

Civil Society



WHEN JOBS GROW ON COCONUT TREES
 Harvesters go pro, make a tidy living

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Jobs and schools



COVER STORY

COCONUT HARVESTERS GO PRO

Some coconut harvesters in Kerala's Kasaragod district have come together to professionalize their services. They are available on phone, wear uniforms and turn up in teams to make a neat living.

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THE coconut harvesters featured in this month's cover story are a good example of how rural employment can literally be found on trees. In sharp contrast, millions line up for government jobs, either seeking favours or paying bribes and mostly ending up nowhere. Clearly, it is a question of orientation. Policymakers have a responsibility to make it possible for people to see and seize the opportunities around them. When people prosper, so does the country's economy.

In AI-driven times should people be climbing trees to have an income? There is a robustness and confidence, a sense of organization and more about the coconut harvesters. It is this that sets them apart and makes them more ready than others for a brave new world. What should be noted is that it comes to them naturally. They have an innate capacity to get their act together on their own.

What if this spirit could be helped to shine more easily? Not just in Kerala but across India could people be helped to fire up their lives, get on with things. Remember, the coconut harvesters are in a state known for its educated unemployed. People with degrees waiting for jobs. The harvesters mostly have school degrees with some having completed graduation. Who knows, their earnings from shinning up coconut trees could help them pick up a better education, move on to other things. Life beckons for them. It's written in their body language. Just see the pictures we have carried with the story.

The Annual Status of Education Report or ASER comes with several insights. Rukmini Banerji of Pratham, which generates the report, makes an important point when she says in her interview with us that India needs to figure out quickly what it needs to do with its youngsters between 14 and 18 years old. How can schoolwork be shaped to empower them for life ahead? How does one equip them to enter the world of work?

Is the UCC in Uttarakhand something to cheer about or should we be worried? A bit of both, Zakia Soman tells us in a heartfelt interview. She and her group have been asking for reforms within the Muslim community for a long time but a stubborn clergy has refused to yield. Soman also makes the point that a Uniform Civil Code should live up to its name by being national in nature. Gender justice should be at its core and there should be much wider consultation before provisions are framed. There are any number of legal minds who can usefully contribute to such a law.

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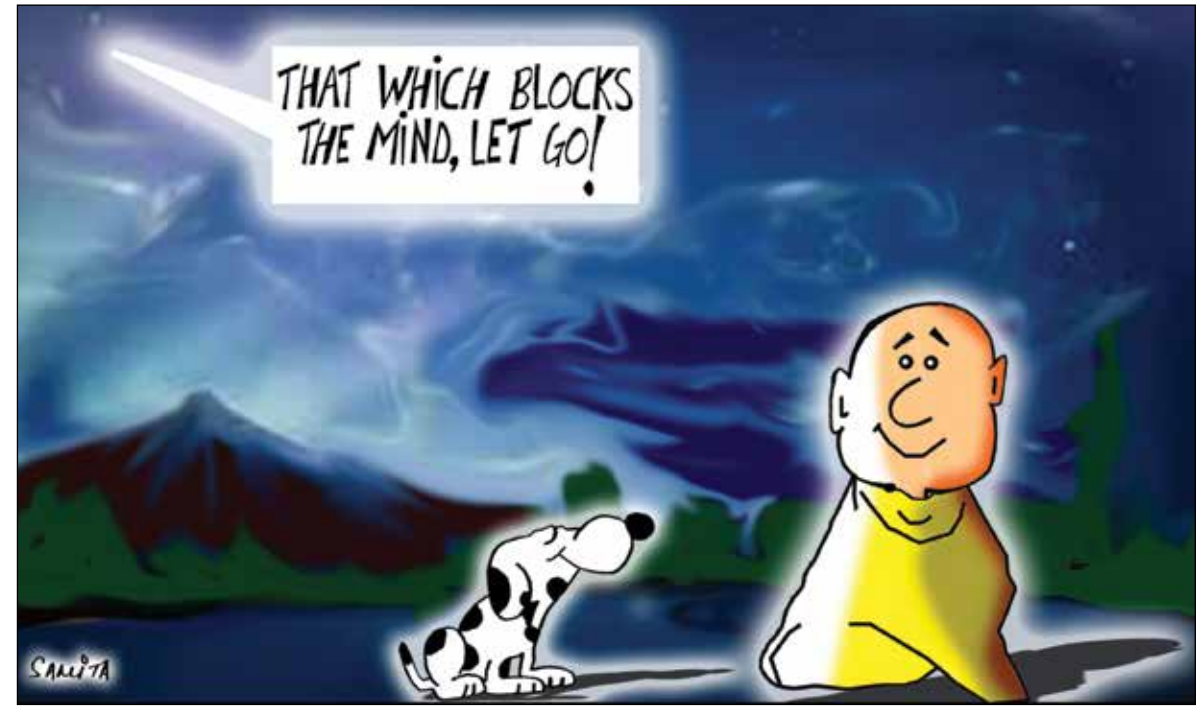
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IN THE LIGHT

SAMITA RATHOR



LETTERS



20th anniversary

Your piece, 'In search of the India story beyond the headlines', was so well-articulated and engaging. It really brought out the essence of what your magazine stands for. Thank you for keeping this independent endeavour up and running for 20 years. Wishing *Civil Society* a very happy anniversary.

Sanjukta Bose

I loved the title because this magazine has always sought out stories that one barely gets to see elsewhere. Kudos to you for reaching out beyond headlines and bringing the lesser-known unsung heroes among us into the limelight.

Shashank

Congratulations! It has truly been a remarkable journey of two decades, reporting extraordinary, engaging and impactful stories that reflect the diversity and resilience of our society. In these challenging times, *Civil Society*

has indeed become a beacon of hope, providing a sense of home and fostering faith in numerous ways. We are sure that it will remain dedicated to the mission of informing, inspiring, and fostering a sense of community with its relevant and meaningful discourse.

Geeta and Brij Wahi

Congratulations on a triumphant 20 years! You have regaled your readers with a carousel of news stories from nooks and crannies across India that are not only new — simply because they were never noticed — but also heart-warming. In a mediascape that thrives on horror stories, gossip and pessimism, you have brought dollops of hope and confidence in our ability as Indians to bring change for the good of all and not just wait for the government.

Amit Bose

I loved this anniversary issue. Kudos to the team for putting together such a lengthy one, with so many valuable insights in every section. The milestones from 2003-2023 were really striking. Artability too is a wonderful initiative, a cause that is close to my heart. Thank you for this.

Satya Manik

Congratulations on your 20th anniversary issue. More power to your elbow. And keep up the good work of bringing out *Civil Society*.

Gautam Vohra

I looked for mention of the Buddha Darya forest but maybe because of space constraints you could not include it. My congratulations on your 20th anniversary issue. It's a comprehensive issue which gets it right. You are warriors in the media.

Colonel Gill

We received the anniversary issue and are very thankful. This issue is a textbook for social organizations. Very inspiring.

Bankim Sheth

This issue was truly very impressive. Each article brought with it some valuable takeaways for people from all walks of life. From healthcare to electoral reform and working women — all are issues of contemporary concern in India and must be spoken about at length.

Sitara Mohan

I am always in awe of independent journalism especially in the context we live in. Thank you for your incredible work. The Artability section amazed me, while the pictures were really fascinating. I learnt a lot about the country too, from all the special articles, especially the India story beyond the headlines.

Shivani B.

Parties and politics

As someone who doesn't have an in-depth understanding of political nuances, Sanjaya Baru's

article, 'From coalition success to single-leader party', was really very informative. The manner in which the coalition success of the past has been explained makes one feel hopeful for a possible shift towards such an era again. It is time for India to become truly democratic again.

Keshav L.

Cleaner elections

I just read the electoral reform piece by Jagdeep Chhokar. It was remarkably easy to follow, considering it is a complex and convoluted topic. I really appreciate it when a news outlet does this kind of analysis and perspective taking — it's the sort of thing average readers do not do and we all so badly need to understand the systems in which we live.

Deepti Kharod

School talk

I read Dileep Ranjekar's article, 'Missing the bus in school education', with interest. The generosity of Azim Premji and the work of the Azim Premji Foundation is making a great contribution to the building of grassroots education in India. It is similar to the contribution of the Tata family and its trusts in the last century. India is indebted to them for taking up a much-neglected segment of our educational infrastructure and enhancing it.

Joe Saldanha

Very well penned. Education is the need of the hour for our country's peace and prosperity. Wish the politicians realize this and don't interfere in educational policies.

Janaki Subramaniam

Dileep Ranjekar draws our attention to the monumental task in front of us. He provides a perspective on where we should be focusing to improve the overall quality of education in the country.

Arvind N. Agrawal

Dileep Ranjekar has rightly addressed the current issue and its root cause. Education has become a business. Schools are today more focused on revenue generation than on instilling values in children. Discipline,

respect, and continued learning are qualities that future and current upcoming generations need to acquire.

Ranjekar has been a great mentor to society. I hope people will pay attention to his views and design an education system that helps to develop values and encourages more people to choose teaching as a profession.

Manmohan Panda

Machine age

Dr R.A. Mashelkar's piece, 'India tech story: better, faster, higher, cheaper', contained valuable insights on India's innovation and tech journey, especially on being a global leader in inclusive innovation. We must take pride in these achievements as a nation. I really learnt a lot from this piece.

Shreya Marwa

Care and cure

Vijay Anand Ismavel's article, 'Low-cost mission hospitals hang in amid rapid change', was such an inspiring read. The spirit of service is something our society should thrive on. This is truly a beautiful sentiment and shows that humane, kind and selfless acts are still very much in fashion. Hats off to the hardworking doctors in mission hospitals who work in such tough environments to serve those who need it most.

Shobhana Jose

"Hospitals which provide dependable care and are run with a spirit of service will remain in demand." True. People can compete with infrastructure and other factors but the spirit of service will always be in demand.

Sankar Daniel

Women and work

"Never before have women had so much work and so many roles to play for such small amounts and sometimes no amount at all." This piece by Reema Nanavaty of SEWA really makes one stop and think. I have shared this article with many of my male family members who refuse to see the plight of women. Nothing can tell the truth better than real facts. The content was so valuable and I especially loved the title, 'Everyone benefits when women earn.'

Siya

This issue arises specifically in rural areas of developing countries where women are not permitted to work for wages. Despite this, women have historically made significant contributions, particularly in rural areas, although the article notes that these contributions are uncountable. In a nation like India, where numerous female politicians have held leadership positions for an extended period of time, women's contributions are still not acknowledged.

Nikita Patel

Cool fridge

Madhukar Shukla's piece on social enterprises in India was interesting, along with the picture of the solar fridge. Clearly, a huge demand for an invention like that exists across the country. I discovered, for example, that 80 percent of the fish catch at the Mohana fish auction in Digha worth ₹4.5 crore is exported. Fish is highly nutritious and a cold chain, along with imaginative marketing ideas and policies, could massively increase domestic fish consumption.

Michael Ghosh

People power

"But the human voice cannot be silenced and, we hope, continue to protest, create, live." This particular line truly resonated with me in Aruna Roy's article, 'People's movements have been losing their voice'. Such an important line of discussion. Really a must-read.

Madhvi Bose

Film saga

Saibal Chatterjee's piece, 'New filmmakers weigh in but the mega stars rule', taught me so much about the dynamics of Indian cinema over the past few years. Very interesting indeed. "Never before had numbers trumped substance quite as emphatically as they did in the past 20 years." Really told me a lot!

Megha Tiwari

Fail safe

Your book review, 'Life lessons: How to succeed with failure', was such an important drift of conversation in a country like ours that glorifies success and is harsh on failure. There barely seems to be any scope for failure, which is just sad. Thank you for writing about this. I will surely pick up a copy of the book.

Minnie Mathew

Gift guide

I found this extensive gifting guide really useful. I am always looking for unique gifts for my friends and some of these were the perfect fit! And it is rewarding to think that buying from them will help these small artisans and producers grow.

Farah Bashir

Orange revival

I have been an old admirer of the writings of Shree Padre. His article, 'Wild oranges return with Friends of Mangoes', was full of wonderful insights about the urgent need for a policy on *in situ* conservation of agro-biodiversity,

in this case, oranges. We should help the conservators characterize these varieties and identify their unique features. I hope local communities will continue to conserve these so that in future our society finds some very important gene pools for solving emerging challenges that arise due to climate fluctuation.

Anil G.

Goa blues

I left Goa in 1991 and whenever I return, I am ashamed of what I see. Your story, 'Goa's walking company offers unusual experiences', is a good initiative to promote natural tourism in the state.

Ten years ago, on my first Sunday morning in Margao, I could not identify any Goenkars on the street. I felt like a stranger in my own land. I am thinking of making another trip in 2024 but the pictures I see on the internet are not of the Goa I knew. The beautiful beaches are now an eyesore. I also learnt that it is not a cheap destination, even for foreigners.

I lived in Salcete and Canacona but I hardly know anything about other places in Goa. I think a lot of local knowledge in villages is kept confined to them. I hope elders, artisans and social activists can help enrich such walking experiences to truly get the essence of Goa.

I propose a special tour for local Goenkars to learn and appreciate what's around them. Maybe a day or half a day in each village?

John Mascarenhas



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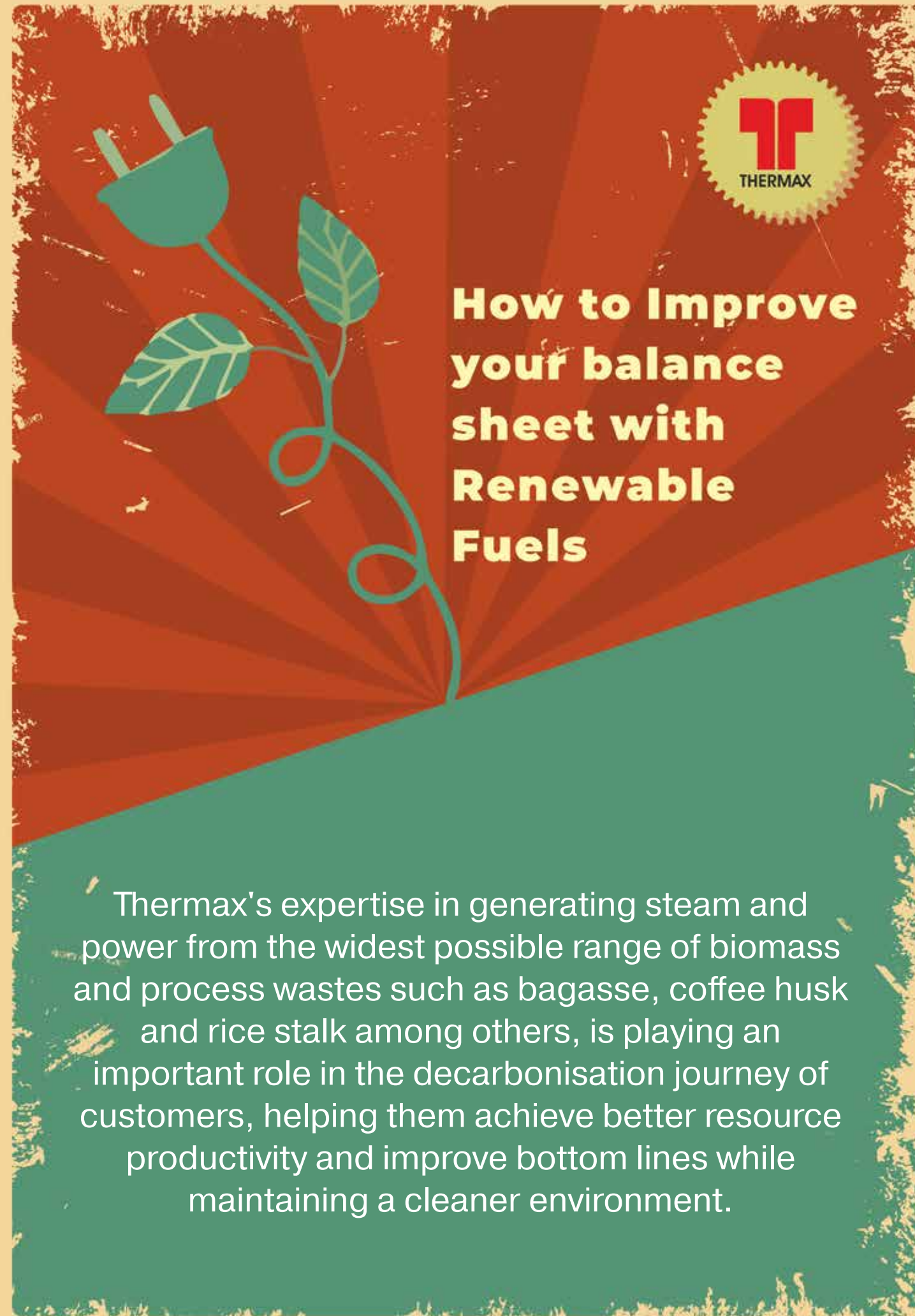
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ZAKIA SOMAN SAYS A CIVIL CODE SHOULD BE UNIFORM



Zakia Soman: 'Raising the marriageable age for girls to 18 is a good thing'

'UCC is right on polygamy, wrong on moral policing'

Civil Society News
New Delhi

SOCIAL reforms have for long eluded Indian Muslims because of an obdurate clergy. Among the few willing to take them on has been Zakia Soman and women activists of the Bharatiya Muslim Mahila Andolan working with her. But their efforts have met with little success and the established order has been able to brush them off.

Now, a law ushering in a Uniform Civil Code (UCC) in Uttarakhand does away with polygamy, sets 18 as the marriageable age for girls and, in addition to the earlier abolition of triple talaq, outlaws unilateral divorce.

Soman says she has no option but to welcome the UCC in the absence of voluntary reforms within the Muslim community. But she worries about social issues being used for political ends by the BJP. Moral policing is also a matter of concern. The UCC is both good and bad in parts, she says in an interview to *Civil Society*. And it would have been so much better if it hadn't been drafted for just one state but been brought in nationally with more consultation.

Q: How do you see Uttarakhand's Uniform Civil Code? What is your opinion?

Over the years the UCC has become a political idea. That has its own implications. The sad part is that I'm forced to sort of welcome it because

our community is not going to reform our personal law. At least not in my lifetime. So, the next best option is to have codified and just laws.

Q: Which aspects of Uttarakhand's UCC do you welcome and which do you find troubling?

Firstly, the age of marriage being legally announced as 18 for girls and 21 for boys is very welcome because the broad understanding in the Muslim community is that the age of marriage is puberty which can mean 14 or 15 or even 13 years. It's basically child marriage by another name.

There have been judgments by different high courts. If I remember correctly, four or five judgments from the Delhi High Court and the Punjab and Haryana High Court held the marriage of a 14 or 15 year old girl to be valid because she happened to be Muslim.

There can be several dimensions to such cases. I am not saying underage marriages should be criminalized. Not at all. What should be addressed is this whole concept that because you are Muslim you are legally entitled to claim that your age of marriage is puberty. Actually, even 18 is too early for marriage.

Our realities are that out of poverty, or lack of any other options, or whenever a 'good match' comes along, parents are always in a hurry to marry off their girls. It's mainly out of helplessness. But we have to take society forward and it is high time we started building awareness that the age of marriage should, at the very minimum, be 18 for girls.

Q: How do you deal with it without criminalizing it? If you have a law which says the age of marriage is 18 or 21, anything below that becomes an offence.

Even the provisions of the Child Marriage Act regard any marriage under 18 of a girl as not void, but invalid till she attains the age of 18. So here is where the political aspect kicks in. In the current climate, it will become a licence to go after a Muslim man if he marries a girl who is not yet 18 and put him behind bars. These are the inbuilt contradictions or gaps.

But I still welcome it. It is a beginning. Perhaps some will pay a price for having married an underage girl. But it will signal to the community that you have to wait till the girl is 18 and the boy is 21.

Like we have seen in Assam, men who married girls who were underage when they married them were jailed. The women now have three or four children and with the husband behind bars they are destitute. The purpose of law is to bring about a just and fair society and not vigilantism or a punitive kind of mindset. You can't score political points by weaponizing the law.

Then, disbaring bigamy and polygamy is a very good provision, although the latest survey of the NFHS (National Family Health Survey) shows that there is not a very big difference between the rate of polygamy among Hindus and Muslims. Among the Hindus it is something like 1.3 or 1.4 and amongst the Muslims it's 1.8 or 1.9.

But polygamy and bigamy amongst Hindus are disbarred by law. Bigamy attracts a seven-year jail sentence. Among Muslims, the common understanding built by the clergy is that if you are Muslim you can have four wives and it's legal.

Whereas I'm very clear that the Quran does not permit polygamy. Even when it is permitted, there are strict conditions and it is the context that is important. So, in today's context, there is no justification whatsoever for polygamy.

Q: When you raise these issues with your own community and religious leaders what is the response?

The response is good from the community *per se*, from women and their families, from those who have no vested interests. But from the clergy the response is, Who are you? You are just women. We don't have to learn from you. You are nobody to teach us.

Then they start saying, You are women who aren't even in Islamic dress. First of all, nobody knows what is Islamic dress. Is there something called Islamic dress? They'll go after me personally, saying that I'm married to a Hindu so I have no right to speak up, that I am acting on behalf of the RSS. This is patriarchal and misogynist.

Q: Do you think that the complete lack of willingness to reform on cultural and quasi-religious matters is entirely patriarchal?

It's a combination. A patriarchal mindset is a key reason, but there are other reasons as well such as poverty, backwardness, lack of education, lack of any awareness, lack of any options within the Muslim community.

In the past several decades the condition of the Muslim community has been going from bad to worse. The social-economic status and all the human development indicators signify this. And, of course, there is politics. The few leaders who are in politics don't really care to empower the community. They perhaps even prefer to let the community remain as it is so long as they keep voting for them.

It's a combination of all these factors. But the deadly aspect about patriarchy masquerading as religion is that when you oppose polygamy, they say you are going against Islam. After that nobody is willing to stand up. Because nobody wants to be told they are going against their religion.

Q: You have a Muslim elite. People at the highest levels of the judiciary, people who are scholars, who've been teachers, professors, vice chancellors.... Why have they not taken up reform of personal law?

This is a very, very important dimension. If we look at some other communities, say, the tribal community, there has been a whole process of building a critical consciousness before and after Independence. There

has been a process of democratization within the community. There was Ambedkar. There was Mahatma Gandhi. Savitri Phule.

There are several Adivasi leaders who have engaged with the community and given back to the community. Inspired by them, even post-Independence, a lot of Dalit and Adivasi leaders worked within the community. This is singularly lacking in the Muslim community.

By and large, 99 percent of Muslims give back to the community in the religious sense. It can be *zakat* or donating to a *madrassa* or building a *masjid*. Basically, giving some kind of material help to those in need. But building a democratic consciousness in the community to make them aware about their citizenship rights, discuss social harmony and participation in a multicultural, multi-faith society have been neglected areas.

The Muslim middle class is also very, very small. The large mass of Muslims is poor. Maybe just one percent would be rich. Typically, post-Independence and after Partition, the number of Muslims belonging to the middle class became very small and it is shrinking because of the kind of challenges they face – political challenges, communal challenges, a discriminatory environment. The Muslim community does not have a sizeable or even a noticeable middle class which could contribute to community well-being and thereby nation building. The nation is, after all, built up of all communities and they are supposed to build bridges, reform and educate.

'A patriarchal mindset is a key reason for the unwillingness to reform among Muslims. But there are other reasons as well such as poverty, lack of any awareness, lack of any options.'

Q: What about divorce, inheritance and adoption?

The next good provision of this bill is that it is ruling out unilateral divorce. It's virtually making divorce mutual because it calls for the participation of both husband and wife.

Even after abolition of instant triple *talaq*, unilateral *talaq* is taking place under the Hasan method. Under this method divorce is not pronounced in one instance but over a period of three months without consulting the wife at all or without the wife having any say. So that gets ruled out with this provision.

The provision on sharing property and inheritance does not discriminate between sons and daughters and mothers and fathers. That is also a welcome provision and an important aspect. The Uttarakhand law does not discriminate between mother and father regarding guardianship of children. It talks about the best interests of the child and provides for mother's sole custody for a child under five. These are good provisions.

What is problematic are the provisions on live-in relationships. Those provisions are based on some kind of moral policing of young couples, people who have fallen in love. It has been in the air for some time now. We have been seeing moral policing for quite a few years.

The provisions are draconian and violative of the right to privacy, even of the right to freedom. I'm sure people will challenge them. It's virtually the state deciding who will fall in love with whom. That's deeply problematic.

You can vote at 18. You can get married at 18. But you can't decide your own life at 18. You can't live with somebody you want to live with. There's a contradiction here. Why, then, keep 18 as the age of marriage if you think

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it's not good enough to live together? I hope there is outrage against this live-in provision.

Q: If every state is going to make its own UCC, we will have some 28 UCCs. Then how is it a 'uniform' civil code?

Exactly. If we look at Article 44 of the Directive Principles in the Constitution under which it is said the state shall endeavour to bring about a Uniform Civil Code, that spirit is about the whole nation. It's not saying 28 states will have 28 different UCCs. Again, I would say it's all about politics.

Q: Were you consulted at any point of time by the Uttarakhand state? Do you know what kind of consultations might have happened?

No, we were not consulted when the Uttarakhand law was coming about. But they are saying that they received over 200,000 responses from the public in Uttarakhand and they've held face to face consultations with about 10,000 people who attended other consultations organized by the National Commission for Women in Delhi. That was on the overall question of reform in law and the Uniform Civil Code. I have attended those consultations but not at the state level.

Q: You would, however, support the idea of a Uniform Civil Code?

In itself a Uniform Civil Code is about gender justice and gender equality. If we take it forward with genuineness and the right spirit, it can be a really progressive law which can further women's equality in our society. That is why it was pushed by Ambedkar and Nehru and supported by women freedom fighters at the time of Independence.

Q: What would for you be the perfect process for coming up with a UCC?

The goal should be gender justice and not scoring political brownie points or consolidating your own political position.

We have enough jurisprudence in our country. If we want to look elsewhere, we can look at some of the countries in the West where live-in relationships are regarded as dignified and respected as marriage. There is no clause that says you have to register in a month or you will be sent to jail.

Instead, their law says that if any two people are invested in each other on a long-term basis, they can voluntarily register their relationship. They can have children also. There is no illegitimacy attached. We can even follow some of the jurisprudence by the Scandinavian countries. We have so many legal luminaries who have thought about the UCC, written and researched it. We can get some of them together, task them with this, and they will come out with a very good, genuine UCC that can be implemented across the country. ■

Crushed hopes of women workers in the auto sector

Kavita Charanji
Gurugram

NEETU Devi lost her hand a year and a half ago in a factory accident. Her hand was crushed by a malfunctioning power press machine in a company that manufactures auto components for Maruti Suzuki in Gurugram. The accident was inevitable. The power press was defective and despite her complaints to her supervisor, she was compelled to continue working.

Today she is in the Labour Court, fighting for reparation from the company. She now waters plants, mans the gates and does similar menial jobs for the factory owners. Nothing can soothe her anguish. "I am like prey for a ravenous tiger," says Neetu.

Safe In India (SII) Foundation's fifth annual report, *CRUSHED*, highlights a worrying trend. More and more migrant women are joining the supply chain of the auto components sector, and suffering injuries on the job.

Originally from Lakhimpur Kheri in Uttar Pradesh (UP), Neetu — who is illiterate — looked for employment everywhere. When a contractor in Gurugram offered her a job in an auto components factory, she grabbed it.

Her dream of a better life for her family now lies shattered. The factory manager took her to an Employees' State Insurance (ESI) hospital in the locality. Later she was referred to a private hospital. After much running around, she managed to get ₹23,000 from the Employees' State Insurance Corporation (ESIC) in lieu of her leave and a monthly pension of ₹7,000.

The company where she works has not given her even a rupee by way of compensation, she says angrily. She gets a monthly salary of ₹12,350 on which she supports her two sons who have studied up to Class 10. Her daughter is married. "I don't know how I will survive without a hand. I am like a sinking ship," says Neetu.

The SII report presents data pertaining to injuries suffered by workers in the supply chain of auto sector brands from Haryana, Maharashtra, Uttarakhand, Rajasthan, Tamil

Nadu and Karnataka.

With a special focus on women workers in the auto sector, *CRUSHED* is a searing indictment of the various stakeholders in the sector, be it the government or industry. Workers are blatantly exploited by auto components manufacturers. The government, on its part, turns a blind eye to lapses in safety checks, under-reporting injury statistics and ignoring loopholes in labour laws.

There is complete absence of concerted national-level action by auto bigwigs or their umbrella bodies. There is also lack of public awareness about the issue and glaring lacunae all around that needs to be addressed.

More migrant women are joining the auto sector and suffering injuries on the job. They appear to be in a more precarious position than men.

Though women are joining the automobile supply chain in increasing numbers, they appear to be in a far more precarious position pre- and post-injury than their male counterparts, according to the *CRUSHED* report. A focus group discussion held by SII with 22 injured women workers operating power press machines in the auto hub of Faridabad in Haryana, revealed a high degree of exploitation by employers.

Injured women workers say that more women are employed as power press operators than men. Though they are believed to be more productive and efficient, they get lower wages.

Straitened economic circumstances drive women to work in unsafe auto components manufacturing units. Many of them are migrants. The lack of viable options in their vicinity makes a factory job look attractive. They initially take on jobs as packers or



Women in the pictures above and below are among the increasing number who experience shopfloor accidents



helpers but are tempted into work on a power press machine by the offer of an extra monthly ₹1,000-1,500. They might also be ordered to do so by their supervisors when there is a shortfall of operators or production pressures are high, says the report.

While men too face many obstacles in getting ESIC benefits post-injury, the situation is far worse for women. They said they had to depend on a male companion to get ESI services and the required documentation from employers. Many are fired from their jobs post-accident or are compelled to scout around for other employment opportunities.

That is a big blow for women, many of whom are single or widows, says Masab Shamsi, operations head, SII Worker Assistance Centres that are spread out in the auto hubs of Manesar, Faridabad, Gurugram and Pune.

With serious crush injuries, they cannot carry out simple housework tasks, he says. "I can't even cook. I depend on people to cook for me," says 23-year-old Mamta Kumari, a migrant worker from a village in Jharkhand who lost her finger on a power press in a Manesar-based factory a few months ago.

Even as she waits for her medical treatment to be over so that she can get her ESI post-injury compensation, she is not hopeful about her future. "The company said they would not give me even one paisa," she says. Her mother and father are agricultural workers so they are not in a position to help out. Her hopes are pinned on finding jobs like stitching in the garments sector.

There are other problems. V.N. Saroja, senior adviser to SII, cites the case of Maruti Suzuki which installed safety equipment in some of its Tier 2 and Tier 3 factories three

years ago. A year later, SII found that some of the factories had uninstalled the equipment because of high production pressures.

CRUSHED notes that there is a clear "lack of professionalism" in a large part of the auto sector supply chain. Contravention of the law is apparent right from the process of "hiring workers who do not meet the defined qualifications by education/gender and then make them operate on poorly maintained machinery with barely any training or safety equipment".

SII has demanded affirmative action by both government organizations and Original Equipment Manufacturers (OEMs) that rake in the gains of products made under substandard work conditions. "Profits and margins cannot rest on the exploitation of individuals who are desperate to just survive," says the scathing report. ■



Rukmini Banerji: 'We should come up with a combination of working and learning'

'India needs to decide what it wants from 14 to 18 year olds'

Rukmini Banerji goes beyond the ASER numbers

Civil Society News
New Delhi

THE problems with school education are there for all to see. Children get enrolled and teachers are better paid, but learning outcomes are up in the air.

Children reach the last few years in school with abysmal capacities in maths and reading and writing. It is a grim situation with the numbers piling up.

For almost two decades now, Pratham, the NGO, has been bringing out the Annual Status of Education Report or ASER which is a survey that provides India-wide snapshots of how children are doing in school.

It is not perfect, but it is a sincere attempt to get a ground-level picture of school education and nudge along the process of finding solutions.

When ASER findings get announced, they make headlines because the numbers are truly

worrisome. But, like the day's news, they are soon forgotten. *Civil Society* spoke to Rukmini Banerji, CEO of Pratham, to get a better understanding. Edited excerpts from a long conversation:

Q: After four years, your report focuses again on students between 14 and 18. What was the reason for revisiting this particular age group?

'Among the reasons that we came back to the 14 to 18 age group was the changes that Covid brought to the lives of young people.'

In 2017 we did 14 to 18 because we felt, and we still feel, that it's an age group that is relatively neglected. It is overwhelmed by exam pressures, but there isn't as much thinking within our education system on this age group as there is on children in the primary, and now the pre-primary group.

We had a sense back then that the New Education Policy that was coming would emphasize pre-primary. There was Covid in between. Among the several reasons that we came back to the 14 to 18 age group was the changes that Covid brought to the lives of young people.

There has been an increase in digital access and availability. In 2017 we did not look at that. I think Covid was the big jolt with which some things became important.

As you know, ASER in 2017 or 2019 or 2023 is much smaller in scale, one district per state and sometimes two districts in the case of UP and MP. The data is useful at the district level,

but it is not a national picture in that sense. It is our attempt to kind of explore something more for this age group. It is to start a continued discussion on what does India want for its 14 to 18 year olds.

Q: Underlying everything you are saying is the need to understand the needs, problems and aspirations of young people entering the world of work and employment. Your study shows many of them are already working at 14 and so on.

And after 14 you are not under the umbrella of the Right to Education Act — technically, I mean. You cannot be officially placed in a job in the formal sector until you are 18. But I think this combination of work and being enrolled in school is happening.

To measure attendance, we visited the biggest government school in the sample village. On a random day, we could know how many children from 14 to 18 who were enrolled were actually present. We know that attendance in high school is actually quite low.

In a way, I feel the kids are working, they're studying, so they're probably not studying that well. They're probably not doing work that they like. But all this doesn't come to the fore. Whether it is a push factor or a pull factor. Or a default factor. Whatever it may be, we probably need to come up with some kind of combination of working and going to college in this age group.

Q: One of the highlights of your report is the poor levels of learning that these teens actually have. The lack of capacity with simple maths and reading and writing.

It is really an extension of the Class 8 learning levels from 2005 onwards. So for us in some ways it's not news. We know that if you haven't had the opportunity to go back and build your foundations, it's not that much better. Having said that, I found this year's digital stuff quite interesting. Because it's not like if you can't read fluently you're not on the internet and doing things. You know what you're doing.

One part of our survey of (access to and use of) digital resources is self-reported, which is what usually surveys are about. But we also actually ask the kids to do something in front of us. That's how you really know the difference between self-reported and actually being able to do.

Obviously, both things have their own constraints. You know, how much can you ask about self-reported till it becomes an opinion or a view as opposed to what you can do. And when you ask people to do something, you know you're in a one-on-one situation in the household. So, you know you can't be doing lots of things.

Even with those whose reading and maths are not strong and they are doing less, what they can do on a smartphone is not zero. There

is something about this age group that I think needs to be taken differently. Firstly, how did everybody learn how to use the smartphone? Self-taught. Learnt from friends. Learnt from siblings. When learning levels are weak, applications in real life are also weak. But what you can do with a smartphone needs to be looked at further because this is all about self-motivation and kids this age are influenced much more by their friends than textbooks.

Q: When the ASER findings are made public each year the headlines are all about 50 or 60 percent of the children not having very basic skills. In a country of our size these numbers are huge. And we keep adding to these numbers year on year. Isn't this a point of great concern?

Absolutely. The question is what do we do so that it doesn't become like this. Let's say between NIPUN Bharat and whatever we are doing in primary, this will reduce if we do things well early on. Equally, what can we do before a young person leaves school. And that what can we do is going to be different from what I can do with kids in primary school.

'There is something about this age group that needs to be taken differently. Firstly, how did everybody learn how to use the smartphone? Self-taught. Learnt from friends...'

Yes, the situation in Class 8 or above is not good but I think it's a different age group and different kinds of methods could be used to say we are supporting you. Or, we can improve you.

Q: A whole generation of people minus the skills, capacities to survive in the modern world. How effective can smartphones be to bridge gaps in learning?

I think we should start from what kids are doing. It's entertainment. Songs and films. They are listening to things that their friends are listening to. I don't think they're searching high and low to find all kinds of music in the world. They are influencing one another. What if the smartphone could be effectively used for learning in the same way.

From our Pratham work, we see that group dynamics are important. You know, you can influence people individually. Those who are outstanding can take a thread and run. But when you have to catch up, it helps to combine a nudge with a group with an interesting project. You tend to have more confidence when you are in a group.

One of our Pratham programmes, Second Chance, is to help girls and women who have not completed Class 10. Then, we do skilling

programmes for young people between 18 and 20. It is for entry-level jobs.

Q: How important is the role of the teacher? Using technology will depend on the teacher.

For us, the teacher is not your usual teacher. For example, the person who teaches our Second Chance girls has also found them and brought them together. She's more than a teacher. She's the one holding your hand. She's the one who goes and talks to your father. Things like that. On the skilling side, a large number of our skilling programmes are residential. The instructor there is also part of that family. I see a very strong role for the human interaction. I think there is a big role of connecting, facilitating, explaining, just knowing where else to go, guiding. There's a lot of guiding to be done at this age.

Q: You've been doing vocational training. Why is there so little interest in vocational courses? Everyone seems to want to join the government.

They want white collar jobs. Or to join the armed forces. Or the government. That is

what, you know, people want to do. We have 140 skilling centres around the country. We see much more uptake in Chhattisgarh, Jharkhand and Odisha. It is very low in Bihar. Everybody in Bihar knows somebody somewhere. So, you'd rather go to your uncle to enter the job market somewhere else than opt for skilling. Not so in Chhattisgarh or Gadchiroli in Maharashtra. We get so many students from there because they don't have the ready connections to somewhere.

Q: Do they get jobs? Do they get work independently? What do they do?

Our skilling programmes are very basic. We do about 14 different entry-level training programmes in food, service, housekeeping. We don't place in Delhi, Mumbai and the big cities but in other places. The hotels give you accommodation. It's a very good entry and then you can maneuver your way around in the hub. We've been doing largely entry-level job placements.

We are beginning to explore local employment — you know, within cycling distance at the village or block levels.

Similarly, self-employment, starting low but what you can do that takes you higher. ■



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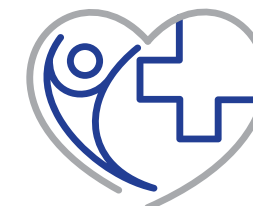
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Give us our forests, say gram sabhas

Jehangir Rashid
Srinagar

Fifteen panchayats in the Kashmir Valley have passed resolutions declaring forests in their vicinity as ‘community’ forests, in line with the Forest Rights Act (FRA) of 2006. The government has reacted with complete silence — leaving the gram sabha decisions impossible to implement. This has irked villagers and forest rights activists.

“When a gram sabha declares a forest to be a community forest, it means that the local community takes ownership and management control of that forest. The gram sabha is a village-level democratic institution in India. It has the power to declare forests as community-owned and determine how they will be managed and used,” says Dr Shaikh Ghulam Rasool, founder and chairperson of the J&K Forest Rights Coalition.

He spells out the benefits that would accrue to villagers and to Scheduled Tribes (STs) like the Gujjar and Bakarwal communities who are nomadic herders of sheep and goats dependent on pastures and forests for grazing their herds.

Once a forest becomes a community forest, it would ensure the preservation and protection of the traditional rights of such ST communities, which have historically been dependent on forests for their livelihoods, cultural practices and sustenance.

Zahid Parwaz Chaudhary, convener of the J&K Forest Rights Coalition, who is also the president of the J&K Gujjar Bakarwal Youth Welfare Conference, explained that decisions taken by the gram sabha are binding on all. The government has to facilitate the implementation of the gram sabha decision.

“It is highly disturbing that instead of the tribal department, the forest department has been made the nodal agency for implementation of the FRA in J&K. It would have been better if a separate department had been created. There is a provision in the Act that stern action can be taken against officers or officials who do not implement the decision of Forests Rights Committees (FRCs) when it also declares a forest as a community forest,” said Chaudhary.

Some of the panchayats which had passed the resolutions are Mujpathri-Budgam, Kawari-Lolab Kupwara, Doodmarg-Tral, Naristan-Hajen Tral-Pulwama, Darde-Woeder Mamer-Kangan, Ganderbal, Mathi-Gawran,



The gram sabha of Kalaroos Kupwara standing on village pasture land

Anantnag, Pregel-A, Wangat-A and Danew Kandi Marg-C, and Kulgam.

“Having community forests will ensure that the rights of STs over forest resources, such as grazing, collection of non-timber forest produce and access to water sources, are recognized and protected. This would lead to sustainable use of forest resources, conservation of bio-diversity, maintain ecosystems and promote long-term benefits for the community,” emphasized Dr Rasool.

It would also enable ST communities to actively participate in decision-making, manage their resources, and exercise autonomy in their communities. It fosters a sense of empowerment and helps address social, economic and political issues affecting the tribe, said Dr Rasool.

Community forests provide avenues for livelihood activities such as forest-based industries, eco-tourism and sustainable agriculture. Economic opportunities are created that improve the overall well-being and socio-economic conditions of the ST community.

Tracing the origin of the J&K Forest Rights Coalition, Chaudhary said that soon after District Development Council (DDC) elections in 2018, an eviction drive against ST families was carried out by the authorities in Lidroo village near Pahalgam. He visited the area and filmed a video that went viral on social media.

“As soon as I uploaded my video there was a buzz on social media. Former chief minister and People’s Democratic Party (PDP) President Mehbooba Mufti visited the area. I got in touch with Dr Shaikh Ghulam Rasool and we decided to work for the ST people with the FRA as our guiding force,” said Chaudhary.

Soon after the Forest Rights Coalition was formed, panchayats were asked to convene gram sabhas to elect Forest Rights Committees (FRCs) in 2019. Training was provided to FRCs

as well as the employees of forests, revenue and rural development departments. The coalition members carried out a sustained campaign across Kashmir to ensure an end to the harassment and eviction of STs.

“We held awareness camps, consultations and workshops at collective and individual levels across the Kashmir Valley. In the beginning not many people joined us but as time passed we were able to attract maximum public participation,” said Chaudhary. He said that action can also be taken against any member or members of FRCs if it is found that they are not implementing the decisions taken by the gram sabha.

“Since the people of the community are the real custodians of the forests we are sensitizing them about the need to preserve the forest cover. Our sustained campaign has yielded positive results since there has been a regeneration of the forests. We want the government to be proactive,” he said.

The J&K Forest Rights Coalition has been receiving calls from ST members in the Jammu region, seeking education about the FRA. Even though resources are limited, they are all set to visit villages in the Chenab valley, Pir Panjal range and Reasi district.

Dr Rasool believes that political turmoil has prevented implementation of socio-economic legislation like the FRA in J&K. Law-makers seem to be less enthused about empowering people belonging to STs, he says.

Mian Amjad Baji, District Development Council (DDC) member, was present during the gram sabha meeting at Wangat-A, Kangan Panchayat in Ganderbal district when the resolution declaring the local forest as a community forest was passed. Amjad, along with the other participants, exuded confidence that a day would come when they would be given their due rights and they would become the real custodians of the local forests. ■

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Street children find a police parent

Rakesh Agrawal
Dehradun

NEHA is a cheerful girl who studies in Class 3. She looks smart in her off-white checked uniform, answering questions put to her by the teacher in her social studies class.

"I joined the school in April 2021, when *poolis chacha* (policeman uncle) talked to my parents. He convinced them to let me go to school. So here I am and my ambition now is to become a schoolteacher," she says.

Neha used to beg at traffic crossings so that she could earn some money to supplement her family's meagre income. Her father is a daily wage labourer and her mother a domestic worker.

For thousands of former child beggars, *poolis chacha* aka Ashok Kumar, a suave IPS officer, is the hero who changed their lives.

It's a common sight in every city to see children begging and selling cheap stuff like dusters, pens, combs and mobile chargers at redlights. Most car owners roll up their windows or drop a few coins into those smudgy hands.

Ashok Kumar too noted the ubiquitous sight of child beggars at traffic crossings. But, instead of turning a blind eye, he decided to pick up child beggars from the streets of Dehradun and enrol them in schools where they could study and become engineers, doctors, teachers, scientists or whatever their hearts desired.

That's why he started Mission Mukti in December 2017. Ashok Kumar decided to implement the Children Act, 1960 across the state. It is a law that bans child begging but is rarely invoked. Mission Mukti's slogan was '*Bhiksha nahi, Shiksha do*' (give us education, not alms). The word *mukti* was chosen because it denotes 'liberating' children from begging.

"In 99 percent of cases, we found that children were forced into begging or hawking by their parents. The children earned about ₹500 a day or about ₹15,000 a month. The parents don't want to work. So, convincing such parents to educate their children isn't easy," Kumar explains.

Ashok Kumar was Additional Director General (Administration/Home Guards) from December 2016 to August 2017 and then Additional Director General (Secretary, Police Sports) from October 2016 to January 2018. He retired on December 1, 2023.

"Identifying such children is easy. Enrolling and retaining them in schools is challenging. Many times children drop out from the schools where we enrol them. Parents remove them from schools forcefully. So, we have to make

consistent effort. We do regular follow-ups and we counsel the parents to work. In the initial phase, the dropout rate was 50 percent. This has reduced to 20 percent now," says Kumar.

In October 2019, in just a fortnight, 200 children were rescued and enrolled in various schools by the Uttarakhand police in Haridwar.

Neha's friend, Akash, studies in Class 5. He too joined the Upper Primary School (UPS) in Khudbuda, a locality in the centre of Dehradun city, three years ago.

He lives with his parents in Govindgarh, Ajabpur, a slum colony in the city. He used to



Children who were rescued and placed in school

spend his day helping his father sell mobile cases at street crossings. His mother is a domestic worker. His small earnings were needed for his seven-member family.

"I love maths and I want to become a scientist when I grow up," he declares.

Both Neha and Akash are doing extremely well in school. Neha scored 98 percent and Akash 91 in the half-yearly examinations.

There is a brother-sister duo too who were picked up by the police and sent to the same school three years ago. Rupa is 11 and Suraj is 13. Suraj used to be a street vendor. Rupa worked as a rag-picker. Both children earned money for their family of six. Their father is a daily wage.

"I'm in Class 5 and my brother is in Class 7. We love to study Hindi. When I grow up I want to join the police force and be like Ashok *chacha*. He is my role model," says Rupa.

"I, too, want to follow in his footsteps and become an engineer like him," says Suraj, who loves mathematics.

Kumar had earned a BTech degree in mechanical engineering in 1986 and an MTech in thermal engineering in 1988 from the Indian Institute of Technology (IIT), Delhi. He then

appeared for the civil services exam the very next year and joined the IPS.

Teachers and principals are impressed by the learning capabilities of these children. "The children have a good grasp of the subjects we teach, although the girls are better than the boys," says Neha Sayana, a class teacher.

Seema Parveen, principal of the school in Khudbuda, is also very supportive. "This is a good initiative by Ashokji. It will enable the children to become part of mainstream society and contribute to it," she says.

Mission Mukti is not just limited to Dehradun city. Many schools across Uttarakhand now have hundreds of such deprived and destitute children. Ten-year-old Aksha studies in Class 5 in Convent School, Srinagar, in Pauri Garhwal district. "I was admitted here in 2022 and this year I came second in class," says the proud student who scored 88.73 percent.

Zeenat, a Class 6 student in Junior High School, Sailanigath, Tanakpur, Champawat district, says, "I love to participate in all sports and cultural activities in school." Zeenat scored 90.22 percent!

So far, more than 7,600 children between five and 15 years have been rescued. Of them, 3,600 were admitted to government schools and 13 sent to correction homes in the state.

The task of enrolling and retaining children in schools has been given to the police personnel of the Anti-Human Trafficking Units (AHTU) of the Uttarakhand police in all 13 districts of Uttarakhand. "Since most of these

children are a good source of income, it's very tough to convince their parents," says Dharmendra Kumar, member of AHTU in Dehradun.

He explained that this means they have to keep track of the child with regular follow-ups and counselling of parents. They have to ensure the child remains in school.

What has motivated the police to take up this mission with such a sense of purpose? "Today's children are tomorrow's citizens. We want them to lead productive lives and not become criminals or gang members. Educating them would reduce this possibility significantly. That means better law and order, less policing and better citizens," says Ashok Kumar.

His work was highlighted in a 2022 book, *Best Practices on Smart Policing*. The book is on the good work done by the police and police organizations of different states. ■



Ashok Kumar

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WHEN JOBS GROW ON COCONUT TREES

Kerala's harvesters go pro, make a tidy living

Shree Padre
Kasaragod

FOUR farmers in Kasaragod district of Kerala had a problem. Between them they had 1,000 coconut trees and time was running out to harvest the coconuts. No matter how hard they tried, they just couldn't find the skilled labour to climb the trees and bring the coconuts down. If they waited any longer, the coconuts would be past their prime, fall to the ground and perhaps rot or get gnawed by animals.

It was then that, by word of mouth, they learned of an association of coconut harvesters called Changadi Koottam, which in Malayalam means team of friends.

Contact was established and on a cool morning at 7 am, 80 coconut harvesters on bikes and in cars zoomed into the fields of the four farmers. They wore uniforms and carried tree-climbing equipment. They split into groups and began climbing the coconut trees. In just 90 minutes, they had harvested all the coconuts from 1,000 trees, perhaps setting a world record!

Started two years ago, Changadi Koottam has evolved into a formal association based in Kasaragod district. It has more than 300 members. They are loosely banded together. They have no office or common number. Instead, the members stay networked with one another and, on receiving assignments, rally others into teams. Despite the lack of an organizational presence, the harvesters are known for their spirited efficiency and can-do orientation. They share a work culture and code.

It is not uncommon to find professional coconut harvesting services in Kerala where unorganized labour is both expensive and in short supply. But Changadi Koottam is likely the largest such service. Despite its almost informal structure it has created an identity for itself by turning up when needed and getting a job done superfast.

Changadi Koottam can harvest a whopping 8,000 to 10,000 trees a day! According to one estimate, they harvest 240,000 trees and make more than ₹7 crore in a year.

Mani Kuttikol, 37, is the founder of Changadi Koottam. It was his idea and he shaped the group from scratch. He is a small farmer with a little less than an acre on which he grows areca nut and coconut.

He is also employed by the Central Plantation Crops Research Institute (CPCRI) in Kasaragod. He has been working there for the past 13 years

and his current responsibility is to facilitate pollination and tasks that require coconut tree climbing. Kuttikol has studied up to Class 12.

Kuttikol was always public-spirited and keen on social service since a young age. He got the idea of starting a labour bank to help farmers battling labour shortages and he discussed it at length with his friends—Vijayan, Rajesh and Sukumaram. The idea of a labour bank morphed into organizing a coconut harvesters' group called Changadi Koottam on WhatsApp.

Kuttikol takes his name from his village and it was from there that the first 40 coconut harvesters came. By May 2021, the group's membership had risen to 70. In January 2021, after a large meeting, Kuttikol and his friends registered Changadi Koottam under the Societies Registration Act. A membership fee of ₹500 per member was fixed. The association has 10 panchayat-level committees. Harvesters who have joined have come to hear about the group from others or through posts on social media such as Facebook.

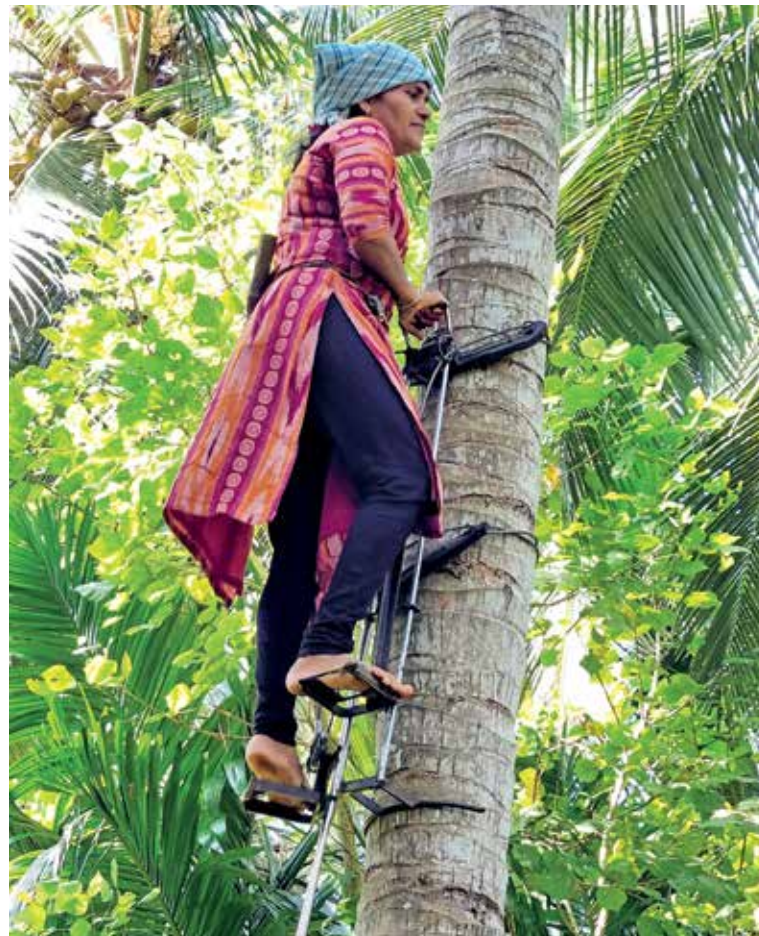
Changadi Koottam has different categories of harvesters. Some have been in this line of work for as long as 20 years. Then there are harvesters who have been trained by the Coconut Development Board (CDB) and others who have learnt on the job. Many of them use a cable device for climbing. Around 100 use the traditional loop, made of coir or plastic bags. A small number also harvest and spray areca nut trees.

Through Changadi Koottam, many have found regular work and income. Among its members are Gulf returnees and graduates. But mostly there are undergraduates and those with a school education. Kuttikol's assessment is that out of 300

members, around 50 also work in areca nut gardens. Around 150 have been trained by the CDB. There are six women harvesters.

EARLY START The money is good. Depending on the number of hours put in, it varies between ₹1,500 and ₹2,500, per day. The harvesters start early to avoid the mid-day heat. By 7 am they are in the coconut plantations and are usually through in four hours by around 11 am. They charge ₹50 per tree. An experienced harvester can bring down coconuts from 10 trees in an hour. If the worksite isn't far, harvesters are home for lunch.

The service has made life easier for coconut farmers. Pramod Cherippady who lives in Kandangali near Payyannur is a schoolteacher and coconut farmer with 400 coconut trees. "For the past two or three



Women make up a small percentage of coconut harvesters



Office-bearers of the different panchayat committees of Changadi Koottam

years, it's become easier for me to get my coconuts harvested," he says. Earlier he would have to take a day's leave from school to get his coconuts harvested. If the harvester didn't turn up, his leave would be wasted.

Contrastingly, the Changadi Koottam team is organized and dependable. They turn up on time without fail, he says. Instead of one or two harvesters, a team of about seven or eight arrive. "I book them about a week in advance," says Cherippady. "Not just me but most coconut farmers in my area are happy with the service. We don't face a scarcity of harvesters now."

The Eleri panchayat in Kasaragod district has a big coconut farm with 2,500 trees. "We used to face an acute shortage of harvesters. So, we would harvest our coconuts only twice a year. Now we just call the Changadi Koottam team. They turn up at the right time. Three people finish the work in about 10 days. Each worker harvests coconuts from 60 to 70 trees a day. Now we harvest our coconut crop four times a year," says K. Bhaskara Nair, caretaker of the farm.

Changadi Koottam members themselves call up Nair when the harvesting time approaches. If there is a shortage of staff to collect and transport the coconuts to the farmer's home, the harvesters cut short their work to ensure the coconuts reach their destination. For long-distance assignments, the harvesters charge petrol expenses.

Sethumadhavan, a farmer in Kowdichar near Puttur in Karnataka, says, "I have only 125 coconut trees. Changadi Koottam is my regular harvesting team now. They do the work very professionally. Before harvesting, they clean the tree crown properly. They love their profession.

If only one worker comes, he stays here till he finishes harvesting all the trees. Sometimes two or three workers turn up and complete the assignment in one day. They also do pest control activities."

In Kasaragod and its neighbouring districts, farmers plant pepper vines along the trunk of the coconut tree. This is a hindrance for harvesters who use the cable device. Sethumadhavan too has such trees. He gives the team an aluminium ladder and support staff to handle it. The harvester can then climb the ladder carrying his device and use it when he reaches the top of the ladder. Though the process takes extra time and labour, the pepper vines do not suffer damage.



Ramesh Nellikatte transports his coconuts

TEAM SPIRIT The district committee of Changadi Koottam has 21 members. It has a president, secretary, vice-president, joint secretary, treasurer and 16 executive members.

Kuttikol is the president, Binu Balal the secretary, Jainendran V.R. the vice-president, Mohanan Kalakkara the joint secretary and Surendran Pookkayam the treasurer.

This is a profession that requires a sense of adventure and fearlessness. Accidents and danger constantly shadow climbers. There isn't just the fear of falling from a tree or getting injured cutting coconuts with a sickle. A harvester can be fatally stung by wasps who build their nests on coconut trees.

Changadi Koottam is striving hard to insure all its members. The association creates awareness about insurance policies and helps with the paperwork. Not all workers have opted for insurance, though. Those who get injured while working are given immediate financial help from Changadi Koottam's own funds.

DECENTRALIZED SYSTEM How does this association book orders, assign them to workers and ensure customer satisfaction? That too without an office, or staff or a common number?

They do not need all this because the system is fully decentralized. Most harvesters have years of experience. They have their own customers with whom they have good relations. Their customers continue to call them for work. The harvester either carries out the assignment on his own or sets up a team, depending on the customer's requirement.

Surprisingly, this decentralized system doesn't affect the smooth functioning of the organization.

The strength of the organization is its team spirit. It doesn't leave room for missteps. When a customer calls up, harvesters ask for details such as distance, number of trees, when the work is to be finished and so on. If the receiver of the call can manage the job on his own, he gives dates. If he requires more staff, he arranges for it and then calls back the customer.

The nature of the job is such that Changadi Koottam members prefer WhatsApp to making phone calls. The reason is that they need to share messages with a large group. For instance, a harvester posts: "We have 500 trees that need to be harvested. Work has to be finished in a week. Those who are nearby and free contact me." Another one messages: "A farmer in Uduma wants 200 trees harvested urgently in a day. Those who can do this job please call this number."

"Harvesting workers used to work in their individual capacity before our association started. There was no interaction between them. The concept of team work was alien to them," says Kuttikol. That has altered completely.

Since Changadi Koottam started, the trend is more towards job-sharing. If an assignment is too onerous for a harvester, he invites others to join. All that workers have to do is to regularly look up messages in the WhatsApp group. They get work instantly without much effort.

To strengthen the organization and decentralize their work even further Changadi Koottam has formed committees in 10 panchayats. Another two are in the pipeline. Each committee has its own WhatsApp group.

Aneesh Barotty is secretary of the Bedagam panchayat committee which was formed just a year ago. The committee began with 40 members and now has 58. Barotty says more people are keen to join. His first task is to bring them under insurance cover.

Kunhikrishnan, 51, is secretary of the Kodom Bellur panchayat committee. "The farmer has to simply contact one of our members. We dispatch workers within two days. Ever since our committee got going, work has increased considerably within the panchayat," he says.

The district joint secretary of Changadi Koottam, Mohanan Kalakkara, is also secretary of Kuttikol's committee. He has an areca nut garden of 1.5 acres. When he started coconut harvesting 13 years ago, harvesters were very rare. Kalakkara underwent training, hoping to be able to harvest his own nuts. He has a scooter, a bike, a car and he has constructed a new house after taking a loan of ₹35 lakh.

"Before we started our association, many of us were worried that other harvesters might act smart and cause us to lose customers. But, in fact, the reverse happened. There is more than enough work for everyone. And it is team work which has become popular and risen in value," he says. Orders are happily passed around. So, farmers don't have to wait for someone to come and bring down their coconuts.

"Team work generates enthusiasm and positive vibes on worksites. Instead of a single person harvesting coconuts for four days all alone, it makes sense for a four-member team to go and finish the work in a day," he says.

FOUR-HOUR WORK DAY Meet some of the harvesters. T. Suresh of Palakundu is 38 years old. He has studied up to Class 10. He used to work for a civil contractor before he trained to become a coconut harvester. He



It is teamwork that has generated enthusiasm and good vibes

says it changed his life.

Suresh bought a scooter two years ago and he has already repaid the loan he took to buy it. "I work 300 days a year. I have about 200 regular farmers as customers. On an average, I earn ₹40,000 per month," he says. Twelve years ago, he took a loan of ₹8 lakh to construct a 900-square-foot house, which he has repaid. He has savings of around ₹2 lakh in the bank.

"I'm happy," he says proudly.

K. Jalajakshi is 42 years old. She learnt coconut harvesting 13 years ago. Her husband works in a hotel. They live in Aramanganam village near Kanhangad. Jalajakshi was always adventurous. She worked as a coolie earlier and also cleaned wells with a rope tied to her waist.

Four years ago, she took a loan of ₹85,000 to buy a scooter. She too has repaid her loan. She leaves her home at around 5.30 am and doesn't mind travelling one or two hours to reach her worksite.

Jalajakshi has studied till Class 10. She is more comfortable with voice messages on WhatsApp. If she gets a work order in English her children demystify it for her. "I have bought a scooter, constructed my 1,000-sq-ft house and I'm providing a good education to my children, thanks to being a coconut harvester," she says. She took a ₹16-lakh loan to build her house. They got ₹4 lakh as government aid through the panchayat. She has repaid her bank loan.

Forty-year-old Binu Balal is a graduate and secretary of Changadi Koottam. "This job is better than a government one," he says. He did pass a public service commission exam but he says he didn't have the ₹50,000 they asked for as a bribe for the job. After trying his luck with small-time jobs, he trained to become a coconut harvester.

Initially, he says, people used to make fun of his profession. He too became self-conscious and would accept assignments far from home so that people in his locality wouldn't know. That was like a bad dream, he says. He took a loan of ₹22 lakh and built a house. Five years ago, he bought a Maruti Alto. All thanks to coconut harvesting, he says.

Forty-five-year-old Satheshan T. Kuttippuram used to drive taxis and buses before going to the Gulf. He returned during the Covid pandemic and couldn't find a job. Finally, he opted for coconut harvesting which he describes as a safe job that brings good returns. All through Covid it enabled him to earn a living. He is one of the few who uses a safety hook while climbing coconut trees, a device he is trying to popularize amongst his co-workers.

The advantage of coconut harvesting is that it just needs a few hours and therefore frees up harvesters to pursue another profession as well and earn more.

Anil Barotty becomes an auto rickshaw driver from 4 pm onwards and earns an extra ₹300 on average every day. Rajesh Ayampara till recently used to rear goats post-lunch, earning ₹1 lakh every year.

In the afternoons, Biju Ananthapura runs a fabrication business with two assistants. They make window frames, sliding doors, kitchen accessories and more using aluminium and other materials.

Some members have specialized in other aspects of the coconut business. Ramesh Nellikatte has become a wholesale tender coconut supplier to shops in his locality. Sino Jose is an expert in cutting unwanted coconut trees or pulling trees away to prevent them from falling on houses.

He has a team of five to six assistants and charges ₹300 to ₹3,000 per tree, depending on the nature of the work. Madhava Badiadka also harvests tender mangoes.

Santhosh P.T. of Chamundikunnu, the publicity committee chairman of Changadi Koottam, says it is social media which has really helped the group spread the word. "Before we began using the internet and posting on Facebook, we were not well known. We now dream of expanding our association across the state."

Changadi Koottam's areca nut harvesters find work in the harvesting season from December to March. Workers like Ashraf Nekraje and Abhishek Cherakkappara climb areca nut trees to spray fungicide during the monsoon. It's difficult to find skilled areca nut tree climbers so there is more demand for such workers. During the areca nut harvesting season, they don't get time to harvest coconuts.

CLIMATE CHANGE A new development is the adverse effect of climate change on coconut trees. For the first time after the last monsoon the group found work orders reducing. "We never experienced this sort of crisis earlier," say the harvesters. Also, market prices for coconuts have been on a downslide, they say. The reason could be that farmers don't get their coconuts harvested on time. So mature nuts fall on the ground and are eaten up by wild boars. It's a loss for the farmer and probably reduces market supply.

Another issue which concerns coconut harvesters is the lack of social recognition. Theirs is a noble profession which is benefitting the farmer community, they point out.

"Though we earn well, youngsters aren't attracted to our profession because of lack of social status. They think they won't get suitable brides," says Thalakkara. An elderly coconut harvester said tartly that youngsters prefer working in malls and car showrooms because they can then dress well and lead an easier life. Another issue that confronts the group is alcoholism. Kuttikol says they are trying to wean members away from alcohol but without much success.

Coconut is Kerala's main crop. The state has thousands of coconut harvesters. Unfortunately, they don't get the facilities they deserve. There is no government registry of harvesters. They don't have provisions like provident fund, or any form of social security.

Says Satheshan T. Kuttippuram, "The government hasn't considered provident fund facilities for us. Toddy tappers get insurance and welfare fund facilities. These facilities should be extended to coconut harvesters too. There is a limit to how much we can support our members if and when they have an accident. If they are hospitalized for months altogether, the government should support them."

So far, the CDB has trained 1,685 harvesters in Kasaragod district. In Kerala, altogether 26,684 have been trained. The all-India number is 65,000.

But after training, the harvesters don't get the handholding they need from the board. Collaborating government organizations like the Krishi Vijnan Kendras have also not given any thought to this. An efficient handholding programme, perhaps by NGOs or farmer organizations, might attract more young people into this profession. Nobody knows how many of the 26,000 people trained in Kerala are actually practising this profession.

Recently, the board started a call centre to provide interested farmers the phone numbers of coconut harvesters. They carried out a survey to build a network but they could find only 1,200 persons willing to do the work!

To encourage more women to join the women's community network, Kudumbashree, the CBD along with the Krishi Vijnan Kendras, and a few other organizations are conducting training workshops for women. At Kendras, after training, each candidate is provided a free climbing device. In south Kerala, there are more women becoming coconut harvesters compared to Kasaragod where only a few women have joined.

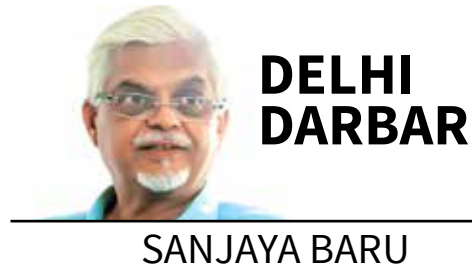
For the past two years, Changadi Koottam has been organizing a get-together called Kutumba Sangamam so that families of members can get introduced, bond over their joys and sorrows, and honour their members.

Last year, the get-together was held on Pallikere beach near Kasaragod. Eight senior coconut harvesters who had worked for more than 25 years were honoured. This year, they went to an island resort called Pudiya Thurutt Eco-tourism Village. They spent the day singing, dancing, honouring senior harvesters and enjoying a lunch together. Six women harvesters were felicitated.

By bringing coconut harvesters under one roof, providing aid to injured workers, and arranging insurance policies, Changadi Koottam has increased communication between members, boosted their confidence and silently raised their social status. New entrants are far less hesitant to stay on in the profession. And there is work and earnings throughout the year — an example the rest of rural India could follow. ■

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Money power and politics



A quarter-century ago, in a different era, a very different kind of politician from very different political parties sat together and presented a report to the Union ministry of law, justice and company affairs on the need for “State Funding of Elections” (1998). The committee was chaired by the CPI leader, Indrajit Gupta, and included Manmohan Singh from the Congress, Somnath Chatterjee of the CPI(M), Vijay Kumar Malhotra of the BJP and Ramgopal Yadav of the Samajwadi Party. They unanimously agreed that “money power and muscle power”, both going hand-in-hand, had vitiated Indian democracy and that something had to be done.

Reading that report today, in the light of the ongoing discussion on the cornering of electoral bonds by the ruling party at the Centre and on the role of money power in politics, one cannot escape the feeling that a mere 25 years ago we lived in a different India. State funding does not mean giving cash to recognized national political parties, the committee concluded, but would imply providing support in kind that offered a reasonable level playing field to all national parties.

What has brought the issue of election funding back on the national agenda today is the fact that over these past 25 years since the submission of the Gupta Committee report, one single political party has cornered over 90 percent of ‘electoral bonds’ sold. The denial of funds to others has raised questions about the direction of Indian democracy and the relationship between wealth and power. Electoral funding is only one dimension of this link between wealth and power.

As I have tried to explain in my book, *India’s Power Elite: Caste, Class and a Cultural Revolution* (Penguin, 2021), in India’s ‘psephocracy’, as sociologist Ashis Nandy characterized an electoral democracy, wealth

remains, above all, the most important determinant of power. The cost of getting people out on election day to cast their vote is rising even as their trust in the system may be waning. Several recent studies have focused on the role of money power in politics and the nexus between crime, business and politics.

The rising cost of election campaigns, the inability of the state to enforce rules pertaining to election funding and, more recently, the brazen manner in which political parties in power are able to corner the bulk of the funds provided by corporates and other donors has made politics a game of the rich in which the wealthy become wealthier and are able to become politically more powerful.

It is not, therefore, surprising that a



Manmohan Singh and Indrajit Gupta: A different India

The Gupta Committee concluded that State funding did not mean giving cash, but a level playing field to all national parties.

disproportionate number of members of state legislatures and Parliament are wealthy. There had been some dilution of this aspect in the first decade after Independence with more members of the middle class, including rich peasants, entering politics. However, as election expenses have grown and with the rising importance of political office as a source of both power and wealth, there has been a rise in the number of the wealthy among the

elected representatives of the people.

Consider the social composition of the 17th Lok Sabha, elected in 2019. It has more wealthy members than any other Lok Sabha in the past half-century. Data collated by the Association for Democratic Rights (ADR) shows that as many as 475 MPs (constituting 88 percent of the 539 MPs for whom data was available) have assets upwards of ₹10 million (one crore), slightly up from 443 (82 percent) in the 16th Lok Sabha. Out of 542 winners analyzed during the Lok Sabha 2014 elections, 443 (82 percent) were *crorepatis*. In the 15th Lok Sabha (2009–14) the comparable number was appreciably less at 315 (58 percent).

The ADR study shows that not only had MPs become richer during the five years they were members of the Lok Sabha but that in successive elections since 2009 the proportion of *crorepati* candidates among the victors has also risen. In other words, the wealthy had a better chance of securing admission to political office, and that office had become an important source of acquiring wealth. In a country with a nominal per capita income that is less than ₹200,000 per annum, and at least a fifth of the population lives in abject poverty, it is surprising that an overwhelming number of elected representatives, both in the Lok Sabha and in Assemblies, are millionaires if not billionaires.

The ADR data showed that with the exception of MPs from the communist parties, all other MPs of all other parties were millionaires, with the BJP having the largest number of them. As many as a third of MPs in the 17th Lok Sabha had assets worth more than ₹50 million, while average assets per winning MP was ₹21 million. The wealthiest MPs, however, came from smaller political parties like YSR Congress, Nationalist Congress Party, DMK, Bharat Rashtra Samithi (BRS) and Akali Dal.

These are, of course, declared assets, and that too, in the name of the specified individual and not of all family members taken together. Many wealthy Indians hold considerable wealth in the name of their spouse. The ADR data also shows, interestingly, that MPs from regional parties like the Akali Dal, BRS and the

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A chip for your thoughts



OVER the centuries, humans have constantly sought to increase their muscle power. Bullocks for ploughing, water currents for milling, and horses for carrying or pulling loads gave way to engines: first steam, then internal combustion, and now electric ones. Brain power, humans soon realized, was even more important. First, it set them apart and made them superior to other animals; for a while, it deluded them into thinking that it would help them to dominate nature; finally — constantly and sadly — it was a way of enslaving, exploiting, and oppressing other human beings.

Brain power increased through cumulative knowledge, passed from one to the other, teacher to student, and generation to generation. Individuals, groups, organizations and nations sought to build on this. Knowledge became the basis for creating technological products, some good, some destructive and a means of dominance and coercion. As a result, knowledge and technology are the new currencies of power.

It is in this context that one needs to look at recent tech advances, be it in generative artificial intelligence (Gen AI), artificial general intelligence (AGI), or brain-computer interface (BCI). In BCI, the latest announcement by Elon Musk’s Neuralink, of successfully implanting a BCI device in a human patient, has created excitement and interest on a par with that seen when Sam Altman’s Open AI released ChatGPT. Neuralink has basically tested the implanting of a miniaturized electronic package (“coin sized”) in the body, connected to the brain and also, via wireless transmission, to an external computer. The implant translates thoughts (brain waves) into action, enabling paralyzed persons to control external devices with their thoughts or even move their limbs in some cases. It holds out great hope for those with neurological disorders such as ALS or Parkinson’s disease.

This is, indeed, a major step, though the

breakthrough — and BCI technology — has been demonstrated by other researchers and is already a few years old. The hype and excitement that accompanies any announcement by Musk is, in part, justified by the fact that he brings immense resources into play. Already, he has a large team working on this and his drive will see things move fast. The initial announcements — and, possibly, intent — is to help people with neurological problems. This noble cause will, hopefully, remain the focus.

Yet, there is real danger that the research and resources will move towards enhancement of brain power. More information, quicker processing, and linkages with AI all seem in the realm of feasibility with implants and BCI technology. With machine-to-machine communication, thought-to-action will take on a new meaning and immediacy. Your thought could turn on the coffee-maker, for instance, or, in a more complex scenario, you



Elon Musk’s Neuralink connects the brain to a computer and translates thoughts into action

could — without moving from your sitting room — open the refrigerator, command a robot to pick up food and place it in the microwave oven, switch on the microwave oven and have it heated. Finally, the robot, on your thought-command, could bring the food and coffee to you in the sitting room.

Similar scenarios could be immensely useful for those with motor or movement problems. However, it may end up being used also by couch potatoes and the lazy! At the same time, electronic enhancement of brain functions would certainly have a large commercial market for other purposes. In the emerging knowledge economy, as humans continue their instinctive competition with other humans, those with superior brain power will overtake and dominate others. There will, therefore, be great demand for BCI tech not for any medical or health reasons, but purely for one-upmanship. This will grow as BCI becomes more capable and versatile.

Herein lies one of the dangers: that BCI will be used for enhancement by “normal” (healthy) people, and — given the likely costs — be affordable only for the well-off. In view of the premium on brain power in the world of today, and more so tomorrow, there is a direct relationship between brain power and income. Thus, those who can afford brain enhancement will earn more, further amplifying the existing (and, in most countries, growing) inequity in society.

While all electronics is thoroughly tested and processors are debugged, there is yet a residual danger of malfunction. An out-of-control brain is certainly a most worrisome possibility. Another danger is regarding data privacy. Despite all possible precautions, it is known that no system is theoretically 100 percent hack-proof. Thus, all the data constantly available in the BCI device may be on a server or otherwise accessible to data thieves. This is even worse than the data on

your computer, since it will also encompass your thoughts. A cyber-criminal might hack directly into a brain transplant. They could then take over control of all actions of the implantee: a scenario too scary to even imagine!

There is also a deeper philosophical issue. Already, it is possible to insert a lens in the eye, an implant in the ear; to replace knees, shoulders, and hips; to transplant kidneys or livers; to have stents and artificial limbs. Today’s external ventilator may soon be improved and miniaturized to become a lung replacement. With all these, are

we like Theseus’ ship? With little left of what you began with (the original you), are you yet the same person? Till now, many answered this by saying that it is the memories and thoughts — the brain — that truly define the individual. With BCI and brain implants, even these may be different, and the question takes on a sharper edge.

This and many other ethical dimensions raise deep concerns about the rapidly advancing technology; more so as it is mainly driven and controlled by private companies. Does this call for ethical guidelines, some form of control and regulation? To be effective, these must be global. Should such rules be in conjunction with those for AI, given a possible linkage of the two? There is need for debate and urgent action, before we are overwhelmed: once the genie is out of the bottle, it cannot be put back. ■

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

Bringing back wildlife



LIVING RIVERS

VENKATESH DUTTA

SANCTUARIES inside rivers? Yes. There are several stretches of rivers that have been declared protected areas under the Wildlife Protection Act, 1972. These river stretches are special in many ways — they are known to protect and shelter many iconic species such as dolphins, gharials, otters and turtles.

Chambal, once infamous for its notorious bandits, has undergone a remarkable transformation and now stands as a sanctuary for the endangered gharials. The National Chambal Sanctuary, also known as the National Chambal Gharial Wildlife Sanctuary, is a vast area that covers 5,400 sq. km. The river meanders through a labyrinth of ravines and hills within the sanctuary. It extends over three states, namely, Uttar Pradesh, Madhya Pradesh and Rajasthan. The sanctuary is known to provide a habitat for the distinct aquatic life that thrives in the Chambal river, particularly the critically endangered gharial.

The river is also home to the endangered Gangetic river dolphin and red-crowned roof turtles. Gangetic river dolphins are classified under Schedule I of the Indian Wildlife (Protection) Act and have been declared an endangered species by the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN). Currently, the Bah range of the Chambal Sanctuary has 24 dolphins, while the Etawah range is home to 147 dolphins. While sightings of these dolphins are rare in these waters, they can be spotted occasionally in the deeper reaches of the sanctuary. Apart from rich riverine diversity, the sanctuary boasts more than 300 species of resident and migratory birds, with several migratory species from Siberia contributing to its diverse bird population.

Two stretches of the Ganga have been declared as sanctuaries. The first is the 82-km stretch between Garhmukteshwar in Hapur and Narora in Bulandshahr district. It was declared a Ramsar site (wetland of international importance) in 2005. The Ramsar Committee designates potential wetlands worldwide as Ramsar sites following an assessment of their ecological importance and significance.

Approximately 63 km of the river stretch lies within Bulandshahr district, while the remaining portions extend into Hapur, Amroha, and Sambhal districts.

This river stretch is currently inhabited by 22 Gangetic dolphins. They have been declared the national aquatic animal of India. However, this stretch lacks a conducive environment for breeding and increasing their population. The discharge of partially treated or untreated sewage from adjoining towns as well as effluents from sugar mills, paper mills, and other industries located near the river poses a significant threat to aquatic animals. Additionally, the run-off carrying pesticides from riverbed farming and illegal fishing activities also needs to be addressed to ensure effective protection of the endangered dolphins.

The second is the 60-km stretch of the Ganga extending from Sultanganj to Kahalgaon within Bhagalpur district of Bihar. This stretch was officially designated the Vikramshila



The Ganga dolphin needs a cleaner, quieter river to survive

Chambal, once infamous for its notorious bandits, is transformed and now stands as a sanctuary for the gharials.

Gangetic Dolphin Sanctuary (VGDS) in 1991. As a riverine habitat, the boundary and expanse of the sanctuary continually change due to flooding and the evolving geomorphology of the Ganga.

Almost half of this stretch has many sandbars which are excellent breeding grounds for birds. There are several river islands known as *dyara* which are also the nesting sites of turtles. Regular conflicts among local residents arise

due to disputes over land ownership, attributed to the changing course of the river and the disappearance and reappearance of river islands. Dolphins have become more visible in the sanctuary due to reduced human activity on the Ganga. Currently, there are around 200 dolphins in this stretch of the Ganga.

Gangetic river dolphins are blind and depend on echoes to navigate their environment and find prey in the water. They rely on echolocation, where sound serves as their primary sense. Using echolocation, they navigate, hunt for food, avoid threats, find mates, reproduce, and nurture their young. The National Waterway-1, connecting Haldia to Varanasi, would pass through the Vikramshila Sanctuary. The noise and vibrations from the large cargo vessels may disturb the breeding potential of these elusive dolphins. Sounds are indeed louder in water. This is because water is denser than air, causing sound waves to travel faster and with more energy in water compared to air.

There is also one case of a river sanctuary being denotified. Varanasi's stretch of the Ganga, a seven-km stretch from Ramnagar Fort to the Malviya railroad bridge that was declared the only Turtle Wildlife Sanctuary in 1989 was denotified by the Uttar Pradesh government in preparation for a possible relocation to another stretch, the Allahabad-Mirzapur section of the Ganga. With National Waterway-1, Varanasi would serve as one of the major hubs for cargo transportation along the Ganga. Given their peaceful nature, turtles leave areas where such

disturbances occur.

After the National Chambal Sanctuary on the Chambal river, the Gandak river in Bettiah, West Champaran district of Bihar, has emerged as the second successful breeding site for gharials in India. However, this stretch has still not been declared a sanctuary.

The expansive floodplains of the Ganga and its tributaries, interconnected lakes and ponds along its banks, as well as mud flats within the river, create a perfect habitat for numerous animals, birds and plants. Despite some of the stretches being declared protected sanctuaries, they continue to face ongoing challenges such as habitat degradation, pollution, and conflicts between humans and wildlife. Illegal sand mining poses a significant threat to the flora and fauna in certain sanctuary sections. Numerous dams and barriers also disrupt free movement of dolphins within the sanctuary. ■

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

Exercising the right to die



HERE & NOW

SUBIR ROY

AS medical science progresses and economic development leads to cleaner environments that transmit smaller infection loads, people are living longer lives. This is to be celebrated but the downside is that the quality of life often does not keep pace with the advancing years. The end of life is marked by fighting growing illnesses, in and out of hospitals. The question that arises is whether it is worth living all the additional years.

The usual response to this, it is not in my hands when exactly my life will end; all I can do to hasten the end is by refusing treatment. But this is rather unscientific and increasingly people are asking themselves whether they can handle their last few years in an orderly manner and themselves decide when these will end.

The issue of euthanasia, ending a life through a conscious decision to do so, is increasingly coming to the fore. The least controversial is the doctors in attendance deciding that a patient is incurably ill and suffering much pain or, worse, has lost all powers to feel the pain and take a view on continuing such a life. In some societies the doctors in charge in such cases go in for euthanasia or medically assisted suicide to end the life of the patient. Euthanasia by disengaging the life support system on which a patient is surviving without the patient's consent, is termed passive euthanasia.

What is more controversial is a patient seeking to go in for voluntary or active euthanasia, consciously asking the doctor to end their life by administering a lethal dose. This can be termed as assisted suicide and is frowned upon across the world. But a change is taking place in many societies, including in India, in that it is still frowned upon but is no longer being treated as a criminal offence for which one can be punished.

Right now only around 300 million people in a dozen countries including Switzerland (an early adopter), Australia, Netherlands, Belgium, Spain and Canada allow active euthanasia under medical guidance and that too under certain strictly defined conditions like the patient being afflicted by an incurable disease which causes much pain.

In India, passive euthanasia, the right to die, was allowed in 2018 as a fundamental right only in cases where a patient was brain dead

and in a vegetative state, while active euthanasia remains illegal. In 2023, the Supreme Court modified the euthanasia guidelines to ease the process of allowing passive euthanasia for terminally ill patients.

The Bharatiya Nyaya Sanhita, which has replaced the Indian Penal Code, does not contain the provisions of Section 309 which punished an attempt to die by suicide. Over a lakh of people end their lives every year. The logic behind the change is the recognition that a person attempting suicide needs medical and psychiatric care and not punishment.

The euthanasia regime remains strict across countries because many believe that only God can take away life which only He can cause to come into being. There is also a fear of misuse, a patient's life being ended without their permission to do so. Historically the most significant example of this occurred in Nazi Germany where thousands of adults and children with disabilities were euthanized.

It is critical to plan how we see the end of our lives. This will help families see their elders through the last part of their lives.

Just as we plan our lives today from an early age, like which stream we will go into (arts or science), what kind of job we will look for, when to marry or whether to marry at all and when or whether to have children, it is critical to plan how we see the end of our lives play out. This will help families see their elders through the last part of their lives which is inevitably medicalised, protracted and painful.

Aviva Whittenberg-Cox, CEO of 20-first, a global consultancy, describes how her mother calmly and peacefully ended her life at age 97 in Canada when she had become wheelchair-bound, incontinent and dependent on care round the clock. What the family cherish the most is the serenity of a planned end at home, surrounded by family with ample time to express love and say goodbye.

As only 10 to 15 percent of us are lucky enough to drop dead, the rest spend their last days in physical and mental decline with medical knowledge and resources devoted to keeping them alive irrespective of the physical pain that it causes them and the mental anguish inflicted on the rest of the family.

The situation in India is that most do not take the trouble or have the foresight to plan how they will spend their last days. So it is often a painful end with serious disabilities and having to depend on care round the clock. The difference between developed countries where most people are covered by insurance or a national health service and a developing country like India is that here most cannot afford care which has to be paid out-of-pocket and so have to depend on the family to perform the most basic physical functions of living.

The urgent need today is for an advocacy movement in the country which advises people on how to plan the end of their lives and thus make it bearable when it comes. Such advocacy does not come easy and is often beset by public controversy. Over a decade ago, an attempt by the US administration to cover the uninsured became embroiled in political controversy. Sarah Palin, a presidential contender, used one provision of the proposed legislation to claim that the government was seeking to create a "death panel". The administration denied this and eventually the legislation removed a provision which would have allowed physicians to provide voluntary counselling to Medicare patients about things like a 'living will', advance directives and end-of-life care options.

The advocacy movement that needs to be launched should focus above all else on advising people how to create a living will. While a will covers what should happen to what a person leaves behind after death, a living will outlines what a person desires done in the last stages of their life. It typically specifies the kind of medical care that an individual does or does not want in the event they are unable to communicate their wishes.

Doctors treating a person with terminal illness or life threatening injury will consult the living will to decide whether to withdraw the life support system or not. If there is no such will then close relatives have to advise the doctors what the patient wants from what they had earlier told them verbally. Ideally, a living will should clarify where a person stands vis-à-vis passive or voluntary euthanasia. The financial condition of the family would typically guide a patient's preferences in this regard.

Overall, two issues stand out. One, does a person give foremost importance to the quality of life in order to decide how long they wish to live? Two, whether the cost of end-of-life medical treatment and care will be affordable for the family. This is classically captured in the following statement: She was cured of cancer but it ruined her family financially. ■

Subir Roy is a senior journalist based in Kolkata

Armed with a fearless pen



AHIMSA MUSINGS

RAJNI BAKSHI

BE Fearless is a compelling, timeless but difficult call. When you are confronted by a hostile mob that is determined to harm you, the dominant biological impulse might well be to flee rather than fight. What enables someone to stand their ground — neither flee nor cower in fear nor retaliate using the methods of the violent mob?

Nikhil Wagle's life and work offer many clues and answers to this question. The highly reputed journalist from Maharashtra has had to deal with far more than his fair share of life-threatening situations.

On February 9, Wagle's car was attacked as he drove towards a public meeting in Pune, where he was to speak. Workers of the BJP had publicly warned that they would not allow the meeting to proceed because Wagle had made critical comments about Prime Minister Modi and L.K. Advani, which they found objectionable.

Several police personnel arrived at the location, where Wagle was staying, and tried to dissuade him from going to the meeting. When he insisted on proceeding with his plans and emerged from the building, BJP workers threw ink at Wagle and broke the rear windshield and some windows of the car — even as his supporters tried to dissuade them and push the attackers back.

Wagle later told website *NewsLaundry* that though he had faced violent attacks before this was different: "It was a mob lynching attempt on me. It was traumatic. It was a narrow escape from death...I am still in shock because of the intensity of the attack and the hate."

A week later Wagle was busy organizing 'Nirbhay Bano' or 'Be Fearless' meetings. This

is also what he did in the mid-1990s when the office of his newspaper, *Mahanagar*, was attacked and ransacked by Shiv Sena workers because the paper was openly critical of the party's politics and its leader, Bal Thackeray.

For several months Wagle and Ratnakar Matkari, a noted Marathi playwright and director, organized public meetings in defiance of the Shiv Sena's threat to disrupt them. It was significant that most of these meetings attracted a large audience, presumably people who were keen to be part of his Be Fearless campaign.



The attack on Wagle, allegedly by BJP workers



Nikhil Wagle stood his ground

Journalism is an extension of Wagle's activism, which dates back to his youth. He was a part of the Rashtra Seva Dal, a Gandhian Socialist organization that has strong roots in Maharashtra. It was thus natural that Wagle was among those young people who responded to Jayaprakash (JP) Narayan's call

political parties. In my study of regional business and regional politics (*Economic policy and the development of capitalism in India: the role of regional capitalists and political parties*, published in *Transforming India: Social and Political Dynamics of Democracy*, Francine Frankel, et al (edited), Oxford University Press, New Delhi, 2000). I drew attention to the role of regionally based business groups from such

for 'Total Revolution'. Like many others, Wagle dropped out of college to join the JP movement in Bihar. Later he led the youth wing of the Rashtra Seva Dal in Mumbai.

When Wagle began looking for a job in journalism, in the early 1980s, none of the mainline papers would hire him because he did not have the required academic qualifications. With financial support from friends and admirers he became a media entrepreneur, setting up his own publishing house and launched a Marathi magazine called *Akshar*. He went on to also launch a sports magazine, *Shatkar*, and later a film magazine, *Chandri*, whose first editor was actor Rohini Hattangadi.

Wagle rose to national prominence with the launch, in 1990, of *Mahanagar*, published in Marathi and Hindi. In 1994, he was imprisoned for a week because he criticized Maharashtra legislators who had showered tributes on a deceased MLA accused of criminal connections. On several occasions he has been physically attacked by Shiv Sena supporters, notably in August 2004, when the assailants beat him and rubbed engine oil on

his face.

Over the past two decades, Wagle has been more active in television news and continued his work in publishing, bringing out about 80 books.

While Wagle is on record as saying that he is not a Gandhian, the influence of JP's famous slogan has been evident in his life and work. Namely, that 'no matter how we are attacked we will not raise our hand in violence'.

At the time of writing there is a 'Nirbhay Bano' poster circulating on social media that quite accurately conveys the energy and resolve this man represents and embodies. At the top of the poster is a row of photos — Chhatrapati Shivaji Maharaj, Jyotiba Phule, Shahu Maharaj, B.R. Ambedkar and Mahatma Gandhi. Below is an image of many raised fists — clenched not in aggression but in determination. ■

Rajni Bakshi is the founder of YouTube channel Ahimsa Conversations

castes as Kammass, Reddys, Chettiars, Patels and so on in funding regional political parties. National or regional, the link between wealth and power has become so intimate that few today even mention in passing the idea of state funding of elections. ■

Those interested in the report of the Indrajit Gupta Committee on State Funding of Elections can find it on the ADR website: www.adrindia.org
Sanjaya Baru is a writer and Distinguished Fellow at the United Service Institution of India

Civil Society pictures/Ashoke Chakraborty



Shyama Prasad Dey spends a quiet moment sipping his own coffee

When there is art in a coffee cup

A cartoonist gets noticed with a stall in Kolkata

SUBIR ROY

THE coffee is cheap, the art is free. As you exit from Gate No. 1 of the Tollygunge Metro Station in Kolkata, you come face to face with a typical stall, the likes of which vend tea, coffee, biscuits and maybe some more light eats. The difference is that in tea-addicted Kolkata this stall boldly tells patrons not to ask for tea but to settle for coffee.

Kolkata Coffee, which covers no more than 3 ft by 5 ft of pavement space and does not have any kind of hawker's licence from the municipal corporation, is the brain child and single-handed creation of slim, slightly greying Shyama Prasad Dey who has made it perhaps the most distinctive roadside little eatery in the city. It is plastered with black and white cartoons and illustrations which trumpet all

manner of slogans that are always bold and most often funny.

Dey has been running a stall for three decades now. Till the Covid epidemic came along his little shop sold newspapers and magazines and was also plastered with his art work as the present one is. Then, after the Covid hiatus, he hit upon the idea of serving instant coffee — black, white and sweet, according to your choice.

Humour has to be within you and that explains the text which the illustrations carry but art or the skill of drawing is almost always picked up in an art college. Dey surprises you by saying he has not crossed the portals of any post-high school institution after clearing the Class 12 examinations. So his art is entirely self-taught and acquired through day-to-day living.

He very clearly says he comes from a lower middle class family and his father ran a small business. His business card has a misprinted word scratched out and corrected by hand. He must not have the means or inclination to get a new set of cards printed. The card, from his magazine stall days, lists some of his other achievements — nail artist, ventriloquist!

From the time when he started doodling three decades ago he and his art have progressed on their own. All the outside help he has got over the years is a few technical tips from art college students — "they are my teachers" — who chanced upon his shop and immediately decided to remember it. He first started creating greetings cards which proved very popular and helped him make up his mind to stay the artistic course.

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The humour is often in the text. The coasters for the coffee cups are hand-crafted and bear the legend, "Keep the cup here, leave behind your mark, thanks". A cartoon depicts what looks like a person carrying a guitar and a *jhola* from behind and carries the line, "The travelling people's MLA".

Dey doesn't know how much his shop, which runs from six in the evening till eleven, earns. He is up at four o'clock in the morning and from daybreak is out in the nearby Bagha Jatun market where he vends tea on foot till 11 am. ("The best time to talk with me is after 11 pm.") These two businesses enable him to look after his small family of wife, 22-year-old daughter and aged mother who spends time with her children's families by turn.

The shop cruises along merrily as customers who chance upon it take pictures of it and post them on Facebook. This spreads the good word around and new customers keep trickling in to come and see for themselves this unique creation. The art college students were impressed in particular by the illustration that adorns the small paper cups in which coffee is served.

The idea came from his daughter who is pursuing a course in media science. Customers are so impressed with these that after downing the coffee they take home the cups, show them to friends who come themselves to sip the mundane instant coffee in a unique visual atmosphere.

Lack of academic credentials has not prevented Dey from earning formal recognition. Till around 2016 he used to put up a stall in the city's famous annual book fair and also the one for handicrafts. There is a certificate of commendation from an edition of the latter.

The clientele Dey draws is distinctive. While I am there one of them says that he comes because of the ambience that the posters hanging all around create. Dey's small talk with



People mill around the stall curiously because of the ambience that the artwork creates



Dey drawing on his coffee cups

customers is also distinctive. He asks a teenage couple whether it is their pre-Valentine's Day outing. They all laugh and admit that till a few years ago they didn't know that there was such a day. Two other customers hug each other. A customer says he comes to the stall because it brings peace to his eyes and his mind.

One customer is a lady working for a leading insurance company who has come despite a back ailment which makes it difficult for her to walk more than a few paces at a time. Another customer simply declares he comes "because he is an artist".

It is perhaps natural that in the hour that I

spend at the stall, usurping the single plastic stool there, the customers are all invariably polite and soft-spoken. And none of them is rolling in cash. One couple asks for a small cup of black coffee and shares it. After I have had my coffee and biscuit I am told the bill comes to a paltry ₹23. I wonder why he is taking a bit of time to return the change. Eventually, when he does, I realize he had been going through all that was there in his little cash box to extract change worth ₹7. He is not the sort to say, as so many stall owners do, "no change."

Kolkata is known for its public display of art which has been made famous by media stories that have reported in detail on the art work of Durga Puja *pandals* and the murals depicting well-known themes. Illustrations by Satyajit Ray for father Sukumar Ray's classic *Abol Tabol* (Nonsense Rhymes) attracted wide attention. If that is the public display of high art, Dey represents the grassroots from which the aesthetics springs. The two make up an organic whole, making the artistic and aesthetic sense a living tradition that is passed on from generation to generation. ■

Samita's World

by SAMITA RATHOR



Picture courtesy of KSCF



Kailash Satyarthi hand-in-hand with smiling children and supporters

BOOKS & AUTHORS

A co-traveller with each child

Kailash Satyarthi profiles the children he rescued

SUKANYA SHARMA

EVEN today, across India, children from impoverished families are subjected to unspeakable horrors. Because of poverty they work with their parents — toiling in fields, hot brick kilns, roadside eateries, mines, hazardous factories and in homes. A happy childhood, school and three meals a day are just a dream for them and their parents.

For many decades after Independence, the menace of child labour was completely overlooked by middle class activists and the political class. Kailash Satyarthi was one of the few lone voices speaking up for children, going so far as to rescue them with his small team. Bachpan Bachao Andolan, the campaign he started, was a radical departure from lobbying and peaceful protests, the usual tools employed by NGOs. He risked his life to rescue children from the clutches of rapacious employers. Outside his modest office in Delhi, there would be a lone armed bodyguard to protect him.

In 2014, Satyarthi was honoured with the Nobel Peace Prize for his persistent advocacy of child rights. His recent book, *Why Didn't You Come Sooner?*, has a dozen poignant profiles of children he rescued. The title is a quote from what Devli, an eight-year-old girl he rescued from a stone quarry, asked him.

It is due to Satyarthi's tireless crusade that education has become

a fundamental right in the Constitution. In 2017 he undertook a Bharat Yatra to fight against child abuse. It led to a stringent law against child sexual abuse.

Civil Society spoke to Satyarthi about his book and some of the challenges he faced during his remarkable journey of not only rescuing children but also becoming a 'co-traveller', a friend they could rely on.

Q: You have been instrumental in rescuing around 150,000 children since 1981. What led you to choose these 12 stories for your book?

I have spearheaded rescue operations that liberated thousands of children, but such endeavours wouldn't have been possible without the support of my organization and colleagues. Over the years, my modest role has been to bring attention to the most invisible and voiceless children.

These 12 children hold a special significance as their stories not only deeply impacted me and our organization but also led to significant societal, national, and international policy transformations. The narratives vividly illustrate how various industries — such as stone quarrying, mica mining, brick kilns, carpet weaving, circuses, and agriculture — enslave children, subjecting them to trafficking, exploitation, physical and sexual



Why Didn't You Come Sooner? Kailash Satyarthi Speaking Tiger ₹399

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abuse, forced marriages or domestic labour. This book and the stories of these children serve to awaken the innate compassion within every reader, fostering a deeper understanding of the plight of vulnerable children and the urgent need for collective action.

Q: What was your biggest challenge while writing these stories?

It has taken me about 12 years to write this book. The biggest challenge lay in being a true co-traveller with each child, ensuring that their lived experiences, marked by unspeakable trauma, were authentically captured without detracting from their individual stories. It was crucial to honour their journey of growth and healing while maintaining the integrity of their narratives as this book tells the story of their shared struggle for justice and dignity.

Q: Do you face fewer obstacles in carrying out rescue missions than you did earlier? Is the administration more responsive?

When I began this journey, child labour was largely absent from public and political discourse, with many countries failing to acknowledge it as a crime. It was often perceived as an economic necessity for impoverished families and was not recognized as a human rights crisis. In our first ever effort to rescue Sabo, a group of my friends and I commandeered a truck, arriving at the stone quarries. There, we faced the harrowing ordeal of a physical assault.

It was a lawyer friend who suggested pursuing a *habeas corpus* petition as our last resort. Ultimately, our unwavering commitment led to the liberation of Sabo and 36 others who had suffered generations of slavery.

This monumental achievement marked the first instance of individual-led emancipation from the bonds of slavery. Today, our cause has driven the enactment of laws that mandate police involvement in rescue missions, a triumph achieved through the tireless efforts of our organization.

Since I was awarded the Nobel Prize in 2014, there has been a significant shift in awareness and rescue efforts. For instance, memorandums of understanding with entities like the Railway Protection Force (RPF) have been established. Given that the Indian Railways serves as the nation's primary transporter, it represents a major route for human traffickers. The strategic placement of RPF personnel at railway stations and aboard trains enables them to intercept trafficking attempts before victims reach their destinations and exploitation begins. With its extensive reach and strategic positioning, the force plays a crucial role in supplementing the nation's efforts to combat human trafficking.

Q: The children are wary of strangers and are withdrawn when you bring them to the ashram. How do you help them feel at home?

We never adhered to conventional wisdom nor approached our work with a charity mindset. Our firm belief is that rehabilitation should be grounded in principles of rights rather than charity. Our rehabilitation centres have always been active hubs of compassion. The interactions between management, teachers, staff, and children are characterized by warmth and camaraderie. Upholding the dignity and trust of each child has been fundamental to fostering integration within the ashram.

Q: You say in the introduction, "I cannot say for sure what thousands of children have learnt from me but what I have gained from them is invaluable." What are the lessons you have learnt?

Children are always teaching us valuable lessons even when they are not teaching us. Their resilience, energy and adaptability have always motivated me to do more and do better. Spending time with children is

akin to recharging your batteries because they have so much joy and love to share. When I interact with them, they quickly discover and befriend the child within me, granting me the precious ability to keep that inner child alive and joyful.

When people maintain authenticity, simplicity, and straightforwardness in life, it's often because they've preserved the invaluable essence of childlike wonder and simplicity. Outside my office hangs a signboard saying: "Walk through this door with your inner child."

Q: Has there been a change in the way people perceive child labour now as opposed to when you first began rescuing children?

When we began, there was little awareness about child labour being a human rights crime. We relentlessly championed the cause of children at various levels, including the UN, and our efforts resulted in the inclusion of specific language in UN SDG Goal 8: Sub Goal 8.7.

It is most shocking that globally the number of child labourers has increased from 152 million to 160 million during the first four years of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). With the world facing multiple crises, the SDG Agenda for Goal 8.7 is headed towards failure. Each of these crises overlaps and has complex interactions, impacting the SDG goals and leading to a spin-off effect on food, health, education, environment, peace and security.

Our promise to leave no one behind is in jeopardy. While there have been strong lobbies advocating the right to work for children, no country in the world can now deny the government's role in addressing child labour and eradicating it. This issue has become an integral part of due diligence and CSR.

Laws have been enacted, except in the sub-Saharan African region, resulting in a substantial reduction in child labour thanks to the SDGs, which have integrated it into the development agenda alongside human rights. Besides, international research has demonstrated that child labour perpetuates adult unemployment, intergenerational

poverty, and health hazards.

Q: Have rescue missions decreased over the years or are you getting more information of children trapped in factories, brick kilns and other places, post-Covid?

Covid-19 resulted in the closing down of schools, and the loss of livelihood of caregivers, leaving several families including children in a highly vulnerable state, making them more prone to traffickers' lure and being re-trafficked.

While there has been improved information sharing and increased awareness about such issues, the underlying factors driving children into child labour — such as unemployment, poverty, social and gender discrimination, and regional disparities have also intensified. Moreover, pull factors like employers' greed have escalated, necessitating ongoing rescue missions.

Q: There is also domestic child labour. Does the child labour law need to be changed to prevent children from working as domestic workers?

Domestic child labour can be likened to invisible slavery, as children engaged in such labour often work in harsh conditions, unseen by their communities. India's domestic child labour laws are comprehensive and stringent. The true challenge lies in the hidden nature of the practice, which can persist unnoticed for extended periods.

As a community, safeguarding children should be a collective responsibility, with RWAs in neighbourhoods being held accountable. Regulations must be implemented for placement agencies that traffic children from areas like Jharkhand, Odisha, Bihar and the Northeast. ■

‘When I interact with children, they discover and befriend the child within me, granting me the precious ability to keep that inner child alive and joyful.’

Discovering the ecosystem of the tiger in Corbett

SUKANYA SHARMA

ANY mention of Corbett Park tends to be about its tigers and Jim Corbett, the colonial game hunter after whom it is named. But what about plants, trees, butterflies, birds and animals that also inhabit this reserve? Surely there must be more to the world of the tiger than is generally acknowledged.

There really is and though perhaps not as magnificent as Corbett's star attraction, they make up a teeming ecosystem waiting to be discovered and without which the tiger itself would not be around.

Setting the record right is a photographic guide by Rajesh Chaudhary who has a PhD in biological science and Vinesh Kumar, a keen nature photographer committed to the cause of conservation.

"There is plenty of nature to observe, imbibe and photograph. Yet every safari trip ends in tiger-talk among visitors. Our instant reaction was to portray the less sought after natural treasures of Corbett Tiger Reserve," say the authors.

So, for anyone off for some tiger watching, here is a guide that will help them see a lot else as well — not just in the reserve but in the Himalayan foothills generally which abound in natural beauty.

Wildlife In and Around Corbett Tiger Reserve is in three sections: "Prelude", "Animals and Plants" and, finally, "Visiting CTR".

"Prelude" has details about the natural and historical settings of the Corbett National Park, the scientific names and identification of organisms and a comprehensive glossary with important abbreviations.

"Animals and Plants" identifies features of the park and has photographs of scores of animals and plants that the reserve and its surrounding areas are home to.

The final segment provides all the details that a visitor to the Corbett Tiger Reserve might require such as route maps, eco-zones, dos and don'ts, jungle clues and pugmarks to watch out for.

It is an easy read with a lot of ready-to-access documentation. So, it is a guide in content, touch and feel. It curates information from the latest scientific publications but leaves out technical terms and jargon.

With more than 1,500 photographs of over 700 species of animals (including mammals, birds, reptiles, amphibians, butterflies) and plants, the guide is comprehensive and well-researched, making it possible to explore the reserve before getting there.

The section on animals begins with a description of the mammals inhabiting the reserve. There is the sloth bear, primarily a solitary animal. Mother bears carry cubs on their backs for as long as nine months, sometimes refusing to let them down even during their daily activities. The reserve is also home to smooth-coated otters. These playful creatures thrive in water and on land. Another remarkable mammal is the red giant flying squirrel, an excellent glider that preys on small cats and owls.

The guide includes a checklist of 496 birds seen in and around the CTR. This section is vibrant and vivid. It includes the painted stork with



Smooth-coated otters enjoy a splash in the Ramganga river



Baby elephant cooling off



Indian Roller



Rajesh Chaudhary



Vinesh Kumar

its artistic feathers, the aesthetic hues of bee-eaters and five diverse woodpeckers with their own drumming sounds.

The CTR also has some spectacular reptiles. Around 18 of the three dozen snake species that have been recorded in the area are presented to the reader. The authors warn visitors to stay away from piles of wood and to always wear ankle boots, emphasizing that snakes are cryptic animals that tend to remain motionless. The reader is introduced to some magnificent butterflies along with tips on how to identify and photograph them. The authors emphasize that butterfly watching is an engaging pastime.

The section on plants documents more than 60 species of trees and 80 shrubs and herbs. The CTR has some splendid trees in and around its buffer zone. The monkey-face tree helps dye silk, is used in traditional medicine and is regarded as auspicious for Hindu rituals. There is also the sacred putranjiva tree whose seeds are made into necklaces to protect children from disease.

The CTR abounds in shrubs and herbs used in traditional medicine. The false daisy is a herb that has traditionally been used to prevent greying of hair, hair loss and for treatment of asthma. Oil from the woodworm is used in folk and modern medicine. There are many more such shrubs and herbs.

There is also the catweed, "an aggressive colonizer native to tropical America which has invaded several parts of India". Also included are details of the blue-violet flowers, their scientific names and conditions in which they are typically found. We have here an absorbing compendium of flora and fauna of the Himalayan foothills.

The latter part of the book is a virtual tour of the reserve with details of its seven ecotourism zones, route maps and ideal seasons for a visit. It also offers a list of suggestions and code of conduct to be followed, photography tips, guides to jungle clues and pugmarks, and finally, incredible excursions. ■

Ambling around Kozhikode

SUSHEELA NAIR

THE drive from the charming hill station of Wayanad to the scorching plains of Kozhikode, the erstwhile capital of the powerful Zamorins, is unabashedly scenic. Formerly known as Calicut, Kozhikode is a commercial hub hailed as the gateway to Malabar. This ancient port has a proud literary history and a bustling contemporary commercial life. Apart from its wafer-thin banana chips and delectable *halwas*, Kozhikode is famed for the ancient temples, mosques and churches that dot the city.

Ever since Vasco da Gama made his celebrated landing on the sands of Kappad Beach just outside Kozhikode and exclaimed, “O *Paradiso!*”, European traders have swarmed to the shores of Malabar, lured by its legendary spices. One can enjoy the quietude of the silken sands of Kappad and gaze at a small obelisk which commemorates the landing of Vasco da Gama in 1498. Today, the beach is dotted with small fishing hamlets. An hour’s walk along the sandy beach will bring you into contact with fishermen drying and repairing their nets and pushing their boats; it is indeed a lovely place to stroll around.

Renowned travellers like Ibn Batuta and Marco Polo have eulogized the enchanting beauty and wealth of the Malabar region which sprawls across northern Kerala, starting with Kasaragod in the north and moving down to Kannur, Wayanad, Kozhikode, Malappuram and Palakkad.

As I ambled around the streets of Kozhikode, I found the city’s prolific literary heritage palpable everywhere. I felt like a student on an assignment as I embarked on a literary sojourn to discover where legendary wordsmiths like Muhammad Basheer, M.T. Vasudevan Nair, and P. Valsala were inspired to write many of their classics. I stumbled upon the statue of S.K. Pottakkatt, a literary luminary, at the entrance of SM Street, which formed the backdrop of his award-winning novel, *Oru Theruvinte Katha* (Story of a Street).

With 70 publishing houses and more than 100 bookstores, Kozhikode is known for its vibrant literary culture. Another astounding revelation is that the city has more than 500 libraries, including private and public ones. Located in a five-storied building with a floor area of 520 square metres, near Mananchira Square, the Kozhikode Public Library and Research Centre is worth a visit. Kozhikode is also a permanent venue for the annual Kerala Literature Festival and plays host to several

other book fairs. It’s no wonder that Kozhikode earned the sobriquet of UNESCO City of Literature and was added to UNESCO’S Creative Cities Network for its proud literary history.

I also learnt that the Thali temple is the venue of Revathi Pattathanam, an annual cultural and intellectual event. At this seven-day feast of learning scholars from different fields are honoured with prizes. Built by the Samuthiri, Kozhikode’s erstwhile ruler, the temple features intricate bas-relief on the walls



SM Street is Sweetmeat Street, famous for the black halwas of Kozhikode



A literary tradition: 70 publishing houses, 100 bookstores

of the sanctum sanctorum and elaborate carvings on the wooden roof.

I visited some famous museums and a gallery that celebrate Kozhikode’s illustrious history. From Krishna Menon Museum which exhibits memorabilia of the statesman, I hopped to the adjacent Pazhassirajah Museum of archaeological finds. The museum’s rare collection of copies of ancient murals, bronzes, old coins, excavated earthenware, models of temples and megalithic monuments like rock-cut caves, crypts and umbrella stones, and urn burials is amazing. Adjacent to this museum is the Art Gallery, with western-style paintings by Raja Ravi Varma and his uncle, Raja Rama Varma.

When literary fatigue sets in, you can take a boat cruise to the unexplored backwaters past tile factories or watch artisans at work on *urus* (dhow) in Beypore. If you are a heritage buff,

you can amble down the streets of Kozhikode and unravel its rich heritage starting from Mananchira Square, an enormous tank fed by a natural spring and almost refurbished to its original form. Most of the attractions of Kozhikode are around this square.

The spiritually inclined can head to the city’s ancient mosques at Kuttichira and the four-storeyed Mishkal mosque boasting the architectural splendour of yesteryears. The 14th century Jama Palli is said to have the largest floor area of all the mosques in Kerala.

Also nearby is Mucchandipalli, the oldest mosque in Kozhikode, built on land donated by the Samuthiri *raja* in the 13th century. A unique feature of the mosques in Kozhikode is the square or rectangular pond attached to them, similar to those in temples.

SWEET OR SALTY? Visit SM Street, the city’s first commercial avenue, whose name is derived from sweetmeat and is famous for black *halwa*, a delicacy that Kozhikode is known for. Black *halwas* were initially exported to Arab countries. Sample a spread of heavenly *halwas*, made from refined

flour, sugar, jaggery and prepared in coconut oil. Relish the yummy dry fruit *halwas* available in various flavours and colours (red, black, green, yellow and cream) as they melt in your mouth. Another much-sought after specialty is crispy and crunchy chips. Raw bananas are peeled, sliced into thin, round pieces, soaked in salty water, drained, and fried in coconut oil. Try the piping-hot banana chips, straight from the frying pan. The chips made from ripe bananas have a slightly sweet taste.

On the culinary front, Kozhikode has a vast repertoire ranging from the delicious vegetarian food of the Hindus to the unique Moplah culinary style that harmonizes Arab and indigenous flavours. When in Kozhikode, don’t miss the proper Malabar style chicken or mutton biryani and beef curry with *parotta*. Due to its proximity to the sea, Kozhikode is most enjoyed by connoisseurs of seafood! Seafood dishes range from scrumptious fish curries, prawn fries and stuffed mussels to prawn biryani. ■

FACT FILE

Getting there: Kozhikode is well connected by air, rail and road. The nearest airport is Karipur. To move around in the city hire autos which are reasonably priced.

Staying options: Hari Vihar, Malabar Palace, Taj Residency.

What to shop: Spices, woven and printed cottons, *halwas* and banana chips, bell metal artefacts, models of *urus*, etc.

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.

JOIN THE ROBIN HOOD ARMY

Modelled on the Re - Food programme in Portugal, the Robin Hood Army started on the streets of Delhi in 2014. It is a zero-funded volunteer organization that works to combat hunger. Volunteers collect surplus food from restaurants and communities and serve it to the less fortunate.

Volunteers in the team, also called ‘Robins’, are largely students and working professionals who do this in their free time. The sections of society this organization serves include homeless families, orphanages, patients of public hospitals and old-age homes. So far they have served meals to 138 million people across 406 cities in 13 countries. The organization does not accept donations. They welcome anybody who wishes to volunteer with their time, and join their “business of spreading smiles”!

info@robinhoodarmy.com
+91 8971966164

BUILD A CHILD’S BOOKSHELF

Books For All, an initiative by an NGO called Guzarish, aims to bridge the gap between those who yearn to read books they can’t afford and those who have books collecting dust on their tables and shelves. The NGO has a four-step model. It collects books, categorizes them, then distributes the books and invites feedback.

So far, they have donated more than 400,000 books and partnered 500 NGOs and 75 government schools. The initiative also emphasizes impact stories, that is, motivating readers by listening to inspirational stories about individuals whose lives they have touched. They offer an internship and volunteer program and also accept books and monetary donations.
team@booksforall.org.in
+91 8700054703

FIRST PERSON

PUROBI TARA CHOWDHURY

‘I’VE SEEN HOW KEEN CHILDREN ARE TO LEARN’

I WAS part of Sandesham, an NGO which conducts after-school classes for underprivileged children. The team’s main focus is to educate young minds and support their families by organizing seminars, health check-ups, and by spreading awareness. They teach children who come from marginalized sections of society.

I volunteered with them for three months. In that short span of time, I had the privilege of noting how keen the children were to learn. Their energy



amazed me. They were quite mischievous too but it was all

part of the game! It was wonderful to witness their curiosity and I enjoyed teaching them English conversation, which they picked up really well.

It was lovely to see them slowly getting integrated into society in small but meaningful ways, and it was really a pleasure to be part of this journey of children from all backgrounds growing together in a positive manner at the NGO. I always remember my time at Sandesham fondly. ■

https://www.sandesham.org
sandeshamngo@gmail.com
+91 9910952466

WOMEN’S RIGHTS AND BASIC HEALTH

Tare Zameen Foundation’s (TZF) focuses on empowerment of women and providing basic health facilities. They are based in Delhi

Projects by TZF include menstrual health campaigns, community health programmes, educational initiatives in slums and monthly ration kit initiatives.

They offer corporate, educational and NGO partnerships as volunteering opportunities, leaving it open for people to contribute according to their interests and potential. They also have a number of campaigns that are up and running, to which anyone can donate.
https://tarezameenfoundation.org/
+91 9958939136

EMPOWER WITH EDUCATION

Mera India Mera Adhikar or MIMA focuses mostly on implementing the right to education, right to equality and right against exploitation. The non-profit began in 2013, by teaching a few children from

various neighbourhoods. They now teach more than 700 children. Over the years MIMA has also organized extracurricular activities like sports competitions, painting contests, and debates. Projects they undertake include providing after-school classes, helping talented children and organizing regular health check-ups.

MIMA also organizes donation drives in collaboration with partner organizations. They accept donations in cash and kind.

You can either donate money through their website or donate toys, furniture, stationery and books.

https://mima.org.in/|9716611524,
+91 9891170578, +91 8826768053

HELP A KITCHEN ON WHEELS ALONG

Rasoi on Wheels is a mobile kitchen service that provides nutritious, tasty and hygienically packed meal boxes to the less privileged. These meal boxes are ideally suited for distribution to the needy in slums, orphanages, old-

age homes and hospitals.

Rasoi on Wheels also provides food, through partnerships with other organizations, to workers on construction sites, housing societies, homes for differently-abled individuals, schools for the blind and NGOs. Their kitchen starts at 3 am every day. They are also a meal partner for HelpAge India. So far, 50,000 tonnes of food have been provided to the poor, with the number increasing every day. Donations of any amount are welcome. You can also choose the number of meals you wish to donate. One meal costs ₹35. If you wish to share your time, Rasoi on Wheels accepts volunteers as well.

https://rasoionwheels.com/
+91 9811982272

SUPPORT CHILDREN WITH CANCER

CanKids — the National Society for Change for Childhood Cancer in India — works across the spectrum of childhood cancer care. Their signature programme is called YANA (You Are Not Alone), which supports the child who has

been diagnosed with cancer, as well as the family.

CanKids partners with hospitals, medical professionals, and state governments to enable access and best standards of treatment, care and support across 58 cities and 22 states of India.

Initiatives under the organization include nine 'home away from home' set-ups (low-cost accommodation near cancer centres for children and their families during treatment), two 'Canshalas' (schools at hospitals to ensure continued education) and a paediatric palliative care centre. They accept donations via their website.

<https://www.cankidsindia.org/>
011-40512467

COUNSELLING FOR MENTAL HEALTH

Manas Mitra, set up in March 2021, is a trust whose objective is to support and assist families providing care to persons with mental disorders with therapy and rehabilitation. Caregivers too get burnt out and have dysfunctional social lives. Their services, apart from therapy and counselling, include sessions on spirituality, professional and legal advice as well as workshops on well-being and vocational skill development.

Their vision is to create sustainable, spiritually driven farm-based communities, set up day care facilities as well as reach out to group housing communities. There are three ways in which you can support them — by registering as a freelance professional service provider, joining the team as a volunteer or by donating through their website or in person.

<https://www.manasmitra.org/>
+91 701171365

FRIENDICOES NEEDS VOLUNTEERS

Friendicoes is now 45 years old and its mission remains the same: to serve all abused, sick, injured animals left to fend for themselves on the streets.

Their facilities include rescue and rehabilitation, mobile clinics, rehoming of cats and dogs, a lifetime care sanctuary as well as fostering and adoption of dogs.

BECOME THE FRIEND OF A CAREGIVER

Caregiver Saathi was born out of the personal experience of its founder, Bhavana Issar, who lost her father to a rare neurological condition. During this period she witnessed her mother's arduous journey as a primary caregiver.

Her research further strengthened her belief that the well-being of the caregiver is vital for the healing of the patient. With this in mind, she began Caregiver Saathi as an ecosystem of support for caregivers.

The organization provides guidance through educational content, tools, access to a community, support groups, and home-care services. It also partners professional healthcare practitioners, care-service providers, employers, and well-wishers. Opportunities for volunteers include doing home visits, research, community awareness, blood donation and emotional first aid. You can also donate on their website.

www.caregiversaathi.co.in | info@caregiversaathi.co.in | +91-932-6161-735

The footfall of animal patients exceeds 40,000 annually. Most are stray dogs or abandoned pet dogs. If you wish to volunteer, they have programmes such as shelter volunteering, adoption and fundraising, and one-time volunteering. You can donate on their website in cash or kind. They accept items like rice, medical supplies, linen, collars and leashes.

[info:https://friendicoes.org/](https://friendicoes.org/)
friendicoes.india@gmail.com
+91 8882931057

RIGHTS OF WOMEN AND TRANSGENDERS

Pukaar India Foundation primarily creates awareness and roots for the rights of women and transgenders. It also works for child welfare. The NGO has a 'Pukaar Probono' programme, which provides services such as counselling for law students and disseminating information about relevant policies to stakeholders.

Pukaar also organizes skill development and training workshops to empower underprivileged women, helping them to claim better job opportunities. Their mission is to empower women, children and the transgender community to realize their full potential. You can volunteer your time or donate via their website.

<https://www.pukaarindia.org/>
contactus@pukaarindia.org
+91 9050478492

A HELPING HAND FOR BLIND STUDENTS

Founded by Shalini Shamnath, Neru Bhargav and Dolly Bhatia, Ujjala, an NGO

in Delhi, helps visually impaired male students studying in Delhi University and the NCR. Ujjala helps blind students from underprivileged backgrounds become more independent and lead dignified lives by providing facilities such as special training, education and safe accommodation with appropriate amenities. The premise is to foster a conducive environment and help students achieve their dreams.

You can donate in cash or kind. They accept furniture, laptops, braille-compatible devices and blankets that are in good condition.

<https://ujjala.org/> | admin@ujjala.com
+91 9811029224

ASHRAM FOR ANIMALS IN TROUBLE

Started as a small shed for rescued animals in 1990, Jeevashram Animal Foundation is a hospital facility for large and small animals.

The ashram offers low-cost OPD services, vaccination, treatment, surgeries and laboratory diagnostics. They also have permanent and temporary boarding and lodging facilities, pet grooming and adoption services. A secluded and quiet part of the premises, called Garden of Eternal Peace, is one of the earliest animal burial places. Volunteers are welcome. They can spend time with the animals, help out at health and anti-rabies camps or spread awareness about street animals. You can also donate through their website.

Most of their expenses are on medical staff fees, food and

medication for the animals at the shelter and upgradation of their X-ray and ultrasound units. You can also sponsor an animal on a monthly basis or sponsor meals for animals on a daily basis.
www.jeevashram.org | jeevashram@gmail.com | +91 11 24124114

BANISH DRUGS AND COUNSEL ADDICTS

With many years of experience SPYM (Society for Promotion of Youth and Masses) provides services in substance use, de-addiction and prevention. They started their first Drug Treatment Centre in 1985. Since 2010, SPYM has also been the largest shelter management organization in Delhi, taking in homeless children, women, men and senior citizens on a daily basis. They run 65 shelters in the city.
<https://spym.org> | info@spym.org
011-41003872

SUPPORT A CHILD IN NEED OF HELP

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

Through their Child Sponsorship Initiative Scheme, an individual or group can support a child financially to pay for tuition, housing, hearing aids and speech therapy.

<http://rayofhope.in>

TACKLE ACCESS TO BASIC SERVICES

Founded in 1972, Apnalaya started as a day care centre for children of migrant labour at Nariman Point in Mumbai. Apnalaya now helps the urban poor access healthcare, education, livelihoods and civic entitlements through advocacy with the government.

Apnalaya trained residents of Shivaji Nagar to work with urban local bodies on civic issues like lack of access to drinking water.

www.apnalaya.org | admin@apnalaya.org
+91-22-23539752 / 9833041074

Small producers and artisans need help to reach out to sell their wonderful products. *Civil Society* happily provides information about what they have on offer and how you can get to them. Here are some fascinating products from Ladakh.



FROM HILLTOP FARMS

Rinchen Youdol's company, Reetsot, sells a variety of organic foods. There's a range of teas – chamomile, rose and peppermint – as well as sun-dried tomatoes, apricots and apples, Himalayan ghee and special hand-pressed oils.

Based in a village called Shey near Leh, Reetsot's main aim is to empower the rural women of Ladakh. Marketing her products at the Ladakh Festival held at Dilli Haat, Youdol says her aim is to bring to urban customers the cleanest organic products available in India, cultivated by women farmers from some of the purest and highest farms in the world.

Reetsot sells whole foods as well as body care and local craft products. There are hand-pressed oils like apricot, which Youdol learnt to extract from her grandfather. Also available are aromatic Himalayan cumin seeds and *rajma*.

A very special self-care product Youdol offers is Himalayan clay. "It's a piece of Ladakh's soul in every jar, the perfect way to pamper your skin and experience the purity of nature," says Youdol.



Contact:
Phone: +91 9289674065 / 01982-252809
WhatsApp: +91 98289574065;
Instagram: @reetsot

TAKE YOUR PICK OF FRESH NUTS

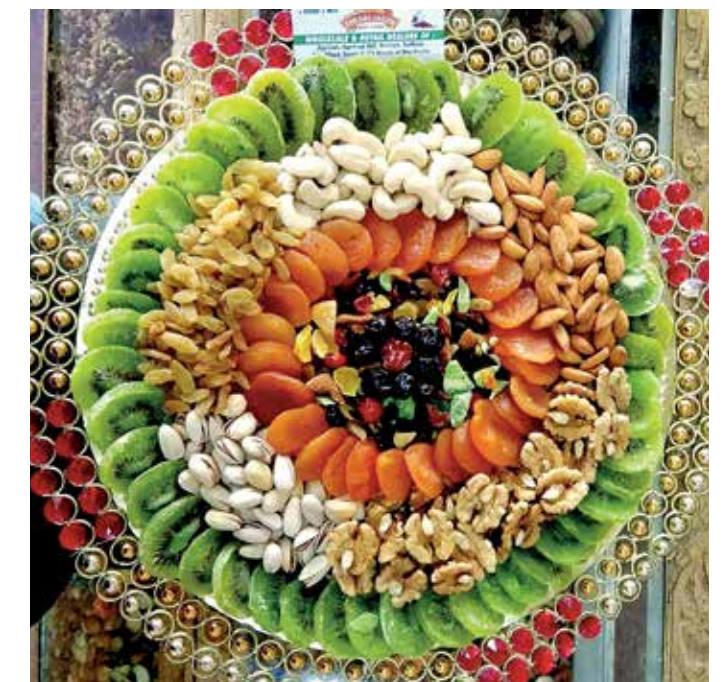


The next time you want to gift a hamper of varied dry fruits, turn to Fida Hussain's FHS Dry Fruits, an enterprise that operates from Ladakh and Kargil. FHS describes itself as a wholesale and retail dealer of a range of dry fruits and nuts such as walnuts, pistachios, almonds, figs, apricots, blackberries, raisins and currants, among others.

Their hallmark is that all their dry fruits are a hundred percent natural, a claim they highlight on their packaging too. Apricots are a common favourite and feature right on top of their category of best-selling products. Rich in fibre, Vitamin A and antioxidants, apricots are also known to be good for the heart and skin.

Another product that has considerable demand are dried figs. Brimming with healthful properties, figs are known to regulate sugar absorption, and help with lowering cholesterol and preventing constipation.

The team is busy throughout the year but more so during the festive season, with beautifully crafted assortments of their specialties as gift hampers. Although based in Ladakh and Kargil, the company promises home delivery of fine dry fruits across the country.



Contact: Phone: Leh: +91 9469588591 / +91 9797010996
Kargil: +91 9469047265 Email: fhsdryfruits@gmail.com

PRODUCTS



FLOWER POWER AND PLANT THERAPY

Makoi is a slow apothecary that specializes in making small batches of formulations from freshly harvested plant materials by hand. Founded by Deskit, who describes herself as an enthusiastic gardener, and Deldan, a “turf devotee with a creative drive”, this newbie micro enterprise entered the market just a year ago.

Deskit and Deldan are passionate about nurturing plants and flowers. Their formulations are made from plants and flowers which they cultivate or source from the wild.

Makoi offers a variety of hydrosols: there is aloe vera, cucumber and orange rind hydrosol, lavender hydrosol and another made of lemon balm and calendula. Also, a variety of lip balms are on offer from seabuckthorn and peppermint to moonbeam and a mix of wild flowers.

Their restorative oils are extracted from plants which thrive in Ladakh like rosehip, calendula, apricot, and seabuckthorn. These oils are known to be rich in antioxidants with antibacterial, regenerative, and rejuvenating properties.

Makoi's Himalayan botanical bath and foot salts are a blend of medicinal herbs and ancient mineral salts and are a remedy for tired and sore muscles, apart from being an aromatherapy experience. Makoi's miniature botanical wellness set is an ideal gift and an indulgent self-care experience.

Since the enterprise uses only fresh plant ingredients in small batches, they inform customers that product availability is limited since it is tied to the seasons. Makoi's aim is to gain deeper insights into the therapeutic properties of plants. Their approach is holistic and sustainable.

Contact: Phone: +91 60006356849 / +91 8800717145
Email: makoiapothecary@gmail.com
Website: www.makoiapothecary.com



DRESS UP IN THIGMA CLOTH

Lobithikma is a venture that seeks to revive and promote Ladakh's traditional tie and dye technique called *thigma* and its art of hand-weaving. *Thigma* is a process that involves resist dyeing on woollen cloth. It is somewhat similar to the *bandhani* technique. Thread and cord are two key tools used in this craft. The cloth is pinched together and the part to be dyed is tied tightly with thread.

The dyes used are natural plant-based ones extracted from onion peel, marigold flowers and ratanjot root. Plant derivatives yield an array of colours and hues of yellow, blue, magenta, grey, green, black, red and brown.

Lobithikma works with local women from different regions of Ladakh. All the raw material that they use is sourced from local artisans from villages in the regions of

Nubra and Changthang. Products include scarves for women and men, coats for men, formal vests, traditional Ladakhi dresses and tote bags. They also offer waistcoats, high boots (*thigma pabu*) and belts (*skerekh*).

Contact:
Phone: +91 9419877948 / +91 8082062298
Email: lobithikma@gmail.com
Instagram: @lobithikma



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TATA STEEL FOUNDATION

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

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

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

