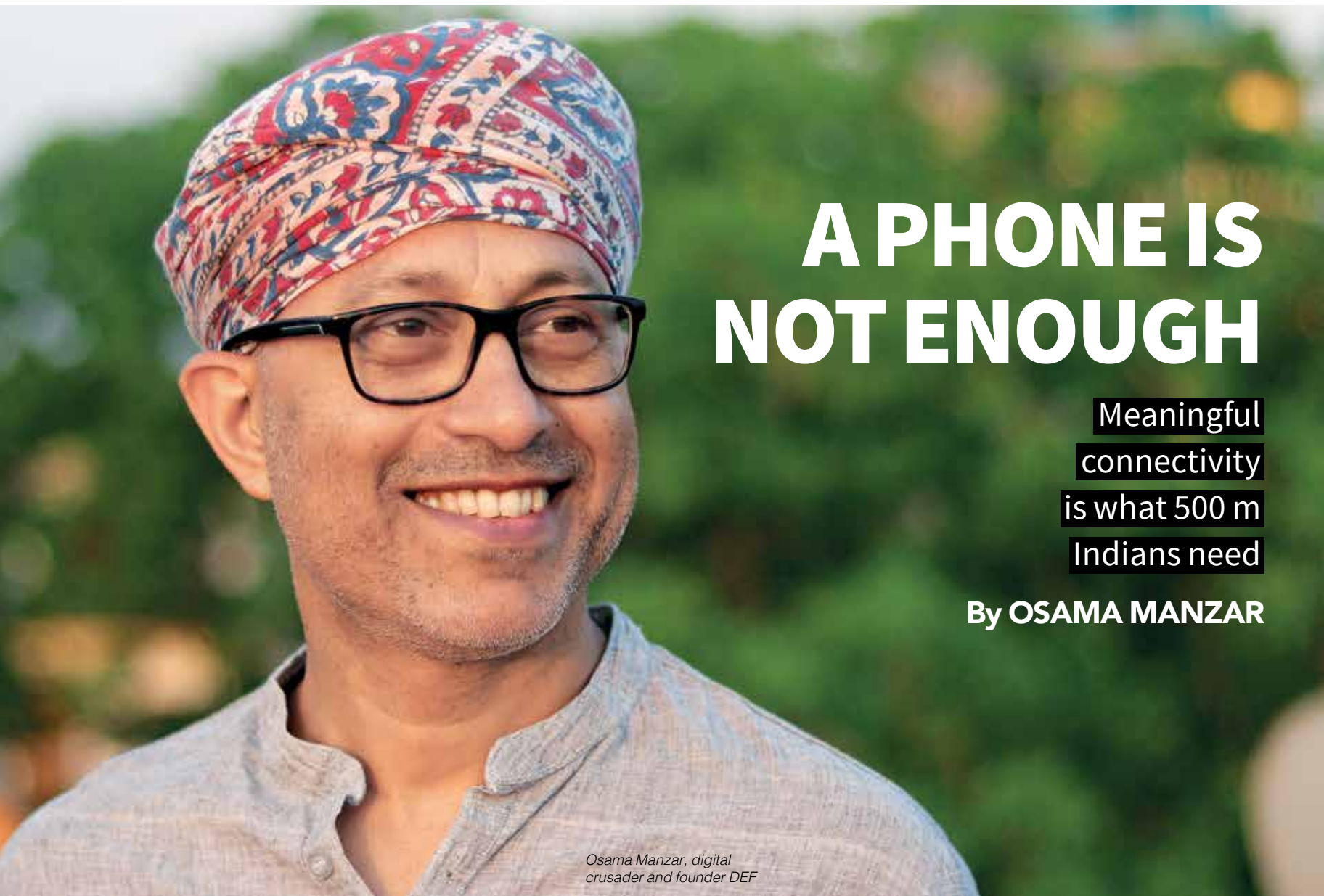


Civil Society



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Meaningful connectivity is what 500 m Indians need

By OSAMA MANZAR

Osama Manzar, digital crusader and founder DEF

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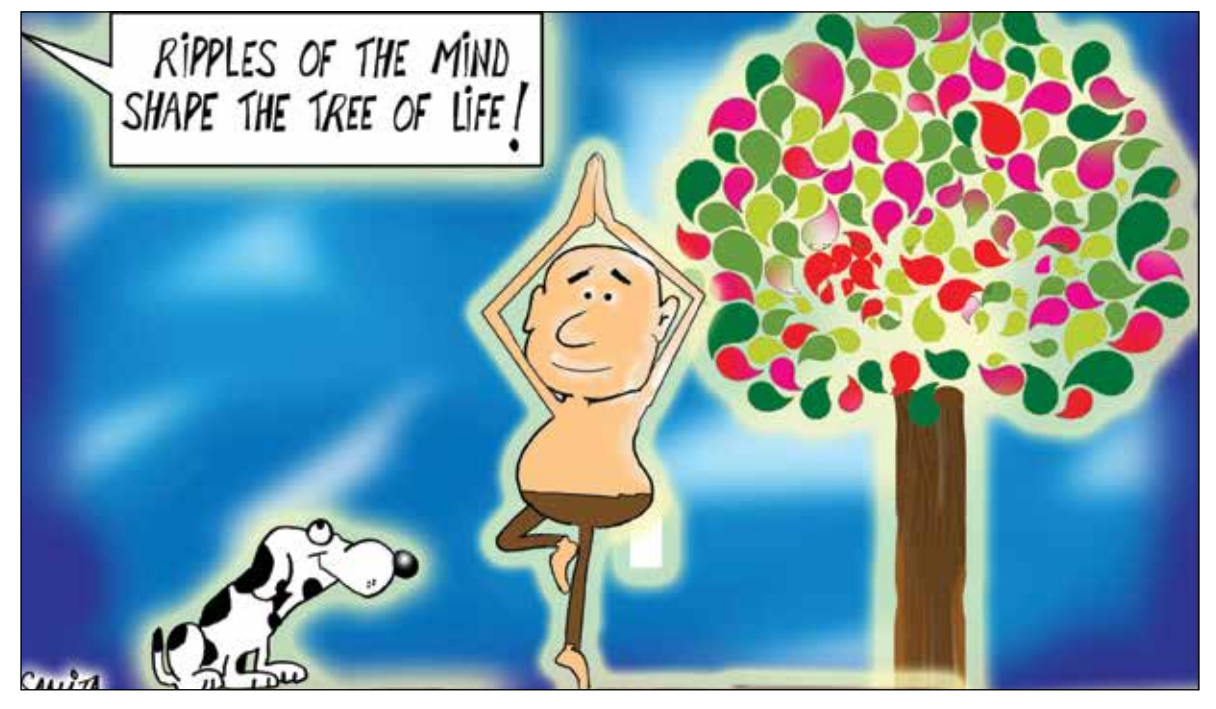


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IN THE LIGHT

SAMITA RATHOR



LETTERS



Helping hands

Your cover story, 'Fruit bowl beats the lockdown', was extraordinary and deeply inspiring. It shows the kind of change individuals can bring about. I salute Krishna Ukkunda, deputy director of the horticulture department in Koppal, and his team. With vision and passion, they ideated and came up with so many initiatives to help farmers sell their produce — from vending vans to raisin-making units to storage units! I hope this story is read and emulated by officers across the country. In our economy, farming is the only business in which the producer remains poor while everyone else benefits.

Dr Anita Patil Deshmukh

Shree Padre's story is an example of how well a system can work to increase farmers' income and dignity. If only there were more officials who genuinely want to bring hope and joy

and improve livelihoods, we could become a strong country.

Mallika Sarabhai

Farmers and markets

Thank you for the interview, 'Farmers need predictable linkages with markets'. It was truly insightful about the situation in rural India. The observations made by Narendranath Damodaran are all rooted in the long years of work done by PRADAN teams in remote rural areas, promoting livelihoods for poor communities. His suggestions are worthy of funding support so that they can be implemented on the ground.

Vijay Mahajan

Maybe linking farmers to markets will work. But surely it will not be enough.

Rural to urban migration has its disadvantages but it's also an unavoidable problem. Given the situation and desire to move to cities, better management of urban livelihoods and social security systems for migrants is the need of the hour.

Manish

Excellent work by PRADAN. Farmers need to be linked to markets. Recently in Telangana, farmers suffered while selling their paddy despite government pronouncements. Predictable and dependable marketing facilities and the Minimum Support Price (MSP) can help small and marginal farmers.

Prabhakar Reddy Tada

I'd like to thank Narendranath

Damodaran for sharing his thoughts. Holding back 40 percent of migrant workers is a great goal. I think the perfect balance would be 40-20-40 for within the village, in nearby towns and in metropolitan cities. This will provide more equitable growth.

Manoj Gulati

Rural jobs

I refer to your interview with Nikhil Dey, 'MGNREGA money will run out with rising demand for work'. A visible silver lining is the slow but gradual return of migrant workers to the places where they worked. Taking care of the migrant crisis in rural areas has to be the joint responsibility of the Centre and the states. It is true that there is shortage of resources. This, however, should not be an impediment. There are ways, though limited, of raising revenues. It depends on the fiscal, monetary and debt measures pursued by the Union government.

Sudhakar Panda

Assisting migrants

In your story, 'Ratnauli hero now go-to man for migrants', you wrote about the migrants who have returned to their villages. I wish the returnees were also interviewed to find out why they wanted to go home.

T. Rangarajan

In big cities, gurdwaras, social organizations and state governments were providing meals to migrant labour but they still preferred to go home. Many continue to suffer in cities because they don't have money to go back.

Sukhwant Bhullar

Letters should be sent to response@civilsocietyonline.com

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ANNUAL SPECIAL ISSUE

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Publisher
Umesh Anand

Editor
Rita Anand

News Network
Shree Padre, Saibal Chatterjee, Raj Machhan, Jehangir Rashid, Susheela Nair, Kavita Charanji

Desk & Reporting
Sidika Sehgal

Photography
Shrey Gupta

Layout & Design
Virender Chauhan

Cartoonist
Samita Rathor

Write to Civil Society at:
A-16 (West Side), 1st Floor, South Extension Part 2, New Delhi -110049.
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Stadium, banquet hall to COVID ward

Doctors as crisis managers

Civil Society News
New Delhi

IT was the middle of June and the new coronavirus had been rampaging its way across cities. The National Capital Region (NCR) had begun experiencing the disease's onslaught. Lockdowns hadn't worked in the absence of adequate testing, isolating of patients and tracking of their contacts.

As the virus roamed free, it was estimated that Delhi would end up having 500,000 cases, which was then considered a huge number. There weren't the oxygen-equipped hospital beds, ventilators, doctors and nurses to cope with such a rush of patients — if a worst-case scenario became reality and so many turned up for treatment.

The Aam Aadmi Party (AAP) state government in Delhi explored many options as it scrambled to get its act together. One of the options walked through the door of Delhi Health Minister Satyendar Jain's office when Dr Ravikant Singh and Dr Rajat Jain of Doctors For You (DFY) arrived with an offer to supplement the capital's healthcare system.

DFY is an NGO which turns up during disasters to help local public health systems cope with emergency loads. It was founded by Dr Ravikant (as he prefers to be known) when he was still in medical college in Mumbai in 2007. It was initially intended to drum up blood donors.

Over time it has come to be modelled on Doctors Without Borders, an international group of doctors who serve at great personal risk during crises. Dr Jain is currently the president of DFY.

In India and neighbouring countries, DFY has served during floods and earthquakes by providing doctors, nurses and medical supplies in times when medical services together with local administrations have collapsed. In the longer term, it also tries to improve public hospitals by training doctors and medical staff in better practices.

DFY was eager to help the Delhi government cope with its coronavirus load. It said it could set up additional facilities with beds and the doctors and nurses needed to treat infected patients who required isolation. It could also work within government institutions like the Lok Nayak Jayaprakash Hospital (LNJP) to strengthen the standards of care available by providing paramedical staff, protective gear for doctors and nurses and generally improving conditions in wards.

The Delhi government took DFY on board. Apart from supporting hospitals, DFY was given a banquet hall in front of LNJP Hospital to set up a 100-bed facility. What was essentially a marriage venue was to be made into a medical facility.

A seemingly magical transformation followed.

DFY put in good quality hospital beds with oxygen. It also deployed doctors and nurses from its own list of volunteers. So impressive was the pace with which DFY made all this happen that the Delhi government decided to hand over the Commonwealth Games stadium to the NGO to create a facility with 500 beds. With similar intensity, DFY worked to turn the stadium into a makeshift hospital in less than a week.

DFY currently manages about 600 hospital beds in Delhi. It has spent some ₹6 crore accessed from an array of donors. The big backers have been the HCL Foundation and ACT Grant. "They have been very supportive and largehearted donors," says Dr Ravikant. With the situation improving and the marriage season coming up, the banquet hall with 100 beds has been closed. But Delhi's response to the pandemic has been vastly reinforced and should

DFY provides more than doctors and nurses with the spirit to serve. It has systems for quickly putting in place dependable and stable infrastructure.

the number of cases begin to rise once more, as is happening during the time of writing, the administration will be much better prepared to deal with the upsurge.

The collaboration in Delhi is an example of what governments can achieve if they draw on the skills, speed and enthusiasm of voluntary organizations like DFY, especially when lives are to be saved and time is short.

DFY provides more than doctors and nurses with the spirit to serve in difficult conditions. It has systems for quickly putting stable and dependable infrastructure in place. Having spent 13 years rushing to disaster zones it knows how to source money, qualified people and materials.

Importantly, DFY knows to deal with governments. Nimble and action oriented as it is in the field, it is equally adept at working its way through giant bureaucracies. However, in the AAP government in Delhi it found an administration that instantly realized the potential of a partnership.

"From the first time we met Satyendar Jain, the health minister, matters moved quickly. Then he



A banquet hall became a well-equipped ward for COVID patients



Arvind Kejriwal and Manish Sisodia inaugurate the ward



The Doctors For You team at the Commonwealth Games Stadium

became infected with the virus and Manish Sisodia, the deputy chief minister, took over. But there was never any hesitation or delay in taking decisions," says Dr Ravikant.

He recalls that the idea of turning the Commonwealth Games Stadium into a COVID-19 facility came from Sisodia himself. It was the perfect place for isolating patients, says Dr Ravikant, being secluded on the bank of the Yamuna and yet within the city. Changes took barely a week because the district magistrate of East Delhi, Arun Mishra, was always available and empowered to take decisions. On occasion, he would sign on files at the stadium itself.

Apart from Delhi, DFY also does COVID-19 programmes in Karnataka, Maharashtra, Kashmir, Punjab, Andhra Pradesh and Assam. Taken together, DFY says it has around 1,900 beds under its charge.

Dr Ravikant says DFY has about 100 doctors working at its COVID-19 facilities. It has a much longer list of some 450 doctors who have shown a willingness to serve in crises. Some prefer to remain in the cities and states where they are located and there are others who are ready to travel.

"When we call for volunteers we get as many as 1,000 responses. We choose from them. Over time we have put together a reliable list of doctors we know we can work with and depend on."

There are specialists and general physicians. In a crisis, DFY looks for doctors who are located nearby. For instance, the doctors it wanted for Delhi were first those who were in the capital itself. Then came those in the NCR and neighbouring states like Haryana.

Asked if they work for free, Dr Ravikant says: "There is no such thing as free. Free does not work out because then there is no accountability. We pay everyone. An MBBS doctor gets ₹1.5 lakh, keeping



Beds laid out at the Commonwealth Games Stadium

in mind that this is COVID-19 and high-risk. A qualified nurse gets ₹50,000. We sign contracts for three months.”

Over time, DFY has learnt management. It has a permanent back office for accounts and human resources. Efficient management is important because going into a disaster zone requires preparation on multiple fronts. DFY also doesn't tend to exit before six months. Doctors and nurses end up being stationed at challenging locations during that time and need to be looked after.

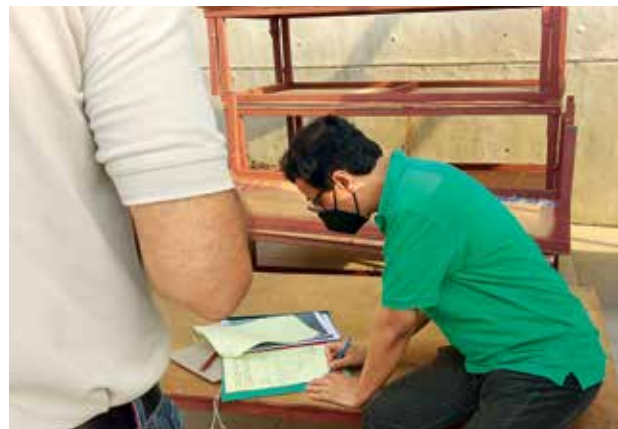
It is also important to get calculations right. Urgency has to come with method and it won't do to rush people around without a clear plan. In Delhi, for instance, it was decided to have one doctor for 30 beds and one nurse for 15 beds. Since a rush was anticipated at the banquet hall facility outside LNJP, it was decided to keep some extra doctors there.

Now, one doctor for 30 beds really means four doctors because there are three shifts and the person on the night shift must take off the next day. Ditto for nurses. There is also the possibility of someone getting infected. All the nurses and doctors also need accommodation and meals.

DFY has acquired considerable expertise in materials management. What and how much to send where is a challenge that recurs from one assignment to the next. Time is invariably short and there has been a lot of learning in sourcing essentials reliably and without delay.

In Delhi, when 100 beds were needed, and orders were pouring in to small manufacturing units from all over the country, DFY had got its act together even while in talks with the Delhi government. It had identified half a dozen vendors and placed orders for 20 beds each with them.

In Karnataka, DFY's partner has been the Azim



District Magistrate Arun Mishra clears files on the spot

Premji Foundation (APF), which wanted to help the state government cope with a rising tide of cases. A 150-bed facility called the Charak Hospital has been created.

“It is really quite amazing the speed with which DFY functions,” says Anand Swaminathan, who heads Azim Premji Philanthropic Initiatives. “They produce doctors and nursing staff from nowhere. It all just happens. DFY is also capable of pivoting quickly. It has a can-do spirit. We set out to do something with the state government that didn't work out, but DFY didn't have any problem adjusting and repositioning itself.”

Says Dileep Ranjekar, CEO of the Azim Premji Foundation: “Doctors For You brings in a strong network of young doctors and nurses who are ready to contribute to the COVID-19 healthcare efforts. It has been a valued partner of the foundation. In addition, the DFY team works in close collaboration with the authorities from government hospitals to ensure clear protocols of patient management.”

The pandemic has shown up multiple shortcomings in the public healthcare system. Poor

reach, inefficient management and lack of motivation among doctors and nurses are some of the problems. Governments would do well to engage with voluntary organizations in healthcare to find solutions in real time and improve services. The private sector, with its focus on profits, doesn't tend to provide viable answers.

Outfits like DFY score high on purposefulness, skills and the ability to innovate. The people who lead them inspire medical professionals to aspire to the higher and more social goals of the profession. When they work with government institutions they not only deliver better services but also enthuse government staff to perform with greater efficiency and dedication in the long term. What looked impossible begins to appear to be achievable.

DFY's learning has come slowly and over time, the painful way. The successful turning around of a district hospital at Motihari in Bihar, for instance, took a year of handholding and engagement.

Dr Taru Jindal, a gynaecologist trained in Mumbai who camped in Motihari in Bihar during that period, remembers it as being a life-changing experience. She was working closely with the state government at the district level and improving the standards of a hospital which had only known neglect.

She says: “I find Doctors For You a highly successful model. It started so small, but these are doctors who wanted to do something for society and came together as a group. They realized that you have to set up an NGO and you have to learn management. First they started working in Bihar (during the floods), then in maternal and child health and now during the COVID pandemic. In the two years I have worked with them I have learnt that their hearts are in the right place and their capacity to work hard is limitless. I feel we need many, many more Doctors For You.” ■

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- Install low-flow showerheads or take bucket baths
- Turn off the faucet in between washing dishes, brushing, bathing, car wash, etc.
- Harvest rainwater

Save nature

- Planting more trees help keep the Earth cleaner and greener. More trees mean improved air quality, climate, and biodiversity
- Renewable sources of energy are constantly replenished naturally. Sources such as solar, hydroelectric, or wind energy, to name a few, can drastically reduce carbon footprint

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- Say NO to plastic. Avoid using plastic bottled water and carry eco-friendly shopping bags
- Segregating waste and using organic waste as compost helps improve soil quality
- Donating or recycling electronic gadgets helps conserve natural resources, avoids air and water pollution, as well as greenhouse gas emissions
- Purchase reusable items instead of disposable ones



R. Balasubramaniam: 'We need a new breed of assessors who can measure social impact'

Are investors, NGOs ready for a Social Stock Exchange?

With the right ecosystem, India can be an example

Civil Society News
Gurugram

THE idea of having a Social Stock Exchange in India has been circulating since it was proposed by Union Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman in her budget speech last year.

Social entrepreneurs face multiple challenges in raising funds for their causes. A structured mechanism would potentially help them find support and scale up more easily.

But what exactly is a Social Stock Exchange and how should a social enterprise be defined? Will investors be ready to support good ideas for 'low' or 'no' returns? Will NGOs be able to transit to this new mechanism?

Dr R. Balasubramaniam has done a detailed report on the concerns and opportunities that emerge from a Social Stock Exchange. He is a physician by training and the founder of the Grassroots Research and Advocacy Movement (GRAAM) and the Swami Vivekananda Youth

Movement (SVYM).

Much of his time has been spent in villages, but he connects easily with the worlds of business and government and knows a thing or two about the functioning of companies.

The Securities and Exchange Board of India (SEBI) has also put together a report on a Social Stock Exchange.

But Balasubramaniam brings to the table insights of a different order because he understands only too well the strengths and frailties of voluntary organizations.

His report goes much beyond finance to explore the possible boundaries and internal dynamics of a Social Stock Exchange in India.

It is also particularly useful that he looks at the experience in other countries like Britain, America and Canada.

Civil Society had a long conversation with him on Zoom — he at his base in Mysore and we in Gurugram. This is an edited version, with the full one being available on our website www.civilsocietyonline.com and on our YouTube channel Civil Society Magazine.

[civilsocietyonline.com](http://www.civilsocietyonline.com) and on our YouTube channel Civil Society Magazine.

What exactly is a Social Stock Exchange?

Let's talk about why people get into business — to get good returns. That is the normative understanding of business. And when they list their company on the stock exchange the intent is to access resources from the public to build their company. In return, the investor gets dividend. To ensure these companies are regulated and transparent, a regulatory body validates their declarations. That's how the concept of a stock exchange came in.

The concept of a Social Stock Exchange (SSE) is very different. The essential difference is that companies on such an exchange don't exist for the profits of any person. Instead, their purpose is a larger social good. But the exchange plays a role similar to that of a stock market regulator. It gets entities listed, the investment, financial instruments validated whether it's a debenture, an equity

investment, or a debt instrument. The companies transparently disclose if they are making profits and the investor's interest is also protected. While the investor can expect near market returns, the intent and primacy of the listed entity is social change and development.

Over time stock exchanges have been evolving due to the difference in thinking amongst companies. Companies started coming under pressure to mitigate harm they were causing to the planet. Investors began looking not only at profits, but also at how good the company's environmental obligation was or its social obligation or its governance in terms of disclosure. So companies moved to what is traditionally known as ESG (economic, social and governance) thinking. In the world of business, they call it the triple bottom line — people, planet and profits.

Based on these understandings, the United Nations proposed the idea of the Social Stock Exchange Initiative (in 2009) where such disclosures would be mandated, and companies would get returns along with declaring the social good they were creating. So private gains began getting merged with the notion of social gains. Different companies have attempted this, essentially creating social enterprises whose primary terms of existence is to create social good and also ensure that the investor gets some fair returns.

Are you saying like in a conventional stock exchange people would be able to buy and sell shares and so on?

Ideally yes. But let me also provide a caveat. There are close to 14 Social Stock Exchanges globally in several countries in different stages of evolution. Not a single one can be called fully functional and successful.

The ideal is if you can list, declare and trade. Let's say you invest in the Swami Vivekananda Youth Movement (SVYM) and we give you shares and a certain amount of dividends. Tomorrow say someone is interested in buying those shares from you. If they can do it then that's a well-functioning stock exchange. It's only in the Canadian Stock Exchange that a reasonable amount of trading is being transacted. Most of the other stock exchanges haven't fully evolved to this stage.

In my report I have classified five Social Stock Exchanges in the trajectory of reaching a stock exchange. Six are in different stages of evolution. Many are just matchmaking portals. You can't call them a stock exchange in the real sense of the word.

But the idea of a Social Stock Exchange is to attract investment in causes which are crying out for funds and support?

The world of social sector development is always starved of funds but let me put things in perspective. India is a signatory to the UN's Social Development Goals or SDGs. We have 17 goals we have to achieve by 2030, as a member country. The reality is it will require an expenditure of a trillion dollars annually on the social sector. Right now, the resources of the government, PSUs, civil society organizations all put together come to around \$440 billion — which means there is a huge deficit of \$560 billion, and that you just can't generate unless you seek private resources.

How do you attract money? A conventional stock exchange market runs on excitement, bubbles, bull runs, profits...

The working group at the Securities and Exchange Board of India (SEBI) has come out with a report but it has not taken into consideration the issues you are trying to raise. They are talking about the Social Stock Exchange as a single entity. I think there are three components. The stock exchange itself is the regulatory bit. To make it functional a lot of work needs to be done first.

One bucket is the supply side: would I as an investor be keen to invest in an entity where I would see no returns or little returns or lower-than-market returns? There should be a reasonable amount of incentive for me to even think of investing.

The second is regulation: SEBI is focusing on the stock exchange itself. But you need people to assess the company's work, its impact. Somebody has to make those disclosures measurable to convince the investor and bring in transparency guidelines.

'Define the social enterprise and set out its boundaries and obligations. My fear is SEBI in its report has refused to do so.'

Third is the demand side: I've been on the demand side for more than three decades. I know that we in the social sector only know our social commitments. We never tend to think of profits. In our DNA, it doesn't exist.

You need to work on creating the ecosystem first before you can even launch a stock exchange.

A social enterprise is a hybrid of social plus enterprise. How will it be valued on a Social Stock Exchange if it comes in with an IPO?

How do you even define a social enterprise? We use this word so casually. The social enterprise is an entity which hasn't been described by law in India. I know a lot of companies that say they are social enterprises but scratch under the surface and they are formal for-profit companies.

Honestly, every company can say it is doing social good. A car manufacturer can say I am enabling transportation of people, which is a social good. There has to be a legally mandated understanding. Different countries have defined it differently. There are currently 62 different connotations of social enterprise being used around the world.

The closest I would recommend is the British definition. The entity generates profits and ploughs it back into the work it is doing without any dividend to the investor. But it may not be practical in the Indian context. What we are proposing is that the promoters don't get any returns, but the investor may get less than market returns and get to see social good.

It can be a dicey situation. No NGO says it's not doing social good. I've been in the sector for 40 years and we all declare we are doing good. But how

do we measure good? These are uncomfortable questions, which we in the social sector have not asked. One is to measure a social obligation in a way in which it becomes a monetizable commodity for an investor. That is the journey we NGOs have to take first.

I would say define the social enterprise and set out its legal boundaries and obligations. My nervousness is SEBI in its report has deliberately refused to do so.

Is it a challenge to set a value on social enterprises?

A challenge, yes. We have not defined what is social and what is enterprise. We need to put in place a legally mandated obligation of that entity. For example, as a non-profit we run hospitals, schools, charge fees, and charge patients. Our returns are pathetic. If I spend ₹100, I get back ₹40. So ₹60 is still donor dependent. I am allowed to raise revenues because these are health and education activities, permitted by law. But I also run a training institute and a research programme. The current law is very clear: we cannot generate more than 25 percent of our total revenue as user income as an organization.

India's definitions are so very suffocating because of tax laws. If I generate the 26th rupee I have to shut down as a non-profit entity. Now you say I have to become a social enterprise and give dividends. How do I do it when the legal framework doesn't permit it?

You need a new and universally acceptable definition of what a social enterprise is?

Which is legally valid and a lot of changes in policy and taxation laws to match up to it. All this has to come first before we set up a stock exchange. A lot of homework has to be done on the social ecosystem before the system is ready to absorb it.

How would you value social and enterprise together? Which would take predominance and how would an investor be enticed by a company like this one?

Valuation principles exist globally. There is GRI, IRIS, Buffet's impact rate of return, ESG disclosure, SASB, BESPOKE etc. Certain standards have been established. When you say social enterprise, is the primacy of its existence social? You try not just to balance the profit logic with the social logic but affirm the primacy of the social logic. That valuation is very critical.

So, we need a new breed of assessors who can measure social impact. What SEBI and for-profit stock exchanges have today are market valuers, who understand the enterprise part of the system. Either they need to be trained or we need a new brand of assessors and valuers who are actually trained in social impact and then deputed to measure before the enterprise comes into an IPO.

What happens to a social enterprise which is hugely successful beyond its social goals and has multiplied its commercial possibilities? Take the example of Body Shop.

You know, these questions have to be tested as we go along. I don't have a ready answer, but these are troubling questions. That is exactly the reason why we have to get this whole concept clear in the first place. ■

GROUND REPORT

Tech design hampers schemes

Aaditeswar Seth
New Delhi

SEVERAL technological systems to ensure delivery of welfare plans and social security schemes by the government have had serious design flaws right from conception. These flaws became even more glaringly apparent during the pandemic when they prevented many people from accessing their rights and entitlements. Here are the faultiest ones.

BIOMETRICS: Biometric failure emerged as the most significant source of errors in the Aadhaar-based authentication process for both the PDS (Public Delivery System) and cash withdrawal to avail of the relief measures announced by the government. Biometrics were originally deemed essential in Aadhaar for de-duplication to ensure that nobody has more than one Aadhaar number; but no efficacy studies have been done and, in fact, studies argue against biometric-based de-duplication. If biometrics do not help with de-duplication then there is no need for them. Other solutions like smartcards should be used to avoid unfair denial of benefits. Some states actually suspended biometric authentication during the lockdown, further corroborating the limited value of the technology.

FAULTY PF-IT SYSTEM: The PF (Provident Fund) IT system does not allow people to correct their own personal details. Errors such as in the spelling of names, dates of birth, dates of employment, and Aadhaar and mobile phone numbers all need to be corrected by employers. Despite allowance offered by the government for PF withdrawal during the lockdown, countless workers were unable to withdraw funds because of such mismatches. It also did not help that many did not even know that their PF contribution was being deducted or anything about their PF accounts or the procedure to withdraw funds. A better designed system would have kept workers informed of PF deductions through SMS messages, and allowed them to fix errors in their details rather than relying on employers to do so.

MGNREGA MIS: The MGNREGA Management Information System (MIS) is highly impressive, housing details of each job card and work done, attendance, payment status, etc, all accessible online. However, MGNREGA workers are unable to use online systems and need to rely on help from others. The MIS therefore largely serves as an accounting function for administrators, while workers continue to face issues with registering their demand for work, tracking payments, and raising grievances.

Simple IVR (Interactive Voice Response) or SMS systems could have been easily layered on the MGNREGA MIS through which workers could

register a demand for work, access their work and payment history, verify details and raise grievances in case of any mismatches. This would have helped more people utilize MGNREGA in these difficult times.

AADHAAR EXCLUSION: Aadhaar was clearly conceived as a system to reduce inclusion errors in welfare schemes, that is, to deny welfare benefits to those who don't deserve them, and marketed likewise as a means to plug such leakages. But these leakages of unauthorized access to welfare benefits are a minuscule fraction of the quantity-related fraud that has continued via the ration dealers even during the lockdown. They do not hand over the due quantity of provisions to people and Aadhaar can do nothing to prevent this nor can it do anything to reduce exclusion errors for the millions of

Financial digitization cannot happen without scaling up of the physical and human infrastructure of banking services.

families who have remained without ration cards even during this period of great need.

A more meaningful objective that the Aadhaar ecosystem can easily serve is to reduce exclusion errors through an analysis of the transaction error logs. This can easily reveal beneficiaries for whom biometric re-registration or name correction could help in availing of benefits. Such lists can be transparently released to panchayats and other field cadre to assist people in getting their entitlements. No such steps have been taken so far, and even calls for universalization of many benefits like the PDS have not helped.

VOICE-BASED SYSTEMS: Who understands and wields a technology is a key factor in determining whom the technology empowers and whom it disempowers. With cash transfers announced by the government, banking correspondents using Aadhaar-based authentication POS (Point of Service) machines were critical in delivering banking services to people at their doorsteps. However, it has also been easy for them to under-report to customers the amount of cash that has been withdrawn from their accounts, by stating falsely that an inactive-account fee was applied.

Audio-enabled POS machines that play information about each and every transaction, explain any errors in simple terms, and suggest appropriate actions in the case of failure, could have levelled the power imbalance between the banking agents and consumers.

The same technique could be applied on POS machines at ration shops, where the dealer similarly has more power and routinely over-reports the quantity of food actually given to the beneficiaries. Technology should be designed to create power equality among stakeholders. If the ration dealer distributes less food because of a shortfall in stocks, then the technology could mandate that he record an oral testimony at the point of service itself, in front of the beneficiary, to confirm the shortage and also raise an alert upstream in the PDS delivery tracking system.

FEAR OF AAROGYA APP: With widespread discrimination against returned migrant workers, the Aarogya Setu app heightens their fear that if they do come out as at-risk or infected then they could be taken away to badly-run quarantine centres or the entire household could be barred from movement and their families too would face discrimination in the community.

The app designers do not seem to understand that technology does not operate in a vacuum. It is used by people situated in particular contexts and use is shaped by perceptions of trust among people with one another and with the technology. The app in its current form amplifies trust deficits and alienates people from technology.

BANKING SERVICES: While DBT (Direct Benefit Transfer) was the fastest means of providing instant cash relief to people who were suddenly rendered income-less, the overcrowding seen at banks has drawn attention yet again to the fact that financial digitization cannot happen without scaling up of the physical and human infrastructure of banking services.

However, despite the failed DBT pilot at Nagri in Jharkhand and bank-Aadhaar linkage problems seen with MGNREGA payments and inactive Jan Dhan accounts, the juggernaut of cashless payments has continued its march.

These cases point towards poorly thought-through technology design, ignorance of the actual operational context, contrived problem statements, and mismanagement of the socio-technological interface with no processes to handle failure cases.

Despite all this evidence, how come disempowering technologies are widely adopted by the government? The answer probably lies in the mindset of the government that tends to look for solutions that ensure compliance and prevent misbehaviour, but not solutions that ensure inclusive access and equity.

Seeing the government as its customer, the business sector exercises a strong influence in the uptake of these technologies by projecting them as silver bullets that can solve the government's concerns, and earns valuable revenue. ■

Aaditeswar Seth is the co-founder of Gram Vaani and teaches computer science at IIT Delhi. The author would like to thank Jean Dreze and Subhashis Banerjee for their feedback and useful pointers for this article.

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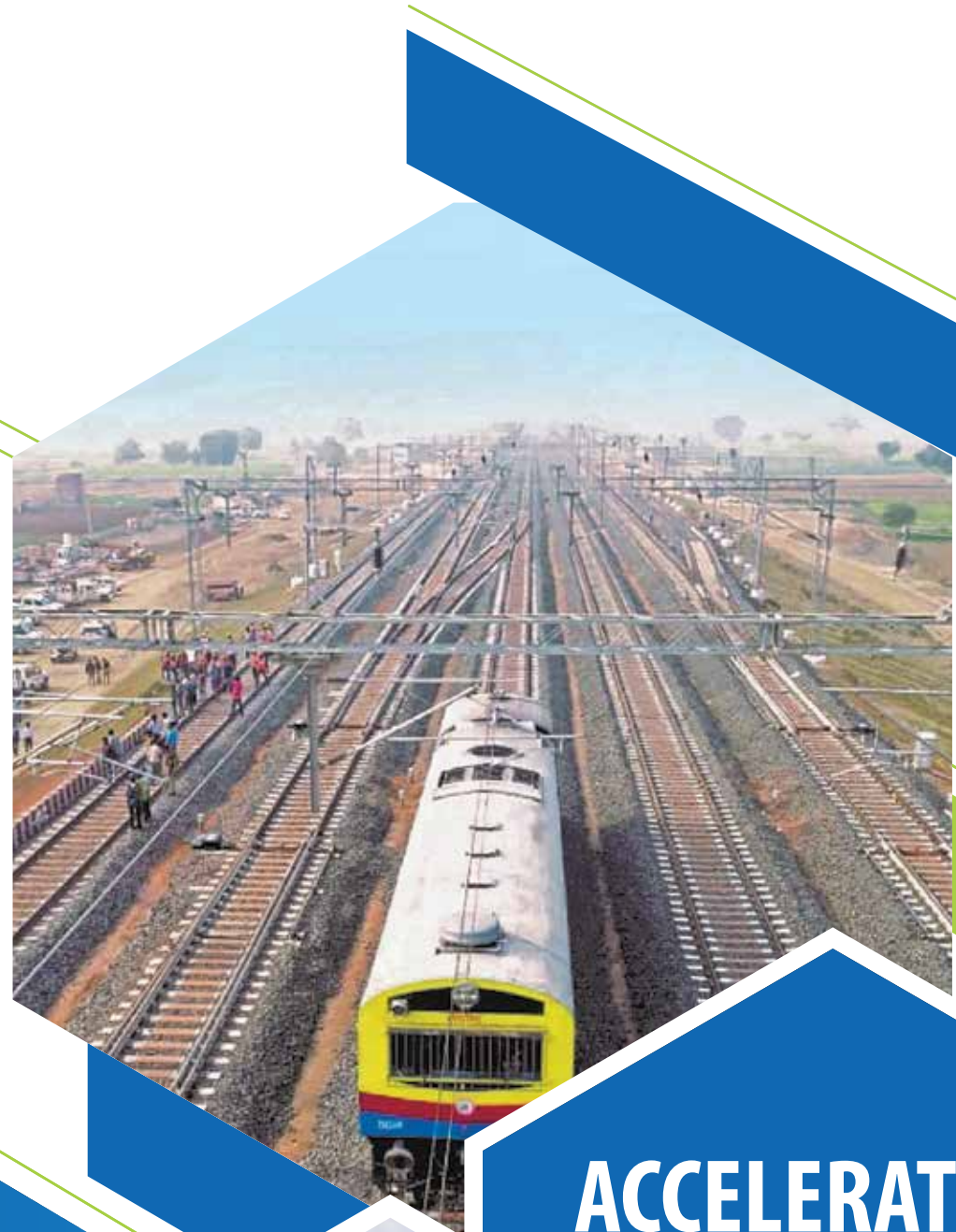
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Arvind Singh (right) with his young volunteers distributing ration kits in low-income areas

Bridging Delhi's nutrition deficit

Kavita Charanji
New Delhi

ARVIND Singh has become accustomed to distress calls for food, late at night. Since the lockdown began, Singh, who leads a health and nutrition initiative by Matri Sudha, an NGO in Delhi, has been distributing rations to needy families in Delhi-NCR with his seven-member team and a group of dedicated volunteers.

Singh recalls a desperate call he got from a family in Gautampuri in southeast Delhi. The family has three children below six, their mother doesn't work and the severely ill father is bedridden.

Matri Sudha sent them nutrition kits. The NGO contacted the Delhi government to get the family connected to the nearest *anganwadi* centre so that they would obtain regular supplementary nutrition.

"The degree of vulnerability in communities is beyond imagination," he says.

The NGO, which works on health and nutrition in Delhi's slums, transitioned to doing relief work for the first time during the pandemic. Getting e-passes, moving food supplies, distributing ration kits, providing PPE kits to health workers, were new experiences for Matri Sudha's team.

So far, Singh and his team have distributed 15,000 ration kits, after verification. Each kit contains essentials like rice, wheat, *dal*, cooking oil, spices and salt. Poorer families are also given masks, gloves, sanitisers and sanitary pads.

Delhi's 10,897 *anganwadi* centres play an integral role in meeting the nutritional needs of around 434,000 children and over 100,000 pregnant and lactating mothers from low-income homes. While children between three and six years of age get hot cooked meals, younger children, pregnant women

and lactating mothers are given take-home rations.

Due to the pandemic, the Delhi government had to close down *anganwadi* centres on March 6 without an alternative plan. The Campaign against Hunger and Malnutrition, an alliance of civil society groups like Matri Sudha, sent Singh, Deepa Bajaj from Child Survival India and Smita Khanijow from Action Aid Association to meet Delhi's minister for women and child development, Rajendra Pal Gautam. They requested the Delhi government to resume supplementary nutrition for registered beneficiaries of *anganwadi* centres.

A few weeks later, supplementary nutrition resumed. However, because of the pandemic, the government preferred to distribute dry rations instead of hot cooked meals. So, beneficiaries were given packets of *panjiri* and groundnuts.

NGOs and *anganwadi* workers point out that this is not adequate nutrition. Because of unemployment, most families are without an income and malnourishment is on the rise. "I receive grams, jaggery and *dalia* at my centre. While quality and supply is good, I see more cases of malnourishment among under-six-year-olds," says Kavita Chauhan, an *anganwadi* worker at Nardan Basti in southeast Delhi, where Matri Sudha has an active presence.

Most cases of malnourishment are of school-going children. With schools closed they are deprived of the midday meal, a key source of nutrition. They aren't registered with the local *anganwadi*. Their desperate families approached Chauhan for help, but under government rules she doesn't have the flexibility to accommodate them in *anganwadis*.

"Five or six children in my locality are malnourished," says Chauhan. Alarmed, she

reported the situation to Laxmi, a team member of Matri Sudha. The NGO promptly provided rations for these children and also distributed sanitary pads for girls aged 14 to 18 years.

Now, Chauhan comes in twice a week to distribute supplementary nutrition, house to house. She is proud to be one of Matri Sudha's 18 Nutrition Champions in Nardan Basti. The Nutrition Champions act as resource persons in the community who work to improve the nutritional status of children below six, adolescent girls, pregnant women and lactating mothers.

However, Chauhan's work as a Nutrition Champion has been curbed by the pandemic. "Our Mahila Mandal at the *anganwadi* centre is at a standstill. The idea was to hold regular meetings and counsel adolescent girls, pregnant women and lactating mothers on subjects like menstruation, correct antenatal care, immunisation and breast-feeding practices," says Chauhan. Such work, she says, is carried out on the phone.

The Matri Sudha team has ensured that vulnerable families gain access to the Public Distribution System (PDS). "In the initial days of the lockdown, families who did not have ration cards or weren't covered by the ambit of the PDS were totally food-insecure," says Singh.

After the Campaign against Hunger and Malnutrition approached the Delhi High Court, the state government cleared the e-ration coupon scheme for those without ration cards. Volunteers helped families fill application forms and connected them to the PDS. The e-coupons were valid till June this year. Activists like Singh would now like the state and central governments to extend the scheme till the end of the year.

The Matri Sudha team has volunteers like Praveen Verma, Nitish, Amarjeet, Nitesh Ritik and Sonu who have laboured day and night to package and distribute the ration kits and essential items they receive from donors.

Verma, co-founder of Ishan, an organization of young people, is a partner of Matri Sudha and a member of the Campaign against Hunger and Malnutrition. He and Singh had individually distributed ration kits and essentials in northeast Delhi soon after the communal riots.

"Previously, we used to run a community kitchen where hot cooked meals were given for children in Nardan Basti. We had to assist people to get access to this kitchen. We also had to assess the needs of vulnerable families in Delhi, Gurugram, Noida and Faridabad who had called us for aid," says Singh.

The team held discussions with apprehensive *anganwadi* workers who didn't have PPE kits to wear when they came to the centres. The workers requested Singh to raise the matter with the government. Other problems included the disruption of immunization coverage and the diversion of ASHA workers and ANMs to Covid-related work.

Through funds provided by donors, the Matri Sudha team distributed masks, hand gloves and sanitizers to frontline *anganwadi* workers and maternal and childcare health workers.

Singh advocates the Delhi government's doorstep delivery of rations scheme and inclusion of all eligible families in the PDS to ensure food security. He also supports the central government's One Nation One Ration Card scheme. ■

On Jhatkaa citizens can speak up

Raj Machhan
Chandigarh

GARBAGE burning, before the pandemic, was a major cause of air pollution in Bengaluru, as in other Indian cities. No checks of any kind by the municipal corporation seemed to be working. Realizing the seriousness of the situation, in 2018, Jhatkaa.org, a platform with digital tools to help citizens raise issues, resolved to try a new approach.

"We decided to initiate a public mobilization campaign. We took it up with Sarfaraz Khan, who was then joint commissioner of solid waste management in the municipal corporation. A proactive officer, he issued a notification that fines would be levied for garbage burning," says Avijit Michael, executive director of Jhatkaa.

But nothing much changed on the ground. "We went back to him with a ground report on the inefficacy of fines," says Michael. This time Khan issued a letter to local officials. "We were told to follow up with these officials," he adds.

Jhatkaa then encouraged people to post on its platform photographs of garbage burning along with the location. People were given contact details of the local officials responsible so that they could be contacted. "This approach did lead to action in 25 percent of garbage burning cases. But it still remained a burning issue," says Michael.

Jhatkaa again escalated the matter to Khan. This time, Khan was flooded with petitions, phone calls and emails from citizens. He set up a team to deal with the violations. In 2019, the municipal corporation allocated a budget to hire ex-servicemen as ward marshals. Thus, each ward in the city now has a marshal tasked with keeping a check on garbage burning, dumping of solid waste and other related violations. The marshals have the power to impose fines on individuals flouting the rules.

"This is the kind of people's movement that typifies our approach to ushering accountability in government organizations. We empower people to come together and make a change," says Michael.

CLOSING THE GAP

Jhatkaa.org was founded in 2012. It aims to engage and mobilize citizens to work towards a more equitable, inclusive, and sustainable society. "Our main thought was that citizens across the country faced a lot of problems due to gaps resulting from a dysfunctional democracy. People don't know how they can take part and how they can hold the government accountable for providing the right services to people. On the government side, we found that since people don't hold them accountable, they also do what they want. This is the main problem we set out to fix by building a movement of citizens who understand how to engage with



Avijit Michael addresses climate change activists outside Town Hall in Bengaluru

governments," says Michael.

Jhatkaa runs specific campaigns. Its two main areas of work, currently, are issues related to air quality, climate change, and gender and sexuality. "We run specific campaigns in these areas. At an operational level, we focus on identifying an issue, whether there is a problem in implementation of existing laws or if the government is having a public consultation on policy. We first analyze the problem, what is the solution, and who is the right person in the government to talk to. It's a complex system. For an average citizen, trying to find a solution is a lot of work. We try to communicate to citizens how an issue is going to impact them. We communicate the process, and



Avijit Michael

and mobilizing and managing volunteers, among other activities. "Being an active citizen is a journey in itself. It generally starts with doing something as simple as signing a petition and progresses to more complex activities like filing PILs and mobilizing others around you," says Michael.

REACHING OUT

Jacob Cherian, director of engagement, Jhatkaa, says, "We did a series of highly successful webinars during the lockdown from April to July 2020. They were free. Each webinar averaged over 70 attendees from our base of activists, workers in the CSO sector, and proactive citizens who had earlier participated in our on-ground activities."

The organization at present claims a membership base of 1.3 million across the country.

How effective is Jhatkaa's approach? Michael says the success or failure of a campaign is largely dependent on the involvement of citizens. "We have had different experiences over the years. It depends on the campaign and how many citizens are involved," he says.

Preventing urban deforestation has been one of the organization's recent successes. "On the gender and sexuality side, we have been successful in getting a number of colleges, universities and companies to set up internal complaints committees to deal with cases of sexual harassment," explains Michael.

Jhatkaa has also engaged with elected representatives. "In Maharashtra, the Shiv Sena government is pushing a strong environmental agenda and a number of good things are happening. It's a constant endeavour on our part to engage with all the stakeholders involved and get things moving on the ground," says Michael.

And how did the name Jhatkaa.org come about? "System *ko jhatkaa denaa hai*. India is too vast and complex for any single organization to solve its problems. We called ourselves Jhatkaa, and as the name implies, we are out to shake up the system in our own way," is Michael's reply. ■

'People don't know how they can take part and hold the govt accountable for providing the right services to people.'

how they can directly send their responses to the authorities using various modes of digital communication," Michael explains.

The organization also takes up campaigns to usher in accountability among decision-makers in the corporate sector. "Our Kodaikanal Unilever campaign was one of our biggest citizen engagement and mobilization campaigns," says Michael. Jhatkaa joined hands with activists to hold Unilever accountable for mercury poisoning in Kodaikanal. In 2016, Unilever compensated 591 former mercury workers of its thermometer factory in Kodaikanal.

Jhatkaa gets people to sign petitions, send mails, make phone calls and share campaigns on social media. It has been organizing webinars to train citizens in areas such as RTI, filing FIRs and PILs,

38 yrs later scab haunts apple crop in Himachal

Raj Machhan
Chandigarh

NEARLY 60 percent of the apple crop in Himachal Pradesh has fallen victim to a disease called scab, which has reappeared in large swathes of the state after a gap of 38 years, taking growers by surprise.

Ashutosh Chauhan, an orchardist from Ratnari in Shimla district, says, "The last time this disease broke out was in 1982-83. I was probably in kindergarten. Most of the new generation of orchardists are way too young to have any memories of it. Now, it has spread again and we failed to diagnose it in its early stages."

Like every year, orchard owners had been on guard against more common diseases like mites, marssonina blotch and alternaria leaf spot. "But growers noticed the disease only when it appeared on the fruits as small brown spots," says Ranvijay Singh, a grower from Rohru.

Orchardists say that the disease caught the Horticulture Department of the state unawares. "Even they were not able to detect it in the early stages. They started issuing advisories on spraying schedules only after scab had spread to large parts of the apple-growing areas," says an orchard owner based in Tikkar area of Shimla district.

At present, scab has impacted almost the entire apple belt of Kullu, Mandi and Shimla districts, with varying degrees of severity. State farmer bodies such as the Kisan Sabha say that over 60 percent of orchards in the state have been affected by the disease.

Apple scab is a fungal infection caused by *Venturia inaequalis*. The fungus attacks the fruit, leaves and shoots. It can substantially reduce fruit yields in apple orchards. It distorts the size, shape and colour of the fruit. Apples affected by scab are not fit for human consumption. If the fungus is not controlled, it can cause early fruit and leaf drop and reduce the yield the following year. During winter, the fungus mainly lives in the fallen leaves. It becomes active in spring, releasing spores into the air which then infect the flowers and new leaves.

Estimates by the state government put apple production in 2020 at 30 million boxes. However, orchard owners are expecting the number to be much lower. "The crop is expected to be 40 percent, or even lower, of what it was in 2019," says Chauhan, who is also the vice-president of the Progressive Growers Association. Himachal Pradesh produced over 40 million apple boxes (each box containing 20 to 25 kg of apples) in 2019. On average, the state produces ₹4,000 crore worth of apples every year.



Apples struck by the deadly scab disease



Ashutosh Chauhan

What has caused the incidence of the disease after such a long time? The former vice-chancellor of Dr Y.S. Parmar University of Horticulture and Forestry, Dr Vijay Singh Thakur, says, "Every disease goes through a boom and bust cycle. For apple scab, this cycle extends over 15 to 16 years. We were able to control the incidence of scab in 1982-83, but a pathogen cannot be altogether eliminated. It lies dormant and then makes a reappearance."

Back in 1982-83, apple scab had impacted almost all apple growing areas, resulting in huge losses to orchard owners. The situation had turned grim to the point that the state government had to step in to buy the produce from growers.

ERRATIC WEATHER

Thakur says that the disease did manifest in 2004, but it was limited to small pockets in Mandi and Kullu districts.

"I had forecast in May that scab was set to affect apple orchards this year. But orchard owners adopted a casual approach, which led to its spread as an epidemic," he says.

Erratic weather conditions in 2020 have contributed to the manifestation of this disease on a large scale. It was an extended winter this year. Plus, it rained heavily in spring, resulting in high moisture content in the air. The average temperature remained around 20 to 25 degrees C, leading to high humidity levels — conditions most

favourable for the spread of scab. "By the time people realized the gravity of the situation, the disease had already assumed epidemic proportions," says Dr Rajender Jhobta, a surgeon and a keen horticulturist from the Jubbal belt.

The outbreak of the disease in apple orchards in Kashmir is another reason for its appearance in Himachal. "Apple growers in Himachal import plant saplings from Jammu and Kashmir. And it's highly likely that scab entered orchards in Himachal with the infected saplings," Jhobta says.

He added that the orchard owners in the 1980s and 1990s followed a rigorous schedule of fungicide spraying and the disease was brought under control over the years. In the last 15 to 20 years, people got the impression that the disease had almost been eliminated until it resurfaced again this year.

MITIGATING MEASURES

Jhobta has been growing apples organically. "I am trying out methods to control such fungal diseases through biological means. An organic orchard naturally has plants with stronger immunity and that is a big help," he says.

Horticulture Department officials, however, downplay the occurrence of the disease, limiting it to a few pockets of the apple belt. "In Shimla district, it has occurred in a few pockets in areas such as Rohru, Narkanda, Kharapathar, Jubbal, Kotkhai, and Chirgaon. In fact, it was not only scab, but multiple infections. But we have been able to control it," says Des Raj, deputy director of the Horticulture Department. "Our field officers turned into scab warriors. We executed scab campaigns, created groups on WhatsApp, and undertook clinical testing. The growers too implemented an aggressive spraying schedule."

Controlling the disease involves spraying of fungicides on the trees after short intervals. It is the advice from the government, but it has led to a big increase in the cost of production, says Rajpal Singh, an orchard owner from Rohru.

Faced with erratic weather conditions, coronavirus, and now apple scab, the year 2020 so far has been one of the harshest for apple growers. ■

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The smartphone emerged as the most important tool for learning during the pandemic

A PHONE IS NOT ENOUGH

Meaningful connectivity is what 500m Indians need



By Osama Manzar

WHEN the coronavirus pandemic set in and a rigid lockdown brought life to a standstill across India, millions of migrant workers left cities and headed back to their villages to be with their families. They carried with them their sparse belongings in small suitcases and backpacks, but their most valued possession was always kept at hand — a cheap mobile phone with prepaid talk time.

The mobile phone was their only link with the rest of the world and particularly their families, waiting anxiously for them to return as they walked down highways and across fields and waded through rivers to sneak across state borders.

But soon keeping the phones functioning became a challenge in itself. There was nowhere to recharge fading batteries and no money to top up talk time. Of some 12,000 people walking from New Delhi to Bundelkhand, 2,000 made calls to a toll-free number on which they had learnt they could find help.

The toll-free number was provided by Jan Sahas Social Development Society, a non-profit, which wanted to help migrants taking challenging routes find directions, shelter or local help.

But the calls received by volunteers at Jan Sahas were invariably about connectivity. The migrants were worried about how to keep

their phones working.

Many of them wanted to know from Jan Sahas if talk time and internet data could be free for them because they didn't have the money to pay for recharges. They were already moving in groups so that several of them could share one mobile phone.

There were other concerns, too, such as the police cracking down on them, highways being blocked and social distancing keeping others who wanted to help away. Yet, it was connectivity that was uppermost in their minds in that time of distress.

The migrants just wanted to talk to their families. A simple need. But as India goes digital, connectivity has come to stand for much more. From banking to education to healthcare to delivery of government benefits and services, everything is increasingly online. Equal access to robust PCs and broadband has acquired a new urgency so that rich and poor alike can avail of mainstream benefits. More so perhaps smartphones and high-speed mobile networks since people prefer handheld devices.

Where does that leave large numbers of Indians who languish on 2G networks and don't have smartphones? India has 500 million smartphone users. But there are also 550 million Indians who have just basic feature phones with which they can at best make calls and send messages, but can't access the internet. Another 300 million Indians have no connectivity of any kind at all.

The result is a digital divide and yawning inequalities. In the very cities where smartphones are common and the best 4G bandwidth is available, migrant workers in the informal sector continue to use basic feature phones. In rural

areas where there are actually 200 million smartphone users, there often isn't the connectivity to support those devices.

Can connectivity be made more meaningful? Should it be treated as a basic right? Should phone calls and data be made free for those who are below the poverty line (BPL) and daily-wagers in the informal sector?

Perhaps this disruptive pandemic is the time to consider a scheme like a 'Pradhan Mantri Free Talk Time and Internet Yojana', especially to combat COVID-19. A scheme of this kind running for six or 12 months will have not just immediate benefits but could be transformative in the long run. The money spent on it could be compensated through USOF (Universal Service Obligation Fund) to which phone companies contribute.

Running a business, e-commerce, online transactions, audio-visual content consumption and real-time video conferencing requires high bandwidth, powerful machines, or at least significantly powerful smartphones with 3G or 4G connectivity. We have widespread connectivity but bandwidth is scarce and limited. Likewise, devices that are powerful enough to deliver multimedia content, including educational content, aren't widely available.

Recently, the Alliance for Affordable Internet (A4AI) released guidelines to arrive at a definition of "meaningful connectivity". It highlighted four requirements: Regular internet access, an appropriate device, enough data and a fast connection.

India has 'connectivity' but not 'meaningful connectivity'. This has led to 320 million students suffering because of the inability to access online education. Over 400 million people, below the poverty line, who are dependent on foodgrains from ration shops, are often unable to access their entitlements because of non-functionality or non-availability of the internet for checking real-time biometric authentication.

Similarly, around two million frontline health workers don't have the smartphones and the connectivity that will allow them to more ably serve children and mothers in villagers. As a result, lives are being lost. In times of a pandemic meaningful connectivity should be regarded as a basic necessity.

We, at the Digital Empowerment Foundation (DEF), are deeply aware of these realities. The pandemic, however, has forced us out of our comfort zone. We took to relief work by providing food for the hungry and migrant workers walking back to their villages. Relief work had its uses. But the more important question before us was how to leverage our digital knowledge to gain a better understanding of the situation. So, we created a database of 150,000 migrant workers and tracked their journeys across cities and towns.

Migrant workers use mobile phones in just the same way as they live their lives — on the move. They rely heavily on them to make calls and on the ability to pay as they go. The pandemic and its fallout became an occasion for us to know the number of users of cheap feature phones or secondhand smartphones.

According to Ashif Shaikh of Jan Sahas: "The total informal sector workforce is estimated to be about 440 million. Out of this, the vulnerable informal sector workforce is around 304 million. The total number of seasonal migrants is estimated to be 55 million." (Census data of 15.1 million is outdated.) Additionally, according to government statistics, every year over nine million new migrant workers move from rural areas to cities and towns.

I am assuming that most migrant workers, adding to the informal sector's entire workforce, would be using feature phones. The International Data Corp (IDC) says that in 2019 there were about 450 million smartphone users as compared to 550 million feature phone users in India. About 40 to 45 percent of feature phone users own a device that costs less than ₹1,000.

The informal sector mostly constitutes the working class. Many float around in towns and cities and in areas where transactions and business take place. Therefore, it may not be erroneous to assume that all of the informal sector, including migrant workers, would be a subset of 550 million feature phone users.

COVID-19 has paralyzed movement, transportation, travel and economic activity that would have ensured food in the hands of people. At this time, the question to address is: how can such a huge population pay for its basic needs and necessities, without being connected? Consider that more than half the Indian population relies on feature phones and prepaid connectivity. Consider also that they have no means to pay for being connected. Consequently, it is important for the government to support digital connectivity and communication as a basic necessity, a fundamental need and a human right.

A MIGRANT WORKER'S STORY

Joseph Hemron called me sometime in May from his in-laws' village, Devbahar Ambatoli, 25 km from Simdega town and about 150 km from Ranchi, the capital of Jharkhand, one of India's poorest states.



Community Information Resource Centres undertook relief work in villages



Soochnapreneurs helped people get their rights, entitlements and access information

Can connectivity be made more meaningful? Should it be treated as a basic right? Should phone calls and data be made free for those who are BPL and daily-wagers? Perhaps this is the time to consider a Pradhan Mantri Free Talk Time and Internet Yojana.

Joseph asked about my family and my son, Abner, in particular, whom he is very fond of. He mentioned that he was stuck in Devbahar Ambatoli because of the lockdown and was unable to return to Delhi, where he lives with his family. I asked if he needed help and sought his wife's mobile number.

The real story emerged when I talked to his wife, Alka. In March, Joseph decided to visit his village, Karra, 40 km from Ranchi, to collect his driving licence, which had been issued from Ranchi. As he was about to leave, his sister-in-law who works as a domestic help in an apartment in Gurugram also decided to visit her village for a short holiday. Instead of going straight to his own village, Joseph went to his in-laws' village to drop his sister-in-law. While he was there, the nationwide lockdown was announced.

Joseph was now stuck in Devbahar Ambatoli since transport was restricted and individuals weren't stepping out due to fear of the lockdown and the raging COVID-19 pandemic.

Meanwhile, in Delhi Alka ran out of money and rations at home. She had already spent March to May borrowing money. A call to her husband was difficult. Sometimes weeks passed before she could speak to him because the



Creating digital awareness



A group of schoolchildren outside a Community Centre



To engage in online learning, students need a powerful smartphone or a laptop with high bandwidth

We formed the 'COVID-19 Digital Emergency Relief Programme' to deliver relief, ensure access to critical information, fight misinformation, mobilize resources and crowdsource essentials for the needy.

village where Joseph was stuck had weak telecom signals which, when disrupted, would take a long time to restore.

I first met Joseph, an Adivasi Christian, in 1998 when he was 20 years old and a rickshaw puller in Ranchi. He would pick up and drop my sister's six-year-old to school. Expecting a child ourselves, my wife and I asked Joseph if he would like to move to Delhi and work in our home. Like millions of citizens, Joseph migrated and lived with us for four years, helping us bring up our son and learning how to drive from my wife.

After he left us, he pursued driving as a career, got married, and started a family. Like millions of migrants, Joseph too lost his job during the lockdown and wasn't paid his dues for the few months he was working. He too got stranded, far from his family, in another state. He suffered economic losses, often lived without food and went for weeks without any telephonic or data connectivity.

THE LAST MILE

The COVID-19 lockdown threw up issues that were never expected to emerge simultaneously with a health pandemic. In late March, we at DEF introspected on our role. We realized that the impact of the disaster caused by the pandemic had spilled over to access to food and relief work — areas which we don't directly work in.

Yet, DEF's widespread digital infrastructure and presence made us realize our responsibility. DEF has over 700 digitally enabled Community Information Resource Centres (CIRCs) run by 'Soochnapreneurs', the name we have coined for 'information entrepreneurs'. We have over 10,000 digital foot soldiers, spread across the country in 130 districts and 23 states.

At the time of the lockdown, our associates across rural India got special permission to move around as relief workers and food suppliers who also provided doorstep banking services and enabled access to government entitlements for villages.

To make an impact, we formed the 'COVID-19 Digital Emergency Relief Program (C-DERP)' with the specific mandate to deliver relief, ensure access to critical information, fight misinformation and fake news, mobilize resources, crowdsource essentials and route them to the needy. Additionally, we also communicated preventive health information and measures including special COVID-19 kits for as many as possible.

Being digitally enabled and entrepreneurially driven, with a physical presence on the ground, makes a difference. I went to Nuh, the headquarters of Nuh district in Haryana, hardly 60 km from the heart of New Delhi, the national capital. Nuh is among the most backward districts of the country, struggling with basic problems related to education.

DEF has more than 10 digital centres across villages and blocks of Nuh district, connected through a broadband wireless network. Across these centres, our local team of Soochnapreneurs managed to raise donations in cash and kind amounting to ₹25 lakh through social and digital media. The Soochnapreneurs in Nuh distributed thousands of food packets for months to those who barely had any income or livelihood.

In Alwar, 71 km from Nuh, DEF has over 10 centres across the district. One centre in Rayebka village is run by Irfan, the local Soochnapreneur, who has reached out to every household in the village and panchayat and ensured nobody is left without food or access to banking.

Irfan would take the authentication through a biometric device. He would collect rations from ration shops and deliver it to the entitled home. Wherever people were unable to withdraw money provided by the Prime Minister's Relief Programme, Irfan, being a licence-holder for providing banking services, would deliver the money to their homes.

Soochnapreneurs across hundreds of CIRCs enabled the delivery of rights, information, and entitlements at the time of the lockdown and the pandemic.

'DIGITAL DAAN'

Every aspect of life in India has been impacted by the pandemic and its ripple effects. But it is the education sector that has been the most impacted in tangible and intangible ways. There was a recent report of a girl who committed suicide because she did not have access to a laptop or any other means of accessing her classes, which were being conducted online.

It has been five months since the pandemic started. Educational institutions have been closed. As public and private institutions steer towards online education and engage students through digital media, the pressure to keep up with this new model is mounting on students and having a domino effect on parents.

To attend and engage in online classes, students need access to a device — a laptop or a smartphone. This device needs to have high bandwidth and the



Migrant workers on the move

In villages, how are migrants surviving without work and money? We will be tracking 150,000 migrants till early next year to understand the long-term effects of the pandemic and the exodus from cities.

capacity of high data consumption as classes take place online, in real time and on video. For education purposes, the best way to be connected is through a desktop or a laptop, not through a smartphone. And India's PC penetration is hardly 3 percent according to data available two years ago. India is going to suffer a tremendous digital divide in access to education. It's going to be tougher on girls, given how often access to digital devices for girls in many households comes as an afterthought.

It is for this cause that the Digital Empowerment Foundation launched 'Digital Daan', an online crowdsourcing initiative, to motivate people to donate their working but used devices for citizens in need. DEF's target is to source a million digital devices and make them available across India over the next three years.

The philosophy of this initiative is simple — to generate and distribute devices so that people gain access and connectivity. This would also help reduce the country's digital lag or exclusion and aid the adaptation of digital culture.

Since March, we have undertaken many initiatives to help in the immediate situation on hand and understand the new normal emerging from the pandemic. Our interest is not limited to just mass migration. We also seek to understand the future of migrant labourers when they return to their villages and homes. Would they come back to cities in search of jobs? How are they surviving in villages without work and money? If the impact of the pandemic continues till early next year, how will they manage for so long?

Towards this end we have designed a programme called 'Migrants: Connecting, Tracking, Serving' and we are conducting an ethnographic study on migrants. We have travelled across Haryana, Rajasthan, Uttar Pradesh, Bihar, Jharkhand, Andhra Pradesh, Telangana, Tamil Nadu and Madhya Pradesh to gain an understanding.

We continue to provide relief work to the most vulnerable and their families and we will be tracking 150,000 migrants till early next year to understand the long-term effects of the pandemic and the exodus from cities. We will be conducting a 30-day digital skilling programme for selected migrants across the country through the CIRCs of DEF and we will produce a documentary film on migration in the digital era.

Till last count, DEF has been able to serve over 500,000 people across the nation during the pandemic and lockdown period. All this was possible because of trained digital entrepreneurs and digital access.

To conclude with the story of Joseph Hemron, we went to his village and brought him to Ranchi, trained him to download and manage the Aarogya Setu app, and bought him an air ticket to fly back to Delhi to his family.

An emotional Joseph told us, "I was already planning to bring my family back to the village as there is hardly any job in the city and no hope either." I offered him a job at DEF so that he can continue to live in Delhi. Joseph said, "The only reason I don't want to go back to my village in Jharkhand is because my children will be destroyed and they will remain uneducated. I want my children to be educated and break the cycle of slavery that we have all been subjected to."

While each of us can help with our capabilities, I hope that the government is also listening to its most vulnerable citizens. ■

Osama Manzar is founder and director of Digital Empowerment Foundation. He can be contacted at osama@defindia.net. Manzar is also a member of the advisory group of Alliance for Affordable Internet (A4AI).

INSIGHT

MEDIA AT
CROSSROADS



SANJAYA BARU
KIRAN KARNIK
PATRICIA MUKHIM
SHREE PADRE
R. BALASUBRAMANIAM

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REDEFINING CITIZEN JOURNALISM

RITA & UMESH ANAND

WHEN we were in the process of launching *Civil Society*, the few people we confided in raised obvious and well-meaning concerns. Who will read it? How will you keep funding it? Will you be able to bring it out month after month? Where will the stories come from?

Setting out as we were with a new idea, we didn't have convincing answers to these earnest questions. But what we did know for sure was that government was receding, the private sector was gaining in prominence and social entrepreneurs of all varieties were playing an increasingly valuable role in trying to ensure equity and balance in emerging equations.

As we envisioned it, there was a need for journalists with mainstream skills to put out the stories resulting from this complex interplay of interests, without taking sides. These were stories that, for several reasons, eluded the big media in print and television. We felt that we could tell them well and there would be readers who would pay.

In 2003, the year we began publishing, talk of a subscription model was seen as being unrealistic. Now it is in fashion. But back then revenues had to primarily come from advertising. The current trend of asking readers to pay for content was unheard of then. We were, if you like, mavericks in this regard and went to the extent of pricing a subscription above the cover price so as to know how much our subscribers loved us!

Of course we got advertising too, but not the kind that influenced editorial. Our advertisers have been supporters of the idea of *Civil Society* magazine. Naturally, advertising being commercially driven, we haven't found too many companies ready to advertise, but those who have come along have been perfect angels.

Seventeen years later, we continue to savour what we believe are the joys of plain vanilla journalism. We do the stories that interest us and surprise our readers. No story is too small for us. Our motto remains: Everyone is someone.

BEING ANONYMOUS

Our very dear friend, the late Anupam Mishra, once said of *Civil Society* magazine that it was "born in the general ward of a general hospital". We try to hold on to that anonymity even today because it allows us to explore spaces we could never otherwise imagine entering. Being part of the establishment is not for us. The stories that come to us as a result are what keep bringing back our subscribers for more.

Being small and underfunded has been both a good thing and a problem. Money is needed, but how much? And should profitability take precedence over one's journalism? We have got by on very little and ensured that we keep costs down and remain sustainable. Our modest ways have especially helped us now, in the midst of the pandemic and economic slowdown.

Reader loyalty has also been a boon. As most publications gasp for breath with advertising gone and readers not willing to pay, we are lucky to have readers who don't mind being donors much beyond their regular subscriptions, just to prop us up that extra bit.

CHOOSING STORIES

The media works best within the framework of a business, but it has to be the kind of business that recognizes its social role, abides by certain values and puts the quality of information above profit. Magazines and newspapers have traditionally served communities and not markets. In more ways than one, publications have belonged to readers, who expect them to be reliable and independent.

Our stories in *Civil Society* have invariably been about people and their lives — of what drives them, how they cope with problems and find solutions. The larger issues that confront India emerge from these personal and organizational narratives. The search for stories has taken us across India in wondrous ways. It really has been quite magical for us personally



Photo: Civil Society/Umesh Anand

Our prime time: We were in Kerala to profile the remarkable Dr C.R. Ely and the growers of the unique Chengalikodan banana

and professionally. As we pass on to our readers the India we discover, we also help make connections which otherwise might never have happened.

Around the time *Civil Society* was launched, 'citizen journalism' had become a fad. But that fad was mainly about getting random opinion from among readers/viewers into mainstream media to give the impression that the latter cares. What *Civil Society* has tried to do is to get professional writers to in fact focus on the real issues concerning citizens, for after all 'civil society' is but a sum of all citizens.

INVISIBLE ICONS

In India a lot of guesswork goes into what readers and viewers want. There isn't a scientific understanding of how media is consumed. Since real alternatives are not provided we don't know what people could prefer. Much too much is assumed and decided by marketing heads.

In *Civil Society* we don't second-guess the reader. Instead we take a purely journalistic call on the relevance of stories and we have met with a good measure of success. While an editorial decision may not always be perfect, it does extend the boundaries of what may work as a story. Journalism is about discovering what lies out there. The farther one travels the better. We are fond of saying that the people you will see on our covers are those whom you couldn't imagine would be cover material. The fact is they are icons in their own right, but have been overlooked.

Our cover on small hospitals in the voluntary public healthcare sector did very well recently. At a time when medicine as a profession is seen as being too commercial, readers were struck by the stories of well-qualified doctors who had dedicated themselves to these hospitals in far-flung parts of India. It also emerged from the story that a national health policy needs to be more inclusive and mindful of the multiple entities in the health sector.

Similarly, when fruit and vegetable growers in a district in Karnataka succeeded in beating the lockdown and getting their perishable produce to buyers despite multiple restrictions during the pandemic, we saw a story in how an alert local administration can help the farm sector. To our minds this was not merely a local achievement in a Karnataka district, but an example with national relevance.

Social innovators plough a lonely furrow. They experiment with ideas whose time hasn't come. Tracking them can be rewarding for journalists. We have

followed the late Javed Abidi as he turned disabilities into a rights movement and got a law passed. Before he died he told us that each of the companies that now hired disabled people was deserving of a case study. Similarly, Arbind Singh struggled to win recognition for the rights of hawkers and also got a forward-looking law through Parliament. It was most interesting to see the Right to Information (RTI) Act take shape and become a law. Our first cover story was on RTI and Arvind Kejriwal, then an income-tax officer on long leave, was featured on the cover with the headline: 'Tax man's burden'. The law, of course, came out of a much larger campaign and for a long time we followed its twists and turns.

JACKFRUIT ANYONE?

As masters of our editorial space we have had the luxury of heading off in different directions. There have been three cover stories on jackfruit thanks to our friend and colleague, Shree Padre. The response to each jackfruit cover has been great. Shree is passionate about jackfruit and so are we.

We highlighted the flaws in the SEZ (Special Economic Zones) policy when most TV anchors and editorial page writers were busy praising it. We were also interviewing Prashant Bhushan long before he had got so much attention and our headline read: 'Who will judge the judges.' Affordable housing, government hospitals, urban slums and migrant labour have all found space in our magazine long before they began getting the attention they now receive.

The media is going through a complicated crisis. Managements are increasingly beholden to governments. There is the problem of low revenues. Digital technology is changing the rules of the game. Neglect of skills has meant that there are fewer journalists with the abilities to provide the coverage that society needs.

Are smaller operations the way to go? We think so but it is difficult to say for sure. The media is a tricky business to be in. Being good is not enough. Perhaps we have just been lucky that *Civil Society* has survived and may continue to do so. But this much is certain — a democracy needs information it can trust and good journalists who can deliver it.

The articles in this section by Sanjaya Baru, Kiran Karnik, Patricia Mukhim, Shree Padre and R. Balasubramaniam all show in their own way the importance of media in our lives and how today it is at the crossroads. ■

MEDIA IS MUCH MORE THAN THE MEDIUM

But falling professional standards, corporate ownership and political influence have cast a shadow on its status as a pillar of democracy.



SANJAYA BARU

ADDRESSING the silver jubilee of the Chandigarh Press Club in September 2005, Prime Minister Manmohan Singh warned the Indian media that a yawning gap was emerging between the media's phenomenal quantitative growth, in terms of revenues, readership and viewership and number of entities, and its qualitative development, in terms of the veracity of news, the quality of programming and the management of the media. "With the rapid growth of media," said Singh, "qualitative development has not kept step with quantitative growth.... The time has come for journalists to take stock of how competition has impacted quality."

Beginning from the post-Emergency years of 1978-80 and through the following decade of business development and the arrival of new technologies and then the post-liberalization decade of the 1990s, the Indian media lived through a quarter-century of unprecedented growth and expansion. In 1982, Indira Gandhi's information adviser, the venerable H.Y. Sharada Prasad, told me that he kept in regular touch only with the editors of five newspapers — *The Times of India*, *The Hindu*, *The Indian Express*, *The Statesman* and *Hindustan Times*. About a quarter-century later, in 2004, as his successor in that post, I was required to keep in touch with these five and the editors of major Indian language publications like *Dainik Jagran*, *Dainik Bhaskar*, *Eenadu*, *Malayala Manorama*, *Siasat*, *Lokmat* and scores more. Moreover, I had to maintain a working relationship with television anchors and, equally important, the media moguls who owned print and TV companies.

Over the past two decades not only have numbers grown, new media platforms have emerged, like Twitter and Instagram, making the job of media management not just difficult but also more varied.

This phase of growth of traditional media has suddenly been halted by the coronavirus pandemic as newspaper readership has dwindled and, more important, corporate advertising has virtually evaporated, exposing the extreme dependence of media on advertising. Subscriber-funded journalism is today the exception, with advertiser or corporate-funded journalism being the rule. This in itself has raised the question whether news media, print and TV, should be considered the 'fourth estate' — an institution of democracy on a par with the executive, the legislature and the judiciary — or simply as just another business activity, with its revenue model, its top line and bottomline. Is media an institution or merely a medium for making money and influencing opinion? As media revenues dip and the means of accessing news changes, journalists are losing jobs by the dozens. Those fortunate to be in employment are afraid to report the news of their comrades falling by the wayside, worried about when their turn will come. After four decades of growth and change the Indian media finds itself at a new crossroads.

POLITICAL BIG BOSSISM

The challenge posed by a loss of revenue on account of the post-COVID economic slowdown and altered news accessing habits comes on top of a more insidious crisis posed by growing political big bossism at the national and provincial levels. If journalists criticizing a Narendra Modi or a Sonia Gandhi are trolled and heckled, those critical of a Mamata Banerjee, a Y.S. Jagan Reddy or a Yogi Adityanath meet with worse fate. Rising intolerance on the part of those in power, at all levels of power — national, provincial, municipal — towards professional journalists has made the profession risky and risk-averse.

Reporters Without Borders, an international NGO, reported this summer that India's rank on a world press freedom index had slipped to 142 from 140 in a list of 180 countries. Another global NGO has highlighted through its Global Impunity Index India's sorry record in the number of unsolved cases of murder of journalists. From real estate dons to sand mafia, from anti-cow slaughter vigilantes to jihadi terrorists, all manner of groups have been targeting and killing journalists. If declining revenues and declining professional values are one side of the coin, the grim external environment is the other side. Caught between falling revenues and

rising threats, professional journalists have been living through the worst phase of Indian media.

There are many factors that have contributed to this grim situation. First and foremost has been the growing link between business, politics and the media. In every state across India a significant chunk of the dominant media is controlled by dominant business and political interests. At one level one must welcome the total transparency in ownership and editorial stance. Tamil Nadu's Jaya TV was owned by the late J. Jayalithaa's party. Businesspersons dealing with the state government were required to advertise on the channel as a way of making financial contributions to the party. The channel was blatantly partisan. There are scores of such politically aligned TV channels and hundreds of newspapers across the country.

CREDIBILITY REDUNDANT

There is no pretence of editorial independence, objectivity in reporting and regard for professional codes of conduct. Since political power is used to mobilize the finance required, editorial credibility does not determine readership. Rather, political loyalty does. What started in an incipient manner in far corners of the country has now become mainstream. Andhra Pradesh's *Eenadu* group heralded the rise of the Telugu Desam Party, while Congress party leader Y.S. Rajasekhara Reddy's son, Y.S. Jaganmohan Reddy, launched *Sakshi*, print and TV. Hyderabad's *Deccan Chronicle* was for long owned by the Congress party's T. Chandrashekhara Reddy, brother of the high-profile T. Subbarami Reddy. In Maharashtra, the *Lokmat* group is owned by the Congress party's Darda family, while *Sakal* has investment from the Sharad Pawar family. In Odisha, politician Jay Panda's wife, Jaggi Mangat Panda, runs OTV, while Arnab Goswami's Republic TV is funded by a clutch of BJP supporters. In West Bengal and Kerala the Left always had its own media mouthpieces, in print and TV, while *The Telegraph* has morphed into a Mamata Banerjee broadsheet. Most Hindi media groups across the Hindi-speaking region have gravitated towards the Bharatiya Janata Party. While India TV's Rajat Sharma has been openly a BJP supporter, *The Times of India* has allowed its Times Now TV channel to be openly pro-BJP. Chennai's *The Hindu* group had a long record of credibility, even after it tilted politically to the left during the editorship of the CPI(M)'s N. Ram.

Such political links were subtler in the national



Rising intolerance of professional journalists by those in power has made the profession risky and risk-averse

media. *Hindustan Times* was always with the Congress and the party rewarded its owners with membership of the Rajya Sabha and other kinds of support, even naming a street in New Delhi after K.K. Birla. A more sophisticated partisan game has been played by NDTV and the *India Today* group, both owing their initial rise to the generosity of the Nehru-Gandhi Darbar. NDTV's Prannoy Roy was favoured with prime time slots on Doordarshan before he launched his own channel. And NDTV, which employed the children of several influential people from the Nehru-Gandhi Darbar, benefitted not just from Doordarshan's munificence but also from privileged access to the finance ministry and the Prime Minister's Office.

Given the orientation of its inaugural issue in December 1975, it seemed *India Today* was in fact launched to defend Indira Gandhi's Emergency. The magazine's very first editorial, written by founding editor Aron Purie, a Doon School contemporary of Rajiv Gandhi, openly accorded support to the Emergency, stating: "There has been worldwide concern about the curbs put on the press since the Emergency. Mrs Gandhi has repeatedly said that she does not want to muzzle the press. But, the problems for democracies is to decide where freedom begins and responsibility ends. As the Emergency continues, press censorship rules are gradually being relaxed to allow constructive criticism of government policies."

PROFESSIONAL CONDUCT

Many issues bedevil the media, ranging from nature of its ownership and the role of owners/publishers in the functioning of media to challenges posed by changing needs and interests of readers/viewers. One key issue on which journalists as a profession have complete control is the extent of and quality of their professionalism and professional conduct. There are many written and unwritten codes of conduct by which a journalist's professional worth

News TV has become part-entertainment. It has resorted to gimmicks in pursuit of TRPs. Journalists are entertainers.

can be gauged. However, there are no credible professional institutions that can offer an independent evaluation of the professional credibility of a journalist. The profession needs one such institution.

Neither the Press Council of India nor the Editors' Guild of India has been able to play its part and earn a standing within and without the profession. There are many media awards that recognize the professional contribution of a journalist but most of these are presented in recognition of individual "good news reports" published/produced by journalists. A very corrupt journalist may have filed an excellent news report that deserves recognition, but in rewarding the journalist for that 'story' the jury is not required to take account of the personal reputation for probity of a journalist. Media honours are for work done, not for how that work is done.

Several individuals have from time to time suggested the adoption of professional codes of conduct by media personnel. Several such codes have been drawn up by various institutions, media groups and individuals. Some media entities have even adopted such codes of conduct. In 2002 the Editors' Guild of India adopted "A Code of Practice for Journalists", and in 2010 the Press Council of India published "The Norms of Journalistic Conduct". As chief editor of *Financial Express* (2000-04) and of *Business Standard* (2009-2011), I

encouraged both newspapers to adopt a code of conduct. The latter makes its internal code of conduct available to all its readers on its website. These are exceptions to the unfortunate rule that most Indian media have not defined appropriate professional codes of conduct, not to mention communicating these internally, within the organization, and externally, to all the stakeholders.

My professional life as a journalist has been in the print medium. I continue to believe that newspaper journalism is real journalism. Television is a medium that lends itself to reportage, but when it comes to analysis and expressing opinion the written word is a medium of communication superior to the spoken word and visual. There is, however, a more fundamental problem with news television, especially commercial TV. In competing for viewer attention with entertainment and sports channels, news TV has also become part-entertainment, part-sport. Sometimes wholly so. Journalists have become entertainers and performers. Their worth is determined by their TRPs — television rating points — not the inherent quality of their work. The medium has morphed the media.

In pursuit of TRPs, television media has resorted to all manner of gimmicks, ranging from the induction of "citizen journalists" to orchestrated shouting matches aimed at arousing the base instincts of a viewer. If a film producer uses sex and violence to capture audience attention, a TV anchor uses political bluff and bluster. One consequence of these trends has been to dilute the standing of a journalist as a news professional. Every profession, from that of a barber to that of a surgeon, has standards by which one's professionalism is judged. By allowing popularity to define one's professional standing, journalism has redefined itself as being in the entertainment business rather than the information business. ■

Sanjaya Baru is a writer and Distinguished Fellow at the Institute for Defence Studies & Analyses in New Delhi.

MEDIA-MESS AGE: FAKE NEWS, GARBLED POLITICS AND MORE

TV and print continue to be important but there is little doubt that new media is becoming dominant.



KIRAN KARNIK

THIS is the media-mess age — the era when the media is making a mess of many things: news, politics, geography and the truth; possibly even ruining your dinner through constant “notifications” on your mobile, or screaming contests on TV. It has created fake news, garbled politics, annihilated distance and often exterminated truth. There was a time when news was factual, TV anchors were calm moderators, politics played out in a gentlemanly fashion and geography determined whom you could call through the telephone. That was, of course, aeons ago — the stone age of media.

Yet, not too long ago, media meant only the printed word, film (movies) and radio. Television had been formally launched in the country in the 1950s, but its reach was limited till the late '70s, and its widespread penetration began only in the '90s. In contrast, the past two decades have seen a media explosion: both in reach and completely new means. Often, the medium determines not only how we communicate, but also what — re-emphasizing the validity of what McLuhan said in 1964: the medium is the message.

Yet, conventional media have not altogether faded away. As many as 197 million households have TV sets, of which an estimated 98 percent are connected to cable or satellite (DTH). In addition, TV draws neighbours and friends who do not have a TV set. Radio continues to hold a fair number of listeners (estimated at 145 million), both in its old form as well as its newer FM avatar, which has a large urban, in-car commuter audience.

Despite TV and the new media, print continues to be important, with growing circulation for newspapers. Given their readership profile, it is not surprising that they wield influence that is disproportionately larger than what one might expect. An important reason for this is the quality of writers and analysis in the opinion and editorial segments, and the perceived authenticity and minimal bias in the news reports. Most TV news channels, on the other hand (and especially in the last few years), no longer even make a pretense of

being objective. They reflect a strongly pro-government stance and an ideological slant, led by highly-opinionated and aggressive anchors, propagating their entrenched positions in discussions, and a definite bias in the selection and narration of news. This abrasive style and extreme positions, pioneered by one anchor became so popular that it is now emulated by almost all others on different channels. Apparently, it resonates with the audience and ensures higher ratings (TRPs) — the determinant for advertising revenue — without eroding credibility.

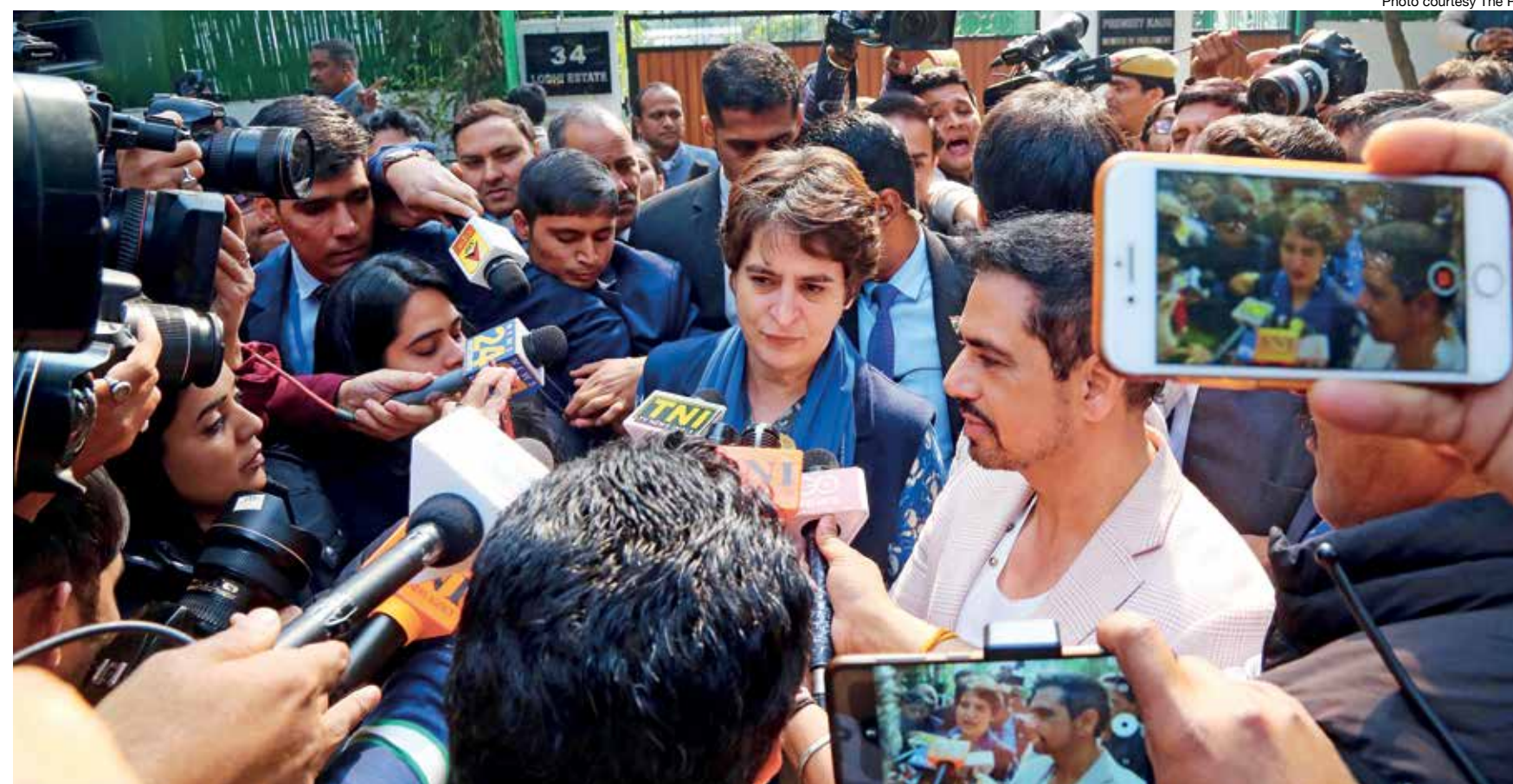
TV DOMINANCE

TV, with its reach and power, has now become an important influencer of decisions. The extent of attention it chooses to bestow on a particular event can make it loom large and multiply its impact. For example, Anna Hazare's fast in Delhi may have been but one more of the many such in the national capital, covered — if at all — cursorily on TV (after all, Hazare was hardly a household name or a popular leader at the time). However, the near 24x7 coverage on TV brought it up front for the country, and drew ever larger crowds at the site. These two (coverage and greater crowds) reinforced each other and had a big impact on the government — probably being the catalyst for its electoral disaster. More recently, media coverage of the anti-CAA protest at Shaheen Bagh in Delhi not only made it a national — even international — event, but triggered similar sit-in protests in other cities.

TV also determines what is “news”. This agenda-setting role is exemplified by the coverage of the sad suicide of a young Bollywood actor, an event that might normally have merited a brief mention on one day. However, by sensationalizing it through various allegations and conspiracy theories, the story was given legs. Soon it became a daily feature on various news channels; linking it to the glamour and gossip of the film world made the story even juicier, with an additional positioning of an interstate political dispute. Even the Supreme Court — which was taking up only some cases, in online mode due to the epidemic — thought the matter important enough to take it up. Doubtless, all this helped increase TRPs of various channels.

OWNERSHIP CONCERNS

There is another little-discussed factor: the ownership of TV channels. If a business channel is owned by a particular corporate house, would it not be biased in what and how it reports? Is there scope to slant and even manipulate news? For example, if a market rumour is reported and then quickly retracted as being incorrect, will someone buy or sell shares in those few minutes and make a killing? Can competitors be run down through planted or



Smartphones, apps and social media make it possible for news to spread instantly

A debate on free speech is overdue given that free expression seems to be increasingly curbed by trolling, threats and sedition cases.

negative stories? These questions arise not just with regard to TV, but for all media, and is the reason why there has often (mainly in the past) been debate on whether there need to be guidelines or restrictions on media ownership.

TV and print, as noted, continue to be important, but there is little doubt that the new media is becoming dominant. It is not just their growing reach (for example, Facebook claims over 300 million users in India) which makes them a powerful force; it is also the characteristics of flexibility, interaction and instant feedback (through forwards and likes). Apps like Twitter, with its initial limit of 140 characters per message, cater perfectly to a generation with short attention spans. WhatsApp not only provides a means for instant messaging and free calls, but also — thanks

to the camera integrated in the mobile phone — led to an explosion in exchanging selfies, including endless photos of oneself and of friends, or of food. To an older generation, this appears vain, narcissistic and inane, but the young love it.

TikTok and its clones transmuted the Twitter concept to video, and these short-video sharing apps stormed the market. Within a year of its launch, TikTok (now banned by the government because of data security concerns) saw more than 600 million downloads in India, over a third of those world-wide, according to media reports. These apps have enabled and encouraged people to upload and share their performances, unearthing dancing, singing and other talent from all corners of the country. In the process, some of them have garnered a vast following and become stars.

Social media has created a whole new set of “influencers”: those who attract a large number of viewers or likes. Of course, these influencers, unlike TV anchors, are used almost exclusively for commercial purposes. Advertisers now pay them to promote their products, making these influencers the new endorser-celebrities. The fact that these platforms are in the form of apps on mobile phones makes them easily accessible on all the 395 million smartphones in the country. Little wonder then that many of these apps are hugely popular.

These aspects of social media are harmless and many are, in fact, beneficial. The ability to easily send and instantaneously receive messages, bills, photographs or videos, at no cost, has been a boon

for small business. Free video calls and immediate sharing of news or answers to queries are immensely useful. The facility to create special-interest groups has helped to keep friends and relatives, dispersed around the country — or the world — in immediate touch with each other, and re-create a bonding that may earlier have been loosened by geography. At the same time, very local uses (for example, a group comprising residents of an apartment complex) is of great utilitarian value. A sudden need for a hammer can be met in minutes when a request is posted on the group, as can a requirement for the contacts of a pediatrician.

FLOOD OF FORWARDS

The new media, though, are hardly an unmixed blessing. The creation of like-minded groups has led to floods of forwards which reinforce already prevalent opinions, resulting in an echo-chamber effect and promoting stereotyping and bigotry. False news and rumours can have a devastating effect, as we have seen in numerous examples in the country, including some that triggered lynching and riots. Instances of this nature, and of allegations that foreign powers sought to influence the US presidential elections four years ago, have led to major social media companies like Twitter and Facebook putting in safeguards. False or incorrect news may be flagged, hate posts taken down and serious offenders barred.

The guidelines and actions by the companies concerned raise some serious issues. On the face of

it, what is being done can be considered an appropriate response. However, should these companies have the right to decide what is appropriate and to censor posts on what has become a public platform? All the more so, when they are so large and enjoy a near-monopoly in their segment? Can they play favourites and favour one point of view and remove another because they deem it objectionable?

The recent controversy regarding Facebook not taking down a vitriolic and communal post by a politician, despite an internal recommendation to do so, has provoked a discussion on free speech. Such a debate is overdue, given that free expression seems to be increasingly curbed by trolling, threats and sedition cases. While the supporters of one party have been called out for such tactics, others are hardly angels — doing the same when they can. True supporters of freedom are, indeed, scarce.

The Facebook story causes deeper concern on two other counts. First, that a senior person decided not to act because she felt that it would offend the government and thus affect their business prospects — signaling that such decisions (regarding what is objectionable) are made on commercial considerations. Does this imply that Facebook will carry any post as long as it furthers their business interests? Second, that taking any action against the post of a ruling party functionary would affect their business — indicating that being on the right side and propagating the views of the ruling party representatives is important for business. If such a perception is correct, it impinges on a basic premise of democracy: the right to express a view contrary to that professed by the government of the day, and yet get equal treatment as others. Kow-towing to the government is not a monopoly of MNCs: in India it has long been a tradition for business leaders to publicly always side with the government (for example, by giving every Budget 8 or 9 out of 10!). However, when powerful media does so, in unison, it spells danger for democracy.

The new media provide valuable services at no monetary cost, but you do pay: through your data. Social media monetizes your data, sometimes selling it to third parties. Through the fine print which hardly anyone ever reads, your private data is generally used with your consent. Such data about you can, with the help of new analytical and behavioural tools, be used to predict how you will act and, possibly, even influence that.

Given the size and power of media companies, should there be some form of regulation? Will this mean transferring even greater power to the government? What should be the rules on collecting, storing, transferring and using data about individuals? These and other concerns deserve thought and debate. With all this one wonders whether to be cognizant of the media message or of the media-mess age. ■

*Kiran Karnik is an independent strategy and public policy analyst. His recent books include *Evolution: Decoding India's Disruptive Tech Story* (2018) and *Crooked Minds: Creating an Innovative Society* (2016).

WALKING A FINE LINE ON THE NATION'S PERIPHERY

Journalists come under pressure from outlawed outfits, government and local institutions in the northeast. They also feel let down by the national media.



PATRICIA MUKHIM

At the time of writing this piece one is baffled by the shutting down of *The Shillong Times* for the second day. For an editor, the newspaper is a baby that needs to be born every day. To not be allowed to bring out the publication simply because two machine men have tested positive and duly quarantined is too stiff a punishment. But that's the price that COVID has extracted from a publication that has been reporting extensively on how the coronavirus pandemic is being managed in Meghalaya, what the gaping lapses are and the stigmatization and paranoia that has created vigilantes who decide what to do with homes and institutions where people test positive.

On the pretext of working closely with these local traditional institutions, governments are succumbing to their diktat. Although these same institutions have been rendering yeoman's service during the lockdown — distributing dry rations and other such utility items — the fact that they do not operate within constitutionally mandated legislation makes them a law unto themselves.

And this is the legacy of India's troubled annexation of territories that have, prior to the British incursion, been little independent principalities. Post-independence, these principalities were either annexed by Instruments of Accession or by mergers. These principalities, which later became states, were however allowed to hold on to their practices of governance although they are outdated in the present circumstances. In 1988 when the Rajiv Gandhi government passed the progressive 73rd and 74th Amendment Acts for creation of urban local bodies and panchayats, the states of Mizoram, Nagaland and Meghalaya were exempted from the purview of the Acts because a limited understanding of the manner in which these

governance bodies functioned informed the Government of India at the time to take the regressive position that has now rendered civic governance hamstrung.

It is in such a turbid situation of several bully pulpits, each one issuing their own diktat, that the media operates. There are several non-State actors and pressure and interest groups that exercise overt and covert influences over us. Then we also have to contend with court orders that tell us not to publish press statements from outlawed underground outfits, especially those calling for *bandhs* on the eve of India's two important national days — Independence Day and Republic Day.

For nearly 30 years, the states of Meghalaya, Nagaland and Assam have not been able to hold Independence Day or R-Day observances. The entire state would be under lockdown. Governments

Your strength is sapped by the knowledge that prising open a corruption scandal can land you in a case of criminal defamation.

would of course send out the compulsory missives that people should not give credence to the boycott call by underground outfits. But governments that cannot ensure that the life and limb of a citizen is protected if she does venture out and attend the R-Day or I-Day parade are unlikely to get compliance. It has taken strong public resolve and the court's intervention not allowing boycott calls by outlawed outfits to be published by the media to make people dare to defy gun-toting outfits issuing diktats from Myanmar and Bangladesh.

Media people and editors have, however, learnt to co-exist with underground outfits, with cantankerous governments, with out-of-work pressure and interest groups and with grumpy judges punishing editors and publishers for contempt of court merely for reporting what judges demand as retirement benefits.

What do media personnel from this part of the distant periphery feel about the much glorified "national media," although the moniker is presumptuous, to say the least. More than media personnel it is the citizenry that feels a sense of grave alienation by this national media that has for more than a month now made a Bollywood actor the subject of intense scrutiny, to the exclusion of every other issue. Assam has had severe floods this year resulting in the loss of lives and livelihoods. Barring one media outlet, *India Today*, who sent their reporter for extensive coverage of the floods, and who reported that about 7.6 million people have suffered and lost everything, other media busied themselves with metropolitan gossip and the corona misadventure. A month before the floods, an oil well in Assam called Baghjan near Tinsukia district went ablaze. It was a major disaster and the fire continued for several days until some external agency came to douse it. The metropolitan media (for that is what they should appropriately be named) has no time for what happens on the distant fringes of the nation where states are closer in distance to China than to Delhi.

FREE AND FEARLESS?

When we hear of words like "the free and fearless press is the greatest ally of a free and prosperous people", we cringe. Here, on the distant margins, we try and defend media freedom at great cost to ourselves but we also adopt a value judgement on how the corporate-owned media conduct themselves. Most have become allies of the government and hence enemies of the people. The prime time debates make us wonder who the hell the media is trying to defend: the citizen or the government. A section of the electronic media is evidently doing the latter. They are certainly not an example we can emulate. But increasingly this behaviour is becoming a role model for survival amidst the gloom that encircles us — the gloom that engulfs those from old school journalism who believe in the dictum that the media should give voice to the powerless and the destitute of this nation, such as the millions of migrant workers who had to trudge amidst insurmountable difficulties to reach their villages.

But working in this atmosphere of claustrophobia can be enervating. Your strength is sapped by the knowledge that prising open a corruption scandal can land you in a case of criminal defamation even



The Shillong Times bonds with its city. A local clean-up led by the newspaper

when all the odds are stacked against the corrupt. They have the money to file cases that they know will take years to be resolved. But they have pulverized us — made us do the rounds of courts, employ lawyers although we operate on a shoestring budget.

ARBITRARY POWERS

At junctures such as these one feels the need for solidarity groups that can lend their valuable moral and professional support in terms of offering advice and guidance. The Editors' Guild of India (EGI) has been a bulwark supporting editors and journalists who have been arbitrarily arrested. But the EGI is also being made irrelevant in the face of the onslaught by forces inimical to a free press.

While the pressures of right-wing politics have not reared their ugly head in the region as is happening in the national capital and other BJP-ruled states, we are tested day in and day out by other external factors such as the traditional institutions which in the current COVID-fighting regime have been vested with powers not commensurate to their stature. Every public institution ought to be subjected to accountability frameworks. Their powers cannot be unchallenged.

In 2014, a judge of the High Court of Meghalaya tried to pull the reins on the arbitrary powers of traditional institutions after a litigant filed a case against a particular headman for issuing No Objection Certificates to residents under his jurisdiction when they wanted to apply for loans or run businesses and even get birth and death certificates. The High Court had ruled in that particular case that there cannot be parallel governments to govern over citizens with some of them hell-bent on depriving the legitimate rights of citizens to practise their trades or solicit money in lieu of those certificates. It is a known fact that the

traditional institutions or headmen take money from land sale transactions. This the Meghalaya High Court found untenable since the traditional institutions have not been granted powers under the Constitution to execute such transactions.

The majority tribal community expects you to take their side in any controversy. If you don't do that you are considered a traitor to the larger tribal cause.

This is the very reason why an FIR was filed by the Dorbar Shnong (traditional institution) of a particular locality called Lawsohtun against this writer. On July 3 this year, five non-tribal boys had gone to play basketball in Lawsohtun, a locality with a majority tribal population. The five boys were trapped inside the basketball court and were beaten black and blue by masked men armed with rods and stones. The non-tribal boys managed to run for their lives. Their families filed an FIR at the local police station but the assaulters were not arrested that day and for several days after that.

TESTING TIMES

I had put out a social media post questioning why the assaulters were not arrested. I also asked why the Dorbar Shnong of Lawsohtun was not able to

apprehend the perpetrators of the violence. I questioned how it is not possible for the Dorbar to identify the bad elements in their locality. The Dorbar took affront at this and filed the FIR against me. Later, several tribal groups put out posters saying #Arrest Patricia Mukhim. The police registered the FIR. I contested the case at the High Court, seeking that the FIR be quashed as it had no merit. The High Court refused to quash it but asked the respondents to show cause. Following this, my lawyers advised me to approach the Supreme Court. And the case is ongoing.

Now there is a history to this recurrent conflict. Since 1979 the tribes had tried to dislodge the Bengali settlers from Meghalaya. Much violence was unleashed on non-tribal settlers here who included teachers, doctors, lawyers, government employees. In 1982, similar violence was unleashed on the Nepali community. Such ethnic violence carried on from that time until the early 1990s. After that Meghalaya saw the emergence of a militant outfit called the Hynniewtrep National Liberation Council (HNLC). This group too targeted non-tribal businesspersons by extorting huge sums. Those who did not pay up were shot in broad daylight. Quite a few left the state and settled elsewhere.

In this sordid environment where reporting the truth is fraught with grievous consequences, it is difficult for the media to operate with objectivity and fairness. The majority tribal community expects you to take their side in any controversy. If you don't do that you are considered a traitor to the larger tribal cause. But *The Shillong Times* has never bowed before any superior might even though we have had to pay a heavy price for that. We hope to be able to fly the flag of a free media as long as our heartbeats allow us to. ■

Patricia Mukhim is editor of *The Shillong Times*

HOW A STORY ON TRIBALS FINALLY REACHED THE PM

NGOs can provide solutions and have an important contribution to make. They deserve to be heard and better understood by journalists.



R. BALASUBRAMANIAM

IT was 1999 and the air was filled with the tension of uncertainty. I was sitting with more than 50 tribal leaders on the bank of the Kabini river discussing what our next move should be. The past few years had seen us battle it out with the local forest department and the Karnataka government, demanding proper rehabilitation post formation of the Bandipur National Park and the construction of the Kabini dam. The dam was built in the Sixties and the declaration of intent for forming the National Park was issued in the early Seventies.

We had petitioned the National Human Rights Commission (NHRC) in the Nineties about the rights of the indigenous communities being violated by these events and the government not having undertaken any rehabilitation for loss of their land, livelihood and habitat. The fight had been long, arduous and not yielding the desired results. The revenue and the forest departments seemed to be at loggerheads with each other. The voice of the tribals amidst all this was getting drowned. Frustration among the tribal communities was rising and some of the younger leaders were advocating a more strident approach as we had hit a seemingly unsurmountable roadblock. The forest department was unwilling to part with the land identified for resettlement, while the tribals were unwilling to translocate once more without adequate guarantees and protection. The state and central governments had differing views on the release of land for rehabilitation and it looked as if we were running out of options unless the highest office of the land intervened.

But then, how does one get to be seen and heard, especially at such levels? I was still a young man whose only resource seemed to be passion, perseverance and a deep desire to fight the injustice meted out to the tribals. Unsure of how to proceed,

I approached a sympathetic bureaucrat whose batchmate was the joint secretary in the Prime Minister's Office and had then Prime Minister Vajpayee's ears. It was that kind soul who explained to me that the PM had a soft corner for marginalized people, especially tribals. He let me know that the PM would start his day only after reading his preferred newspapers and he only read a couple of newsmagazines. He asked if I could get the plight of these tribals written about in these newspapers and magazines. This, he said, was the best way to ensure that the PM got to understand the situation and start the ball rolling for the solutions that could potentially emerge.

If reaching the PM was considered near impossible, I presumed that reaching out to compassionate journalists and editors who believed

Regulatory pressures compel NGOs to limit their presence in the media. Also, media houses are bottom line driven. But there are opportunities to communicate for far less and more easily.

in our cause would be the next challenge. But I was surprised by the support and response that I received from them. These were not armchair journalists pretending to be interested in development issues. They turned out to be serious people who wanted to get their feet dirty and come down and spend time with the affected people themselves. What resulted were insightful articles capturing the decade-long struggle and the knotted responses of the system. The articles did not stop there. They also offered solution frameworks one could consider, provided the different arms of the government aligned themselves. And this is what the PM read and appreciated. I was reached out to and magically the solutions started to flower.

The then chief minister of Karnataka, S.M. Krishna, convened a special cabinet meeting that

was held in our tribal school with all the tribal chieftains attending it. All pending differences were ironed out. The next year saw a complicated and lengthy struggle end in a people-driven rehabilitation plan that is a standing testimony to what media advocacy can achieve when it is coupled with compassionate political leadership at both national and state levels.

SHIFTING PRIORITIES

Fast-forwarding to the current times, one is saddened to see the shifting editorial outlooks and media priorities. The recent migrant crisis that emerged after the lockdown seemed to get far less media attention than the continued 24/7 coverage of the death of a movie star. The pros and cons of the amendment to labour legislation brought in by several states get less newspaper space than our movie stars and politicians testing positive for COVID. Is this shifting priority a product of the changed ecosystem or is it just driven by market forces? Is there a combination of factors that has now resulted in a reduced appetite for development news?

While one cannot have a single-size-fits-all answer, I feel that one needs to take a helicopter view of the current situation to understand this issue more deeply. Societal priorities have changed post the 90s. Increasing consumerism, enhanced access to credit, growing markets and higher purchasing power have shifted how one reacts to issues of poverty and development. While activism is also seeing a downward trend, it seems to be revolving around political narratives rather than serious social or developmental issues. The country is also seeing a growing polarization — whether it is driven by differing ideas or ideologies, by political inclinations or religion, and dialogue is no longer the norm. It is more about the loudest voice capturing newspaper headlines and prime time TV debates. With this lack of substance, the common man is inclined to lose interest or become fatigued by everything that seems to be aimlessly going on around him.

Due to survival pressures and the growing fear of how the regulatory ecosystem will view their advocacy, NGOs too are limiting their media expressions to tokenism nowadays. Added to this is the corporatization of media houses where the bottomline is no longer driven by societal change but by balance sheet pressures. The shift of people's preferences to other channels of communication —



Tribals and officials finally meet thanks to media coverage

blogs, WhatsApp, online news, Twitter, YouTube, and so on — has caused both an overload of information and a reduced interest in people. It is also a double-edged sword, making it difficult to separate the 'real' from the 'fake', and a generalized cynicism seems to be creeping in.

TRP OBSESSION

Television journalism's obsession with TRPs has further reduced the visibility of non-sensational development news. Moreover, human development is a long-drawn generational process and has several players with differing perspectives engaging in it. It has neither the glamour nor the drama that can attract eyeballs and garner advertisement revenues. The short-term attention of people today demands a 'product' rather than a 'process' which is an added challenge for development journalism. Understanding development is a cerebral exercise while people seek short entertainment value items that they can relate to. It is only understandable that the audience and its appetite for development news is shrinking and one now needs to compete with a media that seems to be catering to people's demands and market choices.

What options, then, does an NGO have in today's world? I feel that there are several. These are exciting times for an NGO to communicate its views and ideas more easily and at far less cost than ever before. This is a world where democratization of communication has emerged, and it needs to be exploited by NGOs in a strategic and intentional manner. NGOs need to learn to expand the repository of tools available with them and go with the trends rather than lamenting the changes occurring in the world around them. One needs to understand the medium and the audience and learn

how to capsule content by making it both interesting and entertaining. It is not about reducing the seriousness of development issues but about making it a priority for the viewer/reader.

The current COVID crisis should be seen as an opportunity for doing this. One has to learn how to repurpose information and build narratives of development around this issue. From climate justice to human lifestyles, from economic policies to social safety nets, from profit maximization to benefit optimization, from the role of the public sector to making capitalism compassionate, from growing inequities to ensuring value for all stakeholders — this would be the ideal time for NGOs to start voicing their development concerns in a manner that combines the power of evidence and emotive presentation.

One needs to begin focusing on three major elements — creating awareness of the issue or problem, backing it with the credibility to be speaking on the issue, and goading the audience into concrete

One needs to know the medium and the audience and learn how to capsule content by making it more interesting and entertaining so that it becomes a priority for the viewer/reader.

action that can be undertaken both at an individual and community level. It is about narrating the issue in a manner that does not overwhelm or paralyze the reader but offers pragmatic solutions and spreads hope. Practical options for doing this include writing blogs, books, columns in mainstream media, learning to use social media intelligently, and building in-house strategic communication capabilities. Today's technology offers options that have very little or no cost of production and NGOs need to learn how to maximize the power of audio, video and written material.

SPREADING THE WORD

The time has come for development journalism to be integral to the functions of an NGO and not be sought as a service from professional journalists alone. Several problems today have their root cause in the asymmetry of information leading to the asymmetry of power and solutions for these cannot be achieved only by NGOs engaged in service activities. It can happen only when one evolves into being a provider of credible, authentic and evidential information to all stakeholders of development, getting them to engage in issues that resonate with the current times and finally empower them to be part of the solution rather than being mere spectators of development events occurring around them.

If the earlier NGO narrative was about being in the news, the current mandate should be on democratizing information, enlightening stakeholders, engaging communities, and creating a society of empowered citizens. And when development journalism evolves into this, then one can hope that the 'voice' will drown out the 'noise'. ■

Dr R. Balasubramaniam, founder of the Swami Vivekananda Youth Movement, Mysuru, is a development activist and author. www.drbbalu.com

FARM MAGAZINE BY FARMERS WORKS WELL FOR THEM

Adike Patrike not only provides useful information for farmers, it also runs campaigns on water harvesting, organic farming and more.



SHREE PADRE

IN more ways than one, *Adike Patrike* is a unique publication. We tread a new path in content, reportage and presentation. We source most of our stories from experienced farmers. The magazine is of, by and for farmers.

Many farmers contribute to writing articles, editing, publishing and even distributing *Adike Patrike*. We term our brand of journalism 'self-help journalism.'

I was a freelance journalist when we started the magazine. Being a farmer myself, I knew the drawbacks of the farm media at that time. But we had no idea of how to produce a magazine. Nor were there any farmer-friendly periodicals we could turn to as examples.

The All India Areca Growers' Association, an apolitical farmers organization, is our parent body. It is several decades old. They gave us our initial start-up capital. We also generated our own funds. Many years later, the Farmer First Trust was floated to manage our publishing activity.

But let's go back to 1988, when *Adike Patrike* began. It was a period of crisis for farmers like us. The areca nut market had collapsed. Unlike earlier collapses, this one extended for a few years. At this juncture, a new president took over the All India Areca Growers' Association. The demand for a 'farmers' own publication' was voiced. I, a freelancer, was asked to take the lead and submit a report. My report advocated a magazine which had a new farmer-friendly approach. The idea was well-received. And lo and behold, we plunged into an unknown world.

Media pundits gave us two dire warnings. They advised us to produce a quarterly. You won't get material for a shorter periodicity, they said. They also said that our magazine wouldn't sell on news stands and that we would have to literally force people to buy subscriptions.

We insisted on a monthly. I felt a quarterly wouldn't be taken seriously. The day we released the first advertisement of *Adike Patrike* in newspapers, we started getting enquiries from agencies. Today we have over 125 agencies in five districts.

Adike means areca nut or *supari*. The nut grows on a tall perennial tree (*Areca catechu*). It's the main cash crop of five districts in Karnataka and the adjoining district of Kasaragod in Kerala. The two states produce 70 percent of India's areca nut.

Adike Patrike's target reader is the areca nut farmer. He grows a variety of crops like coconut, cocoa, pepper and cardamom. Therefore the information the farmer needs is also diverse — animal husbandry, manure, irrigation, labour-saving devices, banking, post-harvest technologies, to name a few. We cater to this demand for information.

ALL THEORY

What was the state of farm journalism when we entered the scene? There were a few government-owned farm publications. Agricultural experts, three or four together, used to write for newspapers and farm journals to get academic credit. Their sole objective was to write for the sake of writing. They weren't practising farming. They didn't source information from fields or address ground realities

Agricultural scientists were writing on what they thought would be good for farmers. It was old wine in older bottles. There were many details about the crop, but none about the farmer who had grown that crop.

The net result was that instead of being helpful, many articles actually misled farmers. Ironically,

Farmers should be able to implement the information provided in a farm journal. To do that journalists require a deep knowledge of their target group's profession.

those who grew crops, the farmers, were not expressing themselves.

Cinema, sports or political publications have only two dimensions — you buy them and you read them. But periodicals on farming, electronics or bee-keeping are different. They have an important third dimension — implementation. To do that journalists require deep understanding of their target group's profession.

Farm publications offer new agriculture practices, new crops, newer technologies and so on. If this information is useful, it can be a blessing for farming families. But if the information that was published proves to be untested or wrong, it might put farmers in deep trouble.

One recent example is the extension of oil palm cultivation to areas without irrigation. Several farmers cut or burnt their five or six-year-old plantations in desperation since the crop was dismal. Such cases are not uncommon. A farm publication's duty is to double-check its content, use self-restraint and avoid publishing information that is only of commercial interest.

We consider all these issues and we are cautious when we consider a topic for publication. This has helped us build a reputation for reliability and farmer-friendliness.

REWRITING THE RULES

What is the criterion we use when we decide on a story? First of all, it should be useful and implementable for our farmer-readers. If not, it should at least expand their knowledge. The story should also be exclusive.

We can't rely on unsolicited articles that come through mail. We keep a constant watch on the goings-on in our country. This is essential to zero in on relevant stories. First, we identify a topic. Then we commission selected journalists to do the story. We follow a two-step approach for content generation. For our lead stories, I or my team members personally visit the site.

There is a second method we follow. If there is an interesting development, we contact the concerned farmer. Most of them don't know how to write an article. To help them, we send a questionnaire after explaining the story on the phone. After receiving answers, we phone again to clarify everything. Sometimes we straightaway interview the farmer over the phone. If there is a farmer who can write, we commission the story from him or her.

We use WhatsApp in a big way. If the reporter

and the information provider have good rapport, we can produce valuable stories. Out of the many stories we published, the one on the Malaysian jackfruit farm is memorable. Two gentlemen of Indian origin, living in Malaysia, developed a 30-acre jackfruit farm. They shared each and every detail of the methods they employed with us. These techniques were not known to anyone in our country.

Another useful story was of a huge dehydration unit, equipped with two dozen big solar dryers, in Nashik district of Maharashtra. Nashik is a large, vegetable-growing belt. Market collapse is a recurrent phenomenon. Whenever prices of vegetables crashed, this unit would buy the vegetables and dehydrate them. They created a market for dehydrated vegetables. Large hotels, ships and the city of Mumbai bought from them. We did this story with the help of WhatsApp.

Experiences like this one inspired us to conduct a 'WhatsApp Journalism Workshop'. This method does have some limitations, but works well in certain contexts. In a way, this can be compared to citizen reporting.

ACTIVISM AND IMPACT

In three decades, *Adike Patrike* has initiated five movements.

In the first 10 years we came up with the idea of training farmers in farm journalism. Many professional journalists lack even working knowledge of farming. Instead of pinning hopes on them, why not impart basic writing skills to interested farmers?

So, in the next few years, we conducted five workshops in villages in different districts. We called this movement *Krishikara Kaige Lekhani* (pen in the farmer's hand). When we concluded our movement, we published a handbook with the same title.

Inspired by our initiative, the Centre for Agricultural Media, a like-minded organization, started conducting diploma courses in farm journalism. Today many such trainees — some are agriculture officers — write for different publications. All these efforts have helped to revitalize and upgrade farm journalism.

Our second movement was on chemical-free farming. We were the first to publish a series on vermi-composting in the early 1990s which continues to be popular. The third was a campaign on rainwater harvesting. The fourth was on farmer-centred value addition to augment the income of farmers. Our latest one is jackfruit development. (Read *Civil Society*, May 2018.)

What impact did we have over the years? Some tangible and some not. Our community-owned magazine brought positive changes to the world of journalism and the farming community.

The old way of writing on farming issues is disappearing. Scientists writing with an addendum of names has almost vanished. Newspaper editors have realized the importance of ascertaining the views of farmers. Actual field work — visiting the farm and talking to farmers — is another important criterion that is now insisted on. More interviews with farmers are appearing in both print and

electronic media. With social media's popularity and spread rising, there are many more stories on farming, tips, YouTube videos and so on circulating. Some are really good, useful. Some others are misleading and amateurish.

We don't believe in restricting ourselves to print. In partnership with other organizations, we have been conducting awareness and training programmes on micro-irrigation, electronic fencing, biological control of pests, skill training for areca nut tree climbing, jackfruit festivals and seminars.

We started a 'plant friendship' organization called Samruddhi which has now completed 25 years. Farmers from five taluks meet every month, go on educational tours and exchange planting materials

Adike Patrike's article on rainwater harvesting. They talked to us and started harvesting rain in a big way. One of the worst droughts in memory happened three years ago, but they had ample water.

In six districts, *Adike Patrike* is now remembered for having initiated water consciousness. Rooftop water harvesting became the most followed method. Today thousands of houses have implemented this effective technology without seeking any government help.

We also highlighted technology which could extract virgin coconut oil. It led to a movement in Tumkur district. Not less than 10 farmers are now using these simple machines to make coconut oil.

Our campaign on jackfruit development increased awareness, use and domestic consumption of this much ignored fruit. Today a wedding or a function in the home of a farmer is incomplete without jackfruit dishes. Many small-scale

jackfruit processing units have sprung up. There has also been innovation, like coffee from jackfruit seeds, which is now sold by half a dozen entrepreneurs in Kerala. We gleaned this idea from the Philippines and propagated it.

Adike Patrike introduced Rajasthan's Ada bore well digging technology here, and began cabbage cultivation for the first time in Kasaragod. We organized tomato plant grafting and introduced the recipe for tender coconut jelly from the Philippines. All these initiatives were really useful for our farmers.

We have, on invitation, done workshops on farmer-friendly journalism for NGOs and government institutions. There are requests that we bring out *Adike Patrike* in English.

Pramod Jadhav, Deputy Commissioner of Maharashtra, gets *Adike Patrike* translated locally. Dr Sarthak Chowdhury, professor of Agriculture Extension at the Institute of Agricultural Science at Viswa Bharati University in Santiniketan, has been using our magazine as course material for his students for eight years after translating it.

Adike Patrike is now 33 years old. We look back in surprise. How did we sustain our venture despite so many challenges? We don't get subsidies from the government. No institution or funding agency sponsors us.

We have a full-fledged office and a small team at Puttur in coastal Karnataka. Our only sources of income are advertisements and magazine sales. We manage on a shoestring budget. Because of our support to chemical-free farming, fertilizer and pesticide companies don't advertise with us. That's okay. We have no regrets. Except for two months, when the COVID lockdown began, we have never missed a single issue. For 33 years, we have been there on the stands, on time.

There are always takers for need-based information. It's not easy to generate such content. Marketing is also challenging but not impossible. The biggest ingredient you need for success is to work with all your heart: *dil se kaam karo*. ■

Shree Padre is editor of *Adike Patrike*. Email: shreepadre@gmail.com



We came up with the idea of training farmers in farm journalism. Many journalists lack a working knowledge of farming. Why pin hopes on them?

of vegetable and ornamental plants. This has boosted interest in vegetable cultivation.

We weren't experts when we started our campaign on rainwater harvesting in 1996. We began with a monthly series of success stories on rainwater harvesting by ordinary people titled "*Nela Jala Ulisalau Nooru Vidhi*" (hundreds of ways to conserve soil and water). The series ran for eight years.

The stories were well-received. We began getting requests to run awareness programmes by showcasing our success stories. Between 2002 and 2005, I must have travelled not less than 25,000 km all over southern Karnataka to present over 300 rainwater harvesting slideshows in workshops. Mainstream dailies invited me to write a regular column. We published a few books on these success stories.

One example we like to cite is of Diwakar Bhat and Sripathy Bhat. The two brothers, who live in Kadakoli in Sirsi, have a large areca nut farm. Fed up of acute water shortages, they were on the verge of selling their property. At that juncture, they read

Continued from Page 39

charged with inciting, through a fiery song of his, the suicide of a Mumbai manhole cleaner. The film is a trenchant commentary not only on the bizarre ways in which the law works, but also on the restrictions that are sought to be clamped on freedom of expression in the world's largest democracy.

In *The Disciple*, Tamhane drills his way into a completely different Mumbai milieu. Will the same unerring eye for detail that made *Court* such a wonderfully effective film be on show in the new work as well? "I was not familiar with either setting, which is what attracted me in the first place," he says. Tamhane's approach to storytelling, it would seem, rests upon the urge to explore new spaces and come up with fresh insights unaffected by pre-conceived notions.

He says: "*The Disciple* needed plenty of research and a lot of study. I required some knowledge of Indian classical music before I could even start talking about the subject." So, he plunged "without any agenda or story in mind" into what was a new domain for him. "The theme and the characters emerged from the process of research," he says.

"If you are too familiar with the setting, you tend to take it for granted. Here, I'm seeing everything with fresh eyes, absorbing without judgment and trying to grasp the different aspects somewhat like a kid in a candy store," he explains.

"I approached this world almost like a journalist, interviewing people, attending concerts and slowly entering it and getting familiar with it," he says. "*Court* was very objective. You observe everybody from a distance. In *The Disciple*, you follow the journey of one protagonist and almost get into his mind. It's a lot more romantic, nostalgic and atmospheric."

NEW WAYS OF WORKING

The six-year gap between his first film and his second was necessitated in part by all the travelling that *Court* did. "What happened with *Court*," says Tamhane, "is that after the world premiere, it went to numerous festivals. Then we had to do the India release of the film ourselves, the Oscar campaign took a lot of time, and then the Rolex thing happened. I had to travel to Mexico, London and Los Angeles." And then, of course, a lot of time inevitably went into prepping for *The Disciple*.

"I wouldn't regret the time I took to make *The Disciple* but I want, and hope, to be quicker with my next film," says Tamhane, suppressing a chuckle. But he is quick to add: "People do not remember how much time you took to make a film. They only remember whether the film was good or bad. I therefore think it is all right to be sure-footed."

Has the stint with Cuarón changed Tamhane in any significant manner? "Absolutely," he replies. "Your worldview is yours. I don't think anybody can change that easily. Your personality is inherent and yes, it is also evolving, but change can't be brought about by something external... But being on the sets of *Roma* has definitely changed me as a filmmaker at the level of craft and sensitization to the medium."

Tamhane also reveals that the conversations that he has had with Cuarón and the latter's "feedback and advice" during the making of *The Disciple* "expanded my vocabulary of filmmaking and I can now express my vision better."

Tamhane adds: "I felt I had more control of the medium this time. I also had more resources at my disposal thanks to Vivek (Gomber, producer of *The Disciple*). I could experiment more, be braver with certain choices, spend more time, work with certain collaborators I could not have afforded in the first film. All of them taught me a great deal."

Dwelling upon how much distance he has traversed since *Court*, he says: "I would say *The*



Chaitanya Tamhane with his executive producer, noted Mexican filmmaker Alfonso Cuarón

'In *The Disciple* you follow the journey of one protagonist and almost get into his mind,' says Tamhane.

Disciple is very different although the processes might in some ways be similar. But I had to find new solutions, new ways of working during the making of *The Disciple*. The film is very different in its form as well."

DISCOVERING THE STORY

This is undoubtedly an exciting phase in any filmmaker's life — the leap from the first film to the second and from thence to the next. Tamhane knows that as well as anyone else. "I am still exploring the medium, still trying to find my voice," he says. "I don't want to pigeonhole myself in one particular genre or style. Again, a lot of it boils down to your personality, your intent, your approach. I think it is not even in your control (to decide) what guides you in what you say or what you do as a filmmaker."

The Disciple, according to the film's synopsis, is about a young man who "has devoted himself to becoming an Indian classical vocalist, a lifelong quest in which few succeed. Initiated into this centuries-old tradition by his father, he follows his dream with sincerity and discipline, committing himself entirely to his artistic journey."

It further reads: "As he strives to attain the highest level of his craft, Sharad traces his way through the hallowed mysteries and rituals of past musical

legends. But as the years pass, Sharad will be forced to negotiate between the complex realities of life in contemporary Mumbai and his chosen path, leading him to find his true voice in music and in life."

The Disciple promises to be a distillation of Tamhane's discovery of a Mumbai sub-culture. He wasn't at all into Indian classical music as a boy. "In a lot of Maharashtrian households, classical music is a part of life. People are not only aware of it, they

also go to concerts, some even learn it. I had none of that happening in my house. I did not grow up listening to Indian classical music. I was totally a '90s Mumbai kid growing up on a staple of Hindi films, Marathi television and mainstream theatre."

So when, and why, did he decide to turn the spotlight on classical music? "The starting point for me," he adds, "were the anecdotes I heard about classical music masters of the past and present. These stories fascinated me... Classical music obviously has a rich history... It is a complex world with a lot of different nuances, contradictions and complications."

Significantly, Tamhane has cast two classical vocalists — 30-something Aditya Modak and 77-year-old Arun Dravid — to play the key characters in *The Disciple*. The challenge, he says, was to "find people who could sing and act, have screen presence, and have the inclination and time required for the project".

Mumbai is common to both his films. "I have a love-hate relationship with this city, the only city I've ever lived in. I have seen the city change over the last 30-odd years... It is too chaotic, it is bursting at the seams, it is overcrowded, it is becoming uglier by the day and yet it is a lived experience. It is irresistible, at least for a native. I am immensely fascinated by Mumbai."

When he started out on the research for *The Disciple*, he wondered if classical music was still alive and kicking in Mumbai. "When I actually started attending these concerts, I realized what a vibrant and dynamic sub-culture this is in the city. I was very surprised." *The Disciple*, he says, is "a new way of looking at Mumbai".

In fact, if *The Disciple* has global impact, it could pave the way for the world's leading film festivals to look at Mumbai, and India, in a new light. ■

Tired of Netflix? Check out these other websites

Want to go beyond Netflix and Amazon Prime? A whole range of streaming options out there can deliver the kind of cinema that isn't available in the mainstream. We pick nine of the finest:

MUBI

On this platform the excitement never ceases. Mubi adds one film every day and removes another in a rotating roster. So, there is anticipation every morning as you sign in to check what is new on the platform. The films on Mubi straddle a wide gamut, but the essential focus is on boundary-pushing cinema from across the globe.

Mubi India's subscription-based service adds an Indian film every day, once again representing a wide variety of filmmaking traditions within the country's diverse spectrum of cinematic creativity. Every film offered by the service is accompanied by a critical history, opinions of viewers and other essential information that helps you locate the work and the filmmaker in a defined context.

THE CRITERION CHANNEL

The official streaming channel of the Criterion Collection, a company that restores and distributes film classics, is a veritable treasure trove offering the best of world cinema. It has a library of old films that never go out of vogue as well as select newer titles from around the world.

Also available on the platform are interviews of noted film personalities as well as mini-documentaries that throw light on key cinema movements. The service has a collection of well over 1,000 important classic and contemporary films. It also constantly refreshes its library with Hollywood, indie and arthouse cinema. To subscribe to the Criterion Channel, you need a credit card registered in the US.

BFI PLAYER

This, as the abbreviation implies, is the streaming service of the British Film Institute. Rest assured, therefore, that the fare on offer here measures up to a certain benchmark.

The catch is that films on the platform are currently available only in the UK. You can rent films or subscribe to the service only if you have a British-registered credit card.

If you do, and you are a cinephile, BFI Player is where you should be looking for your daily fix of films. There is the option of renting over 2,000 titles, many of which are fresh off the oven or have just arrived from their festival rounds. Films that a subscription gives you access to aren't quite as varied but they are still worth it. BFI Player also has a lot of free films, but these are mostly shorts and non-fiction footage highlighting Britain through the decades. These too are geo-locked and cannot be played in India.

CINEMAPRENEUR

The latest entrant in the game, www.cinemapreneur.com is a pay-per-view streaming platform that makes independent Indian films, both shorts and features, available globally. Launched on August 1, 2020, the service currently has only 25 titles. It has announced that by the end of the year, it will be streaming as many as 300 films.

Cinemapreneur promises to be the digital home for Indian films that find it hard to break into the mainstream distribution circuit. It already has several films that won national and international awards but were swamped out of the marketplace.

The platform follows a model that ensures that a fair share of the revenue goes to the filmmaker. If Cinemapreneur takes off, it will be a boon for the kind of Indian cinema that reflects the diversity of India and deserves much wider play than it usually gets.

A slew of award-winning Indian films is on the website of the NFDC. For as little as ₹60 per film savour the works of Mrinal Sen, Ketan Mehta, Saeed Akhtar Mirza, Mani Kaul.

IDFA

Films and multimedia projects in the broad-based collection of the world's premier festival of non-fiction cinema, International Documentary Film Festival Amsterdam (IDFA), are available for viewing online. Quite a few of the titles that IDFA has screened over the years may be out of bounds for audiences in the subcontinent — most entries from India and the neighbouring countries are available only in the Netherlands — but what you can watch (some for free) is pure gold. Over 400 films are free to watch, nearly 600 are available on rent. Want to dive into some of the greatest documentaries of our times? Head to the IDFA website.

NFDC/CINEMAS OF INDIA

A slew of award-winning Indian films is on the website of the National Film Development Corporation (NFDC). For as little as ₹60 per film, savour the works of filmmakers like Mrinal Sen, Mani Kaul, Saeed Akhtar Mirza, Ketan Mehta and Goutam Ghose.

A handful of Satyajit Ray's final few films are also in here. Included in the library are more recent critically acclaimed works of directors like Anup Singh, Gurvinder Singh and Ruchika Oberoi, films that have travelled to major international festivals, as well as timeless classics produced by New Theatres.

Visit www.nfcdindia.com, click on the 'Watch Online' tab in the top navigation bar and pick the title you want.

OVID

A streaming service devoted to independent feature films, world cinema and documentaries from around the globe, OVID.tv, as of August 2020, has around 900 titles. The platform offers films that address pressing social and political issues, documentaries on themes of global import, high-quality animation films and the best of international films from renowned directors. Its spread ranges from arthouse films to genre cinema, made by contemporary directors as well as established masters. It seeks "to connect us to our histories, each other, and open up a world of new possibilities". OVID is currently not available in India.

FILMATIQUE

A niche streaming service, Filmatique is currently available only in the US and Canada. However, its journal, which has interviews, essays, festival coverage and reportage of cinema events in New York City, can be accessed worldwide for free. The platform streams carefully curated indie and international films, many of which are barely known outside the countries of production. For film lovers looking for hidden gems, Filmatique is the go-to service. At the moment its library is rather limited and many of its films do not have a closed captioning option. Filmatique aims to promote cinema as a means of fostering "diversity, empathy and understanding across societies and borders".

THE FILM DETECTIVE

A one-stop shop for film classics, this service is a goldmine for nostalgia geeks. It enables you to unearth films lost in the mist of time. This Rockport, Massachusetts-based platform is an archive and television service. Many of the titles available here are in the public domain and can be watched gratis. They have been dug out from oblivion and restored by TFD.

The service has more than 3,000 titles across genres — from horror classics like George A. Romero's *Night of the Living Dead* and the 1937 version *A Star is Born* to Alexander Korda's *The Private Life of Henry VIII* and Vittorio De Sica's *Sophia Loren* and Jean-Paul Belmondo-starrer *Two Women*. The films are available for free with ads. If you subscribe to the service, the films play without ads. ■

HUMDRUM CITY LIFE, CRIME, SUSPENSE...

10 BENGALI FILMS WORTH WATCHING

CINEMA'S GREATS like Satyajit Ray, Ritwik Ghatak and Mrinal Sen once held Bengali cinema's flag aloft on the global stage. But over the years, the film industry in Kolkata has gone strangely insular. Stories that it puts on the screen these days skim the surface of the state's social and cultural diversity. But all may not be lost. Outside the charmed circle of Kolkata's multiplex mavens, a breed of writer-directors — several of them, encouragingly, debutants — hasn't given up the fight. They foray into areas, experiences and themes that challenge them and their audience, and deliver gems. Such films aren't easy to find because the distribution system is predisposed against them. **Saibal Chatterjee** has drawn up a list of 10 films — produced in the last three years — that prove that the spirit of creative adventure isn't dead and buried in Bengal. Most of these titles are available on streaming platforms. Watch them right away if you haven't already. Those that aren't currently available are months, if not weeks, away from landing in our midst. Seek them out.

1 **Ananta (2020) The Eternal** Director: Abhinandan Dutta



FRESH off the oven, *Ananta* has yet to reveal itself to the world. But it is a film that simply has to be on this list, such is its quality. First-time director Abhinandan Dutta captures the monotony of urban life in the daily chores of Shubho (Ritwik Chakraborty), an out-of-work young man who has inherited an ancestral house that fetches him enough money by way of rent to make ends meet, and Mishtu (Sohini Sarkar), a schoolteacher who lives with an alcoholic father. Both are emotionally scarred individuals on whom time weighs heavy. They seek to lose themselves in the routine circularity of their day. From his balcony, Shubho watches Mishtu go to work every morning.

At a specific time of day every afternoon, the two cross each other fleetingly on a staircase strewn with autumn leaves but they do not exchange any words. A connection between the two is suggested but the meetings do not translate into a fully expressed relationship. A lyrical, empathetic rumination on loss, longing and waiting, *Ananta* has a rich soundtrack designed to denote the inexorable passage of time even as the lives of Shubho and Mishtu seem to be poignantly stagnant. A ticking clock, running trains, flowing water, clucking pigeons, other sounds of nature and a wide variety of musical instruments orchestrated to create an immersive aural wraparound. *Ananta* is a story of a love that is like a gurgling stream in eternal flow. You can dip your hands into it but you cannot grasp it within your palm. The film is pretty much the same.

(Not streaming yet)

2 **Binisutoy (2019) Without Strings** Director: Atanu Ghosh



AN instantly striking variation on the theme of urban alienation, the delectable *Binisutoy* sees director Atanu Ghosh exploring the minds of two seemingly successful city-bred individuals through the stories they spin about themselves to get away from the soullessness of their existence. Is living a lie, even if only momentarily, a good enough refuge from the angst brought on by societal expectations and family responsibilities? Perhaps not, but for Srabani Barua (Jaya Ahsan), general manager of a tea company owned by her family, and Kajal Sarkar (Ritwik Chakraborty), a senior executive in a construction firm, it is an act of defiance, of liberation, of assertion. Nothing may come out of the personas and the yarns they weave. Yet the effort is worth it. Ghosh adopts a tone that blurs the line between the teasing and tantalizing on the one hand and the contemplative and poignant on the other. At once enchanting and intriguing in a quiet, genteel sort of way, *Binisutoy* reveals the inner worlds of the two principal characters through subtle twists rather than grand gestures.

3 **Parcel (2020)** Director: Indrasis Acharya



UPTURNING the conventions of a tale of mystery and suspense, director Indrasis Acharya, in his third film, probes the impact of surprise revelations on the relationship of an apparently well-adjusted middle-class couple in Kolkata. Both are doctors although the wife (played by Rituparna Sengupta, also the film's producer) has quit her practice. They have a musically-inclined little daughter. Everything seems to be coasting along nicely when the woman begins to receive parcels (with photographs, flowers and other articles) from a mystery source. As secrets of her past threaten to tumble out into the

open, the wife is compelled to take stock of her own life, her relationships and the society she lives in. In a unique manner, Acharya dovetails the personal tale into the larger realities of the times. The film delves into aspects of the anxieties triggered by the act of getting through life in an urban expanse bursting at the seams and struggling to sustain its civic support systems — here, the city's shaky healthcare infrastructure is under the spotlight. Average Bengali films are literal-minded and overly committed to cause-and-effect plotting. *Parcel* isn't an average film, Bengali or otherwise. It offers no easy closure, leaving us with the questions that it asks. Expect no pat answers from *Parcel*.

(*Parcel* was theatrically released just before the COVID-19 pandemic shut down cinema halls. Not streaming yet, but you can catch Indrasis Acharya's previous two films, both exceptional — *Bilu Rakkhosh* on Netflix and *Pupa* on Amazon Prime).

4 **Mayar Jonjal (2020) Debris of Desire** Director: Indranil Roychowdhury

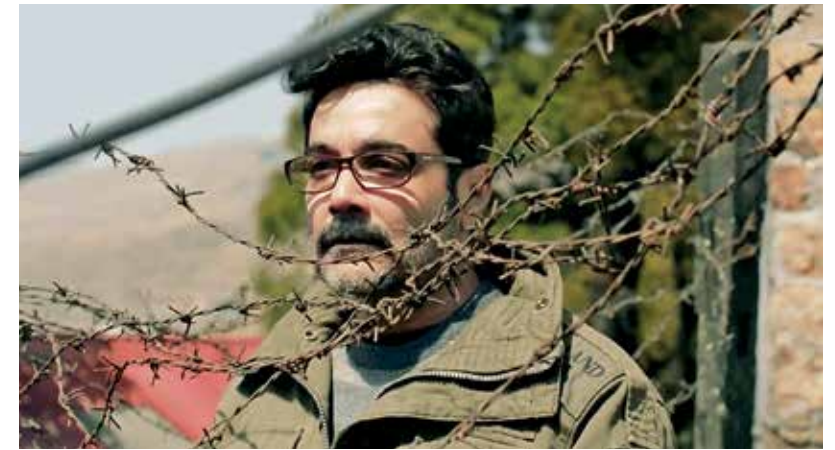


ANOTHER brand-new Bengali film, *Mayar Jonjal* premiered recently at the Shanghai International Film Festival, the first post-pandemic event to be held physically. It marks a return to the big screen for Indranil Roychowdhury, who burst on the scene in 2013 with the critically acclaimed *Phoring*. *Mayar Jonjal* is a powerful diptych adapted from two stories by Bengali writer Manik Bandopadhyay. The film, an Indo-Bangladeshi co-production, takes a long, hard look at Kolkata's underbelly as it probes the effects of neo-liberalism and self-seeking politics on those struggling to survive on the fringes of a rapidly developing city. The two stories it narrates are peopled by gangsters, land sharks, small-time criminals, prostitutes, unpaid factory workers and maidservants, all pushed to the brink by poverty and other misfortunes. A conman feigns love for a sex worker (Chandreyee Ghosh), a migrant from across the border, and hopes to swindle her of her savings. A lower middle-class family man and low-level political worker (Ritwik Chakraborty) is troubled by the fact that his wife (Bangladeshi actress Aupee Karim, making a comeback after a long hiatus) has begun to work as a maidservant in a high-end condominium. The paths of the two men cross. The consequences are disastrous. *Mayar Jonjal* is a story of greed and hope, misogyny and misuse of power. Above all, it is a cautionary tale about a world on the brink of an implosion.

(Not streaming yet)

In *Binisutoy*, director Atanu Ghosh explores the minds of two seemingly successful city-bred individuals through the stories they spin about themselves to get away from the soullessness of their existence.

5 **Nirontor (2020) The Prologue** Director: Chandrasish Ray



CHANDRASISH Ray's debut film is a character-driven drama in which the focus is more on the characters than on the drama. Its introspective quality infuses the film with a deeply affecting, melancholic air. A middle-aged engineer, played by Prosenjit Chatterjee, who has bankrolled the film, travels to a hill location with an assistant (Satyam Bhattacharya) to look for a plot for a new holiday resort. But the purpose of the trip soon takes a backseat as the relationship between the two colleagues, which starts off on the wrong foot, begins to evolve into one of affection, trust and bonhomie. One man carries the burden of the past, the other looks to the future with trepidation. The two reveal themselves to each other, bit by bit. And then fate intervenes. Life takes a new turn back in Kolkata. The debutant director handles the material with impressive panache, never overreaching, never stretching a point too far. *Nirontor* is a mellow exploration of two generations negotiating with each other. Beautifully shot by cinematographer Soumik Halder, the film lingers on the beauty of the mountain locations and the deserted night time street that runs through a residential big-city locality with equal vibrancy.

(Streaming on Zee5)

6 **Raahgir (2009) The Wayfarers** Director: Goutam Ghose



THIS is the odd one out. *Raahgir* isn't a Bengali-language film but it is the latest work of Bengal's Goutam Ghose. It is the 70-year-old director's first Hindi-language film since *Yatra* (2006). In *Raahgir*, he is back among the most marginalized people of rural India through a story that, in contrast to *Maa Bhoomi*, *Dakhal* and *Paar*, underscores the goodness of the human spirit amid crushing poverty and deprivation. His early-career explorations of rural distress were marked by anger and despair. The plaintive tone of *Raahgir* is tempered with profound humanism mirrored in the solidarity that the dispossessed build among themselves as a defence mechanism. The film also looks for beauty and brightness amid an air of gloom. *Raahgir* brings together three of the finest screen actors of our times — Adil Hussain, Tillotama Shome and Neeraj Kabi — in a restrained drama that probes the ramifications that privation has on individuals who are condemned to exist at subsistence level. The screenplay, written by Ghose and Jagannath Guha, examines how the protagonists hold on to the kindness of strangers and are united by hunger.

(*Raahgir*, which had its world premiere at the Busan International Film Festival in 2019, is not yet on a streaming platform)

7 Robibaar (On a Sunday)

Director: Atanu Ghosh



ATANU Ghosh's second entry on this list of unmissable Bengali films is an understated romance with the heart of a complex and demanding psychological drama. The two-hander unfolds in the course of a single day but takes into its sweep a time-frame that spans at least 15 years. Without resorting to any conventional means — either flashbacks or verbose conversations — the brilliantly scripted film places before the audience the past and present of a man-woman relationship that is beyond repair and yet is worth our attention. The two individuals who have drifted apart seek, from their respective standpoint, either escape or engagement. Sayani (Jaya Ahsan) is a law officer in a corporate firm. She is writing a book on white-collar crimes. Asimabha (Prosenjit Chatterjee), with whom she broke up amid bitterness 15 years ago, is a loner and a fraudster with nine pending cases of cheating and forgery against him. The non-judgmental *Robibaar* examines a soured affair that can now only be salvaged if Sayani and Asimabha can put the past behind them and strike a deal with each other. It is a film about forgetting and mending. But is either even possible? While Appu Prabhakar's camera captures Kolkata and its surroundings in shifting luminescence as dawn turns to high noon, and evening gives way to night, a very sophisticated musical score by Debojyoti Mishra highlights the fissures that separate the protagonists. *Robibaar* has gotten as close to being a masterpiece as any Bengali film in recent years.

(Streaming on www.hoichoi.tv)**8 Jonaki (2018)**

Director: Aditya Vikram Sengupta



JONAKI is Aditya Vikram Sengupta's sophomore effort, a work for the ages. The filmmaker won instant admirers with his 2014 dialogue-less debut *Asha Jaoar Majhe* (Labour of Love). In *Jonaki*, he goes several steps forward in search of his own idiom, employing heightened reality and complex dreamscapes to probe love, loss, death, grief and social decay. The result is a film of stunning images and beautiful moments that blend hypnotic surrealism with visual poetry. Built with remembrances of stories that his grandmother told the director, *Jonaki* paints a portrait of the life of a woman whose quest for happiness and fulfilment were thwarted by an affluent family dangling between western values and social conservatism. A domineering mother, a father who dies prematurely, a love affair erased, a teenage marriage... all part of a chronicle resting on snatches of memory.

(Jonaki streams on Netflix)

9 Ami O Manohar (2018) Manohar and I

Director: Amitabha Chatterji



SHOT in black and white on an iPhone (mostly in available light) by cinematographer Modhura Palit, *Ami O Manohar* is a self-assured, exquisitely composed study of loneliness. The film's protagonist is a young working woman who lives with her elder sister. On the way back to her suburban home every day, she meets a man who is months away from retirement. It becomes a daily routine. They talk. The man says he is happily married. The girl claims she has a boyfriend. Neither is speaking the truth. Pretence is the cloak they don to conceal the drudgery of their lives. The man does most of the talking, the girl listens, volunteering personal information only sparingly. They seek solace in memory and imagination. But can they wish away their ennui-filled present? Substance and form coalesce perfectly in *Ami O Manohar*, composed of languid, static single takes that convey the burden of inescapable reality. Director Amitabha Chatterji's first film carves out 'spaces' and moments in time that convey the emptiness of hollowed-out lives in a manner that is not only universal but also vividly expressive. He employs means that are purely imagistic and relies on suggestion rather than explication to tell his story of three enervated souls clinging on to what is lost and seeking to conjure up, in their minds, what is desired.

10 Kedara (2019)

Director: Indraadip Dasgupta



MUSIC composer Indraadip Dasgupta's directorial debut is remarkable in every respect. Bolstered by a phenomenal lead performance by Kaushik Ganguly and a fabulous background score by Bollywood's premier male singer, Arijit Singh, *Kedara* is about an ageing ventriloquist who lives alone in a dilapidated ancestral home in a middle-class Kolkata neighbourhood. Both the man and his calling have been left behind by time. He seeks refuge in a world that he creates for himself. He mimics the voices of his departed dear ones and converses with them to while away his time. His wife has left him. He is ridiculed by the wastrels at the local tea stall. His only friend, a junk dealer, gifts him an ornate *kedara* (armchair). It sparks a transformation. He acquires a new sense of confidence. His own world changes, but the world outside, represented by political goons who have their eyes on a part of his house, has only gotten worse. Filled with surreal touches, marked by a storytelling style that eschews superficial methods and backed by phenomenally evocative sound design, *Kedara* is an out-of-the-ordinary cinematic achievement.

(Available on www.hoichoi.tv)**BOOKS & AUTHORS**

REVIEWS | INTERVIEWS | PROFILES | LISTINGS

Deep dive in the jungle**Civil Society Reviews**

INDIA's wondrous natural heritage is still a hidden gem for most Indians. Not for them the deep jungle, the steep climb or a chance encounter with a slithery snake. No offence, but heritage for middle class India implies the Taj Mahal, the ruins of Hampi or perhaps the Ellora Caves.

This anthology, *Wild Treasures*, lures readers into another world of heritage sites, of forests, mountains, grasslands and a plethora of wildlife. The editors, Perna Singh Bindra, Sonali Ghosh and Anuranjan Roy, have put together a series of pieces by a galaxy of writers: wildlife conservationists, scientists, researchers, forest officers, biologists, historians, journalists and even Amitav Ghosh.

This is nature writing at its best, compelling and informative.

Almost all of India's major national parks, protected areas and wildlife sanctuaries are covered: the Great Himalayan National Park, Kaziranga, Keoladeo, Khangchendzonga, Manas, Nanda Devi, the Valley of Flowers, Sundarbans and the Western Ghats. The anthology then crosses borders to write about natural heritage sites in Nepal, Sri Lanka, Afghanistan, Myanmar and Iran.

"People aren't aware of natural heritage sites like Manas or Kaziranga or the 39 sites in the Western Ghats," remarks Bindra. "We wanted the anthology to be readable and inspire people to care about our ecological wealth."

Bindra got a visiting fellowship from UNESCO's Category 2 Centre which works under the aegis of the Wildlife Institute of India (WTI) in Dehradun. Her mandate was to organize a nature writing festival which she did in February 2017. "It actually morphed into a nature and cultural festival. We had writers like Stephen Alter and Ranjit Lal. Forest officers spoke of their experiences. Regional poets recited poignant poetry in beautiful Hindi. It was all very moving."

The festival got people interested in natural heritage sites. Sonali Ghosh, a forest officer, headed the Category 2 Centre at that time. She was keen to build on the momentum created by the festival and that's how the idea of an anthology was born.

Putting together varied writings wasn't very difficult, says Bindra. A community of people came on board because of their shared interest in nature. *Sanctuary* magazine, where Bindra once worked as a journalist, gave her access to their archives. The book is also beautifully illustrated by Vivek Sarkar and neatly edited.

"This range of writing depicts India's diversity. We are such a blessed country to have such a diversity of landscapes. I especially liked getting



The Keoladeo National Park, famed for its birds



Perna Bindra

Wild Treasures
Wildlife Institute
of India; Perna
Singh Bindra,
Sonali Ghosh,
Anuranjan Roy
₹499

article is on the Great Himalayan National Park in Himachal Pradesh, the deep connect of the people with nature and the importance of an integrated approach to conservation.

Sandeep Pande was posted to Sikkim. His piece, "Securing Khangchendzonga: Happy Forests, Happy People," is a remarkable story of how this region, revered as sacred, was creatively rescued from poaching, ranching and tourism with political backing by Chief Minister Pawan Chamling. When the lucrative cardamom crop was struck by disease, new plantations were raised with MGNREGA funds.

Bindra also recommends reading Stephen Alter's essay, "Writing Outdoors." There is good advice here for aspiring nature writers. Read Samia Saif, a brave researcher and conservationist, on the difficulties of saving tigers in the Sunderbans.

Read also Ullas Karanth on the predators of Nagarhole, Asad Rahmani on the Bengal Florican in Kaziranga and on Manas, Anuranjan Roy's affectionate piece on the creepy crawlies of the Western Ghats, Erach Bharucha on sacred groves and E.R.C. Davidar on saving the Nilgiri Tahr. Bhutan's Queen Mother, Ashi Dorji Wangmo Wangchuck, has penned a memorable piece on the Royal Manas National Park. Bindra too has written a lively and engaging piece on her journey through sites in the Western Ghats.

There are also archival material and historical narratives. Salim Ali's humorous piece on the birds

Continued on page 46



Manas Wildlife Sanctuary in Assam

of Keoladeo is reproduced. And, moving back in time, Francis Younghusband's rapturous ode to Kanchenjunga is almost funny. Read also E.P. Gee's first-hand account of discovering a primate near Manas and how it got named after him.

So how does one protect this valuable natural heritage? The universal axiom is that local people protect forests best. In the past, forest departments and locals were at loggerheads many times but things are changing.

"In all these years in my interaction with forest officials and staff I find that they interact with locals especially in buffer zones and involve them in conservation. It's part of their mandate," says Bindra.

In many remote forested areas, she says, there is no other government department apart from the forest department. It's the rangers and guards who represent the administration.

"There is cooperation. Locals give information of any illegal activity and the forest department helps if they have a health crisis. Villagers also come out to assist if there is an emergency like a forest fire because it impacts them too. The level of participation has increased. The forest department trains locals as guides and there are tiger conservation foundations which help with livelihood and skilling projects."

In fact, some of the pieces penned by forest officers, especially Sandeep Pandey's, are case studies in people's participation in protecting forests.

The real threat to natural heritage sites is from a spate of linear projects likely to come up in ecologically sensitive areas. To make matters worse, a new draft environment impact assessment notification seeks to weaken laws and silence local communities. Environmentalists have objected and called it regressive.

Since it's mostly industry which lobbies for such policies, shouldn't protesters also talk to the business community? "We can't ease pressure on the government. Political will is very critical. Sure, industry lobbies but it is the government which dilutes or changes laws. We do see a weakening of political will. But we have to engage with the

government to conserve these areas," emphasizes Bindra.

Perhaps the pandemic will change business perceptions. It has ruined businesses. Environmentalists point to the exploitation of nature and the consumption of wildlife for an upsurge in zoonotic diseases. "So every ministry, whether it's mining or infrastructure, should be mindful of its impact on the environment and not the environment ministry alone," says Bindra.

Some pieces penned by forest officers are case studies in how local people have been involved in forest protection.

"There is a lot of greenwashing that goes on. Look at Oil India's blowout in Baghjan Tinsukia in Assam. It started in May and ruined one of our finest wetlands, the Dibru Saikhowa Wildlife Sanctuary. Local people are suffering because their groundwater is ruined. It's an ecological disaster by a public sector company," says Bindra.

Another threat is the degradation of forests, and construction of roads and railways through ecologically sensitive areas increasing human-animal conflict. Corridors where animals traditionally crossed over have been segmented by such infrastructure.

"Animals like tigers, lions, leopards, bears are all migrants. They need to travel for sustenance or to find a mate. Earlier they had safe passage because forests were connected. Now they don't so there is more interaction with people and more conflict. I always say, if an animal is invisible it's safe," says Bindra. Her suggestion is to educate people to just let the animal pass. Instead, the sight of a snake or a leopard or a herd of elephants results in crowds, hysteria and violence. The poor animal is beaten up and forced to retaliate.

But, all said and done, in the final analysis, most Indians, especially in rural India, don't mind having animals as neighbours. "We do have conflict but we also have remarkable co-existence. We have 1.3 billion people, grinding poverty, a fast developing economy and in this matrix, an amazing diversity of wildlife. What doesn't get reported is the remarkable acceptance of our people towards animals and that is what has contributed to saving our wildlife," says Bindra. ■

Eureka is in a new home happily with CMYK

The famed children's bookshop is back in Delhi

Sidika Sehgal
New Delhi

IN the midst of the pandemic, a small business which had closed down sprang back to life. Eureka, the iconic bookstore for children in India, had downed its shutters in 2014, hard-hit by e-commerce and high rentals.

Eureka has now reopened inside CMYK, a well-known chain of bookstores in South Delhi's Greater Kailash-II.

"High rentals combined with a drop in sales forced us to close at that time," recalls Venkatesh Swamy, who started the bookstore with Swati Roy in 2003.

Swamy and Roy went on to found Bookaroo, the famed literature festival for children in 2008.

In December 2019, Pramod Kapoor of CMYK and Roli Books called Swamy and Roy to discuss the possibility of sharing the space. "We keep books on art and design. Customers would ask for children's books. We wanted to partner with someone who is entrenched in that world. Swati and Venky are two of the best people in that space," says Kapil Kapoor, Pramod Kapoor's son.

"After we shut in 2014, we did suffer withdrawal symptoms. Now we've got the place, we've got the books and we've got the store up and running," says an upbeat Swamy.

Swamy and Roy worked out a rental and revenue sharing agreement with Kapoor in January and February. The space is shared equally. But the collaboration goes beyond that.

Roy describes the agreement as "two booksellers coming together to serve the community". They plan to do events together and develop the bookstore as a community space. They'd like people to come and talk about books and life, and authors to drop by.

"We want to feed off each other. CMYK doesn't have children's books which we do. We don't keep a lot of books for adults which CMYK does. Now customers will have a larger range to choose from," says Swamy.

These plans are on hold due to the lockdown. "I know there is fear right now of going to physical bookshops. But it will come to an end. It has to," says Kapoor optimistically.

When Roy, 52, and Swamy, 55, started Eureka in 2003, the idea was met with utter disbelief.

"People didn't take children's books seriously then and they still don't. Most people think



Venkatesh Swamy and Swati Roy at Eureka bookstore

children should just study their textbooks and that's it," says Sayoni Basu, publisher of Duckbill Books and their colleague in the world of children's books.

Swamy was working with *Outlook* magazine and Roy with *afaqs!*, a news and media website, when they decided to start Eureka. At that time they would open their bookstore only from 4 pm to 8.30 pm. They kept their jobs for a steady source of income and took the plunge three years later.

By then, the mission to encourage children to read had grown. Roy and Swamy would organize events for their young readers in their small shop. Authors like Ruskin Bond and Paro Anand dropped by and children lined up to get their books autographed.

"We felt that the events we were doing inside the bookstore were not enough. The Indian publishing industry was growing. There were so many new publishers and imprints who were publishing for children. So the time was right to start a literature festival for children. There wasn't any and we were the first ones," says Roy, about starting Bookaroo.

Since 2008, Bookaroo has travelled to 16 cities and done 37 editions including an international fest in Malaysia. A lot of thought goes into curation. "In an adult literature festival, you look at the name of the panelist. In a children's literature festival, content is supreme. We have to excite them with content because names don't matter so much in children's literature," explains Roy.

This year, Bookaroo won't go to other cities but

Brick-and-mortar bookstores help to build a relationship between the author and the seller and create a sense of community.

Roy and Swamy hope to be able to organize the festival in Delhi, in late November. "We are toying with the idea of an online festival," says Roy.

Meanwhile, they have tried to keep children reading and excited about books. Once quarantine became a way of life, they created an online space called the BookarooLitHouse and organized six to eight sessions every month for children.

Paro Anand did a three-day writing workshop, Deepak Dalal led a session on nature and Ajit Narayanan undertook a workshop on cartooning. These were all paid sessions, to ensure that only children who were serious, joined. The modest fee, ₹200 or so, was shared with the author.

Eureka's second innings is a testament to the value bookstores and booksellers add. Basu points out that brick-and-mortar bookstores help to build a relationship between the author and the seller and create a sense of community, unlike

e-commerce platforms. "For a lot of Delhi authors, Swati and Venky help them do that," she added.

"They made reading fun. That's the impression my kids got when they spoke to Swati and Venkatesh. They would discuss characters from children's books with them. That personal relationship they built with the children was very endearing," says a doctor who used to take her daughters who are now grown up, to Eureka.

When old customers found that Eureka was opening again, they reached out to Roy and Swamy on social media and WhatsApp. Some customers brought them gifts and told them not to disappear again.

Roy shared a WhatsApp chat between three friends. One of the girls wrote, "Eureka was my lifeline growing up, I'm so happy they are back." Another girl from Gohana in Haryana wrote to Roy, seeking her help in setting up a library.

When Roy and Swamy were looking for a name for the bookstore, the operative phrase was "discover children's books". They worked backwards from discovery and zeroed in on Eureka. When they asked readers why bookstores were still around, they replied that bookstores were the best place to discover new books. One reader described it as a "treasure hunt".

A muted opening is hardly what Roy and Swamy had hoped for. "Nobody in their right minds would have started a bookstore at this time," says Roy. But now that they are back, they are more determined and excited than ever. ■

RANDOM SHELF HELP

A quick selection from the many books that turn up for review



Organic Farming: Economics, Policy & Practices; Hari Ram Prajapati; SAGE; ₹1,250

This book starts with an extensive description of the economics of organic farming. It describes the state-wise growth of the organic market in India as a result of the proactive policies and actions of successful states. The book also presents exhaustive information about international organic farming rules and regulations based on four principles—health, ecology, fairness and care. These constitute the basis for the formulation of rules and regulations by all countries, and in turn, further enable the expansion and development of organic farming along scientific and democratic lines.



The State of Indian Agriculture: Agricultural Productivity, Food Security & Climate Change; Sanjeev Kumar; SAGE; ₹1,295

The State of Indian Agriculture examines the present scenario in Indian agriculture and studies trends at national as well as state level. The overall objective of the book is to analyze the impact of climate change on Indian agriculture and development and its implications for food security.



Global Commons: Issues, concerns and strategies; Mohanan Bhaskaran Pillai, Geetha Ganapathy Dore; SAGE; ₹1,195

This book provides in-depth coverage of the major facets of preservation of the global commons. These are natural resource domains that are not subject to national jurisdictions and are accessible for all nations. Due to their critical importance in maintaining human lives and livelihoods, and their vulnerability to depletion, the collaborative preservation of the global commons and environmental development are of great relevance to all human communities. The book will, therefore, prove indispensable for all stakeholders in a new, just and sustainable world order.



Rethinking Pluralism, Secularism & Tolerance; Anxieties of Coexistence; Neera Chandhoke; SAGE; ₹895

How can people who speak different languages, worship different gods and subscribe to different concepts of the good live together with a degree of civility, dignity and mutual respect? It is not easy to find answers to this troubled question, given recent political developments in many parts of the world. Today, the world is marked by extreme intolerance towards, racial, sexual, religious and ethnic minorities and refugees. Eminent academician Neera Chandhoke, former professor of political science at Delhi University, takes on the difficult task of finding an answer by analyzing and reinterpreting the concept of secularism, pluralism and tolerance in contemporary India.



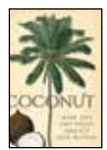
Tribal Development in India: Challenges & prospects in tribal education; R.R. Patil; SAGE; ₹1,295

Tribal development is one of the most important yet underperforming initiatives of the Indian government. This book is a detailed presentation of multi-pronged efforts to strengthen the educational development of India's tribal population. It includes contributions from academicians and professionals belonging to diverse domains, such as social work, education and administration, and those involved in tribal education.



Birds in Paradise; Keoladeo National Park; Sunayan Sharma; Niyogi Books; ₹1,500

Birds in Paradise is a handy guide to one of the world's best conservation parks. The author, Sunayan Sharma, was former director of the park and is now president of the Sariska Tiger Foundation. The book is a first-hand account of the challenges faced by the park and its revival. Keoladeo is an amazing ecosystem with fish, pythons, butterflies and turtles living with cranes, jacanas and egrets. The book has 280 spectacular images by veteran photographer Navin Sharma.



Coconut: How the shy fruit shaped our world; Robin Laurance; Niyogi Books; ₹450

The coconut has long been the unseen player in the endeavours of industrialists, physicians, silversmiths, smugglers and snake charmers. In recent years, coconut products crowd the shelves of supermarkets, health food shops and beauty salons. They are an important part of religious rituals, a sign of wealth and success. Writer and photographer Robin Laurance explores the unseen role of the coconut, past and present. He recounts the nut's remarkable history from providing nourishment to making ropes for ships, to producing gas masks during the Second World War and providing livelihoods through coir matting.



Calcutta Nights; Hemendra Kumar Roy; Translation by Rajat Chaudhuri; Niyogi Books; ₹295

Calcutta Nights is the real-life story and memoir of the enigmatic 'Meghnad Gupta' or Hemendra Kumar Roy—a pioneering writer of Bengali fiction. Translated into English by Rajat Chaudhuri, a century after it was first published in 1923, Roy reveals to contemporary readers the darkest secrets of erstwhile Calcutta, from Chitpur bordellos to Chinese opium dens. The book has great historical value as an authentic and well-researched study of areas people didn't venture into pre-Partition. Roy, the emperor of adventure, detective and supernatural stories, inspired the Hindi movie *Bees Saal Baad* (20 Years Later) and the Bengali film, *Jawhher Dhan* (The Treasure and its Ghost).



The Legend of Himal and Nagrai; Greatest Kashmiri Folk Tales; Onaiza Drabu; Speaking Tiger; ₹350

Filled with serpent kings, long-lost lovers, magical birds and seductive witches, this is an enchanting collection of folk tales from a land as beautiful as it is misunderstood—Kashmir. The 29 stories featured here are about animals, people, mythical creatures and proverbs. The stories are happy, sad, funny, knowledgeable and have many twists and turns. An engrossing read.



The Phoenix Rises; Lockdown Chronicles; Edited by Amit Dasgupta; Wisdom Tree; ₹245

What are people doing, thinking, contemplating, discovering enclosed in their homes during the pandemic? *The Phoenix Rises*, a set of fine writings by diverse writers, skilfully encapsulates some aspects of this unprecedented time for history. Personal and thoughtful, each piece puts forward a viewpoint. Read Jug Suraiya on discovering a balcony, Navtej Sarna on death and dignity, Nikita Bathla on being on the frontlines of the COVID war or Anjum Katyal wondering what life post-COVID will look like. Nicely edited by Amit Dasgupta, a former official of the Indian Foreign Service, this is a book you need to read.



Tagore's Ideas of the New Woman; Edited: Chandrava Chakravarty & Sneha Kar Chaudhuri; SAGE; ₹850

A series of essays analyze Rabindranath Tagore's writings on women. A prolific writer he wrote fiction, poems, dramas, songs on women which retain their appeal today. This collection focuses on issues of gender, heterosexual love, marriage and patriarchy in relation to Tagore's works. It strengthens the claim that the politics of culture and gender were an intrinsic part of the ideology of that period. Perceptions of women and their role in society swung between conservatism and modernity in the Tagore household and the book examines the evolution in Tagore's way of thinking.



Drought Risk Management in South & South-East Asia; Indrajit Pal, Mihir Bhatt; SAGE; ₹1,395

Managing drought is complex. It requires active and continuous participation of national, provincial and local governments, multiple ministries and divisions. This book demonstrates the best practices of social, economic and technological interventions to enhance drought risk management, with the aim of helping to develop plans and policies, and their implementation to reduce the impact of droughts. It also offers the views of field practitioners on the impact of interventions practised at the national, sub-national and local levels. ■

LIVING

FOOD | TRAVEL | AYURVEDA | PRODUCTS | GIVING

Photo: Civil Society/Umesh Anand



Priya Prakash and Vinod Kumar: 'Millets got wiped out because wheat is much easier to use'

The good noodle is here to stay

Millets, red rice, quinoa make it healthy

Civil Society Trends
New Delhi/Mumbai

NOODLES come with irresistible charms. Children who won't eat their meals will happily slurp up a bowl of noodles. Working people find them easy to have on the go. There are eating places in the world where people will even queue up for a signature noodle recipe.

Noodles bring big problems as well. There is way too much starch in the rice and flour and wheat varieties. An energy boost is often welcome, but empty calories never did anyone much good. Chemicals, too, are cause for concern.

But noodle lovers need not despair. The good noodle is here, both tasty and nutritious and easy to serve as well. It is made from different varieties of millet, traditional red rice and even quinoa. In varying degrees, there are fewer carbs and more protein. Also, cultivation is chemical-free.

The idea came to Vinod Kumar when he was into retailing organic products at stores called Naturally Yours in Mumbai. He found that his customers preferred millets to rice. He also discerned a trend

of ordinary folk, and not just wealthy people, being willing to spend more to eat healthy.

Kumar, 38, decided to go from retailing into production and marketing directly to customers. He began identifying farmers who were ready to cut out the use of chemicals and finally go organic.

Naturally Yours began putting out seeds, spices, healthy grains and flour from quinoa, among other such wholesome products. But it was with noodles made from a combination of millets that he struck a chord.

"Multi-millet noodles is hands down our top-selling product," says Kumar.

Either out of awareness or out of medical concerns people were trying to replace carbohydrates with protein in their diets.

There was a cultural reason as well. In past generations, how to cook millets was family knowledge and they were also more readily available. Now, when people wanted to eat millets, they could neither source them nor did they know how to turn them into tasty dishes. Also, there isn't time to spend in the kitchen.

Multi-millet noodles are a one-stop solution.

They come in well-sealed packaging, can be stored and are ready to cook. They can be bought online and home delivered. In addition, farmers and consumers are being connected with each other.

Growing and consuming millets has been on a decline. Yet, in many rural areas, even peri-urban places, millets continue to have a place in local diets. In the northern states, there is *ragi*, *jowar* and *bajra*. In the southern states, there is foxtail millet, proso millet and kodo millet.

"We were not consuming just wheat and rice. We had all these millets also. All of them got wiped out because wheat is much easier to use," says 36-year-old Priya Prakash, a microbiologist who is Kumar's wife and partner in the business. "People don't know how to cook them anymore, and they don't have the time or the inclination to learn," she explains.

"Mixing all the millets together and making noodles from them was a blockbuster idea for us," adds Kumar. "It was a simple idea, really. With the noodles, the benefit of all the grains has become that much more accessible."

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Demand has been growing every year since 2016, the year the multi-millet noodles were launched. It has emboldened Naturally Yours to come up with noodles from red rice, soya and quinoa, which are also growing in popularity.

The noodles are quite easy to make although they need to be boiled for longer than instant noodles. "Instant noodles are flash fried, that's why they cook in two minutes. Our noodles are dried instead," explains Prakash. "It is still just 10 minutes spent on cooking a much healthier meal."

Nine years into the business, there is a lot that Kumar and Prakash have learnt about the organic food industry. People are willing to pay and, in fact, seek out healthier food options. Customers tell Kumar why they buy their products and almost always, the stories surprise him. A struggling artist from Thane spends ₹2,000 every month to buy *ashwagandha* powder from Naturally Yours.

The noodles are priced at ₹125, which is nearly six times the price of a packet of instant noodles. "The noodles are a top-seller. It wouldn't have been so if customers were looking at it from a price point of view," Kumar says.

At the same time it is not overly expensive. A packet serves three people, making the cost of a meal ₹40. A meal anywhere outside would cost much more. Customers make these calculations. For those who live alone there is a smaller packet for just ₹35.

If the price is still a little higher than mass-produced brands of noodles, it is justified by the high quality. Their quinoa pasta has 45 percent quinoa, unlike some brands that have 1 to 2 percent quinoa and claim to be quinoa pasta.

Kumar has his own take on popularizing organic food. He says it won't do to be preachy because then people get put off. It is more important to meet the needs of consumers and allow them to make their own choices of what they want to consume and at what price.

Their approach has been to identify the

customer's need instead of forcing organic products on them. This explains why they've been pruning their inventory from 500 products to 100 and now 45.

Kumar also treats his customers as a community which over the years has gained trust in him. Naturally Yours is a small business with a modest turnover. But since it was launched in 2016, it has nurtured customers as carefully as it has created its products. It has created a small but valuable identity for itself. Kumar says he would never chase size for the sake of size.

When we meet Kumar at Chembur in Mumbai, his office is really a godown. Everything happens from here with a small team of about 18. Kumar and Prakash often attend to online sales themselves.

Production and packaging of the noodles has been outsourced. But there is also packaging of other products which happens in the godown where we meet. Here too Kumar is hands-on.

When Kumar was at Cardiff Business School, where he did his Master's in Business Administration, he came to realize that organic food was a growing trend. On his return to India, he found that there were very few options for a customer looking for organic produce.

"I visited an organic farm run by a relative and he was doing a fantastic job. I thought it must be a profitable operation, but he told me that it was not the case. In fact, he was making losses."

Kumar then started Naturally Yours to bridge this disconnect between the consumer and the producer.

Prakash was previously working as a research associate in Anthem Biosciences, Bengaluru and had a background in biotechnology.

"I had just had a child then and I wanted to eat healthy for my baby," she recalls. But she had to go to different stores for each product. In its earlier avatar as a store, Naturally Yours was meant to be a one-stop shop for the customer looking for healthier alternatives.

In 2010, their first store opened in Chembur on a family plot. They expanded to two more stores in Vile Parle and Bandra. When they saw that brands were manufacturing the same staples, organic pulses and organic spices, they found there was some uncharted space in the organic food industry.

With the shift to making their own products, Prakash took over product development and Kumar the finances and marketing.

They say the creation of real value is what matters to them. They believe that they are giving their customers good products and at the same time helping farmers get a slightly higher price for their produce.

Organic farming on a large scale is not always commercially viable. "We ask the farmer to give us a price in which he can keep the authenticity of the product intact as well as make some money for himself," Kumar explains.

Naturally Yours has a farmer-friendly approach. For any product to be certified as organic, it takes three years of continuous certification. "From the day farmers start converting to organic practices, we buy their products. We see them through the entire life cycle," says Kumar.

Till the products are certified organic, they are called natural products. Their products are certified under the Indian organic standards as well as the US standards. They work with farmers across the country — Uttarakhand, Rajasthan, Andhra Pradesh, Tamil Nadu, to name a few states.

It is a cautiously built business. Care has been taken to add layers to it sustainably. Marketing has been the particularly tricky part. "The Indian retail landscape is very different in each city and we want to understand each city before we enter that space. We don't want to dump our products in the market," says Kumar.

No product stays in the warehouse for more than two months. They have contracts with individual vendors for different products. Small health food cafes in Delhi and Mumbai also buy some of their products. Organic Plate in Karkardooma, Delhi and Sequel in Bandra, Mumbai are some of them.

There are international orders too. They get orders from individual customers in Singapore and the UK, among other countries. Within the country, they receive orders from 23 states including remote locations in Nagaland and Sikkim. ■

Glass of camel milk, anyone?

Or pick from a range of plant and animal milk

Sidika Sehgal
New Delhi

MONISHA Ashokan recalls that if she didn't feel like eating breakfast before dashing off to school, her mother would insist that she at least have a glass of milk. "Milk is a nutritionally wholesome food. It has protein, fat, minerals like potassium, magnesium, calcium and Vitamins A, B2, B12. To have all these in one food is a rarity," says Ashokan who is a nutritionist and co-founder of Nourish Me, a wellness centre in Delhi.

But unlike the old days when there was just cow milk and buffalo milk, people today are spoilt for choice. There is a variety of plant-based milks and animal-based milks to choose from. The demand for new types of milk is also growing for several reasons. There is increasing disenchantment with the quality of the milk available. Reports of cows being given hormones to increase yield and unnecessary antibiotics have encouraged people to look for alternatives.

Many people have found that they are lactose-intolerant, or that they just find it difficult to digest cow or buffalo milk. "In general, people listen to their bodies more now," says Ashokan.

Plant-based milks are easier on the stomach. Among them, soy milk and almond milk are the most popular. Soy life, a Delhi-based manufacturer of soy milk, has increased its production from 500 litres per month in 2017 to 3,000-4,000 litres today. They make soya *paneer* or tofu as well which they supply to hotels.

To make soy milk, soya beans are soaked in water for four to five hours. Once soft, they are ground and then mixed with water. The liquid is drained using muslin and after the pasteurization process, soy milk is ready for consumption.

"We do aseptic packaging for our milk. A vacuum is created in a steel container. The milk is made in the container, heated and cooled. It is packaged then and there so that the milk doesn't come into contact with air-borne bacteria," explains Harshwardhan Sharma, CEO of Soy life. Before starting his venture, Sharma, 32, had enrolled in an entrepreneur development programme at the National Small Industries Corporation (NSIC) in Okhla and learnt to make soy milk.

Aseptic packaging ensures a long shelf life.



Soy life's milk also comes in mango flavour



Jus' Amazing's almond milk sachets



The demand for new types of milk is growing. Many people are lactose-intolerant, or just unhappy with the quality of milk available.

"During the pandemic people wanted to limit trips to the market. So long shelf life is an added advantage," Ashokan says.

Almond milk is as much in demand as soy milk. "If you just look at the number of brands of almond milk that have come up in the last 18 months, you'll know the demand is growing," says Shilpa Mogilishetty who co-founded Jus' Amazing with her husband in 2017.

Jus' Amazing's 30 Second Almond Milk is the first of its kind. A sachet of their almond paste just needs to be mixed with a glass of water to make almond milk. It is rich in protein, calcium and Vitamin E, which is a fat-soluble antioxidant.

Mogilishetty says that vegans and people with lactose intolerance regularly buy from Jus' Amazing. But another segment of customers is trying almond milk simply because the option exists and they find it easy to incorporate almonds into their diet by drinking almond milk.

Milk varieties like soy milk and almond milk are also available in different flavours. "With young children, who may not like the flavour of cow milk, this is a tasty way to get your child to drink milk,"

says Ashokan.

Among animal-based milks, goat milk has made a comeback of sorts. "Farmers speak very highly of goat milk. They tell you that if you have goat milk, you won't have any ailments. It is called '*niroga*' (free from disease) milk," says Ajay Singh, 45, who started Courtyard Farms in 2017 to take goat milk to urban consumers. On Singh's farm in Tijara in Alwar district, there are some 350 free-ranging goats. They aren't confined in small spaces and they can graze outdoors. They aren't fed a specific diet to increase their milk yield.

In comparison to cow milk, goat milk has 15 percent more calcium, 45 percent more Vitamin A and is less fatty. "The fat globule in goat milk is one-fourth the size of the fat globule in cow milk, so that makes it easier to digest," says Singh. Courtyard Farms also makes cheese, ghee and curd from goat milk.

Camel milk is on its way to popularity, especially among those who are diabetic, because it has natural insulin. Camel milk has very high protein content, less fat and less cholesterol. "Camel milk is said to be closest to a human mother's milk," says Ashokan.

Continued on page 52

Samita's World



Continued from Page 51

In 2015, Aadvik Foods became the first Indian company to provide camel milk and camel milk powder in India. From 30 litres a month, sales and production have jumped to 20,000 litres a month.

“We source the camel milk directly from farmers. Since it had become economically unviable for them to earn an income from camels, farmers had stopped keeping them and the camel population declined. But our arrangement gives them a continuous income, enabling them to feed the animals and make profits,” says Shrey Kumar, 31, co-founder of Aadvik Foods who is also a qualified engineer and an MBA.

Among Aadvik Foods’ customers are parents of children with autism spectrum disorder. They often come back to Kumar to tell him that camel milk has worked wonders for a child’s immunity.

Aadvik Foods recently launched camel milk chocolates and cosmetic products made from camel milk. “Camel milk is for the premium market, only people who are looking for it buy it. Chocolates, on the other hand, have the potential to be a mass-market product,” Kumar says.

If you like good old cow milk, there are several organic options available. iOrganic supplies organic cow milk to 1,000 households in Delhi. The milk comes from some 350 cows on their farm near the Delhi-Haryana border.

“We gauge the health parameters of the cow and then gauge the quality of the milk. The difference is massive. If the cow is healthy, the bacterial load of the milk and somatic cell count is minimal, as it should be,” says Aditya Sinhal, founder of iOrganic.

Sinhal recalled that when iOrganic started in 2014, they supplied organic cow milk to some 10 households. But it took just six months to realize that people valued the product because it tasted different and was of better quality. Now iOrganic supplies 20,000 litres every month.

Small producers have done well not just because of market demand but because their products are of superior quality. “People don’t have confidence in the big companies anymore. There is this sense that the milk is adulterated. Small and new companies inspire faith because they are completely transparent about their products. I even remember one milk producer gave out test kits with the product, asking people to test its quality themselves,” says Kumar.

But quality comes at a cost. Regular cow milk costs ₹45-50 per litre. On the other hand, a litre of organic cow milk costs ₹75, soy milk is priced at ₹100, almond milk costs ₹300 and camel and goat milk as much as ₹500.

Rising demand means people are willing to pay for quality. But the higher price is also a limitation. Sinhal remarks that people try their milk and then go back to regular milk pouches because they don’t want to increase the household budget.

iOrganic lost a few customers during the lockdown. Courtyard Farms lost some of its dedicated customers but an equal number joined because they had heard that goat milk builds immunity. Soy life, on the other hand, added 25 percent more people to their customer base.

“The coronavirus pandemic taught us that you cannot take your health for granted. Health is the only asset you really have. Money can be made, real estate can be bought. But health cannot be recreated. That’s why the organic food market is on the rise in India,” says Sinhal. ■

Apricots from heaven

Civil Society Trends
Gurugram

THEY are small, juicy, sweet, bright orange in colour and very nutritious. The kind of goodness that is packed into Halman apricots is such that you couldn’t possibly ask for more. They truly seem to be made in heaven.

As the lockdown eased in Delhi and Gurugram and everyone struggled to breathe a little easier, Halman apricots seemed to make life a lot more tolerable — a welcome and much-needed bright spot.

They turned up as though from nowhere, finding special mention on the Salad Days’ website and in its alerts to customers. At ₹90 a box you just bought them and then went back for more and more. Really it is that easy to become a Halman apricot junkie.

Once properly hooked you also went in for some apricot and orange jam — a perfect combination in small bottles with stylized labels and, most important of all, more fruit and less sugar.

Angels drove 450 kg of apricots in a Bolero down from Ladakh. It was a mission fuelled by the passion of fruit-growers who couldn’t bear to see livelihoods and such wonderful produce destroyed by restrictions on travel.

Salad Days was the perfect collaborator. A small but feisty food business that specializes in salads, juices and sandwiches, it has the kind of client base that would put the Halman apricot on a pedestal and worship it.

In no time the apricots in the first lot were all sold and more were needed, which now arrived as cargo on Air-India. In a few weeks, Salad Days ended up selling 2,000 kg of Halman apricots — they went to homes, bulk buyers and gift boxes.

When the lockdown happened, Salad Days found its business decimated. Deliveries were not allowed to begin with and when they were, customers weren’t sure if it was safe to order in. It faced the fate of all food businesses at the time.

“Our sales of salads and sandwiches were down to barely 20 percent of what we normally used to do,” recalls Varun Madan, the spirited



Varun Madan, founder and CEO of Salad Days

founder and CEO. At the same time, expenses remained because he hadn’t sacked people and salaries were cut by just 10 percent. Staff camped in his office so that they didn’t have to travel. But there was no revenue to speak of while establishment costs had to be met.

Now Madan is not the average entrepreneur. He is a biker who has journeyed to remote corners of the country and a rock musician as well. He and his buddy, Kunal Gangwani, built Salad Days with much heart. These days it is only Madan because Gangwani moved on to something else in Europe or wherever.

Salad Days, however, remains the kind of outfit it was meant to be — slow to grow, committed to quality and always staying clear of beaten paths. So, when Madan got calls during the lockdown from farmers he knew who

couldn’t sell their vegetables he just bought them and offered them to Salad Days customers who wanted fresh vegetables home delivered.

Madan is into growing vegetables and fruits himself. Even before the Halman apricots arrived, he had a big strawberry rescue

effort on his hands. The strawberry variety he grows was ready for picking and distribution just as the lockdown came.

He ended up losing a lot of his crop but not before he had put up a spirited effort to get them to market. An SOS went out to his Salad Days regular customers and then, of course, there was that lovely little bottle of strawberry jam that you could buy to brighten your breakfast.

The pandemic has been without its silver lining. Survival has meant learning some new tricks and improving on old ones. If we weren’t Halman apricot worshippers, we are now. And we also know where to go looking for high quality strawberries in March. As Madan learns from the experience, he has begun casting his net far and wide. Pineapples and Burma Grapes are on their way from Manipur. They would have arrived — except for the truck driver testing positive for COVID! ■



Halman apricots from Ladakh



**AYURVEDA
ADVISORY**
Dr SRIKANTH

Elder care

ACCORDING to research, people who are 60 and older, especially those with pre-existing medical conditions like heart disease, lung disease, diabetes or cancer, are more susceptible to COVID-19. How do we keep our elders safe?

To prevent transmission follow WHO’s three-pronged strategy — social distancing, hand hygiene and respiratory hygiene. Limit your interactions with people as much as possible. But remember, physical distancing doesn’t mean isolation or loneliness.

Wash your hands and face often with soap and water or use a hand sanitizer that contains at least 60 percent alcohol. Wear a mask in public and always cover your mouth especially when you cough or sneeze. Take your daily prescribed medicines regularly. Avoid going to hospital for your check-ups. As far as possible use tele-consultation to speak to your healthcare provider.

Don’t go out unless it is absolutely essential. Avoid visitors and outdoor activities like walking, going to the grocery store or to crowded places like parks, markets and religious places. All elective surgeries like cataract, hernia or knee-replacements (unless complicated) should be postponed.

To keep yourself fit, the key focus must be on food, sleep and exercise. Eat hot, home-cooked food and hydrate adequately. Consume fresh seasonal fruits or juices to boost immunity.

Sound sleep at night will always rejuvenate you. The quality of sleep is important, not the number of hours that you sleep daily! How energetic and enthusiastic you feel after waking up in the morning indicates the quality of your sleep. Practise simple stretching exercises every 4-5 hours during the day to keep yourself mobile and avoid stiffness in your joints. Practise simple *yogasanas*.

Focus on your emotional well-being by being active and thinking positively. Do *pranayama* for about 15-20 minutes, twice daily, to improve lung

capacity. Meditation can help keep stress at bay. Spend time on some recreational activities. This is a good time to pursue your favourite hobbies, whether watching movies or photography. Keep boredom away.

Cut down on listening to news. Limit it to once in the morning and once in the evening. Connect socially without compromising on social distancing. Use technology like regular video calls to talk to family and friends.

REMEDIES: Respiratory complaints: Symptoms like cough, breathing difficulty, change in smell or taste, loose motions, etc. are some common symptoms associated with COVID-19. If you have such symptoms, immediately report to your family doctor.

However, the following regimen at the initial onset of symptoms may be helpful in alleviating the symptoms.

Regular gargling with warm, saline water and plain steam inhalation twice daily. If you have a sore throat gargle with warm, saline water / Oro-T oral rinse (Himalaya) twice / thrice daily for quick relief. Cough can be reduced with Tulasi tablets (2-2-2) or Koflet lozenges / syrup (2 tsp), three to four times daily.

For common cold take Septilin tablets (Himalaya) 2-2-2 for one week or up to 10 days. To relieve nose-block, do plain steam inhalation for about a minute, followed by Bresol NS — spray / drops (Himalaya) — 3-4 times, in each nostril.

If you don’t get relief from the above symptoms in a day or if fever becomes an additional symptom, do not delay in consulting your physician. Prevention is always better than cure.

For enhancing immunity to avoid getting infected, the following remedies may be followed for the next three months.

- Guduchi tablets (Himalaya) or Samshamanivati (any reputed pharmacy) 2 -0- 2, before meals.
- Septilin tablets (Himalaya) 2-0-2, after meals.
- Chyavanaprasha (any reputed pharmacy) 1-0-1 tsp, before meals, or Ayushkwatha (as suggested by AYUSH Ministry, GOI) 20-0-20 ml, before meals.
- For fatigue or unexplained weakness: • Ashvagandha tablets (Himalaya) 2-0-2. • Geriforte tablets (2) or syrup (2 tsp) (Himalaya) twice daily.

DIGESTION COMPLAINTS: • For flatulence/

frequent belching: • Liv.52 DS tablets (Himalaya) 1-0-1, before meals. • Gasex tablets (Himalaya) / Shankhavati (Baidyanath) 2-0-2, after meals.

INDIGESTION: • Trikatu / Gasex syrup (Himalaya) 2-2-2 tsp, before meals. • Jeerakarishtha (any reputed pharmacy) — 4-0-4 tsp, with equal water after meals.

ACIDITY / SOUR ERUCTATIONS: • Yashtimadhu tablets (Himalaya) or Sooktyn tablets (Alarsin) 2-0-2. • Madiphalarasayana (imis / BV Pandit) 2-2-2 tsp, mixed with half-cup water, before meals. • Himcocid SF suspension (Himalaya) 2 tsp, after meals whenever heartburn symptoms present three to four times daily.

CONSTIPATION: • Triphala tablets / Herbolax tablets (Himalaya) 2-0-2. • Sat Isabgol / Softovac (Lupin) 1 to 2 tsp mixed with water at bedtime (dosage may be modified as per your requirement).

DIARRHOEA: • Bael tablets (Himalaya) 2-2-2. • Diarex tablets (Himalaya) 2-2-2. • ORS — as required.

FOR ABDOMINAL COLIC / PAIN: • Himcospaz (Himalaya) 2 caps stat, followed by 1 capsule, thrice daily. • Hingwashtakachurna / Ashtachurna three-fourths to 1 tsp, thrice daily, mixed with fresh buttermilk, after meals.

For anxiety, mood swings or feelings of depression take: • Mentat tablet (2 tab) or Mentat DS syrup (1 tsp) (Himalaya), twice daily. • Brahmi tablet (Himalaya) or Manasamitravati (Amrita Drugs / Kottakkal) 1-1-1. • Stress-relief massage oil (Himalaya) for a 20-minute gentle body massage followed by warm water shower.

FOR STRESS AND INSOMNIA: • Ashvagandha tablet (Himalaya) 2-0-2. • Tagara tablet (Himalaya) 2-0-2. • Stress-relief massage oil (Himalaya). Take a few drops and gently massage on the soles / palms and scalp for about 20 minutes to an hour before sleeping. Excess oil can be wiped off with a clean tissue / cloth. ■

Dr Srikanth is a postgraduate in Ayurveda and has been a consulting physician for the past 19 years. He is currently National Manager, Scientific Services, at The Himalaya Drug Company

Plant your own herbal garden

If you have a small patch at home or even a few pots on your balcony or terrace you can grow some very useful medicinal plants. They can be your own low-cost pharmacy.

We spoke to the Foundation for Revitalisation of Local Health Traditions (FRLHT) in Bengaluru to find out what would be good plants to start with.

FRLHT also has a package of medicinal plants you can buy and plant at home. Contact Ganesh Babu at 9900239450.



TULSI: Plant holy tulsi (*Ocimum sanctum*) in your garden and drive away disease! A light tea made by combining a few tulsi and neem leaves improves the body’s defense mechanism against viruses and

respiratory conditions. A decoction of tulsi leaves with honey and ginger is an effective remedy for bronchitis, asthma, influenza, sore throat, cough and cold.

PUDINA: Pudina or mint (*Mentha spicata*) is easy to grow and very effective for



many illnesses. Chewing mint leaves relieves stomach ache due to indigestion. Tea with mint leaves counters acidity and stress. Fresh mint juice of about 5-10 ml with honey relieves cough and sore throat. A paste made with mint leaves can be applied on skin to relieve itching.

HALDI: Haldi or turmeric (*Curcuma longa*) is the go-to plant for reducing inflammation. Turmeric powder with warm milk helps to alleviate injury, cough and cold. Turmeric paste relieves skin infections. Turmeric is also called Nisha and Rajni in Sanskrit which indicate that it should be harvested after sunset and not during the day. ■



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

Honey from Etna

KAVITA Khorana and her husband started Etna in late 2015. They borrowed the name from Mount Etna, one of the world's most frequently erupting volcanos. "Etna is a metaphor for longevity and aliveness," explains Khorana.

Etna makes a range of natural honey which tastes good and is nutritious too. Honey bees fed on the nectar of jamun flowers give jamun honey. Those fed on the nectar of coriander flowers produce coriander honey.

Coriander honey protects the liver and regulates insulin levels. Eucalyptus honey is recommended for people with aches and pains, and ligament and tendon sprains. Jamun honey can help reduce weight and improve metabolism. Mustard honey can soothe a sore throat and cough, and acacia honey is good for eye problems and skin disorders.

The honey is sourced from all over India. Jamun honey comes from Uttar Pradesh, mustard honey from Rajasthan and acacia honey from Kashmir. Etna also has a wonderful



Photos: Civil Society/Shrey Gupta

range of teas and blends — masala tea, jasmine tea and more.

Contact: Kavita Khorana
+91 11 4357 5209, +91 8510021222; <https://www.etna.in/>

Herbal powders

EARTH Organic sells a range of Ayurvedic powders that can tackle several health and skin problems.

Amla powder mixed in a glass of water is said to aid digestion. Amla is good for the scalp too. It tackles dryness and split ends. It can be used as a face pack too. *Triphala* powder, made with three fruits, is a powerful antioxidant that improves vision and prevents eye ailments. To cleanse skin deeply, apply neem powder mixed with water to make a paste.

Turmeric is famous for its healing properties. Earth Organic's organic *haldi* is matured for two years, enhancing its potency.

Earth Organic is run by the Nangia family, based in Gurugram. The herbal powders are harvested from their farm in Sardana village in Haryana. They began with a bare plot of land. Now there are some 400 trees.

"I created an amla oil because my son got a rash and I didn't want to use an allopathic ointment since he was very young," says Niharika Nangia, about the early days of Earth Organic.

There is a family-run enterprise and they keep going because of their love for the environment. They have received lucrative offers for their farm, but they see their small operation as an opportunity to keep the land toxin-free and organic.

Contact: Niharika Nangia
9818099113; niharika.nangia@gmail.com
<http://www.earth-organic.com/>



Kashida threads

KASHMIR's beautiful Kashida embroidery is full of nature imagery and floral patterns. Abdul Rashid Dar's stall in Dastkaar's Nature Bazaar has pillow covers and table runners with Kashida embroidery.

Abdul Rashid has been a craftsman for 47 years and now works with about 70 *karigars* in Srinagar. His son, Nakib Shah, now manages the stall and the business. The family has been in the business for over four generations.

The artisans who work with them have been taught Kashida embroidery by their forefathers. They are skilled at their work — they are only told that floral designs are in demand and they think up the designs themselves. In recent times, Shah experimented with geometric designs in Kashida embroidery and they too have been well received by customers.

A pillow cover usually takes 10-15 days to complete, though a skilled artisan can complete it in five days. Pillow covers made with woollen thread are used in winter while those made with silk thread are used in summer. The embroidery is done with two-ply or three-ply wool or silk yarn.

Contact: Abdul Rashid
Visit Stall no. 37 at Dastkaar Nature Bazaar, Andheria Modh, New Delhi 110074 or call Nakib Shah at 8715006680



Natural cosmetics

ADRI Naturals was started by Seema Khurana whose firm belief is that natural products make the best cosmetics. When she struggled to find good products for her dry lips and hairfall problem, she decided to develop a range of natural cosmetic products herself. And Adri Naturals was born.

Adri Naturals has a range of natural cosmetic products like face oils, aloe vera gels, lip butters and hair oil. The lip butters are available in three flavours — rose, strawberry vanilla and lavender.

The enterprise has a hair oil which is a mix of nine oils and therefore a one-stop solution for hairfall. A range of aloe vera gels can be used as face packs. The rose aloe vera gel is recommended for people with wrinkles and the neem aloe vera gel is for those with oily skin. They make face oils too. There is an under eye oil to prevent dark circles and a new morning serum for wrinkles, puffiness and uneven skin tones.

Adri Naturals also makes cold pressed cooking oils. Cold pressed oils are superior in nutritional value. In a hot pressed machine, the exposure to heat diminishes the nutritional value of the oil. You can choose from mustard oil, olive oil, sesame oil and coconut oil.



Contact: Seema Khurana
Phone: 7838582223; hello@adrinaturals.in; www.adrinaturals.in

Colourful carpets

IN Mirzapur, India's oldest carpet weaving hub, generation after generation is trained to become gifted weavers. The Mirzapur Dari Weavers' Co-operative Society sells the handwoven carpets in Delhi's Dastkaar Nature Bazaar.

In the large shop, carpets hang from the walls and are piled on the floor. They are available in a range of sizes, 10 feet by 14 feet being the largest and 2 feet by 3 feet being the smallest.

The carpets are made of wool and the base is of cotton. Even a medium-sized carpet of 3 feet by 5 feet takes nearly 15 days to make. The carpets are in lovely hues — blues, yellows, reds and browns.

Amit Baranwal, president of the society, started the co-operative so that weavers can reap the profits from the sale of their work, rather than going through exporters and intermediaries.

He laments that lack of opportunities for weavers is turning the younger generation away from the profession. "If there is a weavers service centre in Mirzapur, perhaps younger people will want to join the profession," he says. Some 30 weavers are part of this co-operative.

Contact: Amit Baranwal
Phone: 9452080918, 7007437903; Stall no. 37, Dastkaar Nature Bazaar,



Carved in stone

BLACK stoneware from Manipur is attractive, hardy and reasonably priced. You can get earthy coffee mugs, water tumblers, kettles, plates, platters, small and large bowls, and vessels to cook in from Eastend Women and Child Development Organization.

The NGO was started by Sangita Keisham after she graduated from Ramjas College in 2006 and returned to Manipur, her home state.

Keisham was keen to revive handicrafts. Her grandfather was a trader of handicrafts during his heyday.

Eastend supports over 1,000 Manipuri women, who are employed in making black stone pottery, cane baskets and bags. Also available are colourful baskets made with recycled plastic.

Black stone pottery is native to Manipur. Weathered rock is crushed and mixed with water to derive a clay-like consistency. The clay is moulded into vessels, not on a potter's wheel but by hand. Once the shaped clay is dry and hard, it is cooked at 900°C. The greyish black pottery has a matte-like finish.

Black stone crockery can be used on the stove, put in the microwave or the oven. Some coffee mugs and bowls also have cane work on their handles and on the sides. These pieces should not be exposed to heat.

A small black stone coffee mug costs ₹200, a pen stand ₹500 and a medium-sized bowl ₹600. The baskets are priced from ₹300 upwards.

Contact: Sangita Keisham
Visit Stall no. 47 at Dastkaar Nature Bazaar or contact Sangita Keisham : 9871820795; sangita.keisham21@gmail.com

Basket medley

OM Prakash's small stall in Dastkaar's Nature Bazaar has baskets of all shapes, sizes and colours. They are all made from moonj grass in Bhadohi in Uttar Pradesh.

Women in villages around Bhadohi make the baskets. The grass is first soaked in water and when it softens, it is woven using a thick needle. A knot is tied in a blade of grass and woven radially. Prakash took out a piece he was working on to explain the process. To give it sturdiness, a frame is made of dry and harder grass. You can buy a beautiful red box with a wooden bird handle to keep rotis warm. Or a big basket to dump clothes in.

Prakash takes out a small basket and says it can be used to pot plants. The baskets are waterproof since they are made of grass and dry quite easily.

The baskets are also strong and sturdy. Prakash stands on a basket to prove that it can withstand pressure without breaking. On sale are also pen stands, small and medium-sized containers to keep trinkets, curios and knick-knacks.

Contact: Om Prakash
8400378596; 9559191600



Stylish Shibori

ANANDA makes dresses, blouses, sarees, dupattas and stoles using an exquisite Japanese dyeing technique called Shibori. The fabrics used are cotton, cotton silk and linen.

Shahin Akhtar started Ananda in 2012 after she came across outfits made with Shibori by a Bangladesh-based NGO in Dilli Haat. Akhtar is an experienced hand. She worked in the textile sector for 40 years. She read about the Shibori technique and taught herself. She then trained a team before she set up Ananda.

At Ananda's unit in Noida, some 10-15 artisans have become skilled at Shibori. The fabric is folded and bound in different ways and dyed to create patterns. In another method, the fabric is embroidered and then dyed. The embroidery is removed and the underlying area remains white, creating beautiful patterns. Shibori is mostly done with indigo dye.

Ananda uses only plant-based dyes. Akhtar says natural dyes are more aesthetic and eco-friendly. Their clothes come in different colours — green, lilac, pink, red and indigo.

Each product has information on the plants used to make the natural dyes. Pomegranates are used to make light yellow colour. For a green dye, light yellow and indigo are mixed. Shibori can be done on all fabrics.

Contact: Shahin Akhtar
Phone: 9810348448
Email: anandanaturalshibori@gmail.com
Website: www.blueananda.com



Native laptop bags

EVERY season, Arti Gehlot and her team at Kirgiti pick one traditional fabric and learn everything about it. Then they use that fabric to make smart laptop bags, wallets and tote bags.

They have worked with Telangana's famous ikat weave, Dabu printed fabric from Jaipur and many other fabrics. Currently, Gehlot is working with block print fabric from Jodhpur and hand embroidery from Delhi. For the next season, she is looking for a craft native to Haryana.

The fabric is sourced from its place of origin and then converted into products in Delhi. Gehlot says she has worked with over 60 artisans from across the country.

Kirgiti products are nice-looking and functional. The laptop bag has space for a charger, a diary and a pen. The large tote bag is roomy and perfect for work.

Instead of using leather, Kirgiti uses cork which comes from the bark of the oak tree. "We liked the look and feel of leather, but it went against our philosophy to use something so unsustainable," Gehlot says. The bark used to make cork leather grows back easily.

Gehlot discovered the beauty of handcrafted products when she was studying fashion design at NIFT. She now hopes to take her handcrafted products to the market.

Contact: Arti Gehlot
Phone: 8510001343 | Instagram: @kirgitibringingbackcraft
Place your order at: <https://www.etsy.com/in-en/shop/Kirgitudesigns>

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

DECENT FAREWELL FOR YOUR PET



PAWS TO HEAVEN

When a loved pet passes away, it is always a challenge to perform the last rites. In Delhi we discovered Paws to Heaven, a crematorium, which does a wonderfully sensitive job. There is a prayer room and a picture wall too.

Paws to Heaven is on Bund Road in the Chhatarpur area of Delhi. It is an electric crematorium where the ashes of your beloved pet can be collected in an urn and given to you the next day.

To keep Paws to Heaven going means using it and donating to it. The original support for this essential service came from BSES Rajdhani, the power company under its corporate social responsibility (CSR). Now it needs the love of animal lovers.

www.pawsindia.org | 011-26895737, 26136435, 26865737, 26965737, 09810036254
paws@pawsindia.org

HELP A SURVIVOR OF SEXUAL VIOLENCE



SHAKTI SHALINI

Survivors of gender and sexual violence need assistance from good samaritans. In South Delhi, Shakti Shalini has a shelter home which can house 10 women. It runs a crisis intervention and counselling centre to help women decide their next course of action.

Troubled women are given legal, medical and mental counselling. Some may choose to file a complaint, while others may decide to take legal action against harsh family members.

Shakti Shalini runs community outreach programmes where women can address their concerns and find solutions. The non-profit also has a skills development and vocational training programme. Shakti Shalini helps women plan their finances.

Since it was founded, Shakti Shalini has supported over 15,000 women. It was founded in 1987 when two women lost their daughters to domestic violence.

www.shaktishalini.org | mail@shaktishalini.org

RICE LOVER? GROW A DYING VARIETY



CENTRE FOR INDIAN KNOWLEDGE SYSTEMS

Did you know that there are nearly 100 indigenous varieties of rice in Tamil Nadu, all with their own nutritional properties? Some varieties are pest and drought resistant, others provide energy and stamina, and still others are given to pregnant women for nutrition.

The Centre for Indian Knowledge Systems is working to conserve the biodiversity of rice. It plants each variety of rice every year, and in more than one part of Tamil Nadu so that no variety is lost in calamities.

You could do your bit with just ₹15,000 by adopting a variety at one location and ₹30,000 at two locations.

www.nammanellu.com | 9940008356 | ciksbalu@gmail.com

GET A PATIENT OFF THE STREET



ISWAR SANKALPA

Poverty and mental illness are twin challenges. In Kolkata, Iswar Sankalpa, founded in 2006, provides affordable mental healthcare to the urban poor. When a poor person loses his home and income, there is a chance he could be suffering from a mental disorder.

Iswar Sankalpa's two shelters house nearly 1,000 men and women. The NGO also helps rehabilitate mentally ill people by providing vocational training facilities.

It runs Crust & Core, a bakery, and Nayagram, where women do farming to earn a living. Iswar Sankalpa works with the Kolkata Municipal Corporation to integrate mental healthcare into primary health centres in the city.

www.isankalpa.org | 033-24597451
info@isankalpa.org

SAVE FORESTS IN WESTERN GHATS



APPLIED ENVIRONMENTAL RESEARCH FOUNDATION

What does it take to conserve an acre of forest? Well, a contribution of just ₹5,000 from you could go a very long way when used by the Applied Environmental Research Foundation (AERF). It has been working in the Western Ghats since 1994 to conserve biodiversity. Since then it has reached out to poor owners of private forests in the Western Ghats and compensated them for not cutting their trees. In this way 5,000 acres have been secured till 2028.

AERF is also into promoting traditional forest conservation practices like maintaining sacred groves and helping communities harvest non-timber forest produce from which they can earn.

www.aerfindia.org | 020-25431870, 020-65235281 | info@aerfindia.org

BE A FRIEND TO FRIENDICOES



FRIENDICOES

Stray dogs need as much love and care as your household pets.

Help stray dogs by helping Friendicoes look after them. Friendicoes runs a shelter, in New Delhi's Defence Colony, for 200 stray dogs, an out-patient clinic for injured animals and a 24/7 ambulance service for stray dogs in distress.

Friendicoes nurses strays back to health and finds them loving homes through their adoption programme. In Gurugram, their sanctuary houses nearly 1,000 animals who have nowhere else to go.

Friendicoes needs volunteers who can walk dogs, help their staff with the adoption programme or people who can foster an animal for short periods.

You could organize a fundraiser for Friendicoes or donate yourself. You can also donate an old car, old furniture, food and medical supplies, cameras and laptops.

www.friendicoes.org
011-2431-4787, 2432-0303
volunteers.friendicoes@gmail.com

YOU CAN RESCUE SEX WORKERS



SANLAAP INDIA

How to help survivors of sex trafficking? In Kolkata, Sanlaap India has a shelter home for 150 girls where they undergo psychosocial rehabilitation. They are also helped to find other ways of earning a living. Along with assisting the recovery of sex-trafficking survivors, Sanlaap builds awareness among communities to prevent sex trafficking. The NGO runs a medical programme for sex workers in Kolkata's red light areas and a child protection programme for children who live there.

At Sanlaap's drop-in centres, children can come and attend formal classes for getting an education or vocational training.

www.sanlaapindia.org | 033-466-2977
hq@sanlaapindia.org

SUPPORT A MENTAL HEALTH PATIENT

THE ACTION NORTHEAST TRUST
It is tough to find a psychiatrist in a city. Imagine how difficult it is in a distant village. The Action Northeast Trust (ANT) has been reaching out to villages in Assam with professional psychiatric care.

That is really great, but ANT needs all the help it can get. You could volunteer as a psychiatrist or a social worker. Or with a small donation of ₹750 you could pay for three months of medicines for a poor patient.

ANT holds a mental health camp on its campus once a month and smaller camps closer to villages. Hundreds turn up because they have nowhere else to go in those remote parts.

www.theant.org | 9435122042
sunil@theant.org

LAPTOP, TABLET FOR THE DEAF

AURED
Children born deaf can learn to hear through auditory verbal therapy which reactivates the nerve connections with the brain. At AURED in Mumbai more than 800 children have benefited and gone on to live normal lives.

Set up by Aziza Tyabji in 1991, AURED's work has primarily been with children from poor homes. After the pandemic, AURED has a problem because it cannot open its centre and the children being poor don't have laptops and tablets.

You can donate your old laptop or tablet or gift AURED some new ones. www.aured.org | 9820174677
aztyabji@gmail.com

NUTRITION THE LOW-COST WAY

CHILD IN NEED INSTITUTE
In 1974, the Child in Need Institute (CINI) began to treat malnourished children in Kolkata with Nutrimix, a low-cost nutritious food. They realized that malnutrition was a social issue and not only a health issue. CINI takes a life-cycle approach to health.

Intern with CINI and help them with documentation, website management, action research, data analysis and fundraising. www.cini-india.org | 9330020997
cini@ciniindia.org

MEALS FOR THE NEEDY IN MUMBAI

Khaana Chahiye
KHAANA CHAHIYE
When the nation went into lockdown, a few good samaritans in Mumbai launched Khaana Chahiye to ensure that people only battled the pandemic, not hunger. By partnering with restaurants, flight kitchens and caterers, Khaana Chahiye is able to deliver 75,000 meals every day across Mumbai.

Khaana Chahiye serves migrant labourers, daily wage labourers who don't have work and underprivileged residents of slums and chawls. If you know someone who needs a meal, call Khaana Chahiye. If you have a bike or a car, you can sign up to be a delivery volunteer. Or you can donate to Khaana Chahiye so that they can continue to supply meals to the needy. www.khaanachahiye.com | 9321128237 | contact@khaanachahiye.com

GETTING TO KNOW WILDLIFE BETTER

Nature Conservation Foundation
NATURE CONSERVATION FOUNDATION

Nature Conservation Foundation (NCF) carries out research and surveys on wildlife and ecology. In the Eastern Himalayan belt it has been conducting surveys on hornbills and mapping conservation strategies. NCF also works in the Western Ghats and coastal areas.

The foundation's knowledge of wildlife and ecology helps governments design appropriate conservation strategies which are then implemented in collaboration with local communities who depend most on forests and natural resources. www.ncf-india.org | 080-23648778, 080-26716897 | smita@ncf-india.org

DO YOUR BIT FOR ONLINE FREEDOM

INTERNET FREEDOM FOUNDATION
INTERNET FREEDOM FOUNDATION

Join Internet Freedom Foundation (IFF) in defending online freedom and privacy. The foundation was born out of the SaveTheInternet movement for net neutrality.

IFF has campaigned for an adequate privacy law. Recently, it wrote to the Parliamentary Standing Committee for a human rights audit of Facebook India. It took up the cause of students of the National Institute of Fashion Technology who complained that their college's social media policy curbed freedom of expression.

IFF is based out of Delhi. But wherever you are you can donate and volunteer. Just shoot them an email. www.internetfreedomfoundation.in | 8527968287, 9990000256
donate@internetfreedomfoundation.in

EDUCATION FOR GIRLS IN UP

Pardada Pardadi Educational Society
PARDADA PARDADI EDUCATIONAL SOCIETY

The gift of education is priceless. When Pardada Pardadi Educational Society started a school in Anupshahr in Western Uttar Pradesh, they believed that education could transform rural India.

Girls from their schools have gone on to work in the IT sector in Bengaluru and some have even gone to the US to pursue higher education.

You can sponsor a girl's education at just ₹35,000 a year. Or you can donate any amount of your choosing to their COVID-19 relief efforts.

You could volunteer as a teacher, as a health and medical volunteer or as a mentor to the students. www.pardadapardadi.org | 011-29542524 | info@pardadapardadi.org

GIFT A TREE FOR A LOVED ONE

RAJANET YEGNESWARAN CHARITABLE TRUST
RAJANET YEGNESWARAN CHARITABLE TRUST

Reforest India plants trees in Bengaluru to improve its forest cover. You can gift a tree to a loved one for just ₹300. Reforest India promises to choose the right species, water the sapling and care for it. So far, it has planted some 60,000 trees in the city. About 97 percent have survived because they are nurtured. Seedballs are never scattered in the hope that some will survive.

You can also pick an occasion, like a birthday, wedding anniversary or a special day, like Mother's Day, to gift a tree.

Reforest India is an initiative of Rajanet Yegneswaran Charitable Trust, a non-profit. www.reforestindia.in/ | 9980013488

BE A NUTRITION CHAMPION

Matri Sudha
MATRI SUDHA
Matri Sudha works in Delhi's slums to fight malnutrition. Almost 57 percent of children in such areas are anaemic. Matri Sudha has trained local women to be Nutrition Champions. They reach out to pregnant and lactating women with advice on nutrition. They identify children who are malnourished and ensure they receive proper nutrition. The NGO also works with *anganwadi* centres.

Matri Sudha has been giving needy families Poshan Kits. Each kit costs ₹1,200 and contains 5 kg rice, 5 kg wheat, 2 kg dal, 1 litre cooking oil, 250 gm masala packets and 1 kg salt. Pay ₹1,200 for a kit and ensure that at least one family is hunger-free. www.matrisudha.com | 99101-44337
matrisudha2000@yahoo.co.in

HELP SPECIAL NEEDS ADULTS

SNEH SPECIAL NEEDS EMPOWERMENT HUB
SPECIAL NEEDS EMPOWERMENT HUB

Adults with disabilities struggle to find employment. But the Special Needs Empowerment Hub or SNEH gives them the opportunity to be financially independent in a sheltered working environment.

SNEH engages them in producing products like steel water bottles, coffee mugs, folders, wallets and cloth pouches. The sale of such products gives adults with disabilities a source of income. 9840076322
specialneedproducthub@gmail.com

BRINGING BACK THE TRAFFICKED

Prajwala
PRAJWALA

For a survivor of sex trafficking, the journey from rescue to rehabilitation is a long one. In Telangana, Prajwala has been working with survivors of sex trafficking since 1996.

Prajwala help survivors with legal and psychological counselling. It also provides skilling and helps in social integration.

It costs ₹6,000 per month to educate a survivor, ₹5,000 per month to rehabilitate one and ₹1,500 per month to educate a child who is at risk of being inducted into prostitution.

www.prajwalaindia.com
sunitha_2002@yahoo.com
Praj_2010@yahoo.com

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