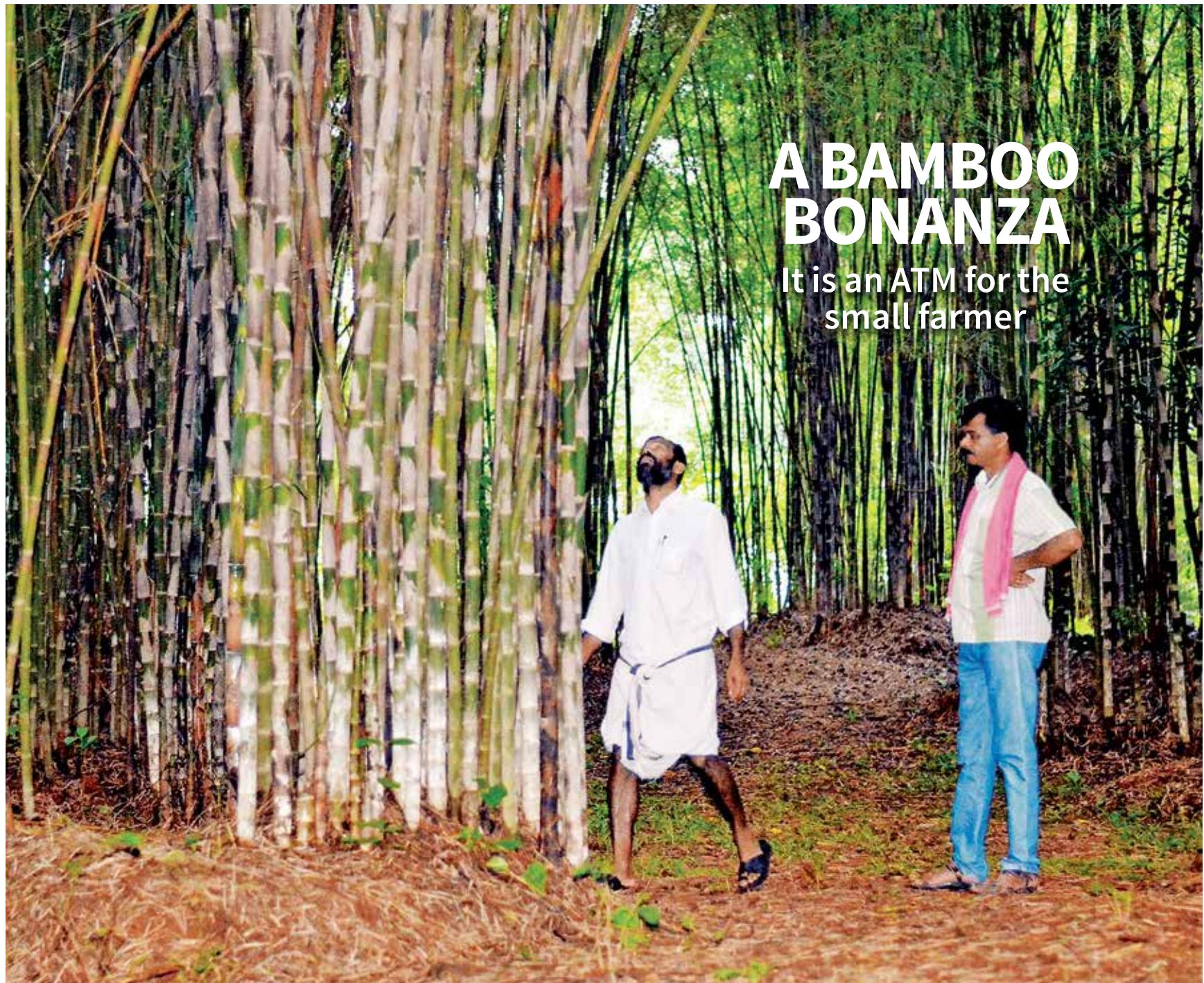


Civil Society



A BAMBOO BONANZA

It is an ATM for the small farmer

SEWA MAKES LEADERS

Page 10

POPULATION MUDDLE

Page 12

KASHMIR'S MUSTARD

Page 16

INTERVIEW

'GIVE CITIES THOSE SMALL HOUSES'

KIRTEE SHAH ON AN URBAN MAKEOVER WITH NEW IDEAS

Page 8

THE DENTED MEDIA

Page 23

INDIA GETTING OLDER

Page 24

PASS ON YOUR MEDS

Page 27



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CONTENTS



COVER STORY

A BAMBOO BONANZA

It is called the lathi bamboo because it was once used as a cane by policemen. But it is a good example of how a tough plant with little glamour to its name gives farmers a ready income.

18

How SEWA makes leaders	10-11
Population paper slammed	12-13
Kashmir discovers mustard	16
The power of the collective	25-26
The voter doesn't have a choice	26
Pass on your meds	27-28
A perfect Pandyan meal	29
Volunteer and donate	31-32
Products	33-34

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Civil Society
READ US. WE READ YOU.

Village and city

ANOTHER election has come and gone without the problems of development getting the attention they deserve. Manifestoes, campaigns and speeches haven't exceeded the usual freebies and demagoguery of the political class. If you were out looking for a modern vision of a fast growing and urbanizing India, it is unlikely that you found it.

As we go to press with the June issue, voting is in its final phases. A future government's big challenge will be to address the many transitions that the country is making. Not least among them is the process of urbanization.

In this magazine we have over years of coverage sought to do away with the false divide between city and village. We make yet another attempt to bring reporting of rural and urban into a single space with our cover story on income from bamboo and a longish interview with architect Kirtee Shah.

Concern that the rural economy doesn't provide the opportunities that keep people from turning up in cities should be matched with concern for cities themselves and the fragile condition they are in. For urbanization to flourish both cities and villages will jointly have to do better. Good economic sense lies in creating a balance.

Both our cities and villages need a new worldview that recognizes their uniqueness in terms of culture, topography, people and traditions. Their problems of the environment, infrastructure and access to livelihoods are much the same and as they worsen rapidly, time is running out for solutions.

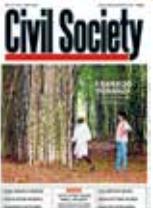
Many of the opportunities for villages are embedded in their biodiversity and natural wealth. Our cover story on the lathi bamboo shows how people discover their own paths to local prosperity. We love doing such stories that reflect a vibrant, creative and entrepreneurial India waiting to be recognized. So much better would it be if policymakers and governments could recognize such potential and help it flower. People in rural areas and farming itself deserve better recognition for what they can achieve.

Cities, similarly, suffer from a lack of recognition of their true potential. Urban planning in India is either non-existent or out of date. Political power hasn't devolved to municipal bodies. Completely lacking in any Indian city is the kind of professional expertise that an urban explosion requires.

We've interviewed Kirtee Shah because he has been rallying people to find solutions through a series of webinars. He has also been roping in government. Making Indian cities functional is a huge task made even bigger by the need for carrying villages along so that they draw on each other instead of being two different worlds.

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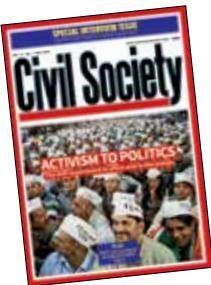


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LETTERS



New politics

Your cover story on AAP, 'Activism to politics', was an insightful read. I really learnt a lot, especially about the party's background and how it all began. I admire the way giving up was not an option for them. India needs parties that can stand up to the current regime and, despite choppy waters, AAP can be one such alternative even today.

Gaurav Singh
Nikhil Dey's perspective on how being a powerful politician can actually be less advantageous than being an activist caught my attention. Our country does not have a dearth of bright minds. If they can come together for good governance, things can be brighter for society at large.

Saurav
We really need more balanced media of this kind in the times we live in.

Mayura Dixit
Thank you for writing about AAP without being one-sided. It is important to engage in political discourse without being aggressive or loud. That is just what this cover story does.

Atin Kumar
I liked your cover story because it puts forth a neutral perspective. At a time when the media is trying desperately to shape political opinion, this came as a breath of fresh air. No one political party can ever be all bad or all good. There are always going to be shades of grey in a country as diverse and densely populated as ours. We need intelligent and balanced minds in the forefront of political activity.

Hassan

Party manifesto

Sanjaya Baru's remark in his piece, '2024: Two narratives', that the "BJP's economic policy

preferences and priorities have not been very different from the Congress, rhetoric apart. The language in which they are wrapped and marketed may be different, but the direction of policy is no different" was insightful. I learnt a lot from this article overall. Much needed around election time.

Sumedha Prakash
We need more perspectives like Baru's. This sentence in his article: "The Modi-Amit Shah-J.P. Nadda BJP has pursued an 'in-your-face' imposition of Hindi" resonated with me since I don't speak much Hindi. I feel very strongly about the imposition of Hindi on non-Hindi speaking states. Their pro-Hindi policy will continue to reflect in the way I view this party in power.

Mallika N.
It is interesting to see the similarities between two seemingly polar opposite parties. It makes one think from a different lens.

Meher Chandok
Baru's article added a new layer of understanding for me. The Hindu-Hindi Bharat vs Unity in Diversity debate is something to consider when we see our elections unfold. Voting responsibly and sensibly is key. Loved this piece and the way it broke down the two narratives.

Asheesh Mohan
A lucid and interesting read. It helped build a more sound and well-rounded understanding of the current scenarios.

Kashish Dua

Goat vets
Your story, 'Goats get a good deal with women para-vets', details one of the most interesting initiatives I have read about. It gives the goats and the women of the district a better life. Bharti Ahirwar looks so proud in that picture! It is only in India that one gets to see such fascinating and unique stories.

Mathew J.

Actually, I would enjoy keeping a goat as a pet if I had the space here in Mumbai. On one of my farm visits to the hills, I realized they are very friendly and docile little creatures who enjoy human company, much like the more conventional dogs we keep as pets.

Gayathri Venkatesh
The protection of children is

Temple love

Susheela Nair's piece on Khajuraho was an informative and interesting travel piece. I have never been to this beautiful temple city but I will surely plan a trip now that I have Nair's detailed and vivid temple descriptions for inspiration. The history that adorns these erotic walls seems steeped in ancient values and would be interesting to explore. I was not even aware that it is a UNESCO World Heritage Site. Impressed to find that out.

Shubha Ray

The celebration of women on temple walls — embracing womanhood, erotica and ancient realities — makes me ponder how these would be seen in today's times, had they been sculpted now. Sometimes it feels as though these ancient monuments are laughing at us, mocking the society we have become today.

Vania Patel

Elections and you

Jagdeep Chhokar's quote, "As a citizen, I have a stake in the electoral process" in his interview, 'Polls are far too important to be left to politicians', made me realize how many of us actually lose sight of this very basic fact. Such an insightful interview.

Karan Manik

Enjoyed Chhokar's lucid perspective. Truly in the spirit of democracy.

Aparna K.

Helping hands

Thanks for Rakesh Agrawal's story, 'Doon's street children find a police parent'. If only all our officers were like this gentleman, our country would be so much safer, more inclusive and worth living in. This is such noble work.

Mathew J.

Child saviour

Kailash Satyarthi has been an inspiration to many of us. I am greatly inspired by the work he is doing to save vulnerable children. While there is undoubtedly a long way to go, his work has been remarkable so far. Thanks for the interview with him on his recent book.

Jyotsna Jha

The protection of children is

definitely important. Equally important is guiding them into good education which will make them independent, self-reliant individuals one day. To achieve this, parent counselling and providing them funds is to be done so that they do not need their children to earn and they understand the long-term value of education. Society must take up this responsibility seriously and with earnestness.

Chandrakha Anand Sio

Satyarthi is truly an icon. I am in awe of the way he has reversed so many wrongs that we let our children face. We need more people like him. The book is dark yet hopeful in parts. It makes for a heart-wrenching read.

Ravi Malhan

No doubt children are being wronged every single day — in war-struck Gaza or in a Third World country like India that is fortunately not at war. We, as a society, have really failed our children. In my opinion it is probably unfair to bring more children into this bleak reality we call our society. It seems to me that it is far wiser to adopt hapless, distraught children who have no family to rely on and give them a better life instead of bringing a new life into the world.

Nisha Johar

It has been an honour for me to meet Kailash Satyarthi personally in the past. He is so down to earth and genuine. It is no wonder that the children he saves befriend him like their own and that too so quickly.

Moksha Patil

Right priority

Kabir Vajpeyi comes across as a genuine changemaker in your interview with him, 'We have not understood the value of child development'. Very rarely have I heard such genuine care and concern for the realities of education and how it affects the development of children in all aspects of life.

Karuna Banerjee

Very inspiring interview. Why we do not engage in this discourse enough is of concern. He explains the value of good childhood development from the economic perspective too. Despite that we

have leaders at the forefront who refuse to acknowledge or understand the value of child development.

Geeta Sharma

Women's rights

Your interview with Zakia Soman, 'UCC is right to ban polygamy but wrong on moral policing', painted bleak yet sadly realistic picture of the orthodox clergy and conservatives responsible for the plight of minority women. It is so heartening to see women standing up for their rights.

Meher

Importantly, Soman says there is barely any sizeable Muslim middle-class. It is a fact that the majority of Muslims are poor. And those that have power or money are only willing to give back to the community in monetary terms. How will any of these issues be solved if this is the way it remains? I am saddened by this thought.

Kabir Chutani

This lady is a true beacon of hope for the marginalized. As a nation, we have failed women of minority communities. I still have some hope, because interviews featuring people like Soman signify that the situation can still be salvaged.

Nethra K.

Bihar hospitals

Your interview with Dr Taru Jindal was an inspiration. I know of people who have flown off to the US or Europe after earning their medical degrees in India.

But here we have a stellar example of a young doctor serving the community. Not only was Bihar a new state for her, even the setting, a dilapidated district hospital, was alien. Yet Dr Jindal devoted so much time and effort to turning it around. The country should really give more benefits and credit to such special doctors doing more than they need to.

Riddhima Kathuria

I felt real joy reading about how Dr Jindal turned around the Motihari district hospital. Doctors like her should be valued in the selfish times we live in. Reading about the state of that labour room and how she herself organized shramdan really

inspired me to do better and serve society in any way I can.

Mridula Hari

Cheetah saga

Ravi Chellam's perspective on the translocation of cheetahs from South Africa to the Kuno National Park in Madhya Pradesh (MP) was very sound and well-informed. It is an absolute shame that the country refuses to listen to experts like him about issues concerning our wildlife. The arbitrary decision to import cheetahs into our sanctuary in MP is harmful to our ecosystem, especially to our wildlife.

Jaya Bose

It is appalling to find out what the real intent behind the cheetah project was. It makes one wonder how many other decisions were taken in this unethical and irresponsible manner in the past. Such decisions should be questioned, critiqued and countered.

Udit Dhaliwal

Going public

Anil Swarup's opinion that expertise can be outsourced but attitude can't be bought or outsourced, in your conversation with him, 'Officers who seek publicity will find they land in trouble', left an impression on me. This is why the nature, character and attitude of an officer or any other professional in service is of even greater importance than skill.

You can always hone your skills

and learn as you go along but a genuine, honest and upright attitude is inherent and should be valued highly if we want able administrators for this country.

Nitya Bakshi

Social sector stocks

I read your interview with R. Balasubramaniam on the social stock exchange and NGOs. In my opinion this idea will remain on paper for all time to come. For us, the social stock exchange should generate profits or generate arbitrage opportunities for sharks.

Himanshi Rai

Emotional disconnect was definitely part of the biggest challenges during the Covid-19 pandemic. I could see students were disconnected too. Getting through to them — convincing them to turn on their cameras, showing them that we are all in this together — was next to impossible. The gaping digital divide is another very vital point brought up here.

Although most of our students could afford smartphones, the lack of education of their parents and elders made it very difficult for them to learn how to access the apps, especially for Classes 4 and 5. This challenge always led us to a dead end. How is one to reach out to students if the virtual classroom is one where they don't even know how to enter, let alone feel welcome?

Pallavi Joshi

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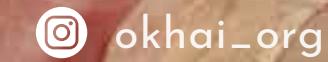
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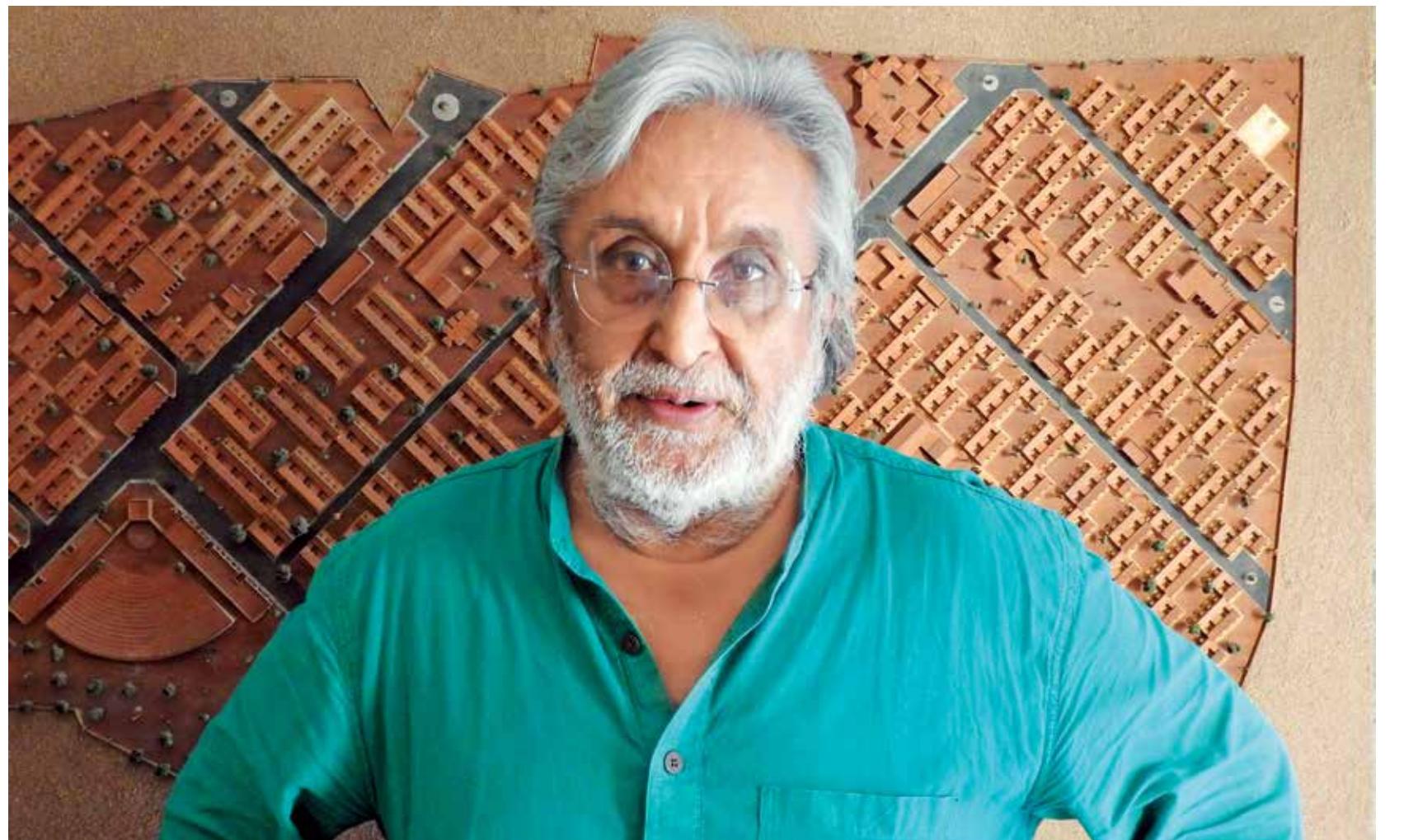
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Kirtee Shah: 'Urban problems are much more complex and difficult now'

'Give cities those small houses'

Kirtee Shah on paths to an urban makeover

Civil Society News
Gurugram

AS India urbanizes, cities need to prepare to carry their new loads. New beginnings have to be made in injecting finance and expertise into municipal administrations. Mayors and councillors should be better empowered, more accountable and higher up the rungs of the political ladder.

Crucial to improving the status of cities is openly discussing their problems and sharing ideas for making urban spaces inclusive and productive. Kirtee Shah, a veteran architect based in Ahmedabad, has been making a valiant attempt to do just that with a series of webinars. *Civil Society* spoke to him about what he hopes to be able to do for cities.

Q: You've been holding webinars on the future of cities and talking to a whole lot of people. Why did you undertake this exercise and what is it that you hope to achieve?

We have done 105 webinars in the past three years and heard about 500 experts and activists. Perhaps in all 100,000 people have been reached. We have covered a large number of topics like water, governance, housing, transportation, slums and so on. But essentially there has been one theme, which is rethinking the Indian city.

Our understanding of India's urban challenge is that it's very complex. It's very difficult. And we as people, we as government, we as professionals,

we as civil society have not really understood the complexity and the nature of this challenge.

Our cities are not emerging as healthy cities. Their problems are bound to get more difficult and complex unless we look for ways to address them.

Q: What do you propose to do with the insights that have emerged from the webinars?

We have started doing two things. The webinars are in the public domain and can be accessed. But we are converting them into knowledge products. Our first product is in the form of a series of books. We have done a book on cities and conservation. We are also working on a book on the urban economy. How does it work? What is happening? There is the informal sector, and the formal sector. Cities are perceived as centres of economic growth.

The second product from the webinars is the creation of what I call a subject constituency. In order to address the urban challenge, we need a broader societal partnership. The government alone is not going to be able to do it. The private sector alone is also not enough.

Q: So you feel you've been able to collect, in one place, valuable insights, expertise, expert opinions and information which might not have been there before.

I wouldn't say not there before, but not in one place. The 105 webinars

are all recorded and retrievable. Each is around two hours. And we are converting them into readable material by way of books. But to me that is not as important as a mass of people coming together on this particular idea. If we really want to approach urban issues properly, we require a wider partnership.

Q: You know, this is not the first time that something voluminous has been put together on cities. There was the Charles Correa report on urbanization, for instance. People have attempted various things. How are you different?

I was part of the National Commission on Urbanization that Rajiv Gandhi had set up under Charles Correa. But more than 30 years have passed and urban challenges need a second national commission for which I have been talking to the Central and state governments. A national commission is not enough and state commissions too are required. Partnerships are needed because urbanization is shooting up and the problems are more intricate now. We don't seem to know how to address them.

Q: How much luckier do you expect to be with a second commission? The first one didn't end up anywhere.

That was in the 1980s and some very interesting ideas came through in those years. There were the 73rd and 74th Amendments and the setting up of a Ministry of Poverty Alleviation. I personally feel urban matters now are much more complex and more difficult. And therefore there is a greater need for governments to respond to them.

Q: The mess is in front of us. But how will your webinars or, for that matter, a second commission on urbanization make a difference?

The first thing is to communicate what is right and what is not. Let me give an example of what we are trying to work on. Under the Pradhan Mantri Awas Yojana, 12 million houses have been constructed. It's a good idea. It's a good project that has been structured rather well in terms of four silos and all that.

We are asking two major questions: What impact has this project had on slums and the quality of life in cities? What is the quality of houses being built? And, speaking of quality, have the issues of design been adequately addressed? Remember, these are small houses and therefore design is very important. For people to live in them for 50 to 60 years, they must be well designed.

Now we are not stopping at saying they are not well-designed. We have started a process and instituted three seasons of a national competition for improving livability of small houses. And we already have something like 150 people participating in the competition last year. New ideas are emerging.

A national competition in itself is also not enough because it does not necessarily produce ideas which are implementable. So, we have started what we call a studio component of the national housing competition where we are working with four schools of design and four architectural colleges to come together to evolve designs which are relevant.

Q: So, then, these designs together with perhaps sustainable standards, eco-friendly standards, would become the basis for the Pradhan Mantri Awas Yojana?

Absolutely. You not only deal with the government but the private sector also has a say.

Q: Would it be correct to say that through the webinars you are identifying concerns that need to be immediately addressed, finding solutions and implementing them because time is of the essence?

I personally feel that it is important to keep in mind that this is not only about government. It is also about professionals. It includes civil society. It is, you know, ideas. We are reaching out to educational institutions so that young students look at the whole issue of small houses. Similarly, our partner for the national competition last season was CREDAI, in Pune, a builders body, which was reaching out to a large number of

builders to sensitize them that housing is not only about profit-making. Housing is about sustainability. Housing is about people. Housing is about culture, society, and that particular message is very important.

And because CREDAI are supporting us, there was much better communication with builders. Similarly, in schools and colleges of design the idea is to sensitize the student community. Architects don't think too much about small houses. Small houses are too small for big architects. But can the young be sensitized to the importance of small houses? That, even if a house is small, you are talking about 12 million houses.

Q: And you're not just building houses, but also providing shelter.

Yes. As an integral and parallel part of this process, we are working on what you can call sustainable urban livelihoods. It was clear during the pandemic and lockdown that something needs to be done for people in the informal sector. We are in the process of putting together a design for sustainable livelihoods which we will submit to the government sometime in June or July.

Q: Could you give us an example of what you call sustainable livelihoods?

A large number of people in the urban sector are informal workers. And informal jobs are not secure. Informal jobs are underpaid. Informal jobs are not, I think you know, sustained. We need a systemic arrangement

'Architects don't think too much about small houses. Can the young be sensitized to their importance? That, even if a house is small we are talking about 12 million houses.'

comparable to the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee scheme, to ensure that people who are employable are employed, that they get work. This is the way of dealing with poverty. This is the way of dealing with homelessness.

Q: What livelihoods are you looking at?

Just about any livelihood. Cell phone repair, vegetable vending. Giving people access to small finance, access to the market will, I think, improve incomes and productivity. They will probably be able to move out from slums into better housing. Youth could get better jobs. In my understanding, the difference between the rural MGNREGA and such an urban project is that it has a greater potential for productivity. It will create new jobs.

Q: What are the other concerns? Cities are full of concerns. You've identified two crucial ones — housing and employment.

Well, I think, on the whole issue of slums, one understands, for instance, the objective of building formal housing. But it is very difficult to provide formal housing to all the people in a reasonable time. There are strategies tried out all over the world, which involve not necessarily building formal housing but doing *in situ* improvement of slums where you essentially build on housing that people have created by giving them incentives in the form of land rights.

If people have built these houses and you take away the burden of eviction, they will improve those houses and they will become transit shelters for five years, 10 years, 15 years, while you are able to build new housing. We are talking at length about a strategy for upgrading slums rather than exclusive attention to formal housing, which, though desirable,

Continued on page 10

Continued from page 9

is not necessarily viable and workable and affordable at this stage.

Q: How do you see the redevelopment of Dharavi?

It so happens the land is in the middle of the city. Land prices are exorbitant. The government will be willing to make exceptions in terms of, you know, FSI (Floor Space Index) and land use and all that. It's on a very large scale. It's a complex situation but if it happens it would improve the lives of those who live there.

Q: Is this a model you endorse?

I don't. But as far as the slum situation is concerned, you require multiple strategies. There is no one single way of dealing with it. It depends where it is. It depends what the community is doing. What are the kinds of jobs? What is the land condition? Every slum requires a different approach.

Q: What about water and cities?

We've done not less than six webinars on water. And we are starting a new series called Water and the City. We had one recently on Bengaluru. We had S. Vishwanath who has the Million Wells Programme running in Bengaluru tell us that the city should not be short of water.

A series of ideas is emerging and we are putting them together and making them available to cities. We are more interested in solutions than the problem itself. We are looking at conservation, recycling, improving groundwater levels.

Addressing consumption is important. I grew up in a village where consumption was no more than 20 litres per capita per day. With current technologies, it is possible to reuse 95 percent of our water, which would greatly reduce the water problems our cities are facing.

Q: What about governance and more local authority? Municipal finance?

Governance is an issue which interests us very much and we are planning three webinars in the next two months on municipal finance.

If we want our cities better managed and planned, we have to get our priorities right with regard to manpower, finance and devolution of authority.

More power needs to flow to the municipal level. We intend working on this at length and producing a White Paper in the next three or four months.

Municipal finance, both in terms of revenue and expenditure, is less than one percent of GDP in India. In Brazil, it is 7.2 percent and in South Africa it's about 6 percent.

Much greater capacities are needed in terms of resources, management and implementation if we are looking at investing \$640 billion in cities. Capacity-building is needed in municipalities. ■

CASE STUDY

How SEWA makes leaders of followers

Sumangala
Ahmedabad

THE ramshackle settlement of migrant workers along the Trikampura Patiya canal in south Ahmedabad was, unsurprisingly, a dismal sight. Black, dirty water stagnated in the canal, emitting a foul stench. Birds fluttered overhead, dipping their beaks in its foetid waters.

Along the canal, in makeshift sheds, lived about 220 families who had migrated from their villages in Dahod district of Gujarat.

They had worked as agricultural labour back home but work was scarce and the money inadequate. Some had been marginal farmers with tiny, unviable plots of farmland.

They had brought their children with them. If the elders at home agreed to look after them, they went to the local school and studied till primary or secondary level.

Those who completed Class 10 couldn't afford to study further.

The sheds had temporary walls made of discarded fibre or asbestos. A strip of small, makeshift bathrooms lined the bank of the canal. The walls were made of three tin sheets. A torn sari served as a door. The *vasahat* or settlement had no electricity or water source or a drainage system or even a street light. The sheds could barely accommodate two or three people but five to six members of a family lived in them.

Every morning the women would cook, pack food and head for the *naka* along with their men, waiting for contractors to arrive and pick them up for the day.

Into this bleak scenario, three women from SEWA (Self-Employed Women's Association), Parvati, Kokila and Pravina, descended one morning and got down to work. In six months, they organized the women into a collective, got them basic facilities, identity cards and access to government services.

Patience, persistence, empathy and trust are the traits that women from SEWA need in abundance when they reach out to marginalized women with a helping hand.

"They go to the *naka* and stand there. The contractor will pick up people according to his needs. The ones who don't get work return and sit idle at home. They have to go

inside the adjacent factory, about one km away, to fetch water. If the security guard is in a good mood, they will be allowed in. Otherwise they will return with empty cans," explains Kokila.

The women from SEWA spoke casually to the men sitting on charpoys holding mobiles in their hands and enquired about their work. Three women workers walked up to them. One had had a miscarriage so she couldn't go out to work. The other two had returned from the *naka* empty-handed.

The three women spoke about their struggles back home in the village. The upper-caste sarpanch allocated MGNREGA work to his own people. If they persisted in demanding work, the sarpanch would harass them. There wasn't much choice but to migrate to the city.

The women wanted basic amenities — housing, health, education for their children and safety at their worksites.

Parvati, Pravina and Kokila listened patiently. They explained the need for collective effort and what they did at SEWA. Kokila identified two girls living in the settlement who had studied till Class 9. She assigned the task of collecting the names and details of the women workers to the young girl and a literate boy.

The three assured the women they would return that very evening and discuss further action when all the workers returned.

"I grew up in a similar shed-type colony. There was no water, electricity or road," says Kokila. "One of the SEWA sisters visited us two or three times and listened to our problems. She asked who was literate and could write down the names and details of the women. I was studying in Class 8 so I volunteered. She assigned this task to me. I also collected the SEWA membership fee from the women. I did it all promptly. That is how my mother and the other women became SEWA members and we began working collectively to get facilities."

Renana Jhabwala, then secretary of SEWA, got Kokila permission to attend SEWA meetings after school. She met Ela Bhatt too who affectionately shortened her name to Koki. "We worked hard for almost six months and got water and electricity. The Ahmedabad Municipal Council (AMC) later



The women from SEWA explain why collective action is important



Parvati with migrant workers



The Trikampura Patiya canal. The settlement is on the left bank

constructed a proper road. After I completed Class 10, I joined SEWA and rose to become an *agewan* (leader). I worked with different trade committees. Whenever I see our sisters in the same situation as I was, I feel very strongly about helping them."

Parvati's parents too were construction workers. "I understand how the contractors exploit us. They make us work overtime and do not pay for it. There's no guarantee of getting work at the *naka*. There is no compensation if an accident happens at the worksite. The women do not get any maternity benefits. These workers need to get identity cards from the labour department to be certified as construction labourers. They can then get insurance and other facilities. We at SEWA act as a bridge between the workers and the labour department's welfare board."

Parvati and Kokila explained to the women

that SEWA would help them get identity cards and other facilities from the labour department, and for that, they needed to become union members. They also explained all the benefits they would receive if they registered and got identity cards. The women had some queries which were answered. The young boy who had collected the details of more than 10 women handed them over. The women workers were unanimous in saying that the AMC should provide tanker water once a day. They also requested solar lamps. SEWA's plan of action showed visible results in six months. Of the 220 families, 155 became SEWA members. SEWA negotiated with the Labour Welfare Board to get maternity benefits for the women. When four workers died of injuries after an accident at a construction site, SEWA helped their families get ₹3 lakh each as compensation from the

Labour Welfare Board.

The AMC agreed to instal a tap from which the women could collect water. And negotiations started with the welfare board to provide solar lamps as the AMC cannot set up a permanent connection to each shed.

A major achievement was that the Annapurna scheme, under which a meal is provided for ₹10, was extended to the workers' settlement in January 2024. Now, before leaving for work, they go to the Annapurna booth in front of the *vasahat* and get a nutritious meal.

Parvati, Kokila and Pravina had been successful in mobilizing the workers. "All our women migrant workers should get basic amenities, welfare board benefits and feel safe at the construction site. That's all we want. It's not much," says Parvati, as she leaves for another worker settlement. ■

‘Muslims can’t outnumber Hindus even in 100 years’

Paper on population gets slammed

Civil Society News
New Delhi

A paper that emanated from the Economic Advisory Council of the Prime Minister (EAC-PM) in May stirred up a storm with researchers, NGOs and legal experts questioning its assertions on religious minorities and accusing its authors of fear mongering during election time.

The paper, titled “Share of Religious Minorities: A cross-country analysis (1950-2015)”, examined the religious composition of populations of 167 countries since 1950 based on datasets. Countries where 50 percent or more of people belonged to a particular religion were analyzed. Thirty-five were OECD (Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development) countries and 25 were from Europe.

In India, from 1950 to 2015, said the paper, the share of the Hindu population declined by 7.82 percent, whereas the share of the Muslim population increased from 9.84 percent to 14.09 percent. The share of the Christian population increased from 2.24 percent to 2.36 percent and the Sikh population rose from 1.24 percent to 1.85 percent. The Buddhist population went from 0.05 percent to 0.81 percent, the highest increase among minority groups. However, the share of the Jain population declined from 0.45 percent to 0.36 percent, and the Parsis from 0.03 percent to 0.0004 percent.

The report concluded that, as in other countries, in India the dip in majority populations and the rise in minority populations was part of a global trend.

The paper admitted it hadn't delved into the reason for such demographic changes. Its ostensible purpose for analyzing such data was to prove that policies, politics and social norms had created "a conducive atmosphere for increasing diversity in society".

Hindus make up 79.80 percent of India's population and Muslims constitute 14.23 percent according to the 2011 census. Critics pointed out that the report was stoking bizarre fears that Muslims would in due course outnumber Hindus and that a 'population jihad' was taking place. Demographic experts see no such danger whatsoever.

Civil Society spoke to Poonam Muttreja, director of the Population Foundation of India (PFI) which has been tracking population trends. She pointed out that the media was misinterpreting the findings of the report and creating a fear psychosis. PFI issued a press release clarifying population data.

Q: You say this paper by the EAC on the share of the population of religious minorities misrepresents demographic trends.

Yes, because they have used data only till 2015. They haven't used census data for the past three decades. If they had, they would have found that the decrease in the Muslim growth rate is faster than the decrease in the Hindu growth rate.

The data that they have used is nothing new. It's been used by the



Poonam Muttreja: 'We don't understand why Indian census data has not been used'

'The decline of the Muslim population started later than that of Hindus because they were far behind in all parameters: health, education, income.'

past decade we had a very good programme, called Mission Parivar Vikas, which went to 146 high-fertility districts in India, mostly in UP which has a large Muslim population, mostly backward. Our mission contributed to decreasing the population in these 146 districts. So not using the data after 2015 is misleading.

Q: What you are saying is that the decline in population is secular. It is related to better education, health and so on and has nothing to do with religion?

Yes. In Kerala birth rates, whether Hindu or Muslim, are much lower than Hindu-Muslim birth rates in UP and Bihar. It is also misleading to say that because Muslims were given more support by previous governments therefore their growth rate was high.

Actually, it is the opposite. If access to education and health services had been high, the share of the Muslim population would have seen an even bigger decline.

Like in Kerala and Tamil Nadu. Better governance, better access to family planning services, better education and income decreases population growth. It is so the world over and India knows that too.

We have invested in education, health and targeted family planning services for the most backward communities. Use of family planning or access to health services is always where you live. There are urban-rural differentials. If you are in a state that is not well administered or you belong to the poorest quintile you will have less access.

Girls have less autonomy but now, through the media, the aspirations of girls, whatever their religion, have changed. They wish to study, marry later, have fewer children. And this is not related to religion.

In Europe, the majority population has decreased because they are better off and more educated.

I am not going to question the intent of the EAC. The PFI's problem is with how the media has misinterpreted this data and created a fear psychosis. It's led to statements which are very divisive. This is not the time to divide the country further.

Q: You say you are not questioning the intent of the EAC?

I'm not questioning it because that's not my job. My job is to give the right demographic data. The data is not wrong, but how they have presented it is like lighting a fire on wood.

Instead, can we please have a better understanding of how these kinds of population figures need to be looked at? Take the total fertility rate (TFR) which is declining fast in India. A recent *Lancet* report showed, and this is true also for other research organizations globally, that their estimates for India are being revised. What they are saying is that the population in India is going to decrease faster than anticipated.

We have a small window of opportunity to capitalize on our demographic dividend because it can become a disaster. If you ignore it, you will have a large unemployed population. That should be our concern.

Secondly, women's workforce participation. Whatever increase has happened is in farm labour or in unpaid labour. We have to worry about women, their aspirations and giving them opportunities, to benefit the country economically and the women as well. They need skills and paid jobs. They are going to have fewer babies and will have more time and opportunity to join the workforce. So we should capitalize on both the demographic dividend and the gender dividend.

Thirdly, we have to worry about our aging population whose numbers are rising. About 20 percent of our population will be ageing by 2036. Who is going to pay for their health needs or care for them? We don't have the health infrastructure or social security. Also, how can we use our older people productively? Do they need reskilling? The only state in India that is working on ageing populations is Kerala. The rest of India hasn't woken up to it.

These are the issues that population data globally and in India is throwing up.

Q: So these are the concerns we should be addressing. Population is not one of them?

Even in 100 years from now we are not going to have a Muslim population that outnumbers Hindus. It's just not possible given the demographic trends. Even if Muslims decide to have more children, it's not possible.

Q: What is the fertility rate for Hindus?

Look, there is no such thing as a Hindu fertility rate and a Muslim fertility rate and a Christian fertility rate. The fertility rate in India at this point is close to replacement level. Fertility rate depends on your income, education, access to health services, family planning services, and women's agency — their ability to make decisions.

If you do want to look at it through the prism of religion then let's be truthful and bring out the data from our census which is world-class and respected and has shaped our policies.

Q: What does the census data say?

I'm not willing to talk about any Hindu fertility rate or Muslim fertility rate. I'm not going to look at the Christian fertility rate. That's not the way to see it. We have to look at our country's fertility rate.

Q: Then how are people coming to these conclusions about a Hindu, Muslim, Christian fertility rate?

Because that data exists. They have used global data that exists on a religion basis. We don't use data based on religion but if you want to know the trends in TFR by religion, I'll tell you, though that's not how I look at it.

The TFR for Hindus was 1.9 and for Muslims it was 2.4 in 2019. The TFR for Christians was 1.9. TFR has been declining among all religious groups. The highest decrease in TFR from 2005-06 to 2019-21 was observed among Muslims, which dropped by 1 percentage point, followed by Hindus at 0.7 percentage points.

Q: As you pointed out earlier, it is impossible for other religious communities to outstrip the majority Hindu population.

Totally, totally.

'A global dataset has been used. It unnecessarily fuels irrational fears in the majority community worldwide. It is misleading. Its impact will be not just in India but globally.'

Q: Were you consulted for this paper?

Not at all. We had no idea this report was even being considered and we work with the EAC. Even the health ministry didn't know about it.

This is old data. Nobody in India, neither the health ministry nor the education ministry, uses it. The fifth National Family Health Survey (NFHS) data is the latest information we have. It is there that we see that the decrease in the Muslim population is higher than the decrease in the Hindu population by a few percentage points.

This is a global dataset they have used. I'm not quarrelling with the data, but with how it has been presented. Actually, it unnecessarily fuels irrational fears in the majority community, worldwide. It's misleading. Its impact will be not just in India but globally and, you know, it gives an opportunity to fundamentalists on all sides to make outrageous statements.

It distracts us from looking at the right issues — the demographic dividend, the gender dividend and the graying dividend. India could be the provider of human capital to the world that is struggling with not having a working age population.

We were shocked at the media reports we saw. That propelled us to issue a statement. It is essential to present data accurately and contextually. It's an opportunity to ask for greater investments in health and education. We advocate a policy that promotes inclusive development and gender equality. ■

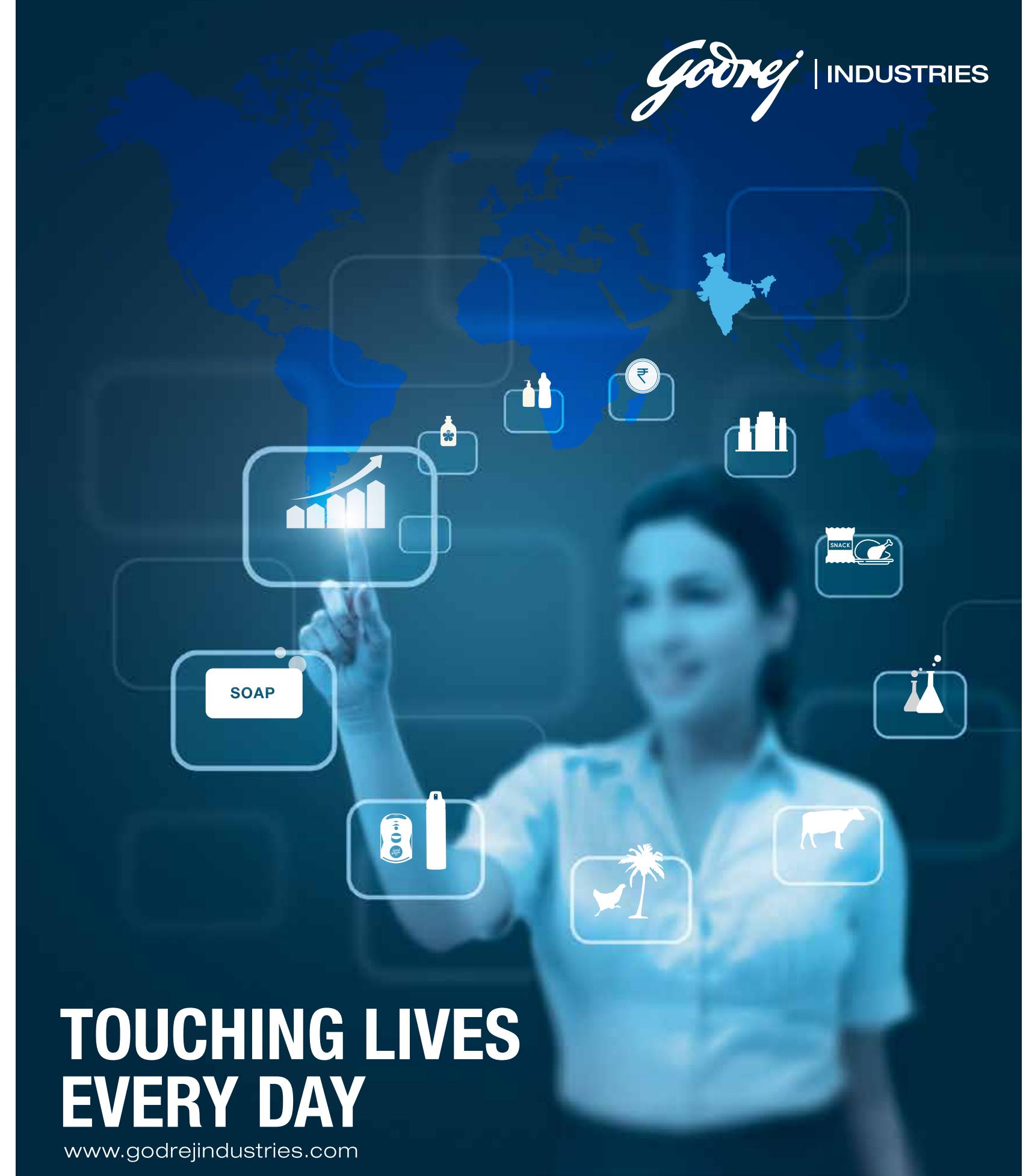
Civil Society

JOINING THE DOTS

THE MAGAZINE THAT GOES PLACES

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Kashmir discovers mustard magic

Jehangir Rashid
Srinagar

MILES of yellow mustard fields dot the picturesque landscape of Jammu and Kashmir, indicating the increasing success of oilseed cultivation in the state.

Through meticulous planning and strategic intervention, the National Oilseeds Mission is transforming agricultural practices in the region. By incentivizing farmers to shift to cultivation of oilseeds during the *rabi* season, it is increasing farmer income and making the state self-sufficient in edible oils.

In 2020-21 oilseeds were sown on 40,000 hectares in Kashmir. By 2023-24, land under oilseed cultivation increased to 140,000 hectares. You can see mustard growing in every district of Kashmir but more so in Srinagar, Tangmarg, Anantnag and Pulwama.

Oilseeds production has registered a staggering increase of over 250 percent. This increase has transformed local livelihoods, fostered economic growth and reduced dependency on imports.

“Our fields would remain barren during winter. There was no activity whatsoever. We were motivated by the Department of Agriculture to go in for oilseed production. I decided to give it a go. I am happy to say I have increased my income after taking up oilseed production,” said Mohammad Shaban, a farmer of Pampore.

Mustard is sown in October. Flowering takes place in March and harvesting in May. After that farmers plant paddy saplings. The extra mustard crop has supplemented the income of farmers.

The success of oilseed cultivation is due to the implementation of the Holistic Agriculture Development Programme (HADP) launched in 2020-21 by the Department of Agriculture. The programme was implemented following feedback from farmers. Three oilseeds are being promoted — sesame, rapeseed and mustard.

“The outcomes are profound. Production of over 133,000 tons of oilseeds last season has yielded 44,000 tons of edible oils. This indicates a monumental leap towards self-reliance. With the value of edible oils estimated at over ₹770 crore, we are not just cultivating crops, we are nurturing a future of prosperity,” says Chaudhary Mohammad Iqbal, director, agriculture, Kashmir.

Chaudhary said that before 2021-22 there was a big deficit in edible oils. The state's consumption was 98,550 tons but availability was just 36,000 tons. “We had to cater to a population of 85 lakh and a floating population of five lakh tourists. The situation has been turned on its head since 2021-22,” he says.



The extra mustard crop has supplemented the income of farmers

Civil Society picture/Bilal Bahadur

It is mustard oil that farmers and consumers are showing interest in since the oil is integral to Kashmiri cuisine.

“In Kashmir, mustard oil is a superhero. It plays multiple roles in many recipes, especially our traditional Wazwan recipes. Mustard oil is used as a marinade for meat. It is used to create delicious gravies or *tadkas* that are poured over various Wazwan dishes just before they are served. It is, in fact, the main ingredient that gives the ancient Wazwan recipes their characteristic taste,” says Mehraj-ud-din, a chef locally known as a Waza.

The research and development aspect of the programme is being looked after by the agriculture universities of Kashmir and Jammu. Other activities include mushroom cultivation, bee-keeping, fisheries and farming aromatic plants. All these are being promoted and supported by HADP.

“Farmers of J&K are redefining the possibilities of oilseed cultivation. They have taken to modern techniques without hesitation and they are also using traditional practices. Agriculture here is now a harmonious blend of innovation and heritage,” said Iqbal Chaudhary.

There is, today, an abundant yield of high-quality oilseeds, thanks to local farmers.

“Despite being the fifth-largest producer of oilseeds globally, India's quest for self-reliance has faced challenges, leading to significant imports of vegetable oils. But change is on the horizon,” said Chaudhary.

With its diverse climate and vast cultivable area, Jammu and Kashmir is poised to become a powerhouse in oilseed production, claim officials.

“This isn't just a government initiative; it's a collective endeavour. We call upon farmers, stakeholders and communities to join hands in this historic mission. Together, we can turn the golden fields of mustard into symbols of resilience and abundance. Let us sow the seeds of prosperity, nurture them with dedication and reap the harvest of a self-reliant nation,” said Chaudhary. ■

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A BAMBOO BONANZA

It is an ATM for the small farmer in Kerala

Shree Padre
Palakkad

WHEN he worked in the Gulf as a cook for 30 years, Azees Aboobacker squirrelled together his savings to raise small rubber and coconut gardens back home in Palakkad district in Kerala. He grew rubber and coconut, but the coconuts got stolen and so did the sap from his rubber trees.

Aboobacker, who is now 62, realized that long-distance farming is risky. What he needed was a plant that would flourish without everyday supervision. He found it in the 'lathi bamboo' or the bamboo variety that at one time was ubiquitously used as a cane by policemen.

It took five years for the bamboo to be harvest-ready, but when it was Aboobacker found that he could pay for his children's education by selling the bamboo from just a small plot. Now, he has bamboo growing on 1.75 acres. "I am a bamboo farmer," he says cheerfully.

The police's lathi bamboo has been replaced by lathis made of fibre. But this bamboo has many other uses as well and consequently a robust

market beckons the farmer.

Botanically known as *Thrysostachys oliveri* or simply *T. oliveri*, lathi bamboo is called *korna mula* in Malayalam. It is used to make an agricultural implement called *thotti* or *thotti mular* which is used to harvest arecanut, coconut and other crops. It is also used to make ladders, rig up shamianas and so on.

Bamboo cultivation has helped Aboobacker get ahead in life. He himself didn't manage to study beyond Class 5. But he invested as much as he could in the education of his three sons. One works as a mechanical engineer in Saudi Arabia, the other is a technician and the third is studying electrical engineering.

"Those who used to ridicule me for raising a bamboo plantation now call me a person with great foresight," says Aboobacker with a laugh.

Like Aboobacker's, personal stories of success with lathi bamboo abound. K.C. John, a bamboo enthusiast in Palakkad district, calls it the "small farmer's ATM," because of how easily it can be turned into cash.

"In Kerala, where land for farming is scarce, the kind of income this bamboo can generate is unparalleled," he says. "Whenever a farmer

requires money, he has to just call up the buyer. He will come, fix the price, cut the bamboo and make the payment on the spot."

John's land is undulating, rocky and with hardly any topsoil. Eight years ago, out of curiosity, John planted a few bamboo plants on roughly half an acre. Last year, he earned ₹35,000 by selling his bamboo culms.

There are others who have profited by growing bamboo. P.A. Achyuthan runs a stationery shop in Keralassery village. He has been raising bamboo on his small plot for 25 years.

"In all, I get 1,000 culms to sell. At the rate of ₹120 per culm, I earn ₹1.2 lakh," he says.

V.G. Vijayan Nayar of Mundur panchayat used to be a full-time farmer before he switched to the real estate business. He has 30 clumps of lathi bamboo. During the pandemic he couldn't sell his culms for a couple of years. But last year he earned ₹60,000 by selling them. Every year, on average, he gets ₹30,000.

What's clear is that lathi bamboo is inexpensive to grow, doesn't need much care and provides good returns.

"Compared to all other crops, it is the most profitable. It has no thorns, harvesting is easy and, like rubber, coconut and banana, it doesn't require high capital investment. No need for irrigation or manure. During the monsoon, all you need to do is heap a few baskets of soil around the bottom of the tree," explains Vijayan.

Vinod Krishnan of Ezakkad village, a rubber grower, has 30 clumps. Seven years ago, he and his brother, Pramod, became bamboo traders.

"We are not paying any attention to our bamboo crop so the quality of culms is average. We earn about ₹50,000 in a year." Since he is a trader, all he has to do is add his own culms to the load he picks up and earn a little extra since he would not be paying for transport.

Lathi bamboo grows to a height of 15 to 25 metres. A few basal internodes remain solid without any hollow portion inside. But the upper internodes have hollow areas. Apart from Kerala, it is grown in northeastern states like Tripura where it is called *kanak kaich*. Recently, due to rising demand, cultivation of lathi bamboo has spread to Maharashtra and Madhya Pradesh.

BURMA TO PALAKKAD *T. oliveri* has its origins in erstwhile Burma or Myanmar. Its advent in India dates to the pre-Independence era, when one Abdul Nasir Mauji imported the plants from Myanmar. They arrived in Palakkad by train. This bamboo variety was probably a new plant across India.

Abdul Mauji started growing *T. oliveri* on a few acres in Ezakkad village in Mundur panchayat, 15 km from Palakkad city. Locals say he used to export the culms and earn a good income.

"He would not share his plants with anyone. If he came to know that his variety was being grown on someone's land, he used to file a police complaint," say locals. But after a few decades, Mauji's family sold off all their bamboo plantations.

An educational institution called Yuvakshethra Institute of Management Studies bought four acres of Mauji's plantation. Plans were afoot to raze the plantation and construct buildings instead. But Father Cherian Anjilmootil, principal of the institution, put his blueprint on hold after listening to Baburaj Mullathodi, a bamboo activist from Uravu, an NGO in Wayanad.

"We don't have such a large collection of lathi bamboo anywhere in the entire state of Kerala. This variety should be conserved and spread around," was Mullathodi's advice to Father Anjilmootil.

Curious about what was growing on their land, Father Anjilmootil and his friend, K.C. John, went to Wayanad and spent a day learning about bamboo and lathi bamboo from Uravu. They were very impressed. They realized that lathi bamboo could be a game changer for farmers. So they changed their earlier decision and decided to popularize cultivation of lathi bamboo as well as other varieties in their area instead.

"In 2013 we held a 'bamboo festival' for the first time. With Uravu's help we exhibited 28 varieties of bamboo plants and more than 100 bamboo products," recalls Praveen Bala, Yuvakshethra's office manager. The one-day bamboo festival got extended to five days since it drew thousands of people. More than 2,000 students from 36 institutions visited the exhibition.

It was an educational institution that popularized bamboo, something generally regarded as the duty of the government and its departments. Yuvakshethra's efforts catalyzed the growth of lathi bamboo in the following years.

In contrast to the earlier owners of the plantation, Yuvakshethra opened up its campus to the local community. Bamboo plants were sold to farmers at a nominal price. The oldest plantation of lathi bamboo on the highway stood like a model farm, inspiring passers-by and farmers. The remaining portion of the old plantation is only one acre. But it shows the level of growth of this variety and how thick a culm grows over the years.

After Yuvakshethra's promotion initiative, bamboo cultivation spread rapidly. Some local people had already realized the potential of lathi bamboo before Yuvakshethra's efforts. But plants weren't available. All the same, some plants did reach a few homesteads and multiplied.

BAMBOO PANCHAYATS "Our Ezakkad village has been known as Bamboo Village for quite a few years," says Father Joseph Olikkalkoonal, vice-principal of Yuvakshethra. Each house in this village has at least one or two lathi bamboo plants.

A casual lookaround in Mundur, Kongat and Keralassery panchayats indicates the popularity of *T. oliveri*. Land holdings here are generally small. A few farmers have grown lathi bamboo on one to two acres.

The three panchayats cover a large area. None has data of the area under lathi bamboo or the total number of existing plants. Around



Azees Aboobacker at his bamboo plantation

'In Kerala where land for farming is scarce, the kind of income this bamboo can generate is unparalleled. Whenever a farmer requires money he has to just call up the buyer.'

12,000 families live in the three panchayats and, according to Vinod Krishnan, at least 25 percent or 3,000 families grow bamboo. Aravindakshan, a local farmer, says, "In Mundur and Kongot panchayats, more than 1,000 families cultivate bamboo and earn at least ₹1,000 per clump every year."

Culms of lathi bamboo sell for ₹100 to ₹150 here. The price goes up to ₹250 to ₹300 once they reach Meenakshipuram on the Kerala-Tamil Nadu border.

Y. Christudas, who lives in Kottakonam, 40 km from Thiruvananthapuram, has been in the business of making bamboo ladders and thotti, the implement for harvesting arecanut and coconut, for decades. He travels to Mundur to buy lathi bamboo culms and spends around ₹20,000 on transport. A culm costs around ₹250 when it reaches Kottakonam. Christudas makes ladders ranging from 10 feet to 25 feet in height. Every month he sells about 300 *thottis*.

A 25-foot *thotti* is priced between ₹600 and ₹700. A ladder of the same height costs ₹1,500. His customers are areca nut, coconut and mango farmers, the state electricity board and event management companies.

Lathi bamboo is also used to make pandals for vegetable crops and to prop up shamianas. In Karnataka and Tamil Nadu, lathi bamboo is used as stakes for crops like tomato. The culms are cut into small pieces for this purpose.

PRICES AND USES Bamboo farmers in Mundur call the past decade the 'golden era' of lathi bamboo. This was the time they got very remunerative prices for their culms. The bamboo was used extensively for sand mining near rivers.

"Since I am a trader too, I have even sold one culm for ₹700 at that time," recalls Vinod Krishnan. After the state government banned sand mining seven or eight years ago, the price came down from ₹250 to ₹125.

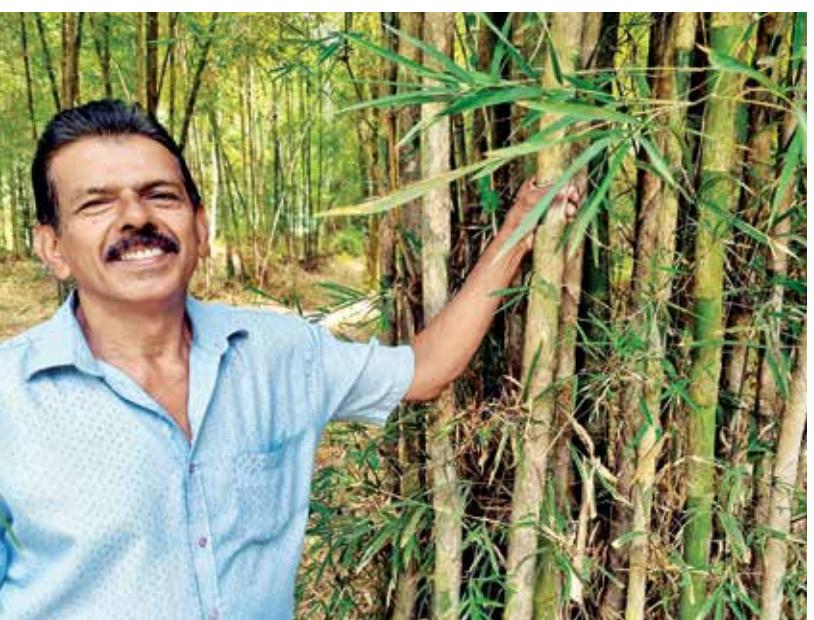
"Despite this, lathi bamboo did not lose its popularity. We don't know in which places it is grown or how much land is under bamboo cultivation," says K.C. John. "But, excluding the monsoon months, we find that during the rest of the year almost one lorry-load full of bamboo culms goes nearly every day from Mundur and its surrounding villages." Aravindakshan adds, "In a week, we see four to five lorry-loads passing from Kongot panchayat."

Mundur has been the nerve centre of the lathi bamboo trade for over a decade. Apart from local sales, lorry-loads are transported to the rest of Kerala as well as to Tamil Nadu and Karnataka.

Sixty-year-old Kunhikuttan of Mundur has been working as a bamboo harvester for the past 35 years. Ten years ago, he became a bamboo trader. He starts work at 7 am. By lunch time, he calls it a day. A team of three can cut 200 culms which makes up around one lorry-load. Mundur now has about 50 bamboo cutters.

Lathi bamboo is not used much in industry. Its end users belong to the unorganized farming sector. So lathi bamboo has a decentralized market. Because of this, growers are getting a very encouraging price.

"Many decades ago, some intelligent guys pointed out that lathi bamboo is very well suited to lifting sand from a river bed. Because of this new use, it started fetching a good price," recalls K.C. John. "Now it has caught the attention of interior decorators. This use will increase in



Achyuthan in his bamboo plantation

course of time. Of late, the construction sector has begun using lathi bamboo instead of iron rods. Bamboo is a quickly regenerating raw material unlike iron that has to be dug out from the earth. If we find new uses for lathi bamboo, its marketing opportunities will increase even more."

PLANT PRODUCTION Tissue cultured plants of *T. oliveri* are now available. But the people of Mundur and many bamboo scientists are not satisfied with their growth. They prefer the rhizome generated plants. This method requires skill. Many growers produce such plants in nurseries and grow bags. They are priced upwards of ₹200. Some

Vijayakumar hunted all over but his efforts proved futile. One day, he was travelling in his car to Mundur. Suddenly, he noted a 'new variety' of bamboo in a roadside plantation. He stopped, went into the plantation and met the farmer, the late T.K. Raveendra, former vice-chancellor of Calicut University. Vijayakumar studied the lathi bamboo and realized this was the variety he had been looking for. He exported 12 containers of lathi bamboo.

"At that time, rules were very strict. I had to put in a lot of effort to obtain clearances from the forest department and other departments. Now bamboo transport has no restrictions. If we get an export order, we can execute it happily," says Vijayakumar.

T. OLIVERI IN THE NORTHEAST It is Tripura in the northeast that grows *T. oliveri* on a large scale. Rajib Kanthipal, a bamboo industrialist, says the state's Bamboo Mission supported propagation of *T. oliveri* on about 1,000 acres under its joint forest management programme between 2005 and 2007.

Farmers grow this variety in three concentrations: high density, medium density and low density. In high density, the gap between two plants is 1.2 to two square metres. This produces culms with minimal diameter. As the density lowers, the girth of the culm increases. High density plantations produce culms of one-inch diameter. Culms in low density have double the girth and are used as fishing rods.

Tripura in the northeast grows *T. oliveri* on a large scale. Every year hundreds of lorries from Tripura carry the bamboo for agricultural purposes across India. Apple growers in Uttarakhand are big buyers.



Aravindakshan (above) and Achyuthan run a nursery that produces lathi bamboo plants

nurseries sell such plants for as much as ₹1,000 each. For farmers, plant propagation is a good source of additional income.

Aravindakshan and his brother, Achyuthan, run a nursery that produces lathi bamboo plants. Achyuthan sells each plant for ₹250. They earn ₹7,500 from plant sales every month.

A quarter-century ago, lathi bamboo was exported to Kuwait for staking orchid plants. Recalls Vakkayil Vijayakumar, "In those days I got a message from London. A company in Kuwait wanted bamboo poles with a specific-size hollow of 10 mm diameter. None of us knew what variety of bamboo would fit such specifications. The only clue we had was the sample they had sent us."

Most farmers opt for high density planting. The culms are harvested in the second or third year of planting, much earlier than in Kerala. The price of culms is also much less. Each culm is sold for ₹60 to ₹80, mostly for making furniture.

"In Tripura, there is demand for whatever quantity of *T. oliveri* you grow," says Kanthipal. "Because of this, farmers cut the bamboo before time, affecting the quality of the culm."

Every year, he says, hundreds of lorries carry the bamboo for agricultural purposes across India. Apple growers in Uttarakhand are big customers. They use the culms to support nets which cover the trees to prevent damage due to hailstorms. *Dendrocalamus strictus* culms aren't strong enough for this purpose. *T. oliveri* is stronger and does the job. Tripura, in fact, can't meet the high demand for this variety of bamboo.

Lathi bamboo is exported to the US and to Switzerland and, ironically, to Myanmar, its country of origin, where it is used as fishing rods.

Partha Chakraborty, another bamboo industrialist from Tripura, says demand for *T. oliveri* has increased over the years. "But we don't have a port near Tripura. So we have to depend on exporters based in Kolkata, which is a limitation," he says.

There is widespread belief that *T. oliveri* bamboo doesn't flower like other species. But this is not true. Its flowering cycle is unpredictable. "We don't generally get reports of *T. oliveri* flowering. One reason is that *T. oliveri* plantations are under private ownership and not in forests," says Dr K.K. Seethalakshmi, a retired scientist from the Kerala Forest Research Institute (KFRRI) in Peechi, near Thrissur.

"*T. oliveri* flowered in its mother nation, Myanmar, in 1891, later in Dehradun in 1938 and in Haldwani in 1962. I started my study of



Buyers use the bamboo to make an agricultural implement called *thotti* and to make ladders



Rhizome generated plants being readied for sale

bamboo in 1979. Till my recent retirement, I have not heard about *T. oliveri* flowering anywhere in the world."

What will happen if it flowers? "There are four possibilities," explains Dr Seethalakshmi. "First, production of ample viable seeds. Second, production of seeds requiring much less germination. Third, production of sterile seeds. Fourth, clumps dying after flowering. However, flowering won't be the end of a *T. oliveri* plantation. It will be a comma or semicolon."

BAMBOO MISSION AND VISION How did this crop attract the attention of farmers in Mundur who are not easy to win over? The first reason is that *T. oliveri* never fails as a crop even with less attention. It is easy to sell, can be grown on unproductive bits of land, and one gets steady returns.

Yet, cultivation of *T. oliveri* hasn't spread to the rest of Kerala. The government has not created awareness about it or taken farmers on study tours. Though everyone describes this variety as a zero-attention crop, a little care and management such as manuring before the onset of the



Thotti, a harvesting tool made with lathi bamboo

monsoon and heaping soil around the roots of the tree, would stimulate growth of more shoots and bring in additional income.

No one has yet come up with a set of practices to grow *T. oliveri*, or recommendations on how and why plants should be spaced. Raising a model lathi bamboo plantation on one acre would also be a positive step. After two years, once the plantation takes shape, regular study tours to this model farm as well as to selected farmers' plantations would encourage more farmers to grow *T. oliveri*.

Scientists from the Krishi Vigyan Kendra could visit farms and provide advice to farmers on manuring or heaping soil around the trees' roots, and so on.

Government agencies have been organizing many seminars and conferences under the Bamboo Mission. Unfortunately, such events do not really present the farmers' perspective. A bamboo activist complains, "I have been attending bamboo seminars for the last decade. On not one occasion have I heard a farmer narrating his experiences from the dais." ■

For information and rhizome generated plants of *T. oliveri*: World of Bamboo – 97470 75610 (Baburaj), 9447741225 (K.C. John) Uravu (Dr Abdullah) – 79027 93203

In Kafka's universe



**DELHI
DARBAR**

SANJAYA BARU

IN June every year the media publishes articles recollecting the imposition of Emergency by Indira Gandhi's government in June 1975. It remains to be seen what impact the results of the on-going general election would have on such recollections this June. Will there be relief that a weaker ruling party will now retreat from the undemocratic excesses of the past five years or will there be fear that a re-empowered ruling party will impose even more restrictions on individual freedoms? If, as some predict, there is a change in government, it would remain to be seen what lessons the incoming rulers have learnt from the outgoing ones.

Political activist and journalist Prabir Purkayastha's arrest last October and his securing bail six months later remind us of the fact that politicians elected to government may come and go, but the instruments of the State continue to act in an arbitrary manner, empowering one set of politicians after another.

In his book *The Emergency Chronicles: Indira Gandhi and Democracy's Turning Point* (Viking Penguin, 2018), sociologist Gyan Prakash recalls the original incarceration of Prabir Purkayastha, founder of news website newsclick.com, on September 30, 1975. The Delhi police arrived at the Jawaharlal Nehru University campus in search of a student leader, D.P. Tripathi, and arrested Purkayastha instead. Unwilling to acknowledge a case of mistaken identity, the police locked up Purkayastha for several months, moving him from one jail to another. No charge was levelled against Purkayastha at the time of his arrest.

While one must criticize the police and other State agencies that have acted in an arbitrary and non-transparent manner, one must also criticize mainstream media for not playing its part as the Fourth Estate and the guarantor of individual freedoms. On this score, the media's role in the Modi years has been far worse than its role in the Indira years. During the Emergency era, editors and publishers could at least argue in their defence that there was an official policy of censorship. Only a few demonstrated the courage to defy censorship.



Prabir Purkayastha, editor of newsclick, on release from Tihar Jail

calls to mind a Kafkaesque experience.

After being in jail for months on end they have all been freed with no evidence yet in the public domain on whether or not their incarceration was justified. It took repeated appeals going all the way up to the Supreme Court for most of them to secure bail. If the police and the lower courts failed the innocent citizen, so too has the media.

While one must criticize the police and other State agencies that have acted in an arbitrary and non-transparent manner, one must also criticize mainstream media for not playing its part as the Fourth Estate and the guarantor of individual freedoms. On this score, the media's role in the Modi years has been far worse than its role in the Indira years. During the Emergency era, editors and publishers could at least argue in their defence that there was an official policy of censorship. Only a few demonstrated the courage to defy censorship.

Most crawled when asked to bend. Only a few, like the then newly launched *India Today* magazine, were enthusiastic defenders of the Emergency. In fact, many believed *India Today* was launched to defend the Emergency.

During the Modi era, mainstream media not only crawled when asked to bend but prostrated itself, doing *sashtanga namaskaram* to the powers that be. While institutions like the Enforcement Directorate, Central Bureau of Investigation, Income Tax Department, National Investigation Agency and the police have all been criticized for not adhering to their stated roles and responsibilities, and for acting in a partisan manner, the mainstream media's record has been no better.

The mainstream media's resounding silence on serious transgressions of law by the government and its various institutions and agencies has hugely damaged its professional reputation. It is into this vacuum that several poorly funded but professionally robust journalists have stepped in and virtually sidelined the mainstream media in public discourse. Consider the readership and viewership of the media platforms of Dhruv Rathee, Ravish Kumar, Karan Thapar and journalists at *thewire.in*, *newslaundry.com*, *thenewsminute.com* as well as the popularity of individual influencers on YouTube and one realizes how irrelevant the Arnabs, Navikas and Smitas have become to political news coverage.

What is interesting in this past month is that 'prime time' news has been edged out by cricket. Between 7 pm and midnight most households are glued to cricket. In the 2024 elections we have probably witnessed for the first time in over a quarter-century the marginalization of television in elections. Even TV news is accessed on social media.

The failure of large segments of the media is as much a blot on our democracy as the non-transparent administration of law by institutions of the State. When caught in the labyrinthine ways of officialdom, the media should come to the aid of the citizen, showing a way out. The media's silence, compounded by either ignorance or partisanship, only increases the burden of the State on the citizen. The media should liberate the citizen from Kafka's world, not become part of it. ■

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

Demographic dangers



LOOKING AHEAD

KIRAN KARNIK

DEMOGRAPHY is in the news, thanks to the Lok Sabha elections and the latest projections of population growth. The former has brought focus to aspects like the size of the electorate, number of first-time voters, and the proportion of women voters; the latter to the likely changes in the dependency ratio. There are a whole host of related issues, some of which have been discussed in past editions of this column.

Breaking news comes from a recent study, published in *Lancet* in March, which indicates a far more rapid decline in India's total fertility rate (TFR) — going down to 1.29 by 2050 — than was assumed in previous studies and projections. Keep in mind that a TFR below 2.1 indicates a prospective decrease in the total population, and India's is already 1.91 (2021). Despite the new figures, we will continue to be the most populous country for many decades yet, due to China's precipitous and much earlier decline in TFR (which, at 1.14 will be lower than India's in 2050 too). The UN had earlier predicted a peak population — of 1.7 billion — for India in 2065. Now, it is almost certain that we will reach our peak population much earlier and at a lower level.

The new figures have several implications for India. The dependency ratio (the very young and old as a proportion of working-age people) will be lower than earlier anticipated, enhancing — at least potentially — the "demographic dividend". Capitalizing on this depends, though, on the working-age population being productively engaged. If that can be done, not only will we reduce the social and economic impact of the present unemployment problem, it could also accelerate the growth of India's GDP. The next few decades present the country a golden opportunity, which we must grab.

Following this, as more people begin to retire, the big bulge in working-age population will start to decrease. In addition, as fewer children are born (resulting in fewer entering the workforce in due course) and better



Governments will earn less and spend more on healthcare when population declines

also semi-skilled or even unskilled labour. The US, for example, is wary of a flood of illegal immigrants, but its economy depends as much on minimally-skilled farm labour from its southern neighbours as it does on the highly skilled tech talent — mainly from India — entering through the H-1B work visa route. Japan, long practically closed for migrants, is now amidst an opening of doors. Though most such countries want imported talent but not the numbers, there is recognition that the latter (low-skilled immigrants in large numbers) is inevitable. In the UK, every sixth resident is foreign-born, according to one report; with 46 million, the US ratio is only a bit lower.

As discussed in an earlier column, any migration — even within the country — creates its own social dynamics, sometimes social tensions. Yet, more societies and nations are now turning truly multi-racial. Acceptability of this is evidenced by the fact that some top political leaders, too, are

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healthcare increases longevity, the dependency ratio will rapidly rise. This will severely strain retirement and pension schemes through a double whammy: lower collections due to the fewer working-age people, and larger pay-outs as people live longer. Fewer working-age people also means lower income tax collections, even as more elders necessitates larger healthcare budgets. The result: an adverse effect on government finances. Taken together, this will cause a decrease in the economic (GDP) growth rate. This and tighter government finances may affect capital investment, jeopardizing future growth.

Countries already facing this problem include those with ageing populations, prime examples being Japan and various European countries. They can sustain their economies only by encouraging immigration. Most are short of both, highly-skilled/educated talent as

immigrants — in addition to many CEOs and entrepreneurs. Strangely, there seems to be greater resistance to foreign migrants in countries like India which, at one time, were the most open to all migrants from anywhere. Yet, looking at the projections, India too must prepare to return to its old openness. The coming economic battles — skirmishes have already begun — are not going to be about global trade, but about the competition to attract migrants.

The basic problem derives from sharp declines in fertility: worrisome enough to warrant action. In China, the fertility decline was the result of a coercive one-child policy. Some years ago, this was changed, and two children were permitted. Now, the government is promoting a three-child norm. South Korea is starting high-speed trains to Seoul's suburbs, not so much for efficient transportation but to promote childbearing! The theory is that the time saved in commuting will be put to "productive" use at home. Singapore is using a more direct means to promote bigger families: it provides cash incentives to parents for every birth and then for the children's upbringing.

In India, many still talk of "population control". Some politicize and communalize this, ignoring the fact that our culturally-similar neighbour, Bangladesh, has a lower TFR than India today — and it will continue to be lower till at least 2100. At 1.91, India's TFR is already below replacement level and population growth is now

driven only by past momentum. Past concerns about "population explosion" may have to give way to the opposite demographic danger: rapidly-shrinking numbers. In years to come, will we have to shift to incentivizing population growth? Experience elsewhere shows that TFR declines are generally precipitous: China is already at just 1.23, Singapore at 1.20 and South Korea at a possibly calamitous 0.82 (2021 figures).

What propels this downward shift, the desire for fewer children (often, none) is yet unclear, though there are alternative explanations. Whichever of these one prefers, it is obvious that the decades ahead call for radical policy shifts. The new projections, the various reasons for decreasing fertility, and the consequent policy options require a more detailed discussion, which will be covered in a future column. ■

The power of the collective



CRAFT EQUITY

SUMITA GHOSE

THE excitement and fervour surrounding the general election in India has been palpable, with heated discussions and loud campaigns dominating the electoral landscape. However, the post-election scenario often sees promises fade into oblivion, leaving people to navigate their daily lives largely on their own.

This reality is particularly stark for rural women, whose fundamental rights often extend no further than the act of casting their votes — a choice often dictated by family patriarchs.

Over my decades-long engagement with rural communities, primarily rural women, in northern and western India, I have witnessed first-hand the limitations faced by women in accessing essential social and economic rights. Despite the right to vote, their lives are marked by exclusion and marginalization. It falls upon civil society organizations to bridge this gap, shouldering the responsibility of ensuring social and economic empowerment. These organizations range from local *mahila mandals*, fostering community cohesion and addressing social issues, to advocacy groups opposing detrimental practices like the proliferation of liquor shops, and self-help groups striving for socio-economic development. At the national and global levels, organizations work towards social and economic justice through diverse strategic actions, mostly advocacy through campaigns and the media.

Non-profit civil society organizations and for-profit social enterprises have showcased the potential of creative and cultural industries, such as handicrafts and handlooms, as sources of economic and social empowerment. These industries, the second-largest providers of employment after agriculture in India, have proven instrumental in fostering continuous learning and practice, driving sustainable livelihoods.

For economic citizenship to devolve to rural communities the following is needed:

Safeguarding rights: People should be assured of fair wages, safe working conditions, and intellectual property, combatting exploitation and promoting fair compensation.

Community empowerment: Recognizing and empowering craftspeople within their communities, fostering entrepreneurship and economic self-sufficiency. It includes making people aware and appreciative of their innate knowledge and traditional skills, and using these to not only create value but also capture that part of it which is their rightful share.

To quote Dhinya Bai who was one of the first to transform her hobby of hand embroidery into a profession through the URMUL Trust

and subsequently become one of the first shareholders in Rangsutra, "We were very shy and hesitant to talk about or showcase our skills but now our girls are very confident and they can delight people with their skills and enthusiasm. There is something that is beyond me or, for that matter, any one individual. All of us add something to this collective spirit of craft with an impeccable mix of aesthetics and utilitarian elements, which spread across to amplify the individual's input. That's how the collective is always greater and lifelong than an individual. This collective work actually brings the market to us rather than us going to the market."

Inclusive economic development: Governments at the Centre and state should prioritize policies that promote economic inclusion, particularly for rural collectives, and acknowledge the collective nature of craft enterprises.

Recognizing the value of cultural heritage: Recognizing the cultural significance of crafts and supporting initiatives to preserve traditional craftsmanship and promote cultural heritage, while allowing for creative interpretation of traditional motifs and designs to suit contemporary tastes.

To quote Dhinya Bai again, "We have to keep our hearts open to embrace new trends and designs and mind open to imbibe and translate them with needle and thread onto fabric. It is this readiness that has brought beautiful handcrafted products into people's lives and in turn empowered the women. They have built their houses, educated their kids and, most importantly, built the spirit to live and command respect. It is literally like an oasis of empowered

Continued on page 26



Rangsutra's craftswomen quickly embrace new designs and trends

'The collective is lifelong and greater than the individual. This collective work actually brings the market to us.'

empowerment. While the latter focuses on enhancing individuals' economic circumstances through access to resources and opportunities, economic citizenship encompasses a broader concept of rights, responsibilities, and active participation in the economic fabric of society.

Governments both at the Centre and the states have taken several steps to promote handlooms and handicrafts, by announcing several programmes and schemes, making

The voter doesn't have a choice



SAYING IT AS IT IS

COL JASJIT SINGH GILL

INDIAN political parties have honed the art of winning elections by holding the voter to ransom. Such is the decline in the standards of politics that people with professional and intellectual merit but without political lineage find it tough to be in politics and are rarely, if ever, in the reckoning during an election.

What we are witnessing is a recycling of available candidates among the mainstream parties. Parties decide who can be voted for. In the absence of meritorious options, the voter doesn't have a choice.

Elections have become so expensive that an ordinary person with ordinary means cannot hope to be a serious contender. It is only the main political parties that can be in the contest. The funds and support that a candidate raises invariably have little to do with ideology and the larger social good. Raising funds to fight an election has increasingly become related to networks and personal equations that the voter doesn't get to see.

A voter who would like to bring change also feels a sense of hopelessness because parties and entrenched leaders have captive vote banks that vote with their feet one way or the other irrespective of regard shown to them or not.

It was to empower the voter and address this situation that the NOTA or 'none of the above' option was introduced. It was hoped that NOTA would discourage parties from putting up sub-standard candidates.

But NOTA doesn't seem to have worked either. Has it been propagated enough? Even if it were to be widely used to rein in political parties, a big weakness of NOTA is that no threshold of votes has been set by which an election can be countermanded. A threshold was necessary. It is hardly likely

Continued from page 25

women in this gigantic Thar desert."

Support for Entrepreneurship: Providing training, resources, and mentorship to facilitate the growth of craft businesses and navigate regulatory frameworks.

Equitable access to opportunities: Ensuring craftspeople have equitable access to markets and credit.

Governments and community-owned organizations must create an enabling

that all voters will opt for NOTA.

Very lenient defection laws also do not serve the voter's interest. Not bothered about breaking the public trust reposed in a representative, politicians switch loyalties without any qualms. Having two-thirds of members defecting as a group, as allowed under the anti-defection law, is another mass insult to voters and a betrayal of them.

It can't get worse when, either because of allurements or coercion or a mixture of both, as is widely alleged, a large number of people's representatives leave one party and join another. The fact that they represent a majority does not take into account the faith placed in them by the voter and the betrayal of that faith.

Changes in the law are needed to make defection 'non-profitable'. There should be a

Funds and support a candidate raises have little to do with ideology and the larger social good. Raising funds is related to networks.

clause to the effect that 'Any candidate who defects from a party he is elected from cannot fight any election at any level for the next five years.' Additionally, holding public office should be ruled out for five years. Nor should it be possible for the defector to return to the party for five years.

The first past the post phenomenon is actually a very sad part of public participation in governance in the present democratic system. A person who gets 30 percent of the votes gets elected despite the second and third candidate getting 29 percent and 28 percent of the votes, respectively. So, two losing candidates, despite getting 57 percent of the

environment for craftspeople to thrive economically. Procurement policies, such as sourcing textiles directly from handloom societies for government entities, can significantly boost the sector.

Additionally, civil society, especially the urban middle class, bears a responsibility to make informed consumption choices, questioning the origins and impacts of products they purchase.

In essence, economic citizenship for

polled votes, sit out as compared to the winning candidate with 30 percent. Is it a true reflection of the mandate of a constituency?

Why can't India have more representative government in a system of conscientious democracy? The Swiss federal government (the Federal Council) is made up of seven members who are elected by the Parliament and who are each members of one of the strongest parties. The federal councillors work together to reach a consensus and set the course the country will follow. The Swiss Parliament (the Federal Assembly) has 246 members who are directly elected by the people. Switzerland has a bicameral parliament consisting of the National Council (200 members) and the Council of States (46 members).

Eleven parties are represented in the Swiss Parliament. Those parties with the largest share of the popular vote are represented on the Federal Council. Some 5.5 million citizens above the age of 18, roughly 63 percent of the total population, are eligible to vote at federal level. Few countries offer their citizens as many opportunities to vote on political issues as Switzerland does. Every year there are between three and four popular votes in which the electorate can have its say on a particular issue. Delegates are elected every four years.

The Swiss model is worth emulating or embracing if India needs to move towards participative democracy, strengthening the existing parliamentary democracy with minimal changes to keep the essence of active participation of every citizen in the country's governance.

Finally, why can't elections be less acrimonious and more oriented towards development agendas? Why can't it be made mandatory that politicians will restrict themselves to issues and not attack one another? They should focus on outlining their programmes for the country. People would then be able to choose, in a more rational atmosphere, politicians and parties on the basis of promise of performance. ■

Colonel Jasjit Singh Gill is an environmental activist based in Ludhiana

craftspeople entails ensuring equitable rights, opportunities, and protections while preserving cultural heritage. It has to be a collective effort involving governments, communities, civil society, and conscientious consumers, aimed at fostering sustainable livelihoods and social justice.

To quote Mahatma Gandhi: There is enough in this world for everyone's needs, but not for anybody's greed. ■

Sumita Ghose is founder-director of Rangsutra Crafts



Medicines, sent by Doctors For You, arriving in Manipur

Done with your meds? You can pass them on to others

SUKANYA SHARMA

DECLUTTERING is the order of the day. Clothes, books, shoes, cosmetics, crockery and such like are relatively easy to give away. But what about those medicines that one no longer needs and haven't expired? What does one do with them? Putting them in the trash is a waste and passing them on to second-users requires medical supervision.

Sushmita Bhatia faced such a dilemma when her husband passed away. A whole lot of drugs had piled up during his long treatment. She began searching on the internet where she discovered Doctors For You (DFY). A phone call later she had arranged to pass on the depressing stash of medicines, reassured that they would now be in the hands of professionals who would put them to appropriate use.

"I read about a couple of others too but this organization seemed reliable, especially because doctors were running it at the forefront — that is what caught my attention first. I was also inspired by the founder's profile, which made me choose to donate here," she says.

"With medicines, you have to be careful because there is always a risk of them falling into the wrong hands."

Doctors For You was founded by Dr Ravikant Singh in 2007 in Mumbai to rush medical support to crisis situations. It could be a flood or an earthquake or the outbreak of some disease. DFY supports government services in such situations. It was a lifesaver during the Covid-19 pandemic.

Recycling of unused medicines is a natural extension of DFY's activities. It happens in three ways: collection boxes at health centres, collaboration with other organizations and walk-in donors.

Dr Rajat Jain, DFY's president, explains, "It is based on community participation — people who have leftover medicines which are due to expire within a period of three to six months can donate them. We sort them, create a pool and then use them for patients who visit our healthcare centres or during relief camps in crisis areas."

For instance, recently in Manipur, donated medicines were added to the stock that was

already being sent for aid. DFY's footprint is pan-India. It has a presence in Pulwama, Patna, Guwahati, Dimapur, Bengaluru, Delhi, Mumbai and so on.

Among tie-ups with organizations, Goonj is one of the main partnerships. Goonj is better known for collecting old clothes and other recyclables. Medicines also come in and go to DFY for use.

Apart from its own health centres, DFY partners with government hospitals which are willing to take unused medicines. This is typically in a scenario when medicines such as potent or injectable drugs for complex medical conditions are donated (since such patients do not come to DFY clinics, they are better utilized if donated to government hospital set-ups).

"We have had people calling in to say their parents have passed away and they want the leftover medicines to go to a good place — where they know it will be used well," says Rohini Wadhawan, a healthcare professional at DFY.

"A lot of things come in, there are adult

Continued on page 28

Continued from page 27

diapers, painkillers, antibiotics, injections and vitamins," she adds.

A recent example is of a donation consisting of diabetes medicines that were due to expire in three months. The team made urgent calls to find out where they were needed on a priority basis and the drugs were put to good use. "The most important area I want to work upon is setting up community engagement medicine banks in almost every city and in hospitals as well. Whenever a patient is discharged, there are a lot of medicines in their possession which are of no use to them and end up being wasted," says Dr Jain.

"In fact, even in a regular household, sometimes six or seven tablets from a single strip go waste. I wish all of us could develop the habit of donating instead of wasting," he says, likening it to the concept of donating used clothes or books in good condition.

Any conversation about medicine banks is incomplete without the mention of 87-year-old Omkar Nath, better known as 'Medicine Baba'. Famous for walking around neighbourhoods of the capital in an orange kurta that bears his sobriquet along with his phone number, he goes from home to home collecting surplus medicines for the poor. Nath used to be a laboratory technician who, after retirement, found that he could make himself useful to society by recycling medicines.

"I have been doing it for the past 17 years. You will see me doing this for as long as I am alive," he says.

His journey began in 2008 after he witnessed a Delhi Metro bridge collapse in Lakshmi Nagar that left four people dead. They were poor labourers who died because they couldn't afford adequate medication. The tragedy had a profound impact on him and he resolved to devote his life to making medicines more accessible for the poor.

"My wife," and he points to her garlanded picture above his desk, "thought I had lost my mind and didn't speak to me for a few months until she saw my photograph in the newspaper one day, and realized I must be doing good work! She was very supportive after that."

Medicine Baba operates out of a small, dilapidated set-up in Uttam Nagar. He rents this space for ₹12,000 a month. He says he squirrels together the cost of his operation through donations and whatever little he can afford. There is a simple desk, a lone computer, shelves full of awards he has received for his work. A small room inside is brimming with tall racks full of medicines that have been donated.

A fridge for the injectables and perishable medical supplies such as insulin and human albumin is placed in a corner. There is a small opening in one of the walls — a window where the action takes place. People from vulnerable backgrounds line up with their prescriptions to collect medicines. This is one way in which the

poor access his collection.

Other ways include Nath's visits to government hospitals like AIIMS and Safdarjung, trusts like the Ramakrishna Mission and old age homes.

Until last year, he would call for medicines on foot despite a problem with his leg. He has now switched to going on his bike, which one of his workers drives for him.

"I have one goal and that is to serve the poor — *sewa* brings me satisfaction," he explains. "I am not a social worker or activist. I am a beggar.

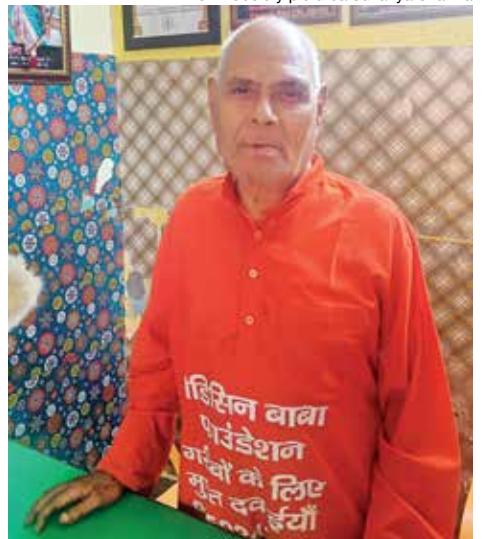


An elderly patient collects used medicines from Medicine Baba's store Omkar Nath is called Medicine Baba

school curriculum is a bigger award for me than the Bharat Ratna!" His card bears the slogan he has coined himself: 'Bachi dawaiyaan daan mein, naaki kudedaan mein' (leftover medicines should be donated, not discarded). His dream is to have a medicine bank in every district. India's size and population worry him but he doesn't lose hope. Explaining his cause, he says, "We all have to die one day but my wish is for no one to die because of lack of access to medicines."

ShareMeds Foundation came up five years ago when a Mumbai-based family realized that

Civil Society pictures/Sukanya Sharma



DONATE HERE

- **Doctors For You** 9818155802
- **Omkar Nath** 9250243298
- **ShareMeds Foundation** 9987592045
- **Uday Foundation** 011-26561333
- **SERUDS** 9849977577
- **Janaseva Foundation** 020-24538787
- **Hope Kolkata Foundation** 033-24742904
- **Saath Charitable Trust** 7947813177

Just like any other beggar or *fakir*, I am a beggar for medicines. That is how I see myself and I have no shame in saying so."

To donate, one can either approach him directly when he is on his visits to neighbourhoods or medicines can be dropped off at his office in Uttam Nagar. His small team has also set up collection corners across the city — gurudwaras like Sikh Sangat in Green Park, crematoriums and some private clinics, where medicines can be donated.

He now receives medicine donation packages worth lakhs of rupees from all over the world, including countries such as France, England, Germany, and the US. A recent delivery from the UK was a box of 200 colostomy bags (a pouch used to collect waste from the body after surgery). These were then donated to the gastroenterology department of a government hospital.

The SCERT English textbook for Class 10 in Chhattisgarh features him. He proudly shows the page and says, "Being a small part of the

the problem of surplus medicines and subsequent wastage was a reality in most homes. To bridge the gap between surplus and lack of access, the foundation began medicine collection at their main centre in Mumbai and has donated more than 30,000 medicine items over the years. Medicines can be donated at their office.

Ripa Sanghvi, co-founder, says, "The problem is real so people are more than happy to contribute to the ShareMeds initiative, which is heartwarming to see. It is quite easy to collect unused medicines but the real challenge is distribution." It would be ideal if the medical fraternity and pharmaceutical companies also do their bit, so that the medicines reach the right people, says Sanghvi.

The internet shows there are other compassionate crusaders working for this cause. Uday Foundation, founded by Rahul Verma, is based in New Delhi's Sarvodaya Enclave and accepts medicines and medical equipment in usable condition like wheelchairs, walkers and canes. These can be donated at their office. Then there is the Mallikarjuna G.-founded SERUDS (Sai Educational Rural and Urban Development Society) in Kurnool, Andhra Pradesh. Medicines are mainly donated in four major areas — distribution in slums via medical camps, old age homes through personal visits, health camps in underserved areas and emergency relief. Janaseva Foundation in Pune, Hope Kolkata Foundation in Kolkata and Saath Charitable Trust in Ahmedabad also accept medicine donations. ■

A Pandyan meal to perfection

SUSHEELA NAIR

AS I stepped into Suvaii restaurant, I noted it had the warmth and ambience of a typical elegant Madurai Chettinad home. This set the stage for an unforgettable dining experience of Pandyan cuisine. As I made my way through Suvaii's sparsely decorated interiors, I was welcomed by framed art gracing its walls depicting *Jallikattu*, the Meenakshi temples, costumes, martial arts, the Chithirai festival, the Thirumalanaikan Mahal, and other scenes typical of Madurai.

The unpretentious interiors draw inspiration from the traditions of Madurai and the Pandyan dynasty and reflect the traditional architecture of the Madurai Chettinad region. The Athangudi tiles for flooring and wooden pillars are also typical of Madurai. One of the things that caught my attention was the tastefully done ceiling with exquisite Kolam art. Even the furniture and lighting complemented the Madurai concept beautifully.

Suvaii, which means taste in Tamil, stands as a testament to the rich culinary heritage of the Pandyan dynasty, one of Tamil Nadu's prominent ancient dynasties that ruled parts of South India. Pandyan-style food is characterized by its lavish use of locally available ingredients such as rice, lentils, coconut, tamarind, spices and meat.

"We take great pride in presenting the best of Chettinad flavours from across the land of the Pandyas that take you back to the 13th century. Our skilled chefs use only the finest ingredients and time-honoured techniques to craft each dish with precision and care. From the aromas of our spicy curries to the delightful richness of coconut, each dish is a tribute to the legacy of the Pandyas," says Siddharth Ranganathan, one of the co-founders of Suvaii.

Locally sourced ingredients are the backbone of the culinary offerings at Suvaii. Explaining why the food is distinctive, Ranganathan says, "Ingredients play a very critical role in ethnic food. For an authentic dining experience, the spices and ingredients are sourced from native regions across Madurai. We use wood-pressed oils, in-house ground spices, pounded masalas, fresh meat and sea food that are procured daily from the source itself. We do not use preservatives, tastemakers, MSG, refined oil, artificial colours, or processed food. We also pound our own masalas which significantly contributes to the taste and essence of our foods. Everything is about freshness and no stored food is used in our restaurant."

The first thing that comes to my mind at the mention of Madurai food is the Kothu parotta. We relished this culinary masterpiece which is made by tawa-frying parotta, spices, meat and egg. With a wide range of parottas like bun parotta, poricha parotta, chicken chilli parotta and so on, Madurai is said to be the *parotta* capital of this region but the signature *parotta* is Kothu parotta which means chopped *roti* in Tamil.

For die-hard non-vegetarians, the mutton *paaya* soup made with lamb trotters boiled with the right mix of home-ground spices would be a nice start. But we gorged on other starters like mutton *kola urundai* (scrumptious mutton keema balls deep-fried with flavourful masala), the *karuvapullai* chicken fry (a South Indian appetizer marinated with



Suvaii in Madurai has built a reputation for its Pandyan cuisine

curry leaves and chilli, deep-fried in coconut oil) and mutton *chukka* (small boneless mutton chunks roasted with freshly pound masala in gingelly oil).

There are other delicious dishes in Suvaii that are exclusive to Madurai, the culinary capital of Tamil Nadu. The *elumbu* roast, a rich flavourful dish where mutton is simmered in a spicy gravy and served with piping hot rice or *dosa* is another non-vegetarian delight. Made of tender goat, the mutton *chukka* is a big hit.

Every bite of aromatic biryanis is a celebration of the rich cultural heritage of Tamil Nadu. Eight types of biryani are served in Suvaii. The mutton is sourced directly from Madurai. It is cooked with flavourful *seeraga samba* rice. We found the meat tasty and tender, served with a boiled egg. The onion *raita* was different and dry without the use of excess curd. The mini non-vegetarian meal comes with an assortment of dishes including mutton biryani, ghee rice, curd rice, *parotta*, chicken-6 and *payasam*.

Another bestseller is the in-house favourite, a three-layered *Kari dosa*. The bottom layer is a plain *dosa*, then an omelette and the top layer is a spread of spicy mutton *keema*. It looked like a pizza left to brown. We found it very filling and crispy. It is accompanied with mutton or chicken curry. It is said that *Kari dosa* was a treasured recipe of the Konar community of Madurai. The Konars were traditionally cow herders or Yadavs settled in Tamil Nadu.

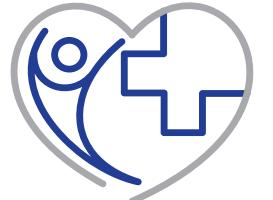
Since most of the meats and ingredients are sourced directly from Madurai, it ensures freshness and authenticity. For instance, our *Ayirai Meen Kolumbu*, a special fish gravy, featured fish exclusively curated from Madurai and stored at a precise temperature. The unique aspect of this dish from Madurai is that the fish can only be cleaned while it's alive, adding a distinctive touch to its preparation.

At Suvaii, the guest has the option of three different meals with no repetition. There is a specialized breakfast menu, an exclusive lunch menu and an exceptional dinner menu. You get plenty of choice so you never get bored with the meals served here. You can eat like a warrior at breakfast and choose from a range of *idlis*, *dosas*, *appams* and *poori* with your non-vegetarian curries. ■

Beyond Business Scripting social change



Building Resilience



Health & Wellbeing



Education & Skilling



Income Generation

Over the past 75 years, Forbes Marshall has been providing innovative offerings to help industries improve their production quality and energy efficiency globally.

We care equally about the community and work with them to build resilience through improved healthcare, education and women's empowerment. We run over 40 projects, through which we cover education of about 13,500 students, empowerment of 2,500 women through SHGs and well being of over 20,000 individuals through healthcare.

VOLUNTEER & DONATE

So you want to do your bit but don't know where to begin? Allow us to help you with a list especially curated for *Civil Society*'s readers. These are groups we know to be doing good work. And they are across India.

You can volunteer or donate or just spread the word about them.

WORK FOR CHARLIE



Charlie's Animal Rescue Centre (CARE) was established in 2013 as a shelter in memory of 15-year-old Charlie, a three-legged dog who was an established figure in the world of canine therapy. The agenda was to enable animals who were elderly, blind, paraplegic or suffering from chronic disease to lead peaceful and dignified lives at the shelter.

CARE is home to dogs, cats, ducks, rabbits, guinea pigs and even some birds. Facilities include ambulance services, an in-patient set-up for sick animals, a medical unit with OPD, OT, and X-ray facilities, along with adoption, canine therapy and holiday boarding.

You can adopt an animal by donating for their food and medication. You can volunteer, sponsor a day's meal or donate. They also have a unique 'gift of good' option, where you can help the shelter on their behalf and you will receive a certificate of appreciation.
<https://charlies-care.com>
+91 948391110

TRANSFORM THE LIVES OF SEX WORKERS



Kat Katha is a Delhi-based NGO that was founded by Gitanjali Babbar after she interacted closely with women who had been forced into sex work. The non-profit's aim is to empower and educate the women and their children. Their programme has four phases — field research and relationship building, schooling, training and skill development and, finally, complete rehabilitation.

Kat Katha has a Bridge School for children of sex workers who are enrolled in certified schools to help them with academics and extra-curricular activities. It also runs a HeARTshala or a tailoring project, and Maitri Meals, an

My journey with specially-abled children began when I started working closely as a volunteer teacher of a child with cerebral palsy. This experience inspired me to seek out an organization where I could interact with more such children. I met the principal of Tamana school, an educational institution for children with disabilities in New Delhi. Her flexible approach made it easy for me to make time from my writing career and family responsibilities and volunteer at my own pace, once a week, every Thursday.

I worked with different groups of children. Many of them were autistic and some had Down Syndrome. My work involved teaching them drama, writing and directing plays for their annual functions. I also planned their Christmas carnival which is held in a big way every year. I would help non-verbal children enact the dialogues and some would even lip-sync. I felt the children found the combination

FSSAI-registered cloud kitchen where women from GB Road, a red light district, cook to earn an income.

Kat Katha has helped 12 women switch to new livelihoods and enrolled 90 children in the Bridge School. Five are now Ashoka Youth Venture Fellows and another five have started their own artistic enterprises.

You can support them by becoming a volunteer or by donating on their website.

Help them in their mission to transform GB Road into a 'street of love.'

<https://www.kat-katha.org>
communications@kat-katha.org
+91 47503252

FIRST PERSON

SANJULA SHARMA, 59, WRITER

'MY HAPPIEST DAYS WERE WITH TAMANA'



annual function one year.

The children, I soon realized, were happy in their own world. While it is important to integrate them into society as much as possible, I realized it was also important to allow them to blossom in their own way.

I was also given the responsibility of conducting volunteering sessions for mainstream school students at Tamana, which was a lovely experience. Seeing the compassion of the student visitors and the lack of inhibition amongst the Tamana children was inspiring. Volunteering with Tamana soon became one of the happiest days of my week. Being greeted by the smiling, excited faces of the children was truly rewarding.

Some of them loved singing, a talent which was discovered when we played games like Antakshari during sessions. This prompted me to write a musical called *Summer Camp* for their

Every time I went for any of my work events, I would have to prepare and carry my papers with me. But whenever I went to Tamana, all I needed to carry was my compassion!

FUND EDUCATION FOR CHILDREN

PARIVAAR

Vinayak Lohani, an IIT and IIM graduate, could have secured a lucrative job anywhere. Instead, he decided to dedicate his life to humanitarian service. He founded Parivaar, an NGO that provides care to impoverished children in West Bengal and Madhya Pradesh. The NGO runs two of West Bengal's largest free residential institutions: Vivekananda Sevashrama for boys and Sarada Teertha for girls.

In Madhya Pradesh, 685 day boarding centres called 'Seva Kutir' have been opened in rural

pockets across many districts. Other initiatives include a 24x7 free ambulance service, 13 mobile health clinics, and a vision restoration programme for the elderly. There is a tie-up with two hospitals for surgery and free medicine. They accept donations online on their website.

<https://parivaar.org> | info@parivaar.org
+91 033 24954118

MAKE TIME FOR THE ELDERLY

As its name suggests Agewell Foundation, has been working for the welfare of the elderly across the country for 24 years. It runs an Agewell Helpline, manned by a

network of volunteers in 718 districts of the country, who attend to medical and emotional care, financial and legal advice, as well as any emergency that may occur. The helpline attends to nearly 25,000 calls by the elderly, every day.

Other initiatives include Share the Warmth, a blanket distribution drive for the destitute elderly in winter, Share a Smile with your Elders campaign, which is a school outreach programme to sensitize children to the rights of the elderly, and an employment exchange programme for senior citizens.

The organization also distributes food packets and healthcare equipment like wheelchairs, adult diapers and walkers to the destitute elderly. You can volunteer or donate by sponsoring a wellness kit, a monthly ration kit or folding beds.

<https://www.agewellfoundation.org>
agewellfoundation@gmail.com
011-29830005

DEVOTE TIME TO MIGRANT CHILDREN

Mobile Creches was one of the first organizations to realize that India's migrant population living in makeshift settlements near construction sites, brick kilns and other informal settlements, desperately needed child care services.

Founded in 1969 by Meera Mahadevan, the NGO sets up temporary day care centres on-site in the Delhi-NCR region, where children receive early childhood education, nutritious meals, and healthcare. Mobile Creches ensures childcare from birth to the age of 12. It partners with real estate developers and contractors, other NGO service providers and the government.

www.thenazariyafoundation.org
info@nazariyaqfrg.org | +91 9818151707

other activities for migrant children which you can mention in your online volunteer form. <https://www.mobilecreches.org>
mail@mobilecreches.org
011-23347635

JOIN AN INCLUSIVE SPACE FOR LGBTQIA+

 Nazariya Foundation began as a Queer Feminist Resource Group founded by a few Delhi-based queer feminists. The group strives to create a friendly space for all LGBTQIA+ persons so that they can have access to resources and equal opportunities.

SUPPORT A SHELTER FOR WOMEN AND CHILDREN

 Maher Ashram is a humanitarian organization in Pune that was founded by Sister Lucy Kurien in 1997 to provide shelter, care, and support to women in distress and underprivileged children. At Maher Ashram, poor, illiterate women and victims of domestic violence are given shelter, education, healthcare, vocational training, and emotional support.

<https://goonj.org/> | mail@goonj.org
011-26972351

MENTOR CHILDREN, ASSIST EDUCATION

 Make A Difference (MAD) was founded by Jithin C. Nedumala in 2006, with the mission of providing quality education and mentoring underprivileged children in India. Headquartered in Bengaluru, it operates in cities across India.

Maher Ashram also runs community outreach programmes to raise awareness on domestic violence and gender equality. Some of their ongoing projects include vocational training centres, schools, and initiatives to empower women through entrepreneurship programmes.

Volunteers can participate in teaching, counselling, healthcare assistance, and administrative support. Donations are welcome either through online monetary contributions or in kind. You can also donate by sponsoring specific projects or individuals through their website.

<https://maherashram.org> | maher@maherashram.org | +91 9011086134

COLLECT CLOTHES, BOOKS, TOYS

 Goonj, a reputed NGO founded by Anshu Gupta in 1999 in New Delhi, is today a pioneer in disaster relief and social development across India. Every time disaster strikes, Goonj arrives to provide relief.

Some diseases they work on a great deal are liver and kidney conditions, cancer treatment, eye care, dental health and diabetes. Medicines they collect and buy with donations range from basic over-the-counter drugs to

prescribed medication for chronic conditions. These are distributed to those in need through partnerships with healthcare facilities, community centres, resident welfare associations and outreach programmes. Apart from donating medicines and medical equipment, you can donate via their website — either one-time or on a recurrent basis.

<https://www.jivanjyotdrugbank.org>
info@jivanjyotdrugbank.com
022 23529047

projects. The organization collects, sorts, and repurposes surplus material such as clothing, household items and other essentials to mobilize the community and initiate development programmes.

One of Goonj's flagship initiatives is its 'Rahat' disaster relief project, through which it supplies clothing, blankets, and hygiene kits, to communities affected by natural disasters across the country.

You can volunteer with Goonj by devoting time to tasks like sorting and packing donated material, participating in community development projects, and assisting with administrative roles. You can donate in cash or kind: items such as food, clothes, toys and household essentials.

<https://goonj.org/> | mail@goonj.org
011-26972351

TRINKETS FROM THE HILLS

Small producers and artisans need help to reach out to sell their wonderful products. Civil Society happily provides information about what they have on offer and how you can get to them. Here are some fascinating products from the Dastkar Mela.



TRINKETS FROM THE HILLS

SONAM Dorjee Negi welcomes every visitor to his stall at Dastkar's Summer Mela with a bright smile. He and his family have been making jewellery for generations. After completing his education, he decided to join the family business instead of going on the routine job hunt.

"Why let the craft go waste?" he explains. While his family manufactures the jewellery, he concentrates on marketing — travelling to craft fairs and events across the country to sell the products. Originally, the family crafted only pure silver jewellery but they decided it was best to shift towards costume jewellery that is now trendy and much cheaper.

Products include earrings, necklaces, bracelets, anklets and bangles. Prices are very affordable. Bracelets cost ₹200-400 and earrings ₹300-400. Heavier pieces are priced ₹500-2000.

"Originally our family used to make only silver jewellery because almost everyone in Himachal always wears silver. Over time the trend here has changed. There is more demand for brass or white metal jewellery since silver has become very expensive," says Negi.

The designs have, however, remained unaltered. Negi's family replicates ethnic design in different metals. That way the jewellery doesn't lose its traditional charm and is easier to sell. "I have only recently opened an Instagram page," he says. "But I believe selling online doesn't work well for us. We find that customers like to come, try on the jewellery and appreciate the pieces. We also get to know what they like."

Contact: Sonam Dorjee Negi – 9810183342

Instagram: @himalayan.artefacts

Email: dorjees46@gmail.com



TENDER CARE FOR YOUR SKIN

TREAT your skin with love and care with Tvaksutra, an enterprise founded by Gunjan Bisht who believes in the dictum, 'Nurture yourself'.

"We are gentle on the skin and the planet. All our processes are absolutely natural and infusion based," she says.

Tvaksutra manufactures and sells lip balms, skin oils, creams, hair vitalizing serums and perfumes. Also available are artisan bar soaps with a range of fragrances. One of their most popular products is their SPF 45 sunscreen. The aloe vera-saffron combination of their gentle face cream helps in maintaining an even tone and is non-sticky.

Another bestseller is their hemp-based scrub, a blend of butters, hemp seed and walnut powder that works well as a skin exfoliator. It can be used as a body scrub too.

"Our packaging is all natural, glass-based and sustainable. Even the colours we use are natural. They are based on seed and flower infusion, making our products organic and safe for the skin and environment," says Bisht.

Tvaksutra's website will be up and running soon. Until then, you can place orders through their Instagram page or by connecting on the phone.

Contact: Gunjan Bisht – 8595316886
Email: tvaksutra@gmail.com
Instagram: @tvaksutra



PRODUCTS



STYLISH MUSLIN WEAR FOR CHILDREN

CLOTHES that are light, airy and organic are best suited for babies and young children. What could be better for their delicate skin than a wispy fabric like mulmul, steeped in Bengal's tradition and history. "We don't make clothes, we make a second skin" is Poulami Chatterjee's tagline for her brand, Kutti-Element of Love.

She found that although there were plenty of breathable summer fabrics for adults, there were very few options for children who actually have more sensitive skin.

Her clothes range has clothing for newborns to children who are 12 years old. Take your pick from attractive *kurtas*, shirts, dresses, kaftans and *dhotis*. Also on offer are embroidered quilts and small, colourful cloth toys. Her products come in a variety of designs and are soft, comfortable, stylish and sustainable.

"I wanted my enterprise to be sustainable, serve people and inspire them to make a conscious choice. Profit comes after these two main objectives," says Chatterjee. Her motto are the three P's: Planet, People, Profit.

"I have customers who have been coming for the past five years to say the clothes are still in good condition and have been handed down to younger children in the family," she says.

Chatterjee ensures clothes for children can be used for a longer period by designing unique patterns that allow for maximum use. She uses the age-old *jamdani* technique of weaving with muslin as the base material for all her apparel. "Muslin is breathable, soothing in summer, easy on the skin and a good absorber of moisture," she explains. Of course, she uses natural dyes.

Chatterjee is based in Kolkata but is a regular at Dastkar bazaars. You can also reach out to her by giving her a call or via WhatsApp and Instagram.

Contact: Poulami Chatterjee – 9051267073
Instagram: @kuttielmentoflove
Email: pouzdesign7777@gmail.com



NO-OIL FLAVOURFUL SNACKS

Asha Grah Udyog was founded by Asha Sharma and her family who settled in Dehradun over 22 years ago. The enterprise began as a small business using traditional recipes. It now provides a livelihood to more than 80 women from Gujrara village of Dehradun. Products on offer include crunchy peanut bites, roasted *moong jor*, *papad* varieties such as *chana-lehsun*, *chana-masala*, *urad dal* and more. They also have baked potato crisps and a range of pickles that are made without oil. Spiced and tangy peanut bites is one of their best-selling products and a popular tea-time snack. Each of their products is either roasted or baked. They do not add chemicals or preservatives and not a single snack is fried.

"All the recipes are my mother's, who started this with the principle of healthy snacking," shares Mrigakshee, Asha's daughter. "My mother has worked with the Dehradun government and the Delhi government as well. We have a long-standing association with Dastkar at New Delhi for the past eight years. It is a wonderful platform for us."

Asha Grah Udyog products have also featured in the International Trade Fair. They have made a conscious choice not to sell online because they believe theirs is an enterprise built on taste and trust, with honest and well curated ingredients. They want clients to taste their snacks before buying!

Contact: Mrigakshee Singh – 8826154481
Email: myashanamkeen@gmail.com



MANAGE Diabetes with 24 Mantra Organic Low GI Rice

GI Value <55

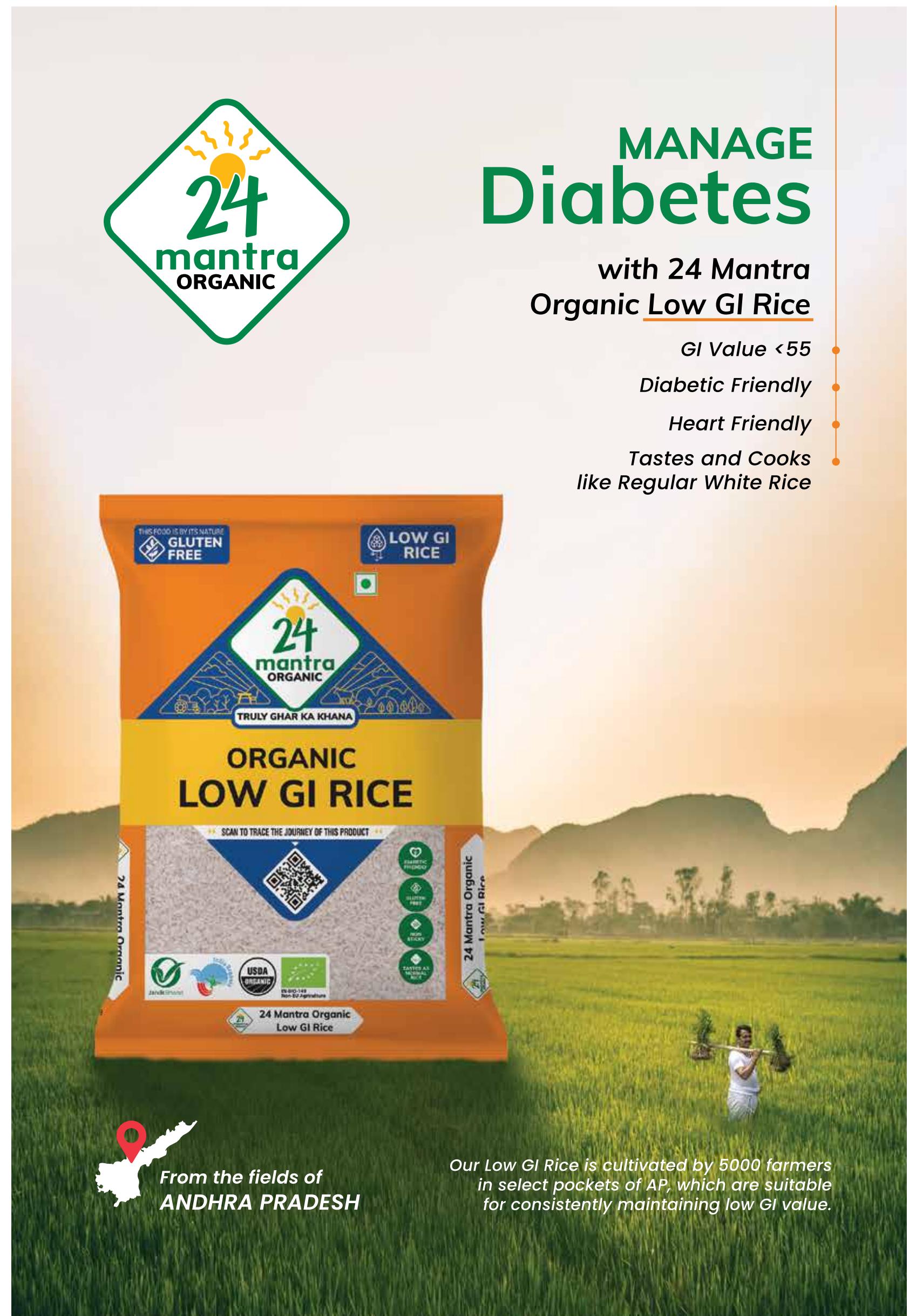
Diabetic Friendly

Heart Friendly

Tastes and Cooks like Regular White Rice



From the fields of
ANDHRA PRADESH



Our Low GI Rice is cultivated by 5000 farmers in select pockets of AP, which are suitable for consistently maintaining low GI value.



TATA STEEL FOUNDATION



WOMEN IN LEADERSHIP: BRIDGING UNSEEN BARRIERS

Tata Steel Foundation enables women to realise their full potential through the Disha programme that facilitates comprehensive and grassroots-level interventions to assert their rights, engage in community decision-making, and contribute to socio-economic development.

Sure, we make steel.
But **#WeAlsoMakeTomorrow**.

- Collaborating with 18,156 women
- 5000 underwent Disha training till FY24