

Civil Society



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AQI rope trick

WE have psyched ourselves into being AQI worshippers. Its numbers, going up and down, hold us in thrall like a good rope trick. So mesmerized are we that forgotten are the grimmer realities of air pollution, the real challenges of bringing it under control — the damage to public health, the cost to the economy and the poor standing it gives India globally. For all the measures taken thus far in relation to automobiles and fuels and the standards set for industry, air pollution continues to swamp cities big and small and rural areas as well. So, what's going on? Better ways forward are required, but first it is important to know the reasons for air pollution's unchecked rise.

Our cover story this month presents data from iForest, the environmental NGO, which shows that burning of biomass and coal is one of the major sources of PM 2.5 air pollution. People continue to use open fires for cooking and keeping warm. There is also the burning of garbage and from the fields comes smoke resulting from stubble burning. This matches seasonal variations in pollution levels. It also underlines the need for re-envisioning cities in the regional contexts to which they belong. In Delhi's case, for instance, just 40 percent or so of the pollution comes from within and the rest flows to it from surrounding areas. Indian cities are also a complex mix of rich and poor. Incentivizing households to make the transition to cleaner fuels for cooking and keeping warm is crucial to cleaning up.

Better-informed governance is needed and that should include empowering local authorities to deal with pollution and its sources and create meaningful citizen awareness. Tackling air pollution is both a challenge and an opportunity. Done well it can transform public health and the quality of life both in urban and rural settings. It can also address the many needs of smaller Indian cities which struggle with the lack of finances and expertise. As urbanization spreads, they need to be bolstered.

Construction workers get a raw deal in our cities. But what is truly shocking is that a fund created for their welfare out of a cess levied on projects has been lying mostly dormant or misused. We have a detailed interview with Debanjan Chakrabarti, vice-president of the Construction Workers Federation of India.

Stories from around the country include K.S. Gopal, a founder of the Deccan Development Society, turning whistleblower and demanding greater accountability from the organization. In case you want to know what to do with your old clothes, check out our Living section. Also, read all our regular columnists with their insights and of course our products and volunteering pages.

Shashi Arora



COVER STORY

RETHINKING THE SMOG

Dealing with air pollution is one of the biggest challenges India faces. Automobiles have been the focus of attention but it is more difficult to end the burning of biomass in kitchens.

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Contact Civil Society at:
response@civilsocietyonline.com
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Publisher
Umesh Anand

Editor
Rita Anand

News Network
Shree Padre, Saibal Chatterjee, Jehangir Rashid, Susheela Nair, Kavita Charanji

Desk & Reporting
Sukanya Sharma
Aiema Tauheed

Layout & Design
Virender Chauhan

Photographer
Ashoke Chakrabarty

Write to Civil Society at:
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LETTERS



Beyond pride

Your cover story, 'Kolkata queer month goes beyond pride', gave me a new perspective on queer art and how the queer space is much more inclusive than the heteronormative society we live in. I especially liked how Navonil Das said the exhibition was open to allies too and not just queer folk. This is what being inclusive is about.

Malavika Mehta

Aiema Tauheed's story was well-written, given the nuances she tried to capture. The displays gave us a glimpse into an alternative perspective. The other aspect I appreciated was her acknowledgement of art as voice and expression. The article also made me curious about Sriparna Dutta and Archee Roy's other work.

Sukanya Das

This was the most detailed and refreshing coverage of Kolkata Queer Arts Month 2.0 I've read so far. The parallel drawn between the East Kolkata wetlands and the discrimination faced by people every day was very hard-hitting.

H. Garg

The queer rights movement has always shed light on a vast range of social and political issues. It has always been intersectional. This was strongly highlighted in the article.

T. Mukherjee

An interesting part of all the displays and the theme of Queer Arts Month 2.0 was its intense stress on the sentiment of inclusivity. This edition, with 'Ghosts and Ghettos' at its centre, captured this conviction perfectly.

Art was taken out of the gallery which, itself, is an act of revolution. In the times that we live in, it seems revolution is the only way forward. To render a cohesive projection of queerness

through the politics of climate, class, caste, space and body is truly difficult. The displays have delivered in their attempt to collate these ideas, and to communicate the undercurrent of a larger community.

'Interlaced Narrative' was a particularly stunning piece. Even the image in the article, with Sriparna standing beside her mother, was powerful. The generational component of oppression was discussed.

The location, Anjali Pratyay, was an excellent decision by the organizers — the space is a symbol of community living. Archee Roy's examination of the idea of *jhund*, of community, evoked a certain strength. The entire exhibition was very dexterous, and a concise representation of Kolkata Queerness.

Sarah Khandeker

Delhi verdict

Your story, 'Has AAP lost more than just the polls?', was a balanced analysis on the results of the Delhi Assembly elections. I enjoyed reading your views, especially the opinion of AAP's own well-wishers who explained why they were hurt by many of the party's policies. It was very disheartening to watch AAP become a typical political party and lose the faith the ordinary citizen, the *aam aadmi* of this country, had placed in it.

Saurav G.

Jobs crisis

Your interview with Ravi Venkatesan, 'Fewer jobs, more opportunities', was very informative. The point Mr Venkatesan made about developing an entrepreneurial mindset stayed with me for a long time, and even made me wonder why we do not teach a course on being entrepreneurial at school level.

Varun Chowdhary

The interview highlighted a very pressing issue and explored an unconventional yet promising solution. The discussion about fostering an 'entrepreneurial mindset' offers a scalable solution. It shifts the focus from job-seeking to self-sufficiency.

Anushka G.

Having a business mindset is important. It is a good approach.

Dilip Seth

I loved the perspective of the discussion in your interview with Ravi Venkatesan.

Kartic Vaidyanathan

Dog days

It is not particularly humane to advocate the 'destruction' of 'unwanted animals' as though we haven't been killing and abusing stray dogs for decades and destroying their habitats. If anything, this view of eradicating all nature from earth is an incredibly western, colonial, and insensitive take that is against Indian tradition, sensibility, and

ways of life. The Animal Welfare Board of India's work is fundamental to creating places where humans and animals can live harmoniously. We don't own the earth and the more we recognize that and listen to stray animals, the safer our cities will be for animals and humans. Stray animals are not cruel. They are constantly fearful and retaliate due to the violence that is being promoted against them.

AJ

Delhi's baoli

Your article, 'Step into Delhi's water history', offered fascinating details of Delhi's water past that I didn't know about. What I found most interesting was this nugget of information on the Kuka community and how some families still use handpumps in a bid to boycott British taps. An interesting read!

Mouni Dey

Mission hospitals

How can Christian hospitals and schools survive in the BJP regime? Neither the government nor NGOs support them financially. Over 65,000 mission schools and 1,000 mission hospitals face closure. The government does not extend quality education and medical services to its own people.

Parneswar Tandia

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DEBANJAN CHAKRABARTI ON A DORMANT WELFARE FUND

Civil Society picture/Ashoke Chakrabarty



Debanjan Chakrabarti: 'Construction workers are being treated just like bonded labour'

‘₹47,000 cr for construction workers lying unspent’

THE construction industry is an important driver of the economy. Workers at sites, however, don't seem to have a share in the prosperity they help generate. Arriving as migrants from rural areas, they cling on to employment in dismal conditions. For want of safety measures, accidents happen all the time. Entire families stick it out in unsanitary conditions. Children don't get a chance to go to school.

A measure of the neglect shown to construction workers is the poor utilization of a fund created precisely for their welfare. Over 25 years, more than ₹78,000 crore has been collected nationally by way of a one percent cess on big projects, but more than ₹47,000 crore of it has not been spent.

The cess is supposed to be collected and spent by states under a national law. There are not only lapses in collection, but even the money that comes in is either not spent on the welfare measures envisaged under the law or, worse, diverted to other purposes.

Mizoram and Kerala are two states that have used their entire collection and, in fact, spent more. For the other states the record is pretty dismal. Maharashtra collected the most cess at ₹11,108.87 crore, but 72 percent of it or ₹8,612.33 crore remains unspent. Uttar Pradesh has collected ₹7,144.50 crore but spent only ₹2,873.69 crore. Delhi has collected

₹2,750.5 crore, but has not spent 82 percent of it or ₹2,281.22 crore.

Haryana has seen a lot of construction, particularly in Gurugram. The state has collected ₹3,337.23 crore, but spent only ₹1,395.61 crore. Gujarat has collected ₹2,013.84 crore but spent ₹545.29 crore. West Bengal didn't spend 65 percent of the ₹3,648.69 crore that it collected.

To find out more, Aiema Tauheed of *Civil Society* spoke to Debanjan Chakrabarti, vice-president of the Construction Workers Federation of India. Chakrabarti belongs to the Centre of Indian Trade Unions (CITU), an arm of the Communist Party of India (Marxist). He is a member of the welfare board in West Bengal.

Q: For how many years has the cess under the Building and Other Construction Workers (Regulation of Employment and Conditions of Service) Act been collected?

The Building and Other Construction Workers Act was passed in 1996. The Central rules for implementing the Act were framed by the Union government in 1998. It was then up to the states to frame their own rules. Different states began collecting the cess at different times. Some states began in 2000, while others started 10 years later. That's because, without framing the State Rules, they could not deduct the cess.

There was no strict instruction from the Union government that this Act and its rules had to be implemented in every state from a specific date. That is why different states began on different dates. West Bengal, I think, started in 2004.

The cess is collected from the construction project. One percent of the project cost has to be remitted as cess to the Construction Workers' Welfare Board in a state.

According to the Act, those engaged in construction — workers, agencies, and companies — should be enrolled with the Construction Workers' Welfare Board. The construction companies are required to register under the Act.

For instance, if a construction company is executing a housing project, a bridge, an aqueduct, a dam, or an electricity installation, whether thermal, hydroelectric, or any other, then one percent of the total project cost has to be remitted to the Board.

Implementation of the Act is a problem. But when a strong union raises these issues in the state advisory board meeting, the Act is implemented.

Q: How much of this fund is lying unutilized?

A month ago, an RTI query to the Union Labour Ministry revealed, I think, that ₹47,000 crore has not been utilized across India. Over the past 15 to 20 years since the cess began to be collected, not more than ₹30,000 crore has been spent. As we have seen, collecting the cess is itself an issue.

Q: How are the states spending this fund?

In some states, during election time, this fund is being utilized by the chief minister to provide benefits to unorganized sector workers. However, this fund is specifically meant for construction workers.

The construction workers' welfare cess cannot be utilized for other unorganized sector workers. But when there is ₹1,000, ₹2,000 or ₹4,000 crore lying in the fund, they spend ₹500 crore or ₹200 crore just before the election for funding other unorganized sector workers. It is a gimmick, a stunt, before the election.

In West Bengal, as a member of the board, I have always said that fund money cannot be spent in other areas. However, the West Bengal government has taken ₹1,200 crore from this fund for the government exchequer. Under the Act, this cannot be done.

The West Bengal government has spent ₹600 crore of this fund in tea garden areas, saying the sons and daughters of tea garden workers can't find employment on the tea plantations and have now become construction workers. The government has enrolled them with the Construction Workers' Welfare Board.

We have protested because, according to the Tea Garden Plantation Workers Act, it is the duty of the plantation owners to incur the expenditure for the benefit of tea garden workers, including crèches, health centres, and other provisions.

In almost every state, this fund is being misused. In Himachal Pradesh, for instance, the state has given ₹3 lakh for house construction to workers enrolled with the board.

Some states have provided ₹6 lakh as accident compensation, while others have given ₹2 lakh or ₹4 lakh. In Kerala, ₹1,600 is given as pension by the government to construction workers which is draining the fund.

The cess is supposed to provide maternity benefits, children's education allowance, funeral benefits, bicycles for construction workers to travel from their homes to work, accident benefits, medical treatment, and even tools and spectacles for workers. It is all there in the Act.

The rules specify these provisions. The Act contains nearly 200 sections dedicated to the safety of construction workers.

Some construction companies, like Larsen & Toubro and Hindustan Construction, make an effort to maintain safety standards at work sites, but others are unconcerned.

I recently received a phone call from Telangana about a high-rise building which collapsed. Several hundred workers from West Bengal

working onsite were injured.

A PhD student from Hyderabad University, along with our union leader, visited the site and reported that no proper lodging for construction workers, no drinking water facilities, no basic amenities had been provided. Regulations specify that separate toilets and accommodation should be provided for women workers. Yet, these provisions were completely ignored.

Construction workers are being treated just like bonded labour. Workers are recruited from villages and remote areas, especially from West Bengal, Bihar, Assam, and Odisha. These are low-income regions from where workers migrate to Maharashtra, Kerala, Tamil Nadu, Andhra Pradesh, and Karnataka, since daily wages are higher there and they can receive some additional benefits.

In Kerala, for example, there is a specific law, the Migrant Workers Welfare Act, that provides protection to these workers.

We have now set up a Migrant Workers Union in some states. Whenever an accident occurs, resulting in a worker's injury or death, we coordinate efforts for hospitalization or transportation of the body back to the home state. We contact our state and district committee leaders, who then engage with the concerned construction companies to secure compensation and arrange transportation of the body.

‘The fund is meant for construction sector workers, but chief ministers in some states have been using it at election time to give benefits to unorganized sector workers. It is a gimmick, a stunt before elections.’

Q: What role do the worker welfare boards play?

For the past three years, there has been no Central Construction Labour Advisory Board meeting. I am a member of that board from the CITU.

I have asked about the cess deposited by the Union government's departments. Only the railways ministry has clarified that wherever railway construction work is going on, they pay the cess to the respective state workers welfare board. However, this is not the case with the CPWD, the irrigation or electricity departments, or other ministries.

The state government can ask a Union government ministry implementing a construction project to pay the one percent cess. However, not all state governments take this up. In West Bengal and Maharashtra, I have provided a list of construction companies handling projects worth between ₹1,000 crore and ₹5,000 crore, but whether they are paying the cess is another matter.

In Maharashtra, there are numerous industries, bridges, and dams coming up. However, because the promoters and construction companies often belong to the ruling party, there is no pressure on them to remit the one percent cess. I have still tried to highlight the issue. But they don't give any response.

Q: How are the worker welfare boards constituted?

The welfare boards, according to the Act, fall under the labour ministry. The labour ministry is present, along with technical persons, representatives from the chambers of commerce, and central trade unions. In some places, CITU has central trade union representatives on the board.

Of the 22 states where boards exist, CITU has board members in only nine states. Why? Because the ruling party does not allow CITU representatives on the board. For example, in Tripura, when there was a Left Front government in power, the CITU representative was present.

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Now, under the BJP government, there is no CITU representative. Only the Bharatiya Mazdoor Sangh (BMS) is represented.

In Madhya Pradesh, a BJP-ruled state, Pramod Pradhan, a CITU leader, was a member. During a meeting, he questioned the chief minister's action of using the fund for other purposes. Because of this, representatives of CITU, AITUC (All India Trade Union Congress), and others were sacked, leaving only the BMS representatives on the Madhya Pradesh welfare board.

In Karnataka, a Congress-ruled state, only the BMS union is represented in the board. The CITU has no representative.

Almost all BJP-ruled states do not allow central trade unions to be on the board. Officials outnumber the few trade unions that are represented.

Q: Has the registration of construction workers picked up? What can be done to smoothen the process?

When registration was offline, it was good. Workers, along with union leaders, filled in the form, deposited the money, and registered. But now, throughout India, there is no offline registration. It is online.

Construction workers cannot fill in the forms themselves for online registration, due to their level of literacy. This is the problem. We are demanding that both registration options, online and offline, should be available to the worker, but the government does not agree.

Q: How are registrations done in Kerala?

Registration initially began with the Construction Workers Welfare Board in Kerala in 1989, much before the Central law was introduced. It was the first Construction Workers Welfare Board in India. Kerala currently has 22 unorganized sector workers' welfare boards. Initially, registration was offline. Now, both online and offline options are available. However, I cannot say exactly how the offline process functions.

In Kerala, the cess fund is being drained by the giving of pension to construction workers. There is uncertainty over whether the board can continue paying ₹1,600 a month as pension to construction workers.

Q: Women workers require facilities like an onsite creche and health services. Housing is a necessity and so is education. What measures are the states taking? Is Kerala providing such services and facilities? In Kerala and some other states, education facilities are being provided under the Act. Education allowances are given to two children of a registered worker. The Supreme Court's ruling is that attention must be paid to making payments for pensions, health purposes, medical treatment, education and accident benefits. Other benefits too are to be provided like cycles, tools, spectacles, funeral services and so on. This is across India for construction workers.

After this Supreme Court verdict, the Government of India issued a circular stating that these aspects must be taken care of.

But you won't find facilities that women workers need at all big projects, whether in urban and peri-urban areas or in village areas. Children come to sites with their mothers and play there itself.

If women suffer from any illness, if a pregnant woman requires hospitalization, and childcare, and leave before and after delivery, there are no proper provisions. They are given hardly 10 days' leave before delivery and 15 days post-delivery. Then they have to rejoin work.

Q: Is money being spent on improving safety standards and working conditions on construction sites?

Companies like Larsen & Toubro and Hindustan Construction do spend some money on safety. In India workers are used to working without safety harnesses, helmets, welding gloves and protective spectacles. I have visited several sites all over India, this is the reality. Some money is spent. But when we ask the management about safety provisions, protective gear, etc., the response is: "Why are you asking for this? Take money, about ₹1,000 per month." ■

DDS FOUNDER IS BACK AS WHISTLEBLOWER

Civil Society News

New Delhi

FOR the longest time, the Deccan Development Society (DDS) has been known for its efforts to empower Dalit women in rural Andhra Pradesh. It has promoted organic farming with the saving of traditional seeds and the cultivation of millets, sorghum in particular, in rain-deficit areas.

P.V. Satheesh, who led DDS till his passing two years ago, came to be called the Millet Man of India. Other recognitions were bestowed on DDS as well. It was copiously funded and succeeded in having its own radio and television outreach.

Recent developments, however, are not flattering. More than 1,000 village women, who were part of the DDS model of rural uplift, have signed a petition asking for accounts of money collected from them over the years. There are other complaints as well. Demonstrations have been held.

Most embarrassing perhaps for DDS has been one of the founders, K.S. Gopal, taking up cudgels on behalf of the women and asking the DDS management to open up its books for scrutiny.

Gopal had moved on from DDS to do other things. He had laid the foundation for DDS way back in 1979 before the organization formally came into being in the early 1980s.

With DDS choosing to remain silent, it is difficult to make a fair evaluation of the charges. But Gopal has been persistent with his enquiries and says the people running DDS must be more transparent and provide answers to specific questions he is raising on behalf of the village women.

Q: You have been raising issues of malfeasance in the functioning of the Deccan Development Society (DDS). What prompted you to do this?

The women of Zaheerabad block in Medak district who have been the beneficiaries of DDS projects approached me. They had several complaints about DDS' functioning. I am a founder-member of DDS. It was after 30 years, in March 2023, that I went to the Pastapur office of DDS to attend the funeral of P.V. Satheesh, a co-founder who had been running the organization. The poor women who were part of the DDS projects approached me, saying, "Sir, they have orphaned us!" I was moved.

A month after Satheesh's funeral, I went back and met the women's groups and multiple issues came to light. Getting the documents has taken a year.

Q: What exactly are the complaints against DDS?

First of all, the women want accounts for money that was collected from them over the years. The women of the backward and arid Zaheerabad taluk were organized into village *sanghams* or collectives. It was something I started in 1979 and it continued after DDS was formed in 1985.

The women would make a pool of their micro savings from which they could then borrow. They used to be given a passbook with a record of deposits and withdrawals. But somewhere down the line DDS stopped giving the women an account of their money.

By my calculation, the principal plus interest money (on savings) lying with DDS amounts to not less than ₹3 crore to ₹4 crore. And it should be given back to the 1,500 women from whom it was collected. It came out of their very meagre savings.



K.S. Gopal with protesting women

Last year, 1,000 women signed a petition given to the District Collector, saying that they fear their money will be lost forever because they get the sense that DDS is on the verge of being wound up.

Q: So, it is essentially about the micro-savings of the women.

There has also been sale of community land. DDS has sold 103 acres in the past decade. Interestingly, six acres in Krishnapur village were sold for a song to a physician treating Satheesh.

Land was acquired using donor money for the purpose of creating *balwadis* or creches. The land was jointly in the name of the DDS and two representatives of the village *sangham*. But *balwadi* lands have been sold without the knowledge or consent of the women.

Despite multiple representations and visits to the DDS office by the women for the past 15 years, DDS refuses to show the accounts or return their money. As founder and member of its general body (meetings have not been held for 30 years), I wrote to and talked with the DDS managing committee for six months. They refused to provide the villagers with financial data or address their grievances.

The women are illiterate and have no documents or records. Everything is in DDS custody. They refuse to show or share it. It took me one year to gather information and documents from multiple agencies. Even now the information is not complete as DDS alone has it. Whatever I am saying is based on evidence and documents that are authenticated and lying with me. An inquiry will bring out a true and complete picture.

The *sanghams* received revolving funds from state agencies and donors and kept them in the local banks with operations being overseen and signed by two representatives of the *sanghams* and one DDS nominee. For one revolving fund for which there is documentary proof,

DDS raised over ₹12 crore between 1998 and 2004. This was DDS' much-acclaimed sorghum (*jowar*) alternative public distribution system. It is for this that DDS has received awards such as Millet Man of India for Satheesh and Millet Sisters Network. Donor oversight ended in 2005. And in 2006 DDS transferred ₹62,68,600 of village revolving funds into fixed deposits without the knowledge of the *sanghams*.

The villagers found that suddenly all their money had vanished. It took me one year to find the data and get the documents. In 20 years, compound interest on the principal should now exceed ₹5 crore.

Q: What do you think has gone wrong at DDS?

I left DDS in 1990. My last visit to the project area was in 1993. Until 2000 things seemed well at DDS. But in 1996-97, three key founders and in all six members quit DDS, unhappy but not wanting to wreck things. DDS never held a general body meeting (this information is from the Registrar of Societies) nor submitted obligatory data to the Registrar for 30 years. DDS went into the complete control of Satheesh.

DDS built a big profile and attracted huge resources. It was a media savvy organization with its own radio and TV (infrastructure). It was a heady mix of Dalit women, traditional seeds, crop biodiversity and food sovereignty. It drew important people to its managing committee which was, of course, nominated.

I met a DDS board member on a train some 15 years ago and she told me that she was forced to quit for questioning how DDS money was being spent on the healthcare of its secretary.

With its success, the ecosystem in DDS became lacking as the organization has no countervailing power. A field investigation report by the Human Rights Forum in December 2023 on what the women have to say was buried. ■

Rock Garden loses a wall, residents rally for Nek Chand

Raj Machhan
Chandigarh

CHANDIGARH's iconic Rock Garden is in the eye of a storm after the Union Territory (UT) administration demolished a part of its outer wall. In its place, it plans to build a mundane parking lot and a wider road near the Punjab and Haryana High Court complex to ease the traffic woes of those who drive to work there.

The Rock Garden is a landmark of the city, and a major tourist attraction. Spread across 40 acres, it contains over 2,000 wondrous sculptures made of scrap and waste materials including bangles, glass, tiles, ceramic pots, broken pipes and more. It has interlinked pathways, made with scrap, and it is dotted with waterfalls and sitting spaces.

The garden was created by Nek Chand, a government employee, who started work on it in his spare time in 1957. Nek Chand created his garden secretly, till it was discovered and officially recognized by the authorities in 1976. In 1988, the government honoured him with the Padma Shri.

The destruction of the wall has angered citizens, heritage conservationists, environmental activists and the arts community. Nek Chand's family is shocked and hurt by the administration's unilateral action.

"The Rock Garden isn't just a tourist attraction, it is part of our identity. Every single soul in Chandigarh has spent their childhood hiding behind these walls, running through its pathways, climbing the very stones that are now being broken apart," Priyanka Saini, Nek Chand's granddaughter, told *Civil Society*.

"For many of us, the Rock Garden was our adventure park before we even knew what that meant. We have all read the story of Nek Chand in our history books, and parents tell their children the story of how one man built all of this. Each person felt pride in knowing that this magical place belonged to their city."

Saini, in fact, even wrote to the Prime Minister pointing out that the garden attracts over 1.5 million visitors annually, second only to the Taj Mahal. It generates a profit of ₹2 crore to ₹3 crore. Destroying Nek Chand's work is a "disservice to India's legacy of innovation and environmental consciousness," she wrote.

Citizens led a series of protests at the Rock Garden, including a Chipko-style demonstration. "It is a direct attack on our heritage and strikes at the root of our artistic values. If a part of the Rock Garden can be demolished then nothing remains sacrosanct," says Samita Kaur, an environment activist and representative of the Saving Chandigarh Citizens Group.

The UT administration, which is carrying out the road widening and parking project, says that the work is being done according to directions



Chandigarh residents hug trees and hold placards

given by the Punjab and Haryana High Court to decongest traffic leading to the High Court complex. The court gets a daily traffic load of around 3,000 to 4,000 vehicles. The existing infrastructure was found inadequate to handle vehicle flow and parking.

The demolition work began on February 22 when heavy machinery mowed down a part of the outer wall in the dead of night. Chandigarh residents woke up to shocking images of the demolished structure on social media the next day. "It was unthinkable. No one was informed about it. No permission had been taken from the Chandigarh Heritage

Committee and other stakeholders. We were totally shocked," says Samita.

Along with parts of the outer wall, the administration axed 200 trees for road widening. R.K. Garg of the Saving Chandigarh group says, "It is a unilateral action by the authorities. The Rock Garden is an integral part of the social and cultural fabric of the city. The demolition of the wall and adjoining structures is like mowing down a wall of the Red Fort to make way for widening a road."

The UT engineering department had floated tenders for the road widening and parking project much before they received approval from the Ministry of Environment and Forests. The tenders were awarded on December 24, 2024, while the ministry gave approval for conversion of forest land only on January 16 this year. "The administration

should lay the entire facts before the public," says Garg.

In response, the UT administration says that the outer wall was not an integral part of the Rock Garden but was "built to enclose the adjacent forest land". It said the administration will build a similar wall adjacent to the demolished wall that will replicate the original design.

"Calling it 'just an outer wall' completely disregards its significance," says Saini. "The Rock Garden was designed as a unified space where art, nature, and architecture flow seamlessly. The outer wall and its surrounding landscape were not just barriers, they were part of the artistic and environmental experience.

"More than that, the area the administration is encroaching upon



Nek Chand turned waste into art

includes forested land. It provides shade to our deer, our peacocks that live there, and is a transition from the urban environment into the magical world that Nek Chand created."

Protesters are also asking why the court has poked its nose into the matter. "If the judiciary is going to decide on matters such as minor parking lots and building of roads then what is the role of civic bodies and concerned authorities?" says an activist, requesting anonymity.

However, Punjab and Haryana High Court Bar Association President Sartaj Singh Narula denied any judicial activism in the matter. "The case was filed before the Court by the Bar Association and is still going on. During one of the arguments, the Court had enquired what was being done to solve the traffic problem. The Chandigarh administration has taken up this course of action on its own."

Narula further says that the area under question was never a part of the Rock Garden. "It was encroached on and the UT administration is only taking it back." He said the association was fully conscious of the need to preserve the environment. "We will be planting 10 trees for

every tree uprooted during the construction activity," he says.

The issue has led to an intense debate over the conflict between conservation of heritage monuments and development of infrastructure. "We are not averse to change, but the way it is being done is not right," says Deepika Gandhi, an architect. Activists say the High Court adds roughly around 1,000 lawyers every year to its rolls. Given the already congested area, it will be difficult to find space for the increasing number of vehicles in the coming years.

Parking space for the High Court could be created in nearby areas, and a shuttle bus service can be employed or a multi-level parking built. A vertical parking structure within the High Court's premises could have accommodated far more vehicles without encroaching on a heritage site. Underground parking is also a possibility.

"The fact that none of these solutions was seriously explored and they picked the easiest solution speaks volumes about the short-sightedness of our administration's planning and development," says Saini.

"This space should be dedicated to future 'Nek Chand's', those with vision, who, like my grandfather, see art where others see waste. Tomorrow, if a child with extraordinary artistic ability wants a place to exhibit their work, to create something meaningful, shouldn't this space be reserved for them? Shouldn't we be fostering creativity instead of paving it over?" asks Saini.

"My job as Nek Chand's granddaughter is not just to protect his legacy but to expand his vision for the country. The Rock Garden was never just about art, it was about opportunity, creativity, and transformation. We should be using this gift to nurture young artists, to teach craftsmanship, to inspire the next generation to create, just as my grandfather did."

The city's citizens have suggested several ways to use the Rock Garden. Theatre doyen Neelam Man Singh said it should be used for cultural performances. Saini says it should be a place where children come to learn sculpture, mosaic work, and sustainable art.

"It could host exhibitions, workshops, and artist residencies, where creativity thrives in the very space built from discarded materials. It could be an open-air museum of innovation, where visitors experience not just the past, but the future of art and sustainability in India," says Saini. ■

A bank for plastic waste

Rakesh Agrawal
Dehradun

EVER heard of a plastic bank? Dehradun has not one or two but 300 plastic banks spread across the city. Their proliferation is impressive. You can find plastic banks in 92 schools, 40 hostels, 10 universities and colleges, 132 Maggi Points, eight malls, the Head Post Office and many government offices.

The plastic banks have been set up by SDC Foundation, a social organization in Dehradun which tackles the menace of plastic waste through its campaign, “Our Mission: A Cleaner Planet.”

“People expressed concern over the growing mounds of plastic waste, highlighting the serious implications for the future. They stressed that without efforts to reduce plastic waste and dispose of it responsibly, the planet will suffer,” says Anoop Nautiyal, who is the founder of SDC.

“We began our campaign in 2019 with one school and 55 girl students. We now reach out to about 100,000 people including 40,000 school students. We have segregated and recycled over 40,000 kg of plastic waste through these banks,” he says.

Ordinary citizens, scientists, professors, teachers, social activists, government employees and those involved in cultural activities are participating in this effort thanks to SDC reaching out to them.

Children have helped with the collection of plastics. Arnav Ridh, a Class 11 student of Sri Guru Ram Rai Public School, a senior secondary school, collects plastic waste from his colony along with three friends. In an hour, he says, they collect around six bags of plastic waste, consisting of wrappers, boxes, carry bags, broken toys and oil sachets. “Plastic is a real curse,” he says. “We deposit it all in our school’s plastic bank. It’ll be born again as utensils, buckets and toys.”

SDC celebrated its milestone of having set up 300 banks by organizing a programme. A panel discussion on plastic waste took place along with plays by school students, a video competition, and more.

“Dehradun was generating close to 500 metric tonnes of waste on a daily basis,” said Gaurav Kumar, commissioner of the city’s Nagar Nigam. Recycling plastic would reduce the overall waste. He urged citizens and all stakeholders to segregate their waste and adopt the 3Rs — reduce, reuse and recycle. He also assured SDC Foundation that the municipality would extend all help to ensure the plastic

banks remained operative.

“Efforts need to be made to extend the concept of plastic banks to other hill towns and cities in Uttarakhand,” said Chandan Singh Rawat, chief environment officer of the Uttarakhand Pollution Control Board who lauded the initiative.

This project has been executed with support from Airbus, a global pioneer in the aerospace industry, under its Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) mandate.

How is the project implemented? The SDC Foundation enables segregation of plastic



Schoolchildren are part of the collection drive

‘We began in 2019 with 55 girl students. Now we reach out to about 100,000 people. Over 40,000 kg of plastic have been recycled.’

waste at the citizen and institution level through its chain of plastic banks. “We ensure timely collection, transportation and secondary level segregation of plastic waste. It is then sent to be converted into fuel for energy use or for production of items made from plastic waste,” explains Dinesh Semwal of SDC.

“The plastic waste from plastic banks is being brought to our Plastic Waste Segregation and Learning Centre at Mehuwala, a locality in Dehradun. Low intensity plastic waste is handed over to the Council of Scientific and Industrial Research’s (CSIR) Indian Institute of Petroleum (IIP) for their plastic-to-fuel programme. It is converted into diesel through a process called pyrolysis,” explained Semwal.

Multi-layered plastic, generally used to package food items, is resistant to moisture, light, and air. It is sent to the Cantt Board and Swayambhu, a recycling unit in Haridwar, where it is made into other plastic items like bottles, stationery and toys.

“Plastic has become a part of our daily lives but it has deleterious side effects. This is a welcome initiative to minimize it,” said Dr Harendra Bisht, director, CSIR-IIP.

A number of institutions, schools and small businesses were felicitated for the work they had done in ensuring the plastic banks functioned.

Mountain Cafe Maggie Point, a café en route to Mussoorie, is one of 186 such points along this popular hill station’s roads that have a plastic bank.

“We have a small shop on our land. We have our home and a cow shed there too. We sell bun-omelette, bun-mask, homemade momos, Maggi, and tea and coffee. We place all our plastic trash in the bank for recycling. We don’t any more burn our garbage or throw it down the hill. We send it for recycling,” says Pooran Singh, 59, proprietor of Mountain Cafe.

The Head Post Office (HPO) in the city centre next to the iconic Ghantaghar also has a plastic bank which was inaugurated in June 2024. Plastic waste generated by the post office and the homes of officers and employees of the postal department is deposited in the bank.

The HPO’s employees are thrilled at the initiative. “It’s a welcome step and we hope it sets an example for other government departments,” said Tikambar Singh Gusain, senior postmaster. Other government institutions like the Soil and Water Institute, Khadi Gramodyog and Officers’ Hostel also have plastic banks.

Eight showrooms and malls have such banks. These include The Mall of Dehradun, which boasts a LEED-certified design, the expansive Centrio Mall and the PVR Mall which has shops, eating joints and a cinema hall.

“Almost every shop owner and customer deposits a huge amount of plastic waste here,” says Rajiv Chourasia, operations head of Centrio Mall.

“These days, almost every item is packed in two or three layers of plastic and then put inside another plastic bag. I unwrap the clothes I buy, and put the plastic in the plastic bank,” says Richa Juyal, a teacher trainer and regular customer. ■

Delhi’s super clean colony

Sukanya Sharma
New Delhi

IN the past six years, even as Delhi’s landfills have overflowed, Navjivan Vihar in South Delhi has shown what it takes to be a model of sustainable living. With collection drives and segregation of waste in households the residents have created a successful system for composting and recycling.

It all began with a workshop conducted by the Municipal Corporation of Delhi (MCD) on solid waste management and the environmental hazards of landfills.

Inspired and determined, the residents of the colony, under the dedicated leadership of its Resident Welfare Association (RWA) secretary, Dr Ruby Makhija, made a conscious effort to handle their waste better. Apart from being an ophthalmologist, Dr Makhija is also the founder of Why Waste Wednesdays Foundation, an NGO dedicated to addressing environmental challenges with innovative solutions.

The colony’s Reduce, Reuse and Recycle (RRR) Centre is an initiative by the foundation. “Being secretary gave me the opportunity to use this platform to offer solutions at the community level, not just the individual one,” says Dr Makhija.

A day in the life of a Navjivan Vihar resident begins by segregating dry and wet waste, which is then collected by one of three garbage collectors on their neatly organized rickshaws. Each of them has four green and blue containers dedicated to wet waste and one large sack for dry waste.

The three primary categories are: wet waste (kitchen scrap, garden clippings), dry waste (paper, plastic, metals) and hazardous domestic waste (sanitary products, broken glass, medicines). This is how they have achieved the 100 percent segregation-at-source model.

Wet waste, which makes up around 60 percent of the colony’s daily waste, gets a new lease of life as compost. The system is efficient. The organic waste is taken to a common area where around 10 waste converters have been installed. Funded collectively by contributions from the residents, these converters efficiently process the organic material, producing compost that nourishes the three parks that Navjivan Vihar is proud of. The same process is followed for dry leaves which are collected in a huge pit, waiting to be shredded.

Dry waste is sent for recycling. Discarded paper is exchanged with recycling units for notebooks, which are then donated to MCD schools. The challenge of plastic waste has also been addressed with viable solutions. In order to reduce single-use plastic, some recycled plastic has been repurposed into durable benches and desks within the society and in the RRR centre. The only category of waste that is handed over to the MCD is hazardous waste such as broken glass and sanitary products.

This systematic approach ensures that each type of waste is processed appropriately, minimizing environmental impact effectively. The enthusiastic sense of ownership and commitment to this endeavour is palpable. “The residents segregate their waste very willingly and so our work becomes easier,” says Jaidul, one of the three sanitation workers in



Dr Ruby Makhija at the wet waste composting site

Civil Society picture/Sukanya Sharma



The collection centre

the colony who is responsible for cleanliness around the compost pit areas and around the RRR centre.

Daily 225 kg of waste is collected in the area. “What stands out in our model is that we do not contribute to the city’s overflowing landfills,” says Montu Singh proudly. He is the supervisor who oversees activities of the RRR centre and the go-to person for any issues in the colony. “If the public and MCD work in tandem, things are bound to move forward. People should work with the government instead of waiting for it to act,” he adds.

Feedback from residents of the colony also shows how involved they are. Many have come forward to share responsibility in remarkable ways. Mona Vashisht handles fabric waste, Anuj Bhatia’s domain is water harvesting, Gopa Banerjee is in charge of garden waste and Shammi Narang is responsible for general waste management.

The commitment to sustainability and social responsibility extends beyond waste management in this neighbourhood. The RRR centre is also a hub for donating pre-loved clothes, footwear, toys, household items and more. The centre has tied up with NGOs across the city, ensuring donated items reach homes where they are needed most.

Navjivan Vihar’s efforts have made it a model for urban sustainability. It has begun to inspire other colonies, not just neighbouring ones but even some in other parts of the capital. It is heartening to see citizens wholeheartedly take part and do their best to keep their colony, a small part of Delhi, clean and tidy. ■

SHG has its say on a bathroom

Bharat Dogra
Basari (Jharkhand)

THE Dalit hamlet of Basari in Hussainabad block of Jharkhand's Palamau district has an exceptionally clean street. Clean water is available too, from an overhead water tank and hand pumps.

But the highlight of the street is a new community bathroom that can be used by any woman in this hamlet at any time of the day. Even in the evening the bathing space was still being used. It is valued because it provides much needed privacy to women.

Pinky Devi, who coordinates a Self-Help Group (SHG) called Roshni in this village, said that the bathroom has been very useful for women and adolescent girls because it provides them privacy. It has helped to improve their hygiene.

The community bathroom is properly covered and safe. It has also been constructed close to a water station that includes a water tank and a solar pump set. It is thus very easy to obtain water at any time of the day here.

The idea has spread to other villages. Similar bathrooms for women, close to water stations, can be seen in other villages of Hussainabad block. The bathrooms have been constructed under a project called HRIDAY, supported by LIC (Housing Finance Ltd.) and implemented by Sahbhagi Shikshan Sansthaan, a local non-profit.

Apart from development needs, the project's main focus was the welfare of women and



The solar-powered bathing space

The bathroom is properly covered and safe. It has also been constructed close to a water station that includes a water tank and a solar pump set.

weaker sections. Women were organized into SHGs in several villages. They were asked what their priorities were.

The project proponents found that in hamlets inhabited by people from marginalized sections, proper bathing places did not exist in many homes. So, women and adolescent girls often had to take quick, hurried baths in open spaces, sometimes leading to embarrassing situations affecting their dignity and even safety.

All these problems were resolved by the creation of safe and clean community bathing places for women which can be used in complete privacy at any time of the day.


The costs for creating such community bathing places, in consultation with local women, were not high, since only one or two are needed, depending on the female population of the hamlet. The project has been deeply appreciated by the women and can be replicated in other villages, including urban slums.

In many villages, especially the hamlets of marginalized people, toilets have been improperly constructed so open defecation is still being practised. The ODF (open defecation-free) status of villages needs to be reviewed.


Implementation requires people's participation. In one hamlet called Mahuari in Hussainabad block, the construction of toilets was much better than in some of the neighbouring areas. The reason was that women here had been very well-organized into an SHG called Parvati. The women intervened and stopped highly flawed construction of toilets from going ahead. It was on the insistence of these women that toilet construction was substantially improved. The result is that the toilets here are far better constructed and much more widely used.

There are lessons from such initiatives for India's sanitation programmes. They should be implemented and planned with the close involvement and participation of local people. ■

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Exposing the NGO glass ceiling

Kavita Charanji
New Delhi

HOW are women treated in non-profits and foundations? What are their opportunities for personal growth and leadership roles? The hope is that these are better places to work for women, but a recent study suggests otherwise.

Women in the organizations surveyed didn't reach top-rung positions, affirmative action policies were lacking and even something as basic as maternity leave was seen as a negative.

The study was conducted by EquiLead, an initiative supported by Climate Asia Inc and the Arthan Foundation to boost women's leadership in the social sector.

The report, 'Unpacking Gender-Equitable Leadership in Organizations: Insights and Strategies', studied 128 organizations in the social sector including non-governmental organizations (NGOs), corporate social responsibility (CSR) foundations, research institutes, intermediaries, funding organizations, and social enterprises.

The objective of the study was to find out, first, to what extent strategies to involve women and give them an important role were being integrated into organizational culture and processes; second, to understand the challenges and opportunities for women's growth and leadership in the social impact sector, and identify best practices; and, last, to pinpoint the challenges social sector organizations faced in promoting women's leadership and fostering Diversity, Equity and Inclusion (DEI).

The launch of the report was attended by senior leaders from the Rockefeller Foundation, PATH, Co-Impact, SAP and Empower. The EquiLead team presented the findings, followed by a roundtable dialogue focused on strategies for gender-equitable leadership.

The report's key findings were eye-openers. While 91 percent of organizations claim to specifically hire women for leadership positions, in reality only 31 percent actually have women in top-rung positions. Ironically, the focus of many such organizations is on gender, women's health and women's education.

Forty-three percent of organizations lack affirmative action policies for women or gender minorities. Fifty percent do not conduct DEI-focused capacity-building or training sessions. As many as 38 percent of organizations do not consider it necessary to provide travel assistance to women after working hours. This is a major lapse. Most cities and towns lack safe

public transport for women.

It is in smaller organizations that more women occupy leadership roles. In larger organizations the number of women at the top shrinks in comparison.

"This trend can be attributed to several factors, including corporate hierarchies, gender biases in promotions, lack of mentorship for women at higher levels, and systemic challenges in work-life balance that disproportionately affect women," says the report.



The EquiLead team

It is in smaller organizations that more women occupy leadership roles. In larger organizations the number of women at the top shrinks.

Women are traditionally seen as caregivers of their children, elders, family and friends. Flexible working hours are not a reality in the sector. Maternity leave is viewed as such a great liability that many social impact organizations think twice before they hire or promote women.

Women contend with gender biases and face barriers in getting leadership positions — the reason being they lack mentorship, networking opportunities, and representation in decision-

making roles.

However, there has been some progress. The PoSH (Prevention of Sexual Harassment) and Maternity Care Policies are being implemented by most organizations, except for a small number.

A few organizations are now veering towards flexible work hours, gender-neutral hiring, pay parity and equal opportunity.

Anchal Kakkar, co-founder of EquiLead, explained, "There are systemic barriers that will take a long time to negotiate. While there

are policies and intent to promote women's leadership in the social impact sector, there is much work to be done because a lot of cultural and behavioural changes are still required. Unless that happens, we will not see more women in leadership positions."

The new report has an action plan for inclusivity in the social sector. Their recommendations, named Participatory Approach to Well-being (PAW), prescribe offering employees autonomy to define and utilize existing provisions for self-care, child care and mental health.

Other strategies are expanding diversity hiring, creating community spaces for women, formal mentorship and sponsorship programmes, gender-appropriate language in job descriptions, an encouragement of cross-functional teams and role rotation.

India's development hinges on the increased participation of women in the workforce. Gender diversity is a driver of productivity, innovation and employee retention. However, what drags economic progress down are deeply ingrained patriarchal and structural barriers. ■

Kashmir worries about drug menace

Jehangir Rashid
Srinagar

MOHAMMAD Sajid (name changed), who lived in a posh part of Srinagar, found it hard to cope with a difficult situation at home. Instead of facing his problems head-on, he landed in the dragnet of substance abuse. Finally, it was his health that bore the brunt of his addiction.

Like Sajid, thousands of young people in the Kashmir Valley have become drug addicts and are finding it difficult to extricate themselves from the morass. People, irrespective of their social standing, are becoming increasingly worried about this disturbing trend. Most believe that corrective measures are long overdue. Religious leaders too are mulling taking up this issue.

Public health experts are of the opinion that there is a close link between mental health and substance abuse. Therefore, it is important to reach out to schools and colleges and educate students on issues pertaining to mental health such as how to handle exam stress or strife at home or troubled relationships.

Wasim Kakroo, consultant clinical psychologist at the Centre for Mental Health Services, Rambagh, Srinagar, explains that substance abuse is a complex problem. Unfortunately, drug addiction is seen mostly as a mere aberration and nobody really tries to understand the deeper reasons for this malaise.

"Biological factors are one of the reasons responsible for substance abuse with genes playing an important role. Some people's stress tolerance is lower. Instead of trying to handle their stress, they fall prey to substance abuse and find pleasure in it," says Kakroo.

They are, in short, predisposed to substance abuse. To prevent children from taking to drugs, the administration organizes day-long workshops on substance abuse in schools and then forgets about the problem for the rest of the year.

"It is important that people, especially teenagers, are made aware of the ill-effects of substance abuse. That is possible only when mental health is included as a subject at school level," Kakroo emphasizes.

A lot depends on temperament. People who are pessimistic and lose hope more easily fall

prey to substance abuse. Kakroo points out that in many cases teenagers are inclined to take to smoking and drinking after witnessing their fathers doing it.

"Teenagers, especially those between 12 and 18 years, need particular attention. This stage of life is a formative one. Both teachers and parents have a pivotal role to play in the overall development of a child," says Kakroo.

To tackle the growing menace of drug abuse the government launched a Nasha Mukti Abhiyan in September 2022. Out-Patient

fact that people who could help aren't doing so. "I have no hesitation in saying that although this has become a crisis, some people are turning a blind eye to it. Everybody needs to play their part so that things improve," he says.

Acknowledging that religious leaders and preachers have failed to tackle this issue, Mohammad Imran, an Imam (who leads prayers), says that substance abuse or drug addiction was never a topic of discussion or discourse for religious leaders to whom people turn for spiritual guidance or for showing the right path.

"Things have changed of late and now preachers are willing to refer to this glaring social problem in their sermons. Our chief cleric, Mirwaiz Mohammad Umar Farooq, has mentioned substance abuse or drug addiction multiple times during the Friday sermons and other regular sermons," says Imran.

In the recent past, the Jammu & Kashmir (J&K) Police has been able to bust gangs involved with smuggling and supply of narcotic substances like heroin and marijuana in various districts of J&K.

Kakroo says that since narcotic substances are very expensive, drug addiction can lead to a spike in crime rates.

"Usually a gram of heroin costs ₹8,000. An addict generally needs around four grams of heroin per day. That means that he has to arrange for ₹32,000 per day. For a month's supply that works out to ₹10 lakh. So the addict spends no less than one crore rupees in a year,"

claims Kakroo.

Unfortunately, he says, the government has not yet framed a rehabilitation policy for ex-addicts. Those who manage to detoxify and quit drugs find themselves jobless. Besides, the person is stigmatized and that leads to social isolation.

"We cannot expect the government to give jobs to the youth who say goodbye to drug addiction. These people can be given some vocational training or imparted soft skills so that they are able to earn some kind of livelihood. Sustenance is important. If former drug addicts aren't gainfully employed they run the risk of falling into the drug trap again," Kakroo points out. ■



Reaching out to the young in Bandipora



Wasim Kakroo

Tribal region gets 3 helping hands

Pushpa Sundar
New Delhi

AN extraordinary partnership between civil society organizations (CSOs), corporate bodies and the Chhattisgarh government is changing the lives of villagers, especially women, in Sarguja, Rajgarh, Korba, Dhamtari, Bastar, Dantewada, U.B. Kanker and five other districts of the state.

Villagers in the tribal belt of the state face many constraints in improving their lives, apart from Maoist violence. Limited water availability hinders agricultural activities and affects productivity. Farmers can only practise single cropping due to lack of irrigation facilities. Diversified livelihood options such as inland fishing, rearing of poultry or growing mushrooms for the urban market, which can be undertaken by women to augment their income and improve family nutrition, are absent due to lack of awareness and technical knowledge. As a result, many farmers are forced to migrate to other regions.

In October 2018, Bharat Rural Livelihoods Foundation (BRLF) initiated a High Impact Mega Watershed Project (HIMWP) to resolve the issues villages were facing. BRLF is an independent society set up by the Government of India (GoI) to upscale civil society action in partnership with the government and interested corporate bodies.

In an excellent example of hybrid philanthropy and tripartite collaboration, the HIMWP partnered the Chhattisgarh government, Axis Bank Foundation, Tata Trusts, and CSOs like Sahabhagi Samaj Seva Sanstha, PRADAN, Carmdaksh and nine others. They worked together with the objective of increasing the income of 250,000 small and marginal households in 35 blocks of the state.

The partnership with 12 CSOs to implement the project helps bring their technical and organizational skills to tribal populations in a large swathe of central India. This tripartite approach to tackling rural India's development issues bridges the critical gap between funding and impact, fosters trust and confidence among tribal communities, and increases the effectiveness of government programmes.

The second phase of the project (from 2024 to 2028) seeks to integrate natural resource management and sustainable livelihoods by combining climate-resilient agricultural

interventions with asset creation for enhanced soil and moisture conservation using the Ridge to Valley approach.

Apart from its own resources, BRLF helps leverage existing outlays of the Central and state governments, through flagship schemes like MGNREGS and other departments like horticulture, fisheries, and agriculture.

The first phase of the HIMWP, from 2018-2022, concentrated on making farming sustainable by using MGNREGS and other government funds to implement a Ridge to Valley approach. The focus was on treating the



Diversified livelihood options include creating community fishponds

upper ridges of watersheds to prevent erosion, enhance water retention and increase soil fertility by constructing various water harvesting structures appropriate for the local topography and hydrogeology.

The CSOs and the State Project Management Unit (SPMU) first organized villagers into producer groups and producer companies. They helped farmers plan crop choices and choose winning commodities for enhanced value chain development. The aim was to increase the cropping intensity of landholdings of small and marginal farmers through use of appropriate practices and integrated natural resource management (NRM). Customized stakeholder learning modules were rolled out with producer group members to improve agricultural productivity, enhance market access, and increase household income.

Since women's empowerment was an important objective, women were encouraged to form producer groups to undertake livelihood activities such as inland fisheries, goat breeding, and collection and marketing of non-timber forest produce. There was special emphasis on lac cultivation and harvesting.

The emphasis of the project was to layer

livelihood activities depending on the terrain, farming possibilities and opportunities for non-farm livelihoods, such as fishing, goat and poultry breeding, on existing NRM and livelihood assets built through MGNREGS.

Activities such as pond-based inland fishing enhance diversification of livelihoods and ensure that households have multiple sources of income — reducing exposure to market or climate fluctuations.

The project also leveraged GIS based mapping techniques to prepare a detailed watershed approach that used maps identifying social and physical resources for effectively planning NRM and livelihood interventions.

In the small village of Bhondla in Bodla block of Kabirdham district a group of women formed the Jai Maa Bhawani Self-Help Group (SHG). Led by their president, Devki Bai, and secretary, Bhojbat Devi, the SHG pooled their resources and enthusiastically created a fishpond and managed it collectively with guidance from the fisheries department.

The results were remarkable. Not only did their families get fresh fish for consumption, improving their nutrition intake, they were able to increase their incomes by selling fish in the urban market nearby. Their success was noticed, and other village SHGs also set up community fishponds. Prawns, which command a good market price, were also introduced.

One of the project's core goals was to mobilize and involve the community in all stages of planning and implementation. Therefore, it built the capacities of frontline functionaries like panchayat representatives, community members, CSOs and SHG members to foster a sense of ownership.

The first phase of the project has, on average, increased the annual income of participating households from ₹38,007 to ₹98,906. The additional income makes for financial stability and better health and nutrition. Most notably, this additional income has been achieved through effective utilization of existing outlays of the government, proving it to be a viable model.

One of the useful skills learned by the villagers, especially the women, is mapping of local resources, location of proposed structures, and making social and physical maps of the panchayat. ■

Pushpa Sundar is the author of 'Giving With A Thousand Hands: The Changing Face of Indian Philanthropy'.

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RETHINKING THE SMOG

Are kitchen fires a bigger problem than cars?

CIVIL SOCIETY NEWS

IT is 6.30 in the morning and you are starting your day in Gurugram. A thin fog, more like a mist, hangs low outside. You check your phone for the weather report to see if there could be rain coming. Along with the weather, you check the Air Quality Index (AQI). It is at 162 at the level of unhealthy. This despite your neighbourhood being leafy and greener than most. In Delhi, where you will spend much of your day, the AQI is 159 at that hour and you wonder how much worse it will get.

Tracking of air pollution has become an everyday activity, particularly so for people in the National Capital Region (NCR). Data is collected from thousands of monitoring devices and made available in real time, instantly, on the screen of your phone. Comparisons are now possible between cities and regions.

AQI has entered common parlance. So has GRAP or Graded Response Action Plan, which kicks in with curbs at different levels of pollution. Both have been around for a decade but air pollution has only become worse. So, what's going on?

A recent inventory-based nationwide study of PM 2.5, that very tiny particulate matter that goes deep into the lungs, suggests the problem is the targeting of the wrong sources of air pollution.

Automobiles have been prominent in the crosshairs of regulators and activists. But instead, they should have been going after the open burning of solid fuels like wood, dried cow dung cakes and coal.

Biomass ranks as a huge problem because people continue to use it widely in their homes for cooking and keeping warm. Similarly, garbage disposal is inefficient with the result that much of it routinely gets burnt.

When biomass is burnt it generates pollution that goes directly into the atmosphere without any safeguards. Machines (think vehicles) can, by contrast, be controlled for emissions.

The study has been done by iForest, an environmental non-profit, whose founder, Chandra Bhushan, is a veteran in the sphere of pollution control.

Says Chandra Bhushan now: "The urban-centric and automobile-centric focus is the reason why we have not been able to address air pollution holistically."

At the national level, Bhushan says, the iForest study found that 55 percent of PM 2.5 across India came from biomass burning. Of this 55 percent, around 48 percent came from cooking and heating in homes and 6.5 percent from crop residue burning in the fields. From industry came 28.9 percent and from power plants 8.3 percent. The entire transport sector accounted for just 6.9 percent, according to this study.

iForest did a second study of PM 2.5 in only Delhi and the NCR and it showed roughly the same proportions. Once again, biomass accounted for the bulk of the pollution with the following break-up: residential cooking 41 percent, heating 10.5 percent, stubble burning 10.5 percent. Transport only accounted for 5.9 percent. Industry was at 25 percent and power 5.9 percent.

Delhi's pollution has also to be understood in relation to its peri-urban areas and the rest of the NCR. The major part of Delhi's pollution, perhaps 60 percent or so, comes from these surrounding areas and 40 percent comes from within Delhi. But for both Delhi and its surroundings taken together the biggest source of pollution is biomass burning.

Much heavy lifting is involved in dealing with such sources of pollution. It means engaging with communities at the household level, social marketing of cleaner practices and providing deterrents and incentives. Getting people to transition to safer fuels at the household level is a slog

as is promoting segregation of garbage and recycling of solid waste instead of leaving it around for people to burn.

Since these aren't glamorous measures, they tend not to get done. There is greater visibility in cracking down on automobiles and bringing in electric buses — both of which are seriously needed — but are not enough to bring down pollution.

GLOBAL EXPERIENCE

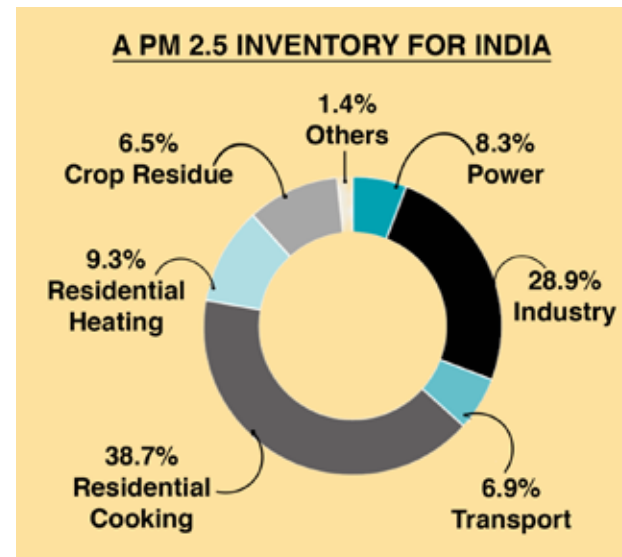
"India can only reduce its pollution if it can reduce its use of biomass and solid fuels. The reason is clear from the numbers. If you take power plants and industry together, you are talking about 35 to 36 percent. But cooking and heating fuel together account for 50 percent. This is what the basket is. So, for us the focus has to be biomass and solid fuel," says Bhushan.

"You know, this is also the global experience. No country in the world has reduced pollution without focusing on solid fuels. In China, before the Olympics, their entire focus was on solid fuels. They started shutting down coal-based power plants. They started providing LPG (liquefied petroleum gas)," he says.

"It is also true of the cleanest countries in the world as far as air pollution is concerned. You will not find them burning solid fuel," he adds.

This can be said of the more developed, prosperous and better governed parts of India as well. In the southern states, for instance, LPG is more widely used and so pollution from open fires is less of a problem.

A kilo of coal or wood burned by a domestic user does more harm than a tonne of fuel burned in an engine with pollution control devices. Pollution from an open fire goes directly into the atmosphere. There are no filters.



Civil Society picture/Ashoke Chakrabarty



The spread of LPG is uneven and firewood continues to be used in kitchens

Families in slums, the large numbers of security guards trying to keep themselves warm on cold nights, tandoors at small eateries all add to pollution in the NCR and elsewhere in the North in ways which are not being assessed.

Sources of air pollution can be put into categories such as combustion, non-combustion and natural. Combustion clearly is what gets burnt whether it is fuel in a car or plant or biomass in a poor home or the burning of stubble in fields or garbage at a landfill. Non-combustion would refer to dust and chemicals — from a construction site, for instance. Dust could also be natural and similarly forest fires though caused by combustion.

REGIONAL APPROACH

Air pollution traverses distances so a regional approach is in order. The smaller cities, peri-urban and rural areas of the NCR and in the North are inextricably linked. Smoke from stubble burning in the fields of Haryana and Punjab add to pollution in Delhi. Forest fires in Uttarakhand similarly impact the region and reach Delhi.

For its study on the NCR specifically, iForest found it necessary to go



Chandra Bhushan

beyond the NCR to include the four districts of Aligarh, Mathura, Agra and Hathras because they are all known to be major sources of pollution and in the proximity of the NCR though not formally part of it. Interestingly, their sources of pollution and the proportion were more or less the same as the NCR itself.

It is a myth that rural areas are not or less polluted. The issue is cooking fuel. The National Sample Survey Office (NSSO) data, says Bhushan, shows that 50 percent of rural India has made the transition to LPG. But this data needs to be tempered with the reality that people have LPG but also use biomass and coal as cooking fuel.

"Overall, our estimation is that close to two-thirds of rural India is primarily reliant on biomass. And close to 20 percent of urban India is reliant on biomass and coal together," says Bhushan. "We did a study in Ramgarh district in Jharkhand. We found 60 percent of Ramgarh district and the city of Ramgarh is reliant on coal as cooking fuel."

The reason a solution to air pollution has been elusive even though it takes a heavy toll on the economy is that there is a lack of focus on the real nature of the problem.

‘India can only reduce its pollution if it can reduce its use of biomass and solid fuels. The reason is clear from the numbers. If you take power plants and industry together, you are talking about 35 to 36 percent. But cooking and heating fuel together account for 50 percent.’



A fire smoulders at one of Delhi's overburdened landfills

“Our focus has been cities because our focus has been the automobile. And in this, we have forgotten about two-thirds of India’s population,” he says.

Cities too are unevenly developed. The poor people in large numbers and in the peripheries have been absorbed without the civic infrastructure or access to urban services. What has ensued is a chaotic situation far removed from stable urban management and standards. As much as rural India doesn’t get the attention it deserves equally peri-urban areas are overlooked.

“We examined 20 years of research and found paper after paper showing that rural areas are suffering equally from air pollution. Researchers have been talking about it. In fact, more people have been dying from pollution in non-urban areas than in urban areas,” Bhushan says.

An inventory put together by iForest shows India burns around two billion tonnes of material. Of this, one billion tonnes is coal and 350 million tonnes is biomass in the residential sector. Industry burns 150 million tonnes and in the fields 100 million tonnes is burnt. Only 125 million tonnes gets consumed by road transport. About 125 million tonnes of oil and 50 million tonnes of natural gas is burnt in industry. About 10 to 15 million tonnes of waste is burnt.

“The problem is that everyone is looking at pollution from their own vantage point. Someone’s focus is the automobile, someone’s industry. A

‘The focus on the automobile was right for the urban areas. But the singular focus was wrong. It hasn’t solved the pollution problem in 20 years. We should have also focused on energy transition in cooking fuel.’

comprehensive picture has been missing,” says Bhushan.

“The legacy of environmentalism in India is rich vs poor, urban vs rural, industries vs cities. It comes from the left. People are not looking at the problem dispassionately. A lot of values get into their thinking, the choices they make. There is a tendency to leave the poor where they are while going after that SUV and industry,” Bhushan rationalizes.

Would he say that the many efforts to reduce automobile pollution were wasted time and effort when addressing solid fuels would have been more effective?

“I am not saying that. But I will say there should have been a parallel initiative. The focus on the automobile was right for the urban areas. But the singular focus was wrong. It hasn’t solved the pollution problem in 20 years. We should have also focused on energy transition in cooking fuel. Today it is because we are at Euro 6 that automobile contribution to 2.5 emissions is 6.5 percent. Had we continued as things were in 1990, when we were non-Euro, it would have been 15 percent,” he avers.

CHINA’S EXAMPLE

India can learn from China. A regional approach was followed to bring down Beijing’s pollution. A target was set for PM 2.5 emissions and to make it happen there was regulation, fixing of responsibility in the government, enforcement and a transition to better technologies. Clean cooking and heating fuels were brought in. All this resulted in PM 2.5



Delhi is infamous for its jumble of vehicles, many of them coming in from neighbouring areas

What we are burning		
An all-India inventory showing fuel/waste quantities and their pollution potential based on the effect of control technologies.		
	Million tonnes	Pollution potential
Coal	1,050	High
Residential biomass	350	Highest
Biomass - industry	150	Highest
Crop residue in fields	100	Highest
Oil in road transport	125	Moderate
Oil in industry	125	
Natural gas	50	Lowest
Open waste burning	10-15	Highest
Total	1950- 2000	

levels falling by 30 percent between 2013 and 2017.

As in Beijing, most of Delhi’s pollution comes from its surrounding areas. The figure varies but around 40 percent of Delhi’s pollution is from within its boundaries. The rest is from outside. Delhi also represents only a small part of the NCR. A regional approach therefore becomes essential. It is also important to improving the quality of life in the NCR generally. This would also hold true for other parts of the country where pollution is rampant and cannot be addressed piecemeal.

According to a report recently put out by the Swiss company, IQAir, Delhi is the most polluted capital in the world. But a more important

revelation in the report is that Byrinhat in Assam tops the list of polluted metropolitan areas. Byrinhat has never been in the news but it has consistently high pollution. Its problem too is regional, being located in Assam but also close to Meghalaya.

LOCAL GOVERNANCE

The report also lists 13 Indian cities as being among the top 20 most polluted cities in the world. The list of course has Delhi, Noida, Faridabad and Gurugram in it. But also in the list are Loni, Bhiwadi, Hanumangarh and Mullanpur.

The thing with pollution ratings is that they represent the tip of the problem. Below is a morass which is difficult to envisage. For all the lesser-known cities mentioned in the IQAir list, there are innumerable more in India which are horribly polluted. They would all have poor infrastructure, depleted municipal finances and little or no access to expertise to help them emerge from the mess they are in. Air pollution would be adding to their disease burden with every passing day.

As India urbanizes, dealing with pollution in cities will require a national effort. Since cities are broke, they will have to be financed and encouraged to bring in expertise and technology. But at the same time there can be no substitute for city-based and regional action. There will have to be the social marketing of measures and creating of awareness.

Mayors and councillors will need an upgrade in their political status so that they can personally lead a transformation. Local administrations will have to persuade people to stop burning garbage and give up using firewood. They will have to put the alternatives in place too. Getting air pollution under control will mean waking up to the long-term harm that it is causing and going beyond GRAP and AQI. A new language is needed. Delhi’s measures have been replicated from the developed world which is why they are limited in their success. A better understanding of local realities is in order. ■

Foreign aid, domestic politics



**DELHI
DARBAR**

SANJAYA BARU

THE mindless controversy generated in Indian mainstream media by US President Donald Trump's decision to wind up the US Agency for International Development (USAID) was one more indicator of the increasing superficiality of media commentary. Trump's decision was bad for the US and, especially, for USAID staff who have been made redundant. However, India is a marginal beneficiary of USAID funds. The controversy at home was blown out of proportion, for purely political reasons.

Much of the focus initially was on the accusation that the Biden administration had deployed USAID funds to benefit the political opposition in India. The worm turned quickly. The political opposition put the government on the backfoot after Trump said that the \$21 million that had gone to India was actually meant for his "friend Modi". After claim and counter-claim, the controversy died down.

There are three relevant issues that have received less attention. First and foremost, the fact that foreign aid is no longer such a big source of funds for India. In fact, it has been an increasingly marginal source, accounting according to some estimates for less than one percent of Indian national income. Second, that India itself is now an aid giver. In fact, the aid India gives has been in excess of what it receives. Finally, that foreign aid enters the country only with Union government approval and more often than not goes to official entities of the Union and state governments. The idea that such aid plays a politically subversive role is passé, at least in India given the quantity of foreign aid.

It was the Atal Bihari Vajpayee government that took the decision to reduce India's reliance on foreign aid after countries like the US, Japan, Denmark and the Netherlands cut off aid to India as part of the economic sanctions imposed after the nuclear tests of 1998. Union

Finance Minister Jaswant Singh took the bold decision to refuse foreign aid and the government launched the Resurgent India Bonds to mop up some of the required foreign exchange. Prime Minister Manmohan Singh adopted the same stance when he declined foreign assistance in dealing with the economic impact of the tsunami in December 2004. Foreign aid regained salience in public discourse during the Covid pandemic. Then too, India was both a giver and receiver of foreign assistance.

India has emerged as a major source of aid both in its neighbourhood and among several less developed economies in Asia and Africa.



Foreign aid is no longer such a big source of funds for India

India has taken pride in the fact that it does not just give out cash, imposing a debt burden, but has offered assistance in kind in the fields of medical care and education. The Indian aid budget now exceeds the foreign aid India receives and so India is a net aid giver. It should, therefore, be prepared for controversy around Indian aid overseas just as overseas aid generates controversy at home. Growing up imposes certain burdens.

Finally, all official assistance, coming from agencies such as USAID, DFID (Department for International Development — the British aid agency) and other such funding agencies of foreign governments, is in fact processed by the Ministry of Finance and requires government approval before disbursement. The political activists of the BJP who thought they may be able to fling mud at the Congress party by referring to reports that USAID money may have gone to the latter may have been ignorant of the fact that all such funding enters the country only with official approval.

In fact, after the Modi government tightened the screws on foreign funding in general, the government keeps a close watch on all external financial assistance, be it from official or non-official sources and given to government or non-government organizations. Hence, the government in India has to be answerable for the sourcing and utilization of all foreign aid. Why some thought they could tar the government's critics with USAID mud is, therefore, not clear. No wonder the controversy died quickly once the facts were out.

Doubts about both the necessity and utilization of foreign aid are understandable. The role of foreign aid in general, and USAID in particular, as an instrument of diplomacy and external influence has long generated controversy. Teresa Hayter's famous book, *Aid As Imperialism* (Penguin, 1971), drew attention, in particular, to the political agenda pursued by the United States in Latin America through the instrument of funding. The Soviet Union had its own aid window through which it pursued its global political agenda. Members of the Congress party and the Communist Party of India (CPI) were named as recipients of assistance in some Soviet papers. The Jana Sangh was often accused of getting funding from western sources.

With the Indian diaspora becoming an important source of both foreign investment and external assistance, both for governments and non-government organizations, including political parties, greater scrutiny of who is funding whom is required. However, what we often get is such information pertaining to the critics of the government and not its supporters. This bias then gets reflected in the way media too views issues pertaining to foreign funds.

While the Trump decision on USAID is not a big problem for India, it has hurt many in America badly and will hurt many in less developed economies who are dependent on this assistance for access to basic necessities including food, healthcare, medicines and livelihood security. The richest nation in the world is pinching the pockets of some of the poorest people in the world. ■

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

Power and big business



**LOOKING
AHEAD**

KIRAN KARNIK

FOR well over a century, sovereign nations and their governments have decided and driven policies, especially in the arena of international relations. Friends and enemies, allies and rivals have been chosen based on the interest of the nation as perceived by the government. This paradigm is now going through a rapid change, especially in some parts of the world.

The most striking manifestation of this is in the US. For some decades, the power of private enterprise in policymaking has been visible. No less than a President (Eisenhower) himself, while in office, called this out, pointing to the "military-industrial complex" as a source of (undue) influence and interference. In US domestic policies, the gun lobby garnered strong support by allying with those who saw guns as protection for — and an extension of — individual freedom. The powerful gun lobby is able to forestall serious gun-control laws, despite hundreds of deaths due to shootings: 507 killed in mass shootings (involving at least four people being shot) in 2024, and a massive total of 47,000 deaths due to gun-related injuries in 2023.

Less visible, though clear to observers, has been the power of other industry lobbies in the US, especially those linked to the tobacco and pharmaceutical sectors. Thanks to media independence, civil society groups, and a culture of transparency in the US, many of the machinations and influences of these lobbies have come to light. Elsewhere, knowledge about the power of such groups to affect policymaking is far less, even though their ability to do so may be as much as in the US.

This, however, is not just a contemporary or new phenomenon. In the 18th and early 19th centuries, the East India Company practically dictated England's policy regarding India. In fact, in its heyday, in many ways it was the de facto sovereign, controlling much of India before the British royalty. It had an army of over 200,000 soldiers — much larger than the British army! The Dutch East India Company had, at one time, a valuation calculated to be \$7.4 trillion in present-day terms: an amount

that exceeds the combined value of the two highest valued global companies today (Apple and Microsoft). While a like-for-like comparison in today's currency is fraught, doubtless these companies by their sheer size and profits had the clout to not just influence policy, but dictate it. In fact, in many areas, they actually exercised the power of a government.

Looking at these and other instances from the past, it would seem that the government as an all-powerful institution was only a brief interregnum — possibly due to communist and socialist ideology — and power is now reverting to private hands in many countries. At one time, it was said of the US that General Motors and General Electric were more powerful than army generals. These companies are now but a shadow of what they once were, but the broader point about the influence of



Elon Musk is said to be as important as President Trump in policy decisions

After the idealism of the 50's in India, one might say there has been a shift from self-reliance to Reliance!

private enterprise remains, with the reins having passed on to global mega tech companies. In some cases, it is individual business leaders who seem to call the shots, rather than those democratically elected. Elon Musk is said to be as important in policy decisions as President Trump.

In India, there have long been rumours and gossip about the influence of one or the other businessperson or industrial conglomerate. The big business houses have always been assumed to have a great influence in government decisions. One might say that

after the ideals and idealism of the 1950s, the policy shifted from self-reliance to Reliance! And now, many feel that there are additions. Though not explicitly stated, there is a sense that India is adopting the Korean model of development, where large industrial conglomerates (*chaebols*) get various forms of support — direct or indirect — from government, enabling their rapid growth, scale, and global competitiveness. These companies, of course, did their own bit too, especially by investing heavily in R&D and ensuring productivity, quality, and cost control — resulting in not only boosting exports by being globally competitive, but becoming world leaders in their field.

Irrespective of whether this is a replicable model or not in India's context, the fact is that it gives great leverage to these companies and their bosses. China seemed to be heading in the same direction, till President Xi decided, a few years ago, to clip the wings of their leaders. It is possible that he sensed their growing power and was uneasy about it. In the past few years, he has been emphasizing the importance of ensuring greater equality. This too may hold lessons for India, especially in contrast to the US.

Around the world, a bigger role for the private sector is becoming the norm. Taking off from the French Foreign Legion of the past, private armies are being contracted by the State for defined tasks. It is but a matter of time before these companies like Blackwater (US) or Wagner (Russia) are privately contracted by any country (this is said to be already happening). In other areas too, including those considered strategic, the private sector is in the lead. Space is one example: with independent capability ranging from launch vehicles to satellites and space stations, industry — promoter-CEOs like Musk, Bezos or (in the UK) Branson being the very visible faces — is now ahead of the governmental space agencies like NASA. The same is happening in fields like artificial intelligence and electronics, led by OpenAI, Nvidia and others.

Capability in these and other cutting-edge areas gives the private sector tremendous leverage, enabling ambitious industry leaders to influence — possibly dictate — policy. This is likely to be a growing trend in the years ahead. What it portends for the ordinary citizen, freedom, and democratic governance are points which call for debate. ■

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

Learning to be owners



CRAFT EQUITY

SUMITA GHOSE

Once came across a saying which went “women usually work on changing themselves, whereas men are all about changing the world.”

I differ. I believe that everyone, irrespective of gender, who is part of a family, community, organization or society, needs to work on changing both, starting from themselves if we want to create and live in a better world.

Rangсутra was founded on this belief. If we were to establish a viable, thriving organization that kept people, artisans, creators, at the centre, then it would be imperative to not only survive, remain independent, and grow as an organization, but thrive in the world outside — that is, the marketplace.

This requires transformation in many aspects of the dominant market-driven model of doing business.

Let's look at the base first, which in economics and business is called the 'supply side'. The first transformation that was required was to move from being beneficiaries or workers to becoming owners.

This was relatively easy in and around Bikaner where the URMUL Trust had worked since 1986. Trust and relationships had been built. As a result, we could mobilize and organize farmers and artisans, women and men, to form their own work groups and organizations.

But when we moved to new areas there was a lot of groundwork to be done. It took much more time because we were beginning work there and people had to get to know us. It was important to invest in forging bonds and building deeper relationships. Without doing this we ran the risk of being reduced to the usual transactional way of working.

Today we have around 2,200 artisans, mostly women, committed to the organization and owning it in different ways. And then there are another 1,000 across different states of the country who are not shareholders but with whom we continue to work, developing new

products and linking them to the market.

The second transformation had to be in finding the right balance between rights and responsibilities. Each worker or artisan who is a shareholder in Rangсутra has the right to get work, access to raw material, a conducive working environment as well as equal and fair wages. Artisans have to balance their rights with the responsibility of being accountable for the quality and timely delivery of their work. And contribute to a conducive working environment.

Most artisans, who were used to embroidering motifs and patterns to embellish tray cloths and decorative items for family and friends, now had to make motifs and patterns

partnerships with a few market partners who understand and respect our social goals. It is a challenge to ensure a 'win-win' for both sides. Especially since this is not a level playing field, between those who live and work in villages and create products by hand and those who market and sell such products in towns and cities in India and around the world.

Another challenge is the intense competition in the so-called handicrafts market — a lot of which is not really hand-made. Most of the garment manufacturing units we compete with are based on the peripheries of cities, with a large population of migrants looking for work, even if the hours are long and the pay just enough to eke out a living in the city.

Balancing the social, economic and financial goals of a social enterprise remains an eternal challenge. In some cases, we have forgone our margins in the interests of ensuring work and fair wages to artisans. At other times, we have had to say no to an order because it does not make any sense for us to accept it. Thankfully, for the most part, we have been able to convince our customers of the inherent value — tangible and intangible — of the beautiful pieces handcrafted by our artisans and our team.

Entrepreneurial ventures are risky, and more so if one is trying to match seemingly contradictory goals, that of running a profitable enterprise, ensuring social inclusion, and making certain that the producers get their fair share of the value that they have been part of creating.

The risk is more acute when played out in the ephemeral world of fashion and the ruthless arena of the market!

So, every once in a while, we are forced to ask ourselves this question: Can one really 'do business' in an intensely competitive market, and 'do good' at the same time? Can it be a win-win for all, when the field is not level to start with? Is it possible to ensure a fair deal for the artisans, do no harm to the environment and still be profitable in order to grow and not stagnate at the same time? Or is this an oxymoron in the intense capitalistic world we live in?

While social bonds, cultural ties and collective action can certainly be valued, respected and accounted for, can these be capitalized without losing their essence? The jury is still out on this one! ■

Sumita Ghose is founder-director of Rangсутra Crafts



Matching the goals of profitability and social inclusion is challenging

As a shareholder each artisan had a right to work but there was also the responsibility to ensure quality and deliver on time.

deriving from what we felt contemporary urban customers wanted from the market. Initially we were concerned that this might mean taking away their creativity, but we need not have worried. All the artisans were happy to experiment with new designs, and repeat them on 10 or more different pieces. Repetition leads to practice. This trajectory improved the quality of their work, and for many it proved to be easier than picking up a new design each time.

Rangсутra has also been able to create lasting

Villages cheer up city

BHARAT DOGRA

It is always a learning experience to listen to grassroots activists who have been working for long years in villages to create a better society. At a recent dialogue called “Swaraj Samvad (Dialogue on Swaraj): Integrating Traditional Knowledge to Enhance Resilience to Climate Change”, it was presentations by grassroots activists that were the most enlightening and encouraging.

The meet was organized at Delhi's India Habitat Centre by Climate Rise Alliance and Vaagdhara, an NGO that works with tribal communities in western India to strengthen the Gandhian values of self-reliance.

First in line was a presentation by Popat Rao Baguji Pawar from the famous village of Hiware Bazar in Ahmednagar district of Maharashtra. He related his experiences spanning 35 years as panchayat leader for his village. He said he worked very hard and with deep involvement to implement the *swaraj* model of self-reliance. He was steeped in this endeavour and never aspired for political leadership or other gains due to the success his village achieved.

Thirty-five years ago, Pawar said, there was widespread liquor addiction, water shortage, poverty, hunger and forced migration in his village. The *swaraj* model of development was taken up with the enthusiastic involvement of the village community. We now have a lot of greenery, no water shortage, high levels of farm productivity, and no liquor problem, Pawar stated. People are willing to contribute, and they turn up in large numbers if a forest fire is to be extinguished.

The success of his village led to it being featured in the famous TV programme, *Satyamev Jayate*, by film actor Aamir Khan. Several visits by dignitaries led to this model being taken up for replication in other villages, including those of tribal communities. In the Vidarbha region it achieved some very encouraging results. In one village, which had become infamous for farmer suicides, such desperate acts stopped completely.

Another positive aspect is that the panchayat conducts social audits to avoid misuse of resources and helps in bringing about transparency. Hiware Bazar is a shining example of a problem-ridden village moving to sustainable progress on the path of self-reliance with the enthusiastic involvement of its people.

The next presentation was by Chaami Murmu from Jharkhand who, along with her friends, has planted nearly 300,000 trees in the

past 30 years. Recalling the situation back then, she said that social norms dictated that women like her lived a narrow existence, confined to their homes. Any effort to play a larger social role was frowned upon. But, overcoming such hurdles, she and her friends picked up skills in the course of their work for the forest department and started planting trees in a big way, first on vacant land. Later, as villages began to appreciate their work and recognized its benefits, they were happy to

to his heart. He becomes very distressed when he hears of any plans to set up industries in forest areas and feels strongly that this should not happen. He said that people complain that elephants are creating problems in villages but his reply is — who snatched away the natural habitat of elephants? When forests are lost, rainfall is affected, he also pointed out.

Anita Damor, an activist from Amlipara village in Banswara district of Rajasthan, presented a different perspective. She



Anita Damor, a grassroots activist, spoke about her successful efforts to combat superstitious thinking

Hiware Bazar has greenery, no water shortage, high levels of farm productivity and no liquor problem. It is a shining example.

cooperate with Murmu. As a result, the green cover increased across a spate of villages. With growing recognition this Padma Shri awardee was able to empower and form several groups of women to plant more trees.

Next came the presentation of Patael Kumar Sahu from Odisha, an organic farmer and protector of biodiversity for four decades. He has been protecting hundreds of medicinal plant species and involved students in their study and understanding. Protection of soil and diversity of seeds and crops has been close

emphasized the importance of dispelling wrong or superstitious thinking among the people. An example she gave related to breastfeeding. The newborn child was denied breastmilk at birth, depriving the baby of valuable nutrients due to wrong notions. She and other women activists helped to disseminate the right message of breastfeeding newborns. After some initial hesitation this has been widely accepted now.

Damor also said that, earlier, the women who prepared chapattis only ate after feeding everyone else in the family. Sometimes, hardly any flour was left for the women. Damor and her colleagues campaigned for everyone to eat together and this changed the existing practice in some families. So, if anything traditional is harmful, it should be changed, she said.

At the same time, she emphasized, valuable aspects of traditions such as the mixed farming system in her area which yields so many different crops and improves food security must be encouraged. ■

Bharat Dogra is Honorary Convener, Campaign to Save Earth Now. His recent book is titled, 'Protecting Earth for Children'.

One reason of Happiness



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Clothes piling up? Pass them on

Give with dignity
by making sure
they are usable

SUKANYA SHARMA

A month later, Mehrotra couldn't put it off any longer. He began sorting out the piles of clothes that his father had left behind. He wanted to give them to someone who would use them well.

His colony's Residents' Welfare Association (RWA) had tied up with Why Waste Wednesdays Foundation, a non-profit, to collect worn clothes, shoes, stationery and other utility items. Why Waste Wednesdays passed on these items to other NGOs who ensured they reached those in need. He called them up and he was told to drop his carton of clothes at the Reduce, Reuse and Recycle Centre in the neighbourhood.

There are similar organizations in different cities in India who ensure that pre-loved clothes end up in the hands of people who need them. We have curated a ready reckoner of a few non-profits who will pass on your used clothes to those who require them.

The biggest recycler of used clothes, and the best known, is Goonj, a social enterprise. Founded by Anshu Gupta in 1999 as an NGO, Goonj was built on the notion of dignity and not just charity. The word 'donation' has been



Sorting of clothes that arrive at Goonj in Delhi

‘When you part with something you have owned, you need to be thankful to the person who is now the keeper of your emotions.’

Not everything that is collected is wearable and so Goonj has to work with the items that come in and in the process add value and make them attractive and useful. The Goonj team has been curating marriage kits with bridal *lehengas* being made from the red *chunnis* that pile up during the Navratri festivities. Jeans that can no longer be worn are repurposed into vegetable bags and other items of everyday use.

“When you part with something you have previously owned, you need to be thankful to the person who is using it and is now the keeper of your emotions. Give only what you can still wear but choose not to,” is Gupta’s advice to contributors. While some clothes are in poor condition and add to Goonj’s workload, there are also those who give with compassion and dignity, cleaning their used clothes, packing them nicely. There are also elderly women who knit sweaters all year round and then, when winter sets in, give 40 to 50 of them in a bundle to Goonj.

The Uday Foundation in New Delhi also

Continued on page 30

Continued from page 29

accepts used clothes for distribution. Founded by Rahul Verma, the NGO functions from its small premises in Sarvodaya Enclave. You can drop off used clothes at their office between 10 am and 6 pm after giving them a call. They also accept unused medicines and healthcare equipment like wheelchairs, walkers and canes. Courierier your stuff from other cities is also possible.

Mother Teresa Jivan Jyoti Home, an orphanage tucked away in Delhi's Mathura Road, is another destination for used clothes for children. Under the compassionate leadership of Sister Rosibel, supported by a team of 25 staff members, the orphanage is a loving home to children with no families. Clothes in good condition for the children are welcome. You will need to drop off the clothes yourself.

Other donations are also accepted. "I have been visiting the home once a year around my anniversary to donate grains, pulses and clothes for the children. The sisters are welcoming and even allow me to interact with the children whenever possible. I now encourage my friends and extended family to donate their clothes here too," says Seema Joshi, a regular donor.

In Mumbai, Sanjeevani—Life Beyond Cancer, an NGO dedicated to caring for cancer patients from an underprivileged background, also accepts second-hand clothes. Sanjeevani provides services to cancer patients, ranging from caregiver facilities, counselling to financial rehabilitation.

The idea of setting up multiple banks for clothes took shape when some members of the NGO's team overheard a conversation between an impoverished cancer patient in tattered and dirty clothes and a doctor who was explaining the importance of personal hygiene.

The team began asking around for donations of clothes on social media and spread the word in the community. Sanjeevani's first clothes bank was inaugurated at the Dr Bhubaneswar Barooah Cancer Institute in Assam just before the pandemic in 2018. "The idea is to assist patients while they navigate the entire spectrum of treatment and go from despair to rehabilitation. We do all we can to make the process less painful," says Ruby Ahluwalia, a senior bureaucrat who started Sanjeevani after her own battle with cancer.

Snehasadan, which means 'a home full of love', also accepts used clothes for children. The NGO runs 12 shelter homes in the suburbs of Mumbai for homeless children. While the children come from diverse religious backgrounds, what is common to them is the struggle of surviving alone on the city's busy and lonely streets.

The shelter homes accept clothes that are in good condition and encourage donors to come by and drop them at their office. Stationery

items, educational material, groceries and essential utility items are also welcome. You need to call them beforehand before making a donation in kind. You can also connect with the children by celebrating your birthday with them at the home, making the day special for the donor and the children.

Noble Nest in Goa is an institution dedicated to the service of poor elderly women who have no family. Maria Merlyn Furtado set up the NGO in her own house at Navelim in 2021. Hers is a life devoted to service. She has worked for hospitals, churches and care homes. Visitors are welcome and clothes can be donated after



Toys can be passed on too

WHERE TO GO

DELHI Goonj: 011-41401216 | Navjeevan Vihar RWA: +91 9560916712 | Uday Foundation: 011-26561333 | Mother Teresa Jivan Jyoti Home: 011-2437 5483
KOLKATA Little Sisters of the Poor: 033-22825552
MUMBAI Sanjeevani: +91 86910 00801 | Snehasadan: +91 83558 97568
GOA: Noble Nest: +91 91305 05205
HYDERABAD: Helping Hands: +91 8309125495
VARANASI: Kashvi Foundation: +91 7607834956
12 MAJOR CITIES: Share at Doorstep: +91 8884784742

getting in touch with them and to understand beforehand what items are needed most. They welcome donations from across the country. "A quaint, cozy pink and white house tucked away amidst Goan palms" is how Asha Mohan describes the structure as she saw it when she visited to make a donation. The exterior of Noble Nest is a testimony to what its name stands for, she confirms.

If you live in Hyderabad, Helping Hands, an NGO, has set up a Kapda Bank where you can donate your used garments. It has tied up with *Siasat Daily*, a local newspaper, and the Faiz-e-Aam Trust. Helping Hands collects used

clothes in good condition, washes, irons and packs them and then donates them to the city's poor families on a daily basis.

In the past, the NGO has distributed shoes and jackets to the boatmen of Dal Lake in Srinagar and to auto-drivers and push cart vendors in Hyderabad and Secunderabad. "To date, we have distributed about 56,000 outfits of clothes. We dispatched clothes to Jammu and Kashmir during a natural disaster and to Patna and Muzaffarnagar during communal riots," says Shaik Akram, manager of Kapda Bank. He proudly explains that at any given time, the bank has more than 10,000 items of clothing. Apart from apparel, the bank stocks a vast collection of ladies' purses, footwear, belts and toys. They prefer donors to visit their office to drop off pre-loved clothes, though they can arrange for a pick-up depending on your location within the city.

Little Sisters of the Poor is an international congregation founded in 1839. Their Kolkata division runs a shelter home dedicated to caring for the elderly poor and destitute. Over time, it has become a safe haven for the elderly who have no resources and no one to call their own. Food, clothing, shelter, medical care and recreation facilities are offered. They are happy to accept clothes and other essential items which can be discussed over the phone before paying a visit.

Kashvi Foundation, based in Varanasi, has been distributing clothes, food, books and utensils to underprivileged individuals and families for the past five years.

The NGO conducts monthly collection drives to facilitate the donation of pre-loved items, especially clothes. You can ask them to pick up your donation by seeing where their collection drives are being held on WhatsApp. The next step is to share pictures of the packed items. The pick-up will be scheduled accordingly. If donors happen to miss the drive dates (announced on Instagram), they can drop off their bundle at the NGO's collection centre after a phone call.

There are similar initiatives that operate across multiple cities. Anushka Jain grew up watching her mother donate clothes on her birthday. As she grew older, she wondered why this was done only once a year and whether it was enough. She started Share at Doorstep, a social enterprise that aims to bridge the gap between donors and NGOs. As the name suggests, they arrange for convenient doorstep pick-up of pre-loved items across 12 major cities and also have courier pick-up options for others. All kinds of clothes, handbags, shoes, accessories and stationery items are accepted.

Begin your decluttering journey by passing on your used clothes to people who are in need of them. But make sure your clothes are still usable, and are suitable for the less fortunate. Give, but with dignity and sensitivity. ■

At Chaitown everyone is happily in

AIEMA TAUHEED

IN the bustling loneliness of the city, where do you go to find an audience when you want to read aloud your poetry, play your guitar or sing those songs that you love? If you are in Kolkata, head for the Chaitown Community where creativity is encouraged to find easy expression.

It is now three years since Elizabeth Decker, an American with a long association with India and a fancy for Kolkata, set the Chaitown Community rolling. She was 73 then and seeking to run a small and interesting business.

Chaitown has since caught on as a place where people do their own thing and discover audiences they never thought existed for their talents. Some are aspiring for professional success and there are others who want to just get away from the tedium of their working lives.

While they have a building in Lake Gardens, Chaitown's events take place all over the city, bringing people together through open mics, musical gigs, fitness sessions, theatre and more. Some of the events are one-of-a-kind experiences.

A recent Bring Your Own Book welcomed book-lovers to share their passion for fantasy literature over *chai* and food. The Common Table Culture Nights celebrate different cultures from around the world. They also hosted a Digital Detox to help people step away from their screens and enjoy the present moment.

Decker is silver-haired with kind eyes and a warm smile. People take to her and she becomes Aunty Beth to many of the young people who gather.

"I wanted to be among young creative people. I mean, in Calcutta we've always had writers and poets underfoot here. I wanted to create a space, an opportunity. A place where anyone could stand up and practise their art without fear or judgement. That's how we started. And then, slowly, we added more things," she says.

Born in Darjeeling, Decker has taught English and writing in schools. A mother of three and grandmother to 10, she grew up in a diverse environment. Her parents arrived in India in 1946 with a mission organization.

She attended Woodstock School in Landour, Mussoorie, where she studied alongside classmates of multiple nationalities. Choosing Calcutta felt natural. She had visited the city as a child and lived here with her



Elizabeth Decker: 'I wanted to create a place where anyone could stand up and practise their art'

husband for several years.

Chaitown Community has only a small staff. The 'community' is ever-increasing. Besides regular performers, there are always different faces adding to the numbers. But who gets to join the community?

On a Saturday evening, we found ourselves at 8th Day Café and Bakery. A girl sat before the mic, her voice steady and resolute, reciting bold Hindi verses on beauty. The crowd listened, some leaning in, others pausing mid-bite. Strangers who had come just for supper stayed to listen, drawn in. For a little while, they were not just visitors but part of something bigger, a community.

"Anyone and everyone can be a part of it. The thing about Chaitown is that we are disgustingly encouraging," Decker says with a grin.

Tanmoy, an MA student who has been learning classical guitar for four years, was about to take the stage for the first time. After a warm introduction by Chaitown, he walked up to the mic, his hands steady but his nervousness evident. Mid-performance, he took a long pause, and before the silence could settle, the crowd responded with cheers, lifting him up with its energy.

"It was very touching for me, everyone liked what I played," he said later, with a smile. "Artistes, especially new artistes, could really use spaces like these. In Kolkata or India, I haven't been able to find a classical guitar culture and hence this is so important. I loved the ambience."

Delecia, an HR professional and first-time performer, hadn't planned on taking the stage. But with a little encouragement from her friends at Chaitown, she found herself singing a duet. "I used to sing long ago, they got me to perform again. It was nice getting this sort of encouragement," she shared shyly.

"It's just a nice break at the end of the week,"

said Aakanksha, an educational psychologist who performs open-mic poetry. "I think a social creative space definitely helps with mental health. Because when you're working, and especially in my field, which is mental health, it gets very draining. And I forget to take care of my own mental health. So, coming to open-mic spaces, I can just express my emotions with music. I can feel my emotions. I get to connect with joyful individuals. It really charges my battery for the week."

Decker says these performances often hold deep meaning for many. She recalled a musician at heart who had been pressured into studying medicine. Finding a space to perform at Chaitown, he said, had saved him at his lowest. With the community's support, he composed an original rap song for Chaitown's anniversary, now featured on their YouTube channel.

But bringing so many people together frequently is not an easy task. "It started by word of mouth, of course. Just putting out a social media post would not cut it," says Akash Chakraborty, who handles marketing and social media at Chaitown.

He explains: "We find talent that likes to put the word out. Sometimes, a bona fide performer will show up, and it'll be on their social media, so by extension, ours as well. Things like that really help."

Thanks to their strong network, cafés often offer their spaces and are willing to pay. "They know that when we walk into a café, we bring 30 to 40 people with us," Decker explains. "Their business increases and visibility increases. And we're happy to do that. We feel like it's reciprocal." Entry to some events is free and for some a fee is charged.

"Many of our events are pay-as-you-can and so we find that people pay more than they would pay if we had put a price on it, because they want to be a part of it," she says. ■

A snug cottage in the jungle

SUSHEELA NAIR

IF you want to experience the feel and comfort of a luxury resort, the warmth of a home and be close to the greens and browns of nature, head to Fireflies Resort, located in a nondescript hamlet in Kabini of HD Kote taluk in Mysuru district. We hibernated for two days in the gentle pace of unhurried activity and recharged our weary bodies and frayed nerves in this sylvan retreat managed by the Shilton Hospitality group, based in Bengaluru. Located on the periphery of the Rajiv Gandhi National Park, Kabini is the area around the backwaters of the Kabini dam built across the Kapila river, a major tributary of the Kaveri.

Sitting on the deck, sipping my first cup of coffee in the morning, I enjoyed an eye-catching view of the varying shades of this green landscape, meticulously manicured lawn and the Kabini backwaters in the distance. If you are the sedentary type, you can recline in a corner of the verandah with your favourite book, soaking in the tranquil ambience of the place, and disengage yourself from the maddening world. If you enjoy 'do nothing' holidays, you can put up your feet and experience the bliss of doing just nothing. However, I chose to stroll around and explore the verdant property.

The first thing that struck me was the sprawling garden with its lush lawns, colourful flower beds, carefully nurtured trees, shrubs and flowering plants like hibiscus. The clusters of plumbago everywhere is a visual delight. It is green beyond imagination and as colourful as a spring garden. Adding to the verdant ambience are lotus ponds with resident ducks. Winding pathways lead to cottages and tents sprinkled across the property. All of them have complete privacy along with soothing views of the lapping waters of the river. The landscape is beautifully laid out with indigenous flowering shrubs and plants. It is difficult to find any specimen of exotic flora in the resort.

"Everything is in harmony with nature in this resort. In keeping with its eco-friendly status, all efforts were made to retain the gifts of nature. The vibrant earthy tones and the natural materials used for construction blend perfectly with the surrounding landscape. Steps have also been taken to minimize formal landscaping," says Amitha Madan, principal architect, Treelight Design.

The artistically designed tents and cottages are named after the trees facing them — like Manga (mango), Errukkum (milk weed), Kadamba (bur flower tree), and Akashmoni (acacia). No tree was cut down during construction. "The cottages and tents are done up with earthy architectural and design elements inspired by local Adivasis. They are



The thatched reception with its rustic charm

The architectural and design elements are inspired by Adivasis. But the cottages are equipped with all modern amenities.

equipped with all the amenities of modern-day life. The rooms are spacious with en suite bathrooms. Each cottage comprises a patio, and a room sans any false notes of opulence. The earthy tones of the cottages carry on inside. The mud-plastered, painted walls and the natural stone wash basin exude a rustic feel. Painted earthen pots double as side tables," explains Madan.

The curved pathways are made of granite waste. Getting around the verdant property is itself a workout and can definitely whip up one's appetite. The ideal way to experience the outdoors is to amble around leisurely. The view from every angle is spectacular.

Fixed meals are provided, using locally available fruits and vegetables grown in the kitchen garden of the resort. The meals, served in the al fresco multi-cuisine restaurant, are exemplary. I found the buffets and other culinary delights as wholesome as home-made food. An acre of the property is dedicated to an organic vegetable and spice garden which feeds the guests with seasonal vegetables and fresh herbs.

There are activities galore to keep you occupied — swimming, volleyball, campfires and indoor games. The best way to unwind in

this glorious outdoors is to take a stroll through the property and follow trails. There is a multitude of nature-based activities for the guests — wildlife safaris, nature trails, coracle rides, sunset cruises, and so on. You can drift down the Kabini river on a coracle or a motor boat. If you are lucky, you'll spot pachyderms quenching their thirst at the edge of the reservoir.

Shivering a little due to the biting cold, we set out at dawn for the much-awaited jungle safari into the Nagarhole National Park which is part of the famous Nilgiris Biosphere Reserve and as such is always teeming with wildlife. We were treated to the sight of langurs and giant Malabar squirrels swinging from branch to branch and a small herd of wild pachyderms ambling past majestically. Birds we saw aplenty. Peacocks and peahens strutted about while a Blue Jay (Indian Roller) which is Karnataka's State Bird perched on a dry branch, posing for a photograph.

Among other animals, we were able to see boar and gaur. Several spotted deer, barking deer and sambar sprinted across our path. Kabini is known for a good number of tigers, leopards, sloth bears and elephants. Though it is possible to spot leopards and even tigers quite frequently in summer, the big cats eluded me. Visibility was poor due to the dense fog and we could not spot them amid the foliage if they were there.

In the evening, we returned after a water safari and sat around a crackling fire under the starry sky, exchanging animal stories and spinning yarns of our encounters in the wild. ■

FACT FILE

Nearest airport and railhead – Mysuru (65 km)
Contact: reservations.kabini@firefliesresorts.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.

Ceramics inspired by the Indus



Indus People's designs are minimalist, modern and inspired by the colours and textures of the Indian subcontinent. Launched in 2018 with a range of tableware in exquisite pastel shades, Indus People has, in a short span, become a reputable brand in the ceramics space.

Four collections are on offer: The Café Range, Dip in the Ganga, The Confluence and the Wooden Collection. The Café Range has cups, saucers, bowls and plates. Dip in the Ganga has dinner sets and kulhars. The Confluence is inspired by the confluence of the Indus and Zaskar in Ladakh and has white ceramic tableware with delicate brushstrokes of grey and blue. The Wooden Collection has bowls, salad spoons and arty round trays.

Also available are curated gift boxes. These include the Himalaya Golden Hour, Kulhar Experience and Chai-Tea Gift Box. Prices range from ₹1,000 to ₹2,500. You can give them a call or shop online.



Contact: Phone: +91 - 98211 99366
Website: www.induspeople.in
Email: hello@induspeople.in

Zero waste is a bare necessity



balms, scrubs and more.

The Rainforest Moisturizer provides deep hydration and starts at ₹199 while the Terracotta Body Scrub is for ₹410. Handcrafted soaps include Saffron Bliss, Brew for the Soul, imbued with coffee, and Dark Knight which contains charcoal.

Their home care range includes handwashes, dish washing powder and a plant-based multi-surface cleaner priced between ₹179 and ₹680. A choice of gift hampers is also on offer including a travel kit with reusable cutlery.

Packaging is, of course, entirely ecofriendly. The enterprise even offers online courses on sustainability and tracking one's waste footprint.



Contact: Website: <https://bare necessities.in/>
Email: info@bare necessities.in

Gifts from the mighty coconut



Maria Kuriakose saw beyond the usual marvels of the mighty coconut and so, in 2019, she founded a brand called Thenga with the aim of repurposing coconut waste into eco-friendly and sustainable products for the home. These are attractive, useful and durable. To date, Thenga has saved 53,000 coconuts from being dumped in landfills, and successfully created a viable alternative to plastic

counterparts.

You can buy shell bowls, cups, candle holders, salt and pepper shakers, glasses, soap dishes and cutlery — all made from discarded nuts. Prices vary based on product size and style. Bowls range from ₹250 for 150 ml capacity to ₹950 for 900 ml capacity. The shell and wood wine glass set of two is a great favourite and is priced at just ₹649.

Each product is handcrafted, ecofriendly and labour-intensive. Thenga, which means coconut, is a women-led enterprise and has created employment opportunities for many women in the rural district of Palakkad in Kerala. You can shop online via their website. Each time you buy a Thenga product, you save a shell, says Kuriakose.



Contact: Phone: +91 96338 13926
Website: www.thengacoco.com



Cheery toys, sarees, jewellery

Soul India is an enterprise which seeks to revive traditional art forms created by weavers and artisans from across India. They make and sell toys, jewellery and sarees — all traditional with a modern touch.

You can buy Kondapalli wooden toys from Andhra Pradesh, known for their vibrant colours and lightweight wood, as well as Etikoppaka toys, crafted from soft wood and lacquer. The cheery toys are priced between ₹199 and ₹700. Also available are coaster sets to pretty up your table.

Handmade jewellery is popular, especially terracotta jewellery sets such as the Durga Set and the Warli Art Set. These are priced at ₹290. Handloom sarees in fabrics like mulmul and khadi as well as Banarasi and Kantha sarees are on offer. Prices vary with Banarasi and South silks starting at ₹2,100 and Kantha sarees at ₹2,600.



Contact: Phone: +91 9500127983;
Website: <https://soul-india.in/>
Email: soul.india@yahoo.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.

OFFER SPEECH THERAPY SUPPORT

Suniye, an NGO in Delhi, has been providing services to speech-and hearing-impaired children for 27 years. It has a school in New Delhi where such children are taught to listen to sounds with their cochlear implants and learn how to speak. The goal is to enable the children to learn how to listen, speak, read, write, and join mainstream society in practical ways.

Suniye offers speech therapy, parent counselling, and rehabilitation post-cochlear implants. The team engages with every person around the child — parents, neighbours and siblings. Efforts are made to seek affirmative action for the children through research and policy development.

To help their cause, you can sponsor a child's education for ₹3,000 a month or donate for a teacher's salary. Volunteering involves fundraising and teaching.

<https://suniye.in/>
+91 9873031973
contact@suniye.in

HELP WITH SEXUAL MINORITY RIGHTS

Founded in 1999, Sangama, an NGO in Bengaluru, works for economically and socially disadvantaged communities like transgender persons, sexual minorities, sex workers and the urban poor in Karnataka. It also works with their family members, friends and their social milieu.

Sangama helps them access their entitlements from the government like pensions and loans as well as benefits from the Construction Workers Board. It strengthens community leadership and sensitizes officials, industry, and elected representatives.

Their project, Breaking the Cycle, supports the education of children of sex workers. Sangama conducts health camps and has an active health programme. It helps the urban poor gain access to basic civic amenities.

Volunteers from all walks of life are welcome. Internships are available for one month or longer.

<https://www.sangama.org/>
+91 9972903460
sangama@sangama.org

NURTURE WITH NUTRITION

MCKS Food for the Hungry Foundation was set up by Master Choa Kok Sui, founder of Pranik Healing and Arhatic Yoga, to realize his vision of a world free of hunger.

Since early 2005, the foundation has delivered more than 12 million meals to people in need. It has a community kitchen equipped to serve 10,000 meals a day to schools, orphanages, old-age homes and hospitals.

Their Ek Muthi Anaaj campaign revives the traditional custom of keeping a portion of food for charity. The idea here is to implement it practically. Participants are given a bucket to collect grain and asked to put a fistful of any grain into it every day, which is then handed over at the end of the month.

Donations are welcome online. You can select a specific cause from their list and donate accordingly.

<https://mcksfood.com/>
+91 9873800500
info@mcksfood.com

SUPPLY NUTRITIOUS FOOD TO ALL

Annamrita Foundation in Nagpur supplies mid-day meals to government schools and non-aided schools, with donor support, for the education of children. It also provides food to

the relatives of patients in government hospitals. Annamrita means 'food as pure as nectar'. The aim is to supply food that is nutritious to those who need it.

The charity's Khichdi Drive is a unique initiative where companies hold a tasting event at their offices and all employees eat the *khichdi* being served to the kids at school. This serves the dual purpose of raising funds and awareness.

Kit of Joy is an initiative that delivers ration kits to children. Each kit has a mix of grains, pulses, oil and spices. Eight crore kits have been delivered to children from eight states so far.

The NGO accepts donations and volunteering involves raising awareness, helping in kitchens, celebrating special occasions with charity and more. They are also in search of CSR partners.

<https://annamrita.org/contact/>
+91 9323111690
info@annamrita.org

TEACH CHILDREN IN REMOTE SCHOOLS

In 2011, Satish Vishwanathan and Venkat Sriraman from Microsoft got together to start eVidyaloka, an NGO in Bengaluru. Its mission is to bolster the education of children studying in rural government schools by crowdsourcing volunteer teachers and linking them to rural classrooms through information technology.

Digital classrooms have been set up in remote government schools where volunteers teach children for two hours a week in the regional language. Science, maths and English are taught along with the basics of artificial intelligence.

Teaching aids are available including lesson plans, presentations and videos. eVidyaloka works in 14 states, 67 districts and 734 schools.

The NGO also runs a Teach

Through Television project that connects volunteer teachers with rural children virtually. With digitally revitalized classrooms, lessons, in the form of videos, reach rural households through local cable networks on select channels. Donate online or volunteer for two hours a week from your home or office.

<https://www.evidyaloka.org/>
080-31223000
talktosomeone@evidyaloka.org

SEEK JUSTICE FOR SEX WORKERS

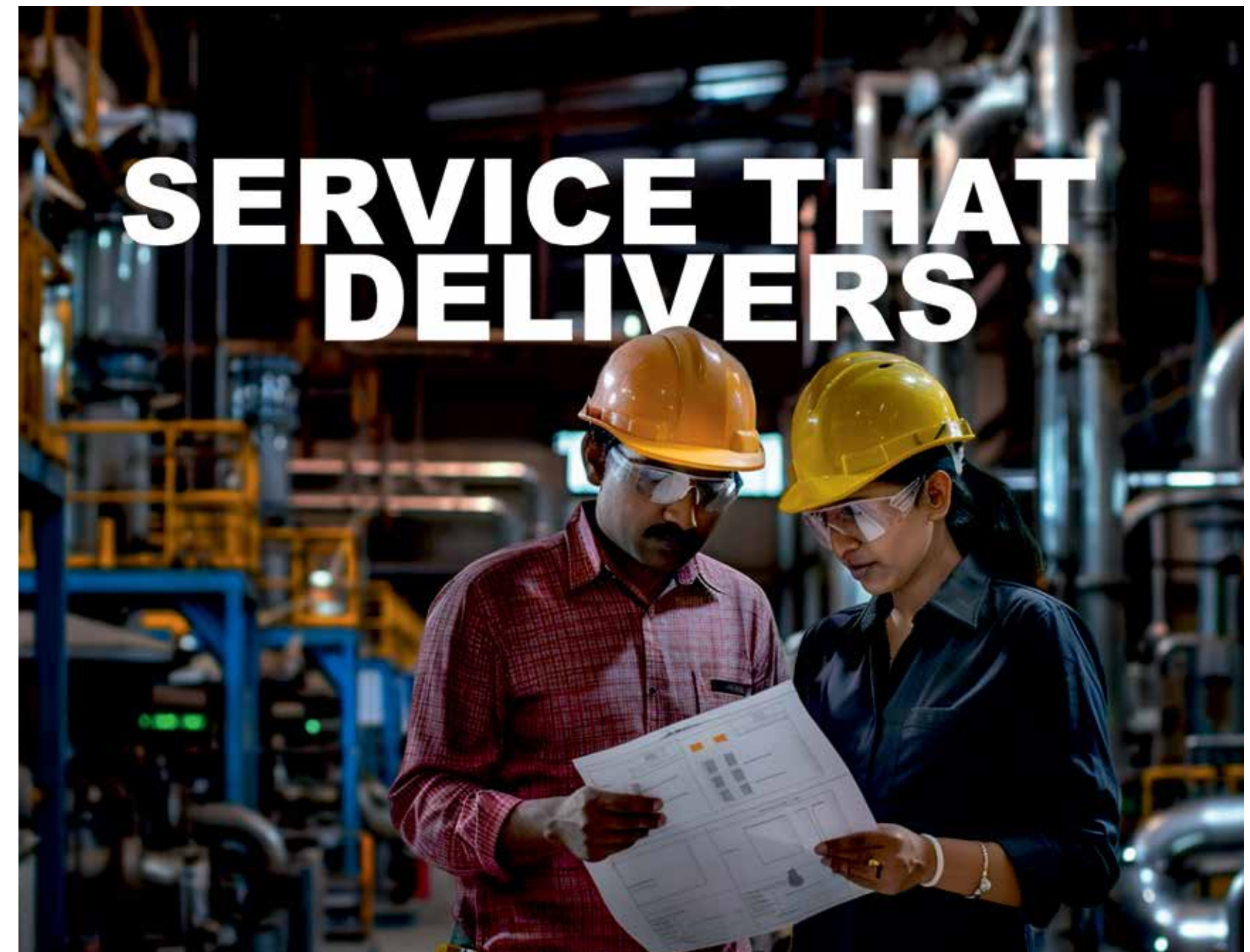
Freedom Firm's mission is to rescue and rehabilitate minor girls sold into the sex trade. Based in Ooty, it rescues the girls, restores their identities and seeks justice against those responsible. The investigation team travels across villages and towns, identifying victims and documenting such crimes.

The next step is to involve the police, get medical check-ups done of the girls and accompany them to government and private shelter homes. The team visits the girls to conduct life skills training, art and craft activities and vocational skill development. The girls learn how to heal and look forward to a better future.

The NGO tries to create systemic change through consistent monitoring, assisting in court trials and pursuing each case until a verdict is announced.

The organization works with communities that are plagued by rampant sex trafficking through generations such as the Bedia, Devadasi and Kanjar communities. To date, 1,004 girls have been rescued. Donations are needed for legal documentation and rescue operations. Volunteering and internship programmes accommodate many skill sets.

<https://www.freedom.firm.in>
+91 4232443053
contact@freedom.firm.in



Service is our foundation built on the ethos that "It pays less to talk about the product and more to understand the customers' problems". It's our daily practice, through over 1,250 customer connects, applying our knowledge, to understand what customers truly need for real, tangible long term benefit.

It drives our actions to Improve Uptime, Improve Plant Performance and Sustain Benefits, and enables us create lasting customer partnerships.



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www.forbesmarshall.com



TATA STEEL FOUNDATION



WOMEN IN LEADERSHIP: BRIDGING UNSEEN BARRIERS

Tata Steel Foundation enables women to realise their full potential through the Disha programme that facilitates comprehensive and grassroots-level interventions to assert their rights, engage in community decision-making, and contribute to socio-economic development.

Sure, we make steel.
But **#WeAlsoMakeTomorrow.**

- Collaborating with 18,156 women
- 5000 underwent Disha training till FY24