Kondalrao, Nakaratnam and Raju were safe, and that Penthakata was mostly undamaged. Many people’s roofs had blown away, but the sea had not swept away the slum, as they had feared. Even Kondalrao’s boat had survived.

“God saved us,” Kondalrao told me, suggesting that he had learnt his lesson and next time, if there was a next time, he would be better about saving himself.

When Prakash returned to Paika Nagar around noon on Sunday, he found that houses were largely intact, but most roofs had collapsed and parts of the slum were badly flooded. Again, nobody came to dredge the slum until the intervention of Sakar, the same NGO that had helped them in 1999. For all the efforts that the government made before the cyclone, it seemed to revert to its default mode of neglecting the slums once the immediate threat was past.

The Odisha state’s measured response to Phailin – as well as that of the districts of Visakhapatnam and Srikakulam in Andhra Pradesh—was an example of thinking ahead in terms of disaster management, and is an encouraging sign of change in the mindset of policymakers and the administration.

The Indian government for instance has already begun working

with the World Bank to build more cyclone shelters along the Andhra Pradesh and Odisha coast, as well as to make existing shelters stronger and more accessible, and to create an early-warning system that immediately alert coastal communities.

“If you adopt this strategy for all future tragedies, Odisha need not be scared of the cyclone in the future. There is no need to be afraid of the cyclone, because it will keep hitting us,” Mohapatra, the special relief commissioner, mused. “We can rebuild the roads, we can rebuild the bridges, we can plant new trees. But we cannot get back the lives we have lost.”

The OSDMA is the visible manifestation of such thinking – an independent authority with an allocated state budget and a dedicated staff focused exclusively on risk reduction. It is a lesson for other states. Only Odisha and Gujarat maintain fully functional disaster management agencies, despite it being required by the Disaster Management Act of 2005. The Center runs the National Disaster Management Agency, but it cannot respond in the nuanced way the state agencies can, by training people, creating awareness, and addressing structural flaws in disaster preparation. The sooner each state’s independent disaster management authorities are in place, the more lives can be saved through prevention.

“There are two ways to react after a disaster,” said Saurabh Suresh Dani, team leader of the World Bank project. “You can say that this is just a one-time thing and move on, or you can say you will make sure that the same thing will never repeat again. That's where Odisha stands, and that's why the story is important.”

“The main thing was that the government took the onus on itself,” Dani added. “It took the responsibility in making sure every single person got out of harm's way.”

Aftermath



A boy clears the debris from his damaged shop

The state administration does not, however, deserve sole credit. The coastal communities were also more prepared this time as compared with previous cyclones -- even if they weren't evacuated to a government-run shelter, people stocked up on supplies and ensured that they made it to a safe place before the storm hit.

Ansari is one person who believes the community efforts have not been given their due. “People are praising the chief minister and administration, but from my personal view, the state administration shouldn't get this credit,” he said. “In fact, considering what happened that credit should go to ground administration and also the community, due to their preparedness.”

Since the super cyclone of 1999, a series of marginal developments in Odisha, like in the rest of the country, helped to better equip the state for calamities. There are of course more cell phones, more television sets than ever before, so people not only know about impending calamities but can call for help in case of distress. Because the national weather service has upgraded to using Doppler radar, it was able to make the kind of accurate predictions that were crucial to the administration's efforts. Agricultural productivity has increased and the state—which was importing rice from Punjab in 1999—now produces a surplus, meaning more food is available for an evacuation and subsequent relief efforts; many more people also have the means to stockpile essential supplies for themselves.

“And more importantly, in the 14 years between 1999 and

2013, a lot of houses have become pucca houses,” said Krishnan Kumar, the district collector of Ganjam. “And national highways have come up, which in itself helps to mitigate disasters” because better roads make it easier to rescue people and deliver relief.

The state, especially the district of Ganjam, now faces the enormous challenge of relief and reconstruction. These efforts were hindered when heavy rains pounded Odisha hardly a week after Phailin passed, causing extensive flooding and aggravating the damage. The state government estimates that Phailin and the subsequent floods caused ₹14,373 crore in damage to public and private property, over a third of that in Ganjam alone, which will among other things need to rebuild its entire power infrastructure.

“I am the last person to be pleased right now,” said Kumar, when I asked him if he was happy with the way the evacuation turned out. “I have a relief operation to do. Only when that is over will I be pleased. But right now we are looking at damage to three lakh houses, and to three thousand crores of public infrastructure not to mention two thousand crores of household damage and a billion dollars in all.”

According to official tallies, well over half a million hectares of farmland have been severely damaged, as well as more than 8,000 fishing boats and 32,000 nets, as well as the tools of thousands of craftsmen. With so many livelihoods disrupted, a massive migration is underway as tens of thousands of labourers and fishermen head to other states in search of work.

“Already it has started to happen,” said Father Peter Jacobs, who runs a nonprofit called PREM that works primarily in Ganjam. “Some of the women are saying it would have been better to die, because they have lost everything except their lives, and now they’re crying and saying that our men will go away. Maybe the government provides some rice and dal for today. But



A relief camp in Berhampur, set up by the organisation PREM.

what about tomorrow?”

As the climate warms, natural calamities are becoming – if not more frequent – more erratic and devastating. Although many lives were saved, Phailin’s sheer destructiveness demonstrates the need to upgrade homes in ways that are not only safer for people living in disaster-prone areas but also reduce the damage caused by future weather-related catastrophes. Most of the million-plus people evacuated this time lived in kutchha houses that could hardly protect their lives or their property. Ideally, when a big cyclone strikes again, those people will be living in the kind of homes that they won’t need to worry about leaving behind.

“The bottom line is that you can’t always put a million people into cyclone shelters,” Dani said. “The stock of housing needs to improve, with technology that makes sure roofs won’t get blown off and houses flooded in, so that all of these people won’t need to be evacuated in the future.”

The same need extends to public infrastructure. Even with conservative estimates, it will cost ₹1,000 crore to rebuild Ganjam’s power network. The system could be rebuilt using underground cables, for instance, which would not be affected by heavy winds—an idea endorsed last month by Marri Sasidhar

Reddy, vice-chairman of the National Disaster Management Authority—though as yet there are no plans to do so.

The other major challenge is the restoration of livelihoods. Kondalrao risked his life—and those of his family—because he is so unprotected against property damage that it was better to take his chances with the storm than to risk the nightmare of losing his family's sole source of income. In fact, the reluctance that so many lakhs of people felt about evacuation is directly related to this sense of vulnerability. Had they had some form of insurance that kicked in immediately—and not just the uncertain promise of government compensation, which costs about as much but takes months to process—then perhaps the decision to evacuate would have been easier.

"Our country's risk insurance coverage is practically non-existent, and that is a sad thing," said Dani. "The more insured people feel, the more their decisions will be about protecting the lives of their families than about making sure their assets are not washed out."

In the end, we may need to start thinking of natural disasters not as discrete, sporadic events but as a fundamental feature of India's developmental challenges. "The pity is, our entire development planning—whether it is for the state or country—doesn't take into account the disasters," said Jagadananda, a well-respected social worker who heads the Center for Youth and Social Development in Bhubaneswar. "Disasters are seen as an emergency situation, and the belief is that we only have to respond to when the crisis hits. But you must bring that element into development planning."

Sunshine

One evening a couple of days after I left Puri, I got a call from



A man fishes in Padampur

Kondalrao. He was in a relaxed, convivial mood. It was a fishermen's festival that day, and everybody in Penthakata was taking a break from the sea, spending time with their families instead.

"I hope you're keeping safe," he said. "They're saying another cyclone is headed this way, and it's going to be big."

It was not, in fact, true. After Phailin and the heavy rains that followed it, all sorts of rumors flew around the state about further disasters. People were more willing—almost too willing—to believe, it seemed. There was even talk of an earthquake headed for Berhampur, even though it is impossible to predict seismic activity.

But the weather was actually going to be lovely in Odisha that week, with plenty of sunshine after a long, gloomy spell. I was told as much by Sarat Sahu himself. Still, I couldn't help but smile that Kondalrao, the skeptic, was calling to warn me about a storm that didn't actually exist.

"Don't worry, it's just a rumor. I spoke to the meteorology people about it," I told him. "And even if it comes, you'll be ready, right?"

"Of course, we'll be ready, but I'd rather it not come, so that's a relief," he answered honestly. "Have you eaten yet?"

"No, not yet," I said. "What are you having for dinner?"

"Fish, of course." He paused for a moment. "It's going to be a good meal."



BEST HUMAN RIGHTS & ENVIRONMENT STORY

BY

URMI BHATTACHARJEE

Runner-up

**INSIDE KAZIRANGA'S
ONE-HORNED DREAM**

Yahoo
7th Oct '13

Urmi Bhattacharjee



Inside Kaziranga's One-Horned Dream

Urmi Bhattacharjee is a journalist based out of Guwahati in northeast India. She reports extensively on environment, wildlife, conflict issues on natural resources. She has been a consultant earlier with the famous California based river advocacy NGO, International Rivers. In 2013, she came up with first of its kind reader's guide to 'Dam sanctioning process in India'. She is currently working with NDTV 24x7 and frequently writes blogs and opinion pieces for Yahoo India, Tehelka, The Northeast Today, Huffington Post among others. She was also a fellow with the Centre for Science and Environment, New Delhi in 2012 and was working on Renewable energy scenes in northeast India.

Inside Kaziranga's One-Horned Dream

A rhino has been poached almost every week this year in Assam's Kaziranga National Park. 25 poachers have been arrested. Crores have been allotted to anti-poaching measures. So why are the poachers still multiplying and prospering?

The Poacher



A rhino carcass at Kaziranga National Park. The horn has been cut off by poachers

In 2008, Bogendra was 17 years old and on the run.

A property dispute had grown out of hand and Bogendra had killed someone. He had grown up in a poor family in Golaghat district in Assam and he knew he was on his own. When a case was registered in Bokakhat station and a non-bailable warrant was issued, Bogendra ran. He fled towards the north bank of the river Brahmaputra, which flows along the Kaziranga National Park.

According to a close associate, it was on the north bank that Bogendra saw the rhinos for the first time. Centuries ago, the Indian one-horned rhino roamed the wetlands of the Indus, the Ganga and the Brahmaputra. Today, the rhino is limited to just two national

parks in Assam—Kaziranga and Manas. The tall grass of Kaziranga is today home to the world's highest population of the one-horned rhinoceros, hosting a population of 2,290 rhinos as per the last census that was completed on March 26, 2013.

A status that was severely threatened by the arrival of the 17-year-old. In Kaziranga, just 20 kms from the place he ran from, he met gangs of poachers who would change his life forever.

Today, Bogendra owns land, money and cars. He is one among an estimated 200 poachers who kill in and around Kaziranga. Suspected of having killed almost 15 rhinos for horns that fetch crores of rupees in the international market, Bogendra is one of the most notorious poachers in Assam. Nevertheless, none of his killings have been registered as a crime under the Wildlife Protection Act, 1972.

As a senior officer in the Wildlife Crime Control Bureau (WCCB) explains, "The biggest problem in wildlife poaching is that it is next to impossible to get an eyewitness. These crimes happen in the wee hours of the morning or night and in extremely solitary places. Thus, establishing a crime before the court is a herculean task. Due to the lack of sufficient corroborative evidences, poachers are not charge-sheeted and they get bail."

And as conservationists gloomily suspect, with every successful poaching the poachers get more and more confident.

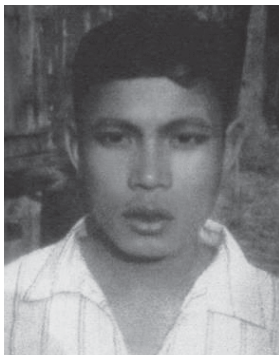
Certainly, the legend of Bogendra has grown and grown. Over time Bogendra has built two kinds of links. He has built strong connections with the international wildlife trade. At home, he has visited Bokakhat close to his home and seduced others into the lucrative game of poaching, promising them assistance in the form of money and weapons. He has managed to escape the eye of conservationists and the police with growing dexterity each time. He has used multiple aliases, and operated under the name of the Nabin Kutum on the north bank of the Brahmaputra. He is known to have

even posed as a woman to give the police a slip. Like all successful poachers, he has mastered the escape routes and developed strong links with international traders.

According to sources, almost 90 per cent of his targets have been rhinos that lived on the outskirts of the park. This was a calculated move since rhino death cases outside the park often go undocumented by park authorities. Moreover, the state forest department is said to have almost no control over the wetlands in the bordering districts of Nagaon, Sonitpur and Moriagaon. Rhinos are also known to stray away to Majuli in Jorhat, the largest humanly inhabited river island in the world.

In 2010, however, a case was registered against Bogendra in Jorhat district, in upper Assam's and about 80 kms from Kaziranga, after he poached a male rhino inside Jadav Payeng's artificial forest. Payeng is a different kind of legend who created a 1,360 hectare forest by planting tree after tree for three decades on a sand bar in Kokilamukh area of Jorhat. Today, it is home to numerous wild animals and about five rhinos and two tigers. Herds of elephants, migratory birds and rare snake species also visit his forest.

The Trade



A file photo of notorious rhino poaching suspect Bogendra Kutum

This year Kaziranga has lost a rhino almost every week to poaching, with a total of 31 rhinos killed already. Last year, on two occasions poachers hacked off rhino horns while the animals were still alive, leaving the 2,000 kg animals to die a slow, painful death.

Rhinos have been slaughtered to near extinction in many places in the world. The trading of rhino horns is a booming

business in the South Asian market. The Chinese believe that rhino horns have aphrodisiac properties, apart from other benefits like a cure for cancer. Though such faiths are largely unfounded, the demands for these horns continue to be extremely high in Vietnam, China, Korea and other places. In Vietnam, it is also taken as a status symbol to own a rhino horn.

Suspected poachers come from Karbi-Anglong, Nagaland and Mizoram. Dimapur in Nagaland is the hub from where these horns are traded to the international market via Moreh (a Manipur border town) to Myanmar, and from there to other South Asian countries. Less commonly, the smuggling route is through Kohima, Nagaland and Tripura. While animals like tigers, pangolins, elephants and bears are also targeted, the poaching of rhinos is maximum given the minimal skills needed and the high returns.

Poachers usually have a complex network of informers who have complete geographical knowledge about the park and its security. There are often middlemen who facilitate the killing and teams of snipers trained in the use of sophisticated guns who usually come from Nagaland and Karbi-Anglong (Kaziranga shares 60 kms of its park border with Karbi-Anglong).

A single kilo of a rhino horn can fetch as high as ₹80 lakh to ₹2 crore – almost 10 times the money earned out of a tiger poaching. Even the field boy, whose only job is to help the entry and exit of the poachers through a demarcated route, gets a hefty pay of about ₹4 lakh.

Poachers in Kaziranga are also aided by militant groups like the Karbi People's Liberation Tigers and Kuki People's Army. For militants, poaching is a relatively easy way of raising funds. "Earlier, these groups used to get a hefty sum for supplying weapons to the poachers. Now they demand a share of the trade amount," says Bibhab Kumar Talukdar, an Asian rhino specialist.

The militants' involvement is obvious from the numerous cases of

rhinos being shot with lethal weapons such as AK-47 guns. The park is divided into five ranges including the Agarotoli, Baghori, Kohora, Burapahar and the central range. Of the five ranges in the Kaziranga national park, the Burapahar range is facing the worst crisis since it is the most prominent militant hideout.

A Hide Not Thick Enough



A rhino straying out to the National Highway 37 when the September 2012 floods inundated Kaziranga

In 2011, the rising instances of poaching prompted an increased vigilance around the park. The forest department was severely jolted after the 2012 floods swept away about 60 rhinos in the national park. More security arrangements were made and commandos from the COBRA battalion of the CRPF were posted in Kaziranga.

The MoEF is now calling for submissions to amend the Wildlife Protection Act since the act is said to have many loopholes, but experts have time and again said that the stricter implementation of the existing act is the need of the hour rather than trying to improvise its provisions.

The Assam state government takes pride in its 2009 amendment to the Wildlife Protection Act, 1972, that makes wildlife crimes

non-bailable and can lead to even life imprisonment for convicts. Under the Wildlife Protection Act, 1972 (the original act and not the Assam amendment), killing of any animal protected under Schedule 1 amounts to immediate arrest and jail for seven years.

In the last two years, the WCCB has become active and the CBI has begun a probe into rhino poaching. Post the series of floods from June to September in 2012, Assam started losing a huge population of its rhinos. Those that ventured to the highlands of Karbi-Anglong became easy prey to poachers. A few rhino deaths were suspected to have gone undocumented. Wildlife watchers and conservation groups pressed hard for a CBI probe into the rhino killings. Following the Union Minister of Environment and Forests (MoEF) Jayanthi Natarajan's visit on September 7, 2012 and after tremendous pressure from conservation groups, a CBI probe was finally initiated.

But look closer and every single thread of the new anti-poaching measures unravels.

At least 25 poachers have been arrested around Bokhakhat since May this year but almost all of them have been bailed out—the crime could be established in none of these cases. Similarly, almost 80 poachers who had been arrested in the neighbouring district of Karbi-Anglong alone last year after the floods, have all been bailed out.

With a conviction rate of zero, serious questions have been raised by wildlife watchers, conservationists and intellectuals on the competence of the forest department and the public prosecutor who have shoddily handled wildlife crimes. The forest department has very poor involvement in enforcing these cases under the Wildlife Protection Act, 1972 due to general reluctance and apathy, which makes matters worse.

“We are unable to secure conviction since the current system is very loose. The public prosecutor is selected randomly by the state

government and they have no orientation on wildlife crimes and their severity,” says a special officer of the WCCB.

However, with almost zero wildlife conviction rates, one cannot rule out the allegations of bribery against the public prosecutor by various sources. The allegations come from a wildlife warden, some members of the forest department, special officer of the WCCB and senior journalists. The number of cases where convicts have been charge-sheeted remains almost nil.

Just as disturbing is the way in which the records of wildlife conviction are maintained by the Principal Chief Conservator of Forests (PCCF), Assam. An RTI information request on wildlife conviction from a Bokakhat youth called Rohit Choudhury has been doing the rounds from one official’s desk to another. Choudhury enquired about the number of cases where wildlife criminals were convicted. His questions, asked about a year ago, were continuously transferred from the PCCF’s office to the Divisional Forest Office and rangers office, with no concrete reply. Replies would only state that that the information sought had been transferred each time to a new desk.

Some Kaziranga insiders claim that many rhino poaching cases have deliberately been kept hidden from the public eye. Sources on the ground say that at least 10 recent poaching cases have been suppressed. “Many a time, I have been told that gunshots were heard and got unofficial reports of killings. But none of these were reported outside,” says a source inside Kaziranga who did not wish to be named. According to these sources, information is suppressed at three levels involving the forest guards, the range offices and the divisional forest officer.

Big promises were made during Jayanthi Natarajan’s visit to the park in September 2012 but they remained confined to proposals or failed altogether. One of the proposals was to introduce aerial drones

fitted with cameras in Kaziranga. A year later, in September 2013, the ministry of defence turned down the proposal citing security reasons.

Wildlife conservationists feel that this volte-face was due to apathy and the reluctance to try out new ideas. A former employee with TRAFFIC, the wildlife trade monitoring network, says, “TRAFFIC had a special military intelligence officer. If an NGO could do this, the state government could have easily used such measures to take care of security concerns in the park instead of dropping the idea of introducing drones altogether.”

No congruence has been established between the police and forest department and also between Kaziranga and the neighbouring Karbi-Anglong. There remains an acute lack of coordination between the five divisions of the park and the neighbouring districts of Morigaon, Nagaon and Karbi-Anglong, all of which was supposed to be strengthened after Natarajan’s visit.

Animals know no boundaries, so it is natural for them to go astray in search of food or higher ground in case of floods. Once strayed, an animal is almost an orphan with no one to own it. The killings of straying rhinos are often not accounted for by Kaziranga or Karbi-Anglong authorities. On various occasions Kaziranga officials say that if a rhino has died outside the park, it is not their responsibility. In Karbi-Anglong, too, officials don’t take responsibility if the rhino belongs to Kaziranga.

Though the CBI probe into the rhino killings was announced last year, it is yet to do any good since the state government has handed over only three cases to them. All of these cases were at least a year old and the evidences has invariably died out.

Winter is coming to Kaziranga. And with the onset of winter, the situation could turn grave. With the water receding inside the park, these pachyderms will be left without any option but to stray out to the north bank of the Brahmaputra for water.

The Guards



Forest guards at the site in the Burapahar range of Kaziranga National Park where a rhino was killed on January 28 this year. Seven empty AK-47 cartridges and three empty .303 rifle cartridges were recovered from the site where the carcass of the male rhino was found.

Though the Kaziranga park authorities have a workforce of 1,200, serious questions have been often raised about its efficiency. A poacher told me, “I was perched on a tree and I had left my shoes at the bottom. An entire forest battalion walked past the tree right under my eyes. They didn’t see me.”

“They did take my shoes, though,” he added with a sarcastic chuckle.

The poacher may scoff, but he knows that shoes are not to be taken for granted if you are a forest guard in Kaziranga. The forest guards, on the frontline of the war against poachers, get paid roughly ₹7,000 per month, and that too not very regularly. They work in extremely hard conditions inside forest camps with little food or electricity. During the floods these guards are cut off totally but often work

continuously on their own to protect the animals.

The home guards (Assam police elite forces) are different from the usual forest guards who belong dedicatedly to the forest department; these forces are sent to give a security boost to the park whenever needed and are not permanent. They have minimal or no training in using sophisticated weapons. A senior forest officer in the Baghori range even claimed that many of the SLR guns provided to the battalion in October 2012 have been simply shelved in the ranger’s office and are actually not put to use at all.

The Kaziranga park also suffers from poor management and shoddy handling of funds. Since 2006, when Kaziranga was declared a tiger reserve, regular funds have come in from the National Tiger Conservation Authority (NTCA).

On August 2013, the NTCA allotted annual assistance of ₹9.33 crore to the park. Of this, ₹3.6 crore is for building anti-poaching infrastructure while a shamefully miniscule ₹1 lakh was allotted for intelligence gathering. There is also a tiger foundation in the park which gets regular funds, mostly from tourism and other donations. However, the department lacks transparency on the availability and utilization of those funds.

There are too few anti-poaching camps in Kaziranga and most camps have deployed just one forest guard. In the neighbouring Karbi-Anglong, there are no anti-poaching camps apart from a couple of forest beat offices in the Karbi-Anglong headquarters of Diphu. There’ve been several rumours of the state forest minister Rakibul Hussain hiring battalions just ahead of elections to use these forces for his election campaigning. The entire home guard population that was recruited a few months ahead of the elections was said to have gone away to campaign for the minister, leaving the park in the lurch.

For some families in the region the dilemma of poaching is an

intimate one. Many poachers' families have links to the home guards. Ganesh Doley was arrested and bailed out twice – last year in Karbi-Anglong and recently this month from the Golaghat sessions court. Doley had poached about 6-7 rhinos a few years ago in his initial years and is now involved in organising poaching. He himself doesn't go inside but trains and facilitates others. He was arrested for his poaching activities and for having illegal arms.

Doley's brother is a home guard in Kaziranga. Even as forest authorities claim that there is no involvement of villages in poaching nor is there illegal encroachment, locals allege that there are numerous infiltrators settled in the sixth addition area of the park. These illegal migrants and the fringe villagers are known to shelter poachers either out of fear or want of money.

To Catch A Poacher



Police with four rhino poaching suspects in Morigaon district of Assam on September 19, 2013.

The forest department has resolved to get poachers to surrender and then use them to catch other poachers. But here, too, the

department does not have policies in place for poachers to surrender.

A close associate to Bogendra says, "Bogendra had been under immense pressure from the WCCB and the CBI. He knew that he'd get caught soon. So he was trying desperately to surrender." Recently, Bogendra, advised by his lawyer, did a seemingly surprising thing – he surrendered before the Jorhat Juvenile court for the murder he had committed as a minor. And now, under the protection from the juvenile court, Bogendra's most heinous wildlife crimes have been overshadowed.

But surrender comes in many flavours. Kartik is about 30 years old, with a dark, thin, unassuming face and bloodshot eyes. He grew up in extreme poverty in a village close to Bokakhat. He had been a regular supplier of .303 rifles to poachers for almost a decade but surrendered in late 2011 and decided to help the forest department. It is a decision Kartik rues today. "They promised me the moon if I surrendered and became an unofficial informer to help them catch other poachers. When finally I surrendered and decided to lead a normal life with my family, the forest officers refused to even see my face," he says.

Kartik has no means of survival any more. "I often feel I should get into poaching again," he says. "But since the gangs know that I had decided to surrender, they wouldn't allow me to live. I'd get killed."



BEST HUMAN RIGHTS & ENVIRONMENT STORY

BY
GOVIND KRISHNA V
Runner-up

TAILORED FOR TYRANNY

Fountain Ink
1st Feb '13

Govind Krishna V



Tailored for Tyranny

A graduate of the Asian College of Journalism, Govind Krishna V started his career as a journalist with The New Indian Express in Bangalore and later covered Karnataka politics as the Bangalore correspondent of The Sunday Guardian. He is currently Reporter-At-Large with Fountain Ink and based in Hyderabad. Over his career he has covered human rights, politics and Hindutva, and has done investigative stories on terror cases, the Aadhaar project and government graft.

Tailored for Tyranny

Tirupur is India's knitwear district, a small town in Tamil Nadu that exports garments worth thousands of crores every year. But success is built on a systematic exploitation of workers who are treated as bonded labour, not paid minimum wages and made to work inhuman hours to produce the brands that everyone wears.

Oh yes, they did, we could come ten minutes late on mornings after 'whole night shifts'. They wouldn't say anything.

The printing machines, adorned with festoons from the New Year celebrations, look like a giant child's plaything. Metal arms of long, alternating spatulas that end in trays are fitted around the central wheel at two levels. The lower circle holds the cloth, the upper is loaded with ink. A computer allows the operator to determine the quantities in which inks of various colours are to be distributed. The man in charge of the printing section is called Kennedy. He says that the "new machine", imported from Italy like most of the machinery in the factory, can print six colours simultaneously, though they would be using fewer colours for this particular order. An operator switches on the machine. It starts rotating and brings the alternating trays into contact, imprinting the design onto the cloth with the help of rollers. The helpers take off the wet cloth and load it into a nearby drying machine.

The steel drying machine is built on the lines of baggage screening machines in airports, only it is at once more rectangular and narrower. As the white cloth is sucked behind a curtain, a steel pipe blows steam from a boiler burning at 1,600 Celsius. Inside, pressers go to work on the cloth even as the ink is dried by the burning heat. When I pick up one of the semi-made T-shirts from the other end, the

fabric is so hot that I can feel my fingers and palm burn.

The T-shirt front has a triangle within a large circle. There is no lettering, but next to it is a picture of a blonde teenage boy with a joyful, alive expression. He seems to have been caught in the midst of some activity we can't see. A whitewashed house, built with wooden planks and surrounded by trimmed hedges stands at the end of the foreground. There are woods in the background, and the scene is bathed in twilight. Once the cloth is cut and sewn, it will be packed to sail on ships leaving Tuticorin and Chennai. It will be sold in retail shops, malls and clothing boutiques across Germany, Austria, France, Switzerland, Belgium, Netherlands and Luxembourg. It will be bought by boys like the one in the picture, and girls who date them. And by people who may live in white-panelled houses or at least know someone who does.

A mark somewhere on the cloth will say "Made in India". Tirupur, the southern Tamil Nadu town that made this T-shirt, as it makes millions of others every year, will go unheralded. As will the factory where it was made. And the hundreds of souls who worked on it, from the labourers picking cotton in Gujarat and Andhra to the young girls in the spinning mills in Erode, the young man from Odisha or UP that stitched the T-shirt in the factory's tailoring shop, and the man who drives along the highway to Tuticorin as Tirupur sleeps. It is doubtful if any of them has ever seen a white-panelled house.

The Warsaw International Factory in Tirupur is not named after the Polish capital, but from the military pact that unravelled the year that the factory came into existence. Towards the end of 1989, a few months after Raja Sanmugham christened the garment factory in a fit of youthful romanticism—after the USSR led East-European military defence treaty against NATO—a revolt in Romania ended the usefulness of the Warsaw Pact on all but paper. A month earlier,

the Berlin wall had come down, reuniting East and West Germany. It also led to the creation of the Eurozone, a fact of great importance for Tirupur.

The Warsaw International factory started by exporting T-shirts to Tom Tailor, a garment retailer in the north German port city of Hamburg, a mere 50 kms from the East German border. In its early days, the factory had a turnover between ₹50 to ₹70 lakh and employed just over 50 people.

In 1991, the USSR ceased to exist and around the same time, Tirupur in central Tamil Nadu became the centre of a textile boom fuelled by exports to European and American markets. According to company officials, the factory, which now has 800 employees, produces 2 lakh pieces a month for Tom Tailor and has an annual turnover of over ₹50 crores.

In the last two decades, rising demand from foreign clients has led several companies like Warsaw to integrate all components of the production process, often within a single factory complex.

In the Warsaw factory, cotton yarn is brought in company trucks from the factory's spinning mills near Erode, about 50 kms away. Different kinds of yarn, produced according to fabric requirements, make their way to the large storage rooms where they are catalogued according to yarn density, colour and type. Depending on the kind of fabric needed, the specific yarn is dispatched to the knitting shops.

There, automated knitting machines turn out grey cloth, so called because of its burnt charcoal-like hue. After scrupulous comparison with the specifications given by the client, the cloth is sent for dyeing, the only part of the manufacturing process not done in-house. The dyed cloth is then compacted in the factory to reduce shrinkage and the finished cloth is then ready for production.

Before production can commence, pre-production samples have to be made and the clients' quality inspectors check them. If they are not satisfied, the process has to be repeated, with tremendous loss in time and money. Otherwise, the dyed cloth is sent for printing and

from there to the tailors where they are cut and sewn to make T-shirts, pants, blazers, sweatshirts pullovers, skirts and other apparel. The finished clothes are packed and dispatched by road to the ports, from where the client, usually Tom Tailor, will ship it to its warehouses in Europe.

“Rajalakshmi, 35, has not been doing ‘whole night shifts’ in her factory for almost a year, at least not more than once a month. She puts it down to the arrival of boys from north India. They work for less and her factory, which sub-contracts garment production from apparel exporters, can afford to let her leave by 8.30 p.m.”

If the production deadline is missed even by a few days, Warsaw International will have to pay air freight to make up for the lost time.

Dhapan Kumar says he holds a BA in history, sociology and education. Kumar, who has been working for Warsaw International for a year as a checker, is from a village on the shores of Lake Chilka, near Behrampur in the Puri district of Odisha. He is one of the tens of thousands of labourers from states like Odisha, Bihar and Uttar Pradesh who migrated to Tirupur in recent years. Kumar stands by a sorting table piled with Polo T-shirts of various sizes.

He faces four production lines: each line has tailors working away at 25 sewing machines arranged back-to-back in single file. Kumar is the only checker for the whole floor. Tailors, after finishing a piece, walk over and drop it on the pile in front of him, where his nimble fingers sort them into different piles by size, ranging from small to extra-large. They are picked up by a factory assistant who hands it to the rows of ironers and packers standing behind.

In a single day, Kumar sorts between 3,000 and 5,000 pieces depending on the pace of production. His shift starts at 8.30 a.m. and finishes at 5.30 p.m., with a 45-minute lunch break and a short tea

break. During the rest of the time, he is at the sorting table and the work is unceasing.

Kumar began working in garment factories in 2006 after “family burdens” forced him to leave his village. From Odisha, he first reached Delhi. He worked there in a garment factory, and later in Noida. In 2009, he came to Hyderabad, where he worked almost three years with a garment manufacturer. The complete absence of job security has turned him into a wanderer; he says he was fired from his last job because he took nine days’ extra leave to attend to a family emergency.

He laments that his education counted for nothing and envies the fisher folk who manage to earn a decent living from the brackish waters of the Chilka.

The biggest lagoon in India and the second biggest in the world, Chilka supports a thriving fishing trade. Last November he went home on leave and stayed with his wife and children for a month. November and December is peak tourist season and attracts visitors keen to watch migratory birds.

“Birds migrate to the Chilka from as far as Siberia. During this time, I work as a tourist guide. I take them on treks through the jungle as well as on the lake. I use my savings to rent a motor boat and hire drivers since I haven’t learnt boat riding.”

“Niraimathi had no idea of the number of shifts she would have to work when she left Chinnaovalapuram and travelled to the factory in Udumalaipettai. The broker had conferred with her parents, but she was not party to it, and it is not clear whether she was ever consulted or had any idea what she was getting into.”

Kumar says he earns close to ₹8,000 a month. The factory has a hostel but he does not stay there. He shares a house with four other

co-workers and shells out ₹2,000 a month for rent. He says the cost of living is so high that he manages to save only ₹2,000 a month. He finds Tirupur not only a costly town but a very boring one.

“You don’t find different kinds of people here. In Delhi and Hyderabad, I met many intellectual people and that expands your knowledge. It’s also not like my village. In a village, if something happens or you need something there are so many people to help you. In a town or a city, you are utterly alone.”

Kumar chokes back his tears as he speaks about not seeing his family. But he says he likes his work and is grateful to the company for employing him. The job allows him to send money home and the company gives him more than a month’s leave to visit his family. He will be going again in November. He made ₹25,000 last year showing tourists around Chilka, and he hopes he can make as much this year. Or maybe even a little bit more.

Tirupur has been a migrant town ever since the Eighties, when workers from the poverty stricken southern districts came here, abandoning traditional occupations like agriculture. The first knitwear unit in Tirupur came up in 1925. Till the early Seventies Tirupur made banians and briefs for the domestic market, and was often referred to as the banian town. According to the Tirupur Export Association (TEA), the town had 230 garment units in 1961. These units were composite mills and did not sub-contract their work. In 1979, an Italian garment importer called Verona placed export orders in Tirupur.

After two years, the Dutch fashion and clothing retail store C & A came calling. Tirupur was on its way to becoming the knitwear capital of India. Throughout the Eighties more foreign importers paid calls and the stream of migration from other districts became a flood.

With the expanding export market, the nature of production as well as labour started to change. Garment exporters started to

sub-contract components of the production process to smaller job work and cluster units that began to mushroom all over the town.

For workers who came to join the dyeing, bleaching, ironing, embroidery, printing and other ancillary units, this was bad news. Daily wages gave way to piece rates, wage became hostage to output.

This tied the workers' earnings to increasing work hours and made it difficult to implement minimum wages, which are calculated according to time. Units closed down often, shifted or hired new workers willing to work under increasingly harsh conditions.

“When a male worker insulted and abused a friend beyond all tolerable limits, Niraimathi found that she couldn't take it anymore. She quit in disgust—the thought of what her family could do with the ₹50,000 could no longer hold her back.”

In the Nineties the export market hit a high. A united Europe expanded markets for international garment players and export figures from Tirupur touched several hundred crores. Forced overtimes, often without extra pay started to become industry practice in several factories. The population of Tirupur was also climbing rapidly with the increasing inflow of migrant labourers.

According to census figures, the population increased by 124 per cent in a single decade. Tirupur, which had 3,02,637 residents in 1991 recorded 6,77,987 people in the 2001 census. By comparison, Coimbatore, the second largest city in Tamil Nadu and a centre of migration to the textile industry saw a population increase of 21.75 per cent in the same period. From banian manufacturing, Tirupur started exporting all kinds of casual wear to European and American markets.

Major clothing brands and retailers who now source from Tirupur include Nike, Adidas, Tommy Hilfiger GAP, Phillips, Van Huesen, Arrow, TESCO, Walmart, Target, Diesel and H&M among many others. In 2004, the multi-fibre agreement, which imposed quotas on

exports of textiles from India to markets in EU, USA, Canada and Finland was lifted, leading to a staggering rise in Tirupur's fortunes.

In 2012, Tirupur's turnover from exports stood at ₹12,500 crore, and production for domestic consumption at over ₹7,000 crore. Latest data put the number of garment units at 6,250. At a conservative estimate they employ more than four lakh workers, of whom the majority are migrants.

Shivaram, the manager at Warsaw International, says overtime is a rare thing in the factory. Perhaps one or two days in a month, when it becomes difficult to meet the production target. What Shivaram says does not tally with general conditions in the garment industry, where the deadline demands of the clients are passed down the work chain.

The Indian garment export industry is competing with workshops in China, Bangladesh, Vietnam and Cambodia, where labour is much cheaper. The stories of the several garment workers interviewed for this story varied with the different conditions in the various garment manufacturing, knitting, dyeing and other ancillary units where they worked. But the average work hours reported were 12 to 16.

Forced overtime appears to be a frequent practice, and workers are given inadequate or no pay at all for extra hours. Many units frequently cancel weekly offs without substitute holidays. Companies that give no weekly offs at all are not unknown.

Rajalakshmi, 35, has not been doing “whole night shifts” in her factory for almost a year, at least not more than once a month. She puts it down to the arrival of boys from north India. They work for less and her factory, which sub-contracts garment production from apparel exporters, can afford to let her leave by 8:30 p.m.

“Whole night shifts” begin at nine p.m. and extend to 5 or 5.30 a.m. Nowadays, Rajalakshmi works only two-and-a-half shifts. The morning shift runs from 8.30 a.m. till lunch at 2.30 p.m., and the afternoon shift goes on till 5.30. She is paid ₹140 for this, less than

the minimum wage of ₹171 fixed for adult workers in the garment and textile industry by the Tamil Nadu government. For the overtime she puts in from 5.30 p.m. to 8.30 p.m., she is paid ₹70 more. By labour rules she should be getting ₹114.

Rajalakshmi, a checker, moved from her village in Virudhunagar district to Tirupur more than a decade ago. Her husband is an agricultural labourer, and she has a son who studies in seventh standard. She joined her current employer five years ago. The factory she was working in earlier (a bigger one with over 300 employees) shifted after a fire gutted the cloth stored in the premises. This turned out to be a good thing, because the new factory, though smaller, was willing to pay more. Otherwise, nothing much has changed in her life since she came to Tirupur. Childbirth, sending her son to school, shifts, celebrating Pongal and Diwali, (the only times when leave is granted) have all revolved around a work routine that has remained a constant.

“In 2007, the Madras High Court declared that Sumangali amounted to bonded labour. Recruiters renamed it ‘Kanmani’, ‘Thirumangalam Thiruman Thittam’, or merely the ‘scheme’. Pamphlets in Tamil promise comfortable accommodation and good food at the company’s expense, and carry graphics of happy girls at the production line.”

In both the factories, Rajalakshmi says she was expected to work Sundays. She worked three shifts most of these years, from 8.30 a.m. to 11 p.m. “Whole night shifts” were frequent and when asked to average it out she says every third or fourth night shift turned into a “whole night shift”. She was not paid extra but got ₹25 to buy dinner. When the work ends at 5 or 5.30 a.m., she was expected to go home and sleep for a couple of hours before reporting for the morning shift. Which, she says she rarely did, because she had to

prepare food for the day. I ask her if the company allowed workers to report late after a “whole night shift”.

“Oh yes, they did, we could come ten minutes late on mornings after ‘whole night shifts’. They wouldn’t say anything.”

Tirupur’s rising fortunes are linked to the fortunes of Western manufacturers. The global recession of 2008-09 saw a reversal of those fortunes.

A sudden drop in demand from EU and American markets was followed by a series of domestic crises that has led to a decline in exports since 2009. One was an order by the Madras High Court in 2011 that shut down over 700 dyeing and bleaching units because they were polluting the Noyyal River. A concomitant rise in the price of yarn led to an increase in production costs, which the companies could not off-load on to their foreign clients.

With wages stagnating, migrants from Tamil Nadu started moving back to their villages. “We estimate that between 1 and 1.5 lakh labourers left Tirupur since 2010. A large part were families who had settled in Tirupur for several years. They were particularly affected because of rent costs. To fill this gap, companies are importing labour from Odisha, UP, Bihar, parts of Andhra Pradesh and even the north-east states,” says Aloysius, founder and director of Social Awareness and Voluntary Education (SAVE), an NGO based in Tirupur that works with textile and garment labourers.

While the spinning industry has so far been buffered from the drop in garment export demand, the conditions of garment workers in Tirupur as well as other centres in Tamil Nadu has deteriorated. Now weeks of high-pressure work is followed by days or weeks when factories and job work units stand idle. The result is increasing financial pressure on the worker, often leading her to switch jobs, and increasing the fragmentation of labour.

Theni lies 180 kms to the south of Tirupur, towards the border

with Kerala. The district is surrounded by the Western Ghats, and is the most convenient route for the stream of tourists who motor from Madurai to the hill station of Munnar or Thekkady wildlife sanctuary in Kerala. The region trades in cardamom, grapes and chilly, besides raw cotton and tea. But along National Highway-45 which connects the nearby town of Dindugul with Theni, there are few glimpses of cultivation beside large stretches of coconut or palm trees. However, as I pass Theni and travel towards the village of Chinnaovalapuram, and the wide roads become narrow ribbons bordered by corn fields, paddy and banana plantations, the occasional grape trellis looms into view, its unladen silver meshes glinting forlornly in the noon sun.

“According to the report of the Anti-Slavery International, as of June/July 2011, 11 international brands were buying from Indian garment suppliers who used forced labour practices. The brands named are: Asda-Walmart, a British subsidiary of the American retail giant Wal-Mart, GAP, Marks and Spencers, C&A, Bestseller, H&M, Inditex, Mothercare, Tesco, Primark and Next.”

Chinnaovalapuram, is dotted by small, cluttered kuccha dwellings without water connections or toilets, and has people desperately straining to make ends meet. Many of its 1,500 residents migrate to prosperous towns like Dindigul, Coimbatore or Tirupur, or to the towns and cities of Kerala, seeking jobs in factories, in construction or the transport sector. Those who stay home work as agricultural labourers.

Since the Nineties at least, there has been a steady flow from Theni of unmarried adolescent girls to the spinning mills that supply yarn to Tirupur and Coimbatore. The girls, often as young as 12 or 13, spend years at factories in Erode, Madurai, Sathyamangalam, Dindigul and Coimbatore, confined to hostels within the factory walls and subject

to working conditions that approximate bonded labour.

According to R Manikandan, chief functionary of the NGO Vinoba Rural Development Sevelaya in Theni, at least 10 girls from Chinnaovalapuram are working in textile mills. He reckons that a similar number from each of over 370 villages in the district are working as migrant labourers in textile factories. According to a report by the Fair Labour Association, each village with about 200 houses has 25 girls between 14 and 18; approximately 15 would be working in factories near the towns.

The word “Sumangali” now has a nefarious meaning across villages in the textile belt. The Tamil word “Sumangali” denotes an unmarried woman entering into matrimony and obtaining the social respect of a married woman. But it has been exploited by textile companies to trap tens of thousands of adolescent girls in a form of bonded labour.

Eighteen-year-old Niraimathi has to be coaxed to speak to me as I meet her in front of the only shop in the locality. Her neighbours tell me that it is because I am young and have come from the city: she suspects that I work for the owner of the mill she left six months ago and will take back what she says to the owner. When she left, she had been told not to talk about what goes on and Niraimathi is visibly uncomfortable as she answers my questions.

She joined a spinning mill in Udumalaipettai near Pollachi at 16, after signing up for a three year scheme. Unable to stand the harsh and illegal working conditions, she quit six months back and came home, with no part of the promised money. She says her father made several visits to the factory after she quit, but the management keeps asking him to come back later to collect the money. Last time he went he was told to come back after six months.

Niraimathi heard of the “scheme” when her aunt’s daughter joined a spinning mill through a job agent. Having stopped her education,

and with at least two years to go before she could legally be married, her parents were enthused by the plan by which their daughter could earn ₹50,000 at the end of three years. She was also entitled to a Provident Fund (PF) of ₹10,000, besides monthly wages. Niraimathi had no idea of the number of shifts she would have to work when she left Chinnaovalapuram and travelled to the factory in Udumalaipettai. The broker had conferred with her parents, but she was not party to it, and it is not clear whether she was ever consulted or had any idea what she was getting into.

In the factory she was to put to work operating the machines that took cleaned and processed cotton fibres and spun it into yarn. She says she was treated well initially. The supervisors and the managers did not shout at her, there were no insults and abuses, and the warden did not make her feel like a prisoner in the hostel, where she shared a room with four other girls. This would change within two months.

From the beginning, she had to work two shifts. The normal eight-hour one and a compulsory extra shift of four hours. Her typical day began with getting up at 5 a.m., a hasty breakfast at the mess and reporting to work by 5.30. At 2:30 p.m. there was a half-hour break for lunch. The lunch was frantic, with 1,000-odd women standing in queue for grub that had to be swallowed down in time to avoid the ire of the floor supervisor. They had to get back before the minute hand slipped past twelve.

The monotony was unrelieved and tedium unbroken except for two tea breaks—before lunch and one in the evening. Two girls were taken off the line two at a time, led to a tea table and given five minutes. Once they were done, they would re-join the line allowing two others to break off.

Niraimathi doesn't know that it was illegal of the company to make any labourer work for more than nine hours a day. In her mind, overtime meant night shifts that would start at 5.45 p.m. or 6 p.m. and would go on into the night, sometimes till the early hours. She

said she was never paid any wages for the extra hours.

As she got off her normal double shift by 5.30 p.m., if the supervisor didn't assign her to OT (as overtime is called), she says she would head back to the hostel, hoping more than anything that she could go to sleep immediately after dinner. It was a wish often unfulfilled.

“If more hands were required for the night shift the manager would ring up the warden and read out a list of workers' ID numbers and names. We had to report to the factory immediately, even if we were sleeping.

“We have been woken up really late at night by the warden shouting outside our doors. She would yell at us until we donned our uniforms and left the hostel. At times we have refused to go because we were so tired, but then she would report us to the manager who would threaten to fire us. If we asked for permission to call our parents, they wouldn't let us.”

Niraimathi says she worked a night shift on an average of three times a week and that she was lucky if she got two Sundays off. She was paid around ₹3,000 a month in wages when she joined and it went up to ₹3,900 by the time she left. Meagre by Indian standards, the pay was generous compared to what girls from her own village were earning in spinning mills.

Studies carried out among textile workers show that many mills pay no salary at all to girls employed under variants of the Sumagali scheme, making them, in effect, bonded labourers forced to work till the end of their contract periods, or risk forfeiting the end payment. And in most cases where daily or monthly wages were paid, including Niraimathi's, costs for food and accommodation were deducted from their salaries, quite contrary to promises made by the agents.

When the export boom started in Tirupur in the early Nineties, hundreds of factories started to come up in other districts in the state

to meet the rising demand for different types of spun yarn. The state government has released no data on the number of spinning mills registered in the state, but NGOs working with textile labourers estimate the number to be over 2,800. SAVE says it was unable to obtain complete figures for the number of mills or labourers in spite of requests to various district administrations under the Right to Information Act (RTI).

Figures for 18 out of 32 districts released under RTI show that there are 1,807 mills in these districts. Field surveys carried out by SAVE in Coimbatore, Dindigul, Erode and Tirupur districts collected data on 1,311 spinning mills. Based on spot interviews with workers and their families, SAVE estimates that over three lakh labourers are employed by the industry in these four districts, of whom over 1,78,000 are women.

According to field data, over 1,05,000 women stay in hostels inside the factory complexes. Over 87,700 are adolescent or post-adolescent girls lured into working with the promise of lump sums at the end of three-to-four-year contracts, often attractively packaged to their parents as schemes by which the girl can earn her own dowry. A large number of them are child labourers between 12 and 14.

“Factories started to provide hostels inside the campus for workers only in the late Nineties. It was started by a few textile mills in Coimbatore and Dindigul and soon factories started canvassing unmarried girls for the Sumangali scheme. Now at least 80 per cent of the spinning mills operate girls hostels on the premises,” says Aloysius of SAVE.

Niraimathi was 16 when she joined the factory; she was by no means the youngest there. There were several girls below 15, some of them as young as 12, she says. “What mattered was not the age, but the size.”

She says, “When the government inspector visited the premises,

the management always knew beforehand. We were warned by a whistle. They then herded all the girls who looked small and younger than 18 into the guest houses and locked them in till the inspector left. Once more than a hundred girls were locked up inside for a whole day. Since I looked bigger than my age, I was never taken off the shift during inspections.”

In the two years that she lived in the hostel in Udumalaipettai, Niraimathi stepped out of the factory campus only thrice. Those were times when she was allowed to visit home for two or three days. The girls are not allowed outside the hostel and are not permitted to receive any visitors. Parents can visit their wards only once in several months. The visits are brief and their frequency is strictly regulated.

“If parents come too often, the warden has a word with the manager. The manager then speaks to the parents and tells them that the girls would grow home-sick and will not be able to work,” says Niraimathi.

To ensure that only immediate family members have access to the girls, a visitor’s pass is given to parents that carry their ward’s photograph, a three-digit identity number, and the home address. The card is signed by the factory authorities and has to be produced to enter the hostel. Niraimathi says she has never fallen sick, but when any of the girls needed to visit a doctor, they are always accompanied by the warden and security staff.

It is not merely visits that are restricted, but also telephone calls to the outside world. Girls were allowed to speak with their parents only once in two weeks and for very brief periods. When parents call, they are usually told that the girls are at work or sleeping.

“One of the senior girls told us that everything we say over the phone is recorded. So even when I talked to my parents, I wouldn’t dare tell them anything about what was happening there,” she says. Niraimathi never found out whether the telephone conversations

were really recorded or not. It did not matter in any case.

When a male worker insulted and abused a friend beyond all tolerable limits, Niraimathi found that she couldn't take it anymore. She quit in disgust—the thought of what her family could do with the ₹50,000 could no longer hold her back.

If Niraimathi's account is accurate, the factory management systematically violated almost all the provisions of the Indian Factories Act (IFA). Employment of children under the age of 14 in factories is a cognisable offense under section 67 of the Factories Act. Minors aged above 14 but under 17, like Niraimathi, cannot be asked to work for more than four and a half hours a day or after 7 p.m., under Section 71(1) and Section 70(1A) of the IFA. Section 71 (2) prohibits adolescents from being employed after 7 p.m.

No factory can have more than nine compulsory working hours (Section 54) while any overtime work must be paid at double the normal rate (Section 59). Any night shift has to be compulsorily followed by a day's leave and weekly holidays that are cancelled have to be compensated with a substitute. The penalty for not complying with several of these sections is imprisonment extending up to two years and fine. The wages paid fall far below the minimum wage, which in Tamil Nadu is fixed at ₹171 for adult workers and ₹110 for apprentice workers for the textile industry.

In 2007, the Madras High Court declared that the Sumangali scheme amounted to bonded labour. With the scheme gaining in notoriety, recruiters for the textile companies have renamed the scheme "Kanmani", "Thirumangalam Thiruman Thittam", or merely the "scheme". Pamphlets printed in Tamil, with offers of employment in textile mills for young unmarried girls are a common sight in Theni. They promise comfortable accommodation and good food at the company's expense, and like the brochures of private colleges often carry graphics of happy girls at the production line or

relaxing in spacious hostel rooms with friends during off-hours.

They promise unlimited TV and music, different varieties of food and proximity to towns as attractions. The pamphlets as well as the middlemen state that the girls would be required to work only eight hours a day and would get holidays on all Sundays. They would be paid monthly or daily wages and would be given a large amount of money at the end of their contract. Varying from company and scheme the amount could be anywhere from ₹35,000 to ₹75,000, not including Provident Fund (PF) and ESI.

Studies by NGOs based on testimonies from labourers report high levels of health problems from the uninterrupted labour, lack of medical care and reluctance of factories to grant sick leave. Both male and female labourers report being forced to work prolonged periods in spite of illness, and of being relieved of duty only as a last resort. Women, most of them in their teens, interred in factory campuses have no independent access to medical care and their chances of getting treatment are completely dependent on the will of individual managers or supervisors.

A report on the condition of the garment industry in Tamil Nadu by the Fair Labour Association (FLA) says vomiting, numbness, headaches, heavy body pain, diarrhoea, anaemia, menstrual, uterus and stomach problems is prevalent among labourers working under the Sumangali system. It also identified a high incidence of respiratory diseases like asthma, bronchitis, Tuberculosis and deposits of cotton in the lungs because of lack of proper protective gear.

It has been three years since Jayapriya (25) came home after completing her three-year contract with a spinning mill in Madurai. Squatting on the stone steps of a neighbour's house with her one-year-old boy in her arms, she compares her working days to prison time. But release hasn't brought her freedom from the ill-use she suffered there. She still retains the visiting pass the factory gave

her parents. A photograph taken especially for the occasion, it shows a smiling 19-year-old with her parents standing by on both sides. The girl staring out of the photograph is stockier, a bit plump even, very different from the bony woman with pointed face and thin lifeless hair sitting opposite me. Nothing would mark out the picture from any family photograph, except for the blue seal of the textile company and the illegible scrawl of some unknown factory official.

“This is how she used to look. The factory people completely ruined her health by making her work 15 hours a day without any rest. She has less blood now and is very weak. She gets tired easily even doing house work. We had to spend a lot on her treatment,” says her husband, Surulivel who joins us.

Surulivel is a riot of colours. Wearing a bright orange shirt with a red chequered towel wrapped around his waist, a red mobile phone can be seen sticking out of his shirt pocket and his dark wiry legs are splattered with mud. He is an agricultural labourer and as he bemoans the shortage of money, he keeps repeating his conviction that the mill work wrecked his wife’s health.

“We have spent around ₹15,000 on her treatment. She had problems with child birth and we had to do a Caesarean operation. It was at a government hospital, so that was free. The doctor has asked her to eat lots of fruits, but we can’t afford it.”

Jayapriya vividly recalls the deafening sounds of the machines, the stifling heat, and the cotton dust that pervaded the buildings. Two years into her work she started experiencing back pain. She had to work the full day shift which started at 5.30 a.m. and went on till 2.30 p.m., when there was a half-hour lunch break. Then followed the illegal extra four-hour shift till 6.30. A break for dinner followed and by 7 p.m. she would begin the OT shift that lasted till 1 p.m., sometimes beyond. She says she never got an off on Sundays.

When her backache became so bad that she had trouble working, she was taken to a private clinic, accompanied by the hostel warden

and two security guards. The doctor spoke only to the warden and Jayapriya does not know what he told her: she remembers that he did not ask any questions about her work at the factory.

The food served was bad, almost inedible, says Jayapriya. If work was not completed by lunch time, the supervisor would not allow her to go for lunch or dinner. Some of the child workers who couldn’t stand the hunger would ask for a toilet break and slip into the lunch line, she recalls. Working hungry and lack of sleep led not only to exhaustion, but also to stomach ulcers. The condition was exacerbated because they were often served re-cooked food.

“Almost half the girls suffered from ulcers or other digestive ailments. We never got time to eat. The vegetables were often dirty and at one time, we found insects in the food,” says Priyanka, Jayapriya’s neighbour, who joined the same mill as cleaner a year after her.

She says she was taught to take apart the machines and clean them using petrol and other cleaning fluids. Though she had the same 16 hours as her friend, as a cleaner she worked in different sections, including the clinic.

“Two years after I joined there was a sudden outbreak of diarrhoea. We suspected it was because the water was bad but we never knew the real reason. Several girls were rushed to the hospital and when more fell sick they brought in doctors to treat us. But they wouldn’t let anyone go home. And when I tried to tell my parents about being sick, they disconnected the phone,” she recalls.

The wardens had little authority over shift timings and even when the girls ran fevers, it was difficult to convince the male supervisors to relieve them. “If we told them we were ill, they would look at our faces and size up how sick we were before giving even a single shift off. The only way to get leave was if the doctor said so,” says Priyanka. This was essentially a Catch-22 situation.

While forced labour, child labour, wage theft, absence of trade unionism and systematic exploitation mark much of the textile and garment business throughout the country, there is an even darker side to the industry. The near-slavery situation in the labour camps, their insulation from the outside world and the unchecked power male supervisors and managers have, often lead to sexual harassment of female workers.

Given the cultural taboos, it goes severely underreported, say NGOs working in the field. K M Ramesh, a Project Manager with SAVE who works on child rights, reports rescuing a minor who was gang-raped and kept as a bonded labourer in a spinning mill in Sathyamangalam.

“The girl ran away from Madurai when she was around 16 after a fight with her parents. She was approached by an agent at the Madurai bus stand. When he learnt from her that she had run away from home, he told her that there was a good job. She was taken to a factory in Sathyamangalam and kept there for two years. She was not paid a paisa for the work. She says she was raped daily by the owner and other factory officials.

“Some of her colleagues who finished their contracts spread the word around in their villages and that’s how we came to know about the case,” says Ramesh.

The factory owner refused to let Ramesh meet the girl saying that he would only allow her parents access to the girl. When the police refused to act, SAVE filed a case before a magistrate praying for a search warrant. Ramesh entered the factory along with the police and brought the girl out. Though she gave a statement before the magistrate saying she was raped and named the factory owner and other officials at the spinning mill, she did not want to file a complaint. “She just wanted to go home. The magistrate did not take suo motu cognisance and no charges were framed. The men she named remain at large.”

A report published by Anti-Slavery International (ASI) in December 2011 on “Forced Labour in the Manufacture of Garments for International Brands” used export data from Tuticorin port and Chennai port to find out the international clothing brands that were part of the supply chain that utilised forced labour or child labour.

According to the report, as of June/July 2011, 11 international brands were buying from Indian garment suppliers who used forced labour practices. The brands named are: Asda-Walmart, a British subsidiary of the American retail giant Wal-Mart, GAP, Marks and Spencers, C&A, Bestseller, H&M, Inditex, Mothercare, Tesco, Primark and Next.

An earlier report in May 2011 by the Centre for Research on Multi-national Co-operations and the India Committee for Netherlands named 37 brands in European and American markets as sourcing garments that originated with Indian suppliers who make use of forced labour. The end-users identified in the report consisted of American, British, German, Spanish, Italian, Icelandic and Swiss brands. Apart from those named in the ASI report (except H&M) it also includes international brands and retailers such Tommy Hilfiger, Diesel, Abercrombie and Fitch and Izod (Phillips Van Heusen).

It is almost certain, however, that the number of foreign companies using products of forced labour from Tamil Nadu, Delhi and Karnataka and other parts of India is much higher. All the reports cited based their research on identifying garment exporters in Delhi and Tamil Nadu. The list is far from exhaustive. Also, many exporters source their yarns from spinning mills they do not own.

“Many of these studies... have focused on vertical garment manufacturing units with direct relations with the brands and retailers, however brands and retailers have limited access and influence on the entire supply chain where a large part of Sumangali exists,” says a report by the Fair Labour Association.

The spinning sector exports 23 per cent of its production. It is

exported to Europe and America as well as to China and Bangladesh, from where they might find their way into Western markets. Campaigns against forced labour and slavery had led to negotiations with Indian garment and textile manufactures as well as the foreign companies they supplied. Though there have been promises of reform and many high-sounding declarations of intent since 2010 to reform the sector from all these stakeholders, activists working against forced labour conclude that not much has changed.

The ASI report says: “Anti-slavery’s experience of trying to engage with businesses indicates that many seem to be dealing with the question of slavery in their public chains as a public relations issue to be managed rather than as a human rights issue to be addressed.”

Tirupur Export Association president A Sakthivel was unavailable for comment. Executive secretary S Sakthivel said he was not authorised to discuss questions related to allegations of forced overtime and fair wage practices.

A P Appukutty, president of the Tamil Nadu Spinning Mills Association was also unavailable for comment despite repeated attempts to contact him for his reaction on the Sumangali and other forced labour schemes.

Muthulakshmi joined a spinning mill in Madurai in 2006, at 15 and worked there till 2009, as an auto-cone checker and stayed in a hostel with more than 1,600 girls. Auto-cones are automated machines that wind the spun cotton into yarn and are the last stage of the production process in a spinning mill, before the yarn is exported or sold to fabric makers and garment factories.

The machines stood serially in gigantic rows, which Muthulakshmi and the other girls had to supervise. One girl had to oversee eight to ten of these machines, each winding thread at blinding speed into eight cones fitted into a circular base. The

female workers had the job of making sure the threads didn’t slip as they entered the cones. It was a job that needed a lot of concentration, something that was not aided by the frequent night shifts that went on till 11 p.m. and lack of sleep that left Muthulakshmi with a searing headache.

“I used to feel that my eyes would burst in my sockets. I threw up many times during the night shifts. But if I told my supervisor he would tell me that that is how night shifts are. Around the time I joined, I had to work a whole month while sick,” she says.

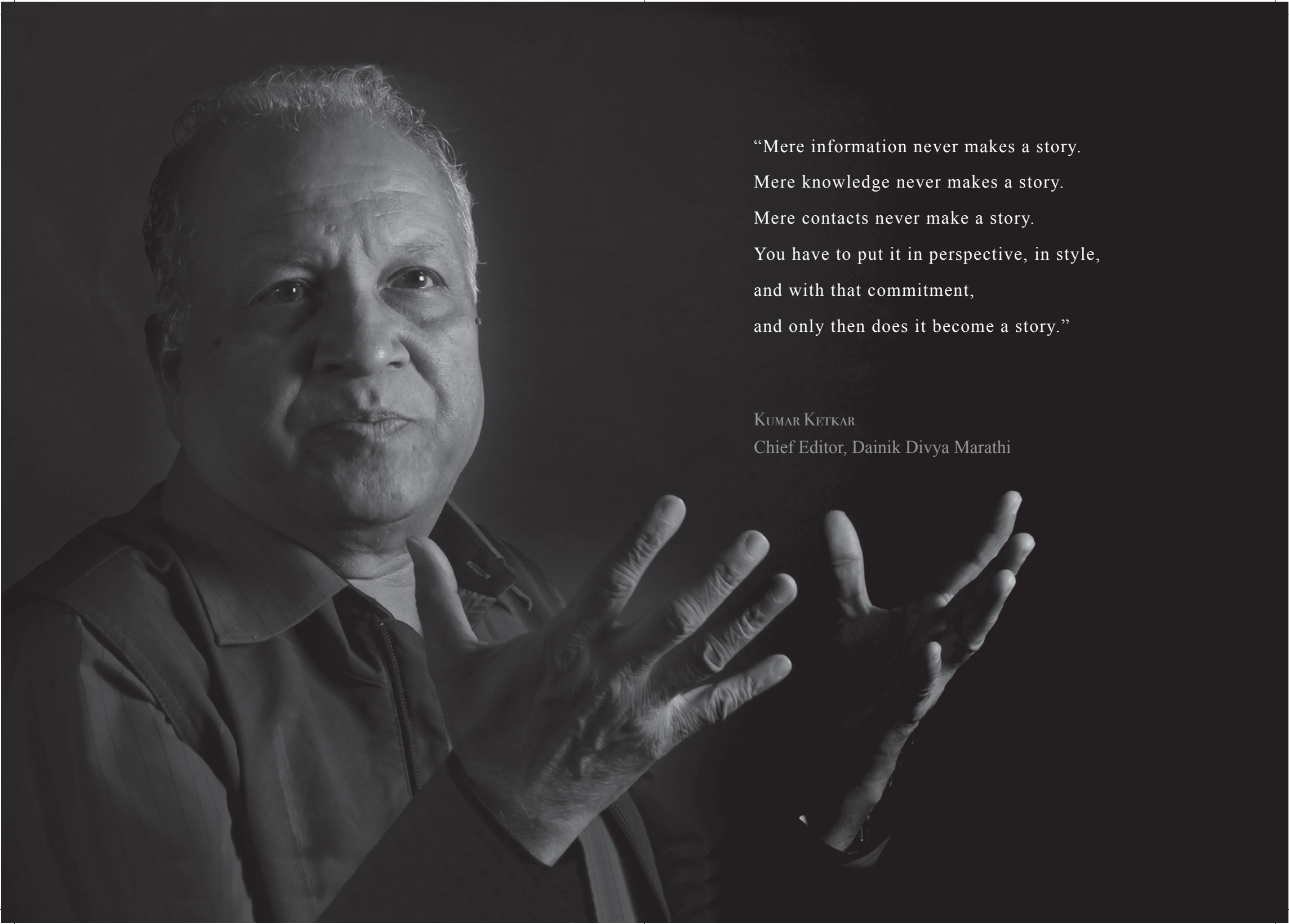
One day a girl screamed when the thread sliced off her finger. Muthulakshmi didn’t hear it as the steady drone of the machines drowned out all human sounds. But she saw the blood splatter across the factory floor and remembers feeling faint. She says sleep-deprivation must have made the girl groggy as she was handling the thread.

In her three years at the factory, two more girls lost fingers in similar accidents. No compensation was paid to any of them. And what is more, they had to continue working till they completed their contracts.

The accidents became a drag on Muthulakshmi’s mind, but she didn’t want to go home without the money. With an alcoholic father who was unwell, and a brother who was studying a B.Ed, her wages kept the family afloat. She earned only between ₹35 and ₹55 a day, but there was the promise of ₹70,000 at the end and that kept her going.

It is that promise that keeps thousands of girls going. It makes them live inside factory walls, in hostels that are like jails. It makes them swallow down their lunch so that they can get back to the production line before the supervisor shouts. It makes them work day and night like slaves. It causes ulcers and TB. It cuts fingers. It ruins bodies. And when companies renege on that promise, as they often do, it kills dreams and snuffs out hope.





“Mere information never makes a story.
Mere knowledge never makes a story.
Mere contacts never make a story.
You have to put it in perspective, in style,
and with that commitment,
and only then does it become a story.”

KUMAR KETKAR
Chief Editor, Dainik Divya Marathi

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IN INDIAN JOURNALISM

· 2014 ·

**BEST LIFESTYLE &
ENTERTAINMENT STORY**

BEST LIFESTYLE & ENTERTAINMENT STORY

By

AKSHAY MANWANI

Winner

**THE SHOW OF SHOWS:
PRODUCING INDIA'S GREATEST
TELEVISION SHOW EVER**

The Caravan

1st Apr '13

Akshay Manwani



The Show of Shows

Akshay Manwani is a freelance writer based out of Mumbai. His writings have appeared for a number of publications including The Caravan, Business Standard, Mumbai Mirror and The Big Indian Picture. His first book, Sahir Ludhianvi: The People's Poet was published by HarperCollins India in December 2013.

The Show of Shows: Producing India's greatest television show ever



(Left to right) Girija Shanker (Dhritarashtra), Firoz Khan (Arjuna), Renuka Israni (Gandhari), Virendra Razdan (Vidura), Nazneen (Kunti), Praveen Kumar (Bhima), Gajendra Chauhan (Yudhishtira), Nitish Bharadwaj (Krishna), Sameer Chitre (Nakula) and Sanjeev Chitre (Sahadeva).

In December last year, between takes for the Hindi romance serial *Pyaar Ka Dard Hai Meetha Meetha Pyaara Pyaara*, Mukesh Khanna, dressed in a brown three-piece suit and a polka-dot tie, walked to his dressing room on the set of Rajshree Productions in Mumbai's Film City. On the way, Khanna, who plays the leading man's grandfather, ran into Kanwarjit Paintal, who plays a friendly in-law. The two men, both slightly bulging at the waist, exchanged pleasantries and discussed the day's shooting schedule.

It was, in many ways, a banal moment: two spent actors casually chatting before their next takes for a regular television show. But there was something striking about it, too. Twenty-five

years ago, at the very same location, these two actors were locked in battle as two of the most crucial characters in the most significant programme ever shown on Indian television: BR Chopra's *Mahabharat*. (Paintal's androgynous Shikhandi was used by the Pandavas to take down Khanna's indomitable Bhishma in the battle of Kurukshetra.)

Every Sunday, beginning in September 1988, streets in cities across the country would grow deserted at the approach of 9 am. In rural areas, people cycled tens of kilometres to the nearest house with a television set, neighbours crowding in together to watch the epic show, which depicted the mythological conflict between the Pandavas and Kauravas for the throne of Hastinapur. Across the nation, *Mahabharat* held the collective attention of 200 million Indians for 45 minutes each week for nearly two years.

Part of the show's appeal was due to its timing: *Doordarshan* began broadcasting it soon after it aired the final episode of Ramanand Sagar's *Ramayan*, a stupendously popular television adaptation of Valmiki's epic, which had stoked public demand for mythological entertainment. But *Mahabharat* was something more.

For many Indians, this was their first sustained exposure to an epic whose tales they had grown up hearing. Compared to the *Ramayana*, which is celebrated annually in the form of *Ramlilas*, the *Mahabharata* had had less reach in the public imagination. A story of endless family feuds, many Indians were superstitiously averse to keeping the book in their houses—which meant that, for most of them, their only link to the epic was through the 700-verse published extract of the *Bhagavad Gita*, the theological and spiritual discourse that Krishna passes on to the Pandava warrior Arjuna before the battle of Kurukshetra.

A lot has changed in the world of Indian television entertainment since *Mahabharat*'s final episode was telecast on

Doordarshan, India's national—and, at the time, only—channel, on Sunday, 8 July 1990. Two years later, cable entered India; by 2012, there were 848 channels. The ₹370 billion Indian television market is now the third largest in the world. But, a quarter of a century after its first appearance on television, and despite all the advancements in craft and technology the industry has seen, what remains unparalleled is the scale at which *Mahabharat* was made, and the impact it had on its audience. Watched by almost a quarter of the Indian population, which was on the cusp of the wide-ranging political and economic changes that the early 1990s would bring, this monumental television adaptation of a relatively unpopular epic became one of the most important cultural signposts of independent India.

Contrary to popular perception, *Mahabharat* wasn't commissioned by Doordarshan to capitalise on *Ramayana* after the latter was rapturously received—according to Sevanti Ninan's *Through the Magic Window: Television and Change in India*, *Ramayana* drew close to 100 percent viewership in parts of the country. The genesis of *Mahabharat* was less calculated. "Early in 1985 or thereabouts Rajiv Gandhi had written or spoken to the minister for information and broadcasting, VN Gadgil, about the kind of serials being shown on Doordarshan," wrote Bhaskar Ghose, who was the Director General of Doordarshan from mid 1986 to the end of 1988, in his memoirs *Doordarshan Days*. "The minister said that the PM had given him and the secretary SS Gill to understand that Doordarshan should broadcast serials that depicted the values enshrined in our ancient texts and philosophy, the kind of values that were contained in the *Mahabharata* and the *Ramayana*. The secretary took this to mean that the prime minister wanted both the epics telecast on Doordarshan, and

immediately shot off letters to two prominent film producers in Bombay, Ramanand Sagar and Baldev Raj Chopra."

In their eagerness to carry out what they took to be Rajiv Gandhi's command, the authorities at Doordarshan bypassed standard procedures such as shortlisting producers and scrutinising their work. "Both Ramanand Sagar and BR Chopra saw the immense possibilities of making a fortune from these serials," Ghose wrote in his memoir. "Both lost no time in getting hold of sponsors, who also recognised that these epics would draw large audiences. Within a short time, by early 1986, each had readied six or seven episodes of the respective epics."

To prevent the mess that a simultaneous telecast might have created, especially the splitting of advertising revenues, Ghose asked BR Chopra, who was producing the series with his son Ravi, to defer the airing of *Mahabharat*. Thus the Chopras, who shot the first few episodes of *Mahabharat* for Doordarshan's approval in early- to mid-1986, postponed the shooting of the remainder of the 94-episode drama to early 1988, the same year that the series finally went on air.

Chopra had just hit another high note in what had been a glittering cinematic career, with a series of successful movies that included *Insaaf ka Tarazu* (1980), *Nikaah* (1982) and *Tawaif* (1985). His entry into television, like many other film producers of his time, such as Ramesh Sippy (with the Partition-era drama *Buniyaad*) and Prem Kishen (with the short-story serial *Katha Sagar*), followed the implementation of a new policy at Doordarshan to allow private players to produce content for prime-time broadcasting, a move that ushered in the first rush of sponsored programming.

A film journalist before he made his first movie, *Afsana*, in 1951, BR's interest in cinema sprung from a deep desire to bring

about social change through art. As Rachel Dwyer wrote in her biography of his younger brother Yash Chopra, BR was critical of “film producers, who, in his opinion, were wasting their time with comedies and mythologicals, dancing and songs, thus avoiding dealing with any serious social issues.” When B.R. Films was launched in 1955, the filmmaker channelled his discontent into movies that addressed a range of diverse subjects: Nehruvian socialism, the emancipation of women on the margins of society, communal harmony, Partition and corruption. *Aaj Ki Awaaz* (1984), which was about a professor combating the world of crime, even began with the message, “THIS PICTURE IS ADDRESSED TO THE CONSCIENCE OF THE NATION...”

The *Mahabharata*, a story full of moral conflicts, was an epic that BR had long wanted to adapt for screen. “It is famously said of the *Mahabharata* that Vyasa imbued all concepts of feeling, emotion, sentiment, relationship[s]—whatever is there in the world—in it,” BR said in *Mahabharat ki Mahabharat*, a behind-the-scenes production commissioned by the Chopras. “*Aur kaha jaata hai, jo is mein nahin hain, woh kahin nahin hain*” (And it is said that what is not there in it, does not exist anywhere else). It was a story too big to be compressed into the three hours of a feature film. Television offered BR the freedom to explore its scale.

Between their first couple of telefilms—*Teri Meri Kahani* (1982) and *Dharti Aakash* (1983)—and *Mahabharat*, BR and Ravi had directed and produced, in 1986, their period television series *Bahadur Shah Zafar*. When work on *Mahabharat* began, several members of the cast and crew from the series were carried over to the new production. Most prominent among them was Gufi Paintal, whose contribution to the magnum opus ranged from production design to casting to associate direction and, most memorably, portraying Shakuni, the dice-toting plotting uncle of the epic’s

antagonist, Duryodhana.

“Ravi was very interested in expanding the business. With all his aspirations, he ventured into television, which was very big by then,” Gufi—now bespectacled and almost 70—told me, when I met him on the set of Zee TV’s *Mrs. Kaushik Ki Paanch Bahuein*, a family-friendly drama in which he played the character of a genial ghost.

The first challenge before the producers was to commission the script for the extraordinarily intricate and multidimensional story of gods, princes, miracles and destinies. In order to capture on television the nuances of emotion, ethical dilemmas and relationships the *Mahabharata* contained, the Chopras knew they needed the very best writers. The team they put together was a formidable one: Rahi Masoom Raza, the well-known author of novels such as *Topi Shukla*, signed up to write the screenplay and dialogue; Satish Bhatnagar, an eminent writer of screenplays, came on board to do research and work on the scenarios; and Pandit Narendra Sharma, who had translated several of Mahatma Gandhi’s speeches into Hindi, and conceived All India Radio’s light-entertainment station, Vividh Bharati, agreed to advise on the concept and write the occasional lyric.

Sharma was an expert on the *Mahabharata*. “We used to refer to him as team ke Sanjay,” said Gufi, likening Sharma to the blind Kaurava king Dhritarashtra’s charioteer, who relays to the king—through miraculous vision granted to him by Ved Vyasa, the epic’s author—the events at Kurukshetra. “Sharma would narrate the subject as if he was watching it. It was so clear in his mind. What comes where, every character—what is his attire, what is his look, what is his personality,” Gufi added. Sharma wrote the show’s title song, ‘*Atha Shree Mahabharat Katha*’, and a number of *dohas* (couplets) that appeared either at the end of every episode, as a kind of summary, or in the course of a particular episode, to stress

specific points.

According to an anecdote Sharma's daughter, Lavanya Shah, narrated to me over email, BR Chopra and Rahi Masoom Raza once asked Panditji, as Sharma was known, how he knew that Khanna's character, Bhishma, always wore white. In his reply, Sharma read out a passage from the epic in which Bhishma gently reproaches one of the young protagonists for jumping into his lap with the words: "*Vats, dekho tumhaarey dhool-bhare vastron se mere shwet vastra, dhooli dhoosrit ho jaatein hain*" (Child, see how your dusty clothes sully my white robes).

Calling, no doubt, on his reserves of experience as well as the distant days when, as a graduate student at Government College, Lahore, he had studied English literature, BR supervised the scripting and screenplay sessions almost daily. In those sessions, in addition to the authoritative critical edition of the epic from Pune's Bhandarkar Oriental Research Institute (BORI), the team referred to a number of additional sources across languages, including poet and translator Purshottam Lal's version in English—perhaps the most complete rendering of the epic in any language, and an attempt to stay faithful to the oral tradition in which the work was originally created.

As BR and his team of writers laboured on the screenplay, casting for the series got underway. Auditions were held at Filmalaya studios in the Mumbai suburb of Andheri West. "We gave ads in all the papers all over India. We had about ten to fifteen thousand applicants. We came down to about 1,500 individuals whom we screen-tested," Ravi Chopra said in *Mahabharat ki Mahabharat*. (The making-of video is an invaluable resource, especially now that BR has died and a breathing ailment has constrained Ravi's ability to speak.) The briefs for casting, he explained, were inspired from existing depictions of these characters in popular culture: "You've seen them in paintings, you've seen them in comic books," Ravi

said. So, in *Mahabharat ki Mahabharat*, we see a very young, slender Kitu Gidwani auditioning for the role of goddess Ganga, Bhishma's supposed mother—and losing the part to Kiran Juneja, a buxom woman who better conformed to popular conceptions of female deities.

"We didn't really give as much importance to the acting part of it," Ravi said, a statement confirmed by the previous track records of most of the final cast. Mukesh Khanna, Firoz Khan (who played the hero Arjuna), Nitish Bharadwaj (who played Krishna), and Surendra Pal (who played the cousins' tutor, Dronacharya) had all been in small roles and forgettable films. Pankaj Dheer, who played the Pandavas' estranged half-brother, Karna, had played the lead role in a couple of average movies—*Bekhabar* (1983) and *Mera Suhag* (1987)—but had not managed to leave much of an impression on audiences. Even those who had been working in television were not exactly stars. Gajendra Chauhan, cast as the eldest Pandava, Yudhishtira, had appeared in the hit series *Rajni*, in *Darpan* and even in BR Films' *Bahadur Shah Zafar*, but was still waiting for a real breakthrough. Girija Shanker, the blind king Dhritarashtra, had played Raliya Ram in the memorable *Buniyaad*—but had been overshadowed by stronger actors in that cast, like Alok Nath and Anita Kanwar.

Despite the emphasis on looks, matching actors to roles was a painstaking process, and many casting decisions were eventually reversed. The entire process, Gufi said in *Mahabharat ki Mahabharat*, took a full eight months from late 1986 to early 1987.

"Kaunsa role doge?" (Which role can you offer?), Khanna recalled asking Gufi when I met him. He hoped to play either Karna or Arjuna, the two central warriors. "Bhishma was nowhere in my mind," he added. After his auditions, Gufi told him: "[BR] Chopra saab thinks you will be a very good Duryodhana." Khanna said he

was nonplussed by the suggestion to play the epic's main antagonist. He protested, saying, "*Gufi, mere andar se villain nahin nikalta*" (I just cannot play a villain), but the roles of Karna and Arjuna were assigned to Pankaj Dheer and Firoz Khan, respectively, while his own fate remained undecided.

The next time Gufi contacted him, it was with the offer to play the heroes' teacher and mentor, Dronacharya. "I just took one second and said, 'Ok, *karta hoon* (I will do it).'" His family members were aghast at his decision. "My brother was sitting next to me. He said, '*Tu pagal ho gaya hai? Tune Duryodhana mana kar diya* (Have you gone mad? You turned Duryodhana down), who was one man against five people, *tum ek guru ka role kar rahe ho?*' (You'll play a guru instead?)" But Khanna didn't care. "I just wanted to be a part of Mahabharat," he said. "I attended the muhurat as Dronacharya where Raj Babbar"—the film star who had been roped in to play the king, named Bharat, from whom all the main characters descended—"asked me '*Mukesh, aap kya kar rahein hain* (what role are you playing)?" to which I replied, '*Abhi tak to Dronacharya* (Dronacharya, as of now).'" There couldn't have been a more appropriate answer.

The man initially chosen for Bhishma was Vijendra Ghatge, an established character actor in Hindi cinema, who had also earned recognition as Vrushbhaan in *Buniyaad*. But Ghatge turned the role down on learning that it would require him to play an elderly figure for a large portion of on-screen time. According to Gufi, however, *Buniyaad's* schedule was clashing with *Mahabharat's*, and so the Chopras thought it wise to replace Ghatge. "Stature-wise, *jo usko costume aaye, woh isko fit aa gaye*" (The costumes that were tailor-made for Vijendra, fit Mukesh perfectly), said Gufi, who asked Khanna to step into Ghatge's shoes.

"And that is why I always say, this was not done by Gufi Paintal

or Papaji [BR Chopra]," Khanna told me. "It was done by destiny."

Puneet Issar's casting as Duryodhana was similarly unforeseen. Few in the film world were unaware of Issar's reputation, and the Chopras were no exception. "They knew me because of *Coolie*," explained Issar, who had inadvertently injured Amitabh Bachchan, then at the dizzying heights of his stardom, on the set of the 1983 Manmohan Desai film. Bachchan lay for weeks on the brink of death, and the accident earned Issar both the fury of Bachchan's fans and considerable notoriety within the business.

Issar had done quite a few films by the time he auditioned for *Mahabharat*, including the Ramsay brothers' cult production *Purana Mandir* (1984), but the *Coolie* episode caused him to be typecast as a "fighter". Thus, while the Chopras thought his muscled, six-foot-three frame made him the right candidate for Bhima—the second of the five Pandava brothers, known for his strength and size—Issar wasn't interested. "I was clear that if I played Bhima, I would continue to be branded as a he-man," said Issar, who shaved his head in 1993 to play the main villain in *Ashaant* (opposite a young Akshay Kumar) and has kept the look ever since. Instead, Issar, who trained at Mumbai's Roshan Taneja acting institute, was keen on the role of Duryodhana. "Everything revolves around him," Issar said. "And my own criterion was that I wanted to prove myself as an actor."

The Chopras were not convinced. Issar recalled Rahi Masoom Raza, who was present, even rebuking him for his suggestion: "You must consider it your good fortune that you are being offered a hero's role. Everyone is coming here to be a hero. Beggars can't be choosers." The problem, as Issar saw it, was, "*Yeh paroksh mein thaa. Pratyaksh mein thaa* (My qualities were hidden. What they could see were)—height, eighth-degree black belt, amazing body." He remembered BR telling him, "*Bete, is mein aap ko Hindi bolni*

padegi aur dialogues bahut hongey” (Son, you will have to speak in Hindi and memorise a lot of dialogue).

Issar couldn’t have asked for a better challenge. Having performed *Jayadrath Vadh*—a lengthy poetic rendition of the Mahabharata written by the famous Hindi poet Maithili Sharan Gupt—as a student at Mumbai’s Mithibai College, Issar responded by reciting lines from it to the Chopras. “*Mujhe woh kanthast tabhi yaad tha* (I remembered the poem by heart even then). I spoke continuously for 15 to 20 minutes in *klishit* (chaste) Hindi,” said Issar. On finishing, he heard BR say: “That’s my Duryodhana.”

Issar’s selection created a curious problem for the Chopras. Sagar Salunke, who was also being considered for the role of Bhima, appeared an unequal adversary to Issar’s formidably built Duryodhana. “Chopra saab [BR] would tell me jokingly, ‘Puneet, if we don’t get a bigger Bhima than you, *to tere ko Duryodhana nahin milega* (you will not play Duryodhana)’”.

In their hunt for a bigger man than Issar, the Chopras eventually heard of Praveen Kumar, a two-time Asian Games gold medallist in the discus throw (1966 and 1970). Issar promptly pushed for his selection. “Being a sports fanatic, Praveen Kumar was my hero. Six-foot eight-inches tall, awesome personality,” Issar said of the man who would eventually kill him on screen. Kumar, done with his career in sports, had already tried his hand at Hindi cinema as the villain’s henchman in films such as *Loha* (1987) and *Shahenshah* (1988). His selection as Bhima was settled the moment he entered the room. “*Us mein tantana ho gayi*” (There was a sense of commotion), he told me over the phone from Delhi. With Kumar cast as Bhima, Sagar Salunke was relegated to the role of Balarama, Krishna’s elder brother.

Meanwhile, four people were contesting for the central part of

Krishna. *Mahabharat ki Mahabharat* shows three of them—an awkward-looking Gajendra Chauhan, a soft-spoken Rishabh Shukla and a hairy-chested, moustachioed Nitish Bharadwaj—auditioning for the role. Rakesh Pandey, a small-time actor in several Hindi films of the 1970s and 1980s, who had played Krishna in a few Bhojpuri films, was also considered for the part. “I was cast as Vidura [the soft-spoken royal advisor] initially,” Bharadwaj recounted when I met him on the set of *Jalosh Suvarnayugacha*, a dance competition on ETV Marathi, where he is a judge, though he insists that he is only “a guide” to the contestants. As soon as our conversation began, I noticed that he spoke with the same clear diction that was a hallmark of his performance in the series.

Bharadwaj was later called for another screen test for *Mahabharat* because Ravi Chopra, who had directed him in a few ad films, thought him too young to play the role of Vidura, the elderly uncle to the warring royal cousins. “That screen test, specifically for Krishna, was viewed by the entire team, which consisted of BR uncle, Raviji, Rahi Masoom Raza and Pandit Narendra Sharma. That’s how I was selected.” What worked for Bharadwaj, a Maharashtrian Brahmin, as Gufi said, was his command over Hindi.

“When the first list [following the auditions] came out, I was doing Krishna’s role,” Gajendra Chauhan told me. Once it was decided that *Mahabharat* would be broadcast only after the conclusion of *Ramayan*, and the shooting schedule pushed ahead, Chauhan used the time to act in a series of Malayalam films. “I shot in Cochin, Trivandrum, Quilon, Chalakudi,” Chauhan said. Although his career flourished, the southern state’s famed food did not exactly suit him. “I became fat,” he explained. “When I came back here and met Ravi Chopra, he said, ‘My god, what

have you done to my Krishna? You have to cut down.” But try as he did, Chauhan just could not get back in shape. It was at this point, he said, that the Chopras replaced him. “My weight issues and his smile, which worked to his advantage, led to Raviji voting in Nitish’s favour.”

Subsequently, Chauhan was asked to audition for the part of *Yudhishtira*. Having lost out on Krishna, Chauhan was apprehensive about playing the eldest of the Pandavas, of whose role in the *Mahabharata* he knew little. (Pankaj Dheer and Girija Shanker were also intimidated by their lack of familiarity with their respective characters, Karna and Dhritarashtra.) “As a child, in school and college, we had heard of the Pandavas and the Kauravas and there was some fight—but we didn’t know what, exactly, the fight was about,” Chauhan said. “Krishna’s role, the Lord’s role, had to be important, but the rest we didn’t know.” Ravi, nonetheless, prevailed on him. “They made me dress up in Yudhishtira’s attire, auditioned me,” Chauhan recalled. “Everybody liked it and I was taken to Chopraji [BR], who was immensely impressed. I was finalised on the same day.”

Roopa Ganguly wasn’t the Chopras’ original choice for Draupadi’s character, either. That was Juhi Chawla, who, having played Begum Nur Jahan in *Bahadur Shah Zafar*, had initially been signed on. But she backed out after landing the lead role in prominent filmmaker Nasir Hussain’s *Qayamat Se Qayamat Tak*, which went on to become 1988’s blockbuster, and made her an enduring star. It was only after Chawla backed out that Narendra Sharma recommended Roopa Ganguly, whom he had seen in a serial called *Ganadevta*. Directed by P Kumar Vasudev, who had also directed the popular soap *Hum Log*, *Ganadevta* was a story based in a village, with Ganguly playing the role of a prostitute.

Gufi Paintal had no idea who was going to play Shakuni. After

Gufi had auditioned several people for the role, the Chopras turned to the man who had already, for them, established his credentials as a villain—in *Bahadur Shah Zafar*, Gufi had been cast as the wicked Briton, Metcalfe. Gufi had been about to undergo an operation to fix a hip problem that forced him to move around with a slight limp; but he decided against it, in order to tap into the popular notion that evil characters generally suffered from some sort of infirmity. “I asked my bosses if I could make Shakuni lame,” said Gufi. “They all agreed, saying this is what will give Shakuni’s character shade.”

Even after all the actors had been chosen, one part remained unfilled: *Samay* (Time), who would bind together each episode of the show with an opening narration. “One of the first things that we discussed was that it is such a vast subject that we require a narrator,” BR revealed in *Mahabharat Ki Mahabharat*. “One day Dr. Rahi came to me and told me, ‘I want you to hear something which I have written.’ The moment he spoke his first sentence, ‘*Main Samay hoon* (I am Time),’ we were floored,” BR said.

Even in his earlier work, BR Chopra had been fond of using voice-overs to establish themes. *Nikaah*, which dealt with the laws of divorce in Muslim society, began with the image of a nude woman taking up the centre of the screen, before a female voice began an extended commentary on the many roles of a woman. The opening words were: “*Main aurat hoon*” (I am a woman).

But where *Nikaah*’s female narrator merely explained the background to the film, the narrator in *Bahadur Shah Zafar*, a personification of Delhi’s Red Fort, was closer in its scope to *Samay*. Having introduced itself in a familiar manner—“*Main Lal Qila hoon* (I am the Red Fort),”—the monument explained its *raison d’être*: “*Main lal pathharon par likhi hui Hindustaan ki kaumi taareeq ka ek baab hoon, jo kaheen arq-e-gulaab se likha*

gaya hai aur kahin khoon-i-shaheeda se” (I am a chapter in Indian history, where the engravings on my red stone have at times been made with the extract of rose petals and at others in the blood of martyrs).

In the first episode of *Mahabharat*, Samay presented itself as: “*Maine is katha ko itihaas ki tarah guzarte dekha hai*” (I have seen this story unfold like the passage of history itself).

In the 1965 film *Waqt*, BR Films’ first colour production, directed by Yash Chopra, the Chopras had established the notion of the primacy of time. This was evident in the film’s title song:

Waqt se din aur raat, waqt se kal aur aaj,

Waqt ki har shai ghulam, waqt ka har shai pe raj

(Night and day are a function of time as are tomorrow and today

Every entity is a slave of time, time lords over every being)

“Someone said, Dilip Kumar has never done any narration, why don’t you take him, he will do it. Someone suggested we take NT Rama Rao because he has a saintly image,” BR said, recalling recommendations for the voice of *Samay*. The producers zeroed in on Harish Bhimani, an established voiceover artist and writer. “*Oye, Harish, aa ja tu phir se*” (Harish, you have to come again), Bhimani recalled, impersonating the manner in which Gufi called him each time over the phone in his Punjabi accent for the many trial sessions. By this time, Bhimani had lent his voice to some famous advertisements, including his turn as the devil in an Onida television ad that ran, “Neighbour’s envy. Owner’s pride.” He had also written the screenplay for the popular television drama *Khandaan*. According to Bhimani, it took him a long time to get *Samay*’s tone right, because the Chopra camp hadn’t fully disclosed the details of the project. “I thought it was a story for kids,” Bhimani told me. The only brief given to him, he recalled, was, “We don’t want God, we don’t want Akashvaani, we don’t want Harish Bhimani.”

At the end of his wits in the third meeting, but willing to give it one final shot, Bhimani adopted a certain grandeur in his tone, dramatically slowing the pace at which he read the opening lines. “I was thinking to myself, this is ridiculous,” said Bhimani of that last attempt. To his surprise, though, a *paan-chewing* Rahi Masoom Raza told him when he finished, “*Harish beta, suno, is ko pakad ke rakho. Isko apne zehen mein baandh ke rakho*” (Harish, remember this tone. Hold this thought). Later, when Bhimani attempted to speed up the pace during the actual recording, reasoning that the tone was too laborious to catch viewers’ attention, Rahi’s curt response was: “*Sara mulk sunega. Aap wohi raftaar rakhiye*” (The whole nation will listen. You maintain that pace).

“I was wrong. It worked,” Bhimani admitted to me. That final tone, he believes, was so well received because it was “completely my original timbre. It was a rhythm that had not been heard before—and I romanced every word.”

With 150 main actors, over 100 people in the production crew, over 2,000 pages of script and two straight years of shooting, the scale on which the Chopras executed the project was never in doubt. “The expenditure incurred on producing this entire show is approximately ₹9 crore,” the production controller, Kishore Malhotra, said in *Mahabharat Ki Mahabharat*, which puts the average cost per episode at just under ₹10 lakh, an imposing figure for that time.

Much of *Mahabharat* was shot at Mumbai’s Film City in Goregaon East. A few outdoor segments, such as those portraying Krishna’s childhood, were shot at Chena Creek in Navi Mumbai, while the opening episodes of the series, where the personification of the Ganga emerged from her river, were shot at Mahad, which is between Mumbai and Mahabaleshwar. For the final battle of Kurukshetra, the entire unit made its way for a 15-day schedule to

Jaipur, where thousands of people were hired on a daily basis to recreate the battleground.

But big budgets did not necessarily translate into smooth production. “In those days, neither did we have the technology, nor the equipment, nor the know-how, nor the technicians,” said Pankaj Dheer, who, today, lives a few blocks away from Issar, with whom he has maintained a close friendship. “That meant we had to practically do every scene physically. We had to do actual shoots at actual locations.” Segments that would today be produced using special effects—such as the one in which Krishna reveals his *ishwariya roop* (divine form) to Arjuna just before the start of the war, or the crucial scene of Draupadi’s *vastra-haran* (disrobing)—took days to shoot. “Imagine wearing a *mukut* (crown), which weighed about three, three-and-a-half kilos all day long. Today a *mukut* weighs a few grams because it is made of a lighter material, but looks just as good,” remarked Dheer.

That the Chopras managed to make the serial’s vast, vivid scenes credible at all was, to a large extent, due to the ingenuity of art director YL Bagchi, who had recreated the Mughal era in *Bahadur Shah Zafar*. A commercial artist who had trained at the State Lalit Kala Akademi in Varanasi, Bagchi started by creating magnificent sets from scratch at Film City—such as the Lakshagrah set, the house made of lac in which the plotting Kauravas induced the Pandavas to sleep, so they could be burned alive. Bagchi explained that the structure was built with nothing but plywood and plaster, over which he put a coat of wax. “It was a gimmick,” Bagchi said.

Even as episodes were being shot and readied for air, BR, who had envisioned the show as having a social role, kept improvising on the script to address contemporary Indian concerns. His ideological bent was apparent from the very first episode, which began with Bharat, the monarch, grappling with the issue of dynastic succession. As

Saroja Bhate, member of the regulatory council at Pune’s BORI, confirmed, this was not how the critical edition of the Mahabharata, on which the show was based, commenced.

Samay, too, hinted at this departure a few scenes into the episode. When Bharat was about to announce his successor, Harish Bhimani’s voiceover boomed, “*Yeh hai Mahabharata ki amar katha ka pehla, anlikha panna*” (This is the first, unwritten chapter of the eternal story of the *Mahabharata*). Later in the episode, having found none of his nine sons worthy of ruling the kingdom after him, Bharat proclaimed *Bhumanyu*, the sage Bharadwaj’s son, as his successor. When confronted by his mother, *Shakuntala*, about the decision, Bharat responded: “I’m not only a father, but a king as well... Every citizen in my kingdom is part of my family. If I were to nominate one of my sons as heir to the throne, then I would be guilty of being unjust to both my kingdom and my subjects.”

“Since this episode was telecast at a time when Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi, who had succeeded his mother, was being criticised for his incompetence and corruption, viewers were able to recognise its relevance to contemporary politics,” wrote media anthropologist Purnima Mankekar in her book *Screening Culture, Viewing Politics*. BR brought up the inheritance debate again when the old, blind king Dhritarashtra—Bharat’s descendant and the Kauravas’ father—was haunted by the ghosts of his ancestors. Bharat, long dead, confronted him with the injustice he had meted out to the Pandavas, calling him a king who, “*Apne putra-moh mein padkar, desh-prem, rajneeti ki maryada ko bhang kiya hai*” (In the love for his son, has violated the norms of patriotism and politics).

Over the course of its two-year run, the series made a number of other socio-political assertions. After the battle of Kurukshetra, when the eldest Pandava Yudhishtira is crowned king, he envisions good and prosperous times for the people of Hastinapura, but he also

holds that such a utopian state is only possible when people are committed to the service of the country. In the words of Devdutt Pattanaik, the prominent author and mythologist, this was “a speech very similar to John F Kennedy’s, ‘Ask not what your country can do for you; ask what you can do for your country.’” In the final episode, the family patriarch Bhishma—who has spent much of the war on a bed of arrows—stresses to the Pandavas the pre-eminence of defending the nation state, at any cost, against division. “*Yadi koi paristhiti desh ke vibhaajan ki maang kar rahi ho, toh Kurukshetra mein aa jao, kintu desh ka vibhaajan kabhi na hone do*” (If any circumstance threatens the unity of the nation, be prepared to battle, but do not allow the nation to split), he warned, at a time when Sikh separatism roiled Punjab and similar movements were brewing in Kashmir and the North East.

The show’s social messages came under fire from many sides. Several critics excoriated BR for the argument he seemed to advance about the connection between womanhood and nationhood. Though the dying Bhishma told the Pandavas that the development of any society could only be gauged from the manner in which its women were treated, a woman’s honour was ultimately shown to be secondary to the nation’s interest. “*Tum apne apmaan ko baar-baar beech mein mat lao*” (Don’t let your humiliation get in the way every time), Arjuna admonished Draupadi on the eve of his final battle against Karna. Draupadi responded by asking Arjuna whether her disgrace counted for nothing—“*To kya mere apmaan ka koi arth nahin, dhanurdhar?*” But he held firm to his view: “*Hai, priya Draupadi, hai. Kintu utna nahin jitna tum samajh rahi ho. Tum Draupadi ho priye, Hastinapura nahin*” (Yes it does, Draupadi. But not as much as you think. You are Draupadi, my dear, not Hastinapur).

“Chopra’s interpretation echoes themes found in fascist discourses of nationalism,” the critic Mankekar commented. “Not

only is the nation conflated with the state, but it is patently clear that the ‘personal problems’ of Indian women, iconicised by Draupadi, cannot be permitted to overshadow the ‘national problem.’”

Other commentators worried that the show flattened some of the deep ethical issues, and the suffering, of the original narrative: “It portrayed Pandavas as good and Kauravas as bad and did not dwell on their respective moral dilemmas or what made them this way,” Pattanaik said. “It ended with the Pandavas winning. No suffering despite losing all their children.” Then there was the problem of cultural homogenisation. The academic Ananda Mitra criticised the series for being a predominantly North Indian interpretation of the epic—as is obvious in the costumes, props and backdrops, as well as in the language and music. The writers and producers were all North Indian, and their choices ignored other regional versions of the story. Still, as Mitra points out in his book *Television and Popular Culture in India: A study of the Mahabharat*, the narrative boundaries of the serial, clearly expressed in the song that played at the end of every episode—“*Bharat ki hai kahaani, sadiyon se bhi puraani ... hai nit nayee puraani, Bharat ki yeh kahaani*” (This story of Bharat, is an ancient one... It is a tale that is both old and new, this is the story of Bharat)—presented the show as the story of the entire Indian nation.

For the majority of the Indian television audience, however, the show was utterly riveting. The figures more than confirmed the craze. “Doordarshan, it is believed, netted ₹65 crore from it as advertising revenue, with advertising rates for this one programme being raised three times during its telecast, from ₹65,000 for ten seconds in October 1988 to ₹1 lakh for ten seconds in May 1989. In comparison, the rate for Ramayan never exceeded ₹70,000,” wrote Ninan in *Through The Magic Window*.

With a family feud at its core, *Mahabharat* was an evolution over

the *Ramayan* in terms of plot. It may have been profoundly religious in parts—particularly the episodes during which Krishna rendered the Bhagavad Gita to Arjuna—but in tracking the declining fortunes of the Bharat-vansh family over several generations, its scope transcended that of mythology.

“*Mahabharat* was able to occupy that median position, where it co-opted from both the religious and the social,” wrote Ananda Mitra. Mankekar made a similar statement based on her work with Hindu, Muslim and Sikh viewers, who felt that the *Ramayan* was comparable to participating in a Hindu religious ritual. “By contrast,” wrote Mankekar, “the *Mahabharat*’s tale of blood and gore, romance and family politics, conspiracy and deception made for a multitextual viewing experience.”

At an individual level, too, *Mahabharat*’s characters appealed to contemporary Indians. Where Rama in *Ramayan* represented the ideal, each of *Mahabharat*’s characters was steeped in ambiguity and was eminently recognisable.

Draupadi, for one, emerged as an empowering figure for the women of India. Although Mankekar’s study showed that women across religions were moved by Draupadi’s *vastra-haran*, since it made them “relive personal humiliations in their families, in their offices, in public spaces,” and “reflect on, and sometimes critique, their own positions in their family, class and community,” Draupadi seemed a more modern woman than *Ramayan*’s female protagonist. Where Sita appeared to bear her suffering silently, Draupadi became an icon for gender emancipation, her indignation at the excesses of patriarchy fully justified to women across the country. “It’s not easy to gather so much of courage, so much mental strength,” said Roopa Ganguly. “That’s why women aspired to be like Draupadi.”

Mahabharat’s impact swiftly moved beyond India’s shores. In Britain, where it was broadcast on BBC2 on Saturday afternoons in

the early 1990s, audiences were stimulated by its discourse on dharma and righteous action. Professor Marie Gillespie, who studied its impact on a Bengali family as part of a larger ethnographic study of the television culture among young Indian immigrants in London’s Southall district, told me over Skype that the broadcast, a part of the BBC’s diversity policy, was “empowering”. As she further explained, “It enabled young diasporic Indians to acquire a deeper knowledge and understanding of and to feel proud of their religious heritage in a context where parents had experienced racism and religious intolerance, and in a nation-state where religion was deemed to be a matter for the private and not the public sphere.”

In India, the combined impact of *Ramayan* and *Mahabharat* was amplified because their telecast coincided with the long political revival of Hindu fundamentalism, which eventually led to the demolition of the Babri Masjid in December 1992. “The telecast of this epic [*Ramayan*] every week for more than one and a half years helped to powerfully re-establish this Hindu epic in the national consciousness. In doing so it fuelled the *Ram Janmabhoomi* movement on a national scale,” Ninan wrote.

“Within popular culture, the recirculation of the *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata* brought Hindu heroes into the domesticity of nearly 90 per cent of Indian homes, reemphasising the Hinduness of India, and consequently, the un-Indianness of non-Hindus,” wrote Mitra. The representation of *Ram*, *Krishna* and the *Pandavas* in the two serials, according to Mitra, established the connection between the production of a heroic national image and Hindu religion.

However, Arvind Rajagopal—in an article titled ‘What If DD Hadn’t Telecast *Ramayan*?’ in *Outlook*, in 2004—suggested a nuanced difference between the two epics. Had *Mahabharat* been broadcast before *Ramayan*, he argued, the ethical rather than the identity component of Hindu culture might have been foregrounded.

This, wrote Rajagopal, was because, “There are few rakshasas [demons] in the *Mahabharat*. Instead there is a Hindu joint family engaged in a ruinous civil war. Its characters are of a royal lineage, or have unparalleled qualities of strength or beauty. But each is ultimately alone. No identity, no religion or dynasty can save them. Each has to find the path of virtue, however difficult it may be. That is the lesson of this epic.” Rajagopal, who teaches in the Department of Media, Culture and Communication at New York University, stuck by his analysis in an email exchange with me in December 2012, writing, “The *Mahabharat* was actually closer to great art—it made people think. *Ramayan* told you what to think and feel, by comparison.”

Notably, all those from *Mahabharat*’s cast who entered politics following the series’ success—Mukesh Khanna, Pankaj Dheer, Gajendra Chauhan and Nitish Bharadwaj—aligned themselves with the BJP. “I am not a fanatic,” said Dheer, who campaigned for the BJP during Vajpayee’s regime. “My reasons were that I was anti-Congress and I was a person who admired Atal Bihari Vajpayee.” Bharadwaj, who joined the party in 1995, and who in 1996 was elected to the Lok Sabha from Jamshedpur, had similar reasons. “I thought the BJP was a party with a difference,” he said. “The way India had gone—rampant corruption, things being in complete disarray—there was this nationalistic feeling in me. I thought I could contribute through the BJP, to change the wrong things in India.” Chauhan, who started campaigning for the BJP in the early 1990s, was just as unequivocal: “No, our characters didn’t shape our political leanings,” he told me. “I campaigned for the BJP and Shiv Sena because I felt these parties were worried about India and Indians.”

In any case, it would have been a struggle to create a political identity independent of their association with *Mahabharat*. “People would visit us on the sets like they were visiting a temple,” Khanna

told me. Chauhan said people came to see him as inseparable from his character; on the day the crucial gambling episode from *Mahabharat* was broadcast, he told me, “I had gone to Juhu in my car in the evening, and was driving back alone. I think it was at a signal at Seven Bungalows when someone from the adjacent car shouted at me and said, ‘*Sab kuch toh juey mein haar gaya. Draupadi ki gaadi lekar ghoom raha hai kya?* (You lost everything in the course of gambling. Are you driving Draupadi’s car?)’”

Today, the actors unanimously acknowledge the push the series gave to their respective careers. “This was the role that put me in the spotlight and put me in the category of a ‘good’ actor,” said Surendra Pal, who, after his stint as Dronacharya, went on to become a prominent face on television, working in serials like *Chanakya* and *Chandrakanta*. “*Mahabharat* gave me the stamp of an actor. I started getting work more easily,” said Puneet Issar, who acted in several major films after, such as *Sanam Bewafa* (1991), *Khalnayika* (1993) and *Ram Jaane* (1995). Pankaj Dheer said, “After *Mahabharat*, I was flooded with films. I did about 175 films after that. All A-grade films, all different roles. I played the bad guy, I played the good guy, I played character roles: *Sadak* (1991), *Saugandh* (1991), *Ikke Pe Ikke* (1994)—*bahut zabardast daur chala* (it was a great phase).”

Although several commentators think that the actors could not shed their *Mahabharat* images, irrespective of how their careers developed, many from the cast rejected this theory. “I am not trapped,” Gufi Paintal said, vehemently. “I have done varied roles.” Chauhan said the same for himself: “It never happened with me. No image can bind an actor. If an actor does any role convincingly, he will find success. I did *Ajnabee* on Doordarshan for four years after that. I was the main villain opposite Danny Denzongpa—it was a superhit serial.” Others handled such criticisms by exaggerating their later success. “I enjoyed very good popularity,” Firoz Khan told

me. “I did about 165 films. Unfortunately for my other colleagues, they didn’t climb the ladder as high, but I shot up.” Even Nitish Bharadwaj, who initially admitted that producers were unwilling to experiment with him, ultimately said, “I was not trapped in the image, but people were trapped in seeing me as Krishna.”

Only Roopa Ganguly and Mukesh Khanna could escape their *Mahabharat* personas to any significant extent. Ganguly, having unsuccessfully tried her hand at Hindi films after the series, returned to Kolkata. “I did two or three Hindi films, but I realised it was not my cup of tea,” she told me. “I was not the kind of person who could dance around trees.” In Kolkata, she found stardom quite independent of the serial that had shaken the rest of the country, and went on to work with eminent Bengali filmmakers such as Rituparno Ghosh, Goutam Ghose and Sekhar Das.

Khanna’s career followed a unique trajectory. “After *Mahabharat*, I did 60 films where I became everyone’s father—from Shah Rukh Khan to Feroz Khan,” he told me, referring to films like *Guddu* (1995) and *Yalgaar* (1992). He was primarily seen as the “*vivash pita-maha*” (helpless patriarch), a clear reflection of his role as Bhishma, which came in the way of him getting lead roles. The frustration spurred him to make *Shaktimaan*, a superhero series in which he played the title character. It first aired on Doordarshan in 1997 and went on to become a phenomenon in its own right. As a superhero, Khanna appealed to a generation very different from the one who saw him as the elder statesman of the Hastinapur raj sabha. “In the BJP’s election campaigns, I would be introduced as, ‘*Badon ke pita-maha, choton ke Shaktimaan* (Bhishma for the elderly, *Shaktimaan* for kids),” he said of this dual image, one he still enjoys.

It is telling, however, that Mukesh Khanna made *Shaktimaan* with his company Bhishma International. As telling is the fact that Surendra Pal named his Bhojpuri production house Dronacharya

Films, that Firoz Khan changed his name to Arjun, and that Gufi Paintal anchored a satirical political show for Sahara Samay called *Paisa Phenk Chunaav Dekh* dressed in the costume of Shakuni.

The cast of *Mahabharat* continues to coexist in the vast expanse of Mumbai’s entertainment industry, barring a few. Nazneen, who played Kunti, the Pandavas’ mother, stopped acting after the show ended; Sameer Chitre, who played Nakul, one of the younger Pandavas, emigrated to the US 17 years ago; and Virendra Razdan, who played Vidura, passed away in 2003, but the rest of them continue to work.

Nitish Bharadwaj has given up politics. “I realised what Indian politicians need from actors is actors who can parrot lines or dialogues from their serials or films,” he told me. He is about to make his directorial debut with a Marathi film. He also awaits the release of a Hindi movie, one in which he plays the lead.

Pankaj Dheer had a similar experience in politics. “In the end, it was futile. All of them [politicians] are dirty eggs in the same basket.” He is doing a number of shows on television, as is Surendra Pal. They can be seen together in the hugely popular *Devon Ke Dev, Mahadev*, a mythological series based on legends about Shiva.

Gajendra Chauhan continues his association with the BJP as the joint convenor of its cultural cell, while remaining active on television, appearing in serials like Doordarshan’s *Nancy Arjun*—once Firoz Khan—is looking to make his comeback after having taken a break from cinema about five years ago. “I was getting stagnated, with the same villainous roles, the same fight and rape sequences,” he told me.

Mukesh Khanna plans to revive *Shaktimaan*. “I have already made a telefilm on *Shaktimaan*. I would even like *Shaktimaan* to be made for 70mm,” he said, before explaining the rationale for his ambitions plan: “Everyone knows *Ra.One* was a disaster. Kids still know that

Shaktimaan is India's first superhero.”

Puneet Issar claims to be writing, directing, acting and producing an Indo-British film: “It’s a crossover film, on the lines of *Bend It Like Beckham*. I haven’t titled it yet.” Gufi Paintal is busy doing character roles in films and television; Girija Shanker runs a production house called Greenlight Films; and Renuka Israni, who played Dhritarashtra’s queen Gandhari, can be seen on Sony’s well-liked television drama *Bade Achhe Lagte Hain*.

Roopa Ganguly is now back in Kolkata, after having spent the past five years in Mumbai, appearing in shows like *Kasturi* for STAR Plus and *Agle Janam Mohe Bitiya Hi Kijo* for Zee TV. “I took those characters to break the image of Draupadi,” she told me. “Both were very weak women. I enjoyed doing those roles.” Ganguly also won a National Award for Best Female Playback Singer for the Bengali film *Abosheshey* (2011), and played Ileana D’Cruz’s mother in the Ranbir Kapoor-starrer *Barfi* last year. “I don’t plan my future,” she told me when I asked her what she was doing next.

Praveen Kumar seems to have vanished from the screen. “I recently did some Bhojpuri films and ads, but will come to Mumbai only if there is some good work,” Kumar, who has retired to Delhi’s Ashok Vihar, told me.

The many who have stuck around in Mumbai, most of them residing in or operating out of offices around the Lokhandwala and Versova areas of Andheri, hardly meet to relive the memories. “I think people are very busy,” said Bharadwaj. “Their lives have gone in diverse directions.” Puneet Issar took a more pragmatic view. “In our line, friendships are only project-wise,” he said. “When you associate on a project, you think that the friendship will last forever, but it doesn’t work that way.”

Since *Mahabharat* wound up in 1990, there have been, unsurprisingly, several attempts to recreate the phenomenon. In fact,

even though Samay had declared an end to the show with “*Maharishi Ved Vyas ka jai-kavya aaj samaapt hua*” (Ved Vyasa’s great epic concludes today), the Chopras themselves tried to exploit its popularity through *Mahabharat* Katha, a 45-episode series that aired on DD Metro a few years later. The idea was to deal with some interesting side stories in the epic, but the sequel just didn’t measure up. “The reasons were many,” Gajendra Chauhan explained. “It was shown on a wrong channel [instead of DD National]. Satellite was booming. Thirdly, the Kauravas who were killed in the main *Mahabharat* were brought back to life in this. People did not accept this.”

“They [the Chopras] shouldn’t have done *Mahabharat* Katha, but they wanted to stretch it because they realised this was a goldmine,” remarked Puneet Issar. Other attempts included a stylised telling of the Mahabharata by Ekta Kapoor in *Kahaani Hamaaray Mahaabhaarat Ki*, where actors boasted six-packs and designer couture, for the TV channel 9X in 2008. That, too, failed to capture the public’s interest.

Five years on, this February, a film titled *Mahabharat Aur Barbareek* released across Indian theatres and went unnoticed. It was centred on the story of Bhima’s grandson Barbareek, whom Krishna prevents from taking part in the battle of Kurukshetra because of three infallible arrows awarded to him by Lord Shiva, which seemed an insurmountable threat given the brave warrior’s own oath to always support the losing side. The film brought together most of the actors of the original series. “People recognise them even today,” the film’s producer, KK Yadav, told me when I met him in his office in Andheri West. Otherwise a businessman from Gurgaon, Yadav’s first film was *Miss Anara* (2007), based on a real-life pornography scandal in Jammu and Kashmir involving a beauty pageant winner.

“If Arjun is standing on one side, Puneet Issar on the other, and they are engaged in battle, you don’t need to explain to the audience

who they are.” But Barbareek was a pale shadow of the original. The men—some of whom now have double chins—are awkward incarnations of their characters, who are supposed to be the perfect embodiments of suppleness, strength and virility.

Yadav had begun his ambitious quest by approaching Gajendra Chauhan, who had worked in Miss Anara, with the idea of *Barbareek*. “He was shooting at Film City. I went there and I told him, ‘*Mujhe saarey Mahabharat waaley chahiye* (I want all the Mahabharat characters).’” Besides agreeing to help on this count, Chauhan also suggested the name of Dharmesh Tiwari, who played Kripacharya in Mahabharat, for director.

And so, 25 years after the original *Mahabharat* went on air, Nitish Bharadwaj, Roopa Ganguly, Gajendra Chauhan, Arjun, Praveen Kumar, Sanjeev Chitre (Sahdeva), Puneet Issar, Pankaj Dheer, Surendra Pal, Gufi Paintal and Vinod Kapoor (Duhshasan) found themselves cast in the same roles that had made them household names in India. “We even got the same costume and makeup persons we had in the *Mahabharat*,” said Chauhan, when we met before the film’s release.

“I did not want to do the role, but even if one of us backed out, then it wouldn’t have happened,” Roopa Ganguly said by way of explanation. A few others, such as Pankaj Dheer, were more practical. “I did it for the money,” Dheer told me. “I was paid really well. There were no emotions attached at all.”

The notable absentee in Yadav’s production, made on a modest budget of ₹5 crore, was Mukesh Khanna. His primary concern was that he no longer did roles that required him to stick on a beard. “*Gum itna laga chukaa hoon ki* (I have applied so much gum over the years that) my skin revolts against it.”

“Where will I find the same dedication to play Bhishma?” he added. “I am a serious actor. I don’t want to look stupid.” On probing

him even further, Khanna said, in a tone not too dissimilar from that of the *taat-shree* imparting wisdom to the Pandavas in the last scene of the final episode of *Mahabharat*: “*Woh Mahabharat bantey, bantey, bann gayee. Aaj chance hi nahin hai, kyunki mahaul badal gaya hai*” (That Mahabharat was destined. Today, it does not stand a chance, because circumstances have changed).



BEST LIFESTYLE & ENTERTAINMENT STORY

By
TRISHA GUPTA
Runner-up

**DIFFICULT LOVES:
HOPE AND HEARTBREAK ON THE
FRINGES OF URBAN INDIA**

The Caravan
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Trisha Gupta is a freelance writer and culture critic. Her writings on cinema, literature, art, photography and places open up questions of gender and class, modernity and tradition. She is a columnist for Mumbai Mirror, Sunday Guardian and Hindu Business Line. She has written over a dozen articles for The Caravan since May 2010, and also writes for Open, Business Standard, The Indian Express, Yahoo Originals and Outlook Traveller, among others. Just as a film writer, her subjects have included the Malayali fascination with world cinema, Pradip Krishen's journey from film to forest, Tagore adaptations in cinema, Rituparno Ghosh's intimate canvas, Imtiaz Ali's fictional heroines, and how recent Hindi cinema has been transformed by English. Before turning freelance, she worked as Theatre Editor at Time Out Delhi, Principal Correspondent at Tehelka and Consulting Editor at Biblio. She has an MPhil in cultural anthropology from Columbia University and an MA from the University of Cambridge.

Difficult Loves: Hope and heartbreak on the fringes of urban India



Till We Meet Again, a film that follows the lives of four working-class men in Jahangirpuri, Delhi.

Sometime in 1998, the documentary filmmaker Rahul Roy started to spend time in the company of four young men called Bunty, Kamal, Sanju and Sanjay in the rough Delhi neighbourhood of Jahangirpuri. *When Four Friends Meet* (WFFM), the film that emerged two years later, in 2000, was a remarkably frank portrait of working-class masculinity. These were young men who had dropped out of school and, in many cases, had been working since they were very young, though they continued to live with parents. Roy's quiet presence was able to elicit still-fresh memories of childhood and anxieties about an unstable financial future. In one haunting sequence, the camera circles the boys as they pose in a classroom of the sort they should still have been studying in, while the soundtrack lets their memories of childhood bounce off the walls: "None of us have ever shirked hard work. Even as children we would lift heavy

weights... We didn't know what the real wage should have been. We'd be thrilled with 10 paise, enough to buy sweets from the halwai. Or gamble with friends."

Girls were a hot topic, but none of the four friends seemed to have actually had a relationship with one. Their laughing confessions—about deliberately standing too close to "smart" girls in the bus, or verbally harassing ones who walked past them in the neighbourhood—displayed an unexamined sexism, pinned into place by a thoroughly disturbing circular logic. "*Bolti woh ladki hai jo thheek nahi hoti. Agar woh bolegi toh uski beizzati hai ismein*" (The girls who speak up are the ones who aren't good. The good girls know that by speaking up they will bring shame upon themselves).

Despite these views, Roy's protagonists were unsure enough to seem vulnerable. The swagger was laced with insecurity. The closest any of them had come to a real girl was the floppy-haired, boyish Bunty, who appeared to have a rather bold admirer. "She said 'I love you' to him thrice. He couldn't even say it once," his friend Kamal mocked him affectionately. "Her friend even left them alone together but this Bunty did nothing. I would have flung her down and taken a kiss at least." The banter around sex remained at the level of adolescent peer pressure: competing with the other boys, rather than providing the space for anything like a real relationship to blossom. Even when speaking of romance, love could appear only within filmi scare quotes—"*Mohabbat ke dushmanon ne gate lagwa diye*" (The enemies of love put up gates outside), said Bunty with a laugh as they walked into the monument that served as the area's romantic rendezvous spot.

The language of cinema was the surround sound of these lives. Hindi film romance could often couch harassment as attraction, and the boys imbibed that lesson faithfully: "*Ladkiyan khud kehti hain, hamaari naa mein haan hoti hai*" (Girls say it themselves, our 'no'

contains a ‘yes’), as Sanju said. But even that ubiquitous fantasy did not make imaginable a leap into real-life love. It was the arranged marriage that loomed large, complete with the vision of the domineering wife.

At the end of the documentary, Roy asked the boys if he should come back ten years later. “We’ll be ready!” said Sanju immediately, “*Ghulami ki zanjeeron mein jakde hue chaar maharathi phir dekhna aap*” (Come and see us again, four great warriors bound in the chains of slavery). Cynical humour met television melodrama in his vision of the future: “*Meri boorhi ma vahan khaans rahi hogi aur main apni biwi ke saath khaat pe leta hua hounga. Aur main kahoonga, ja ma ko dawai de aa. Toh woh kahegi, tum hi de aao, tumhari ma hai*” (My old mother will be coughing there and my wife and I will be cuddling on the bed. I’ll say, go give my mother her medicine. And my wife will say, go give it yourself, she’s your mother). He paused for an instant, as if to let the joke sink in. Then his face changed. “*Aise toh nahi hoga na sir?*” (It won’t be like that, will it, sir?)

A little over a decade later, Roy did return, to shoot *Till We Meet Again* (TWMA), completed this year. The arranged marriages had happened, children had been spawned. The four protagonists had lost some hair, gained some weight. They seemed irretrievably older—but not necessarily wiser.

If *WFFM* contained much that was worrying, there was also an open-endedness that prevented that film from closing on an altogether pessimistic note. Perhaps it was just that the protagonists were young, not yet quite set in their ways; perhaps it was simply the good humour and hope they still had for the future. But watching both Roy’s films together now is depressing. Over 13 years, nothing seems to have challenged any of the easy clichés the men clung to as teenagers. The city has changed around them, yet these men’s

convictions about appropriately masculine behaviour seem to have changed unsettlingly little. No radical loves have shown up to soften them. Their certainties have grown stronger. In order to become men, it seems, they must either become hardened, or break.

Made as part of a film project called Let’s Talk Men, funded by an array of UN agencies as well as South Asian and international government bodies, both Roy’s films feed into his long-term interest in masculinities (the project uses the plural deliberately, to replace the assumption of an essential or inborn masculinity with the different ways in which manliness is socially constructed). Roy’s body of work as a filmmaker reveals a lifelong interest in the intersection of gender, labour and class. In *Majma* (2001), he explored working-class male sexuality through the lives of two men in the Meena Bazaar area of Delhi’s walled city: one running a wrestling akhara, another a pavement seller of sexual remedies. In *The City Beautiful* (2003), Roy’s focus is on a weaving community’s loss of livelihood, but he also pays close attention to its impact on marital dynamics. With *WFFM* and *TWMA*, Roy captures something of the travails of boys growing into men on the economic fringes of post-liberalisation India.

The enormous energies of Indian commercial cinema, in every region and language of India, are channelled into creating portrayals of young men for audiences of young men. And yet, watching Kamal, Bunty, Sanjay and Sanju makes you realise how rarely you see men on the Indian screen actually negotiating the everyday pressures of work, family or financial responsibility—and, importantly, failing. What makes Roy’s films remarkable is the non-judgemental space he creates, leaving his male protagonists free to express opinions that might diverge from his own, and to give voice to fears and vulnerabilities. A vast gulf separates the heroic

masculinity of Indian cinema from most lived male experience. When is the last time you saw a Hindi film hero have—or strive for—an arranged marriage? They exist in our contemporary movie universe only as evil things that rob the hero of the heroine (*Rockstar*, *Aakash Vani*), as side-plots to a main story about shaadi planning (*Band Baaja Baaraat*), or at most, as chance encounters that can create complicated dramatic possibilities for romance (*Shuddh Desi Romance*, *Tanu Weds Manu*). Even in the “alternative” universe of *Gangs of Wasseypur*, Manoj Bajpai’s Sardar Khan could not be left to live out a life within his existing (presumably arranged) marriage to Naghma (Richa Chaddha)—on-screen masculinity demanded that a mistress be wooed, and won. Arranged marriages are too close to drab reality. Sometimes they’re a bit like work: “*Doosri shaadi ke liye mujhe bahut paapad belne pade*” (My second marriage took a lot of effort), says Kamal in *TWMA*. “I was booked every Sunday, seeing a new girl.”

This is not to suggest that popular cinema falls short if it doesn’t reflect reality. But if our feature films choose other tasks for themselves, then it is left largely to non-fiction films to give us some sense of what the lives of most Indian men and women are like. And documentary is indeed stepping in where fiction fears to tread. Two other recent films have also explored love and arranged marriage, opening up the question of individual choice within the traditional joint family from different perspectives, and providing valuable counterpoints to Roy’s vision. One is *When Hari Got Married* (2013), featuring a Dharamsala-based taxi driver whose voluble thoughtfulness manages to make our view of traditional Indian life a little sunnier. The other is *Nirnay* (Decision), a 2012 film that focuses its attention on young women in Ghaziabad, offering a bleak but powerful parallel narrative through the eyes of women rather

than men. Both are set in North Indian contexts comparable to Roy’s, though *Nirnay*’s characters are lower-middle class rather than working class, and Hari has emerged from a rural background into a small town with a burgeoning tourist trade.

All four films, though very different in style and approach, are strongly rooted in their specific milieus. Jahangirpuri is a resettlement colony established in post-Emergency Delhi. Roy’s protagonists have childhood memories of arriving there with their families to find a barren expanse divided up into plots with lines of white powder. By the 1990s, it was a bricked-up warren of lanes. By the time of Roy’s second film, in 2013, it appears even more densely built-up, though no more glamorous than before.

The interiors of their pakka homes look as claustrophobic as in 2000, though they do contain, at the very least, a bed, a television and several plastic chairs. Each of the men has at least one parent around, usually the *boorhi ma*. Each also has a wife and children. Responsibilities have expanded, but the scope of their lives has changed very little. Only Kamal, who has stopped working since he made a loss of one lakh rupees a year and a half ago, is lucky enough to have parents still able to provide for him. Bunty, whom we saw driving an auto in 2000, now works two jobs daily: as a Vodafone salesman during the day and a delivery man for a Chinese restaurant at night. Sanjay still runs his cycle rickshaw rental business but mentions that his brother sources and supplies pigs, while he himself has begun to put his savings into real estate. Real estate, he says, is the future. Sanju, who used to assemble electrical equipment in 2000, made heavy losses and now drives an auto. He stopped driving for six months because of a spine condition, and has only recently got back to work.

One of the most moving sequences in the 2000 film was shot in

Sanju's workroom. He sat on the floor, cross-legged, hands continuously at work, answering the filmmaker's questions about his dreams with a sunny smile that kept the depressingly bare space from closing in upon us. "Like everyone else", he said, he dreamt of being well-off. "But if I stay honest, I'll probably stay where I am." "So dreams don't come true if you're honest?" asked the filmmaker. "*Bilkul nahi hote hain ji!*" (They certainly don't, sir!) said Sanju. The "ji" had a jauntiness—it seemed to channel the upbeat tramp of Raj Kapoor's *Shree 420* persona, belying the gravity of what was being said. Then, as if on cue, Sanju flipped around the idealistic message of the 1950s classic. "*Aajkal sachchai aur imandaari se sirf daal roti chalti hai. Jeene ke liye sapne dekhna zaroori hai*" (These days, honesty only gets you the bare necessities. To live, one has to dream).

In the 2013 film, we see Sanju in his dark, cramped home, in which he and his ever-smiling wife live with his mother and three rather sweet children. The eldest child is urged by his mother to tell the camera what he wants to be when he grows up. Perhaps all of five years old, the boy struggles with the thought. "*Vakeel* (lawyer)," he says finally. Then "No, not that." "And your papa?" "*Mere papa? Papa abhi tak toh kuch bhi nai bane. Sirf gaadi chalaane wale driver hi bane hain*" (My papa? Papa hasn't become anything yet. He's only become a driver), says the child with blithe frankness. Sanju's smile is frozen at the corners of his mouth.

Roy shows how men's lives in Jahangirpuri are defined by work outside the home, and women's by work within it. That gendered division of labour holds true even—perhaps especially—when a man is unable to go out and earn money. Kamal's unemployed status does not propel him towards sharing any of his wife's duties. The very thought of him changing his baby's nappies is so amusing to his wife that she collapses in a fit of giggles. None of the four wives work

outside the home. This, despite the fact that the households from which Roy picked his protagonists already contained working women in the 1990s. Sanju's sister, for instance, worked with the NGO Action India, and while admitting that he had opposed her decision initially, he seemed grudgingly to applaud her *himmat*. Kamal's mother, too, worked with the same organisation, and he could not quite object to her job. But he seemed to approve mainly because she could take days off at will. He himself would only let his wife work if it was "good work"; factory work would be a strict no-no.

Bunty's first wife died tragically by being accidentally electrocuted, and in the course of the making of the second film, he acquires a second wife who seems to have come recommended primarily by her poverty and his children's need for a caregiver. Unsurprisingly, with the exception of Sanju, the men all seem quite comfortable with the idea that disciplining their wives might involve some physical violence. Not a full-fledged beating like the ones administered by the drunkard husband of Bunty's unfortunate sister, whom he describes as often dragging her out into the street—but perhaps a couple of slaps, just to make it clear who's boss. The romantic ideas that seemed to still float about in their minds in 2000—Kamal quoted a line from *Hum Dil De Chuke Sanam* about how conquering a woman's body might be easy, but it wouldn't help conquer her heart—seem to have vacated space for a vague ennui.

Meanwhile, Bunty has acquired a lover, a relationship that seems to consist largely of cellphone flirtation—and that he does not appear to think of as being in any way unfair to his new wife. When he amuses his buddies by calling his lover and putting her cooing on speaker-phone for their listening pleasure, he does not seem to think he's being unfair to her, either.

Another cellphone romance on speaker-phone lies at the centre of

Ritu Sarin and Tenzing Sonam's film *When Hari Got Married*. This one is much sweeter.

The film opens with Hari driving his taxi on a mountainous road, one casual hand on the steering wheel, speaking cheerfully into the cellphone. "Good morning," we hear him say, in what is apparently his standard ritual gambit. "Good morning," says a young female voice. "Namaste," says Hari. "Namaste," obliges our invisible voice. "I love you," says Hari now, stretching out the phrase in a singsong way that suggests a response is due. "Same to you," says his fiancée shyly on the other end of the line. Hari is quick to pounce. "No, you have to say 'I love you'" he says immediately. "I love you," we hear her say finally. Now Hari grins happily. "Good girl, good girl," he says, eager to make amends for his earlier insistence. Then, in a mock-serious tone: "*Madamji naaraaz toh nahi ho gaye?*" (Madam, you didn't get upset, did you?)? "*Nahi toh* (Not at all)," comes the voice on the other end of the line. "*Pakka* (sure)?" says Hari.

Whether it looks like it or not, Hari, too, is having an arranged marriage, one which he only agreed to after six months of refusing. Sarin and Sonam have lived in Dharamsala for 16 years, and have known Hari since he was 16—he lives in a village behind their house. They even knew he was going to get married. But what got them excited—and what gives their film such a marvellous sense of *joie de vivre*—is Hari's subtle but sure-footed transformation of the circumstances of his arranged marriage.

Hari has not had much say in the choosing of his bride, Suman. But now, talking to the filmmakers, he chooses to have a say about not having had a say. And the tenor he chooses to do it in is often side-splittingly funny. "What kind of a girl is she?" we hear Sarin ask. "*Chhoti chhoti ladki hai*" (A very small girl), says Hari immediately, even as his father, sitting next to him, pronounces her "*bahut badhiya*

(wonderful)". Hari insists on repeating that she wasn't his choice. They've been engaged now for two years, and he's barely set eyes on her once. But now that he's got hold of her phone number, he's beginning to develop a connection with her. "Naturally, if you talk every day on the phone, you can fall in love with a stone, even..."

Hari's father was widowed at the early age of 22, and never married again. Both Hari and his two brothers feel that the sacrifices he made for them must be repaid by being good and obedient sons, which means, among other things, marrying the girls their father chooses for them. The filial relationship here, just as it is in the Jahangirpuri of Rahul Roy's films, is one of indebtedness.

But while Hari is marrying to oblige his father, his own expectations from a wife are fairly traditional, too. There's no question in his mind that Suman's arrival is what is needed to sort out the mess his domestic space is currently in: he visualises a life of coming home at night to home-cooked meals rather than staying out late drinking with men friends, or going to his father's for dinner. Hari is completely transparent.

He seems to do his thinking in front of us, whether it is about how the sex of a baby is determined by the male chromosome ("keetanu", he calls it), or about how only a son can be expected to stay with you forever, because a daughter, no matter how close or caring, will eventually have to marry. "Then, without her husband's permission, she can't even visit her own home... If I stop my wife [from visiting her parents], she can't go." That's the way the system works, and how can he change it all by himself? "It is changing, but slowly." And yet, at the end of the film, when Hari's own first child is a daughter, he greets her arrival with undisguised delight.

Like in Roy's films, where the spotlight is reserved for Kamal, Bunty, Sanjay and Sanju, the focus in *When Hari Got Married*

remains on Hari. Suman, Hari's wife, only really appears in the film after her marriage, which is to say, very briefly indeed. It was a deliberate decision in both cases—Roy's films are meant to be about the men, and Sonam and Sarin, too, told me that they felt their film would be much tighter if they stuck close to Hari's perspective. They chose not to meet Suman until Hari did. These choices do have the desired effect, of pushing us to inhabit the men's minds. But I ached to also hear the women talk about their lives—without their husbands being around to hear the answers. That moment never came.

The men in Roy's second film seem to derive little emotional succour from their marriages. Kamal dismissed his failed first marriage in a line as "*kharaab ho gayi* (went bad)", but seemed to have even less investment in his second one—his phrase "*sahi chal rahi hai thodi bahut* (running okay, more or less)" could easily have been used for an old bike. Chanchal, his current "*gharwali*" seems "*sahi*" to him primarily because "she agrees to all I say and doesn't make too many demands". Sanjay tells us matter-of-factly that he doesn't really talk to his wife. The only one conscious of a shared life is Sanju, who sweetly recounted how a post-marriage "date" at Rajghat helped Pooja and he reach an "adjustment". But even he seemed too weighed down by the burdens of earning a living to fulfil the desires Pooja doesn't quite dare to voice. "He keeps lying there silently, only talks when I talk to him," Pooja says on camera. When the kids insist on going out, he takes them in his auto, but not his wife. "We don't have the budget," he says. Bunty seems to have mourned for his dead first wife, but clearly has no relationship with his second. It is hard now to imagine him as the same young man who burst into tears when Rahul's first shooting schedule with them ended.

In contrast to these men, Hari offers us hope. He recognises that if the system doesn't offer him much choice, it is weighted even more strongly against his wife ("What does a man have to lose? Even if the

girl turns out bad, we're still in our own home"). And he is able to follow up that recognition with a wonderfully matter-of-fact sensitivity.

One evening a month before his wedding, Hari sits on a bench outside his room, swinging his legs with trademark restlessness as he muses aloud about love in marriage: "*Ghar chhod ke aayegi apna*" (She'll have left her home). It'll be difficult. I'll have to love her."

"And if you don't?"

"Then she'll get sad."

"Then?"

"Then she'll get sick."

"Then what will you do?"

"We'll have to go the doctor, and the loss will be mine."

Hari's logical-emotional accounting, sweetly ridiculous as it is, endears him to us. It is all we have to go by, in any case, to help us believe that Suman will be more or less alright with him.

To actually hear from women, we must step into the world of a very different film: Pushpa Rawat and Anupama Srinivasan's *Nirnay* (Decision). In 2007, Rawat, then a Class 12 student in Ghaziabad, signed up for a photography class at the National Bal Bhavan on Kotla Road, Delhi. Srinivasan, a 2001 graduate in Film Direction from the Film and Television Institute (FTII), happened to teach videography to Rawat's group. Srinivasan stayed in touch with Rawat, taking her on as assistant on her documentary *I Wonder*. "*Phir ma'am ne kaha, kab tak mujhe assist karogi, apna kuchh banao* (How long will you keep assisting me, ma'am said, urging me to create something of my own)," laughs Rawat, now 26. She began shooting in 2009 with a Sony Handycam, producing 40 hours of footage over nearly three years, constantly discussing it with Srinivasan, whom she credits with having done "all the hard work, all the thinking".

Rawat's confidence in her craft is still limited. But Nirnay makes remarkable use of the power of documentary, and displays Rawat's steely courage in opening herself and her life up for scrutiny. When she began shooting, she was romantically involved with a young man named Sunil, a neighbour of hers in Ghaziabad. They had decided to get married, and Rawat wanted to give her friends an example of love marriage. "*Main unko yeh dikhana chahti thhi ki yeh decision, yeh nirnay, kaise lo*" (I wanted to show them how to take this decision), she says, smiling a bit sheepishly. "*Lekin phir sab kuch ulta ho gaya*" (But then everything went topsy-turvy).

Sunil's parents opposed the marriage, primarily because Pushpa came from a different caste. Pushpa's parents were against it, too. Sunil chose not to oppose his parents. At their urging, he married Vinita. In a remarkable series of one-on-one interviews, Rawat trains her camera on her parents and Sunil's, on Vinita and on Sunil himself. Alongside these interviews are her exchanges with her girlfriends: Mithlesh, Lata, Pooja, Sunil's sister Geeta. In many cases, conversations take difficult directions. Pooja talks about being persuaded to abort a pregnancy because it might be a girl, and shares her sorrowful realisation that she could have resisted it. When Lata says that her parents never supported her desire to train as a singer, and that she is keen to find a husband who will, we hear Pushpa's gentle, insistent voice: first parents, now husband—why do you want to depend on someone else all the time? But it is not only her friends and family of whom tough questions are asked: it is also the filmmaker herself. "Today you are sitting here with a camera. But what have I done? Have you ever thought about it?" demands a pensive Mithlesh of Rawat.

The film provides an affecting glimpse into the lives of young women from lower-middle class families in Ghaziabad: girls who are sent to school but not meant to think of careers, or, god forbid, love.

They are expected to get home before dark, help with the housework and marry into households where their lives might well be even more curtailed than they already are.

By focusing on people and places she has known for years before she showed up with a camera, Rawat achieves an introspective intimacy that is often stunning. Instead of dramatic tension, we get closely observed, gut-wrenching detail. In one deceptively quiet conversation, for instance, her friend Mithlesh talks of her fears about arranged marriage. "The family in which we have been born, have lived all our lives: when we are not even able to understand them, how will we be able to adjust in a new family? I will not be able to." And yet we can already see that the little toss of the head with which Mithlesh says this is all she will manage; she is not going to be able to resist the marriage when it comes. The terrible truth is that she knows it, too. "What has changed from age 12 to 22? Earlier also if my mother said no to something, I had to accept. Even today the situation is exactly the same. If she says no, it means no."

We are on Mithlesh's terrace, and as she speaks the camera moves away from her to slowly focus on three boys on a neighbouring roof, scrambling about to retrieve a kite. They seem strangely, radically, free.

The contrasting unfreedom of women emerges, gently yet undeniably, in Rawat's repeated return to women's hands at work: peeling onions, chopping *lauki*, cleaning rice, pounding grain, rolling out rotis. That visual theme—the incessant, repetitive performance of domestic labour—is constantly echoed by the voices of women in the film. The powerful opening sequence is itself about neglected housework. We hear the angry clanging of a ladle on a *kadhai*, and a loudly haranguing female voice: "You have no time to spare. So busy roaming around... You never wash the clothes! You never do any of the chores! Have you lost your senses?" It turns out to be Rawat's mother, addressing the filmmaker herself. In the

excess of that opening accusation is contained a clue to the magnitude of Rawat's personal departure. And as the film unfolds, the tasks so deeply entrenched as women's work transition in our minds: from benign everydayness to being the devourers of female lives. "There's no time to think about my own life," says Geeta, as she cuts down branches for firewood or fodder. "I'm so busy with the housework." "There was no time to think," says Vinita. Her family introduced her to Sunil, and insisted she make up her mind immediately. The time Vinita had asked for was a week. This is one of the few conversations where Rawat lets her words betray something of her feelings. Vinita, who seems to be meeting her for the first time, asks Rawat if she's met Sunil. "Yes, I know him very well," says Rawat. "I've known him for four years."

Perhaps the most chilling part of *Nirnay*, as it was in Rahul Roy's two films, is the passage of time. In Rawat and Srinivasan's film, we watch several young people go from being unmarried, confused 22-year-olds to being married, sometimes to being parents—all in less than an hour of running time. And yet, far from any breathless excitement, there is only a sense of drift; a terrible closing-off of options. "What do you miss most?" asks Pushpa. "A life of my own," says Mithlesh, now in her marital home, looking ill-at-ease in a heavy sari draped in a *ghunghat* around her head. "Most of all, I miss myself." We watch these young women, deprived of individual choices, transfer their hopes onto their children. "I won't make him an angry person, absolutely not. Isn't that so, my child?... I know how difficult it is to bear it when people speak harshly," says Geeta, cooing at her baby in the cot. "He will be clever, too, not a simpleton like me." "*Yeh mera apna hoga.*" (This will be all mine), says Mithlesh of the baby she is expecting. "I want to give this child all the happiness that perhaps I could never have." In one of the first lines spoken in the film, Pushpa's father had said with grave

irritation: "Is this why we educated you? So that you go out of our control? What is the point of having such children?" We watch now, with impending horror, as the cycle of unfulfilled expectations threatens to carry on.



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**BEST SCIENCE &
INNOVATION STORY**

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BY

VIRAT MARKANDEYA

Winner

FORBIDDEN SYMMETRY

The Caravan

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Forbidden Symmetry

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Forbidden Symmetry: The quest for a radically new form of matter



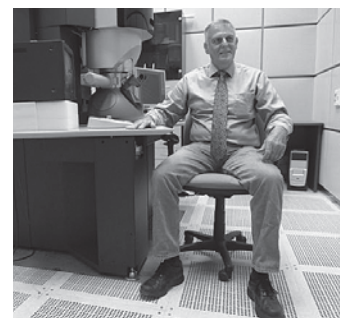
From left to right: Luca Bindi, Valery Kryachko and Paul Steinhardt

Paul Steinhardt sat riveted to his seat as the driver, Victor, steered the double-track vehicle from side to side, dodging hazards every few feet. It was July 2011, and the 58-year-old physicist found himself in Chukotka, a region in Far Eastern Russia where the moon rises to white midnights framed against the smoky Koryak Mountains. He had never been camping, but was now leading a geological expedition deep into the Russian tundra, a land fractured from the Alaskan mass and inhabited by bears, against which the expedition team carried modified Kalashnikovs to defend themselves. There were no roads, and on occasion the vehicles, called snow-cats—rectangular boxes painted bright orange and blue-grey that trundled along at a top speed of 15 km per hour—would have to cross entire water bodies on a hope and a prayer.

Steinhardt was headed to a stream 230 kms to the south-west of Anadyr, the capital of Chukotka, searching for fragments of a meteorite unlike any known before. Embedded in the rock could be a form of matter called quasicrystals that had never before been found in nature.

Quasicrystals riff on something as basic as the way atoms (or molecules, or ions) are arranged in materials. When they were first synthesised in a lab in 1982, they overthrew 200 years of scientific dogma about the laws of matter. They form a bridge

between ‘true’ crystals like salt and gold, and amorphous, disordered materials like glass, which were the only categories of solid material previously thought to exist.



Israeli scientist Dan Shechtman discovered the 5-fold symmetry (or ‘forbidden symmetry’) of crystal structures in 1982.

Quasicrystals changed the very definition of crystals and the assumptions of crystallography - the science used to study the arrangement of atoms in solids. Their discovery allowed materials researchers to play with an infinite new range of atomic structures. The internal structure, in turn, creates the solid’s unique properties. Practical applications for quasicrystals have already been found, such as in the strengthening of steel, and the unique way they interact with light has led to several patents.

Steinhardt had been at the forefront of quasicrystal research—the word ‘quasicrystal’ itself came from a paper he co-authored in 1984. Initially met with scepticism and ridicule, hundreds of quasicrystals had since been found. (They are rather common in certain aluminium metallic phases.) But quasicrystals

had only been artificially made in the laboratory, and were therefore thought not to be an important building blocks of the material universe. The primary goal of the Russian expedition was to show beyond a shred of doubt that quasicrystals could form in nature. This would move science one step closer to showing that quasicrystals were as robust (and perhaps as universal) a form of matter as crystals.

After a “four-day rollercoaster ride”, as Steinhardt would later call it, the expedition arrived at the Listvenitovyi stream. The excavation team began panning for quasicrystal candidates, separating rock and other minerals from clay for a kilometre along the stream. An analysis team then sifted through the panned material, looking for minute grains in what had originally been a tonne of sediment. If indeed they found natural quasicrystals, it would rewrite mineralogy textbooks and open new directions for material science.

Blame the omnivorous reading habits of an Italian geologist for starting it all. In 2007, Luca Bindi was a curator at the Università degli Studi di Firenze who was interested in incommensurate structures—in which, like quasicrystals, atomic clusters don’t repeat regularly or are aperiodic—in minerals.

His curiosity led him to a 2001 paper in *Physical Review Letters*—not a staple journal for the earth sciences—by Peter J Lu at Harvard and Paul Steinhardt and Nan Yao at Princeton.

It discussed a method to find and index new solids called “quasicrystals” based on their X-ray diffraction patterns. The analysis had found 50 promising mineral candidates, but no clincher.

“Bindi” had never worked with this form of aperiodic structure before. Nevertheless, as he scanned the list of candidates, he saw three minerals he was familiar with: aktashite, gratonite, and tantalite.

“I was shocked to see them in this list,” he recalled. “Could

they exhibit a quasicrystalline structure?”

Bindi knew quasicrystals were important. Finding a natural quasicrystal, for one, would revolutionize the way minerals were conventionally classified—because all known minerals were either crystalline or amorphous, rather than quasicrystalline in structure. At the end of the paper, a line caught his eye: “We are interested in collaborating in exploring the leading candidates, only some of which have been given in Table I. Those interested are encouraged to contact P. J. L. and P. J. S.”

Bindi had a hunch that the minerals were among the collections of the Natural History Museum of the Università degli Studi di Firenze that he knew so well. Bindi ran to check out the database for the 50,000-specimen mineralogical collection at the museum. “They were there!” he later wrote to me in an e-mail. So he decided to contact Lu and Steinhardt.

In October 2007, when Steinhardt received an e-mail from Bindi offering collaboration, the search for natural quasicrystals was in a slow phase. Steinhardt, who was known as a cosmologist for his work on inflationary models of the universe, tinkered around with several projects at once, including solid-state physics of which the quasicrystal hunt was a part. He had then been toying with the idea of compiling a catalogue for meteorites similar to the catalogue for terrestrial minerals compiled by the International Centre for Diffraction Data, which he had unsuccessfully used in the 2001 paper. Steinhardt had a hunch quasicrystals could be found in meteorites and a database would facilitate the search.

Steinhardt didn’t know much about the Italian museum, but Bindi seemed enthusiastic, so the Princeton collaborators gave him a list of minerals that seemed promising but hadn’t yet been checked. Out of this list, Bindi thought he could procure about

half a dozen.

The laborious process of slicing the mineral, preparing the sample, and observing its powder pattern to check whether it was a good candidate or not took about a month. The researchers tested six samples in all. Nothing worked.

“It was failure after failure after failure,” Steinhardt recalled. “We thought we’ll write a paper saying that we tried six more and they failed.”

The idea was to update the 2001 paper, create some noise, and get more people interested. “Luca was pressing to write-write-write,” Steinhardt told me. “I was like, hmnn, I don’t know.”

The lull might have been fortuitous. Bindi decided to take a fresh approach to the problem. Rather than simply cross off the minerals he had been sent by Steinhardt, he put down a list of known synthetic quasicrystals and stared hard. Did these compounds show anything in common? The answer soon popped up: all the quasicrystals had metallic aluminium, and often copper, in their formula.

Bindi looked up mineralogical databases for natural aluminium-copper alloys. He found two—khatyrkite and cupalite. And then he made a second discovery: he had one of the minerals right under his nose. In a minor, but important, collection housed in the Florence Museum, he found a sample with the catalogue number “46407/G” labelled “Khatyrkite” and catalogued as sourced from the “Koryak Mts., Russia”.

Bindi began careful single-ray X-ray diffraction and chemical analysis to see what the khatyrkite sample revealed. Soon, he was sure he had something. Excited, he emailed Steinhardt in early November 2008. Steinhardt was, in fact, in Genoa to give a talk at the Festival della Scienza on cosmology. (‘Beyond the Big

Bang, The Universe Without End,’ it was titled.) Before the beginning of his presentation, Steinhardt responded on his BlackBerry: “I look forward to seeing the ppt file—it sounds much more exciting than what we had before (a null result).”

After looking at the file, Steinhardt sent an effusive note saying that he agreed they actually might have a natural quasicrystal. The last overwhelming evidence would be a diffraction pattern taken with a transmission electron microscope. As Bindi did not have the equipment in Italy, he decided to send the samples to Princeton. Two 60-micron-sized grains were couriered there on November 11.

The sample came FedEx-ed in a tiny plastic box labelled “khatyrkite”. The box contained two brass holders out of which glass rods stuck out, and on the glass rods were specks of matter.

“If this turns out to be the quasicrystal, I’m going to be frustrated, because I can barely see this thing,” Steinhardt had joked. “I thought it would be something I could hold in my hand, like a rock.”

Worse still, after waiting for close to a decade since his 2001 paper to find a sample of a natural quasicrystal, Steinhardt would have had to wait another few months to confirm that the sample was legitimate. It was going to be Christmas break in Princeton, and the only lab where a physicist could test the sample would be closed. Steinhardt was told he couldn’t have the lab for another three months because it was already booked. He decided he would slip in earlier.

On New Year’s morning in 2009, when they knew no one would be there, Steinhardt and Nan Yao, head of the Princeton Institute for Science and Technology of Materials’ (PRISM) Imaging and Analysis Center, slinked into his lab at Princeton. Despite Bindi’s enthusiasm, Steinhardt thought they would spend a few minutes

checking and failing—and then he could sleep again.

Then, a small disaster almost struck. Before the scientists could proceed with their electron diffraction experiment, they had to take the samples off a needle. The sample had been described to them as being a grain: a single, solid thing. It actually was a tiny, micron-size powder of grains. “The moment the first drop of acetone fell on it, the whole thing fell off,” Steinhardt recalled. “If you had sneezed at that point, the entire sample would have been lost. Fortunately, just below the needle, we had a crucible where all the powder collected.”

When they put the sample under the microscope, what they found was breathtaking. The grains yielded a beautiful pattern like the mosaic tiling on the ceiling of the Alhambra, but infused with light—the signature diffraction pattern of a quasicrystal.

“That was just an incredible, incredible feeling,” Steinhardt told me. “I never believed that when I was looking at something in nature that it would be anything as good as that. I thought it might be something quite deceptive and poor, and that if you squint at it you might recognise it. Here it was, magnificent and perfect.”

The next day, Bindi received an e-mail from Steinhardt. It was titled “Quasi-Happy New Year”. Bindi knew they had their sample. Less than two years later, in 2011, the Israeli researcher who discovered the first synthetic quasicrystal would win the Nobel Prize in Chemistry.

“10 fold???” Dan Shechtman scribbled in his notebook. It was April 1982 and Shechtman, a researcher who was visiting the U.S. National Institute of Standards and Technology (then called the National Bureau of Standards), had peered into his microscope and seen a pattern not unlike the one Steinhardt would later glimpse. What he saw were circles made of ten dots, each the same distance from one another.

If what Shechtman was seeing was correct, then the crystal in front of him had a ten-fold symmetry. Turning the image by one-tenth—36 degrees—would yield the same picture. But this meant that the atoms inside the crystal were packed together in a way thought to be impossible. Further analysis by him showed that the crystal was actually based on 5-fold symmetry—a “forbidden symmetry”.

Indeed, when Shechtman went back to Israel, the head of his laboratory handed him a textbook of crystallography to read. When Shechtman stubbornly persisted with his experimental results, he was asked to leave the research group. Even more powerful opposition came from two-time Nobel Prize winner Linus Pauling. In Shechtman's 2011 Nobel lecture, he recalled that Pauling, probably the most famous chemist of the 20th century, would go from conference to conference declaring that there was no such thing as quasi-crystals, just quasi-scientists.

The tension between the younger and the older researcher arose because the arrangement of atoms in crystals, based on results since 1912, had always been found to be periodic—a regularly repeating arrangement. The very definition of a crystal furnished by the International Union of Crystallography in the 1980s was “a substance in which the constituent atoms, molecules, or ions are packed in a regularly ordered, repeating three-dimensional pattern”.

Shechtman's work went against 70 years of experimental evidence but that wasn't the worst of it. There was a reason why Pauling was more than sceptical, and that deeper argument had to do with mathematics—the way atoms can theoretically be packed together.

Building the general argument up from a concrete example, consider the problem of tiling a two-dimensional surface—like a kitchen or bathroom floor—leaving no gaps, where different tile

orientations are allowed. A quick examination will show that it is possible to do so with a triangular tile, a square tile, and a hexagonal tile.

The general property underlying those specific shapes is rotational symmetry. Rotational symmetry refers to how an object or shape is indistinguishable from its original state when turning it to a certain degree.

A triangular tile has a three-fold symmetry because if you turn it 120 degrees, the same pattern will appear. A square has four-fold symmetry because turning it 90 degrees gets you back to the same shape and so on. In fact, there are any number of shapes beyond the simple triangles and squares that can tile a floor without leaving gaps because they have this intrinsic property of three-fold or four-fold symmetry.

But try tiling a floor with a five-fold symmetrical shape like a pentagon without leaving gaps, and the task is quite impossible. It is impossible for symmetries beyond six as well.

The same principle that applies to two dimensions applies to three-dimensional structures, including in the packing of atoms. Several proofs have shown that it is mathematically impossible to have regularly repeating structures of five-fold rotational symmetry and symmetries beyond six.

But what about instances where the atomic arrangement does not repeat regularly?

Here again the answer lies in mathematics. A British mathematician and cosmologist, Roger Penrose, trying to solve a long-standing problem in the field, had created the most elegant and simple form of aperiodic structures in the mid-1970s. Using just two tiles, a fat and a thin rhombus, and enforcing certain rules on how the two could fit together, he created a quasi-periodic mosaic in two dimensions.

In 1982, a crystallographer at Birkbeck College in London, Alan Mackay, used the Penrose tiles to represent real-world crystallography. In his model, atoms lie at the intersection of three lines, or vertices, in the Penrose tiling. By this reasoning, he showed what kind of diffraction pattern a hypothetical crystal with five-fold symmetry would show.

The five-fold symmetric Penrose tiling gives rise to a pattern that repeats at two different intervals—a long and a short interval that has an atomic equivalent. “Instead of atoms repeating throughout the structure at some regular interval, as in ordinary (periodic) crystals, atoms in quasicrystals are spaced at long or short intervals,” Steinhardt wrote in a 1996 PNAS (Proceedings of the National Academy of Science) paper.

One particularly beautiful aspect is that the ratio between frequency of the long and the short intervals tends towards an irrational number—the famous golden ratio, which in turn is connected to the Fibonacci sequence (0, 0+1=1, 1+1=2, 1+2=3, 2+3=5, 3+5=8, 5+8=13...).

The interval that comes next comes of the enforced matching rules—but however much you zoom out to see the global structure, it is impossible to see it as a particular, even if spectacularly complex, repeating pattern. It is a kind of dissonance in space—just as you think a quasi-periodic sequence is settling down, it breaks its rhythm.

Quasicrystal patterns often resemble other symmetric tilings, such as the Islamic girih at Alhambra. But just as with the Penrose tiles, it is the enforced rules on how the tiles fit together that gives rise to a true quasi-periodic arrangement. Only the Darb-i-Imam in Iran seems to enforce similar rules to create a quasi-periodic tiling that could be extended infinitely, capturing that iterative property which allows quasi-periodicity.

Meanwhile, Shechtman still had not found a journal to publish his results. He had been rebuffed by the *Journal of Applied Physics* in the summer of 1984. The editor had sent his manuscript back unread by return of post.

It would be November 1984 before his findings, written up with collaborators Ilan Blech, Denis Gratias and John Cahn, were eventually published in *Physical Review Letters*. During the peer-review process, Steinhardt got the chance to see it.

Steinhardt was approaching the quasicrystal debate from a theoretical point of view. Motivated by work he had done with David Nelson at Harvard on icosahedral bond orientational order in supercooled liquids, he was looking at forbidden symmetries in crystals with collaborator Dov Levine. By 1984, Steinhardt had shifted from the University of Pennsylvania to IBM in Yorktown Heights, NY, in order to encourage scientists to look for such materials in the laboratory.

When Nelson visited him at IBM, Steinhardt saw a preprint of Shechtman's work. "He did not know that Dov and I had been working on the quasicrystal idea. But when I turned to the page with the diffraction pattern, I jumped up, went over to the desk, and brought David back an image showing the diffraction pattern we had computed for an icosahedral quasicrystal. The two matched," Steinhardt wrote in an e-mail.

Publishing in the same journal as Shechtman that year on Christmas Eve, he and Levine also coined a word that stuck.

A quasicrystal is the natural extension of the notion of a crystal to structures with quasiperiodic, rather than periodic, translational order. We classify two- and three-dimensional quasicrystals by their symmetry under rotation and show that many disallowed crystal symmetries are allowed quasicrystal symmetries....

Steinhardt has been championing quasicrystals ever since.

In these three decades, hundreds of quasicrystals have been reported and confirmed. Researchers reinterpreted their past experimental results to find quasicrystals even before that date. They are no longer considered unique and are ubiquitous among certain metal alloys. But there was still one nagging issue: all the quasicrystal structures reported so far had been produced in the laboratory.

Thinking in terms of principles, as is the wont of a theorist, Steinhardt could see no reason why quasicrystals would not exist, or even be abundant, in nature. "The theoretical view was that these were as robust as crystals," he said. "Even being energetically favoured compared to crystals under some circumstances."

But when he put forward this idea, people would say, "Gee, so why hasn't a natural quasicrystal been found?" and Steinhardt would respond that it hadn't yet, "but I'm looking." Therein lay the reason why he was so ecstatic that New Year's morning in 2009. The elation, though, was short-lived.

It was clear that the Florence sample was a quasicrystal, but was it a natural quasicrystal? What was its provenance? It was, after all, just a few micron-sized grains from a collection in Italy. Wasn't it possible that it was an industrial by-product like slag?

In fact, the grains were enveloped in carbonaceous chondrites, rock material that was thought to be from the very old, carbon-rich meteors. Steinhardt and Bindi took the sample to meteor expert Glenn McPherson at the Smithsonian.

McPherson, who had been expecting them, met them at his door. He was deeply sceptical, and said if it was a meteorite, it was unlike any other he had seen.

Other experts were sceptical as well—it was merely a label that said the Florence sample was from a remote part of Siberia. Even

if it had been found in Siberia, it wouldn't be a clincher for geologists who had seen many false claims in the past.

Such scepticism feeds into a shadowy market for meteorites that is both unregulated and rather lucrative. A cursory check on eBay on 29th April this year showed the bidding price for an "Apollo 11 meteorite" at \$4.5 million. For fragments of the Chelyabinsk meteorite that crashed into Siberia in February, classifieds on a Russian website were asking for as much as \$10,000, according to news reports.

"When I first read this account I thought, wow, maybe this is a hoax," said Ebel Denton, curator of the hall of meteorites at the American Museum of Natural History in New York, referring to Bindi's original paper in 2009. "Maybe someone made this material in a lab and put it out in the middle of Siberia."

What Denton did agree with is that it is a strange rock indeed. Not only for the quasicrystal structure, but for the grains' mineral composition: Al₆₃Cu₂₄Fe₁₃. In other words, it contains 63 parts aluminium to every 24 parts copper and 13 parts iron: icosahedrite.

Iron is about 2,000 times more abundant than copper, and yet there is more copper in this rock than iron. Copper and aluminium have also never been found combined together in a meteorite before, a fact that's been explained by the very different geochemical behaviour of the two elements—that aluminium condenses at much higher temperatures than copper.

Denton now seems convinced the Florence sample is a natural quasicrystal, but he still doesn't know what to make of it. "I don't know what the deal is with this rock," he said. "It would be nice if there other rocks like it. There are probably in the order of 20,000 meteorites studied by humans over time, and no one has ever found anything like this."

In 2009, when the tests had whittled away the micron-sized quasicrystal grains, the urgency to get more of this material and to discover its provenance was even more palpable. But where would one look?

Khatyrkite, the mineral in which the quasicrystal grain was embedded, got its name in 1985 from a paper by LV Razin, NS Rudashevskij, and LN Vyalsov. The American Minerologist has the Russian translation of the long title as, "New natural intermetallic compounds of aluminium, copper and zinc—khatyrkite CuAl, cupalite CuAl and zine aluminides—from hyperbasites of dunite-harzburgite formation."

The minerals occur in black slick washed from greenish-gray cover weathering from serpentinite, Listvenitovij stream, Khatirskij Ultrabasic zone of the Koriakskho-Kamchatskaya fold area, eastern USSR (Koriakskhiye Mts.). They are intimately intergrown, forming small (up to 1.5 mm) irregular, angular, metallic, steel gray-yellow grains, similar to native Pt. Type material is preserved at the Mining Museum of the Leningrad Mining Institute, Leningrad, USSR.

It was confirmation that the mineral associated with the Florence sample was also found in a stream in the Koryaks, but it was still only circumstantial proof—just as finding a sample of quartz certainly did not imply that it had to be from the same place where another sample of quartz had been discovered.

Yet, there was the Koryak label. Steinhardt and Bindi needed to find this man LV Razin. With the help of friends in Russia, they did.

Razin was in Israel, but was uncooperative. He asked for

\$15,000 just to speak to them. People said he had been a KGB agent, smuggling platinum out of the former U.S.S.R. In short, he was a man you couldn't trust, and phone conversations, as Steinhardt soon found out, were futile.

As the scientists looked into the original Razin paper, and followed many false leads, another mysterious figure emerged. His name was VV Kryachko, and it seemed he had found the original Khatyrkite sample. In the original paper "it is kind of an obscure sentence", Steinhardt said. "There is this guy, VV Kryachko, and he is washing clay in the stream, and somehow he found this material. And it never mentions him again."

So they asked people in the Russian Academy of Sciences: who was this guy? According to Steinhardt, some thought he was a fictional character created by Razin to cover up his tracks while he was prospecting for platinum. But the team was desperate, so they asked again, and got the encouraging response that he was a real person but that he had died. Another time, the response was even more dramatic: he was a local Chukchi who had wandered off into the wilderness.

After some scrounging, the researchers found a paper from the mid-1990s that carried the same name, VV Kryachko. On the phone with his co-author from Russia, Steinhardt was told that "Valery" was very much a real person. In fact, he was the doctoral student of the person on the other side of the call, Vadim Dissler. "And furthermore," the voice on the other end said, "he is coming to town with me. Do you want to talk to him?"

On Steinhardt's website there is a photograph of three men in khakhi. To the left is Luca Bindi, rugged and smiling, to the right, Paul Steinhardt, more restrained, and in the middle, a compact man with white stubble and knotted eyes.

Valery Kryachko, who might have held the first known natural

quasicrystal in his hands three years before Dan Shechtman peered into his microscope for a glimpse of one, works in the private mining sector in a town south of Moscow. Valery is over sixty and doesn't speak English, only Russian. Steinhardt described him as warm, keenly interested in science, but not an academic in the usual sense.

As Steinhardt exchanged e-mails with Valery, using Google to translate, it seemed to confirm that the sample was indeed natural. Meanwhile, the case against slag was also building. Around the summer of 2010, Bindi found stishovite inside their sample. Stishovite is silicon dioxide—quartz and sand. It needs extreme atmospheric pressure to form. Embedded inside the stishovite was the quasicrystal grain. It would be next to impossible to artificially recreate the conditions necessary to produce such a sample as such atmospheric pressures only exist deep within the Earth's core or in cataclysmic processes in outer space.

By the time of this second confirmation, Valery had already offered to guide a contingent to the source of the quasicrystals, which he fortuitously still remembered—a stream in the Koryaks. In October that year, Steinhardt decided to take him up on the offer.

Who would fund such a trip? It cost in the order of \$150,000. Federal grants were out of the question and organisations like National Geographic and the American Museum of Natural History had their own agenda. To make matters worse, Princeton was in the middle of a fund-raising drive and forbade Steinhardt from approaching any donors associated with it. Steinhardt asked his contacts to ask their contacts and pass it forward. Finally, a donor, who Steinhardt preferred to remain anonymous, agreed to take care of the funding.

After assembling a 15-person team including Italian, Russian, and American researchers, organising a meet-up in Princeton to

see if the team clicked, wading through a morass of paperwork for a journey to the Autonomous Okrug of Chukotka, they were finally ready to hunt for quasicrystal grains.

Neither Steinhardt nor Bindi know where to begin to describe their trip to the stream and back. They recall eating mushrooms and enormous salmon plucked from the stream, firing Kalashnikovs on vodka bottles, hearing tales of bears (“The claim was if you walked in groups of three or more they wouldn’t bother you”) dealing with regular engine trouble and working in an exotic land.

Listening to Steinhardt at 1 a.m. with an undercurrent of thrill in his voice at the recollection, it doesn’t feel right to attempt to parse in data points what this journey meant to him or Bindi.

But had they found the quasicrystal sample? When would they know?

Bindi, who “has the best eyes” spotted what he thought was a quasicrystal grain the very first day at the stream. A few days later, they began to find grains with faces apparently the shape of a decahedron, which caused some excitement. The form suggested it was a quasicrystal with ten-fold symmetry, but as Steinhardt tells it, it turned out to be pyrite—Fool’s Gold.

After gathering enough material, the expedition party moved back to Anadyr, the easternmost town in Russia and had a closeout scientific meeting to get everyone on the same page. At the end, only Bindi believed that they had more than a one per cent chance of finding something, because he had liked that grain on the first day.

As it turns out, they did find grains that were quasicrystalline, but they didn’t know it until Bindi confirmed it in his lab weeks later in August.

“That was an amazing moment,” Steinhardt said, “because this was a wild goose chase and suddenly we had the wild goose.”

The 120 grains are dispersed among labs in Princeton, Caltech, the Smithsonian, Italy, and Russia. Of these, nine have been confirmed to be quasicrystalline. The story of those grains is both grand and mysterious.

The grains were forged in our solar nebula 4.5 billion years ago, around the time the earth itself was new-born, through the process that is yet not known. They were attached to a meteorite that crashed to earth some 15,000 years ago.

If this mineral with forbidden symmetry was present at the birth of the solar system, what else are we missing? How abundant are quasicrystals in the galaxy?

Pulling on one loose end of solid-state physics had led to new geology and mineralogy, which led to meteorites and the formation of the solar system. It led to the first natural quasicrystal, icosahedrite, and the extra-terrestrial body hosting it—khatyrka. Now, in yet-to-be published results, the researchers are looking at other meteorites to understand how to look for related metallic phases (not necessarily quasicrystals) and the formation of planets.

Steinhardt wouldn't say more, but Bindi wrote me an email: “I am recently reading a lot about the possible mineralogy of other planets of our Solar System. Who knows? Maybe there could be a planet where quasicrystals are more common than ordinary crystals.”



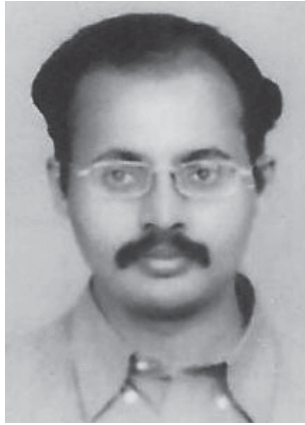
BEST SCIENCE & INNOVATION STORY

BY
JAIMON JOSEPH
Runner-up

**WHY JP SINGH IS EVERY
INDIAN FARMER'S BEST FRIEND**

Yahoo Originals
12th Nov '13

Jaimon Joseph



Why JP Singh is every Indian farmer's best friend

Jaimon Joseph worked for more than 13 years with Network 18 Television and became Editor for Science and Technology at CNN IBN. He is now an independent journalist who both writes and produces video documentaries.

Why JP Singh is every Indian farmer's best friend

How did an unassuming Varanasi farmer and school dropout come to be sought after by farmers, praised by experts and awarded by the government for his famous seeds?



JP Singh, the farmer whose innovations have won him fans and several awards.

I'm in Varanasi, looking for the house of JP Singh.

Spirituality soaks everyone and everything in Varanasi, also called Benares and Kashi - the holiest of seven holy cities in

Hinduism. Key to the founding of both Buddhism and Sikhism, home to Tulsidas and Kabir and one of the oldest living cities in the world.

Stepping out of Varanasi railway station early in the morning though, there's none of that mature tradition on display. It's just another small town bursting at its seams. Roads with minds of their own that wander away from intersections. Autos, jeeps and buses jutting out haphazardly, all waiting for the day's first passengers.

At Rajatalab, an inconspicuous market crossing about an hour away, the rush is gone. Everyone seems to know the house of JP Singh, the beejwala. But no one's in a hurry to get there. Thirty minutes of waiting and five minutes of arguing later, we're on our way. The roads are narrow and cobblestoned, winding around years of haphazard constructions.

A railway crossing happens. Then suddenly, there are green fields on both sides. Groups of girls flit past, grey salwar kameezes neatly pressed, white dupattas daintily clipped, all cycling in tandem to school. Their mothers are already at work, leading buffaloes out to pasture, drying out dung patties they'll burn in stoves later. The city is suddenly a distant memory. Fifteen minutes later I'm outside his house.

This is a man who's been awarded by two successive Presidents - in 2002 by President APJ Abdul Kalam and in 2009 by President Pratibha Patil. In May this year, Minister for Agriculture Sharad Pawar picked him for the Plant Genome Saviour award. In September, he hosted scientists and farmers from South India, the US, Brazil, Haiti and Indonesia.

His claim to fame? He develops indigenous, high-yielding and disease resistant varieties of plants. So far, he's perfected more than 460 types of paddy, 120 of wheat, 40 kinds of arhar dal and three of mustard. He's also grown a special type of wood apple or

bel, one that yields 8-10 fruits in a single bunch, multiplying harvests for poor farmers.

One million farmers in about seven Indian states swear by the seeds he provides. He sells them for ₹30-40 per kilo, compared to the ₹200-300 that agents charge for genetically modified (GM) crops. Still, his crops outperform the GM ones on yield. And from their grain, farmers plant for the next harvest - something they can't do with a GM crop.

Yet, when Jai Prakash Singh walks out to greet you, there's no arrogance. Just the humility of years spent in struggle. The smile is warm and welcoming. But the eyes appraise you, check your worth - the instinct of a hard driving man, for whom getting results is important.

On the other side of the road, there's a big seed storehouse. On this side is a sprawling bungalow and on the porch, a number of cars. But they all belong to his brother - Chandra Shekhar Singh Raghuvanshi, a big shot seed tradesman and lawyer - says JP as he leads me out back, to a simple, single-storeyed concrete house that's been under construction for three long years. It is here, in an unpainted room that still has a floor lined with cowdung paste, that he tells me his story over a hot cup of delicious tea.

“We are five brothers and sisters. I'm number three. I was the one who was weak in school. I never passed my tenth standard exam in 1983,” says JP.

“Our father, Shitala Prasad Singh, was a primary school teacher. He was a strong, outspoken man, well known in the villages around here. He even stood for elections once. But he never became an MLA. He was too blunt for anything like that.”

In the 1970s, around the time of the Green Revolution, a busload of agricultural scientists came down to JP's village from the university in Pant Nagar. They asked if anyone wanted high yielding seeds and training on how to grow them. JP's father roped in his friends from the village and together, they reaped some of the biggest harvests ever reported in these parts. Later, Shitala Prasad became an agent for the National Seeds Corporation, with small shops in a few towns in UP.

“Since I was the school dropout, I used to hang out at his shop a lot, in the first few years after 1983. One day, a customer came in when Father wasn't around. He'd had successive bad crops, was under financial pressure. He wanted seeds that would guarantee a good harvest. I gave him a government variety called UP 2003, which was pretty hot around that time.”

A few months later, the man came back to Shitala Prasad's shop. He was beaming from ear to ear. He sought JP out and when he had his attention, he said he'd had the best harvest in his village. His money problems were gone and his relatives didn't think he was a loser anymore.

“That one incident changed everything for me. I was stunned to find that a simple seed could so dramatically change a man's fortunes. And after being treated as a no-good school dropout, I was elated to receive praise for a job well done. That's when I decided I'd experiment with seeds.”

JP got married in 1984, a year after flunking his Class 10 exams. He eventually fathered two daughters and two sons. But without a degree, he could never land a job or earn enough to sustain his family comfortably. Shitala Prasad's seed business soon ran into losses. A number of his shops closed down. And JP had to leave home for a while, making a living as best as he could, even if it meant working as a farm hand or labourer. But he

never forgot his dream. When he came back to Tandiya village around 1990, he picked up where he'd left off.

He would cycle 25 km up and down everyday, to and from the Banaras Hindu University. There was a senior scientist there, a Dr. Mahatir Singh, who was working on hybrid wheat varieties.



In his farm outside Varanasi JP Singh continues to work on new strains of crops.

JP went just to watch him at work.

“He'd open the grain pod of a desi variety with pincers, remove the stuff inside, clean the pod with a chemical and then fill it with germinating grain from another, higher yielding wheat plant. In a few weeks, the original plant would put forth much larger, heavier ears of wheat than it normally would. We'd get a hybrid plant with a higher yield.

“I didn't have his expertise, or access to the chemicals he used. So I just messed around with the plants in my own field. I'd open their pods, and remove two of the three tiny flowers inside. I'd replace those with miniscule flowers from a higher yielding variety. Somewhere along my fumbling around, I managed to whip up a robust strain that performed better than its siblings. That was my first discovery - I called that strain Mahesh.”

All the wheat varieties JP has today - Dollar, Samrat, Viraat,



JP Dollar, JP Samrat, JP Viraat and the other wheat strains JP has developed.

the whole JP series - are offshoots of that first strain Mahesh, developed around 1991.

“From then on, I'd simply identify plants that grew larger, or faster, or gave higher yields than the rest and segregate their seeds. Those seeds I'd plant in a separate plot in the next season - and then again segregate the best performing plants. Over time, they've given me the hundreds of varieties I sell today - all champion performers. All products of careful selection.”

Unknown perhaps to JP, different scientists have different takes on his claims to fame. Dr. KP Singh is a retired professor from the Chaudhary Charan Singh Haryana Agricultural University in Hisar, Haryana. He's been associated with JP Singh for close to 15 years. He's also well known in academic circles as a reputed plant geneticist. He reveals an angle to JP's story that not many might know about.

“In the '70s and '80s, there was a bunch of geneticists in India, myself and Dr. Sanjay Rajaram [wheat specialist and Padma Shri awardee] included, that was researching high yielding varieties of wheat. We collaborated with institutions in Ukraine and Mexico, collected plant material, did gene modifications and got some outstanding test results in India. Curiously, not many in the Indian bureaucracy paid much attention in those days. We had a load of high potential seeds on our hands and a government supremely dis-interested in supporting them. So we donated those seeds to farmers.”

Dr. Singh believes that the spectacular yields that JP and other rustic plant breeders in UP are witnessing now might be a late byproduct of solid scientific work done decades ago in Indian labs.

Dr. Bhim Singh Dahiya was Director of Research at the same university till a few years ago. Today, he is Chief Coordinator of Research at Kaveri Seed Company in Hyderabad, a private firm with a ₹900 crore annual turnover. He agrees in part with Dr. Singh.

“Way back then, India had poor technology, low access to resources and poor seeds. The Agriculture Ministry was focusing on all rounder seeds - that would give consistently high yields in all sorts of climates and conditions, if given generous doses of fertiliser and pesticide. That aim unconsciously biased the way we collected our data and the way we evaluated our seeds.”

“No two farms have exactly the same type of soil. Different parts of Uttar Pradesh can have dramatically different water tables, salinity and fertility. Crops developed by scientists like Dr. KP Singh were tailor made for specific soil and climate conditions - they'd deliver average yields in certain places but outstanding yields where other crops might not survive. That's why they were ignored by the government and why Dr. Singh ultimately decided to give them away.”

“Today, the tables are turned. We've reached a tipping point in the amount of fertilisers and pesticides we can use. In the amount of land and irrigation we can provide with conventional methods. As a country, we do have access to money and latest technology. What we need now are seeds bred to survive and thrive in differing conditions. Particular seeds for particular soil types. The sort of work that was ignored years ago.”

But Dr. Dahiya is clear that JP has every right to the credit he gets today. “The first plant breeders in the world were illiterate farmers. Not scientists. Before the green revolution, the seeds our farmers picked and grew for centuries were selected purely on their suitability and performance in differing conditions. That's exactly the sort of work JP is doing now. It takes years of

observation and selection to propagate a particular trait in a plant. JP does it so well, his seeds are better than some developed in our research institutions.”

Just how much better is pointed out by Dr. Jagveer Rawat, a scientist formerly with the Krishi Vigyan Kendra in Panipat and now with the Lala Lajpat Rai University of Animal and Veterinary Sciences in Hisar. He met JP in 2002.

“In 2002-2003 and 2003-2004, JP's plants were put under observation on the Krishi Vigyan Kendra farm. Both Dr. KP Singh and Dr. Bhim Singh Dahiya were part of the study. One particular strain of wheat, called the X-JP 52, was found to be exceptionally rich in iron content. It was also almost immune to damage from water-logging. After almost two years of work, about 16 cultivars - or plant strains which showed promise under test conditions, were taken away by the Chaudhary Charan Singh Haryana Agricultural University for further studies.”

Dr. Rawat himself was so impressed with JP's seeds, he got his own NGO, the Manav Kalyan Sewa Samiti, to work with him. He's now lobbying with the Planning Commission to get low cost farmer innovation centres established in every district in India. The idea is to get such centers to work with enterprising local farmers like JP Singh - to cross pollinate ideas that could drive India's next green revolution.

By 1997, JP Singh's seeds were the rage in many parts of Uttar Pradesh (UP). But he'd give them all sorts of names, whatever caught his fancy at the time. In 1997 Dr. Ram Kirpal Singh, the Krishi Zilla Adhikari, happened to visit his farm. Tagging along was an AIR radio crew.



The seed varieties that farmers flock JP Singh's home for

“Live on air, Dr. Singh told me he'd never seen ears of wheat so big, even on farms abroad. Still on air, he suggested I give my own name to the varieties I develop - JP, for Jai Prakash.”

The idea caught on. Before long, farmers were clamouring for JP seeds.

When business began to look like it would take root, JP did what people expected him to do. He would suddenly takeoff. Between 2000 and 2002, he'd take furtive breaks from work - sometimes 2 days, sometimes a whole week. He'd tell his wife he was away visiting friends.

What he was actually doing was state hopping. Bihar, Bengal, Jharkhand, Chattisgarh, Maharashtra - he visited them all. He'd travel without reservation in general compartments, sleep on the pavements, eat at the homes of acquaintances. They'd also introduce him to farmers in remote villages in those states.

With signs and gestures, he'd tell those farmers he was looking for unusual seeds - wheat or rice with high iron content, plants that were drought resistant, that took very little time to grow, or ones that delivered bumper harvests. He'd wrap those seeds in small bundles and like squirrels that carry back nuts to their nests, JP Singh would carry his precious seeds back home to UP.

There, on a paltry one bigha plot his uncle had left him in his will, JP would plant the seeds he'd gathered - and begin the process of observation and segregation all over again. When his father died, JP got another five bigha, which were immediately devoted to more experimentation. Another few bighas were borrowed from his mother and other uncles. There was never enough money to buy land outright - but just to work with his seeds, JP was prepared to scrounge around.

Sometime after 2002, JP started the Nav Gram, Nav Ratna Yojana. The idea was to adopt nine villages within a 50 km radius. In each of those villages, people would try to focus on at least one important initiative. One village could focus on animal husbandry - breeding high milk-yielding Murrah buffaloes, for example. Another would concentrate on developing a seed warehouse.

A third could work on cottage industries based around farm produce - for example - making biscuits from iron-fortified wheat. A fourth would set up an Agromart, a one-stop mall for everything you need in agriculture.

JP's movement began to take root. Starting on June 8 every year, he'd take out a walkathon to all the nine villages he'd adopted around Tandiya. Hundreds of folks joined in, most simply for the fun of it.

For nine days and nine nights, they'd be on the road - sleeping

in the open, sharing food cooked on village hearths. They'd talk about the problems of each village, till the fields together, lobby the panchayats, the District Collector and the Block Development Officer for funds. Not content to do the exercise only in Uttar Pradesh, he branched out.

In 2003, he did a padayatra in Gurgaon, just outside Delhi. In 2004, he was in Haryana's Kathal district. In 2006, Madhya Pradesh. The more places he went to, the more his fame spread. The more famous he became, the more his seeds came to be in demand.

Soon JP began to experiment with chemical-free organic farming. Crops don't grow well without a fortified diet to help them along. So JP Singh concocted his own mix.

"I'd take 10 kilos of cow dung, 2-4 litres of cow urine, 2 kg of jaggery, 2 kg of wheat flour, 2 kg of old mud from beneath a peepal tree. Add half a kilo of a chemical called Trichoderma. Top up the tank with water and stir, till the entire thing became a viscous slag. Then, I'd leave it out to dry."

"The dry powder is what I'd spread on my fields. I call it Jai Amrit Fertiliser. It promotes the growth of healthy bacteria and other living organisms, which help fix nutrients and enrich the soil. I've had bumper yields with that stuff on my fields. I dare any scientist to show me a chemical fertiliser that can do better."

It isn't an empty boast. The Gurukul, a residential school in Kurukshetra, Haryana, spread the stuff on 32 acres of their private farms and planted his own JP 1091 strain of wheat. They harvested 20 quintals of wheat per acre. JP claims the average yield in the area, with chemical fertilisers, is about 12 quintals per acre.

As we talk, JP's phone keeps ringing. Someone calls from

Satara in Maharashtra requesting a few quintals of seeds. Another chap calls from Itarsi in UP. Has the seed truck crossed the check posts, he asks. How much longer before it gets here?

To each caller, JP talks in that same polite, mellifluous dialect peculiar to this part of Uttar Pradesh. "Everything's on schedule", he assures. "Just hang on, the seeds will be there before you know it."

As he hangs up JP says, "This phone is my shop now. People keep calling from all over India. And I keep sending out my seeds. Isn't technology great?"

Even as he talks, young farmers from the neighbourhood sort through sacks of seeds in his living room. "Babuji, I'm sowing my crop rather late this year. Give me something that'll thrive despite that change," shouts one.

JP smiles.

Out in his fields in Tandiya village, JP proudly points out the plant varieties he peddles today. In the distance, an especially potent strain of wheat. Up towards the left, a strain of black rice. It's the sort that's popular in the North East and in countries like South Korea. But JP says he found this one in his own fields, just selecting and hoarding unusual seeds. "Just look at the colour. I even got the grain tested. The scientists say it's rich in iron," he says delightedly.

And yet, in all this success, there is a tinge of sadness.

"The crops this year didn't do as well as they should have. First, we didn't have a tractor. I sold mine when the family property was being redistributed among us brothers. A new one costs ₹4-5 lakh and I don't have that sort of cash. So this year, we tilled our fields using bullocks. Old style.'

"Then, we didn't have enough water at the right time. My submersible pump gave up the ghost this year. And we didn't have the money to get it repaired. Without water, the crops this year are slightly stunted. Their yield will probably go down too."

I ask him why he won't sell his seeds at higher prices. After all, they're champion varieties, ones that practically guarantee bumper harvests. Their GM competitors cost upto 10 times as much - and yet, people buy them.

JP Singh smiles when he hears my question. "I'm not in this game for the money", he says. "If it was just money I wanted, I'd have made it a long time ago.'

"I'm happy when farmers benefit from my seeds. I've never calculated if they'll cheat me, if they'll pass off seeds from my crops as their own. Some do, you know - but word gets around. Word of mouth is everything in this business. Nobody forces people to call my seeds by the names I've given them. But they do. Maybe it's because they trust me.'

"Money is important. But there's enough to go around. It's we humans who have to help other humans. That's humanity. That's what will save us all. That's probably why I keep my seeds cheap."

He tells me about his encounter almost 20 years ago with a sage, believed by everyone to be around 130 years old. "His name was Ram Dass, and he was so old, he moved on all four limbs - but he did move fast. He clambered up the rock he used as a seat. And before I could speak a word, this man who I had never met before, who could have known nothing about me or my visit, said calmly - I know why you've come. You'll help bring back Ram Rajya."

Ram Dass told JP he'd preserved documents 120 years old - texts written on parchment, minutes of meetings long since

forgotten. They were meetings of ancient sages in Kashi, laying a road-map for the return of Ram Rajya. Three or four days after JP met the sage, Ram Dass died. It was almost like he'd been waiting for JP to arrive. Before he died, he entrusted to JP the documents he'd been guarding.

“From ancient times, he said, there has been an unbroken line of storytellers. To them was given the task of telling the world a true story. Of how the sages cursed the royal traditions of kings and caused them to crumble. They were disgusted by the vile lives those emperors led. But their curse disrupted a system of law that had held the world together since the beginning of time. It was the beginning of massive upheavals around the globe. This age will pass away one day. And with it, will go the problems of our present world. But that will happen only if men know of the bliss that once existed on Earth. When they work for it and yearn for it with all their hearts. This is the time when leaders of all nations and faiths must unite. To hasten the return of Ram Rajya.’

“Sant Ram Das told me he was a storyteller. A custodian of ancient truths. A herald of the time to come. I didn't realise it then. But when he handed those withered parchments to me, he was passing on the tradition. I'm the storyteller now. I'm the one who has to bear witness to the world.”

A few minutes before I was to leave his house, JP Singh suddenly asked, “Bhaisaheb, what does one do to get a Nobel Prize?” I tried explaining to him the importance and perhaps the impossibility of snagging a Nobel. The educational intricacies, the need for peer reviewed work.

Midway through my soliloquy, I realised how hollow I must have sounded. I was preaching theory to a man who enjoys the

trust of thousands.

He heard me out patiently. Didn't interrupt, didn't demur. But there was that calm look in his eyes. City boys can talk all they want. But this farmer has his heart set on a Nobel. No one can tell him he can't have it.



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IN INDIAN JOURNALISM

· 2014 ·

BEST TELEVISION STORY

BEST TELEVISION STORY

BY
PRIYALI SUR
Winner

GIRLS IN BONDAGE

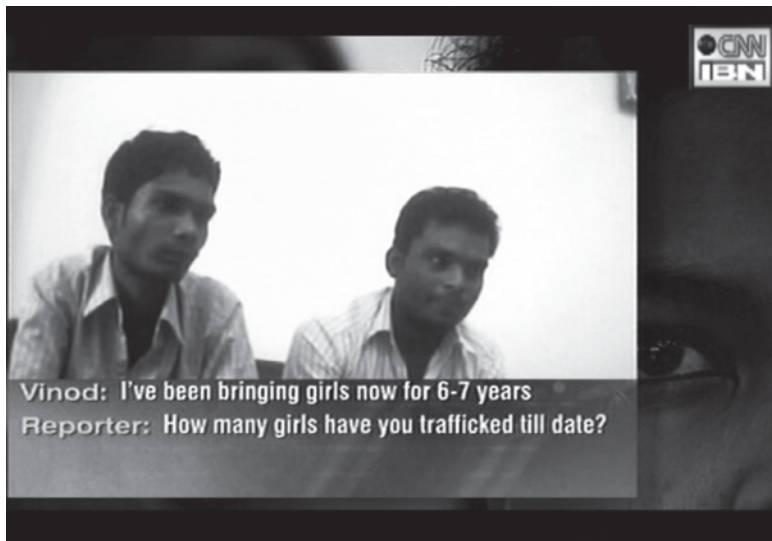
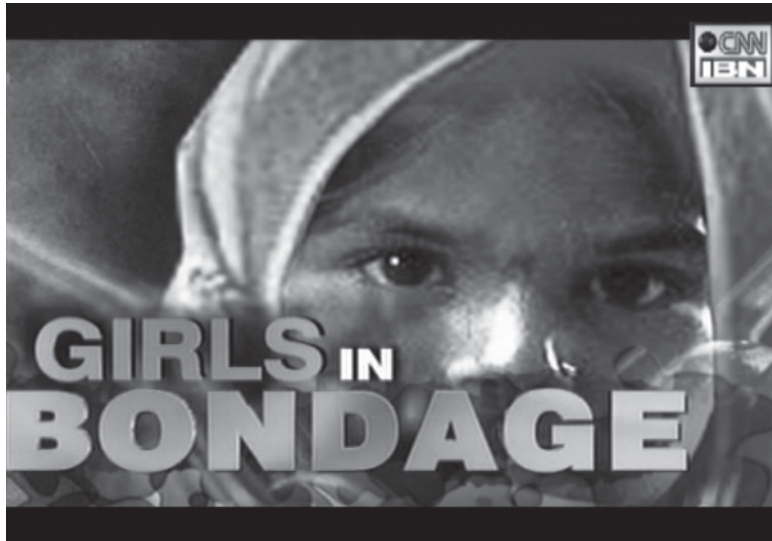
CNN-IBN
16th Oct '13

Priyali Sur



Girls In Bondage

Priyali Sur is a special correspondent and anchor with CNN IBN. She is also part of the 30 minutes team in the channel that produces long format news documentaries. Her main reporting areas are gender crimes, women rights and human rights violations.





BEST TELEVISION STORY

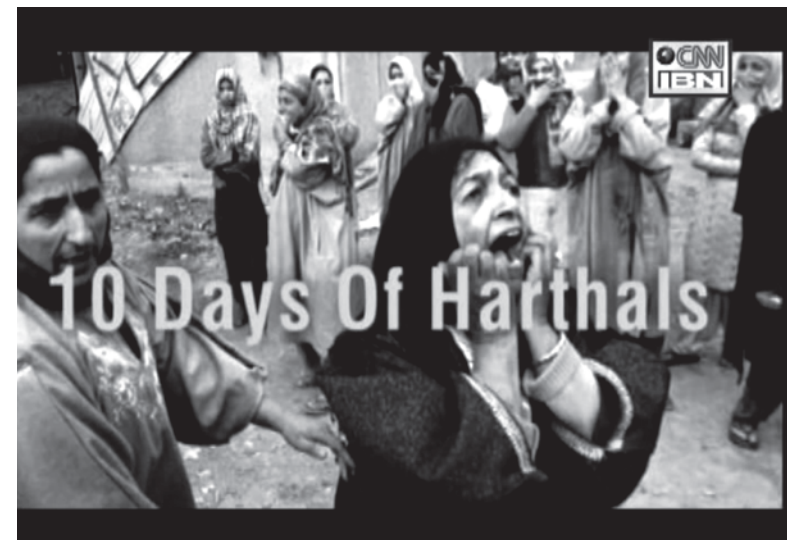
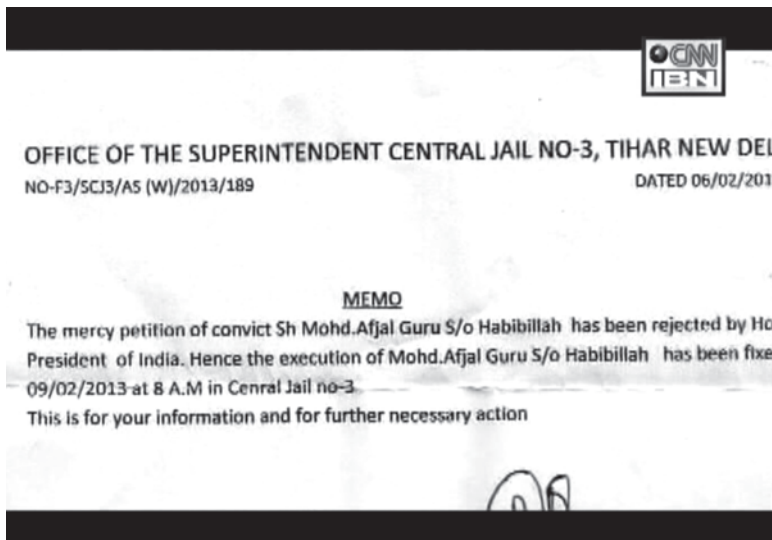
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ANUBHA BHONSLE
Runner-up

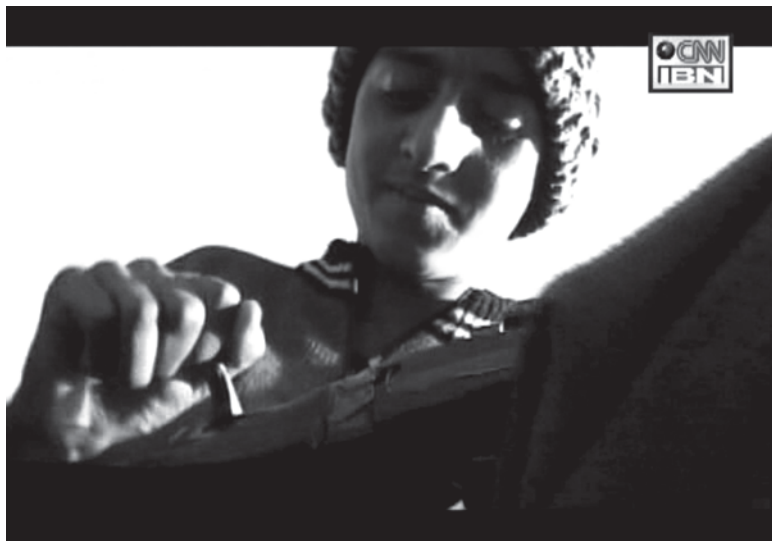
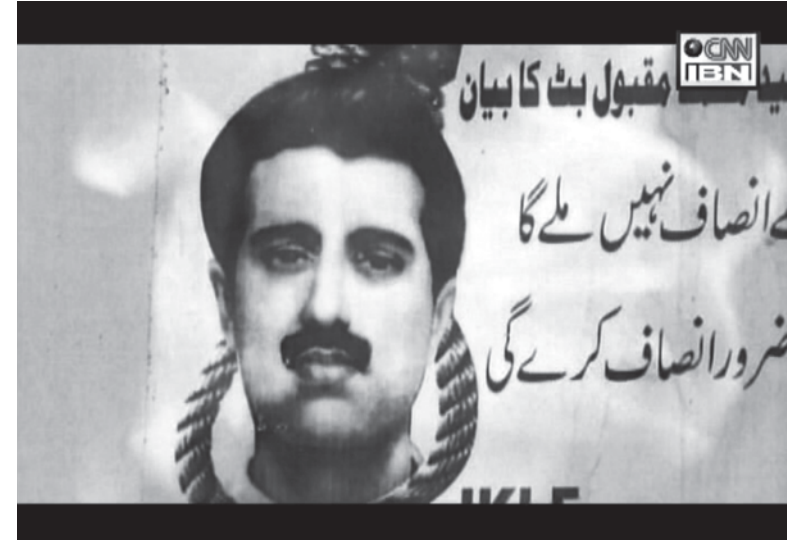
KASHMIR AFTER AFZAL

CNN-IBN
9th Feb '13



Anubha Bhonsle is a journalist, currently employed as Senior Editor with CNN-IBN. For the last 15 years her body of work has included in-depth reportage on development, women rights, human rights, and politics. She reports extensively from North East, specifically Manipur, Jammu and Kashmir and parts of North India. Her reportage has looked closely at human impact of conflicts and resistance movements on women and children. Anubha has been awarded the Ramnath Goenka Award for coverage of politics and matters related to governance, the Chameli Devi Jain award for her body of work in the aftermath of the Muzaffarnagar riots, Encephalitis in Gorakhpur, women in the armed forces. Her documentary and incisive work in Manipur has been commended at the New York Film Festival. Recently her coverage of the Uttarakhand flash floods was recognised by several awards.







“47 years in this profession.

Getting beaten up by communally oriented angry mobs,
getting beaten up by policemen who were doing lathicharge,
seventeen defamation suits at various levels,
none of which I lost because I had truth on my side.”

V. GANADHAR

Veteran Columnist

RedInk

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IN INDIAN JOURNALISM

· 2014 ·

THE BIG PICTURE

THE BIG PICTURE

BY

NARENDRA BISHT

Winner

MUZAFFARNAGAR RIOTS

Outlook

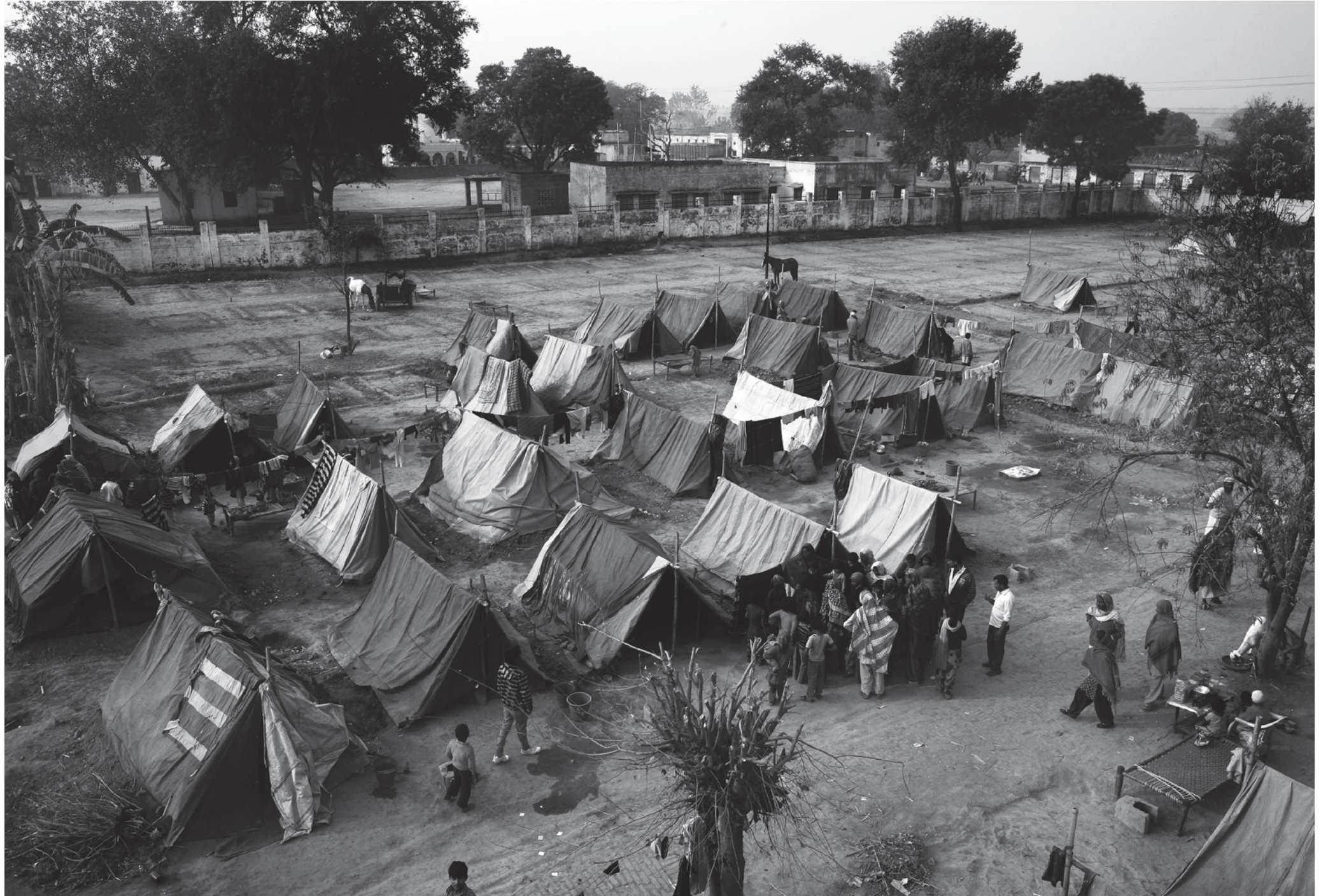
30th Dec '13

Narendra Bisht



Muzaffarnagar Riots

Narendra Bisht is Photo Editor with Outlook magazine. He picked up his first camera at age nine. Much to the dismay of his parents, he began to work at age 18 for a Dehradun-based newspaper. He completed a BA while working there and since then has shot for the India Today, The Times of India group, Dainik Jagran and wired agencies. He has covered the Iraq War, Post Tsunami scenario in Sri Lanka and the conflict in Kashmir.



THE BIG PICTURE

BY
RAJU SHINDE
Runner-up

ACID ATTACK VICTIM

Mumbai Mirror
5th Jul '13

Raju Shinde



Acid Attack Victim

Raju Shinde has over 14 years of experience in the field of photo journalism. He started his career with Hindi Newspaper. He is currently a Chief Photographer with Mumbai Mirror. He is also a winner of 2013 RedInk Award in The Big Picture category.



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· 2014 ·

BEST POLITICS NEWS

BEST POLITICS NEWS

BY
P R RAMESH
Runner-up

**BJP MAY FIELD
NARENDRA MODI FROM
VARANASI TO WIN OVER
UTTAR PRADESH**

The Economic Times
04th Jul '13

P R Ramesh



BJP may field Narendra Modi from Varanasi to win over Uttar Pradesh

P R Ramesh is the Managing Editor of Open. He joined Open in January, 2014. Before joining Open, he was with the Economic Times as its National Political Editor.

BJP may field Narendra Modi from Varanasi to win over Uttar Pradesh



The state had swayed in BJP's favour in the 1990s when the party approached the electorate with the message of Hindutva, but it has steadily slipped out of hand.

Narendra Modi is likely to contest the next Lok Sabha elections from Varanasi, a move that points to the strategy of BJP's presumptive prime ministerial candidate to help the party recapture its lost ground in the Hindi heartland.

Confirming the choice of the holiest of cities for Hindus, after months of speculation over constituencies, including Lucknow and Allahabad, a senior leader said the Gujarat chief minister was willing to step out of his comfort zone to make a larger impact by contesting from the most populous state of Uttar Pradesh, which accounts for 80 Lok Sabha seats. The constituency is currently held by former BJP president Murli Manohar Joshi, who is likely to be offered an alternative seat as he makes way for Modi.

BJP, which had won just 10 seats in Uttar Pradesh in the 2009 polls, is banking on a campaign around Modi in the state, said the leader, who did not wish to be named.

The state had swayed in BJP's favour in the 1990s when the

BJP may field Narendra Modi from Varanasi to win over Uttar Pradesh

party approached the electorate with the message of Hindutva, but it has steadily slipped out of hand.

Upper caste voters

This was after the ascendancy of the Mulayam Singh Yadav-led Samajwadi Party and Mayawati's Bahujan Samaj Party. The Congress' meltdown that helped the BJP's growth in the last decade has been working in favour of the two regional outfits.

But with Modi entering the fray in Varanasi, BJP's strategists expect the upper caste voters to return to the party fold, especially since both the SP and the Congress aggressively woo the numerically preponderant Muslim community in the constituency.

"The upper castes, which had gravitated to other outfits, will get a new option with the BJP coming up with a credible face in the state after a long time. Modi's candidature will increase our capacity to reach out," said a BJP leader, adding that the party will also get an opportunity to flaunt Modi's identity as a leader from the Other Backward Classes. "The non-Yadav backward voters that supported the BJP in the past will also find Modi appealing," the leader said, pointing to Bihar, where the BJP is using the same ploy to undercut JD (U) leader and Bihar Chief Minister Nitish Kumar's hold over the community.

Modi, who has been struggling to live down the anti-Muslim riots under his watch in Gujarat in 2002, has fashioned his campaign around good governance and economic development. BJP's strategists, however, believe the subtext of communal and caste appeal will resonate with the party's traditional voters in not just Uttar Pradesh but the entire Hindi heartland.

Modi's candidature can be troublesome for the ruling SP, which is eyeing the entire chunk of Muslim votes, a BJP strategist said, reasoning that in a direct combat between the BJP and the Congress, the Congress could emerge as a claimant for the community's votes.



BEST POLITICS NEWS

BY
BHAVYA DORE
Runner-up

**US GROUP THAT
OPPOSED MODI STARTS
CAMPAIGN AGAINST HIM**

Hindustan Times
02nd Mar '13

Bhavya Dore



US group that opposed Modi starts campaign against him

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The group that opposed Narendra Modi's talk for students of Wharton school in March is now asking American universities to screen a documentary on the 2002 post-Godhra riots as part of a 15-day campaign against the Gujarat chief minister later this month.

American universities are being encouraged to screen Final Solution, the 2003 Rakesh Sharma documentary on the riots which pointed to state complicity, which was banned for a brief period in India.

The original protesting group, spurred by University of Pennsylvania professors, is now reaching out to other universities in the US to build on the anti-Modi momentum in a campaign between April 15 and April 30.

Eight universities, including New York University, Ohio State University and the University of California, Berkeley have already planned screenings, according to the group's Facebook page, with more expected to join. The University of Pennsylvania already screened the film last month, in the wake of the cancellation of the invitation to Modi.

"The thinking is simple — the campaign is to reiterate a firm opposition to Narendra Modi and the politics he represents, and particularly to ongoing efforts to repress memories of the 2002 genocide in Gujarat," said Ania Loomba, one of the Upenn professors, via email.

After Loomba and others opposed the invitation for Modi to speak at the Ivy League University's business school at the Wharton India Economic Forum, the organisers cancelled his talk, which sparked off a chain of events, including other speakers and sponsors backing out.

An online petition originating in Philadelphia has also been set in motion, to hold Modi accountable for human rights violations and has garnered nearly 100 signatures so far.

"We, concerned citizens from India, the United States, and around the world are outraged at the massive effort by Narendra Modi, the chief minister of the Indian state of Gujarat, to erase from public memory the 2002 genocide that occurred in this state," it reads.



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BEST POLITICS FEATURE

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By
KRISHN KAUSHIK

Winner

**INSIDE MAN:
THE CONVENIENT OPINIONS OF
ATTORNEY GENERAL GOOLAM VAHANVATI**

The Caravan
05th Jan '13

Krishn Kaushik



Inside Man

Krishn Kaushik is a staff writer at The Caravan. He covered hyper-local news, among other things, in New York City while learning to be a better reporter and writer at Columbia University's Graduate School of Journalism. He grew up in Delhi and has worked at the United Nations for nearly a year, writing stories about the UN's impact in various rural parts of the country.

Inside Man: The convenient opinions of Attorney General Goolam Vahanvati



| ONE |

In the cosmos of the Indian establishment, the Supreme Court is a central galaxy. Its brightest stars, the senior advocates, can be seen gliding across the plaza outside the chief justice's courtroom with an imperial hauteur, in their distinctive robes and “monkey suits” (as lawyers call the waistcoat worn by judges and seniors of the bar). Around each of these seniors orbits a small entourage: not only an assistant (usually carrying phones and bags), but three or four juniors, along with one or more independent advocates—lawyers who have not yet attained seniority, and work with the seniors on a case-by-case basis.

In an era when fortunes can be made and lost on the whims of government policy (or the manipulation thereof), billions of rupees hinge on the decisions of the Supreme Court, which has become the ultimate arbiter in innumerable disputes between

corporates and the state. Today, the country's top lawyers, who charge upwards of ₹10 lakh (₹1 million) for a single court appearance, are some of the capital's most powerful figures, Delhi's closest equivalent to the Wall Street investment bankers that Tom Wolfe once dubbed “masters of the universe”.

It is not uncommon for these stars to quietly fade, due to age or exhaustion. But it is a rare sight when one of the masters gets pulled down to earth, even if briefly, by scandal or misfortune—a spectacle that draws rapt attention from the merchants in Delhi's power mandi.

When the spectacle involves not just any top lawyer, but the master of the masters—the Attorney General for India, the legal custodian of the public interest of 1.2 billion people, who occupies a constitutional position designed to stand above the petty intrigues of politicians and corporates alike—it is a matter of grave concern that stretches far beyond the capital, for what falls is not just the man but the office.

So on 27th February, all eyes were turned toward an otherwise unremarkable courtroom in Delhi's Patiala House, where Goolamhussein Essaji Vahanvati was appearing before a Central Bureau of Investigation (CBI) special court. Vahanvati, the thirteenth Attorney General for India—the Union Government's top law officer, with an office on the second floor of the Supreme Court and the right to an audience in any court in the country—was not arguing before the bench. He was standing in the witness box, answering questions about his role in what was, at least for a time, the country's biggest scandal—the fraudulent allocation of 2G cellular spectrum. It was the first time in India's history that the country's attorney general had deposed as a witness in a trial court.

Over the course of two days, Sushil Kumar, the defence lawyer

for the prime accused in the 2G scam, former communications minister Andimuthu Raja, peppered Vahanvati with questions. In his cross-examination, Kumar intended to demonstrate that Raja had sought and received the approval of Vahanvati, who was then the solicitor general, while making the decisions that investigators alleged were at the heart of the scam.

The file outlining the revisions to license allocation procedures had been sent to Vahanvati for his signature three days before the contested licenses were issued, and Raja had argued that Vahanvati's opinion gave legal sanction to his policies, though the law ministry had earlier declined to grant that approval. Furthermore, Kumar argued, Raja had consulted with Vahanvati as he formulated a new process for the awarding of licenses, suggesting that Vahanvati, who was promoted to attorney general in 2009, had been well aware of the decisions that were now being characterised as a scam.

Claims of this sort—that others in the government knew exactly what he was doing—form the backbone of Raja's defence, which maintains that he has been unfairly prosecuted for decisions that the cabinet had not seen fit to overrule. But Raja contends that Vahanvati's role was even more significant: Prime Minister Manmohan Singh and other members of the cabinet had discussed these issues, and even seen files outlining the plans, but it was Vahanvati, Raja says, who gave legal imprimatur to the policy.

While Vahanvati stood uncomfortably in the witness box, parrying Kumar's questions with careful replies, Raja made a display of his disagreement. At one point, near the end of the first day of questioning, Raja interjected in a voice loud enough to be heard by all of the 60 or so people inside the courtroom, exclaiming, "He is telling all the lies and I am the one going to jail." Vahanvati, who had thus far avoided looking at Raja, turned

File notings from 7th January 2008, showing Raja's request that the solicitor general's opinion be obtained, and Vahanvati's response: "What is proposed is fair and reasonable."

toward him with obvious indignation, in disbelief that the tarnished minister would say such a thing in court.

There was more at stake for Vahanvati than mere embarrassment: the judge in the case, OP Saini, had the capacity to add Vahanvati to the list of accused if his testimony suggested a deeper involvement or complicity with Raja's actions. But even Kumar, Raja's lawyer, admitted this was not likely, and after two days in the witness box, Vahanvati was excused. He had managed to avoid any obvious missteps, and consistently depicted his role in the scandal as that of a minor bystander, whose legal opinions had been confined to narrowly drawn procedural questions.

Still, his appearance before the CBI special court marked a low point in his tenure as a law officer of the Union government, which has not been without its share of controversy. While much attention has been paid to the 2G scam, and thus to the role Vahanvati played, it is not the only case in which his opinions may have lent legitimacy to questionable decisions. In recent

weeks, his name has surfaced in news reports as one of the government officials involved in watering down a CBI status report in the coal allocation scandal; in several other matters, Vahanvati has been accused of tailoring his interpretations of the law for the benefit of influential corporate houses.

Vahanvati is not the first attorney general to find himself mixed up in the messy partisan work of the government he serves; many Supreme Court advocates lamented that the independence of the government's law officers had been corroded by political pressure over the past three decades. But Vahanvati has been more controversial than his predecessors, and not only because this government has been beset by allegations of spectacular corruption.

Over the past four months, while I was conducting interviews with Vahanvati's friends and associates, fellow senior advocates, and Delhi's corps of fixers and lobbyists—who occupy the intersection of government, business, media and law—the attorney general was rarely out of the news, and the news he was in was rarely good. One of his colleagues told me, admiringly, that Vahanvati was a man with “quick solutions to complex problems of law”; this makes him invaluable for a government whose trysts are mostly with crisis. But even feats of legal agility can't keep an incorrigible client out of trouble forever, and eventually the lawyer is left holding the bill.

Before he was appointed as the Union government's solicitor general in 2004, at the start of the first United Progressive Alliance (UPA) term, Vahanvati had been the advocate general of Maharashtra, a position to which he rose after almost three decades arguing before the Bombay High Court. “Every lawyer's dream is to practice in the Supreme Court,” Vahanvati told me

when I met him in January. “Earlier I had been coming to Delhi a lot, but I had never had a sustained exposure to Delhi. This was a great change in my life.”

In person, Vahanvati is unfailingly polite and courteous, almost to the point of primness. During our only meeting, at his official residence on Delhi's Motilal Nehru Marg—next to the Taj Mahal Hotel—he spoke so quietly and calmly that I could have heard a caterpillar crawling across his meticulously organised desk.

At one point in our conversation, which lasted about an hour, he produced a small red diary, about six inches by three inches, inside which he had noted, in small and careful handwriting, citations of past decisions, important cases, and legal arguments. It was, he explained, one of the diaries he had carried in his pocket during his early years at the Bombay bar. Back then, he said, junior lawyers spent hours and hours sneezing over dusty volumes of old case law. “One sentence would come out after three to four hours of research,” he said, adding that today's juniors don't understand how to properly draft their briefs. “Now,” he sighed, “everything comes readymade. But I always tell my juniors that unless you research yourself, you will never really improve as a lawyer.”

His friends and critics alike concur that he is a relentless worker, obsessively concerned with details and diligent in his preparation. Janak Dwarkadas, a senior advocate at the Bombay High Court and a friend of Vahanvati, said he always had “complete mastery over the facts” of the case at hand. “He has all three qualities needed to be a competent lawyer,” Dwarkadas said. “Excellent memory, excellent command over facts and law, and an excellent ability to put his point across to the court.”

After becoming a senior at the bar in 1990, Dwarkadas told me, Vahanvati was involved “in every single significant case” at the

Bombay High Court. “Don’t quote me on this, because it will make me sound foolish,” one of Vahanvati’s close friends, a Supreme Court advocate, told me, “but if there is a genius at the bar today, it is Vahanvati.”

Harish Salve, one of the country’s most prominent lawyers, and a former solicitor general, has known Vahanvati for 30 years. The attorney general has “a very sweet, very understated and gentle style” in the courtroom, Salve said. “He is definitely a fine lawyer.”

“When you are a law officer,” former solicitor general Gopal Subramaniam told me, “you have a relationship with the state, as it is your client, but you are also an officer of the law: you have to promote the law, and the rule of law.” The government’s law officers—the attorney general, solicitor general, and the additional solicitors general—have always been political appointments. But they are expected to give independent legal advice to the government they serve, even while they represent that government before the courts. “If you have a government that believes in you and has faith in you,” Salve said, “you can tell them, ‘Look, if you do this, it won’t look nice.’ And they will say, ‘OK, we won’t do it.’” As the attorney general or the solicitor general, Salve said, “you’re really the conscience-keeper of the government.”

But the government must first decide whether it wants honest advice, or merely legal ingenuity. “Independent advice from a good law officer can mitigate the number of legal cases against the government,” one senior Supreme Court advocate told me. But too often, he said, “their opinions are now used to provide a legal sanction to policies that are in a gray area.”

This, in essence, is the case made by Vahanvati’s detractors: that as the solicitor general, and then the attorney general, he has more often done what the government asks than what the law

requires. One former law officer, who worked under both Vahanvati and the previous attorney general, Milon Banerji, told me that while Vahanvati “might have a better knowledge of the law” than his predecessor, “Banerji had greater integrity and dignity.”

Prashant Bhushan, the activist lawyer and Aam Aadmi Party leader, who is involved in several lawsuits related to the 2G scandal, said Vahanvati was “a competent and intelligent lawyer—smooth in his working style and quite effective in court.” But Bhushan charged that Vahanvati’s opinions in several cases showed he was “willing to give convenient advice, suiting a minister or ministers, who use it as a cover for all their dubious dealings, just as Raja did.”

“A convenient attorney general is very useful to the government,” Bhushan said. “And therefore they go all out to protect him.” One corporate lobbyist who knows Vahanvati suggested a similar, if more dismissive, summary of his role: “He’s the government’s alibi.”

After arriving in Delhi in 2004 as an outsider, Vahanvati rapidly learnt to negotiate the city’s networks of power. Few expected that he would succeed Banerji as attorney general in 2009. The consensus was that the job would go to Gopal Subramaniam, then an additional solicitor general, who was a favourite of both Banerji and the then law minister, HR Bhardwaj, and also close to the Gandhi family. But after Bhardwaj was replaced as law minister, Vahanvati was given the post.

“Within a few years he understood the power structure and made key contacts,” the law officer who worked under Banerji and Vahanvati told me. One of these is Ahmed Patel, the political secretary to Congress president Sonia Gandhi. Patel, whose name is whispered with reverence in off-the-record Delhi, was consistently described by people who know Vahanvati as his most

powerful ally in the capital. “Of course he knows how to navigate Delhi now,” Vahanvati’s friend, the advocate, responded when I asked him about the attorney general’s political savvy. “I told you: he’s a genius.”

But before he came close to Patel, Vahanvati already had a powerful friend in Anil Ambani—whose name came up immediately when I mentioned to any senior lawyer that I was reporting a profile of the attorney general. It’s not clear when Vahanvati first met Ambani, but dozens of people testified to their friendship, which dates back to Vahanvati’s time in Mumbai. Another law officer who worked with Vahanvati described him as “very close” to Ambani, while a senior bureaucrat who worked under Finance Minister P Chidambaram told me that Ambani and Vahanvati had often come together to have lunch with Chidambaram.

For all his proximity to power, the soft-spoken Vahanvati keeps a low profile and attracts very little public attention. “He’s the kind of guy you could pass by without noticing,” another lobbyist said. But Vahanvati occupies a critical junction in the capital’s circuits of influence: almost every controversial matter—the policies and decisions that later get challenged in court, disputed by ministries, or probed by the CBI—will likely pass through the attorney general’s office before it’s resolved.

| TWO |

Vahanvati began his legal career at the Bombay High Court in 1972, as a junior to his father, Essabhoy Gulamhusein Vahanvati. “I was in great awe of my father,” Vahanvati told me. “Ever since I was a kid, I always wanted to be a lawyer.”

Vahanvati said that his paternal great-grandfather had been a builder of wooden ships—hence the family name: ‘vahan’, in

Gujarati, is a ship. “That probably explains why my mind is so wooden,” he quipped. His grandfather had subsequently made a great fortune in the shipping business—in part as an agent for British merchant companies in Mumbai—but “lost all of his money” during the Great Depression.

The senior Vahanvati joined the bar in 1943, six years before Goolam was born. “My father was an extremely honest man,” Vahanvati told me. “No judge ever asked him to justify a statement which he made in court.” Rafique Dada, who served as a junior to Essabhoy in the early 1970s, remembered him as an honest lawyer and a “great raconteur” who was “one of the most loved members of the bar.” After the court had adjourned for the day, Dada said, the lawyers would congregate in the library, where Vahanvati “was so popular that many people gathered only to listen to him.”

In 1975, when Vahanvati was only 26, his father died of an ulcer. “He died very suddenly,” Vahanvati said. “He was very young, and my life changed. I just had to put my head down and work. I worked 18 hours a day.” Dada remembered the young Vahanvati as “carefree, but very sharp”, and “an outstanding lawyer”. Dinyar Madon, who was among Vahanvati’s first juniors in the early 1980s, recalled that he used to get “60 to 70 matters each day”, and worked longer hours than anyone else in the office.

Vahanvati told me that his father’s early death had served as a motivation to succeed. “Can I be honest with you?” he said. “Basically, I felt always that my father didn’t deserve to die so young. There was always a feeling that I have to bring out his name. It’s very difficult for me to describe, but that was my driving force.”

Vahanvati took pains to emphasise that he had little interest in personal enrichment. “I am not a money-minded person,” he told me. “What can you do with money? If money is all you want, then

don't be a law officer." He recounted a scene from the Supreme Court, where other senior advocates were showing off their pricey watches. "I said, 'You guys are wearing on your wrists more than what I can earn in a month.'" While the desks of senior advocates are typically littered with Montblancs and other luxury pens, Vahanvati called my attention to the compulsively neat row of perfectly aligned pens and pencils on his table. "Look at my pens," he said. "All of them are presents, and they are all cheap highlighters and little things that keep me going." Later I was told by both Vahanvati's son, Essaji, and one of his good friends, the lawyer Raian Karanjawala, that he had "an impressive collection" of expensive writing instruments, suggesting that he might have slightly exaggerated his indifference to material possessions.

(At the end of our interview in January, I suggested to Vahanvati that we should meet again, and he agreed. But he declined all subsequent requests for an interview, including more than 10 attempts to contact him for comment in the three weeks prior to publication.)

"He doesn't call himself a Delhi person," Vahanvati's son told me. "He comes back to Mumbai during every vacation." In Mumbai, Vahanvati owns one house, which he has given to his son, and rents three apartments in a building called Joyeden, a block from the Taj Hotel in Colaba. (According to the trust that governs the building, the rent for two of these apartments is only ₹490 per month, while the third rents for ₹64.) In the 1990s, before he became advocate general, Vahanvati sold an apartment he owned in Pune, and bought a two-acre plot outside the city; in 2003, he purchased two adjacent acres. Janak Dwarkadas, who worked with Vahanvati on many occasions, lives in a farmhouse next door to Vahanvati's property. He described it as "like a seven-star resort", mentioning a stream that runs across the land, two bungalows, Jersey cows, sheep, and plants and trees from

around the world. "He's a collector by nature," Dwarkadas said, and recalled walking around the property with Vahanvati, who "knew the name and details of every tree."

At the end of 1999, Vahanvati said, he received an unexpected call from Vilasrao Deshmukh, the newly elected Congress chief minister of Maharashtra, offering him the post of advocate general. Vahanvati told me that he didn't know Deshmukh, but "he had heard about me." At that point, according to Dwarkadas, Vahanvati was one of Mumbai's top advocates. "He had a flourishing writ court practice and a good commercial practice, which catapulted him to the advocate general's post," Dwarkadas said.

One of Vahanvati's good friends in Delhi told me that Vahanvati had called him shortly after the Maharashtra elections in 1999. Vahanvati said he was being considered for the advocate general's post and asked his friend, who was close to senior Congress leader Madhavrao Scindia, then the party's in-charge for Maharashtra, to recommend him. "I was holidaying in Rajasthan, I remember, and he called me and said can you talk to Madhavrao Scindia. I spoke to Scindia and told him that if you're considering Vahanvati, he will be a good choice."

Before becoming the state's advocate general, Vahanvati had already become friendly with Sharad Pawar, whose Nationalist Congress Party was Deshmukh's coalition partner. In the mid-1990s, Vahanvati told me, Pawar had been fighting a defamation case against a newspaper that alleged he had ties to the Mumbai underworld. Vahanvati had often worked with JN Gagrat, who was Pawar's lawyer, and when he heard about the case from Gagrat, he volunteered to approach the newspaper himself and settle the controversy. "Without going to the court, I spoke to the newspaper. I said, 'This is wrong, what you've done, there is already an injunction.' So they apologised. I came to know him briefly then." As advocate general, Vahanvati

represented the Maharashtra State Electricity Board in the state's long-running tussle with the American energy company Enron, whose involvement in the Dabhol power project was the single largest foreign direct investment in India at the time, and the subject of massive controversy, much of it centred around Pawar. Later on, Vahanvati appeared several times for Pawar in a case against the Board of Cricket Control in India, which Pawar headed from 2005 to 2008.

A solicitor from Mumbai who has known Vahanvati for several decades told me that he once confessed that it had been his dream as a child to be driven around in an official car with a red beacon—a status symbol not accorded to state advocates general. His chance arrived when the UPA government came to power in 2004; at that point Vahanvati had been an advocate general for four years, under Deshmukh and his successor, Sushil Kumar Shinde, who now serves as the Union home minister.

Many senior advocates in Mumbai told me that Vahanvati was a top legal mind, whose skills as a lawyer made him an obvious choice as solicitor general. In Delhi, however, opinions were less kind—or more cynical—and many people told me there had been substantial lobbying behind Vahanvati's appointment. A person close to Bhardwaj said he was only concerned that Milon Banerji be made the attorney general, and had no opinion about who should be selected as solicitor general. According to this person, “a Mumbai corporate lobby” had pushed to have Vahanvati appointed.

Many people told me that Bhardwaj was not fond of Vahanvati, and had argued against his appointment as attorney general in 2009. “Bhardwaj thought Vahanvati lacked the stature at the bar” that was required of an attorney general, the former law officer who worked under Banerji and Vahanvati told me. A senior Congress member of parliament, who said “Bhardwaj couldn't stand Vahanvati”, told me that Pawar and Shinde had influenced

the decision to promote Vahanvati, which took place only after Bhardwaj was replaced at the law ministry by Veerappa Moily. (Bhardwaj, who is now the governor of Karnataka, did not respond to multiple requests for comment.)

A few days after Vahanvati's promotion in June 2009, the well-connected journalist Prabhu Chawla, now the editor of the New Indian Express, told the lobbyist Niira Radia that Vahanvati was “an old friend of mine” during a taped phone conversation. “He is very close to Anil Ambani, everyone knows about it,” Chawla continued. “Anil Ambani, Nusli Wadia, and our power minister—kya naam hai?—Shinde, they all went for him for the appointment. Bhardwaj never liked him. Bhardwaj would not have made him the attorney general agar Bhardwaj law minister hotaa (if he was still law minister).” (When contacted for comment, Chawla said Vahanvati was a friend, and declined to be interviewed for this story.)

A close associate of Anil Ambani acknowledged Ambani's friendship with Vahanvati, but insisted that the two men were not unusually close, and that their acquaintance was of relatively recent vintage—after Vahanvati came to Delhi. Ambani, this person argued, naturally had dealings with many powerful people in government, and had only come to know Vahanvati through Ahmed Patel; Vahanvati, he said, was close with other corporate leaders as well—closer, this person said, than he was to Ambani.

| THREE |

On the wintry morning of 28th January 1950, the first chief justice of India, along with the chief justices of 14 high courts, the advocates general of eight states, the prime minister and other cabinet ministers, and a handful of diplomats and foreign envoys, gathered in what was then called the Chamber of Princes in the

Parliament building. (The hall is now used as a library.) The proceedings commenced with a speech by Motilal Setalvad, the first Attorney General for India, who had assumed his post two days earlier when the Constitution came into force.

“The writ of this court will run over a territory extending to over 2 million square miles, inhabited by a population of about 330 million,” Setalvad said. “It can truly be said that the jurisdiction and powers of this court, in their nature and extent, are wider than those exercised by the highest court of any county in the Commonwealth or by the Supreme Court of the United States.” His address, which lasted only a few minutes, marked the inauguration of the Supreme Court of India.

Though the attorney general rarely makes headlines, it would be hard to overstate the significance of the position—it is, as Gopal Subramaniam told me, “one of the most important constitutional posts in India.” The Constitution specifically mentions that the president must select for the post a person “qualified to be appointed a Judge of the Supreme Court”. Therefore, Subramaniam said, the attorney general “must be a man of such fearless character, equivalent to that of a judge—with the ability to give fearless advice to government, to the Parliament, to the judiciary.” The same qualities are sought in the solicitor general, he said, “to be equally independent of the executive.”

Neither the attorney general nor the solicitor general have fixed tenures; they serve as long as they have “the pleasure of the President”, which means they can be replaced whenever the government wishes. Salve said that while the law officers are political appointments, that does not mean that they are not expected to “rise above their brief”.

“It is a position of great responsibility,” said PP Rao, a senior Supreme Court advocate. “It requires independence, ability, and

integrity.” Rao and Subramaniam both praised the first four men to occupy the office, from Setalvad through SV Gupte, whose tenure ended in 1979. They were, Rao said, “men of absolute independence”, but “thereafter, things have been different.” Since then, Rao said, “political considerations prevailed” within the government, and persons with what Rao called a “servile mindset” had been appointed. “You cannot afford to have a pliable person there,” Rao said, “or the very objective of the office is defeated.”

In late February, a day before Vahanvati’s deposition in the 2G special court, I met his son, Essaji Vahanvati, in Mumbai. Essaji, named after his grandfather, is a partner at one of the country’s top firms, AZB Partners, and looks about a decade younger than his 33 years. It was the first of our two meetings, both at his firm’s offices in the Express Towers at Nariman Point. We sat in a conference room named “Sycamore” and looked out over an impressive view of the sea. Essaji described his father as “an extremely generous person”, very dedicated to his work, compulsive about reading and preparation.

He recalled that his father had been aware, before the 2004 elections, that if the Congress came into office, he might be appointed the solicitor general. When I asked about his sense of Vahanvati’s friends in politics, Essaji said, “In Delhi he did get to know and work with a lot of people over there. He’s known PC [Chidambaram] for many years, just to give an example ... I think he’s close to Ahmed bhai [Patel] also.” After his father had become advocate general, a different sort of visitor started appearing at their house. “There were a lot more government people who had to come,” he said. “And when they come they don’t come in one or twos, they come with their whole band of people.” When Vahanvati was a senior advocate in the Bombay

High Court, Essaji said, his friends were more likely drawn from the corporate world, or even Bollywood—"the people he worked for". I mentioned that a lot of people said Vahanvati had a close relationship with Reliance; did he remember how that came about? "Reliance, yeah," he said. "I am not so sure about what happened exactly." But as a state's advocate general, he continued, "a lot of people tend to end up meeting you."

When Anil Ambani's name came up—as it inevitably did—in my conversation with Prashant Bhushan, he argued that Vahanvati should have recused himself from any matters involving Ambani or his companies. "Vahanvati told me himself that he is a close friend of Anil Ambani," Bhushan said. He pointed out that Vahanvati continued to give opinions, or appear on behalf of the government, in cases where Ambani's interests were at stake. "That, itself, is a conflict of interest."

Mohan Parasaran, the current solicitor general, argued that talk of this sort, about corporate interests exerting influence on law officers, had been grossly overstated. To be selected as a law officer, Parasaran pointed out, "you must have had a good private practice as a leading lawyer—these industrialists would have been your clients at some point in time." Former clients often become friends, he said, and "it is difficult to cut off these relationships: I can't say, 'Don't come and meet me,' no?" But this did not mean the law officers could not issue objective opinions in cases concerning friends or former clients. "See, these days nobody can avoid controversies," he said. "If you're holding a public office, it's easy for anybody to accuse anybody." Parasaran made it clear that he felt the allegations against Vahanvati were unfair, and said it was too easy for others to assume that identifying the beneficiaries of a given legal opinion provided evidence of favouritism. "If you go and drink milk

under a palm tree," Parasaran concluded, "people will think you're drinking arrack."

Harish Salve, who returned to his lucrative private practice in 2002 after three years as the solicitor general, agreed that it was facile to assume a given opinion had been issued for the benefit of one party. "Why a law officer holds a particular opinion—does he do it to please the government or does he do it because he believes it—these are matters on which you cannot comment unless you have all the details," Salve said. But he also suggested that he would find it difficult to be objective about matters that concerned his own friends, and mentioned Mukesh Ambani and Jet Airways chief Naresh Goyal. "If you ask me about Reliance, I will tell you, 'Don't ask me,' because my relationship with Mukesh is very deep, so my opinion may not be objective," he said. "If I became attorney general, and a file came dealing with aviation, I would decline it, because anything I say is going to either hurt or help Naresh. One of the reasons I would never become a law officer now is that Reliance is in almost every business in the world, so if a file came to me which would either benefit or hurt them, I would have to say no."

Whatever the nature of Vahanvati's relationship with Anil Ambani, there are at least two cases where Vahanvati authored opinions pertaining directly to Ambani's companies. In these cases, his opinions were both controversial and beneficial to Ambani's interests. The first of these concerned one of the companies implicated in the 2G scandal, Swan Telecom; Vahanvati's opinion forestalled an investigation into the company's ownership patterns, though the CBI later determined it had been set up as a front company for Ambani's Reliance Communications.

By January 2009, one year after the contested 2G licenses had been issued by the Department of Telecommunications (DoT),

multiple legal challenges had been mounted against the allocation process. Several of these concerned Swan, which had been awarded licenses for 13 service areas.

According to two complaints filed with the Prime Minister's Office (PMO), from the Congress Rajya Sabha MP Dharampal Sabharwal, and Janata Party president Subramanian Swamy, as well as a writ petition filed in the Delhi High Court, Swan Telecom had been in violation of the guidelines for issuing mobile licenses. These specified that a company already in possession of spectrum in one circle could not own more than 10 per cent of another company applying for additional spectrum in the same circle, as Swan had done. As Swamy wrote in his complaint, "The documents available disclose that on March 2, 2007, when Swan Telecom applied for Unified Access Services Licences, it was owned 100 per cent by Reliance Communications and its associates."

On 12th January 2009, an internal DoT memo, responding to these complaints, asked whether "Ministry of Corporate Affairs may be requested to examine the matter," to determine if Swan's ownership pattern had violated the guidelines. In a subsequent memo, dated 5th February 2009, AK Srivastava, a deputy director general in the DoT, suggested that the opinion of the solicitor general should be sought, because he was representing the government in the High Court. A note on the same page from Siddhartha Behura, the telecommunications secretary, suggested: "Through the Ministry of Law we may refer this matter to SG." Three days later, a note by Raja suggests the question could go straight to Vahanvati: "May be sent to SG directly since the cases are represented by him before the TDSAT and other judicial forums including HC [High Court] Delhi."

The file was not sent to the law ministry. Instead, Vahanvati

sent an opinion, issued on his own letterhead, on 25th March 2009. It argued that the ownership of Swan at the time of its application—in March 2007—was irrelevant, because Reliance had voluntarily divested its shares in the company in December 2007, nine months after applying, but one month before the licenses were issued. Therefore, Vahanvati concluded, "the file shows that there has been a full consideration of all relevant material and the conclusion that the applicants fulfilled all the necessary conditions cannot really be faulted."

In an interview with *Mint* in February 2011, Vahanvati defended his opinion, saying, "All the facts relating to Swan were known. DoT had gone through the shareholding of Swan and given them an okay." (A subsequent CBI investigation would show that all the facts were not yet known, revealing an intricate web of cross-holdings designed to disguise the full degree of Reliance's involvement, for which three Reliance executives are now on trial.)

Vahanvati's opinion, according to later notings in the file, was twice cited to block additional requests that the matter be referred to the corporate affairs ministry for further examination. The Comptroller and Auditor General (CAG) report on the 2G scandal admonished the telecommunications department for consulting Vahanvati rather than the finance or corporate affairs ministry, and characterised the department's reply—based on Vahanvati's opinion—as "evasive".

In late 2011, the CAG began to circulate a draft report indicating irregularities in the government's allocation of captive coal blocks to private firms, which soon developed into the scandal unfortunately known as "Coalgate", with a price tag said to be even larger than the 2G scam. One portion of the report focused on Anil Ambani's Reliance Power, which had been given

permission to divert surplus coal allocated for an ultra-mega power plant (UMPP) at Sasan in Madhya Pradesh to another power plant nearby. The CAG later estimated that the financial benefit of this concession for Reliance Power would be ₹29,000 crore (₹290 billion) over a period of 20 years.

After the CAG draft report was circulated, an empowered group of ministers headed by Pranab Mukherjee asked Vahanvati for an opinion on whether the Sasan decision had provided an undue concession to Reliance. Officials from the coal and power ministries argued that the decision should be cancelled, but Vahanvati disagreed. In April 2012, the empowered group of ministers cited Vahanvati's opinion—which the Financial Express called “a big relief to the government”—and opted to allow Reliance to go ahead.

The story is a complicated one, and it reflects badly on nearly everyone involved. It began in 2007, when Reliance Power won a bid to operate a UMPP at Sasan; according to the terms of the contract, three captive coal blocks would be allotted, to be used exclusively for power generation at the Sasan plant. Soon after the contract was signed, according to a senior official in one of the concerned ministries, Reliance Power “started moving in Madhya Pradesh.”

In October 2007, Reliance Power signed a memorandum of understanding with the Madhya Pradesh government to develop another power plant at Chitrangi, which would produce electricity using purchased coal. That same month, Shivraj Singh Chauhan, the chief minister of Madhya Pradesh, wrote to the prime minister requesting that Reliance Power be allowed to divert “excess” coal from the captive mines designated for Sasan to the plant at Chitrangi. This would increase the profit margins on the electricity sold by the Chitrangi plant, since its tariff had

been set based on the assumption of higher costs to acquire coal.

An empowered group of ministers headed by then power minister Sushil Kumar Shinde approved Chauhan's request for Reliance in August 2008. Their decision stipulated that the excess power generated by surplus coal should be sold at rates determined by competitive bidding (which would keep prices low). But as the CAG report notes, the tariff for Chitrangi had already been set, so the savings accrued to Reliance rather than consumers. The group of ministers, the senior bureaucrat told me, had effectively “tweaked the policy to suit Reliance”.

But Tata Power, which had also bid for the Sasan UMPP, filed a petition challenging the decision before the Delhi High Court in January 2009. Tata argued that the government had retrospectively changed the terms of the contract to benefit Reliance, and that it would not have withdrawn its competing bid if the surplus coal provision had been in place. (Vahanvati defended the government before the High Court, which dismissed Tata's petition; the matter is now pending before the Supreme Court.)

In December 2011, an empowered group of ministers once again considered the Sasan decision. According to the senior official, Shinde had started to have second thoughts: “After the CAG report came out, Shinde got scared,” the official said. “He thought as the power minister that he would be made the scapegoat, and he wanted to withdraw the allotment to Chitrangi. But Pranab bulldozed him.”

The power and coal ministries had been asked to formulate a blanket policy for surplus coal, which could then be applied to any future UMPP projects. Mukherjee, the senior official said, requested that the ministries “keep Sasan in mind”. But in response, they proposed that any surplus coal must be sold to Coal India at cost, citing an existing policy that does not allow

private companies to earn profits from mining coal. Noting that the original allotment for Sasan had specified similar conditions, the senior official said, the ministries recommended reversing the original decision granting Reliance permission to divert surplus coal to Chitrangi. “We formulated a policy, but it was withdrawn within three days,” the senior official said. “There was pressure from Pranab to ratify the policy that was used for Sasan, and we were told to consult the attorney general and come back.”

Over the next several months, the senior official said, the policy was discussed between the power, coal and law ministries. In response to their queries, the law ministry and Vahanvati raised additional questions and responded to them; questions whose answers, according to the official, had direct implications for the Sasan affair. “We had asked about four questions,” the official told me, “and he answered about ten.”

The new questions and answers, the official said, were “totally in line with what Reliance had wanted”. Vahanvati “interpreted that the clause was open for the government to decide” whether surplus coal could be diverted. “We said no, the clause did not say that.” Furthermore, the official argued, the documents specified that any excess coal could only be transferred to a subsidiary of Coal India. “He misinterpreted that the excess coal could be given to a subsidiary of Reliance.”

When the empowered group of ministers convened in April 2012 to consider the excess coal policy, the coal and power ministries presented their position “in black and white” alongside Vahanvati’s opinion. “We were overruled,” the official said, “but the CAG report says what we were saying.”

Since then, a senior Supreme Court advocate told me, “Every time Sasan comes up in court, Vahanvati starts sweating when he has to appear.”

| FOUR |

For all the sensational coverage it received, the 2G scandal—arguably the defining scam of our time—essentially consisted of a disarmingly dull sequence of complex policy decisions. Few doubt that A Raja, in his role as communications minister, was responsible for initiating and executing the contested changes to the spectrum allocation process. The controversial question, which dominated two years’ worth of media reports and parliamentary discussions, concerned the involvement of others in the government: if they were aware of Raja’s intentions, were they complicit in some or all aspects of the scam, or did they choose to ignore his actions? Or had he misled the prime minister and several others about the true nature of his plans?

The intricate details, involving many subtle alterations to government policies and procedures, recorded in a trail of bureaucratic memos and file notings, are fantastically boring. But the basic outline of the scandal can be summed up by a few key decisions, whose effect was to tilt the playing field in favour of certain companies—including Unitech Wireless, whose proprietors were close to Raja, and Swan Telecom.

After the communications ministry received an unprecedented number of applications for mobile licenses and spectrum in late 2007, Raja altered the rules by which those applications were to be processed. First, he changed the cutoff date to an earlier point, eliminating more than 300 of the 575 applications; second, he shifted the criteria for determining the order in which licenses would be granted. The now-controversial “first-come, first-served” policy was already in place, but Raja altered the definition of “first-come” so that the date applications had

originally been filed was no longer relevant. Qualifying companies would be awarded licenses in the order in which they fulfilled the conditions in the letters of intent issued by the ministry; in short, whoever deposited their cheques first would get spectrum first.

Many of the individual steps in the evolution of Raja's new policies are laid out in a Department of Telecommunications (DoT) file, number 20-100/2007-AS-1/Part C, perhaps the most widely publicised "secret" document of the past decade. It begins with a memo from a director inside DoT, dated 24th October 2007 suggesting that the "Learned Solicitor General" provide his opinion on the proposed methodology to allot licenses and spectrum. After a letter to this effect was sent to the law ministry, the law minister, HR Bhardwaj, responded that given the importance of the case and its complexity, "it is necessary that the whole issue is first reviewed by an empowered group of ministers", after which the "legal opinion of the AG [Milon Banerji] may be obtained."

Raja found this disagreeable, and sent a letter to the prime minister protesting that there was no need for an empowered group of ministers to decide the issue, since it did not involve "new major policy decisions" but only procedures for implementing existing policy. Still, in the first week of December 2007, Raja went to meet Pranab Mukherjee, then the foreign minister, who chaired an existing group of ministers on spectrum issues. He was accompanied by Vahanvati, who as solicitor general was defending the DoT in a lawsuit filed by the Cellular Operators Association of India (COAI), a lobby group that represented Airtel and Vodafone, among others, challenging the criteria for awarding additional spectrum.

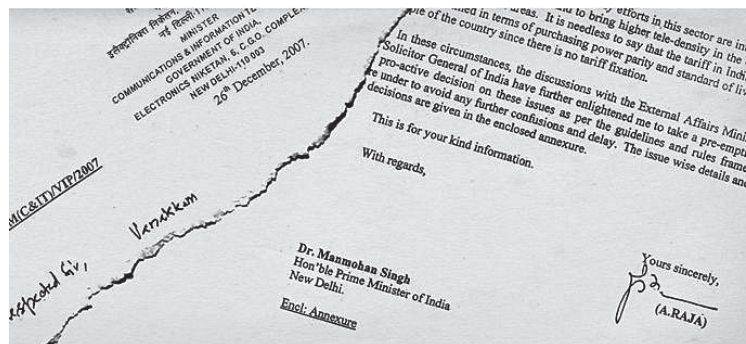
The meeting was a brief one, and no minutes appear to have

been prepared. But Vahanvati presented Mukherjee with a note, detailing the government's response to the COAI lawsuit, which was later sent by Mukherjee to the prime minister. Under the heading "The issue of new telecom licenses", Vahanvati described the "first-come, first-served" policy in a way that left room for Raja's alteration, stating that applicants would be granted their licenses and spectrum once they complied with the letter of intent (LOI) conditions.

A letter sent by Raja to Manmohan Singh on 26th December and copied to Mukherjee informed the prime minister that Raja had "several discussions" with Mukherjee regarding spectrum allocation, and that Vahanvati "was also called for the discussions to explain the legal position." A memo from Raja, attached to the letter to the prime minister, provides an account of the revised procedures—including, critically, the new criteria for awarding licenses according to the order in which applicants meet the required conditions: "An applicant who fulfils the conditions of LOI first will be granted license first, although several applicants will be issued LOI simultaneously. The same has been concurred by the Solicitor General of India during the discussions."

Thus far, Raja's revisions to the allocation procedures had not yet been announced. In early January 2008, the DoT prepared a press release that described the new policy for determining the order in which licenses would be granted; the same release revealed for the first time that the cut-off date for eligible applications had been retrospectively moved forward, disqualifying all those who applied between 25th September and 1st October 2007. Rather than submitting the release to the law ministry—which had earlier demanded the issue be referred to an empowered group of ministers—Raja made a note on the file, instructing the telecom secretary to "please obtain Solicitor General's opinion since he is appearing before the TDSAT and

High Court Delhi”, a reference to the COAI lawsuit.



Telecommunications minister A Raja's letter to Prime Minister Manmohan Singh, which referred to discussions with Vahanvati.

On 7th January 2008, the telecom secretary, Siddhartha Behura, went to Vahanvati's official residence with the file, including notings and annexures, and a draft of the press release. On the page of the file following Raja's note, under a handwritten "S.G", Vahanvati wrote: "I have seen the notes. The issue regarding new LOIs [i.e. the allocation of new licenses] are not before any court. What is proposed is fair and reasonable. The press release makes for transparency. This seems to be in order."

Behura returned with Vahanvati's signature on the file, which Raja interpreted as granting legitimacy to his modifications in the license allocation procedure, as described in the press release—whose publication, three days later, set the scam in motion.

During Vahanvati's deposition before the CBI court on 27th January of this year, Sushil Kumar pressed the attorney general with a series of questions intended to demonstrate that he could hardly have been unaware of Raja's revisions to the policy, given that he had been consulted at several earlier junctures, and had signed off on the release of the press note whose contents included the two most significant revisions: the new cut-off date

for applications and the redefinition of the terms by which "first-come, first served" would be implemented.

Kumar's questions about Vahanvati's signature on the file lasted several hours. Vahanvati repeatedly insisted that his note on the file only approved the release, not the policies it described. Behura had called him, Vahanvati said, only to ask whether any developments in the COAI lawsuit might obstruct the release of the press note and the issuing of new licenses, after which Behura asked that Vahanvati record his opinion in writing.

Vahanvati said his note and signature did not convey his approval of any policies, which, he said, he was anyway unaware of. His replies to Kumar were a mix of exasperation and lawyerly precision, and featured many variations on a single phrase: "It is wrong to suggest that the Minister did not ask my opinion on the press release ... It is wrong to suggest that my opinion was sought through this file on the proposed course of action to be taken by the DoT ... It is wrong to suggest that I am wrong on this point."

Though Vahanvati's written reply begins with the phrase "I have seen the notes", he contended that this statement did not in fact refer to the file in its entirety, but only to the notes on the page preceding his signature, instructing the telecom secretary to obtain his approval on the press release. Two pages earlier, the file contains a memo from Raja to the prime minister, which states in bold text that Vahanvati had concurred with his redefinition of the criteria to determine "first-come, first-served". But in response to a question from Kumar, Vahanvati stated that he had not concurred, and that he was not aware Raja had claimed as much, because he did not refer to any earlier pages in the file before giving his approval to the press release.

Neither Kumar nor the lawyers for the other accused asked Vahanvati why he had given his approval to a file that had not been routed through the law ministry, a possible violation of the

government's rules of service for law officers. (Raja and Vahanvati both believe, albeit for slightly different reasons, that this was legitimate.)

A few weeks before Vahanvati's testimony, I had asked one of his colleagues whether it was unorthodox for the solicitor general to offer his opinion on a file sent to him directly. The colleague defended Vahanvati, but also said, "The thing is, it was not as though this was the first time the file had been sent to him. He was being consulted on a regular basis." This would suggest that Vahanvati had been given many opportunities to acquaint himself with the file. In his testimony before the 2G court, however, Vahanvati stated, "I had not seen the other pages of the file."

With regard to the policies described in the press release, Vahanvati argued that he was not aware that the cut-off date had been changed from 1st October 2007 to 25th September 2007, as the release mentioned only the latter date. His statement that "what is proposed is fair and reasonable" and that "the press release makes for transparency" was not, he maintained, an acknowledgement of the revised procedure for implementing "first-come, first-served", even though the release states that "who so ever complies with the conditions of LOI first" will be granted a license.

The senior Congress MP told me that within the government, "it was commonly admitted that Vahanvati vetted the press release." In its chargesheet, the CBI accused Raja of having "fraudulently" altered the press release after obtaining Vahanvati's approval, by removing the final paragraph before it was published. The Congress MP, however, pointed out that this was irrelevant. "Raja has been hit even for the first paragraph."

The CBI had also accused Raja of fabricating the meeting with Vahanvati and Mukherjee that he described in his letter to Manmohan Singh, stating that "the investigation has not revealed any discussions with the SG". In 2011, however, Vahanvati's office revealed in response to a Right to Information query that the meeting had indeed taken place, raising the question of whether Vahanvati failed to mention it when questioned by CBI investigators.

For Raja's defence, the meeting took on particular significance; Kumar proposed to Vahanvati that the meeting proved "policy and procedures were formulated by the DoT, after discussion with you and the then Minister for External Affairs." Vahanvati denied this was the case, and insisted there had been no such discussion; he merely presented his note to Mukherjee, who went through it "very carefully and asked me some questions". Kumar, in a dramatic flourish, suggested that the details of this meeting would show that Raja had not acted alone, but that the truth would never come out because only three people were privy to the details. "One is him," Kumar said, and pointed to Vahanvati. "One is him," pointing to Raja. "And the third is at a position where we cannot reach"—in Rashtrapati Bhavan.

Kumar clearly believes that Vahanvati's role was sufficiently substantial to exonerate Raja of any charge that he deceived the government about his intentions. "Either Vahanvati is as guilty as the minister," Kumar told me after the deposition, "or he is as innocent as the minister—this is my conclusion." It may not be the case, as Kumar implies, that Vahanvati approved Raja's actions with full awareness of their implications. But the

available evidence, combined with Vahanvati's unconvincing account of his own role, suggests either an implausible lack of comprehension or, less charitably, a negligence of his obligation to provide accurate legal advice.

A CBI investigator involved in the case told me that "based on the facts that emerged from the investigation, there was no criminal evidence against Vahanvati," though many had speculated that he might be named an accused. But, the investigator added, "It could be speculated that there was passive complicity with Raja." Vahanvati, the investigator said, was close to Anil Ambani, and "it seemed this was all done to help Swan."

According to the investigator, the then CBI director, AP Singh, could frequently be heard complaining aloud that the agency had come under intense pressure from the Prime Minister's Office to limit the boundaries of the investigation. Two other people involved in the case—another member of the investigating team and an advocate representing the government—told me separately that the PMO had also worked to ensure Vahanvati would not be among the accused, an allegation repeated by the senior Congress MP. (AP Singh refused multiple requests to be interviewed for this story.)

One person who seemed confident Vahanvati had failed to maintain his distance from Raja was the lobbyist Niira Radia, whose taped conversations, leaked to the media in 2010, contain several disparaging references to the attorney general. On 11th June 2009, in a call with her client Ratan Tata about her attempts to secure dual-technology spectrum in Delhi for Tata, she explained that she had met Raja along with Anil Sardana, then the managing director of Tata Teleservices. Raja wanted to grant the

available Delhi spectrum to Anil Ambani's Reliance Communications before any other player came into the fray, Radia said, and she told Tata that Raja would obtain legal assistance from Vahanvati, who was then defending the license allotments before the telecom disputes tribunal. "I think Raja will be trying to get in the attorney general," Radia said.

In another conversation, five days later, Radia told K Venugopal, an editor with The Hindu Business Line, that Vahanvati had advised Tata not to fight Raja's decision. "I know how Vahanvati has called Anil Sardana, and all of us, and said you know, don't oppose minister, don't oppose this, we'll ensure you get your spectrum," Radia said.

Later in that same conversation, Radia adds, "I've been party to a meeting, I mean, where Vahanvati has told Anil Sardana, 'Do not oppose Mr Raja ... We will make sure you get your spectrum, I'm giving you my word, isn't my word good enough?' ... I walked out of that meeting with Anil Sardana, I said Anil do not allow this."

When I contacted Sardana, he insisted the meeting Radia described had never taken place, and he "had no familiarity with the person mentioned". But a person close to Sardana confirmed to me, in two separate conversations, that Sardana said Vahanvati warned him that if Tata tried to block Raja's decision, they would never get spectrum in Delhi. To date, they have not.

| FIVE |

During my interviews with more than half a dozen current or former law officers, nearly all discussed the difficulty of

maintaining one's independence when faced with pressure from the government, at whose pleasure you serve. "Your government is a client—they want some opinions that promote whatever is their policy," the current solicitor general, Mohan Parasaran, told me. "What I feel is, you can bend, but not break. You can bend to a reasonable extent, but you can't compromise on your conscience and integrity."

The question of how far you can bend before your integrity has been compromised is a subjective one; given the realities of Indian politics, each law officer surely has their own sense of what constitutes an acceptable balance between political expediency and constitutional morality.

Still, it would be hard to deny that in recent years, that balance has shifted in the wrong direction: if the government does not respect the independence of the law officers, then the law officers it gets will not be independent. The more that political pressure is successfully brought to bear on important decisions, the more it will be seen as acceptable, and the more it will continue to succeed.

But as Harish Salve told me, it is almost impossible to definitively prove that a specific legal opinion reflects the influence of outside pressure rather than inner conscience; even if there were evidence that pressure had been applied, a lawyer could plausibly argue that he had reached the desired conclusion independently. Nor, for that matter, can an opinion be shown to be "wrong", except insofar as it misrepresents the facts or the law; the question of which facts and laws are relevant to a given case is invariably open to interpretation.

While it may be improper to draw such conclusions from a single opinion, it can still be the case that examining a body of

opinions and their circumstances, over time, can reveal patterns that either confirm a lawyer's integrity or raise doubts about their independence. One opinion that looks convenient may not really be so, but when many look convenient, there may be reason to believe they are.

When a law officer is asked to give an opinion, he or she may have no control over the use to which it is put. But here too, a pattern may emerge: a sample of opinions that appear to serve the immediate political needs of the government may suggest that opinions have been drafted to cater to those needs.

In this regard, there may be no opinion more embarrassing for Vahanvati than the one he produced in November 2008, recommending that a disproportionate assets case not be registered against the Samajwadi Party (SP) president Mulayam Singh Yadav, a little more than three months after Yadav's support saved the UPA in a crucial trust vote in Parliament. The opinion attracted criticism at the time, but it marked the beginning of a legendarily ridiculous chain of reversals and re-reversals in the case, which have, in hindsight, made the opinion look even worse.

The CBI had conducted a preliminary enquiry into the assets owned by Yadav, his two sons, and his daughter-in-law in response to a directive from the Supreme Court in March 2007. Seven months later, after finding *prima facie* evidence that Yadav and his family had assets disproportionate to their income—even before assessing the full value of real estate in their names—the CBI concluded that a case should be registered. For an unknown reason, the Court had directed the CBI to submit the results of its

preliminary enquiry to the government. Anticipating that it would not act, the CBI filed an application with the Supreme Court in October 2007, requesting the Court to order the case be registered without further reference to the government.

After the Court failed to respond, the CBI filed another application to the same effect in March 2008, to which the Court again did not respond. In the months that followed, the SP stepped in to support the UPA in July 2008, and Yadav's daughter-in-law Dimple sent three letters to the government, accompanied by tax returns, declaring her innocence.

Prompted by Dimple Yadav's complaint, the then law minister, HR Bhardwaj, asked Vahanvati for an opinion as to whether the CBI should proceed with the case. Vahanvati's opinion, delivered in November 2008, challenged the premise of the CBI's preliminary enquiry and recommended that the CBI withdraw its application to proceed with an investigation. The central argument of Vahanvati's opinion—which has been called “absurd” and “scandalous” by the press—was that it was improper for the CBI to include the assets of Yadav's sons and daughter-in-law in its enquiry unless it could prove that they were being held for him to avoid detection. In other words, the investigation could not proceed unless the investigators could show beyond doubt that the assets were deliberately concealed, a burden of proof that could only be met through further investigation.

But Bhardwaj quickly concurred with Vahanvati's opinion, and recommended the CBI withdraw its application to open a full investigation. The agency complied and requested the application be withdrawn. The Court, however, refused to honour the CBI's

request—which was based on Vahanvati's opinion—and demanded that the agency first explain why it wished to withdraw the case.

At the next hearing, in late January 2009, Vahanvati appeared before the Supreme Court, representing the government, and dismissed his own opinion recommending withdrawal. “I had given an opinion in this case in November last,” he said, “and it is no longer relevant.” Now the government argued that it wished for the CBI to consider the merits of the case on its own before coming to a decision on whether to proceed. Two weeks later, Mohan Parasaran, representing the CBI, conceded that the agency had acted on the instruction of the law ministry—again, based on Vahanvati's opinion—in seeking to withdraw its application, an admission that was excoriated by the justices. Vahanvati, again representing the government, now told the Court, “We don't want to take any decision in this matter. Let the CBI consider the representation and submit report to the court.”

The twists and turns continued: in March 2009, the CBI completed its reversal, asking the court to ignore Vahanvati's opinion and proceed with the case. But in February 2011, Vahanvati was back in court once again, now arguing that the case should again be withdrawn, on the basis that the Court was not allowed to order a CBI probe unless “fundamental rights” had been violated. A bemused bench told Mulayam's lawyers, “He is supporting you. In fact, he has argued for you.”

The matter is still not resolved. In November 2012, the petitioner who originally brought the case against Yadav in 2005, Vishwanath Chaturvedi, filed a complaint in a Delhi court charging Vahanvati—along with Bhardwaj and four others—with “criminal

conspiracy” to shield Yadav from prosecution. Meanwhile, the case against Yadav remains in limbo: the Court ordered the CBI on 13th December 2012 to continue its probe, this time without “obligation to file the status report before the government”.

Last month, Vahanvati found himself entangled in another uncomfortable situation involving a CBI investigation—this time involving the agency’s ongoing probe into the coal allocation scam. A series of news reports revealed that a status report submitted by the CBI to the Supreme Court on 8th March had first been vetted and toned down by officials from the law ministry and Prime Minister’s Office.

Several of these media reports have placed Vahanvati at a meeting, held in the law ministry on 5th March, where the report was amended; others have not mentioned his name.

But four sources, including a lawyer who represents the CBI, confirmed that Vahanvati was present at the meeting called by law minister Ashwani Kumar, along with additional solicitor general Harin Raval, CBI Director Ranjit Sinha, and OP Galhotra, a CBI officer. Raval and Vahanvati, I was told, were already present when Sinha and Galhotra arrived. The men reviewed the report together and changes were suggested; a new report was printed within the law ministry, and submitted to the Supreme Court.

The question of Vahanvati’s participation is particularly serious: in the Supreme Court hearing on 12th March, Harin Raval, representing the CBI, was asked if the report had been shared with the executive, which he denied. The bench then asked Vahanvati, representing the government, if he had seen the

report. He replied that he had not.

When the first news reports describing the law ministry meeting began to emerge earlier this month, I thought back to something Vahanvati had told me when we met in January, about his admiration for his father. “My father was a great influence on me,” he said. “I learned a lot from him. He never misled a judge, and that’s why his credibility was so high.”



BEST POLITICS FEATURE

BY
NIRANJAN TAKLE
Runner-up

**A CASE OF
EXPLODING ONIONS**

The Week
13th Oct '13

Niranjan Takle



A Case of Exploding Onions

Niranjan Takle is Principal Correspondent with The Week since the last 3 years. He is an electronic engineer by education and a journalist by choice for the past 15 years. He has worked as Bureau Chief of IBN Lokmat in north Maharashtra for 4 years. Earlier, his cover stories on Indian prisoners in Pakistan, Anna Hazare's aides, mining in Goa etc. have caught attention of many.

A Case of Exploding Onions



No bed of roses: Sachin Shewale, a farmer in Nashik, was forced to sell his produce at a low price to the traders' cartel, as he did not have proper storage facility.

The onion is a bulb bomb in India. It is powerful enough even to shake governments. The Janata Party government at the Centre in 1979 and the BJP government in Delhi in the 90s are still considered victims of onion heat.

This year, yet again, we saw onions exploding. Prices skyrocketed to record levels, prompting Twitter jokes such as onion rings giving diamond rings a run for their money.

Jokes apart, a bunch of thieves actually attempted to hijack a truck with 40 tonnes of onion on the Jaipur-Delhi highway. A daily-deal company's web site crashed after it announced to sell onions at ₹9 a kilo to the first 3,000 customers. And onion had become the most googled word in India in mid-September.

A few missing pieces of chopped onion in an omelette nearly got a wayside eatery owner in Uttar Pradesh bumped off! A trigger-happy customer was reportedly enraged as the shopkeeper argued that onion was too precious these days. Fortunately, the shopkeeper ducked in

time, and the gunshot missed him by a whisker.

Far away from such onion tales, Bhaskar Nyaharkar sat rueing his plight. The onion farmer in Maharashtra's Nashik district—home to about 70 per cent of India's onion trade—is in the middle of a muddle, clueless about meeting his family's needs.

Not faraway, Omprakash Raka basked in glory. The onion trader was in the middle of overflowing sweetened milk and mithai. He had made a huge profit, and was celebrating his election as chairman of Lasalgaon Merchants' Cooperative Bank. The Lasalgaon market is India's largest onion market.

“Had I had the capacity to hold my stock for a month, I would have been able to sell my produce for at least ₹3,000 per quintal,” said Nyaharkar, who had been forced to sell his yield at ₹1,200 per quintal. “I would have comfortably earned ₹2 lakh more for the 120 quintals I sold to Gotusheth (Raka's moniker among farmers).”

Raka was too busy to empathise with Nyaharkar and his brethren. His grand household was in a festive mode. And all bigwigs of Lasalgaon—political leaders, government officers,



Hapless, helpless: Marginal farmers like Bhaskar Nyaharkar have no choice but to sell their produce to the big traders.

businessmen and agriculturists—made it a point to drop by and congratulate him.

The Raka family started trading in onion long ago and then spread its wings over other vegetables, fruits, seeds and fertilisers. It later got into sand, granite and marble trade, too, and also handles rail transportation of goods from Nashik.

In the first half of September, the Rakas traded 4,869 quintals of onion in the domestic market and exported 575 quintals to Dubai and 205 quintals to Bahrain, while the government was busy importing onion from Egypt, China and Afghanistan. The business was booming, even as farmers like Nyaharkar were back on their fields, toiling for the next crop.

Though their fates are interlinked and dependent on onions, Raka's pleasures and Nyaharakar's pains are separated by a tricky term—business acumen.

The Rakas have it in abundance. And they are aided by their networks across market committees of Nashik and 'inside' information.

Powerful traders like the Rakas manipulate the market. They book stocks from farmers at low prices, much in advance. Thousands of tonnes of onions are hoarded to create a short-supply. And as the prices spiral up, the hoarded stocks are released. It was such an artificial scarcity that allegedly spiked onion prices to record highs.

“Traders in Lasalgaon Agricultural Produce Market Committee alone earned more than ₹150 crore in just four days (August 12-15) this year,” says Dr Giridhar Patil, a farmer-activist.

At least 6.5 lakh quintals of onion was auctioned at Lasalgaon in the past three months. Documents accessed by The Week show that almost all of it went to 12 traders/groups, who clearly enjoy monopoly over the Lasalgaon market.

They are Saibaba Traders, Hemant Raka, Puja Investments,

Anand Trading, Sureshchandra Jain, Kisan Darade, Sudarshan Traders, Hiralal Kaluram, Kesarchand Runwal, Pushkar Runwal, Subhash Lunawat and Abhay Surana.

Besides the monopolist 12, another big name is the Bramhechha family. It apparently has eight licences through various firms in other APMCs in Nashik.



Passing the buck: Akshay Bramhechha, a major trader in Nashik, says implementation of the Model APMC Act, which would benefit farmers and consumers, is the government's job.

Ajay and Akshay Bramhechha run the business of trading in agriculture produce. They also have a wholesale shop of foodgrain and coarse cereals, and deal in tyres for four-wheelers, trucks and tractors. They have a huge storage facility of onion close to the Lasalgaon APMC. The Bramhechhas exported over 465 quintals of onion to Bangladesh in the first half of September, when onion prices were peaking.

Sureshchandra Jain is another major player in the Lasalgaon APMC. His nephew Nitin Jain also holds a licence under his firm Puja Investments. Nitin, a member of the Lasalgaon APMC board

of directors, exported 720 quintals of onion to Nepal and Dubai, again in the first half of September.

Most of these traders finance political leaders during elections. It is also these traders who elect local politicians to the APMCs, which are supposed to oversee trade. The crux of the issue seems to be here. Though the Union government circulated the Model APMC Act to all states, its implementation has been shoddy—especially in Maharashtra, home state of Union Agriculture Minister Sharad Pawar.

“The Model APMC Act allows anyone to participate in the auction and no licence is needed, but the APMCs do not allow this,” alleges Ravi Devang, president of Shetkari Sanghatana, a farmers’ organisation. “Many big traders have multiple licences within their families and they just do not let anyone from outside participate in the business. The APMCs have become places of robbery.”

Furthermore, since only select traders bid in the auctions, they form a ring and decide prices, ahead of the bidding.

“The auctions are a farce,” says Devang. “Traders bid by pulling fingers of each other under a cloth; each finger denotes a value. Once the bidding is over, the winner announces the price. The farmers have to sell their crop to him even if the price does not meet their production cost. They get beaten up if they refuse. Even traders who tried to participate without licences have got beaten up.”

There are three onion crops in a year—kharif, late kharif and rabi. All farmers harvest at the same time and, hence, huge quantities of onion queue up at the APMCs for auction. “Traders, looking at the huge inward, keep the prices very low—between ₹500 and ₹800 per quintal,” says Patil. “During the last few days of auction when onion inward starts dropping, the prices are raised to about ₹1,500. But when traders get orders from

district-level markets and retailers, the entire stock is sold at ₹2,000-₹3,000 a quintal, and the consumers pay ₹28 to ₹40 a kilo.”

This year, however, almost 80 per cent of the rabi crop was bought by traders at ₹800 to ₹1,200 a quintal by February-March. So, only a maximum of 20 per cent of the total crop was left with farmers who had storage facility. Eventually, when it was brought to the APMC yard, the traders raised the price to ₹5,600 per quintal. However, the entire stock—including the 80 per cent already bought in March—was sold at ₹4,000 to ₹6,000 a quintal.

“I have been saying since July that there is no shortage of onion in the country,” says R.P. Gupta, director of National Horticulture Research & Development Foundation. “Official figures show that 27.5 lakh metric tonnes of onion were stored during February and May. Monthly consumption of the country is only 7-8 lakh tonnes per month.... So, where was the problem of shortage?”

Lasalgaon market president Jaydutt Sitaram Hokkar concedes that the onion-laden tractors coming in these days are not primarily from fields in Nashik, but from cold storages that have come up in the vicinity.

Onion was brought under the National Horticulture Mission in 2004, when it was de-notified from the list of essential commodities because production levels were satisfactory. Until then the state governments had the power to decide prices, and a minimum support price was set for the farmers.

Initially, the farmers got subsidy for raising storage cages. It costs ₹40,000 to build a temporary cage, and about ₹2 lakh for a storehouse. The subsidy, too, was stopped in 2004.

“Now only big farmers and traders have the financial capacity to store onions and 80 per cent of the onion producers are marginal farmers,” notes Shirish Kotwal, a legislator from Chandawad in Nashik. “It is only those big farmers and traders

who have earned money in the past two months. The majority of onion farmers have not earned a penny, as they had sold their crop to the traders for lack of storage facilities.”

Sunil Narode, a farmer, says, “Many of them [traders] pay advance and book stock right in February, and the crop is kept in the cages or storage houses of big farmers.” And that is why onion stocks were not found at traders' places during raids.

However, the existence of cartels became clear in mid-September, when the Lasalgaon APMC registered a record price of ₹5,700 a quintal. The marketing director of the state agriculture board held a meeting with all APMC secretaries on September 19. They were warned that the angered government was set to crack the whip.

The prices fell to ₹4,300 a quintal—within 24 hours. “Was it a coincidence? The prices have stopped shooting up since then. So, the government knows about the nexus, but turns a blind eye,” says Devang. “It knows that APMCs do not follow the Model APMC Act, and it allows the exploitation of farmers and consumers to continue.”

The APMC Act allows anyone to participate in the auctions of agriculture produce. Yet, a select group of traders continue to dominate trade.

“This happens because the nexus controls the rural credit system, on which farmers are dependent,” says Devang. Farmers who challenge the nexus are deprived of credit facilities.

“This compulsion makes farmers slaves of the system,” adds Patil.

A recent Competition Commission report on the 2010 onion crisis, too, highlights the issue of cartelisation of trade and the traders' grip over the credit system.

“It is a fact that hardly 10 per cent farmers had stored their

produce,” says Gupta. “Most of the onion was with the traders. With the good monsoon this year, traders anticipated that the kharif crop of onion would reach markets early this year and, hence, they spiked prices. This was the first time that prices went up in July. The APMCs knew about it, but remained passive.”

The APMC honchos have another take. “The yield was less because of drought. There was a demand-supply mismatch, which resulted in prices skyrocketing,” says Nanasaheb Patil, chairman of Lasalgaon APMC. But what about the National Horticulture Research & Development Foundation's stock figures? He simply trashes them.

Patil, however, agrees that few farmers actually earned, as they did not have sufficient stocks. And he quickly defends the traders: “Traders protect farmers during bad times. They also suffer huge losses at times. Now, whatever they purchased on the September 19 at ₹5,600 per quintal has dropped to ₹4,300. This means a loss of about ₹5 lakh per truck load.”

Devang refutes the argument: “Traders buy hardly 5 per cent of the total stock at the highest price; the rest is booked [much earlier] at a much lower price. So, such fluctuations do not harm traders.”

Ducking The Week's questions, Omprakash Raka takes off on another tangent. “The government should stop interfering in markets,” he says. “We spend our money to nurture export markets in various countries, and the government bans export or raises minimum export price. This kills our competitiveness and the Chinese traders walk away with business.”

He is ready with a reason for the price rise: “This year's yield was extremely low and, hence, prices rose—it is only because of the demand-supply mismatch.”

Akshay Bramhechha, too, washes his hands of the mess: “It is easy to blame us traders. Implementation of the Model Act is the

job of the government. We operate within the rules set by the APMC. But since onion has an emotional and political value attached to it, political parties blame us.”



Omprakash Raka

Raka and Bramhechha say the recent price rise hardly affected the middleclass. “A middle - class family eats hardly two kilos of onion a month. If retail prices have gone up from ₹20 to ₹80 a kilo, they are paying hardly ₹120 more than their average spending. This should not disturb them so much; it is rarely that a farmer earns money,” says Raka. The Competition Commission report, however, clearly notes that few farmers gain even when prices go through the roof.

The media is the next in the firing line: “Why doesn't the urban media question a farmer's wife about her livelihood when prices drop to ₹5?” asks Bramhechha.

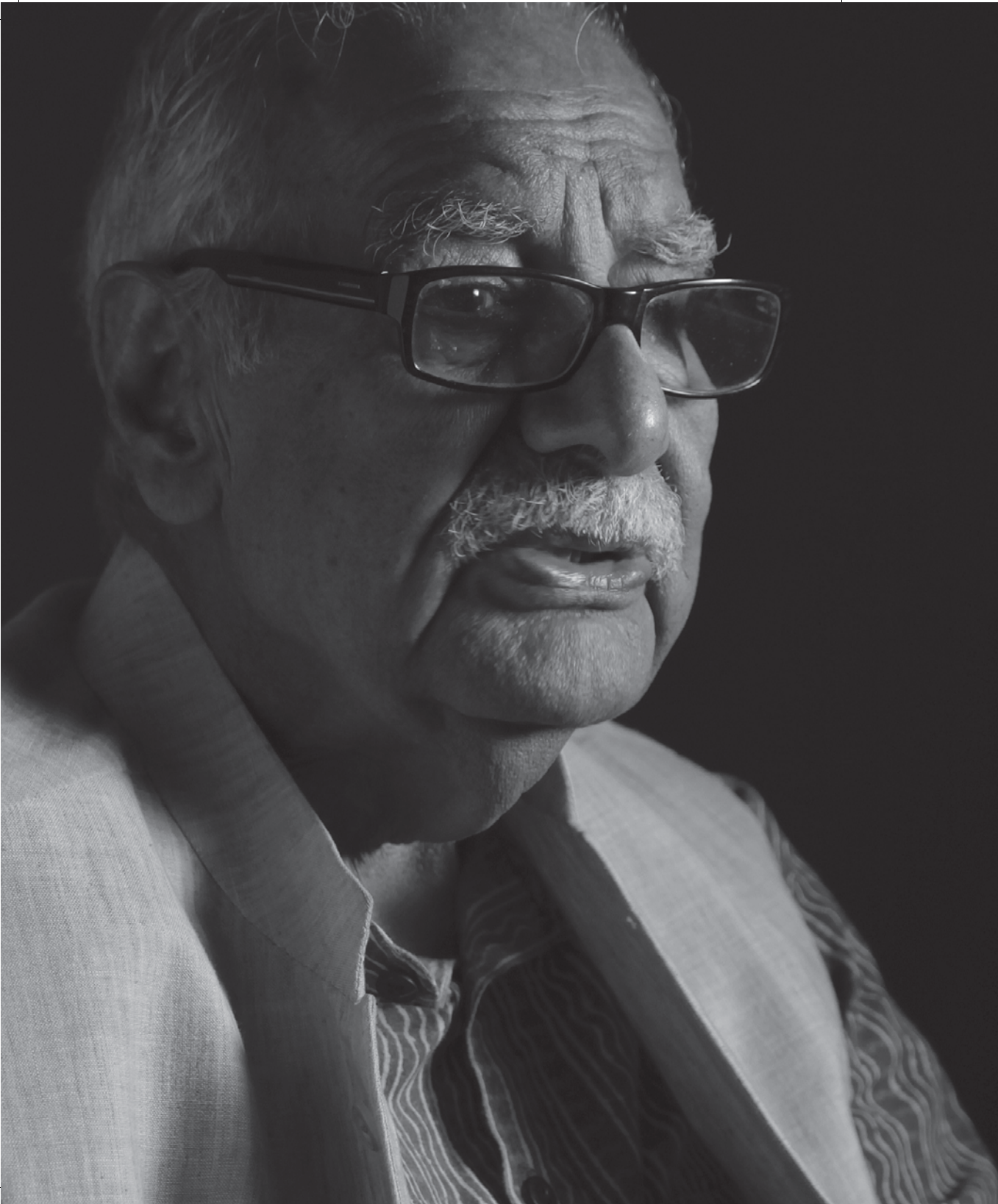
But it is the traders who slash prices whenever it suits them, says Devang. “And government chooses to be passive.”

Adds Giridhar Patil: “About 90 per cent of the traders belong

to the BJP; the state co-operative and agriculture ministers are from the Congress; and NCP chief Sharad Pawar is the Union agriculture minister. What more to say about this all-party alliance?”

No wonder they say that politics of onion, too, can bring tears.





“Journalism is beyond only writing stories.
You need to ask what contribution do you
make to the society, to the country and
to the value system.”

KULDIP NAYAR
Veteran Journalist

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IN INDIAN JOURNALISM

· 2014 ·

BEST SPORTS NEWS

BEST SPORTS NEWS

By

GAURAV GUPTA

Winner

**NDA STOPPED MATCH-FIXING PROBE:
FORMER DELHI POLICE COMMISSIONER
NEERAJ KUMAR**

The Times of India

08th Dec '13

Gaurav Gupta



*NDA stopped match-fixing probe:
Former Delhi police commissioner Neeraj Kumar*

Gaurav Gupta is a sports journo with TOI Mumbai since 2007. He covers The Cricket section and follows it very closely. His father was a sports enthusiast and that is where he got into sports as a career. He did his BBA but since had his mind on cricket his brother pushed him into sports journalism. He believes and practices Honest Reporting and promoting young players.

NDA stopped match-fixing probe: Former Delhi police commissioner Neeraj Kumar



Former Delhi police commissioner Neeraj Kumar, under whose tenure the cops uncovered a major spot-fixing scandal during IPL 6, revealed at the 'Times Literary Carnival' on Saturday that the then BJP-led NDA government put an abrupt end to investigations in the 2000 match-fixing probe.

Kumar was a DGP with the Central Bureau of Investigation (CBI) in 2000 when the agency intercepted a conversation between a blacklisted bookie and then South African cricket captain Hansie Cronje. Inquiries by the CBI, followed by Cronje's confession and testimony, exposed a scandal that shook the nation completely. After the CBI report became

*NDA stopped match-fixing probe:
Former Delhi police commissioner Neeraj Kumar*

public, the BCCI banned former India captain Mohammad Azharuddin and Ajay Sharma for life, while Ajay Jadeja and Manoj Prabhakar were barred from the game for five years. The scandal engulfed cricket great Kapil Dev too, before he was given a clean chit by the CBI.

Speaking at a seminar titled 'Sixers and Fixers — has the gentleman's game gone to the goons?' at the fest, Kumar said the NDA government "shut" the probe after a point, instructing the CBI to "go no further."

"After we (CBI) had submitted our first report, a whole lot of work needed to be done, but the government then decided... this far and no further, because all kinds of skeletons were tumbling out and cricket is a religion in India," Kumar said, leaving the audience stunned.

Later, speaking exclusively to TOI, Kumar elaborated further. "If you see the CBI report on the net, it says further inquiry will continue. It didn't continue because it would have meant a lot of other dirt would have come to the surface," Kumar said.

The revelation does give one the impression that the scandal may have been even bigger than it turned out to be. Were there more cricket stars who were "protected" by the then powers that be? Kumar's claim may just open a whole can of worm given that he practically terms the report deliberately "incomplete".

The alleged political interference wasn't a one-off either, going by Kumar's claims. The former police chief said he had received a "request" from "someone" to avoid quizzing a few bookies in Mumbai while the Delhi Police was unearthing the fixing scandal this summer. "It was small request. It wasn't forced upon us," he recalled.

Kumar felt that this "government order" was a mistake. "I'll

be very honest. I don't know what exactly went on in the minds of people who took that decision, but it should have continued. Unless we come to know what is wrong with us, we cannot go about correcting our mistakes."

Batting for a strong anti-fixing law, he said, "A strong anti-fixing law will act as a deterrent. It should be a penal law. The fixers and those who get 'fixed' should both be sent to jail," he said. Even in the case of the IPL 6 spot fixing scandal, he said, the BCCI could have done more than just ban S Sreesanth, Ankit Chavan and Ajit Chandila for life. "Is banning three cricketers the end of the matter? Isn't there a need to look further? Could there be an in-house investigation, brain- storming which ensures that it doesn't happen again, and the IPL too gets its credibility back? Is it happening? It is not."

Kumar said he was "surprised" and "saddened" after a meeting with Sreesanth when the fast bowler was in jail. "He appeared to be a devoted, enthusiastic cricketer. He kept saying he wanted to play for India... but the fact of the matter is he committed a fatal mistake, and there is no going back," he said.

He said that though the Delhi Police had enough evidence to nail the three cricketers, the case may suffer due to delay. "If the evidence we have is properly pursued in a court of law, it may end in conviction. However, sometimes, trials go on and on... new police officers come and they aren't that keen that the investigation is done properly. The nature of our criminal justice system is also such that it can be time-consuming," he said.

He also called upon the cricket authorities to be "more serious if they want to clean up" the system. "It is part of our overall psyche. Our general thinking is that strong

enforcement is best avoided."

Those implicated in the fixing scandal back in 2000 aren't doing that badly in life, he pointed out. Azharuddin is a Congress MP from Moradabad while Jadeja is leading Haryana in the Ranji Trophy. "It is a clear reflection of our society. We have a tolerant, forgiving attitude," Kumar said.



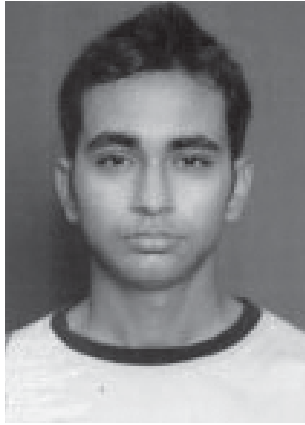
BEST SPORTS NEWS

By
AMIT KAMAT
Runner-up

**SAI OF NO RELIEF
FOR LEADING ATHLETES**

Mid Day
22nd Oct '13

Amit Kamat



SAI of no relief for leading athletes

Amit Kamat started his journalism career in 2010 with the Free Press Journal as a sub-editor on the general desk before moving to Mumbai-based tabloid Mid Day in 2012 as a sub-editor-cum-reporter in the sports department. He completed his BMM degree (Journalism) from LS Raheja College of Arts and Commerce in 2010.

SAI of no relief for leading athletes

Sports Authority of India's Kandivli (East) complex where World Wrestling Championships' bronze medallist Sandeep Yadav, Mumbai's only London Olympics wrestler Narsingh Yadav and many other sportspersons live and train is a shoddy facility with shortage of bathrooms, filthy toilets and congested rooms; authorities claim State Government is responsible for its maintenance.

When Sandeep Tulsi Yadav clinched the bronze medal in Greco- Roman at the Wrestling World Championships in Budapest exactly a month ago, he cemented the status of Sports Authority of India's Kandivli campus as the nerve centre of wrestling in the city.

However, despite Sandeep's feat, nothing much has changed at the centre for wrestlers, definitely not the dingy rooms that house the athletes or the repugnant sanitation facilities that they are forced to endure daily.

The hostel building housing the wrestlers, hockey and kabaddi players has 27 rooms — all of which reek of decay and neglect. Each room, roughly 100 sq feet in size, is inhabited by two or three athletes. The athletes can't recollect when the hostel was last renovated.

Six toilets, 50 users

Besides the small rooms, the six toilets shared by over 50 athletes, are downright squalid.

None have taps while their doors have holes. Bathrooms are effectively non-existent. The structure that houses the bathing cubicles has been shut for reasons unknown, forcing athletes to bathe under taps in the open. No athlete should live like this, more so athletes of the calibre of Sandeep and his roommate Narsingh Yadav, who was the city's only Olympian at London 2012 and is also a 2010 Commonwealth Games gold medallist.

Sandeep, who has spent 13 years here, is now accustomed to the appalling conditions. "We complained a few times but nothing happened. Irrespective of how we perform at the world stage and what medals we win, the conditions here don't change. Luckily, Narsingh and I are frequently in Delhi for training camps, so we don't have to bear this daily," Sandeep told Mid Day yesterday.

Jagmal Singh, the centre's wrestling coach said, " Today we have two athletes winning medals on the world stage (Narsingh & Sandeep), but if facilities are better, tomorrow there will be 10 such athletes.

When athletes from other places hear that the Kandivli SAI centre provides great facilities, they too will come here to train with us." Sandeep still hopes for improvement. "The last Deputy Director Virender Bhandarkar was here for 11 years but never bothered to hear our grievances.

But, his successor Mr. (Satish) Sarhadi asked us what problems we are facing as soon as he joined (four months ago).

Things can change," he added.

However, change will most likely have to hold its horses until the wrangling over authority is resolved. The genesis of the

problem lies in the agreement between SAI's Director General and the Director of Sports and Youth Services (Pune) that was signed on August 30, 1989.

According to the agreement (a copy of which is with Mid Day), the State allotted the land on which the Kandivli campus currently stands, to SAI, but agreed to undertake its maintenance.

Bureaucratic mess

The Deputy Director of the Kandivli campus, Sarhadi, claims he is helpless. "We can do basic maintenance work, but we have to take permission from the State Government before undertaking any renovation. There is so much bureaucracy and redtapism that we can't even carry out renovation work under Corporate Social Responsibility.

We had plans to build a new 100- bed hostel for athletes but the State Government wants us to take permission from them for every little thing," said Sarhadi.

The Deputy Director of Sports and Youth Affairs, Mumbai division, Anand Venkeshwar remained unavailable for comment. Repeated calls to his mobile phone went unanswered.

About SAI Kandivli

Located right beside the Western Express Highway, the Sports Authority of India's (SAI) Kandivli East centre is a sprawling campus that has an athletic track, a hockey astroturf pitch, a wrestling centre, a boxing ring, a volleyball court, a basketball court and other sports facilities like a judo/karate hall, pool and billiards table.

The centre has three hostels for sportspersons. One houses the girls, the second is shared by athletes and volleyball players, while the third hostel, which is in the worst shape, houses the wrestlers, hockey and kabaddi players.



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IN INDIAN JOURNALISM

· 2014 ·

BEST SPORTS FEATURE

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By

BHARAT SUNDARESAN

Winner

**THE ONE WHO DROPPED THE BALL:
BEFORE SACHIN TENDULKAR,
THERE WAS ANIL GURAV**

The Indian Express
19th Nov '13

Bharat Sundaresan



*The one who dropped the ball:
Before Sachin Tendulkar, there was Anil Gurav*

Bharat Sundaresan is a principal correspondent with The Indian Express. He's been covering cricket for the last six years, and has followed the Indian team's fortunes in the Caribbean, South Africa, Bangladesh and Sri Lanka during that time. When he's not writing or reporting, the West Indian fanatic manages to be a massive source of distraction and noise in the press box, which his fellow colleagues would testify.

The one who dropped the ball: Before Sachin Tendulkar, there was Anil Gurav

When Sachin Tendulkar started out, Anil Gurav was Mumbai's brightest star, offering him tips and once a bat. As Sachin calls it a day, Bharat Sundaresan meets the man who disappeared into the shadows.

Far, far away from Wankhede Stadium and even further away from the man who is the cynosure of it, in a 200-sq ft cramped dwelling with paint peeling off the walls, lurks another Sachin story.



Gurav in a lane of his Nalasopara shanty in Mumbai. Few here believe that once he was among the chosen ones of famed coach Ramakant Achrekar

On most days, at most hours, on a bare rickety bed here, in Mumbai's Nalasopara, you can find Anil Gurav. The smell of cheap alcohol rests around him, as do years of pain in his wild, staring, glazed eyes. It's his memory that remains the sharpest, particularly so these days. And as the Tendulkar story draws to a glorious end, these memories have been flooding back to Gurav: of how it was he who had once been the chosen one, of being called the Viv Richards of Mumbai, the next big thing from the

city since Sunil Gavaskar, of playing with that curly haired boy from Bandra who had always been so talented, of teaching him a few tricks, and of once, long, long ago, lending a cricket bat with which the boy would hit his first competitive century — one of a historic many.

Gurav also remembers every bitter detail about how he lost his own way, partly to many things beyond his control. Particularly a brother who strayed to the other, darker side of Mumbai.



Nalasopara itself is the back of beyond — in Mumbai parlance, 26 stations away from Churchgate if you board a slow train. To get there though is only the beginning of the ordeal. While the main market area in this outlying suburb bustles with activity, the only way to 'Tulinge Naka' is via a treacherous potholed road.

Deep down in one of its narrowest lanes, lies a “landmark”, 'Trimbak Bungalow', in reality as dilapidated as its neighbouring slums. A walk past a few tattered shanties, side-stepping dog faeces and an overflowing drain, leads one to Kholi No. 5.



There are some in the locality who are aware Gurav was once a cricketer. His achievements they know of only vaguely. To most, Gurav is what he seems: a 48-year-old incorrigible drunk striving to keep his family together.

There was a time though when it was on his stumps that famed coach Ramakant Achrekar had placed a coin first — a sign in Mumbai cricket circles that meant you

were the chosen one. Before Sachin, there was Gurav.

As he tells his story, we are constantly interrupted, by nosy neighbours either peeping through the window or the open door. Some smile wryly. Some shake their head in disgust. Some even dismiss his story as an inebriated rant.

Gurav ignores them.

The boys mockingly invite Gurav to participate in their cricket



matches before slandering him. And they speak in whispers about how he will go to any extent for his next drink — even if it means cleaning gutters or selling off the trophies and medals he once won. He keeps on talking.

Things were a lot different 25 years ago, says Gurav, his eyes giving away little, except when they light up as he describes a shot with a flick of his wrists or recalls one of his many aggressive knocks. That was when the stylish right-hander would set off a buzz every time he arrived at the crease. When Gurav cut the ball, it would slice through the grass. Every hook shot that he sent sailing over the outfield from under his nose would invoke raptures of applause. In mid-'80s the murmurs were that the maidans were witnessing the arrival of the next big thing from Mumbai since Sunil Gavaskar.

Among the ardent fans were Sachin and Vinod Kambli, who would often spend hours watching Gurav bat in the nets or were asked to observe his stroke-play by their coach. “Sachin loved my cut and hook shot. He also took a few tips regarding how to go about playing with as much power as me,” says Gurav.

Former Mumbai cricketer and a Sachin confidant, Rajesh



Sutar, remembers that everyone from Achrekar's nets thought it would be Gurav among them who would go on to play for India. "He was called the Viv Richards of Mumbai at that point. Even Sachin used to admire his batting a lot," Sutar says.

They also remember that he had the audacity to overrule coach Achrekar's stringent rules and continue playing tennis-ball tournaments.

Mangesh Bhalekar, another noted maidan coach, remembers people bunking work to watch Gurav take an opposition attack apart.

Even as Sachin began stealing some of his thunder, Gurav remained the star of Mumbai's upcoming batting talent, representing Bombay Schools and the Bombay U-19 team.

Talking about the time he lent Sachin his bat, Gurav says: "I was his captain at Sassanian (the cricket club). He wanted to use my bat but was too shy to ask me directly. The request came through Ramesh Parab (now the international scorer at Wankhede), and I told Sachin he could use it provided he made a big score. He said, 'I will sir', and went on to score a century with my SG bat," he says.

A deep breath later, his stained teeth breaking into a huge smile, Gurav says: "Imagine Sachin called me 'sir' back then."



Gurav's highest score came for Bombay Schools, 135, in a crunch match, where he overshadowed the likes of Sulakshan Kulkarni, the current Mumbai coach, and a few others who would go on to play Ranji Trophy.

His story, of course, would take a completely different tangent. And as he fell from grace, it would coincide with the rise of Sachin.

"Sachin was always special. He had all the shots and a great temperament. He also was blessed in a way, everything happened at the right time for him. Most importantly, he had a great background," says Gurav. "Background is everything," he adds, after a pause.

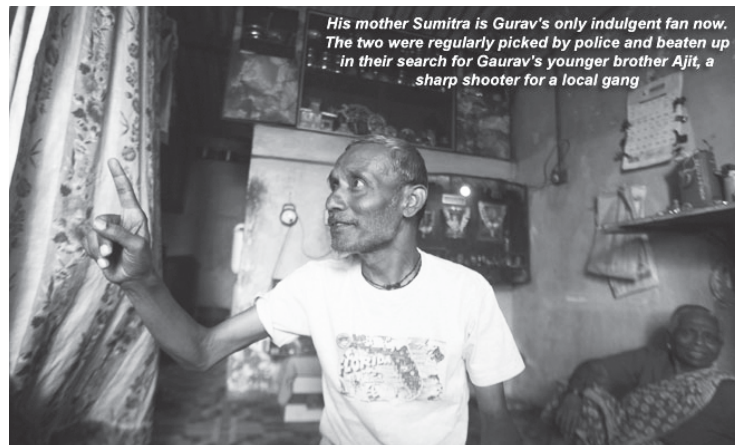
Gurav should know. Around the time he was scoring his big hits in the maidan, younger brother Ajit was climbing the ranks elsewhere — as a sharp-shooter for a famous local gang in Parel, where the Guravs originally hail from. As Gurav moved from Western Railway to New India Assurance for better cricketing opportunities, Ajit rose into the upper echelons of crime, bringing the city police in hot pursuit.

The association would prove costly, says Gurav, notwithstanding all the laurels he was earning in the field. A top police officer who later became very well-known, he says, kept picking him and his mother up in their search for Ajit.

"He would question my mother and me repeatedly and then take us away. They would beat us up, me more than her. Luckily I still had a name in the cricket circuit, and someone would come to my help. But not before they had left me in no condition to stand," Gurav shudders.

Mother Sumitra, who lives with Gurav and his family, points to her swollen knees, before breaking down. "Anil could at least get away because someone would recognise him or he would show them a few photos of his cricketing achievements. I had no such option.

They would keep me for days, even up to a month,” she claims.



Gurav reels off the names of the police stations he was taken to. While he still played cricket at this time, it got more and more difficult to keep up with the game. “I was afraid every time I walked out to the field,” he recalls. “I didn't know when they would come for me.”

Finally, desperate to distance himself from his brother, Gurav and his mother moved to Nalasopara in early 1990s. They hoped that the police wouldn't find them there. “After a while, they caught up with us there too,” he says.

While Ajit would also land up at times, mostly in the middle of the night, to meet their mother, Gurav says he “just ignored his presence”.

The memories of what happened after one such visit still haunt him. “They came in five vehicles, some 20-odd cops, and surrounded the place. I was having dinner and before I knew it, there were two revolvers placed on either side of my head. They

had never laid eyes on Ajit so they presumed I was him. They dragged my mother and me away. Somehow my brother escaped yet again,” he recalls.

This time Gurav was made to spend a night in lock-up and sleep on the cold floor with criminals for company. “I was tied upside down and beaten. They broke my leg. The torture was inconceivable,” he says.

As he remembers that night — “mother had made mutton that day,” he whispers — Gurav suddenly clutches his head and starts rubbing his temples. His eyes redden, though there are no tears.

By 1994, Gurav had made a name for himself at New India Assurance (NIA), and using some influence there, he finally



convinced the police that he had no ties with his brother anymore. That was the end of the police pursuit, say the mother and son.

In Mumbai Police records, Ajit remains untraceable and still wanted. Gurav and Sumitra claim to have not seen him in years.

While those nightly knocks ended, by that time Gurav's cricketing career was also over. He took to heavy drinking. While he continued

to work as a clerk at NIA, his life was now in a free fall.

Gurav remembers avoiding any contact with Achrekar, the man who first spotted the cricketing spark in him, as he did in several of his legendary pupils. However, five years ago, he did bump into Achrekar at a local match. “It was in the afternoon and I was drunk. We didn't acknowledge each other for a while and then he suddenly signalled to me, asking me to join him. All he said was, 'Khelaayla shikavle mee, daaru pyaayla naahi (I taught you how to bat, I don't remember having taught you how to drink). What have you done to your life?'," recalls Gurav, shutting his eyes.

Sutar admits that family problems played a huge role in Gurav's downfall, but he also recollects his former teammate failing to perform to his potential on the big stage. “The sad part is that when it was needed the most, Gurav missed out. He was a prolific run-scorer but whenever any selector came to watch him, he never scored big runs,” he says.

That's another piercing memory for Gurav. It was an inter-Railways match between Western and Northern in 1986 at Karnail Singh Stadium in Delhi. “The selectors were there and told me I was one century away from being picked for the Railways Ranji team. I raced to 84 and was confident, and then just lost my nerve. The leg-spinner was Durga Prasad and I jumped out of my crease and attempted a shot that I never used to, an ugly hoick over mid-wicket, missed the ball and was stumped. That shot still haunts me in my sleep. That shot changed my life,” says Gurav.

He diligently preserves now the remaining proof of what could have been — holding on to all his certificates and newspaper cuttings of all the matches where his name is mentioned, some kept in files but most of them folded under his mattress.

In that small house, that's his sanctuary. Talking about his wife



Anita, Gurav lights an imaginary fire, adding she is “aag (fire)”. His sons have only heard stories of Gurav's cricketing days, stories that miserably pale both in the harsh light of their surroundings and the harsher light of the missed possibilities. Yash, 10, is too young to say as much, but Aniket, 18 — Gurav says without much bitterness — long gave up on him.

Aniket is gone for most part of the day from home, returning only around midnight. He scored 85 per cent in his recent Class XII examinations, Gurav adds proudly.

“I am pursuing a banking and insurance degree from MMK College in Bandra. By 3 pm I'm at Nariman Point for a traineeship at NIA, from where I leave at around 8.30 pm. I got the job through my father's reference but I don't talk to him. I have gone through his paper-cuttings a few times but I don't think much of them,” Aniket says.

The sport the 18-year-old was closer to was chess, in which he won several competitions across Nalasopara.

Alone in that home, with only his indulgent mother for company, regret hangs almost constantly around Gurav. “When I

was at the peak of my powers, I always made the right choices with the bat. Didn't matter who the bowler was or where he was bowling, I always knew which shot to play and which ball to leave. Unfortunately I made all the wrong choices in my life off the field," he shrugs.

"I always had good friends like Sachin," Gurav adds. "But I chose to be with the wrong ones, and look where it's left me."

He did run into Sachin once after he began his descent. On a rare occasion that he had donned cricketing whites, he ran into him at the Islam Gymkhana at Marine Lines, in the early 1990s.

"I was just leaving the ground when I saw this melee. Sachin was getting into his car, with some 10 security guys holding back the crowd. Somehow he spotted me, and called me over. We could only speak for a couple of minutes, but he asked me to come over to his house," recalls Gurav.

A few days later, he went to La Mer, Sachin's old residence, only to be told that the cricketer had left for England the previous evening.

"My main intention was to take my bat back. The SG one that he never returned. That was the only bat I ever owned in my life. I hope to meet him after retirement and ask him to return it, since he's not using it," he says.

Gurav also hangs on to the hope of starting over himself, having signed up for the Alcoholics Anonymous programme in Nalasopara. "One at a time, one at a time," he repeats a slogan learnt from his first AA meeting.

He is confident of sticking to what he has been told, to wake up each morning and convince himself not to drink that day, and to keep going like that.

But then the day drags on and, away from the flashlights of Wankhede, the shadows creep in long and fast. Gurav suddenly asks for some money, "Aaj aapke naam pe ek 90 ml (Today a toast

to you for 90 ml)."

You are not surprised. That penny on Gurav's stumps dropped a long time ago.



BEST SPORTS FEATURE

By

PULASTA DHAR

Runner-up

**RUNNING FROM BOMBS:
THE STUNNING STORY OF
AFGHAN FOOTBALLER ZOHIB AMIRI**

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Pulasta Dhar



*Running from bombs:
The stunning story of Afghan footballer Zohib Amiri*

Pulasta Dhar has been working with Firstpost.com since November 2011 as a sports journalist. Apart from writing, he produces audio and video content for the website. Before joining Firstpost, he has had short stints at BBC Radio Leicester during his time in England while completing an MA in Broadcast Journalism from the University of Sheffield. He has also worked for The Post Newspapers in Zambia and will be hosting a show on All India Radio in the next few weeks.

Running from bombs: The stunning story of Afghan footballer Zohib Amiri

Zohib Islam Amiri was transformed into one of the most famous personalities in Afghanistan after leading his country to their first football trophy – the SAFF Cup - earlier in the month (they beat India 2-0 in the final). The win united the nation, which seemed to have begun partying by the time Amiri lifted the cup over his head.

The defender, who plays his club football for Mumbai FC, gave an exclusive interview to Firstpost.

Afghanistan-Pakistan-Afghanistan-India

“I was in the car, with loud music playing.” Amiri says. He puts his fingers into his ears and beats his head hip-hop style, showing that he was really into the music at that moment, almost



Amiri with the SAFF Cup.

listening to it again inside his head.

“I was just doing something and suddenly there was a loud boom. At first I thought there was something wrong with my car, and when I looked up... when I looked up I saw smoke and people running towards me. So many people, just running.”

And the next thing he knows, is that he's running with them too.

“What else do you do? Where do you go? You just forget about everything, leave everything and just run with your people. Do you even know how the bomb blasts are?”

“There's one bomb here, two minutes later - one here, and two minutes later - one more here,” he says, making a triangle on his palm to show that there's no place to escape.

Amiri's father ran a shop in Kabul to support his family. This included his five sons and a daughter. When the Taliban's power in Afghanistan was at its peak, the family escaped across the border to Pakistan. It is here that Amiri's memory sort of blacks out.

“I don't even remember. It was only for a year, but I don't remember. We went away, because one day they would come and take my father and ask for money. Next day my elder brother — it was too much to take. But we came back, and thankfully everything we owned was still ours.”

Discovering football

Still just 23, Amiri has always loved football — in fact, he says Afghans love the game. They are passionate about it and when he saw this passion, all he wanted to do in life was play.

“They loved me at school because I played football. I could sport long hair and do anything without worrying about what my teachers would say — because they would think 'if he's angry the school team will lose'.”

“Even at home, my parents were supportive. They said if I

wanted to play the game then I should only concentrate on that. If I wanted to study, then I should just do that. But nobody would think about studies in Afghanistan at that time.”

There were other obstacles too.

“It’s feels dangerous to even think of entering a football stadium, where they are killing someone or cutting their hands or legs. When you enter a sports complex or a stadium, you can feel the fear.”

Yet Amiri's stature grew quickly, starting with his exploits at school level football. He was still a teenager when he became his country's highest paid football player.

“I played for Shoa in their B team when the A team stopper got injured. I played in his place during the next match and was invited to the national team for practice. I told myself, ah come on, this is no big deal. But then, I got in the team and I was still a teenager when Kabul Bank picked me up and made me the nation's highest paid player.”

Amiri - the footballer

“Why eight yellow cards?”

“Why? You tell me,” he says, and we meet his stare with surprise. He looks towards the video producer, who's also startled.

But eight is not bad, Amiri, it's not bad.

“No, no, no. They were stupid yellow cards.”

Last year, in 20 starts at club level, Amiri received just four yellow cards. In his whole international career, he has received just eight. This, from a player who plays at left-back or centrally sometimes, is remarkably disciplined. But he's not satisfied.

“I've never been sent off, you know?” That's a record Ryan Giggs would be proud of.

Amiri has great versatility. “We play him up front when we need a late goal,” Mumbai FC team manager Henry Picardo, said.

And the Afghan loves it: “I just love playing striker. But I play

best as left-back or stopper. I've even played on the right.”

Offers from other clubs? “Yes, big offers from other teams in the I-League and a couple from Oman and Bahrain, but I'm staying here,” he says with an air of confidence.

Life in India

“If only the FRRO can be more cooperative,” he says, looking at his phone ruefully after a long phone call. “One other Afghan wants to come play in India, but they're not giving him a visa. It's weird. If Indians want a visa for Afghanistan, you can get it in 10 minutes, but if someone wants to come here, it's a pain.”

Amiri, however, has sorted out his yearly entry to the country to play the game, and he's enjoying every minute in India. Picardo also revealed that he hardly gets homesick. He says, “Amiri is the one who binds the team.”

Like every other footballer, he has a tattoo — a roll of designs



President of Afghanistan Karzai greets Amiri after the SAFF win.

on his left arm with the names of everyone special in his life. “I still want to add to it,” he says.

There is also something of David Beckham in him when it comes to fashion. “I love to shop, oh I love shopping for clothes in my free time. You should see my cupboard, they're full of clothes.”

And what about languages, where did he pick up Hindi? “Bollywood of course. Shahrukh, he's the Badshah. He's the real superstar.”

Amiri loves life, he's playful in the interview, he enjoys talking. He has endless stories from every city he's been to. In fact, behind this lies a fearless attitude to everything. “I don't mind. You make me say it on camera or off it. You can use everything.”

“It's great. I'm totally at home here. The team offered me another house, but I said I'm staying with the boys. I've never felt like a foreigner living in the country.”

As much as he's sure of living in the country, Amiri falls short of words when we asked him where India was falling behind in terms of football.

“They have everything, everything! It's confusing why they're not doing better. I think they're not taking the game seriously. Maybe the nation is not taking the game seriously.”

The SAFF Cup final

“We knew the Indian defenders were slower than our strikers and wingers, and we could hurt them on the counter-attack. I know the players, I know them very well and this was our plan. The coach said, this is the best time to use all the counter-attacking practice of the last 2-3 months.”

Amiri is someone who puts thought into his game and he could have a future as a manager once he hangs up his spikes. “It's all in the head. You were talking about those yellow cards, they have come when I'm upset or angry... not because I wanted to make a bad tackle. The tackle was bad because I was thinking wrong.”

The strategy worked — India got hit with two goals on the counter and over the course of 90 minutes Amiri and his

team-mates had entered Afghanistan's history books.

The party which has been due for decades

“Can you believe they broke bullet-proof cars? They're crazy!” Amiri told President Hamid Karzai that there was no way the players were going to take the helicopter back to their homes after winning the SAFF Cup and landing in Kabul.

“No it's impossible, the president tells me. I said, no, we want to be with the people. When I went out and saw, the bullet-proof car was broken. They wanted to touch us, kiss us, hold us. It was crazy. They're the best,” says Amiri.

“I can't step out of the house in Kabul,” he adds, looking outside the window of the second floor apartment — at the freedom he has here.

“Everyone knows Afghanistan is a fighting country. That we're a place where there are drug-smugglers and there's killing. We're tired of this. Every time I lead out the country, I want to show people that we're moving towards normalcy. We're thinking about peace, we're taking the 'sports way' to do this.”

It was quite enchanting to see people — all sorts of people — girls, boys, men, women everyone — dancing and having a party on the streets of Afghanistan after the SAFF win. It was a party which has been due for decades.

“The best part of all this is we're united. To see these people, it made me cry. We are all together, and that's what we want.”

Afghanistan has been growing in terms of sport. In 2012, they launched their first professional football league. And their Finance Minister Omar Zakhilwal said in 2010 that all provinces will have cricket grounds in the next two years. As a university student was quoted as saying in this report, “sporting heroes help us forget.”

And Amiri is now very much one of these heroes.



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