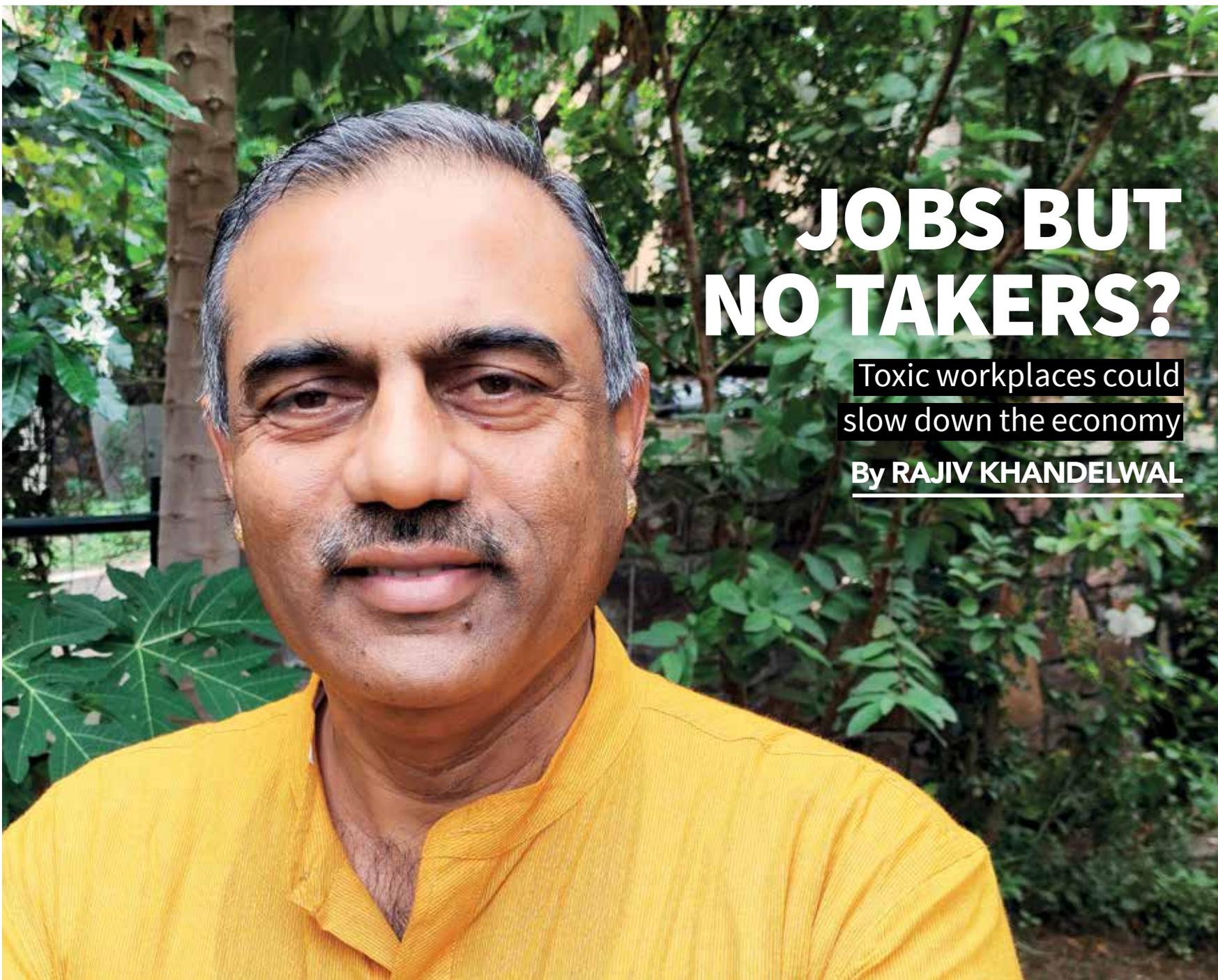


Civil Society



JOBS BUT NO TAKERS?

Toxic workplaces could slow down the economy

By RAJIV KHANDELWAL

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IN CIVIL SOCIETY EVERYONE IS SOMEONE



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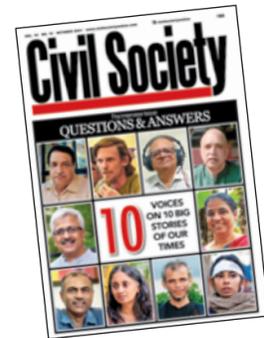
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IN THE LIGHT

SAMITA RATHOR



LETTERS



Free thinkers

Nandita Haksar's piece, 'Who is a political prisoner?' is a highly important article. Haksar makes a compelling argument of rising above partisanship of every hue. Clear definitions in simple language that only long practice, varied experience and theoretical understanding can bring are visible in every sentence. Everyone engaged in such debates must read this.

Anjali Deshpande

You have raised a very, very relevant question. In our present trying political scenario, how do we define a political prisoner when we don't have a definition of a prime minister or political leader? The whole state of today's politics is merely a one-man ministry. Seriously, we need awakening.

Diana Raval

Quiet hero

I found your tribute to Vir Chopra to be so true. Vir's 'super calm demeanour' is what impressed me from the start. I was in the design team of his Maldives resort. It was truly amazing to work with him. He wore many hats with such humility. Never tooted his horn. He happily taught others by sharing his experience and knowledge. He mentored the young members of the team with a pure heart.

Vir was a great foodie too. Throughout our travels on work as a team, he planned all tasks very methodically. We kept long hours yet good food was always given its rightful place. And, yes, he was a true family man. Whatever his work schedule, wherever he would be travelling, I always heard him joyfully chatting and guiding his daughters through their school tasks or their queries, without sounding busy! I learnt a lot from him and shall remain indebted for that.

Hettu

I met Vir sir in 2005 after the tsunami when Vikram Varma told him about me and my green work. He invited me to Reethi Beach Resort and from then on began a very special relationship. I was his go-to green man. He was always ready to experiment and this led to many ecological changes we made on the island. In fact, we both took the decision that the water villas which were damaged by the tsunami would be restructured rather than demolished and rebuilt. I completed

the job in 2010, slowly and steadily.

When he got four new islands on lease, he called me and said, "Yaara, I am stepping out of the Maldivian government office and my first call is to you. Get ready, we have to make the greenest resort possible."

All the ideas I promoted related to waste, energy, water, air, he supported wholeheartedly. Reethi Faru had a surfeit of green ideas and technology. We travelled to various parts of Asia. In fact, at the Canton Fair, Vir, Ravi bhaisaab and I would walk nine to ten hours a day. I asked him where he got so much energy from, he just smiled and said, "It's the passion, Rajpal!"

Vir was a mentor to me, my daughter (who learnt diving at the resort), my son and my wife. We would have long conversations on philosophy, life, mental health, etc. We all cherish the many holidays we had on the island, all graciously hosted by him. I also cherish the 16 years of banter, serious discussions on many topics and the work we did together. He was an agnostic and often made fun of me and my religious ways, yet respected my views.

Rajpal Navalkar

I met Vir and his wife about 20 years ago at a family gathering. I admired him for his intelligence, simplicity and truthfulness. My condolences to the grieving family.

Veena Kalra

COVID data

Your interview with Professor Chinmay Tumble, 'In a pandemic official data is crucial. We need it

daily', is an important one. Indians are in denial. They only believe the low estimates provided by the Government of India. It is sad to see India on a list of countries of concern along with Pakistan, Syria, Saudi Arabia, Iran and others. It is sad to read about the rising incidence of hate resulting in violence.

Porus Dadabhoy

I liked the fact that you highlighted this topic. It's not glamorous so typically doesn't get headlined, but how critical it is for decision-making!

Deepti Kharod

A kind heart

I read your piece on Siddharth Shriram, 'A caring industrialist who truly believed in giving'. Thank you for sharing this information on a life well lived. He was certainly an inspiration for all of us. You were privileged to have him as a friend and benefactor. I was particularly drawn to the line, "giving back to society has little to do with how much wealth one had. It was more of a personal orientation".

Evita Fernandez

Social crusader

Thanks for writing about Anindo. I had the privilege of knowing him when we both worked in Bihar between 2008 and 2013. He was a gentle human being with a strong social commitment. Anyone with less conviction would have easily given up, given the obstacles in implementing rural reforms. But Anindo was made of sterner stuff. It's indeed a pity that he fell victim to the pandemic at such a young age.

C.K. Ramachandran

Learning lag

This is with reference to your report, 'Children suffer learning loss'. Thank you for sharing a very important and informative piece of writing. You tried to draw the attention of educational functionaries towards a very important issue which we had not thought of.

Mohd Jalaluddin

Regular reader

We regularly receive your magazine and read it with great interest. I write to congratulate you on the very rich September issue. Each article is powerful and full of learning for organizers like us, working in the field.

Reema Nanavaty, SEWA

Letters should be sent to response@civilsocietyonline.com



COVER STORY

JOBS BUT NO TAKERS?

The Aajeevika Bureau has been involved with workers' rights and conditions on shop floors. Here Rajiv Khandelwal, co-founder, provides an insight into what terms of employment have become.

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Civil Society
READ US. WE READ YOU.

The standards problem

WE can't stop talking about what a great future the Indian economy has. But how quickly we arrive in the future will depend on the route we take. Lousy infrastructure, crumbling cities, toxic workplaces and a privileged elite are going to be speedbreakers we could do without. Respecting people's rights and helping the weak and poor come up are important whether in government or running a company. We need empowered and healthy people. Not wretched and exploited masses. Better standards for everyone should be a national goal. Maybe it already is but in that case we should stop paying lip service to it and get on with the real work of providing equal opportunities and access.

Our cover story and opening interview this month are about our inadequate efforts to achieve real growth and development. Rajiv Khandelwal, co-founder of the Aajeevika Bureau, takes us inside workplaces to show us what is really going on with employment. The Aajeevika Bureau has done seminal work in understanding and helping the Indian working class, especially the vast numbers of people in the unorganized sector. We have known the Aajeevika Bureau for some years now and we have done many stories on their work. But this article is written by Rajiv especially on our invitation and is part of a series we have been running in which outstanding civil society leaders take us deeper into their work and the issues of the day.

In our interview with Dileep Ranjekar we take a close look at the recent craze for online learning and explore whether digitized lessons and tutorials can have wide application across the entire school system — as is being conceived by some. Our association with Dileep goes back several years. He has been a tireless observer of education in government-run schools and has been travelling to corners of the country as part of the Azim Premji Foundation's efforts to train teachers and improve the quality of learning for children in general and not just for those whose parents can afford expensive private schools. In this role, Dileep's concern has been for the last child. You cannot build a modern economy without education for all.

On the question of online learning and the use of technology, he says it has to begin with empowering the teacher, who is pivotal to the learning process. Technology can't be expected to replace the teacher. It is also important that the vast majority of schools in the country have better infrastructure, computers and internet connectivity. A national vision for education is needed for a country as economically and culturally diverse as India and just business entities pursuing commercial goals aren't the answer.

We have received an enthusiastic response to our Living section which seeks to introduce to our readers good products and better lifestyle choices. When we recommend red rice noodles or an ice-cream or a coffee, we would like you to know that we do so after consuming them ourselves for a while. We also look out for companies that have a strong social purpose. They should be encouraged.

Shankh Anand

Dileep Ranjekar on online and digitized learning

‘Tech has to be teacher-driven in schools’

Civil Society News
New Delhi

MUCH store is being placed by online learning. Companies in the business of tutoring children are now being valued at billions of dollars. Word has been getting around that digitized learning is the way to bridge huge backlogs in education. But transforming the classroom through technology may not, however, be so easy.

In fact, going by experience, bringing in technology by itself will probably yield few benefits. Teachers are needed to use technology well and provide the human touch in the learning process.

There is also the possibility that clumsy attempts to push technology without adequate preparation may actually have the opposite effect by further weakening an already inadequate school system. It could result in widening of the gap between the rich and the poor who don't have access to the required infrastructure or the resources to invest in devices.

Previous experiments show that for technology to deliver a better quality of education, it needs to be first espoused and comfortably used by the teacher.

To find out more, we spoke to Dileep Ranjekar of the Azim Premji Foundation (APF), which introduced digital learning resources as an attempt to provide alternative learning experiences for schoolchildren 20 years ago with limited results. Edited excerpts from the interview:

The Azim Premji Foundation tried putting digitized lessons in government schools, but it didn't seem to work out to satisfaction. What was the learning from that initiative?

To begin with, they were not digital lessons but “digital learning resources” (DLR) to provide a learning experience which was interactive and self-paced. This was initiated in 2000 and continued till 2007 in the 10 percent of government schools which already had computers.

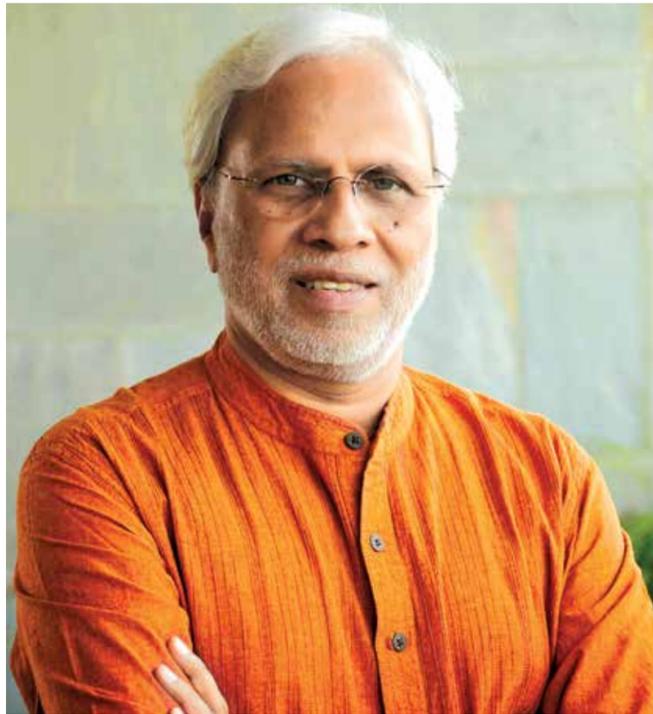
We were continuously taking stock of the effectiveness with which these schools were using the DLR. In 2007, we took stock of the programme through an external agency and got it well-researched for outcomes in four or five states. What we found was that in terms of learning there was no difference between the schools that had our digitized resources and those that did not.

There were some exceptions where there was a perceptible improvement in learning. But we found it was because teachers had actually understood the digital content and they were choosing to use it to supplement their pedagogy. Among the gains from the programme were better attendance and enrolment. There was community support and we found children being shifted from private schools to government schools.

So for the three important goals of enrolment, attendance and quality of learning, there were some positive results for two, but not for the third, barring exceptional cases.

The research revealed that 57 percent of the schools couldn't use their computers either due to lack of electricity or maintenance issues with computers including simple things like a CD getting stuck in the computer.

By 2007, the focus of school education had shifted from attendance and enrolment to quality of learning. So we decided to probe further. Was the problem with the content of the DLR or the way it was getting deployed? Those were years when CDs were still in use and internet penetration was almost non-existent in schools.



Dileep Ranjekar: 'There has never been a national vision to deploy technology in schools'

To understand the real issues, we decided to do further research for a period of about two and a half years in three states: Odisha, Puducherry and Chhattisgarh. We said in some schools we would have no intervention. In some others we would focus on capacity building of teachers. And in a third category of schools we undertook both capacity building of teachers as well as letting them choose whatever digital learning resources they wanted to use as part of their teaching-learning.

Obviously, after two and a half years, the winner was the third category in which the capacity of teachers was enhanced and the technology they used was an integral part of their pedagogy.

So, the findings were very clear that the teacher is the pivot. The teacher's capacity and understanding of what is education and how it should be carried out to get the best results with the children is the most critical issue. And unless the teachers integrated technology as an integral part of their pedagogical process, technology alone would not work.

One problem of the digital learning resources used by government schools was that teachers were not fully involved. There was a room, there was a computer and the classroom bell would ring and that period was a computer-aided learning class. But that was it. The teachers almost used it as relief for themselves.

How many states came on board for the computer-aided learning programme?

Eighteen states came on board as the DLR was available in as many as 21 different languages, including four tribal languages. Many of them were Hindi-speaking states. We had initially done a pilot in Mandya and Kolar districts of Karnataka. The government liked what it saw in the pilot and asked the Foundation to help implement the programme in over 500 schools across the state that already had computers.

We did not ask a single state to buy computers. The programme was for those government schools that already had computers but did not know what to do with them. Because, as far as we were concerned, it was not just about technology or computers but about an alternative experience of learning.

Much effort went into developing the DLR through visuals and storytelling so as to attract children. We must have invested around \$2 million in the programme.

That was in 2007. We are now in 2021. Is the teacher better equipped to use digital learning tools today?

The majority of teachers are still hesitant and have apprehensions about using digital technology as a part of the educational process. It is because most of the teachers were not born in the technology era. The exceptions are the young teachers who got infused into the system during the past 15 years and who are comfortable with technology.

Infrastructure is a very real issue — infrastructure in the form of investment in technology, the availability of internet with the appropriate speed and bandwidth, etc. Electricity supply continues to be a problem. It is very unpredictable, especially in rural, semi-rural and many urban areas too. These constraints were more acute earlier, but they continue substantially.

Budgets for electricity and internet broadband are non-existent in almost all schools — it's important to note that budgets provided by the government for teaching-learning material in many states is merely ₹500 per teacher per year — and that too has been discontinued by some states in the recent past.

Availability of high quality content in the local language is a big challenge. A few English-speaking elite (well-resourced) schools are able to go in for something the parents can afford to provide the required technological solutions to their children. A very minuscule percentage of students use content provided by only commercial organizations, not by organizations which are dedicated and focused on quality of education alone.

Are you saying that we don't have a national strategy?

Absolutely correct. There has never been a national vision for deployment of technology in education — nor is it a part of teacher education. As a member of many government committees, I get amused when some very senior people, including ministers and bureaucrats, claim to have improved the quality of education in their states by merely providing computers. This is a very simplistic view. What do you do with that computer? How have you transformed the process of teaching and learning? How has the understanding of teachers improved in using these computers? What are the children allowed to do on the computer? What kind of technology are you using? There is no mention of all this.

It is all very simplistic and, unfortunately, even educated people who are not aware of the education process glibly speak of deploying technology to improve quality of education without reference to teachers. The reality is that there is not a single country where you have a valid example of technology in education being deployed on a mass scale to improve quality of education. We have travelled and observed education (including usage of technology) in many countries, including Australia, France, Japan, Singapore, the UK, US, etc and not found any experiment at scale.

The teacher can't be replaced by the computer, but the computer or your digital learning can reinforce what the teacher does in a lead role? Is this what you are saying?

Exactly. I saw very interesting usage of technology in Finland. A real flower was projected as it is in the classroom. The parts of the flower could be magnified. That is the kind of technology we need to put in the hands of the teacher. In our own government schools, at some places where our digital learning resources were being used, I saw some fantastic innovations. But they had nothing to do with the vision of any particular government.

These are outliers.

Outliers that will fade away if not systematically encouraged.

There are companies in digital learning with fancy valuations. They are advertising and being written about all the time. A message seems to be going out that this is the way education needs to go. How do you see it?

Market forces do have an influence on everything, including education. But the sustainability of this current trend is seriously in question. We at the Foundation strongly believe that any technology intervention without a long-term vision, deep understanding of the education process and all teachers being involved in such deployment will not be sustainable. No short-cuts will help. In any case, only a minuscule population of the elite can afford the technology offered by these companies.

In the past few months, because of many aspects of the pandemic, divisions have grown between, let's say, the elite and non-elite sections of society.

Let me quote the findings of research carried out by the Azim Premji Foundation across five Indian states, close to 26 districts and more than 1,500 public schools.

This covered about 90,000 students or so. And the study brought out the non-effectiveness of online education.

An overwhelming majority of teachers and parents suggested that the online mode was inadequate and ineffective for education. And this has nothing to do with Byju's and others, this is online education. Teachers shared their professional frustration with conducting online classes. More than 80 percent of the teachers expressed the impossibility of maintaining “emotional contact” with their students during these classes, thus eliminating the very basis of education, which is an emotional connect with learners. And more than 90 percent of teachers felt that no meaningful assessment of children's learning was possible during online classes. It was just not possible.

Parents echoed the same sentiment with almost 70 percent being of the opinion that online classes were not effective for imparting learning to their children. They wanted the schools to reopen. The study also highlighted the massive, absolutely massive, digital divide. More than 60 percent of children could not access online education opportunities because of the non-availability of smartphones and difficulty in using apps. The issue of access was further exacerbated for children with disabilities. Ninety percent of teachers expressed their inability to deal with the problem of disability online.

Technology is not going to go away. There's no question of us becoming less digital. What is it that you feel can be done to get teachers to utilize digital resources more effectively?

One thing I want to clarify is that, per se, we are not against technology. I and

‘Teachers shared their frustration with conducting online classes. More than 80 percent expressed the impossibility of maintaining emotional contact with students.’

some of my colleagues really come from technology backgrounds, technology companies. What we don't agree with is the glibness with which technology is deployed in schools. There has to be a vision for implementing technology.

An overall strategy.

There has to be a national vision that has to be mapped on the National Education Policy and the National Curriculum Framework. Anything detached from these two will have no future and no meaning.

It has to be designed for the last child.

Exactly. Including providing for ever-changing technology. You know, as the technology changes, what do you do? Having done this, the number one priority is actually improving the competence of teachers. Their outlook for overall education, their perspective of education, their alignment with the national policy documents on what education should achieve and how it should be transacted. We have to have very developed and very capacitated teachers who will look at technology as an additional, supplementary tool for making teaching-learning far more effective. So it has to be an integral part of the teaching-learning process and not be a standalone, it cannot be a one-off kind of thing, it cannot be used in an ad hoc manner.

So this brings us back to square one, that you first need a functioning educational system with a vision. And the biggest resource within the education system is the teacher because the teacher has to finally connect with the child.

Absolutely, absolutely. The government has opened schools to reach 97 percent of the population at the middle school level, and almost 99 percent at the primary level. Similarly, if the government thinks that technology is an important and integral aspect of education, it must provide for it in a meaningful manner, not just by placing computers and some smartboards and calling them smart schools. This is the same thing as smart cities, you know. Unless the city has certain very minimum things you can't call a city a smart city.

If technology is considered to be an integral part of education, the government must provide for the same at its own cost — like it currently provides textbooks, mid-day meals and many other facilities free of cost. ■

Ludhiana's cursed Budda Nala

Civil Society News
Ludhiana

IT is a bustling industrial centre hardwired for making money. Known for its mills and exporters, it is not uncommon to find a Ferrari or Bentley inching along on its crowded streets. A civic movement is the last thing you would expect in Ludhiana, but in the past couple of years socially conscious citizens have been trying valiantly to be heard amidst the commercial hurly-burly of the city.

Their big concern is the Budda Nala that flows for 14 km through the city and then goes on to join the Sutlej. As it passes through, it becomes the receptacle for chemical wastes, sewage, dairy effluents and garbage.

The *nala* turns black and is an embarrassment for Ludhiana, but more significantly the pollution that goes into the *nala* compromises the quality of water in the Sutlej, one of Punjab's principal rivers, which it joins after it leaves the city.

The Sutlej is a source of drinking water for some 10 million people further downstream in Punjab and Rajasthan. Ludhiana's reckless dumping of wastes is therefore creating a health hazard on a much larger scale.

The sources of pollution are textile mills, dairies and the city's sewers. As the contamination of the *nala* has grown, concerned citizens have come together to find a solution.

They have been talking to the mill managements and dairies and petitioning the state government in Chandigarh but the path for them is not just steep, it is also tricky.

Just when they seem to have made some headway, thanks to the National Green Tribunal, they realize entrenched interests have actually run rings around them.

For instance, a ₹600-crore plan for channelizing and treating wastes has been passed, but its details weren't shared with the public. Instead, it was posted online among other government tenders.

Says Jaskirat Singh, a software engineer who has played a key role in raising objections: "It is a 500-page document and there is very little discussion on water and water quality. It is entirely focused on the civil work: cement quality, iron quality and so on. So, I told them that this is a drinking water problem, this is an environment problem, this is not a civil engineering problem."

He was also aghast to find that the whole project was supposed to be headed by a civil engineer with 10 years' experience. "It is still so. I suggested that some environmental scientist or water scientist or a public health specialist should head this project," says Singh.

He adds: "We told them the biggest problem is that industry waste and domestic waste is getting mixed up. And that is mixing up the accountability of the Ludhiana municipality and the pollution control board with neither wanting to be held accountable. That cannot continue because that has been the root of the problem. But they have again created a big sewage treatment plant (STP), which



The Budda Nala continues to be a receptacle for chemical wastes, sewage, dairy effluents and garbage



Jaskirat Singh

will cost about ₹250 crore."

The plan says that 20 percent of the STP's capacity will be for handling industrial waste, which Singh says is wrong. The costs of maintaining and running the STP will be borne by the municipal corporation, using taxpayers' money. Also, the previous STP got damaged because of chemicals in industrial waste.

Singh laments the attitude of industry. Units want to remain where they are, scattered all over the city, when it would be much better if they were put in three clusters and their wastes were treated at source. It is the same problem with dairies, which don't want to be relocated or invest in treatment facilities.

The Budda Nala is actually fine till it enters Ludhiana. In fact, its flow is lean for 14 km before entering the city since it serves canals along the way. The problem begins in Ludhiana where the flow swells, but with sewage and chemicals.

Interestingly, Ludhiana does not depend on the Budda Nala. It draws its drinking water from underground. The *nala* could contaminate aquifers but most people live at a distance from the *nala*. The people who live near it are poor and

Singh laments the attitude of industry. Units want to remain scattered across the city when it would be better if they were put in three clusters and their wastes were treated at source.

don't count for much.

"In Ludhiana we use underground water. We have plenty of it with the Himalayas giving us a lot of mineral water. We are using our underground aquifers. We are creating polluted water out of that and we are throwing it into the river and that water we're sending across to our brothers and sisters in other cities for them to drink. We are a bunch of fools, actually," says Singh in exasperation.

It is perhaps not the only example of short-sighted governance in Ludhiana. When Tirupur in Tamil Nadu brought in regulation to get dyeing units to clean up their act, some of the production shifted to Ludhiana where the rules were lax, says Singh.

But this time it is residents of Ludhiana themselves who have raised the issue of pollution. They have also been joined by people in Faridkot, Muktsar and Fazilka where NGOs have raised the issue.

Singh says there have been efforts to bring all stakeholders on one platform, but it isn't easy. "You know, everyone is too selfish, I think. Nobody wants to change themselves. Everyone wants the other guy to change," he says. ■

Wular Lake is choking with sewage, filth

Jehangir Rashid
Srinagar

WULAR Lake, one of Asia's largest freshwater lakes, is turning into a shadow of its former self. Located in Bandipora district of North Kashmir, the lake, which once brimmed with fish, is now brimming with pollution. Fish species which thrived in its waters are disappearing. Fishermen are abandoning their traditional livelihood and becoming labourers on construction sites.

Fisheries is an important adjunct to agriculture in Jammu and Kashmir and, according to estimates, contributes a significant 23 percent to the state's Gross Domestic Product (GDP). Besides being an important economic activity, the fish economy also generates self-employment.

"In the past, the lake was full of fish. We would catch fish of varying sizes on a daily basis but the situation has now changed. Most fishermen return empty-handed in the evening. Those who are lucky come back with a few kg of fish," said Ali Mohammad, a fisherman.

Rough estimates suggest Wular accounted for 60 to 70 percent of the demand for fish in the Valley in the past. But the state is now importing fish and catch from other states dominates markets. The production of fish in Wular has touched its lowest ever, say experts.

They point out that the increase in pollution is due to the exponential growth of residential houses near the lake and the presence of scores of camps of security forces along the Jhelum river. Sewage from the houses and security camps is directly disgorged into the lake. Previous governments turned a blind eye to this rampant pollution.

"Inflow of sewage, siltation and encroachments have badly affected fish yield. Animal carcasses,



It's hard to catch any fish in Wular Lake

latrine waste and other pollutants are all dumped in the lake. Aquatic life has paid a heavy price. The unfortunate part is that nobody is bothered about remedying the situation," said an expert, requesting anonymity.

Mohammad Subhan, a fisherman, said most people belonging to his fishing community have said goodbye to fishing and taken up menial jobs. He said fishermen have been pushed to the wall and that drastic measures need to be taken to restore the lake to its original state.

A survey carried out by a global agency said that resource mapping trends of Wular indicate a steep decline in its fish catch over the past 50 years. The survey states that a massive decrease in the lake's water level and its degradation have led to a steep decline in native fish species like *Schizothorax* (snow trout) in Wular.

"Large quantities of sewage from Srinagar city and major towns flow into the lake, resulting in increased eutrophication which has adverse impacts on the growth and development of fisheries in general and sensitive species like *Schizothorax* in particular," says the agency report.

The fishermen and experts say that if filters are erected at Shadipora in Sumbal block upstream, sources of pollution like polythene and animal carcasses can be prevented from entering the lake.

Such measures can help increase the fish population.

Decline of *Schizothorax* is also attributed to the introduction of carp species into the Dal Lake, resulting in their proliferation, as well as heavy siltation in Wular. Excessive growing of vegetable crops on floating gardens, leading to algal bloom, has also led to destruction of the breeding grounds of local fish species.

"The government's priority seems to be revenue generation from tourism rather than the conservation and development of lake fisheries, which would enable fishermen to earn an increased income in terms of returns on time invested in fishing," points out Ghulam Rasool, a fisherman.

Rasool says that care needs to be taken to ensure sustenance and propagation of local species and less of carp. He says that carp culture can be promoted as a separate freshwater aquaculture activity in other water bodies, which would yield good income and help maintain the supply of fish to the markets.

"Monitoring agencies like the Pollution Control Board could have done a great job in stopping pollution in Wular," said a group of fishermen.

"But this did not happen and as a result the lake is full of garbage, human excreta, silt and other forms of pollution. At the end of the day it is the poor man who suffers and this is the case with us, the fishermen of Wular," they added. ■

Samita's World

by SAMITA RATHOR



‘The oppressed classes don’t know their power’

R.S. Praveen Kumar on joining the BSP and empowerment

Civil Society News
Gurugram

FEW people are blessed with R.S. Praveen Kumar's enormous energy. A tall and lean man with his head shaved, even at the age of 54 he cuts a striking figure with a pace of his own.

He is a decorated police officer who made a name for himself as a police officer when posted in Maoist controlled areas of Andhra/Telangana.

But it was as secretary of the Social Welfare Schools of Telangana, a large network of government-run schools, that he achieved the status of a hero. He transformed the schools, where some of the most deprived communities sent their children, into bustling hubs of modern education.

Recently, Praveen Kumar left all this behind to join the Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP), which has little or no presence in Telangana. Mayawati has made him the party's coordinator for the state.

Praveen Kumar comes from a scheduled caste and has known poverty. But having been in the IPS and then acquired a master's at Harvard and worked in government, what was it really that drew him to the party and politics? To find out, we spoke to him at some length in Hyderabad.

You have been a decorated police officer, you have been admired for the work you have done as an administrator in the Social Welfare Schools of Telangana. Why have you taken the decision to enter politics?

Great question. Both when I was in the police and when I was with the schools I always felt that I wasn't able to do much for people on a larger and wider scale. Maybe it is my nature that I am intolerant with the pace with which I am achieving things. But, as a police officer, there would always be a dilemma within me about whether I am protecting the rich from the poor or the poor from the rich. Out on the streets I would be clearing the way for politicians and leaders, but back in the police station these would be people accused of crimes. I would be clearing the streets for people accused of offences.

It was because of this that I chose to work in tribal welfare, in the schools run by the government. In the role of secretary of these schools, I had a lot of freedom. But in recent times I noticed the state

government was more interested in throwing money at people to buy their support than in institution building, empowerment and transformation of the lives of tribal people and the lower castes. For instance, for the Huzurabad by-election which is due on October 30, formally the government has spent ₹1,000 crore just to get votes and win a seat.

My question is, where is that money coming from? Just for one assembly constituency, you design so many schemes. On the other hand, children are without education and in higher education there is a shortage of regular teachers. In Telangana, we have seven universities in which

‘What I could do in the past nine years in government is only one percent. There is 99 percent still to be done. That’s why I put in my papers.’

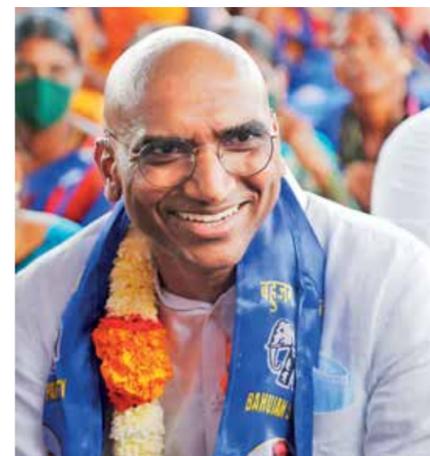
there are 3,000 professor posts of which only 800 are filled. For the past seven years 2,200 posts have been vacant. Our chief minister has never stepped into any of the institutions — neither the schools, nor the universities. There was no review of education at all.

With ₹1,000 crore I can build medical colleges, I can build engineering colleges, I can build nursing colleges. I can create as many opportunities as possible for the people to go to different countries, to go to different states, and to experience different things in life. But that is not what our chief minister wants and he says it is not what people want. According to him, they want to see the money in their accounts. Direct cash transfers to their accounts in huge numbers, not just ₹2,000 or ₹3,000. So he wanted to do this as a pilot project in direct cash transfer in Huzurabad because there is a by-election.

What I could do in the past nine years as a secretary of social welfare and tribal welfare is only



Praveen Kumar: 'We are getting a huge response'



Praveen Kumar

one percent. There is 99 percent that remains to be done in this country, in this state. So that's why I thought I should put in my papers.

So it's actually to do your bit for raising the standards of politics, and simultaneously to be able to do more than you would be able to do in a single role?

Yeah, that's true.

Why the BSP?

The TRS (Telangana Rashtra Samithi) was out of the question for me, having seen it from very close. They have no interest in human development. The BJP is

divisive and wants to create communal tensions. They will take India back into the dark ages.

What did you see in the BSP?

The very idea of the BSP came from a person like Manyavar Kanshi Ramji. And he got inspired by B.R. Ambedkar. Ambedkar in turn got inspired by Mahatma Jyotirao Phule and Savitribai Phule. These are people who gave their lives to bring equality in this country. These are the people who fought for social justice.

The Congress has promoted so much dissension, so many caste associations and those associations have become stooges. They are tools in the hands of the ruling classes and the people they're supposed to emancipate.

The BSP has a very solid ideological base, the ideology which says equal opportunity based on your population and your presence in society.

Similarly, the BSP is a party which wants to protect the Constitution in letter and spirit. It is one party, to the best of my knowledge, which does not promote crony capitalism. It does not pay money for votes. In South India, every voter is given about ₹5,000 or ₹10,000. But BSP goes to people, collects money from them to run the party. It is crowdfunding.

Is there no corruption in the BSP at all?

My strong belief is, they are for the poor. All the allegations that are levelled against the BSP are absolutely baseless. You know, the Supreme Court itself has said that the corruption allegations against Behenji Kumari Mayawati are absolutely baseless

and that she's innocent. The record of the BSP has been that it is tough on those responsible for corruption. Workers make up the BSP and they come with the clear agenda of liberating the poor.

There is a lot of personal glorification which happens around Mayawati, you know. In UP you have these multiple statues, etc. Now, these are things that have happened on public record. How do you react to this?

I think this is beyond my domain, but my feeling is this is blown out of proportion. I have myself visited the Samajik Parivartan Sthal in UP and Noida and what she had done is to create a history which was earlier conveniently pushed under the carpet. I didn't know about Periyar Ramaswamy till I became a graduate, till I started preparing for the civil services.

I didn't know about Narayana Guru. I didn't know about Savitribai Phule. What kind of country, what kind of education system do we have, where the people who actually contributed were made to fade into the wilderness?

So what Mayawati had done is to bring back that history which was made to fade away. Bring it back and give it shape. There is nothing wrong in what she had done. I disagree with the point that it is a kind of glorification. No, she in fact has brought the reality to the surface. The real history of India.

I was made to read about Gangadhar Tilak, Taty Tope, or Madan Mohan Malviya and so on and so forth, and Veer Savarkar. But I was never told about Mahatma Jyotirao Phule. I was never told about Jhalkari Bai. I was not taught about Kabir Das.

How will you build the party in your state?

We don't have an MLA or MLC and our voting percentage is only two percent. So, people ask me what is the point. My answer is, the need for power is innate in the oppressed classes. Unfortunately, they have not been told about their potential in electoral politics. The oppressed don't always have to be at the mercy of the ruling classes.

In the BSP in Telangana what we are trying to do is popularize the symbol and the ideology and go into each and every village and make the elephant, our symbol, a part of their lives.

We are getting a huge response. Like, for example, I resigned on July 19. And then I joined BSP on August 8. On the day I joined, thousands of people came to the public meeting at which I was taken into the party. So my foundations are based on a great dream, which is still unfulfilled for millions in this country.

So what is the main agenda? What are the issues you will give importance to in your state?

First is the best possible education and preferably in the English medium. There should be residential education in huge numbers. The syllabi should be chosen from the best in this country and the world. There should be an emphasis on the education of women.

Second is health. When I was down with COVID-19, despite having had two doses of the vaccine, I went to the Gandhi Hospital. Our government healthcare facilities are in urgent need of improvement. We want healthcare to be free. Not just at the tertiary level in our cities, but at the primary level too. We want to raise life expectancy to 100 years.

Third is self-employment. I know the government, beyond a point, cannot create jobs. But unemployment is a major problem in Telangana. And we want to take up unemployment in a big way.

Fourth is eco-friendly living. We have to stop destroying our basic ecosystems.

Fifth is social justice and preservation of the culture of all people.

Sixth is ensuring that major contracts aren't concentrated in the hands of a few industrialists and business houses. They must be awarded more transparently so that in a democratic manner they are also given to people who comprise the largest number, whom we call the Bahujan.

Finally, we want reservations in the private sector as well. Governments are encouraging the private sector, but where is social justice in private entities? Who is going to look into Adivasi employment? Who is going to look into Scheduled Caste employment? Who is going to ensure the gender balance? Who is going to ensure that the OBCs are taken in huge numbers in the private sector? Nobody. There is no system in place.

Right now a lot of the Dalit vote which you represent goes to the Congress and to the TRS.

We will have not only the Dalit votes — that's why I said the Bahujan votes — we also have a lot of the poor among the Backward Classes coming towards us. We have a lot of tribals coming towards us. Women and religious minorities too. I see all these people as future leaders. And for that matter, we want to represent everybody — including people from the upper castes. ■

It is like the Bigg Boss House...

Disom looks for leaders and gets its first batch

Civil Society News
New Delhi

HOW much money and time would you put into developing leaders who will serve India well? It is a tough one, but what does one year and ₹3 crore sound like to you?

Most brave new ideas seem a bit over the top. So also with Disom, a leadership school, in which 21 people from multiple walks of life are learning to dream, discover themselves and become servant-leaders in public life.

For the past several months, even as they have been learning to live with one another, this first batch of Disom fellows have immersed themselves in an unstructured process of discovering India and their places in its complex social and political landscape.

Disom is a leadership school, but not in the sense you might expect. The course is for a year, but there is no faculty, rigid learning material or even a campus for that matter — though the original intention was to have one. Those who join are paid what they need to stay away from jobs and take care of their families. They spend nothing.

It is a consensual arrangement. Everyone is free-falling, hanging together almost like skydivers fluttering around but connected. Looking out and in. Decisions are taken collaboratively at daily meetings.

The first batch of fellows were chosen after an extensive search. An essential qualification was to have a dream to serve society. The course began in February and, as the year progresses, and they go from one experience to the next, they revisit that dream to see if it's intact or has changed. Finally, they will go out into the real world to make that dream happen.

The first two months were spent on the campus of the Initiatives of Change at Panchgani, two hours from Pune. Then it was on to Nagaloka, a Buddhist training centre in Nagpur, to imbibe the meaning of the middle way. Next came 25 days on the Nai Talim campus at the Gandhi Ashram at Sevagram in Wardha. From there it was off to Hyderabad and the Montford Social Institute run by Brother Varghese who works with invisible people in cities. And then to Varanasi, Bastar and who knows where?

The idea of a leadership school came from Initiatives of Change, which is concerned about moral values in public life. It was set up in India by Rajmohan Gandhi in 1968.

The trustees of Initiatives of Change suggested the idea of a leadership school to Biren Bhuta, whom they knew over the years. He had just then given up his job as Chief of CSR at Tata Steel.

Bhuta, 47, wasn't the usual company executive. He is introspective and abstemious in his lifestyle. He had been a journalist before joining Tata Steel. His handling of CSR had an authentic quality about it. He was, for instance, deeply respectful of tribal



Disom fellows share a laugh



Biren Bhuta: 'There are conflicts, there is affection'

cultures. An annual festival of tribal people, called Samvaad, held in Jamshedpur, was unique.

"When I quit Tata Steel my intent was to just chill, travel around the country, explore what next I could do in life. I especially wanted to make tribal worldviews succeed," says Bhuta.

He was hesitant, but the thought of setting up a leadership school immediately appealed to him. He saw the school as an "inspirational idea" which had the "seeds of transformation if I can do it right."

Bhuta now has with him eight others who together make up a faculty but prefer to be known as "curators." Like the people admitted to the course, these "curators" too come from different walks of life. The process of learning is shaped as they go along by the fellows as well as those directing the course. Everyone is involved. The common goal is a better understanding of India.

Bhuta did much of the spadework for Disom. He talked to hundreds of people across the country. It was decided to fund it with modest donations, the highest being ₹10 lakh so that no one could exercise too much control.

Fellows could be from any strata of society so long as they had a vision. The money part was important. It was decided to fund people as per their need. Currently that works out to around Rs 11 lakh for the year per person which includes accommodation, travel, food, healthcare and a stipend. The total cost of running the course works out to around ₹3 crore.

The 21 fellows together represent a microcosm of the country. They are between 23 and 38 years old. There are 15 men, five women and one person who identifies himself as non-binary queer. Two of them are persons with disabilities and one is wheelchair bound. Eight come from tribal communities, three are Dalits and three are Muslims.

How do so many strong-minded people who see themselves as leaders manage to stay glued together?

Says Bhuta: "It's like the Bigg Boss House, you know, that thing that happens on television. So, there are conflicts, there are skirmishes, there is affection for each other. There could be romantic things happening. All of this that we see in society."

"Everything that happens outside happens here. As it unfolds, we deal with it and we discuss it. Every morning, we have a *majlis* and every week there are two fellows who take the leadership of the week," he explains.

How successful will Disom be? It is anyone's guess. But that an interesting beginning has been made is there for all to see. ■

Himalaya Wellness Committed to Preserving Biodiversity

Being a leading global healthcare brand, Himalaya Wellness Company is conscious of the need for sustainability and has pledged to conserve biodiversity through several initiatives. One of the major initiatives is the tree plantation drive being conducted since 2012.

India, an extremely biodiverse country, has over 45,000 species of plants in 2.4% of the world's land area. However, many life forms are at risk due to rapid urbanization and development activities; hence prioritizing and preserving biodiversity is the need of the hour. Since 2012, Himalaya Wellness Company has planted over 8,00,000 trees across the Western Ghats, Meghalaya, the Eastern Ghats, and Bengaluru. The local communities are then handed over the plantation that helps them earn a livelihood.

Saplings of fruit and vegetable-bearing, fodder-providing, and nitrogen-fixing trees are planted in rural communities. This gives the local communities complete autonomy of the plants and the produce, which they may either use for economical upliftment or for personal consumption.

Himalaya also worked on building eco-villages to generate sustainable farming or secondary livelihood options. The Khasi tribes in Meghalaya were trained for beekeeping, vermicomposting, and mushroom cultivation.

Globally, we are facing a huge environmental crisis, and the time to act is now. Himalaya pledges to restore and preserve biodiversity and keep working towards protecting our Mother Earth. This is the way to make the world a better place to live!



¹<https://india.mongabay.com/2020/09/nature-in-peril-as-biodiversity-losses-mount-alarmingly-states-the-living-planet-report/>

Tourists or trees? Doon picks trees

Rakesh Agrawal
Dehradun

THE Doon Valley is witnessing protests by young people and senior citizens against felling of trees to broaden a highway connecting Dehradun with the picturesque hill town of Mussoorie. Angry and determined, the tree activists are turning up at various spots of the proposed highway expansion to stage protests.

On October 2, Gandhi Jayanti, they gathered at Asharodi in Dehradun, at the edge of a tunnel linking the city with Saharanpur. They shouted slogans and waved placards. Next, the tree activists, young and old, moved to Mohand in Saharanpur where they were joined by the Van Gujjars, a nomadic community living on the fringes of the Rajaji National Park.

A week earlier, on a leisurely Sunday, hundreds of tree activists turned up at Sahastradhara Road near the historic Khalanga War Memorial in Dehradun. They carried placards which read: 'Ecology is permanent ecology', 'Tourists ko kya dikhaogay? Landslides?', 'Save Trees, Save Life'.

They pinned colourful posters on tall eucalyptuses lining the road. The posters depicted a tree bleeding and mauled, trees growing in a round circle, Mother Nature and her trees, and much more. Others tied *raksha-sutra* (a red thread signifying protection) on the trees and then hugged them, emulating the famed Chipko movement.

The government plans to widen the four-lane Dehradun-Saharanpur highway (National Highway 307) into a six-lane one. Around 15 km of road is on the Dehradun side and 30 km falls in Uttar Pradesh (UP). A bypass will be built, making it easier for tourists to get to Mussoorie.

But to do that some 11,000 trees will have to die: 2,700 trees in Uttarakhand and 8,300 in UP. Another 5,000 trees will subsequently be axed to build a science institute in Balwala on the outskirts of the city.

All this proposed tree felling has deeply incensed green activists, students and citizens. They point out that the Doon Valley has turned grey with dust and smog due to rapid construction of a plethora of buildings, surge in vehicles and thundering traffic.

"Since Dehradun became the capital of Uttarakhand it has lost 70 percent of its tree cover. This proposed road widening will further denude its greenery," rued Chetna Bhatt, 23, an undergraduate and a member of MAD (Making A Difference), a volunteer student group in Dehradun. Altogether 20 student groups, non-profits and teacher associations have joined hands to oppose tree felling.

"We're here to save our beloved Dehradun from assured destruction. On this road alone 2,200 trees are going to be cut just to facilitate tourists coming



Students, non-profits, teacher associations and senior citizens oppose felling of trees for expanding a highway



in their huge SUVs. Instead of promoting tourism, it'll destroy every tourist attraction here," pointed out Anchal Sharma of the Earth and Climate Initiative.

She was correct. Located 14 km from Dehradun, Sahastradhara Road has, over the years, transformed into a posh area for the upwardly mobile. It is now dotted with multistoried apartments, malls, multiplexes, hotels, restaurants and an IT Park.

For years it was a tourist attraction. Sahastradhara means 1,000 springs. People would flock here to splash around in those springs. It still has a few sulphur hot springs left which are considered therapeutic. But most springs have dried up due to the construction of new buildings. It's also a hilly area, higher than the city and therefore a little cooler. But Sahastradhara is now mostly in the news for waterlogging and landslides. A recent downpour nearly drowned its IT Park.

Even the eucalyptus trees, long derided by environmentalists for being water guzzlers, are being stoutly defended.

"We will replicate the spirit of Chipko. We have the blessings of Gaura Devi (a stalwart of the Chipko movement) who taught us to be ready to sacrifice our lives for trees," said Anup Nautiyal of SDC Foundation, hugging a eucalyptus. His friend, Jaya Singh, encircled another tree.

"We won't let them cut our beloved trees," declared Arnav Ridh, 20, another undergraduate, who was there with his friends.

Some sceptics wondered why people were upset about eucalyptuses being felled.

"Even eucalyptus produces enough oxygen in a day for four persons. That's worth a lot. People suffer due to lack of oxygen," emphasized Archie Bisht, 22, another undergraduate.

"There are several other broad-leaved, slow-growing trees like peepal, mango, banyan and *pilkhal* (a species similar to *peepal*) being cut, not just eucalyptus. We don't want our city to become like Ghaziabad or Meerut," said Himanshu Kumar of Citizens For Green Doon, (CFGD).

The protesters also challenged the very notion of development. "Development *nahin chahiye* (No to development), *ped katana nahin chahiye* (trees mustn't be felled). Let's not cut trees, destroy wildlife and our natural resources," said the young activists.

Senior citizens joined in to protest against tree felling and to support the younger generation. "Sahastradhara is already a 60-foot-wide, two-lane road. That's enough to bear the present load of traffic. We see no rationale for this tree sacrifice," said Kalyan Rawat, environmentalist and founder of Maiti Andolan. A non-profit, Maiti Andolan propagates a tradition that has caught on. After their wedding, newlyweds take a sapling and plant it outside their home.

The protest is rousing support online. But there is a schism between participating groups on whether to approach the courts. The CFGD is not keen. They would rather continue the protest online and offline.

MAD is willing to go ahead. "We'll be doing an online protest through Facebook, Twitter and filing online petitions through www.change.org. We will also go to court, if need be," said Karan Kapur of MAD.

Tree felling in Uttarakhand has been stopped since a PIL was lodged in the Uttarakhand High Court. But in UP, felling has started.

"So far, the administration hasn't responded to our protest. Cutting down eucalyptus doesn't need permission from the forest department. I maintain eucalyptus trees are crucial for the biodiversity of an area as they give shelter to birds and bees. We will approach the High Court of Uttarakhand and the National Green Tribunal," said Kapur. ■

*Woh rishton main vishwas, woh vishwas ki mithaas
Har mithaas jo hai khaas...*



*Aao manain
Mawana ke saath
Har
pal
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Idiyappam from a machine

Shree Padre
Kottor/Kerala

EVERY day, just before daybreak, a small farmhouse in Kottor village swings into action. It becomes a bustling factory for just three hours — from 4 to 7 am.

What sort of factory is this? If you enter the premises before sunrise, you'll be surprised to find that it is an *idiyappam* or rice noodle factory. Named Shavai, it manufactures and supplies *idiyappam* every morning to around 100 eateries in a 50-km radius from its premises.

Ten years ago, if someone had mooted the idea of starting a breakfast factory in Kottor, a sleepy village in Kerala, people would have laughed. They laughed at 42-year-old Rajesh Majakkar too, when he started his rice noodle factory in this rural belt.

But the success of his venture has silenced all his critics. On an average, Shavai sells 3,000 *idiyappams* daily. During the pandemic, daily sales crossed 5,000 to 6,000 *idiyappams*. "Once schools reopen nearby, eateries will buy more *idiyappams*," says Majakkar, a civil engineer who has been running a successful construction business for 15 years.

Two years ago Majakkar went to Dubai on an assignment. While eating in a restaurant, he happened to see an automatic *idiyappam* machine. It was the first time he had seen one. When he asked where it was from he was surprised to be told, it had come from Coimbatore.

Back home, Majakkar plunged into handling his construction company. But he kept recalling the rice noodle machine. He began to dream of starting a food business with it.

Then the pandemic started. Two relatives, brother-in-law Shrinidhi Nadumane and the latter's brother-in-law, Shriharsha Chennangod, had returned to Kottor, weary of city life. Majakkar entrusted the task of starting his venture to them.

Ready-to-cook noodles are not a novelty for people in Kasaragod. But ready-to-eat noodles are. Many companies in Coimbatore make different models of noodle making machines which work with a motor and pneumatic pressure. Majakkar bought a couple of machines.

Now, in the wee hours of the day, work begins in the factory. With a production rate of two noodles per minute, the machines easily reach their target for the day. Before daylight breaks, packets of *idiyappam* are packed into delivery vans and start their journey. The ready-to-eat *idiyappam* is sold within a few hours by hotels to thousands of customers.

Idiyappam is a popular breakfast dish in Tamil Nadu and South Kerala. *Idiyappam* shops churn out hot noodles, batch after batch, in quick succession. These old shops make *idiyappam* manually.

Shavai rice *idiyappams* are priced at ₹7 each and



The noodle making machine at work



Rajesh Majakkar with Shrinidhi Nadumane

have a shelf life of only a day. Apart from Kasaragod city, Shavai's noodles are sold in rural towns and hotels. A helping of two *idiyappams* is priced at ₹30 to 40 per plate and served with either chutney, *sambar* or *kayihalu* (sweetened coconut milk).

Shavai also gets orders for weddings, meetings and other gatherings. People in the vicinity of the factory come in the early mornings to buy directly from it. Such orders need to be placed the previous night. On Sundays, the company earns ₹500 from local purchases.

The industrial method of making *idiyappams* differs slightly from the domestic method. In kitchens, rice is soaked in water, ground and then kneaded and turned into noodles. But in the factory, the batter is made with rice flour, kneaded, put in the machine and cooked after it emerges as noodles.

What is remarkable is Majakkar's inventiveness and creativity in running his business in which he has invested ₹10 lakh. He has improved quality, cut production costs and innovated.

For example, Shavai's noodles are much thinner than normal *idiyappams*. "Our noodles are now half in diameter compared to what the machine was producing earlier," he says. "We had to spend considerable time and money to get micro holes put in our moulds to make the noodles finer. Such modified parts aren't readily available. It required painstaking effort to find a workshop that could do this.

"When you eat any rice preparation, you feel like drinking water in between since your throat feels dry. We researched this aspect and our *idiyappam* is the answer."

What difference do finer *idiyappams* make? "The noodles look very neat and attractive," says Majakkar. "Customers prefer narrower threads. Many hotels exhibit *idiyappams* in their displays. Our *idiyappams* look noticeably different."

The team succeeded in making thinner noodles after failing several times. The first batch was sent to 10 hotels nearby for sampling. The delivery boys told the owners that the *idiyappams* were free but they insisted on paying. "From tomorrow send us regular supplies," they said.

The first day itself 300 *idiyappams* were ordered. The next day 500 were ordered and the sales graph kept rising.

Shavai has recently started making *idli* and *kadubu*, another dish made from steamed rice. The company also offers an assortment of customized *idiyappam* options — you can buy carrot, beetroot, mint and tomato *idiyappams*.

"Fresh extracts of these vegetables are mixed in the batter instead of water," explains Majakkar. These special *idiyappams* need to be ordered beforehand and are priced higher. The team will be experimenting with other vegetables and fruits like jackfruit and mango.

He also increased the production capacity of his noodle machines to 1,200 *idiyappams* per hour instead of 700. By using solar heated water for boilers and smaller, energy efficient burners, he reduced gas consumption by 40 percent.

Changing the noodles to micro sizes, finding methods to prevent noodles from sticking to one another during transportation are other examples of Majakkar's research.

Shavai also plans to introduce a breakfast packet for travellers and daily wage workers. "They rush to work early morning, catching trains and buses. They don't have time to make breakfast," says Majakkar.

The breakfast packet will consist of a punnet box with two or three *idiyappams* and a local tangy chutney called *sollameerya*, made from tamarind and chillies. This chutney is a traditional dish of the Karad Brahmins, the community to which Majakkar belongs.

"I'll be happy if I can sell 1,000 boxes per day," he says, as optimistic as ever. ■

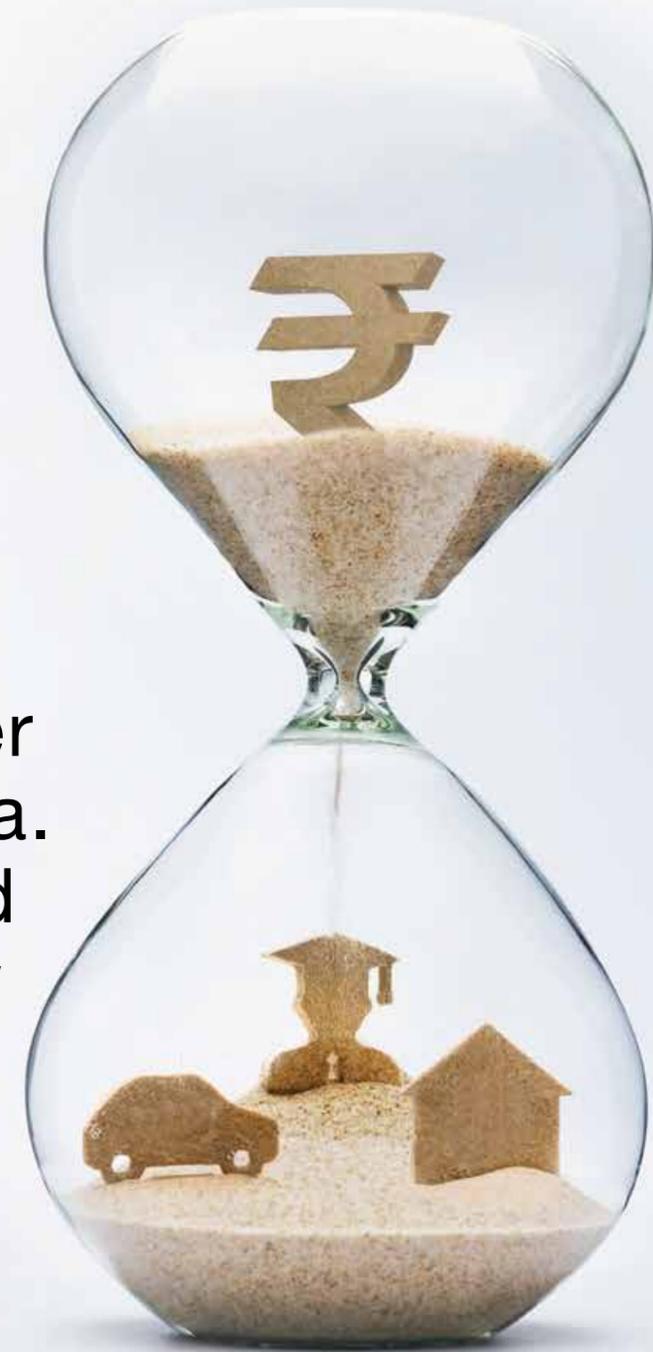
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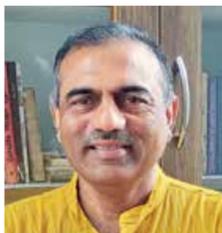
Photo: Civil Society/Umesh Anand



The construction and real estate sector is suffering a steep deficit of 30 percent workers

Jobs but no takers?

Toxic workplaces could slow down the economy



By Rajiv Khandelwal

WITH A DECADE of shop floor experience, Harlal is an expert in firing up and managing boilers in a textile factory. He has been working in Rajkot, Gujarat, one of the centres of the Indian textile industry. Despite the importance of his role and many years of service, Harlal was earning just ₹350 for a day's work. His wife made another ₹200 a day from sweeping and cleaning the mill. The

family lived in the mill despite the heat and smoke on the premises.

A year ago Harlal found himself accused of selling coal on the side and pocketing the money. He swears on his young sons that he stole nothing but, facing a backlash from his contractor, he had to flee Rajkot and return to his village in Karauli, in Rajasthan. After building up a debt of ₹40,000 in the village, Harlal is back in Rajkot with the same contractor who now pays him only partially every week and keeps the remainder for payment on a later date.

Stories like Harlal's abound in the country. Paltry wages, dismal workplace conditions and the absence of rights have increasingly made employment an untenable burden. Workers are opting to stay away or enter and exit quickly,

which has been showing up now in data.

The Manpower Group Employment Outlook Survey for 2021 reports that a whopping 43 percent of all employers are unable to make steady hires and are struggling to find recruits across all levels.

So, while media reports abound with stories of rapid economic recovery after the battle with COVID-19, there are continuing laments of worker shortages in several sectors.

For instance, the construction and real estate sector is suffering a steep deficit of 30 percent workers and its growth plans will need a million workers more in the next two years.

It would appear that in a reviving economy everyone will find work. If not locally available, work will certainly be available at some distance away. If it is difficult to find employment by one's own devices, it will come through a contact, an intermediary or an agent. Nobody needs to go without work unless they choose not to work at all.

It is, therefore, surprising that thousands exercise the option to not work. Or exit work quickly if they do decide to work. Surely, fears of COVID-19 and the spectre of lockdowns aren't keeping people away from work anymore.

It certainly did impact the willingness among migrants to get to work — especially as employment also recovered very slowly after frequent shutdowns,

disrupted supply chains and drying up of orders. However, now that the economy is throbbing again and needs workers, why are workers not showing up?

The answer is not in the quantum of jobs being created but in the quality of the ones on offer. Jobs for millions were a bad deal before COVID-19 and they continue to be a bad deal now. Until the fundamentals of wages and work conditions are fixed it is doubtful that Indian industry will have a just share of its urgently needed workforce.

ABYSMAL WAGES

Wages, for labouring millions in India, remain appallingly low. The minimum wages mandated by law are still way short of the aspired living wage which might allow wage-dependent households the chance to lead a well-nourished, wholesome and dignified life. Studies estimate that minimum wages elude over 60 million workers — a sizeable proportion of the entire workforce. Add to this the reality that in the waged work spectrum there is a gap of at least 33 percent between what women and men earn for the same quantum or nature of work.

The India Wage Report, published by the International Labour Organization (ILO) in 2018, is amongst the most credible recent accounts of India's wage structure and its governing policies. The report refrains from making any indicting comments on the underlying factors of low wages but it does assert that "low pay and wage inequality remain a serious challenge to India's path to achieving decent working conditions and inclusive growth".

Barely half of India's workforce earns a wage and the proportion of wage-earners rises very slowly over time — for example, from 46 percent in 1993-94 to just 49 percent in 2011-12.

The work of the remaining workforce is not waged — because of the high proportion of self-employed workers and home-based workers (who are paid piece-rate), and people working as unpaid helpers in their family enterprises. Such work can be low-return and extractive.

The national floor wage announced in 2017 was shockingly low — just ₹176 per day. The government has yet to consider recommendations of its own committee that proposed a floor wage of ₹375 (with regional variations). States are free to determine higher minimum wage rates but these still remain way below fair standards, barring some exceptions like Delhi or Kerala.

India is witnessing a massive increase in the number of contract labour everywhere. The Annual Survey of Industries (ASI) says that there has been a surge in the use of contract labour in the organized manufacturing sector.

The share of contract labour in total employment increased sharply from 15.5 percent in 2000-01 to 27.9 percent in 2015-16 (a huge escalation in real terms given India's labour-intensive workforce). The increasing use of contract workers who are not employed directly by the employer, but by an intermediary or contractor, reflects significant informalization of the workforce.

This has major implications for what workers can claim as a rightful wage or entitlement: usually contract workers will go without stable, written contracts, social security coverage like insurance, pension or paid leave — all of which are needed for a workforce to experience well-being. Payments determined on the quantum of work done are often a means of paying workers less than the market wage.

The payment of wages through intermediaries and contractors results in arbitrary commissions and cuts, which result in low returns for workers. The reality of wage fraud in such systems is a major hindrance to employment environments becoming stable.

The data is disturbing: 67 percent of the Indian workforce go without written job contracts, 52 percent receive no paid leave, and 54.2 percent are ineligible for social security according to the Periodic Labour Force Survey (PLFS) report of 2019-20.

Poor wages, especially in cities that attract millions of migrant workers, result in workers making compromises on what they eat and where they live. One-fifth of Indian workers above 45 years are undernourished, according to its first Longitudinal Ageing Study. Most informal workers live in unthinkably squalid conditions in cities. There is just not enough income to buy or prepare three nutritious meals or rent dignified spaces, and workers cut back on these costs in order to save enough for remitting back home.

However, this condition of work and living is inherently unsustainable. It is not surprising, therefore, that workers from urban settings return frequently to their rural homes and often just quit their work on account of sheer exhaustion and morbidity.

Even in so-called high growth potential sectors like logistics and retail, earnings barely match fair standards of compensation. Hours of work are long



Many more factories now hire workers on contract



More than 100 workers lose their fingers and limbs in Haryana's auto clusters every month

Poor wages, especially in cities, result in workers making compromises on what they eat and where they live. There is just not enough income to buy or prepare three meals or rent dignified spaces.

and earnings are often linked to efficiency or outputs which unfairly pressure workers into risky behaviour. No wonder that the average retention of workers in these "future of work" spaces is very short.

UNEASY ENTRY

Take the case of Prashant, who escaped from a harrowing work situation in a hotel on the Indore-Bhopal highway. He had to work nearly 14 hours every day and was paid a paltry ₹5,000 per month — that too not regularly. Back in his village near Banswara town, Prashant contacted the STEP Academy where he signed up to be trained as a two-wheeler repair mechanic. Unfortunately, he did not have the capital to start a workshop of his own. He also needed to spend



Women are paid much less than men



Inside a textile mill in Narol in Ahmedabad



When migrant workers went back they found themselves on the street

time to continue his practical training on the job.

An Udaipur-based service franchise of a major automobile brand took him in at a stipend of ₹3,000 per month, guaranteeing him a fuller salary after six months. Prashant could only survive three months on this earning and he finally quit to go back to his village. He has started to go find work as a daily wage labourer in Banswara. He says he will get back to Indore one day again — at least the food was not bad in the hotel!

Prashant's experience is common among people trying to find their way in life. But there seems a general unwillingness to accept this reality. When we talk to any reputed provider of skilling and vocational training or to a placement company, we hear an unequivocal lament — the youth do not stay in jobs despite “attractive terms”. Many hold MGNREGA responsible for creating a low-paid, lazy alternative in rural areas which is coming in the way of higher aspirations among youth.

The universal attrition we encounter among young and freshly skilled workers should really be attributed to extremely low entry-level wages. These vary from sector to sector, but mostly entry wages are in fact no better than stipends such as ₹4,000 per month in small hotels or units with the offer of dilapidated accommodation and possibly a meal thrown in for good measure.

Several establishments, such as in the hotel industry, practise engaging a large number of trainees as a proxy workforce. Trainees will undertake the most tedious of all work in the guise of being trained for a very small stipend. Our experience suggests that the hospitality industry has worked out a full model of having a cheap workforce based on the large supply of hotel trainees made available to it through private institutions. The tedious and high-pressure work conditions that are not adequately compensated result in young workers moving on when they can't take it any longer or something marginally better comes along.

Probe this further and we find that skilled personnel at entry level in many employment sectors are forced to work on sub-survival wages. Retail, automobile repairs, logistics and delivery and manufacturing have a long gestation period for wages to become equal to acceptable levels.

The severe under-pricing of the trainee hits young skilled workers even in the otherwise high-demand construction sector. Freshly trained plumbers, slab workers, electricians, marble fitters and so on will have to work for long on low wages before they come into their own as self-employed technicians able to command a respectable wage. It takes enormous tenacity (and subsidy from the family) to survive this uncertain period of low-waged existence. In our skilling programme there is a pensive record of trained youth returning to labour *nakas* and hiring themselves out to work as unskilled workers because it brings them a higher daily wage.

Several labour recruiters tell us to help them identify pools of unskilled boys and girls (“We will mould them.”) and not bother with skilled youth. With this

The universal attrition among young and freshly skilled workers should really be attributed to extremely low entry-level wages. These vary across sectors, but mostly entry wages are no better than stipends.

frequently repeated refrain the message to young people in general is that training is not worth its effort, price and time — except for the laminated and stamped certificate which holds a vague promise of a formal job in future.

WORKSITES OR WAR ZONES?

Shankari fell from the first floor scaffolding of a building under construction. She miraculously survived the fall, but suffered five fractures all over her frail body. She did not have proper shoes as she made her way up the ramp carrying a 40-kg load of bricks, resulting in losing her footing. The contractor rushed her to the hospital and got her first-aid.

Shankari, however, needed surgery in her arms and also a test to assess if she had suffered a head injury internally. The contractor threw up his hands over spending more money and the building company refused to offer any assistance. Shankari had to return to her village in a private vehicle, paying an enormous ₹26,000 for the journey. Her sons are paying off this debt by working in a neighbouring mine.

The average Indian worker is exposed to possibly the most grave and risky conditions anywhere in the world. The number of accidents (especially life altering or fatal) is alarmingly high and remains seriously under-reported.

The Labour Bureau under the Ministry of Labour and Employment collected data on injuries and fatalities till 2017 and documented nearly 6,000 injuries and just over a thousand deaths across the country. Even this is serious under-reporting of injuries — possibly just 10 percent of the total accidents and deaths that occur. And this data does not even represent the informal sector, which employs a majority of workers.

An unverified press report in 2018 claimed that there are over 48,000 fatal accidents on worksites in India annually. Of these, construction sites account for nearly a quarter of all deaths while spaces such as manufacturing, processing, recycling, waste sorting and transportation, etc are virtual war zones for workers who remain untrained and unarmed to keep themselves safe.



Overworked workers operate hazardous machines in toxic factories

The average Indian worker is exposed to possibly the most grave and risky conditions anywhere in the world.

In the automobile clusters of Gurugram, Faridabad and Manesar, a notable report by Safe-in-India estimates that a hundred workers lose their fingers and limbs every month. These are workers employed in small units that supply parts to established automobile brands such as Maruti, Honda and Ford.

Just in the past two years, we have intervened in over 150 cases of worker accidents in a mid-size textile hub of Ahmedabad. Not far from Ahmedabad we have recorded over a hundred electrocutions and injuries involving crushed limbs among workers of power looms in Surat. There is an unprecedented scourge of silicosis and similar occupational diseases in mining, quarrying and stone work across the country.

What further aggravates the risk for workers is the overlooked reality of shelter on hazardous worksites. Millions of small units double as homes for workers by night even if the shop floor is highly risky or hazardous. It is all too often that workers will get trapped in avoidable accidents that might have been prevented if they had an option for housing other than their toxic workplace.

There is an unusual aversion to implementing safety standards at worksites despite the costs being just marginal. Safety measures are seen as an impediment to productivity and are often just showcased to tick the boxes of legal compliance. Of course, the common solution is to push the onus of safety on the workers (“We give them masks and helmets but they don't want to wear them!”) rather than focus on making the sites of work safer and accident-proof, or investing in mechanical safety protocols.

Larger industrial players driven by the compliance compulsions or obligations to their global buyers often adhere to high safety standards — at least in their own facilities and for their core, on-roll employees. Yet downstream in the supply chains of even fully compliant industries safety conditions for workers may be very compromised. They are neither being assessed nor being acted on for improvement.

The missing healthcare services in the dense and often degenerated neighbourhoods of workers speaks of huge intra-urban disparities. To fill the vacuum of public care services, a flourishing business of quackery exists in workers' clusters — the quacks are the first port of call for workers battling injuries and illnesses. Out-of-pocket expenditures on healthcare can make deep dents in the earnings of workers, who often prefer to return home than to languish in cities. Dangerous and accident-prone work conditions have a damaging impact on workers' stability and productivity.

NO TIME TO LOSE

A disturbing piece of data that came to public light a couple of years ago continues to haunt me. The National Crime Records Bureau (NCRB) published an analysis of recorded suicides which stated that 23 percent of all suicides were committed by daily-wage workers. Of course, the NCRB makes a disclaimer about relating occupational engagement to suicidal tendencies, but the connection cannot be wished away. The poverty of daily-wage work must aggravate psychological isolation and stress.

The narrative of jobs and employment generation rarely focuses on the dignity of work. Decent, well-remunerated and safe work is a prerequisite to a productive workforce which in turn forms the very foundation of a flourishing economy. Instead of correcting the very fundamentals of how work is transacted and workers are treated, we place an oversimplified focus on skilling and vocational training or on data collection and mapping to help create digital platforms of interface between employers and workers. These can only become relevant and possibly useful if the more structural issues of work begin to be addressed — fair wages, social security, safety at work, gender parity, access to housing and food, access to justice and opportunity to all workers for participating in the future of work. ■

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Bombay House and Delhi



DELHI DARBAR

SANJAYA BARU

WHEN the Narendra Modi government announced its decision to hand Air India back to the House of Tatas, a Congress party functionary tweeted the warm personal correspondence between the late J.R.D. Tata and Indira Gandhi to suggest that there was nothing personal about the government takeover of the airline. It is true that JRD maintained good personal relations with both Jawaharlal Nehru and Indira Gandhi. However, JRD and the Nehru-Gandhis walked very different political paths. Narendra Modi put his state's money where his mouth was by throwing a lifeline to Ratan Tata, offering him land for his Nano auto project, when he was summarily evicted from West Bengal.

The differences on economic policy and the role of the private sector between Nehru and JRD go all the way back to the 1940s when Nehru and the Indian National Congress sought state dominance in the industrial sector while JRD viewed the public sector only as a transitional strategy given the then limitations of the Indian private sector and advocated the eventual privatization of the public sector once Indian business had the financial and managerial capacity to take over.

The views of Indian business leaders, including JRD, G.D. Birla, Purushottamdas Thakurdas, Lala Shri Ram and so on were formalized in what came to be called the 'Bombay Plan'. Also known as the 'Tata-Birla plan', the document, published in 1944, was titled, "A Plan of Economic Development for India". I have co-edited a book of essays, along with Meghnad Desai, analyzing the Bombay Plan, titled *The Bombay Plan: Blueprint for Economic Resurgence* (Rupa Publications, Delhi, 2018). We have also republished in the book the original document and a supplement to it published a year later in 1945.

Nehru's ideas were formalized in the document put out by the National Planning Committee of the Congress party and found policy expression in the First and Second Five Year Plans. It was declared that the public sector would occupy the "commanding heights" of the economy. In 1956 the Congress even adopted a formal resolution stating

that it sought to establish in India a "socialistic pattern of society".

Indian business leaders were divided on how to respond to this. While G.D. Birla and many Marwari business leaders reconciled themselves to state participation in the industrial economy, JRD viewed public sector dominance as a purely 'transitional' arrangement. In fact, in the supplement to the 1944 Bombay Plan document, the 1945 addendum says:

"State ownership is necessarily involved in all cases where the state finances an enterprise which is important to public welfare or security. State ownership will also arise where in the public interest it is necessary for the State to control an industry, but the circumstances of the industry are such that



For Air India to regain its lost elan, it will take more than the ownership shift from Delhi to Mumbai

control is ineffective unless it is based on State ownership. ... If later on private finance is prepared to take over these institutions, State ownership may be replaced by private ownership."

In post-Independence India, JRD took this view more seriously than other business leaders. Unhappy with the leftward tilt of the Congress under Nehru, JRD chose to assist in the launch of the Swatantra Party, India's only truly free enterprise advocating political party. Guided by Minoo Masani and funded by the Tatas, among others, the Swatantra Party advocated the freeing of private enterprise. G.D. Birla, on the other hand, went along with the Congress leadership opting to pursue the path of 'crony capitalism'. Using his links with Congress leaders to secure industrial licences, Birla used government control to secure competitive advantage for his companies. In an address to a gathering of industry leaders Birla said, "Swatantra politics are not good businessmen's politics."

As I have argued in another recent book of mine, *India's Power Elite: Class, Caste and a Cultural Revolution* (Penguin Viking, 2021), the Birlas were the original crony capitalists, benefitting from the munificence of the Delhi Darbar, so to speak, while

JRD's Bombay House kept a discrete distance, maintaining good personal relations with the Nehru-Gandhis but wary of state capitalist policies.

In returning Air India to its original owners the Modi government has claimed that it has taken a historic step not just in the field of civil aviation but in redefining state-capital relations. An economic adviser in the Union finance ministry went so far as to say that the government had dispensed with the euphemism of 'disinvestment' and declared unabashedly that it had 'privatized' the 'national carrier'.

How truly historic this step is, however, remains to be seen given the fact that 'crony capitalism' has thrived even under the current dispensation.

Indeed, crony capitalism thrives across the country under different political parties and privatization has rarely meant that the government is no longer in the business of business. Many business leaders have prospered across many sectors in the past seven years, mimicking the experience of counterparts in previous dispensations.

Now that the ownership of Air India has moved from the Delhi Darbar to Bombay House, one hopes Ratan Tata will also be able to end the airlines' feudal culture and inject greater professionalism into its management. For half a century Air India has been run by joint secretary-level officers in the Union

government, asserting the will of their political masters. Attempts at inducing corporate efficiency by inducting professional managers did not yield results because the *darbar* and its *darbaris* continued to hold sway. Can Ratan Tata end this managerial culture?

The Tatas should learn a lesson or two from their partners, Singapore Airlines, which is in fact state-owned but a totally professionally managed airline. During a recent visit to Singapore I was introduced to a gentleman seated at an adjacent table in Little India's Komala Vilas, a south Indian restaurant. He was the former chairman of Singapore Airlines! I was told he lived the life of an ordinary citizen as chairman of SIA and continued to do so in retirement.

Ratan Tata too is known for his human touch and has lived without airs, but while ownership of a corporate can easily be transferred, it's difficult to alter management culture. For Air India to regain its lost elan and reputation as one of the world's best airlines, a reputation it did have, it will take more than the ownership shift from Delhi to Mumbai. ■

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TECH TALES

KIRAN KARNIK

PEGASUS no longer has wings and is dead in the media. One refers not to the winged horse from Greek mythology, but to the eponymous computer software. The latter created quite a storm and got extensive media coverage some weeks ago, before it was ousted by other "breaking news". Yet, a debate on it needs to stay alive, as it raises many important issues. Pegasus is the surveillance software — or "spyware" — developed by Israeli cyber security firm NSO. According to reports, it was used by government agencies in India to tap into the phones of various individuals, presumably to safeguard national security or ensure law and order. Apart from specialized cyber security companies, non-formal hacker groups and state agencies in some countries are known to have the capability (often used) to penetrate the computer systems of other countries or even individual devices like cell phones.

Pegasus, one example of this, is said to not only be able to listen in on conversations and steal all the data stored in a cell phone (messages, contacts, videos, data, notes, etc.), but also to turn on the microphone or camera of the device. If this is not scary enough, note that the spyware gets automatically installed through a WhatsApp call made to your number — i.e., without your knowledge. Moreover, it apparently has auto-destruct capability, making it virtually impossible to prove that your phone was hacked.

These enormous capabilities have given rise to a serious outcry in many countries, especially when reports indicated that countries were using Pegasus to spy on the leaders of other nations; also that, in many cases, domestic human rights activists and dissenters were spied upon by their government. The company (NSO) defended itself by saying that it sold the spyware only to select governments. Even if this is truly so, governments will inevitably use it for their own ends — both domestically and in the global arena. Most recently, for example, there are media reports of a leader from the UAE (the ruler of Dubai) using it to spy on his ex-wife and her lawyers. Some reports indicate that in India it was used to spy on various activists. A case on this is now in the courts.

How ethical is such surveillance? The infringement of privacy is justified by governments on the grounds of security or public order. Many — probably a majority in most countries — see this as appropriate: overall good (protection against terrorism) must take precedence over individual concerns. It is seen as analogous to security measures and searches at airports (and now in

many other places): a nuisance, but accepted as necessary. Another, or additional, rationale is "if you have nothing to hide, why should you worry?"

Similar concerns and views are expressed with regard to surveillance cameras in public places and face-recognition software. Two Indian cities (Delhi — at number one — and Chennai) are amongst the global top 10 in terms of density of cameras. Most of the others are, expectedly, in China; but London too figures in the list. One increasingly important role that these cameras play is face recognition. While this helps to identify terrorists and criminals, it takes away individual anonymity. Is this aspect important at all? If so, does the possible advantage of identifying rotten apples outweigh concerns about individual privacy? While it may serve to expose the rendezvous of one terrorist with another, it would also reveal secret trysts of lovers. Does this

gensets in Kolkata, whereas most homes in Mumbai did not even store candles: both indicative of the state of power supply in the two premier metros.

Concerns about privacy have led to a lot of discussion about use of facial recognition software. San Francisco banned its use by police in 2019. An additional concern stems from the fact that surveillance capabilities (and the data collected) are also with private companies. Even those who believe that the government will do things only for the larger public good may have serious worries about surveillance when they realize that it may well be private companies that are involved. Combining data captured from your cell phone with that from surveillance cameras plus using facial recognition can reveal where you went — which shop, restaurant or office — when, and for how long; what you ate or purchased; whom you met or called; what messages



High camera density is an indicator of poor safety and is, therefore, a negative comment on the city

Should we push for global covenants constraining the use and sale of spyware? Technology itself is arguably neutral, but how it is used is not.

provide scope for misuse and blackmail?

The growing number of surveillance cameras is indicative of worries about terrorism, but more so about public order and safety. In this context, it is odd that some Delhi leaders took pride in its being number one, seeing it as an accolade. The very requirement for such high camera density is an indicator of poor safety and is, therefore, a negative comment on the city. As an analogy, one recalls from earlier years the huge number of household

you sent or received; which websites you visited, and a whole lot more. In addition, it can find out (from other phones) what your colleagues or friends are saying about you. In short, someone in some company may know more about you than you do.

This raises important issues of ethics. Should camera coverage be restricted? Should data from this be strictly limited to only some agencies, with constraints on its use? Should facial recognition software be used at all? If so, where, by whom, in what circumstances and with what limitations or safeguards? Should we push for global covenants constraining the use and sale of spyware? Technology itself is arguably neutral, but how it is used is not. Here, what is our ethical framework? As we inevitably move to a surveillance state and surveillance capitalism, these and other questions (including more difficult ones from genetic engineering) about ethics and technology deserve serious debate. ■

Kiran Karnik is an independent strategy and public policy analyst. His recent books include *eVolution: Decoding India's Disruptive Tech Story* (2018) and *Crooked Minds: Creating an Innovative Society* (2016). His latest book, *Decisive Decade*, is on India in 2030.

The power of local



LET'S
TALK

ARUN MAIRA

IMPACT has become an important concept in social entrepreneurship. When more financial resources are deployed to have more impact, the worlds of social change and finance combine, and they clash. Large “impact funds” have formed to improve education and public health, save the natural environment, and for other social causes. They cannot have the desired impact on the lives of people unless they change their theory-in-use of what impact is and how it is produced.

Conventional management science says programmes must be “focused”; money must be used “efficiently”; and progress must be “measured and monitored”. The corporate sector’s professional methods do this well. With finance resourced from the business world, through CSR, philanthropy, and “social venture” funds, corporate methods for delivering standard products on a large scale (fast foods, phones, medicines, etc.) have slipped into the complex world of social change. The corporate approach to scale can deliver large quantities of something or the other that communities need. But they cannot solve problems of persistent poverty, increasing inequalities, and all-round environmental degradation, listed in the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

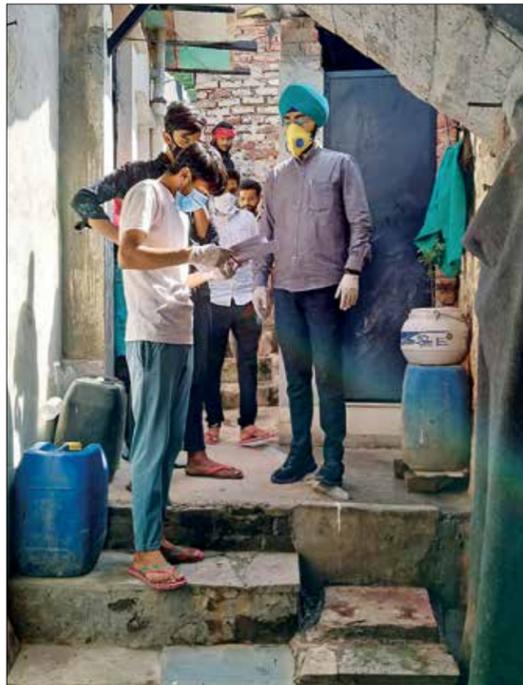
The SDGs are systemic problems. Systemic problems require ‘systems thinking’ to understand the inter-connections between many problems before jumping too deep to solve any of them. Expertise focused on any one for the sake of scientific efficiency, without understanding how many problems are interlinked, invariably produces “fixes that backfire”, especially on the most vulnerable people. The use of scientific-industrial management methods (SIM) to “scale up” agricultural production has increased the supply of food in India and elsewhere. But malnutrition has not reduced. SIM has produced billions of doses of new vaccines to fight COVID. But less than 5 percent of citizens in poorer countries have received them, whereas over 80 percent in rich countries have (and now are getting a third booster dose).

SIM solutions are created within scientific silos and then scaled up through focused industrial pipes. They increase efficiencies in the use of resources; they do not solve intractable problems of inequity. SIM is infecting the social sector too when providers of finance become engaged with “social impact” causes, albeit with noble intentions. They bring their methods with their money. With SIM methods

deployed within NGOs, often by management consultants, and SIM language used on both sides, donors can monitor progress more easily.

Albert Einstein said it is madness to try to solve big problems by applying even harder the methods that have caused the problems. According to the Social Progress Index (SPI), developed by a US-based think tank, the SDGs will not be achieved until 2082 if we continue the methods of solving large problems we are using. The COVID-19 pandemic has delayed SDG achievement by a further 10 years, they estimate.

No doubt, rich and poor countries must collaborate to solve global problems. However, there must be equity in sharing responsibility and in



An NGO, Matri Sudha, distributes ration kits in Delhi slums

the sacrifices required. The richest one percent of the world’s citizens have added twice as much carbon to the global atmosphere as the poorer 50 percent (Oxfam estimate). It is immoral to now expect the poorer 50 percent to make the same sacrifice to solve a problem created by the over-consumption of the richest few. The side effects of the global “Net Zero” target to reduce carbon emission to mitigate climate change may kill poor people suffering other problems even faster. Rich countries must reduce their own consumption levels and provide sufficient resources to poorer countries for adaptation. Because none will be safe, unless everyone is safe, whether from Covid or from global warming.

Global well-being is suffering from a scarcity of equity, not a scarcity of supply of stuff. Solutions are devised by experts at the top of systems and enforced on the people by powers above, supposedly

in the interests of all. Global rules expand monopolies of large agro-industrial enterprises. They protect the intellectual property rights of rich corporations, enabling them to charge prices they deem fair for their own profits that poor people cannot afford. When people resist these ill-conceived and inequitable solutions, they are accused of resisting scientific ideas. Poorer nations are resisting global trade rules devised by Western lobbies in the World Trade Organization (WTO). Indian farmers are bravely resisting new farm laws announced by the central government without consulting them.

SIM is not the solution for global systemic problems. Local systems solutions collaboratively implemented by communities are a better solution for global systemic problems and more equitable too. They are founded on three principles: Systems, Equity, and Local (SEL).

Conceptually, SEL is different to SIM. For SEL:

- More equity, not just more efficiency, is the overarching outcome that new solutions must produce.
- Impact must be measured from the perspective of improvement of all-round well-being of the most vulnerable people, not by the numbers of people provided with products and services.
- Scale is required in outcomes, not in the sizes of enterprises to produce them.

Fundamental shifts in power are necessary in the governance of global and local social systems:

- From the science of technical experts to the wisdom of common people.
- From the wealthy who finance social enterprise programmes and decide their outcomes and design, to the communities on the ground who know which SDGs pinch the most and how.
- From the SIM establishment that sets the rules for global and national policies to local democratic forums in which stakeholders

listen to one another, and set the rules with which they will govern themselves for equitable solutions to the complex problems they must solve.

Gandhiji had provided a talisman to policymakers. Think of the impact your solution will have on the poorest person you know before you implement it. It was a principle not for charity — for determining who deserves doles. It was a principle for empowering the most vulnerable people, and experts too. By listening to them with respect, we give dignity to vulnerable people. And by listening to them we also empower ourselves, because we will understand how the system we want to improve really works.

More SEL (systems, equity, local) and less SIM (science, industry, management) will make the world better for everyone. ■

Arun Maira is author of *A Billion Fireflies: Critical Conversations to Shape a New Post-pandemic World*

What did Afghan NGOs achieve?



HERE
& NOW

ANITA ANAND

I worked in Afghanistan from 2004 till 2016 on short assignments with the UN system and national and international CSOs (civil society organizations), designing training modules for journalists, conducting training, doing evaluations and assessments of projects, and assisting CSOs with strategic planning. I met Afghan homeworkers, cleaners, cooks, drivers, translators, students, ministers, government officials, antique and *kilim* sellers, donor agency staff and expats. And people on the street. As an Indian I moved around rather freely till 2012 and later 2016, when my movements were further restricted, due to security concerns.

During these two decades, Afghanistan moved from an area of darkness — being in conflict for decades, occupied by the Soviet Union from 1979 to 1989 and under the Taliban from 1996 to 2001, with a civil war in between — to a modern nation state.

The Taliban have taken over a very different Afghanistan from 2001, when they were ousted. In 2004, a 500-person Jirga (gathering of elders) adopted a Constitution forming the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan, based on democratic principles. It was a first for the country.

The Constitution recognized civil society as an essential pillar of democracy in Afghanistan. As a new nation, systems had to be put in place for the functioning of CSOs/NGOs. They had to be registered with the Ministry of Economy (MoE). In 2018, according to the Directorate of NGOs of the MoE, 1863 NGOs were registered, implementing 2,537 projects with a total cost of \$876 million. Sixty-nine percent of the projects, with budgets amounting to \$603 million, were implemented by national NGOs, employing 85,000 persons, and around 1,000 foreign nationals.

In some ways, CSOs as we know them are not new to Afghanistan. Researchers Mehreen Farooq and Waleed Ziad point out that for centuries, the backbone of Afghanistan’s civil society has been its community-based *shuras* (councils), *jirgas* (tribal assemblies of elders), and religious institutions. The latter include mosques, *madrassas*, *khaniqas* (Sufi centres for cultural and spiritual advancement), and shrines — all key public spaces, in rural, urban, or tribal settings. Mosques, like the Jami Masjid of

Herat, have for centuries addressed community concerns and conflicts. In 2006, while I was in Kabul, riots broke out and a week-long curfew was in force. The Imam of the Pul-e-Kshisti mosque in his Friday talk pleaded for calm and peace.

Despite modern governance systems in place, surveys indicate that most Afghans perceive traditional dispute resolution mechanisms to be fairer and more effective than the modern state courts. Newly formed CSOs, recognizing this valuable resource, worked with religious, tribal, and youth leaders to improve their efforts. In Kunduz province, which is prone to ethnic tensions and Taliban violence, CSOs have worked with *jirgas*, providing them training in anger management and mediation skills to mitigate conflicts in their communities.

Though most of these tribal and religious norms,



Children in a class at an Aschiana-run centre in Kabul. Aschiana reaches ten thousand children.

institutions and community-based organizations tend to be rather conservative, even reactionary, they undoubtedly constitute an important asset in ensuring ‘good governance’ in rural Afghanistan — though there are some that, far from positively promoting good governance, undermine it through pursuit of their sectional interests.

And CSOs are often suspect. Many Afghans blame the suffering and the upset they have endured on alien ideas, foreign weapons, money, and the foreigners who accompanied them. The CSOs are mostly foreign-funded and bring systems that are alien to traditional Afghan values. Transparency, human rights, and rights of women, youth and minorities are contentious issues in Afghan society which is traditionally a tribal and non-inclusive society, patriarchal and hierarchical.

So much so that, since the Taliban took over in August this year, calls for inclusiveness in the government and for protection of women and their rights are falling and will fall on deaf ears, as the Taliban are intent on a strict enforcement of Sharia, which has no room for this inclusion or recognition of rights.

Mainstream media analysts have, since 15 August,

focused on how the US involvement in Afghanistan, in trillions of dollars, has been for nought. Nothing could be further from the truth. My experience is quite the opposite. Since 2004, I have witnessed a nation change and grow, mature and bloom. Not everything has gone right, but not everything has gone wrong either. And much of this change has been possible by foreign donor funding, to lay the foundations of a democratic and modern state.

Perhaps the best success story has been the blossoming of CSOs. Women’s organizations, many under the umbrella of the national Afghan Women’s Network (AWN), have successfully lobbied for policies and programmes to mainstream women into Afghan society, focusing on empowering women at the community level, which traditionally has been a male prerogative.

In 2009, during the general election, the AWN initiated the five million women campaign to get women to register to vote. To counter the high rate of domestic violence, women’s groups have initiated shelters to provide a safe space and offer skill development. One shelter in Kabul even opened an all-women’s restaurant a few years ago.

Like women’s organizations, the media too has blossomed. Private and government print and AV media are in all 34 provinces. Social media has been a boon for CSOs to meet, organize campaigns, strategize and lobby the government. On a 2012 visit to Kabul, I met representatives of CSOs from various constituencies — youth, women, minorities, physically challenged, and so on. I heard their concerns and felt that the challenges

they faced were no different than in other developing countries, including India. The anxiety over funding, increasing control by the government and lack of capacity plagued many CSOs. The lack of experience and exposure was a hindrance to many CSOs being more effective.

As security concerns increased over the past few years, the government came down on CSOs, with restrictions and arbitrary reporting and financial requirements. In July 2020, Amnesty International warned this development was a “serious threat to the existence of civil society”. The International Centre for Not-for-Profit Law reported that as of January 2021, the MoE had deregistered 3,371 NGOs since 2005 because they could not report to the ministry. As of January 2021, the Ministry of Justice too had terminated 1,600 associations for similar reasons since 2013.

The takeover of Afghanistan by the Taliban does not bode well for institutions, including CSOs. However, the foundations established by CSOs cannot be dismissed that easily. How this will play out in the future is yet to be seen. ■

Anita Anand is a development consultant and author of *Kabul Blogs: My Days in the Life of Afghanistan*



Harini with her father Varadarajan Sivakumar, founders of Earth Rhythm

Up close, safe and customized

The new boom in natural cosmetics

SURMAYI KHATANA

IS your skin too sensitive for just any soap? Does your curly hair need something special to shampoo with? Are you choosy about the face mask you use? Are you worried that your hand cream has too many chemicals in it?

You probably are and like a growing number of Indian cosmetics users you are most likely to have found what you are looking for from a string of small and ethically run companies that have been putting high-quality natural products on the market for consumers at very reasonable prices.

Many of these companies are homegrown and have been started for personal reasons because the founders couldn't find the products they were looking for in India. Others have come up because the business in natural products is good. But they all make personal grooming a lot safer.

Earth Rhythm is an example. When Harini

Sivakumar was unable to find fragrance-free creams and soaps in the markets for her son who has Down syndrome and eczema, she took matters into her own hands by making soaps, lip balms and body butters at home.

It was 2015 and she called her venture Soapworks. In just three years, by 2018, she had enough success to launch Earth Rhythm with a bigger range.

"You could only find fragrance-free products in pharmacies, not in the supermarkets or grocery stores," she explains. A former banker based in Gurugram, Sivakumar tested the market with her soaps with ₹5,000 of personal savings for raw materials, by setting up stalls at fairs. Soon, people began approaching her with specifications of the types of soaps they needed.

"I saw that there are consumers looking for products like these but unfortunately, due to a lack of availability, they were all resorting to buying from MNCs and international companies. So, I thought,

why can I not do something like this in India?"

It took a year to figure out the business. It meant going from banking and commerce, which had been her world until this idea dawned, to chemistry.

"I had to get commerce out of my head and relearn organic chemistry and inorganic chemistry," says Sivakumar, recalling the early days of her journey.

By 2018 she was ready to take the plunge and, with her father, Varadarajan Sivakumar, also a banker, Earth Rhythm was founded.

In 2020, Earth Rhythm registered for a manufacturing licence. While Harini's initial aim was just to be a home-based entrepreneur, currently they deliver pan-India and also in Nepal, Bhutan, Lithuania, Sri Lanka, the US and UK. The growth has been on the back of a loyal customer base in India.

Focusing largely on skincare and haircare, Earth

Rhythm also offers some makeup. A dedicated research and development team works to pick up international skincare trends in both West and East. "As a member of the World Cosmetics Council we are able to track skincare trends and identify new ingredients," says Harini.

Working on 'tech-based' skincare, Earth Rhythm makes their products under the supervision of certified chemists. All their products undergo clinical trials for four to eight weeks. A yearly schedule of upcoming products is made for the catalogue with a threshold of 130 products.

Prioritizing transparency in labels, an important part of developing the product, is the ECOCERT Certification, for safe, clean, and cruelty-free manufacturing.

"We source all our materials from organic vendors. Even for synthetic sources, we ensure it is ethically extracted. All of which is confirmed by ECOCERT, helping us communicate to consumers through our labels," says Sivakumar. "Consumers look for whether a brand is safe or not. Ethics and clean practices are reinforced with certifications."

Their sustainability practices include biodegradable or recyclable packaging, ensuring all ingredients are sourced ethically, while maintaining ECOCERT standards and being cruelty-free.

Their shampoo bars are their bestsellers, making up to 30 percent of revenue. They offer 10 types of shampoo bars which are free of sulfate, parabens, and fragrance, including a baby shampoo bar. The solid bars come in colourful metal tins. Green surfactants are used in the product to ensure that the grey water or wastewater is not full of pollutants. Their Murumuru Butter Shampoo Bar for curly hair, priced at ₹500, has quickly become a favourite.

Earth Rhythm offers four face moisturizers catering to different skin types as well as skin issues. All of them are fragrance-free and range from ₹600 to ₹750. Phyto Clear helps in soothing scars or wounds, Phyto Repair has anti-ageing properties, Phyto Fuse hydrates the skin and Phyto Ceramide, which we tried, prevents dryness and irritation. One can find the products on their website, where the results of their clinical trials with the product are also listed for reference.

Social media and micro-influencers on the internet played a huge role in the marketing of Earth Rhythm in the initial stages. "Now bigger companies are also realizing the sheer number of views micro-influencers can bring in," says Harini.

CUSTOMER FEEDBACK

The best feature of local companies like Earth Rhythm is the intimate relationship they maintain with their customers. Consumer response and feedback play a major role in the catalogue. "If we feel that a product is not doing well, we take it back to the drawing board. We ask our customers to fill out a questionnaire of what they expected, whether the product worked for them and,



if not, what went wrong?"

When a product is pulled from the catalogue, the team at Earth Rhythm goes through the list of people who bought it and asks them questions. This helps the team re-evaluate whether the formulation should change or whether customers were simply not excited by the product.

Earth Rhythm also tracks their consumer journeys, whether a product was bought again. On a month-to-month basis they email and send questionnaires to understand how customers are interacting with their products.

Earth Rhythm has managed to retain their early customers with a repeat rate of 40 percent per month. They have very active customers, who email suggestions and discuss products with the eager team. The majority of Earth Rhythm's clientele are between 20 and 30 years old. "We usually have 70 percent women and 30 percent men using our products, but we are very active and vocal about including men in skincare," says Harini.

INCLUSIVE WORKPLACE

Another thing that makes small homegrown companies special is their focus on building inclusive teams. Harini's interactions

The best feature of local companies like Earth Rhythm is the intimate relationship they maintain with their customers. Consumer response plays a major role in their catalogue.

through her son with the community of adults with special needs and disabilities in Gurugram led her to train and hire them in departments like labelling.

The early employees, who previously worked as domestic workers, are currently supervisors with graduate degrees due to the conducive workplace environment of Earth Rhythm. "Whenever we interview any candidate, we also look at whether they are adaptable to an inclusive team in terms of class, gender, disability, and the kind of culture that we have worked to create."

Sustainability and ethical practices take the forefront for many of the new cosmetics companies. Dot and Key, a Kolkata-based company founded by Anisha Agarwal and Suyash Saraf in 2018, runs an Earth Program which accepts empty bottles of their products from customers and recycles them. Catering to niche skin issues, they offer a variety of

Continued on page 28

Continued from page 27

clay masks and face serums priced from ₹400 to ₹500, packed in glass bottles and jars.

PERSONALIZED, TRADITIONAL

The rise of homegrown companies has also brought a 'back to the roots' approach with companies basing products on Ayurveda and home remedies. In that vein, delivering freshly made cosmetics is Nat Habit, founded by Swagatika Das. Based in Gurugram, they make natural cosmetics inspired by grandmother recipes.

They prepare their products in their specially set up kitchens with cosmetologists and doctors to deliver them the same day. Their Fresh Hair Nutri Masks use oils, leaves, herbs and flowers and need to be refrigerated and are priced at ₹150 for one pack.

With new skincare regimes and complicated ingredient names finding their way onto product labels, the new cosmetics companies devote time and space on their blogs and social media to explain the uses and benefits of the ingredients in their products. Companies like Earth Rhythm use their social media posts as guides, categorized by skin types, for customers.

Taking this personalized guidance a step further, Oilcraft Naturals offers a consultative approach via phone calls in which they suggest bespoke regimens based on skin types and concerns that the customer might have.

Oilcraft Naturals was set up by Nina Dube Tiwari after realizing the need for natural products while she was pregnant. "I was looking for end-to-end natural products, completely ethically sourced, to use. I decided to fill the vacuum that I saw," Tiwari explains. "I wanted to make something reasonably priced that met international standards."

Tiwari, who also serves as president of GE Capital, has been in the natural cosmetics market space for over a decade. She caught on early to the rising trend of people caring more about what they consume or put on their skin.

Oilcraft Naturals sources ingredients and herbs from their own farms or directly from farmers. Their Rose Water Facial Mist, at ₹600, is a refreshing product made from crops cultivated in Kannauj, Uttar Pradesh. Headquartered in New Delhi, Oilcraft Naturals delivers across the world.

The new cosmetics companies work to put actual care into customer care. "We have hand-held some of our customers through their journeys as they and their skin change. Some are almost like family," says Tiwari.

One of the things that set homegrown companies apart from their international counterparts is the absence of 'fast beauty' and instead a paced introduction of well-researched products. Oilcraft Naturals invests time in their research and development to introduce new products that fill vacuums in the market.

"Products should be designed to be able to work across issues, a face mask working on acne can also work on pigmentation," says Tiwari, explaining why research matters. Oilcraft Naturals introduces two to three products every year, maintaining a catalogue of 100 products, which include massage oils, aromatherapy products, serums and face washes. The consumer now has a range of products and companies to choose from. ■

Mango joy in winter

SURMAYI KHATANA

THE big problem for fruit-growers is what to do with their perishable produce if they can't find buyers during the season. One way out is to turn the remainder of the crop into pulp, and bottle and tin it. This way it can be sold all over the country year-round.

As winter rapidly approaches, one way to hold on to the flavour of summer is to get your hands on some Alphonso mango pulp cultivated and packed in Ratnagiri, in the Western Ghats of Maharashtra.

This way, even when it is out of season and not available as a whole fruit, the pulp of the mango, extracted and preserved, can be used to make milkshakes, *lassi*, custards, cakes and *aamras*, which is a puree. You can also just tuck into the pulp a little bit at a time whenever you feel like it.

Mango pulp sellers are a lifeline. You can get sweetened as well as unsweetened varieties. The sellers pride themselves on having products free of preservatives or added sugar.

One such outfit making the mango available year-round is Kubalwadi. Set up by Yogesh Chakre, former head of human resources and management at a real estate company, Kubalwadi gets you 'ghar-cha hapus', or homegrown Alphonso and aims to bridge the gap between farmers and consumers. With farms where they grow mangoes without pesticides or chemicals, giving special attention and care, Kubalwadi produces Ratnagiri and Devagad mangoes.

Ratnagiri and Devagad are districts where the best quality Alphonso mangoes are grown. They might vary in colour, but the mangoes here are unique.

One can log onto Kubalwadi's website, or place the order via WhatsApp and get an 850-gm tin delivered

in Delhi for ₹560. The pulp needs refrigeration in a glass or plastic container after opening of the tin.

Kubalwadi also works to help drought-affected farmers in the Vidarbha region of Maharashtra as part of their collaboration with Dilasa Sanstha, an NGO in the area.

After a bumper crop in their orchards, the Applied Environmental Research Foundation

(AERF) packed their Ratnagiri Alphonso pulp into glass bottles to sell, using the proceeds for their ongoing efforts for forest conservation in the Western Ghats. The AERF protects private forests by creating financial incentives for communities to preserve forests and prevent felling of trees.

AERF took up value addition of mangoes when use of chemical fertilisers in the area led to an eventual decline in the production of mangoes and a loss of

pollinators like bees.

The mango economy of the region was suffering. Farmers were abandoning farms, converting and cutting forests. AERF decided to step in with a programme for sustainable orchards.

The mango pulp was the result of a pilot project in Sangameshwar block of Ratnagiri district for sustainable farming of mangoes by using *jeevamrut*, a natural fertilizer made of cow urine and dung. They set up a system for production of *jeevamrut* at Ujgaon village and collaborated with local communities.

"We thought the mango pulp would help us take forward the conversation on sustainable food production in a large way to a variety of people," says Suchitra Naidu of AERF.

The pulp helped them initiate conversations about forest conservation and sustainable food production with customers ranging from small-town fruit vendors to corporate executives in cities.

You can also buy yourself a kilo of mango pulp at ₹1,650 from Two Brothers, an organic farm set up by brothers Satyajit Hange and Ajinkya Hange.

On their website, they describe the process of turning mango fruit into pulp.

The pulp is extracted using a pulp extractor, after which it is cooked at 90 to 100 degrees for an hour and stirred continuously for a thick consistency. The cooked pulp is then packed into sterile food-grade foil packs and then shipped out. ■



Contact: www.kubalwadi.com/WhatsApp:9920465252
www.twobrothersindia.com
 For AERF mango pulp: Suchitra Naidu - 9823872015

YOU AND THE E-WASTE MOUNTAIN

Don't sell an old machine, better to just recycle it

CIVIL SOCIETY NEWS

DO you know where your PC and its monitor went when you dumped them after they couldn't be cranked up anymore? Or what finally happened to that heavy laptop that you junked after long years of use to make way for a new featherlight version? Or who took away that BlackBerry, which suddenly became worth nothing?

Chances are that you have no recollection and even if you were to sincerely try to trace these once much-loved possessions you wouldn't know where to begin to pick up their trail let alone discover where they really landed up.

Each year, Indians generate 3.2 million tonnes of e-waste of which just 500,000 tonnes turn up at the 312 registered recycling units in the country. Where the remaining 2.7 million tonnes go is anyone's guess.

E-waste describes discarded electronic and electrical devices. As India goes rapidly digital, the numbers are steadily rising. People are buying more computers and mobile phones and the new expanding middle class is acquisitive with abandon.

The result is a stubborn tide of unaccounted-for waste which leaves the environment awash in chemicals, metals and plastics. Cleaning up such a mess is impossible. But stopping the waste from getting out is easily done if only regulators, manufacturers and consumers were to collaborate and get their act together in the larger interests of the planet.

Cerebra Integrated Technologies has spotted both a business opportunity and a social purpose in putting e-waste in its place. A division of the company, registered as a recycler, will be running a campaign in large workplaces to create awareness about e-waste.

It will be using emailers and online messaging to spread the word. The company has several big clients who outsource some of their manufacturing to it. The recycling unit closes the loop by being able to safely dispose of devices when they age.

By getting into workplaces, Cerebra intends to start a conversation around e-waste which deals not just with disposal but also usage.

Cerebra has come up with a "Device as a Service" programme under which it will provide fully loaded and customized hardware and services for a fee per device. After a certain number of years, Cerebra will replace the devices.

In this way, organizations get rid of the headache of putting hardware and systems in place. They also convert capital expenditure into running cost. But a big gain also is an incremental social one in which computers get taken away at the right time and safely recycled instead of becoming overaged, unusable and disposed of for a pittance en route to becoming hazardous waste.

There is a mindset that needs changing. Whether it is an individual or a company, value is attached to waste in India. Everyone hangs on to devices and, at the time of dumping them, the expectation is that there will be something given back in return. This is irrespective of the full value having already been derived from the product.

"We Indians consider waste as value. That is the basic root of the problem. It is not just individuals, but companies too," says Ravi Neeladri, CEO, Recycling and Refurbishment at Cerebra. "Companies want some money for even those assets that are fully depreciated in the books of accounts. Now when they're selling (old devices) the informal sector can always quote a better price than the formal sector because they don't have the recycling factory costs and all of that."

"It is this mindset that must change so that the company and the retail customer perceive e-waste as a danger to society," he explains.

For that to happen regulation is important. The government formulated e-waste rules in 2014 and then improved on them in 2016, making manufacturers responsible for their products. ■



Ravi Neeladri: 'We Indians consider waste as value. That is the root of the problem'

Cerebra has come up with 'Device as a Service' under which it will supply hardware and services for a fee and take away devices that get old for recycling.

But rules don't get easily implemented. The same manufacturers who take responsibility for their products in other economies shy away from doing so in India because regulation hasn't been in step with the market and now there is a pricing issue.

"In other societies the cost of recycling is included in the price of the product," explains Neeladri. "The same companies that follow extended user norms in other markets don't do it here because they see India as some kind of geographical space different from the rest."

In 2016 when the Indian government introduced extended producer responsibility in India, manufacturers objected, saying this was a cost that would hit their bottom line.

So, it is a balance between regulation and mindset. Both are needed because one draws on the other. There are limits to regulation if people don't want to be sustainable in their practices.

"We would want to see what we don't see right now, which is a company saying the lifecycle of a laptop is, say, four years, but for the kind of programming the company does it is perhaps three years. So why not get the laptop refurbished to its full and then donate it to a school or to deserving people?" says Neeladri.

"But we don't see that. Everybody wants to drive it to the last byte of information that they can get from the laptop or a desktop. And then they would want to sell it, not wanting to know where this will land up," he laments.

Cerebra Integrated Technologies has been around for 28 years and has a fascinating past. Initially it was into manufacturing and IT products under its brand name, Cerebra.

Before IBM, Lenovo, HP and Dell came along, Cerebra had a significant market share. It played a big role in computerization in India, especially of the banking industry in the 1990s.

"Most of our computerization at that time was done on Indian PCs. We had BCL, we had Zenith, we had Cerebra. And we used to even manufacture servers back then. But we didn't have deep pockets like the global companies so eventually we all had to die out," explains Neeladri.

Cerebra got into recycling in 2014. Once again, its timing was right. The explosion of waste was beginning to be felt and in many ways Cerebra is a first mover. The expectation is that it will benefit from environmental awareness and better regulation. ■

The iconic garden

SUSHEELA NAIR

EVERYONE knows Lal Bagh but much remained to be told about it. It's all here now in an anecdotal narrative.

"Lal Bagh became my favourite haunt to forage, a lab to explore and an outdoor studio to draw my first botanical drawing and paint my first landscape," writes Suresh Jayaram, an art historian.

His book chronicles the changing scape of Lal Bagh, one of the largest lung spaces in Bengaluru, and how it has evolved over centuries.

The city that has been intrinsically linked to royal visionaries. The competence of Hyder Ali and Tipu Sultan, the modernist agenda of the Mysore state, colonial influences, botanical transactions and urbanism have all left a deep imprint on Bengaluru.

The author has acknowledged the contribution of the Kew-trained Superintendents — John Cameron, G.H. Krumbiegal, H.C. Javaraya and M.H. Marigowda who were part of the larger colonial enterprise of reworking the city's landscape. These four pillars played a significant role in the development of Lal Bagh with their distinct ways of plant introduction, the building of monuments, expansion of Lal Bagh, and taking horticulture to different parts of the country. Their names are etched in the annals of Indian horticultural history.

What makes this book distinctive is that it is illustrated with photographic accounts, snapshots from family albums of friends, and picture postcards from studios in Bengaluru dating to the early 20th century. An intricate map has been provided by an architect. There are contributions from artists who have worked in the city and archival documents lost to public memory.

"The book is the result of over three years of collection, collation and conversation. While research into archives and historical records has played a key role, the process of putting together this book mirrors closely the tradition of storytelling," explains Jayaram. The book starts with personal anecdotes, historical incidents, local narratives and refers to accounts of travellers like Francis Buchanan. It is a collage of anthropology, art history, and urbanism with the eye of an aesthete. Tracing these shifts with Lal Bagh as its protagonist, the book touches upon the significance of the garden in its historical and contemporary context and sheds light on the often unseen gardener communities that tend to the Bengaluru we identify with today. From the Darogas working under Tipu to the heads of horticulture who were initially instated under the East India Company, the systems that seem invisible today are amply evidenced in history.

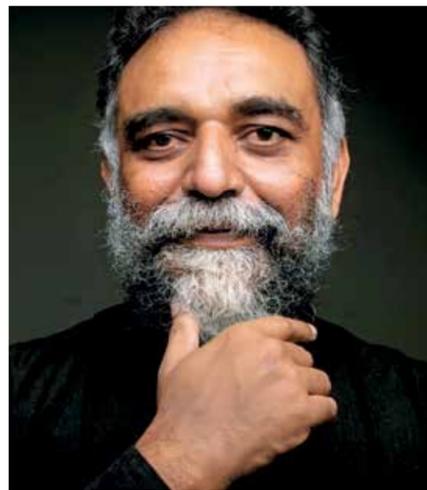
The book brings to the fore this administrative machinery that is often relegated to the background.



Lal Bagh is a trail of fragrances from various leaves and flowers



Bangalore's Lal Bagh: A Chronicle Of The Garden And The City, Suresh Jayaram, Visual Arts Collective Trust ₹1000



Suresh Jayaram

The author retraces his ancestry to the Thigala (gardener) community and acknowledges the debt he owes to this community and their green fingers.

An entire chapter is devoted to the garden's hoary monuments like the century-old rocks, the Mandapa, ancient archaeological remains like the 'veeragallu', the Kempegowda watchtower/Mantapa, the Glass House modelled on the Crystal Palace in London, the circular dovecote with Tudor architectural details, the bandstand, the equestrian statue and floral clock, and the two-tiered wrought-iron fountain adorned with sculptures from Greek mythology. The Dr. M.H. Marigowda National Horticultural Library is a brilliant archives collection which has documented the plants and their botanical significance. This helped the author in his research for the book.

"The monuments of Lal Bagh extend far beyond the garden's built-up structures — the trees

What makes this book distinctive is that it is illustrated with photos from friends and postcards from the city's studios.

themselves are a living heritage that cannot be ignored," writes Jayaram. This garden is a trail of fragrances from various leaves and flowers like the fragrant eucalyptus, the heavenly *champa* and sampige, and the exotic *ylang-ylang*. Other important trees featured are the baobab and the oldest tree with gnarled growth.

With research stemming from the author's role as artist, art historian, curator and garden enthusiast, the book grounds itself in local histories and contemporary concerns.

Jayaram locates himself within the botanical paradise that is Lal Bagh and draws our attention to a garden and urban cosmos that holds within its bounds so much that city-dwellers might easily pass it over.

The author expresses apprehension about Bengaluru losing its green cover and the 'Garden City' tag, owing to increasing urbanization. His book represents a nostalgic tome for old-time Bengalureans who have been witness to the city's transformation.

Jayaram takes us down memory lane, speaking of his childhood outings to Lal Bagh where he would clamber up trees and go on expeditions to collect seeds and flowers to study as specimens. He rues that everything is much altered now and one can no longer picnic in these green environs due to a ban on bringing in food from outside. ■

Maa Durga and the times

Durga Puja in Kolkata is a festival like no other. Lights, prayers and creative *pandals* are the setting for community celebrations. The *pandals* also reflect popular concerns — farmers, migrant workers, refugees and the lockdown.



Photo: Civil Society/Sumona Chakravarty



Photo: Civil Society/Ashoke Chakravarty

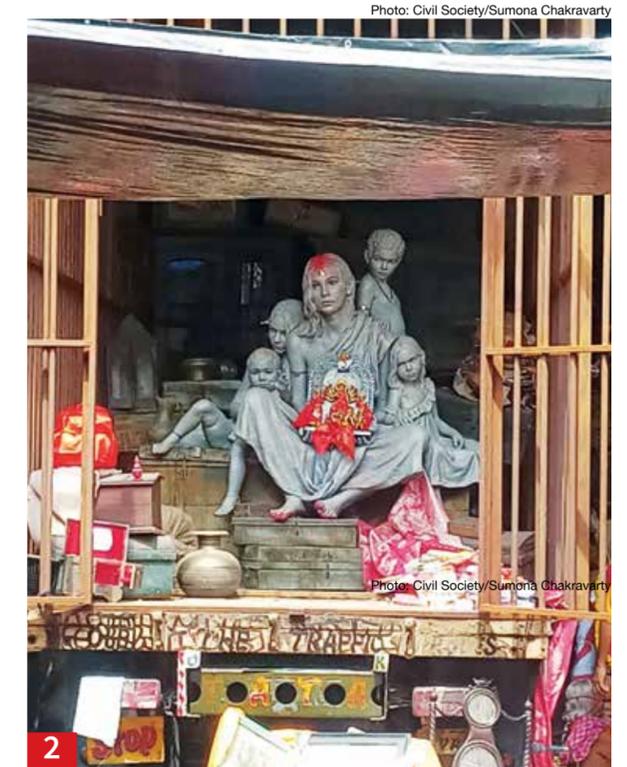


Photo: Civil Society/Sumona Chakravarty

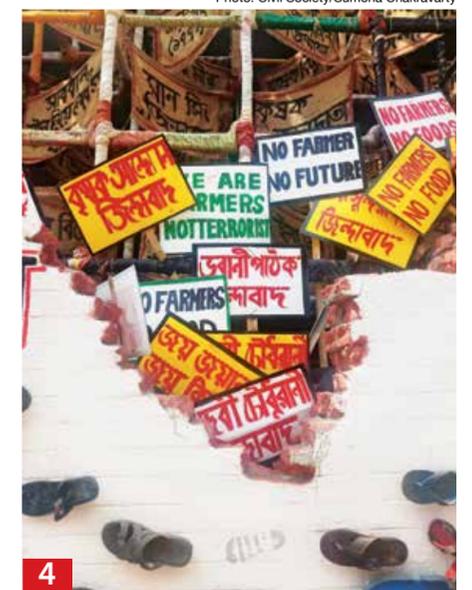


Photo: Civil Society/Sumona Chakravarty

1. Samajsebi Sangha's pandal: Maa Durga surrounded by items of daily use reflecting the lockdown lifestyle
2. Borisha Club's pandal shows deep concern for the plight of refugees
3. At Chakraberia an elaborate pandal was made out of cane
4. Dum Dum Park Tarun Sangha's installation speaks up for the farmers' agitation

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

JAZZY KETTLES

IF YOU ARE fond of tea then a kettle painted in vivid colours is an artefact you'd likely cherish. More so if those colours are in the style of a Pattachitra painting. Apendra Swain and Chittaranjan Swain craft not just kettles but bowls and trays in Pattachitra, all made of aluminium. They were at Dastkar's Diwali *mela* for the first time and looking forward to selling their wares after a hiatus due to the pandemic.

The Swains are from Raghurajpur, a heritage crafts village of 150 households in Puri district of Odisha. Before COVID, tourists would arrive in busloads after their pilgrimage to the famed Jagannath Temple in Puri. The village has all facilities, says Chittaranjan. Every child goes to school. And the village is awash with objects painted in the Pattachitra style.

The Swains were also selling lovely Pattachitra paintings on canvas. They explained the painstaking work that Pattachitra entails and hoped they would be blessed with customers.

Contact: Chittaranjan and Apendra Swain – 9938620662, 7978276463



DELIGHTFUL SIP

MANIPUR'S SYLVAN VILLAGES have within their folds a wealth of biodiversity which is slowly vanishing from its landscape and fading from memory. How to save it all? Elizabeth Yamben thought of an idea: convert it into teas. A former investment banker who'd worked in London and Singapore, she put in her savings to start a small business in 2017 called Dweller with the tagline 'for the simple joys', employing local women.

The infusions are unusual and rejuvenating. There is a tea made from spiced hog plum, an indigenous fruit good for fatigue and bloating, and Nong-mang-kha ginger green which helps combat cough and cold. Another bestseller is green tea with lotus leaf and Fruity Roselle Olive, an uplifting infusion which you can drink hot or cold.

Yamben works with a cheerful team of 21 women. Headquartered in Imphal, they source their plants from surrounding villages and 10 percent of profits is ploughed back into conserving indigenous plants.

Contact: Dweller Tea, Uripok Yamben Leikai, Imphal – 795001, Manipur
Phone: 8730003033 Website: www.dwellerteas.com

GLOWING LAMPS

LIGHT UP YOUR home this festive season with a range of lamps designed by Insha-e-Noor Producer Company, a crafts-based women's enterprise from Basti Hazrat Nizamuddin in New Delhi. There are lamps with intricate Sanjhi work, lamps with embroidery, and crochet thread lamps in different colours which will add a touch of class to your home.

Also available are delicate doilies in crochet, pretty trays with Sanjhi work, beeswax candle and tealight holders and attractive boxes to gift dry fruits.

Insha-e-Noor comprises 100 women who have mastered five intricate craft forms and now produce a range of quality handicrafts. The group is supported by the Aga Khan Development Network under its Nizamuddin Urban Renewal Initiative.

Contact: 9205308098, 8130414700, Email: insha.e.noor@gmail.com



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.

EDUCATION AND EQUAL ACCESS



LEADS

Life Education and Development Support (LEADS) was established in 2005 to empower economically deprived people in the rural and urban slums of Jharkhand. The organization works with marginalized communities to help children, adolescents, specially abled persons and pregnant women. Its primary work involves provision of quality education to all, ensuring child rights, assured livelihoods to marginalized people, promotion of skilled human resources and more.

LEADS works in a dedicated manner to improve lives. The non-profit aims for a society where all have equal access and control over resources irrespective of caste, creed, economic status or gender. You can help by donating and volunteering.

www.leadfindia.org | leadfindia@gmail.com | 8987583419

HELP 2 DISTRICTS IN ANDHRA PRADESH



Chaitanya Educational and Rural Development Society

Established in 1996 by a group of rural people in Andhra Pradesh, Chaitanya Educational and Rural Development Society (CERDS) was founded to work in Prakasam and Guntur districts of the state to aid marginalized communities in the area.

CERDS works on diverse issues — access to safe drinking water, education and aiding tribal communities as well as people with disabilities. They also run a project to reduce child labour. To boost primary education they have provided educational supplies to 1,250 children from underprivileged sections, orphans, physically challenged children and fire victims.

CERDS has helped instal 600 bore wells, ensuring safe drinking water to 12,000 families and 55,000 tribal people and other vulnerable communities.

www.cerds-india.org | cerdsindia@gmail.com | +91 9666159615

CREATE CARING FAMILIES



Arnimaal Institute

Set up in 2011, Arnimaal Institute for Rehabilitation works for vulnerable communities in Jammu & Kashmir. Its agenda is to strengthen child protection systems, fight substance abuse, provide humanitarian aid and empower women. Arnimaal's aim is to create caring families, alert communities and responsive governments. As a part of their Child Welfare and Protection Programme, they organize general health check-ups, reading workshops and psychosocial workshops at juvenile homes in Kashmir. You can donate, volunteer or intern with them.

www.arnimaal.org | arnimaal.org@gmail.com | +91 9818277421

GIVE CITIES A FACELIFT



Vrikshit Foundation

Vrikshit Foundation is a voluntary organization based in Delhi that organizes cleanliness drives and works on environment protection and awareness programmes. Set up in 2019, Vrikshit functions in 14 states and has helped clean up over a million kg of trash in more than 287 locations. They work with partner organizations for safe disposal of the collected garbage. Their projects also help underprivileged individuals living in hazardous sanitary conditions. The foundation carries out awareness programmes on climate change and the environment. Their key projects include the Yamuna Banks Cleanup project, and other cleanliness drives, awareness drives, and plantation drives. Their volunteers have planted more than 18,756 trees so far.

You can help them organize cleanliness drives and eco-friendly garbage disposal.

www.vrikshitfoundation.com | vrikshitfoundation@gmail.com | +91-7827552596

FIRST PERSON

Vaishnavi Sharma, student

'AT RAAHAT I WAS ABLE TO HELP WOMEN IN DISTRESS'

DURING THE lockdown, cases of domestic violence increased a lot. I knew someone personally who was facing domestic violence at home. I tried helping her but there are limits to how much you can intervene in someone's life. When I joined Raahat, a non-profit that helps victims of domestic violence and creates awareness of abuse, I realized I could do my bit.

I found out about Raahat and the dire situation regarding domestic violence through the statistics and posts that they put up on their social media platforms.

As cliched as it sounds, it did not feel like work. I was motivated throughout the 10 months that I volunteered because it was something completely different to what I had done before. I had never



volunteered for social work, so at Raahat I was able to channel my keenness to bring about awareness and social change. The atmosphere at Raahat was very good, and we became a close-knit circle.

Personally, I learnt how to be more patient with people and

sensitive to their situation. I also learnt to develop my communication skills. The relationships I built with the people I worked with during my time at Raahat have endured beyond my volunteering period.

While working with their campaigns department, I realized I had leadership skills that I had never previously tapped into. At the same time, we were never limited by the department we were working in, everyone knew everyone else and we learnt from one another. I joined them when they were a fairly new organization and I was so personally invested that right now when I see Raahat doing well I feel happy that I had a role in bringing them to where they are now.

www.projectraahat.in | projectraahat.s@gmail.com | +916398416938, 19810224560

SAVE TURTLES AND JUNGLES



Sahyadri Nisarga Mitra

Sahyadri Nisarga Mitra, a non-profit established in 1992, works for nature conservation through research, education, creating awareness and building community participation. Sahyadri works mostly in the Konkan region in Maharashtra. It protects turtles and helps local people organize turtle festivals.

Currently, it is working for the conservation of the Indian pangolin, an endangered species. Its project, My Jungle, aims to save forests.

It provides homestay facilities for people who want to engage with wildlife. The non-profit also provides basic training in beekeeping and use of bee-boxes as a part of their efforts to save bees.

If you know Marathi, you can volunteer with them for fieldwork with local communities. People fluent in Hindi and English can help with documentation.

www.snmcpn.org | 942383170, 9373610817

PLANT POWER

Flowers and plants almost always capture our attention. We wonder what their names are, where they originate and what they could be useful for. There are rare plants we may never see. Ganesh Babu, a botanist, is our guide.



Wavy trumpet

Dolichandrone atrovirens (Roth) K. Schuman., popularly known as wavy trumpet, is endemic to India. It is a medium-sized tree which attains a height of 10 to 15 metres. Dense foliage makes this tree lovely. Flowers appear in summer and fruiting continues into the next flowering season.

The flowers are large, white and trumpet-shaped. Fruits are dehiscent capsules, up to 30 cm long, beautifully twisted and speckled. The plant is comparatively fast-growing. It is much appreciated for its eye-catching foliage, and is especially suited for avenues, driveways, patios and outdoor recreation areas. The branches form a medium-sized canopy and provide shade. As the leaves create a lot of litter in summer, they make the soil fertile. In Kannada, wavy trumpet is known as udi mara, in Tamil as poombaadiri and in Telugu as oddi. It is used in traditional systems of medicine against diabetes, anxiety and as a rejuvenator.



Indian cherry

The Indian cherry or Indian plum is a joy for any garden owner. An edible landscape is both fun and functional in an urban space. Growing fruit trees, that too wild and native, as part of a frontyard landscape enhances it.

The fruit ripens early in the monsoon season and lasts for another four to five months. It is important that these berries yield fertile/viable seeds for further propagation. Adding this small tree in an edible landscape is aesthetically pleasing due to its shining foliage and gleaming fruits of various colours. The leaves and fruits are used in traditional medicine for diarrhoea and bronchial complaints. The tree is botanically known as Flacourtia jangomas (Lour.) Raeusch. It is called mullu sampige in Kannada, rubikka or lololikka in Malayalam, vaiyankaarai in Tamil, paniamla in Hindi, heitroi in Manipuri and sruvavrksa in Sanskrit.



Trivrit vine

Trivrit or Operculina turpethum is a low vine commonly recognized by its flamboyant clusters of vividly hued, large flowers. It has strikingly untainted white, trumpet-shaped flowers, dark-green heart-shaped leaves and slender, purplish-green twining stems. The stems entwine themselves around their props. On closer look, one notices the twisted four-angled stems.

It is a large climbing shrub which exudes a milky sap when injured. Fruits appear as cones and later unfold as lotus flowers. The four black seeds are enclosed within the bloated, transparent, floral parts. Trivrit's natural habitats are hedges in coastal areas and wayside thickets up to an altitude of 900 m above sea level. Flowering and fruiting can be seen in all seasons.

Trivrit is predominantly used as a tonic for the liver. It is also an effective laxative and is used to relieve chronic constipation. Trivrit also helps combat obesity. It is botanically known as Operculina turpethum (L.) S. Manso. In Hindi, it is called nisoth, in Kannada tigadeballi, in Telugu tigada, in Malayalam trikolkpakonna and in Tamil sivadhai.



Shyonaka

Shyonaka, botanically known as Oroxyllum indicum (L.) Kurz (Bignoniaceae) is one of the 10 ingredients of *Dasamula arishtam*, a potent combination of the dried roots of 10 plants used in Ayurveda. It is decreasing alarmingly due to heavy trade in the critical part, the root.

Shyonaka is a medium-sized, deciduous tree that reaches almost 10 metres in height, with an irregular, linear crown. Its stem has many persistent leaf scars and the bark is prominently dotted with lenticels. Leaves are large, up to six feet long, with many leaflets. The leaves with jointed leafstalk wither at the base of the tree and look like a heap of broken bones, hence this tree is commonly known as broken bones tree.

Shyonaka is a beautiful tree with few branches, most noticeable in autumn when its leaves shed. But its bell-shaped flowers and sword-shaped fruits remain. The flowers, which open at night, are large, purplish-red outside and creamy yellow inside, about six cm long and 10 cm broad. The fruits are large, up to 100 cm long, brown, flat and woody, open along the sides and split into two parts at the time of seed dispersal. The seeds are plentiful, thin, flat and with a whitish, transparent wing. In Malayalam shyonaka is known as palakapayyani and in Tamil it is called vangamaram and venpadiri.



Cat's whiskers

Cat's whiskers is scientifically known as Orthosiphon stamineus Benth. It belongs to the tulsi family. It is a fast-growing perennial herb, 30 to 60 cm tall. Inflorescence is in close-whorled, pyramidal kind of racemes at the end of the branches, up to 20 cm long and six cm broad at the base and narrower towards the end. The flowers are white or pinkish-purple, about three cm long. Stamens are very prominent,

longer than the corolla. The peak period of flowering and fruiting of cat's whiskers is between April and July. Attractive shiny white bundles of stamens jut out from the shorter flowers and catch the attention of a variety of butterflies. The dark-green, shiny leaves create a wonderful colour contrast, making this an attractive under-shrub. It can be planted in groups or to form informal borders, as clumps on rockeries or even in containers. It looks amazing as a continuous hedge on a lawn.

The leaves are said to have diuretic properties and increase uric acid excretion, therefore the 'Java tea' prepared from these leaves is used for kidney and bladder diseases. Most vernacular names available in different languages are just a translation of cat's whiskers: poochameesa in Malayalam, poonai meesai in Tamil, bekkina meesai in Kannada, mutri tulsi in Hindi. In Ayurveda, it is considered a substitute for tulsi.



Guduchi

Guduchi or Tinospora cordifolia is a perennial, dioecious climber. It is also referred to as amrta or 'divine nectar' in Ayurveda. The climber's matured stems produce long, thread-like aerial roots. The leaves are heart-shaped. It is grown for its dense foliage rather than for its flowers. However, the female plants are worth seeing during fruiting. As it is a hardy plant, it can be planted any time of year. Temporary supports, such as sticks or twines, should be provided. It creeps up vertically as well as horizontally. Hence it can be planted to spread on walls or sprawl along fences, as a trellis or be allowed to hang down from roofs.

In Hindi, it is known as giloy, in Malayalam as chitramrta, in Kannada as amrutha balli, in Tamil as seendhil and in Telugu as thippatheega. ■



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