



*Phutse glacier, the first and largest artificial glacier built by Chewang Norphel in Ladakh, part of the highest watershed project in the world.*



*Grandmother and grandchild in Sakthi village at the tail of Changla glacier. The lives of the villagers who are farmers have been transformed thanks to the glacier.*

It is often said, think any statement of fact about India and its exact opposite would be true as well. So we are a poor nation, but we are also obnoxiously extravagant and rich. We are socially ribald, scurrilous and full of pulpit preachers. But we are also refined, selfless and giving. We may be annoyingly conservative, but our liberated lot rivals anyone else seen across the world.

Now add another one to this list. We ruthlessly hype those who dazzle. We magnify Bollywood stars and cricketers and genuflect before them, believing they are the only achievers we have. But there are those who stay in the shadows, the media's blind-spot. The ones who are doing, not preaching. *Unsung*.

## Rays of hope

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*Unsung*

Text by Anita Pratap; photographs by Mahesh Bhat  
Mahesh Bhat Publishing, Bangalore, 2008, 98 pp., Rs 950  
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VINAY TEWARI

This book profiles nine magnificent Indians, whose life stories perhaps are not just meant to be read and admired, they are meant to be soaked in, a lot like the warm glow of the winter sun. And if you strain a bit more and read the unwritten, it is meant to tell you exactly what is wrong with our governance, administration, intent and society. And who will eventually set all this right. *Unsung* tells you it will, inevitably, be the unknown, the ordinary citizen who will end up achieving the impossible. Simply he/she is blessed with that dying art—working with vision, will, commitment and selflessness.

Strangely, the fact about every Indian fact and its opposite being true holds true for *Unsung* as well. There is, almost an inverse effect of what the Pratap-Bhat duo perhaps specialise in. Pratap's prose is more descriptive, its crispness a lot like a time-lapse video, almost helping you

needed. It was turning out to be a season of despair. And much like the prolonged, depressing winter chill that

had enveloped not just the north but also Mumbai this year, it was getting a bit gloomy. Till I finished *Unsung*.



*A classroom in the primary school run by Tulasi Munda's (left) Adivasi Vikas Samithi in Serenda, Keonjhar, in the mining belt of Orissa.*

Anita Pratap and Mahesh Bhat have deftly picked up a collection of *navratnas* from across the country, each of whom has chosen a path not many dare to take. The path of being a doer, and not a pulpit preacher. Each, an essay of inspiration, selflessness and sheer grit and determination, all rolled into one.

I read the book at a time when Raj Thackeray was moving around with a contorted face, spewing invectives and venom and largely behaving like a teenager who pretends he is leading a revolution. Worryingly, some voices even began suggesting he may be succeeding in getting a handful on his side who believe he is THE change Mumbai



imagine a frame-by-frame essay of these nine nondescript Indians and their quiet mini-revolutions. Bhat, through his black and white frames, says more than what any piece of text can ever describe. The smiles, the eyes of the protagonists, even the poignant poses, speak and describe more than any amount of verbosity can manage.

The pictures in the book talk; the writing is sheer imagery.

You can almost see the effort the duo has put in choosing the *ratnas* from areas and regions which cover the expanse of our vast countryside. Many being tales from a terrain, which is seemingly pretty, but is so naturally hostile you begin to wonder what metal its heroes are made of.

In fact, as you read *Unsung*, it almost goads your head to play a quiet, private little game with your heart. One which needs you to choose which amongst them is more inspirational. I played the game. And strangely, both my teams lost. Neither my head, nor my heart could put one above the other, could not even find the first amongst equals. They were all winners. Both my heart and head unanimously agreed.

Take Chewang Norphel, for instance. The first *ratna*, whose playground is a region where freezing point is considered pretty hot, who doggedly pursued his quest of bringing water to villages of Ladakh, where there was just snow—round the year. Or Subhashini Mistry in the village of Hanspukur in West Bengal, who sold vegetables, scrubbed floors, polished shoes and used proceeds from all of this to build a hospital!

And then there is Hasnath Mansur, who lives in Bangalore, a city feted across the world as the Indian Silicon Valley, but which has in its belly “open, festering and slimy drains” all around. Hasnath made this her terrain, resolving to extricate the poor Muslim women from the ignorance of their rights and helping them get educated.

And if you are one who squirms at the very mention of the word lawyer, read what George Pulikuthiyil does. He began his legal journey by fighting for the parents of a 23-year-old man, who preserved their son’s body for ten years as they suspected their son was tortured to death by the police in Kerala’s coastal town of Chertalla. George fought their case. For free. After a tortuous court battle, he won. The family got Rs 3,00,000 as compensation. Not that money mattered for them. It was justice that they sought. And got.

For those cynical of the way government and its employees work, K. M. Chinappa’s life history is recommended. Described as a warrior of the jungle, Chinappa, a forest ranger, suffered threats, danger, arrest, a jail term and a job transfer. Yet, he continued with his single-minded mission of ending the hunting of wild animals and protecting the rapidly diminishing wildlife.

From the oft-chronicled



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*Hasnath Mansur (top) feels that only 15 per cent of women from poor Muslim families are literate. Lack of education and poverty leads to suppression. She helps them become informed and take charge of their lives.*

Lakshman Singh of Latoria in Jaipur, known best for his landmark innovations in water conservation to Rangaswamy Elango, an engineer in Tamil Nadu’s Kuthambakkam, whose tireless efforts at educating and helping the local populace run grassroots businesses against heavy odds threw up remarkable results—their stories provide an inspirational domino effect.

A bit like what Tulasi Munda’s story did to me. A remarkable woman who made Serenda, located 350 kilometre from Bhubaneswar in Orissa and in midst of the state’s mining belt, her battleground. A battle which saw her ensuring 20,000 people got educated in her 40 years of doing this. For free—and despite belonging to a poor Adivasi background!

Having read such great tales, it is inevitable to ask, who exactly inspired the writers to chronicle these nine outstanding human beings? Well, thank Vijayanath Shenoy. The writers give credit to him for planting the seeds of the need to document such selfless achievements. Shenoy is a collector. He collects old, ancestral homes, deriving what he calls is “negative pleasure” for this act. He began doing it as he could not bear to see the annihilation of his homeland’s traditional architecture, a kind of fallout of the crumbling joint family system. He set up a heritage village in Manipal, by carrying out the seemingly impossible task of transplanting homes—delicately dismantling the crumbling heritage homes, transporting every little item, then re-assembling and preserving them!

In her Foreword, Pratap describes *Unsung* as a book which is more of a rustic route to our roots, amidst the superhighways of globalisation where Big is Beautiful and Beautiful is Big. I would kind of reverse the logic.

*Unsung* is a book about some beautiful people who are doing things bigger than what most of us can ever hope to achieve. They are smarter and more worthy of genuflection than all those who speak and claim to be protagonists of corporate social responsibility, social work and “work for people”. It is a book which may help you understand why the debate over whether abusing your mother (*Maa Ki*) should be considered less grave than abusing your genetics (monkey), is not the only national crisis we have gone through.

It is also a book which should be made mandatory reading for all SUPW students (remember, Socially Useful and Productive Work classes in school?). It should be translated and kept in all State assembly and Parliament libraries, with the hope that one elected “nation builder” will read it and get inspired by it. It is a book which desperately needs a sequel...may many sequels. Just to keep our hope alive, our winters a bit warmer.

Perhaps, it may be a good idea to start off by translating it into Marathi and sending a couple of complimentary copies to Messrs Raj Thackeray and Abu Azmi.