

The Road Not Given

Sankarshan Thakur steps off the road to discover the pieces of an ordinary life and its not-so-ordinary ironies

Look at the picture of this man, look at it carefully and imagine what or who he could be. Doesn't strain the imagination, or does it? A farmer. Right, but there might be more. A horticulturist. Right, but there might be more. A not-so-well-to-do horticulturist. Right, but there might be more. A middle-aged, not-so-well-to-do horticulturist in a hot place. Right. But there might be yet more. This man is all of those things, and more. This man is also a Chemistry graduate. There are more things true about people than are often told.

It's nothing Arun Kumar boasts about or even bothers to tell. A degree in Chemistry? And so what? What did he ever make of it, or from it? What could he? Nothing. He graduated in the mid-1990s, in the dark belly of the wayward derelictions of Lalu raj in Bihar. "I got that degree and there was nothing to do with it, no opportunity to take it further, no jobs, no opportunity. Nothing moved those days, *kuchh kar hi nahin paaye*... I just could not do anything. I don't even recall where my degree is, probably eaten up by termites, but who cares, nobody cares..." This man is also a tale of how misguided politics can pervert ordinary lives in whose name it purports to exercise power. But he made something of his life, an underfed but sufficient thing.

Arun Kumar had a bit of what man has fought most wars over — a patch of land. He returned to it and tilled it and watered it and coaxed out of it what land can often give: the fruit of labour. At the back of his wattle-and-thatch barracks now flourishes what might look like a jungle outgrowth but is actually a nursery. "I just put in what I could lay my hands on and this is how it turned out."

It turned out well and variegated, everything from jackfruit to mango to papaya to banana to guava to custard apple to grapefruit to jamun to sapota to mulberry to teak to sheesham to roses and dahlias and chameli and hibiscus and what have you.



SOIL TOIL: Arun Kumar in the little patch of sustenance he has crafted

"Do you have mahogany?" "Yes, I might have a few at the back." Arun Kumar walks into the thicket, rustling through the foliage, and returns with both hands full. "Mahogany! Young ones, will be ready in about 20 years or so, that is about the time I have taken to make this place what it is."

In that time, Arun Kumar, BSc, Chemistry, also reared a few heads of cattle into a healthy pen, bred a family of frisky goats, and crafted a greenhouse where all manner of gourds grow amid the tresses of vines. "We make do, it is not such a bad life."

Could have been better. And

here's the bitter irony of it. Within a shout from where Arun Kumar has created an existence for himself is the Rajendra Prasad National Agricultural University. This is Pusa in the north Bihar district of Samastipur. Pusa is metaphoric to the study and practice of agriculture and animal husbandry. Pusa is how the Indian Agricultural Research Institute (IARI) in Delhi too is named.

Pusa, the Pusa in Samastipur, is a fertile roll of land more than 1,300 acres. It was marked out by the British for its richness of grass and other natural

vegetation and its flat run in the mid-19th century and recommended as a horse-breeding centre to feed the colonial constabulary. Later, at the turn of the century, an elaborate cattle-breeding enterprise was attached to the flourishing stables. Around the same time arrived an unforeseen gift from unforeseen quarters, a gift worth a bob or two, a gift of \$30,000 from a certain Henry Phipps of Chicago, USA.

It transpires that Phipps was fond friend to Baroness Curzon, herself the daughter of an American billionaire, and wife to Lord Curzon who was then the Crown's Viceroy and Governor General to India. The promise and potential of developing that sprawling tract of land in north Bihar may have come up on the Curzons' dining table, and Phipps, never having been to Bihar, never having had the faintest notion of it, made the offer of the bounty. There exists a view among some that the name Pusa may have come from Phipps — Phipps of USA, and therefore Pusa. Some, of course, dispute that and say the name Pusa predates Phipps and his largesse.

But whether or not Phipps had anything to do with the etymology of Pusa, it is with his grant that the foundations of the agricultural centre were laid and Pusa, in time, came to be known as a premier research and learning institution.

Henry Phipps has an intimacy with Pusa that travelled thousands of miles from Chicago; Pusa has none with Arun Kumar next door. It could easily have had; and profitably. Arun Kumar with his native's knowledge of the soil and how the elements alchemise with it; Arun Kumar with his instinct for what the earth will give and how; Arun Kumar with his degree in Chemistry. But Arun Kumar doesn't look to Pusa, the thought has probably never struck him that he possesses what it takes to put to use what he thought went to waste all those years ago. He has been too busy making his life what it is. That is who the man in the picture is, a man making a life of it.



CELEBRITY CIRCUS

BHARATHI S. PRADHAN

Making choices

A few days ago, an ardent SRK fan asked anxiously, "What's gone wrong with Shah Rukh Khan?" His choices, obviously. Fans are worried because it's been a trio of failures — Fan, When Harry Met Sejal and Zero with a money-spinning Raees somewhere in between, which people forget to factor in. What also seems to escape notice is that Raees was stereotypical box office fare, designed to bring on the ceetees. The three that didn't work were out of his comfort zone, almost experimental. Which really means an experiment could go wrong but if a star like him falls back on a winning formula, he has his audience. They haven't gone anywhere.

What is also intact is his charisma and star power. And as long as he has that, it's not going to be a repeat of what happened to Rajesh Khanna after the arrival of Amitabh Bachchan. True, there are many more jostling for fan attention today, younger, more energetic names like Ranveer Singh, Ranbir Kapoor and Varun Dhawan, all focussed on the job. But Shah Rukh's magnetism lives on.

One witnessed that drawing power when he was the surprise keynote speaker at an awards function organised by the Film Critics Guild in Mumbai sometime ago. Being a part of this guild, one was privy to what went on backstage, where he made the request not to announce his name. It had been a last-minute decision to approach him since it was the first time these awards were being held and without the routine song-and-dance star items, it had to be a different sort of function. A keynote address was perfect and Shah Rukh fit the bill as a speaker who would combine substance with wit.

Shah Rukh was in China (coincidentally for the screening of Zero) when the invitation went to him and he was scheduled to return to Mumbai the same evening as the function. It was one of those nail-biting, cut-to-cut moments with all the excitement of a climax scene since he was scheduled to speak right at the end as an apt wrap-up.

But what if his plane didn't land on time?

Only those who've done an awards show will know the exaggerated emotions that surface during such evenings with Shah Rukh's staff on the phone reporting yes, he's landed, yes, he's in the car, yes, he's headed your way. In the hall, there was the usual panic as the evening moved towards the final awards. Quick whispers to Javed Akhtar and Ramesh Sippy, who were giving away an award to Reshma, the stuntwoman of Sholay. "Can you talk for a little while longer please?" Anything to keep the show going until Shah Rukh Khan arrived.

It was worth the chewed nails and the excited tension for once he arrived and went straight backstage, he simply took over. He'd made his notes on the plane. He made fun of critics, he knew each one, he namelessly labelled some as has-beens, he mentioned another whose reviews were kind to him even when his film was a flop, he imitated a senior critic, and he made fun of himself. But he also had the right touch of gravitas as he spoke about critiquing a film and the way forward for critics.



Shah Rukh made fun of critics, he knew each one... he imitated a senior critic, and he made fun of himself

It was a man of today speaking, a man who had his audience and knew it. One hears Shah Rukh today is taking his time choosing what his next film will be (after stepping out of the Rakesh Sharma biopic). Choose well, SRK.

Meanwhile, Shabana Azmi and Javed Akhtar, who were the toast of the awards show, had a bit of a health scare recently. She was in London when Javed doubled up with a severe back ache and was hospitalised in Mumbai. He had an amusing senior citizens' conversation about it after Javed returned home. "At this age of our lives, we can only wish each other great health," I said. Javed chuckled. Shabana had the last word: "Even when I sneeze, the doctor says it's degeneration due to age," she texted. The antidote is humour. And that both Shabana and Javed have plenty in store.

Bharathi S. Pradhan is a senior journalist and author

My life. My telling. In my voice

Manasi Shah brings back the story of a fledgling publishing house that is putting out little-known tales of a much-ignored people

The painting on the wall shows two ebony male figures with bows and arrows. "Sidhu and Kanhu," says Ruby Hembrom, by way of introduction. "They are very important for us, the Santhals. This painting is also by a Santhal, an artist named Saheb Ram Tudu," she continues. Sidhu Murmu and Kanhu Murmu were Santhal leaders; they mobilised about 10,000 Santhals in present-day Jharkhand and Bengal in 1855 in an armed uprising against the landlords, money-lenders and the British.

The 41-year-old Hembrom is the founder of Adivaani, an "archiving, chronicling, publishing and disseminating outfit of and by the 104 million indigenous peoples of India". The word *adivaani* means the Adivasi voice. In India, Scheduled Tribes are broadly referred to as Adivasis. Santhals form a fraction of these Adivasi people. Throughout this interview, however, Hembrom uses the two terms interchangeably.

Hembrom moves her hands animatedly as she talks. She is dressed in a floral cotton dress, has a resolute face and a way of holding your gaze throughout the conversation. She says, "Since its inception in 2012, Adivaani has produced 19 books," and her earrings swing determinedly.

Hembrom's family had shifted from Benagaria village in Jharkhand to Shillong and then to Calcutta in the mid-1970s. "There was some conflict with the church leaders because of which my father and his students had to move out," she says. In Calcutta, he taught at the theological college, Bishop's College. Says Hembrom, "We come from a culture that has an oral tradition. Engaging with textbooks was really difficult."

At the Hembrom residence, Santhals living in Calcutta would gather every now and then to discuss culture and politics. Many of her father's friends too would contribute to the Santhal newsletter, *Jug Sirjol*. Hembrom's mother, Elveena, assisted the treasurer, and her father, Timotheas, was its editor for 30 years. *Jug sirjol* meant a new era. She says, "None of them were professional writers, but they wrote. It was not just a cultural expression, there was also political commentary." When Hembrom started Adivaani, the first book off the press was a San-

thali translation of a part of her father's doctoral dissertation titled *Santal: Sirjon Binti Ar Bhed-Bhangao*, which is about the Santhal people, their way of life and so on.

School wasn't a happy place for Hembrom. She says, "There was no one who looked like me. Being Adivasi means your features, your face, they tell your story." Her classmates would ask her if she polished her face when she polished her shoes. When she said she was an Adivasi from Jharkhand, she was asked if she ate humans or lived on trees.

Years later, when Hembrom completed her law degree and joined the IT industry, she realised she was the only Adivasi in her work sphere. "Even during recruitment

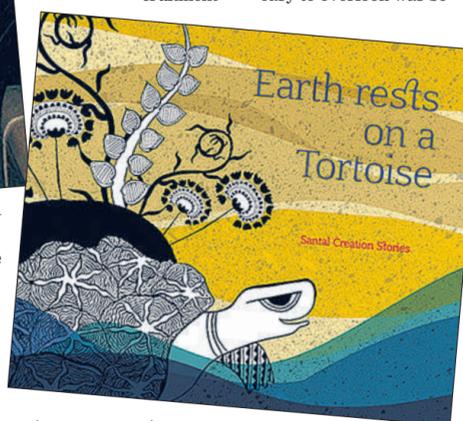
and signed up for a publishing course. She says she knew she wanted to make a difference but was not sure how. She was thinking on the lines of educating young Santhals in English and telling them about their history. "If not now, these stories are going to be forgotten. It had to be done," she says.

The history of the Adivasis has always been written by others — the mainstream historians. While the Adivasis treasure their cultural and historical legacies, there is next to no documentation of this by themselves. Says Hembrom, "We may have a shorter history of writing but we still write in our native language. Santhali is written in five official scripts — Bangla, Devanagari, Odia, Roman and also Ol Chiki. But if you look at Adivasi writing — as opposed to writing on Adivasis — it is usually self-publication, because no one wants to publish us." It was also beginning to dawn on her that one reason Adivasis were easy to overlook was be-

cause they didn't themselves write in English.

Hembrom realised it was important to begin at the beginning — write stories for children about how the community came into being. She says, "I have grown up bereft of many stories and people in villages too are no longer growing up in that tradition. Not because they are displaced by their regions but because of changing lifestyles and taking over of our lands by mining companies. You go to Jharkhand, you will see grandparents and grandchildren working in stone quarries. Where is the time to sing or tell these stories?"

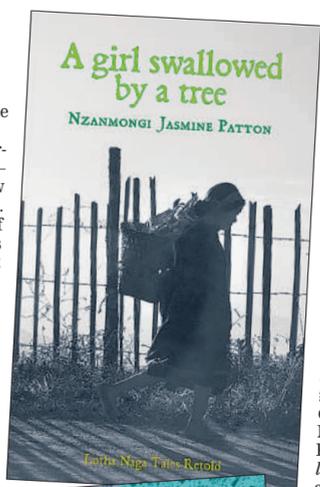
We come from the Geese is about the creation of the Santhals



The history of the Adivasis has always been written by others... One reason the people were easy to overlook because they didn't themselves write in English

Hembrom blames this on the language trap. She says, "We are educated in a language that is not English and that makes us redundant in larger society. How far can you go if Hindi and/or Bangla is all that you know other than your mother tongue?" She continues, "Just imagine, it is this one language, English, and my ability to speak it that has enabled my entry into spaces that have been closed to us for so long. And I thought I have to teach my people to communicate in English."

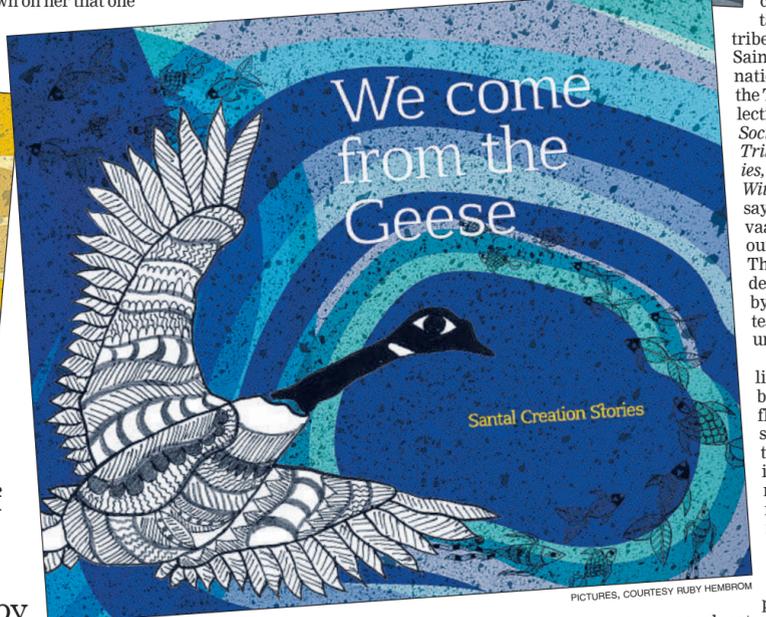
And so in April of 2011, Hembrom quit her job



Hembrom thought it would be a good idea to bring out a book which would introduce people to Adivasi issues in peninsular India such as corporate crimes, poverty and other development-induced problems. All this came together in the book, *Whose Country Is It Anyway?* Then there is *Becoming Me* by Rejina Marandi — a book about Liya, a young Santhal from Assam and her struggles against the backdrop of ethnic riots. Nizamongi Jasmine Patton's *A Girl Swallowed By A Tree* is a collection of 30 folk tales from the Lohra tribe of Nagaland. Bodhi Sainkumar Raneer is the national co-convenor of the Tribal Intellectual Collective of India. He edited *Social Work In India: Tribal and Adivasi Studies, perspectives from Within (Volume 3)*. He says, "We work with Adivaani to publish some of our work and material. These books are academic pieces compiled by the Adivasi faculty teaching in colleges and universities."

As Adivaani gained literary traction, Hembrom's mail inbox was flooded with manuscripts. "It was very interesting material but it was mostly from non-Adivasis. I told myself this platform isn't really for them because if they take their writings elsewhere, they will get published. It became very clear to me at this point — this platform was going to be exclusively for Adivasis," she says.

The journey from book to book was not entirely smooth. Hembrom gets agitated as she details some of the affronts she has had to face. She says, "Once people learn you are an Adivasi, they try to assume power over you." People have also criticised her for using English and have asked her how Adivasis even engage with it. Says Hembrom, "It is about existing. Nudging your way to shelves and marking your presence."



from the geese couple, Has and Hasil. Since it was a book for children, the creative thought had to extend to visual representation as well. For instance, there was that struggle to find a fitting representation of Thakur Jiv, the Supreme Being. In the end it was decided that Thakur Jiv would have larger eyes and the subordinate beings — Bongas — would have smaller eyes. The rest was up to the children — they could give the Supreme Being the gender they wanted, any form they imagined.

PICTURES, COURTESY RUBY HEMBROM