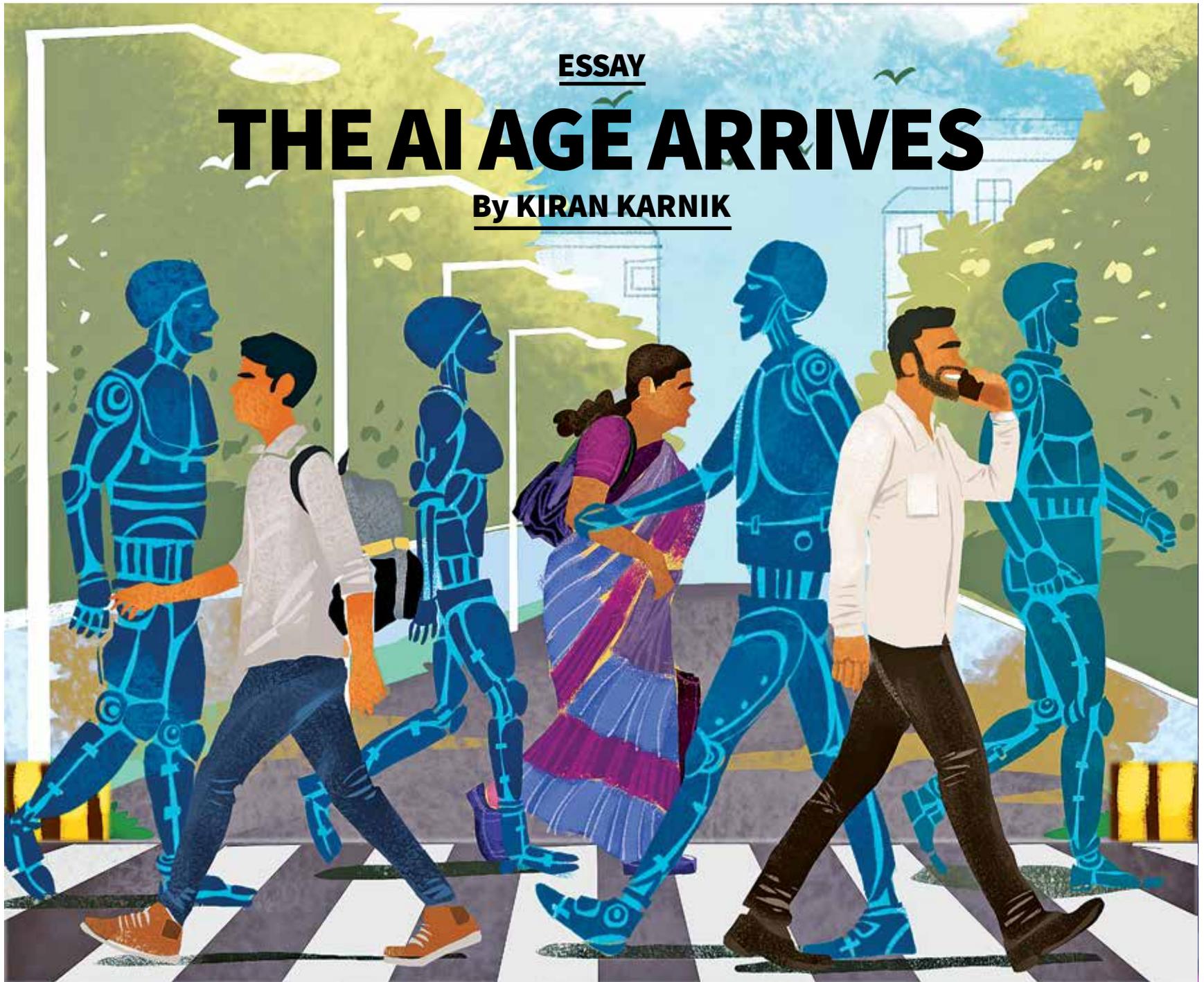


Civil Society



ESSAY

THE AI AGE ARRIVES

By **KIRAN KARNIK**

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Civil Society
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Art of the essay



ESSAY

THE AI AGE ARRIVES

What to make of AI? From self-driving cars to taking over mundane tasks from humans, the implications boggle the mind. What's there in it for countries like India?

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The magazine does not undertake to respond to unsolicited contributions sent to the editor for publication.

WHEN we began our magazine in 2003, we used to publish an essay on the last editorial page — which is the one before the back cover. The essay in the first issue was by Aruna Roy on democracy. Essays by others followed, each unique and thought-provoking.

In this current issue we have revived the essay in *Civil Society*, but instead of it being back of the book, we have put it on the cover. We could think of no one better than Kiran Karnik, our regular columnist, to deal with the opportunities and concerns surrounding AI or artificial intelligence in a way that would be easily comprehensible.

Also, like us, Kiran is a firm believer in technology promoting inclusion instead of leaving people out or trampling on privacy and personal rights. We wanted to go beyond a technical explanation to the social implications of AI and particularly so in an unequal society such as ours.

It is absurd to think of stopping AI in its tracks. It has already made important inroads into our lives. It will take many forms as it goes along. The focus should be on keeping up with it, no matter how difficult, and harnessing it to empower people and diminish inequalities. In a sense, that is the eternal challenge in dealing with technology. The first step, of course, is to create awareness and that is what our essay attempts.

We all seem to have forgotten that there was an epic agitation by farmers to focus attention on Indian agriculture. Farmers camped at the entry points to Delhi for well over a year and that too during the trying days of the pandemic. Three hastily passed laws on agriculture were finally withdrawn by the Modi government. But nothing else has changed. For the interview of the month, we spoke to Devinder Sharma, journalist and researcher, on this incomplete story and what should be done. Reforms, of course, are needed but to what end? Sharma is of the view that the hands of farmers should be strengthened. Handing agriculture over to corporations in a country where 50 percent of the population lives on farms is folly. We agree.

We feel strongly about reviving libraries in the country. We grew up using libraries and while that meant borrowing books you sometimes never read, it also provided exposure to all kinds of books. The library network set up in Arunachal Pradesh by Uncle Moosa, creatively supported by the state government, is an example of how books should move around and be shared so as to discover the joy of reading. We revisit his story, having been to Arunachal some years ago, in the belief that this is a model for other states.

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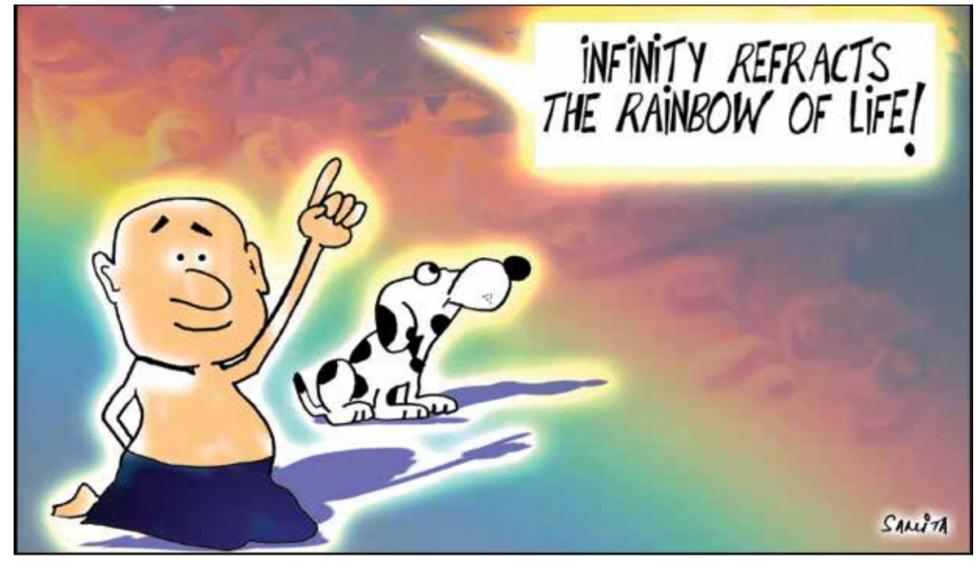
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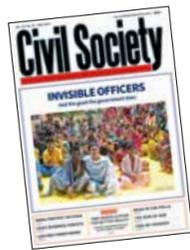


IN THE LIGHT

SAMITA RATHOR



LETTERS



Star officers

I am so proud and happy to have read your article, 'Invisible officers make a difference', featuring Rumana Jafri's commendable achievements. Officers like her are the backbone of the state's administrative body. Her work ethics are a source of inspiration for future officers.

Sumita Chatterjee

Rumana Jafri's remarkable work has established her as a role model for other officers, especially women, illustrating that with determination and resolve, a woman can bring about change regardless of the challenges she faces. Her unwavering dedication is a beacon of hope for the nation.

Yeseko Dandia

Officers like Rumana are a boon for our society. The government and the public should come forward and recognize their work and offer them complex problems

to resolve so that there is greater good in our society.

Atish Kumar

Inclusive work

It certainly gave me hope when I read about the Mitr Trust and the SMILE scheme in your article, 'Transgenders try their hand at enterprise'. Individuals in this unique world suffer a lot and social discrimination is only one aspect. It is time we accepted transgenders into our world and accepted them unconditionally. A hard one for some of us but doable and must be done.

Evita Fernandez

Cultural roots

As a member of the crafts council of Andhra Pradesh, it was

heartening for me to read 'Dolls to remember'. Why don't all councils jointly approach the seven National Institutes of Design and come up with a series on regional dolls? This is the thought that occurred to me. I will share your article with our council members.

Jayasree Devineni

Birds and people

The reducing of trees and foliage and the increase of noise in areas where constructions are done scare away birds who look for peaceful places to live in. At the same time the return of these birds means they adjust to their new environment and come back to places they called home for a long time. This is wonderful for

us who would like them around.

Chandrasekha Anand Sio

Dog menace

It's the failure of local government agencies in curbing the dog menace which is now thrusting the responsibility on citizens. Children and elders are being bitten every day by aggressive dogs. This is abhorrent.

Siddharth Jain

NGOs and govt

Civil society organizations are under severe attack despite their great contribution to the nation. They are under attack because they can play a role in creating awareness among citizens. Hence they are being crushed by over-regulation, Income Tax raids, ED, FCRA, etc. It is time for an "Ease of Doing Good" index. The non-profit sector contributes 2 percent to the GDP, provides goods and services, intangible value addition, and employment. It is high time we lauded them.

Amita

Joy of books

It was wonderful to read about innovative ways of keeping the bookshop and reading culture alive in our society. The joy of browsing through bookshelves, the smell of fresh paper and discovering stories as well as kindred souls is unmatched in any online experience. I wish Kunzum all the best.

Varnita Mathur

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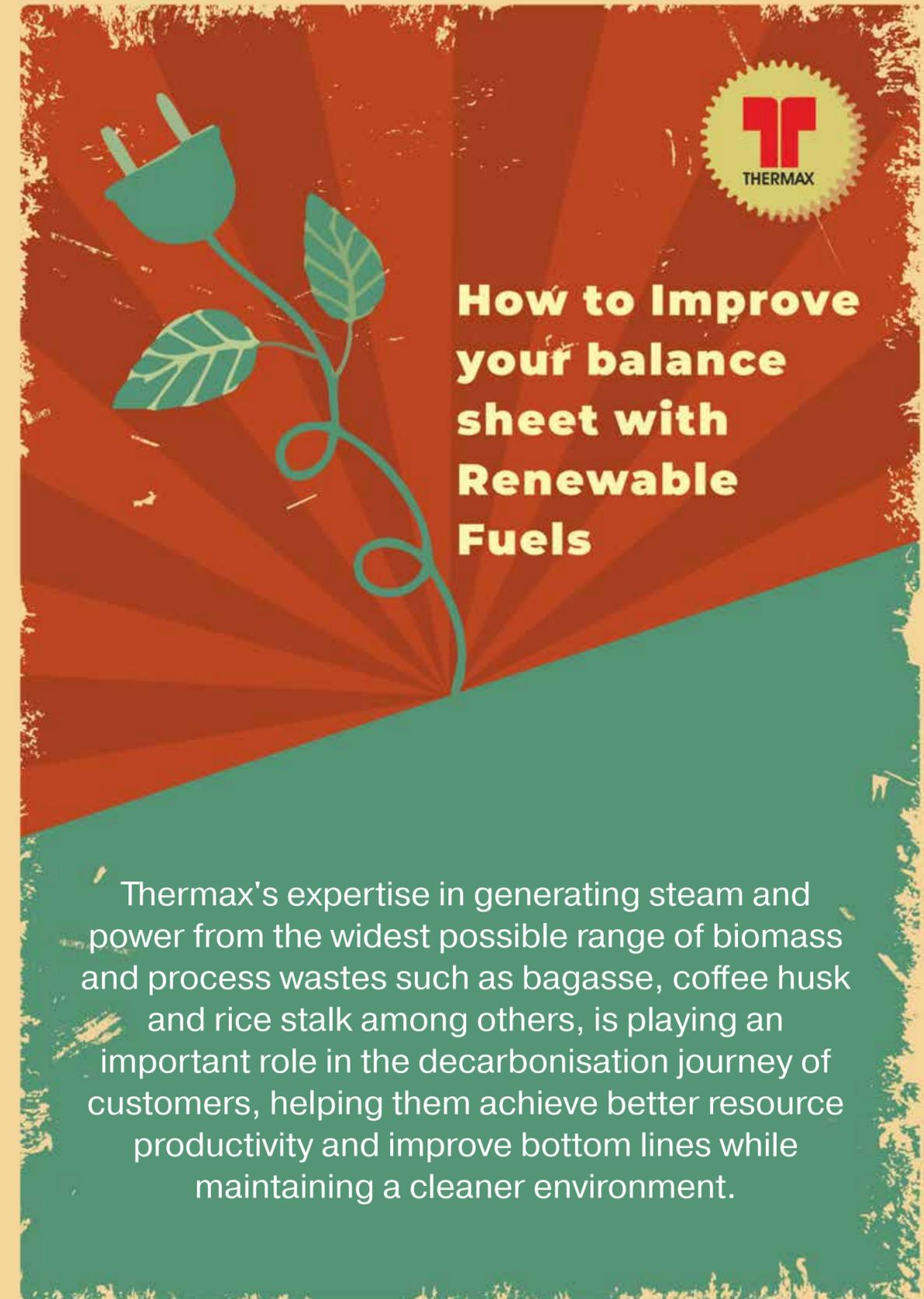
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DEVINDER SHARMA ON GIVING AGRICULTURE ITS DUE

‘It is stupid to take people off farms and use them as cheap labour’

Civil Society News
New Delhi

WHEN farmers blockaded Delhi for more than a year in 2020-21, right through the pandemic, it seemed that they had compelled the government to think afresh on agriculture. Three pro-free market laws that had been rushed through Parliament were scrapped, but many of the long-pending issues that bedevil the farm sector were brushed under the carpet and remain unattended.

Farmers had come together out of fear of losing their lands to corporations. Their protests warded off this danger, but achieved little else. Once the new laws were scrapped and the agitation called off, disparate unions that had united under pressure from ordinary farmers soon fell apart.

It has been two years now, but demands such as legally guaranteed minimum support prices, *mandis* in easy reach and investments in rural infrastructure remain to be addressed. The more complex goals of preparing farmers for the effects of global warming, reducing chemicals in farming and widening the basket of crops so as to promote sustainability and nutrition have also not got the attention they deserve.

For a better understanding, *Civil Society* spoke to Devinder Sharma, senior journalist and researcher based in Punjab, who works at field level and is an insightful voice on Indian agriculture.

Q: The historic farmers’ agitation against the Central government’s farm laws seems to have been forgotten. Are there any outcomes from it at all?

The iconic farmers’ protest was historic, but the outcome that people were expecting, by way of fundamental changes in farming laws so that agriculture becomes economically viable, has not been addressed.

The agitation, however, did result in the withdrawal of the three contentious farm laws (which opened up agriculture to corporations and a free market). The withdrawal of the three laws is very, very significant for the future of India. When it comes to farmers’ incomes, bringing agriculture under the control of corporations has not worked anywhere in the world. So, if Indian farmers were also forced to come under a corporate yoke, I’m sure agriculture would have been further devastated in India. And, as the farmers feared, their lands would have been taken away.

You know, we have this cut-and-paste policy tradition. The three laws were based on what American or European agriculture is talking about.



Devinder Sharma: ‘Agriculture can be our second powerhouse of economic growth’

And, as usual, our lazy economists in India thought that they were suitable for India. But if you go around the world you will see distress in agriculture all over. Corporatization has not worked.

Secondly, in the name of climate change, there is now a war against farmers. And it has begun from Europe. Holland has already asked 3,000 farmers to get out of agriculture. They are saying that no farmer can keep more than two cows. Three thousand farmers quitting from Holland’s 11,000 farms is quite a blow to agriculture.

The UK is also telling 5,000 farmers to plan to get out of agriculture. New Zealand is a dairy country. Because of increased emissions from cows, they are going to impose a tax on the cattle wealth of New Zealand.

So everywhere there is a clear message — more corporate control is coming up in agriculture. And this is where all eyes are fixed. Indian agriculture is also under attack unless our farmers are able to stand up and demonstrate that agriculture can be viable without the help of corporations.

Q: Wouldn’t the role of the state be crucial at such a time?

Let’s say there have been efforts to marginalize the role of the state for quite some time. From 2003 onwards, there has been an increasing understanding among Indian policymakers that we must move towards a market economy. Whether it is this government or previous governments, they have always been telling us that markets are the best judge, they can provide a better price, they can also tackle the supply chain or logistical questions that agriculture is going to be confronted with. So, in their understanding, farm incomes will go up substantially if this process is adhered to.

But look at what has happened in America. One of their agriculture secretaries, during the Nixon years, said ‘grow big or get out’. At that time about 15 percent of the American population was involved in agriculture.

Today, it is just 1.5 percent. According to Indian economists the smaller the number of people in agriculture, the more their income. By that logic, if the population of American farmers has come down, their income levels should have gone up.

But that didn’t happen. Which tells us that Indian economists are still far behind what is happening globally. I’m saying this because in America, the rate of suicides on farms is 3.5 times the national average. And if American agriculture was economical, or viable and markets were paying the right price, there is no reason for the US government to be providing Rs 79 lakh per year per farmer as domestic support just to keep them on the farm. The American government is providing so much subsidy. That cannot be a model for India, let’s be very clear.

About 50 percent of our population or 600 million people are involved with agriculture, directly or indirectly. To push them out of agriculture is a stupid idea. I think economists all over the world must admit that this stupidity has to now stop. I remember one of the former governors of the Reserve Bank of India saying that the best reform or the ‘big ticket’ reform for India would be to move people out of agriculture into urban areas because cheap labour is needed there. That thinking has to go.

We are now witnessing increased ruralization. That is the way forward. Agriculture can sustain more people. Make agriculture viable and profitable.

In fact, agriculture should have been and can be the second powerhouse of economic growth in India. Why do we have to follow cut-and-paste policies from America and Europe? And then you brand these economists as great. There is a question we need to ask: how relevant are these economists today?

Q: The viewpoint that agriculture can be the next big powerhouse is gaining resonance. A sustainable lifestyle, all biodegradable materials will come from agriculture...?

I think what you are saying implies that agriculture has tremendous potential to resurge. The world realizes that 34 percent or one-third of global greenhouse gas emissions come from agriculture globally. That means agriculture has a significant role in climate aberrations.

That also means that we need to transform agriculture. You don’t do more of the same. You get out of that trap. Look at countries like Brazil, Argentina, America, the European Union. These countries are actually devastated by the kind of farming that was prevalent all these years — intensive farming, exhaustive farming which has led to climate change. So we need to first reframe or redesign agriculture by providing farmers with a living income and by moving to agroecological farming. The world is talking about it.

I’m glad that in India there is increased understanding that we must move from chemical to non-chemical agriculture. There are some positive signs.

More importantly, we need to have a guaranteed income prescribed for farmers. They too have similar aspirations as people in cities. We have all these years deliberately kept agriculture impoverished by denying farmers their rightful prices. This has to change. Farmers need to get their rightful income. And I look forward to a kind of reverse migration taking place in India in the years to come, if we really make agriculture economically viable and profitable.

Q: What has happened to farmers’ demands like minimum support price (MSP), more *mandis* in rural areas, better road connectivity? Have the states acted on these demands?

The simple answer is no. The government has set up a committee but its terms of reference do not include talking about MSP in a manner that farmers have been demanding, which is to make it a legal obligation. But let me illustrate why MSP is a very significant tool to bring back pride to agriculture.

If you buy a pen, it has a price tag. If you buy a computer, it comes with a price tag. So does a motorcycle or a car. Why is it that only agricultural produce does not have a price tag? That is what we need to understand.

Because our country’s economic design was woven such that to keep economic reforms viable, you had to sacrifice agriculture.

This is what America and Europe did. Now the push is that India should do it too. That is why those contentious laws were brought in. The only way to fix a price tag for agricultural produce is by MSP. India has a built-up debt system. We are a role model. Everywhere I have travelled in the world, people have been talking about guaranteed prices.

Even in America. In 1979, a massive tractor protest was held in Washington, DC, by farmers who came from across the country. They were demanding income parity, or guaranteed price. Jimmy Carter, who claimed to be a farmer, was the president. But he couldn’t do it because he came under pressure. The result is that the movement failed in America.

The same movement began in 2020 in India. It has ‘succeeded’. We need to make MSP a legal right which means nothing can be purchased below the MSP. Nobody, whether it is the government or companies or private traders, can buy below that price. That should be the reform we should be aiming at to make agriculture viable and productive.

‘We have deliberately kept agriculture impoverished by denying farmers their rightful prices. This has to change. I look forward to a kind of reverse migration.’

Q: Isn’t that the idea of a competitive economy?

Well, I think industry’s idea of a competitive economy is how to source the cheapest raw material. During the farmers’ protest, when I first made a statement that what agriculture needs is a fourth law which makes MSP a legal right for farmers, industry responded. Some of the BJP spokespersons wrote articles that if we were to bring in a fourth law then the entire purpose of bringing in the three farm laws would be gone.

They were saying that the three laws would bring higher incomes to farmers. Well, if you are in any way willing to give a higher price to farmers then you should have no objection to a minimum benchmark price. But they don’t want a legal MSP because then they can’t ruthlessly exploit agriculture. This is what’s been going on all these years. Agriculture has been deliberately kept impoverished.

It was very clear that they would oppose the MSP. Industry’s idea of competitiveness is not based on creating efficiencies in their own production systems. It is based on where they source cheaper raw material, and get water and what better way than to exploit agriculture.

Q: But why has the farmers’ movement gone silent?

It was basically pressure from their constituencies that kept the leaders of the agitation together at that time. The average farmer was convinced that once companies came in, their land would be taken away. So that fear brought them together.

The leaders, due to pressure from farming populations, had to give a semblance of solidarity.

But it wasn’t really there. We all know soon after the laws were withdrawn, they split. Some wanted to fight the upcoming elections, some wanted to oppose it. Even if they make an effort now, I don’t think they can come together and be a strong visible opposition or an alternative voice in this country for the 2024 election.

But nevertheless, I think that particular year itself gave a tremendous boost to farming populations. They now realize that they can, if they get together, form a political powerhouse in India, which is required. If a man who was a *chaiwallah* can become the prime minister I see no

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reason why a tractorwallah can't become the prime minister.

Q: What was also brought into focus during the agitation was the *mandi* system and the need to strengthen it. Also rural infrastructure that would be more distributed so that farmers would have access to more *mandis*. Have any states done this?

You know, if you look at infrastructure development, the unwritten rule that we follow is to sacrifice agriculture for the sake of industry. The first rule is to deny farmers an income so that they have no option but to quit on their own.

The second rule is to reduce public sector investments in agriculture. Over the years, public sector investment in agriculture has come down drastically. A study by the Reserve Bank of India tells us that between 2001-02 and 2011, public sector investment came down to 0.4 percent. That's 0.4 percent of GDP for 50 percent of the population. If you look at the corporate sector, their share of tax concessions in the GDP is 6 percent. That kind of tax concession is also an investment for companies.

The government announced that real *azadi* for farmers is when they can sell their produce anywhere in the country. No. Real *azadi* for farmers will be when there are *mandis* closer to their farms spread throughout the country. Roughly, we have 7,000 *mandis*, the Agricultural Produce and Livestock Market Committee (APMC)- regulated *mandis*. What we

'The government announced that real *azadi* for farmers is when they can sell produce anywhere in the country. No. *Azadi* for farmers will be when there are more *mandis*.'

need are 42,000 *mandis* if you have to ensure there is a *mandi* in every five-km radius. For this you have to invest in roads and not just highways.

We should have made adequate public sector investments in agriculture and the *mandi* is one classic arena. Second, of course, are storages. Recently, the government announced that they are going to use primary agricultural societies to build 700 storages. This is what the Grow More Food campaign had demanded in 1979 — build godowns across the country so that the burden is taken away from Punjab and Haryana, and it becomes easier to distribute food stocks locally.

It didn't happen because priorities were different. The focus is on corporations, corporations and corporations. I'm happy about godowns being built, but I think efforts should be made to build 42,000 *mandis*. That would bring farmers closer to *mandis* and there would be less distress sales. That is the kind of infrastructure we need.

Just to give you an idea of how important this model is, some years ago Dr M.S. Swaminathan and I attended a summit on European Union agriculture.

Before we spoke we received a message from President Lula, this was during his first term. He had set up a ministry for food security to achieve zero hunger. Their food security minister had flown in to have a discussion with us and understand what they could learn from India. We put up a number of recommendations. But the most important one was that Brazil should set up a network of *mandis*. And Brazil did it.

Interestingly, Brazil has a *mandi* system now. In a 20-km radius they have a *mandi*. Anyone who has anything to sell can bring his produce to the *mandi* and the government is bound to purchase it.

They also set up a conditionality, which I think was positive, that those who bring their produce to the *mandi* must also put their children in school. So enrolment in schools went up. Officially, Brazil is hunger-free. They learnt from us. They prioritized what we told them. And look at us. Our policymakers are more concerned about four-lane highways and six-lane highways. ■

Books go far and wide the Moosa way in Arunachal

Civil Society News

New Delhi

LIBRARIES and bookshops are falling apart in big cities, but in Arunachal Pradesh a voluntary effort is spiritedly spreading the joy of reading among young people, reaching homes and government schools across the largely rural state.

Some 10,000 books are in circulation through a network of small community-run libraries and reading rooms with the Bamboosa Library in the town of Tezu, in Lohit district, serving as the headquarters.

As the books find their way across Arunachal, going from one hand to the next, they discover readers. Readers in turn get to experience the printed word and discover for themselves the world at large in many bits and pieces far removed from their remote lives.

It is a slow and unpremeditated process. A trickle in tune with the easy-paced and pastoral existence in the mountains. No instant results are expected. But a book in hand is the first step towards encouraging reading, spreading awareness and triggering transformations.

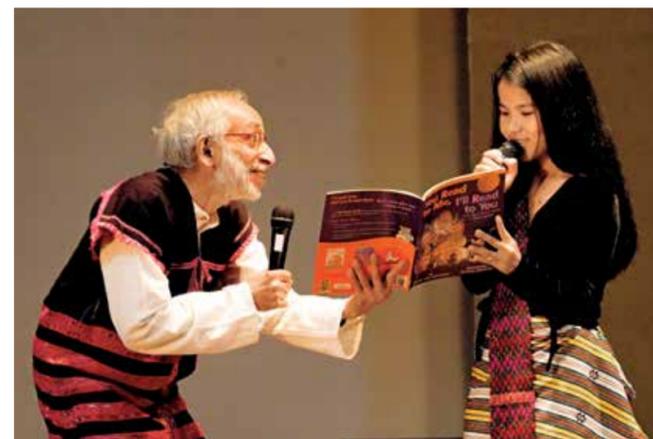
The libraries are also free-form. They come alive or go dormant, depending on local champions. Don't expect to find extensive catalogues or a librarian behind a desk. It is all easygoing and relaxed with titles coming and going. The collections of books are varied — biographies, children's stories, classics, novels. They are all donated by well-wishers in India and abroad. The Arunachal government library directorate has also provided books.

An important role the libraries play is in personal development. They are venues for the young to meet and interact. Read-aloud sessions spur children to do their own reading. Recitations and skits and plays help the young shed their inhibitions about making public appearances. In remote villages, where little else is available, the libraries, through the activities they promote, provide exposure and some excitement. They offer hope in settings where life, though familiar and secure, can also seem humdrum and remote, especially for teenagers.

Coordinating these enthusiastic but disparate efforts is Sathyanarayanan Mundayoor who is affectionately called Uncle Moosa. He is from Kerala, so what is a Malayali doing in the villages of Arunachal?

He arrived in Arunachal in the 1970s from Kerala to serve as a teacher as part of a national effort to spread education and integrate the mountainous border territory with the Indian mainstream. He never went back and now at the age of 71 is part of the tribal cultural mosaic.

A short, frail man with a bird-like presence, Uncle Moosa has few needs and lives to dream. He dresses in a *mundu* and *kurta* and a cloth *jhola* is mostly his entire baggage. When he speaks it is in one



Uncle Moosa reads aloud with a student. The libraries are all about coming together for activities and shared learning

continuous stream as though twittering.

He is much loved locally and welcomed into homes. Beginning as a teacher, he saw the potential of libraries in not just spreading formal education but also in helping the young along in complicated stages of their lives. As a result, he has seen more than one generation grow up and is inextricably a part of this extended family.

A few years ago, Uncle Moosa and the library movement entered the Civil Society Hall of Fame. Recently, he was a recipient of the Padma Shri. Our journey to Arunachal to discover him was full of wonderful surprises beginning with Uncle Moosa himself. We invariably don't meet Hall of Fame entrants till we turn up to check them out. Uncle Moosa was never anything we imagined. Nor were the innocent and fresh faces of tribal youngsters at the libraries and schools. He had clearly created a rare chemistry among them.

"If readers cannot come to books, books must go to readers," says Uncle Moosa. He explains that the Lohit Youth Library Network was launched in 2007 with this as its motto. The idea was to spread the joy of reading, through activities and personal example, and less to run libraries.

After 16 years, the network continues to be powered by activists. No one works for a salary. Nor does Uncle Moosa who is involved full-time but in an honorary capacity. As will happen with such elective arrangements, outcomes can vary depending on involvement. There will be strong spells and weak ones. But this is the serendipitous style

Volunteers continue to power the network. No one takes a salary. Not even Uncle Moosa who serves full-time as coordinator.

that was envisaged for the network.

During the pandemic, everything came to a standstill, as was only to be expected. Now the network is slowly regaining a rhythm. The Bamboosa Library has moved into a new building. There is more space for its books, a small amphitheatre and a guest room where visitors can stay overnight if required.

The new building comes from the state government, which has over the years played an important role in supporting and

encouraging the library network. The Lohit district administration has been particularly supportive. But the network is far removed from being a government-run programme and remains people-driven.

"All libraries are run by non-salaried youth volunteers as a service with no monthly honorarium to anyone," reiterates Uncle Moosa.

"Volunteers, like human society, are evolving, changing. Hence there cannot be fixed volunteers at a library (in our network) unlike in an institutional library. So, some unit libraries remain dormant for some periods while some old units started in 2008-10 have become defunct for want of volunteers and mentors," he says.

"Promoting reading habits among Arunachali students is done through activities by activists or volunteers using the library as a base within the library or outside, even at faraway locations. Thus, we encourage readers to emerge as reader-activists," he adds.

Reading aloud sessions are found to be particularly useful in getting young people to engage with books. Reading together with others helps

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dispel inhibitions of not just reading but articulating words and speaking up. Currently, the Bamboosa Library is holding such sessions.

“After the pandemic, it was found that there were severe deficiencies in government middle-school students in reading aloud passages and pronouncing words. So, the Bamboosa Library tied up last year with the Denning College of Teacher Education in Tezu to involve trainee teachers as reader-activists by enhancing their reading aloud skills. This would benefit the trainee teachers as well as students in government schools. It would also give the Bamboosa Library a regular stream of new volunteers for its reading campaigns,” says Moosa.

It is also part of the network’s mission to produce and promote children’s literature in Arunachal’s languages. For this it has tied up with Tulika in Chennai. Hambreelmai Sai, a Mishmi folktale in the Mishmi Kaman language, has been produced as well as a biography of Mahatma Gandhi in five tribal languages.

Reading sessions and other activities serve as a spark for other community efforts and Uncle Moosa has been gifting books and magazines to get them off to a good start. With some handholding, people come forward. The Garung Thuk Community Library in West Kameng district has been around since 2018. The Free Library at



Senior activists of the library network have formed a forum

Naharlagun in Itanagar opened in 2019. In Changlang district the deputy commissioner launched a community library volunteers’ initiative in 2021 and last year a New Age Learning Centre was opened at Miao in the district.

The Lohit Youth Library Network was designed to be free of encumbrances. It was envisaged as being without assets or weighty managerial responsibilities. Its role was to be motivational. The network’s strength was to lie in reaching corners of the Lohit-Dibang Valley region to inspire people to set up libraries and reap the benefits of reading.

Uncle Moosa describes the network as a “virtual entity” with libraries, including the big ones at Tezu and Wakhro, being owned and managed by separate NGOs and organizations. The network neither raises funds nor spends money. It doesn’t pay salaries or meet infrastructural expenses.

Volunteers who have been involved for some time and are now senior have formed an organization called the Forum of Library Activists. The Bamboosa Library, which is administered by Education Care for Kids, a registered NGO, is raising a corpus to which donations can go.

In Delhi, mentors and supporters of the library network have formed the Reading Promotion and Endowment Trust for Arunachal (REPTA) which has been a source of funding and receives donations that go to the network. Patronage has also come from the Surajmal Jalan Charitable Trust in Assam.

In this way the network says it has reached 9,000 young people in Arunachal over the years — an average of 600 a year. Are these numbers an accurate way of assessing its impact? Perhaps not. Having books in circulation so that young people can be exposed to them is an achievement. To do so joyfully is even more significant. ■

HOW TO BUST A MYTH WITH A GOOD BOOKLET

Kavita Charanji
New Delhi

WHEN two women daily wage workers in Sakra block of Muzaffarpur district in Bihar couldn’t afford to pay for a superior quality of sanitary pads, the women’s cooperative manufacturing the pads decided to give it to them free every month until their SHG got off the ground.

“It’s a question of women supporting women,” says Ayush Poddar of Bookletpedia that is part of the Haq project, a collaboration between Bookletpedia, EdutopUp and the Bihar government’s Sachhi Saheli Sanitary Napkin Producer Cooperative Society Limited (SSNPNCSL).

The two companies, Bookletpedia and EdutopUp, helped the cooperative set up the sanitary pad factory in Sakra under the Chief Minister’s Skilled Workers Entrepreneur Cluster Scheme. During the Covid-19 pandemic many migrants returned home to Bihar. The factory was set up to provide employment to women and improve their access to hygienic sanitary pads.

“The objective of the Haq project is to create income-generating opportunities for women, irrespective of their household’s economic status,” says Piyush Poddar, co-founder of Bookletpedia, that designs Information, Education and Communication (IEC) material and trains people at the grassroots.

The factory is being run by the Sachhi Saheli Utpatak Samiti, a collective of Self-Help Groups (SHGs), set up with help from JEEViKA, the Bihar government’s social and economic empowerment programme for the rural poor.

The women are being trained in leadership, communication, team-building, accounting and sales. Bookletpedia is helping them market the sanitary pads and teaching them soft skills. Logo, tagline, and packaging have been designed to create a distinct identity for the Haq sanitary pads. EdutopUp is providing technical support and liaison expertise.

The manufacturing facility, set up in 2020, has so far produced 6,000 sanitary napkins, six in a pack, priced at ₹35. It has a production capacity of 30,000 sanitary napkins. The women have been trained to manufacture the pads themselves. The cooperative’s company is called Sachhi Saheli Sanitary Napkin Utpadak Swawlambi Sakhari Samiti Ltd.

“The pads are manufactured using an automatic machine as per the IS-5405 sanitary napkin standards set by the Bureau of Indian Standards,” says Piyush with pride.

The cooperative says their Haq sanitary pads are superior to ordinary cotton ones because they are ultra-thin, more absorbent, last longer and are therefore cost-effective.

“The pads are based on the Super Absorbent Polymer (SAP) gel technology so they are far more absorbent than cotton pads. They have an absorption capacity of over six hours,” says Ayush Poddar, co-founder of Bookletpedia and Piyush’s brother. “Because they are more absorbent, the upper surface of the pad remains dry so it keeps diseases associated with less absorbent pads at bay.”

However, marketing the pads has been challenging. The local community of Sakra block is largely impoverished. Many are daily wage labourers, small *kirana* shop owners or farmhands.

When the team conducted a survey along with members of the SHGs they found that 92 percent of 141 women respondents used ordinary cotton sanitary pads, priced at ₹30. Eight percent of women



A meeting of SHGs discusses marketing strategies



The women’s collective manufactures the sanitary pads

said they used cloth. But cloth needs to be dried in the sun, which is not always possible due to space constraints, so the women dried them indoors. This made them prone to disease. The team was concerned about the eight percent of cloth users.

Secondly, women are reluctant to talk to their husbands about menstruation and their needs. Two members from the eight percent of respondents happened to use cloth. The Poddar brothers and co-founders of EdutopUp, Rahul Rungta and Ankit Bhardwaj, talked at length to the two women and found they earned very little and had no control over their earnings. They handed over their money to their husbands. The cooperative decided to give them free sanitary pads.

Marketing strategies have evolved over time. Initially, SHG members would go house-to-house to sell the Haq sanitary pads. Now village organizations and cluster-level federations advertise and market the napkins.

“We are not saying we will compete with sanitary pad manufacturers like Stayfree or Whisper. Our aim is to use village organizations and cluster federations as platforms to market our product,” says Piyush.

Bookletpedia’s booklet on gender and menstruation comes in handy. “In the Haq project we have used our booklet to make women understand the linkage between gender and menstruation. Women know that talking about menstruation is considered taboo in their families. But they never linked it to patriarchal norms,” Piyush explains.



Piyush Poddar and his brother, Ayush

‘In the Haq project our booklet makes women realize the link between gender, menstruation and patriarchy.’

“The booklet has been used also to bust myths around menstruation and discuss menstrual health management. In every session, the team emphasizes the benefits of using a sanitary pad and makes it normal to talk about hygiene during menstruation.”

The high social capital that SHG cadres have with the community helps a lot in creating trust in the product, he says. With the government and NGOs supporting the cooperative and the SHGs, women are coming round to spending ₹5 more on their menstrual health and hygiene.

The Haq project hopes to collaborate with the Bihar government’s Education Department to instal sanitary pad vending machines in government schools and replicate the Sachhi Saheli model in other parts of Bihar.

The venture’s sustainability depends on funds from the government and whether this collaborative effort can create leadership within the cooperative, an effective alliance between the government and the cooperative, as well as improve the skillsets of cooperative members, explains Piyush.

“Our USP is that we design booklets that make use of local characters in simple

language. We try to iron out issues like policies, government schemes and social issues,” says Piyush. He cites the example of a MGNREGA booklet designed for the Rajasthan Mahila Kalyan Mandal in Ajmer that, coupled with capacity building, helped the organization reach 3,973 households between September 2020 and March 2022 in Silora and Jawaja blocks of Ajmer and empowered them to access benefits under the scheme. ■

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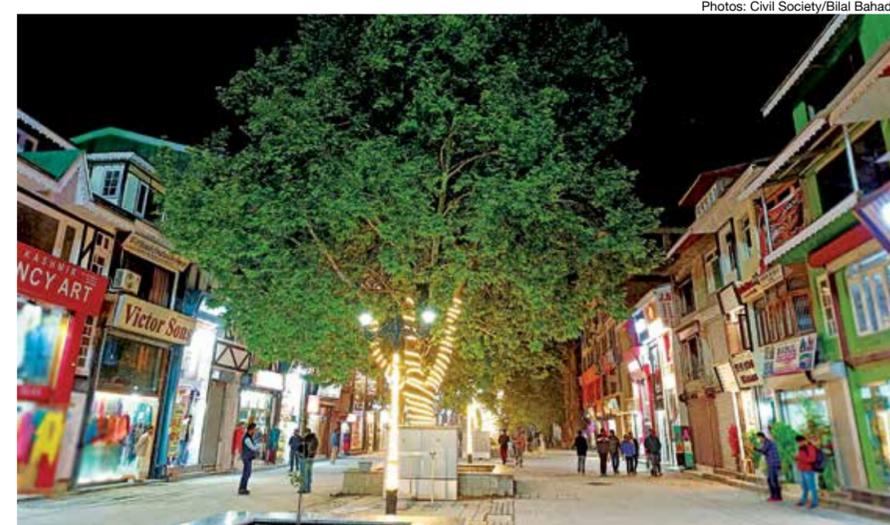
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NEWS CITIES



Transformation: Polo Market was renovated and prettied up in time for the G20 summit

Polo wow! But Central?

Jehangir Rashid
Srinagar

SRINAGAR's new hangout zone is Polo Market where locals and tourists congregate to shop, pass time at a café or just relax on a bench and watch the world go by. The market is now a pedestrian zone with a smart bicycle station. It looks spiffy and cool.

The other hangout joint is a two and a half-km stretch along the Jhelum river on the Rajbagh side which too has got a facelift. It's been prettied up with luminous lights, plants and paving. There are also walkways being built between Lal Mandi and Rajbagh. Battery-operated rickshaws are now plying in the city and a modern bus depot is expected to come up soon.

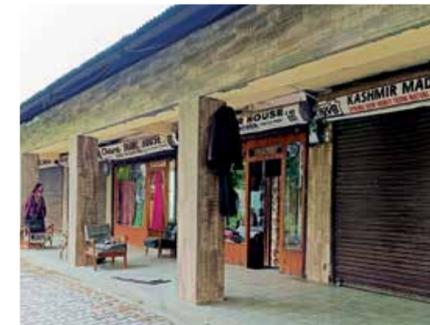
Srinagar owes much of this speedy revamp to the G20 summit which took place over May 22-24. Delegates visited Polo Market and shopped and were all praise for the market, much to the satisfaction of shopkeepers.

But another market is wondering why it was bypassed. Shopkeepers in the Government Central Market, located in the heart of Srinagar city, are upset that their market has been completely ignored, though officialdom has its own side of the story. Shopkeepers here say theirs is a historic market, inaugurated by Maharaja Hari Singh, the last king of Jammu and Kashmir. It was a shoppers' paradise for locals and tourists.

"The Government Central Market was a famous market. Tourists and locals used to throng here. The market was the ultimate destination for tourists keen to buy pure Kashmiri art products. However, over the years the market has lost its charm and the hustle and bustle is missing," says Nisar Ahmad Kitab,

president, Government Central Market Shopkeepers Association.

The market is spread over 4.5 hectares and has 125 shops selling exclusively local Kashmiri products like pashmina shawls, kani shawls, papier mache items, carpets, copper work, khatamband, walnut wood carvings, chain stitch and crewel embroidery products, sozni, namdha, gabba and silk. Locally, people



The derelict Government Central Market

referred to the market simply as 'numaish'.

Kitab says that the shops used to sell pure Kashmiri art at fixed prices and no seller indulged in cheating. All products were properly tagged. Nobody could doubt the genuineness of the products, he emphasizes.

"This market has a history of 70 years. It was well organized with business hours extending to 11 pm. It used to open as early as 9 am. If a shopkeeper indulged in cheating he would be asked to close his shop for seven days. A nominal rent was charged for the shops by the government," points out Kitab.

It was during the tenure of Chief Minister Bakshi Ghulam Mohammad that people were allotted shops in Central Market. With the onset of militant tourists began ignoring the

market and preferred to spend time visiting the Dal lake and surrounding touristy places.

Kitab says that later the market saw a revival of sorts but the devastating floods of 2014 acted as a dampener. Since then the shopkeepers have been suffering losses. He says that the government is pressuring them to keep their shops open despite the fact that there are no customers.

"We have demanded that shopkeepers should be allowed to sell local products till tourists return. This place should come up on the tourist map. Around 40 shops have been shifted to the nearby Power Development Department (PDD) building," says Kitab.

According to him, the government has started organizing exhibitions at Kashmir Haat in the vicinity but there is nothing attractive being sold there. Instead, this market should be given proper publicity so that tourists come to know of it.

However, an official of the Department of Handicrafts alleged that shopkeepers in Central Market have in a way cheated the government since many of them have sold off their shops. He said that since the shops were given on lease to them, the shopkeepers had no authority to sell them.

"The shopkeepers were asked to pay ₹15 as monthly charges to the government but they haven't been paying it. We have told them to keep the shops open. But they have resorted to breach of trust by keeping them closed. The government is lenient towards the shopkeepers but they cannot take things for granted forever," said the official.

He said only 15 shopkeepers are carrying on business. The rest, including the ones who have been shifted to the PDD building, either keep their shops closed or are selling them off. He said that a detailed project report (DPR) of ₹55 crore has been submitted to the administrative department for modernizing Central Market but it has not been cleared till now.

Prominent social and political activist Jagmohan Singh Raina has written to Prime Minister Narendra Modi, seeking his intervention in the revival of Central Market.

"There is no centralized market in Srinagar. Master artists and craftsmen have no dedicated place to showcase their arts and crafts. As a result, the economy is in a doldrums. Since the prime minister has been emphasizing the economic revival of Jammu & Kashmir, revival and resumption of this exhibition ground market on the old pattern would be a booster dose in this regard," says Raina in the letter.

He has said that tourists would also get an opportunity to buy real Kashmir-made products from the actual stakeholders. Srinagar needs an art and crafts centre on the pattern of Pragati Maidan in New Delhi and Fashion Centre of Chandigarh at the exhibition ground in Srinagar, he said. ■

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Holy shrines are demolished in forest drive

Rakesh Agrawal
Dehradun

THE Uttarakhand government's anti-encroachment drive to demolish religious structures inside forests has resulted in a quiet sense of unease. Most of the structures that were demolished were *mazars* which are revered by both Hindus and Muslims.

The demolition drive began by razing *mazars*, then went on to flatten makeshift temples and sundry structures and after that tried to evict the Van Gujjars, a nomadic community residing near the Jim Corbett National Park. That alerted villages in the vicinity and forest rights activists who stepped in and began protesting. The administration seems to have withdrawn for now.

Mazars are enshrined tombs where a pious Muslim saint is buried. The forests of Uttarakhand are dotted with such shrines, some of which are ancient. Hindus and Muslims revere them and come with offerings of flowers, incense and a *chadar*, often hoping their *mannat* or wish will be granted.

Susheela Devi, who walked up a hill to Sayyid Baba's *mazar* in Pacchwa, a locality on the outskirts of Dehradun, was shocked to find it had been reduced to rubble. She had come with flowers and incense to pray for a safe pregnancy. An elderly resident, Afsaan Ali, consoled her and promised to take her offerings and her *mannat* to a *dargah* in Dehradun.

The administration's plan was to free up 370,00 sq km of forest land from encroachments. But it hit a hurdle. A survey by the forest department to identify such illegal religious structures revealed that many notable

ancient temples also stood on forest land like the famous Mansa Devi temple in Haridwar and Garjia Devi temple in Ramnagar. So the forest department decided that religious places built before 1980 in reserved forest areas would not be demolished.

Chief Conservator of Forests Parag Madhukar Dhakate, who has been entrusted with this task, said, "So far, we have removed 227 illegally built religious structures from forest land including 200 *mazars* and 27 temples and freed 60 hectares of land. There are various kinds of encroachments such as hutments, resorts, houses and so on."

But the substantial number of *mazars* which were obliterated gave the whole exercise a communal expression. The state government

A survey to identify religious structures which were illegal revealed that many notable temples also stood on forest land.

claimed that anti-social elements emerge from these *mazars*, and that they were an insidious plan to grab forest land and declare them wakf properties.

Chief Minister Pushkar Singh Dhami disputed the notion that *mazars* were ancient structures and dedicated to saints. He said he would not allow 'land *jihad*' and said around 1,000 *mazars* had been illegally built. He also expressed concern about 'demographic changes' in the state. The Muslim population has risen marginally from 12 to 14 percent.

The Pauri district administration razed the *mazar* of Baba Gayasuddin Aula-e-Karim Shah in Satpuli village in early May. In Haridwar, a *mazar* near Aryanagar Chowk, at Jwalapur, on the city's outskirts, was demolished. Along with the *mazar*, a Hindu place of worship

at Singh Dwar was also demolished.

A majority of Muslims, fearful and worried, chose not to speak up. "What's the use of arguing now? The officials have already done what they were directed to do. No one will hear us," said an *imam* of Jwalapur, shrugging hopelessly.

There were a few exceptions. In mid-May, a crowd gathered outside the Thapli Baba *mazar*, close to the Jim Corbett National Park, to protest against the demolition. But forest officials claimed that it was illegally built on forest land and demolished it.

The administration then shifted its focus to evicting the Van Gujjars, an impoverished forest-dwelling pastoral Muslim community, not recognized as a Scheduled Tribe in Uttarakhand. Around 400 Van Gujjars, living in their dilapidated, thatched homes in reserve forests and forests under the revenue department in the Terai East and West Forest Divisions of Ramnagar area, adjoining the Jim Corbett National Park in Nainital district, were served an eviction notice.

This worried residents of villages in the vicinity of the park who wondered whether they could be next. The matter was taken up by the Van Panchayat Sangharsh Morcha (VPSM) in Bhowali which fights for the rights of forest-dependent communities.

"We wrote to the DFOs and the deputy director of the forest department, drawing their attention to the fact that the eviction order was issued by lower-level officials like the Van Darogas. As per the Indian Forest Act, 1927, only higher-level officials like DFOs can issue such eviction orders. The eviction order was subsequently withdrawn," said Tarun Joshi, VPSM convener.

The VPSM also argued that legally eviction cannot take place while there are cases being heard on titles for forest rights. "The evictions are a communal act by the government. We demand the implementation of the Forest Rights Act and a land rights law," said Shankar Gopal, convener of the Chetna Andolan. ■

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Samita's World

by SAMITA RATHOR



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THE AI AGE ARRIVES

By Kiran Karnik



JULY 16, 1945, marked the start of a new era in human history: the beginning of the nuclear age. On that date, in Alamogordo, New Mexico, a nuclear device was successfully tested by the US. Watching the test, Robert Oppenheimer (then director of the Los Alamos laboratory, where the bomb was created) — presumably in awe, and possibly in fear — quoted the *Bhagavad Gita*: “Now I am become death, the destroyer of worlds.” Less than a month later, the first nuclear bomb was dropped on Hiroshima, causing unimagined devastation: truly, the destroyer of worlds.

This was followed, a few days later, by another nuclear bomb dropped on Nagasaki; these twin bombings have so far been their only use in destruction. However, ever more sophisticated and powerful nuclear devices (including hydrogen or fusion bombs) have been developed, tested, and deployed, with the worldwide inventory of these estimated as exceeding 12,000. Even a fraction of these can wipe out much of the life

on earth. In 1945, the genie was out of the bottle and, like toothpaste out of a tube, can never be put back.

Are we now in the process of letting another genie out of the bottle, in the form of Artificial Intelligence? The first nuclear test was preceded by many years of theoretical physics (Einstein’s simple equation, $E=mc^2$ — the basis of nuclear energy and bombs — was formulated in 1905), developments in other related fields, and practical experiments on splitting the atom. Similarly, today’s AI has its genesis in many years of foundational work in various disciplines, converging into user apps like ChatGPT. Are we then on the threshold of another new era in human history — the AI Age — or have we already crossed the Rubicon?

To many, the analogy with the nuclear age would appear strange. After all, ever-more-capable computers, and increasingly sophisticated software and applications, have been positive developments. They have made life easier, speeded up processes, and brought in transparency. In conjunction with communication technology, they have revolutionized work, entertainment, connectivity. Information of all kinds is now available anywhere, anytime, and literally at your fingertip, on a computer or mobile phone. All you have to do is to articulate a question (no literacy

required) into your mobile phone — in one of many languages — and you will get a near-instantaneous response.

Despite all its wondrous applications, AI has a potentially dark side too. It is this that is of growing concern, worldwide. Evidence of these worries is seen even in the public sphere. Some weeks ago, a number of tech leaders, including Elon Musk, sought a six-month “pause” in the development of AI, so as to allow time for formulation of a regulatory framework. Physicist and Nobel Laureate Stephen Hawking too had apparently expressed deep concern about AI and its implications. The CEO of OpenAI, developer of ChatGPT, has himself called for regulations on AI. US Vice-President Kamala Harris convened a meeting of CEOs of big tech companies to discuss AI and its impact.

Though the US seems to favour minimal state intervention for the moment, the European Union is already drafting a law to regulate AI; meanwhile, Italy has gone a step further and banned ChatGPT, mainly due to worries about its access to private data. China already has tight control on the internet and digital technologies; doubtless, it will soon have laws in place to deal with the use of AI.

In India, discussions about possible regulation are underway. The Digital Data Protection Act, now being drafted, will certainly cover some aspects. A minister has stated that the proposed Digital India Act (a revamp of the Information Technology Act) will have a separate section on AI and other emerging technologies, and will focus on protecting users. Aspects like fake news are to be handled through a government-created mechanism that can order the taking down of any item.

GROWING AT WARP SPEED So, what is the “dark side” that has rather suddenly spawned so much worry, worldwide, about AI? More on these worries later, but the trigger has clearly been the advent of ChatGPT, which has propelled AI from the background — embedded mainly in business-to-business software — into a consumer product that is available for every smartphone. Its popularity, indicative of its tremendous functionality, can be gauged from the fact that the app had over a million users in just five days (Facebook took 10 months and Twitter two years), and over 100 million in two months, making it the fastest-growing app in history. Even the sensational Tik Tok took nine months to reach the latter milestone.

As much as the warp-speed growth of the app, what has thinkers worried is the capability of its foundational software, GPT or Generative Pre-trained Transformer and, more broadly, generative AI. So, what exactly is it and why have so many expressed concerns about it? The journey began about a decade ago, with “deep learning”, which used vast data bases and neural networks running on powerful computers, to recognize images, process audio and play games: the latter with human-superior capability. For example, Alphabet’s AlphaGo software beat a top player of the Chinese game Go in 2016. In fact, the potential of machine learning was exhibited as far back as 1997, when IBM’s Deep Blue defeated chess grandmaster Garry Kasparov.

Building on deep learning, now so-called large language models (LLMs) draw on massive datasets and underpin an app like ChatGPT. Its working can be simplistically explained by taking the example of asking it to complete an unfinished sentence. The LLM first converts each word or word-group into a pre-assigned number (or “token”); each is then put in a space along with other similar words. Next, based on its training, its “attention network” links related words (e.g., which noun does the adjective qualify: “beautiful” being linked with “roses” in “a beautiful collection of roses”); it then picks the highest probability word to find the next word in an incomplete sentence; finally, it goes through iterations (autoregression), based on its training, to keep checking upto its limit.

The critical element is the size of its training database. One of the points of concern regarding AI is that as these LLMs grow larger, their capability increases even faster — but unknown quirks sometimes come up. One measure of growth is the difference between GPT-3 and the next version, GPT-4, developed just a few months later. The former could process up to 2,048 tokens at a time; GPT-4 can handle 32,000. As an

instance of how this increases capability, take the American Uniform Bar Examination: while GPT-3.5 (superior to GPT-3) failed, GPT-4 passed it by being in the 90th percentile. The combination of faster computers, massive databases and better algorithms that draw and learn from them are the drivers for LLMs.

GPT-3 drew from data available on the entire internet from 2016 to 2019, selecting a very small subset of it, after filtering out the loads of junk, for its training. GPT-4 was trained, according to reports, on a vast base of images too. The large databases are necessary for self-learning by LLMs. This follows the simple methodology of a self-test: taking part of a text and trying to guess what words would complete it; checking its answer against the original text enables it to learn on its own. Obviously, the more such “tests” it takes and learns from, and the bigger the size of the data it can draw on, the more accurate it becomes. Hence the need for super-fast computers and really large databases. In practice, the LLM does this by operating various “attention networks” in parallel, enabling scaling, but requiring computers with sophisticated Graphic Processing Units (GPUs).

While the growth in capability from one generation of AI to the next (GPT-3 to GPT-4) is exponential, so is the requirement for computing power (as also electric power and skilled human-power) — and hence cost. One estimate indicates that training GPT-3 cost \$4.6 million; this escalated to the order of \$100 million for GPT-4. Governments and companies may not be deterred by costs of this order, so the constraining

AI in combination with electronics and robotics is changing the shop floor in factories, the operation theatre in hospitals, laboratories and classrooms in educational institutions.

factor is more likely to be the amount of data available: we may soon reach the limit of high-quality text which can be downloaded from the internet. Also, without some major breakthrough on computer hardware, speed of data processing may become a constraint too.

COMPANIES RUSH IN Meanwhile, companies are rushing to use the new technology in all their applications: not only for near-instantaneously digging out any information which may be required, but also conveying it through chatbots that can now emulate human response (leave alone speech) so well that the human-machine differentiation has become very difficult. Many routine tasks are being automated, making for greater efficiency, speed, lower costs, and reliability — as also 24x7 availability. Apart from completing sentences and scouring databases to answer queries, AI can now write reports, essays and poetry, or create illustrations and sketches, amongst other things. Generative AI (GAI) is very definitely the top-of-mind, flavour-of-the-year topic in boardrooms around the world.

GAI’s capabilities are not only spreading rapidly and extensively in the sphere of business and industry, but also to health, education, scientific research and a wide range of other areas. In education, it has opened up vast possibilities: once more, there are dreams of creating a system that is equitable, extensive, and excellent. Yet, even as the ways AI can best be used in learning are being explored, the flip side of it being used to “cheat” (e.g., ChatGPT being used to write essays and assignments) are already common. Now, much energy and skill are going into devising ways of using AI itself to spot such unethical practices. As in many other fields, technology is both the problem and the solution, with the two bound in a never-ending cycle.

At the same time, AI in combination with electronics and robotics is changing the shop floor in factories, the operation theatre in hospitals,

and the laboratories and classrooms in educational institutions. In conjunction with sensors and machine-to-machine communication, it can ensure safety and efficiency through predictive analytics that will ensure on-time maintenance of machines, equipment, vehicles, planes and ships. The marriage of hardware and software is becoming more ubiquitous, extending to a variety of problems in different fields.

A few days ago, there was news of a person who, as a result of an accident in 2011, was paralyzed below the waist, and told he would never walk again. However, as reported in *Nature*, a digital interface developed by scientists in Switzerland has now restored communication between his brain and spinal cord, allowing him to stand, walk and even climb stairs. Chip implants in humans will soon become commonplace; software and AI may enable them to replace, supplement and augment various bodily functions and organs, enabling human capabilities to reach new levels. With Musk's Neuralink receiving a green light from the US Food and Drug Administration to go ahead with in-human clinical trials for a brain implant, one can imagine this going to the next level as a brain to machine link is established and AI brought into play.

Hundreds of other uses are already underway and many hundreds more will certainly be seen as innovators begin to leverage the endless possibilities of GAI. Indicative of the tremendous surge in the actual use of AI is the speed with which ChatGPT has spread. Another is the present and projected growth in demand for the necessary hardware. This is manifested in the market cap of Nvidia, by far the biggest maker of the chips and GPUs which power the fast computers necessary for LLMs and AI. In just one day, on May 25, its market cap rocketed by a mind-boggling \$184 billion, taking it to just short of a trillion dollars (a landmark it has now crossed). Open-source implementation of LLMs is now on the cards and many innovative new apps will certainly ride on these, further boosting demand.

CHEAPER THAN HUMAN LABOUR The increasing capabilities of GAI mean that it can now perform many functions being done by humans. Its ability to do this at a cost lower than human labour, and to do so efficiently and autonomously, is likely to result in a new transition: the “outsourcing” of work to machines. In the short term, jobs are likely to be lost, though historical evidence points to the fact that every technological breakthrough has resulted in ultimately creating more (though different) jobs. However, apart from increased unemployment in the short term, there will be pain for many who do not have — and may not be able to pick up — the skills required for the new jobs that will result. Also, there is deep concern that AI is different and that job losses will be both permanent and massive. Of course, every new technology claims such exceptionalism. Is AI truly going to be different? Some give it a “co-pilot” role, implying continuing need for human involvement. However, this will not obviate the need for fewer humans, as AI drives the efficiency of output.

Many are concerned about the even broader issues that may result from the human-comparable (possibly super-human) capabilities of AI. It is this that is the basis of worries raised by experts. Science fiction stories sometimes are built around a future in which machines and robots take over the world. As AI becomes ever more versatile and powerful, will it become more autonomous? Already one has practical scenarios where it makes sense for a machine to override humans. One example is a car facing a sudden obstacle: an AI-driven computer can more quickly sense and process all the data to decide on the optimum action — brake, swerve, etc. — and also act faster than a human.

As instances like this multiply, will most decision-making pass on to machines? Will humans become a species inferior to machines? Will AI do to humans what we have done to other species — including driving many to near-extinction? Should we be paying serious attention to a recent letter, signed by over 350 experts, including Sam Altman, CEO of OpenAI (the creator of ChatGPT), which warns of “the risk of extinction from AI”, suggesting that it should be “a global priority alongside other societal-scale risks such as pandemics and nuclear war”?

The many broader aspects of AI and its impact have taken discussions of this from the corporate boards to Cabinet meetings in many countries. The focus is not only on how it may be used — by companies, institutions, and countries — but also on concerns about its impact: on jobs, on security, and through its use by much of the population (via new apps like ChatGPT, for example, or by its embedding in existing apps).

These and the larger questions noted earlier are no longer merely speculative or philosophical, nor are they of some distant future. We need to ponder them with some urgency, forgetting the competitive one-upmanship between nations. Meanwhile, even more immediate issues confront us, resulting from the power and versatility of GAI.



The autonomous car is here to stay

BIASES CREEP IN One concern about AI, particularly for countries like India, is the bias that unintentionally creeps into the apps of which it is the foundation. Whether it is LLMs trained on text, or algorithms which learn from images, a very large proportion of the data used originates from the West, as do the algorithms themselves. As a result, the skewed data and biases of the programmer produce output that is discriminatory, or even wrong, in some situations. One simple example is with regard to the problem facing an autonomous vehicle when confronted with a choice of whether to avoid a child who suddenly comes in the way but then having to hit an older person. The decision algorithm fed into the computer depends on the view or bias of the programmer. In the case of training databases, an example is of face recognition: due to the images used (mostly “white” Westerners), its veracity depends on skin colour, being high for whites but sometimes making mistakes for dark-skinned people. One researcher documented this recently, explaining how, in 1998 — as a doctoral student — he had created an algorithm that unintentionally had a strong racial (colour) bias. The same bias now occurs in gender identification, where dark-skinned women are often identified as male. There may be such biases built into many apps because of the algorithm and the training data bases (using more balanced data is constrained by availability, which also results in greater cost). They are embedded deep within the AI system, and so are not easy to find.

Data-driven biases or those due to programmers’ perspectives are not limited to the West. LLMs which use Indian languages are prone to biases too, for the same reason of skewed data; similarly for apps developed here. In fact, given the historical problems in Indian society, texts used for training are more likely to be gender-biased, besides having possible caste biases. With the extensive inequity in India, images used for training are not likely to be representative of the vast diversity in the country. Mistakes and wrong identification are, therefore, likely. With the huge increase in surveillance cameras, and their use for face identification (not only of known criminals, but also of “trouble-makers”), the potential for harm is

substantial. Inevitably, hackers may try to intentionally embed biases against specific individuals or segments of the population. These worries make it worth considering whether every app should mandatorily be required to go through some form of a “bias test”.

SMILING WRESTLERS? Biases apart, while the capabilities of GAI are most impressive, it seems that LLMs are unpredictable and sometimes generate wrong and false information. With increasing size, capabilities — but also complexities and unexpected responses — increase rapidly. Their creative abilities can make things worse. One example is a recent incident in a Manhattan court. The lawyers of a litigant filed a brief which quoted more than half a dozen relevant court decisions which supported their contention, complete in most cases with details like the court and judges, docket number and dates. However, neither the opposing lawyers nor the judge himself could find the decisions and quotations summarized by the lawyer who had prepared the brief. In response, he admitted that he had used ChatGPT to do his legal research. Apparently, it had basically invented the judgments and details!

Closer home, some days ago there were painful images of forceful eviction, dragging, and detention by the police of wrestlers protesting at Jantar Mantar in Delhi. As these were circulating on social media, accompanied by critical comments about police high-handedness, a very contrary one popped up showing two top women wrestlers — key protesters — smiling happily while taking a selfie with the police. This strange image turned out to be fake, generated with great realism by AI. Similarly, probably as a joke, someone created and posted a false image of the Pope in a fancy puffer jacket. Many such fake images, rendered very realistic by AI, are now beginning to appear, supplementing fake news posts — and often giving apparent credibility to them.

Social media is already a major source for disinformation and fake news. Organized groups and bots are known to spread negative messages on a mass scale. The situation is made worse by the algorithms in play that feed news and views to selected individuals, reinforcing existing opinions and creating an echo chamber effect. The capabilities of AI to locate like-minded individuals and feed their biases will make this more serious, especially with the addition of images which are “realistic fakes”. On the other hand, AI may be trained and used to filter out any dissenting views or to specifically identify individuals who tend to be deviant — possibly (inevitably?) pre-emptively.

Another concern is the further heft that GAI will add to the growing power of big tech. Will a few companies dominate and — maybe literally — rule the world? Alternatively, or through these companies, will a few countries call the shots? Many are surprised that tech companies are themselves calling for regulation. One could ascribe this to an unexpected rise in their social consciousness, or a clever and selfish motive to maintain their leadership in this area through a freeze in development (by other companies/countries).

LOOKING AHEAD IN INDIA As noted, individual countries, including India, are debating regulatory frameworks. The trade-off between regulation that is too early (throttling innovation) and too late (the horse may already have bolted from the stable) is a difficult one. India may be well served by resisting the temptation of showing it is a leader by being quickly off the blocks. A more measured approach is desirable, with a step-by-step roll-out that takes account of feedback from each move forward. Little or light regulation of research, more for platforms, and fairly stringent laws for apps may be a wise approach. Guidelines and guard rails might be a good start, before getting to mandatory regulations and laws.

Meanwhile, we cannot afford to be left behind in this key technology that already has visible ramifications in all areas: from daily life to economic efficiency, social sector uses, and security. India’s capabilities in hardware development, especially at the basic stages (beginning with chips/GPUs) is rather rudimentary. Our expertise — as in many other sectors — lies in the software, apps, and business models. This is an area

in which we should push ahead with rapidity, and one in which we could have ambitions of being in the top bracket. It will require large investments, especially in hardware, data centres, and development of human resources.

Importantly, to maximize benefits and ensure that development is inclusive, there is need to create multi-lingual access, at least in major Indian languages. This requires large datasets for training, so as to ensure better accuracy and also quicker response. In this respect, non-English languages face a serious problem, because of the lack of digitally stored data that the LLM can feed on. This means greater processing cost, because it requires more “tokens” (one experiment showed that



A doctored picture of the wrestlers smiling

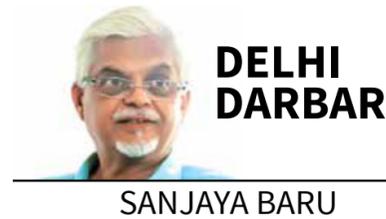
Malayalam required 15 times that required for English; another showed Hindi required almost five times). One laudable effort being made in India is by AI4Bharat, an IIT Madras initiative, which aims at “building an open-source language AI for Indian languages, including datasets, models, and applications”. Expanding such work will help to make GAI and its apps more inclusive. However, in doing this, we need to be cognizant of the dangers of bias that could creep in.

Despite the many worries, GAI holds great promise as a technology that might well compare with the steam engine or with the computer, in terms of impact. Policies need to be put in place which ensure that it does not widen inequity (within and between nations), or leave behind those who are disadvantaged, as other technologies have often done. A global regulatory regime may well be required, but it should be one that is not discriminatory and treats this technology as a global public good. As in a pandemic, none is safe until all are.

Are the concerns about AI’s negative impacts exaggerated? Will even the good it does result in an idle human race, with all work and tasks automated? Everyone loves a vacation, but will a permanent, life-long “vacation” be fun? Elsewhere (see ‘Zero Sum Game,’ *Civil Society*, May 2023), we have argued that some human functions will not be taken over by AI, that human “stupidity” will be a match for artificial intelligence. The future could then be human plus machine, rather than one or the other. Such a combination could end up being not a mixture, but a composite, taking the form of implants in humans, linked to a computer running GAI. This could result in GAI expanded differently: not generative AI, but Gen AI, like Gen Z (after all, in a circular world, A follows Z), a new generation, with brains and physique amplified by chips and AI. The question of who is in charge — human or machine — will not arise; having made some birds and animals extinct, humans may now have created an altogether new life form: Gen AI may not just be a new generation, but an altogether new species. ■

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Diplomacy, society and business



DELHI DARBAR

SANJAYA BARU

growing public engagement of diplomats.

I recall External Affairs Minister S. Jaishankar telling me that when he was posted to Beijing as India's ambassador, he discovered he would be the first Indian plenipotentiary in the Middle Kingdom to socialize with Chinese business leaders. Till then Indian ambassadors only engaged with government officials, most often of equal rank. Diplomat turned politician Natwar Singh once famously said that when he joined the foreign service, diplomats walked the 'high road' of formal engagement with host government and fellow diplomats of equal rank, while it was left to the 'lesser' officers of the commercial service to engage host



US Ambassador Eric Garcetti enjoying a south Indian meal in New Delhi

The days when US ambassadors were content to meet the movers and shakers of Lutyens' Delhi are long over.

governments and local business on business and commerce. But, recalled Singh, by the time he became foreign minister he realized that even diplomats had to engage with business.

In fact, in India the diplomatic engagement with the business community began with Rajiv Gandhi's government when business leaders accompanied the prime minister on important

foreign visits. The idea being that business-to-business relations would be forged at the highest level of government. This went further after economic liberalization in 1991 and the opening up of the economy. Interestingly, Prime Minister P.V. Narasimha Rao's first visit overseas was neither to an important neighbouring country, as has often been the practice, nor to a Big Power but was to the then economic powerhouse of Germany. All prime ministers since then have had business delegations joining them on foreign trips.

The civil society engagement of Indian diplomats overseas has also changed. I recall a former ambassador to Kuwait complaining to me that on his posting he had ceased to be a diplomat and had become a trade union leader-cum-labour relations manager since most of his time was devoted to attending to the problems of overseas Indian workers in that country. Today, however, Indian diplomats find themselves devoting as much time to the Indian diaspora as to the host government that they have been assigned to deal with. Often, a diplomat's success in engaging the overseas Indian community overshadows any failure in representing Indian interests with the host government.

Not only has the Indian diaspora grown over the years, it is today among the largest worldwide. In the developed Anglosphere — US, UK, Canada, Australia, Singapore and the Gulf — it is also among the wealthier and better educated communities. What has, however, raised its profile is the fact that this diaspora's social and political preferences are seen as shaping domestic politics in India. While all PMs have over the years interacted with the overseas Indian community, Prime Minister Modi has taken this to a new political level. It has, therefore, become necessary for other politicians too to engage the Indian diaspora with a view to domestic constituencies. This can only politicize the role of Indian diplomats overseas.

Another recent phenomenon in India linked

Continued on page 23

Yamuna is a little bit cleaner



LIVING RIVERS

VENKATESH DUTTA

THE Yamuna river is showing some signs of improvement in its water quality. The levels of biological oxygen demand (BOD) in the Najafgarh drain evidenced a notable reduction of 33 percent, compared to the previous year, in May 2023. A lower BOD level signifies a decrease in organic pollutants and an overall healthier aquatic environment.

This drain contributes to approximately 70 percent of the wastewater discharge into the Yamuna in Delhi. The BOD value at Kashmere Gate dipped from 55 milligrams of oxygen per litre (mg/l) in May 2022 to 38 mg/l in May 2023. This indicates a positive trend in terms of improved water quality. However, the desirable value in a healthy river should be less than 3 mg/l. Therefore, a lot has to be done to see an appreciable improvement in water quality of the river. The most important step is to make all the Sewage Treatment Plants (STPs) functional and discharge fresh water into the river during the lean season.

In November 2021, Chief Minister Arvind Kejriwal announced a comprehensive six-point action plan aimed at addressing the fundamental issues impacting the Yamuna. The action plan includes connecting *jhuggi-jhopri* clusters to the sewer network, efficient tapping and diversion of drains, desilting of trunk sewers to remove accumulated sediments and debris, and upgradation of STPs to enhance their capacity and efficiency in treating wastewater. The action plan outlines crucial steps to tackle the challenges faced by the river, reflecting a commitment to its restoration and conservation.

Approximately 75 percent of the pollution in the Yamuna is concentrated within a short, 22-km segment, from Wazirabad to Okhla, receiving sewage from 16 drains. Remarkably, this relatively small portion represents less than 2 percent of the river's total length, which extends approximately 1,376 km from Yamunotri to Allahabad. The river flows 54 km in Delhi from Palla to Badarpur after travelling nearly 400 km from its origin in Yamunotri.

Throughout the dry season, which spans approximately nine months of the year, there is a lack of fresh water in the Yamuna downstream of Wazirabad. Instead, the only flow present consists of sewage, both treated and untreated. Moreover, pollution from the sugar and paper industries in Uttar Pradesh, which is carried through the severely polluted Hindon river, also adds to the contamination of the Yamuna.

Recently, the Central Monitoring Committee established by the National Green Tribunal (NGT) evaluated the initiatives of the Delhi government in maintaining the cleanliness of the Yamuna in Delhi. During the meeting, concerns were raised about industries operating in non-conforming areas. Additionally, the timelines for constructing new STPs and upgrading existing ones that do



The Yamuna needs more fresh water and more efficient STPs

not meet the prescribed standards were also discussed. The deadline for completing the STPs at Rithala, Kondli and Okhla by June 2023 has not been met. The upgradation of non-compliant STPs to meet the prescribed standards by June 2024 is also a huge challenge.

A substantial portion of the sewage in Delhi is not being properly treated before being discharged into the Yamuna. Additionally, around 29 percent of the sewage generated in the city is not treated at all. Many STPs have been found to be non-compliant with the treatment standards set by the Delhi Pollution Control Committee (DPCC). Out of the 35 operational STPs, 22 were not meeting the prescribed standards for treating sewage. As a result, the partially treated water released from these STPs continues to pollute the Yamuna. In order to achieve desired levels of water quality of the river, it is essential to improve both the quality and capacity of STPs. Without these enhancements, major progress in improving the river's water quality cannot be attained.

Currently, there are 1,797 unauthorized colonies in Delhi with a population of

approximately seven million people. Additionally, there are 675 *jhuggi* clusters with a population of around three million people. Due to the lack of a proper sewerage network, a significant amount of sewage is released into natural stormwater drains. Ultimately, all these drains converge and flow into the Yamuna.

Untreated or partially treated sewage contains particles of soaps and detergents, oils, greases and surfactants that these STPs are unable to treat. The lean phase of the Yamuna river exacerbates the problem due to reduced water inflow and limited dilution of pollutants. The reduced water flow restricts the river's ability to flush out pollutants effectively, affecting the natural self-purification capacity of the river. Without adequate water flow, the river struggles to maintain a healthy ecosystem and remove or disperse the pollutants effectively. As a result, the pollutants, including untreated sewage, industrial effluents, and other contaminants, remain in the water for a long time.

Can we bring back the Yamuna to its former glory? The answer is yes, provided we have a robust system of sewage management and freshwater inflows into the river. The untreated sewage and industrial effluents are pouring a variety of chemicals, heavy metals, and other pollutants into the river, posing serious threats to both human health and the ecosystem.

Reviving the Yamuna needs increased vigilance, strict regulation, enforcement of laws and proactive measures. Enhancing the quality of river water relies on two crucial factors: ensuring a minimum flow of fresh water and minimizing the discharge of polluted water, including both domestic and industrial waste, that enters the river.

Efforts to combat pollution in the river should be intensified on multiple fronts. Implementing strict wastewater treatment protocols, enhancing industrial regulations, and promoting sustainable waste management practices are crucial steps in mitigating pollution. The government and relevant authorities must work together to ensure that STPs are upgraded and operate efficiently, adhering to prescribed standards. Industries must be held accountable for treating their effluents before discharge, and regular monitoring and enforcement should be implemented. The floodplains along the Delhi and Uttar Pradesh stretch of the river should be designated as an environmentally sensitive zone for river conservation. ■

Venkatesh Dutta is a Gomti River Waterkeeper and a professor of environmental sciences at Ambedkar University, Lucknow

Raising the hand of peace



**AHIMSA
MUSINGS**

RAJNI BAKSHI

AN impassioned procession of protesters was marching towards Gandhi Maidan in Patna. The year was 1974 and that procession was part of the Bihar Movement led by the Gandhian veteran, Jayaprakash Narayan (JP). This was a movement against corruption and for deepening of democracy.

Suddenly, there was gun fire from the window of premises occupied by an MLA who presumably opposed the protesters. Amarnathbhai, a full-time worker of the Sarvodaya movement, was present. Here is how he recalls what happened next.

The gun fire caused an upsurge of anger among the protesters. Fortunately, JP was not walking in the procession at that precise moment. But the protesters understood that the gun shots were an attempt to kill their leader. Plus, some of them had been injured. It was in this mood of rage on a fragile leash that the procession entered Gandhi Maidan. The historic Maidan, in the heart of Patna, spreads across 60 acres and was packed to capacity. Even the roads around the Maidan were packed with surging crowds.

Amarnathbhai recalls that some of the protesters did shout slogans calling for violence. Such as: *'Khood ka badla khood'* ('Blood for blood'). When JP reached the Maidan he was handed a note from the District Magistrate (DM). In the note the DM pleaded that JP alone could save the day. Patna is now in your hands, the administrator wrote, the police will not be able to control the situation.

This was the context in which JP went on the dais and asked all those gathered to raise their hands and pledge that no matter who was responsible for the gun fire, they would not respond in kind. And then he invoked the slogan that was to become the rallying call of the JP movement: *'Hamla chahe jaisa hoga, haath hamara nahin uthega'*.

Amarnathbhai recalls how the slogan reverberated through the multitude, inspiring and being absorbed. The slogan may have been used before but many participants in the JP movement recall that tension-filled day at Gandhi Maidan as the occasion when the

slogan took on a life of its own.

This month, June 2023, many people who identify with the JP movement are marking its 50th anniversary. For them and many others, the pledge to remain committed to non-violence is not merely a historical memory, it is a lived and practised commitment. For example, the Narmada Bachao Andolan in the early 1990s embodied this ethos as those resisting the submergence of their homes and lands protested against the construction of multiple dams on the Narmada river.

However, both the slogan and the ideal it represents have also been ridiculed and rejected. This has been done not just by the extreme Left and Right of the political spectrum. Mao Zedong's infamous claim that political power grows out of the barrel of a gun



JP addressing a rally in 1974

'Hamla chahe jaisa hoga, haath hamara nahin uthega' was to become the rallying call or the slogan of the JP movement.

has left its mark even on those who don't follow him or call themselves communists.

So why does JP's rallying call still ring true? Why does it seem appealing even to those who have doubts about making it practicable?

One, because most human beings know at an instinctive level that retaliatory anger usually produces unfortunate results. By comparison, self-restraint in a crucial moment of anger, or provocation to violence, becomes a powerful inner strength that can work wonders.

Two, as political philosopher Hannah Arendt has so precisely said, it is not power but merely obedience that flows from the barrel of a gun.

True political power involves participation and engagement, not fear-driven obedience.

Three, the more commonly this ideal is neglected the greater the significance of every tiny way in which it is practised or reaffirmed in principle.

An incident at a polling booth in the 1989 Lok Sabha elections may serve as an illustration. Veteran socialist activist Vijay Pratap was on duty at a booth as part of Rajmohan Gandhi's team. The latter was contesting the Rae Bareilly Lok Sabha seat as the combined opposition candidate, challenging the sitting MP and then prime minister, Rajiv Gandhi.

At one point there was an altercation and some of the Congress party workers began beating one of Pratap's colleagues. The man fell to the ground. Acting out of a combination of instinct and training, Pratap flung himself protectively on top of the fallen man, simultaneously shouting out: *'Hamla chahe jaisa hoga, haath hamara nahin uthega'*. Years later, Pratap recalled that those doing the beating seemed so stunned by this form of resistance that they stopped.

The annals of non-violent political action from across the world are filled with accounts of this kind. Of course, not everyone on this path lives to tell their tale. But the death toll seems to be much higher among those who choose the gun as their companion in political action.

A piece of insight from Prof. Anil Gupta's Ahimsa Conversation might help to locate this striving in our immediate context. Gupta taught at IIM Ahmedabad for over three and a half decades and has a nuanced understanding of everyday life in India since he has traversed much of the country on foot during his scores of Shodh Yatras.

Yes, violence has increased in the past few decades, says Gupta. But if we focus only on this dark dimension, then we will not be able to find within ourselves the strength, courage and confidence to see that there is also still goodness and compassion in our society and that we can build upon that to rejuvenate our *samaj*.

The 50th anniversary of the JP movement is worth celebrating not merely for the impact it once had on the Indian polity but because its rallying call inspires us to cultivate inner strength and staying power to challenge not just violence but cynicism. ■

The History for Peace project's 2023 conference from August 3-5 in Kolkata, is on the theme "The Idea of Justice" (www.historyforpeace.org). Rajni Bakshi is the founder of YouTube channel Ahimsa Conversations

Adding up rail accidents

BHARAT DOGRA

THE recent horrible train accident in Odisha is a grim reminder of the urgency of improving the safety of our trains. While all European Union countries combined recorded 683 deaths from railway accidents in 2021, India recorded 24 times this number with a figure of 16,431 deaths in 2021.

The year 2021 witnessed lower than average accidents as traffic was just recovering from the shutdown due to the pandemic the previous year. In a more normal year, judging from average figures for the past decade, about 24,000 people die in railway accidents every year in India, according to official data.

The number of injured persons has generally been very low, at just one injured per 10 railway accidents. In 2021 there were only about 1,800 injured people for about 18,000 accidents.

How can 10 railway accidents together result in only one injured person? In the case of the European Union the number of 'seriously injured' is more or less the same while in the US the recorded number of injured is much higher.

Following similar trends, the number of injured is likely to be several times more than what has been recorded in official data in India. In the case of road accidents too, the number of injured has been highly underestimated in official data.

The data for railway crossing accidents shows that in 2021 there were 1,505 railway accidents in which 1,807 people died and 148 were injured. Here, again, it is clear that the actual number of injured would be substantially higher.

In addition, reliable estimates are needed for accidents taking place on railway platforms. In large railway stations, big crowds on platforms often result in people being injured, particularly on staircases.

Diplomacy, society...

Continued from page 20

to the spread of consulates in major cities is the rising profile of foreign diplomats in the social life of cities other than New Delhi. Consuls general in cities like Bengaluru, Chennai, Hyderabad, Kolkata and Mumbai are actively engaged in giving public lectures, funding seminars and engaging civil society in a variety of ways. This, too, is a new phenomenon.

One high-risk situation often occurs when the platform for a departing train is changed just before departure time, leading to a huge surge of people — with the probability of stampedes increasing significantly.

On the other hand, some of the smallest stations which might be under-equipped in terms of facilities have their own problems and sometimes, particularly at night, it becomes risky to either board or alight from a train, as trains stop for very short durations. It is really difficult to board or alight with luggage, which sometimes results in passengers being injured. Even minor assistance can help to protect several passengers, particularly the elderly.



Railway budgets should spend much more on safety

Nearly two-thirds of deaths due to railway accidents result from falls and people getting run over. One can understand that most of these people come from very poor backgrounds. On the Mumbai Metropolitan Area train tracks there were 2,507 deaths and 2,155 injuries in 2022, according to official data. About 1,100 deaths were caused while crossing the railway tracks and about 700 were due to falls from running trains. Such victims are mostly from economically weaker sections.

A great human tragedy occurred in 2020 when, due to the Covid pandemic, very few passenger trains were running — nearly 8,700 poor people died while walking along rail tracks. They were mostly migrant workers and

their families, including children, walking back to their homes in distant villages, whose reflexes had probably been slowed by hunger, thirst and fatigue.

However, this official data might be underestimated as the number of injured was only one-tenth of fatalities.

Injuries from railway accidents can be quite severe. Clearly, there is an urgent need to accord more attention to free treatment and rehabilitation of all injured, apart from providing financial compensation.

Railway budgets should have much more provision for safety and for taking care of the needs of ordinary passengers as many accidents

result from overcrowding of trains. Budgets should increase provisions for safety aspects including proper maintenance of railway tracks. Those regions which report high accident rates should be monitored and special steps should be taken to improve safety.

The maximum number of railway accidents — about 19 percent of the all-India figure — is reported from Maharashtra while the most railway crossing accidents take place in Uttar Pradesh.

In Mumbai, a number of suggestions have been implemented to prevent deaths resulting from hurried crossing of railway tracks and these have resulted in some

reduction, but the wider challenge here is of shortage of trains — resulting in overcrowding and a rush to board a particular train.

Trains used more by migrant workers have seen frequent overcrowding, particularly during the seasonal rush, and these deserve special attention.

Generally, there is a huge surge of sympathy in the immediate aftermath of major accidents, but afterwards, the long-term needs of medical care and rehabilitation are neglected. The railway authorities should pay more attention to making the railways safer and setting up a system of emergency healthcare. ■

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retired diplomats have been able to secure visiting professorships at institutions in countries they have served in. Some retired diplomats have been lobbyists for business groups, even defence industry lobbies. Of course, it is now commonplace for children of diplomats to not just secure overseas education but also employment and, eventually, citizenship. ■

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Ramesh K.V., master Yakshagana puppeteer, with his pantheon of vibrant puppets

Puppets wait for their museum

A personal dream runs aground

SHREE PADRE

ONE hundred puppets from the Epics are waiting patiently for their museum to open. Their creator, 58-year-old Ramesh K.V., master Yakshagana puppeteer, has run out of money.

The museum is his labour of love and has, so far, been financed with savings and loans. The building is up in the Pilikunje area of Kasaragod in Kerala, but it is not enough. Much more needs to be done to make it habitable for his puppets and, with their expressive faces, they are biding their time.

Ramesh sits despondently on a sofa in his three-storied house. "I really don't know what to do next," he says. "When we started performing 40 years ago this art was already declining. Yes, about 100 to 125 years ago puppet shows were popular and we had more than 50 Yakshagana puppet teams. By the 1980s this number declined to eight and now there are just two."

Yakshagana bayalata is a traditional form of theatre which developed in the coastal regions of Karnataka and Kasaragod in Kerala. It combines dance, music, dialogue and stage techniques with a unique flourish. Yakshagana refers to nature spirits (*yaksha*) and people (*gana*).

In Yakshagana bayalata, actors play mythological roles. The Yakshagana puppet show is a miniature form of Yakshagana bayalata. From behind small screens, *sutradharis* (meaning the one who holds the strings) make

the puppets enact the same scenes.

The two teams that still hold performances are Ramesh's Gopalakrishna Yakshagana Bombayata Sangha (GYBS) which adheres to the Thenku thittu or southern style of Yakshagana and Kogga Kamath's team, Uppinakudru, which performs the Badagu thittu or northern style. "If both wind up, then it is the end of this art form," says Ramesh.

It was this thought that haunted him. After wracking his brains for some time, the idea of a museum struck him. He spent all his savings plus borrowings from friends and family to build the museum. All of 4,500 square feet, it was completed in 2013. The first floor has an exhibition hall where 50 puppets are being displayed right now. His dream is to house 1,000 puppets. It has an office, a library and a guest room for researchers. The second floor has an auditorium and a stage.

Why 1,000 puppets? "Because there is a lot of variation in each role. Even the woman's role or the servant's role in our puppet shows has dozens of variations," he says. "Veteran Yakshagana artistes have promised to guide me in creating all kinds of puppets made from soft wood."

In the old days, Yakshagana bayalata puppet shows used to start at 10 pm and carry on until the first rays of the sun highlighted their tent. Coastal Karnataka used to have over a dozen Yakshagana bayalata teams who performed every night for half the year. Some temples even owned one or more Yakshagana troupes. Then there was Harake bayalata,



performed by devotees when their prayers at a temple were answered.

Similarly, Yakshagana puppet shows used to run two and a half hours. But all this glory is now history. Yakshagana puppet shows are rare and confined to an hour and sometimes just to 30 minutes.

Despite this, until the pandemic, Ramesh's GYBS used to be invited to perform here and there but post-Covid even those rare invitations stopped, making it difficult for him to repay his bank loans.

"String puppetry is tough and given a lot of importance globally. Out of six strings, even if one gets twisted during a performance, or if there is a single wrong move, it is noticeable. It is really important to conserve this rare art form," says Dr Vayalkara Jayarajan, folk researcher and founder of the Folkland International Centre for Folklore and Culture, based in Payyanur, Kerala.

STARTING EARLY Ramesh says it was his father, K. Venkatakrishnayya, owner of a printing press and an art aficionado, who encouraged him to become a traditional puppeteer. Ramesh was the eldest of his six children. "My father groomed me and my three brothers as artists," he says. When he was in Class 6, his father gifted him a book on Karnataka's puppet shows which captivated him. Two years later he showed Ramesh how to make a clay model of Lord Ganesha.

After that, there was no stopping Ramesh. He began making puppets using branches of trees and coconut shells. His sister stitched the costumes. His turning point came in 1980 when he went to watch Kogga Kamath's Yakshagana puppet show. Ramesh was casually strolling around their camp when he came to know they needed a harmonium player. Ramesh volunteered at once. He learnt how *sutradharis* move the puppets and how to enact Yakshagana roles from Yakshagana actors.

Ramesh's biggest strength came from his family who joined enthusiastically. "We formed a sort of family team, me, my three younger brothers and four cousins. With the help of recorded songs, we could easily hold a performance," recalls Ramesh. Whether it was costumes, music, props or travel, it was his close-knit family that delivered.

His sisters, Geetha and Anitha, have always stitched and designed the puppets' costumes. Dr K.V. Omprakash, his younger brother, works at the Hassan Institute of Medical Sciences and is also an expert puppeteer



Ramesh's troupe has earned accolades for India



The space for the museum is ready

who joins the troupe occasionally. Another brother, K.V. Shrivathsa, is an instrumentation engineer, well-versed in *bhagavathige* (mythological songs) and in playing the *chenda*. Geetha's husband, P.K. Venugopal, handled administration until he passed away in 2007.

In 1981, Ramesh's troupe performed for the first time. It was an in-house show at the behest of his relatives. "We thought we'd do just this one show," says Ramesh. But the performance was rivetting, and everybody enjoyed it.

Besides, word spread. Ramesh began receiving invitations to perform from nearby temples and schools. A few VIPs attended the shows and were full of praise. The all-round appreciation encouraged Ramesh to start GYBS.

His younger brothers were still in school. "I was obsessed with puppet shows. The sounds of the *chende* and the *maddale* of Yakshagana would be ringing in my mind. I thought, if I continue with this hobby, it will affect the education of my brothers. But my father was enthusiastic too. We had acute financial difficulties at that time. All this was overcome by my father's will power, sincerity and good contacts."

In the initial years the troupe included a *bhagavath* or a singer who narrated the story in poetry form, and two helper artists. This added to their expenditure. So, after a few years the troupe began using recorded songs and bought a large vehicle.

Although GYBS is located on the Kerala border, the biggest demand for their shows came from Karnataka where it is an ancient art form, across the coastal belt up to Kasaragod. They also held shows in Delhi, Kolkata, Sikkim, Mumbai and several other places where this art form was unknown. They used to hold around 15 to 20 shows every year before the pandemic.

Despite their professionalism, earnings continued to be meagre. "We spent more than what we earned," confesses Ramesh.

In 2010, when their troupe was selected to represent India at the International Puppet Festival in Czechoslovakia, they didn't have money for travel and other expenses. They needed ₹2.5 lakh. The Kerala government didn't help, the Karnataka government promised help but started taking its own time.

Finally, it was Sudha Murthy of Infosys who gave ₹1 lakh while Dr

Continued on page 26

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Veerendra Heggade of Dharmasthala contributed another ₹25,000. The team somehow managed to raise the rest and made it to Czechoslovakia. They returned with plaudits and an international award.

Their other performances abroad in Lahore, Paris and in China were thumping successes. Researchers of puppet shows came to Kasaragod to gain more knowledge about their puppet show and people turned up to learn puppetry from them. Some foreign museums bought their puppets.

MAKING A PUPPET Despite no formal training, Ramesh makes beautiful eye-catching puppets. He uses a lathe now but it still takes him months to make a puppet out of soft wood. The puppets don't last long.

"What we have right now is the fifth generation of puppets. In our long journey, we must have abandoned about 500 puppets," says Ramesh. For their proposed museum, they are planning to display puppets made of teak so that they last for 500 years, quips Ramesh.

The idea of building a puppet museum was inspired by a child's innocent query. In 2010, sponsored by Sudha Murthy, GYBS decided to celebrate its 30th anniversary by performing free puppet shows for children in 30 schools in the four districts of Kasaragod, Dakshina Kannada, Udipi and Chikkamagaluru.

The programme was called Chinnara Anganakke Puththali Yatre or 'golden tour to children's arena'.

After each performance, the team would show children the puppets and explain how they were made and deployed with just six strings each. They found the children engrossed in the demonstration. At the end, they would invite students to come up and try their hand at puppetry. This was the best part for the children. They participated excitedly.

At the end of one such show, a shy student stayed back in the hall. They asked him what he wanted and he said: "Can you teach me how to play these toys the way you do?"

"I was really touched," says Ramesh. "I realized that our art form does have promise, that there are youngsters who are fascinated by it and can take it forward. After thinking, this idea of a puppet museum struck me."

Ramesh's old house was dilapidated. Instead of spending ₹5-6 lakh to repair it, constructing a new one would be wiser, he thought. "That house will be for the family. But where will the puppets go?" he asked himself. So, he built a three-storied house with a museum for the puppets. It has cost him around Rs 1.5 crore.

To make one puppet takes him a month and costs ₹30,000. "I welcome well-wishers to sponsor some puppets for the museum. We will display them along with the donor's name," he says. ■

Contact: Gopalakrishna Yakshagana Bombeyata Sangha (Ramesh KV) - 94467 72277

RANDOM SHELF HELP

Freedom as it came

CIVIL SOCIETY REVIEWS

WHEN Independence Day arrives each year, how should the spirit of the freedom struggle be remembered? There are speeches, flag-hoisting ceremonies and parades aplenty. But how does one rise above the noise and, in a rapidly changing world, remain connected to the values and commitment of a generation that put an end to colonial rule and, through diverse efforts, fashioned a modern Constitution and republic?

For present-day Indians to cherish and protect the liberties they now have and move strongly ahead, it is important for them not just to symbolically acknowledge independence, but to also be imbued with the sacrifices and struggles, the hopes and aspirations that were invested in a democracy that was expected to hold its own in the world.

A museum here or there or history textbooks caught up in cyclical controversies don't serve this end. Remembering the past should be a much bigger project that involves everyone in an unfettered search. It should bring events and people alive and ensure they remain memorable. It is in such stories that the efforts and experiences which finally shaped and became the foundation of a progressive nation will be found.

Seen thus, Independence becomes more meaningful and a daily celebration of what everyone stands for. It is more inclusive as well — whether looking back on the past or recognizing what ordinary folks now strive for. It goes from mere ceremony to being work in progress, which is the better way of keeping future generations engaged.

Researchers and journalists have an important role to play. They have the skills to go far and wide and deep at the same time. Good journalists know how to engage with their subjects and their audiences.

Veena Venugopal has shown what is possible with her outstanding book, *Independence Day: A People's History*. She has identified and interviewed people across India who saw August 15, 1947. They narrate to her their personal stories — each unique because the stories are primarily about themselves. But the narration is also set on the larger canvas of

what happened on that day in the country and particularly where they were.

The stories reveal the way the leaders of the freedom struggle were revered, the vastness of the country and yet its binding unity, the respect the media enjoyed and the important role it played in informing people, the challenges of being employed in government but having siblings and children fighting British rule, the heartbreak of a communal divide and the resulting waves of brutal violence.

Venugopal has used oral history deftly to give us a page-turner. The accounts flow smoothly, but are also intricate with many layers. They are not too long and not too short. Clearly, she has had to work with her subjects, helping them piece together their recollections and fill in the gaps. Selecting her subjects was important. They couldn't be too young at the time of Independence or so old now that they wouldn't be lucid. Discovering them was obviously not easy, but she has mostly made good choices.

The book's strength is that the narrators are mostly unknown. The usual movers and shakers on Independence would have been complete bores. So, here are people who have something to say which you are not likely to have heard before. It also means that you can begin by reading any one of the 15 stories. There are surprises aplenty.

The first story is of Tarun Kumar Roy who was in Krishnagar. Born in 1929, he was 18 years old at the time of Independence. Krishnagar is currently in the Nadia district of West Bengal. But when Partition was taking place, it was not clear whether Krishnagar would be in East Pakistan or India.

Roy and his family were among a large number of Hindu families in the Hindu-majority Krishnagar who waited anxiously to know where the dividing line would fall. There was confusion till the end. Cyril Radcliffe's report was with Mountbatten and a decision was awaited. But on August 15 it seemed that Krishnagar would be in East Pakistan and the Pakistan flag was hoisted. Days later at midnight on August 18, it came to be known that Krishnagar was, in fact, in West Bengal. The next day the Indian flag was hoisted.



Veena Venugopal

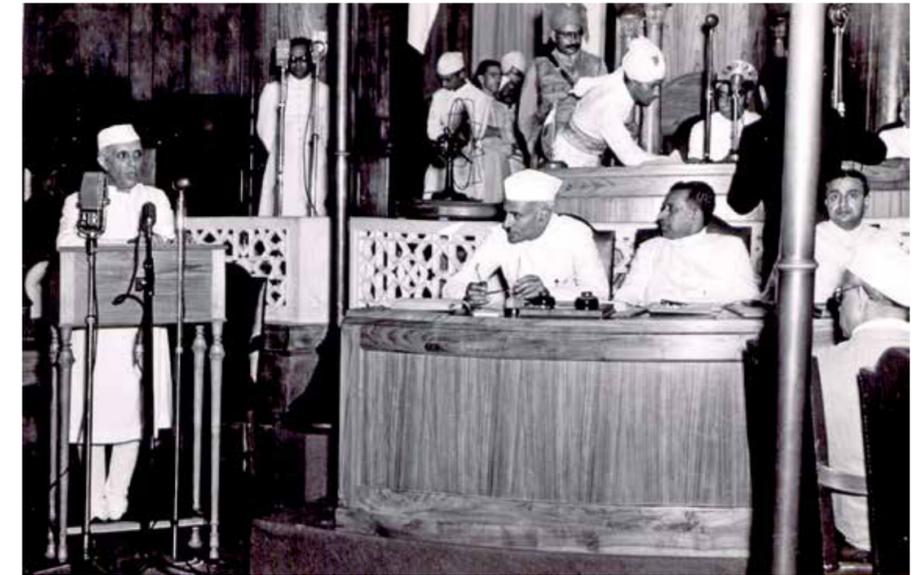
So it was that Independence Day was celebrated twice in Krishnagar. On August 15, when Krishnagar was thought to be in Pakistan, the local Congress leader hoisted the Pakistan flag and Hindus like Roy made sure they were present at the ceremony. Everyone shouted, "Pakistan Zindabad."

When it came to the hoisting of the Indian flag on August 19 it was done by the Muslim League MLA and the Muslim district magistrate Naseeruddin, handed over charge to a Hindu magistrate and left for Kushtia which was in East Pakistan. Everyone said, "Jai Hind."

Those were stressful times. Roy remembers the communal rivalries and tensions. Partition and the run-up to it divided people in more ways than geography. Rumours abounded and old associations became strained or fell apart. Independence was, of course, welcome and was better than being under the British, but in Krishnagar Hindus braced themselves for being free in a Muslim-dominated East Pakistan. Partition didn't make anyone happy.

The stories are in parts brilliant in the way they take the reader to 1947. Here is a paragraph from Roy's account: "At midnight I stood in front of a radio shop. There was a huge crowd. We stood there, all of us, and heard Nehru speak the now famous words — our tryst with destiny — and that is how I knew power had changed hands, and we were citizens of the new nation of East Pakistan. Nobody felt happy about this. In the crowd there were a significant number of Muslims and they didn't look happy either."

The stories reveal a lot about the social milieu. The status of women, for instance, in Ambika Menon's story. Her father was a municipal school headmaster who went from Ooty to Dehradun. The family home was in Palakkad in Kerala where she felt the pulse of



The book's strength is that the narrators are mostly unknown. They have something to say that you have not heard before.

the freedom movement in discussions within the family. She ended up being the only girl studying at Doon School because her father was a teacher there. She wanted to study medicine and be a doctor, but her grandmother didn't allow her. She went on to teach in schools, but there was no real independence. Finally, there was marriage and after 32 years divorce — after which she began discovering a life she could call her own.

The stories tend to meander as is only to be expected. They aren't just focused on Independence Day. But they succeed in recreating the setting and mood. They move between the very personal and the larger

canvas of the freedom struggle and impending independence.

An interesting paragraph in Menon's story reads: "The freedom struggle was a strong presence in my childhood. In Kerala, the vernacular press — *Mathrubhumi* and *Manorama* — play a huge part in the state's readership.... There were long and passionate arguments about all the topics of the day. Often there were critiques of the movement. You couldn't help but hear these. All the great heroes — Gandhi, Nehru, Patel — were household names for my brother and me. It must have been the same for other kids during that time."

Children of today don't have the benefit of such exposure. They can't because families are smaller and the generation that knew about the freedom struggle has passed. These are also cynical, colder and less idealistic times. Bringing back that old spirit is important for India, but the question is how. Oral histories like these are a form of storytelling that works, but much more needs to be done for future generations to feel more rooted. ■

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READ?

Civil Society is going places...

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Civil Society

Get away from it all

SUSHEELA NAIR

IF you are seeking to unwind and calm your nerves, jangled by urban living, head to Kshemavana, a wellness and naturopathy retreat far from the madding crowds, din and bustle of Bengaluru.

Kshemavana (meaning forest of well-being) was conceived and started by the well-known Sri Dharmasthala Manjunatheswara Educational (SDME) Society.

The lush greenery that greets you when you enter the premises is a soothing contrast to the blaring horns outside. As I was ushered into Garuda, the administrative block, I was charmed by the traditional wooden carved canopy, the entrance courts with open layouts, the indoor trees and the Garuda installation.

The installation, as its name suggests, is an ode to the beings of the sky. It is the first place of interaction at the property. It houses the OPD, Pravesha, the administrative block, and the treatment areas. Consultation rooms, breaking away from the typical doctor's desk, have a round table for informal interactions.

Designed by prominent architect Mahesh Diophode and conceptualized by reputed designer Ayush Kasliwal, the architecture is indicative of ancient *vaastu* principles with colours, designs, and structures inspired by Kurma the turtle, Nandi the bull and Garuda the eagle, bringing together the elements of the sea, earth and sky.

The buildings are interspersed with courtyards, atriums and open screens, making the most of the pleasant weather. The spaces are mainly categorized into two blocks — public and residential. The Nandi block has dining areas that offer customized diets and over 25 therapy units.

The Kurma building is a masterpiece. It is an ode to all the water creatures. The building houses the pool (called Vari), a modern gym, Garadi (a yoga studio), Bodhi (a library), and Dhyana (a meditation hall), at the ground level. On the upper level is Siddha, an airy yoga hall-cum-auditorium.

The pool treatment area is designed to give the feel of a water world. The colour palette with elements such as a hanging boat (sourced from Dharmasthala's private collection) makes this place come alive. The Meditation Room, in a cave-like structure with micro concrete finishing, is a sanctum for reflection with acoustics designed for soft reverberation.

Kshemavana offers therapies and treatments to help balance one's inner energy and heal the

mind and body. The expansive property is designed to make you experience calm while absorbing nature all around.

Spread over 20 acres, the verdant retreat is a combination of exquisite spaces and tranquility, and has been created without disturbing nature. Ambling around in this pastoral paradise, I saw a profusion of trees, plants, herbs, flowers, fruits and vegetables which are used for the treatments as well as for the vegetarian cuisine.

On our arrival at the resort, multi-hued flowers were in bloom in clusters. Along with



Kurma, the Turtle House



The swimming pool with the overhanging boat

native species, the use of non-invasive exotic plants attracts beneficial insects and wildlife — offering additional colour and year-round interest. The Temple Plaza is a gentle intervention that builds upon the existing brick kiln structures to create a sacred and social space. After a stroll, as I relaxed on the stepped layout which doubles as seating, I could sense positive vibes. In the distance peacocks strutted around, butterflies flitted from one flowering plant to another, and birds chirped.

NUTRITION AND HEALING One has to follow a strict regimen at Kshemavana and each person has a prescribed diet. Meals are vegetarian, and smoking and alcohol are

prohibited. Food served ranges from soups and salads to just fruit, and boiled or raw vegetables. The day starts with fresh juices and for breakfast there are smoothies with coconut milk and flaxseed or fruit bowls with coconut milk plus soaked dry fruits. One is advised to avoid tea, coffee, white flour, sugar, milk, refined food, bakery products, fried stuff and refined oil.

The patient's daily routine and diet are decided, depending on his or her ailment. The therapies and treatments offered are personalized to help balance inner energy and heal the mind and body.

"Kshemavana is a lifestyle that evolves through consultation, integrity in treatment and a mind-shift in living. We offer a lifestyle of health and sustainability. Therapy sessions are customized and designed on the five pillars of well-being: mind-body medicine, sleep medicine, nutritional medicine, energy medicine, and gut medicine," explains Dr Narendra Shetty, chief wellness consultant.

The healing sessions are customized to ensure optimal benefit during the course of the stay. The therapies are drawn from ancient Indian healing sciences of naturopathy and yoga. Meditation has taught people that the body's innate healing tendencies are switched on and these are combined with deep relaxation techniques, remedial breathing, physical rehabilitation, holistic nutrition, and much more where nature is one's partner in healing.

Rest and relaxation is the only agenda at Kshemavana. One can feel aches and pains melt away as the nimble fingers of the expert masseurs knead away body tension and put an end to insomnia. The massages are complemented by steam baths, showers, hot packs, showers, yoga exercises and meditation. The gamut of

treatment packages includes therapies like acupuncture, mud therapy, hydrotherapy, counselling, physiotherapy, and nutrition, not only to treat medical conditions but also to build immunity, improve blood circulation, purge toxins, help shed excess weight, and promote general health and well-being.

With the relaxing treatments and strict diets, one is ensured that there is very little that cannot be conquered, including ailments. In all, it is a back-to-the-basics return to nature. By the end of the wellness programme, one is certain to learn more about how to achieve optimal health on all levels: physical, psychological, and spiritual. ■

Contact: Kshemavana - info@kshemavana.com

Small producers and artisans need help to reach out to sell their wonderful products. They can't advertise and they don't know to access retail networks. *Civil Society* happily provides information about what they have on offer, their skills and how you can get to them.

FABRIC FROM PLANTS AND FLOWERS



Anuradha Singh is an expert in eco-printing, a method by which she extracts natural dye from a plant and transfers it onto fabrics like silk and cotton. Wispy stoles, attractive cushions and table runners are made from the fabric Anuradha dyes.

She creates botanical or eco-prints, going on long walks in her neighbourhood and foraging for a variety of plants. Dyes are extracted from those plants and then patterned onto fabric in her studio. So each piece is unique. All are prints of leaves and flowers, created by hand. Only natural fibres are used and there is zero waste. "Each leaf, fabric or colour used has a journey attached to it. To create with natural resources adds a deeper connection to the art," she says.

Ecological dyeing is a process by which dyes are produced from fruits, flowers and plants for clothing, linen and even paper. "It's an alchemy of natural dyes," according to Anuradha.

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Email: mailbox4anuradha@gmail.com



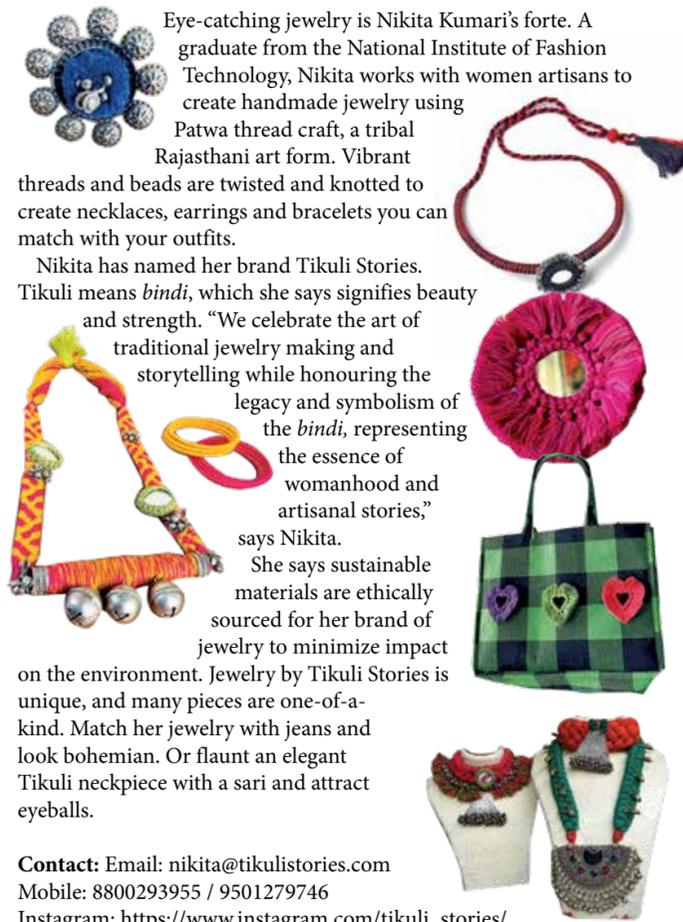
MAGIC WITH BEADS AND THREAD

Eye-catching jewelry is Nikita Kumari's forte. A graduate from the National Institute of Fashion Technology, Nikita works with women artisans to create handmade jewelry using Patwa thread craft, a tribal Rajasthani art form. Vibrant threads and beads are twisted and knotted to create necklaces, earrings and bracelets you can match with your outfits.

Nikita has named her brand Tikuli Stories. Tikuli means *bindi*, which she says signifies beauty and strength. "We celebrate the art of traditional jewelry making and storytelling while honouring the legacy and symbolism of the *bindi*, representing the essence of womanhood and artisanal stories," says Nikita.

She says sustainable materials are ethically sourced for her brand of jewelry to minimize impact on the environment. Jewelry by Tikuli Stories is unique, and many pieces are one-of-a-kind. Match her jewelry with jeans and look bohemian. Or flaunt an elegant Tikuli necklace with a sari and attract eyeballs.

Contact: Email: nikita@tikulistories.com
Mobile: 8800293955 / 9501279746
Instagram: https://www.instagram.com/tikuli_stories/



PURE AND HEALTHY OILS

Gyros Farms makes a range of oils which are pure and undiluted, using traditional techniques of cold pressing. Founded by Yogesh Tyagi, an engineer, and Richa Tyagi, a biologist, Gyros Farms works with farmers in Uttar Pradesh and Rajasthan to buy nuts and seeds, paying, they say, more than market rates. The traditional method of extracting oil involved using a stone base and wooden plungers and processing oils at room temperature so that there is no loss of nutrients. No plastic is used in packaging. Gyros takes you seamlessly from 'seed to spoon'.

"Our products are a manifestation of organic utility, rustic heritage and modern science," says Richa. They also say they have undertaken research on seed quality and extraction methods.

You can buy black or yellow mustard oil, groundnut oil, sesame oil and coconut oil from 500 ml to 15 litres. A 500 ml bottle of groundnut oil costs ₹299.

Contact: Yogesh Tyagi, mobile: 91685 27666
Website: https://www.gyros.farm/
Facebook: https://www.facebook.com/gyrosfarm



So you want to do your bit but don't know where to begin? Allow us to help you with a list especially curated for *Civil Society's* readers. These are groups we know to be doing good work. And they are across India. You can volunteer or donate or just spread the word about them.

GIVING PEACE A CHANCE

 History for Peace is a network of educators and members of civil society from across South Asia. History for Peace project, anchored in Kolkata, serves as a platform for discussion, debate and the exchange of ideas pertaining to teaching and learning of history for peace and mutual understanding. The objectives of the project are: exploring multi, inter-disciplinary and creative approaches with emphasis on the arts; developing and collating resources; addressing bias and prejudice; promoting initiatives and exchange of ideas across South Asia and teacher development.

History for Peace conducts an annual conference as well as shorter talks and workshops through the year. In these trying times the project is working towards inspiring teachers to look beyond textbooks and bring pertinent conversations into high school classrooms.

Your support will go a long way towards spreading their work across the country. To contribute please write to info@historyforpeace.pw

BASIC HEALTHCARE WHERE IT MATTERS

 What do people in remote and underserved locations do for primary healthcare services? Getting to a facility often means forgoing daily wages and travelling long distances. There are also cultural and linguistic divides.

But what if healthcare could be locally available, accessible and low-cost? Six AMRIT Clinics in south Rajasthan seek to achieve just this. Set up by Basic HealthCare Services, a non-profit, they are proof of the concept that small local facilities are effective.

AMRIT Clinics are located

within the community and run by empowering nurses and local health workers who are supervised by a physician. Telemedicine is also used. The doctor visits a clinic once a week but is available for consultation 24x7. Each clinic serves a population of 90,000.

Outreach services include antenatal care, postnatal care of mothers and newborns, follow-up of chronic patients, and community education. Social contracts with private hospitals enable referral care. Patients pay small user-fees for clinical services. You can donate to Basic Health Care Services or volunteer with them.

Visit them online at bhs.org.in or call +918003696391

BANISH DRUGS AND COUNSEL ADDICTS

 With many years of experience SPYM (Society for Promotion of Youth and Masses) provides services in substance use, de-addiction and prevention. They started their first Drug Treatment Centre in 1985. Since 2010, SPYM has also been the largest shelter management organization in Delhi, taking in homeless children, women, men and senior citizens on a daily basis. They run 65 shelters in the city along with drug de-addiction centres for juveniles, adults and the homeless. SPYM works as the Technical Support Unit of National AIDS Control Organization. You can volunteer with SPYM or donate to them. <https://spym.org> | info@spym.org | 011-41003872

EMPOWER WOMEN, FIGHT FOR CHILD RIGHTS

 Based in Ahmedabad, the Friends Care Foundation's forte is empowerment of women and child rights. The foundation supports orphanages, education, the elderly, as well as relief and

medical programmes.

They raise funds for patients in V.S. Hospital and Civil Hospital in Ahmedabad. Friends Care Foundation also organizes distribution drives for ration kits, footwear, clothes, sanitary pads and food. They are currently running a fundraiser to aid widows in Ahmedabad and for their Covid relief programmes. You can volunteer for one of their projects for women, children, or for medical access. You can also donate to their efforts.

www.friendscarefoundation.org
care@friendscarefoundation.org
+91-7600999977

PITCH IN FOR BETTER COMMUNITY HEALTH

 Nada India Foundation works to end drug addiction and prevent non-communicable diseases (NCDs). Its aim is to enhance community health and well-being. Set up in 1999, Nada runs the Nada NCD Prevention Network which consists of grassroots organizations working on NCD prevention and risk factors. Nada India organizes workshops on social work intervention for the prevention and control of NCDs. They help rehabilitate people with addiction issues in Delhi-NCR through various events, workshops and also marathons. They also work on skill-building and sensitization.

Nada India undertakes research as well. They have researched the efficacy of auricular acupuncture as well as issues such as child rights, substance abuse, and adolescent health. You can donate to their efforts or volunteer with them.

<https://www.nadaindia.info>
nadaindia@gmail.com | +91 - 9810594544

BRIDGING GAPS IN BENGAL'S VILLAGES

 AHEAD (Addressing Hunger, Empowerment And Development) is engaged in

sustainable rural development. The NGO, founded in 2008 and based in Kolkata, works in 12 out of 18 districts in West Bengal and in one district each in Jharkhand and Odisha.

AHEAD partners panchayats and zilla parishads and engages village communities in implementing its programmes. It also helps local village institutions to provide last-mile support to government programmes. AHEAD trains villagers in growing food and improving nutrition through farming in homesteads or on fallow land. It also offers training in farm-based livelihoods.

AHEAD has an after-school programme which teaches students how to create community-based livelihoods. Teachers are also trained in using creative means to enliven textbook-based learning. You can donate or volunteer with AHEAD.

<http://www.aheadinitiatives.in>
ahead@aheadinitiatives.in
+91-033-40670369

SUPPORT A CHILD IN NEED OF HELP

 Ray of Hope was set up as a social service organization in Hyderabad by eight engineers from the IITs and IIMs. They aid and support Pocharam village in Telangana and have helped 200 orphaned children with housing, schooling, medical and recreational facilities. They also work with visually-impaired children to facilitate their education.

Through their Child Sponsorship Initiative Scheme, an individual or group can support a child financially to pay for tuition, housing, hearing aids and speech therapy. Or well-wishers can spread the word. They have plans to build a school in Pocharam village.

You can donate to their efforts or sponsor a child through their sponsorship initiative.

<http://rayofhope.in>



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TATA STEEL FOUNDATION

Skilling programmes at the **Foundation**, are poised to **Reimagine** and unlock potential

Our journey of partnering the nation's aim to build a technically skilled youth base, is now in its 10th year. Our Industrial Technical Institutes of Tamar (from 2012) and Jagannathpur (from 2017) have ushered a rigor in this vocation among rural youth and in particular, girls from tribal belt in Jharkhand. The need is strong, and so is the appetite to create more bases (the third at Chandil, from 2022), to provide many more trained hands for a resurgent India.

**More than 650 youths
trained and the
journey continues!**

