

The Shola Fellowship



Pickings from the River: Second Confluence

January 5 - 7, 1997
Northern Hay, Kotagiri
Nilgiris, India.

The second confluence

This was the second meeting of the Shola Fellowship - a group of thinking and concerned persons working on a wide range of issues relating to development and environment. The Fellowship has a core group of about a dozen members and a periphery of invitees who bring new leases of life and diversity to the network. The Fellowship met first in March 1996 [and all that they could materialise was a 23 page document which was interesting in its content, unlike the normal report of the day; and said very little, quite like the report of the day]. This document tries to seek a path of change and describes what seems to have transpired in the second meeting in January, 1997.

Beside a village with a predictably unpronounceable name, 54 km NE of Kotagiri town, flows this enchanting stream. You have to reach this scintillating (and often slippery) delight of matter-with-a-mind after having trudged through series of arabica, non- organic coffee plantations. It is beautiful there on the banks of this stream. It helps if you had not slipped on your way up. It is even better when you realise that the common rocks, rounded and smoothed by the flowing water, have a memory of their own. The spirit of the dead, some societies believed, was enshrined in special rounded stones which are reverently collected in an assigned place. Some see images of nature in these round stones - a study in Australia traces back these stones to the shape of the foetus.

As we discussed the history of stones, facilitated by Rev. Mulley in this Keelcoupe twilight, the river brought us closer to the Sholas. We had taken another step in bringing together a diverse group despite their different professions and preoccupations. As water rounded stone, the Fellowship had stepped into another twilight.

Apart from the core Fellows (Appendix A), this time the gathering had seven interesting add-ons (Appendix B).¹ Jayesh and Vinodini brought a rare mix of melody and spice, delicious Khakra and pickles from Gujarat. An expectant Pawan was all nervousness and fright (Bharati later delivered a 9 lb baby boy who they have named Ravi Shanker). Anil Pande seemed as dishevelled in August company and continued putting kitchen forks to subaltern use i.e. substitute for his forgotten hair brush. K. C. Malhotra (KCM hereinafter), had new stories to tell (and suitably adapt old ones to changed habitat). Poonam facilitated discussions on personal-professional conflicts. Little Kaholie felt at home with the surreal aspects of egg-headed discussions though she will be able to cope with Cintra only a couple of years later. Rev. Mulley, like last year, was in and out helping the spirit of the group. Sajju enjoyed every session of the meeting (thanks to her for marrying Mathew !). The change of species composition can easily be fathomed by comparing with the March 1996 gathering. The only unchanged elements were the venue and the bounce in Cintra's stride.

How this began

The idea of the Fellowship was born in a Ninety-six August twilight as Som, Mathew, Pratim and Sneha, released from the pressures of projects and deadlines, felt a strong urge to pool our common expertise to finding solutions that concern all of us, transcending the limits of organisations, projects, location or disciplines. The idea was received enthusiastically by members of TARU and Keystone, who have been collaborating both formally and informally for the past several years, and by other professional associates and friends.

¹ It is least of the scribes' intentions to relegate people into appendices, for not only is it unbecoming but also infra-dig. Currently however, imperatives of document production dominate.

For the past few years, many of us have been concerned about the impacts of the rapid changes in the economy and society on the vast majority - especially the socially backward and economically marginalised peoples. More and more often, these communities are caught in the cross-fire between national and local developmental goals; growth and development objectives; bear the brunt of depleting resources and shrinking options - a cross-section of issues of development and environment. These are important matters to engage with if pro-active strategies to safeguard the interest of the poor, are to be put in place. We felt that a Fellowship like ours could lead the innovations in methods, tools and ways of thinking that will be the hallmark of a work strategy for the future.

The Fellowship brings together a group of people who are trying to make a paradigm shift as they try to understand small parts of the world, helping each other adopt new ways of working, exploring future avenues of support and action research. We believe these type of efforts and alliances will help determine the face of tomorrow's world.

Our Focus

The Fellowship draws its inspiration² from the giraffe - you know one when you see one but you can't describe it. Here's what the Shola does :

It networks to share ideas, methodologies and approaches. It uses synergies from working of a multi-disciplinary team for tangible action in each individual's work or interest area. The Fellowship also explores fresh ideas and potential for action research in the areas of :

² Watch this space for ever changing opinions (after the innovative christening of the 1996 Keystone annual report as 'The Tree Fall Gap' - not to be confused with the FOREX gap or the housing gap or ecological generation gap).

Appropriate technologies
Information systems and dissemination avenues
Rural micro-enterprises
Innovations in market intervention
Social and anthropological issues linked to natural resources

We share our work with other groups and individuals who can contribute in their unique fashion, in furthering the objectives of the Fellowship, through participation, or absorption of these ideas in their own work spheres. We propose to extend our boundaries to include partners from South-Asia, in the near future, and other regions soon after.

Day 1, Night 1

[This unusual header style is a result of non-payment of per diems for a day's work. The Fellowship hence is really a long drawn out affair beginning very late in the morning and concluding early, the next morning.]

Like all meetings, we began with introducing ourselves (this is a popular opener even among friends). Being a little self-obsessed helps. Especially if you have to recount how the Fellowship came about, the urgent need for it, how nobody knew about this but it was a good thing and how we needed money but nobody was willing to give any.....³

Northern Hay is an old beautiful bungalow which was the venue for both the meetings. We wish to thank the Trust for making it available for our use, free of cost. We felt that a change of venue for meetings may be desirable considering travel costs (and saving Keystone folks a lot of

³ A formal presentation "The Shola Quintessence" is available on request.

hosting trouble) and opportunities to be in other pristine environments. The next meeting is planned to be held either in the Himalayas or along the west coast. Pawan and Bhat are currently trying hard to beat each other in losing their bids.



Sharing of expectations were interspersed with introductions. Anil and Pawan were here the first time and wanted some time to share what they have been doing, get to know what this group does, how we can take things forward together, how we can help each other out. Like in documenting pottery of the *Kotas*; like in commercialising socially and environmentally desirable goods and values. Poonam was here on holiday but also looked forward to a retreat for the group; a time to introspect and share, get back in touch with oneself and others. Others talked about their expectations - some had come with open minds, some for a time to talk and relax, others to look for new perspectives and meaning, to add value - and by the end of the day, we were able to plan a schedule of discussions and outings. After a tiring day (most had travelled the night

before) it was an early start for dinner.

The dinner gathering is usually longer than the planned daytime deliberations. As the evening grew and the cold set in, a lively discussion wiped the weariness from many a brow. KCM took the lead and recounted his experiences with a contact mission with the Jarawa tribe of the Andamans. His presentation carried on to describe the work being undertaken to trace back the ethnic origins of peoples in the sub continent based on studies of blood samples. There were interesting surprises and controversial questions. Perspectives of biologists and anthropologists though, quite a refreshing perspective on races and social groupings, in the midst of racism and ethnic conflict reported in media. Cintra played till Rajiv announced dinner that he had not prepared (a conscientious follower of camp responsibilities agreed to earlier in the day).

Day 2, Night 2

The day started late (didn't we tell you) with a small presentation from Anil on his work documenting Kota (a tribe in the Nilgiris) pottery. The work itself came about because of Rev. Mulley and Keystone had noticed that the pottery of the Kotas was fast dying out. It was a short piece of work but Anil was always there in the village - sitting, talking, watching - here is what he found. In most places we know of in India, men make the pots. Only women in Manipur valley make pots and here was another such rarity. Pottery was practised in only five of the settlements now and only some women were making these seasonally.

Kotas made their pots on wheels and also by padding. The wheel they use is shaped like a dish, a metal structure with a hole and a stand. The clay is mined from a suitable place close to the settlement. Some sand is also mixed in the clay depending on the quality and need. Two women work on the wheel - one turns the wheel while the other fashions the pot. "The

craft is really versatile”, says Anil. Pots are usually made before a pre-sowing festival in January. Deities and priests are worshipped on this full-moon night. There is patron relationship of other communities with the Kotas. The Badagas for instance, collect pots made by them when their women attain puberty. About 50 to 60 Badaga settlements were supported in earlier days, by one Kota settlement, for supply of pots for religious and utilitarian purposes. UPASI (a Planters’ Association) had tried to revive this art with CAPART (a Govt. of India funding agency) support, in one village. Electric wheels and other innovations failed but miserably. Anil has documented the relationship of the craft with the lifestyles, past and present, of the Kotas and other communities. The document has also identified some practical inputs for its revival such as linking with the market, other skills to be picked up by the community, pricing for different segments etc. A proposal has been canvassed with some agencies to properly document and initiate action on a small-scale and responses are awaited.

Catching up with changes that have come about in the last one year - Pawan started with how he was an architect turned into a contractor by the ways of the big bad world. A stint making alternate-wood furniture, prior work with local and low-cost construction technologies and the latest round of business in the construction business, had a lot to teach. “It does not work”, he says, “if you do not have the right combination, the right people and a minimum amount of resources”. His reflection was that many of our efforts probably do not get “there” since we may have a reticence in aggressively commercialising them. The wheels of commerce discussion established for the gathering how important it was to pool resources, expertise, opportunities. May be one of the few ways, and pretty potent compared to the other cloudy paths, is that we use marketing of products, services and ideas, as our vehicle for cultivating the delicate plant of lasting and pervasive social concerns. A nodding agreement and that was a realisation driven hard by Pawan’s sharing. The challenge of

transformation - as the business policy types might say, “I am for I create value”. And gone are the days when, value creation was done by factories and machines only. And social response the realm of a few do-gooders and charity trusts. Like we have advertising and FMCGs (uh-fast moving consumer...), we need a counter-ideology, a counter-culture which injects a spore of veritable doubt, a healthy disregard for the shining and mobilises a live-force of concerted action. And good ideas need good marketing. Alternate and sustainable life-styles need promotion and dissemination that they are sought after, cherished. Values of the poor and marginalised (and their potential to create these) need start and finish. Interesting. The most novel (often hotly debated) upshot that business is “not bad”. We can be middle, scrupulous people who earn a decent return on doing things we think are good. We will take the Shola Eco Ensemble discussion to see how the detailing is done, we said. Scheduled for the next day.

The two discussions had set the tone for some serious lunch and we all looked forward to the other wonder of live systems. It was Bhat’s turn to describe the concept and practice of the Living Machine. Old texts tell us that running water is always pure. Polluting waters are one of the recounted sins. This is the eon of water as the situation on ground and works of authors remind us time and again. This will be the decade of work and conflicts (and solutions hopefully) around water. In India (read urban areas), about 20 litres of water is used for flushing once. The average for water consumption in India works out to be 4-5 cum per capita per annum. With many of the big and small towns becoming Sintex-nagars⁴, the amount of sullage and waste-water generation if huge. While

⁴ Sintex is a plastic water-tank, available in various sizes, often installed on roof-tops and a key factor for sleep-at-night for many an urban Indian. Electric-powered Booster pumps, installed to suck water from the mains (“it is against the law”) are the ancillary. “Auto-sense” pumps get activated on level decline but a luxury.

there is the omni-present problem of water supplies necessitate huge investments, safe sewage and sullage disposal are posing great challenges in many urban settlements. Environmental engineering solutions have been tried to solve some of these - treating sewage for re-use in flushing for instance. Bhat had a fruitful interaction with John Todd who has developed some variations of such an innovation and a couple of them are working in Scotland and the US.

Living Machine is conceptually a simple series of chambers which use physical (e.g. aeration) and biological (e.g. plants) cleansing methods to render the sewage useful, or harmless in any case. The differing environment in each chamber or cell helps “clean”, be rid of or absorb the pollutants. Think of a set of inter-connected chambers - we introduce the sewage from one end, treat it in a chamber for sometime using an environment - may be specific physical stimulus and/or specific plant species; passing on to the next chamber for another type of cleansing, and so on till the end where the water is near-cleansed. A simple variation is to just keep drawing water with impurities on-board and aerating it vigorously. Say a boat which has a number of such chambers or cells with different environments is cleaning the lake waters at the bottom. This is called the Lake Restorer.

Ph, N and C are the main pollutants in sewage. The Cellular Structure machine has a Suldge Bed, Floating Plants, Micro-organisms on pumice-stone like pebbles, Water hyacinth and Ecological Beds as the different chambers.

Bhat, recharged after his visit to the U.S. (especially after seeing the Ocean Arks facility and meeting with Dr. John Todd) presented to the group the conceptual basis for ecologically engineered systems in waste water treatment. Bhat’s belief in ecological engineering had received a fillip in America when he saw the Living Machine in operation at a Muncipal waste

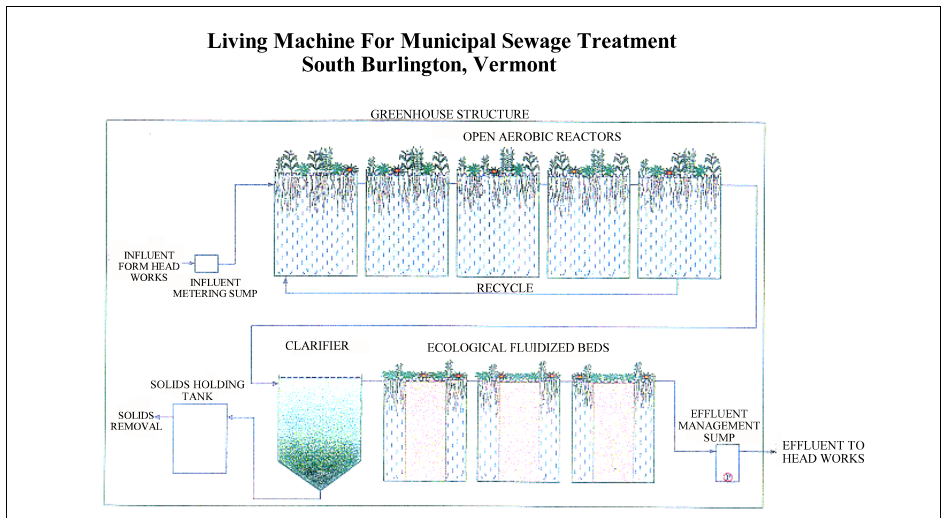
water treatment facility.

What is a Living Machine ?

Conventional effluent treatment technologies address the problem of organic carbon, nitrogen compounds, Phosphorous and metals either by aerobic, anerobic or combination process and settling chemical reactions. Biological agents are a recent add on. However these technologies have run into problems in real life (they don't work the way they are supposed to) because of species specialisation, requirement of systematic preventive maintenance etc. Enormous amounts of energy is spent to separate the sludge and the water. Similar processes - oxidation, reduction, adsorption and chelation- are carried out in nature in various ecological niches ranging from marshes, river banks, mangroves, lake bottoms etc. The processes include various bio-geochemical processes where life forms play catalytical role-actively or passively. Ecologically engineered Living machines attempt at recreating these niches in suitable physical spaces to achieve the task of treatment. Species diversity and control are modulated by applying predator-prey relationships.

What we heard and discussed.

Bhat described these concepts with sketches and operational examples of both aerobic and anerobic systems and stressed that this would become a key technology in India within the next 5-10 years as the process is environmentally benign and life cycle costs are lower. The counter to this claim was argued by Som who calculated that the public utility domain in India would not appreciate a low cost and low maintenance option as the current stakeholder population would feel threatened. Bhat decides to go back to the drawing board to check out the niches where product introduction would make business sense in present reality.



Though slightly technical, the discussion became lively. The prospect of offering Living treatment systems to the many municipalities; the vast potential owing to its cellular and hence, scale-neutral architecture; environmental benefits appealed to the us. The stakes in traditional sewage treatment systems; the fact that we still had a long way of experimenting, piloting and getting the cellular environments right, and their combinations - were identified as the tasks ahead. There have been some enquiries and as we write this, many clients have evinced interest in this technology. Bhat and Rajiv are pursuing from their Bangalore office.

The bilateral and multi-lateral groups continued with their chats on subjects of common interest. The customary visit to Longwood Shola was the next item for the day. The ride was short as usual, the walk enjoyable as ever. Some were lucky to spot the Malabar Giant Squirrel jumping from tree to tree. Of course, most of the group missed the Bisons grazing near the reservoir, and had to be content seeing the photos later. The small reservoir remains the same and you got the same effect - see A First Gathering cover shot.

The evening returned to an unstructured format. Spontaneous sharing to recount of tales and foibles. With coral reefs, honey bees and eco-tourism in Malaysia, Pratim was able to start the group into an evening of mixed activities including some casual cooking on the side. The hodge-podge also had a new but failed attempt to map correspondences and concepts between ecology, economics and (brace-up) real-life. It looks like this :

ECOLOGY	ECONOMICS	REAL LIFE
Natural	Micro, development (?)	Confusion
Socio-biology	Monopoly	Arrangement
Altruism	Cartel	?
Niche Specialisation	Segmentation	Constituency
Symbiosis	Group Company	Coalition
Succession	Planned Obsolescence	Third Force
Parasitism	Brokers & Bankers	Nabobs, Elite
Colonisation	Market Share	Peasant Movements
Migration	Taxes and Subsidies	Rag-picking
Co-evolution	Cable Operator	MTV

You can try adding some more to the list. May be to discover the similarities of the oikos and divergences from what is increasingly know as real-life situations, often alien, incomprehensible always.

Day 3, Night 3

The day began with a cloudy mood but the visit to the Tea factory was to infuse the aroma of the valley back. Tea plantations in the Nilgiris are old and so is the Chettiar Tea factory. The factory produces a range of cheap to expensive teas which are sold in South India. The Manager was kind enough to take the groups around and explain the whole process of planting, picking, flue-curing..... It was fascinating to see the evolution and modernisation of the factory equipment and processes (the machinery works factory is also in the same campus and the company sells excellent Tea processing machinery to customers far and wide). We learnt about the niceties of tea-tasting, sorting and quality control. Of course, the near-wholesale purchase of discounted tea packs for friends back home !

We gathered at Northern Hay around noon for the session on Shola Eco Ensemble. The SeE is a private company promoted and supported by the network organisations for the procurement of natural and eco-friendly products. It is envisaged (that word sounds like and means the long-term) that Shola will make millions selling its range of organic coffee, honey, spices, rajma (kidney beans) and other unique and exotic products in India and abroad. As the first step in this direction, Shola was to participate in an exhibition at Delhi, a few weeks after the Fellowship met. Sneha, Mathew and Rupa had a long discussion on the products they would carry for the exhibition and the price they should quote. The question was does one skim the market or hope for a deeper penetration. How much are people willing to pay for something 'unique' and is 'green' unique enough. Since the raison de etre of Shola is ethical marketing and transparency too, what should be the impact on procurement price if Shola is able to command a higher market price ? It was decided that since the products we sell are often coming into the monetised economy for the very first time, it is best to use higher factors prices and arrive at the procurement price rather than link it with the market price of the end product. Sneha presented the costs and potential returns from attending the exhibition (the

actual figures looked very different, but then she is an economist).

The afternoon was spent discussing Pawan's new company which will promote adventure tourism in the Garwhal Himalayas. Pawan has identified a network of traditional Garwhali homes which will be restored for use by trekkers, and his partner knows the best trekking routes in the region. He is therefore bidding to hold the next Fellowship meeting in the Garwhal so he can test (on the most discerning of guests) if everything works according to plans.

Since some of us were to leave early the next morning, it was decided that we have an early dinner and catch some sleep. And as this was to be the last evening together, everyone trooped into the kitchen and from the medley emerged a veritable feast, the consumption of which had to be accompanied with soulful ballads. And so it began, and continued, well past midnight, almost till dawn. If Rajiv had not insisted on grabbing some sleep in the middle of the convention centre, all would have been well. But his snoring quietened the rest of us and we dozed. In those few moments of repose Bhat, Ranjan and Rupa almost missed their taxi and the flight. And such were the picking from the river this year.

APPENDIX A

THE SHOLA FELLOWSHIP

Aro : Aromar Revi

- works with TARU and crunches numbers, problems and mediocrity.

Bhat : G.K. Bhat

- is a geologist, know-all STP-maker (green only); part-time cook and dog-lover.

Mathew : Mathew John

- Keystone rock, manages the programme from Kotagiri. Voracious Eater (no lotus).

Pratim : Pratim Roy (Toto)

- ecologist turned honey-hunter, hilly-Billy, visionary. Bong to rote.

Ranjan : Ranjan B. Verma

- Information man from TARU. Mobile drive, mobile phone, mobile joy.

Rajiv : Rajiv K. Raman

- Electrical engineer turned socio-economist. Fast-pointer, slow-scribe, timely coffee.

Rupa : Rupa Mukerji

- Shola Pivot. New-age traditionalist. Igloo-seller (to icelanders). No nonsense.

Shrikant : Shrikant Joshi

- Silent. Behind the scenes. Absent at the this meeting. (Not by design).

Snehlata : Snehlata Nath

- Spirit. Keystone Anchor. Shola Partner-in-crime. Doer and Poetess.

Som : Somnath Sen

- Undertaker. Petty politician. Self-claimed writer. Loud-mouth (his choice of epithet).

APPENDIX B

Pawan Jain is trained as an architect and runs his firm based in Dehradun. Having done a variety of projects in vernacular building, low-cost construction, earthquake resistant structures, conventional and “different” urban houses and institutional buildings; Pawan has also dabbled in creating furniture with Eucalyptus and among his latest endeavours is an Eco-tourism company for the Himalayas. Pawan alternates between witticisms, teaching in the local polytechnic and sharing his frustrations in the most charming manner possible. Pawan, Bharati (also an architect) and new-born Ravi Shanker live in Dehradun.

Anil Pandey belongs to Delhi and has done a commendable job of staying away from there. Anil has lived and worked in Bihar and the north-east; learnt pottery in Himachal, worked with many NGOs and was also part of a ship-building team which did not sail. He has moved recently to Auroville where he learns and practices pottery. He has in Kotagiri recently to help document the dying art of Kota pottery. Anil does what he likes and only for such periods that the liking is alive. Not an easy one to daunt, Anil is a great cook and artist in life.

Poonam lives in Delhi and works on child-centred education at the Delhi University. She is working from within the system (a difficult one we know) trying to bring about small changes which add up to a lot. Apart from many research activities, she has been able to put child-centred education as one of the programme priorities of the University. She now has her hand full with running an undergraduate course in Elementary Education - first of its kind in the country. Poonam has had Kaholie and Aro helping her out with her agendas - including that of coming for a break in the Shola gathering this time.

Kaholie is the supreme challenge to egg-headed pretenses and a wanton indulgence with Cintra. She reads in nursery in Delhi and found a new paradise in the open, no-pollution Nilgiris. Largely because of her, the group was able to get their meals on time. She ably fulfilled the role vacated by Rituraj (in the last meeting) and showed all signs of being ready to take on Cintra the next time around.

Cintra, also name of the Keystone home, is a two-year old constantly mocking the designs of the universe and consultants, lately. She has rightly chosen to be a canine after observing the curious habits of humans. Cintra has unmatched and at times exasperating, bounce and playfulness. She guards the Cintra, its flowers and the honey. Also reminds us of the simpler things in life. No, not politics.

Rev. Mulley is a friend of the network who belongs to Kothagiri. He has lived and worked with different tribal groups in the Nilgiris and is an authority also on the various pieces of academic and anthropological works done in the area. Rev. Mulley is always there when you need him and it was partly his encouragement that the Fellowship came into being and meets regularly.

Sajju - Annie found herself amidst this strange (but hopefully pleasant) company after she moved to Nilgiris in November. Sajju was teaching in electricals in College in Bangalore before she wed Mathew. She now teaches in the Kotagiri Public School and lives with Mathew in Shelby. Sajju is deceptively quiet and quietly witty. She gave us her company whenever she was free from her work and chores. Of course, the group trooped over for her coffee one of the late afternoons!

Prof. K.C.Malhotra (KC or KCM) is a statistical anthropologist working at the Indian Statistical Institute in Calcutta. A guru to many of us, KCM cuts a wide swath starting from his research work on Pastoral Nomads in

Western Ghats; backboning the Western and later, Eastern Ghats marches; chaffing wood from dwellers and fauna in Joint Forestry Management and telling you the evolutionary history of lines on your hands. KCM sits on many a Board including that of the Dept. of Science and technology, Govt. of India and assists myriads of INGOs, donors and NGOs across the country. Of course, it is a treat to hear his stories and fables - some serious, others controversial - all scintillating.

Vinodini Bhatt works with ASAG in Ahmedabad. Trained in design and building of appropriate technology structures, her interests go further. She promotes and works actively with women's groups in Ahmedabad who buy spices and hand-pound and blend them to suit myriad palates. Vinodini is all cheers with this mirch-masala and hopes to market them far and wide. Sure enough for we had a taste of the home-made fare at the meeting. Although busy with his industrial exhibition in Coimbatore, partner **Jayesh Bhatt**, found some time for us as well. Jayesh brought resounding melody at the middle of the night and livened up many a wilting brow.

APPENDIX C

FACES AT SECOND CONFLUENCE



Aro & Kaholi



Bhat



Sneh



Rupa



Pratim



Ranjan



Mathew



Som



Rajiv

FACES AT SECOND CONFLUENCE



Poonam & Kaholi



KCM



Vinodini



Anil



Rev. Mulley



Sajju



Pawan



Cintra



Jayesh

