

Civil Society



PRESCHOOL MAKEOVER

How better design is making a difference to anganwadis

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Civil Society
EVERYONE IS SOMEONE

**WHERE
ARE WE
BEING
READ?**

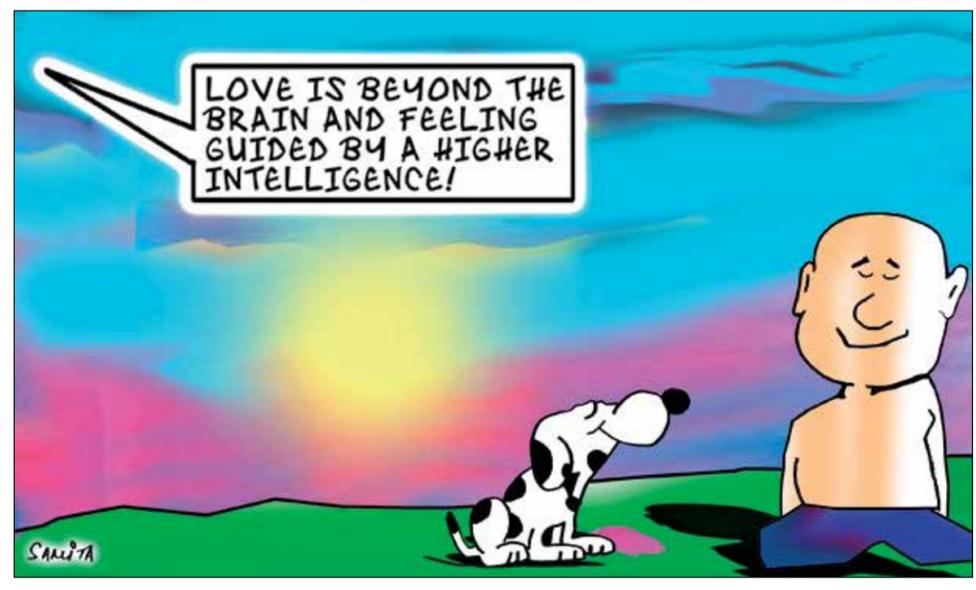
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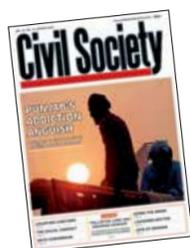
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IN THE LIGHT

SAMITA RATHOR



LETTERS



Punjab unravelled

As part of the Hindu Punjabi community with ancestors who moved to the Indian side of Punjab at the time of Partition, Punjab and its way of life have always had deep impact on most of our psyche. There is a close connect which I felt with the culture, the Holy Book and the faith of Sikhism.

As a teenager in the 1990s, reading an article in *India Today* about cocaine addiction prompted me to ask my physician father how one deals with addiction.

Your cover story, 'Punjab's addiction anguish', helped me pick up Dr Anirudh Kala's book. It felt like a deep dive into Punjab, its culture, its faith, its problems and the issues around addiction. How did it all begin, what are the roots of this addiction epidemic, and how did an entire generation of youth, which could have propelled Punjab's culture and its

land to a new high, get wasted metaphorically and physically.

A good, engaging and informative read.

Dr Bhuvan Chugh

Spreading care

Thanks for the opening interview with Dr Gayatri Palat, 'Palliative care is integral to a caring health system.' Congratulations to her for being able to spread the reach of palliative care to primary healthcare level. What a wonderful impact that must be having on the people of Telangana. Fortunately, she has a very farsighted and enlightened state healthcare ministry supporting her. They need to be applauded too.

Pheroza Bilimoria

Cheetah puzzle

As we read this article, 'Making a tally of cheetahs, dead and alive,' the sixth cheetah died. But I guess we will wait till 10 are dead—since 50 percent of deaths is an accepted failure. This brings me to the point that you have pointed out in your story, why do this project at all? It seems no different from what the maharajas of yore used to do.

Salone

Project Cheetah is a vanity project. On the other hand, why don't we think of translocating a small population of Gir lions from Gujarat to Kuno? In African countries, do they co-exist with cheetahs?

Kannan Vaithianathan

This is a case study of how unquestionable worship and salute of the wishes of the top guy leave everything in disarray. Every part of this story wrecks of misplaced priorities and pandering to ego and hubris. It makes one wince in agony.

Rosemary Viswanath

Drain woes

Sanjaya Baru's column, 'Down the drain' was excellent. Most highway engineers do not understand the value of surface drainage and do not provide enough channels to drain massive overflow of rainfall, just to save costs. A major reason for Delhi's floods is the construction of narrow bridges, creating bottlenecks and reducing the flow of water.

Rajesh Kaushik

From practical experience I can say that cross drainage is a big bother. It slows down progress which is always measured in length of road created per unit time. The effort and time to create culverts and minor bridges is never appreciated. Also, cross drainage needs to be sited very precisely and the landowner downstream will invariably object.

Rohit Kakkar

Worker rights

I read your piece, 'Companies pledge better worker rights'. It had good information and I think it is new mindsets which will help.

Lekha

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Design matters

THERE is a lot of recent policy talk on preschool development. For the majority of India's children the anganwadi is preschool. The country has some 1.4 million anganwadis, but they are in a sorry state. Run as they are, they lack the capacity to serve the needs of a child's early development. It wasn't meant to be like this. The anganwadi was envisioned in 1975 as a part of a bunch of services meant for the development of children.

Clearly, over the years this vision was not adequately implemented. Anganwadis have badly built and maintained buildings. They lack trained workers. The original idea of embedding them in the community was never fulfilled. As a result they fester as badly managed government institutions.

So, what can be done about them? Preeti and Kabir Vajpeyi are architects who have shown that redesigning the buildings so that they are more child-friendly, attractive and oriented to delivering the services of the anganwadi can make a whole big difference.

We bring you as this month's cover story their efforts over the years in several states across the country. The Vajpeyis have shared their improvements with state governments, encouraging engineers and officials to implement them as also come up with innovations of their own. As architects, the Vajpeyis are a brilliant example of what public-spirited professionals can do for development.

Bunker Roy is no stranger to us and our readers. It comes as a happy milestone that the Barefoot College he founded has completed 50 years. What does Bunker think of his unconventional journey and how does he assess the achievements of the institution he founded so long ago? To find out, we interviewed him through an exchange of multiple questions and answers because Bunker was in Jaipur and ailing and we were in Gurugram and ailing too!

We all benefit from the gig economy. But, really, it is time to do something about its deleterious effects. The adverse conditions in which gig workers perform, enslaved, so to speak, by app-based companies, cries out for reform. A Rajasthan state law which not just gives them social benefits but also creates a record of the services they perform is clearly a major development with the promise of transforming the way these businesses are run.

Highlighting good causes and raising funds for them is a challenge most voluntary groups find difficult to measure up to. Pardada Pardadi has been holding a rural marathon to draw attention to its efforts for educating the girl child in Uttar Pradesh. The marathon is a unique event in which thousands, particularly women, participate. It hardly has sponsors, but it does much to create awareness about Pardada Pardadi and its cause.



COVER STORY

PRESCHOOL MAKEOVER

Anganwadis are crucial to early education but they are beset with problems. The buildings are in terrible shape. Preeti and Kabir Vajpeyi have been using better design to transform them.

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Contact Civil Society at:
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 The magazine does not undertake to respond to unsolicited contributions sent to the editor for publication.

Publisher
Umesh Anand

Editor
Rita Anand

News Network
Shree Padre, Saibal Chatterjee, Derek Almeida, Jehangir Rashid, Susheela Nair, Kavita Charanji

Photographer
Ashoke Chakraborty

Layout & Design
Virender Chauhan

Cartoonist
Samita Rathor

Write to Civil Society at:
 A-16 (West Side), 1st Floor, South Extension Part 2, New Delhi - 110049.
 Phone: 011-46033825, 9811787772
 Printed and published by Umesh Anand on behalf of Rita Anand, owner of the title, from A-53 D, First Floor,

Panchsheel Vihar, Malviya Nagar, New Delhi - 110017. Printed at Samrat Offset Pvt. Ltd., B-88, Okhla Phase II, New Delhi - 110020

Postal Registration No. DL(S)-17/3255/2021-23. Registered to post without pre-payment U(SE)-10/2021-23 at Lodi Road HPO New Delhi - 110003 RNI No.: DELENG/2003/11607 Total no of pages: 32

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BUNKER ROY SAYS TILONIA HAS BEEN INSPIRATIONAL

‘People without degrees can be engineers and health workers’

Civil Society News
New Delhi

THE Barefoot College has completed 50 years, a signal achievement for any voluntary organization. Based at Tilonia, in a corner of Rajasthan, it has found recognition for itself across the world.

By training rural people, particularly women, to address their own development needs, the college has shown that learning is not just about degrees. So much more impactful are the practical skills, innate abilities and traditional knowledge of communities. Acknowledged and put to good use, they can be empowering and transformational.

The barefoot in the college's name defines its spirit. Helped to discover themselves in their own environment, people without a formal education set up solar facilities, design and construct buildings and create elaborate water harvesting networks. Everything becomes possible. Being rural doesn't mean being backward. To the contrary, village practices run deep and have their own sophistications.

Behind this wonderful idea all these years has been Sanjit Roy, better known as Bunker. Why Bunker, you might ask. Because his brother was Shanker. There was a bubbly insouciance in his early years. Everything rhymed.

When you are born into influence and some wealth, chances are that you will continue to see the world in just one way. Not so Bunker, who as a young man slipped out of his gilded zone to live and work in villages in true personal reverence for Gandhi's ideals.

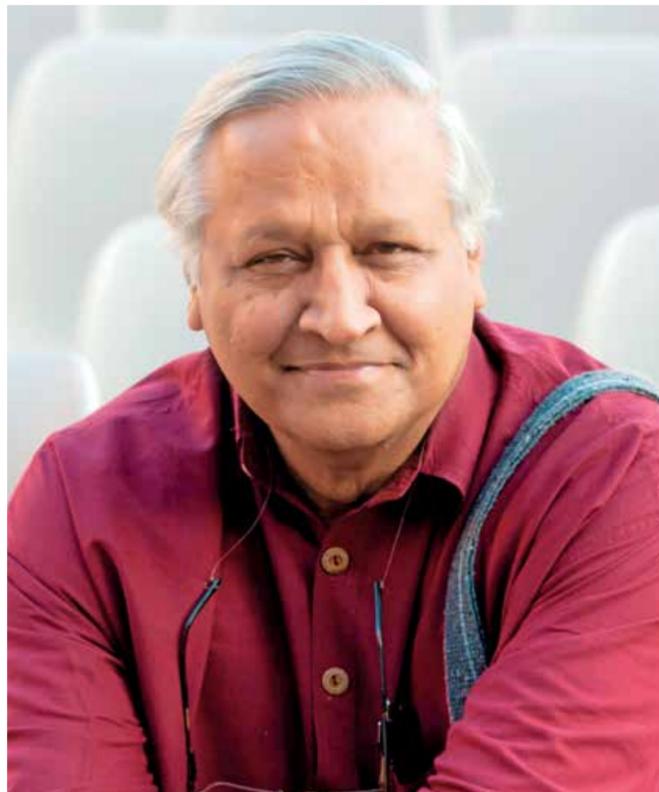
Opting out was difficult to explain because Bunker had a whole lot going for him. Doon School. St Stephen's College. India's national squash champion three times. A swashbuckling cricketer. A medal-winning swimmer. A charmer on campus.

But then came a detour from which he never really returned. He joined other young people in answer to JP's call to come to the aid of famine victims in Bihar. The poverty and deprivation he saw, perhaps upfront for the first time, so disturbed him that he came back convinced that all he wanted to do was work in rural India.

That was in the late 1960s and a few years later he ferreted out Tilonia. The Social Work and Research Centre (SWRC) was then set up by him and Aruna Roy. The Barefoot College followed. The Roys were youthful and out to change India. The spark hasn't left them though the years have added up.

In the past 50 years much has changed. The Indian economy is the toast of investors. But the vision on which the Barefoot College was based remains relevant. Rural India deserves much more recognition and respect than it gets.

Our interview with Bunker Roy as it unfolded between Tilonia and Gurugram:



Bunker Roy: 'I am happy to be a catalyst for non-violent ideas'

Q: When you chose Tilonia to set up SWRC what were you thinking? A tiny, unknown location in such a large country... what sense did it make to you? What was your dream?

From 1967 to 1971, I was blasting 500 open wells in Ajmer district for an organization called the Catholic Relief Services. I was taken to Tilonia by a colleague of mine, Meghraj, who was a rock-driller. I was thinking of a small project focusing on water because water is a big problem in the desert. We did a groundwater survey of 110 villages and we found the situation critical.

Q: So it was specifically to address the water problems of a desert area? Has Tilonia's water problem been solved?

Tilonia's water problems will never be solved in this lifetime because the population has increased and the water level has gone down from 60 feet to 300 feet. I was really addressing the water problems of 100 villages around Tilonia. The demand for water for agriculture, drinking, commercial farming has increased manifold — so there will always be a shortage. What remains to be done is to be disciplined in use of water. Water management is more important than ever.

Q: You mention rock-drilling, which would mean groundwater. Over time you seem to have found more merit in water harvesting. Was your learning from this?

Yes, it was my learning. Between 1974 and 1989 we believed the engineers — that the drinking water solution would be through handpumps. But we learnt from an old man in the village that the long-term solution to the water problem is in rainwater harvesting and not exploiting groundwater.

So today we have a network of rainwater harvesting tanks all over Rajasthan and other states. We collect 90 billion litres of rainwater

through tanks, *nadis* and dams.

Q: Generally, a whopping 50 years later, when you look back is it with satisfaction, regret...?

It is a matter of great satisfaction that Tilonia has managed to change the mindset of people towards literacy and education. For 50 years, we have shown the importance of rural quality in education as against importance being given to degrees and qualifications. From the very beginning, we were convinced that paper degrees do not guarantee professionalism and competence. In a meeting called by the Mind and Life Institute in Zurich in 2011, I gently challenged His Holiness, the Dalai Lama, when I said, where is it written that just because someone cannot read or write, he or she cannot be an engineer, a health worker, a communicator, an educator. Where is it written, Your Holiness? Your Holiness, do you agree?

The regret is that even when I worked at the highest policy level in the government, in the Planning Commission (1984-89), when I took one rupee as consultancy fee, I did not manage to convince people that this was the rural solution for India.

Q: How can someone be an engineer, doctor, nurse or optician without knowing to read or write? Surely some distinction must be made between the uses of traditional knowledge and modern science? Are you saying we don't need modern education at all?

I don't understand how someone can be an engineer or nurse without hands-on knowledge and competence. There has been traditional technology without degrees that has kept the world going.

In every isolated village of India and abroad, there are women who are midwives who help, often in complicated cases, where hospitals are far away. Midwives are also opinion-makers and hold considerable influence over other women. It was only when we understood their strengths and some weaknesses and worked with them that we understood women and that empowering them meant respect and dialogue.

Men and women who have knowledge and practical experience in engineering and medicine have kept the rural world going. They did not have the opportunity to read and write, but they have common sense, intuition, improvisation and gut intelligence. They are highly respected, sought after, in their villages, and are able to apply their skill without anyone asking to see their degree.

The spot for drilling a bore well or digging a well is even today decided by a water diviner, with a high percentage of success. It is fortunate and somewhat extraordinary that there are some geologists who are also water diviners!

The danger comes when a graduate with a paper degree (and no real education, considering the ethics of education and educational institutions) in engineering, or in medicine or what you call modern science, is let loose on communities.

Yes, I am saying categorically that what goes by the name of modern education does not fulfil or satisfy genuine rural needs. Tilonia's success in using semi-literate and illiterate people is a challenge to modern technical and professional education. Degrees have to be validated with proven competence. We are still waiting for that to happen.

Q: What difference do you think you have made to the country, to Tilonia itself?

I would like to think that the work on the ground has motivated and inspired lots of people from different walks of life to follow the Tilonia example and claim that they got the inspiration from Tilonia. This includes, I think, hundreds of people all over the world.

Q: Put this way, it would seem you are happy to have been a catalyst for new ideas. After all "hundreds" doesn't add up to much in terms of the world. Is that then the role social activists like yourself should be satisfied with? Drivers of ideas and solutions in the hope of larger change at some time?

I am happy to have been a catalyst for strong, innovative, down-to-earth

non-violent ideas that have never been tried before. Tilonia has always provided the space to try these ideas and even if some of them have failed, we will continue to provide a platform for innovation to young people.

I do not call myself a social activist but a social entrepreneur and I am never satisfied with results because there is always scope for improvement. The whole idea of the woman catalyst bringing fundamental social change at the village level was at the forefront of Tilonia's engagement.

For instance, women hand-pump *mistris* and traditional midwives participating in the movement for generating awareness about *sati* and other social issues, minimum wages, untouchability.

Fed into government, they have led to larger changes in government policy and programme. The innovation with school education with untrained but committed local teachers led to the Rajasthan government's Shikshakarmi, a programme for schools in remote areas that was run by literate but untrained teachers from the community. They were appointed as government teachers all over the state.

The work of identifying Dalits and backward class women with leadership qualities led to the Women's Development Programme of the Rajasthan government — a landmark programme that spawned many other such programmes in India. The Lok Jumbish programme was also the result of experiments tried in Tilonia by the Rajasthan government.

‘The spot for drilling a bore well or digging a well is even today decided by a water diviner, with a high percentage of success. It is fortunate and extraordinary that there are some geologists who are also water diviners!’

Tilonia's battle for minimum wages for famine relief works, based on the ground-breaking leadership of a Dalit woman, Naurti, resulted in a famous judgment in a PIL in the Supreme Court in 1983. The order by Justices P.N. Bhagwati and R.S. Pathak established that no work site in Rajasthan could pay less than the minimum wage structurally.

Q: You know, you come from such an elitist background. Doon School, St Stephen's. What was the point at which you changed direction?

When I went to the famine in Bihar, in response to an appeal by Jayaprakash Narayan. The poverty, starvation, the helplessness, the cruelty — there was an India that I had never seen. And neither St Stephen's College or the Doon School exposes its students to such experiences, which I think is a great shame.

Q: What did it take to gain acceptance and involvement with marginalized communities? How did you strike a chord?

I was not interested in gaining acceptance from the community I was working with. Rather, my aim was to select community leaders from these castes and villages to be my eyes and ears. So all the work that is reflected is actually the work of these people on behalf of Tilonia.

My job was not to become a *neta* and speak on behalf of communities, but to identify potential leaders in these communities who would then implement all the programmes and projects that have been done over the past 50 years.

Q: But surely your elitist background made it easier to access funds in the corridors of power. You were their *neta* or, at least, their

Continued on page 8

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spokesperson in those settings. They could not have done it on their own.

Tilonia must be one of the few civil society organizations that initially received more funding from government than from foreign sources. This is because I was in school and college with bureaucrats who were in the corridors of power.

So, access to funding was relatively easier. Between 1975 and 2000 we had access to funding from important ministries, including those of external affairs, science and technology, education, rural development, etc. I agree I was often the spokesperson in these settings. And, occasionally, when they wanted to try an idea bypassing the system, they would approach me.

Q: Do traditional technologies make a difference to development? And if those technologies and practices already existed why would you need SWRC or Barefoot College?

The job of Tilonia is to demystify technology and bring the most sophisticated technology into the hands of very poor people. It would be these people that would be controlling the use and spread of technology. This should ultimately include Gandhiji's last man and woman.

'Tilonia's two campuses were first solar electrified in 1986 and 1990. Today there is the model of Solar Mamas in villages.'

Q: Which technologies have been improved and promoted and how would you rate their success?

Solar technology, water management technology, dryland technology, waste management technology are some examples.

Q: In recent times you have worked to promote solar power. Was this a turnaround in your thinking?

No, the two campuses of Tilonia were first solar electrified in 1986 and 1990. We have always promoted technology that will lead to the welfare and development of people at the level that matters most. Today there is the model of the Solar Mamas, recognized by the prime minister of India, of training illiterate, rural grandmothers from non-electrified villages all over the world, with the support of the Ministry of External Affairs (which supports the travel and training cost). Tilonia has trained over 1,700 Solar Mamas in 96 countries.

Q: For someone who has done so much, you must have regrets. What are the mistakes, missed opportunities that haunt you?

I regret that I did not manage to convince civil society groups to adopt a code of conduct in spite of a national dialogue to voluntarily adopt the values of simplicity, austerity, transparency and accountability in their working. The smaller organizations were all for it, but the larger foreign-funded organizations shut it down.

I also regret that the bottom-up, Gandhian, barefoot approach has not been adopted by civil society organizations on a large scale. In 1974, however, we had this scheme of inviting young boys and girls from different parts of the country to stay an indefinite period, pick up some confidence and competence and then help them start their own organizations in the states they came from. So we have a network called Sampda of 20 barefoot colleges in 16 states in India, reaching over two million people.

Q: And what's it that you cherish personally over and above all that can be quantified and put in an annual report?

Aruna Roy's contribution to Tilonia. ■

GIG VOODOO GETS REALITY CHECK IN RAJASTHAN

Law provides workers social security, neutral platform on which they will be registered

Civil Society News
New Delhi

A state law passed in Rajasthan recently holds out promise for gig workers by ensuring a public record of their jobs and having employers of their services contribute to a government-supervised fund for social security.

The gig economy has so far been under the spell of aggregators who have used online applications to a voodoo-like effect. Once they are in, workers have few choices and no real control over the terms on which they can earn. In such a trance-like state they spend long hours on the job jeopardizing their health and risking their lives to meet impossible deadlines.

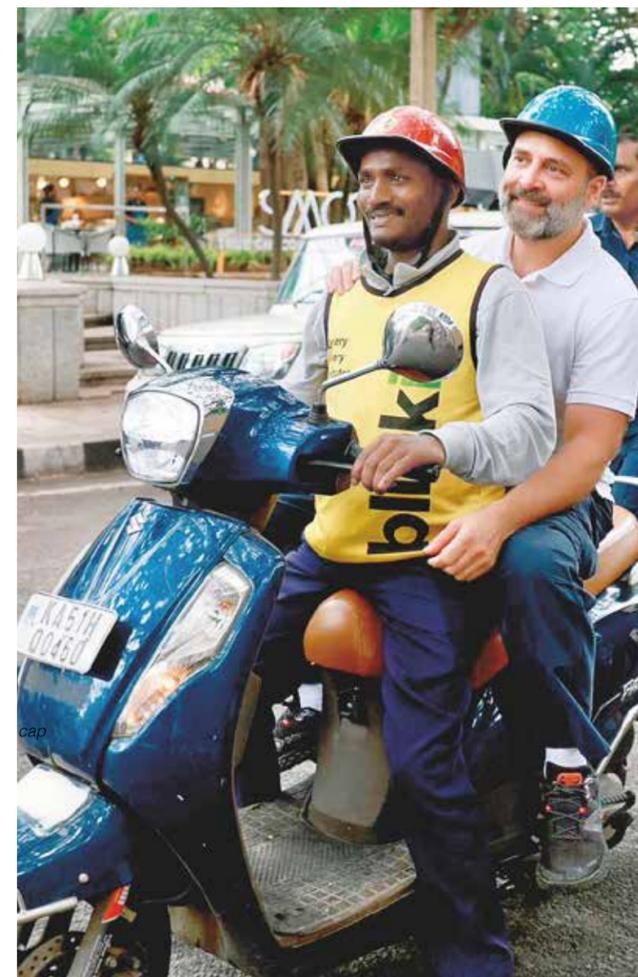
Gig workers are visible in cities big and small, delivering just about everything from pizzas to parcels, driving taxis and now increasingly providing services of plumbers, electricians, carpenters, cleaners and even healthcare attendants. In the absence of enough organized sector employment, people sign up. Regular employers in turn have found it advantageous to outsource their manpower requirements and get people off their books.

The Rajasthan law for the first time seeks to put the brakes on the free and easy ways of aggregators who thrive on the sizeable commissions they earn by taking services to customers. At the heart of the control they exercise are technology platforms that decide charges, wages, hours of work and targets.

But it is technology itself that the Rajasthan law will be using to give gig workers social benefits. An IT platform will reflect the employment data of all aggregators. Every job done will be recorded. And a percentage of what gig workers are paid will flow into a social security fund to be used for insurance, pension and so on.

The world over, gig workers have tried to assert themselves by calling for regulation. But it hasn't worked because aggregators, being companies with investors and having valuations, oppose any attempt to set their rates or reduce profit margins and give workers a better deal, saying that such steps interfere with their business models. They argue that they need to be free to run their enterprises.

Another option explored was to have an app just like aggregators



Rahul Gandhi rides with a Blinkit delivery man in Bengaluru and with Nikhil Dey (right) as the Bharat Jodo Yatra passed through Rajasthan; Baba Adhav (riding pillion) who brought in social security for the hamals or head loaders in Pune's wholesale markets

have apps except that this would be run by the government or gig workers themselves. But that meant running a company or cooperative or whatever entity. It would be an impossible task. Moreover, such an app would have to compete with established aggregators who have cash to burn and would be able to undercut the gig workers.

The inspiration for the Rajasthan law, which creates a platform and has a tripartite board, really comes from Baba Adhav and the head loaders or *hamals* of Pune's wholesale markets. Loaders would carry heavy sacks and ruin their health but have no social security to fall back on.

Baba Adhav organized them into a union and institutionalized a small levy on every load which would go towards their social security. A tripartite board consisting of traders, the loaders and the government would govern the fund.

"This was so appropriate. The focus was on social security which no one could object to, not even the aggregators," says Nikhil Dey of the Mazdoor Kisan Shakti Sangathan (MKSS) who was closely involved in the process.

Secondly, the *hamal* breakthrough was to form a board and have a levy on each sack, meaning on each piece rate work which would go to social security. This is exactly what the Rajasthan law does.

"We picked up on that idea in Rajasthan and that's the Rajasthan breakthrough. And we made a demand



Ashok Gehlot

not just for a law, but it was a law that had a solution in it, at least for social security," says Dey. "And that was put in front of the chief minister and it was put in front of Rahul Gandhi and it was passed as a law."

Gandhi himself had taken an interest in the lives of gig workers in Karnataka. He was seen jumping onto the bike of a delivery executive in Bengaluru amid talk in Karnataka to regulate gig employment.

In Rajasthan Gandhi was presented with a draft law while he walked through the state as a part of his Bharat Jodo Yatra. It went from him back to the Rajasthan chief minister, Ashok Gehlot, and was passed.

In Rajasthan there are perhaps 300,000 gig workers and in terms of a constituency they don't add up to much. But across India, the numbers are huge as people sign up in droves for work, often simultaneously with one or more aggregator companies — the Uber plus Ola kind of thing.

While the Rajasthan law is not necessarily a vote-catching stratagem, it is a good example of what politicians should do to improve social equity, promote fraternity and legally empower workers in complex workplace equations.

The true test of the law will be in its implementation. But it certainly has much going for it as it dribbles past challenges in regulating the gig economy. It is called the Rajasthan Platform Based Gig Workers (Registration and Welfare) Act, making it clear that it

Continued on page 10

Continued from page 9

is meant only for those who are registered on platforms of aggregators.

The gig economy goes much beyond its online manifestation. Construction and domestic workers, for instance. Or casual labour engaged in road construction. You could add to them security guards. But the law does not serve any of them because having a record of their identities is next to impossible. The rules on construction workers, for instance, have been imperfectly implemented. Vast numbers remain to be registered and therefore don't benefit from the cess collected from builders for their social security.

The Rajasthan law nevertheless overcomes many hurdles. Right now it is a breakthrough. But chances are that it could become a model. With the use of IT, similar regulation could serve other forms of employment as well.

The Rajasthan law is a breakthrough, and chances are that with its use of IT it will be a model for other forms of employment.

Among the achievements of the law are:

1. Recognition: It puts the names of workers and where they are registered on a public domain platform where they are freely visible. Thus far, employment was only between the companies and the gig workers.

2. Instant registration: There is instant registration from the aggregator app to the public domain platform. It could be multiple aggregators or just one. It also reflects the number of hours put in and the jobs done. It could be six hours or six months, six trips or 60 — it all gets recorded.

3. Multiple jobs: The gig worker can be a driver, delivery executive and plumber, all in a day, and it would be recorded with the income reflecting in their ledger account.

4. Transparency: For the first time the worker's name, how much was charged and how much the worker got will be recorded. In the case of taxi drivers the number of the car and ownership details will reflect. So, the personal data is no longer only in the control of the companies.

5. Physical meetings: The law provides for a tripartite board on which the workers, the government and the companies will be represented. So far, the complaint of gig workers has been that all their interactions with companies are online. Now they can sit across the table.

6. Social security: The money collected on each transaction translates into social security for workers. Some of this, such as accident insurance, becomes immediately available. ■

Rural marathon says it all for the girl child

Civil Society News

New Delhi

EVERY year, villages in Anupshahr *tehsil* of Bulandshahr district in Uttar Pradesh witness a unique event — a rural half-marathon. Thousands of girls and women, some even in saris, run through Anupshahr's roads bathed in the early morning sun. The men, who were at one time gawkers, merrily join in solidarity with their womenfolk.

The residents of around 132 villages and surrounding areas look forward to this unusual event. It is organized by the Pardada Pardadi Educational Society (PPES) which runs schools for girls and skilling programmes for women in Anupshahr *tehsil*. This year 4,000 runners took part.

The man behind the idea of a rural marathon is Virendra Sam Singh who set up PPES in 2000 to educate the rural girl child. Today more than 1,600 girls study in the four schools run by PPES.

The first marathon was organized in 2014 to raise funds for PPES. Over the years monetary gains have been modest. But the marathon fulfilled another purpose — it raised awareness about girls' education and improved the profile of PPES amongst villagers in the district.

"Today the marathon has become a celebration of the right to education for every girl child," says Sam Singh with pride. He is happy to see the smiles and joy on the faces of thousands of participants in the marathon every year.

This rural run has three versions — the half-marathon (21 km) for the serious runner, the mini marathon (10 km) for the larger population and a 'short' run of five km for the very young and the elderly. It starts early, at around five in the morning, and winds its way through the villages and the Aligarh bypass.

Sam says the primary idea is to bring girls out in the open, especially in a region where patriarchy rules, for the world to take notice. This, he feels, will give these girls confidence and the self-belief to explore their own worth, and possibly create leaders in future.

Hundreds of women members of self-help groups also join in in their saris to encourage more girls to take part in sports and not be

cowed down by the domination of males.

The CEO of PPES says, "This is more than just a run for girls or women. It is a great opportunity to show the world that no restriction can be placed on women because of their gender."

The Pardada Pardadi Educational Society, a non-profit working in Anupshahr since 2000, envisions creating a society where rural women have a share equal to men in contributing to the growth of the nation.

To empower these rural girls who hail from the most disadvantaged communities, PPES



A proud moment for these village women, having run the marathon

provides them free all-round education and vocational training to prepare them for employment. The schools run from 8 am to 4.30 pm with day boarding facilities.

The journey began when Sam returned to his ancestral village, Bichola, in Bulandshahr after spending 40 years with DuPont, an American multinational, as an engineer. Born in a feudal family, Sam was part of the patriarchal system and the rigid caste hierarchy that dominate rural lives, in particular, Bulandshahr. Troubled by the inherent gender inequality, Sam spent some time in the Dalai Lama's school in Dharamsala in the late 1980s.

Impressed by its self-sustaining model, Sam was to test it a decade later when he decided to set up schools for girls back home in Bulandshahr. In 2000, he set up the Pardada Pardadi Educational Society. Twenty-three years later, it's come a long way. PPES provides quality education to girls from low-income rural families, providing midday meals, skilling programmes and a chance for the girls to follow the career of their dreams.

Inspired by a changing India and the need for women to play a greater role and drive this



The marathon has become a celebration for every girl child as boys and girls from surrounding villages take part in the annual run for equality in rural Anupshahr



change, Sam wanted to do his bit. He feels that it is the girl child who goes on to be the mother and if the mother is educated then the whole family benefits and in turn, so does society.

But rural India is still very conservative and it's no different in Anupshahr. Young girls dreaming of taking part in sporting activities find little encouragement. The lack of resources

keeps the girls homebound. This is where Pardada Pardadi (the reference to great grandparents is meant to link the past with the future) helps the girls break through by providing them the necessary encouragement and sporting gear to take part with the boys on an equal footing.

Though Sam remains ever hopeful of change,



in these 23 long years has it changed enough? "Unfortunately not." Society remains highly male-dominated because men still control the levers of power. Pointing out that women *sarpanches* are being elected in different parts of the country and this gives him hope, he says, "One day, I'm sure this will change and we can be a catalyst in that change." ■



RWAs asked to keep watch on child labour

Kavita Charanji
New Delhi

A 10-year-old child, hired as a domestic worker, was brutally beaten up by her employers, a well-off couple in Delhi. The wife is an airline pilot, while the husband works as ground staff for another airline. The little girl's family members say she was often hit by hot iron tongs. Her condition when she was rescued looked appalling.

This is just one of a spate of cases where underage children, hired to do household chores, have been viciously tortured by their wealthy employers. Sometimes such brutality goes on for months because it is hard to identify the child and take action. This is a crime behind closed doors and child labour laws need to be changed if such abuse is to stop.

To find a strategy to rescue such children, the National Action & Coordination Group for Ending Violence Against Children (NACG EVAC) India, held a stakeholder meeting recently. The participants included representatives of NGOs, Resident Welfare Associations (RWAs), lawyers, the Delhi Commission for the Protection of Child Rights (DCPCR), the International Labour Organization (ILO), and academia, among others.

"The aim of the meeting was to condemn the recent act and extend solidarity to the victim. Collective efforts and recommendations to end violence against children in India were other

objectives," says Sanjay Gupta, chairperson, NACG EVAC India and director of CHETNA, a well-known NGO, which works for children.

Among the issues flagged by the panelists were need for stricter implementation of laws, legislation focused on child domestic workers and a fresh census to determine the scale of

RWAs were asked to be accountable and sensitize residents on child rights as the deep-seated reasons for sending children to work are unlikely to go away easily.

child labour in the country. RWAs were asked to step in and show greater accountability. They can, for instance, sensitize residents on child labour laws and build awareness of child rights. Similarly, market associations, shopping malls and eateries which tend to employ children need to be made aware of child labour laws and child rights.

Gupta also said the draft National Child Protection Policy by the Ministry of Women and Child Development (MWCD) is to be a slim volume which will advise responsible behaviour towards children, mention various

laws related to children as well as a reporting mechanism if one sees a case of child abuse.

The other point raised at the meeting was the need for a single-window approach to labour issues so that government departments can work in close coordination.

But deep-seated problems which lead to poor parents sending their children to work in households, such as poverty, lack of education, and migration, are unlikely to go away. Impoverished families send their children to work in the belief that they will supplement family income and get some degree of security. "In Delhi, with rapid urbanization and migration parents are pushing their children into work, not knowing how hazardous that can be," says Madhavi Kotwal Samson, convener of the Delhi Chapter of NACG EVAC India and founder of an NGO, Abhas.

Whether domestic work by children can be considered hazardous is controversial. The Child Labour (Prohibition and Regulation) Amendment Act of 2016 allows children above 14 to work, but not in designated hazardous occupations, and domestic work does not come under the category of being hazardous.

Children under 14 cannot work except in "family enterprises". They can also work in their own homes after school hours and during vacations. Despite the Right to Education Act, 2009, which promises free and compulsory education for children upto the age of 14, young children are found tending to younger siblings or doing back-breaking work. They are highly vulnerable to being exploited as child labour.

Activists say there is a definite loophole in the law. As one participant said, "Saying that children can work at home is simply an outsourcing mechanism." This, in fact, perpetuates child labour. Work has shifted underground.

It is widely known that young children are engaged in home-based enterprises like bangle making or making matches, *bidi* rolling, and other occupations that put them at high risk of developing severe health complications.

Activists at the meeting described other violations of child labour legislation. Descriptions emerged of young child rag pickers buried under mountains of garbage in East Delhi's infamous Ghazipur landfill. Some are found with burns on their hands and feet. Child trafficking is rampant in Jharkhand and Bihar, while Firozabad in Uttar Pradesh is the hub of dangerous bangle making units that employ children.

Suggestions made related to identifying children at risk of being pushed into child labour based on factors like class, caste, gender, religion and location.

Value-based education, greater accountability of RWAs regarding employment of minors and advisories to residents were other suggestions that were put forth. ■

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Villagers identify the ultra-poor

Iqra Khan
Ranchi

HOW do you identify the ultra-poor in a village? The most efficient way is to ask the community to come up with indicators according to their values, found PRADAN, which has been working in Adivasi hamlets in Jharkhand for many years.

Finding out who the ultra-poor are can be challenging because they are generally bracketed with a broad category of people living in extreme poverty, say economists Abhijit Banerjee and Esther Duflo.

PRADAN decided to design an identification process and then intervene to help the ultra-poor. After working out the framework of their research, they conducted a study in 10 villages of four panchayats in the Torpa block of Khunti district in Jharkhand.

Around 42.16 percent of Jharkhand's population is multi-dimensionally poor, making it the second poorest state in India. The latest edition of the Multidimensional Poverty Index, 2021, released by NITI Aayog, reaffirms the paradox of Jharkhandis being deprived of basic amenities despite the state owning abundant natural resources.

Many Adivasi hamlets in Jharkhand bear the brunt of extreme poverty. Torpa block is one such pocket. Two decades of PRADAN's engagement in Adivasi regions have contributed to its improvement, yet a significant part of the population, around 10 to 15 percent, remains deprived of the benefits of development programmes.

A 'wealth-ranking tool' was adopted to identify such families through community-led institutions such as women's collectives and self-governance forums like the tola sabha which is similar to the gram sabha. All residents come together to decide issues concerning the hamlet. Village-level forums were sensitized on what constitutes extreme poverty and a shared understanding emerged. Poverty indicators were decided by tapping into humane and tribal values.

Once such ultra-poor families and individuals were identified, gram sabhas were facilitated to register the ultra-poor and prioritize them in government programmes and schemes.

COMMUNITY MARKERS Based on the indicators listed by the community, 59 families/

individuals were identified as ultra-poor from 10 villages with the help of local institutions. The indicators analyzed were: families or individuals who could not manage more than four or five months of rations annually, landless families, those ostracized by the community, women-led families with dependants, single women, distressed migrant families, the mentally or physically disabled, and orphans.

The ultra-poor are deprived of basic social welfare schemes. They remain bereft of Aadhaar because of the information divide, inadequate enrolment facilities, updating and retrieval issues and technical biometric glitches.

For sustenance, most ultra-poor families engage in multiple livelihood options due to



A women's collective discusses poverty indicators

lack of assets, human and financial resources, poor physical health, caste discrimination and occupational structure, social norms, low land productivity, and lack of irrigation resources.

Because of a myriad of vulnerabilities, it becomes difficult to apply one straitjacket solution to help the ultra-poor. Here are profiles of some of the ultra-poor and vulnerable families in Khunti district.

S. Topno, 43, a single woman and resident of Marcha, has psychiatric disabilities. She lives in a *kutcha* house with a roof that needs repair, but no one offers to help.

P. Hemrom, 48, a resident of Manmani, lives with her husband and four children. The couple is mentally unsound and doesn't receive a pension because they don't have the required documents.

M. Dhanwar, 48, a mentally unsound resident of Jagu village, lives with her nine-year-old daughter who was born out of forced physical relationships by men who used to exploit her. She has neither an Aadhaar card nor a disability certificate.

The deplorable conditions of everyday survival of the ultra-poor are due to the

intersection of different identities. They are at the receiving end of structural violence. Therefore, each family requires abundant attention from various stakeholders as well as customized pathways to assist them.

There are different faces of vulnerability layered with multiple disadvantages. Prominent among these are social and economic disadvantages, geographical limitations, political scenarios and limited coping capacity coupled with insecurities.

Some indicators in isolation have contributed to understanding the condition of the ultra-poor, while in other cases, a couple of factors together account for the extreme poverty.

Social capital is another factor that plays a crucial role in the lives of the poor. Those with social capital tend to fare better than those lacking contacts or those not part of women's collectives or the tola and gram sabha.

For instance, R. Devi, 33, a resident of Dao Toli, lives with her family of four and has access to welfare programmes like rations, livestock schemes, and credit facilities. She says that her family benefits from her being a part of the SHG and the neighbours approach them first if they have to hire labourers for work.

The ultra-poor are predominantly women. But caste dynamics, social standing, and occupation together also contribute to increasing the vulnerability of the poor.

K. Lohra, 80, a resident of Jagu village, doesn't own a home and lives in a dilapidated room. He has neither a ration card nor a pension to sustain himself. He has a daughter who went with someone to work in the tea gardens in another state and never returned.

Sensitizing every local forum about its most vulnerable and poor section of society is critical. To help them access their rights and entitlements, one needs to sensitize the community, build the capacity of the ultra-poor, customize suitable livelihood options and create awareness of their rights.

Forms of assistance are consumption support, access to welfare schemes, counselling of people with psychiatric disabilities, sensitization workshops for community members, admission of children in government boarding schools, waiver of school fees, capacity building of members with alternative livelihood options, and access to interest-free loans. ■

Iqra Khan is a development practitioner working with PRADAN. She holds a master's in development studies from the Azim Premji University

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Innovative activities for tribal children come with design changes in an anganwadi in Chhattisgarh

PRESCHOOL MAKEOVER

Anganwadis benefit from better design

Umesh Anand

New Delhi

IT was a small and forbidding toilet, airless and unlit. Squatting in it was unpleasant and came with risks both real and imagined. Slipping was a serious possibility. For the uninitiated there was also the irrational fear of falling into the pot itself.

Rural children, around the age of three, for whom the toilet was meant, found it unnerving to be shut into a small, dark space. They were accustomed to going out in the open, invariably in the company of siblings or friends. Urinating or defecating was a group thing. They liked the earth under their feet and some greenery around.

Anganwadis in India are plagued by such problems of inappropriate infrastructure. They were conceived of to provide health, nutrition and early education to preschool children and additionally, counselling for young women and adolescent girls. But, in fact, anganwadis are neglected and depressing spaces least suited to the objectives for which they were meant.

They are poorly maintained and clunkily built. If the toilets are a mess so are the kitchens and activity rooms. The anganwadi worker has no formal training for the complex and delicate task with which she has been entrusted. There is corruption and questionable oversight.

The anganwadi idea goes back to 1975 and the framing of the Integrated Child Development Services (ICDS). There was great foresight shown then in the early needs of children, young mothers and adolescent girls.

Over 50 years, however, little seems to have been done to make the anganwadi an effective piece in the jigsaw of women and child development.

There are perhaps 1.4 million anganwadis in the country, but they don't hang together in the absence of a larger and coordinated sense of purpose. Now, with the New Education Policy emphasizing early childhood development, dysfunctional anganwadis will surely be a stumbling block.

It is not as though efforts are not being made to bring about improvements. But these are mostly voluntary and disaggregated. For example, the Azim Premji Foundation has been training anganwadi workers in Telangana. Then again, at certain anganwadis meals might be outsourced and come from centralized kitchens in the interest of better quality. Within government itself there are good examples. At the district and block levels you will find officials who take a special interest in the functioning of anganwadis under them.

But if these efforts don't add up to much it is because anganwadis exist in a landscape that is vast and varied. No two states are alike and sometimes one district to the next can be different. Missing is that overarching strategy that alone can ensure shared learning, uniform standards and a sizeable impact.

Better design, for one, has been overlooked. Anganwadis need to be, first of all, inviting and child-friendly spaces. Thoughtfully built anganwadis are also essential to outcomes in health, nutrition and education. It is not just a question of ambience, but of functionality as

well. Bad toilets don't equal better health and lousy, unhygienic kitchens don't churn out quality meals.

Kabir and Preeti Vajpeyi are public-spirited architects who have been working in several states to improve anganwadi infrastructure. They have come up with design ideas and performance standards which they have themselves implemented. These are now available for use with adaptations across the country in different settings. Since anganwadis vary across the country and local ownership is important, no single ironclad design will work.

Success lies in getting down to the details because design can't be a distant exercise. But there can be common principles and solutions that facilitate the functioning of the anganwadi in the way that it was envisaged as serving children and young women.

TOILET CHANGES In the case of a dingy toilet in Chhattisgarh, for instance, they first moved the urinal out of the building so that children could happily use it together and squat or stand, as they chose.

To bring light and air into the toilet they created a large ventilator. The door of the toilet was divided into two shutters. For children squatting inside to defecate, only the lower one would be locked so that the child could be supervised from the open upper half and wouldn't feel alone. For the women using the toilet both shutters would be closed. The fear of slipping was addressed by installing a grab bar. Finally, light and bright colours were used to make the interiors more cheerful. To use water more efficiently they introduced SATO taps which provide a steady but limited flow.

"We were dealing with an existing situation. We couldn't demolish and make the toilet again. The toilet had also to be for use by both women and children. You cannot afford in most cases to have another toilet added to that situation. So we have designed it in a manner such that it can be used by adolescent girls, by women, including pregnant women, and these very young children, because the resources are severely crushed anywhere in any state," says Kabir Vajpeyi.

KITCHEN UPGRADE The kitchen presented its own challenges of where the grain should be stocked to be safe from rodents, getting the smoke out of the room, where the stove should be located and the scope of bringing down the temperature in the kitchen. Meals are an important service that an anganwadi provides. When they are cooked on the premises, they need to be hygienic and nutritious.

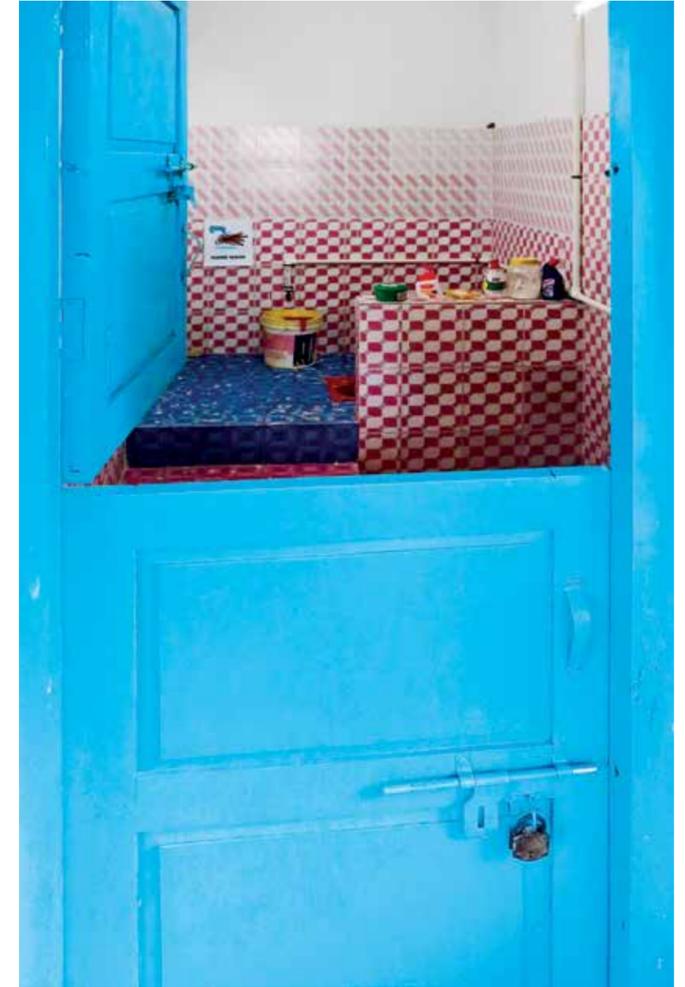
The solutions had to be once again inventive and low-cost. By creating a skirting two to three inches high from the floor and a counter around three feet above it, a storage facility emerged in which sacks of cereals could be stored. Steel shutters protected the grain from pests. Smoke from the stove was removed by having ventilators.

"Often, we would find a vacant room of, say, seven feet by eight feet or seven feet by seven feet with one window and one door as a kitchen," says Kabir. "And typically it would have all this stuff lying on the floor because there was absolutely no almirah there to keep things. Most of the cooking would happen outside because inside it was hot and full of smoke."

"We asked them if they would prefer cooking while standing or sitting on the floor. Based on that preference we would prepare a layout plan. And in that we would provide for various things. If you're cooking sitting on the floor, what should be the access to water, for instance. The cereals in gunny bags had to be close to the floor but not on it because of rodents and the possibility that the bags would get wet when the kitchen was washed."

A skirting at a height of three inches served this purpose. The gunny bags or the containers into which the grain had been poured went into the storage space between the counter and skirting. The counter top itself also became storage space.

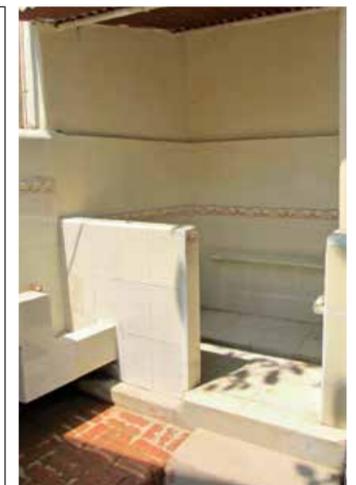
To deal with smoke in the kitchen they relied on creating a ventilator and a chimney. The ventilator was particularly important because it brought in light and fresh air apart from taking out the smoke. Where possible, a smokeless *chulhah* was introduced with a direct outlet through



A toilet with half-doors and painted in bright colours is less forbidding for rural children



A SATO tap helps conserve water



An open urinal appeals to children

the wall. Anganwadis mostly go without electricity so there is no scope for an exhaust fan. They relied on traditional practices for better light and ventilation in most cases.

Traditional buildings have roofs that breathe because of the tiles that have been used. Air goes in and out. But in government-constructed buildings the roofs are made from reinforced concrete.

"We made a ventilator, which was splayed inside. And it was also splayed down. This was an interpretation of what they were doing in

their mud houses. It could have a metal grill or a variation of that, using timber,” explains Kabir.

On the roof, inverted mud pots were used to provide thermal insulation. This was done not just for the kitchen but also for the activity room, or wherever the children sat.

The result was that the anganwadi soon became much cooler in the daytime than the other buildings around. Counselling of mothers typically happens in the afternoon at an anganwadi because they are then free of morning household chores. As the anganwadi became more comfortable, the attendance at these sessions began increasing.

“What I’m trying to say is that often we look at a building or the built environment only as something which is input/output driven. But here we were trying to see how it could be outcome driven also. By that I mean how could we facilitate the core services for which the anganwadi was built,” Kabir elaborates.

The anganwadi also has to be seen as being more than a building. The outdoor spaces are as important as the rooms. The children are very young and at a stage of their lives when they need to play and run around.

NUTRITION GARDENS Similarly, for better nutrition it is not just improvements in the kitchen that are necessary. The anganwadi can grow useful vegetables which can be used in the meals for the children.

Kabir says a nutritionist told them that for the deficiencies common in Chhattisgarh, children should be eating papaya, banana and drumstick. Even a small part of a papaya or banana would give them the trace nutrients they needed.

The challenge was to make this possible at the anganwadi level. So people in the horticulture department were approached. They said they could provide the plants and guide the anganwadi workers in growing them.

Vinyas, the architecture firm which the Vajpeyis run, also began a process whereby engineers of the panchayat could be trained to prepare a site plan to channel wastewater into the nutrition garden. It simply meant directing the natural wastewater to the plants.

“What I’m trying to say is that you can create a whole ecosystem around this small entity called an anganwadi,” says Kabir.

BALA PLUS The Vajpeyis are the authors of BaLA or Building as Learning Aid, a programme which seeks to enhance the learning environment in government schools through innovative design changes to the buildings at minimal cost. They have around 200 affordable designs and BaLA has over time come to be adopted by several state governments.

The programme began as an experiment in the late 1990s in Rajasthan where the challenge was to uplift the environment of a school within a budget of ₹20,000. There were several innovations such as lowering windows to bring in more light and air into classrooms, using grills to teach alphabets and numbers, enlivening exteriors with bright colours and sprucing up the school grounds to make them more inviting and accessible to children. Importantly, BaLA enlisted teachers in this spirit of change and encouraged them to keep innovating.

But their work with anganwadis is not a mere extension of BaLA. While some of the challenges of improving a built infrastructure may be similar, anganwadis are more complex. They are expected to cater to the development of preschool children. In addition they serve as counselling and health check-up centres for adolescent girls and pregnant women. There are six clear services that the anganwadi is supposed to provide in



Kabir Vajpeyi



Preeti Vajpeyi



Inverted pots on a roof used as thermal insulation to keep the indoors cool in Chhattisgarh



A nutrition garden provides the vegetables for a healthy diet

education, health and nutrition. The design challenge is to facilitate this complex web of services.

“Frankly, we graduated from the schools to anganwadis. And the reason we graduated was because many of our friends, who are either part of the government or other institutions, felt that what we are trying to do with schools is needed much more with anganwadis because they are more ignorant of what the possibilities in their physical environment are,” says Kabir.

“And as we were digging deeper to understand what an anganwadi is, I, Preeti and our entire team felt that this is such an important institution but so little is known about it. For example, the national building code talks about preschool, not anganwadi. Preschool is a limited version of an anganwadi. It does much, much more than what a preschool does. The anganwadi has not been looked at as an important institution.

“So it’s not just BaLA though BaLA is the vehicle here. It is just one of the things we do. We make the kitchen functional. We make the wash, water and sanitation facilities functional. We see how to make the main activity room better suited for all the activities there. Similarly, how do we use the outdoors?”

Using standards set by the ICDS mission and relying on their experience of working in Chhattisgarh, they created models on the ground for tribal and non-tribal areas, both rural and urban. These were documented in great detail and shown to the Ministry of Women and



A redesigned kitchen at Sargipal, in Chhattisgarh



Ventilators serve to bring in more light and fresh air like this one in an activity room

‘We look at a building or the built environment only as something which is input/output driven. But here we were trying to see how it could be outcome driven also.’

Child Development, which agreed that the models could be shared with other states.

THREE DOCUMENTS In 2014 Vinyas consolidated its experience into three different resource documents. One was meant for planners and administrators at the state, district or project level. The second was for technical people in line functions such as the PWD and rural department engineers. The third was for anganwadi workers and their supervisors.

They were mindful of the diversity in the country. What would work in Manipur might not in Gujarat. Enough room was left for innovation.

“So, rather than becoming prescriptive, we came up with ideas, a collection of doable ideas and performance standards,” says Kabir.

Instead of creating one model, they created a framework within which multiple models were possible. If someone in Odisha came up with a

BEFORE & AFTER



Well-used and child-friendly open spaces are important in an anganwadi. These before and after images show the difference that can be made



Lowering windows and using grills creatively makes a huge difference



This half-door and latch are child-friendly



A well-lit activity room



Very young children in anganwadis need to play. Some discarded tyres in sand can get them excited

different way of providing ventilation, that would be fine. The important thing was ventilation. Similarly, if a new specification emerged from Himachal it would find acceptance in the system. Cost too would vary from the mountains to the plains and the coast. No single cost structure was seen as being practical.

Originally, the anganwadi was meant to be a community-based institution. The community was expected to provide for it and manage it. In such a situation there would be no need for a building. But this didn't happen because a sense of community ownership has to be engendered.

Instead, the anganwadi became a wholly government-run programme and the notion of community engagement became diluted. It was now up to the government to get things done.

Of the 1.4 million anganwadis in India only about 30 to 40 percent run in a dedicated building. The rest are located in schools, health centres, panchayat bhavans and other such premises.

They could also be in rented premises and sometimes even just in the open under a tree. In Bengal there are examples of youth clubs being used in the day for anganwadis.

Within the machinery that governs anganwadis, such as the ICDS

secretariat, there isn't the technical expertise to ensure that the physical infrastructure serves the stated anganwadi objectives. Construction is handed over to the PWD or Rural Engineering Department. They have no understanding of what is needed.

There are, of course, exceptions. Good panchayats do exist which take care of their anganwadis. Kabir recalls an engineer in West Bengal's Malda district who passionately pursued design changes he had been introduced to.

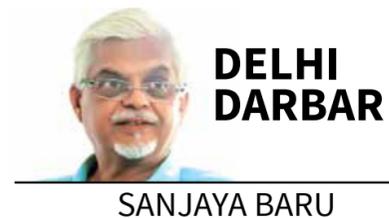
He himself was from UP, but a reason for his interest was that his mother had been an anganwadi worker and his father a schoolteacher. Designs Kabir had left with the Women and Child Development secretary at a desultory meeting in Kolkata had in fact trickled down to the districts and were being followed.

Such instances proffer hope that improvements are indeed possible. But such is the magnitude of the task that little will happen within a meaningful timeframe unless early childhood development is given a big push and the importance of the anganwadi is acknowledged as a staging post for taking programmes in education, health, nutrition and family welfare forward into communities. A huge unfinished agenda remains in an area that is key to India's ambitions of being a developed economy. ■

INSIGHTS

OPINION | ANALYSIS | RESEARCH | IDEAS

A debate of bytes



**DELHI
DARBAR**

SANJAYA BARU

WE have all heard television journalists implore whoever they are seeking to interview, "Give me a byte". In the age of electronic and digital media a byte is the equivalent of a quotable quote or a headline for print journalists. We are in the era of bytes. So who cares for that long sentence, that complex argument, that cleverly crafted paragraph. All we seek is a byte.

Time was when parliamentary debates were about substance. Today they are about bytes. That quotable quote. So, what will you take away from the two-day-long debate in Parliament on the no-confidence motion tabled by the opposition political parties, the INDIA alliance. Rahul Gandhi calling Narendra Modi a 'Ravana', or Gaurav Gogoi's well-crafted critique of the Modi government's mishandling of the situation in Manipur? My guess is we will all remember Rahul's 'Ravana'.

Not surprisingly, therefore, the Congress party's strategy seems to have been that while Gogoi will state all the facts for the record, Rahul will provide the byte. The strategy worked. Even senior political journalists devoted their reportage and commentary to Rahul's bytes while forgetting to compliment Gogoi for his well-crafted indictment of the Modi government.

Parliamentary debates of the past were for the record. Today they are for the recording, so to speak. Televised debates have made one-liners more important than long speeches. Decades from now, when a researcher reads through the archives to see what was said by whom on a particular issue, chances are they would still find Gogoi's substantial formulations more useful. So, substance is still for the record.

Perhaps that is not being fair to the average citizen who may still wish to listen to a

Parliament debate to understand what the issues are. In the early days of televised debates viewers did pay attention. Some parliamentary performances have become so famous that they are still viewed on YouTube. For example, Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee's speech during the confidence vote of 1996.

The most important, elaborate and interesting parliamentary debates in recent memory that had many citizens glued to the television were the debate on the method of selection of Supreme Court judges, the debates on the United States-India civil nuclear energy agreement and the vote of no confidence debate of July 2008. Viewers across the country

While there were always the interruptions, the shouting down of opponents and the walkouts, there were also the clever repartees and the light-hearted banter. Parliamentary debates were both educative and entertaining. The several debates in Parliament on the US-India nuclear deal, in fact, shaped the deal in a decisive way. The specific issues raised in Parliament became the talking points for negotiators. In an earlier era, Parliament debates on such policy issues as bank nationalization, trade liberalization, industrial delicensing, farm loan waivers and so on were substantial and there was much in them from which both policymakers and researchers could learn.

When was the last time one benefitted from a learned debate in Parliament on major policy changes? The infamous farm sector reforms that generated so much controversy, resulting in the government finally withdrawing the bills introduced in Parliament, in fact became controversial because they were not properly discussed and debated. An arrogant prime minister flushed with increased majority in Parliament pushed through a bill that otherwise had few flaws and needlessly allowed a controversy to brew and blow up.

When every section of society feels their views have been properly

aired in Parliament it becomes easier for the government of the day to implement laws. Mere majority on the floor of the House is no guarantee that a law passed by Parliament would secure wider public approval. The citizen must feel that her views have been taken into account in whatever the government is doing. That is the purpose of a Parliament debate.

Consider the impact that the recent debate on the vote of no confidence would have in addressing the situation in Manipur. After all, as Gogoi pointed out with such great detailing, the no-confidence motion was tabled in the context of the Central government's handling of the situation in Manipur. Gogoi detailed his charges very well and the government was required to respond. Home Minister Amit Shah tried to do so, but not very convincingly. Even so, he at least made the effort.

Continued on page 24



Which will be remembered? Rahul's 'Ravana' or Gogoi's well-crafted speech?

Parliament debates of the past were for the record. Now they are for recording, so to speak. TV debates have made one-liners more important than long speeches.

heard with great interest the views on such important issues of learned parliamentarians like Arun Jaitley, P. Chidambaram, Sitaram Yechury, Asaduddin Owaisi and so on and the stellar performances of prime ministers like Vajpayee and Manmohan Singh.

Those left behind



LOOKING AHEAD

KIRAN KARNIK

recognition of the importance of education spreads, more migrants are now moving their children to schools in their new urban abode. This is amplified by the perception that schooling in the city is far superior to that available in their home village. Consequently, it is only the elders who are left behind in the village.

With no job — and, often, little capability to take up any demanding work — the elders (parents) are economically dependent on their children. They are part of what used to be called the “money order economy” (money transfers are now done through more efficient means), with their very survival predicated on



Increased migration has left behind the ageing poor

money transfers from faraway children. The combination of human relationships, family ties, and social norms ensures that this system works in almost all cases. However, there are some cases when recalcitrant children — for whatever reason — do not send any money. The elders (sometimes, just a single surviving parent) are then dependent on the largesse of some better-off relative; when such support is not forthcoming, s/he is left destitute.

In future, with growing migration, increasing costs, breakdown of many social norms, and increased longevity, one can foresee this becoming a major issue. The number of poor and destitute elders, with little economic support, is set to become huge. Fast economic progress, one hopes, will mitigate economic hardship to some extent. However, there is another major problem. Even amongst those who are better off because they do

receive money regularly from migrant children or have some independent financial wherewithal, there are issues beyond money. Sooner or later, practically all elders need some form of physical support for mobility. Going anywhere — to the medical centre, for example — requires assistance. Some organizations try to minimize the need to travel for healthcare by taking medical staff to villages and homes (HelpAge India, for example, operates 160 Mobile Health Units that provide a range of health services, including medicines, at the doorstep). Technology is now enabling remote healthcare, including diagnostics and consultation, via tele-medicine.

Human needs, though, are not limited to physical needs. Mental and emotional health are as important and, in fact, influence overall well-being. This under-recognized problem of emotional health is a growing problem which afflicts people across class, gender, and age. It is particularly severe for elders, many of whom have little interaction with others. Their own family often ignores them, even in multi-generational households, as the young are busy with work and their own lives. The problem is now prevalent in both rural and urban areas: working couples and busy children have no time for the elder generation. In rural India, the situation regarding human interaction has worsened with migration, which often leaves only the elders in their village homes (government data indicates that as many as 18 percent of elders live alone or with just their spouse). The resulting loneliness creates and amplifies mental health problems.

It is fashionable to talk of Gen Z — or newer variations — being distinctive. It is time to also focus on the “left behind” generation — the many millions of elders living a lonely life, often with little financial, caregiver, or emotional support — as one which deserves attention. NGOs are already doing quite a bit and they will, doubtless, do more. Governments — central and state — need to step in and mount large programmes, including substantially larger pensions, special wards and attention in hospitals, far better primary healthcare (including free medicines), and a strong focus on mental health through special counsellors and psychiatrists. Elders, 130 million-plus (over 300 million by 2050), deserve this.

Elders have given us — as individuals and as a country — much and made many sacrifices. It is now payback time. ■

Kiran Karnik is a public policy analyst and author. His most recent book is 'Decisive Decade: India 2030, Gazelle or Hippo'

Wrecked rivers hit back



LIVING RIVERS

VENKATESH DUTTA

OVER the past two months, there has been a series of natural disasters including flash floods, thunderstorms, cloudbursts, landslides, and road collapses in various parts of northern India. Despite having access to advanced weather forecasting technology, it seems we are inadequately equipped to effectively address the situation on the ground. These events have caused extensive damage and chaos.

In the Himalayas, a distinct trend is emerging wherein greater amounts of rainfall are occurring within shorter timeframes. Dehradun experienced a staggering 135 mm of rainfall within a mere 90-minute period while Darjeeling recorded a rainfall of 227 mm on August 9. This year, the heightened precipitation can be also attributed to the combined impact of the southwest monsoon and western disturbances.

Specifically, in the states of Himachal Pradesh and Uttarakhand, there have been approximately 75 landslides and 40 instances of flash floods during July and August. The region witnessed the evacuation of over 50,000 tourists due to the unprecedented rainfall. On August 9, a cloudburst hit Sirmaur district, resulting in significant rise in the water level of the Giri river, causing it to overflow into nearby residential areas. On July 9 and 10, the village of Pandoh, located on the bank of the Beas river, also witnessed a sudden surge by the river. This powerful deluge wreaked havoc as it swept away a bridge and homes, carrying people and their belongings in its insistent flow.

The economic toll of these floods is estimated to exceed ₹10,000 crore. Popular destinations like Manali and Shimla were particularly hard hit by cloudbursts and landslides, leading to widespread destruction. The local tourism sector now faces substantial setbacks due to the severe disruption of road networks. In addition, schools, hospitals and community centres have also been affected by the destructive forces of nature.

The Sutlej, Beas, and Yamuna, along with their tributaries, are experiencing high water levels. Relentless rainfall has resulted in

considerable destruction across various regions, including Pauri Garhwal, Rudrapur and Nainital districts, where roads and bridges have been swept away. Landslides caused the closure of the Shimla-Kalka and Chandigarh-Manali national highways. Further, heavy downpours resulted in landslides that obstructed the highways leading to the shrines of Kedarnath, Badrinath, and Gangotri. In the light of these disruptions, pilgrims en route to Kedarnath were stopped and advised to seek shelter in safe areas until the route was restored. Tragically, a landslide occurred on the intervening night of August 3 and 4 in Gaurikund, situated 50 m above the swollen Mandakini. The force of the landslide washed 23 people away in the raging river.

In July, the Yamuna breached its banks, resulting in widespread flooding in Delhi, Mathura, Vrindavan, and Agra. Intense



Multiple rivers surpassed their previously recorded flood levels

rainfall in the national capital, as well as in the upper regions of Uttarakhand and Himachal Pradesh, led to multiple rivers surpassing their previous recorded flood levels and inundating surrounding areas. The impact was also felt in Greater Noida, situated between the Yamuna and Hindon rivers, where the floods had a significant impact. The water from the Yamuna flooded the Ring Road in Delhi, while in Agra it reached the walls of the iconic Taj Mahal — a historic occurrence last seen in 1978. Images from these cities revealed settlements submerged upto waist level, with partially submerged vehicles resembling isolated islands amidst the deluge. The district administration had to undertake evacuation of thousands of residents to relief camps.

The floods in Delhi can be primarily attributed to excessive encroachment on the Yamuna's floodplains. Unregulated addition of built-up area and encroachment along the river has impeded its natural flow. Further, the build-up of silt has raised the riverbed, causing the river to hold less water than its original

capacity. As a result, during high-flow events, the river will breach its embankments and deluge the city.

Rivers constitute the main drainage that allows water to move quickly during a rainstorm. During rainfall, water naturally seeks its own course — following the natural drainage system. During an extreme rain event, we cannot keep water stored. Whatever water comes from upstream has to be released downstream. The dams that impound water must release water. Every city should have a drainage master plan. But in reality, we disregard rivers' physical boundaries; we obstruct their natural course, we allow unregulated construction on their floodplains, we make highways and roads on waterbodies. Consequently, even during normal rainfall, rivulets and rivers experience swift and significant increases in water levels. The inadequate drainage systems fail to cope with intense bouts of rainfall.

Our fragile mountains are witnessing unprecedented development. Several hydropower and road widening projects are being carried out without proper ecological, geological and engineering assessments. The prosperity of the hill states is measured in megawatts (MW) and length of road network to attract investments. Rivers and their ecosystems are particularly vulnerable to such large-scale land use modifications. Hydropower projects have effectively turned once robust mountain rivers into mere streams. Some river channels have

been redirected through tunnels that are carved into the mountains. Large-scale concretization and unscientific cutting along the mountain slopes for road widening and other tourism infrastructure are the major causes of landslides during flash floods.

In times of such extreme events and cloudbursts, the accumulated debris is washed back into the river by the surging water. This detrimental phenomenon is eminently observed in rivers like the Parvati, Beas, and Sutlej, as well as numerous smaller hydropower dams. Adding to these worrying factors, plans or projects for lengthy tunnels spanning upto 150 km along the Sutlej are causing substantial damage to the entire ecosystem.

Yes, the climate has indeed changed, but we are amplifying the impact. With climate change a reality, we should not add another layer to the problem, but make adequate adaptations and changes in our infrastructure planning to climate-proof future generations. ■

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

Fight back with a kiss



AHIMSA MUSINGS

RAJNI BAKSHI

IT is ten years since the annals of nonviolent civil disobedience were enlivened by the ‘kissing protest’ in Turkey. In May 2013, scores of couples locked lips at a subway station in Ankara to protest against the authorities chastizing a couple for kissing in public.

This action quite flummoxed the authorities. What the police are trained to handle is protesters aggressively shouting slogans, waving banners and pushing against police barricades. But what could the police do with hundreds of people just kissing assiduously? Absolutely nothing.

As nonviolence trainer Srdja Popovic wrote about the defiant kissers in Turkey: “It’s not only that the amorous demonstrators aren’t breaking any laws; it’s also that their attitude makes a world of difference. If you’re a cop, you spend a lot of time thinking about how to deal with people who are violent. But nothing in your training prepares you for dealing with people who are funny and peaceful.”

This is an example of what Popovic calls ‘a dilemma action’—that is, an action that forces the authorities into a lose-lose situation. The underlying philosophy is ‘laughtivism’. This term, briefly referred to in the previous column, calls for closer attention.

At first glance ‘laughtivism’ may seem puzzling or even a bit contrived. It is, however, a serious term which refers to strategic use of humour and mocking in order to undermine the authority of those in power. The term has been coined and popularized by the Belgrade-based Center for Applied Nonviolent Actions and Strategies (CANVAS), founded by Popovic.

Much of Popovic’s writing is about the details of laughtivism. For example, an article he

co-authored for *Foreign Policy* magazine in 2013 was titled “Why Dictators Don’t Like Jokes”. It was accompanied by a photo of a Tunisian demonstrator holding his bread stick like a weapon in front of advancing riot police.

The term laughtivism may be newly coined but its practice is well established. In cinema, one of the most iconic examples of this genre is Charlie Chaplin’s *The Great Dictator* in which Chaplin lampooned Adolf Hitler—conveying powerful insights to his audience even as they laughed.

Popovic’s first step is to challenge the common assumption that laughing as you protest can only be a form of venting frustration but cannot actually make a difference. In his book, *Pranksters vs. Autocrats: Why Dilemma Actions Advance Nonviolent Activism*, Popovic draws on two decades of experience to



Kissing as a form of protest is defiance without violence

demonstrate how an element of play not only melts the protesters’ fear, it can also unmask the weakness of those in authority.

According to Sarah Freeman-Woolpert, a student of Popovic, humour and irony were deployed often during the dark days of the Third Reich in Germany. Writing in the journal, *Waging Nonviolence*, Freeman-Woolpert says that laughtivism is now being used to counter the revival of Nazism: “Today, the resistance takes the unlikely form of clowns—troupes of brightly dressed activists who show up to neo-Nazi gatherings and make a public mockery of their hateful messages. This puts white supremacists in a dilemma: their own use of violence will seem

unwarranted, yet their machismo image is tainted by the comedic performance. Humour de-escalates their rallies, turning what could become a violent confrontation into a big joke. Cases show that anti-Nazi clowning can also turn into a wider community event, bringing local people together in solidarity and fun.”

These experiences show that dilemma actions and laughtivism are potentially as effective against hate-mongers and xenophobic extremists as they are against government authorities. For example, in 2012 local authorities in Russia banned public demonstrations that were bringing thousands out on the streets in protest against the election scandal. Activists in the Siberian city of Barnaul staged a ‘toy protest’.

If people had carried the anti-Putin placards they would have immediately been detained.

Instead, protesters propped up the placards on teddy bears and Lego characters. Sure enough, the Siberian authorities removed the placards and banned future toy protests. But, as Popovic writes: “...the government’s clumsy reaction, videos, images, and stories of their decision made national and international headlines.”

Similarly, in 2007, the Panties for Peace campaign highlighted human rights violations in Myanmar. Women across the world sent female underwear to Burmese embassies in various countries. Their

purpose was to insult the military junta leaders who apparently believed that any contact with female undergarments — clean or dirty — would sap them of their power.

In two-thirds of the cases of dilemma actions that CANVAS has studied, they found that the actions were replicated by others. You may well ask: What is the good of this ripple effect if authoritarian regimes remain in place? Surely keeping the spirit of defiance alive is an end in itself. And, in the long arc of struggles that challenge brute force with the power of humane values, even momentary achievements command respect and can deepen resolve across generations. ■

Rajni Bakshi is the founder of YouTube channel Ahimsa Conversations

A debate of bytes

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However, the people of Manipur and the rest of the country were waiting eagerly to hear the prime minister speak on the subject. After all, the issue by then had become Modi’s stunning silence on the matter. He was just not uttering a word. Sections of the pusillanimous media

had finally gathered enough courage to demand that the prime minister speak on the issue. A serious law and order situation in a border region is not merely an issue for the home minister to handle. The prime minister should take full responsibility and be seen to be doing so.

In the event, Modi not only took his own time, a full 100 minutes of posturing, before

deigning to say something on Manipur but in fact said very little. Clearly, the people of Manipur — both sections of that society who are ranged against each other — would have felt let down. Neither would have felt reassured that their problems were at the top of the prime minister’s mind. What a pity. ■

Sanjaya Baru is a writer and Distinguished Fellow at the United Service Institution of India

LIVING

FOOD | TRAVEL | REVIEWS | PRODUCTS | GIVING



The Draco, poised for flight. It is like a mini dragon

Good coffee, wondrous forest

CIVIL SOCIETY REVIEWS

WHAT makes coffee divine? A zillion processes in the lap of nature. Soil, water, microorganisms, plants, vines, trees, birds, bees, animals and reptiles all hang out together to give that bean its halo.

Reptiles, animals in coffee, do we hear you ask in amazement? Yes, yes, up in the steamy and teeming forests of the Western Ghats all living forms are part of a collaborative effort. These mountain ranges are bursting with biodiversity. They are a rare boon to the planet.

Take, for example, the Draco, a gliding lizard with a yellow dewlap. Membranes in its forelegs and hindlegs expand to serve as wings when it needs to escape a predator or if it feels the urge to just shift location a bit from one tree’s bark to another. A Draco flies like a mini dragon.

The Draco’s world is the forest. You won’t find it in your neighbourhood park. So, don’t even think of bringing it home. And if you happen to see forests vanishing, remember the Draco will be vanishing, too.

It is a coffee named Draco which we are trying out in this magazine. It comes from the Black Baza Coffee Company whose repertoire of products is finely honed by the perfections it



Arshiya Bose in the wilds Draco-watching

discovers in the wilds of the Western Ghats.

“We have been inspired by the Draco’s evolutionary flight. How did it feel to sit on a rock for two straight hours despite leeches, and watch this fantastical creature flick its yellow dewlap before it took off from the trunk of one tree and glided to another? Well, it inspired a coffee, a more modest evolutionary flight but an intelligent adaptation nonetheless!” says Black Baza’s ebullient founder, Arshiya Bose.

“Inspired by the setting in which we first saw the Draco, we created a brew where Arabica from the BR Hills exists in quantum entanglement with green cardamom from Attihally. This is a delicate coffee deliberately,” she says.

If you are the instant coffee drinking type, shoving spoonfuls of powder into cups of hot water, you are clearly missing out on the exciting action. Instant is just not the real thing. The caffeine may be the stimulation you need but you aren’t among the woke coffee-drinkers of the world.

Good coffee equals good forests and vice versa. Forget what comes from company-owned plantations. That is the kind of mass-produced stuff corporate profits are generated

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from. Think instead of those small farmers on homesteads and their coffee plants entwined with cardamom and pepper and nourished by life forms you can't imagine.

When this magazine was in Coorg not too long ago, we spent a brilliant night watching rare frogs twinkling in the dark. It was surreal. What we were witnessing was really just one scene in a much bigger performance. This was also the time when frogs would be born on trees, encased in leaves which would open to let the babies fall into water bodies to become tadpoles. Snakes from all over would congregate at the water bodies to make a meal of the frogs.

In the Western Ghats in Maharashtra, Archana Godbole, a botanist on a mission to document and save biodiversity, would walk us through sacred groves and private forests where communities over generations had built up storehouses of gene wealth. Cobras would be gently shooed away. The great Indian hornbill, nesting in the hollows of trees, was the dependable carrier of seeds. Scorpions were a part of life. It is here that the unique Alphonso mango flourishes.

Dark clouds now hover over these idyllic arrangements. They have always been under some kind of stress. A sacred grove vanishing here, a private forest getting chopped down there to sell off the timber for some quick money.

But now the threat is more serious. A recent amendment to the Forest Conservation Act (FCA) of 1980 says there will be no protection to forest cover unless it is recognized as being forest by the government.

The amendment relates to border tracts so as to facilitate the construction of strategic infrastructure. Security is important but in the fragile Himalayas such construction, even if needed, could have its own problems. In the Western Ghats, if the new law is applied, it could throw small farmers with family holdings into turmoil. Many of their lands are under the

1980 act deemed to be forests even though they don't figure in government records as forests. They grow excellent coffee, premium pepper and cardamom and more. But now with the amendment cutting through them with some six-lane highway would be possible. Livelihoods and nature's bounty would be lost.

"Vast acres of forested land, scrub jungle, grasslands, high-altitude deserts and alpine forest exist beyond government records and these areas are likely to lose legal protection," explains Bose.

"In coffee landscapes, for example, sacred groves and community forests are maintained by villages but are not recognized as 'forest' in government records. While the FCA requires a rigorous process of obtaining clearance before such forests and ecosystems are diverted for non-forest use, the amendment would fast-track this diversion...and local communities, our partner producers, would have little legal backing to resist," she fears.

"Fast track for whom? Enter the builders of six-lane highways and miners of bauxite, makers of dams and rollers of steel," Bose reiterates.

Black Baza has been working with small growers and community groups, assisting them in using their eco-friendly traditional practices to carve out a niche for themselves in markets where consumer preferences have not just veered away from chemicals but are also conscious of fair trade terms and promotion of small producers.

The small company's slogan is that it produces "diversity friendly coffee". While doing so it protects the balance in nature and simultaneously takes farmers to markets and helps them compete with good branding and penetration.

Bose was researching sustainability certifications in coffee when she was approached by coffee growers of the Kodagu

region to help them better market their produce. She has a PhD on the political ecology of markets for biodiversity conservation from Cambridge University.

The coffee business is infamous for its inequalities. The grower gets just 2.8 percent of the retail price. As Bose morphed into an ethical entrepreneur, setting up Black Baza, growers began getting 17 percent from the company.

It is not just the money. It is also the building of identity. The communities come to be known for what they grow. And it doesn't happen in a shrill, evangelical way. Black Baza is great with its appeal to consumers, its packaging and its online presence where it is not just about transactions but immersion in the world of small coffee growers.

When the customer buys the coffee they sign up to be part of a transformational experience. The messaging is great: "Your cup of coffee is kinder to the environment and the grower." Of course the coffee is good, but you also "secure livelihoods and strengthen coffee farming practices that conserve biodiversity. We invite you to participate in the process. This is a great step one. But we can do more".

Bose stresses that it was the farmers who came to her. They were growing coffee under trees as it should be grown while in other parts of the world plantations had replaced such practices.

Extending herself beyond her academic interests, Bose set up Black Baza in 2016 as an "activist company". It remains a private entity and a business. But like many small, modern Indian businesses it has a mission and strong ethical foundations.

At last count, there were 650 producers she was working with. They come from tribal and marginalized communities who get left behind in the stampede for market share. Getting them a better deal is both a business and a social goal. It puts much more than caffeine into a cup of coffee for the urban consumer. ■



Become an Onam tourist

SUSHEELA NAIR

FROM August 17 to September 16, or the month of Chingam as it is called in Malayalam, God's Own Country comes alive with vivid, vibrant colours heralding Onam, a joyous fiesta of music, dance and sumptuous feasts.

Nature is at her dramatic best in Kerala when the torrential monsoon rains have washed the land clean and verdant fields emerge greener, refreshed, brimming with life. The harvest of paddy is in. There is a burst of flowers and trees laden with fruit. The pageant is all set for Onam, a harbinger of spring — signalling the harvesting season. Onam epitomizes the new-found vigour and enthusiasm of the season, and is celebrated with traditional fervour with visits to temples, family get-togethers, gifting of clothes to near and dear ones called Onakkodi and plenty of merrymaking.

Redolent with myths and legends, the festival recreates an idyllic state of a prosperous Kerala once ruled by Mahabali, a benevolent king, "when all men were equal, when no one was poor, when there was neither theft nor dread of thieves". It is a demonstration of the jubilation of his subjects over the annual homecoming of the legendary king.

It is reminiscent of a gilded golden age, a festival of plenty, and a commemoration of the prosperity of a euphoric past. Onam originated as a harvest festival, celebrating the season of plenty. The very word Onam means prosperity. Thus, Onam is a season for all the communities of Kerala to rejoice. What makes it distinctive is that it is no longer a Hindu festival; it is now a Kerala festival celebrated by all Malayalis, irrespective of religion, caste or creed.

Synonymous with flowers, gifts and feasts, Onam denotes the festivities after the harvesting season. It commences with Atham and lasts for 10 days, culminating on Uthirathi. During Atham, people gather flowers and arrange them in various formations known as *athapookalam* in the frontyards of their houses. The climax of the 10-day celebrations is on Thiruvonam when the courtyard of every home in Kerala comes alive with the vivid colours of *pookkalam* or floral carpets welcoming Mahabali. Clay images representing Mahabali and Vishnu are made and kept in the specially decorated ground in the courtyards.

But the most important aspect is the *sadhya* (grand lunch) that awaits the Malayali on Thiruvonam (last day). So much so that whichever part of the world



Snakeboat races on the Pampa river in Aranmula is an all-community affair

they may be in, it is for Onam that Malayalis choose to head back home, to share in the joy of togetherness. Whatever happens, in no household is this lunch missed. Known as *onasadya*, the feast is a veritable treat of vegetarian delicacies served in a distinct order on tender plantain leaves and savoured in the company of kith and kin. The feast is a gourmet's delight and the memory of the lip-smacking curries like *pulisseri*, *kalan*, *olan*, *erisseri* and *avial* with their tantalizing aromas lasts till the next Onam.

But the celebrations are not restricted to feasting. Onam is also the time for gaiety, cheer, songs, dances, games and backwater carnivals. It brings an enchanting aura, providing an opportunity for Keralites to display their prowess in these diverse fields. It is also the time for rejoicing, renewal of friendship, reunion of relatives, and the revival of a myriad of folklore forms like Pulikkali. Every year, on the fourth day of Onam, Thrissur, the cultural capital of Kerala,



Pulikkali or the Tiger Dance is performed on the fourth day of Onam

reverberates to the rhythm of Pulikkali, a native dance form in which painted men with tiger masks prance. The whole town sports a carnival atmosphere, full of action and colourful spectacle.

Colourful backwater carnivals, aquatic festivals and snakeboat races are organized along the holy Pampa river as part of the celebrations. Aranmula, a tranquil village in Pathanamthitta district, plays host to a post-harvest boat pageant and race which have become an integral part of the land's ethos. What makes this water regatta interesting is that this all-community affair transcends religion, caste and creed — thus promoting communal harmony and religious tolerance.

Onam conjures up quite a number of images and impressions and brings cheer to the people. The courtyards resonate to the rhythms of Kaikottukali, a dance performed by women and children around a *nilavailakkavu* (lamp). The swing is an integral part of Onam, especially in rural areas, and young men and women, decked in their best, sing Onam songs, as they celebrate on swings slung from tree branches. The memories of *onapudava* (new clothes) linger as the year-long wait for another Onam begins.

The joyous occasion provides an opportunity for Keralites to display their prowess in the diverse fields of art and crafts, sport and games.

In addition to traditional customs, in contemporary Kerala there are exhibitions and sales across the state, flower shows and food festivals. Kerala comes alive with classical and folk dance performances, music recitals, cultural pageants, and much more! ■

Samita's World

by SAMITA RATHOR



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.

JEWELLERY MADE WITH PAPER

Savi Kanwal, a paper artist and illustrator, founded Cheapquills in September 2019 just before the Covid-19 pandemic in Almora to support her family. A postgraduate in Remote Sensing and GIS from Kumaon University, Kanwal was shocked by the tonnes of oxidized jewellery thoughtlessly dumped into fields and water bodies in Uttarakhand, poisoning soil and water.

She started Cheapquills from home to tackle this issue in her own way. Kanwal creates frames, illustrations and jewellery made with paper. Her paper jewellery is waterproof and eco-friendly. It is also lightweight and affordable.

Her micro-enterprise is run solely by her. Every single piece is designed and made by her. She takes around 20 days to complete an order. Each piece is very precious to her as it is customized specially for her clients, she says.

Place orders with Vani Savi Kanwal at +91 95288 90429; email: cheapquills@gmail.com Instagram: <https://www.instagram.com/cheapquills/>



WEAVES FROM THE NORTHEAST

The Nomi – Weavers Nest offers handcrafted jewellery, textiles and ethnic wear from the Northeast made by local artisans.

Nomi was a talented girl from Assam who wanted to design and promote ethnic and fusion wear for women and men using the Northeast's weaves. However, she passed away.

So, to fulfil her dream, her brother, Sushant Phukan, founded The Nomi to boost the livelihoods of artisans and weavers from the Northeast.

"We aspire to connect the rich heritage and creativity of the region to diverse markets across the globe with sustainable fashion," he says.

Phukan is a former techie. He has now devoted himself full-time to promoting The Nomi. He has a stall at Dastkar's Gali-e-Khas in Delhi's Andheria Mor.

Place orders with Sushant Phukan at +91 97174 74959; email: nomiwn1@gmail.com Instagram: <https://www.instagram.com/thenomiofficial/>



INDIA'S SEEDING MAN

In 2014 when Roshan Ray got a large print order for wedding cards, it got him thinking. The cards would be discarded soon after the wedding, he realized. Ray was in the business of handmade paper in Bengaluru. Used paper could be reborn but how should he do it?

Ray came up with a winning idea. He designed wedding cards with plant seeds embedded in them. So once people were done with the wedding they could plant those cards and grow a multitude of plants, fruits, vegetables or herbs.

That's how his enterprise, Seed India, was born in 2014. Ray went from designing seeded cards to making seeded pens, pencils, calendars, tags, clay lamps, *rakhis* and the national flag. The colours used are all made from natural dyes.

Seed India claims to be the largest producer of eco-friendly products in India. It exports to around 25 countries.

Ray studied at Bishop Cotton School in Bengaluru and then graduated from the Dayananda Sagar College of Engineering. His business, he believes, is about changing mindsets so that environmental degradation does not happen in the first place.

His factory at Bommasandra in Bengaluru is an example of the circular economy. The paper itself is made from waste cotton cloth from textile manufacturing units which would otherwise fill up landfills or clog drains, ponds and rivers.

Waste cloth is chopped, cleaned and beaten to pulp for eight to 12 hours by machines. The pulp is infused with seeds and taken to a vat lifting frame that forms the pulp into sheets. The sheets are then naturally dried for six to seven days before being cut into customised shapes and sizes. This paper is completely biodegradable. Only organic or edible dyes are used.

Ray is full of ideas to prevent pollution and waste from building up. Every year, tonnes of idols are immersed in rivers and ponds causing water pollution. Traditional Ganesh idols are made of plaster of Paris and use insoluble paints which are bad for the environment.

Seed India's Ganesh idols are made of clay and embedded with seeds which can grow into plants after immersion. Seed clay statues just need some water to burst into tiny tomatoes, *tulsi* or marigold plants.

Or take the national flag we fly on Independence Day or Republic Day. Instead of buying a plastic flag, and then disrespectfully throwing it away, Seed India offers an alternative — a seed flag that can grow into a plant.

Likewise there are seed *rakhi* kits and Diwali lamps you can plant. And calendars. Every month, just tear off the page and plant it. You can grow basil, brinjal, spinach, morning glory and marigold.

There are also seed balls for mass plantations and Ray has collaborated with Satya Sai orphanage in Kerala to plant these all over the state. He has made cards for New York Fashion Week and garment tags for an exhibition on sustainable products at the UN.

Companies can get business cards made from Seed India. You can also buy jute bags and cork bags. Ray now has another idea. How can water hyacinth be converted into paper? He would like to rid Bengaluru's lakes of masses of floating weed.

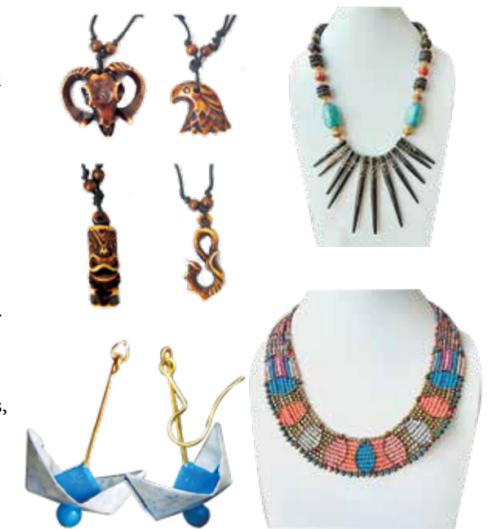
To buy products from Seed India call 6364699837 for bulk inquiries; email: seedpaperindia@gmail.com

WITH BEADS, METALS, WOOD AND MORE

Vani Agarwal specializes in designing attractive jewellery for her clientele. An MBA in marketing and finance from Bengaluru University, she studied the market and found there was demand for customized jewellery. She tried buying readymade jewellery and selling it online but she wasn't satisfied with what was available. So she started her own enterprise called Jhumka Chica.

"Women need jewellery which matches their clothes. Office-goers look for simple, elegant jewellery which can be worn the whole day," explains Agarwal.

She designs jewellery which is young and kinky using a variety of materials and techniques: threads, beads, metal, wood, fabric, jute, silk, origami and more. "Customers always like lightweight jewellery with a heavy look," she says. You can buy earrings, necklaces, bracelets and more to match your outfits. Or you can ask Agarwal to design something chic for you. Place orders with Vani Agarwal at +91 9971822327 email: vaniagarwal13@gmail.com Instagram: [Jhumka_chica](https://www.instagram.com/Jhumka_chica)



VOLUNTEER & DONATE

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.

DIAGNOSING LEPROSY, HELPING PATIENTS

 The Leprosy Mission Trust India (TLMTI) was founded in 1874 in Ambala to help people affected by a curable disease which turns them into outcasts in society.

Apart from leprosy, the trust works with people suffering from other neglected tropical diseases, like lymphatic filariasis. TLMTI provides medical care and treatment, livelihood opportunities, economic development and social inclusion to those affected by leprosy.

The organization diagnoses over 6,000 new cases of leprosy each year. The trust works with 15 hospitals, six vocational training centres, and four residential care homes for elderly people affected by leprosy. The trust runs a research laboratory across nine states in India.

<https://www.leprosymission.in/>
+91 (0) 11 4353 3300 | info@leprosymission.in

GETTING CHILDREN TO STAY ON IN SCHOOL

 Human Hope Foundation specializes in remedial education for children from marginalized sections of society so that they have access to quality education and stay on in school.

To fill the gap between enrolment and learning outcomes, Human Hope Foundation runs a Remedial Education Program. The program supplements school education by looking after each child's learning needs. The foundation also offers a range of extra-curricular skills with the help of volunteers. There are workshops for students to learn skills like dancing, singing, painting and making handicrafts. There is also a scholarship program for six students from economically weaker backgrounds. The foundation works on water, sanitation, and health issues as well.

<https://www.humanhopefoundation.ngo/>
+91 8091030875 (Whatsapp), +91 9418030875 | humanhopeindia@gmail.com

PUTTING AN END TO POACHING

 The Wildlife Protection Society of India (WPSI), set up by in 1994 by Belinda Wright, a wildlife photographer and conservationist, is on the frontlines of conservation in the country. The WPSI works closely with government agencies to combat poaching and tackle human-animal conflicts. The WPSI has conducted 200 workshops, training over 8,000 officers in wildlife law enforcement.

The WPSI's wildlife crime database is a meticulous record of 33,000 wildlife cases and 27,000 wildlife criminals. The non-profit not only exposes widespread tiger poaching and seizes illegal wildlife products, it also provides legal aid to prosecution in wildlife court cases. You can volunteer or support them with a donation.

www.wpsi-india.org | 011-41625920
wpsi@wpsi-india.org

WORKING FOR THE GIRL CHILD, MOTHERS

 Founded by a doctor alarmed at the extent of female foeticide, Vatsalya has been working since 1995 at the grassroots with communities to combat female foeticide and create awareness of the rights of the girl child.

The NGO assists in the implementation of the law against ultrasound use to identifying the gender of a foetus. Its workers are active at the state, district and national level. Based in Lucknow, Vatsalya's main work is at the grassroots where it trains traditional midwives and others at the lowest rungs of the healthcare system. It helps them in dealing with social issues and providing nutrition to promote maternal and child health.

<http://vatsalya.org.in/>
info@vatsalya.org.in
vatsalyaa@rediffmail.com

SURGERIES TO BRING BACK A SMILE

 An adult or child with a cleft lip or palate finds it difficult to lead a normal life. He or she can't speak clearly nor eat properly.

It can also lead to ear infections, hearing problems and dental problems.

Mission Smile provides cleft lip and cleft palate surgeries for children and adults free of cost.

Till date, the non-profit has carried out 36,000 safe corrective surgeries and gifted 36,000 smiles to such individuals.

You can volunteer with them as they go from state to state putting up camps and identifying patients.

If you know someone with a cleft lip, connect them to Mission Smile.

You could also support a surgery with just ₹28,000.
www.missionsmile.org | 9007883789
contact@missionsmile.org

SUPPLY NUTRITION TO HIV/AIDS CHILDREN

 Sparsh Balgram works for the welfare of children afflicted by HIV/AIDS. It strives to provide them with education, health and nutrition.

The NGO runs a shelter for children with HIV/AIDS in Pune. It works across Maharashtra for such children. Their project, Sparsh Sanjivani, involves providing nutrition bags filled with pulses, fruits and other groceries to young children. Currently, 20 children are being provided a nutrition bag every month. Sparsh Balgram aims to bring under its care 100 children by year-end. The NGO takes care of medicines needed by children and it also provides a good education to the children.

<http://www.sparshbalgram.in/>
sparsh.balgram@gmail.com
mahesh@sparshbalgram.com
020 25823700 / +91 7620 0402 30

WITH STARS THAT SPECIAL SHINE

 How can you bring a little happiness and hope to those who may be having a tough time? Well, you could drop by and cheer things up by your very presence and showing that they are not alone. You could also help out with counselling, Zumba classes, football coaching and medical check-ups. STARS, which stands for Spending Time and Reaping Smiles, was formed in 2013 and is based in Goa. It supports youngsters under a scholarship programme so that they can continue to go to school and college. It helps single mothers and poor families with their monthly rations so that they get to eat the essentials. There are also medical check-ups. You could donate to STARS or volunteer with them if you are in Goa or perhaps replicate this beautiful idea wherever you happen to be living.

www.thinkstars.org | 9850168166
lushanferns@gmail.com

LIFE OF DIGNITY FOR THE DISABLED

 In Bengaluru, over 900 students with disabilities study at Samarthanam's residential schools. By providing free tuition, free accommodation and accessible infrastructure, the school is truly able to empower these children. There is also a special school for children with intellectual disabilities. Around 100 students study at this school.

The goal is to enable them to live a life of dignity. Skills are imparted at their 13 livelihood resource centres and 64 percent of those who get training find jobs. Support them with a donation or volunteer with them.

You could help convert textbooks to accessible formats or act as a scribe for a visually challenged student.
www.samarthanam.org | 9480809586
kumar@samarthanam.org



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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!**

