

# SPECIAL ANNIVERSARY ISSUE

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# Civil Society

20 years  
of original  
journalism

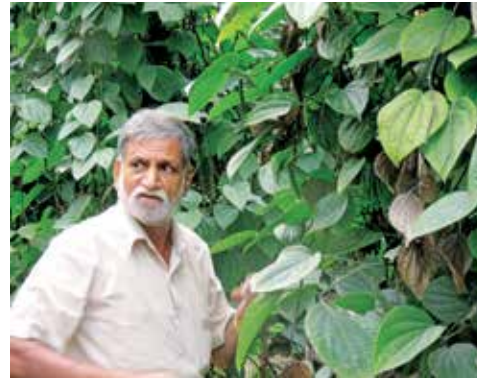
## INDIA IN TRANSITION

RITA & UMESH ANAND | SANJAYA BARU | R.A. MASHELKAR | KIRAN KARNIK  
ARUN MAIRA | DILEEP RANJEKAR | JAGDEEP S. CHHOKAR | PAVITRA MOHAN  
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MISHRA | MADHUKAR SHUKLA | VENKATESH DUTTA | SAIBAL CHATTERJEE

# IN CIVIL SOCIETY EVERYONE IS SOMEONE



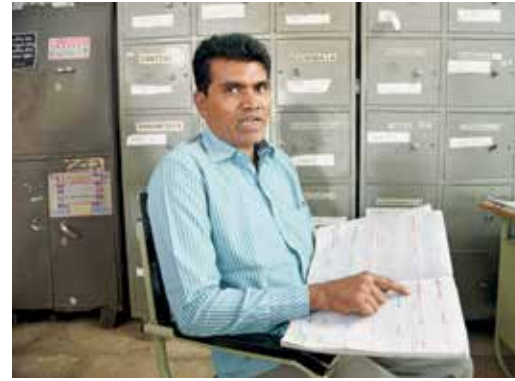
Girish Bharadwaj | Bridge builder



M.N.R. Venugopal | Pepper doctor



Prasanna Rajendran | Turnaround scientist



Beeram Ramulu | Warangal's rights man



Sanjay Sahni | Ratnauli's hero



Women of Bundi | Farm entrepreneurs



Sathyarayanan Mundayoor | Life coach



Govind Desai | Peace activist



Prathap B. Rao | 'Pothole Raja'



Nikhil Dey | Voice of reason



Honnesara Paniyaji Manjappa | Change agent



Siddharth Shiram | Caring industrialist



Ramesh Garu | Teacher with toys



Jaskirat Singh | Code breaker



Mohammed Gafur Chhipa | Titri's headmaster



Nilesh Mohite | Mind doctor



C.R. Elsy | GI hunter



Sunil Kaul | Northeast's friend



Puli Raju | Suicide documenter



Raj Seelam | Entrepreneur with a mantra



Archana Godbole and Jayant Sarnaik | Guardians of the ghats



K.P. Arjunan | Pulse reader



Sudha Sinha | Devoted oncologist



Chintakindi Malleshham | Inventor



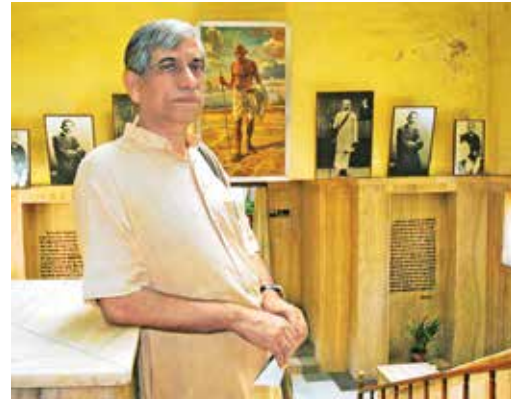
Begari Lakshamma | Seed keeper

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know  
matters.  
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people  
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# IN CIVIL SOCIETY EVERYONE IS SOMEONE



Anupam Mishra | Water guru



Abhijit Prabhudessai | Goa's voice



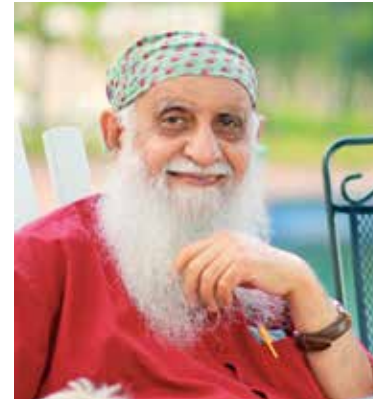
A.V. Balasubramanian | Rice custodian



Zakia Soman | Feminist



Jean Dreze | Bottom-up economist



Ravi Chopra | Mountain visionary



Indian Ocean | Iconic band



M.S. Swaminathan | Farmers' scientist



Dhrubajyoti Ghosh | Engineer and ecologist



Valmik Thapar | Tiger spokesman



Ravikant Singh and Rajat Jain | Calamity specialists



Chetan Maini | Electric car innovator



Osama Manzar | Digital crusader



Arvind Singh | Malnutrition fighter



V. Ravichandar | Urbanist



Kirat Brahma | Culture messenger



Arbind Singh | Vendor leader



Vijay Mahajan | Microfinance legend



Ann Miriam and Vijay Anand Ismavel | Makunda's first couple



Laxman Singh | Rain catcher



Dipankar Chakraborti | Scientist and whistleblower



Anil Swarup | Fine officer



Arshiya Bose | Coffee ethicist



Baba Adhav | Hamal helmsman



Rajkumar and Mary Ramasamy | K.C. Patty's hope



Gautam Vohra | Writer and activist



Jogesh Kumar | PHC reviver



Renuka Gupta | Mother to Anupshahr



Banwang Losu | Script creator



Gautam Sharma | Master headmaster



Naurti Bai | Super sarpanch

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stories of  
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Ratna Vishwanathan | Development optimist



Bashir Ahmad Mir | Peacemaker



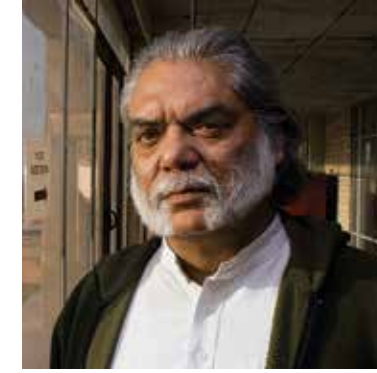
Devinder Sharma | Farm scholar



Medha Patkar | Rights campaigner



Javed Abidi | Disabilities advocate



Dinesh Mohan | The listener



Aadiwasi Jan Jagruti team | Nandurbar's angels



Soumya Swaminathan | Nutrition evangelist



Geeta Wahi Dua and Brij Dua | Inventive landscapers



Ajay Mathur | Energy insider



Dr G.G. Gangadharan | Insightful vaidya



Ravi Chellam | Wildlife expert



Sumoni Jhodia | Tribal leader



S. Vishwanath | Rain man



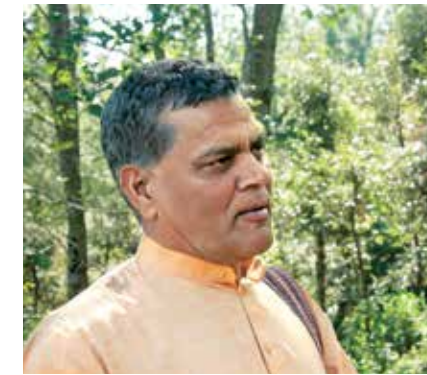
Aziza Tyabji Hydari | Aural educator



Damera Yadaiah | Saver of babies



D.P.S. Toor | Rural surgeon



Sachidanand Bharti | People's forester



Apar Gupta | Internet activist



Shankar Singh | Grassroots rockstar



Poonam Mutreja | Women's cheerleader



Blessy and Prabhu Joseph | Spirited physicians



R.S. Praveen Kumar | Officer turned politician



Ratish Nanda | Conservationist



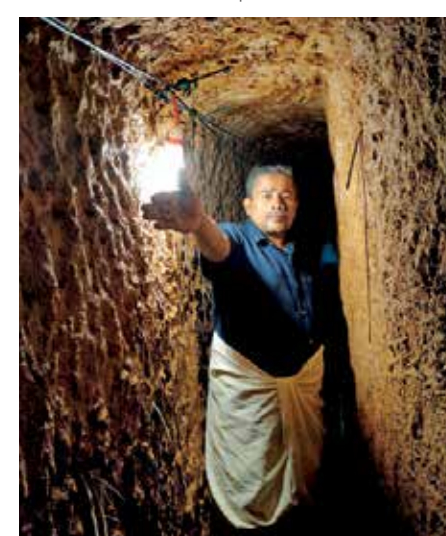
Evita Fernandez | Doctor with heart



Ganesh Babu | Plant whisperer



Ramesh K.V. | Classic puppeteer



P. Jayakrishnan Nair |



S.V. Kameshwari and Prakash Vinjamuri | Health educators

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would not  
otherwise  
see from  
a magazine  
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# Civil Society

READ US. WE READ YOU.

## Thank you! 20 times over!

PEOPLE express amazement that *Civil Society* should have survived 20 years as an independent magazine. Truth be told, we are as amazed as anyone else. When we started, we weren't sure we would last six months and there are times even now when we feel like an endangered species.

The credit for hanging in is often goodnaturedly given to us in the magazine. We are touched, but, truly, our own survival and success would not have been possible without an array of well-wishers helping us along. So, to our advertisers, subscribers, vendors, friends and colleagues, we would like to say thank you — 20 times over!

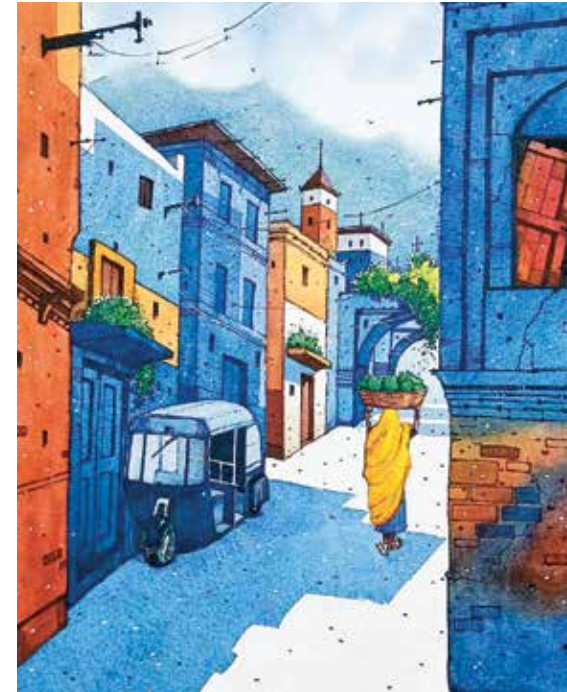
Our survival in the choppy waters of the media business is perhaps also a sign of the times. The day of the old-fashioned independent publication drawing its strength from a community of readers seems to be back. It has a lot to do with changing consumer preferences. People are wary of commercially driven content. They want to be reliably informed about their world with stories that matter and they can trust. Technology makes the rough and tumble of news easily available everywhere. Opinions and commentaries fly thick and fast. But the well-crafted journalistic reportage has its own special appeal and there are takers.

Standards are important. We work hard and smart at our stories. But we are immensely fortunate to have columnists in Sanjaya Baru, Kiran Karnik, Arun Maira, Dileep Ranjekar and Jagdeep Chhokar. Columns on rivers by Venkatesh Dutta and peace by Rajni Bakshi reflect their specialized interests and have been invaluable. We are known for the quality of our pictures and many of those which make up our rich archive are thanks to Lakshman Anand, who also chipped in with the cover photo for this issue.

To R.A. Mashelkar we owe a debt of gratitude for being a great advocate of our magazine and making it his personal cause. Ours has been a long association.

This special issue is about 20 years of *Civil Society* and 20 years of India. As journalists free to do our own thing we have had a great journey understanding and reporting on the many changes that have been swirling around us as the economy grows and old equations give way to new ones. It is impossible to document all that we have done, but, in this issue, we make a brave attempt. The special articles we have commissioned track some of the changes India has been through. Once again, it isn't possible to be exhaustive.

We also bring back Artability, our special section on art by people with disabilities. This is the second edition of Artability and there will be many more to come.

### ARTABILITY 2

Join *Civil Society* in this second annual exploration of disability art as we curate the work of 10 inspiring artists. "Art washes away from the soul the dust of everyday life," said Picasso. What about those who are differently abled? What does art do for them?

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### INDIA IN TRANSITION

Rita & Umesh Anand | Sanjaya Baru | R.A. Mashelkar | Sumita Ghose Pavitra Mohan & Sanjana B. Mohan | Dileep Ranjekar | Jagdeep S. Chhokar | Arun Maira | Reema Nanavaty | Aruna Roy | Rajiv Khandelwal Kiran Karnik | Madhukar Shukla | Surinder S. Jodhka | Santanu Mishra Venkatesh Dutta | Vijay Anand Ismavel | Saibal Chatterjee

18-57

### A JOURNEY TO REMEMBER

Some stories from 20 years of *Civil Society*

58-66

### A GIFTING GUIDE

There is often a dilemma when it comes to finding an ideal gift for loved ones. The country is teeming with small producers and artisans who need help to reach out to sell their wonderful products. *Civil Society* has curated a gifting guide, complete with what they offer and how you can reach them.

79-86

Cover photograph by Lakshman Anand for *Civil Society*

### ANNUAL SPECIAL ISSUE

This special double issue celebrates 20 years of our magazine and is for the months of January and February. Our next issue will be in March.

Thermax's expertise in generating steam and power from the widest possible range of biomass and process wastes such as bagasse, coffee husk and rice stalk among others, is playing an important role in the decarbonisation journey of customers, helping them achieve better resource productivity and improve bottom lines while maintaining a cleaner environment.



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IN THE LIGHT

SAMITA RATHOR



LETTERS



Peace works

Rajni Bakshi's story, 'Non-violence in a violent world', was very good. I like the way the Seville statement was summarized and the way the Rabi asks people to be part of the solution rather than be part of the problem.

T.S. Ananthu

Excellent cover! Training for non-violent action is very important. Please take the initiative for that. I would be happy to support you.

Mohan Hirabai Hiralal

"In a time of polarized societies and cancel culture, nonviolence is naturally threatening" is such an important truth in the violent world we live in today. This cover story is immensely insightful in more ways than one. It inspired me to strive for my own little world of peace amidst the chaos that engulfs us all. Reading this made me think perhaps our world isn't entirely bleak. Maybe there is still a chance for peace to prevail.

Thank you for choosing to write on matters that are often shelved.

Mala

Village voice

I liked reading Prof. Surinder Jodhka's opinion on the rural economy, sociology and politics. Your interview with him, 'The Indian village is not static', highlighted how the narrative of rural India has been shaped by external socio-political thinkers and capitalists. Being part of the rural community, I completely agree with his thoughts on rural governance and the panchayat system. His insight on how migration works as liberation for Bihar's youth is completely new. We need more voices and narratives on the Global South.

Naresh Kumar

This is a thought-provoking interview.

Kanchan Mondal

I found this interview particularly insightful. The sad reality, as Prof. Jodhka puts it is —"earlier, the Nehruvian middle class still felt it had the onus of taking everyone along. But that is not 'in' anymore." As a country this is shameful, to say the least. Villages are the roots of any society, intrinsic to the social fabric of India.

Gauri

Makunda Hospital

I was recently on a birding expedition on the Dosdewa Forest

Trail in Assam when I fell down and got a serious fracture in my left ankle. I was taken to Makunda Hospital. I was extremely impressed not only with the quality of care but also the empathy shown by the doctors and staff. Keep it up, guys!

Dr Ian D'Souza

Money matters

Your story on Rang De, 'You can fund an artisan directly now', is a great initiative. But the transaction costs in terms of time spent in waiting and time spent in convincing the retail investor would be too high to secure a tiny investment of, say, ₹50,000. There are many other issues related to scaling up the impact of such small investments which crop up when things start getting a little better. It is a long road ahead.

Jayant Sarnaik

Foul air

In Jyoti Pande Lavakare's piece, 'Pollution the internal enemy', the first line is meaningless. The issue is not "safety" but "risk", and WHO experts manufacture risks of air pollution, both ambient and household. It is also incorrect to assert that "even lower pollution levels cause disease, disability and death". Public health academics 'attribute' death and disability to discrete diseases and then apportion blame across different "risk

factors", air pollution being one of them.

Nikhil Desai

What an amazing and enlightening article. It resonates with all that I preach but my words go mostly unheard.

Ashwani Khurana

This article is important. Air pollution is a silent and deadly killer. There has been a steady rise in the incidence of lung cancer among non-smokers as well as heart attacks, as the writer points out. Ignore the facts at your peril.

Harmala Gupta

App for parents

Usha Rai's article, 'Parenting app improves child health', was so unique and inspiring. Mothers, especially those who cannot afford to give their children enough time, can really benefit from this initiative. I often worry about little children playing in dangerous construction sites. This made me realize all hope is not lost. Such meaningful work.

Dhruv

Travel bug

I really enjoy Susheela Nair's travel pieces, especially 'Soaking in the Konkan'. I had no idea the Konkan was such a wholesome travel destination! I will be sure to suggest it to family and friends. The pictures are so idyllic, it made me want to catch a flight this instant.

Mehreen

Dog days

Your article, 'Deadly strays? Or community dogs?', was very apt and well-articulated. This is a problem being faced across the country. The municipal authorities are not doing their job. Nor are the dog feeders showing any sense of responsibility for their stray dogs. Interestingly, they have also tried to obstruct municipal authorities from trying to do their job as per the law. It is high time we stick to the parent Prevention of Cruelty to Animals Act and other municipality and police laws than get bullied by the life-threatening ABC Rules. Amidst all this it's the poor stray animal who suffers.

Nagen

Dogs are domestic, companion animals that need to be owned.

*Canis lupus* means dog of the household, not the streets. The only way to coexist and improve the lives of dogs is to ensure that they are owned or taken care of in shelters. Being homeless on the streets, regardless of being sterilized, is the definition of cruelty. Stray dog control is also the statutory duty of the state. NGOs and activists, however well-meaning, cannot be involved in animal and disease control. Their intervention must remain limited to running shelters and adoptions. Unfortunately, we have allowed harmful policies like the ABC Rules to be implemented for 20 years and this has severed relations between people and dogs. Dogs do not belong on the streets.

Meghna Uniyal

Dog activists are spreading false information that dogs don't bite unless provoked, that a hungry dog will bite, sterilisation reduces dog bites and so on. Animals, particularly dogs, must be owned or, if not owned, then kept in a shelter. Dogs should not be roaming on the streets because keeping them homeless, ownerless and feeding them there causes a congregation of stray dogs. It results in aggressive territorial pack behaviour causing them to chase, attack and bite people, especially the vulnerable.

Vineeta S.

The arrogance and adamant behaviour of purported animal welfare activists are actually damaging the cause of stray dogs. The bullying by dog feeders with the active support of NGOs who don't consider the safety of residents and children at all has already caused a lot of damage. People and children have died and unpleasant incidents have taken place. Inaction by government agencies and ambivalence by the courts is turning many dog lovers against stray dogs and their feeders. If this inaction affects election results politicians will have to bear the brunt. People are fully aware that there is one MP for the cause of stray dogs. But there is no MP capable of talking about safety, hygiene and human lives which are being adversely affected due to stray dogs.

Kumar

I cannot understand why people can't empathize with dog problems. Humans have taken over all places, food and shelter. Dogs have nothing to survive on. They are hungry and sick. All humans are corrupt and use the money that is issued for animal welfare. Animals cannot do anything. Humans either kill them or let them live happily. The government is spending crores in the construction sector, on free food, electricity, buses and lots more. Why can't they make shelters for animals?

Jyoti R.

Brahma miseries

Thanks for writing about our plight in 'Dogs, people and the courts'. It's horrible to stay here in Brahma Suncity Housing Society. We have 80-plus stray dogs moving around and it's very scary to walk on the road. The Pune Municipal Corporation (PMC) is not interested in tackling this matter.

Sanjay

The sad part is that despite incidents of attacks by stray dogs increasing in Brahma Suncity, no action has been taken. Those responsible are ready to compromise with the safety of children.

Awadhi

Housing societies must be saved for humanity's sake. Leaving children and senior citizens to the mercy of strays within their own premises is the worst way to curb development of the country.

Ritu Mazumdar

How long do we have to suffer and protect ourselves from stray dogs in our housing society? Who has thought up this 'territory of dogs' theory? If this is so then why are these stray dogs brought into the housing society from the territory where they were born? Why is there no national outrage when children or the elderly are killed by stray dogs?

Rumi Ganguli

Aggressive dogs are a menace.

Suraj

Everyone in Brahma Suncity is living in fear. Why is there no law to protect humans against stray dog bites? Why don't dog feeders feel no remorse when stray dogs bite and maul residents? Why is there no law which stops feeding raw meat to strays? I strongly condemn this biased law, the pseudo stray dog lovers, and ineffective, insensitive bureaucratic lobbies. Humans have the right to safety.

Darshan

It's difficult to sleep at night with stray dogs barking. The prime minister should look into this matter. Stray dogs should not be allowed into gated communities.

Kishore B.

Citizens have the right to safety. Ineffective and insensitive bureaucrats only bow down to their superiors and those in power. The ABC Rules are biased and unconstitutional since they are against human safety. These rules need to be revised. Dog feeders should be held accountable for all stray dog bites and attack incidents.

Kishor

The law needs to be unbiased. Citizens have the right to safety. Why only implement laws for stray dogs? Why not for free-roaming bulls, cows, horses, sheep, goats, pigs, elephants, etc. Residents of all castes, creed, age and gender are scared of stray dog attacks.

Vicky

The government should set up shelters for dogs. They come under the wild animal category. Territories are created by humans. When the PMC kept the dogs for some time, they were able to survive so 'territory' is just an excuse.

Sunita Asher

Stray dogs have become a threat to human lives in our society. Children cannot go alone to the park, to bus stops, or to the super market located within our housing complex. We can't go for a walk after 9 pm due to fear of attacks by stray dogs. While going to office, I have to ensure my auto rickshaw comes right up to my building since the dogs attack, sniffing my tiffin bag. There is constant fear in our minds.

Mamta Mago

A dangerous situation has unfolded in Brahma Suncity. Surely we have the right to life. I have very old parents with morbid conditions. They have been advised by the doctor to go for morning and evening walks. Due to these stray dogs my parents can't go down to walk. As a result, my father has developed further complications.

Who is to blame? The government which comes out

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with draconian rules like the ABC Rules? Or the judiciary which, despite knowing the facts, chooses to decide in favour of these laws instead of assessing them and setting a precedent? All I know is that living in a society where incidents of stray dogs biting residents occur on a regular basis is scary. We are dealing with human lives here.

**Amit Jha**

The residents of Brahma Suncity in Pune and in other housing complexes across cities are being deprived of their basic right to a secure existence. Government authorities are showing more concern for stray feral dogs than human lives all in the name of the senseless ABC Rules. There is something else going on. NGOs are getting funding to feed animals and they are munching on most of this money themselves. I request the concerned authorities and the PMO not to test the patience of citizens. We will go to any length to save our loved ones and seek justice.

**Chetan Deshmukh**

It seems that in India dogs have more rights and privileges than humans. It has become more and more difficult for humans specially kids and elders to go out on their own. Everyone is scared. People making decisions on stray dog protection don't seem to be aware of the reality. They go by theoretical assumptions.

**Richie**

## In Bengaluru

Our apartment complex in Bengaluru was a peaceful society. Then two women bought flats here. From the day they moved in we began to see stray dogs inside our premises. We first thought it was a random occurrence. But soon the population of strays increased. Open feeding of dogs started inside our residential zone. The strays started getting aggressive and chasing kids and adults who were carrying groceries. When residents objected, a series of FIRs/NCRs (Non-Cognizable Reports) were lodged against them.

We saw the inside of a police station for the first time in our lives thanks to the two women. We had a beautiful society and just

two people spoiled it. We were written about in newspapers, and we were called "animal haters".

Those two women were the only animal lovers around! One had a fancy pet at home and the other one did not. What animal love do they espouse without adopting a single stray dog and giving it a decent life? These people love to see human-animal conflict. They love to throw their food waste at these stray dogs. They love the publicity it brings them.

**Deepti Pillai**

## Dog lovers

I understand your concern for the welfare of both humans and animals, particularly in the context of stray dogs. It can be disheartening to witness the challenges faced by these animals and the apparent shortcomings in the implementation of government schemes aimed at their well-being. Addressing the issue of stray animal overpopulation is crucial for their welfare and the safety of the community. Implementing effective birth control measures, such as spaying and neutering programs, can help control the population of stray animals. Collaborative efforts between government bodies, non-profits, and local communities are often necessary to achieve meaningful results. If you're passionate about this issue, you might consider getting involved in local animal welfare organizations, advocacy groups, or community initiatives that focus on improving the lives of stray animals.

**Jyoti Rawat**

You know what is deadly? Writing, publishing and forwarding articles that instigate more fear in society. Fearful people are unreliable and easily turn violent because they wish to destroy what they are afraid of. Animals can smell fear pheromones/hormones. They naturally do not trust fearful humans and rightly so. This becomes a negative action-reaction spiral and hence a self-fulfilling prophecy.

Media has power and should use it wisely. To solve human-animal conflict, media should promote effective ways to coexist. It should disseminate good

practice examples, tools and resources. Encourage people to be compassionate as per the Indian Constitution. Bridge the gap between polarized groups in society instead of widening the rift. Capacitate communities to take responsibility to control and manage the population of their fellow non-human residents in a humane manner through positive action instead of negative arguments.

For example: following a humane and holistic community adoption model, the free living dog population in our colony was reduced from 26 in 2018 to 13 in 2023. The RWA had formalized a dog management committee. All community dogs were mapped and put on record, fed, sterilized, vaccinated, medically taken care of, collared, and provided with winter jackets.

Individual cases of undesired dog behaviour were analyzed methodically with the involvement of a dog behaviour expert to identify and address the root causes through interventions aiming at desired behavioural changes in the dogs.

Awareness on how to harmoniously coexist was raised through webinars/info sessions with residents and guards, kids' activities, photo-poster competitions, quizzes, posters, flyers, canine carnival fair, etc. The model is now being adopted in other colonies in a formal or informal manner.

**Anna**

## River watch

Venkatesh Dutta's article, 'A force for the river', mentions police stations for keeping rivers free from pollution. After a long time I read a mention of vetiver, an under-used plant useful for soil conservation and erosion. Thanks for highlighting the need for ecological battalions nationally. The states can raise such battalions to keep their rivers clean and save their water bodies from pollution.

**Col Jasjit Singh Gill**

Most of the pollution in the Ganga and other rivers is due to administrative inaction in letting effluents and sewerage into the rivers. The Environment Task

Force does not seem to have any role in preventing such major incursion into river ecology.

**Dr Narasimha Reddy Donthi**

The Environment Task Force battalions are doing an excellent job everywhere including Rajasthan. Punjab needs four such battalions, for the Sutlej, Beas, Ravi and Ghaggar. This must be done on priority to save these rivers and their ecology.

**Col C.M. Lakharpal**

Reading this piece opened my eyes to the need for a 'force for the river'. This really is remarkable work and should be spoken about more widely.

**Tara**

## SEWA helps

Your cover story, 'A living on the LOC' was such a delight to read. Shahnaza's happy words were my favourite because you could tell she is speaking for all her sisters. It is not only the exemplary social work by SEWA that is remarkable but also the persistence that went into it. Working for the liberation of women is challenging no matter what the socio-cultural or religious background is. This is incredible work and more people should know what can be done if there is genuine intent to help. This epitomizes sisterhood for me.

**Juhee**

## Errata

Nagendra Rampuria was inadvertently referred to as Jaipuria in the latter half of our story, 'Dogs, people, courts' in the December issue. It was also incorrectly reported that the Animal Welfare Committee was set up by the High Court. It was set up by the Animal Welfare Board though its findings were to go before the court and be part of the proceedings.

In the November issue, Meghna Uniyal was referred to as an animal rights activist. She says she would like to be known as a champion of 'animal welfare'.

Mehtab Saifi's photograph in the December issue was the wrong one. Here is the correct picture.



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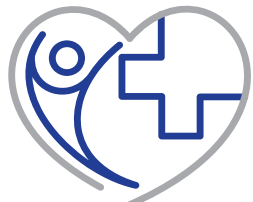
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# 20<sup>th</sup> ANNIVERSARY

## LOOKING BACK AND AHEAD

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# INDIA STORY BEYOND THE HEADLINES

**RITA & UMESH ANAND**

IT was a well-attended event in the amphitheatre of the India Habitat Centre on Lodhi Road, a posh part of New Delhi. In attendance, however, were not the well-heeled and influential people you might have expected to find. Instead, there were slum-dwellers onstage, and they had brought along their own audience of ragpickers and daily-wage earners.

The event, cheekily named Shehr.com, had been organized by the Hazards Centre, a small NGO, so that the poor could voice their views on what life was like for them in Delhi and what their expectations were. There were short plays and some speeches by the slum-dwellers and the odd performance by university students.

The Delhi government, then under the Congress, had circulated a draft master plan for transforming Delhi into a world-class city by 2010, when it would be the venue for the Commonwealth Games.

The government was seeking public opinion on the draft. The Hazards Centre wanted the poor to be heard. To make their point, Shehr.com had been organized at the Habitat Centre — no less. The NGO was devoted to making cities inclusive through better design and access to infrastructure. Its young activists, led by the ageing but long-haired Dunu Roy, were asking the question: “Whose city is it, anyway?”

On the same day, on the manicured lawns of the Habitat Centre, across from the amphitheatre, an entirely different kind of event was taking place. Buffet counters were loaded and set to serve a sumptuous lunch and there was an impressive array of spotless white tables. TERI, the energy NGO, was holding a conference on sustainability and the midway break in the proceedings was coming up when the delegates would be convening for lunch.

It was difficult not to notice the sharp contrast between the two events. Both were about sustainability, but the participants belonged to separate worlds and, of course, their perspectives were different. The slum-dwellers came out of the neglected peripheries of the city. They were interested in basic necessities and had perhaps never before set foot in the India Habitat Centre. On the other hand, TERI's gathering, and the NGO's own leadership, was sophisticated, urbane, well-connected and technologically driven.

It was February 2006. Our magazine had completed two years and a few months at the time. We were finding our feet. But, as journalists, we were enthralled by the complexities we were seeing. We put Shehr.com on the cover of our next issue with the headline: “What is a world class city?”

It was the kind of India story that went beyond everyday headlines. We had started *Civil Society* to seek out the voices that don't get heard and give them a chance to be among the headlines. With India urbanizing somewhat rapidly and haphazardly there was a need to understand the growth pangs of cities a lot better.

**FIRST ISSUE, KEJRIWAL** *Civil Society* was launched in September 2003 as a monthly magazine. Our very first issue had Arvind Kejriwal on the cover. We found him in Sundernagari, a slum in northeast Delhi, conducting a campaign against municipal corruption. He was then an officer of the Indian Revenue Service, on leave from the government.



Civil Society picture/Umesh Anand

Our story was on the right to information (RTI) and we found in Kejriwal the perfect face to take readers into this complex and little understood subject. The cover was headlined: Taxman's burden.

RTI wasn't as yet a Central law but a campaign for it was already underway. State governments were under obligation to have better transparency because of World Bank conditionalities. Delhi already had a state-level RTI law.

Kejriwal's NGO, Parivartan, had opened an office in Sundernagari. The issues he took up were corruption in municipal contracts, lack of accountability of officials, the right of the citizen to be heard, food disbursed through ration shops and the quality of civic assets.

These very issues became the planks on which Kejriwal would pursue his political career successfully. He still commands an unsurpassed following among voters in Delhi because of the grassroots concerns his Aam Aadmi Party (AAP) raises and his promise of empowering the common citizen.

As a social activist, Kejriwal and Parivartan were supported by Aruna Roy, Nikhil Dey, Shankar, Shekhar Singh and others associated with the Mazdoor Kisan Shakti Sangathan or MKSS. They had already been campaigning for RTI. They brought to Sundernagari the device of the public hearing or *jan sunwai* to create awareness.

We went on to cover the India Against Corruption movement, the

Lokpal agitation with Anna Hazare and the coming to power of AAP with its promise of a new politics in the country. Our coverage included other voices as well, including those who had reservations about the selling of the Lokpal idea as the solution to all corruption.

In 2003, governments were beginning to recede and yield space to the private sector. Utilities were changing hands. New technologies were being born. To maintain a balance, social enterprises and activists were needed more than ever. Among them were changemakers with solutions to longstanding problems of development.

As journalists we found these stories exciting and worth exploring, more so because other journalists weren't seeing the potential in them. Kejriwal, Aruna Roy and others, for instance, came to be visible in the big press only much later. We felt that in a crowded media market we would also be breaking new ground and carving out a unique space for ourselves. We would be noticed as a publication and so also the changemakers we were writing on.

**OUR CHOSEN WAY** The stories we began doing were unusual. With blinkers gone and now masters of our own brand, we were free to make our own choices, chart our own course. We covered initiatives that other publications dismissed as being too small or insignificant. By employing mainstream skills and clear editorial values we raised the bar for such stories.

*Continued on next page* »

Call it prescience, but while our first cover story was on RTI and featured Kejriwal, our second was on Sheila Dikshit who was involving the RWAs (Resident Welfare Associations) of Delhi in governance and our third was on NGOs in politics. All three cover stories were to play out majorly in the months and years to come.

It was also important to us that our stories be done on merit. So, there were stories we didn't want to do. We held back from a bleeding-heart approach. We didn't see value in regurgitating problems. Instead, while presenting problems, we looked for solutions. Scandals and exposes were not for us either. Professionally-shot colour pictures and modern layouts further shaped an environment of optimism.

We found *Civil Society* increasingly being seen as a solutions magazine of sorts though that was only partly our goal. Readers began coming back to us, saying: "You give us hope. There are so many good things happening in the country."

We now have a sizeable archive of rare pictures and stories that provide a unique and valuable record of India in transition over the past 20 years. There are scores of significant interviews. The India story post economic reforms would be incomplete without acknowledging the contribution made by NGOs, activists and public-spirited individuals in shaping a modern, inclusive and forward-looking country.

**A DEFINITION** An initial challenge was to come up with a definition of "civil society" — both for ourselves and for readers. The term "civil society" wasn't as widely understood in 2003 as it is today and we would be very often asked what it meant. Early in our journey, we decided that civil society couldn't be restricted to a handful of prominent, mostly urban, organizations and individuals. We felt it should include the large number of small groups and individuals trying to make a difference across the country. And India had many working far from the limelight.

The role of civil society is to be a pillar in its own right by holding the private sector and the government to account. It protects our shared values when they are in danger of being trodden upon. NGOs and activists do this by being whistleblowers, filing public interest litigation and generally mobilizing opinion against transgressions.

Civil society may not necessarily have a single voice because there will be disparate views and positions on issues as they arise. However, a broad base of values that define the general good is what holds the social fabric together despite differences that may exist and keep manifesting themselves.

Activists are also always in a fragile position because they aren't elected and assume the role of speaking for the general good. This leaves scope for misrepresentation. But all things considered, a vibrant civil society is essential for the healthy functioning of democracy.

Social enterprises come up with innovative solutions to the problems of development. They speed up inclusion by closing last-mile gaps in the bestowing of rights and delivery of services. They innovate and think ahead for the general good — something governments and corporations don't do well enough on their own.

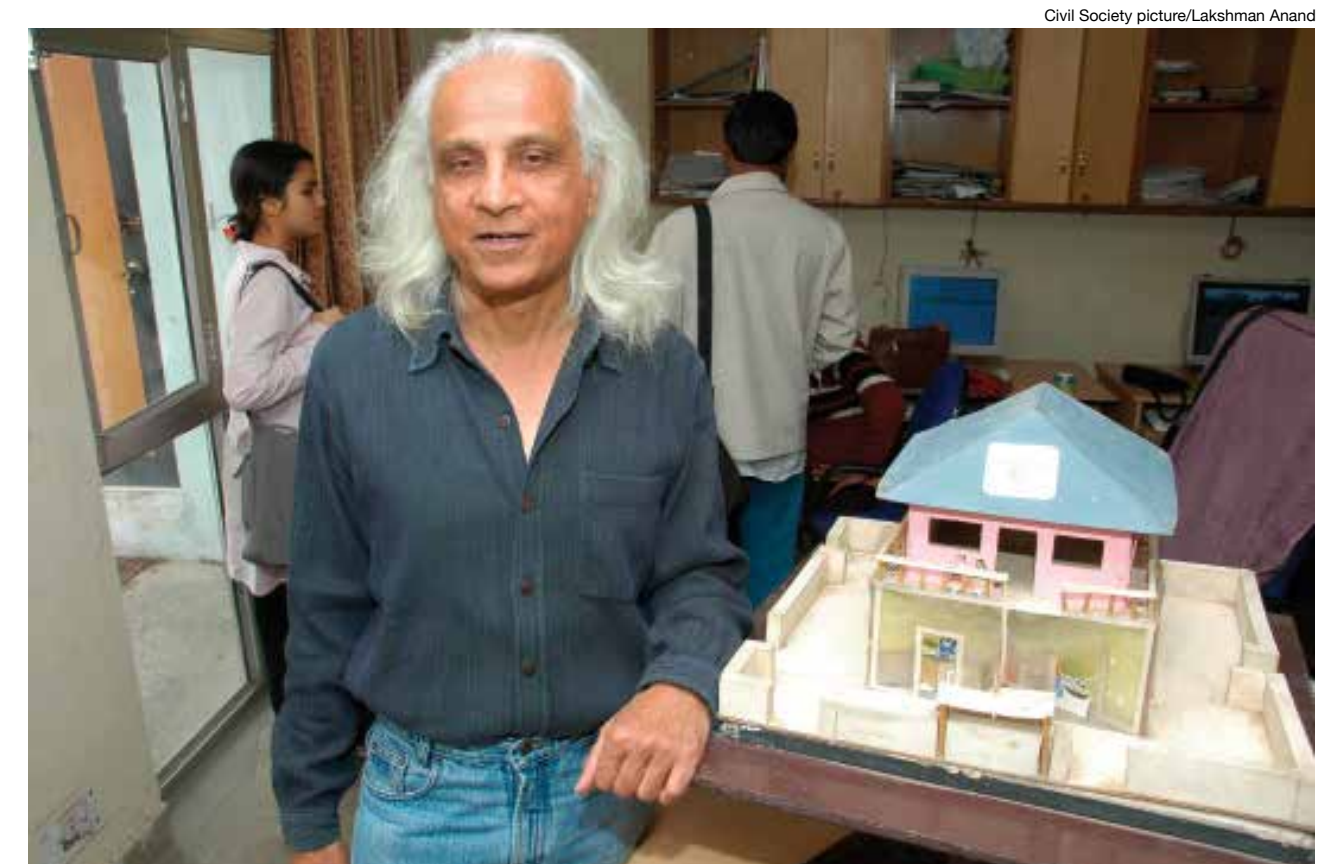
There are also individuals who speak up and do their bit in the course of their professional lives. They, too, play a civil society role. It could be a businessman, doctor, lawyer, engineer, government servant or code writer. They could be lending their skills to a good cause or simply setting an example by being inclusive or using specialized knowledge for the public good.

Small endeavours tend to be driven by passion and designed to meet some local need. But in doing so, we have found, they often also address national-level concerns in healthcare, education, environment, water, nutrition, agriculture, digital access and so on. They have the potential to be shared, adapted and scaled. Shining a light on them is important so that they become known.

We have found from our stories that water harvesting in Rajasthan elicits a response from north Karnataka. The building of low-cost bridges for cut-off communities in Karnataka evoked an interest in the northeastern states. Affordable housing has takers everywhere.



Back in 2003: Arvind Kejriwal and the Parivartan team at their office in Sundernagari in northeast Delhi



Dunu Roy: What is a world class city?



Anna Hazare being feted in Delhi during the Lok Pal agitation

We have witnessed people eager to learn from one another and, more interestingly, governments willing to learn from innovators. This is civil society at work and social interaction at its creative best.

**PATIENCE IS NEEDED** It takes time for change to happen, but it finally does arrive. In 2006, when we first reported on Preeti and Kabir Vajpeyi, they couldn't find state governments that were willing to adopt their low-cost ideas for improving schools.

As architects they had shown in Rajasthan what could be done to transform school buildings for as little as ₹20,000. Their programme was

called Building as Learning Aid or BaLA. It involved brightening up exteriors with paint and using everything from window grills to doors and floors for learning. School compounds were revived so that children could play joyfully in them.

Persistence paid and now BaLA is widely used across states. A deputy commissioner in a northeastern state we were interviewing told us he relied not just on NGOs to get children to school but had on his own initiative implemented BaLA because he recalled Kabir Vajpeyi lecturing on it at the IAS academy.

Innovators are by definition ahead of the times. Governments, on the

other hand, tend to be sluggish in getting the message. It is not as though individuals and groups seeking to bring change are always right. But without doubt governments need to increase their capacity to engage productively with new ideas.

Activists, on the other hand, have to see patience as a virtue and a necessity. Our dear friend and advisory board member, Anupam Mishra, would say: "NGOs think change comes overnight. It doesn't happen like that."

When Ela Bhatt, the creator of SEWA, talked about women's rights and employment 50 years ago in India she was way ahead of the curve on this issue. It is only now that the economic potential of women is being recognized and that too perhaps not as widely as it should be.

Recently we did a story on how SEWA had helped women in Kupwara district, near the Line of Control in Kashmir, acquire skills and have incomes and assert their identities within their families and the community. Having a livelihood has transformed the lives of these women. But it took SEWA all of 13 years to achieve this.

The women in Kupwara had grown up in the midst of extremism and anti-India sentiments. They were suspicious of anyone reaching out to them. SEWA had to bring them to Ahmedabad, Mumbai, Pune and Delhi to show them what they were missing out on. They were introduced to the empowering work done with other women. The experience changed the way they regarded India. The exposure was liberating in personal ways as well — for instance, the experience of being on a seashore and being away from home.

Supporting SEWA in this initiative all these years has been the Union government's Home Ministry. The current one under the BJP has been the most supportive — surprising as that might be to many. Clearly, much is gained by governments that let activists take the lead in certain contexts.

**HEALTHCARE** It is not as though governments always listen. Healthcare is an example where a reorientation is desperately needed. Our coverage of healthcare has been extensive. We have focused on the voluntary and government sectors to find what works.

Small hospitals with public spirited doctors whose stories you will find in our magazine have for long been showing the way to reach large numbers of people who cannot afford expensive private care. The pandemic showed the importance of readily accessible primary care. The

*Continued on next page*

mission hospitals, outfits like Doctors for You, the rural surgeons' movement and the innumerable excellent doctors in the government system need to be looked at more closely so as to bring back values to the medical profession and place healthcare above being a business. A robust economy first has to have healthy people.

**MOVEMENTS AND LAWS** Apart from RTI our magazine covered movements for the right to food, education, disability employment, rural employment and street vending. We also reported on the persistent efforts by Breastfeeding Network of India that finally brought about the ban on promotion of baby food.

We were there as these movements were gathering momentum. We were witness to how much effort and patience went into framing laws. The laws that got passed at the time like RTI, MGNREGA, right to food and right to education addressed people's issues and came from the grassroots. They were opposed by the bureaucracy and economists and lobbyists for industry as well.

At no stage was it easy even though there was a Congress government in power and it was expected to be amenable to suggestions of activists. Perhaps they could have been better framed if consultation had been yet wider as in the case of the right to education. But they have proved to be important pieces of legislation that have served the country well. They have been used not just by the Congress but now by the BJP too.

**ROLE OF NAC** The impression often is that the National Advisory Council (NAC) pushed policies and legislation through. From where we could see things it didn't seem entirely so. From the RTI agitation, when the law was getting stuck, we have pictures of posters with slogans like: "Sonia Gandhi chuppi chodo" or "Sonia Gandhi break your silence".

Without doubt the NAC gave NGOs enormous access. But activists also had to deal with government, at least from what we could see. There remains a need to understand a device like the NAC a lot better. It served an important role in giving voice to civil society. In doing so, did it undermine government is a question that remains to be answered.

It is important not to bore the reader. A mix of stories works well. It helps to have cinema, books, new-age businesses, recycling, solar power, electric vehicles, healthcare and disability art in addition to stories of empowerment and social justice.

The Indian civil society space is rich and varied. There are changes in consumer preferences. Entrepreneurs come along with great ideas. Established businesses go through changes. New technologies change social behaviour. In an emerging economy getting globalized and experiencing high growth, nothing is at a standstill.

Our Living section has tried to reflect these changes through the stories of people. Our coverage of cinema has not been only of alternative films and documentaries, but also of Mumbai and the emergence of directors like Anurag Kashyap during their early rise.

Under books we have done reviews and spoken to authors who might

have otherwise gone unnoticed. For all the digital reading that happens, print is very alive. A feature on preloved books had readers writing in.

It has also been a wonderful experience reporting on new-age businesses whose leaders and founders are educated, socially driven and respectful of the natural environment. Such businesses may be relatively small, but they are incredibly valuable.

Raj Seelam's 24 Mantra is an organic food company. He has built it from scratch. There is the Black Baza Coffee Company, which describes itself as an activist company selling sustainable coffee. Its founder is Arshiya Bose, who decided to connect consumers to small coffee growers in the Western Ghats. Vinod Kumar and Priya Prakash of Naturally Yours are in the business of healthy noodles and pasta from millets, red rice and so on.

Tushar Devidayal produces solar refrigerators which can be used in villages. There are solar dryers for which the Sant Savta Shetkari, a farmer-producer company, sought out S4S Technologies. Women farmers in Bundi in Rajasthan come together to create an enterprise to sell their produce. We have in this issue the story of rangSutra in the words of its founder, Sumita Ghose.

**HALL OF FAME** The Civil Society Hall of Fame became our magazine's annual event for recognizing changemakers from all over the country. After a recognition ceremony, Indian Ocean, the iconic fusion band, would perform in what we called the Everyone is Someone Concert. It used to be among their best performances.

Entrants to the Hall of Fame can't apply. They can't want to be famous. They are identified for their work through our networks. Mostly, they are surprised that they are on any kind of list at all.

Over the years, the Hall of Fame has come to include doctors, scientists, insurance agents,

farmers, *vaidyas*, human rights activists, tribal leaders, government schoolteachers and headmasters, social innovators, administrators.

The list is too long to be reproduced here. We have brought them to Delhi and feted them at an event in the heart of the capital. They have come dressed in their own local styles and spoken about their work in their own local languages, requiring translators for the Delhi audience.

If the Hall of Fame has drawn a large audience each time it is because the diversity it showcases is magical. The people it honours are each different from the other, exceptional in their own ways. They represent the great diversity and energy that exists in the corners of our country.

Twenty years is a fair length of time to keep a magazine running. Journalism offers a perch like no other from which to observe a nation caught up in the processes of change. We have more stories than we can tell and an archive with many gems.

If there is one thing we would like our magazine to be known for, it is that it offers a unique perspective into Indian civil society. It is a hopeful perspective that throws light on the many Indias and the many Indians who make our nation and society so vibrant, so creative and yet so challenging. We would like to see ourselves as messengers from this changing India. ■



A jan sunwai: Jean Dreze, Aruna Roy, Shekhar Singh and Colin Gonzalves



The women of Bundi being felicitated at the Hall of Fame event in Delhi

# Civil Society

JOINING THE DOTS

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WHERE ARE WE BEING READ?

# FROM COALITION SUCCESS TO SINGLE-LEADER PARTY POWER

Politics has had a split personality in two decades of contradictions. With a strong centre and growing regionalism, which way is democracy headed?



SANJAYA BARU

INDIA's political landscape in the first quarter of the 21st century was defined by two dualisms. First, a visible divide has emerged in the political preferences of the predominantly Hindi-speaking India as compared to non-Hindi speaking regions of the subcontinent. Second, in the first decade of the 21st century the electorate showed a strong preference for multi-party coalitions, while in the second decade voter preference has been in favour of single-party governments, both at the Centre and in the states. Going forward, politics across the country is likely to revolve around these two tendencies. Will the electorate continue to be divided along linguistic and regional lines? Will it continue to opt for single-party governments with a dominant leader?

There is a third aspect to India's political personality that has also changed over this past quarter-century. When *Civil Society* magazine was launched two decades ago, civil society organizations were not just politically active but had acquired an unprecedented degree of influence in policymaking. Political parties were forced to pay attention to the demands of civil society. There is no better example of this than the role played by the National Advisory Council of the United Progressive Alliance (UPA) government that gave an unprecedented voice to representatives of civil society in the shaping of government policy.

As this period has progressed, dominant political parties have been able to reassert themselves in the policy space, sidelining civil society movements. Indeed, whatever civil

society activism we see today seems to be dominated by the various political extensions of the dominant political organizations, namely, the RSS and the BJP, and in that sense raises doubts about whether such organizations do represent civil society or in fact are extensions of the ruling dispensation pretending to be representatives of civil society.

Consider each of these three propositions. There has been much talk of a North-South divide in political preferences of the electorate in the wake of recent assembly elections. The real divide is not North-South but in fact Hindi-non-Hindi, with Gujarat and Assam being exceptions. The rise of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) as the dominant political party is the most important political phenomenon of this past quarter-century. However, there are two aspects to the BJP's rise that require to be spelt out.

First, the fundamental change in the political and social character of the BJP itself. The BJP that was led by Lal Krishna Advani and Atal Bihari Vajpayee was a very different political phenomenon compared to the BJP led by Narendra Modi, Amit Shah and Yogi Adityanath. The Advani-Vajpayee BJP was dominated by upper castes, especially Brahmins and Banias, and the Punjabi Hindu refugees who had come to India from Pakistan after Partition held sway in Delhi.

Second, the rise of the Advani-Vajpayee BJP during the so-called 'Era of Coalitions', 1988-98, its participation in coalition governments, made that BJP a more 'inclusive' party. While the party remained loyal to its core ideology of Hindutva, interpreted by most political scientists as 'Hindu majoritarianism', it sought to present a more plural personality and successfully worked with a range of non-sectarian parties. Prime Minister Vajpayee became popular across the political spectrum, given his consensual style of political management.

By contrast, the Modi-Shah BJP that came to power in 2014 was not only more assertive in terms of pursuing the Hindutva agenda, but it also deliberately chose an 'exclusionary' model

of political management rather than an inclusive model. Further, the Modi-Shah BJP saw a decline in the influence of the upper castes, especially Brahmins, with the retirement/ouster/death of leaders such as Murali Manohar Joshi, Ananth Kumar, Sushma Swaraj, Prakash Javadekar, Suresh Prabhu, Arun Jaitley, Manohar Parikkar and so on. The only Brahmins with important portfolios in the Modi government are Rajya Sabha members Nirmala Sitharaman and S. Jaishankar.

For all his popularity Modi has not been able to make a decisive dent in the non-Hindi states, barring his home state of Gujarat. From Punjab and Bihar in the north, to Bengal and Odisha in the east to the entire south, the BJP remains a marginal player. Even in Maharashtra its hold remains tenuous. Overcoming its 'Hindu-Hindi' personality remains a challenge. It is both its principal strength and its principal weakness. What this has meant is that there is no tall and politically significant leader from anywhere in the non-Hindi states within the BJP leadership pantheon. Hindi-speaking leaders dominate the BJP and will continue to do so for some time to come, given current trends.

**RISE OF REGIONAL PARTIES** While this period has seen the gradual and continuing decline of the Indian National Congress, except for the brief hurrah of 2009, the persistence of what are called 'regional' parties in the non-Hindi states remains an important aspect of Indian politics in this period. Even a national party like the Congress has been able to make its presence felt in Karnataka and Telangana by elevating the role and profile of its 'regional' leaders. Interestingly, in Uttar Pradesh the dominant political personality is no longer the BJP's national leadership but the 'son of the soil', Yogi Adityanath.

As the country moves towards the 2024 general election, this dualism in Indian politics — between Hindi-Hindutva nationalism and non-Hindi regionalism — will remain a significant element, defining the nature of the



The rise of the BJP as the dominant political party is the most important political phenomenon of the past quarter-century

competition and its outcome. The formation of the I.N.D.I.A. coalition is, therefore, a significant event and it is at present the only platform that offers political space to political leaders from the non-Hindi regions. The I.N.D.I.A. coalition is, in many ways, a natural response to the dominance of the BJP. Every time a single party has dominated national politics coalitions have emerged to challenge that dominance.

In 1989 Prime Minister Vishwanath Pratap Singh declared that Indian politics had entered the 'era of coalitions'. He proved prophetic. Between 1989 and 2014, for a quarter-century, the ruling political dispensation in New Delhi was an explicit or implicit coalition of multiple political entities. Three prime ministers, P.V. Narasimha Rao, Vajpayee and Manmohan Singh, provided astute and consensual political leadership, holding together the coalitions they headed. While Vajpayee and Singh headed explicit coalitions, Rao headed an implicit coalition, which is what the Congress party certainly was after the deaths of Indira Gandhi and Rajiv Gandhi.

With the political consolidation of the BJP under the highly centralized leadership style of Prime Minister Modi the polity has entered a new era of 'single leader dominance'. Even regional political parties function in the manner in which the BJP under Modi does, that is, with a highly centralized leadership. If Modi dominates the BJP, Mamata Banerjee

dominates the Trinamool Congress, M.K. Stalin controls the DMK, K. Chandrashekar Rao the Bharat Rashtra Samithi, Naveen Patnaik the Biju Janata Dal, and so on.

**NEED FOR CONSENSUS** With the centralization of political control within most political parties, Indian democracy has become weaker. Indeed, single-party dominance is a characteristic of most non-democratic societies. Most mature democracies are governed by coalitions that are forced to pursue consensual politics and policymaking. Given this fact, Indian democracy has generally become weaker over the past decade as political coalitions have been replaced by parties with centralized leadership.

Not surprisingly, though, the one national party that is once again moving in the direction of consensual leadership is the Congress party. Its more recent experiment with empowering provincial leaders has so far met with mixed results. In Karnataka and Telangana, it helped the Congress return to power. In Madhya Pradesh and Rajasthan, the strategy failed to deliver success.

If the BJP does not perform well in 2024, provincial leadership within the party may once again assert itself against central leaders. Thus a Yogi Adityanath, Shivraj Singh Chouhan, B.S. Yediyurappa, Vasundhara Raje and such like may assert themselves against the Modi-Shah-Nadda triumvirate.

This constant jostling between centrifugal and centripetal tendencies in Indian politics will remain a natural characteristic of democratic politics in a diverse and plural polity. No single political force can hope to retain its sway across the country for all time. This remains the key strength of Indian democracy.

As the electorate approaches the 2024 general election, the BJP and its enthusiasts are putting forward the thesis that the country requires a government run by a single party with adequate parliamentary majority to enable it to sail through the choppy waters of domestic and external uncertainties and challenges. This is a self-serving argument of the ruling party.

The fact is that coalition governments have performed as well as any in managing crises and challenges to national security and stability. In fact, the best years for independent India in terms of economic development, poverty reduction and global standing have been the 'coalition era' years of 1991-2014. Under three consensual prime ministers, India weathered many storms, economic and geopolitical, and emerged as a major power. If the current decade of one-leader dominance is replaced by an era of coalitions, it will do Indian democracy and the economy no harm. It may well do some good. ■

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# INDIA TECH STORY: BETTER, FASTER, HIGHER, CHEAPER

From rocket systems to affordable diagnostics, homegrown efforts have taken India from being an outsourcing hub to a centre of innovation for corporations.



R.A. MASHELKAR

INDIA can be proud of its technology and innovation journey of the past 20 years. I was not just a witness but an active participant in this journey. What follows is a view from my personal window on the progress that we have made during 2003-2023.

Rather than providing a chronological listing of achievements in individual sectors, I will highlight the special features of the changing landscape in these 20 years. These are:

- Mastering denial-driven innovation
- Leading in inclusive innovation
- Becoming the globally preferred location for technology generation
- Becoming the key enabler for Atmanirbhar Bharat
- Chasing exponentials

**DENIAL-DRIVEN INNOVATION** Indian technology grew in denial-driven mode on this 20-year journey, where for love or money, no technology was available to India for strategic sectors such as space, defence, nuclear energy, and supercomputers.

Take defence. India developed diverse missiles and rocket systems, remotely piloted vehicles, light-combat aircraft, etc. Brahmos is a great example of Indian prowess in a strategic technology.

Take atomic energy. The entire range of technologies, from the prospecting of raw materials to the design and construction of large nuclear reactors, was developed on a self-reliant basis.

The Indigenous Nuclear Submarine (2009)

was a proud achievement as it was our first indigenously developed nuclear-powered submarine, making India one of the five nations to achieve this feat.

Take space. The journey from Chandrayaan-1 to Chandrayaan-3, which showcased ISRO's comprehensive capabilities for a secure lunar landing and surface roving, are a great achievement just as is the Mars Orbiter Mission, making India the only nation to succeed in the first launch. The simultaneous launch of 104 satellites, is yet another brilliant example.

**INCLUSIVE INNOVATION** In the past two decades India has emerged as an undisputed leader in 'inclusive innovation', which creates products and services that are available, affordable, and accessible to the whole population, and not just a privileged few. It 'includes' the 'excluded' by deploying disruptive high technology, scalable products, and services — often through breakthrough business models. It ensures access equality despite income inequality.

Some of these have been truly game-changing and are taught as case studies in the world's leading business schools. For instance, Aravind Eye Care doing high-quality cataract surgery at one-hundredth of the cost in the US or Narayana Hrudayalaya doing high-quality heart surgery at one-twentieth of the cost prevailing in the US.

Similarly, the Jaipur foot, a high-performing \$28 artificial foot, which became a *Time* magazine cover story, is a benchmark for inclusive innovation.

In 2011, I started The Anjani Mashelkar Foundation in memory of my mother to propel an inclusive innovation movement in India. The start-ups that we recognize and nurture are solving India's grand challenges of diagnosing cancer, heart disease, anaemia and lung disease besides helping in mother and child care in villages, to name a few instances. They are using the highest technology to offer healthcare at ultra-low cost. For this, they are fundamentally disrupting current best practices and inventing the next practice.

Swaasa is one such example that uses the

AI-assisted smartphone to analyze the cough of a person and diagnose the state of health of their lung.

All this at less than ₹1 for a test as opposed to ₹1,500 currently paid by patients due to the requirement of expensive equipment, infrastructure and trained technicians. The science behind the innovation has been published in *Nature*, a premier science journal.

India was well known for achieving inclusive innovation by using *jugaad*, which meant low-cost, low-science, ad hoc solutions.

There is a need to make high technology work for the poor in our Indian Inclusive Innovation 2.0 agenda.

**PREFERRED LOCATION** India's competitive advantage is that it generates more intellectual output per dollar invested than any other nation. Our own analysis for 2020 has shown that the ratio of R&D dollars spent by different nations as compared to India for producing the same output in terms of research publications varies thus: UK (2), Australia (4), China (5), Germany (6), US (7), Japan (12). India offers not only cost arbitrage but also value arbitrage.

The Mars Orbiter Mission was done at one-tenth the cost of the corresponding US mission with the same objectives. KPIT has just commercialized an indigenous world-class hydrogen fuel cell bus in partnership with NCL under CSIR's New Millennium Indian Technology Leadership Initiative (NMITLI) programme.

It is remarkable that the NMITLI budget for 13 years was 10 times lower than the US Department of Energy budget of one year for the same goals!

India has an amazing competitive advantage. As a result of this advantage, India during these 20 years has transitioned from an outsourcing hub to a centre of innovation for global corporations.

India's rise as a powerhouse for Global Capability Centres (GCCs) is remarkable, with over 1,500 GCCs employing 1.5 million people. India has over 45 percent of global GCCs, hosting 50 to 70 percent of global tech and operations headcount.



ISRO's proven capabilities for a secure lunar landing and surface roving are a great achievement

**ATMANIRBHAR BHARAT** Atmanirbhar Bharat should not mean just 'make in India' as in 'assembled in India' but should mean 'invent and make in India'. India has made gradual progress in this over the past 20 years. Here we showcase only one instance that saved millions of lives.

When the Covid-19 pandemic arrived in India, we had negligible diagnostic capability, no point-of-care diagnosis, no vaccines, no therapeutics, and the biology and mechanism of the action of the virus were unknown. Our scientists delivered on all this and more.

Take diagnostics. The cost of the RT-PCR test was brought down from ₹3,000 to ₹100 by Indian scientists. Take vaccines. Indian scientists got into the act with multiple strategies for vaccine development.

There were 'invent in India' strategies. Bharat Biotech used inactivated virus and its Covaxin has been used to vaccinate millions around the world. Zydus is using spiked protein. Genovax has developed mRNA-based vaccine.

There was 'make in India' by using overseas inventions as well. Covishield was developed by the Serum Institute of India in partnership with Oxford University and AstraZeneca.

During the pandemic, India administered two billion-plus vaccine dosages in a record 18 months. It was not just the development of the vaccine but management of its supply chain and monitoring of cases assisted by the COWIN digital platform, that made this execution happen.

**CHASING EXPONENTIALS** In 20 years, there were some exciting developments in diverse fields, which were not incremental but exponential. Total innovation was the key.

That meant synergizing technology, business model, system level, workflow, organizational and policy-level innovation.

Digital transformation is the most significant exponential achieved on this 20-year journey. With exponential increase in smartphone usage and affordable data plans, over 800 million Indians gained access to the internet and digital services.

India's Aadhaar project was the largest digital social security inclusive innovation initiative globally which transformed the landscape of access to financial and digital services in India. Jio used Aadhaar verification to enrol 100 million customers in 170 days. In February 2017, India was ranked 152nd in data consumption over a mobile. Within one year of Jio's arrival, it 'pole vaulted' to number one.

India rose to number one in real-time digital payments globally, with 89.5 billion payment transactions worth \$1.6 trillion in 2022. The Unified Payments Interface (UPI) has surpassed the milestone of 10 billion monthly transactions with the total value of these transactions now exceeding ₹15 trillion per month. India accounted for 46 percent of global real-time payments.

The Indian start-up ecosystem has been chasing exponentials between 2015 and 2022:

- 247 times increase in the total number of start-ups
- 15 times increase in the total funding of start-ups
- 9 times increase in the number of investors
- 7 times increase in the number of incubators

Close to 50 percent of start-ups came from Tier II and Tier III cities. They are largely focusing on emerging technologies such as artificial intelligence, machine learning and data science.

Some start-ups are chasing exponentials in terms of delivering an incredible price performance envelope. The start-ups nurtured by the Anjani Mashelkar Foundation are achieving exponential healthcare. Sanket, a credit card-sized, hand-held, 12 lead ECG machine, has recorded over three million scans in 12 countries. Forus health, which brings affordable eye screening to the poor, has touched the lives of over 7.5 million people in more than 40 countries.

The question arises whether our innovation ecosystem is growing exponentially. The answer is yes and no.

From 2003 to 2023, the number of IITs increased from seven to 23, Central universities from 18 to 56, total universities from 300 to 1,113. Besides, seven new IISERs (Indian Institute of Science, Education and Research) have been created. But R&D expenditure for the past 20 years has remained static at around 0.7 percent, well below the global average of 1.8 percent. The creation of the National Research Fund of ₹50,000 crore is great news, provided it overcomes the imminent challenge of almost 70 percent of the contribution coming from industry.

India is well poised to become the third largest economy in the world by 2030 and may even become the largest in a few decades.

This growth has to be science, technology and innovation-led. That means we will have to be world class. More important, we must ensure that this growth is equitable and inclusive. We hope this dream will come true as we leave behind these 20 inspiring years and begin our journey with hope and aspirations for the next 20 years. ■

*Dr Raghunath Anant Mashelkar is an influential thought leader who is globally recognized and honoured for his contributions to science and technology.*

# NEW-AGE COMPANY: ARTISANS AS CO-OWNERS, DIRECTORS

Rural women mean business at rangSutra, which markets handcrafted apparel and home furnishing. For many of them their shares are the only assets in their name.



SUMITA GHOSE

THE idea of rangSutra came to me while on a sabbatical in 2002. I was writing a paper on the kind of new-age organizations that were needed which would address inequalities and injustices faced by communities around the world. I envisioned an organization that would bridge the divide between marginalized rural communities and thriving urban India, between tradition and modernity, to create a more equitable and just society.

It took us four years to register rangSutra Crafts India in 2006 as a company and start work in full swing. Our approach remains constructive, building on skills that artisans and their groups already possess, investing time and resources on product development, on building capacities and capabilities on the ground. All these formed the bridge, linking artisanal skills and products with the market for handcrafted products.

Our purpose is to ensure regular work and sustainable livelihoods for rural artisan communities. To achieve this, we equip them with the necessary skills, equipment and technology required to run a 21st century enterprise — one which is committed to people and the planet, along with financial sustenance or profits. We are market oriented but not market driven.

We needed funds. Philanthropic organizations were unwilling to fund us as we were not a charitable organization. Banks were unwilling to lend us money due to our lack of business experience, and our inability to provide collateral for loans.

That's when the idea of asking artisans to put in share capital, albeit small amounts, was

suggested by William Bissell of Fabindia. rangSutra's purpose is to ensure regular work and incomes for rural artisans...and we invited them to be co-owners. Without much ado, 1,000 artisans, 800 of them women, from western Rajasthan — all part of the Urmul Trust network — put in trust, talent and ₹1,000 each, to start rangSutra: a community-owned social enterprise. We call ourselves a social enterprise, because positive social change, a society with opportunities for all, is the ultimate goal. The means towards this goal is the designing, crafting, marketing and selling of ethically produced handcrafted apparel and home furnishing.

Supported by impact investors Fabindia and Aavishkaar, we took our first steps on the journey of crafting our company. No complex strategies guided our actions; just vision, commitment and action.

Looking back, what seemed like a practical thing to do — inviting artisans to be shareholders — had strategic outcomes as well. It instilled a sense of agency especially among women artisans. As a woman artisan said: "rangSutra shares are the only asset I own. Our land and our home are in the names of the male members of our family. Working on the orders that rangSutra brings gives us income... we have our own bank accounts now and we can choose to spend our earnings as we wish. We have a voice, and it counts."

Artisans have representation on our board and play a crucial role in the growth and development of the organization. Many of the producer-companies we work with have grown several times in the past 16 years and, in the past two uncertain Covid years, worked with and depended on rangSutra to ensure work for their artisan members. We, in turn, depend on our buyers and customers support us with market access, market knowledge as well as technical knowledge regarding the products we make for the global citizen.

**MAKE IN VILLAGE** A turning point in our journey was our decision to move away from the tradition of home-based work that artisans, especially women artisans, were used to and

which they preferred. Instead, we created small production centres in villages initially based in someone's courtyard and housed later in proper production centres built by the local panchayat, after demands from women to have a 'space for themselves'.

This decision to set up small village-based production centres was something we learned from our 10-year partnership with IKEA. Initially some women were reluctant to come to our centres, some husbands and parents did not allow their wives and daughters to work outside the home, but there were always trailblazers and soon the others followed.

Our buzzing centres are testimony to the fact that women meant business: they put in place rules for the centre, monitored attendance, discussed work and other topics while they did their needlework — creating beautiful hand-embroidered products. The centres became spaces to learn from one another, help one another and take their centres, which in some cases were local legal entities, to another level.

**CRAFT MANAGERS** Key players in this transformational journey are our CMs — Craft Managers — women and men who are artisans, are high school-educated and, most importantly, have leadership qualities — stepping up to motivate and enable other women to join centres and learn skills at the village level. Most of the women are young and are guided by older women in their villages.

One such older stalwart is Dhinya Bai, who has travelled to Jaipur and Delhi to sell products made by her and other women, and to Varanasi, where she trained craft managers. Dhinya speaks Sindhi, Marwari and Hindi. A very sharp and humorous person, she has two sons and daughters-in-law who also embroider. "We were very reluctant to exhibit our skills but now our girls are very confident. There is something that is beyond me or for that matter any one individual. All of us add something to this collective spirit of craft with a mix of aesthetics and utilitarian elements, which spreads across to amplify the individual's input. That's how the collective is always greater and more lifelong than an individual. This



No complex strategies guided rangSutra; just vision and commitment to bringing positive social change

collective spirit actually brings the market to us rather than us going to the market."

Dhinya and a hundred others like her are now looking at the future with an open heart and mind. She says, "We have to keep the heart open to embrace new designs and the mind open to imbibe and translate them with needle and thread on fabric. It is this readiness that has brought one of the finest oeuvre of handcrafted products into people's lives and in turn empowered the women. They have built their homes, educated their kids and, most importantly, built the spirit to live and command respect. It is literally like an oasis of empowered women in this gigantic desert."

**SUNSET TO SUNRISE** The widespread belief is that handlooms are a sunset industry, that the weaving profession cannot accommodate the aspiration of the youth anymore, and that the profession has become economically unviable. But Swarooparam, a handloom weaver from Sancho, whom we helped set up a weaving unit in his village, and many of his fellow weavers, defy this myth.

Misrhrimal, a fellow weaver, says, "You have to look at it more holistically than just the amount we get in hand. I worked in a metro city. I was paid a little more than what I make here. But if I add the living expenses, travelling back home once in a while and other costs, living in the city did not make any sense. Apart from that, I can work and spend time with my family and kids. I am not only a breadwinner for them. My responsibility is much more than that — to be with them not just as a provider but to share their joys and sorrows."

Swarooparam also relates to this. "It's a very viable profession provided you have your mind, body and heart in line with weaving. This is much more than a medium to earn a living. It gives me a sense of pride when people greet me as an artisan and not as an unskilled labourer. It gives independence, livelihood, health, professional longevity and autonomy if you remain committed to it and are open to new ideas and collaborations. Self-image, reputation and pragmatism are the key areas. And it's the collective responsibility of all."

Working as a self-employed weaver he gets perks like spending time with family, friends and neighbours, and eating home-cooked food along with ₹20,000 to ₹25,000 per month which actually makes the quality of life better than a migrant worker in a city. He believes that weaving is something he can practise till he is at least 70.

"Since 2011 I have been working fulltime on handloom with rangSutra. Before that I was in Surat for three years and I realized that life would not take me anywhere. So I decided to come back and work with rangSutra. Here, people know me and I feel a sense of belonging to this soil," says Swarooparam.

Weaving is not easy. A lot of preparation goes on before a weaver gets onto his loom. Careful preparation of the yarn, which could include reeling of the yarn, dyeing, making bobbins, preparing the warp, and then carefully attaching the warp to the loom, needs to be done before the weaver actually starts weaving the fabric. He or she has to be alert and aware during the entire weaving process, to ensure that the fabric taking form on the loom is even,

and the designs or motifs are as they were designed to be. It could be a simple plain weaving technique, a basket weave, a twill weave, or the more complex satin weave.

While the entrepreneurial-professional approach is necessary, it is not enough. The main binding factor that connects us all in rangSutra is the collective spirit and the form of organization. Instead of working through a few master weavers, as is the norm, at rangSutra we prefer working with groups and collectives, where each artisan has the chance to build on his or her talent and improve skills.

Sevaram from Napasar explains the advantages of working in a cluster: "There is cooperation instead of competition. Everyone gets their share of work and is equally paid. So we all work together. I learnt from elders and I guide younger people. It's like a flowing river, that's why we as a collective never stagnate."

Of course, for us, celebration of handloom would not be possible if it were not for the hundreds of rangSutra customers who choose to wear and buy handloom as well as our buyers, especially IKEA, who have helped revive handloom techniques and strengthen our weaving units, giving handloom and weavers a new lease of life in the 21st century.

We have faced challenges along the way, and tried to overcome them, failing at times, but trying to evolve ways of working that make us resilient and strong. For us at rangSutra, every day is a new beginning, a chance to be a better version of ourselves, knowing that we have the power within to create a vibrant organization, where it is a pleasure to come to work! ■

Sumita Ghose is the founder of rangSutra.

# PHC WITH A WORK CULTURE WILL TRANSFORM HEALTH

Elimination of polio and neonatal tetanus are huge achievements, but bigger investment and a rights approach can make the system a lot more efficient.



**PAVITRA MOHAN  
& SANJANA B. MOHAN**

THE past 20 years have special significance for India's public healthcare. One of the most important reforms in public healthcare, the National Rural Health Mission (NRHM), was seeded at that time. We, too, started working closely with public health systems 20 years ago. In the past 10 years we have been working closely with marginalized communities in south Rajasthan.

It is difficult to capture all the changes that have taken place in two decades, but, having witnessed our health systems up close, we have shortlisted six key trends that we found striking and defining for healthcare in our country during a period of rapid change.

For the first time, India has achieved a fertility rate of 2.1, which is the replacement fertility rate. Simply speaking, based on current fertility patterns, a couple on an average would produce two children in their lifetime — in numerical terms, they would replace themselves. At such a fertility rate, the population will continue to grow for some decades because of the large numbers of existing couples (demographic inertia), but as they grow out of childbearing age, population will stabilize.

Since Independence, high levels of fertility and high population growth were always quoted, in academic circles and by the media, as impediments to India's development. This led to an obsession with population control, culminating in the infamous Emergency-era sterilizations. Following the International

Conference on Population Development (ICPD) at Cairo, India committed to pursuing a development approach rather than a control approach to population stabilization. As part of this approach, targets and coercion for adoption of contraception were to be abolished and replaced with broader efforts at improving health and development and promoting choices.

Targets and coercion, however, remain firmly prevalent in India's population programme, to this date. Tubectomy or sterilization performed on women, remains the most-focused approach. More than one-third of all women of childbearing age continue to undergo tubectomy, as opposed to less than one percent of men having undergone vasectomy. Women know little about the different choices that exist, and the option of "operation" or female tubectomy is taken right to their homes through the ASHAs and ANMs. There is an urgent imperative to widen choices for family planning in the truest sense, and not let the burden of contraception continue to be on women.

**SHIFTS IN DISEASE PATTERNS** India also saw the eradication of poliomyelitis and elimination of neonatal tetanus, the two scourges that killed and maimed millions of children. As paediatric residents in the early 1990s, our wards were full of children with poliomyelitis and neonatal tetanus. This is a stupendous achievement indeed and underscores the value of India's extensive public health system for vaccination and surveillance. Besides eradicating poliomyelitis, routine vaccination coverage has also increased significantly and equitably.

India's epidemiological transition is characterized by the double burden of diseases. On the one hand, there are high levels of communicable diseases, such as tuberculosis and, on the other, diabetes and heart diseases are assuming epidemic proportions.

Chronic Respiratory Diseases are an example of a continuum between communicable and non-communicable diseases. Alongside, there are threats of epidemics of emerging diseases such as Covid, sometimes referred to as a triple burden. Even in some of the most marginalized

populations such as those we serve in rural south Rajasthan, there is a high burden of communicable and a growing burden of non-communicable diseases.

Such a situation, where multiple conditions are simultaneously prevalent, can be taxing for any health system, but especially one with limited resources. We need higher investment in healthcare along with a much higher prioritization of primary healthcare, especially primary health centres (PHCs).

**MALNUTRITION PATTERNS** There has also been a shift in malnutrition patterns. While there has been a decline in undernutrition levels, high levels persist, more so among marginalized communities. Simultaneously, the prevalence of overweight and obesity has increased, leading to a double burden of malnutrition. We have found high levels of undernutrition as well as growing levels of overweight even among labour-migrant men across the cities of Gujarat, who come from underdeveloped states such as Odisha and Rajasthan.

Such a situation has been caused, to a large extent, by non-availability and high costs of nutritious food, and easier availability and lower costs of an unhealthy, high-carbohydrate diet. Climate change, a push away from animal foods, disrupted food systems, and high food inflation will continue to affect the nutritional status of populations. Nutrition security, instead of just food security, can reverse this trend.

**MORE HEALTH PROVIDERS** There has also been a significant increase in the production and deployment of doctors in India. Currently, India creates about 80,000 to 100,000 doctors per year. This has led to increasing numbers of doctors being deployed in rural PHCs as well. Based on rural health statistics, in 2005, there were 20,000 doctors posted in 23,000 PHCs, a doctor to PHC ratio of less than one.

By 2022, some 30,000 doctors were posted for 25,000 PHCs. For the first time in the past 20 years, there is at least one doctor for each PHC. During this period, the availability of nurses and Auxiliary Nurse Midwives (ANMs)



A shortage of doctors and nurses cannot any more be an excuse for poor healthcare for rural populations

in rural healthcare systems has increased even more remarkably. In addition, there is now a million-strong new cadre of ASHAs, that have extended healthcare to the village level.

Therefore, a shortage of doctors and nurses cannot any more be an excuse for poor healthcare for rural populations. However, inequities in availability of human resources for health persist: PHCs and CHCs in tribal and other underserved areas continue to have fewer doctors and nurses, adversely affecting the care they receive. In the absence of a transparent health policy, many doctors and nurses manage to get transferred out of such "difficult" areas, denying the healthcare that marginalized communities need.

One of the most significant issues that continue to plague India's primary healthcare systems is a hierarchical and non-motivating work culture. A study of PHCs in Rajasthan by Abhijit Banerjee and Esther Duflo in Rajasthan in 2005, highlighted high levels of absenteeism among primary healthcare staff. Kritika Goel and Reetika Khera visited the same facilities 10 years later and found that while some parameters including infrastructure and availability of drugs had improved, levels of absenteeism remained the same and the utilization of the PHCs remained sub-optimal.

**DECLINE IN EXPENDITURE** Overall expenditure on healthcare as a proportion of GDP has declined in the past 20 years. Despite recommendations of the National Health Policy 2002 and 2017, and commitments by subsequent governments to increase government allocations to at least two percent of GDP, allocations continue to hover around one percent (from 0.96 percent in 2005 to 1.35

percent in 2019-20). In the same period, worryingly, there has been a decline in overall health expenditure by both the government and people themselves from 4.25 percent to 3.3 percent of GDP.

The National Health Policy of 2017 for the first time spoke of expanding the government's role from provision of healthcare to strategic purchasing of healthcare. The policy paved the way for the Ayushman Bharat Pradhan Mantri Jan Arogya Yojana (AB-PMJAY), the government-funded scheme that provides a health insurance cover for secondary and tertiary care.

Different states have adapted the scheme according to their own needs. A study that sought to understand the expenditure incurred by cancer patients across six states suggested that those who were covered by the scheme did indeed incur less expenses and were less likely to be indebted.

According to Shram Sarathi, a not-for-profit organization that provides microfinance and finance literacy to rural, marginalized populations of south Rajasthan, repayment of expenditure on healthcare is the single most important reason (76 percent) for families seeking emergency loans. With the existence of a publicly funded health insurance scheme (Chiranjeevi Yojana) that commits to provide cashless treatment of upto ₹25 lakh per annum per family, such a situation appears paradoxical.

We have identified a few reasons why families continue to pay large sums, delay treatment or fall into debt for seeking care. Firstly, the hospitals that are empanelled are often very far from where marginalized people live, making it extremely difficult for them to access. Secondly, information regarding the

entitlements under these schemes are difficult to understand. In the absence of clear information on which diseases will be covered, which hospitals will provide that care and what will be the other costs that they will have to bear, people are wary of travelling hundreds of km only to be denied the cashless services that they need. Therefore, they would rather not seek care, or take loans and seek expensive private care when the disease is advanced.

**RIGHT TO HEALTH UNREALIZED** Over the past two decades, sustained advocacy by networks such as Jan Swasthya Abhiyan led to a wider understanding of the value of a legislated right-to-health act, and a promise to do so in the draft National Health Policy. However, by the time the final draft came out, it was dropped, stating that Indian health systems are not prepared yet to honour this right.

Continued advocacy by health activists led to a legislated Right to Health (RTH) Act in Rajasthan. The Act commits to provide free the full range of health services at public health facilities to all persons in the state of Rajasthan, as a matter of right. In the face of an unexpected and unfair opposition by doctors, the Act was diluted to accommodate their interests. While the Act has been legislated, the rules are yet to be drafted.

So, India did come closer to having a right to health, but also saw unprecedented opposition, stalling or dilution of such a right. States such as Tamil Nadu have also been working to legislate an RTH Act. Hopefully, it will be well thought through and pave the way for equitable and dignified healthcare for all. ■

*Dr Pavitra Mohan and Dr Sanjana Brahmawar Mohan are founders of Basic Healthcare Services.*



# MISSING THE BUS IN SCHOOL EDUCATION HAS BEEN COSTLY

Learning has been reduced to marks, jobs and money. What is needed is better citizens with a civic sense. Schooling awaits a cadre of well-trained teachers.



**DILEEP RANJEKAR**

IT was a cold midnight in December and many of us were patiently waiting for our turn to get a taxi outside Bengaluru airport. Since many flights were delayed, it was a long queue. Most passengers were keen on getting home as early as possible. A person (probably a senior IT professional) in the queue just ahead of me looked particularly restless. After some time, he took out a cigarette packet from his bag, lighted one, crushed the empty packet and threw it on the ground. The dustbin was just three feet away from both of us. As a reflex action, I picked up the empty packet, threw it in the bin and asked him in a low tone, "Brother, what are you doing when the bin is so close?" Others were looking on at this interaction. The smoker just gave me a quiet look and inhaled a few more puffs. Perhaps it was humiliating for him to be called out in this manner. After a few minutes, better sense prevailed, he turned around and, like an erring schoolboy, said to me, "I will not do it again."

This is surely not an isolated incident. Most of us experience such incidents frequently in daily life. We see people jumping the queue, motorcycles and cycles on footpaths, cars under no-parking signs. The list is unending. Just a few days ago, the minister for transport submitted statistics in Parliament showing that over 400,000 deaths occur yearly on our roads due to the sheer indiscipline of drivers and pedestrians.

And we blame our education system for such behaviour. By way of comparison, we often talk about Japan and how from an early age a civic sense is instilled in children. They are

taught to be good citizens, respectful of others. This orientation has led to the many strides that Japan has taken, which are so visible even to a casual visitor.

In India, however, the focus on scoring high marks in crucial exams has led to the exclusion of other goals that should be a part of education. Schools have become factories. Success is defined by jobs and money. Missing is a civic sense, respect for the environment and national priorities.

Interestingly, this reality is at variance with our policies. The 1986 National Education Policy (NEP) and the more recent NEP 2020 have clearly articulated that the core purpose of education is to develop responsible human beings with the ability to think independently. They should be creative, inclusive, respectful of others and understand our constitutional values.

When we at the Azim Premji Foundation chose to contribute to public school education some 23 years ago, it was with a clear understanding that education has a powerful and sustainable influence on multiple aspects of development. Most importantly, attainment of education goals should provide an equitable opportunity to individuals to participate in the social, economic and cultural growth of society.

Before 2000, the status of education in India reflected some frightening realities that included low literacy, very low rates of enrolment (59 million children out of 225 million were out of school), attendance and completion. There were several infirmities such as poor infrastructure (especially basic issues such as classrooms, toilets, drinking water facilities, etc), an adverse teacher-pupil ratio, meagre transition from school to higher education and, above all, grossly inadequate quality of teacher education. The gender differences in rates of enrolment, attendance and dropouts were alarming (25-30 percentage points between girls and boys).

**GOOD MOVES** The first 20 years after 2000 saw some very positive developments such as the launch of an integrated Sarv Shiksha

Abhiyan that explicitly focused on dramatically increasing the number of classrooms, teachers, toilets, innovative programmes to improve the quality of education as well as teacher development, and so on. All these were backed by significant financial support that had been missing.

Acceptance of education as a fundamental right, the launch of the world's largest mid-day meal programme (the fundamental link between nutrition and child development) and the Right to Education Act, were all backed by sound legislative muscle. The National Curriculum Framework 2005 was a significant step forward in changing the direction of the quality of education. Schools were opened at more than 95 percent of habitations, making education more accessible to children. The Sarv Shiksha Abhiyan was followed by initiatives for high school and university education. All this led to a dramatic rise in the number of educational institutions in the country as well as enrolment of children though attendance and dropout rates continue to be challenges of various degrees.

However, several serious challenges still loom large. Achieving quality of education, envisaged in our education policy and curricular framework, is among the biggest of challenges.

**TRAINING TEACHERS** The teacher education overhaul that is fundamental to achieving education goals can prove to be the single biggest contributor to the transformation of education quality in India. Unless we successfully implement it, the quality of education will continue to be illusive. Without an accountable and empowered teacher, achievement of curricular goals through appropriate classroom practices and pedagogy is unlikely. Given the current education department structures, school cultures rarely reflect autonomy and accountability of schools.

While we often sing positively about the diversity of our cultures, the multiplicity of languages, dialects and mother tongues poses a severe challenge.

Among the most important challenges is our



Education should be about critical thinking and commitment to constitutional values

seriousness and ability to have quality implementation of our policies and programmes. Illustratively, it is over 37 years ago that we clearly defined structures at various geographical levels to support educational institutions. These are State Councils, District Institutes of Education and Training, and Block/Cluster Resource Centres. But they lack the requisite number and quality of personnel who can improve the capacity of schools and teachers.

Education quality will not sustain unless we have a very competent and committed group of almost 150 persons in every district that engages with capacity enhancement of schools and teachers.

In summary, while we, as a nation, have articulated the right intent to achieve education of a kind (through policy and curricular framework) and imagined practical structures at the Centre, state, district, block and cluster level, the quantitative and qualitative implementation of our programmes has been woefully inadequate to achieve the desired results.

The Azim Premji Foundation's work on the ground comprising tight, continuous and large-scale engagement with teachers, school leaders, teacher educators and education functionaries has been of tremendous value in our learning over the past 23 years. In our journey in the education domain, we came across several exemplary teachers and school principals, who, despite all odds, have achieved commendable results through their deep commitment to education and children.

Probably because of our learning and

understanding in education, the government was comfortable in closely involving us in the making of policies and curricula which in turn led to further insights into what it takes to contribute to the national agenda on education with far-reaching implications for India's development as a progressive society.

**VISION AND WILL** How do we see the next 20 to 25 years of education evolving for India? The first and foremost requirement is to have a huge political commitment to develop a long-term vision (at least for the next 20 years) for India and to agree to drive that vision, irrespective of which political party is in power. This needs to be backed by necessary political will to realize the vision. This must lead to providing necessary budgets, creating institutions to develop high quality personnel, including teachers, school leaders and competent enabling educators. Political will must constantly reinforce commitment to public education and inspire quality implementation of policies and practices.

We need to create a culture of empowerment, trust, integrity and accountability up to the last mile. Illustratively, mere tinkering of structures and empty motions of implementation are just not enough. An overhaul and re-design of the system are needed.

**Priorities for education transformation:**

1. Teacher education overhaul
2. High-quality early childhood education
3. Foundational literacy and numeracy
4. Emphasis on conceptual understanding, critical thinking, innovation, commitment and practising of constitutional values

5. Focus on real learning instead of examination/marks driven education
6. Genuine last mile delivery of programmes and benefits announced — especially for marginalized members of society.

The nation must realize that education cannot be viewed in fragments. It should be a continuum. Early childhood education has a deep positive influence on the development of children — contributing to their learnability at the primary level and subsequently in high school. Schools feed into college education and quality higher education is a resource for school education.

Only when we have education that develops independently thinking individuals who are committed to our constitutional values will we have a responsible society. We will not be required to tell people to put their empty cigarette packets in the dustbin. Commuters on roads will follow traffic rules without coercion by the law-and-order machinery. People will think twice before creating environmental pollution and organizations will not be required to invest in employee training to teach basic issues like communication, interpersonal relations, integrity and teamwork. Belief in pluralism, gender sensitivity and rational thinking will be part of the DNA of society. Conflicts between religions, castes, communities will significantly decrease when people resolve issues through reason and democratic means.

High quality education at all levels is fundamental to our attaining the status of a truly developed and happy society! ■

*Dileep Ranjekar is founder CEO and Advisor, Azim Premji Foundation.*

# IT'S BEEN A LONG AND BUMPY ROAD TO ELECTORAL REFORM

Enlightened citizens and the judiciary have brought in more accountability and transparency into India's political system despite pushback from political parties.



**JAGDEEP S. CHHOKAR**

In a landmark judgment 20 years ago, the Supreme Court made it mandatory for candidates contesting elections to Parliament and state Assemblies to disclose their criminal, financial and educational antecedents by way of a self-sworn affidavit to be submitted as a necessary part of their nomination papers.

A three-judge bench unanimously struck down an amendment to the Representation of the People Act of 1951 which had sought to keep from public view the records of politicians standing for elections.

The court weighed in on behalf of citizens, saying they not only had the right to participate in elections, but also be informed voters.

The lead judgment, written by Justice M.B. Shah, declared "Section 33-B of the Amended Act is held to be illegal, null and void."

It is impossible to say whether it was ordained or fortuitous but *Civil Society* magazine was launched six months later in September 2003 to "tell stories of change from across the chaotic landscape of post-reforms India". The Supreme Court's judgment, six months earlier, on March 13, was an important piece in electoral reform and liberalization in favour of the citizen.

But what does declaring "Section 33-B of the Amended Act is held to be illegal, null and void" have to do with electoral reforms? This needs some clarification.

The Association for Democratic Reforms (ADR) had filed a public interest litigation (PIL) in the Delhi High Court in 1999, seeking that disclosure of criminal, financial and educational antecedents by candidates

contesting elections to Parliament and state Assemblies be made mandatory. The Delhi High Court, in a judgment on November 2, 2000, upheld the petition.

This was not acceptable to the Union government of the day and the Union of India filed a Special Leave Petition (SLP) challenging the judgment of the Delhi High Court. Several political parties became intervenors in the case in support of the government. But the Supreme Court, in a judgment on May 2, 2002, rejected the appeal and upheld the Delhi High Court judgment.

The Union government was, however, not satisfied. An all-party meeting decided that the judgment of the Supreme Court would not be allowed to be implemented. It was decided to amend the Representation of the People Act by inserting Section 33-B through an ordinance which was later passed by Parliament. It was this amendment to the Act which was challenged in the Supreme Court.

**COMMITTEES AND PEOPLE** Electoral reforms had been an occasional topic of national discourse since the mid-1960s. One of the earliest committees set up by the Government of India, the Dinesh Goswami Committee, wrote in May 1999, "All these four decades, especially after 1967, the demand for electoral reforms has been mounting up."

Nothing majorly significant happened despite several committees having been set up and having submitted their reports.

The Vohra Committee Report (1993) focussed on the criminalisation of politics; the Indrajit Gupta Committee (1998) on state funding of elections; the 170th report of the Law Commission of India dealt with 'Reform of the Electoral Laws' (1999). In 2002 came the report of the National Commission to Review the Working of the Constitution.

After 2003, there seemed to have been a spurt in the filing of public interest litigation on various aspects of electoral reforms. Some of the important petitions are listed below.

The People's Union for Civil Liberties (PUCL) filed a PIL on April 1, 2004, asking for the provision of a NOTA (None Of The Above)

button on electronic voting machines to enable a voter to say that they did not want to vote for any of the candidates on the ballot without any breach of the secrecy of voting. ADR became an intervenor in the case. A three-judge bench upheld the PIL on September 27, 2003, directing the Election Commission to provide the NOTA button on the EVMs.

**TWO PETITIONS** In 2005 two petitions were filed. One by an organization called Lok Prahari on April 19, 2005, and another by advocate Lily Thomas on September 1, 2005, asking that Sub-section 4 of Section 8 of the Representation of the People Act (RP Act) 1951 be declared unconstitutional and struck down. ADR became an intervenor in the case. The two petitions were heard together and resulted in a landmark judgment on July 10, 2013, which declared Section 8(4) of the Representation of People Act unconstitutional. This judgment needs some explanation.

Section 8 of the Act, titled "Disqualification on conviction for certain offences", provided broadly that any person who is convicted of a criminal offence for which the punishment is two or more years of imprisonment, is disqualified from being an MP or MLA for a period of six years from the date of conviction.

Sub-section 4 of Section 8 made a special provision for sitting MPs and MLAs in that it said that if convicted of such an offence they would not be disqualified immediately but have a period of three months in which to file an appeal. If the appeal was admitted for hearing, not accepted or approved, they could continue as MLA or MP till the appeal was finally disposed of by the Supreme Court.

The result of this special provision was that while a common citizen could not contest elections for six years from the day of conviction, sitting MPs or MLAs could continue to contest elections till an appeal was disposed of by the Supreme Court, a process which could take years and years! Lok Prahari and Lily Thomas challenged this special provision and the Supreme Court upheld their petitions and removed this special provision.



The UPA government drafted an ordinance to pre-empt Lalu Prasad Yadav's ouster from Parliament

A review petition was filed and was rejected by the Supreme Court on September 4, 2013, giving finality to the judgment.

This judgment had two interesting consequences. Once the judgment became final, its implications started worrying politicians. Judgment in the fodder scam case in Bihar, in which Lalu Prasad Yadav was a prime accused, was expected and Lalu Prasad was likely to be convicted.

Lalu Prasad's party, the Rashtriya Janata Dal (RJD), was one of the members of the United Progressive Alliance (UPA), and the government headed by Manmohan Singh did not want Lalu Prasad to be ousted from Parliament. The government, therefore, prepared a draft ordinance to undo the Supreme Court judgment.

In a dramatic event on September 28, 2013, while the draft Ordinance was being presented to the media in a press conference in the Press Club of India in New Delhi, and the prime minister was on a visit to the US, Rahul Gandhi, who was then vice-president of the Congress party, walked into the press conference and physically tore up the draft.

"I'll tell you what my opinion on the ordinance is. It's complete nonsense. It should be torn up and thrown away. That is my personal opinion. ... I am interested in what the Congress is doing and what our government is doing. That is why what our government has done as far as this ordinance is concerned is wrong," Gandhi said.

In the event, Lalu Prasad was convicted by a CBI court on September 30, 2013, and sentenced to five years of rigorous imprisonment on October 3 and disqualified

from the Lok Sabha on October 22.

The second interesting consequence came almost 10 years later, in early 2023, and it came to Rahul Gandhi himself.

Gandhi was convicted of defamation and sentenced to two years' imprisonment by a court in Surat, in Gujarat, on March 23. Consequently, he was disqualified as a member of Parliament. But his conviction was stayed by the Supreme Court and he was reinstated.

**NUDGING THE SYSTEM** Many other petitions have been filed and many orders have flowed from the Supreme Court. Not all of them have resulted in major reforms to the electoral system but some have been effective in nudging the political system into action, sometimes retrograde.

Two significant cases in the recent past have been on the appointment of the Chief Election Commissioner (CEC) and Election Commissioners (ECs) and on electoral bonds. Another one, seeking implementation of the Central Information Commission's full-bench unanimous judgment declaring six national political parties as 'public authorities' under the Right to Information Act is still pending in the Supreme Court since May 2015.

Yet another petition seeking a robust and transparent system for counting of votes, based on the experience of the 2019 Lok Sabha election, has also been pending, waiting to be listed, in the Supreme Court.

Electoral bonds have already been written about in an earlier issue (*Civil Society*, December 2019). A case filed by ADR and Common Cause was finally heard earlier this year and judgment was reserved.

The issue of appointment of the CEC and ECs is currently in the news. The CEC and ECs have been appointed by the President solely on the advice of the government of the day since Independence although Article 324(2) of the Constitution required Parliament to make a law in this regard. No government has ever felt the need to make this law.

This issue was challenged in the Supreme Court by ADR in a PIL filed on May 17, 2021. The Court decided that Parliament should make such a law, and till the law is made by Parliament, the CEC and the ECs should be appointed by the President of India on the basis of the advice tendered by a committee consisting of the Prime Minister, the Leader of the Opposition in the Lok Sabha and, in case there is no such leader, the leader of the largest party in the Opposition in the Lok Sabha and the Chief Justice of India.

This seemed to have disturbed the government of the day significantly. The government has on December 21 got a law passed in Parliament, with over 140 MPs of the Opposition having been suspended. The law is a complete negation of the Supreme Court's judgment. It replaces the Chief Justice of India in the selection committee with "a Union Cabinet Minister to be nominated by the Prime Minister". So, the matter is back to square one!

The story of electoral reforms over the past 20 years has been one of one step forward and one and a half steps backwards. Civil society proposes, the judiciary sometimes approves, and then the politicians dispose! The struggle continues and will continue. ■

*Jagdeep Chhokar is a concerned citizen*

# INSTITUTIONS ARE IN NEED OF A REBOOT TO SERVE PEOPLE

Civil society organizations could lead the way and reform themselves first by being less corporatized and more representative of the interests of citizens.



ARUN MAIRA

IMAGINE you are flying in an old propeller airplane with 100 passengers and crew. The ride has become bumpy. Worse weather ahead. The plane must fly faster and higher for safety. You wish the aircraft would somehow transform, midair, into a sleek jet so that all aboard could reach their destination safely.

Institutions are vehicles designed to carry humans on a journey to their aspirational goals. Institutions of democratic governance, such as elected assemblies and courts of justice, have evolved to improve governance of societies; and institutions such as corporations and stock markets have evolved to increase economic growth.

An airplane requires several complex systems — engines, navigation systems, an aerodynamic body, and wings — working in harmony to make it fly. Human societies need many institutions working together for a well-governed economy and society. These also include a variety of civil society institutions.

When a plane is to fly faster, higher, and safely too, it is not sufficient to change only one system, such as the engines to give more power. The design of the fuselage must be changed too, as well as cabin systems for passenger safety.

Independent India set out to its tryst with destiny in 1947. A Constitution was formed in 1951, delineating the principal institutions for governance at the national and state levels. Other institutions were also formed: some with constitutionally defined roles such as an independent Election Commission; and others by executive orders such as a Planning

Commission. Whereas the designs of institutions of business and civil society were not specified, they were expected to conform to the Constitution's guiding principles.

Two overall principles were to guide all institutions. Indian society would be "secular", and the Indian economy would be "socialist". However, the meaning of "secularism" continues to be contested and "socialism" is disputed too.

**SOCIALISM AND CAPITALISM** By 1991, there was increasing concern about the health of the Indian economy. Its critics said it was too "socialist", not sufficiently "capitalist". The Soviet Union had lost the Cold War and collapsed: US ideologies spread around the world. India needed a bailout from the IMF, which compelled India to join the Washington Consensus of global, free market capitalism. In this ideology, "private" is good and "public" is bad. Government must be curtailed, and the business of business must be only business.

Oddly, even though top-down planning, with five-year plans and sectoral allocations of budgets, was considered a Soviet, and socialist, idea, India's Planning Commission remained, an anachronism, in place from 1991 until 2013.

The private sector added more power to the economy. Growth rates climbed higher. By 1999, when the BJP formed its first government (in a National Democratic Alliance with other parties), it celebrated "India Shining". However, common citizens were not benefitting from GDP growth sufficiently. The United Progressive Alliance of the Congress with its communist partners won the election in 2004 on a "socialist" platform. Nevertheless, the basic structure of economic policies was not changed. The Congress' economic advisors continued to celebrate India's growth trajectory, this time with the slogan, "the world's fastest growing, free market, democracy". This distinguished India from China, whose GDP was growing much faster, and who attracted more investments from the US and other Western countries.

Dr Manmohan Singh, the prime minister from 2004, who was India's finance minister in

1991, was recognized by business leaders as the champion of the economy's liberalization.

However, it was clear to Dr Singh and other Congress leaders that the pattern of India's growth was neither inclusive, nor sustainable. It was not bringing all citizens along equitably. Not enough opportunities were being generated for the millions of young people wanting to earn sustainable incomes. Also, the pattern of growth was harming the environment.

A survey by the international Sustainable Economic Development Assessment (SEDA) framework revealed that, with each percent of GDP growth, the Indian economy was generating the least numbers of jobs compared to all BRICS countries and its sub-continental neighbours also. Each percent of GDP growth was also harming the country's natural environment more than all other countries. Groundwater tables were falling alarmingly, and India's cities were becoming the most polluted. Therefore, Dr Singh charged the Planning Commission with developing the 12th Five Year Plan, to commence in 2012, to achieve not only faster, but also inclusive and sustainable growth.

**CHANGING COMPLEX SYSTEMS** Dr Singh also took this opportunity to examine the utility of the anachronistic Planning Commission, the hangover from the pre-1991 "socialist" era. He invited me to join the Planning Commission, and since I was not a qualified economist, and had no previous experience in government, he expected me to bring a fresh perspective. The Planning Commission gave me a perch in India's cockpit from which I could see the breadth of the country's challenges and the performance of its institutions. He asked me to recommend suitable reforms of the planning process.

A process of "systems' thinking-based scenario planning" was applied to understand the interplays of the internal and external forces impacting India's growth trajectory and institutions. The analysis revealed growing misalignments between the purposes and designs of institutions and the needs of the



It has mostly been a top-down approach with trickling down of benefits

country. It explained why, while the airplane had new economic engines to take GDP higher, citizens in the back were being deprived of sufficient oxygen for sustaining their lives, and also how emissions from the engines were harming the environment.

**Policy planners were not measuring what matters:** There was an obsession with measuring GDP to decimal points every quarter; but few accurate measurements of inclusion and sustainability even every five years. Globally, GDP was the only measure of the health of an economy. The belief was that growth will lift all boats; and people below will benefit from a "trickle down" from above. Inequalities were increasing around the world. India was most vulnerable because the Indian economy needed to create more good jobs to carry along its large number of aspirational youth (its "demographic dividend"). It had to do this much faster than other countries to avoid social and economic turbulence.

The capitalist ideology of privatizing the economy to boost growth required the government to ease regulations, so that businesses could use more land, exploit forests, and consume more fresh water (while discharging wastes into rivers), to expand their business operations. Regulations of employment were also eased to enable businesses to reduce their costs. India began to climb the World Bank's global "ease of doing business" rankings: socialist concerns of common citizens' "ease of living" were put on the backburner.

**Planning was top-down:** The widely applied theory for planning, when resources are scarce and outcomes must be produced efficiently, is

top-down management. Experts determine the allocation of resources. They measure progress, and coordinate activities, to ensure the machine produces the expected outcomes. Top-down management of complex systems is common practice in the corporate sector, governments, and international development programmes. It is not a Soviet invention: it is a universal management practice.

Wherever "one size solutions fit all", this way of management can work. Corporations reduce complexity to develop specialized solutions (implementable on scale) by focusing only on one segment of the economy. They reduce complexity further by pushing out messy environmental and social realities from their business models as "externalities". Similarly, macro economists are guilty of oversimplifying socio-economic-political systems when they focus only on managing GDP, which is a measure of the size of the economy, not its internal shape. They also set aside complex environmental and social forces as externalities to their mathematical models.

**Economists were not listening to the people:** India's plans were being built upon the economists' statistics. Economists were not listening to the people. Lives of people were numbers in their equations. Their statistics were not measuring what really matters to people. Therefore, their decimal point estimations of GDP did not matter much to the people.

**CORPORATIZED CIVIL SOCIETY** All governments, especially democratic ones, must serve citizens. Corporations must serve their investors: it is the purpose for their existence,

codified in corporate law. Corporations lobby for policies that protect their private property rights (over land, money, and intellectual property) and policies to increase their profits. When democratically elected governments, swayed by powerful corporate lobbies, put the interests of powerful and wealthy corporations above the needs of common citizens, they become out of touch with common citizens.

Civil society must be a check on the power of corporations and governments. Civil society must represent and serve common citizens: it is the purpose for its existence. Civil society organizations also serve society by providing last mile connectivity to those citizens that governments and large businesses do not reach. Civil society organizations perform in several ways:

1. As "activists" standing up for the rights of common citizens against the power of governments and corporates. (Telling truth to power)
2. As extensions of government programmes, philanthropy, and CSR reaching into communities. (Giving fish)
3. As facilitators of local "development", by enabling communities to build their own capabilities. (Learning to fish)
4. A fourth role some civil society (i.e., not for profit and non-governmental) organizations perform is as Thought Leaders. They research and present insights from the points-of-view of those left behind.

With the ideological swing from "socialism" to "capitalism" in the 1990s, governments began to leave citizen welfare to the private sector. Governments were short of resources;

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## Rebooting institutions

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also accused of incompetence. Philanthropy and CSR expanded, bringing more money from the business sector to support civil society organizations delivering on the ground (Giving fish). Activists against capitalism's excesses (Truth to power) were, of course, not supported. The roles of think tanks (Thought Leaders) became muddled. Whose side were they on? Were they socialist (on the 'Left')? Or capitalist (saying the 'Right' things from the Establishment's perspective)?

With philanthropy and corporate money came corporate ideas of organization, and management consultants to help civil society organizations improve efficiencies and expand their scales. With this help, chemistries of civil society organizations began to change. They became more "professional" (in a corporate way), and more entangled in accounting to their donors. Their spirit of service to citizens began to be dulled by the corporatization of their organizations and processes.

Concepts of "development" were also distorted — towards more efficient delivery, on larger scales, of whatever the donors focused on: delivering healthcare services, or building schools, or providing new energy solutions, etc. — rather than building the capacities of communities. Giving them more fish; not helping them to fish for themselves.

**REDESIGNING CIVIL SOCIETY** With their desire for support from those with money, civil society organizations began to adopt the ways of business. They compete amongst themselves for recognition; they promote their brands; they professionalize their human resource management. They are coopted into the paradigm of competition for growth, rather than cooperation for a common cause.

Many institutions need reform simultaneously to enable humanity to reach its aspirational goals: institutions of government and business, and civil society too. The G20 has admitted that, midway on our journey, we have covered only 12 percent of the distance to reach the SDG goals. Time is running out. We cannot carry on with the ways of thinking and working that have created this existential problem.

Reform of civil society institutions is most urgent. Because they must compel the others to reform to serve common citizens. Civil society organizations must reform themselves to empower citizens to help themselves, and not remain dependent on their charity. Civil society organizations, including the media, must reconnect with their existential purpose in society, from which they have drifted. Too many have become business-like and have lost the genuine spirit of service to the people. ■

*Arun Maira is the author of Shaping the Future: How to Be, Think, and Act in the New World.*

# EVERYONE BENEFITS WHEN WOMEN EARN

But they are poorly represented in the labour force, paid less and not given opportunities they deserve.



REEMA NANAVATY

**WOMEN** in the informal sector in India work for almost 16 to 18 hours a day, often in difficult working conditions. Yet they earn less than men. Their assets are barely one percent of what men own. They have limited access to water and sanitation. Or even to clean air and light. And hardly any social protection in terms of insurance, pension or medical aid.

There are millions of women who work out of their homes. They could be makers of toys, incense sticks, kites or *beedis*. Some roll tapes and others wind circuits. They could be cooking and selling meals or into packaging things from food to air fresheners.

In the rural economy, women pursue traditional family occupations. They are in animal husbandry, dairying, farming, floriculture, horticulture, weaving, salt farming and more in rural areas. Even though their contribution equals or exceeds that of men, the family's assets, be it land or tools or animals, are owned by the men. Women's work remains unaccounted for, unprotected, and invisible, not only to the economy but also to the family and to herself.

It has been so for four decades. With economic liberalization, globalization and climate change the inequality they endure has worsened in the past 20 years. Where they haven't been replaced ruthlessly by machines, they toil harder in adverse circumstances — be it on farms or exploitative factories run by global companies drawing on cheap and unorganized labour.

Participation of women in labour markets has been declining. In the informal sector they remain invisible and aren't counted as workers.

Their contribution to the economy goes unnoticed. But even if fewer women are formally employed it doesn't mean their workload and family responsibilities are reducing. They are, in fact, increasing and increasing at an accelerated rate. Never before have women had so much work and so many roles to play for such small amounts and sometimes no amount at all.

As Ela Bhatt, founder of the Self-Employed Women's Association (SEWA) put it: "If there is poverty we can assume there is discrimination based on class, caste, colour, religion, gender, or language; we can assume there is intimidation and fear in the community, in the family, in the workplace, and in the environment; we can assume hierarchical institutions where one thrives at the cost of another, and one dominates over others in society and individual relations."

She also said that as women become active in the economy, with decent work, basic income, access to basic needs, and social protection, and a future, poverty cannot continue.

This remains SEWA's experience over the past 50 years with thousands of women in hundreds of trades and businesses in more than 19 states of India. Let me draw from this perspective to look at women's economic participation in the workforce.

**HOME-BASED WORK** The ILO (International Labour Organization) Convention 177 on home-based work has not been ratified by any country, including India. South Asia has the highest number of home-based workers. As a result, global supply chains benefit by their contractors sub-contracting work to these home-based women workers at exploitative wages and in very indecent working conditions.

Similar is the situation of vendors and hawkers in India. In spite of their contribution to the city's economy and in peri-urban and rural areas, they are not recognized as entrepreneurs — rather they are seen as encroachers! Construction of a mall is seen as infrastructure development. But no city will consider setting up an entrepreneur school or centre for the women vendors — because they are dirty, poor, illiterate and women. This is odd because even



Learning skills: Women come into their own at a SEWA centre in Kupwara district of Kashmir

now over 80 percent of city dwellers buy around 70 percent of their daily food and other needs from vendors and hawkers.

No Indian city has bothered to create spaces for vendors with lighting, sanitation and waste disposal facilities. There is a national law for regularizing street vendors, but many cities have yet to formulate a policy for vendors. Better arrangements and rules would bring more women into vending and make them a part of the urban economy. The female workforce is overlooked by cities and citizens.

**LOST ROLES** The reality of rural women today as shared by Shardaben Jhala of SEWA is, "Agriculture is getting mechanized. So the work where women were used as agricultural labour is now done by machines. And women are not invited to run these machines." Such changes push women out of work in rural areas.

With agricultural land turning into industrial land, women lose their roles in the rural economy. Men migrate and educated young women work as labour in factories. The older uneducated women only get casual work such as collection of wood, fuel, wild berries and so on. This is all seasonal work and that too for a few days in a month. They are paid small amounts for their work. And often such payments are delayed. They face extreme events, floods, heat, and cyclones almost each year and some years all three in one season. As happened in Gujarat in 2022.

Rekhaben Jaiswal says, "Initially every house used to keep one or two cows. Now there are large cattle sheds owned by big farmers. Women

go and work at these cattle sheds occasionally. From being cattle owners they have become cattle labour." This means low wages, long hours, and no say in work-related decisions.

Activities such as tailoring and vending have slowed down as so many mobile retail vans bring readymade, packaged goods to villages. When local markets wind up, women suffer.

**NO ACCESS** Women in family occupations mostly don't have access to the market. Socially and culturally, too, they are excluded and therefore their contribution is unaccounted and unrecognized. The traditional skills women have, which should be considered valuable heritage, are also not recognized. Women as artisans — embroiderers, knitters and dye workers — possess exquisite skills but do not benefit from the commercial value created from them. Most of the money goes to the designers, traders, stockists and middlemen. Graduates from institutes of fashion and design are called professionals. But what about the skills of artisans? We hesitate to recognize our own women and their work that has sustained our economy and culture.

**SKILL DEVELOPMENT** At SEWA we believe in the need for skill development to bring more young women into employment. These may be new skills, old skills, traditional or modern. We see skilling as an effective way of integration. While higher level skills have been given a good deal of attention, as a result of which we have highly qualified professionals in every field of whom we are proud, the same is not true with

the majority of young people who have basic schooling or no education at all. Education without skills is lame, Elaben often said.

Elaben also said, "No skill should be allowed to become redundant or obsolete from our skill-rich country, India. We must develop a market for skill training with fair and higher returns. With skills, employment opportunities open up. It is only when women come into their own in the workplace that they will be recognized as nation builders."

Equally, it is important to formally recognize the contribution made by women in households. Should work at home not be regarded as work? Managing the family's budget and taking care of children are important responsibilities. Household chores are hard work. Planning family events is work.

As technologies swamp workplaces, there is the danger that fewer women will find employment. There is immediate need to implement the recommendations of the ILO's 'Global Commission on Future of Work' report.

This report calls for a human-(may I say woman)centred approach to work. This approach has three pillars of (a) increasing investment in people's capabilities, especially those of women; (b) increasing investment in the institution of work such as women's cooperatives and small businesses and associations; and (c) increasing investment in decent and sustainable work where women are in large numbers. This is the key to more participation of women in India's labour force. ■

*Reema Nanavaty is the director of SEWA.*

# PEOPLE'S MOVEMENTS HAVE BEEN LOSING THEIR VOICE

Centralized power is now reversing the gains from laws based on consultation which enriched policy making and addressed the concerns of the marginalized.



ARUNA ROY

IN many countries around the world democracy is being gradually reduced to an electoral vote, with the majority party assuming almost all legitimacy. Many lawful concerns and advocacy for “people” are being reduced to the margins. Discussions are not representative and majoritarian interpretations of democracy dominate.

In India, what is now being witnessed is a reversal of the efforts made by people's movements to access rights and formulate rights-based legislation.

These movements were in answer to the first 50 years after India's freedom when development and basic rights remained inaccessible because of the structural corruption of the delivery system.

Since the Narmada Bachao Andolan (NBA), movements sought to define the rights of people to participate in designing policy. The understanding of citizens' rights led to questioning the role of political representatives, shifting the discourse towards demanding participatory democracy.

The relevance of rights-based legislation was understood by people. The independent campaigns for these laws became the democratic demand of people at the grassroots. There was the Right to Information, the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA), National Food Security, Right to Education, the Scheduled Tribes and Other Traditional Forest Dwellers (Recognition of Forest Rights) Act, Street Vendors Act, Protection of Women from Domestic Violence Act, the Scheduled Castes

and the Scheduled Tribes (Prevention of Atrocities) Amendment Act, Amendments to the Disability Act of 1995, the Lokpal and Lokayuktas Act, 2013 and the Whistle Blowers Protection Act, 2011.

And these are just some of the many significant people's movements. One seeks a collective pardon for leaving out others for want of space. The civil society narrative of 20 years is complex and huge.

As we stepped into the 21st century we carried with us the momentum of the growing democratic confidence that citizens could fashion national policy and legislation.

The seminal issues of transparency and accountability were defined by a group of peasants and workers from central Rajasthan. Their struggle for wages traced the paper trail between the fudged muster roll, unpaid wages, government opacity, outlining their demand to the right to live with dignity. Transparency and accountability were perceived as critical for rights, livelihood and for development.

Grassroots struggles were located in the socio-economic realities of inequality. Justice was inaccessible because of corruption, the arbitrary use of power, and a complicit local government. The poor were permanently on the fringes, defined as criminals. The system reacted to this questioning with violence and viciousness.

**PUSHBACK BY THE STATE** The system reacted with the imposition of criminal cases — including bizarre accusations of conspiring against the State. People were persecuted for claiming the right to decide on their own development, like the location of an atomic plant in a tsunami-affected area in Kudankulam or protests against mining in tribal areas. It became clear to village India that welfare promises had to be transformed into rights for access to basic services, and to establish the legal validity of their claims.

Even the Mazdoor Kisan Shakti Sangathan (MKSS)'s Right to Information (RTI) campaign began with the demand for minimum wages for government works. It was interesting to follow the paper trail — from the muster roll, to the

BDO (Block Development Officer) office. The muster rolls had dead people's names and bills were made out to fictitious individuals, which enraged middle-class villagers, upset with how corruption resulted in divesting the rural village economy of simple but important assets. Asking for information about the expenditure on public works brought the village together despite differences across caste, class and religion. Corruption, nepotism and the arbitrary use of power affect individual lives. They also make a mockery of development promises and constitutional rights. Public hearings exposed the farce of governance in government hospitals, schools and other systems of delivery of welfare.

The response of the political system was largely one of anxiety because the rights-based laws legitimized the right to question their impunity, and they often reacted with violence. More than 100 RTI users have lost their lives for questioning authority.

**RESTRICTIVE ORDERS** Post-2014, there have been greater restrictive orders, removing spaces of protest. Activism has become a pejorative word and is stoked by hate speeches and derision through such hate speech. Words like ‘urban Naxals’ have become labels to delegitimize and stigmatize urban support and amplification of the voices of tribals and other vulnerable groups. The Bhima Koregaon incarcerations are actually of people who amplified Dalit and tribal voices for the delivery of constitutional promises.

The rights-based campaigns questioned the conventional notion of governance and power. The demand for engagement with democratic processes was a demand for constitutional equality.

An early attempt at creating platforms for such engagement was the National Advisory Council (NAC) formed by the UPA governments — I and II. It functioned as a pre-legislative platform to engage with people. This engagement largely formalized the obligation of power to consult, deliberate and evolve policy participatively. Though the legal context of the NAC in the structure of parliamentary



The National Food Security Act and MGNREGA were drafted by people's movements

governance remained unclear, it did manage to engage with a democratic, participatory process. It opened up channels for engagement with the system. Civil servants and policymakers had to listen to people and their points of view.

**NO DEBATE ON LAWS** The NAC in its second phase was persuaded to debate on the need for a pre-legislative policy, but ended as an office order. This tradition has been set aside by the Central government. It is unbelievable that a spate of laws has gone through Parliament with little or no debate, often bypassing reference to Select and Standing Committees, created for larger participation and involvement of people in decision-making. Urban civil society has remained largely silent on these issues.

After the 2014 elections, there was a systematic attempt to weaken the rights-based laws. Prime Minister Modi said in Parliament in 2014 that MGNREGA “was a living memorial to the Congress government's failures. After so many years in power, all the then government in power was able to deliver was for a poor man to dig ditches a few days a month”.

But the National Food Security Act (NFSA) and MGNREGA were the only support to rural people during the Covid-19 pandemic induced counter migration. RTI, however weakened, still plays a role in legitimizing questions and speaking truth to power.

The right to question and freedom of expression are the nerve centres of a democracy. Mass movements which systematically spoke truth to power were strong ethical forces influencing a range of people's concerns. Derisive labels for social movement leaders as *andolan jeevis* have been coined to present them as a disvalue to society.

These two decades also saw brutal attacks on people like Narendra Dabholkar, Govind Pansare, Gauri Lankesh and M.M. Kalburgi, who questioned and spoke of rationality, exposed superstition, bigotry, fundamentalism and the emerging political culture of communal politics. It also saw the systematic and engineered attempt to put down student agitation and movements. The attack within Jawaharlal Nehru University (JNU), the incarceration of student activists, the fundamentalism on campuses, disallowing entry into colleges and universities were all part of this pattern. There has been a strong clampdown on student articulation. Unable to protest, they continue to live with injustice. As a result, there have been suicides. Rohith Vemula's untimely suicide is a case in point.

MeToo and Not In My Name caught the imagination of young people in search of justice. The spontaneous movement in response to the Nirbhaya case brought women together to demand a powerful rape law, which was framed with public consultation.

**EROSION OF RIGHTS** The Constitution has been cunningly corroded by the passage of laws which undermine fundamental rights and guarantees. The hazy apprehension in 2014 that the Modi government would impose restrictions on free speech and expression and promote inequality based on religion, has become reality. In 2019, any voice raised in protest and even acts of charity for the victims of communal conflict in Delhi became subjects of government scrutiny, and many have been jailed without logic.

The spontaneous protest on the NRC (National Register of Citizens) and Citizenship (Amendment) Act (CAA) was not just by

minority communities. Large numbers of democratic citizens came together to fight inequality. It was ruthlessly put down. The huge farmer agitation, when thousands of farmers began protesting, demanding the repeal of three farm laws passed as ordinances, challenged the ruling party.

There was no deliberation in Parliament and no democratic space for protest. It implicitly argued for pre-legislative consultation as a right when laws affecting thousands of people are passed in camera. It redefined the dimension, scale and possibilities of struggles for rights in India. The ordinances were set aside after a struggle which lasted a year and four months.

The NGO sector has been at the receiving end of numerous irrational changes in the Foreign Contribution Regulation Act (FCRA). As a result its ability to contribute in critical sectors — climate change, education, malnutrition or human rights — has declined.

Places for protest have shrunk by intent. Using the National Green Tribunal's decision on noise pollution, Jantar Mantar was shut down for many months. It became active only after litigation in the Supreme Court. The new rules and conditions of protest, post the judgment, have also changed the contours of people's mobilization.

The control of political power through centralization of technology so clearly visualized in the two dystopias — Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World* and George Orwell's *1984* — has become frighteningly real.

But the human voice cannot be silenced and, we hope, continues to protest, create, live. To quote Bertolt Brecht: *In the dark times / will there also be singing? / Yes, there will also be singing. / About the dark times.* ■

Aruna Roy is a member of the MKSS.

# INFORMAL WORK HAS BEEN GROWING AND IS AS NASTY

Migrant workers continue to be employed in unsafe, underpaid roles. Joining them are the gig workers in cities. 'No contract' has become the norm for the workforce.



RAJIV KHANDELWAL

TWENTY years ago, the idea of establishing Aajeevika Bureau took seed in our minds. We were excited about the possibility of sparking lasting impact on the lives of millions of informal, especially migrant, workers. We were cognizant of the harsh realities of the problems confronting workers. Our early travels to exploding cities and rapidly growing industrial markets in neighbouring Gujarat brought to us the harrowing conditions confronting thousands of workers from everywhere in the country.

These were workers migrating due to persistent poverty at home. They accepted work in Gujarat for meagre wages and in high-risk and hazardous conditions. No one had any written documentation of employment or a formal contract. Provident Fund, ESIC (Employees' State Insurance Corporation) cover or social security of any kind was almost entirely missing.

If accidents or illnesses happened — and they did frequently — workers headed home rather than attempting to navigate or avail of health services in cities. Workers on construction sites and in hotels and factories had been herded by contractors. Few, if any, had any inkling of who owned their site or the factory where they spent most of their working day.

Communication was tedious. Only the contractors or supervisors had cell phones, if at all. Workers remained largely unconnected with one another and with their families at home. Only a few had phones in their pockets and they could barely afford to recharge their SIM cards. Banks would routinely refuse to

open bank accounts as proof of residence or introducers were unavailable.

Wage payments happened in cash. Wage frauds and leakages went without redress. Workers rarely kept records of their attendance. There was no written history of payments. Many workers, especially Adivasi ones, lived life on the cusp of survival and destitution. Chronic debt, severe malnutrition and illnesses marred their lives back home and these issues travelled with them to cities where they worked.

The dense and decrepit neighbourhoods in which they stayed were largely beyond municipal gaze. Congested *chawls* with dark, dank rooms shared by male migrant workers became dens of disease. Workers whose rural homes were a day or overnight journey away, fled back home regularly, with frequent breaks from work. The work and living conditions were too arduous to be suffered for long periods — rest, recuperation and immersive social engagements were needed. In one of our early surveys, we noted that the Adivasi males exited their jobs in cities permanently at the young age of 32 years — as wages remained stagnant, frequent illnesses disrupted work and many faced abuse and bondage at the hands of their contractors and employers. Twenty years later, many of these scenes continue to replay.

**STAGGERING NUMBERS** Despite a massive increase in the workforce over two decades, the share of informal employment in total employment continues to be staggering. In the past 20 years it has witnessed a minor decline — from 93.2 percent in 2004-05 to 90.6 percent today. Even in the formal sector, informal employment has jumped from 4.2 percent to 9.5 percent in this 20-year period.

No wonder 63 percent of India's entire workforce does not possess a work contract. Nearly 54 percent works without any form of social security. And nearly 47 percent of the entire Indian workforce does not enjoy a single day of paid leave. A 10-to-12-hour gruelling, high-risk work shift has become normal for many engaged in informal arrangements.

Wages across the board for informal sector workers remain nearly stagnant or record

meagre increments that lag far behind the consumer price index.

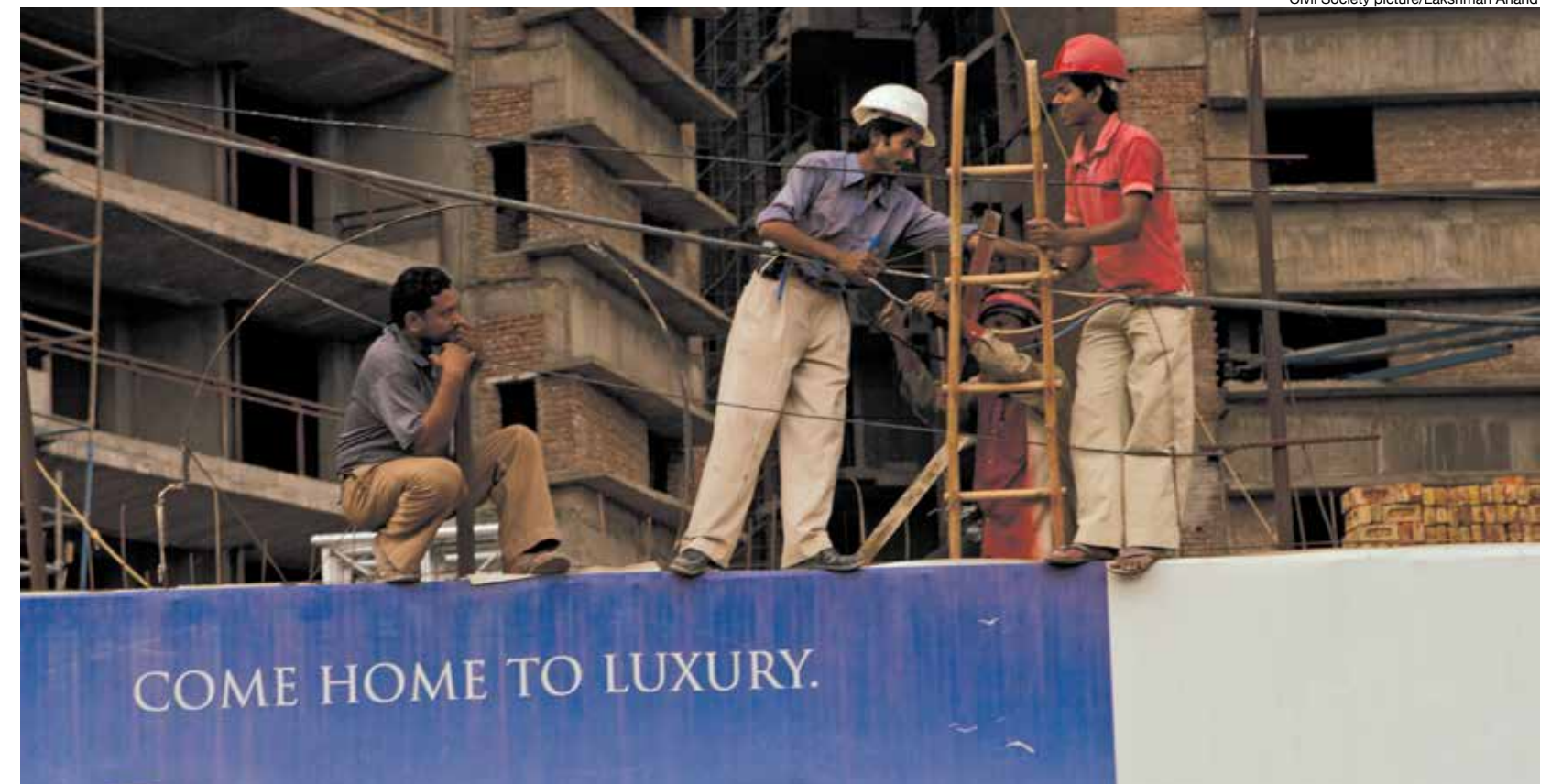
Work continues to be perilous for Indian workers. Work sites in India are amongst the most dangerous in the world. Even official estimates — which are severely under-reported — provide alarming evidence of workplace hazards. In 2021, the Union labour ministry informed Parliament that at least 6,500 workers died on duty in factories, ports, mines, and construction sites in the preceding five years. Over 80 percent of these fatalities were reported in factories. In fact, deaths in factories increased by 20 percent between 2017 and 2018.

Most of these deaths were reported from the top industrialized states, including Gujarat, Maharashtra and Tamil Nadu. Let us not forget that for every death that occurs, there are multiple cases of grievous injuries and accidents that happen and that bring life-long disability to workers.

**DILUTION OF SAFETY LAWS** Undoubtedly, the rising graph of industrial accidents is strongly correlated to the dilution of industrial labour and safety regulations everywhere. It is also strongly linked to another reality — the fragmenting of industrial production where manufacturing, processing, assembling, grading, recycling work gets outsourced to smaller sites and units. For smaller players, investments in workers' training, safety infrastructure or an ecosystem of prevention are too remote (and possibly too expensive) to be implemented.

Since the initiation of India's industrial era was led by the public sector, the discipline of occupational health and safety became embedded in large factory units and sites. This has yet to find its way to millions of smaller enterprises and units where downstream manufacturing occurs and where workers are exposed to utmost risk. For all the modern advances in India's celebrated industrial clusters, the industry supply chains and their workers largely sweat it out in an era reminiscent of medieval times.

New forms of work and work arrangements have also emerged, probably unimagined two



Labour continues to be underpaid and work conditions are perilous

decades ago. Many of these are driven by advances in digital technology which has given impetus to a massive increase in e-commerce and the advent of app-based services and work.

Gig work has redefined the standard notion of work and the core employer-worker relationship. It is creating a large underclass of workers who are unable to claim stable wages or social security and whose incomes are tied to complex algorithms that push workers unsustainably harder to earn a decent return. Legislation to govern work and the work conditions of these workers is still in the early stages of being formulated.

In the labour markets familiar to us, we've also been witness to other technology-related shifts that overburden workers by significantly increasing and expanding their load. One of the most telling examples of this shift is in the colossal power loom clusters where hundreds of thousands of migrants find work. New and rapid machines have reduced the demand for workers on the shopfloor. However, machines now allotted to workers have increased in number, making shifts longer and more exhausting and their earnings more volatile.

**COVID AND BEYOND** It took the Covid pandemic for the migrant experience to find its voice. The sheer magnitude of misery inflicted on migrant workers trapped in unfriendly cities and their treacherous journeys back home elicited sympathy for their fragile condition. Much was said about the need to create databases of migrants and track them, provide affordable housing, create a portable Public Distribution System (PDS), improve services for their stability and stand by their rights as

citizens. But except for some new and local initiatives, much of the migrant discourse seems to have faded away.

At the national level the e-Shram programme to register all workers has resulted in workers being logged. However, registration is unlikely to result in any shift in the informality that corrodes workers and work conditions. For this, stronger labour governance and laws are needed, not less. Not just for the migrant worker community but for workers at large. The gaze of labour rights has firmly shifted to the smokescreen of massive welfare schemes for workers. In this single-minded pursuit of registration, enrolment (usually digital) and seeking schematic benefits, the core attention to wages and work conditions has been considerably diluted.

Over the past two decades, new migration streams have etched their routes on the labour mobility map. Transportation and communication infrastructure has made it infinitely quicker for workers to move from one part of the country to another. Climate induced distress in rural areas is pushing out larger numbers to look for survival further from their regions. There is a rising number of women entering the migrant workforce even from societies such as Rajasthan where social orthodoxy inhibits women's mobility. Long distances, long-duration migration among women is a sure sign of regions nearing destitution — the push of poverty is too severe for women to remain at home. Women's entry into the workforce as migrants poses new challenges of ensuring security and parity with male workers. Even more important is the onerous task of reducing the burden of care

duties among women, as they attempt to find dignified work.

As earlier, Dalits and Adivasis continue to be the most significant proportion of low-waged, unskilled, hazard-prone and casualized workers across all sectors. Social hierarchies and exclusions are routinely and brutally reproduced at work. This is unlikely to change within the foreseeable future.

**INDICATORS OF CHANGE** Yet there are many strong signs of hope. We find a new sense of political consciousness and awareness of rights among migrant communities. This is encouragingly true among otherwise reticent Adivasi workers who are asserting their rights, seeking entitlements and are not fearful of fighting frauds of wage and compensation. We have an astounding traffic of wage disputes being registered across the country by workers who will no longer make peace with reconciliatory settlements by their employers. Encouragingly, women workers have begun to approach legal assistance directly as well.

Our advocacy with governments that calls on them to be a more forceful regulator and enforcer of labour rights does not usually go very far. We have, however, begun to see some signs of hope for responsible change in business practices that affect workers' rights. This consciousness is rising on account of the concept of ESG (Environmental, Social and Governance) and initiatives like Social Compact that are invoking, not moral responsibility, but an imperative of common cause among workers, employers and the economy. ■

Rajiv Khandelwal is co-founder of the Aajeevika Bureau.

# CELL PHONES, DRONES, CASH TRANSFERS AND MUCH MORE

The challenges of the past two decades have been to make rapid tech changes inclusive, address issues of privacy and now balance AI with human controls.



KIRAN KARNIK

THOSE were the days, sang Mary Hopkin, many years ago. The nostalgic lyrics refer to good times in the past, implying days that were better than the present. Yet, for many, the here-and-now is best reflected in William Wordsworth's words: "Bliss it was in that dawn to be alive/But to be young was very heaven."

These contrasting lines come to mind when one looks back two decades and sees the impact of contemporary technology on sociology, economics, and the tremendous changes in daily life.

Few things have driven this change as much as information and communication technologies (ICT), and cell phones in particular. At the beginning of this millennium, there were four million cell phone subscribers in the country; a decade later (in 2011), it had increased, at mind-blowing speed, to 750 million; now there are well over a billion. The effect this has wrought on a host of areas is truly radical and has redefined concepts of distance and geography, bringing people closer to one another.

The impact is amplified when mobile communication technology is used in combination with other developments. One amongst them is a unique identity for every Indian, signified by the Aadhaar number (1,380 million now have this identifier), an exercise that began as recently as 2009. Another is a bank account: the number of those with one has grown rapidly, with over 500 million Jan Dhan accounts now. The synergizing of these with the other two (Aadhaar and mobile phones) has made for the JAM trinity, which

has facilitated a range of other initiatives.

What is special about Aadhaar is that it is based on biometrics and has a database that can be accessed online to verify or confirm one's identity. This has made possible remote or e-transactions. Thus, if the ration card is linked to one's Aadhaar, the person should be able to go to any ration shop anywhere in the country and get her due rations with just the biometrics. In fact, with the JAM linkage, all subsidies can be transferred directly to the targeted beneficiary, doing away with the need for ration shops. Other transactions too do not need intermediaries.

Financial transactions have been revolutionized with technology. In times past, withdrawing money from one's account could only be done for a few hours a day, only on working days and required a trip to the bank. Computerisation and telecom connectivity, through ATMs, made possible cash withdrawals 24x7, and from any ATM location. Today, one can do most banking transactions from home or office, obviating the need to go to a bank.

Platforms like Unified Payment Interface (UPI) have driven fintech applications, and peer-to-peer payments via mobile have brought unimagined convenience to money transfers. This has made life easier for hundreds of millions of individual consumers, including those dependent on remittances from afar. Thousands of small and micro businesses or vendors can also benefit through digital records of sales, enabling easier grant of loans.

**EASY AND CHEAP** Social interactions have changed radically. Messaging, talking to anyone practically anywhere on Earth, video calls, and multi-party videoconferencing — for both work and socializing — are commonplace, having become easy and cheap thanks to the mobile phone, connectivity, inexpensive data transfer, and new apps. Apps, in conjunction with innovative business models, are widely used for delivering food and goods, for getting a cab, and various other purposes.

These are particularly helpful to those who are home-bound. Some of these apps are also business facilitators, enabling MSMEs and

others to vastly expand their potential geographical and customer base. Like UPI, other digital public infrastructure (DPI) platforms continue to spur many new and innovative applications.

**ALL IN A HANDSET** The mobile handset has become increasingly versatile, encapsulating an almost unbelievable range of uses. Today, it is a powerful computer, a camera, video recorder, radio, television, audio recorder, watch, alarm clock, stopwatch, calendar, appointment diary, photo album, compass, torch, and so much more. Almost incidentally, it can also be used for calls! As an access device, cell phones — now ubiquitous across the socio-economic spectrum — highlight the transformation in daily life brought about by ICT. Apart from these, areas like health and education are being transformed. With Covid lockdowns and the necessity of moving to online mode for education, this sector has become, like fintech, a major user of ICT.

Online consultation became common during Covid, pushing the envelope of tele-medicine. Other technologies too are playing a role with health tech — part ICT, part medical, part electronics — emerging as a wave of the future. Multi-disciplinary convergence is revolutionizing diagnostics. New methods combine the latest in medical science with electronics and artificial intelligence, resulting in quicker, better, and cheaper testing, while enabling superior and more effective treatment by individualizing it. Led by start-ups, these new innovations provide better and inexpensive healthcare in remote and under-served areas.

Technology has also made possible self-testing by those with no medical knowledge. Twenty years ago, the only "home test" instrument was a mercury-based thermometer. Now, many homes have a digital, infrared one. Oximeters, blood sugar and blood pressure measurement devices, and Covid detection kits — all for use at home by laypersons — became common a couple of years ago. The combination of electronics, biological science, software and AI has triggered on-going progress in ensuring better, more universal, and cheaper healthcare.



Transactions have been revolutionized with technology

An important aspect of "intelligent automation" is that it enables the skill of a lower level to be used onsite, while facilitating access to specialists located elsewhere. This is crucial for rural India, which has a shortage of medical personnel and an acute scarcity of key specialists. It can transform primary healthcare centres and small rural clinics, ensuring almost the same level of medical advice to villagers as may be available in the best urban hospitals.

Much remains to be done, but over the past two decades health tech is making a difference to people at large, with developments now beginning to move from lab into practice. Advancement in varied technologies is synergizing to transform healthcare through non-invasive diagnostics — imagine a test for TB based merely on coughing into your cell phone, or a sensor-based haemoglobin test, new and personalized treatments, and low-cost vaccines that do not require a cold chain or refrigeration. Knee replacements are now common, and more organ replacements are not far behind. The dream — or nightmare! — of living to 100-plus or even near-immortality is now on the horizon.

**REMOTE WORK** The ease of remote work due to high-quality and reliable telecom connectivity, combined with the AI-enabled lowering of the onsite skill requirement, makes decentralization possible and economically viable. This could change many things, from migration patterns to urbanization. For the first time in history, we may well see a reversal in rural-urban flows, affecting the very structure

of the country's economy and society. Already, especially post-pandemic, we see early signs of this, with people continuing WFH from hometowns or preferred locations like Goa.

Transportation is being transformed with the increasing use of electric vehicles in the past few years. Commuting has become far more comfortable and efficient with Metro services now in many cities. Major upgrading of the railways is underway, with new tech for passenger safety, comfort, and high-speed trains. This may transform inter-city transport in the way that Metros have eased intra-city movement.

**DRONES, SPACE TECH** Drone technology has made its way from military and limited recreational use to functional civilian uses. Still in its early stages, this technology is already being used for delivering medical supplies to remote areas and for a wide range of mapping and monitoring purposes. Its application in agriculture — especially precision farming — is immense and only just beginning. Home delivery of goods, circumventing road traffic, is yet being experimented with, but next year your biryani order may routinely be delivered via drone!

Other technologies too have seen great progress. Some, like renewable energy, are of great significance in terms of their long-term effect on our lives (by reducing global warming and the risk of climate change). However, despite the large potential for household solar generation, there is yet limited large-scale use. Others, like space tech, are of strategic importance to the nation and provide immense

benefits and applications, generally in conjunction with other technologies. Biological science, including genetics and gene editing, have made great strides, but the impact on daily life is just beginning to manifest itself. The same applies to materials science and a number of other technologies.

Tech has transformed our lives as never before, with the past two decades improving the comfort and ease of living, exemplifying the wonders and benefits of tech. Yet, there are worries about their deep downsides and collateral damage. Concerns about privacy spring from the widespread use of Aadhaar, as also from mining and analysing other massive databases; CCTV cameras and drones threaten privacy, and enable intrusive surveillance; generative AI, rapidly-evolving artificial general intelligence (AGI) and robots could lead to joblessness and, it is feared, even threaten the ascendancy of humans; genetic engineering may unleash unknown viruses and epidemics.

In many of these, governments could be the hero or the villain. There is also growing anxiety about the role of the private sector, particularly large tech companies. Simultaneously, burgeoning energy needs could lead to runaway temperature rises and climate change, resulting in one more threat to human survival.

Human wisdom — a trait yet to be matched by any form of AI — could help us make the right trade-offs (even compromises) that best serve all of humanity and the planet itself. ■

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

# SOCIAL ENTERPRISES DOING WELL WITH MORE SUPPORT

There has been a spurt in new-age initiatives that lead to higher farm incomes, digital empowerment, better services in healthcare, housing, water, education.



MADHUKAR SHUKLA

SOCIAL entrepreneurship has been around for a long while, but a spurt in its growth was witnessed after 2002 when 10 outstanding social entrepreneurs from India and Bangladesh were recognized for their contribution at the India Economic Summit of the World Economic Forum.

They were felicitated by the then President, Dr A.P.J. Abdul Kalam, and thereafter social entrepreneurship found official acceptance and currency.

The next five to six years saw an increase in activities and initiatives related to social entrepreneurship in India.

A 2012 study, *Landscape of Social Enterprise in India*, carried out by Intellectap, noted: "Nearly half of the enterprises in our survey have been operational for less than three years, and nearly 80 percent launched operations in 2007 or later. The take-off appears to have occurred in 2005-2006."

The distinctive aspect of this growth has been the innovations which Indian social entrepreneurs made in problem identification and developing new solutions.

In a way, India provides fertile ground for such innovations. Despite being a resource-rich country, India also hosts a disproportionate number of people who lack access to basic education, primary healthcare, clean water and energy, linkages to markets and justice.

Social innovations, or finding innovative, sustainable and scalable ways to bridge this "unequal access" to basic societal resources and amenities has been a pervasive feature of Indian social entrepreneurship.

To cite a few examples of such innovations: Haqdarshak provides technical and field-based assistance to marginalized and illiterate communities to help them avail of the benefits of government welfare schemes.

Ventures such as Ekgaon, DeHaat and Samridhhi work to increase incomes of small and marginal farmers by providing them technical inputs and connecting them to markets.

The Digital Empowerment Foundation has been working to bridge the digital divide among remote communities to enhance their access to information, markets and livelihoods.

From Operation ASHA comes the diagnosis and treatment of tuberculosis at the doorstep of marginalized communities at a nominal cost. And Hasiru Dala mobilizes, trains and enables wastepickers to leverage their skills to become "waste entrepreneurs".

The list of such innovation is a long one and it continues to grow greater awareness and support for inclusion and equity.

Over the years, increasingly, the work of Indian social entrepreneurs has been recognized and felicitated on global platforms such as the World Economic Forum, Skoll World Forum at Oxford University, Schwab Foundation for Social Entrepreneurship, and the like.

The models and solutions developed by Indian social entrepreneurs have also been replicated in other regions, especially in the low-income countries of Africa and Latin America.

These achievements of Indian social entrepreneurs were paralleled by the growth of a supportive ecosystem of organizations and activities. Many of these organizations and initiatives were themselves entrepreneurial efforts which provided essential and customized services and resources to social entrepreneurs, and to seed new ventures. In the following paragraphs we will trace some of these developments which transformed an isolated field of practice into a vibrant sector.

**A TALENT PIPELINE** For any sector to scale, the availability of skilled talent is essential.

During the past two decades or so, two streams of initiatives have come up to create a pipeline of socially sensitive young people with the skills and orientation for social entrepreneurship.

On the academic side, the past two decades saw many academic institutes launching courses and programmes to prepare such a talent pipeline. Between 2004-07, six major educational institutions (IIM Ahmedabad, IIM Bengaluru, Indian Institute of Forest Management, Bhopal, Institute of Rural Management, Anand, Xavier Institute of Management, Bhubaneswar and XLRI, Jamshedpur) introduced courses in social entrepreneurship in their curriculum.

In 2007, the Mumbai-based Tata Institute of Social Sciences and Narsi Monjee Institute of Management Studies each launched a full-time two-year master's programme in social entrepreneurship.

Over the years, such academic courses have proliferated. They are offered by many educational institutes such as Ambedkar University in Delhi, Gujarat National Law University, IIM Lucknow, Madras School of Social Work.

The University Grants Commission and the Atal Innovation Mission have started supporting and promoting Faculty Development Programmes to create a pool of social entrepreneurship educators.

**FELLOWSHIPS** The other stream of initiatives was the rise of "fellowship programmes", designed to sensitize and prepare the youth and students to understand and develop skills to address social issues. These fellowships provide one to three years' immersive learning-by-doing experience during which the participants live and work in marginalized rural and urban communities, identify their social problems and develop and implement solutions to address them.

Fellowships have proliferated. Some of them are the Change Loom programme (by Pravah and Ashoka Youth Ventures in 2006) and the Gandhi Fellowship (by Piramal Foundation in 2007), the ICICI Fellowship (now India Fellow



A solar fridge: Cooling in the middle of nowhere

Programme), SBI Youth for India Fellowship, the Government of India's Prime Minister's Rural Development Fellowship and Mahatma Gandhi National Fellowship, SRIJAN's The Buddha Fellowship, Disom Foundation's Disom Leaders Fellowship, etc.

A review of some of these fellowships showed that more than half of their participants chose a career in social ventures, or started their own.

**TECHNICAL SUPPORT** A related, and significant, development has been the emergence of a set of organizations which provide technical support services customized for social ventures.

Outfits such as 3rd Sector Partners and OppertuneJobs facilitate recruitment. Intellectap provides advisory services. Intellectap offers consultancy as do Sattva, Samhita and some others. SVP Partners promotes collaborations and partnerships. The impact of these services has been to make social enterprises more efficient and speed up the growth of the sector as a whole.

Important technical support came from social incubators which have proliferated during the past two decades. Starting with the founding of Dasra and Villgro (earlier Rural Innovation Network) in 2001-02, there are now estimated to be about 30 to 40 incubators specifically focused on both for-profit and not-for-profit social ventures. Some of the prominent ones which have had impact are Action for India, CIIE (Centre for Innovation, Incubation and Entrepreneurship) at IIM

Ahmedabad, Incubation Centre at TISS in Mumbai, INVENT Social Incubation Programme at IIT Kanpur, iSEED at IRMA, Marico Innovation Foundation, N/Core, RTBI (Rural Technology Business Incubator) at IIT Madras, Tata Trust's Social Alpha, StartUp!, UnLtd and so on.

Access to funds has grown over the past two decades both for for-profit and not-for-profit ventures. Equity/debt-based investments and philanthropic capital have opened new opportunities and challenges for social entrepreneurs.

Starting from the initial handful of social impact investors (Aavishkaar India Micro Venture Fund, Lok Capital, Acumen Fund and Elevar Equity), the Impact Investing Council of India now has around 60 active impact investors as members. Good returns from investments in for-profit social enterprises have also attracted traditional investors of commercial start-ups.

Impact investments have grown from \$100 million about a little more than a decade back to around \$6 billion in 2022. These investments are skewed towards sectors which provide quick and high returns — financial inclusion, technology for development, and clean tech. But funds do also go into education and healthcare where gestation periods are longer. Overall for-profit social enterprises attract a larger availability of funds.

Not-for-profit social enterprises have been experiencing uncertainties over funding. Over the years the traditional sources of funds

(grants and donations) have started drying up. The financial meltdown of 2008-09 resulted in fewer donors.

Thereafter, the Direct Tax Code 2010 (which curtailed tax exemptions for social ventures) and more recently the changes made in the Foreign Contribution Regulation Act (FCRA) have had an adverse impact on the flow of philanthropic capital.

But there are also new emerging sources of funds for the not-for-profit social enterprises. For instance, the CSR Act, 2014, which made it mandatory for companies (with a net worth of more than ₹500 crore, or a turnover of ₹1,000 crore) to spend two percent of their net profits in CSR activities, brought in funds worth ₹1.27 lakh crore into the sector.

The Social Impact Bonds and Development Impact Bonds are other emerging funding instruments, though still in a nascent stage. These "pay-for-success" bonds allow the donor/investor to pick up the cost of the project of the social enterprise upfront with a guarantee from the government or a developmental agency to provide a return when the outcome is achieved.

Another exciting source of funding, launched earlier this year, is the Social Stock Exchange. It provides a platform for social enterprises to list themselves on the National Stock Exchange (NSE) to seek investments and grants.

Social entrepreneurship offers the hope of sustainable, equitable and just growth and transforming society through greater efficiencies. ■

*Dr Madhukar Shukla is a former professor of XLRI in Jamshedpur.*



# THE INDIAN VILLAGE HAS BEEN RELEGATED TO THE MARGINS

Agriculture isn't the sole form of employment in rural India. Among the urban middle class and elite there is utter ignorance about the nature of rural life.



**SURINDER S. JODHKA**

TALKING about agriculture has not been fashionable for quite some time. This is surprising because agriculture remains the single most important sector of the Indian economy. Its share in the national GDP has indeed been coming down over the past seven decades. However, it still makes for nearly 15 percent, which is not significantly any less than the manufacturing sector. Even more important, it remains the biggest source of employment in the country. Furthermore, the effective value of agriculture far exceeds its share in GDP figures or the number of workers to whom it provides full-time employment.

It continues to be a critical source of livelihood for many more, who may have found alternative sources of employment but have not completely given up working on their small plots of land. Besides the value addition to their household economies, owning and working on their agricultural land also gives them a sense of belonging and a dignified source of identity.

Surprisingly, it is not only agriculture that has seen a steady decline in the narratives on the Indian economy, the village too has been relegated to the margins in the national imagination. This is despite the fact that nearly two-thirds of India continues to be "rural". It now only appears as a site of deprivation, seeking State benevolence and welfare schemes. The middle class-centric urban media actively reinforces such an image of the village.

Narratives on the rural are also marked by an utter ignorance of the nature of rural life across sections of the urban middle classes and the

elite. The rural, for example, is often viewed as being synonymous with agriculture. Everyone living in a village is presumed to be a farmer/peasant. However, this is far from true.

The social organization of the Indian village has always been a very complex and diverse reality. The popular notion of a 'peasant economy', where families cultivated their small holdings with family labour and produced foodgrains primarily for their own consumption, was never the case in India.

The norm of caste did not allow nearly half of the rural residents to cultivate land. However, not all the artisans and Dalit castes in the village were dependent slaves of the local landlords. Many of them were skilled and specialized in producing a wide range of commodities. Today, a larger proportion of rural incomes comes from non-farm activities, across regions of the sub-continent.

**COLONIAL NARRATIVE** The narrative of the village as a depressing place begins with its colonial representations. They popularized the view of it being a stagnant economic system, for centuries and millennia, caught in the whirlpool of caste and a self-imposed culture of isolation. And that the local people purportedly surrendered to the vagaries of nature and their pre-given karma.

In reality, however, the agrarian economy of the pre-colonial period had neither been a "backward" system, nor a homogenous universe or a sea of isolated villages. For example, Indian cultivators did not depend solely on rain. They had evolved a range of sustainable systems and modes of irrigation involving wells and ponds. The cultivators also produced a substantial surplus. Thriving urban centres and flourishing political empires of ancient and medieval times are proof of this.

Much of the wealth that the empires possessed, in search of which the European colonizers came to India in the first place, was sourced primarily from its agrarian riches.

However, by the time the British left, Indian agriculture indeed presented a sight of hopelessness. Driven exclusively by their colonial interests, the British experimented

with cultivators, forcing them to pay land revenues in cash, which in turn made them switch over to cash crops such as cotton. The British exported cotton to their cloth mills running on power looms. These policies also killed the local craft in the towns and cities of India, resulting in de-industrialization and de-urbanization of the region. While the dependence of the population on agriculture grew, production of foodgrains declined, resulting in misery and hunger. Millions perished in frequent famines.

**AGE OF DEVELOPMENT** By the 1960s the Nehruvian state managed to find the resources to invest in modernizing its agrarian economy. Helped by some global agencies, and using new technologies developed elsewhere, India moved onto a path of increased productivity. Though confined to a few promising pockets, the state investment in agriculture provided an impetus to growth. Within a decade or so, the country was producing enough food.

The success of Green Revolution technology during the 1960s and 1970s in select pockets was an important turning point in the development history of India. Its implications were not confined to economic growth. It transformed rural social relations and traditional authority structures in the regions where it succeeded. The face of the countryside began to change rapidly. In terms of social groups, the most visible beneficiaries of this change were the substantial landowners from the locally dominant caste groups, who had traditionally been landowners and cultivators.

The newly emergent agrarian elite farmer did not speak only for his own caste or class. He spoke on behalf of the entire village. However, this excitement about the new technology and growing incomes did not last too long. By the mid-1980s, the Indian countryside began to show a new kind of restiveness; this was particularly pronounced in the pockets that had been at the forefront of agrarian modernization. The surplus-producing farmers began to mobilize themselves into unions demanding subsidies on farm inputs and higher prices.



Who decides for whom? As primary stakeholders, farmers wish to be heard

Farmers mobilized themselves in different parts of India quite successfully for over a decade. Their movements of the 1980s also signalled the rise of a new mobile social category of rural people. They had prospered, which had also brought them close to the market economy. Though they spoke for agrarian interests, they aspired to go beyond the village.

The agrarian economy could not satisfy their aspirations for social and cultural mobility. They were quick to move from their local seats of power to legislative assemblies in the state capitals. The surplus they generated from agriculture went into the education of their wards, and into urban trade and other non-agricultural occupations. Their educated children often found jobs in the local bureaucracy and other expanding departments of the state government.

The neo-liberal reforms of the early 1990s proved to be a turning point for the Indian economy. The private corporate sector moved to the driving seat and its growth was rapid. The size of the national economy expanded but it did not generate too many new jobs. Thus, unlike the "classical" growth trajectories of the industrialized nations of the Global North, even when the share of India's agriculture declined rather rapidly, a much larger proportion of the workforce remained employed in agriculture. Such a decline in the relative size of the agrarian economy in terms of its value addition has produced many imbalances, going beyond the sphere of income and employment.

The growing size and power of the urban and corporate capital also marginalized the agrarian economy in the national imagination, the effects of which began to also be felt by those working in the sector. For example, as mentioned above, the growth in agriculture had previously given enough income and aspiration to the landowning classes/castes to educate their wards, hoping that they would find employment outside the village. But in the new schema this was no longer the case.

Those who controlled corporate capital preferred their own, those from the urban upper castes and urban educated individuals with the required cultural capital, leaving those coming from agrarian backgrounds in the lurch. As the "reforms agenda" spread across the states, their ability to generate jobs began to shrink. With their own growing debts, the state governments had no choice but to reduce their salary budgets and cut down on hiring.

**WAY FORWARD** What could be the way forward? From a purely market and growth driven perspective, agriculture is merely an economic activity which needs to be rationally incorporated and integrated into the larger corporate economy. Indian corporate capital also appears willing to engage with agriculture, albeit on its own terms. Food processing could be a big business in a rapidly urbanizing world with growing numbers of the middle class, within India and abroad.

To the neo-liberal policymakers of the Indian state, unwilling to invest in agriculture, this appears to be the most desirable solution for a

sector complaining of crises for a long time. The eagerness with which the Union government legislated the three farm laws in 2020 is clear evidence of it.

However, Indian farmers have also come to see themselves as citizens, who not only have a sense of what is good for them but also want to be involved in the policymaking process. While the logic of corporate-led growth may make sound economic sense, the farmers' anxieties of losing control over their livelihoods is not entirely baseless.

The challenge is not simply that of reconciling two divergent views. It is far more fundamental. Who decides for whom? As primary stakeholders, the farmers' wish to be heard is hardly illegitimate in a country that claims to be a democracy.

However, the 'Indian farmer' is also not a singular category. They are diverse and divided, by their regional histories, climatic conditions and even social identities. Yet they are not anti-development. On the contrary, they too are eager to enhance their incomes, and improve their welfare and capabilities, as any citizen of a developing country would be.

Thus, the answers too should not be visualized in the singular. Plural modes of development are not only possible but are also an urgent need of our times. The way forward does not lie in an alternative policy frame to be visualized by yet another set of experts. It ought to emerge from effective and meaningful conversations. ■

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# CSR WORKS WHEN COMPANIES HAVE PARTNERS, A STRATEGY

From science education to dental health to upskilling painters, companies are effectively linking their businesses to the development needs of communities.



SANTANU MISHRA

THE past two decades, beginning from the turn of the millennium, have had a profound impact on how development is perceived globally. What has emerged is more evolved understanding of the change process and a collaborative approach to the solving of social problems.

Smile Foundation, which we founded in 2002, has had the experience of having worked with over 400 corporations. We have formed many long-term, outcome-oriented and enriching partnerships.

A long list of corporations we have collaborated with includes FIS, ANZ, Avery Dennison, Mitsubishi Electric, Philips, S&P Global, Target International, Shell, Deutsche Bank and MSD Pharma. Our partnerships go back anywhere between seven and 12 years.

When we started our journey it was the absence of a formal financing mechanism for social enterprises in India that pushed us to explore partnership with the corporate sector as an alternative resource model.

We were highly inspired by the thought and philosophy of Peter Senge, the founder of the Society for Organizational Learning, who propagated that “sustainability, social equality and the environment are now business problems and corporate leaders can’t expect governments to solve them alone”.

We were encouraged to find ways of channelling the resources of corporations to achieve development goals. Over the years, we were able to successfully set up a bridge – linking the needs of development initiatives with the business needs of corporates.

Many Indian and global companies have now started linking their CSR programmes to the core of their business successfully. A good example of this is our Mobile Dental Health Programme, in partnership with Haleon (the makers of Sensodyne), which is a novel way of taking dental healthcare services to the underserved communities. Another case in point is the ITrain project of Berger Paints for which Smile is the implementing partner. The project is helping upskill the existing painter community in 24 states of India.

Similarly, multinational companies with engineering at their core are keenly promoting higher education in technical and science streams by offering merit-based scholarships to deserving students across the country. More than 1,500 young people have benefitted through these scholarships this year alone. Many are now working for reputed brands.

**CRITICAL PERIOD** The 1990s was the decade that presented a critical period for us, changing the nature in which we observe and interpret the world around us. Globalization and liberalization knocked on our doors, which we gladly opened. This allowed not only businesses to flourish, but also created mechanisms through which they could provide support and engage in various philanthropic activities in the country.

The leap gained an even greater impetus from the technological revolution. It is for all of us to see how technology has been connecting individuals across geopolitical boundaries, enabling individuals transcending socio-economic conditions to engage with each other and enable organizations to disseminate relevant information with regard to garnering support for various issues. But most importantly, the internet and technology marked a shift in power bringing attention towards civil society: their needs, their voices in their own words. As people took ownership of change, we saw some powerful digital movements around the world that brought people together for social causes.

With civil society strengthening and taking on the baton of social change, the onus fell on

businesses to prioritize social responsibility and accountability. The increasing pace of globalization also became instrumental in expanding the scope and adoption of Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR). Firstly, businesses started thinking of doing good in a more strategic and planned manner. Secondly, partnering with civil society organizations and combining their skills and the corporate’s resources also gained momentum. And lastly, corporations around the world started to think about how CSR could make “business sense”.

On the global stage, about two decades ago in 2000 during the Millennium Summit of the United Nations, the United Nations Millennium Declaration resulted in adoption of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). The MDGs helped create novel partnerships, invigorated public opinion, besides trying to normalise the value of setting up ambitious development goals at the international stage. In addition, the MDGs tried to reshape decision-making in the developing as well as developed worlds alike. The immediate and fundamental needs of people were given priority.

In 2015, the MDGs were replaced by the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) as a renewed set of international development goals. Governments have pledged to meet these new goals by year 2030. The SDGs offer a new vision, and new challenges, for development actors around the world.

The SDGs were more consultative and participatory and, in terms of an agenda, an improvement over the MDGs. The SDGs have paid due attention to significant engagement of civil society organisations and other actors in the social sector right from the framing stage. Building meaningful and systematic partnerships with the private or corporate sector in order to achieve sustainable development is yet another forward-looking vision in the SDGs.

To align SDGs with ESGs and achieve sustainable impact in its true sense, all stakeholders must come together. Business, government and civil society are the three foundational pillars on which any democracy



Productive partnerships: A mobile dental health programme

stands. A convergence between these three is the way forward and can open up a whole new world of possibilities in achieving social equity. Growth is not a matter of chance but the result of forces working together. India Rising will be a story written by these three forces.

**PARTNERSHIPS** In our partnership with SBI Cards to set-up and implement e-Arogya Clinics in the aspirational district of Nuh (Mewat), Haryana, active partnership with the district authorities helped introduce the new concept of telemedicine to the community and with consistent efforts the uptake of services almost doubled over a period of two years. The model clinics have now been adopted by the government. We are already in the process of replicating the same model to set-up e-Arogya clinics in other states.

With PepsiCo Foundation, we have been implementing a project in Sangrur, Punjab, for improving the nutritional and health status of mothers and children with a focus on the first 1,000 days.

The project ties in well with the Poshan Abhiyan of the Government of India and also encourages use of locally sustainable methods like creating kitchen gardens and use of locally available low-cost ingredients to make nutritious recipes.

We have also been working in the space of education, with a special focus on integrating STEM, experiential learning and vocational

education with classroom learning to help improve the overall learning outcomes of children studying in government schools in 10 states, with support from various corporate partners.

In concurrence with the New Education Policy, these projects are not just making experiential and practical learning accessible for children, but also equipping them with knowledge and tools to understand and navigate local and global issues.

**FUTURE OF CSR** Corporate social responsibility (CSR) has promising and exciting prospects for the world in the near future. The evolving CSR trends and innovations especially in the past two decades indicate that CSR will play an ever-significant role in how companies do business, engage with communities and how civil society views the world of business.

Communities, customers as well as employees have an increasing say with respect to sustainability. In the pursuit of responsible business practices, the convergence of ESG goals have become paramount for corporations globally. This is no longer about minimizing local harm but creating measurable community development to even reversing global climate change.

As companies increasingly recognize the importance of social impact and prioritise their ESG goals, it is imperative to align these

with achieving the overall Sustainable Development Goals to attain the greater good. With further evolution of technology and ever increasing awareness of civil society, businesses will find opportunity to address education, healthcare, upskilling, besides creating value not just for their shareholders but also for the society as a whole.

With the coming of the Social Stock Exchange, CSR spending and impact investment will become more strategic, transparent and effective. It will also put the onus on the development sector and civil society organisations to pursue excellence and consistently deliver high social return on investment.

As companies become cognizant of the social impact of business, the only way forward is to align their ESG goals with achieving the overall Sustainable Development Goals. Businesses, governments and civil society organizations all have a role to play here and positive collaboration between these three will continue to pave the way forward for social development and equity.

When companies align their business goals with the policies and development agenda of the government, and civil society organisations help take welfare schemes to the last mile, sustainable development on the ground can be achieved. ■

Santanu Mishra is co-founder and executive trustee of the Smile Foundation.

# RIVERS LOSING THEIR RIGHTS AS URBAN PRESSURES MOUNT

Rivers, water bodies and groundwater form one ecosystem. But their collective flow has been disrupted by encroachments, pollution and reckless extraction.



VENKATESH DUTTA

RIVERS are living entities. They are ecosystems in motion. Throughout history, many civilizations have flourished along the banks of rivers. They have been regarded as life-giving mothers. However, the very essence of these life-giving rivers is now under threat due to rapid encroachment on their floodplains. The rivers in which water was available throughout the year and was flowing uninterrupted about three decades ago, now have water available only during the rainy season.

The water flowing in these rivers in other seasons is tainted by pollutants from urban drains. Encroachment upon floodplain zones has become widespread. Rapid urbanization often leads to encroachment on riverbanks and floodplains. Unplanned urban development can contribute to pollution, reduced water flow, and habitat degradation in smaller rivers. How to create a balance between development and ecological integrity remains a grand challenge in the face of rapid land transformations.

Rivers start from their sequential first-order smaller streams and transform through successive higher order streams into a major stream or the main river. Due to urbanization and industrialization, the initial chain of rivers is disrupted, due to which stream connectivity is affected and flooding occurs during the rainy season. For the revitalization of rivers, stream connectivity with their small tributaries and streams is always necessary so that continuity of adequate water in the rivers is maintained.

Recently, in Barabanki district (neighbouring Lucknow), on September 10 and 11, 2023, an unprecedented 400 mm of rainfall occurred in a span of 48 hours, marking the highest recorded rainfall for September in this region. This deluge triggered a flood-like situation in areas adjacent to the Reth river (a tributary of the Gomti stretching 109 km) and its tributary, the Jamuria (extending 22 km), as they traverse Barabanki district.

Beyond heavy rainfall, a significant contributing factor to the prolonged waterlogging in urban areas were the encroachments from unauthorized construction over the past decade along both banks of both rivers. These rivers are lesser-known and the authorities did not pay attention to the massive encroachment happening along their banks. There are hundreds of smaller rivers that are undergoing the onslaught of encroachment.

**ENCROACHMENTS, LAWS** Urgent measures are required to safeguard these vital ecosystems and ensure the sustainable coexistence of rivers and humanity. Granting legal rights to rivers and their adjacent floodplains is imperative to ensure their preservation, especially in the face of regional development that has encroached upon their land. The Articles of the Constitution, provisions of various Acts and several policy documents provide the basic framework of legal rights of rivers. Various Acts, mandates and notifications have been issued by the Central and state governments from time to time to protect floodplains, reduce pollution and conserve watersheds in river catchment areas. But these provisions are scattered and seldom exercised in defending river rights.

To implement these provisions effectively, mutual coordination among all the concerned departments is required. However, models of effective coordination are missing.

In 2010, the Uttar Pradesh chief secretary issued directions to stop illegal construction/encroachment on river floodplains. The order also mentioned that the floodplain zone along the rivers should be displayed as a flood-

affected area in the Master Plan, no construction was to be allowed and that land use should be kept green.

The National Disaster Management Authority (NDMA) in 2008 issued guidelines for states for flood zoning as an important “non-structural measure” to mitigate floods. It suggested that areas likely to be affected by floods in a frequency of 10 years should be reserved for green areas like parks and gardens and concrete structures should not be allowed. It also talks about other zones in the floodplain, for example, areas of flooding in a 25-year frequency, and asked states to make plans accordingly for those areas.

In 2016, the Centre also issued directions against encroachment on the floodplains of the Ganga or its tributaries. On July 13, 2017 in the *M.C. Mehta vs. Union of India and others* the National Green Tribunal (NGT) passed an order stating clearly that floodplains should be demarcated and “...100 meters from the edge of the river should be treated as no development/construction zone in segment-B of Phase-I, Haridwar to Unnao, Kanpur”.

In 2022, the chief secretary, UP government, directed the district magistrates of the state’s 75 districts to prepare and monitor revitalization and rejuvenation plans for smaller rivers and tributaries at the district level through the District Ganga Committee. A committee was also formed to identify government land/river area located within two km of small and tributary rivers and free it from encroachment.

The NGT was not satisfied with the response of the Ganga Committee regarding the encroachment. In November 2022, the Principal Bench of the NGT in an order stated that construction was to be removed by the Ganga Committee which had not been done and reiterated its order for the demolition of illegal structures.

**SMALL RIVERS IMPEDED** Along with the gradual evolution of rivers in nature, water bodies came into existence through fluvial processes in the catchment areas. With time, the longitudinal and lateral connectivity of



Floods happen when water has nowhere to flow

rivers and their water ecosystems got lost due to the development of roads, highways and residential colonies on the surface, but connectivity with the river remained through groundwater at the sub-surface level. The rivers and ponds on the surface have been fragmented and the existence of wetlands has been eliminated due to continuous encroachment, unplanned construction and change in their land use. In the past five decades, there has been irreparable loss of about 70 percent of wetlands in several districts of Uttar Pradesh.

Rivers generally move forward in the alluvial areas, meandering through vast landscapes. The natural flow of rivers is affected due to construction of bridges, highways and roads in the floodplain zone. Due to unplanned development of settlements without calculating the discharge of the river, the flow path and the alignment of a river changes.

It is often seen that bridges are constructed by the Public Works Department or National Highways Authority of India or other agencies without taking technical advice from the Irrigation and Water Resources Department, because of which the width and height of the bridge are hardly proximate to the design discharge of that site.

Due to poor design, the drainage is badly affected — resulting in severe waterlogging during the rains. As per the Environment (Protection) Act, 1986 and EIA Notification, 2006, proper assessment of environmental impacts must be carried out to ensure that no harm is done to the ecosystem, including rivers and wetlands.

Cities, having developed on the banks of rivers, are constantly expanding. Along with urbanization, industrialization is also happening rapidly. All man-made and industrial wastes from cities are discharged into rivers and their tributaries through natural drains. The smaller rivers are now considered *nullahs*, although they are natural units of all the rivers. Thus, rivers are no longer capable of purifying water and have become highly polluted. The Gazette Notification of the Ministry of Water Resources, River Development and Ganga Rejuvenation, dated October 7, 2016 states that “no person shall directly or indirectly discharge untreated or treated sewage or sewage sludge into the river Ganga or its tributaries or its banks”. However, the biggest polluters are the municipal agencies which are either discharging untreated sewage into the rivers or are unable to treat the sewage to required standards.

**GROUNDWATER AND RIVER FLOW** Due to urbanization, groundwater has been exploited the most. Maintaining groundwater levels is essential as the underground water maintains the continuity of the water level of rivers and ponds during the dry season. Most of the rivers which do not originate in snow-covered mountains are fed by rainwater and their base flow primarily depends on groundwater and artesian wells. The decline in groundwater levels has resulted in drastic reduction in base flow, leading to the extinction of artesian wells.

All the natural water bodies and water sources in the catchment areas of the rivers will have to be revived so that groundwater levels

can be recharged from these water bodies during the rainy season and minimum water flow can be ensured in the rivers due to the activation of artesian wells from groundwater during the non-monsoon period.

In 2019, the government came out with the Ground Water Management and Regulation Act, which talks about a water security plan and putting a limit on extraction. But the larger question remains — how will these provisions be implemented on the ground? Till date, no formula for sustainable extraction limits has been formulated. The Act is also silent on the biggest user of groundwater — the irrigation sector. The Act covers only bulk users in the urban and industrial sectors.

Often smaller streams, water sources and underground water in the watershed are defined as separate units whereas all of them are integral, indivisible and members of the river family. For the revival of the river, the water streams of its catchment area, its sources and underground water will have to be thought of as an integrated unit. All the units will have to be revitalized, only then is the revival and survival of rivers possible.

Rivers often traverse multiple jurisdictions, and coordination challenges between different districts can impede the effective implementation of rejuvenation plans. Based upon field observations, there seem to be large gaps in policy implementation, enforcement and monitoring by the district authorities, leading to non-compliance with orders designed to protect smaller rivers. ■

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

# LOW-COST MISSION HOSPITALS HANG IN AMID RAPID CHANGE

They learn to be sustainable by charging small fees from their patients and go from donors to CSR funding. But finding doctors with the spirit of service is a tough task.



VIJAY ANAND ISMAVEL

THE first Protestant Christian mission hospital in India was started in 1870. Many of the early mission hospitals were established in remote rural areas or small towns and were focused on women and children or marginalized groups such as leprosy, tuberculosis and HIV patients. The first leprosy hospital was started in Purulia, West Bengal, in 1888 and continues to function today, run by The Leprosy Mission Trust India.

The Medical Missionary Association, set up in 1905, later became the Christian Medical Association of India (CMAI) and continues to provide coordination to the Protestant Christian medical mission network in India. The Catholic Christian hospital network in the country is coordinated by the Catholic Health Association of India (CHAI), established in 1943. The first nursing and paramedical training institutions as well as many of the modern schools and colleges in the country were established by mission bodies.

After India gained independence, many expatriate staff returned to their home countries. In the 1970s and 1980s, the government required the remaining expatriate medical staff to leave. This led to a loss of support from their overseas supporters which in turn resulted in the closure of many mission hospitals at that time.

At present there are about 270 Protestant Christian hospitals and 600 Catholic Christian hospitals functioning in the country.

In the past 20 years, rapid changes have affected the way mission hospitals function, just as they have affected other

'not for profit' hospitals.

In the past, many of the mission hospitals, especially those in remote rural areas, were manned by a single long-term doctor or a small number of doctors who did everything — they could manage medicine, paediatrics, surgery and obstetrics. Some of the doctors could do orthopaedics and basic neurosurgery, paediatric surgery and provide other services.

At present, most young consultants are trained in a sharply focused area of medicine. The medicolegal and regulatory environment has also changed considerably, requiring consultants to stay within their area of expertise. This has ended the days of the intrepid, adventurous, highly trained consultant who could manage most medical/surgical cases confidently and replaced them with multi-departmental hospitals with consultants in each department.

**CHARGING FEES** Many of the old mission hospitals could provide free or subsidized treatment to all who came to them because they were supported by donations, equipment and manpower from churches in the developed world. Such support has been severely curtailed by loss of interest from overseas donors and increased regulation of foreign donations by the government.

At present, mission hospitals generate most of their income from patients. In most hospitals patients in private wards pay more so that the patients in the general wards can be subsidized or given charity although there are mission hospitals, like the Makunda Christian Hospital in Assam, that have no private rooms and exist solely for the poor.

Indian entities, such as philanthropic foundations, churches, government grants and CSR-giving companies have replaced some of the external donors.

Insurance payouts from the government (Pradhan Mantri Jan Arogya Yojana (PMJAY) scheme), as well as various state government schemes have contributed to the income of these hospitals with many patients opting to avail of this cashless reimbursement facility. Maintaining financial sustainability and yet

being poor-friendly has become a tight balancing act.

**COMPETITION** When they were established, many of the mission hospitals were in very remote areas connected by poor roads. Slowly, entire towns with many other hospitals grew around them, leading to a lot of competition. Further, government hospitals provide free or highly subsidized treatment and corporate hospitals provide exclusivity at costs that a growing number of people can afford.

There have been several mission hospitals that have not been able to adapt to the changing scenario and have therefore closed while some others were taken over by 'for-profit' entities. The remaining mission hospitals have evolved successful models to sustain themselves and thrive, continuing to provide healthcare to the poor and marginalized in spite of these challenges.

Mission hospitals were established with the motive of sacrificial service — most of them will have the words 'for the poor and the marginalized' and 'in the spirit of Jesus Christ' in their founding documents. Staff worked under many challenges which affected their personal and professional lives because of their commitment to Christian service. Many of them experienced heavy workloads, low salaries and many other inconveniences. Living conditions were less than ideal and children had to be sent off to distant schools.

It is not easy to recruit and retain people with such an altruistic worldview. India produces ever greater numbers of doctors each year, but this has not changed their distribution—they continue to be low in number in remote areas and in poor parts of the country. There is great disparity within and between Indian states — the multidimensional poverty index is 0.7 for Kerala and 50.9 for Bihar and this disparity is reflected in the number of doctors per capita as well.

**NEW SERVICES** Many mission hospitals have repositioned themselves to adapt to the changing scenario around them. There are hospitals that provide geriatric care or palliative



A neonatal care unit in a mission hospital

care, having moved from the traditional areas of obstetrics and surgery. Some have continued to compete with other hospitals by attracting patients with better quality of service in urban areas and by larger volumes of poor patients in rural areas.

India has seen a major movement towards commercialization of healthcare which is quite pronounced in the 'for profit' sector. Large hospitals acquire the latest equipment and attract top specialists by paying volume-based remuneration.

At the other end, government insurance schemes provide cashless reimbursement to poor patients but many of the procedures that were the mainstay of mission hospital income have now been reserved for government hospitals. This has led to hospitals constantly having to reposition themselves by finding patients and services that are falling through the gaps. They are thus God's instruments of care in a world of need.

**MEETING CHALLENGES** Despite these challenges, many Christian hospitals have grown from strength to strength. The Christian Medical College, Vellore, was started in 1900 and its hospital has expanded considerably in the past 20 years with a large new campus, housing 1,500 additional beds with tertiary/quaternary care facilities being inaugurated in 2022. Patients from all over the country and abroad come in increasing numbers to this institution, attracted by its ethical practices.

The larger mission hospitals offer medical, nursing and paramedical training programmes. Many of them offer the DNB course for

postgraduate medical training as well as all levels of nursing and paramedical training affiliated to nursing councils (some through the Christian Medical Association of India which pioneered many of these programmes in the country).

**RESURGENCE** There is a resurgence of interest in medical missions with many young Christian healthcare students belonging to Gen Z exploring the possibility of serving in needy parts of the country. They are willing to delay the gratification of getting into postgraduate courses as soon as possible and earning attractive salaries in the corporate world or abroad. The future of mission hospitals in the country rests on the shoulders of these young men and women.

New mission hospitals and services are constantly being started in many parts of the country. Many of the mission hospitals have received accreditations such as from the National Accreditation Board for Hospitals (NABH), National Neonatology Forum and others which testify to their high quality of services despite their relatively low costs of treatment.

Many mission institutions provided comprehensive care. The mission compound often had an English medium school and college as well as health and development projects in the surrounding villages. In the past 20 years, despite mushrooming of educational institutions across the country many old mission institutions continue to provide high quality training wherever they are located, having earned the trust of several generations.

The Leprosy Mission Trust India is the largest provider of services to those affected by leprosy in the country today — their network of hospitals, vocational training centres and research centres continues to provide succour to this marginalized community. Other hospitals are focused on eye work, performing cataract surgeries to large numbers of people and curing them of their blindness.

With increasing numbers of patients affected by mental health issues and cancer, new opportunities to care have opened up. Some of the mission hospitals have also moved into super specialist services such as cardiology, neurosurgery, urology, and nephrology. During the recent Covid pandemic, mission hospitals were at the forefront of Covid care in the country.

What is the future going to be like? With the patient increasingly suspicious of the healthcare provider, hospitals which provide dependable care and are run with a spirit of service will remain in demand.

India continues to be a country with low investment of public funds in healthcare and a high rate of 'out of pocket' expenditure that drives large numbers of people to destitution from a single major healthcare event. Hospitals that can reinvent themselves and find ways to provide lifesaving treatment at affordable costs to those who fall through the gaps will make transformational impact in the India of tomorrow. Mission hospitals have mostly been invisible in the past and many of them will continue to be so in the future. ■

*Dr Vijay Anand Ismavel ran the Makunda Hospital with his wife, Ann, for 30 years. He is currently at the Christian Medical College in Vellore.*

# NEW FILMMAKERS WEIGH IN, BUT THE MEGA STARS RULE

Bollywood churned out more of the same with an eye on box-office numbers. Southern cinema surged. And there were directors who did their own thing.



SAIBAL CHATTERJEE

INDIAN cinema underwent paradigm shifts in the new millennium. It transited to the digital format, production budgets soared, streaming platforms altered the entertainment landscape and VFX-laden pulpy period dramas from the South hit paydirt.

Amid these changes, megastars continued to call the shots. With outlays burgeoning, filmmakers shunned experiments and focused on profits. For films that clicked — these inevitably were far less in number than ventures that bombed — box-office collections were the sole differentiator.

Did swelling numbers translate to improved quality? Rarely. Filmmakers, especially those in Mumbai, continued to put all their eggs in tried-and-tested baskets. They aped Hollywood and devoted a good part of 20 years to developing spy and cop universes.

The spy universe, centred on fictional RAW agents, emanated from the Yash Raj Films stable in the form of *Ek Tha Tiger* (2012), *Tiger Zinda Hai* (2017) and *Tiger 3* (2023). It continued with *War* (2019) and *Pathaan* (2023). Salman Khan, Hrithik Roshan and Shahrukh Khan embodied the secret agents.

The cop universe, producer-director Rohit Shetty's brainchild, yielded *Singham* (2011), *Singham Returns* (2014), *Simmba* (2018) and *Sooryavanshi* (2021). Ajay Devgn, Ranveer Singh and Akshay Kumar were the stars of the show. They played supercops who revelled in breaking the law, signalling a dangerous faith in extra-legal methods of dispensing justice.

In Chennai, screenwriter-director Lokesh Kanagaraj went a step further with the Lokesh

Cinematic Universe (abbreviated to LCU) of Tamil action thrillers. It started with *Kaithi* (2019), featuring Karthi in the lead role, and continued with *Vikram* (2022), top-lined by Kamal Haasan, Vijay Sethupathi and Fahadh Faasil, and *Leo* (2023), starring Vijay.

In a machismo-driven ecosystem, independent filmmakers chipped away with intent, creating cinema rooted in reality, dealing with urgent themes, marked by unique narrative methods and seeking a gender-sensitive approach to storytelling. A crop of writers and directors in Kerala and Tamil Nadu, riding on the streamers whose subscription base peaked during the coronavirus lockdown, carved a space for themselves.

Tamil cinema, always predominantly geared towards mass-oriented entertainment, produced a new breed of filmmakers who pushed in a new direction — Vetrimaaran (*Aadukalam*, 2011; *Visaranai*, 2016), Pa. Ranjith (whose *Kabali* and *Kaala*, both starring Rajinikanth, subverted norms of commercial cinema), Mari Selvaraj (*Pariyerum Perumal*, 2018; *Karnan*, 2021; *Maammanan*, 2023) and P.S. Vinodhraj (*Koozhangal*, 2021).

The ever-reliable Mani Ratnam took nary a false step in his magnum opus, *Ponniyin Selvan 1* and *2*, which made masterly use of visual and sonic means — and minimal reliance on computer graphics — to vividly bring alive the past. The two films were a demonstration of how to mount historical epics — a skill that most Mumbai filmmakers are bereft of.

From Kerala came clutter-breaking cinematic works like *Angamaly Diaries* (2017) and *Ee. Ma. Yau.*, both directed by Lijo Jose Pellissery, *Ariyippu* (2022), directed by Mahesh Narayanan, who edited Kamal Haasan's Tamil espionage thrillers *Vishwaroopam* (2013) and *Vishwaroopam II* (2018), and *Kumbalangi Nights* (2019), helmed by Madhu C. Narayanan.

A new generation of Kerala filmmakers like Sajin Babu (*Unto the Dusk, Biriyani*), Don Palathara (*Shavam, Everything is Cinema, Family*), Prasanth Vijay (*A Summer of Miracles, Daayam*), among several others, sought, each in his own individualistic way, to carry forward the legacy of masters like Adoor

Gopalakrishnan and G. Aravindan.

In Mumbai, the start of the millennium coincided with the advent of directors like Anurag Kashyap (*Black Friday, Gangs of Wasseypur*), Vishal Bhardwaj (*Maqbool, Omkara, Haider*), Dibakar Banerjee (*Khosla Ka Ghosla, Shanghai*), Vikramaditya Motwane (*Udaan, Lootera*), Neeraj Ghaywan (*Masaan*) and Chaitanya Tamhane (Marathi films *Court* and *The Disciple*), who stayed true to their own personal visions while functioning in India's movie capital.

The lone filmmaker from Bengal who consistently made his presence felt on the international festival circuit was Aditya Vikram Sengupta (*Labour of Love, Jonaki, Once Upon a Time in Calcutta*). In Bengali cinema's shrinking non-mainstream space, three other names stood out — Atanu Ghosh (*Robibaar, Binisutoy, Shesh Pata*), Indrasish Acharya (*Pupa, Niharika in the Mist*), and Abhinandan Banerjee (*The Cloud and the Man*).

**HATE AND HALF-TRUTHS** For all the significant highs registered by Indian cinema in the past 20 years, what lamentably stood out was the mainstream Mumbai movie industry's lack of spine and creative integrity. Many filmmakers slavishly perpetuated officially mandated narratives. Hyper-nationalism, Islamophobia and toxic masculinity overran the industry, swathes of which crawled when asked to bend.

The valour of soldiers was evoked for sectarian purposes (*Uri: The Surgical Strike*), a community was persistently othered (*The Kashmir Files, The Kerala Story, Sooryavanshi*) and bloodthirsty, badly behaved men were normalized in bloated narratives in which women had little agency (*Arjun Reddy, Kabir Singh, Animal*).

Some films talked up government initiatives/achievements (*Toilet: Ek Prem Katha*, 2017). Some lionized righteous Hindu rulers of the past and demonized Muslim monarchs — *Padmaavat* (2018) and *Tanhaji* (2018). Some others (*Baby* and *Holiday: A Soldier is Never Off Duty*, both starring Akshay Kumar) presented the minority community as



Mani Ratnam was masterly in his magnum opus, *Ponniyin Selvan*

the source of all trouble.

The past two decades of Hindi cinema, broadly speaking, had two distinct halves — the UPA years (2004-14) and the Modi era (2014 to the present). It was in the latter phase that entertainment turned into a vehicle to peddle divisive ideas.

Lopsided films like *The Kashmir Files* and *The Kerala Story* minted money by taking advantage of a climate in which hate and bigotry were instantly marketable commodities. When *The Kashmir Files* director made *The Vaccine War*, about a fanciful scenario in which India covered itself with glory in its handling of the Covid-19 situation, it flopped because it had no minority-bashing to prop it up.

**DEFIANT FEW** While a segment of the industry allowed itself to be coopted by the powers that be, a small and defiant band of filmmakers, several young documentarians and South Indian directors articulated their growing discomfiture with the steady backsliding of democracy.

Independent documentary filmmakers, led by the formidable Anand Patwardhan, came into their own like never before. Patwardhan's *Vivek (Reason)*, a 218-minute documentary that traces the systematic demolition of secular democracy in a nation founded on the principles of freedom and equality, won the top prize at the 2018 IDFA International Documentary Film Festival, Amsterdam.

Younger documentary filmmakers Payal

Kapadia (*A Night of Knowing Nothing*), Rintu Thomas and Sushmit Ghosh (*Writing With Fire*) and Shaunak Sen (*All that Breathes*) won major prizes at Sundance and Cannes, besides earning Oscar nominations.

Kolkata filmmaker Sreemoyee Singh's *And, Towards Happy Alleys*, an exquisite personal essay on Iranian cinema, poetry and women fighting for freedom, earned a slot in the Berlin Film Festival's official selection. Sadly, however, these wonderful films struggled to find domestic distribution because they called a spade a spade.

The industry developed global ambitions with three VFX-heavy Telugu period epics, *RRR* (2022) and the two parts of *Baahubali* (2015 and 2017), directed by S.S. Rajamouli, seeking to rival Hollywood superhero franchises.

On the domestic circuit, *Baahubali: The Beginning* set the stage for *Baahubali: The Conclusion*. The follow-up earned three times what the first film did, which was proof of the committed fan following for Rajamouli's twin blockbusters, which in turn prepared the world for the advent of *RRR*.

**GLOBAL AMBITIOUS** *RRR* travelled all the way to the Academy Awards and generated a great deal of excitement without permanently prising open the doors that block Indian cinema's chances of matching the global clout that the cinemas of China and South Korea possess.

The Kannada period action film *KGF* had an

arc similar to that of *Baahubali*. *KGF — Chapter 1* (2018) collected one-fifth of what *KGF — Chapter 2* amassed but what it did was set the stage for the 2022 follow-up, released after the cinema shutdown necessitated by the Covid-19 pandemic, to make a killing.

The Telugu hit *Pushpa — The Rise* (2021) made big bucks, whetting the appetite of movie fans for the follow-up, *Pushpa — The Rule*, scheduled for release in 2024.

*Dangal* (2016), the highest-grossing Indian movie ever, wrestled its way into the Chinese market and grabbed the third spot on the country's list of the most successful non-English films of the year.

Many medium-budget Hindi films that dealt with sensitive themes — homosexuality, body shaming, even erectile dysfunction — found takers. Most of these films starred Ayushmann Khurrana, beginning with *Vicky Donor* (2012), in which the actor played a sperm donor in Delhi.

In *Shubh Mangal Saavdhan* (2017), Khurrana played a character with erectile dysfunction; in *Bala*, he was a man grappling with hair loss; and in *Shubh Mangal Zyada Saavdhan* (2020), he was cast as a gay man.

It was a period of turmoil and discovery, of lost opportunities and exciting breakthroughs. Every decade of Indian cinema, a volatile domain at the best of times, is marked by tremors that are felt for long. But never before had numbers trumped substance quite as emphatically as they did in the past 20 years. ■

Saibal Chatterjee is a senior journalist and film critic.

# 2003 to 2023

SOME STORIES FROM A JOURNEY TO REMEMBER

## In the days when RTI was still a campaign



We were onto the right to information or RTI much before it became a national law. On the cover of our very first issue in September 2003, 'Taxman's burden', was Arvind Kejriwal. On leave from his job as an income tax officer, he was experimenting with uncovering corruption in municipal development works in Sundernagari, a squalid colony in east Delhi. Kejriwal's small outfit at the time, Parivartan, consisted of young people. They were helped by the Mazdoor Kisan Shakti Sangathan (MKSS) and the National Campaign for People's Right to Information, which had already done much work on RTI and had experience in holding public meetings. *Civil Society* attended public hearings and social audits. We tracked the RTI law every month as it passed through the National Advisory Council, hit hurdles and finally became a law.



Civil Society picture/Lakshman Anand



Civil Society picture/Lakshman Anand

## NGOs in politics



Our second issue's cover story was on Sheila Dikshit's engagement with resident welfare associations (RWAs) in Delhi. And our third, 'NGOs in politics', was prescient of times to come. *Civil Society* was the first to capture a trend that was to culminate in the India Against Corruption movement. And finally, Arvind Kejriwal's Aam Aadmi Party. Our cover story showed how increasingly people's movements on land rights, forest rights and so on felt the need to engage with politicians. Already, the Association for Democratic Reforms and Lok Satta were weighing in on cleaning up politics and elections. For the past 20 years corruption has been a simmering issue.

## When Gurgaon wanted to vote

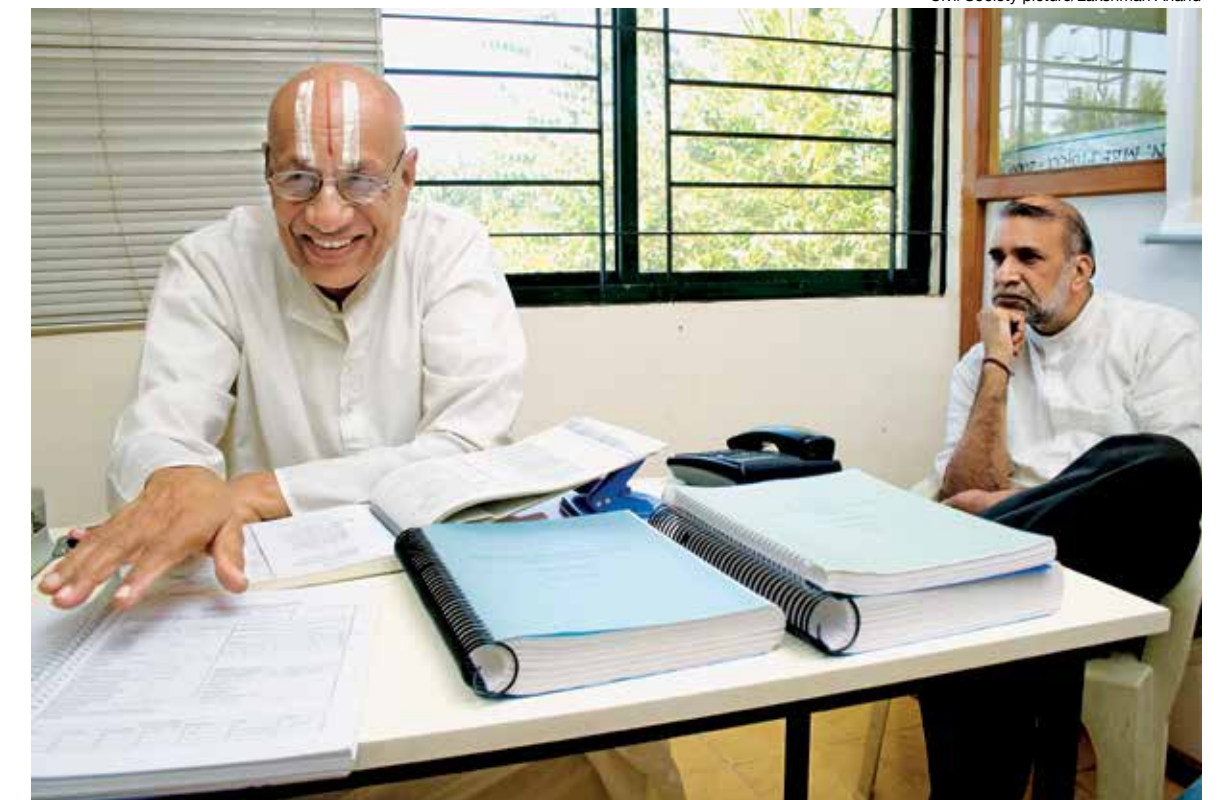


In the early 2000s Gurgaon, as it was called then, was a growing metropolis. But, incredibly, its new residents, who came in a great exodus from Delhi and elsewhere, didn't have the right to vote. Their names didn't figure in the electoral rolls and updating the rolls was a chore.

Basic amenities didn't exist. Roads were a mess, water was in short supply, electricity was erratic, there was garbage everywhere and gensets polluted the air. Residents found they had no voice because they weren't registered as voters.

Our cover story, 'Gurgaon wants to Vote', captured this dilemma. People's Action, an NGO, galvanized RWAs into action. They pleaded with the Election Commission to simplify the procedure by allowing RWAs to authenticate applicants.

The EC agreed. Not only did people get their voting rights, RWAs gained status and formed a joint front to finally get the administration to listen to their woes.



Civil Society picture/Lakshman Anand

## Mr Roots and the promise of Ayurveda



In 2004 we were breaking new ground as a magazine by reporting on traditional medicine. Darshan Shankar was Mr Roots on the cover of our fourth issue. His work at the Foundation for Revitalization of Local Health Traditions (FRLHT) featured several times in our pages over the years. It was a window on the science of Ayurveda and a different worldview. Ayurvedic doctors had their own orientation. A whole lot of interesting work had been done at FRLHT. There was a vast collection of medicinal plants from across India. We were also introduced to natural cures and folk healers. It wasn't widely understood then, but a majority of Indians meet their healthcare needs through herbal medicine. Shankar's mission was to give traditional medicine a bigger role in public healthcare. It was cheaper, natural and came with fewer side effects. He sought to build bridges with modern medicine by documenting medicinal plants, knowledge about them and the efficacy of herbal cures. Some of the validation was done in a laboratory.



Civil Society picture/Lakshman Anand

## Forest rights



When the Forest Rights Act was passed in December 2006, after a long agitation, there was elation. But implementation proved tougher. It was resisted by forest departments and many states. Adivasi groups once again turned up in Delhi to protest. We spoke to them, sitting on the pavement in Jantar Mantar. They patiently explained the complicated process they had to undergo. Not just land rights but community rights to collect forest produce and protect forests was being denied. Land required for industry is invariably taken from tribal communities. Despite the Forest Rights Act, and several others, it is industry that wins.

## When CSE took on Coke, Pepsi

All hell broke loose when the Centre for Science and Environment announced that there were pesticide residues in bottles of Coca-Cola and Pepsi. It had tested the cold drinks in its own laboratory. The giant brands worked overtime to defend themselves as it was increasingly clear that their reputations had been dented.

But there was another story waiting to be written. It was the story from inside CSE. What was it like for an NGO to take on two global corporate entities several times its size in resources?

CSE already had a reputation of being a gutsy environmental group. Its late founder, Anil Agarwal, had set high standards for the NGO. CSE and its publication, *Down to Earth*, carried his imprimatur. But the cola fight was on a scale of its own.

*Civil Society* featured CSE on its cover, speaking to Sunita Narain and others in her doughty team. They had their hands full defending their findings and fending off an onslaught against them from the companies, chambers of commerce and a government apprehensive of displeasing multinationals.



## Flood business

With eight major rivers Bihar should have been a powerhouse of agriculture and processing. But it is nowhere near being so.

Activists have blamed embankments for increasing the fury of floods, converting soil into sand and impoverishing farmers.

Our story, which covered five districts, found villages submerged in silt and sand, changes in cropping patterns and distress migration.

Repeatedly building embankments was a good business for the local people who went from one flood to the next. Much better would have been to have natural flood control measures.



## A clean world car from India

Long before India woke up to electric vehicles, Chetan Maini had developed an electric car called the Reva in Bengaluru. It should have been the pride of India but instead it languished. Maini canvassed relentlessly for tax breaks and other incentives to spur sales of his car and encourage other electric vehicles. He met with little or no success.

The Reva was an attractive small car ideally suited to congested and polluted Indian cities. It came in eye-catching colours and had a cute shape. There were many technological innovations incorporated into it. But Maini struggled to sell the Reva in India. Makers of cars with combustion engines had a stranglehold on the market and policy as well. The government was niggardly with its incentives. The push now given to electric vehicles would have not just helped the Reva but brought more electric vehicles on the road a decade ago. Interestingly, Maini found ready takers elsewhere in the world. So, the Reva would sell in London but you couldn't find it on the streets of Delhi. It was truly a clean world car and it came from India!

## Zero-emission green homes

The construction industry has to make the shift to being sustainable. It was as clear as daylight 20 years ago as it is today. Water and raw material shortages, growing pollution and concerns over energy use have kept growing.

But how to popularize better building practices and make ecologically friendly construction more the norm than the exception?

Way back in April 2008, we felt Chandrashekhar Hariharan had some of the answers with a company he had founded. Biodiversity Conservation India Ltd was making use of traditional building methods and technologies for creating housing for the rich. He was making green not only good but aspirational as well. If the rich didn't need cement slapped all over their houses, perhaps the middle class would follow. Building practices too would be transformed.

We showcased his developments in Bengaluru in the belief that he was a frontrunner and his were ideas that needed to be propagated. Hariharan and his company were perhaps ahead of their time and then seemed to be overtaken by events. But green housing remains a growing need.



## A health centre for Molarband

A dilapidated health centre in Molarband, a resettlement colony in southeast Delhi with open drains, dicey water supply and rife with disease, was transformed into a clean and well-equipped clinic with top-notch doctors in attendance. This welcome turnaround was initiated by the Arpana Trust, with Dr Rahul Gupta, a gastroenterologist, and his family of physicians taking the initiative to bring together some of Delhi's best physicians.

The transformed health centre became a shining example of what local healthcare should be. The top doctors volunteered their time. But the centre had its own staff as well. There was a pharmacy and a dental clinic. X-rays, ultrasound examinations, ECG and pathology tests were done. An ambulance rushed patients to hospitals when the need arose.

Large numbers of women and children turn up throughout the day for treatment. A small one-time fee is charged for registration. The Arpana Trust created awareness on waste management, family planning and health and lobbied for clean water from the government. They also started a school with mid-day meals and cultural activities for children. Their efforts resulted in better health indicators for the community and helped make the colony more habitable. The Molarband health centre is an example of how government health infrastructure can be used.



## BaLA for schools

What can architects do to improve school education? They can redesign the school itself. We found Kabir Vajpeyi and his wife, Preeti, were turning around ramshackle government schools at low cost. The programme was called Building as Learning Aid. Doors, windows, floors and the school

compound were used to enhance learning. Back in 2006 it had few takers though it had succeeded in Rajasthan. But we had Kabir and Preeti on our cover. Now the programme is widely used across states.

There are alphabets and fractions embedded in grills, angles from the sweep of a door, measures from furniture, puzzles on the floor, mud maps and more. Sundials, swings made from tyres, poles and activity brick maps turn disused playgrounds into a riot of colour and activity for children.

Recently they have been redesigning anganwadis or preschools, once again reviving languishing government assets. This is a story we featured in September 2023.

## Wetlands of East Kolkata

**Civil Society** Kolkata has an eastern draining board like no other city has. It's a natural system sustained over generations for taking away the city's sewage.

The eastern slope is aligned to the drainage networks that the British built for the city. They go from west to east as they empty into river networks.

Uniquely, the sewage, as it leaves Kolkata's underground drainage system, flows into ponds where fish are cultivated. It is a brilliant example of food from waste.

The ponds provide low-cost sewage treatment. It is a natural cleansing process as the sewage stands exposed to the sun. The nutrient-rich water is then perfect for growing fish which reach Kolkata's markets.

In regular cycles, the cleansed sewage is released into channels and from there flows into the river.

The ponds were brought to prominence by Dhrubajyoti Ghosh, who was a civil engineer in the municipal system, but went on to be internationally famous for his resolute efforts to save the wetlands of East Kolkata.



## Hindi cinema's radical mainstream

**Civil Society** As early as June 2009 we identified directors in Hindi cinema who were carving their own path, telling stories which were different from the predictable song and dance routine movies that were being churned out. This new breed of filmmakers articulated social and political concerns of contemporary India. They had stories to tell that were closer to local realities.

We had a youthful Anurag Kashyap on the cover whose quirky film, *Dev D*, was attracting audiences and critical acclaim. Films like *Black Friday*, *Gulaab*, *Paanch* were nonconformist and yet successful, widening the notion of mainstream.

Raja Menon's spirited little film, *Bara Aana*, was a black comedy, featuring the subaltern. Sooni Taporewala's directorial debut, *Little Zizou*, an English film on intra-community politics, Irfan Kamal's *Thanks Maa* on a Mumbai street urchin, Piyush Jha's *Sikander* plus filmmakers like Rahul Dholakia and Sudhir Mishra proved Hindi cinema was evolving.

Some cited Rajkumar Hirani's successful *Lage Raho Munnabhai* as the first film that redefined mainstream cinema.



## Homestays in Sikkim

**Civil Society** It doesn't take much to sell Sikkim as a tourist destination. Hill stations in the north have become overpopulated, dirty and saturated with tourists. Sikkim is still clean and pristine. It has dense forests, clear streams, lakes and wildlife.

Pawan Chamling, former chief minister of the state, took the path less travelled. Instead of mass tourism he decided to promote homestay tourism and organic farming. That would put money in people's pockets and leave a lighter ecological footprint.

Our story involved experiencing firsthand in Sikkim the joys of living with local people, enjoying delicious home-cooked meals and trekking through forests filled with the chatter of birds. It was an exhilarating experience.

## In search of the sustainable city

**Civil Society** Cities and India's chaotic urban growth interested *Civil Society* right from the magazine's inception.

Many NGOs and public-spirited experts were trying to solve the problems of urbanization. There were solutions in real time that were being offered.

We saw for ourselves the role of being journalists who tell these stories to bring changemakers and governments together.

It was of course a long haul. As we look back, consciousness has grown but cities have only become more intractable. Many good ideas have fallen by the wayside. Municipalities are not the powerhouses of change that they are meant to be. Huge metropolises in India cry out for expertise and better governance. Municipalities remain at the bottom of the chain of political authority. A mayor counts for little. A councillor for even less.

In 2008, our anniversary issue was titled 'Future City'. We pulled together the best minds and cited examples from all over the world. The mayor of Bogota, Enrique Penalosa, wrote a special piece.



## Celebrating the humble jackfruit

**Civil Society** Jackfruit is now Kerala's state fruit. It has status and earns money for farmers and food processing units. But this was not always so. Jackfruit has always grown on homesteads and been widely consumed, but like all things easily available no one bothered to see its economic potential or give its nutritional values importance.

*Civil Society* has done three cover stories on jackfruit and innumerable smaller stories, which is perhaps a lot but we have been of the view that agriculture deserves this kind of micro attention.

Our coverage wouldn't have been possible if it weren't for our colleague, Shree Padre. We were also encouraged by our readers who found great merit in the jackfruit stories. Jackfruit clearly had a following. Readers wrote in with their recipes for jackfruit dishes.

Apart from writing for *Civil Society*, Shree Padre edits *Adike Patrike*, a newspaper for farmers. With his small team he has done much to change the status of jackfruit. Over the years *Adike Patrike* has provided some 400 pages of coverage to stories on jackfruit.



## Eating right

**Civil Society** We were reporting on eating right back in 2009, much before it had become fashionable to do so. We travelled to Kerala for the Annam food festival, centred around improving diet by

returning to one's roots. Despite its sound healthcare, Kerala's incidence of diabetes and hypertension is higher than the national average.

The food fest had a spread of dishes made with tubers, traditional rice, leaves and millets. *Pathayam*, a natural food at the festival, offered *ragi appam*, scented *terali appam*, *ela ada* and *kozhukkatta*.

"If food diversity dies, agricultural diversity dies too," said Dr G.G. Gangadharan, Ayurvedic physician and one of the organizers of the fest.



## Facing up to Facebook



Everyone is on the internet, but making sure that the internet is truly for everyone is what civil society must do. Bridging the

divide in digital access and making sure that the access comes unfettered, is the work of activists who understand technology and its social implications.

In 2016, the issue of net neutrality was raised by a motley band of activists when the average internet user had no clue about net neutrality.

In question was Free Basics being promoted by Facebook and Airtel Zero. Both were packaged in the promise of easy access. But, they were herding internet users in directions profitable to them.

*Civil Society* spoke to these activists. For us it meant understanding net neutrality and what it meant for democratic access on the internet. From this successful campaign emerged the Internet Freedom Foundation, led by Apar Gupta, a lawyer, who put his career on hold to perform this key function in a technologically driven, unequal world.



## The tragedy in Bilaspur



Tragedies make the news and get widely reported. That is not the case with follow-ups. When 16 young women died hours after undergoing laparoscopic tubectomies in Bilaspur, Chhattisgarh in 2014, there were headlines. But it was in a fact-finding report that the whole story came out.

*Civil Society* gave the report the prominence it deserved. To cite just one of the tragic facts: A single surgeon did 83 surgeries in rapidfire, spending a minute and a half on each woman.

Poonam Muttreja, executive director of Population Foundation of India, had put together a fact-finding team. Four reputed voluntary organizations with three doctors travelled to Bilaspur to investigate the tragedy. Their report, 'Robbed of choice and dignity: Indian women dead after mass sterilization', pointed out all the sickening lapses. The women had died of septicemia. The hospital was a dirty and dilapidated structure. Needles and syringes weren't sterilized, the same laparoscope was used. On the basis of the report, a public interest litigation (PIL) was filed in the Supreme Court. Justice Madan B. Lokur's judgment sought a stop to sterilization camps and asked the government to invest in fixed-day services. Muttreja called it a landmark judgment.

Civil Society picture/Lakshman Anand



## Humayun's tomb



The magnificent Humayun's Tomb and its nearby monuments together with the Sunder Nursery in Delhi attract thousands of visitors these days.

But the brilliance and scale of this restoration effort was told by *Civil Society* in a cover story way back when work was still in progress.

We have been tracking architect Ratish Nanda and his team for a long time. More recently, we featured the restoration of the Quli Qutab Shahi tombs in Hyderabad.

Both stories had a wow factor which had readers writing in to say how pleasantly surprised they were.

Restoration of monuments is integral to urban renewal. Cities live as much in the past as they do in the present. Bringing historical sites back to life gives cities character and makes them worth visiting.

## An upsurge on the campus



Campuses in tumult have their own stories to tell. Protests broke out in Jawaharlal Nehru University, Jamia Millia Islamia and Delhi University.

Students were demonstrating on issues like they hadn't for quite some time. Soon, campuses in other cities joined in.

The protests were primarily against the National Register of Citizens (NRC) and the Citizenship (Amendment) Act (CAA). When students in Jamia were rounded up by the police, the stage was set for a bigger confrontation with the Union government. But it was not just the two laws. Students were also protesting against the highhandedness of college administrations, lack of safety for women, unemployment and the lack of freedom of expression.

Unexplained mob attacks in JNU saw left-wing students and professors injured. The firebrand leader of the JNU Students' Union, Aishe Ghosh, was among them.

The campus uprising soon sputtered out. But in the two cover stories we did we tried to show the angst of a new generation.



## Hindutva plus welfarism



As India prepares for the 2024 elections, our cover story on the BJP's victory in 2019 has been spot on. It was the mix of nationalism, Hindutva and welfarism that had worked so potently in favour of the party, Sanjaya Baru wrote in the cover story. The BJP was back, more dominant than ever under Narendra Modi's leadership. And the State loomed large since neo-liberal and market-oriented policies had failed to address the basic issues of development facing the nation. It was "the *mai baap* of a 21st century *sarkar*", Baru wrote in his analysis. Modi was the cult figure who would bring gas, electricity, drinking water and food rations to the doorsteps of people. Will the same formula work in the 2024 elections? Only time will tell.

*Civil Society* has mostly given politics the miss. There are a number of publications covering political developments and we don't find it necessary to be among them. But at election time and with the coming to power of new governments we have felt the need to offer readers our perspective. It has been so since 2004 and the coming to power of the first UPA.



## The rural hospital



Some of the finest doctors in India choose to serve in rural areas where their services are most needed. The picture on the left is of the Christian mission hospital at Chinchpada in Maharashtra. There are several more we have discovered in our quest to report on healthcare in the government and voluntary sectors.

These hospitals meet the needs of vast numbers of patients who would otherwise go unserved. Early in our journey, we came across the rural surgeons' movement when we met Dr D.P.S. Toor, a general surgeon. Through him we got to know Dr J.K. Banerjee, one of the founders of the movement. There are some 400 rural surgeons strung across the country. They provide quality affordable care.

Through our coverage of such doctors, we have tried to highlight their contribution and their special needs which tend to be ignored despite the good they do in remote areas.

## When SEZs were too hot to handle



When the UPA government pronounced its Special Economic Zone policy, it hoped to solve problems of land acquisition and boost the economy.

Industry was happy with the prospect but the people who would have to give up their land were not.

Even as justifications for SEZs flooded the media, protests began breaking out and gathering momentum.

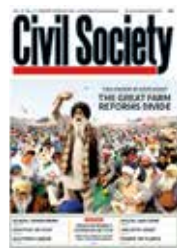
Activists rallied people against the policy. There were demonstrations in cities and the government was confronted. Not everyone was convinced that the SEZs would translate into better standards of living. There was also the question of compensation for land.

*Civil Society* saw the SEZ policy as the hot potato that it was becoming. It had been pulled out of a hat by the UPA government without adequate consultation. We spoke to affected communities and reported their opposition. Such a sweeping reform by stealth couldn't possibly succeed. Talking to people who would give up their land, it was clear that the SEZs could not be the big push they were intended to be.

Civil Society picture/Shrey Gupta



## The great farm reforms divide



For over a year, farmers from across India held a protest against three farm laws passed hurriedly by the BJP government. Camping on the outskirts of Delhi, they educated seasoned economists on what was wrong with those laws.

The laws sought to enable farmers to sell their produce at *mandis* managed by the state government and at private markets set up by companies. The Minimum Support Price (MSP) paid by the government would continue but the companies would not be taxed. Farmers could get into contract farming arrangements.

Farmers said this would leave them at the mercy of private traders, who would whittle down prices and take away their land. The 41 farm unions who organized the protest demanded a legally backed MSP. *Civil Society* spoke to experts and informed readers about why farmer unions were protesting in Delhi.

What is emerging today is a rethink on the Indian village and farmers. Villages have long been looked down upon, a regressive byproduct of colonial thinking. States that have invested in rural infrastructure like Goa and Kerala have done well. If rural India is given the attention it deserves, manufacturing has a chance to shift closer to villages and create non-farm jobs.

Civil Society picture/Shrey Gupta



## Migrants in the mirror



The sudden lockdown in the aftermath of Covid-19 resulted in migrant workers pouring out of cities, desperately trying to reach home. The images were heart-rending: famished children, people stuffed into trucks, pregnant women walking miles, horrific accidents.

The invisible worker became visible for the first time. But there was no real data on migrant workers. To give our readers a clearer understanding of the complexities of migration, we spoke to those in the know: Rajiv Khandelwal of Aajeevika Bureau, who has worked extensively for migrant labour, Chinmay Tumber of the Indian Institute of Management (IIM), Ahmedabad, who has studied migration, K.R. Shyam Sundar of the Xavier School of Management (XLRI), Jamshedpur, an expert on labour laws. Regardless of which state they came from, workers must have access to housing, rations, education, healthcare and security of wages. There are laws in place but most remain unimplemented. Workers need rights — not welfare schemes.

# GALLERY



## ARTABILITY

Second Edition

A year after *Civil Society* launched Artability, we are back with a new edition showcasing 10 artists with disabilities doing outstanding work. Follow them from here and discover their valuable collections.

They each have their personal styles and ways of viewing the world. If one thing runs in common it is a high level of skill. They are professional artists in their own right.

They are both self-taught and trained. They are also teaching art to others. Their capacity to rise above their challenges in effort to express themselves makes them very special.

For several years now, *Civil Society* has given space to the Beyond Limits exhibition held by Preeti Johar of the Family of Disabled. It carries forward the work of Preeti's father, Dr Rajinder Johar, who suffered from quadriplegia after an accident and founded Family of Disabled.

Artability seeks to build on the event to be a destination for artists and their work which might not otherwise find notice.

“Art washes away from the soul the dust of everyday life,” said Picasso. What about those who are differently abled? What does art do for them? Join *Civil Society* in this exploration.





## Real and surreal

DEEPALI SHARMA

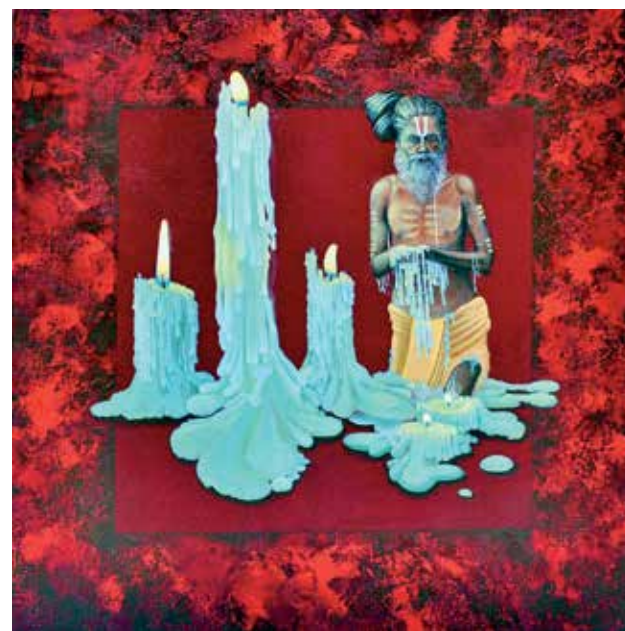
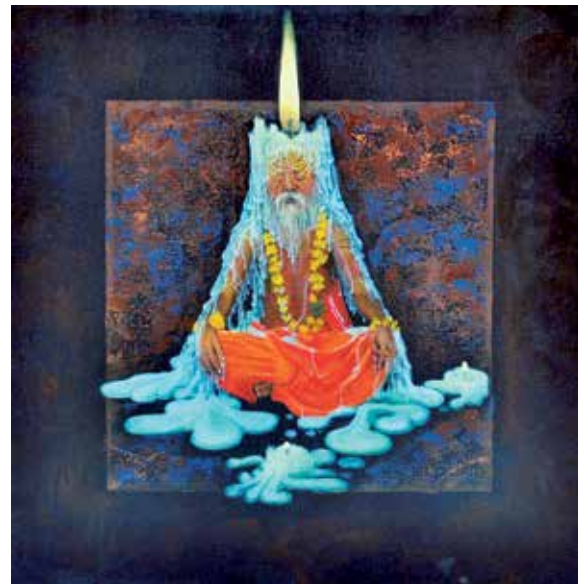
Profoundly influenced by surrealism from an early age, Deepali Sharma is inspired by Pablo Picasso and Salvador Dali. She finds painting “the best way to express inner feelings and dreams”.

Her style is a blend of the real and surreal. She works with charcoal, oil, acrylic and woodcut.

*Captivity II* is an example of her surrealism explored through acrylic on canvas. *Sadhu I & II* deal with godmen and spiritual power.

Deepali has participated in exhibitions internationally and across the country at venues such as the Lalit Kala Akademi and Arpana Art Gallery.

Deepali, 33, is hearing impaired and based in Rajasthan. She has a master’s degree in art. Her work can be found on her Instagram account (@deepaliart) and website (www.deepaliart.com).

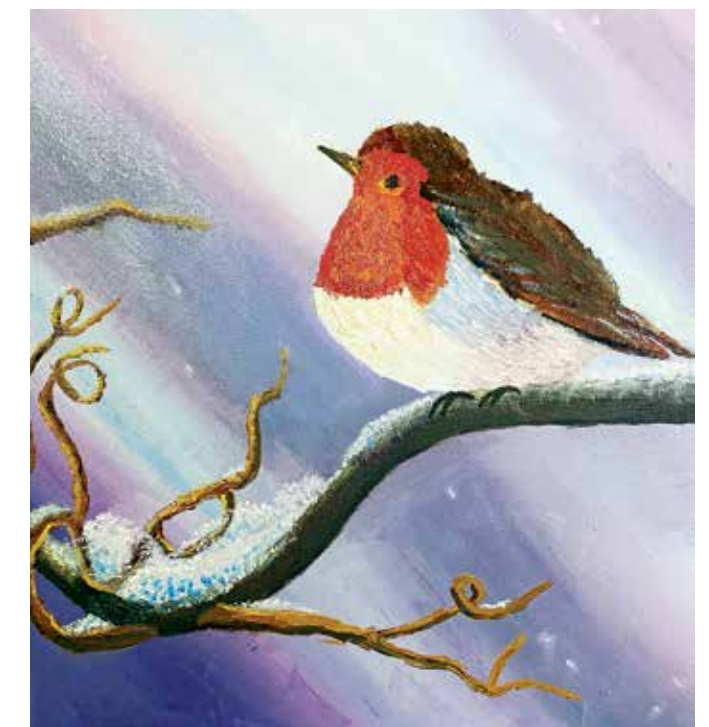
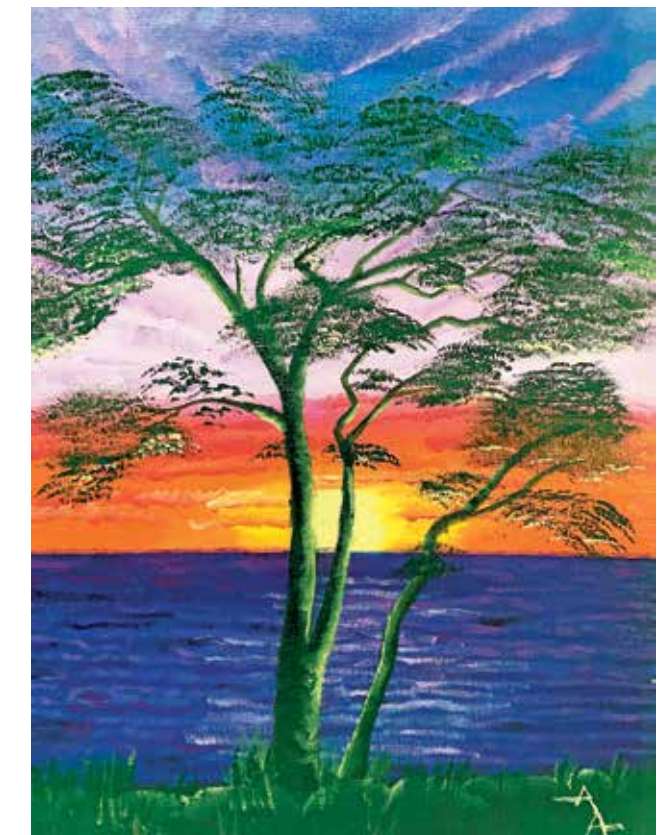


## Eye for the vivid

ANUBHA AGRAWAL

A talented singer and vibrant artist, 25-year-old Anubha Agrawal is based in New Delhi. Her experiments with the brush began at the early age of three. While she has dabbled in other art forms like resin art, fluid art and woodcut-prints, her favourite medium is oil on canvas. Most of her work is an array of landscapes in vivid and vibrant colours.

Many of her paintings have been selected and displayed at various art galleries where her style was appreciated and received wide press coverage. Her work has also been showcased at the National Gallery of Modern Art. Anubha, who has been diagnosed with autism, also has a master’s degree in Hindustani classical music from Delhi University.





## Deft with acrylics

CHHAVI SHARMA

A master of acrylic on canvas, 30-year-old Chhavi Sharma has more than a decade of experience as an artist. Her themes range from togetherness, as seen in her painting titled *Living Together*, to nature and life, as expressed in her work, *Roots of Life*. She also experiments with modern art.

Chhavi, who has a master's degree in art, is hearing impaired but that has not hampered her creative journey. A recipient of the Samaj Ratna Award from the Rajasthan Jan Manch, Chhavi is based in Jaipur. She has participated in exhibitions held in various countries such as South Korea, the US and at home at prestigious venues like the Lalit Kala Akademi and Jawahar Kala Kendra, among others.



## Inspired by green

KABIR VERNAL

Loose brush strokes and abstract elements are typical of the work of Kabir Vernal. His inspiration comes from nature, but it is in the abstractions that his signature can be found.

Kabir is just 11 years old and is primarily a non-speaking child on the autism spectrum. He is home schooled in Hyderabad.

As his skill has grown, Kabir has been experimenting with a range of textures, often choosing his colour palette on his own.

He is the recipient of a gold medal in the junior artist category at Star Future Artist. He has held a solo exhibition at the Arpana Art Gallery.

Kabir's creations are sold on the Atypical Advantage website. You can also see his works on his Instagram (@artby.kabir) and Facebook (Art By Kabir).





## Dharamsala and more

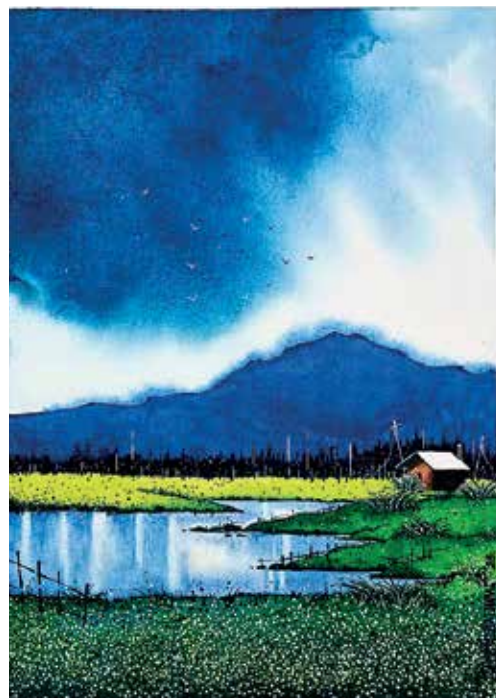
BEETAN GOSWAMI

Based in the idyllic town of Dharamsala in Himachal Pradesh, Beetan Goswami's art mirrors the serene and scenic mountains his home is nestled in. His work, *Cloudy Beauty*, defines his perception of the world around him.

Beetan is 43. He is hearing impaired. Water colour is his chosen medium.

Located as he is in the mountains, Beetan's work is suffused with nature's bounty. His is a quest for peace.

*Snowy Nature* is a good example of his bonding with the elements. *Blue City* captures the essence of the city of Jodhpur as he perceives it.



## Nature and the female form

MAMTA BERA

The female form, depicted in a state of nudity, fascinates Mamta Bera. It is through the female form that she explores her 'intricate connect' with nature.

"My artworks serve as a means of reimagining and recreating memories from my past, particularly my childhood," says Mamta.

The artist in her is the observer weaving her own "narratives and interpretations" of what she perceives.

Nature is at the heart of her work. She uses acrylic as her medium of expression.

Rather than emphasize the subject, she chooses to rely on vibrant colours to convey emotions.

Mamta, 25, has muscular dystrophy. She is based in New Delhi and has an art degree.





## Innocence and maturity

ROHIT VYAS

Is it possible to be simple in theme and intricate in form? Rohit Vyas shows how. A cat or a horse could be just what they are or intricately come to life on his canvas. *Search* has a cat looking out for food. *Ashwa* depicts the power and strength of the horse. *Innocent Childhood* explores ideas of hope and the dreams that lie ahead.

His recurrent themes are the quest for solitude, the peace in nature and animals as symbols of power and strength.

He works with a variety of mediums such as water colour, charcoal and acrylic water colour on canvas. His detailed work has striking use of colour and bold yet intricate strokes lend his art a distinct identity of its own.

Twenty-five-year-old Rohit has speech and hearing impairment and is based in Udaipur, Rajasthan.



## Fighting back with art

SADHNA DHAND

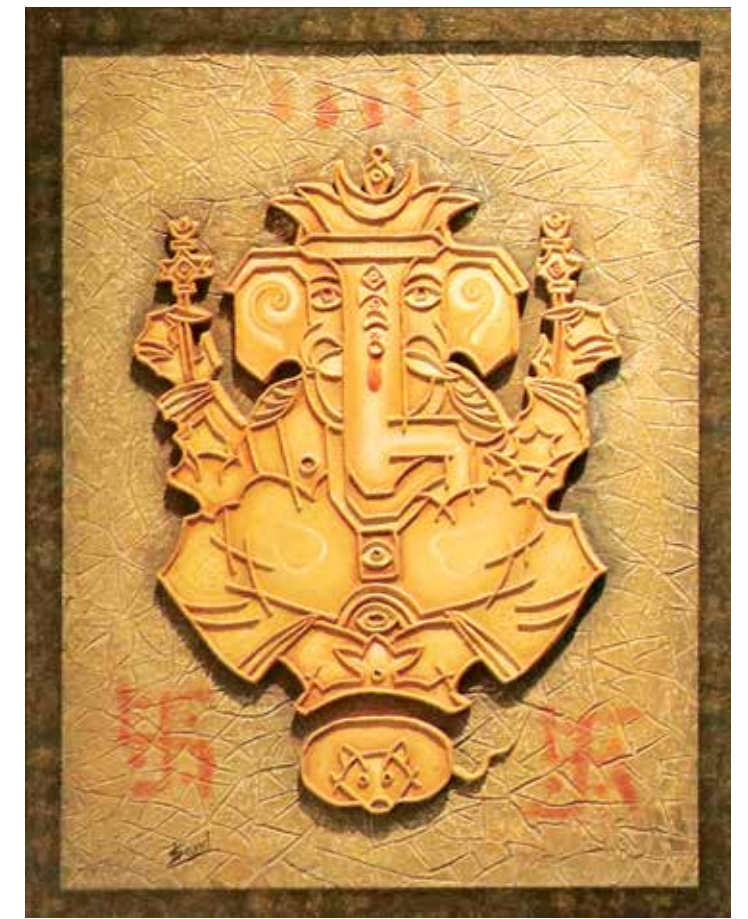
“My mother inspired me to battle the challenges of life and empowered me to carve my own creative niche,” says Sadhna Dhand, an artist based in Raipur.

Trained in multiple art forms like Tanjore, stained glass painting, murals and sculpting, Sadhna has been able to carve an identity for herself far removed from her physical limitations.

With a diploma in fine arts, Sadhna has trained over 20,000 students in various fine art forms at her home since 1982.

Sadhna, 67, was born with *osteogenesis imperfecta*, a congenital bone disorder, colloquially known as brittle-bone disease.

Despite having suffered from 80 fractures and loss of hearing and mobility by the age of 15, she has continued to create art as a way to combat life’s challenges.





## Many ways to paint

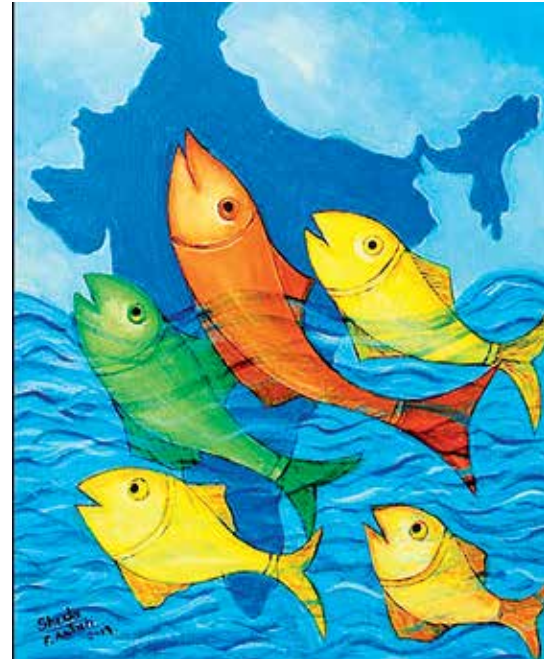
SHEELA SHARMA

It was in a train accident when she was just four years old that Sheela Sharma lost her arms. Her mother also died in that accident.

She was sent to an orphanage and began going to a primary school where her teachers discovered her incredible ability to sketch using her mouth and toes. Over time, she began painting with her mouth and now at 55, she has a vast repertoire of work.

Sheela's chosen medium is acrylic on canvas. Most of her artwork centres around themes like flowers, Lord Ganesha and love between mother and child. She has a bachelor's degree in fine arts and is an active member of the association of Mouth and Foot Painting Artists (MFPA).

In a message to people with disabilities, she says, "If one is willing, one can achieve it all... nobody is incapable of doing anything."



## Digital art and pictures

SAM VARGHESE

Sam Varghese, an 18-year-old based in Kerala, sees dots and lines as the root of all objects. It is perhaps this perspective that is reflected in his art, lending it a unique flavour.

His work, *Lines and Dots*, epitomizes his thought process, while another, titled *The Forest*, highlights the theme of beauty in a collection of things.

Sam works primarily with digital art. He finds it serves as a useful means of expression for him.

Sam, who has autism, also enjoys photography. He has received training in nature and shadow photography. He finds joy in art, photography and cooking and has recently completed his schooling.



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# A GIFTING GUIDE

There is often a dilemma when it comes to finding an ideal gift for loved ones. The country is teeming with small producers and artisans who need help to reach out to sell their wonderful products. *Civil Society* has curated a gifting guide, complete with what they offer and how you can reach them.

## Terracotta beauties

Mansi Verma stall sells a delightful jumble of things you'd love to take home. An attractive lamp glows gently behind her. There are more on her counter, along with planters with green leaves peeping out, pen-stands, bowls, a jamboree of jewellery, including bracelets for men and neckpieces for women.

It's all made in terracotta, the material Verma likes working with. She started Banerii, her enterprise, four years ago after graduating in fine arts. Verma says she is inspired by nature, mythology, pop culture, Mughal art, traditional motifs and *jaali* work.

Everything is done by hand. "A lot of love and labour goes into all this," she says.

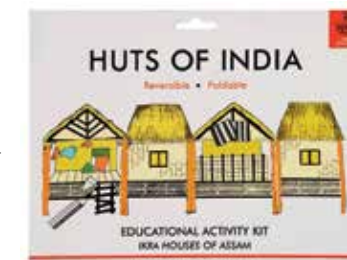
That is apparent. Each piece is a work of art. Colour, shape and design blend beautifully. Pick one beauty and take it home.



Contact: Mansi Verma, 9871819056 Email: banerii.itshandmade@gmail.com

## Child's Potli

Potli is a wondrous *khazana* for little children. It introduces the child to the colourful, artistic world of Indian folk art and craft with amazingly inventive do-it-yourself kits. Your child can put together puzzles of Madhubani art, block print your *dupatta* or T-shirt, build a tribal hut, make a kite or dress up a doll in a costume from Kerala, Gujarat, Punjab or West Bengal. All priced at ₹950. You can buy painting kits like a Kerala Mural Kit which costs ₹500.



Founded by Pooja Ratnakar, a NIFT alumna, Potli was created to raise awareness and preserve ancient art practices. If you are looking for unique games and artistic do-it-yourself activities, Potli has just what your child needs.



Contact: Website: <https://potli.org/>  
Phone: 077019 27741  
Email: [Info@potli.org](mailto:Info@potli.org)



## Coconut medley

Rabiah is an NGO which sells a range of coconut products. There is coconut milk, coconut powder, coconut pickle, coconut hair mask, coconut honey, coconut soap, and more, all reasonably priced.

Rabiah also spreads information about the health benefits of using coconut. "I got interested in marketing coconut products because my thyroid problem vanished with coconut oil. We are also the only palm sugar brand in India.

Palm sugar has a lot of therapeutic qualities," says Nitin Goyal, CEO and founder of Rabiah, handing over a bottle. "And don't eat honey from bees, have our coconut honey instead." We try it and find it has a rich caramel taste.

Goyal says it is the Coconut Development Board which has been helping entrepreneurs set up enterprises involving coconut by providing machines and techniques. Altogether, the board has developed some 50 products from coconut by working with Farmer Producer Organizations (FPOs) in the southern states.

The Rabiah coconut range is also available on e-commerce sites, including Amazon. All the products are neatly and hygienically packed.

Contact: Website: [www.ngoproducts.org](http://www.ngoproducts.org)  
Phone: 9350276162; 8800758890  
E-mail: [nitinpawangoyal@yahoo.com](mailto:nitinpawangoyal@yahoo.com)







### Neem tableware

The wondrous neem tree is famous for its many medicinal qualities. While neem leaf and bark have been used for ages, neem wood is now gaining in popularity. It is being shaped into kitchenware. Since 2010, Tora Creations, a micro-enterprise in east Delhi, has been manufacturing spoons, spatulas, platters, bowls, coasters and other serve ware. Tora also sells razors, toothbrushes, tongue cleaners, combs and bottle cleaners made of neem wood.

“Ours is a family business,” says Siddharth Gola. “We never cut trees. We buy all our neem wood from Chhattisgarh from forests where trees have been sustainably harvested.” Neem products sold especially well during the coronavirus pandemic and exports have been picking up. You can buy online and for Delhi customers a home delivery option is available.

**Contact:** Website: [www.toracreations.in](http://www.toracreations.in)  
Phone: +91 8048983022  
Email: [Info@toracreations.in](mailto:Info@toracreations.in)

### Puppets and lampshades

Interested in quirky puppets? Dalavai Kullayaapa, an artist from Nimmalakunta, a remote village in Anantapur district of Andhra Pradesh, makes and sells bright, attractive puppets fashioned from translucent leather. In the old days such puppets were used to perform Tholu Bommalata, a traditional form of shadow puppetry in Andhra performed by itinerant artistes.

You can buy puppets in sizes ranging from one foot to six feet. The main characters from the epics are available along with a range of animals — tigers, snakes, camels and elephants. The puppets are made from goat leather and natural dyes are used.

Dalavai Kullayaapa, with his brothers and 50 artisans, also produces paintings, lampshades, wall hangings and even leather jewellery. The vibrant paintings depict scenes from the *Ramayana*, *Mahabharata* and *Bhagvata Purana*.

**Contact:** Website: [www.nimmalakuntaleatherpuppetrycraft.com](http://www.nimmalakuntaleatherpuppetrycraft.com)  
Phone: +91 9959309029  
Email: [puppetry.kp@gmail.com](mailto:puppetry.kp@gmail.com)



### Delightful sip

Manipur’s sylvan villages have within their folds a wealth of biodiversity which is slowly vanishing from its landscape and fading from memory. How to save it all? Elizabeth Yamben thought of an idea: convert it into teas. A former investment banker who’d worked in London and Singapore, she put in her savings to start a small business in 2017 called Dweller with the tagline ‘for the simple joys’, employing local women.

The infusions are unusual and rejuvenating. There is a tea made from spiced hog plum, an indigenous fruit good for fatigue and bloating, and Nong-mang-kha ginger green which helps combat cough and cold. Another bestseller is green tea with lotus leaf and Fruity Roselle Olive, an uplifting infusion which you can drink hot or cold.

Yamben works with a cheerful team of 21 women. Headquartered in Imphal, they source their plants from surrounding villages and 10 percent of profits is ploughed back into conserving indigenous plants.

**Contact:** Website: [www.dwellerteas.com](http://www.dwellerteas.com)  
Phone: +91 8730003033  
Email: [hello@dwellerteas.com](mailto:hello@dwellerteas.com)



### Rustic wool



India’s rich tradition in wool is fading from memory. For centuries pastoral communities sheared wool from sheep and sold it to spinners, creating a seamless cottage industry of dyers and weavers. Today, India spends ₹2,000 crore annually importing wool while local wool goes waste. No effort has been made to modernize local wool.

Desi Oon, an initiative by rangSutra and the Centre for Pastoralism, is trying to reverse this decline. It brings together India’s best crafts organizations — Khamir in Gujarat, Avani from Uttarakhand, Aana-Jaana in Himachal Pradesh and others to revive the entire supply chain of traditional wool.

You can buy beautiful warm jackets, durries, coats, blankets from Desi Oon.



**Contact:** Website: [www.rangsutra.com](http://www.rangsutra.com)  
Phone: 011 2649 4145  
Email: [contact@rangsutra.com](mailto:contact@rangsutra.com)

### Earthy skin

First Water Solutions offers a range of natural cosmetic products from solid perfumes and face scrubs to body lotions and serums. Their Pure 21 Face Serum is a non-greasy, water-based serum. It is a combination of 21 flowers, fruits and herbs. Also available is Pure 21 Face Oil for those with dry skin. Their solid perfumes come in several unusual fragrances like musk mint, pine and cedar. These formulations are a combination of ancient remedies and modern research.

First Water Solutions’ products are plant-based and vegan. No artificial chemicals, parabens, alcohol, synthetic colours, petrochemicals or gluten are used. Their products are not tested on animals either. Their belief is that nature can provide for all personal care needs.

**Contact:** Website: <https://www.firstwatersolutions.com/>  
Phone: +91 9958211228  
Email: [firstwaterindia@gmail.com](mailto:firstwaterindia@gmail.com)



### Himalayan bounty

The Inhere Aajivika Utthan Samiti (IAUS), an NGO in Almora district of Uttarakhand, runs a successful non-profit, Himalayan Fresh, which supports and promotes agricultural produce grown by women farmers on their terraced farms. The difficult terrain makes it tough for farmers to reach urban markets.

Himalayan Fresh doesn’t impose new crops on farmers but helps them to improve agricultural practices and boost yields. Surplus produce is picked up by Himalayan Fresh for processing, packaging and marketing. The objective is to empower women farmers, transform agriculture into a viable livelihood and bring economic security to small farmers in the hills.

Himalayan Fresh works with 2,000 farmers. They are certified as organic.

Himalayan Fresh offers consumers a range of natural and fresh foods. They sell pickles, jams, concentrates, pastes and chutneys, spices, pulses and



cereals along with herbs and teas. The teas on offer include tulsi-arjun, jamun-lemongrass, brahmi-saunf and more, which soothe health conditions like diabetes, chronic cold and digestive issues.

**Contact:** Himalayan Fresh  
Phone: 09675449003, 8958519912  
Email: [himalayanfresh97@rediffmail.com](mailto:himalayanfresh97@rediffmail.com)



### Seed or flower?

Abracadabra! You can create magic too. Plant a pencil, sprinkle some water and watch it grow into marigold flowers. Seed Paper India sells wedding cards, pencils, calendars, price tags and visiting cards made from plantable seed paper. You can even just buy sheets of seed paper from them.

Are you a Ganesh devotee? Seed Paper India offers a Plantable Seed Ganesh. Place the Ganesh on top of a tray of soil and pour some water every day whilst chanting your prayers. In two to four weeks a plant will sprout. A six-inch Plantable Ganesh is available for ₹490 and an eight-inch one for ₹90.

The Seed Paper team works with printers to customize designs on their paper products. Wedding cards are priced at ₹50 each. Seed Paper also offers recycled handmade paper. And a pack of magical seed pencils comes for ₹24.

**Contact:** Website: <https://seedpaperindia.in/>  
Phone: +91 6364699837  
Email: [seedpaperindia@gmail.com](mailto:seedpaperindia@gmail.com)



### Cane comfort



Makon Home makes furniture and other products from rattan cane and bamboo. Pooja Moirangthem founded Makon Home to market cane products handwoven by women in Manipur. You can get blue and green outdoor cane chairs and tables as well as bamboo baskets, trays, planters and laundry baskets. Also available are handwoven and hand-dyed cotton bedsheets, curtains, throws, dupattas and cushion covers. One can also place bulk orders for cane baskets and boxes.

**Contact:** Website: <https://makonhome.com/>  
Phone: +91 9810306264  
Email: [makonhome@gmail.com](mailto:makonhome@gmail.com)  
Instagram: [www.instagram.com/makon.home](https://www.instagram.com/makon.home)



### Smell divine

Niyor makes perfumes that are natural and unusual. Founded by Ishan Bhasin in 2019, Niyor's perfumes are made from essential oils and are free of chemicals and alcohol. Niyor means dew drops in Assamese. Bhasin has invented a range of fragrances. Take your pick from Jasmine, Mint Chocolate, Onyx, Lavender, Allure Rose, or Lime Fresh. Some perfumes are named after places like Nicobar, a perfume with complex notes, or Alexandria. You can get a set of five perfumes for just ₹500. Or you can get your own perfume made by giving Niyor a call. What's more, all the perfumes are packed in pocket-sized bottles so you can slip one into your bag and spread fragrance wherever you go.

**Contact:** Website: <https://www.niyorperfumes.com/>  
Phone: +91 9874362633  
Email: [niyor.perfumes@gmail.com](mailto:niyor.perfumes@gmail.com)



### Soft toys and more

Deepa Pant, an alumna of NIFT, started Svatanya to help empower underprivileged women by upskilling them to make handcrafted products. The aim is to train the women and help them gain financial independence and self-reliance. You can buy soft toys, bottle covers, cloth masks, and wall hangings ranging from ₹300 to ₹2,000. They

also offer earrings, bracelets and necklaces made from cloth. Svatanya runs an initiative that distributes soft toys to underprivileged terminally ill patients and children with disabilities living in slums and hospitals.

**Contact:** Website: <https://svatanyaindia.com/>  
Phone: +91 95607 03555  
Email: [SvatanyaIndiaFoundation@gmail.com](mailto:SvatanyaIndiaFoundation@gmail.com)



### Painting the jungle

Baiga art is bright and beautiful and looks fabulous on a wall. "It's our traditional craft and we love doing it. But the money we earn is not enough," rues Amar Baiga, looking lost amidst his paintings in the din of the Tribal Mela. He and his brother, Sushil, live in a forest village on the outskirts of the Bandhavgarh National Park in Madhya Pradesh. "We are a collective of 10 artists. Whatever we earn is divided amongst us," says Amar. They need to find ways of earning more, he says. A

new addition are attractive masks made of papier mache and wood. There are paintings of their village, animals, plants and trees. The Baigas worship nature. They wouldn't like to paint the city landscape. It's completely alien to them, explains Amar. The two brothers spend more than half the year working as agricultural labour.

**Contact:** Amar Baiga, Phone: 7806062516  
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### Northeast specials

Fear not the big bad city. Armed with the world's hottest chilli, the famed *bhutjholokia* of Northeast fame, you can whoosh away evil intent. We spied this deadly pepper spray powered by *bhutjholokia* at the annual Tribal Mela in Dilli Haat. It is manufactured by the Northeast Farm Sales Promotion, a social enterprise based in Guwahati. This pocket-sized weapon costs ₹400.

The company aggregates and distributes unique organic products from the seven states of the Northeast. "We go deep into villages and request them to grow local organic products which we know will sell. The biggest problem small growers face is lack of marketing. We provide that," says Joseph Lalrofel, sales representative, ensconced in his small store.

There are natural room fresheners imbued with cinnamon and lemongrass as well as packs of black rice, bay leaf powder, pepper, cardamom, pickles and, of course, red hot chillis. You can place your order on the TRIFED website and they will soon also be available on Amazon.

**Contact:** Northeast Farm Sales Promotion  
Website: [www.northeastsales.in](http://www.northeastsales.in)  
Email: [ednortheastsales@gmail.com](mailto:ednortheastsales@gmail.com)



### Warm and cosy

Project Purkul is a cloth-based handicrafts collective based in Purkul village near Mussoorie in Uttarakhand. The women artisans here are masters at applique, patchwork and quilting. The initiative aims to bring a balanced blend of comfort and beauty to personal accessories and is committed to product quality, design and long-term sustainable value.

A range of colourful products with pretty motifs is on offer. For your home there are quilts, table runners and buntings. For your kitchen, you can buy oven mitts, tea cosies and aprons. There are baby quilts and play-mats for children and backpacks, diaries and bottle-covers for adults. Project Purkul even has accessories for your pets. Their 'paw purpose' section on their website offers a delightful variety of soft beds and playmats for furry members of the family!

**Contact:** Website: <https://www.projectpurkul.com/>  
Instagram: <https://www.instagram.com/projectpurkul/>

### Bliss with jaggery



Instead of white refined sugar try healthier options made with organic jaggery and honey. Founded by Apeksha Grover Bagga, Doree offers Desi Khand which is made by evaporating sugarcane syrup without removing the molasses,

Paan Gulkand made with honey, Real Gud Cocoa, Gud Sattu, Gud Chai Masala and more. These are all made from grandmother recipes. You can also buy dried rose leaves and moringa leaves. The organic jaggery powder costs ₹125 and the other jaggery-based products are priced at ₹300.

**Contact:** Website: <https://www.doree.in/>  
Phone: +91 92058 67294  
Email: [doree.cresto@gmail.com](mailto:doree.cresto@gmail.com)



### Vegan spreads and snacks

Peepal Farm rescues animals and runs an organic farm in Dhanotu village in Himachal Pradesh. Started in December 2014 by Robin Singh, Joellen Anderson and Shivani Bhalla, Peepal Farm's main focus is improvement of animal life. They started Peepal Farm Products to spread awareness about animal welfare. You can buy vegan spreads, snacks, body care and pet care products straight from the hills.

The three founders of Peepal Farm believe in reducing consumerism and even encourage you not to buy their products and instead use their recipes posted online. But if you don't have the time for that, they assure you that buying from them means minimizing waste and packaging and engineering profits that go towards saving animals. Their vegan bar and spreads range from ₹80 to ₹220. You can also buy handcrafted jewellery, upcycled products and home accessories.



**Contact:** Website: <https://shop.peepalfarm.org/>  
Phone: +91 9805668368  
Email: [products@peepalfarm.org](mailto:products@peepalfarm.org)

### Stitches of love



Devotion is an apt name for a shop that sells products lovingly made by rural women in Haryana. You can buy sheets, towels, curtains and table linen for your home, beautifully hand embroidered and neatly stitched. For babies there are frocks, quilts, sweaters and more, all soft and cuddly. For women there are attractive kurtas, nightwear and saris with stylish embroidery and patterns.

Devotion is a unit of the Arpana Trust which works to improve health, education and the livelihood of marginalised people in Haryana, Himachal Pradesh and Delhi's slums. Over 2,000 women have been organised into Self-Help Groups (SHG), trained and linked to banks. Arpana markets their products and Devotion provides a steady source of income to thousands of families.

Arpana runs a multispecialty hospital in Karnal. In Molarband slum of Delhi, a team of Delhi's best doctors provides healthcare at its clinic. Arpana is committed to providing selfless service to all, as propagated by its founder and inspiration, Param Pujya Ma.



**Contact:** Devotion,  
Phone: 011- 24331136, 9871284847  
Email: [arpanadevotion@gmail.com](mailto:arpanadevotion@gmail.com)



### Snow leopards, yaks

Have you seen animals from snowy Ladakh in warm Delhi? Of course not. But you could catch a glimpse of small lifelike replicas of wildlife from icy Ladakh at a Ladakh Festival held at Dilli Haat. There were blue sheep, snow leopards, yaks, marmots, mountain rabbits and more — all made of sheep wool, warm to touch and inexpensively priced.

These doll-like animals are made by a self-help group (SHG) of women in the picturesque village of Rumbak located in the high altitude Hemis National Park, 32 km from Leh.

"When our women aren't busy tending to their fields of barley, wheat and vegetables, they stitch these," explains Lobsang Namgyal, their sales representative. The women were taught to make animal models by an international development agency. "Whatever they earn is put into their SHG corpus to spend on a group activity," says Stanzin Jigstal who runs a homestay. The critically endangered snow leopard prowls around Rumbak village and the Hemis National Park in search of blue sheep, its natural prey. You can trek through the lovely park and if you are lucky catch a glimpse of the elusive snow leopard as well as the splendid black-necked crane. Rumbak has a number of homestays.

**Contact:** Lobsang Namgyal, Phone: 9622994092  
Address: Village Rumbak, District Leh – 194101



### Unique rice

India is undergoing a rice revolution in long forgotten rice varieties. Farmers are keen to grow traditional varieties and consumers are happy to buy. They are also healthier and more eco-friendly than tasteless modern hybrids.

So gift your family and friends a box of unique rice varieties from Centre for Indian Knowledge Systems (CIKS). You can take your pick from four kinds of boxes: the Luxury Collection, Mother and Child Collection, the Red Collection and the Aromatic Collection.

The Luxury Collection has six types of rice: Mappilai Samba which is rich in fibre and iron, Kitchili Samba, an everyday rice

easy-to-digest, Kuzhiadichan, which is rich in antioxidants, Karunkuruvai, used by Siddha practitioners to treat illnesses, Seerage Samba, an aromatic variety rich in iron, and Kullakar, a rice with low glycemic index, high in iron and antioxidants.

CIKS has been reviving traditional rice varieties of Tamil Nadu by working with farmer producer companies. The rice they grow is sold by Sempulam Sustainable Solutions, a company that markets and packages gift packs of traditional rice.

You can place your order from Sempulam on their website [www.sempulam.com/shop](http://www.sempulam.com/shop) Or buy through Amazon and Flipkart.

**Contact:** Website : [www.ciks.org](http://www.ciks.org)  
Phone: 91-044-42188011  
Email: [info@ciks.org](mailto:info@ciks.org) / [ciksorg@gmail.com](mailto:ciksorg@gmail.com)



### Arty puzzles

Frogmag sells folk, tribal and miniature art jigsaw puzzles. Run by Shalini Ghosh, an alumnus of the National Institute of Design (NID), FrogMag promotes Indian art through engaging games. The toddler puzzles cost between ₹500 and ₹600 and come in a set of six. The puzzles in two or four pieces are easy for a child to put together.

FrogMag also has 63-piece puzzles, priced at ₹600, that include Santhal art, Kalighat Pat and Madhubani, among others. The games are designed by women folk artists who learnt the art forms from their families and tribes. There are other memory-based games like mix and match puzzles available as well. In the catalogue are also pretty and colourful scarves and earrings priced between ₹500 and ₹2,000.

**Contact:** Website: <https://www.frogmag.com/>  
Phone: +91 9811408313  
Email: [frogmag@gmail.com](mailto:frogmag@gmail.com)



### Art in every corner

Some Fine Handicrafts has tables, trays, lamps and furniture with beautiful art work. You can buy a tray with a Madhubani painting, a table with intricate zardozi work, a shoe cabinet with the loveliest Warli etchings and stylish lamps with Gond art.

Ramachandran Nair, a zardozi expert, started this enterprise about a decade ago. "The idea is to imbue articles we use every day with traditional Indian art. Paintings don't have to only decorate our walls," he says.

Nair has a workshop in Delhi which employs 16 skilled artisans who needed to get back on their feet in the aftermath of the pandemic.

He travels to villages in 16 states to pick up works of art. "Some of my artists have disability. Most don't want to travel to Delhi. So I go to them," he says.

The paintings are brought to the workshop and integrated into classy products. The wood used is termite-proof and the designs are eye-catching. "I am selling timeless art. You can use it for years. If the artwork on your lamp or tray gets spoilt, I can repair it," he says. If you want to gift one of his products, he can pack it and send it.

**Contact:** Website: [www.somefinehandicrafts.com](http://www.somefinehandicrafts.com)  
Phone: +91 9891591931  
Email: [info@somefinehandicrafts.com](mailto:info@somefinehandicrafts.com)





## Goatskin Guitar

Tsering Angchuk is a musician from Changtang in Ladakh. Sitting inside his stall at Dilli Haat, he strums a traditional tune on a colourful local guitar with six strings. Pleased with the small audience he has attracted, he plays another tune — this time with an instrument which has three strings and resembles a violin. Both instruments are made of goatskin and painted with bright floral motifs. “I learnt from a musician in another village around 20 years ago,” he says. “I have played for All India Radio and I have a repertoire of around 70 songs.”

Angchuk says he plays for all celebratory occasions. It could be a wedding, a festival or a birthday party. A traditional dance called *jabro* cannot begin without his guitar and violin, he says. Ladakh has a rich tradition of folk music played on very old indigenous instruments. But, as disco replaces *jabro*, the region’s music and dance tradition begins to fade away. Local people lose interest and since the remuneration is very little just a few musicians are left. Angchuk is unfazed. He says that if people don’t want to listen, it’s okay. He plays at night for himself.

**Contact:** Tsering Angchuk – 9469360136



## Wooden games, trinkets

Shikha Shah makes and sells colourful wooden games, trinkets and even repurposed car tyres. Shah began Scrapshala in 2016, learning from her mother’s example of waste management in an Indian household. They started by selling painted beer bottles to local cafes and now sell upcycled and eco-friendly products, handcrafted by local artisans in and around Varanasi. Scrapshala offers wooden games, utensils, home decor and stationery. They also sell housekeeping products and brushes made from coconut fibre. Scrapshala has eco-friendly alternatives to daily lifestyle products like razors, paper pencils, and dish washing scrubs. In home decor one can buy repurposed glass bottles, cassettes as pen stands, and wooden mats.

**Contact:** Website: <https://scrapshala.com>  
Phone: +91 7411079110  
Email: [scrapshala@gmail.com](mailto:scrapshala@gmail.com)

## Art and a story

Patachitra is Bengal’s traditional art of scroll painting, still largely done with natural colours. Patuas or chitrakars are a community of folk artists who are painters, lyricists and singers all rolled into one. While their paintings are called patachitra, the songs they sing that narrate the stories on the scrolls are called *poter gaan*. This vibrant and colourful oral-visual art form dates back to the 13th century.

Banglanatak.com, a social enterprise which works with traditional artistes has organised the chitrakars, helped them make their artwork contemporary, found them markets and boosted their income. Pingla village in West Midnapore is the best-known patachitra hub. Incomes of the chitrakars living in Pingla have increased to ₹30,000- ₹40,000 per month. In the old days, the chitrakars painted scrolls on traditional themes like tales from the Ramayana and Dashavatar (the 10 incarnations of the Hindu god Vishnu) and of Muslim saints. Now they produce their artwork on a range of products — coasters, bottles, saris, T-shirts and more. Patachitra is also being used by the government for social awareness campaigns.

**Contact:** Website: [www.ruralcrafthub.com](http://www.ruralcrafthub.com)  
Swarna Chitrakar, Phone: 9732799107  
Manoranjan Chitrakar, Phone: 9732731776



## Upcycled décor

Get handpainted decor, stationery and items for festivities while supporting the women in Delhi’s Ghazipur slum community. Gulmeher strives to provide an alternative and sustainable livelihood for the women waste pickers in Ghazipur by creating eco-friendly products using discarded flowers and recycled paper. Since 2013 they have trained 120 women as skilled artisans, given 35 women employment in their East Ghazipur centre, and skilled 20 women in embroidery and stitching. You can get stitched notebooks made with recycled paper, coasters made out of newspapers, wall hangings and fridge magnets. You can also get handmade bags, boxes and cards for gifting.

**Contact:** Website: <https://gulmeher.com/shop/>  
Phone: +91 9310503175  
Email: [gulmeher@gulmeher.com](mailto:gulmeher@gulmeher.com)



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