

2 MY SPACE  
Seasons in the sun...

3 FICTION  
The alphabet - I

4 ALL THINGS CONSIDERED  
Flight lice

# The Assam Tribune READING Sunday



**A**mong certain groups of the population in Assam, the process of maturity in teenage girls starts at an accelerated pace, defying the natural course of the human body.

Under the garb of human development index and inflated promises, the lives of hundreds of innocent young girls continue to be jeopardised, making a mockery of the so-called welfare schemes which have failed to benefit the tea garden community.

A case in point is the marriage of Kalyani Dhanowar, a Class-VI student of Tinikhuria Primary School, Dhekiajuli block, Sonitpur district, which was solemnised in full public view around six months back at the Orang tea estate, 12 kilometres away from Sonitpur.

Kalyani is barely 14 years old and as per the customary rules, the father of the teenage girl had to compensate for his daughter's decision to elope by paying a 'fine' in the form of cattle.

As my interactions with Kalyani's family members progressed, Iliajir Dhanowar (18) and Lily Dhanowar (16), the older siblings of Kalyani divulged that she is now expecting a baby and that her husband works at the Orang tea garden.

Kalyani's story does not surprise or worry anyone in the locality, including her family members. Attaining motherhood in their teens is a common practice among girls in most tea gardens of Assam, and there are hundreds of precedents set every year. Multiple pregnancies in quick succession at a very young age, even before crossing their teens, has had serious implications on the lives of young/adolescent girls over the years in the tea gardens of Assam.

Seeta Kisan is another such adolescent girl of Sangakata Dartuli Basti, who gave birth to an acutely malnourished child at the Rakysmari PHC, Dhekiajuli tea block. The stunted and underweight child has developed multiple complications, but there is hardly any specialised health care on offer. The young mother says, "I have never gone to school. I do not know my age."

Some 35 kms from Dhekiajuli, Urmila Gowala (15) of Nahoroni tea estate is about to get married in the next few months. As Sanjay, with whom she had eloped, is away, their marriage has been delayed. "As soon as he comes, I will get her married," says Urmila's father. This is another case of child marriage in the waiting.

The scenario is no different in Dibrugarh town. As I entered the Greenwood tea estate, some 30-odd kms from the town, young women with children in their laps were a common sight.



## Hidden truth

Sanjoy Ray reports on the rampant teenage pregnancy and maternal mortality cases among the tea community of Assam.

The ANM of the tea estate hospital there was attending to a young pregnant woman on the hospital bed, as I, assisted by Babul Saikia, a Childline staff, drew her attention. Saikia and the ANM had known each other for a while.

"She is Anila Sahu," the ANM said. In order to find out what was ailing Anila, I followed the medical staff to a different unit of the hospital.

"Her's is a complicated case. Anila, a Class-X student, first confided to her mother about her pregnancy only at an advanced stage. By then she had missed most of her ante-natal doses of medicine." The medical staff informs.

Luckily for her, she escaped social disgrace, as the father of the baby accepted their relationship and they got married.

But that has not solved the problem of her high-risk pregnancy; she has swollen legs and is severely anaemic.

Unlike Anila Sahu, fate, however, had different plans for Meena (name changed), who is also from the same tea estate in Dibrugarh. After becoming pregnant at the early age of 14 years, she was neither accepted by her partner (already married and a father of two) nor did her parents allow her to stay with them.

With no one to look up to, Childline, Dibrugarh, took up her case and a few months later, she gave birth to a child in a government-run shelter home. The man she claims to be the biological father of her child, however, refuses to own responsibility and the case is now being examined by the Child Welfare Committee of the district.

As I was trying to grasp the disturbing scenario in the tea gardens of Assam, another shocker of a story was waiting to be told by the Childline team.

A 14-year-old girl had given birth to a baby on October 13, 2014, in the Borbarua tea

estate of Dibrugarh. The father of the baby is around 17 years and although the boy initially admitted to being the biological father, he has now fled his house.

While giving an overview, a senior doctor of the health department says, "The trend of underage pregnancy – be it unwanted or otherwise – is rampant in tea gardens. There is virtually zero awareness about safe sex or other issues in this closed group, making them vulnerable to HIV. Nobody cares about it."

The Assam State AIDS Control Society admits that there has been no survey or study conducted on the tea garden population so far, which should come as a shock to many.

Moreover, there are stories of fathers getting their daughters married off just to clear their debts, which they are otherwise unable to pay.

Although considered an under-recorded statistic by many, it is now estimated by government agencies that of every 100 pregnancy cases reported in the tea gardens of Assam, 20 per cent of them are teenagers.

According to the Annual Health Survey, 2012-13, the mean age of marriage is 22 years for Assam. However, eight per cent of marriages still take place before 18 years of age.

Director of the North-East Society for the

scenario where there is no provision of sex education, neither from the parents nor from the school, the vicious cycle will continue."

Linking the trend to low literacy rate among tea garden girls and women, the All Adivasi Students' Association of Assam (AASAA) president Raphael Kujur believes, "The government has virtually turned a blind eye to issues like child marriage and teenage pregnancies. No quality education means zero awareness among the young girls and boys about safe sex and issues related to pregnancy."

Doctors and on-field health workers believe that because of their immaturity in handling responsibility, they do not even recall their last menstruation period, which makes it that more difficult to figure out the expected date of delivery.

Dr. H.K. Dutta of Maijan tea estate, Dibrugarh, says, "We are spreading awareness at different levels and also setting up a mothers' club. In fact, Maijan tea estate is the first tea estate in Assam to have set up a mothers' club."

Manisha Choudhury, a State Reproductive and Adolescent Health Consultant, National Health Mission (NHM), who has been working in this field for the last many years, making field visits and gathering first-hand information, says, "The problem of teenage pregnancy is certainly there and keeping that in view, the NHM is giving special impetus to creating awareness on health issues among adolescents at different levels. The introduction of both in-school and out-of-the school peer educators is one such step in sensitising the vulnerable population."

The community-based programme, involving Line Leaders, tea estate management and other stakeholders will be crucial. According to Choudhury, the newly-launched Rashtriya Kishor Swasthya Karyakram, once replicated across the State, will certainly leave an impact.

Barnabas Kindo of PAJHRA, a Tezpur-based NGO working for the empowerment of tea garden population, says, "The issue of teenage pregnancy is compounded by various factors. While in its apparent manifestation, the issue can be linked to ignorance and illiteracy among the working tea garden population, on a deeper reflection, the issues are also linked to lack of any government services or facilities available in tea garden areas, be it education, health facilities or any other form of economic opportunity."

Of course, a lot needs to be done. But the first step could be an infusion of the viability and value of their basic rights, like education and health. If they are made aware of their basic personal rights, the problem of teenage pregnancy can be nipped in the bud.



Apu trilogy, *Jalsaghar*, *Teen Kanya* and *Devi* were destroyed when the London-based lab storing them caught fire. Subsequently, several efforts have been made to restore and preserve Ray's films and other film-related memorabilia, but already much had been lost. Reportedly, there is no surviving copy of India's first talkie, *Alam Ara* (directed by Ardeshir Irani, 1913), and only two reels exist of the country's first feature film, *Raja Harishchandra* (Dadasaheb Phalke, 1913).

Interestingly, it was in 1992 that the UNESCO established the Memory of the World Programme 'to protect

resources, skills, and structures, thus impoverishing the memory of mankind. Much more will be lost if stronger and concerted international action is not taken."

It was decided that the UNESCO, together with the Co-ordinating Council of Audio-visual Archives Associations (CCAAA) and other institutions, will "focus global attention on the fragility of this heritage."

Delhi-based musician Moloy Ghosh is a foot soldier of such preservation efforts. He says he receives quizzical looks from acquaintances when they realise that he has taken up digital restoration of old audio material as a profession.

## For posterity

**T**his November, *Garam Hawa*, a classic Indian film, will be re-released in the PVR cinemas in Pune, New Delhi, Mumbai, and a few other cities. Directed by M.S. Sathyu, it is the poignant tale of a Muslim family which decides to stay back in India post-Partition.

While cinema-goers are delighted by this opportunity to see a film that was first released in 1974, the importance of this re-release goes much beyond. It is also an indication that India is not only gradually realising the need to preserve the country's audio-visual heritage, but that private players are also taking an interest in the preservation effort.

Under the aegis of Indikino Edutainment, *Garam Hawa* has been digitally restored through a three-year-long project and at a cost of more than Rs. one crore. A little over a year ago, another popular film, *Chashme Buddoor* (first released in 1981), directed by Sai Paranjpye, was similarly restored by Reliance MediaWorks and re-released.

Cut back to 1992, the year the Academy of Motion Pictures Arts and Sciences decided to honour veteran Indian filmmaker Satyajit Ray with the Lifetime Achievement Award (the Oscar). Filmmaker and critic Richard Schickel was asked to put together a montage of Ray's films.

A search revealed that hardly any copy of Ray's films were available in the US and those that were available were in extremely poor condition. Later, in October 1992, at the behest of the Academy, when Professor Dilip Basu of the University of California, and David Shepard, Director of Film Preservation Associates and a member of the Academy, began an assessment of Ray's films, they were in for a rude shock; the original negatives of 18 of Ray's films were in critical condition.

In 1993, the original negatives of six classic films – the

and promote the world's documentary heritage through improved strategies for preservation and access.' With much of the documentary heritage (print and audio-visual) at risk from natural calamities, war and other social upheavals, paucity of funds for preservation in ambient conditions, etc., the project aims to sensitise governments, international organisations and foundations and to foster partnerships to implement projects.

With audio-video material now an integral part of our daily lives, its archival importance often escapes us. In the '70s, possessing a tape recorder was a style statement. Not only did we play taped cassettes, but many of us also recorded family members' voices; the introduction of pocket recorders was a boon for the roving reporters. But as technology evolved, tape recorders faded away and many junked the tape cassettes.

In 2005, the UNESCO concluded that "much of the world's audio-visual heritage has already been irrevocably lost through neglect, destruction, decay and the lack of

**Uttara Ganguly** explores how India is waking up to the need for preserving its audio-visual heritage.

"Even though compact discs (CDs) of old recordings are slowly becoming available in the market, music companies are only interested in releasing CDs of old recordings that cater to the masses; hence, quite naturally, classical music is the worst sufferer. This is why extra initiative needs to be taken to preserve our old classical recordings," says Ghosh.

At the institutional level, various bodies are trying to restore, digitise and preserve archival material. The National Film Development Corporation (NFDC) has undertaken a project to restore a large number of classic Indian films produced by it. It has already launched a few of the classic films in DVD format, including a six-DVD pack of *Tagore Stories on Film*.

On the private front, Reliance MediaWorks and Pixion, both Mumbai-based, have set up globally acclaimed studios for restoration and digitisation of old films.

The All India Radio (AIR) launched a special project, in 2001, to digitise the archival recording preserved in its Central Archives; by 2005, approximately 15,900 hours



of programme was transferred into digital medium. "AIR Kolkata has started the work of digitisation of its rich archival material from 2008 onwards by transferring the audio material from analogue to digital format," informs Soumyendra Kumar Basu, Assistant Director, Programmes.

The material is being stored in a secure server and there are plans to link up the servers of various AIR stations so that the archived material can be drawn upon from any corner of the country.

According to K. A. Dhiwar, film preservation officer at the Pune-based National Film Archive of India (NFAI), "We are always in search of archival material. But it is not always easy to come across them." The institute has digitised films by Guru Dutt, Bimal Roy, Mrinal Sen and others.

The School of Cultural Texts and Records, established in 2003, works primarily (almost exclusively) with audio material. "Our music archive specialises in recordings in North Indian classical music, though we also have significant holdings in other genres as well," informs Professor Das Gupta.

"Ours is a digital archive, and we have digitised around 6,500 hours of music. These are sourced from music collectors all over the country – and abroad. We currently have some 50 collections, all of which are available for onsite access. They are stored under the name of the contributing collector. We have recorded from analogue material dating from the 1900s – shellac records, reel tape (from the 1940s), vinyl (from the 1950s), and most importantly, cassette tape."

The Kolkata-based Weavers Studio Centre for the Arts, in 2013, presented 'Voices of India', the first ever audio exhibition in Kolkata, at the ICCR – in collaboration with AIM (Bengaluru) – where visitors could hear rare recordings and voices of great leaders, classical music, and music from the world of films and theatre between 1900 and 1950.