

Civil Society



BEYOND PRIDE

In Kolkata, some new ground

Curators of the
Kolkata Queer
Arts Month:
Anindya Hajra
and Navonil Das



DELHI VERDICT

IS AAP NOW JUST ANOTHER PARTY?

Pages 8-11

AAP'S MIXED LEGACY

Sanjaya Baru in Delhi Darbar
Page 24

INTERVIEW

'FEWER JOBS, MORE OPPORTUNITIES'

RAVI VENKATESAN ON MAKING
THE YOUNG SELF-STARTERS

Page 6

ON A MANGO YATRA

Page 15

SHRINKING DELHI

Page 25

THE MAHAKUMBH

Page 26

The AAP story

HOW should the Aam Aadmi Party's (AAP) defeat in Delhi's Assembly elections be seen? It all depends on how AAP is to be regarded. If it is just another political party then victory and defeat are part of the hurly burly of politics. But if AAP is special and was expected to bring about a transformation in the quality of governance then, perhaps, we should shed a tear for AAP and ourselves. The opportunity to make a difference has been lost and will be difficult to regain.

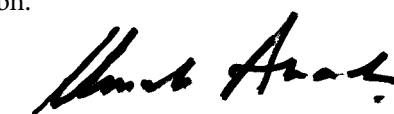
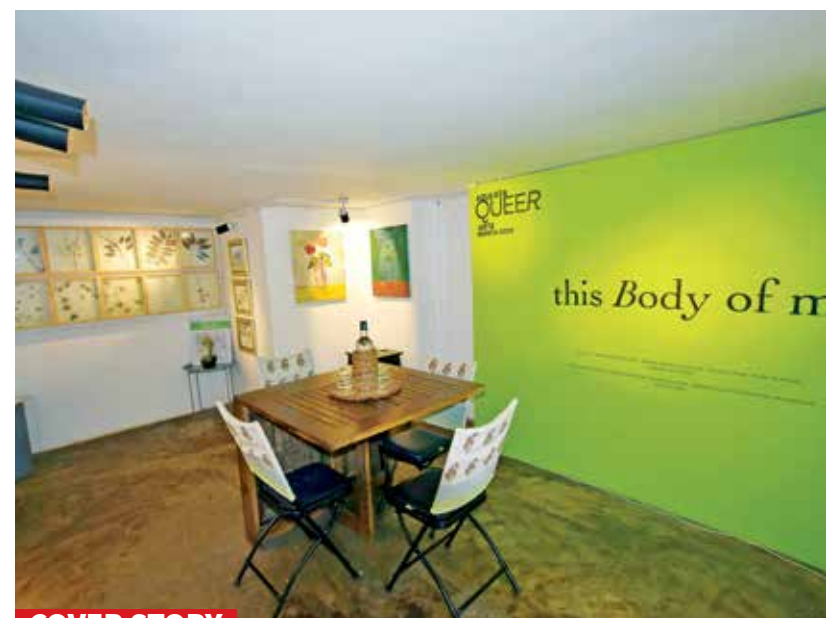
This magazine has tracked Arvind Kejriwal from much before he became a prime-time headline. Our first issue in 2003 had him on the cover because he was an interesting face in the RTI movement.

We were there in the slums of Delhi, the schools, ration shops, Jantar Mantar protests and public hearings. AAP's lineage as we know it is complicated. It was born directly out of the India Against Corruption movement whose antecedents have never been fully figured out. But AAP also emerged from a long history of activism in India. These were credible and sincere efforts by different social sector groups. AAP benefited from such disparate efforts and the momentum they provided for accountability and change in the country. They addressed serious problems of growth and development.

The general view is that AAP has let down the people who wholeheartedly supported it. It is true that the BJP government at the Centre gave it a tough time. But it is also true that AAP didn't deliver on many fronts that it could have. It searched for national status without fulfilling its duties in Delhi and by using shortcuts to popularity like freebies. The most galling of all has been the concentration of power in Arvind Kejriwal. It is a one-man party.

We have for our story in this issue spoken to many of AAP's well-wishers and raised the question whether AAP has lost more than just the election. Check out their views. The irony is that AAP itself sees the defeat as merely an election setback — some calculations gone wrong. It expects to be back in some combination or the other. For a lot of people that unfortunately is not enough.

Where are millions of young people with some kind of an education going to find jobs? There aren't jobs though there is growth. And these are AI times. Ravi Venkatesan tells us, in our interview of the month, that the solution lies in engendering an entrepreneurial mindset in the country. The young particularly must learn to be self-starters. There is a lot more in this issue from philanthropy with Pushpa Sundar, strawberries in Bahraich, a mango yatra and our columnists, particularly Venkatesh Dutta braving it out at the Mahakumbh.

COVER STORY

GOING BEYOND PRIDE

Kolkata Queer Arts Month 2.0 was a fascinating collection of canvases, photographs and exhibits across three venues in the city. You didn't have to be queer to be part of it.

20

COVER PHOTOGRAPH BY NISHAN DAS

Cruelty of witch-hunting..... 12

Beauty of the Constitution..... 14

Bahraich strawberry boost..... 16-17

Injured workers speak up..... 18

Drowning in sin..... 26

Respect for each other..... 27

ABC is not the last word..... 28

Delhi's water history..... 31

Fort, beach and song..... 32

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LETTERS



21 years

Congratulations on completing 21 years of hard work. I loved this issue. It had so much information about different products and crafts and art. I was very impressed by your section on the artworks done by people with disabilities.

I really enjoyed reading the magazine. You cover so many areas that touch our lives, be it economics, politics, education or environment. The writers always bring up issues to enlighten our thinking. It is rare to see such an independent spirit of journalism. Best wishes and I hope the magazine will continue for many more years.

Nilva Vohra

Your anniversary issue was a delight to flip through. I especially loved the piece 'All things bright and beautiful'. Overall, the issue made me pause, step back and take a genuine break – in keeping with your theme, 'small and slow'. Congratulations on completing 21 years as an independent magazine.

Sagari Mitra

In the times we live in, marked by the cruelty of war, genocide, fascism, authoritarianism and a pliant media, it is very creditable that you have kept this magazine going in an entirely independent manner.

I wish many more milestones for *Civil Society* in the years to come. In a country as diverse and interesting as ours, we need people who make a conscious effort to showcase the real India, the less-talked-about India and the India we should all be proud of.

Sapna Sayal

Unique art

I would like to thank you for your section, Artability. The

artists you cover are superb. With their unique skills and expertise, they have undoubtedly proved that where there is a will, there is a way. They are an inspiration to so many others. Keep rising and shining, I say.

Shalini Sharad

Kudos to your effort to applaud such talented stars. I call them stars as they are beautiful souls and rather rare. Irrespective of their shortcomings they spread happiness through their work. I know one of the artists you covered, Devanshee Srivastava, since many years. She is a charming child. With loving parents and a supportive brother, she has sailed through many hurdles in life gracefully. Her beautiful art work is displayed with pride in my clinic and is deeply appreciated by my patients.

Dr Harsha Chaudhary

The artists touched our hearts with their work. I would like to congratulate them and the magazine for featuring their incredibly talented work.

Rashmi Wahi

When I saw the Artability segment in your magazine, I instantly thought, This is awesome work. Thank you for showcasing such genuine talent.

Anjum

The eight artists you highlighted are so skilled and their stories are

very inspiring. I once had a student with autism who found joy in painting. The Artability section helped me reconnect with him. What a lovely idea.

Sushmita R.

All artworks featured in the Artability section fascinated me but one stood out in particular — Anjum Malik's painting of a boat with crutches representing the oars. The symbolism resonated with me and I want to congratulate the artist on such skilled and mature work. This is genuine talent.

Jyoti Dharmara

Someone close to me has Down Syndrome. I thought I should share with you that she really enjoyed the art showcased in Artability. Her favourite was *Tree of Life* by Rishi Datta. Thank you for giving space to artists with disabilities in your magazine.

Anchal Mehra

Donkey love

When I read 'Donkey's milk great for soap', I realized how much we don't know about the world of organic products. An interesting read.

Rachit Randhawa

Donkeys are most marginalized animals, shunned to the fringes of animal society. So, it was fascinating to read how they can be an economic asset too.

Karan Manik

Mission hospitals

I read about Dr Vijay Anand Ismavel and his wife, Dr Ann Miriam's selfless work at Makunda Hospital in Assam in *Civil Society's* May 2020 issue. It's because of their commitment to respond to His calling that this hospital is growing from strength to strength with diversified services for the poor.

Thank you for enlightening us about the current status and challenges faced by the Christian Mission Hospitals in remote areas of India.

I pray that our Lord will continue to bless these hospitals with committed professionals to serve the needy.

Saday Godem Topno

Doctors and AI

I agree with Dr Raju Sharma's perspective in his interview, 'AI should be used to help doctors, not replace them,' in your August 2024 issue.

AI is a technology that is here to stay. It needs to be used to solve some problems and can take over the mundane tasks that doctors do every day, making it easier for them to focus on complex matters that require cognitive skills.

Harsh Kandpal

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RAVI VENKATESAN ON MAKING THE YOUNG SELF-STARTERS



Ravi Venkatesan: 'What you need to be able to do is to show young people what kind of businesses they can start'

'Fewer jobs coming up, but more opportunities'

Civil Society News

New Delhi

THE scenes are all too familiar. Tens of thousands showing up to claim a couple of government jobs. Children trudging their way through school, barely learning to read or write. Where will employment for so many millions of Indians come from, especially when even those who get a college education don't find takers?

Such grim odds, that too amid rising expectations, call for less orthodox solutions. For instance, inculcation of an 'entrepreneurial mindset' could be one way out. It would take people from being job-seekers to self-starters.

Ravi Venkatesan believes that the future lies in helping the inventive and risk-taking spirit in individuals blossom by connecting them to success stories, cleaning up regulation, making finance available and handholding them in the adoption of modern technologies.

Venkatesan is the co-founder of GAME or Global Alliance for Mass Entrepreneurship. He used to be the chairman of Microsoft India and has held other significant corporate jobs.

He has been working innovatively on the employment problem in the

country and we spoke to him recently to catch up.

Q: When we last met, you were deeply involved with the Delhi school programme on entrepreneurship. How is that doing?

The Delhi school programme is now running in 13 states. And I think, according to the latest numbers, four and a half million kids a day are going through this programme.

That's one of our successes. It's run by my co-founder, Mekin (Maheshwari), and the Udhya Learning Foundation. It's an extraordinary success which continues to spread to more and more states.

It turns out that this whole issue is very complicated, like most things. We've had many interventions which have been successful. For instance, we focused on how to make it easier to register a small company and operate as a small business, something that the finance minister said a lot about in her Budget speech.

We've worked for two years in Punjab. Most of these issues are actually at the state and local level and not at the Central government level. We did a tremendous amount of work on decriminalization, simplification and digitization of regulations in Punjab and we're

trying to see how to take it to more states.

Q: What exactly does that mean? Putting processes online or what?

It means that you first look at the regulatory thicket. How many regulations does a small factory or a small food business have to comply with? And then you understand how many of them are actually criminal offences. It turns out, for instance, that under some Factories Act, if you don't lime wash your factory walls, it's a criminal offence. This is a regulation that's more than a hundred years old. It may have made some sense then. It certainly makes no sense today. Of course, nobody goes to jail now. But it becomes an opportunity to make some money.

There's a nice report that we put out on this. But, basically, you go and understand working with the government. Usually, the friction is over environmental compliances or fire and safety issues.

You work to try and decriminalize, simplify the number of compliances and then the final step is — can you digitize many of these so that there is no human interface and there's no application of judgement required which is where a lot of the problems arise. So, if you can actually just do it all online then it makes it easier. The work in Punjab was quite successful until the government changed.

Q: How long was this work going on in Punjab?

Two years. Then the AAP government came in and it all stopped. When Vini Mahajan was chief secretary and Captain (Amarinder Singh) was the chief minister, the environment was very conducive to progress on all this.

We have been focused a lot on what we can do to support women. If it's hard for a man, it's even harder for a woman entrepreneur. Only 20 percent of businesses are women-owned. Then, if you look beyond self-employed businesses, that number is actually four or five.

We did many things which didn't work, but the one that seems to be really showing lots of promise is our work with aggregator and collective organizations like YouthNet in Nagaland and elsewhere in the Northeast or Saath in Gujarat.

Through these collectives, we're able to get a lot more women transacting on e-commerce platforms like Amazon. You have to do a lot of work on capacity building of these entrepreneurs as well as with the platforms to make this possible. It's showing great promise and our goal is to create 250,000 women entrepreneurs transacting and improving their incomes.

Q: In the Northeast or all over India?

All over India, but the Northeast is particularly good because of our partner, YouthNet. It was covered in the Economic Survey because Anand Nageswaran liked that initiative in particular. Then we've done quite a bit of work on improving access to loans for small businesses, first-time entrepreneurs.

Q: Give us an idea of what the entrepreneurship programme has meant for the four million kids it has worked with. Is there any way of assessing that?

There is. What we're saying is, in the 21st century there are going to be fewer jobs but more opportunities. And so everybody needs an entrepreneurial mindset, whether or not you're actually going to start your own business. Our point is, every young person needs to be exposed to this, and what we're seeing is it has already had a dramatic effect on their engagement levels, their academic performance in school.

And then you're seeing about 10 percent of them moving down a path of actually starting businesses. One of the aspects of this programme is whenever the state government is really supportive, they give small loans to these students to start a real business. Those tiny seed loans are working really well.

Q: What is the kind of entrepreneurial activity they might get into?

Well, the smallest ones are typically in services. For instance, there's a guy

called Monu whom I bought a toolbox. He was repairing electric rickshaws in Delhi. There's another guy who's actually started a truck logistics company. He doesn't own the trucks. He runs a booking service, matching supply and demand. So that's a more sophisticated kind of business. There are smaller efforts to start an electrical business. Many of them join Urban Company and become self-employed entrepreneurs to start with and then, hiring more people, become small businesses that work with the Urban Company platform, offering different types of services. All these case studies are documented.

Q: What is it that you put a young person through in this course?

Well, it turns out that entrepreneurship requires a certain fundamental mindset and skills. One is agency. Another is problem solving. The third is resilience or tenacity. The fourth is resourcefulness. You have to bootstrap your way and find a way to mobilize resources. We help them develop these skills experientially.

For instance, how do you teach a young person tenacity? You'll start with a simple exercise like in the class you have to build a paper aeroplane with your weak hand, learn to fly that and compete with your classmates. So that's a pretty frustrating thing for a kid to actually try and fold a piece of paper with your weak hand.

'An entrepreneurial mindset is what everybody needs, whether or not you're actually going to start your own business. Our point is, every young person needs to be exposed to this.'

Or, you have to work in a team and build the highest object in the classroom. It requires imagination and working with other kids to accomplish this. They'll pile books on a desk, then school bags on and then one kid will climb on top of that and somebody will climb on the back of that kid. Then there is the capstone programme. They have to get together and actually run a business during the summer holidays. They each get ₹1,000 as a loan. And so, five kids will get together and with ₹5,000 they have to figure out what business they can run during the summer holidays.

You also expose them to successful small entrepreneurs, somebody from their own community who's running a *kirana* shop and they don't realize that the *kirana* shop and *chaiwala* can easily make ₹3 lakh per month. You begin to see money and somebody from your own community doing this. They get exposed to a lot of role models.

Q: This would require an enormous amount of outreach?

Our partner, Udhya Learning Foundation, does it, not GAME. It is an enormous amount of outreach. First of all, we work with state governments and unless the chief minister and the education minister are committed, we don't go there because all this is delivered through the existing infrastructure of government schools and teachers. Then you have to put this into the curriculum, which is now possible through the new National Education Policy (NEP). This is part of skilling and immersive learning. Then you have to train the teachers on how to deliver this curriculum.

Q: People who are entrepreneurial don't necessarily have to excel in traditional ways of learning, right?

That's the point. When I started GAME six years ago, one of the most encouraging things for me was that during the Industrial Revolution in

Continued on page 8

Continued from page 7

Britain in the 17th and 18th centuries or America in the 18th or 19th century, the vast majority of important entrepreneurs were illiterate and from very modest backgrounds, whether it was James Watt or Thomas Edison or Isaac Singer. They were, in a classical sense, complete failures. But that wasn't a barrier for them to achieving success.

Q: What is it like in rural areas? You know, rural entrepreneurship versus urban settings.

Well, this is where GAME is now becoming really interesting because we are getting on the ground. So far, we were trying to understand what the issues or challenges are, the barriers, the constraints and how do we solve them. Now we have to get into a location and see how we can inspire much more entrepreneurship and success.

We have been out on the ground in Nagpur district for the past year, in Nagpur city and also peri-urban areas. We are also working in Vizag district. We've got a partnership now with UP to be in every district. They have a programme or a scheme called M-YUVA to give interest-free loans to 100,000 first-time young entrepreneurs every year. This is a giant opportunity.

What we're finding is people are lost. They don't know what to do. And so, conversely, they're very hungry and open. What you need to be able to do is show them what kind of businesses they can start. There's no point asking them what sort of businesses they would like to start. They don't know.

The more you can expose them to different businesses which require relatively low capital investment, below ₹10 lakh, the more likely they will be able to do it.

One of our more interesting pieces of work has been to identify businesses that are relevant everywhere. For instance, we are working with an organization called SELCO (Solar Electric Light Company). They have 175 different businesses which are powered by small solar panels, whether it's a milking machine and a milk chiller or a *roti*-making machine, or a chilli dryer.

They've had significant success, mobilizing 25,000 entrepreneurs in Karnataka to start these types of businesses. What we're saying is, why can't we take SELCO to every state in the country?

There are many, many people in the country who've done a fantastic job with sustainable agriculture. These are models which require no pesticide, no fertilizer, no seeds and you're able to build a circular economy at the unit farm level.

I was with this farmer in Ahmedabad who runs Bansi Gir farms. It's such a good model. He is already working with 6,000 farmers. How do we take him and expose him to farmers in many more locations? We don't want to push them. Our job is to make the connections so that adoption can happen.

Q: Millions of people apply for jobs. What do you do about people who aspire to only that one job in the police or in government?

One of the things we have to do is figure out a model that can self-replicate in many, many locations. It should have local support.

The idea is like the RSS *shakhas*. Can we have lots of these local units which self-organize around a common idea and template? Can we get there in the next 12 or 18 months? It has to be a movement of volunteers, not about paid people going there, showing up and trying to do something.

I've abandoned the idea of creating an organization that can go to more and more places and do things, and raises philanthropic grant money to do it.

I'm much more excited about creating a model where somebody who hears about it in Coimbatore and gets excited, starts a local chapter, plugging into a national network where these business models are available. That's the network model I'm focused on building and want to put in place quickly. It's a bottom-up movement with which it will be possible to scale up rapidly. ■

HAS AAP LOST MORE THAN JUST THE POLLS?

Civil Society picture/Lakshman Anand

Its admirers say it has become another party

Civil Society News

New Delhi

DURING the high noon of the India Against Corruption agitation, the Ramlila Ground in Delhi used to be filled to capacity for rallies. The speakers were activists, of different persuasions, most of them addressing such large numbers of people for the first time. When the agitation morphed into the Aam Aadmi Party (AAP) similar crowds would show up on several occasions, including twice for rather dramatic public oath-taking ceremonies of the AAP government.

Those were times that were full of anticipation and the mood was electric. Activists making the transition to politics were talking of setting new standards in public life. Common people felt they were witnessing the beginnings of a major social transformation — a corruption-free, transparent government run by leaders shorn of the customary trappings of office like red lights on cars and layers of security.

AAP seemed to be born in a flash as also India Against Corruption. In reality both successfully rode the momentum of decades of civil society activism. They specifically came out of the Right to Information (RTI) campaign. But RTI itself was just the tip of a growing iceberg of causes with which activists had been pushing governments to deliver benefits to citizens and understand their many pressing needs.

Activists had been working across a range of concerns in health, education, environment, nutrition, forests, land rights and transportation. There were initiatives far removed from public view but of great significance such as the drafting of a law to protect whistleblowers.

It was with this lineage that AAP came to power in Delhi, buoyed along by the goodwill of diverse groups across the country and seen by ordinary people as the medium for addressing their real needs.

A decade later, as AAP contends with defeat in the recent elections to the Delhi Assembly, much of the earlier headiness has waned. AAP's own aura has dimmed. It lost to the BJP by just two percent of the overall vote, a whisker of a margin. But its supremo, Arvind Kejriwal, and other key leaders were defeated. It could still fill the Ramlila Ground with crowds though perhaps not with the same degree of idealism that brought it into prominence.

Charges of corruption against its top leaders, together with stints in jail, haven't been entirely convincing. However, in the hurly-burly of politics, AAP is now seen as just another political party struggling to stay in power by any means.

Even if it were to get its political math right and return to power, AAP would find it difficult to replenish the reservoir of goodwill it had. Activists and professionals who once flocked to the party with high expectations now question AAP's record after two consecutive terms of power in the state of Delhi.

The lack of inner-party democracy in AAP has been disappointing to many. Even after 10 years, there is no party structure and Kejriwal is the single point of reference. Everyone else in the party defers to him and his ambitions. Elections have been



Shot from the past: Kejriwal campaigning in 2013, fresh from the anti-corruption agitation

fought, and now lost, in his name.

The party was supposed to raise the bar for good governance but it is instead accused of using subsidies to garner votes even more recklessly than the older parties have done.

The AAP leadership is seen as not having measured up to the delicate task of being in government. With its shrill personality cult, endless run-ins with the Centre and conflicts with the bureaucracy, it has created the impression that activists can't be trusted with power.

AAP's promise was that it would run an honest and corruption-free government in Delhi. It was hoped that the party would go on to reform and improve healthcare, school education and public transport. It was expected to rise above sectarian politics and be an example of open, consultative and decentralized governance.

Except in the case of education, where a tangible beginning was made, the AAP government's record has been disappointing. The number of buses and commuter trips made through public transport have actually declined. Air pollution has gone on unchecked despite the harm it does to public health. There has been a buzz around Mohalla Clinics, but their impact is yet to be understood and they didn't seem to fit into the health system of the capital.

OPPORTUNITY LOST

Jayaprakash Narayan is the founder of Loksatta, which long preceded AAP as a party attempting to raise standards in public life. Narayan is a heartfelt well-wisher of AAP and gives AAP high marks for coming

to power in Delhi. He also sees no shame in AAP losing the elections by just a small percentage of votes while seeking a third term.

"I think it has been a very, very creditable performance by AAP. To come out of a movement and be from the middle class without a political background and to come to power is quite remarkable," he elaborates on his admiration.

Narayan, however, has what he calls a few "pain points". He wishes that AAP had "come up with ideas that really matter to the country". They had the opportunity in a "very pragmatic way to transform our democracy" — through "genuine local empowerment", for instance.

"Arvind Kejriwal was the most empowered mayor in India. And yet he did not realize the importance of empowering local communities and the municipalities or whatever in a genuine and heartfelt way. And then making them work," regrets Narayan.

He believes that AAP lost the opportunity to use its voice to bring change. "The only relevance it now has is to be just like any other political party," he says.



Jayaprakash Narayan

Continued on page 10

Continued from page 9

Narayan is also pained by AAP raising freebies to the level of a philosophy, forcing other, bigger parties to follow suit.

“I hope it’s not irreparable but it has done very severe damage to the country. We always had a culture of short-term welfare. But there was always a measure of balance. AAP raised this short-term freebie culture to a philosophy,” he says.

“I have great respect for AAP. I believe they are some of the most talented people. But I think they lost their way. Like many others in India,” he says.

AIR POLLUTION UNCHECKED

“It is so disappointing to see AAP fail. It was a middle-class party with well-educated leaders coming to power, perhaps for the first time in this way. Everyone wanted them to succeed,” says Chandra Bhushan, a seasoned environmental campaigner who has worked with governments and industry and currently leads the NGO, iForest.

“It was, in a sense, our government. But frankly, I don’t think they did anything, whether it was air pollution, river pollution, reviving the Yamuna or dealing with congestion. This has been a wasted decade,” says Chandra Bhushan. “AAP took over from the Congress government under Sheila Dikshit, but didn’t take forward the modern systems that she had begun putting in place for Delhi,” he says.

Especially unfortunate has been the inability to rein in air pollution despite the costs that result from leaving it unchecked.

Chandra Bhushan explains that around 60 percent of Delhi’s air pollution comes from outside and about 40 percent is a result of what happens within Delhi.



Chandra Bhushan

Automobiles account for a part of the 40 percent, but a significant amount of air pollution comes from the open burning of biomass for cooking and keeping warm in winter. This is why even after stubble burning ends in the fields of Punjab and Haryana, pollution continues to spike in Delhi.

To rein in pollution, the AAP government needed to seriously improve public transport to get people out of private vehicles, which it didn’t do. It should also have planned a transition to cleaner energy for its citizens burning wood and coal.

“In 2020 I suggested that the ₹1,000 crore collected by way of environment cess be used to distribute LPG cylinders free to the poor to see the impact it would have on bringing down pollution in the winter months,” says Chandra Bhushan.

“There is a general consensus that open-air burning, not just in Delhi but all over India, is a primary cause of air pollution. Delhi needs to think about the energy transition of its poorer population,” explains Chandra Bhushan.

Not only did the AAP government not do what it needed to within Delhi, laments Chandra Bhushan, it also did not measure up to dealing with neighbouring states and the Central government to bring down air pollution in Delhi.

BUSES NEGLECTED

As with air pollution, public transport remained neglected when it should have been a priority. The number of buses in Delhi, now at around 3,000, is in fact half the number that used to be on the roads, says Geetam Tiwari, a professor at IIT Delhi who has been involved with Delhi’s transportation plans over the years.

Tiwari celebrates the granting of free bus rides to women by the AAP government, but she bemoans the lack of buses themselves. The number of commuter trips is at its lowest in 12 years, she says.



The number of buses has declined

Tiwari was part of the team that designed Delhi’s first bus rapid transport system or BRTS as it came to be known. The idea was to make bus travel comfortable and accessible.

AAP junked the very first BRTS, which it inherited from the Sheila Dikshit government, to please car owners in south Delhi. It could have instead tried to implement it better and explored the possibility of design changes, Tiwari says.

Much work on a bus system in Delhi preceded AAP, but it didn’t seem to want to draw on it. Not least among these efforts was the creation of the DIMTS or Delhi Integrated Multi-Modal Transport System which was a joint venture between the government and IDFC.

Under DIMTS there was the corporatization of bus services. DIMTS created public transport infrastructure and monitored the efficiency of bus services. The idea was that Delhi would have an integrated Metro and bus system.

DIMTS continues to function but no longer as the centrepiece of Delhi’s transportation system. In the absence of the importance it should have been given, it has seen its technical people drifting away.

“Our disappointment with the AAP government was that though they were for the *aam aadmi*, their policies were not at all bus-friendly. There were no discussions on the plans for Delhi. There was no recognition of the institutional mechanism under DIMTS which was supposed to take the city forward,” says Tiwari.



Geetam Tiwari

Civil Society picture/Lakshman Anand



Mohalla Clinics were not part of a system

Electric buses have been added to Delhi’s streets, but they are too few in number and certainly not enough to compensate for the general decline in bus transportation. The bringing in of electric buses has also been ad hoc and unplanned.

Explains Tiwari: “It is not just about a fleet of buses. It is about the system. The quality of public transport you have. What your waiting times are. How you manage the delays. How you ensure that the whole city has access to an affordable and quality bus system integrated with your Metro system.”

NO HEALTH STRATEGY

In the setting up of Mohalla Clinics, AAP lays claim to have provided healthcare services to people. But, as in transport, with its free rides for women, AAP’s propensity for grandstanding seems to have come in the way of shaping policy and putting in place a system which it could have done with some of the best possible expertise being available to it.

The status of Mohalla Clinics in the public health architecture of Delhi is tenuous. Many have in fact already closed down. With a randomly appointed MBBS doctor in attendance and some basic medicines these clinics provide at best some elementary care.

The clinics have no referral powers which means they are not integrated with the secondary and tertiary hospitals of the city. They are also dependent on ad hoc appointments and contractual service providers.

Delhi has municipal dispensaries, some primary health centres (PHCs) in its peri-urban areas, secondary and tertiary level hospitals. In fact, it has a preponderance of super specialty hospitals.

The AAP government, with its huge mandate and its willingness to spend on healthcare, could have provided Delhi with a robust network of PHCs with a bigger range of facilities and run entirely by the government.

This would have met the need for primary care and taken the load off hospitals like AIIMS where people tend to flock. The Mohalla Clinics provided visibility and instant political dividends, but have left a rapidly growing city unprepared to deal with health matters at the level of the community.

“I believe that it was a political strategy, but a political strategy that did not have deep roots. So, it kind of showcased something. There was a lot of excitement and, you know, people felt that something is being done. But that’s not how you build institutional structures,” says Rama V. Baru, who has been teaching and researching health policy at Jawaharlal Nehru University (JNU).

“In my view, not enough energy went into framing a policy on getting human resources, training people, rational practices and so on,” says Baru, explaining the need for groundwork.

“It was ad hoc from a public health perspective. Going beyond coughs and colds, each time you have a serious health crisis such as a cholera outbreak you have to treat people. But you also have to look at water supply and sanitation. That bit I have found completely lacking,” says Baru on the need for a vision.

“There may have been reasons why they could not forge it. But I am not even sure they had the appetite for it. In a city like Delhi with acute socio-economic disparities, sewage is a huge problem, so is drinking water supply,” she says.

Some investments were made in secondary-level hospitals and tertiary hospitals. But what Delhi really needed, and it could have been put in place over 10 years, was a dependable and inexpensive primary healthcare network.



Manas Human

MOVEMENT OR PARTY?

The appeal of AAP in its early days cut across society. It captured the imagination of people from different walks of life.

Manas Human, MD and CEO of an IT company, was among those early supporters and continues to be sympathetic to AAP. He says the anti-corruption plank on which AAP came to prominence is no longer important to people.

“I think we as a people have reconciled ourselves to corruption in our daily lives,” he says. “Parties are corrupt in one way or another to be in power and no party stands out.”

Asked if the anti-corruption movement would have been more effective if it had remained a movement, he says: “I personally feel that it would have. It might have had the chance to be a much bigger movement today and have a bigger impact than as a party.”

“I would still give AAP another chance to demonstrate something unusual. But I do think there is some value in being apolitical. I keep thinking of Mahatma Gandhi. He was not a political leader and at the same time he was a leader who influenced politics without belonging to a party.” ■

The cruel practice of witch-hunting

Kavita Charanji
New Delhi

WITCHES don't exist yet in rural India women continue to be branded witches. Their heads are shaven, they are sexually assaulted, forced to eat dirt, burnt alive and killed because in the male mind witches are for real.

Superstitious beliefs are not, of course, the only reason behind such criminal assaults. This is revealed in a survey, "The Dark Realities of Witch-Hunting: New Evidence from Bihar", carried out in 2023-24 by the Nirantar Trust and the Bihar Women's Federation along with other groups in 10 districts of Bihar.

Most women branded witches are married, live in joint families, are between 46 and 66 years old, have seen a recent increase in their income and play a leadership role in their village. Around 97 percent are from Dalit, Other Backward Castes (OBCs), or tribal backgrounds and come from landless households.

The survey was sparked by a horrific incident in Dumaria block of Gaya district in Bihar when a Dalit woman was assaulted and burnt alive after being branded a witch. Other cases in Bihar's districts surfaced. A woman in Muzaffarnagar was disrobed and paraded naked, with her head shaved. This shocking incident made news but the outrage died down quickly. One or two women in each of Bihar's 45,000 villages face the danger of being branded a witch.

"We felt that this issue has become so normalized and on such a large scale that it needed to be addressed. It is very dehumanizing, and is the cruellest form of violence against women," says Santosh Sharma, who leads Nirantar Trust's grassroots programme in Assam and Bihar, which focuses on women's empowerment and gender-based violence.

There is no Central law that directly addresses this issue. Four states, Bihar, Jharkhand, Chhattisgarh and Assam, have laws related to witch-hunting.

At a press conference to discuss "25 Years of Bihar Witch Prohibition Act 2000: How Many Killed and How Many Displaced?", it was clear that the law had failed abysmally in preventing witch-hunting.

For its survey, Nirantar talked to 145 women from 114 villages who were assaulted after being called witches. They found that marriage did not offer protection. As many as 121 of the 145 women surveyed lived with their husbands and children in joint families. The majority of the victims were married, widowed, deserted or unable to bear children.

One hundred and eight women were between 46 and 66 years of age, an indicator that women

past their reproductive age were more vulnerable.

The perpetrators of witch-hunting were often family members. According to the survey, 43 percent of the women said that accusations of witchcraft originated within their families. Neighbours followed, and eventually the entire village community ganged together to brand them witches.

Violence could also be traced to deep-rooted patriarchy. Vocal women in the village were more likely to be targeted. These women

no support from the justice system. She said the practice of witch-hunting is rampant in the state. Just four months ago, a woman was accused of witchcraft. Her hair was cut, she was garlanded with shoes, thrashed and taken out in a procession to the beating of drums.

When Sahu and her group went to meet her at her maternal home, they found her so traumatized that she was unable to talk to them. She refused to return to the village. Two men were caught by the police but freed later. "The panchayat, mukhiya and sarpanch do pay



Most women branded witches are married, have a recent increase in income and play leadership roles in their communities

occupied leadership or representative roles in institutions like the panchayats, Self-Help Groups, anganwadis, and so on.

Another reason was a visible increase in the income of the woman or her family. Deaths of individuals, children or livestock within the family also led to accusations against a "witch".

Women faced the most persecution during the summer and monsoon months when diseases like cholera, malaria and kala-azar were at their peak.

Ojhas, or 'witch' doctors/traditional healers endorsed accusations of witchcraft since they earned a living out of such superstitious beliefs. They were the first to 'confirm' such suspicions about a woman. It was clearly in their interest to perpetuate such myths.

State laws criminalizing accusations of witchcraft have failed miserably. Very few officials or panchayat heads are aware of them. The police too are unaware of the provisions of the law. "There is no implementation of the law," says Ajay Jaiswal, a lawyer and founder of the Jharkhand-based non-profit, Association for Social and Human Awareness (ASHA).

Laxmi Sahu, secretary of the Bihar Women's Federation based in Champaran, said they get

attention to cases of domestic violence but they are completely silent on witchcraft-related violence. The entire community ranges against the woman," says Sahu.

Women suspected of witchcraft become completely devastated, says Kavita Kumari, a Bihar Women's Federation activist from Muzaffarpur. "Depression is an understatement. They feel suffocated and live in constant fear," she says.

The Nirantar Trust report has made several recommendations to policymakers to curb this form of violence. It has called for greater accountability of *ojhas* and panchayats. "The *ojhas* are the main instigators. We need very strong penal action against them or they should be offered an alternative livelihood so that they can earn a living with dignity," says Sharma.

The report also seeks dedicated state-level helplines for women so that those who have faced or are vulnerable to such violence can call the helpline. Also, laws to combat such violence need to be made more effective by educating officials, the police and panchayat heads. Tackling this form of violence must become a priority in Gender Justice Centres at state level, it says. ■

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Beauty of the Constitution

Sukanya Sharma
New Delhi

WHEN a charitable trust called We the People Abhiyan set out to educate citizens about India's Constitution, its members encountered a surprising reaction. People who attended their workshops were drawn to the artwork in the Constitution. They were fascinated by the beauty of the document.

"We had been focusing only on the text but we realized that if the art excites people and connects them to the Constitution, then this is something we should be talking about," says Vinita Gursahani Singh, managing trustee at We the People Abhiyan. The team ideated and then decided to write and publish a book on the artistic aspect of the Constitution. Their publishing journey took them all of two years. Titled *Art in the Constitution of India*, the book was finally released at a public function in New Delhi's Jawahar Bhawan on January 31, in collaboration with the Rajiv Gandhi Foundation.

"While the Constitution is a powerful book full of provisions for all of us to be able to lead fulfilled lives, it is also a strikingly beautiful book and that is what we are trying to highlight with this endeavour," remarks Singh.

The book explores the artistic intricacies of the document. The two original manuscripts in Hindi and English were written entirely by hand. There are details of the calligraphy, types of nibs used, and illustrations in each of its 22 parts and artistic borders.

The book honours calligrapher Prem Behari Narain Raizada and artists from Santiniketan, Nandalal Bose and his team, who left indelible artistic imprints on the pages of the Constitution.

The launch was preceded by an exhibition titled "Samvidhan Samvad", that focused on the making of the Constitution and delved into lesser known historical insights, stories and rare archival materials that led to the creation of India's defining book of law.

The 16 panels in the exhibition displayed the composition of the Constituent Assembly, Dr Rajendra Prasad, the first President of India's approach built on respectful dialogue and the social, cultural and religious diversity amongst members of the Constituent Assembly. Back then a panel was formed which debated the right to vote. The proposal that only literate people should be allowed to vote caused an uproar and was rejected.



Vinita Gursahani Singh explaining the Samvidhan Samvad exhibition to students



Students playing the Constitutional Saanp-Seedi

This marks the first stage of the exhibition. Two more exhibitions are slated to be held. The first will focus on the details of the Constitution after it was written and is planned in time for Ambedkar Jayanti on April 14.

The second will be held by November and will focus on what the Constitution today means for the citizens of India. "In a way, it has been designed as a travelling exhibition. If its integrity is maintained, any school, civil society organization, or university can access it, take prints and hold the exhibition anywhere in India," explains Singh.

"The reason we need to remember and understand the origins of our Constitution is that it is currently under very severe attack," said well-known Congress politician and

diplomat Mani Shankar Aiyar. "The principle of the document is checks and balances. The legislature, judiciary, and executive must ensure they uphold the spirit of the Constitution."

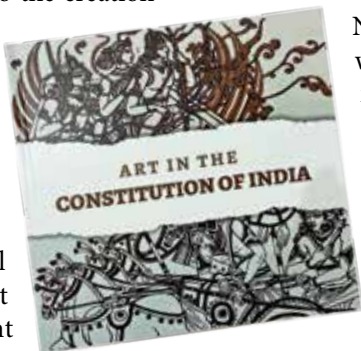
Vijay Mahajan, CEO of the Rajiv Gandhi Foundation, reiterated the importance of promoting these values. "While we may deify the Preamble and be inspired by it, we have to strengthen our resolve to fight, Article by Article, for the integrity of the Constitution's ideals," he said.

But he also reminded the audience that we have much to be grateful for. "Life expectancy in India was 32 years in 1947. It is now 70. This is an unparalleled achievement in public health and has been enabled by the vision embodied in our Constitution. So, we have a lot to celebrate but we must also remember our duty as citizens to protect and promote that vision."

This celebration of the Constitution was attended by students from the Salaam Baalak Trust, Jawaharlal Nehru University, Ambedkar University and Gujarat Vidyapeeth, among other institutions.

There were some inventive games for participants too. A Constitutional Snakes and Ladders game called Saanp-Seedi, Preamble Jumble, a fun puzzle where participants piece together the Preamble, and Screen Printing where attendees can print their own copy of the Preamble. There were also pledge boards and selfie points in keeping with the theme.

A copy of the Constitution placed on a stand in the heart of the corridor created much buzz. The exhibition and book launch were followed by a short *mushaira* where young poets recited rhythmic verses inspired by India's Constitutional values. ■



From America to India on a yatra for mango divine

Shree Padre
Kasaragod

ANIL Sharma's love affair with the mango began around 10 years ago. Walking around a store in Chicago, where he's been living for 30 years, he spotted Chausa mangoes for sale by sheer chance, he says.

He bought a box, took it home, and ate one. It tasted heavenly. "The mango was sweet as honey," he recalls. "My eyes closed. My head moved from side to side. I ate every bite with great delight."

Sharma placed the remaining mangoes tenderly in his fridge. A few weeks later he took out another one. It still tasted divine.

The memory of those mangoes didn't fade with time. It struck Sharma that he could travel to India on an Aam Yatra and savour as many varieties of mangoes as his heart desired. An American citizen, Sharma hadn't visited the land of his birth for 23 years. After he retired in 2019 at the age of 62, the idea of going on an Aam Yatra geeked him.

The objective of his journey would be to visit orchards growing India's best mango varieties. He wanted to pluck unripe mangoes, naturally ripen them and taste them.

Sharma didn't want to go on a five-star guided tour of orchards. He wanted to travel quietly, with no loud announcements on social media, just like an *aam aadmi*. The tour took him four months from April to July in 2024.

Sharma landed in Delhi on March 8 last year. Since he was visiting his motherland after a long gap, he was eager to see how the land of his birth had progressed since then.

It hadn't been very difficult for him to plan his journey. He has a friend, Jaidev, a mango trader in the US, who knows mango suppliers in India. They briefed Sharma on the mango season, and put him in touch with traders and growers. They also kept updating Sharma during his tour.

Since he had decided to travel simply, he opted for non-AC trains during the initial leg of his journey. But once the summer heat set in, long-distance journeys became uncomfortable. For smaller trips, he even boarded unreserved compartments. For accommodation, he used AC railway retiring rooms or nearby hotels.

At every destination, he would visit a mango orchard, the local mango market and a heritage site. He travelled by bus or used an auto or a cab. If a place was within three kilometres, he simply walked.

SEASONS AND REGIONS Sharma's first stop was in Rajasthan. Sadly, the mango season hadn't set in yet. But surprisingly, he procured a small greenish red mango with yellow orangish pulp called Sindhura. It was amazingly flavourful. "Wow, this is a wonderful way to start my *yatra*," he told himself.

Sharma then went to Ratnagiri and Vengurla in the Western Ghats and from there to Dharwad to taste the famed Alphonso. Two mangoes for which Andhra Pradesh is famous, the Bangapalli and Himayat, lured him to Bakarapeta near Tirupati and a farm near Hyderabad. Salem was his destination for the Malgoa and a few local varieties. He tasted the Gir Kesar in Junagadh.

After that Sharma travelled to Lucknow to savour the Dasheri and Langda. Unfortunately, the Langda season hadn't set in. He tasted the Dudhiya Malda, Jardalu and Bombay varieties in Bihar.

Sharma had heard that the best Chausa mangoes came from Multan in



Anil Sharma decided to travel simply for his Aam Yatra, opting for non-AC trains

Pakistan. So, he ended his *yatra*, in the third week of July, by travelling to Multan to taste their Chausa too.

GREEN CHAUSA How would Sharma rate the mangoes he tasted? Which were his best varieties?

"I would give first place to the Chausa I ate in Delhi. The second would be Sindhura in South India, the third the Himayath I ate at Bakarapeta in Telangana. Fourth is the Pandoori Mamidi, a local mango variety in Andhra. It has a distinct flavour. I found the Kishanbhog I ate at Malda in West Bengal far superior to the much-touted Himsagar."

"Alphonso, of course, is a great variety," he added. "Except for Chausa, the other four were new to me and they made me happier."

Two varieties, he says, deserve special mention. "I visited Mathew Joseph, a retired soldier in Kainedi, Alleppey. He has grown more than 50 mango varieties on his farm which he has painstakingly collected from across India. Two varieties of hybrids, H-87 and H-151, were

Continued on page 16



At the Kannapuram festival where there were 150 varieties of mangoes

excellent.” Both have been developed at Kerala’s state farm at Karimbam near Thaliparamb.

He says he can’t really recall the exact number of mangoes he tasted during his journey. “I was made the taster of selected local mango varieties at the Kannapuram mango fest. I must have eaten at least 25 fruits there. Some months later, Shyju Machathi, a mango conservationist and a friend, brought me a big basket of mangoes from a mango fest in Bengaluru. Altogether, I must have eaten not less than 100 varieties.”

Sharma says the Kannapuram mango fest was his most memorable moment. “There were about 150 varieties of fruits. I was honoured by being given the responsibility of being a taster. I can never forget their affection and hospitality,” he says.

A common complaint is that mangoes that arrive in the market early aren’t tasty because they have been harvested too early. “I too had similar experiences. Like, I bought Lakhanhog which looked nice but the taste was flat. I bought Malgoa from a big mall in Tirunelveli but that too tasted flat. In fact, the raw mango of the same variety presented by friends in Palakkad tasted far better when ripened,” he says.

NOT IN A HURRY Throughout the tour, Sharma used public transport. “My main objective was to interact with co-passengers. I wasn’t in a hurry.” Yet, due to the language barrier, he was disappointed that he couldn’t converse with people at many places.

“A senior NRI coming all the way in the midst of summer won their hearts and opened a lot of doors for me. Even though I was a total stranger, many people went out of their way to help me,” he recalls. At Bakarapeta, he stayed in the home of Subedar Naidu. “Words aren’t enough to thank them for their hospitality,” he says.

Sharma always kept one or two mangoes in

his bag throughout the *yatra*. “There were instances when I didn’t have time to search for safe food or no time to eat at all. On such occasions, a mango served me as a meal or breakfast. I always carried a knife, a plate and napkin to enable me to eat it anywhere while travelling. It was safe and nutritious food and provided me the required energy.”

He never ate unripe mangoes. “Apart from my passport and mobile, the mangoes I carried were my most precious belongings. Sometimes I travelled very long in the summer heat to collect a few mangoes. Eating them before ripening, I felt, was a crime.”

US SUPPLY CHAINS Sharma also pointed out the difference in production, supply and marketing of produce in the US and India. “It is a big commercial business in the US, very sophisticated and streamlined. Mangoes are sourced globally and available year-round. In winter, they are sourced from South America. In summer, supply comes from Mexico and Asian countries. However, the taste of those mangoes is no way near Indian mangoes.”

In the US only about eight to nine varieties of mangoes are available. Another three to four varieties come from India and Pakistan in minuscule quantities. American consumers generally buy mangoes for the week, expecting them to ripen over time.

Sharma is puzzled as to why Indian mangoes are not promoted abroad. “Why aren’t excellent varieties like Chausa and Sindhura marketed like the Alphonso? Is it because it arrives first or its production volume is more? Look at the Pakistanis. They put in a lot of effort and so they are able to export their Chausa mangoes very well.”

“Life is very short,” Sharma says. “Find a reason to travel with spontaneity and a sense of adventure. You will be rewarded beyond expectations. Explore India. It has world-class architectural history. Keep that in mind when you plan an overseas vacation.” ■

BAHRAICH GETS A BIG STRAWBERRY BOOST

Usha Rai

Bahraich (UP)

THERE is palpable excitement in Gajpatipur village of Bahraich district in Uttar Pradesh (UP) where 10 women are cultivating organic strawberries on two acres for the first time. Farmers from Gajpatipur and neighbouring villages are arriving to take a look at the coveted new fruit carpeting fields in red and green. They too would like to grow the luscious fruit because of the lucrative income they could earn.

Thirty-six-year-old Siratul Nisha, one of the women cultivating strawberries, says, “I am not good at calculating the large amount earned on strawberries, but I know it will be in lakhs! My husband accompanies me to the market and does the calculation too. I am planning to grow strawberries again later this year.”

Some 30,000 plants are blooming. The first crop of strawberries has been harvested, packed neatly in boxes and sold in the *mandi* and markets of Bahraich. The strawberry season extends from October to mid-March.

It’s been a windfall, says Nisha, another strawberry cultivator. “One kg of strawberries fetches ₹250 in Bahraich. On an acre or from 15,000 plants we hope to harvest 7,500 kg of strawberries. We have two acres under strawberries in Gajpatipur so it will be a bonanza.” The fact that it is organically grown has added greater value to the fruit. The biofertilizer, a blend of cow dung, neem and other ingredients, is accessed from another group of women, also in Bahraich, who specialize in producing organic, home-made fertilizers for farmers.

Upesh Dubey, the agriculture specialist of the Aga Khan Foundation (AKF) which has sponsored the pilot project on strawberries, says the women, most of them in their twenties and thirties, are hard-working, disciplined and ambitious. Bahraich has been selected because it is an aspirational district in which the foundation integrates human, financial and technical resources to address the challenges faced by marginalized communities.

Each of these 10 women was selected from 30 farmer families who attended AKF’s Farmers Field School and are recognized for adopting best farming practices.

Rajkumari, just 22 years old, says, “The



The popularity of the fruit in the homes of the women and the good returns from its sales have strengthened their resolve to invest in strawberry cultivation

fruit is harvested in batches as it ripens. So, we pack two to four kg at a time and take it to the *mandi*. From my earnings from strawberries, I am saving enough to invest in the crop again next season.” Rajkumari, and Siratul, Munni, Suman, Shanti and Ramvati, will be using the money to improve their homes, add an extra room and some will be building their first *pucca* house. Money will also be spent for better education for children.

Almost every woman wants to use the additional income to improve irrigation facilities. Many women buy water from those who have a well or a boring. Dubey explains that the women now want to turn to solar power for irrigating their fields because it is so much cheaper. Eight of the 10 women in strawberry cultivation are members of AKF’s solar-powered irrigation system and pay at the rate of ₹2 per unit of water supplied to them.

Twenty-six-year-old Suman says she had no prior experience in growing strawberries. “I followed the training provided by the foundation and did exactly as instructed. I learnt that strawberries do not require excessive water and that proper irrigation management can yield better results.” She plans to invest the earnings from strawberry sales in her children’s education. Some money will be saved to grow high-value crops like broccoli and red, yellow and green capsicum.

Some 30,000 plants are blooming. The first crop has been harvested, packed neatly in boxes and sold in the *mandi*.

“I also want to arrange better irrigation facilities to ensure successful strawberry farming again,” she says.

Most of the women and their children have tasted strawberries for the first time and they love it. The popularity of the fruit in their homes and the good returns from its sales have strengthened their resolve to invest in strawberry cultivation. “Upeshji and AKF have spurred us to dream big and if more farmers take to strawberry cultivation our fruit may reach markets in Lucknow,” says Ramvati with pride.

Each woman has invested ₹50,000 for strawberry cultivation. Of this amount ₹30,000 was provided by AKF which in turn received the money from IndusInd Bank as its flagship CSR (corporate social responsibility) initiative. The remaining ₹20,000 is the contribution of the farmer herself for

irrigation, fertilizers, etc. Each farmer is expected to make a profit of ₹2 to ₹2.5 lakh.

Irrigation has to be measured and done at the right time. The plants need to be protected from fog which can occur anytime in the 40 to 45 days of the crop cycle. So mulching or protection of the cultivated area with biomass is important. The strawberry stems are procured by the AKF from Hyderabad and 3,000 stems were given to each of the 10 women.

“Our training began early last year,” says Shanti. “We were taught the minutest details of strawberry cultivation... the distance between plants, the manure to be used, the exact measure of irrigation for the crop. In fact, we began by sowing the stem and when it started sprouting in a month, transplanted it into our earmarked fields.” From the harvested crop, stems can be cut and kept for the next two seasons.

There is almost a geometric pattern to the strawberry fields. The first lot of the fruit was packed and reached the *mandi* in January. “I forgot to tell you we were also taught packing,” Shanti chips in. “We are using plastic boxes this season. But, in keeping with environmental concerns, we are looking for non-plastic containers.”

If mangoes are the flavour of the summer season, the women of Bahraich are making strawberries the flavour of winter. ■

The injured worker speaks up

Kavita Charanji
New Delhi

SAFE in India (SII)'s sixth annual report, "CRUSHED 2024", breaks new ground. For the first time, injured auto sector workers themselves carried out research for the report. Shramik Saathis or worker volunteers were trained in participatory research methods by SII and its partner, Praxis.

They used tools like factory resource mapping, body mapping and daily schedule mapping for an entire year. Through community or factory meetings, group discussions and individual-level interactions, the workers collated their major findings on worker safety concerns, key causes of compromised workplace environments and made important recommendations to the government, factory owners and managements.

Eight workers led over 100 workers in the survey. Their findings are brought together in an important chapter, "Hamaari Baat, Hum Bataayengey", in SII's report.

Several workers identified high production targets as the main cause of accidents. "When targets are high, operators sometimes themselves stop or remove the sensors and continue working," said one worker. They also expressed anger at the unfair treatment meted out to them by managements.

Perhaps the greatest value addition of the research is the recommendations by workers to factories, auto brands and the government. The workers call on auto component factories to meet basic safety standards like good equipment and infrastructure, clearly worded contracts and job security along with fair wages, basic facilities like clean workspaces, hygienic canteens and toilets.

Workers also want automobile brands to be more proactive in ensuring welfare issues are not compromised. They called for fair pricing for auto supplier factories so that employers can give workers a better deal.

State and Central governments are asked for more support and closer monitoring of factories. The workers sought permanent jobs, timely payments, stricter government audits, job security and encouragement to establish groups or platforms that will enable them to jointly voice their concerns and resolve them.

"My recommendation is that workers



For Safe in India's sixth report, the injured auto sector workers carried out the research themselves

should get permanent employment. This would result in salaries being credited to the accounts of workers. They would also get the legal minimum wage," said Suchita Saini, an injured worker.

Women workers are under additional pressure as there is gender disparity in auto sector supply chains. They are underpaid, overstressed and face pressures at home too.

Data was gathered by over 300 injured women workers, led by a group of 20 women injured on power press machines in Faridabad, Gurugram and Manesar. The proportion of women paid less than ₹9,000 is higher than men, both as operator and helper. Financial pressures often drive women to operate power press machines instead of the packing jobs for which they are usually hired.

Altogether over 6,500 injured auto sector workers that SII has assisted over the years, mainly in Haryana and Maharashtra, have contributed to the report. The statistics of injured workers are likely to be much higher nationally.

The report has several highlights. Thousands of workers in the supply chain of the top 10 auto brands continue to lose their fingers across the country. There are no major changes in vulnerable regions. Injured workers from Haryana and Maharashtra are mostly young migrants in low-paid, contractual jobs.

The lower the wage and level of education, the more fingers are lost. Untrained, low-paid helpers are often forced by their supervisors to function as machine operators without safety measures or adequate training.

Injuries due to crushing continue to be on the upswing. The major culprits are the notorious, poorly maintained power press machines that function without legally mandated safety guards or sensors.

Employers are unconcerned and reluctant about registering employees under the legally

mandated Employees State Insurance Corporation (ESIC) when they are hired. The ESIC e-Pehchaan (identity) card is vital for workers as it entitles them and their families to a range of ESIC healthcare benefits as well as compensation for sickness, injuries, unemployment, childbirth and death. However, injured workers report that they received the card only after the accident. The claim for insurance then becomes a long, arduous journey.

Rules are bent in other ways. Few get appointment letters or salary slips. Less than 5 percent work the legally mandated 48 hours per week or less. The majority work 12 hours a day, six days a week. Needless to say, they do not receive legally mandated overtime wages.

Against this grim scenario, there is some good news. Maruti Suzuki, Hero and Honda, brands with significant supply chains in Haryana, have seen eight quarters of falling accident trends, although they reported 1,000 injuries in 2024.

But there is need "to see a consistent improvement in this data for three years to demonstrate systemic change," the report points out. More worryingly, there is "anecdotal evidence that one of these three brands is asking their suppliers to be 'zero accident'. That mandate is leading to some suppliers not sending their injured workers to ESIC, making their situation worse."

The auto industry has to wake up to the plight of workers down the deeper supply chain.

As Sandeep Sachdeva, founder and CEO of SII, observes in his introduction to "CRUSHED 2024": "We cannot forever rely on 'low-road' manufacturing based on low-cost labour arbitrage. We need to take the 'high-road' of better working conditions to drive up higher value and quality production which is not possible with our current *jugaad* mindset."

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Kolkata queer month goes beyond Pride

AIEMA TAUHEED

WHEN the Queer Arts Month 2.0 opened in Kolkata recently it marked yet another step forward in the long and complicated quest for a better understanding of people with different gender and sexual identities.

The show was put together innovatively by Navonil Das and Anindya Hajra to convey that there is more to Pride than celebrations and slogans. It went on to accommodate all voices and experiences seeking equality.

Interestingly, the Kolkata Queer Arts Month 2.0 came around the time when the Supreme Court upheld its earlier order disallowing same-sex marriage, but giving people the right to live together.

The queer rights movement has had a long and arduous journey. It has been through courts and legislatures with successes and failures. But the challenge that has been most difficult to cross has been the elementary human one of being accepted as a part of one universe with everyday choices and concerns.

It is to this end that the Kolkata Queer Arts Month was conceived and first held in 2023. The November event, with “Ghosts and Ghettos” as its theme, built on the first. It was held at three locations: Aranya Baari, a café, Anjali-Pratyay, a space for assisted living, and Experimenter, an art gallery.

With an open call for submissions and invitations to a select few, the exhibition featured artworks by about 25 artists. These artists are people who are both queer and allies.

Says Das: “They are not all queer. I said that if we want others to be inclusive, we must be inclusive ourselves. That’s why Kolkata Queer Arts Month is open to everyone. Many artists are allies who have a strong political voice, and we welcome them.”

The abbreviation LGBTQIA+ is itself a constantly evolving one. It stands for lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, intersex, agender. The plus sign holds space for inclusivity, an ever-expanding swath of the community, with a growing understanding of gender identities and sexual orientations.

“We didn’t want to position ourselves as curators, per se. Last year, we invited Kallol Datta, a textile artist and designer, specifically to take on that role because we weren’t sure what form or shape the event would take. Kallol gave it a great structure,” says Das.

“This year, we thought about doing things differently, especially with a budget cut in place. But you wouldn’t be able to tell,” he remarks with a chuckle, looking around at the bold and brilliant artworks at the café.

Why “Ghosts and Ghettos” as the theme? “As marginalized people, we continue to carry the ghosts of the past and are confined to the ghettos of the present,” says Das. The ghettos, he says, are not just places but states of being.

This Body of Mine on a vivid green wall welcomed people at Aranya Baari. Das tells us that in queer politics, the body plays a crucial role. There is the trans body, the queer body, bodies of different shapes — some visible, some hidden.

These bodies are often judged for existing outside heteronormative expectations, especially regarding sexuality.



Anindya Hajra: ‘We have hosted several collaborations this year.’

“So, *This Body of Mine* is a way of urging you to look within yourself. We are exploring our bodies through art,” he explains.

There was a wall dedicated to the East Kolkata Wetlands and it was called *Disappearing Dialogues*. The wetlands have been gobbled up by real estate and with them have gone plants and other organisms. This used to be a unique natural recycling system using sewage to grow fish and garbage gardens to cultivate vegetables.

Frames containing medicinal and edible species were on display. Next to them were abstract ink drawings on Fabriano paper. But what could plants have to do with rainbows?

“Ecology of nature and ecology of people cannot exist in silos. Conversations on sustainability are not complete without addressing our current socio-political situations,” explains Das. “These leaves, gathered from wetlands so close to us, remind us of what we’re losing out on.”

Das, popularly known as Nil, is a queer fashion designer who wears his identity on his wrist through a signature Pride band. His pluralistic worldview shone through in his friend, Eina Ahluwalia’s pendant called the ‘Mandir Masjid pendant’ resting on his chest.

A recipient of the Tertiary Art Prize in Australia, he returned to India in 2004 to launch his label, Dev r Nil. Raised in Bengal’s *paraa* culture, he began as a volunteer, serving as a sexuality officer in college and supporting Pride events in Kolkata. He also happens to be a founding member of The India Story which is now in its 10th year.

PINK PARTIES Das and Hajra are pivotal to Kolkata’s queer rights movement. About 15 years ago, when Hajra, visibly trans, was barred from entering a club, it sparked the inception of Pink Parties here. These now serve as the fundraising backbone of Kolkata Pride, with a significant portion of the funds for Queer Arts Month 2.0 coming from them.

A small flight of stairs leads us up to the dining space of the café. Shaded lamps, fairy lights, books, rare old LPs in a basket and some plants give the café its quaint, rustic charm. Bold and life-sized paintings cover every wall.

Civil Society pictures/Ashoke Chakrabarty



Navonil Das: ‘Many artists are allies and we welcome them’

Social maladies, cloaked and caked in dirt, are laid bare on canvases, brazen enough for onlookers to gasp. There is the searing depiction of Draupadi’s disrobement from the *Mahabharata* in watercolour and ink on acid-free paper, surrounded by painted eyeballs depicting the male gaze in the courtroom. Titled *Panchali in the Court*, this piece is part of an original graphic novel by Sankha Banerjee.

On another wall hangs Vijay Kumre’s *The Red Light* (2024), in which an actual red light glares through a canvas of jute. Next to it is a nude woman, with dull, bloodshot eyes. “Well, it is, quite literally, a depiction from a red-light area. Talks of prostitution and women from the marginalized sections there,” Das explains.

In a room just a flight of steps away lie two life-sized cloth canvases by

‘As marginalized people, we continue to carry the ghosts of the past and are confined to the ghettos of the present. The ghettos are not just places but states of being.’

Sriparna Dutta, whom Das describes as one of the most celebrated artists this time. Sriparna, a multidisciplinary visual artist and former IB educator, works with women at grassroots level. She greeted us with a bright smile alongside her silver-haired mother, who had kindly eyes and an even brighter smile.

MOTHER AND MUSE As they stood proudly beside the artwork, it felt as though the fabric had come to life, artist and muse extending seamlessly into flesh and blood. And why not? Titled *Interlaced Narrative* (2024), stitched onto the canvas of her mother’s saree were two large figures — Sriparna and her mother — surrounded by caricatures of women in various poses: some washing dishes, one standing tall, and another peering directly at us.

As a child, she watched her mother, a house nurse, spend 30 tireless years juggling daylight hours and gruelling night shifts, all for the sake of her child’s future. But in 2020, she took a step beyond the role of a daughter to truly see her mother as a woman. That’s when the stories surfaced — of abuse and sexual violence, of strained household dynamics, and of economic hardships.



Sriparna Dutta and her mother with her artwork, 'Interlaced Narrative' (2024)

Those revelations became a turning point for her. In 2021, she was out travelling and meeting women in different work settings.

“Who is this?” we ask her, pointing at a caricature of a woman who seems to be doing dishes, “I met her in Nala Sopara, a small village in Mumbai, where she was caught up with her daily chores. Her hands never stopped, moving deftly from one task to another, yet she was kind enough to talk to me,” she fondly recalls.

Pointing at another caricature, her eyes soften again, “That’s Devika, she’s in 9th grade. Her mother, Sushma Didi, is a worker. I spent a birthday with the family,” she says.

WOMEN’S LIVES Sriparna is currently working on two research projects. One of these projects is on economic discrimination, where she’s asking women one simple question: How would you spend a hundred rupees?

“For one, it’s not even enough to splurge on a coffee latte. For another, it’s a hearty meal of biryani. And for yet another, it’s the investment in a packet of cigarettes to keep her customers coming back to her *chai dukaan*,” she explains.

The other is a project on 21st-century women. Among whom stands a domestic worker, violated by her *malik*, forced to show up each day because survival doesn’t afford the luxury of refusal. Another, locked inside her home by an office-going husband, stares at a door that separates her from a world she’s never known. And yet another, raped by her in-law while her husband watches in silence and hopes for the birth of a baby boy. And many, many more.

These are all women etched onto the fabric of both her artworks exhibited at Aranya Baari and Experimenter, the third site.

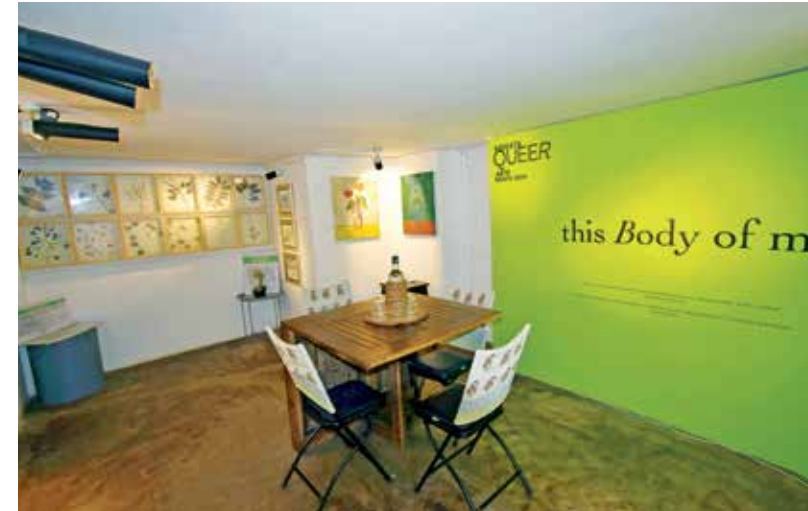
At Experimenter, she has an ongoing handmade cloth book of these women. One that allows the visitor to pick it up, flip through and place it back, etching their own touch onto it. She wanted her art to be touched and felt by all, in an attempt to shatter the elitism that comes with art.

Anjali-Pratyay, which is a site of the exhibition, provides assisted living for recovered mental health patients. Taxi drivers can only identify it as a *pagal khana*. But it is far from what an asylum looks like. Residents, some



Archee Roy with her artwork, 'I, Exist'

Civil Society picture/Aiema Tauheed



'This Body of Mine' is a way of looking within. It is the exploring of one's body through art.



Rare old LPs in a basket and some plants give Aranya Baari café its quaint, rustic charm



Sheba Chhachhi's 'Seven Lives and a Dream'

with family and many without, live in harmony, spending their days baking, attending workshops, and stitching.

Abhijit Sengupta of Anjali-Pratyay showed us around. Kind eyes and smiles greeted us. Some were too busy pouring batter into moulds or stitching to notice us.

By this point, we couldn’t help but wonder why the exhibition had to slip out of an art gallery.

“We wanted to examine whether the gallery space itself can become a kind of ghetto. How do we dismantle that? Do we, by operating within the art world, confine ourselves to the white cube of the gallery alone?” explained Hajra, a founding member of Pratyay-Gender Trust.

At Anjali-Pratyay, a large wall read: ‘We can always go’. The library and an adjacent room were turned into exhibition spaces. In the large room, a table displayed ceramic objects that caught the eye. “Everything on this table was created by our residents,” says Sengupta, beaming proudly.

The collection included a ceramic turtle, fish, coasters, spoons, plates and more. All in great shape. “They were delighted to see their work on display,” added psychologist Suhita Surai.

Next to the table was a large canvas titled *I, Exist* with brushstrokes resembling the lines of a topo map, eyes and handprints scattered across. This work was created by Archee Roy, a Dalit queer visual artist and activist with Sappho for Equality. “These are my hands. I try to imprint myself in my work so that I exist wherever I go. The system won’t give me space to exist, but I will claim my own,” she said. What began as activism for Archee soon turned into a realization that art could also be a powerful form of expression. She is currently studying textile design at Kala Bhavan, Visva-Bharati University, Santiniketan.

“We are facing systematic oppression,” she said gravely. “It’s about surviving every moment.” Her works are inspired by socio-political complexities around us. “You’ll also notice a fish in this artwork. When something happens to one, they all come together, galvanizing into a cluster,” she said.

‘The intention was to go beyond the textbook definitions of what it means to be queer, particularly within the arts space.’

Recalling a dialogue by Pares Rawal’s character in *Bhool Bhulaiyaa*, “*Jhund banake chalo*,” she talked about the politics of *jhund*. “We move in clusters because we know we can’t fight alone,” she explains. “It’s very different from the history of ghettos in Black American society. We know that we can’t fight alone. We have to ghettoise. We’re claiming ghettoisation.”

To her, this *jhund* stands for solidarity for survival. She uses broomsticks and large brushes, painting freehand to make her work “instinctive.” *I, Exist*, an acrylic painting on a three-metre-long canvas, took her three days to complete. The dynamic, unpredictable lines in the work explore the tension between chaos and resilience. The eyes featured in the piece serve as mirrors, speaking truth to power.

At the Experimenter Art Gallery was featured a segment from artist-activist Sheba Chhachhi’s *Seven Lives and a Dream*, a series of monochrome photographs from the 1980s’ anti-dowry protests. The intense eyes of women which seemingly follow you, honour the feminist activists of that time.

As Ahon Gooptu, gallery associate, said, “Maybe that’s the point. Their gaze follows her in her work. She has documented her foremothers.”

Overall, it took Das and Hajra exactly a month to prepare this Queer Arts Month. “This year’s edition saw more spontaneous submissions than the last one. It is perhaps due to greater awareness after the first edition. We also hosted several collaborations, including a workshop with contemporary dance practitioner Sudarshan Chakraborty and the girls of Ektara School,” Hajra says.

“The intention was to go beyond the textbook definitions of what it means to be queer or trans, particularly within the arts space. This is precisely where this edition of Kolkata Queer Arts Month has made its mark, as a trans and queer-led initiative,” Hajra continues.

At Experimenter, surrounded by artworks and poems, with the line ‘Rust is our redemption’ on the wall, Anindya shared a glimpse of the next edition, which will feature a retrospective on trans and queer lives in India. ■

AAP's mixed legacy



**DELHI
DARBAR**

SANJAYA BARU

AFTER the Indian National Congress morphed from being a national movement into a political party, several civil society movements have tried to make this transition. The most prominent among them being the Dravidar Kazhagam (DK), led by Periyar, that evolved into more than one political party. In the 1980s the leadership of the students' movement in Assam moved from street protest to state governance. The All Assam Students Union (AASU) and various other offshoots of the students' movement emerged and withered as political parties. The agitation for a separate state of Telangana led to the creation of the Telangana Rashtra Samithi (TRS) that was in office for a decade.

None of them came out of a movement stirred by the urge to fight and root out corruption in public life and ensure good governance in the way that the Aam Aadmi Party (AAP) came into being. Coming together as India Against Corruption (IAC), exposing misrule during the second term of the United Progressive Alliance (UPA) government, a motley group of individuals inspired hundreds of young idealists who had grown tired of what they viewed as a 'paralyzed government', to form a political party that eventually grabbed power. Like so many popular civil society movements that made the transition from the street to government, AAP too found itself fighting elections and forming a government.

The damning incident of senior Union ministers Pranab Mukherjee and Kapil Sibal rushing to the Delhi airport to greet yoga guru and business baron of alternative medicine Baba Ramdev symbolized the UPA government's utter desperation to cling to power. Several apparently high-minded individuals including Anna Hazare, Kiran Bedi, Yoginder Yadav, Prashant Bhushan and Arvind Kejriwal emerged as beacons of hope for thousands of young people in search of better and more honest governance.

Kejriwal proved to be a clever political tactician. He soon settled down to the usual business of sidelining other leaders within the movement and consolidating power. His real leap to unquestioned power in 2015 was a consequence of his defeating Narendra Modi's Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) at a time when it was still busy celebrating its historic victory. Kejriwal was the David who had stolen the ground from under the feet of Goliath. Ever since then, the unseating of Kejriwal became an obsession with Modi. Hence, the BJP's victory in the Delhi State Assembly elections must taste particularly sweet for Modi.

While psephologists and political analysts would look at electoral data and communication to explain this change,



The beginning: Agitating against corruption

political sociologists have before them a case study worthy of research on how a social movement transformed into a political party and was defeated on the very basis on which it came to power — the popular perception of persons in public office getting corrupted. Modi used the liquor licences issue to first damage Kejriwal's personal reputation as a crusader against corruption and then systematically incapacitated his party and government to deliver the final denouement.

Kejriwal's original sin was to alienate many senior colleagues from IAC and imitate the governance style of statist political parties wherein party leadership and government leadership vest with one individual. He owes his success in retaining power for a decade and, importantly, registering a respectable electoral performance, in terms of vote share, even in defeat to two factors.

First, the social welfare agenda AAP pursued, especially in improving the quality of and

access to public health and education. This made the AAP government stand apart from any previous government in Delhi and most state governments across the country. In the highly class-divided national capital the poor and the lower middle class remained loyal to AAP. In my own residential locality in South Delhi our household help put it well. "All the owners of homes here," she said to us, "vote for BJP. All the household helps vote for AAP."

Second, the virtual absence of any credible local leadership within both the BJP and the Congress. The few who were there were sidelined by the leaderships of both national parties. Moreover, AAP had several high-quality performers like Manish Sisodia, Saurabh Bharadwaj and Atishi Marlena who had no rivals of any repute in either the BJP or the Congress. As a voter in South Delhi I can vouch for the sincerity, commitment and honesty of our local AAP MLA, Saurabh Bharadwaj. Pity he lost.

The tragedy for AAP was Kejriwal's no-holds-barred ambition to go national. In trying to do so he fell victim to the usual political habit of raising revenues by all means. He adopted several suspect mentors among regional parties. They were cleverer. He was not. Every political party raises funding through legitimate and illegitimate means. Sometimes the means are legitimate but dubious, like electoral bonds. Most parties have learnt how to collect funds without getting caught. Kejriwal was in too much of a hurry to learn such tricks. Most of his colleagues were too honest to want to learn such tricks. In the event, the cookie crumbled.

AAP's impressive vote share and reasonable representation in the State Assembly means the party can remain around till the next election. However, it must introspect deeply and find new ways to inspire its support base. Maybe the time has come for Atishi Marlena to in fact take charge of the party as Leader of the Opposition and make a mark for herself. She has proved to be a fighter and can emerge as a powerful voice of a younger generation. AAP was once a ray of hope in Indian politics. It has to find ways to regain that élan and edge. India needs a different kind of politics than what most mainstream parties are capable of and willing to offer. ■

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

How to shrink Delhi



**LOOKING
AHEAD**

KIRAN KARNIK

ONE of the catchy slogans popularized by Prime Minister Narendra Modi was 'Minimum government, maximum governance'. It reflects an aim to provide effective, efficient, and extensive governance while optimizing the cost, control, and size of the government. This laudable goal is now global and is a continuation or fallout of the Thatcher-Reagan ideology, when the objective was to reduce the size of the bureaucracy.

In the US, this legacy is now being taken forward in a big way: newly-elected President Donald Trump has announced a goal of cutting two million government jobs, creating a Department Of Government Efficiency (DOGE) to help do this and to improve processes. DOGE is overseen by industry hotshot Elon Musk, well known for radical action (including drastic and sudden job lay-offs) in his business empire. Therefore, immediate steps are no surprise: within a few days of the new administration taking over, tens of thousands have been given marching orders and entire agencies — like USAID (United States Agency for International Development) — shut down.

In India, similar precipitate and knee-jerk steps would be ill-advised. However, changes in the governance structure and mechanisms are long overdue. First, the steady inflation in ministries must be reversed. Over time, a whole host of new ministries has come up or new ones been created by bifurcating existing ones. While a few have a common minister, the bureaucratic paraphernalia is separate for each and perpetually growing. It is time for a rationalization. Also, as the government role has diminished in some sectors, a ministry may be unnecessary.

Domains like power, telecom, and banking have a preponderance of companies, both private and public (with the former being dominant) and an independent regulator. Is a separate ministry/department required at all? A close scrutiny of each ministry is needed and its existence justified to an independent panel. In fact, it may be best to begin with a blank page and then list only the ones that are essential; the rest can be phased out.

Apart from a gargantuan bureaucracy, what the growth in ministries does is delay and

fragment work. Many things are handled by more than one ministry, resulting in approvals and actions having to go through multiple ministries. Take skilling/training, an area which is receiving a lot of emphasis. This involves multiple ministries and departments, including Skills, MSME/Industry/Heavy Industry, HRD, Labour, and the domain ministry. In addition, Finance weighs in on everything, even after clearances and budget approvals, and some require a nod from Home. Foreign investment generally adds one more stop on the journey. These are in addition to numerous approvals required at the state and local body levels.

Despite all the talk about ease of doing business and single-window clearances, the convoluted processes through multiple ministries add time, effort, and cost to all projects. In this situation, agility and global

Knee-jerk steps like in the US under DOGE are ill-advised in India. But changes are overdue: Delhi should be home to only key ministries.

competitiveness are obviously hard hit. Apart from business ventures, individuals too suffer similar travails in their quest for permissions and approvals.

The other dimension is the extent of centralization. Most visible and odd is its physical manifestation. Barring two, all Central ministries and departments are in Delhi. Even within Delhi, as many as possible are crowded into a few dozen buildings, almost all in central Delhi. A noteworthy point is that the only two that are not headquartered in Delhi (Space and Atomic Energy) are — by general reckoning — the most effective and efficient ones. This writer has argued that their distance from Delhi is one cause for their success!

The replanning and changes envisaged (and now underway) in "Lutyens' (central) Delhi" represented a grand opportunity to change the topography, (organization) structure, and physical form of government. My efforts to promote thinking on this, however, came to naught. Maybe this issue can be opened up again as preparation for a new and rejuvenated India, taking note of the important but reduced role of government, and the need for

it to be agile and quick-acting.

Technology has opened up multiple new possibilities in governance and also in the extent of decentralization. The Covid lockdowns demonstrated the feasibility of work-from-anywhere (WFA), and the whole government machinery navigated this period successfully using video conferencing and communication links, with most employees in WFA mode. Clearly, government offices don't have to be cheek-by-jowl to function efficiently. In fact, they now need to be closer to the "action" in their sector.

With the lockdown experience, a future restructuring of government functioning — keeping in mind the aphorism at the beginning — could be highly decentralized for efficiency, with the collateral benefit of reducing congestion in Delhi and possibly creating new growth centres. First, the number of ministries could be drastically reduced, with regulators or empowered commissions (as in Space and Atomic Energy) making the ministry redundant. Second, the ministries should be moved from Delhi to locations closer to the core of their sector. As examples, the Shipping Ministry could be headquartered in Gujarat, which has major ports, or Mumbai; Steel should be in Jamshedpur, Bhubaneswar or Kolkata; Agriculture in Punjab or Madhya Pradesh; Forests in Ranchi or Shillong; Technology/Electronics in Bengaluru, and similarly in other sectors (assuming these ministries are required at all). This will ensure closer interaction with industry, rather than with other bureaucrats, translating into quicker and better governance of the sector.

Delhi could be home only to a few key ministries, which too could be dispersed in different parts of the capital. The beautiful Central Vista, from the new War Memorial through India Gate, to the grand Rashtrapati Bhavan, could be flanked by parks, gardens, museums, art galleries, performance venues: centres of art and culture which are freely accessible public facilities.

Such a restructuring would be both physical and of mindset. Instead of hundreds of crores of rupees' expenditure on a reported Metro (train) connection between the government buildings now planned, India could be a pioneer in use of tech to link different agencies of government which are dispersed around the country: a major step in promoting a more decentralized governance that moves closer to the other two tiers (state and local bodies) and to citizens. Wouldn't this exciting possibility be a great way to start the 2030s? ■

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

Drowning in sin



LIVING RIVERS

VENKATESH DUTTA

THE Ganga basin is one of the most densely populated regions in the world. It is beyond belief that over 500 million people took a dip at the confluence of the Ganga and Yamuna in Prayagraj in a span of just 45 days! Nowhere else on Earth does such a massive congregation take place in a 'sacred riverspace' revered for the Triveni Sangam, the confluence of three rivers: the Ganga, Yamuna, and the mythical Saraswati. Hindus consider the waters of this union sacred, believing in their spiritual and purifying power.

The Ganga is not just a river but considered mother to millions of Hindus, deeply embedded in both faith and daily life. Beyond religious beliefs, it serves as a vital lifeline for a large part of India's population. The tradition of taking a holy dip during the Mahakumbh is rooted in the belief that, during specific planetary alignments, the waters of the Ganga transform into 'Amrit' — the nectar of immortality.

For this sacred ritual, a minimum water level, ideally waist-deep, is necessary, and the water quality must meet bathing standards to ensure the safety and sanctity of the experience.

Between May and June last year, a 1.5-km stretch of the Ganga, from Shastri Bridge to the Sangam, was dredged to reclaim riverbed land for the gathering. As a result, the river's course was shifted 200 metres away, and its naturally braided channels — previously split into three streams — were merged into a single flow.

To ensure adequate water depth for the ritual baths, an additional discharge of 230 cubic metres per second (cumecs) has been released from the Tehri Dam reservoir since December 15 for the Prayagraj Mahakumbh. Further, since December 24, 5,000 cusecs of water have been released from the Narora Barrage, with the Kanpur Barrage also contributing significantly to the Ganga's flow.

Given the river's travel time, water released from Narora Barrage takes approximately 10 days to reach the Triveni Sangam in Prayagraj, while water from Tehri Dam takes around 22

days. Therefore, these releases are carefully timed in advance of the key bathing days to maintain sufficient water levels.

Flow is a master variable in river ecosystems — when a river's natural flow improves, it tends to cleanse itself through dilution and sediment transport. However, the greatest challenge remains on-site sewage treatment. Without it, the risk of untreated waste mixing with the Ganga is dangerously high.

Managing a gathering of this magnitude in such a confined space is a formidable task. Yet, an even greater challenge lies in preserving the river's self-cleansing ability to sustain such an immense population influx.

Releasing additional water is a temporary fix — it enhances dilution, making the river



While millions come to the Ganga to wash away their sins, can the river survive our sins against it?

On special days 35 to 40 million people took a dip in the Ganga, generating about 15 to 20 million litres of sewage.

appear rejuvenated. But how long will this illusion last? Without sustained efforts in pollution control, wastewater management, and ecological restoration, the cycle of contamination will continue, undermining long-term river health.

On special bathing days, approximately 35 million to 40 million people took a dip in the Ganga, generating an estimated 15 million litres to 20 million litres of sewage. This is in addition to the 472 MLD (million litres per day) of sewage that Prayagraj produces daily.

Before November 2024, a significant portion of this sewage was not being properly treated, with 128 MLD of untreated wastewater flowing directly into the Ganga. However, in the lead-up to the Mahakumbh, following strict directives from the National Green Tribunal (NGT), the administration pledged to treat a major share of this pollution load.

In an affidavit submitted to the NGT in December 2024, the Uttar Pradesh government reported that out of the 471.92 MLD of total sewage, 293 MLD is discharged into 81 drains flowing into the Ganga and Yamuna, and 178.31 MLD enters the sewage network, which is linked to 10 sewage treatment plants (STPs) with a total capacity of 390 MLD.

Of the 81 drains carrying sewage into the Ganga, 37 have been connected to STPs, treating approximately 216 MLD of wastewater. However, the remaining 44 drains, which carry 77.42 MLD of sewage, remain untapped and untreated. Authorities claimed that on-site treatment — including screening, ponding, and biological and chemical processing — was implemented. However, the effectiveness of these measures remains uncertain, as the water quality of the treated effluent flowing into the river was not adequately tested. The river stretch between Bullua Ghat and Rasoolabad

Ghat continues to receive multiple sewage streams carrying untreated waste, undermining river health.

To manage the massive influx of pilgrims, approximately 1,45,000 toilets and urinals were installed. However, many became unusable due to a lack of timely cleaning and maintenance. With over 10,000 sanitation workers operating in shifts, the sheer scale of the gathering made waste management a monumental challenge. Even with 120 tippers and 40 compactor trucks, the solid waste generated during the special bathing days overwhelmed the available infrastructure, highlighting the urgent need for more efficient waste management strategies in future events.

While these measures represent progress, effective long-term wastewater management remains critical to maintaining river health beyond the festival period. While millions come to the Ganga to wash away their sins, the real question remains — can the river survive our sins against it? ■

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

Respect for each other



CRAFT EQUITY

SUMITA GHOSE

THE idea for Rangсутra came to me during a year-long sabbatical in 2001-02. It was a much needed sabbatical, as I had recently experienced some traumatic events. In 1997, my husband and colleague, Sanjoy Ghose, was abducted and killed by the United Liberation Front of Asom (ULFA), a terrorist group in Assam. His loss was catastrophic for my family, our colleagues and me, raising many questions to which I found no answers in the external, material world.

This led me to the Gnostic Centre, dedicated to the understanding and practice of Integral Yoga as taught by Sri Aurobindo and the Mother. Here, I learned to calm my scattered mind and gained practical tools to live a centred life, responding less to external circumstances and more to what was within. This journey helped me cope with the immense tragedy and, in time, move beyond it and find meaning and purpose in life again.

In 2001, I received a Fulbright Scholarship for Conflict Transformation at Eastern Mennonite University in the US. The programme encouraged looking at conflict as an opportunity for transformation, aiming to balance unequal power dynamics between individuals, groups, communities, and nations. I was inspired to explore ways of reducing the growing inequalities between urban and rural India.

Urban Indians had better access to education, healthcare, and employment. An introduction to Appreciative Inquiry provided another perspective: envisioning and designing a better, more inclusive world based on strengths and opportunities.

This is where the idea of Rangсутra was born. Through my work with artisans, particularly handloom weavers and hand embroiderers, I knew they were highly skilled — often self-taught by observing and learning from their elders. Growing up in urban India, I also understood that many urban Indians appreciated and wore handwoven, handcrafted garments.

Thus, Rangсутra came into existence in 2006,

without any formal feasibility studies or business plans. Inspired by Amul, I borrowed their tagline: "Respect for the producer and respect for the customer." We added "respect for each other", emphasizing the importance of teamwork.

From the start, our guiding principles were rooted in empowerment rather than a beneficiary or transactional approach. My experience with the beneficiary model showed that it often led to dependency, while the transactional approach left artisans with little control over pricing or bargaining. An empowerment approach recognizes that all individuals have the power within to live a life with purpose.

They need opportunities and access to knowledge and resources to make a meaningful

to invest in Rangсутra. I was surprised that they agreed, and that laid the foundation for a community-owned social enterprise.

One thousand artisans became first-time shareholders in Rangсутra, putting in ₹1,000 each. This investment came with an aspiration to improve their craft and elevate it to a new level. They would no longer only weave blankets or embroider wedding gifts for their daughters but would also create garments and home furnishings which reached towns and cities across India and the world.

Aware of the faith and trust the artisans had shown by investing their very scarce monetary resources in the venture, I felt an immense sense of responsibility to also put my money where my mouth was. I borrowed small amounts from friends and family to match the

contributions of the artisans. We received support from angel investors Fabindia and Aavishkaar.

As shareholders, artisans ensured work for many months of the year, generating consistent income. In addition to their wages, they received dividends from the company's profits. Although the shares were initially small, their value has increased substantially over time.

This shift also created a new sense of value for artisans, especially women, who make up 75 percent of our current shareholders. As one artisan in Pugal, Bikaner, said, "This share certificate is my only asset. I've framed it because it's the only document with my name on it — our home is in my husband's name, and the fields we cultivate are in my father-in-law's name."

Opening bank accounts in the women artisans' names was also a first for many, giving them control over their money and encouraging a habit of saving for future goals, such as assets or education. The income and interactions with other women in craft centres as well as workshops organized by Rangсутra have helped broaden their horizons. They now feel connected to a larger community of buyers and customers.

At Rangсутra, important decisions we make centre around people — artisans, the team and customers — and the planet. Of course profitability is important as we wish to grow, but it is not the sole purpose of our organization. We try to be the change we want to see in the world and show that there is a way of conducting our business such that it benefits and creates value for all along the chain, and not just a few. ■

Sumita Ghose is founder-director of Rangсутra Crafts



Opening bank accounts in the women's names was a first for many

Important decisions at Rangсутra are centred around artisans, the team, customers and the planet. Of course profitability matters.

contribution to society through their work. This focus on empowerment led to many discussions with artisan groups and community-based organizations working on rural livelihoods, as we prepared to register the organization.

Being denied even a small loan from banks because of our lack of experience in running a business, and because we could not provide collateral for the loan, with some amount of hesitation we asked artisans I had worked with previously at the URMUL Trust in Rajasthan

ABC is not the last word

MEGHNA UNIYAL

SEVERAL laws at state and Central level protect citizens from being subjected to stray dog attacks and ensure public health and safety. Yet, the common misconception is that only the Animal Birth Control (ABC) Rules are the 'law' and must be strictly adhered to. In reality, there is a host of legislation that refutes the ABC Rules.

The ABC Rules, notified by the Ministry of Culture in 2001 and amended by the Department of Animal Husbandry in 2023, require the sterilization, maintenance and feeding of stray dogs on the streets and prohibit their removal even if they attack or kill citizens.

In 2008, the Bombay High Court had laid down that the ABC Rules do not override the State Municipal Act and upheld the discretionary powers of the municipality to remove or destroy stray dogs causing a nuisance or danger to citizens. This was challenged in the Supreme Court by the Animal Welfare Board of India (AWBI) in 2009.

In May 2024, refusing to give prevalence to the ABC Rules, the Supreme Court dismissed the AWBI SLP (Special Leave Petition) and sent the matter back to the states, stating:

"We clarify that all issues raised... are kept open to be adjudicated in an appropriate proceedings, before the appropriate forum, in accordance with law. Whether be it may the mechanism in terms of the new Rules deficient/insufficient or repugnant to the Constitution or the parent statute(s); in our considered view, which can be best considered by the Constitutional Courts or other Forums accounting for all factors and circumstances, local in nature, being germane for adjudication for them and to decide it independently."

Public health and safety are state subjects and Article 21 guarantees the right to life and personal liberty of citizens. Animal/disease control are governed by several Central statutes, state Acts, BNS provisions and Supreme Court judgments, all of which override and supersede the subordinate ABC Rules.

In fact, no law or Act envisages the maintenance and feeding of stray dogs in public places or private, gated premises nor recognizes that stray dogs have "territories" in these areas. Even the parent legislation, the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals Act, recognizes their negative impact on people as

well as their own suffering as homeless animals, and prohibits their abandonment on the streets and specifically requires their permanent removal and/or humane euthanasia.

The Rights of People with Disabilities Act mandates the removal of all physical and environmental barriers that impair mobility, accessibility and inclusivity of disabled citizens in public places. The visually impaired and other disabled citizens use sticks which aggravate aggression in stray dogs. Often unable to see, hear or avoid stray dogs, they are very vulnerable to animal attacks, injury and death.

The Prevention and Control of Infectious and Contagious Diseases in Animals Act states



Stray dogs outside an ATM in Delhi

that no animal suffering from any of the 25 listed scheduled diseases may be maintained in any public place and any stray dog found to be infected with any scheduled disease must be euthanized by the municipality.

All state Municipal Acts, Police Acts and local bylaws require local authorities to provide safe and disease-free streets, footpaths and public places for citizens. Relevant provisions of the Bharatiya Nyaya Sanhita prohibit and penalize acts that cause public nuisance, danger, spread diseases and endanger lives of citizens, including "negligent conduct" with an animal, pet or unowned.

All areas inside residential societies are paid for and jointly owned private property of residents. No rules can force the maintenance and feeding of stray animals inside private gated premises. The same is applicable to schools, hospitals, offices, etc. This was reinforced by the Madras and Odisha High

Courts directing the removal of all stray dogs from IIT Madras and the Law College premises, respectively. Last year the Supreme Court itself issued a circular prohibiting the provisioning of food to stray animals inside its premises as it leads to their congregation, causing animal attacks and hygiene issues.

The apex court's numerous judgments protect and reinforce Article 21 — the fundamental right to life, liberty, livelihood, peaceful sleep, safe shelters, disease-free and obstruction-free public places, footpaths and streets and freedom of movement. The presence of stray dogs and throwing of food packets to "save" them in public places, streets and private, gated premises, violate all these provisions, rights of citizens and judgments.

Article 51A(g) is often and inexplicably used to justify the ABC Rules. It lays down an unenforceable duty — "to protect and improve the natural environment including forests, lakes, rivers and wildlife, and to have compassion for living creatures" — and makes no reference whatsoever to stray dogs or their feeding on the streets. A 2016 Supreme Court judgment prohibits the feeding of pigeons even from one's own private balcony, citing "nuisance" for other residents.

In January 2024, the Supreme Court in the Bilkis Bano case stated: "In a democracy, where rule of law is its essence, it has to be preserved and enforced, particularly by courts of law. Compassion and sympathy have no role to play where rule of law is required to be enforced." Undefined, subjective notions

of "compassion" and self-styled 'duties' cannot be used to violate the fundamental rights of citizens.

The Nagaraja judgment of the Supreme Court is often cited deceptively by stray dog activists and the AWBI as giving "rights" to animals. However, in May 2023, a five-judge constitutional bench of the Hon'ble Supreme Court overturned the same and laid down that the Indian Constitution neither recognizes nor gives rights to animals. It also upheld the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals Act, stating — "Exceptions are incorporated based on the Doctrine of Necessity. Clause (b) to Section 11(3) deals with the destruction of stray dogs, out of necessity, otherwise, it would be harmful to human beings."

It is indeed time for High Courts as well as authorities to act "in accordance with law." ■

Meghna Uniyal is Director, Humane Foundation for People and Animals

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Civil Society picture/Umesh Anand



Pushpa Sundar: 'My interest was in funding for social change and social sector organizations. That's really what led me to philanthropy.'

'Raising funds is a thankless task'

Pushpa Sundar on making philanthropy work

Civil Society News

New Delhi

PHILANTHROPY has a special buzz among the ultra-rich. If net worth matters, so does how much is given away. But who to give to and for what? Should it be an instinctive decision or a calibrated one?

These are vexing concerns. Entire teams in large foundations work on vetting proposals, checking out NGOs and then holding them to account. But then there are also big donors who believe it makes practical sense to cut a cheque and forget about it.

Few people understand the giving scene as well as Pushpa Sundar, having been in the thick of it for many decades. She last ran Sampradaan Indian Centre for Philanthropy, an organization that connected donors and recipients. She was also in the Ford Foundation and the Federation of Indian Chambers of Commerce and Industry (FICCI). Before that she was in the IAS.

Sundar's many roles uniquely placed her to understand how philanthropy can rise above mere charity and make a difference

in terms of development.

Now in retirement, she has shared some of those insights in an easy-flowing autobiography detailing her personal 'journey from the IAS to philanthropy'. Raising funds is a "thankless task", she says, even as oversight is needed to ensure money goes to the deserving and is well-used.

Q: You are one of the frontrunners in understanding philanthropy and, in a sense, a precursor to what we see as corporate social responsibility (CSR) now.

Well, my interest in philanthropy came out of an interest in funding. I was always interested in NGOs. Back then I was with the Ford Foundation and they gave grants for three years at a time. And if successful, they removed it for a while. It's not an infinite source of funding. The grantees would ask me, Where should we go once this is over, what should we do?

So, I started exploring what and where the other sources of

Continued on page 30



Beyond the Heaven-Born: But a Service
Service / Speaking Tiger/ ₹599

Continued from page 29

funding for social sector work were. My interest was in funding for social change and social sector organizations. That's really what led me to philanthropy, plus the fact that I was myself working in international philanthropy so I was aware of all the developments in America and elsewhere.

Q: What is the line between philanthropy and charity and philanthropy and CSR? Or is the difference largely manufactured?

To the layperson there is no difference between charity and philanthropy. The two terms are used interchangeably. But I make a distinction between charity and philanthropy. Charity is something impulsive. You give because something strikes an empathetic chord with you and you want to give something.

But it is not a thought-out decision with the purpose of making long-term change. That is philanthropy — when you plan for long-term change with your money and you give it consciously and not just for temporary alleviation.

Q: Philanthropic organizations want assessments and results. Do you think expectations need to be more nuanced?

Definitely. In charity, as I said, there is no expectation, no after-thought. But because philanthropy is a conscious decision in order to bring about some positive social change, you do have certain expectations. If these expectations are excessive, then that's wrong because you are giving in order to help somebody bring about social change.

If that organization is unable, despite its best efforts, to achieve what you expected out of it then I think that's not on. This is the big difference. The philanthropist and the organization that has received funding have to work together towards the desired end. And only then can you really blame the person and say he hasn't done what I wanted. Both have to work together.

Q: NGOs complain they spend so much time justifying every penny. Do you think there could be a little reorientation?

See, I have been on both sides. When I was in the Ford Foundation I was making grants, and when I started Sampradaan Indian Centre for Philanthropy, I was on the other side, seeking grants. I have seen both sides of the equation.

In the Ford Foundation you worked with the grantee to achieve a consensus on what would be achieved. You met them frequently. You discussed their progress. But at the end you reviewed it.

In philanthropy, at first it was very liberal, you just gave and forgot. Then came philanthropic capitalism, where, you know, business criteria began to come into assessing philanthropy.

Q: You mean impact investment?

That's right. You looked at metrics. Calculations. In many ways, the end goal, which was to bring about some social change, was lost sight of in this sort of nitty-gritty — how much has gone into administration — without really looking at whether it has achieved substantial results.

Now there is a trend back to the earlier system. People are saying, No, this is not the way to approach philanthropy, we should give a certain amount of freedom to the person to whom money has been given. Broadly, if you work together, then you reach, if not 100 percent, at least 80 percent of the target you wanted.

Q: There have been recent examples of extremely wealthy generous donors like Melinda Gates and MacKenzie Scott upturning the

method of giving completely. Do you think more can be achieved with that approach?

I think that's going to the other extreme, human nature being what it is. There can be some grantees who are not genuinely motivated, who receive the money, and then become irresponsible. A certain degree of checks and balances is necessary.

It should not kill the initiative and the spirit behind the work. If that is being maintained I think it's fine. But, you know, there have been, even in the NGO sector, several instances of money being misused.

Q: People join the government because they like to make a difference. In retrospect, do you think you would have been able to do more had you stayed in government?

Well, it's always nice to be able to look into the future and you know, think what if...

Since the past few years, I have been doing mock interviews for a coaching institute which prepares aspirants for the IAS and other civil services. I chair a panel of people, and this is everybody's standard reply that they want to serve society.

As if you cannot serve society in any other line. Yes, to some extent, you have the power and some resources in government. Setting up Sampradaan was so hard for one single person. You have more help if you are in government.

The other side of the coin is there is no guarantee that the service will use your background, your talent, your previous expertise. You are moved around from place to place depending on the exigencies of the service.

I ask this particularly to engineers, doctors and MBAs who want to get into the IAS. Their number is increasing by the year. There is no

thorough study of how much of their expertise has been used in government service. It's basically a generalist service. You might be in one post today, and then be doing something totally different.

Should there be some kind of specialization in government service where doctors are kept in the health sector and so on. I think for administrative reform you need some thorough studies of what has happened to the utilization of the people who get into the service and their backgrounds.

Q: Today, NGOs find it tough to raise funds. What advice would you give them?

Fundraising is a very difficult job, no doubt, whether it's the government or an NGO or any other organization. It's a very thankless task. That's a fact.

There have been attempts to teach people how to fundraise. There was a South Asian fundraising group which used to organize training workshops. Several others have also held fundraising workshops. In Sampradaan we did case studies of how different organizations raised money.

On the other hand, being approached by fund seekers can be so irritating sometimes. People wanting donations can become aggressive and intrude on your privacy with whining messaging. There are organizations that are on my blacklist because they cross the boundary.

Q: Writing your autobiography is always a big decision. What motivated you?

Several people I knew were writing their autobiographies and so that set me thinking, why not me? Of course, the one big thing that comes up with writing an autobiography is: How much to reveal and how much to conceal, especially about oneself. So that was a decision that one had to make. But I decided that whatever I would say would be the honest truth. ■

‘Charity is impulsive but philanthropy is a conscious decision for long-term change, not just for temporary alleviation’

Step into Delhi's water history

SUKANYA SHARMA

ON a cold and foggy winter morning we found ourselves amidst a quiet, serene and ancient compound in New Delhi's R.K. Puram with tombs on one side and a stepwell on the other. We were on a heritage walk to the Munirka Baoli. Our enthusiastic group consisted of two retired gentlemen, a couple of working professionals, a young government official, one foreign tourist and four chatty college students. It was clear that interest in Delhi's *baolis* transcended age and professions.

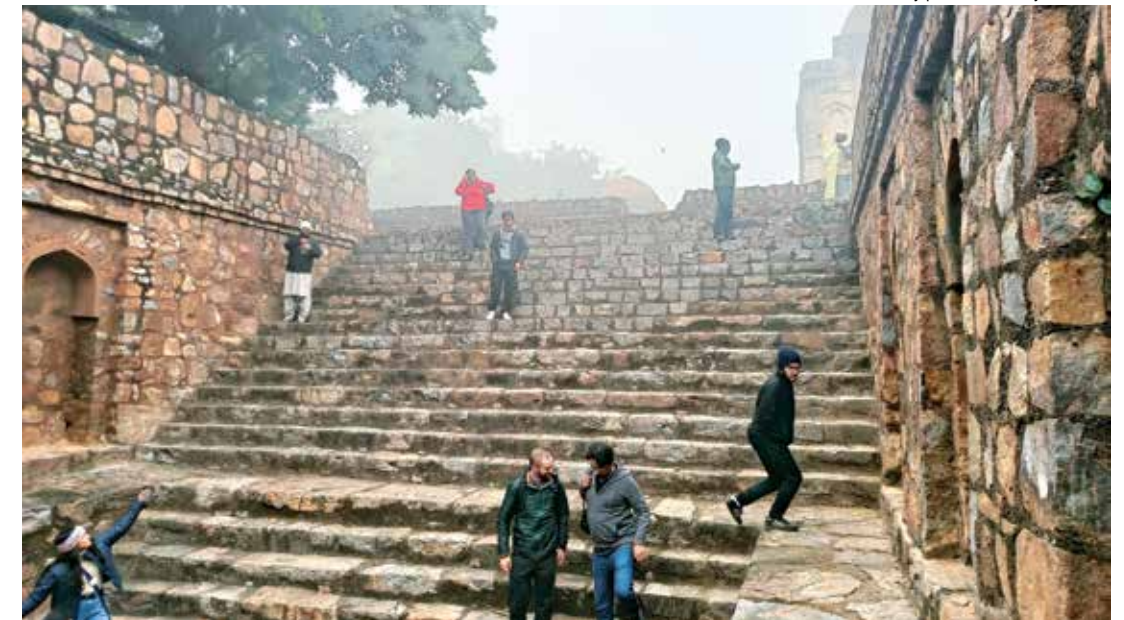
The walk was organized by Tales of City in collaboration with Niyogi Books, publisher of *Delhi Heritage — Top 10 Baolis* by Vikramjit Singh Rooprai, who led the walk. Tales of City is a travel and heritage enterprise that organizes curated walks across major Indian cities, offering a blend of history, art, tradition and interactions to present the true essence of a city to its people.

Rooprai is an ex-software engineer by profession and a heritage activist and educator by choice. His passion for his new-found career is palpable. While he devotes much of his time to exploring and writing on facets of Delhi's heritage, he is involved with educational institutions through his organization, Heritageshaala, which sets up heritage labs in schools across India to develop novel methods of pedagogy through the use of history. "I train teachers on how to use history to teach subjects like science. I'd call it applied education," he explains.

The agenda for the morning began with an informal introductory chat as Rooprai walked us through his book and the extensive research he'd undertaken for four years. Alongside, he narrated anecdotes which helped break the ice. He told us how the book is close to his heart. He reminisced about how he went back and forth with his research before condensing it into the slim volume we were all holding.

Delhi is still home to 32 *baolis*, out of which 14 are accessible. Four of these are in use even today with water being pumped out regularly. These are at the Red Fort, Old Fort, Feroz Shah Kotla and Banjaron ki Baoli. The *baolis* of the Nizamuddin Dargah and Gandhak are believed to be holy so people often take a dip in them despite hygiene issues related to stagnant water, explains the author.

"It took me the longest time to locate this Munirka Baoli." He catches us off-guard. How could this structure be buried in oblivion? The



Enthusiastic participants exploring the Munirka Baoli during the heritage walk

name gives it away. Back in the 1950s, a portion of land was taken from Munirka to form Rama Krishna (RK) Puram and this is why the *baoli* now falls in Sector 5 of this colony.

Measuring 100 feet by 38 feet with a well to the south, this is one of Delhi's smaller *baolis*. The complex, also known as Wazirpur Gumbad, dates back to the Lodhi era. It houses five tombs, a prayer wall (Qanati Masjid) and a stepwell. The tombs are of unknown people so local devotees refer to them as 'Pir Baba'. The most striking feature is that it is tucked between a modern-day gurudwara and a temple on either side — a symbol of peaceful coexistence in a world fraught with communal divisiveness.

While exploring the stairs down this intricately built structure, we also learnt that some of the practices we now refer to as superstitions (such as not washing one's hair on Tuesdays) can be traced to these stepwells. Since the soap used for clothes was harsh on the skin and *amla shikakai* used to wash hair was damaging for clothes, certain days were earmarked for washing hair and others for clothes to suit adequate use of the water stored in the stepwells.

We asked if *baolis* can be revived. Rooprai said it would be difficult but not impossible. A real effort at reviving this system would involve draining out the water in a *baoli*, cleaning its bed and directing rainwater into it for many monsoons.

The ancient water system is challenged because of Delhi's leaky sewerage system. For

that an underground water decontamination plan spanning the whole city is required. Despite these roadblocks, he insists this should be made a priority. Logistics and political will are key elements. "Vikramjit's proposal to use the stepwells as aquifers and divert rainwater into them might be one way of partially reversing the unending cycle of continuous exploitation of water," writes historian Sohail Hashmi in the foreword to the book.

Even though the walk covered only the Munirka Baoli, it sparked animated discussions about the other, more famous, *baolis* in Delhi, especially Rajon ki Baoli and Ugrasen ki Baoli, both of which feature in the book. And so, the walk extended beyond the confines of this complex that stands tucked away in this quiet neighbourhood.

With the tour of the complex and stepwell behind us, the conversation shifted towards the realisation that much of our history may have been lost in translation or coloured by colonial prejudice. This sparked a discussion that led to a nugget of history from the Kuka community (now known as the Namdhari Sikhs), to which Rooprai belongs.

He proudly explained how the Kuka movement was one of the first instances of non-cooperation against the British.

In fact, there are still some traditional Kuka families that refrain from using tap water and have wells in their homes even today. They still boycott anything invented by the British. This incidentally leads us to the author's next book, in the pipeline, which he hopes to begin working on this year.

The uniquely curated walk was a holistic experience that piqued interest in Delhi's myriad heritage sites. ■



Delhi Heritage: Top 10 Baolis
Vikramjit Singh Rooprai / Niyogi Books/ ₹399

Fort, beach and song

SUSHEELA NAIR

UNENDING swathes of greenery greeted us as our vehicle meandered along the hilly roads of Bekal in Kasaragod district of Kerala. Flanked by the dense forests of the Western Ghats in the east and the blue Arabian Sea in the west, with the Talapadi and Trikaripur rivers flowing nearby, it is a languid, alluring destination.

Straight ahead, across a turquoise-blue bay studded with colourful fishing craft, loomed an imposing promontory crowned by the ramparts of an impressive laterite fort. To the south is the curvaceous Bekal Beach, and to the north at Kappil is a tiny cove sandwiched between two headlands, beyond which a long, straight beach stretches for miles.

Standing 130 ft above sea level near the outer boundary of the seaside fort of Bekal, with rain-laden clouds hovering over, we could feel the soulful melody of *Tu hi re* playing in our minds. Bekal Fort attained tinsel fame when Mani Ratnam chose it as the locale for a song sequence in his hit film, *Bombay*. It evoked memories of the hero crooning on its rain-drenched ramparts whilst waiting for a clandestine meeting with his *burqa*-clad paramour.

This lilting song sequence in *Bombay* lured film buffs and movie makers. The wet, green ambience coupled with the black, weathered laterite captured by ace lensman Rajiv Menon drew tourists to this fabulous fort and catapulted it to fame as a tourist destination. The seaside fort is said to have moved even the most battle-scarred of soldiers to poetry.

The fort, the largest in Kerala, has been witness to half a millennium of north Malabar history. While we were lazing around on the beach, a local filled us in on the chequered history of the fort. If only their walls could speak, they'd tell tales of the intrigues of Sivappa Naik of the Ikkeri dynasty, Kolathiri Rajas, Vijayanagara kings, Hyder Ali, Tipu Sultan and the British. It is now under the Archaeological Survey of India (ASI) and excavations have unearthed remains of a durbar hall, a temple complex, and coins and artefacts pointing to the strong presence of the Mysore Sultans.

Bekal Fort derives its name from the words *be* (burning) and *kallu* (stone). Another view ascribes its origin to a local Krishna temple which is said to have given the place the name of Devakulam (abode of the *deva*). This became Dekal and got corrupted as Bekal. According to another version, the word Bekal is derived from the word Baliakulam, meaning 'Big Palace'. The place is said to have been the seat of a big palace in the past. The term Baliakulam got corrupted as Bekulam and later as Bekal.



The fort faces the spectacular Bekal Beach



The large observation tower in Bekal Fort

Entering the fort, we walked into a 30-acre expanse of land which has several watch towers, peepholes, secret tunnels, and of course cosy corners and niches for rosy-eyed honeymooners. And there is the ancient magazine which used to store weapons and ammunition. Come monsoon and the vast space gets carpeted with grassy knolls. Inside, a secret tunnel leads you right into the sea. You can clamber along the battlements or climb down to the beach through hidden passages or look for the Muthukkinar (well of gems) where the Nayaks used to deposit all the ornaments of the dead. Or watch the setting sun with the ramparts of the fort silhouetted against the horizon. Strolling around, we found small peepholes on the walls of the fort where the soldiers on guard used to place the barrels of their rifles.

Near its entrance is a temple dedicated to Hanuman, as old as the fort itself, and a mosque believed to have been built at the instance of Tipu Sultan. Over 300 years of history lie in the imposing ramparts of this majestic fort that juts

out into the Arabian Sea. The renovated Mukya Prana temple at the entrance next to the gate draws a steady stream of visitors. The facade of the high walls with the battlement and the entire structure of the fort are an architectural delight.

And there is a large observation tower in the middle of the fort at a height of 10 m and with a circumference of 27 m. Clambering on to it, a spectacular view was in store — of the shimmering horizon beyond the sea on the west and to the east the unending stretches of greenery of the lush valleys

and the undulating mountains. Sentinels must have kept vigil here day and night, gazing out through the moss-covered peepholes to spot enemies advancing from the high seas. The fort was presumably built with a view to spotting enemy vessels afar in the ocean. Tall, bushy grasses with golden bristles swayed gently against the backdrop of the weather-beaten structures.

The sky turned an unusual crimson as the sun set and we climbed back to the fort. The historic importance faded in the background for a moment as our thoughts slowly lapsed into the romantic song sequence in *Bombay*. Mani Ratnam probably couldn't have found a better locale to match the fathomless passion and anguish of the lovers in the film. Seeing Kerala's largest fort in a state of neglect, we felt saddened and left with heavy hearts. ■

FACT FILE

Where to stay: Taj Gateway Bekal
Contact: reservations@ihcltata.com
Distance: Mangalore – 60 km

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.

Jewellery that's cool and green



Bits of leftover fabric, paper, metal, stones are magically transformed at WHE by Abira into desirable pieces of jewellery. Founded by Prianka Khandelwal, WHE stands for women, handmade and eco-friendly. Abira means strength in Urdu. This micro-enterprise is run completely by women, providing them an income and opportunities to learn and grow. They can work from home or come to the workshop.

WHE by Abira makes earrings, necklaces, bag charms and wall hangings. The wood and fabric earrings are especially unique. There is jewellery made of scrap metal and another collection that uses jute and shell to craft pretty pieces.

Earrings cost between ₹600 and ₹1,200 and prices for necklaces range between ₹1,000 to ₹1,200. The jewellery is natural and handmade. Shop online on their website. They deliver across India.

Contact: +91 9096947918
Website: www.whebyabira.com
Email: whe@abiracreations.com



Chill on Katran chairs



What's the Hindi word for a jumble of colourful cloth discarded by cloth mills? The word is *katran*. Such leftovers have traditionally been collected by farmers, spun into ropes and used to make *khatiyas* or light airy beds, perfect for steamy summer days.

The Katran Collection by Sahil Bagga and Sarthak Sengupta breaks new ground with such bits and pieces of cloth. Their enterprise, Sahil & Sarthak, repurposes vibrant scraps and converts it all into handwoven chairs. Also available are tables, lamps, mirrors and cushions in eye-catching designs.

The chairs are comfy, and colourful. A rocking chair woven in rainbow hues attracts immediate attention. There are other enticing chairs to choose from: the Cloud Chair, the Seraphina Chair, the Love Chair and the inviting Pelican Chair made with soft threads. The Katran Hang Rickshaw Swing is a perfect fit for your living room or bedroom. The elegant Razia Lamp is made of georgette. Bespoke mirrors like the Victorian Mirror add a dash of colour to a plain wall. Each product is handmade so no two products are alike.

Take your pick from their website and drop them an email for a detailed catalogue to know more.

Contact: +91 954 083 5554
Website: www.sahilsarthak.com
Email: sahilssarthak@sahilsarthak.com



Buy an edgy activist bag

A designer from New York, a conservation architect trained in Philadelphia and a retired physics professor from Delhi University got together and mulled the issue of India's mounting landfills. And they invented a solution to one major trash pile: discarded seatbelts from the auto sector.

Thus was founded Jaggery, an enterprise that promotes Bagtivism, a down-to-earth philosophy that fuses bag fashion with activism, and holds aloft the principles of sustainability, empowerment, innovation, collaboration and social responsibility.

Jaggery retrieves discarded belts from landfills and auto scrap yards and repurposes these into stylish bags. You can buy tote bags, satchels, laptop bags, backpacks, briefcases and messenger bags.

The bags have been categorized into collections. Under Noir you'll find backpacks while Museum of Fade has briefcases, and Heryana is for totes. The bags are durable, easy to clean and waterproof. To browse or shop, visit their website or connect on email.

Contact: Website: www.jaggerybags.com
Email: info@jaggery.co



Upcycled décor, bags, accessories

Use Me Works, a Delhi-based enterprise, picks up textile waste from factories, boutiques and homes. Their team of skilled women turns such waste into a range of creative products — home décor, bags and accessories.

Zero-waste bunting decorations cost between ₹390 and ₹1,300 and are one of their most popular products. Bags and wallets range from ₹600 to ₹1,500, while cushion covers start at ₹350.

Apart from manufacturing, the venture conducts workshops for corporate companies and educational institutions, to enable greener and more sustainable lifestyle choices. They are located in Chhatarpur in New Delhi. You could pay them a visit or shop online.

Contact: Website: www.usemeworks.com
Email: reach@usemeworks.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.

REACH OUT TO CHILD DOMESTIC WORKERS

Udyam was started when Neeru Juneja tried to interact with the child of her domestic worker. The child appeared scared and nervous. Her mother revealed the story of her abusive father and lack of education.

Udyam helps such children gain an education and have a brighter future. Nirmaan, their flagship programme, focuses on children attending government or municipal schools. Remedial classes from nursery to Class 12 are held along with bi-weekly assignments. Udyam promotes moral and personality development through confidence-building workshops and vocational training.

Extracurricular activities like football, squash, dance and drama are offered. The annual festival, Taraang, is a great favourite with students and parents. The Mahila Samarthya Manch educates mothers through workshops on academics and women's hygiene, and facilitates the opening of bank accounts. One can donate on their website. Volunteers are welcome.

www.udyamtrust.com
+91 11 4905 2567
info@udyamtrust.com

SAVE CHILDREN FROM REDLIGHT AREAS

India's first child prostitution-free redlight area is in Varanasi. This happened due to Guria, an NGO founded by Ajeet Singh two decades ago. At the age of 17 he adopted the three children of a sex worker. Guria's mission is to eliminate second-generation prostitution and help women end their dependence on the criminal nexus that enslaves them. Guria assists rehabilitation, livelihood support programmes and breaking of stigma.

Due to Guria's efforts, India

has a cultural group of 30 women, formerly in the sex trade, who perform traditional music and dance programmes to earn a livelihood and create awareness. They perform at reputed venues across the country. Guria also provides witness protection to rescued survivors who are at risk of attacks. You can help their cause by donating via their website.

www.guriaindia.org/
+91 5422504253|
info@guriaindia.org

MAKE GIRLS STRONG AND CONFIDENT

Anhat For Change combats violence against women and girls, boosts their confidence and helps with reproductive health issues. Founded in 2018, it works in rural West Bengal.

Anhat's key initiatives are Udaan, which tackles gender-based violence, and Unnati, a menstrual hygiene programme. Anhat also runs an Adolescent Empowerment Programme in schools, where they create awareness on gender and sexuality among adolescent girls and boys.

Football For Her encourages 30 adolescent girls from Murshidabad district to play the game, be fit and confident and break stereotypes. The NGO accepts donations online via their website.

www.anhatngo.org | +91 9836015001
info@anhatngo.org

SHELTERS FOR THE WORKING CHILD

Tiljala SHED helps ragpickers and street children in Kolkata leapfrog 'from a life in rags into a world of sunshine'. Founded in 1987 by a handful of youth in Tiljala, the non-profit runs two shelter homes. The one in Park Circus is for street and working children and a new shelter in

South 24-Parganas is for children who've been in conflict with the law. It houses 25 children.

Some of their campaigns are emergency food and medicine, tailoring skills for girls, education for vulnerable children and alternative livelihoods for ragpicker families.

Tiljala SHED also has several skill-building programmes and women-oriented projects like making sanitary napkins, stitching, beauty training and bag-making, among others. The idea is to develop financial stability in a gradual and sustainable manner. Donations are welcome on their website.

www.tished.org | +91 9831413187
contact@tished.org

WALKING CANES FOR THE BLIND

The Blind Welfare Society in Delhi helps the visually impaired, especially girls who suffer from blindness. It was founded by R.P. Bhola, who despite being afflicted with a visual impairment called retinitis pigmentosa became the first blind principal of a senior secondary school.

The NGO runs grocery donation drives, distributes laptops, provides braille learning and has a hostel for blind girls. One of their most successful initiatives has been the walking cane donation project, under which high-quality walking canes were distributed to a chosen few. The donation was tracked to keep a record of how useful their endeavour had been.

The society offers many volunteering opportunities which you can find out about on their website. For donations, the team has curated grocery kits and individual items for the visually impaired.

www.blindwelfaresociety.in
+9968969932
info@blindwelfaresociety.in

GOOD SCHOOLS FOR SLUM CHILDREN

Responsible Charity's mission is to end poverty. Based in Pune and Kolkata, it began as a volunteering effort in 2008 and now calls itself a radical grassroots movement for social change. The non-profit identifies children in slums and sponsors their education in private English-medium schools till college. It helps with tuition, a Slum Jam music programme, community visits, health programmes and employment.

Responsible Charity's Clothes for Help project encourages people to donate their old clothes. It collects T-shirts, sweaters, shirts, blankets and other winter clothing in good condition between October and January at their collection centres. You can join their mentorship programme, help raise funds or shop at Amazon, which donates to them.

www.responsiblecharity.org
033 4004 8442
c4pune@responsiblecharity.org

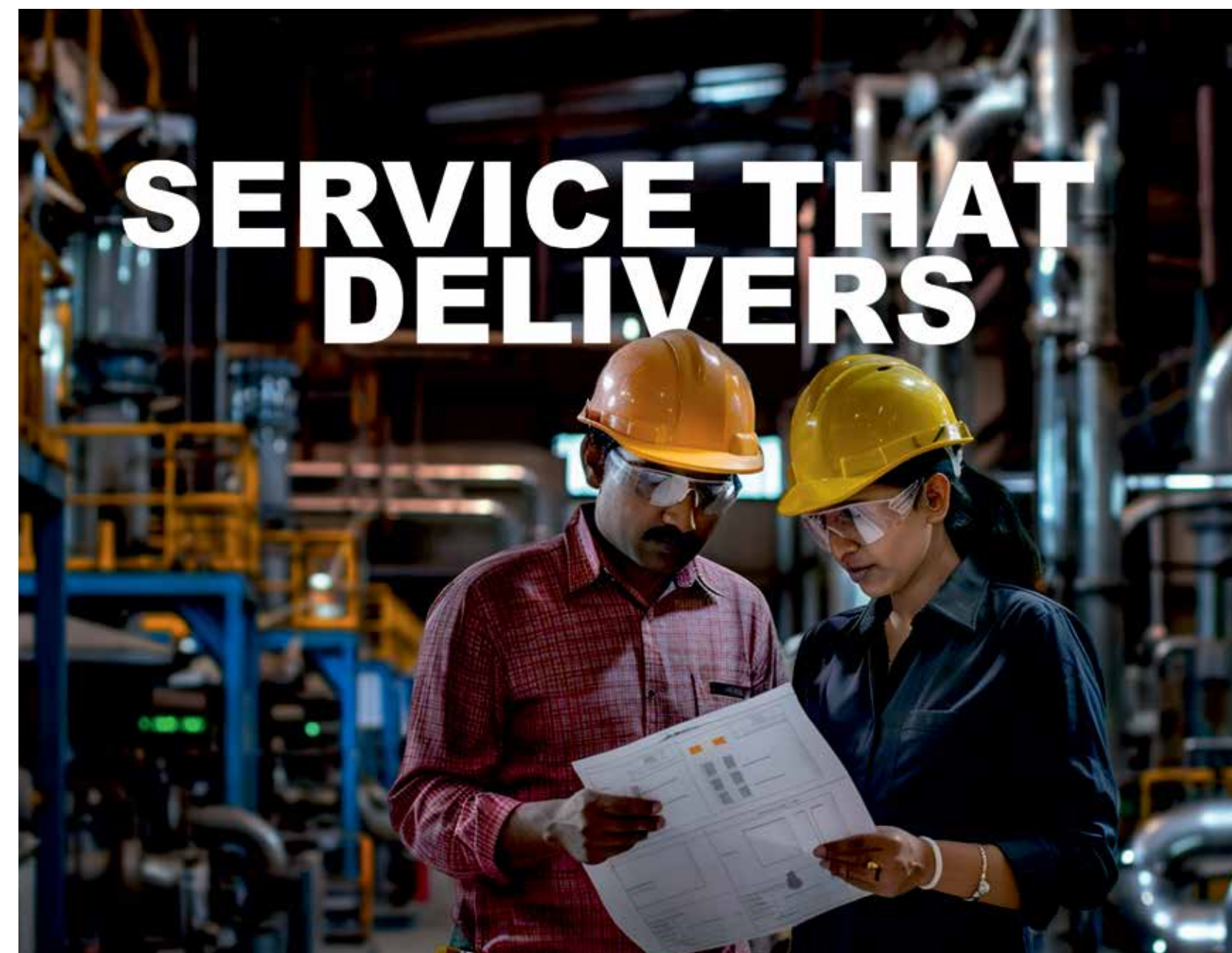
LINKING UP WITH A PSYCHIATRIST

The Live Love Laugh Foundation raises awareness around stress, anxiety, depression and mental health in India.

It helps people access psychiatrists and counsellors, especially for those in remote areas, and ensures affordability with low-cost services. Its rural programme has treated 17,105 individuals and supported 39,489 caregivers across seven states.

Initiatives include training for frontline workers and providing free treatment. Services are available in English and local languages, ensuring comprehensive support in Karnataka, Tamil Nadu, Odisha, Madhya Pradesh, Himachal Pradesh, and Kerala. Donations can be made online.

www.thelivelovelaughfoundation.org
info@thelivelovelaughfoundation.org



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.



Process and Energy Efficiency | Environment

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