



Photo: Mary

# A return to nature

IN THE NEW WORLD, CARING FOR NATURE IS A CRUCIAL ASPECT OF SURVIVAL. POWERED BY HIS OWN CONVICTIONS, THE AUTHOR IS PUTTING THIS PRINCIPLE TO WORK IN HIS OWN LIFE

by **D V Sridharan**

Starting from 2000, I published an online magazine called GoodNewsIndia.com for six years. It featured little known stories of individual endeavour that added value to this country that often exasperates us so much. My objective was two-fold. One, I wanted my stories to radiate an infectious positivism. Two, once so infected I hoped my

readers would turn around their own lives and begin to add positive value to India.

The publishing effort was entirely my own. I was the reporter, writer, editor, techie, and financier. I travelled the country meeting people I was drawn to respect, observed their unsung work, and wrote about them. By 2006, there were about 100 major stories

## MISSION OF POINTRETURN

**P**ointReturn aims to be a campus self-sufficient in water, energy, food, and cash, created on land that was abandoned as useless.

Objectives of the project are many. These follow in random order:

- Demonstrate techniques to reclaim wasteland
- Demonstrate conservation and optimal use of natural resources, ecological sensitivity and sustainable consumption for living well
- Become a profit centre
- Inspire people to return to land
- Revive sound practices of rural India, that have been over-run by 'progress'
- Document the pointReturn experience so that it serves as a guide for prospective back-to-landers
- Serve as a retreat for people to recharge and re-inspire themselves
- Serve as a learning centre for children and adults
- Be a well-equipped facility for hands-on experimenters to develop their practical ideas in architecture and building, energy, useful devices, teaching and learning, solutions for vexatious municipal problems and marketable products derived from nature's surpluses
- Conceive, develop and perfect micro-businesses that differently-educated young people can take away and run
- Demonstrate how when one plans for local geographies, alternatives to petro-fuels, food retail chains and distributed water supplies are possible

*Source – [www.pointReturn.org](http://www.pointReturn.org)*

of 2,000 words each or more, and about 300 minor stories of about 700 words each.

It was very satisfying work. There was the technical and physical satisfaction of labouring over every aspect of production (each of the nearly three quarter million words had been typed in by me). And there was the worldwide following and much admiration. In 2006, my mailing list crossed 5,000.

Then one day in mid-2006, I stopped updating GoodNewsIndia (GNI), suddenly, as it seemed to many readers. Why? I have stated the reasons at great length in an article on the GNI homepage. But let me set them out concisely here.

### Going silent

There was not one reason but several. 2000

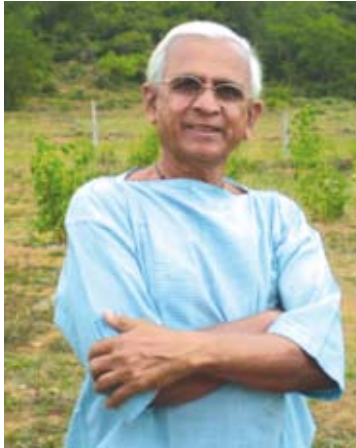
saw the beginning of India's economic liberalisation and economic boom. I too was enthusiastic, as some of my GNI stories will testify. I had hoped that when Indians get richer they would turn to the two crying needs of this country – to nurture the environment and to reach out to the disadvantaged. By 2006 not only was neither happening in any significant way, the position was in fact getting worse. The environment was taking a beating and income inequalities were rising. The economic boom had mesmerised all Indians who were capable of benefitting by it – there were hordes of people outside the boom's ambit who were not equipped to profit by the boom.

No doubt, GNI readership was increasing and praise and media attention was fulsome but I had to ask if GNI was fulfilling the second of its objectives – to inspire readers to direct action. (The first objective of course was to hold up role models worthy of emulating.) In my opinion, the section of society from which social (as distinct from 'political') leadership should emerge was busy chasing profitable careers and businesses.

The most transformative work that I discovered as a reporter – work that lifted most people above the happiness line – was where the environment was being restored and natural resources were cared for. But there were increasingly few such stories to report. I found myself grieving over the fact that agriculture and therefore the prosperity of over 50 per cent of Indians somehow dependent on it, had fallen off the agenda of policy makers. There was, of course, the periodic affirmation but there was no visionary zeal for agriculture; industry being the darling.

And so there I was the publisher of positive stories, overcome by pessimism. A more pathetic quandary is hard to imagine. There was no way I could go on publishing my feel-good stories. I likened myself to a cruise ship operator taking people to charming sites or a barman whose customers were getting drunk on his stories rather than getting charged up to act.

Nor could I publish my rants and let them stand alone. For then I would be no different from the complainers, the protesters,



the alibi seekers, the finger pointers who so rouse me to anger. It is my conviction that before we whine we must have credentials to prove we have tried a personal solution that went beyond intentions, that cost us time or money or both. It is a conviction that hardened during the Narmada protests. (What should they have done? Well, that is another story, but a creative side to the protests was possible but was not even explored.)

So I went silent. It was not until 24 months after I stopped publishing GNI that I publicly stated my reasons. In that time, I pondered the course I must take. Searching for a way out of the rubble of pessimism is the mission of the spirit; failure to do so is to court living death.

What did I have to rebuild myself with? Well, I had these convictions – that the economic liberalisation and the consequent boom had increased inequalities even if there was indeed some poverty reduction. That natural resources were being uncared for, or worse, being abused. That farmers, the people who feed this vast land, were being given some sympathy and some dole, but little serious attention. How could I as an individual Indian address these concerns? I undertook an evaluation of my own resources.

### Regenerating the planet

And so it came about that I sought and bought an orphaned piece of land and chose to restore it as an environmentally stable, productive part of this planet. Who knows – where telling stories of others' work at GNI may not have yielded the results I sought, stories of my own modest, personal effort may succeed.

Essentially, pointReturn is an attempt to prove my conviction that caring for nature is the key to resolving the many problems of a vast country like India. An active national policy to develop and nurture natural resources would keep everyone busy, well fed, happy and distributed throughout this land, instead of just in urban nodes. pointReturn's mission is to create from scratch, on an orphaned piece of 15 acres, a habitat for 40 people self-sufficient in food, water, energy, and cash. It is a journey of a thousand steps of which maybe just ten have been taken. There are already a 1.6 million-litre rainwater-harvesting pond, a windmill steadily pumping water, over 500 trees growing well and the first attempt at growing grain crops. It is a journey deliberately undertaken singly by a 66-year-old man, trying to show what should be possible for many people working within the limits of their own time, energy, and resources. India needs many self-starts, big and small that shrug off the tiresomely-restated ills of our society. ☺

*We welcome your comments and suggestions on this article.  
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