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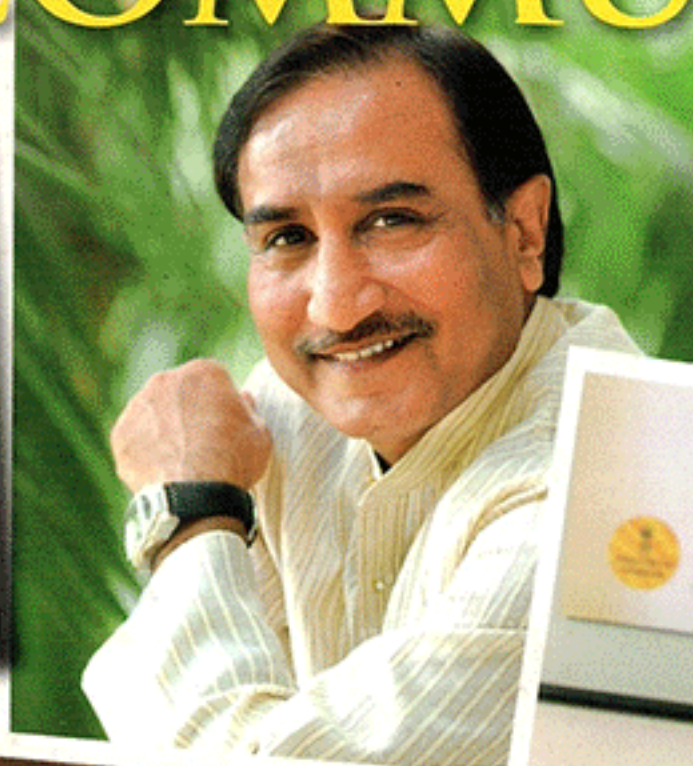
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MARWAR INDIA

PORTRAIT OF A COMMUNITY

JANUARY-FEBRUARY 2009

DOYENS OF THE COMMUNITY



Karni Mata
A different form
of worship



Portraits
of the Jaipur
Maharajas

Gita Piramal Laxmi Goel Motilal Oswal Amla Ruia Sukhraj Nahar



ALTRUISM



Gift of life

Amla Ruia has brought life-giving water to parched villagers through her water harvesting projects, converted a herbal garden in Mumbai into a nature trail admired by environmental architects, and teaches children to care for Mother Earth.

Text: Lina Mathias
Photographs: S Das

Water is fundamental to all human activities but access to this essential element is hardly universal in our country. Which one of us has not heard or read stories of women walking 3 to 5 km in parched villages to get a couple of pots of drinking water? Most of us make sympathetic noises and move on. One woman however did not stop at that. Amla Ruia decided that she had to be a part of the solution to this problem.

An obsession

Immersed in *satsangs* (discourses) almost through the day, she hardly ever watched television. One day in 2001, while idly flipping channels she saw the plight of drought-hit villagers in Rajasthan. Ruia simply could not get those pictures out of her head. She explains what motivated her to take so many pains to respond to what she saw on television. "Mostly, we donate clothes and money when there are appeals for the drought-hit villagers. Or, people collect grains and other essentials and take trucks to these areas. But I wanted to do more than that; I wanted to find a permanent solution."

Typically, she got down to finding out more about the situation and chanced upon the work of the non-governmental organisation (NGO) *Tarun Bharat Sabha* run by Rajendra Singh (a *Magsaysay Award* winner). She became an associate of the TBS, and contributed funds and resources to various water harvesting projects it undertook. As she says of her chance television watching that day, "All big things have small beginnings." She began to realise what a difference the water harvesting was making to the lives of the villagers, and began collaboration with the *Ramgarh Vikas Trust* in Ramgarh Shekawati. Until now she has built 200 *kunds* (a circular underground well) in this place which yield 2 crore litres of pure drinking water.

Life-giving

Ruia recalls with delight what the villagers, who had suffered the parched earth and dry wells, said to her after her water harvesting projects took off. "*Aap ne toh paani ki mauj lagaa di*," they told her. Roughly translated it means, "You have initiated an abundance (a celebration) of water". She points out that there can be no greater sense of fulfillment than knowing that women who walked huge distances under a blistering sun now can get water almost at their doorstep. Her NGO, *Aakar Charitable Trust*, has a water harvesting consultant, a project manager and a team, all dedicated to making villagers aware of the wonders of water harvesting. "I learn from the villagers," she says simply pointing out that this is not a new concept at all and that ancient India long practiced it. The *johads* of the olden days were born of such wisdom, and every *amvasya* (new moon), villagers met to discuss water conservation and supply. The British rule created circumstances whereby this ancient wisdom and community practices fell into disuse.

She may make it all sound effortless but changing mindsets and dealing with the bureaucracy can never be an easy task. The villagers first demanded money for the stones that were used in the water harvesting projects and handling

THE COSMIC EMBRACE

Amla Ruia in collaboration with the Sri Aurobindo Society's Bombay Regional Committee will be presenting 'The Cosmic Embrace' at the Nehru Centre, Worli on 17 January.

Through song, dance, drama and the ancient art of Malkhumb, the dance ballet will present an excerpt from Sri Aurobindo's famous work, 'Savitri', the story of Nachiketa (from the Upanishads) and the life of Raman Maharshi.

Ruia has worked on the opera, its production and rehearsal with her typical self-effacing and single-minded concentration. The 90-minute presentation will convey the fundamental values of life through a collage of different art forms. The rehearsals are held on the lawns of her home. "My husband is already dreading what I will get up to next after 17th January," she laughs.

Characteristic of her self-effacing manner, she makes even the most tedious and time-consuming tasks sound easy and effortless.

However, a seminar she organised at Priyadarshini Park in order to motivate housing societies to do rain water harvesting met with very little success. She gave out 800 personal invitations and in collaboration with the Brihanmumbai Municipal Corporation (BMC) put up posters in many places.

"The turnout was very poor. In Mumbai, only a major crisis or a requirement by law can get people to shed their lethargy," she points out.

Giving quietly

Her passion for water conservation has led to the composition of 60 songs on CDs teaching school children the virtues and advantages of water and soil care. She has also produced audio cassettes and CDs meant for students of standards I to V and standards VI to X and they contain *prathna* (prayer) and *dhyani* (meditation) on fundamental values.

Her *Bal Vatika* in Ramgarh and a tribal school in Dahanu are the channels through which she ensures that the younger generation grows up with a healthy respect for nature and Mother Earth. She also holds classes for children from economically backward sections at the *Rajasthan Mahila Mandal* premises at Gamdevi.

Recalling her *satsang* (discourse) days she observes, "I have moved from *gyan yoga* to *karma yoga*." Her gentle demeanour does not make much of her multi-faceted personality—she paints (she has held a one-woman show of her oil paintings at the Taj Gallery), gardens extensively and her composition of the *Ashtavakra Gita* is a visual and audio treat. Typically, she says in a self-deprecatory tone, "From 14 years of complete self-effacement I have moved to such intense involvement." Both phases of her life have made such a vast difference to thousands and thousands of villagers in India. ☸



"ALL BIG THINGS HAVE
SMALL BEGINNINGS."