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Civil Society



UPSURGE FOR DEMOCRACY

Where did 130 m voters go?

Neha Bora, the firebrand AISA president, leans out of a police vehicle on the Safdarjung flyover

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Civil Society
READ US. WE READ YOU.

Fortress Delhi

WHEN police in tens of thousands are deployed to turn Delhi into a fortress it must sadly be inferred that the national government sees itself under siege. How can a country run like this? Where dialogue would have done, roads were closed, trains deferred, the internet blocked and preventive detentions made to prevent the protests called by the Cockroach Janta Party's young leaders. If the government doesn't have the heft and maturity to deal with some sincere young people, can it be relied on to represent our interests in more complex global situations?

An example of the government's paranoia is the way in which it deals with the media. The big newspapers and channels have been made to sing for their supper. Try reading the papers or watching any of the news shows on television — it is difficult to spend more than a few minutes on them with the odd exception.

But, having silenced the big media, the government found that people were getting their information from smaller and independent publications and websites and YouTubers. Solicitor General Tushar Mehta recently lamented in court that anyone and everyone with a microphone and camera was becoming a journalist. He wasn't incorrect and this magazine agrees with him. We live in an era of distributed and empowering technologies. Information will move. So will disinformation which is something the BJP is no stranger to.

It is the responsibility of the government that institutions like the media, judiciary and the Election Commission flourish so that democracy is enriched. But we see the opposite happening. When the cockroach protests began on June 6 newspapers and TV channels ignored them — under instructions, we are told by insiders. It was left to a magazine like ours or a micro initiative like the gutsy Peek TV to tell the story with responsibility. Finally, the agitation itself became the generator of its own news — not the best thing.

This cover story on the cockroach agitation is our fourth one. When we were at the barricades at Jantar Mantar we realized that the support for the CJP has only been growing. The issue of electoral rolls resonates widely with people. The government would do itself a favour by lowering the ramparts of its fortress and engaging with what is being said.

We also bring you in this issue lots of other coverage, ranging from a key interview on global warming to angst over the FCRA bill and what Kashmir's apple growers are up to.



LETTERS



Catching the eye

Many thanks to Saibal Chatterjee for featuring us in your cover story, 'Multiplex Rebellion'. Unfortunately, Pradeep, Amitabh, Abhijit and Raja are working with glasses on. I am the only one taking off my glasses to pose! The story is beautiful.

Ranjan Ghosh

School reform

Thank you for your interview with Kabir Vajpeyi, 'Fixing schools needs more than activism'. Yes, the issues highlighted are all important. However, it is also important to acknowledge that school infrastructure has remained both problematic and controversial. From the days of Operation Blackboard to the District Primary Education Programme (DPEP) to the Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan, a lot of resources have been allocated for infrastructure. In fact, after the Right to Education (RTE) law, basic facilities like buildings, water, toilets, etc. have been "monitored".

More than 30 years of my field-based research has revealed, first, that the quality of what is built is poor and beset by corruption. Second, there is little allocation for maintenance, repair or timely augmentation. Third, the designs approved are "one type suits all", leading to huge cost and material-related problems in many sub-regions like mountain areas, deserts, or regions with heavy rainfall. Neither is local expertise respected. The list is rather long and has remained constant since Operation Blackboard was launched in the late 1980s.

Vimala Ramachandran

Regional comrades

We stand in firm solidarity with the young people of India demanding electoral accountability and defending their democratic rights.

Recent detention of peaceful protesters, organizers and journalists in New Delhi along with internet suspension and restrictions at Jantar Mantar directly threaten fundamental freedoms. Concerns regarding electoral integrity and institutional independence require transparent answers, not barricades and censorship.

This struggle is not yours alone. From Dhaka we stand with you as friends bound by a common demand for accountable power, democratic institutions and human dignity.

We know this struggle intimately because we have lived it. In July 2024 our student-led movement against recruitment quotas transformed into a nationwide uprising against 15 years of authoritarian rule. The State responded with live ammunition. The United Nations later estimated that as many as 1,400 people were killed during the uprising and its suppression. We deeply remember and honour the solidarity shown by Indian students, writers and independent voices during our uprising.

We recognise India's rich traditions of democratic resistance. The women of Shaheen Bagh defended equal citizenship through a Delhi winter, while generations of students at JNU and Jadavpur University have sustained organised dissent.

These remain invaluable democratic inheritances. Today, we once again see the courage of young Indian women on the streets. In Bangladesh, women were also at the forefront of the July Revolution, their courage and sacrifices helped secure our victory.

Hindutva majoritarianism, fascism and every form of religious supremacy must not define the future of South Asia. We reject authoritarianism, communal hatred and intolerance in India just as we reject them in Bangladesh.

Our shared future must rest on communal harmony and social justice irrespective of religion, caste, gender or class. No society is truly democratic while minorities live in fear, dissent is criminalized and citizenship is conditional on identity.

We call upon Indian authorities to respect the right to peaceful assembly, disclose the whereabouts and legal grounds for detaining protest organizers, immediately release those held for exercising their rights and ensure journalists can report without intimidation or equipment seizure.

Today many young leaders have been unjustly detained. Sharjeel Imam and Umar Khalid continue to be kept behind bars for years without trial. We regard all of India's young protesters of conscience as comrades. Their courage inspires young people across South Asia.

Our struggles are interconnected, extending to unresolved issues of border killings, water-sharing, environmental protection and national sovereignty. We seek a South Asia where nations treat each other as equals, governments remain accountable and sovereignty is never an excuse for domination.

To the democratic people of India from Dhaka and from the unfinished democratic aspirations of our July generation, we stand with you.

Inquilab Zindabad.

Moin Khan

IN PASSING FLOWER POWER

Civil Society picture/Umesh Anand



Amid protests at Connaught Place in Delhi, a quiet moment at Gillu Florist

Right to protest

The job of the Delhi Police is not to flatter the government but to protect the law and India's Constitution. The uniform is given for the safety of the people, not for slavery of the government. The real strength of the police lies in its impartiality, honesty and in winning the trust of the people.

Aman Kalsi

In a democratic country every citizen has the right to raise their voice for their rights and for administrative transparency. Youth cannot be silenced by blocking roads or detaining them. Let this fight for justice continue.

Harish Chandra Sardar

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ROXY MATHEW KOLL ON THE IMPACT OF WARMING



Roxy Mathew Koll: 'Urban planning has to treat extreme rainfall, sea-level rise and coastal flooding as basic design conditions'

'Freak weather events are now the new normal'

Civil Society News
New Delhi

THE weather suddenly seems impossible to predict. Whether in urban or rural areas, freak events have been upturning everyday life and causing devastation like never witnessed before. Ferocious downpours, scorching heat waves, imploding glaciers and crumbling mountainsides have wrought havoc and made a mockery of standard disaster management.

No one is quite sure anymore of what's coming. There is a need now to rethink what is known and plan for the unpredictable. It is possible by going beyond mere meteorology to pool expertise drawn from geophysics, hydrology, geology and ecology. Much more savvy and alertness are needed in governance whether in cities and villages in the plains or high up in the fragile mountain states.

We reached out to Roxy Mathew Koll of the Indian Institute of Tropical Meteorology for a perspective on these changing scenarios.

Q: There have been several episodes of freak rainfall, causing disasters in both rural and urban areas. Should we expect more such rainfall going forward? Will it get worse? Will it get better?
This is a question that I get from the public and politicians as well. Will these extreme weather conditions continue into the future? The answer is that it will not only continue, but the frequency, intensity, duration, and the area covered by these events, particularly heatwaves, extreme rainfall, droughts, and cyclones, are increasing for India. The ocean on all three sides and the Himalayas on the north used to be our forte, but not anymore, as they are facing rapid changes, with the Indian Ocean warming the fastest among all the tropical oceans and the Himalayan glaciers melting.

These events will intensify further because carbon emissions continue unabated and uphill. Since carbon dioxide stays in the atmosphere for several hundreds to thousands of years after emission, the damage that we see now will continue into the future. What we can do is to keep it from accelerating further.

As of now, the global mean surface temperatures have increased by about 1.5°C, compared to pre-industrial levels. The extremes that we see now are loaded in response to this global warming. But we are expecting a 2°C increase by 2050, and weather systems worsen with every 0.1 degree.

In terms of rain disasters, I won't call them freak rain events. It may appear freak but that is because our normals have expired. We have moved to a new climate, where extreme rains are the normal. Warmer air holds more moisture, and for a longer time. So it may not rain for several weeks, and when it rains, it dumps all that moisture in a few hours to few days. The way we have built our urban areas, they are mostly covered with concrete, with paltry space for the water to permeate into the ground. This creates both flooding and groundwater depletion, leading to water stress.

Q: It seems as though there is no predictable pattern to the rainfall. Each episode seems to come as a surprise. Have weather conditions become impossible to forecast?
The monsoon in general is predictable, and this year the India Meteorological Department (IMD) had predicted a relatively slow and weak monsoon season for India, in an average sense. But then there is a high variability within the season and across the country. In India, we use state-of-the-art models running on super-computing machines for generating the forecasts. In fact, a lot of this forecasting R&D is done at my institute, the Indian Institute of Tropical Meteorology.

So why is it hard to predict our weather? In the tropics, we have fast-moving, small-scale weather systems and clouds which are hard to simulate with our current weather models. This is why short-scale weather forecasts over India sometimes fail compared to the US and Europe. In the higher latitudes, the weather systems are relatively large and slow-moving, and this movement is more dominated by the rotation of Earth, which increases the predictability.

At the same time, global warming is bringing more heat to the tropics, supercharging the weather systems with the additional heat and moisture, and thereby making it more chaotic and unpredictable.

There is also predictability beyond the immediate weather forecast. Suppose we predicted heavy rains. Will it flood your city or river or house? Will a landslide occur? This needs a chain of models beyond weather forecasting, from hydrology to geology and geophysics to landscape interactions and so on. Who is doing that? It needs different ministries and departments to work together, share data and expertise. At the moment, there is no collective, concerted effort in that direction.

Q: Cities have been hit hard. What should urban areas be prepared for? What is the future of Mumbai, Chennai, and Vizag?
The first thing is that these cities do not face the same climate risk. Mumbai has extreme monsoon rain coming off a rapidly warming Arabian Sea, combined with high tides and rising sea levels. Chennai has a different rainfall season, with northeast monsoon extremes and cyclones from the Bay of Bengal. Visakhapatnam has severe cyclone and storm-surge exposure, along with intense rainfall and steep terrain close to the coast.

But they have one thing in common. We have built (and are still building) cities and their infrastructure considering yesterday's climate.

Drainage capacity, flood lines, building regulations and infrastructure were designed from historical records. Those records are becoming less representative of the climate we are moving into. The flood line of the last 10 years is not necessarily the flood line of the next 10 years.

And climate change is only half the story. We have concretized enormous areas, encroached on floodplains and wetlands, narrowed natural drainage and built very expensive assets in exposed coastal zones. Urban planning now has to treat extreme rainfall, sea-level rise and coastal flooding as basic design conditions, not exceptional events.

'Suppose we predict heavy rains. Will it flood your city, or river or house? Will a landslide occur? This needs a chain of models, beyond weather forecasting, from hydrology to geology and geophysics to landscape interactions.'

Q: What happens in the Himalayas affects the whole subcontinent. Disaster after disaster has struck the mountain states. Are we likely to see more Nepal-like crises?
The Himalayas worry me because several risks come together there. You have intense rainfall, very steep slopes, fragile geology, retreating glaciers, expanding glacial lakes and large river systems flowing downstream to densely populated regions.

A very heavy rainfall event in a plain may cause flooding. Put the same amount of water on a steep Himalayan catchment and you can trigger landslides, debris flows, blocked rivers and sudden downstream floods. One event can cascade into several hazards. And again, climate is only part of the story. Roads cut into unstable slopes, construction is close to rivers, deforestation and rapid urbanization can magnify the damage enormously.

So, yes, we should expect more situations where extreme weather produces cascading disasters across the Himalayan region. The Western Ghats follow a similar trajectory. That makes land-use planning, slope monitoring and catchment-level warning systems as important as the weather forecast itself.

Q: An uneven monsoon also makes the entire farm economy very vulnerable. What is the meteorologist's advice on agricultural policy?
We have to stop looking only at the seasonal rainfall total. A farmer does not experience a seasonal average. The farmer experiences the onset of rain, a three-week dry spell, a cloudburst before harvest, an unusually hot week or a reservoir that does not refill.

So agricultural planning needs to become much more climate-informed and local. Crop calendars, irrigation decisions and farm advisories should use forecasts from the seasonal scale down to the next few weeks and days. We also need crop varieties that can tolerate both heat and water stress, better soil-moisture conservation, water storage and crop choices that make sense for the local water budget.

There is an economic side that is often missed. The impact of a bad monsoon does not end when the monsoon ends. A farmer can enter the following year carrying debt, having sold livestock or exhausted savings. Reservoir shortages and food-price effects can also continue into the next season and next year.

So, resilience has to include credit, insurance and market support alongside better weather information. Climate risk is now a farm-policy issue, not merely a meteorological issue.

On top of all these, it is now possible for us to identify hotspots and plan for the coming decades. We need to disaster-proof our farms. It may be through early warning systems, or using drought- or flood-resilient crops, or having a diverse set of crops that could cushion the impacts. The solutions may vary according to each region or climate hotspot. We need to clearly assess and plan, and bring this to policy as well.

Q: While the weather conditions are worrisome, how much of our situation is of our own making? Do we need another development strategy? Urbanization in the mountains seems to have deleterious consequences.
As I said, climate change is only part of the story. For climate change, we can blame ourselves and our fossil-fuel-thirsty, energy-hungry population all around. But what amplifies this climate change are the local land

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use changes and decisions. Many times an episode of rainfall becomes deadly because we have no more space for the water to flow naturally. The same for heatwaves. We have made urban heat islands, which amplify the heat on a single day (and night) by 5°C or more because the concrete and built-up area is trapping the heat.

We may need further development, and we may not be able to stop it either. What we need is a local climate and environmental assessment before each infrastructure project, and making sure that these projects consider future changes. If we are building an expressway, it has to last for the next 30 to 50 years. Will it, under a strong cyclone or heavy rains? Or will it by itself create floods by blocking water.

'For climate change we can blame ourselves and our fossil-fuel-thirsty, energy-hungry population.'

We saw heavy rains in Lonavala in Maharashtra and Wayanad in Kerala breaking part of the newly built tunnel roads over the hills. This is because we did not consider the potential of extreme heavy rains occuring in this area.

Currently, we have the capacity and data to do such assessments and prepare our infrastructure projects to be future climate resilient. We can do the same with our houses, our farms.

Q: What has been the impact of the super El Niño on coastal areas? What should coastal communities prepare for?
Humid heat, I would say. El Niño raises global temperatures. We had a weak monsoon this year, which also meant more heat and humidity. This will continue into the upcoming seasons. In addition, the cyclone season is coming up, and our seas are warmer than usual, which supports strong cyclones. Watch out for the early forecasts and take precautions. India's cyclone forecasting is excellent.

Q: Disaster management has been getting more funds and attention but would you say prevention and awareness are more necessary?
We are good at responding after major disasters occur. The transition should be to managing a disaster before it strikes. ■

Tougher FCRA creates all-powerful authority

Provisions arbitrary, could lead to taking over of minority assets

Praveena Sharma
Panaji

ONCE again the Central government wants to amend the Foreign Contribution (Regulation) Act (FCRA), citing national security. This time the proposed amendment has met with fierce opposition not just from the non-profit sector but from members of Parliament as well who described the Bill as draconian and targeting minority institutions.

Critics argue that the Bill, introduced in the Lok Sabha on March 25, goes beyond regulating foreign donations. It gives the government greater control over assets and operations created from foreign contributions when an organization's FCRA registration is cancelled, surrendered or lapses.

Cleofato Almeida Coutinho, a senior lawyer, described the proposed amendment as "totally arbitrary". He pointed out that it vests "sweeping powers" in a 'designated authority' — an officer or authority to be notified by the Central government for the "purposes of the Act".

"According to me, the Bill gives them [the government] the right to issue notices. It gives them the right to suspend FCRA licences based on public interest. The so-called public interest is not defined," said the constitutional lawyer.

The government, on the other hand, maintains that since foreign funds concern national security and can potentially be used to exert foreign influence, organizations operating under FCRA regulations require stringent oversight. It is with this objective that the government proposed amendments to the 2010 FCRA.

The Bill, which met with fierce opposition in Parliament, was subsequently referred to a Joint Parliamentary Committee (JPC) which is currently scrutinizing its provisions and is expected to submit its report before the Winter Session.

Citing an example of arbitrariness, Coutinho said a particular ethnic group in Kerala could be brought under the law while another ethnic group could be kept outside its ambit.

"It makes no sense to have a Bill which does not clearly define to whom it applies and who is excluded from it," he argued. He also expressed concern over the extensive powers proposed for the designated authority under the amendment Bill.

"The designated authority is loaded with so much power and when any authority has this much power, there is always a risk of power being degraded or misused," cautioned Coutinho. According to him, the Bill in its current form is likely to impact institutions, assets and properties of minority communities the most.

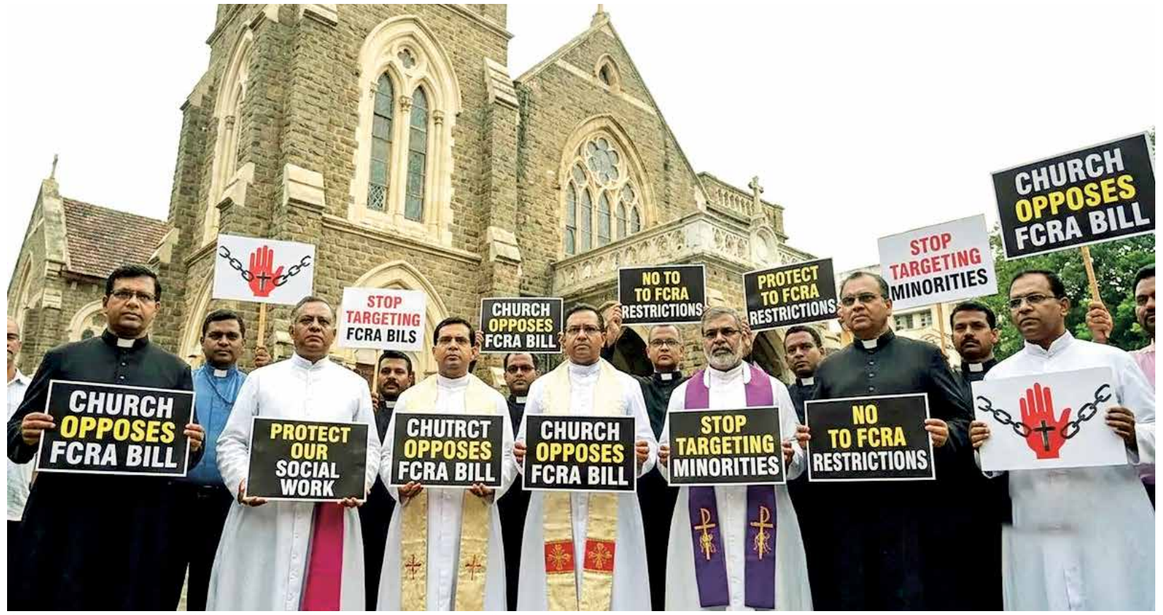
"Basically, it is an arbitrary Bill, which will give this designated authority sweeping powers over the properties of minorities. I am saying minorities because 55 to 60 percent of institutions operating on foreign contributions are with minorities or at least aligned with them."

The powers of the government-appointed designated authority are also reflected in the Bill's Statement of Objects and Reasons. It states that the proposed amendment seeks to "introduce a comprehensive statutory framework for vesting, supervision, management and disposal of foreign contribution and assets through a Designated Authority".

PLUGGING GAPS The Bill notes that the proposed legislation seeks to plug "certain operational and legal gaps" identified over the years, "particularly in relation to the management of foreign contribution and assets created therefrom in cases where registration is cancelled, surrendered or otherwise ceases".

"Section 15 of the (FCRA) Act provides for vesting of assets, but the absence of a comprehensive framework for supervision, management and disposal of such assets has led to administrative uncertainty and scope for misuse," states the Bill.

Critics have raised concerns over the



Church leaders protest: The FCRA changes are likely to affect trusts across religious minority communities

provisions contained in Chapter III-A of the Bill, which deals with the vesting of foreign contributions and assets in the designated authority in respect of any person or entity whose certificate has been cancelled under Section 14, surrendered under Section 14A, or ceased under Section 14B or under any rules made under the FCRA.

The Bill states that foreign contributions and assets would "provisionally vest" in the designated authority "from the date of such cancellation, surrender and cessation" of the FCRA certificate.

Several critics of the Bill have raised concerns over the provision that "vests wholly" assets in the designated authority, irrespective of whether they were created or acquired wholly or partly from foreign contributions or from other sources.

The proposed amendment places the onus on the affected party to establish that funds from other sources were used for "any distinct portion of the asset created or acquired".

POWER UNDEFINED The proposed changes to the Act would empower the designated authority to "either directly or through an administrator, take possession of assets". The authority would also be responsible for the supervision, management, safeguarding, preservation and maintenance of such assets.

This provision, seen as particularly far-reaching, would allow the designated authority to provisionally vest an entity's assets for management "in the public interest"

Under the Bill, the designated authority has the powers to dispose of assets through sale if FCRA is not renewed.

under sub-section (1) of Section 16A "in such manner and for such period as may be prescribed". It would also permit the authority to utilize the entity's foreign contribution for managing its assets and activities.

If an FCRA-registered organization fails to obtain, renew or restore its certificate within the specified period, its assets and foreign contributions "shall thereupon stand permanently vested in the Designated Authority" and be used for "public purposes". This could include transferring the acquired assets to any ministry, department, authority or agency of the Central or a state government, or to a local body.

The designated authority would also have the power to dispose of assets "through sale or any other appropriate process" and transfer the proceeds "together with unutilised foreign contribution to the Consolidated Fund of India". There is also apprehension that the proposed provisions in the Act or rules could be applied retrospectively.

"All such foreign contribution and assets shall, from the date of commencement of the Foreign Contribution (Regulation) Amendment, 2026, be deemed provisionally to be vested in the Designated Authority under sub-section (1) of Section 16A," states the proposed amendment.

TOUGH COMPLIANCE Father Maverick Fernandes, a diocesan priest and director of Caritas Goa — the social service wing of the Archdiocese of Goa and Daman — said the proposed amendments were likely to make regulatory compliance even more complex than it already is.

He said there was already an effective system in place to prevent misuse of foreign funds received by social service groups and organizations operating under them.

"We already have systems put in place where the fund comes first into the State Bank of India account in Delhi. They (the government) have monitors in Delhi. That money gets transferred to the organization, to its local operational account. There also it is scrutinized by them," he said.

Father Fernandes said the latest amendments appeared to be based on the presumption that foreign funds were being misused. He described this as "ridiculous", arguing that several checks and balances were already in place to monitor the use of such funds.

He was also concerned about the provision

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requiring a continuous flow of annual foreign contributions, with any breach potentially resulting in the cancellation of an FCRA licence.

He said most organizations involved in social service work raise funds from both foreign and domestic sources. His own organization receives about 20 percent of its funding from foreign contributors and 80 percent from within the country.

"An organization is not dependent only on foreign funds. They also depend on local funds. You cannot discontinue your activities just because one part of the funds has not been received on time. Sometimes, foreign funding is supporting just a small part of the work. Does that mean the whole work has to be discontinued? Why does the organization have to suffer?" said Father Fernandes.

Recently, several organizations receiving foreign funding have reportedly faced delays in the deployment of funds due to geopolitical developments.

SHRINKING FUNDS Many NGOs also said that foreign contributors are now hesitant to send funds to Indian organizations because of uncertainty over the status of their FCRA licences and the safety of their funds.

"There is no certainty of what will happen to our licence, our assets and properties. This is scaring away some foreign contributors, who are refusing to bring money into India without clarity on the rules governing the FCRA law. There is no clear-cut understanding of what would happen to foreign funds in case the government takes over an NGO's assets and properties and starts running it in the public interest," said an NGO executive, speaking on condition of anonymity.

Such concerns, NGOs say, are slowing the inflow of foreign contributions into the country and could adversely affect social initiatives undertaken by NGOs, as well as the watchdog role played by some organizations.

This has led to the cancellation, suspension or cessation of licences of several organizations. According to official data, 52,159 entities have been granted FCRA licences since the Ministry of Home Affairs (MHA) began maintaining digital records in 2012.

Of these, 14,455 organizations, or 27.7 percent, are currently active and eligible to receive foreign contributions, while 37,704 licences, or 72.3 percent, have had their licences cancelled or deemed to have expired due to non-renewal, administrative issues or violations of the rules.

At present, active entities receive around ₹22,000 crore in foreign contributions annually. There are also concerns over how "foreign contribution" is defined and interpreted under the FCRA.

According to chartered accountants familiar with compliance requirements, the definition can extend beyond direct foreign contributions received by an organization. They said receipts from the rent of buildings constructed wholly or partly using FCRA funds, the sale of products manufactured using machines purchased partly with FCRA funds and partly with local funds, and payments made by patients treated in hospitals built wholly or partly with FCRA funds are also being treated as foreign contributions.

Similarly, fees paid by students studying in schools built wholly or partly with FCRA funds are also being treated as foreign contributions, according to the chartered accountants.

A senior lawyer with a global human rights watchdog, who also requested anonymity, said, "The amendments to the Act as sent to the JPC will be debilitating for many civil society organizations. The apprehension of religious bodies that it may facilitate the takeover of their assets by the State is a legitimate one."

He believes the proposed revisions to the foreign contribution law will affect trusts across religious communities."The provisions are draconian, to say the least, and patently unconstitutional, as State appropriation of property is a very contested terrain," he said.

According to him, several other provisions of the Bill are at odds with the government's stated policy objectives. For instance, he pointed out, the requirement for organizations to receive ₹10 lakh in foreign contributions to avoid cancellation of their registration "contradicted the policy of 'Atmanirbharta' (self-reliance) that is central to the policy of Viksit Bharat".

"It makes institutions forever dependent on foreign money and does not offer a ramp to transition completely to domestic funding," argued the lawyer.

He said the JPC should ideally tone down, if not completely do away with, the proposed provision allowing the takeover of institutional assets. One way forward, he suggested, would be to make the provision prospective rather than apply it retrospectively.

"One of the glaring gaps in the law is the inability of organizations to return money to donors in case the institution no longer needs the funds, cannot spend them within the prescribed period, or in the event of suspension or cancellation.

"Doing this would allow the money to be usefully deployed elsewhere by the donor entity instead of languishing in frozen bank accounts in India. This is a historic opportunity for the JPC to address this," said the lawyer, who has previously worked closely with the government.

Coutinho does not expect the Bill to be struck down or substantially toned down, despite describing it as a "bad law". ■

Going to the loo can get your goat in Kolkata

Aiema Tauheed
Kolkata

WE walk into the Pay & Use Toilet block in Ward No. 66 in East Kolkata and come face to face with a goat neatly tied up in one of two cubicles. The other cubicle is, of course, utterly dirty and unusable. There's no wash basin, forget about sanitary napkins. After all, the goat needs neither.

Three children, around 10 years old, seem to be in charge of this toilet block. They collect ₹3 before letting us in.

Such is the pathetic state of most public toilets in Kolkata.

Last year the Sabar Institute and the Azad Foundation published a study titled "Status of Public Toilets for Women and Trans/Queer Persons in Kolkata". Three undergraduate students, Prajakta Upadhayay, Sai Deepthi and Palak Kumari, have now arrived from the Azim Premji University in Bengaluru to take a relook at these toilets, write an assessment, or an 'objective observation report' and post ratings on Google.

Upadhayay is doing a BA in social sciences, while Deepthi and Palak Kumari are studying economics.

Another toilet block we visited was around 200 metres from the Park Street Metro station. It was supervised by a male caretaker who took ₹3 as user charges. 'Gents' and 'Ladies' was written on a blue board at the entrance.

But inside there wasn't a separate section for women. The caretaker directed one of the girls to a bathroom meant for bathing. It didn't have a toilet. The latch was broken. A noxious stench filled the air.

One student went in to use the washroom while the other two inspected everything from gender-wise separation and cleanliness to lighting, dustbins, water supply, the availability of handwash, sanitary napkins and so on.

They photographed the toilets, made mental notes, and, once outside, wrote a detailed review. "How many stars should we give it?" they asked one another. They perused their checklist and a consensus was reached to ensure a fair rating.

Bad Google reviews can send cafés and brands into a tizzy, prompting them to upgrade. Why should public toilets be any different? The trio also went on a hunt for public toilets unlisted on Google Maps.

If you find yourself in a new city the tendency is to look for things on Google, explains Palak Kumari. She says they hoped that their reviews and experiences would help women, queer folk and others find suitable public facilities.

The three girls relied on Google Maps to get from one toilet to another. That sometimes led them to a dead end. They walked through Kolkata's lanes, following the map, only to find the toilets locked.

Predictably, the toilets were all dirty with wet muddy floors, broken commodes and mugs. There were steep stairs before individual toilets, roofless toilets perched on high platforms with no privacy, and toilet spaces doubling as storage units.

The elderly and those with disability would not be able to use any of these public facilities.

Yet, to our astonishment, some public toilets in the city are actually well maintained. Take the one in Maddox Square, Ward No. 69. It had separate loos for men and women. "We clean it two to three times every day," said the caretaker. Rahul, a user, stepping out of a male washroom, said, "They keep these very well-maintained. There are no issues."

'Toilets in wealthier areas are better run since the residents want them for the use of their maids and drivers.'

How come? "Looking around it seems this is a residential area inhabited by upper-middle-class people. That should have an influence," Upadhayay noted.

The Sabar Institute and Azad Foundation study confirmed that wealthier neighbourhoods tended to have many more public toilets. They also seemed to be better maintained. But most upper-class or upper-middle-class people probably never use a public toilet. So why are they better maintained? Here's the reason:

"They don't want their maids, drivers, and other staff to use their personal toilets. So, there is demand for more toilets where rich people live. For example, you'll find more toilets in Ballygunge but not in Kidderpore," says Sabir Ahamed, founder of Sabar Institute.

They began researching the condition of public toilets out of a larger concern — the declining participation of women in the workforce. "And for ten years we found there was a decrease," explains Ahamed. "Everyone just measured that workforce participation was low. But nobody delved into why."

The Azad Foundation trains women from marginalized backgrounds to become professional drivers. Ahamed recalls a woman driver telling him that finding a toilet could take one-and-a-half hours. "She said she struggled to find a washroom while returning from a programme organized by the previous chief minister. Petrol pumps, which did have toilets, didn't allow her to park."

Once, a foreign professor accompanying Ahamed for work needed to use a toilet. He took her to a prominent public institution. "It took me 15 minutes to find the key," he recalls, still embarrassed.

These experiences eventually led to the study, carried out with students from 10 colleges and two universities. The focus was deliberately on informal women workers — women who cannot simply walk into a shopping mall, cafe or other private facility to use a toilet.

Around 7,578 women and 38 trans/queer people participated in the study. Fifty-three percent of women respondents worked in informal sectors as street vendors, salespersons, domestic workers, janitors, building cleaners, construction workers, gig

Continued on page 14





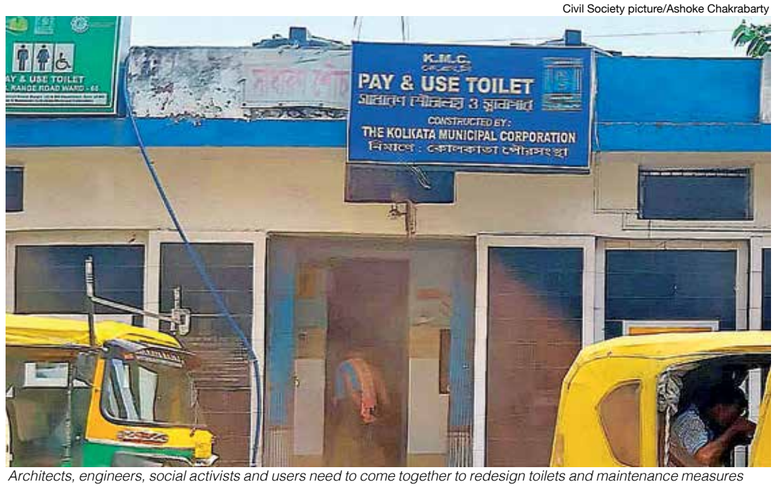
A goat tethered in a toilet cubicle and (right) the students conducting their survey

Civil Society picture/Ashoke Chakrabarty



A pay-and-use toilet under lock and key

Civil Society picture/Ashoke Chakrabarty



Architects, engineers, social activists and users need to come together to redesign toilets and maintenance measures

workers, drivers, and so on.

The study revealed that at major railway stations there was heavy footfall but there weren't that many toilets.

Howrah, which handles over 900,000 people a day, has 33 toilets for men, 19 for women and five for people with disabilities. Sealdah, with a footfall of 1.5 to 1.8 million, has 23 toilets for men, 24 for women and just three for people with disabilities.

The average monthly income of surveyed respondents was ₹8,929. Seventy-three percent of respondents paid to use toilets, spending as much as 10 percent of their daily income. Sixty-two percent of respondents found public toilets inaccessible to people with disabilities. Lactation points and diaper-changing facilities were generally absent.

Handwash was often unavailable and 30 percent of respondents rated the toilets they used as "dirty" or "very dirty". Sanitary napkin disposal facilities and vending machines were also largely missing. Women and queer respondents said they reduced their water intake to avoid having to use public toilets.

Safety emerged as another barrier. Fifty-three percent of respondents said they felt unsafe using public toilets. Among trans/queer respondents, 52 percent reported harassment, 38 percent reported toilets without functioning door locks. The presence of men stationed outside women's toilets added to their unease.

Fifty-one percent of respondents said inadequate, non-inclusive or poorly maintained public toilets impacted their ability to work outside the home and earn an income.

In other words, a toilet, or the lack of a usable one, is a barrier to earning a living for women. The study includes a series of recommendations: the number of toilets should match footfall, female staff should be stationed outside women's toilets, and adequate number of toilets should be provided for cis women and trans/queer people.

Also included is the need for an independent committee to supervise cleanliness, accessibility, and grading of existing public toilets. Standards of hygiene could be improved through basic facilities like handwash and continuous water supply. Sanitary napkin vending machines and adequate lighting were other requirements.

Ahamed disagrees that privatization of toilets could be the solution. "In Kolkata, where informal women workers are already spending 10 percent of their income on toilets, long-term investment needs to come from the state. CSR can also work but not complete privatization. It's a social good, we can't view it from a revenue perspective," he says.

The problem is especially acute for transgender and people with disabilities. It's the Public Works Department which builds miserable toilets and their awareness of social issues is generally abysmal.

Ahamed underlined the importance of architects, engineers, users, and social activists coming together to design toilets and set a system for ongoing cleanliness.

The report caught the attention of people. It was presented to the mayor and municipality during the Trinamool Congress regime. "We gave them pictures of dysfunctional toilets, data, recommendations, everything, but we got no response," says Ahamed.

The Sabar Institute then got students involved, hoping to build pressure on the government. The students audited 15 public toilets across different wards. Ahamed also visited Jantar Mantar in Delhi to support the Cockroach Janta Party protest over the paper leak scams and the broken exam system. He now hopes to begin a social media campaign on renovating public toilets, with reels to engage younger audiences.

Recently, Ahamed met officials of the Kolkata Municipal Corporation. Talks were positive, he says, leaving him hopeful. ■

When fake shots for rabies get dispensed

Civil Society News
New Delhi

RABIES is an incurable disease and the rabies vaccine is a lifesaving drug. So when batches of spurious vaccines are discovered, it is a matter of great concern.

In April this year a batch of spurious rabies vaccines was identified and traced to an address in Mukherjee Nagar in Delhi. The vaccines were fake but were being sold under the brand name Abhayrab, which is widely used in India.

Last year a batch of vaccines which was meant to be distributed through the government hospital system was found to have been diverted and was selling through private outlets in Bihar. The vaccines were spurious.

It is not known whether these are isolated cases or point to a much larger problem with rabies vaccines. Several reliable brands are available through dependable cold chains. But India is a huge market with diverse sources of supply.

India ranks right at the top of a global list of dog bite and rabies cases. The rough annual figures are 3.7 million bites and some 5,000 deaths. But it is widely acknowledged that there is under-reporting and a figure of 20,000 deaths is also cited based on modelling.

Awareness of the need to be promptly vaccinated has grown. The question is, how dependable is the supply? For a balanced perspective, ***Civil Society*** spoke to Dr M.K. Sudarshan, founder-president and mentor of Association for Prevention and Control of Rabies in India (APCRI), based in Bengaluru.

Q: A batch of rabies vaccines found to be fake was seized in Delhi in April. What exactly did the testing of the vaccines reveal?
Police, with the help of officials from the Central Drugs Standard Control Organization (CDSCO), raided a residential premises in Mukherjee Nagar, Delhi, and seized a batch of Abhayrab rabies vaccine (Batch KE 25012).

Civil Society picture/Ashoke Chakrabarty



India ranks right on top of a global list of dog bite and rabies cases

Subsequent testing at the Central Drugs Laboratory, in Kasauli, Himachal Pradesh, showed the vaccines were of very poor quality and potency. The same laboratory had previously tested the same batch of vaccines submitted by its manufacturer, Indian Immunologicals (ILL), based in Hyderabad, in November 2025, and found it to be of good quality.

This time, the laboratory also reported 17 discrepancies in the packaging and labelling of the seized vaccines — further confirmation that they were spurious.

Q. This is the second instance of spurious vaccines being seized. Why is this happening and what is its fallout going to be?
The earlier instance was in January last year. Interestingly, it was officials of Indian Immunologicals who had noticed that a batch of Abhayrab (KA24014), supplied to the Bihar government, was circulating in the private markets of Bihar and Uttar Pradesh. They lodged a complaint with the drug control authorities in Delhi. Consequently, raids were conducted in Patna on the wholesaler and others who were involved in the racket of diverting vaccines and selling them. The Abhayrab vaccine packs found to be fake were seized and destroyed.

In such cases revaccination is essential. One cannot take chances with rabies, a practically 100 percent fatal disease. Rabies vaccines are life-saving medicines. It requires tracing patients and administering the genuine vaccine to them.

When the problems with the vaccine batch in Bihar became known, the governments of the US, UK, and Australia issued advisories and identified their nationals who had been given the Abhayrab vaccine. They were advised to get themselves revaccinated with a rabies vaccine brand approved by their own national health authorities.



Dr M.K. Sudarshan

'A more stringent law is needed that deters criminals from making fake medicines and ultimately protects the lives of people.'

This is the protocol and it was scrupulously adhered to in these countries. The people who had taken the Abhayrab vaccine got themselves revaccinated with their nationally approved brands of the rabies vaccine.

Q: Why is the recent seizure of fake rabies vaccine even more serious than the earlier episode?
The 2026 episode is more serious because it is a frank case of a spurious drug — with the potency test failed, its source of manufacture not yet known, etc.

In the 2025 Bihar case, it was an original batch of the vaccine, supplied by the government, that was diverted, repacked, possibly poorly stored, and so on.

The manufacturer of Abhayrab, Indian Immunologicals, formally lodged a complaint with the CDSCO. It also displayed a public notice on its website and issued press releases stating that the company was ready to extend full cooperation with the regulatory authorities in whatever further course of action was required.

Q: Such vaccines do need more oversight from the regulatory authority, perhaps more laws, don't they?
Yes, stringent and deterrent laws are needed to prevent fake vaccines from entering the market. If this trend of spurious Abhayrab vaccines continues, very soon its procurers as well as beneficiaries will lose confidence in this brand not only in India but overseas too where it is currently being exported.

Hence, the company must take proactive and aggressive steps to prevent recurrence of such episodes in future. Such actions should be shared widely with the public through print and electronic media as a confidence-boosting measure.

It is not just the rabies vaccine. The menace of spurious drugs has become a national malady now. Even drugs used in critical care, anti-cancer drugs and life-saving medicines are being found to be spurious. Also, repeated episodes of seizure of spurious medicines show India in poor light abroad.

Consequently, the Government of India should quickly initiate suitable administrative and legal measures to curb and eliminate this menace. A more stringent law is needed that deters criminals from making fake medicines and ultimately protects the lives and health of the people of this country.

Q: How widespread is the use of Abhayrab?
Abhayrab has a 40 percent share of the domestic rabies vaccine market. Its manufacturer is a subsidiary of the National Dairy Development Board (NDDB), a Government of India organization. It is, therefore, a public sector backed company. The company exports Abhayrab to over 40 countries in Asia and Africa. But two batches of the Abhayrab vaccine (KA24014 and KE 25012) that were found to be fake or spurious have reportedly not been exported.

In July this year, consequent to the Bihar and UP episode of 2025, the company had introduced a new pack of Abhayrab with six security features, to prevent it from being faked. Unfortunately the beneficiaries or users of this vaccine are yet to learn about these new security features. Incidentally, the company, as a public welfare measure, is also supplying the same vaccine at a subsidized cost of ₹295 per vial through the Jan Aushadi pharmacies across the country. ■



High-density orchards produce bigger yields

Apple growers are beating the heat

Kashmir's traditional orchard is now denser

Bisma Bhat
Srinagar

THE roads of South Kashmir's Shopian district are crowded with workers and vehicles. This district is called the apple bowl of Kashmir, and the air here is thick with the aroma of freshly picked fruit.

Ladders lean against the trunks of apple trees while workers climb into the clusters of branches, picking the reddest fruit first. Tarpaulins spread beneath the trees catch apples that fall, preventing the soil from muddying the fruit. At the edge of the orchard, men load wooden crates into waiting vehicles that take the harvest out through the gate.

By late morning, the sun turns harsh, and Fida Hussain, 53, walks slowly between his rows of trees to examine the apples still hanging on their branches. His orchard looks quite like it has for decades.

But the seasons that govern it have changed.

Hussain says the climate behaves differently than it did a decade ago. Winters have turned warmer and drier, spring arrives earlier, and summer brings rain and hail just when the crop stands most exposed. "Seasons behave erratically and that affects our apples," he says.

The orchard once followed a calendar that growers trusted. Spring covered the trees in white and pink blossoms, in summer fruit hung from the branches, and autumn ripened millions of apples. Hussain remembers a gentler autumn rain, a mild shower during harvest that left the apples clean and bright.

Hussain followed methods handed down by his family for generations. He grew traditional varieties, relied on common irrigation practices and pruned the trees on a schedule that generations of growers had used. The orchard depended on an assumption that the weather would stay within a known range, and that assumption has grown harder to defend.

Today, the traditional orchard demands heavy labour and yields less fruit, he says. Hailstorms this year destroyed about 60 percent of his produce. Traditional varieties also need repeated pesticide spraying, and even that spraying leaves the harvest open to chance.

Those losses have pushed Hussain toward a decision that is increasingly evident through Kashmir.

He plans to replace his traditional orchard with a high-density plantation. Farmers in his district once hesitated to uproot established trees, Hussain says, until they watched newer orchards produce bigger yields and withstand pressures that had damaged older ones.

"Many farmers, after noticing the positive results from high-density orchards, are now shifting towards them and I am also planning to do the same," he says.

High-density cultivation places more trees in a smaller area, often with dwarfing rootstocks and varieties that growers select for productivity and disease resistance.

The system can include irrigation infrastructure and hail protection, so the change involves far more than planting extra trees. Smaller trees set at closer intervals make pruning, spraying and picking easier, while traditional trees stand tall, spread their branches wide, and demand ladders and heavy labour at harvest time.

Prof. Ashaq Pandit, head of the Division of Fruit Science at the Sher-e-Kashmir University of Agricultural Sciences and Technology, outlines the vagaries of weather that farmers now face: frequent hailstorms, heavy rainfall, sharp temperature rises and ill-timed snowfall. Wet conditions also encourage apple scab, Alternaria blotch, powdery mildew and other fungal and bacterial infections, and growers respond with additional spending on fungicides, insecticides and pesticides.

"High-density orchards can ease some of those pressures once growers choose suitable varieties and rootstocks and instal reliable irrigation," Prof. Pandit emphasizes. "Suitable varieties withstand many apple diseases, and hail nets protect the crop from storm damage."

Winter still gives Kashmir's trees one clear advantage.

Apple trees need roughly 1,500 hours of chilling, Pandit points out, and the Valley receives about 2,400 hours of chilling in all. Growers now wonder how long that advantage will last as temperatures rise. The question goes beyond individual farms.

Jammu and Kashmir (J&K) has about 172,000 hectares under apple cultivation, and produces roughly 80 to 85 percent of India's apples.

A few kilometres from Hussain's orchard, Shakeel Ahmad farms 60 *kanals* (about 7.5 acres) of traditional apple trees. He has watched the move toward high-density cultivation with interest, and he has calculated the cost.

Installation in a high-density orchard costs about ₹2 lakh per *kanal,* he says, so converting his entire holding would require an investment running into crores of rupees. "High-density orchards require more money to get installed," Ahmad muses. "Although such orchards have less expenses and yield more profit after installation."

That upfront cost becomes a barrier for growers who are already absorbing losses due to the intransigent weather. As Ahmad says, growers pay for the installation from their own pockets. He wants the government to create a subsidy scheme for apple orchards. He also wants insurance that covers losses from hailstorms and frequent rainfall.

His arithmetic exposes a central problem of adaptation in Kashmir's apple economy. The technologies that help farmers respond to changing conditions demand capital just when erratic weather makes farm income harder to secure.

Research from the valley documents this pressure. Dr Bilal Ahmad Sheikh and Dr S.H. Baba published a 2023 study in the *International Journal of Agriculture and Animal Production* on how climate change affects apple farming in the Kashmir Valley. The researchers focused on Kulgam district in South Kashmir, where growers reported low production in 2023, and found that shifting climate patterns had produced substantial losses in the apple business and reduced productivity.



Apples being put in crates



Closely grown trees have a better survival rate

Rising temperatures have increased pests and diseases, the researchers found, and both threaten orchard health. Altered flowering times can disrupt pollination and reduce fruit set and yields, while changed rainfall and reduced snowfall can create water stress that hinders tree growth.

"Heavy rain, hailstorms and unseasonal snowfall physically damage trees and fruit and complicate transportation," the study states. "Climate change can also alter which areas suit particular varieties, so farmers may eventually need to explore new varieties and diversify their crops."

The authors called for climate-smart farming practices, including pest management that combines several methods, efficient irrigation and orchard management that adapts to changing weather. They also named access to credit, insurance and other support as key parts of adaptation.

Continued monitoring and cooperation among scientists, farmers and policymakers, they argued, would help track conditions and design responses. Their broader finding was concise and clear: the industry's future depends on how well growers and institutions adapt as the climate changes.

That transition already shows in the fields, where Shaheem Shafat, 40, has watched demand climb for seven years. He founded GrowBros Agritech and spends his days installing high-density orchards and building orchard and greenhouse infrastructure.

"People are desperately switching to high-density orchards because of climate change and because the yield is huge," he says.

During 2025 and 2026, his company installed high-density apple orchards on 30,500 *kanals*, and he expects that figure to grow as traditional orchards suffer repeated weather losses.

The scale gives the shift meaning beyond individual farms. Kashmir's apple industry supports a large network of growers, workers, transporters, merchants and storage operators, so a change in how growers plant orchards can alter the economics of the entire sector.

But technology addresses some risks and leaves others open. A hail net protects fruit from hail, irrigation helps during water stress, and a well-matched rootstock improves orchard performance under particular conditions. Only the weather decides when the next storm will strike, how warm the next winter will become and how rainfall will change disease pressure.

That volatility has changed the calculation for farmers such as Hussain.

His orchard still holds the trees his family planted and tended through decades of changing seasons. He sees the cost of keeping them and the price of replacing them.

Generations of growers read a calendar of blossom, fruit and falling leaves. Now they are rewriting the orchard, fitting their farms to a climate that has left the inherited calendar behind. ■

Clean tech in kitchens helps women earn

Bharat Dogra
Udaipur

HOW does India's status as a global leader in renewable energy help rural women who are poor and marginalized? The Udaipur Urja Initiative (UUI) Producer Company Limited, set up by an NGO, Seva Mandir, demonstrates how clean tech can work at the grassroots for women.

The company resolves problems which affect women, like smoke-emitting cooking stoves and unreliable conventional lighting, through sales of alternative clean tech products at affordable prices. UUI has trained a network of women entrepreneurs who sell and service such products.

Lakshmi and Reeta from Sagwara village in Kherwara block of Udaipur district say three big changes induced by UUI have changed their lives: stoves which emit less smoke, solar lighting and the opportunity to earn by becoming an entrepreneur of clean energy products.

Women can buy stoves which not only emit less smoke but also use less firewood for a subsidized price of ₹500 compared to the market price of ₹7,000 for such stoves. UUI markets two kinds of stoves, large or 'jumbo' and small or 'smart'.

Since these stoves help to significantly cut greenhouse gases in the form of carbon emissions caused by wood smoke, their spread yielded carbon credits which were then used to subsidize reduced smoke stoves.

The stoves also reduced health risks for women while cooking by bringing down their exposure to smoke. Unlike the earlier stoves or *chulhas* which are fixed at one place, these stoves are mobile and can be taken to any spot more convenient for cooking. So the owner can chat with a friend or relative while preparing dinner.

The second change was that the women and their families could access solar lighting in various forms. This includes Kisan Torch, Inverter bulbs, Camp Portables and Rooftop Solar.

Such products made it possible for women to attend to their fields at night and safeguarded them against the risk of snakebite and similar nocturnal dangers. And, of course, children could study in the evening even if the regular power supply failed.

The third and perhaps most significant change for many women was that a series of income opportunities opened up for them. One such job was of monitoring the reduction of emissions from less smoky and less wood using stoves. This involved data gathering. The women visited homes in their village and found answers to simple questions regarding the extent to which less wood was being used.



UUI sells clean-tech products like Kisan Torch, Inverter bulbs, Rooftop Solar through women entrepreneurs


The stoves require less wood and emit less smoke

The second job opportunity was that they received commissions for selling various solar lighting devices in villages. Increasing use of these solar lighting devices also contributed to climate mitigation.

By combining these two forms of earnings many rural women, including those from tribal communities, have been able to significantly increase their income, although the exact extent of this increase differs depending on their work performance record.

Rajnish Kumar, area manager of UUI, said, "Many women are happy that they have emerged as successful rural entrepreneurs with possibilities of further progress."

People here are either farmers, or rear cattle or work as labourers. The money the women earn is a critical addition to household incomes since their communities are categorized as below poverty line.

Women from tribal communities are provided credit and technical support, along with hand-holding and training. Trusted by the communities to which they belong, the women act as nodal points of ethical marketing in their respective villages.

This effort by UUI has its roots in several experimental efforts initiated much earlier by Seva Mandir. Once these efforts reached fruition, the NGO, about four years ago, hived it off into a producer company.

Seva Mandir's relationship of trust with many rural communities still continues to be helpful for UUI. It has expanded to five *tehsils* of Udaipur district.

Women entrepreneurs also reach out to small and marginal farmers. They procure pulses and cereals which are processed in-house and sold directly to consumers.

UUI has further added to its climate resilience efforts by contributing to natural farming and tree planting as well.

It is the relationship of trust established among people across villages that enabled successful implementation of this initiative. ■



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COVER

UPSURGE FOR DEMOCRACY

Where did 130 million voters go?

Civil Society News
New Delhi

THE power of a bristling State was on full display in New Delhi as the Narendra Modi government cracked down on demonstrators seeking the resignation of the chief election commissioner, Gyanesh Kumar.

A questionable revision of voter lists has resulted in 130 million citizens finding their names removed, prompting the spunky Cockroach Janta Party (CJP) to launch a 'Gyanu must go' campaign in true Gen Z style.

Measures not dissimilar to those reserved for an internal emergency were imposed in the capital to stop people from protesting. An estimated 40,000 police personnel were put in position. The arrival of long-distance trains was deferred lest they bring in protesters. Metro stations were closed. The internet was blocked within a 4-km radius of Jantar Mantar, the protest venue. Diversions and barricades made it difficult to get around.

Activists were picked up from their homes. The key leaders of the CJP — Abhijeet Dipke, Ashutosh Ranka and Saurav Das, who were the moving force behind the protests — were plucked off a flight as it landed in New Delhi. Ratna Singh, head of CJP's legal affairs cell and a lawyer herself, was taken away from her flat early in the morning. Dhruv Rathee, an influencer, was taken into detention from his bedroom as he opened his eyes.

What was the government so worried about? Just a little over two months earlier, tens and thousands of self-proclaimed 'cockroaches' coming seemingly out of nowhere had compelled the Modi government to ask Union Education Minister Dharmendra Pradhan to resign over exam leaks.

Now the CJP, the party of the cockroaches, formed impishly on the internet to poke the chief justice of India in the eye when he called young people cockroaches, was back. This time it was holding a mirror to the functioning of the Election Commission. There has been widespread unhappiness across the country with a special intensive revision (SIR) of electoral rolls. The allegation is that Gyanesh Kumar, though chief election commissioner and a constitutional authority, has been cooking lists of voters to help the BJP win elections.

For the Modi government this is another moment of reckoning. Most families have a story to tell about having to run back and forth with documents just to prove that they are voters. There is also a deeper concern that democracy itself is being undermined. The BJP's recent victory in West Bengal, where nine million names were deleted, is cited as an example.

Such suspicions were reinforced when investigative stories published in *The Indian Express* showed that Gyanesh Kumar's decisions had been questioned by the two other election commissioners who make up the three-member Commission. The three are expected to act unitedly.

A major transgression by Gyanesh Kumar was his decision to amend Form 6 which is used by first-time voters to register — specifically young people becoming eligible. He was not authorized to change the form. That

Ordinary folk have found inspiration in the protests organized by the CJP to take on authority and demand better governance.

can only be done by the government. Under the change, information was now required about parents and grandparents which would be difficult to provide. The CJP saw this as a ruse to prevent young first-time voters from voting because they are disenchanted with the Modi government.

The Congress, too, has been reaching out to the young and 'vote *chori*' has become a slogan of the opposition parties. But it is in the protests organized by the CJP that ordinary folk have found inspiration to take on authority and demand better governance. The CJP has been a truly liberating influence on people. Since it burst onto the scene on June 6, it has been reclaiming public space for citizens who have been raising their voices. The success of the agitation over the exam system has shown what is possible.

Protests have been breaking out across the country — from girls in Rajasthan wanting their schools repaired to young women on the Delhi University campus asking for safe public

Civil Society picture/Lakshman Anand



AISA members led by Neha Bora surprise the police by surfacing at Mandi House



Protesters at Connaught Place

Civil Society picture/Lakshman Anand



A driver by profession came from Madhya Pradesh for the Tiranga March

spaces, jobseekers in Maharashtra unhappy with exams and villagers in Goa refusing to give up their paddy fields for luxury housing projects. Campuses of the IITs in Mumbai and Delhi have seen students coming out to ask for improvements in evaluation systems and living facilities. The students have been unsparing of faculty and administrators.

JANTAR MANTAR The government has accused CJP and student organizations of trying to create chaos and anarchy. The prime minister has derisively called activists *'andolanjeevi'* and 'Dimaagi Naxals' — questioning their loyalty and contribution to national causes. Jantar Mantar, for decades used, and cherished too, as a common public space for raising causes, has been 'denotified' or removed from the list of places where people can gather.

But on October 10 people turned up to protest at Jantar Mantar in response to the CJP's call despite all the government's warnings and security measures. People came in ones and twos and small groups as well. Though it seemed

COVER

like a trickle, there would have been several thousands who showed up despite Jantar Mantar being sealed and public warnings that the protest was illegal. Before they could amass, they were quickly picked up by the police, bundled into buses and sent to distant detention centres where they were released at night.

Members of the All-India Students' Association (AISA), a leftist student union, proved to be difficult to swoop down on. AISA is a daring union which has allied with the CJP. Led by the firebrand Neha Bora, they surfaced suddenly at Dilli Haat, a few kilometres from Jantar Mantar where the police didn't expect them and began marching towards Jantar Mantar. Out-of-shape police personnel, both men and women, struggled to catch up with the energetic Bora and her followers as they shouted slogans denouncing Gyanesh Kumar and calling for his resignation.

A scrum ensued on the Safdarjung flyover with the police trying to pin down Bora and her followers and put them into buses to be detained. When they did manage to get her into a bus, Bora emerged from a window, fist clenched and shouting slogans. AISA activists then threw themselves onto the front of the bus, presenting the police with the challenge of pulling them off.

CP PROTEST On October 16, the CJP issued a call for a Tiranga March at which demonstrators would wave the national flag at Central Park in Connaught Place. The police banned it despite court orders permitting the demonstration. Dipke was detained. Das and Ranka were already locked up for jumping a gate to get into Jantar Mantar.

Police in huge numbers laid siege to Connaught Place and Central Park was sealed to ensure that the protest didn't take place. Yet, a modest number of protesters carrying the national flag showed up anyway. They weren't allowed to congregate. They couldn't enter the park and had to be satisfied with hanging around Connaught Place's Outer Circle. Their numbers may have been inconsequential but what showed through was their commitment to be there. They were also of different ages and walks of life. They stood around in the Outer Circle with the police blowing whistles from time to time and getting them to move on.

Once again, it was Bora and the AISA activists who gave the police a tough time. Instead of Central Park, they showed up suddenly at Mandi House, a kilometre away, where the police were in fewer numbers and were caught off-guard. Everything happened at a tempo which outpaced the police, particularly the women constables and officers whose job it was to pin Bora and other women activists down. Well-built constables tried to carry away the AISA men. It was a melee like the one we had witnessed on the Safdarjung flyover.

On October 10, Jantar Mantar was sealed. Yellow-painted iron barricades with rows of armed police made entry impossible. Journalists trying to find positions of vantage were herded to a corner of the pavement.

CALL OF THE COCKROACH

People from all over came to unfurl the national flag













Civil Society picture/Lakshman Anand



A lone protester displays her poster with the sealed Jantar Mantar in the background

Civil Society picture/Lakshman Anand



The three young men from Surat and Mumbai who came by train for the October 10 protest

AT THE BARRICADES A sprinkling of CJP supporters managed to make their way to the barricades and were waiting quietly, barely making their presence felt. A slim young and soft-spoken woman wearing an air-pollution mask stood with a sea of khaki around her. She carried a large poster, intricately designed, with the words 'revolution' and *'azadi'* large and visible together with the Ambedkar slogan: 'educate, agitate, organize'.

A few feet from her another young woman, a software engineer, seemed to be waiting patiently for something to happen. She carried no protest accessories with her — no poster, no banner. But from her body language it was clear she was there to be counted.



The core CJP team: Saurav Das, Ratna Singh, Abhijeet Dipke and Ashutosh Ranka

"I set out from my home at five in the morning to be here," the software engineer said to us when we got talking. "This is the time to speak up. What is happening in the country is practically a dictatorship. If the elections are fair what is there to hide? Why doesn't the government hold an inquiry? After all, the Election Commission is an independent body. It should have nothing to do with the government."

We found our way to the Outer Circle of Connaught Place near the Rivoli cinema, thinking that demonstrators in larger numbers could try to make an entry from there. The police were present in sizeable numbers.

A coconut vendor grimly told us what he thought: "The situation in the country is bad. One should not be made to beg for something so basic as the right to vote. Removing the names of 130 million from the rolls and snatching away the right to vote is a *maha paap* (big sin). Live and let live is what I would say to the government."

SAVING DEMOCRACY Sitting vulnerably on a bench on Janpath's broad footpath were three young men, all in their early twenties. On most days they would not have been visible amidst crowds of shoppers and pedestrians. But on October 10 they were the only people there — so deserted was Janpath because of the lockdown by police.

The three young men, all new to Delhi, had arrived by train in the early hours and used back roads to get to Janpath where they had met up and decided to hang together. We had got past barricades thanks to the press tags around our necks and some cajoling of the policemen on duty. At that hour, quite literally, there was no one else around.

"We have come to save democracy," said one

'Removing the names of 130 million and snatching the right to vote is a big sin. Live and let live is what I would say to the govt.'

of them, a student from Surat. "It is only if you vote that you can have a democracy. My name was struck off the list and so were the names of members of my family. I am here to protect my rights. It seems like Emergency has been declared. We are asked where we have come from, what we are doing."

The other youth from Surat ran a small medical store. "For us this is the second freedom struggle," he declared. Asked if they were waiting for Abhijeet Dipke to arrive, he said: "Whether Dipke comes or not, it doesn't matter. Our commitment was to get here and to make the protest a success and we have done our bit."

The Assamese young man, from Mumbai, had taken a week off from his job to attend the protest. He had been attending protests in Mumbai and decided that he should be present at this one in Delhi as well. "The time to act is now so that something really wrong, which cannot be undone, doesn't happen," he said.

The CJP's protests have opened the gates for issues of governance and social equality. From June 6, when the first protest was held at Jantar Mantar, we have noticed the presence of a growing number of young women. They came dressed as they pleased and felt safe despite the large crowds.

These young women were also in the forefront of lampooning Narendra Modi through posters and memes and deflating his carefully cultivated image of power and

authority. Modi has steadily become an emblem of patriarchy and the BJP as a party of ageing men seeking to exercise control by any means.

The fight against patriarchy is more robust now than ever before. When a young woman out with her boyfriend was raped in Aastha Kunj Park near the Lotus Temple in Delhi, women students came out demanding not just better policing and lighting, but also acceptance of their right to be out at all hours. The women told men to stay away from their protests.

WOMEN PROTEST Torchlight processions were taken out as the campus erupted. Demonstrations were held at the statue of Swami Vivekananda, making the point that equality and liberal values are longstanding Indian values which the BJP for all its claims to being the custodian of culture and traditions is failing to protect.

Sujata, a fourth-year student from Gargi College, said, "We are marching at night to reclaim our spaces like parks and transport and we have equal right to access them because the issue is not men vs women but all of us vs patriarchy. Regressive measures like societal pressure and not going out after 7 pm make us feel like we are being caged. The women who are protesting are under surveillance and then threatened by colleges themselves."

Aastha Kunj Park has neither CCTV cameras nor adequate security. The Nirbhaya Fund, set up after a brutal rape case years ago, overflows with funds which neither the municipality, state government nor the Centre — all three under the BJP — put to use. Delhi has the highest crime rate against women among metropolitan cities.

"The government has normalized rape culture, they should be ashamed. Some do moral policing by telling us not to wear revealing clothes. Is it not a cultural shock for the prime minister that girls are being raped? Yet, he is silent on this," said a student.

"We want men to look somewhere else, not be fixated on us. People rub their bodies against us in the Metro and it has been normalized. We are nowhere near Nari Shakti because we never give *shakti* to the *nari*," said Bipasha, a second-year student at Daulat Ram College.

Kolkata is often spoken of as a safe city for women but it is not without instances of rape and harassment. Women have been taking out marches to reclaim the night there as well.

"I don't think any city in India can say that women are completely safe at all times, and it is something the ruling dispensation should be embarrassed about," said Kaniz Fatima, 25, born and brought up in Kolkata.

"Being somebody who has travelled to 70-plus cities in India till date, I'd say that there is no city that is truly safe because at the end of the day, be it Pushkar, Banaras, Bangalore, Bombay, Pune, Jaipur, Delhi, Kolkata, Indore, Bhopal, whatever — every place I have seen and witnessed instances of men making me feel uncomfortable, or making some woman around me uncomfortable. Or I've heard stories from women about what all they have faced in those cities," said Vyomika Dev, 25, a Union Public Services Commission aspirant who has a BA in history from Lady Shri Ram College for Women.

Civil Society picture/Akshit Gupta



Girls on Delhi campus reclaiming the night



Rahul Gandhi during the Democracy March to the Supreme Court

"The way every city is designed is against women. Be it Metro stations, bus stops or parks, these spaces usually exist in really dark spots and have shady corners that are often populated by men. This discourages women from accessing them," she said.

Ranjini Majumdar, 23, grew up in Howrah, adjacent to Kolkata. She has spent time in Kolkata, Bengaluru, Delhi and Pune.

"Pune, I found, was quite safe while I was there," she said. But when asked where she felt absolutely safe, her answer was not an Indian city. It was Kyoto, Japan, during an internship, where she spent two months travelling alone. She recalls one seemingly ordinary experience with a sense of wonder — a 40-minute walk from her university to her hotel at 4 a.m. "Nobody would just even, you know, look at you. It was so freeing to be able to walk around the city at any hour of the day and night and not feel threatened by anything."

In Goa, which faces its own problems with governance, safety is among them but it is control of land that worries Goans most. In a week since the recent CJP agitation, 300 people, many of them professionals, joined the party, indicating surging interest in holding traditional politicians to account.

Amreen Shaikh, the CJP spokesperson in Goa, says Gen Z has been active and a campaign to fix schools has been underway. "Every village should have its own CJP group monitoring public schools in their village, rather than having the same volunteers go from one village to another," says Shaikh.

The CJP has also encountered government apathy in its efforts to draw attention to the poor condition of state-run schools. For instance, when the group approached Goa's Directorate of Education (DoE), its concerns were dismissed with the assertion that schools in the coastal state were comparatively better than those in other states.

The CJP has become a catalyst for longstanding grievances affecting young people the most whether it is education, women's safety and now vote *chori*. ■

Reporting by Akshit Gupta, Praveena Sharma and Aiema Tauheed

Power and legitimacy



DELHI DARBAR

SANJAYA BARU

THE status of any nation, and indeed any institution, is defined both by its power and its legitimacy. Power does not necessarily extend legitimacy, either to a state or an institution, nor does legitimacy in itself confer power. It used to be claimed by Western analysts during the Cold War that while democratic Western societies had acquired both power and legitimacy, non-democratic nations may have power but do not enjoy international legitimacy.

An authoritarian, totalitarian or fascist state may command power but in the modern world it lacks legitimacy. Recent trends within democratic nations have brought this claim into question.

As the world's most powerful nation and as a 250-year-old democracy, the United States enjoyed both power and legitimacy over the past three-quarters of a century. Today one sees a weakening of its power but an even greater weakening of its legitimacy — as a democracy. Our own republic has been able to gather more power over the past quarter-century — power in its various dimensions — but over the past few years its legitimacy as a democracy has been increasingly called into question.

Consider each of the four institutions or 'estates' of our democratic republic — the legislature, the executive, the judiciary and the media. The power of each of these institutions has grown over the past decade. Parliament has been dominated by a single party that enjoyed majority support of its own till 2024. After 2024 the single largest party formed a government with the support of parties beholden to it in one way or another.

One would have thought that the executive and Parliament would have been weakened by this outcome. On the contrary, the political leadership has used its executive power to consolidate its parliamentary support base. Taken together, Parliament and the government have been able to reinforce their power. Yet, somewhere in this exercise the legitimacy of both has been compromised. The means adopted by the ruling regime to ensure and stabilize its majority in Parliament after 2024 has certainly reduced the political and moral legitimacy of the government.

The government itself, both at the Centre and in the states, has garnered more power than ever before. Yet, its inability to govern for the better good of the people owes to its reduced legitimacy among the public. Every major policy decision is viewed as benefitting an individual, a business or a social group. Rarely is national interest seen as the driving force. This speaks of reduced legitimacy of the State.



The government has garnered more power than ever before

The judiciary has been a focus of much criticism over the years. Through the instrumentality of the collegium as well as by being supportive of the ruling regime on critical matters of policy and politics, the judiciary has, at various levels and at the top, compromised its legitimacy even as it has garnered more power and pelf. The manner in which the courts have dealt with individual freedoms and political privilege has seriously damaged the legitimacy of the courts among the lay public.

What of the media? Its power has grown along with its profits. The highest in the land court the most expensive of journalists and their billionaire owners. Ironically, though, the legitimacy of those very high-profile men and women of the media has plummeted. Few believe mainstream media and fewer still believe the alternative media.

All of this has bred cynicism among many. It is, therefore, most heartening to see a large number of young people derive inspiration from the likes of a Neha Bora and an Abhijeet Dipke to step out and try and make a difference. They may yet lack power but they have already acquired legitimacy as the voice of an entire generation. The ruling regime's attempts to build an alternative and supportive Gen Z platform has fallen flat. The misuse of power delegitimizes the attempt to seek legitimacy in this manner.

There are many instances of the powerful being defeated by the weak when the former lose legitimacy. The defeat of the US in Vietnam is a fantastic example of how a war was first lost in the minds of the people before it was lost on the battleground. When soldiers or police question the cause they are being commanded to defend and begin to believe in the cause they are asked to suppress then all legitimacy is lost. The powerful become the defeated.

Something like this is happening today in India. Since 2024 the Bharatiya Janata Party has been able to consolidate its political position by securing adequate numbers in Parliament and winning a series of assembly elections — most importantly, Maharashtra, Bihar and West Bengal. Prime Minister Narendra Modi's power is at its peak. His sway over the sub-continent has widened. Yet, his leadership is fast losing its legitimacy at home and overseas.

Serious questions are being raised about the nature of Indian democracy in many friendly countries. India's inability to convince the world of her case in executing Operation Sindoor underscores this harsh reality. While the international community expresses solidarity in the battle against terrorism, it seeks evidence in support of India's case, unwilling to take New Delhi's explanations at face value.

India's power ensures that some sympathy is conveyed. The ruling dispensation's lack of legitimacy as the upholder of the values of a liberal, plural, secular democracy come in the way of any unquestioned acceptance of the Indian version of events. The same is true at home. The government's power and the power of the various institutions of the State help it survive attacks from the outside. However, that is no longer because people are convinced of the legitimacy of one's arguments. ■

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'.

Youth can change politics



LOOKING AHEAD

KIRAN KARNIK

RECENT upsurges of mass mobilization — most notably by the Cockroach Janta Party (CJP) — seem to mark a new and notable direction in the political landscape. What began as an online, social media joke or satirical reaction to a comment by the Chief Justice of India has evolved into an on-ground "movement".

After an uncertain start, it gained momentum as concern about the leaks in NEET (National Eligibility cum Entrance Test), the nation-wide entrance test for medical admissions, focused on demanding the resignation of the education minister. In a few weeks, it grew to cities across the country and attracted ever-bigger crowds everywhere, comprising youth but also including many others.

After its success in getting the minister to resign, it shifted its attention to the sorry state of schools, especially in rural areas. It is now part of a broader coalition that is concerned with the revision of electoral rolls through the Special Intensive Revision (SIR) and the consequent deletion of a reported 130 million voters. Demonstrations and mobilization have now begun, with protests in many centres from October 2 demanding the resignation of the chief election commissioner, Gyanesh Kumar, who is faulted with being responsible for many of the decisions.

After some hesitation and suspicions about the organizers, opposition political parties are now joining the mass movement, though its organizers are as yet staying away from any party affiliations. The Central government, after first ignoring the CJP, is now clearly worried. Its leaders have been trying to court youth through social media platforms and interactions in colleges. Part of the nervousness — though as yet largely invisible — comes from the analogies and experience of our neighbours. In just the past few years, we have witnessed movements — largely triggered and led by youngsters — in Sri Lanka, Bangladesh and Nepal. Each one successfully brought about regime change in the country.

Many decades ago, student movements were a force that wrought great change. The anti-war protests (against US involvement in Vietnam) in the 1960s was the biggest factor influencing public opinion, ultimately leading to US withdrawal. In Europe — particularly France and Germany — student uprisings in the late 1960s led to changes in politics, with a marked "leftward" shift and the emergence of environment as an important agenda (the Green party in Germany is an example). Decades later, popular uprisings — again with youth often at the forefront — marked the "colour revolutions" in (then) communist Europe, and the "Arab Spring". These led to regime changes in many countries. Now, there is again a student movement in France, against poor school infrastructure.

In India, we have long had a tradition of mass movements, beginning with the decades-long freedom struggle. In the 1970s, there was the Navnirman Andolan in Gujarat, with students at the forefront, and Jayaprakash Narayan's movement originating in Bihar. These triggered Indira Gandhi's Emergency in 1975, but also forced her to call for elections in 1977. More recently, especially from 2012, there was mobilization against corruption, which included many from the middle class. This culminated in the defeat of the UPA.



Youth-led mobilizations have grown spontaneously

For many years after the 1991 economic reforms, the swing to privatization seemed to spawn growing materialism, with many (including, admittedly, this writer) arguing that the young generation was concerned only with salary levels; a non-idealistic, non-ideological, I-me-myself selfishness exhibited through continuous posts of narcissistic selfies.

University campuses, barring a handful or less, were quite "dead", with hardly any ferment or intellectual churn. The anti-CAA (Citizenship (Amendment) Act) movement reflected some mass activity but seemed geographically limited, and Covid killed any chance of its growth. The farmer agitation was another mass mobilization, a rare one that made the government back down. Again, though, it was limited: to parts of Punjab, Haryana, and UP.

In 2026, we see, once again, mass mobilizations in many places around the country. These, too, are youth-led and have grown almost spontaneously, without any organized entity in overall charge. This and the historical "rewind" bring out two points sharply. The first is the effectiveness of such mass movements. In India, we have seen how impactful the completely peaceful ("Gandhian") movements have been. Almost in contrast, the ones which chose the path of violence — be they separatist or "left-extreme" — have not succeeded: their violence justifying strong State retaliation.

The second is the nature of these mobilizations. Though, in a few cases, one knows of the hand — visible and sometimes invisible — of a political party behind them, in most cases they have had origins in a spontaneous upsurge of dissatisfaction. Is this now a growing trend, in which political parties of all hues become less important?

Looking ahead, is this the death knell for political parties, a portent of new societal structures where traditional multi-party democracy is replaced by non-party representatives from mass movements? Or will this mark the birth of a new "youth" party, possibly necessitated as a reaction to the old and ageing leadership of most existing parties? Notably, there is no large political party of the young in any country. Of course, Nepal's Balendra Shah, Finland's Sanna Marin, and France's Emmanuel Macron are below 40, while Sebastian Kurz was elected Austria's Chancellor at 30. However, the presidents of the US, China, and Russia are all septuagenarians, as is our PM.

A move towards governance through mobilization around a cause and "instant democracy" through digital town halls (new tech makes it feasible and easy) may seem tempting, with participatory decision-making on a continuous, almost real-time basis.

However, there are dangers in instant decisions, made with little introspection, expert opinion, or discussion. Referendums can be swayed by emotion, making today's decision tomorrow's regret (Brexit is but one example). At the end of the day, it does seem that a multi-party electoral system with a parliament and parties to discuss and mediate may be slow but is the "least worst".

A question, then, to ponder: does advancing tech and AI call for a new form of organizing, a new system of freedom, participation, and democracy? ■

Kiran Karnik is a public policy analyst and author. His most recent book is, 'Dusk or Dawn: Essays on India and the Emerging Tomorrow'.

The learning curve in healthcare



HEALTH DIALOGUE

Dr ALEXANDER THOMAS

THE future of Indian healthcare will depend greatly on the kind of healthcare professionals we train today. Medical education is not only about scientific knowledge and technical skills. It must develop professionalism, ethics, communication, leadership, research, innovation and, above all, compassion. The human touch — listening to patients, understanding their concerns and communicating with empathy — must remain at the heart of medicine.

These principles apply equally to nurses, allied health professionals and the wider healthcare workforce.

The expansion of postgraduate training through the National Board of Examinations in Medical Sciences (NBEMS) has been an important reform. Allowing accredited hospitals beyond traditional medical colleges to provide postgraduate training has increased capacity while linking education more closely with healthcare delivery. Public-private partnerships can strengthen medical education and healthcare service delivery while addressing critical workforce shortages.

The National Medical Commission (NMC) is also moving towards a more modern regulatory framework. The shift from the traditional "inspection raj" towards transparent, technology enabled and outcome oriented regulation is welcome. Regulation should increasingly assess educational quality and graduate competence rather than simply checking infrastructure and compliance. Vacancies in key NMC positions should also be filled promptly so that the Commission can discharge its responsibilities effectively.

ACHIEVING QUALITY The priority in healthcare education must be quality, not simply expansion. Institutions should maintain consistent standards of teaching, clinical exposure, skills development and competency. Ultimately, outcomes, not infrastructure alone, should determine quality.

India should not measure success simply by the number of healthcare professionals it produces. Every graduate must be adequately trained and capable of delivering safe, effective, ethical and compassionate care.

The MBBS degree needs to regain its value and purpose. Traditionally, the MBBS graduate was expected to function as a competent general physician and undertake a range of basic procedures. Increasing specialization, changing societal expectations, and growing legal and judicial concerns have progressively narrowed the confidence and scope of many MBBS graduates.

The MBBS graduate should be strengthened and empowered to function as a competent general practitioner, particularly in primary care. Specialist training can subsequently provide opportunities for advanced practice.

The proposed one-year compulsory rural service after MBBS could benefit both communities and young doctors. Graduates would gain experience managing diverse conditions, often with limited resources, while rural communities would gain access to trained doctors. Such service must be supported by adequate infrastructure, accommodation, safety, remuneration, mentorship and specialist advice. Properly structured, it could become a valuable component of medical education.



The MBBS graduate should be empowered to be a general practitioner

BEYOND NEET-UG The National Eligibility cum Entrance Test-Undergraduate (NEET-UG) has brought greater uniformity and transparency to medical admissions, but remains overwhelmingly examination based. Academic ability is important, but medicine also requires empathy, communication, resilience, ethical judgement and emotional maturity. The aptitude and suitability of candidates should therefore receive greater consideration.

The government's NEET reform committee should examine whether the present system can be made more holistic, efficient and fair without compromising merit or transparency. The objective should be to select students who have both the academic ability and personal qualities required for a demanding profession.

The transition from MBBS to postgraduate training also needs attention. NEET-PG provides a national, merit based mechanism for selection into specialist training. However, intense competition has led many MBBS graduates to spend two or even three additional years preparing exclusively for the examination. This delays professional development and imposes significant personal, financial and national costs through the loss of productive healthcare providers to the nation.

The proposed common national exit examination for MBBS could provide a viable way forward. With appropriate preparation, it deserves early implementation. It could establish a consistent national benchmark for graduates and provide valuable feedback on the quality of medical education across institutions. The NBEMS provides a useful model. Its postgraduate examinations are conducted nationally in a standardized format at neutral centres, with independent examiners who have no prior association with candidates or their institutions. A similar approach could strengthen objectivity, consistency and fairness in an MBBS exit examination.

Institutions should also be assessed through the performance of their graduates in common examinations and other meaningful outcomes. High-performing institutions should be recognized, while those below expected standards should receive support and encouragement to improve. This would create a culture of continuous institutional improvement rather than one based primarily on regulatory compliance.

Doctors are leaders as well as clinicians. Medical education should therefore provide exposure to leadership, finance, management, organizational behaviour, health economics and healthcare policy.

Technology and artificial intelligence must also become integral to education. Students need exposure to digital health, electronic health records, telemedicine, data analytics, AI assisted diagnosis, robotics and genomics, together with their ethical, privacy and safety implications. Technology should enhance, not replace, the human relationship between doctor and patient.

Healthcare is delivered by teams, not individuals. The future of Indian healthcare will depend not only on infrastructure, policy or technology, but equally on the values, competencies and vision of every healthcare professional we train today. ■

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 city in the mirror



LINES OF SIGHT

SHYAM TEKWANI

OUTSIDE Mysuru's suburban bus stand, an 85-metre wall had acquired a second purpose. For nearly 30 years, passing men had used it as a urinal. Warnings, railings and religious tiles failed to end this. In May 2026, the municipal corporation covered the stretch with reflective panels. Officials reported a 90 percent fall in offenders within a day. The city had finally found someone these men were reluctant to offend: themselves.

Yet there was a public toilet nearby, and it was barely used. That detail prevents an easy sermon about either municipal neglect or national character. A city can build a toilet and allow it to become filthy, unsafe or difficult to find. A citizen can pass a serviceable one and choose a wall. Provision without civic habit may remain unused. Civic injunction without usable provision becomes hypocrisy.

Henry Miller offers an unlikely way into the distinction. In *Black Spring,* he stops his bicycle at the Saint-Cloud bridge and enters a Paris pissoir. He has the whole day, sunlight above him and birds making a commotion; a woman looks down from a window. What impressed Miller about France was that its people would "admit to the necessity of pissing now and then".

But the operative fact in his rhapsody is easily missed: there was a urinal. Miller was not relieving himself against somebody's gate. Paris had admitted the body into the design of the street and given the bladder a civic address.

The pissoir did not make the French morally superior. It embodied an elementary compact. The body need not be treated as shameful, but neither should a stranger inherit its consequences. A public convenience was courtesy cast in iron. A urinal was never merely plumbing. It decided how bodily need entered public space and who got to decide.

India's beleaguered wall reveals what happens when that compact fails. Property owners have placed religious images along their foundations. Volunteers in Rajasthan once blew whistles and beat drums behind offenders.

Mysuru has now called in the mirror. The wall has been placed under the protection of religion, public embarrassment and finally self-regard. Every elevated sentiment is summoned to perform the work of a modest, clean urinal. All these devices treat the wall as the patient. They can protect a corner; they cannot create a civic arrangement.

The comedy should not conceal how unevenly the freedom is distributed. A man caught short can turn towards a wall with the assurance of long practice. A woman cannot ordinarily do the same. The public wall is thus an informal male convenience built into the geography of the city. For her, an absent, dirty or unsafe toilet may determine how much water she drinks before leaving home, how far she travels and how long she can remain in the city. Public sanitation therefore regulates who may inhabit public space without elaborate preparation.



Mysuru calls in the mirror to stop urination in public

Mysuru's mirrors are clever. They may also prove temporary. A reflection can produce embarrassment but it supplies neither water nor maintenance.

Even Miller's sunny composition contains the division. He stands in the street, bodily need accommodated and mind at ease; the woman appears at a window. He possesses the day. She occupies the frame.

There is another figure outside the frame. The man finishes and walks away. The smell remains with the shopkeeper, resident, vendor and passer-by. Eventually someone must wash the pavement clean.

In India, sanitation work continues to follow old lines of caste and newer forms of insecure contract labour. The act appears individual only because its consequences are assigned to people who remain unseen.

"Lack of civic sense" is too weightless for this transfer of burden. One man's convenience becomes another person's stigmatized work.

Swachh Bharat placed sanitation at the centre of official policy and government publicity. It built toilets on a vast scale, but construction was also the part easiest to count, photograph and claim.

A toilet, however, is not a monument but a continuing service. Its less certain legacy lies in the distance between a toilet built and one kept open, clean, safe, supplied with water and used. Mysuru's barely used facility shows why the obligation still runs in both directions.

Civility begins in that reciprocity. It asks the city to design for people as they are: women and men, young and old, disabled, hurried, ill or far from home. It asks the citizen to understand that a blank wall is not unused space awaiting his claim. This is neither puritanism nor permissiveness. It is the unglamorous agreement by which an unavoidable need is met without humiliation, trespass or an invisible servant.

Mysuru's mirrors are clever. They may also prove temporary. A reflection can produce embarrassment faster than a warning sign, but it supplies neither water nor maintenance and does nothing for the woman searching for a safe toilet. Its deeper value lies in the question it returns. Who needs to change: the man, the municipality, the design of the street or the habits by which men have occupied it? The only serious answer is: all four.

Miller found joy in a city that had made a place for bodily necessity. An Indian city will not become civil by denying that joy, nor by covering every vulnerable wall with gods and mirrors. It will become civil when relief no longer requires trespass, when restraint is matched by provision, and when neither the smell nor the labour is left to somebody else.

Mysuru installed a mirror so that the man at the wall might see himself. A civil society would ask the city to do the same. ■

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



Around 20 people come together for a philosophical session

Share your deepest thoughts

Bonding over a bowl of soup

PRAVEENA SHARMA

SINCE the beginning of this year, while Goa's beaches have continued to draw their usual crowds of holidaymakers, a quieter gathering has been taking place away from the crashing waves. On the second Saturday of every month, around 20 people come together at a pre-decided venue — not for a party or a picnic, but for a conversation.

Clutching a cup of soup in their hands, they meet at different locations across the coastal state to informally philosophize on pertinent matters — some close to their heart, others relating to society in general.

As a community engagement talk shop started by the School of Sanskrit, Philosophy and Indic Studies (SSPIS) of Goa University along with the Philosophical Association, Soul & Soup Saturdays or S3 has caught the attention of everyone with a penchant for thoughtful conversation.

This soulful and soupy Saturday affair is an initiative by Dr Walter Menezes, assistant professor at SSPIS, along with research scholar Jonathan Sequeira, to underscore the relevance of philosophy and stimulate intellectual discussions in people's everyday lives.

"We are increasingly observing the diminishing relevance of philosophy in people's lives. With Soul & Soup Saturdays, we are trying to make the discipline of philosophy and what we teach at the university relevant to people, weaving it into their lifestyle and daily routine," he says.

The themes are wide-ranging, with a universality and depth that prod participants to look inward. They have included "What Holds Relationships Together: Commitment or Convenience?", "Who is in Charge? Reflections from Stoic Philosophy", "Humour and Sarcasm", "Self-Love, Healing or Narcissism?", "Shared Humanity: Is Suffering Meaningful?", "Anger and Indifference: The Price We Pay" and "Nuclear Families and Stress Management".

QUESTIONS, NOT ANSWERS The Saturday event series took off on January 10 at Bay 15, a beachfront open-air dining lounge with sweeping sea views in Dona Paula. Against the backdrop of the sun's fading ember glow, nodding palms and the coastal breeze rushing in from Odxel Beach, 20 locals and tourists from across Goa gathered to discuss the intricate relationship between technology and well-being.

The 90-minute group discussion over a bowlful of soup, held early evening, follows a seven-step format. It begins at 4.30 pm with a 20-minute ice-breaking round that buzzes with introductions and light banter, before the moderator, usually Menezes, puts the topic of the evening on the table with a 10-minute speech.

The group then breaks into teams of three for a 20-minute vibrant and personalized conversation on the topic, after filling their cups with steaming soup. This is where the theme gets flipped over and over, opening up different perspectives and interpretations.

Then comes a five-minute moment of introspection, or "silent reflection". This is when everyone is compelled to "force clarity of the theme in relation to one's life".

After the meditative process, which immerses participants in their thoughts and consciousness, the floor is opened for 20 minutes for everyone to share their "philosophical takeaway" with the group in "one sentence".

Continued on page 30

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At the end of the session, everyone absorbs the substance of the discussion and leaves at 6 pm with lingering questions -- to which they try to seek answers on their own.

"The aim of philosophy is to help us ask the right questions. No one will have a perfect answer, but everyone would strive towards finding the best answer for oneself," states a note outlining the seven-step method for the philosophical outing in Goa.

The ninth and latest edition of Soul & Soup Saturdays was held on September 12 at Ferry Cross Museotel in Betim, where 29 people from diverse backgrounds gathered to share their thoughts on the theme — "Gender Roles & Unspoken Self: Dialogues on Social Expectations and Emotional Burden" — as they sipped soup and took in the scenic view of the gently flowing Mandovi River, with the Goa skyline stretching across the horizon.

The subject of the conversation was inspired by the famous quote from French philosopher and writer Simone de Beauvoir's 1949 book, *The Second Sex*: 'One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman.'

For sexagenarian educator Elmera D'Souza, who had already attended two Soul & Soup Saturdays, the topic of discussion was particularly close to her heart. As a single mother, she had spent much of her life navigating gender biases and breaking through glass ceilings, often grappling with challenges that extended across different aspects of her life. She hoped the conversation would help her find answers to some of the questions that have gnawed at her for years.

"I went through a lot of hardships — financially and otherwise. These philosophical sessions help you understand your problems and, eventually, yourself," she said.

Dinesh Verma, a general physician and eye surgeon, shared how his understanding of gender responses changed during his stay in the UK in the 1980s. He recalled noticing that issues considered gender-sensitive in the UK were often laughed off or dismissed in India.

The experience, Verma said, made him reorient his own views on gender and recognize biases within himself. He began to notice how the attitude of Indian men could change depending on whether a senior colleague was a man or a woman, particularly when he observed the behaviour of his Indian juniors.

"There is a definite gender bias in us (Indians). If I, as a man, had a woman as my senior, my attitude was different. I started to realize this when I observed my Indian juniors," Verma opened up in front of the group.

Like D'Souza and Verma, the weekend gatherings give everyone a platform to reflect, question and philosophize on the theme chosen for the evening.



Victor Hugo Gomes of Goa Chitra Museum expressing his opinion



Three participants enjoy their time together



People from all walks of life are welcome

TRAVEL AND TALK One of the charming aspects of the Saturday event is that participants bring along their fluorescent blue soup cups, priced at ₹300, every time they attend. And once they have finished their soup, they wash the cup and take it back home with them.

What began as a personally funded initiative has gradually found its own rhythm. Menezes said the Soul & Soup Saturdays sessions were initially free, with him bearing the expenses himself. As the gatherings grew, a nominal registration fee of ₹100 was introduced, largely to cover the cost of the soup and expenses related to registering the initiative's trademark.

Over time, the conversations have travelled across different locations in Goa — from Bay 15 and Chitra Museum to Ferry Cross Museotel, Mr Farmer, Casa do Povo, Nana Nani Natwanche Park, Peace Cottage and Goa University. Each venue, Menezes said, offers a setting conducive to slowing down, sitting together and engaging in meaningful philosophical conversations.

Interestingly, the venues do not charge the organizers for hosting the sessions. Menezes said the venue partners have supported the initiative as they see it as a form of social service.

"We don't pay for the venues as our venue partners see us as doing a social service. Earlier, the events were completely free, but since the last session, we have started charging a registration fee of ₹100. This is mainly to cover the cost of the soup served during the session and part of the expenses involved in acquisition of a trademark," he said.

Encouraged by the response to Soul & Soup Saturdays, SSPIS has launched another initiative, Philoretreat, and a tourism project funded by the Indian Council of Social Science Research (ICSSR). The central research body has sanctioned a grant of ₹81 lakh for the project.

"We are bringing philosophy and philosophical counselling into the tourism sector. I have received a project worth around ₹81 lakh from the Central government, focusing on indigenous cuisines, wellness and philosophical counselling. I'm integrating all of these elements into hinterland tourism. It is a part of the Viksit Bharat project," Menezes said.

So, the next time you head to Goa, remember that you may not just be soaking up the sunshine or feasting on delectable Goan cuisine. You may also find yourself putting on your thinking cap, stirring up a few questions and straightening out a few thoughts at one of Soul & Soup Saturdays' philosophical sessions. ■

Stark film on a girl's fate

SAIBAL CHATTERJEE

AN Indian short fiction film currently doing the rounds of festivals and winning accolades across the world isn't interested in entertaining its audience. Not in the least. Shobhita Thakur's *Khilawadi* has a clear purpose. It does not deviate from it.

Centred on women of an oppressed, exploited caste, Khilawadi speaks to our collective outrage at the plight of all women who are deprived of the right to their bodies.

The 26-minute film, Thakur's directorial debut, brings us face to face with the horrific reality of girls from the Banchhada community in Madhya Pradesh who are forced into sex work as soon as they attain puberty. They are born without agency.

What they get to do with their lives is preordained by the caste they belong to. Thakur distils all such girls — she met and spoke with many during her four-month research — in the lead character of Sapna, played by Jahnavi Rane.



Shobhita Thakur with Jahnavi Rane who plays the lead character of Sapna

The reality that Sapna represents is shockingly stark. But Thakur, sensitive to the anguish of the Banchhada women, refrains from anything that is graphic, sensational or in-your-face.

Khilawadi is a disturbing and heart-breaking film but it does not turn the plight of the victims into a spectacle. You feel their pain even though you may not 'see' it in bold relief on the screen.



Born in Madhya Pradesh in a leftist family, the writer-director of *Khilawadi* spent the early years of her life in Bhopal, Indore, Ujjain and Raipur before joining the Film and Television Institute of India in Pune to train as an editor.

"Being from a Scheduled Caste myself, I have all my life known about caste-based atrocities in MP. I was always aware of the Banchhada and Bedia women," says Thakur, whose decision to focus on the painful subject was instinctive.

"After FTII and some years of work in the industry, when I decided to make my own film, I simply had to tell stories of girls and women who need the support of the voice of cinema," she adds. "This story simply had to be told. The world needed to know how easily we turn a blind eye to oppression and injustice."

The world is responding to *Khilawadi*. The film is travelling and being embraced wherever it is screened. The most notable of the awards that it has garnered is the one at the Altyn Minbar Kazan International Film Festival in Russia where the jury was chaired by a filmmaker Thakur idolizes, Majid Majidi.

Sapna is 12 and pre-pubescent. The spirited schoolgirl with dreams of escape on the wings of education faces the prospect of all doors being slammed in her face.

In the opening sequence of *Khilawadi*, Sapna, impervious to the many hurdles in her path, stands at the window of a village medical clinic where the doctor is a woman. She imagines that she can make her way one day to the position the doctor holds.

But the fate that most likely awaits Sapna has been decided for her by her mother, her brother, whose wedding has cost the impoverished family and driven them into debt worth lakhs of rupees, and a society closing in on her like a ruthless predator.

Her mother, Sanjhi (Richa Gupta), gives her no hope. She looks forward to the day she will ritualistically initiate her daughter into prostitution, completely unmindful of the girl's aspirations. Sapna wants to go to college and break free from the trap that an accident of birth has laid for her.

At school, Sapna's teacher, also a lady, talks about astronaut Kalpana Chawla, who represents a very, very distant reality for a Banchhada girl born without the privilege or power to pursue what her heart desires. Her mind may soar but her body is mortgaged to fate and a rigid social structure, neither of which allows her any leeway.

Before Thakur began filming, she spent hours with Banchhada women trying to understand their lives and struggles. She visited their homes and interacted closely with them to understand what they deal with as women doomed to a way of life that they have no way of altering unless the world wakes up and does something about it.

"I also spent four months in Bhopal talking to social workers and civil society activists, besides reading books and watching documentaries about these women," Thakur says, adding that "the final screenplay was decided by the Banchhada women. They themselves told me each and every scene of the film as it happened to them. I created fictional characters based on their true accounts."

But she did fall back on "poetic licence" in the film's final montage. "It was my own emotional, lyrical take on my impressions of the pain that girls like Sapna endure," she says.

Sapna isn't just one girl. She stands in for her entire ilk. Says Thakur, "I met many girls. Some had never been to school and some had dropped out. One girl managed to finish her master's in physics. I modelled the ambitious part of Sapna on this girl."

She adds: "But since a post-graduate Banchhada girl was a rare anomaly, I mixed many other girls to create my lead character. Sapna's fate is the fate of most Banchhada girls." ■

Become a day-tripper in Mysuru

RASHMI GOPAL RAO

THE royal city of Mysore is a study in contrasts, seamlessly merging tradition with modernity. Palaces and old markets are juxtaposed beside industries, IT companies, cafes and much else. Once a tranquil traditional city, Mysuru has rapidly evolved into an expanding urban hub bustling with economic activity.

For the day-tripper the city offers a gamut of choices — palaces to explore, markets to shop in, museums to peruse, libraries to browse, and gastronomical delights to savour. It is, after all, the cultural capital of Karnataka.

The city is most famous for the 10-day Dasara Festival held every year. If you've missed it this year, catch it next time. Here's a bit of background to a grand celebration synonymous with Mysuru.

Also called Navratri, the festival, once the preserve of the royal Wadiyar dynasty, is today celebrated with great pomp and fervour as the state festival of Karnataka. It is called Naddabhabba which means the festival of the land or state.

"What is particularly significant is that Dasara, which once centred around the ruler and the royal court, gradually became a people's festival without losing its traditional character, rituals and grandeur," says Gouri Satya, senior journalist and historian who lives in Mysuru.

After Independence, the royal Dasara celebrations evolved into a large-scale public event. Initially, citizens took the lead in organizing various events, and later the state itself took over the celebrations, involving people in much larger numbers than before.

The kingdom of Mysuru was founded in 1399 after which it was ruled by the Vijayanagara empire. After the empire's downfall, it was ruled by the Wadiyar dynasty. The last reigning king of the dynasty, Jayachamarajendra Wadiyar, governed till 1950.



The historic Mysore Palace. There are seven magnificent palaces.



The Kaladevi Doll Museum, a delight for children



Caparisoned elephants prepping for the Dasara parade

Mysuru is famous for its palaces. But there is a lot more to discover such as its musuems, markets and libraries. The Dasara Festival is an annual draw.

BURST OF CULTURE From early September it is not uncommon to see 10 to 12 elephants parading down Mysuru's main streets. Kept on a strict regime of fitness and diet, these pachyderms are made to practise the walk in the early mornings and in the evenings.

The festival is the epitome of grandeur and opulence. The private royal durbar in the resplendent Mysuru palace is illuminated with over 100,000 light bulbs. Social and cultural activities are held across the city, including folk dance performances, wrestling matches and even a torch light parade.

The highlight of the festival is, of course, the Jamboo Savari — a procession of caparisoned elephants. The lead elephant carries the coveted golden howdah which weighs a whopping 750 kg and houses the idol of Goddess Chamundeshwari. "Today Mysuru Dasara represents a continuity between the royal past and the present. The palace, the procession, the elephants, the music, the illumination and the participation of the people continue to give the festival its distinctive character," says Satya.

"No other festival has such a large canvas or has become so deeply ingrained in the cultural life and identity of a city," he adds.

PALACE HOPPING Mysuru has seven major palaces, earning it the epithet of "city of palaces". The most famous is the Amba Vilas palace, simply called the Mysuru palace. It is an architectural gem built in the Indo-Saracenic style with influences from the Rajput, Gothic and Hoysala schools as well.

The original palace was destroyed by a fire and the present structure was completed in 1912. Beautiful gardens, stunning domes, grand durbar halls and breathtaking paintings are some of its highlights which attract thousands of visitors each year.

Then there are the Lalit Mahal palace and the Jaganmohan palace; the latter now houses the Jayachamarajendra Art Gallery. Visit also the famous Chamundeshwari temple which is located atop a hill and is about 13 km from Mysuru. The deity is one of the 18 Shakti peethas and is highly revered and patronized by the royal family. If you are a fitness enthusiast, walking up 1,000 steps to reach this temple built in the Dravidian style is a good idea.

MUSEUM TRIPS The city is full of insightful museums that are a delight for the discerning traveller. The railway museum, in the centre of the city, has interesting train models, locomotives and vintage engines. There are information boards, yesteryear photographs and models depicting the history of the Southwestern Railway apart from ticketing tools, lanterns and several other paraphernalia related to trains.

Also have a look at the R.K. Narayan museum which has been established in the home of the legendary author. You can relive the magic of the famous television series, *Malgudi Days*, the book, *Swami and Friends*, and catch a glimpse of the author's personal belongings which include his awards, books, writing table and even clothes.

The Government Museum and Art gallery, situated in the 225-year-old Wellington Bhavan, houses a range of art from Indian miniature paintings and Mysuru Ganjifa art to Mysuru traditional paintings. What's also unique here are the portraits of the palace artists.

There is also the Kaladevi Doll Museum, a fandom for children. Established in 2023 by Ramsons Kala Pratishtana, a non-profit art foundation in Mysuru, the museum houses a collection of over 5,000 dolls that have been sourced from across India and the world. From Cheriyal to Kinnal and Varanasi dolls to Channapatna, the museum has it all.

TASTE OF HERITAGE If you like to tread the offbeat path, opt for a heritage walk. It will take you past several historical buildings and monuments which hold stories dating back centuries. The iconic Devaraja market offers visitors a taste of local life and culture. A visit to the market is a treat for the senses with its wide variety of flowers, fruits and vegetables. From vermilion to bangles to the fragrant GI tagged Mysuru jasmine, the market offers a kaleidoscope of sights!

You can taste the famous Mysore pak at Guru Sweets located here. This legendary sweet is believed to have been created by royal chef Kakasura Madappa in 1935 by mixing gram flour, ghee and sugar. The chief chef of Maharaja Krishnaraja Wadiyar IV, Madappa set up his shop near Devaraja market to sell the sweet after it gained popularity.

Mysuru is a paradise for food lovers. The city caters to every palate. Traditional eateries include the original Vinayaka Mylari, which dishes out the delectable fluffy, buttery Mylari dosa served with sagu (a vegetable curry) and chutney, and Sri Gayatri Tiffin Room (GTR), which serves some excellent masala dosa, idli-vada, and filter coffee.

The café culture of the city has ensured a steady stream of new restaurants and bakeries. From SAPA Sourdough & Pastry, The Local Friendly Bakery, Minimal Coffee Roasters, Old House, Neon Castle to Sahib's Brick Oven Pizza, Mysuru has it all. ■



The Central Library in remote Maniguh village has more than 22,000 books in multiple languages

Village with a yen for books

RAKESH AGRAWAL

MANIGUH is a picture-perfect Himalayan village, a potential tourist attraction — but its fame has spread because it has a profusion of libraries and an evolving reading culture.

How does a remote village in Rudraprayag district of Uttarakhand, perched at an altitude of 1,650 m, turn into a literary hotspot?

Our story begins on 26 January 2003, Republic Day. Suman Mishra, a journalist and writer from Delhi, along with his wife, Bina, and two collaborators, Rahul Rawat and Aalok Soni, started a Central Library in Maniguh with 4,000 books.

The group earlier founded the Hamara Gaon Ghar Foundation (HGGF) to improve literacy rates and reduce migration from the hills by turning remote villages into knowledge and culture hubs. "In 2021, we studied the village's major challenges and realized that isolated interventions in education or tourism would not be enough," recalls Suman Mishra. "We decided to adopt a holistic approach, combining books, culture, skills and livelihoods to make village life more sustainable and attractive."

The Central Library now has more than 22,000 books in multiple languages — Hindi, English, Sanskrit and regional languages like Garhwali, Kumaoni, Urdu and more. The collection includes literature, science, history, competitive exam prep, children's books, and rare historical texts from the historic Naval Kishore Press, one of South Asia's most influential publishing enterprises founded in 1858 by 22-year-old Naval Kishore.

Access to the library is free, and it remains open throughout the year. The library is very popular among young people, who study in it for hours to prepare for competitive exams. If it wasn't for this library, they would have had to travel all the way to Dehradun.

Apart from Central Library, Suman Mishra and his group built smaller library centres where children and trekkers can stop, sit and read. "We expanded the Central Library to four smaller open-air Pustak Mandirs or book temples, along trails, near temples, and village spots," says Bina Mishra.

Maniguh, a fairly large village of some 250 households, is divided into six toks or hamlets. Smaller book temples, in the tok, make it easier for children to access books.

HGGF then began to create a broader ecosystem of skill building, eco-tourism and livelihood generation. Its work attracted the attention of the Uttarakhand Open University which has come on board to support education, digital literacy and re-engage women in learning programmes.

To create livelihoods, skill development projects have been introduced. One example is the Pine Needle Craft Workshop, where local women learn to transform discarded pine needles, a major cause of forest fires, into eco-friendly products. A second workshop trained people in beekeeping. Another was on biodiversity conservation.

An annual Gaon-Ghar Mahotsav, a two-day cultural festival, brings together professors, writers, poets, artists and musicians from across the country. Besides celebrating local culture, it creates a rare space for dialogue between rural communities and the wider intellectual world.

Equally popular are the Book Marathon, where young and old sit together and read, and a Summer Learning Program, organized in collaboration with institutions such as the Tata Himmotthan Society. Through storytelling, reading campaigns, craft activities and experiential learning, these programmes encourage children, and often entire families, to rediscover the joy of reading. ■

Malaysia's thrilling tourism fest

SUSHEELA NAIR

OUR Malaysian sojourn began with a visit to Bukit Bintang, one of Kuala Lumpur's busiest commercial and entertainment hubs. We headed for the Rain, Rave, Water Music Festival 2026, which was part of Visit Malaysia's national tourism campaign. This high-energy celebration coincided with the nation's Labour Day, bringing together music, culture and community in one unforgettable experience. The usually congested streets transformed into a massive open-air, high-energy water-soaked dance floor.

Encashing on changing demands, perspectives and consumer patterns, Tourism Malaysia has come up with innovative ideas to draw tourists. The Indian tourist, for instance, has evolved and matured from being a first-time traveller looking for destinations packed with routine sightseeing. When destination fatigue sets in, tourists scout for off-the-beaten-track sites, new experiences and experiential travel.

Hence, Tourism Malaysia has embarked on a marketing spree to promote and showcase niche destinations and new experiences in and around Kuala Lumpur.

Water fountains, artificial rain, and lighting effects installed all over the city culminated in a dazzling effect. The sound system, with a series of speakers strategically placed along a street, created a reverberating surround-sound experience. Water cannon and sprays drenched festival-goers with water. Blending entertainment with cultural story-telling, the festival featured regional and international DJs, Malaysian performers, and themed rain-inspired installations.

We strolled through the Rhythm of Flavours Zone, a curated food bazaar which reflected the Malaysian culinary landscape, featuring dishes such as nasi lemak, grilled satay, nasi goreng and laksa. The Rhythm of Culture showcased the traditional crafts of Malaysia.

Sated with the bustling nightlife, world class shopping, spectacular shows, top-notch leisure and entertainment facilities of Kuala Lumpur, the next morning we hopped onto the Hop-On-Hop-Off bus to explore KL's iconic landmarks. We enjoyed the cityscape from an open-air deck as the bus took us through the concrete jungle, and historical landmarks. We found many city residents also taking this tour to experience the magic of the double-decker bus at night, surrounded by the stunning skyline, nightlife and dazzling lights of the streets and buildings.

The highlight of our trip was our visit to the interactive Immersify Gallery in Bukit Bintang. As we entered the wondrous world of Malaysia's first permanent, purpose-built immersive media art gallery, we felt we were embarking on a multi-sensorial journey. We explored 30,000 sq. feet of 11 uniquely crafted zones infused with Malaysia's vibrant cultural identity. We raved about the 360-degree mirrors, ambient lighting, and floor-to-ceiling projection and watched the spectacular visual extravaganza of Immersify. The juxtaposition of stunning visuals and world-class technology transported us to the realm of make-believe.

Civil Society pictures/Susheela Nair



Wira and Manja, mascots of Visit Malaysia 2026



Batu Caves, a popular destination for Indian tourists

From spatial 3D surround sound and state-of-the-art visual projections to interactive walls and majestic larger-than-life installations, Immersify KL harnesses the power of cutting-edge technology and creative art to produce a world-class multi-sensory journey. It is highly rated for its visually stunning digital art projections and family-friendly vibe.

The 11 interactive zones include a children's sea creature colouring space and rooms that bring famous masterpieces to life. We found it highly accessible and engaging for children, who can see their coloured-in drawings projected on walls, as well as for older adults.

After a sumptuous, traditional village lunch at Kampung's, we headed to Skyline Luge, a popular getaway located amidst the scenic Gamuda Gardens on the outskirts of Kuala Lumpur. Though not on the regular tourist radar, locals from neighbouring places come in hordes for a dose of fun and adventure at Skyline Luge. It is a favourite haunt of families. There is a multitude of activities to indulge in, irrespective of age. We experienced the thrills and spills of adventure sport. We felt the adrenaline rush as we raced down 1,600 m of track over 30 twists and turns, navigated hairpin corners, and sped through tunnels.

We started our adventure with the Skyride, a relaxing four-seater chairlift that took us smoothly to the top of the Luge tracks and the start of the Hyfly Zipline. The ride on the chairlift, which you take from the bottom to the top of the track, ascending slowly with your feet in the air, is scenic in itself — affording panoramic views of the greenery around Kuala Lumpur and of the track.

From the Skyride, we enjoyed the twists of the snaking tracks below, soaked in the soothing scenery before the lush rainforest beyond and went on a clicking spree. It gave us a unique perspective of the entire adventure park, including the thrilling Hyfly Zipline high above the valley.

We culminated our Malaysian sojourn with a boat ride along the scenic, serene Putrajaya lake, a man-made wonder spanning 650 ha of beautiful water and exotic wetlands. Curated by Pulse Group, the cruise is one of the best ways to experience the modern cityscape of Malaysia's administrative capital. ■

FACT FILE
Getting there: Air Asia, Batik Airlines and Malaysian Airlines
Visa: 2026 is Visit Malaysia Year, it is visa-free for Indians till year-end
Accomodation: There are five-star, mid-range and budget hotels
What to eat: Try the street food

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