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## People's Own Fortune Tellers and Story Tellers

Sometimes unpredictable events lead to favorable outcomes. Sethu Das of Design & People tells us how fortunate he was to meet with Anubrotto Kumar Roy, popularly known as **Dunu Roy** — India's own story teller whose stories are centered around the wisdom of the ordinary people.

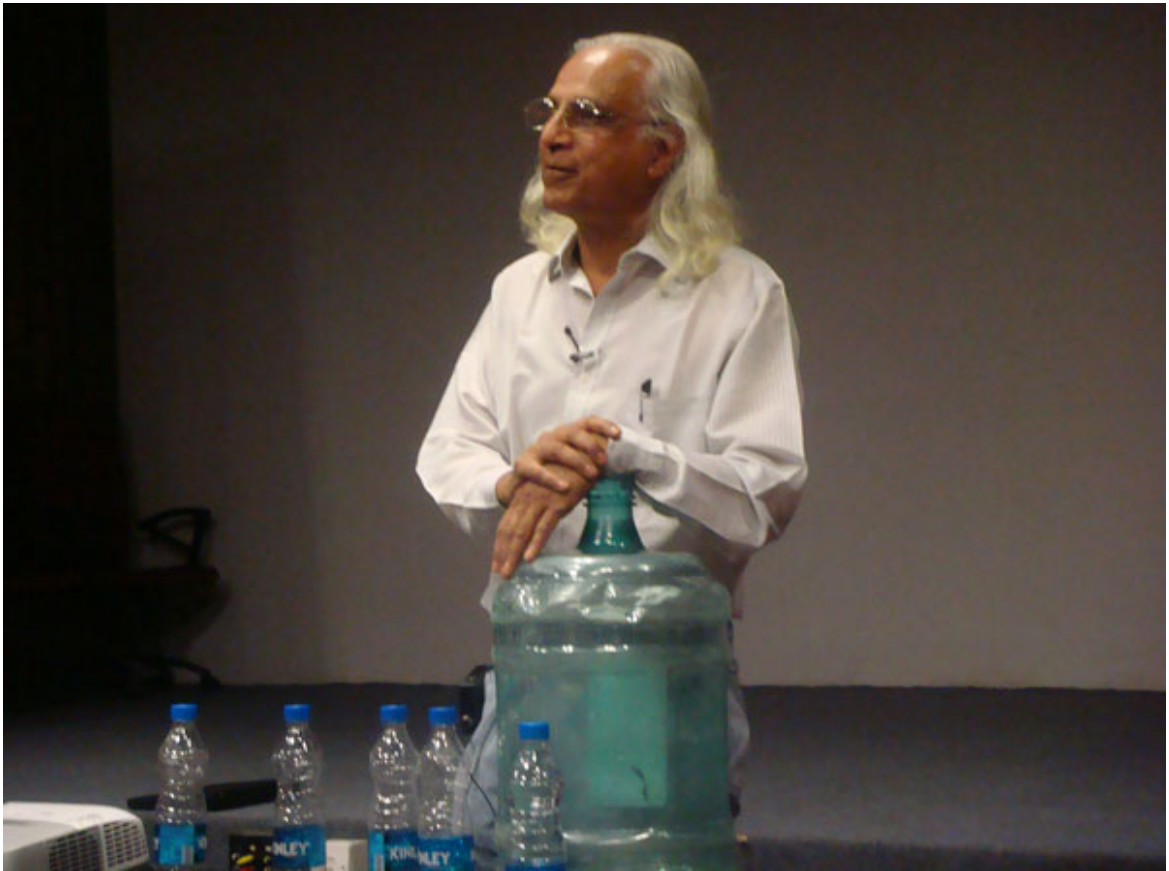


**ONE** more seminar on Sustainability has come to an end. Delegates and speakers have returned. Plastic bottles of Kinley packaged water produced by the Hindustan Coca-Cola Beverages were left behind to ensure the sustainability and livelihood of rag pickers. In spite of criticisms, the organisers managed to bring together some of the most outstanding speakers to participate in the event — 'In A Planet of Our Own — A Vision of Sustainability and Design from Across Six Continents'. The organisers also chose one of the best places to hold such an event in November 2009 — Industrial Design Centre (IDC) of the prestigious Indian Institute of Technology (IIT), Bombay.

A student sitting next to me at the IDC Conference Hall asked, "Are you waiting for CK Prahalad's lecture?" "Absolutely not," I replied. The student was a bit surprised to learn that I had no interest in listening to Padma Bhushan Professor Coimbatore Krishna Rao Prahalad, one of the most successful business thinkers of our times who has written bestsellers such as 'The Fortune At the Bottom of the Pyramid' and 'The Future of Competition'. There seemed to be no end to surprises. The audience was surprised when the moderator of the event announced that CK Prahalad would not be delivering the lecture he had earlier agreed to. They were more surprised when the reason was disclosed. Apparently, an agent from CK's Office had informed the IIT that the Management Guru charges US\$ 85,000 per hour for his lectures — an amount even Bill Gates does not earn from his lectures (according to a source at Microsoft India)!

Soon after the seminar on Sustainability in Mumbai, CK Prahalad appeared on ET-Now TV for an 'exclusive' interview. When the interviewer asked what's next from CK, the guru replied "If you look at my work, they are centered around four areas: globalisation, role of connectivity, inclusive

growth and sustainability. Nobody has looked at all four of them and said what are the linkages. So it's this intersection of the four that's going to create the next big opportunities for management, the next big opportunities for humanity in general." Probably CK Prahalad, who was once a part of the Union Carbide Battery company may consider adding the fifth one — 'sustainable mechanism', because over the years the gurus of our times have developed a mechanism to ensure their own sustainability on this planet by selling the ancient wisdom of the ordinary people to the corporate world.



Dunu Roy, the story teller during 'In A Planet of Our Own' seminar on sustainability held at IDC from November 3-7, 2009. (Photo: Prof VP Bhatpat)

Sometimes unpredictable events lead to favorable outcomes. CK Prahalad was immediately replaced with Anubrotto Kumar Roy — popularly known as Dunu Roy, the Story Teller — giving people an opportunity to listen to some of the real people from real fields. He has the 'reputation' of having brought both IIT Bombay and Madras to a standstill when he had revolted against the institution protesting the ill-treatment of the mess contract workers of the hostel, hired and fired by the IIT and denied legal rights or dignity of labour. Probably that was the only time the prestigious Indian Institute surrendered to a protest by asking all students to vacate the campus. An IIT alumnus of 1967, Dunu Roy is the recipient of the Distinguished Alumnus Award of the year 2000. He later moved to Annupur, a small town in Madhya Pradesh, to start a small motor repairing workshop as a way of getting to meet and interact with the ordinary local people. Today he runs 'Hazards Centre' an organisation of researchers and professionals.

The chemical engineer-turned-researcher-activist who spends most of his time in the field of rural development, started his 'presentation' without slides or a Microsoft Office Powerpoint slideshow. "Don't stare at the screen as there is nothing! You need to look at my face all the time since I don't have a PPT to show you," warned Dunu Roy, who depended on five empty Kinley bottles and one Bisleri can to explain his theory on the accessibility of clean drinking water of the haves and have-nots of this country. It did not take much time for Dunu Roy to get the entire audience involved with 'stories' from real life, to think and wonder about. All his stories centred around the wisdom of the ordinary people, not the corporate tycoons. Roy believes that these people, though marginal, have their own minds and how these minds work can never be interpreted through a Powerpoint presentation.

#### Some Words of Wisdom

Story 1: This real story is from a slum near Worli in Mumbai, called City of Joy or Prem Nagar. For years the slum had a very common issue — poor sanitation. Dunu Roy and his team had a discussion with the local leaders about the sanitation problem and finally decided to construct cement channels near the road to resolve the crisis. Everyone liked the idea of building cement

channels to complete their daily business but wondered where the money was going to come from. Money was collected and the work finally started. A local woman asked Dunu Roy "What is that hole in the ground?" He replied, "That's for defecation!" The woman had more questions: "So you shit in a hole? That's an interesting concept! But what happens to the shit that goes into a hole?" she wondered. "Because when we shit in an open space we know that it starts decomposing and disappears in a day under the hot sun. But when we shit in the hole where there is no sun or air, how does decomposition happen? And what kind of uncivilised people are you to shit inside a room with walls around?" When more people came to know that you need water to make the toilet-technology function, they wondered where the water was going to come from, because they have no water for this purpose. Dunu Roy said, "In the West people use paper." They responded: "Paper! They wipe their ass with a piece of paper? Is that a civilised way to live? You guys are thinking too much." After a long debate, the locals took Dunu Roy and his team to show the place at the back of the slum where they actually defecated. The people of the civilised world were surprised to see how the open toilets, between the slum and a small hill behind, function. Women had their own open place and had time shifts to avoid conflicts. And there were no walls in between that disconnected people. Toileting is a social activity in India, where people sit next to each other talking of worldly events and discuss issues of common concern. The only two issues they were left with were the flies sitting on the shit and spreading diseases and the local scavenger — the pig — that did a good job everyday by cleaning the area soon after the social event (and sometimes even when the social activity was taking place, which was very embarrassing). Dunu Roy left the last two 'design issues' of Prem Nagar with the Design institution to be resolved.

Story 2: Once there was an earthquake in Uttarkashi, in the UP hills. Dunu Roy and his team went to see what they could do in the region. Whenever there is an earthquake, people from other regions get concerned and send clothes, food, medicines, etc. to help the afflicted people. They did the same for the victims of Uttarkashi. Dunu Roy was surprised to see people from Chennai sending light summer clothes to the kids living in minus two degree Celsius in the hills! When Roy reached the hills, he could also see piles of corrugated iron sheets lying on the streets. These corrugated iron sheets were sent from one of the largest steel manufacturers in India to build huts for the earthquake victims in a cold, hilly region! Apparently the steel manufacturer appealed for the compassion and love from hundreds of workers for the unfortunate people up in the hills. The workers collected a month's salary from all to send corrugated sheets to make huts. Rs 150 million was collected and with that money the steel manufacturer 'bought' corrugated iron sheets produced by his own company, put them on their own trucks and transported them all the way to Uttarkashi — a win-win situation! Because your workers contribute, you buy your own iron sheets, use your own trucks with the fuel from your own company, and write it off as a tax rebate. What could the people in Uttarkashi do with these iron sheets? Well, do not underestimate their imagination. They put the donated corrugated iron sheets on the main road and every time a truck came over the sheets, the corrugation disappeared. They flattened the iron sheets using the trucks; cut the metal sheets into pieces to make trunks and cupboards. Then they sold them in the city to buy what they actually required — material to build huts!"

"This is the logical thinking power of the ordinary people! They don't necessarily have marginal minds, but they have their own minds." Dunu Roy continued, "You may spend time understanding their songs, crafts and art, but how many of you would spend time understanding how their minds work? We do not know the dynamics of their thinking. We rarely try to understand how people think."

Story 3: Ten years back a political party that lost the elections, approached the High Court. They argued that they lost the election because the demographic nature of Delhi has changed with illegal Bangladeshis settling in the city. According to them, people from Bangladesh got their illegal documents to vote and they lost the election. They made a plea to the High Court that Bangladeshis must be sent back to Bangladesh so that the demographic nature of Delhi is restored and they win the next election to come back to power! The Judge called the Police Commissioner and asked how many Bangladeshis were there in the capital city. The Commissioner informed that they never bothered to count, but there numbers must be in the hundred thousands. And what did the Judge do? The Judge divided the number by 365 days of a year and ordered the Delhi Police to arrest 300 Bangladeshis everyday and deport them to Bangladesh! This is the quality of justice that exists in incredible India! Subsequently the police set up a special task force to arrest 300 Bangladeshis every day. Acting under the High Court Order, police took every paper from their pockets and tore apart almost everything from ration cards to electoral cards except one document that carried an image of Mahatma Gandhi — that's the 100 or a 500 Rupee currency note! We asked the cop "How do you know who's a Bangladeshi?" The police had three criteria to identify a Bangladeshi — anybody who cannot speak Hindi with a proper accent, anyone who has a Muslim name and anyone who wears a lungi — must be a Bangladeshi by definition! The quality of justice! This is the Illegal Immigrants Deportation Tribunal Act (IMDT) and under the IDMT ordinance passed in 1983, 75 per cent of the population in this country cannot prove that he or she is not a foreigner — because they don't have a birth certificate or a passport to prove that they are the citizens of India.

"So what do these people do — surrounded by a structure of pressure and oppression?" This is a question we all may have to address at some stage or the other — whether out of choice or by compulsion to deal with similar issues. The choice is of course yours, the compulsion comes from the fact that you live in a society where this oppression is universal. And we are all victims of that oppression" — the story teller concludes.

**We should not forget the fact that there are hundreds of Dunu Roys and story tellers among us. All we need to do is to identify them. President Dr APJ Abdul Kalam is one among those who found Dunu Roy. While speaking at the 2005 Pravasi Bharatiya Divas, Dr Kalam did add a sentence praising the contribution of Dunu Roy in the field of rural development. These are people who sacrificed their corporate jobs to build up rural communities. These are people who neither required chartered flights to reach our villages nor required agents to connect them to the masses.**

**It was indeed worth listening to India's story teller, but it was worth more missing the fortune tellers of the corporate world.**

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