

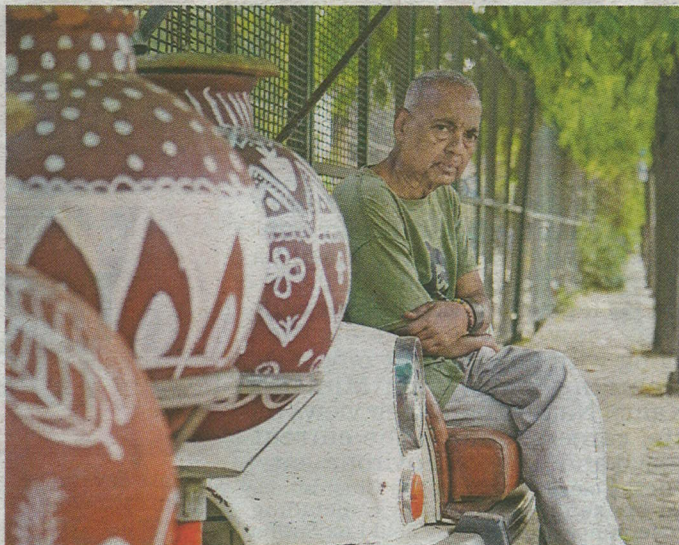
Azerbaijan, the Land of Fire

Pages 22-23

Feel Good Factor

A 'misfit' among elites

HARDIK CHHABRA



70-year-old Natarajan runs a food stall in Panchsheel Park where he feeds women and children for free.

Known as 'matkaman', Alag Natarajan is setting up water pots across Delhi

By Smitha Verma

IT'S A busy weekday morning in the posh Panchsheel Park locality. In one corner of the service lane, there is a nondescript stall that is serving hot bread and omelettes. You can wash down the meal with a glass of buttermilk and a piece of jaggery. You may think of it as another roadside business venture but on closer inspection, you will see the owner isn't charging money for his food from women and children (from men he charges a measly amount of ₹15).

Next to his small clean table-top food counter is a van, which can't be missed for it is adorned with metal paraphernalia, speedometer dials and clock dials that draw instant attention. There are valuable lessons on metal plaques welded across the van. Sample this 'Our prime purpose in this life is to

outside my house. I was shocked to know that the owners whose houses these men guard don't even give them water.' The anger and pain in his voice is palpable. "Our greed has overtaken humanity."

Today, he has set up 85 *matkas* across South Delhi, which he sets out to fill in his van (that has been fitted with two water tanks, generator, pulley hose pipe) at the crack of the dawn as "traffic is less at that time." He has employed an assistant who refills the pots thrice a day during peak summer months. At every *matka* stand, he has installed air pumps, which can be used by cyclists, rickshaw pullers, cart pushers and so on. His van even serves the purpose of a mini fire engine, having imported a fire extinguisher, special fire nozzles and a mini ladder from the US. "I've informed the neighbourhood to call me in case of any fire in the vicinity. I can work till firemen reach the spot," he says selflessly. He has saved one of his neighbour's home from being gutted down, and put out a fire at the nearby electricity office.

His biggest concern runs around arranging water. He has repeatedly contacted the Delhi Jal Board to provide him with water but "that has gone in vain." He wouldn't register himself as an NGO because "why should I waste money as licence fee? I would rather use it to place more *matkas*." He funnels in close to rupees one lakh every month from his savings into this initiative, and donations are hard to come by.

He has volunteered at a Delhi school for homeless children and a hospice for terminally-ill cancer patients. He has also conducted the last rites of poor people who died at the cancer hospice and put to rest unclaimed bodies on the roadside.

What keeps him going? "Humanity! I have simplified my life, all my savings is going into this. Goodness lies in all of us but we are locked up in greed. Time we overcame it!"

Alag Natarajan would rather be smug about feeding a hungry child than having a Bentley parked in his driveway, like most of his affluent neighbours.

Natarajan set up 85 *matkas* in South Delhi

help others. And if you can't help them at least don't hurt them.' The man behind this noble initiative — Alag Natarajan — leads by example. He runs the stall from 6am till 9.30am, feeds close to 120 people, and walks back home with the blessings of many empty stomachs that he has filled.

People close to him may call him a maverick, but the 70-year-old cancer survivor, who ran a successful business venture in London for over three decades, is now on a mission to serve the poor. About five years back, on a hot summer day, he put up a water cooler outside his house. "It was an idea that I picked up from someone else." What started with one water cooler outside his Panchsheel Park house soon changed into a mission of putting up *matkas* (earthenware pots) across several points in South Delhi earning him the name of 'matkaman'. "I was surprised to see watchmen from the neighbourhood come to fill their bottles

He out to
s birthday

few years
ndard of
e with the
and there
t."
dogs are
with
raw
il, oats,
d
e cakes,
erent
n loaves
for birth-
ays.

mpur

Go
th

CH