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harmony

celebrate age



The magazine for silver citizens



Announcing this year's winners!

True COLOURS

There could be no better time to celebrate the real heroes of this country.

In the past weeks, like my fellow Indians, I have watched appalled as a few powerful people—because of greed, mismanagement, neglect and arrogance—have left the arrangements for the Commonwealth Games and our nation's reputation in tatters. We have all seen the disturbing images of the filth, the collapses, the casualties. Confronted by such testimony, it is even more disheartening to hear the statements made by the people in charge who, clearly, have little regard for the taxpayer's money. Like all of us, I pray for a miracle and hope the Games are successful. Either way, however, a nation that prides itself on being tomorrow's superpower has been humbled before the world today. Shame, grief, rage...that's the legacy they have left behind for generations to shoulder.

Contrast this to an unsung tribe of Indians who maximise every rupee, every opportunity, and explore every avenue and route to benefit the maximum number of people. They do this with scant financial backing and political patronage but truckloads of faith. They dream with their eyes open, their minds alert and their sinews braced to fight, prevail and achieve. What sets them apart is one simple word: commitment.

Like the winners of Harmony Silver Awards. This month, you will meet our 10 heroes from cities and towns across India who have raised the bar higher than ever in terms of accomplishment and zeal. As I promised you last month, their stories will enthral and inspire you. The currency that impels them to become agents of change is not the dollar or Euro but ideas. And driven by their



Donald Woodrow

commitment they use this intellectual capital to optimal advantage to ensure a better life for those around them despite social and political pressure and economic and physical limitations.

It has not been easy to find these achievers and bring them to centre-stage. And we are only too aware that for every outstanding silver who will take the stage on 6 October to receive an award, there are hundreds more who toil unnoticed across the country, confronting the odds and besting them, getting the job done quietly, efficiently, successfully.

As thinking Indians, we need these real heroes to come forward and set an example for a society where venality, corruption, self-interest and apathy are increasingly threatening to become the four points of the moral compass. It falls upon all of us, those that believe in the potential of our people and our country, to scour the country to find these gems and bring them to the spotlight. It's time to show the world India's true radiance.

Tina Ambani

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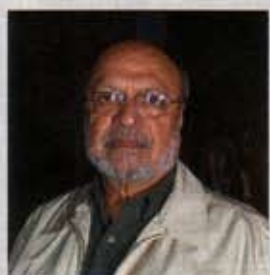
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Silvers of the year!

The winners of Harmony Silver Awards 2010 are no more gifted in vigour, wealth, circumstance or fortune than the rest of us. But they have not let their limitations deter them from questioning injustices, challenging norms, persevering against all odds, and forging ahead. While most of their contemporaries have retired, their good work continues relentlessly, the fight in them still alive, the fire burning bright. Meet the winners of Harmony Silver Awards 2010. And don't keep the winner in you waiting too long.

The Jury



Shyam Benegal



Chanda Kochhar



Mrinal Pande



Piyush Pandey



Smita Parekh

Bharat Singh Sisodia 66

After reforming the dangerous Khanjar tribe in Banswara, Rajasthan, and rehabilitating hundreds of opium addicts, this former police officer continues to sow the seeds of social reform, this time as a messiah of health for the poor

◆ Dhanya Nair Sankar ■ Pankaj Sahu

In 1984, a major communal riot broke out at Banswara, a village in southern Rajasthan on the Madhya Pradesh border. Inhabited mainly by tribes like the Bhils, Meenas, Damor and Charpotas, it is also home to Patels, Rajputs, Brahmins, Mahajans and Muslims. While Hindus and Muslims picketed each other, whipping up fear and ferment, one man faced much of the brunt of the irrational hatred: sub-inspector Bharat Singh Sisodia. Refusing to be partial, he began to lock up anyone who was lawless, earning the wrath of both sides to the extent that the slogan, "Bharat Singh ko bhagao, Banswara bachao", became the village catchphrase.

Today, over 25 years later, the same man is lauded as a messiah who has brought quality healthcare and medicines to hundreds. In 2002, he set up the Vagad Sena Sansthan trust, which supplies subsidised medicines by passing on the commission paid by drug companies; provides free medicines and emergency health services to families who live below the poverty line; runs a de-addiction centre; gives accommodation to hearing and speech-impaired students studying in the civic school; and offers boarding facilities to families who come to the hospital here. Probably the most impressive feat considering the area's history is that the Trust has 175 trustees and 700 members from different castes and religions.

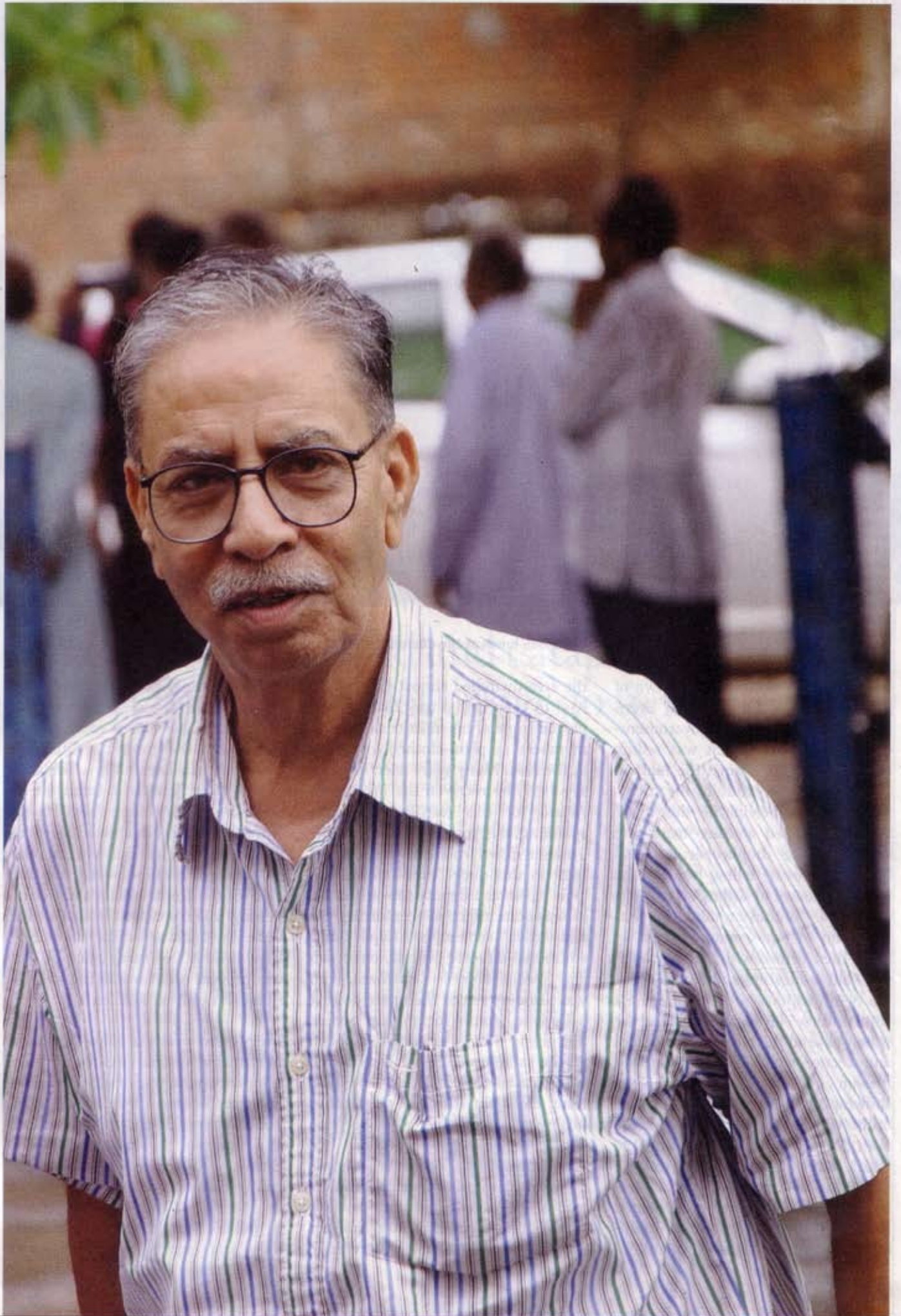
Sisodia has never shied away from a challenge ever since he began his career in Rajasthan Police as a deputy sub-inspector in 1968. During this period, Banswara district lived in fear of a gypsy tribe, the barbaric Khanjars, who would loot, maim and murder villagers and travellers in broad daylight. While the modus operandi of the police was to rough up and thrash suspects, Sisodia was thinking long-term—he wanted to reform the tribe. "The Khanjar tribe living in Magadha village is one of the poorest in India," he explains. "What's worse they were treated like criminals even some hundred years ago by the rulers here; although their crimes were not justified, their anger was somewhat understandable."

"Education and employment are twin weapons to fight rural poverty"

A constable helped him learn more about the tribe. "He was completely well-versed with their living and modus operandi," Sisodia recalls. "I learnt that these tribes didn't believe in anyone, especially the police. I also realised that the youngsters went astray early on." He paints a picture where the

tribals—young and old—led a life of utter debauchery; children would often amuse themselves by stoning peacocks.

"Small things if unchecked ultimately snowball into something serious," he says sagely. So he started visiting the village regularly and tried to create a rapport with the tribe. "I learnt that consumption of illicit liquor was rampant.





Poor villagers and families of patients queue up for free lunch at the *dharamshala* in Banswara; (opposite) with recovered addicts

So I ordered a complete shutdown of illicit liquor shops in the area." Eventually, there was just one government-owned store left, which was selling a bottle for Rs 8 against the marked price of Rs 50. "Naturally, the tribals would make a beeline for this shop." So Sisodia tried another tactic—he convinced the shopkeeper to escalate his prices by telling him he was incurring losses by selling so cheaply. It worked. "Within months, the consumption of liquor was reduced by half." Then, armed with a firm conviction that "education and employment are twin weapons in the fight against rural poverty", he began to counsel the tribals to send their children to school and secure small construction and masonry jobs for families who were showing signs of reform. Initially, the other villagers were sceptical; some even accused him of siding with the tribals. But when they realised that the incidences of crime had reduced, they became convinced and even helped Sisodia secure jobs for them. Gradually, over a decade, the crime rate in

the area dwindled almost completely. And to keep it that way, Sisodia employed some of his most trusted team members as plain-clothed vigilantes in the area. Many years later, in January 1997, he received the President's Award for this feat, as his work spanning the years had successfully brought down robbery, dacoity and theft in this once crime-infested region. "Even as a deputy sub-inspector, he was quite effective in enforcing law and order," remembers Kapil Garg, additional director general, terrorism and Special Forces (Rajasthan), who was Sisodia's senior then. "He doesn't believe in simply locking up people but giving them a chance to reform. At the same time, he was very tough with hardened criminals. The best thing about him is that he never stops believing in people."

It's probably because this simple man, an epitome of frugality, understands his people and the poverty that plagues them. Born and brought up in the nearby Dungarpur village,

Sisodia is the third-generation police officer in his family after his father and grandfather. "He is completely in touch with the ground realities and problems of villagers," says Brigadier (retd) Vijay Saxena, a friend of Sisodia from their college days. "Having travelled and lived across Rajasthan, that is no wonder. But what is most surprising is his unwavering compassion for the downtrodden and the underdog. His conviction is unshakable; once he decides to do something, he will do it. No man, beast or God can prevent him from doing what he thinks is right," says Saxena.

Every hero needs a cause—Sisodia's next major mission was to crack the rampant opium trade that plagued the Udaipur-Banswara belt. (Banswara is 160 km from Udaipur.) This belt is a key link on the opium route to Burma, Afghanistan and Nepal. In 1998, Sisodia was posted to Udaipur as the additional superintendent of police. "We arrested several addicts and coaxed them to become



“I have been criticised and catapulted to the highest level. I don't let either go to my heart”

informers,” he recalls. “Those who traded the drug were shown no mercy and were arrested immediately.” And while the trade itself was being contained, dealing with the widespread addiction posed another problem. “Daylight robbery, human trafficking and prostitution were rampant. Imagine committing the worst possible crimes and not feeling a thing because you were high,” he adds, his voice heavy with emotion. “I remember the case of a young girl from one of the best families of Udaipur who went missing; she was found a week later married to an auto driver, who was also an opium trader. An addict herself, she had no idea what was happening with her.” Disturbed by this incident, Sisodia began police awareness camps in Udaipur in 1999.

But even before his efforts could take off fully, he was once again transferred

to Banswara as the additional superintendent of police in 2000. To his chagrin, he found the situation was no different there. “In villages, opium was used for every celebration, even religious ceremonies,” says Sisodia. “I learnt much to my surprise that consuming opium had been a sort of tradition in this area. Only it was done discreetly earlier. Villagers were ready to kill, sell their women or steal to get their high.”

Sisodia travelled through 115 villages in the district in a span of 12 months and counselled addicts personally. Every evening after work, he would visit families to speak about the ill effects of opium. “He would make sure we were completely cut off from getting opium,” says Tharjeng Patel from Oda village, who is now a worker in Sisodia's trust like many recovered addicts. Patel was among the

first people to be counselled by him. “We were made to take oaths on our family members' lives promising we would never touch the drug no matter how disturbing the withdrawal symptoms.” The God-fearing villagers were also required to take a pledge before the local deity in the hope that this would further strengthen their resolve. From these villages, a motley group of 16 villagers and recovering addicts came forward to support his de-addiction campaign. Encouraged, Sisodia decided to start a full-fledged camp for de-addiction.

First, he needed a building to start this camp. He found it in a *dharamshala* inside the periphery of Mahatma Gandhi Government Hospital in Banswara that lay in ruins. With Rs 50,000 donated by a businessman in Udaipur and the support of then collector Rajeev Thakur, Sisodia

The hospital where Sisodia set up a medical shop, Lifeline, that offers free medicines to tribals

got the Public Works Department of the Rajasthan government to spruce up the premises, which was given the moniker, 'the Centre'. By 2002, he formed a private trust, Vagad Sena Sansthan, to help villagers overcome their addiction.

By way of Sisodia's travels through the villages, he had also learnt how difficult it was to get access to medicines, so he decided to set up a medical shop at the centre, aptly named Lifeline, and help the poor pay for emergency operations. "We get free medicines here, which is a big boon for us," says 48 year-old Kamsa Amrji from Ghatoi village. She comes to the Mahatma Gandhi Government Hospital almost twice a month as her father-in-law is battling heart disease. "The biggest achievement for the Trust is they have reduced the price of medicines by almost 80 per cent," says additional district magistrate, B L Swarankar. "And for the poorest of poor, they are entirely free. As most patients coming here are tribals, they also get access to quality healthcare. Even government-funded medical shops haven't been able to achieve the same results." The Centre's role evolved further when Sisodia realised it could also be used as a boarding house for the families of patients admitted in the hospital. While the rooms are free for families below the poverty line, a nominal Rs 50 per day is charged to those who can afford it.

In 2003, Sisodia retired and moved to Udaipur, where he was keen to continue the work he had begun in Banswara. In 2006, the Trust took over the *dharamshala* in Maharana Bhhupal Hospital, Udaipur, furnishing it and providing bedding and a kitchen for fresh cooked food for families of patients, apart from starting a de-addiction centre. Today, the trust runs five *dharamshala* around the hospital—in all the Trust's total annual spend adds



up to Rs 700,000. "The funds are donated by trustees and their families," says Rahul Saraf, one of the trustees. "Each trustee can donate up to Rs 3,000 a month under his name."

In Udaipur, meals are free, while the rooms, equipped with bed, television and newspapers, are priced at Rs 50. (The poor are not charged.) For Anita Sahu from Madhya Pradesh, the Seth Rameshwarlala Saharia *dharamshala* is like a second home. "My father is admitted in the civic hospital and I have no relatives here, nor can I afford to stay in a hotel," she says. "Here, all the facilities you find at home are available." In 2008, the Trust took over a *dharamshala* at the Harideo Joshi Government Hospital in Sisodia's native Dungarpur, which also provides free rations to boarders.

Sisodia juggles his time between Udaipur, Banswara and Dungarpur, visiting the latter two at least once a month. Despite there being 100 people to support him, he is still considered a one-man army. "He comes by 9 am and spends almost 12 hours

here," says Deep Lal Sen, nursing superintendent at the Panna Tai Mahila Chikitsalaya, who juggles his time between the hospital and the five *dharamshala* in Udaipur. "It is very inspiring to see him engage with people and patients."

His family—wife, two married sons, two daughters and three grandchildren—are also inspired by Sisodia and proud of him although they hardly get to spend much time with him. "Many friends have told me to leave him and at times I have seriously considered the suggestion," says his wife Sushila Kumwar in jest. "But if a man has so much of passion for society, he certainly has a lot of it for his family!" For his part, Sisodia says, "My family has never complained despite my long absences. And their appreciation only motivates me." And so his work continues and the accolades pour in. But our crusader's feet remain firmly on the ground. "I have been both criticised mercilessly and catapulted to the highest level," he says. "I don't let either go to my heart. I just want to do some good work."