

Cultivating uncertainty ~ I

The rural residents of West Bengal are losing their natural passion for nature and natural resources. This can be attributed to the threat of agonising uncertainty that stems from callous administrative management of the countryside, writes dhrubajyoti ghosh



water quality, skewed distribution and social exclusion that has continued through all these years. This is in spite of whatever progressive policy, strategy, mission and such other commitments sprinkled liberally in solemn addresses. A tribal (Sabar) girl in village Kalyanpur, Barabazar block of Purulia district drinks canal water because she is not allowed to collect water from the dug well in the next village. "Untouchables" ~ the social verdict of exclusion continues even after 64 years of Independence.

More than half of the Kumari command area of

MAN, being a part of nature, is endowed with strong affinity for nature and natural resources. That is the natural order of things as is evident from the dawn of civilisation; from the cave paintings showing early man's dependence on nature. Being in harmony with nature is then not a matter of acquired learning but an essential expression of human instinct. Just as humans get instinctively hungry, they instinctively love nature. A Spirkin writes in *Dialectical Materialism* "The most intimate part of nature in relation to man is the biosphere, the thin envelope embracing the earth, its soil cover, and everything else that is alive. Our environment, although outside us, has within us not only its image, as something both actually and imaginatively reflected, but also its material energy and information channels and processes. This presence of nature in an ideal, materialised, energy and information form in man's Self is so organic that when these external natural principles disappear, man himself disappears from life. If we lose nature's image, we lose our life."

Can there be an erosion of this instinct? This question could not have failed to strike any regular visitor to the West Bengal countryside (possibly to other parts of the country as well), especially over the past three decades. Even in the relatively more impoverished neighbouring country, Bangladesh, one can travel along village routes and find the ponds all along almost crystal clean and looking well cared for. The people care for their ponds instinctively; not because of any regulatory *farman* (diktat).

Contrast this with the situation in West Bengal. It is difficult to find a clean pond. Over the past few decades, the naturally green villages have taken on an unkempt look. This lack of care is not just about the ponds; ponds here symbolise a cultural trait that seems to demonstrate a loss of the natural passion for nature and natural resources. Lack of care is writ large in village landscapes where litter is spread ubiquitously, agricultural waste is

dumped randomly, there are few well looked after gardens and the tendency to encroach stealthily is ever so visible.

This deterioration is equally attributable to a callous administrative management of the countryside. The drinking water supply mission created a large number of tube wells almost throughout West Bengal but did not include any drainage system for the wastewater from these tube wells. Invariably, an ugly mess of wastewater and soil can be seen downstream of these wells. Just a touch of intelligent and creative labour could convert these eyesores into a beautiful garden. Wastewater from the tube wells can irrigate the garden throughout the year.

The bottomline is that the villagers are losing their love for nature and natural resources. The question is why is this society suffering from this social malaise? The search for an answer should start with an attempt to understand the state of the mind in which the villagers are living and how they are affected by a threat of agonising uncertainty that lies (not too well) hidden in the rural milieu of West Bengal. Not much, if anything at all, is being discussed about this phenomenon that haunts the minds of most of the villagers; it is like an eerie breeze that cannot easily be understood by an outsider.

Uncertainties, in any form, become particularly worrisome in rural settings where society derives stability and calm from the inherent with natural qualities: fertile terrain, amongst others. The infusion of uncertainty in such societies tends to be more damaging to normal human instincts. Starting with this premise, some of the major uncertainties that engulf present-day village life in West Bengal reveal themselves.

Uncertainties regularised

What are these uncertainties? Those familiar with West Bengal villages will find it easy to understand that they have grown around uncertainty of livelihood opportunity; uncertainty relating to water distribution and quality of water;

uncertainty of health care; uncertainty of child education; and, most importantly, uncertainty of governance. To take the first uncertainty around livelihood, over the past decade, a new area of speciality service has emerged that finds boys and girls mostly from rural Bengal turning out to be excellent service providers as domestic help, especially in Delhi and Gurgaon. They are villagers who have migrated from their places of origin because of the absence of occupational space in their state. Bengalis were not exactly well known as reliable domestic help even two decades back. It is not that they are happy living and working in such alien conditions but that they have realised that they had no option.

Those that did not leave the state have no assurance of return from labour or sometimes labour and capital that they put in agriculture. The manner in which agriculture is managed in India is a matter of depressing uncertainty that is looming larger and larger for the poorer farmers. Farmers of West Bengal say that "a few years ago, a farmer spent Rs 10 and earned Rs 2 to grow an amount of food grain that now takes Rs 20 to grow and generates a profit of no more than a rupee. Farm animals, which were living for 20 years are now dying at 10. The hay used for roofing now wears out in two years. Earlier they could easily sustain for six years". These are but the tip of the ice-berg and all that the managers of village society expect is infinite resilience of farmers so that they can negotiate these uncertainties by themselves.

Uncertainty continues unabated for those who may have some cultivable land in West Bengal. Mr Anup Panda, a farmer from Asanmani village, Simlipal block, Bankura district lamented that he was completely powerless to stop any farmer, enjoying appropriate political support, from farming on a part of his land and taking away the produce without bothering to pay anything as rent. This is not an unusual event in West Bengal villages.

Then there is uncertainty around

more than 4,500 hectare does not receive any canal water when the farmers need it. Shamelessly, the villagers close to the dam at the upstream of the canal take as much water as they need, wasting more than 10 times their actual necessity. This they do simply by breaching the canal embankments close to their plot of land. One may argue that this is hardly a matter of uncertainty but one of certainty: the few farmers at the upstream could surely take as much water as they intend to and most farmers at the tail end know that there is no water for them. This example is fairly representative, particularly for the command areas of the small and medium dams of West Bengal.

The state has also been encountering one of the most serious problems of water quality because of arsenic and fluoride pollution. Arsenic in groundwater has been identified in six states of India: West Bengal, Bihar, Uttar Pradesh, Jharkhand, Assam and Manipur. In West Bengal, thanks to the benchmarking work of the School of Environmental Sciences, Jadavpur University, there is systematic information regarding arsenic pollution put in the public domain since 1983. In most other states, arsenic data was available only after the beginning of the present century. What has been monstrously irregular is that very few tangible steps were taken at least for the first 20 years since 1983. Around 37 per cent of the West Bengal population is unsure of the quality of water it is drinking as far as arsenic pollution is concerned. What could have been an example in setting standards for remedial measures for the whole country, has now become an example of neglect and sloppiness.

(To be concluded)

The writer is a UN Global 500 laureate is the regional chair for South Asia Commission on Ecosystem Management, International Union for Conservation of Nature

Cultivating uncertainty ~ II

dhrubajyoti ghosh

ELABORATE research is available on the extent of uncertainty that the villagers are forced to live with; about the state of health care in many West Bengal villages, as also Indian villages. Research confirms the reasons for despair and disrepair. What is less discussed, however, is that, with the decline in village peoples' care for nature, the central point of this discussion, the knowledge of health care based on herbs and plants has rapidly declined. Disappearing along with it are the knowledgeable persons who had astonishing command on remediation of diseases and preventive medicine. Costly synthetic medicines are replacing herb and plant-based traditional medicines. This is seriously diminishing the traditional knowledge stock. The vacuum has been filled up by quack doctors euphemistically called rural medical practitioners (RMPs) who are the be all and end all for most of the villagers today.

India has more than a million RMPs, many of whom are not formally trained or licensed. In West Bengal, close to 50 per cent of the village women visit RMPs while only about 11 per cent visit government health centres. In 2003, only 5.7 per cent of the primary health care centres of West Bengal had 60 per cent or more staff and only 8.6 per cent of the primary health care centres had more than 60 per cent of necessary equipment. These quacks recommend antibiotics at will and their patients very rarely consume more than three ~ at the most four ~ tablets, the minimum dose being six in some cases or 10 in others. The state can take pride in having created millions of anti-biotic resistant human bodies, waiting for a horrific future that is hardly included in policy discourses. Thus the glaring shortfall in health care is only waiting to create more health related tsunamis.

The fourth uncertainty is in the area of education for the rural child. Here again, there are very good studies that have recorded the rural scenario. Particularly worrying is the enormous gap between the urban super-child and his/her rural counterpart. In most village schools there is not much uncertainty regarding the quality of education. It is uniformly poor. What happens after the child completes it? Not all slumdogs become millionaires. Rural parents are now keen to see their children educated to detach them from the supposed stigma of becom-

ing a farmer. At the end of the day, largely, neither do they learn farming nor anything else that might land them a job to support themselves or their families with dignity or pursue any non-firm enterprise with success. Does this phenomenon get discussed in policy-setting debates? The accompanying loss of knowledge stock from a generation too appears to be a matter of little or no concern.

Finally, the uncertainty of governance. The traditional *gram-samaj* (village society), which used to resolve all local conflicts is being replaced by highly-politicised institutions that are mostly biased and hunting ground for rent-seekers. Natural justice is being replaced by political ambition and greed. Eligibility for a service like Indira Awaas Yojana or an opportunity to work in a 100 days' work assurance programme is more likely to come

icate virtues ~ appreciation for niceties, inclination to care for nature, ability to soak in the beauty of a full moon night ~ when confronted with such acute and constant stress caused by uncertainties around every aspect of its life support system?

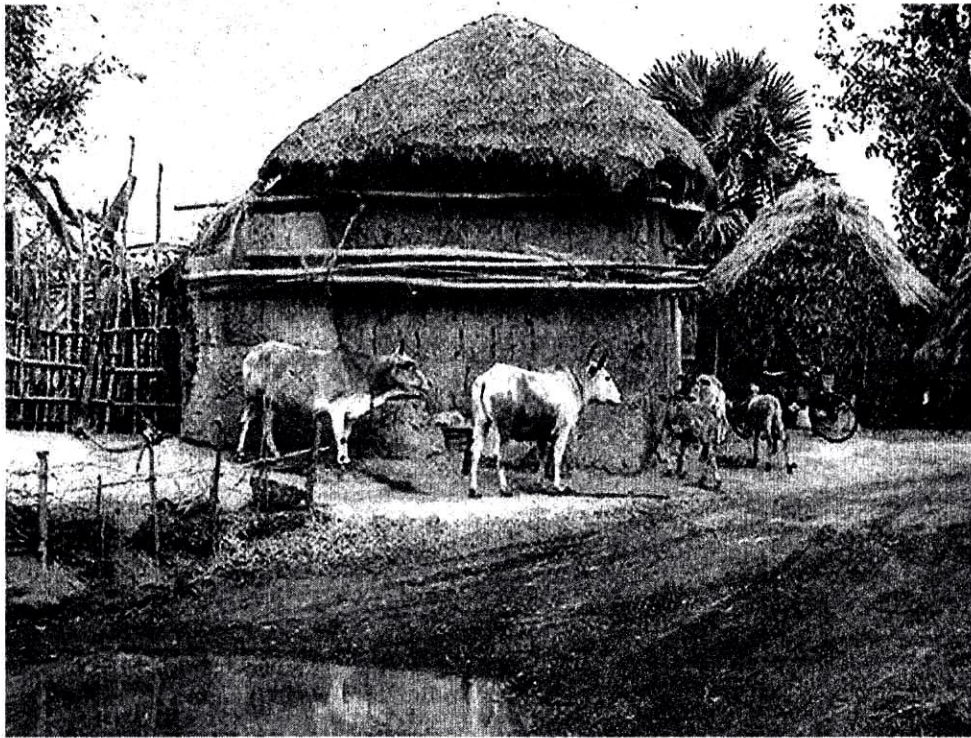
The natural response to stress is to come out of it; to challenge it. The latest evidence of such response on a global plane is to be had in West Asia. However, there are methods to dampen this challenge. Villagers were driven into a make-believe world of expectations for which one was only required to grease the right palm. Most villagers of West Bengal kept on greasing in expectation. The power that cultivated this uncertainty wilfully was never challenged until of course the 2011 election.

The million-dollar question now is: can the reconstruction of the mind take place? Caring for natural resources is a function of mind. One cannot be attentive to nature and natural resources without mentally leaning towards them. Would the villagers get back their ability to care for nature and natural resources? Will they unite and happily work for and again create clean ponds, clean villages, and beautiful gardens and put the landscapes in order? One will have to wait and watch the unwinding of events during this crucial decade.

The assault on the human mind, blocking its natural affinity to care for nature and natural resources is not unique in West Bengal. If the promise of a "wind of change", so loudly proclaimed today, releases the millions of

poor villagers from the confines of confusion and makes them breathe natural fresh air ~ where they can freely and fearlessly think, love and respect, begin to get back the ecstasy of nature in its abundant flourish ~ villages all over the country will regain hope. They may then begin to move forcefully to challenge the mindlessness in natural resource management across the country. (Concluded)

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smoothly if subservience to the controlling political flag is clearly demonstrated and a part of the grant deposited as donation. The actual state of governance in many cases is miserable with out of turn allocations of services breaking the basic structure of governance not only in rural development matters but also plaguing welfare management in West Bengal.

This rather dire standard of living of villagers, who are poor and in the majority, has persisted despite all welfare and poverty alleviation programmes undertaken by the government and the powers that be functioning in tandem. What does one expect of a human mind with its del-