

POST-POLL SPECIAL ISSUE

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Civil Society

What governments can do

A WISHLIST AFTER THE VERDICT



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The vote and after

WHAT do the recent election results tell us? In our view people may care about India's global aspirations, but not without their basic needs addressed. Of what use is economic growth that can't bring people up socially and economically, or at least give them the hope that they are benefitting from a rising tide.

The results also tell us that people worry about too much power getting concentrated in one party or person. It is a lesson for politicians and parties in general. As large as India is, it needs multiple efforts and centres of power. Inner-party democracy is the correct place to begin. Letting go is the mantra of success. Aggrandizement doesn't work. To be out there, one among many, empowering others and yet have a following is the challenge of leadership in modern India.

In this magazine we spend almost no time on or with politicians. It is not our job to advise them. But there is a strong case for politicians being more grounded and devoting time in legislatures and outside to matters of development.

To this end we have devoted this post-election special issue to spelling out in simple and achievable terms what politicians should take up and governments could do in the interests of the country.

We have brought in some of the most interesting people we know, who are also acknowledged in their spheres, to suggest just the five things which if implemented could make a difference.

It is not and couldn't possibly be an exhaustive exercise. But from education to healthcare and road safety these are things we should be thinking about and implementing quickly in a bipartisan spirit. Aspirations to make India a global power must surely begin with the standards we maintain for ourselves in daily life. We should ask ourselves what we really have to show as of now.

The role voluntary organizations play in development is not always appreciated. They represent citizen efforts that succeed where governments cannot. For instance, the Association for Democratic Reforms (ADR) has played an important role in raising concerns associated with elections and politics. Cleaning up of public life and ensuring accountability has to be a continuous process. The people at ADR have pegged away with determination and lack of bias.

Another example of the voluntary sector's contribution can be seen in the work done by Doctors For You (DFY). In the best spirit of the medical profession, these are physicians who have made themselves available during calamities. They were first in the Civil Society Hall of Fame a decade or so ago. In an interview in this issue, Rajat Jain, the DFY president, traces some of the new developments in their journey.

Rajat Jain



PEOPLE'S AGENDA

With the heat and dust of the elections over, it is time to get down to those doable things that can make the lives of ordinary folks so much better. Healthcare, housing, cities, innovation, rights and a lot more. Read what some of the finest minds in different spheres have to say.

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LETTERS



Bamboo ATM

Kerala farms somehow sprout the most interesting tales! Your story, 'A bamboo bonanza', reminded me of how the coconut harvesters made a tidy living too. More youngsters should begin valuing farming and agriculture now.

Jayant Mehta

It was fascinating to find out how easy it is to grow and sell bamboo. The demand was known to me but such insider details were truly a find. I learnt a lot.

Naintara Joshi

This current array of uses for lathi bamboo are more appealing than its original use and purpose. Kudos to farmers for recognizing bamboo's worth and realizing its value in such an intelligent and experienced manner.

Latika Kumble

Urban growth

The "Rethinking Cities" webinar series I mention in my interview, 'Give cities those small homes', under which 110 webinars have been completed, is to create a "subject constituency" and work towards building a societal partnership that can address India's urban challenges. It needs knowledge, experience and resources of all sections of society. It also needs everyone to behave responsibly in conserving nature's resources and put to creative use technological innovations to make life fully functional.

It's an amalgamation of micro and macro, individual and community, nature and science, economics and society, the physical and spiritual. Citizens need both goods and services. They also need peace and harmony. The slogan that sets the goal is to be economically productive, socially just, culturally vibrant, politically participatory, environmentally sustainable,

technologically adaptive and people-centric. There is no overall sustainability without urban sustainability. The challenge is much more complex with cities having chosen questionable paths to grow and develop.

Kirtee Shah

A great initiative which needs a lot of support. Two points I'd like to make: MGNREGA has its flaws. We need to ensure that these do not creep into the urban equivalent of MGNREGA. We do not need a battery of idle people.

Secondly, along with water, we need to look at sanitation. While obtaining an environmental clearance no one is looking at whether the sewage treatment plant of one housing complex is at the desired distance from the neighbour's drinking water supply. There are no guidelines on this and no one is taking a comprehensive look.

Neelima Jerath

Slums appear where they do because of their proximity to work opportunities. A lot of resettlement programmes dump people at the far edge of the city or town. Also, small houses seem a good idea because multi-storeyed apartments have not worked out, even in Delhi. Are there model cities in India which have done praiseworthy construction in urban areas?

Ananda

Population numbers

Your interview with Poonam Muttreja, 'Muslims can't

outnumber Hindus even in 100 years', was an eye-opener. How can the Economic Advisory Council (EAC) allow such a report to be published? If the Population Foundation of India had not released a clarification, almost everyone with less knowledge of the reality would assume the report to be true. This is just gross misuse of data, and misleading the public in such a large 'democracy' is ridiculous, really.

Rohini Biswas

Election downsides

I wish Col. Gill's comments in his article, 'The voter doesn't have a choice', get implemented. But none of these will. Because the people who are expected to make such changes will never budge. It is not in their interest.

Candidates who get elected forget forthwith what they had said to lure voters during their election campaigns. Elected representatives know that they don't have to care for their constituents until the next election looms. They work on the maxim that the public has short memory.

I fully endorse Col. Gill's recommendation that there should be stringent laws against defections, but why can't the public punish the defectors? For that matter, why shouldn't there be a minimum qualification for the candidates? Why are convicts not barred from contesting? Why isn't there a check on the elected representatives' source of income?

Dr Balwinder Singh

A thought-provoking write-up. India's so-called participatory democracy is a farce for the voter. Voters are trapped in the ploys of politicians.

Brij Bhushan Goyal

We, the people of India, should accept the fact that we are not bothered about changing anything. We criticize everything instead of understanding where the problem really lies and solving it. We have one of the best Constitutions in the world. But we do not have the best citizens. We are now knowingly or unknowingly a part of Robin Hood politics at its worst — where each political party tries to woo the majority population with freebies procured from the pockets of taxpayers.

Rajesh Rai Dhanda

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RAJAT JAIN ON DEALING WITH CALAMITIES

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Rajat Jain: 'Strengthening government facilities has a much larger impact than creating a parallel system'

‘Our way of looking at disasters has changed in 17 years’

Civil Society News
New Delhi

FROM floods to earthquakes and the Covid-19 pandemic, Doctors For You has played a key role in providing medical services and relief. Founded by Dr Ravikant Singh in 2007 in Mumbai when he was a student, the organization has grown across India in the past 17 years.

It has built systems for intervening in crises and attracts talented doctors who want to give their time to serve meaningfully and improve public healthcare. During the pandemic Doctors For You (DFY) used all its experience to create Covid-19 facilities almost overnight in different parts of the country, helping various state governments.

Civil Society spoke to Dr Rajat Jain, the present president of Doctors For You, on how the organization has grown and adapted itself to meet current needs.

Q: Doctors For You was started to deal with calamities. Is this still your core mission?

It remains an important area we are working on. After so many years, we have finally been able to set up our Disaster Secretariats. Previously we were only responding to disasters which were of national importance. But now we are responding to disasters which are local in nature and of importance to a particular state. Dealing with calamities is definitely a

part of our core mission.

Q: What do you mean by local calamities?

It would typically be limited to a state. The state might have run out of resources to deal with it. An example would be a flood in Kashmir, which we know has been going on for 15 days but is not in the national news. In dealing with a disaster, a state may go beyond its resources. The external support it needs may be small but crucial.

Usually, you get to know about a disaster when it becomes news and comes to the attention of the nation. But now that Doctors For You has Disaster Secretariats we are monitoring developments. We get to know of a local calamity. We have a secretariat in Delhi, we have a secretariat in Guwahati, we have a secretariat in Bihar. We have one in Mumbai and in Bengaluru too.

Q: What is a Disaster Secretariat? How does it function?

A Disaster Secretariat identifies calamities and monitors situations round the clock. It monitors the work teams are doing on the ground. It ties up with local organizations. The secretariat makes it possible to respond in small but important ways. We responded to a flash flood in a village in Kashmir and got people evacuated over two days. Then we looked at what else we could do for them in terms of hygiene and other kinds of follow-up. Dealing with the aftermath of a disaster is important.

Q: What major disasters have you addressed in the recent past?

Climate change is providing challenges because of extreme weather conditions. There have been cold waves and heat waves. These have become disasters in themselves.

Last year, in the winter, we responded to an extreme cold wave in a major part of north India. Right now, in May, we prepared for a heat wave. There is a lot of construction going on. Construction workers get badly affected in very hot conditions. Are they able to maintain their hydration? We undertake advocacy and awareness activities.

Our way of looking at disasters has changed in the past 17 years. Previously, for us, a disaster meant a flood, an earthquake. It would be in the news and we responded to the medical management of that disaster. But now we are looking at an overall contribution that we can make.

Q: You mentioned heat disasters. The effects of global warming are widespread. Are you looking at it in any specific way, involving specific communities?

It is the vulnerable sections of society that are affected the most. Labour is vulnerable, for instance. The vulnerable have always been our focus and remain so as we address global warming's impacts.

Q: Could you explain the idea of a Disaster Secretariat? Why don't municipalities and state governments have Disaster Secretariats? Is yours a model that needs to be adopted?

As a doctor, the one thing I understand is that early intervention is the key. How can you diagnose anything early? It's as simple as that. The sooner you identify and diagnose the problem, the better you can treat it.

Previously we would hear of the news and then swing into action. Now we are working one step ahead and a lot of the time we are the people who give news of the disaster. It means our response is much faster. In the first 10 years of Doctors For You, our average response time was two to three days. Now, our average response time is less than 24 hours.

That brings us to the question of how the Disaster Secretariat functions. There is a team. They look at newspapers. They go out into the field. They talk to other NGOs. Doctors For You currently has a presence across states from north to south and east to west. We have teams on the ground who connect with local people.

Previously my team was sitting in Mumbai or Delhi. And we would hear news of a flood somewhere. It would take time to get there. But now what we would do in days we achieve in hours. It is also much easier to make a primary assessment as to whether external intervention is needed or not.

Q: How are the secretariats staffed? What kind of preparedness do you have?

We have a warehouse in Bihar with everything needed for a disaster. From portable tents to a portable hospital, we can pull it all together. In case of a flood, we have our own boats which can be sent. It is a large warehouse and it is in Bihar because we have space that belongs to us.

Thanks to our partners, we have the resources to employ people for dedicated tasks. Earlier, there was a lot of multitasking. The pandemic has led to the realization that early intervention matters. Our partners now see this.

Q: Improving the functioning of government health facilities was an important objective of Doctors For You.

It remains a major objective for us and a major dream for me personally. I am a radiologist, but Ravikant (the founder of DFY), who is a public health person, helped me realize that it is not possible to replace the government in healthcare. Strengthening government facilities has a much larger impact than creating a parallel ecosystem, no matter how much money you might pump into it.

If I utilize my resources to strengthen the public healthcare system, I will be creating a much, much bigger impact. There is an impression that

government doctors don't want to work. The fact is that they lack the infrastructure and systems that would allow them to perform to their true potential.

We have found that plugging small gaps helps the system. There could be 10 things required for a surgery, but if one of them is missing the surgery can't take place. Working with the government system and strengthening it is an important part of what we do.

Q: What does it take to work with the government?

It is difficult to give a clear answer to that because most of the time we are working with individuals. There are those who have vested interests and there are those who want to work for the people.

Getting the first permission in a hospital is always difficult. We only work with permission. There is a lack of trust and resistance. If the system is not working, obviously there must be a reason. It is a challenge.

We always try to include good bureaucrats who want the system to work better. So, most of the time the intervention is at the level of the bureaucracy. There are politicians. But it is the bureaucracy that gets things done.

Q: What did the Covid-19 experience teach you? You set up so many facilities at lightning speed and there was high praise.

I have grown as a human being working during the Covid-19 pandemic. The way I was working before and after is completely different. In the medical field we react to situations. The pandemic underlined the need to prepare. But the good part also was that, faced with a crisis in our

‘Previously we would hear the news and swing into action. Now we are working one step ahead and a lot of the time we are the people who give news of the disaster.’

country, people went out of their comfort zone and tried to support one another. That's a very, very unique aspect of our country. We tend to think people are self-centred. No, they are not. They are just busy with their own lives. Given a challenge, they come forward.

Q: During the pandemic, Doctors For You was creating facilities in record time. How did you do that?

We already had 15 years of experience in setting up facilities quickly during disasters. Whether it's a small clinic or a big clinic, the broad model remains. We employed that experience. We had our checklists. We also knew how to put trained manpower in place.

The biggest challenge for the government was to get manpower to run its facilities. Doctors and paramedical staff were worried about getting infected. Because of my background of working with doctors on a professional front, it was easy for me to reach out to motivated people who wanted to work. But they still needed to be trained. I took the challenge upon myself because it is best to set an example. You have to do it yourself first and show people you are doing it. I overcame my own hesitation and began working in Covid-19 hospitals. I sat with people who were managing Covid-19 and learnt the protocols from them.

I was able to train young doctors who joined us and, seeing me work, they felt motivated. We said, 'Give three months of your life to the country.' I am very thankful that people came forward. We moved trained people around to train others. So, if 10 people went from Delhi to Bengaluru where another 20 were trained, we had 30 people in Bengaluru.

Post the pandemic you can't imagine the kind of requests we get from people who want to volunteer with us. They also come from management and engineering institutes. They come from Europe and America. ■



Kumaraguru, a farmer from Kotagiri, inside his polyhouse where he grows sweet passion fruit

Passion fruit rises in the south

Shree Padre

Kasaragod

A little known fruit, synonymous with the northeast, is finding takers in the southern states of Kerala, Karnataka and Tamil Nadu. Passion fruit is the rising star among fruits. Due to increasing demand for sweet, edible passion fruit and not the juice, farmers are scrambling to find the right varieties, even during their travels abroad.

What has fuelled this demand? Dengue fever. About a decade ago, dengue raged across Kerala for a full year. Doctors began recommending passion fruit to patients to increase their platelet count. People started asking around for the fruit for their sick relatives. This sudden demand alerted shopkeepers who began seeking out the fruit.

Whatever the scientific truth, the general belief across Kerala is that passion fruit is good for dengue and for cancer patients undergoing chemotherapy. In Kerala, zilla panchayats, Kudumbasree (Self-Help Groups) and Krishi Bhavans began promoting passion fruit and distributing plants.

Soon, passion fruit processing companies got into the act. Idukki became a hub of sorts with two large companies producing passion fruit squash. Smaller units followed. Along highways, stalls began selling passion fruit sherbet. In southern Kerala, passion fruit juice is now the most popular 'welcome drink' at weddings.

But, over the years, consumption of the whole fruit began to outpace the juice drinking. "The quantity that goes for processing has declined. People are eating the whole fruit. I think the ratio is 60:40," says Jomy Mathew, an award-winning farmer who grows about 90 tonnes of passion fruit every year on his farms near Shimoga.

"I sell to traders in Kannur and Kozhikode apart from selling to Fruit Valley, our farmer-producer company. Most of my fruit is consumed whole, as a table fruit. The seconds are sent for processing and I earn less from them," he says.

The demand is for the sweet variety with a longer shelf life. Shiju Kappumel G., a farmer in Wayanad, grows passion fruit on three acres and sells mostly online. He sensed that customers only wanted to buy the sweeter variety. He sold about one tonne, mostly to customers in Bengaluru. But after some time he ran into a problem. His customers complained his fruits had a very short shelf life. Shiju has now found a variety that lasts longer and is all set to grow it for sale.

The passion fruit which has been traditionally popular is *Passiflora ligularis* or sweet granadilla, locally called the Kodaikanal passion fruit. It's a convenient table fruit, ready to eat. All you need to do is press it between two fingers and enjoy the white pulp which pops out. The edible seeds are nutritious too and high in Vitamin C.

This is the only sweet passion fruit that is commercially grown in our country. It is not easy to scale up cultivation because it requires an elevation of 1,000 to 1,500 metres above sea level to grow well.

However, passion fruit or Krishna *phala* is a farmer-friendly crop. It grows on a vine and starts yielding fruit from the first year itself. It fruits once or twice a year and doesn't require much nurturing. The fruit is native to the southern Brazil region. In south India, it is being grown in Kerala, Karnataka and parts of Tamil Nadu.

Every time dengue strikes, demand for the fruit rockets. Says Joemon Jose, deputy manager of marketing at the Vegetable and Fruit Promotion Council Keralam (VFPC), "Our farmer members bring small quantities of marketable excess for selling. Generally, they get an average price of

₹40 per kg. During dengue fever period, the price rises to ₹70."

Abdul Jabbar of Kannur, a passion fruit trader, sells 500 tonnes of passion fruit annually to supermarkets in Kerala and Karnataka and in West Asia. "After Covid, eating passion fruit to build immunity has become a trend," he says.

SEARCH FOR PLANTS In India, there are only four or five varieties of passion fruit. The Indian Institute of Horticulture Research (IIHR) has released a hybrid variety named Kaveri. The Kerala Agriculture University's variety is called 134-P.

Passion fruits are known by the colour of their rind which is yellow, red or purple. The yellow ones are known to be sour and are used for juicing. The purple ones are sweeter and can be eaten whole.

"Of late, we find customers don't ask for sherbet or squash. They ask us to cut fresh fruit, sprinkle some salt or sugar over it and give it to them with a spoon," says Sajeew Uchchakkavil, manager of the Plantation Corporation of Kerala (PCK) in Kasaragod which has also pioneered passion fruit cultivation. Interestingly, farmers are consuming the fruit too and not just selling it.

PCK has three farms in different locations with a sales outlet in each where passion fruit squash, fresh sherbet and fresh fruits are sold.

Due to the limited varieties available, farmers have been looking beyond Indian shores for better and sweeter versions of passion fruit. "My last visit to Indonesia confirmed my impression that they have sweet passion fruits. A new market would open up for us if some of these varieties succeed in our environment," says Anil Balanja, a well-known grower of exotic fruit from Balthagady in Karnataka.

"The climate of Indonesia and south India are almost the same. We have to bring Indonesian sweet passion fruit varieties here and start experimenting. If it turns out to be like the sweet Kodaikanal passion fruit it will click in the market."

Balachandra Hegde Sayimane, a farmer from Uttara Kannada, went on a tour to Hainan island in China a few years ago to participate in an agricultural exhibition. He spotted a company that was promoting 'golden harvest' hybrid passion fruit. It was very sweet. Sayimane brought back some seeds and planted them on his farm. The vines grew well and produced fruits of the same taste. He gifted some seeds to two farmer friends. There, too, the vines replicated and yielded the same sweet fruits.

Madhu Kollakattu, a farmer in Idukki, possesses a rare cultivar of passion fruit. Its rind is deep red and it is not sour at all. He says it was gifted to him by an American tourist. It yields sweet fruit.

Another farmer, Anas P.K. from Narikunni near Kozhikode, has grown about 40 varieties of passion fruit sourced from Thailand, Malaysia and Ecuador in the past 18 years. The one from Ecuador, called *Passiflora affinis*, is very sweet.

What are the traits of good passion fruit which can be eaten whole? "It should be less sour with a thin rind. It should contain more pulp, be a little watery and palatable without added salt or sugar. The variety we have satisfies all these qualifications," says Jacob Francis Challisery whose father grows exotic fruits, including passion fruit, on a large scale in Dakshina Kannada district.

"People are turning away from beverages with added sugar. This is the right time to introduce passion fruit as a table fruit," he says.

Most of these varieties do not have names; nor has anyone cared to document them. The next step is for IIHR, the KVKs or agricultural universities to study all the farmer varieties being grown. Farmer organizations can support such studies. An online meeting of all passion fruit farmers would be a good start.

"All these cultivars that farmers claim are good to eat whole need to be shortlisted and scientifically evaluated. Then the best ones can be propagated to interested farmers," says Dr Vijay Sulladmath who retired as principal scientist of IIHR and has researched passion fruit.

He points out that to raise a gene pool would take time. So he suggests collecting all possible information from farmers and making a selection. Then, by 2026 we would have at least three or four varieties that can be grown and introduced in the market. All the necessary components are there — cultivars, innovative farmers and enthusiastic scientists.



Farmers are looking for sweeter varieties of passion fruit from Southeast Asia

THE RIGHT HEIGHT Let's turn to Kodaikanal in Tamil Nadu, India's hotspot for passion fruit. It is grown in Dindigul and Nilgiri districts of the state.

The Kodaikanal passion fruit is orange, egg-shaped and smaller in size than other varieties. Its white pulp has no flavour. From there the fruit is sent to Hyderabad, Mumbai, Bengaluru and Goa. The biggest customer is Bengaluru. During the peak season the price rises to ₹1,200 to ₹3,500 for a 14-kg pack.

The lower Palani hills area in Dindigul district is the biggest producer of the fruit. But not many farmers grow it. They say they earn much more by growing coffee, avocado and banana together. Also, short-duration exotic vegetables fetch better returns.

However, Coonoor is emerging as an important hub of passion fruit cultivation, with it replacing oranges, the traditional crop. "Kotagiri was an orange valley at one time. Oranges have totally vanished now. Sweet passion fruit is easier to grow and needs less management," says Kumaraguru, a farmer from Kotagiri.

He has been growing passion fruit professionally in *pandals*. His farm is 30 km from Ooty and 1,800 metres above sea level. Initially, he grew passion fruit in polyhouses. His trial cultivation during the monsoon was successful. But in summer the vines started scorching so he installed micro sprinklers inside the polyhouses. He gets his best crop in winter and sells through his own marketing unit called Sigma to buyers in Coimbatore and online for ₹240 per kg.

In Idukki district the fruit is called the Munnar passion fruit. It has two seasons and is available in markets for five to six months. It is tourists who have popularized the Kodaikanal passion fruit. Local shops hang up the fruit with twines in Munnar and Kodaikanal. One passion fruit costs between ₹5 and ₹20. From Munnar, fruits are despatched to cities like Bengaluru and Chennai.

In the forested areas of Kandalloor, tribals pluck these fruits and bring them to the market. Being a wild crop, it doesn't require much attention. Farmers get between ₹100 and ₹150 per kg for the fruit. Most homes here have two or three vines of passion fruit which give them good returns of ₹1,000 per kg, even if all other crops fail. Propagation is easy, though harvesting is difficult.

It is believed that the British introduced passion fruit in Kandalloor and Vattavada panchayats of Idukki district. An exotic winter vegetable is the main crop of this area. This is why passion fruit hasn't attracted farmers seriously. ■

Keeping waste out of landfills

Kavita Charanji
Gurgaon

COMPETING with Gurugram's glitzy skyline and its denuded Aravali range is another mountain rising to new heights every day. This is the infamous Bandhwari landfill which is fed 2,000 tonnes of garbage daily from Gurugram and Faridabad. The site, spread over 30 acres, is 40 metres tall, dwarfing the hills around it.

Toxins released by plastic, metals and biomedical waste indiscriminately dumped here have ruined air, water and soil — endangering not just the environment but the health of the residents of Bandhwari village.

But, let's face it. Responsibility lies at the door of Gurugram's residents. They can lend a hand by tackling their own household waste. Helping people do it is I Am Gurgaon, a reputed citizens' initiative to green the concrete jungle of Gurugram. Its success in converting a large stretch of barren land into the lush Aravali Biodiversity Park is well known.

The group has set up three waste recycling units located at Samadhaan Hub, Badshahpur Forest Corridor and Creek 56. At the Prachin Hanuman Aur Shani Dev Mandir only flowers and festive waste are collected. On any given day, residents can bring their dry waste to any of these centres.

A visit to the Samadhaan Hub sustainable solutions centre in Block D, Sector 26A near Khushboo Chowk reveals how I Am Gurgaon's units work. Set up in partnership with the Municipal Corporation of Gurgaon (MCG), the Hub is where corporates, RWAs, citizens, schools can drop off segregated, clean and dry wastepaper, plastic, e-waste, metal, glass, clothes, expired and unexpired medicines, and medical equipment.

Through informative exhibits, visitors learn about little-known facets of waste and its management. Interactive workshops on dry waste segregation are held with schools, RWAs and corporates. They can also participate in events like community clean-up drives and engage in interesting workshop sessions.

"The main idea behind our recycling units is that nothing should go to the landfill. Wet waste can easily be composted at home. However, dry waste is non-biodegradable and this was a challenge for people," says Anjali Khatri, founder-member, I Am Gurgaon.



A waste recycling unit set up by I Am Gurgaon

To solve this problem, the group partners with NGOs and organizations that recycle waste. Soft and multi-layered plastics and religious waste go to an organization called Avacayam. Here people with special needs turn the waste into beautiful gift items like planters, bags and mats. They also make incense sticks and Holi colours, among other items.

Hard plastics are sent to local recyclers in Delhi, Noida and Gurugram. They are then reused for making roads.

NAMO, India's largest e-waste recycler, picks up e-waste while clothes are donated to Goonj. The proceeds from paper waste are donated to Freepathshala and fund the education of underprivileged children and children of construction workers.

Under a tie-up with Inchpaper for its Har Haath Kitaab (A Book in Every Child's Hand) project, textbooks are donated as learning material to NGOs for teachers and students, while storybooks go to community libraries and reading clubs. Workbooks, unused notebooks and practice worksheets turn into valuable resources for underprivileged children.

Metal is picked up by the e-waste vendor and local recycler. Like glass, it is repurposed. Medicines and medical equipment are collected at the units. The expired medicines are incinerated by a hospital while unexpired medicines are donated to charitable dispensaries and hospitals.

"We offer solutions for most kinds of dry waste. We are very particular about who we give the waste to. Our recyclers are verified and we ensure that they are recycling them the correct way," says Namrita Chaudhri, core team member of I Am Gurgaon.

Between 2022 and June 2024, I Am Gurgaon collected 174,831 kg of dry waste. If the units hadn't been around, the waste would have probably ended up in landfills like Bandhwari. As it is, the city sends an estimated 1,200 tonnes of waste every day to landfills.

This scenario is avoidable with greater public awareness and stricter implementation of solid waste management laws by the government. From time to time plastic bans have been enforced but they are sporadic and half-hearted. Products like bio waste, cosmetics, disposable single-use plastic plates and cups go to landfills but waste can be minimized.

Over the years, I Am Gurgaon has run a series of awareness campaigns to motivate citizens to take responsibility for their waste. "Our mantra is Refuse, Reduce, Reuse, Recycle, Repurpose," says Chaudhri.

They have carried out Bring Your Own Bag (BYOB) campaigns at markets, initiated the setting up of art installations made of waste and, says Khatri, helped transform Shri Ram School into a "No Plastic Bag Zone".

At Shri Ram School they ran a campaign to reduce the use of plastic and polypropylene bags during their Open Days, distributed free canvas bags through waste interactive games, and initiated pledges by parents, students and faculty to forgo the use of plastic bags and encourage others to do the same. "Today the school proudly displays a sign outside saying that it is a 'No Plastic Zone'. We hope more schools are inspired to do the same," says Khatri. ■



Namrita Chaudhri and Anjali Khatri

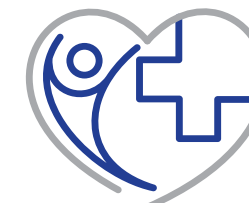
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In Kashmir a special healing touch

Jehangir Rashid
Srinagar

FOUNDED in 1970 by Dr Mir Mohammad Maqbool, a renowned ear, nose and throat (ENT) specialist, the Voluntary Medicare Society (VMS) at Bemina on the outskirts of Srinagar, has been helping people with disabilities shine in sports and achieve international fame for the country.

It has produced two international wheelchair basketball players, Ishrat Akhter and Inshah Bashir. While Akhter represented India at the international basketball championship in Pattaya, Thailand, Bashir represented the country in international basketball tournaments in Noida in Uttar Pradesh and in the US. She was selected for a national award by the Ministry of Social Justice & Empowerment and felicitated by President Draupadi Murmu.

“The VMS has been able to improve the lives of people affected by certain disabilities. Our institution strives to highlight societal changes that can promote inclusion, participation and accessibility. This will help to realize the full and equal participation of persons with disabilities in society,” says Dr Bashir Ahmad Lone, director, VMS.

Initially the society provided rehabilitation to people affected by hearing and speech disabilities. Over time, services and facilities were extended to people with physical and mental disabilities.

Crippled by polio, Rameez Raja, a resident of Rathsun-Beerwah in central Kashmir’s Budgam district, couldn’t lead a normal life. Physiotherapy at the VMS has enabled him to move around. “I can say I have improved by almost 90 percent,” he says. “I am now studying for my bachelor’s in humanities at Degree College in Magam. All thanks to Dr Qayoom, Dr Suhail and others at the physiotherapy unit.” He also plays cricket and took part in a wheelchair national cricket tournament held some months ago. The society has a sports club and a fleet of ambulances. It has in-patient wards as well.

Subsequently, the institute started services for people affected by spinal cord injuries. It has earned the reputation of being a one-stop centre for those who need occupational therapy, development therapy, physiotherapy, prosthetic consultation, orthotic consultation and counselling. Alongside, peer counselling is provided. All these activities are carried out under the banner of the Shafaqat Rehabilitation Centre (SRC).

Dr Lone said that VMS owes its success to the hard work put in by its dedicated team. Awareness and solutions are most important, he said.

“The physiotherapy lounge is well-equipped with state-of-the-art equipment to provide therapies like manipulation, electro and hydrotherapy, exercises with special focus on spinal injuries, paediatrics, stroke, Parkinson’s disease and amputees. At the occupational therapy unit patients are trained in activities of daily living. Techniques like sensory integration therapy, bowel and bladder/pressure sore management therapy, neuro-developmental technique, splint making and adaptive devices are used,” said Dr Lone.

He said the prosthetic and orthotic appliances (artificial limbs) are manufactured



Ishrat Akhter, an international wheelchair basketball player

in-house by an experienced team of professionals. The technology used is low-cost but of high quality. Needy patients are provided transportation, food and accommodation as well.

“The society conducts outreach programmes in far-flung areas of J&K. This helps us identify and refer beneficiaries to the Shafaqat Rehabilitation Centre. We have two separate male and female wards to accommodate patients,” said Dr Lone. The VMS offers wheelchairs, customized walking aids, adaptive devices and hearing aids.

The establishment of the Shafaqat Rehabilitation Centre was made possible thanks to the efforts of former bureaucrat Khurshid Ahmad Malik who suffered a spinal injury due to a horrific car accident on the Srinagar-Jammu national highway on March 19, 1987. Malik went to the National Spine

Centre in London for rehabilitation but the cost of treatment was very high.

“After struggling for 18 years the rehabilitation centre for physically, mentally impaired persons and for hearing and speech impaired persons was founded in May 2007 with the generous support of friends, relatives and, above all, by ordinary people. The rehabilitation centre has facilities like steam bath, hydrotherapy, CAM for pain management and a prosthetic limb centre which is operational since 2011,” said Malik in a message.

The International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC), Geneva, has also pitched in. It has set up the prosthetics and orthotics centre and equipped it with modern gadgets and technology. Limbs and splints are provided free after a process of assessment for eligibility. The patients are discharged after providing gait training by physiotherapists specially trained for the purpose.

Irshad Manzoor Bhat, a resident of Hyderpora in Srinagar, had lost mobility of both legs. His stint at VMS has changed his life. “I never imagined I would be able to play wheelchair basketball and then represent my state at the national level. I also play cricket and do all things independently.”

At the speech therapy unit manual and technical devices are used to develop listening skills. All this is done under the auditory and speech training module of the institute. Equipment is available to record and assess hearing loss in children and adults with hearing impairment.

VMS also works for visually impaired people. It has established a digital literacy lab for them. From 2017 to 2022, VMS rehabilitated 248 visually impaired beneficiaries. The organization provided them with adjustment courses that included mobility training, Braille literacy and activities of daily living (ADL). Recognizing the critical role of technology in modern education and employment, VMS launched a new initiative in 2022 aimed at digitally training visually impaired children.

This initiative sought to equip children with the digital literacy needed to thrive in today’s technology-driven world. Over 2023 to 2024, VMS successfully completed four computer training batches, digitally training 48 visually impaired children.

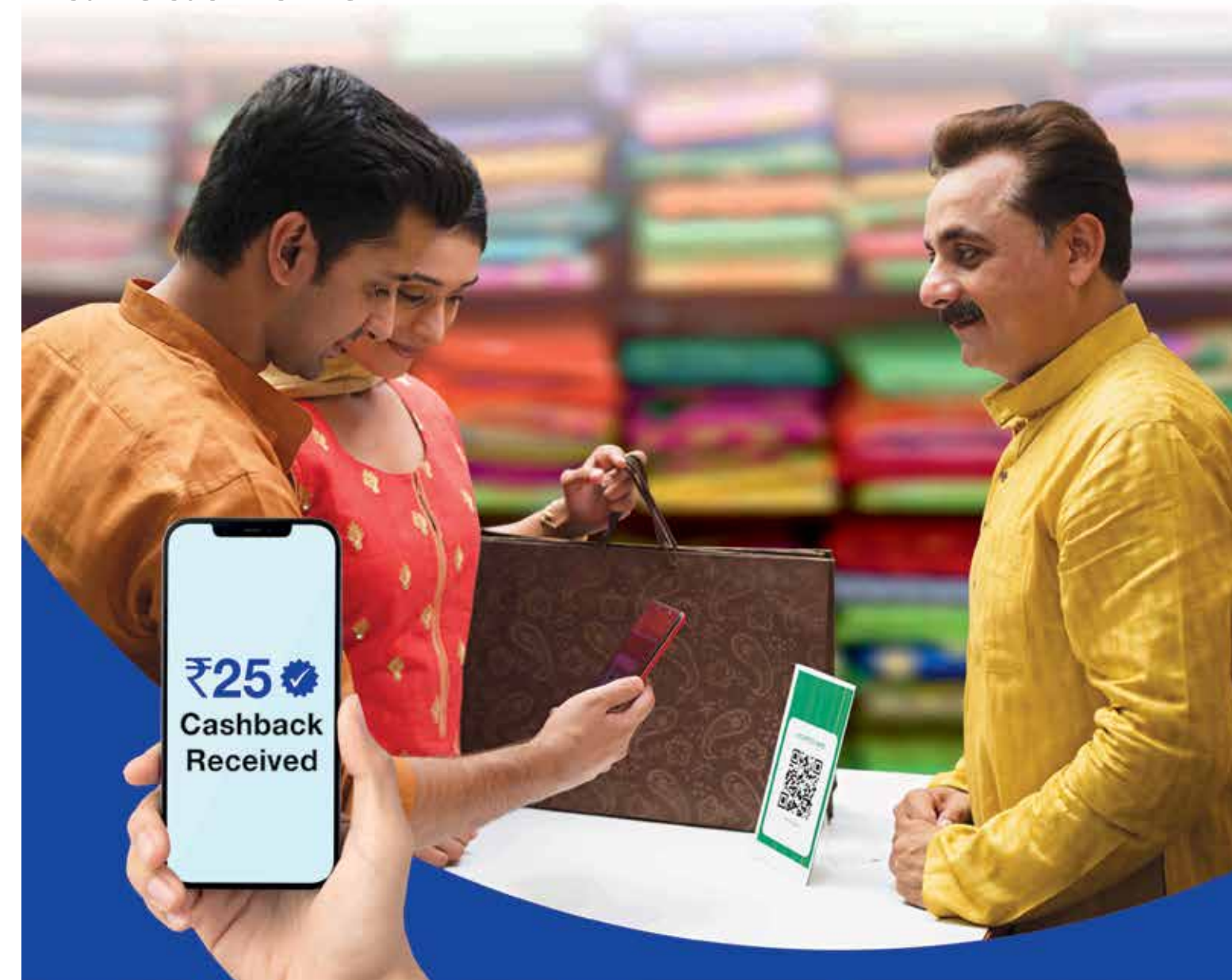
The society is in the process of constructing a super specialty hospital for patients who need specialized treatment. As a social organization, the VMS depends on donations by people within and outside the country. It also collaborates with banks like State Bank of India (SBI) and the Jammu & Kashmir Bank. ■

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WISHLIST AFTER THE VERDICT

What governments can do for a more inclusive India

SANJAYA BARU

RAJIV KHANDELWAL

DILEEP RANJEKAR

VIJAY ANAND ISMAVEL

KIRTEE SHAH

V. RAVICHANDAR

MANAS FULORIA

RATISH NANDA

SUMITA GHOSE

KIRAN KARNIK

R. A. MASHELKAR

ARUNA ROY

NIKHIL DEY

JAGDEEP CHHOKAR

VENKATESH DUTTA

MATHEW CHERIAN

→
16-31

GETTING ON WITH WHAT MATTERS

RITA & UMESH ANAND

ELECTIONS come with their surprises. The 2024 general election will be remembered for how the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) was given a smaller mandate by voters just when it seemed omnipotent and poised for a big victory.

Right from the time the election process began, the BJP had declared itself the winner. The opposition had been derided and made almost invisible. A vast promotional effort positioned Narendra Modi as the supreme leader who could take India to great heights globally. Fawning anchors and editors and swarms of faceless bots reinforced this image.

Yet when the results came in, the BJP, far from being victorious, could barely form the government and that too only with the support of partners. What had gone wrong? Why was a party and its leader with lofty ambitions and the fastest growing economy in the world being given such short shrift?

Theories abound about how people voted. It would be a mix of many factors. Caste would have been a consideration. So also, local issues and concerns. The blitz about India rising would certainly have brought the BJP votes. But if you wish to see voting trends as a political smoothie the predominant flavour, to our journalistic taste buds at least, was the anguish of ordinary people over their poor quality of life.

Ayodhya, it should be noted, voted not for the Ram temple but for itself because despite all the hotels and wide roads nothing had been done for the residents of the rundown town. There was local disapproval over demolitions and other acts of highhandedness. At Ram's birthplace a Dalit, no less, was elected in the ultimate snub to the BJP.

Hype is no substitute for reality. People live with problems that slogans don't solve. The lack of basic amenities is a challenge people would rather do without, especially now when they can see on the internet the standards that prevail in other countries.

Crumbling cities and languishing villages don't make a nation that is progressing. Modi's claims of development and Viksit Bharat haven't found ready resonance. Maybe he shouldn't have been making them at all because many of the responsibilities for better development fall in the domain of the states, municipalities and panchayats. They need to be supported and given more agency, not dictated to.

Yet, he presented himself as an all-powerful leader, a messiah with personal guarantees. In the event, people in sizeable numbers, as the results show, weren't convinced. They voted for leaders they could reach, touch and hold to account for deliverables at their doorstep.

The Modi government was finally seen as being by the rich, for the rich and without real solutions for the urgent problems of the country.

Commentators who say Modi's personal popularity has not been dented may like to reconsider their calculations. A single leader can't be the answer to a myriad of problems of development which require decentralized administrations.

Strident nationalism and religious sectarianism that the Modi BJP represents have limited appeal in a globalized world. To be rooted in religion or culture can be reassuring. But intermingling of people, ideas and economies is the modern mantra. Distributed technologies of various kinds have oriented people to make their own choices and get on with their lives. The thought of a dominant and dictatorial



Distributed technologies have oriented people to make their own choices. The thought of a dominant, dictatorial force can be abhorrent.

force can be abhorrent to people in a new age.

The BJP is not alone in the neglect of developmental issues or the use of freebies to make up for the lack of delivery. A review of manifestoes of all parties will show that health, housing, education, jobs, transportation, environment, agriculture at best get lip service. There is no serious discussion and strategizing within parties.

The BJP had, however, promised that it could be different. But after 10 years in power, it seemed less likely than ever to deliver on those promises. Arrogance and concentration of power in one leader with close links to big business were reasons for people to wonder what the future would hold. Of what solace can a high GDP rate possibly be to a citizen who can't access the basics of a better life? Instead of disparities being bridged they have actually been widening.

With an election now done and dusted, how should the country proceed? There is a case for having a bipartisan agenda for getting those things in place that matter most to people.

With this in mind *Civil Society* reached out to some of the finest minds in different spheres to identify five initiatives each that a new government, of any persuasion, should take up for the benefit of the nation as a whole.

Employment tops the list because, of what value is economic growth if it cannot lead to a bigger and better trained workforce which is fairly paid and allowed to enjoy a higher standard of living? For far too long workers, most of them migrants trapped in skewed arrangements, have been exploited by paying them pitiable amounts and denying them their rights. Changing this should be a priority for both social and economic reasons.

Healthcare and education follow because they are the standard bearers of development. It should be the duty of any government to

invest copiously in both. Currently, private schools and hospitals eat into family incomes significantly. Governments also need to ensure certain standards are maintained.

Important anti-poverty measures like the laws on the right to food and rural jobs should be placed above debate because they have proved their usefulness. They need to be strengthened and institutionalized to a greater degree. So also the right to information law which has been weakened in implementation but is at the heart of accountability in a functioning democracy.

There are many other areas that we feel we have gainfully covered in the collection of pieces that follows — innovation, technology, conservation, rural entrepreneurship and more. But ours is not an exhaustive exercise. For instance, we regret the omission of agriculture, but innumerable issues of *Civil Society* will tell you how much importance we give it and what the ways forward could be.

We in this magazine particularly worry about declining electoral standards and media values. A mature democracy chooses its leaders carefully. There should be a level playing field for all contestants to come forward equally. Impartial journalism has an important role to play too. It is not what we have been witnessing.

Technology allows the powerful to amplify their power. It can be all-pervasive and benumbing when controls are in a few hands. The past few months are an example.

Chances are that you are bewildered and exhausted by the long election season. It was not that you were standing for election yourself, but at times it almost seemed so. The simple act of casting your vote became stressful, in the summer heat, but for those who wanted to make a difference it was an effort worth taking. There is a message in the mandate. ■

Small media with big impact



**DELHI
DARBAR**

SANJAYA BARU

AMONG the many institutions of Indian democracy that earned disrepute in recent years the so-called 'mainstream' media stands out. Becoming overtly politically partisan was one crime. Equally important, becoming professionally incompetent was the other. Consider the performance of the various journalists who interviewed Prime Minister Narendra Modi in the run-up to the Lok Sabha elections. Not one interview threw light on any issue of real policy or political interest. Almost all of them ended up offering free publicity to the prime minister, projecting him as a larger-than-life personality. How many hours do you work? Do you never rest at all? Where do you get this energy from? And such questions made Modi look like an athlete and a yogi combined, not very prime ministerial. These interviews were certainly not informative, not even entertaining.

What is, however, amazing is that their impact on public opinion was marginal. On vote counting day, Modi's Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) fell woefully short of a majority. The media, especially Hindi language television, went overboard in providing exhaustive coverage of the opening of the Ram Janmabhoomi temple in Ayodhya. In the event, the BJP lost the Lok Sabha seat in the constituency that houses the temple. In Varanasi, the prime minister himself saw his vote share decline. When the Sengol was installed in the new Parliament building, with elaborate religious rituals, there was similar TV coverage. This will help the BJP do well in Tamil Nadu, the political pundits had predicted. The BJP came a cropper in the southern state.

I wonder if there has been any introspection in editorial meetings in television studios and newspaper offices across the country. Was there any soul searching? Have senior journalists who have been around for a long time and are now dubbed 'godi media' done any introspection?

Or, have they come to value access to power as more important than speaking truth to power?

More than all these questions the real issue that must worry mainstream media is its growing irrelevance. If all their sustained and over the top campaigning for the ruling dispensation has not helped the ruling party get more seats, then there is a serious issue of both credibility and impact. Are advertisers asking themselves why they should continue to advertise on TV channels and in newspapers that don't seem to have much impact on consumer preference? If, after all the PR and bombast, they have not succeeded in changing consumer preference, rather, the consumer turned away from the



Dhruv Rathee was the media sensation of these elections

product being marketed, why should big firms advertise in such media?

On the other hand, consider the small, financially unsupported media that is making waves and beginning to make a difference to consumer preference. Till a few months back I had not heard of Dhruv Rathee, even though he has been around for a while. In the weeks preceding the general election, viewership of Rathee's YouTube shows went up by leaps and bounds. By early May his viewership hit 25 million.

Rathee was the media sensation of the elections to the 18th Lok Sabha. He was far ahead of all competition. However, he was not the only media 'influencer'. From Ravish Kumar to Siddharth Varadarajan, from new media sites like TheNewsMinute.com to NewsLaundry.com and dozens of other websites and YouTube sites, there has been an efflorescence of new, small media that has put big media in the shade.

The 2024 election results reaffirmed the wisdom of that old saying: 'One can fool all

the people for some time, some people all the time but one cannot fool all the people all the time.'

It is generally the norm for all political parties to evaluate their performance after elections and take stock of what worked and what did not. In any serious political party there would be detailed and candid discussions on what went wrong and what went right. Even if it is for public consumption such parties stand by their 'leader', as the Congress party always did after its electoral losses, protecting Sonia Gandhi and Rahul Gandhi from internal criticism. Political parties do undertake serious introspection for the stakes are indeed high.

The question for the media is whether there has been such introspection and internal self-criticism within media organizations after their ignominious performance in the recent past. Should celebrity editors and anchors who have lost all credibility continue to remain in their seats? The media often asks whether 'heads would roll' in political parties after a political defeat. The question for the media itself is, will heads roll after such loss of credibility?

Given the high entry and operations cost of mainstream print and TV media, small media and media start-ups have always had a difficult time in the media marketplace. However, the internet and mobile telephony have opened up spaces for small media. This space too can come under threat if telecom firms refuse to provide access to such media. Thus, people like Rathee, Varadarajan and Kumar might find reaching their readers and viewers difficult if internet platforms will not carry them.

What the experience of small media shows, however, is that as long as there is professionalism and commitment to the truth and a fighting spirit among media professionals there will always be space for small media. Indeed, with time such small media may become big — overtaking mainstream media. This is a development one cannot rule out given the loss of credibility of so many newspapers, magazines and TV channels. ■

Sanjaya Baru is a writer and Distinguished Fellow at the United Service Institution of India

LABOUR

More jobs are the answer with living wages, basic rights for workers



RAJIV KHADELWAL

INDIA's economic growth has consistently relied on low-waged, precarious and flexible labour. Combined with agrarian collapse in many regions, this reality has resulted in massive distress migration from rural areas to urban and industrial markets. The numbers are staggering. India's circular migrant workforce is estimated to be over 140 million people. Construction alone engages nearly 50 million migrant workers — a large proportion of whom are low-waged, contractual and casual. Many other sectors of the economy — manufacturing, mining, transportation, sanitation, domestic work, vending — comprise mainly migrant, informal workers.

The lives of these workers are defined by erratic work, low wages, absence of social security and exposure to workplace hazards. There are at least four imperatives for the government to vigorously pursue:

Make job creation central to social and economic policies

The first priority should be to put job creation on track. High rates of unemployment imply jobless growth or low-quality jobs for which there are no takers. Stable and rewarding jobs are missing for the young, including those who are educated, trained and aspiring to join the workforce with their dignity intact. The emphasis must be on creating decent employment, not just informal, casual work. This shift will encourage informed and secure migration and a move away from unproductive forms of work.

Why minimum wages, why not living wages?

The second priority should be to protect workers' wages. We must reject the minimum wage mindset and move the needle to ensuring decent, living wages for workers. In a country where 40 percent of all informal workers do not even earn a minimum wage, the aspiration for living wages may sound unreal. Yet this commitment needs to be made. With food inflation staggeringly high and earnings so meagre, workers and their dependent families not only remain undernourished but deeply immersed in debt. Poor wages affect migrant workers profoundly. A large part of their earned incomes is consumed for mere survival in cities — rent, food and transportation — all of which add up, leaving little or none for bringing back home.

Ensure affordable housing, healthcare, access to rations for migrant workers

The third priority is to universalize access to low-cost, affordable and dignified housing, free healthcare and access to the Public Distribution

System (PDS) for migrant workers. All of these have remained in discussion for years, a few even leading to some policy announcements.

However, on-ground implementation remains dismal. The Affordable Rental Housing Complex scheme does not yet serve the desired segment of working migrants and the urban poor. The portability of PDS across states, which would make it possible for migrants to access subsidized ration away from their home, is not yet operational.

Have safety at workplaces, there are too many accidents, deaths

The fourth priority should be to focus on making our construction sites, factories, facilities, units and markets completely safe and free of injury, trauma and accidents.

Civil Society picture/Umesh Anand



Workplaces are not safe. There are too many accidents, deaths.

For Indian workers, work is an act of utmost peril. Our work sites are amongst the most dangerous anywhere in the world. In 2021 the government reported that nearly 6,500 workers died while at work in the past five years. Accidents in factories had galloped by 20 percent within a year's time!

Most of these deaths were reported from the migrant-dense, highly industrialized and developed states, including Gujarat, Maharashtra and Tamil Nadu. Employers are able to sign out of safety imperatives at workplaces because regulations remain weak and unenforced.

Moreover, sites of work have shrunk to small, micro units where labour becomes invisible and vulnerable to all manner of risk. Undoubtedly, migrants form the largest proportion of those who lose limbs and lives while at work in these spaces of fragmented production and processes.

Protect rights, give social security and legal aid

We must root for universal social security and entitlement. Nearly 54 percent of all

workers do not enjoy any form of social security. Further, a massive legal aid and justice programme is needed to ensure that wages of workers remain protected. Almost 63 percent of India's entire workforce does not possess a work contract.

The attention that Covid-19 brought to the migrants' experience has largely vaporized. The much-discussed comprehensive policy for internal migration is yet to be implemented. Instead, we have country-wide registration of workers under the e-shram programme which has enrolled nearly 30 crore workers. The utility of this massive exercise is yet to be established. Scores of welfare schemes dominate the labour narrative — these overwhelm workers' rights and claims. The state must commit to a longer lasting and fundamental shift to workers' welfare as a matter of their right, not a populist favour by a government seeking to win votes. ■

Rajiv Khandelwal is co-founder of the Aajeevika Bureau.

EDUCATION

Funds, quality teaching and political will for improving schools



DILEEP RANJEKAR

THE societal gains from education are universally recognized. Societies that have prospered and have educationally done well have invested public funds in government-run schools that are for everyone. The more people are empowered with quality education, the better the nation performs in its development indicators including in building a 'responsible society'. In India, school education has been a fundamental right enshrined in the Constitution. But despite this commitment, successive governments at the Centre and in the states have failed to make the investments that would have shaped a modern and meaningful education system.

The image of the government school has taken a beating leading to migration of students to 'private schools' even as it is recognized that only public schools can meet the quality education needs of a large country like India with equity. Comprehensive recommendations were made in 2016 by the Central Advisory Board of Education Sub-Committee towards improving public schools. But there has been no serious effort to implement the recommendations. Now, as a new government assumes office, it is perhaps a good time to see what it could do to change things.

Seriously target six percent of GDP as the spending goal on education

Since 1965, it has been strongly recommended that six percent of the national GDP be spent on education. The current actual spend levels are below three percent. We must seriously take a big step to move to the goal of six percent.

The prioritization of spending must be in recruitment of teachers, quality teacher-educators, high quality school infrastructure and implementation of structural changes (such as early childhood education) emerging from the National Education Policy 2020.

The role model for budgeting must be the per student per year budget provided in the Kendriya Vidyalaya and Navodaya Schools — where parents aspire to admit their children. Otherwise we are creating huge inequity for students learning in government schools.

The states that cannot afford to make this investment from their budgets should be helped by the Centre to the extent they fall short.

Meet the teacher-to-pupil ratio as mandated under the RTE Act

There is currently gross inadequacy of teachers in government schools across India. There is also a highly skewed spread of teachers (far superior in urban and adverse in remote areas). The averages reflected at state and district level are grossly misleading.

At the simplest level, in every school, we need one classroom per grade and one teacher per classroom. It must be recognized that it is impossible to hope for quality education for all, in the absence of each child receiving quality attention by a competent teacher.

Make early childhood education compulsory for all schools

One of the critical structural changes in NEP 2020 is ECE in every school. This is a long-pending issue that has the potential to radically improve

government schools and contribute to better enrolment and continuation in government schools. Since ECE is currently absent in public schools, children join private schools and continue in those schools. This requires ECE being part of the Education Department instead of coming under the Women and Child Development Department.

There should be teacher-educators in every district to develop teachers

The teacher is the biggest influence in a classroom, which is the crucible of learning. Though some efforts have been made to reform pre-service teacher education, the immediate key issue is the development of nine million teachers in government schools. Some immediate concrete steps would be:

- Identify and intensely develop a team of about 100 highly competent teacher-educators in every district.



The teacher is the biggest influence in a classroom

- Teacher-educators must thoroughly understand the educational and pedagogical principles of NEP 2020 as well as of the new National Curriculum Framework.
- Ensure understanding of purpose of learning subjects and their integrative nature in contributing to the overall development of the child.
- Provide an effective mechanism for teacher-educators to deeply engage with all teachers at the district level. The focus should be comprehensive educational processes.

Consolidate schools in clusters where students are too few

The Sarv Shiksha Abhiyan, in 2000, rightly initiated and implemented the concept of a school in every habitation. During the past decade or so, owing to several factors, the number of students in public schools has declined to the extent that many schools have become unviable.

We should do a thoughtful strategic consolidation of schools to ensure there is the necessary teacher to pupil ratio together with quality learning resources, infrastructure (toilets, drinking water, playground, library, etc) and quality access for marginalized and girl students in remote areas.

With funding and political will, these priorities could go a long way in creating a foundation for quality school education with equity. We owe it to our future generations and to our ambition to be a truly developed nation. ■

Dileep Ranjekar is founder, CEO, and advisor, Azim Premji Foundation.

HEALTHCARE

Help small and remote hospitals with policies that work for them



VIJAY ANAND ISMAVEL

IN India as a whole, investment in healthcare is minuscule compared to elsewhere in the world. A few states such as Tamil Nadu and Kerala have invested well in healthcare and are reaping the benefits. For poorer parts of the country to catch up, they need funding. They also need policy makers to frame rules and regulations that realistically address the challenging conditions in small hospitals at remote locations where these facilities are all that people have by way of access to healthcare.

Speed up insurance payments to small hospitals, they need the money

The government health insurance programme, Ayushman Bharat, under which the Pradhan Mantri Jan Arogya Yojana (PMJAY) falls, helps poor people receive cashless funding for their healthcare expenditure. Many not-for-profit hospitals are registered under PMJAY and offer services to poor patients. But these hospitals face prolonged delays in receiving payment for services rendered which severely affects their cash flow situation.

The PMJAY programme should be strengthened with larger fund allotments and payment for services should be immediate. This will help prevent patients who are unable to use the services of 'for-profit' private healthcare or government providers from falling through service gaps.

Blood banks and ultrasonography at remote locations will help save lives

Critical services such as access to safe blood and ultrasonography are restricted by Indian law. The present blood-banking law requires a hospital to employ a full-time pathologist or a doctor with one year of service in a blood bank. Most remote location hospitals are unable to meet this requirement. The cornerstone of the blood-banking law is the safe cross-matching and screening of donated blood. This is a simple process within the capability of trained laboratory technicians. If the government allows well-trained technicians (overseen by a medical officer) to be sufficient for the processes followed in blood banks, it will be much easier to start blood banks in remote parts of the country.

Another area where current Indian law is unduly restrictive is the requirement for a radiologist or doctor with one year of experience in ultrasound to order or operate an ultrasound machine. This is part of the Prenatal Diagnostic Tests (PNDT) Act which addresses the problem of foetal sex determination leading to female foeticide and skewed sex ratios. Ultrasonography and echocardiography have evolved all over the world to become high-quality point-of-care diagnostics which greatly aid in clinical examination by imaging. However, the decision to declare foetal sex is not related to the qualification of the sonologist but is a moral decision anyone could make. The requirement to have a predefined qualified doctor to perform ultrasonography (or even order a machine) greatly affects access to this lifesaving technology, especially in remote and rural parts of the country.

Give incentives for setting up hospitals in poorer states and backward areas

The government already has numerous ways to identify geographical

locations with the greatest needs: these include the "Empowered Action Group" states, the aspirational districts and the Multidimensional Poverty Index. Unfortunately, healthcare investment — funding, facilities and manpower — continues to be focused on the richer, urban areas.

To counter this, the government could consider major incentives to set up and run healthcare facilities in the neediest areas. This could include funding and relaxation or exemption of criteria to register the facilities. In addition, meeting predefined targets should allow greater incentives to be given to these entities.

Hospitals in locations where government services are poor could be allowed to recruit doctors fulfilling their government service obligations and this service could be treated as equivalent to working in a government institution.

Develop protocols that work in resource-poor settings

Gold standard protocols are set in fully developed countries. But they are unrealistic in poorer parts of the world where resources are constrained. Medical colleges should teach students guidelines for the management of



The government could consider incentives to set up healthcare facilities in remote areas

disease and allow them to develop their own protocols according to the needs of the situation where they work. Bad practices, such as the indiscriminate use of steroids or antibiotics, should be strongly discouraged.

Rein in quacks, but you don't need super specialists for everything

India has a large, unregulated healthcare sector — where untrained quacks as well as those not trained to do so, prescribe and dispense allopathic medication. This leads to iatrogenic disease, drug resistance and inappropriate treatment.

At the other end, fully trained MBBS doctors or even consultants are not allowed to perform simple procedures like basic obstetrics or surgery. This trend towards super-specialist services makes access to healthcare more difficult and expensive, especially for India's poor.

There should be national guidelines on the management of specific diseases. Trained people such as nurse practitioners could be allowed to prescribe / dispense or perform procedures such as basic anaesthesia. ■

Dr Vijay Anand Ismavel ran the Makunda Hospital for 30 years. He is currently at the Christian Medical College in Vellore.

HOUSING

Affordable shelter with a better quality of life



KIRTEE SHAH

THERE have been government efforts over the years to provide housing to people, particularly in urban areas. But much remains to be done, and time is running out. In the next 30 years there will be a need to provide housing to 400 million people in cities. A change in mindset is needed to see housing as not just an economic activity, but an environmentally sustainable one involving people. A house is a social good which goes beyond bricks, cement and the real estate business.

A “house” is a place that becomes a “home” through the chemistry of love, care, compassion, affection, togetherness, and giving. It is a place for family where values are shaped and culture germinates. It's the cradle of human society.

Put people at the centre of housing programmes, houses are for them

Housing in India is created by people through their inventiveness. Housing programmes run by the government therefore need to involve the people for whom they are meant. It should use their energy, resources and motivation in a creative way.

Housing is for the people and they must be empowered as clients, residents, financiers and contributors. It is an aberration that people have been excluded from the housing process as it is practised now. They should be at the centre of the process.

It is seldom recognized that 60 percent of all rural housing stock in the country, despite massive looking government schemes, are created and designed according to the family's needs, constructed within means, supervised by family, approved by neighbours and mostly financed by the owner. It is a family product.

And, out of 10 houses that come up in our cities the public sector's contribution is one unit, the organized private sector's is two units, the unorganized private sector's is three units and the community's contribution, including housing in slums, is four units.

These are rough figures, but they tell us that housing is predominantly an informal, unorganized and little regulated activity. Any housing programme should give people/communities a role.

Make land more affordable and easily available for housing

For housing, land is needed in urban areas. It should be affordable and freed up from procedural red tape. The reality is that in the absence of a vision for making land available, the cost of land has risen and

become unaffordable — not only in the metros, but also in the smaller Tier II and Tier III cities.

A house bought for ₹1.5 lakh in Ahmedabad 25 years ago is sold for ₹5.5 crore now, that too just for the land, as the house is demolished. If the cost of construction has risen five times, the cost of land has risen perhaps 100 times.

And that is only the cost part. Land use planning, land records, management, administration and so on are a murky business and embroiled in corruption, underhand practices and black money. Cleaning all this up should be a priority.

Have an in-situ slum upgrading strategy, along with formal affordable housing

Urban slums aren't going away. Improving the quality of life in them should be a priority. In-situ upgrades are required and affordable housing must be among them. Any initiative should be affordable for both the low-income buyer and the subsidizing government.

There is not much evidence to suggest that the Pradhan Mantri Awas Yojana (PMAY), under which 12 million affordable houses are being constructed for the economically weaker groups, has impacted slums in cities in any significant way.

The programme is well-conceived with multiple options to choose from but it does not meet the unique needs of urban slums.

It would be far better to draw on international experience in dealing with slums. That is, make in-situ upgrades, secure land tenures to remove the fear of eviction, incentivize investment in housing by the people themselves and have the local authority provide infrastructure.

The Jaga Mission project of the Odisha government, under which slum development is being done under the in-situ slum upgrading strategy, is drawing attention for its success.

Slum communities are witnessing visible change, the cities look more attractive, and the subject experts see successful scaling up of pilots. Most importantly, giving land titles to the slums has not led to any disruption.

The regulatory system needs improvement

Reforms are required across the board from zoning regulations to building bylaws to the building permit system. The regulatory system seems to be designed to suffocate creativity — so badly needed to speed up projects, reduce cost, introduce new ideas, save resources and innovate in technology and construction. It is arbitrary and subjective in interpretation and results in

corruption and money going to officers and political bosses. Streamlining the regulatory system could result in savings of 15 to 20 percent in construction costs.

Find professionals who know how to deal with modern problems

Municipalities lack modern expertise. Officers, architects, planners and contractors aren't equipped to deal with the various, complex problems of burgeoning cities. Perhaps they can be retrained to an extent. If not, bringing in better professionals is imperative. It can't wait in the face of a rising tide of problems relating to environment, finance, waste and energy. ■

Kirtee Shah is an architect based in Ahmedabad.



Housing is a family product

CITIES

For urban renewal, let power and funds flow to the local level



V. RAVICHANDAR

WITH a new dispensation at the Centre, it's time to rethink urban initiatives that can be catalyzed across cities and towns in the country. While it's true that the bulk of the transformation has to be led by the state governments, the Centre can provide direction and funds to help kickstart the process.

Empower cities, make them a third tier of governance

During the elections there was a lot of talk around amending the Constitution. An amendment is actually needed urgently in the context of cities so as to junk the 74th Amendment and replace it with an act that can truly empower our cities as the third tier of government. The 74th Amendment was stillborn and is currently no panacea for our many ills in urban governance.

We have a constitutional defect at birth. While Tier 1 and 2 (Centre and state) of government were clearly spelt out, when it came to Tier 3, we unfortunately settled for 'local bodies'. These have since become vassals of the state governments. We could do with a new act for urban centres.

If this cannot happen, can we reimagine city governance so that it is more outcome focused? Systemic solutions are needed to deepen decentralization and also have appropriate centralization across multiple agencies at the local level.

Plan for disasters like floods brought on by climate change

Climate change is a reality. Building resilience is a necessity. Our cities and towns do get flooded during the rains thanks to the unplanned, rampant development with no respect for land contours leading to over-concretization. If the rains fail, we will have water scarcity. Our waste-to-landfill model, particularly in larger cities, could result in the contaminating of groundwater and pose serious health challenges. Retro-fitting our cities will take time, money and effort. For now, we must have disaster management and recovery plans in place to deal with exigencies when things go wrong.

As signatories to the net zero climate goals by 2070, cities must be encouraged to develop and implement Climate Action Plans. Sustainable growth and being cognizant of a city's carrying capacity need to be in its DNA.

Get in those investors, money is needed for a better quality of life

Cities are the new engines of growth and increased urbanization (with rural migration) in the years to come will be inevitable. It is time to consider creation of a City Economic Development Agency for each city. It could focus on investment and job creation. To do well cities need to attract global investment. Economic development should come from knowledge and skills. It is necessary to go beyond real estate development. Basic services should be seen as a tremendous economic development opportunity. The informal economy has high growth and development potential.

Our efforts to attract investments started with country attractiveness

as the core proposition. It then evolved into State Global Investor meets that are common currently. The next wave, as is the pattern globally, will be cities attracting investments on their own merit.

Basic services should be sorted out, do simple things well

The common woes of most urban centres revolve around mobility, garbage management, water security and sewage management. We need to learn to do simple things well.

Take walking, for example: it is time cities focused on pedestrians in the same manner that they attend to motorist concerns. Walking is a mobility mode and preceded all other forms of movement. Can we make our cities and towns pedestrian-friendly by designing with them as the central customer?

Solid waste management will need us to embrace decentralized processing with minimum waste sent to landfills — treat waste as a resource.

Water security will require us to look at aquifer recharge, rainwater harvesting and demand side management. Cities need to be 'live-and-



With climate change urban disasters like floods are becoming common

work' places that serve all residents. For the quality of living to improve, cities need to focus on becoming financially stable with their own sources of revenue.

Public spaces foster community spirit and shared experiences

A city comes alive in its public spaces. Parks, lakes, grounds, galleries are important. It is important to develop the 'soft' infrastructure. There is scope for privately enabled public spaces to be developed using philanthropic capital. The government too needs to work on building inclusive spaces for the general public to use. This will help foster community spirit and better mental well-being through shared experiences.

India's urbanized population is currently around 35 percent. Globally developed countries have reached over 80 percent urbanization levels. This trend is inevitable and will happen in the decades to come. We need to be proactive and adopt dynamic short and long-term planning measures that make our cities vibrant engines for India's development. ■

V. Ravichandar has been involved in urban issues.

ROAD SAFETY

Look beyond driver error to safer design, speed limits, monitoring



MANAS FULORIA

I bet that you, dear reader, have probably lost a friend or relative to road crashes. I have lost one *mausaji* and one dear friend. Near-misses cut even closer. My father had his face gashed in a crash, my mother-in-law had her knee broken in another. I myself survived two close calls.

You may have too. The police put down most crashes to “driver error”. That’s incorrect and dangerous, since it absolves others. Here are

four things that the government must do, and a fifth point that is really for car and motorcycle companies to drive. And we as citizens have to keep pushing for each one of them.

Invest in debugging roads for bad design and deadly geometry

At least 10 percent of the funds going into new road infrastructure should be spent on debugging existing roads for safety. Disappearing lanes, missing or misleading signage, badly-designed intersections, and other similarly deadly road geometry must be addressed.

The crash that killed Cyrus Mistry in 2022 was at a point where three lanes on the highway suddenly became two without any warning signage or road markings. But that hasn’t changed things at the National Highways Authority of India (NHAI). At the busy border between Delhi and Gurugram on NH-8, there are 18 south-bound lanes that become nine within about 500 metres, again without any visible signage or road markings. I’m sure every VVIP in India has gone over this patch, but it remains this way.

Make highways and streets less car-centric, give people space

Highways and streets that are not inclusive should also be treated as buggy and to be fixed. Our highway and street infrastructure is very car-centric; it is designed by the rich, for the rich. But very few people in India travel by car. Many people walk, or cycle, or take shared autos or buses, or ply slow-moving rickshaws or bullock carts or tractors.

Our highways have almost no provisions for this silent majority, even when these highways are cutting through villages and towns. Our city streets are designed as wannabe highways and just as bad.

Even in a city like Gurugram, along the length of the swooping NH-48 or the glitzy Golf Course Road or any other street, there is hardly any safe way to walk across or cycle across safely and conveniently.

Our concept of smart cities needs to emphasize provisions for at-grade crossings every few hundred metres in residential and commercial areas, bicycle lanes, and thoughtful plans for slow-moving and non-motorized traffic.

Get serious about speed limits, they are the easiest way to save lives

Every stretch of road should have speed limits posted for all to see. Every fatal accident there involving vehicles that weren’t speeding should lead to a reduction in that speed limit. Even the worst-designed road and the worst driver cannot take lives if speeds are low. Hence, speed limits are the easiest way to save lives.

New York City reduced its default speed limit from 30 mph (about 50 kmph) to 25 mph (about 40 kmph). It is, this year, considering reducing

the speed limits further, mostly to 20 mph (about 30 kmph). Bloomberg reports that New York ended 2023 with its safest year for pedestrians since record-keeping began 114 years ago, with 101 pedestrian deaths in a city of 8.5 million people. What’s more, New York had 262 traffic deaths in total in 2023, while Gurugram had about 400, with only about one-fifth of NYC’s population.

Enforce rules and penalize offenders with the use of digital evidence

Enforcement with digital evidence should be ubiquitous and its effectiveness at each location should be measured and reported. Enforcement today is mostly in a few local pockets and concentrated on a few revolving topics of the day, like riding a two-wheeler without a helmet or talking on the phone while driving. Instead, it should be so pervasive that anyone breaking any rule should expect to be automatically penalized. Wrong-side driving, speeding, parking illegally on the footpath or roadside, overloading vehicles — all of these must be penalized out of existence.



Our highways and streets are car-centric but very few people in India travel by car

Digital evidence is the way forward. Speed cameras are already making some cities safer. I am personally willing to sacrifice some privacy for saving lives, even to the extent of a GPS-driven “black box” in each vehicle that stores a few hours of location and speed data.

Encourage a polite driving culture and dissuade road vulgarity

We have to make civility on the roads become classy and aspirational. India may boast of being an ancient civilization, a Vishwa Guru, but one could hardly infer that from a comparison of our driving culture with that in Western countries. We dart about our roads in a frenzy, leaning on the horn, sparing no thought for the pedestrians, whether aged or children or pregnant, or for cyclists.

My company, Nagarro, recently sponsored comedian Gaurav Kapoor to make a stand-up segment on civility on the roads, or *Sadak Sabhyata*, which has already received two million views. As a society, we have to expand such efforts thousand-fold. Auto companies could take the lead on this, especially the luxury brands that appear to be disproportionately involved in road crashes. ■

Manas Fuloria is the CEO and co-founder of Nagarro.

HERITAGE

Hold on to the past, put it to good use



RATISH NANDA

INDIA takes pride in being an ancient culture. Yet, we protect less than 3,700 monuments of national importance. The states and municipalities together protect a similar number. By comparison, New York City has almost 30,000 heritage buildings protected by law. In the United Kingdom, close to 600,000 heritage buildings are recognized and protected.

Sadly, heritage in India is seen as a burden and not the economic asset that it can be. We at the Aga Khan Trust for Culture (AKTC) have demonstrated through our work at Humayun’s Tomb and Sunder Nursery in Delhi and the Qutb Shahi Heritage Park in Hyderabad that national heritage can significantly improve the quality of life of urban populations.

The BJP manifesto for 2024 promised: “We will restore and preserve culturally important Archaeological Survey of India (ASI) monuments, re-igniting our rich heritage for the 21st century.”

To ‘restore’ is to bring back the original condition and often requires multiple actions, including restoring of missing ornamentation and architectural elements. However, even 75 years after Independence, the ASI continues to largely follow the colonial practice of ‘preservation’ — or minimum intervention even when some monuments have lost significant architectural elements. Even though restoration of ancient structures is not possible, I do hope the BJP manifesto does indeed aim to ‘restore’ a majority of our medieval national monuments.

The following five actions would help realize this potential:

Choose major monuments in each of the ASI’s five regions and begin work

Conservation, even if only ‘preservation’ and not ‘restoration’, is needed across all of the 3,675 national monuments. However, if in the next five years pilot conservation/restoration projects can be undertaken at major monuments in each of the five ASI regions, that would revitalize both the ASI and the state departments of archaeology. These pilot projects at grand sites should focus on conservation but also include landscape and ecological restoration.

The AKTC’s conservation of more than 60 monuments in Delhi and more than 100 in Hyderabad required over 1.5 million man-days of work by master craftsmen. This job creation is a byproduct of conservation and could be funded by schemes such as the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA).

Get companies into building tourism infrastructure

Despite 30 years of liberalization, the responsibility for national monuments has only been seen to devolve upon the Central government/ASI. The recently launched ‘Adopt Heritage’ scheme allowing companies to use CSR funds to build tourism infrastructure — site museums, parking, toilets, signage, illumination — at national monuments is a step in the right direction. Already, IndiGo has demonstrated the value of the scheme at Rahim’s mausoleum in Delhi. However, the ASI must ensure that misguided companies do not use the scheme to compromise the significance of national monuments by reducing them to backdrops for corporate events or, worse, using CSR funds for activities they are not

permitted — such as building fine dining restaurants atop the monuments, as has already been proposed! Such misuse will no doubt incite public fury and kill a well-intentioned scheme.

Safeguard monuments against encroachment

Almost all our national monuments suffer from encroachment, even Humayun’s Tomb, the Red Fort and the Qutb Minar — World Heritage Sites located in the national capital.

At Tughlaqabad Fort, the erstwhile *chowkidar* of the ASI encouraged encroachment and over 200,000 people today inhabit the fort. There are even more at Golconda!

The ASI monuments are also valuable land holdings for the Central government and it has to be a priority for the new government to secure our national heritage from encroachment.

Use heritage to enhance the quality of life for local communities

Well-conserved/restored national heritage sites, through instilling a sense of pride as well as creating jobs and wealth, can also be used by local communities. In Nizamuddin, the AKTC’s conservation effort was coupled with significant effort to create health and education infrastructure, provide vocational training opportunities, instal public toilets for pilgrims, undertake urban and housing improvements, and do



Well-conserved heritage sites can help in creating jobs and instilling a sense of pride

landscaping of public parks, amongst other benefits for residents.

If the ASI can partner with civil society organizations to provide similar benefits to needy communities living near monuments, then in future years our national built heritage will be seen for the national asset it is and, just like the environment, receive public support for conservation.

Set up site museums to help people understand heritage

The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) has mandated that site museums be set up for all World Heritage Sites and Tentative World Heritage Sites, across the world. Conservation of model national sites should be followed by creation of site museums/interpretation centres to allow visitors/tourists to understand the cultural context in which the sites were built and the reason for their significance.

Site museums need to be innovative, use modern technology to appeal to a younger audience, inform and educate in a manner that generates additional interest in the site. In doing so, they can help build bridges between communities, generate significant tourism if well designed and serve as an important 21st century layer at historic sites. ■

Ratish Nanda is CEO, Aga Khan Trust for Culture.

JOBS

Give craft start-ups the status they need



SUMITA GHOSE

AFTER agriculture, handlooms and handicrafts provide the second largest source of livelihoods for rural communities. Many families practise both — rainfed agriculture in one season and crafts the rest of the year. Many also grow vegetables and keep small animals or cows to augment their incomes and fulfil their needs.

Agriculture is a risky profession and can absorb only a limited number of people into farming activity. Handlooms and handicrafts of different kinds can be an alternative source of employment for rural Indians who would rather stay in their villages, instead of moving to overcrowded and polluted towns and cities and end up as construction workers.

Equally important, crafts provide a space for expression of one's creativity and identity. Handwork, being repetitive and requiring focus, is meditative and helps in calming the mind.

The handicraft and handloom industry can alleviate rural unemployment if relevant government ministries, departments and we the people lend a helping hand. The needs of the sector must be addressed on a war footing with carefully thought-out strategies, if we wish to capitalize on our incredible craft heritages.

Bring SHGs together for micro-enterprises

This can begin with organizing Self-Help Groups (SHGs) in villages, which can then collectively form an organization. It could be a society, or a company. A local community-based NGO is best suited to lend a helping hand with financial support from the government.

Organizations like NABARD have already helped build such producer organizations. While some have been able to successfully find market access, those in the handicraft and handloom textiles sector still need help to find markets and cater to market demand. This strategic partnership between civil society organizations and the government — both committed to keeping people and the planet at the centre of all their interventions — can go a long way in ensuring inclusive organizations working with the goal of sustainable development at the grassroots.

Producer groups can manage district centres of excellence

Design a hub-and-spoke model to reach out to the last mile of artisans. Investment in appropriate technology and infrastructure is needed to set up centres of excellence in each district in the country, where there are a sizeable number, at least 500, of active artisans.

The hub would house a design studio for regular product development using local skills and raw materials, keeping the contemporary market in mind. Also, a raw material bank and processing facilities like dyeing, with an effluent treatment plan, and finishing, packing, dispatch facilities for shipping.

Thirdly, digital technology — for management of inventory, and for accounting purposes — is crucial for the producers' group to scale up for greater social impact. Digital technology can also help weavers connect directly to the market through government channels like the Open Network for Digital Commerce (ONDC).

Sumita Ghose is founder-director of Rangсутra Crafts.

Provide hands-on training programmes for skills to run community enterprises

This is essential to ensure that community enterprises become viable and growth-oriented. Training would include skills and handloom/handicraft techniques, and learning and implementing the requirements of the contemporary market — especially with respect to quality and timely production. Enterprises must reach the market in time.

The state can bring the market to artisans at airports and in cities

Governments can play a significant role in promoting crafts by organizing global-standard exhibitions in state capitals and cities with airport access. This would draw both tourists as well as buyers of crafts and textiles from across the world to where products are actually made. Seeing artisans at work, getting a glimpse of all that goes on behind making a hand-crafted product is great incentive for purchasing products and for placing orders. This will also give a boost to the tourism industry, benefitting homestays and hotels.

The middle class can play a role in boosting handlooms

The middle class can create jobs in rural India by buying handmade products instead of mass-produced ones for home decor, clothing, accessories, and gifts. It can promote our cultural heritage by incorporating handmade items into everyday life. This includes wearing handloom sarees, handcrafted garments, pottery, or decorating homes with artisanal textiles and artwork.

The middle class can also spread awareness about the value of handmade products and the importance of supporting artisans and

Civil Society picture/Lakshman Anand



Centres in each district managed by artisan collectives can boost crafts and incomes

weavers. It can encourage friends, family, and colleagues to appreciate and invest in the unique craftsmanship of Indian artisans. It can explore local markets, craft fairs, and exhibitions to discover handmade treasures from different regions of India.

For special occasions such as weddings, festivals or corporate events consider commissioning custom-made handicrafts or handloom items. This not only supports artisans but ensures unique and personalized gifts.

By seeking out and purchasing from social enterprises and NGOs that work with artisans and weavers you can improve their livelihoods, promote their products and contribute to social and economic empowerment in rural communities. Also, look for handmade items that are sustainable and eco-friendly and made from natural materials, organic dyes, and recycled materials.

Share the stories behind handmade products with others to create a deeper connection and appreciation for the craftsmanship involved. Whether it's the history of a traditional craft technique or the journey of an individual artisan, storytelling can inspire others to support the handicraft and handloom industry. ■

TECHNOLOGY

Spend on tech, focus on strategic areas



KIRAN KARNIK

TECHNOLOGY is the currency of power, and the driver of economies around the world. So, what needs to be done for India to make the leap in technological capability, enabling an acceleration in sustainable and inclusive growth? It could spend more, be purposeful, promote diversity and upgrade higher education.

Target reaching a spend of two percent of GDP on R&D by 2030

For decades now, political leaders (including prime ministers) have set a target of two percent of GDP for R&D. Even this modest target is a pipedream, with the present gross expenditure on R&D (GERD) estimated at just 0.65 percent. The PM must announce a year-by-year ascent path, to reach two percent by 2030. In addition, provide appropriate tax or other incentives to increase private sector R&D spending to 0.75 percent in five years, from the present 0.26 percent.

China — our main rival — spends 2.43 percent and, with a GDP that is more than four times ours, this translates to over 10 times India's expenditure (Israel invests 5.6 percent).

Mission mode for efficiency, accountability and delivery

While funds are necessary, they are not sufficient. Executing in true “mission mode” requires structures and systems that facilitate efficiency, accountability and delivery. Delegation and empowerment are key. Over the years centralization and excessive bureaucracy (including tech-bureaucracy) has become the unfortunate norm. There is much to be learned from the experience of our nuclear and space programmes, especially from their early decades.

The growing prowess of India's tech industry, its agility, flexibility, and speed of execution, offer unique opportunities, as do its market knowledge, market linkages and global connections. Allowing industry far greater access to government research facilities and promoting interaction between the two could stimulate R&D. Public-private partnership would, therefore, be a very effective mechanism for rapid progress. Collaborative international links (with companies or universities and research institutions) should be established for R&D, wherever appropriate.

Focus on strategic areas like agriculture, health-tech, pharma, AI and more

Even with big increases, funds will always be scarce. Focussing on a limited number of fields is therefore necessary. We need to pick areas which are important and strategic with a view of the future and of our capabilities and strengths. Amongst these would be: agriculture; health-tech, healthcare and pharmaceuticals; electronics; cyber, computers, and AI; genetics and biology; climate change; energy; transportation; nuclear and space tech. Even within these, a tighter focus is essential. For example, thorium reactors and small modular reactors; or space-tech applications, scientific research, and autonomous/robotic space systems, instead of huge time, effort and funds going into vanity-driven human space flights.

While a mission-orientation with clear deliverables, costs, and time-

frames is essential, funding should also be provided for blue-sky, open-ended research and for basic science. These are the foundations and seeds of future (often, yet unclear) technologies and missions.

Improve education at all levels and encourage diversity for innovation

Much has been written about India's innovative capabilities, about frugal engineering, and real-life space missions that cost less than movies about them. Despite this, we rank 40th in the World Intellectual Property Organization's Global Innovation Index (GII) 2023. This is certainly great progress from our position (81) in 2015, but far behind China (12) and South Korea (10).

If India is to be an innovative society we need to encourage diversity. This requires reversal of the present philosophy of uniformity and centralization — in education (curriculum, admission tests, systems, procedures, and much else), organization of research, funding, etc. — which dampens innovation.

Going from STEM to STEAM, India can be a talent factory

We are proud of our top sci-tech educational institutions: the Indian Institute of Science and the Indian Institutes of Technology (IITs) are globally renowned. Unfortunately, the average sci-tech institute is miles below. The long tail of hundreds of universities and colleges provides even poorer education. India does produce the second-largest number of graduates in science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM), behind only China.



Upgrade the quality of higher education but start at school level

As a result, India has a couple of million graduates with sci-tech degrees, the top 10 percent of whom are high-quality professionals. This number makes India a hub of talent and an attractive destination for so-called Global Capability Centres (R&D hubs of MNCs). Now, in keeping with new needs, STEM must quickly integrate Arts — and humanities — to become STEAM.

Rapidly upgrading the quality of higher education is essential, but we need to start at the school level. In addition, there is a need to equip those who have minimal education with skills that do not necessarily need a strong academic base (masons, electricians, plumbers, and carpenters, for example). Upgrading skills (eg., in AI) of those already employed is a must if they are to continue being productively employed.

India needs these skills, and it is the only way to reap the benefits of the demographic dividend. At the same time, demography is creating a shortage of workers and talent in most developed countries. Here, then, is a unique opportunity for India to meet its own needs and be a big exporter of talent. Success in this is dependent on the rapid scaling and quality improvement of our education and skilling systems. ■

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

INNOVATION

Big ideas come from a risk-taking culture, it is time to get started



R. A. MASHELKAR

INDIA should create science that will lead and not just follow. Innovations from India should be disruptive and not merely incremental. Innovation with inclusion will make India a global leader in providing access and dealing with problems of poverty.

A culture of risk-taking needs to be encouraged as opposed to being risk-averse the way we are now. 'Make in India' should not just mean 'assembled' in India, but 'invented' and 'made' in India — not just for India, but for the world.

Industry should invest much more in R&D, govt should give the incentives

The first priority should be to urgently deal with the current low investment in R & D, which is just 0.64 percent of GDP, well below the world average. Indian industry's investment in R & D is only around 0.2 percent of GDP. The government should play a bigger role to play in getting industry to spend on R&D. Innovative public private-partnerships (like for instance the successful New Millennium Indian Technology Leadership Initiative) is one way. But performance-based (both on input and output) incentives is another way. Incentives like weighted tax deduction, accelerated depreciation allowance, investment allowance have been either reduced or withdrawn. It is very easy to bring them back with a policy switch.

Link the lab to the market, help ideas find the money they need

The second priority is to accelerate the currently sluggish journey from mind to marketplace. In terms of technology readiness level (TRL), the labs begin at proof-of-concept level (TRL1) but Industry seeks fully standardized and market-ready products (TRL 9). Research labs have their limitation to go beyond TRL 4 or so, which involves only a successful demonstration on a small scale. For India, the journey from TRL 4 to TRL 9 has been a real valley of death.

The government should set up 100 sector-specific 'Innovation Translation Facilities' in partnership with industry and within or in the vicinity of industry. These should be publicly owned but privately managed facilities. Catapult is an interesting model that exists in the UK.

Cut back on bureaucracy because it is suffocating science and tech

The science, technology and innovation system should be freed up from bureaucracy. It has been a long-standing problem. The current audit systems do not recognise that science is an exploration and cannot be treated in the same way as in road-building. The previous efforts on decentralization are giving way to centralisation. Disbursement of research funding has become slow.

Govt as first-buyer, early-user can grow markets for new products

The fourth priority is for the government to set up aggressive public procurement policies. Innovations are products of creative interaction of supply and demand. India has incentivized supply by funding many research institutions.

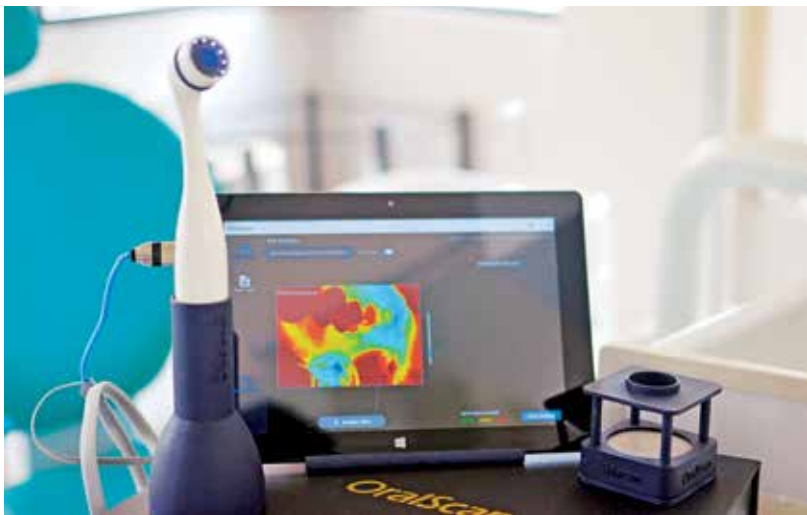
We also need aggressive demand side initiatives. With large procurement budgets, government can not only be the biggest, but also the most influential and demanding customer.

More specifically, the government could act as the 'first-buyer' and an 'early-user' for small, innovative firms and manage the consequent risk thus providing the initial revenue and customer feedback they need to survive and refine their products and services so that they can later compete effectively in the global marketplace.

The government can set up regulations that can successfully drive innovation either indirectly through altering market structure and affecting the funds available for investment, or directly through boosting or limiting demand for particular products and services.

Buy from the private sector, free up tender, bidding rules

The fifth priority is to look at the instruments to give a greater role to the private sector. Many success stories of innovation policy in advanced economies are grounded on connection between public expenditure for innovation and spillovers into the society that are obtained through the



OralScan is a non-invasive optical device that detects oral cancer

'buy' approach by contracting out to the private sector (like NASA in USA does) rather than the 'make' approach in a government-funded institution (like ISRO does). This calls for a radical departure from the currently adopted 'make' path to the 'buy' path, wherever possible. It will yield higher returns to society per unit public expenditure.

We need some truly bold steps to fundamentally change the General Financial Rules (GFR), which is the fundamental document that shapes government contracting in India. Bidding and tender requirements are unsuitable for research contracts. Efficiency of research gets impaired and costs of contracting increase through tendering. Rule 144 (for goods) and Rule 201 (for services) should be modified to exclude research contracts.

Grants are a flexible instrument to fund research. Under Rule 230, only educational institutions, cooperative societies and government organizations are allowed to receive grants from the Union government. This should be amended to include all forms of organizations including private for-profit firms. ■

Dr Raghunath Anant Mashelkar is an influential thought leader who is globally recognized and honoured for his contributions to science and technology.

RIGHTS & LAWS

Consult citizens, strengthen RTI, rural jobs, food security



ARUNA ROY & NIKHIL DEY

WE have two main reasons to suggest what the priorities of the new government should be. The first is in the hope that this newly elected government will welcome citizens' suggestions and feedback when it formulates law, policy and modes of implementation.

The second is to address "the people" in a democracy with the faith and understanding that citizen-centric democratic processes will eventually result in a state-society-citizen-engagement that will make citizen participation meaningful, far beyond the vote.

Roll back oppressive laws, give people space

Over the past decade, democratic participation has become increasingly difficult and even dangerous. Any voices of dissent, or even campaigns and movements that demanded rights and entitlements for people, were discouraged, criticized, and suppressed.

There is a crying need to roll back the restrictive and oppressive practices that have weaponized laws to curtail any form of criticism or opposition. The Unlawful Activities (Prevention) Act (UAPA), the curtailing of the freedom of speech, the Prevention of Money Laundering Act (PMLA), the amendments to the Foreign Contribution Regulation Act (FCRA), and the manner in which these have been misused needs to be brought to a halt in order to make the best use of the energy and expertise of citizens.

The sanctity of physical space for non-violent and democratic protest needs to be restored if India is going to come out of being labelled and evaluated as an "elected autocracy", or functioning as an "undeclared emergency".

Rescind and review the unconstitutional and arbitrary revisions that have been made to school textbooks — be it history, civics, political science, science — by the National Council of Educational Research and Training (NCERT) under the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020. Instead promote constitutional, democratic, secular and scientific values amongst children in their formative years.

Make the right to information a constitutional right

Reverse dilutions in India's celebrated RTI Act and ensure it is properly implemented in letter and spirit. It would be appropriate to give the RTI the status of being an explicit constitutional right. This would protect the independence of the information commissioners and strengthen the efforts of citizens in fighting corruption, controlling the arbitrary exercise of power and enable them to make informed choices.

Spend more on rural work, food security, pensions

Two laws that have repeatedly saved India's most economically vulnerable and marginalized people from starvation and destitution have been the National Food Security Act (NFSA), and the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA). Both laws saved millions of people from starvation during Covid-19. Along with social

security pensions, these entitlements can prevent starvation and destitution. But they need to be strengthened in key areas:

Social security pensions have provided pensions from the Central government to the elderly, disabled, and single women, at the ridiculously low and cruel amount of ₹200 and ₹300 per month! The number of people covered is so small that vast numbers of the disabled and elderly populations are unable to get any pension at all! It has been left to the states to enhance these entitlements.

Employment guarantees for the rural poor have been undermined by insufficient fund flows. Covid times dramatically showed us the vulnerabilities of the urban poor. Foodgrain guarantees under the NFSA have also been undermined because the increase in population has not been ascertained since the census has not been carried out.

This has been pointed out by the Supreme Court of India, and needs to be urgently corrected.

Rajasthan's "Minimum Guaranteed Income" law provides a legal entitlement of 125 days a year in rural and urban areas. Those who can work, and want work are given a work entitlement. Those not able to work because of old age, disability, etc, are given a statutory entitlement of a minimum pension of ₹1,000 a month with an increment of 15 percent per annum. Perhaps this law should be followed nationally.

A law to protect gig and other unorganized sector workers

Workers in India's unorganized sector have no social security and no protection by labour laws because they are unable to even get themselves registered in their workplaces. The gig economy has taken the impunity of employers to a new level. They claim piece rate work takes away their responsibilities as employers, as piece rate work has no employer-employee relationship.

However, Rajasthan's gig workers social security law has positive implications for a large segment of unorganized sector workers. By mandating a transaction-based social security fee to be paid by employers of piece rated (gig) workers into a tripartite social security board, the law manages to pin employers down at three levels:

First, it underlines that even with piece rate work, employers have a responsibility to meet the social security needs of workers. Each transaction can be linked so that no work exists without employer responsibility. Secondly, the digital platform tracks each transaction of the worker. In this way, it automatically registers the worker and automatically deposits the social security fees. Thirdly, it allows for an independent grievance redressal mechanism through the tripartite board. Regulation of the unorganized and unregulated sector can, thereby, be introduced in a practical, trackable way.

Domestic workers, brick kiln workers, mine workers and construction workers can also come under this formulation.

Ensure accountability of public officials

Finally, to realize our constitutional and statutory rights and to ensure delivery of basic services, we need an accountability framework. This includes a social accountability law, an independent Lokpal and a whistleblower protection mechanism, to ensure high-level accountability of all public officials. ■

Aruna Roy and Nikhil Dey are co-founders of the MKSS.

PUBLIC LIFE

For a vibrant democracy, financial transparency and a strong CEC



JAGDEEP CHHOKAR

spectrum, the following six reforms seem to be the most significant and urgent.

Every political party must function in a democratic manner within itself

The single most important reform needed is internal democracy in the functioning of political parties. We have a very incongruous situation. While the country claims to be a vibrant democracy, none of the political parties, the so-called 'pillars' of democracy, are democratic in their internal functioning. The Law Commission of India said in its 170th report in May 1999:

"It is therefore, necessary to introduce internal democracy, financial transparency and accountability in the working of the political parties."

"Internal democracy" as used by the Commission means (a) demonstrable democracy, and (b) candidates should also be chosen democratically, not on the whims of the party leadership.

A draft bill titled The Political Parties (Registration and Regulation of Affairs, etc.) Draft Bill 2011 was prepared by a committee chaired by Justice M.N. Venkatachaliah, former Chief Justice of India. This draft bill was sent to all political parties in 2011 but nothing has been heard from any of them.

Citizens have the right to know how political parties are being funded

The excerpt from the Law Commission's report reproduced above specifically mentions "financial transparency and accountability". Governments of all hues have maintained that citizens/voters have no right to know the source of funds of political parties but the Supreme Court (SC) has said in the recent Electoral Bonds judgment that citizens do have this right.

This issue has also been taken up under the Right to Information (RTI) Act in the past. The Central Information Commission (CIC), the highest statutory body in the country under the RTI Act, in a unanimous, full-bench decision on June 3, 2013, held that six national political parties were public authorities under the RTI Act. All the six parties blatantly refused to follow the directions of the CIC. The matter has been pending in the Supreme Court since 2015.

Independence of the Election Commission is essential for the working of democracy

This is a fundamental issue regarding the conduct of elections in India which the Constituent Assembly (CA) had discussed at length. The primary concern was to make the Chief Election Commissioner completely independent of the Executive. A consensus could not be arrived at and, as a compromise, it was left to Parliament to make a law in this regard but this was never done and the CEC and the ECs continued

to be appointed by the government of the day.

The SC, on March 2, 2023, directed Parliament to legislate on the issue, and said that till a law was made, the appointments should be done on the recommendation of a committee consisting of the prime minister, the leader of the opposition, and the Chief Justice of India (CJI). In December 2023, Parliament did make a law, leaving out the CJI and replacing him with a minister nominated by the prime minister, which negated the spirit of the SC judgment and the CA debates.

Given that the independence of the Election Commission of India (ECI) is fundamental to democracy, it has been proposed that the following process be followed for the appointment of the CEC and the ECs.

- An existing committee of Parliament, or a new committee formed for this purpose, should propose the qualifications and requirements for persons to be appointed as ECs/CEC.
- The proposal of the committee should be put to Parliament and should be considered approved only if approved by a two-thirds majority of the members of Parliament present and voting.
- Once the qualifications and requirements are approved by Parliament, the same committee should be entrusted with the task of searching for and selecting individuals proposed to be appointed as ECs/CEC.
 - The committee should invite nominations of and applications by individuals appropriate for and interested in being appointed as ECs/CEC.
 - Out of the nominations and applications received, the committee should short-list persons considered appropriate.
 - The committee should meet the short-listed persons in open hearings which should be accessible for viewing by people at large through video transmission.
 - After the hearings, the committee should select individuals proposed to be appointed as ECs/CEC.
- The committee should send its recommendations to Parliament for consideration.
- Recommendations of the committee should be considered approved by Parliament only if approved by a two-thirds majority of the members of Parliament present and voting.
- Once Parliament approves the recommendations, these should be sent to the President for approving the appointments.
- Once appointed, such persons should stay in their positions for six years or till the age of 75 years, whichever is earlier. Persons above the age of 69 years should not be appointed.

More power should be given to the ECI to discipline political parties

Article 29A of the Representation of the People Act, 1951, gives the ECI power to register political parties. Normally, a registering authority also has power to deregister. However, the SC, in a judgment on May 10, 2002 (*Indian National Congress (I) vs Institute of Social Welfare and others*), held that though the ECI does have the power to register political parties, it does not have the power to deregister them. This puts India in a unique position in the world where a political party, once registered, will continue to exist till eternity!

This makes the ECI totally powerless to discipline political parties and puts political parties, once registered, almost completely above the law of the land. There is therefore an urgent need to review this judgment.



Citizens must know how political parties are being funded

A law is needed to bar candidates with criminal cases pending against them from fighting elections

Consequent to judgments by constitutional courts, since 2003, candidates contesting elections to Parliament and state assemblies have to disclose criminal cases pending against them. As a result of these self-disclosures, data from the 2004 elections onward shows a consistent progressive increase in the number of members of the Lok Sabha with criminal cases pending against them from 25 percent in 2004 to 46 percent in the 2024 elections.

Political parties have not stopped giving tickets to such people despite repeated appeals by several sections of society, and being fined by the SC.

It has been recommended by several agencies, including the ECI, that persons (a) against whom a criminal case has been registered at least one year before the date of the election, (b) the prescribed punishment for the offence is two years or more of imprisonment, and (c) charges have been framed by a court of law should be barred from contesting elections.

Parliament has not done this despite repeated requests. The SC has refused to step in, saying making laws is the job of Parliament, but has repeatedly made fervent appeals to Parliament to do this. If it is not done, a time will come when more than 50 percent of the members of the Lok Sabha will have criminal cases pending against them.

Take NOTA seriously so that people get better candidates

The SC, in a landmark judgment on September 27, 2013, directed the ECI to make provision for voters to express their desire not to vote for any of the candidates on the ballot, without violating the secrecy of their vote, by providing a NOTA (None Of The Above) button on the EVMs.

The ECI provided a button. The rule regarding counting of NOTA votes says that out of a total of 2,000 registered voters, if 1,999 votes are cast in favour of NOTA and even one vote is cast for one of the candidates,

Data from 2004 onward shows a progressive increase in the number of members of the Lok Sabha with criminal cases pending against them from 25 percent in 2004 to 46 percent in the 2024 elections.

that candidate will be declared elected. This follows the letter of the law but absolutely ignores and violates the spirit of the judgment which is captured in the following sentence:

"When the political parties will realize that a large number of people are expressing their disapproval with the candidates being put up by them, gradually there will be a systemic change and the political parties will be forced to accept the will of the people and field candidates who are known for their integrity."

To implement the SC judgment in the right spirit, the following has been suggested:

- If NOTA gets the highest number of votes, no one should be declared elected and a fresh election should be held.
- In the fresh election, the candidates who contested the earlier election should not be allowed to contest.
- In the fresh election, if NOTA gets the most votes, there should be a run-off election between the top two candidates who secure the most valid votes.

This has been implemented by two State Election Commissions, of Maharashtra and Haryana, and the ECI should also do this so that the SC judgment is implemented in the right spirit. ■

Jagdeep Chhokar is a founder of ADR and a concerned citizen.

RIVERS

Protect floodplains, check creeping encroachments and sewage



VENKATESH DUTTA

ensure the protection and rejuvenation of India's vital river systems. Here are my five wishes:

Recognize rivers as legal persons or living entities with their rights

Bestowing rights on rivers would go a long way in ensuring their protection. The concept isn't fully understood here as yet. Instead, rules and guidelines for protecting rivers from human activities are primarily derived from a variety of state and Central laws. But recognizing rivers as legal persons or living entities is a notable development in many countries, including New Zealand, Australia, Bangladesh, and Colombia.

Granting rivers legal personhood or living entity status implies that they possess rights similar to those of human beings. A clearer understanding of river rights allows for legal action on behalf of these ecosystems when they are threatened or harmed by human activities.

Floodplains are vital and should be protected with zoning regulations

Often, there is no clear demarcation of river boundaries, making it easy for individuals and entities to encroach on these lands without immediate repercussions.

In 2016, the Centre issued directives to prevent encroachment on the floodplains of the Ganga and its tributaries. According to the notification of the *Gazette of India*, Ministry of Water Resources, River Development and Ganga Rejuvenation dated October 7, 2016, Section 6(3): "No person shall construct any permanent or temporary structure for residential or commercial or industrial or any other purpose on the banks of the river Ganga or its tributaries or in its active floodplains."

Additionally, in 2008, the National Disaster Management Authority (NDMA) provided guidelines for states on flood zoning as a crucial 'non-structural measure' to mitigate floods. According to these guidelines, areas likely to be affected by floods should be designated as green spaces, such as parks and gardens, with a prohibition on concrete structures. The guidelines also address other zones within the floodplain, such as areas prone to flooding with a 25-year frequency, recommending that states develop plans accordingly.

However, many states have not delineated the floodplains of their rivers, allowing builders and urban local bodies to occupy these critical areas.

Use buffer zones to prevent river land from becoming real estate

There is massive encroachment on the land of rivers. Smaller rivers have been badly impacted by intrusion in their channel by farms, settlements and illegal structures. As cities grow, there is a demand for more land for housing, infrastructure, and commercial development. Riverbanks often provide prime real estate due to their scenic and strategic locations. There

is often a lack of stringent enforcement of laws protecting river lands, compounded by corruption and administrative inefficiencies. Therefore, strict measures are required to ensure that new developments do not encroach on river land and that adequate buffer zones are maintained. For this, a programme is urgently required to accurately survey and clearly demarcate river boundaries to prevent further encroachment. The revenue department should carry out regular monitoring and surveillance of river lands using satellite imagery, drones, and ground inspections to detect and address encroachments promptly.

Have drainage master plans for all towns and cities to stop sewage entering rivers

Rivers generally traverse alluvial areas, meandering through expansive landscapes. Cities have often developed along their banks and continue to expand. The urbanization is accompanied by rapid industrialization, both of which impact the natural flow of rivers and their feeding tributaries. Further, the construction of bridges, highways, and roads within floodplain zones has severely disrupted their flow. Unplanned urban sprawl, without considering the city's natural drainage systems, threatens their resilience.



Giving rivers legal rights can go a long way in ensuring their protection

Over time, the longitudinal and lateral connectivity of rivers and their aquatic ecosystems has been compromised due to the development of roads, highways, and residential colonies on the floodplains. If cities do not develop their Drainage Master Plans, there would be flooding as well as depletion of water due to loss of recharge space.

Revive small rivers and rivulets that are fast getting built upon

Many smaller rivers and rivulets across India are disappearing at an alarming rate. Some have been converted into sewage drains, while others have succumbed to extensive encroachment by both private and government entities. Field observations indicate a significant gap in policy implementation, enforcement, and monitoring by district-level authorities, resulting in non-compliance with orders intended to protect these smaller rivers. Most of the ongoing efforts are directed towards big rivers, while smaller rivers do not get the desired level of attention. Therefore, a dedicated programme should be started for rejuvenation of smaller rivers. ■

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

SOCIAL SECTOR

Improve the ease of doing good, let non-profits function freely



MATHEW CHERIAN

what about the ease of doing good? Development programmes need voluntary effort to make them more effective and reach communities efficiently.

Non-profits make a substantial contribution to the economy. They employ 18 million people and it is estimated there are nine million volunteers in the country.

FCRA licence renewal should be as simple as getting a passport

Doing Foreign Contribution Regulation Act (FCRA) documentation online can be a nightmare, especially for small organizations. Mistakes cannot be corrected and if there is a discrepancy between the soft and hard copy versions of the information, all the documents go up for scrutiny. In the absence of clear-cut criteria for renewal of an FCRA licence every five years, organizations are not sure of their survival. Why can't the conditions be clearly spelt out and the paperwork made easier — like getting a passport.

The rule that requires 85 percent of foreign funds to be spent in the same year should go. The unspent money is treated as income when it is more in the nature of 'deferred liability'.

Small community-based organizations can't use their own resources every year till the funds arrive from the grantee. FCRA reporting becomes more complicated if local money is used. The local police, Income Tax Department and also the Economic Offences Wing harass the ground-level voluntary organizations.

Make the norms for registration and exemption simple in much the same way as rules relating to FDI are simplified for companies. Why should there be double standards for different sectors?

The stipulation of opening an FCRA account only in the State Bank of India on Parliament Street, New Delhi, should be changed. Any SBI branch should do.

Reduce discretion in tax matters, treat fundraising as charity

The legal incentives available to philanthropic organizations and the non-profit sector fall into two general categories: (i) tax exemptions for the income and goods that non-profit organizations receive and (ii) tax advantage for donors, both individual and corporate, for contributing to the non-profit sector through deductibility of charitable contributions.

The revenue authorities retain substantial discretion in these decisions and apply it arbitrarily. The structure of support is enhanced by exemption or deduction procedures that are not entirely transparent. It leads to harassment by the tax officials.

Fundraising by non-profits should not be seen as a commercial activity as most revenue authorities currently tend to do. Building an organization requires fundraising. It involves costs which should not be seen as

commercial costs but as charitable costs.

Philanthropic donations should be 100 percent tax exempt and Section 35 AC should be reinstated. Local donations can sustain the voluntary sector and the contributions to the national economy can be improved significantly. Going *swadeshi* and not *videshi* is the path ahead.

Liberalize CSR spending, open up more sectors for companies

The CSR guidelines indicating that spending should be 100 percent complete by the end of the financial year is an artificial timeline. This needs to be modified and, if tax exemptions are being given for CSR donations, it should follow the tax guideline of 85 percent spend and carry forward for five years as before. There needs to be a more liberalized approach to CSR and support to all the SDG goals and inclusion of all sectors of children, disabled, women, elderly, animal welfare and a 'leave no one behind' approach. Sustainability goals should be incorporated



Non-profits provide last-mile solutions

into these objectives of the Ministry of Corporate Affairs CSR guidelines and should be solely for the social sector, implemented by non-profit organizations.

Incentivize impact investing to get the Social Stock Exchange working

The present lack of tax incentives for the zero-coupon bond will create a situation where donors may not invest, barring an altruistic donor. Tax incentives of at least 80 G tax exemption need to be provided which will create a new funding avenue for the listed non-profits, if not 100 percent tax exemption. The government needs to enable tax exemption for Social Stock Exchange donors.


An appellate tribunal to address the grievances of the voluntary sector

In spite of the tremendous contribution by civil society there is a perennial problem: departments do not answer to the grievances of the voluntary sector. There is no appeal process or grievance redressal system. The Home Ministry poses a major problem, not answering any emails or letters or even acknowledging them. It is a non-transparent and completely unaccountable system. I suggest creation of an appellate tribunal headed by a judge on the lines of the Central Administrative Tribunal (CAT) so that our grievances can be addressed. ■

Mathew Cheria is Global Ambassador of Ageing, Helpage International.

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.

PLANT MANY MORE TREES

 Founded in 2021 by Rituraj Khanna in New Delhi, the SankalpTaru Foundation's work focuses on mitigation of climate change, reforestation, and enhancing biodiversity.

Their key projects include large-scale tree plantation drives. One such project is the Rural Livelihood Support Programme which aims to increase farmers' income by planting fruit-bearing trees that provide environmental and economic benefits. Another initiative is Trees for Tribals, that helps to enhance the green cover in tribal areas and create sustainable income sources for them.

SankalpTaru uses innovative technology such as geo-tagging trees to monitor their growth. The NGO collaborates with corporates, schools, and individuals to foster collective responsibility for environmental conservation.

You can participate in plantation drives, awareness campaigns, and community engagement activities. Donations to sponsor tree plantation can be made and volunteering opportunities can be accessed online.

<https://www.sankalptaru.org/>
wishy@sankalptaru.org | +917409999111

EDUCATE AND EMPOWER LITTLE GIRLS

 Nanhi Kali, founded in 1996, is a flagship programme of the K.C. Mahindra Education Trust based in Mumbai. The NGO is dedicated to empowering underprivileged girls through quality education and academic support to bridge the gender divide. It provides educational material, uniforms, and coaching through trained tutors, ensuring the girls remain in school and succeed academically.

The NGO also implements community-based interventions to sensitize and mobilize families

FIRST PERSON

KAVITA SINGHAL, 69, POET, EDUCATOR AND SOCIAL WORKER

'JAN MADHYAM MADE ME MORE COMPASSIONATE'

Thirty years ago I met Ranjana Pandey, one of the founders of Jan Madhyam, an NGO that works for the well-being of underprivileged children with disabilities with a special focus on the girl child. Since then, I have been associated with the organization in many ways.

When I look back, I feel it made me a kinder person. I learnt a lot and became a better human being during my time at Jan Madhyam. My volunteering journey began primarily with fundraising and organizing events. I coordinated with places like the Australian High Commission, restaurants like Olive, fashion shows and so on. I was their chief organizer for the annual fair too. It was a lot of work but I enjoyed doing it because it was for a good cause.

I also volunteered to teach, for which I would go to the centre in Aya Nagar. The mini-van that picked up the children would pick me up too. My hours were from morning to about 4 pm. While it was tiring, the experience was unforgettable. I wasn't trained to teach special children but I learnt while volunteering and

and communities about the importance of girl child education. It supports the girls in school and at home. Nanhi Kali works in Maharashtra, Madhya Pradesh, Uttar Pradesh, and Tamil Nadu and impacts the lives of over 500,000 girls.

You can help in tutoring, mentoring, and community mobilization. You can donate and support a girl's education. Regular updates will be sent to you on the child's academic progress and personal development.

<https://www.nanhikali.org/>
support@nanhikali.org
022 689975500



dove into it rather easily. I mostly taught lessons about money, weights and some writing in English.

What attracted me to Jan Madhyam was that it was a happy place. It had a mix of mainstream and disabled students from marginalized communities and there was never a dull or depressing moment in the day.

We had morning assemblies with dance, music and yoga. Later, activities like clay modelling were added to break the monotony of academics. Working with clay helped the children develop motor skills so it was one of the primary activities and it was fun to watch the kids enjoy it!

Other activities helped promote sustainability. The children made

paper bags and mats with bamboo, newspaper or leftover junk. These activities were complemented by a creative staff. All of us in the volunteer team felt we were in a calm and happy place – that was all that came to mind when surrounded by the children.

I am now on their governing board as I enter my 31st year with them. The volunteering opportunities were flexible and still are. That is another thing that makes the NGO so good to be associated with. There was one person accomplished in dance who used to come in once a week for lively sessions. Others who had time would come every day. There was something for everyone. All you needed to do was feel committed to spending time either with or for the well-being of these lovely children.

Another aspect of Jan Madhyam was that the children were so happy to see me and always wanted hugs and smiles. The interactions were filled with joy and positivity. It really changed my perspective on life and made me a better person.

students are offered scholarships.

Regular medical camps, mobile health services as well as a community health centre are Aarohi's main initiatives in healthcare. Their livelihood programmes include promoting sustainable agriculture, skill development, and women's empowerment projects.

You can teach at their school, take part in healthcare outreach programmes, or support some of their community projects. You can also donate for any of the above programmes.

<https://www.aarohi.org/> | +919758625455

TEACH CHILDREN IN THE HILLS



Aarohi was founded in 1992 by Rajnish and Neelima Khosla in Kumaon district of Uttarakhand. Their NGO provides healthcare, education and livelihood services. It promotes sustainable development in this ecologically fragile state.

Children in remote villages are provided quality education. The Aarohi Bal Sansar school offers a comprehensive curriculum with an emphasis on creative learning and critical thinking. Meritorious

END POVERTY WITH SCHOOLING



In Bengaluru, Parikrma Humanity Foundation helps children from low-income families with education, nutrition and emotional support.

It was founded in 2003 by Shukla Bose, who wanted to break the cycle of poverty families were caught in by providing comprehensive education, healthcare and family care.

Parikrma runs four schools and a junior college in Bengaluru. It has a student strength of over 1,700 children. Education is holistic, modern and comprehensive. The emphasis is on English, science, and mathematics, so that children can compete with the best.

Nutrition is provided through balanced meals, healthcare, and emotional support. The overall well-being of the children is their focus.

An End-to-End Child Care programme supports children from kindergarten through college. The team engages in community development initiatives, working closely with the families of the children to create a supportive environment for their growth and development at home too.

Volunteering opportunities at Parikrma include teaching, mentoring, and participating in extracurricular activities. Donations are welcome.

<https://www.parikrmafoundation.org/>
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+91 8023635225

JOIN THE FIGHT FOR WOMEN'S RIGHTS



Since 1984, Jagori, founded by a group of feminists, has resolutely fought for women's empowerment, legal rights and gender equality through awareness, advocacy, and action.

Jagori's 'Safe Delhi Campaign' tries to make public spaces safer for women by addressing sexual harassment and street level violence. They carry out safety audits, hold community workshops, and collaborate with the police and local authorities to put in place urban safety measures.

Jagori works in rural areas too. In Himachal Pradesh and

Jharkhand they support women's leadership and economic empowerment through training and capacity-building programmes.

The group also runs educational campaigns, prints various publications and resources on feminism, gender violence, and women's rights. They support survivors of violence with legal aid, counselling and referral services.

You can participate in Jagori's community outreach programmes, campaigns, and support services. Online donations can be made via their website.

<https://www.jagori.org/>
jagori@jagori.org
011 41618709

BUILD SKILLS AND PERSONALITIES



Rashmi Mishra founded VIDYA to empower and transform the lives of women and children through vocational training and women's empowerment programmes. It works in Mumbai, Bengaluru and Gurugram, impacting over 500,000 beneficiaries with its holistic approach to community development.

One of VIDYA's key projects is its school programme that focusses on academic excellence and, more importantly, on life skills, and extracurricular activities.

Its Beyond School Programme offers after-school support and bridge courses to help students achieve academic success and personal growth. VIDYA runs vocational training programmes that equip youth and women with skills needed for employment, fostering economic independence.

The NGO also runs a women's literacy and empowerment programme under which it provides adult education and skill development courses.

You can teach, mentor or participate in community development programmes. You can also sponsor a child's education, contribute to vocational training programmes, or support overall initiatives.

<https://vidya-india.org/>
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UPLIFT RURAL LIVES WITH RDF



Rural Development Foundation (RDF), founded in 1996 by Pranati Reddy and Anil Kumar Reddy, is based in Hyderabad, Telangana. Education and life skills from an early age are its focus areas.

RDF runs schools and junior colleges in rural Telangana for children from poor families. It also gives due emphasis on academics, sports, and extracurricular activities like music and dance. RDF schools emphasize English language proficiency, digital literacy, and critical thinking skills, ensuring students receive a well-rounded education.

Key projects include the Kallela Rural School, Matendla School, Redlawada School, and the Vaniniketan Junior College. These institutions not only provide education but also nutritional meals, healthcare, and life skill training to students. RDF runs teacher training programmes to ensure that rural educators are well-equipped with modern teaching methodologies and the will to make a real change.

Volunteering opportunities at RDF include organizing extracurricular activities, teaching and participating in community outreach programmes. Donations, especially for infrastructure support, are welcome online. The team requires funds also for its health and nutrition projects.

<https://rdfindia.org/>
development@rdfindia.org

CHILDHOOD TO LIVELIHOOD



Founded in 1999 by Matthew Spacie in Mumbai, Magic Bus is today a pan-India organization which works in Nepal and Bangladesh as well. Magic Bus works with children living in poverty and takes them from schooling to earning decent livelihoods.

The NGO's Childhood to Livelihood programme provides education, life skills, and employability. This programme works with children from 12 to 18 years of age, hand-holding them from school to employment. Education is integrated with life skills and vocational training.

Magic Bus ensures that its student participants are well-equipped and competitive to make it in the job market.

Magic Bus, which began with a game of rugby, emphasizes sports and activities to foster teamwork, leadership, and problem-solving. Sessions are designed to be fun and engaging to reduce the burden of constant learning.

You can volunteer and mentor children, conduct life skills sessions, and assist in community programmes. Donations are accepted via their website. You can sponsor a child's journey from education to employment or contribute to community outreach efforts.

<https://magicbus.org/>
info@magicbusindia.org
022 62434848

BE A WILDLIFE WARRIOR



Wildlife SOS was founded in 1995 by Kartick Satyanarayan and Geeta Seshamani. It is well-known for rescuing and rehabilitating wildlife, protecting habitats, and reducing human-wildlife conflict.

Wildlife SOS's Elephant Conservation and Care Centre in Mathura, Uttar Pradesh, is a sanctuary for elephants rescued from abusive conditions in captivity. The centre provides medical help, rest and a safe space.

Wildlife SOS has multiple wildlife rescue centres across India that rehabilitate bears, leopards, and sloth bears, among other animals.

The team also carries out community outreach and educational programmes, raising awareness about wildlife conservation, promoting coexistence with animals, and advocating policy change to protect endangered species and their habitats.

As a volunteer you can assist with animal care, habitat restoration, research projects, and community engagement initiatives.

You can donate online and support conservation projects, rescue operations, and wildlife rehabilitation efforts.

<https://wildlifesos.org/>
info@wildlifesos.org
+91 9871963535

PRODUCTS

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



MAGIC KNOTS

Neat, beautiful, ethical, functional and pocket-friendly. Moh Moh Ke Dhaage ticks all the right boxes for the discerning shopper. MMKD offers crochet pieces, crafted with utmost care by grassroots artisans. You can buy handbags, slings, tote bags and purses. Also pretty sandals, mufflers and shrugs in vibrant colours. The sandals have unique and attractive designs. For little girls there are accessories such as scrunchies and clips — all in crochet. And crop tops for teens, ideal for summer. For the home there are cushion covers.

Founded by Rachna Kumar, MMKD is based in New Delhi.

Rachna says she comes from a family of art entrepreneurs who strive to create beautiful and also ethical products.

“We collaborate with women artisans. They earn a monthly income and we regularly put up a stall at Dastkar Bazaar in New Delhi,” says Deepak, the designer at MMKD.

“Materials are sourced from a variety of states, mainly Uttarakhand.”

Their products cater to diverse preferences



and make for ideal gifts as well. One can shop either on their website or at the Dastkar Bazaar.

Contact: +91 8800755245
Website: www.mohmohkedhaage.com
Email: info.mmkd@gmail.com

TOY LAND IN TOWN

Channapatna is well known as Karnataka's toy town. It is famous for its eco-friendly and attractive handcrafted toys. The craft is also protected as a geographical indication (GI) under the World Trade Organization.

Noor Salma, a skilled artisan from Channapatna, specializes in handcrafting wooden pieces using natural lac obtained from the

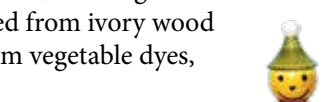
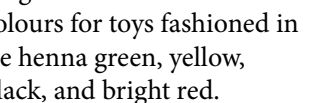
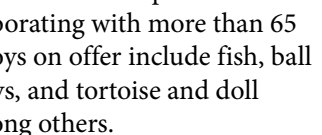
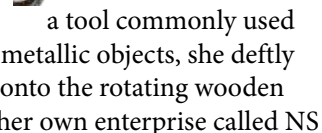
forest. Using an electric lathe, a tool commonly used for shaping wooden and metallic objects, she deftly applies the lacquer onto the rotating wooden pieces. She runs her own enterprise called NS

Toys, collaborating with more than 65 artisans. Toys on offer include fish, ball and cup toys, and tortoise and doll keyrings, among others.

Traditional colours for toys fashioned in this manner are henna green, yellow, orange, deep black, and bright red.

These toys are predominantly crafted from ivory wood and coated with lacquer derived from vegetable dyes, ensuring they remain non-toxic and safe for children to play with. To buy these delightful toys you can phone Noor Salma, or contact Dastkar where she puts up a stall during festivals.

Contact: +91 9341467034,
+91 9901215804



CRAFT UNDER ONE ROOF

The India Craft House or TICH has a range of products from clothes to home décor. “You could call us a social enterprise with a heart,” says co-founder Sona Puri. “This idea was born from our desire to preserve the legacy of traditional Indian craft and create a larger canvas for our artisans. We try and do this by creating a fair price and business platform.”

Their online store has numerous products which are neatly categorized and also tell you which state they are from. You can choose products of cloth, needlework, glass, wood, leather, and jewellery from 25 states.

Categories include home and living, and products for women, children and men. From tableware, linen, lamps, board games, clothes, pocket squares to jewellery, bags, toys, piggy banks and wallets — the range of products is diverse and caters to all kinds of consumers. Prices, of course, vary depending on what you are buying.

The TICH team travels to remote villages to seek out artisans. It partners with NGOs and self-help groups. Altogether, it has a network of over 2,000 artisans.

“One never haggles over prices of branded goods. Then why the need to push a poor artisan's earnings even lower?” asks Puri, who says they are committed to ensuring a fair price for the artisan.

Browse their website and place your order. The India Craft House also participates in exhibitions and fairs across the country.

Contact: +91 9311227797
Website: theindiacrafthouse.com



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TATA STEEL FOUNDATION



SKILLING TODAY FOR AN ABLE TOMORROW

Through our skill development initiatives, we enable youth with relevant and quality skills to fill the much needed gap of skilled workforce for the industries in India and even abroad.

- Industrial Training Institutes (ITIs) set up in PPP mode with state governments
- Training facilitated for hospitality industry
- Project Samriddhi enabling training in various nursing and paramedical courses for healthcare industry

- Garnering employment opportunities through Model Career Centre
- Multi-skill Development Centres imparting short-term and long-term courses

In FY' 24, 90,455 youths linked to various skilling initiatives.

Sure, we make steel.

But **#WeAlsoMakeTomorrow.**

