

# BEYOND THE GREEN DESERT

Jagannath Vartak reflects on years of working outside his native India to make a better life for his family, an experience that led him to write a memorable book. By Saniya More in Mahim, India

An arrangement of carefully framed photographs featuring famous places from around the world is the first thing I see as I walk through the gate into Jagannath Vartak's home. A light drizzle is falling outside but the trees surrounding the sturdy house create a protective canopy of leaves, sheltering everything below it. Mr Vartak sits outside on his porch. "I've been waiting for you," he says in Marathi with a smile.

I have come to speak with Mr Vartak about his recently published memoir, *Hirve Valwant or Green Desert*, which chronicles his 24 years working in the Arabian Gulf. Originally written in the author's native Marathi, the book has won seven literary awards in Maharashtra state, including the prestigious Sahitya Ratna Puraskar or Literary Gem. Since then, *Green Desert* has been translated into English and Hindi, and there are plans for editions in Urdu, Gujarati, German, Spanish and French.

Mr Vartak is from Mahim, a small village in Maharashtra. Now 72, he spends much of his time at home, where he writes stories for newspapers and occasionally travels with his wife. In other words, he lives a life that isn't as fast-paced as it was a few years ago.

In the early 1970s, after growing up in perpetual poverty and getting married in the process, Mr Vartak decided to fulfill a life-long dream in the hopes of providing a better life for his family and giving his two sons a quality education. He pursued work outside of India because, although he would be separated from his loved ones, his financial prospects would improve dramatically.

Finding a job overseas was not easy. Back then, many workers from India and other parts of Asia were recruited by big companies in the Arabian Gulf, primarily for infrastructure work. They hired people through agents, who would organise travel and legal matters. However, some workers encountered major problems while preparing for life abroad. As Mr Vartak writes in *Green Desert*, some of his initial struggles included losing a great deal of money to a fraudulent agent and getting jailed for a crime he didn't commit, barely making ends meet through it all.

His luck soon changed, though, and in 1977 Mr Vartak boarded a flight to Saudi Arabia, bidding farewell to his family, friends and motherland. For the next 24 years, he worked all around the Gulf, spending a few years in Yemen and the United Arab Emirates. After a highly successful job with Matrix Construction in Abu Dhabi, Mr Vartak wanted to come back home.

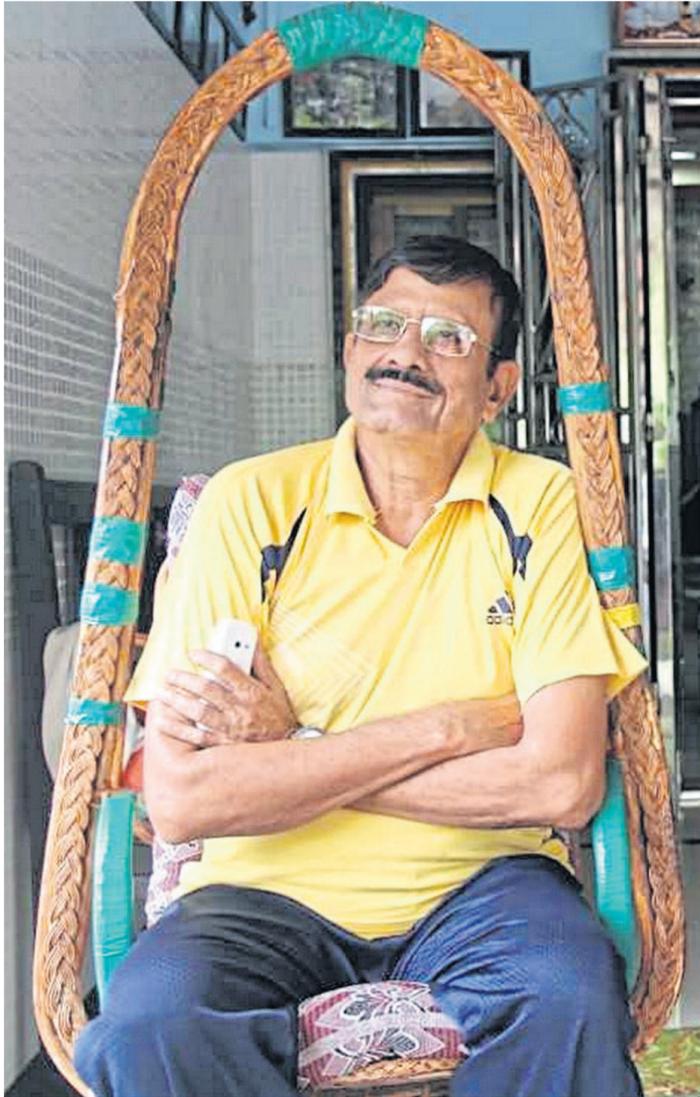
"They wanted me to take a six-month break and return to work," he tells Asia Focus over *chai* and biscuits in the living room of his home. "But I told them I didn't want to live there anymore. I wanted to return to my family, and so, I resigned with satisfaction."

*Green Desert* originally began as a column in *Mahikavati Varta*, an Indian monthly newspaper. Mr Vartak decided to write in fragments because he thought it was more accessible and reader-friendly. In fact, it wasn't until a close friend suggested turning his articles into a book that Mr Vartak began writing *Green Desert*.

"24 years of my life — it was all still in my head. So I wrote down everything I could remember," he says.

#### REALITY OF THE GULF

In addition to sharing what he learned from living away from home, Mr Vartak also wanted to use his book to educate anyone looking for work in



“If I could go back in time, I would do it all again for my children's higher education”

the Arabian Gulf. He emphasised that people get so caught up in making money that they don't think about the problems they could potentially face once they are away from their homeland.

"I wrote this book as advice and support for these people. They should know the reality of the Gulf," he says.

During his time in his last job before returning to India, Mr Vartak developed a strong relationship with Yusef Zattari, the general manager of the company, and the relationship endures to this day.

"When I first applied for the job, he asked me why I was working in the Arabian Gulf at the age of 48," Mr Vartak says, recounting his first meeting with Mr Zattari. "I told him I wanted to give my two children an education."

After hearing his reply, Mr Zattari instantly gave him the job, which completely turned around Mr Vartak's financial situation.

## JAGANNATH VARTAK

### AGE & BORN

● 72 years old, April 10, 1945 in Palghar, India

### EDUCATION

● Completed high school and obtained an industrial safety diploma

### CAREER HIGHLIGHTS

● 1977-83: Worked for Edox Eter  
● 1993-2009: Worked for Matrix Construction

### AWARD

● 8 awards for his memoir, *Green Desert*

### FAMILY

● Married with two sons

Writing *Green Desert* was an emotional process, Mr Vartak points out. One can see why.

Amid his encounters with culture shock, racial discrimination, inequality, and ever-lingering homesickness, he describes an experience in his book — which he tells me again when we talk — that was arguably powerful enough to put his life abroad on hold.

While working at a train station, Mr Vartak witnessed first-hand a construction accident that resulted in the death of a worker.

"I saw somebody die right in front of my eyes." Years later, recounting the story still brings tears to his eyes. Mr Vartak takes off his glasses and is quiet.

While Mr Vartak was in the Arabian Gulf, his wife stayed back in India, carrying out all the responsibilities in her husband's absence. A former matron at Goa Medical College, Jayashri Jagannath Vartak, now 76, raised their two sons, mostly unaware of what was happening to her husband.

"Whatever my husband faced, he never told me anything he was going through. I was crying as I read the book, wondering how he survived it all, why he didn't come back to me," she says, as she shows me around their 40-year-old house. "His only motto was to give his two children a future."

Discussing how much his family supported him, Mr Vartak says there were times when his wife was uncertain about him going abroad. "Every wife wants her husband to be with her, but we needed money, so she accepted and supported my decision. She was 100% with me," he says.

Because their relationship had a strong foundation and they trusted each other completely, their marriage stayed intact, he says.

Since he returned from abroad, Mr Vartak's two sons have attained the higher education that he fought to give them. His older son attended the prestigious Indian Institute of Technology Bombay, going on to do his master's and PhD in the United States, where he now resides. Mr Vartak's younger son earned a bachelor's degree in textiles and did his MBA in retail marketing, and now works in Mumbai.

Although he struggled and faced many

obstacles in the Arabian Gulf, Mr Vartak says he doesn't regret any of his decisions. "If I could go back in time, I would do it all again for my children's higher education," he says.

### POLITICS AND CONFLICTS

When asked about his views on India's progress as a nation, the outspoken author shared his views on religious conflicts and India's current leadership.

"Since Narendra Modi, the progress that India has been wanting to make is finally coming true," he says of India's prime minister. "In 10 years, India will be a truly different country in all aspects: economic, environmental, cultural and social."

Since he assumed office in 2014, Prime Minister Modi achieved many milestones for India. Some significant accomplishments include Jan Dhan Yojana, which gives anyone the ability to open a bank account, and the Swachh Bharat Mission, a campaign that promotes a cleaner India by building more toilets and improving waste management systems.

The 66-year-old leader has been dogged by controversy, however, because of his Hindu nationalist beliefs, particularly during deadly sectarian riots in 2002 in Gujarat, where he was chief minister at the time. However, Mr Modi's charisma and policy-driven vision for India have gained him widespread popularity in the country.

According to Mr Vartak, the prime minister's roots have been the key to his success.

"Because he comes from a humble background, he has knowledge about everything and considers every single person in the country, not just the wealthy and the elite," Mr Vartak says.

However, Mr Vartak also emphasised that his country still has a long way to go, especially when it comes to the ongoing conflict between India and Pakistan.

"When I first encountered Pakistani people, I was biased toward them. But I was surprised to find that the issues at the border did not concern civilians like them, they only concerned the politicians," he says.

He recalls a time when his wife was visiting him in the Arabian Gulf, and how a Pakistani driver from his company would often bring her flowers and treated her with a great deal of respect.

In Mr Vartak's view, it is unseemly for Indians to provoke conflict with Pakistani civilians just because of their citizenship.

"Once, we were all part of Hindustan. Our culture and values were the same back then. They have still maintained them and so have we," he says. "Yes, we may practise different religions and live life differently, but our differences in *dharma* (faith) should not be means for battle."

On what he hopes readers get from reading *Green Desert*, Mr Vartak says the following:

"We all have to struggle in life, but at the end of the day, there is nothing greater than the sense of satisfaction we get, knowing we survived through it all."

*Green Desert*, it turns out, may not be just a one-off publication. Mr Vartak reveals that he is working on another book about a miner's life that he aims to get published soon, saying he felt "fully satisfied" while writing and wants to continue feeling that way.

An avid reader, he says he greatly values stories that make him a better human being. For this reason, he wants to write stories that move his readers, he adds.

## NOT YOUR TYPICAL RAGS-TO-RICHES TALE

By Saniya More

The intense heat is the first thing your body notices. Your arms are sore, blisters adorn your palms from yesterday's labour at the construction site. Overhead, the sun shines brightly ahead, and you wipe that first layer of perspiration away with the back of your hand. Almost on instinct, you reach into your pockets. Good, you think. The money is safe.

This is one among many vivid scenes Indian writer Jagannath Vartak describes in his memoir, *Green Desert*, which follows his 24 years working as a technician in the Arabian Gulf. The book tells the story of a man who realises that the only way he can bring his family out of poverty is by working overseas and sending the money he earns back home.

Mr Vartak shares the numerous struggles that many migrant workers face abroad, particularly those from South Asia. He writes about staying away from family and still somehow maintaining ties with them, ensuring he is working in a position that matches his qualifications, and trying to persuade his company superiors to give him and his colleagues more

resources, including adequate bath water and food that complies with his religion.

Because the book was translated from the Marathi language, some cultural undertones are lost in translation, which makes it difficult to understand certain situations. For example, I had some difficulty initially understanding why Mr Vartak's act of writing a love letter to his wife was something extraordinary. Some cultural metaphors are also difficult to translate word-for-word.

Despite this, *Green Desert* is an eye-opening, heartfelt recount of life through the eyes of an outspoken, self-reflective narrator. Rather than a clichéd rags-to-riches tale, it is a collection of experiences that ultimately transform Mr Vartak's small-town naivety into a sense of global awareness.

Mr Vartak's new cultural awareness blossoms slowly as he works at different companies and witnesses loss, incredible loneliness, and satisfactions as well.

At the start of the book, we learn that Mr Vartak is from Palghar, a small district in the Indian state of Maharashtra.

His small-town background may have been the reason behind his initial hostility towards the first Pakistani workers he runs into. Before boarding his first flight to Saudi Arabia, he is approached by these workers, who beg him to help them fill out their forms as they are illiterate. Initially, he is uncertain about extending a helping hand, but he quickly realises his education would have been all for nothing if he refused.

A few years later, he writes about Pakistan in *Green Desert*. He acknowledges that India and Pakistan may continue to exist in a state of conflict, but that the citizens of the two countries should not be divided. He also states that during his years in a Muslim-majority region, he never faced backlash from any Pakistanis.

Although his worldly views transformed him in many aspects, Mr Vartak kept his culture and values intact throughout his life in the Arabian Gulf. When faced with a difficult situation, he writes that he would invoke the name of his family deity for comfort and security. When he first arrives at his first work

site, he discovers that the food consists of camel meat, which goes against his Hindu morals. He puts his foot down and demands a proper diet. Surprisingly, his requests are met.

One of the reasons I enjoyed reading *Green Desert* was its intimate style of narration that carried much depth between the lines, particularly during moments of sorrow or disappointment.

After spending a few years in the Arabian Gulf, Mr Vartak witnesses the brutal death of a worker. He writes about how the experience made him question his decision to be away from his family in a foreign land where he faced hurdles everyday. As we read on, we realise how much that single event altered his outlook on life.

Throughout *Green Desert*, Mr Vartak shows an incredible resilience. As he writes, his main goal in life was to bring financial stability to his family and provide a bright future to his children. He fights many battles along the way, all creating experiences that didn't just change his outlook, but may change yours too.

## BOOK REVIEW

### Green Desert

JAGANNATH VARTAK

