

BOOKS IN FOCUS

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SUBURBS

By Charu Soni

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THE CHALLENGE OF INEQUITY

Solutions remain elusive as industry and civil society leaders grapple with issues

By Ritu Bhatia

IT'S A THEME that was first explored in a 2008 TV show and has now been turned into a book. Uncommon Ground is a series of conversations that took place between industry and civil society big-wigs. Their objective was to explore the dynamic between the world of business (the "second" sector) and that of non-profit organisations (the "third" sector) in various areas — the delivery of health services, production of energy and support services for food production, for instance — and how these supplemented the role of the government.

This dialogue, Nilekani felt, was particularly relevant at a time when the government's role in both the economy and the direct provisioning of public goods and services has declined, creating gaps that are increasingly being filled by corporate entities and the social sector.

Despite their parallel roles they play, those in business are often suspicious of those in the social sector, and vice versa.

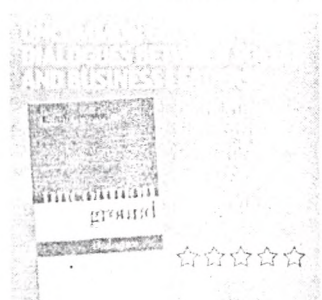
The intention of Uncommon Ground was to promote a dialogue and find areas of consensus for leaders of these sectors who are ideologically divided over eight issues central to India's development. It attempts to provide answers to important questions like: If sustained GDP growth has led to the dramatic improvement in the quality of life for many, then why are millions still living dismal lives? Why are so many people being denied access to the natural resources on which they depend and to alternative opportunities?

The idea of facilitating a dialogue between luminaries who would otherwise not have come together for discussions is indeed unique: Mukesh Ambani and R.K. Pachauri debate decentralised energy options; Mirai Chatterjee and Habil Khorakiwala discuss a new model for new private-public partnership that could improve healthcare; and Yogi Deveshwar and Sunita Narain explore how industry can become more environmentally sustainable. The author interjects on both sides, ensuring that the dialogue is constructive and doesn't become confrontational.

Each chapter offers readers a glimpse into some aspect of



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development. The section of health, for instance, documents the exchange between Khorakiwala, a pioneer in the pharmaceuticals and biotechnology sector, and Mirai Chatterjee, a well-known health activist and co-coordinator of social security at SEWA, that highlights the huge lacunae in the health sector. So many factors obstruct the delivery of health services to people across India — from the regional difference in healthcare indicators to the low public investment in health.

Solutions suggested are interesting enough, especially Khorakiwala's ideas on a new model for private-public partnership. But the chapter falls short of expectations when it comes to the National Rural Health Mission, which Khorakiwala describes as "conceptually

sound". The absence of a sound critique of this programme, which was founded six years ago and marked a paradigm change in the government's approach to health services, is a major gap.

As you read on, it becomes apparent that the "dialogue" format doesn't do justice to many of the topics. The chapter on food security especially leaves a reader wanting more, perhaps because of the contradictory nature of the issues being contended with. As many as 300 million Indians still go to bed hungry. Yet obesity is also on the rise, so the challenge is two-fold — coping simultaneously with obesity and hunger!

Solutions for food shortages range from producing and eating locally; downsizing the big conglomerates in food and creating a complementary ecosystem with special farming zones like SEZs. Those for obesity range from ban on products bad for the health to self-regulation by food companies.

Organic food comes up somewhere in between, leaving you with a dissatisfied feeling. Sorely missing is some sort of analysis or summary of the ideas exchanged at the end of each chapter. This would have been especially useful for those who don't want to plod through an entire chapter but want a gist of the issues that plague various sectors instead.

By Michael Lewis; Allen Lane, ₹599 ✓

AMERICAN writer and journalist Michael Lewis travels to Iceland, Greece, Ireland and Germany to understand the triggers of the European financial crises and comes up with some startling observations. In his telling of the story, the Icelanders are alpha male risk takers, Greeks corrupt and mistrustful, the Irish overzealous and the Germans double-faced. And all that adds up to financial fiasco. Iceland, according to Lewis, turned itself into a banking hub by recycling world's money — taking short-term loans from foreign entities and re-lending it to themselves to buy assets (like Indian power plants or Danish newspapers) — creating false prosperity and living off money they did not own.



By Hakan Nesser; Pan Macmillan, ₹12.99

THIS IS the sixth book in the Van Veeteren series penned by one of Sweden's most popular crime writers, Hakan Nesser. First published in 1998 as *Munster's Fall*, this book retitles Veeteren and introduces a new detective, Inspector Munster. The action takes place in Maardam, a fictitious small coastal town in Sweden. In it four Swedish pensioners find out one day that they have won 20,000 kronor in a lottery. They gather to celebrate. Soon afterwards one is stabbed to death and another disappears. To unravel the mystery, Inspector Munster must interact with a psychotic family that hides a hideous secret. Is it all make-believe or did it really happen? It's a Scandinavian roller-coaster with enough loops and twists to keep you between the pages.



By Philippa Gregory; Simon & Schuster, ₹699

THIS IS for teenage history buffs. *The Lady of the Rivers* narrates the story of Jacquetta Woodville and her daughter, Elizabeth, who ended up marrying England's King, Edward IV (1442-83), in a secret ceremony. A cousin of the Holy Roman Emperor, Jacquetta married John of Lancaster, 1st Duke of Bedford, an ambitious man thrice her age, who acted as the Regent of France on behalf of his nephew, Henry IV. Her second marriage was to Sir Richard Woodville. During this time, she served Margaret of Anjou as her Maid of Honour. Philippa Gregory reconstructs the events of the 15th century to weave an intriguing tale of life, love and survival.

