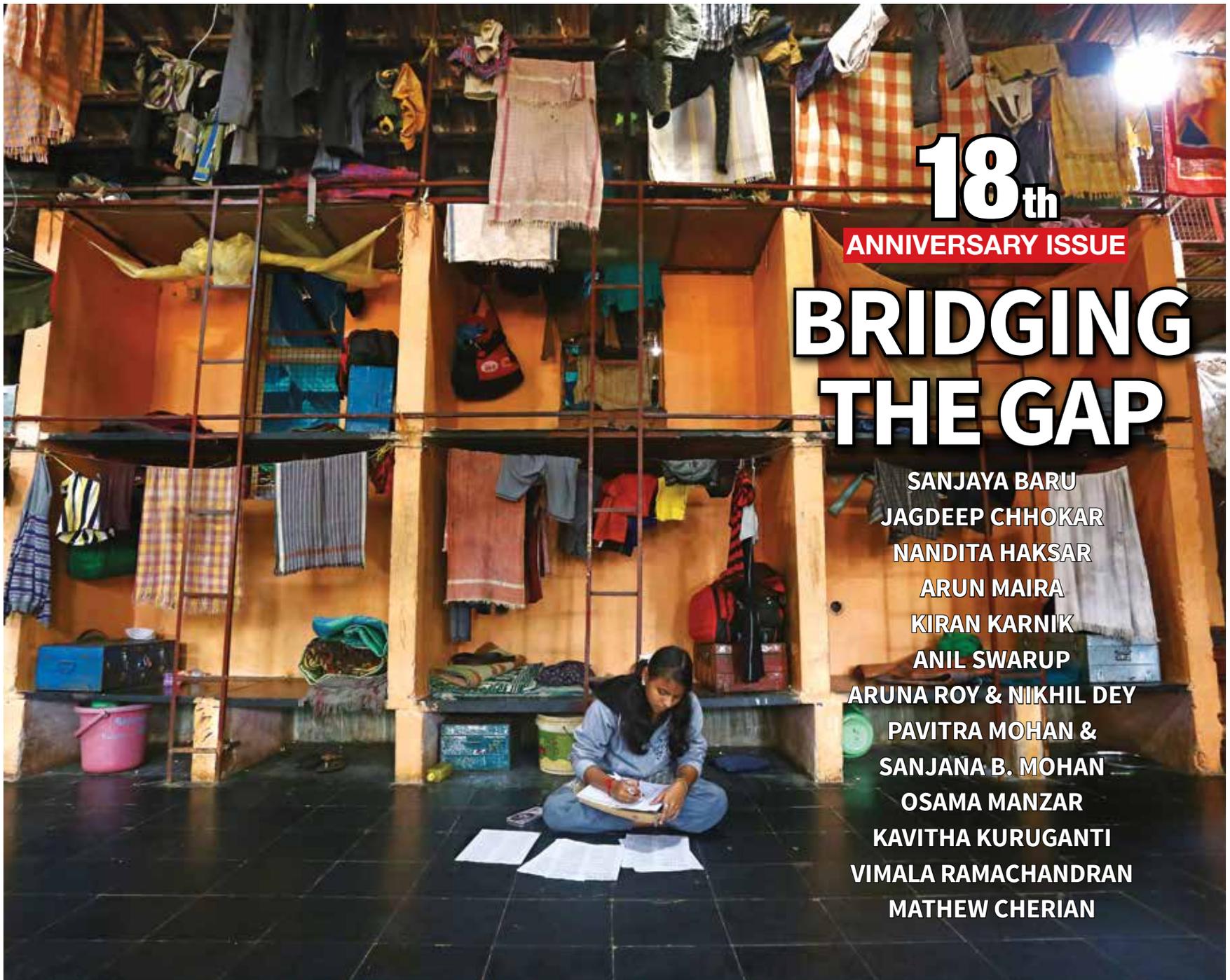


Civil Society



18th

ANNIVERSARY ISSUE

BRIDGING THE GAP

SANJAYA BARU
 JAGDEEP CHHOKAR
 NANDITA HAKSAR
 ARUN MAIRA
 KIRAN KARNIK
 ANIL SWARUP
 ARUNA ROY & NIKHIL DEY
 PAVITRA MOHAN &
 SANJANA B. MOHAN
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You read it first in Civil Society

Great stories of change across India from a magazine built on trust



READ US. WE READ YOU.

Civil Society

READ US. WE READ YOU.

18 and around

If you asked us how 18 years have passed in our magazine, we would have some difficulty telling you. It is not that we don't know. It is just that we don't pause long enough to be able to remember. Time moves fast when you are bringing out a magazine and, so, here we are with a special anniversary issue to mark 18 years and, in our own style, coming of age.

In celebration of our journey, we have dedicated this issue to the great work that voluntary organizations and activists do in promoting development. Without them there are many things that governments wouldn't be able to get right — not just here in our country, but the world over as well.

Despite this, the voluntary sector in India has been under considerable stress in recent times. It is partly because of stifling regulation and the central government's suspicions with regard to activists and NGOs. It is also because of a sluggish economy and the challenges of finding donors.

NGOs are not without their blemishes. There are those that do not make the cut and can be accused of inadequate accountability and questionable delivery. But this should not be a reason to put NGOs in general through a grinder and bring all the good work that is being done to a standstill.

To alleviate the recent gloom and help change the narrative somewhat we decided to get some of the best minds in the country to weigh in on the contribution that voluntary organizations make and why they are needed — especially so in an economy with a significant and persistent development deficit such as ours.

We are fortunate to have many outstanding contributors who have spared the time to write for this issue. You will find their pieces in the pages ahead and we would like to believe that together they make a uniquely relevant collection in these times.

With the spirit of voluntarism growing, especially so after the pandemic, people look for NGOs to which they can donate or where they can give their time. We offer in this issue a sizeable number of organizations that we are happy to recommend. An expanded Volunteer and Donate section seeks to make connections which our readers will find useful.

Our opening interview is with Ritwick Dutta, the environmental lawyer. He and Rahul Choudhary are founders of LIFE, or Legal Initiative for Forest and Environment, which won the Right Livelihood Award this year. Dutta and Choudhary have won several big environmental cases. The interview with Dutta provides an insight into the reasons for their success and the challenges of taking environmental causes to court.

From Punjab we have a green manifesto put together by citizens as the state goes to the polls. They want political parties to focus on the problems of pollution in Punjab. The story on a solar fridge is a reminder of how appropriate technology can be used to alleviate rural distress. Art by people with disabilities is getting more attention and buyers too — we have a story on an exhibition in Delhi. Our Living section continues to grow in strength. You will find small companies making innovative products. This time it is Ancient Living based in Hyderabad. Check it out.

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ANNUAL SPECIAL ISSUE

This special issue of Civil Society celebrates 18 years of our magazine, which was launched in 2003. Since this is a double issue for the months of January and February, we will be back in March.

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IN THE LIGHT

SAMITA RATHOR



LETTERS



Women power

Thanks for the cover story, 'Put women in charge,' by Poonam Muttreja on the issue of reproductive health. The Bilaspur deaths were horrific and shocking. But, that tragic incident also reveals the failure of our health policies. We are not building enough health facilities in rural India which would take care of the reproductive and other health needs of women. Despite vehement and justified criticism by feminists about sterilization during the Emergency, it is still the only option given to women. Women should decide how many children they want to have and, according to their health status, a choice of contraceptives should be made available to them.

Shanta Sinha

Being civil

I read your interview with Anil Swarup, 'Headline hungry officers

will land in trouble.' I appreciate the distinction he makes between providing valuable information and seeking publicity. It can be somewhat depressing though when you do good work, despite odds, and nobody notices. The media, local and national, needs to report such efforts consistently.

Chetan Chawla

Beer, rice

I liked your story, 'Beer revives lost Goan rice.' Suraj Shenai's People's Lager is precisely the kind of enterprise Goa needs. It is ideal for the environment and it spreads wealth as well as good cheer. The government could help by lowering taxes for local brews.

Louis Fernandez

New cosmetics

The effort to produce natural products which are gentle on the skin and hair is wonderful news. Once people are aware of the benefits of these natural products, their manufacturers will have greater incentive to create a bigger variety. With an increase in sales we may look forward to prices being more affordable.

Chandralekha Anand Sio

It is encouraging to see your passion and interest in offering products with no toxic material.

Evita

The new cosmetic companies have the potential to become major global players and rival entrenched companies, just like the

pharmaceutical companies did many decades ago.

Amit Mishra

Padma winner

Sathyarayanan Mundayoor, whom you mention in your story, 'A young doctor as DC sizes up Changlang,' has done a great job in setting up community libraries in Arunachal. Uncle Moosa, as he is known, really deserved the Padma Shri. I am proud to be from the same village as him. Such people are very rare and our country needs them. My hearty congratulations.

Dr Balagopalan Unni

Floral matters

Dr Ganesh Babu in his column, 'Plant Power', explains all the features of flowers, bushes, trees and other plants, very well. You have given useful content to people. He has observed plants closely. The content is original and the pictures are of high quality.

Dr M. S. Krishnamurthy

Pollution woes

Your report, 'Ludhiana's cursed Buddha Nala,' was excellent. Keep following up to see where this leads.

Himanshu Thakkar

Film fest

Thanks for Saibal Chatterjee's story, 'Arab voices by the Red Sea.' The El Gouna Film Festival seems to have shown an array of fascinating films from a part of the world whose culture we don't know much of. For cinema buffs, it would be most interesting to watch films by Arab directors and get an insight into their stories and concerns.

Shyam Devraj

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Ritwick Dutta (right) with Rahul Choudhary, winners of the Right Livelihood Award

‘We approach environmental litigation like criminal lawyers’

Ritwick Dutta on being activists but fighting and winning cases on specific points in the law

Civil Society News
Gurugram

TAKE a good cause to court and what can you hope to get? Only as much as the law can give you. Even as concern over the environment has continued to grow, winning verdicts against offenders needs clever lawyers as much, or perhaps even more, than activists with heart.

Ritwick Dutta, 47, and Rahul Choudhary, 47, have the distinction of being both activists and savvy lawyers at the same time. They have won several landmark verdicts, one of the most significant being against the mining rights given to Vedanta in Odisha.

The secret of their success in court is that they are diligent about separating the cause from the case. Using the fine print in rules and regulations, they have got the better of highly paid counsel and powerful companies.

Dutta and Choudhary were recently recognized with the Right Livelihood Award, or the ‘Alternative Nobel Prize’ as it is also popularly known, for defending the rights of people whose livelihoods and traditions are affected by projects.

When not in court, Dutta and Choudhary are campaigners who create awareness in communities about their legal rights in relation to natural resources. In this role as activists, they work through their trust, the Legal Initiative for Forest and Environment (LIFE).

We spoke to Dutta in a long and freewheeling interview when they returned from Stockholm after receiving their award. Here is a small and edited part of that insightful conversation.

You are one of the country’s leading environmental lawyers. But very little is known about you and your partner, Rahul, and LIFE, your trust.

Let me be very frank, I had no great interest in law.

I graduated in sociology from Delhi University and studied law so that I could get more time to think about what I wanted to do in life. An LLB gives you breathing space. Personally, I didn’t see myself becoming a litigation lawyer wearing a coat and gown and standing before judges. In fact, I didn’t enroll as a lawyer till 2001, which was all of two years after I got my law degree.

My core interest was, and remains, nature and wildlife. I started going to wildlife sanctuaries across India. As I moved around, it became clear to me that love for wildlife is linked to keeping the habitat intact. The animal is at risk due to poaching but the wild animal’s home is at greater risk due to habitat destruction whether in the form of mines, dams and highways among other projects.

A lot of wrong things were happening across the country, at that time, since people weren’t going to court out of fear — not of courts or judges — but of lawyers. They are more afraid of lawyers than of the

courts. The first thing they worry about is how much the fellow is going to charge. With lawyers, even a cup of tea costs money. As a result, even when violations take place in front of people’s eyes, and they are aware of them, they are reluctant to take legal recourse.

So, that prompted you to set up LIFE?

LIFE was a result of the realization that there is need for a specialized environmental law group in India — one that takes up different environmental issues across the country.

However, it is important to clarify that none of the litigation we undertake is funded through LIFE, which is a trust for creating awareness among people about their environmental rights and undertaking research in areas concerning environmental law and policy.

We also decided, as a matter of practice and principle, that we would only represent others. We would not file cases in our own names and never in the name of LIFE. That remains our basic motto.

There was hardly any organization on environmental law. We felt there was need for an environmental lawyer doing general practice in environmental law. We had lawyers doing tax matters, family matters and then 10 percent would be environmental law cases.

There were individual lawyers but very little specialization in the field of environmental law. You had people doing forests, pollution, wildlife and so on. We must have done close to 1,000 cases.

Yours, then, is perhaps the country’s first and only environmental law firm.

No, Sanjay Upadhyaya’s Enviro Legal Defence Firm (ELDF) is India’s first environmental law firm. The basic difference between us and ELDF is that we, as a matter of practice and principle, do not represent industry or the government. ELDF represents industry, including those against whom there are allegations of environmental violations, and they are perfectly within their right to do what they think is best in terms of an organizational goal and mission. Our stand has been that we are environmentalists and, therefore, we cannot and do not represent industry, the corporate sector or the government in any matter irrespective of the merits of the case.

How do clients approach you? Do they come to you? Do you go to them?

Multiple things are at work. There is a huge civil society network in India. A lot of them are aware of our work. They bring issues directly to us. There are networks that exist on forest rights, on mining and wildlife among others. Our many cases give us visibility irrespective of whether we win or lose.

One of LIFE’s core activities has been training and capacity building of communities and NGOs across the country. We make people aware of their legal rights vis-à-vis the environment. We don’t ask them to come to us, but this is one way in which cases do come to us.

We take fees in our individual capacity as lawyers but as an organization we only take funding for training and research. For litigation we urge communities to pay as per their capacity. If they don’t have the capacity to pay, then we subsidize them or, in some instances, do it pro bono.

How do you subsidize them?

We don’t quote any fees. We leave it to the community to decide. If they don’t have money, they give a declaration.

We give them three options. One, to pay the fees as they deem fit. Second, for those who cannot afford to pay professional fees, we expect them to pay for at least the cost of litigation — court fees, photocopying charges etc. Finally, those who cannot afford to pay anything, we ask them to give a declaration.

In my early days in Odisha I told the community I would appear for free. Their condition was such that I felt bad taking money from them. The villagers insisted on paying and, when I asked why, they said it was their experience that a lawyer who appears for free gets bought out by the other side! By paying they felt I would pick up their call and they would have the right to question me.

What we have managed to do is change the domain of environmental litigation from being the exclusive domain of NGOs or human rights groups to one where affected individuals are the petitioners. We believe in the power of the individual.

Whether you look at the POSCO steel plant or

‘We have managed to change the domain of environmental litigation from being the exclusive domain of NGOs to one where affected individuals are the petitioners.’

the Vedanta bauxite mine in Odisha or the hydropower project cases in the Himalayas, it is in most instances, the individual farmer, fisherman or pastoralist who is the petitioner.

The nature of litigants has also changed. It is not always poor people struggling to eke out their living that need our help. Many a time well-off farmers involved in agribusiness or aquaculture also approach us since they fear loss of business due to environmental degradation.

For example, we represented the Alphonso mango growers of Ratnagiri in Maharashtra. They are well-off farmers, mainly exporters. They said their exports would be affected if a coal-fired power plant came up within 15 km of their orchards. WTO standards say no exports to Europe if you have a power plant next to it. They gave us fairly good resources.

We also represented one Ali Hussain, a large aquaculture guy in Tamil Nadu who feared that a power plant would affect his business. At the same time, a lot of traditional fisherfolk were also opposed to it. The fees we get from a person who has greater financial capacity are used to subsidize those who are unable to afford the cost of litigation.

How did you and Rahul come together?

We were classmates in the law course in Delhi University. Rahul I also worked with Colin Gonsalves whose practice was focused on human rights. While I was there, I worked on a 3,000-page handbook for environmentalists for which I had to carefully read a whole lot of judgments. It helped me acquire a thorough understanding of environmental law. Rahul and I launched LIFE in 2005 because we wanted to focus on the

environment. We started in the *barsati* in my Noida home.

Your Vedanta case was a landmark case. Tell us about its significance and the learnings for you.

The Supreme Court’s judgment is significant because, for the first time in the Indian system, the aspect of referendum was applied. The court actually directed that it is for the gram sabhas in the Dongria Kondh tribal areas to decide whether mining should take place or not.

What is very important is the chief minister of the state approved the proposal for mining, the environment minister approved it and, finally, even the prime minister approved it. Yet the Supreme Court, relying on the Forest Rights Act (FRA), held that it still had to be placed before the gram sabha for its consent. This is democracy at work.

The judgement is significant for this issue. It places decision-making in the hands of the people to be affected most by mining. What is unfortunate is that the precedents of this case have not been followed in subsequent cases on mining, dams or other projects. The entire litigation took a decade.

Our learning was that environmental cases need

to be fought on specific points in the law and not emotive issues. We argued that proper procedure had not been followed in the EIA.

The entire EIA did not mention the sacred nature of Niyamgiri. The EIA process requires cultural aspects to be taken into consideration, which are unfortunately ignored the most.

How did the case come to you?

The case came to me by accident. It was not even filed before the Supreme Court, but before the Central Empowered Committee (CEC), a committee of the Supreme Court.

I had completed my law course a year earlier and I had no idea what Vedanta was. In 2002-2003 information available online was sparse. I thought maybe it was some holy company (given its name ‘Vedanta’) having some business interest in Odisha.

It was Dr Sreedhar of the Enviro Trust/Academy of Mountain Enviro, not the tribal community, and Mines, Minerals and People (an NGO) who asked me to take it up. The local community approached me later to represent their cause.

Honestly, it was not part of any great plan or ‘conspiracy’, as those in power would like to call it, to either stop the mining project or protect the tribal community. I was shown a patch of forest and told this would all get destroyed if mining were to take place.

I chose to approach the CEC simply because it was less intimidating. It had, as its members, forest officials, IAS officers, conservationist Valmik Thapar and others. It was more approachable and for a young lawyer. This is what matters the most.

Continued on page 8

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I argued my case. On the opposite side were eminent senior advocates CA Sundaram and Mukul Rohatgi, among others. Thankfully, unlike present times when young lawyers have in-depth knowledge about lawyers and law firms, I didn't know about their eminence and so I had no fear. And we got the first injunction or stay against mining despite the array of senior advocates.

After that, the group representing the Dongria Kondh tribal community approached me to represent them also. Biswajit Mohanty of Wildlife Society of Odisha also filed his case through his own lawyers. That was when I realized the close connect between wildlife, forests and tribes and that it's possible to argue for all three.

The record is that since the CEC is a committee of the Supreme Court every recommendation is accepted by it. And the CEC gave a very strong report against Vedanta. We thought we would win the case.

But, in a rare departure, the Supreme Court did not accept the report of the CEC. The court decided to allow mining to happen.

We never let go of any opportunity provided by the law. Notwithstanding the negative verdict of the Supreme Court, we went ahead and challenged other approvals (such as the environmental clearance) granted to the project before another judicial forum — the National Environment Appellate Authority. We kept the fight going, notwithstanding legal setbacks.

At the same time, many other developments took place: Jairam Ramesh became environment minister, Rahul Gandhi said the case had become an international embarrassment for India and the Forest Rights Act of 2006 was passed by Parliament which recognized the rights of forest-dwelling communities to forest land.

The Supreme Court was left with no choice but to review its earlier decision allowing for mining and directed the mining company to seek the consent of the gram sabha under the FRA. Subsequently, all the gram sabhas opposed the mining. Niyamgiri, the sacred hill, was saved. Democracy and the rule of law triumphed.

You managed to halt a hydropower project in Tawang in Arunachal Pradesh. Stopping a hydropower project is tough to do.

In the Tawang case we basically used grounds which were more in terms of administrative law principles. We approach environmental litigation like a criminal lawyer would approach a case. What are the finer details that are missing? What is the critical omission that would render the whole project void?

In Tawang we found it in the Environment Impact Assessment (EIA) report which did not take into account the black-necked crane which was sacred to the Buddhist community at Tawang.

There is a clear requirement in the forms for the EIA to state if the area is important from a cultural point of view. We had enough documentary evidence to show that this area is regarded as sacred because six or seven black-necked cranes, which are considered the embodiment of the Dalai Lama,

come to the site for wintering in December.

The scientists who did the EIA in summer could not have noticed the black-necked cranes because the birds come for wintering from China. They don't come in summer. The scientists, on the other hand, found December too cold to be in Tawang!

We said this was an instance of concealment of information. The declaration, which one makes while submitting a passport application form where one states that every information given above is true and correct, is applicable in environmental law too.

In the form they filled up for Tawang the project's developers said there was no sacred place and no endangered species in the area. And they signed it.

Above it was written that the information provided is true and correct and if it is found to be incorrect at any stage the approval granted should



Rahul Choudhary and Ritwick Dutta in the field: 'We are environmentalists'

be revoked at the project proponent's risk and cost. It was signed by the managing director of the company. We invoked that provision.

In most environment cases we do not approach the case as an environment sustainability issue. We look for a violation of the process and a point in law. In the case of Tawang, we said the omission was a case of misrepresentation. The law says submission of wrong, false and misleading statements is a ground for revocation of approval already granted. We applied those principles.

The NGT said in its judgement that both the project proponent and the consultant did not disclose the presence of the black-necked crane which they ought to have. It said to do a fresh study looking at the concerns of the black-necked crane.

The NGT did not say that there should be no dam in that area. It directed the Wildlife Institute of India to do a fresh study keeping the black-necked crane as the focal point. It further directed that the result of the study should be placed before the local community who will then decide whether the impact of the dam will be positive or negative and if they should go ahead with it. I am happy to state that the Wildlife Institute of India, in its study, has said no to the project.

So, this means you have to be a clever lawyer and keep away from emotional and ideological issues? Absolutely. Judges find it difficult to understand the significance of a black-necked crane. It's not easy to explain it to them. You can't go to the court saying you don't like dams. You have to give legal and scientific reasons why having a dam at that

location is not a good idea and why it cannot be legally and ecologically permissible.

Gram sabhas are supposed to be consulted, but what we hear of are shoddy EIAs and dubious public hearings to clear projects. Now a further dilution of the process is taking place.

Many times, the issue of 'saving the EIA' is raised. I don't think there is anything worth saving in the EIA process as it exists now. At the same time, there is no political will to bring in a system which allows for meaningful EIAs. The existing EIA regime allows everything to happen.

Let's be clear. Ninety-nine percent of projects that come up in India do not need an EIA. For highways only 100 km plus require an EIA so almost all the highways coming up are 99 km long. This is achieved by splitting up projects.

All big buildings and construction coming up are below 20,000 square metres. So, really speaking, we don't have an EIA process in place today which can be called a scientific or community-driven process.

The new draft EIA notification has serious problems, but the existing one also has serious problems. The existing faulty process continues. The new diluted process is not going to make things better. In fact, it will make things worse.

We are stuck between a horrible process which exists today and a further diluted process which has not been allowed to come in, rightfully so.

Whether it is the earlier 1994 notification or the 2006 notification, the entire way in which an EIA report is prepared serves no purpose at all — either of informing

communities or decision-makers. It reads more like a detailed project report on the benefits of the project.

The public hearing is only a consultation process. It is not a consent-driven process. You are supposed to listen but not to act. That's how it has been interpreted.

The Expert Appraisal Committee (EAC), which is supposed to look into documents and the public hearing minutes, is not even fit to be called an expert body.

The mandate of the EACs, it seems, is to put a rubber stamp, which they are doing very effectively.

The EAC for coal mining and power plants is headed by a person who is on the board of a thermal power company. He has stated that his expertise is speedy approval of power plants and mining projects.

The EAC for river valley and hydroelectric projects is headed by Professor K. Gopakumar from the Indian Institute of Science. There is no mention of river or environment in his CV. His expertise is in electronics, switches and switchboards.

We must not forget that the capacity of civil society and communities to challenge existing faulty EIAs is extremely limited. There is a right of appeal before the NGT once environmental or forest clearance is granted.

But, of the roughly 300,000 to 400,000 approvals granted in a year, the combined might of all civil society groups and communities has been on average to legally challenge around 50 or 60 of them. The easy way to know that is from the number of appeals in the NGT. ■

Voting out liquor in Rajasthan

Women use excise rules to prohibit sale

Surmayi Khatana

New Delhi

THE sale of liquor will soon be stopped in the villages of Barar and Hamela Ki Ver in the Rajsamand district of Rajasthan following a referendum on November 13.

The referendum was held under a provision of the state's excise rules which disallows the sale of liquor if 20 percent of the voters in a panchayat want it stopped.

The women of the two villages led the campaign against liquor. One of them, in a video shot on the day of the vote, says: "We wanted everyone to vote for the ban because we are distressed. Our children are troubled and cannot do what they want to do or study. The men drink and disrupt the peace of the house."

The Rajasthan Excise (Closure of Country Liquor Shop by Local Option) Rules, 1975, provide for the option of a referendum to ban the sale of alcohol in a panchayat.

The unique rule was first used in 2016 in the Kachhabali panchayat after which it has been used in the surrounding panchayats.

Women have been seeking an alcohol ban since 2015. In Kachhabali they mobilized support, wrote letters and brought up the problem in gram sabha meetings.

Archana Singh, the district collector of the time, pointed them to the Rajasthan Excise Rules 1975. The women seized this opportunity and after campaigning, raising awareness, and a referendum, the ban on alcohol sales was applied.

The neighbouring panchayats, Mandwar and Thaneta, followed.

The referendum puts an end to the sale of alcohol in a panchayat, which means that no tenders can be issued for a *theka* or a liquor shop in the area ever again. It does not criminalize the consumption or possession of alcohol, but only its sale in that geographical area. The rule also allows for closure of existing licensed liquor shops in the area.

A pre-vote requires 20 percent of the panchayat voting list to sign and declare their willingness for a referendum for an alcohol sales ban to be held. The sub-divisional magistrate verifies each signature.

In Kachhabali, 40 percent of the people in the voting list had signed, of which 20 percent of the names were confirmed before a date for the referendum was declared.

The people of Barar had previously tried to use the provision in 2017 in the domino effect that followed from Kachhabali, but were unable to confirm the 20 percent votes in favour of the referendum.

A panchayat can retry for a referendum after three years and Barar voted this year. For the referendum to be successful, 51 percent of the panchayat voting list must vote for one side. The ballot does not have any symbols and only asks the voters to say 'yes' or 'no'.



Women led a vigorous campaign: 'We wanted everyone to vote because we are distressed'



The MKSS helped raise awareness

"Explaining to the people which one is 'yes' and which one is 'no' was tough. The women invested a lot of time in their campaigning and mobilization in explaining the distinction," says Shankar Singh of the MKSS (Mazdoor Kisan Shakti Sangathan).

The MKSS works with peasants and workers in Rajasthan and has played a key role in the passing of the right to information law and the national employment guarantee law, MGNREGA. For the referendums, the MKSS has supported the women of the panchayats, helped them in raising awareness and in mobilizing support.

"We were approached by the people of the area with issues surrounding alcoholism. Usually, it is we who have to find the laws and policies that help people. But, this rule for a referendum was found due to the efforts of the women from the panchayats. It is an effort by citizens and the full credit should go to the women," says Nikhil Dey of the MKSS.

After raising awareness through plays, going door to door, talking to young children in schools to convince their parents to vote, 3,600 people voted out of 5,632 registered voters.

Of these votes, 3,261 or more than 90 percent of

the votes cast were in favour of the ban. Some 146 people voted against and 193 votes were disqualified.

From April 1, 2022, all excise licenses will be withdrawn and liquor shops will be closed.

The main issues with alcoholism in the villages are the same as in any other. These include domestic violence, nuisance, accidental deaths, motor vehicle accidents and death due to alcohol. But there are deeper and more complex consequences of alcoholism: family lives disrupted, women having to take on the responsibilities of earning as well as running their households on their own and younger people consuming alcohol early. Easy and close accessibility to alcohol makes many of these issues much worse.

Consumption does come down depending on access. While the sales ban will help regulate and control alcohol in the area, alcoholism and de-addiction require elaborate actions. There are rehabilitation centres, but some of them are in poor condition or too far away.

Earlier, the excise department handled rehabilitation centres but this responsibility has now been handed over to the social justice department. The MKSS emphasized the need for de-addiction programmes especially in the panchayats that voted for the ban. Rehabilitation efforts are still at the nascent stage.

The referendum has also created awareness about issues associated with alcohol and the kind of help alcoholics need.

The enthusiastic mobilization of the people and the referendum are markers of a population keen to make decisions that have a direct impact on their lives. "It is a fantastic show of direct democracy and part of a growing cultural democratic ethos of the people in this area. People here have taken part in the campaign for RTI. They have seen public hearings and social audits and been part of such democratic processes," says Dey. ■

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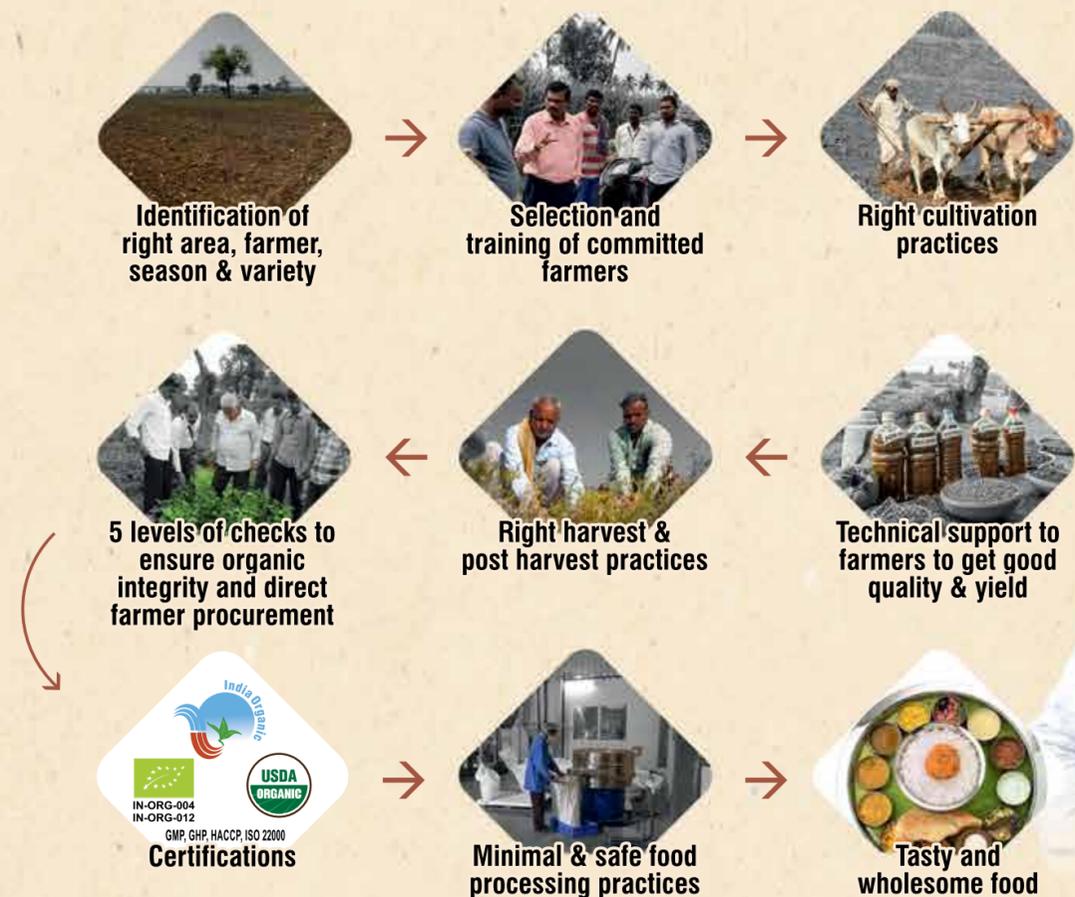
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A fridge from the sun

Cooling in the middle of nowhere

Civil Society News

New Delhi

WHEN tribal women go into forests in Udaipur district to pick fruits like *jamun* and *sitaphal*, they are always in a hurry to find the first buyer they can get. These fruits are so perishable that the price declines with every passing hour and with the odds stacked against them, the women invariably end up selling them cheap.

For some of them, however, perishability is no longer a problem. A refrigeration facility run on solar power allows them to keep the fruit for four to seven days.

At a local processing unit, they keep the pulp of the fruit under refrigeration until buyers pick it up at a better price for making ice-creams and milkshakes. Refrigeration, using solar power, has helped these women increase their earnings through some rudimentary arbitrage.

Solar fridges have similarly helped dairies in Uttar Pradesh which have to contend with breakdowns in power supply. They can now keep milk products overnight and have more franchisees. Earlier, the milk would just go bad.

Making these apparently small but, at the same time, far-reaching enhancements possible is Devidayal Solar Solutions, a company founded by Tushar Devidayal in 2015.

Devidayal, 46, studied in America and worked for some time on Wall Street before returning to India and his family's business in chemicals and agricultural inputs.

He grew the family business and sold it to a Japanese company. He then went on to do an MBA in England and, having gotten interested in sustainability, he reinvented himself as a solar-power entrepreneur. It is a role in which he seems to have combined both his understanding of rural markets, which came from the family enterprise, and his familiarity with the worlds of finance and business.

Devidayal sees great opportunities in solar power — not just in terms of the profits that can come from it, but also for what it does in improving the lives of people cut off from the benefits of useful technologies.

As with all enterprises that explore new markets, he has had to cut a path for himself and figure out the way ahead. It is not easy to sell a solar fridge or cold storage to someone who can't even imagine what it might be. It is even more difficult to assess their capacity to pay. How does one make financial sense of the dribbles in which the marginalized earn?

New-age businesses get their energy from the freshness of the ideas and emotions with which they are launched. It is a potent mix and more so when technology is added to it. Solar power used creatively can be a game-changer and companies



The solar fridge is popular with small kirana stores

such as Devidayal's transform lives through their entrepreneurship.

Realizing that the ability to pay would be a hurdle in selling the fridge to small rural enterprises, Devidayal prepared an impact assessment study and sought funding for a pilot project from Powering Livelihoods, a programme by Council on Energy, Environment and Water (CEEW) and Villgro Innovation Foundation.

The study estimated that a solar fridge would increase the income of businesses by ₹7,000 per month in areas that experience intermittent power supply. Clearly, the potential to pay existed, but the problem of how to pay remained.

"Consumer financing is tough to get with solar projects and products," says Devidayal. "Powering Livelihoods helped get risk guarantees to financiers and piloted our projects."

"We are now able to offer EMIs of around ₹3,000 since, if the income increment is ₹7,000, they should be able to pay as well as save," he says.

Major users of the solar fridge are *kirana* stores in towns and rural areas because they need it for their cold drinks and ice-creams. Afternoons often see power cuts in these areas. It is also the time of day for shift changes in factories and school students going back home. So, for a general purpose *kirana* store, the solar fridge is a boon.

"In the 400 solar fridges we have installed in the last year, over 150 have been in *kirana* stores," says Devidayal.

The solar fridge works 24/7, reducing the chances of wastage and spoilage caused by power cuts. The storage varies from 100 litres to 350 litres. The price ranges between ₹60,000 and ₹95,000, including the charge controller, solar panels, battery, wiring,

installation and freight charges and GST.

The fridge works on a direct current (DC) and does not need an inverter. It is four times more energy efficient than an average fridge. Even if connected to the grid, the solar fridge would use 0.33 units of electricity instead of 1.4 units used by a normal fridge. An average fridge from the market, if connected to solar power, would require three times the panels and four times the batteries, making it a bulky and space requiring operation.

An independent impact assessment study from the SELCO Foundation, with a sample size of 75 solar fridges, found that businesses using solar fridges saw their income go up by between ₹4,000 and ₹7,000 a month. Another study in Delhi took a sample size of 61 installations and concluded that there was a similar increment in income.

But the impact a solar fridge has is really difficult to measure because its use is disaggregated and its beneficiaries are not easily identifiable.

For instance, flowers at *dargahs* and *mandirs* are also saved from spoilage. Now what could that mean to people with small incomes? Similarly, fisherfolk have found the solar fridge to be more efficient than ice, which is what they generally use. It has translated into monthly savings. The possibilities are endless.

Devidayal Solar Solutions has its head office in Mumbai and branch offices in Lucknow and Indore. But a bigger network is needed to reach customers and remain in touch with them for after-sales handholding.

"During COVID-19, we realised the need for online troubleshooting with limitations to on-ground visits," says Devidayal.

So, an up-to-date YouTube channel followed and an active helpline on email and WhatsApp was created. When it comes to empowering the small user, however, there will be no substitute to delivering technology with a human interface. ■



Tushar Devidayal

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A GROWING CANVAS OF 'BEYOND LIMITS' ART

Surmayi Khatana

New Delhi

IT is a painting of the Golden Temple in Amritsar and it is blessed. There is divinity in its details. Turbans and dupattas reflect in the tank of the Hari Mandir. You could be there with that man performing *sewa* in the background.

Hardeep Singh Kalsi is the painter. He is from Ludhiana, self-taught and 44-years old. He also has a speech and hearing impairment.

Along with 66 other artists with disabilities like himself, his work was on display at the Arpana Fine Arts Gallery in Delhi in December.

The exhibition was curated by Preeti Johar, CEO of the Family of Disabled (FOD), who has made this annual exhibition an opportunity for artists with disability to interact, display their works and find buyers.

The exhibition is called Beyond Limits and on display this time were over 100 artworks. Some were by seasoned painters while 23 artists exhibited their work for the first time.

Business was good and the exhibition ended with 23 sales of artworks ranging from ₹4,000 to over ₹1 lakh.

Along with paintings, there were sculptures in wood, steel, fibre, stone and bronze. Walking through the hall you could see artwork with mixed media, acrylics, oil, ink and even digital art on display.

A series of three miniature paintings depicting Ganesha in contemporary settings caught the attention of visitors and was a crowd-puller.

The paintings, by Ajay Kumar Garg, depict Ganesha travelling in an autorickshaw and sitting on a see-saw. Garg is a 50-year-old artist trained in the tradition of the Royal Court Art of Rajasthan.

He has formal training in miniature paintings. In his work Garg captures the playful attitude of Ganesha. Like Kalsi, Garg too has a speech and hearing impairment.

Family of Disabled is an NGO that works to build the capacities of people with disabilities. It was founded in 1992 by Dr Rajinder Johar, who never let quadriplegia prevent him from helping other people with disabilities.

"Earlier we would write letters to artists and organizations. Now with the internet it is easier for us to reach out to people and for them to reach out to us," says Preeti Johar, his daughter.

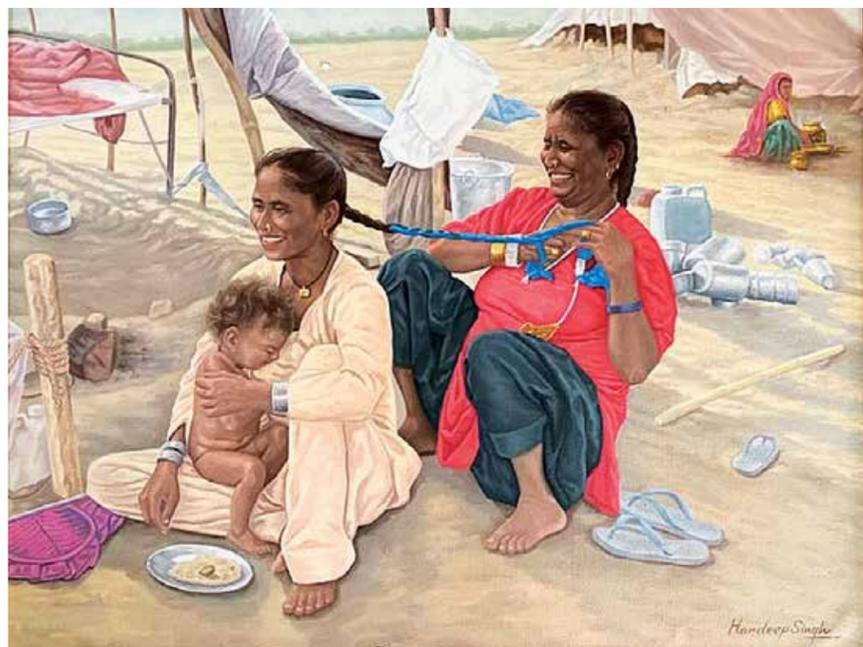
Scouting for artists and putting the exhibition together means going to art institutions, speaking with other NGOs, and communicating with networks of people with disabilities. Word of mouth helps too. Artists, who have previously exhibited their work, tell other artists not to miss this opportunity.

The exhibition has been consistently held since its inception in 2001. In 2020, FOD was unable to have an offline exhibition due to the pandemic and held it virtually instead.

"While we were glad to be able to connect



Hardeep Singh Kalsi's painting of the Golden Temple



Making a Plait, another painting by Kalsi

online, what was missing were the minute details that you can spot only with the painting right in front of you," says Johar, pointing to Kalsi's painting of the Golden Temple.

Kalsi's touch is brilliant. He likes to paint "rural elegance and everyday joys". His paintings look like photographs from afar. In 'Making a Plait' you can even spot a bit of pickle on a plate.

Arveen Budh Singh's work on Lord Buddha radiated peace with a green background of leaves in the midst of the hall. The serene painting is

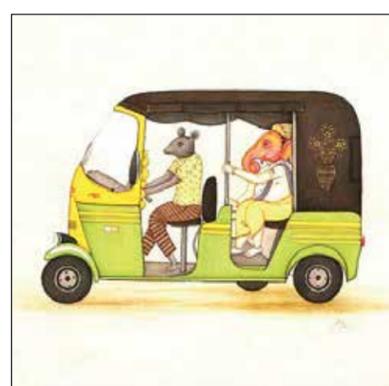
acrylic on canvas.

Another striking exhibit was a five-foot-tall artwork in black ink. Niyaz Hussain's 'Selfie', was influenced by his mother. He explained how a mother in a family structure is often busy ensuring that every individual is cared for.

She doesn't give priority to her own needs. 'Selfie' captures a moment of reflection in a mirror. A mother's contribution to shaping her child before and after birth is depicted by the details drawn in her womb and limbs. The being with



Niyaz Hussain and his paintings, 'Selfie' and 'Love Story'



Ganesha in an autorickshaw by Ajay Kumar Garg

horns growing in her thigh represents a grown child dismissive of his mother's experiences.

Hussain uses ink on paper as his medium since both are easy to carry around and economical as well. "My budget is pretty important to me. I have a lot of family responsibilities and so ink and paper work well," explains Hussain.

Next to 'Selfie' was Hussain's painting 'Love Story'. He said it was inspired by personal experiences of an inter-religious relationship. Etched in black and white, it had lines and shadows with interesting elements to gaze at.

Hussain had polio in both his lower limbs. He has been associated with FOD for over 11 years. FOD helped sponsor Hussain for a bachelor's degree in fine arts at Jamia Milia Islamia.

He participates in 'Beyond Limits' each year and considers it a space where he can spend time with other artists and their art and feel inspired. ■

Green manifesto in Punjab but by voters, not parties

Civil Society News

New Delhi

PUNJAB has an array of environmental problems.

Some of them have to do with pesticide overuse and exploitation of groundwater. Others are caused by emissions and wastes. Sewage has been contaminating water sources. The state's green cover is in jeopardy.

Serious as these issues are, general concern is lacking in both people and politicians. Activists say even when people die from pollution, the message doesn't seem to go home.

So, how to get everyone talking about the decline in the environment, especially when it is now having a direct impact on the quality of life?

Some activists see a People's Green Manifesto as one way of bringing their concerns into focus. They hope political parties will at least sit up and listen during election time. Perhaps it will also prompt voters to think.

The manifesto was released recently and it deals with the location of industrial parks near forests, chemical waste being dumped in water bodies, poor urban planning, dumping of garbage, pesticides and better traffic management. There are, in all, 40 points.

"Election time is when the ear plugs are removed. Otherwise what we say falls on deaf ears," says Jaskirat Singh, one of the activists behind the manifesto.

"When people are asking for *atta*, *dal*, free electricity and what not, let's see if they can also talk about the environment a bit. *Hawa paani ki thodi baat karte hain, kya pata koi is time pe tukka lag jaye* (Let's talk about clean air and water at election time. Maybe this time we will be lucky)," he says with a bit of humour.

But Singh is being self-deprecating. He, and others like him, have put in a lot of effort in preparing the manifesto and giving it visibility.

They have also reached out to local luminaries. Baba Balbir Singh Sechewal, who is famous in Punjab for singlehandedly cleaning up water bodies, has agreed to be the face of the initiative. There are also Dr Inderjit Kaur, Baba Sewa Singh and Giani Kewal Singh — all of whom are recognized locally. Medha Patkar was invited to Punjab to release the manifesto.

Lack of awareness and the apathy that results from it prevent people from making demands on their politicians.

"I see people are suffering, but they are not talking about it. Probably most of them don't even realise

why they are suffering. In one particular village in Abohar near Fazilka there were 11 deaths in 2021 due to cancer. I know that they drink water from the Buddha Nala," says Singh.

Cleaning up the Buddha Nala has been a major issue for residents in Ludhiana like him who are aware of its toxicity. Currently, chemical wastes and sewage end up in the Buddha Nala as it passes through Ludhiana. Its water is consumed further down.

Also of great concern is the danger to Matewara forest which is 20 km from Ludhiana. The government has planned a 1,000 acre industrial park there, right on the floodplains of the Sutlej.



Citizens of Ludhiana hold up the green manifesto with Medha Patkar

The People's Green Manifesto raises these issues amongst others. It suggests framing an industrial policy that takes the environment into account. How factories are located is important. Also, with urbanization growing, there is a need for managing cities with greater foresight.

A similar green manifesto was put out 10 years ago and was largely ignored by politicians. This time too politicians haven't shown much interest.

The earlier manifesto was on broad issues. It was on organic farming and pesticides and made some mention of water and air pollution. It got glossed over because of this — and perhaps because it was ahead of its time.

Now more people are aware of environmental problems. The framers of the current People's Green Manifesto are, therefore, hopeful of evoking at least some kind of response. They have taken up current issues, such as the location of the industrial park, in the hope that it will resonate with people.

More than 20,000 people have been reached using the internet and public meetings. It is a small number, but a beginning has been made.

"We are keeping it very simple. We are taking it step-by-step. We have a long-term vision but we don't have a long-term plan as such. Politicians are so smart, they slip away at every next step. You cannot count on them," he says. ■

SAFFRON BLOOMS IN THE SOUTH

Shree Padre
Kasaragod

FOR 39-year-old Girish Muchal Ramaswamy, a rose farmer in Vasupura village, November 11, 2021 was a day of great significance. As he stepped into his cold storage that day, an exciting new fragrance greeted him. Ramaswamy recognized the aroma. He realized saffron had finally bloomed in his cold storage.

After a year of toil, Ramaswamy's dream had finally come true. He had become the first farmer in Karnataka to grow saffron, the most expensive spice in the world.

The best quality saffron is priced at ₹2 lakh per kg. Lower quality produce costs a minimum of ₹1.3 lakh per kg. Saffron is produced from the dried stigmas of the flowers of *Crocus sativus*, the biological name of the plant. The flowers are called saffron rose.

The general impression is that saffron cannot be grown outside a 25-km radius of Pampore in the Pulwama district of Jammu & Kashmir (J&K). The cool temperature of the state is best suited for this elusive flower. Ramaswamy disproved such notions by growing saffron in warm Karnataka, albeit in controlled conditions.

His farm at Vasupura is in Kudligi taluk, 85 km from Hospet, the capital of the newly formed Vijayanagara district.

Ramaswamy started Sri Rama Flora at the end of 2016, investing ₹4.75 crore to grow roses under protected cultivation. On six acres he set up poly houses, cold rooms and allied infrastructure, even harvesting rain from his poly houses. This water, stored in a huge plastic-lined tank, was sufficient for irrigating his rose plants for six to eight months.

A successful rose farmer, Ramaswamy is general secretary of the Karnataka Small Flower Growers Association (KSFGA) and is director of the International Flower Auction, Bengaluru (IFAB).

His roses were marketed through IFAB. When the going was good, Sri Rama Flora's turnover was ₹4-8 lakhs per month. The roses were sold mostly in the domestic market. For special days like Christmas, Valentine's Day, Mother's Day, the flowers were also exported.

But due to the pandemic his enterprise came to a standstill. Fruits and vegetables are considered essential commodities, but not flowers. The horticulture department officers advised Ramaswamy to prune his rose plants and stop production. He lost lakhs of rupees. When the pandemic continued he removed half his rose plants since he couldn't afford to maintain his farm.

Sri Rama Flora has four cold storage rooms. Each one has a storage capacity of 6 x 4 x 4.5 metres with a volume of 108 cubic metres. Ramaswamy started wondering whether these rooms could be put to any productive use. He began trawling the internet



Girish Ramaswamy with his saffron grown in a controlled atmosphere



intensively. It was then that he came across the work of Dr Ardalan Ghilavizadeh, a senior agricultural consultant in Iran, on growing saffron indoors.

This method of growing saffron in a controlled atmosphere is called aeroponics. It is a process of growing plants in an air or humidmist environment without using soil or any aggregate medium.

"That was a ray of hope," recalls Ramaswamy. He studied the Iranian expert's success. "One advantage I had is that I already had cold rooms, the main requirement. I didn't have to invest any money in that. Secondly, since saffron is a 45-day crop, once normalcy returns I could raise saffron during the off-season for rose."

"Another possibility was to grow saffron through vertical farming," he says. Vertical farming is the practice of growing crops in vertically stacked layers, often in a controlled environment, to optimize plant growth, and without use of soil. You can get high yields from a small area. Also, he came to know that two brothers, Naveen and Praveen, had grown saffron in controlled conditions in Haryana.

Ramaswamy contacted the Iranian expert and the two brothers but couldn't afford their consultation fees. So, once again, he turned to the internet. He started studying how to grow saffron in a controlled environment. His elder sister, Hamsaveni Kumar, deputy director in the Agriculture Department and his younger brother, Harish M.R., an assistant

horticulture officer in the Horticulture Department provided vital information. Ramaswamy approached the Spices Board which also gave him a helping hand. So did Raichur Agriculture University.

His next task was to get good seed material. Ramaswamy browsed IndiaMART, a B2B marketplace, and contacted a few Kashmiri farmers through his friends. After much effort, one Kashmiri farmer agreed to send him four kg of seed material.

He got 200 bulbs from Kashmir. Growing saffron in an artificial atmosphere requires utmost care and knowledge. First, the outer layer of the bulb has to be removed. Then it has to be treated with a fungicide and shade dried. Corm rot, a fungal disease, is a serious issue.

After treating his bulbs, Ramaswamy started growing them in his cold room. On September 30, he recalls, he 'sowed' the bulbs. If the temperature of the cold room is increased, humidity decreases, and vice versa. "We vary the physical parameters too so that plants feel it is day and night," he says. LED lamps are lit from 6 am to 6 pm for plants to think it is day. Low temperature and high humidity are required. Flowers don't bloom if the temperature goes above 18 degrees Celsius.

Plant nutrients are provided via foliar sprays. Ramaswamy recorded the growth of his saffron plants every five days by taking photos. Once in a while, he measured the sprouted flower stalk with a vernier caliper.

On the 43rd day, November 11, the first flower bloomed. "That was a moment of great joy for me. In fact, I never expected my experiment to be so successful. At best, I thought I would get a half-bloomed flower that would fall soon," says Ramaswamy.

According to media reports the saffron grown by the two Haryanvi brothers is of good quality. So a precedence exists of growing quality saffron in controlled conditions. As for costs, Ramaswamy says an investment of ₹30 lakh is needed to build a cold storage area which would grow one tonne of saffron bulbs. Peripherals like racks and artificial lighting would cost another ₹3 lakh. ■

Contact: Girish Muchal Ramaswamy - 86189 01776; shriramflora@gmail.com

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Pages 18-41



THE JOY OF JOINING THE DOTS

RITA & UMESH ANAND

As our magazine completes 18 years, how should we look back upon the time we have spent? How should we also look ahead? Looking ahead is somewhat scary since publishing on the whole is in a precarious place right now and, as a business, *Civil Society* remains as undercapitalized as it was when we began. Looking ahead, therefore, comes with its spells of vertigo. We would much rather keep our heads down and live for the day.

But when we look back over 18 years, we feel only great joy in having served to join some of the dots in a country as vast and diverse as ours through this magazine's stories and pictures.

We had decided right in the beginning that our emphasis would be on people and their lives and not so much on opinion and commentary.

Public spats and angry outbursts were also not for us. We wanted to quietly go about our stories and bring out a magazine with the best possible production standards.

In particular, we wanted to cover those people who were doing interesting and significant things for bridging the social and economic gaps in the country, but weren't normally getting covered. If others couldn't see the stories in their work, we could and wanted to bring them to wider notice. Our interest was in successes and achievements and the capacity to overcome problems.

With such an approach we would not only have an understanding of problems but also those efforts that were leading to solutions. Both were important to us with the emphasis being on solutions.

'Everyone is someone' was and has remained our slogan over these 18 years. It isn't just a line that sounds good. To us it has been the guiding principle for our coverage and the basis for any modern society.

This anniversary of our magazine comes at a time when NGOs are the subject of some amount of controversy. Are they needed? Who is funding them? Are they enemies of the country?

The concerns raised by our National Security Adviser, Ajit Doval, are not entirely unfounded. It is naive to think NGOs can't become pawns of larger global interests. Also, when money flows internationally from governments and corporations they choose their causes.

But we have to say from our experience that NGOs and activists play an important role in helping governments solve the problems of development. They create awareness, connect with communities and solve last-mile problems that governments just don't know to handle.

Whether it is healthcare, solar power, digital access, waste management, financial inclusion or education, NGOs have been problem-solvers and gamechangers. Their energy and inventiveness should continue to be harnessed in the process of nation-building.

Faced as we are with inequality and a huge development deficit, the spirit of voluntarism is needed more than ever to help more people come up. NGOs represent that spirit of inclusion and progressive fraternity around which better-off Indians can and should gather.

Our special contributors in this anniversary issue have each dwelt on the enormous work that NGOs do in different domains. Where controversy exists, they have offered a perspective, but let there be no doubt that we can't do without a vibrant social sector.

In this magazine we have, right from the beginning, defined civil society as going beyond NGOs, think tanks and other such organizations.

When we started out 18 years ago the term civil society was not as widely in currency in India as we find it today. Globally, it was regarded as a counterweight to hold governments to account and ensure that people in power didn't stray.

We felt for our magazine the term should include anyone

who contributed to the strengthening of our shared values as a society. It could be a doctor, lawyer, company executive, government official, industrialist, entrepreneur, scientist, farmer, teacher or journalist. In fact, the more people remained socially-driven in their professions and everyday lives the better. We have engaged with both socialists and those with rightwing leanings as well as a religious orientation.

People's movements of which we have seen several in the past 18 years, have led to greater democratization by going beyond urban elites and reaching out to the very poor and disenfranchised. These movements, as distinct from formally structured NGOs, have resulted in forward-looking legislation such as on the right to information, rural employment, access and jobs for the disabled and rights of street vendors.

Our magazine has covered all these and more, invariably picking up trends much before others. We have also tracked the transition from the voluntary sector to politics. Arvind Kejriwal was our first cover story when he was still an income-tax officer on long leave experimenting with the RTI campaign.



Savitri Gaur from Bundi addresses the Hall of Fame audience in Delhi: 'I am the CEO of my company'

Over time, we tracked his journey into politics through the anti-corruption movement. And soon the activist became the Delhi Chief Minister in our stories! For the record, our third issue's cover story in 2003 was headlined: 'NGOs in politics'. It was about crossing over from activism to politics. So, we can lay claim to being prescient.

But it is in presenting the stories of ordinary people that we have found real joy and satisfaction. These are people who have brought change around them and would perhaps have gone unnoticed if we hadn't turned up as inquisitive journalists in our quest for interesting stories.

We remember standing in a warehouse with women farmers in Bundi in Rajasthan. With some help they had started a farmer-producer company, the Samridhhi Mahila Crop Producers' Company Ltd, to market the soya and other crops that they were growing. Their sense of empowerment was awesome. We brought them to Delhi for the Civil Society Hall of Fame event at the India Habitat Centre. When Savitri Gaur made a short speech beginning with 'I am the CEO of my company', she received resounding applause from the urban middle-class audience that had packed the amphitheatre. (See picture.)

Joining the dots for us has meant putting out in our magazine the stories of people in far-flung corners of the country and connecting them with our very diverse readership. Beyond our journalism, the Civil Society Hall of Fame has been a mechanism through which we have celebrated changemakers, identifying them and bringing them finally to an event in the heart of the

capital to be feted.

There was Sanjay Sahni, an electrician on the streets of Delhi who used the internet to uncover corruption in rural job payments in his village in Muzaffarpur in Bihar. Dr Jogesh Chaudhury in Barmer transformed a decrepit PHC on his first posting as a government doctor. In Kerala, Dr C.R. Elsy helped farmers get GI status for a range of agricultural produce.

We discovered Uncle Moosa running a library movement for young people in Arunachal Pradesh. And lest we forget, there were three women from Jongsha village in Meghalaya who used RTI to uncover corruption in the ration system. At the Hall of Fame event in Delhi, the Jongsha women sang an anti-corruption song on an open microphone using background music from a mobile phone. They had rehearsed the song overnight while being our guests in Delhi.

These names are just a few. The list is much longer and fills the pages of issues we have brought out with unfailing regularity over the years.

While we have mostly gone out in search of stories, there have also been those stories that have come in search of us. In India there is an innate desire to connect and cohere. Not pull apart. Our challenge as journalists has been to help make this happen with credibility and skills.

It has been heartening to see a story from one corner of the country find resonance in another. We know because our readers tell us. A response we have consistently received over the years is that our magazine makes our readers feel good about India. That is so interesting considering the problems we face as a nation.

The pandemic has brought with it suffering and gloom. But even at its worst it has also shown how much people care for a fair, just and inclusive India. Our time in the past 18 years has been spent discovering talented and progressive Indians who each day do their bit to build a modern country. They speak different languages, represent different cultures and aren't alike to look at. But we in this magazine know them to be one people in search of a common future.

NGOs have a special role to play in crafting such a common future. As India speeds ahead with digitization, an enormous opportunity presents itself, but there is also a digital divide.

Helping people use computers and smartphones and the services of the internet is the work for which activists are needed. Governments and companies, however well-intentioned, don't have the capacity to bring about such change. Nor can inclusion be achieved through markets alone.

Issues pertaining to digital access are also complex and call for an understanding of technology and its social implications. If we need activists to promote digital access, we also need activists to caution us that the internet comes with its negatives and is not the magical solution to all our problems. We have seen this when the issue of net neutrality arose over Facebook and its onslaught with Free Basics.

An area we have been particularly interested in is healthcare. Privatization in healthcare has brought limited success and mounting problems. Finally, it has been left to the voluntary sector in healthcare to shape the models that work for the majority of Indians who seek basic facilities.

From our stories we have found that qualified professionals who are socially responsible make the perfect change leaders in an increasingly complex world. In affordable housing, for instance, it took finance professionals, who had stepped away from mainstream banking roles, to redefine creditworthiness and give out those small loans to borrowers in the unorganized sector. An activist spirit was necessary to achieve this. The government and the large banks, both private and public, couldn't do it.

The way forward is through pragmatic partnerships. It is important that the government create the atmosphere and contexts in which talented people and institutions discover each other in the interests of the larger social good. ■

STATE AND CIVIL SOCIETY, FROM KARAT TO DOVAL

It was the CPI(M) leader in 1984 who first saw an imperialist strategy to influence development by using 'voluntary agencies and action groups.'



SANJAYA BARU

Ajit Kumar Doval, India's National Security Adviser (NSA) and a retired officer of the Indian Police Service, set the cat among the pigeons in November with an address to IPS probationers at the Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel National Police Academy with these words: "The new frontiers of war, what you call the fourth-generation warfare, is the civil society." Wars, he declared, have ceased to become an effective instrument for achieving political or military objectives. They are too expensive or unaffordable and, at the same time, there is uncertainty about their outcome. It is civil society, he concluded, that risks being "subverted, suborned, divided, and manipulated to hurt the interests of a nation".

Rebutting the NSA and joining issue with her former civil service batchmate, the distinguished civil society leader, Aruna Roy, argued that it was incumbent upon civil society activists to in fact ensure that the State and its agencies adhered to the values and principles of the Constitution and that civil society is not an enemy of the State.

The views expressed by Doval and Roy echo similar arguments that date back almost half a century. It was the former general secretary of the Communist Party of India-Marxist (CPI-M), Prakash Karat, who in fact fired the first salvo against the growing political activism of what he called 'action groups and voluntary agencies' and what have come to be called non-governmental organisations (NGOs).

A simple and useful definition of an NGO is provided by the Global Development Research Centre: "A non-governmental organization is an independent, flexible, democratic, secular, non-profit people's organization that usually works for and/or assists in the empowerment of economically

and socially marginalized groups."

Drawing attention to their role in civil society in a famous essay published in the CPI (M) party journal, *The Marxist* (Vol.2, No.2, 1984), Karat wrote:

"There is a sophisticated and comprehensive strategy worked out in imperialist quarters to harness the forces of voluntary agencies and action groups to their strategic design to penetrate the Indian society and influence its course of development. It is the imperialist ruling circles which have provided through their academic outfits the political and ideological basis for the outlook of a substantial number of these proliferating groups in India. By providing liberal funds to these groups, imperialism has created avenues to penetrate directly vital sections of the Indian society and simultaneously use this movement as a vehicle to counter and disrupt the potential of the Left movement. The party has to take serious note of

Ajit Doval has not clearly defined who he is worried about. There is no one type of NGO, nor does the data suggest that the majority of NGOs are foreign funded.

this arm of imperialist penetration while focusing on other instruments and tactics of imperialism. An ideological offensive to rebut the philosophy propagated by these groups is urgently necessary, as it tends to attract petty bourgeois youth imbued with idealism."

LONG DEBATE

Karat's 1984 polemic initiated a wide-ranging and long debate in India and overseas on the role of NGOs and their relationship to the State and mainstream political parties. Civil society activism and NGOs have been part of Indian political life for a long time. The freedom struggle and the Indian national movement drew its strength from civil society activism splintered into scores of what may be called 'NGOs' across the subcontinent. However,

the sudden and rapid spurt of civil society activism through NGOs in the post-Independence period can be traced to five phenomena dating back to the 1970s and 1980s.

First, and perhaps foremost, was the imposition of the Emergency by the Indira Gandhi government in 1975 that drove a considerable amount of mainstream political activity underground and manifested itself in 'non-political' NGOs. Second was the post-Emergency boom in such activism with political leaders like Jayaprakash Narayan blessing various NGO activists and the Janata Party government extending official recognition to many. A third factor that contributed to the rise of NGO-sponsored civil society activism has been the growing demand for increased State funding for welfare and development programmes in the face of budgetary cuts forced by the worsening financial condition of the central and state governments.

In fact, it was the CPI (M)-led state government of West Bengal that made deteriorating Centre-state financial relations a major political issue, with state governments complaining that their welfare and development budgets were being cut back due to fiscal compulsions caused by growing centralization of finance and governance. Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi's attempt to get the Union government to directly deal with local government institutions, especially panchayats and zilla parishads, provoked state governments to complain about fiscal discrimination. Against this background, civil society organizations began demanding greater fiscal allocation for welfare programmes. Some state governments then decided to implement their programmes through NGOs, further empowering their developmental role.

WORLD BANK

A fourth factor, that Karat also drew attention to, was the interest that developed western countries and multilateral financial institutions dominated by them, like the World Bank, showed in directly delivering development aid to beneficiaries through NGOs rather than government organizations.

Karat quoted World Bank President Robert McNamara, who told a meeting of the Bank's governing council in 1983 that the Bank should recognize the role of "new forms of rural institutions and organisations that will give as much attention to promoting the inherent potential and productivity of the poor as is generally given to protecting the power of the privileged".



Prakash Karat



Ajit Doval

As World Bank president it was James D. Wolfensohn who gave NGOs a central role in the Bank's programmes, laying the foundation for their semi-official status in all multilateral forums and conferences.

"In all its forms, civil society is probably the largest single factor in development. If not in its monetary contribution, then certainly in its human contribution and its experience and its history," declared Wolfensohn, making the Bank organizationally recognize their role "in meeting the challenges of development and welcome the opportunity to work with civil society".

NGOs have acquired a high profile in the functioning of the Bank, the World Trade Organization and so on, and at multilateral gatherings of these organizations and conferences on climate change and other global challenges. There is no denying the fact that several western governments have used NGOs to promote their national agendas in the garb of global good.

In the climate change debate it is moot whether western NGO activism and their accusations against developing countries have strengthened or weakened the global campaign for dealing with the challenge of climate change and carbon emissions. Sometimes the best can easily become the enemy of the good and NGO activism at the global level can end up preventing a reasonable consensus in its enthusiasm to secure the best possible outcome.

CSR FUNDS

Finally, a fifth factor that has contributed to the rise of NGO activity has been the legislation of a corporate social responsibility (CSR) law that requires corporate entities to invest in a given financial year two percent of average net profits made during the three immediate preceding financial years. The opening of this corporate tap has helped many genuine NGOs to substitute

foreign funding with domestic funding. While there is the usual fraud in CSR that one encounters in other avenues of business, and while it is true that many companies are retaining CSR funds within their organization by promoting their own NGOs (BONGOs or business-organized NGOs), the CSR Act has also opened up new avenues of funding for many cash-strapped NGOs.

Karat's essay provoked a fascinating debate in which such eminent activists and scholars such as Anna Hazare, Ela Bhatt, Rajni Kothari, D.L. Sheth, Harsh Sethi and B.S. Baviskar participated. Bhatt summed up a widely held view that "democracy and development require active and informed participation at the grassroots" and that this was what NGOs were enabling. In his presidential address to the 26th All-India Sociological Congress in 2000, titled "NGOs and Civil Society in India", sociologist Baviskar attributed the rise of civil society activism to the 'retreat of the State' in many areas of development and the rise of 'neo-liberal' economics. Baviskar's address remains relevant reading even now. (Published in *Sociological Bulletin*, Vol. 50, No.1, March 2001.)

BJP's NGOs

While Karat saw the hand of 'imperialism' behind the increased role and influence of NGOs in India, Doval has not clearly defined who he is worried about. The fact, however, is that there is no one type of NGO nor does the data suggest that an overwhelming majority are either foreign-funded or anti-national. In fact, when the Narendra Modi government began exerting pressure on civil society organizations and NGOs through increased scrutiny of their finances and functioning, many drew attention to the fact that even the Rashtriya Swayamsewak Sangh (RSS) was a recipient of foreign funding. Those defending the RSS pointed to the organization's welfare and developmental role

and said foreign financial contribution was being used for the betterment of people's lives. Much the same can be said for the work of an overwhelming number of NGOs, and everyone would have their own definition of welfare and development.

Interestingly, while the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) accused the Manmohan Singh government of giving undue space to NGOs in shaping public policy through the institution of the National Advisory Council, chaired by Sonia Gandhi, the BJP has also allowed NGOs including the RSS, the Swadeshi Jagran Manch (SJM) and several others to play an active role in providing policy advice to the government. If both the national political parties have found it useful to rope civil society organizations into the policy-making apparatus of the State there must be good political reasons. Perhaps they seek social and public legitimacy for government policies by showing that they are based on ideas emanating from civil society. This only reinforces the role of civil society organizations in public policymaking in a democracy.

It is testimony to the health of Indian democracy that all manner of NGOs do exist and function and that civil society remains active and vibrant, often in the face of extreme coercion by the agencies of the State. In itself, no democratic State should find fault with such organizations and should be able to make a clear distinction between NGOs that fit this bill and those that do not. The present trend of subjecting all NGOs to increased State scrutiny and harassment should stop. If indeed civil society has become a 'war front' due to NGO activity and there is a threat to national security from them it is up to the government to ensure that it has the capacity to monitor such anti-national and anti-social activity without subjecting all NGOs to avoidable scrutiny and bureaucratic harassment. ■

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WE, THE WARRIORS OF DEMOCRACY...

It is non-profits who have made courageous attempts to clean up elections, get better politicians and compel political parties to be more transparent.



JAGDEEP CHHOKAR

IN his now famous speech to budding police officers in Hyderabad on how civil society groups can be subverted, the National Security Adviser, Ajit Kumar Doval, widely regarded as the third most important official in the security establishment, significantly said: “The quintessence of democracy does not lie in the ballot box ... it lies in the laws which are made by the people who are elected by those ballot boxes ... The new frontiers of war, called Fourth Generation of Warfare, is represented by the civil society...”

There are two fallacies in this formulation. One, ballot boxes are not of any use unless citizens, actually cast their votes into the ballot boxes. The other fallacy is about the people elected by those ballot boxes. What type of people are they? Data shows the number of MPs in the Lok Sabha with criminal cases against them has been growing. The Association for Democratic Reforms (ADR) collected this data from the self-sworn affidavits of candidates contesting elections to the Lok Sabha in compliance with decisions of the Supreme Court of India in 2002 and 2003.

Readers can judge the quality of “the people who are elected by those ballot boxes” from this table:

MPs in Lok Sabha with criminal cases pending against them		
Year	Number of MPs	Percentage
2004	125	23%
2009	153	28%
2014	185	34%
2019	233	43%

So, what's new, you might ask? Till the year 2004, voters had no way of knowing what “type” of people they were casting their votes for in the “ballot boxes”. This was because of a specific provision in law which permitted a sitting legislator, convicted in

a criminal case, to continue to be in that position and contest further elections, whereas a common citizen was barred from contesting elections for six years if convicted in a criminal case. But we are getting ahead of our story.

HOW IT ALL BEGAN

Around 1998-99, there were a lot of media reports about people with pending criminal cases against them contesting elections and getting elected. Around the same time, in May 1999, the Law Commission of India submitted its 170th report, Reforms of the Electoral Laws. In a comprehensive review of all the electoral laws one of the recommendations of the commission was:

“In the interest of transparency, we have also suggested provisions making it obligatory upon every candidate to declare the assets possessed by him or her or by his/her spouse and dependent relations and the particulars regarding criminal cases pending against him/her, in the nomination paper itself.”

A group of public-spirited persons decided to file a Public Interest Litigation (PIL) in the Delhi High Court in December 1999, requesting the implementation of the above recommendation. The Delhi High Court, in a decision on November 2, 2000, upheld the petition and directed the Election Commission of India (ECI) to collect and make the necessary information available to voters.

The Union of India (UoI) filed an appeal in the Supreme Court against the Delhi High Court's decision. Several political parties became interveners in the case, in support of the stand of the UoI, opposing the Delhi High Court decision.

The Supreme Court gave its judgement on May 2, 2002, upholding the High Court judgement, and directed the ECI to get information on a sworn affidavit from each candidate seeking election to Parliament or the state legislature, as a necessary part of his nomination paper, on the criminal, financial and educational antecedents of the candidate.

The ECI's implementation of these directions made the entire political establishment very unhappy. In an all-party meeting on July 7, 2002, it was unanimously decided that the Supreme Court's decision and the consequent order of the ECI would not be allowed to be implemented, and the Representation of the People Act, 1951 (RP Act), would be amended, in that very session of Parliament if necessary, to nullify the Supreme Court's decision and the ECI order.

A bill to amend the RP Act was accordingly prepared but it could not be introduced in Parliament as the Lok Sabha was adjourned sine die. The government then decided to issue an ordinance.

Given that the draft of the ordinance seemed to be prima facie unconstitutional, about 30 civil society representatives met the President and cautioned him about it. When the ordinance was sent to the President, he “returned” it. The Cabinet, however, sent it to the President again and he had to sign it following established convention. The Supreme Court's decision of May 2, 2002, thus stood nullified.

The struggle did not end here. Three PILs were filed in the Supreme Court challenging the amendment of the RP Act. All three petitioners were civil society organisations: Association for Democratic Reforms, People's Union for Civil Rights and Lok Satta.

The Supreme Court gave its judgment on March 13, 2003, holding that the amendment of the RP Act was unconstitutional and null and void. It restored the Supreme Court judgment of May 2, 2002, saying it had “attained finality” and that there shall be no appeal against that judgment.

This effort, from 1999 to 2003, is what enabled voters/citizens to know what type of people were “elected by those ballot boxes” and laws made by whom are the “quintessence of democracy”.

THE AFTERMATH

Yet the number of tainted MPs in Lok Sabha has consistently risen over the last four general elections! So, what impact has all this effort had? On the face of it, the proportion of people with criminal cases pending against them in the Lok Sabha has increased. But if one goes into some details of the electoral process, it is revealed that most of the reasons for this increase can be found in the laws made by the people who are elected by those ballot boxes!

Further, the root of all these mysterious outcomes lies in an institution called “political parties”. What political parties in India are, and what they should be, is best described in the following paragraph of the 170th Report of the Law Commission of India:

“If democracy and accountability constitute the core of our constitutional system, the same concepts must also apply to and bind the political parties which are integral to parliamentary democracy. It is the political parties that form the government, man



The number of tainted MPs in the Lok Sabha has consistently risen over the last four general elections

the Parliament and run the governance of the country. It is, therefore, necessary to introduce internal democracy, financial transparency and accountability in the working of the political parties. A political party which does not respect democratic principles in its internal working cannot be expected to respect those principles in the governance of the country. It cannot be a dictatorship internally and democratic in its functioning outside.”

The National Commission to Review the Working of the Constitution (NCRWC) chaired by the former Chief Justice of India, Justice M.N. Venkatchaliah, in its report submitted on March 31, 2002, said:

“The Commission recommends that there should be a comprehensive legislation (may be named as the Political Parties [Registration and Regulation] Act), regulating the registration and functioning of political parties or alliances of parties in India.”

These recommendations were made in 1999 and in 2002, but it seems “the people who are elected by those ballot boxes” have not had the time or inclination to implement them.

SEVERAL INITIATIVES

On the other hand civil society activists, or shall we call them ‘Fourth Generation Warriors’, have been trying to get exactly the same done.

The ADR requested a committee chaired by Justice M.N. Venkatchaliah, to draft a bill to regulate the functioning of political parties. This committee drafted what it called the Political Parties (Registration and Regulation of Affairs, etc.) Bill, 2011. This draft bill has been shared with all the major political parties but none has shown any inclination of taking it up.

In addition, several initiatives have been made by civil society groups to cleanse the electoral and political systems. Some representative examples are listed below:

- In June 2013, the Central Information Commission (CIC), in response to an application by ADR and S.C. Agrawal, declared in a unanimous, full bench decision, that the six national parties — the BJP, INC, BSP, CPI, CPI(M) and NCP — are public authorities under the Right to Information (RTI) Act, 2005. All six parties refused to comply with the CIC's order. In May 2015, the same petitioners filed a petition in the Supreme Court to implement the CIC's order. The petition is still pending in the Supreme Court.
- In July 2013, the Supreme Court set aside clause 8(4) of the RP Act on petitions filed by Lily Thomas, a public-spirited Supreme Court lawyer, and Lok Prahari, a civil society group in Lucknow. As a result, sitting MPs and MLAs were barred from holding office on being convicted in a Court of Law.
- In September 2013, the Supreme Court ruled, in a PIL filed by the People's Union for Civil Rights, that the right to register a “none of the above (NOTA)” vote in elections should apply and ordered the ECI to provide such a button in the Electronic Voting Machines (EVMs).
- Again, in September 2013, on a PIL filed by Resurgence India, another civil society group, the Supreme Court ruled that no columns or boxes should be left blank in affidavits filed as an essential part of the nomination papers, in terms of its judgment in the 2003 ADR case.
- In March 2014, the Delhi High Court in its judgement in a PIL filed by ADR, held that the BJP

and the Congress were both guilty of accepting funds in violation of the Foreign Contribution (Regulation) Act, 1976 (FCRA 1976), and directed the Ministry of Home Affairs and the ECI that appropriate action under FCRA 1976 be taken against them within six months of the judgment. Both the parties first filed appeals in the Supreme Court and then withdrew them. In the meantime, the government amended the FCRA twice, once with retrospective effect, eight years after the Act being amended had ceased to exist! The matter is still sub judice.

• In September 2017, ADR and Common Cause, another civil society group, filed a PIL in the Supreme Court challenging the constitutional validity of the Electoral Bonds scheme introduced by the government, enabling anonymous donations to political parties, in any amount, by anyone (including Indian and foreign companies with branch offices in India).

In an interim order on April 12, 2019, the Supreme Court said that “the rival contentions give rise to weighty issues which have a tremendous bearing on the sanctity of the electoral process in the country. Such weighty issues would require an in-depth hearing...”. But the learned judges of the Supreme Court have not had time to hear the petition till now, while elections continue to be held and unaccounted money keeps flowing.

The third highest functionary in the security establishment of the country seems to have a lot on his hands in dealing with Fourth Generation Warriors! ■

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WHEN NGOs BECOME BOTH THE WEAPON AND TARGET

In fourth-generation warfare the fineprint matters. Who is the non-State actor fighting the State in India's case? Who is subverting civil society?



NANDITA HAKSAR

voluntary organizations which are colloquially bunched together as NGOs or non-governmental organizations. The Central Statistical Institute of India in 2009 had estimated that there were 3.3 million NGOs registered in India, or one NGO for every 400 Indian citizens. In 2020, GuideStar India (GSI) had more than 10,000 verified NGOs and more than 1,600 certified NGOs on its portal. There are also 100,873 NGOs registered on the NGO Darpan portal of the NITI Aayog.

During the monsoon session of Parliament, Union Minister of State for Home Affairs, Nityanand Rai, said ₹16,940.58 crore was received by NGOs in 2017-18, ₹16,525.73 crore in 2018-19, and ₹15,853.94 crore in 2019-20. In other words, ₹49,000 crore in foreign funds was received by more than 18,000 NGOs in the country in the last three years.

HIDDEN AGENDA

These funds are from foreign funders backed by various States and transnational corporations. The first to point out how foreign-funded NGOs subvert civil society were the Leftists and communists. They sought to expose a hidden agenda of foreign funding through the 1970s and 1980s. From the Left's perspective, all through the Cold War era donor agencies played a nefarious role in furthering the imperialistic agenda.

The Ford Foundation, for example, was pressed into service by the CIA to counter the 'communist threat' by setting up cultural fronts, enlisting the support of prominent anti-Left intellectuals, and in India working closely with the Nehruvian regime (itself keen to quell peasant uprisings in Telangana and other places) to co-opt agrarian struggles through community development projects.

There were four broad ways the foreign funds given to NGOs were seen to subvert civil society:

1. NGOs undermine, divert, and replace

The Left saw donor agencies as playing a nefarious role in the Cold War era with NGOs as a tool to further the agenda of imperialism.

autonomous mass organizing; they were used to subvert mass movements and crush them.

2. NGOs are a tool of imperialism — this has been well documented by many economists and writers like James Petras, a retired Bartle Professor (Emeritus) of Sociology at Binghamton University, New York, and author of more than 60 books published in 29 languages, and over 600 articles in professional journals.

Petras pointed out: "As opposition to neoliberalism grew in the early 1980s, the US, European governments and the World Bank increased their funding of NGOs. There is a direct relation between the growth of social movements challenging the neoliberal model and the effort to subvert them by creating alternative forms of social action through the NGOs."

The basic point of convergence between the NGOs and the World Bank was their common opposition to 'statism'. On the surface NGOs criticized the State from a 'Left' perspective defending civil society, while the right did so in the name of the market. In reality, however, the World Bank, the neoliberal regimes and western foundations co-opted and encouraged NGOs to undermine the national welfare State by providing social services to compensate the victims of multinational corporations (MNCs).

3. NGOs replace what the State should be doing. For instance, why was the World Bank interested in funding an NGO working on groundwater survey in Rajasthan? World Bank President Robert McNamara and Ford Foundation Chairman George Bundy went to visit the NGO without even informing the government. The NGO was involved in various irrigation projects, which should have been undertaken by the government rather than the World Bank.

4. NGOs support capitalism by erasing working class struggle. As far back as 1981, the Communist Party of India-Marxist (CPI-M) had expressed concern about the role of NGOs in subverting working class movements. Prakash Karat had argued this in his article in *The Marxist*.

WAR ON TERROR

Doval's concerns about the subversion of civil society, however, are rather different. He is building a case for creating a narrative that the greatest threat to national security is the non-State actor which is the 'Islamic terrorist'.

This narrative takes advantage of the so-called



At the World Social Forum: Do NGOs get used by foreign interests to subvert social movements through alternative forms of social action?

War Against Terrorism and tries to promote through the media a picture of the threat to civil society which is conflated with the idea of Hindu society. All those who point out that this is a false narrative are then deemed to be anti-national i.e. anti-Hindutva.

Doval and the intellectuals who have congregated around the Vivekananda International Foundation are promoting the idea that this threat to civil society can be countered with a policy to build a strategic culture. Doval was the founder-director of the foundation.

The Vivekananda International Foundation, together with the Manohar Parrikar Institute for Defence Studies and Analyses (MP-IDSA), has

organized a series of lectures over the past few years to explore the roots of India's strategic culture, language and philosophy.

Can a strategic culture which excludes religious minorities help in stopping the subversion and manipulation of civil society or would it invite external forces to take advantage of the internal divide within our society to further subvert our national unity?

Many independent intellectuals have voiced concern about Doval's statement. But there is no movement to seriously challenge the growth of the Hindutva ideology because of the proliferation of sectarian 'non-governmental identity groups' whose structure, funding and leadership do not allow for a

strong movement against the subversion and manipulation of civil society.

Petras documented how US policy in Iraq led to the physical destruction of Iraqi society and, further, de-modernized a secular, developing society and reversed it to a series of warring clan-tribal-clerical-ethnic based entities devoid of any national authority or a viable economy.

This is an example of fourth-generation warfare. It has an uncanny resemblance to the way our society is heading with ethnic, religious, sectarian divisions sharpening and the idea of a united, secular and socialist India receding from the memories of the present generation. ■

Nandita Haksar is a noted lawyer and human rights activist.

WHERE ARE WE BEING READ?

Civil Society is going places...

Udupi, Koppal, Palakkad, Tenneru, Taleigao Plateau, Kothrud, Kutch, Porbandar, Chamoli, Lohit, Bhavnagar, Ahwa, Sonipat, Tiswadi, Amritsar, Dehradun, Sabarkantha, Valsad, Sirsa, Erode, Hamirpur, Aizwal, Kinnaur, Dhanbad, Dumka, Palamu, Shimla, Chamarajanagar, Haveri, Tezu, Bellare, Madikeri, Malappuram, Jhabua, Amravati, Kolhapur, Osmanabad, Bishnupur, Mysuru, Dimapur, Rajsamand, Mokokchung, Mayurbhanj, Bathinda, Barmer, Hoshiarpur, Jhalawar, Auraiya, Farrukhabad, Lakhimpur Kheri, Pratapgarh, Burdwan, Murshidabad, Pauri Garhwal, Cuddalore, Nungambakkam, Malda, Bharatpur, Sivaganga, Kancheepuram, Varanasi, Porvorim, Kanyakumari, Perambalur, Pudukkotai, Shahdol, Panjim, Thoraipakkam, Tiruvannamalai, New York, Bardes, Nalgonda, Domalguda, Changlang, London, Avittathur, Itanagar....

Civil Society

SOCIAL CAMPAIGNS HAVE GIVEN VOICE TO THE WEAK

From RTI to food, to rural jobs and forests, the drafting of laws has been in consultation with ordinary people and governments held to account.



ARUNA ROY
& NIKHIL DEY

WE are all citizens alike in our constitutional rights. There are categories which define us. But when categories swallow the human condition, it is time to stop and think. Civil society is one such classification that is perceived in very different ways. Those outside the State and market are generally recognized as part of civil society. This huge expanse of citizens, from the highly privileged elite to the emaciated silicosis patient, are all dumped in an arc of incompatibilities. It is a conglomerate of several groups of people with diverse and often contradictory interests.

For a long time, the Mazdoor Kisan Shakti Sangathan (MKSS), has patiently tried to inform the discourse that marginalized people are seldom included under this definition. They remain, in many ways, the crux of Mahatma Gandhi's 'last man' — the millions who have lived on the fringes of the basic necessities of life, as well as the people and communities fighting for justice for whom Babasaheb Ambedkar fought all his life.

In this scale of diminishing power, the marginalized and the less privileged have never quite been acknowledged as civil society, or even citizens with equal rights. By the nature of their economic and social marginalization, they are made politically invisible. Their participation and effective articulation as citizens have been incumbent on organizing themselves into collectives to be heard.

The social movements that emerged from their struggles and campaigns have focused on their voice being heard in both State and society, based on the constitutional values of equality, justice, and fraternity. The rights-based laws that were enacted in India between 2005 and 2014 are a narrative of

assertion of these values which have contributed to making a more equal and just India.

Social movements have affirmed the democratic rights of all citizens. They have questioned the mainstream development paradigm that fosters inequality and plays havoc with our natural resource base. Their small and big victories over the years have been the result of a strong assertion of democratic citizenship.

They have incrementally strengthened the voice of the marginalized and given space to voices of dissent. The laws they have brought have evolved from robust processes of consultation and advocacy in the larger civil society. As a result, parliamentary platforms have been strengthened.

In the past two decades there has been considerable focus on the role of civil society. There is a realization that democratic participation does not end with the vote. Citizens can assert their rights to participation in governance and make interventions. While the privileged elites have resented this, movements have been questioning non-participatory development policies and multiple kinds of inequalities. The Narmada Bachao Andolan (NBA) and the National Alliance of People's Movements (NAPM), for instance, go back to Dr Ambedkar's concerns about democracy addressing economic and social inequalities.

The authoritarian and unconstitutional developments in political power and governance were questioned by the JP movement. After the Emergency, the importance of public articulation and the freedom of expression became core values. Civil liberties emerged as an important issue of public concern and the People's Union for Civil Liberties (PUCL) was formed.

LAWS BY THE PEOPLE

The rights-based laws passed in India from 2004 to 2013, are the contribution of social movements and citizens groups to the legislative framework in process and content. They shifted priorities and engaged the attention of policy-makers, enabling a seminal shift in policymaking and legislation. They contributed to the creation of a system of engagement with democratic governance. These platforms enabled government, academics and specialists to sit with people's organizations and design policy and legislations.

The law on the Right to Information (RTI) was shaped in an 11-year campaign during which lacunae in the proposals were intermittently dealt

with. The basic legislation, drafted by the Press Council Chair, was discussed in several fora and critiqued. Even the worst critics of the RTI and the other rights-based laws have had to acknowledge their efficacy. Equally important is the process through which this engagement led to framing policy with people's campaigns and movements. There was also unprecedented political will during the UPA years to promote a participatory policy-making process.

There were three broad categories of rights-based legislations that were passed in this period. One set covered democratic and participatory rights such as RTI, Lokpal, and the Whistleblowers Protection Act. The extraordinary success of RTI in empowering people led to the demand for more transparency and accountability measures. But it also made the government extremely wary about other legislations that might empower people to hold them to account. RTI marked a dramatic shift in not just access to information, but also access by citizens to their share of democratic entitlements and power. Today, about six to eight million people use the RTI law annually. Despite amendments, it continues to be an important tool to demand disclosure from an opaque system. It strengthens the right to make informed choices.

The second category of legislations that created the economic and development rights of people were recognized first in the National Rural Employment Guarantee Programme. MGNREGA, as it was later called, was a legislation that overcame budgetary constraints to provide up to 100 days of work to any rural household, on demand. MGNREGA is not just the world's largest employment programme — it is also designed so that people are empowered to access and secure their rights. Subsequently, the Scheduled Tribes and Other Traditional Forest Dwellers (Recognition of Forest Rights) Act, 2006, the Street Vendors (Protection of Livelihood and Regulation of Street Vending) Act, 2014, the Right to Education Act, amongst others, were passed which recognized the rights of the systematically marginalized.

MGNREGA has provided work to some 290 million households for the year 2020-2021 till now. During the pandemic, had it not been for MGNREGA and the National Food Security Act (NFSA) there would have been a huge crisis with reverse migration, hunger and unemployment taking many lives.

The third category of legislations created welfare



The iconic Ghotala Rath Yatra: There has been a growing awareness of citizens' rights

and equality rights for particularly marginalized communities. The NFSA took a step to guarantee access to affordable foodgrain to a large proportion of the population. The Workers' Social Security Act, 2008, The Rights of Persons with Disabilities Act, 2016, The Protection of Women from Domestic Violence Act, 2005, the Scheduled Castes and the Scheduled Tribes (Prevention Of Atrocities) Amendment Act, 2015, all became a powerful means of strengthening equality and civil rights.

FACING THE BACKLASH

Such rights-based legislations helped correct the imbalance of power between the people and democratic institutions created for their welfare. The 'right' established the inviolability of the demand. These legislations made changes in a country notorious for poor implementation and feudalism. The rights-based framework was also accompanied by a democratic people-based framework for governance, including social audits to institutionalize peoples' monitoring of social sector programmes and entitlements. The framework of social accountability is influenced by Ambedkar's concept of social democracy.

This framework for law and policy, as defined by the Directive Principles of State Policy (DPSP) and demonstrated practically, introduced a new welfare and rights-based framework. The market and the corporate sector had occupied centrestage in policy-making and did not let go of their influence over the political economy, and, therefore, the democratic processes of governance. Today, the ideological battle between market forces and social movements are sharply visible across the legislative framework. Instead of the DPSP and its progressive framework setting the policy-making agenda, it is 'economic growth' and profits that have continued to

increasingly influence the various arms of the State. That the rights-based legislations have survived, and even during the pandemic were the mainstay of the survival of millions of people, is a tribute to their efficacy. Even issues of health were framed in terms of the rights of citizens to equal access to public health, although the rights-based framework remains an unfinished agenda.

The rights-based legislations were a culmination of what progressive policy-making had envisaged in the six decades since India became an independent republic. They were, in fact, amongst the most significant paradigm shifts towards people-centric legislation since Independence within the framework of the Indian Constitution. They survived the onslaught of a 'powerful' government that is very antagonistic to 'rights' and wants to define them as doles. The critique of RTI, MGNREGA, NFSA and other such laws comes from those who jealously guard the system of policy-making.

The rule of law derives from the Constitution and no law or body can abrogate this basic framework. Freedom of expression is fundamental to all rights, including the right to live. It is also intrinsic to democracy. For people's participation in the legislative framework, the most important expression is public action. This should be broadly defined through the written or spoken word, through collective protests or even individual dissent. The competing efforts to influence the policy-making sphere between market forces and peoples' groups, are sharp and polarized. The invisible undue influence of money and capital is getting more accentuated under an economic model that is dramatically increasing inequality. This brings entitlements for citizens and profits for companies into clear conflict.

With a series of rights-based legislations enacted

in India, democracy seemed to have come of age. However, the next decade will show that it is a struggle between two world views. The rights-based legislations still offer citizens some space for public action and give an opportunity to engage with aspects of governance as well as question policy. The RTI, Land Acquisition amendments, the MGNREGA, etc. have been wounded by the assault on them, but will survive.

Influence of corporations over the arms of the State has also been steadily on the rise. This explains why civil disobedience, protests and dissent have been squashed. In contemporary India, civil movements and protests are either seen as coming in the way of 'economic growth' or condemned as anti-national, terrorist or seditious. Activists are incarcerated. Basically, this is a fear of being questioned and a resistance to forfeiting the impunity that elites have enjoyed in many ways. Many of the amplifiers of the voices of mass mobilization by tribal or Dalit communities are in jail.

Power is never voluntarily shared. In contemporary India, the celebration of RTI, MGNREGA and other rights-based legislations, shaped by popular support, harbour hope for democracy. The nature of the resistance to the discriminatory CAA (Citizenship Amendment Act) and NRC (National Register of Citizens) laws, and the unjust farm laws, has also been a shining global example of democratic assertion within a constitutional framework.

Attacks on 'civil society' are an attempt to make it totally silent. Hope hangs by a thread with the indomitable creativity and resilience of ordinary people and the fact that we are, and will remain, argumentative Indians. ■

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A LOT TO LEARN FROM NGOs IN SCHOOL EDUCATION

Government stumbles because of its disconnect with ground realities. For the success of schemes, outreach and feedback from beneficiaries is crucial.



ANIL SWARUP

WHEN I was transferred to the School Education Department in 2016, hordes of 'advisers' descended to tell me what afflicted school education in the country and how it could be better managed. There were examples given from all over the world — Finland, England, Holland, Scotland, New Zealand and Iceland. When I asked one of the advisers whether they had the opportunity to look within India, I drew a blank.

Hence, I decided to take a look around the country. I travelled to 23 states during my initial phase as Secretary, School Education and Literacy. Some of the interior areas were chosen to assess what was happening in the hinterland.

The first two districts on my list were Bastar and Sukma in the state of Chhattisgarh. There was also an opportunity to travel from Pune to Goa by car, stopping on the way to look at schools in rural areas. The journey from Srinagar to Leh by road, not taking the national highway, was indeed a fascinating one. These visits enabled me to appreciate what was and what wasn't happening in the country in the context of school education.

However, the biggest outcome from my travels was the fabulous homegrown models of school education that were flourishing in the interior areas. These had the potential of being scaled. Unlike the 'imported' models of school education, the homegrown ones did not require proof of concept. In many cases they were being replicated. Hence, they could easily be scaled.

Another aspect that struck me was that the success of most of these models was based on public-private partnerships (PPPs) between state government agencies and NGOs. This also made me appreciate the role of civil society organizations in improving the quality of school education.

I recall walking into a government primary school unannounced. It was the lunch-break and I had the

occasion to eat the mid-day meal. The quality of food was incredible. There were all sorts of stories (most of them negative) going around about the mid-day meal scheme but here was an example of delicious and nutritious food being served.

Arriving at the state headquarters, I inquired about it and I was informed that a civil society organization, Akshay Patra, was the agency responsible for the high quality of food. I was blissfully unaware of it. I was soon to fly down to the headquarters of Akshay Patra in Bengaluru to see how the government could assist in expanding delivery of such meals to more districts. This was one of the finest examples of a PPP in the social sector. Soon elaborate plans were put in place to scale the operations of Akshay Patra. It was a win-win for all the stakeholders. Hence, it happened and continues to happen.

110 MODELS CHOSEN

Consequent to my visit to the states, 110 successful models were picked up. Those NGOs that were associated with the rollout of these models were invited to Delhi and, over a period of six days, an attempt was made to ascertain how success was achieved in making it happen. Apart from other factors, what was common amongst all these success stories was the intense and meaningful association between NGOs and state governments.

However, most of them were not operating on scale. The task now was to facilitate their scaling. This was done through regional and state-level workshops in which 24 selected models were widely publicized.

Thus, Sampark Foundation that was doing exemplary work in Chhattisgarh under the inspired leadership of its chairman, Vineet Nayar, scaled its

There were fabulous homegrown models of school education that were flourishing in the interiors and needed no proof of concept. They could easily be scaled.

Common among all the success stories was the meaningful association between NGOs and the states. Workshops were held to publicize 24 of the models.

operations in a number of other states. Akshara Foundation, led by its dynamic chairman, Ashok Kamath, was impacting learning outcomes in some districts of Karnataka. It not only expanded its domain within the state but expanded outwards to states like Odisha.

Aditya Nataraj and Manmohan, founders of the Kaivalya Foundation, took their good work well beyond Rajasthan where they had tasted success in improving learning outcomes. Humana People to People had successfully demonstrated how they could mainstream out-of-school children in Haryana. They now moved into many more states. They were much better placed, as compared to government officials, in reaching out-of-school children and their parents. Raj Gilda's Lend A Hand moved beyond the city of Pune to other parts of the country giving a new and purposeful dimension to vocational training in partnership with respective state governments.

PPPs IN MUNICIPALITIES

On another front, NGOs were partnering municipal corporations to prove that such PPPs could bring about a qualitative change in delivery of school education. Organizations like Mukangan and Peepul's Foundation were doing seminal work in Mumbai and Delhi respectively. They leveraged existing school infrastructure and added enormous value through their interventions that centred primarily around improving the quality of teaching. The fact that the municipal corporations they were working with, were willing to expand this partnership reflects the success of these organizations.

These are just a few of the many NGOs that are working in conjunction with state governments to improve learning outcomes. These organizations



Akshay Patra's involvement in school midday meals is one of the finest examples of public-private-partnerships

need to be encouraged. There is a lot to learn from what they have already achieved and the potential they have.

In fact, after my retirement from government service, a foundation, Nexus of Good, was set up to highlight and promote the work of such organizations. The idea is to explore how their work could be seen, understood, appreciated, replicated and scaled even further. Hundreds of such examples are available on the Nexus of Good portal www.nexusofgood.org.in.

NGOs don't merely play an important role in the field of education, they do so in the health sector as well. When we were designing and then implementing the Rashtriya Swasthya Bima Yojana (RSBY), a paperless and cashless health insurance scheme for the poorest of the poor in the country, interactions with NGOs helped us appreciate the ground reality.

GROUND REALITIES

A large number of government schemes fail due to their disconnect with ground realities. Unlike most government servants, NGOs interact with beneficiary groups much more intensely because that is their bread and butter. During the course of implementation of this smart card-based scheme, the role of NGOs became even more critical on account of their phenomenal outreach.

The World Bank described the RSBY 'as a model of good design and implementation with important lessons for other programmes in India'. This couldn't

The problems of the school sector are too huge to be tackled by public or private sectors alone. It was surprising that the NEP made just a passing reference to NGOs. The NEP has missed a stratagem.

have happened without the support and participation of the NGOs. RSBY has now morphed into PMJAY (Prime Minister's Jan Aarogya Yojana) with many more features and much larger coverage. NGOs continue to play an important role in the spread of the scheme. It is difficult to visualize an effective penetration of the scheme without engaging with NGOs.

The problems pertaining to the social sector are too huge to be tackled by the public or private sectors alone. Hence, it was surprising that the new National Education Policy (NEP) made just a passing reference to the role of NGOs. The NEP missed a stratagem.

This was perhaps on account of the distrust between entities in the public and private domains. This also explains the unfortunate statement made by the National Security Advisor about civil society organizations as the "new frontiers of war" that "can be manipulated to hurt a nation's interest". A strong and sweeping statement indeed by someone who occupies an important position in the government.

What a number of us fail to appreciate is the fact that efficiencies can come from private entities and scale from the public domain. If mutual distrust is reinforced, the hiatus between the public and the private will grow whereas it is imperative for them to come together. This gulf needs to be bridged. It should be done in the interest of the country. It can be done because it has been done. There is so much good that is being done on either side of the 'fence'. This fence needs to be broken. The collaboration of the good on either side can be transformative as has been demonstrated in the examples given above.

There is some good news as well. The Department of Company Affairs is in the process of setting up a web portal to bring all stakeholders (Central government, state governments, CSR funding agencies and NGOs) on a single platform so that they can 'marry'. Organizations like the Nexus of Good Foundation, are working assiduously to highlight exemplary work that can be replicated and scaled through PPPs in the social sector. All this augurs well for the future. ■

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FOR RURAL HEALTHCARE IT IS BACK TO BASICS

NGOs have models that work in remote areas to reduce costs, create access and change health-seeking behaviour in communities.



**PAVITRA MOHAN
& SANJANA B. MOHAN**

THERE are huge disparities in healthcare in India. We have large private hospitals in cities where rich people can walk in and get state-of-the-art healthcare at a high cost. We also have poor people who die at home because they cannot reach the nearest health service or afford treatment. There are yet others who fall into indebtedness trying to get treated.

At the conference of a management school, the CEO of a large hospital boasted of how the time to get a patient into the operation theatre is decreasing and is now less than 30 minutes. Compare this with the many months of delay before a TB patient in remote and rural south Rajasthan is able to start on appropriate treatment. Juxtapose these two situations and we get a picture of the inequities in India's healthcare.

There are other stark examples of the disparities in health and nutrition between the rich and the poor. In rural south Rajasthan, we found that 49 percent of mothers of children under three had not consumed any pulses and less than 65 percent had not consumed any vegetables in the past 24 hours. Only about five percent had consumed any milk, and none had consumed an egg or meat.

NGOs have made a big difference in the lives of marginalized populations, either directly or by influencing programmes and policies in healthcare. The examples cited here are merely some of the organizations we are familiar with. There are many others doing great work.

TACKLING MALARIA

Jungles and a tropical climate are fertile grounds for mosquitoes. Coupled with poor public health measures and absence of healthcare, malaria grows

unabatedly in such areas. Irrigation canals, built to bring water for farming and prosperity, have also brought mosquitoes and malaria. Some states and districts with a higher percentage of tribal populations also have the highest incidence and deaths due to malaria.

Odisha has a large proportion of tribals living in remote, rural areas. The Christian Hospital in Bissamcuttack has been providing healthcare to them for decades. A large community programme that seeks to understand and respond to the needs of such communities for livelihoods and health complements the hospital's services. Through careful observation and long-term work, the Bissamcuttack team identified the link between malaria and childhood malnutrition.

They also noted that during the malaria season early identification of people suffering from the disease and prompt treatment rapidly decreased the parasite load in the region. When this situation is reached, even if mosquitoes continue to bite people, they do not find any parasites to carry in their blood and infect others in subsequent bites.

Through this action, coupled with other measures such as spraying insecticides and active use of bed-nets, the Christian Hospital was able to significantly reduce the incidence of malaria.

The Odisha government noted their success and partnered with them to scale up the programme across other tribal districts. The results were astonishing: an 80 percent reduction in the incidence of malaria!

The World Malaria Report 2018 reported that while there was a rise in malaria globally, in India there was a dramatic decline by 24 percent. And that decline was because malaria cases in Odisha dropped by 80 percent. Such is the power of long-term engagement with the community, careful observation and partnering the government at the right time.

NEWBORN DEATHS

In the 1990s, there was stagnation in death rates among children, which meant that the number of children dying every month was increasing. A careful assessment indicated that many children died soon after birth or within a month of being born. Babies born into poor families in remote, rural communities were more likely not to survive.

One such area was Gadchiroli district in Maharashtra. SEARCH, an NGO, designed and implemented a community-led plan to improve newborn health. They realized that approaches by

specialists and hospitals were not appropriate for remote, rural settings. Their many years of work with such communities had strengthened their belief in community action.

SEARCH identified and trained village women to visit all pregnant women and guide them on how to take care of themselves and their babies. The women were also trained to identify and treat babies who were sick. Many neonatologists visited Gadchiroli and endorsed the skills of these women who were barely educated. What highly qualified doctors could not achieve, the village women achieved in a short period of time. Within a couple of years, at a low cost, newborn deaths were slashed by about one-third.

The initiative influenced the Union government's policy to focus on home-based community approaches to improve newborn survival. Wider implementation of this approach finally led to a declining trend of newborn deaths, which had been stagnant for decades. In fact, SEARCH's approach influenced policies on newborn mortality and health across the developing world, especially for marginalized populations.

CHEAPER MEDICINES

In India almost 70 to 80 percent of all health expenditure is from household budgets. It is people who spend on health services and not the government. A major out-of-pocket expense is on drugs. The poorest people access government health facilities, but lack of available drugs means they have to spend money despite being in a public facility. Prayas, a non-profit in Rajasthan, for several years advocated the availability of free drugs in government health facilities.

Partnering a sensitive district magistrate, they were able to pilot a free-drug scheme in one district. The scheme was a big success. People started using government health facilities much more in rural areas. The government not only saved money by buying drugs in bulk, but was also able to ensure better quality. Subsequently, the scheme was scaled up to the entire state.

HEALTH POLICY

India's Constitution does not include health as a fundamental right. But the right to life is a fundamental right and offers us a window to address the denial of healthcare as an infringement of this right. Not having health as a human right affects the poorest the most.

Several NGOs and coalitions such as the Jan



An Amrit Clinic in south Rajasthan serves as a PHC and has nurses from marginalized communities

Swasthya Abhiyan (People's Health Movement) have been running a sustained campaign to enhance public expenditure on healthcare and to promulgate health as a fundamental right. Sustained advocacy led the Government of India to commit to increased expenditure on healthcare from 1 percent of GDP to 2.5 percent of GDP in the National Health Policy. It remains to be seen if the increased allocation will translate into fewer people becoming impoverished because of what they have to spend on healthcare.

But such a commitment is the right step towards creating a more just healthcare system. Sustained advocacy by NGOs has also led many state governments to announce intentions of having a Right to Healthcare Act. However, no state has so far actually passed such a law.

AMRIT CLINICS

India has a large network of primary health centres (PHCs) across rural areas but in remote and tribal regions PHCs function poorly. Doctors are not available, healthcare providers behave inappropriately and there is lack of essential medicines and equipment. Local communities are pushed into seeking care from quacks and traditional healers resulting in a high burden of illnesses and deaths which are entirely preventable.

At Basic Healthcare Services we started with the belief that nurses, skilled and supported by physicians and enabling technology, could provide healthcare to such populations. Physicians would train, provide teleconsultation and on-site consultation for chronic and more difficult conditions. We took into account the fact that over the past decade or so many young girls from tribal

areas had been opting for nursing as a profession. Such nurses, from similar remote and marginalized communities, were more likely to empathize with them. That provided us with a large force of women to address the huge gap in providing healthcare.

In southern Rajasthan, faced with dwindling land sizes and disappearing forests, many young tribal men would migrate to cities such as Ahmedabad, to work as manual labourers leaving behind women, children and the elderly. In the absence of men and cash, they find it even more difficult to access distant and expensive healthcare.

Basic Healthcare Services set up a network of PHCs, called AMRIT Clinics in six such communities in southern Rajasthan with the aim of providing low-cost and responsive healthcare.

Nurses from similar communities were trained, supported and mandated to provide healthcare in the clinics. Supported by a visiting physician and enabled with simple technology, protocols and diagnostics, they are able to address a large proportion of the healthcare needs of the population.

Other important elements of services include 24/7 availability, required drugs and equipment, community engagement for their health and well-being and linkages with referral hospitals for those needing specialized care. Community health workers further deepen the link with communities.

In the eight years since they began, the clinics have helped save thousands of lives by taking care of a large proportion of the health needs of communities, including infectious diseases, non-communicable diseases, reproductive health conditions and childhood illnesses.

One such clinic is now accredited for safety and quality by the National Accreditation Board of Hospitals & Health Care Providers (NABH), demonstrating that high-quality healthcare is possible even in such remote and resource constrained settings.

The services have also influenced substantial change in behaviour. Women, who would deliver at home, now prefer going to a health facility. At one time, the word tuberculosis would invoke fear and denial. People would delay seeking care. Now they come early for treatment.

The AMRIT experience shows the transformative impact of primary healthcare delivered by nurses and supported by physicians and health workers.

TRAVEL FELLOWSHIP

NGOs are increasingly playing a role in mentoring young, idealistic healthcare professionals. The Tribal Health Initiative, a remarkable organization in Sittilingi Valley in Tamil Nadu, has a programme called Travel Fellowship for young doctors. For about a year, fellows get to visit and work in three or four healthcare organizations in rural and tribal areas across several states.

Basic Healthcare Services is also a part of this network. It is an absolute joy to host and support these young doctors from across the country, who are dreamy, idealistic and ready for the grind. We are certain that the fellows and other young doctors who work with us will become capable leaders tomorrow who will take forward the dream of an equitable and just healthcare for all, with dignity. ■

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

DIGITAL INDIA'S SUCCESS HAS COME OUT OF COLLABORATION

Over the years voluntary organizations have worked with communities to make the internet inclusive and take it to the poor by solving last-mile problems.



OSAMA MANZAR

IT was 2003 and Geneva was hosting the first global summit on using digital infrastructure for serving the development needs of communities. I was in the India Pavilion when Arun Shourie walked in — lean, alert and full of probing questions in an almost journalistic manner.

Shourie wanted to know from me what was the future of information and communication technology, or ICT, in India. How could grassroots organizations in the voluntary sector help create an internet ecosystem in the country, he asked.

As we talked, we agreed that for the use of the internet to be meaningful there would have to be a collaborative effort between the government and voluntary organizations. As in other spheres of development, one couldn't possibly do without the other.

Shourie was then Minister for Information and Communication Technology in the National Democratic Alliance (NDA) government under Atal Behari Vajpayee. It was the perfect time for him to be in Geneva — just as it was for people like me who were activists.

The world was realizing the enormous potential for using the internet and other communications for the purpose of development and bringing large swathes of the world's population out of poverty.

To achieve this, of course, the internet would have to first be inclusive and provide access to rich and poor alike. It was to this end that the first World Summit of Information Society (WSIS) had been convened in Geneva and the reason people representing government, companies and voluntary organizations had turned up from all parts of the world.

WSIS was initiated by the United Nations to create an evolving multi-stakeholder platform aimed at addressing the issues raised by technology

through a structured and inclusive approach at the national, regional and international levels.

The goal of WSIS is to achieve an information society which is oriented to development. It envisions an order that allows everyone to create, access, utilise and share information through digital infrastructure.

The UN charter to achieve this goal was passed by Secretary-General Kofi A. Annan in 2003 and was endorsed by India as a member-nation.

HUMAN INTERFACE

Since then, over the years, voluntary organizations have helped successive governments implement the digitization of India by helping solve last-mile problems of various kinds. Technology, no matter how powerful, becomes transformational only when there is a human interface. Activist groups have worked with communities to help them use their mobile phones and computers to learn, earn and access their rights in ways that were not possible before information technology became so all-encompassing.

Activists have also had a role to play in shaping government policies to make them more effective. They have successfully pointed the government in directions in which it might not otherwise have been headed. In doing so, government decision-making has been enriched. On occasions when activists have clashed with government their criticism has been wholesome. They have served as whistle blowers.

The point I would like to reiterate here is that, in India, the history of bridging the information divide is closely connected with voluntary efforts. Several organisations such as the Internet Freedom Foundation (IFF), IT for Change (IT4C), SFILC.in, Centre for Internet Society (CIS), Alliance for Affordable Internet (A4AI), Association of Progressive Communications (APC), Global Network Initiative (GNI), Internet Society (ISOC) and the Public Interest Registry (PIR) have vigorously responded to the new needs and issues that have emerged with the expansion of the internet. Their aim unflinchingly has been to ensure an accessible, safe and democratic internet.

SERVICE CENTRES

In 2007, the Government of India (GoI) was formulating a plan for common service centres (CSCs) run by village-level entrepreneurs (VLEs). The GoI had identified IL&FS as a consultant to

draft the policy and the Digital Empowerment Foundation (DEF) was also invited to contribute. Why would a government invite a civil society organization to draft a framework? It is because of the valuable experience we have from working with communities at ground level.

Today CSCs are one of the most active internet infrastructure links to the larger India. They are known by different names: Akshaya in Kerala, Pragya Kendras in Jharkhand, E-Seva Centres in Andhra Pradesh and so on.

CSCs are the points that provide access to delivery of essential public utility services, social welfare schemes, healthcare and financial services among many other things. Registered as a Special Purpose Vehicle Company, CSC India Limited now claims to have more than 300,000 centres.

NET NEUTRALITY

On the issue of net neutrality, voluntary organizations played an important role in helping the government take an informed decision on the pitfalls of going with Facebook's internet.org and Free Basics.

Net neutrality requires a public network to treat all content, sites and platforms equally. Facebook was, on the other hand, offering free access to a few selected websites through Free Basics. Only selected content by Facebook and its partners in India was to be made available.

While Free Basics was packaged as an attempt to provide free internet to thousands of rural and remote Indians, the campaign led by Save the Internet (which is now the Internet Freedom Foundation or IFF) exposed how it was violating net neutrality.

An open letter I wrote to Mark Zuckerberg became a crucial advocacy document. Together with the efforts of other campaigners it resulted in the revocation of Free Basics by the Telecom Regulation Authority of India (TRAI). Several civil society organisations came together to uphold the sanctity of net neutrality in India.

WIFI FREEDOM

Recently, Government of India (GoI) announced PM-WANI — a framework to provide internet through public wifi hotspot providers. Now any shopkeeper can buy internet and sell internet without paying licensing fees. The journey of creating a PM-WANI system is based on advocacy done by civil society groups. Digital Empowerment



A group of schoolchildren at a Community Information Resource Centre

Foundation's Community Network was seen as a model for last-mile connectivity.

Community Network uses frugal technologies to connect communities and relies on the existing spectrum of 2.4 GHz and 5.8 GHz, which does not require licensing. PM-WANI has liberalised the access to internet and freed it from the shackles of ISPs (Internet Service Providers) and telcos.

A couple of years ago we initiated a programme to empower young tribal girls by connecting them to highly educated successful women as mentors on a video call. We called the programme Going Online as Leaders (GOAL). The idea was to connect on weekends one mentor with five tribal girls on a video call. They could spend time talking without any agenda.

The programme became very popular and went from 25 tribal girls to 100 tribal girls and 25 mentors. It got support from Facebook and gradually the Ministry of Tribal Affairs adopted it. The mentors helped the girls develop better communication skills, offered mental health support and trained them in digital skills, entrepreneurship and leadership.

The National Digital Literacy Mission (NDLM) emerged from a collaboration between DEF, Intel and the NASSCOM Foundation. Finally Dell, Lenovo, Microsoft and NIIT joined in to facilitate the government's vision of making at least one person per household e-literate.

PRIVACY, MISINFORMATION

The internet has led to more democracy. It is difficult now to suppress information. Injustices, when they take place, find their way into the public domain.

In this way civil society has come to be expanded.

On net neutrality, the government took an informed decision thanks to the advice from voluntary groups on the pitfalls of Free Basics by Facebook.

It encompasses people much beyond the urban elites who would earlier dominate it. Now everyone has a voice and it can be heard in multiple languages from remote corners.

This expansion of civil society comes in an age of local governance and distributed technologies. The internet allows them to deal with the issues that directly relate to their lives and well-being. In their equations with government they also have the choice to collaborate or oppose or do both simultaneously.

While these are favourable developments in the creation of internet infrastructure and access, it is also important to highlight the pressing issues of data privacy, misinformation and shutting down of the internet.

In India, currently, there are no regulations in place to restrict the collection, storage, representation and analysis of personal data that can potentially harm individuals and vulnerable communities in multiple ways. More alarmingly, the majority of internet users do not even know the harm of sharing their private data online or have

any control over how the information is being used.

It is important to have more participatory processes on the ground on privacy awareness and data usage while simultaneously building up a regulatory mechanism at the policy level.

Internet shutdowns should be viewed with serious concern. In a context where the government is pushing for more digitisation and all our daily activities depend on being online, internet shutdowns essentially translate into the shutting down of the day-to-day life of its citizens. Under the pretence of maintaining law and order, internet shutdowns become a tool to suppress voices of dissent, as seen for example, in the case of the farmers' agitation.

This method of law and order maintenance immediately translates into punishment without due process. The biases of the police machinery get to decide who gets to use the internet, when and on what terms. It is important to reiterate the point that the internet is a fundamental right of all citizens and not a means of State patronage.

Finally, as much as lack of connectivity is a pressing issue, so is the recently increasing incidence of misinformation. While usage of the internet and digital services have been increasing, the threat of misinformation, disinformation and fake news have been rising concomitantly. This has larger social, economic, political, cultural and democratic consequences.

Addressing these problems urgently should be a part of efforts to bridge the digital divide. It is only voluntary organizations that can do it in collaboration with the government. ■

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HOW ORDINARY FARMERS FOUND A UNITED VOICE

When hundreds of diverse unions, voluntary groups, NGOs, enterprises, individuals come together with a purpose, their strength is irresistible.



KAVITHA KURUGANTI

As this piece is being written, 'ordinary farmers' who were also outstanding citizens leading the historic farmers' protests at Delhi's borders, are going home to a heroes' welcome from other farmers and citizens. Flowers are being showered from chartered planes and from hundreds lining the highways as lengthy convoys of protesting farmers head home.

It is only now that the media is picking up stories of how the local poor at the protest sites are likely to go hungry after the *morchas* are lifted, and how local enterprises and shops will be affected without the economic boost provided by the protest townships.

Stories of valiant old and young citizens, of men and women, of farmers and their supporters, of people from different states and socio-cultural diversities are emerging. The new friendships discovered and bonds built are being narrated as feature stories in media reports. India's historic farmers' movement of 2020-21 has, after all, emerged victorious against an unbending and uncaring government!

There are numerous analytical pieces that can be written about various aspects related to this farmers' movement — both on the demands of the protesting farmers, as well as the organizational aspects of the movement.

What the farmers achieved is actually way beyond either of these interesting facets. Farmers are squarely back on the political landscape of India. They are asserting their identity as farmers proudly. They have discovered the strength of unity, of working together by putting aside various differences. They have learnt to draw strength from their diversities.

When they lifted the *morchas* and went back home, protesting farmers knew that on the demands front — which were mainly four when the

movement began and became six by the time the Prime Minister announced the government's decision to repeal the three anti-farmer laws — the ending of the agitation was less than satisfactory.

However, farmers also know and have internalized deeply, the other positive outcomes of the struggle. Many smaller struggles around numerous local issues had fructified successfully during the course of the 12-month agitation. While the agitation has been called off, the struggle and movement will continue, the protestors vowed.

If civil society is to be defined as 'a community of citizens linked by a common cause and collective activities', India's farmers' movement led by the Samyukt Kisan Morcha (SKM) is indeed one of the largest civil society groups out there. A wide array of organizations are referred to as civil society and this movement really reflected the entire diversity of such organizations. It is a movement which led to newer and larger alliances even as existing civil society organizations swung into action and new groups were formed spontaneously.

It was in October 2020 that a strong farmers' platform called the All-India Kisan Sangharsh Coordination (AIKSCC), an alliance of hundreds of farmers' organizations, put out a call to other organizations which were not part of the joint platform, to join hands for a coordinated struggle against the Centre's three 'black farm laws'.

SINGLE PLATFORM

The call by the AIKSCC was unconditional and inspired confidence in others to step forward. By that time, organizations in Punjab had already put aside their differences and were agitating jointly as a platform of 30 organizations.

The AIKSCC joined hands with two organizations, the Bhartiya Kisan Union (BKU) Rajewal in Punjab and BKU Chaduni in Haryana to begin with. A five-member coordination committee was created on October 27, 2020. This body then reached out to the Rashtriya Kisan Mazdoor Sangh (RKMS) which was a national alliance of more than 150 unions, and the Samyukt Kisan Morcha was formed in the early half of November 2020. By the time the current agitation was called off, other than AIKSCC and RKMS, a new alliance got created with some unions which were not part of either alliance called the Bharatiya Kisan Mazdoor Federation.

Other than farmers' organizations, several professional organizations (lawyers and medical professionals, for example) and enterprise-based

associations (rice millers, commission agents in agricultural markets, traders' associations, transporters' associations etc.), faith-based groups (gurdwaras), NGOs, people's organizations and membership-based unions (trade unions, women's organizations, students and youth groups, for instance), labour unions, charitable organizations, philanthropists and several others were an integral part of the Kisan Andolan 2020-21.

Importantly, social media communities as a new-age manifestation of civil society, were prominently visible and active in the farmers' movement.

The diversity of the farmers' organizations themselves was quite impressive. In terms of size, while some farmer unions were strong only at their *tehsil* level, others were national organizations with tens of lakhs of farmers as members. While some unions were more mixed in terms of caste and gender, others were mostly of upper caste and upper class male farmers. While some unions were mainly focused on landless agricultural workers, others reflected the concerns of large farmers.

ROLE OF KHAPS

The much-maligned *khaps* of northern India played a big role in supporting the farmers movement. *Khaps* are, admittedly, a caste-based institution representing upper castes and patriarchy. For those of us who would like to see caste annihilated and patriarchy destroyed *khap* panchayats are institutions that are not progressive.

Yet they are a civil society mechanism in themselves based on social kinship networks. They identified the profession of farming as their primary identity and they were the backbone of local support and solidarity for protesting farmers at various *morchas*.

Some groups were focused mainly on sugarcane farmers' issues or paddy growers, others were focused on a more expansive canvas. Some were registered and some were not. Some were membership-based and more organized, while most others were not. Some networks focussed only on women farmers.

In terms of political ideologies too, the spectrum ranged from Left to right-of-centre. Some were affiliated to political parties while most others were not, and they kept away from electoral politics.

Irrespective of this diversity, this unprecedented movement forged bonds of unity and coordinated collective action in unexpected ways. Decision-making was democratic and consensus-based. It



Gurdwaras and others set up langars that fed tens of thousands regularly

appears that tough lessons learnt from past movements helped the leaders in dealing with potential fissures with greater maturity and wisdom.

When the *morchas* were lifted on December 11, 2021, and the current agitation called off with the struggle suspended, the Samyukt Kisan Morcha prioritised the unity of the joint platform more than one or two pending demands! This was on a clear understanding that if unity is upheld, more battles can be fought with the same strength or greater strength in future.

The future of the SKM, in fact, promises to be in the form of a wider and stronger platform, with more farmer unions likely to join the platform as the struggle for the Minimum Support Price (MSP) as a legally-guaranteed entitlement of all farmers, begins in right earnest.

GIVING AND SUPPORTING

Many civil society groups, especially charitable organizations and some NGOs, played a supportive role in this movement. They were not an active part of the protests, or part of any decision-making in the Samyukt Kisan Morcha. However, they took up activities that they might have undertaken in a disaster relief setting!

Medical aid camps and support to commuting services for locals were some of the NGO activities. By March 2021, a sophisticated hospital sprang up close to the Singhu Border stage, for instance, with an ICU also included. Some organizations started library services and even classes for children of local communities as well as protestors, at *morcha* sites. Gurdwaras and others set up *langars* that fed tens of thousands of people regularly. The local poor enjoyed the warm food that they got over the past many months, thanks to the *kisan andolan*.

Other than the assertion of citizenship that all participants in this movement reflected, one key element that spurred contribution to the movement is the notion or ethos of '*sewa*'. This, obviously, is

Young people gave up jobs to volunteer. Social media teams got created. Lawyers gave free services. Doctors camped at the *morcha* sites.

from the Sikh religious-cultural background, but it caught on quite widely across communities.

The kind of *sewa* that was witnessed in the movement is quite expansive and impressive. Young men and women who gave up their jobs to volunteer in the movement; social media teams that got created and were constantly on the job to spread the message of the farmers and garner wider support; lawyers' associations who stepped in to provide free legal services and take up protest actions in solidarity; numerous doctors who camped at *morcha* sites to provide untiring services.

There were local villagers who kept up a steady supply of vegetables, grains and milk for the protestors. Many philanthropists donated in cash and kind. There were people who maintained 'tent cities' and visitor tents at the *morchas*. Volunteers at the stages of the protest sites. Transporters' associations who provided bus services to ferry people, free of cost. Citizens who donated blankets and shawls to all protestors. Volunteers who were running local newspaper services. A woman protestor who was stitching clothes free of cost, and a cobbler mending shoes and bags on a voluntary basis.

Everybody had a role to play and a niche service to provide. There were artists and sportspersons who were lending support in their own way. Several of these people and groups were not organized in

any centralized manner by the SKM, but somehow fell neatly into place in running vibrant protest townships smoothly for 379 days!

FORCED TO BLINK

The climbdown by the Government of India from its obstinate stand and the repeal of the three central farm laws are a great positive development in our democracy. Many state governments and almost all political parties in the Opposition were in support of the farmers, and the Modi government was forced to blink.

It is clear that the SKM-led farmers' movement did not achieve all its demands in the current agitation, even though many other deeper intangible positive outcomes were obtained. It is nobody's case that Indian farming does not need 'reforms'. There is much more to be done, both in terms of what needs to change, and how civil society can organize itself to bring about that change.

There is no real bridge right now between *nirmaan* and *sangharsh* in the world of agriculture and farmers' empowerment. The element of *rachnaatmak sangharsh* (constructive agitation) is missing in farmers' agitations, in terms of presenting lasting and real alternatives. There is a need for most farm unions to innovate their organizational mandates and structures.

On the other hand, the academic world and the NGO world do not even converse with farmers' unions in any meaningful fashion. Deep conversations across civil society organizations, which help cross-learning in developing discourse and practice of both *nirmaan* and *sangharsh*, are needed. It is hoped that, as we move forward from this historic and inspirational farmers' struggle, such conversations are possible — for both farmer unions and NGOs to learn from each other, and for greater strength and solidarity. ■

Kavitha Kuruganti is a social activist known for her work related to sustainable farm livelihoods and farmers' rights.

SOMEONE MUST STAND UP AGAINST CORPORATIONS

If NGOs don't perform strongly in this decade, SDGs that have been set and mitigation of climate change will become further out of reach.



ARUN MAIRA

FIFTEEN years ago, Umesh and Rita Anand asked me to write a book for the corporate sector to explain what the civil society sector is and what it does. I found that difficult because I had spent my entire working life until then in the corporate sector and did not understand the civil society sector well enough. Instead, I wrote *Transforming Capitalism: Business Leadership to Improve the World for Everyone*, urging business leaders to change the way businesses were managed to benefit everyone, not just their own investors and employees. Since then, I have worked outside the corporate sector: five years as a member of India's Planning Commission and the rest with civil society organizations. I now dare to write this essay to explain to civil society what it must do to improve the world for everyone.

We — that is, all humanity in the corporate, government, and civil society sectors — cannot carry on the way we have been for the past century, and more so in the last 30 years. At 'the end of history' (as Francis Fukuyama called it), with the demise of the 'socialist' Soviet Union and victory of the 'Washington Consensus' of 'liberal' economic policies, the role of governments was reduced to removing themselves from the path of the capitalist juggernaut. A higher ranking on the World Bank's Ease of Doing Business index became a coveted honour for governments in developing countries. They were judged by how easy they could make investments of capital and production of business profits — and also the ease of taking the capital away whenever its owners wished to.

A "boundaryless", "nationless" world for capital was the new vision of a liberated humanity, even as millions of people were losing lives trying to breach national boundaries, in small boats across oceans and ragged caravans on the ground. They were escaping the hopelessness in their own countries,

ravaged by civil wars, often sown by colonial histories, and stirred by the continuing meddling in their affairs by governments and large corporations of the rich countries. History has not ended. The powerful continue to exploit the weak for further gains for themselves, which is a sad theme throughout human history, within nations and amongst nations. The continuing colonization of the lands of other people, and their cultures too, and its disastrous effects on the health of the entire planet, is explained, without any punches pulled, by Amitav Ghosh in *The Nutmeg's Curse: Parables for a Planet in Crisis* and Mahmood Mamdani in *Neither Settler nor Native: The Making and Unmaking of Permanent Minorities*.

Someone must stand up for those who do not have economic and political power against the selfishness of corporations and the wrong policies of governments. Corporations have been taught that the business of business must be only business. Governments have been weakened by the same ideas and are unable to improve the world for the majority of their peoples. To stand up for the people is the fundamental role of civil society everywhere. Civil society must strengthen itself to deliver what humanity needs it to. The existential question of 'what' is civil society, and the practical question of 'how' it can deliver what is expected of it, have become very urgent. I dare say that if civil society will not perform strongly within this decade, Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and mitigation of climate change will become further out of reach.

THIRD SECTOR?

Who is a member of society? All citizens are, even those who work in the corporate and government sectors. What is a civil society? Civil society is a society that is civil in its conduct. Who must work civilly? Surely all citizens should, to make the society civil.

I must admit I have a hard time seeing civil society as a third sector which, by definition, would have excluded me when I was in the corporate sector and in the government. Because I have always wanted to uphold the values of civil society which I learnt from the teachings of Mahatma Gandhi, Gautam Buddha and Jesus. The principle of *anyodaya* — of thinking of the poorest person first when devising any policy or strategy. The principle of courage to stand up for what is right — especially for the rights of the least powerful people. The

principles of non-violence and civility, while struggling with courage against the resistance of the people at the top of economic, political, and scientific pyramids to share their power with those below.

Climate change and the COVID-19 crisis which are shaking up the world demand that the whole of humanity must cooperate for everyone's sake. The snooty attitude of "I am alright, Jack", and the complacency of "Thank goodness the hole is not on our side of the boat" (which is tragically evident in the sharing of vaccines), will sink everyone, even the most powerful.

At a time when all nations and all people must come together, the social fabric of humanity has been weakened by the indifference of the powerful and is being torn apart by uncivility in public discourse, spreading like a disease with social media, and with violence by governments against their own people. Even 'civil society' leaders and their organizations have been drawn into an uncivil 'tit for tat'. Often, they too do violence to others: by insulting them in speech, some even by taking up arms. For a good cause, perhaps, but very uncivil in method.

The business sector likes stability: it makes planning for the future easier. Governments are expected to remove troubles and keep societies calm. Governments and business leaders are fearful of losing control whenever there is rumbling among the people, demanding change in the system. The instinct of the powerful is to suppress voices of dissent so that they do not amplify. Therefore, they will accuse protesters against injustice in the system of disturbing the public order, as the Indian government has done with farmers who camped around the capital city for a whole year, wanting to take their non-violent protest to Parliament.

Civility has been drained out of society by the excess of speaking, and the paucity of people in the corporate, government and civil society sectors who are willing to listen to "People Not Like Us".

Powerful people, and even scientific experts, must listen more to the masses, rather than trying to convince them with their own eloquence, or trying to educate the people with their own lopsided views of reality. Also, the experts, operating in their scientific and organizational silos, must listen to one another to understand the whole system before prescribing solutions with their limited understanding of it. Otherwise, their fixes will backfire. Even civil society activists standing up for



Capital moves freely across the world but people are prevented from migrating to escape the hopelessness in their countries

their own causes — for women, minorities, children, the environment, migrants, informal sector workers, small farmers, and so on — must listen to one another and cooperate rather than competing for attention as they are.

PARTNERSHIPS

The 17th SDG says there must be stronger partnerships to achieve all the goals faster. Partnerships are required between sectors, and amongst the champions of the various goals too, because all goals are interconnected in one large system. Therefore, leaders in civil society must create a strong, united, movement for change, rather than build larger civil society organizations jostling with one another.

Some of my friends in civil society will be disappointed that I am not advising them about how they can scale up their own organizations and obtain their chosen outcomes faster, with better marketing of their brands, and more efficient management of their resources. As a former successful management consultant that is what they would expect me to do. However, my experience with all three sectors has brought me to the realization that the fundamental requirement for democratic, as well as scientifically sound, change in complex systems is civility in public discourse. It is the means for reaching the goals that humanity has set out to reach. It is also an essential condition for any society to consider itself a civilized society.

What can civil society organizations do collectively to create a more civil society? Firstly, competition amongst themselves for recognition and for funds must be subdued to form a movement for a common cause. Secondly, they must not demand changes in regulations only for the

Civil society and the citizenry must heal themselves. When listening breaks down, society breaks apart. Citizens must listen to those who think differently.

convenience of their organizations, as the demands to ease Foreign Contribution Regulation Act (FCRA) provisions are perceived to be. What they stand up for must be directly of concern to all citizens, not just their organizations.

The history of successful civil society movements reveals some lessons. Even with a visionary cause, such as a fight for the rights of common people, there must be concrete goals that will bring people together. Repeal of the farm laws was a goal that united farmers. The demand for a Lokpal Bill in Parliament united many organizations in a nationwide 'anti-corruption' movement. A law for the 'right to information' (RTI) was the concrete objective of a successful civil society movement.

What the common people are being denied now, in the name of law and order, is the right to speak up and protest, and the right to assemble to present their concerns. The new labour codes, which Parliament has approved, dilute worker rights to join unions. The farmers, protesting about the undemocratic way Parliament had passed the farm

laws, were even denied their rights to peacefully assemble close to Parliament to protest about the undemocratic action of the government! The RTI Act obtained the right of citizens to be informed by government. Democracy, as well as sound policymaking, requires that the people must be listened to by the powers above. Civil society organizations of all stripes, including unions, should find common goals in laws and regulations that preserve their rights to assemble non-violently and protest constructively so that citizens can be heard.

Civil society and the citizenry must heal themselves too. Communication has two sides to it: speaking and listening. When listening breaks down, communication breaks down and society breaks apart. Citizens must listen deeply to others, especially those who think differently. Children are taught from school onwards to speak and write well and how to win debates, rather than listen to others. Even leaders are expected to be great communicators, rather than good listeners.

Perhaps those civil society organizations which are not inclined to gather at the hustings to demand change can propel a wider and deeper movement for change within society. The discipline of listening to others who are unlike oneself must be taught in schools. That is the way to learn the whole truth. Public discussions must be designed for thoughtful deliberations amongst citizens, unlike the debates in the media that are promoting antagonism in a race for TRPs. Leaders in business, government, and civil society must listen more deeply to one another, and to the common people for whose sake they must work together to make the world better for everyone. ■

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

THE SOCIAL SECTOR DOES NOT LAG IN INNOVATION

NGOs deserve a level playing field in which they can continue to give their best and partner government in delivering benefits and services to people.



KIRAN KARNIK

ON March 25, 2020, the Prime Minister announced a complete and almost immediate nationwide lockdown. From the next day, hundreds of thousands of daily-wage workers, most of them migrants, lost their jobs. With no income, meagre savings and no social security safety net of any kind, hunger and destitution stared them in the face. Fear about an unknown disease added to the worry about death by starvation. At such a time, both survival and emotion dictated that they return to their village home and family.

The sudden lockdown left them stranded far from home. Thousands rushed to railway stations and bus terminals; finding no transport, many thousands just began to trek hundreds of kilometres. Most were stopped and just milled around not knowing what to do. Even as the government machinery began to slowly comprehend the situation and decide on action, non-governmental organizations (NGOs) stepped in. They provided water, food and correct information: all three being equally essential. Later, NGOs supplied free rations in rural areas, a big help to millions of new-jobless.

As the virus turned into a pandemic, NGOs helped spread awareness of safety measures and countered vaccine hesitancy. Some facilitated vaccinations for the elderly, who are more vulnerable to COVID-19, and even arranged to transport them to vaccination centres. When the second wave peaked and the public health machinery practically broke down, NGOs tried to ensure the provision of oxygen to the sick and also helped in cremating COVID-19 victims. Some facilitated assistance from abroad: both oxygen/equipment and funds. Some put together teams to aid local administrations and hospitals. The role of NGOs was widely recognized, and top leaders from government appreciated the important contribution

of civil society.

For decades, NGOs have played a role in a wide range of fields. A majority focus on service delivery, taking education, health and other services across the country. Their work in child nutrition, female reproductive and general health, and livelihoods has been exemplary. Mid-day meals for schoolchildren is an example, with one NGO alone providing millions of meals to students. Its model of doing this through hygienic, state-of-the-art kitchens and equipment has won wide acclaim.

In education, for decades NGOs have done excellent work, especially in science education and — more broadly — the promotion of scientific temper. This includes unique initiatives like the Children's Science Congress and the Science Express. The latter was an exhibition-on-wheels which made stops at railway stations across the country, taking science and the method of science to children (and adults too) in thousands of towns and villages. NGOs have made mathematics enjoyable through games and kits, and created interest in space through model rocketry and astronomy.

In many of these areas, innovations and methods pioneered by NGOs have been integrated into the government system, thus enabling scaling. They have taken on the task of training the teachers, health workers, or other concerned interlocutors, so as to facilitate the process. In this joint work with the government, sometimes further innovation and improvements have come about.

THE LAST MILE

Some of this work has been done in cities, but most of it reaches out to the rural populace and — within that — to the disadvantaged. This last-mile/last-person connect is possible because of grassroots NGOs which are well integrated into these areas. Their selfless work over the years has helped to develop a close relationship with the local populace, enabling them to be trusted partners — so vital in healthcare but also, more generally, in understanding their needs, problems and in eliciting genuine feedback.

There is much else that NGOs do in the field of service delivery, not only supplementing and complementing the efforts of government, but — as noted earlier — often bringing a fresh approach and innovations, which can then be adapted for use across the state or country.

NGOs play a vital role in another area too: advocacy for policies that would be beneficial to the

disadvantaged and actions to advance these. This includes promoting, establishing and trying to enforce many new rights for all citizens. Amongst these are free and compulsory primary education, the right to information, food and (in rural areas) employment. Years of hard work, sustained advocacy and mobilisation of people by NGOs has paid off through laws that mandate these, putting in place essential safety nets for the poor and, through RTI, strengthening democracy by ensuring transparency and minimising information asymmetry.

VOICE OF THE PEOPLE

Much work of NGOs is done in partnership with government, but there are areas where the two may not see eye-to-eye, especially when the NGO puts forth the voice of the disadvantaged or affected persons and fights for their rights. Examples include forest-dwellers seeking to protect their habitat, farmers preventing their land from being acquired for industry or other purposes, locals protesting against the ravages of mining, people opposing dams that inundate their land or road construction that results in floods and landslides, policies that threaten their well-being, etc.

In such cases, NGOs often act as organizers, or amplifiers that take the voice of those affected to the administration and to other countrymen. Typically, governments — irrespective of their political orientation — frown on this role (as do many companies). Yet, in a democracy, what can be more important than to give voice to the voiceless, and seek to get those who will not listen to hear? For, amongst the most critical functions of an NGO — best captured in a cliché — is to speak truth to power.

The disagreements become confrontations and even conflicts when the government — central or state — chooses not the path of dialogue and discussion, a genuine attempt to jointly seek a solution, but prefers instead to use the power of the State to crush dissent.

This has been witnessed over decades, in a variety of fields, across the country: from the Chipko movement of the 1970s (in Uttarakhand), the anti-dam protests (about Sardar Sarovar and in the northeast), the anti-nuclear power-plant demonstrations (in Tamil Nadu and Maharashtra), anti-mining mobilisation (in Odisha), to the more recent anti-CAA sit-ins in 2019. In such cases, the official machinery paints NGOs (and individuals)



Innovations abound: The first structures for a cancer hospital in Muzaffarpur arrived on a truck from Chennai

involved as “anti-development and progress”.

In the agitation against new farm laws too, there was no prior consultation and little dialogue. After a year of sustained protests by farmers — who were prevented from marching into Delhi — the government was forced to relent by repealing the laws. Meanwhile, the agitators had again been branded: not merely anti-reform or anti-development, but also Khalistanis and anti-national. Of late, this tag of being anti-national has become an increasingly common description of anyone who questions government policy.

Those who organize the disadvantaged and fight for their rights are identified as Naxals, especially in Chhattisgarh and Jharkhand, and jailed under stringent laws, with no bail. The case of 85-year-old Stan Swamy springs to mind: a dedicated social worker, arrested and refused bail by an obviously biased judiciary and treated inhumanly by the authorities concerned. Even if he were actually an “anti-national”, refusing a drinking straw to a person with Parkinson's defies any concept of humanity that most would have.

UNFORTUNATE LAWS

Such actions and the targeting of NGOs, including well-known national and international ones, has certainly tarnished India's image as a democracy. More importantly, these have trod on the freedoms that are an inherent part of all citizens rights in a democracy. It is both the responsibility and duty of NGOs to sustain and develop these rights, especially in situations when the other arms of democracy fail to do so.

It is unfortunate that governments — state and central — have, particularly in the last dozen years, brought in laws and practices that constrain NGOs. The very premise of FCRA is “guilty, unless proven

otherwise”. NGOs are required to jump through hoops to cross the seemingly intentional obstacles put in their way. One example is the requirement for all NGOs, irrespective of their location, to open their main FCRA account in one specific branch (in Delhi) of one specific bank. Even if the government feels the need to access all data on remittances, balances, and transactions, in these days of core banking technology such information can be easily gleaned irrespective of which branch of the bank hosts the account.

Recent amendments bar an NGO from making sub-grants from foreign contribution. This completely upsets the working model of many an NGO which partners with small, grassroots NGOs for the last-mile delivery. This model is similar to that of companies, whose distribution chain has smaller partners who deliver to customers. Will the government even contemplate barring Nestle or Hindustan Unilever from paying their distributors and local shops?

It is obvious that small NGOs, with deep local knowledge, are best suited for last-mile delivery and interaction. However, they have neither the capability to write detailed proposals or to meet the stringent compliance requirements of large foreign donors. This is best done by bigger NGOs. In this model, each (big and small) plays the role for which it is best suited. The new law destroys this synergy and disrupts the ecosystem of NGOs.

In addition there is the general constraint on “political activity” by NGOs receiving foreign funding. Any advocacy can, very clearly, be classified as political. In many ways, fighting for rights is necessarily political.

In contrast, in the corporate arena, government is encouraging and actively promoting the inflow of foreign funding and, in most sectors, even

permission is not required. It is well-known that many companies have active advocacy programmes, directly and overtly seeking to influence government policy. Many companies work in “sensitive” areas and, in fact, are encouraged to make investments there. Further, there is now the Ministry of Home Affairs audit for NGOs receiving foreign funds, but not for companies. Why, then, this paranoia about foreign influence through NGOs and this lack of trust in them?

It is, of course, known that some foreign donors seek to influence the agenda of NGOs. However, there are many other ways of handling this. Nor can one argue that NGOs are all knights in shining armour. It is a very large and diverse community, and includes more than a few who may be fraudsters and charlatans or do indulge in various undesirable activities. But who will seriously contest that such black sheep also exist in all other arms of our democracy: legislatures, government, judiciary, media and corporations? Yet, none of them is burdened with the controls and suspicions that NGOs suffer.

NGOs are a key pillar of a democratic society. They assist the government to reach the far corners of the country and the most disadvantaged in our population; provide relief and succour at times of natural or man-made calamity; create new, innovative models of development and help the government to adapt these and scale their impact; get authentic feedback from the grassroots; uphold civil liberties; and ensure that the voiceless have a say. Most important, they serve as the conscience of the nation and ensure that we remain a robust, vibrant democracy. It is in the interest of the nation to support and encourage them. ■

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SAVIOURS OF LEARNING ARE AT THE GRASSROOTS

Small rural NGOs tried reaching out to children without access to education during the pandemic. But with no funding they are now being wiped out.



VIMALA RAMACHANDRAN

THE COVID-19 lockdown has had a devastating impact on children in pre-schools, *anganwadi* centres and schools. There has been huge loss of learning, lack of access to nutrition in the absence of mid-day meals and psychological and social trauma for both children and parents. Teachers, on the other hand, have suffered loss of livelihood if they are in private schools or on contract with the government.

Several studies like the ASER and Oxfam reports have highlighted the dire situation in both rural and urban areas. Where relief has come, it has been from NGOs working at the grassroots. Many of these organizations are small ones whose contribution has gone unsung. They have been effective in reaching out to children at home and getting teachers to ensure that at least some learning takes place in informal classes in the open.

Aragamee in Odisha, the India Education Collective in several states, Bodh Shiksha Samiti in Rajasthan, MV Foundation in Andhra Pradesh, to name a few, have actively engaged with parents, teachers and children. In Chhattisgarh, volunteers have worked closely with the state government to facilitate outdoor classes for children in small groups. Similar reports have trickled in from parts of Uttar Pradesh, Bihar, Tamil Nadu, Odisha and a few northeastern states.

Organizing and working with teacher collectives to help them reach out and work with children has also been a popular strategy. For example, the India Education Collective organized eight teacher collectives in UP during the second COVID-19 wave. The collectives have made it possible to assess the health of teachers and provide them with virtual training sessions. Worksheets and learning materials have also been provided to children. Similarly, the Azim Premji Foundation has also worked intensively with teacher collectives in many states to reach out to children and parents.

The important question before grassroots NGOs has to do with their very survival. Since the dawn of the Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan as a comprehensive and integrated scheme and later the Samagra Shiksha programme, the space for NGOs in education has been shrinking gradually.

It is state governments that are partnering NGOs. States like Odisha, Andhra Pradesh, Meghalaya, Telangana, Chhattisgarh and Tamil Nadu are working with grassroots NGOs to improve teacher-training and introduce new pedagogic practices.

Alongside, availability of funding for grassroots NGOs working with children and in schooling has been shrinking at an alarming rate.

At the start of the pandemic lockdowns, education was not viewed as a priority — relief, support to displaced migrants, oxygen supplies and basic healthcare took precedence. Six months down the line, the plight of children not attending school and having no access to a smartphone or a computer, started being discussed. As survey results came out, the cumulative learning loss, nutritional impact and emotional/mental health of children became more apparent. Large urban-based NGOs did not have the bandwidth to respond and it was rural grassroots NGOs that stepped in.

Even before the pandemic struck, entities like the Tata Trusts stopped funding grassroots NGOs as they preferred to work directly on the ground. They were among the few national funders who prioritized education for several decades. Changes in the FCRA guidelines and norms have also affected small NGOs who used to work in collaboration with a nodal/larger NGO that had the capacity to get FCRA registration and manage all the paperwork.

Working with children from pre-school to secondary level has never been easy. The primary role played by NGOs was one of supporting and encouraging the participation of all children in government schools, mobilizing and training school management committees or parent-teacher committees, providing supplementary and after school support to children, managing libraries and supporting principals and schoolteachers. This requires intensive work on the ground and human resources. The NGOs not only need to pay field staff, they also need to prepare materials that can be used by teachers and children.

Yet, large donors insist on minimizing personnel cost without realizing that work in education involves personnel. Salaries of teachers, trainers and similar expertise is not 'management' but actual field

costs. Over the years, the demand to reduce 'personnel' cost without any understanding of what education actually entails has also been a huge blow to grassroots groups.

This issue has not been adequately highlighted by the NGOs themselves or by federations of NGOs. Working in the education space or in child development is impossible without people on the ground. Teachers, teacher-educators, pre-school educators, cooks and support staff are essential. When donors insist on minimizing personnel costs, NGOs then resort to producing teaching-learning material or providing other material inputs. But even the best workbook or teaching-learning material is useless unless there is a teacher who can use the material to work with children face-to-face and in small groups.

The hype about online-learning or hybrid models has been challenged with recent information (for example, the ASER 2021 report) on access and, more importantly, the ability of small children to engage with learning through a smartphone. The architect of the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020, Dr Kasturirangan, has said that direct interface between teachers and children is critical and extremely important in the early years of schooling. The NEP 2020 also reinforces the importance and pivotal role of teachers in the lives of children.

Therefore, donor agency policies favouring printed material and online models goes against the very grain of meaningful educational processes.

NGOs working on early childhood development and school education face huge challenges today. These include making up the learning loss, enrolling dropouts in school, providing bridging support to children to enable them to 'catch up' with their age appropriate grade competency, promoting accelerated learning and foundational learning. Above all, ensuring food security to children from the most deprived sections of society requires active collaboration between the government and grassroots organizations.

Online education is not the answer. What children need is face-to-face interaction, small group learning, love, care and encouragement. International management consulting companies cannot do any of this and they do not have the economic incentive to work with the poor. Yet, unfortunately, the fashion among state governments is to sign PPP contracts with them. I am left wondering — when will they ever learn? ■

Vimala Ramachandran is an educationist.

NGOS WORK HARD BUT GET A RAW DEAL IN REGULATION

The majority of NGOs raise funds within the country, are *atmanirbhar* and deserve an enabling environment as envisaged in the policy framed in 2002.



MATHEW CHERIAN

THE voluntary, non-profit sector has contributed to democracy, equity and nation-building during and after Independence. It has grown in all fields, from primary education to aging and from environmental action to the conservation of art and culture. It is estimated that the NGO sector contributes 3.5 percent to India's GDP. It provides jobs, employment and works to reach the 'least and last' in the country.

However, the lack of recognition to the NGO sector is a matter of concern and dismay. There has been no policy framework for non-profits. They exist to fulfil the needs and gaps that the government usually cannot bridge. Let us not forget that most of the significant work in the country be it in water, livelihoods, rural development, leprosy rehabilitation, right to information, recognition of the homeless etc came from small pilots done by NGOs that were innovative, cost-effective and timely.

From earthquakes to floods, epidemics to pandemics, NGOs have stood shoulder to shoulder with governments and citizens to offer support, assistance and solidarity.

The regulatory framework for the NGO sector, however, has been challenging and instead of furthering it, has ended up strangulating it. The 'ease of doing business' index has been improved. The government has eased a lot of regulation in other areas of governance. However, ironically, the 'ease of doing good' has only become riddled by unnecessary paperwork and increased suspicion. There are constant 'audits' under the Foreign Contribution Regulatory Act (FCRA). There is excessive scrutiny by income-tax authorities despite filing returns, annual reports and regular audits.

There were 42,000 registered FCRA organizations in 2010 when the new amended FCRA was passed.

The Minister of State for Home Affairs said in Parliament in 2021 that 20,400 registrations of non-profits have been cancelled, which means foreign funding comes to only 22,000 NGOs or just 0.07 percent of the sector which is a measly ₹16,343 crores. The majority of NGOs raise funds within the country and are more *atmanirbhar* than any other sector of the economy.

The NGO sector needs an enabling environment to flourish and serve India's marginalised people. There was a flicker of hope in 2002. A policy was announced by the Atal Behari Vajpayee government with much fanfare in Vigyan Bhawan. One of its main tenets was: "The government will also examine the feasibility of enacting a simple and liberal Central law that will serve as an alternative all-India statute for registering voluntary organizations, particularly those that wish to operate in different parts of the country and even abroad. Such a law would coexist with prevailing central and state laws, allowing a voluntary organization the option of registering under one or more laws, depending on the nature and sphere of its activities."

This promise was never fulfilled and some of us spent valuable time drafting this new policy which, unfortunately, never became law.

In 2007, the National Policy on the Voluntary Sector was notified. In Clause 5.2 it said: "Partnership between government and voluntary organizations implies identifying shared goals and defining complementary roles. It must be based on the basic principles of mutual trust and respect, with shared responsibility and authority. These principles must be explicit in the terms and conditions of the partnership. They must also be evident in the formal and informal systems of collaboration."

The policy indicated more progressive steps in Clause 6.1: "The government will support and encourage existing, as well as new, independent philanthropic institutions and private foundations to provide financial assistance to deserving voluntary organizations. It will also promote dialogue among 10 public and private grant-makers so that they may take advantage of the best practices in grant-making and fund-raising strategies."

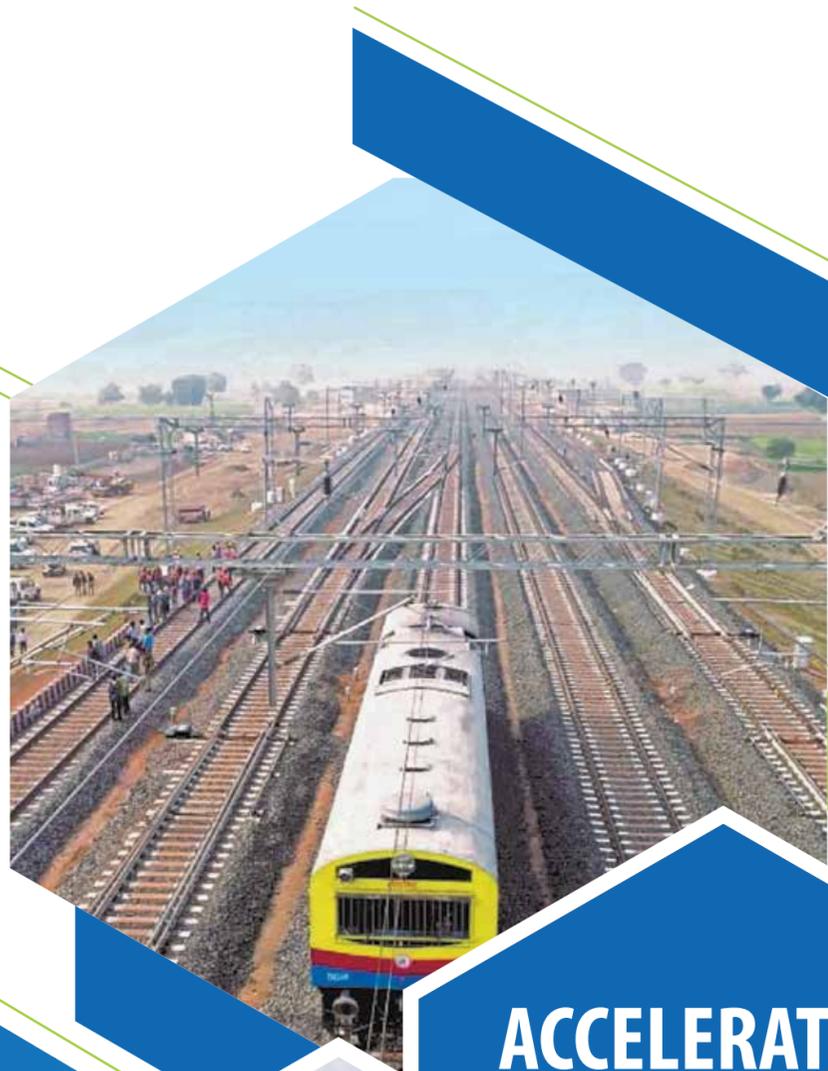
What we saw in reality is just the reverse! The taxation of non-profits did not improve but worsened. It is high time the policy framed by the NDA government in 2002 is implemented. The foreign funding bogey and the FCRA and FEMA originated in 1975 during the Emergency. The ban

on funding to non-profits began at that time and many agencies were on the banned list, especially Gandhian organizations, those associated with Jayaprakash Narayan and the Lohia socialists.

Instead of being repealed, this discriminatory law has been further tightened. Listed are some stringent steps taken by the government:

- In 2010 the FCRA law was amended and the new amendment said that registration will not be indefinite but time-barred. It offered a five-year registration instead of a permanent registration that existed before.
 - Simultaneously the registration of 14,000 NGO was cancelled overnight, many for simple reporting delays and so on.
 - The law in 2016, by the current BJP government, said that all organizations have to reapply for their FCRA registration with a five-year validity.
 - In September 2020, the Government of India passed an amendment that restricted sub-granting to all NGOs. Many small organizations in rural areas have come to a grinding halt. Even those who worked tirelessly during the pandemic could not be paid leaving families in distress.
 - The renewal process has been held up for many months with no transparency from an unresponsive Home Ministry.
 - All NGOs with FCRA had to open a bank account in the State Bank of India's main branch on Parliament Street in New Delhi.
 - All members have to sign an affidavit that they know about the organization and can be criminally prosecuted for any violation and have to submit their PAN cards and Adhaar cards.
 - An affidavit is mandated for NGOs to make an undertaking under Section 10 (5) of FEMA, signed by all the authorized signatories of the new SBI account.
 - The draconian FEMA, which was withdrawn for the private sector, has been brought back to the NGO sector through the backdoor.
- It does seem that the Emergency is back for the non-profit sector and so are the delays in response, lack of grievance redressal, and no right to information. The foreign funds which come for the non-profit sector are from public global charities approved by respective governments and as per norms of the Financial Action Task force (FATF). The funds are not from tax havens like Mauritius and Bahamas. Then why this over-regulation? ■

Mathew Cherian is the author of 'A Million Missions' and 'Ageing and Poverty in India'. He has been amicus curiae to the Supreme Court.



ACCELERATING INDIA'S PROGRESS

ACCELERATING INDIA'S PROGRESS

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Back now to your roots

Ancient Living has cosmetics and games

SURMAYI KHATANA

ANCIENT Living has self-care products that rival grandma's kitchen in purity and wisdom. There are soaps, shampoo bars, scrubs, hair masks and a range of undiluted oils. Shampoo bars have *henna, methi, shikakai, amla*. Oils include orange, patchouli, lavender and rosemary. Also included is an organic baby care section with massage oils made of almond or sesame.

There is something special for your mind as well. Ancient Living has Native Games — forgotten board games children used to play and which foster a spirit of togetherness. Attractively painted by Cheriya and Madhubani artists, the board games look enticing. Roll your dice and play Pachisi or Indian Ludo, Lagori or Seven Stones, Snakes and Ladders or Moksha Pata, Noughts and Crosses or perhaps you'd like to play the Serpents Game.

"We wanted to not only pass on the wisdom of previous generations but also make products that are culturally relevant and emblematic. You know, like when you visit a country and bring back something which reflects it? That is what we wanted to do," says Kalyani Gongi, who founded Ancient Living in 2011.

After working for seven years as a software engineer, Gongi decided to return to her roots. Dissatisfied with the organic oil blends sold commercially, she wanted to make her own blends using the skills she learnt from her father, B. Nageshwar Rao. His organic farm grew eucalyptus and lemongrass. Gongi and her father used to attend courses on organic oils and herbs together as a hobby.

"Ayurvedic formulations available in the market source their herbs questionably. Growing a herb on a chemical-based farm instead of an organic farm makes it lose its essential characteristics," Gongi explains. She also wanted herbs, Ayurveda and its cultural roots to be preserved. Her family has always been deeply rooted in nature. They had been making their own plant-based remedies for several years.

At first, Gongi made oil blends for friends and then graduated to putting up stalls at exhibitions. Finally, she invested her own savings to set up Ancient Living. Her handmade artisanal products are now sold domestically and internationally.

Ancient Living is a licensed manufacturer of Ayurveda products and certified as organic and cruelty-free. Their products have no synthetic smells or colours and are free of sulphates, parabens and additives.

CORE VALUES

Gongi began by making blends for her aromatherapy segment of products. Herbs were sourced from her family's farm. As the volume of production increased, her enterprise began sourcing raw material from organic certified farms across India. One of her key values was to use only chemical-free herbs.

This philosophy of sustainability extends to packaging and customer feedback. Ancient Living packs their products in what they call 'earthy' packaging. Eco-friendly packaging has been an important goal for the team. Powder soaps and hair packs are packed in paper bags. Glass bottles and jars are used for shampoos, scrubs and face washes. They also offer wooden combs. Plastic bottles are available for customers buying products for young children. But the bottles can be sent back to Ancient Living which, in return, offers discounts on subsequent purchases.



Kalyani Gongi



Organic oils and shampoo

Another core value for the team is not to use personal care products to exploit the insecurities of customers or promise impossible beauty outcomes. "We will not promise that this face wash will make your skin look lighter. If someone asks us for a fairness cream, well, that does not fit in with our values. What we can promise, instead, is healthier skin," says Gongi.

Ancient Living is responsive to customer needs. They introduced shampoo bars when customers specifically asked for them. Although only 10 percent of customers who buy shampoo opt for shampoo bars, they make them all the same. Gongi says it's important to cater to the minority as well. "Our catalogue has always been more customer-centric than market-centric," she says.

New products are introduced after considerable research which can extend for up to a year. Team ideas and customer inputs are sought and included. The team maintains a database of what their customers are looking for and buying from them, to gauge what the customer needs and likes. They also directly interact with their customers for feedback. The catalogue is updated annually and products are tested in their microbiology labs.

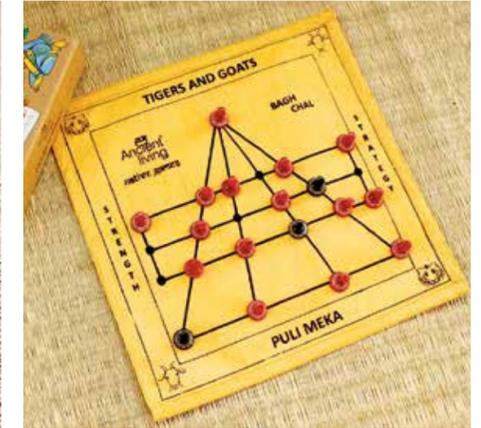
Ancient Living's bestsellers are their handmade soaps, especially the Kasturi Turmeric soap. Priced at ₹195, it tops their sales chart. The Ancient Living website describes each ingredient in the product and what purpose it serves.

Handmade soaps shaped like elephants, lions and monkeys have been specially designed for children. "We don't just want to sell soap. We also want to give you a product that is handmade, has a story to tell and improves your mood," says Gongi. All soaps are packed in paper boxes.

Ancient Living is now a one-stop shop for aromatherapy. You can buy clay diffusers, candle vaporizers, essential oils, carrier oils and blended oils. The Organic De-Stress Blended Oil, infused with lavender, bergamot and rose, helps to reduce exhaustion and stress. It's a perfect accompaniment to yoga and meditation.

As part of their COVID-19 Essentials, they offer Tulasi Hand Cleansing Soap Balls, a jar of small single-use soap balls for washing hands. Ancient Living reuses misshapen soaps to create small soap balls. Their Organic Baby Care collection offers bath powders and massage oils made out of almond and sesame.

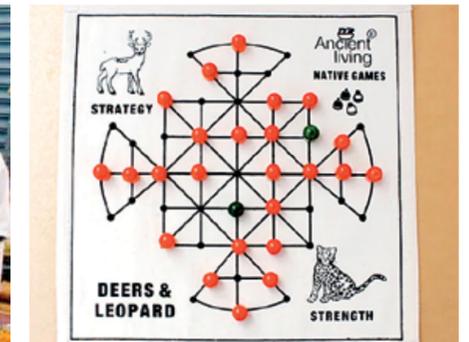
Apart from shampoo bars, Ancient Living's hair care range includes hair packs and washes specifically designed for different scalp types. The hair protein pack is a mix of *methi, hibiscus, bhringraj* and *amla*. Stirred with yogurt, it cools the



Traditional games made from wood, cotton and silk. They are handpainted by Cheriya and Madhubani artists



Handmade soaps are bestsellers



'We divide personal care products by skin type and scalp type. We want customers to get something that works for them.'

scalp and tackles hairfall effectively.

"We divide some of our personal care products by skin type and scalp type like oily, dry and normal, because we want customers to get something that works for them. We want them to come back to us," says Gongi.

Retaining customers is a priority for Ancient Living. To market products, they rely on word-of-mouth and customers finding customers. A lot of Ancient Living's consumers are repeat customers and have helped the brand grow, "If a customer is happy, they will definitely talk about our products and recommend them," says Gongi. In India, most clients are from big cities but in the US, UK and the Maldives, their clients are from both cities and small towns.

You can place orders on their website. Four of their brick and mortar stores had to shut during the pandemic but two in Andhra Pradesh and Karnataka are still functioning.

TRADITIONAL GAMES

Gongi's foray into traditional games is in line with her philosophy of passing on traditional Indian practices to the next generation. She recalls playing games like Astha Chamma with her brother at the farm. Today, most children tend to be glued to computers, the TV screen or their smartphones, isolating them from nature and other kids. Ancient Living tries to find traditional board games



played in different parts of the country.

The games are made from wood, cotton and silk and are artisanal. Ancient Living has Cheriya and Madhubani artists in-house, who handpaint their games. No two games look alike. Each is distinct, varying in design and colour. "We wanted to encourage artistic creativity and give them a free hand in painting because the aim is to also preserve the art," explains Gongi. For her traditional board games are also an art form.

Ancient Living's website explains the rules of the different games along with a short history of their origin. The design of their Pitthu game has seven handpainted wooden blocks instead of stones and a rubber ball. Along with the rules of the game, a short paragraph on its 5,000-year-old history is listed. The Pitthu set is priced at ₹850.

One can get the board games customized. Ancient Living also offers terracotta and wooden handmade toys like kitchen sets and dolls.

Gongi hopes that the games will foster holistic growth and build character attributes like strategic thinking, team-building and family bonding. "These are games you can play with your grandmother," she says. Their Nine Men's Morris or Navakankari is dubbed the 'Daadi' game. The games do very well outside India too, "Our customers in different countries really enjoy the products. They like keeping these games and showing them to their family and friends as a token of Indian culture." Beauty and brains are both promoted organically by the enterprising Gongi and her team at Ancient Living. ■

YOU AND THE E-WASTE MOUNTAIN

Don't let dead batteries haunt the world

SURMAYI KHATANA

CHANCES are that expended pencil batteries have been collecting in your drawer and every time you think of sending them off with your kitchen waste in a garbage bag, you hold yourself back because you are aware that it is not the correct thing to do.

The pencil battery pile-up is just the most visible and annoying tip of the problem. Today, our lives are governed by all types of gadgets and they are powered by a range of batteries big and tiny. There are lithium batteries, lithium-ion batteries, lead-acid batteries, alkaline batteries and zinc-carbon batteries — it is a long list and the numbers are increasing.

Where do all these batteries go when they die, some in the very gadgets in which they have been embedded? The truth is no one really knows. Although batteries are hazardous waste, they end up in landfills along with other domestic refuse when they should go instead to recyclers.

In 2019, according to estimates, 2.7 billion dry-cell batteries were being used annually in India. Out of these, around 90 percent ended up in the informal sector instead of with authorized recyclers. Now that is just dry-cell batteries. It is difficult to find numbers of the others.

The Solid Waste Management Rules of 2016 place batteries in the category of domestic hazardous waste, but do not mention segregation. Batteries are clubbed with waste like paint cans and tubelights.

There are a few formal collection systems or recycling facilities in some cities. A handful of NGOs are filling this gap by collecting dry-cell batteries from homes along with other e-waste but what they take away is insignificant.

Saahas and Environmental Synergies in Development (ENSYDE) in Bengaluru have set up e-waste collection centres across the city in schools, stores, malls and apartment complexes. Their BE-Responsible Initiative has connected with some 800 institutions and RWAs.

E-waste is segregated into batteries, CDs and other such waste which is then sent to authorized recyclers like e-Parisara on the outskirts of the city, on trucks. You can locate their e-waste drop boxes from their website. Saahas collected 2.7 tonnes of e-waste per month last year and the non-profit is expanding to Gurugram, Mumbai and Noida.

In Pune, SWaCH is an authorized e-waste collector with two collection centres. It helps e-waste reach authorized recyclers in the city.

In Delhi, the Municipal Corporation of East Delhi is working with Attero, an e-waste recycling company, to collect e-waste from homes and has recently started collecting lithium-ion batteries.

Car and bike batteries are usually bought back or exchanged at auto retailers and service centres because of the value of the materials inside. The Batteries (Management and Handling) Rules 2001, apply an Extended Producer Responsibility on manufacturers of lead-acid batteries for recycling. From retailers, the battery goes to the manufacturer's warehouses where it is collected by authorized recyclers.

Nile Limited, based in Andhra Pradesh and Telangana, took up recycling lead-acid batteries in 1999 with the boom in automobile sales. Nile recovers lead, which is the basic component of batteries, and sells it back to battery manufacturers.

Once the used batteries make their journey on trucks to the Nile plant, a machine called the battery breaker crushes the battery.

"There are dangerous elements in the battery, so the crushing cannot be done manually since it would pose a hazard," says Sandeep Ramesh, managing director of Nile.



Sandeep Ramesh of Nile which recycles 50,000 tonnes of lead acid batteries a year

Of the estimated 2.7 billion dry cell batteries that are being used annually in India, 90 percent end up in the informal sector.

Using density separation, lead particles are separated from plastic, electrolytes and acids which are neutralized with lime. The plastic is washed and sent to a plastic recycler.

The extracted lead paste or bullion, a mixture of 96 percent lead and other metals, is treated in a two-stage process. First, it is heated at a high temperature in a furnace after which the pure lead is processed in another furnace.

The average life of a battery depends on usage. It usually lives up to the three-year warranty period but its life could extend up to five years.

The rise in auto sales and telecom towers has increased demand for lead-acid batteries. "While UPS inverters haven't seen an exponential growth recently due to power supply becoming better, there has been a rise in the number of automobiles and telecommunication towers which use lead acid batteries as back-up," says Ramesh.

Nile recycles over 50,000 tonnes of batteries annually, on average. It is in the process of setting up a lithium-ion battery recycling plant in Hyderabad.

Extended Producer Responsibility extends to batteries inside electronic gadgets like laptops, computers, phones and so on as such devices are considered one unit. When such gadgets are recycled, the batteries inside are sent to authorized battery recyclers.

The Batteries (Management and Handling) Rules were formulated in early 2001. Since then battery use in vehicles and devices in India has increased hugely. The rules only cover lead-acid batteries and not dry-cell batteries used in homes. But the proposed draft Battery Waste Management Rules 2020, cover single-use disposable batteries, among others, under Extended Producer Responsibility. It then becomes important for the producer to set up a system of collection and buy-back.

The draft rules are under review and there are some differences over how various types of batteries should be dealt with. The rules, currently, deal with all types of batteries together.

"Industry has responded to the draft saying that clubbing some types of batteries may not be best since each of them have vastly different chemical compositions," says Ramesh.

It remains to be seen how the rules are finally framed. Till then, getting batteries to people who know how to dispose of them safely would be the correct thing to do. ■

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



Aao manain Mawana ke saath Har pal Tyohaar (e)



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Wondrous stepwell and a love story

SUSHEELA NAIR

A 20-km detour from the city of Ahmedabad took me to Adalaj, a village reputed for an architectural wonder: a marvellous stepwell or *vav* built in 1499 to hold water, offer spiritual sustenance and be a refuge for travellers and local people.

As soon as I stepped into the ornate five-storied structure, I was bowled over by its striking beauty. What makes Adalaj distinct from other stepwells is its spectacular mix of Indo-Islamic architecture and design. The legend behind its genesis is as intriguing as its architectural brilliance. The saga of the stepwell's creation has elements of love and war, devotion and betrayal.

As I strolled around, I observed the details of this story inscribed on walls and pillars in Sanskrit and Pali. The Adalaj *vav* was commissioned by Rani Roopba, the queen of Rana Veersingh, a local chief who was vanquished by the Muslim ruler, Mohammed Begada. The Vaghela queen had already begun building the *vav*, when her husband was defeated by Begada. Smitten by her stunning beauty, Begada proposed to her.

Playing it safe, the dejected queen agreed to the proposal on condition that he complete the five-storied stepwell as a sign of devotion. Enticed by her charms, Begada agreed to take up the challenging task. The excavation and construction work, which had stalled abruptly, began in right earnest. As years rolled by, an edifice juxtaposing the old Indian architectural ideals with the nobility of Islamic architecture, emerged.

When the five-storied structure was nearing completion, Rani Roopba plunged into its waters and ended her life. This has sanctified the place and many rural people carry back water from this well, like revered Ganga water. Every visitor prays for the spirit of the Rani who is believed to still live here. Begada halted construction immediately, which could explain the incomplete dome, but did not demolish it. The enraged ruler ensured that this exemplary stepwell would not be replicated and hence put to death the masons involved in its construction.

One can spend endless hours gazing at the stunning beauty of this sculptural extravaganza. Weaving my way through the passageways and the ornate pillars of this naturally air-conditioned *vav*, I marvelled at the dexterity of the skilled sculptors. What grabbed my attention was the enormous, rectangular *vav* with strong arches and pillars placed as if guarding the centrally-placed *vav* full of cool, fresh water. Built of sandstone, the stepwell at Adalaj consists of octagonal landings, huge colonnades embellished with a profusion of carvings and exquisitely carved niches. As I descended, I could sense a perceptible drop in temperature — a natural air-conditioning system of



The Adalaj stepwell is an architectural wonder



The well at the lowest level

The stepwell served as a resting place. It supplied water and was a sight for sore eyes for the weary traveller, trader and pilgrim.

sorts. The temperature is always six degrees cooler than outside. This helped keep the water cool even in the scorching heat of summer.

The *vav* stands as the only major monument of its kind, with the entrance stairs leading to a stepped corridor. Three entrances meet at the first storey underground, in a huge square platform. There are openings in the many ceilings which make for good ventilation for the octagonal well. However, direct sunlight does not touch the flight of steps or landings except for a brief period at noon. We found the structure's interplay with light striking.

The influence of the earlier Solanki ruler is perceptible in the combination of Hindu and Muslim architecture. Other wondrous carvings are the leafy creepers. Typical adornments of Muslim architecture coexist with Hindu symbols such as animal motifs, the bird, the horse and the elephant together with *navagrahas* and images of Goddess Shakti.

The *vavs* are essentially rectangular structures with the opening to a flight of descending steps at one end and the shaft to the inner well at the far end. I was beguiled by the decorative theme of jousting elephants as a continuous motif on the walls and pillars right from the beginning of the steps until the penultimate level. Juxtaposed with these are motifs in the form of geometric and floral patterns.

Other carvings on the panels depict the lifestyle of those days — women performing daily chores like churning buttermilk, leisure activities of people, a king sitting on a stool with two *chauri* bearers, musicians accompanying dancing females besides abstract symbols of gods and goddesses.

I observed traces of Buddhist and Jain influences on some of the pillars and walls. The *Ami Khumbor* or pot holding the water of life and the *Kalp Vriksha*, the tree of life sculpted in a niche from a single slab of stone, held us spellbound. There is a belief that the small friezes of *navagrahas* at the edge of the well, protect the monument from evil spirits and bad omens. These depictions are said to attract villagers for worship during marriages and other ritualistic ceremonies.

Built as a resting place for pilgrims and traders, the *vav* obviously fulfilled a ritualistic as well as a utilitarian need. These wells supplied water certainly but also rewarded the effort of reaching the spot with 'rest for weary bones and a sight for sore eyes.'

In the past, travellers used to stop by to quench their thirst. These subterranean *vavs* were also frequented by caravans as stopovers along trade routes to take shelter from the heat and rain. Villagers used to stop by the *vav* every day in the morning to fill water, offer prayers to the deities carved into the walls and interact with each other in the cool shade. I returned overwhelmed by the foresight and public-spiritedness of the creators of this stepwell who thought of conservation, given the scarcity of water and scanty rainfall in this semi-arid region. ■

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CURATED FOR YOU. CHECK THEM OUT.

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WORK AND TEACH STREET CHILDREN

Salaam Baalak Trust Established in 1988, Salaam Baalak Trust, based in New Delhi, supports street and working children in the National Capital Region (NCR). With the aim of creating a sensitive and caring environment for street children, Salaam Baalak has set up four children's homes and three open shelters to provide 24/7 care and protection services. The trust also runs a mobile school programme for children living in slums. A 24-hour helpline is also manned by them.

You can volunteer with Salaam Baalak Trust for tutoring, healthcare or documentation for a minimum of four weeks. The trust also accepts donations online.

www.salaambaalaktrust.com | volunteer@salaambaalaktrust.org | contact@salaambaalaktrust.org

CLEAN UP SLUMS, SPREAD WARMTH

Ek Kadam, an NGO in Delhi-NCR, runs relief programmes for children living in urban slums as well as for other vulnerable communities. Their Operation Clean Zari project works to clean up slums in and around Delhi-NCR. Ek Kadam distributes free medicines, blankets and clothes as part of their relief programme.

Under their Joy of Giving Festival they distribute food and clothes during festivals to the underprivileged. They also organize awareness programmes and camps on AIDs and cancer.

Ek Kadam provides free vocational training to women in Delhi's slums. You can volunteer with them or donate to their efforts.

www.ekkadamfoundation.org | info@ekkadamfoundation.org | +91-(120)-4289700

BUILD SKILLS AND CAREERS

Muskurahat Foundation The Muskurahat Foundation was established in 2014 in Mumbai. It works to empower vulnerable youth and children in shelter homes. Their project, KEYtaab, offers holistic education and has a curriculum which covers social-emotional learning, academics and mental well-being. It is being taught in 13 shelter homes and five community centres in Mumbai.

Project Saarthi is a career readiness programme for youth in shelter homes. It helps them identify careers, develop work skills, find employment and live independently. The non-profit will be

FIRST PERSON

Chethan Elvis Das, IT professional

'I BECAME A WARDEN TO UNDERSTAND TRAFFIC'

WE ALL SIT and complain about traffic instead getting out there and understanding how complex it can be. I personally wanted to be on the ground and understand what the actual problems are when it comes to traffic or managing it.

Some 10 years ago I met a traffic warden at a junction. He was wearing a uniform which looked different from the one policemen wear. I spoke to him out of curiosity. He told me about the Traffic Warden Organization, a volunteer force which helps manage traffic.

I have been volunteering with the Traffic Warden Organization in Bengaluru since five years now. I have been able to help many people on the road while managing traffic. I have received a lot of blessings from older people and many thank yous from people passing by. If there is a mishap, I call the ambulance or help people caught in tough situations on the road. On ordinary days, I help streamline traffic and help pedestrians cross the road.

Wearing a uniform obviously has its own kick, but it is being able to help people on the road that gives one a fulfilling feeling. Some of my fellow volunteers have saved lives in accidents. We feel we can make a big difference.



Chethan in uniform on duty in Bengaluru during rush hour

I have been working four hours every week for the last five years. I have controlled traffic on weekends, during peak hours, important festivals and special occasions. Alongside, I fulfil my duties at Socialbytes Technologies Pvt. Ltd where I work.

There are regular recruitment calls for the Traffic Warden Organization.

Right now we have a volunteer force of some 800 wardens. You need a reference and basic qualifications. You also have to sit for an interview. The Bangalore City

Police Traffic Warden Organization is a voluntary outfit with the Commissioner of Police as chief patron.

One of my responsibilities, apart from managing traffic, is creating awareness. As part of the organization's 'Catch Them Young' programme for road safety awareness and training for young kids, I help in holding workshops in schools on how to use the road safely, obey traffic lights, and what to do in emergencies.

www.bcptwo.com | bcptwohq@gmail.com | www.facebook.com/bcptwo

Since 1993, Astha India has been working to disseminate information among people with disabilities, especially those in the urban slums of Delhi. They run a National Disability Helpline which was the first of its kind when it started in 2000. Callers can access information and receive counselling. You can help them reach more by volunteering to do desk research or take workshops for children with disabilities. You can also donate to their cause.

www.asthaindia.in | aarthindia@gmail.com | 011-26449026

helping youth to transit from school to college and into a profession.

You can volunteer with the Muskurahat Foundation and become a Smile Soldier. You can also donate to their efforts or help them raise funds for projects.

www.muskurahat.org.in | president@muskurahat.org.in

HELP THE YOUNG LEARN AND EARN

DEEPALAYA Deepalaya was started in 1979 to educate underprivileged girl children. It also works for low-income women and youth. Deepalaya has projects in Delhi, Haryana, Uttar Pradesh, Uttarakhand, Punjab, Kerala, Andhra Pradesh, Maharashtra and Telangana.

Deepalaya's Vocational Training & Skill Development Centres (VTCs) provide hands-on skills that enable

TACKLE ACCESS TO BASIC SERVICES

APNALAYA Founded in 1972, Apnalaya started as a day care centre for children of migrant labour in Nariman Point in Mumbai. Apnalaya now helps the urban poor access healthcare,

education, livelihoods and civic entitlements through advocacy with the government.

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

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

GIFT A TREE AND HELP SAVE THE EARTH

Green Yatra A pollution free and green Earth is what everyone wants. But it takes spirited citizens to make it happen. Green Yatra, a Mumbai-based NGO, has set a target to plant 100 million trees by 2025 under their Pedh Lagao campaign. You can support them by gifting a tree to a loved one for their birthday or anniversary.

Green Yatra's Go Green Kids visits schools and sensitizes students to

environmental issues. Students are taken on a clean-up drive or to build a birdhouse or plant trees in school premises. Green Yatra partners with companies like McDonalds and Oracle and systematically manages their waste. Since 2012 they have saved 8,000 tonnes of garbage from going to a landfill and 27,000 tonnes of greenhouse gases from being emitted.

You can volunteer your time or support them with a donation.
www.greenyatra.org | info@greenyatra.org | +91 99675 38049

INFORMATION FOR THE DISABLED

ASTHA For a person with disability, navigating each day can be hard. But access to the right information, knowing what schemes the government has to offer and knowing one's legal rights can make a big difference.

Since 1993, Astha India has been working to disseminate information among people with disabilities, especially those in the urban slums of Delhi. They run a National Disability Helpline which was the first of its kind when it started in 2000. Callers can access information and receive counselling. You can help them reach more by volunteering to do desk research or take workshops for children with disabilities. You can also donate to their cause.

APNA GHAR IS HOME FOR EVERYONE

APNA GHAR Everyone needs a home. Apna Ghar Ashram is a home for the destitute, the sick and injured, the old and homeless and the mentally challenged who have nowhere else to go. Apna Ghar volunteers find them on railway stations, bus stands and at religious places.

At Apna Ghar, they have a roof over their head, food and medical attention. There are 35 such ashrams across the northern part of the country. You can support Apna Ghar with a contribution. One inmate's daily expense is ₹70. You can also volunteer as a member of the medical team, or as a vocational trainer, or an IT professional.
www.apnagarashram.org | +918764396811

TRAINING AND JOBS FOR WOMEN

MAHILA DAKSHATA SAMITI The road to

gender equality is a long one. Mahila Dakshata Samiti has been charting a path since 1976 by empowering women and children in distress through education and employment.

They train women in tailoring, embroidery, cooking, baking and catering so that they can be financially independent.

Women who have been forced out of their home and have nowhere to go can live in their short stay home where they are given medical care, counseling and skills training. There is also a family counseling centre. Women can also seek legal aid and police assistance with their help.

Mahila Dakshata Samiti has upgraded infrastructure in government schools in Karnataka and conducted field visits to ensure children don't drop out of schools. You can make a donation to them.

mahiladakshatasamiti.org | 9341222585
mahiladakshatasamiti@yahoo.co.in

PUTTING AN END TO POACHING

WPSI India has a growing wildlife crisis and the Wildlife Protection Society of India is at the frontlines. It was set up in 1994 by Belinda Wright, a wildlife photographer turned conservationist.

Since then, the WPSI has worked closely with government authorities to combat poaching and deal with human-animal conflicts. WPSI has conducted 200 workshops, training over 8,000 officers in wildlife law enforcement.

WPSI's wildlife crime database is a meticulous record of 33,000 wildlife cases and 27,000 wildlife criminals. They have not only exposed widespread tiger poaching and seized illegal wildlife products, but also provided legal aid to prosecution in wildlife court cases.

You can volunteer with them or support them with a donation.

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

SCHOOL WITH A DIFFERENCE

DIKSHA Diksha is a school started to cater to the children of construction labour working in its neighbourhood of Palam Vihar in Gurugram. As parents go from site to site, children lose out on an education. Diksha tried to fill a gap. Over time it has begun serving other low-income families as well. On any morning, neatly turned out children can be seen cycling and walking to the school.

The school doesn't stop at classroom teaching and books. It provides opportunities to learn folk art, dance, drama and sports. It teaches children to be responsible citizens. A child gets a uniform, books, a midday meal and health checkups.

www.dikshaschoolindia.org | dikshaschoolindia@gmail.com | 9818068141

SURGERIES TO BRING BACK A SMILE

Mission Smile Fixing a cleft lip or a cleft palate isn't just about looks. A cleft lip or palate means that the individual can't speak clearly and can't eat properly. It could also lead to ear infections, hearing problems and problems with teeth. Mission Smile provides cleft lip and cleft palate surgeries for children and adults free of cost. Till date, they have carried out 36,000 safe corrective surgeries and gifted 36,000 smiles to those individuals.

You can volunteer with them as they go from state to state putting up camps and identifying needy patients. If you know someone with a cleft lip, connect them to Mission Smile. You could also support a surgery with just ₹28,000.

www.missionsmile.org | contact@missionsmile.org | +919007883789

SUPPORT A MENTAL HEALTH PATIENT

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

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

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

www.theant.org | sunil@theant.org | +919435122042

MENTAL HEALTH HELP FOR THE POOR

The Banyan While one in four people in India has a mental health condition, the

incidence is higher among the homeless. One in three homeless people suffer from a mental health condition. The Banyan offers holistic mental health solutions to homeless people in Tamil Nadu, Kerala and Maharashtra. They run 16 centres and reach nearly a 100,000 people.

At their centres, patients have access to emergency medical aid, psychiatric and psychological care. There is an outpatient department and a long-term care facility. The Banyan helps with vocational training and reintegrates people into society. Nearly 70 percent of patients have been reintegrated.

www.thebanyan.org | alamelu.venkatesh@thebanyan.org | +91-9677121099

FIGHTING CANCER WITH A GOOD DIET

Cuddles Foundation A lot is needed to fight cancer. Chemotherapy and funds for treatment to begin with. But even the best treatment can fail without a nutritious diet. Cuddles Foundation helps bridge that gap for underprivileged children with cancer.

They partner with government and charitable hospitals where their nutritionists create diet plans and nutritional charts for children undergoing treatment. They educate parents in home-based nutrition and also provide hot meals, ration baskets and nutritional supplements if required.

Cuddles Foundation believes that food heals and helps medicine work. With the right nutrition, children fighting cancer not only have better immunity against infection but improved chances of survival. They work with 33 hospitals in 20 cities across the country. Among them are Belgaum, Madurai, Srinagar, Dibrugarh and Raipur.

www.cuddlesfoundation.org | team@cuddlesfoundation.com | 022-49790823

BREATHING EASY IN KOLKATA

Clean Air Breathing Kolkata's air is akin to smoking a minimum of five cigarettes a day. And five cigarettes is a conservative figure. It could even be as high as 25 cigarettes per day! Kolkata Clean Air started as a citizen's movement in 2017 to change this grim reality. Since then, they have carried out tree plantation drives, encouraged vertical gardening and waste composting at the community level. They have also invested in research on Kolkata's air, carried out a transport and congestion mapping exercise and done health checks among police

officers. Support their efforts by becoming a donor or join as a volunteer. By devoting 5 hours a week, you could save lives lost to lung cancer, stroke and diabetes.

www.kolkatacleanair.in | kolkatacleanair@gmail.com | +918336919233

FROM STREET TO SCHOOL



A child needs an education and street children are no different. In Delhi, CHETNA has contact points where they are taught formal subjects and also take part in sports. When the child is ready, he/she is mainstreamed into government schools.

CHETNA has been around since 2002, working directly with children. It is also a Childline partner, which means that if a child needs to be rescued, they show up. They also conduct workshops with stakeholders. One of their programmes helps make the police child-friendly. There are also two substance harm reduction centres to help children dealing with substance abuse. Your donation can take a child from the street to school. www.chetnango.org | info@chetnango.org 91 - 11 - 41644471, 41644470

LEARNING TO CARE FOR ANIMALS



A sick cat shows up at your door. Or an injured bird falls into your garden. What do you do? Most of us fumble for answers. Stray Relief and Animal Welfare (STRAW) India wants to change that through animal welfare education.

They collaborated with the Central Board of Secondary Education and other state educational boards and introduced a module on humane education. Their Compassionate Classrooms programme has reached thousands of children across India. STRAW organizes nature walks to familiarize children with the natural world. There is also an animal helpline to counsel pet owners and coordinate rescue operations of injured animals. You can volunteer or donate. www.strawindia.org/home.aspx | contact@strawindia.org

DECENT FAREWELL FOR YOUR PET



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

RICE LOVER? GROW A DYING VARIETY



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

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

You could do your bit with just ₹15,000 by adopting a variety at one location and ₹30,000 at two locations. www.nammanellu.com | 9940083356 | ciksbalu@gmail.com

prayer room and a picture wall too.

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

To keep Paws to Heaven going means using it and donating to it. The original support for this essential service came from BSES Rajdhani, the power company, under its corporate social responsibility (CSR). Now it needs the love of animal lovers. www.pawsindia.org | paws@pawsindia.org 011-26895737, 09810036254

HELP A SURVIVOR OF SEXUAL VIOLENCE



Survivors of gender and sexual violence need assistance from good samaritans. In South Delhi, Shakti Shalini has a shelter home which can house 10 women. It runs a crisis intervention and counselling centre to help women decide their next course of action. Troubled women are given legal, medical and mental counselling. Some may choose to file a complaint, while others may decide to take legal action against harsh family members.

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

Since it was founded, Shakti Shalini has supported over 15,000 women. It

SAVE FORESTS IN WESTERN GHATS



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

AERF is also into promoting traditional forest conservation practices like maintaining sacred groves and helping communities harvest non-timber forest produce from which they can earn. www.aerfindia.org | 020-25431870, 020-65235281 | info@aerfindia.org

not only physically healthy but mentally fit and ready to live and earn normally on their own.

Some of the inmates can hardly speak when they come in, but when they recover they are able to say where they are from and go back home. Ashabari also gives them vocational training and helps them find work.

Ashabari's weekly free outdoor clinic for the poor helps 1,000 people every month. Medicines worth ₹50,000 are also distributed free every month.

www.ashabari.org | brpjd@gmail.com +919830109428

BE A FRIEND TO FRIENDICOES



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

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

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

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

www.friendicoes.org | volunteers.friendicoes@gmail.com | 011-2431-4787

YOU CAN RESCUE SEX WORKERS



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

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

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

WITH STARS THAT SPECIAL SHINE



How can you bring a little happiness and hope to those who may be having a tough time? Well, you could drop by and cheer things up by your very presence and showing that they are not alone. You could also help out with counselling, Zumba classes, football coaching and medical check-ups.

STARS, which stands for Spending Time and Reaping Smiles, was formed in 2013 and is based in Goa. It supports youngsters under a scholarship programme so that they can continue to go to school and college. It helps single mothers and poor families with their monthly rations so that they get to eat the essentials. There are also medical check-ups. Under their sports programme, professional coaches have been going to four homes.

You could donate to STARS or volunteer with them if you are in Goa or perhaps replicate this beautiful idea wherever you happen to be living. www.thinkstars.org | lushanferns@gmail.com | +919850168166

GIRLS GET BICYCLES, WOMEN COMPUTERS



In Bharuch district of Gujarat, 150 girls every year receive bicycles so that they continue studying in the secondary school in a neighbouring village.

Enrolment rates have increased and attrition rates have decreased in 39 primary schools. And by constructing and renovating 20 toilets in schools, 25,000 children have benefitted.

All this is thanks to Gram Vikas Trust, which works with children, women and the elderly in nearly 200 villages of the district, helping the elderly with ration kits and helping women become proficient with computers. Support them with your donation. www.gvtbharuch.org | contact@gvtbharuch.org | +919662006293

LAPTOP, TABLET FOR THE DEAF



Children born deaf can learn to hear through auditory verbal therapy which reactivates nerve connections with the brain.

At AURED in Mumbai more than 800 children have benefitted and gone on to live normal lives.

Set up by Aziza Tyabji in 1991, AURED's work has primarily been with

GETTING AHEAD IN VILLAGES



If you want to contribute to rural development, check out AHEAD Initiatives in West Bengal. It stands for Addressing Hunger, Empowerment and Development and has been based in Kolkata since 2008.

It is out in the villages that AHEAD is deeply engaged on issues of food security, sustainable development and primary education.

AHEAD's big contribution is in working with panchayats and zilla parishads to implement its own programmes and by providing last-mile solutions to implement the government's programmes.

So, if helping the government's local institutions deliver is of interest to you, AHEAD is the place to go to for some interesting volunteering opportunities. Or you could become a donor. ahead@aheadinitiatives.in | Abeer.Chakravarty+919830998875

children from poor homes. After the pandemic, AURED has a problem because it cannot open its centre and the children being poor don't have laptops and tablets.

You can donate your old laptop or tablet or gift AURED some new ones. www.aured.org | azytabji@gmail.com +919820174677

NUTRITION THE LOW-COST WAY



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

Intern with CINI and help them with documentation, website management, action research, data analysis and fundraising.

www.cini-india.org | cini@cinindia.org +919330020997

GETTING TO KNOW WILDLIFE BETTER



Nature Conservation Foundation (NCF) carries out research and surveys on wildlife and ecology.

In the Eastern Himalayan belt it has

been conducting surveys on hornbills and mapping conservation strategies. NCF also works in the Western Ghats and in coastal areas. The foundation's knowledge of wildlife and ecology helps governments design appropriate conservation strategies which are then implemented in collaboration with local communities who depend most on forests and natural resources. www.ncf-india.org | smita@ncf-india.org 080-23648778, 080-26716897

DO YOUR BIT FOR ONLINE FREEDOM



Join Internet Freedom Foundation (IFF) in defending online freedom and privacy. The foundation was born out of the SaveTheInternet movement for net neutrality. IFF has campaigned for an adequate privacy law. It wrote to the Parliamentary Standing Committee for a human rights audit of Facebook India. It took up the cause of students of the National Institute of Fashion Technology who complained that their college's social media policy curbed freedom of expression.

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

HELP ON THE STREET



People addicted to drugs and alcohol, HIV patients who have been dumped by their families and homeless men and women need help to get off the street. Reaching out to them in Goa is the Street Providence Trust. It runs six shelter homes and provides food, medicines, clothes and hospitalization, if necessary. Several such people have been reunited with their families, which is essential because the support of relatives is what they really need.

Excess food from restaurants is collected and stored in 38 freezers across Goa. The poor in villages are given access to these freezers. Volunteers warm the food and serve it. Breakfast is available free outside four government hospitals in Goa. There is also a programme called Meals on Wheels which takes food to the poor.

streetprovidencegoa.com | street.providence70@gmail.com | +918380097564

EDUCATION FOR GIRLS IN UP



The gift of education is priceless. When Pardada Pardadi Educational Society started a school in Anupshahr in Western Uttar Pradesh, they believed that education could transform rural India. Girls from their schools have gone on to work in the IT sector in Bengaluru and some have even gone to the US to pursue higher education. You can sponsor a girl's education at just ₹35,000 a year. Or you can donate any amount of your choosing to their COVID-19 relief efforts. www.pardadapardadi.org | info@pardadapardadi.org | 011-29542524

BE A NUTRITION CHAMPION



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

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

www.matrisudha.com | matrisudha2000@yahoo.co.in | +9199101-44337

HELP OUT A WASTE PICKER



In Pune, Kashtakari Panchayat Trust's (KPT) sole focus is the waste picker's life and their mission is to make it better. KPT conducts workshops and trainings for waste pickers on best practices. They train waste managers and municipal officials. They help waste pickers and their children access education. They facilitate college admissions and help with government and private scholarships.

During the lockdown, KPT provided PPEs and ration kits to waste pickers. You can help a waste picker by donating just ₹2,227, which is the cost of a month's ration kit and supply of PPEs. Your contribution can help elderly waste pickers who have lost their livelihood and income.

www.kashtakaripanchayat.org | 9158007062 kashtakaripanchayat@gmail.com

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.

RUSTIC WOOL



India's rich tradition in wool is fading from memory. For centuries pastoral communities sheared wool from sheep and sold it to spinners, creating a seamless cottage industry of dyers and weavers. Today, India spends ₹2,000 crore annually importing wool while local wool goes waste. No effort has been made to modernize local wool.

Desi Oon, an initiative by Rangсутra and the Centre for Pastoralism, is trying to reverse this decline. It brings together India's best crafts organizations — Khamir in Gujarat, Avani from Uttarakhand, Aana-Jaana in Himachal Pradesh and others to revive the entire supply chain of traditional wool.

You can buy beautiful warm jackets, durries, coats, blankets from Desi Oon.

Contact: Rangсутra Crafts India, 1st Floor, Champa Gali, 317/276, Saidulajab, Saket, New Delhi- 110030 Phone: 011 2649 4145 Website: www.rangсутra.com



FRAGRANT OILS



Seema Khurana churns out almond oil from a small crusher as shoppers look on curiously. Her stall is choc-a-bloc with bottles of various sizes, shapes and hues all containing a range of different oils.

A doctorate in botany, Khurana runs Adri Naturals, a micro-enterprise that specializes in oils. She has an oil for every skin ailment whether it is acne, dry skin, hair fall or eczema. Herbs, nuts, seeds, berries and leaves are all mashed and mixed to produce pure oils.

"I have carrier oils, aromatic oils and essential oils," she says. There is rose, sandalwood, fenugreek, sesame, coconut, tea tree and more. She has oils for you, oils for your kitchen and oils for puja. If you are looking for oils, pure and safe, then Adri Naturals is your destination.

Contact: Akshay Khurana, 7838582223; Email: hello@adrinaturals.in Website: www.adrinaturals.in



COOL UZBEK CLOTH

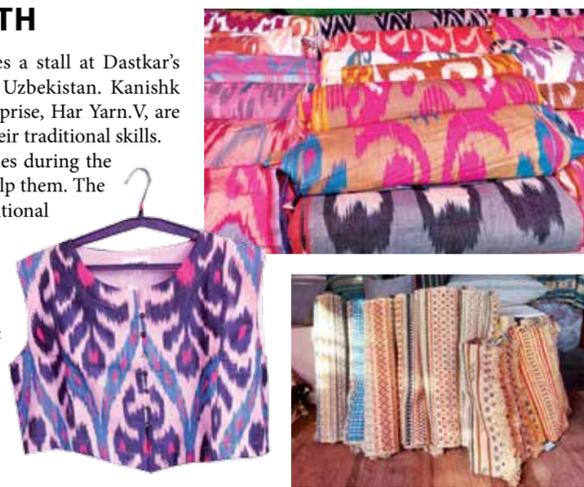


The blend of colours strikes the eye as one passes a stall at Dastkar's Handloom Fair, which is displaying fabrics from Uzbekistan. Kanishk Bhardwaj, a designer from Gurugram and his enterprise, Har Yarn.V, are helping Uzbek refugees living in Delhi modernize their traditional skills.

Bhardwaj says he came across a few Uzbek families during the annual Surajkund Fair in Haryana and decided to help them. The Uzbeks were carrying with them some of their traditional Ikat designs.

They weave on a small loom, just 15 to 16 inches wide, so the narrow fabric, made in panels, is stitched together. The cloth produced is in silk and cotton. Blouses and dresses are made with the fabric but it's also selling for upholstery. The fabrics are a riot of colours, cool and contemporary.

Contact: Kanishk Bhardwaj-9873395233; Email: haryanvi@gmail.com; info@haryanvi.com Twitter: official_har.yarn.v



BLUE SKIES FOR OUR CHILDREN

HONDA

HONDA

presents

Varun ke Vardaan



Uchai ka Ustaad

Paani ka Pehalwan

WB20XD High Head Pumpset

WB30XD High Water Output Pumpset



BIS Certified



BIS Certified



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- EASY TO START**
- SELF PRIMING**
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Suitable for irrigation in hilly terrains



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- SELF PRIMING**
- POWERFUL** 5hp OHV PETROL ENGINE

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Honda India Power Products Ltd.

(Formerly Honda Siel Power Products Limited)

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