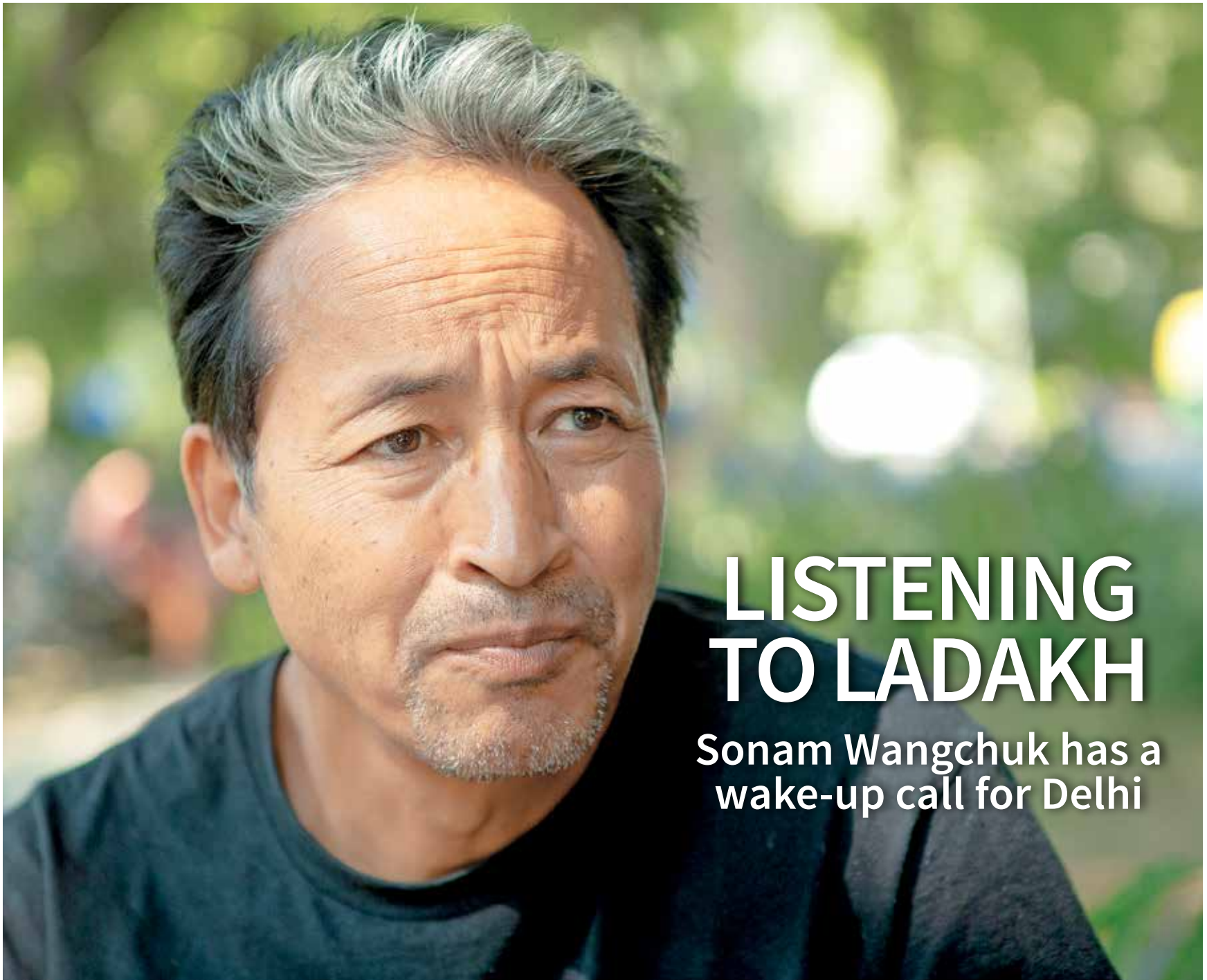


Civil Society



LISTENING TO LADAKH

Sonam Wangchuk has a wake-up call for Delhi

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Meeting Wangchuk

PUTTING Sonam Wangchuk and Ladakh on the cover was a no-brainer for us. We have been reporting on the Himalayas over the years and have some understanding of how fragile their condition is. That apart, there is a story waiting to be told when someone with Sonam Wangchuk's credentials is compelled to walk 1,000 km to Delhi and then go on a fast just to be heard by the Union government.

Wangchuk deserved to be treated more respectfully because of his own personal credentials and the issues that he is raising. The demand for Ladakh is for implementation of the Sixth Schedule. In actual terms that means decentralization, respect for community rights and respect for the environment. It is the intertwining of all these that makes governance in the Himalayas complicated. These areas just can't be developed like any other part of the country. The failure to treat the mountain states as having special needs has resulted in the string of disasters that have been witnessed in recent times.

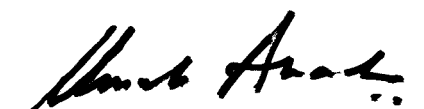
The Himalayas are important not just for the people who live there, like the Ladakhis, but the country as a whole and the planet too. The Indian government sitting in Delhi has a moral responsibility to grow and invest in institutions that will allow the mountain states to flourish in ways that are customized for them.

Ladakh shouldn't be left to seethe. Its young don't have employment. Education is not up to scratch. There is a growing sense of being used, dumped and ignored. It is a potent mix of problems that won't go away unless the government meets people like Wangchuk and opens itself up to new solutions.

Junior doctors in Kolkata have sacrificed their Pujas to be on an agitation to improve State-run hospitals in West Bengal. This is no small thing. Yet the Trinamool Congress-run state government won't listen. We spoke to these doctors and found that they are only asking for hospital basics. Why can't the government get such basics in place? If parties like the Trinamool which came out of an agitation won't listen to protesters when they clearly have a case, such as the doctors do, who will?

Talk about reservation for sub-castes is fine. But real solutions don't come easy. Our interview of the month is with Raees Mohammad, a Dalit who converted. He has been running a sanitation company. Why so? Because he believes caste begins in the toilet and sanitation should be made into a respectable activity to deal with discrimination.

We also have our regular columns. Check out Living for a hideaway in Goa and good things to buy.




COVER STORY

LISTENING TO LADAKH

People in Ladakh have been demanding local self-governance and protection of their tribal traditions under the Sixth Schedule. Sonam Wangchuk brought their demands to Delhi.

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LETTERS



Epic blunder

Your cover story, 'Goodbye to the Great Nicobar?', was an eye-opener. It is appalling to note that such arbitrary and uninformed decisions are being taken in our democracy. Such decisions must have wider participation and be transparent. Thank you for writing about such a pivotal issue.

Soham Menon

Former Naval Chief Admiral Arun Prakash should be involved in decision-making on all aspects of the Andaman and Nicobar Islands. The fact that no one is listening to environmentalists is of great concern. Losing this gift of an island in the name of 'development' will be a great tragedy.

Jaya Bera

Admiral Arun Prakash's opinion on the Nicobar project was very insightful. Well said, sir.

Narayan Moorthy

This is why I oppose promoting tourism. I hate celebrating World Tourism Day. Certain places should be left untouched. So very sad. Pankaj Sekhsaria's earnest efforts have gone down the drain.

Sujata Patnaik

Safety first

Your interview with Dr Alexander Thomas, 'Hospital violence rampant in India', raises some valid concerns. When such safety measures and suggestions exist, why do the majority of hospitals not have them? Doctors were revered just a few years ago but now they seem to be in one of the most unsafe professions, prone to violence.

K. Menon

Thank you, Dr Alexander, for your candid comments. There is need for change across our hospitals and we certainly need focused training on 'communication'. That's where most problems can be prevented and resolved.

Evita Fernandez

What happened in R.G. Kar Hospital can never be condoned. But we must start talking more about the dangers so many doctors face. Doctors really are life-savers. It is such a shame.

Anurita Panth

At municipal hospitals, on each floor we have a security officer. We also limit the working hours of doctors.

Porus Dadabhoy

Period positive

As a teacher I believe sanitary pad vending machines are a genius idea. Our infirmary often runs out of stock. Sometimes girls from lower income backgrounds skip school. Later, they say they cannot afford to buy expensive menstrual pads and feel shy about approaching the school nurse more than once a day. This effort resolves all these concerns effectively.

Neha Mathew

Sanitary pad vending machines at examination centres is a simple, thoughtful idea by Matri Sudha. It must have been hard to implement. It really is a remarkable endeavour.

Kanishka Jain

Tram tussle

Apropos Aiema Tauheed's story on the legal tussle over Kolkata trams. The Mamata Banerjee government does as it pleases. We have seen that quite often. But it is heartening to see people's groups fighting for trams in court. Hope better sense

prevails. Trams should stay.

Jyotsna B.

Kolkata trams are a part of heritage. You can change the name of the city from Calcutta to Kolkata, yet people still say 'Cal'. Ditto, it's impossible to imagine the city without its beloved trams. The government should have thought this through far better.

Shantanu Das

Cheetah muddle

Your interview with wildlife expert Ravi Chellam was excellent. He has rightly analyzed all the cons of the cheetah project. There are no pros. Failing to analyze the spatial ecology of the animal and poor prey density have led to this catastrophe. The ingress of similar cats, e.g. leopards, into cities like Pune these days is unsurprising. Rather, it is almost a daily occurrence. The reason is paucity of prey. Keeping animals in a cage for more than 30 days and feeding them manually means they lose their wild habits. If we keep cheetahs like this for two years and call it a conservation effort, it is unacceptable. All this requires a more scientific approach.

K. Muralidharan

I am tired of waking up to the news that another cheetah has died in Kuno. We should quickly uncover the murky business behind this conservation farce.

Tanmay Kapur

What have cheetahs done to deserve this? They are dying due

to the actions of an arrogant and ill-informed government. It's cruel.

Kavita Goel

If we don't have adequate space for the cheetah to roam freely, how will it help conservation? Space is a basic prerequisite for the cheetah. Even a novice would know this. It shows how wrong this project has been right from its premise to its process and now its outcome.

Thomas Jose

Going bananas

Shree Padre's story, 'Banana bank's rare varieties go commercial', introduced me to the concept of a banana bank for the first time. A novel and resourceful idea, it is earning money for cultivators as well, an added bonus.

Ambika Jasola

Another fantastic story from Shree Padre. Thank you for being so vigilant in finding and reporting these inspiring stories.


Ken Love

Right jaggery

Choosing good jaggery is important. My grandfather eats a particular kind which is dark and hard. He adores it with milk. This is the first time I read about Marayoor jaggery from Kerala. I will share this with him as he is the biggest *gur* enthusiast in the family.

Avika Gupta

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RAEES MOHAMMAD ON DEALING WITH STIGMA

‘People should be getting into the business of sanitation’

Civil Society News
New Delhi

FOUR years ago, Raees Mohammad, with a PhD in English and a stint as an additional lecturer behind him, decided to return to his hometown, Kotagiri, in Tamil Nadu to get into sanitation.

He was formerly known as Ravichandra Bathran. Being a Dalit, he had chosen to convert to Islam. But even after this change in identity, he wasn't done with his family occupation of sanitation.

In fact, he was fascinated by sanitation and had been researching it. After returning to his hometown he decided to start a most unusual business, the Kotagiri Septic Tank Cleaning Services Pvt Ltd. Earlier, he had run Dalit Camera, a YouTube channel.

Raees belongs to the Arunthathiyar caste. His father was a sanitation worker given to drink. His mother was a sanitation worker too. Thanks to her efforts he got an education, but for Raees elevating sanitation to a respectable service beyond discrimination interested him more than anything else. Dalit salvation for him lay in making sanitation work respectable.

We spoke to Raees Mohammad about his unique journey and the complexities of caste equations. Below is the edited version of a fascinating conversation.

Q: Why did you step away from teaching and start a sanitation enterprise?

I've been working on sanitation for the past 10 years. My research focus was on sanitation. In India, sanitation work has a stigma. We think that it can be addressed by the State.

My approach has been that sanitation should be made a respectable profession. Now, we all tend to believe that if you have a new perspective people pick it up and it influences civil society and state policy. It has not happened in my case for the past 10 to 15 years.

I went to different movements, especially the Dalit movement. I told them sanitation workers in India lack self-respect, you need to address this, it can be sorted out. Why aren't you addressing it?

Then I found the issue cannot be addressed by State intervention alone. It is embedded in the mindset of every individual, especially the anti-caste movement. They too have stigmatized sanitation work. They said, what kind of self-respect can you expect as a sanitation worker, you have to quit the work.

I told them hundreds of thousands of people work on sanitation. It's an amenity. You can't tell them to leave their work. You have to address the stigma attached to it. They said, we are not going to address it at all, you ask them to leave it.

I disagreed. I started a trade union for sanitation workers (Sanitation Welfare Trade Union) to address basic issues: insurance, travel, work, security, self-respect. I was working as an ad hoc lecturer in English at Madras University. I quit my job and came home. I decided to shift to sanitation as a business, to create a role model. Many people were running away from sanitation work.

Q: It's a difficult business to run. What issues do you face?

When I started, I thought, let me mobilize funds, buy a pick-up vehicle,



Raees Mohammad: 'The worst stigma we face is when we go to Dalit areas'

essential machinery, and begin. After entering the business, I realized how very lowly it was and it wasn't just about caste.

The first time we went out, the motor broke and sewage spilled all over our bodies. There were days when my partner would say not to come home without taking a bath.

The public knows where to build a toilet, but they don't pay any attention to the septic tank. Most of these septic tanks are in very bad condition. There is no machinery to help us clean such septic tanks.

If you import such machinery, it will cost ₹1.5 lakh and by the time you finish paying all dues the cost will double to ₹3 lakh. The Bandicoot robot has been invented here to clear manholes but that is minimal. IIT Chennai has yet to invent machinery for sanitation work.

Then there is discrimination and humiliation. The worst stigma we face is when we go to Dalit areas. They have the least respect for us and the work we do.

If the pick-up vehicle is parked 30 or 40 metres away from the home, you have to lay a hose. They will say it should not touch the footpath or the wall. And I'm wondering, what's wrong with the hose? It looks quite okay. It is a terrible experience.

If it's a backward caste house, we will be given some respect. But in Dalit homes, they will say, 'Don't spill here. You should not spill there. Don't spill a single drop, we will get a disease.'

When I told a Dalit friend I would be selling my septic tank vehicle to another friend (I was planning to learn law and I was trying to mobilize funds), my friend said it was the best news he had heard in a while

because I was exposing myself and my family to disease.

Now, that is not scientific. It's just hearsay. We do take safety measures. We take care of ourselves physically. But there is so much stigma attached to this work, especially among Dalits.

The Tamil Nadu government brought in a policy to fund mechanization of septic tanks and provide loans to buy lorries. A Dalit leader wrote to the chief minister saying not to give this loan to Dalits because this is caste-based labour. Let backward castes be eligible for it. Ten years earlier the same organization had stated that no Dalit should get into a manhole and if they did, they would be lynched. This actually happened.

In my area, which is hilly, there is a site for sewage disposal. Some, in this business, spill the sewage on the road. We tell the collector but he pays no attention. The earlier collector would hold regular meetings to check sewage disposal. This is very important. Land and groundwater have become contaminated in Perur district because of improper sewage disposal.

It's a difficult business. We have to battle stigma as well as the indifference of the district administration. It's painful. Still, I think we do a great job and we do get the greatest respect in most places we go to.

Q: Do you do only septic tanks? Or manholes as well?

We do septic tank cleaning, choke pit cleaning, drain cleaning and we do manhole cleaning. There are private manholes in people's homes too.

Q: How much does a sanitation worker working with you earn? And how much does a sanitation worker working elsewhere earn?

In my company, they earn ₹30,000 per month, excluding food and medical expenditure. Sometimes we look after their family expenditure. The driver gets ₹35,000, excluding the uniform and medical expenditure and food as well.

Q: How many people do you employ now?

Right now, we have four people.

Q: What is the volume of business that you do in a month?

In a month we do between ₹3 lakh and ₹5 lakh worth of business.

Q: And how much do you charge? Has it gone up?

It has gone up, actually. Earlier we used to charge ₹8,000. Now our minimum charge is ₹10,000 and maximum is ₹15,000 because the disposal site is far from the district.

Q: Why is there so much stigma attached, especially by Dalits, to sanitation work?

It's rooted in anti-caste thinking. Dalits are trying to come up the caste ladder. Babasaheb Bhimrao Ambedkar converted to Buddhism and encouraged us to leave our traditional occupations, educate ourselves and migrate to cities. Castes, for example, like the Paraiyars, who beat the *parai* for the dead, started a movement to leave their traditional occupation. Dalits too think they should leave sanitation work.

Q: Should they?

Actually, jobs that castes like the Mahars or Chamars used to do are already unviable with industrialization and mechanization. You get called to beat the *parai* when someone dies. It's a part-time occupation. They pay you a little money and give you some alcohol. But sanitation is a 24/7 job. It is also commercialized. You can make a business out of it. But the State does not pay attention to it. Mechanization is slow because they think cheap labour is readily available.

In my area, many of the women who joined the sanitation workforce as door-to-door (garbage) collectors were all previously working on tea estates. They found their earnings as tea workers were not steady and they couldn't get a bank loan because you need a secure income for that. The women did not feel there was any stigma attached to their work as sanitation workers. But, if they go somewhere, they don't

say they are sanitation workers.

Another reason waste management in our country is so bad and we can't bring about a revolution in it is because it is categorized as a service-oriented industry and not as labour under the Essential Services Maintenance Act (ESMA). There is no secure income or compensation for sanitation workers.

The Swachh Bharat Abhiyan introduced door-to-door collection. When the rules were framed, they thought of all participants. But what is happening on the ground is that the entire load of waste disposal is being put on the shoulders of the sanitation worker. As per the rules the sanitation worker does have the right to impose a fine on the person who is not segregating his waste.

That is not happening. And when the women complain to the supervisor, they say, you do it yourself, what are you there for. So, the entire onus is put on the sanitation worker. You can't expect them to work more than eight hours a day. Basic issues like medical security are not provided.

Q: You are saying sanitation workers should be treated like professionals?

Yes. I'll give you one example of stigma. I've done my post-doctoral on sanitation. I've written many articles for *The Economic and Political Weekly*. In the recent Supreme Court judgment (on sub-categorization of castes) there was a reference to one of my articles. But until this day you will not find any mainstream or even regional newspaper covering why

‘The Tamil Nadu government brought in a policy to fund the mechanization of septic tanks and lorries. A Dalit leader wrote to the chief minister saying not to give this loan to Dalits.’

exactly I'm doing this. In contrast, an MBA sells *pani puri* or an IIT graduate sells tea, it becomes international news.

After the Supreme Court judgment, Sun TV did a special story about my work. It was a great story. But not a single important person, a Dalit leader or a person from the Scheduled Castes community, called to appreciate my work or congratulate me. Instead, people called and said, you are doing sanitation work, great, you should come and clean my house, I live in Chennai, how do you clean and how much do you charge?

After a story about me was published in *The Indian Express*, the CPI(M) wanted to congratulate me. They called the state secretary in Tamil Nadu. They were the main reason for bringing sub-classification in Tamil Nadu. Their state leaders called me up. I was in Coimbatore. They said, when we organize a meeting you should come, we need to honour you. They organized the meeting. They didn't call me. I don't know why.

Q: They didn't call you?

They didn't. There should be recognition. What we are doing is revolutionary. The government machinery knows, the district collector knows. We are trying to erase the stigma associated with this work and create awareness. We are also saving people from harassment by other septic tank workers. Across Tamil Nadu, they harass the public. In Nilgiri district they can charge anything from ₹30,000 to ₹1 lakh to clean septic tanks.

They will ask for washing soap, dozens of cakes of bathing soap, several litres of kerosene, cooking oil. They say they have to use it for cleaning.

Continued on page 8

Continued from page 7

Actually, it's for their personal use. We have broken their monopoly.

We also do government offices free — and schools, police stations, hospitals. You know why? Because they do not have funds for septic tank cleaning.

The recognition we deserve, we do not get from anywhere. Even Sun TV's story on me was slighted. People said, 'why do you do such stories, he should leave his caste occupation.'

My objective from my business is not money alone. It is to address the stigma associated with the work. But the media is not ready to lend a hand.

Q: What are the technologies you need?

After I came into the business a few important people have started talking about septic tanks. I argue that there is still manual scavenging in the septic tank business. It will take time for people to even understand how we work. Technology will come in the second stage.

There is actually no technology at all. We need to update the machinery itself, that is, the tanker, and increase the sucking capacity. It is not as powerful as the machines you get abroad. You need machines to liquify sewage, to check the level of the septic tank. Sometimes it takes us a day to just find the septic tank. People buy houses but they don't ask where the septic tank is. That machinery is available abroad. Also, better jetting machines.

But those who run this service do not want to switch to mechanization. For example, if I use a motor and work manually, I can charge extra. I liquefy the sewage. But others in the business will instead remove it manually and charge ₹1,000 to ₹1,500 per gunny bag.

They want to do cost-effective work and make profits. Even their vehicles don't have fitness certificates. They earn about ₹2 lakh to 3 lakh per month. I use a jetting machine. To clean manholes there is technology. I had to buy it from Mumbai since it wasn't available in Tamil Nadu. But even the municipality doesn't use this technology, though it is easy to work with.

Q: Would you encourage others to enter this business?

I'm stating that this is a business. I'm not encouraging or discouraging anyone. If you're an educated person, and you think you can manage a business, this is a good sector to be in. Even Dalits know this.

The municipality runs the largest sanitation business and Dalits, who are already working there, have knowledge. They should introduce technology and start their own enterprises.

Lastly, if customers do not speak properly to our staff, we leave, even if it means a loss to our business. We are very particular about this. ■

DOCTORS ASK FOR HOSPITAL BASICS

Pujas pass in hunger strike

Aiema Tauheed
Kolkata

JUNIOR doctors have called off their agitation in West Bengal on the promise that the state government will hold talks with them on their demands, but right through the Durga Puja festivities they were on hunger strike. It was no small sacrifice which won the hearts of citizens who showed up, some with their families, to support them.

It was the brutal rape and murder on August 9 of a young junior doctor, on night shift at the government-run R.G. Kar Medical Hospital, that shocked her colleagues. The slow response of the government coupled with abysmal working conditions at the hospital compelled junior doctors to begin a movement demanding justice.

They began their hunger strike on October 5, following nearly 50 days of 'cease work' in two phases. Currently, seven junior doctors are on strike, with many in urgent need of medical attention.

They have placed 10 demands before the West Bengal government. These include justice for the R.G. Kar Hospital victim, the immediate removal of Health Secretary N.S. Nigam, improved workplace security, a centralized hospital referral system, a bed vacancy monitoring system, and basic infrastructure like on-call rooms, CCTVs, and proper washrooms.

Dr Sayantani Ghosh Hazra from the West Bengal Junior Doctors' Front (WBJDF), pale-faced and determined, was on Day Nine of her fast when we met her. "All our 10-point demands pertain to justice. Justice for Abhaya and creating an environment so that another Abhaya does not recur," she reiterated. "Our demand for a digital bed vacancy system or transparency in the West Bengal Recruitment Board are all related to justice. Any scope for non-transparency creates a situation where we doctors, especially junior doctors who are at the forefront, face mental and physical assault."

Dr Alolika Ghorui of Calcutta National Medical College, weary and soft-spoken, and on Day Three of her hunger strike, said violence against doctors stems from a flawed

healthcare system. Before joining the protest, she spent her days taking care of other doctors on hunger strike.

District hospitals refer patients to medical college hospitals despite having the facilities to treat them. Patients, frustrated by repeated referrals, delayed ambulances, and lack of guidance, often cannot contain their fury when a bed eludes them at the overcrowded hospital. Junior doctors, who are typically the first to face such patients, bear the brunt of this tension. Trained security personnel are essential to prevent such volatile situations from escalating.

The government has belatedly announced a central referral system. But other serious issues are still pending.

Dr Parichay Panda of Shishu Mangal Hospital, on the third day of his hunger strike, underlined the need for urgent security measures — such as proper deployment of police personnel, including female officers. He also stressed the importance of regular patrolling and installation of CCTV cameras.

"Simply placing a CCTV camera won't do. Monitoring is required. There was a CCTV camera in Abhaya's case, but we all know how much footage was actually uncovered by the CBI and Kolkata Police. So, monitoring is essential," said Dr Ghosh Hazra.

They were joined by Dr Bipresh Chakraborty, a Doctorate of Medicine (DM) Gastroenterology resident at IPGME&R (Institute of Post Graduate Medical Education and Research) and SSKM Hospital, who arrived after working a gruelling 36-hour shift in his hospital.

With horror and disgust, he recounted a brutal assault that had taken place the previous day at the IPGME&R and SSKM Hospital, when 10-15 goons had stormed the premises and viciously beaten a patient's relative and son. "This attack happened right in front of CCTV cameras and police personnel," he said, clearly appalled. "The state government must ensure that these security systems are both implemented and enforced."

"Having the tools but not using them is just as bad as not having them," he pointed out.

The doctors had already shared their



Junior doctors continue their agitation joined by people from all walks of life



Dr Alolika Ghorui



Dr Bipresh Chakraborty



Dr Sayantani Ghosh Hazra

recommendations. These include proper CCTV installation as well as adequate and well-trained security personnel who aren't just silent bystanders. He also said there was need for a panic button for doctors so that help could reach them immediately. It is not possible for hapless doctors to stave off violent attacks on their own.

Dr Chakraborty said government hospitals were steeped in an all-pervasive threat culture, backed by impunity. "A culture of threat is fostered by those who know that powerful individuals will protect and guide them. That is why they feel no fear." This posed a threat to not just doctors but patients as well and needed to be addressed, he said.

Another pressing issue is the poor quality of medicines supplied, a matter that needs urgent attention. There should be no compromise when treating patients, particularly the quality of medicines and implants, emphasized Dr Chakraborty. He stated that corruption, of any

kind, at any level, should not interfere with a patient's health or a doctor's duty.

Another gaping hole in government hospitals is the shocking lack of basic amenities compromising health and hygiene. "This is a hospital," said Dr Panda. "People are performing surgeries, checking patients, transfusing blood, and handling emergencies. If basic amenities are not provided to doctors, the well-being of both doctors and patients suffers, leading to the collapse of the entire system."

And for women this lack of basic facilities is doubly distressful.

"When we are on our periods, it is especially difficult. In our five-storied hospital building, there is only one properly functioning women's washroom. Until this movement started, we didn't even have a female rest room. We always felt the need for one, but we thought, 'This is a government hospital, what more can we expect?' We are trying to break this mindset.

Civil Society picture/Ashoke Chakrabarty

Civil Society pictures/Aiema Tauheed

There is a budget and a functioning government. If they want to, they can make these changes," said Dr Ghorui.

Washrooms and safe resting spaces are essential for women's safety. "Abhaya had to go and sleep in a room where seminars are conducted. That is not a place for us to seek refuge," emphasized Dr Ghosh Hazra.

Dr Chakraborty said, "It is a very sad state of affairs that in the 21st century we still have to request for these basic amenities." The exhaustion from his long shift in the hospital was visible on his face. He spoke with deep disappointment of the bare expected minimum that is not provided to doctors. "In the past 36 hours, I had to use the washroom in my duty room. The sanitation system doesn't work. The flushes are broken, and there's no soap. We're not fighting for this right now, but this is the bare minimum."

Even a basic healthy meal eludes doctors working long shifts. The canteen situation varies across medical colleges. Some have 24/7 canteens, while most do not. In her college, said Dr Ghorui, the canteen is particularly bad. "They don't even stay open 24/7, so we have to order food with our very limited salary."

The government must recognize that shifts lasting 24 to 48 hours for doctors in residency are inhuman. The doctors see an overwhelming number of patients during these hours, which is also unacceptable. "More and more medical seats must be created," said Dr Panda. "The system needs a solid structure. With the

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country's large population and the limited number of doctors available to serve them, a complete structural change is necessary. This is a long-term requirement."

Despite such trying work conditions, junior doctors still attend to patients and have not complained about their inhuman working hours.

"We're used to the shifts, which is why most of us don't even complain about them," said Dr Ghorui. "There is a continuation. We can push ourselves up to 36 hours and still make sound medical judgements. But beyond that, it becomes dicey. We need rest to make proper judgements."

There was some criticism around the junior doctors' agitation. It was said that because of their 'cease work' the healthcare system was in a shambles and that the lack of junior doctors on duty had led to patients suffering greatly.

"We are postgraduate students. We are supposed to study and learn, not be the backbone of the healthcare system. But if such is the situation, it exposes the shortcomings of the WB Health Recruitment Board, the WB Medical Council, and other bodies regarding manpower," said Dr Ghosh Hazra.

She expressed her gratitude to the senior doctors who had stepped in to take over their duties so that they could continue to protest, but she questioned the need for such a situation to arise in the first place. The 'cease work' wasn't a ploy to shirk work but to debunk the notion that students are the sole upholders of the healthcare system.

Junior doctors are also paid poorly. West Bengal probably pays the lowest stipend in India to its hardworking junior doctors.

"We are underpaid, but that is not the purpose of this movement," said Dr Panda. "Our movement is not about salary."

Dr Chakraborty added, "The stipend we receive in West Bengal is very low. There should be a uniform stipend scale across India to ensure that residents are neither overworked nor underpaid."

This year, Goddess Durga was welcomed with a cry for justice and recognition of the determined spirit of the young doctors. "I celebrate from Mahalaya itself. Even if I am on duty, I wear a sari to celebrate each day," said Dr Ghorui. "But since this incident, it just doesn't feel right. Ma Durga shouldn't come to this place. That's how we feel."

It was also astonishing to see people from all walks of life and every religion and gender, from silver-haired elders to children with schoolbags, sitting at the site in solidarity. "I do not know how long we will have to fast," admitted Dr Ghosh Hazra, uncertainty in her voice. "I'm ready to stop fasting as soon as we receive affirmation of our 10-point demands," she said, as people who had joined them burst into loud chants, demanding justice. ■



Gurugram's first complete street with broad footpaths, a cycle path, greenery, benches and more

Gurugram gets road people can walk on

Sukanya Sharma
Gurugram

GURUGRAM's impressive skyline hides its ground reality: broken roads, ramshackle pavements and pools of stagnant water. There is a stand-out spot, though. It's a small stretch of road, 2.4 km in length, unusually well-designed with a cycle path, vendor zones, bus stops, EV charging points, street lights, benches, pathways and greenery.

This is Gurugram's first model road or 'complete street', which means people can travel safely here, using any means of transport. It runs parallel to the Delhi-Gurugram highway, an important intersection used daily by around 50,000 to 70,000 people.

Originally named Sanath Road, this derelict stretch was 30 metres wide with a broken pavement and often waterlogged due to poor drainage. Encroachments, illegal parking and poor lighting completed the picture. Women avoided Sanath Road because it wasn't considered safe. In just four years, there were 47 casualties due to road accidents.

Such was its condition that people working in nearby multinationals and residents of the adjoining Sector 18 held a ceremony to rename it Anath Road — meaning a road that had been 'orphaned' by civic agencies.

A decade later, Anath Road has a new name. It is now called Janpath, a street for everyone.

Companies, government agencies and an NGO got together to transform it. Nagarro and Maruti Suzuki India, partnered the Gurugram Metropolitan Development Authority (GMDA), the Dakshin Haryana Bijli Vitran Nigam (DHBVN), the Municipal Corporation of Gurugram (MCG) and Raahgiri Foundation, an NGO.

The idea was to work unitedly to enhance road safety. The project began with a survey in 2019, followed by design approval from GMDA the following year. Construction continued despite frustrating delays during the pandemic and, finally, this year the street was inaugurated in its new avatar.

Those who had witnessed its former version found the new street hard to recognize. The stretch that people once chose to avoid is now a popular pedestrian-friendly avenue, a hangout hub and a place to walk and talk.

"More streets need to become 'janpaths', or streets for people. The urban quality of life depends on the ubiquity of such streets. Without the ability to walk freely, safely and with dignity, we are a little like caged animals," remarks Manas Human, co-founder and CEO, Nagarro.

The redesign plan comprehensively integrated all services — drainage, sewage, lighting, pedestrian needs and cycling infrastructure.

The work was divided with a strategy in

place. GMDA, Nagarro and Raahgiri Foundation prepared the redesign plan. The MCG was given the responsibility of installing the new sewer line and cleaning the existing one. The DHBVN shifted power lines from overhead to underground. The footpath, cycle tracks and landscaping were developed by Raahgiri Foundation. Initial plans for redevelopment required felling of almost 300 trees. Nagarro spoke to government agencies who devised a plan that did not require a single tree to be felled.

The project's launch was marked by a tree plantation drive along the road. One hundred and fifty volunteers planted 600 saplings. Due emphasis was given to native species to help combat waterlogging. Raahgiri also organized a walk down the street with students of Delhi Public School in Gurugram, who showed considerable enthusiasm while learning about the model street.

Eco-friendly materials were used and a water recharge system put in place as well as solid waste management practices. Around 11,000 tonnes of construction and demolition waste

Construction waste was used. A water recharge system was put in place along with solid waste disposal practices.

were used to build the pathway, cycle track, seating, planters and walls. "The combination of innovative design and sustainable solutions has enhanced accessibility and safety for all road users while also addressing the impacts of climate change," says Sarika Panda Bhatt, co-founder of Raahgiri Foundation.

About 150 dustbins have been installed along the curbs. Along with street waste, the bins also facilitate garbage removal from the village areas behind the road. There are 415 new street lights, making it safer for women. Ninety benches provide a place to sit and rest for the elderly and for youth to hang out. Six new bus stops are another useful addition.

The cycle path is being extensively used by people, especially those living in the vicinity, for commuting to work. "I have heard conversations where colleagues are competing about who took the least time to cross Janpath road on their cycle every morning," says Shakti Singh, site engineer, Raahgiri Foundation.

The street has become a hangout hub — be it for a quick *chai* session in the middle of a busy working day or for a lunch meeting with colleagues. And sometimes just to take a walk and clear the mind, say a few professionals.

Civil Society pictures/Sukanya Sharma



Open spaces and street lighting make it easier for women to walk together



A green booth

Vendors too have been included. "The new areas they have demarcated for us are easy to maintain," says Mahesh, a vendor. "I like that my stall is now spruced up and I have been making an effort to keep it clean."

The revamped avenue is well lit. Street lights illuminate the footpaths and cycle track, not just the carriageway. The broad footpaths allow more people to walk together in groups which helps women feel safer even in the late hours. It is no longer isolated — the street's lively atmosphere helps resolve safety concerns. Including women in every aspect of design, decision-making and construction has helped make this project gender-inclusive, says the team at Raahgiri.

"I save around ₹50 to ₹60 every day because I no longer have to look for a rickshaw to take

me down the street. The lighting makes it easier and safer to walk," says Shalini Mehta, who works in the area. Sabiha, who has recently joined Raahgiri and comes to Janpath for work, says, "As a woman, it makes me feel safer for two reasons: one is the new lighting, the second is that people now tend to walk in large groups — the open spaces make it much simpler for us to walk together."

"By prioritizing women's safety, we have made Janpath a more inclusive and welcoming space for everyone," remarks Bhatt.

Preservation, plantation and use of eco-friendly materials along with implementation of advanced technology like smart lighting and EV charging have created a road that can serve as a blueprint for the city's maze of *anath* roads. ■

From fellowship to rural startup

Kavita Charanji
New Delhi

NISHANT Singh, a software engineer working with Wipro in Hyderabad, nursed a quiet ambition — he wanted to set up his own social enterprise. He had read biographies of Muhammad Yunus, the father of microfinance, and Leila Janah, the young founder of Samasource, who believed it was well-paid work and not aid that eradicated poverty.

It was the SBI Youth for India (YFI) Fellowship that caught his attention. Nishant applied, was accepted, and then placed in Jawhar, a tribal hill station in the Western Ghats in Maharashtra. He worked there in partnership with BAIF Development Research Foundation, formerly called the Bharatiya Agro Industries Foundation.

The 13-month fellowship programme is an initiative of the SBI Foundation, the State Bank of India's CSR wing. To be eligible, candidates have to be between 21 and 32 years of age. They could be young working professionals or fresh graduates. Apart from citizens of India, Overseas Citizens of India can also apply as well as citizens of Nepal and Bhutan.

“During our selection process, we look for individuals whose aspirations in the development sector are strongly aligned with the realities of rural life. They must have the potential to bridge the gap between these two worlds,” says Gyan Prakash, head of the YFI Fellowship programme at SBI Foundation. Prakash himself is an SBI YFI Fellow who collaborated with Chirag, an NGO, to enhance a social enterprise led by rural women.

Experiences often differ and have their own outcomes. Nishant found that the tribals he was working with still consumed their traditional diet, a staple of millets, moringa and mahua. But Jawhar was plagued by other problems. A one-crop cycle led to seasonal migration which had a deleterious effect. Education of children came to a halt. The tribals became disconnected from the Anganwadi and other government schemes. Migration also alienated them from their communities and diets. They didn't know the foods they consumed were considered 'superfoods' by urban consumers.

Nishant realized it wasn't charity that tribal communities needed but empowerment. They needed to earn more. “The SBI YFI Fellowship gave me the freedom and headroom to discover the direction in which I wanted to head. I learnt to interact with the community, understand their needs and include them in their solution. By the end of this transformative journey, I was ready to go on my journey,” says Nishant.

Once his fellowship was over, Nishant returned to Jawhar and set up a social enterprise called Jawhar Farms. Today, Jawhar Farms has not only carved a niche in the urban market for healthy millets-based food but also provided a livelihood for tribals.

At Jawhar Farms, millets, moringa and mahua are procured directly from farmers at market prices. Local tribals then make them into products like ragi cookies, ragi laddoos, ragi papad, among others. “We market these as products from a tribal farm, chemical-free and natural with all healthy ingredients. Our enterprise services the rural economy and solves the problems of migration and unemployment,” says Nishant.

Jawhar Farms won a ₹9 lakh grant from the SBI Foundation. It is all set for expansion. Nishant is planning a full-fledged production unit with new eco-friendly packaging and marketing to get more orders. He's also exploring if this model can be taken to other tribal areas of India.

Nishant is from the 2022-23 batch of SBI YFI Fellows which has an alumni network of 580 former Fellows. The Fellowship was introduced 13 years ago. Thus far, 11 batches have received the grants. According to



PIRUL converts pine needles into baskets and useful products



Nishant Singh set up Jawhar Farms which markets millet-based foods

the SBI YFI programme office, they are working in 250 villages and impacting the lives of 150,000 people.

“One way to measure impact is by assessing the sustainability of youth-led interventions and ongoing projects. The solutions developed by Fellows at the grassroots level should have the potential to scale up on their own or in collaboration with partner NGOs, and benefit local communities,” says Prakash.

Another success story is that of PIRUL Handicrafts, founded by Nupur Poharkar, a veterinarian who became a social entrepreneur. An SBI YFI Fellow of the 2020-21 batch, Poharkar was placed at Khetikhan village in Champawat district of Uttarakhand. She found that pine needles were causing havoc in the region. They led to forest fires and caused groundwater table depletion. At the same time local women needed to supplement their meagre income. The men migrated to the cities and sent tiny sums to their families back home. It was a hand-to-mouth existence for the women. The solution, she realized, was to enable women to earn a livelihood from waste pine needles. That is how the seeds for PIRUL were sown.

Starting with three women, PIRUL now provides employment to over 100 women from remote villages in the Kumaon region. The women are trained to make handicraft products like coasters, pen holders, planters, sling bags and so on from pine needles. PIRUL markets its products through exhibitions, a few stores in Hyderabad, Nainital and Mussoorie and exports its products as well.

With a grant of ₹9 lakh from the SBI Foundation, Poharkar intends to scale up, and focus on marketing and business development. ■



Nupur Poharkar

CLEANED IT WELL, BUT IT STILL GOT THAT SMELL?

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Villagers come together in large numbers to restore the environment by volunteering their labour once a year

WITH THE SPIRIT OF HALMA

Jhabua's community effort brings hope

SHREE PADRE

WATER shortages and loss of forest cover are major causes of suffering in rural areas. People need to come together to restore their local resources, but how can they be rallied for their common good?

For decades Jhabua and Alirajpur in Madhya Pradesh have lived with the spectre of scarcities and environmental distress. It has led to flight from the region by way of migration to cities.

In the past few years, however, there has been a glimmer of hope that things can be different. A movement built on the tribal tradition of *halma* or coming to the rescue of one's neighbour has led to some successes in water harvesting — reviving ponds and tanks and creating trenches on hillsides to slow the flowing away of rainwater.

Every February-March, coinciding with the festival of Bagoria, villagers come together for *halma* to restore water in the region. It is a variation of *halma* as it is known which is an act of good neighbourliness. But it works well

to bring the community together.

One can picture the scene at 5.30 am when the sun is rising. People in thousands wind their way in a procession to a hill in Jhabua. Moving together are young people, old men, mothers with infants in their arms, small children with their parents and even the physically challenged. They carry spades, pickaxes and containers. Motivating slogans rent the air. Their collective *josh* is unusual, almost like being battle-ready.

Behind this innovative effort is the Shivganga Samagra Grama Vikas Parishad, a non-profit based in Jhabua. Founded in 2007 by Mahesh Sharma, a social worker, and Harsh Chauhan, a mechanical engineer from IIT Delhi and a tribal himself, the non-profit has expanded the scope of *halma*.

Last year, 40,000 people from 1,500 villages took part in Shivganga's annual *halma* in February. They dug 100,000 metres of contour trenches which have the capacity to catch 600 million litres of rainwater. In the past 20 years, 10 such events have been held. This is a massive

groundwater recharge mission. The outcome is that tanks in the foothills of the Hathi Pawa hill never dry up and bore wells have enough water.

Reviving water systems and forests needs a blend of local knowledge and modern science. Shivganga trained youth to become 'gram (village) engineers'. It has organized festivals of wild food to improve nutrition, promoted organic farming and set up a farmer producer company.

It has also had to begin fighting for forest rights and the implementation of the Panchayats (Extension to Scheduled Areas) Act (PESA) of 1996, which gives tribal gram sabhas the right to self-govern.

STEEPED IN DISTRESS Jhabua is one of the most backward districts in India. In 2008, Alirajpur, a new district, was carved from Jhabua. The tribal population is 87 percent. Jhabua is 150 km from Indore, the state capital. The two districts have a population of 200,000 living in 1,320 villages.

Ninety percent of families own cultivable

land. Yet, they are forced to migrate to urban centres to earn an income. The most critical problem, tribals told Sharma, is lack of water. Rainfall in the two districts is 850 to 925 mm. But villages did not have structures that could catch the rain. As a result, drought was endemic— making it impossible to cultivate a second rainfed crop.

Migration affects health of the family, children's education, and tribal culture. Older children are left behind to look after younger ones. They don't go to school. Or play like other children. Debt is another anxiety. There are still others. The districts don't have water, roads, transport, medical facilities or even proper schools.

Sharma, a graduate, returned to Jhabua in 1988 to understand why his district was so backward. He began walking from village to village, talking to people, winning their confidence, and understanding their concerns.

Shivganga has 52 full-time volunteers. Half are local tribal youth between 16 and 20 years of age. There are well-qualified volunteers as well. Three graduates from NIT Rourkela, two advocates from Karnataka, an MBBS doctor, and a yoga graduate work selflessly. Hundreds of locals work informally as volunteers.

"When I first came here, I felt I had travelled back in time. The villagers here don't seek any comforts. They go to immense trouble to treat their guests well," recalls Vishwanath Allannavar, a lawyer from Karnataka, who worked as a full-time volunteer at Shivganga till recently.

"Why is it that generally NGOs fail in rural development missions?" asks Harsh Chauhan, rhetorically. He has a ready answer. "They take a unilateral decision, make an action plan and try to make the villagers follow their design. Instead, if the organizations involve themselves in finding out the solution and facilitate a collective decision, chances of success are higher."

Shivganga looks for honest youth who can "take the village forward". Rajaram Katara, a senior full-time worker, is one of Sharma's earliest finds from the tribal community.

"When we visit a new village, our first task is to identify *paramarthis*," explains Katara. "We look for people who help when someone is ill, who crisis-manage when someone is in distress. We never approach village leaders like the *sarpanch* or *mukhiya*. It is generally 20 percent of influential people who volunteer for a new programme. Invariably they have money on their minds. But the entire village is not selfish. There will be people of integrity. We have to find them."



Contour trenches are built to capture the rain

They found each village had about 200 to 300 youth between 18 and 25. It was this section that Sharma sought out. In 2004, he began the Vananchal Sashaktikaran Varg or training classes for empowerment at Dharamपुरi, headquarters of Shivganga, in Jhabua.

In the course of their training, tribal youth were asked to describe the status of their villages and identify who was responsible for its problems. Using such tactics, youth were encouraged to analyze their problems and suggest solutions. In no time, Shivganga came to know that the first 'sorrow' the district faced was water scarcity.

After several brainstorming sessions on how to resolve the water crisis, Shivganga organized a mammoth *jal yatra* in 2008 with placards and slogans. After the *yatra*, a few village elders sought out Sharma. They wanted to talk to him.

"How can water scarcity be resolved by processions and slogan shouting?" they asked him. "We came with spades and pickaxes to start work straightaway."

This simple question by tribal elders made the leaders of Shivganga rethink. They went on village *yatras*, underlining the importance of starting a movement to restore groundwater. In the course of one such meeting an elderly villager told them: "It's not so difficult to begin such a movement. Just call for a *halma*."

The elder's suggestion proved a turning point for Shivganga. But first let's understand this unique tradition. *Halma* is community service or *paramarth* to help those in distress without expecting anything in return.

For instance, if a family, despite its best efforts, is unable to complete time-bound work

on its own, it calls for *halma*. Or, a family needs to build a new house but the monsoon is approaching and the work is lagging. It can call for *halma*. The villagers arrive to help construct the house. The owner of the house is not expected to pay anything in return. The practice of *halma* was alive in many villages, though in some community spirit was diminishing.

There was all-round approval when Shivganga suggested a call for *halma* to restore groundwater. In 2008, the first annual *shramdan* was conducted. About 1,300 villages in Jhabua and Alirajpur are calling for *halma* for rural development works, mostly for water conservation and afforestation.

POWER OF COMMUNITY Shivganga linked *halma* to Bagoria, a week-long festival of the tribal community which takes place in February-March every year.

The *shramdan* is organized just before Bagoria. About 300 volunteers begin preparations three months prior to the festival. Districts are split into sections and volunteers assigned to each. They go from house to house, inviting families for the annual *shramdan*.

The volunteers tell them about Shivganga, its activities and how people can get involved. They note the number of people from the family who can join the *shramdan*. An estimate is drawn up for their stay, meetings, and other activities at the Dharamपुरi Gurukul.

By reviving interest in *halma*, many water conservation works have taken place in villages. In the past 17 years, *talab* (tank) construction or repairs have been carried out in 130 villages. As a result, every year millions of litres of water are stored for public use.

The topography of Jhabua and Alirajpur is undulating, with hills and valleys. People have dug about 250,000 metres of contour trenches which catch a huge quantity of rainwater. Last year alone, 17 villages constructed tanks which

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will hold substantial amounts of water.

In Sadh village the local tank had become defunct due to silting. Villagers submitted letter after letter to the government. Officials brushed aside their demand. To scotch the request they even said reviving the village tank was dangerous!

In 2017, the villagers united with Shivganga's help. A few youngsters got themselves trained as gram engineers. Tribal leaders gave a call for *halma*. For one and a half months 800 people, including from neighbouring villages, participated and restored the tank. The value of this work is estimated to be about ₹30 crore.

The tank now holds water enough to meet the needs of about 5,000 people in five villages. What the government couldn't do for many decades, locals did in 45 days, without asking for a single rupee from the government.

FIRST EVENT In 2009, the first annual *shramdan* on Hathi Pawa hill was held. However, this year the event was not organized. "We study the local situation, look at the convenience of people and finally take a decision on whether to go ahead with the programme or not," explains Katara.

The annual *shramdan* is a mammoth event. Around 40,000 people participate. Yet it takes place without a glitch, professionally managed by villagers.

How is it organized? Both districts are split into distinct regions. Each region is identified by a particular colour allocated to it. If blue is the colour of a region, the parking ground, mess, tents, and *shramdan* area will all have blue flags. This averts confusion. Even illiterate visitors will not get into the wrong venues.

The programme unfolds like an *utsav*. Villagers arrive in bullock carts, tractors, vans on the first day. A procession, a religious meet and cultural programmes are held. The next day, everyone gets up at 5 am. The canteen keeps breakfast packets ready for them to carry. After prayers, with implements like spades, pickaxes and containers, they begin climbing Hathi Pawa hill.

Singing prayers and songs about water conservation, they reach the top of the hill. Markings are already etched for each group. They start digging contour trenches. Families work together as if it is a family task. The work goes on till noon.

The event now attracts people from India and abroad. Rajendra Kumar, an industrialist and social worker from Raichur in Karnataka, took part in the 2020 *halma*. He visited some villages in the interior after the event, riding pillion on a two-wheeler.

"I stayed in a hut. They treat guests with a lot of affection. In those villages, all works, including well or tank repair, house construction, trenching, planting trees in the forest, is done through *halma*," he says.



Halma has restored water tanks and forests in villages



A group of village volunteers with saplings

VILLAGE ENGINEERS Constructing a *talab*, contour trenching, or making an earthen dam do require engineering skills. But getting the services of engineers from far-off cities in remote villages is tough. Shivganga noted that quite a few tribal people were very knowledgeable about *talab* construction. Why not improve their skills and make them engineers? The organization went ahead and has now groomed about 1,200 'gram engineers'. Candidates, mostly Class 8 or Class 9 dropouts, were chosen and trained at the G.S. Institute of Technology and Science (GSITS) in Indore for five days. "I have been teaching here for 38 years. I haven't come across such attentive students as those from Jhabua," remarked Dr Sandeep Narulkar, professor of civil engineering.

Students were taught *talab* construction, how big its bund should be, how to assess the inflow of water into the *talab*, how to mark the land for digging contour trenches and so on. They were also taught how to repair old dams and revive silted *talabs*.

"We don't teach watershed development to them. We designed their syllabus exactly for the kind of hands-on expertise they will be required to deliver," he said. "They understand

even complex subjects very quickly. Students from Jhabua learn by careful observation, unlike our regular students. We teach them through an interactive method."

Dr Narulkar said that even after returning to their villages, students keep in touch with their professors. "Whenever they have any doubts, they call us. They use video calls to get clear and specific instructions."

The main issue the professors faced was that some Jhabua students didn't even understand Hindi. They knew only Bhili. How would they explain English technical terms to them? "We too learnt in the process. They came up with their own alternatives for many English terms. We then stuck to those terms," said Dr Narulkar.

The government has constructed *talabs* in some villages but they leak due to poor workmanship. "Now gram engineers are called and they repair the leak without delay," said Dr Narulkar. Women too have begun volunteering to become gram engineers. "Their learning levels are on a par with men," said Dr Narulkar.

Talab construction or repair takes place generally at the end of summer. Dr Narulkar and his team of engineers visit Jhabua at this time to see how water works are being designed. "We show the work of our rural engineers to the team. Visiting engineers usually endorse site selection and similar decisions taken by villagers," says Chauhan proudly. "Our gram engineers interact with the engineers confidently. Some sites were risky, we felt. Yet, our gram engineers went ahead with the work and succeeded. Theirs is *desi* knowledge."

Shivganga is now 18 years old. In 2019, Mahesh Sharma was honoured with a Padma Shri. "Initially, the dream of creating a sustainable Jhabua was mine alone. Now thousands of villagers share the same dream," he says. ■

Contact Shivganga at 95882 96068

RATAN NAVAL TATA (1937-2024)

In the cockpit gently

ARUN MAIRA

WITH Ratan Tata's passing, the Tata Group, Indian business and the country have lost a great leader and role model. Ratan was a trained airplane pilot, like JRD Tata before him. I have flown with Ratan in single-engine planes in rough weather when he was completing the flying hours required for his licence. What he accomplished as chairman of the Tata Group in the 1990s was the conversion of an airplane in flight with all stakeholders aboard. The group has been modernized and enlarged.

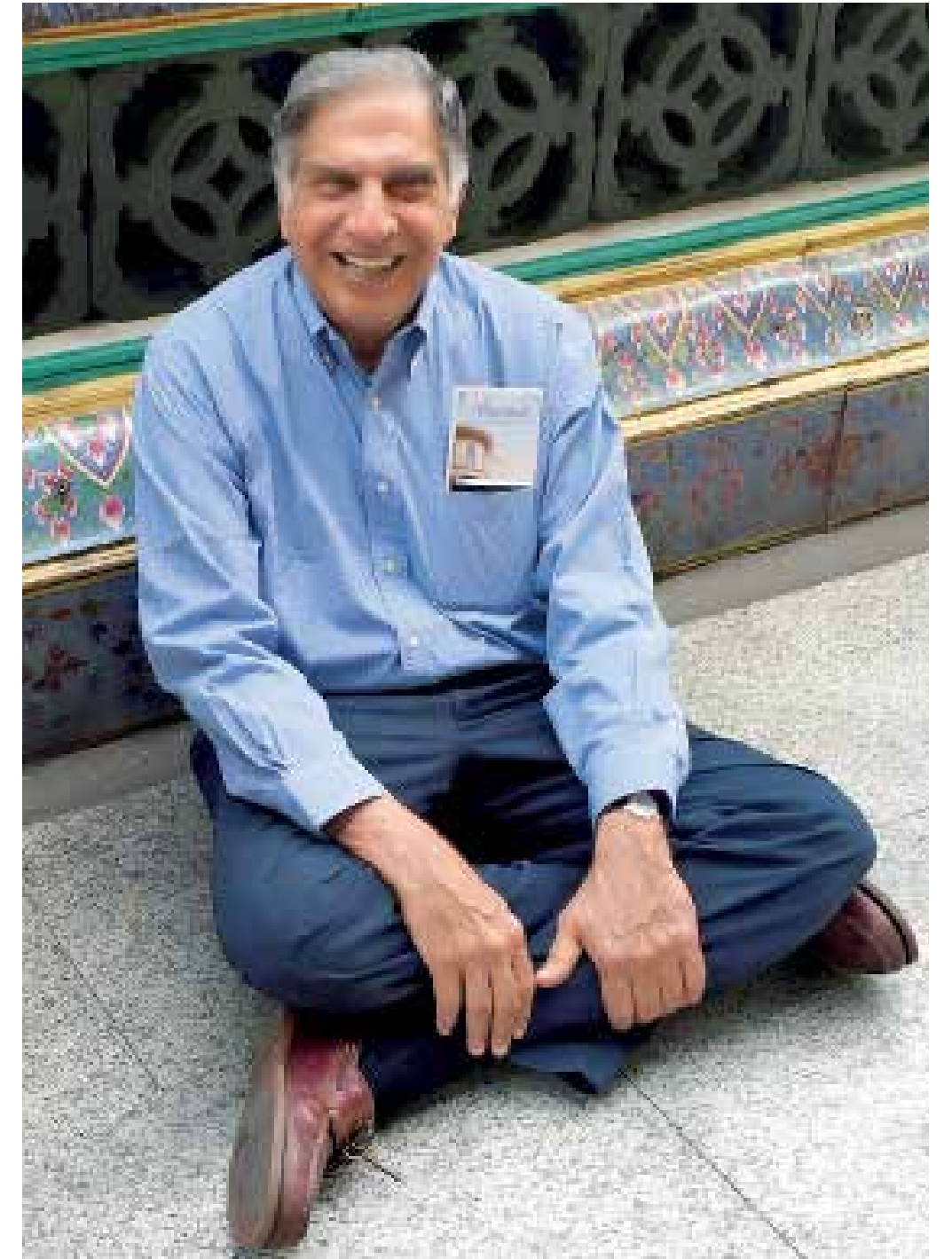
Ratan converted the reliable airplane he inherited from his predecessors into a modern jet capable of flying farther and competing internationally. The Tatas are not what they used to be, nostalgic old-timers say, though the group remains what it has been for over a century: the most widely trusted pillar of Indian industry.

The Tatas are trusted not because they have increased shareholders' wealth, or because they have the largest philanthropic trusts. They are trusted because their human values have endured, and their values of business responsibility have been preserved. Ratan Tata lived by these values personally. He lives on as a role model.

Ratan led the group through a difficult transition after taking over the baton of leadership in 1991 from JRD Tata who had led the group for 50 years. JRD had built the group after India's independence when the foundations of the country's industry were being built, which the British had prevented.

JRD had to take many difficult decisions in those difficult times. He said whenever he was in doubt, he would ask himself what would be good for India, and then what would be good for the Tatas. He would choose what was good for India because it would turn out to be good for the Tatas also in the long run.

As an enterprise, the Tatas were the most trusted business enterprise in the country, trusted even more than the government. The national industrial policy, which the private business sector had supported, reserved basic industries such as steel and fertilizers for the government sector because they required large amounts of capital which the private sector could not raise. Tata Steel's employee unions prevented the



government from nationalizing Tata Steel. They said the Tatas cared very well for their employees' well-being, and they were proud to work for the Tatas.

The Tatas had been the first to introduce provident fund and other welfare measures for their employees even before such policies were implemented in the Western world. Tata Steel's shares were treasured by older persons as a reliable insurance for their old age. With union support, Tata Steel remained in the private sector as a role model of socially

responsible business enterprise.

Ratan took over leadership of the Tata Group when the Indian economy was opened to foreign markets in 1991. The general view was that Indian industry had been shielded too much from foreign competition until 1991 and was not fit for international competition. Ratan took advantage of the new freedoms given to business and made the Tatas the most admired Indian business group internationally.

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In the cockpit gently

Continued from page 17

The Tatas took over ailing, marquee British companies — Corus (British Steel), Jaguar Land Rover, and Tetley Tea — and reversed the colonization of Indian industry. By 2010, Tatas had become a global organization with over 60 percent of revenues from outside India, investors and employees around the world, and many foreign nationals in the upper management. Along with foreign investors came foreign technologies and Western ideas of ‘professional’ business management for ‘modernizing’ Indian industries.

Tata Steel’s tagline was ‘We also make steel’, an expression of the Tatas’ social responsibility. The ideology spread around the world from the US in the 1990s was that businesses contribute to society by increasing the wealth of their investors, and ‘the business of business must be only business’. B. Muthuraman, CEO of Tata Steel, was asked by a young financial analyst in New York, in a quarterly earnings call (a new practice for Indian companies), when Tata Steel would become a proper capitalist enterprise and shake off its ‘socialist’ moorings.

Prime Minister Manmohan Singh addressed the Confederation of Indian Industry (CII)’s members in 2007. They thanked him for opening up the economy in 1991 and for enabling them to create more wealth. He gave them some advice. He asked them to resist excessive remuneration to promoters and senior executives and discourage excessive compensation.

“Rising income and wealth inequalities, if not matched by a corresponding rise of incomes across the nation, can lead to social unrest,” he warned. “An area of great

concern is the level of ostentatious expenditure on weddings and other family events. Such vulgarity insults the poverty of the less privileged.”

He called on industry to be proactive in offering employment to the less privileged and encouraged CII to implement its programme of affirmative action for the social castes who had been historically deprived of equal opportunities. Sadly, only the Tatas and a few others implemented the programme.

The Tatas and some other industries led a movement to develop a national, voluntary code of business responsibility. They asked the government to support it. Another

Ratan Tata converted the reliable airplane he inherited from his predecessors into a modern jet capable of flying farther and competing globally.

business lobby proposed an alternative: compulsory spending of two percent of net profits by companies on CSR (corporate social responsibility). It would be much easier for industry to implement and for government to monitor.

Most NGOs also supported this proposal. It would provide them a guaranteed source of funds. The Tatas pointed out that they were already spending more on CSR.

Companies must be accountable for the impacts of their operations, from which

they generate their revenues and profits, on the well-being of society and the environment. The ‘two percent CSR’ was like offerings at temples by the rich for absolution of sins committed. It was a very small price to pay for the ease of doing business.

The stock market capitalization of the Tata Group of companies increased greatly during Ratan Tata’s tenure as chairman: from \$5 billion in 1991 to \$100 billion in 2021 when he retired. The Reliance Group performed even better in stock markets, increasing its value from \$2 billion to \$220 billion in the same period. Since then, fortunes have changed. As I write today, Reliance is worth \$277 billion and the Tatas \$400 billion!

Stock market valuations are speculative and fickle. They do not measure real value. The Tata Group has endured as the most respected business enterprise in India because it is built on human values, not driven by stock valuations.

Ratan’s repurposing of the Tata Trusts doesn’t generally find mention. In much the same way as he worked with different Tata companies to give them a group identity, so also with the trusts. He brought them together as the Tata Trusts. He professionalized their functioning without diminishing their social objectives. The trusts found that they could be more collaborative and outcome-driven in addressing developmental objectives in areas such as cancer and nutrition.

Ratan will always be remembered for his many organizational achievements and leadership qualities. But above all it will be for the grace, kindness and humility with which he lived. ■

Arun Maira is the author of ‘Shaping the Future: How to Be, Think, and Act in the New World’

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Sonam Wangchuk with fellow campaigners in the driveway of Ladakh Bhavan in Delhi

LISTENING TO LADAKH

Sonam Wangchuk wants Delhi to wake up

Civil Society News

New Delhi

WHEN you live up there in the Himalayas, how do you make yourself heard in Delhi? In an era of instant communications, the possibilities are many. But chances also are that you might end up walking the entire distance to the capital in the hope that someone notices.

Ask Sonam Wangchuk and 152 others who trudged all the way from Ladakh to Delhi with their demand for greater freedom to govern themselves in their villages and protect the fragile ecology of the mountains among which they live.

Walking 1,000 km is no small feat. But it didn't get Wangchuk and his fellow campaigners, mostly village folk, the hearing they were hoping for from the government. Instead, entry to Delhi itself became an ordeal.

At first, they were detained at the border of the capital. Later they were allowed in, but denied permission to take their peaceful protest to Jantar Mantar where people with causes are permitted to gather. Finally, they were corralled into Ladakh Bhavan, a government facility for Ladakhis in transit.

At Ladakh Bhavan, out in the open in the driveway, the campaigners, led by Wangchuk, went on a fast asking that the government at least

agree to discuss implementation of the Sixth Schedule of the Constitution in Ladakh.

After 16 days, the fast was finally called off when the government agreed to talks on the Sixth Schedule. A joint secretary in the home ministry met Wangchuk with a letter stating the government's commitment.

The Sixth Schedule would provide protection to tribal culture and traditions and give Ladakhis the right to manage their affairs through different tiers of local governance such as village councils.

Under the Sixth Schedule they would have a say in development decisions instead of impositions from Delhi. Most important, alienation of their land in the name of development would stop.

For Ladakhis the environment is high on the list of their worries. These are people who live in the midst of uniquely stark and severe natural conditions. They depend on a symbiotic relationship with their mountains, glaciers and grazing lands. With global warming, glaciers in the Himalayas are melting. Temperatures are rising. Ladakhis worry about what might be coming up. They feel they are best equipped to deal with their situation themselves.

Wangchuk says Ladakh's concerns are also relevant to the rest of the Himalayan states which are facing a serious environmental crisis. Local self-governance and better awareness of their special needs is required. A

mechanism is needed for the mountain states of India to be involved when decisions are made relating to their governance, development and the well-being of ordinary people.

The experience has been that the region is not understood by planners and policymakers sitting at a distance because they are unaware of the ground realities and are often influenced by interests that don't have the local good in mind. If previous governments erred through their neglect, the BJP government has been particularly inclined to slam through decisions.

Wangchuk is no everyday activist. He has global rockstar status as an environmentalist whose work with glaciers has been acknowledged. He is an engineer and inventor. The blockbuster Hindi film, *Three Idiots*, told his story and made him a household name. He leads a movement to reform education in Ladakh.

But the Union government thought little of ignoring him and his views. Running a fever and worn down physically by being on fast, Wangchuk met the media, small groups of admirers and other campaigners like the leaders of the farmers' agitation. But the government tried to force him into anonymity by not meeting him, treating him as though he didn't exist. It is what Ladakhis resent most under Central rule, particularly by a majoritarian BJP government.

In the 2019 elections to the Lok Sabha (Ladakh has one MP), the BJP promised in its manifesto to implement the Sixth Schedule of the Constitution. In 2020, during the Leh Hill Council polls, the promise was reiterated.

It has twice reneged on its promise, leading to the current protests. In recent times there have been large crowds out in the streets in Leh, seeking the Sixth Schedule's implementation.

THE BACKGROUND Till 2019 Ladakh was part of the state of Jammu and Kashmir. Then overnight Article 370 of the Constitution was abrogated and simultaneously Jammu and Kashmir lost statehood. It was turned into a Union Territory, bringing it under the direct control of the Union government.

At the same time Ladakh was sliced off and spun into a separate Union Territory. While being part of Jammu and Kashmir, Ladakh had better access to development schemes, funds and of course it had popular representation. Once it was turned into a Union Territory it was directly in the grasp of a distant Central government.

The situation is complicated by Ladakh being on the border with China and particularly so in a theatre where China has nibbled away territory. But the Ladakhis feel their nationalism is beyond question. So many of them serve in the armed forces. One of the protesters we speak to, Tearing Stanba, has pictures in his phone of his years in the Army when he was posted all over the country. On the border the best bulwark against an aggrandizing neighbour is to have rooted communities and functioning democratic institutions. Ladakhis have traditionally been such a bulwark.

In an interview Wangchuk gives us under a tree outside Ladakh Bhavan, he says: "For the Himalayas as a whole I think there should be special provisions that give local elected bodies powers to take stewardship of their areas, mostly environmentally and culturally, because these cultures have kept the Himalayas alive and safeguarded for millennia."

"Now these policies need to be framed, but in the case of Ladakh there is already one (a policy) and that's the Sixth Schedule of Article 244 of the Indian Constitution, which gives indigenous tribal communities more control of how the region is managed through the public representatives who have law-making powers as regards to their areas, environment, land, forests, customs and so on," he says.

He continues: "And this is what was promised to Ladakh repeatedly in 2019 and 2020 and it is there in the election manifestoes. It is there in the minutes of the tribal ministry. So, to take a U-turn when it comes to actually doing it doesn't show the government in good light."

Wangchuk is concerned that decisions regarding the creation of



The padayatra from Ladakh

infrastructure and setting up of industries don't take local interests into account and have disastrous effects which are difficult to reverse.

"We should not see these mountains just as a resource to be exploited in a few decades by a few millionaires and billionaires. And then you are left with the devastation that you see in Sikkim, in Himachal, in Uttarakhand," he says.

"It is very sad that governments give a free hand to corporations. Corporations squeeze and extract their profits in a decade or two and then leave the place. It is a use-and-throw style. And then when disaster strikes, like floods in Sikkim, or, you know, roads and entire mountains collapsing, that is dealt with through taxpayers' money. And then, finally, the local people have to bear the consequences for generations," he says.

For Wangchuk, the solution is local empowerment and proper popular representation so that the decisions taken have the involvement of people and keep their interests in mind.

"We have a situation where a place like Ladakh is so different from any part of the country, in fact any part of the planet. It looks and feels more like Mars or the Moon than Earth. Only local people will understand what it takes to keep it healthy," he explains.

SOLAR EXCESSES How much do consultation and local knowledge matter? Solar power is a good example. It is a green industry, but when solar power producers turn up in Ladakh and take over large tracts of land, they upend life in local communities without realizing what they are doing. What may appear to be barren land is actually productive and essential for local people grazing their animals. In another geography, a meadow may be lush and green. But in Ladakh's extreme conditions it comes with sparse vegetation and that is what animals graze on.

Says Wangchuk, "I am a fan of solar power. But the way it's being done is what I have problems with. No local people are consulted. Land is just getting earmarked because it looks like flat wasteland. But what meets

the eye is not the reality. These seeming wastelands are the source of food for tens of thousands of groups. Sheep. Yaks. They don't know that this is how life survives in Ladakh. It's not like lush green pastures. The pastures in Ladakh are very different."

He says: "They think these are all easily available for solar power plants. If the locals had been asked, they would have shown other places where animals don't graze. If I had been asked, I would have shown them how to take solar power from the top of mountains and leave the pastures to the goats and sheep below. It would have been a win-win situation where the local herders would get twice their fodder and the nation solar power."

Wangchuk believes that there is reason to feel concerned about the future of Ladakh because of growing frustrations brought on by environmental imbalances, lack of opportunities and a sense of disenfranchisement. The government needs to be more sensitive in its handling of Ladakh and invest in institutional mechanisms that people can happily own.

How difficult is it to raise an environmental issue as he has done? "If your cause is big, nothing is difficult. If it is a non-issue, then anything is difficult. So, in absolute terms this may not be easy but when compared to the scenario which will take shape in the coming decades, this is nothing," he says.

"You know, in a place like Ladakh, which is on the ultimate border, flanked by hostile countries like China and Pakistan, when people, especially the youth, are unhappy, frustrated, it can lead to a big upheaval in the future. Maybe liberation movements. I am not saying it should. But it can. And if my little effort today helps in preventing that, even if it takes my life, it's just one life, not 5,000. So, it (the challenge and sacrifice) is very small when compared to what we are seeing."

SIKKIM'S GLOF CRISIS Wangchuk's views resonate in other Himalayan states. Decentralization, local governance and a Central mechanism that is sensitive to the special needs of the mountains are some of the issues that are widely expressed.

In Sikkim, for instance, P.D. Rai, a former MP, says there should be a special-purpose vehicle that can hear out the mountain states and help them cope with their challenges.

Rai is a founder-member of the Integrated Mountain Initiative which serves as a platform for sharing concerns and solutions and shaping the case for treating the mountain states differently.

Rai recalls a time when they went to the Planning Commission and Montek Singh Ahluwalia agreed to the creation of a special group for the mountain states. But then the government changed and the Planning Commission itself was dissolved.

"There is nobody in Delhi who is thinking differently. We had gone to the extent of building that knowledge base or building that sensitivity in the Planning Commission. But unfortunately, immediately after we had done it, the new government came and dismantled the old Planning Commission. The Planning Commission was such an important institution from that point of view," says Rai.

"Building a road in the mountains is not the same as building a road anywhere. Everyone here would want infrastructure. You want your internet, power supply, water and so on. But each of these things will require to be done in a way which is in harmony with nature or the way we are structured geologically," explains Rai.

Just how fragile the mountain states are can be seen from the impact that just one GLOF or Glacial Lake Outburst Flood on October 3, 2023, has had on Sikkim's economy.

"One GLOF has crippled our hydel power generation. It has destroyed our road infrastructure. Hotels are empty because the tourists have stopped coming. As a result, livelihoods are on the line. With power generation affected, the government is not earning anything and can't pay salaries," says Rai.

Sikkim was doing well, having built good roads. It was able to give cheap hydel power to industry together with subsidies and could attract pharmaceutical companies. Tourism was flourishing.



People in thousands gather in Ladakh over their Sixth Schedule demand

Civil Society picture/Umesh Anand



Mostly simple folk have come down from Ladakh and are fasting



Tearing Stanba, a former Army man, is among the campaigners

Civil Society picture/Umesh Anand



On the road to Delhi

But it has all been reversed by a single natural event. With infrastructure gone and the state's economy in decline, the companies which made investments there want to relocate.

"I've not in my lifetime seen such a bizarre and seriously problematic situation which will require many, many years for us to climb, or crawl back from," says Rai.

UTTARAKHAND UPENDED Dr Ravi Chopra in Dehradun is similarly perturbed by the imposition of decisions taken in Delhi and the lack of consultation.

Chopra, with an IIT degree, is the founder of the People's Science Institute. He is a respected and reasonable voice on the mountains. He was appointed by the Supreme Court to lead an empowered committee on reviewing development decisions such as road building in Uttarakhand after major disasters there.

Like Wangchuk, he is concerned about imbalanced development, water shortages, melting glaciers, disappearing forests, heat islands. He too sees the answer in local empowerment and community initiatives. But governments are not sensitive and will not listen. When the people of Joshimath, a town experiencing the long-term effects of reckless road building, wanted to meet the chief minister of Uttarakhand, he kept them waiting till late at night and then gave them a few minutes.

Chopra says: "My primary concern is that we are standing at the very edge of a tipping point because of the catastrophic impacts of climate change. I don't think the government is prepared for them. It is not displaying a good understanding of what's in store for us."

"The Himalayan environment is fragile to begin with. The whole region is geologically fragile. Extreme impacts on it are going to be devastating. I mean, we know that there are certain kinds of disasters that are sitting over there. I can see them. And I need to be prepared today if there is a disaster tomorrow. I need to have disaster mitigation built into development programmes," he says.

Asked what he fears happening in Uttarakhand and the rest of the Himalayas in the next few years, Chopra says the two major manifestations of climate change are in temperature and rainfall patterns.

In the foothills, temperatures are reaching 40°C in summer. They could reach 50°C by the end of the decade.

He asks: "Are we thinking in terms of heat shelters? I haven't heard the word. Are we thinking in terms of decongesting our concrete jungles? Relocating economic activity, dispersing it? Dispersing tourism?"

Changes in rainfall patterns mean less precipitation in winter and shorter, more intense, spells of rain in summer. Western disturbances are no longer restricted to winter. When western disturbances collide with the monsoon clouds, they produce disasters.

"Are we redesigning our roads? No. Are we redesigning our dams? No. Are we trying to reforest and green our cities? No. I don't see mitigation measures being taken and that is my primary concern," says Chopra.

"Let's begin with what's happening at the top. Glaciers, we are told, are melting. But, you know, many of the glaciers are small. The ice pack is not uniformly thick. So, some parts where the ice pack or ice mass is less are melting and forming lakes. There's fragmentation of glaciers. Lakes are being formed, the number of lakes is increasing and therefore the probability of GLOFs is increasing. What do you need to do? You need to prepare disaster prevention plans now in anticipation of what is going to happen in the river valleys when that flood comes down," says Chopra.

Across the Himalayas there are many takers for the issues that Sonam Wangchuk is raising. In the mountains, there are multiple local manifestations of the concerns he is trying to take to policymakers and the government.

But this is not just about the mountains. All of India and the planet itself depends on sustainably governing the Himalayas. Preserving them and preparing for what might be going wrong with their ecology should be a national priority. Wangchuk is also raising concerns of air and water without which life itself is impossible. From Ladakh comes a wake-up call for everyone. ■

The giving instinct



**DELHI
DARBAR**

SANJAYA BARU

A running theme in the many tributes paid to industrialist Ratan Tata has been the recognition of his record as a philanthropist and his humane personality. Evidence normally cited of the former is the record of the Tata Trusts and of the latter is his care of stray dogs. Philanthropy is typically more institutional and the expression of social commitment. Charity or concern for the underdog, so to speak, is more personal and emotional. Ratan Tata was known for both. Indeed, the Tata Group has set a benchmark of sorts for the social commitment of Indian business.

It must be pointed out, though, that a philanthropist is not necessarily a charitable and humane individual. The philanthropy of most Indian businesses and businesspersons is nothing more than a means of tax avoidance or adherence to the provisions in company law relating to corporate social responsibility (CSR). Charity, on the other hand, is a more heartfelt response to social inequity and individual need. Ratan Tata expressed his social commitment both institutionally and personally.

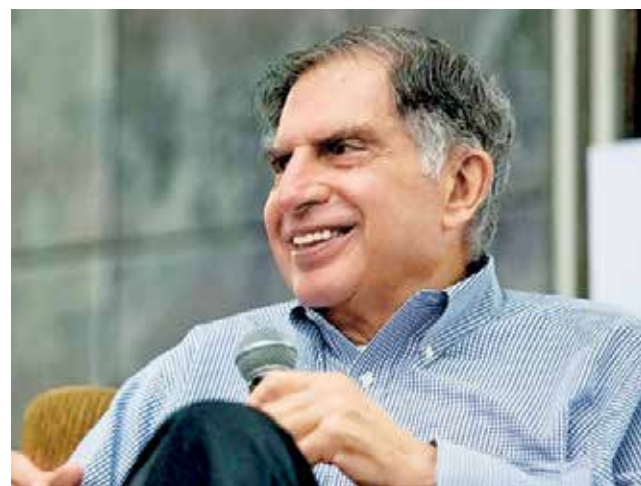
Pushpa Sundar, formerly of the Indian Administrative Service (IAS), wrote a series of books, including *Business and Community* (SAGE, 2012) and *Giving with a Thousand Hands* (Oxford University Press, 2017), examining the track record of business philanthropy and the charity of the wealthy in India. Ratan Tata even wrote a foreword to the book that examined the record of CSR. Sundar's general conclusion is that the track record of India's wealthy as far as charity and philanthropy are concerned is abysmal.

One does not have to delve deep into social science research to discover this fact. Walk into any trendy market or drive through any metropolitan crossroads. The poor and the needy are before us. Often cooking, living, sleeping, playing on footpaths along busy streets. The attitude of the urban rich,

especially the entitled nouveau riche, to the poor and the needy is a striking commentary on the social outlook of a prospering nation.

I make a distinction between 'poor' and 'needy', for often the needy are not necessarily poor. Merely disenfranchised by the market. Every time my daughter, Tanvika, and I go to New Delhi's trendy Khan Market, she points to this difference. Shuklaji is an educated, visually impaired gentleman, an independent individual with a demeanour of dignity, who stands at one corner, outside some of the fancier shops in Khan Market, selling napkins and *diyas*.

He does not speak, much less beg a passer-by, and doesn't whine about his ailments or hand out a booklet seeking money. He must



Ratan Tata was known for his humane personality

hope that someone who has spent a few lakhs inside one of the fancy shops can afford to buy something small from him simply because it is economical, sustainable and of quality. That they would do so without bargaining. Tanvika always wonders how many have acknowledged him and genuinely spent time to ask him about his life instead of merely taking a photograph and uploading it on social media to prove they have contributed to society.

Charity is not about donating money at art auctions, at home decor stores or at fashion shows. One should invest time in ensuring that the benefits of one's charity, or philanthropy, in fact reach the intended person. This should be done in a manner that preserves their dignity.

The person giving must also try and understand the person receiving, and support in a way that addresses their needs. Not just handing out biscuits and beverages but clothing, shelter, education, food and medication. These are their real requirements.

At a crossroads in Saket that we often drive by there is an elderly gentleman who also merely stands there, his hand shaking, perhaps due to Parkinson's, selling roses. An elderly woman who sells incense sticks, after the loss of her son, competes for your attention. The old man stands in silence, waiting to be helped.

Rapidly developing urban India is full of such persons. Many think of them as 'beggars'. They may just be 'needy', marginalized by society and the market. The organized philanthropy of business can address the larger social challenges a society faces. It is individual charity that must address the needs of the needy.

These are thoughts that cross one's mind reading tributes to a 'giver' like Ratan Tata in the midst of a festival season. India is a nation of extreme inequality. There are the billionaires with their growing and aggressive opulence, and the desperately needy willing to wait in hope. Festival time is a period in which these social and economic inequalities stare us in the face, impact our ears and blind us to the reality around us.

Every cracker that bursts could have fed a family at least one meal. Yet, we pollute with impunity, air and noise, consume calories endlessly in celebration of our prosperity, unmindful of those who stand and serve. It is because of this deep-seated indifference to social inequality that Mahatma Gandhi

enunciated the concept of Trusteeship. That a capitalist is a trustee of social wealth. The Tata Group under Ratan Tata's leadership has come to epitomize this to a far greater extent than any other business enterprise. There are many business leaders who have undertaken profound acts of philanthropy and charity, Azim Premji being one of them. However, as a corporate entity the Tata Group has internalized this philosophy.

There is an apocryphal story on social media on Ratan Tata's approach to trusteeship about a group ordering more food than they could consume at a restaurant. As they leave without having consumed all the food on the table, they are admonished for the wastage by a disapproving lady, "The money is yours, but the resources belong to society." That was the essence of Gandhiji's Trusteeship theory and Ratan Tata imbibed it more than most business leaders. ■

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Is it the end of family?



**LOOKING
AHEAD**

KIRAN KARNIK

MARRIAGE and family are institutions within which we have grown up, comfortable in the assumption that these are an integral or permanent part of the way our society is structured. These have endured, with some variations, over the centuries, having evolved as practical arrangements which also provide a safety net for difficult times. Yet, recent times are seeing some upheavals and radical shifts. As we look at the years and decades ahead, what changes might we see? In the face of technology-driven social turmoil, will these institutions continue to thrive or even survive?

An earlier column ('Individualism and Identity', *Civil Society*, October 2024) discussed the phenomenon of growing individualism and the countervailing movement towards group identities. An important driver of the former is the technological trend of creating new gadgets that are intended as personal or single-user devices. The best example of these is the whole host of uses — video viewing, music listening, voice calling, text messaging — packaged in a mobile handset, a form factor geared for individual consumption. Increasingly, it is also taking on a part of the role of computers — which have transitioned from room-sized "main-frames", to PCs, to laptops and tablets, to the handset.

The mobile handset now also features an increasingly sophisticated camera, complete with flash, low-light, wide-angle, zoom, and video recording features. While this versatility makes it capable of taking all kinds of photographs, its most popular use is for "selfies": a telling reflection of the individualism amongst the 'I-me-mine' generation.

Reinforcing this, and in parallel, there is the broader sociological change towards a stronger individual identity. Combined with — or driven by — rapid growth in wealth in a few segments, the trend manifests itself in various ways. Take simple daily-use items: limited earlier to toothbrushes, each one in the family now has their own, individual, bath soap and shampoo. With higher incomes, on the priority list is a separate bedroom for each youngster in

the household, as is a car. Various factors drive this, but doubtless it also reflects a growing and wider trend. Just as a car has increasingly moved from a common family utility to an individual convenience, houses are transitioning from being a family home to a conglomeration of living spaces for individuals, with some common facilities (kitchen, drawing room). Separate bedrooms now also double as home offices, facilitating work from home (WFH), or as classrooms for learn-from-home. This, in turn, drives the need — and is a justification — for personal individual rooms.

Responding to the trend, corporate communication to consumers — advertising, promotional and marketing material — has progressed beyond customization. Thanks to Gen AI, it now mines and scrapes data about you from all sources and uses it to create individualized, personalized messages.

The family structure moved from multi-generational joint families to so-called nuclear



There is also a longing to integrate into a group

families. Then, working couples brought back elders into the home, mainly to baby-sit their grandchildren, leading to the rebirth of the joint family. However, this resurgence may be halted by rapidly declining fertility rates. In fact, especially in the middle class, a substantial proportion of the population may be moving to the "double income, no kids" (DINK) stage. The result: no necessity of retired elders in the home.

In the low-income group, the migrants to cities used to be predominantly males. Now, with more job opportunities for females, the wife is increasingly joining her spouse soon after he has settled into a job. In most cases, children are with them. However, given the size of affordable homes, they are unable to accommodate retired parents from their village home. This means that the mother can work outside home only for very limited hours. Many poorer households make this trade-off, yet bringing their children to the city in the

interest of better education, the perception being that city schools provide superior teaching. The first choice is inevitably a private school, even with its high fees, rather than a free government school. However, one can — as an optimist — see a future where government schools in villages provide quality education. With this, migrants may leave children in the village, while they continue to live in the city as a nuclear family; effectively DINKs, like their middle-class counterparts.

Does this portend a decline in family bonding and its loosening as a structural unit? With migration leading the youth to distant locations, many elders are now looked after by the extended family or the community. Will we see this happening for children too, with community care and nurture supplementing that of grandparents, since the parents are at a faraway location? Though communes and Israeli kibbutzes are now past tense, countries like Vietnam have adopted the community-

care model for elders. It is possible that such community care and nurture could extend to children too. Will that mean the end of "family"? This may well be reinforced by another trend — growing globally, though yet rare in India: the preference to stay unmarried; sometimes with a live-in partner and, in other cases, just by oneself. Like cars with just one person and single-user gadgets, single-person homes may increasingly become the norm.

Yet, humans are basically social beings. Even after many months of Covid-forced quarantines and lockdowns, people everywhere were

very soon back to mingling and joining crowds. While there is a focus on the self, on privacy, individuality, and being alone, there is also a longing for integrating in a group, of which the family is the smallest. In years to come, will it — as now — be supplemented by caste, religion, cult, or common-interest identities? Or will the family, as one group identity, die out? Will this change in the most basic unit of society lead to more drastic alterations in the broader societal structure? Will it lead to a desperation in finding other group identities and a fanatical loyalty to them? Apart from implications for individuals, will these changes have wider reverberations across all societies, globally? What changes will result in institutions and structures of governance? These are issues well worth pondering, for they have serious social, political, and economic ramifications that affect our future. ■

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

When rivers break free



LIVING RIVERS

VENKATESH DUTTA

LAST month in Bihar many rivers swelled, spilling onto floodplains and inundating farms, settlements and roads, and displacing more than two million people. Due to very heavy rains between September 27 and 28 in Nepal, a high volume of water suddenly entered the Kosi, Gandak, and Bagmati rivers on September 28.

Within 24 hours, embankment breaches along the Indo-Nepal border in several blocks led to severe flooding, affecting large settlements. All major transboundary rivers in Bihar such as the Kosi, Bagmati, Mahananda, Parman, Kamla, Adhwara, Gandak and the Burhi Gandak were in spate. The flood situation worsened in the first week of October as floodwaters entered new areas.

Approximately 28.69 lakh people were affected by floods across 450 villages. About 13.70 lakh were children. On September 30, 67 blocks across 13 districts were severely affected including the high-density areas of Sitamarhi, Patna, Katihar, Purnea and Bhagalpur. This time, the rivers flowed above the embankments at several places, indicating that their beds had been choked with silt due to jacketing by embankments on both sides. The sediments are being confined inside the two sides of the river for decades, making it shallower. The irony of facing extensive flooding, alongside a 20 percent rainfall deficit in the state, paints a complex picture of how climate patterns and water management are interacting.

When a river overflows its banks, flooding happens. During a flooding event, the volume of water in a river becomes so large that it covers areas outside its own channel. The textbook definition of a flood is “an unusually high stage in a river — normally the level at which the river overflows its banks and inundates the adjoining area”.

The annual inundation of floodplains by incoming water is a normal event. The water flows downstream, carrying with it large amounts of sediment. This is how the Ganga delta came up, through a large built-up of sediments carried by the rivers. The rivers in the Ganga Basin are high-energy systems —

they transform landscapes, recharge aquifers, carry high sediments and replenish ecosystems. The Indo-Gangetic-Brahmaputra plains in north and northeast India are among the most flood-prone areas on earth. These basins carry almost 60 percent of India's total river flow.

The monsoon system is very old — 15 million to 17 million years old. Nature has designed it in such a way that 75 percent of rain occurs in just four months — between June and September. Out of these four months, the peak spell is of 15 to 18 days — when the river swells with heavy discharge. We are supposed to plan for this three-week mayhem which is ‘climatically natural’ for the rivers. Water will return to where it belongs, in river valleys, old channels, natural depressions and so on. But if we block rivers, the flooding impact would be manifold.



About 73 percent of land in Bihar is flood-prone

Before embankments were built, rivers had the option and space to distribute their sediment. Now rivers quickly overflow.

Bihar has a unique geomorphological setting — the northern part is drained by extensive river networks coming down from the Himalayas and merging into the Ganga. From the high-altitude Himalayas to the almost flat plains of north Bihar, rivers with heavy discharge get a short distance and time span to travel.

Several rivers are transboundary. They enter Bihar from Nepal, arriving rather quickly from high mountains and carrying a large volume of water, unconcerned about administrative

boundaries. This is how rivers travel from upstream to downstream. They also carry sediment loads from the slopes of the Himalayas. Rivers often change their course due to shallower and flat channels and soft alluvial soil. Due to the shift of the river channel and heavy bank erosion, villages on riverbanks get wiped out. The region itself may have a rainfall deficit. Yet, when floodwaters from upstream regions make their way downstream, it leads to flooding even when local rainfall is sparse.

About 73 percent of land in Bihar is flood-prone. This means 30 out of 37 districts have around 22 percent of the country's flood-affected population. What is really worrying is that Bihar's flood-prone area has nearly tripled from 2.5 million hectares in 1954 to 6.8 million hectares in 2024. This shows that flood engineering has not been successful in containing these high-energy rivers. Embankments gave only a false sense of relief. They led to drainage congestion and rising of riverbeds.

Before embankments were built, rivers had the option and space to distribute their sediment. Now, rivers quickly overflow their banks. Regular embankment breaches have further compounded the intensity of flooding. The receding of floodwaters from catchments is also obstructed by embankments.

The Kosi embankments were designed to handle a water discharge of 9.5 lakh cusecs, but with the river becoming shallower due to increased sediment deposition, the effective capacity of the river channel to carry water has reduced. This makes the embankments vulnerable to breaching even at discharge levels lower than its design capacity.

The flood-affected people are considered ‘pathological normal’ — they have not been adequately cosseted although they brave the impacts of climate with their own means. Submergence and erosion have become part of their collective psyche and fate. They have been silently going through difficult times, picking up the pieces and starting again, showing immense resilience with locally-led adaptation.

Relief camps are required, but for transformative resilience, long-term floodplain management strategies are needed, that is, strategies that could break the vicious cycle of maladaptation. Taming high-energy and dynamic rivers like the Kosi with dams and barrages is not a good idea. ■

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

What's microfinance upto?



HERE & NOW

SUBIR ROY

AFTER half a century of growth, microfinance seems to be currently going through one of its periodic off-colour patches. In July, the Reserve Bank of India (RBI) asked microfinance lenders in Bihar and Uttar Pradesh (UP) to go slow on disbursement as a precautionary measure as it saw signs of overheating in the previous three months.

What happens to microfinance in these two large and fairly impoverished north Indian states is important because together they account for a quarter (25.3 percent) of the total number of microfinance loans. They are also among the fastest growing in the sector for half a decade now. Bihar, in particular, has overtaken West Bengal and Tamil Nadu to become the state with the largest MFI (Microfinance Institution) loans in the country.

The current travails of the sector are illustrated by microfinance company Spandana Spohorty Financial taking the dramatic decision to stop lending to new customers who do not have a credit history. In a few branches where there are signs of high stress, it has even stopped taking on new customers with or without any earlier credit history.

To understand the importance of what has taken place, it is critical to understand that microfinance lenders lend without any kind of security. All the comfort the lenders have is to get the borrowers to form groups and undertake to ensure that all group members abide by disciplined repayment.

There are several reasons why repayment has suffered lately. A heatwave set back agricultural schedules, depressing the sentiment of farm workers and affecting the level of attendance at group member meetings. Disruption was made doubly worse as the country had to go through a long general election process lasting seven phases. Particularly affected were Bihar, UP, Madhya Pradesh, Maharashtra and Odisha.

This is not the first time that the sector has met with a setback. Historically, the first and the worst was the blowout in Andhra Pradesh in 2010 when scores of defaulting borrowers, unable to take the pressure of strongarm

collectors, died by suicide. Then came the setback caused by demonetisation in 2016 and thereafter followed the pandemic which hit in 2021. Microfinance has recovered from all these. The ability to keep going forward depends on being able to change regulations to respond to new changes.

The cardinal reality is that micro loans are not a magic pill to alleviate poverty but do make a material, if marginal, difference in poor people's lives. If we come to the current reality of the reason for Spandana's action it is necessary to appreciate that there is no need for any history of credit record in microfinance.

It all began with the practice of giving small loans to poor women in villages and urban slums without security for short periods, which



Historically, you did not need credit history to get a micro loan

At the end of the day, microfinance is a mission. Those who do well are able to change into NBFC-MFIs and small finance banks.

they would repay in easy instalments and thereby become eligible for another slightly bigger loan. Women with good credit records would get successive rounds of loans which would make a big difference in their lives.

A borrower being unable to repay a loan would make her ineligible for a fresh loan. So a microfinance lender would, at worst, lose the last loan if a borrower failed to pay the last one and would not get the next one. Seeking to keep a record of credit history for such borrowers and taking a decision on it as done

by Spandana is not so critical.

Microfinance lenders know that borrowers will sometimes temporarily use the money to meet urgent family needs like a child's school fees or the cost of treating an illness and still pay back eventually. A serious illness is, of course, only treatable by selling a family asset like a plot of land but that is a different ballgame.

Microfinance does not claim to address problems like family emergencies. A bank official, on the other hand, who finds a loan borrower is defaulting, will ask a borrower to deposit some more collateral security.

There is also a difference in the way the two kinds of lenders determine the interest rates they charge. Microfinance lenders charge interest rates keeping in mind that

some poor borrowers will default (the husband of the borrower may lose the power to earn a living) and the loan will have to be written off. Microfinance lenders will typically have to secure finance at a higher rate than banks which are generally larger.

However, sometimes bank officials will charge a stiff lending rate to microfinance borrowers simply because they find that the market at that particular time allows them to do so. They are legally permitted as RBI rules now do not lay down any interest rate ceiling for microfinance lenders but ask them

to lay down the rationale of their lending and keep within their parameters. As a result, the entire sector at times faces public criticism for charging a high rate of interest to very small borrowers.

At the end of the day microfinance is a mission. Those who do well and grow are able to change into NBFC-MFIs (Non-Banking Financial Companies-Microfinance Institutions) and small finance banks. One of them has, in fact, become a universal bank — Bandhan Bank. As they grow they become indistinguishable from generic commercial lenders. For example, adverse mention in the media currently has affected the share price of Bandhan Bank.

Spandana has recently acted as a commercial lender but needs to keep in mind that it is also a microfinance practitioner which has to abide by a different culture. The inability to do so raises the question — are some microfinance deliverers losing their ethos? If this is so then are we seeing the beginning of the end of microfinance as we have known it? ■

Subir Roy is a senior journalist based in Kolkata

Handmade is the future



CRAFT EQUITY

SUMITA GHOSE

IT's a no-brainer. The cultural and creative industries have the potential to not only ensure regular work and employment for rural women and men in India, they are also kind to mother earth as they gobble less energy, being powered by people. These industries include handmade crafts for everyday use as well as for decorative purposes at festivals, weddings, folk dance or drama.

In the past, carpenters, ironsmiths and others made tools for farming and looms for weavers, and were kept busy most of the year, like the potters. With the introduction of tractors, threshers and other heavy machinery, most of them have lost local markets. A similar situation applies to handloom weavers, block printers and tie-dye artisans, who have lost local customers to cheaper mill-made, machine-printed fabric, and to export surplus knitwear — T-shirts and trousers for men which are comfortable, inexpensive and good for daily wear.

The good news is that globally handmade is acquiring premium status, especially in Europe and North America. Similarly, the band of conscious customers is growing in large cosmopolitan cities in India and parts of Latin America.

So how does one link the two — makers and buyers?

Post-Independence, the government, spearheaded by stalwarts like Kamladevi Chattopadhyay, set up several institutions to promote handloom and handicrafts in rural areas. The Development Commissioner (Handloom & Handicrafts), the National Institute of Design, and the State Emporiums helped rural craftspeople access urban markets.

The Khadi and Village Industries Board continues to make herculean efforts, working right through the chain, empowering spinners, weavers, and tailors to make products. It has opened khadi outlets in virtually every block in the country so that people can buy affordably priced khadi products.

In the private sector, Fabindia has been the most impactful. It has built a community of craft lovers, and made a large variety of crafts

accessible and cool to a large number of Indians, old and young. On the supply side, they have worked closely with handloom weavers and block printers and helped hone their skills to keep pace with the growing market demand as the middle class grew with liberalization and more employment opportunities.

To cater to the export market, a lot is already happening in the field of textiles. Garment factories and units have sprung up around large metros and smaller towns, over the past 30 years. These have catered to mostly fast fashion. Some are owned by designers, and recently backed by business houses, catering to high-end boutiques in India and across the world.



Globally, handmade is acquiring premium status

Despite the above and efforts by social enterprises like Dastkar, SEWA, URMUL Trust, we have seen the number of active artisans dwindle over the years. While many fortunate artisans have educated themselves and their children and switched to other aspirational occupations in towns and cities, many others have been forced to migrate out of their villages, working at manual unskilled jobs on a temporary or permanent basis.

So here's what is required to get hand work and craft back to where it deserves to be — aspirational to the maker and the wearer or user.

Investment by the government through panchayats could be in the following:

- At the block or district level: Allocating land, buildings and appropriate technology to enable a hub for promotion of handloom or handmade crafts. For textiles, this would include a yarn bank, dyeing facilities, and an appropriate effluent treatment plant to ensure that land and water sources do not get polluted.
- Access to designs, information on bazaars, including the government's online

procurement marketplaces.

- Help in formation of weaver societies, and making available low-cost credit to these societies.

- Provision of hands-on training (preferably on the job) to weavers in design and product development, in costing, production planning and quality checks at each stage.

- Links upward to local and national level textile (whether garment or home furnishing) retailers and exporters. While the textile industry is huge, a majority of the fabric exported is made in mills. This makes sense from a national and global point of view in terms of production timelines, but it translates into work for a fewer number of weavers, and larger income disparities within the industry. If

more textiles were handwoven, it would give work to a larger number of weavers, and would also ensure year-round work for weavers, leading to increased incomes.

- Private sector aggregators, wholesalers, retailers could step in and provide the necessary support at different stages of the supply chain to ensure that products are of the standards required by the contemporary customer.

At Rangсутra, where we work right across the chain to take products made by rural artisans to the market, we have seen that with the right inputs in product development, design, appropriate

technology — like solar powered looms for weaving plain or striped fabric — and explaining what the customer wants, handloom and handicrafts have gone a long way in ensuring regular work for our 2,000-plus artisans. This includes a large number of women who do hand embroidery, leaving their indelible handprint on cushion covers and home furnishings and, of course, on apparel — which makes it special for the conscious customer.

This customer knows that this means work for rural women, who may not have access to machines to do machine embroidery but are proud to leave their signature hand work on each item they make.

The fact that most of the artisans are also shareholders in Rangсутra means that they understand the value of their work and aspire to take their craft to greater heights, and to customers all around the world. Now it's time for buyers and customers to step up and consciously decide to buy and wear consciously crafted clothes and home décor. ■

Sumita Ghose is founder-director of Rangсутra Crafts

LIVING

FOOD | TRAVEL | REVIEWS | PRODUCTS | GIVING



Handcrafted floor tiles, tiled roofs, terracotta and wood create a design medley



The deck adjoining the dining room

Three Waters, the non-hotel

Discover the real joy of being in Goa

CIVIL SOCIETY REVIEW

IT is a villa with just seven rooms, but in its location, architecture and aura it offers a whole world of experiences.

For the immersive traveller, it is a trapdoor to the traditional Goan way of life far removed from mindless tourists, messy beaches, loud parties and extortionist taxi drivers.

Over the years, Goa has been a great place to visit with its salubrious coastal weather, gentle and sincere people, brilliant food, monsoon rains and peaceful coexistence. History, culture, art and music have drawn people to Goa.

In recent times, however, it hasn't been quite the same. With investors moving in, properties changing hands and tourism becoming brash, the Goan spirit has been in decline.

But for those willing to make the quest, things truly Goan are possible to find such as this villa which goes by the name of Three Waters.

Located in Betul deep in the south of Goa, everything about Three Waters sets it apart, beginning with its name. Two of the 'waters' are the

Sal river and the Arabian Sea. Betul lies on the Sal at the point where it meets the Arabian Sea. The third 'water' is a nearby spring known apparently for its healing properties.

Three Waters is a place to stay. But if you are thinking that this is a hotel stop now! It is a 'non-hotel', we are told by the sign outside.

In fact, the villa is first and foremost a museum for seashells. A rare collection of 9,000 seashells, lovingly curated and preserved, adorn its walls. Staying here means being in their company.

If Three Waters is a non-hotel it is also a 'museotel', perhaps the only one of its kind with the rarest collection of seashells in the world.

Restoring an old villa and making it a museum for seashells has been the work of Victor Hugo Gomes, a Goan artist well known for his efforts to preserve Goa's past. He has done museums on transportation, food, implements. He is an outstanding restorer and collector too — gathering old doors, windows and other artefacts and putting them to use again to bring back the past exactly right.

For Three Waters as a place to stay he has teamed up with Neemrana

Continued on page 30

Civil Society picture/Umesh Anand



Here's where the Sal river meets the Arabian Sea

Civil Society picture/Umesh Anand



Fishermen set out with their boats

Civil Society picture/Umesh Anand



A museum of seashells, perhaps the only one of its kind

Hotels, whose founder, Aman Nath's efforts at reviving forts in Rajasthan are well known. Gomes and Nath share a bandwidth. They are both master restorers and know how to elegantly revive things of beauty from the past.

Nath brings to Three Waters his ample experience in creating and managing off-beat properties, mostly steeped in local history and culture and also bearing his signature nuances. The most famous for a long time was Neemrana in Rajasthan. But following on its success and iconic status there have been many more properties that have been transformed by him from being ruins into destinations sought out by discerning travellers.

That Nath and Hugo complement each other well shows in the terracotta, wood, handcrafted floor tiles and tiled roofs at Three Waters. A million nuances hang together in some strange harmony, making it an elevating experience to be there.

Only non-mechanized fishing is permitted at Betul. You could add that to the reasons for visiting it in these days of trawling by corporations and big menacing ports destructively straddling coastlines. At Betul, you are at peace with the river and the sea. Fishermen set out in their low-slung boats with sputtering motors to cast their nets. Trawlers stop a decent distance away.

To come here is to choose to spend some days in slow motion. Amble through the village, cycle along the Sal, do some birdwatching, take a dingy to the beachhead at the confluence of the Sal and the ocean. For those with a yen for history and a ramble through ruins, there are the remnants of a historical fort, Carbo de Rama, one of the only two Hindu forts in Goa built by Shivaji.

Don't feel like moving at all? Then sit out on the deck adjoining the dining room and observe the river. When the tide is in, the boats go out. And when the tide is out the village dogs jump in to catch their share of fish.

Remember you would be here for the quietude, not the party. It will be to sink into silence, not splash around. The setting is thick with tall trees and greenery. This is the Western Ghats, remember, with its majestic biodiversity, snakes, insects, birds et al.

A swimming pool at the back of the villa, and trees overhead, is good enough for some decent lengths while the chirping of birds fills the air.

Civil Society picture/Umesh Anand



Corine Fernandes, with a history degree, manages Three Waters

There are books, board games and fishing rods on offer.

Non-hotel this might be, but as a paying guest, you will get your broadband, air-conditioning, mini-bar, meals and laundry service. Even a charging point for electric cars.

The identity Three Waters adopts is personalized, customized, chemical-free and born out of a loving restoration effort from the tiles on the floors to the carved furniture, tiled roof, wooden columns and windows and doors.

A non-hotel needs 'non-staff'. The team that runs Three Waters from one day to the next has been drawn from the Hugo and Nath collection of people. They are just different and know what it takes to keep a 'non-hotel' up and running.

Corine Fernandes, a young Goan with a history degree, manages the operation. She was drawn to Gomes' efforts at restoration and explorations into Goa's culture. She worked with him before her current role at Three Waters.



Enveloped in green, the villa has been carefully restored



The bedroom has a balcony and is equipped with all amenities

She says the original purpose was restoration, not to run tourism. But, as Gomes struggled to meet the expenses of the restoration effort, and set up the seashells museum, the idea of earning revenue from the place emerged.

"But he is essentially a restorer. He used to restore old houses. When the owners wanted the doors and windows and old furniture replaced, he would buy them and keep them. The doors and the windows that you see here were from such houses, brought to this property. He restored them and he fixed them," she explains.

Asked if the rooms fill up a lot, Fernandes says: "Young people come to Goa to party. This is a quiet place and so you don't have them coming here. But the rooms do fill up. Like last June, July, we were crowded. As well as August, September. In a year, for about five months, you have a good number of bookings."

There are those who especially come for the rains, she says, explaining that people who want to experience the natural beauty and uniqueness of Goa stay to be part of it in seclusion.

"There is the smell of the mud, especially after the first shower. And then you'll see a lot of fish. You will see water coming up on the road, actually. And then you see a lot of dogs going to catch fish. They all line up, the dogs. And it's amazing to watch the dogs, the way they catch crabs," she says.

Three Waters is an example of destination tourism off the beaten track. It is for travellers looking for the Goa they don't usually find. Because it is deep in the south of Goa, getting to Betul is a long ride from either of Goa's two airports. Once there it is an opportunity to connect with nature and heritage, to experience the food. If Goa's more popular spots throb with activity, Betul is the kind of place to go fishing in silence.

People who have stopped visiting Goa feel they end up spending as much as they would going to Thailand, Singapore, Malaysia, Sri Lanka and even Europe. They are also more professional in their hospitality — which means they are safer, cleaner and more dependable. They know to make vacations memorable and use their history, traditions and natural beauty to offer an experience. Goa, in the midst of the exotic Western Ghats, could similarly flourish. Three Waters is an example of how it could hold its own. ■

Cricket, cake, circus

SUSHEELA NAIR

THALASSERY has the distinction of being the land of cakes, circuses, cricket, Communism, looms, lore, spices and Theyyam, a ritual art form. As I strolled into the bungalow at The Heritage 1866, a premium heritage homestay, I felt at ease at once. A flight of steps leads to an imposing gateway which catches one's attention. The genesis of the 158-year-old manor can be traced back to the late freedom fighter, Ryrü Nair. This majestic bungalow has been restored meticulously under the supervision of its present owners.

With lofty wooden ceilings, decorated flooring and an antiquated ambience, every corner breathes history. The very essence of Kerala seems to have filtered through the doors of the manor. Rooms in the bungalow are named after flowers. Some of the rooms are river-facing while others overlook the courtyard. The interiors have decorative touches like a Theyyam mural. Notable among the collection of treasured artefacts is a water pitcher gifted by Netaji Subhas Chandra Bose to Ryrü Nair.

Beyond the tranquil confines of The Heritage Bungalow are a myriad of tourist attractions but we chose to explore just a few. We started with the Thalassery Fort, built in 1708 on a headland facing the sea. Clambering up to the fort, we were rewarded with a captivating view of the sea. As we ambled around, we could see laterite walls, cannons, turrets, imposing bastions on the flanks and pepper cellars from which trade was conducted. Mysterious and secret underground tunnels that lead to the sea are blocked now and a short lighthouse on its flank lies disused.

Half a kilometre away is the Odathil Palli, a mosque, built by Moosa Kakka of the Keyis family around 1806. It is a blend of Hindu and Muslim architecture. Sans any minarets, it is noted for its copper plate roofing, abundant use of wood, wooden walls and pillars with intricate carvings. The three-storeyed mosque epitomizes the beauty and versatility of Kerala craftsmanship. Non-Muslims are not allowed entry to the mosque.

We headed to Gundert Museum, a treasure trove of knowledge. It is housed in a sprawling bungalow amidst verdant lawns, which is built in traditional Kerala architectural style, with tiled roofs and spacious verandahs which

run along the four sides.

It boasts of digital installations on Dr Herman Gundert, the German missionary and renowned scholar who compiled the first Malayalam-English dictionary. Equipped with headphones, I listened to Gundert's biographical audio, replete with images, names and significant events from his life. The museum had different zones, each offering a unique experience. It sheds light on the life and contributions of Gundert, who is remembered for his invaluable contributions



The Heritage 1866 is a 158-year-old manor that has been restored

to the Malayalam language, and Malabar's cultural and linguistic landscape. His other contribution is the establishment of the first printing press in Malabar.

At Muzhappilangad beach — said to be India's only drive-in beach at low tide — we saw tourists zipping and zooming past on motorbikes and others testing their motoring skills in four-wheel drives. We took a leisurely stroll along the four-km stretch and then relaxed blissfully on the beach overlooking the enchanting island of Dharmadam, a five-acre island encircled by a river and the sea. This lush, palm-covered spot, locally known as *pacha thuruth* (green island), sits beyond the confluence of the Anjarakandi and Thalassery rivers, just 100 metres from the sandy beach of Dharmadam, which itself is set off from the mainland by rivers that surround it on three sides with the sea to its west.

A Buddhist stronghold, it was earlier known as Dharmapattanam. One can see the water gushing up madly and receding as quickly by turns. At low tide, one can dally in knee-deep water for hours on end and wade to the island.

There are laterite cliffs with deep fissures in some, protruding into the sea. The eeriness on a new moon night with the waves dashing furiously against the ring of laterite cliffs lingered long in our memories after the trip.

Cakes came to Kerala when an early British settler, craving Christmastime cake, got a local cook to reproduce the rich fare after obtaining the ingredients for it. It started the practice of baking that continues to this day in Kerala.

History was made when Mambally Babu, owner of The Royal Biscuit Factory, baked arguably India's first plum cake that led to Thalassery's unofficial title, Land of three Cs — Cakes, Cricket and Circus. Although the original bakery is not there, we stopped by the current one in a mall to have wood-fired gourmet handcrafted plum cake, crispy, scrumptious barley biscuits and other goodies.

Thalassery is said to be the birthplace of the Indian circus tradition. As for cricket, it was Arthur Wellesley, Duke of Wellington, who first introduced the game among commoners.

Besides these three Cs, Thalassery has other claims to fame. It is the birthplace of Communism in Kerala and one can see a proliferation of cooperatives involved in coir weaving, *beedi*-making, and so on. It was a treat to watch weavers at work on traditional pit looms, handlooms and shuttles, weaving cotton and silk fabrics, at Pinarayi. Our Kannur sojourn culminated with watching a ritualistic Theyyam performance featuring colourfully costumed performers depicting fascinating folk tales.

Back at the bungalow, after a hectic sightseeing spree, we indulged in the diverse snacks churned out by the kitchen staff. Sweet treats like *muttamala* (egg yolk noodles) and *unnakaya* (fried bananas) offer a delightful contrast to savoury bites like *ari pathri* (spiced flatbreads) and *kallumakaya* (mussel specialities). *Petti pathiri*, bread stuffed with meat, is a must-indulge delicacy. But the highlight is the Thalassery biryani, made using *kaima/jeerakalasa*, an Indian aromatic rice, instead of the usual basmati rice, tender meat, and a symphony of spices like cloves, cinnamon and cardamom. ■

FACT FILE

How to reach: Thalassery airport – 22 km; railway station – 9 km.

Where to stay: The Heritage 1866, Melur Village, Dharmadam, Thalassery

Contact: stay@heritage1866.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.

Clothes and décor in Patachitra



Colourful trays and quaint kettles that catch the eye. Blouses and shirts with art all over. And dupattas with beautiful motifs in appealing colours. All hand-painted by a soft-spoken Patachitra artist, Madhumita Chitrakar.

Born into a family of generational artists, it was natural for her to take to Patachitra, a traditional art form of West Bengal, early in life. "Our art is known for intricate detail, vibrant colours and folk narratives. We use natural colours — oil for décor items and fabric colours for apparel," she says. Décor items range from ₹550 to ₹900 and clothes are priced between ₹950 and ₹1,200.



Contact: +91 8327639311

Jute bags for work and leisure

Abhijit Mohapatra and his team of 12 artisans make eco-friendly jute bags of all shapes and sizes for every requirement. Whether it's your laptop, tiffin box, charger or just your wallet, Mohapatra's bags have space for all. His eco-friendly bags are a favourite with working women and men. "While we do sell typical handbags and purses, it's the conference bags that are our bestsellers," he says, proudly adding that he has recently bagged two bulk orders for a Delhi University event and one for a corporate conference in Uttarakhand.



The entrepreneur from West Bengal mainly deals in bulk orders. Prices range between ₹300 and ₹2,000 per piece, depending on size and design. For single orders, you can call him. Or ask him when he plans to set up a stall at Dastkar Bazaar or Dilli Haat.

Contact: +91 7893335568

Ikat weaves in many hues

Eye-catching ikat fabrics from Telangana have grown to rival gossamer Chanderi from Madhya Pradesh in recent years. Sri Mahalaxmi Ikat Handlooms, founded in 1988 in Nalgonda, specializes in unique handloom ikat textiles in a riot of colours. Products include bedcovers, dupattas, and traditional ikat saris.

Local weavers from Nalgonda acquired this skill during the era of the Nizams and, as they honed their craft, demand for their products increased. The art of ikat weaving is fascinating. Before the threads are placed on the loom, they are dyed using tie resists positioned in an intricate pattern. When the fabric is woven, the threads move slightly, creating the distinctive feathered appearance typical of ikat fabric. To buy from Sri Mahalaxmi Ikat Handlooms, you can call or visit them at the Dastkar Bazaars.



Contact: +91 9703926125

Block prints for your home



Kamal Handprint, a family enterprise, sells attractive block-printed home furnishings. Started 40 years ago, the business is now run by Naveen Chipa, who belongs to the family's third generation. It has built a name for itself in producing authentic Jaipur prints and currently supports 16 artisans. Half are men who work with hand-blocks. The women are skilled at quilting and stitching.

Products on offer include a range of home linen — cushion covers, towels, bedcovers, bedsheets, dohars, quilts and tablecloths. Double bedcover sets are priced at ₹1,850. A set of three towels is for ₹1,020. Care is taken to ensure that genuine and high-quality hand-block prints that sustain the craft tradition are offered to customers.

To browse their collection, check out their Instagram, visit the Dastkar Bazaars or give them a call.

Contact: +91 9887187144

Instagram: @kamal_hand_printers



Bags from the Northeast



Kritanya specializes in handwoven bags. There are tote bags, linen bags and those made with kauna, a weed from Manipur.

Then, there are upcycled accessories like bag charms. Manjuri Hazarika started this micro-enterprise in 2010 with her husband. The couple works with weavers to create unique designs and collaborate in a small workshop. "It has become our happy place," says Hazarika. The emphasis is on ethical production and promoting weaving techniques while responsibly sourcing from artisans.

Most weavers are women who rely on the income to support their families. Cotton dupattas range from ₹600 to ₹1,300. Bags, made from pieces with slight defects, are an example of their commitment to sustainability. Shop online on their website.

Contact: +91 8130479470

Email: info@kritanya.com

Website: https://kritanya.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.

CREATE A HAPPY LIFE FOR THE ELDERLY

Isolation and loneliness often dog the elderly. Silver Inning Foundation (SIF), a social enterprise, addresses micro and macro issues facing senior citizens to create an elder-friendly world. Founded on July 14, 2008 in Thane, SIF reintegrates senior citizens into mainstream society, helping them live with dignity and pride.

Vibrant and interactive initiatives include counselling, training, lectures and workshops. The Elder Referral Helpline provides information specific to issues the elderly face. Families with elders suffering from dementia or Alzheimer's are provided assistance with home care. A popular event is Umang, the senior citizen talent show. Internship and volunteer programmes are an integral part of the organization. Donations are accepted via cheque or online. www.silverinningfoundation.org/ +91 9987104233 silverinnings@gmail.com

A HELPING HAND FOR CANCER CARE

After overcoming Stage 3 breast cancer, Ruby Ahluwalia, a senior bureaucrat, started Sanjeevani in 2012 to help underprivileged patients and their families complete cancer treatment. She understood the physical, emotional and financial stress that cancer patients go through. Sanjeevani provides other services also like skill development and counselling to those who have overcome cancer.

Ahluwalia and her team work with 30 superspecialty hospitals. CanSahyogi is their counselling initiative while CanAhaar helps with nutritional support. Satori is a wellness programme. To date, the lives of over 500,000 cancer patients have been impacted. The

Mumbai-based NGO is looking for more volunteers who can undertake counselling, create awareness, and provide temporary homestay arrangements for patients and their families. www.sanjeevani-lifebeyondcancer.com/ | +91 86910 00800 | info@sanjeevani-lifebeyondcancer.com

BRING WOMEN INTO THE WORKFORCE

Azad Foundation brings underprivileged women into the workforce by training them to become professional drivers through their Women With Wheels programme. Apart from learning to drive, the women are taught self-defence, communication skills and English. After training, Azad Foundation helps women find employment as drivers in partnership with Sakha Consulting Wings Pvt Ltd, a company that runs a cab service, Sakha Cabs, which employs only women drivers.

Azad's presence is mainly in Delhi, Jaipur, and Kolkata. They are on the lookout for office furniture and old computers. Volunteering with them would include writing stories, translation between English, Hindi and Bengali and overseeing car maintenance. www.azadfoundation.com 011-49056322 | support@azadfoundation.com

A HEALING TOUCH FOR DISTRESSED ANIMALS

Chhaya, an animal welfare hospital and rescue shelter, was set up on the outskirts of Kolkata in 2008 to take care of bruised and battered animals roaming the streets of the city.

Services at this hospital and rescue shelter include a helpline number to report injured and abandoned animals, pick-up of distressed dogs, antiseptic baths

and deworming on the day of admission. It also runs an Animal Birth Control programme to reduce the street dog population.

Medical services include treatment ranging from burn injuries, maggot-infested wounds to cancer management. Surgeries include tumour removals, haematoma and amputations. Accident victims are treated and rehabilitated. Prosthetics for horses are also provided. Join the network of volunteers or visit the hospital to see it in the thick of action. You can also donate online. <https://prca-chhaya.in/> +91 98302 79138

AFFORDABLE PRIMARY HEALTHCARE CLINICS

Swasth began in 2009 as a non-profit committed to promoting primary healthcare that is affordable and accessible for people from low-income and marginalized communities. They have three focus areas: sustained well-being, comprehensive primary healthcare and health coach training. With a network of over 20 charitable clinics, Swasth India Medical Centre has been a facilitator in about 1.5 million healthcare interactions. The NGO hosts regular workshops on themes such as mindfulness, meditation, and the integration of neuroscience and yoga. <https://www.swasth.org/> +91 9594547374 | info@swasth.org

STAND WITH THE DISABLED

ASTHA is committed to empowering people who are both disabled and marginalized. Their mission is to facilitate access to education, healthcare and employment.

Founded in 1993, ASTHA began as a special school and is now a community-based organization. It mainly works in the slums of Delhi. The team runs

a life skills programme for young adults, focussing on building confidence, self-reliance and social inclusion.

The curriculum includes heritage, sex education, music and sports. It runs India's first and only online National Disability Helpline, an initiative for people with disabilities by people with disabilities. It is headed by Rakesh who has polio and Gaurav who is blind. The helpline has grown into a vital resource for individuals with disability and their families. You can do your bit by donating or joining ongoing campaigns. www.asthaindia.in/ | 011-26466250 aarthindia@gmail.com

GO GREEN IN THE NORTHEAST

Aaranyak was founded in 1989 as a nature club by a group of enthusiastic environmentalists. The aim was to protect the endangered white-winged wood duck in the Dibru-Saikhowa Sanctuary. Their petition led to a court verdict that upheld wildlife protection laws, marking the beginning of an impactful journey.

Aaranyak has, over the years, become an internationally recognized organization. Its primary mission is to conserve the biodiversity of the Northeast through research, education, capacity building and advocacy. It is a recipient of the Indira Gandhi Paryavaran Puraskar. The NGO's project, 'Restoration of important habitats of the Gangetic dolphin' was globally acclaimed.

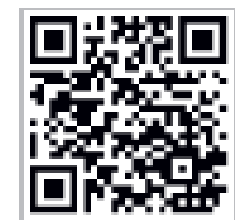
Aaranyak is a member of the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN). It contributes valuable research on ecosystem management. It has led 152 projects and has a dedicated team of 351 volunteers. Join or donate online through their website.

<https://aaranyak.org/> +91 3612230250 | info@aaranyak.org



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