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Civil Society

COCKROACHES SPREAD OUT

Campaign to improve govt schools begins from Alwar

Abhijeet Dipke, Cockroach Janta Party founder, makes an inventory of what's missing in a school

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Civil Society
EVERYONE IS SOMEONE

The magazine that goes places invites you to come along

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Young people across India have rallied around the Cockroach Janta Party's demand for having improvements made to the education system. What shape will the agitation take? 20

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

Editor
Rita Anand

News Network
Shree Padre
Saibal Chatterjee
Jehangir Rashid
Kavita Charanji

Desk & Reporting
Aiema Tauheed

Layout & Design
Virender Chauhan

Photographer
Ashoke Chakrabarty

Write to Civil Society at:
A-16 (West Side), 1st Floor,
South Extension Part 2,
New Delhi -110049.
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Civil Society
READ US. WE READ YOU.

Dimaagi Naxals: Who are they really?

THE prime minister used his Independence Day speech to announce that the government/BJP/RSS will be identifying Dimaagi Naxals and going after them. Almost immediately, students who were calling themselves cockroaches have begun calling themselves Dimaagi Naxals.

The prime minister will now have his hands full tracking down Dimaagi Naxals because they will be available in tens of thousands — in much the same way as young people filled the streets at the call of the Cockroach Janta Party. Make way then for the Dimaagi Naxal Janta Party. Social media is already full of creative memes.

A Dimaagi Naxal, we are left to assume, is a sympathizer of the Naxal movement. But who are these people? Where are they to be found? Is it that the Dimaagi Naxal label will be used to hound just about any critic of the government and its policies? Who will decide?

The Red Fort event and the speech of the prime minister was a staid and stage-managed event. Elsewhere, India entered its 80th year of independence in a youthful spirit symbolized by the Cockroach Janta Party's agitation for a better education system. The youth agitation embodied the very values on which the republic was founded. The agitation was above caste and religion and spoke for those who haven't done well economically. Young people in India, we can see from the agitation, are committed to nation-building and shouldn't be taken lightly.

It isn't an easy challenge to take up. But the sincerity of young people trying to fix government schools and bring standards to college education is attracting more and more support. The contrast is too stark to be missed. While the Modi government is all about grandiose plans such as a new Parliament building, what the youth activists are talking about are basic things like fixing schools.

Our interview of the month with Dileep Ranjekar shows how little attention is truly paid to education. Report after report lies unimplemented. Nandan Nilekani has been asked to chair a committee to look into exam leaks when the Modi government just two years ago in 2024 set up a committee on the very same subject and did nothing to implement its recommendations.

There are agitations happening across India and they are all demanding better governance. We have a detailed story from Goa on how the villagers of Carapur are desperately trying to hold on to their land. They are up against builders and Goa's politicians but they haven't given up their agitation.

LETTERS

Story matters

Loved the August issue of *Civil Society*. Apart from your bold stories and editorial on the Cockroach Janta Party (CJP) movement, I thought both stories by Praveena Sharma, her interview with V. Radha, an IAS officer, on repurposing government staff and on Margao's Shadow Council, were excellent. Shree Padre is always good, and I enjoyed reading his story on bringing life back into tanks. I also liked Rashmi Gopal Rao's stories on Bhoomija's architecture and Amritsar's heritage architecture.

It's refreshing reading *Civil Society* after looking at the screaming stories in newspapers. Keep it up.

Usha Rai

Seek solutions

We often demand our right to protest, but conveniently forget that every right comes with an equal responsibility. Public discourse has increasingly become confrontational rather than constructive.

The debate surrounding NEET is a classic example. What began as a genuine concern over irregularities has, in many instances, evolved into a political battle rather than a serious discussion on policy reforms. If our objective is to improve the system, then our focus must be on solutions, not on scoring political points.

Responsibility does not rest with one institution alone. Some teachers, who are expected to uphold the highest ethical standards, have unfortunately become aligned with coaching centres, creating conflict of interest and fuelling a commercialized education system. Many parents, driven by the desire to secure a medical seat for their children, are willing to participate in unethical practices. Equally, many students pursue medicine not because it is their passion, but because it is their parents' dream.

Perhaps it is time for parents to give their children the freedom to choose careers based on their interests and abilities rather than societal expectations. A motivated professional is always a greater asset to society.

When irregularities were identified, the government ordered a re-test for those affected. While no corrective measure is perfect, taking decisive action to protect the integrity of the examination was an important step. The larger challenge, however, lies beyond any single examination.

The uncomfortable truth is that corruption remains one of the biggest diseases affecting our society. It is not confined to governments or institutions; it exists wherever individuals compromise their moral and ethical values for personal gain. We are all part of this system, and therefore we all share responsibility for reforming it.

A system cannot be transformed merely by passing the blame or searching for scapegoats. Real change begins with introspection, accountability, and the courage to uphold integrity, even when it is inconvenient.

Democracy thrives on diverse opinions and healthy debate. Differences of opinion are its strength. But above all, the nation and its long-term interests must come first.

Dr Naresh Shetty

India abroad

I felt extremely shamed while reading Sanjaya Baru's column, 'The ugly Indians'. This is the reality. The Indian passport, whose Global Passport Index is at 125, also reflects where we stand. All of us, readers of this magazine, must spread this message, of improving our behaviour, across schools, educational institutions and other forums. Small beginnings, small change, for cumulative impact.

Jayasree Devineni

Street style

I liked reading Aiema Tauheed's piece, 'The lungi is redesigned with inspiration from the street'. Purushu Arie has created radically beautiful real fashion. Well done.

Rajkumar Ramasamy

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IN PASSING WHEN IT POURS

Civil Society picture/Ashoke Chakrabarty

The old-fashioned umbrella still protects people from the rain

शिव नाडर फाउंडेशन

विद्याज्ञान
उत्कृष्ट आवासीय निःशुल्क शिक्षा

सपने देखना आपकी ज़िम्मेदारी, उन्हें पूरा करना हमारी।

विद्याज्ञान स्कूल के 2027-28 बैच के लिए ऑनलाइन पंजीकरण अब प्रारंभ हो गए हैं!

शिव नाडर फाउंडेशन के मार्गदर्शन एवं संरक्षण में, विद्याज्ञान मेधावी विद्यार्थियों को कक्षा 6 से 12 तक **निःशुल्क उत्कृष्ट शिक्षा** प्रदान करता है। विद्यार्थियों को राष्ट्रीय एवं अंतरराष्ट्रीय स्तर पर खेलों में उपलब्धियाँ हासिल करने, विदेशो में उच्च शिक्षा के अवसर प्राप्त करने तथा विभिन्न अंतरराष्ट्रीय मंचों पर अपने प्रतिभा एवं नेतृत्व को प्रदर्शित करने के अवसर मिलते हैं। हमारे पूर्व छात्र आज देश-विदेश में विभिन्न क्षेत्रों में उत्कृष्ट प्रदर्शन कर रहे हैं और अपने समुदायों में सकारात्मक बदलाव ला रहे हैं।

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- समग्र विकास: उच्च स्तरीय शिक्षा के साथ खेल, संगीत, नेतृत्व विकास और व्यक्तित्व निर्माण के अवसर
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DILEEP RANJEKAR ON IMPROVING THE SYSTEM

‘There was no need for a new committee on exams’

Civil Society News
New Delhi

Dileep Ranjekar: ‘Governments have been appointing committees and not implementing their suggestions’

FACED with students protesting in the streets and nationwide unhappiness over the leaking of examination papers, the Narendra Modi government did what most governments getting a barracking tend to do: it set up a committee.

The government appointed Nandan Nilekani as the head of the committee, perhaps to win more brownie points for itself — Nilekani being a techie and entrepreneur with a progressive image.

It turns out, however, that the Nilekani Committee is preceded by a similar one that was appointed just two years ago when a comparable crisis over exams prevailed. It had the same brief: to clean up National Eligibility cum Entrance Test (NEET), a dysfunctional exam system. None of the elaborate recommendations made by that committee was implemented by the Modi government.

Will this then be the fate of the Nilekani Committee as well? It is too early to tell. There are also concerns that the committee’s members, Nilekani included, don’t have the necessary exposure to education as a field to make useful recommendations. A former secretary of education is the only exception. Other members include a former director of the Intelligence Bureau and the secretary for logistics in the Modi government.

To know more about the examination imbroglio, we spoke to Dileep Ranjekar, founder CEO of the Azim Premji Foundation, who has worked closely with governments over the years to promote public education.

Q: How effective do you expect the Nandan Nilekani-led committee to be in reforming NEET and solving the problems associated with it?

First of all, there was absolutely no need to appoint a new committee for recommending reforms in examinations because the identical mandate was covered by a committee appointed under Prof. K. Radhakrishnan just two years ago, in 2024, when there was a similar controversy over NEET and loss of public confidence in the examination system.

Appointing new committees is not the solution. Implementing the valid recommendations already made by the previous committees by appointing a task force of very competent people is the real solution.

Governments, and not just this one, over the past 25 years have been appointing committees on education and then doing practically nothing to implement their valid recommendations.

Illustratively, in 2016, the Central Advisory Board on Education (CABE), which is the highest authority on education in the country, had appointed several sub-committees to suggest improvements in the education system. Being a member of CABE, I was a part of one such important sub-committee that made several recommendations to improve school education after months of deliberations. Most of the recommendations of those committees have not been implemented.

It is the same with the new law to make the examination process tighter with higher penalty or punishment for leakage offenders — there are already existing laws that are hardly being implemented. Creating fast-track courts is theoretical since courts are unable to meet the pendency of the huge number of cases in the fast track. Therefore, far higher focus and energy have to be devoted to prevention rather than dealing with the criminality of leakages.

Assessment and examination has to be in the context of the education policy of 2020.

Q: What should be done with the National Testing Agency or NTA?

The Radhakrishnan Committee made important recommendations for reforming the NTA and for the conduct of national entrance examinations. The recommendations were intended to comprehensively restore trust in national entrance examinations such as NEET, JEE (Joint Entrance Examination), CUET (Common University Entrance Test), and UGC-NET (University Grants Commission National Eligibility Test) by making the system more secure, transparent, technologically robust, and professionally managed.

The Radhakrishnan Committee’s suggestions were many but I would like to specifically talk about 10 most critical ones, which are hugely relevant and should have been implemented.

- **Restructure and strengthen the NTA:** Reorganize the NTA into a professionally managed, autonomous institution. Create dedicated verticals for test development, technology to support information security, examination operations, research and analytics, and ethics and vigilance. The committee also recommended reduction in dependence on outsourced persons by recruiting domain experts as permanent staff.
- **Strengthen governance:** Establish an empowered governing board with clearly defined responsibilities. Separate policy, operational, and oversight functions without ambiguity. Introduce stronger internal audit and accountability mechanisms.
- **Enhance examination security:** Develop comprehensive Standard Operating Procedures (SOPs) for both pen-and-paper and computer-based tests. Strengthen encryption, secure printing, transportation, storage, and chain-of-custody for question papers. Improve cybersecurity and continuous monitoring.
- **Use technology to prevent malpractice:** Introduce stronger candidate authentication through biometric and digital identity verification. Use AI and data analytics to detect suspicious patterns. Improve surveillance at examination centres.
- **Reform pen-and-paper examinations:** Adopt Computer-Assisted Secure Pen-and-Paper Testing (CPPT). Question papers transmitted digitally in encrypted form. Printing only at secure examination centres shortly before the examination. Minimize opportunities for leaks during transportation.
- **Improve examination centre management:** Certify and regularly audit examination centres. Create standard infrastructure and security requirements. Maintain a national database of approved centres.
- **Strengthen coordination with states:** Develop institutional linkages with state and district administrations. Use district-level committees to support secure conduct of examinations. Improve coordination with law enforcement agencies.
- **Involve test indenting agencies:** Make IITs, universities, and other examination-owning institutions active “knowledge and examination partners” rather than merely clients of the NTA. Encourage joint planning, test design, and quality assurance.
- **Improve risk management:** Prepare detailed contingency plans for technical failures, paper leaks, natural disasters, and cyberattacks. Conduct regular security audits and mock drills.
- **Monitor implementation:** Constitute a high-powered steering committee to oversee and monitor the implementation of the committee’s recommendations and review progress periodically. The government subsequently constituted this committee in November 2024.

Q: But just two years later the Nilekani Committee is setting out to cover the same ground.

Yes. It has been asked to address paper leaks and restore public confidence in the NTA. The new committee has been created precisely with the identical task that the Radhakrishnan Committee was assigned with.

‘Issues in education are basic and interlinked. As laid down in the NEP 2020, the education process from kindergarten to Class 12 must be seen as a continuum and holistically and not viewed in a fragmented manner.’

The government would do well to review the implementation of the previous committees appointed by the government itself.

The sub-committees appointed in 2016 under CABE by the same government spent enormous time and resources in developing recommendations for overall improvement of education, including the subject of assessment and examinations at various levels. Most of these recommendations remain non-implemented.

Q: If you were to list the things that should be done to improve the quality of education, what would they be?

Issues in education are basic and interlinked. As laid out in the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020, the education process from kindergarten to Class 12 must be seen as a continuum and holistically, and not viewed in a fragmented manner. To my mind, some critical issues are:

- Significantly higher investment in education than currently budgeted. Education budgets have shrunk during the past decade or so. Jawahar Navodaya and Kendriya Vidyalaya are a good benchmark to begin with for both budgets and processes. Current per student budgets in government schools are a fraction of what is provided in these schools. Why are we discriminating against the children of marginalized parents?
- Exhibit political will to restore “Brand Government School” through quality infrastructure, libraries, and superior learning experience.
- Radically transform teacher education at both pre- and in-service levels. Mere tinkering will not help.
- Strengthen all academic and administrative institutions with well qualified people.
- Equal opportunities for pre-school education. While urban elite children are well prepared to join Class 1, the same benefit is not available for children of parents with less resources or with marginalized background.
- Strong focus on functional literacy and numeracy during the primary education stage — this is fundamental to subsequent learning.
- Appoint teachers as per the ratio prescribed in the Right to Education Act in all government schools.
- One classroom for one grade and one teacher per classroom — where not feasible, provide ability to teachers for multigrade teaching-learning. Eliminate single-teacher schools entirely.
- Provide full autonomy — financial, administrative and academic — to institutions of higher education to make them independent and vibrant institutions fully aligned with overall education goals. Eliminate unnecessary regulation of these institutions.

Q: Can technology alone deliver better education and improve the examination system?

Technology can only be used to deliver tamper-proof tests faster and at a scale. Even for this purpose, we know how ineffective government websites are, not only in education but overall, in many sectors. Address those bugs to make life easier for students and parents.

Improving education requires doing much more heavy lifting in preparing teachers of radically superior quality, improving course materials, and making learning a holistic experience. Investments are needed in human resources and infrastructure. There can be no short-cut.

Continued on page 10

Continued from page 9

A fundamental change is needed from examination-oriented education to real education. It is also important to do away with the multiple examinations that students have to undergo to get into a decent institution of higher learning.

Q: What mandate would you give the Nilekani Committee?

Understand the overall goals of education and evaluate how the current examinations measure achievement of those goals — including affective domain (such as creativity, empathy, sensitivity, understanding of constitutional values, etc). Current examinations are too focussed on limited abilities of students.

Don't reinvent the wheel. Review and consolidate all earlier recommendations of the Radhakrishnan Committee, identify those for immediate implementation, recommend specifics like:

a. detailed implementation plans

b. how to find competent and high-integrity people resources

c. technology architecture for the conduct of high-stakes examinations

d. making the technology interface highly user-friendly as well as fool-proof.

While the JEE/NEET, etc provide equitable opportunity for students across the country to appear for the exam, the process of preparation for such exams is highly inequitable since it needs significant financial and time investment in getting coached through expensive coaching centres — whose primary focus is how to crack the exams and not enhancing the student's development or abilities.

Focus on how to make the interface of various testing websites and portals accessible all the time — all bugs and glitches must be addressed.

Avoid the requirement of appearance for multiple examinations — at the Centre and state levels. Can a student appear multiple times in a year rather than just one high-stakes appearance that determines the student's fate? It is ridiculous that just one exam seals the fate of a student.

Give much higher weightage to the Class 12 examinations held by state boards and the Central Board of Secondary Education (CBSE) and the Council for the Indian School Certificate Examinations (CISCE).

The core principles of education — goals and assessment — should override technology itself. Technology should not be seen as a hammer that will fix everything.

The committee should study the assessment methodology deployed by some of the more developed nations like Sweden, Finland, the UK and US, etc to learn from their best practices. ■

Bengaluru brings back its footpaths

Rashmi Gopal Rao
Bengaluru

FOR many years, walkable footpaths have eluded citizens in Bengaluru. They protested, requested and once desperately danced on the streets for neat footpaths to walk on. The municipality remained mostly ambivalent.

As in every Indian city, Bengaluru's footpaths are populated by vendors, vehicles and whatnot. So broken is the footpath and so dangerous that walking becomes a survival of the fittest walkathon.

Then, surprisingly, on July 1, Krishna Byre Gowda, Minister for Greater Bengaluru Development, launched a Safe Footpath Campaign and, astonishingly, cleared 750 km of footpaths on major roads by month-end.

The immediate catalyst for the Safe Footpath Campaign was the Supreme Court judgment on June 19 which declared the right to walk on footpaths as a fundamental right. Justice P.S. Narasimha emphasized that local authorities, municipal corporations and civic bodies of respective states needed to ensure that footpaths were safe, clean and walkable.

An added reason was safety. Pedestrian deaths account for almost 30 percent of all fatalities caused by road accidents in Bengaluru. In 2024, the city recorded the second highest number of pedestrian deaths in India.

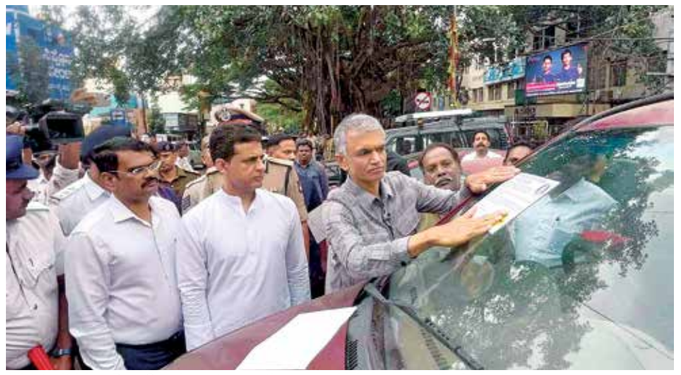
The Safe Footpath Campaign's ambition is to clear 2,000 km of arterial and sub-arterial roads of encroachments, thereby improving mobility and accessibility for citizens. Encroachments include vendors, illegally constructed steps, ramps, extensions by shops and commercial establishments, parked vehicles, accumulated trash and more. The objective is to make public spaces safe and inclusive by reclaiming footpaths and removing obstruction of any kind.

But the campaign doesn't stop there. A budget of ₹70 crore has been allocated to repair broken paving slabs, kerb stones, rectify level differences, and so on. An appeal was made by Byre Gowda to shop owners and vendors to voluntarily clear their unauthorized constructions and stalls failing which action would be taken. Street vendors were requested to shift their stalls to other roads rather than blocking pavements on main roads where pedestrian traffic is heavy.

Footpaths have been marked so that there is space for vendors

A JCB clears encroachments

There are plans to rebuild footpaths


Minister Krishna Byre Gowda pastes a notice on a vehicle parked on the footpath

ON AN UPSWING Footpaths totalling 750 km have been cleared of around 3,000 tonnes of debris, over 5,000 advertisement hoardings, 3,000 steps and more than 2,000 vendor establishments. The MLAs (Members of the Legislative Assembly) of several constituencies have been out there, doing

The campaign covers all five Bengaluru city corporations (the central, north, south, east and west zones). According to a social media post on the chief minister's official Instagram handle, an impressive 200 km of footpaths was cleared in the first three days of the campaign.

"It is undoubtedly a positive move by the government," says Sunil Pichamuthu, who leads colonial history walks under the moniker, Ken Yore Community. "Stairs, slopes made by shop owners, vehicles parked illegally and even vendors make it difficult for people to walk in peace on the streets. As long as it is implemented effectively and the debris is removed after clearing the footpath, it is a wonderful initiative."

inspections and pulling up people for misusing footpaths and littering.

More than 1,200 abandoned vehicles have been affixed with stickers for owners to clear them of their own accord and about 172 vehicles have been towed away. Citizens can report the presence of such vehicles using the BTP ASTraM app which was launched by the Bengaluru Traffic Police.

However, on some stretches vendors staged a comeback. "Accessibility and mobility greatly improved when the bustling Avenue Road was cleared. But it lasted just a week and now all the vendors have returned. They set up shop with just some crates and chairs which they carry with them once they wind up for the day. So, the basic problem of being able to walk freely persists," points out Sudha Puttaraju, 36, who frequents the Avenue Road market. Hawkers also staged a comeback at Gandhi Bazaar in South Bengaluru.

In such instances, Byre Gowda has decided to allow the hawkers to occupy a part of the pavements and leave enough space for pedestrians. The hawkers are also encouraged to shift to less busy roads. The government plans to relocate hawkers to designated vending zones. The idea is that the rights of both pedestrians and hawkers get protected. The right to walk on a pavement should not be at the cost of livelihoods, remarked Byre Gowda. Solutions have to be found.

"Several government-owned complexes in localities like Basavanagudi, Malleswaram, etc. have shops that are vacant. The recently constructed multi-level parking complex in Gandhi Bazaar has several shops in the lower level which are yet to be occupied. It is a good idea to accommodate vendors there," says V. Shishanjan, 29, founder, Pathwatch.in, a civic grievance platform.

In addition to safe footpaths, the need of the hour is to include relevant street signs, zebra crossings and attention to places where no footpath exists, adds Shishanjan.

Citizens have also been raising objections to how the elite have encroached on footpaths by parking their luxury cars or by growing their own gardens on footpaths.

"One of the recurring observations has been the perception of selective enforcement. Action against minor structures has been taken while larger and more obvious encroachments remain untouched," says Satyalaxmi Rao, a citizen volunteer. It is hoped that the implementation will be uniform and consistent and tackle all kinds of illegal occupation of public spaces.

The government has already proposed to increase the fine ten-fold from ₹500 to ₹5,000 for violations such as driving on the footpath.

"This is another big risk and poses a major threat to pedestrians. It definitely needs to be curbed," says Dr Rajeev Nrupathunga, heritage enthusiast and founder of Revival Heritage Hub (RHH).

CITIZENS ON BOARD Residents of various localities have also pitched in. Rao, for instance, has been actively working with stakeholders to resolve civic issues in Basavanagudi ward, one of the oldest and most reputed areas of Bengaluru.

"For the past three years, citizens here have been leading a sustained Safe Footpath Campaign. There was growing concern that public footpaths and storm-water drains, created using taxpayers' money, were increasingly being occupied by unauthorized ramps, concrete extensions, compound wall projections, private gardens, parking structures, etc, and reducing pedestrian space. In several places citizens, including senior citizens, schoolchildren and persons with disabilities were forced to walk on busy roads."

The city's most famous advocate of safe footpaths is Arun Pai, 57, who calls himself the "Footpath Mayor of Bangalore". He is the founder of the famous 'Bangalore Walks' and has been raising awareness about safe footpaths for two decades. Pai has been successful in getting the attention of the authorities to fix footpaths. Several corporators, government officials and engineers often attend his walks. He also runs 'Walkaluru' which has been conducting group footpath walks over 140 km of Bengaluru's interconnected footpath network since December 2024.

Residents of localities like Sanjaynagar, Bellandur and Malleswaram have for long lobbied for better and safer footpaths.

About eight years ago, the residents of Malleswaram danced to Bhangra beats and performed Bharatanatyam to draw the attention of the civic authorities. After that, the 18th Cross and 8th Main Road got smooth footpaths.

A recent success story is the construction of a two-metre-wide, 100-metre-long footpath at the busy Silk Board junction of the city. This was a collaborative effort by residents, the Bengaluru South City Corporation and CGI Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) programme. Similar initiatives are on the anvil in other parts of the city like Mahadevapura. ■

Women hold up posters against the luxury homes project which they say will destroy their village's ecosystem

Carapur refuses to give up

Village takes on big builder

Praveena Sharma
Panaji

TWO months before the Cockroach Janta Party's (CJP) Gen Z protest against exam paper leaks began at Jantar Mantar, a group of women started a sit-in in Goa's tranquil village of Carapur in Bicholim *taluka*. They were opposing a mega project by the Mumbai-based House of Abhinandan Lodha (HoABL).

Spread over 5.3 lakh sq. m, the project comprises luxury villas with swimming pools, five-star hotels, an artificial beach, commercial complexes and civic infrastructure.

The women say the project will destroy the fragile ecosystem that has sustained their village for generations.

While protesters at New Delhi's Jantar Mantar dispersed after getting Union Education Minister Dharmendra Pradhan to resign, the women of Carapur continue their agitation even as work on the project gathers pace.

Since April 5, come rain or shine, these women sit silently at the protest site, holding up posters against the Abhinandan Lodha project and corruption. Over time, they have garnered support from activist groups, environmentalists and political leaders. Their quiet, consistent protest contrasts with Gen Z's fierce, impatient and irreverent agitation, but their resolve is no less strong.

"It's been 124 days now. I come here every day, first and foremost, to save my village from destruction," said Supriya Gaunkar, a 41-year-old native of Carapur. "This mega project by Lodha will destroy our village. We all know what happens when a project of this scale comes up in a village."

Nita Morajkar, a 42-year-old housewife, believes indiscriminate tree felling, construction and concretisation on the hills and plateau will dry up all the lakes in her village.

"During the monsoon, the streams flowing down from the hills recharge our lakes and other water bodies. The 5.3 lakh sq. m Abhinandan Lodha project (on the plateau and hills) will dry them up. They are planning not just residential buildings but also artificial beaches, five-star hotels and several commercial projects. All this will destroy our greenery, forests, hills, culture, heritage and everything we have fiercely preserved over the centuries. We will not allow them to do this just for their profits and financial gain," she said resolutely.

Dr Swapnil Salelkar, a Right to Information (RTI) activist, has extracted reams of information on the project and its approvals. He is emphatic that a project of the scale proposed by HoABL is not environmentally viable in Carapur, which has a population of around 7,500. He warns that it will put immense pressure on the village's civic amenities and could ultimately lead to their collapse.

LEGAL TANGLE According to information available on the Real Estate Regulatory Authority (RERA) website, the HoABL project, called One Goa, will be developed in three phases, with construction having commenced on April 24, 2024, and scheduled for completion by March 31, 2029. The project is being promoted by Errichter Infra Private Limited. Phase 1 will be developed over 1.8 lakh sq. m, Phase 2 over 2.1 lakh sq. m, and Phase 3 over 1.4 lakh sq. m.

The project is described as "a luxury five-star hotel and gated residential development by India's largest branded land developer, celebrating Goa's vibe and lifestyle, coastal living, heritage and colours with a touch of modernity".

Under the heading 'External Development Work', the company states that the road network is being developed in-house, with 60 percent of the work already completed. It also declares that it was meeting 15 percent of its water requirement on its own.

Dr Salelkar, a former Indian Air Force (IAF) medical officer who is also the spokesperson for the movement, said their immediate demand from the Goa government is that it issue a stay order on the ongoing project.

He said their primary contention is that the project has failed to secure an Environmental Clearance (EC). He argued that, since the proposed township will be developed over an area exceeding 50 hectares, it is required under the Environment Impact Assessment (EIA) Notification, 2006, to obtain an EC from the State Environment Impact Assessment Authority (SEIAA) before undertaking any site development or construction activity.

The villagers of Carapur have challenged the statutory approvals granted to HoABL's project before the western zone bench of the National Green Tribunal (NGT). In July, the tribunal admitted the petition and issued notices to the Union government, the Goa government, the SEIAA, the Town and Country Planning (TCP) Department, the collector, the Carapur-Sarvan Panchayat and the project developers. The tribunal has not stayed the project but is examining whether environmental laws were violated.

Additionally, the Goa Foundation has filed a Public Interest Litigation (PIL) before the Bombay High Court at Goa against Town and Country Planning Minister Vishwajit Rane, Errichter Infra Pvt Ltd, the SEIAA and HoABL. The NGO has alleged that land parcels were unlawfully converted using controversial planning provisions without obtaining the environmental clearance required under the 2006 EIA notification.

VILLAGE IDENTITY Dr Salelkar said residents of Carapur believe projects such as One Goa will bring an urban nightmare to the village.

"Carapur has a population of approximately 7,500. The project proposes to build around 2,000 housing units, a five-star hotel, an artificial beach and other amenities. The company's own documents state that more than 17,000 people are likely to move in, requiring around 2.5 million litres per day (MLD) of water. This excludes the water required for the swimming pools, beach, five-star hotel and commercial buildings," he pointed out.

According to him, Bicholim *taluka* is already experiencing a water deficit of 0.5 MLD.

"They (the project executives) have already been told that water cannot be supplied to them. They committed to investing in and obtaining water from a water treatment plant. Now, there is already a shortage of 0.5 MLD of water, on top of which the project will require another 2.5 MLD. Where will you bring the additional water from? There is also the issue of sewage. They can resort to groundwater extraction, which could cause groundwater contamination," he said.

The project site is spread over 5.3 lakh sq.m

Supriya Gaunkar and Nita Morajkar

He flagged other side effects of urbanization, including the proliferation of slums, loss of cultural heritage, air pollution, hill cutting, deforestation, rising crime rates and a general decline in the quality of life, which he warned could despoil otherwise serene Carapur.

In May, the Directorate of Panchayats issued a circular proposing the notification of 56 villages as urban areas in the state. It directed the Block Development Officers (BDOs) to seek the views of the respective village *panchayats* on the proposal.

Carapur was among the villages proposed to be notified as an urban area. The move was fiercely opposed by villages, forcing the government to back down. A similar attempt was made in 2020, but the government was forced to withdraw the proposal then as well.

"We are opposed to such urbanization. Once it begins, we will have a municipality. They will start changing land use and zoning to enable outside investors to come and undertake development in our villages," said Dr Salelkar.

To prevent the government from reviving the proposal and to reiterate their opposition to the HoABL project, the residents of Carapur-Sarvan — the two constituent revenue villages operate as a single local administrative body — convened a *gram sabha* on August 2, where they passed eight resolutions. The resolutions were submitted to the state government and the heads of various government departments.

One of the resolutions states: "The gram sabha resolves that no large-scale residential, commercial or township development shall be permitted unless an independent scientific carrying-capacity assessment establishes that adequate water resources, road infrastructure, sewage treatment, solid waste management, stormwater drainage, disaster resilience and public services are sufficient to sustain such development without adversely affecting existing residents or the environment."

They also resolved to treat Carapur-Sarvan as an "environmentally sensitive rural village" and to protect its agricultural land, orchards, *khazan* lands, hill slopes, plateau ecosystems, wetlands, forests and groundwater recharge zones from indiscriminate conversion.

DEBATABLE DEAL Besides environmental destruction, the alleged fraudulent land deal and abuse of power by Rane and his family are at the heart of the Carapur protest.

The 5.3 lakh sq. m parcel of land sold to HoABL was registered in the name of Rane's grandmother, Manormabai Rane. According to Dr Salelkar, it was allegedly transferred, without any financial consideration, to Karapur Estate Private Limited — a company linked to the Rane family. Carapur is also spelt as Karapur.

The transaction allegedly took place in 1997, when Rane's father, Pratapsingh Rane, was Goa's chief minister. Dr Salelkar further alleged that the transfer was carried out without a stamped instrument or registration.

"When the land was transferred to the company (in 1997), it was not a legal entity. Karapur Estate Private Limited was

Continued on page 14

Carapur refuses to give up

Continued from page 13

incorporated only a few months after the transfer (in 1998) and was later sold to HoABL (in 2024)," he said.

Vishwasrao Rane, a cousin of Vishwajit Rane who has filed a property dispute case in the same matter before the Judicial Magistrate First Class (JMFC) in Bicholim, called the transfer of the land to Karapur Estate Private Limited and its sale to HoABL, on a later date, a "fraud".

"It is a complete fraud. You cannot transfer property to a company that is not registered. It was only possible because his father, Pratapsingh Rane, was the chief minister at the time. Vishwajit and his wife, Divya Rane (currently an MLA) were directors on the board of the company. They were signing all the documents," he said.

Vishwasrao Rane told *Civil Society* that his family was unaware of the alleged "land fraud" until recently. It came to light after they began examining publicly available information and tracing the transactions involving their ancestral land.

"There are two families. One family belongs to Vishwajit Rane, and the other belongs to us. He and his family own half of the land, and we own the other half. Since he and his father (Pratapsingh Rane) were in power, they misused their position to transfer the land to their company and sell it to HoABL," he said.

Under Vishwajit Rane, the TCP Department has been accused of manipulating and illegally amending several provisions of the TCP Act that favour real estate developers and investors. One of the most prominent is Section 39A of the TCP Act, which is alleged to allow arbitrary changes in land use and zoning, including the conversion of agricultural and orchard land into settlement areas.

Such alleged tinkering with the law could have facilitated the conversion of agricultural and orchard land into settlement areas for the township project in Carapur.

It is pertinent to note that HoABL is also politically well connected. The company emerged after Abhinandan Lodha's departure from Macrotech Developers (formerly known as the Lodha Group), the real estate company founded by his father, Mangal Prabhat Lodha. The latter is a Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) politician and currently serves as Maharashtra's cabinet minister for skill development, employment, entrepreneurship and innovation.

There is no public evidence to suggest that HoABL has received preferential treatment from the current government because of the family's political connections. *Civil Society's* attempts to reach HoABL for comment did not elicit a response.

HoABL currently has three projects in Goa: One Goa in Bicholim, spread over more than 100 acres; The Imperial Goa in Old Goa, spanning 18-20 acres; and Gulf of Goa in Vasco.

The land deal for more than 135 acres in Bicholim for the Carapur project was finalized by HoABL through a commercial sale deed executed on March 12, 2024. The project was later registered with RERA as One Goa, a mixed-use development, on May 3, 2024.

Armed with the commercial sale deed and statutory approvals, Dr Salelkar alleged that the Mumbai-based real estate developer felled hundreds of trees to begin construction. When the villagers, who were in the midst of updating their Form 14 records, got wind of the activity, they decided to inspect the site, which was being guarded by HoABL bouncers.

"No one was allowed to go there (the construction site). We went there on the pretext of offering prayers to our deity. We took pictures and showed them to the villagers. A few months later, we took the women to the mountain. When they saw the destruction, they started crying — an area of 5.3 lakh sq. m had been completely cleared," he said.

According to him, more than 500 *khair*, or acacia, trees were felled, along with trees of several other rare species. One of the villagers, who had a tenanted cashew plantation there, lost around 250 cashew trees.

"Nobody could do anything about the destruction because of fear of the powerful people involved. Even the police were scared to go there," he said.

Objections filed against the project with the authorities were ignored, while a weak and "non-speaking" stop work order issued by what the villagers described as a compromised *panchayat* was stayed by the Directorate of Panchayats.

The people of Carapur then approached the Bombay High Court at Goa and the NGT. Their final line of attack was a sit-in by women protesters, who are building pressure through their quiet resolve.

On August 5, they completed four months of protest, having stood firm against financial and political power. They have now moved their protest site from Carapur village to Azad Maidan in Panaji, where they have joined the broader agitation led by activist Rama Kankona.

While the Carapur movement is specifically demanding cancellation of the HoABL mega luxury housing project and opposing urbanization under Section 39A, it is also now broadly championing tribal welfare, land rights and environmental protection across the state.

Dr Salelkar said it was the women of Carapur who have kept the protest going by showing up every morning.

"We cannot afford to lose this battle to save our village because, if we do, it will set off a trend that will spell destruction for other villages like ours, and we will not be able to stop it," he said. ■

Safety still eludes workers on auto shopfloors

Kavita Charanji
New Delhi

FOR a decade Safe In India (SII) has been assiduously tracking the number of accidents in the supply chains of major auto brands and lobbying for worker rights and safe shopfloors. So, has India's mighty auto sector become safer for workers?

SII's eighth *CRUSHED* report indicates that policies are improving. The downside is that implementation is slow and halting so it's not having an impact on the lives of workers. They still suffer crush injuries on the shopfloor, losing one or two fingers on average. The upside is that a few positive trends have emerged.

CRUSHED has two new features this time. First, a national survey of workplace safety across 10 major auto brands in four states — Haryana, Maharashtra, Karnataka and Tamil Nadu. The report analyses trends in accident cases in the supply chains of auto companies like Maruti Suzuki, Hero, Honda, Tata Motors, Mahindra and Bajaj.

Second, the report also assesses whether worker-friendly aspects of the new Labour Codes are being implemented. The codes have provisions for fair wages, social security, industrial relations, occupational safety, health and working conditions.

The report's data is based on evidence collected from over 11,000 workers supported by SII since 2026, mostly from Haryana, Maharashtra and, this year, from Tamil Nadu.

Most workers are young migrants on contract. More than two-thirds had lost a finger — mostly due to power press accidents. Either the machine had a worn pedal, a damaged bolt, or missing sensor. Machines are obviously not being maintained. An additional worry is that 70 percent of workers learn to operate the machine on the job and are given no basic training.

Confirming the tawdry working conditions in auto supply chains, Ramsingh Parihar, who has lost two fingers of his left hand, says, "Factory owners will do anything for their profits. If an operator is absent, they deploy a helper earning ₹450 per day to sit there. The owners do not instal sensors because with sensors the speed is lower and less components get produced."

And this is not a greasy small factory problem, notes the report. A large number

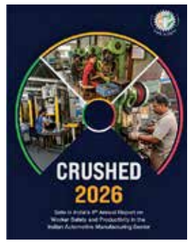
Workers, above and below, who lost fingers owing to power press machine accidents

of factories with a high rate of injuries are actually affiliated to the Automotive Component Manufacturers Association of India (ACMA), the industry's apex body.

The overwhelming majority of injured workers, 98 percent, that SII has helped in Haryana and Maharashtra work in the supply chains of auto giants like Maruti Suzuki, Honda, Hero, Tata Motors, Mahindra and Bajaj.

The report found that compliance was stronger in the southern states. There were better safety mechanisms, working hours fixed as per law, and the quality of audits was also better. So, role models already exist.

In Haryana, injuries are reporting a decline. Maruti shows a downward trend, while numbers for Hero and Honda are static since 2022. In Maharashtra, Tata Motors and Mahindra supply chains show an upward trend. One exception is the Bajaj supply chain where injuries have reduced.



Seventy-two percent of workers worked over 60 hours every week as against the statutory 48-hour weekly cap. Just 5 percent received appointment letters. All this is in clear violation of the Labour Codes.

Workers get Employees State Insurance Corporation (ESIC) e-pehchan cards only after they get injured whereas they should get it upon employment. Employers do not submit accident reports or delay doing so.

"Women workers in our company asked the supervisors for the ESIC card so that we could get free medical treatment but they turned down our request, saying we could not have it at the moment," says Jayashri Phad, who lost two fingers of her right hand in an accident that incapacitated her.

In Haryana, where SII has been working since 2019, the share of workers being given an ESIC e-pehchan card before an accident, instead of afterwards, has been steadily improving. Treatment at an ESIC hospital soon after an injury has occurred has also gone up from 46 percent in 2019 to 58 percent in 2025 in Haryana.

The true extent of workplace accidents may never be known. The official Directorate General, Factory Advice Service and Labour Institutes (DGFASLI) data tends to underreport accidents. The ESIC's disbursement data and SII's data of injured workers assisted show higher figures. Closing this gap is important because solutions can emerge only from accurate data.

Moreover, DGFASLI's 2024 data has still not been published. So there is a three-year reporting gap by DGFASLI whose mandate is to ensure "safe and healthy workplaces for all in factories, construction sites and ports". How DGFASLI will fulfil this mandate is uncertain.

Many workers say that when auditors come to the factories to take stock of work conditions, contractors and supervisors order workers not to report problems on the shopfloor. They remain silent owing to the threat of sacking. Labour departments do not inspect the factories.

Pintu Nikalie, who has lost three fingers of his right hand, says that he has worked in an auto components factory for 16 years and that safety concerns are outweighed by production pressures.

Yet making auto component factories safer is not rocket science, says the report. "Better ergonomics, asking workers where the real hazards are, bringing inspectors and engineers into the same conversation instead of treating inspection as adversarial, are some straightforward measures."

Sandeep Sachdeva, co-founder and CEO of SII, points out that worker safety is good for businesses. In his introduction to the report, he writes, "The opportunity of safer work is higher productivity. World-class manufacturing requires professionalism — stable skills, reliable uptime, predictable quality and disciplined processes. Unsafe working conditions undermine all of this."

Non-profits and experts on labour policies have repeatedly flagged unsafe factories, poor wages, and lack of housing or health facilities as snags for India's ambition of becoming a manufacturing hub. It's time to change speedily. ■

‘Let equality come from within the community’

Aiema Tauheed
Kolkata

ANOTHER Universal Civil Code (UCC) is now being compiled for West Bengal along the lines of similar codes in BJP-ruled states. A committee headed by a former Supreme Court judge, Justice Ranjana Prakash Desai, has been asked by the state government to examine a draft UCC.

The CPI(M) has staunchly opposed its imposition, calling it an exercise in futility and needless interference in people’s private lives. The party plans to campaign against it.

We spoke to Dr Malini Bhattacharya, member and former president of the All India Democratic Women’s Association (AIDWA), affiliated to the CPI (M), to understand what the proposed UCC could mean for West Bengal, which has a large minority, Muslims and tribals, who are residents of the state.

Q: The bill has not yet been made public. What worries you?
The bill is based on three other Uniform Civil Codes in three BJP-ruled states: Uttarakhand, Gujarat and Assam. These three codes are very similar. That’s why we may surmise that the West Bengal code is going to be similar, if not exactly the same. It is on that basis that I can talk about its main provisions.

Those codes have three parts: marriage, divorce and succession, three major aspects of civic life or family life. It’s going to affect our family lives immediately. That’s why it’s important for us to understand what its provisions are.

All the codes say that all marriages have to be registered. Not under the Special Marriage Act of 1954, an all-India Act, but under the state’s UCC. For some reason, which we don’t know, marriages have to be registered in the state of which you are listed as a resident.

Supposing you are a resident of West Bengal, but you live in Odisha or in Delhi. When you get married, you have to get your marriage registered here in this state. Why? I don't know.

People who got married or got divorced before this code was in situ, also have to get a marriage certificate. Suppose I have been married for 30 years. Perhaps I don’t have any documentation for my marriage. Maybe I was married according to Hindu rites or Shariat law or whatever. Well, if I married according to Shariat law, there would be some document. But in a Hindu marriage, there would be no such document.

So if you ask me now to get my marriage registered, I will be in great trouble. It would be similar to the citizenship issue, where you have to produce so many documents, which you don’t have. This provision is going to be stressful for citizens, particularly those who are not so educated, or come from poorer families, labour families. Unless the government undertakes a widespread programme to inform people in West Bengal, many people won’t even know.

If you don’t know and you haven’t registered your marriage, then if the government gets to know they will send you a notice. You will have to respond within a certain time limit and get your marriage registered. If you fail to do so even after the notice, then you may have to pay

Dr Malini Bhattacharya

a fine or you may even be jailed. It’s a very draconian sort of law.

Q: Any other provisions you’d like to underline?
Yes. The codes include live-in relationships. There are many adult men and women who choose to live with each other. Now, that is their right, a right that is recognized in every democratic country.

According to this code, all live-in relationships will have to be registered. If you don’t register, you will get a notice. If you fail to respond to the notice, then you will be fined or detained. Why? This is a private relationship.

If there is a case of abuse in a live-in relationship there are other laws to take care of it like the Protection of Women from Domestic Violence Act, which was passed in 2005 and recognizes live-in relationships. If a woman gets abused or if there is violence against her, or if she is not given any maintenance, then of course she can complain and she can get her rights. That is already there. Why do you want people to register their live-in relationships? This is just plain intrusion into private relationships, according to us.

Then, there is the question of succession. In most family laws, there is generally some injustice towards the woman. The code may very well state that all children will have equal right to succession, to parental property.

It’s there in the other three states so it may also be included in the West Bengal UCC. That would be good, but it could have been done without bringing it in under a UCC.

And, of course, one of its major provisions will be, if you want to get married, there shouldn’t be any other living spouse.

We have been working on this UCC for a very long time. And we found that within the Muslim community itself, there are movements against polygamy, which is allowed in the Shariat. There was a movement against instant triple *talaq*, which is why ultimately the Supreme Court banned instant triple *talaq*. It came because there was demand within the community. And that is the best way to change family laws.

Of course, family laws are imperfect. We have always stood for equal rights, equal laws. We have said that just by bringing uniformity from the top, you cannot prevent inequality. Equality has to come from within the community.

From my experience in West Bengal, marrying more than once, even in accordance with Shariat law, has become almost obsolete. We are against polygamy. But it is already becoming obsolete.

What is nasty is that they are setting it up as if it is for the benefit of Muslim women against Muslim men. This is divisive politics.

Q: Are there provisions that you feel have been overlooked?
Hundreds of women — Hindus, Muslims, Christians, of every denomination — get married. After a while, they have one or two children. Then the husband leaves the wife and goes off. It has nothing to do with the Shariat. It is pure and simple desertion. It happens regardless of religion.

If you want to tackle this problem, you don’t need a UCC. You need to strengthen the Special Marriage Act. You have to tell people that whatever your religion, in whatever way you get married, get your marriage registered under the Special Marriage Act.

The Special Marriage Act, the Anti-Dowry Act, and the Protection of Women from Domestic Violence Act protect women particularly from this kind of abuse. You don’t need UCC for that.

Our fear is that the UCC is being brought in because the government is keen to exercise greater control over our family lives and lifestyles. That is why we want it to be discussed before it is turned into law. ■

Red List wonder with a trunk full of beautiful fruit

Shree Padre
Kasaragod

HOW does a tree found deep in the forest and listed as a threatened species in the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN)’s Red List catch the attention of farmers and become a local icon?

That’s what’s happening to *Baccaurea courtallensis,* a forest tree endemic to the Western Ghats which is also found in Kerala and Karnataka. Called *moottippazham* in Malayalam and *koli juttu* in Kannada, the tree, a medium-sized evergreen, is an awesome sight during the monsoon. In June and July, it yields fruit in dense bunches clinging to the tree’s trunk. The entire tree then bursts into a kaleidoscope of colour: bright pink, yellow and light orange.

Baby Abraham George, now 73, recalls how his elder brother, Mathew Malekudiyil, brought the seedlings of this tree from a tribal hamlet in Venmany forest in Idukki district.

George planted it on his farm in Vannappuram *panchayat* in the same district. Currently, he has 50 such trees. George now has the distinction of being the only large-scale *moottippazham* grower in India.

He cultivates other crops as well on his one-and-a-half-acre farm such as coconut, nutmeg, cocoa, mango and rubber. His stand-out crop, however, is *moottippazham*. Over the years he has planted about 300 such trees, with the oldest now 42 years old.

The trees have been yielding fruit continuously for the past 30 years. The oldest has grown to a height of about 30 feet. It produces approximately 100 kg of fruit every year.

“In our soil condition, *moottippazham* starts bearing fruit in about four years. In the first year, it produces only four or five bunches. As the tree matures, the yield increases. A nine-year-old tree produces around 50 kg of fruit,” says George.

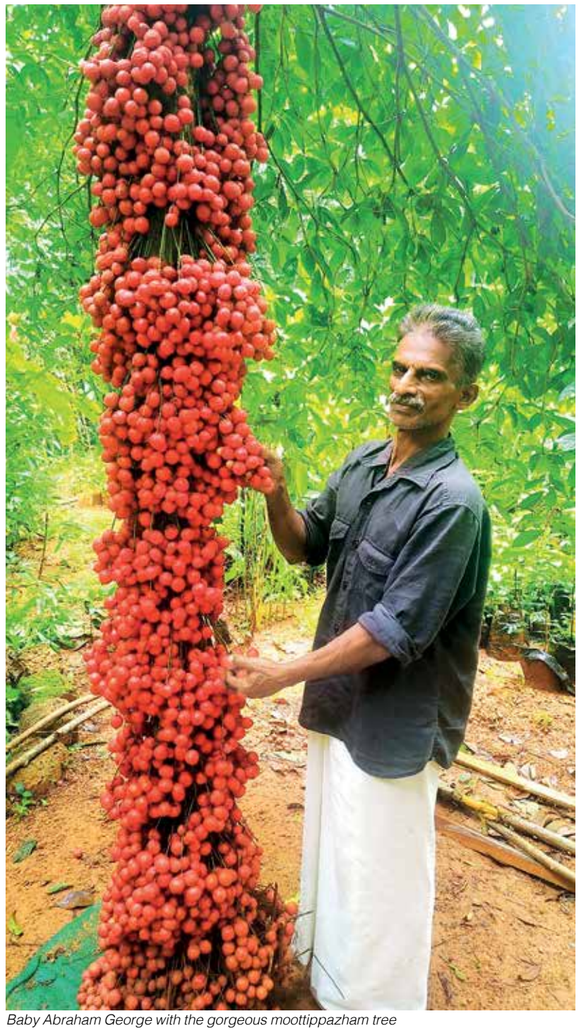
At first the tree did not attract attention. Since its sweet and sour fruit is edible, children would pluck and eat it. Whenever villagers asked for the fruit, the family happily shared it for free. People also ate the little-known fruit out of curiosity. Gradually, fruit lovers began to notice *moottippazham*.

Then George’s daughter, Jentina, began trawling the internet for information about the tree. She found very little scientific research available on *Baccaurea courtallensis* but there was mention of indigenous communities using the fruit to treat various ailments, and there were indications that it possesses medicinal properties.

George was optimistic about *moottippazham’s* prospects. He paid close attention to the trees, raising 20 to 30 saplings every year and distributing them freely to neighbours. Over time, as demand increased, he began selling the saplings.

About seven years ago, George’s *moottippazham* trees drew public attention when the then state agriculture minister, V.S. Sunilkumar, visited his farm. People from near and far started asking for the saplings and fruit. This opened up a business opportunity for George’s family. They now produce seedlings as well as grafted and layered plants.

About two years ago, the family’s enthusiasm for the tree received another boost. A foreign tourist came to visit George’s elder brother who also has a *moottippazham* tree. The visitor was fascinated by its fruit and bought some. When George heard of it, he thought, “This fruit has great potential to attract foreign tourists.”


Baby Abraham George with the gorgeous moottippazham tree

His son, Jerin, also became deeply involved. The family stepped up production of saplings. They were also able to sell some of the fruit.

Since the fruit has a hard rind, it can be safely sent by courier. “This year I sold about 500 kg of fruit at ₹200 per kg,” says Jerin. The tree’s yellow fruits are sour and the pink ones are sweet, he says. The fruit has only a small amount of edible pulp.

While George concentrates on propagation and sale of *Baccaurea* plants, Jerin has started experimenting with value addition of the fruit. Last year he made *moottippazham* pickle. It received a good response online. This inspired him to continue experimentation. He is trying his hand at making squash. A commerce graduate, he is researching other products he could make like dehydrated fruit powder, herbal tea, and so on. The fresh fruit is sold online to local customers. “Tribals used this fruit as medicine, for skin care and to stop a wound from bleeding. I’m planning to make soap from the fruit,” he says. Jerin also plans to start a sales counter on the highway selling all the *moottippazham* products the family makes.

The tree now grows in many households in Vannapuram, which is a hilly *panchayat*. According to Jerin, the *panchayat* has around 100 such trees and with the right plans in place it can become a tourist attraction. ■

Contact: Jerin Baby – 75608 57969

Electric buses outsmarting Srinagar city

Jehangir Rashid
Srinagar

Civil Society picture/Bilal Bahadur

The red electric buses are plying across the Kashmir Valley instead of being limited to Srinagar

UNDER the Srinagar Smart City Project, the government introduced 100 red electric buses in November 2013 so that people could travel easily across the city. The decision was welcomed by residents who looked forward to hassle-free commuting. Instead, three years later, the eco-friendly red buses are darting all over Kashmir, intruding into districts and towns, and clashing with private transporters who regard areas outside Srinagar as their domain.

"Srinagar city is probably the only smart city in the country where the operation of smart buses has been extended to other districts of the Valley. The red buses were meant to improve connectivity only within Srinagar district and its outskirts. Currently, these buses are running across the length and breadth of Kashmir," said Mohammad Umar, a resident of Bemina.

Apart from Srinagar district and other districts, the smart city red bus service, operated by the Jammu & Kashmir Road Transport Corporation, is being extended to Budgam, Ganderbal, Pulwama, Sopore, Chadoora, Charar-i-Sharief, Pattan, Khrew and other towns in the Valley. Even lesser-known areas in Central, North and South Kashmir are being connected via the government's smart city bus service.

The red buses are being permitted to operate within Srinagar and all over Kashmir. But private transporters are not permitted to ply within the city, except for a handful of mini buses.

Alarmed at this intrusion into their territories, private transporters have protested in Srinagar. They organized a day-long '*chakka jam*' some months ago along with people who were facing difficulty in reaching their destinations.

"The protest was successful. Private transporters wholeheartedly participated. The government had to cancel examinations scheduled for the day since their transport system, aka the red buses, could not meet the demand and people were inconvenienced," said Matt Shabir Ahmad, chairman of the All Kashmir Transporters Federation.

Following the protest, the government invited them for talks to end the impasse. But mere promises were made, said Ahmad. No solutions emerged. The government is just biding time, he alleged.

'The smart city bus service has become a direct assault on the livelihoods of private transporters. There is no solution in sight.'

"Honestly speaking, the private transporters are living in pitiable conditions. The smart city bus service has become a direct assault on the livelihoods of private transporters. All the long- distance bus owners, Tata Sumo owners, mini-bus owners and other private transporters are running from pillar to post but there is no solution in sight," said Ahmad.

Most transporters say their problems started when long- distance buses and other passenger traffic vehicles bound for North Kashmir were directed to vacate the general bus stand at Batmaloo within Srinagar and shift to Parimpora on the outskirts of the city. Similarly, passenger vehicles bound for South Kashmir were directed to board and de-board their passengers at Pantha Chowk, also on the outskirts of Srinagar.

"Batmaloo is a centrally located area. It is visited by each and every person from the Valley. Once the bus stands were shifted to Parimpora and Pantha Chowk, people were reluctant to disembark and search for some other transport to get to Srinagar city. They look for bus services in their districts and towns which will take them directly to Srinagar city," said Ali Mohammad, a veteran transporter.

At the Batmaloo bus stand, hundreds of shops selling merchandise had been set up by small businesses. Once the buses were moved out, these shopkeepers got no customers and were forced to shut their businesses. The once bustling Batmaloo bus stand now looks deserted.

Another issue facing transporters is the absence of an Automatic Testing Station (ATS) in Kashmir. According to Ahmad, the government had claimed that an ATS would be set up in the Pampore or Pantha Chowk area and that land for it had been identified.

"The ATS is operating in Jammu but not in Kashmir. As a result, we can't renew the fitness certificates of our vehicles. Currently, around 10,000 private vehicles are not running since their fitness certificates have expired and not been renewed due to the absence of an ATS," said Ahmad.

He pointed out that this was not the fault of the transporters. Yet they are asked to pay a daily fine if they ply their vehicles. Although the officials concerned have been directed not to fine the transporters, on the ground penalties are still being imposed, said Ahmad.

"Years ago, the Jammu & Kashmir High Court had issued directions that long-distance buses should not ply in Srinagar city. The order was a good one. But it should be implemented in letter and spirit. Smart city buses are running in the city as well as in districts," said Ahmad.

Private vehicles operate on alternate days since most passengers use the smart buses of the Jammu & Kashmir Road Transport Corporation. The government needs to step in and work out routes.

"Many youths have taken loans from banks to purchase various passenger vehicles. Around 150 to 200 new buses have been added to the Kashmir Motor Drivers Association (KMDA) bus stand. These new transporters as well as existing ones need a helping hand from the government," said Ahmad. ■

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COCKROACHES ARE SPREADING OUT

Campaign in schools begins

Umesh Anand
New Delhi

JUST when the Narendra Modi government seemed invincible, its muscular presence casting an imperious shadow across the country, young people taking over the streets at the call of the Cockroach Janta Party (CJP) showed how things could be different.

The open season for defiance began on June 6 with a modest crowd showing up at Jantar Mantar in Delhi. But by July 20 tens of thousands of protesters thought nothing of spitting in the eye of the Modi government and even making a bid to enter the parliament building.

In no time, somewhat like a balloon being pricked, the strongman image of Modi, assiduously built, also lay in tatters with him being lampooned and ridiculed on social media and the streets.

The CJP has won hearts and admiration for successfully raising the issue of the high cost of school and college education and the tragedies that surround the leaking of question papers time and again. Millions of families are relieved that someone has spoken up and even exerted enough pressure to have the education minister, Dharmendra Pradhan, resign. For once there has been accountability.

But the question now is what next? The CJP was founded as a joke on social media by Abhijeet Dipke in response to something the chief justice of India said about young people. Such was the resonance to Dipke's joke that the cockroach became the central motif of a social and political tsunami.

But how does the CJP transform the tectonic energy it has unleashed into something more permanent without losing its edge? The core team has already begun reaching out to government schools in rural areas where the conditions are abysmal. Taking a cue from the CJP protests, young students in schools have also begun protesting. Dipke and others have set out to fix 100 schools — beginning with Alwar, which will almost certainly trigger demands from thousands more.

Dipke is now asking why money has been spent on a new parliament building and new house for the prime minister when schools don't have proper classrooms and toilets. It is an explosive issue. Families, whether urban or rural, who cannot afford expensive private schools feel discriminated against.

"Politicians don't improve government schools where every child can get an education because they don't send their own children to government schools," says Dipke.

The CJP also takes the view that politicians don't want people to be educated because then they would start questioning them, the way the CJP is now doing.

It is a young and assertive India that celebrates the 80th year of independence. It is far removed from the prime minister's curated ceremony at Red Fort. The young are rejoicing in their own ways forward, no longer buying what the government tells them.

Over the past 12 years, under the Modi government, India has veered in the direction of becoming a plutocracy with chosen businessmen enriching themselves hugely.

The CJP has released tectonic energy, but how will it turn it into something permanent without losing the edge of the agitation?

A triumphal narrative has been built around the performance of the government with exaggerated claims of economic prosperity. Bought-out media owners and a pliant judiciary, as also hollowed-out constitutional institutions, have helped and been complicit.

NARRATIVE DEMOLISHED The CJP's agitation has shattered this narrative. The agitation highlighted the problems associated with education but in the process also brought to the surface widespread dissatisfaction with the dictatorial ways of the Modi government, poor condition of cities and shabby health services. The growing communal divide in India under the BJP has also been denounced.

Rajeev Sadanandan, former health secretary of Kerala and respected for his honest opinions, says: "A group of youngsters has proved Gandhi's maxim that truth is the absence of fear. The agitation shows that we have failed the next generation who are filled with anger which was ready to burst and did so through an unexpected stimulus."

Sadanandan says the agitation "showed the limits of instruments of coercion of powerful governments. The memory of the successful uprising will continue to inspire hope for people who are willing to fight injustice and caution those who believe that protest can be suppressed by use of brute force".

Sadanandan expects the government to "live in denial" and "take revenge on individuals". So, one of the steps to be taken going forward is to have a "system that can expose such vindictiveness and support resistance".

"But the myth of invincibility has been broken. This provides an opportunity for political and civil society actors to mobilize to oppose anti-people measures," says Sadanandan. "Opposition parties, too, have to leverage their organizational strength to keep the government from stifling dissent further."

Surinder Jodhka, professor of sociology and author of *The Indian Village*, which provides insights into rural aspirations, says: "Democracy requires irreverence. The facade of godly authority has been shattered. And I think everyone knows it, even those who are holding those positions, they also know that the air has gone out of the balloon."

"The second thing is that the fear has ended. There was an anxiety among many that this regime would go on for forever and that, at least during our lifetime, nothing was going to change. So, I think that perhaps will travel very far," says Jodhka.

DEMOCRACY ALIVE There is reason to celebrate that "democracy is alive". Many of the young people at the protests came from typically BJP families.

"Young women, in particular, realize that there is a world outside that needs to be enjoyed and lived and in some sense be part of. And I think this is something completely new," explains Jodhka.

"That was the most surprising thing when I went there. Young women in their teens literally, you know, late teens, they're standing there wearing shorts with posters which are written in sometimes even very foul language, very provocative," he says.

Claude Alvares, based in Goa, has for decades been an independent voice for protecting the environment and inclusive development. He is effusive about the CJP and what it has achieved.

"It has brought a whole new force into the Indian political arena. Previously, we were stuck with the Congress and the BJP fighting among themselves, along with a few regional parties. The public has been forsaken by all these established parties," he says.

For Alvares, it is an unpredictable "fresh invention" that has infused everyone with a sense of excitement.

"Young people have, for a change, taken charge of things. They may not have taken charge of politics, or they may not have taken charge of any political party or government, but at least they have taken charge of setting the agenda," he says.

"Right now, these people (CJP) have restored the 'parliament of the streets' and brought back accountability to the system. In future, if the system is made more transparent and accountable, many things would improve. Even in Goa, we have the same situation. In most cases, they (governments) had to swallow humble pie and concede because they are not able to deal with a population of 1.4 billion — neither the prime minister nor all the chief ministers. And so, (now) the recovery of democracy will lie only in the hands of the public," says Alvares.

The crusader for Goa wants the CJP's presence to spread across India, taking on state governments over regional issues and demanding accountability from them.

"I wish CJP actually blossoms in every capital of the country and takes up issues that are not only related to the Central government but also to state governments. Our state governments are doing equally badly, with Assam indulging in communal politics and Maharashtra and several other states engaging in corrupt politics," he says.

Alvares believes young people need to take inspiration from the CJP movement and fix the country's broken system, which he believes has robbed the country of a bright future.

"Most universities are out of date. There's nothing that you can't get on the internet nowadays in terms of information. There's no point in spending your time trying to get these (university) degrees, which don't get you any jobs. If more and more young people get out of

CIVIL SOCIETY PICTURES/LAKSHMAN ANAND

The agitation attracted young people in tens of thousands seeking a return to constitutional values and holding aloft Ambedkar's portrait

these institutions and start involving themselves in social problems and trying to hold their systems accountable, I think we would be able to set right many of the wrongs that have developed in the vacuum over the past 20-30 years," he says.

Pradhan's resignation, he believes, should set a precedent for demanding accountability from corrupt ministers, bureaucrats and individuals across states and institutions.

"It's not only ministers, but a sizeable portion of the bureaucracy that should be shown the door. That would put the fear of God into the rest of them. There's no other option," he suggests.

Criticizing the judicial system, Alvares says it has shied away from squarely fixing blame on those responsible by "following a dubious line of not holding ministers and senior bureaucrats responsible for the mess that takes place in administration and governance".

Students at a government school in Alwar talk about their problems

Rajiv Khandelwal is founder and executive director of Aajeevika Bureau, which works with migrant labour to secure their rights.

RETURN OF PROTEST Khandelwal, like Alvares, welcomes the "return of protests to Indian streets" and "reclaiming the democratic act of seeking accountability".

Explains Khandelwal: "After years of criminalization of all dissent under this government, the CJP has dismantled fear and brought back the courage to raise our voices."

Khandelwal says the CJP has successfully highlighted the ills of the education system in India, especially privatization.

He says: "We have managed to secure unprecedented public attention to the complete commercialization and collapse of education in India. For years, admissions have become intensely competitive and priced far beyond low-income Indians — including in the coaching industry. I doubt this exists anywhere else in the civilized world."

"For now, CJP must remain a public movement doing *janta ka kaam* — demanding accountability. It should not become a political party yet. This time will help its leaders mature, refine their ideology, and understand electoral politics better," says Khandelwal.

But improving education should remain the focus. A better public education system, which is accessible and affordable, is needed for building an inclusive and competitive India.

"The education system must be deprivatized. That means substantially improving public schooling — both infrastructure and quality of teaching and learning. I strongly support common schooling norms where, by law, all public servants and government employees must send their children to government schools," says Khandelwal.

"That alone will force a huge jump in quality. We must also do away with these hyper-competitive exams and massively expand higher quality education in the states," he says.

Khandelwal is anxious that the space for people to speak up be protected. Progress comes from review and criticism. The right to question."We must legally protect whistleblowers and the citizen's right to dissent and protest. Without fearless citizens and independent institutions, accountability will remain elusive," he says.

Mathew Cherian, who has led many social sector organizations, feels the CJP's major contribution has been mobilization of the youth not only over all the problems related to the exam system but also the larger issues of transparency and accountability which are the foundations of a functioning democracy.

A society based on fairness and social justice was the guiding principle of the CJP agitation. And this is to be welcomed and amplified among the young, says Mathew, noting the Ambedkar influence on the agitation.

Jodhka says the agitation marks a return to the democratic values on which the Indian republic was founded. He sees great hope in the young because they have sought to reclaim India from politicians.

"So, it's a return to our basic democratic values in that sense that people are actually being able to speak their minds, wear what they want, fraternize with who they like. While the leader is Dalit, there could be many other castes over there," says Jodhka.

It is an image of an India which didn't seem to exist till the CJP brought young people out to express themselves. "This young India has been largely hidden, isn't it?" says Jodhka, who says he was amazed by the spirit of the agitation when he went to Jantar Mantar.

Having asserted itself so simply and yet forcefully and successfully, this young India, ready to call out the powerful and ensconced, is unlikely to step back. ■

CIVIL SOCIETY PICTURES/LAKSHMAN ANAND

Young women made up a large number of the protesters

Abhijeet Dipke greets supporters

The core team celebrates the resignation of Dharmendra Pradhan as education minister, their main demand

COVER

‘The cockroach has turned the tables on the ruling class’

A spectacular revolt yet to be a movement, says Aruna Roy

Civil Society News
New Delhi

Aruna Roy: ‘This protest had all the elements of a powerful, spontaneous and successful uprising’

FEW activists have been a part of public life in the way Aruna Roy has. Over four decades she and her colleagues in the Mazdoor Kisan Shakti Sangathan (MKSS) have tirelessly been a voice for the unheard. From working with communities in Rajasthan, they helped frame laws on the Right to Information and Employment Guarantee. *Civil Society* spoke to Roy on the Cockroach Janta Party and the recent student agitation.

Q: What has been achieved by the Cockroach Janta Party protests?

There is a poster circulating which names Chief Justice of India Surya Kant as the co-founder of the Cockroach Janta Party! There is an element of sharp irony and humour that defines how young minds have succeeded in turning every insult, slur, and abuse into an opportunity or even a compliment that helps make them increase their legitimacy.

The wholly unwarranted comments by the chief justice of India would have irked and invited only statements of protest signed by a few people who would have had the courage to raise an objection against even the CJI.

It was (Abhijeet) Dipke’s extraordinary call that brought all the voices together — bringing politics and the angst of millions of young people together — that inverted the insult, by turning it into a badge of proud identity. Upturning the political image and the insult!

Dipke invited people to join, using the same media that had belittled them, and picked a moment which burst the dam when literally millions of youth and others signed up to be members of the revolt to demand accountability.

It was sharp and scathing, but it was humorous and a deadly metaphor — the cockroach is the only living creature so far identified that can resist a nuclear holocaust. The metaphor was used to turn the tables on an arrogant ruling class. This mode of turning the insult against those using it became one of the powerful tools of the young Gen Z movement.

In retrospect, it seems like this was a moment waiting to happen, the players yet to appear. The patience of many people has been systematically wearing thin; the doublespeak and the *‘jumlas’*, the closing of aspirational choices, education, opportunities, and employment, even of the privileged, posed immediate problems for youth. All this added up to the CJP protest.

The extraordinary achievement of the CJP has been to dismantle fear, bring young people together in a creative manner — demanding change and understanding the need for solidarity and commitment. Most importantly, the CJP gathered people through social media, but brought them on the streets and, along with other student and youth groups, showed courage, determination and commitment till they achieved their limited but seemingly impossible goal of securing the resignation of the Union education minister.

There was another spin-off of this protest that is extremely important for the health of India’s democracy — the return of popular support and legitimacy to street protest, symbolized by Jantar Mantar.

In BJP times, the spaces for protest long fought for, including Jantar Mantar, had been systematically cut off. The MKSS had managed to reopen Jantar Mantar for protests through a PIL in the Supreme Court, but that came with many unreasonable restrictions and conditions. The CJP protesters disregarded fear of prosecution and victimization and managed to overcome the restrictions imposed on the freedom of expression and space for protest.

Jantar Mantar was liberated from unreasonable police restrictions and made accessible 24/7 as it had been for decades. We must remember that in all of New Delhi, Jantar Mantar remains the only small and almost symbolic space for protesters asking for the democratic right to speak, protest, differ, dissent and have their voices heard by those in power.

Cultural expression flowed into multiple forms of song, theatre, lampooning, and recreating the theatre of the absurd. The freedom to lampoon the head of state and authority released the coils of tension which had spread across India. The language of the CJP protest freed India from the shackles of mainstream polarized political idiom, and created a fresh language of critique and creative expression.

The protest site was open to all, and included diverse political shades amongst the youth. One must not underestimate the importance of the commitment of the other student unions from the Left and the many independent groups and individuals who came to strengthen the demand of the CJP but even more to seek a new paradigm of political empowerment.

It was a spectacular revolt, which laid the ground and sowed the seeds of a movement for accountability in its nascent form. But the building and sustaining of a political formation requires hard work, consistency, and the backing of varied forms of lateral support, invoking tools of ideology, legal, political, and constitutional support.

Q: Would you define this as a movement?

In a new and refreshing way, the CJP sustained the fundamental belief that we must speak truth to power. It has been an extraordinary victory, but the 40 days at Jantar Mantar can only be seen as the first step in a series of struggles that can develop into a movement. As the CJP takes shape and formulates its more fundamental demands, it will tell us whether this will mature into a movement that will provide a conception and imagination where the youth of the country see a dignified future for themselves.

Civil Society picture/Umesh Anand

Sonam Wangchuk’s hungerstrike was crucial. Protesters hold up his poster

This protest had all the elements of a powerful, spontaneous and successful uprising. What can only be seen as a limited objective of securing the resignation of the education minister has been achieved. For this to grow into a movement there needs to be a more complex and cohesive articulation of the road ahead.

Big political movements are constituted of many parts, and the long road ahead has to be empowered by different critiques and conceptions to construct an ideology of sustained resistance and change. Each part has to be clear in its focus and goal.

Q: What is the way forward?

The energy has to be sustained by being inclusive and bringing together the small revolts on numerous issues, all concerned with accountability. While the list of non-negotiables will need consent and agreement, its interpretations need to be issue-based, multiple, the many issues concerned with accountability. It cannot be one issue, because even the issue of NEET (National Eligibility cum Entrance Test) touches only the fringes of the privileged amongst the youth.

The challenges include:

- Conception for a truly new education system which provides equal opportunity to all Indians for a free education from primary to university level. Education as a commercial enterprise must stop.
- Most of the young people at Jantar Mantar were concerned about examinations and employment. The CJP and its allies will have to address the question of what the demands of a right to employment campaign would be.
- On an ongoing basis, repression against those who protest will have to be countered. The FIRs lodged, and all arrests made must be questioned. Reports of the minorities being harassed and false cases piled against them are coming through. The CJP will have its hands full in trying to fulfil its promise of getting every FIR removed.
- There are many demands from different segments of students that will cause a split amongst the youth. The demand for doing away with SC/ST (Scheduled Caste/Scheduled Tribe) reservation is one such example. The movement will have to make sure that the demands and rights of the most marginalized amongst them are always centre-stage and supported by the movement as a whole.

Q: How should accountability in governance be addressed?

Accountability and transparency are the two most fundamental principles of democracy. Without transparency, there can be no accountability. We need to know what the State is doing, how decisions are being made, where basic constitutional rights are violated and the spending of public money, and who is responsible for these decisions. Before we can question, demand answers, or seek redress. Together they question the impunity of power and demand decentralized responsibilities to be defined and held accountable.

But accountability cannot depend only on citizens repeatedly asking questions or demanding the resignation of officials. A government cannot function if every failure is treated as an individual political crisis. Accountability must therefore be built into the architecture of governance itself, through laws, institutions, processes, and clearly defined responsibility.

This is why an accountability law is necessary. Every public service must have a clearly prescribed time limit, a designated officer responsible for its delivery, transparent processes for tracking applications and decisions, and an accessible grievance redressal mechanism. Where a service is delayed or denied without legitimate reason, there must be consequences, including penalties for the responsible official. There must also be checks and balances so that responsibility is neither evaded nor unfairly imposed.

MKSS understood this almost four decades ago: the struggle for the Right to Information was a struggle for transparency — the right to know. The struggle for a *Jawabdehi Kanoon* (Social Accountability Law) is the natural next step (RTI Part 2) — or the right to demand answers.

Accountability, therefore, must move from being a moral expectation to a legal and institutional obligation. It requires a policy intervention that makes the State answerable to its citizens every day, not merely on scattered issues once every five years. Democracy cannot survive on elections alone. It survives when people have the power to question, institutions are required to answer, and failure has consequences.

The right to accountability is part of a legal framework. The MKSS has spent many years in Rajasthan and elsewhere building a bottom-up framework for accountability. But every government, regardless of ideologies, is reluctant to pass a law. This too requires a nationwide movement, similar to the one which led to a powerful national demand for the passage of the Right to Information Act in 2005. Such an accountability law would help address the people’s right to seek accountability not just in education and employment but across the spectrum of their rights as citizens.

The CJP spoke truth to power, the unfinished agenda to “make truth powerful” and “power truthful” will define the future course of action. ■

What's in a name?

DELHI DARBAR

SANJAYA BARU

On my first day in class at New Delhi's Jawaharlal Nehru University, a classmate from North India asked me, "Is your name pronounced as 'Sanjayya', like that Congress party president, Sanjivayya?" No, it is not 'Sanjayya' but 'Sanjaya' pronounced with the last 'a' half-uttered. What does that mean, she asked me. You know, I said to her, in Sanskrit there is a half 'a' or 'uh' sound. Like in Ashoka pronounced as 'Ashokuh' or Rama pronounced as 'Ramuh.'

She had a blank expression on her face. I don't understand, she said. It is Ashok, Ram and Sanjay, no? No! I retorted. That's what Hindi has done to Sanskrit names. In Telugu all Hindu names end with an 'a' — Krishna, Narasimha and so on. In Tamil an 'n' is often added. So Krishna becomes Krishnan and Narasimha becomes Narasimhan. A Gopal can be a Gopala or a Gopalan.

All my life I have had to explain these differences to my Hindi*wallah* interlocutors. I never imagined that one day I would have to get a notary to testify that the 'Sanjay' in my voter identification card is the same as the Sanjaya in my Aadhaar card. Thereby hangs a Kafkaesque tale.

Digitization of individual identity and a multiplicity of official digital cards has made matters worse. In trying to settle matters relating to my deceased in-laws, my wife had to get notarized statements to say that 'Vaithyanathan' is the same as 'Vaidyanathan', and 'Shanta' and 'Shantha' are the same person. How does one explain to a Hindi-speaking official in Delhi that in Tamil there is no way of distinguishing between 'th' and 'd'? My father had a similar problem with his name, 'Vithal' — often typed as 'Vittal'.

I have had to deal with another problem — the incompetence of typists hired by the Unique Identification Authority of India. My Aadhaar card spelt my name as Sanjya. To get that changed to Sanjaya rather than Sanjay was in itself an effort. Indian citizens and their locational status are today identified by multiple digital statuses — Aadhaar, PAN (Permanent Account Number), passport, driver's licence, bank account, electricity bill, telephone bill, water bill, gas bill. Ensuring that one's name is typed in the same form on all identification papers has become important in this age of digital harassment of citizens.

My 2002 voter card mentions my name as Sanyaya Baru. I did not bother to get it corrected because in 2002 no one ever imagined that the Election Commission of India would one day become part of a wooden-headed, authoritarian system that would be quite happy to delete names from a voters' list on the slightest of pretexts. How does one prove that a Sanyaya living in one part of Delhi in 2002 is the same as a Sanjaya living in another part of Delhi in 2026? There are forms to be filled, attested photocopies of multiple identities to be enclosed to get the bureaucracy to do its work.

Names are spelt wrong by incompetent typists, causing utter confusion

My wife had to get notarized statements to say 'Vaithyanathan' is 'Vaidyanathan', and 'Shanta' and 'Shantha' are the same person.

Digitization, it was assumed in the era of carbon copies, photocopies and fax machines, would make matters easier. What has not helped is the inability, perhaps unwillingness, of government to certify that there is indeed one single digital identity that can be used to ensure that all others fall in line. One by one, the different digital identities of the Indian citizen are now subject to questioning by different branches of the State itself. No one is willing to let the citizen know which identity is the last word.

To get my passport I have to produce my Aadhaar card. To change the address on my Aadhaar card I have to show my passport. Neither the Aadhaar card nor the passport is proof of my citizenship. Kafka redux.

A passport, we have been recently informed, is no proof of one's citizenship. It is merely a travel document. One wise member of the government said this is because only 8.0 percent of Indians hold a passport. What then of PAN? What percentage of Indians hold a PAN card? How many have electricity bills or bank accounts in their name? Aadhaar is perhaps the most widely held identity card but it is most unlikely that every single Indian out of the country's 1.5 billion in fact has an Aadhaar card.

Four decades ago, in the mid-1980s, my brother wrote to me from the US, asking for his birth certificate. He had not collected one before going overseas. I discovered then that neither he nor I had a birth certificate at home. All we had as proof of our birth and date of birth was a letter from the nursing home where our mother gave birth to us.

I decided then to see if I could in fact secure a birth certificate from the Hyderabad municipality. I went to a municipal office that was straight out of a Kafka story. Crowded, chaotic and with no one knowing who was in charge. Yet, an elderly clerk came forward to help. He took my application that mentioned the name of the maternity home and my brother's date of birth. I was asked to return after three days. When I did, a certificate was handed to me. Human and humane intervention in a pre-digital world helped.

Maybe today's modern systems are better at maintaining records and a click of a computer key can produce the document one seeks. But, if the staff manning these systems are not educated enough, their English language ability patchy and their Indian language knowledge even worse, how can one make them understand the difference between Sanjay and Sanjaya? ■

Sanjaya Baru is an economist, former newspaper editor and author. His most recent book is 'Secession of the Successful: The Flight out of New India'.

Caught in the MCQ trap

LOOKING AHEAD

KIRAN KARNIK

A cleverly framed question can stump even geniuses. How do you answer with a digital yes or no a question like: "Have you stopped cheating in exams?" This query is like: "Have you stopped beating your wife?" Yet, tests based on multiple choice questions (MCQs) are similar: the answers hardly reveal the truth about a person. Sadly, ever more of our education system depends on MCQs for assessing students. Little wonder that many score 95+ in literature or sociology, unimaginable — especially for old-timers — in such analysis- and essay-based subjects.

As in so many fields, the goal was well-intentioned: to reduce subjectivity in grading. In addition, technophiles touted things like optical readers, through which a machine could read the answers to MCQs and immediately produce a grading. Greater technological use came through computerization, by which students could directly enter answers into the computer, enabling quicker and objective assessments. Such uses of technology greatly facilitated mass testing, enabling and promoting centrallization: one country, one test.

The concept of a single test — for admission to undergraduate medical colleges (National Eligibility cum Entrance Test or NEET), engineering (Joint Entrance Examination or JEE), universities (Common University Entrance Test or CUET), etc. — is a boon in some ways, avoiding the pressure, cost, and time of appearing for many tests. The advantage is further amplified by the fact that the scores of these tests — intended for Central universities and institutes — are used by many other institutions as the basis for admission. On the other hand, it means that the fate of the student is dependent on this single-point, single-day annual event. Anyone who misses it, or is not at their best on that day, is doomed to failure — or at least to waiting another year for a second chance.

Having spent years preparing for the test, and much money on coaching classes, failure is seen as the ultimate disaster. Conversely, success in the test is a pathway to opportunities. Particularly for the not-so-well-off, admission — especially in prestigious medical or engineering institutions — is considered a way of moving out of poverty, a guarantee of a better life. Securing a place in the government-owned ones also means lower fees: so important for most, whose families stake their all (often taking loans) for their daughter or son to qualify.

This test is perceived as so important, and the stakes so high, that it induces tremendous stress in students. Peer and parental pressures add to this; in a few unfortunate cases, youngsters have been driven to suicide. It is in this context that the corruption leading to a leak in the NEET paper this year — and the consequent announcement of a re-test — generated so much anger. It meant more pressure, more uncertainty, more cost; also, it exposed how leaks enable a few privileged and rich to buy their way into these institutions, at the cost of others who may be more deserving. An insensitive observation by the highest judicial authority was the last straw.

Civil Society picture/Lakshman Anand

The problem is fundamental and quick-fixes won't work

Following the forced resignation of the education minister, the prime minister announced a task force to look at tests and reforms in the testing agency. A similar incident of paper leak two years ago had also led to the formation of a committee. The fate of its 101 recommendations is not known. Both committees were chaired by technologists. Clearly, the government has great faith in technology as a solution.

The problem, though, is broader and more fundamental which is why quick-fix tech solutions won't work. Committees may douse flames temporarily, but the malaise runs deep.

A few suggestions on what is needed: Decentrallize admissions. While a single test has many advantages, this must be only one input in determining admissions. Each institution should have the freedom to add other (well-defined, publicly-announced, and transparent) criteria, enabling it to identify and admit those who best match the institution's orientation: one may specialize in research, another may emphasize entrepreneurship.

Unlike the Indian Institutes of Technology (IITs) which have had a single "merit list" based on a common test (JEE), the Indian Institutes of Management (IIMs) have long had a system in which the Common Admission Test does not result in a common ranking; each institute uses the test scores (with varying weightages for various elements in it) but then follows its own procedure for selection. The differing filters reward different capabilities, ensuring diversity and enriching peer learning, a contrast to the factory-produced near-clones that IITs select.

Promote in-school learning: Making schools — which inculcate capabilities beyond only academic — more important than coaching classes is vital and best done by including weightage for Class 10 and 12 marks in the admission criteria. It would reinvigorate schools and reduce the disadvantage of those who cannot afford tuition or coaching classes. Further, regional diversity can be promoted by selecting the toppers of the state boards from surrounding states.

Overhaul tests, eliminate MCQs: Analysis, critical thinking, and problem-formulation can be tested — and promoted — by a drastic overhaul of the test papers. Ease and speed of evaluation of lakhs of answer papers prompted the move to objective, MCQ-based tests. Now, the same efficiency can be achieved even for text-form answers by using the growing capability of AI.

Ensure diversity: Apart from the common-test score, admissions could use other criteria: bonus marks for the socio-economically and gender disadvantaged; winners of recognized maths, chess, sports, or theatre and other cultural competitions; and for top rankers in each state school board. This would recognize capabilities beyond the narrowly academic, and ensure true diversity.

Increase test frequency: The tests must be conducted far more frequently than annually. Ultimately, in a few years, they could be online, anytime, anywhere, with due checks and verifications. Question banks and technology can ensure integrity.

Tech solutions to automate and secure existing processes is only a band-aid for a problem that requires surgery. New technology (especially AI) is vital, but only a means. As outlined, drastic changes in structure, content, and process are required. This calls for a complete review from a pedagogic, goals, and systemic viewpoint. ■

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

The law is clear on strays

CITIZENS IN COURT

MEGHNA UNIYAL

ANIMAL and disease control is the fundamental responsibility of every modern state. Across the world, constitutions and public health laws empower governments to quarantine, remove and wherever necessary, cull animals to protect people, livestock, pets, wildlife, as well as the environment from attacks and diseases. India is no exception via its state municipal and *panchayat* acts, central statutes and BNS (Bharatiya Nyaya Sanhita) provisions. Significantly, two recent landmark Supreme Court judgments regarding the fundamental Right to Life of citizens under Article 21 also underscore the above laws.

Yet over the past two decades, a growing narrative has sought to romanticize stray animals, while portraying lawful animal control as violent and irreligious. Domestic and even international animal rights organizations have increasingly portrayed measures for removal of stray animals as immoral and violent, despite foreign NGOs accepting similar policies in their home countries. PETA, for instance, supports euthanasia for stray dogs in the US, yet champions homelessness for the same animals in India. Government agencies and courts attempting to enforce existing laws are often demonized using selective and misleading references to religion and mythology.

While kindness toward animals is undoubtedly a value across India's religious traditions, it is disingenuous to suggest that these traditions endorse the unrestricted presence of stray animals or require the state to remain passive in the face of pests or dangerous animals.

In light of the recent Supreme Court judgment specifically for the removal of stray animals from public places, perhaps the most misleading and most oft touted example to promote the idea of stray animals and their public feeding, is one of the first three chapatis in a Hindu household being made for a cow, a crow and a dog. This may be a common practice in many households in India. However, it is symbolic and under no circumstances can it be interpreted to mean that everyone has an inalienable religious duty, or worse, a right, to go around town throwing food at every cow, crow and dog they encounter. Symbolic household traditions, however pious, are not public policy.

Nor do Hindu scriptures support such an interpretation. Hindu mythology presents dogs in a complex and often contradictory light. While dogs are associated with loyalty and companionship when owned, they are also linked with Yama, the god of death. They serve as guardians of the underworld, accompany fierce deities such as Kalabhairava, appear in myths such as that of Sarama, mother of Yama's four-eyed dogs, in roles far removed from modern sentimental portrayals.

Ganesh*ji* is inseparable from the mouse, yet no religious texts prohibit rodent control when rats threaten crops, food supplies, or public

Civil Society picture/Umesh Anand

Stray dogs roam around in Cyberhub in Gurugram

health. The cow is Shivji's *vahan*, but the idea of wandering ownerless cows is not promoted as anything desirable or religious. These stories concern owned or symbolic animals, not unmanaged, uncontrolled animal populations.

Hindu scriptures also describe rebirth as an animal, as one possible consequence of karma, symbolically reflecting a hierarchy of values, mirrored in constitutional principles — humans have fundamental rights, animals do not. Religious symbolism has never been intended to be a substitute for practical governance nor can it override constitutional articles.

Gautam Buddha's teachings of nonviolence are often confused with pacifism. Non-violence towards living beings is largely supported in Buddhist scriptures. However, when Buddha referred to the necessity of protecting oneself and others, he did not exclude lethal self-defence, that is, as Buddha stressed, to be free of hate. Buddha was not a pacifist and ferocity required to protect the innocent is far from immoral, where Buddhism is concerned. As a member of the warrior caste, Buddha never counselled his royal students to abandon legal administration with its consequences and punishments for crimes, nor to abandon warfare and protection of people.

Islam and Rabbinic Judaism reflect a more complex relationship with dogs than contemporary public discourse perhaps acknowledges. While both traditions recognize kindness toward animals, dogs have historically been regarded as ritually impure in some theological traditions. This demonstrates that no major religion offers an unqualified endorsement of any animal in all contexts, particularly where public health and safety are concerned.

In another landmark June 2026 judgment, the Supreme Court laid down that walkable, safe and obstruction-free footpaths are a fundamental right of citizens. This necessarily requires the removal of stray animals to keep roads safe for pedestrians. This is not the promotion of irreligious cruelty, but enforcing constitutional protections for both people and animals in public places.

However, regardless of what occurs in whatever mythology or religion, the Constitution of India guarantees people the right to life, liberty, freedom of movement and a safe and disease-free environment. The personal beliefs of any party, in either divinity or lack thereof, cannot in any way undermine or override the fundamental right to life guaranteed to citizens under Article 21. Therefore, it can be said that animal welfare exists within the boundaries of the law and constitutional values.

Millions of animals that don't harm us at all are killed simply for the palate, with little or no daily outrage, even by animal rights activists. In this context, it is hypocritical to frame the killing of animals to protect people as well as other animals as immoral or irreligious.

As the Supreme Court has said: "While considerations pertaining to animal welfare and the protection of sentient beings constitute matters of undeniable constitutional, statutory and moral significance, such considerations cannot be permitted to eclipse or subordinate the paramount obligation of the State to safeguard human life, bodily integrity and public safety. When the safety and lives of human beings are weighed against the interests and welfare of sentient beings, the constitutional balance must necessarily and unequivocally tilt in favour of the preservation and protection of human life." ■

Meghna Uniyal is Director, Humane Foundation for People and Animals.

Expanding quality care

HEALTH DIALOGUE

Dr ALEXANDER THOMAS

INDIA's healthcare future will not be determined solely by large metropolitan hospitals or cutting-edge medical technology. It will be shaped by the quality of care available in district hospitals, primary health centres (PHCs), rural clinics, and smaller healthcare institutions that collectively serve millions of Indians every day.

For several decades, healthcare discussions in India have focused predominantly on tertiary care, advanced interventions, and sophisticated technology. While these are undoubtedly important, universal healthcare can only be achieved by strengthening the grassroots systems where most citizens first encounter the healthcare system.

There is a growing recognition that patient safety and quality cannot remain the privilege of a few elite urban institutions. Quality healthcare must become accessible across the entire healthcare ecosystem.

One of the most significant milestones in this journey was the development of National Accreditation Board for Hospitals & Healthcare Providers (NABH) Entry-Level Accreditation. This initiative helped democratize quality standards across the country. Initially, many smaller hospitals perceived accreditation as expensive, complex, and beyond their reach. Over time, however, they came to appreciate that standardization enhances patient safety, strengthens accountability, improves infection control, streamlines documentation, fosters better communication, and builds public trust.

By making quality standards accessible and achievable for smaller institutions, NABH Entry-Level Accreditation encouraged thousands of hospitals across towns and cities to embark on their quality improvement journey. The ripple effect has been profound, strengthening systems of care, improving patient safety and clinical outcomes, and positively touching the lives of millions of patients and their families across India.

Importantly, accreditation is no longer viewed merely as a voluntary quality initiative. Increasingly, governments, insurers, healthcare purchasers, and public health schemes recognize and incentivize accredited institutions. Many empanelment and reimbursement frameworks now give preference to hospitals that demonstrate adherence to quality standards. As a result, accreditation has become a powerful driver of continuous improvement and an important marker of credibility, accountability, and sustainability within the healthcare ecosystem.

Through workshops, mentoring programmes, and quality improvement initiatives conducted across the country, we repeatedly observed that relatively simple interventions could produce remarkable improvements in outcomes. Measures such as hand hygiene, medication safety protocols, biomedical waste management, standardized documentation, and effective communication systems often saved lives without requiring substantial financial investment.

Civil Society picture/Umesh Anand

PHCs should evolve and become community health hubs

Perhaps the most important lesson from quality improvement work is that systems matter more than heroics. Healthcare is fundamentally a team endeavour and should not depend solely on individual brilliance. While exceptional individuals can make a difference, reliable systems save lives consistently and sustainably.

I also participated in discussions around the development of hospital grading frameworks through the Quality Council of India (QCI). Such initiatives represent the next stage of the quality journey, encouraging healthcare institutions not merely to meet minimum standards but to continuously improve performance and outcomes. Hospital grading can help patients make informed choices while motivating healthcare providers to strive for higher levels of excellence.

Technology has the potential to transform grassroots healthcare. Telemedicine, digital health records, artificial intelligence-assisted diagnostics, remote consultations, and mobile health platforms can significantly reduce urban-rural disparities in access to care. However, technology must remain an enabler of human-centred healthcare rather than a substitute for compassion, empathy, and personal engagement.

PHCs must also evolve beyond being providers of episodic treatment. They should become comprehensive community health hubs offering preventive care, nutrition counselling, lifestyle medicine interventions, maternal and child health services, mental health support, screening programmes, and healthy ageing initiatives.

Lifestyle medicine deserves emphasis at the grassroots because prevention is more equitable and cost effective than managing advanced disease. Without a strong focus on prevention, healthcare costs will eventually become unsustainable.

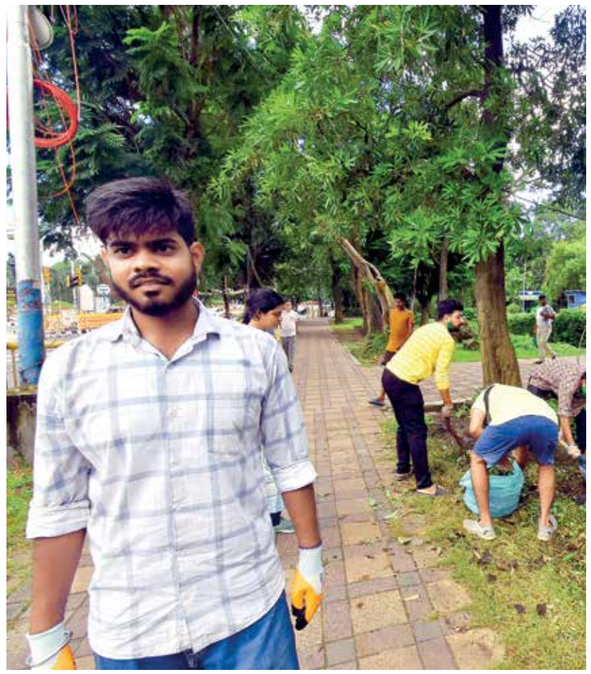
Workforce development remains another critical priority. India needs not only more specialists but also stronger nursing systems, allied health professionals, healthcare administrators, community health workers, and skilled technicians.

The Karnataka Diploma of National Board (DNB) public-private partnership initiative demonstrated how collaborative models can strengthen healthcare capacity. By bringing together government agencies, private hospitals, and educational institutions, the programme significantly expanded postgraduate training opportunities while simultaneously enhancing healthcare delivery across the state. The initiative has become a nationally recognized example of how public-private collaboration can address healthcare workforce shortages while improving access to quality care.

Healthcare quality is fundamentally a matter of social justice. Poor-quality healthcare disproportionately affects the most vulnerable sections of society. Unsafe practices, healthcare associated infections, delayed diagnoses, medication errors, and inadequate standardization impose enormous human suffering as well as substantial economic costs. Conversely, quality healthcare saves lives, improves patient outcomes, enhances public trust, and reduces wasteful expenditure. Good communication, patient safety systems, and quality processes not only improve outcomes but also generate significant savings for healthcare institutions and society as a whole. ■

Dr Alexander Thomas is founder and patron of the Association of Health Providers India, Association of National Board Accredited Institutions, and Consortium of Accredited Healthcare Organizations. The unabridged version of this column appears on our website.

ROCK volunteers remove political buntings and visual clutter from public spaces



Sachin Bhagat founded CleanUp Kolkata and attracted an earnest volunteer force

Cleaning up in Kolkata

Citizens get down to removing posters, plastic

AIEMA TAUHEED

ON a sultry Sunday morning at 9.30, 30 people in caps and casuals arrive at the Matangini Hazra statue near Shaheed Minar in central Kolkata. They are from CleanUp Kolkata, an initiative started by 22-year-old Sachin Bhagat, a BTech student at Meghnad Saha Institute of Technology.

The place is littered with all kinds of rubbish: polythene bags, plastic sachets, discarded cloth, glass bottles and more. Reusable gloves and masks, funded with the pocket money of 17 team members, are passed around. Volunteers roll up their sleeves and get to work.

In South Kolkata, at 5.15 am as the sun rose, a similar group of volunteers had got busy. They were bringing down the profusion of political buntings, leaflets and other visual clutter marring the city, post-assembly elections.

They are from ROCK, an acronym for Reclaim Our City Kolkata, started by Mudar Patherya, a social activist and entrepreneur.

"Elections are like an orgy. Every wall, every road is plastered with political messaging. The Election Commission has directed that within 15 days political litter has to be removed. But nobody does that. Everybody is scared, especially if the litter belongs to the political party that has been elected," says Patherya.

Two earnest groups of volunteers in two parts of the city spend Sunday morning cleaning up the mess left behind by people and politics. They strive to create civic sense and empathy for the city by their own example and through social media. Does it have an impact? Let's return to CleanUp Kolkata.

HANDS AND HEARTS Before the clean-up drive begins, Sahil Shaw, camera in hand, documents the drive to share it on Instagram and across social media. Shaw is in charge of content. The posts help bring more people into the initiative and keep the conversation on cleanliness going. Volunteers pitch in, taking selfies and recording snippets.

"I had free time in college and I wanted to use it to give back to society. I was inspired by what I saw on Instagram — clean-up drives happening in other states, but not in my city. My college was so clean but the moment I stepped outside, the place was filthy," says Bhagat, who started CleanUp Kolkata in December 2025. After some hesitation he created an Instagram page and a WhatsApp group to spread word of his initiative.

He chuckles as he recalls that only three to five people turned up the first two months. Getting more people to join was a struggle. "I had to do everything myself, from editing social media posts to organizing the drives. And believe you me, I didn't know anything about it. I am very introverted," he explains.

YouTube became his guide to editing and using social media. "After two months, once I learnt how to edit, one of my videos went viral, crossing almost 100,000 views organically," he says.

His first drive was at Rabindra Sarobar. "It was anxiety-provoking," he recalls. "People were watching us picking up litter and somehow we couldn't look them in the eye. It felt like they thought we were insane," he laughs. Nevertheless, the drive ended with big bags of garbage.

The volunteers now split into smaller groups, and spread out. They are reminded to segregate glass bottles for recycling. "I'm collecting plastic bags. We also came across chips packets, coffee cups, cigarette butts and wine bottles," says 34-year-old Rajarshi Ganguly, an advocate at the Calcutta High Court. Gaurav Paswan, a 20-year-old BCom student, works alongside with a shovel.

Pari Shaw had arrived after an hour-long bus ride. And yet she was early. A 19-year-old political science student, she has been volunteering with CleanUp Kolkata since February 2026. She is in charge of management and coordination.

Shaw picked up wet, mushy waste in a drain close to the statue, while insects and mosquitoes swarmed around her feet. "It's our responsibility to take care of Mother Earth. That's what brings me here today," she says.

But her decision to volunteer isn't understood in her home. "I am often asked, *'Padh-likh ke ye sab kya kar rahi ho?'*" she says, "I want to ask them, what have you done with all your education if I'm having to pick up your garbage?" She laughs, simply ignoring all the taunts thrown at her at home.

Moulika Roy, a 32-year-old yoga teacher, has commuted for an hour from Kestopur to join the drive. "Cleanliness is a big problem in our country. I want to do something about it, no matter how small," she says, pulling out garbage from a drain with her gloved hands.

There's also Fara Parween, a 22-year-old student of sociology who has come all the way from Howrah. She has been volunteering with CleanUp Kolkata since February 2026 and now serves as its secretary. "People don't get tired of littering, so we won't get tired of cleaning up," she quips, guiding those who joined in late.

"I'm picking out tiny pieces of plastic from weeds and grass. Eventually, they'll get buried under the mud, but they won't decompose," says Mohit Chowdhary, a textile trader, as he bends over the grass.

Near Shaheed Minar, the volunteers were joined by homeless children who live there without a roof over their heads. Among them were two young girls who are cousins, Naina and Khiri. They happily joined in, picking up litter from the space they call home.

"We stay here, so we don't want it to be dirty," says Khiri, who has studied up to Class 3 in a government school. Naina has studied up to Class 5. She says, "People keep littering though we tell them not to." Their mothers nod in agreement. The response they get is dismissive: "This isn't your father's property."

Civil Society pictures/Ashoke Chakrabarty

CleanUp Kolkata comprises mostly young people mobilized through Instagram

A tree festooned with political posters

A volunteer climbs a ladder to remove a poster

But there are small acts of solidarity too. Like passers-by stopping to join in. Mintu Katlik, who works at Mother House, headquarters of Saint Teresa's Missionaries of Charity, noticed the group and joined them. "Today there aren't many locals here, but usually three or four passers-by pitch in, asking for gloves and masks," says Bhagat.

Locations are selected from suggestions made by CleanUp Kolkata's more than 8,000 Instagram followers. Personal observation comes in handy too, says Bhagat. The Maidan before the Victoria Memorial is a frequent site for cleaning because it repeatedly gets littered. Volunteers have also cleaned Motijheel Bridge, Rabindra Sarobar, parks and ghats.

By around 11.30 am, the drive comes to an end. More than 50 biodegradable garbage bags have been filled. Ecoville, a recycling initiative by the Starlite Group of companies, has partnered CleanUp Kolkata. Three out of four drives held each month are done in collaboration. On this day, however, there has been no tie-up, so the collected waste was taken to a nearby Kolkata Municipal Corporation (KMC) dustbin.

The bigger goal, says Bhagat, is to spread awareness and alter habits. "This is just 10 percent of our work. Ninety percent is changing people's mindset," he says sombrely.

THE UBIQUITOUS POSTER In just over a month, ROCK's volunteers have removed 700 to 800 flexes. Armed with three to four ladders and pliers, they get it off trees and electrical poles.

"I noticed something interesting. TMC flexes are all scattered. You know why? Because those flexes are taken off and used by people who sleep on the road as a shelter," says

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Cleaning up in Kolkata

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Patherya, a senior citizen.

Patherya called up his constituency's MLA, Swapan Dasgupta, who is also the state's finance minister, and told him the clutter had to go. "I said, you need to clean up. Otherwise, I'm going to start a campaign. He said, you start. And you knock off my own flexes and sell them."

Patherya started ROCK in early July, irritated with political banners fastened onto walls, trees, railings and grills across the city. ROCK initially attracted four or five volunteers. "We cleaned quite a bit," he says.

He chose a two- to three-kilometre radius from his home to begin work, moving in all four directions from there. ROCK's first step was to clean up Southern Avenue, a green neighbourhood in south Kolkata. "The moment you remove garbage, it starts looking even greener," he remarks. Apart from several main roads, lanes were also tackled.

ROCK too uses social media to reach out and keep the campaign going. "I would regularly and consistently post on Facebook and ask people to join us. We clean twice a week — on Saturday and Sunday morning, beginning around 5 am," he says. The drive usually winds up by around 7.30 am.

ROCK's volunteers come from all walks of life. There are homemakers, business executives, students, entrepreneurs, all willing to go the extra mile to help spruce up the city.

The group spans generations too. "I am amazed that 65-year-old ladies have come and cleaned with us. A 70-year-old lady joined us. From 13-year-olds to the elderly, we have volunteers from all age groups," he says.

He embarrassedly admits that not more than five people show up on each drive. But the novelty is that a new set of people come each time. They want to do something to arrest the decline of the city. The recent Cockroach Janta Party protests, he adds, may have strengthened the feeling that something needs to change.

Patherya recalls a tree on Elgin Road which had been completely covered with placards and flexes. "That classic tree had 27 placards and flexes. We removed all. Seven days later, the guys returned to put them on the tree again. It's becoming a good battle," he says.

Patherya realizes there are limits to how much a handful of volunteers can do to keep a large city like Kolkata clean. The idea is to reach out to citizens and create awareness.

To add a touch of drama he sends 'magic pliers' and handwritten notes of encouragement to people who want to take up cleanliness drives in their own neighbourhoods. "These are magic pliers. These will clean up Calcutta," he chuckles, displaying a pair. His social media posts tag the KMC and Agnimitra Paul, the state's urban development minister. ■

School gives artisans a Madhubani makeover

RASHMI GOPAL RAO

INDIA has an impressive treasure chest of traditional craft, and it is politically correct to say we must preserve all of it. Actually, that's tough to do. Market trends change. For any craft to remain frozen in time is to risk certain death.

Here's where MAATI — The Craft School helps. Working through training centres and clusters in Madhubani and Darbhanga districts of Bihar, the school helps traditional artists expand their repertoire from paper paintings to contemporary textiles, home décor, and modern design.

The school, which is supported by the Tata Trusts, was started in early 2025 with the belief that traditional crafts can become powerful tools for cultural preservation as well as economic empowerment.

MAATI stands for Mithila Art and Artisan Transformation Initiative. It was founded in 2006 by Payal Nath of KADAM, a non-profit organization whose agenda is to create sustainable livelihoods.

"Over the years, KADAM has worked on handicrafts, natural fibre livelihoods, education, rural enterprise, and community development," says Amitava Bose, president of KADAM. "Our primary objective is to build an ecosystem where artisans are supported with design innovation, enterprise development, market exposure, and contemporary learning opportunities."

Madhubani painting originates from the Mithila region of Bihar and Nepal and has traditionally been practised by women within their homes and communities. The art form is known for its intricate line work, bold compositions, symbolic storytelling, and deep connection to local culture.

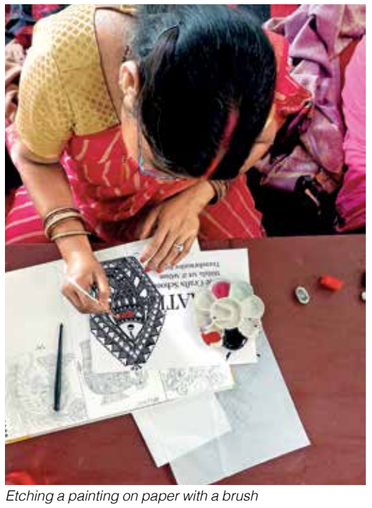
Its visual language includes motifs inspired by nature, mythology, local folklore, rituals, animals, trees, celestial bodies, and everyday life. The main colours used include black, white, yellow and blue, all of which are derived from natural sources like turmeric, rice flour, indigo, soot, and so on.

The composition is dense with patterns of flowers, animals, birds and geometric designs and the artists leave almost no gaps in between. Different schools of practice such as Kachni-Bharni, Godna, and Tantric painting bring their own distinctive aesthetic nuances and narrative traditions.

A group of women artists finetune their skills

A Madhubani artist holds up her work

"Design innovation alongside preserving traditional knowledge systems is key. Craft needs to be reimagined in the contemporary context and yet maintain its relevance. We provide structured training and mentorship to artisans and encourage enterprise development and entrepreneurship," adds Bose. MAATI emphasizes the use of eco-friendly dyes and supports design innovation.



Etching a painting on paper with a brush

The entire ecosystem has been designed to reduce the involvement of middlemen and, as an upshot, boost the confidence and leadership virtues of artisans. This fosters an atmosphere where the craft can thrive as both a cultural practice and a viable source of income.

MAATI works directly with clusters and engages with artisan communities. This outreach was strengthened by the involvement of Kaushik Jha, director of the Mithila Art Institute from 2003 to 2019, says Bose. "Under his able leadership, the institute emerged as a cornerstone for Madhubani art preservation and artisan development. He acts as an adviser to KADAM, guiding the cluster teams while connecting us to many revered artisans in the region."

The school helps Madhubani artists to expand their range of skills from paper paintings to modern textiles and decor.

Leveraging on Jha's extensive network, MAATI reached out to artisan households, local leaders, community organizations, and cultural institutions across Darbhanga and Madhubani districts.

THE ARTISANAL SYLLABUS Currently, MAATI is working with 150 artisans from clusters in Madhubani and Darbhanga. Once they are onboarded, artisans become part of a structured learning journey that includes design training, product development, exposure visits, material experimentation, enterprise development, and market engagement. The aim is to strengthen both creative and entrepreneurial capabilities. Women are an absolutely critical component.

"With MAATI, I have been able to create new designs and experiment with my own technique. I have been doing this for a long time but doing things in a process-oriented structure makes me feel very good about my art," says Ram Dulari Devi, 50, who has been practising Madhubani painting for over two decades.

Through continuous research in natural dyeing, design interventions through unconventional design themes, mentorship, and market exposure, artisans are encouraged to explore contemporary applications of traditional visual languages. "When modern design concepts are introduced, they can feel difficult initially, but the results are deeply satisfying. That is what encourages me to continue learning with MAATI," says 20-year-old Anjali Kumari, a Madhubani artist.

A diverse range of products including paintings, wall art, textiles, sarees, dupattas, stoles, contemporary lifestyle products, and design-led collections have been developed through the programme. Many of these products are showcased through exhibitions, curated retail platforms, design fests, and direct market engagements.

"We have conducted events and exhibitions in major cities like Bengaluru, Hyderabad, etc. We are also exploring opportunities for larger collaborations, installations, and projects that can bring Mithila art into contemporary spaces while creating meaningful livelihood opportunities for artists," adds Bose.

The artists themselves see it as a splendid opportunity. "We are getting an opportunity to explore new markets and platforms. I get to travel out of my village which I have never done before and I look forward to learning more," says Rubi Devi, 34, who has been a Madhubani painter for over a decade now.

Fair compensation is central to the entire approach. "Artisans are involved in understanding costing, value creation, and pricing structures so they can make informed decisions about their work. Each artisan receives the price quoted for their work individually, once sold. Our objective is not simply to sell products but to help artisans build sustainable and independent enterprises," adds Bose.

"We truly believe that craft is not simply about preserving the past. It is about creating possibilities for the future. Every artwork represents knowledge, memory, skill, and lived experience. By investing in artisans, we are investing in communities, cultural continuity, and sustainable livelihoods. Our journey is ultimately about ensuring that tradition and opportunity continue to grow together," Bose emphasizes. ■

VOLUNTEER & DONATE

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.

The Public Foundation

The foundation promotes equal access to healthy food. It has a community fridge initiative, called Ayyamittu Unn, which means to share food with the needy before you eat.
The fridges are accessible to everyone, making it easier for people to share and receive food. With each fridge feeding 100 to 120 people daily, the initiative has a significant impact on reducing food waste and hunger across Chennai, Bengaluru, and Vellore.
Phone: +919884466228
Website: www.thepublicfoundation.org

Mann

Mann is a charitable trust based in Mumbai that empowers people with special needs by focusing on ability rather than disability. The organization works to combat the exclusion and stigma faced by individuals with Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities (IDD). It provides guidance, education, and support that enable them to lead fulfilling lives and participate in society.
Phone: +919930067153
Website: www.mann.org.in

MedForAll

A social initiative dedicated to reducing medicine wastage and saving lives, MedForAll acts as a bridge between pharmaceutical companies and NGOs. It ensures that medicines nearing expiry dates do not go unused but reach patients who need them most, and for free. By redistributing surplus medicines, MedForAll improves healthcare access while reducing waste.
Phone: +918657378132
Website: www.medforall.co.in

Kishoree Foundation

A charitable trust based in Bihar's East Champaran district and Patna, with a presence in Jharkhand and West Bengal, Kishoree Foundation works on public health, menstrual hygiene, and women's empowerment. Its initiatives include community awareness programmes, manufacture of Kishoree Pad, a low-cost sanitary napkin, and livelihood opportunities for rural women, with a strong focus on grassroots participation.
Phone: +919931405487
Website: www.kishoree.org

Vanangana

Vanangana works in some of the poorest districts of Uttar Pradesh, where drought, scarce resources, and entrenched feudal power structures shape everyday life. It has been combating the grave and pervasive problem of violence against women by making Dalit women an important part of village development and thus ensuring their safety and empowerment. Most beneficiaries have been women who were under threat and were victims of domestic violence or social violence.
Phone: +919026229583
Website: www.vanangana.org

Movement for Scavenger Community

An organization based in Assam, it works for the children of sanitation workers by providing education, skill development, and entrepreneurial training so that they become self-reliant and break the cycle of caste-based sanitation work.
Phone: +9193550 05999
Website: www.scavenger-movement.org

Tapish Foundation

A trans-led grassroots organization based in Indore, Madhya Pradesh, working for the dignity, safety and equal rights of transgender and gender-diverse communities. The foundation's work includes community support, shelter, and initiatives on health, housing, education, skills and livelihoods.
Phone: +9174153 56507
Website: www.tapishfoundation.org

Kherwadi Social Welfare Association (KSWA)

Founded in 1928, Kherwadi Social Welfare Association's flagship movement, Yuva Parivartan, was started in 1998. The organization creates opportunities for school dropouts, underprivileged youth and women through vocational training, skill development, and livelihood programmes that help them lead productive and socially useful lives.
Phone: +918828170103
Website: www.yuvaparivartan.org

SAFEE Foundation

A grassroots NGO based in Saidabad, Hyderabad, SAFEE works for the safety and inclusion of vulnerable communities. The non-profit focuses on education, health, empowerment, and long-term community development. It runs 14 learning centres, supports school dropouts, has elderly care programmes, holds community health camps, and imparts digital skill training for youth and women.
Phone: +919963917634
Website: www.safee.org.in

Harijan Adivasi Rural Development Society

HARDS is a non-profit civil society organization established on January 2, 1998, committed to empowering Dalit, tribal and weaker sections through education, health, livelihoods and disaster relief.
Phone: +916372559906
Website: www.hardsociety.in

The Banyan

Based in Tamil Nadu, it works with homeless persons with mental illness. It provides crisis intervention, housing, healthcare, and long-term community support, enabling individuals to move from the streets to recovery, social reintegration, and independent living with dignity and sustained care.
Phone: +919677121099
Website: www.thebanyan.org

Association for Social and Human Awareness

Established in Jharkhand, ASHA works with women and children, especially those hailing from tribal communities. Its major areas of intervention are: preventing witch-hunting, human trafficking, promoting education, building awareness, empowering women and improving the health of women and girls. It also ensures safe migration, converges its efforts with developmental programmes, collaborates with local self-governance and helps capacity-building of marginalized communities.
Phone: +917979090915
Website: www.ashajharkhand.org

Raahi – A Journey Towards Dignity

A nonprofit in Karnataka which works with the AFAB (Assigned Female at Birth), Queer and Intersex community, including trans men, partners of trans men, queer women, lesbian women, and bisexual women. It has opened Karnataka's first shelter home for the community.
Phone: +9197397 80319
Website: www.raahithejourney.org

Sukoon-TISS

Marital disputes are stressful, and facing them in public courts can be overwhelming. Sukoon is a field project of the Tata Institute of Social Sciences (TISS) that promotes litigant well-being by providing free psychosocial services in family and district courts in Mumbai, Thane, Kalyan, and the High Court. Individuals, couples, and families can seek help. Sukoon also conducts research and workshops on marital issues.
Phone: 022-25525068
Website: www.sukoon-tiss.in

Ashiyana Foundation

Children facing abuse, neglect, or legal trouble with no safe place to turn to, are helped by Ashiyana Foundation. It supports children and youth aged 12 to 24 who are orphaned, abandoned, runaways, from abusive families, living on the streets, or in conflict with the law or in need of protection.
Website: www.ashiyanafoundation.org
Email: hello@ashiyanafoundation.org

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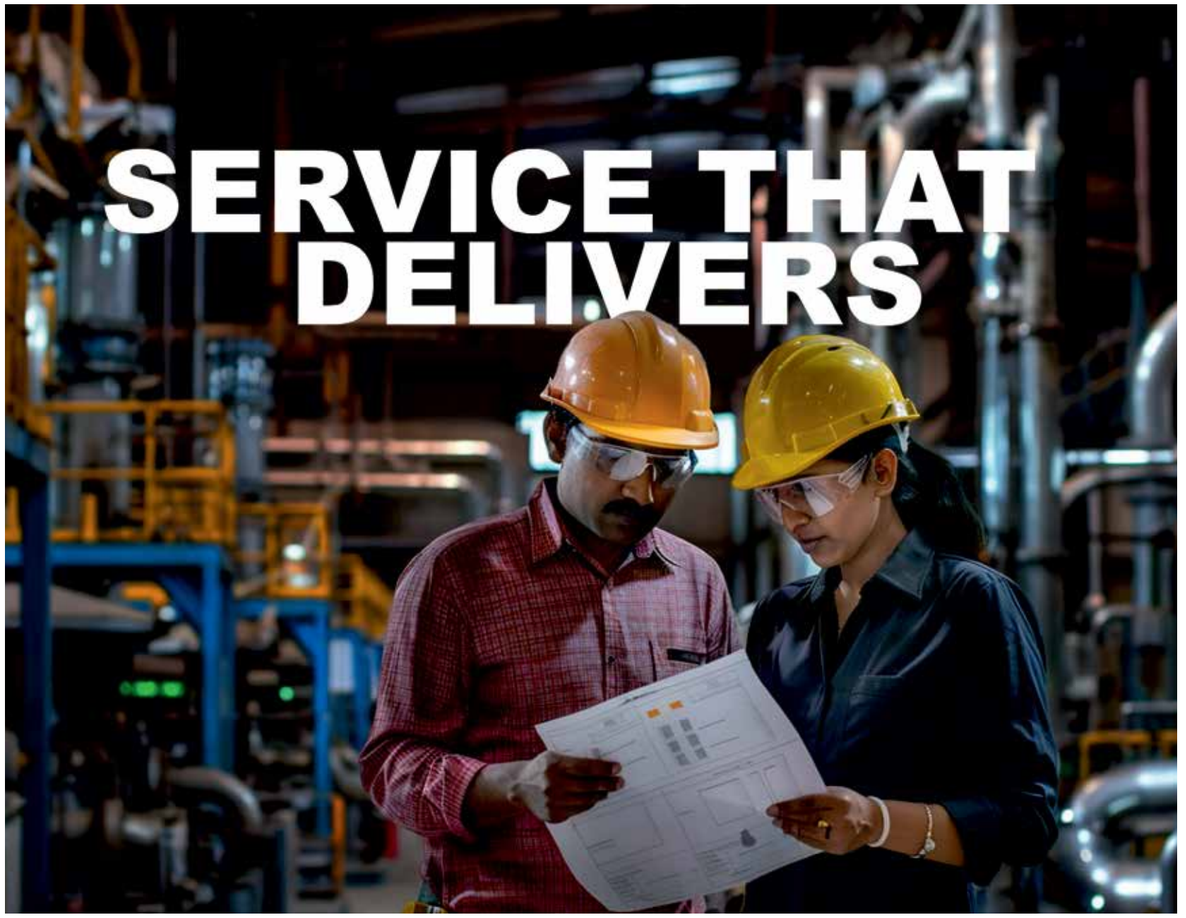

Service is our foundation built on the ethos that "It pays less to talk about the product and more to understand the customers' problems". It's our daily practice, through over 1,250 customer connects, applying our knowledge, to understand what customers truly need for real, tangible long term benefit.

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

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TATA STEEL FOUNDATION

TATA

ENABLING LIFELONG PATHWAYS TO LEARNING AND GROWTH

Education begins with a child stepping into a classroom, but its journey extends far beyond. It kindles curiosity, nurtures confidence, and opens windows to a world of possibilities.

Across schools, communities, and learning spaces, Tata Steel Foundation walks alongside children and young people as they discover their potential. Through flagship initiatives such as the **Education Signature Programme, Masti Ki Pathshala, Jyoti Fellowship, Akanksha, and Pre-Matric Coaching**, learners are supported to overcome barriers, build strong academic foundations, broaden their horizons, and unlock opportunities that may otherwise remain beyond reach.

In FY2025-26, the Foundation's education initiatives reached over **9 lakh children and youth** across multiple states, enabling access to learning, higher education opportunities, future-ready skills, and pathways to meaningful livelihood opportunities.

A child who learns begins to see the world differently. A community that learns begins to transform it.