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Civil Society

CALL OF THE COCKROACH

Anguish over education spills onto the streets

A young protester at Jantar Mantar in Delhi

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Civil Society
READ US. WE READ YOU.

Cockroach and cause

PEOPLE trying to wrap their heads around the sudden emergence of Abhijeet Dipke's Cockroach Janta Party are making the mistake of trying to assess how many followers he has. Neither the massive online numbers nor the modest turnouts at his meetings is a true indication of the chord he has touched with ordinary folk.

We covered the Jantar Mantar protest in Delhi. It wasn't easy to be out in the open for long hours in Delhi temperatures, but people came — first in a trickle and then in a steady stream. Each one of them, of different ages and walks of life, seemed to be there by choice and with concerns that mattered to them. We can certainly vouch for the innumerable cockroaches we spoke to. For each cockroach that turned up there would be many who exist but didn't come.

It is not easy to protest in today's India and doubly so in Delhi. Protests have been stared down, students have been in jail on flimsy charges and Jantar Mantar itself has been out of bounds for NGOs and activists. It is puzzling, therefore, why this protest was permitted.

Did the Modi government see in it a convenient safety valve to release growing unhappiness with its performance? Education and employment are sore points. The centrallized exam system has problems. Dipke's movement captures the angst of the young, their ire against nepotism and the indifference of the elite to a crumbling education system and job market. The young don't seem to have a future in India.

As the Narendra Modi government completes 12 years, claiming economic growth figures that are higher than those of the UPA, a rising tide of people are dissatisfied with the lives they are being forced to lead. The Cockroach Janta Party brings their concerns together. The question is whether it diverts attention from the Congress and Rahul Gandhi.

Our story on cashew apple juice in this issue highlights the challenges that farmers face in taking their ideas to market. Cashew apple juice is a drink with great potential. It is full of health benefits. But, try as farmers might, they lack the supportive systems to create value addition and enhance their livelihoods. States and the Centre need to wake up.

In our interview of the month, Dr Alexander Thomas emphasizes the need for a better system for resolving disputes between doctors and patients. The Consumer Act is not working. It is important to build trust between the medical profession and citizens.

There's also an interview with Ziaul Alam of CITU on how Left unions feel about the Labour Codes. Our Living section offers you the Good Doll, Nilah, and a peek into the world of spies and journalists with Shyam Bhatia's first novel.

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LETTERS

Tree yatra

Your cover story, 'Putting trees on the map', was an interesting profile of Uday Krishna Peddireddy. We often celebrate building new things. We measure development by what is added to the landscape. Trees that continue to survive could be the biggest marker of progress. The value of trees extends far beyond environmental benefits. Trees contribute to the character of a place and a sense of continuity. Great effort.

Harshita Agrawal

Love knot

Your story on a law in Gujarat requiring parental consent for a love marriage was disquieting. I'd like to say the very idea defeats individuality, ownership over life and the concept of adulthood. It is an assault on a person's fundamental right to life and liberty. It is undemocratic.

It saddens me that even in the 21st century we are debating the reinforcement of an idea that is so regressive. Anyone who does not baulk at such a law clearly prioritizes control over love in parenthood and in relationships. Adulthood is tied not just with freedom to make choices but inherent empowerment, responsibility and the confidence to make the right choice. It is disappointing that one would go to the extent of killing a person and violence instead of merely accepting a different idea of love.

Sampreeti Purohit

Trans law

Aiema Tauheed's story, 'Trans people in a fix after new law is passed', was timely. One of the more egregious products of this act is the complete erasure of transmasculine identities into a specific subset of imposed femininity. This adds to the pervasive misogyny we see all around us in every aspect of our lives.

There is also a specific subset of the population which does not identify with male or female binaries, that is, the 'enbys' in colloquial terms. It imposes the erasure of such middle identities. As of now, the ball is in the court of the apex judicial body. A long, strenuous and precarious period awaits the lives of these gender minorities, as they live in a limbo.

Angshu

Safe roads

Rashmi Gopal Rao's cover story, 'When there are angels on the road', was very positive. Civic-driven action feels so hopeful at a time when apathy seems to be on the rise.

Shaheen

Students on streets

The Nasha Mukt Abhiyan launched by Lieutenant-Governor Manoj Sinha in Jammu & Kashmir has undoubtedly become one of the biggest social awareness movements in recent years. At a time when drug addiction is silently entering homes and destroying young lives, this campaign has created a sense of responsibility within society. The efforts of the police, civil society members, district administrations, teachers, volunteers, and local communities deserve appreciation for confronting an issue that remained hidden for years behind silence and fear.

However, while appreciating these efforts, another question deserves equal attention: why are educational institutions repeatedly becoming the centre of every campaign, rally, and official gathering?

For years, students in Kashmir suffered academically due to disruptions, closures, uncertainty, and irregular classroom learning. Yet, even today, whenever there is a government programme, awareness event, VIP visit, or district-level campaign, schools and colleges are often the first to be asked to participate. Students are brought in buses to fill grounds and halls, while classrooms remain empty.

A student who repeatedly stays away from studies slowly loses focus, discipline, and interest in education. Teachers struggle to complete syllabi, students struggle in examinations, and many eventually suffer academically. While the administration aims to save youth from drugs, society must also ensure that students are not pushed away from education itself.

Drug addiction destroys individuals, but educational decline weakens an entire generation. The responsibility of awareness should not fall only upon schools and colleges. Mohalla committees, panchayats, religious leaders, social activists, market associations, and local communities must take stronger ownership of such campaigns. Awareness can be spread through mosques, community halls, social media, local gatherings, and door-to-door outreach without repeatedly disturbing academic schedules.

Today, in many offices and departments, people often hear the same response: "The officer has gone to attend a rally." This culture of excessive programmes and symbolic gatherings must be questioned. Real change comes through consistent education, counselling, rehabilitation, law enforcement, and community responsibility.

Fighting drugs is necessary but protecting education is equally necessary. A society that loses its classrooms while trying to save its streets risks damaging both.

Mir Mushtaq

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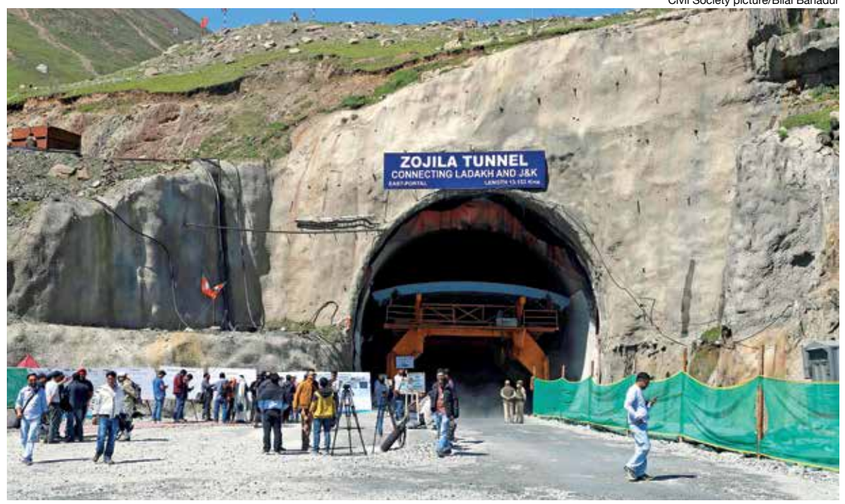
IN PASSING THE LAST MILE

Civil Society picture/Bilal Bahadur



The Zojila Tunnel which will connect Ladakh and Kashmir all year round is a technological wonder now in its final stages

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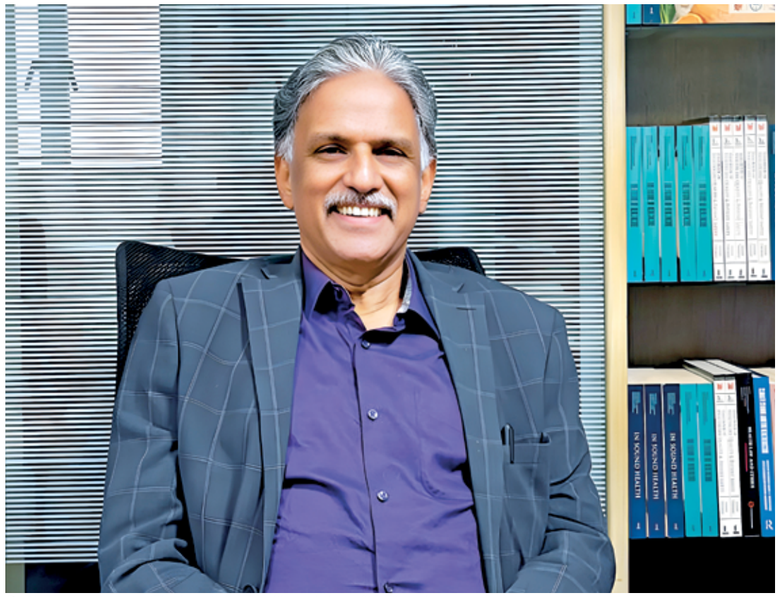
ALEXANDER THOMAS ON SPEEDY JUSTICE AND TRUST

‘In patient-doctor disputes it is better to talk first, sue later’

Civil Society News
New Delhi



Dr Alexander Thomas: ‘The intention is to ultimately benefit patients’

HOLDING a doctor to account for malpractice or negligence is a long and complicated process, anybody will tell you. A resolution when it does finally arrive may not be worth the years spent in pursuing it. Both doctors and patients suffer because of prolonged wrangling.

Dr Alexander Thomas, founder of the Association of Healthcare Providers India and other key organizations, believes it need not be so. In his view, instead of rushing off to the courts under the Consumer Protection Act, a simpler mechanism — using mediation, for instance — could resolve a great many disputes at the hospital level itself.

Doctors and patients need to talk to each other a lot more, says Dr Thomas, who has gone to the Supreme Court seeking a better system than what is available under the Consumer Protection Act.

Q: How widespread is medical malpractice in India?
If we look at the figures, a significant number of complaints are filed across the country every year. In 2024 alone, there were close to 550,000 cases pending across various forums. At the same time, many cases are resolved each year, while others continue for prolonged periods.

It is equally important to recognize that there are patients with genuine grievances who are often unable to access timely justice because of the complexity, delays, and inefficiencies within the system.

Q: What does it say of the system?
It highlights the need for a grievance redressal mechanism that is more accessible, transparent, efficient, and patient-friendly. The relationship between patients and healthcare providers is built on trust, and any system we create should aim to preserve and strengthen that trust while ensuring accountability and fairness.

Q: Are we getting you right: There are complaints, both genuine and false. And complaints that don’t get articulated?
Yes, absolutely. There must always be accountability within the healthcare system. At the same time, many patients with legitimate grievances are unable to navigate the present system effectively because of delays, costs, lack of awareness, or procedural difficulties.

Q: There have been cases of negligence which have been fought in the courts and they’ve gone on and on for ever. The system is skewed against the patient. Could you tell us something about the PIL that you have filed relating to this in the Supreme Court?
The PIL seeks to remove doctors from the ambit of the Consumer Protection Act framework in matters relating to medical negligence and to explore more effective, balanced, and less adversarial mechanisms for grievance redressal.

The objective is not to reduce accountability, but to create systems that encourage quicker resolution, transparency, dialogue, and patient-centred review. I believe there is value in strengthening hospital-level grievance mechanisms, mediation processes, and independent review systems that can address concerns more efficiently and compassionately.

The intention is ultimately to benefit patients by ensuring timely explanations, fair review, appropriate corrective action where necessary, and preservation of trust between doctors and patients.

One important approach is mediation and structured communication. Many patients primarily want clarity about what happened and reassurance that their concerns are being taken seriously.

Several quality frameworks, including standards encouraged by the National Accreditation Board for Hospitals and Healthcare Providers (NABH), already emphasize patient grievance systems, communication, and structured review mechanisms at the hospital level itself.

A more collaborative and transparent approach can help reduce misunderstanding, improve patient satisfaction, and preserve trust between patients and healthcare providers.

Q: Isn’t mediation supposed to be at the heart of the consumer Act?
Mediation does exist, but in practice disputes can sometimes become formal, adversarial, and prolonged very early in the process. It may help if hospitals and healthcare institutions strengthen internal grievance systems where patients and families can receive timely explanations, support, and opportunities for dialogue before matters escalate.

Importantly, patients should always retain the right to approach courts, regulatory bodies, or other authorities if they are not satisfied. The intention is not to replace legal rights, but to provide additional pathways for quicker, fairer, and more compassionate resolution.

Q: Wouldn’t there be a conflict of interest if the mechanism to find a solution is at the hospital level? After all, the patient is holding the hospital and doctor to account. In the courts, hospitals have dragged on cases for years. They don’t want to take responsibility and pay compensation.
That concern is understandable, which is why any such mechanism must be transparent, accountable, patient-inclusive, and subject to oversight. The purpose is not to shield anyone from responsibility, but to encourage early resolution wherever possible.

Most doctors and hospitals also prefer systems that are fair, balanced, and focused on learning, improvement, and patient welfare rather than prolonged confrontation alone. Both patients and healthcare providers contribute to delays in cases for various reasons. It is in the interest of all stakeholders to conclude these matters quickly and fairly.

Q: So, this is limited to doctors. If the doctor was not negligent and it was the hospital to blame, the patient can take the hospital to court.
The PIL is limited to doctors. Hospitals will still come under the ambit of the consumer forum.

Q: Is there a difference between malpractice and negligence?
Yes, there is an important distinction. Malpractice generally implies deliberate wrongdoing or undertaking medical procedures without adequate competence, training, or infrastructure. Negligence, on the other hand, may involve lapses, errors in judgement, communication failures, or unforeseen complications in a highly complex field.

Medicine is not always an exact science, and outcomes can vary despite appropriate treatment. This is why communication, informed consent, and proper documentation are extremely important.

Q: Can one have an example of this?
For instance, before a major surgery, patients are naturally reassured and encouraged. However, even when procedures are performed correctly, complications can occasionally occur because every individual responds differently.

Sometimes dissatisfaction arises not only because of the outcome itself, but because expectations, risks, and possible complications were not discussed adequately beforehand. Better communication can significantly reduce misunderstanding, anxiety, and distress for patients and families.

Q: Is it a worldwide phenomenon?
Yes, these are global challenges. However, Indian doctors often work under extremely demanding conditions, managing very large patient volumes along with surgeries, emergency care, administrative responsibilities, and hospital rounds. When I compare India to Australia, where I worked, the environment here is far more demanding.

In the US and several other developed countries, doctors are not certified unless they pass examinations in communication skills. In India, this was not the case until recently, when we lobbied with the National Medical Commission to introduce communication and ethics in the undergraduate and postgraduate curricula. I hope this will make a significant difference.

‘One important approach is mediation and structured communication. Many patients primarily want clarity about what happened and reassurance that their concerns are being taken seriously.’

Q: What would you call a hard case of malpractice?
A serious case of malpractice occurs when an incompetent or inadequately trained person performs a procedure negligently, thereby placing the patient’s life or safety at significant risk.

Q: And if a totally competent, well-qualified doctor gets something wrong, that’s negligence?
Not necessarily. Medicine is not an exact science. There are many things that cannot be predicted. Let me give you an example. We were treating a young child following a road traffic accident.
The child was recovering very well but suddenly suffered a cardiac arrest because of a blood clot.

Each patient is unique and reacts differently to various situations and treatments.

Q: Then it’s really quite difficult to determine the culpability of the doctor.
Not entirely. There are established standards and guidelines. What is needed is an accountability system in which the patient’s grievance is properly addressed. In consumer courts, matters often become confrontational, further eroding trust between doctors and patients.

The interests of the patient community are also being harmed in some ways. Today, because of consumer litigation and violence against healthcare workers, defensive medicine is increasingly being practised. Defensive medicine significantly increases the cost of treatment because doctors may order unnecessary investigations or procedures primarily out of fear of litigation rather than clinical necessity.

Q: There’s been a great deal of commercialization of healthcare. Has this lowered public trust in doctors?
Rising healthcare costs and commercialization in some sectors have certainly influenced public perceptions and contributed to concerns about trust. This is an important issue that the healthcare community must address thoughtfully and responsibly.

Publicly listed corporate hospitals are often primarily profit-driven, and this can affect public perception of both doctors and hospitals.

At the same time, private healthcare institutions have also contributed significantly by introducing advanced technologies, specialized care, innovation, and improved treatment outcomes for many patients.

The challenge before us is to ensure that healthcare remains ethical, affordable, compassionate, transparent, and patient-centred.

Q: Are we better off with private or public sector healthcare? Both have their problems, but which sector are we better off with?
Both sectors play extremely important and complementary roles. Government hospitals provide essential access to millions of people, especially those from economically weaker backgrounds, while private institutions have often led innovation, specialization, infrastructure development, and technological advancement.

Continued on page 8

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India's healthcare system will become stronger through meaningful collaboration between the public and private sectors, particularly in areas such as training, infrastructure, affordability, and access to specialized care.

Q: To the average citizen it appears that the healthcare system in this country is at a point of crisis. Is that the perception within the profession as well?
Yes, there is certainly concern about rising healthcare costs, increasing expectations, workforce pressures, violence against healthcare workers, and the changing nature of healthcare delivery.

At the same time, it is important to acknowledge the extraordinary dedication of thousands of small and medium hospitals and healthcare professionals across the country who continue to work long hours with a strong sense of service and commitment.

The future of healthcare must focus on restoring trust, strengthening communication,

'Thousands of health professionals across the country work long hours with a strong sense of service and commitment.'

improving accountability systems, and ensuring that patient welfare remains at the centre of all reforms.

Q: But is there within the profession a concern that the profession has just drifted?
Yes, there are some concerns. There is significant inequity within the system, where a few doctors earn enormous amounts while many other healthcare workers earn far less, despite medicine being a team effort.

We must also recognize that most healthcare in India is delivered by small and medium-sized hospitals with dedicated doctors and staff. India has some of the finest healthcare professionals and institutions in the world. We have also made major progress in medical education, technology, public health, healthcare access, and specialized care.

The way forward lies not in blame, but in collaboration — between patients, doctors, hospitals, policymakers, regulators, and society. If we focus on communication, transparency, ethics, accountability, and patient-centred care, we can build a healthcare system that is both compassionate and trusted. ■

'Every worker should earn ₹26,000 a month'

Ziaul Alam on why the Left sees the new Labour Codes as helping no one

Aiema Tauheed
Kolkata

THERE is simmering resentment among workers across categories over sparse wages, poor safety standards and living conditions. Left parties hold the view that the Union government's four Labour Codes — on wages, social security, occupational safety, health and working conditions — will not make things better.

Civil Society spoke to Ziaul Alam, general secretary, Centre of Indian Trade Unions (CITU), aligned with the Communist Party of India (Marxist), on what lies ahead.

Q: You have been critical of the Labour Codes notified by the Union government. But do you have any effective counter-strategy, apart from some protests?
We've engaged with these Labour Codes since 2020, from the time they were placed in Parliament. We thought that the philosophy behind it was ease of doing business, as the prime minister put it. But ease of doing business must balance with ease of living.

Since 2020, across India, there is sporadic unrest among workers because the Union government has paralyzed the functions of the labour department, the labour courts and tribunals handling labour cases. As a result, labourers, workers, employees don't have any forum to present their grievances.

You cannot dismantle this tripartite consultation mechanism at every level and hide the principal employer to ensure ease of doing business. Bring them to the table because workers are working for the overall turnover of the company.

In most sectors, the turnover or profit, before tax or after tax, is going up. That's how so many billionaires are being added every year in India. But where does profit maximization come from? It comes from the effort of the workers.

So why should they not demand or feel that since the enterprise is growing, their living conditions should improve too? This is the main conflict.

Q: How is CITU trying to restore this tripartite system?
All 10 central trade unions, including CITU and even the Bharatiya Mazdoor Sangh (BMS), are engaging with this issue. It is to sensitize employers and understand whether they want to come under the ambit of the Labour Codes.

In most sectors, the actual employer or management feels that without consultation with workers, "We cannot run the factory even for one hour." Because the workers contribute the most to ensure the factory functions.

We will continue to do what we did in the past at shopfloor level, at company level and at enterprise level. Without that tripartite forum, how will you decide what percentage the bonus rate should be? Should it be 16 or 20 percent? Consultation is needed.

In the production process, particularly in manufacturing and organized service sectors, consultation is a must.

It is meaningless to say that with this number of workers such provisions will be activated and beyond 300 you will have different rights.

The supply chain consists of many enterprises. At every layer they employ multiple numbers of workers. It could be five or 150. Even for marketing, you deploy promoters, advertisers, promotion and sales agencies. There are workers in shops and retail outlets too. So workers at every stage are important contributors, which actual employers do not deny.

CITU has formed sectoral teams to study what was going on before the Labour Codes and what is happening after them. What has emerged is that most workers and actual employers want consultation.

We also wrote a letter to the Union government pointing out that since 2015 the Indian Labour Conference, which was scheduled to be held every year and was inaugurated by the prime minister, has not been convened. What is the reason?

Q: What is the alternative you are offering to workers in terms of minimum wages, safety, housing benefits, and social security?

Civil Society picture/Ashoke Chakrabarty

Ziaul Alam: 'The SME sector is the backbone of employment'

Will you include education and health? Currently a worker spends a considerable part of his/her sparse earnings on all that.
What we have studied and calculated — and this is our first demand — is that no worker family can survive without wages of less than ₹26,000 per month across India. This is the benchmark.

Whether we are talking about a worker on contract, a temporary worker or casual worker, without ₹26,000 the worker's family cannot meet the costs of education, health, food, housing. Alongside there must be a dearness allowance component to take on the consequential effect of inflation in every quarter.

Segregate and enlist the sectors which are rising, are profitable, important, and strategic, where different forms of skills are needed, and sectors which depend on multi-layered supply chains. Depending on the skill, hardship and hazards required, the scale of wages should be determined.

Three types of scaling — unskilled, semi-skilled and skilled — do not match with emerging, evolving and changing sectors where we are adopting more science, technology and machinery.

For ITI (Industrial Training Institute) and technical graduates you cannot just pay ₹13,000 or ₹20,000. You cannot say you are not getting any value addition. They are adding value due to their technical training.

Secondly, in any job or employment, there must be a defined employer-employee relationship, which is stated in the appointment letter. Almost 50 to 60 percent of workers don't have defined employer-employee relationship. The worker or employee must receive an appointment letter ratified by the principal employer.

The employer cannot just say, "Don't come from tomorrow." Workers must be given a show-cause letter and the worker or employee should be given space to reply.

Whether you employ someone for one month, or three months or as an independent worker, the appointment letter is a must.

'In the SME sector almost 100 percent of workers are on contract, although they work there for 20 or 25 years.'

Also, in some places, workers carry identification cards with only the name of the contractor or the firm which has employed them. Not right. The principal employer and the company's name must be on that identification card, because they are getting the service provided by the worker.

Q: On the issue of wages, industries — especially the SME sector — could object. Would you make wages elastic, depending on the sector's ability to pay?
Actually, SME sectors employ more than 50 percent of the workforce in our country. These are the main labour-intensive sectors.

The SME sector is the backbone of employment. No big firm can operate without SMEs in the supply chain. It is a very important and strategic sector.

At micro-level, in household enterprises, families do part of the finished work, whether it is garments, leather products, etc. Because of this, many products that are widely used are comparatively cheap in India. Without high establishment costs, they are part of the supply chain which supplies to the big firms.

There must be a security- and safety-sensitive policy by the government for such sectors. The rate for electricity charges must not be the same as for the big firms, as it is currently.

Family micro enterprises must have a safety net for food, housing, children's education and medical needs, along with wages. Multiple agencies of the government need to step in — women and child departments, education, skilling, marketing, etc.

China adopted this policy and they deliver unfinished products at a cheap rate.

For most micro-level enterprises, the family head is also the worker. Over the years he or she sometimes recruits neighbours for some jobs. This is not a typical employer-employee relationship. They are all owners. But reducing their costs and safeguarding their infrastructure is required.

Small firms need capital and land. The work is clearly defined. The owner of the firm employs around 10 to 15 workers but has no resources for training, skilling or adopting good machines. So financial support by the government is required.

Medium enterprises employ 100-plus workers. In small and medium sectors, almost 100 percent of workers are on contract. You will find the same workers working there for 20 or 25 years.

But since they are on contract, the employer avoids many social security clauses. The relevant Labour Code is undefined and hazy where the contractual worker is concerned.

Ownership of responsibility comes automatically if employment is assured. That is the main cause of unrest among contractual workers.

In the 1960s, till the 1980s, in the public sector the government employed about five lakh permanent workers. Today that figure has shrunk to less than a lakh. But the overall number of workers engaged on contract has increased to 12 lakh.

What the government is trying to do is evade workers' lawful entitlements and their right to enjoy secured lawful entitlements.

The labour court says it is the employer's prerogative to hire people on a temporary or permanent basis.

The work is the same but the names of the workers are not. They are employed for six months and before they become eligible for certain entitlements like bonus you oust

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‘No worker should earn less than ₹26,000’

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them. That bonus is not a liability for the employer.

Q: According to the Labour Code you can’t announce a strike as long as the management is in dialogue. What can a trade union do in such a situation?

We do not take permission from the employer or the government when we go on strike. It depends on the employer-employee relationship, whether the employer is a government enterprise or a private one, big enterprise or a small or medium one.

If negotiations fail, and there is no provision in the code by which the government can sensitise the employer to be fair to workers, then we don't need any permission from anyone to sell our labour or skills.

Q: What are the difficulties you face in unionizing workers in an industrial belt?

In new upcoming sectors, there is a vacuum. A growing number of workers are engaged in the gig economy, but neither the Union nor state governments have formulated any policy defining employer-employee relations, workers’ rights, employers’ responsibilities or employers’ rights.

Only a few states — Jharkhand, Karnataka, Tamil Nadu, Rajasthan, Kerala — have introduced some sort of text for discussion. But the gig economy itself is rising, particularly post-Covid. So we are forming unions. Sometimes the government tries to obstruct us. They are giving us many clauses to fulfil eligibility requirements.

Domestic work, care work, elder work, childcare work are all services serving the economy. There must be provisions and legislation for their safety, security, pay, leave, medical, etc. It is absent.

In so far as conciliation, bargaining and discussion are concerned, all labour officers — whether assistant, additional or deputy — were designated as commissioners. That means their role was quasi-judicial.

But the Labour Code has converted them into facilitators. That means they have no power to take legal action. You are just reducing their importance.

Q: How important is broader solidarity in your fight for farmer-worker rights?

We have formed the Samyukta Kisan Morcha which has 500 to 600 farmer unions. We have the All India Agricultural Workers Union.

We are also reaching out to slum dwellers, as the government has not yet framed policies for them. We want to draw a clear line between the government, that is pro-big business, and the have-nots. ■

TMC gone, tram hopes soar again in Kolkata

Aiema Tauheed
Kolkata

Civil Society pictures/Ashoke Chakrabarty

Trams offer an invaluable advantage to Kolkata

THE BJP’s victory in the recent state elections has kindled hope among tram supporters that the network will be restored and trams will trundle freely in Kolkata once again.

Urban Development Minister Agnimitra Paul and Transport Minister Arjun Singh have both spoken positively about restoring the tram system. Restoration and modernization of the tram network and its integration with the Metro are, it seems, on Arjun Singh's agenda.

“There are many positive signs. But unless it really happens, in reality, we will have doubts,” says Dr Debasish Bhattacharyya, founding president of the Calcutta Tram Users’ Association (CTUA) which has fought for the restoration of the tram network for many years. The ground floor of his home, which is over 100 years old, doubles as the CTUA office.

Surrounded by books on trams and framed by old-style windows, Dr Bhattacharyya says he is hopeful the tramways will spring back to life.

Global events have strengthened the argument for electric mass transport. Recently India faced fuel shortages due to geopolitical tensions. The city’s trams offer an invaluable advantage — a public transport system that does not depend on imported petroleum.

An added advantage is, unlike electric cars and buses which rely on batteries, trams depend on electricity drawn from overhead lines so they don’t leave behind a trail of toxic waste.

Once the backbone of the city’s public transport system, the tram network has shrunk to a shadow of its former self. Today, only two routes ply on the city’s streets.

“We are blessed that we never discontinued the tramways. All the depots, the infrastructure, tracks, traction poles, the workshop, everything is ready here. Due to the last government’s sabotage, the properties are in a shambles but the network can be revived within a short period if there is political will,” says Dr Bhattacharyya.

The CTUA is yet to formally approach the new government. Do they have a blueprint for revival?

“One after another, tram routes were closed. We want to reverse this declining trend by reviving one tram route in one month, maybe another tram route the second month, and continue like that,” he says.

The depots still have many serviceable tramcars, though no investment has been made. The few trams that run rely on poor quality spare parts from the local market.

At one time all these parts were manufactured in the Nonapukur Workshop — the only workshop where trams are completely overhauled and manufactured. “At present, if you visit the tram depots, they are like graveyards,” says Dr Bhattacharyya.

For 20 years no one has been recruited so there is a backlog of vacancies. People who retired were not replaced. Revival of the tram service will create jobs.

“Earlier we had up to 10,500 people employed in the tramways transport system,” recalls Dr Bhattacharyya.

“The Nonapukur Workshop has around eight different shops, including carpentry, welding, wheel, carriage and wagon sections. A few people remain there, sitting idle because there is no work. For many years, they have been coming to work, drawing their salaries, sitting idle for eight hours, and then going home.”

How long would a full-scale revival take? “It depends largely on funding. If sufficient money is provided, I guess within a year or two all the tram routes can be restarted,” says Dr Bhattacharyya.

His estimate is based on what he sees as the network’s biggest advantage: much of the underlying infrastructure still exists. In several parts of north Kolkata, tram tracks remain embedded in the roads, while depots, workshops and traction poles are still in place.

Dr Debasish Bhattacharyya: ‘We are blessed that we never discontinued the tramways’

Dr Bhattacharyya also recalls what overseas friends and supporters of trams had told him. “Foreign tram drivers and the railway experts who visited said that the quality of the tracks is akin to those in Vienna and many other European cities, including in the Netherlands,” he says.

Even where services have ceased, the basic framework of the system survives. The infrastructure, including overhead poles, remains standing, although the copper traction wires have been removed. According to him, a large part of the fleet requires only minor repairs, oiling and cleaning to return to service.

“I can also tell you that, for Metro station construction, tram tracks were removed from BBD Bagh and Esplanade. As compensation, the West Bengal Transport Corporation (WBTC) received money from the Metro Railway. After that, they did nothing. I have all these RTI documents with me. They consumed the money. They used it somewhere else. It was not used for the benefit of the tramways,” he alleges.

If the new government seriously wants to revive the tramways, it can be done within two years, he believes.

However, ongoing infrastructure projects could slow the pace of revival. “For example, on Diamond Harbour Road, there is the Metro construction going on in Joka,” he points out.

Apart from being green and clean, trams will enhance the city’s image. “Tramways are a marker of urban development and confidence. They are safer for women and the fare is inexpensive,” says Dr Bhattacharyya.

Safety concerns and traffic-related objections cited previously by authorities were largely manufactured to justify the steady withdrawal of tram services and are unfounded, he believes.

“Because of very low running and operational cost and very high longevity, the tram fare is a minimal ₹6 or ₹7, wherever you travel. Whereas in a bus, especially an AC bus, the fare could be as high as ₹50.” For low-income commuters and daily wage earners, the difference is significant.

CTUA is also keen that Kolkata’s tramways receive recognition from UNESCO for their heritage value, similar to Durga Puja in Kolkata which now has a UNESCO tag. He argues that any such effort would require long-term commitment from WBTC to preserve and maintain the system.

“The city’s trams are a living industrial heritage. Just like the Darjeeling Himalayan Railway and the Kalka-Shimla Railway, Calcutta Tramways is equally eligible for the UNESCO tag. The only reason the tramways can’t apply is that the owner of the system has to provide a guarantee that the property will be maintained for 20 or 50 years.”

Trams also derive their heritage value from the historic neighbourhoods they connect, Dr Bhattacharyya points out. The Rabindra Sarani corridor, for example, runs through several of north Kolkata’s cultural landmarks, including Lalbazar, Nakhoda Mosque, Tagore’s house, and Bagbazar.

The future of Kolkata’s trams is also being fought in the courts. A Calcutta High Court order in 2023 called for the system to be “restored, maintained and preserved” and directed the state to examine ways of revitalizing the network. Time will tell whether Kolkata will see all its trams back on the tracks. ■

Cashew apple juice, anyone?

Opportunity beckons to boost farm incomes

Shree Padre
Kasaragod

Vishwakeshava and Navyashri Kuruveri produce additive-free cashew apple juice

IN April this year, Vishwakeshava and Navyashri Kuruveri, two young areca nut farmers, joined a training programme at the Directorate of Cashew Research (DCR) in Puttur, Karnataka, to learn how to make cashew apple juice and extract its pulp.

After training, the couple returned home, set up a tentative unit and began making cashew apple juice, unsure if it would sell.

To their utter surprise, it evoked huge demand. They sold 300 litres of fresh juice for ₹100 per litre in their initial pilot. Unwittingly, they became flag-bearers of the new drink as word spread.

The Kuruveris cultivate areca nut near Paivalike in Kasaragod district of Kerala. They also grow cashew on five acres and sell the kernels online.

"From two kg of raw cashew nuts we earn ₹300. But from 10 kg of cashew apple, which we used to throw away, we earned ₹875," says Vishwakeshava, somewhat bemused.

Cashew or *kaju* is, of course, well known. Lesser known is its brother, the humble apple, fruit of the cashew tree. A small squishy yellow-to-red fruit, it's cast aside in favour of the nut. Now, after decades of neglect, the cashew apple is finally enjoying the limelight the nutty *kaju* once occupied.

In districts of north Kerala, cashew apple is having a moment, proving its mettle as juice and pulp. It has health benefits too. The juice has a high percentage of fruit extract, Vitamin C, six times more than orange, plus minerals and antioxidants.

India is the second largest producer of cashew nut in the world — producing about 795,000 tonnes of raw nuts annually. As for the cashew nut's apple, which is eight times its weight, 60 lakh tonnes are produced annually. Not even one percent of the apple is utilized. The only commercial use of the cashew nut apple is to produce the Goan feni.

In contrast, Brazil exports cashew apple juice to 15 countries. Twenty-five percent of the country's cashew apple is converted into juice or pulp. The juice sector is dominated by a few large companies such as Britvic. But cajuína or clarified juice is produced by medium-sized companies that market it under their own brand. There are also thousands of small producers who process it locally and sell without branding the product. Cashew soda is also popular.

India is wasting a whopping quantity of cashew apples which could increase the income of farmers and create a new sector in the food industry.

ON THE SHELF India does have a few cashew apple production centres.

There is the Cashew Research Station (CRS) at Madakkathara in Thrissur under the aegis of the Kerala Agriculture University (KAU) and the Cashew Technology Centre (CTC) which comes under the Keladi Shivappa Nayaka University of Agricultural & Horticultural Sciences (KSNUAHS) in Shivamogga. Both are administered by universities and do not enjoy complete autonomy.

Cashew apple and nut on a tree

CRS has been developing cashew apple products for the past 30 years. According to Dr Jalaja Menon, associate professor and head of CRS, more than 30 of their products are ripe for commercialization. Ten, she says, are very promising. Around 12 technologies have been bought by institutions and individuals. Son Pandar Sundi, a Farmer Producer Company (FPC) in Maharashtra, is investing ₹2.5 crore to set up a huge unit for cashew apple beverage.

CRS recently launched a string of new cashew beverages blended with mango, pineapple and grapes which mask the cashew apple's strong aroma, disliked by some people. CRS has also developed pasteurized cashew apple ice-cream, a tutti frutti, plus cake, chutney, pickle, jam, candy, and an energy bar.

The Plantation Corporation of Kerala (PCK), a state government undertaking, grows cashew on some 4,500 hectares. For the past decade it has been selling fresh cashew apple juice from four centres. Currently, two centres, Periya in Kasaragod district and Mannarkad in Malappuram district, are selling cashew apple juice, priced at ₹40 for a 300-ml glass.

The drink is pure and natural with zero additives. No sugar, water, preservative or essence is added. "In 2014 when we first launched this drink 75 percent of our revenue used to come from raw cashew nuts. Now it's 50 percent," says Sajeev Uchchakavil, PCK group manager.

"We do have many limitations. Juice counters, being on our farms, don't have much footfall. Besides, sale of juice is not our main activity. We don't advertise or undertake promotions. If private entrepreneurs take this up, they can earn five times the income they get from selling cashew nut. Our cashew apple carbonated drink also sells reasonably well and has greater potential," he says.

Puttur's DCR has developed about 17 products from cashew apple, including Cash Lime, a ready-to-drink beverage, a fruit bar, liquid jaggery, cashew paste and a health tonic.

Unfortunately, hardly anyone has even heard of these products. They sit on lab shelves, because research stations don't introduce their products to industry or promote them.

IN MISSION MODE But things are changing, albeit slowly. On March 11 this year, the DCR's outreach to businessmen attracted 32 representatives from the local beverage and food industry. They sampled five products, mainly beverages, and engaged in a thorough discussion on commercialization of such inventions. Then, in April DCR held a training programme in Puttur for anyone interested in making cashew apple juice and pulp.

Cashew farmers, keen to increase their income, became the first enthusiasts of the cashew juice business. Juice, without additives, is the ideal value-added product for them. The only investment needed is a simple juice extracting machine and a deep freezer. But whom to sell to? They need to be in a place where they can attract health-conscious buyers.

For a week, N. Thippeswamy, an organic farmer in Chitradurga district, worked in mission mode. Every morning, he would travel to his cashew orchard and return with a bag brimful of cashew apples. At night he would extract juice from the fruit. Early morning, at 7 am, he would head for a street where people came to jog, carrying the juice and fruits. Thippeswamy was keen to find out whether his cashew apple juice and fruits would find buyers.

"Today is my fourth day test-marketing my juice and fruit. I find that every day sale of juice is increasing. I don't need to offer so many free samples anymore. I have repeat customers. I could even sell a few fresh fruits at ₹40 per kg. Certainly, there is good demand for both juice and fruit," said Thippeswamy, who has invested in a juicer machine.

Hardsell: Karnataka farmer N. Thippeswamy hits the street to market his homemade cashew apple juice

A range of products has been developed by cashew research centres but they sit on lab shelves since no one introduces them to industry.

Canute Aranha, a cashew farmer, earns an additional ₹1 lakh to ₹1.5 lakh every year, selling cashew apple juice. He has 300 cashew trees on his Navaprakash farm near Mulki in coastal Dakshina Kannada district. The trees yield half a tonne of cashew nuts. For five years Aranha has been selling cashew apple juice' is well known to locals in nearby towns. "Our ready-to-drink (RTD) juice has good demand. I can even sell up to 1,000 bottles per day," he claims.

When bottled with additives or other fruit the colour changes

For the past 20 years, Soans Farm in Moodabidri *taluk* has been extracting zero-additive cashew apple juice which it sells in 700-ml bottles. "We are producing juice to demonstrate that anyone can make it and earn money," says I.V. Soans.

A few entrepreneurs have also joined the cashew apple bandwagon. Dehydrated cashew apple which can be converted into candy and *khajoor,* is emerging as a promising business opportunity.

Very few start-up owners try their hand at incipient food processing. One is K.V. Sushama who is from Taliparamb in Kannur district of Kerala. Adopting technology from CRS, she invested ₹12 lakh and started a unit which manufactures a carbonated drink with cashew apple juice called Kazecool. A 250-ml bottle is priced at ₹40.

"The thing is, people suspect there is alcohol in this drink. We have to dispel such wrong notions. In three months, we could sell 200 bottles," says Sushama.

Kiran Kamireddy, from Andhra Pradesh, is another newbie entrepreneur. While studying at the Central Food Technological Research Institute (CFTRI) for his PhD, he came to know about the sorry state of the cashew apple. After three years of preparation, he is all set to launch his own enterprise which will manufacture a ready-to-drink beverage under the brand name of Jeedi, with three variants. Kamireddy has hired a person to collect the fruits from farmers, extract the juice and send it to Bengaluru for processing.

STATES IN LINE Maharashtra leads in value addition of cashew apple with squash and syrup, but the state hasn't been able to promote a marquee drink. Sindhudurg district in the Konkan is the centre of cashew apple industries with syrup being its lead product. With 10 units, Konkan produces an estimated 25,000 litres of syrup.

In West Bengal, it is the state government that has promoted cashew apple syrup through

Continued on page 14

Cashew Technology Centre's marketing outlet in Shimogga

Bottling at GoanFest, a company in Goa

Sufal Bangla, its marketing chain of 600 mobile and static outlets that sell farmers' products directly to consumers.

In 2018, the then project director of Sufal Bangla, Gautam Mukherjee, introduced cashew apple syrup. Around 1,000 half-litre bottles were sold in two years. "There was good demand from households," recalls Mukherjee, "but we had to stop because of Covid. If community-based organizations encourage farmers, step up production and create a regular supply chain, this product can move well in the Sufal Bangla marketing network."

The fruit is also used in traditional Ayurvedic medicine and tonics. Ayurvedeeya Arkashala Ltd, an old Ayurvedic medicine company in Satara, makes two medicines for bronchial disorders which are popular. Prasad Shivaram Marathe, a cashew farmer from Sawantwadi in Sindhudurg district, supplies several thousand litres of cashew apple juice to the company which is located 300 km away.

THE DOWNSIDES The biggest challenge farmers and entrepreneurs face is the high perishability of the fruit. If the cashew apple drops while harvesting, it gets damaged and is susceptible to contamination. It also begins to ferment. Experts warn entrepreneurs not to use fallen fruit since it could be contaminated with microbes.

The second problem is seasonality. The fruit is available for only three months. There are ways to preserve it as pulp or even the whole fruit, says Dr Jalaja Menon. Both CRS Thrissur and CTC Shivamogga make products through the year using preserved materials.

Bonerpakhi, a West Bengal homestay, used to welcome guests with cashew apple juice

Dr Anand Tendulkar of Kankavali, a champion of underutilized crops of the Konkan, has invested in a large aseptic preservation plant with his friends. He believes the plant will be able to extend cashew apple's shelf life up to 18 months. Hopefully, it will attract the attention of bigger players in the food industry to cashew apple.

Marketing cashew apple juice, a new product, is also difficult and expensive for small entrepreneurs. They find that the most inexpensive and effective form of marketing is to interact with consumers.

"We have introduced our best cashew apple products to representatives of industry. If anyone wants to commercialize any of them, we can provide training, a licence for a fee, and help in the initial phase, if necessary," says Dr J. Dinakara Adiga, director of DCR, Puttur.

With renewed interest in cashew apple products and the backing of a string of research institutes, perhaps the time is ripe for industry to take another look at the overlooked cashew apple. ■

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Time runs out for the markhor

Jehangir Rashid
Srinagar

THE sanctity of the Gulmarg Wildlife Sanctuary, with its rare animals, is likely to be upended by noisy tourists in cars. A road leading right up to the sanctuary has been approved and is expected to be constructed soon.

Environmentalists and wildlife experts are deeply worried. They point out that the proposed road will seriously impact wildlife, fragment corridors and endanger the survival of the markhor, listed as an endangered species.

On May 4, Manoj Sinha, lieutenant governor of the Union Territory (UT) of Jammu & Kashmir, approved the construction of the Asha-Cheema-Gurdaligali-Aphrawat-Sarson-Anita Road during a meeting of the UT's Wildlife Board.

The markhor is the world's largest wild goat, renowned for its incredible ability to scale steep cliffs. The male has striking, corkscrew-shaped horns that can grow up to five feet in length. The goat is native to the Pir Panjal and Kazinag ranges of J&K and parts of Pakistan and Afghanistan.

"The road is not merely an infrastructure project. It is a direct intrusion into one of the most ecologically sensitive landscapes of the Pir Panjal Himalayas," says reputed conservationist Dr Shaikh Ghulam Rasool, founder of the Nature Conservancy Alliance (NCA).

"It will fragment vital wildlife corridors linking the Kazinag National Park, Limber Wildlife Sanctuary and the Tatakuti–Hirpora conservation landscape, thereby disrupting the movement of the endangered markhor. It will also disturb critical habitats of the Himalayan musk deer and brown bear."

And once fragile mountain ecosystems are fragmented, their restoration becomes nearly impossible, Dr Rasool warns.

As it is, Gulmarg, a noisy tourist hotspot, has swapped its greenery for concrete hotels. "Once a road is built, tourists will drive their vehicles right up to the sanctuary. This will lead to noise and disturbance. The movement of animals will be severely affected. The onus lies with the government to restrict the movement of civilians," points out Mansoor Nabi, wildlife expert who works as project coordinator with the Himalayan Brown Bear Trust.

Nabi emphasizes that an environmental impact assessment (EIA) should be carried out before going ahead with the plan to build a road in an ecologically sensitive area. Environmentalists and wildlife experts must be included to ensure wildlife is not endangered in any way.

Civil Society pictures/Bilal Bahadur

The markhor with its unique spiral horns

A road to the Gulmarg Wildlife Sanctuary will fragment wildlife corridors and disrupt the movement of the endangered markhor.

"Gulmarg was basically a ski resort. But now we have minimal snowfall there so the skiing schedule has gone awry. As it is, scores of trees were cut for the two phases of the Gulmarg gondola project," says Nabi.

The Gulmarg Wildlife Sanctuary is a safe corridor for the markhor but it also hosts other important animals like the goral, barking deer, musk deer, black bear, brown bear, the monal pheasant and others. The sanctuary is strategically located, stretching from Trikanjan-Uri in North Kashmir to the Pir Panjal range on the border with Himachal Pradesh.

The worry is that the markhor may become extinct. In 1990, a markhor was captured in an injured condition. According to Nabi, no scientific survey has been carried out since to ascertain the exact number of markhor in J&K. There have at best been random sightings of the animal.

"In 2004 the Wildlife Trust of India (WTI) carried out a survey but for reasons best known to them they confined their research to Limber in Baramulla and Hirpora in Shopian. In the past, the movement of the markhor was also restricted due to the firing range at Tosa Maidan. We need proper research to assess the markhor population," says Nabi.

The Gulmarg Wildlife Sanctuary is also the corridor of the hangul, the Kashmir stag, which is a subspecies of the Central Asian red deer. It is the only surviving Asiatic member of the red deer family and classified as critically endangered. It is on the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN) Red List. According to a census in 2019, only 237 hangul exist in the wild. It is a protected species under Schedule 1 of the Wildlife Protection Act and is J&K's state animal. The government is legally obliged to protect it.

Hangul used to be sighted at multiple places in Hirpora-Shopian before the construction of the Mughal Road that connects the Kashmir Valley with the twin districts of Rajouri and Poonch located across the Pir Panjal range.

Nabi believes that the markhor will meet the same fate as the hangul, if immediate steps are not taken to save it from extinction.

"We have already lost the hangul, a treasure of J&K. If apathy towards the markhor continues we will lose this treasure as well. It is imperative that any steps that go against the protection of this endangered animal are avoided and that too without any delay," he emphasizes.

Owais Ahmad, an environmentalist, feels that instead of wrecking the habitat of wildlife species the government should be working to protect the animals. He seeks an immediate roll-back of the LG's approval of the controversial road to ensure the animals are left in peace.

"It is important that the decision taken by the Wildlife Board to construct the road up to the Gulmarg Wildlife Sanctuary is withdrawn and that too at the earliest. The LG should withdraw his approval. Otherwise we will lose our rich stock of wildlife," says Ahmad. ■

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CALL OF THE COCKROACH

Anguish over education spills onto the streets

Civil Society News
New Delhi

BEGINNING on June 6 in the blistering afternoon heat of Delhi, a series of protests over the education system have been held in cities across India under the banner of the internet-born Cockroach Janta Party (CJP).

The protests have drawn modest numbers of a few thousand each time, but they have been attended with enthusiasm by people from all walks of life, and ages too. Among the honorary cockroaches was Sonam Wangchuk, the respected climate activist who found in the CJP a "creative and peaceful expression of youth unhappiness".

The demand has been for the resignation of the Union education minister, Dharmendra Pradhan, after repeated question paper leaks that have led to the cancellation of exams and upended the academic plans of millions of young people.

A large number of students have died by suicide because of the unbearable burdens that a centrallized examination system imposes on them. There is also the huge cost of coaching classes. Online marking systems have been found not to work.

The cockroach agitation has demanded accountability from the Narendra Modi government, beginning with the resignation of the education minister.

Till the July issue went to press, none of its demands had been met. A second protest at Jantar Mantar, which began on June 20, was continuing overnight, protesters having camped in the open, defying eviction by the police.

The CJP to us appeared to be driven by honesty by its founder, Abhijeet Dipke, 30, a communications professional based in the US, and a core bunch of young people.

By creatively taking on the privileged, the protest has touched a chord in millions of families fed up with the high cost and inefficiency of the education system imposed on them.

But opinions varied on the protest and Dipke. Among activist groups he was viewed with some amount of suspicion because he had popped up from nowhere, riding a social media tsunami.

The least charitable view was that he had been put up by the government to divert attention from the poor performance of the Modi government in running the exam system and education in general. The Congress and Rahul Gandhi in person were already successfully capitalizing on the issue.

Interestingly, the protest was given the miss by almost the entire mainstream media. It was left to small magazines like ours, websites, YouTube channels and so on to tell the story.

The story for us in this magazine was as much in the message as the messenger.

FIRST POST When Dipke, sitting in Boston, launched the CJP with a post on X, he received a deluge of support online way beyond his expectations.

It was just a funky idea. A cheeky response, in the style of social media, to the Chief Justice of India, Surya Kant, remarking in court that unemployed and uneducated young people were like cockroaches infesting the system.

Thumbing his nose at the chief justice, Dipke spelt out the eligibility for joining the Cockroach Janta Party as: Unemployed, lazy, chronically online and having the ability to rant professionally.

If all such cockroaches could come together, how powerful they would be, said Dipke. In no time, on social media, there were 22 million young people signing up, happy to call themselves cockroaches.

Right on top of their list of concerns was the education system. Centrallized exams to enter colleges, as introduced by the Narendra Modi government, had become a burden. Such were the pressures that students had been dying by suicide. Families were going broke funding special coaching classes. Worst of all, since 2021 exam questions had leaked out repeatedly and no one in the government was ready to take responsibility.

The CJP decided to call for the resignation of Education Minister Dharmendra Pradhan. Emboldened by the online response, Dipke opted to come to India and organize protests on the ground.

Arriving in Delhi on June 6, Dipke went straight to Jantar Mantar where nearly 2,000 people gathered under a blistering sun to seek the resignation of the minister. June 20 was set as the date for the resignation.

Civil Society picture/Lakshman Anand

In searing heat on June 6, Abhijeet Dipke (right) addresses the first rally at Jantar Mantar

Picture courtesy: CJP media cell

Climate activist Sonam Wangchuk came from Ladakh to be part of the cockroach protest

A series of protests followed in Pune, Bengaluru, Jaipur, Patna and Ahmedabad — all drawing modest crowds.

People we spoke to at the first Jantar Mantar meeting came from all walks of life and were of different ages.

Renu, who works for a company, said: "I'm not a student but I am here for the future of my children. Just look at the state of the education system in India. What kind of opportunities are we giving India's young. This is the time to speak up."

Rajpal had come from Rajasthan. "People pass exams after studying hard and then the exams are cancelled later and no one is accountable. Look at the suicide rate among students. And it is not just education, but governance in general under Modi. Whether it is the foreign policy or the economic policy."

Manav from JNU (Jawaharlal Nehru University) said he was doing a master's in medieval history. He wasn't directly affected but felt it was time to speak up and seek accountability. He carried a poster saying: "Plumbers of the country unite. Too many leaks in the education ministry to fix."

Sapna and Vishnu were a Malayali couple running a small wholesale business in food products from the southern states. They were there because education is an important issue.

Jitesh, in his twenties, was from Rohtak. "I am a graduate and so I am not directly impacted but this is an important issue and I support the demand for accountability."

Over the past 14 years there has been little tolerance shown by the Modi government for protests. Jantar Mantar has been out of bounds for activists. Permission for the CJP protest comes as a surprise.

The BJP government, interestingly, seemed to give the CJP a long rope. Fears that Dipke would be arrested did not come true. Instead, police officers met him at the airport to hand over permission to use Jantar Mantar, which has for long been out of bounds for activists as a protest venue.

The night-long vigil at Jantar Mantar on June 20

Protesters beat thalis with the chant, 'Go Pradhan, go!'

DEADLINE SET With the deadline of June 20 for Pradhan to resign, a second event was planned at Jantar Mantar for which young people were to come from all over India.

As the big day arrived there was still no sign of Pradhan resigning. The crowd at Jantar Mantar this time was about the same as the first time. The only difference was that a significant number of leftist students were present. The stories were sadder too: a father whose son had died by suicide after the NEET leak, a woman from Odisha with kidney cancer accompanied by her 13-year-old son. She wanted him to become a doctor.

As the 5 pm limit for holding the protest came, Dipke said he would not leave Jantar Mantar till Pradhan resigned. The protest continued all night into the next day.

CORE GROUP By all accounts, Dipke was juggling gaming and job hunting from his apartment in Boston when he accidentally gave birth to the CJP.

Dipke was born and raised in Maharashtra's Chhatrapati Sambhajinagar (erstwhile Aurangabad). He studied journalism at the Symbiosis Institute in Pune and earned a postgraduate degree in Public Relations (PR) from Boston University.

Before moving to the US, he worked on

COVER

The protests drew enthusiastic demonstrators, many with innovative posters which they had brought along

In Bengaluru: Abhijeet Dipke, Prakash Raj and Sonam Wangchuk

digital campaigns of Arvind Kejriwal's Aam Aadmi Party (AAP) between 2020 and 2023. Dipke has 245,000 followers on X, which he joined in 2014. In various social media posts, he has described himself as "a Dalit" and "a millennian" and consistently signs them off with "Jai Bhim".

He comes across as someone deeply aligned with Ambedkarite thought and constitutional principles. This perception was reinforced when he displayed Dr B.R. Ambedkar's *My Autobiography* upon landing at New Delhi's Indira Gandhi International Airport.

It was therefore not surprising that when the head of India's judiciary casually referred to the country's unemployed youth as "cockroaches", Dipke decided to test the collective power of the disempowered. He created a platform for these "cockroaches" and invited people to join with a simple message: "What if all cockroaches came together?"

Understandably, many people have questioned his past association with AAP. Much as he tries to distance himself from it, the label continues to follow him. As a digital media strategist and volunteer for AAP, he played a key role in driving the party's meme-driven digital campaign during the 2020 Delhi Assembly elections.

For now, CJP continues to serve as a platform for expressing public angst against the government, complete with a political symbol and a manifesto, but without registration with the Election Commission of India (ECI).

"It doesn't matter whether you belong to the Congress, AAP, the Samajwadi Party, the Trinamool Congress (TMC), or any other party. What matters is your commitment to safeguarding democracy and strengthening India," has been Dipke's refrain.

Walking alongside him as spokespersons are Ashutosh Ranka, a graduate of the Indian Institute of Technology (IIT), Kanpur; 26-year-old investigative journalist Saurav Das; and political researcher, author and filmmaker Vijeta Dahiya.

Ranka's professional background is also linked to AAP, where he served as the party's "unofficial" national spokesperson. A London School of Economics (LSE) graduate from Jaipur, he worked as a consultant with McKinsey & Company for nearly two years, from August 2017 to May 2019. Since August 2025, he has been employed as a senior associate at Global Health Vision.

In media interviews, he has denied having any recent association with AAP, stating: "I never actually held an official position in the party." However, many online articles continue to describe him as "the national spokesperson of the Aam Aadmi Party", while others identify him as "formerly an associate fellow with the AAP government".

Das, who is from New Delhi, is an investigative journalist whose work has appeared in national and international publications such as *The Caravan*, *Frontline, The Wire, The Hindu*, *Al Jazeera*, and *New Lines Magazine,* among others. Along with CEO Shubham Thakur, he co-founded Climate Action Front, an environmental organization focused on climate research and net-zero policy.

Das has followed in the footsteps of his father, Shaikh Azizur Rahman, whose work has been published by *The Guardian* and Voice of America. He has carved out a niche for himself by leveraging the Right to Information (RTI) Act to produce credible and impactful investigative stories. He is also the author of the book, *Complicit Silence: The Court's Role in India's Quiet Suffering*.

Dahiya, who is from Sonepat in Haryana, is a political researcher, author, filmmaker and content creator who stirred controversy with his comment, "Lord Ram ate meat." An engineer by qualification, he writes under the pen name of Gulfam and has served as a primary researcher and scriptwriter for YouTuber Dhruv Rathee. He has authored two books — *Power of Universe* and *To Hell with That Job* — and directed the Haryanvi films *Darare* and *Opri Parai.*

His professional experience includes stints at Ranbaxy Laboratories Limited and the Ministry of External Affairs. Dahiya's social media posts reflect his deep concern about India's political, social and governance issues. He has attributed the overwhelming response to CJP to the "collective resentment" felt by many people across India.

HIGH DRAMA There was high drama the day Dipke arrived from Boston on June 6. In a reel he uploaded he said he feared arrest. It seemed almost certain that the CJP protest would be scuttled by the government.

In the event, Dipke was received at Terminal 3 by police officers who handed him permission for holding the protest at Jantar Mantar without even having applied for it. He was also escorted to Jantar Mantar.

If there were expectations that the venue would be swamped with supporters, they were not fully met. Nonetheless, nearly 2,000 people, carrying placards and flags and wearing cockroach masks, braved the capital's oppressive heat to join the protest.

Many believe that the turnout of nearly 2,000 protesters was impressive, given the lingering fear among people of being targeted or placed under government surveillance following the experience of participants at the last major demonstration over New Delhi's poor air quality late last year.

Apart from Dipke, the protest was addressed by Wangchuk, who came especially for it from Ladakh. He also joined the protests in Pune and Bengaluru, saying he was happy to offer his guidance to young people.

When the movement reached Pune it gathered considerable momentum, with hundreds of students and young people assembling at Savitribai Phule Pune University, where the CJP unveiled its exam manifesto.

The charter's key demands included ₹10,000 in compensation for students affected by paper leaks, examination postponements or delays in declaration of results; alternative dates for re-examinations to be announced and concluded within 72 hours; the introduction of special trains to examination centres during recruitment drives; physical evaluation of answer sheets instead of online assessments; age relaxation for candidates affected by delays; mandatory audits of computer-based tests; and the awarding of examination contracts solely on the basis of merit.

Dipke said the release of the manifesto would be followed by aggressive lobbying with Members of Parliament (MPs) across party lines.

"The monsoon session is coming up, and we will be urging them (MPs) to raise the issue there (Parliament) and also hold discussions within their parties. That's the kind of advocacy we want to pursue in the short term," he said while addressing the crowd.

Quoting the popular Buddhist phrase '*Tamso Ma Jyotir Gamaya*' (from darkness to light), Wangchuk urged the audience at the rally in Pune to "walk from darkness to light". He stressed that education and environmental protection must become national priorities if the country is to secure a bright future. He also called on people to follow the guiding principles of truth and non-violence in their pursuit of justice.

The protest in Pune was followed by similar demonstrations in Lucknow at Eco Garden on June 12 and in Amritsar at Golden Gate on June 13. Uttar Pradesh had already witnessed a similar agitation on May 29 in Prayagraj, where students threatened to intensify their campaign against the sealing of three coaching institutes in June if their concerns remained unaddressed. The Prayagraj Development Authority (PDA) has maintained that the coaching centres were operating without the requisite approvals.

Addressing the sizeable march in Lucknow, Dipke declared, "If it becomes necessary to go to jail, I will be the first to go, but no one will back down."

He reached Hyderabad and Bengaluru on June 14. Hundreds participated in rallies in both cities, and the issues raised expanded beyond examination irregularities to include concerns over what protesters described as growing curbs on civil liberties under the ruling regime. The Bengaluru protest was attended by actor Prakash Raj, who is known for expressing his views fearlessly on a range of public issues. Addressing the gathering at Freedom Park in India's Silicon Valley, Dipke urged people to speak out without fear of arrest.

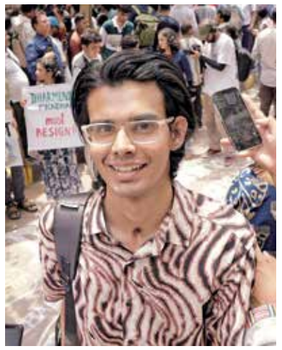
In Jaipur, the CJP was at first denied permission to convene its supporters at Shaheed Smarak with authorities citing "law and order" concerns. However, approval was later granted subject to certain conditions.

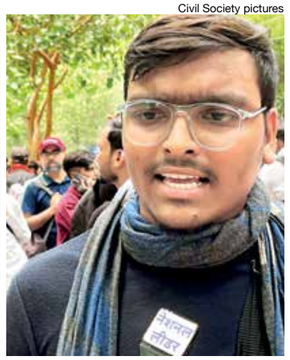
It was by all accounts a small gathering of no more than a thousand and it was marred by an assault on Dipke. He was slapped multiple times by two men who came up to him.

Will the movement gather momentum and catalyze change in the education system? Much will depend on strategy and people's support. ■

Praveena Sharma contributed to this story.

Civil Society pictures





Young faces from across India filled the protest venues

A protest in Amritsar was well attended

Khorakiwala's odyssey

DELHI DARBAR

SANJAYA BARU

He took a bet in 1997 investing in innovation, research and development. After thirty years it is beginning to pay off. At a time when there is widespread concern about inadequate investment in R&D and new product development in India, and how China is miles ahead on this score, the news of Zaynich's launch by the pharmaceutical firm, Wockhardt, deserves celebration.

I must begin with a confession. I joined the board of Wockhardt as an independent director in 2012 when the company was in a difficult financial situation. The management was under pressure to cut costs and wind up projects. The company's chairman, Dr Habil Khorakiwala, was willing to do whatever it took to sail through turbulent times but he would not give up on a major research programme that he started in the late 1990s. By 2023, when my term on the board came to an end, Wockhardt's research team had already seen the light at the end of a long tunnel.

Last month, Dr Khorakiwala announced that a new drug, Zaynich, an antibiotic aimed at dealing with antimicrobial resistance, had secured all required approvals, especially from authorities in the United States. A senior scientist at the Indian Council of Medical Research observed, "Zaynich symbolizes the maturation of India's life sciences ecosystem and demonstrates that Indian innovation can address global health challenges at the highest level." When launched globally, Zaynich will fetch several billion dollars in revenue.

New drug discovery is a long-term game. It requires consistent financing and investment in research. As Khorakiwala mentions in his fascinating autobiography, *Odyssey of Courage: The Story of an Indian Multinational* (Rupa Publications, 2017), it was in September 1997 that he first met Dr Mahesh Patel and invited him to head Wockhardt's R&D team. Dr Patel had by then worked for more than two decades with Hoechst and Ranbaxy. Inspired by the examples set by pioneers like Parvinder Singh of Ranbaxy and Anji Reddy of Dr Reddy's, Khorakiwala decided that "the future lay in antibiotics" and this required product innovation based on original research.

Dr Patel warned Khorakiwala that a firm's R&D effort can only succeed if it is led by the man at the top. The R&D team would report only to the company's chairman and managing director. The latter would have to be prepared to offer sustained support over a long period of time to achieve meaningful results. That is what finally helped deliver results.

The Indian pharmaceuticals industry has long established its global competitive and innovation credentials and yet Zaynich's development and global approval is a major milestone for novel antibiotics development in India. The saga of Zaynich has its ups and downs. Indian firms engaged in R&D-based new product development have to face both external and domestic challenges.

Habil Khorakiwala did what it took to develop a novel antibiotic over years of R&D

External challenges are understandable in a competitive global economy, especially in the highly profitable drugs business where American, European and Japanese multinationals have long dominated the market. Western regulatory agencies are rarely supportive of Third World firms. The entry of Indian firms into the highly competitive drugs market is not easy. The exit of multinationals from antibiotics also created an existential challenge. Should an Indian company invest in novel antibiotics when global firms are quitting? Khorakiwala was convinced it was worth staying the course.

What is regrettable is the fact that Indian firms have to also deal with domestic regulatory challenges. Government bodies engaged in regulating drugs research, production and marketing have been wooden in the exercise of their supervisory and approval functions. Many Indian companies have opted to shift their R&D units out of India and conduct Phase 1 and Phase 2 trials outside the country because of difficulties at home.

The willingness to invest in R&D is a function of many factors. Commitment of a company's leadership to R&D is only the first of many requirements. Securing funding is the next challenge since it is often not easy to convince a banker that a particular project may yield adequate results. Even setting aside funds from a company's profits is difficult if shareholders are not convinced about the likely success of an attempt to innovate, invent or discover. Khorakiwala's shareholders were incredibly supportive and kept faith in the R&D team's ability to deliver.

Finally, in the pharma business, the regulation and approval process and the quality of regulatory institutions is a major hurdle that firms have to cross. Being able to overcome all these hurdles and deliver is a Herculean task requiring considerable patience and commitment on the part of corporate leadership.

It is interesting to note that the Indian pharma industry had its initial spurt of growth in the highly protective environment provided by the Indian Patents Act of 1970. Indian industry welcomed the protection it received and large parts of it sought to seek extension of such protection.

However, by the end of the 1990s leaders such as Parvinder Singh, Anji Reddy and Habil Khorakiwala changed their view and understood that Indian companies too could become multinationals in this business and required a global level playing field to be able to compete against established multinationals.

In 2000 Khorakiwala prepared a Vision 2020 for the pharma sector that has withstood the test of time. Indian pharmaceuticals, biotechnology and information technology sectors are today well recognized as comprising globally competitive firms. The Covid pandemic of 2019 established the global credibility and value of Indian research. Protecting this reputation will be as difficult as securing it. The global market is a highly competitive arena. Entry is difficult but survival is even more so. ■

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'.

The boastful Indian

LOOKING AHEAD

KIRAN KARNIK

In the first few years of the new millennium, "India Shining" was the country's calling card. It was to be India's century, marking the rise of a resurgent India, a soon-to-be superpower, already in the limelight and soon to take the global centre-stage.

The democratic and peaceful rise of India was seen as the model for other developing countries. In corporate boardrooms around the world and in cabinet meetings in key countries, their "India strategy" was a high-priority agenda item. India's *jugaad*, innovation and frugal engineering were widely applauded, as were its unique business models. Indian leaders were feted and warmly received around the world, even as a stream of top global CEOs visited India.

Sadly, the shine soon dulled, first domestically (the NDA government, led by Prime Minister Vajpayee, lost the parliamentary election in 2004), and then internationally. The years that followed did see high growth, with tens of millions pulled out of poverty each year; yet, the lustre had faded. By 2013, India transitioned from being the toast of the town and "favourite flavour" to the category of "Fragile Five" (the five countries with vulnerable economies).

The past dozen years have witnessed ups and downs. Demonetisation and Covid were key contributors to the downturns. The post-Covid recovery was badly hit by the war in Ukraine from 2022, followed by Donald Trump's sanctions against Russia, and drastic tariffs for US imports. As a virtual trade war (almost completely one-sided) upended global supply chains and slowed global economic growth, the US-Israel attacks on Iran in June 2025 and the massive attacks this year further exacerbated the economic situation, with disruptions in oil and gas supply causing serious problems.

Now, foreign money is fleeing the Indian stock market, net foreign direct investment is hitting rock bottom, and oil prices are sky-high. The scarcity of gas is causing hardship to households and industry, the rupee is at a record low, and inflation is climbing. Predictions of a below-par monsoon threaten rural distress and more economic pain. Certainly not a shining scenario.

Earlier, in decades gone by, India's projected image was of a moral, peaceful country that followed the rules, a friend to all, and bending over backwards to show it was not dominating small neighbours. Indians, especially in the West, were seen as hard-working, honest, amicable, talented: great co-workers and good neighbours. They were self-effacing, to the point of invisibility, and almost meek. Now, the image is of "India shouting".

New India and Indians today are seen as boastful, arrogant, aggressive, bullying. Amongst the early transitions was the embargo against Nepal in 2015 following the ethnic problems there. This was perceived as attempting to bully a dependent and small neighbour. Earlier, incursions across other borders (surgical strikes) were never officially acknowledged; now, they were formally confirmed and boastfully announced.

Prosperity makes for immediate visibility

India's presidency of the G20 was publicized as a great recognition; in reality, it was only part of a routine rotational process. Unfortunately, the noise about our presidency submerged the accomplishment of a consensus-based final declaration. India's self-anointed status of Vishwaguru, as also a unique Vishwamitra, were scoffed at in private. Such public chest-thumping hardly goes across well. When the US and President Trump do this, it draws dislike amongst people (and countries) across the world. Yet, they have the power — economic and military — to force acquiescence. We don't. They can afford to ignore the backlash. We can't.

If India is now sounding too brash, the new Indians are worse (certainly a minority, but perceived as flag-bearers). The contrast with the past is striking. Earlier generations of Indians who went abroad — whether to study or to work/settle or as tourists — were analogous to the traditional Indian housewife: meek, self-effacing, completely unselfish, hardworking, and efficient — melding into the surroundings, practically invisible.

Now, their vastly greater number (in the US, the Indian diaspora is about five million) and prosperity makes for immediate visibility. Their success, rather than being an exemplar for other immigrants, is now a cause of envy and jealousy. Also, Indians abroad have moved from meek to self-confident to assertive to aggressive. Blocking New York's Fifth Avenue or downtown San Francisco for *baraats* and celebrations adds fuel to the fire, as do Diwali fireworks in banned areas. Enjoying oneself without a care for local rules and behavioural norms, or not respecting the rights and sensitivity of others, are hardly signs of cultured behaviour. Now, Indians are loud, in the worst sense of the word.

If this is bad, we are seeing worse. Indian tourists begin their near-uncouth behaviour right from the airport departure lounges. The aircraft, the arrival tarmac, and hotel lobbies are treated as picnic spots. Unruly behaviour, children running amok amidst adults singing and dancing, treating public spaces as home drawing rooms. Toddlers are encouraged to show off their dancing skills in public, with restaurant tables serving as the stage. From the breakfast buffet, enough food is taken away to make for a full lunch. Little wonder that hotels in Switzerland have a set of instructions specifically for Indians. More recently, the media covered examples of crass public behaviour by Indian tourists in Vietnam, antagonizing locals in one of our few friendly neighbours. What a contrast with the Japanese!

For long, China followed the dictum "hide your power, bide your time". Now that they are, in fact, a superpower, a new and aggressive China has emerged. We imagine we too can do the same as a country (or emulate a new role model, Israel). That we are in the same league — militarily or economically — is a delusion which self-proclamation will not make real.

The invisible Indian has been replaced by the loud, misbehaving, me-first ones who imagine that the world is at their feet, emulating the overbearing Americans, rather than the ever-polite Japanese. Ultimately, the question is our aim: just military and economic power, or a polite, caring, civilized people who take forward the heritage of a society that respects other sentient beings as much as oneself? ■

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

Human rights over stray dogs

CITIZENS IN COURT

MEGHNA UNIYAL

THE Supreme Court has delivered a historic judgment upholding the fundamental right of citizens under Article 21 of the Constitution to be protected against attacks by stray dogs in public places.

The judgement came on May 19 and upheld directions issued in November last year for the removal of stray dogs from institutional areas and prohibition of public feeding of stray dogs.

The earlier orders had been challenged by numerous NGOs and activists, citing the Animal Birth Control (ABC) Rules that require the release, maintenance and feeding of stray dogs wherever they are found.

Dismissing all such applications, the court upheld citizens' fundamental rights under Article 21 over any expansive interpretation of animal rights that endanger human health or safety.

It is important to understand what this judgment means for people as well as the authorities.

It is the State's duty to secure citizens against threats to life and safety

The Supreme Court did not uphold or strike down any rules as it was not hearing a challenge to any legislation. It laid down the constitutional basis on which all related matters are to be heard so that relevant laws are read and enforced in light of Article 21 and not unconstitutional aspects or propaganda.

Most importantly, it clarified, once and for all, that the stray dog issue is a public health and safety issue as well as a fundamental rights issue.

The judgment stated that it is the State's "affirmative, non-negotiable and continuing duty" to " secure citizens against threats to life and safety arising from stray dog attacks and related dangers."

"Any failure, hesitation or administrative apathy in adopting such measures would strike at the very core of the constitutional guarantee under Article 21 and would render the fundamental rights guaranteed to citizens illusory, hollow and incapable of meaningful enforcement in the lived realities of society."

While an Act represents the intent of the legislature and is passed by Parliament, subordinate rules made under an Act are only meant to further or help implement the said Act. Rules cannot create new entities nor bestow rights, and most importantly, cannot violate their own parent legislation or the Article 21 rights of citizens.

The ABC Rules are an aberration in this regard, directly violating the parent statute as well as fundamental rights of citizens. Framed ostensibly under the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals (PCA) Act, the ABC Rules are a law unto themselves.

They create new entities like "community dogs", "caregivers", etc, legislate around these concepts, grant "rights" to stray dogs and their proponents and suggest that stray dogs have equal or greater rights than people. The ABC Rules, in fact, do not implement or further the PCA Act nor any other Act in existence. The sterilization and maintenance of homeless dogs on the streets as something desirable, and even virtuous, is not envisioned anywhere under the Indian Constitution.

The Supreme Court firmly rejected the notion that stray dogs possess any rights to occupy any public, private or institutional spaces. stating:

"Upon a careful examination of the relevant provisions, we are of the considered view that a proper and harmonious construction of the provisions of the Animal Birth Control Rules, 2023, when read in conjunction with the parent enactment, namely the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals Act, 1960, does not support the proposition that stray dogs possess an indefeasible or absolute right to occupy or remain within all categories of spaces or premises, irrespective of their nature or use," the court said.

It is important to also put to rest the unfettered propaganda that the ABC Rules have been based on.

Dogs have been bred for thousands of years for specific characteristics to serve human interests and dog breeding is the practice of mating selected dogs with the intent to maintain or produce specific qualities and characteristics.

Conversely, stray dogs are a result of random breeding between dogs and individual characteristics vary widely. Dogs, as a species, bite for any number of reasons – territorial aggression, overstimulation, lack of socialization, medical conditions, genes, injury, etc.

None of these issues is addressed or resolved by feeding or sterilization. If anything, they exacerbate the same as feeding creates territories, making dogs aggressive in areas where they're fed.

Rejecting all excuses for lack of action on the part of the authorities and refusing to accept lack of funds and infrastructure as reasons to deny fundamental rights to citizens, the court stated, "The responsibility of the States and Union Territories, in this regard, cannot be diluted or deferred on the ground of administrative inconvenience, financial constraints or logistical challenges. These are matters that fall squarely within the domain of governance and prioritization, and cannot be permitted to operate as constitutional alibis for executive paralysis in matters directly implicating human life and public safety."

As Milton Friedman wisely observed, "One of the great mistakes is to judge policies and programmes by their intentions rather than their results." On both counts though, the ABC Rules have been an intrinsically flawed experiment, driven by animal rights ideology, bullying citizens into "co-existence" with animal attacks and diseases.

The apex court has had the last word on the matter, "The right to live with dignity under Article 21 of the Constitution of India necessarily encompasses the right of every citizen to move freely and access public spaces without living under a constant apprehension of physical harm, attack or exposure to life-threatening events such as dog bites in public areas."

With this landmark judgment, the Supreme Court has unequivocably upheld the fundamental rights of citizens and reaffirmed what the Constitution always intended – public health and safety of citizens is the primary duty of the state, and that the protection of India's citizens can no longer be sacrificed at the altar of animal rights activism. ■

Meghna Uniyal is Director, Humane Foundation for People and Animals. The unabridged version of this column appears on our website

The Good Doll for all reasons

A 10-year-old from the Nilgiris

RASHMI GOPAL RAO

A child's first bestie is her doll, soft, cuddly, someone to play with, whisper little secrets to, and tuck into bed at night. A faithful companion. Not a walkie-talkie plastic doll with a battery and a face that's not familiar.

A doll named Nilah is The Good Doll — simple, safe, soft and relatable. She's also ecofriendly since she's made by hand from recycled material.

Sunita Suhas and her husband, Suhas Ramegowda, launched their enterprise, The Good Doll, in 2023 from their leafy home in the Nilgiris where they were leading a lifestyle in tune with nature.

"We started The Good Doll with the conviction that Indian children deserved a doll that looked like them and was set in a play universe that reflected their world. Nilah, our flagship character, is designed as a 10-year-old girl from the Nilgiris. The idea is to make Nilah every Indian child's neighbourhood friend," says Sunita.

Nilah is every child's neighbourhood friend

The couple stumbled upon the idea by chance and then built on it. "Sunita had developed a hamper for a newborn," explains Ramegowda. "It included a quilt with a rag doll as an accessory. The quilt didn't sell much but the rag doll took off and within one or two months, the market started calling Nilah the Indian Barbie. That caught our attention. As we dug more into this space, we realised there was a gap in the Indian toy industry."

In general, the toy industry followed a 'cut-copy-paste from the West' approach. Indian faces weren't represented. Most dolls were fair, had blonde hair and followed the beauty standards of the West.

Sunita and Ramegowda spent some 15 years in the corporate world. They had travelled the globe, lived in multiple cities before deciding to give it all up for an alternative lifestyle ensconced in the hills.

"The last city we lived in was Bengaluru. We grew up in typical middle-class families in small towns so in some sense, that drove us to develop this urge to do well in life, earn well and acquire all the material that qualifies for 'a good life'. We did well for ourselves and lived quite a comfortable life. Both of us have been in leadership roles in big corporations such as Royal Dutch Shell, Bank of America, Accenture, etc," says Ramegowda.

The creators: Suhas Ramegowda and (below) Sunita Suhas

There are eight other characters including Nilah's parents. The doll set includes a cozy bed and clothes, all from natural materials.

However, around 2015, the couple began to introspect and question their true purpose. "We started to ask ourselves existential questions and that led to an inward journey. We began to understand what gave us true happiness and in pursuit of that we decided to move to the rural parts of India," says Sunita.

In 2016 they undertook an adventurous road trip across 14 states in two and a half months. They stayed in villages for the experience and switched to a more minimalistic lifestyle.

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"Our son was unschooled. So, we went through this journey between 2015 and 2017. In 2017 we figured we did not want a city life and that prompted us to quit our jobs and move to the Nilgiris in Tamil Nadu. The choice of the Nilgiris was simply because we wanted to be in the mountains and live off the grid," says Sunita.

And for two years they did just that. "We built ourselves an earth home, grew our own food, drew water from mountain streams and used solar electricity. During this time we closely interacted with local communities living around us. We began to understand the lack of livelihood opportunities they had. In our attempt to provide them with a solution, we started an upskilling programme in the course of which we taught them patchwork and quilt making," says Sunita.

Nilah now has siblings and friends

'We have developed a semi-assembly line and operate from a centralized unit. We produce 5,000 units every month.'

The couple then began Indian Yards Foundation. Apart from quilt making, they upskilled women in crafts like sewing, embroidery, crochet and macrame. They incorporated a start-up in September 2021. Till May 2023, they designed and sold a variety of products in the home and living category.

Until Nilah entered their lives. The Good Doll now has eight other characters including Nilah's parents, siblings, grandparents and friends. The doll set comes with accessories such as sets of clothes, a cozy bed and more.

The dolls and accessories are all crafted from natural, recycled materials.

"We realised that since the doll garments and the doll itself is a miniature, we do not need to buy yardage of fabric which we would eventually cut up into small pieces. Instead, if we worked with textile factories, we could upcycle pre-consumer textile waste. We are BIS-ISI certified. Our dolls are also tested by US and EURO safety standards," says Ramegowda.

Nilah and her family. Below: A young fan clasps Nilah happily and (right) production in progress

Over the years the couple has painstakingly built infrastructure and a supply chain. It hasn't been easy given the difficulties of operating an enterprise in the mountains. It is, they say, the price they pay to stay true to their purpose which is to create more jobs in the Nilgiris.

"We have meticulously developed a semi-assembly line with different teams working on different stages of the production process. We now operate out of a centralised unit that employs 40. Our decentralised teams engage over 60 people. We produce roughly 5,000 units every month and we are looking to scale this number to 15,000 units per month by the end of this financial year," says Ramegowda.

Ninety-four percent of their total workforce comprises women from local rural and indigenous communities. "About half the women earn more than their husbands," says Ramegowda. "Also, 70 percent of them say they now have financial freedom and 80 percent participate in household decisions." Their goal in the short term is to create 20,000 jobs for women from this region.

The Good Doll has sold to over 75,000 families till date. Growth is impressive at 63 percent from year one to year two and then 100 percent from year two to year three. The Good Doll is leading the market in the rag doll segment in India. Nilah is arguably a comforting companion and a dear friend for children, who've let her into their hearts. ■

A legacy is written

RASHMI GOPAL RAO

THERE's a seemingly nondescript building in Rajahmundry with a sloping roof and a board which reads Ratnam Pen Works. Most people walk past it. But, wait. This building is steeped in history. India's first indigenous fountain pen was manufactured here and the history of the fountain pen is intrinsically entwined with India's freedom movement. None other than Mahatma Gandhi, Father of the Nation, endorsed the first fountain pen that was manufactured here.

Kosuri Venkata Ratnam is the pioneer behind Ratnam Pens which was founded way back in 1932. "The first fountain pen manufactured in India was created by my grandfather, K.V. Ratnam. He was originally a goldsmith. He specialized in die cuts and engraving and was a highly skilled worker," says K. Gopala Ratnam, the grandson who is carrying on the family's legacy.

In 1921 K.V. Ratnam happened to meet Gandhi. On that occasion he presented him with a small die cut sculpture of Gandhi himself. The Mahatma advised him to manufacture something that would be useful to the common man. It could be anything from 'pin to pen', as long as it was not imported, was Bapuji's advice.

The word 'pen' struck a chord with K.V. Ratnam who researched deeply to find out how pens could be made from scratch.

"Providentially, Sri M. Krishnamachariar, the then sub-judge of Rajahmundry, got a broken nib of one of his pens fixed by my grandfather. Impressed by the finesse with which my grandfather repaired his pen, Krishnamachariar promised him all help for starting a pen manufacturing unit," says Gopala.

Subsequently, K.V. Ratnam started a small pen manufacturing unit in 1932 and named it K.V. Ratnam & Brothers (he had a younger brother, K.V. Satyanarayana). He sent one pen to Gandhi. "It was, however, rejected by Gandhiji. He felt it was just another import that was only assembled in India," says Gopala.

K.V. Ratnam was not demotivated. He went back to the drawing board, improved his skills and perfected the art of making iridium-tipped nibs, the most difficult part of pen making.

Later he crafted a couple of additional pens and sent them to Gandhi through J.C. Kumarappa, who was then secretary and organizer of the All-India Village Industries Association.

"This was in 1935. To my grandfather's surprise he received a letter from Gandhi*ji* himself on July 16, 1935 which stated that the pen seemed to be a good substitute for the foreign pens one saw in the bazaars and that he was happy after using it. This was a turning point for my grandfather. After that, word spread and the demand for pens made by K.V. Ratnam soared," says Gopala.

Kosuri Venkata Ratnam and his grandson, K. Gopala Ratnam

Gandhi's letter is a highly treasured souvenir for the family and has been carefully preserved.

Following Gandhi's endorsement, Ratnam pens were used by an impressive lineup of well known personalities like Acharya Vinoba Bhave and presidents of India such as Dr Rajendra Prasad, Dr Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan, V.V. Giri and Dr Shankar Dayal Sharma. Even prime ministers like Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru, Lal Bahadur Shastri and Indira Gandhi used the K.V. Ratnam fountain pen.

At his peak, K.V. Ratnam employed over 40 people whom he taught the skill of pen making. All pens were made of ebonite with high-quality nibs. Some were even crafted in gold.

"Like with a lot of small cottage industries, several staff members left the firm after learning the craft and set up their own units. Despite that, my grandfather was always gracious. He taught the art of pen making to all his employees in the true spirit of the Swadeshi movement whose main pillars were self-sufficiency and national pride," says Gopala.

The business was continued by K.V. Ratnam's sons, K.V. Narasimha Chary and K.V. Ramana Murthy. K.V. Narasimha Chary is also credited with starting the first ballpoint pen manufacturing unit in Rajahmundry, a skill he picked up in Germany.

Today K.V. Ramana Murthy's sons, K. Gopala Ratnam, 55, and Chandrashekhar, 46, continue to run the fountain pen business. Their pens have been used by famous personalities too, including politicians Atal Bihari Vajpayee, Chandrababu Naidu, Chiranjeevi and Pawan Kalyan, former RBI Governor Raghuram Rajan and Prime Minister Narendra Modi.

"Our pens have been recognized by the Andhra Pradesh government and are used for all official works. One of our pens was also presented along with a Ladakhi woollen khadi stole to Angela Merkel by Prime Minister Modi during her visit," says Gopala.

The process of pen making is manual. It is a skill that has been handed down by K.V. Ratnam to his sons. Gopala in turn learnt the skill from his father.

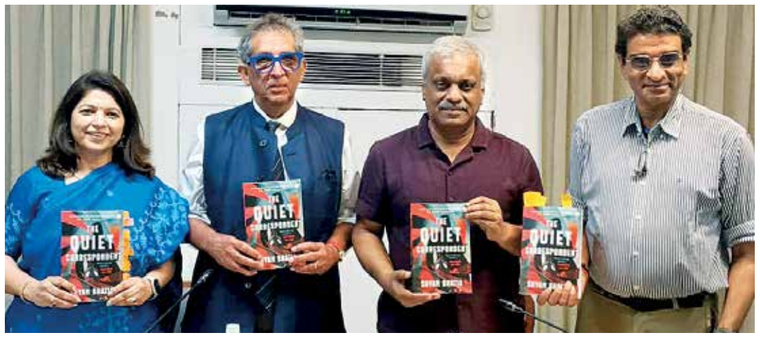
"We follow the same process and standards. Most people today do not have the patience to learn the craft. While we do have a lot of people coming in to learn, they do not last more than a day or two. They expect me to pay them after just one hour of training. Like most handicrafts, the art of fountain pen making is increasingly becoming unsustainable," explains Gopala who has been involved in the business since 1986.

Pen making involves standing long hours in front of a lathe machine. The current generation lacks the patience required for this. Also, the lure of technology and desk jobs is way higher. Hence the desire to work in the handmade goods sector is fast diminishing.

Today the pens are made by Gopala and his brother. They make about five pens a day. A single pen takes about five hours. The primary material used is ebonite, a hard, durable material obtained by vulcanizing natural rubber.

"We source the ebonite from Gujarat just like during my grandfather's time. Pen making is a multi-step process that involves cutting, boring, shaping, threading and fixing. We get stainless steel nibs crafted as per our requirements from Mumbai; until Covid we were manufacturing the nibs ourselves," says Gopala. They make a little over 200 pens a month. Currently, the starting cost of a pen is ₹1,200 and can go up to ₹5,000.

Will the skill endure? Gopala states that although his children are very young, he hopes that one day they will continue the family business and carry on what has been an enduring legacy. ■



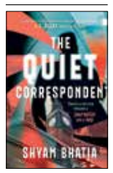
Shyam Bhatia, second from left, at the launch of his book, 'The Quiet Correspondent'

Will you agree to be a spy to get a good story?

SUBIR ROY

THIS is the story of how an accomplished peripatetic newspaper correspondent journeys to the most troubled region of the world and unearths exclusive stories. And those stories become information for intelligence agencies. The correspondent inadvertently becomes a spy for his minders and delivers what they are looking for.

Within this the correspondent develops a tender romantic relationship which ends for him with an unbearable tragedy. Thus the novel can be read at three levels: high-quality journalism, powerful cloak and dagger stuff, and a human story.



The Quiet Correspondent / Shyam Bhatia/ Juggernaut/ ₹799

The publisher's blurb says that the book is about the protagonist, Amol Batty, part-Indian and British-educated, who is a reporter with a conscience, uncovering the secret dealings of governments. This takes him from London to Beirut, Jerusalem and the Balkans. Batty is torn between loyalty and integrity. At the end of the day he has to decide if the story should remain paramount or serve the cloak and dagger machinations of the political powers whom he has chosen to serve.

The author, Shyam Bhatia, is himself a foreign correspondent, which is why the story has such an authentic tone. He currently lives in London and previously reported from Cairo, Beirut, Jerusalem and Washington. He has been the Middle East correspondent and diplomatic editor of the *Observer,* US correspondent of the *Deccan Herald* and editor of *Asian Affairs*. He is currently the London correspondent of *The Tribune.*

Bhatia has five books to his credit and has received recognition from the British Press Awards. Unsurprisingly, the book is far more than cloak and dagger stuff and aspires to a place among serious literary writing.

The novel's action is psychological rather than physical, unfolding in embassy corridors and the quiet corners of war-torn hotels. The question it poses is one Bhatia has lived with for decades: at what point does the journalist become complicit?

The book is essentially about the deployment of journalism by 20th century intelligence agencies. Courted into plum postings by the Secret Intelligence Service (SIS) and a fellow compromised journalist, amid the ambience of a rainy London, Batty traverses conflict-ridden landscapes only to discover at the end that he has been used as a propaganda tool by the intelligence agencies.

The relationship between the British press and the intelligence services has been one of the more productive and least examined arrangements of the Cold War order.

The geography — Beirut, Jerusalem, the Balkans — evokes landscapes where information, propaganda, and intelligence have historically been at their most unstable, where the correspondent's copy and the intelligence report have bled into each other as a matter of operational routine.

Bhatia uses this terrain to argue, quietly but with some insistence, that the foreign desk and the intelligence agency were never entirely distinct institutions.

The story Amol Batty thinks he is telling turns out to be one he has been assigned to tell. That duality is the novel's central, and most unsettling, proposition.

Q&A

'In fiction you have to learn to trust your imagination'

Shyam Bhatia spoke to Civil Society *on writing fiction, creating characters and war reporting*

You're a celebrity reporter and an acclaimed non-fiction writer. Why the switch to fiction? Was the process seamless?
I never really saw it as a switch. Throughout my career, whether as a reporter, foreign correspondent or non-fiction author, I have essentially been telling stories.

There were certain experiences and moral dilemmas I encountered over many years that journalism could describe but not fully explore. Journalism tells you what happened. Fiction allows you to ask what it felt like.

The challenge was not the writing itself but learning to trust imagination as much as evidence. As a journalist, you are trained to stay within the boundaries of what you can prove. As a novelist, you have to create an entire world while remaining emotionally truthful. That took some adjustment, but it was also immensely liberating.

West Asia as the background is timely, coinciding with the present imbroglio. What is it about this troubled region that made you return to it in another genre?
West Asia shaped much of my professional life. I spent years travelling and reporting across the region and was constantly struck by the difference between the headlines and the reality.

The region is often portrayed solely through war and political upheaval. Yet it is also a place of extraordinary hospitality, resilience and humanity. Some of the warmest friendships of my life were formed there.

The longer I reported from the Middle East, the less interested I became in who was right and the more interested I became in why people believed they were right. Fiction offered an opportunity to explore those questions through individual lives rather than headlines.

The central character, Amol Batty, is a journalist unwittingly entangled in the spy world, evolving into a watcher. Did you base him on anyone?
Amol is not based on any one individual, nor is he a disguised autobiography.

Like many novelists, I drew on fragments of people, places and experiences accumulated over a lifetime. Some of his reporting assignments echo situations I encountered as a correspondent. Other aspects came from people I met along the way.

What interested me most was the position of the observer. Journalists spend their lives watching history. What interested me was what happens when history starts watching back. Amol begins as an observer and gradually discovers that observers are never as invisible as they imagine.

Amol plunges into dangerous reporting assignments — Gaza, Tehran, Sudan — giving the story an edge. What motivates a reporter into risking life and limb?
There is certainly an element of idealism. Many reporters genuinely believe that important stories deserve to be told, particularly stories involving people who otherwise have little voice.

But there are other motivations too. Curiosity is a powerful force. So is the desire to witness events first-hand rather than rely on second-hand accounts. Most foreign correspondents are not looking for danger. They are looking for understanding. The danger sometimes finds them.

Of the people you write about in West Asia, each has his own version of the reality of conflict. Were you trying to reflect the many layers of West Asia's many conflicts?
Very much so. The Middle East taught me that every conflict contains at least two truths and usually several lies.

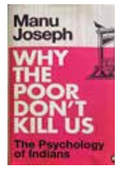
Peace seems like an illusion but it is aspired to anyway in form if not in substance. Is there room for lasting peace?
The Middle East cured me of certainty. The lesson I drew was to be wary of absolute predictions.

There's this undercurrent of racism which Batty contends with in your story. Have things changed in recent years?
People who live between cultures often see things that others miss. They also belong nowhere quite completely. That is something Amol experiences throughout the novel.

You've been promoting your book in India. Any interesting responses?
Many readers have been intrigued by the relationship between journalism and intelligence. As I sometimes put it, journalists and spies have one thing in common: both are paid to ask questions. The difference is what they do with the answers. ■

RANDOM SHELF HELP

A quick selection from the many books that turn up



Why the Poor Don't Kill Us / Manu Joseph / Aleph Book Company / ₹599

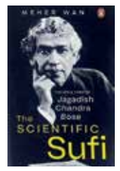
Getting away with inequality

In times when Indians in tens of thousands are holding protests against the Narendra Modi government, chanting, "I am a cockroach", at the call of the Cockroach Janta Party, this incisive, anecdotal and cynically funny book has special resonance.

Why the Poor Don't Kill Us is about "the psychology of Indians", as the subtitle says. We are invited to figure out the evolving code behind a feudal algorithm which makes the poor silently poor and powerless even as the rich get richer in India.

The poor don't kill the rich because they have been browbeaten into believing that they can't. That of course doesn't mean that they won't one day. The middle class, which should be accelerating change, is with its chicanery a speed breaker. They bluff the poor into submission.

The cockroaches right now are predominantly middle class. Can they be trusted? Are they really speaking for the poorest of the poor? Is the challenge to the Narendra Modi government, even as it imperially celebrates its 12th year in office, a true sign that inequality as an arrangement is not working? Or are we off on another diversion?



The Scientific Sufi / Meher Wan / Penguin Random House India / ₹699

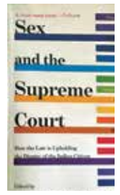
J.C. Bose should be everyone's hero

India has had many scientists it should be very proud of. Little, however, is in the public domain about their stellar achievements. Industrialists, politicians, film stars and even bureaucrats have enough and more written about them. For scientists, one has to search.

J.C. Bose is an example of the great minds that are glossed over. Children don't grow up saying, I want to be J.C. Bose, when that is the kind of stature he should have in the public mind. He is, after all, credited with work on wireless communication and the nervous system of plants that should have earned him two Nobel Prizes.

The Scientific Sufi is, therefore, a welcome offering. Authored by Meher Wan, a scientist himself, it is a great example of what a biography should be. It is sensitively researched and strung together.

Wan documents Bose's childhood, his amazing father who was in the Indian Civil Service, his education in England, early career as a teacher in Presidency College who refused to take his salary because it wasn't on a par with what British professors were getting. Bose himself went to St Xavier's School and College.



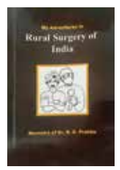
Sex and the Supreme Court / Edited by Saurabh Kripal / Hachette India / ₹499

Removing legal hurdles to reform

The Supreme Court has been a catalyst for social change in favour of sexual minorities and women. Where change hasn't come from within society itself, because of entrenched opposition, the court has opened up pathways for progressive reform.

Famously, in 2018, the court struck down Section 377, thereby decriminalizing homosexuality and putting an end to a law which has lingered since 1860 and has been used by conservatives to stifle gay rights. Similarly, the court has weighed in favour of the transgender community and the rights of women against harassment in the workplace. There was also triple *talaq* and Sabarimala.

This is a rare collection of pieces on different cases that the rulings of the Supreme Court radically altered. It is a manageable, reader-friendly volume, putting together what one should know, and serves a useful purpose.



My Adventures in Rural Surgery / Dr R.D. Prabhu / Notion Press / ₹ 280

Surgeon with a rural mission

When Dr R.D. Prabhu decided to set up his surgery in Shimoga in Karnataka, he could only afford to rent a house that was known to be haunted and had been the nemesis of previous occupants. That was in 1970. Earlier he had spent five years in England and passed his FRCS examination. Between a hospital position and a small practice in Shimoga, he decided that he would prefer to use his medical skills where they were most needed in India.

Dr Prabhu's is an inspiring story. He spent long years practising in Shimoga, providing the town and district quality medical care at affordable fees. In his self-published memoir he presents his life as an ethical medical practitioner.

Dr Prabhu is one of India's 400 rural surgeons who have set up small hospitals in remote parts of the country. Shimogga had a district hospital but the well-off would all go to Bengaluru for treatment. The district hospital was poorly managed. He offered a much needed alternative. ■

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 issues 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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