

Civil Society

GOODBYE TO THE GREAT NICOBAR?

Port, township, airport spell doom



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Those remote islands

A country's attitude to its environment defines how good a place it is to live, work and have a future. Evolved societies with forward-looking leaders respect nature and protect it even as they seek economic growth and material prosperity. Quality of life matters. Polluted cities, for instance, are not worth living in. What real progress can there be if natural resources are eviscerated in the name of development?

India's record in the past 10 years has been poor. Big industry is being given a free run. Government initiatives have been rammed through. Respect for informed opinion has fallen apart.

Increasingly, people are objecting because their lives are being impacted by pollution. They are holding governments to account and shaming companies. But who speaks for a remote island such as the Great Nicobar, far from the mainland.

The Great Nicobar and the accompanying Andamans are not just unique in their natural beauty but are also repositories of precious biological wealth. Protecting them for the planet and future generations should be the responsibility of governments.

The opposite is happening. The Indian government is pushing through a development plan which will have a transshipment port, an international airport and a township on the Great Nicobar. It is too much of a load for that fragile setting.

Little would be known or understood about this government-sponsored initiative were it not for activists and responsible scholars like Pankaj Sekhsaria. They have highlighted why it will be an environmental disaster. They have also brought to public notice the way permissions have been granted without adequate scrutiny.

If security is the reason for the development plan for Great Nicobar, it is surely excessive. Defence capabilities could easily have been reinforced and expanded at little or no environmental cost.

The damage done to the Great Nicobar will be unrepairable and come at a huge loss. Equally unrepairables for some time to come will be the checks and balances that the government has overridden.

The tragic rape and death of a young woman doctor inside R.G. Kar Hospital in Kolkata has brought to the fore the conditions in which India's doctors work, particularly those in government service.

We have interviewed Dr Alexander Thomas, veteran of the world of healthcare, on what can be done. A book, *Perils in Practice*, which we have reported on alongside the interview, also provides valuable information and suggestions. Governments need to listen.

We also bring you our regular columnists, opportunities to volunteer and donate, and a feature on jaggery for those wanting to get off sugar but unable to shake off the urge for something sweet.



COVER STORY

GOODBYE TO THE GREAT NICOBAR?

The Andaman and Nicobar Islands are in the crosshairs of a project that could spell their doom. A container port and more is coming up on the Great Nicobar when it is clear it can't take the burden.

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LETTERS



Magic weaves

Your cover story, 'A brand is built in rural Bengal', highlighted the amazing work AHEAD, an NGO, has done. I hope Oikko will be able to provide a livelihood to about 400 villagers. Let us support them by buying their products.

Rupa De

My mother always spoke fondly of Bengal's Tussar and reading your story took me down memory lane. It is wonderful to see Tantipara's weavers getting a chance to revive their skills and make a living out of a classic craft form. The pictures were very appealing too.

Mamta Guha

Reading about the revival of the age-old Tantipara Tussar weaves was an enriching experience. Kudos to AHEAD for its efforts to revive rural livelihoods with compassion and strategy.

Priyavarth

We need similar initiatives to revive the Indian crafts and handlooms sector. I would love to visit the Oikko store and see the incredible work being done for myself.

Namrita Gola

I really found this story inspiring. Definitely worth a read.

Sumanto Chattopadhyay

Empowerment in the true sense of the word.

Ramesh Aggarwal

Jackfruit chips

Shree Padre's story, 'Jack the Vietnam way', highlighted Tom Kavalackal's business sense. His long-term plan worked well for his company, Pristine Tropical Fruits. Starting with packed frozen jackfruit and then making the transition towards traditional jackfruit preparations was a smart choice. A perfect blend of business, agriculture and tradition all packed into one idea.

Bhavna Singh

Vietnam has a great jackfruit culture. It was interesting to read how an idea that came to Tom Kavalackal in Vietnam could be transposed all the way to Kerala. Agricultural enterprises are integral to a sustainable society.

Gayathri Rajendran

My next vacation is to Vietnam and reading this story has made me excited about visiting this country. Kerala's enterprises never fail to amaze me. Jacme's jackfruit chips are definitely on my priority snack list now.

Ragini Nair

This is really a great initiative. Small-scale industries have their own charm and benefits. Absolutely loved this endeavour.

Koyal Munjal

Real life hero

Thanks for your obituary of Virendra 'Sam' Singh. "Sam was the kind of person who thought everything is possible. He wanted the girls to have the world's best jobs" — this really tells us all we need to know about how visionary Sam Singh was. I am proud to be part of a society that has people like him and his team. The girls at Pardada Pardadi were so lucky to have a 'dada' or 'pardada' like him.

Jyotsna Barua

Giving up a corporate life to set up an educational trust for the downtrodden villages of Anupshahr is truly a lesson in life. There are so few like Sam Singh who have the compassion and courage to do something so meaningful. May his soul rest in peace. All good wishes for his NGO and the team who are keeping it going.

Meghna Kulkarni

I am very inspired by Sam and what he has done for the girls of Anupshahr. My grandfather is from the same place. When I showed your write-up to him, he was really delighted to read about the work that has been done. He too had a patriarchal childhood and felt very deeply for the way his sisters were made to marry young. The story of Sam Singh's legacy overwhelmed him. I hope to volunteer with Pardada Pardadi one day if I get the chance.

Kanika Gaur

I know a person who visited the PPES schools and returned with

fulsome praise. The efforts are so genuine and add such immense value to society. Uttar Pradesh has a long way to go but it is endeavours like these that truly rekindle hopes of change.

Mani Sharma

The girls of our country are in constant need of a guardian angel like Sam Singh. It is remarkable to see the impact PPES has had on so many families. To use resources, ideas and people to create so much social good is very rare in the times we live in.

Mira Dixit

Freedom first

Sanjaya Baru's article, 'Not easy to find a Yunus', was excellent. Yes, in today's world Mohammad Yunus is one of a kind, precious but rare in our sub-continent where governments stoke divisiveness and conflict just to garner votes. Thank you, Sanjaya, for this piece.

Vimala Ramachandran

This article is truly full of insights. It is a lucid explanation of complex political scenarios. It was very informative to read. As always, Baru's perspective is worth engaging with.

Avinash Gupta

A mature and brilliant analysis by Sanjaya Baru with good advice packed within.

Aman Nath

Memoirs

I read your review of Aruna Roy's book, *The personal is political*. To choose such a title for her memoir seems very appropriate. Aruna Roy's activism and feminism through the years has been an inspiration to many of us. I will definitely read her book.

Mahima Sanghvi

Aruna Roy and I know each other well. I understand her thinking and her committed actions and I can only say I wish there were more women and men like her.

Aruna Rodrigues

I recently read *The Rajiv I Knew* by Mani Shankar Aiyar. The writer really does come across as an aide who knew him well. It was an engrossing read. I came across new facts about Rajiv Gandhi's leadership, of which many aspects remain unknown. This review was very

Rekha Ghosh

insightful. I enjoyed reading it.

More births

Kiran Karnik's article in your August issue, 'Boost that birthrate', was well written with various options that are sound and useful.

Porus Dadabhoy

I feel we as a society do not talk about demographic changes as much as we should. Discussions and analyses like Dr Karnik's are important to get a general sense of where we are headed and what the future holds for us and the coming generations.

Vikram Gupta

It is high time we started thinking about the current status of our population. Conversations always end up in 'we can't do much' but the truth is, we can. Especially if we have an adequate plan in place. We have already seen other countries face this demographic pressure and now we are next in line. The situation is about as serious as it gets.

Atin Joshi

Reviving rivers

I'd like to comment on Venkatesh Dutta's article in your July issue, 'Protect floodplains, check creeping encroachments and sewage'. There is so much to learn from nature, from river systems and water bodies. Plans to revive Lucknow rivers are a good step in the right direction.

Lalit Tambe

Rivers are the basis of our very existence. It is really sad that officials and agencies are not well-versed in environmental issues and therefore don't know how to handle the problems which crop up.

Javed

India's wildlife

Ravi Chellam's suggestions in your August issue, 'Wildlife plans should not leave out communities', really do make sense. My family and I are all passionate about wildlife. We really appreciated reading his wildlife roadmap with one suggestion linked to the next. It was a lucid and well-thought-out piece.

Anita Handa

With so many cheetah deaths being reported in Kuno, day in

and day out, it becomes even more important to take a step back and read an agenda for wildlife like this one. These are the kind of sound, intelligent and practical perspectives the government needs to listen to because it can help make the right decisions.

Jaya Das

Reading on wildlife is always interesting but this article was better than most I've read. Ravi Chellam's engaging agenda is much needed in the reckless times we live in today.

Mohan Chutani

Ravi Chellam has highlighted very aptly how ecological restoration has to become a development priority. With the climate change crisis looming above us all, these efforts can go a long way in alleviating ecological distress.

Kavita Shukla

Greatly appreciate Ravi Chellam's passionate writing. I feel inspired. What he says about invasive species, independent monitoring and everything else is very true.

Abhishey Mukkatira

Crafting culture

Sumita Ghose is quite right in her article, 'Give craft start-ups the status they need'. Artisanal handloom skills of the past are bringing our people together. It is a beautiful phenomenon that I am proud to read about. Our country truly has much to offer.

Naintara Chauhan

I would like to draw your attention to the Solapur Chadar which is made in Maharashtra, the home of handloom. This *chadar* is unique and the issues it faces need to be addressed.

Past and present

Ratish Nanda in his piece, 'Hold on to the past, put it to good use', correctly points out that preservation of heritage structures adds to the culture of the country and its history. It is important for the generations to come. All forms of heritage should be recognized and preserved.

Chandralekha Anand Sio

The idea that restoration of national heritage sites can help create jobs and wealth and at the

same time be used by local communities gives conservation a new angle. These ideas help us find value in the past, which is so often cast aside as being redundant and ancient.

Manju Tiwari

If companies can collaborate with the government and create a culture of infrastructure which encourages tourism, we will begin to see conservation as an important tool to connect with the past and the future. It may even encourage us to become tourists in our own country and explore places we haven't seen but were always so close to us.

Mallika

Food trip

Susheela Nair's article, 'Joys of the Telugu Kitchen' was interesting. The names of the dishes are tongue twisters, though. I am only familiar with *puliyogarai* and the variety of pickles which are available where I live. These are commercially prepared and I'm sure the original taste must be quite different. I'll definitely visit Telugu Kitchen on my next visit to Bengaluru.

Rathi Marar

Telugu Kitchen looks awesome. Great for a weekend getaway, though prices look a bit steep.

Prem Ambat

Stressed students

I would like to share with you and your readers my observations as a

teacher on parenting and stress. I recently discussed the reasons behind some of their poor academic performances. I was surprised to learn that many of them attributed their struggles to stress, despite coming from middle or upper middle-class families where parents go to great lengths to ensure their children have comfortable lives.

These students have access to the best schools, coaching classes, and all necessary facilities, yet their performance still suffers. This led me to wonder whether their stress might actually stem from the comforts provided to them.

When we look back into history, we find examples like Babasaheb Ambedkar, who faced immense struggle just to gain an education. He would stand outside classrooms, striving to listen to the teacher and gain knowledge.

Our children don't face such challenges, yet they still claim to be stressed. I believe that parents should strike a good balance between love and strictness when dealing with their kids. This balance is crucial to help children navigate stress and focus on their academic and personal growth.

Pratima Pai

Caste reference

I refer to your article on Ramesh Gharu in your 2016 Hall of Fame issue.

When someone searches for the


surname 'Gharu' on Google, the first thing it highlights is that Gharu is from the lowest rung of the Scheduled Castes.

Is it really necessary to mention that in your article? I request you to please remove either your article or that specific line for the sake of a better and more peaceful society. A lot of people in urban areas who have this surname are doing well in their lives. Not everyone is comfortable revealing their caste. Since Google is an open source of knowledge, one needs to be careful what information is being uploaded on the internet. Specifically highlighting these details will only lead to more inequality in society.

Sunita Khandare

Thank you for reaching out. As a magazine celebrating change leaders from all walks of life for over 20 years now, we appreciate your sentiment. Please be assured that the story was approached with the utmost sensitivity and respect. We made sure to consult Ramesh Gharu, who is widely known as Gharuji, to ensure that his voice was accurately and respectfully represented. He wants to convey that he identifies with the lowest caste, and we have honoured his request to share this aspect of his identity.

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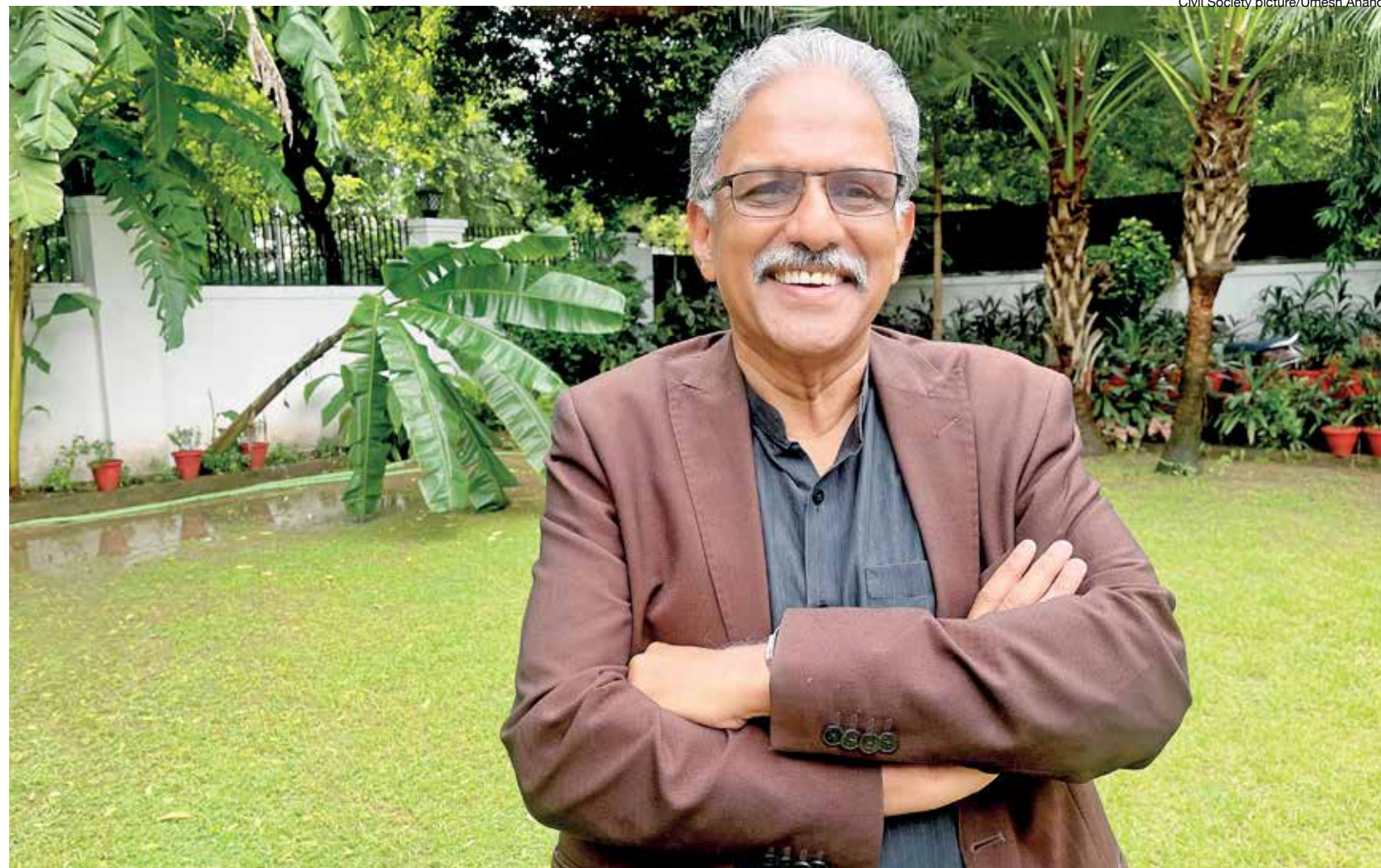
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Dr Alexander Thomas: 'Doctors should learn to communicate'

'Violence on doctors is rampant'

Dr Alexander Thomas on improving hospitals

Civil Society News

New Delhi

WHEN things go wrong, doctors face the brunt of public anger and angst. Dealing directly with patients, they are held to account and very often become targets of violence.

How much are doctors themselves to blame for the messy and dangerous situations they find themselves in and to what extent are hospital administrations responsible?

The rape and death of a young and committed doctor in Kolkata shows that there is much about the running of hospitals that needs to improve, especially in the state sector.

So, what can governments do to shape up? We spoke to Dr Alexander Thomas, a veteran of the healthcare system and founder of the Association of Healthcare Providers India.

Q: The terrible episode in Kolkata has made everyone aware of what doctors go through. But surely this is not the only episode. In your position, could you tell us how frequently doctors face this kind of insecurity, and the tragic consequences that result from it?

I think this violence is not restricted to doctors alone. Nurses and healthcare workers, as well as doctors, have been subjected to violence for many, many years. In the past few years, the situation has actually

become worse, especially after the Consumer Protection Act came into force. Earlier, it was a different relationship. Doctors had a bond of trust with their patients. Unfortunately, that has changed. We are trying to remedy it.

But violence in hospitals is rampant in India. I also need to tell you this is a problem globally. In fact, the World Health Organization (WHO) has declared violence against healthcare professionals a global emergency. But, I think, compared to other countries, India has a much, much larger share of the incidence of such violence. During the COVID-19 pandemic, you must have read about many instances.

Q: Do you recall other cases of doctors elsewhere in the country who have met such a horrible death while just going about their duties?

In 2022 we lost Dr Archana Das, a young mother of two, in Rajasthan. She was harassed by the police and other people in the community. She died by suicide. The very next year in Kerala, Vandana Das, who was just 21, was stabbed to death by a convict patient.

And the list goes on and on. There are many other cases which we don't even hear about. It has prompted us to start taking a very proactive stand.

Q: So, it's a problem which should have been attended to a long time ago. Doctor associations have made suggestions about what could be done to make hospitals safer. And to make the work of doctors safer.

Can you explain to us some of the suggestions that have been made as policy prescriptions?

Actually, we took it up at the national level, perhaps two years ago after Dr Archana Das died. Leaders in the healthcare sector who have experience on the ground went through the issues and, more importantly, the remedies. We wrote a book called *Perils in Practice*, which is available as a free download on Amazon.

We realized that doctors and nurses are soft targets. Usually, in a hospital, people come in full of emotion. There are anti-socials who take advantage of the situation. There's a regular racket in many hospitals where anti-socials will say, "I'll get the charges reduced, you give me 25 percent."

They used to foment trouble and attack doctors. We came up with suggestions. We looked at various reasons why we have reached this stage in our country.

Just a decade or two ago, doctors had almost the same status as God. We don't want that. We just want to be normal people whom people trust.

One of the things we realized was that from our side too there have been issues. We went about addressing them first.

One was the capitation fee. That's hopefully gone out of the window. It commercialized medicine. I'm thankful to the government for having brought in legislation to stop that.

Secondly, a very important aspect was that we forgot how to communicate with our patients. We weren't taught this. It's a very strange situation because in developed countries, unless you pass an exam in communication, you don't get your degree. In India, nothing like that exists.

We wrote the first book on patient communication in the country. The book became a movement for various reasons. One reason was that administrators found that better communication actually saves a lot of money. Our purpose was to try and improve communication with the patient and thereby alleviate the patient's stress and go back to a good relationship with patients.

We were able to influence the Medical Council and the government to introduce it in the curriculum. I'm very happy to say that the first batch of those who have been trained will be passing out this year. That will definitely bring down some of the incidents of violence because medical students who become doctors will know how to communicate with patients. We have to realize that patients are very vulnerable. They are emotionally stressed.

On the ground, we have realized that anti-socials and then patients get upset. They target one particular doctor whom they surround and intimidate. There's a chapter in our book on how to pre-empt violence, along with signs of impending violence.

If something happens, the hospital staff comes down. If it's a small hospital, people from other hospitals join in to physically protect the doctor.

We have told our doctors they have to practise ethical medicine. They have to be honest with the patient. We have been saying this to governments. Many governments have been very positive, especially in Karnataka. They have brought in strict laws against healthcare professionals being assaulted. It is a non-bailable offence.

When we wrote our book, we found that doctors don't follow up on cases. Supposing there is a case of assault in my hospital. I just go once to the police station, file a case, and then forget about it. So, hardly two to three percent of cases end up in convictions. We have put up some guidelines on this. They have been circulated widely and people have been using them.

Q: There is talk of increasing security in hospitals. Is that a solution? Are we really addressing a serious flaw in overall hospital management? You know, you could have security people, but if hospitals aren't able to deliver certain end results, you will not get an atmosphere in which doctors can work safely.

I absolutely agree. Announcements that FIRs have to be filed within six

hours won't act as a deterrent. I think hospital managements should ensure that women doctors and healthcare workers are taken care of, their duty rooms are not open to everybody coming in or going out. There should be a system that creates a network in the hospital. So that, if there is trouble, we support one another.

After any incident of violence, we must counsel and support the victim. Many people, because of violence, have actually moved away from medicine.

And that brings me to another very important point. We are losing our best minds because of violence. They are turning away from medicine and opting for other professions.

Q: State-run hospitals are the worst managed because of lack of oversight. Have you any suggestions on how oversight can be improved? Should we have citizen committees which oversee hospitals?

It's not rocket science. This is easily doable. I can give you examples of great hospitals. The Jayadeva Hospital in Karnataka, for instance. It is a fantastic organization which makes sure that affordable treatment is available for everyone. And they take care of their staff.

There are umpteen problems due to lack of oversight and lack of accountability. Two steps can be taken. We have always advocated that patients have to be part of the process. We've recently started an organization called Patients for Patient Safety, an organization I'm part of. Our goal is to establish a committee in every hospital focused on patient safety.

'We realized that doctors and nurses are soft targets. Usually, in a hospital, people come in full of emotion. There are anti-socials who take advantage of the situation.'

We are aware that some clinicians are concerned that these committees might question their practices. No, we suggest that the patient be involved in the treatment. The patient can give suggestions. Ultimately, we tend to forget that all of us, from the director to the security guard, are all there for one person, and that is the patient. We need to remind ourselves of that.

So, it is imperative that the patient and his relatives are involved in his treatment or any other matters of the hospital.

Q: How serious a problem is corruption in the private sector and in the public sector?

In the private sector, it may not be so much, because the private sector has to sustain and show results. They drive hard bargains and so there's not enough left for permissions.

In the government sector, I'm not so sure. I have heard that there is corruption, but I don't have any proof. I think it is an issue. With technology and more transparency, I think that can be addressed. If it is a problem, there are mechanisms to address it.

Q: Very successful models of hospitals are available in the voluntary sector. What is it that works in a voluntary sector hospital that doesn't work in the state sector hospital?

I spent my entire career in a mission hospital, the Baptist Hospital in Bengaluru. In all voluntary mission hospitals — you have Muslim

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mission hospitals, you have Hindu mission hospitals — the doctor doesn't look at the money. He treats the patient as a patient. What is necessary is done. There is no pressure on him.

I think the small hospitals on the periphery are doing a great service to the community. They work very hard and basic healthcare is available. But I think the main thing we need to get back to is that we need to keep the patient's interest first.

If you look after the patient, especially the poor patient, God will ensure that you get enough money. Mission hospitals are living examples of a patient-first approach, where treatment is affordable. Their patients are given free treatment and the hospitals are doing well.

But, at the same time, the government needs to invest more in tertiary hospitals like Tamil Nadu and Kerala have done where the ordinary citizen or the poor can go.

Why should that not be so in all the other states? They invest enormous amounts of money. The cost of the government hospital is actually more than the private hospital if you factor in the cost of procedures.

Q: You would say that, first, it is important to bring back the spirit of healthcare by placing the patient at the centre of it. Second is to manage the hospitals in a more transparent way along with oversight and a sense of mission and purpose. Yes, and accountability.

Q: In West Bengal, this young doctor was obviously a public-spirited doctor, so she was also probably managing her patients really well. But there was no one managing the environment in which she was working. What would you give greater importance to: the doctor's attitude or managing the administration?

I think it will be difficult to choose one over the other. Everything has to be worked on. Attitude, as well as better management are both needed. There were a lot of things I learnt during my studies and in the course of my work. When I was put in a position of authority, I tried to implement certain measures which would be good for doctors.

Another important aspect that I think we need to look at is that resident doctors are sometimes really overworked.

They work for about 36 to 48 hours. That's not right, both for the resident doctor and for the patient because you need to be in a good frame of mind when you look after your patients.

We are sending out an advisory to all our hospitals asking what their standards are on personal safety, especially for women doctors. ■

DOCTORS MOST UNSAFE IN ICU AND EMERGENCY

Study lists perils in hospitals

Civil Society News
New Delhi

THE rape and murder of a young woman doctor in the seminar room of R.G. Kar Hospital in Kolkata shocked the nation. But for those who work in hospitals, they have been becoming increasingly unsafe.

The R.G. Kar tragedy brought doctors and other health professionals onto the streets to seek justice for the young physician who was brutalized. But they were also demanding better working conditions and greater accountability from governments.

In an atmosphere full of acrimony and mistrust, the doctors first kept Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee waiting at a venue for the talks. And then she kept them waiting outside her house. Finally, when they met, some demands were conceded.

But matters might never have reached such a flashpoint if governments like hers had been engaging with doctors and understanding their challenges.

Several suggestions have been made by the organizations representing health professionals but they haven't been picked up by governments.

One such effort to bridge the gap has been a well-researched book titled: "Perils in Practice: The Prevention of Violence Against Healthcare Workers". The book, which has been around for some time, is authored by Dr Alexander Thomas, Sahajanand Prasad Singh and Divya Alexander.

The book digs deep into the causes of such violence and has a useful list of preventive and post-incident measures to be followed if a doctor or healthcare worker is attacked while going about their duties.

Data reveals that such violence in India is worse than what happens globally. About 75 percent of doctors admit they have had to deal with violence in some form or the other.

It could be verbal, emotional, sexual, psychological, threats, abuse or serious bodily harm. Seventy percent of such

violence is perpetuated by the family or relatives of a patient in a hospital.

As many as 62.8 percent of doctors say they are unable to see their patients without fear of violence, 13.7 percent fear criminal prosecution and 57.7 percent have thought of hiring security guards in their clinics or hospitals. These are alarming statistics.

India needs to act quickly to prevent such violence. Trends reveal the healthcare system is attracting more women, and 60 percent are becoming doctors. Nurses are overwhelmingly women. Violence isn't limited to government hospitals but extends to private sector ones, the dominant player in the health sector. Government hospitals provide only 30 percent of healthcare today.

The book looks at the reasons why violence against doctors and nurses is rising. The trust deficit between doctors and patients has widened over the years. The earlier reverence for doctors has been replaced with an impression that doctors merely want to make money and are business-minded professionals.

In government hospitals, doctors are forced to work with crumbling infrastructure, lack of adequate staff, poor hygiene and sanitation, shoestring budgets, short supply of life-saving drugs and more. In rural areas especially, there are very few doctors and staff to attend to a large number of patients.

There is also low literacy on health matters among people. They assume that the patient, if not overly dependent, will come home. This could be due to poor communication between the harried, overworked doctor and the patient's optimistic family, about the sick person's condition. Delayed treatment, inadequate supply of life-saving drugs or diagnostic equipment can also lead to anger.

The perception that the patient is being overcharged, delayed discharge of patients, not handing over the bodies of patients are also reasons. Although there are government health schemes to pay for procedures, the money is not enough. The schemes don't pay



Junior doctors demand justice for their fellow doctor and safer working conditions

for aftercare or if further surgical intervention is required.

According to the book, the areas in the hospital most prone to violence are the emergency rooms, the ICU, the delivery room, and even the wards. Research shows, 50 percent of violence takes place in the ICU, 45 percent in the emergency room, mostly by the patient's emotionally upset family and relatives. Another study in 2018 revealed that 50 percent of attacks are reported during the night shift.

The authors recommend that an ICU with over six beds should have a medical counsellor to communicate with the patient's relatives and such interactions should be recorded.

There are laws to protect healthcare workers. During the COVID-19 pandemic, when several incidents of violence occurred, the Central government brought in an ordinance and 23 state governments too have promulgated laws. These are cognizable and non-bailable but implementation is poor. Filing an FIR and following up on a case is tedious so less than 10 percent of such cases have been registered under these Acts. Special courts can be tried out along with creating awareness among the public, prompt action by state agencies and sensitization of the police and judiciary.

Bringing doctors into the ambit of the Consumer Protection Act has worsened the doctor-patient relationship, according to the



More women are becoming doctors and health workers

authors. It has led to an increase in cases of medical negligence and made doctors defensive and wary.

"The unique nature of medical and healthcare services must be properly appreciated before dealing with legal issues relating to these services. Medicine is truly a science of uncertainty. Each drug could have a different degree of effect on different individuals. Some may develop side effects,

which others do not," write the authors.

Consumer courts are not experts to decide medical negligence. The authors recommend that regulatory bodies under the National Medical Commission Act, 2019, handle such cases with appropriate safeguards rather than consumer courts.

The authors have several recommendations to prevent violence in hospitals.

Most important is better communication between doctors, patients and their family members/attendants. Healthcare workers must know how to convey bad news to the patient and family members. An entire chapter has been devoted to communication, including verbal, non-verbal communication and active listening. Since 2019, a module on attitude ethics and communication has been introduced in medical colleges.

Information about waiting time, proper signage, a grievance redressal cell, CCTVs and a trained security team are other suggestions put forth. The media too could play a positive role by being impartial, scientific and by also reporting successes in healthcare.

Finally, the authors emphasize that it is the patient's well-being that must be the focus of attention. It falls on the shoulders of the overworked, harried doctor working in a crumbling government hospital to ensure that the patient is better taken care of. ■

Sanitary pads at exam centres

Sukanya Sharma
New Delhi

SEVENTEEN secondary and senior secondary schools in southeast Delhi now have sanitary pad vending machines which are fully automatic and user-friendly. The machines are a real boon. The schools double as exam centres so, for the nervous girl candidates who turn up, sanitary napkins are now readily available. There are incinerators as well to blitz discarded napkins.

“Girls from Class 7 to Class 10 are especially vulnerable to the challenges of menstruation. As teachers we need to be sensitive to this issue, especially during exams. We should allow timely washroom breaks,” says Meghna Sachdev, a government schoolteacher. A student had once admitted to her that she was more nervous about how she would handle her periods than about the exam itself.

The sanitary pad vending machines were installed this August by Matri Sudha, an NGO which works on health, nutrition and menstrual hygiene, with the support of Indian Oil Corporation (IOC) as part of the latter’s CSR obligations.

Most schools do have sanitary napkins in their medical rooms, but are sometimes not adequately stocked. The infirmary could be at a distance from classrooms. Girls might also have irregular period cycles, leaving them unprepared. Some students don’t have the money to buy sanitary napkins. The vending machine is the answer to all these vexing issues.

The idea of setting up sanitary pad vending machines at board exam centres first came to Matri Sudha after the Madras High Court ordered the National Testing Agency to make sanitary napkins available near washrooms in the National Eligibility cum Entrance Test (NEET) exam centres on May 2 this year. The order was an outcome of its ruling allowing a candidate with special needs to wear an adult diaper and be permitted adequate washroom breaks to change.

A beginning had been made. Matri Sudha set up a meeting with Dr Divya Gupta, member of the National Commission for Protection of Child Rights (NCPCR), to discuss its initiative. The commission endorsed Matri Sudha’s views and promised support.

Subsequently, Matri Sudha sent a letter to the Ministry of Education on May 21 this year, asking for four provisions to be made at Central Board of Secondary Education (CBSE) examination centres: availability of sanitary products, restroom breaks, educational programmes to raise awareness amongst students and teachers, and, lastly, ensuring dignity and respect for female students with



Arvind Singh, CEO of Matri Sudha and his team with Smita Prasad, principal of the government school in Molarbund



The sanitary pad vending machine which was installed

regard to their menstrual needs.

A month later, on June 13, an advisory was issued by the Ministry of Education regarding menstrual health for adolescents, reflecting Matri Sudha’s suggestions. In its statement, the ministry said, “free sanitary pads should be available at all Class 10 and Class 12 board exam centres. Female students must be permitted to take necessary restroom breaks to address menstrual needs and increase focus on their exams.”

“It felt like a step forward in the right direction — menstruation goes beyond women’s hygiene. It is an underlying determinant of health and must be given that importance,” says Arvind Singh, CEO of Matri Sudha. Access, awareness and affordability are the NGO’s three golden rules.

Matri Sudha went a step further. It collected data about girls appearing in all Class 10 and Class 12 board exams, and is now drafting a letter to all education secretaries across states to make provisions for sanitary napkins at their respective exam centres. The ministry’s advisory is applicable to all CBSE-affiliated board exam centres across the country, applicable from the 2024-25 academic session.

Alongside, Matri Sudha is running campaigns to inform girls and their parents of this initiative

by IOC and the Central government.

Working women are also sometimes forced to skip work due to their periods. “Taking leave during menstruation should be an option, not a necessity,” says Arvind Singh. “Women should not be compelled to miss work because of the lack of safe and clean facilities.”

Another remarkable effort by Matri Sudha is its plan to instal similar sanitary pad vending machines in 14 Metro stations in Delhi, partnering the Delhi Metro Rail Corporation. These include Lok Kalyan Marg, Rajiv Chowk, Govindpuri, Lajpat Nagar, Central Secretariat and AIIMS.

Commuters will be able to easily access one or multiple pads at a minimal cost.

“The machines, once installed, will be easy to use. One sanitary pad will cost ₹2 to make the project sustainable. Any user can either put a coin in the machine or use UPI to pay. The money will be used by Matri Sudha to replenish stocks by adding the deficit amount from its own funds after monetary support from Indian Oil Corporation ceases,” explains Singh.

Matri Sudha’s vending machines initiative is part of its Menses Health Project, supported by IOC. Its objective is to ensure access to safe and affordable menstrual products, enhance sensitization, include menstruation as a health subject in India’s National Health Policy and make schools and workplaces gender inclusive by ensuring sanitary pad vending machines.

Recently, the NGO published a report titled “A Step Up for Period Positive Delhi” that covers the experiences, realities and challenges of menstruation.

“The report lays the foundation for a more informed and empathetic society, where menstrual health is not a source of shame but a subject of open conversation and understanding,” remarks Surender Singh, president of Matri Sudha. ■

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Order by court helps last-ditch effort to save Kolkata trams

Aiema Tauheed
Kolkata

AFTER decades of being an important part of Kolkata's public transport system, trams are on the verge of being pulled off the streets and used only for their heritage value to give joyrides to tourists.

Restraining the state government is a last-minute directive from the Calcutta High Court which has agreed to examine a petition by a public-spirited group of city-dwellers who point out that trams are good for the environment and interwoven with the life of the city.

For the Kolkata Tram Users' Association (KTUA), the intervention of the court is part of its last-ditch effort to prevail on the state government which has reduced tram routes from over 50 to just three in the city. These are the routes from Esplanade to Shyambazar, from Esplanade to Gariahat and from Tollygunge to Ballygunge.

"It is not a victory as yet. It is a welcome pause, but we don't know which way things will go. Efforts to remove trams in Kolkata have a long history with bus operators and the automobile lobby influencing the government," says Dr Debashish Bhattacharya, founding president of the association.

Dr Bhattacharya, who worked as a scientist in protein biochemistry and enzymology at CSIR-Indian Institute of Chemical Biology (CSIR-IICB), explained that he has no professional connection with tramways but is passionate about public transport, especially rail-based systems like railways and tramways.

In a room where Rabindranath Tagore's portrait on the wall shares space with pictures of various trams, Dr Bhattacharya, silver-haired and reflective, sits in what he calls the association's office. With a soft smile, he confesses how he would often skip school to explore Calcutta, discovering its nooks and crannies from the comfort of a tram seat.

He recounted that the KTUA was officially formed in 2016, inspired by Australian tram employee Roberto D'Andrea, who visited Kolkata several times to raise awareness about the benefits of tramways. During a felicitation function for D'Andrea at the Esplanade tramways control room, a group of pro-tram activists and civilians, including Dr

Bhattacharya, decided to set up the association.

It began working formally to advocate the continuance of tramways. The association also educates citizens about the benefits of tramways, which actually improve the quality of urban life.

There have been at least two court hearings, says Dr Bhattacharya, that have resulted in orders — though not final verdicts — which favour the preservation of trams.

These orders prohibit bituminizing tram tracks or selling and scrapping tramway assets like cars and depots. Yet authorities are continuing to defy such legal restrictions, including bituminizing tram tracks, which is currently illegal under the stay order.

Dr Bhattacharya said that while a public-private partnership (PPP) model could be a viable solution, the authorities seem determined to shut down the tramways. After decades of serving as a crucial part of Kolkata's

Trams are gentler and have fewer service needs than buses, for instance. They are also cheaper to instal and cleaner to run.

public transport system, trams are now on the brink of being reduced to mere heritage attractions, instead of being a respected part of Kolkata's transport system.

The legal struggle gained momentum when two Public Interest Litigations (PILs) were filed almost simultaneously in the Calcutta High Court. Advocate Sulagna Mukherjee filed a PIL focusing on the financial aspects, land sales, and corruption associated with the tramways.

Almost at the same time, a citizen group, People United for Better Living in Calcutta (PUBLIC) filed a case to prevent the bituminization of tram tracks. These cases were later clubbed together and in 2023, the High Court directed the formation of a committee to recommend actions aimed at restoring the tramways.



Public support for trams has grown in recent years

Unfortunately, alleges Dr Bhattacharya, the committee's leadership — comprising the managing director and deputy managing director of the West Bengal Transport Corporation (WBTC), both seen as anti-tram and aligned with the state government — skewed the process. Proposals from pro-tram activists were excluded from the minutes, while anti-tram suggestions were incorporated. Although the minutes were circulated, the final version submitted to the court remains unknown, despite repeated protests from the tramways association.

Frustrated with the role of the state government, Dr Bhattacharya said it was working to tarnish the reputation of trams by promoting the idea that they are outdated and only suitable for museum displays.

He noted that systematic efforts have been made to make trams appear unreliable and useless. For example, a timetable posted at the Shyambazar terminus about two years ago vanished within days, suggesting corruption and deliberate sabotage. An affidavit is expected to be filed at the earliest.

Dr Bhattacharya says their case is bolstered by the extensive documentation they have gathered, which supports their stand with solid reasons.

He also noted that public awareness and support for the tramways have grown significantly, with more people speaking up on social media in favour of preserving the trams. This, he believes, is a significant success in their efforts to mobilize the people and protect this vital part of Kolkata's heritage.

The government, however, says it is getting rid of trams in the interests of road safety. It claims that tram tracks criss-crossing the city's streets have been the cause of accidents. Trams also slow down traffic, adding to the city's already notorious traffic jams.



Dr Debashish Bhattacharya, founding president of the Kolkata Tram Users' Association

Dr Bhattacharya retorts that these are mere excuses. Where are the numbers to back such claims, he asks. On the contrary, trams have served Kolkata well for generations. They are easy to board and alight from. They are gentler and have fewer service needs than buses, for instance. And, of course, trams are much cheaper to instal and keep in service.

"Trams have played a pivotal role in shaping the city's cultural and social life," he says. Trams bring together people from all sections of society. Children have learnt to navigate the city using trams, a shared experience that transcended social boundaries.

Removing them would not only disrupt transport networks but also erase a significant part of Kolkata's history. The tram routes weren't just about getting from one place to another. They connected many of the city's

most important institutions, hospitals and markets. Calcutta University and Calcutta Medical College are examples.

In the era of global warming, having a functioning tramway system is the best environmental statement that Kolkata can make as a sustainable city, he points out.

While Kolkata's tram system has been slowly dismantled, the global trend has been just the opposite. Cities across the world have recognized the benefits of trams and have reintroduced or expanded their tram networks.

Dr Bhattacharya says in cities like San Diego in California, trams are viewed as the future of urban transport, providing a sustainable and economical solution to traffic congestion and pollution. The financial viability of trams has been proven repeatedly, as they offer lower operational costs compared to buses, especially

as long-term investments.

"Dismantling Kolkata's tram system would be a costly mistake, both financially and environmentally," he warns.

The seeds of this decline began in the early 1990s when the then transport minister under the Left Front government declared that trams would die a natural death due to obsolescence. Ironically, this announcement came just a year after Kolkata procured its last tram car with World Bank assistance.

Once financial aid for tramways ceased, the focus shifted to buses, which were perceived as being more modern and efficient. However, this shift overlooked the higher operational costs associated with buses, which have a much shorter service life compared to trams. While a tram can serve the city for decades, buses need frequent replacements, leading to continuous financial outlays, raising suspicions of corruption within the transport department.

Between 1990 and 1992, several tram depots were dismantled. Functioning tramcars were sold off as scrap, ostensibly to make room for the newly acquired buses. The rationale cited was that buses were more efficient. But critics argue that this move was driven more by the potential for kickbacks from bus manufacturers and suppliers.

Buses, unlike trams, have a lucrative market for spare parts and fuel, both of which are prone to theft and mismanagement. Trams, on the other hand, run on electricity, which cannot be easily siphoned off, making them less attractive for those looking to profit from the public transport system. The shift from trams to buses thus seemed more like a politically motivated decision than one based on efficiency or public interest.

Kolkata's tram system, if preserved and modernized, could serve as a model for sustainable urban transport in India. The infrastructure, although neglected, still exists, and restoring the tramways would require only a moderate fraction of the investment needed to expand other forms of transport like the Metro rail.

Dr Bhattacharya expressed concern over the unutilized heritage value of Calcutta Tramways, which he called a "living industrial heritage". He drew a parallel with the Darjeeling Himalayan Railway (DHR), which has a UNESCO World Heritage tag.

Calcutta Tramways meets all the criteria for such recognition, he says. However, unlike the DHR, which Indian Railways is committed to maintaining intact, in this case the West Bengal Transport Corporation (WBTC) aims to uproot the tramways.

If the tramways are likely to be destroyed in a year or two, UNESCO is hardly likely to bestow the World Heritage tag. This underscores the precarious situation facing the tramways and the glaring missed opportunity for the city of Kolkata. ■



The cheetah project is a big black box at this point of time

‘It is two years, let’s see if the cheetahs are put in the wild’

Ravi Chellam says project is muddled thinking

Civil Society News
New Delhi

TWO years after African cheetahs were airfreighted to India amidst much fanfare, little is known about the government’s favoured wildlife project.

The cheetahs were to be released from their enclosures and roam in the wild. The cheetahs were supposed to enhance wildlife conservation and natural habitats. That goal does not seem near. The only free-ranging cheetah was recently found dead.

To understand what might be going on with the cheetah project, *Civil Society* spoke to Ravi Chellam, a conservation scientist and a knowledgeable observer of India’s wildlife management.

Q: It’s going to be two years since the launch of the cheetah project. They are now all set to release the cheetahs into the wild. Should one assume from this that the project is a huge success?

Whether the cheetahs will be released in the wild remains to be seen. I’m saying this because the timelines outlined in the government’s Action Plan for Introduction of Cheetah in India or Cheetah Action Plan (CAP) for short, have not been followed. We don’t know what is the basis on which this project is currently being implemented, its day-to-day management, long-term plans, short-term plans...all of it is a big black box at this point of time.

Q: You mean it’s all shrouded in secrecy?

It’s shrouded in confusion and complete lack of clarity on what this project is about. The narrative has been constantly changing. The goal

posts have been shifting. To describe it as a mess is paying it a compliment.

Because it’s criminal, what we are doing. We have brought a Vulnerable (IUCN classification) species which is facing a high risk of extinction in the wild, all the way from Africa in the name of conservation. And we’re doing nothing for conservation. On the contrary, we are negatively impacting conservation in India in multiple ways.

Q: How exactly?

First of all, attention has been distracted from much more crucial, urgent, important, nationally recognized priorities. I’m referring to the National Wildlife Action Plan (NWAP). It’s a document which has guided wildlife conservation for decades and the current plan is for the period 2017 to 2031.

Under the NWAP, the conservation of species like the Great Indian Bustard, the gharial, translocation of species like the Asiatic lion have been accorded high priority. Do we hear anything at all about these? Do we know what level of investment is going into the conservation of these species?

No, because today conservation in India is all about tigers and cheetahs. And, as for the cheetah, I have not seen any impact on conservation other than negative. For instance, the Supreme Court ordered the lions to be translocated to Kuno in 2013. We are not even talking about the lions coming to Kuno. We’re talking, instead, about cheetahs not only in Kuno but in Gandhi Sagar and in Nauradehi in Madhya Pradesh, all the way to Banni in Gujarat.

Each time we talk of cheetahs, it is essentially a civil engineering enterprise. We are building enclosures, fences, catching leopards, moving leopards from their native habitat — all in the name of cheetah

conservation. They’re catching prey from all over and bringing them to feed the cheetahs in enclosures. This is what I mean by the negative impacts on conservation.

Q: Indian wildlife conservation has a long history. A lot has been done. Has there been a sudden change? Is there now a point of hiatus in which wildlife policy has been subverted and hijacked?

I humbly appreciate what we as a country have done for wildlife conservation. We are, in many ways, the model for the world. Which other country has such a large and high-density human population? And a population which depends primarily on the land, on biological resources for day-to-day survival, livelihoods, and still hosts large populations of tigers, leopards, snow leopards, elephants and much more.

People don’t necessarily view wildlife as alien. Most local communities and local cultures accept all forms of nature as a part of their lives. That’s a huge, huge plus point. We can see by some metrics, like animal population numbers and lack of large mammal extinction, that we’ve done a pretty good job.

But post-1990 we’re seeing a great push for what is called development. This notion of development rides on destroying functional ecosystems. Native wildlife habitats are being destroyed for so-called human benefit. Where will wildlife go? So, they’re coming more and more into human-dominated habitats. Conflicts are increasing.

To answer your question, there is hubris and great elements of impunity seeping right through the cheetah project. The National Tiger Conservation Authority (NTCA) has literally befuddled the Supreme Court by saying one thing and doing quite another. They went to the Supreme Court saying, allow us to explore habitats other than Kuno for the introduction of African cheetahs. Years go by and judges change. And we end up with the cheetahs going to Kuno.

In an appeal to the court on the 2013 order, which said it’s illegal to bring African cheetahs to India, particularly to Kuno, the NTCA sought relief. It told the court, allow us to explore other habitats. The two that were mentioned were Nauradehi in Madhya Pradesh and Sathyamangalam in Tamil Nadu. And Sathyamangalam was not even surveyed. This is just one example of how this project is riddled with poor science, acts of impunity and disrespect for the rule of law.

The CAP promises many things. For example, that the cheetahs will serve as a flagship for saving open natural ecosystems, like grasslands, savannahs and scrub forest.

If the cheetahs are not able to survive and are held captive in six square kilometres of enclosures, how are they going to have any impact on the broader conservation goals? At the same time, populations of critically endangered species like caracal and the Great Indian Bustard are declining. Most recently, we find the numbers of the lesser florican also drastically going down. We are not paying attention to any of this.

Q: In what other ways has the Supreme Court been misled?

The most specific way is that they (the NTCA) said they will not disrupt lion translocation to Kuno and that they will consider other habitats for the cheetahs. This hasn’t happened.

The January 2020 order of the Supreme Court appointed a committee to monitor the implementation of the cheetah introduction project. In 2023, the government told the court, we have the experts, allow us to do it, there is no need for monitoring by the committee. So even the court-

appointed committee has more or less stopped functioning.

Q: Should the cheetahs not have come to India? Or is it that cheetahs coming to Kuno has been a big mistake?

To establish any wildlife population, the very minimum basic requirement is going to be adequate space. And for that we need to understand the ecology of the species, especially its spatial ecology and its social organization. Cheetahs, by definition, are a low-density and wide-ranging species. That means one to two cheetahs in 100 square kilometres of the best habitat. To establish a population, we’re talking of 50 or more animals.

We need at least 4,000 to 5,000, possibly up to 8,000, square kilometres of good quality habitats, sufficient prey and minimal disturbance to establish a population of free-ranging cheetahs in the wild.

Currently, India just does not have that amount of space of the desired habitat quality. If we are serious about establishing a cheetah population, we first need to identify and secure habitats, ensure that these are connected, well-protected and monitored for several years, before bringing the cheetahs.

Here we have brought the cheetahs, we are holding them captive for two years. We then say Gandhi Sagar is being readied for them as well as Nauradehi. And we will establish a captive breeding centre in Banni. These are not science-based conservation plans but plans which are a result of muddled thinking.

Q: Is there any merit at all in bringing cheetahs to India?

The crux of the argument is that the cheetahs have gone locally extinct in our country and hence it’s our moral and ethical responsibility to bring them back. The other argument is that open natural ecosystems, like grasslands, scrub thorn forests, are neglected and hence need a push in terms of conservation. The example given is Project Tiger which served as a flagship for conserving our forests. That’s a moot point. But that’s the analogy that’s being provided.

If we don’t have sufficient space for the cheetah to roam freely, how is it then going to

play that flagship role? We are constantly giving away these habitats for huge solar energy plants, wind farms, and other projects which change the land use, everything that goes against the stated aim of the cheetah project.

Much of these habitats is still considered wastelands. India has a Wasteland Atlas. If we are serious about conservation, we should remove these habitats from the Wasteland Atlas and give such habitats the respect and importance they deserve.

We don’t need to bring in the African cheetah to do that. India has the Great Indian Bustard, the lesser florican, caracal, wolf, chinkara, the blackbuck. I could go on and on. In what way do these lack charisma? Are these not, at least many of these, critically endangered species?

We really need to be focusing on habitats and the species that are already native to India. If we get all of that right, maybe 15 to 20 years down the line when habitats are ready, we can consider bringing cheetahs.

A better option would be to work with Iran, which has native Asiatic cheetahs, collaborate with them, enhance habitat protection, grow the population, learn from that process and ensure that we are able to conserve Asiatic cheetahs in Iran to begin with. Saudi Arabia is planning to establish a cheetah population. We need to cooperate internationally rather than bring these animals to India for the glitz. ■

Ravi Chellam is a wildlife biologist and conservation scientist based in Bengaluru. He is CEO of Metastrata Foundation and coordinator of Biodiversity Collaborative. The views expressed are independent and personal.

Banana bank's rare varieties go commercial

Shree Padre
Kasaragod

DURING the pandemic, Babu Parambath, a social activist, mulled growing something on his sister's tiny 0.20 acres of land lying idle before his eyes. He'd been extolling the virtues of organic farming to all and sundry but the truth was, he'd never picked up a spade.

Parambath began growing new varieties of banana on that land. In the process, he got more and more immersed in collecting new varieties. Within a year, he had amassed 112 varieties sourced from different areas. A few were very rare.

One day, it struck him: "If my sister wants the plot to construct a house, or for anything else, what will be the fate of my painstakingly collected banana varieties? A flood or natural calamity could also destroy this genetic wealth. How can I conserve it all here?"

An idea then dawned on him — a banana bank. He would give five banana suckers to local people keen to cultivate the fruit. This way, rare varieties would be retained in the area. If anyone were to lose a variety, he could procure it from the others. In the process, interest in banana cultivation and the culture of eating homegrown fruits would grow, he reasoned.

If you look closely at Babu Parambath's one-year account of his 0.20 acre banana garden, you won't believe your eyes. In 2022-23, he earned ₹272,300. His expenses were just ₹47,500. So, his net income, all profit, was ₹224,800!

GROWING BANANAS The banana plays an important role in the Kerala diet. All parts of the plant are consumed. The problem is that Keralites are so fond of their Nendra banana that no other variety is of much interest to them.

That was Parambath's first problem. Luckily, he had a ready audience willing to listen, because of his many welfare activities. He had networked resident welfare associations, an organic produce marketing cooperative, a group doing rainwater harvesting, and more.

He began telling them about his plan of starting a banana bank. During one such interaction, a young National Bank for Agriculture and Rural Development (NABARD) officer listened keenly. Impressed, he asked Parambath to draw up a project proposal on the banana bank. NABARD studied his plans and gave him a grant of ₹2.5 lakh for two years from 2022 to 2024, to start the banana bank.

Parambath shortlisted 35 banana varieties for distribution to 100 houses. Since the response was enthusiastic, he expanded distribution to 200 houses spread over four clusters.

"Ours was not like any government project. We ensured that the plants were given only to interested persons," he says.

"There were two objectives," points out Mohammad Riyaz, district development manager, NABARD, for Malappuram and Kozhikode districts. "One was propagation and disseminating rare banana varieties to different farmers and second was conservation by ordinary farmers. Both objectives were fulfilled very nicely. All participating farmers are now getting very good returns."

Distribution, marketing and sales seamlessly merged when Parambath decided to set up his banana bank under the aegis of the Niravu Farmers Producer Company Ltd.



Babu Parambath with one of his banana varieties

Niravu, which means 'full' in Malayalam, started as a community initiative in 2006 in Vengeri under the Kozhikode City Corporation which had plans to promote organic farming. In 2017, Niravu floated a farmer-producer company called the Niravu Farmers Producer Company Ltd. The banana bank was ensconced there.

Thanks to media coverage people knew about Parambath's banana collection and the rare varieties on offer. The number of farmers who approached the banana bank, perhaps 40 or 50, was small because this is an urban belt belonging to the corporation.

Most people keen on cultivating offbeat varieties were from different professions. They had small bits of land ranging from 2,100 square feet to 4,400 square feet. A few had never grown bananas. There were also families who had been cultivating one or two local banana varieties, but didn't have access to rare ones.

Distribution of banana plants was only the first step. Ensuring that these families planted the banana varieties and took good care of them was more difficult.

The Niravu Banana Bank roped in the services of two agriculture

science graduates, Athulya and Aswathi Narayanadas, from Kerala Agriculture University (KAU) to monitor cultivation. Along with Parambath, they visited all homesteads and kept guiding growers through a WhatsApp group.

"People who weren't farmers were also very keen to grow bananas. Niravu guaranteed them a good price through their own network for banana bunches as well as plants. This helped spread banana cultivation and retained the interest of stakeholders," says Athulya.

Devadasan P.K., a former army employee, was already interested in cultivating new banana varieties. His association with the banana bank fuelled his hobby. Now he has 80 varieties, some of which he procured from different sources in Kerala.

"The advantage we have is that the Niravu FPC's sales counter gives us a good price for our banana bunches. Many banana farmers contact me for plants of rare varieties. Also, we don't have to give the sales counter full banana bunches. We can just give hands too. When we harvest a new variety, we can keep one bunch for our use and sell the rest."

Keen to cultivate diverse banana plants on their campus, Providence Women's College in Malapparamb got deeply involved in the banana bank project. Initially, they had only five varieties. They acquired 44 varieties from the bank which they asked their students to plant.

"Now the college has about 100 varieties. Some have already produced bunches," says Dr Jeena Karunakaran, a faculty member. "We, four or five lecturers, also took a few plants home. I had five varieties earlier, now I have 40. A few have yielded bananas."

Dr Karunakaran favoured varieties like Manjeri Nendran, Chenkadali and Swarnamukhi Nendran. "When we buy the same variety from the market we find the banana is not as tasty as the one we have grown," she observed.

Dr Minoo Divakaran, a professor of botany in the same college, has arranged for name plates for each banana plant with its own QR code. The code shows details of each variety when scanned. "We got the name and QR code printed on metal plates since they can't be spoiled by rain. Many of our QR codes are connected to the varietal details given by the National Research Centre for Bananas (NRCB) website. Interested students make use of this information."

"When Babu Parambath gets newer varieties, he gives one plant to us. That's how we now have 100 varieties. Our dream is that sometime in the future our students will have all these varieties in their homesteads," says Dr Divakaran.

INCOME AND DIVERSITY Although the two-year project of the Niravu Banana Bank is over, give and take of fruits and plants is continuing enthusiastically. The bank charges ₹250 for each sucker of a special variety. "Our highest booking, of almost 2,050 suckers, is for the Zanzibar variety. In the normal course, this would take decades to deliver," says Shilpa N.T., manager of Niravu FPC's sales outlet.

The biggest problem that farmers face is that traders don't buy new varieties for a higher price. They treat every variety on a par with the commercial one and pay the same price.

But the Niravu sales outlet gives growers a higher price. Even when the Nendran banana's market price is ₹70 per kg, Niravu pays ₹100 per kg. The FPC has fixed prices depending on variety and quality. The farmer or cultivator has to just pay 13 percent of sales proceeds to the outlet as handling fee.

Each member has a code which is mentioned on the bill for producer traceability. Since the Niravu FPC pays more than the market price, many households are incentivized to grow newer varieties.

Babu Parambath's impressive income from his small garden was

possible because of four factors. One, the Niravu outlet bought special varieties of bananas for a high price. Being organically produced, the demand was good. Second, Parambath himself did most of the manual work, thus saving on labour costs. Third, since the bananas were rare varieties, the suckers of the mother plants attracted demand and were sold through the Niravu sales counter. Fourth, through a simple method called macro propagation, taught by the National Research Centre for Banana (NRCB) in Tiruchirappalli, Parambath produced and sold hundreds of macro plants too.

For growers of new banana varieties, it is not the fruits alone that bring in an income. Young plants or suckers too are in demand. Depending on the variety, each mother tree yields two to six suckers. The Niravu sales outlet accepts bookings for suckers as well as for fruits.

The outlet sells banana hands and bunches. A frontline rack exhibits the best varieties of banana hands with their respective names. Nowhere else do you see the names of bananas displayed.

"Farmers don't need to bring the whole banana bunch to our shop. We buy the hands too. This is very convenient for people who want to



Harvesting bananas is an occasion marked with family and friends

cultivate a new variety. If customers have to buy the whole bunch, they won't be able to consume it. It will get rotten," says A.P. Sathyan, chairman of the Niravu Banana Bank.

Members of the bank also have access to training and the latest knowhow. Twenty-five members went on a study tour to KAU's Banana Research Centre at Kannara in Thrissur. Subsequently, another 25 members went to the NRCB in Tiruchirappalli. The training they got in both places improved their skills and enthused them further.

THE BANK'S IMPACT The banana bank has succeeded in removing the average Keralite's mental block against other varieties of banana. They have realized that the Nendran banana isn't the sole custodian of taste and health.

Kerala now has about a dozen banana variety collectors. They have started selling suckers of rare varieties through social media. It has sparked huge interest and demand. The suckers are costly because sellers have spent a lot of money procuring the mother plants. It is not easy for ordinary people to acquire a rare variety.

Significantly, the bank has shown that local communities can conserve and sustain rare varieties. The banana bank offers rare planting materials that people would not have been able to access. It has also demonstrated that varietal conservation, even by planting a small batch of five rare varieties, can be remunerative, if grown organically and sold through a dedicated sales outlet. ■

Pahadi bands make merry

Rakesh Agrawal
Dehradun

THE wedding took place in Kalsi, a plateau perched up in the hills, in Dehradun district. The bride, Sangita Jhunwan, a Rajput, looked resplendent in her wedding finery. Her groom, Sanjay Tomar, was a Pahadi from Chakrata, a popular tourist destination which gets buried under snow every year.

What was so special about their wedding? The music. Instead of loud, thumping *filmi* songs put together by a DJ, a local band called the Jhankar Pahadi Band played dulcet music under a colourfully decorated shamiana. The lyrics were poetic, the music melodious and the ambience dignified.

The sounds of traditional and modern instruments fused to create music with local flavour. The band strummed on the ramtulla, a stringed instrument, and the dhol, the damana brass cones, the khanjari or dhapali, a hand-held drum, along with a Casio organ, all came together to serve up local music.

Local Pahadi bands have taken over from DJs and *filmi* music in parts of Uttarakhand and in Sirmour district of Himachal Pradesh. "Today, in all 398 villages in the Jaunsar-Babar region no DJ performs. They have been completely replaced by us, the Pahadi bands," claims Vinod Kumar, who heads a similar music group called the Chhaleshwar Band Party.

The Jhankar Pahadi Band's repertoire isn't confined to weddings. They play for all kinds of celebrations, be it a birthday or a marriage anniversary, the birth of a child or a ritual like a *mundan*. The band, through its music, promotes the region's unique cultural traditions and its lyrics speak against casteism.

It was Prem Pancholi, a researcher and artiste, who began this music revolution in Dehradun in 2005. He carried out a study of the musical instruments, musicians and singers of Uttarakhand. In December 2005, he invited folk musicians of the state and held a 15-day workshop.

"In 2003 I began a campaign to promote the dhol and its players. We did a study on why this instrument had fallen into disuse. It used to be played at almost every occasion. We listened to the problems of dhol players and ideated on a strategy to turn it into a remunerative profession," says Pancholi.

About 12 traditional dhol players participated in the workshop and came up with a common policy. "We decided we would play for a fixed time, at a fixed rate. Patrons would earlier force us to play for hours and pay us just a pittance after the show," says Sunil Besari, chief singer of the Pahadi Band Party.

Not only would the players receive a trivial honorarium, they would also be treated very shabbily. The dhol players were all Dalits whereas their patrons were upper-caste. "My



Traditional musical instruments like the ranginga (above) are being revived

father, a famous dhol player, and his party members would be housed in the cow shed at night. They were given left-over cold food for dinner," recalls Vinod Kumar.

Word spread and in just five years, local musicians got organized. Dehradun district now has 175 bands with a set of rules and regulations that everyone adheres to. "People who hire us must tell us in advance the duration of the event, how long they want us to play and agree to pay the fee we demand," says Kumar.

The local bands have become popular. For bands like Jhankar Pahadi Band and Mahasu, the waiting list is six months.

"We are booked almost three months in advance," claims Besari. He is supported by Jhankar Band's Jubal Das.

In 2007 there were just two or three bands. "Now, there are 175 band parties of eight to 10 members each. Each band earns around ₹12 lakh to ₹15 lakh a year. So far, it's a steady

income," says Pancholi.

It has also given the Dalit dhol players more status in society. Uttarakhand is the only state in India where upper castes form the majority community and Dalits are a minority.

"We ask for and get comfortable rooms to sleep in and we eat what their guests are served," says Deepak, a dhol player of Deevan Jaunsari Band.

Enhanced status and income have changed the character of the bands. The Pahadi Band Party, for instance, has ten members. Eight are Dalits and two are Kshatriyas, who are upper-caste.

After playing for three hours at the wedding of Radha Dobhal to Manoj Juyal in Kaploli village in Uttarkashi district, Devendra Panwar and Mahi Rawat sang with full *josh* the famous Jaunsari song, "Rani Chumma". "We work together and proudly carry forward our unique culture," says Panwar.

"We eat together. After all, we are all *kalakars* (artistes). That is our identity. We are above caste and communal identities," says Harish Lal, his Dalit companion.

After the wedding, more than 100 guests hit the floor to dance the Jhumelo, a popular folk dance of Uttarakhand.

About 35 km from Chakrata, close to Lakhmandal, near an ancient Hindu temple dedicated to Lord Shiva, Reema Chauhan was getting married to Ratan Singh. When a local hill band's lead singer, Sunita Rohilla, burst into "Jimedaro Ki Beti", the vibrant folksy music electrified the atmosphere and had guests on their feet.

This February, in Kundu village, a Himachali band performed for an hour for 14-year-old Priyanka Negi's birthday party. Her father, Mohan Singh Negi, owns an apple orchard.

Local musicians are earning a decent income. "A band player earns about ₹1.5 lakh a year. They charge ₹5,000 per wedding. Besides, gifts are showered on them by the appreciative *baratis* and *gharatis*," says Pancholi.

Band players like Suresh Kumar and Harish Lal and singers like Anand Singh Panwar endorse this. "Last year, I earned ₹1.5 lakh and many gifts," says Suresh Kumar.

Also, band members like Suresh Kumar of Pujeli village, Uttarkashi district, who was unemployed earlier, are now quite content. "Since I earned ₹1.5 lakh last year, I'm planning to construct a new home," he says. But most of his relatives and friends have migrated to Delhi. ■

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Picture/Dhritiman Mukherjee



The Great Nicobar's dense forests and pristine waters are a treasure trove of living organisms

GOODBYE TO THE GREAT NICOBAR?

Port, township, airport spell doom

CIVIL SOCIETY NEWS

THE Andaman and Nicobar Islands have always been known for their sparkling natural beauty. There are dense and sweeping forests, brilliant beaches and calm waters with hues unlike anything coastal elsewhere. The islands are also a treasure trove of living organisms, a collection of genes so ancient and pristine that they deserve to be preserved for their encoded mysteries.

Strung out on the eastern seaboard of India, the islands are located at a great distance from the mainland. Consequently, they have had a remote and shimmering presence of their own. Thus far, it has generally been agreed to avoid foisting infrastructure on them. Tourists do arrive and hotels have come up, but fortunately without too much impact. The islands have generally survived as gems of natural beauty and undocumented biological wealth.

It may no longer be so. A project is now underway for setting up a transshipment port, a township and an international airport on the

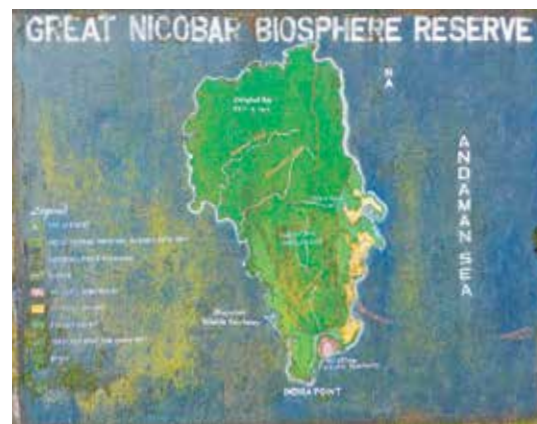
Great Nicobar Island, the ecologically outstanding and southernmost of the islands.

The project has been whisked through clearances after it was conjured up by policy wonks in Delhi in the name of national security. The Andaman and Nicobar Islands make up a strategically placed archipelago. India is already well in control. A case has, however, been made out for a more elaborate presence.

To this end, ₹72,000 crore is to be spent over 30 years on the Great Nicobar which will rudely disturb the island's precious ecology in irreversible ways. Its natural beauty and life-forms will most likely be lost forever.

Environmentalists compare the Great Nicobar with the Amazon — an invaluable asset to the planet in its quest for balance and continuity. Unique species abound. The leatherback turtle, for instance, arrives seasonally to nest, breed and disperse. There are ancient tribes with their cultures on the island.

In these times of global warming and climate



A biosphere as valuable as the Amazon

change, preserving the Great Nicobar, and with it the other islands of the archipelago, should be a priority. Instead, about a million prehistoric trees, dating back to the Pleistocene era, are slated to be cut down. What transpires on the Great Nicobar will have a cascading effect on the rest of the islands as well.

It is not quite clear how a private commercial transshipment port and an international airport in Great Nicobar will serve defence interests. Far from the mainland and surrounded by existing ports in Sri Lanka, Singapore, Malaysia, Kerala, the port will struggle to become commercially viable. Building such infrastructure on an ecologically fragile island, prone to subsidence and earthquakes in the midst of an unpredictable and rising sea, may not be a smart investment.

The perceived security danger is seen from an expansionist China, which has spread itself out in the South China Sea. The Great Nicobar and other islands in the archipelago sit on the sea lanes that lead to the Malacca Strait on which China is almost entirely dependent.

But China is far away from these islands and as yet it doesn't appear to be in any position to grab them. On the contrary, now, with a port coming up and huge investments being made, geopolitical alarm bells will begin ringing. Chances are that China will see a danger to its interests.

The project has been framed in NITI Aayog, the Central government's closed-door think-tank. Subsequent clearances have been given without proper oversight between 2019 and 2023. There has not been adequate or meaningful public consultation and debate. When matters have reached the courts, hearings have been peremptory and lacking in accommodation of complex environmental factors. National security blindly seems to have been the overriding consideration.

Would it have been enough to just strengthen the facilities that already exist on the Great Nicobar? Could a lighter touch have served India's need for development and defence, and averted the damage that will almost certainly be caused by the planned moves?

There is an opinion in defence circles that India's military presence could have been bolstered effectively without diminishing the environmental value of the islands or causing geopolitical stress points.

Admiral Arun Prakash was the Indian Navy chief and the Commander-in-Chief of the Andaman and Nicobar Islands Joint Command after Kargil happened. Now living in retirement in Goa, Admiral Prakash said to *Civil Society* that India's presence on the islands is "not inadequate" but "needs to be reinforced".

However, reinforcement, in his view, could happen without upending the ecology of the Great Nicobar and yet meeting defence needs.

"There is room to bolster, expand and reinforce the existing military presence and infrastructure. I would imagine that there is plenty of land and space available without significantly disturbing or disrupting any of the valuable ecological or anthropologic assets of the island," says Admiral Prakash.

"The archipelago spans 700-800 miles north to south, but since most of the islands are uninhabited, it is up to us to bolster our presence so that our possession of the islands cannot be challenged," he says, explaining that several smaller islands could have been used instead of the Great Nicobar. (Read accompanying interview with Admiral Prakash on Pages 24-25.)

All the heavy lifting for calling into question the planned build-up on the Great Nicobar has been done by environmentalists. Pankaj Sekhsaria, a professor at IIT Mumbai, has in his individual capacity played an important role in documenting the problems relating to the project and the damage that will be caused. He has drawn attention to the poor quality of environment impact assessment (EIA) studies and the lack of oversight.

Some of the measures to mitigate the effects of the project are laughable and bureaucratic in

Picture/Dhritiman Mukherjee



The Great Nicobar is home to the Shompen and Nicobarese tribals. The Shompen, above, a shy people, have lived here in relative isolation, for centuries.



Leatherback turtles nest every year at Galathea Bay, one of the world's largest nesting sites

intent. For instance, ancient trees cut down in Great Nicobar are to be compensated for by growing trees in the Aravalis in Haryana at the other end of the country in the north! The former Haryana chief minister, Manohar Lal Khattar, talked of developing a night safari in the Aravalis. Imagine trading the uniqueness of the Great Nicobar for a night safari, say incredulous environmentalists.

Giant leatherback turtles arrive each year at Galathea Bay to nest. The beach of their choice was officially a sanctuary, but under the current development plans has lost this status. Instead, a 300-metre channel through the port is all that the turtles have for getting to their nesting site. It seems to have escaped official scrutiny that the turtles would be competing with giant ships to get to their traditional breeding ground in the bay which itself has been taken over.

A compilation of articles, *The Great Nicobar Betrayal*, curated by Sekhsaria, has recently been published to make available alternative points of view and awaken public attention, even as the government forges ahead.

The government's project has been ironically named 'Holistic Development of the Great Nicobar Island'. It is being implemented by the little-known Andaman and Nicobar Islands Integrated Development Corporation, which is based in Port Blair.

"Where is the scientific rigour and expertise?"



After the tsunami, the lighthouse stands in the sea

asks Sekhsaria, pointing out flaws in the EIA for the project and the clearances given by the Union Environment Ministry.

“It is stunning that the environment ministry agreed to divert 130 sq km of primary forests on the condition that these forests would be compensated for by tree plantation in the state of Haryana, more than 2,000 km away,” he says.

“We are talking about a tropical evergreen forest spread over 130 sq km, a million old-growth trees, the northern Indian Ocean’s most important leatherback nesting site and an island that experienced one of the most severe earthquakes and tsunamis in human history in 2004,” he says.

Sekhsaria quotes from the EIA consultant’s site visit report which talks of the island’s dense vegetation. “The hills are steep, slippery and totally covered by multistoried vegetation. Whenever we could gain entry through some opening in the dense forest, visibility was poor and humidity was high...when one looks upwards to find what tree it is, it is not just one but many. Most trees are overgrown by heavy climbers and the tree trunks are covered by epiphytes including mosses, lichens, epiphytic ferns and orchids.”

The consultant’s report further adds: “It was impossible to use any measuring device like tape to make any quadrat in the forest vegetation. Hence intensive survey was carried out on both sides of Campbell-Indira Point for four days. It is about 45 km (sic) and the entire stretch was surveyed eight times in four days.”

‘It is stunning that the environment ministry agreed to divert 130 sq km of primary forests on the condition that they would be compensated by plantation in Haryana, more than 2,000 km away.’

That the environment ministry should have based its approvals on this kind of EIA report is stunning.

To be fair, the ministry laid down conditions for providing clearances. The only problem is, Sekhsaria points out, the conditions are bizarre.

For example, expressing concern over the project disturbing endemic owls, the ministry’s condition was: “Trees with nesting holes of owls to be identified and geo-tagged.... Such trees shall be safeguarded as far as possible.”

The condition is unimplementable. It would appear that no one in the ministry and its committees has applied their mind.

Says Sekhsaria: “Nesting holes of owls are tough to locate in the best of situations. We are talking of 130 sq km of pristine tropical forest. A million trees are to be cut. Even scores of India’s best birdwatchers working year round wouldn’t be able to survey a million trees.”

The Galathea river empties into the ocean at Galathea Bay, not far from Indira Point, the southernmost tip of India. Giant leatherback turtles have their nesting sites. Some go to Australia after breeding and others to Africa to return again as they have done for hundreds of years. It is, as a researcher described, an almost supernatural phenomenon.

To protect the turtles, the Galathea Bay Wildlife Sanctuary was created in 1997. The current project takes that protection away. Official permissions for the port have flowed in mysterious ways. Contradictions abound.

For instance, the sanctuary was denotified in January 2021 while the prefeasibility report was released in March 2021, two months later, by NITI Aayog’s consultants.

It is similarly interesting that the environment ministry released India’s National Marine Turtle Action Plan in February 2021 apparently without



Foliage and undergrowth are thick and difficult to walk through



The Nicobar long-tailed macaque

realizing that the Galathea Bay Sanctuary had been denotified a month earlier. Galathea Bay’s turtles find glowing mention in the plan when the very provisions for their protection had been removed.

Denotification was done by the National Board for Wildlife (NBWL). The Wildlife Institute of India (WII) ratified the decision without undertaking specialized studies, says Sekhsaria.

“The Wildlife Institute of India offered a mitigation plan but it was just a fig leaf. The leatherbacks enter the bay today through a mouth that is three kilometres wide. At least 90 percent of this access will be blocked, leaving the turtles just 300 metres for reaching the nesting beaches. The turtles will compete with huge ships, their sounds and lights and pollution,” says Sekhsaria.

Seismicity in the islands is also a reason for concern. The project site sits on a fault. Researchers have said there have been 400 earthquakes in



Megapode

10 years. Janki Andharia of the Tata Institute of Social Sciences (TISS) and her colleagues have been studying the islands after the 2004 tsunami and don’t think the seismic issue has been adequately addressed.

Sekhsaria says that the Great Nicobar’s coastline sank 4.5 metres after the tsunami. One visible proof of this is the lighthouse at Indira Point, which used to be above the water and is now in it.

“Investing in a port at precisely this location seems reckless,” says Sekhsaria. “Especially when rising seas are forcing island nations to relocate.”

The Great Nicobar has been inhabited by the Shompen and Nicobarese tribals for centuries. Both tribes have lived relatively isolated from the rest of the world. The tsunami of December 2004 slammed the island and killed one-third of the Nicobarese. The government relocated them into shanties. Both tribes yearn to return to their historical lands.

Picture/Dhritiman Mukherjee



There is an abundance of owls on a million trees. How will their nest holes be identified?

Picture/Dhritiman Mukherjee



The Nicobar treeshrew

The Shompen, 245 in number in 2022, have been classified as a particularly vulnerable tribal group (PVTG). They rely on hunting and foraging in their forests. About 1,200 Nicobarese live in South Nicobar. Tribal chiefs have clearly said they don’t want to give up their ancestral land and forests.

This is their habitat, protected by the Forest Rights Act and a spate of numerous other laws. Yet the project was cleared under the Forest Conservation Act for diversion of forest land and two environmental clearances were given from the Union Ministry of Environment, Forest and Climate Change in rapid succession in 2022.

Environmentalists invariably turn to the courts for a fair decision on their concerns. But there has been no legal relief — in strange circumstances.

There were four appeals before the eastern zone bench of the National Green Tribunal (NGT) which were summarily dismissed by a special bench, says Norma Alvares, a public-spirited lawyer.

The appeals were listed for filing of affidavits, as distinct from final hearing, on April 3, 2023. But a six-member special bench constituted for the day with judges and experts from the northern zone insisted on taking up the matter and disposed of it straightaway.

“The NGT proceeded to pronounce summary judgment on all four appeals, including the forest appeal, though not a word had been argued by one of the appellants,” says Alvares. “It passed its judgment, once again, in violation of the principles of natural justice.”

The articles curated by Sekhsaria are a sad testimony against a system controlled by forces that citizens can’t hold to account. It is reassuring that critics of the project are well-qualified and well-informed and ready to speak up for the farthest part of the country in the name of the environment. It is worrisome that an entire government and the system it controls should be unwilling to listen. That the Great Nicobar should be treated as dispensable is a tragedy of immeasurable proportions. ■

‘Possible to bolster security without harming ecology’

Admiral Arun Prakash on the Nicobar project

Civil Society News

New Delhi

IS the huge investment in a transshipment port and other infrastructure on the Great Nicobar Island really needed to bolster India's strategic presence in the region? Or would a lighter touch with the reinforcing of current defence facilities have been enough?

Admiral Arun Prakash believes that a lighter touch would have worked just as well. Admiral Prakash, now retired and living in Goa, is a former Navy chief. He was head of the joint command of the Army, Navy, Air Force and Coast Guard in the Andaman and Nicobar Islands.

Admiral Prakash says strengthening of India's presence is needed. But it could be achieved by merely expanding India's defence capabilities on the Great Nicobar and also using some of the smaller islands if required. In this way, there wouldn't be the ecological damage that is going to be caused by large commercial facilities.

Q: Can you tell our readers why the islands are of great strategic significance and suddenly an urgent national security issue?

My connection to the islands goes back to 2001, when I was posted as Commander-in-Chief of the newly formed Andaman and Nicobar Command. Till then the islands had been looked after by the Navy. Fortress Andaman Nicobar, located there, was manned by only the Navy, with small elements of the Air Force and Army made available.

After the 1999 Kargil War, a major defence review took place, and one of its outcomes was that the Government of India decided to bolster the security of the A&N islands. To this end, it was decided to create a joint command in the A&N islands, with a Commander-in-Chief who would have under his command elements of the services — the Army, Navy, Air Force — as well as the Coast Guard.

The Andaman and Nicobar archipelago, as we know, is strategically located in the middle of the Bay of Bengal, almost equidistant between the Indian peninsula and Southeast Asia. Myanmar and Thailand are quite close, and the northern tip of Indonesia is just about 90 miles from the southernmost island, which is Great Nicobar Island or GNI.

Given this location, and the fact that the Andaman and Nicobar archipelago dominates the shipping lanes which run from the Pacific, through the Strait of Malacca, across the Indian Ocean to the Persian

Gulf, the Red Sea, and then on to Europe, it occupies a very strategic position.

If we go back into history, the Japanese, within weeks of the Pearl Harbor attack (in December 1941), swept across Southeast Asia and by March 1942 had occupied the Andaman and Nicobar islands, chasing out the British garrison. Having established their HQ in Port Blair, they were going to use the islands as the springboard for their invasion of India, which never came about.

Then, we come to the time of Independence. Pakistan's Mohammad Ali Jinnah made a bid for these islands, basing his claim on the fact that they lay on the sea route from West Pakistan to East Pakistan. At the

same time, the UK Chiefs of Staff told their government that these islands were of strategic value to British interests in the East, and should be retained as Crown possessions. I think we should consider it fortunate that, for various reasons, the British agreed to oblige Nehru, and handed over the islands to India.

I gave this background to highlight the strategic importance of these islands to India, and why we cannot afford to neglect them. They can be a springboard for India to implement whatever policy initiatives it wants in the strategic sphere. On the other hand, if they fall into the hands of an adversary power, they can pose a huge threat to India. Their strategic importance to India is increasing by the day — given the emergence of China and the Indo-Pacific paradigm.

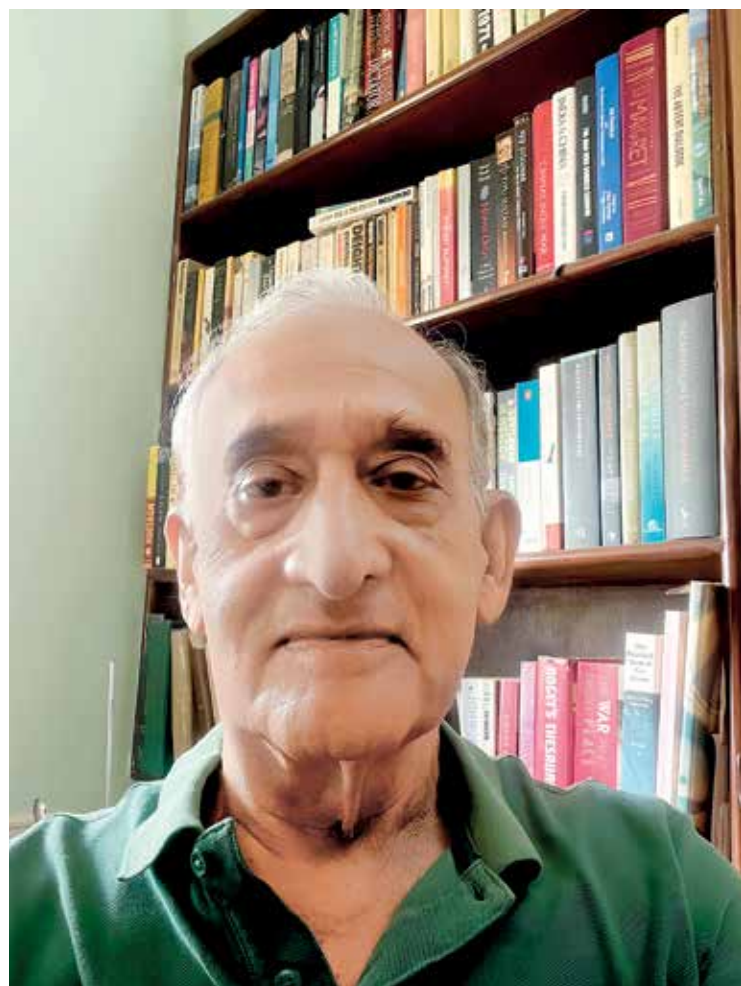
Q: Despite the fact that we have remained in control of the islands, is our possession of them inadequate?

Well, it is not inadequate but it needs to be reinforced. The archipelago spans 700 to 800 miles, north to south, but since most of the islands are uninhabited, it is up to us to bolster our presence so that our possession of the

islands cannot be challenged. At this moment, we are there, our forces are there, the islands seem well protected, but who can predict the future?

Q: What would be the advantage of this huge project which we are undertaking on the Great Nicobar Island? What is the strategic value we gain from it?

The Great Nicobar Island is one of the largest islands in that chain and, as I pointed out, as the southernmost island it is closest to Indonesia and the Malacca Strait. This strait is the shortest, safest and most economical exit and entry point for all the shipping that traverses to and from the



Admiral Arun Prakash: 'There is room to accommodate all concerns'

Pacific and Indian Oceans, carrying oil, energy, raw material and other trade.

If you create a military stronghold in the Great Nicobar then you can dominate the Malacca Strait very conspicuously. We already have a presence on this island, by way of a small airstrip, a naval air station, a minor port and a small garrison — all on the eastern side of the island. There is room to bolster, expand and reinforce the existing military presence and infrastructure. I would imagine that there is plenty of land or space available without significantly disturbing or disrupting any of the valuable ecological or anthropologic assets of the island.

And, secondly, if you still want more land for military infrastructure, there are other islands just north of Great Nicobar where you could accommodate an airfield and a port.

Q: What can be done to meet strategic objectives and still have a lighter touch on the environment?

If you're only thinking of bolstering your security capabilities, there is adequate space on the eastern part of the Great Nicobar. As I mentioned, the minor port in Campbell Bay, the existing airstrip and the army garrison all have room for expansion and extension to meet enhanced security requirements. There are also smaller islands to the north of the Great Nicobar which could accommodate airfields, harbours and garrisons.

Q: How imminent is the danger of China occupying these islands in military terms?

While it may have been a possibility a few decades ago, it is a far-fetched idea today. The nearest Chinese naval base, in Hainan, is about 3,000 miles away. Moreover, they've got many other problems at their doorstep that they need to worry about; like Taiwan, for instance. On the other hand, Deng Xiaoping admitted in 2003, soon after we formed the Andaman Nicobar Command, that China faced a "Malacca dilemma".

Deng coined this phrase because he felt that closing of the Malacca Strait by an adversary could form an "iron chain around China's neck". He was referring to the fact that almost 80 to 90 percent of China's energy trade, raw materials, finished goods, etc, passes through the Malacca Strait. Any power which decides to interfere, interdict, or choke off this area can cause immense damage to China's economy, industry, trade and so on.

So, it is China that should be worried about what happens in the Malacca Strait rather than us running scared of somebody coming and occupying the islands.

Q: Does our attempt to bolster our presence by having this extensive form of development on the Great Nicobar change the strategic environment in any way?

Of course it will. If you're going to spend ₹72,000 crore in developing an island which is sitting at the mouth of the Malacca Strait, it's going to send a huge message and may even ring alarm bells in the region. It may possibly be resented in Indonesia, which is next door, or in Malaysia, because it spells "competition" in many spheres. So, it is a very significant message, there is no doubt about it.

Q: But what should the priorities be for the development and ecology of the islands? Or is defence the single biggest priority?

When I was the Commander-in-Chief, all these issues were of concern. But they needed to be looked at in three separate boxes. One was the welfare of the islanders, because the economy is, as you know, very minimal. They live mostly on support from the mainland. There is a need to develop the islands so that they can become as self-sustaining as possible and people can earn a living on their own.

It was quite apparent that there were two main areas in which the economy could be expanded on a sustainable basis — tourism and fisheries. The islands have a huge exclusive economic zone where our fishermen are seen occasionally, but neighbours' trawlers come in and take away a huge catch. We hardly have any fishing initiatives on an industrial scale, just small trawlers and little canoes, etc.

The other was the ecology. Many of the islands are in a pristine state. You have tribes that have lived there continuously for millennia — unspoiled by "civilization". This is very precious heritage which we need to protect and preserve for as long as possible.

And the third factor was security. In which order of priority you consider these three depends on who you are. As Commander-in-Chief, security came first for me. At that point of time (2001-03), we had put forward a plan which ensured that we had a military "presence" from north to south with adequate forces to deter and, if required, arrest foreign trespassers, poachers and illegal fishermen. While some of our proposals did receive approval, many requirements remained unfulfilled due to the internal dynamics of the service HQs.

However, much has changed since and now one understands that there is a security presence right across the islands. From north to south, there's a Naval Air Base in Diglipur, close to Myanmar; then, in the middle, there is a Naval Base and Naval Air Base as well as Army presence in Port Blair; further south we have Car Nicobar which is an Air Force Station; and finally, in the south there is Great Nicobar, which I have already described. The current presence can be built upon and bolstered

by inducting more units, more firepower as well as sensors like radars, etc.

Is there any conflict between ecology and security? This is not really within my purview but I would say that if there is a conflict, there is enough room to accommodate all concerns and achieve a balance.

Q: In purely commercial terms, do you see a large port over there being viable?

I'm not an expert so I'm not going to claim any great depth of knowledge here. However, common sense tells me that in the vicinity of the

Great Nicobar, there are ports like Singapore, Port Klang in Malaysia, and Hambantota, created by the Chinese for Sri Lanka. A little farther on is the large port of Colombo. All these ports constitute what are called "transshipment ports" for India.

This is because most Indian ports are unable to cope with large container-carrying ships. So right now most container traffic destined for Indian ports is off-loaded in one of these transshipment ports. Smaller ships which can dock in Indian ports pick up goods from these ports and bring them to India.

The ports I mention are old, established transshipment ports. Very recently, we've also proudly inaugurated Vizhinjam Port in Kerala, touted as the first Indian transshipment port, which is meant to take away traffic from Colombo Port.

To my mind, given the close proximity of these ports, it will take considerable time for a new port like Great Nicobar to establish itself, and begin taking away traffic from these ports. I'm sure experts have examined this issue but, to my mind, I would say that it will take time for a new port to be able to compete with existing ports which have been around for many years and are very efficient.

Secondly, a major port in Great Nicobar will lack a hinterland. I am not familiar with the proposed master plan but currently the rest of the island is just tropical jungle, tribals, crocodiles and the Galathea river. Let's remember the geographic remoteness of Great Nicobar. It is 1,000 km from Chennai, 2,000 km from Kolkata. It would be a matter of time, perhaps several decades, before such a port becomes established. It can, happen, but it will take time and a major struggle before it can become a reality. ■

Marking territory



**DELHI
DARBAR**

SANJAYA BARU

DOGS do it. Mark territory. So do humans. The methods differ. The objective is the same. To protect one's turf by limiting entry. Nations use passports and visas, barbed wire and walls. Professions use qualifications. Unions sometimes use muscle power. The successful marking of territory is based on effectiveness of entry barriers. The caste system has been hugely successful given that entry is decided by the accident of birth. Many professions use qualifying exams, minimum qualifications and other means of limiting entry and marking territory.

Lateral entry into government is once again in the news because the Central government tried to open a window where a door was shut. The hurried backtracking on this effort by an otherwise tough-minded prime minister is not surprising. Those who carry out his orders may have been marking their territory.

It would be in keeping with the 'trade union' mindset of the various orders of the civil service. Slow to recruit from outside the service, they are quick to find excuses for not doing so.

But why blame the civil service alone for such trade unionism. Consider the appalling case of the dismissal of Dr Ajit Ranade, vice-chancellor of the Gokhale Institute of Politics and Economics (GIPE), Pune, on the grounds that he lacked adequate teaching experience as specified by the University Grants Commission. The teaching profession is another trade union that is quite happy citing rules to prevent lateral entry. Ranade has a stellar academic and research record. Perhaps superior to that of most faculty at GIPE. So what? He did not satisfy entry requirements. This insularity is not just trade unionism. It is a manifestation of professional casteism. Insiders find arguments to keep outsiders out.

Consider the case of Dr Ranade at GIPE. Does a vice-chancellor have to have teaching experience? Many universities have had great vice-chancellors with no teaching experience. K.R. Narayanan, former President of India, was

a successful and distinguished vice-chancellor of Jawaharlal Nehru University. Why a vice-chancellor needs 10 years of teaching experience is not clear. A VC certainly needs to have empathy towards teachers but the job requires more administrative experience than teaching experience. With all his teaching experience Jagadish Kumar ended up with a questionable and mediocre track record as vice-chancellor and his record as an administrator was abysmal.

The civil services make much of their entry qualification but as generalists their qualification after a couple of decades in office is in fact their experience. However, that kind of experience is also picked up by professionals in other fields.



Dr Ajit Ranade was not allowed to be VC of the Gokhale Institute

Lateral entrants into government like Lovraj Kumar and Manmohan Singh proved to be as good civil servants as the best of the Indian Administrative Service (IAS). In fact, IAS officers like Abid Hussain and Naresh Chandra proved to be excellent diplomats when posted to Washington, DC.

True, exceptions do not prove the rule. When an Indian Foreign Service (IFS) diplomat with some professional experience in trade policy tried to become the Indian ambassador to the World Trade Organization, the IAS fought hard to retain that post for its own.

There was a time when the prime minister felt free to appoint eminent persons as diplomats. Nani Palkhivala, L.M. Singhvi, S.D. Muni are some examples. Prime Minister P.V. Narasimha Rao tried to persuade industrialist Hari Shankar Singhania to go as ambassador to Germany. Singhania declined because he felt his company still needed him at the helm. For an inexplicable reason such lateral entry into diplomacy has sharply come down. Prime Minister Manmohan Singh did not appoint a

single person from outside the foreign service as ambassador to any country. He succumbed to the trade unionism and professional casteism of the IFS.

What is interesting is that while the civil service tries to keep the doors to lateral entry closed, many members of the civil service happily secure lateral entry into the territory of other professions. There are any number of vice-chancellors across the country from the IAS and IPS, any number of managers of large public sector firms from these services. The rigidly insular civil service has been successful in breaking barriers to entry into other professions. So, we have had IAS officers running an airline and IPS officers running public transport.

As longevity increases and with retirement age fixed at 60 in government, senior citizens have to find new sources of employment. Many retired civil servants are opting for teaching. The late Rahul Khullar of the IAS, who retired as Union commerce secretary, became a popular schoolteacher in a Delhi school. Former Defence Secretary Sanjay Mitra, an IAS officer of the West Bengal cadre, is teaching at IIT Delhi. Former National Security Adviser Shivshankar Menon teaches at Ashoka University. Such examples of lateral entry of civil servants into teaching should make civil servants more open to lateral entry into government. Indeed, it should also make more academic institutions more open to lateral entry of qualified persons into their hallowed portals.

Of course, every job must have some basic qualifications and every profession must have some defining qualifications. An allopathic doctor must have at least an MBBS degree. An aeroplane pilot must have training and a certain number of hours of flying experience. Basic qualifications are necessary. However, there are any number of professions where the relevant qualifications can be picked up over time without one having acquired certification.

Most objections to lateral entry are about turf protection. At the Gokhale Institute the protests against an economist of some distinction becoming vice-chancellor may well have been prompted by jealous senior professors in the running for that post. More often than not, such protests are about limiting competition. That is what animals do too when they mark territory. It's a survival strategy. ■

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Rise of individualism



**LOOKING
AHEAD**

KIRAN KARNIK

MANY claim that we are entering an era which marks the end of ideologies and the death of "isms". Communism dissolved with the Soviet Union. Capitalism is seen as cruel. Idealism has been trumped by cynicism, but the latter too is frowned upon; after all, who likes naysayers and pessimists? Whether or not one agrees with this thesis, there is certainly one "ism" that now rules the roost: individualism.

Seniors will recall the arrival of the first television set in their neighbourhood. Everyone crowded into that privileged home to watch special events — often "live" — on television: cricket Tests (no ODIs or T20s then!) or the Asian Games (hosted in India just when colour TV first came to the country). Crowd-viewing extended also to the once-a-week movie on Doordarshan and, later, to the weekly super-hit *Mahabharata* or *Ramayana* episodes. It was taken for granted that entry was on a walk-in basis, with the hapless household expected to not only provide chairs to all, but also tea!

For the set-owner, there was the compensation of an elevated standing in the community. Naturally, the TV set, as a status symbol, was installed in the hall, which also led to a positive feedback loop between accessibility for outsiders and the number who walked in. As TV sets rapidly proliferated, the crowd waned; soon, viewing was limited to the family. For many years, families watched programmes together — even after the TV was sometimes moved, in bigger homes, from the hall to the dining room.

The telephone of yore was another such "community asset". Phone connections, a rarity, were treated as public access devices, available to all neighbours, known and unknown. Incoming calls too were sometimes for a neighbour, and it was the duty of someone from the household to go and inform him/her. Partly for this reason, but equally for its status-signalling, the telephone, like the TV, was installed in the drawing room. This also facilitated its continuing use (after neighbours got their own phones) by all in the household at all times. Thus, like the TV set, the telephone

too continued to be a family device. So was the radio, in earlier years, when the family sat together to hear the cricket commentary or the news. Even the famed *Binaca Geetmala*, probably the most popular music programme of all time, was family listening.

The transistor radio was the first harbinger of change. Its advent marked the beginning of portability and hence of individualized listening, further facilitated by earphones. From the mid-1990s, the spread of mobile phones — at first very slowly, but then accelerating at breakneck speed — brought both mobility and individualization to telephones. Development of this technology, especially the amazing versatility of the handset, brought text, photos, and video to the mobile phone. Meanwhile, the invention of laptops and tablet computers, along with easy and cheap broadband connectivity, took video



Fuelled by AI, even advertising is becoming individualized

to one more screen. These largely replaced the fixed-place personal computer and rendered redundant the TV set, while making computers mobile and aiding individualization. Music has seen a similar journey: from radiograms (a drawing room showpiece) or record players, to Walkman and mobile audio-cassette players, to the mobile phone.

This transition of commonly used devices from a fixed place in the home and use by all family members to mobility and individualization is a historical trend. Consider time devices: they moved from the community (clock towers) to the home (wall or table clocks) to individuals (wristwatches and now mobile handsets). The same with movies: from large theatres to TV sets to PC/laptop (or even mobile phone) screens.

This background — how devices have moved from household ownership (typically, one per home) and family use to individual ownership and use — is an analogy or metaphor for what is arguably a sociological trend. Today, depending on the level of wealth,

everything is moving to personal rather than family use. The mobile phone is probably the best exemplar of this, with every youngster desirous of his/her own handset. What does this portend for societal organization? Does individualization imply a reluctance to share? Which is the cause and which the effect? Does migration, with individuals leaving their family home in search of livelihoods, amplify the trend?

Nowadays, one notices growing selfishness and considerable narcissism, best exemplified by the endless selfies being taken, with much preening and posturing, even in public places. Technology has contributed to this, in a way: from the mirror at home (which one looked at before stepping out) to the mirror in the "compact" in a woman's handbag (used before entering a meeting or a restaurant) to the self-image viewed on the mobile screen (sometimes every few minutes): each has been easier than the previous one.

The lack of civic sense and courtesy on roads, and the driving, are also examples of selfishness, of the I-me-myself mentality, especially amongst youngsters. Are these tell-tale signs of a more individualized identity? Will the transition from multi-generation joint families to nuclear families move next to childless single-generation families of two, as fertility rates continue to plummet? As marriage becomes less universal and people prefer only temporary partners, will we see the next logical step: one-person households?

Technology is aiding individualism, as noted in the earlier examples. Even advertising, fuelled by artificial intelligence, targets people with individualized ads, based on gigabits of data about all aspects of each one's life. Simultaneously, technology is also creating — through WhatsApp groups, for instance — group identities. One also sees, possibly as a Newtonian reaction to individualism and loneliness, growth in cults and interest groups, globally. In India, identity around caste and religion-related groups seems to be growing.

Will the future see this growing tension between the thesis of individualism and the antithesis of group identity being resolved in some form of synthesis? It is not clear what form this synthesis may take, but it could well also mark the resurrection of the family, even joint family, that now appears to be endangered. What does seem likely is the emergence, in the coming decades, of new societal structures. ■

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Land grab on the banks



LIVING RIVERS

VENKATESH DUTTA

OVER the past two years, I have had the opportunity to meet with district magistrates (DMs) and chief development officers (CDOs) across 10 districts of Uttar Pradesh (UP), namely, Pilibhit, Lakhimpur Kheri, Sitapur, Lucknow, Hardoi, Rae Bareilly, Unnao, Bahraich, Gonda and Mau. These meetings often culminated in day-long workshops on river and wetlands rejuvenation, attended by a diverse array of line officers such as sub-divisional magistrates (SDMs), deputy collectors, block development officers (BDOs) and engineers.

Through these discussions and fieldwork, a striking issue surfaced repeatedly — the rampant encroachment on lands that belonged to rivers and water bodies. The scale and complexity of encroachment was massive. The land parcels adjacent to rivers and wetlands were being grabbed on a daily basis, often without attracting any public outcry or attention.

The root of the problem lies in the ambiguous status of these 'commons'. There are no clearly defined property rights attached to these vital waterscapes.

Ownership remains murky. There are no comprehensive guidelines outlining their use.

During fieldwork, it was observed that many of the land parcels had been leased out to private individuals, and many of these temporary leases were never revoked. I urged the district magistrates to instal boundary markers — similar to those the railways use to safeguard their properties — to clearly demarcate floodplains and river boundaries and reassert public ownership.

We even embarked on an effort to map some smaller rivers, but the project quickly unravelled. Block-level officers gave up this crucial exercise, citing countless title disputes with private landowners. In one particularly shocking instance, a flowing river had been divided into multiple 'gatas' — land parcels, with sections of barren land inexplicably marked in the middle of the river.

Similarly, wetlands had been carved into private plots — a development paradox often encountered in all the districts, in contradiction of their 'water state'.

As I dug deeper, a disturbing pattern began to emerge. These alterations — gradual in some cases, abrupt in others — were made by *lekhpals*, *tehsildars* and SDMs over the past four decades, often without any regard for the ecological nature of the land. It was hard to digest that a water body could be reclassified as a settlement unit. Worse yet, these actions flew in the face of multiple court orders intended to protect these precious resources. The scale of the land conflicts is not just a threat to rivers and wetlands but an indictment of local governance that has allowed such obvious disregard for nature's boundaries.

The gradual nature of such land grabs over the decades points to a systemic exploitation of legal loopholes, often involving altered land records, ignored court orders, and unofficial land deals. The leasing of public lands to private individuals and builders without revoking



The scale of encroachments on river land and water bodies is massive

those leases, and the lack of clear property rights over these commons, create an environment conducive to erasing of vital ecosystems.

Powerful interests — whether land developers or local elites — can manipulate weak enforcement mechanisms and the lack of transparency in acquiring valuable land, especially in areas that are difficult to monitor, like rivers and wetlands. Poor record-keeping and title disputes often make it difficult to enforce court orders. In many cases, land records are outdated or incorrect, leading to confusion about what constitutes a water body and who owns it.

I suggested installing marking pillars as a practical and effective way to define property rights of rivers, wetlands, and other commons. By physically demarcating the boundaries of these water bodies, including the 'buffer land', it would establish a clear, visible line between public and private land. The marked boundaries can be integrated into existing land records and cadastral maps,

making future land disputes easier to resolve, as well as preventing future illegal alterations. I also suggested putting visible signboards in areas where land grab was frequent, stating that the land belonged to the government.

A comprehensive mapping and documentation exercise by the land revenue department would need to precede any demarcation to ensure that the correct boundaries were being marked. At several places, embankments with the excavated river silt were made, narrowing the rivers and legitimizing the false river boundaries. This also led to people extending their farmlands into the riverbeds.

Several court orders in India have emphasized the need to protect water bodies and explicitly ruled against altering their natural state. In a landmark case of a resort encroaching upon the land of the Beas river in Himachal Pradesh (*M.C. Mehta v. Kamal Nath & Ors.*, 1996), the Supreme Court invoked the public trust doctrine, stating that the government holds natural resources, including rivers and water bodies, in trust for the public. The court ruled that such resources should not be privatized or altered in a way that harms public interest or ecological balance. The judgment emphasized that no one, including the government, has the right to transform a natural resource like a river for private gain.

Similarly, in the *Hinch Lal Tiwari v. Kamala Devi* (2001) case, the Supreme Court ruled against illegal encroachment upon and construction on a village pond in UP. The court ordered the removal of illegal constructions and stressed that such measures must begin at the grassroots. In the order, the SC mentioned that the forest, tanks, ponds and so on are nature's bounty and maintain the delicate ecological balance. Therefore, they should not be used for non-environmental purposes, such as private construction. The Court reaffirmed the need to restore ponds, lakes, and rivers to their original state for public use and ecological benefit.

In 2017, the National Green Tribunal (NGT) directed states to identify, notify, and protect wetlands under the Wetlands (Conservation and Management) Rules, 2010. The NGT has consistently emphasized that water bodies cannot be altered or reclaimed for other land uses, as it would have devastating ecological consequences.

Despite such clear-cut court rulings, encroachment on ponds, lakes, and rivers continues unabated. ■

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

Going beyond home



CRAFT EQUITY

SUMITA GHOSE

I began working in Mumbai (then Bombay) as a young woman of 20. My workplace was safe, but I had to remain vigilant during my bus rides to work to avoid unwanted proximity from men. I carried a large safety pin for protection, just in case.

Some years later, working in rural Rajasthan, I began to grasp the literal meaning of the phrase, "It's a man's world". There was minimal space for women outside their homes, except for agricultural work, and they rarely ventured out alone. Our organization, the Urmul Trust, was among the first in the remote area of Loonkaransar, to employ women, who travelled to villages in order to gain a better understanding of the challenges faced by other rural women.

We focused on improving maternal and child health in Bikaner district, working with village midwives to teach safe birthing practices and providing advice on nutrition and immunization. This experience revealed the deeply patriarchal and often feudal nature of village society. We found that only older women were permitted to leave their homes, while young mothers and mothers-to-be, whom we wanted to support with pre- and post-natal care, were largely confined to their homes. It took months, and in some cases years, for younger women to come out of their homes even to attend meetings in their villages.

Instances of sexual abuse were rarely reported or taken to the police. We supported one young woman who chose to speak out and file a case, but the lengthy process and eventual 'compromise' — where the perpetrator's family paid off the survivor's family — illustrated the difficulties in seeking justice and the feudal and patriarchal mindset of the local village leaders.

Nurses, often from Kerala, stationed in remote village centres feared living alone in villages. Similarly, women teachers commuted from their homes to distant villages, often arriving late and returning home after dark, leading to high absenteeism and contributing to the practice of keeping young girls at home, instead of at school.

The 1987 drought drastically changed the

situation. Both men and women were compelled to work in drought relief efforts to earn money and food. We launched an income generation programme for women by supplying wool from Bikaner, Asia's largest wool *mandi*, to women in their villages. Using milk societies and collection centres as distribution points, we collected handspun wool weekly and made payments. Soon, powerful men in one village objected to women coming to these centres and barred us from entering. However, women, now having had a taste of independence through work, continued



When Rangсутra set up production centres, the shift was met with reluctance. Women felt unsafe going out of their homes initially.

to gather on the outskirts of the village to collect raw wool, deposit their hand-spun wool, and receive their earnings. This marked one of the first instances of women stepping beyond their traditionally assigned roles.

When pioneering women challenge patriarchy, they often face societal and institutional resistance. Bhanwari Devi in

Rajasthan, who was gang raped by powerful men in her village for protesting against child marriage, became a symbol of the struggle against such oppression. Her case led to the Vishaka Guidelines in 1997 and later the Sexual Harassment of Women at Workplace (Prevention, Prohibition, and Redressal) Act or POSH Act in 2013, which aimed to prevent sexual harassment of women in workplaces.

Although progress has been made, challenges remain. Recent statistics show a decline in women's workforce participation, particularly in urban areas, partly due to safety concerns and inadequate facilities for working mothers.

In 2006, when we started Rangсутra, all women artisans worked from home due to the lack of designated workspaces. A pivotal moment came when we decided to move away from home-based work and establish small production centres in villages. Initially set up in courtyards and later in proper centres built by local panchayats, these spaces were created in response to women's demands for a dedicated workspace.

This shift was met with initial reluctance from some women and their families. However, trailblazers like Priyanka emerged, and soon others followed. Priyanka, now in her early twenties, grew up watching her mother, aunts and grandmother create beautiful hand-embroidered art. Her grandmother, a first-generation immigrant, ensured she received an education. Priyanka not only graduated through distance education but also mastered embroidery.

As a crafts manager with Rangсутra, she established a village-based craft centre at her home and later petitioned the local panchayat for land to build a dedicated centre. Today, 20 to 30 women work together at this centre, creating better lives for themselves and their families. Priyanka funded her own college education through her work, and similar centres have sprung up in the Pugal area, thanks to the efforts of empowered village women advocating their own workspaces.

Individual efforts along with collective action and support from local NGOs and government bodies can help women gain more agency at the workplace. But transformative progressive change can happen only when patriarchal institutions in our society, polity and economy make way for egalitarian and cooperative ways of working and living. And for that to happen, all of us, women and men, have to play an active constructive role. ■

Sumita Ghose is founder-director of Rangсутra Crafts



Marayoor jaggery being made the traditional way in the Idukki district of Kerala

In search of good jaggery

SUKANYA SHARMA

ALL talk about white sugar begins and ends with getting off it. But *gur* or jaggery, no less sweet and laden with calories than white sugar, has got a formidable reputation for being wholesome.

Traditionally used in Indian households in desserts or just to nibble on after a meal, *gur* now also has a growing fan following among the health conscious. It has something to do with the times. People are more careful about what they eat.

Gur comes from the sap of palm trees and sugar cane. It is nutrient rich. It is full of minerals. If you happen to be short on iron, *gur* is for you. Lore has it that it works as a digestive after meals.

So, if you are looking to sweeten that mid-morning coffee, powdered *gur* is what you want. *Gur* has also gotten to be trendy. When you serve it you are among the woke people

who not only know that *gur*, lumpy and organic, is good but also better than anything else — processed, refined or artificial.

Recipes for which *gur* is employed exist in every family and could fill a book. But how does one ensure that *gur*, commercially packed and sold as jaggery, one is getting is pure? With so much commercialization happening, a wholesome natural product hasn't been spared. How good it is will depend on who is making it. Many bulk manufacturers use chemicals to instil colour and enhance shelf life. So, how do you choose?

"The dark brown colour, which is the natural colour of jaggery, is good for health," says Dr C.R. Elsy, retired professor of Kerala Agricultural University, who has been supporting traditional producers and spreading awareness about the value of organic jaggery and the dangers of chemical additives.

Despite all the talk of organic jaggery, commercial jaggery made with chemicals still

has a wide consumer base. The main reason is that people prefer to see their *gur* in a particular colour.

"Some prefer golden-brown, some yellow and others orange. Depending on their preference, manufacturers are forced to add chemicals to get that colour. Very often even chemicals actually used to tan leather are used," says Dr Elsy.

These chemicals linger in the jaggery, disrupting its purity. They have a detrimental effect on health. Organic jaggery, with richer flavour and higher nutritional value, is the preferred choice for those seeking healthier and environmentally sustainable alternatives.

Take, for example, Marayoor jaggery made in the Idukki district of Kerala. "While making Marayoor jaggery, not a single chemical is added. But vendors selling *payasam* tell us that if they made this sweet with Marayoor jaggery, it will not sell because the colour becomes too dark," says Dr Elsy.

"Lime or okra juice is used during the clarification process. Both help remove dust and impurities. Since we do not add preservatives, Marayoor jaggery must be stored in the refrigerator."

Dr Elsy advises consumers not to buy jaggery that has chemicals. "And look out for preservatives too," she cautions.

Prioritising purity makes it easier to enjoy the health benefits jaggery offers. You can savour its natural sweetness without guilt.

"Varieties that are dark brownish usually contain higher levels of minerals like iron and calcium. Avoid jaggery that appears pale, as that indicates it has undergone excessive processing," says V.K. Dixit, an experienced professional in the sugar industry and president of Oswal Overseas Ltd in Uttar Pradesh.

THE ORGANIC SHELF There are a few names in the jaggery business that are reputed for their commitment to quality and traditional production practices. They also help farmers sell their produce in bigger cities. We are talking here of 24 Mantra, Nature's Soul, Organic Tattva, Nutri Org and Miltop.

Founded two decades ago by Raj Seelam, 24 Mantra is renowned for its organic jaggery. A half-kg pack of unbleached jaggery powder is for ₹80 and is available in supermarkets and online platforms such as Amazon, Big Basket and Blinkit.

"As someone who needs to cut refined sugar from my diet, I always opt for 24 Mantra's organic jaggery as my go-to sweetener," says Dhruv Tiwari, creative director at DDB Mudra Group.

Ordering last-minute on apps like Blinkit makes it more accessible and aligns with his late hours. One of the special features of 24 Mantra's jaggery is its purity and authenticity. Traditional methods of pressing and distilling palm are still being used.

This involves three key steps — extraction (of juice from sugarcane), clarification (filtering of inorganic salt, fibre, wax, etc.) and concentration (boiling the juice for hours). This process ensures high quality and nutritional value, making 24 Mantra a trusted player in the market.

Nature's Soul in South Delhi sells premium organic jaggery. They have tied up with farmers in various districts, like in Kolhapur district of Maharashtra.

"The sugarcane that grows along the Panchganga river here is mature and GI tagged. The farmers we have tied up with are fourth-generation *gur* farmers. Since they are busy throughout the year, they find it tough to brand themselves and, therefore, selling is a problem for them. That's where we come in. We source from them and then market their jaggery across the country. This is the story of

Tiranga jaggery from Kolhapur," says Arjun Sahni, founder of Nature's Soul, talking about their best-selling jaggery.

Another popular product is the digestive spiced and mixed nuts jaggery, produced by farmers in Sirmour, Himachal Pradesh.

Nature's Soul also sells jaggery products marketed by brands like Mother Organic from Uttarakhand, Pro Nature, which produces jaggery in Haridwar, and Adya Organics, producers of date palm jaggery powder, based in Patna.

These are available in select health food stores, their Nature's Soul outlet in New Delhi's Defence Colony and from their website. Prices range roughly from ₹95 to ₹399 for a half-kg pack.

"I can vouch for the exquisite taste of their Tiranga jaggery. My grandfather adores it. Each time he craves something sweet, he asks for Tiranga *gur*. It has become a staple dessert in our home," says Akanksha



Mediratta, senior accounts manager at Google and a regular at Nature's Soul. Although she is based in Dublin, this store is a stop she doesn't miss on her trips to Delhi, twice a year.

Founded by Rohit Mehrotra, Organic Tattva is based in Greater Noida and offers a diverse range of organic jaggery products in cube and powder form. Their bestseller is jaggery powder which is priced at ₹81 for 500 gm. It can be found in organic stores across the NCR (National Capital Region) and on their website.

A unique feature of Organic Tattva's jaggery is its fine texture and distinct sweetness, making it ideal for a variety of dishes. "I use it for *kheer*, teacakes and in plain milk too," says Tanuja Krishnatray, former principal, Little Footprints Preschool.

Nutri Org specializes in high-quality jaggery that is sourced from farms in the Uttarakhand belt. The company sources from 400 to 500 farmers who cultivate organic sugarcane for Nutri Org. "I would suggest that our jaggery be used as a replacement for sugar or any other sweetener in milk and tea. It should be added after boiling, instead of before, for best results," he says.

Miltop's organic jaggery products are known for their earthy flavours. Their jaggery is available in organic stores and several online platforms. The brand is committed to ethical

sourcing and environmental sustainability and claims to have greatly reduced the use of plastic in their packaging too.

"Miltop jaggery powder is of high quality, with a rich colour and good texture. My daughter loves it," says lawyer Seerat Randhawa, who has a start-up venture of her own. She has made a conscious choice to introduce her eight-year-old daughter to jaggery as a replacement for refined sugar.

IN MODERATION Packed with essential minerals like iron, calcium, magnesium, and potassium, jaggery has its share of health benefits. It can assist bone health, prevent anaemia, and help regulate blood pressure. Its high iron content makes it useful for patients with iron deficiency. Jaggery is also known to regulate body temperature and keep you warm in the colder months of the year.

"Jaggery helps to boost immunity and regulate hormones, especially endorphins, in women. It also helps to reduce stress," says Shally Khurana, dietician at the AIIMS Trauma Centre.

However, jaggery is not recommended for diabetic patients due to its high glycaemic index, she says. "While it is beneficial, jaggery should be consumed in moderate amounts and never in excess because it carries a risk of sugar spike," she explains.

Even in the medical fraternity, there are different perspectives on jaggery. Dr Namrata Singh, former dietician at AIIMS and professor of Nutritional Sciences at the Indira Gandhi National Open University (IGNOU), has a more cautious view.

"The calorific value of sugar and jaggery is the same. But since jaggery is not as refined as sugar, it contains useful micronutrients and some iron. This is its main advantage. However, since these micronutrients are present in minimal amounts, one would have to consume a substantial quantity of jaggery to benefit from them — which is not advisable because that would lead to soaring your calorie intake," she says.

"When it comes to research regarding nutrition, there are a few review papers published by pharmacologists and agricultural scientists but none from a nutritionist's point of view," says Dr Singh.

Moderation is the key, she says. "It is better to use it as medicine. For instance, in homemade ointments and as the classic remedy for a sore throat by combining ginger and honey with jaggery."

Dr Singh advises consuming jaggery in small quantities. "In a 2,000-kilo calorie diet, the allowance for sugar is 20 to 25 gm a day. So, I would say the same amount is recommended for jaggery on a daily basis, if it is being used as a replacement for sugar. More than that would be harmful," she warns. ■

Looking for a getaway? Try Mysuru

SUSHEELA NAIR

IF you want to distance yourself from the hustle and bustle of Mysore, the royal city, head to Ibis Styles, a tranquil hideaway where luxury meets nature in quiet elegance. Surrounded by lush environs, what makes Ibis Styles distinctive is the unique design, inspired by the Ranganathittu Bird Sanctuary, featuring bird motifs, local flora and fauna, and a Mysuru-inspired colour palette. Each corner exudes the city's soul, offering a stylish blend of classic charm and modern flair. One can step into the hotel that is as vibrant and colourful as Mysuru and feel the classic Mysuru experience but in a more stylish way. Ibis Styles brings global chic and local charm to Karnataka's cultural capital.

Explaining the concept behind the design of Ibis Styles, Anuj Chaudhry, cluster general manager of Ibis Styles Mysuru, Grand Mercure Mysuru and Grand Mercure Bengaluru, says, "It is a celebration of the natural beauty that surrounds us with elements like patterns, wall frames, and our desk motifs all inspired by the vibrant and diverse birdlife of the Ranganathittu Bird Sanctuary. We wanted to bring a touch of the sanctuary's tranquility and charm into the hotel, creating a space where guests can feel connected to the local environment, while enjoying modern comforts. Each design choice is a nod to the sanctuary, offering our guests a unique and serene experience."

As you enter the hotel, you get a feeling of space. The theme of birds is discernible everywhere right from the reception desk, engraved with birds in flight, and the interiors of the chandelier lampshades with birds looking at the light. The 'Feature Wall' in the reception area, which is dedicated for keeping artefacts related to birds, catches your eye.

The hotel exudes a contemporary feel. Each floor has a different colour theme and features 100 aesthetically done rooms and 30 stylish suites. Accommodation comes in four categories — queen rooms, twin rooms, superior rooms, and executive suites. Each room at Ibis Styles is designed to blend

traditional charm with modern facilities to provide a unique and memorable stay. Right from the positioning of rooms, everything is in harmony with nature. The rooms combine elegance with modernity.

The Verandah, the hotel's multi-cuisine restaurant, catches your attention with its vibrant mosaic of colourful visuals and wall paintings of avians. You can grab a drink in the Flamingo Bar, inspired by the mirrored elegance of flamingoes on water. You can work up a sweat in the gym, or take a splash in the rooftop infinity pool.

One of the highlights of the hotel is that it



Boating in the Ranganathittu Bird Sanctuary



The Verandah, a multi-cuisine restaurant, with birds as its theme

offers petcats in style, so that furry friends can have a blast! They are always welcome, with special amenities. Special beds and feeding bowls are available upon request. There are also designated pet-friendly rooms to ensure comfort for your pets.

Sustainability has been at the forefront of the operations in all Accor hotels. From the initial concept stage of the hotels, green practices have been incorporated. The initiative at Ibis Styles is being driven by replacing plastic bottles with sustainable glass water bottles with a negligible carbon footprint. In some rooms, the wallpaper is made from recycled glass.

From the hotel, we went museum hopping to the Rail Museum which houses priceless locomotives, coaches, collections of paintings and photographs narrating the 'Rail Story',

some heritage treasures like signalling equipment and steam engines that evoke memories of a bygone era of the Indian Railways. The highlight is the Maharani's Saloon, built in the UK, of 1899 vintage coupled with a kitchen-dining car built in Mysore in 1914.

It offers a collection of rolling stock reminiscent of a dated grandeur, upholstered according to lavish regal notions of how travel was to be undertaken. Other rare items on display include a hand-operated crane, Krishnaraja Wodeyar's personal telephone of 1930, a working model of a mini steam engine, and a railway clock dating back to 1889.

After we had our fill of the regular sights of Mysuru, we visited Devaraj Market, the city's famous fruit, flower and vegetable market. We strolled down the numerous open corridors and stalls, and discovered covered stalls stacked with pyramids of fruits, conical mounds of bright kumkum powder and stacks of glittering bangles. We found an incredible variety of fruits, especially the Nanjangud Rasabale banana, spices, betel, blocks of jaggery, antiques and a wonderful array of vegetables.

The huge mounds of marigolds, jasmine, aster and roses made a stunning medley of colours. The aromas of strong spices, perfumes and the fragrances from the thousands of heaped flowers, especially Mysore Malli, are a treat for the senses.

Mysore is reputed for its shimmering silks, sandalwood carvings, rosewood inlay work, wooden toys and exquisite handicrafts. Don't miss the incense sticks. Mysore paintings, resplendent in their combination of gold leaves and vibrant colours, are much sought after by art lovers. Explore the vibrant market areas such as Ashoka Road, Sayyaji Rao Road or Devaraj Urs Road and get the best pick of what you want from the shops that are choc-a-bloc with souvenir items.

The best time to visit the Ranganathittu Bird Sanctuary is at the crack of dawn. You can have your fill of birdwatching on a boat ride when this all-season picturesque preserve for water birds becomes a vibrant mosaic of colours with cormorants, spoonbills, river terns, plovers, open-billed storks, white ibises, egrets, darters and herons foraging into the waters. You can delight in watching the winged visitors building nests or plunging into the water and returning with fish for chicks. ■

FACT FILE

Getting there: Mysuru Airport — 17 km; Bengaluru — 146 km.

Where to stay: Ibis Styles, 17/2, KRS Road, Metagalli, Mysuru

Reservations: ibisstyles.com

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 of their attractive products.

INDIAN TOYS FOR THE FESTIVE SEASON



When the idea of creating traditional Indian toys first came to Bharathi, it was mostly for her six-year-old daughter. "There were no affordable Indian toys in the market. The ones I found were designed for people living abroad. They were out of reach for middle-class buyers," she says.

It was Bharathi's close association with artisans that gave her the confidence to start her own brand. She started Diyas Decoratives in 2017 to revive, revisit and reintroduce traditional crafts, first through toys and then later through other products.

She began with handcrafted toys, particularly *pitthu*, doll sets, *lattu* and wooden tic tac toe. Soon these became go-to birthday gifts for the children in her close circle.

Diyas Decoratives has tied up with self-help groups and now supports the livelihoods of more than 275 rural artisans from 15 regions in India. Around 170 artisans work exclusively for her brand.

Diyas Decoratives takes care to ensure that the materials and colours used are non-toxic, eco-friendly and safe for children of all ages. "Each product has a specific story behind it, a pair of hands that crafted it and a lot of emotion poured into it," says Bharathi. The family doll set and spinning tops are priced at ₹380, the hand-painted piggy bank is for ₹350 and the Channapatna set of four toys is for ₹550. "Everyone should be able to afford and experience Indian toys," says Bharathi.

Diyas Decoratives has also branched out into selling earrings, trinket boxes, trendy bangles and colourful idols. Their most recent addition is a traditional set of dolls and idols curated for the festival of Navratri. These have been crafted by artisans from Karnataka, Tamil Nadu, Andhra Pradesh, Maharashtra, Uttar Pradesh and West Bengal. Baby Ganesha idols by artisans from Kondapalli were loved by many during the just-concluded Ganesh Chaturthi festivities.

"More than the brand and our products, it is the artisans who deserve to be appreciated," says Bharathi, who has been lobbying for artisan visibility for a long time. A new studio with a vibrant display of the products has just opened in Indiranagar, Bengaluru. You can shop online on Amazon or reach out via Instagram and WhatsApp.



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Instagram: @diyas_decoratives



PEARLY TABLEWARE AND DECOR



Maity Handicrafts, founded by Joygopal Maity from Midnapore, specializes in a range of utility products made with mother of pearl. Maity learnt this craft from his uncle and spent eight years working alongside him before branching out on his own. His goal was to preserve this traditional craft as well as earn a livelihood from it. Today Maity employs 20 people, five of whom are women. Using mother of pearl and hardwood, the group crafts tableware, jewellery, stationery, kitchenware and decor. Their popular products are tissue boxes, coaster sets, and salt and pepper sets.

A set of six coasters is priced at ₹980 while stylish tissue box holders are for ₹840. Elegant pearl trays are also on offer for ₹1,390. The coaster and tray combination is a popular option for gifting. Maity Handicrafts often participates in Dastkar bazaars across the country. They are also available on the phone for more details.

Nacre or mother of pearl, is a hard, silvery layer found in the shells of some mussels and oysters. This material is resilient and iridescent. Sea shells have always played a significant role in the rich heritage of Bengal crafts, particularly in the southern districts of West Bengal. Artisans skilfully slice these shimmering shells using simple hand tools to create a variety of items, including bangles, bracelets, and decorative pieces.

Contact:

Phone: +91 8710083286

Email: dashandicrafts@gmail.com



So you want to do your bit but don't know where to begin? Allow us to help you with a list especially curated for *Civil Society's* readers. These are groups we know to be doing good work. And they are across India.

You can volunteer or donate or just spread the word about them.

PUTTING CHILDREN BACK IN SCHOOL

Years ago, Om Prakash Gurjar, a former child labourer, was rescued by Kailash Satyarthi, Nobel Peace Prize winner and founder of Bachpan Bachao Andolan, from the harrowing conditions he had been forced into as a young boy.

Gurjar is now helping other beleaguered children find their feet. Along with his wife and a friend, he has set up the Paathshala Trust in Jaipur which works for the health and protection of street children, child protection and child welfare. The trust is committed to ensuring no child is denied education and forced to work in exploitative jobs. It shelters children from violence, helps with school learning and English teaching.

Two projects that stand out are the homestay cultural exchange and school re-admission. The first is a programme that allows volunteers to stay with the child's family and help with kitchen farming, toilet building and organizing awareness drives for child safety. The second is a school re-admission project for dropouts. It was started after the pandemic when many children were forced to stop going to school. The trust helped 110 children return to school and ensured their fees, stationery, uniforms and other needs were fulfilled.

Paathshala Trust accepts donations online and invites volunteers year round to engage in a range of activities.
<https://www.paathshalatrust.org/>
info@paathshalatrust.org
 +91 9782209683

FIGHT CHILD SEXUAL ABUSE

Inchara Foundation works to protect child rights. It especially helps children who are victims of

sexual abuse. Founded by Preetham Rodriguez, the NGO is based in Mangalore in Karnataka but has a presence in other states as well.

The foundation runs a child care institution, Inchara Home, for girls who have been sexually abused and are in need of care and protection. They admit girls who are referred by the Child Welfare Committee. Currently, it is home to 20 girls. Overall, 122 girls have benefited from their care.

Inchara has also launched the Angel & Model Safe School Initiative to prevent child abuse and facilitate a child-friendly ecosystem in schools. It has covered 15 government schools so far. Playgrounds using scrap and low-cost urinals are other activities that the organization has set up.

Volunteering opportunities and internships are accessible on their website. You can donate one-time on their donation portal or on a recurring basis.
<https://incharafoundation.org/>
foundationinchara@gmail.com
 +91 8244271098

REJUVENATE LAND WITH WATER

Established in 1993, the Watershed Organization Trust (WOTR) is an NGO and think tank that operates at the intersection of practice, knowledge and policy. It collaborates with stakeholders across these sectors to ensure water and food availability as well as livelihoods and income security for vulnerable communities in rural India.

In the past three decades, WOTR has impacted over 6.93 million lives across 7,124 villages in 10 states, including Maharashtra, Telangana, Andhra Pradesh, Jharkhand, Rajasthan and Bihar. It has regenerated more than two million hectares of degraded landscapes and

increased potential water harvesting capacity significantly.

Its focus areas are watershed development and ecosystem management, climate resilient agriculture, sustainable rural livelihoods, biodiversity, women's empowerment and sanitation.

The WOTR Centre for Resilience Studies (W-CReS) conducts applied research on ground-level problems while ECOBARI is a multi-stakeholder collaborative that works to conserve local biodiversity and manage natural resources in a sustainable manner.

You can intern for a month or for a year. Donations are accepted via bank transfer and through their website.
<https://wotr.org/> | info@wotr.org
 020 - 2422 6211

MAKE BIHAR A YOUNG, SMART STATE

Since 2010, Diksha Foundation has been offering holistic education to children from marginalized communities in Bihar, a state which lags behind in literacy. Their syllabus includes educational practices which enhance learning outcomes, knowledge of civic rights, gender equality, global citizenship and use of academics in modern-day technology.

Diksha's Knowledge Hub for Education and Learning (KHEL) is an after-school supplementary programme which imparts computer training to over 1,000 children.

The English Access Micro scholarship is a two-year global flagship project funded by the US State Department. English and personality development classes are conducted for socio-economically disadvantaged youth between 13-17 and 17-21 years. The syllabus includes democratic values, civic consciousness and critical thinking skills.

Donations to Diksha can be made via cheque or online through their website, Milaap and Give.do.
<https://dikshafoundation.org/>
contact@dikshafoundation.org
 +91 9835055503

A HELPING HAND WITH LEPROSY

The Bombay Leprosy Project, a charitable organization, was founded in 1976 by Dr R. Ganapati, an eminent leprologist. He transformed leprosy work from a closed institutionalized endeavour to a community-based initiative. His pioneering work has led many medical and para-medical workers to join in this crucial mission.

The project works to improve the quality of life of leprosy patients. The organization has been instrumental in implementing policies of the National Leprosy Eradication Programme. Unlike traditional hospital-based approaches, it focuses on community-based work, which allows leprosy patients to live with their families and helps eliminate stigma in society.

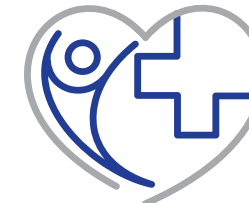
The NGO helps with diagnosis, treatment, and management of disabilities among people affected by leprosy. It has also been engaged in scientific investigations to address unresolved issues surrounding leprosy. It has published over 350 scientific papers in Indian and international journals, and its excellence in leprosy research has been recognized by the Government of India and the World Health Organization.

Based in Mumbai since its inception, the outfit is managed by a dedicated team and relies entirely on public donations to sustain its activities. Donations are welcome and can be made through NEFT, RTGS, and SWIFT. Details can be found on their website.
www.bombayleprosy.org
bombayleprosy@gmail.com
 +91 99878 26871

Beyond Business Scripting social change



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Health & Wellbeing



Education & Skilling

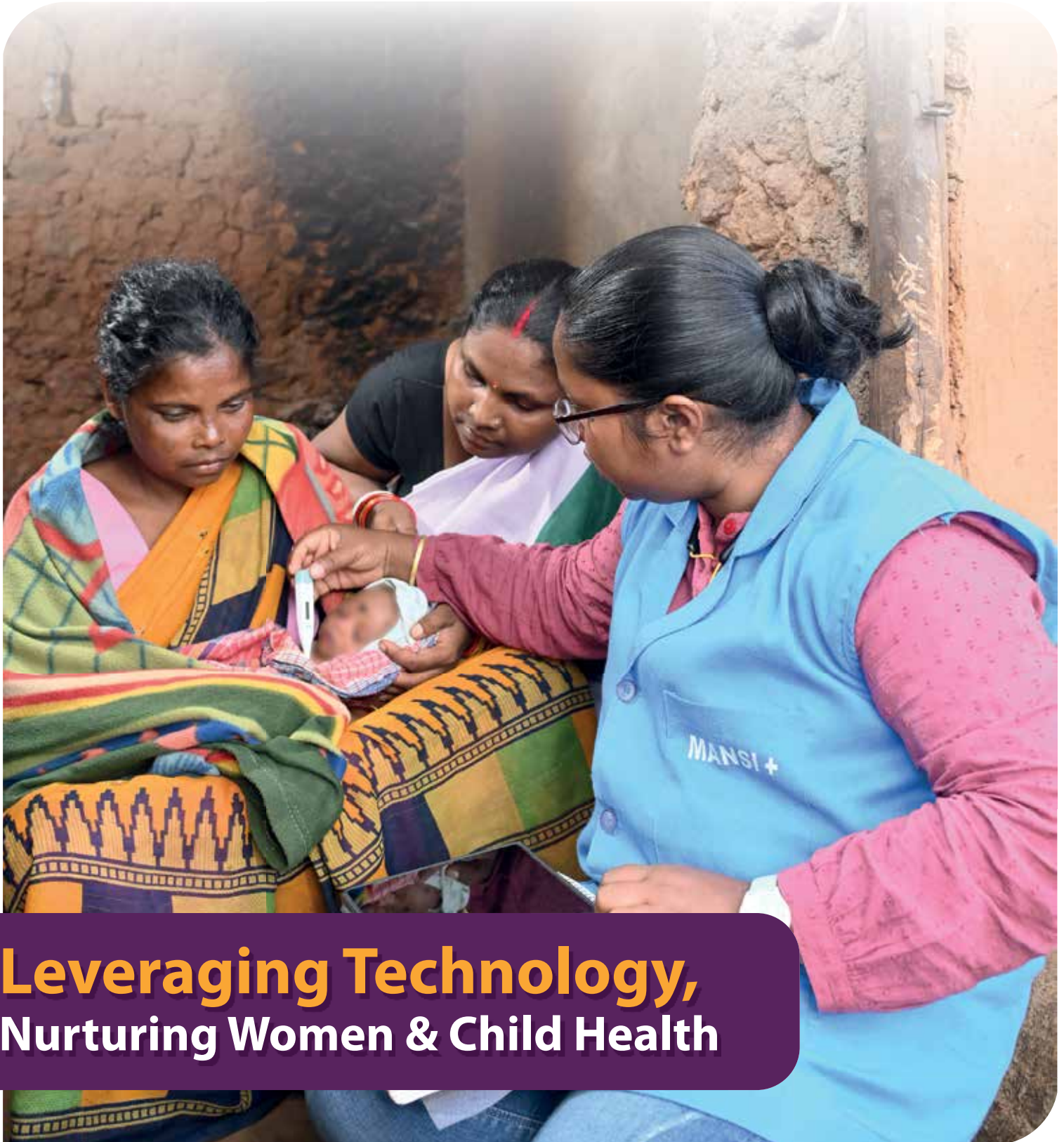


Income Generation

Over the past 75 years, Forbes Marshall has been providing innovative offerings to help industries improve their production quality and energy efficiency globally.

We care equally about the community and work with them to build resilience through improved healthcare, education and women's empowerment. We run over 40 projects, through which we cover education of about 13,500 students, empowerment of 2,500 women through SHGs and well being of over 20,000 individuals through healthcare.

TATA STEEL FOUNDATION



Leveraging Technology, Nurturing Women & Child Health

Digital innovation for rural health

MANSI+, a signature programme

- Focuses on the health and survival of **women and children** before, during, and after childbirth.
- Augmented through **Operation Sunshine**, a digital tracking mechanism to trace and address high-risk pregnancies in the remotest pockets of rural India.
- Touched **800,000 lives** and addressed **99.3%** pregnancies and childbirth.

