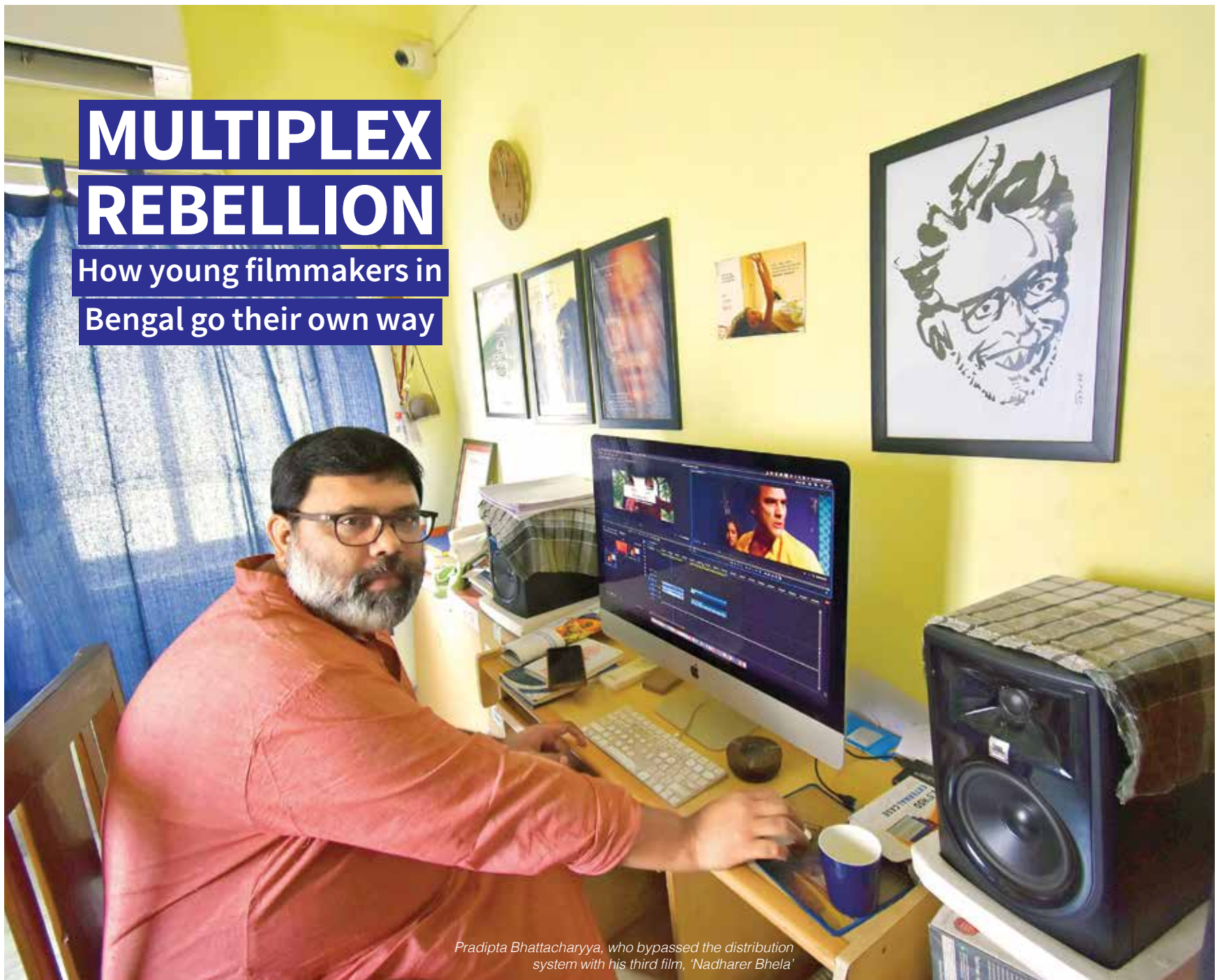


Civil Society

MULTIPLEX REBELLION

How young filmmakers in
Bengal go their own way



Pradipta Bhattacharyya, who bypassed the distribution system with his third film, 'Nadharer Bhela'

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Civil Society
READ US. WE READ YOU.

Anxious nation

IT is not the style of this magazine to harp on what is missing and going wrong. There can be no end to that. But, as journoes who move around a bit, we can't help but notice how anxious people are about the future of India. Some of that anxiety burst forth during the Cockroach Janta Party's recent agitation of which we had a pulsating, sweaty ringside view. There is a lot more bubbling beneath the surface which we come across all the time.

Of what good are economic indicators if they don't reflect conditions in real life? It is the question ordinary folks are asking, far removed from the nuances that economists claim to have mastery over. The recent shindy over GDP numbers for the first quarter has done little to clarify things. How does one react to numbers which seem like make-believe — even if they are not?

For all the claims of blistering growth, we ask ourselves whether India really feels like a \$4 trillion economy. The answer is visible in its derelict rural areas, collapsing cities and mobs of unemployed young people. Basic healthcare and education elude the vast majority. Real estate is a driver of the economy, but where is the safe and affordable housing for those who cannot drum up the large sums needed to buy a home? Clearly, India is growing for some and not for a whole lot of others. The majority, we must report, see themselves as being left out — sinking instead of rising.

Our story on the hostel tragedy in New Delhi in this issue gives some idea of the heartbreak families experience when they send their young ones to university. Whatever happened to the double and triple engine *sarkar* in the capital? In our month's special interviews, Dr Arun Gupta, on food safety and nutrition, tells us about the long struggle to at least tell consumers what they are getting. Why should this be so when public health is at stake? Kabir Vajpeyi, the architect, offers a bottom-up view of the opportunities missed in improving government schools. There is learning for the Cockroach Janta Party in what Vajpeyi has to say.

The complexities of the disaster in the upper reaches of Nepal should alert India to what to expect in its Himalayan states. Some of the danger comes from the very character of the Himalayas which are young mountains in the process of change. For the rest, we have our governments to blame because of the mindless pattern of development. Ranadhir Mukhopadhyay, a geologist, offers some fine insights.

We begin a new column by Shyam Tekwani, a long-time colleague, who will write on the media and more. Also check out our regular columnists, Sanjaya Baru, Kiran Karnik and Dr Alexander Thomas.

Shyam Tekwani



COVER STORY

GETTING PAST THE MULTIPLEX

Young Bengali filmmakers are bypassing the traditional multiplex route and taking their films directly to audiences in India and the world. A dent has finally been made in distribution.

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LETTERS



CJP in focus

Your cover story, 'Cockroaches are spreading out', on the Cockroach Janta Party (CJP) and its School Thik Karo campaign, is encouraging for young people. Clearly, there is support and sympathy among the older generation in the social sector for the CJP movement. Also, Aruna Roy's views were most insightful.

Snigdha Mehta

Exam mess

Apropos your interview with Dilip Ranjekar, 'There was no need for a new committee on exams', I would agree. Instead of adding another layer of committees, perhaps the focus should be on addressing the gaps that have already been identified and ensuring a process that students can trust. Really hope to see trust restored in the exam system.

Sakshi

Village fight

Praveena Sharma's story, 'Karapur refuses to give up', has an update. The government's latest decision to issue a stop-work notice to the Abhinandan Lodha Group mega project in Karapur-Sarvan of Goa smacks of chicanery.

The timing of the notice coincides with the forthcoming Assembly elections which the BJP is desperate to win. Some within the current ruling dispensation have a lot to lose if they are ousted in the elections.

The people of Karapur-Sarvan should definitely celebrate this small victory that has come in the form of a stop-work notice, but please don't let your guard down. This government, which is allegedly in league with the land mafia, cannot be trusted.

The villagers must understand that a stop-work notice is not the solution. They must now pressure

IN PASSING IN GOD'S HANDS

Civil Society picture/Umesh Anand



Images of deities adorn exposed electricals in mishap-prone Gurugram

the government to place all permissions granted to the project in the public domain so that these can be reviewed.

Franky Gracias

What stands out is that this isn't an isolated fight. Across Goa, village after village is protesting against projects that threaten land, water and livelihoods. When ordinary residents have to spend months fighting builders and development projects, it raises a bigger question about what we mean by 'development' and who it is really meant to serve.

Sreyashi Das

Visual eyesore

I read with interest Aiema Tauheed's feature, 'Cleaning up in Kolkata'. I have mad respect for those who spend their weekends cleaning up after others. I look forward to volunteering when I'm back in the city.

It's sad how environment remains a low priority. Our streets, water bodies, and public spaces are so closely tied to our everyday quality of life. Clean-up drives are important but they raise a larger question about how we as citizens treat shared spaces.

Also, should the onus of cleaning up be on a few citizens? As part of a larger effort to keep the city clean, awareness drives about the link between

environment, health and lifestyle should be made.

Harshita Agrawal

All illegal hoardings should be removed, especially the political ones. They put those up before festivals and then forget to pull them down for a year.

siddhartha947

I request Agnimitra Paul to please remove all hoardings, placards from the city including political ones except those which are proper billboards in designated places. It looks very dirty and ugly. People or political parties or organizations who have put them there should remove them. Else please penalize them with hefty

finest for defacing city walls.

kakoli.ghosh.90

Safe walk

I'd like to comment on Rashmi Gopal Rao's story, 'Bengaluru brings back its footpaths'. Reclaiming footpaths is important, but it's equally important to consider the livelihoods of street vendors who depend on these spaces. The challenge is to find a balance where pedestrians have safe, accessible footpaths while vendors have space to earn a living with dignity.

Anushka Gupta

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Ice, rock and water came tumbling

Nepal's disaster not a GLOF but many things coming together

Ranadhir Mukhopadhyay

Panaji

BY the morning of August 26, something gargantuan had taken place high above the river valleys of Nepal.

The first clue was a violent tremor. Seismographs registered a signal equivalent to a magnitude 5.2 earthquake. For a moment, it looked as though the Himalayas had simply done what they have done many times before. But there had been no earthquake. Only a mountain had moved.

At roughly 5,200 metres in the Langtang region, a gigantic mass of ice and rock appears to have broken loose. It plunged down the mountainside with such force that the falling material generated its own seismic signal. Then it entered the river system below.

That was when a geological event became a human catastrophe. The torrent raced down the Lende Khola and Trishuli system, travelling nearly 100 kilometres. It was not water alone. Ice, mud, boulders, broken rock and sediment were swept into the flow, turning the river into a gigantic conveyor belt of destruction. Bridges vanished. Roads were torn apart. Buildings were buried or swept away. Hydropower projects were damaged. The vital Nepal-China corridor was hit.

RESTLESS HIMALAYAS To understand what happened, forget for a moment the familiar image of the Himalayas as a magnificent wall of snow. Geologically, it is a restless young mountain system.

The Indian and Eurasian tectonic plates continue to collide, pushing the Himalayas upward. Around Langtang, the mountains are made largely of intensely deformed and fractured gneisses, quartzites and marbles. Rivers have carved deep valleys into this rising terrain, while glaciers have spent thousands of years cutting and steepening the slopes.

It is a landscape of enormous beauty — and enormous instability. The ingredients are already there: steep slopes, fractured rock, glaciers, deep gorges and powerful rivers. All that is sometimes needed is a trigger.

The first reports naturally suggested a glacial

lake outburst flood, or GLOF. The Himalayas are notorious for such events. A lake forms behind a natural dam of ice or moraine; the dam fails; a wall of water races downstream.

But this time the story appears to have been different. Satellite evidence reportedly found no pre-existing lake at the collapse site.

Instead, a mass of glacier ice and rock appears to have failed almost simultaneously — or one may have triggered the other. Scientists are still considering several possibilities: a glacier collapse carrying rock, a rock avalanche incorporating glacier ice, or a compound ice-rock slope failure.

That uncertainty should not be brushed aside. It is precisely what makes the event scientifically important.

Because, if a catastrophic flood can begin without a large, identifiable glacial lake, then simply mapping dangerous lakes will never be enough to protect Himalayan communities.

This was where the real transformation occurred. Imagine tonnes upon tonnes of ice and rock suddenly entering a steep Himalayan drainage system.

The ice began to fragment and melt. Water lubricated the debris. The torrent picked up additional sediment, boulders and material from the valley floor. A collapsing glacier became a moving mixture of water, ice, rock, and mud. That distinction explains the extraordinary destruction.

Water can inundate a bridge. A debris flow can smash it. Water can flood a building. A boulder travelling inside a debris flow can demolish it.

And the Himalayas' narrow valleys acted like giant channels, concentrating the energy. In parts of the river system, water levels reportedly rose by about nine metres in only 30 minutes. The original collapse may have occurred high in the mountains. But the mountain's energy was now travelling through the river.

CASCADING DISASTER An even more sinister possibility existed. The debris rushing downstream could temporarily block the river, forming a natural dam and creating a new lake. If that barrier subsequently failed, it could generate another flood.



The Himalayas' narrow valleys acted like giant channels

In other words, the disaster could reproduce itself. One event could trigger the next: mountain collapse → ice and rock avalanche → melting and debris flow → river blockage → temporary lake → possible dam failure → downstream flood.

This is what we geologists mean by a compound cryosphere-geosphere-hydrosphere hazard. The terminology may sound complicated. But the reality is brutally simple: In the high Himalayas, one disaster can become another.

There is an obvious temptation to explain everything through climate change.

The Himalayas are warming. Glaciers are retreating. Permafrost (a part of soil, rock, or sediment — that continuously remains at or below 0°C (32°F) for two consecutive years or more) and ice conditions are changing.

These changes can influence the stability of mountain slopes. Climate change undoubtedly belongs in the risk equation. But that is not the same as proving that climate change caused the August 26 collapse.

The available evidence does not yet establish the precise role of warming, permafrost degradation, meltwater pressure or rainfall at the actual failure site. Weather observations are particularly poor at these extreme elevations.

The scientifically safer conclusion is that climate change may be a risk multiplier, rather than a demonstrated immediate trigger. That

distinction matters. Because while the climate debate continues, another question can be acted on immediately.

FRAGILE SYSTEMS Could people have been warned? This may ultimately prove to be the most important question of all. The Himalayan landscape is no longer empty.

Population has increased. Roads have pushed deeper into valleys. Hydropower construction has expanded. Tourism has grown. Workers, vehicles and settlements occupy places where a sudden flood can arrive with terrifying speed.

The danger is therefore not simply the mountain. It is exposure to the mountain.

The August flood reportedly travelled about 36 kilometres from the Nepal-China border to Betrabati in roughly 40 minutes.

Monitoring stations transmitted data, but some stopped as the disaster unfolded. Worse, several monitoring installations were destroyed because the bridges carrying them were themselves swept away. The warning system was facing something it was not designed for.

And all this happened even when the technology already exists. This is perhaps the most frustrating part of the story.

We already possess much of the technology required to do better. Satellites can monitor glaciers and unstable slopes. Seismic instruments can detect sudden mass movements. Automatic river gauges can

measure rapidly rising water. Cameras can watch vulnerable valleys. Remote sensors can transmit data in near real time. Artificial intelligence can increasingly compare satellite images and identify changes that the human eye might miss.

But these technologies are expensive and need to work together. A system that watches only glacial lakes can miss a collapsing glacier. A river gauge may detect danger only after the flood has begun. A sensor sitting on a bridge may disappear when the bridge does.

The Himalayas need something more ambitious: an integrated, cross-border warning system that watches the entire chain — from unstable mountain slopes and glaciers to rivers and downstream communities.

This matters because Himalayan hazards do not respect national boundaries. The glacier, the river and the flood may begin in one country and kill people in another.

This is where international agencies come in. Such an expensive integrated warning system needs enormous funding, which a country like Nepal and many other smaller countries cannot afford. The UNFCCC (United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change), which aims to stabilize greenhouse gas concentrations to prevent dangerous human interference with the climate system, may help finance and instal such mechanisms in vulnerable areas globally.

THE REAL WARNING The Nepal disaster was not simply a flood. It was probably not even a conventional GLOF. It was a geological and glaciological chain reaction — one in which gravity, fractured rock, ice, water and a rapidly responding river combined to create something far larger than the original collapse. And that may be the real warning.

For decades, disasters have been placed into convenient boxes: earthquake, landslide, avalanche, GLOF, flood. The Himalayas do not respect those boxes. Hazards have overlapped in Nepal.

A glacier can destabilize a mountain. A mountain can collapse into a river. The river can become a debris flow. The debris can create a temporary lake. The lake can burst. And the resulting flood can destroy communities many kilometres away. The future Himalayan disaster may therefore not arrive as a single event. It may arrive as a chain reaction.

The scientific task now is to reconstruct that chain — from the first fracture high above 5,000 metres to the final boulder deposited downstream.

The humanitarian task is even clearer. We cannot stop the Himalayas from moving. But perhaps we can learn to hear the mountain before the river roars. ■

The author is a geologist. Reprinted with permission from The Goan Observer.

ARUN GUPTA ON A CAMPAIGN TO SAVE PUBLIC HEALTH

‘Hype drives processed food, front-of-pack labels needed’

Civil Society News
New Delhi

A range of packaged foods picked up thoughtlessly for consumption contain hidden dangers. The list of such foods is long — cereal bars, biscuits, noodles, nachos and much more. Nobody warns the consumer that these ultra-processed foods are full of salt, sugar and fats.

That is about to change. An ongoing legal battle in the Supreme Court has delivered a verdict which is an inflexion point for public health awareness.

On August 13 the Supreme Court ordered the dithering Food Safety and Standards Authority of India (FSSAI) to place warning labels on ultra-processed packaged foods high in salt, sugar and fats. The FSSAI has, finally, proposed a red hexagonal warning label on such unhealthy foods.

It was 3S And Our Health Society, a group of ex-judges, lawyers and public health experts in Kerala, which filed a petition in the Supreme Court. They were backed with evidence by Nutrition Advocacy in Public Interest India (NAPI) which has been researching ultra-processed foods and their impact on health globally for a decade.

Dr Arun Gupta, a paediatrician and head of NAPI, spoke to *Civil Society* on the trajectory of this legal battle. It is a hard-won victory, he agrees, but the FSSAI needs to be more of an activist agency for public health and food safety, instead of succumbing to the interests of the food industry.

Q: Tell us about when and why you began this fight against unhealthy processed food.

We started discussing unhealthy food marketing and food policy in 2016. We were not really getting anywhere at that time. But we noted that the Brazilians had given the world a Nova classification of foods, a wonderful way to look at industrially made food products.

They had examined how such foods were produced, the level of processing done, the additions — colours, flavours, emulsifiers, stabilizers used — which are not culinary in nature. They clearly differentiated between real foods and industrial foods.

Evidence emerged from France, Brazil and other parts of the world that consuming such



Dr Arun Gupta: 'We need an awareness campaign on ultra-processed food in every language'

foods led to a rise in rates of obesity, diabetes and heart disease.

There were some randomized clinical trials for evidence. Studies have consistently shown that there is a risk to health when you consume more of such foods. For example, if your dietary pattern changes by 10 percent, your risk is considered higher. If you have a diet of 2,000 calories and you're adding 200 calories of ultra-processed food, it will be considered on the high side. If it is three or four percent of your total daily diet, it'll be estimated to be low consumption.

Evidence is available on health risks comparing high vs low consumption. Studies have compared the two and found that when you cross 10 percent the risk of becoming obese or getting diabetes or heart disease is

higher. About 32 diseases were found to be linked to consumption of ultra-processed foods. Later, more diseases got added.

Last year, three papers in the *Lancet* series looked at evidence, policy and how industry pushes back. I was part of that series and co-authored the third paper. A new meta-analysis in the *Lancet* series showed association with 12 diseases linked to the intake of ultra-processed food products.

Q: How widespread is ultra-processed food consumption in India? How would you measure it as a threat?

India is not consuming such foods at a very high level at the moment. We do not have Indian data, actually. What we have is data from Euromonitor International, which

projects that it's rising very sharply.

From data we have, as India's Economic Survey 2025-26 indicated, India is shown to be the fastest growing market for ultra-processed foods (UPFs). It grew by 150 percent from 2009 to 2023. Retail sales of UPFs in India surged from \$0.9 billion in 2006 to nearly \$38 billion in 2019, a 40-fold rise.

Q: Is this increase driven by industry? Or by a change in lifestyle?

Lifestyle is a very wide term to use. According to our analysis, it is driven by aggressive marketing of addictive food products sold as convenient and mostly projected as real and healthy.

People are not lethargic by nature. It's the eating habits. The Indian diet for thousands of years did not consist of these processed foods. The rise in obesity has significantly risen in the past two decades.

People have been blaming samosas and jalebis. I agree they are high-salt, high-fat, high-sugar products. But they are not marketed. No halwai comes on TV telling people to eat his samosas every day. It's not part of a dietary pattern but consumed during festivals or special occasions.

This is different from the ultra-processed packaged food industry. What drives it is marketing and aggressive advertising, including using children, using celebrities, and the tag of 'buy one, get one free'. It matters.

Nobody tells you in their advertisements or on the front of the packet that this product contains high sugar, high salt or high fat. Neither has the government pushed them to do it. Why would industry do it then?

Q: When you approached the government, what was the response?

Five years ago, we decided that there were three or four policies globally considered essential for minimizing consumption of unhealthy diets.

In 2017, the Union Ministry of Health came out with a documented plan to control common non-communicable diseases (NCDs) and proposed three or four policies. One was front-of-the-packet labelling warning consumers. Second, a restriction on advertisements. Third, school food regulation. And fourth was higher taxation. The earlier finance ministry had already implemented a 'sin tax' on cola drinks.

We first focused on front-of-the-packet warning labels. We are an expert body, including academics. We developed policy briefs and began writing about this issue in newspapers and issuing press statements. We received a huge response from the media.

We approached the FSSAI, wrote to the PMO, filed RTIs. We found that the PMO had summoned the FSSAI in 2021 to implement these policies speedily.

The FSSAI held a series of stakeholder meetings in which 80 percent of participants consisted of representatives from the food industry and 20 percent from groups like the Centre for Science and Environment (CSE), a person from the World Health Organization (WHO) and so on. We were not invited. They decided on a health star rating.

It was an idea they'd taken from Australia which is struggling with it. The product is rated according to its healthfulness. Least healthy gets a half-star and most healthy a full star. That means, if a chocolate is high in fat, sugar and salts but has a few nuts, it might inch towards healthy and get more stars. By that measure no ultra-processed food would be considered unhealthy but just least healthy.

We opposed it. Meanwhile, in 2022, after finishing the consultations, the FSSAI invited public comments on its draft notification. They got 14,000 comments. It took them two years to analyze them.

Q: The consumer needs to be better empowered to understand front-of-package labels. How can this be achieved?

India is very poor on nutrition research, on the

indicating that these are ultra-processed food products in prepackaged form and they are high in salt, sugar and fats. Use of symbols can be communicated to people.

The same food companies do the right thing in Europe but not in India.

Currently, a communication campaign by the government is underway called Eat Right, and Aaj Se Thoda Kam. I think that's the wrong approach. They are hitting on home cooking. But cooking is not the problem. It's packaged ultra-processed foods which are the problem.

Q: Do you see scope to educate schoolchildren and schoolteachers on the hazards of consuming foods high in salt, fat, sugar and chemicals?

This is important. We went to 30 schools last year. We showed them slides, shared posters and talked. Children are very honest. The canteens have to change availability and accessibility. That's where the rule of law matters.

Recently, for example, a court in Rajasthan took suo moto cognizance and said no school will have such foods. Regulation exists but it is not being implemented.

‘Samosas and jalebis are not marketed. No halwai comes on TV telling people to eat his samosas every day. Ultra-processed food is driven by marketing using children and celebrities. It matters.’

whole. Global research shows that people spend just seven seconds in a store deciding to pick up a food product. That's why it's important that warnings be written in bold on the front of the packet.

Some countries warn consumers about all four HSSFs (high salt, high sugar and high fat) including calories, others do so about three. WHO has provided benchmarks.

A hexagon sign is printed on the front. For example, if a product is high in four nutrients of concern including energy, then four hexagonal signs will be printed. Even if you can't read, you can see the hexagonal signs and identify the food's nutritional profile. This can be highlighted by the Central and state governments in their campaigns.

In India we are demanding a warning in two languages, in Hindi in the Devanagari script and in English, like in the Infant Milk Substitutes (IMS) Act.

Q: How will all consumers understand the significance of this signage?

If we get the best policy from the public health point of view, we should also launch a widespread campaign in every language,

We have reached out to teachers as well and asked them to spend one hour in the week talking about real foods, cooking and ultra-processed foods. But we are so controlled by a particular system in place that we don't change.

When I asked a child whether he would stop drinking Coke, he frankly said no. I asked why. He said he liked watching cricket and everyone around drank it. Unless this environment changes, education will be fruitless.

Q: You're sceptical of the FSSAI's present affidavit to the court. Why?

They had proposed an even worse labelling than the health star rating in court. They wanted to print the table they now have at the back of the package which tells you how many calories, fats, sugar and salt the product has and what your daily requirement is, in front. The judges rejected that outright.

The judges told them: We are asking you to give the policy to the people. If you don't do so, we will give it. That was the best sentence in that order. Examples from Chile, Mexico, Israel, Canada were quoted.

I have never read such a wonderful order as

Continued on page 12

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the August 13 one from the Supreme Court because courts only talk about legalities. This is an order which is so strong on technicalities, economics, health, health rights, right to life, everything. This is an ongoing battle. A counter affidavit has been filed.

Q: But they have agreed on front-of-package labelling in court?

They have agreed to front-of-package warning labelling with a red hexagon sign. But the devil is in the detail. The FSSAI wants the warning label only if two nutrients are high. It could be fat and sugar. Or salt and fat.

Secondly, they use added sugar as the metric. Industry can claim no added sugar and then use jaggery or Maltodextrin or some other added nonsense and get away with labelling.

Take an ad in *The Times of India* for Protinex. It says zero sugar. When you read its contents, it says total sugar is 18 gm. Now zero sugar doesn't attract the warning label. But if the metric was total sugar, there would be a warning, right? That is one of the problems we are tackling now.

There is another technical reason. You cannot measure added sugar in the product. You can only measure total sugar in the lab. If you have to test a product the lab can tell you how much total sugar there is in the product. It can't tell you how much was added, say, from fruits or milk or whatever.

Q: Does FSSAI test the product?

No, industry has to write how much added sugar their product contains and how much total sugar. The lab can only test total sugar. It won't be able to find out how much sugar was inherent and how much sugar was added. The risk to health is from the total sugar or free sugar, as WHO says, in the product. That's why this metric should be total sugar.

For one nutrient there should be one warning. If three nutrients are high, then three warnings should appear on the packet. The FSSAI wants to put only one hexagon which will say high salt, high sugar.

The font size will be only six or seven points. We are saying it should be a percentage of the surface area of the packet. If the size of the packet is small, the label will be small. We are demanding that the hexagon should be displayed on 15 to 20 percent of the surface area of the display area in Hindi and English.

We also don't want the FSSAI to reopen the entire process. We are hearing that industry wants to delay to the extent possible by getting the FSSAI to issue a notification and start inviting comments once again. Then they will say they are analyzing the comments all over again, which will take 10 years. That is their hope. The demand we are putting up in court is that the FSSAI must give us the regulation in three months. ■

KABIR VAJPEYI SAYS CJP CAMPAIGN COULD OPT FOR BETTER DESIGN, LOCAL OWNERSHIP

‘Fixing schools needs more than activism’

Civil Society News

New Delhi

IN the early 1990s, Kabir and Preeti Vajpeyi took up the challenge of transforming a rural government school in Rajasthan with a budget of just ₹25,000. Could architects transform learning spaces by making them child-friendly and immersive and take their low-cost ideas to scale?

From that special initiative came BaLA or Building as Learning Aid which laid out ideas for inexpensively renovating classrooms to meet the needs of children — bringing in light and ventilation, among other things. BaLA also showed what could be done with open spaces around schools — playgrounds, for instance.

BaLA came to be adopted by some 20 state governments, but was never adequately implemented. The Vajpeyis worked closely with different administrations, gleaning in the process the ways in which government officials and engineers can be motivated to improve schools. They realized how important it is to have local-empowered school management committees.

As the young leaders of the Cockroach Janta Party (CJP) set out on their School Thik Karo campaign, *Civil Society* spoke to Kabir Vajpeyi on the complexities of rejuvenating government schools.

Q: Since the 1990s, as an architect, you have been working to improve government schools in rural and remote areas. What is the advice you would give the Cockroach Janta Party campaigners?

I welcome the Cockroach Janta Party campaign for drawing public attention to the sorry state of government schools. The fact that the younger generation is taking it on is very important and heartening. My broader advice to them is that it should go beyond activism and into constructive engagement. Activism is important to make people aware of the sorry state of government schools. But it is equally important to have constructive ideas on what can be done now. I'm happy to share ideas on this.

Q: The immediate concern is the lack of

infrastructure in government schools. Basic facilities are missing like drinking water, toilets, leaking roofs, nowhere to even sit. What is the best way to fix all this?

At one level, these are not complicated problems to fix. But, if you look at such problems from a systemic perspective, then you require multiple interventions. I would broadly classify what can be done at two levels. One, the essentials you need. The second is to piggyback on that and bring in more qualitative aspects of engagement which enhance learning for the child.

As an architect I've realized, over a long period of engagement with systems and with design, that a school building is not just infrastructure or a shelter. It is much more

‘A government school would probably have the highest diversity among children which may not be true with private schools.’

than that. The building and its premises can play a much more engaging role in the very process of education. So, in the campaign, infrastructure should be only one component, because we need to fix many other things in that system.

We can repair the leaking roof, broken window, broken floor, broken plaster. Let's understand that this repairing is about reinstating the original structure. But what if the original itself needs tinkering? Some buildings may need major repair. Some may be prone to flooding, earthquakes or other natural hazards. Perhaps maintenance of the structure was never done. All this is needed and requires time, effort and engagement.

Then comes the second level which is slightly more qualitative repair work. Like fixing basic lighting, ventilation, basic furniture, storage and display features within the classroom. Maybe the toilets need hand washing facilities and the mid-day meal



Kabir Vajpeyi: 'Changes in pedagogy need to be reflected in classroom design'

kitchen requires some basic augmentation.

Children need natural light and ventilation. More so from the perspective of inclusion. A government school probably would have the highest diversity amongst children, which may not be true with private schools. A large number of children with special needs could be part and parcel of our government schools. Let's say there is a child who is hearing impaired or visually impaired, but is not even identified or diagnosed with that disability. Basic natural, sufficient light and sufficient ventilation can compensate for the child's loss.

For this maybe you need more ventilators, wider windows, maybe you need to convert a window into a door. You need more than one fire exit. For the mid-day meal kitchen you may require better storage for ingredients, for cereals. It may require a chimney. Generally, the kitchen is just a blank room, spewing smoke.

Similarly, the toilets. Very often the toilets are very male-centric. The people who design those are male engineers, without any understanding of the needs of girls or women teachers. One example: an adolescent girl requires additional space to change clothing. The design of the toilet and its provisions have a direct impact on attendance and learning. Studies confirm that girls skip as many as 50 days, which is 25 percent of school-going days in a year, because the toilet is not functional or

user-friendly. This is the third level of school improvement.

I call this adaptation and augmentation with sensitivity towards the child, the girl child and the child with special needs.

Q: To clarify, the first level is physical changes. The second is ambient changes. And the third, qualitative changes.

Yes. The third one is where there is broader scope for other interventions. For example, experiments in pedagogy and new methods of teaching-learning don't place the teacher in front in the classrooms.

That redefines the relationship between the teacher and the child. The architecture we have had for classrooms for ages does not support that. Do we still need a big chalkboard at the teacher's height and children sitting in rows like empty pots to be filled with knowledge that only the teacher has?

If those changes are happening at the pedagogy level, it's important to ensure that they are reflected in the physical design. I'm not suggesting we demolish all classrooms. But what is the tinkering we can do to reflect new pedagogy realities of engaging with the child?

The director of NCERT (National Council of Educational Research and Training), a long time ago, said new pedagogy encourages children to engage directly with materials. So,

you need niches, displays and storage spaces which are accessible at the child's height and not just the lockable storage which only the teacher can use. This is a pedagogical shift which needs to reflect in the physical environment.

Q: How important is the land around the school building?

If we reflect, what do we recall from our school days? The response, if we ask anyone, is invariably nature, the outdoors. It is never usually the building. Did you learn everything in the classroom? The answer is a clear no.

We have learned in a garden while taking a walk, maybe in a bazaar or on a cycle or bus. Children learn all the time. Then why are we fixated only with the classroom? The fact is that the outdoors impacts you immediately. A child entering a school for the first time engages with the outdoors first and then the classroom comes into the picture.

We can make the outdoors much more experiential with sensitive plantation. Winter deciduous trees — in North India you allow the sun to penetrate, in summer they become shady trees.

You could plant trees which have colour, fragrance, shapes, textures, all kinds of things. And children love this. You could have an entire outdoor become a habitat for birds, animals and insects, which becomes part of your EVS (Environmental Studies) class. And you can run your class right there.

The best thing about the outdoors is that it is sun-lit. And sunlight is one of the best disinfectants that you can ever imagine. It's also free.

It can be done almost everywhere with the School Management Committees (SMCs). I've seen schools that don't have gardeners. Children take care of all the plants, even during their holidays. They stay back after school.

Q: Why are SMCs not functional?

See, the basics don't need to be reinvented at all. The Right to Education (RTE) Act contains in detail what every functional all-weather school must have. It clearly spells out the size of the classroom, space for children, toilets, the kitchen and so on.

Along with the RTE Act, the SMC was very well thought-out, as an institution to take care of the school. It would comprise parents, people from the community and be managed by the headmaster. It was supposed to be strengthened through training and capacity

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building with programmes to be done by the government. Financial support too would be provided by the government. This money would be deposited in the SMC bank account.

A lot of work needs to be done right now to strengthen and revitalize the SMCs. Otherwise, school buildings will continue to be handed over to contractors who will build as they please. There has to be a sense of ownership from the SMCs.

It will require effort and funds to strengthen the capacity of SMCs. One of the core functions of the SMC is to draw up a school development plan. If enrolment is increasing, how are we going to expand the school? You need a school development plan to decide that.

One of the problems schools face is that schemes have come up. So Swachh Bharat Abhiyan comes in and then suddenly you have a whole range of toilets. But do you actually need those toilets and where should they be placed? No one is doing any planning. The toilet is then plonked on some open space which was otherwise a playground for children. Needs could be very diverse across different school sites. The SMC and the school development plan as per the RTE, need to be revitalized.

Integrated planning, where you integrate infrastructure with education, is important while strengthening the SMC. The next component is technical support. The engineers who are part and parcel of the system come on deputation either from the PWD (Public Works Department) or some other agency. Since they would be dealing with children, they need to be sensitized to understand the detailing that would be useful from the perspective of the child and the teacher rather than just making routine brick and mortar stuff.

Q: In videos posted on social media, many schoolchildren say they don't have an important basic facility — drinking water. Why and what can be done?

Drinking water is a very critical facility. The responsibility of providing water is not of the SMC. The panchayats and wards must take up this responsibility.

There have been orders on drinking water at the highest level, but I don't know why they never reach the ground. In October 2018, an announcement was made at the national level that within 100 days all schools and Anganwadis would get a water connection. I don't expect piped drinking water to reach every place because that is not feasible, but at least water and drinking water can be made available. This hasn't happened till date.

I'm right now working in Meghalaya and I know many Anganwadis don't have water at all. We discovered that Anganwadi workers are buying water with their own salaries, which includes the cost of transport and the price

paid for the 10-litre bottle that they carry to the Anganwadi centre.

In Darjeeling I noticed tankers being purchased for ₹2,000, which are put into one large tank in the school. This is not the responsibility of the school but of the government. Schools are paying from their own funds which are supposed to take care of other school needs like maintenance, for instance.

Q: How much talent, expertise, creativity is there in government to achieve any of the things you've spoken of?

Well, I think there is enough talent. The point is, are they harnessing and utilizing it? From my own experience, there are creative engineers, right from block and cluster level to state level. There are creative teachers and headmasters in the system too.

Q: What's missing?

I think the system doesn't nurture that creativity. On one of our field visits there was an engineer who told me, Sir, we get sanctions worth a few crores for making school buildings.

'A lot of work needs to be done right now to strengthen the capacity of the SMC. One of its functions is to draw up a school development plan.'

We implemented BaLA there. I don't particularly like to show what we do with the building. We don't put our heart and soul into it. It's what we do with BaLA with minimal resources that creates excitement and motivation. We want to share it.

Q: Every idea needs a spark and ownership. Is that right?

I would like to frame it slightly differently. It's not about bringing in new talent. It's about giving them the freedom to explore rather than instructions to follow.

The objective is ownership. Schools are fundamentally suffering because of lack of ownership. It could be the SMC, if it is functioning. Or people in the community who have an affinity with the school because they studied there. But these are individuals who care. It needs to be systemic. Creative engagement also helps achieve a sense of ownership. Also, recognition. Not monetary but just recognition of a good act.

I'll give you an example. In Godhra, a civil engineer came up with a unique idea of making

a slide in the school compound while implementing BaLA. He mentioned it to me. I was keen to see it. He was hesitant. I really liked it. I videoed it and showed it to the education secretary. He said, Is this happening in our state? Can you give me the details? Days later the engineer called me to say the education secretary had come to the school and said he wanted to only see the slide. He gave him a letter of appreciation. This message must have spread like wildfire to all the 450 engineers in the state.

Q: But why isn't BaLA more visible today?

One reason I would cite is institutional memory. The second is in all these 20 states, implementation and adaptation were not uniform. In Punjab they photocopied the book, made posters and placed them on the walls. In Gujarat there was continuity of vision. They invested in not just making it but also ensuring sustainability. Their education department and officials were responsive and sensitive, and their engagement with education was deeper.

Q: When was this?

From 2006 till 2012. They told us, In Gujarat we don't have a schedule of rates for child-friendly items of work. What do we mean by that? When the PWD undertakes construction, they have a schedule of rates for making everything from the building's foundation to the roof. But for BaLA ideas, there was no official schedule of rates. So how do you pay if somebody makes it?

They came up with a very intelligent solution. They said the schedule of rates was very important because we are talking about schools in jungle areas, in the desert, near the coast, so one single rate will not work.

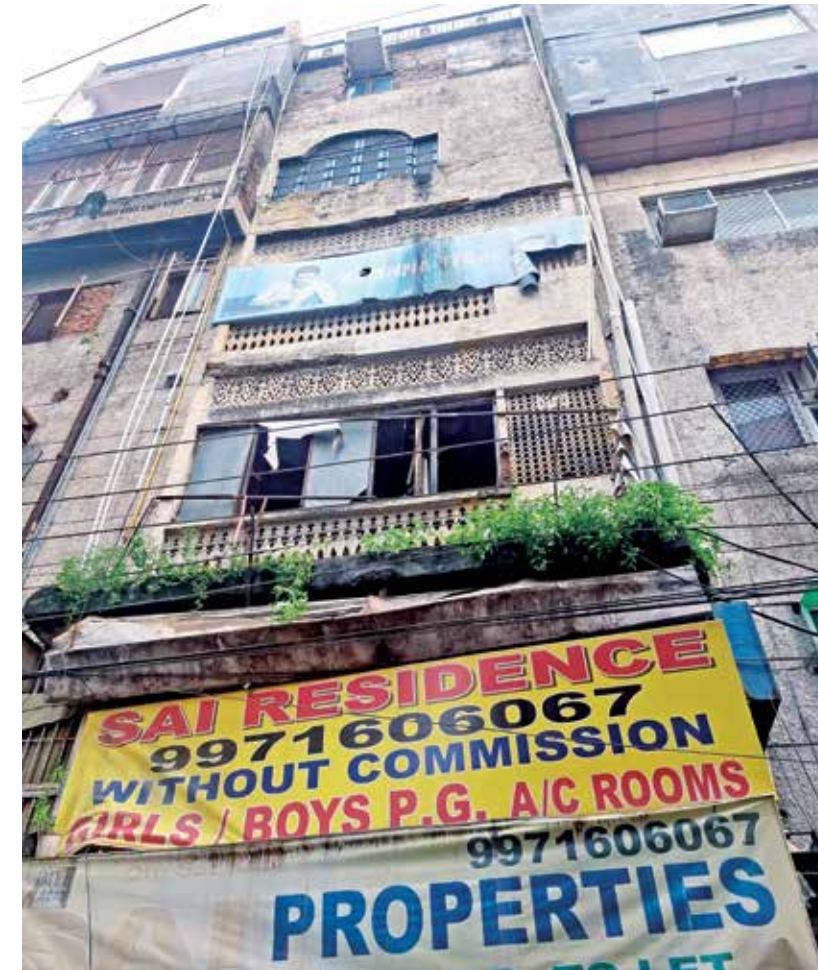
You won't believe this: we did a four-day, 24/7 workshop to get inputs from all their 450 engineers, to collect and give data on various material rates from different places and create this schedule of rates. It happened because of the vision of the state project engineer.

The second thing is they invested in training of teachers and headmasters. So that what they made would be used by the children and maintained. This engagement resulted in qualitative change on the ground. States like Himachal also implemented BaLA successfully.

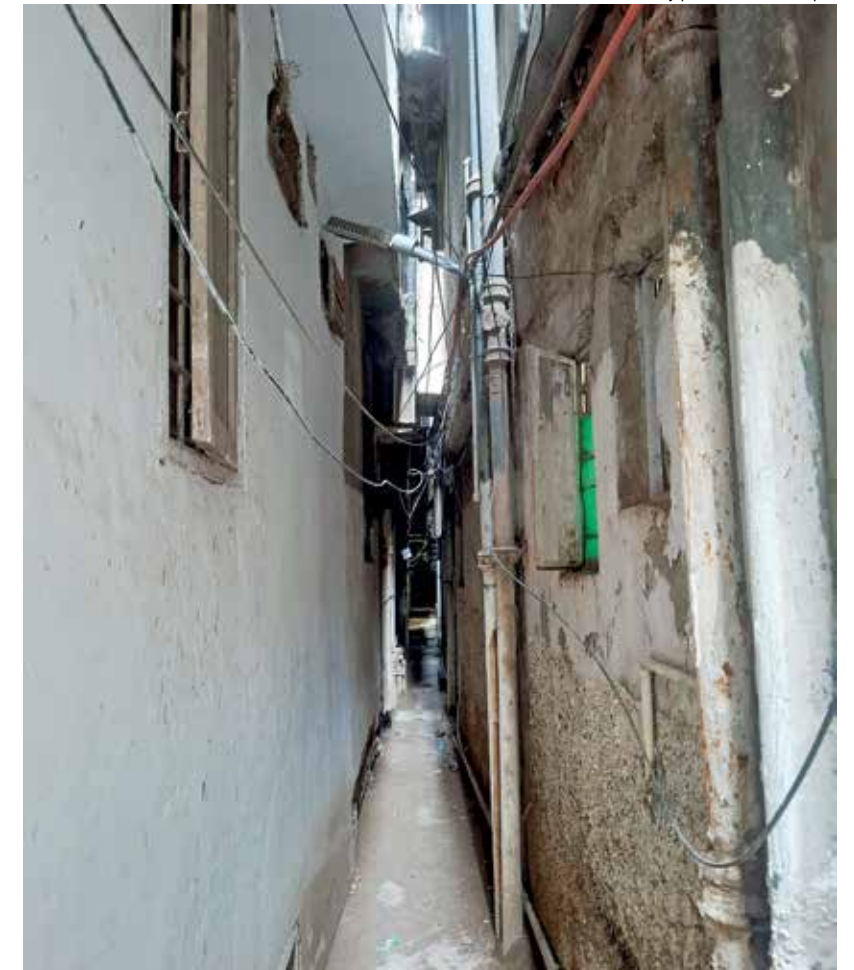
Apart from institutional memory the idea of BaLA got diluted in the system over the years. It percolated into the Ministry of Education and was included in the Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan. In 2014 it became part of the WCD-ICDS (Ministry of Women and Child Development-Integrated Child Development Services) mission framework.

But the version of BaLA now is to paint Mickey Mouse, Indra Dhanush and Chota Bheem on school walls and Anganwadi walls. Even the NITI Aayog does this. I've told them, Please don't do this and call it BaLA. ■

Civil Society pictures/Akshit Gupta



Narrow buildings offer rooms for students



There is hardly any space between buildings

When DU dream ends in tragedy

Students forced to slum it out off-campus

Akshit Gupta

New Delhi

IT was a dream come true for Anishka when she secured admission to Maitreyi College in Delhi University's South Campus. She comes from Sultanpur in Uttar Pradesh and the opportunity to study and live in Delhi came with hopes of transitioning from small town to big city life. Little did she realize that she would have to begin her journey amidst the squalor of Satya Niketan's narrow lanes in Delhi.

Thousands of students every year make it to Delhi University (DU) but due to the scarcity of hostel accommodation they end up as paying guests in structurally fragile buildings with almost negligible civic amenities. It was one of those buildings in Satya Niketan, 'Hostel Daze', that collapsed recently, leaving several young students dead and drawing national attention to Delhi's poor urban governance.

The somnolent Municipal Corporation of Delhi (MCD) finally swung into action and began sealing rickety buildings. The upshot was that students became homeless with nowhere to go. They began an indefinite sit-in

and a protest march, demanding mandatory safety audits of all PG hostels, Rs 1 crore compensation for each victim's family and secure hostel facilities for all students.

Developed in 1968 as a low-density resettlement colony under the Delhi Development Authority (DDA)'s Jhuggi Jhopri Removal Scheme, Satya Niketan was originally planned as a colony with small 40-metre plots designed for ground-plus-one floors. However, after DU's South Campus was established in 1973, local landlords seized the opportunity to convert their residential properties into lucrative paying guest (PG) accommodation. The massive surge of outstation students desperate to live close to their campuses emboldened landlords to construct extra floors on their rickety buildings.

For decades, the civic administration turned a blind eye to weak foundations, non-existent layout plans, and dangerous basement renovations. Despite the presence of the BJP's 'triple-engine government' at the Centre, in the state, and as the majority party in the MCD, urban planning continued to decay due to systemic rot.

Maitreyi College is not far from Satya Niketan where Anishka has a bed in a room shared by two others. Every day she navigates narrow, twisted streets to reach her college. At night the streets are unlit and become unsafe. Her room is claustrophobic. The only window opens onto sewers and garbage.

"We are not able to understand how the construction of these buildings got approval," she says. "I cannot walk freely at night as it gets really dark and there have been untoward incidents in the past."

INSTITUTIONAL CRISIS It is an institutional crisis which has been ignored. According to DU's Annual Report 2025, around 250,000 students were enrolled in various courses whereas the university's hostel capacity is 9,000 beds or so. It means that a mere four percent of students get into hostels and the rest have to fend for themselves.

Prabal Yadav of Sri Venkateswara College, directly opposite Satya Niketan, describes the plight of finding a "good PG". "A middle-class person cannot live here comfortably. If you can

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shell out more than ₹20,000, you might get a liveable room, else you accept a place in a building full of cracks.”

Students, thrilled to be in DU, are simultaneously vulnerable to exploitation. Yashvardhan, a third-year student at Sri Venkateswara, says, “Our college only has 144 seats for both boys and girls. Even if we apply, then merit and distance are calculated, due to which we fall off the list. We have no option than to choose to stay at hostels run by private operators which are unregulated.”

Due to lack of safety audits by the MCD of such buildings, and a stark demand-supply mismatch, ‘students cannot be choosers’ is a stark reality. This allows property owners to normalize violation of bylaws, turning the buildings into death traps.

Horizontally, the structures of the buildings have been extended to a stretch where balconies of adjacent houses are at an arm’s distance, and there is no space for natural light to seep in. Students describe living in these

‘Most of the rooms have no windows. It is living always surrounded by concrete with no ventilation.’

PGs as “matchbox living” because, in a bid to maximize rental income, floors have been partitioned to construct several small rooms.

Prachi Saini, a fourth-year student at Maitreyi, says, “Living in these matchbox-like rooms is highly risky. If we are on an upper floor and there is a fire, there will be no time to react.” Another student, Riya Gupta, shares an unsettling reality, “Most of the rooms have no windows, leaving no space for ventilation. It is living always surrounded by concrete.”

The financial toll is no less punishing. Students are bound to an 11-month contract with a one-time security deposit, which is non-returnable. They are left with no choice but to continue staying in the same place despite poor and dangerous conditions.

“The floors are damaged, and rooms are plagued by termite infestations and seepage issues. Now, the owner has imposed a mandatory ₹150 electricity charge even if the room is empty,” says a student who requested anonymity. For Prachi, the upfront cost became so high when she first arrived in Delhi that funds became an immediate concern. “I came here in my first year of college. Combining rent, which is around ₹15,000 per month, security deposit, and other charges, I had to



Rescue workers at the site of the tragedy



The inside of a typical room

pay ₹40,000, which is not easy for someone coming from a small town,” she says.

EVICITION THREATS In 2022, a building toppled in Satya Niketan due to unauthorized renovation work, and now Hostel Daze, a PG for boys, has collapsed. Many in the area fear that more buildings will come down.

Ravi, another student of Sri Venkateswara, says, “If we dare to speak about the building’s structural lapses to anyone, the owners threaten us with instant eviction and then we have no place to go.” The surveillance is intimidating, a violation of the fundamental rights of the students. “The PG owner told us not to form unofficial WhatsApp groups to share our grievances and warned that if we do it, we will be ousted,” says Riya.

Most property owners have ignored notices from the MCD, which has not taken action.

The buildings have been stretched vertically up to six floors to create more rooms. In June 2026, a notice was served to House Number 216 in Satya Niketan, stating that construction above the fourth floor was unauthorized. The structure still stands tall with five floors. “Cracks have always been visible due to load-bearing construction but now, after the incident, many of my friends have shifted to staying with friends who live in flats. There is this constant fear: what if our building collapses?” says Riya.

The administrative negligence behind the disaster is blatant. The tragic collapse of the Hostel Daze PG was not inevitable had the MCD taken stringent action. From missing emergency exits, unauthorized construction, and zero safety audits to unmet building bylaws, violations culminated in the loss of seven lives. In the aftermath, as a knee-jerk reaction, five high-ranking MCD officials have been suspended and a committee has been formed to launch a probe into the incident. People are asking for proactive good governance which involves regular audits, enforcement of strict rules, and a proper grievance redressal mechanism for accountability and transparency.

Deepu, a student at Atma Ram Sanatan Dharma College, says, “The entire structure of the building is without proper beams, substandard material is used, and no one is there to monitor.”

As the High Court has held DU co-responsible for the disaster, the onus is also on the university to provide safe accommodation facilities to its students. Until policymaking is reviewed and a system of checks and balances is formed, students will continue to bear the brunt of a compromised Delhi administration. ■

Rise of the purple sweet potato

Shree Padre

Kasaragod

THE colour purple dominates M.V. Prasad’s house. It is everywhere: in his courtyard, kitchen, packing area, car and even his bike looks purple. The reason is that his prized crop of purple sweet potatoes is packed in purple and scattered throughout his home.

This is no ordinary humdrum sweet potato. It’s a biofortified, nutrient-rich wonder. It now sells in Bengaluru’s premium stores at between ₹200 and ₹2,000 per kilo under the Prasad family’s brand name, Sweet Pot, with the tagline ‘Simply Super Food’.

Prasad, 56, is a dynamic farmer, willing to take risks. Originally from Mailengi in Kasaragod district of Kerala, he has lived in Bengaluru for the past 23 years. Keen to farm since childhood, he bought a hillock at Shivagange, 50 km from Bengaluru, and plunged into farming 12 years ago.

For eight years, he cultivated dragon fruit, explored new technologies and developed several value-added products. After that, he began looking around for another high-value crop. Browsing through Food Stories, a store on MG Road in Bengaluru, purple sweet potato caught his eye. What he found intriguing was the price: ₹2,000 per kg.

He began investigating why it was so. His search eventually led him to the Indian Council of Agricultural Research (ICAR)-Central Tuber Crops Research Institute (CTCRI). He learnt that two biofortified varieties had been developed at its Bhubaneswar centre — Bhu Krishna and Bhu Sona. Prasad then sourced planting material from the CTCRI research and extension centre at Dharwad and brought it to his Green Farm in Shivagange.

And so, from the pink dragon fruit he transitioned to the purple sweet potato about a year ago.

Bhu Krishna is a purple-fleshed biofortified sweet potato rich in anthocyanins. Bhu Sona is an orange-fleshed variety rich in beta-carotene. An attractive colour, enhanced nutritional value and growing interest among health-conscious consumers have created a premium market for these varieties.

ON THE FARM Purple sweet potato is a 100- to 120-day crop. Proper moisture and nutrient management are important. Sweet potato weevil is the pest which tends to attack it. In his inimitable style, Prasad deviated from conventional cultivation methods. Instead, he cultivated sweet potato using grow bags, drip irrigation and shade-net protection.

“Grow bags make pest and weed management

easier. Planting and harvesting are convenient, and damage to the tubers is minimal,” he explains. “Water and nutrients can be routed precisely through drip irrigation. My labour requirement is also reduced.” The method also helps manage tuber size. The market demand is for purple sweet potatoes weighing roughly 200 to 500 gm.

Raj Halappa, a friend of Prasad who also grows the same potato, endorses his methodology of using grow bags. “When sweet

IN THE MARKET Once the crop was ready, Prasad faced a bigger dilemma. Who would he sell to? He identified premium consumers and stores, developed a brand, designed packaging and built a system which supplied sweet potatoes throughout the year.

Two stores which stock his produce are Bhoomi Farm and Food Stories in Bengaluru. He has also identified other stores, farmers’ markets and WhatsApp groups of consumers.

“This crop is not suited to conventional



No ordinary sweet potato, it is a biofortified, nutrient-rich wonder



M.V. Prasad with his packaged purple sweet potato

wholesale markets. Farmers should market directly and earn more through value addition,” he points out.

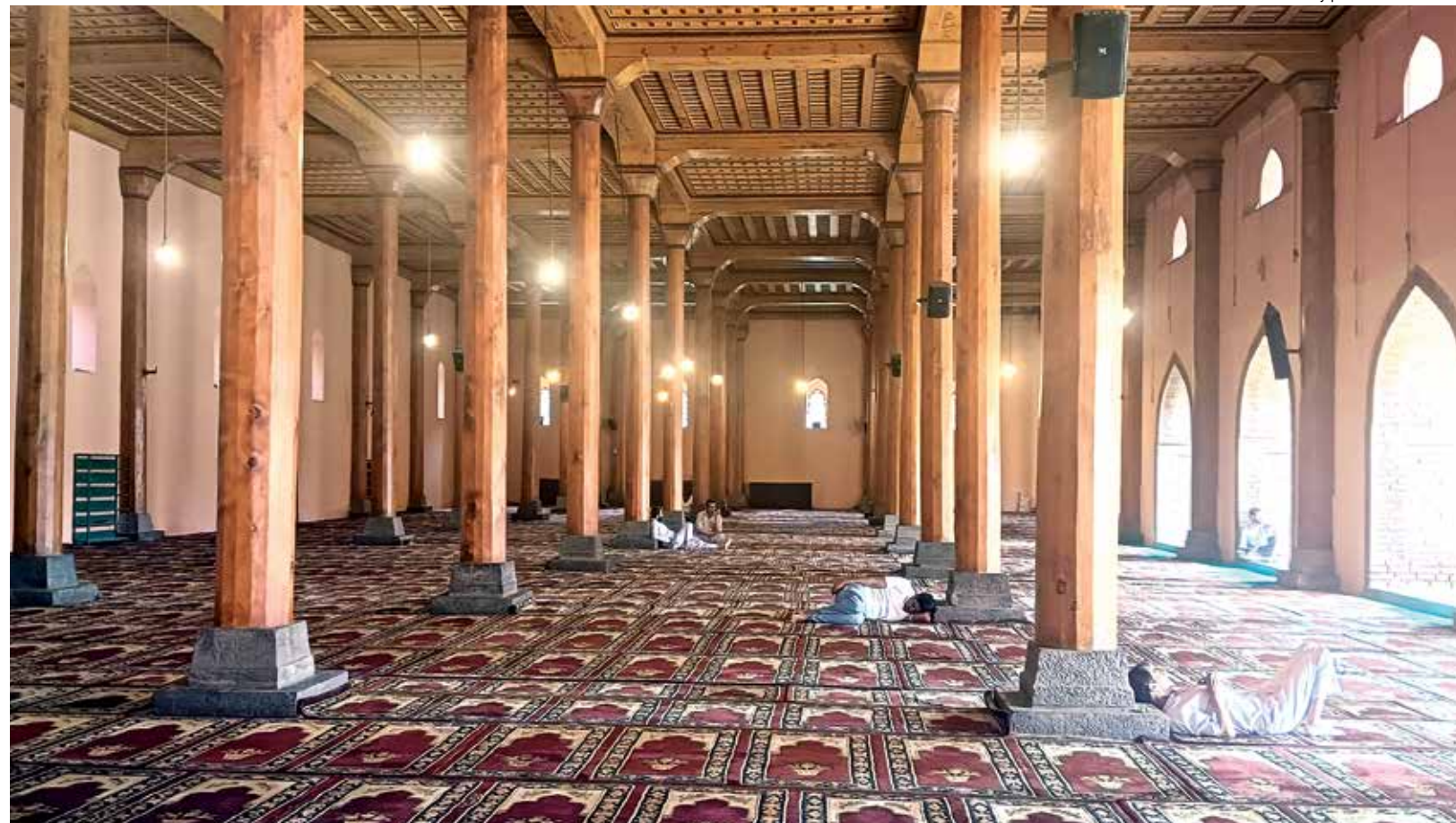
Another distinctive feature of Prasad’s cultivation method is daily planting and daily harvesting. By staggering planting, he created a seamless supply chain of sweet potatoes, essential for a directly sold branded product.

Green Farm now functions like a family-owned company. Prasad’s wife, Asha, experiments with recipes and value-added products. Their daughter, Prashanthi Maylengi, a postgraduate in microbiology, handles branding and digital marketing for Sweet Pot. Altogether, the enterprise employs about 25 people in production and supply.

Sweet Pot has now crossed Indian shores. The first export consignment went to the Maldives, and around 100 kg is now being sent to Dubai.

Prasad gratefully acknowledges the support of CTCRI, Bengaluru’s Gandhi Krishi Vignana Kendra, the University of Horticultural Sciences at Bagalkot, and Indian Institute of Horticultural Research. CTCRI has recognized his work. On July 27, at a function in Thiruvananthapuram, M.S. Prasad received the Farmer of the Year award. ■

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After prayers, people relax in the Jamia Masjid's cool environment, which their homes don't offer them

Civil Society pictures/Bisma Bhat

HOW COOL IS A MOSQUE!

Bisma Bhat
Srinagar

THE afternoon sun shone brutally overhead. The few pedestrians kept close to walls and shop fronts, seeking patches of shade. The heat forced most people to stay indoors, making the streets deserted.

But Srinagar's century-old Jamia Masjid seemed to belong to a different world. The sun did not cast its burning rays indoors.

After the Zuhar prayer concluded, instead of going home men settled down in the vast prayer halls before large open windows through which a cool breeze blew in.

Two men stretched out on the cool floor of the hall for a nap. Another two rather elderly men sat on a window sill, their legs dangling, facing the breeze blowing in from the small tank in the mosque's courtyard. Two young boys splashed their faces with water from the tank.

"We won't go home until the sun eases. We are here until Magrib prayer after which the heat lessens. At home, sitting under a fan which only swirls hot air around makes us feel sweaty and lethargic. I don't think even an air conditioner can provide the comfort here in

the mosque," said Abdul Rehman, who had come from nearby Gojwara.

Muhammad Sultan too did not go home after prayer because of the heat. "I cannot walk even a few steps outdoors. I am here because this place offers what your air conditioner cannot. At home the AC and fans raise your bills but staying here is free," he said.

Kashmir has been witnessing extreme weather, with exceedingly hot summers and dry winters. "The people of Kashmir don't have tolerance for such heat. Earlier, whenever the temperature would rise, it would rain and the temperature would fall. But this year we have hardly had any rain," said Sultan, 52.

Elsewhere in the mosque, two college girls, Toiba and Rounak, came to rest in the airy arcades along the thick walls. Wearing black abhaya, they set their backpacks down, rested their backs against the stone walls and closed their eyes.

"Every day after classes we come here, walking more than a kilometre from our college, to spend some time here before going home," said Toiba, studying in Islamia College.

"Here the environment is suitable for women and the coolness of this place makes it

perfect to rest," added Rounak. Tuba, another friend, said that it was not only a place of worship but a place where spending time together had tightened their bond of friendship.

A few kilometres from the Jamia Masjid is another stone-carved mosque which stands on the left bank of the Jhelum. The Pathar Masjid was built by Mughal Emperor Jahangir's wife, Noor Jahan, in 1623.

More than four centuries later, the old walls with large open windows and cool interiors are drawing people not only to offer prayers but also to take shelter from the summer heat.

As the sun climbed higher in the sky, the four giant chinars in the four gardens before the mosque offered islands of cool shade. Under the giant canopy of greenery a man slept on an iron bench.

The cool and shady environs of Srinagar's mosques and their surroundings have taken on a new role, showing how Kashmir's cultural architecture holds lessons for dealing with climate change. Around three kilometres away from the Pathar Masjid, in the heart of the old city, stands another large mosque — Srinagar's second-largest, after the Jamia Masjid. The Aali Masjid fascinates people across Kashmir.

Even the relatives of patients admitted to the nearby Sher-i-Kashmir Institute of Medical Science (SKIMS) come here to relax. The peace and calm of the mosque makes them forget their worries about their sick relatives for a while.

"I sat on the lawn in the breeze, and for a bit I could forget about my brother who has cancer," said Mushtaq Ahmad, as he left the mosque to head back to the hospital.

Mehraj-u-din, 62, who lives in the Eidgah nearby, has observed how the mosque has taken on the role of a community shelter where people from different walks of life come for some respite from stress.

Built centuries ago, when no one could have forecast climate change, these structures are already functioning informally as heat shelters in addition to being places of worship.

Their cool environs are not quite accidental; they emerge from architecture that is in step with Kashmir's landscape and climate. Features such as thick walls, high timber ceilings, large windows, use of stones together contribute to keeping the interiors cool while keeping out much of the harsh sunlight.

According to Asma Nisar, a young architect, traditional architecture is key. "These mosques have a different kind of design which keeps them cooler during the summer. Large open windows allow air to enter, high ceilings hold warm air up, the thick walls do not let heat pass inside, and the use of timber contributes to a cooler environment," she explains.

This is truly climate-conscious construction which relies on passive control of indoor temperature unlike modern buildings where concrete, glass and sealed interiors trap heat.

Independently, these features may appear ordinary but together they are formidable.

Another architect, Munaf Amin, says that the spread of lawns surrounded by chinar trees act as a natural air conditioner, generating cool breeze around the mosques.

"In the old city, houses were tightly packed with hardly any lawns and greenery. There are few windows in them which do not allow air to pass freely," said Munaf.

He pointed out that the use of stone in the Pathar Masjid is another factor contributing to its cooler environment. "Stone has good thermal mass due to which it remains cooler in the shade. If the same stone remains in the sun it becomes hot and retains heat for a longer time," he said. Moreover, he said, this doesn't just keep the place cool, it also has the ability to withstand an earthquake. Kashmir is known to be in a seismic-prone zone.

Around the mosques, trees play an equally important role in cooling the environment. In Srinagar's old city, concrete houses have very small courtyards which provide little space for planting trees.



A huge chinar stands within the garden of the Pathar Masjid. People often relax in its shade in the heat of summer



The Jamia Masjid has a large cool tank

These spaces are becoming more important predominantly for those who cannot cool their homes or workplaces and those who are more vulnerable to heat such as the elderly, the very young, the sick, and outdoor workers.

In Kashmir traditionally talk about climate was dominated by the prolonged cold of its harsh winter but now the situation is changing.

Faizan Arif, an independent climate analyst, said that, on an average, Srinagar has warmed by one degree. "On an average scale, I have studied the temperature of Srinagar station from 2000 to 2019 and then I compared it with the temperatures of two decades earlier, 1980 to 1989. I find that Srinagar has warmed by 1.05°C," said Arif. He added that the rising temperature means that the atmosphere now has the ability to hold more moisture — resulting in less rainfall which in turn means hotter summers.

For the past several years, Kashmir has

witnessed unusually high temperatures — prompting advisories and heat preparedness moves.

The lessons that traditional architecture holds for adapting to extreme climate conditions has forced people to revisit their traditional way of construction as well.

"There are certain techniques that people can adopt, keeping in mind traditional architecture techniques, while constructing their homes. Installing small windows can reduce the heat reaching indoors, and a covered wooden balcony can cut the summer sun," said Nisar.

However, she added that it is not possible to build houses in a traditional way because materials such as wood cannot be sourced and neither is it logical.

"In modern homes, where people are going wrong is that they don't take into consideration the path of the sun. The position of the windows matters, the direction the building faces matters, the thickness of the walls matters, choice of material matters, ventilation matters," she emphasized.

If rising temperatures become the norm in Kashmir, identifying more existing spaces including schools, community halls and libraries could become one component of heat preparedness provided these spaces meet the basic requirements.

Back inside the Jamia Masjid, the afternoon moved on inexorably slowly. The man sleeping in the vast hall remained undisturbed by the heat outside. The two college friends chatted while resting against the cool walls. The two children continued to play with the tank water. The others sat in the cool breeze.

Everyone was waiting for the sun to set and the soothing dusk to arrive. For the time being, though, the sun was blazing. ■

Historic town cleans public spaces, river

Bharat Dogra
Udaipur

KHAMNOR is an innocuous small town in Rajasthan's Rajsamand district, close to famous Udaipur, a tourist hotspot with shimmering lakes. The town's sole claim to fame is its proximity to Haldighati where a historic battle was fought between Maharana Rana Pratap and Mughal emperor Akbar in 1576.

Khamnor is once again in the spotlight but this time it's for the town's successful efforts to improve sanitation, clear garbage and create civic awareness. Until five years ago, despite its location near a heritage site and an important river, Banas, the town and its market area were marred by garbage. Even the river and local water sources were not spared.

Seva Mandir, a well-known voluntary organization in south Rajasthan, initiated a sanitation project here, got citizens involved and empowered sanitation workers. The efforts had a spiralling effect and inspired a group of Khamnor's youth or Gen Z to get together to clean up the Banas river.

This situation has now improved. The market and residential areas are cleaner and so is the river. Water sources too have benefited a great deal from the special cleaning drive.

Jyotsna, a member of Seva Mandir's solid waste management team, says, "About four years ago we along with several community members started coordinated efforts for improving sanitation here. A *vikas samiti* or development committee was formed."

"People of all communities and stakeholders, from shopkeepers to sanitation workers, were involved. These efforts led to identifying bigger problem areas and we called for voluntary work. It received a good response," she adds.

The town's recent success is likely to be sustainable as it has got local people involved. They have accepted responsibility for improving sanitation.

"In recent times people here have come together again and again to contribute voluntary work for keeping streets, markets and water sources of our town clean," says Rekha Khatik, a resident who is an active volunteer. "Meetings are held and the time and site of the next gathering for voluntary work is decided according to need. A *bawdi* (water

source) was clogged so badly with dirt accumulated over several years that cleaning it seemed a formidable task. But once we got together to share responsibilities we made this very difficult work much easier."

The sanitation drive has led to better conditions of work and dignity for sanitation workers. Shiv Narain, another team member, says, "The earlier contract system for cleaning was not working well, so effort for moving to a better system and a better team was made, leading to better results. At the same time, it was ensured that the earnings of workers increased."

Rimjhim Pandey, coordinator of these efforts in Seva Mandir says, "An important aspect of our efforts is that sanitation workers should be able to work in conditions of dignity and justice. Hence we call them Arogya Mitra (friends who protect us from disease) and we



Local people got involved in the campaign initiated by Seva Mandir

Inspired by the late G.D. Aggarwal, local youngsters began cleaning the Banas river which flows through Khamnor.

try our best to ensure that discriminatory attitudes towards them end. They deserve to be respected for their important contribution to society."

The sanitation workers were provided masks, gloves, shoes and jackets. Health check-ups were also arranged. Merely changing the timing of the garbage collection van ensured that much of the garbage which was earlier being left out could now be collected.

Bharat, a sanitation worker, confirmed that working conditions had improved. But, he said, problems arise when *panchayat* funds are delayed, leading to delay in salary payment

and adversely affecting the work. This is an important issue that needs to be worked out.

Garbage which had collected and stagnated in many areas was cleared. Public campaigns like those on avoiding polythene use helped to reduce generation of garbage. More dry waste could be available for resource recovery and for recycling.

Seva Mandir's efforts encouraged youth groups in Khamnor to join the cleanliness drive. They decided to help clean up the Banas river which flows for over 500 km in water-scarce Rajasthan. Its upper reaches are in South Rajasthan in the Aravali hills. This seasonal river is sometimes referred to as Van ki Aas or hope of forests, a reminder of its important ecological role.

Unfortunately, the river had become a dumping ground for all kinds of garbage. This degradation of the river was being watched

with increasing concern by a group of youths including Suresh Lohar, Pravin, Kajal, Lalita, Rajat, Deepak, Hitesh and others. "It was really worrying to see that even diapers and sanitary napkins were being dumped in the river and its vicinity, along with all sorts of other garbage," says Kajal.

Suresh Lohar, who emerged in a leadership role, says he was deeply inspired by the scientist, Dr G.D. Agrawal, who sacrificed his life for protecting the Ganga river. "I started thinking more about Dr Agrawal's mission. If an elderly and senior scientist could sacrifice his life for the cause of protecting the Ganga, then surely we younger people should do our bit to reduce pollution in a river flowing close to our home."

This group formed a small organization called Sarva Hith (welfare of all). True to its name, they decided their first big initiative would be to clean the river. They spread awareness through social media and recruited more volunteers.

They began cleaning with enthusiasm but also faced several difficulties. Many kinds of harmful garbage had been thrown into the river which was not easy for inexperienced young people to handle.

As students, they had heard about such initiatives but had never previously participated in them. Nevertheless, about 22 young people joined on most days and work continued for about 10 days. Over 100 sacks of garbage were removed from the river and its vicinity.

The volunteers from Sarva Hith also got involved in a campaign against use of polythene and in tree planting. They participated in Seva Mandir's initiatives to learn about good solid waste management in places like Indore, Dungarpur and Udaipur, thus opening up new possibilities and ideas for future work. ■

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MULTIPLEX REBELLION

How young filmmakers in Bengal go their own way

Saibal Chatterjee
Kolkata/Delhi

AFTER facing hurdles releasing his first two critically acclaimed films in the multiplexes, Pradipta Bhattacharyya did the unthinkable with his third venture, *Nadharer Bhela* (The Slow Man and His Raft, 2025).

He completely bypassed the established distribution system and hit the road with the film. Earlier this year, Bhattacharyya screened the film across West Bengal with the help of crew and cast members, friends, well-wishers and students.

Starting in Tehatta in Nadia district and Berhampore in Murshidabad district and travelling as far as Krakow, Poland, *Nadharer Bhela* found enthusiastic audiences at community-led screenings everywhere. In Delhi, the film was screened a few months ago at the Niv Art Centre in Neb Sarai to an enthusiastic audience. The show was followed by an interaction with the director.

Bhattacharyya admits that self-distribution isn't the easiest thing to do unless one has a strong support system. He does have a network across West Bengal because of the film students he has taught at Kolkata's Roopkala Kendro and Satyajit Ray Film and Television Institute. The experiment, thanks to all the help, is bearing fruit.

"We are going only to places where we know there is an audience for our film and where we have volunteers who can help us locally organize a screening," says Bhattacharyya. "We are making a profit and the producer is recovering his investment."

Independent filmmakers working in India without the support of leading production banners and box-office stars have faced an intractable distribution-exhibition gridlock for years. Nowhere has the situation been worse than in West Bengal.

Politically connected arbiters dictated terms to the Bengali movie industry for over a decade, severely stunting its growth. A new government is now in the saddle but uncertainty continues to persist. The danger of one set of power brokers being replaced by another still looms.

Away from the pulls and tugs of vested interests, a small crop of Bengali filmmakers is

ploughing a fringe furrow with varying degrees of success. While that may sound like good news, the ifs and buts obstructing these rebels cannot be ignored.

West Bengal once produced cinema that earned plaudits the world over. The state has all but fallen off the map — and into a rut.

Not only do contemporary Bengali filmmakers have to make do with a limited number of screens, they also suffer the continuing ill-effects of a stranglehold by a handful of blinkered players.

Little space is available for films that do not play by the rules. However, amid the gloom, some filmmakers are resolutely fighting back. The odds are stacked against them but their defiant voices are being heard above the din of mediocrity.

Bengali filmmakers had to make do with a limited number of screens and suffer a stranglehold by a handful of players.

These directors are jostling for a rightful piece of an ever-shrinking pie. At least two of them have succeeded to a significant extent in the endeavour. Four others, all self-taught, are looking for ways out of a confounding and frustrating maze. They have made exceptional films that are both courageous and original.

In a market driven by safety-first tactics and overrun by detective stories, gangster sagas and sloppy melodramas, these men have something genuinely interesting and intrinsically meaningful to share with the world.

TRAINED TECHNICIAN With two critically acclaimed films, *Bakita Byaktigato* (The Rest is Personal, 2013) and *Rajlokkhi O Srikanto* (2019), film editor and teacher of cinema Pradipta Bhattacharyya is leading the charge.

He is the only one among the six who is a formally trained film technician. The other five — Ranjan Ghosh, Amitabha Chatterji, Abhijit Chowdhury, Sudipta Laha and Raja



Raja Ghosh, director of 'Chabiwala' — The Keysmith'



Ranjan Ghosh experimented with the production of his film, 'Adama'



Abhijit Chowdhury, director of 'Dhrubor Aschorjo Jibon'



Pradipta Bhattacharyya hit the road with his film, 'Nadharer Bhela'



Amitabha Chatterji's '8' is a black and white film depicting his struggles as a filmmaker

Ghosh — have all picked up the ropes on the job, having ventured into filmmaking from other professions.

These six directors are in search of a breakthrough, individually and collectively, and are striving to create a space that the mainstream movie industry, a slave to dead habit, isn't willing to grant them.

The ticket pricing is the key, says Bhattacharyya. "For a Bengali film, a multiplex ticket is priced at ₹180 to ₹200. Our tickets are ₹350 each. Moreover, while a multiplex show never manages more than 30 to 40 percent occupancy, every show of ours draws 300-400 people."

In this key respect, Bhattacharyya's radical 'distribution' model differs from the one that Malayali filmmaker John Abraham and his fabled Odessa Collective adopted four decades ago for his crowdfunded *Amma Ariyan* (Report to Mother, 1986).

Abraham, trained at the Film and Television Institute of India, Pune, screened *Amma Ariyan* (his fourth and final film released months before his untimely death due to a fall from a rooftop) across Kerala on a completely non-commercial basis.

That is not the case with *Nadharer Bhela*. "Our aim is to ensure that we make enough money for the producer who invested in the

film," says Bhattacharyya.

Nadharer Bhela, a poignant tale of a hapless misfit in a fast and connected world, follows a man (Amit Saha) who is severely motion-impaired and, therefore, a butt of ridicule, contempt and exploitation. So slothful is he that he is seen as a freak and subjected to much ignominy.

A rural circus run by a ruthless manager (Ritwik Chakraborty) hires him as a performer because animals are no longer permitted and men become horses and bears to entertain the paying public.

People are responding to the film because of its strong thematic core. "The model that I

have adopted will work only when people like a film. No film can be thrust upon an audience," says Bhattacharyya, who intends to keep screening *Nadharer Bhela* until Durga Puja this year.

Given the success of the experiment, he says, he might consider extending the strategy to his two earlier films. "The viability of this model can be ascertained only when two or three more such initiatives are attempted and tested," he says.

EARLY DAYS Filmmaker Ranjan Ghosh agrees with Bhattacharyya's strategy with a rider: "I won't call it a model just yet. For it to

become one, it has to work for other independent films as well. For now, it seems to be a worthwhile experiment.”

Ghosh, who was a mariner before he became a filmmaker, experimented not so much with the distribution as with the production of his fifth film, *Adamyia* (Unbroken). It is a sinewy political thriller centred on a young activist on the run from the law after a failed attempt to assassinate an election candidate who makes pompous promises.

Ghosh filmed with a skeletal crew deep inside the Sundarbans. “The shoot was tough, really tough,” he says, “especially because we were just the six of us.”

He adds: “Actor Aryunn Ghosh, cinematographer Arkaprabho (Das), Arjo (Giri), Souryaa (Madrajee) and Shubham (Dutta) were all young men with little or no experience in acting or assisting in films. Thanks to their passion and energy, not for a moment did we feel the strain of the shoot.”

“Arka shot in natural light, at times using torch beams or a lantern or matchsticks or a temple’s tube light,” says Ghosh, who quit his shipping industry job and served as assistant director and co-writer of Aparna Sen’s *Iti Mrinalini* (2011).

He made his independent directorial debut with *Hrid Majharey* (2014), a Bengali feature film produced as a tribute to William Shakespeare on the Bard’s 450th birth anniversary.

The six members of the *Adamyia* crew handled all aspects of production, including art, costumes, cinematography and sound recording, and operated without any equipment, except a battery-run source of light and a wooden stool used as a makeshift tripod.

The hard work paid off. *Adamyia*, after its first screening in Kakdwip, Sundarbans, on Republic Day on the request of local college students the crew befriended during the shoot, had a successful eight-week theatrical run.

The film first played in multiplexes and the Nandan cineplex in Kolkata and then in a single-screen theatre, an unprecedented outcome for an independent film made well-nigh on the fly. Ghosh now intends to take *Adamyia* to other parts of West Bengal where it has not been screened yet. “But there are significant costs involved. Let’s see how that pans out,” he adds.

BEING ORIGINAL This story of resilience and defiance in an industry loath to shed its complacency isn’t only about what Bhattacharyya and Ghosh have achieved on two fronts of the filmmaking cycle. The four other directors mentioned earlier — three of them have only made their first films and are now in different stages of making their next — are also waging war on a film production machinery opposed to original ideas.

The most experienced of the quartet,

Amitabha Chaterji, burst on the scene in 2018 with the sparse but exquisite *Ami O Manohar* (Manohar and I). The film won the Federation of Film Societies of India’s KR Mohanan Award for the Best Indian Debut Feature at the International Film Festival of Kerala.

Chaterji has since made three more films, each as uncompromising as the other. His latest, a black-and-white film titled 8 to signify



the eight years he has devoted to the struggle to make the sort of films that he believes in, premiered at the Kolkata International Film Festival (KIFF) last year.

The film is a freewheeling, candid meta-rumination on the director’s life, work, relationships and creative credo. “I have always considered myself a film student rather than a

filmmaker,” says Chaterji, who, in his 20s, had a software company.

He watched mostly mainstream films back then. On Independence Day of 2008, a stock market friend dragged him along to a screening of Ingmar Bergman’s *Wild Strawberries*. “The film changed me completely,” says Chaterji. “I had no desire to get back to my office anymore....”

For the next six to seven years, he devoured films and read about the medium voraciously. In the process, he discovered Yasujiro Ozu and Abbas Kiarostami. The striking minimalism of their cinema stayed with him and impacted his own films.

But none of his films has made it to multiplex screens yet. *Ami O Manohar* was on MUBI, a streaming service devoted to arthouse cinema, for a while, but his attempts at theatrical distribution of the film failed. So, Chaterji is now wondering if his approach is sustainable.

He says: “I have an advantage and a disadvantage. I can make a film with limited resources. The disadvantage is that I’ve gotten into the loop of letting my films do the festival rounds and end their journey there. But now when I see other independent filmmakers in Kolkata release their films and receive a good response, it makes me want to rethink my approach.”

TWISTED THRILLER Further afield, Abhijit Chowdhury worked in several countries in the West as a software architect and also taught in an American university before taking the plunge into filmmaking. His directorial debut, *Dhrubor Aschorjo Jibon* (The Strange Life of Dhrubo), landed the Best Film Award in the Bengali Panorama section of the 2024 edition of KIFF.

Dhrubor Aschorjo Jibon is a whimsical and captivating story of crime and culpability that plays out in four alternate realities, with each segment serving stylistically as a nod to one of four great Bengali painters — Jamini Roy, Gaganendranath Tagore, Bikash Bhattacharjee and Benode Behari Mukherjee.

The film embeds the visual language of art in the heart of a twisted thriller. It was in the making for 18 months, with eight to nine months devoted to work on the VFX and design. “It ran for three weeks in multiplexes and Nandan,” he reveals. It did not get the play it deserved.

“We had no clue how to go about promoting the film. We did not get the support we expected from the media. That hasn’t deterred us. We love making films. We are driven by passion, not by a desire for fame and money,” he asserts. “People in the film’s core production team worked for free and that is the only way it could have been made.”

The Bengal School of Art exponents who have influenced the visual texture of *Dhrubor Aschorjo Jibon* faced creative and existential

crises in different timelines similar to the ones that West Bengal’s independent filmmakers do today, Chowdhury points out.

“There was a time when art in Bengal (and the rest of India) meant Western art. These legendary painters had to struggle to make inroads and find takers,” he adds.

Chowdhury is currently working on the background music of his next release (working title: *Swapno Holeo Sotti*). “I have been making the film for a year now. It is a Gen Z story about a struggling actress confronted with a dilemma,” he says.

When Chowdhury quit his tech industry job in 2018 and returned to Kolkata, he made web shows to sustain himself because film assignments were difficult to come by. “Now I do not make web shows anymore,” he says. Irrespective of how their films fare, these filmmakers are going all in.

REFLECTING REALITY Sudipta Laha is the director of *Karon Greece Amader Desh Na Othoba Blue-Black O Transparent White*, a self-reflexive film about the doubts and misgivings that assail a young filmmaker. The fictional filmmaker has long conversations with a seasoned and sorted painter who hasn’t sold a single artwork in his life nor participated in an exhibition but has no regrets whatsoever.

The exploration of creativity and its purpose and struggles, says Laha, stems from questions swirling in his own mind. “The meta narrative is natural,” he says. “I can never make a film that is entirely imaginary. It has to reflect my lived reality.”

The character of the stoic painter in *Karon Greece Amader Desh Na...* is modelled on real-life artist Umashankar Bhuiyan. Similarly, the struggle of the filmmaker in the film mirrors what Laha’s own state was during the six or seven years that he spent setting up and making his directorial debut.

Raised in Rasidpur village in Hooghly district, Laha quit a job in the Uttarpara branch of a finance company. “I survived all of eight months,” he quips. It was when he shifted to Uttarpara as a primary school student that he saw V. Shantaram’s *Do Ankhen Barah Haath* and found the images transfixing.

A few years later, while still in school, he watched Mrinal Sen’s *Interview*. As his cinematic universe expanded, he saw more and more of Sen and other masters, which strengthened his resolve to become a filmmaker himself.

Laha cut his teeth with a couple of short films that employed rough and ready methods. “They were very, very bad but I learnt a lot from the experience. I figured out that writing was at the heart of filmmaking,” he says.

Laha’s first feature film, which is unlike any Bengali audiences have ever seen, has been hailed by critics but the box-office returns have been paltry.

“I shot *Greece Amader Desh Na...* Dogme 95 style (that follows a manifesto formulated by a group of avant-garde Danish filmmakers in 1995) in natural light. I wanted the film to possess a certain rawness,” the young filmmaker explains.

Would he look at the possibility of travelling with the film and doing shows for different audiences? “What has been done with *Nadharer Bhela* is praiseworthy, no doubt, but I cannot say if this model has a future. One swallow doesn’t a summer make,” argues Laha.

Laha began shooting his next film in September. “It is a relationship drama involving a 45-year-old man and two women, one aged

the keys to,” says Raja Ghosh. “I started writing a script although I had no training in scriptwriting. Once I was ready with a draft, I approached actress Amrita Chattopadhyay with a plan to make a short film. She suggested that I should make a feature-length film.”

The plot of *Chabiwala* — *The Keysmith* centres on a keysmith who is in love with the daughter of a Muslim village headman. Because of the class and religious differences between the two, the girl is married off to a man in Kolkata.

The keysmith, played by theatre actor and director Kaushik Kar, travels to the city every day with the box containing his key-making



Sudipta Laha, director of 'Karon Greece Amader Desh Na Othoba Blue-Black O Transparent White'

‘The meta narrative is natural. I can never make a film that is entirely imaginary. It has to reflect my lived reality,’ says Laha.

35, the other 30 to 32. This, too, will be a film within a film about a filmmaker,” he adds. It will be in Bengali and will be bankrolled by a Mumbai producer with a Bollywood actor in the lead.

LOOKING WITHIN Turning the gaze inwards is also what debutant Raja Ghosh did in *Chabiwala* — *The Keysmith*. The film germinated when, while clicking photographs on Rafi Ahmed Kidwai Street in central Kolkata, he met an elderly keysmith, Ikram Ali. The would-be filmmaker asked the man: Do you make all kinds of keys? The old man’s reply: Yes, I make keys for everything, for doors, for almirahs, and for hearts and minds too.

“That set me thinking about the internal locks that we humans have and struggle to find

tools, his mind set on finding the woman he loved and lost.

In the big city, he meets a washed-out writer (Subhasish Mukherjee), who keeps losing the keys to doors and cupboards even as his creative juices dry up and he struggles to put pen to paper.

The production wasn’t smooth sailing for the determined outlier. “We shot in fits and starts for 24 days. The shoot got discontinued several times for want of funds,” says Raja Ghosh. “Even during post-production, we were in and out of seven sound studios for the same reason.”

For his next film, he is toying with several ideas, one of which nearly found a producer. The project stalled when the director was told to make the film in Hindi. “I am now looking for funding from somebody who will agree to invest in a Bengali film,” he says.

He, too, is looking at the makers of *Nadharer Bhela* and *Adamyia* as beacons of hope. “What is being done by Pradiptada is certainly inspirational. And *Adamyia* has also shown us a way forward,” says Raja Ghosh.

So, is there sustainable life beyond the multiplexes, and unshackled from ensconced film production practices, in West Bengal? The aforementioned directors will not die wondering. They are giving it their best shot. ■

Gossip makes world go round



**DELHI
DARBAR**

SANJAYA BARU

WHEN the editor of this publication invited me to write a monthly column, he suggested that it be titled ‘Delhi Darbar’ and that I comment on events from the perspective of the national capital on issues of interest to his readers in civil society. Most of what is published in this journal is a view of development from below. My remit was to offer a view from above.

This week I bring to you a most interesting development in what has come to be known as ‘Lutyens’ Delhi’ — the region within a radius of a kilometre or so around what is now called the Central Vista. Lutyens’ Delhi has suddenly woken up to the revival of political gossip.

Gossip is an important and defining feature of all political capitals. Indeed, from time immemorial kings and queens have sought gossip from the street from the hangers-on at the darbar. Court jesters often made use of the freedom they enjoyed to discretely part with gossip for the benefit of the monarch. During my time in the Prime Minister’s Office I would refer to myself as the court jester whose job was to carry meaningful gossip to the PM. Prime Minister Manmohan Singh was quite welcoming of my initiative to carry street gossip to him. He would even enjoy hearing some of the stuff picked up from journalists about his colleagues and himself.

Since my media career began as a business and economics journalist I used to often say deprecatingly that political journalism was little more than gossip. It took me some time to realize that gossip is the stock in trade for political journalists because a careless remark made by some functionary of the State often turns out to be the seed that bears fruit in the form of an interesting, if speculative, story. A news story then acquires a life of its own.

For decades, political parties have been sieves through which interesting news stories would slip onto front pages and television news. The Congress party was always a treasure

trove of gossip. The Bharatiya Janata Party too was no different during Atal Bihari Vajpayee’s time. If the likes of M.L. Fotedar and Jairam Ramesh were the Congress’s sources of gossip, Arun Jaitley and Pramod Mahajan were the BJP’s. Journalists loved them and courted them because they offered good stories.

After joining the PMO I very soon learnt the art of letting out news in the form of casual gossip. Clever hacks would pick up the trail and a news report would soon be born. Every scoop, as they say, begins as a plant.

This media merry-go-round ended with the arrival of Narendra Modi in Lutyens’ Delhi. As chief minister in Gujarat he ran a tight ship and brought that culture to New Delhi. Very



Stories about: Amit Shah vs Yogi Adityanath and more

Leaks dried up under Modi. But when a few thousand cockroaches mocked the powerful the gossip dam burst.

early in his term a story circulated in the media that someone from the PM’s office had called minister Piyush Goyal, who was at the time in the airport, waiting to board a flight, and suggested to him that as a Union minister he ought to be properly attired and not turn up in public in blue jeans and T-shirt.

This story has never been denied or confirmed. One does not know if this really took place. The purpose of circulating this bit of gossip may well have been to warn one and all that the PMO has its eyes and ears everywhere. And its circulation had its intended effect. Suddenly, the government and the ruling party stopped leaking stories.

Journalists were bereft of sources and of news, not to mention gossip. The favoured ones were fed officially approved stuff that often sounded bizarre and plain silly. Officially approved gossip has little value.

All this changed suddenly in the summer of 2026 when a few thousand cockroaches walked the streets of Lutyens’ Delhi and posted memes and videos on social media mocking the powerful. It reminded many of the famous Hans Christian Andersen story, ‘The Emperor’s New Clothes’. The gossip dam burst and a flood of political gossip began to gush down Raisina Hill.

Speculation about a cabinet reshuffle, the perennial gossip-based news story of political journalists, started figuring in prime-time newscasts. We learnt that Union Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman and Commerce and Industries Minister Piyush Goyal were rarely on good terms. At one point the PM had to ask them to stop quarrelling. It reminded me of the stories around the tension between P. Chidambaram and Kamal Nath.

Social media has many political journalists now telling us who is up and who is down. What is happening between Amit Shah and Yogi Adityanath. That Maharashtra Chief Minister Devendra Fadnavis is RSS supremo Mohan Bhagwat’s favoured candidate for PM. There are even those who suggest that all is not well between the top two. The minister-in-waiting to be PM is the external affairs minister. Why do you think Taranjit Singh has been made Lt. Governor of Delhi and allowed to have a more prominent media profile than Chief Minister Rekha Gupta? The gossip mill says: because he’s been put there as a potential replacement for the current Sikh minister.

Sure, all this is gossip. And this is gossip that I have picked up staying at home. I rarely step out and the only place I end up visiting is the India International Centre. That place used to be a fountain of gossip during the days when Arun Jaitley and friends gathered for tea. Today’s members have no clue what’s happening in the corridors of power. If this is the gossip I pick up sitting at home, there must be more that journalists in the field are aware of. Hopefully, Lutyens’ Delhi will come alive once more with juicy political gossip. ■

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 need to question



**LOOKING
AHEAD**

KIRAN KARNIK

AT the recent convocation of IIT-Delhi, Prime Minister Narendra Modi said, ‘The youth should question things that are accepted without a thought.’ Few things are as important as this for the future of our country. It is the young who will take the country forward in the years to come, and it is their intellectual capability which will be a prime determinant in our competitive standing amongst other countries. Prosperity, sustainability, and people’s overall well-being — even the country’s military and soft power — will depend on our cognitive capital.

New technologies and their rapid diffusion — among nations as well as within each country — have led to lower asymmetries. The first industrial revolution gave the leaders a head-start of many decades over others. India, for example, missed the bus and lost a century or more of economic growth and technological development. Now, to stretch the analogy, buses arrive at greater frequency: those who are left behind can get the next bus sooner, reducing the gap to possibly a couple of decades. Further, those who are smart can get the bus to go faster, thus possibly beginning to catch up with the leaders in less than a decade, at least in a few areas. In most areas of technology, ‘smarter’ and faster will be made possible through intellectual capability.

Cognitive capital, in years to come, will be the critical factor as machines and artificial intelligence (AI) become less of a differentiator. Competition between companies and amongst nations will increasingly be about intellectual capability and not about faster algorithms or bigger data centres. It will not be so much about which LLM (Large Language Model) is larger, or whose AI assistant is better. All these are undoubtedly important, but the crux will lie in who more beneficially uses these tools and what gains — economic or other — accrue. This, in turn, will depend on how clever combinations of human+AI are devised, and on prompts that can make the best use of AI capabilities.

This calls for critical thinking, innovation, and imagination: capabilities that are

developed by questioning. The conventional education system is an antithesis of this. It is based on rote learning; in the classroom, students are expected to keep eyes and ears open, but mouth tightly shut, and questions are actively discouraged. Strict hierarchies — whether in the home, where elders call the shots, or at the workplace where the ‘boss’ generally makes unilateral decisions — make it natural to take or give orders, rather than to discuss and debate. If many people yet develop critical thinking capabilities and are innovative, it is despite the system.

As we seek to accelerate economic growth and move to the next orbit of overall development, the capabilities of our human resources base will be the driving force. AI and other emerging technologies dictate this, as do work and employment opportunities. Routine, repetitive, and standardized jobs —



Economic growth is linked to cognitive capital

whether in a factory or office — based on clear rules, defined processes, or straightforward logic, will be increasingly automated, and better handled by AI, with little need for a human. It is jobs that require judgement, contextual knowledge, and innovative or critical thinking that will be the domain of humans or human-plus-machine combinations.

Therefore, the education and work systems must facilitate more questions and critical thinking. Differences in thought, dissent, and debate must be encouraged. Learning and experience must enable you to answer questions, but equally it must teach you to question the answers. It is only this that will spur innovation and even invention, the springboards for progress and rapid development.

Yet, the ambience today is one in which criticism or dissent in any form is strongly discouraged. Dissenters are branded as negative, anti-development, even anti-national and troll armies unleashed on them. Listening

to alternative views is practically banned, with organized protesters demonstrating against talks by well-known academics and writers. This has gone so far as to bar stand-up comedians!

In all cases, groups known for violence threaten or actually organize a protest. The police, out of deference to powers-that-be or fearful of possible violence, take the easy route of telling the organizers to call off the talk or event, sometimes themselves refusing permission for it. This is so common and frequent that examples are redundant. As for criticism, without it how can critical thinking be developed? If at all anything is deterring development and is against the interests of the country, it is this clamp-down on dissent and criticism.

Possibly leaders (of whichever political party is in power, at state and Central levels) want no questions. They would like all citizens to be obedient — similar to those British soldiers who unquestioningly marched into an ambush in 1854, immortalized in Lord Alfred Tennyson’s lines: ‘Theirs not to make reply, Theirs not to reason why, Theirs but to do and die.’ In this context, it is noteworthy that the Supreme Court judge, Justice Ujjal Bhuyan, talked of tolerance and dissent being essential in a democracy and part of our constitutional rights. ‘The right to question...is an expression of citizenship, liberty and constitutional responsibility,’ he said.

Yet, the space for alternative views, differences and dissent is being steadily constricted. Books are being banned and removed from libraries. Having certain books in your home is being used as evidence of ‘anti-national’ activities. School textbooks are being rewritten to eliminate some of our history, create uniformity, and delete alternative interpretations.

The words of the prime minister and of some judges may be insufficient, and apparently — from many court judgments too — current legal and constitutional provisions do not provide sufficient safeguards for diverse thought, dissent, and criticism. It may be time for a specific Right to Question law which clearly spells out a right to dissent, to criticize policies and to question. This is essential for the future of our country and, hopefully, will find support from lawmakers, some of who might want to introduce such a bill in Parliament. ■

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

India's lifestyle crisis



HEALTH DIALOGUE

Dr ALEXANDER THOMAS

INDIA cannot treat its way out of the growing epidemics of diabetes, obesity, hypertension, cardiovascular disease, cancer, mental illness, and other chronic diseases. Prevention must become the foundation of healthcare.

My journey into lifestyle medicine grew out of years of public health policy work in preventive health, nutrition and healthy ageing. It was also driven by the widespread misinformation surrounding diet, exercise, supplements, and healthy living. To address this gap, we wrote *Lifestyle As Medicine: The Science of Healthy Living*, an evidence-based resource developed in collaboration with eminent experts to promote a scientific understanding of lifestyle interventions.

We also organized a landmark national conclave at the Christian Medical College (CMC), Vellore, bringing together leading experts from across India to develop a roadmap for integrating lifestyle medicine into mainstream healthcare. The recommendations from this conclave were submitted to the Government of India (GoI) to support the incorporation of lifestyle medicine into national health policy.

Lifestyle medicine addresses many of today's greatest health challenges, including chronic diseases, mental illness, healthy ageing, rising healthcare costs, and environmental sustainability. It recognizes that nutrition, physical activity, restorative sleep, stress management, emotional well-being, social connections, and environmental health are not simply lifestyle choices but evidence-based therapeutic interventions. Most importantly, these are largely within an individual's control and can be incorporated into everyday life, empowering people to take responsibility for their own health.

India is experiencing a silent epidemic of lifestyle-related diseases that increasingly affects younger populations. Sedentary behaviour, ultra-processed diets, chronic stress, inadequate sleep, social isolation, pollution, unhealthy urban environments, and excessive screen time are driving this crisis. Hospitals alone cannot solve these problems.

A fundamental challenge is that healthcare

systems continue to prioritize treatment over prevention. High-cost procedures and medications receive far greater investment than nutrition counselling, behavioural interventions, physical activity promotion, and community-based preventive care. This imbalance is neither medically nor economically sustainable. Without greater investment in prevention, healthcare costs will continue to rise while population health steadily declines.

Lifestyle medicine must therefore move beyond wellness programmes and become an integral part of mainstream healthcare. Primary Health Centres and family physicians should routinely provide evidence-based nutrition counselling, obesity prevention, tobacco and alcohol cessation support, exercise prescriptions, mental health services,



Lifestyle medicine should be part of national policy

Without investing in prevention, healthcare costs will continue to rise while population health steadily declines.

sleep counselling, and healthy ageing guidance alongside conventional medical care.

Medical education must also evolve. While students receive excellent training in diagnosing and treating disease, there is comparatively little emphasis on nutrition science, exercise medicine, behavioural psychology, sleep health, and preventive care. Future healthcare professionals must be equipped not only to treat illness but also to preserve health.

Schools and workplaces are equally important because they shape lifelong health behaviours. Childhood obesity, physical

inactivity, poor nutrition, excessive screen time, and stress are emerging as major public health concerns. Through collaboration with the Food Future Foundation, efforts are underway to introduce evidence-based lifestyle medicine and nutrition education into school curricula and undergraduate medical training, helping create a culture of prevention from an early age.

India also possesses a rich heritage of healthy dietary practices, physical activity, yoga, mindfulness, and strong community traditions. When rigorously evaluated through scientific research and responsibly integrated with modern medicine, these practices can make a valuable contribution to preventive healthcare.

Lifestyle medicine is equally critical for healthy ageing. Preventing frailty, sarcopenia, falls, obesity, diabetes, cardiovascular disease, and cognitive decline enables older adults to maintain independence, improve quality of life, and reduce healthcare costs. In support of this vision, the newly-established Association for Healthy Ageing (developed in collaboration with Vayah Vikas, the Dementia India Alliance, and the Indian Institute of Science's longevity initiatives) is advancing healthy ageing as a key pillar of preventive healthcare.

Lifestyle medicine also aligns closely with climate and planetary health. Sustainable diets, active transport, green urban spaces, cleaner air, and environmentally responsible lifestyles improve both human health and environmental sustainability. In this way, lifestyle medicine serves as a bridge between preventive healthcare and climate action.

For policymakers, lifestyle medicine extends well beyond the health sector. It influences economic productivity, education, food systems, urban planning, environmental sustainability, workforce participation, and social equity. Few public health strategies have the potential to improve population health, reduce healthcare expenditure, and advance sustainable development simultaneously.

The future of healthcare will not be determined solely within hospitals. It will be shaped in homes, schools, workplaces, and communities, where health is created long before disease requires treatment. If India is to achieve a healthier, more productive, and more sustainable future, lifestyle medicine and prevention must become central pillars of national health policy. ■

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

The creation of bias



LINES OF SIGHT

SHYAM TEKWANI

I have before me half a dozen reports about the death of Shivcharan Ram Ratan Gupta in an old-age home at Sonipat. In one he is 74, in another 78. He had lived at the home for 18 months, nearly two years or three years, depending on the account. One says that his daughters lived in Nepal, Uttar Pradesh and Mumbai, while another manages to place all three in Mumbai.

These discrepancies are not important. A man's age is often reported wrongly, and "three years" may simply mean "a longish time". But they are worth noticing because the reports, though uncertain about things which could have been checked, were in complete agreement about those which could not.

They knew that Gupta had longed to see his daughters, that the daughters had no time for him, and that their conduct illustrated the decay of family life in India.

The ascertainable facts seem to be these. Gupta died after a prolonged illness. His daughters did not come to Sonipat. Employees of the home and local residents performed the last rites while the daughters watched over a video call. One daughter sent ₹5,100 towards the expenses.

Whether the daughters behaved badly I do not know. Neither, so far as I can discover, did anyone who wrote about the case. This did not prevent nearly everyone from writing as though the question had been settled.

Most of the information came from one man, the administrator of the home. A video circulated on social media. From this material half a dozen news organizations produced much the same account.

This is a common illusion of modern journalism. If six reports repeat a statement made by one man, the reader feels that it has six sources. Six clocks set by the same inaccurate clock do not give six independent measurements of the time.

The headlines did most of the work. *The Tribune* announced that a man who had spent his life educating his daughters died while "his girls" watched by video call. NDTV and the *Times of India* led on daughters who skipped the funeral and requested a recording. *India Today* put daughters, the video call and ₹5,100 in its headline. The *Free Press Journal* went

further and began with a curse: "*Aise bachhe kisike na ho*"— may no one have children like these. One word appeared in all these headlines: daughters.

A headline is supposed to tell you what happened. Here the headlines told you what to feel about what happened. By the first sentence, the daughters were already in the dock.

The fact that they were daughters was essential to the story. Nearly every account mentioned that Gupta had no sons, that he had spent his earnings educating the three girls, and that two became teachers. These were not merely identifying details. They were entries in an account.

If the absent children had been sons, there might have been no less indignation. But it is doubtful whether the reports would have repeated that their father had paid for their education. A man is expected to educate his sons and normally receives no special credit



for doing so. To educate daughters can still be described as a sacrifice for which repayment is expected.

There is an odd rule at work here. A daughter is expected to leave her father's household when she marries, but is condemned if she appears to have left it too completely. She must belong elsewhere without becoming distant, and become independent without ceasing to be beholden. The reports had only to place an educated father, three successful daughters and an unattended funeral in the same paragraph. The reader would do the rest.

There is a curious little point on the NDTV page. Near the top is a summary labelled "AI-generated, newsroom-reviewed". This is commendably frank. A few lines below, in the human-written report, one reads that Gupta "longed to see his three daughters".

No source is given. Perhaps Gupta did long to see them. The machine's contribution is labelled; the journalist's guess is not.

Then there is the video. *India Today* reports

that a daughter asked how much longer the cremation would take and added that they had to eat and bathe. Other accounts give only the question about the time and the answer that another 10 or 15 minutes remained. The published transcriptions differ.

I have not heard a complete, authenticated recording, and I suspect that most of those who condemned the daughter had not heard one either. Even if the words were spoken, we do not know what preceded them or what practical or ritual arrangements lay behind the question. A fragment of conversation is not a character reference.

But it was exactly the fragment the story required. Detached from its surroundings, it ceased to be a question and became an admission of guilt.

None of this requires a direct lie. A man died. His daughters were absent. They watched through a phone. Money was transferred and a recording requested. Each statement may be true. The deception, if that is the word, lies in the selection and arrangement.

Select five facts, omit the surrounding history, add an adjective or two, and a character emerges. "Absent" becomes "ungrateful", "asked" becomes "demanded", and "could not come" becomes "refused". The reader is not ordered to condemn. She is merely shown the facts in the correct order for condemnation.

Later the reports said that the case had "sparked a debate" about the abandonment of elderly parents and the decline of Indian values. This is rather like striking a match and then reporting the fire as a spontaneous event. The debate had been prepared in the headlines.

It is possible that the daughters behaved callously. It is also possible that the family had a history which none of the reporters knew. Families contain debts and injuries which cannot be reconstructed from the final afternoon of one member's life. Death silences the dead, but it does not make the survivors transparent.

The task of the news media is not to acquit the daughters or prosecute them. It is to say what is known, who says it, and where knowledge ends.

A camera can show that three women were on a phone screen and not beside the pyre. It cannot show why they were absent or what they felt as they watched. Once journalism claims to see those things, it may still possess facts, photographs, headlines and an AI-generated summary but it no longer possesses news. It possesses a moral tale. ■

As a photo journalist, Shyam Tekwani covered Sri Lanka's civil war embedded in the LTTE. Currently he is a professor and columnist specialising in security affairs.

Charm of a Goan-style house

Red oxide floors, oyster shell windows, tiled roof

ANITA ANAND

I've moved. Again. In January 2025, my husband and I moved from Delhi-NCR to Goa. We had lived in the house we built in 2004 for 20 years. It was a big move, but we managed it well with some planning and help from professional packers and movers, along with family and friends.

I've moved 26 times, living in homes in India, the US and Italy. For me, moving brings both excitement and trepidation. Excitement because it's a new place and an opportunity to recreate my environment. Trepidation because of the work involved in moving, resettling and infrastructure challenges.

A week before we moved, I looked out of the windows of my last home and asked myself: Will I miss this view? The waving banana plants, the coconut trees, the betelnut palms, the rice fields in the distance, the mango tree that peeps into the bedroom window, and the long view from one of the kitchen windows, over the sink? Can I live without daily access to a swimming pool?

The house we moved into is an old standalone Goan house, restored by the owner in a simple, charming way. When I saw the house advertised as a rental, I was drawn to the oyster-shell windows (which keep out the heat while letting in the light) and the deep-red floors. I first encountered such windows in the Philippines in 1986 and fell in love with them. The next year, I saw them again in Goa during a visit.

I have long admired the red oxide floors of traditional homes, a durable, eco-friendly flooring option that combines red oxide pigment with cement to create a smooth, earthy, and cooling surface, suitable for both modern and traditional homes. I'm not sure if this house has a red oxide floor or its tiles painted over, red. But, I like it.

In my subsequent and frequent visits to Goa, I have lusted after such homes and longed to live in them.

Friends dissuaded me, saying it would require too much maintenance, be a hassle to replace the tiled roofs, which would be destroyed by the annual monsoon rains, and contend with the never-ending seepage, mould, dust mites and other challenges.



It is small, compact and charming. We are getting used to the eccentricities of old homes.



So, my husband and I, after seeing multiple bleak apartments, opted to stay in a standalone villa in a complex of 34 other villas, built just ten years ago, all surrounding a swimming

pool. It worked well. We were happy. The neighbours were a good mix of professionals. There was a sense of community.

However, the landlord sold the villa, as he had told us he planned to, and we had a good 19 months there. While we had invested in an apartment being developed by an architect friend in Goa, I expressed my reservations to my husband as it neared completion; I couldn't see myself living there. It was smaller than most places we've lived in over almost 35 years. Its advantages were that it was well-designed, had state-of-the-art technology, was easy to maintain, and was one of six apartments sharing a common swimming pool. We were to be on the second floor, with a lift in the building.

I suggested to my husband that we should try to live in a Goan-style home, as it was my heart's desire. I had told myself many years ago that as I aged, I should prioritize what mattered to me. I didn't plan on dying in an apartment!

My husband agreed, and I found the house online. It's small, compact and charming. It has a veranda where we can sit out, facing a small

garden that opens into a wooded area. It has generously sized rooms and red floors. It has an attic that can be used creatively for various purposes. The kitchen is the heart of the house, with space for people to hang out, giving the cooks room and allowing for eating and drinking at the same time. Perfect.

It's an unfurnished house, so our many items have fitted in well. We had to procure beds, wardrobes, a refrigerator and a stovetop hob. We gave away the beds we used in Delhi because the landlord of the villa in Goa couldn't move his beds.

We had to get a gas connection, as we were using the previous landlord's. Fortunately, the new landlord was kind enough to suggest we take one of their beds and use the gas cylinders, as their furniture was going into storage for about two years.

My husband and I had discussed the new house, how we would use it and where we would put what. It was exciting to imagine a new home where we could build on what we've had in our present and previous homes and improve on them.

We are enjoying the old-fashioned doors and cupboards that the owner restored. It's fun deciding what goes where. We've had a Bastar artwork since 1993 and have put it on the outer wall of the house, as it's a bit difficult to find. We put up a wind chime on the veranda that had been dormant for the past 18 months.

We set up seating areas in different rooms, and here's one we love. We have our coffee here, looking into the long kitchen.

Now, in the new home, (see picture) we are a little over a week old. With the help of a dynamite husband-and-wife team, Makhbool and Farzana, we have a handyman and someone to unpack, sort, and clean. Anand, the gardener, is much, much more than that. The electrician and plumber have been in and out, helping us deal with the multiple challenges of an old home.

We are getting used to windows that don't shut properly, rusted latches, and other eccentricities of older homes. But we chose it, so we accept it.

I like the idea of moving because it keeps me from getting stodgy or stuck in my ways. It's an opportunity to create a new environment, see the world through different eyes, and make new acquaintances and friends. In all 27 homes I have lived in, I haven't regretted any of the moves.

I sit at the computer writing this, watching the pink allamanda in a cup of water, to my left. The bloom falls from the tree by the blue gate at the side of the house. On my right is a cup of hot water with honey. Above the computer monitor, a sea of green. Outside, it's raining, and the sound of raindrops is comforting and reassuring.

We are happy in our new home and look forward to many good times. ■

TIBETAN TOUCH

Tibetan craft, culture and spirituality were celebrated at the Spirit of Tibet festival, held in New Delhi over September 3-5. We bring you a glimpse.



Dolls with an identity

Karma is a smart-looking male doll, a Tibetan with a *chupa* tied around his waist. Gaitri is a pretty Himachali doll with a scarf wrapped around her head. Take your pick from Dolls4Tibet, a social enterprise that makes a variety of eco-friendly dolls with sheep's wool, cloth, thread and needle. There are Gaddi couple dolls, mini-dolls, stuffed animals dressed like humans and more.

Each doll has a name and represents a distinct culture. This whimsical collection with its array of doll characters will warm the heart of any little child.

Dolls4Tibet is managed and run by Tibetan women. The enterprise helps the women to become financially independent. Prices start from ₹1,000 upwards. Interested buyers can also visit Dolls4Tibet at their workshop in hilly Dharamsala.

Contact: Phone: +91 9816374389 | +91 9882604879. Address: Session Rd (near Kashmir House Hotel), Kotwali Bazaar, Dharamsala, Himachal Pradesh - 176215 Website: dolls4tibet.com/contact-us



The spiritual jewel box

In search of spirituality? Wear a bit of Yue Jhuru jewellery. It's a handcrafted, unisex artisanal brand that seamlessly fuses ancient Buddhist teachings with contemporary, minimalist designs. After all, your choice of jewellery depicts not just your style sense but, in many ways, your culture as well.

And so it is with Yue Jhuru, which means turquoise and coral. It's a combination which signifies balance and harmony between earth and sky. The enterprise has an objective: to conserve Tibetan traditions, its timeless philosophy, and ancestral heritage.

Crafted with sterling silver, Yue Jhuru's range includes necklaces named Impermanence, Dharma Wheel, and Pata (the eternal knot). Also available is a range of earrings.

Yue Jhuru's jewellery line is sold online in the Ngatso Tibetan Store.

You can also explore their collection on their Instagram page.

Contact: Phone / Orders: +91 8130562758; Instagram handle: [instagram.com/yuejhuru](https://www.instagram.com/yuejhuru)

Freedom in your hand

Wear your cause on your sleeve with bracelets made by Tibetan Nuns Project (TNP), a non-profit which educates and empowers nuns of the Tibetan Buddhist tradition.

The nuns make several products including freedom bracelets with black and white cotton yarn. Each bracelet comes with a card detailing its historical significance.

The bracelet signifies your support for the Tibetan cause. The design for the bracelet was first created by Tibetan political prisoners near Lhasa. It was a form of silent protest after they were jailed for participating in the 1959 uprising against Chinese occupation. Each bracelet is priced at ₹1,200.

The bracelets are a source of livelihood for refugee nuns living in India, supporting their basic needs like education, food, and healthcare.

Website: <https://tnp.org/contact/>; address: Tibetan Nuns Project, c/o Dolma Ling Nunnery, P.O. Sidhpur - 176057, Dist. Kangra, Himachal Pradesh



Tracking Hoysala's unusual legacy

RASHMI GOPAL RAO

THREE splendiferous Hoysala temples are already on the UNESCO World Heritage list. Each is delightfully artistic. Why go on a *yatra* to dig out more? That's what Shashidhara H.G., a financial consultant with a yen for history, did. Surprisingly, he discovered a swathe of Hoysala temples, as many as 1,500, with some startling features.

After years of research and footslogging he has now published a book, *The Hoysala Heritage*, in two volumes. Here are a few snippets which underline why the temples captivated him.

The Doddagaddavalli Mahalakshmi temple is the only temple with four shrines. It was built not by royalty but by a rich merchant in what would be Maharashtra today. Back then it was part of the Hoysala empire.

Then there's the Hiriyuru Kunjeshvara temple. Built by a rich merchant of Keralam in the name of his son who had passed away, it has a zodiac wheel with 12 suns and 12 zodiac signs carved on it. Local villagers use it to predict the future, based on the shadow of the wheel. And the Arasikere Shiva Temple, on the other hand, is the only temple with a domed entrance hall.

The three UNESCO-tagged Hoysala temples are Hoysaleswara in Halebid, the Chennakesava temple in Belur and the Keshava temple in Somanathapura in Karnataka. The temples Shashidhara has tracked down and studied are scattered across the state.

"My journey into Hoysala temples started in 2015 when I first visited the Keshava temple in Somanathapura. I was amazed to witness the spectacular architecture and this piqued my interest," says Shashidhara who has a master's degree in ancient history and archaeology.

He started collecting information on other Hoysala temples by poring over books, research papers and journals including the famous *Epigraphia Carnatica* volumes. Within a year, he had compiled information on more than 100 temples.

"Today my count of Hoysala temples is over 1,500 and I have identified close to 90 percent



The Haranahalli Lakshminarasimha temple in Arasikere taluk, Hassan district



Hulikere tank in Belur taluk is ringed by artful structures

of them with the help of Google coordinates," he says.

Shashidhara made it a habit to note down his research and publish his findings as weekly articles. "I initially published these articles on social media. Many readers started requesting me to publish all this in a book which would be useful for students, historians, tourists and anyone who is a history and heritage enthusiast," he adds.

With support from stalwarts like the historian and epigraphist, Dr H.S. Gopal Rao, he finally published both volumes of *The Hoysala Heritage* this June.

Co-authored by historian Shankara Ajjampura, each volume covers 50 Hoysala temples in great detail. The books start with an introduction to the Hoysala empire and how the dynasty ruled parts of Karnataka from 950 CE. The rulers were not just able administrators but patrons of architecture and sculpture and hence built several elaborate temples.

The book traces the evolution of the Hoysala school of architecture and how it differed in the states of Karnataka and Tamil Nadu. The nuances of sculptural style, intricate craftsmanship and the temple plan, including the star-shaped plan, the circumambulatory path and sanctum sanctorum are noteworthy.

There are explanations on how the deity installation follows specific patterns according to the temple style and sect, depending on whether it is a Vaishnava temple, Shaiva temple or a Jain Basadi.

The temples in both volumes are segregated according to district and include those in Bengaluru, Hassan, Mysuru, Shivamogga, Tumkuru, Chitradurga, Mandya, Chikkamagaluru and Davanagere districts of Karnataka. Also covered is a temple in Tiruchirappalli district of Tamil Nadu.

It is this compilation that makes the book a treasure house for travel enthusiasts and history lovers, as a visit to a particular region would ensure that they would visit most of the temples located there.

Since not much is known about this cluster of temples, the effort put in by Shashidhara to document every detail is of great value. Each temple has a chapter dedicated to it and has elaborate, authenticated information about its location, history and architecture along with epigraphical details and even folk stories, if any, associated with it.

There are also details on the present condition of the temple and a QR code for its Google location at the end. This is particularly useful for readers who intend to visit.

"Students, professors, history lovers, explorers, YouTubers and NGOs have started using these volumes as self-explanatory guides. Youth groups and NGOs have taken the initiative to clean many of the temple premises and are also taking up proposals for their renovation with the concerned departments," says Shashidhara, who is coordinating with the government to create awareness and initiate conservation measures.

"Many interested readers have already visited several of these temples with the help of location QR codes," adds Shashidhara.

The two volumes will be available on Amazon and Flipkart shortly. ■

A toast to Kolkata's Chinese

AIEMA TAUHEED

STEP inside the Sea Voi Yune Leong Futh Church, built by Chinese migrants in 1908. It's just a few steps from Sei Vui restaurant on Blackburn Lane in Toretta Bazaar, once the nucleus of the Chinese community.

Inside is the newly opened Cheenapara Heritage Gallery in one room. Red Chinese lanterns hang from the ceiling, their golden light casting a warm, lambent glow over photographs. There are around 20 objects here which depict different aspects of Chinese life in Kolkata, religious, occupational and quotidian.

"The community is fading. And we're getting older. So, there has to be something that remembers us. The young are not coming forward," says Yao Hua Chen, 72, president of the All India Chinese Association.

These storied objects belong to Yao, to his friends and their clubs. They were happy to give them for the gallery. Yao has also asked the community not to throw away old objects or other remnants of the past, but to donate them to the gallery. There are no fixed timings to visit the gallery as yet.

The lead organizations who helped set up the gallery are the CHA Project, a design studio based in Singapore, and the Calcutta Chapter of INTACH (Indian National Trust for Art and Cultural Heritage). Urban conservationist Kamalika Bose reached out to Yao Hua Chen, who in turn sounded the community. Sohini Pyne curated and designed the project while historian Tansen Sen provided the historical context.

The small Chinese community, reduced to just 2,000 now, feels very proud of the newly opened museum, says Yao, who initially had to use persuasion. He has a background in carpentry and runs an interior decoration company, so he undertook the physical setting up.

The first of three exhibition panels, titled "The Chinese in Kolkata: A Migrant History", traces the beginnings of the Chinese community in India. In 1778, Atchew, who signed his name as Yang Yazhao, was granted land by Governor-General Warren Hastings to establish sugar plantations near the Hooghly. He brought workers from China to labour on the plantations. The second impetus for migration were the Opium Wars which began from 1839.

By the 1930s, two distinct Chinatowns emerged in Kolkata: Toretta Bazaar, mostly inhabited by Cantonese migrants, and Tangra, where Hakka migrants established tanneries. Later waves came from Hubei and Shandong. Today, these neighbourhoods have clubs, Chinese schools, restaurants and other community institutions.

The second panel, "The Tale of Two Chinatowns", traces the evolution of both neighbourhoods. Toretta Bazaar was home to around 2,000 Chinese residents. Different migrant groups established their own schools, shoe stores, newspaper printers and other businesses that served both Chinese and Bengali customers.

Tangra, the second Chinatown which emerged in the early 20th century, became the centre of the tanneries industry. The first tannery was started by one Xiong Hecheng.

The third panel, "Finding Niche Economic Specialisations", underscores the many trades in which the Chinese community found its footing. Cantonese carpenters furnished trains, theatres and docks. The Hakka community were expert shoemakers and tanners, the Hubeinese were teeth setters, and people from Shandong became traders.

Four racks behind glass display tools and wares from such trades. There are sauce bottles from Pou Chong along with a menu card, and carpentry tools, once used by Yao. Dental instruments have been donated by Yao's dentist friend, Christopher Hsue, and shoemaking tools by another friend, David Chen.

"Lower Chitpur road till Bentinck Street, it was all shoe shops. Today, barely 10 survive," explains Yao. His own business is limping along.

"Most of the Chinese community have moved to Canada," a local visitor chips in.

Another exhibition panel explains the background to the Cheenapara Heritage Gallery, focusing especially on Toretta Bazaar. A hand-painted scroll hangs on the wall. "This is from our village, Siwei, from the Overseas Chinese Association. The chairman presented me this drawing," Yao says proudly.

Alongside there is a note on *huiguans*, important institutions for the Chinese diaspora. They provided lodging, and were places where migrants could meet, resolve conflicts and even pray. Each community set up its own *huiguans*. On Blackburn Lane alone, there were five *huiguans* established by Cantonese migrants from Guangdong province.

A mahjong set under a television shows scenes from Toretta Bazaar. Pointing to a large, ornate vase with colourful peony and artworks, Yao says it was sent to them by the Chinese Consulate in 2008.

Across the room a charcoal portrait of Sun Yat-sen, about a century

Civil Society picture/Ashoke Chakrabarty



A charcoal of Sun Yat-sen catches the eye

old, catches the eye. Facing it is a painting of Mahatma Gandhi. "They were both freedom fighters, one from China and the other from India," Yao says, gazing admiringly at the portraits. One can see cymbals, incense sticks, fortune sticks, a metal bowl and a singing bowl mallet here.

Another section has brilliant photographs of festivities in Chinatown or Cheenapara taken by Bijoy Chowdhury, a documentary photographer based in Kolkata. There are pictures of Lunar New Year celebrations, dragon dances, the Mid-Autumn Festival, the Dragon Boat Festival and many more.

There are also pictures in monochrome of everyday life — scenes of breakfast at Toretta Bazaar, a game of mahjong, an elderly couple seated in a traditional hand-pulled rickshaw, and a momo seller sitting behind her steaming container of momos, and so on. "You see the one where people are playing mahjong? Here, the light is falling overhead from the ceiling. But a mahjong light stand gives light from a more convenient angle. I plan to get it installed here," Yao says enthusiastically.

Under a glass shelf there sits a thick, native-place association membership register, with donations received, a brief history of Ruan-Liang temple, and the results of elections to its board. "The last name here is mine, after I became the president of the club," says Yao, who hopes the gallery will preserve a record of the community's way of life and, for its younger members, a window into the lives their forefathers led. ■

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

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

SAFE Foundation

A grassroots NGO based in Saidabad, Hyderabad, SAFE 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

Nizhal

A Chennai-based non-profit, Nizhal promotes concern for trees. Established in 2005, it advocates sensitive urban greening with a focus on indigenous tree species and

regeneration of local biodiversity. It has a tree helpline where you can report tree abuse and tree-cutting.

Phone: 98841 14721
Website: www.nizhaltn.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

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

Earth Focus

Based in Kanha, Madhya Pradesh, Earth Focus' mission is to empower forest-dwelling communities and restore nature through contextual education and sustainable livelihoods. They leverage indigenous and local knowledge along with scientific and technical knowhow to build ecological and socio-economic resilience.

Phone: 77688 92288
Website: www.earthfocus.in

Kadambagachi Banglar Karusilpa Unnayan Sanstha (KBKUS)

KBKUS empowers women in districts of West Bengal to become financially independent

through rural skill development, self-help groups, jute craft training, and entrepreneurship programmes. Participants learn to use industrial machines, receive business development support and are guided with marketing help and export facilitation.

Phone: 98745 99023
Website: www.kbkus.org.in

Helping Hands Punjab

Established in Punjab, Helping Hands rescues homeless people from roadsides, provides them with shelter and medical care, and supports their journey from unemployment to employment, helping them rebuild their lives with dignity.

Phone: 78884 51139
Website: www.helpinghandspunjab.org

Spriha Society

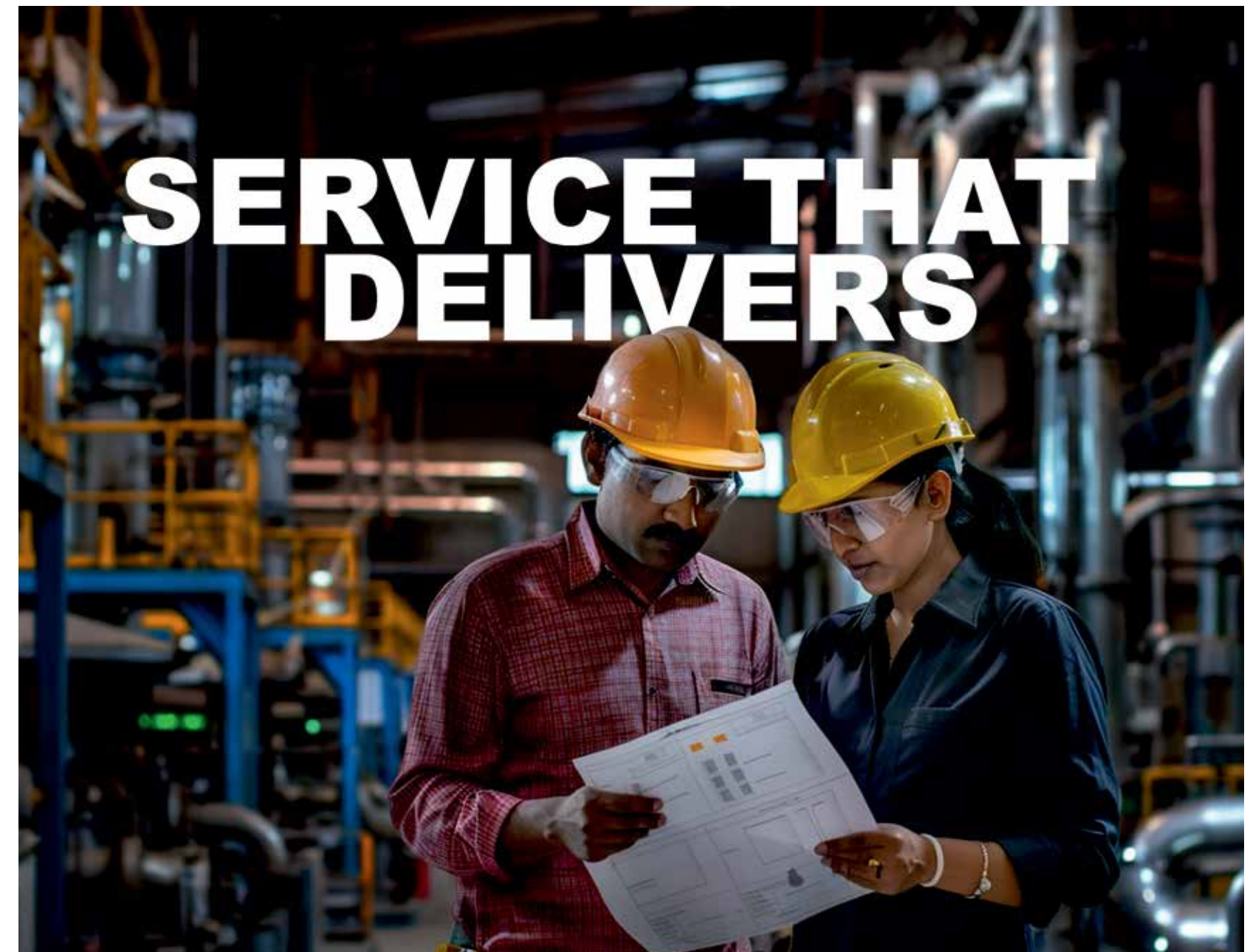
An NGO based in West Bengal, Spriha works to fight period poverty and spread awareness about menstrual health and hygiene. The organization supports women and girls by distributing sanitary pads. Its flagship initiative, Let's Talk About Periods, reaches out to schools to create awareness through discussions that help break stigma. Spriha has, so far, reached over 45 government schools in Kolkata.

Phone: 99037 10722
Website: www.sprihasociety.org

Kherwadi Social Welfare Association (KSWA)

Founded in 1928, Kherwadi Social Welfare Association's flagship movement, Yuva Parivartan, was started in 1998. The organization fills an important void. It has created employment 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



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

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



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Every high-risk pregnancy identified in time is an opportunity to save a life.

Through MANSI+, over **1.44 lakh** high-risk cases among women and children have been identified, with **93%** successfully managed.

In FY2025-26, the programme reached **10.4 lakh** individuals including women, children and adolescents.

Operation Sunshine, a technology-enabled platform under MANSI+, has been bridging healthcare accessibility gaps through real-time tracking, reaching **2,74,572 pregnant women** in FY2025-26.

MANSI Darpan, an innovative self-monitoring tool designed for high-risk pregnant women-reached over **7,280 women**, enabling informed care-seeking and self-care practices.