

Civil Society

MOVE MORE, EAT RIGHT

A definitive interview with Dr Anoop Misra on what sedentarism and diabetes are doing to public health



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IN THE LIGHT

SAMITA RATHOR



LETTERS



Small wonders

Thanks for the cover story, 'Reinventing healthcare,' by Dr Raghunath Mashelkar on an amazing range of innovative technologies. These are the real nanos of India: small, easy-to-use and inexpensive problem solvers. It is such inventions that will make India a powerhouse of manufacturing. We do need investment and it should come from Indian industry.

Shailaja Sinha

Great article. I was delighted when I read about the dengue device. This is essential reading for all pathologists in India.

Soumitra Das

Good governance

I read your interview with R. Balasubramaniam, 'We are mapping officers for competence and capacity.' I found the piece very insightful. The Government of India has done a

wonderful job in setting up a competent commission to improve the competency of government servants.

Anikethan

I believe a change in mindset is the need of the hour. Recently, I wrote to the PMO requesting computer science be introduced as a subject for the UPSC exam. The response I got was that this is not a core subject—a completely 'rule based' response.

Rupa Ghosh Dastidar

Nut wealth

I enjoyed reading Shree Padre's story, 'Jobs grow on coconut trees.' Very well-reported. The jobs problem can be solved by such out-of-the-box ideas. It's interesting that Pushpangadan Mohandas went from

a techie job to coconut harvesting. The story also highlights the importance of encouraging internal migration in the search for jobs.

Shantha Nataranjan

Bee buzz

Your story, 'A Sunday with bees,' was a great read. I hope this initiative reaches farmers, forest officials, wildlife conservationists, commercial florists and policy makers in horticulture. Professors in agricultural universities should also read it. The crisp note on the need to secure and balance our ecosystem needs to be circulated. Please promote this story to companies keen to fund conservation efforts in water and forests.

Abhinav B. Chopra

Heritage in Gujarat

Susheela Nair's piece, 'Walking into the past in Ahmedabad,' was a magnificent article. She enlightened me on 600 years of Ahmedabad's amazing history and heritage.

Vasudev Singh

I liked Susheela Nair's piece, 'Wondrous stepwell and a love story in Adalaj.' I felt as if I had been transported to that era. She recalled that tragic story, along with details of the stepwell's exquisite architecture, the cruel mind of the invaders, the tragic end of the sculptors and the intelligence of the brave queen.

Rajagopalan TV.

Healing touch

I have a suggestion to make after reading your article, 'Doctors out there: Why small hospitals matter.' Bringing the large network of not-for-profit hospitals under PMJAY (Pradhan Mantri Jan Arogya Yojana) can usher in a sea change in access to health services. PMJAY is a successful and sustainable financial model for these hospitals. The Niti Aayog brought out a document on this.

Dr Jacob John

State vs NGOs

With reference to Mathew Cherian's article, 'NGOs work hard but get a raw deal in regulation,' I'd like to say government policies towards this sector are characterized by complete double standards. Just compare the strict 2 percent CSR regulations and NGO regulations versus the removal of the 7.5 percent cap on political donations.

Amita

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COVER STORY

MOVE MORE, EAT RIGHT

Sedentary lifestyles are leading to obesity and lifestyle diseases like diabetes and hypertension that are making people more susceptible to infections. A deep dive with Dr Anoop Misra.

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Frontline people

BLESSED are the people who serve in remote areas. They are self-motivated and get little institutional encouragement. Those who benefit from their presence are plain lucky. We are fortunate to know several of these frontline people because we seek them out and spend time talking to them about their lives and work.

In this issue we are delighted to profile and connect our readers with the Deputy Commissioner of Baksa district in Assam and the doctors of the Homi Bhabha Cancer Hospital in Muzaffarpur in Bihar. Through their efforts, in diverse ways, they are helping to transform corners of the country that cry out for development.

The DC, Aayush Garg, is a chartered accountant by training who has worked with PwC and ITC. The cancer specialists come from different parts of India to live and work in Muzaffarpur. They have degrees with which they could be hired in hospitals in any big city.

Are they merely outliers in a shoddy system or will their efforts result in solid change? It is difficult to tell. Good people come and go. But while they do what they do, they are deserving of our attention.

Coverage of politics and elections has always thrown us into a dilemma. We have no real interest in the give and take of politics and we don't want to waste time and energy keeping pace with newspapers and TV. We are, however, interested in the issues of development, which actually cut across party lines. We also realize the value of analysis and we are very fortunate to have with us knowledgeable columnists. In this issue Sanjaya Baru and Nilanjan Mukhopadhyay put the recent Assembly election results in perspective and look ahead to 2024. Is it a done deal or not? Take a look at our Insight section. Also check out columns by Kiran Karnik and Arun Maira who have a following of their own in our pages.

Like so many of us you have probably toyed with the idea of buying an electric vehicle and held back. Till infrastructure is put in place, it is a difficult choice to make, especially if you only have money enough to own one car. Our advice to you is to be brave and take the plunge. You won't regret it. In our Living section, our colleague, Surmayi Khatana, has done a wonderful piece on her cousin and the Nexon he bought. Newly married, he and his young wife took off to Mussoorie in it. This is as good as it gets. EVs are well on their way to becoming the widely preferred personal transport that they should be. In Civil Society we have been tracking EVs for a very long time. We had Chetan Maini and his outstanding Reva car on our cover a decade ago. Maini was clearly ahead of his time and for that matter so were we. But that hardly matters: it is more important to be part of the future before it arrives. We found Chetan very interesting and the Reva really good fun to drive. So did many other countries, but India took its time waking up.

In our Living section also take a look at Saibal Chatterjee's review of Mahishasur Marddini (A Night to Remember), which pieces together stories of gender discrimination and sexual violence.

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Deputy Commissioner Aayush Garg checks out an anganwadi

Baksa sets a record with 196 anganwadis in three months

DC is a CA who worked with PwC, ITC

Civil Society News
New Delhi

BAKSA has long been accustomed to its obscurity. The pace of development in this northwestern district of Assam has been painfully slow. There aren't the schools, colleges, hospitals and enterprises that its population of around a million needs for life to improve.

It became a full-fledged district in 2003 after the setting up of an autonomous council for Bodo tribal people in a deal to end their insurgency. But subsequently, not much has changed though 18 years have passed.

Imagine the surprise then when the Assam chief minister, Himanta Biswa Sarma, made it a point to visit Baksa in November last year to inaugurate 107 newly built anganwadis or playschools.

In all, 196 anganwadis have come up in just three months and they meet the pre-school needs of 5,600

children in Baksa. It is an achievement that breaks all records in easy-paced Assam. Each anganwadi has a large central room, a kitchen and toilet. There are water and electricity connections.

Interestingly, the anganwadis have been built under MGNREGA or the rural employment guarantee scheme. The project has generated 56,000 days of work and disbursed ₹12 crore, primarily to impoverished and unemployed tea garden workers.

Making all this happen is the somewhat low-key and guardedly enthusiastic Aayush Garg, 32, who is the deputy commissioner of Baksa district.

Garg has been in the IAS for six years and it is the first time that he is in a DC's post, but he has set a scorching pace and been inventive with his ideas for the district.

Perhaps that has something to do with the transition he has made. He is a qualified chartered accountant who worked with PricewaterhouseCoopers (PwC) and then ITC before deciding that he needed to do more with his

life. He was planning to apply for a management course in one of the Ivy League universities and then pivoted to appear instead for the civil services.

As an auditor in the private sector, Garg was cynical about government. He wasn't convinced that development reached the people who needed it. Since his job required him to travel, he thought he knew enough about India.

But just studying for the civil services examination widened his horizons. There was more to the country he actually knew about. And once in government he came to better understand the needs of the people and the processes of development. The realization grew that even the little that reached people made a serious difference to their lives. He was no longer merely the chartered accountant and auditor that he had been trained to be. He acquired insights he could never have had before. He began seeing the grey and finding meaning in it.

"Sure, serving the nation has to be the main reason for joining the services. To be honest, status

and social esteem are also involved. But the biggest change that happens in an officer's mind is when you actually go and see things on the ground. Your conception of fundamental rights, the Constitution, what the nation is or what our poverty really is changes," says Garg.

"When you talk to people, you realize that their expectations out of life are really, really simple," says Garg. "You have to just empathize with them and look at it from their perspective. You might say, okay, this is a small project, of about two lakh rupees. What will it yield? Or how will it impact anything? But at the village level, just the inflow of that two lakh rupees will make a world of difference."

The idea of building anganwadis in Baksa emerged from a meeting to review work done under the aspirational districts programme of the the NITI Aayog. It was shocking that of the 2,000 anganwadis in Baksa, just about 400 had buildings of their own. The rest had mushroomed here and there.

"I think the trigger point was just that aspirational district review meeting. In some of the aspirational district parameters, we were doing really well. So we got a congratulatory grant from the NITI Aayog to the tune of around ₹7 crore as a discretionary fund with which the district was free to do what it wanted," says Garg.

"We were actually deciding on the allocations of that ₹7 crore when the Social Welfare Department proposed the construction of 10 or 15 anganwadi centres. The budget was coming to around ₹90 lakh. Essentially, they were eroding one-seventh of the ₹7 crore for setting up 10 anganwadi centres that didn't count for much out of 2,000 anganwadi centres. I said it was a waste of money that wouldn't do anything for our score as an aspirational district either," Garg recalls.

The need for anganwadis, however, interested him deeply. He then began thinking of bringing in a company with corporate social responsibility (CSR) funds. But then two issues surfaced: a CSR partner would always look for publicity and the second was that the anganwadis were government assets, which would require maintenance over the years. If they came through a company it would be difficult to predict what could happen later. Government staff would have no sense of ownership and responsibility.

It was around then, give or take a few days, that the project director of the District Rural Development Agency responsible for MGNREGA planning called to say that targets had to be set for using funds and he needed time for a meeting. The thought came to Garg that the anganwadis could be built using MGNREGA money.

"It suddenly struck me that we had a solution for our problem. You know, just one plus one equals two," says Garg. "Why don't we club the two issues, I thought to myself." Garg spoke to the village development officers (VDOs) and persuaded the Village Council Development Committees (VCDCs) in the district to recognize anganwadi construction as MGNREGA work.

There are 102 VCDCs in Baksa and it was decided to do a pilot project of two anganwadis per VCDC. That would make it 204 anganwadis, but the number was whittled down to 196.

The project was launched on August 15, 2021 with the stiff and somewhat unrealistic deadline of

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The anganwadis are bright and cheerful structures with a central room for the children and learning material on the walls

Continued from page 7

one month for having all the *anganwadis* up. With an extension of the deadline, 156 *anganwadis* were completed by November 14, Children's Day.

As word got around and the chief minister's office got to hear of it, the CM asked to know more. Some 20 days later, Sarma visited Baksa and inaugurated 107 *anganwadis* at one go.

As Garg set out to improve the *anganwadis*, he was struck by how far removed they were from playschools in cities.

He thought about the expensive and well-equipped playschool his niece went to in Ludhiana. The *anganwadis* of Baksa, by comparison, had virtually nothing going for them, not even proper buildings.

Baksa is in the heart of tribal Bodoland and borders Bhutan. It is all of 2,189.8 km from Ludhiana — Google will tell you. But it could also be next door, depending on who you are and how you deal with distance.

Garg decided to bridge the gap by bringing a bit of Ludhiana to Baksa. If his district's *anganwadis* couldn't equal the standards of privately-run urban playschools, couldn't they at least aspire to resemble them in some ways?

Garg got in touch with the principal of his niece's Ludhiana playschool for ideas and pictures of her classrooms so that he could try something similar in Baksa. She was happy to help.

"She sent me all the fancy drawings on the wall, the maths, some interesting ideas with tyres and all recycled materials here and there. And, in addition, we also roped in the Piramal Trust here. The trust is actively working with us for a couple of other initiatives. So, their regional manager in Guwahati was in touch with me," recalls Garg.

He also had friends who had given up jobs in companies to work with NGOs. He decided to tap them for help and test his ideas on them.

"There is this organization, ILSS India — basically leaders for the social sector. I have a really close friend there by the name of Pratyush Rawal. I called up Pratyush and told him what I wanted to do. He connected me to another senior person in Piramal Trust. The trust said that they would be willing to contribute. They sent an entire team that went around to our sites. They saw the local requirement, including doing things in the Bodo



Chief Minister Himanta Biswa Sarma inaugurating the *anganwadis*

language," says Garg.

"They came up with some really interesting designs. They gave me a playbook of around 35 to 40 pages, detailing all the ideas that could be done," recalls Garg, happy that he had reached out to them. "And we shared them with our engineers. We just called a very simple meeting. We said this is what we want, can you guys do it? And I think five out of the six engineers agreed. They said it was very much doable. No extra budget was required, just very slight modifications would do the trick."

The Social Welfare Department has its own standard design for the construction of an *anganwadi* centre. A small number of *anganwadis* are constructed every year. The estimate for constructing such an *anganwadi* is ₹5.96 lakh. There is one large room, which is supposed to be the common area for the children, a kitchen and a bathroom.

"These are the three standard components and all the 200-odd centres that we've constructed conform to the same drawing. So, this is the basic infrastructure which we are providing. And in addition, fortunately enough, we have a high-focus scheme here, the Jal Jeevan Mission. We are providing every household with a water connection. I brought our *anganwadis* under the scheme. There is, similarly, a power connection," says Garg.

Distant as Baksa is, ideas from all over India have converged to make the *anganwadis* a reality. Some influences have been over the years. As Garg immersed himself in the project, he remembered hearing a lecture on BALA by Kabir Vajpeyi while he was under training at the IAS academy. BALA stands for 'building as learning aids' and involves using architecture to enhance the learning experience of the child.

It could involve lowering a window to let in more light into a classroom or putting numbers and letters into window grills or using doors to teach angles. It encourages teachers to be inventive in using the physical environment.

Listening to Vajpeyi as a trainee at the academy, Garg had thought the BALA concept was far-fetched but here in rural Baksa he could see that the concepts Vajpeyi expounded made eminent sense as low-cost ways of transforming his *anganwadis*. He got hold of a BALA booklet.

The BALA programme is really meant for schools above the level of the *anganwadi*, but it is inspirational and a trigger for fresh ideas in settings for children.

"We didn't involve Mr Vajpeyi and his team," says Garg. "But we were influenced by their ideas. We would love it if he were to visit Baksa and see what we have done." ■

The street child's newspaper

Kavita Charanji
New Delhi

IT was an emotional moment for the editorial team of 32 children who gathered at the Press Club in Delhi to celebrate the 100th edition of their newspaper, *Balaknama*. Many of them had really struggled to be where they are today.

Balaknama has changed the lives of thousands of street and working children. A bilingual monthly newspaper published in Hindi and English, it has covered over 4,000 news stories over the years, with 400 children as reporters and editors.

"I am really happy to be the editor of *Balaknama*," beamed 19-year-old Kishan. "When I toiled as a *gutka* seller, it was difficult for me to imagine that I would play this role. Thanks to the NGO, CHETNA, which encouraged me to learn to read and write, I am where I am today. I am now off the streets and will do Class 10 through open schooling."

Balaknama is testimony to the resilience of CHETNA's street and working children who would otherwise mill around street lights, flyovers, small shops, garbage collection points or slums to earn a living for their families. The children faced formidable obstacles. They were illiterate, forced to beg or trapped in child labour. They often took to gambling, drinking and drugs to escape the harshness of their lives.

The loudest applause was for Vijay Kumar, a former street child and former editor of *Balaknama*. Kumar became a child labourer when he was just eight years old. He became a worker at a shop in the wood market of Delhi's Kirti Nagar. As he became older he was made to carry enormous logs up four flights of stairs for a paltry sum. There was no relief at home either because he lived with his family in a crowded slum near a railway station.

Then he met a CHETNA team member. Life changed dramatically. He was taught to read and write under a tree along with a group of children. This sparked his interest in education. Today he is assistant project coordinator with CHETNA's Gurugram programme for around 700 street children. Alongside, he is doing his post-graduation in social work from Jamia Millia University in Delhi.

Balaknama features the issues which street children in Delhi-NCR, Uttar Pradesh and Haryana confront. It has a team of 64 reporters. The "talking" or "*batuni*" reporters, mostly illiterate, report traumatic experiences faced by street and working children, to the writing reporters. The reporters then thoroughly vet and research the facts before going on to write a news story.

The latest *Balaknama* issue has hard-hitting stories. Some of the headlines read: "Innocent Children Troubled by the Fights of Drug Addicts and Alcoholics", "Children Compelled to Perform Dangerous Tasks", "Street Children Shivering from Cold in the Absence of Warm Clothes".

Jyoti, 21, started out as a "*batuni*" reporter with *Balaknama*. She candidly admits that before she met the CHETNA team she spent her time



Balaknama has a team of 64 'talking' reporters who bring in stories of traumatic experiences that street and working children face in Delhi, NCR, Uttar Pradesh and Haryana. The stories are researched and verified by the children.

ragpicking, smoking and begging at Nizamuddin Railway Station. CHETNA stepped in and encouraged her to join open school. She is now on the verge of finishing Class 10. Today, as a staff member of CHETNA and a *Balaknama* reporter, she takes pride in her large number of published articles.

A few days ago, she says, she wrote a piece on how gambling had ruined the lives of adults and their children in a certain locality. "I went and talked to the parents and their children and convinced them to give up this vice. Now the community says, 'Don't engage in gambling or madam will publish a story on it,'" Jyoti says with pride. She has also done stories on the flourishing illicit liquor trade, water shortage, child marriage and other issues.

For young Bittoo, another "*batuni*" reporter, his most important breakthrough was working alongside Kishan Bhaiya to wean a child off alcohol.

Balaknama is now looking ahead. It has many plans. For one, a digital version of the paper is on the cards. Meanwhile, the monthly is circulated by the children through their WhatsApp groups while older children download the paper electronically. The paper is sold for ₹5.

The media, both national and international, has picked up the *Balaknama* story because it depicts the dramatic difference that a small-time newspaper can make in the lives of street children. The monthly has also caught the attention of policymakers, says Sanjay Gupta, founder-director of CHETNA. The NGO is happy that the National Commission for Protection of Child Rights (NCPCR) came across a *Balaknama* story on street children who ingest white correction fluid for the high it gives. The NCPCR set up a committee to conduct an all-India study to see how substance abuse by children could be brought under control. Gupta was co-convenor of the study. He says that the Commission, working with many NGOs, has recently introduced a standard operating procedure (SOP) for the care, protection and rehabilitation of street-connected children. Now the Supreme Court has taken cognizance of the SOP and directed district magistrates to swing into action in their respective areas.

But Gupta believes that in an ideal world *Balaknama* should have little leverage. "There should be no need for a paper like *Balaknama*. If there are no street children, then *Balaknama's* role is over." ■

Samita's World

by SAMITA RATHOR



Muzaffarpur hospital gets going with surgeries, chemo

Good doctors sign up from all over

Civil Society News
New Delhi

IT is a year since the Homi Bhabha Cancer Hospital and Research Centre opened its prefabricated doors to patients in Muzaffarpur, bringing specialized care to this small city and its hinterland in Bihar.

In the short time since services began at the hospital, 228 major and 683 minor surgeries have been performed by a team of doctors brought to Muzaffarpur from all over India.

The hospital has taken in 7,027 patients for day care. Chemotherapy has been administered 5,075 times. And it has handled the deaths of 46 terminally ill patients.

Dependable healthcare is generally scarce in Muzaffarpur. The most basic of facilities either don't exist or fall far short of optimum standards. Till this hospital came up, diagnosing a cancer here, let alone treating it, was a gamble.

But the Homi Bhabha Cancer Hospital has nimbly established itself. It has four surgeons and three oncologists. There are nurses, paramedics, senior and junior residents and administrative staff. There are diagnostic laboratory facilities.

The hospital began by offering clinical services with the first patient registering on February 4, 2021. Now head and neck, breast and gynaecological surgeries are being performed apart from several minor surgical procedures. Cases of blood cancer have been successfully treated.

The hospital still does not have radiation therapy for which a reinforced bunker is required. It used to lack a full-fledged laboratory, but it has now been brought up to standard with an investment of ₹7 crore and genome sequencing is to begin soon.

Bihar has a pitiable record in providing public healthcare. If someone has a serious illness in Bihar, chances are that, if the money can be put together, they will head for doctors and facilities with proven track standards elsewhere in India. So significant are the numbers of such patients that they are even noticeable in train bookings.

Imagine now the opposite happening. Think of a technologically equipped hospital with well-qualified physicians and surgeons from other parts of the country showing up in Bihar to offer their medical skills to patients.

It is such a cancer hospital that has become a reality in Muzaffarpur, where even some of the most basic of health services with reliable standards

have not been easy to find.

Dr Ravikant Singh, founder of Doctors For You (DFY), the voluntary organization through which doctors serve in hotspots during epidemics and natural disasters, has led the initiative and has been instrumental in attracting medical talent. He has temporarily stepped aside from his role in DFY to be officer-in-charge and associate professor at the hospital.

The medical talent the hospital has succeeded in attracting to Muzaffarpur are not just highly qualified physicians and surgeons, but spirited too. Together with nurses, paramedical staff and administrators they raise the threshold for the

'Unlike in Mumbai, 98 percent of the patients who come to us here are poor. There is great joy and professional satisfaction in giving them relief.'

quality of services that should be available to patients in Muzaffarpur and Bihar in general. Over time it can be hoped they will also raise expectations and spur demand for higher standards.

Generally, it would be difficult to find doctors ready to go to remote places. They are loath to give up better prospects in big cities. The lack of infrastructure and urban facilities are deterrents. Where would the children go to school? What is there for entertainment? Where does one find a peer group?

Dr Guru Charan Sahu is one of those who has made the shift. He is a head and neck surgeon who decided to forgo opportunities in Kolkata, Hyderabad, Delhi and other cities from where he had firm offers.

He has shifted bag and baggage to Muzaffarpur with his wife, two-year-old son and his parents.

Dr Sahu gets a consolidated salary of ₹1.2 lakh. If he had taken up any of the other offers available to him elsewhere, he would have been paid about ₹1.6 lakh or maybe even ₹2 lakh.



Dr Kishore Kumar Kote (left) and Dr Ravikant Singh in one of the wards with a patient



Dr Guru Charan Sahu counsels a patient



A surgery in progress

But he has no regrets. Working in the hospital in Muzaffarpur makes him feel that his skills are available for everyone and not just those who can afford privatized urban care.

"Private sector healthcare is like a business. Those who pay more can get better treatment. But in the Tata Memorial Cancer Hospital it is the care that matters and it is available for everyone, rich or poor. I like working for everyone," he says during the first conversation we have over the phone.

"I came here because my teachers, Dr Ashish Mishra and Dr Pankaj Chaturvedi, told me that this is where I should work," says Dr Sahu.

Dr Sahu grew up in Behrampur in Odisha. Till Class 10 his education was in Oriya. He then went on to get MBBS and an MS degrees, also in Behrampur. His first employment was also there.

A fellowship in head and neck cancer surgery followed at the Malabar Cancer Centre in Kerala and then he was lucky to get an internship at the Tata Memorial Cancer Hospital in Mumbai. From Mumbai he was sent to Varanasi and it was from there that he moved to Muzaffarpur.

Dr Sahu's small-town and middle-class upbringing, he says, has conditioned his attitude to being a doctor. His father retired as an employee of the State Bank of India and it is from him that he imbibed values that continue to influence him.

"I owe my orientation to my father. He would always say to me that it is much better to do something extraordinary in an ordinary place than be ordinary in an extraordinary place," says the emotional Dr Sahu.

He hurriedly clarifies that he is not calling Muzaffarpur 'ordinary', but it does throw at him the challenges that he might not have to face in medical establishments in bigger cities.

While Dr Sahu is from Odisha, Dr Kishore Kumar
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An aerial view of the prefabricated structures of the hospital

Kote is from Andhra Pradesh. He is a medical oncologist and he says he sees all kinds of cancers in his OPD at the hospital in Muzaffarpur.

Dr Kote grew up in a village 120 km from Visakhapatnam. He did his MBBS in Kakinada and got his MD degree at the Devunoori Institute of Medical Sciences in Hyderabad. He then went on to get a DM at the Tata Memorial Hospital in Mumbai.

From Mumbai it was straight to Muzaffarpur. It was a choice Dr Kote made because of the challenges of treating patients in Muzaffarpur.

“I am managing my patients alone and learning so many new things after I came here,” he says. “In cancer we are always learning.”

“In the Tata Memorial Hospital in Mumbai there are all the facilities that a doctor can ask for. The best high-end investigations are available in minutes. But in this hospital in Muzaffarpur we have had to start from scratch,” he says.

“After a year almost all the treatments available in Mumbai are also available here. There is a lot of satisfaction in being able to treat poor people who really need better medical facilities,” he explains.

As a medical oncologist, he sees all kinds of cases in his OPD. There are patients with different types of cancers who come for treatment.

“Unlike in Mumbai, 98 percent of the patients who come to us here are poor. There is great joy and professional satisfaction in giving them relief. One young woman with a two-month-old baby came to us with a 10-cm cervical swelling, a 10-cm mass in the chest and a 10-cm mass in the abdomen. She couldn’t move her neck. But after one round of chemotherapy the swellings have gone. We were overjoyed. Of course, she needs three more cycles of chemotherapy.”

With all his qualifications and skills, what does money mean to him? “I respect money. Everyone needs it. If I go out on the street and say I am a doctor I will get respect but no one will give me food or petrol. For that one needs money,” he says.

But money isn’t everything. The opportunity to deliver high-end care in a resource-poor setting is invaluable for the way it improves the lives of people with no other access to superior medical facilities.

For Dr Tulika Gupta, 34, her role as assistant

medical superintendent is an opportunity to build a cancer hospital from scratch.

“It is a great opportunity to set up a new institution,” she says.

She belongs to Gorakhpur and trained as a dentist. She then went into hospital administration, taking a postgraduate degree from the Sanjay Gandhi Postgraduate Institute of Medical Sciences in Lucknow.

Dr Gupta applied for the post of assistant medical superintendent at the Tata Memorial Hospital in Varanasi. She was finally posted to Muzaffarpur.

“It is important that better healthcare reach different parts of our country. The Tata Hospital is in Mumbai but that is not enough. I am glad to be helping in the process of taking cancer treatment to places where it hasn’t reached,” she says.

Taking the government health sector forward is challenging, but rewarding too in terms of the exposure. And at ₹1.1 lakh a month not bad in terms of salary. Muzaffarpur is where she expects to be for the next five years till the permanent structure of the hospital comes up fully.

BACKGROUND

India’s public healthcare system is not lacking in design. It is structured to go from the primary to the tertiary levels. But it is badly managed. The different tiers of the state-run system don’t work in unison and while the private sector fills the gaps it isn’t the solution that millions of Indians need.

So it was that the cancer hospital in Muzaffarpur was envisaged and waiting to be set up since 2018 as part of a larger effort to take better quality care to underserved parts of the country. It is a collaboration between the Tata Memorial Centre and the state government in Bihar and the Department of Atomic Energy, which has provided ₹198 crore for the construction of the hospital.

The hospital is located in the premises of the Krishna Medical College and Hospital under the Bihar government where 15 acres have been transferred to it.

Even as approvals for building the hospital were given in 2019, the coronavirus pandemic struck. Setting up of the hospital became doubtful. In the

best of times, a hospital project in Bihar would be caught up in a lot of back and forth. The virus made it much more improbable.

In the meantime, DFY decided to set up a facility for coronavirus patients in Muzaffarpur.

It found the funding for 100 beds and with a rare inventiveness that characterizes DFY’s style it roped in Modulus Housing Solutions, a start-up by two IIT Madras alumni, Shree Ram Ravichandran and Gobunath P., to put up a structure quickly.

But even as these preparations were being made, the first phase of the pandemic ended as suddenly as it had begun. As the number of cases began falling, the beds for coronavirus patients were no longer needed.

DFY then did a pivot and transferred the funding and the plans for the hundred beds to the setting up of the cancer hospital.

The prefab and foldable structure meant for the coronavirus facility got converted into the cancer hospital with the components actually arriving on a truck from Chennai, where Modulus is based.

Modulus was originally interested in the housing market, but during the pandemic it saw the possibilities of using its technology for setting up, on an urgent basis, small hospital facilities for COVID-19 patients.

In Muzaffarpur the same prefabricated structure served to quickly rig together the cancer hospital and the project was up and running in record time.

THE TAKEAWAY

What is the learning from the Homi Bhabha Cancer Hospital in Muzaffarpur?

First is the importance of partnerships. The government and voluntary sector, the Union government and the state need to come together to improve healthcare where it is needed most.

Second is to inspire medical talent to go to those parts of the country where it is needed most. Doctors need a sense of purpose that goes beyond the money they can make from their medical skills.

Third is urgency. Millions await healthcare and the only way of getting it to them fast is by being in mission mode. Hospitals and other facilities have to come up quickly. ■

Embattled Sawant has last laugh

Derek Almeida
Panaji

THE point when the Congress likely lost the elections in Goa was probably in January, when all the party candidates pledged in a temple, mosque and church not to defect after being elected. Then, in February, the pledge was made again in the presence of Rahul Gandhi. By then it was amply clear that the greater foe at the hustings was the party’s reputation for selecting candidates with little or no integrity, rather than the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP). And this was exactly how the elections played out with voters not too sure if voting for the Congress was not equivalent to voting for the BJP.

At the same time, nothing deserves to be taken away from the victory of the BJP led by Dr Pramod Sawant. When he was sworn in as chief minister after the death of Manohar Parrikar, he knew the memory of his popular and competent predecessor would loom large over his tenure.

Initially he didn’t seem to measure up. But then he showed political skills that no one knew he possessed. He split the Maharashtra Gomantak Party (MGP) and the Congress, and got rid of the Goa Forward Party (GFP).

He went on to win local elections and finally emerged from Parrikar’s shadow by leading the BJP to a thumping victory in the recent assembly elections. Although 20 seats is not a majority in the 40-member House, for Goa it constitutes a huge victory because the last time the BJP won so many seats was in 2012 when it got 21 and Parrikar was at the helm.

Having said that, there are a few takeaways from this election that point to a sophisticated electorate that knows to choose in its own best interests.

Goa has had a tradition of infusing the Assembly with fresh blood in every election since 1999. Invariably, nearly half the old blood is jettisoned. In the 1999 election, 23 sitting MLAs were voted out.

In subsequent elections the figure varied between 19 and 17. This year, too, 19 sitting MLAs were rejected and sent home.

Defectors were especially punished. Nine of the 12 MLAs who left the MGP and Congress to join the BJP mid-way through the term were defeated. This is good news for a state which at one point of time had the reputation of changing governments and chief ministers at the drop of a hat.

AAP GETS A FOOT IN THE DOOR

For the first time since Arvind Kejriwal’s Aam Aadmi Party (AAP) decided to take a plunge into the unfamiliar territory of Goan politics in 2017, it has wrested two seats — Velim and Benaulim. This might have come as a surprise to AAP itself, especially when 35 of its 39 candidates lost their deposits. A close look at these two constituencies



For Chief Minister Pramod Sawant it was a hard-earned victory

Goans voted in their own best interests and defectors were punished with nine of the 12 MLAs who joined the BJP from MGP and Congress being defeated.

indicates a five and four-way vote split, respectively, which has only one explanation — an electorate in search of an alternative. In terms of vote share in the state, AAP made an insignificant improvement from 6.3 percent in 2017 to 6.8 percent this time. Nonetheless, with two MLAs in the Assembly, AAP will get a chance to show its mettle.

‘SAVE GOA’

The surprise of this election was, without doubt, the Revolutionary Goans Party (RGP) — formed three months before the polls with the potent ‘Save Goa’ slogan, which was exploited by the GFP in 2017. At that time, many expected the party to fall by the wayside and eventually be consigned to the bin of political history. It proved otherwise, by winning one seat (St Andre) which even the Trinamool Congress (TMC), with its resources, failed to do.

Led by Manoj Parab, who contested two seats but ended up losing both, the RGP turned out to be a huge obstacle for the Congress. Reports suggest that the RGP was responsible for the defeat of Congress candidates in at least five constituencies and a senior Congress leader quipped, “RGP has taught us a few lessons.” The RGP has built a formidable reputation and reports suggest that in South Goa,

where the party fared well, it notched up a vote share of over 10 percent.

MAMATA MISSING

There was a time in the run-up to the elections when Mamata Banerjee’s TMC cast a larger than life shadow over Goa. Almost overnight the party, with its army of IPAC workers/volunteers created a huge footprint and it seemed the TMC had arrived. In the end the party suffered the same fate as AAP five years ago. Twenty-one of its 26 candidates who contested the elections lost their deposits and none was elected. The party polled 5.21 percent of the votes.

There is a tendency to look at elections as a binary — BJP versus Congress. This election was more than that. It appeared as though the Congress was fighting on several fronts. It had AAP and TMC on one side, the RGP on the other and a host of independents waiting in the wings. This left non-BJP voters in a spot. The vote splits in several constituencies reflected this confusion. Voters were looking for an alternative to the Congress.

It now appears that Sawant unwittingly laid the foundation for victory in 2019 when he split the MGP and the Congress. The MGP, which was always in a position to play kingmaker, has been relegated to the fringes. It won two seats, but the BJP needs none, even though the MGP has pledged support to it.

But all is not well in the BJP camp either. Panaji MLA-elect Babush Monserrate, who won on a BJP ticket, minced no words when he told the media that he had to fight against the BJP and the Congress in Panaji and Taleigao where his wife was a candidate with the lotus symbol. In faraway Valpoi, Vishwajit Rane hinted that he was also in the race for the chief minister’s post. Another term for Sawant means that there will be resentment in some quarters of the BJP. But then, in Goa, attrition in politics is a constant and elections serve as a mere interregnum. ■

PUNJAB ACTIVISTS HAVE A LIST FOR AAP

Civil Society News
New Delhi

ACTIVISTS in Punjab have a long list of demands for the Aam Aadmi Party (AAP) government as it assumes office in the state.

The party has been swept to power with a thumping majority on the promise that it will bring freshness and accountability into governance and address the needs of citizens.

Activists, on their part, have expectations that the AAP government will pay heed to their concerns regarding the environment, agriculture, water bodies, reckless urbanization and the wilful behaviour of industry.

In the past, governments of the Congress and the Akali Dal have done little or nothing to address these concerns. The allegation is that both parties were complicit with vested interests and the administration under them couldn't be held accountable.

Since AAP has offered itself as an alternative, the hope is that it will show greater resolve and deploy the technical and administrative talent which can take up issues that the older parties either couldn't understand or just chose to ignore because they were in conflict with their bases of support.

A typical issue on which action is sought is the Buddha Nullah, which flows through Ludhiana. Waste from dyeing units and dairies and sewage from homes enter the nullah which further contaminates the Sutlej, which is the source of water for people downstream.

Environmentally conscious residents of Ludhiana have been asking the Punjab government to act in this matter by getting industries and dairies to treat their waste. They also want sewage to be treated separately.

After much effort, a ₹650-crore plan was sanctioned, but citizen groups say it is headed by a civil engineer who doesn't have the competence to deal with matters of environmental engineering. The implementation of the plan, they say, is also shrouded in bureaucratic secrecy.

The Buddha Nullah is an example of how pollution has been increasing in Punjab. Urbanization has been unregulated and industrial units have been allowed to come up without adequate planning.

The Mattewara Textile Park is another focal point of concern. There are objections to locating the park close to forested areas and further contaminating the Sutlej. Activists want the park shifted.

Activists have also been fervently pleading for the setting up of clean industries that do not draw on



Victory rally: Bhagwant Mann and Arvind Kejriwal



Release of a green manifesto before the elections for which several groups came together

Punjab's already stressed natural reserves.

"Punjab needs more clean industries that do not damage its water reserves and environment and that therefore protect the health of its citizens. What will your government do to improve industrial policy so that we discourage polluting industries and encourage clean industries," says a green manifesto presented to parties before the elections and which now represents the expectation from the AAP government.

Citizen groups which had been working on several issues had organized themselves before the elections to draft green manifestoes which were then handed over to different parties.

The issues are varied, but there are common concerns over the lack of water-harvesting, poor agricultural practices, the depleting groundwater table, the diminishing of tree cover in the state and rampant industrial pollution.

The overarching concern is that Punjab's development model is destructive and falsely pursued in the name of progress.

Garbage disposal and landfills are also a concern with cities in Punjab producing approximately 4,300 tonnes of waste daily.

A manifesto signed by several organizations says:

"The befouling of Punjabis by marketing destruction as progress and promoting a model of development which is polluting and damaging to our precious natural resources like water and air is costing us dearly in terms of health."

The activists haven't been mincing their words. They have accused the Punjab Pollution Control Board of corruption and would like to see the AAP government implement environment-related projects with transparency and accountability.

For all its potential, Punjab is a troubled state. The decision to vote for AAP stems from deep disappointment with the performance of both the Congress and the Akalis. Expectations of the new government are high because it comes with the promise of development above narrow political interests.

For AAP, on the other hand, the challenge is in governing a large and complex state and dealing with a long legacy of issues which predecessor governments have left. Listening to citizen groups and prioritizing its agenda accordingly would be the new government's best hope of quickly addressing the concerns that matter to ordinary people. Involving citizen groups in taking the government's work forward will be equally important. ■

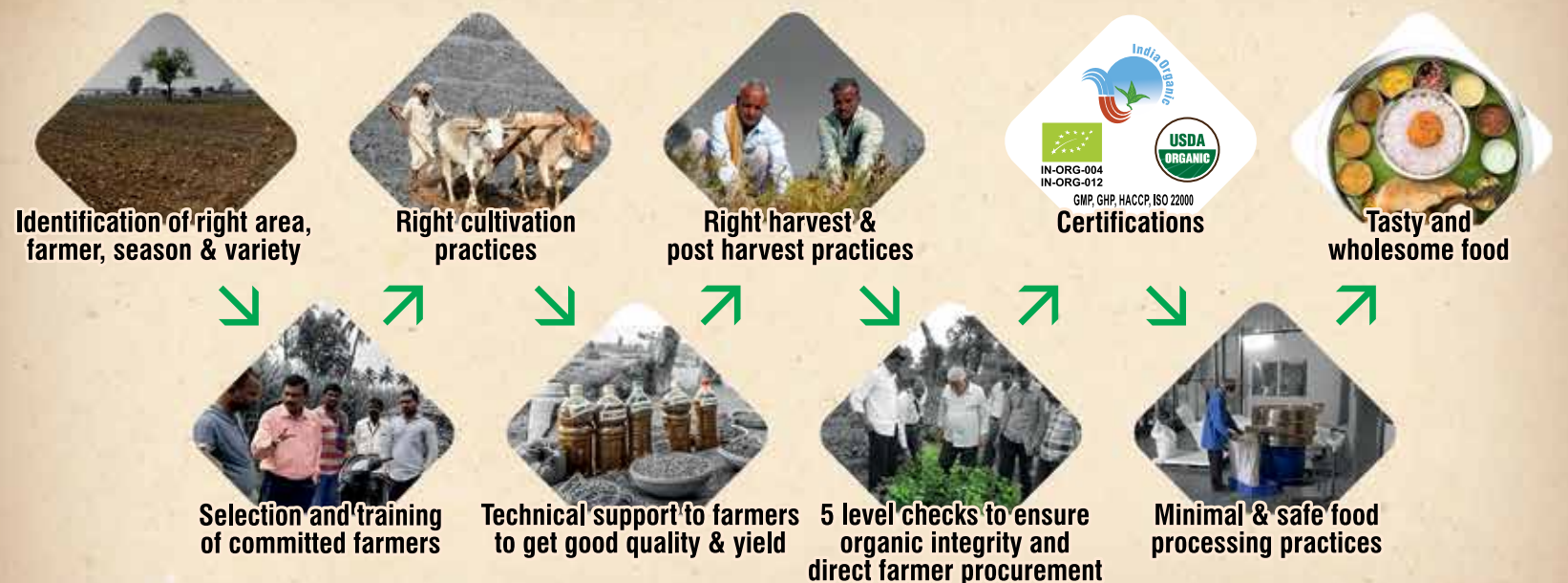
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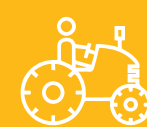
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Cars at the cost of fingers

Kavita Charanji
Gurugram

BEHIND the swanky cars that whiz down Gurugram's roads hides an ugly truth: the exploitation of workers in its booming auto components manufacturing units. Working conditions are so unsafe that workers lose their fingers and hands while operating unsafe machines. Mostly migrant workers take up these jobs. Getting timely medical treatment is tough. Even tougher is getting compensation from the government-run Employees' State Insurance Corporation (ESIC). Workers face an uncertain future.

"The whole debate is nothing new. There are manufacturing units in the supply chain that supply components that are cheaper, more flexibly. When cost is the primary criteria, occupational health, human rights and labour rights get compromised," says Sandeep Sachdeva, co-founder and CEO of Safe in India Foundation (SII), based in Manesar in Gurugram, Haryana.

SII focuses on the occupational safety and health of workers in auto sector supply chains. It helps workers with crush injuries access healthcare and get compensation from ESIC. It also advocates for worker safety among auto sector companies, government and other key stakeholders and supports ESIC in streamlining its healthcare and compensation services nationally. Also, SII creates awareness amongst workers on safety in the workplace and ESIC services.

SII has set up Worker Assistance Centres in Manesar and Faridabad. The centres help workers with crush injuries access ESIC healthcare and compensation. They also assist them through complex bureaucratic procedures that workers find daunting to negotiate. Through close interaction with workers at ESIC offices and community outreach, the centres gather evidence-based data that can drive improvements in auto sector supply chains and ESIC services.

It is Sunday and the Faridabad Workers' Assistance Centre is abuzz as workers give their feedback to the SII team after a safety training session organized by the Labour Ministry's Directorate General Factory Advice Service and Labour Institutes (DGFASLI).

"Sixty percent of all accidents reported to SII occur on power press machines. Today, workers were briefed on the importance of safety gear like helmets, gloves, goggles and earplugs to prevent workplace injury. They were also informed about safety sensors and how bypassing those sensors can prove hazardous," says Amitesh Kumar Singh, coordinator at the Worker Assistance Centre.

Safety training and rules on safety gear exist only on paper, say workers. Safety gear is provided only during audits, says Arvind, a former power press operator in Faridabad. He lost three fingers in two separate workplace accidents. "No company in Faridabad trains workers," he says, justifiably angry. "They don't tell us about the importance of a safety sensor or run us through the safety checks required before machine operation. Regular safety checks or



Sandeep Sachdeva (third from left) with his team outside the Worker Assistance Centre in Faridabad

There are units that supply components cheap and when cost is a factor, the safety of workers and their rights are invariably compromised.

maintenance are hardly ever undertaken by a company. No action is taken even when a worker brings this to the attention of his employer."

This is exactly what happened on October 23, 2020, when Arvind met with his second accident. He recalls that he informed the maintenance staff of the factory about the defective power press machine he was supposed to operate but no one paid attention. Just as painful is his memory of not being given any first aid. Instead, he found himself in the contractor's home from where he was taken to the nearest ESI hospital. There, he was referred to a private hospital.

Almost one and a half years later he has been told that ESIC will grant him Permanent Disability Benefit, termed "pension" by the workers. Helped by people working at the SII centre, he has negotiated his way through a maze of ESIC documentation procedures. "A worker only gets ESIC benefits if correct documents have been submitted like an accident report, attendance sheet, salary sheet, witness statements, workers statements and medical board clearance from an ESI dispensary," says Singh.

Arvind has finally got his right to this pension but he is bitter. He now hopes to support his family by setting up a small toothpowder business.

Young Rohit, from Kharakpur village in HarDOI district of Uttar Pradesh, lost three fingers in a shopfloor accident. The Faridabad centre is helping him get his Medical Board clearance after which he

will get his pension. Meanwhile, the factory where he met with an accident has given him work as a packer. His advice to other workers is that they should avoid the power press or, at best, remain helpers rather than become operators. Many times, he says, companies make helpers into operators and expect them to pick up the ropes on the job.

Narottam Jatav has been luckier. He lost one finger in an accident in a motorcycle parts company in Bawal near Rewari that lies beyond Gurugram. When he established contact with SII, the staff guided him through the complex documentation procedure to claim pension. Today, not only has he got his pension, he has landed a job as a field executive at the Faridabad Worker Assistance Centre.

Workers would be safer if they were aware of their rights, says Singh. Under ESIC rules, from day one of joining employment, a worker is supposed to get an ESIC identification card that entitles him and his eligible dependents to their rights to health services as well as compensation in case of sickness, injury, unemployment, childbirth and death. Often this identity card is given to injured workers after an accident occurs. Clearly, despite paying their ESIC contribution workers were not benefitting from ESIC services they were eligible to for several months, even years. Obviously, when an accident occurs they face a harrowing time.

The Worker Assistance Centres reflect SII's worker-centric approach to industrial safety. Set up and supported mainly by the alumni of the Indian Institute of Management Ahmedabad (IIM-A) batch of 1991, IIT-Roorkee 1988 and other well-known donors like the Azim Premji Foundation and Lal Family Foundation, the organization could have just pontificated on workplace safety. It chose otherwise.

"When we started, we had the choice of going down the path of being a think-tank or working on the ground. We chose to start with working on the ground, help injured workers humanely and then based on that learning and evidence, build advocacy," says Sachdeva. ■

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MOVE MORE, EAT RIGHT, BUILD THOSE MUSCLES

India needs to prepare its healthcare system to deal with sedentarism and diseases it brings, says Dr Anoop Misra

Civil Society News
New Delhi

THE COVID-19 pandemic has been the focus of the world's attention. But is this crisis just about a new virus and the problems it is causing? Or are there larger issues involved here of unsustainable lifestyles and global warming?

Could it be that other diseases, rising silently, are intersecting with the pandemic? Perhaps there are several pandemics and epidemics that are now converging.

Topping the list of concerns are obesity and diabetes. An increasingly sedentary world is plagued by both. For India, with its inadequate public awareness, shaky healthcare system and rising incomes, the problem with these non-communicable diseases is complex.

A major concern is the connection between non-communicable diseases and infectious diseases. Take, for instance, COVID-19 and diabetes and hypertension. Or tuberculosis and diabetes.

To walk us through this difficult terrain, we spoke to Dr Anoop Misra, chairman of the Fortis-C-DOC Centre of Excellence for Diabetes, Metabolic Diseases and Endocrinology.

In his current avatar, Dr Misra works for the private sector, but he has a distinguished record in the public sector as well — having spent long years at the All-India Institute of Medical Sciences (AIIMS) in Delhi. We bring you an abridged and edited version of an extensive interview:

Q: Dr Misra, you have said that sedentarism is a pandemic. What exactly do you mean? Is it that global lifestyles with mechanization and automation have resulted in people moving less?

Absolutely. Of course, it is a pandemic, no doubt about it. The worldwide increase in sedentarism is very well known. India is more affected by this phenomenon. People in the Western world tend to be active in their daily lives and exercise more because of the parks, open spaces and easy availability of exercise facilities.

Q: Would you say that diabetes and obesity, that have a clear connection to sedentarism, should also be seen as pandemics in which India is particularly affected?

Agree. Diabetes, the way it is growing, is astonishing. We knew 20 years back that it would go up. Unfortunately, whatever is being done is not good enough. Obesity, too, is going up and up and it takes more diseases along with it. Hypertension, heart disease, fatty liver and even cancers are going up because of obesity. It is in epidemic proportions in India. Far from reaching a plateau, we are on an ascending limb of the curve.

Q: And unless we see it as an epidemic, we're not going to be able to deal with it on that scale.

Oh yes, absolutely. The warning about this happened some 10-15 years earlier. The curve is going up and not likely to flatten in the next decade. It will affect the



Dr Anoop Misra: 'The health system is not ready for the increase in non-communicable diseases'

health of the nation and our economy in a major manner.

Q: Are obesity and diabetes only urban phenomena? Rich people's diseases?

It is a very good question. Some 15 years ago, we used to say this is a rich people's disease and predominantly urban. But the scenario has changed markedly. People across economic strata suffer from it, including the poor. It is going from urban to suburban and to rural areas. The incidence has been doubling in rural areas though they haven't caught up with cities as yet.

Q: You have worked for long in government facilities and now you are in the private sector. What is the impact obesity and diabetes on this scale are having on the public healthcare system? Do you think a redesign of the public healthcare system is now overdue?

That's a very important and complicated question because I have seen public health systems for 40 years, right from the time when as students we used to go to villages in Haryana. At that time there would be a small, two-room OPD centre with some basic drugs. Our wonder drug at that time was a simple injection of penicillin (no other antibiotic was available!).

Many improvements have been made since then. There are efficient ASHA workers at the village level and we have a much better equipped healthcare system today. There is no question about it. But the system is not prepared for the huge increase in non-communicable diseases (NCDs).

The human resources at the primary level and even at the secondary level are not equipped to deal with this surge. They are not trained to deal with NCDs in

an effective manner. Just giving a tablet to somebody who has diabetes is not enough. Comprehensive advice, management of multiple comorbid diseases and careful regular follow-ups are needed. If left uncontrolled, diabetes may lead to a heart attack, stroke, kidney failure, foot infections.

Just take the example of foot infections. We often see people coming from villages with foot infections and with gangrene setting in. They have been walking barefoot. The basic health advice, to avoid walking barefoot, is not given to them and appropriate initial treatment is not given.

As a result, the foot infection rapidly becomes complicated and sometimes amputation has to be done. Diabetes is the number two cause of amputation in India, the first being accidents. Diabetes is also the leading cause of blindness and an important cause of renal failure in the country.

What we need to do is to strengthen primary healthcare. This is very important. If you go to some of the primary health centres there are persistent problems. The drugs are not available the way they should be. The doctor is also not available. And you can't blame doctors. I mean, people do not want to go to a small primary healthcare centre and work there because of poor infrastructure, intermittent electricity, etc.

Q: What should be done socially to deal with obesity, diabetes, sedentarism?

Lots of people have thought about this before and there is a plan in place in the government. I was a part of the National Diabetes Control Programme and aligned with that is the Heart Control Programme and a Stroke Control Programme. There are common risk factors in all these diseases like unhealthy diet, lack of exercise, smoking, alcohol, stress, pollution. And all these could be

The curve for obesity and diabetes is going up. It is not likely to come down in the next decade. It will affect the health of the nation and of the economy in a major manner. Not just the rich but the poor are also affected. It has gone from urban to suburban to rural.

effectively tackled at the primary health centre.

The national control programmes are very detailed. But the message hasn't gone out loud and clear to the population. They need the same enthusiasm and visibility that was given to the polio programme. Most importantly we must involve all stakeholders. So far it hasn't happened in an adequate manner. This is the downstream pathway (towards healthcare workers and the general population) for which we haven't done enough.

The upstream pathway requires bolstering too with clear legal and policy based interventions such as increased taxes on sweetened carbonated beverages, tobacco, and unhealthy oils. Further, taxes should be decreased for healthy fruits and vegetables.

Food labelling plays an important role. Now, I'll give you an example from Brazil where clear labels are available on foodstuff and people know what is good for them and what is not. It has brought down the incidence of obesity. This will have an impact on diabetes and heart disease too. Regulation and awareness are both required.

Q: With specific reference to COVID-19, you have said that society needs to wake up to the co-relation between infectious diseases and sedentarism. People with diabetes, hypertension and sarcopenia have been more affected by the virus. And perfectly healthy people who got infected tended to become diabetic and experience extreme muscle weakness and other symptoms.

It is clearly a two-way pathway of COVID-19 to diabetes and diabetes to COVID-19. In our research studies, a very strong relationship of both has been shown. COVID-19 is causing diabetes in people who are predisposed to it. And patients

with diabetes who have uncontrolled blood sugar are getting more severe COVID-19. We knew before COVID-19 that infections are prevalent in patients with diabetes. And that's why even before the advent of COVID-19 vaccinations, we were vaccinating diabetes patients for pneumonia and flu.

But, more importantly, as far as India is concerned, we have more infection-related epidemics combining with the diabetes epidemic. For example, it is happening with tuberculosis and diabetes. This we knew again before COVID-19 — that tuberculosis is occurring more in diabetic patients and somehow, though patients with TB are not obese, they have more diabetes than individuals without TB.

India was warned about this by the World Health Organization (WHO) and there are a number of research papers on this subject. It is an important issue because the COVID-19 infection may last for a short while but TB will remain for several months, and scarring because of TB will remain throughout life. There is some data to show that whatever treatment we are throwing at TB may not be as effective in a patient with uncontrolled diabetes.

This kind of coexistence of poorly controlled diabetes as well as widespread infections (a 'syndemic' of TB and diabetes) in the Indian population is clearly seen during the COVID-19 pandemic. We now see more patients with uncontrolled diabetes as compared to before COVID-19. As the diabetic population grows in India, unfortunately, 60 to 70 percent of cases are uncontrolled and prone to COVID-19, other viral infections and TB.

Q: The pandemic has brought many new words and terms into popular usage. One such term is 'cytokine storm' which prompts the immune system to get all hyper and attack organs. COVID-19 generally leaves the body wasted. You have suggested that exercise promotes early recovery. How should it be done?

It is interesting that Indians have a higher level of cytokines than Western people even when they are healthy. If you measure C-reactive protein, interleukin-6 and other cytokines, the levels in Indians will be two to three times those of people in the West. This is also true for young people in their twenties and also for non-obese people. So we already have more inflammation in the body over which when we get COVID-19 (or any other such illness), inflammation increases multiple times, converting easily into a "cytokine storm". In such a situation the patient's health goes rapidly downhill.

Our muscles are also thinner than those of Western people. There are many causes. Most of us are vegetarian and hence our protein intake is not adequate. We also have a tendency to be markedly sedentary.

If someone who has less skeletal muscle (termed as sarcopenia) gets COVID-19 and is in hospital for some time, the muscles are lost fast. You could lose substantial muscle during seven to 10 days of hospitalization due to fever, widespread viral infection, cytokine storm and from being in a severe catabolic state. Building lost muscle may take consistent efforts and is a slow process. It is especially so if you have a severe infection and are on multiple drugs and steroids.

Two issues have implications for post-COVID recovery. One is muscle loss, also called "acute sarcopenia". The other is multiple nutritional deficiencies. Besides vitamin deficiencies, protein deficiency is important for muscle strength and recovery from COVID-19.

Many other deficiencies occur after COVID-19 — calcium and magnesium deficiency, etc. Altogether, your body is weak and you have a high likelihood of developing post-COVID syndromes. You may have marked fatigue, breathlessness, brain fog, dizziness, etc. Recovery is variable but generally is longer in patients who were unfit pre-COVID and have poorly controlled diabetes and other co-morbid diseases.

For recovery, exercise combined with good nutrition is necessary. A good rehabilitation programme is required for which a nutritionist and physiotherapist should be involved. With a proper programme I can assure you most patients will recover in a short time.

Q: And resistance training would be a core part of this.

I'm a great fan of resistance training because of a study that was done in 2005 by my colleague, Dr Naval Vikram, in AIIMS when I was there. We took a small number of people and put them through supervised physical exercises twice a week. Resistance training using weights and special apparatus were done under the supervision of experts. We found these individual metabolised glucose faster and their sugar levels went down significantly compared to another group that did not do such exercises.



For women in particular resistance training is much needed



Outdoor gyms make a difference

Many people think that for doing such exercises one has to go to the gym and be under trainers. Wrong. You just have to do five to 10 minutes of resistance training at least five times a week. And this can be done at home. The instructions can be followed by just about anybody. And this is very important for people who are above 60 years with sarcopenia. You can lift small weights at any age. Some elderly people and those with heart disease think that lifting weights is bad for the heart.

This is not true. These people can learn to do resistance training with small weights under supervision. There is a good possibility that the heart's functioning also becomes better with such exercises. Resistance training is particularly important for women to keep their muscles fit since Indian women are markedly sarcopenic and have a low level of fitness.

Q: What is sedentarism and how should it be defined?

There are several aspects to it. First, being able to go out and exercise, and second, which is often combined with the first, is inactivity in daily life. Sitting at a desk, lying around in bed, and reading newspapers or watching TV for prolonged periods is sedentary behaviour. Such people need to move more even if it is for five minutes every two hours.

Q: It won't do to go for a 30-minute walk and keep sitting all day.

Both the structured walk and activity through the day are required. And if you think that you can just be a couch potato for 23 and a half hours and do half an hour of physical activity and that compensates for everything it is not going to work. In such people the benefits of physical exercise are mostly lost.

Similarly, if you consume 300 calories of junk or imbalanced food and subsequently exercise, thinking that you will burn the excess calories and be fine, you are wrong. Calories from such food will be specifically injurious to the liver, kidneys and heart. And this effect won't be counteracted by exercise. Your active lifestyle, proper diet, outdoor physical activity and resistance exercises — all of these are important.

These characteristics of high body fat, high internal fat, low muscle mass and physical unfitness are peculiar to Indians. They may not occur as much in other populations.

Q: How do I know that I am fat though I am fit-looking? Or that I am fat but actually quite fit?

You can calculate your own BMI and there are calculators on the web. In India, based on the criteria for the Indian population, if your BMI is below 23 you are normal. Between 23 and 25 you're overweight and above 25 you're obese. In comparison, for the West, the equivalent BMI readings are 25 and above 30 to define being overweight and obesity. These criteria for diagnosis of obesity in Indians were published by us in 2009. Now, besides being widely used in India, they are also used for Indians settled in the UK and the US.

But BMI is never a perfect measure of obesity. Because, if you look at WWF wrestlers their BMI is 35 to 40 (which is in the category of obesity) but they have huge muscles and low body fat. So if body fat is considered a definition of obesity, these people are non-obese despite high BMI. If you take long-distance runners, in particular elite marathon runners, their BMI is often below 18.5, which we can consider to be undernourished. But they are all muscle, their body fat is below 10 percent and they are extremely fit.

Hence BMI as a criterion of obesity and body fitness has fallacies. It will not tell you your body fat or abdominal fat. It will not tell you about your muscles. For that you have to go to more sophisticated instrument-based measurements.

In the research centre I am sitting in, we have many such instruments. One of them is a simple bioimpedance apparatus. What we see in gyms are the cheapest versions of this instrument. They are never very accurate. More sophisticated versions are more expensive and more accurate. A bioimpedance machine

passes a low-grade current through you, to assess the impedance of body water. It will calculate how much body water you have and by using an inbuilt equation it will tell you your body fat. It is never accurate because it will be affected by multiple factors. For example, if you have had a couple of litres of water to drink, the reading will vary. Most accurate for measurement of fat is a dual-energy X-ray absorptiometry, called a DEXA scan, an immovable apparatus and only available in select centres.

For measurement of fitness or assessment of muscle power more expensive instruments are required. For example, we can make the person run on the treadmill and measure oxygen efficiency. It is usually meant for elite athletes and sportsmen. We can assess muscle power by using a handgrip apparatus. In a few seconds you will know how much muscle power the person has.

Q: But if I am not a world-class athlete, just an ordinary person who wants to know whether he is fat despite being fit-looking, what do I do?

There are other very simple ways of estimating body fat. One of them is using a calliper to judge subcutaneous fat. The calliper, used in four places, can calculate body fat. The other important measurement which I must emphasize is waist circumference, which is an indirect measure of abdominal fat, a very important risk factor for heart disease. The bigger the waist the more the likelihood of heart disease, hypertension and diabetes. Normal values of waist circumference should be less than 90 cm for men and 80 cm for women. Some consider this measurement to be more important than BMI for assessing overall heart risk. These criteria for the Indian population were published by our research team.

Q: With the calliper you are basically pinching the body?

It looks small but it costs ₹40,000. It is very accurate. Fat is measured in millimetres. It assesses how much subcutaneous fat is there in that area. It is interesting that Indians have higher subcutaneous fat than other races. ■



Elite runners have very low BMI but are healthy

Q: Is it necessary that you will be fat because you are sedentary? Or can you be thin and sedentary?

Yes, that is a very interesting question. You know, if you compared the average person's weight in the Indian population to that in the Western population (we have published several research papers on this), our weight is lower than that of white people in the US or the UK.

So we are generally not too fat, specifically if we apply Western standards of body mass index (BMI). But, internally, we have extra fat. So an Indian who is 50 years old, weighs 70 kg and is five feet 10 inches with a BMI of 22, which is not considered overweight or fat, may yet have 30-40 percent body fat, clearly in excess.

His abdomen and internal organs (particularly the liver) would be accumulating fat, which is bad for his metabolism. By looking at this guy and measuring his BMI, you would say he is not fat but internally he is obese. He could be termed as metabolically obese, which is having as bad a metabolism as an obese person. Without regular exercise he is certainly going to accumulate excess fat in the abdomen and internal organs. His fitness levels, already affected by internal fat, will progressively go down. Diabetes and heart disease may occur even at a young age.

On the other hand, a fat person with a BMI of 27 (obese by the Indian BMI standards) may be very active and doing all kinds of exercise and he will probably be spared many health problems as compared to a person who has a BMI of 22 but is sedentary. The reason our bodies have excess fat in almost every organ is not clear. One line of thought is that over centuries we have accumulated fat internally because that is the most effective form of energy conservation in case of famine. And our bodies continue to store fat on that ancient but still active programme.



THE POLLS & AFTER

IOU: A 2022 message for 2024



DELHI DARBAR

SANJAYA BARU

INDIA is a psephologist's and electoral data miner's delight. Not only does the country generate an enormous amount of electoral data but does so on a regular basis. It is, therefore, not surprising that almost every major political party now hires data miners and data analysts to generate political strategies. Some have even made a fortune in this start-up business. Despite the availability of more data and access to cleverer ways of processing and analyzing that data, election outcomes continue to baffle political analysts. The voter, like the consumer, is queen!

Indian election analysis has deployed several concepts such as swing vote, anti- and pro-incumbency vote and, a very Indian idea, Prannoy Roy and Ashok Lahiri's 'index of opposition unity' (IOU). Interestingly, in the media analysis of the recent assembly elections, one mostly heard of the pro- and anti-incumbency factors and very little about the 'index of opposition unity'. It would be useful to analyze the outcomes in Goa and Uttar Pradesh using the IOU concept. I would assume the score would have been very low.

Given the fact that we are once again in a political era in which there is one major national political party facing a plurality of opposition parties, the IOU concept would be once again relevant. This is the one big message for the Sonia Congress. It has been splitting the opposition vote in state after state, pretending to be the old single largest national party facing the new single national party. The fact is that the Sonia Congress is now just another regional party that has to work with other regional parties to keep the new single largest national party in check.

This is what the Sonia Congress was forced to come to terms with in Maharashtra where it is in coalition with Sharad Pawar's Nationalist Congress Party and Uddhav Thackeray's Shiv Sena. While the three partners did not come together before elections to exploit the IOU and win an election on their own in Maharashtra in 2019, their subsequent unity has allowed them to remain in office, keeping the BJP out.

The Sonia Congress could have made Mamata Banerjee's victory in West Bengal in 2021 easier through a pre-election alliance with the Trinamool Congress. Or, maybe not. There is a view among

several regional political parties that the Sonia Congress is at present more a political liability than an asset. In Uttar Pradesh, for example, many have argued that Akhilesh Yadav preferred to go it alone rather than seek an alliance with the Sonia Congress. While this may be true, it is possible to argue that if the Sonia Congress had more modest ambitions and had agreed to be a junior partner of the Samajwadi Party, the outcome may have been at best marginally different but a new political platform would have been crafted for the future.

for the party, what incentive was there for the Congress party voter to return to it?

Going forward to 2024, the 'index of opposition unity' will remain a critical factor in determining electoral outcomes. It is helpful to recall that, of the 16 Lok Sabha elections held after the first one of 1951, the outcome was pro-incumbent in the first four (1957-1971) and in the next eight general elections (1977-1998) it was pro-incumbent only once, in 1984, after Indira Gandhi's assassination. In the subsequent five general elections (1999-2019),



The question is whether pro-incumbency in Modi's favour will be sustained

Given the fact that we are again in an era of one major national political party, the index of opposition unity would be relevant.

It is still not clear what precisely was the Sonia Congress strategy for UP given the fact that the collapse in its vote base in the state had occurred as long back as in the 1985-1991 period. The Congress vote share has remained low and stable since 1991. With neither Rahul Gandhi nor Priyanka Gandhi Vadra offering themselves as potential state leaders

three (1999, 2009 and 2019) delivered pro-incumbent outcomes.

If the present BJP era is viewed as being similar to the Nehru era for the Congress, with successive pro-incumbent outcomes, then one should expect 2024 to go in Narendra Modi's favour. On the other hand, if Modi's style of governance and its economic outcomes are similar to the Indira Gandhi era, in which anti-incumbent outcomes far outnumbered pro-incumbent outcomes, then one should expect the 2024 outcome to be open to a real contestation.

What will make a difference to the 2024 outcome will be the 'index of opposition unity'. Given that the period of 1951 to 1971 was largely pro-incumbent and 1977 to 2014 was largely anti-incumbent, the question is whether the pro-incumbency of 2019 in Modi's favour will be sustained. Clearly, the 'index of opposition unity' can make all the difference.

However, if opposition unity has to bear fruit at

the national level the Sonia Congress has to come to terms with the harsh realities of today. To begin with, it must cease to be the Sonia Congress and return to its earlier avatar of being at least the Indira Congress, if not the Indian National Congress. The Indira Congress was home to almost all the ex-Congress leaders of today who are at present in different political parties. If they have the courage, honesty and political commitment to offering an alternative to the 'Hindu-Hindi' nationalism of the BJP and are willing to work with a coalition of parties that are more committed to the values of the Constitution then it is still possible for a newly reinvented Congress to become the magnet for a new national coalition that can at least try to generate adequate anti-incumbency sentiment in time for 2024.

If, however, every non-BJP political party remains a one-leader, one-family-led party then the BJP will continue to record victories. Even though the BJP is also now a 'one leader' party, it has a national organization that is capable of delivering political victories across the country. The BJP's challengers, with the sole exception of the Left parties, are all 'one leader/one family' parties, with weak party structures and organization. Little wonder then that Modi relentlessly targets *parivarvaad* and dynastic rule.

If the non-BJP parties have to blunt the edge of Modi's *parivarvaad* attack then all regional party leaders — Sharad Pawar, Mamata Banerjee, Naveen Patnaik, M.K. Stalin, Uddhav Thackeray, Arvind Kejriwal, K. Chandrashekar Rao, N. Chandrababu Naidu (or Y.S. Jaganmohan Reddy, depending on how the chips are likely to fall in Andhra Pradesh), the Yadav boys of UP and Bihar, the Abdullahs of Kashmir and such like will have to come together, with Sonia Gandhi working with them, to engineer an electoral strategy that multiplies their individual strength.

This may sound bizarre but Indian politics is once again at a point when a range of political parties will have to come together, organizationally and ideologically, to challenge the dominance of the single big incumbent. In the 1960s, few viewed the communist parties as ever being in the position of kingmakers, nor did many regard Chaudhary Charan Singh as being of prime ministerial timbre. No one in the 1980s imagined a bunch of regional players would end the dominance of the Nehru-Gandhis.

If Sonia Gandhi restored power to her family it was by aligning with all such parties that had relentlessly fought the three prime ministers from her family. It is such out-of-the-box solutions that can help restore relevance to the Congress at a time when regional parties constitute the bulwark of a non-BJP platform. The problem for the Congress is that the rising stars of the non-BJP coalition are mostly anti-Congress parties — like the Aam Aadmi Party (AAP) and the Telangana Rashtra Samithi (TRS). However, if the likes of a Pawar and a Banerjee can bring Sonia, Rahul and Priyanka to work alongside, if not with, a Kejriwal, Patnaik, Rao, Reddy and Thackeray then a national alternative can potentially emerge. If not, Modi will get re-elected in 2024 and the pro-incumbent phase will get lengthened. ■

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The 2024 polls will be no cakewalk



INSIDE TRACK

NILANJAN MUKHOPADHYAY

A shroud of gloom characterized the usually self-assured responses of Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) leaders in the run-up to March 10, the day of counting for the assembly polls in five states. But, once the results were declared, the despondency had shifted back to the opposition parties. They were back to where they have been for most of the period since May 2014, save for a few occasions when opposition victories, more the exception than the rule, proffered hope amid a grim scenario.

This neat interchange of extreme sentiment is symptomatic of the binary-centric times we live in, when every response or assessment is in black or white, never in the shades in between, even though life is mostly otherwise. The verdict of these crucial elections too must be examined on the basis of the figures contained in data sheets and not on political hyperbole. Just as it was short-sighted on the part of the BJP's adversaries to conclude that its leaders' unease was a sign that Uttar Pradesh and Uttarakhand, at least, were ready for a change, it would be wrong to now assume that the BJP is home and dry regarding 2024.

A day after the BJP returned to its home base with a contextually extraordinary and way-beyond-expected haul in its kitty, Prime Minister Narendra Modi was back to what he is most comfortable with: campaigning for an election. On March 11, he flew into his bastion, Ahmedabad, and beamed his way through a nine-km massive road show from the airport to the BJP headquarters in Gandhinagar, continuously flashing the V-sign. It marked not just the beginning of a two-day tour to his home state, but also the soft start of the BJP campaign for assembly elections due in November-December this year. Between now and then, he is expected to visit the state at least once a month to ensure that its bid for an unprecedented sixth consecutive term does not run into rough weather the way it did in 2017, almost jeopardizing his bid for power in 2019.

A day prior to visiting the state that paved his way to premiership, Modi was at his party headquarters in Delhi. Addressing party workers, he declared that the 2022 assembly elections in four states that the BJP had won had cleared the path to 2024, an assertion for which his former associate, election and communication maverick,

Prashant Kishor, mocked him. Although he did not name the prime minister, Kishor used the moniker 'Saheb', which has a naughty and conspiratorial ring to it. Modi's one-time election strategist pointed out that the parliamentary polls will be contested on different terrain. Modi does know that no saga concludes prematurely or before its time. Almost a quarter of a century ago he had told me, and I quoted him in the biography I wrote, that "full stops" come only when due or when "willed", while gesturing skywards.

Not just 'Saheb', but anyone who perused the detailed results or examined the only empirical dataset on voter behaviour and analysis of the verdict — the usual post-poll survey by the Centre for the Study of Developing Societies — is aware that these elections were much closer than apparent. Consider these factors: the BJP vote share in the most consequential state, UP, declined

As the results show, there will always be a division of the votes against the BJP, but the BJP has reached a plateau of sorts and going beyond this mark will depend on the unexpected.

from the level it touched in 2019 and the number of assembly seats it won in 2017, satisfaction over performance of the Centre was higher than for the party's state governments, and there was just a five percent difference between the desire for 'change' and for the incumbent to return and this gap was chiefly because of the challenger's inability to consolidate and augment the pro-change vote.

Even if one casts aside the argument of the party's critics that the BJP failed to get the support of 80 percent of the electorate, as the UP chief minister contentiously claimed, the ultimate outcome is not really comforting. That India is a first-past-the-post system is a reality. There is no escaping that reaching the absolute value on the index of opposition unity is near impossible and, consequently, there will always be a significant division of the anti-BJP vote. But, as the results show, the BJP has now reached a plateau of sorts. Going beyond this mark, even holding on to these levels, depends on unexpected developments that can be electorally harnessed by Modi, as with the Pulwama-Balakot events in 2019. Modi knows,

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more than anyone else, that 2024 will be no cakewalk and his decision to start campaigning immediately indicates this.

The BJP success in four states is all the more significant because it was the first set of polls after the brutal second wave of the pandemic, that only exacerbated the difficulties faced during the first wave which forced the largest post-independence migration and sent millions out of jobs. They are now dependent on dole in the form of free rations which has become an albatross of sorts around Modi's neck. For the BJP, the most noteworthy takeaway from these polls is that people's electoral choice was not made on the basis of their material situation and personal misery. But will this sentiment be limitless? This calculation is always uncertain and during the campaign, senior BJP leaders were unsure if voters would actually be sparing towards the party. This is evident from two disparate interventions made by them in the course of the campaign.

The first was the response of the BJP leaders to the agitation by those aspiring for railway jobs that spread like wildfire through UP and Bihar in January. Quite at odds with the Modi government which projects the image of being led by an unbending leader, the railways minister immediately called for reconciliation and constituted a committee to examine the concerns and demands of the aspirants. The issue was also flagged by leaders within the BJP, notably the former Bihar deputy chief minister, Sushil Modi, but without aggravating it and with a tone of seeking a solution. Eventually, the demands of the examinees were accepted and this was notified on the day of the electoral verdict.

Likewise, a reconciliatory approach was displayed even on a crucial issue linked to the Hindutva agenda and this was personally assured by Modi. Midway through the campaign, as the polls in UP headed eastwards, where the problem of stray cattle arising out of the Yogi Adityanath government's crackdown against cattle slaughter is greater, Modi acknowledged having made a mistake in not controlling the chief minister's exuberance. Modi did not name Adityanath, but accepted in a public meeting that he was aware the people faced extensive damage to their crops on account of "chutta janvar" and that the state government would roll out a new policy on cattle. The BJP will certainly not promise to loosen the leash on an issue that was part of the party's systemic efforts to create an impression that its initiatives were aimed at 'inconveniencing' (thereby 'fixing') Muslims. Despite this small concession on a core issue, the BJP received the unwavering support of Hindus — possibly because more Hindu farmers were hit by the menace of stray cattle. Sample this data from the CSDS finding: out of the sample it surveyed, 54 percent of Hindus voted for the BJP — up from 47 percent in 2017. In contrast, only 26 percent of Hindus who participated in the survey voted for the Samajwadi Party although their numbers were up from 19 percent in the previous assembly polls. Reverse polarization levels were even higher — in constituencies where Muslims were 40 percent or upwards of the total voters, an astounding 69 percent of Hindus aligned behind the BJP,



There is no escaping that reaching the absolute value on the index of opposition unity is near impossible

The solidification of the Hindu vote in favour of the BJP in Uttar Pradesh and other heartland and western India states may be good news for the party, but will paradoxically work against it in regions where people are not as supportive of Hindutva politics.

although the SP secured encouraging backing from all Hindu castes in seats with less than 10 percent of Muslims.

The solidification of the Hindu vote in favour of the BJP in Uttar Pradesh and other heartland and western India states may be good news for the party, but will paradoxically work against it in regions where people are not as supportive of Hindutva politics. This points to the possibility of not just a vertical plateau but a horizontal limit too, to the party's expansion. Over the past several years, the BJP has been trapped in this quagmire — polarization works to its advantage in states dominated by its core constituency but at the same time has the capacity to alienate voters in states where support for Hindutva is not as strong.

In addition, the electoral verdict throws up a challenge for the BJP in the further shrinking of the Congress and the rise of the Aam Aadmi Party (AAP). Dynasticism and the politics of appeasement of religious minorities (read Muslims) are the party's main charges against all opposition parties. These two get blunted in the case of the post-ideology Arvind Kejriwal-led AAP because it does not take positions on contentious issues pertaining to minority rights and concerns. But, to ensure that it does not get estranged from middle-of-the-path secular

Indians, AAP continues to pledge adherence to India's pluralistic tradition, more reassuringly than the BJP leadership. With AAP's spectacular rise in Punjab, a development that certainly marks the beginning of the party's geo-political expansion, the pitch is certain to get queered for the BJP and Modi in the run-up to 2024.

In the immediate term, the party will face electoral challenges in Gujarat and Himachal Pradesh later this year while next year there will be keen contests in April-May in Karnataka where its incumbent's handicap is further weighted by a none-too-inspiring state leadership. Additionally, there are the numerically significant states of Madhya Pradesh, Rajasthan and Chhattisgarh towards the end of 2023 besides the northeastern states of Meghalaya, Mizoram, Nagaland and Tripura at various times next year. Besides electoral and political challenges, the BJP has to contend with a possible rise in the sense of deficit in governance and the volatile international scenario. Modi loves challenges but in the quiet of the night even he may sense within himself that he has more than a plateful. ■

(The writer is an NCR-based author and journalist. His latest book is *The Demolition and the Verdict: Ayodhya and the Project to Reconfigure India*. His other books include *The RSS: Icons of the Indian Right* and *Narendra Modi: The Man, The Times*. He tweets at @NiranjanUdwin)

Reason to wonder and worry



LOOKING AHEAD

KIRAN KARNIK

IN the years ahead, technology will affect and change our lives even more than it has in the past. Last month, this column briefly covered many aspects. Given its pervasiveness and impact, we continue to look at technology this time as well. In the coming years, technology will be amongst the biggest drivers of the global economy. India is uniquely placed to leverage this in a big way and, while meeting its own special needs, to also claim a far bigger share in the global pie.

Amongst the fastest growing segments will be individualized health devices. While consumer-level blood sugar testing and blood pressure measuring devices have been in the market for a while, millions of oximeters were sold to households during the COVID-19 pandemic. Wearable health devices are already a common consumer item, with the "wrist-watch" of yore now as multi-functional as the mobile phone, and fast becoming as widespread. Amongst its functionalities is the measurement and display of a host of health parameters, which can also be transmitted to a doctor. With increasing sophistication in data analytics and artificial intelligence, a linked service provider can automatically send back personalized health advice based on the individual's health indicators and history. With advances in technology and in health science, the capability of wearables will increase manifold, further spurring demand and sales. There is an increasing number of other tech-based health devices for individual, household or community use, each having considerable demand (some innovative devices were covered in Dr Raghunath Mashelkar's article, *Civil Society*, March 2022). With the vast and fast-expanding domestic market, and the consequent economies of scale, India can easily become the global centre for manufacture of such devices. This could be as big a segment of the global economy as the mobile handsets segment is today. It is an opportunity which India must not miss.

Transportation will witness a sea change. The automobile, one of the mainstays of mobility for over a century, will be transformed with the death of the internal combustion engine. Electric vehicles (EV) will dominate, while newer modes like magnetic levitation and hyperloop will begin to come into play. Drones for short-distance shipping of goods or deliveries will soon be common, though

their use for human transportation is probably a decade away. For long-distance travel, planes and trains will still be the primary mode (apart from ships and boats, primarily for goods). In this, while major changes in aircraft technology are likely to be limited to cleaner fuels, high-speed railway (HSR) will transform travel. India needs to quickly modernize its own now-obsolete network by developing capabilities in HSR, a technology in which it has fallen behind. All these technologies — EVs, hydrogen, drones, HSR and, to a limited extent, mag-lev and hyperloop — will be in use for transportation by the end of this decade. India must



Drones for short-distance shipping of goods will soon be common enough

Dematerialization is changing the need to transport the physical form as we are seeing with books. But the *Star Trek* stage is as yet decades away.

accelerate development of technologies in all these fields for both domestic use and as a global player.

A more basic transformation that is already underway is dematerialization: the conversion of atoms to bits. The most visible examples are books and music CDs: both are now available as digital bit-streams, dispensing with the need to transport the physical form. This is a new form of "transportation". We are, of course, some decades away from the *Star Trek* stage of "Beam me up, Scotty"!

Apart from healthcare and transportation, another aspect of our daily life that will be transformed is learning. With ever-accelerating change, jobs and roles will be in constant churn. Those who cannot keep up with new knowledge

will be in danger of unemployment, making continuous learning, updating, and upgrading of skills absolutely essential. In this, technology is the cause and the solution. Online will play a central role, becoming the primary learning mode, especially for those already working. The already prevalent facility of learning being conveniently available — anytime, anywhere, on any device — will be supplemented by much greater use of AV/VR and AI, enabling quicker learning. With its existing technological base and educational infrastructure, edtech can become a big contributor to talent creation as well as economic growth for the country. Just as it is becoming the pharmacy of the world, India could be the "university of the world", creating learning content and providing online courses to learners around the world. This is an area in which initiative and innovation are underway; however, much of it is constrained by regulations and rules. Radical reforms in the educational system can accelerate the take-off.

In rural India, tech will spur a new burst of productivity in agriculture. Use of drones for assessing soil moisture and crop health will be accompanied by their use for spraying pesticides and fertilizers where required. Complemented by satellite imagery, weather prediction and on-ground technologies, precision farming will become common in a few years. This will save input costs, increase yields, and thus farm incomes. Other technologies will result in better seeds — increasing output and enriching the produce with vitamins

and minerals, catalyzing a new green revolution. Backed by sophisticated analysis of space imagery, tech will also help fisherfolk by suggesting locations for increased catch. Combined with better weather forecasting — enabled by space tech and computer models — and communication, storm and disaster warnings will help to safeguard their lives. At the same time, new communication and production technologies, along with better and cheaper logistics, will facilitate decentralization of manufacturing to rural areas. This will reduce migration to urban areas by providing livelihoods to surplus farm labour.

In the next 10 years, these and other tech-related developments can truly transform India. The right policies, the appropriate ecosystem, and other essentials to realize this were mentioned in this column last month. Yet, there is concern about the negative impact: will the disadvantaged get left behind; will there be a generational digital divide which works against elders; will an overdose of tech make people lose touch with ground reality and live in a fantasy metaverse; will tech dehumanize us? These are issues for which we do need answers and solutions. The starting point must be deliberation and debate. ■

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

Putting the powerless first



TIME TO LISTEN

ARUN MAIRA

THE COVID-19 pandemic has put the global economy through a severe stress test. As accelerated stress tests do in medicine and engineering, revealing structural weaknesses in the systems being tested (complex human bodies, and complex machines like aircraft and motor vehicles), the pandemic has revealed dangerous weaknesses in designs of global supply chains, health systems and education systems, and in the designs of cities which could not provide the needs for sustainable incomes and healthy living for all their citizens. Millions of poor workers left Indian cities in which they were not cared for, to return to their villages from where they had come to these cities with hope for better lives. Public health systems failed to cope, even in rich countries. Foundational years of child education have been wasted around the world.

Never waste a crisis they say: crises are opportunities to make substantial reforms to put systems into better shape. The Indian economy was in crisis in 1991. The opportunity was seized for reforms and economic growth was accelerated. Reforms after the Asian financial crisis in 1997 were directed by the IMF and the World Bank. A wider global financial crisis followed in 2008 and G-7 countries stepped up to put global economic growth on track. Structural reforms after all these crises have resulted in larger gaps between wealth on top and the masses below.

After every crisis, the engines of financial growth were further improved while the rest of the aeroplane was neglected. Thus, economic structures became further imbalanced and in the pandemic they became badly disjointed. Oxfam estimates that the wealth of the 10 richest people in the world doubled during the pandemic, and two Indians climbed up the ranks of the world's richest people, while incomes of 99 percent of humanity fell. Millions of Indians fell below the poverty line, reversing whatever gains were made earlier.

The disastrous effects of global climate change have become more visible within wealthy countries too, with unseasonal temperatures, fires, and floods in the US, Australia, and Europe. The IPCC has warned that time is running out fast. Global leaders gathered in Glasgow but could not chart an acceptable plan. They were especially challenged by the need for justice demanded by poorer countries. They have already suffered the most and should not be expected to share equal moral responsibility for humanity's failures, to reduce the congestion of space for carbon in the atmosphere, which has been crowded out by a handful of rich countries with their pursuit of high technology, energy consuming,

economic growth. India is committed to achieving global goals of overall reduction to be achieved later this century. However, millions of people in India and other developing countries, already struggling, must survive during their difficult journeys to achieve the global goals.

Principles of equity and justice must be applied in all major economic, environmental, and social reforms from now on, to create more sustainable, more inclusive and more resilient systems that will withstand further shocks, without having to throw the poor out of the ship without lifeboats, which has happened with previous reforms. Albert Einstein



Millions of poor workers left Indian cities in which they were not cared for

said, "Trying harder to solve problems with the same ideas and tools that have caused them is madness". Flaws in the scientific industrial paradigm which has driven economic growth in the last century have been revealed. We cannot use the same scientific industrial ways of thinking, and the same forms of institutions, to get ourselves out of crises created by their overuse and misuse.

While the pandemic was raging, and the plight of the masses could not be ignored any longer, many leaders said that, after the pandemic passes, we must build a new, resilient, more inclusive, and more sustainable global system, on new foundations with new ideas. There was hope that global supply chains disrupted by the pandemic would be restored when the pandemic eased. They have been thrown into further turmoil by the sanctions imposed by the West in the Ukraine crisis. Institutions created post the Second World War to ensure global peace have failed. Flaws in their architecture — the Security Council, World Bank, IMF, and WTO — in which power to fix the rules of the game lies with the most powerful, who will look after themselves

first before the rest, have once again been revealed.

Paradigms are hard to change. Those who have led the creation of the prevalent paradigm with power vested in its design will resist fundamental changes. They fear their loss of power. At the international level, the US, with the largest defence forces in the world and control of the dollar, the global currency of trade, is reluctant to lose its power to control geo-politics and the global economy. Within the US, and other countries too, the rules of the game are influenced by big investors and large corporations. Rich countries control "intellectual property". Even 'socially' minded

governments are obliged to go along with these rules. Thus, the masses already left behind fall even further behind after any crisis-induced reforms, as they did after the last global financial crisis.

The time has come to step out of the rut of how things are usually done, and best practices of the present paradigm, to design new institutions and fundamentally new solutions that will create more equitable and resilient systems. The designs of these systems must be founded on the perspectives of the poorest and most powerless citizens within them, not just the ideas of experts, investors of capital, and policy makers on top.

This is an introduction to the challenges before us. In my pieces to follow, I will discuss designs of cities, education systems, and health systems to create more inclusive and sustainable societies. In them, we will listen to the voices of the presently powerless. In fact, I have urged Rita and Umesh Anand to change the tagline of my column for this purpose from "Let's Talk" to "Time to Listen". ■

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

LIVING

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Aarti and Abhinav Bainslay with their Nexon: In the first month of ownership they spent just ₹5,000 on charging their car and that included the trip to Mussoorie

My cousin's electric car And how he went to Mussoorie in it

SURMAYI KHATANA

WHEN Abhinav Bainslay found it was time to junk his old car, he and his wife, Aarti, went through days of indecision over what to buy. They wondered whether to just play safe and choose another petrol/diesel car or be bold and make the switch to an electric vehicle (EV).

After weeks of doing their homework, they decided to go the EV way and now Abhinav, who is 30 and my Mamaji's second son, can't stop talking about the Tata Nexon that they bought.

As family, I listen, and with interest, because we live in Gurugram on the Dwarka Expressway and are keen to beat rising fuel prices. But here is Abhinav's story of making the switch to clean mobility and not regretting it.

High on the list of Abhinav's EV anecdotes is the recent trip he and Aarti made to Mussoorie. It cost them just ₹500 in terms of the price of charging the Nexon. But, more important, with a strategy in place, the charging was done easily — just twice on the way up from Delhi.

Fast-charging stations can be found across cities

and states using the Tata Power EV app or with a quick Google search. There are 377 charging points in some 170 stations in Delhi currently, the number of which is expected to increase by June. Fast charging takes only 30 to 60 minutes for a full charge.

After charging the car at home for the trip to Mussoorie, Abhinav made a stop at a charging station in Muzaffarnagar to top up the battery while he and Aarti grabbed a quick bite.

Another recharge was done at a charging station near Mussoorie, which was enough to travel locally in the hills. An interesting statistic is that it took only five percent of the battery to cover the 33 kilometres between Mussoorie and Dehradun since the road is downhill.

They took along a 20-m cable to make it more convenient to use a portable charger. The cable helped them charge the car at a *dhaba* along the highway on the way back to Delhi.

The reality of Abhinav's life is of course far removed from chilling in Mussoorie. He does a daily commute of 70 to 80 km as he goes between Noida, where he lives, and Delhi, where he works.

He is an entrepreneur and so there is other moving around to be done as well apart from the home-to-office-and-back thing.

While with his combustion engine car he would spend somewhere between ₹20,000 and ₹25,000 on petrol in a month, with the EV he has spent only some ₹5,000 in his first month of ownership and that includes the trip to Mussoorie!

His daily travel distance of 70 to 80 km would require him to refuel his car often. Now, after charging his car at night every day, he comes home with 50 percent of the battery intact.

A regular charger with a power plug comes with the Nexon as it does with other EVs. With this it takes seven to eight hours to recharge the car and the cost of the electricity would be about ₹240.

A home charging point is installed for free at your residence by Tata Motors when you buy a Nexon. The charger can be connected in both independent houses and apartment buildings. Abhinav's is directly connected to his flat's electricity meter.

The point comes with an authorization system to ensure that no one else uses your home charging

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point in your parking space. Once the battery is fully recharged, the charger goes off automatically.

The Tata Motors ZConnect app allows for remote commands, security, trip analytics, speed limits, and battery levels. It also helps you get a general diagnosis of the car.

A Tata Power EV app shows you the nearest charging stations and also allows you to pay for the charging online as well as check your battery level.

Some vendors also sell extensions and heavy-duty DC chargers which come in three variations of 15, 30 and 50 KW. While a recharge takes place quicker with these, they are expensive and prices range from ₹3.5 lakh to ₹5 lakh.

Abhinav is thrilled that there is no clatter in the car and one feels little to no vibrations.

"It makes for a very fatigue-free drive. It wasn't till I sat in my EV that I realized the amount of noise we put up with when we travel by a petrol or diesel car," says Abhinav.

The car functions on a motor instead of the internal combustion engine of petrol and diesel cars. An EV's motor is inherently more silent and



Tata Power's EV app shows you the nearest charging stations

In Delhi-NCR traffic the car can easily cover 230 km to 240 km on a full charge, which means each kilometre costs a little over a rupee.

requires less maintenance costs. The motor is powered by a lithium-ion battery which has a warranty for 160,000 km or eight years, whichever comes first.

The first three services are free. But even afterwards Abhinav anticipates that he will make big savings on servicing. An EV requires almost no maintenance in comparison to an internal combustion engine for which the oil, coolant and air filters have to be changed.

The car has a good suspension and the on-road experience is on par with, if not better than petrol and diesel cars. The smooth drive makes one feel like you are in an expensive vehicle.

"The drive feels much closer to that of a luxury car," says Abhinav.

In Delhi-NCR traffic the car can easily cover 230 km to 240 km on a full charge, which means each kilometre costs a little over a rupee.

"I have come to enjoy Delhi's slow-moving traffic and even traffic jams," says Abhinav, who admits to chucking to himself whenever he crosses a petrol station now.

We spoke to reputed automotive journalist Murad Ali Baig about what he thought of Abhinav's experience.

"EV's have a huge advantage over IC vehicles as their electric motors deliver full power at all times. A typical 100 hp IC engine may only deliver some 20 hp at 1,000 rpm, 40 hp at 2,000 rpm and full power at high engine speeds unlike an EV that will always deliver full power," says Baig.



A home charging point is installed for free. Abhinav's is connected to the electricity meter of his flat



A portable charger is handy to have

electricity is also usually cheaper than fossil fuels. Thus, the users of EVs not only benefit from lower energy costs but enjoy a 'feel good' emotion that they are doing something positive for our threatened environment," Baig says.

Technologies take time to find popular acceptance and reach economies of scale. The EV has already come a long way globally with electric two-wheelers taking over streets, especially in China. So, change is round the corner.

All leading car manufacturers are investing in electric. Many models exist globally and though Tata Motors has been an early mover there are others as well and the market is poised to grow.

Baig points out that the imported lithium-ion battery packs are currently very expensive, taking up the cost of all EVs, but their price is slowly coming down.

The battery packs also have the disadvantage of being very heavy, making a typical electric car like the Tata Nexon heavier than the 1,200-kg petrol model. Stronger suspension and braking systems are therefore required, says Baig.

The EV's range of 200 km to 400 km is commonly seen as a disadvantage, but early buyers could take a lesson or two from Abhinav who has found easy ways around this problem. There are also charging stations coming up all over cities and highways too. Battery swapping is already possible for trucks and two-wheelers and there is no reason to believe that cars will be far behind. ■



Mahishasur Marddini's characters walk into and out of the stage, play their parts and speak their lines before disappearing into the 'wings'

Film with the feel of theatre

A single-night bundle of tales on misogyny

SAIBAL CHATTERJEE

NOTHING that a feature-length fiction film postulates on the hurdles that women face in India can be deemed an eye-opener. The reality is infinitely more skewed than what a big-screen dramatization of it can ever capture.

A new Bengali film, Ranjan Ghosh's *Mahishasur Marddini* (A Night to Remember), pieces together stories of gender discrimination and sexual violence to attempt the onerous task of revealing the sheer gravity of the situation on the ground. It succeeds to a great extent.

Mahishasur Marddini has an unusual feel and texture. It combines the grammar of cinema, the methods of proscenium theatre and the interpretative tools of socio-political observation to throw light on what ails a society that worships the Mother Goddess but denies women equality and dignity.

The film's title, an appellation for Goddess Durga, literally translates as slayer of Mahishasura, a demon king of Hindu mythology. It draws from real incidents and talking points to craft a layered portrait rendered in the manner of a multi-act theatre production. The characters walk into and out of the stage, play their parts and speak their lines before disappearing into the 'wings' and, in the end, contribute to the overall statement that the 'play' seeks to make.

The film features three Bengali cinema stars — Rituparna Sengupta, Saswata Chatterjee and Parambrata Chattopadhyay — alongside promising

newcomers and competent supporting actors.

Mahishasur Marddini, which unpacks a single-night, single-location bundle of tales, plays out in an old Bengal mansion where last-minute preparations are underway for Durga Puja. The idol of the goddess, made by a Muslim artisan, stands witness to the goings-on on the screen, as it awaits ritual invocation for the five-day annual religious festival that recently earned an 'intangible cultural heritage' tag from UNESCO.

On the eve of the first day of the festivities, the landlady (Rituparna Sengupta, in her third collaboration with Ghosh) and four young tenants, all final-year students, spend the night receiving a stream of visitors — an Army major (Shaheb Bhattacharjee) and his wife (Poulomi Das), an elderly member of an NGO that performs the last rites of unclaimed bodies (Pawan Kanodia), a cynical ruling party politician (Saswata Chatterjee) and an election strategist (Parambrata Chattopadhyay).

They find a female infant abandoned in a garbage bin behind the house. Over the next few hours, they have to collectively confront and process several more unpleasant turns of events that expose tensions simmering under the surface.

None of the characters has a name. Their



Ranjan Ghosh

identities stem from the work they do and the ideas they propound, from the philosophical to the practical, from the political to the polemical. Each male character represents a facet of masculinity that explains why we are the kind of people we are, besides providing the filmmaker a prism through which he can view the ingrained prejudices and inherent ills that beset us as a people.

Parts of the film may seem a tad facile given the fact that the truths being articulated are far

too familiar to bear repetition but, seen as the sum of its parts, *Mahishasur Marddini* delivers a strong, incisive and significant commentary not only on the status of women at home and in the world, but also on the state of contemporary India as a whole.

On one level, the film alludes to the mythological epics — the abduction of Sita, the humiliation of Draupadi, the cutting off of Surpanakha's nose — to underline a tradition of misogyny. On another, the plot incorporates little acts of omission and commission to emphasize the class divides that define our society and nation in the present day.

In his director's note, writer-director Ghosh, who a decade and a bit ago assisted Aparna Sen during the making of *Iti Mrinalini* (2011) besides co-writing

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the film, says: “Mahishasur Marddini avoids a mechanical plot. The dramatic moments here do not emerge from the cause-and-effect structure of usual plot-driven stories.”

“This film,” he says, “is my humble tribute to the rich Indian theatre tradition and the Indian aesthetic of cinema. I have explored and experimented with the formal elements of both. The entries and exits of the characters, their performances, dialogues and activities, the staging and blocking, the use of props, the lighting and shot-taking are all arranged to further the combination of two forms of story-telling.”

Ghosh’s debut film, *Hrid Majharey* (2014), reimagined a Shakespearean play in a modern context to mark the Bard’s 450th birth anniversary. He has since made two other films — *Rong Beronger Korhi* (Colours of Money, 2018), an anthology of four short stories, and *Aaha Re* (2019), an inter-faith love story involving a professional chef from Dhaka and a middle-class Kolkata woman who runs a home-cooked food delivery service.

Mahishasur Marddini, the director’s fourth film, was shot after the second wave of the COVID-19 pandemic and the post-production was wrapped up around the time that the Omicron variant of the virus surged across India.

The ‘present’ scenario in the film — it spans a few hours stretching from evening to dawn, with a dark, diseased, disquieting night in between — unfolds in the courtyard of the vast mansion. The past — seen from multiple points of view — is staged in spaces inside the same edifice. The flashbacks serve the purpose of revealing the inner demons that haunt the protagonists, be they female or male, none of whom is blameless.

Mahishasur Marddini, incidentally, premiered on International Women’s Day at the 13th Bengaluru International Film Festival (March 3-10, 2022). The film is peopled by a spectrum of women — on one end is an Indian Air Force test pilot readying for a space mission, on the other is a destitute girl who has been gangraped and burnt alive near a graveyard, sparking communal rioting in the area.

The film is, however, not only about women grappling with gender discrimination and social obstacles. It probes the thinking of violent, myopic, self-seeking men who stand in their way or seek to engage with them in ways that



Ranjan Ghosh directing: ‘This film is my humble tribute to the rich Indian theatre tradition and the aesthetic of cinema’

betray brazen toxicity.

Says Ghosh: “The film is about guilt-ridden memories, fake appearances and the eventual crumbling of these appearances.” Indeed, *Mahishasur Marddini* does not merely present a one-dimensional narrative about wronged women — yes, a few of the women we see or hear of on the screen are grievously wronged — but also delves into lapses of judgement that seemingly sensitive but privileged individuals make when it comes to dealing with people lower in the pecking order.

“Both feminist and political, *Mahishasur Marddini* is my attempt to create a bleak and haunting world that evokes our shame and leaves us bruised,” says Ghosh. The synopsis calls the film “a letter of apology” to women for the wrongs they have endured through the ages, and continue to do so to this day.

That creative choice gives the writer-director the scope to articulate his concerns in a manner that is both comprehensive and pointed, especially when the film is at its best. *Mahishasur Marddini* is at its most trenchant when it calls out, if only in passing, majoritarian narratives and the culture of hate and division that gnaws at the vitals of the nation.

One of the men asserts that the only true borders

lie between day and night, life and death, hope and despair and that man-made borders count for little. Unfortunately, as it transpires not long after this utterance, these ‘insignificant’ borders do the most serious damage to humanity.

The politician — he is the minority face of the ruling party — gets the rough end of the stick from both the woman who is days away from leaving for Russia to train as a cosmonaut and her pugnacious young paying guests. Many a wrongdoing is laid at his door, but this man isn’t projected as the fount of all problems.

What is more, he gets his own back occasionally — he takes jabs at popular notions that have gained currency owing to their unquestioning perpetuation. He asserts how the privileged class that has traditionally wielded power in this land conveniently labels dissidents as outlaws and goes after them. Sometimes it is an intransigent tribal king (isn’t Mahishasura one?) and sometimes a student leader from a summarily othered community, he says.

Mahishasur Marddini is an important film because it stares at the rot in the soul of India in the face while crafting a hard-hitting and urgent cautionary tale about a night without end. ■

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



*Aao manain
Mawana ke saath*

*Har
pal
Tyohaar*



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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.



Flavours of honey

Gaurav Kushwaha, a finance consultant from Noida, is creating a buzz in the world of honey. He has set up Niyamaya, an enterprise that collaborates with indigenous tribes and beekeepers to sell their organic honey. He says he first tasted honey collected by tribal communities at a flea market in Odisha and was stumped by its deep flavours.

Niyamaya offers a variety of unifloral and multifloral honeys. There is an *ajwain* honey and an auburn forest honey imbued with the nectar of medicinal flowers. You can also buy eucalyptus honey from Himachal Pradesh, and sheesham honey from the forests of western India. Naturally, Niyamaya's honey is organic and free from the detrimental effects of processing.

Contact: Gaurav Kushwaha +91-8130531155 | Email: care@niyamaya.com
Website: <https://niyamaya.com/>



Play the zenzula

So you want to learn to play music but can't find the right instrument? Perhaps you'd like something uncomplicated? Try the zenzula. It might just be the right fit. The instrument has nine tines and a teakwood soundboard that produces deep, lingering tones. It even fits into the palm of your hand. The zenzula is a modernized version of the African instrument, kalimba. Lalith Choyal sells this and other such vibrantly colourful hand-carved instruments. You can also find a tonga, a teakwood KaZula with 15 tines, and the original kalimba. Each of them emits a deep, resonating sound. You can also order a customized instrument on their website. Rock on.

Contact: Lalith Choyal +918828354767 | Email: zenzula@zenzula.com
Website: <https://zenzula.com/home>



Wooden games, trinkets

Shikha Shah makes and sells colourful wooden games, trinkets and even repurposed car tyres. Shah began Scrapshala in 2016, learning from her mother's example of waste management in an Indian household. They started by selling painted beer bottles to local cafes and now sell upcycled and eco-friendly products, handcrafted by local artisans in and around Varanasi. Scrapshala offers wooden games, utensils, home decor and stationery. They also sell housekeeping products and brushes made from coconut fibre. Scrapshala has eco-friendly alternatives to daily lifestyle products like razors, paper pencils, and dish washing scrubs. In home decor one can buy repurposed glass bottles, cassettes as pen stands, and wooden mats.

Contact: Shikha Shah 7411079110 | Email: scrapshala@gmail.com
Website: <https://scrapshala.com>



Sweet and healthy

Maakrit makes delectable jams, chutneys and craft chocolates. All their products are made with natural ingredients. No refined sugar, preservatives or artificial colouring and flavours are added. For sweetness in the chocolates, Priya Jain, founder of Maakrit, uses jaggery and fruits. On her catalogue you will find some unusual offerings like beetroot and *amla* jam, and raisins chutney. Maakrit's chocolate called Date with Cacao, is made with rose, pomegranate and cacao. What's more, their chocolate gift packs are packed in braided palm leaf boxes.

Contact: Priya Jain +91 9210198013
Website: <https://naturesoulshop.com/product-category/brand/maakrit/>

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

HELP OUT WITH RESCUE, JUVENILE JUSTICE

PRAYAS Prayas Juvenile Aid Centre Society caters to the needs of children and youth by helping marginalized, vulnerable, trafficked, runaway and missing children. The non-profit runs children's homes and homeless shelters for distressed children. Prayas has 164 centres and outreach programmes in Delhi, Bihar, Assam, Arunachal Pradesh, Andaman & Nicobar Islands, Jharkhand and Kashmir.

Their project, Prayas Juvenile Justice, provides institutional care and protection to children as well as rescue and rehabilitation of victims of abuse, basic health services, and alternative education.

They also run a Crisis Intervention Centre and helplines for women and children at risk. Prayas provides vocational training as part of their economic empowerment programme. You can donate or intern for their projects.

<https://prayaschildren.org> | prayas@prayas-children.org | +91-11-29955505, 29956244

TAKE FOOD KITS TO THE HUNGRY IN DELHI

CHHOTI KHUSHIYAN (CCK) Founded in 2016, Chhoti Khushiyan (CCK) works with people living in poverty. They organize frequent distribution drives of clothes, food, rations, reading material and stationery. Their *Aao Milkar Bhookh Mitaayein* project involves distribution of ration kits to rickshaw-pullers, people living in slums and the vulnerable in and around Delhi.

Items in the kit are listed on their website. They encourage school enrolment and organize activities for children in slums and provide them books.

Chhoti Khushiyan also volunteers with old age homes. It helped an old age home in Delhi get coolers and fans. You can donate to CCK to help their efforts or volunteer with them.

<https://chhotichhotikhushiyan.com>
support@chhotichhotikhushiyan.com
+91 9557933587

GREEN WORK TO SAVE THE HILLS

SHEG Society for Himalayan Environment & Geology (SHEG), a non-profit based in Berinag in Pithoragarh district of Uttarakhand, works on protection of the Himalayan environment and geology along with community development, sustainability, women's empowerment, livelihood, healthcare and emergency response to natural calamities. They organize skill building and training programmes for women on spice cultivation, computer training and sewing.

They also set up medical camps on sanitation, general health, family planning, and create awareness amongst children and parents about the harmful effects of drinking and smoking.

They also organize training sessions on fruit and tea plantation and vermicomposting. As part of their environmental work, they offer workshops on waste management and geo-hazards.

SHEG works on geo-technical assessments of sensitive areas affected by landslides and floods. Swastha Pahad is their COVID relief initiative. You can donate or volunteer with them.

<http://shenggo.com/>
ratnakarph@gmail.com
05964-244103, 9411335579

BUILD THE CAPACITY OF FARM COMMUNITIES

ASA Founded in 1996, Action for Social Advancement (ASA) was set up by a group of development professionals working on natural resource development with tribal communities in central India. Their mandate includes implementing farm-based livelihoods for small and marginal farmers, improving land and water resources, promotion of sustainable agriculture and creation of market access for farmers.

Community-based and farmer-producer organizations are helped to build their capacity to access credit and improve their livelihoods. ASA is currently working on agricultural biodiversity conservation with farmer communities in Madhya Pradesh. You can donate or volunteer and intern with their programmes in Odisha, Jharkhand, Bihar, Maharashtra, Chhattisgarh, Madhya Pradesh, Gujarat and Uttar Pradesh.

www.asaindia.org | asa@asahopal.org
+909109988781, 09109988784

WELFARE EFFORTS OF VARIOUS KINDS

SAMARPAN FOUNDATION Samarpan Foundation, a charitable non-profit entity, provides support and assistance of any kind wherever there is a humanitarian, ecological, environmental or animal welfare need. Samarpan Foundation runs mobile medical clinics in the Sundarbans for 250 patients of all ages with various medical conditions. It provides emergency medical relief and specialized medical care, including an eye clinic.

The foundation runs a women's centre in Guwahati which helps migrant families from Bihar, Bengal and Manipur. They also have two children's homes in Delhi.

You can donate to specific projects run by Samarpan or donate to the foundation. You can also volunteer for their projects in Delhi, Bengaluru, Guwahati, Mumbai, Goa and the Sundarbans.

www.samarpanfoundation.org
volunteer@samarpanfoundation.org
donate@samarpanfoundation.org

JOIN A CAMPAIGN TO END CHILD ABUSE

HAQ HAQ works for the recognition, promotion and protection of the rights of children. The non-profit organizes campaigns against child trafficking, child labour, violence and abuse to actively engage in public education and advocacy on children's rights. HAQ also seeks to serve as a resource and support base for individuals and groups dealing with children. They provide training and capacity building for law enforcement agencies and other institutions that come into contact with children on a regular basis. HAQ supports children in conflict with the law by providing legal aid and counselling to victims of child abuse. HAQ also undertakes research to mainstream children's concerns into developmental planning and action. They release a Child Rights Index and special reports on child soldiers and children in mining in India. Donate to HAQ to help their efforts. You can also volunteer or intern with them.

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



Snap ginger

Alpinia calcarata (Haw.) Roscoe is a perennial shrub known by its trade name, lesser galangal or snap ginger. The shrub's rhizomes and stalks are aromatic. Shoots are very long, shiny, and have inflorescence of 10 to 15 cm long lax spikes which droop if large. Flowers are large, leathery, white with red blotches at the base and beautiful streaks throughout. The blooms

are long-lasting and beautiful hence the plant is used as an ornamental flower as well as a cut flower. With long, striking leaves and lots of long-lasting, red flowers, this ginger is one of the best accents in a shady landscape. Snap ginger is useful as a tall informal hedge or as a screen or a backdrop. It can also be used as a border hedge. It is quite popular for its medicinal uses against cough, asthma and fever.



Hop-headed barleria

Hop-headed barleria is a much-branched under-shrub which reaches up to 1.5 m in height. Its stems are armed with spines and inflorescence consists of axillary and terminal spicate clusters, many-flowered, up to 10 cm long. Flowers are bright yellow and borne on spine-tipped, leaf-like bracts. It is found to grow occasionally along hedges and neglected areas near habitations, open forests and rocky habitats

throughout India. This spiny shrub is hardy, drought-resistant and capable of tolerating full sunlight. It thrives in almost all types of soil.

The plant has bright yellow flowers which emerge sporadically from cone-like inflorescences, surrounded by green leafy bracts. It can be planted in groups in a flower zone or to form borders or as clumps. *Hop-headed barleria* is a lovely addition to the collection of xerophytes. Planting it intermittently or in a continuous row in a well-maintained lawn will enhance the surrounding landscape. Since it is armed with spines, it can protect itself from grazing animals. Planting it along fences and edges can protect the entire garden. Traditionally, it is used against herpes and poisonous bites.



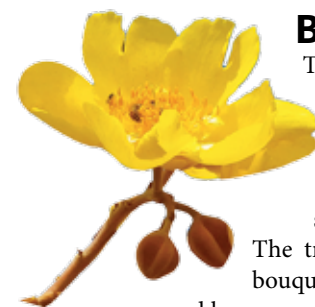
Safed Musli

Safed Musli is a popular medicinal plant endemic to the wet forests of peninsular India. It is scientifically known as *Chlorophytum borivillianum Santapau & R.R. Fem.* As the genus name *Chlorophytum* (chloro means green and phytum means plant) indicates, it is an evergreen, perennial plant.

Safed Musli reaches up to two feet in height and has a tuft-like appearance. Its roots are tuberous. It has compact foliage with seasonal beautiful, dense, star-shaped white flowers. This plant can primarily be used as a ground cover due to its short-stature, clump-forming habit and dense, shining foliage. Its drooping leaves make it perfect for hanging pots.

Safed Musli is a medicinal plant suitable for an indoor environ with low-light conditions. It also looks stunning if planted in a mass on well-maintained lawns. As a border plant, this species can be used to define the shape of thematic layouts. Its dense rooting system and covering foliage can be employed to prevent soil erosion. Its arching inflorescence starts rooting when it touches the ground and new leafy plantlets are produced. This is a unique feature of Safed Musli. Hence, it is also called a 'walking plant'. The specific epithet, *chlorophytum borivillianum* indicates its native range — Borivali is a suburb of Mumbai. The roots are used as an aphrodisiac. Regular intake of its root powder in milk is

reportedly useful against impotency and premature ejaculation. Under IUCN, this species has been tagged as 'critically endangered' due to its high-volume trade and reduction in its natural population.



Buttercup tree

The buttercup tree, also known as *Cochlospermum religiosum* (L.) Alston, is a medium-size deciduous tree. The crown is usually asymmetrical with a few trunks or branches dominating it. The leaves are broad, palm-shaped and appear at the ends of the branches.

The tree blooms when leafless and looks like a big bouquet of flowers. Flowers are large, up to 10 cm across, and have an appealing charm due to their bright colour, size and magnitude. The tree's brilliant display is composed of a multitude of lotus-like golden-yellow blooms borne in terminal flower clusters. It is a fast-growing ornamental tree for tropical climates and a perfect backyard specimen. The tree is widespread in dry forests, rocky hill-tops and also grows close to cliffs of savannahs. The specific epithet, *religiosum*, derives from the fact that its flowers are used as offerings in Hindu temples.



Kurinji plant

Stenosiphonium cordifolium (Vahl) Alston is a type of kurinji flower endemic to peninsular India and Sri Lanka. The plant reaches two metres in height. Its leaves are almost lance-shaped, and shining white underneath. Its upright growth makes it a salient border plant.

Its flowers are strikingly bluish-white, tubular, arising as dense clusters on the axils of leaves. This kurinji's bushy habit and profuse flowering makes it a wonderful focal point for landscapes and an eye-catching addition to borders and clumps. It prefers full sun to fairly high temperatures and is a fast-growing native shrub which does not require even regular watering. It is a beautiful shrub that enlivens the garden with its lovely blooms. The shrub's numerous stems and flowering twigs make it an ornamental addition in native gardening. It can be planted as a single specimen, a regular clump or as a running hedge. To create privacy or a good screen, this tall shrub can be planted compactly.



Velvety beauty berry

Velvety beauty berry is a lovely shrub or small tree which reaches a height of eight metres. It is endemic to peninsular India and Sri Lanka. Velvety beauty berry's biological name is *Callicarpa tomentosa* (L.) Murr. Its branchlets, leaves and inflorescence are very soft to the touch.

The shrub's terminal leaf-buds are used as wicks for lighting lamps and its dense hairy leaves are lighted by applying a little oil on them.

It is believed that the Pandavas used these leaves as fire torches during their exile hence the tree is also popularly known as '*Pandavara Batti*'. Velvety beauty berry is best suited to urban lanes and gardens. It can grow well within its boundaries. Its flowers are bright pinkish-white with numerous yellow stamens making it a pictorial patch in any garden. Its mild look can grace any landscape. With many branches and a slightly broad crown, this tree is ideal for a patio. Although its native range is considered the Western Ghats, it grows well in an urban environment too. Velvety beauty berry is used to treat liver disorders, fever and skin diseases. ■



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