THE HINDU CENTRE
for
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Interview

Scientific Approach Works Better than Emotions in Winning Support for Public Causes: Ramsar Awardee Jayshree Vencatesan

Saptarshi Bhattacharya

A view of the Pallikaranai Marshland in Chennai. File photo : Pichumani K / The Hindu

The world's wetlands play multiple crucial but unrecognised roles – protecting biodiversity and flood control, to name but two. However, despite the 1971-Ramsar Convention, which provided the framework to conserve wetlands, there has been a gradual loss of global wetlands to activities such as urbanisation, agriculture or pollution. India is no different: Some estimates suggest that about 65 per cent of its wetlands might have been lost. It became a party to the Ramsar Convention in 1982 and has since brought 89 wetlands under the protected area framework. The National Wetland Atlas 2024, published by the Space Applications Centre of ISRO, states that India has a total of 16.89

million hectares of wetland area – including river but excludes paddy field areas – which works to about 5.12 per cent of the country's geographical area.

Conservation of wetlands received a boost after conservationists adopted a scientific approach and established legal frameworks over the past two decades. In Chennai, the Pallikaranai Marsh, a 1,247-hectare freshwater marsh and partly saline wetland, became the symbol of this movement. ***Dr. Jayshree Vencatesan, co-founder and Managing Trustee of Care Earth Trust****, and Dr. Ranjith Daniels, co-founder of CET, using basic tools, carried out the first biodiversity assessment of the marshland, with support from the Tamil Nadu Pollution Control Board, which also helped them take the message far and wide. In an interview with* ***Saptarshi Bhattacharya, Senior Coordinator, The Hindu Centre for Politics and Public Policy****, Dr. Vencatesan, a recipient of this year's Ramsar Award for Wise Use of Wetlands, one of the 12 women globally recognised for their work in wetland conservation, traces her journey and the various learning curves that she had to negotiate. "Every research that happens in this world is public funded. It's your responsibility to give it back to people," she emphasised. Excerpts:*

Firstly, congratulations for winning the Ramsar Award for Wise Use of Wetlands. What does this award mean to you in particular and the wetland conservation movement in India in general?

Thank you for the wishes. It certainly means a lot. Primarily, it is a validation of whatever we have been doing. When I started working on wetlands, most people said that it was the stupidest thing to do. These were not charismatic habitats. That was 25 years ago. Now, there is a lot of interest, and this award brings additional and much needed attention to wetlands. Forget Jayshree Vencatesan the individual the cause, the issue, the topic have all gained more attention. That I think is the best part about this award.

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Your work on wetlands goes back to the time you started your NGO, Care Earth Trust. At that time, there wasn't much focus on wetlands. These lands were also categorized as 'wastelands'. Please take us through the journey and how they gained importance as 'wetlands'.

I'm glad you asked this question. I'll have to start by making a confession of sorts. I started working on wetlands, not because I was naturally drawn to it. We had just started the NGO and we were broke. We had no money and so we had to find a theme that would support the institution. That's when I chanced upon a newspaper article which spoke about the need to protect the Pallikaranai Marsh [in Chennai]. This was issued by the Tamil Nadu Pollution Control Board (TNPCB) and I started off working on wetlands essentially because I had no funds. That is the truth, the harsh truth. Within a few days, I was convinced that I had chosen the right path. The realisation of wasteland becoming a wetland or the wetland being called a wasteland is not mine. It came from a Village Administrative Officer. It's time I told people the truth. I had gone to interview him as part of my preliminary assessment of the Pallikaranai Marsh which was supported by the TNPCB. He was amused by the fact that there was someone looking at this particular marsh which locals called by a generic name – a *kazhuveri*, a place that discharges waste. So, he was wondering why this woman was looking at a wasteland. Then he asked me what I was trying to do. I told him it was important and gave him the usual reasons that all researchers give, assuming that he didn't know it. He stopped me midway and said that whatever I did, the land was not going to be protected primarily because it was a wasteland. Then he told me that in Tamil Nadu, all such lands are under the category of wasteland and that there's nothing much one could do about it. The government was free to allot this land to anybody for any purpose as long as the purpose was justifiable.

Dr. Jayshree Vencatesan

That was a big revelation, and I owe it to him. Unfortunately, I don't remember his name. It was he who taught me that. Then I went into all the land records and how all land classifications came about in Tamil Nadu and realised that we were still following something that the British had put in place, the archaic Munro and Reid land classification. The British classified lands as wastelands and productive lands essentially for taxing purposes. It was not their intention to give a designation to it. We retained it and, I would say, badly managed it. To say that that category has disappeared is erroneous. We still call slices of lands as wasteland, we still treat them badly. Just that this bit of land (the Pallikaranai Marsh) thankfully got reverted to or got called a wetland. The first 4-5 years of my work on Pallikaranai Marsh was dominated by me trying to tell people and the officials that it was a wetland. One day, when we were standing there for an inspection, a group of pelicans came and landed there. I then asked them, "Sir, for us it is a wasteland. But birds know where there is water,

right? They have come to catch fish." With that things improved a bit. Unfortunately, tracts of lands still get called wasteland.

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Using scientific approaches and establishing legal frameworks for environmental conservation perhaps began in the 1970s. But Care Earth Trust did something that was not much heard of at that time – a non-governmental agency using science to map a marsh so that it could be protected. Please take us through the various stages of the journey.

This is also very interesting a question. One of the questions that I often get asked is how do I work with the government so closely. Why do they listen to you? Nobody listens to me, that's a different thing. Why do they treat you with respect? Perhaps because of our training. Dr. Ranjit Daniels and I, we were the ones who started Care Earth, were very clear right from the beginning that we will not steer away from science. That's our training, that's our strength. We will not be a group of people who will just do science and keep it locked in a cupboard. I used to get very angry with people who do research and keep it locked; neither publish it nor share it with others. Every research that happens in this world is public funded. Let's admit it. It's your responsibility to give it back to people or give it back to the institution. You make it public for some use, whether it will be for basic research or applied research. It is that anger that contributed to this kind of a thing. Aiding it further was Madam Sheela Rani Chunkath [the then chairperson of the TNPCB]. When she gave us this assignment of assessing Pallikaranai Marsh, she said that we got to do two things: one, tell me how much of the Marsh is still left, we realise that much of it is gone; the second thing she said was to stick to biodiversity. The third advice which she gave was very, very critical. She said don't talk about encroachments, because if you talk about encroachments at level one, the project is not going to progress.

We did this biodiversity assessment. Once the report was out, she was very happy with it. She asked what I wanted to do with it. She was expecting me to say that I'll publish it, which is what I wanted to do at that point of time. Then I realised that there was no point in publishing it. After a few reads, nobody's going to look back at it. That was also the time when evidence-based policymaking was being initiated the world over although nobody had a hang of how exactly it was done. Neither did I. I thought why not we use the data itself as the entry point for advocacy. I didn't even know the word advocacy. I thought we could make it public so that there are some reactions. Then it was given to me as an offer. Ms. Chunkath said if we were willing to present this report to a large audience, she would take the responsibility of creating a platform. If a two-member NGO called for a meet, nobody would show up but if the TNPCB calls for a meeting, everybody would show up. She asked us to use that to our advantage. It was she who guided me on this. So, the initial platform was created by the TNPCB. Once people heard us speak science and heard us speak in a very objective manner, I remember you were there in one of the meetings, it became more or less a strategy. I realised there was merit, there was some plus in using science as an advocacy. So, I used it and, more importantly, we stayed true to that. We never veered away from it.

At the same time, there was also this realisation that a holier than thou attitude of practicing science is not for a country like India. Just because you are a scientist, it doesn't mean that you don't participate in a hunger strike that's happening. You are also a part of the community, right? All this was learnt over a period of time when I spoke to people, interacted with activists and fellow NGOs. Every step was a learning process. Very soon, I realised that if I keep myself neutral and spoke only about the data, I'll have more people listening to me rather than getting emotionally entangled. I'm fully committed to the Pallikaranai Marsh even today; it is something that has given everything I have today. That part is kept to myself. I won't show it out. But we used the science part of it to talk to people, convince people. This was one finding we had presented so much that a TV program with a national audiance spoke about it; the 90 per cent reduction of habitat, from 6,000 hectares to 600 hectares. That was something that clearly shocked people, and it was very powerful at that point of time. You wrote about it as well.

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What is really interesting is that nobody asked us how we did it. That also needs to be said because if you speak of science, people assume that it's highly intensive and requires a lot of money. That (the extent of the habitat loss) was actually estimated by Dr. Daniels and me. He had a moped then, a TVS Excel Champ. Dr. Daniels and I would sit on that and go around the marsh. We had a rope, a compass and a pair of binoculars. That's all we used. Taramani gate used to be our point zero. From there, using the vehicle's speedometer we used to go round and round the Pallikaranai Marsh and that is how we estimated the area loss, which finally turned out to be exactly the correct one. Science can be practiced also using very basic equipment. Just a notebook and pen like the late ornithologist Salim Ali did, that's also useful for science.

We often see government policies running contrary to conservation necessities. You have worked within the system. Do you see a change now?

There has been enormous change. I would have to correct you on this thing that most of the policies are against biodiversity or conservation. This, once again, goes back to the British system of functioning. Even today, what the government does is that it treats forests as an exclusive entity. They think all wildlife, all things green and meritorious are in the protected area system. Everything else is up for grabs; you can treat it the way you want to. That is the overall approach to planning and development in this country. That's why you have a large chunk of land with the Revenue Department. The minute you say that some land is being protected, people are upset. It is also because of the conditions that govern protected area management, which is more or less what's called inviolate management – people are not wanted. This is how protected areas started. When protected areas were first established, the prevailing notion was that people are detrimental to wildlife and so keep them out. Since then, things have changed. We have realised that that's a narrow way of looking at it. That is why we had biodiversity conservation as a concept coming up

where we say people are very critical. Human communities can influence, they can manipulate, they can destroy, they can do everything. But give them the responsibility of being conserver. The species that is capable of creating havoc is given the role of a custodian. That's how I'd look at biodiversity conservation. We are the top predators. We can create havoc through the system. So, make us responsible. Then we'll help things become better. That is how things have changed now. It's slowly happening.

The second factor is, most of our protected areas are terrestrial. The [Forest] Department is very well versed with protecting terrestrial areas. Wetlands is a recent inclusion. We had bird sanctuaries and all that but wetland management is a recent thing. The policies were all geared towards wetlands as entities that support agriculture. It's a very narrow way of looking at it. That is why the problem has come. When you say wetlands, the immediate thing that people think of is agriculture. There are other problems too, seemingly unimportant problems, like in India wetlands are normally paddy patches because we go by the Revenue terminology. The minute you say wetland, it means a paddy land. So, all this put together, there is more of confusion and ignorance rather than a deliberate intention to come up with policies that are weak. Now, of course, things have changed. Things are way better than what they were 25-30 years ago. We have the Wetland Rules, we have the Wetlands Authority for identifying and prioritising wetlands, because wetlands is a system where human interference is a must. You cannot have wetlands that are close to people. So, from being a department that manned forests with humans as the problematic species, we have come a long way where people are being coopted. That's where it is. If you ask me how I handle this, I'd say I'm also learning while in the system. One thing that I have realised, this is something that has come about in a very hard way, is that the assumption that the government officials do not know many things, do not understand science, is erroneous, especially officials in the lower levels of the hierarchy. I give a lot of importance to what the forest guard or the forest watcher knows. I'm not saying that I don't listen to the senior officials. A lot of local knowledge comes in; clarity about what is allowed, what is not, and what is doable. Talk to them and they will tell you what are things that can actually be done using what methods. That helps me a lot.

You also spoke of working with communities. Now, among your first projects was drawing up a biodiversity strategy and action plan for the Western Ghats where you worked with the community. Tell us briefly about the experience you had over there.

Working with the community was in fact much earlier. All my work, right from the beginning, from the day I finished my Masters, even during my Masters, I did only community-based work. Once again, many people will wonder how to work with the community and all that, whether community will accept. Everything is possible as long as you are open. That is what I learnt. If you think you can con the community, mask your identity, fudge your questions, it is something as a journalist you would know, it bounces very badly. My way of looking at approaching community is to be very open about what you are and why you are there. Don't try to fiddle around. It helps that I'm from South India and most of my work has been in South India. I don't look different; I don't dress differently. I also speak their language. I pick up dialects very easily. I relate to them in a manner where I am non-threatening. And, most importantly, if they are saying things which are contrary to my belief system, I don't reject them. Whatever people are saying, I take it as what they have said; accept their pluses and minuses. Who am I to sit in judgment? That's something I'll never do. And I'll keep the engagement going for years.

I'm also very upset with people who go to communities just for a small research project or an intervention project. You do that and then you don't talk to them, don't interact. That's not done. You build a relationship with the communities and keep the relationship. That's how I've been working across ENVISAP (Environmental Vigilance for Safe Planet) projects and the earlier projects. We had to be very open to make sure that their confidence was there, that they were able to tell me the truth. Once they said it, I'll represent it. Working with communities makes you realise how insignificant you are. Your presence or absence doesn't make a difference with people. In fact, one lesson that I learnt 15 years ago on this aspect was from Sathyamangalam in a village called Thengavakkada. There was an independent panchayat *thalaivar* [leader]. We went to him with some project on Moyar river. He said, "Welcome, madam. What project is it this time?" So I asked, "Why, sir? Why do you say this time?" "Yes, madam. Today, tiger will be big for you, tomorrow it would be the vulture, the day after tomorrow it would be the elephant. Day by day, as projects change, your animal changes. You will change and you will expect us to change as well. That is not how it is for us, madam. All are important for us. At the same time, we will hunt and eat them as well. Our

relationship with these species is different." This was a neat summary of how our prioritisation process works. It is true. Today the elephant is important, tomorrow the tiger is important. When the tiger is important, the elephant becomes null and void. The local people are not like that. In fact, when I was doing my post-doc, I had to identify some trees to measure them. This was a study that was supported by Smithsonian. A tracker told me that for researchers today this tree will have this name, or that name. Tomorrow another name, then another name the day after. Then we would synonymise. "We aren't like that. For 2,000 years, we have the same name." Then he told me the tree species' name is Malayalam, Tamil, Kannada, his local language, which is Kurumba, and the scientific name. That's the kind of knowledge they have.

You also foregrounded the contribution of women in conservation. How did that come about?

This is something that's been there right from childhood. I belong to the state of Andhra Pradesh where you see very strong women. I am not saying that the other States don't have. When I was growing up, that's what I was exposed to; women who were holding on to the reigns of the family, who were able to provide for the family, who travel long distances to sell the crops that they grow. In fact, my earliest memory is of one of the fruit vendors who used to come to my house in Rajahmundry to sell fruits. That lady would come by train, she was a tribal woman, nearly 45-50 kms away. Everyday, back and forth, selling fruits. I once asked her, I mean I was a kid so I didn't know how to put it, why she had to come so far. She said *bua*, meaning food. That comes only by selling this. I didn't understand the seriousness of that but somehow it had got into me. Wherever I went, whichever rural area I went to, I saw that women worked non-stop, while men were able to take a break. Early PRA (Participatory Rural Appraisal) exercises with communities were interesting. We were looking at what roles men play and what were the responsibilities of the women. We divided the community into men's group and women's group and gave them some chalk pieces. Women had to list all the work that they were doing and men had to list theirs. The women's list kept going and the men's list was over after eight or nine activities. Then one of them decided that they (the women) were writing a lot, so we will also write. What do you write? Because they had already come to the night and they had their drink and that's all they had. Then one fellow took a chalk piece and put a big line saying we support all that the women do. Women are able to do everything that they do only because we support them. He said this is the biggest task that we are doing. So many such

episodes. I realised that women's role is very critical. More than anything else, I had the opportunity to, when I was in M.S.Swaminathan Foundation, take up two studies on assessment of child care needs of women in the unorganised sector, women who were working in the unorganised sector using natural resources, like quarries. A few questions in that gave me a lot of insight. One asked where they kept their child. The women said at home. But when we went to the site, there was nobody there. The children were playing on the street. I asked them that they said the children would be at home. They said that for them the word home means the community. It doesn't mean the four narrow walls. The second thing was this dependency. Does your income contribute to the family? One woman said, income or no income, every woman's work contributes to the family and asked me to not categorise this as female dependent. I had the maturity to listen to it. That's when I discovered that all households fall on the continuum of female dependency. It's a continuum where the male is totally absent to the end point where both are present, but the contributions are not equal. This eventually became a study of food security along the continuum of female dependency where I found that across all types of landscapes in TN, it was the woman's ownership of natural resources as such that directly translated into food security for the family. Even if she had one cow, that was just enough to sustain the family's food security. She was able to, not enough but able to. Anything that the woman owned in terms of natural resources, whether it be a tree or to the maximum, a piece of land, the output of it went to the household's food security. So, for one part of my career, I have always been looking at women's studies. That's what you probably see reflecting even today.

Coming back to wetlands, what is the extent of wetlands in India today. What percentage of the world's wetlands is in India and how has India come to this situation?

Most of our water bodies, wetlands, are man-made. There is a big diversity in it. Dominating in terms of number are regions which are semi-arid. Indian wetlands are organised like that. If you take a very broad pan-India view, Gujarat first, Rajasthan, and Tamil Nadu are normally considered semi-arid. These are the States where you have the maximum number of human-made wetlands. In the Himalayas and the Western Ghats, you have these charismatic little-known wetlands like peat lands, bogs, and mountain wetlands. In the other regions, which are the plains and plateau tables of India, you have large lakes, reservoirs and such stuff. Right from the time kings ruled us, water bodies have been a priority intervention. In fact, in school, whenever we were asked to write about kings, we'll

say they planted trees and they dug water bodies. This was the standard answer. You can write for any dynasty. The number is really mind-boggling.

What is a wetland? That debate is what has actually killed wetland conservation in India, I feel. For a long time, we refused to accept that human-made water bodies are wetlands. We said those are water bodies, wetlands are natural. This actually is erroneous. According to the definition of the Ramsar Convention, you have the marine or coastal kind of wetlands, you have the inland wetlands, and you have human-made wetlands. All three are considered wetlands. Even if the soil is wet, it's a wetland. But we refused to do that. We treated them differently. So, the actual percentage is a number that they give saying nine per cent of India is under wetland. It is quite erroneous. We don't have a very, what should I say, reality reflecting estimate or a figure for that. Secondly, many of these shallow wetlands which were there for purposes other than irrigation were lost. As I told you earlier, we looked at wetlands as the contributing factor to agriculture, every other role or function it performed, the ecosystem services it performed was not taken into consideration. Close is possibly fishing. But other things like fodder, medicinal plants, invisible ecosystem functions like flood mitigation, groundwater recharge were not factored into any accounting system. So, all the shallow wetlands got lost. I would say that the loss has been so mind-boggling that, hopefully, the figures never come out, because if they come out, they are going to shock everyone. I say this against the backdrop where the government has reclaimed wetlands for constructing houses through dedicated schemes such as the Eri Scheme that you see in Chennai. The logic that went behind it was there is no more agriculture being practiced, so this could be converted to habitation. Those are the areas which are now flood prone. Loss has been terrible, that is as far as the numbers are concerned. There has been another kind of loss where the wetland area has been lost, the permeability of the system is gone. That people say is about 65 per cent. Sixty five per cent of the country's land has lost its permeable quality. It has become impermeable; 65 per cent is phenomenally high.

Is there a metric that you use to assess this change?

Yes, at a very broad level we use satellite imageries analysis. But I always back up satellite imagery analysis, geospatial analysis with hard field work. We go to the site where we see whether the wetland exists or not. How do we do that? Of course, we assess the presence and absence of wetness. We don't fall for this thing of water being absent. We see whether it is wet or not, whether

there is hydric soil or not. Next what we look for is plants and animals that indicate that that place is wet. By looking at the vegetation pattern, you would know if it is wet. For most of the patches, one straight thing you can say is Typha, Bulrush. You see Bulrush, you are very sure it is a wetland. That is how we do it. We use plants, animals, satellite imagery and then humans, the best source of data. Then historical records. Wetland data can't be obtained with just one source. You have to use multiple sources, and historical data has to be taken into consideration.

Now, let's come to a little different topic: science communication, whose importance has grown over the years, especially in the era of misinformation and disinformation. What has been your organisation's approach to the digital era?

I have had the opportunity to work as a Ramaseshan Fellow with *Current Science*. That was for science communication. I trained under probably the best people the country has ever had in science communication, although it was an Ekalavya kind of training: Prof. Balaram, Prof. Niranjan Joshi, and Prof. K.R. Rao. In fact, my greatest boasting point that I really talk about big time is Prof. K.R. Rao not rejecting my first article. I wrote that and he said that it can be published as a Ramaseshan Fellow. Somebody told me that Prof. K.R. Rao saying okay means you have arrived. There I was taught two-three things, or I learnt two-three things. One, the need to be objective, present data as it exists. Two, not to engage in plagiarism.

In fact, now with much of the data, I find these are the two things that typify data—manipulated to a great extent and copy pasted from the net. These are among the biggest problems we have now. Many young students come to Care Earth and when you give them an assignment, they go to the Net and just copy or use AI software to do it. This creates havoc. Data, when presented in a manner that's not very true, is very difficult to decipher. Very few people have the skill to catch it, to identify it. Most of the time, it just enters the system and stays on. We are being careful about it in the sense that we ask for citation, we ask for photographs and all that. If you ask me personally how I am able to handle it, I'm actually totally helpless. Most of the time I'm caught unawares. I try to correct, but it's not going anywhere, especially when we encounter people who take up opposite positions to what we hold with data like this. It becomes more a question of you versus me, rather than the data. That objectivity is gone. Many a times, certain organisms are reported which are not known to occur in mainland India. Sometimes, they make bizarre statements. I had the privilege of reviewing an

Environment Impact Assessment Report where the first line in the section on biodiversity says there is no biodiversity in the landscape. How can you have no life in a landscape? Are you in vacuum? That's when it hurts but we are helpless. Hopefully, some system will come over where these things can be caught right at the beginning, because once you allow it to seep in, it stays there forever. That's a bigger problem actually. Data in this electronic format on the web don't disappear at all. Do you think just because you deleted it, its gone? It doesn't go. It stays and creates havoc.

And to identify all that, you require education. How important is it to have environmental studies in the curriculum? Also, what career prospects can a young student expect in conservation and what subjects should they focus on?

I'll try to answer that to the best of my ability. But one thing I'll say as a condition right at the beginning: your grounding has to be very thorough. Whatever you specialise in, whatever you eventually become is dependent on how thorough you are with your basics. That grounding will come about only when your fundamental subjects of science, social science, mathematics, and language are clear. Environmental science and ecology is one discipline – once again, its my view and I don't have the data back up for it – you would become good at that only if you are able to expose yourself to all these subjects. By just studying Biology alone you don't become a good Ecologist. It's got a lot of applied value. You will become a great expert wildlife biologist and all that but if you have to take it one notch above, engage in the kind of work that we do, you need to be exposed to all the academic subjects that are in existence and do a good job of learning the fundamentals. Only then it can happen. That is why we have a programme called mainstreaming ecology into school curriculum and pedagogy where we made sure that teachers from other disciplines are also active participants. That's because the minute you say you are going to do a training programme on ecology or environment education, the school managements send all the biology teachers. That's when we said no. We can pick up this from anything, from poetry, from Wordsworth or from Bharathiyar. You can learn ecology. Mathematics can be applied to ecology. So that is fundamental.

Second thing, now the way things are going, every discipline, every career will have a dimension of environmental studies. Even if you are a medical doctor and you claim that you don't really have to do it, you are quite wrong. How you get rid of your biomedical waste has an environmental studies

angle to it. In the practice of Law, there's plenty of opportunity in terms of interpretation, coming up with new legal provisions, fighting for rights like patents, every career that is in existence in the world today, from IT, from bioinformatics to being a school teacher, environmental studies is there to stay. It's the science for the future. Having said that, I would also say that it's very difficult to train yourself in that to be an expert. It's not definitely a subject where you can say study BSc or MSc or BA or MA. I'm not saying everybody should go for a PhD, you should have a well-rounded exposure right from childhood if you have to do environmental studies. That is what I find as outstanding quality in all the top environmental studies people in India or the world over. They all had the opportunity to do various courses, train themselves in multiple vocations, have a good understanding of ground reality, as also theoretical. That's when you become good.

[**Saptarshi Bhattacharya** is Senior Coordinator, Programmes and Administration, The Hindu Centre for Politics and Public Policy. He is a former Chief Sub-Editor and a former Chief Reporter of The New Indian Express . He had been a journalist for the past 27 years, most of which were spent as a reporter with The Hindu and a Correspondent for national television channels Aaj Tak and Headlines Today.]