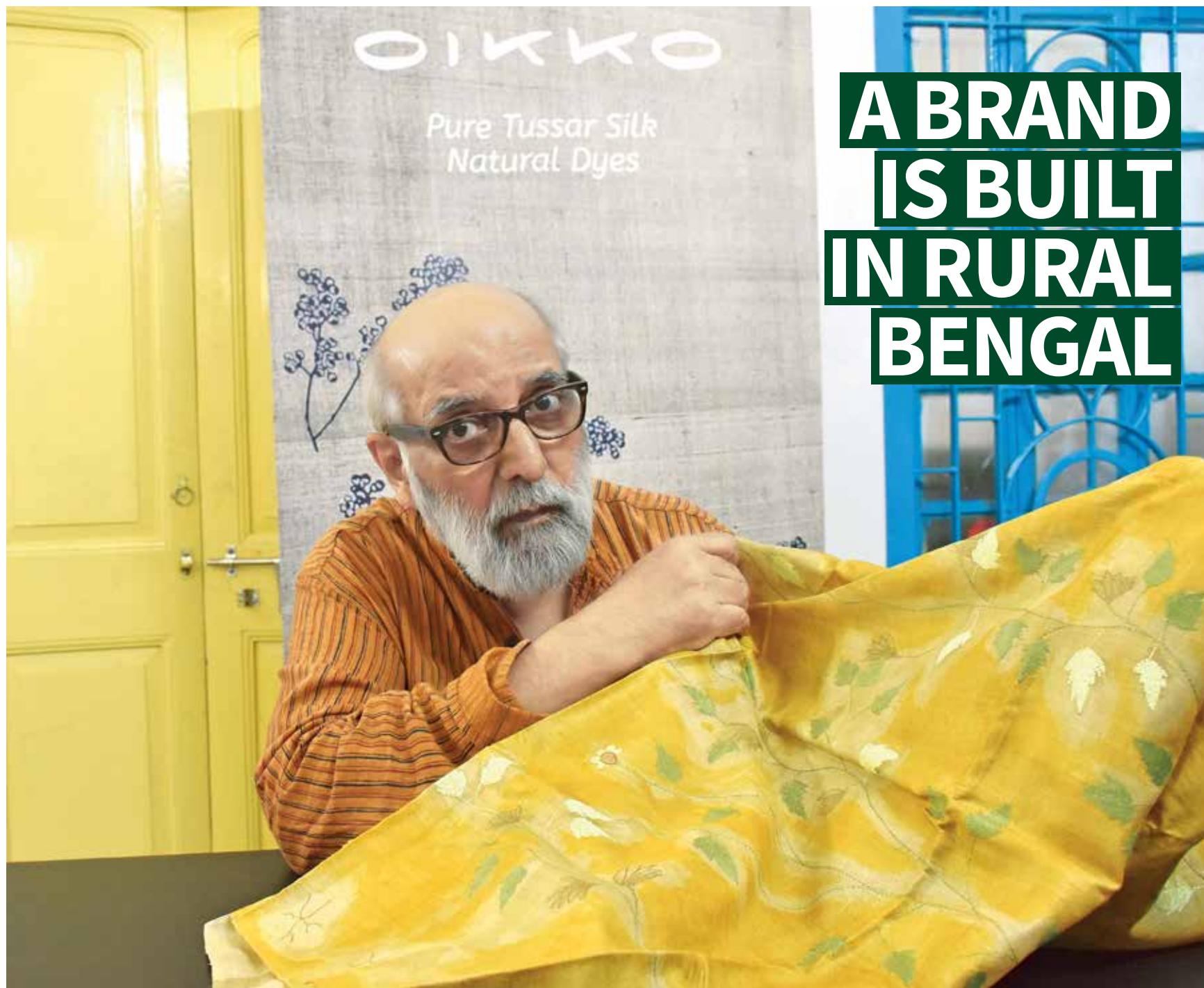


Civil Society



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COVER STORY

A BRAND IS BUILT IN RURAL BENGAL

The talented Tussar weavers of Tantipara in West Bengal have for long been in decline, but are making a comeback and that too with a brand of their own called Oikko.

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The magazine does not undertake to respond to unsolicited contributions sent to the editor for publication.

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South Extension Part 2,
New Delhi - 110049.
Phone: 011-46033825, 9811787772
Printed and published by
Umesh Anand on behalf of
Rita Anand, owner of the title, from
A-53 D, First Floor,

Panchsheel Vihar, Malviya Nagar, New Delhi - 110017.
Printed at Samrat Offset Pvt. Ltd.,
B-88, Okhla Phase II,
New Delhi - 110020
Postal Registration No.
DLS-17/3255/2024-26.
Registered to post without
pre-payment U(SE)-10/2024-25
at Lodi Road HPO
New Delhi - 110003
RNI No.: DELENG/2003/11607
Total no of pages: 36

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Jobs and skills

AMID the chatter about creating more jobs, the opportunities in promoting traditional skills and crafts tend to be overlooked. This is unfortunate because bolstering them takes economic growth to rural areas, disincentivizes migration and perpetuates talent that goes from one generation to another.

Creating employment in India is complicated. Not all the pieces in the jigsaw can come together at the same time. Education, training and investments can't be perfectly calibrated. India has lacked a vision for what can be done for its employable people, both young and ageing. The consequences are now visible in the widespread joblessness and frustration that is all around us. It is no solution to pull people out of villages and give them menial jobs.

This magazine has repeatedly highlighted the plight of workers in industries like construction and automobile parts. We have also shown in innumerable stories the value that gets created by connecting farmers and craftspeople to finance, markets and enabling technologies.

The talent and entrepreneurship in villages should not be overlooked. Our cover story from West Bengal in this issue highlights one more example of the opportunities that exist. In this case a voluntary organization, AHEAD Initiatives, is helping script a revival of Tussar, the exquisite silk.

The NGO has created a brand, Oikko, which combines Tussar with innovative prints made with vegetable dyes, to give Tantipara a modern presence and help it compete in urban markets.

For a long while the weavers of Tantipara have been in decline despite producing beautiful Tussar because of the way markets have changed. Now they are getting noticed again.

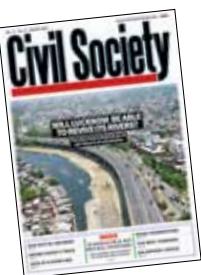
Squabbles between the Centre and the states are nothing new. But have the recent frictions descended into animosities with long-term consequences for governance in the country? We spoke to Anil Swarup, the veteran bureaucrat who has vast experience in dealing with this relationship.

Municipal waste has become a huge problem across cities largely because systematic efforts haven't been made over the years to find solutions. The answer lies in segregation, recycling and composting. But how should these be done on a scale big enough to make a difference? We bring you an example from Bengaluru where the municipality has successfully collaborated with waste-pickers in a number of wards.

We also have for you our regular columns and features and the first in a new series on food streets in the Living section.



LETTERS

**River and city**

Venkatesh Dutta's cover story, 'Can Lucknow get back its rivers, lakes?' was a great account of the small rivers and water bodies around Lucknow and their sorry plight today. His is a rich understanding of water and cities. Prof. Dutta's article underlined the need to revive water bodies through decentralized sewage treatment plants (STPs) where water can be treated and reused to revive defunct water bodies, recharge groundwater and for urban reuse.

I especially liked Prof. Dutta's graphic description of lakes and water bodies. He writes about Karela Jheel, an oxbow lake in Hulaskheda in Mohanlalganj area of south Lucknow, and the Bakh river which used to irrigate thousands of acres of agricultural land. Today, people don't even know it existed just 50 years ago.

His detailed account of Lucknow's changing topography and the disappearance of its water assets is an eye-opener.

Depinder Kapur

AI and health

Your interview with Dr Raju Sharma of AIIMS, New Delhi, 'AI should be used to help doctors, not replace them', was so informative. The rapid rate at which AI has begun to seep into all aspects of life is alarming and this is precisely what makes it a topic so important to talk about and grasp fully.

Arvind Gopi

I enjoyed reading this interview on AI in healthcare. This is a subject worth discussing. Time and effort have rightly been put into this interview. So insightful.

Dr Naveen Jain

I couldn't agree more with Dr Sharma's perspective: "This (AI) alone will not be a solution to our

lack of infrastructure."

Sapna Kabra

What I found interesting was that there are leading academic institutions involved in developing and validating algorithms and helping governments with how such technology should be deployed. I was not aware of this earlier.

Harsh M.

Dog menace

In response to your piece, 'Dog bite anger leads to protest in Jor Bagh', I'd like to point out that Ambika Shukla has saved stray dogs and kept them at her residence in Jor Bagh and left them in the open. The terror of dog bite threats for elderly citizens and young children is inhuman. It is best to keep wild dogs in a farmhouse in a rural area and build shelters. Why should we suffer and be bitten by dogs because of a powerful lady with strong political connections?

Vishal Sood

Ambika Shukla's terror exceeds the boundaries of Jor Bagh. When I protested in my society about the stray dog menace, I received a call from her threatening me with dire consequences if I did not stop my protest. I surrendered.

Aseem

Wow, this magazine has cherry picked stories to showcase dogs as a menace. I didn't expect such disappointing reporting touted as 'journalism'. The funniest bit is starting an article by saying the people of Jor Bagh would otherwise never have resorted to protesting on the streets. This is such a classist remark. I am glad this magazine does not have any reach at all. However, I'm quite disappointed that you are demonizing the woman who helps thousands of dogs, and rescues and feeds countless strays. Let's face it, this earth was not created only for human beings to roam around.

Priya Singh

Canine board

Meghna Uniyal's article, 'Animal Welfare Board out of control?' was excellent. The government should be ashamed of itself for causing the death of innumerable children by supporting a

draconian policy. I hope you succeed in awakening the government.

Vineeta S.

I appreciate Meghna Uniyal for her dedicated efforts to protect algorithms and helping governments with how such technology should be deployed. I was not aware of this earlier.

Sabu Stephen

Undoubtedly the Animal Welfare Board of India (AWBI) is blind and deaf. It seems it doesn't have any official who has exposure to wildlife, veterinary science, animal ecology, health, public administration or governance and law.

Sudheer Kumar

The present AWBI should, in fact, be disbanded with immediate effect for not living up to the basic charter of its existence. A new AWBI should be constituted with representatives from citizens, Resident Welfare Associations, local authorities and animal lovers. Alternatively, the AWBI should be decentralized and each state should have its own animal welfare board with similar representation.

Wg Cdr P.K. Roy Chowdhury

I fully agree with this article.

Joginder Singh

Wildlife agenda

Ravi Chellam's piece, 'Wildlife plans should not leave out communities', has been written with clinical precision. All that has been stated by him is true and very practical. For conservation of any ecosystem or protection of an endangered species, relocation of locals is not a solution. In fact, it only adds to the problem.

Making them part of the project is the only way to success. It's not a political or public issue. The locals know the forest ecosystem much better than any forest official or so-called conservators. Because they are sons of the soil. From the smell, the sound, the screeching in the jungle, they can figure out what lies ahead. Also, they are accustomed to the wild. Any relocation will shatter their normal life.

projects which will upgrade their life too.

K. Muralidharan Nair

Great article. We need to be constantly reminded of what we have and what we need to do to safeguard our biodiversity and our future.

Kamal Bawa

Just last week I woke up saddened by the news of yet another cheetah cub dying in Kuno. It is high time we realized how important wildlife conservation is. Such efforts must be carried out in a genuinely well-informed and efficient way.

Kavish

Say cheese

What a lovingly written article on Kalimpong cheese! I remember eating this cheese and Kalimpong lollipops, a special treat, as a child. My two siblings and I were once promised the lollipops as a reward if we took our vaccination shots "without making a fuss". Three brown Kalimpong lollipops in their transparent plastic wrappers were taken out of a bag and placed tantalizingly on the dashboard of our jeep. You bet we were on our best behaviour! The lollipops removed every trace of fear of the dreaded injections. We happily ran out for our pokes! Could you share the details of how one can procure Kalimpong cheese? Could you also track down those Kalimpong lollipops?

Radhika Chandiramani

I love cheese and Civil Society. I would love to have the address and contact details of the supplier in Kalimpong so I can order from him.

Dr Kirti Sheth

To see a forgotten art being revived, especially with a food, is always such a joy. We have so much happening alongside all the chaos in our country. India has much to offer.

Mamta Bora

Delectable piece on Kalimpong cheese. I had it last when I covered the 1989 elections! I'd forgotten about it till I read your piece.

Nilanjan Mukhopadhyay

You can get Kalimpong cheese from Larks store in Kalimpong's main market. You can also buy it from the weekly *haat* market. Larks is a well-known store that

Fair polls

I read Jagdeep Chhokar's article on the importance of a strong Chief Election Commissioner and financial transparency for a vibrant democracy. No voter, system or public is forcing parties to include this in their party manifesto.

Cosmos Sangma

Kalimpong cheese coated with egg and arrowroot and deep fried is delicious. Instead of Bombay duck, put this fried cheese in the gravy and it will immediately lead to an 'I'm just loving it' moment!

Neelakash Gurung

It was a delight to read about the adventurous process of bringing Kalimpong cheese all the way to Delhi. I was amazed to read that a city like Delhi does not have Kalimpong cheese. The piece really made the cheese lover in me excited about trying it out myself.

Mahima Krishnatray

We have rural enterprises all around, yet they are hardly ever spoken about or given the credit they deserve. As a child I went to Kalimpong and Darjeeling numerous times during my summer holidays. Reading about Mr Yonzon making fine cheese on his farm brought back idyllic childhood memories. I'm passing on this story to my family and friends and I'm looking forward to enjoying some Kalimpong cheese together.

Meenu Malhotra

Besieged rivers

Venkatesh Dutta's article in your July issue, 'Protect rivers, check creeping encroachments', was well researched. It can really help our governments.

Jasjit Singh Gill

Telugu delights

Susheela Nair's piece, 'Joys of the Telugu kitchen', sounds interesting though the names of the dishes are tongue-twisters. I am only familiar with *puliyogarai* and the variety of pickles that are available in the state. These are commercially available. I am sure the original taste must be quite different. A tick on my next visit to Bengaluru.

Rathi Marar

FCRA bugs

Mathew Cherian's article, 'Let non-profits function, make FCRA simpler', was a timely and relevant article with useful and practical suggestions that should be considered immediately. We need to build constituencies in political parties, media and governments who support the NGO cause.

Abhimanyu Singh

intrinsic value of river health is crucial for sustainable development. Understanding the river's ecological flow and its watershed relevance is imperative.

Sustainable agricultural practices, effective management of industrial waste and sewage, and a strict 'no-plastic policy' are essential to halt the further deterioration of river water quality and its impact on riverine ecology. Every river, big or small, weaves a unique thread in our ecological tapestry.

Why do political parties and politicians consider voters to be fools? Perhaps because defection laws are weak. Why allow two-thirds of elected representatives to flout and backstab the public mandate?

NOTA

needs

to give more muscle to the right to reject button. If it gets 20 percent of polled votes, the Election Commission should countermand the elections. MPs who defect to another party should not be allowed to stand for any election for the next five years. Neither they nor their family members should be nominated for any post or allowed to become members of any government commission or corporation.

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build their houses incrementally to suit their needs and affordability. The process is supported by millions of artisans, labour, material suppliers, land and service providers, all of whom form a significant part of the economy.

However, incremental housing is not recognized in building and planning regulations. Neither is it supported by architects and planners, often resulting in deficiencies in structural safety, light and ventilation. Large parts of cities go without safe water and sanitation and designated spaces for schools, playgrounds and health facilities. This mode of housing production will continue at scale for a long time to come and must be incorporated into planning and design processes and regulations.

Banasree Banerjee

Healing hands

Doctors for You is an excellent initiative to help people in difficult situations. There should be more such endeavours.

Chandrakha Anand Sio

Errata

Aarohi, the NGO based in Uttarakhand, was founded by the late Oona Sharma and Dr Sushil Sharma and not as mentioned in the Volunteer & Donate section of the July issue.

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ANIL SWARUP SAYS DEVELOPMENT NEEDS DIALOGUE

‘Big dangers in rift between Centre, states’

Civil Society News
New Delhi

RELATIONS between the Centre and the states have been fraught. A recent meeting of NITI Aayog was not attended by the Opposition-ruled states with the exception of West Bengal whose chief minister, Mamata Banerjee, walked out half-way, saying she was being ignored.

Being in control and centralizing power have been the signature traits of the BJP-led Union government, especially so in its second term. It has led the states to feel insecure.

States where the Opposition parties have been in power have felt the heat of a political onslaught with even chief ministers being locked up and an agency like the Enforcement Directorate being given free rein.

Less visible but perhaps more serious are the challenges being posed to the delicate federal balance in the country. The BJP-ruled states have been as impacted as the Opposition ones with chief ministers being made beholden to an omnipotent Central government. States, no matter who is in power, it would seem, are being forced into retreat.

What long-term impact does this trend have on development and governance in the country? Well-empowered and accountable states and cities are needed for economic and social progress. It is at the local level that all the action happens.

Civil Society spoke to Anil Swarup, who as a secretary in the Union government worked closely with the states in departments as varied as coal and education.

Q: The Centre and the Opposition-run states seem to be locked in endless combat. What do you think has brought this about? What is happening?

It is a totally unnecessary war that in the long term or even the medium term does enormous damage. I can only conjecture why this is happening. I can see four possible reasons.

First, there is apparent aggression on any issue taken up by the Centre which puts the state in an assumed role of adversary. This has certainly been so till the 2024 election.

Second, I think there is an absence of consensus-building. Missing is the philosophy that you have to take people along to make things happen on the ground. I have always believed that the Centre is a fiction. Actual action happens in the states. And hence it is necessary and important to take them along. I have seen this government work from very close quarters in its first four years when I was there. It is not that the Centre and states will agree on everything. There were disagreements. The question is how do you resolve that disagreement now?

Third, there is an absence of a consensus-builder like Arun Jaitley. He was a guy who could talk to the states and take them along. Otherwise, GST would not have happened. GST happened because of his sagacity, his ability to negotiate, talk, discuss with the so-called adversaries — at least those who are seen as adversaries now.

I saw him operate very successfully, even in the case of coal reforms,



Anil Swarup: 'A consensus-builder like Arun Jaitley is missing'

when I was the secretary. Now, he was not my minister, but he played a phenomenal role in getting the states on board. Why I say this is because coal was a classic example of Centre-state cooperation. Coal existed in all Opposition-ruled states — West Bengal, Chhattisgarh, Jharkhand, Madhya Pradesh, Odisha. And yet everything happened there. How did it happen? Because of the sagacity of Arun Jaitley.

The fourth reason is unease on the economic front. I think the problems relating to unemployment and so on are very serious ones. Now, if you are appearing to partner with the states, you can't pass on the blame to them. So, when you have a blame game going on and there is a crisis, you want to find somebody to pass the blame to.

Q: What about BJP-run states? The Centre seems to be walking over them as well. Does this indicate an unwillingness to recognize the role of the state? In a sense, a much deeper problem in a federal system.

You know, the fundamental philosophy is of moving towards a unitary form of centralization. If your own party is there, no problem. If a chief minister is resisting you, change the chief minister. Get a man who's a total yes-man. And that was evident in Madhya Pradesh, in Rajasthan. It is the reason for the tension building up in Uttar Pradesh. In a sense, it is not new. It is what Indira Gandhi did.

Q: The 'double-engine sarkar' idea strikes at the very roots of federalism, doesn't it?

This happens in every evolving democracy. It happened during the 1970s when, before the Emergency, Indira Gandhi tried to dominate every state and had her own men there. It is natural when you have a dominant party ruling the Centre and a person who would like to be seen as the

person who is doing things.

This is why I say the sagacity of someone like Arun Jaitley is needed. I mean, the Centre was still very dominant but the quest was to enter into a dialogue. If you're only throwing salvos at each other, the communication stops. There will still be disagreement. There will be strong disagreement. But you will not have a situation where you have a NITI Aayog meeting to which all the Opposition leaders don't come and then the only one who comes walks out. That's a serious issue. Someone in the government has to maintain communication.

Q: What does this kind of conflict do to the development process in the country? You have been in health, education....

We can't imagine the damage it is doing to the development of this country. As a secretary in the Government of India I did not convene a single meeting with the state governments in Delhi. I went to the states, sat with them, spent entire days with senior officers, with chief ministers and conveyed a value proposition to them.

You think that you passed an order and it will be implemented. Usually it is, but probably the extent to which it should be implemented and the spirit with which it should be implemented can happen only if you take stakeholders, the states, into confidence.

So how do you take them into confidence? It is not that you allow them to dominate. That's not the question here. The question is whether you are able to convey a message to the states that what is being conveyed to them carries value for them.

Q: Conflict, on the other hand, brings the development process to a grinding halt.

It's not grinding to a halt. But we are a developing economy and the pace could be much faster if the people who have to make it happen on the ground are part of your entire process.

It is easy to have ideas. But for any idea to fructify and sustain over a period of time, it has to be politically acceptable, socially desirable, technologically feasible, financially viable, administratively doable, judicially tenable, emotionally relatable and environmentally sustainable.

For it to be emotionally accepted it is most important for stakeholders to feel that the decision is theirs. Without that, they don't see any benefit in implementing that decision. That's where the Centre-state relationship becomes very important.

Q: The Enforcement Directorate (ED), Central Bureau of Investigation (CBI) have become instruments solely in the hands of the Centre. Isn't this weakening them and distorting enforcement?

You are making an understatement. In fact, for me misuse and abuse of these Central agencies can lead to devastating effects. Crime and law and order are state subjects. It is under the Prevention of Money Laundering Act (PMLA) that the Central government has appropriated for itself the authority of doing things without the consent of the state government. The CBI cannot enter a state without the consent of the state government.

The PMLA under the ED is a problem now. If the states decide to come down heavily on Central government officers, we are in serious trouble. Crime is under the state governments. If they start registering cases left, right and centre against Central government officers, they won't be able to function in the state.

It's already happening in Tamil Nadu. There were FIRs registered against ED officials and they can go ahead and even arrest them. Look at the consequences of what is happening now. It will have long-term consequences and will destroy governance.

I don't know whether you recall this: a Central minister was arrested in Maharashtra when the other government was ruling the state. Look at the impact on governance. This is very serious. It needs to be resolved straightforwardly. Using, abusing and misusing any law enforcement agency is going to have long-term impact.

And state governments are waking up. They're getting back their mojo post the last election. I think more state governments are going to

become aggressive. And I hope they don't, because then we are in serious, serious trouble. There will be a constitutional crisis. And you can't keep dismissing state government after state government.

Governments like those in West Bengal and Tamil Nadu are quite capable of taking such actions against Central officers, even Central ministers. What do you do then? I mean, you can keep going to the court and getting bail. But then we'll be wasting time on such issues. This is perhaps the most dangerous aspect of Centre-state relations and one has to tread very carefully.

Q: In recent times we have seen the Centre destabilizing popularly elected governments. Delhi and Jharkhand are examples.

Dismissing or manipulating state governments has happened in the past, since the 1970s. It is nothing new. But now, instead of dismissing a government lock, stock and barrel, you manipulate and get people on your side. The methodology has changed but the consequences are nothing new.

Q: NITI Aayog set out by saying that states needed to be given their rightful place. And that each state was different with its own needs. What happened to that kind of thinking?

NITI Aayog should not be implementing things on the ground. It should work as the principal facilitator in the country. How do you do that? Things are happening in the states. If I were sitting there, I would pick up

‘Misuse and abuse of Central agencies can lead to devastating effects. If the states come down heavily on the Central government officers, we are in serious trouble. They won't be able to function.’

successful models so that they can be replicated. This should be the primary role of NITI Aayog. It should be showcasing successful models to other states and asking them how it can help in implementation.

It can be transformational. I did that in education. I used to have regional workshops where I used to call state governments to roadshow good work.

Instead, NITI Aayog has started inspirational districts on the lines of a 20-point programme. So, everyone is now cooking up data to be there at the top. They are making districts compete with one another. How will a district in Bihar compete with a district in Kerala? I mean, this is pointless. This type of computation does not work. You have to enable them. You have to learn from one another and then compete with one another. Here, even the adjoining district will not tell the other how they are able to succeed in a particular area because they're competing with them. What is going on?

Q: The North-South divide has been growing. Is it just another manifestation of Centre-state tensions? How far do you think this is going to go?

You could look at its various dimensions. Economically, the per capita GDP in the southern states is higher. The rate of growth has been higher year on year, which means the gap is increasing. Socially, the South has handled caste and religion better. It may not be perfect, but while being more religious, people in the South are less communal. Similarly, they have come to terms with caste. And then comes delimitation, which means the South is not as politically powerful as the North. Given these factors we could be in serious trouble unless the situation is addressed. ■



Kumuda at her dry waste collection centre which she runs with a self-help group of waste-pickers

A trash solution in Bengaluru

Waste-pickers help civic body with recycling

Sumangala
Bengaluru

MOST cities in India struggle to cope with their waste, but Bengaluru has been putting in place a solution that holds out hope for the rest of the country. A collaboration between the municipal corporation and collectives of waste-pickers with the help of an NGO has made it possible to segregate recyclables in several wards every day so that less trash reaches landfills.

Sky-high trash mountains are an eyesore in rapidly growing cities like Delhi and Gurugram. From segregation to disposal the game gets tougher with rapid urbanization. No landfill is big enough and soon new dumping sites are needed. Gurugram and Delhi are examples of how tricky the problem can become.

Bengaluru's strategy has been to whittle down the amount of trash it has to handle. The city generates 5,000 tonnes of solid waste every day. In 2017, the Bruhat Bengaluru Mahanagar Palike (BBMP) signed a Public-Private Partnership (PPP) with Hasiru Dala or Green

Force, and waste-pickers — making them responsible for collecting dry waste, sorting it, segregating it, selling it and thereby reducing the waste that makes its way to landfills.

Dry waste collection centres (DWCCs) have been set up by the BBMP where dry waste is collected and segregated into reusable and recyclable waste. Hasiru Dala has trained waste-pickers to manage 33 DWCCs. The city has 225 wards.

The NGO was registered in 2013 in Bengaluru. "That's the time citizens started talking about waste management and segregation. But nobody talked about waste-pickers," says Nalini Shekhar, executive director and co-founder of Hasiru Dala. "Whichever city is not performing on waste management, its saviours are the waste-pickers."

The quantity of mixed waste heading to landfills has reduced, affirms a BBMP official from the Mahadevapura zone. "Wherever DWCCs are operating efficiently, waste segregation is happening," he says.

The Residents Welfare Association (RWA) at Block 13 of JP Nagar 3rd Phase has been

working with the DWCC, BBMP and Hasiru Dala for the past five years. Aparna Kumar, a member of the RWA, says they organized a door-to-door awareness campaign and even went to local schools to underline the importance of segregation.

Three times a week, a waste collection van collects all dry waste from residents and brings it to the DWCC. The waste-pickers have a calendar planner. Each ward has been divided into blocks.

"If some residents do not segregate their waste properly, the dry waste collector does not take it. They inform us, and we speak to the residents and ensure they segregate properly the next time," says Aparna Kumar.

"We also make sure residents give due respect and call the waste collectors by their names. You know, most of the time, people call out to them derisively, 'Kachrawali, come here,'" says Shweta Urs, a member of the Women of Wisdom, a group that acts as a bridge between residents of Blocks 1 to 9.

"We must understand that they are helping us by taking our waste and keeping our

surroundings clean and hygienic. They are doing dignified work. If all the wards have their own DWCC, the quantity of mixed waste going to landfills will reduce."

The net result is that her block is clean without any spots where people would randomly throw bags of mixed garbage under cover of darkness.

THE SUPPLY CHAIN It has been a difficult journey for Hasiru Dala. Putting a waste management system in place with waste-pickers as its lynchpin required meticulous planning and continuous follow-up with BBMP officials, corporators, and ward members. Hasiru Dala also had to carry out extensive information, education and awareness campaigns among residents and implement intensive training sessions for waste-pickers.

"The biggest challenge we faced was organizing waste-pickers and building trust. Through conversations and surveys, we gradually engaged with them. We provided capacity-building programmes and leadership training to help them become operators of DWCCs," says Shekhar.

The second challenge was changing the attitude of residents towards waste-pickers who were perceived as poor and dirty. "Most of them are from the Dalit and other underprivileged communities. We engaged intensely with the RWAs, colleges, and civil society organizations. We facilitated dialogues that have slowly changed this perception. People now view waste collectors as silent environmentalists and robust entrepreneurs, transforming waste into valuable commodities."

Before starting, they conducted a detailed survey of waste-pickers' work patterns and socio-economic status.

They realized early on the need for policy changes to empower waste-pickers. The first step they took was to get them occupational identity cards under the Solid Waste Management Rules, 2016. The organization filed a PIL and fought a Lok Adalat case to make this happen.

Karnataka's Urban Solid Waste Management policy of 2020 clearly states that a "ULB (Urban Local Body) can thereafter (after the survey and identification) issue occupational identification cards either through authorized officers of ULB/NULM City Livelihood Centres and NLRM to waste pickers and other informal waste workers above 18 years of age".

The identification cards validate that they are city residents. These cards act as official identification and can be used as proof of address/identity when applying for other social security benefits. This also allows waste-pickers access to public spaces and recognizes their work for the city. Around 11,380 such cards have been issued.

"This policy intervention was much needed,"

says Shekhar. "Later, the Rural Development and Panchayati Raj (RDPR) department in Karnataka directed all gram panchayats to issue occupational identity cards to waste collectors. Karnataka is the only state that has implemented this."

Hasiru Dala has slowly extended its operations to other districts of Karnataka, including Mysuru, Mangaluru, Tumakuru, Hubbali-Dharwad, Davanagere, Chamarajanagar, Kodagu (Coorg), Chikkaballapura, and the cities of Coimbatore, Trichy, and Rajahmundry.

COOPERATIVE MODEL Under the PPP, the BBMP has to provide space and buildings for the DWCC with electricity, toilets, drinking

and quantity of segregation improved."

All dry waste is sorted into a minimum of five categories — recyclable, non-recyclable, bulky waste, hazardous domestic and e-waste. The recyclable waste is further classified into categories and sorted accordingly. BBMP is responsible for taking back mixed waste, e-waste, sanitary waste and medical waste.

Hasiru Dala identifies the waste-pickers and supports BBMP in issuing identification cards. It provides training and PPE (personal protective equipment) such as gloves, green overcoats, handwash and so on to each DWCC. It also offers technical support for data entry and supports waste-pickers in availing of social benefit schemes. There are financial literacy programmes for the waste-pickers too.



Nalini Shekhar with waste-pickers who have been trained and given identity cards by the civic body

water, and other infrastructure facilities for the segregation process. However, in most DWCCs, BBMP only provides space and pays half the cost of vehicle charges for waste collection. Each DWCC has two to three dry waste collection vans with a driver and a helper.

An SHG of waste-pickers is formed in each DWCC. The operator of the DWCC runs it with the SHG, along with a driver and a helper. Their salaries are paid by the operator.

Hasiru Dala, as a resource organization, helps form the SHG and handholds the operator in managing the DWCC. The centre is open from 10 am to 6 pm. A weekly meeting is organized and each member contributes ₹100-150 towards a common pool. If any member requires a loan they can tap into this amount. The SHG at JP Nagar 3rd Phase 177 DWCC has a ₹50,000 deposit in the bank.

"We first carried out an awareness programme with residents, informing them of the need to separate dry waste and wet waste at home and keep it in separate bins," says Chinnaiah, manager of the DWCC programme at Hasiru Dala. "Once awareness levels improved, residents began to get involved and the quality

TRASH TO CASH: Hasiru Dala's efforts have converted some of the operators of DWCCs into entrepreneurs. Two of them, who used to run small scrap shops, increased their income by becoming DWCC operators and have spoken at global forums on waste management.

K. Kumuda, who runs the DWCC in JP Nagar 3rd Phase, Ward 177, was honoured in February 2024 with the Most Inspiring Woman Entrepreneur award by the Ministry of Textiles and the Confederation of Indian Textile Industry (CITI) for collecting and recycling textile waste. She led an initiative by Hasiru Dala called Hasiru Batte, or Green Cloth, to handle discarded clothes. Textile waste was collected, segregated and sent to processors to channel it into the circular economy.

Last year, Kumuda's DWCC caught fire but she bounced back quickly. She collected money from residents, took a bank loan, and rebuilt the DWCC in two months.

Kumuda's turnover, by selling segregated waste, is ₹3-4 lakh per month. After paying salaries to the waste collectors and driver, the rent for the centre, and other expenditures, she

Continued on page 10

Continued from page 9

is left with a profit of ₹20,000 to ₹25,000 per month. Each waste collector is paid ₹500 to ₹700 per day, depending on their experience.

Kumuda's grouse is that in the past three months the rates for plastic and paper waste have declined sharply. She says she is now running at a loss and managing the centre by dipping into her savings. Two tonnes of dry waste yield only one tonne of saleable recyclable waste. Half of it or one tonne will be mixed waste which the BBMP takes back.

Kumuda says there is more awareness among residents now about segregating dry and wet waste. Medical waste is a challenge, though. "Some people keep the diapers of kids and elderly people in the middle of the dry waste. We don't realize it while collecting their waste. We come to know only during segregation."

Ten to 12 women are part of Kumuda's SHG. Laxmamma, an SHG member, recalls working as a waste-picker as a child with her mother.

"Dogs would chase us and people would look down on us. They would say, 'You are a rag-picker, stand away. You smell bad.' The rainy season made it worse, with everything wet and filthy. Some days I earned ₹300 and some days just ₹100. Working at this centre with an ID card, I earn a steady ₹500 per day for eight hours of work. I finally have a stable income and dignity."

Another SHG member, Leelavathi, says, "Every day, I would wake up early, head out with my bag at 5 am, and collect waste on the roadside until noon. My shoulders, legs, and back constantly ached. I was barely managing my household with the little income I earned. I resigned myself to a life of unrelenting hardship and indignity, believing it was my fate. Then, I was invited to join this team. Instead of collecting waste on the streets, I was given the job of sorting it. I cared for my family through rag-picking, and now my children are settled. I have a steady income and I can support myself with dignity."

Leelavathi never went to school. "Now I know how to sign my name. I have a bank account. I proudly wear this green overcoat, have an ID card, and lead a dignified work life."

Indumathi, another waste entrepreneur, has been running two DWCCs. One is in Bellandur Ward 150 and the other covers Wards 88 and 52. As a child, Indumathi worked as a labourer in a garment factory. She got married and raised two children while juggling multiple jobs. After losing her debt-ridden husband, she started working as a waste-picker and set up a small scrap shop.

During a survey of waste-pickers, a Hasiru Dala coordinator visited her shop and offered her the opportunity of operating a DWCC. Initially hesitant, Indumathi joined and took part in capacity-building and upskilling programmes, including leadership development and communication training.



Waste-pickers say they earn a steady income and are treated with dignity by residents

Indumathi says her turnover used to be around ₹15 lakh per month. After meeting all her expenses like paying salaries to her waste collectors, drivers, rent, and so on, she used to be left with a profit of ₹50,000 to ₹60,000 per month. But, for the past three months, she has been facing a monthly loss of around ₹80,000 to ₹90,000 and is struggling to keep her centre operational.

"The rates of all types of recyclable plastic, paper and cardboard have drastically decreased. I have stock in my centres but very little market demand. For the first time I took an advance from one of my vendors. That was not enough so I took a bank loan. Hasiru Dala helped me with the loan procedure," she says.

She is hopeful of receiving a subsidy from the government. "Bank officials will tell me the subsidy amount in a few days," she says.

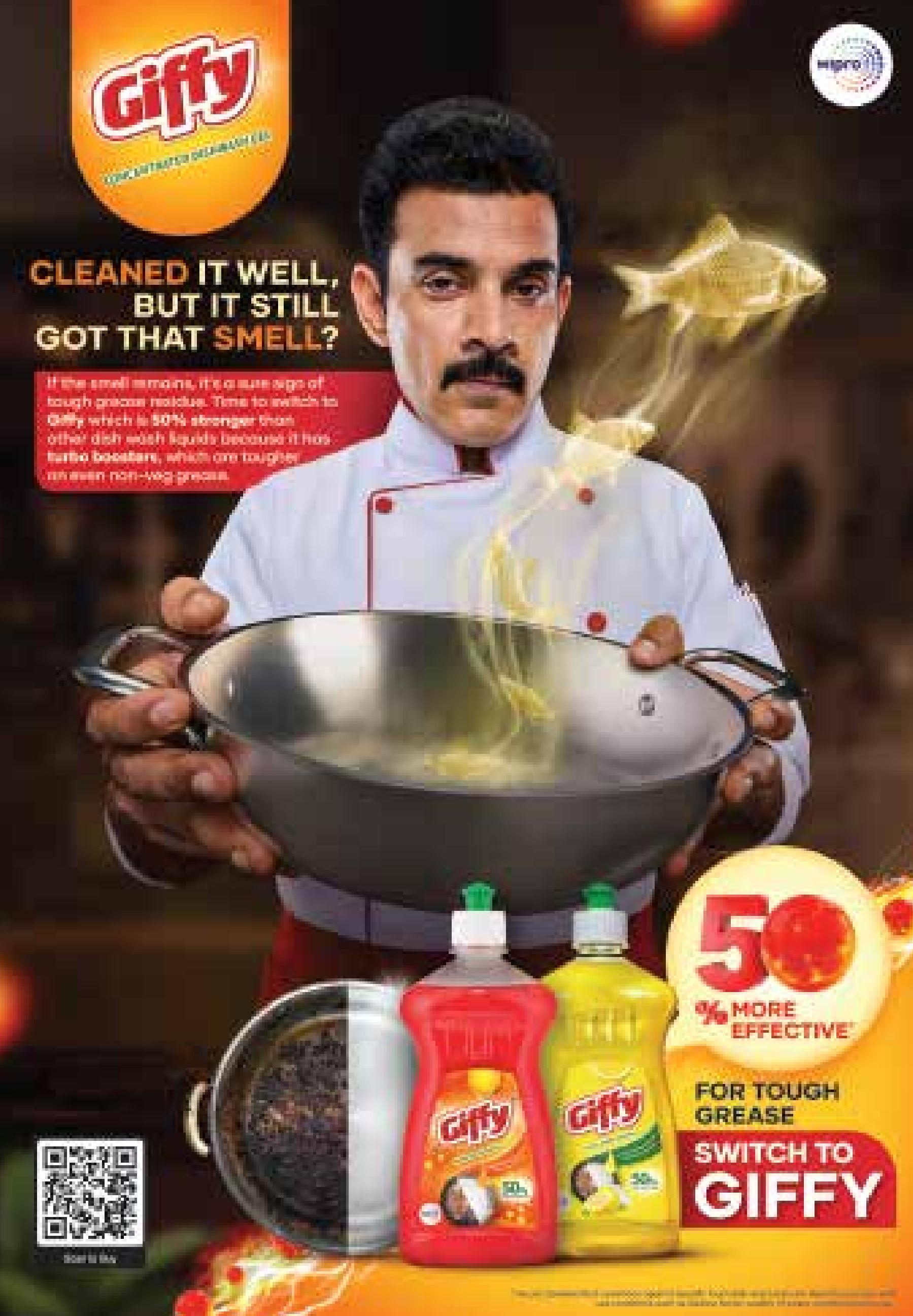
Indumathi took part in the International Negotiating Committee (INC) meeting organized by the United Nations Environmental Assembly (UNEA) and held in

Uruguay as the sole Asian representative. It was agreed that waste-pickers would be included in discussions and their voices heard.

She also represented Asia at the second meeting of the UNEA in Paris from May 29 to June 2 this year. "In Paris, we discussed the need to promote recyclable plastic and ban single-use plastic. Not all plastics can be recycled, and many countries are unaware of waste-pickers' work," Indumathi explained.

Reflecting on her journey from being a waste-picker to a waste entrepreneur and an international advocate, she says, "It was possible because Hasiru Dala conducted so many capacity-building programmes for us."

Shekhar is modest about her organization's work. "Even if Hasiru Dala is no longer there, a robust policy framework will allow DWCCs to operate efficiently, and waste collectors can continue their work without inhibition. We don't want Hasiru Dala to become a unicorn; we want the concept of Hasiru Dala to become a unicorn." ■



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Jack the Vietnam way

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ABOUT a decade ago Tom C. Kavalackal, a well-to-do Keralite, made a trip to Vietnam. Quite by chance, he was served jackfruit chips — a snack he'd never eaten before. Impressed with the crunch and flavour of the chips, he wondered whether such an awesome product could be made from local jackfruit back home.

Determined to give it a try, he returned to his village, Kappil, in Malappuram district of Kerala and started Pristine Tropical Fruits in 2018. Within a few months, his factory began producing vacuum fried jackfruit chips. Until then, chips made from ripe jackfruit were almost unknown in the market.

Kavalackal is now 65 years old. His son, Rony, runs the business which has made a name for itself in jackfruit processing. The company had to initially invest substantially in R&D to be able to manufacture jackfruit chips throughout the year.

After overcoming setbacks due to Covid and floods, Pristine set its sights on the export market. It soon realized it would have to master the ability to produce a series of frozen jackfruit products. The company started with packed frozen tender jackfruit and went on to create traditional jackfruit preparations and semi-processed jackfruit.

Pristine now exports 15 jackfruit products under its brand name, Jacme, to a dozen countries. Five products are semi-processed — ripe jackfruit, green jackfruit, sliced green jackfruit, tender jackfruit and sliced jackfruit seeds.

The other 10 are typical traditional preparations like Chakka Varatty, Chakka Ada, Kumbiliyappam, jackfruit halwa, and jackfruit Elayada from ripe jackfruit. Their most inventive products are vacuum fried jackfruit chips and jackfruit cake from ripe jackfruit. Chakka Puzukku with tender mango pickle and mango curry has green jackfruit as its main raw material. Idichakka thoran, made with tender jackfruit, is a stir-fry dish.

Pristine exports to the US, UK, Ireland, New Zealand, Canada, Australia, Qatar and other countries. Frozen products like tender jackfruit, frozen green jackfruit and frozen sliced green jackfruit are sold in the Gulf



Rony with his father, Tom Kavalackal

countries by the Lulu hypermarket group under its brand name. Pristine has dedicated distributors in the countries it exports to. Frozen ripe jackfruit has a shelf life of a year.

"About 80 percent of our customers are Keralites living in the countries we export to. But we also have customers who belong to the Philippines and Sri Lanka. Tamilians too are buyers," says Kavalackal. "Demand is steadily rising."



Export of frozen jackfruit and other value-added products goes back two decades, pioneered by Parayil Exports of Kottayam district. More than 10 companies in Kerala are now exporting sliced green jackfruit. According to guesstimates around 1,000 tonnes are sent out of the country.

Interestingly, Kerala is the only state that exports sliced green jackfruit.

But Pristine has caught up with the early birds in the business. It exports about 100 tonnes of sliced green jackfruit which is cooked as a vegetable and seems to have the biggest demand. Chakka Puzukku, which can be made into a staple food or converted into chips, is also popular.

"We have many Chakka Puzukku aficionados in Texas. They are early settlers who migrated

from the Travancore area. It's mainly the elderly generation that is very fond of it," says Kavalackal.

In Travancore, Chakka Puzukku retains its popularity amongst the Christian community. "It is an evening snack relished with tender mango pickle," says Kavalackal. "We export the same combination."

Another 300 tonnes of sliced green jackfruit, green jackfruit bulbs and tender jackfruit are also exported. "But frozen sliced raw jackfruit doesn't have a market in Kerala. We did introduce it in some supermarkets in Ernakulam but it didn't click at all," he says.

So, his company hasn't placed its frozen jackfruit products on supermarket shelves in Kerala or anywhere else in India.

After experimenting with freezing many jackfruit varieties, Pristine zeroed in on the Vietnam Early variety. They found it best suited for freezing. "Its flakes are very firm," says Kavalackal. "To ensure a dedicated supply we took 30 acres on lease and planted 6,000 trees which are now two years old. They will start yielding fruit from next year."

Most of their tender jackfruit is sourced from Idukki and Wayanad districts. The season is from January to February in Wayanad. In the Thiruvananthapuram-Neyyattinkara area, jackfruit is available from November to December.

During the season, Pristine collection centres buy about two tonnes of jackfruit daily. It is cleaned, cut and blast frozen in the cold room.

The jackfruit off-season is from August to

November. To meet its requirements, Pristine has started sourcing frozen jackfruit from an Idukki company from whom they bought 20 tonnes this year.

A frequent visitor to Vietnam, Kavalackal has picked up important lessons from there. He noted that each jackfruit factory which made vacuum fried chips, their main product, had links to pre-processing centres. "People arrive at their collection centres with peeled jackfruit flakes. About two to five tonnes per day is bought, blast frozen and stored in a cold room. It is supplied to industries according to their requirement or exported to other countries. China is a major buyer," says Kavalackal.

Taking a leaf out of Vietnam's book, Kavalackal's company freezes ripe jackfruit in its cold room. This helps tide over shortages during the off-season.

Pristine went the extra mile to realize its dream of being a leading jackfruit processor. The company arranged to buy ripe fruits from a faraway centre in Pala in Kottayam district. The peeled flakes were blast frozen there by another company. Frozen jackfruit blocks were transported in reefer trucks to a friend's cold room in Palakkad. From there the frozen fruit was brought to Kappil village in Malappuram, as and when required, to produce vacuum fried chips. To ensure efficient and timely transport, the company hired a reefer truck on a monthly basis.

Today, Pristine has all these facilities at its headquarters. The company has three blast freezers, three cold rooms with a combined capacity of 200 tonnes, and three reefer trucks. Such sophisticated infrastructure has been built for the first time in India's jackfruit industry.

Cutting and peeling jackfruit bulbs is the toughest job in jackfruit processing. Peeling is a cumbersome job since it is done manually. One person's output is only 20 to 25 kg of flakes per day. Women staffers are paid a daily wage of ₹400.



Jackfruit chips being packed and readied for sale



The company makes jackfruit kumbiliyappam as well

For efficiency and better output, Pristine outsources the work of jackfruit peeling. It buys peeled jackfruits from the neighbourhood, paying ₹100 per kg during the off-season and ₹70 during the peak season. If the flakes are sliced, the company pays an extra ₹10 per kg.

Scientists say that single-variety plantations are required for the jackfruit industry to prosper in India. This will ensure heterogeneity of sweetness, colour, flake size and thickness.

Kavalackal's view differs. He says it is only jackfruit chips which require homogeneity. "Since we grade the jackfruit flakes, we are able to solve the problem of heterogeneity. Small, uneven flakes are diverted for making halwa, varatty and kumbiliyappam," he explains.

Pristine's professional, nimble and quick-to-learn attitude has helped it make a name for itself in jackfruit processing. Kavalackal has overcome many challenges to become a leader in jackfruit products, especially the chips that caught his fancy on a visit to Vietnam. ■

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Civil Society

Youth suicides worry Srinagar

Jehangir Rashid
Srinagar

M AHI (name changed), a resident of Srinagar, was devastated when she scored low marks in her Class 10 exams. Unable to come to terms with her results, and fearful of her family's disapproval, she took the extreme step of ending her life by jumping into the Jhelum river from a bridge.

Junaid (name changed), also a resident of Srinagar, reached the Rajbagh area to die by suicide. He too planned to jump off a bridge into the Jhelum. But a relative spotted him just in time. When asked why he was killing himself, he replied that his family was harassing him since he had failed to find a job after graduating with a professional degree.

To prevent youngsters from jumping off bridges, the district administration of Srinagar has decided to fence the bridges as quickly as possible. The modus operandi of distressed people is to stand on top of a bridge and then plunge to their deaths in the Jhelum. Fencing is expected to be completed soon.

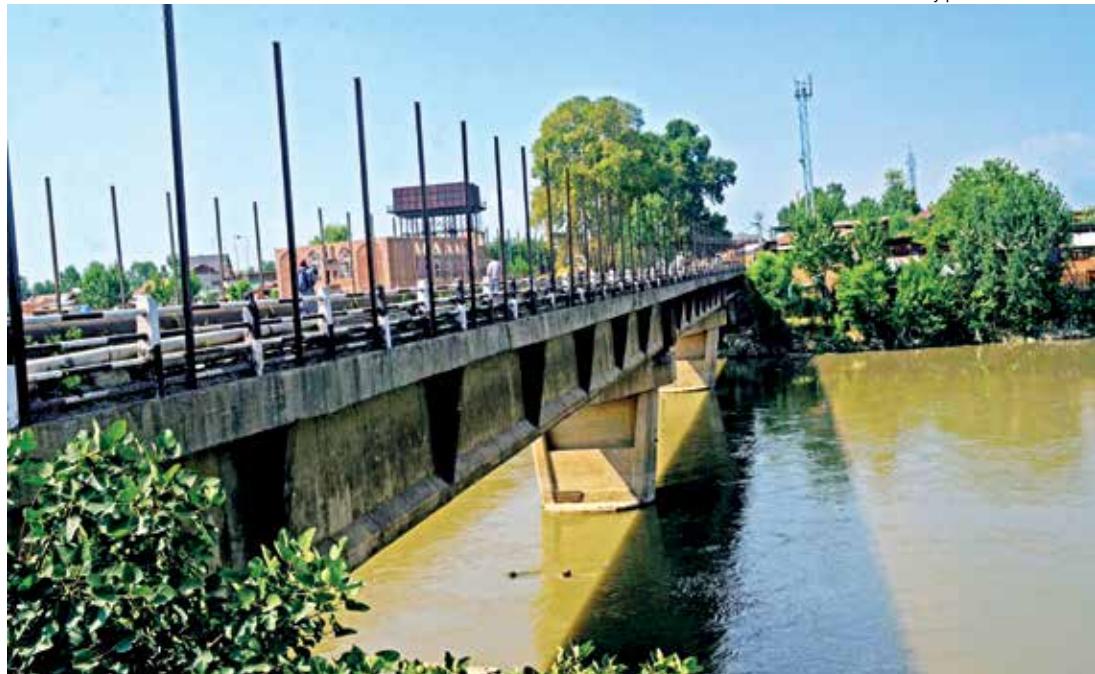
But it may not stem what appears to be a rising trend of suicide. No data has as yet been collected. The reasons for suicide are generally failure in exams, financial instability, or the break-up of a love affair. Generally, the age group most prone to suicide is 18 to 25 years.

Since this is a subject that's taboo in Kashmiri society, not many are willing to talk openly about it. So the conversation surfaces in social media and then becomes a hot topic. Different social media channels resort to non-stop reporting of suicide cases. This is worrying psychiatrists and mental health counsellors.

Prof. Arshad Hussain, a reputed psychiatrist, says that the factors contributing to suicide and its prevention are complex and have not been fully understood. But the media can play a significant role in either enhancing or weakening suicide prevention efforts.

"The complexity of factors contributing to suicides calls for nuanced reporting, steering clear of oversimplification. Celebrity suicides warrant particularly cautious handling due to the phenomenon of copycat suicides. In these instances, the focus should be on celebrating the positive contributions and achievements of the celebrity, featuring images from happier times," says Dr Hussain, who is part of the faculty at the Government Medical College, Srinagar. He also works at the Institute of Mental Health and Neuro Sciences (IMHANS), Srinagar.

"Media reports on persons who were in adverse life circumstances but managed to cope constructively with their suicidal thoughts have been associated with a decrease



Bridges over the Jhelum are being fenced to prevent distressed young people from plunging to death

in suicidal behaviour. Further studies suggest that educative media portrayals featuring how to cope with suicidal thoughts may help reduce suicidal behaviour," said Dr Hussain.

Information about support resources, like suicide prevention centres, crisis helplines, and health and welfare professionals should be provided at the end of every programme, he suggests. Information about where to seek help should include services that are recognized in the community as being of high quality and accessible 24/7.

"Apparent changes in suicide statistics should be verified, as they may signal temporary fluctuations. The phrase 'committed suicide' implies criminality and unnecessarily increases the stigma experienced by those who have lost a person to suicide. Particular care should be taken by the media not to promote certain locations as suicide sites," said Dr Hussain.

Kakroo suggests that mental health awareness should be made part of the curriculum from primary school onwards. This, he says, will encourage children to speak about mental health issues and teachers will be able to come up with specific solutions according to the emerging situation.

"Research has indicated that sensationalist portrayal of suicide on-screen and in the theatre can lead to subsequent imitation suicides and suicidal attempts. Those involved in the development or production of content for cinema, stage and screen should exercise caution in depicting suicide in order to reduce the risk of causing harm," he said.

Mental health professionals also say Kashmiri society should overcome its hesitation and start talking about suicide and mental health issues more openly.

Wasim Kakroo, consultant clinical psychologist, Centre for Mental Health Services, Rambagh, Srinagar, says that the reverse happens. Instead of speaking with compassion and understanding, a vilification campaign is carried out against the person who takes this extreme step. People should

understand that taking such a step is not easy. The person who tries to die by suicide does so because they feel helpless and is pushed to the wall. There could also be biological factors or adverse childhood experiences like bullying in school or domestic violence, he points out.

Kakroo is emphatic that the taboo attached to mental health issues needs to be overcome. Parenting has to be in tune with contemporary life situations. Parents should be friendly and not strict with their children.

"The parents have to maintain a fine balance. They need to be friendly with children and at the same time the activities of children have to be monitored. Moral education needs to be given to children and they should be asked to follow religious obligations on a regular basis," says the psychologist.

Kakroo suggests that mental health awareness should be made part of the curriculum from primary school onwards. This, he says, will encourage children to speak about mental health issues and teachers will be able to come up with specific solutions according to the emerging situation.

"Schools have to be more accommodative towards children and they should look into complaints against a child in a broader form. Since the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 has asked schools to appoint a full-time counsellor, it should be done in letter and spirit. The time has come for more focus on emotional quotient (EQ) rather than intelligence quotient (IQ)," says Kakroo.

Since a stigma is attached to this social problem in Kashmir, most religious preachers and scholars are unwilling to talk about mental health issues. A campaign and the participation of religious leaders is important. ■



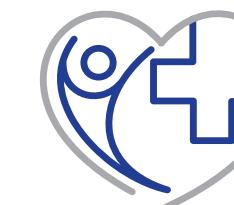
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Auto shopfloors not getting safer

Kavita Charanji

New Delhi

LEADING auto manufacturers compete fiercely for a bigger slice of the Indian market, spending on advertising and lobbying for tax cuts. But inadequate attention is paid to ensuring an accident-free supply chain with decent working conditions for toiling workers. Workers are vulnerable to serious injuries, even death, due to accidents on the shopfloor. The supply chains of major auto companies continue to be hazardous.

Grievous accidents are glossed over by companies, government and the media. On March 16 this year, an explosion occurred in the factory of an auto components manufacturer called Lifelong Private Limited in Dharuhera, Haryana. The company is a supplier to Hero Motors. Around 60 workers were badly burnt in the blast, of whom 19 died. Later, it was found that simple, regular cleaning of the exhaust ducts could have averted the tragedy.

Yet it was business as usual in the factory a day after the incident. Only two arrests were made — two months later.

It was against the backdrop of this horrific incident that Safe in India Foundation (SII)'s latest report, "SafetyNiti 2024", was released on August 9 at the India Habitat Centre.

"SafetyNiti 2024" is the fourth edition of Safe in India's annual report which tracks Occupational Safety and Health (OSH) in India's top 10 automobile brands. It examines policies for their supply chains and identifies gaps, opportunities, best practices and solutions.

The top 10 auto brands, in terms of their net sales, that come under the report's scanner are Ashok Leyland, Bajaj, Eicher, Hero, Honda, Hyundai, Mahindra, Maruti, Tata and TVS.

The findings of SII's painstakingly collated report are based on analysis of documents in the public domain related to the OSH policies of these 10 brands. The report assesses to what extent the brands have committed themselves to improving OSH standards in their own factories and in their deeper supply chains.

The report advocates greater safety standards. It puts forth key recommendations to all stakeholders — automobile manufacturers, apex industry organizations such as Automotive Components Manufacturers Association of India (ACMA), Society of Indian Automobile Manufacturers (SIAM) and ESG (Environmental, Social and Governance) auditors and investors.

There are sections too on a model Supplier Code of Conduct (SCoC), an assessment of the new Business Responsibility and Sustainability Report (BRSR) submissions to the Securities and Exchange Board of India (SEBI) by the top eight auto brands, and recommendations for non-financial auditors and financial investors.

Twenty-one parameters have been used to gauge shopfloor safety standards. They look at, among other aspects, whether a brand has a publicly declared OSH policy for its own factories and whether it monitors and reports accidents and worker injuries in its Tier 1 and Tier 2 supply chain even if it is not doing so currently in the deeper supply chain. Questions also revolve around whether the brand has a grievance redressal mechanism for workers to report unsafe working conditions in



Workers continue to be grievously injured on shopfloors

its immediate Tier 1 and 2 supply chains even if not in the deeper supply chain.

Tier 1 are direct suppliers to the auto company. Tier 2 are suppliers to the Tier 1 supplier. Then comes the deeper supply chain.

The report finds a trend of continuing improvement mostly in policy rather than on the ground, particularly in the brands' deeper supply chains. For instance, six auto brands now treat their non-permanent workers on a par with their permanent workers in terms of OSH policies.

Eight auto brands have their Supplier Code of Conduct in the public domain though, at the moment, it is applicable mostly to Tier 1 suppliers.

However, none of the automobile brands seems to have a Standard Operating Procedure (SOP) or a comprehensive OSH implementation plan for the deeper supply chain. They are equally lax when it comes to monitoring whether even their Tier 1 suppliers enable workers to get letters of employment or ESIC registration, or report accidents and injuries in the workplace.

Reflective of the industry's casual approach to worker safety are the thousands of injuries that take place on the shopfloors of supply chains every year. SII found over 2,000 serious disabling injuries annually in the auto components factories in three districts in two states. Most of these workers, largely contractual young migrants, are highly exploited. They earn less than ₹15,000 for 12-hour shifts, six days a week, with overtime not

paid at legal rates.

"Can Indian manufacturing, especially the automobile sector, professionalize with such disregard for workers, their families and their dignity?" asked Sandeep Sachdeva, co-founder and CEO of SII, at the launch of its recent report.

The fact is, he pointed out, that "these workers' lives are cheap, their safety is inconvenient and their families' lives are dispensable".

The irony is, pointed out V.N. Saroja, senior adviser, SII, that the automobile manufacturers have all the clout they need to improve workplace safety. The sector contributes about seven percent of India's GDP and 35 percent of its manufacturing GDP. The companies wield enormous influence over their supply chains, which depend on them for their entire business. Moreover, they are in a strong position to influence government policy and implementation of those policies.

The annual SafetyNiti reports, it is hoped, will motivate the top auto brands to get their act together and set in motion measures to improve worker safety standards in their supply chains. Greater accountability from the industry is long overdue. ■

VIRENDRA SAM SINGH (1939-2024)

Mission impossible in Anupshahr

CIVIL SOCIETY NEWS

IF empowerment of young women is what is in mind, Anupshahr is not the easiest of places to begin. A dusty and conservative town, it is an example of how deeply entrenched feudal and patriarchal values are in rural India.

From an early age, girls in Anupshahr are in a queue to be married off and the possibility that they can have an education and find employment is not entertained by local families.

But it is here that Virendra Sam Singh succeeded in igniting the first sparks of social change. It has taken all of 24 years, but thanks to his efforts the lives of more than 8,000 girls have been impacted by quality education and many have gone on to get jobs in various sectors both in India and abroad.

It is not just about education. There are other signs of change as well. Each year, a pulsating half-marathon is run through the streets of the bleak town with girls and boys competing with one another in a zesty display of equality. Often the girls do better than the boys, showing what is possible when age-old restrictions are cast aside.

The half-marathon has become an event awaited with much anticipation locally. It is an example of the innumerable other ways the girls have been carving out space for themselves.

Over the years, Virendra Sam Singh, popularly called just Sam, had come to be seen as a local hero. And when he passed away on July 22, a pall of gloom descended on Anupshahr.

Sam's end came in Virginia in America at the age of 84, surrounded by his family. But it was to Anupshahr that he was brought for cremation, surrounded by the thousands of girls whose lives he had changed.

Often, people go round the world only to discover that their true passion lies where they began. It was so for Sam who returned to Anupshahr because he wanted to dedicate himself to the educating of girls. A modern India would have to empower its women. Education was the key that had to be turned.

Sam grew up in Anupshahr in a patriarchal family. With all the benefits of a good education and training as an engineer, he settled in America. He retired as the South Asia head of Dupont, the multinational.

But when he sought to inject new meaning into his materially successful life, it was to Anupshahr that he returned to set up Pardada Pardadi Educational Society (PPES), an NGO. What better way could there have been to give back to a backward corner of the world where he had been a privileged beneficiary purely because of his gender?

The transition involved not just leaving the life he knew behind, but also his immediate family. In many ways, it was a crazy idea. It required complete dedication while being in Anupshahr. Over time, he set up two schools that offer holistic education, vocational training, day boarding, nutritious meals and a unique scholarship of ₹10 for daily attendance.

The schools at present fulfil the educational needs of over 3,500 girls from 120 villages. Every PPES graduate is either employed or earning an income or pursuing higher studies sponsored by the NGO.

"His passing leaves a gaping hole in my heart. But I am grateful for the gifts he leaves behind. Pardada Pardadi is his greatest gift," says Renu Singh Agarwal, his elder daughter. ■



Rural marathon: Girls show what is possible

Sam's sensitivity to gender inequality came out of his own upbringing in a typically feudal family. The privileges and opportunities he enjoyed, the girls in the family did not. He was affected by the unfairness of this regressive equation and it stayed with him even as he spent 40 years abroad.

Driven by the thought that he could be an instrument of change, he went in 1988 to the Dalai Lama's school in Dharamsala, which made the base for his model for the schools that PPES would set up with their focus on universal educational values and livelihood skills.

"Sam wanted every girl of Anupshahr to be financially independent and so the day a girl child joins us in nursery, we give her a job guarantee. It is a bold statement to make but it is the driving force behind Pardada Pardadi," says Lokender Pal Singh, who has worked closely with Sam over the years and now heads the PPES board as president.

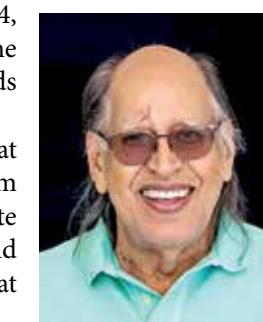
"Sam was the kind of person who thought everything is possible. He wanted the girls to have the world's best jobs," he adds. Setting higher goals became the culture at PPES. "If a girl is excelling in sports, the next thought is of how she can represent the country. If another is inclined towards science, then she gets the support she needs to become a doctor."

Over the years, this vision has created stories of change and empowered many young girls to pursue dreams that they are otherwise taught to never speak of. For instance, Savita, who was introduced to Pardada Pardadi at the age of seven, is now a validation engineer who has become a role model for the girls in her village. Her new-found skills and resources have also helped her to design and project-manage the construction of a spacious three-bedroom house for her father, a single parent.

But the main thrust has been on enabling girls to get basic jobs and stable incomes which can make them independent.

"The ultimate aim is that no girl should be left behind. That's the way he thought and we are determined to take his vision forward. He may not be physically present but he lives on with all of us at the organization," says Lokender Pal Singh.

"While I grieve his passing, I am full of pride over the heirloom we now hold and I am optimistic about the future of Pardada Pardadi," says his daughter. ■



Virendra Sam Singh

Hatheli has been a first mover

Shefali Martins
Tilonia

A young mother from a remote village in central Rajasthan had no option but to take her baby daughter to her field while she tended cattle. Every morning, she made a makeshift cradle by tying a *dupatta* to a tree branch. The infant would be rather restless. But she wouldn't cry when she'd hear the cowbells jangling on the herd grazing nearby.

That gave the mother an idea to calm her baby. She took a piece of colourful scrap cloth, filled it with goat feed and agricultural waste, gave it the shape of a bird and put an old cowbell on it. She hung this on the makeshift cradle and it became a distraction for the baby. This is how the bell *tota*, or bell parrot, a signature product of the Hatheli Sansthan, was created.

The Hatheli Sansthan is an enterprise of the Barefoot College in Tilonia. The collective promotes local artisans and their indigenous crafts, thereby creating community livelihoods. It works on a core principle of the Barefoot College — that people with ground-level experience are wiser than those with fancy college degrees.

Like the bell *tota* that decorates many urban drawing rooms across the world, products from Hatheli are the outcome of rural innovation. Hatheli, or palm, celebrates work done by hand. It started as the craft section of the 52-year-old Barefoot College in 1974 but was registered as an independent organization in 1992.

In the past 52 years, Hatheli has provided livelihoods to over 25,000 artisans from five districts and more than 48 villages in Rajasthan. Most artisans come from Dalit communities. The collective engages their various skills of sewing, needlework, embroidery, tie-dyeing, block printing and weaving, and provides a platform for sale. Currently, it works with around 400 artisans from Barmer, Ajmer, Jaipur, Nagaur and Tonk districts, alongside 36 trainers who are mostly women.

Hatheli is an early pioneer of taking the *haat* bazaar concept to urban India. In 1975, it held its first 'Tilonia Bazaar' at Triveni Kala Sangam in New Delhi where people saw the apparel, accessories, home goods and other handicraft items and also got to interact with the artisans. They appreciated their work, and gave suggestions and feedback. The artisans sold the products they created, developing their marketing skills. Since then Tilonia Bazaar has been operating from the campus of Barefoot College. Another Tilonia Bazaar shop is

functional on the highway between Ajmer and Jaipur at Patan.

What distinguishes Hatheli is its participatory management that ensures democratic decision-making. Nosheen Khan, a management consultant at Hatheli, says, "We often see an urban manager managing rural enterprises. But Hatheli is an amalgamation of the thoughts of both urban and rural people. As consultants, we discuss the idea with the artisans who contribute to the process and tell us about its viability."

Hatheli products are made from homegrown and indigenous material, promoting a culture of sustainability and the circular economy. So, besides fabric woven in Tilonia, there is block-



Craftspeople at work

printed fabric from Balotra, Bagru and Sanganer used widely in clothes and linen. The embroidered pieces come from Barmer, blue pottery is sourced from Mahala, leather goods from the nearby village of Harmada and Bandar Seendri, *papier mache* from Nallu, *peeda* chairs (woven jute chairs) from Ladera and rugs from Jawaja, among other items.

Applique work clothes, wall hangings and linen are popular products made on the Barefoot College premises at Tilonia and Barmer. The woodwork unit adds products like tray sets, wooden toys and laptop cushions to the fare at Tilonia Bazaar. The unit uses scrap wood as much as possible.

A favourite print can find many expressions at the bazaar — you would see it on clothes, cardboard paper holders, diaries, tray mats and other handicrafts thanks to another innovation, the Kabaad se Jugaad unit. This upcycles fabric and scrap paper, ensuring almost zero wastage in the handicraft production process.

Kailash Kanwar, coordinator of the stitching unit, has been with Hatheli for the past 34 years. "There is space for everyone at Hatheli. On every piece, at least four artisans get work. Whether we make a garment, bag or

bandhanwar (door hanging), different people work on different things. We focus on giving work to women from backward castes and poor families. Some of them work here full-time. Some take a week's work back with them," she explains.

The *sansthan* is inclusive even in the division of work. Tassels used in earrings and clothes are made by senior village women as that work doesn't require sharp eyesight needed for stitching and applique. So, even at the age of 75-80, they can have their own earnings.

Hatheli has also helped revive crafts that were dying. The leatherwork of Harmada was on the verge of extinction when it got associated with the organization. Today, the leather artisans of

Harmada not only send their products to Tilonia Bazaar but also work independently and supply to Fabindia and similar chains. Similarly, Bagru block printing, which was almost dying out, is now thriving.

Artisans keep in touch with changing trends and customer preferences. "We draw inspiration from what happens around us. Our popular kaftans were inspired by African women who came to Barefoot College for the Solar Mamas programme. The *ghaghra* that women wear in rural Rajasthan took the form of long skirts for their urban counterparts," says Nosheen.

It's not only the art that matters, but the artisan too. Chain Sukh, a senior member of the carpentry section, says, "People come to us for vocational training. We especially train youth who are physically challenged. This makes them employable." Adds Kailash, "I have travelled a long way from wearing a *ghoonghat* (veil) to working independently and earning my own money. The younger women in my family follow suit. They give my example to encourage others in the village."

Hatheli also has an online presence managed by Shaheen Bano, a young resident of Tilonia. "I do product photography and upload the content with all details. I post on social media more actively closer to any exhibition we organize," says Shaheen. During the lockdown, locals learnt how to sell online through WhatsApp.

The focus of Hatheli is not to make exotic products for the affluent but to bring the joys of rural art to urban folk. The prices are suited for college students and those in the modest income bracket. It helps them make conscious purchases with the awareness that there are no middlemen involved and the artists themselves get the remuneration for their labour. ■

Charkha Features

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One of the weavers, Shyamsundar Dutta: 'There was a time when Tantipara had 400 looms. Now there are barely 100'

Tantipara goes to market with Oikko

A BRAND GETS BUILT IN RURAL BENGAL

CIVIL SOCIETY NEWS

TANTIPARA is a small village in West Bengal, a few hours by train from Kolkata. Chances are you won't ever be headed in its direction. But if you happen to come across skillfully woven and printed silk products under the name of Oikko in your city, remember they come from there.

Oikko has been popping up at crafts bazaars for the past couple of years, catching the attention of fashion scouts in search of designs and fabrics they can use. Most recently, Anita Dongre's office at Global Desi, an iconic womenswear brand that melds traditional with modern, expressed interest in Oikko designs and a line of garments is perhaps on its way.

A fine dining restaurant in Chennai is also a potential customer — it wants its silk cushions with unique Oikko designs. You can get Oikko products in the Sasha store in Kolkata and the Amoli boutique in Santiniketan.

So, Tantipara has been quietly making its presence felt. The notice it is getting doesn't come a day sooner than it needs to. The weavers of Tantipara have for long been recognized for their Tussar, the traditional

name of the silk fabric they produce. But the past few decades haven't been good for them.

Weavers in Tantipara have witnessed business dwindle in the face of changing markets, cheaper alternatives and the rising costs of raw materials. Younger people have also seen no future in weaving. As the bottom has dropped out of the local economy, villagers have had no option but to migrate in search of work — mostly opting for menial work on construction sites and so on. Some have gone to distant cities.

In the midst of such gloom and despair, Oikko has arrived as a ray of hope. It is the outcome of an effort by AHEAD Initiatives, an NGO that has worked with the weavers and women in the village to combine Tussar with distinctive designs and embroidery to create a brand. Oikko gives beautiful Tussar the composite appeal of a brand so that the weavers and the village of Tantipara itself can compete in a modern marketplace.

The value addition has been inventive. Oikko in Bengali means oneness and is an emblem of ecological balance. The colours used are natural dyes made from the flowers and fruits of the area. The images are from nature. All the natural colours they need are made by the people of the village with the exception of indigo which no longer grows there.

AHEAD Initiatives arrived in the village around 2016 to implement an

after-school programme. It wasn't then but is currently funded and partnered by iiINTERest of Denmark. They set out to address the problems of nutrition, environment and livelihoods. Soon it was clear that reviving weaving of Tussar and making it remunerative could be a game changer. The women had design and embroidery skills. The weavers were of course masters of their craft.

The NGO trained local people in natural dye-making and block printing. An innate local talent for embroidery and design has been helped to flower. But, above all, the initiative has helped Tantipara connect with the world and be recognized in markets it couldn't earlier reach. Business is done in the name of the Tantipara Prakritik Tussar Kendra. A proper producer company is the next stage in this journey.

Tantipara is an example of how rural areas can flourish by reviving local skills and by making traditional forms of employment sustainable through identity building.

It is not an easy path to take. It is still very early days in Tantipara, even after eight years. AHEAD Initiatives has been working directly with just nine women for the creation of products even as it reaches out to some 200 others. Revenues, too, are as yet minuscule. There is as yet a lot of handholding that happens and so it is difficult to envisage when a local producer company will look after its own affairs entirely. Nevertheless, a beginning has been made.

Recalls Shyamsundar Dutta who belongs to an intergenerational family of Tussar weavers: "There was a time when Tantipara had 400 looms. Now there are about a hundred. The younger generation isn't interested in weaving because it's not financially sustainable for them. Raw materials are expensive. Thirty years ago, a bag of around 1,500 cocoons (Tussar silk is extracted from silkworms) was priced at ₹65; now the same costs ₹10,000. Moreover, it isn't a one-person endeavour. One weaver is dependent on others to weave a single garment. So they migrate outside West Bengal because they can earn much more as labourers."

Says Abeer Chakravarty, managing director of AHEAD Initiatives, "Our work has been directed at tackling and redressing food and nutrition security, providing contextually appropriate education following Gandhi and Tagore's philosophy of education, and creating livelihood opportunities by optimizing the skillsets of communities."

Forced migration, early marriage and some cases of trafficking are social problems that have plagued Tantipara and can be traced to the absence of sustainable livelihoods.

Preserving the environment is also important and factored into the Oikko brand. Until eight years ago there was widespread use of chemical dyes. Now that the people of Tantipara have brought back the natural dyes they once used, they have put chemicals behind them.

Chakravarty used to be in advertising. He knows a thing or two about marketing. Now in his mid-sixties, he runs AHEAD with great passion. Connecting villages and cities and getting wholesome produce to consumers while making sure farmers earn decently has always been an area of interest for him. He once ran a small enterprise delivering organically grown fresh vegetables to people's homes — this was decades before the current buzz over home delivery.

For Chakravarty, while communities make choices unique to themselves, when looked at together, they point to a single problem that threatens handicrafts across the country — fair access to markets.

"We have incredible artists who aren't able to find a market and so are closing down or taking short-cuts to make their products such as using chemicals, or Chinese silk and Korean silk that are inferior to the silk



Leaf motifs being embroidered on Tussar



Natural colours and designs inspired by nature

Tantipara is an example of how rural areas can flourish by reviving skills and by making traditional forms of employment through identity building

that was woven for generations," he says.

"Handwoven traditional sarees are being replaced by machine-made substitutes and weavers are compelled to work as masons in other cities. Handicrafts represent the intricately diverse creativity of rural India and in our not linking artisans to distributive networks and re-linking their communities to the earth, as they were before, we are in danger of losing our cultural heritage," he explains.

The After School project in Tantipara zeroed in on honing embroidery and returning to natural colours. Artisans have been working with mediums that include block printing, hand painting,

tie-and-dye, and spray painting.

Says one such artisan, Uttam Das: "When we used chemicals, the grass around our homes would be destroyed. The feel of material that is naturally coloured is different, lighter, and the inherent golden texture of Tussar is amplified."

The collaboration with iiINTERest as a funding partner began in 2018. It was then that AHEAD Initiatives started its handicrafts project in the village. They researched natural dyeing and experimented with plants indigenous to Tantipara. Artisans in the village like Das say they have now become "all-rounders", equally adroit at making colour and designing.

Their 10 core colours have been developed from madder roots, turmeric, tea, hibiscus, dadmari (emperor's candlesticks), haritaki (myrobalan), onion, marigold, neem and palash (flame of the forest).

Experiments have extended to art-making techniques as well — they found that metallic facial spray guns used in salons could be adapted as spray painting devices for fabric as well.

Guided by Bodil Bitze Faber of iiINTERest, the artisans have internalized a design aesthetic that draws on their own natural environment. The goal was to design pieces that were both distinguishable from other Tussar products in the market and authentic to the sensibility of Tantipara.

They desist from cluttered designs and excessive embroidery, evolving a style that is elegant in its minimalism and simultaneous attention to detailing. In reimagining Tussar designs, they attract buyers who relate to the vision underlying the products and discover in their artistry contemporary appeal. Their products comprise sarees, stoles, scarves, bags and purses, cushion covers and table-runners.

'The Oikko brand story rests on the ethos and values of artisans. Oikko means harmony or oneness. Our brand, Oikko, is about harmony between soul, soil and society.'

In 2022, with the pandemic fading, they started exhibiting under the name of the Tantipara Prakritik Tussar Kendra and the Oikko brand name has followed.

Chakravarty adds: "While pure Tussar silk and natural dyes are key differentiators for Tantipara Prakritik Tussar Kendra and the designs are distinct, the Oikko brand story rests a lot on the ethos and values of the artisans. Oikko is a Bengali word (originally *Aikyam* in Sanskrit) which means harmony or oneness. Our brand, Oikko, is about harmony between soul, soil and society — arising from a belief in the interconnectedness of life."

As a result, Oikko is careful about who it partners with commercially, choosing distributors who are in sync with their sustainability practices. Their products have been sold and exhibited by Kolkata's Sasha (a store for and distributor of Indian handicrafts), they have also been invited to exhibitions at three Dastkar fairs (Delhi) and Nabanna (Santiniketan), and Amoli — a boutique in Santiniketan that spotlights Birbhum's arts — sells their products.

Exhibitions have played a pivotal role in tapping potential supply chains because leading designers get to see their products, catalyzing enquiries and orders. It was through one such exhibition that the fine dining restaurant coming up in Chennai ordered cushions for their space from Oikko.

The growth of the project has been very natural. One thing led to the next and it wasn't as though there was a grand plan. At first some products were being designed and made with Scandinavian designs



The Oikko centre



A typical After School session



A weaver with his Tussar silk

when the skill of the local people became apparent. Chakravarty recalls taking a bunch of samples over to Sasha where the people were thrilled and emphatically suggested that Tantipara send its products to crafts fairs such as the one held by Dastkar in Delhi.

Says Chakravarty: "I told Bodil that we should go and show the products to some people. She had a nice bundle of these clothes and we went to Sujatha and Rupa at Sasha. They were just floored by what they saw. They called others and said, 'Look at this incredible stuff they're making.' And what they found incredible was of course the designs but also the way embroidery and hand painting had been blended. It was very different. They said we must display in exhibitions and that they would call up Laila Tyabji. I said, 'Look, we're not ready to sell anything.'



The women are skilled at intricate embroidery



Abeer Chakravarty

We just want to show you some stuff? The beauty of it is that the whole thing developed organically. You know, it just flew."

Training continues to run concurrently for the artisans. Sasha has conducted sessions on costing and how to form a company, as has the Fair Trade Forum. The idea is to instil an understanding of self-reliance and self-sufficiency in the artisans.

Says Chakravarty: "We are here to facilitate. The objective is to create something that's sustainable enough so that when we step out, they can carry on. We won't be here forever and we can't fund them forever."

This sentiment is echoed by Bitze Faber: "It is very important that the young people who are working with it now find that this is their own, build their own future: we are just visitors on the way."

Fostering self-sustainability is not at the cost of self-awareness and, perhaps more importantly, communal self-awareness. Elucidates Chakravarty: "Firstly, fashion is the second largest polluter in the world and we don't want to add to that. Secondly, inspired by Tagore who so early on had recognized the need to rejuvenate Indian handicrafts, we drew on the skills that were ingrained in the community to reinvigorate what and how they were creating. Thirdly, we envisioned a product that was different and that gave higher returns. We don't want to create a factory. Anyone we work with must respect artisans. Plus we want them to have fun making art and, at the same time, make a living out of it."

The enjoyment is palpable, whether in the weekly After School classes where first- and second-line trainers are teaching embroidery to larger groups of women in the village (and they don't mind if classes spill over) or in the block printing, hand painting and *kantha* work spaces where artisans design, stitch, paint and co-create colours together. Nothing is

machine-made — not even the labels or the cotton bags in which Oikko products are put.

The pace is unrushed, the atmosphere is happy and a shared sense of pride and ownership percolates from the personal and communal coding in the nomenclature of the houses where they work — *Amader Bari* (Our House) and *Neel Bari* (Blue House) — to the manner in which they speak about their craft, at every unit of operation: "Being able to teach and being able to embroider pieces we sell is deeply satisfying," asserts Shitala Mondal, who has been with the organization since 2018 and was one of their first After School trainers, teaching *kantha* embroidery. Further, she repurposes discarded synthetic cloth and cotton material to fashion doormats and pillowcases.

"I'm delighted that I could first learn and then teach others both within and outside Tantipara (they have, additionally, facilitated classes on embroidery in Purulia)," affirms Tuhina Kabiraj, a second-line trainer who has also been associated with the centre since 2018.

Bikash Dutta, who works with, among other units, block printing, embodies the spirit of the enterprise when he notes: "I value the variation in design that I've learned here along with the fact that what we do is always grounded in nature."

And Uttam Mondal exemplifies the artisans Chakravarty spoke about, struggling to find professionally viable opportunities as artists. "I've loved painting since my childhood and used to teach children how to draw just because I liked it so much. But I had to give it up and start an electronics business to earn. AHEAD Initiatives gave me the chance to train in what I'm passionate about. Now I hardly have the time to open my shop," he smiles as he deftly shifts between block printing and hand painting. ■



DELHI
DARBAR

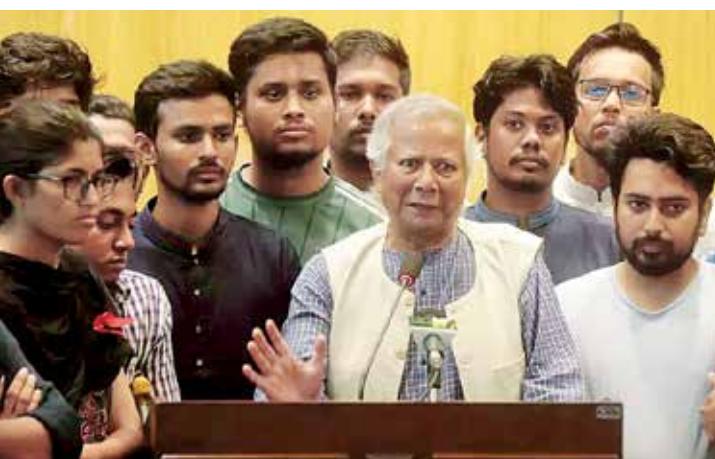
SANJAYA BARU

DEMOCRATIC institutions ensure that a State renews its legitimacy within civil society. When those who take control of the State subvert and delegitimize the institutions of democracy, this renewal ceases to happen. Regular and transparent elections to the legislature, that represents civil society, enable the State to renew legitimacy through popular mandate. When this fails, ceases or is subverted, then a revolution is the only means by which civil society regains control of the State.

This is precisely what is happening in Bangladesh. The government of Sheikh Hasina lost its legitimacy because of the manner in which it chose to govern and sought to renew its mandate. A democratically elected government had subverted the institutions of democratic governance to the point that democracy itself was under threat. The State in Bangladesh could have sustained itself through increasingly authoritarian, if populist, governance. That story has played itself out in many countries from Argentina to Russia.

In the end, so bankrupt had Hasina's democratically elected regime become that an upsurge of youth ensured its exit. What is interesting about Bangladesh is that this body of youth, that had spontaneously come together and battled for change, was able to find a leader who had independently secured the support of civil society through his life and work. The popularity and social standing of Muhammad Yunus had nothing to do with the movement of the youth. The two came together the day Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina escaped to exile.

Bangladesh is fortunate to have had Mr Yunus. What could have happened without a Yunus around is what we saw in Sri Lanka in 2022. A popular uprising forced President Gotabaya Rajapaksa and Prime Minister Mahinda Rajapaksa to eventually step down. However, the Parliament remained in place and soon a new government was formed under the leadership of Ranil Wickremesinghe. An



Muhammad Yunus with students

bloody. Hence, and understandably, there have been reprehensible and regrettable events ranging from attacks on religious minorities to the physical hammering of the statue of Banga Bandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman. These are tragic events. They have tarnished what was essentially a youth revolt against repression and injustice. They will cast a dark shadow on what was essentially a movement for freedom and self-respect. But such is the nature of any revolt. Revolution is not a dinner party, said Mao Zedong famously.

It remains to be seen in which direction Bangladesh will move. Will communal forces overwhelm a State in disarray? Will Big Power rivalry impact the future course of events? Can the interim government put Bangladesh back on the course it was set barely a decade ago, as a bright spot in South Asia?

Sri Lanka's precedent suggests that while political stability can be restored, a corrupt elite who ran the country down may yet return to once again dominate the institutions of the State. Restoring democracy, after an

authoritarian regime has been dislodged, requires enormous patience and wisdom on the part of civil society leaders. South Africa was fortunate to have had a Nelson Mandela around at the right time, just as Bangladesh is fortunate to have Yunus around. Of course, we have seen what has since happened in South Africa after the memory of Mandela has receded.

As events unfolded in Dhaka, many analysts had forecast a familiar scenario. A military takeover. In the event, Bangladesh witnessed a civil society takeover. In a remarkable turn of events a group of respected and highly qualified citizens came together to form a government under the leadership of Mr Yunus. His individual social and global standing, as a Nobel Peace Prize, winning social activist who has empowered millions of the poor, has for the moment restored a semblance of stability.

Regime change can be noisy, dirty and

Yunus too could play such a facilitating role, ensuring that a modern, secular and forward-looking leadership is once again empowered.

For its part, the political leadership in India can play a significant role by supporting such a transition in Bangladesh rather than use the divisions within that country to further stoke divisions within ours. In the long term India has the obligation and the opportunity to empower plural and secular democracies all across South Asia. If

India chooses to secure short-term gains by exploiting divisions within the region it will pull the entire region down.

One of Muhammad Yunus' first statements after the regime implosion in Dhaka was to seek the revival of SAARC — the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation. There was a time in the early 2000s when I too joined the ranks of SAARC sceptics. However, over the years I have realized that our sub-continent requires an institution that facilitates regional cooperation and trust-building. Over the past decade New Delhi turned its back on SAARC and has tried hard to breathe life into BIMSTEC — the Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation. While BIMSTEC has been viewed as a bridge to ASEAN (Association of South East Asian Nations), it has not been able to enthuse its membership in the manner SAARC once did. Muhammad Yunus today has the stature across the region that could help revitalize SAARC. He should do that. ■

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

Not easy to find a Yunus

Broken bridges of governance



LOOKING
AHEAD

KIRAN KARNIK

AT the recent Conference of Governors, Prime Minister Narendra Modi urged governors to serve as "an effective bridge between the Centre and the state". Unfortunately, it seems that these have been built by the contractors who specialized in self-destruct bridges in Bihar! Delhi's "broken bridge" problems seemed unique, an aberration, caused mainly by the complexity of being a state but not quite, and also the lack of clarity about division of powers. As court battles continue and new laws further

erode the powers of the elected government, citizens pay the price.

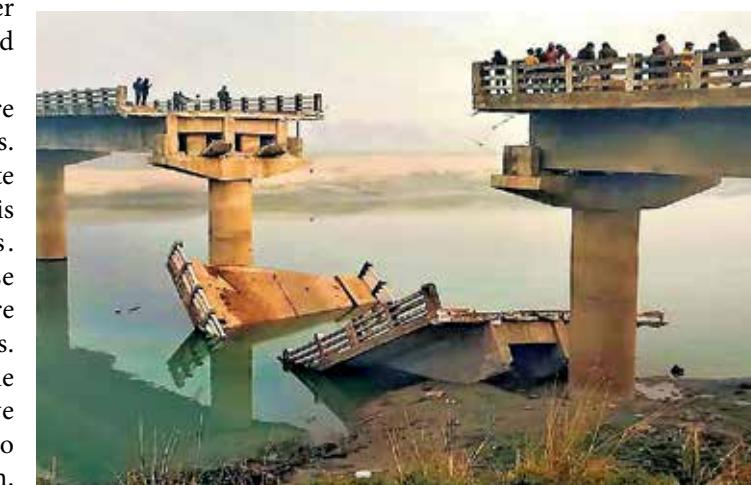
Now, many other states too are amidst governor-government battles. It seems every "opposition party" state is embroiled in a controversy vis-à-vis Centre-appointed governors. Increasingly, it is evident that these disputes are political battles and are affecting overall Centre-state relations. These differences, and the blame game of mutual finger-pointing, have resulted in no accountability, no monitoring, and inefficient execution. The full force of the negative impact is felt by common people in their daily lives.

In cities and towns, civic services have broken down. Flooded streets, water shortages, power outages, sewage overflows, traffic jams, unbreathable air, lawlessness: these and other problems plague us. The never-discussed devolution of power and funds to the third formal level of government (local bodies/panchayats) and the lack of decentralization is a major factor contributing to this sorry state. Exacerbating this is chaotic structuring of local responsibilities. With multiple agencies often involved in delivering a service, it becomes easy to play the blame-shifting game and to avoid accountability.

The justice system is a major pillar of governance, but is now as broken as the Centre (governor)-state relationship. Sadly, the police are seen as extensions of those with money or power, serving as an appendage of the government and the parties in office. Between them and the courts, they have ensured that the process is the punishment. FIRs are filed at the drop of a hat; arrests are immediate, except

for the powerful; jail rather than bail is the norm, despite pious statements by the Supreme Court; and trials go on forever, with adjournments as frequent as ads in IPL cricket matches. A wide and ever-growing number of laws allows arrests and long detentions with no recourse, thumbing their nose at concepts such as "innocent till proven guilty". Intended as a deterrent for terrorists, these draconian laws have over the decades steadily filled the rule book, with their use becoming ever more frequent with wildly wide interpretations of "anti-national activities". All political parties, when in power (whether at Centre or state) are complicit in their enactment and use (or misuse).

Numbers are a poor indicator of the impact on individuals, but the fact that 76 percent of those in jail (figures available for 2022) are undertrials — not convicts — is a telling



One of the bridges which collapsed in Bihar

statistic. Despite all the judicial pronouncements you read — from the Chief Justice of India (CJI) downwards — this figure has actually increased, from 70 percent in 2018. More significant — 11,000 have been in jail for five or more years, a doubling from 5,000 four years earlier.

A recent case from Delhi epitomizes the situation better than figures. A man driving his vehicle at 20 km per hour was arrested and kept in jail for four days, before getting bail, but the case against him apparently still stands. His crime: the water from the flooded street entered a basement because of the waves caused by his car, sadly drowning three students trapped there. While the court made scathing observations ("luckily you have not *challaned* the water") and expressed surprise that no official had yet been held accountable for the flooding, it did not follow up by punishing the police for the frivolous FIR and arrest. Even Kafka could not take absurdity to this level.

Another example: Gurugram, along with

the rest of the NCR (National Capital Region) and most other cities, has unbreathable, near-poisonous air. At the same time, thousands of trees — the best natural air-purifiers — are being cut with the permission or connivance of officials. While it is reported that the millennium city is consuming 240 percent of its water recharge, the government has decided that only 75 of the 5,000-plus acres of the Najafgarh wetland/jheel are worth conserving (the rest, presumably, can be sold to real estate developers). The same government continues to fight cases to allow "development" in the protected Aravalis. Just further evidence of a dysfunctional, citizen-unfriendly governance system.

What is noted above is indicative not only of the problems of poor governance, but also of correctives needed. Key amongst these are decentralization and devolution. Not only more power to the states, but to local authorities (the third tier of governance).

Looking ahead, one also foresees:

- The institution of governor, a hangover from colonial times, being altogether scrapped. In rare and very exceptional cases (ideally, to be approved by the Supreme Court), the Centre can appoint an administrator (members of political parties/organizations will be barred) for a limited period, till a new government is in place.
- Drastic reforms in the judiciary and police, along with independent oversight of regulatory agencies, so as to ensure their independence.
- More and smaller states with greater devolution; city mayors or CEOs with powers similar to a chief minister within their area, and bearing full responsibility for the smooth functioning of the city or panchayat.
- Single agencies with full responsibility for a complete task (e.g., sewerage, or road maintenance, or waste disposal), with no scope for buck-passing.
- Mandatory social audits of citizen services by recognized CSOs or professional agencies, along the lines of the statutory financial audit.
- All constraining amendments to the RTI Act scrapped to ensure that citizens have easy access to all information, thereby improving accountability.
- Grievance agencies with teeth, at various levels.

These changes are both necessary and inevitable for the country to fulfil its ambitions and for citizens to have a better life. ■

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

Railways on the wrong track



**HERE
& NOW**

SUBIR ROY

THERE seems to be something seriously wrong with Indian Railways. In a two-month period ending July 2024 there were three major accidents. The worst railway accident in decades occurred in June 2023 when three trains collided in Odisha's Balasore, leading to the deaths of 288 passengers.

As is to be expected, this has become a matter of political controversy with the opposition Congress pointing to 14 major train accidents in the ten years that the present dispensation has been in power at the Centre. The West Bengal chief minister has added to this by asking what kind of governance is in play.

Why have things come to such a pass? Running Indian Railways (the fourth largest national railways in the world with 1.2 million employees) is more than a full-time job and the minister in charge traditionally holds a senior position in the ministerial council. But what has drawn attention is Railways Minister Ashwani Vaishnav being in charge of two additional ministries.

The opposition has pointed out that he does not have enough time to do justice to his railways job but this does not prevent him from being highly active on social media, earning the sobriquet of "reel minister".

The railways are neglected in another critical way. Until lately, the railways used to merit having a separate budget. Now, in the general budget, with various ministries fighting for space, the railways get only passing mention.

As for financing, Indian Railways has over time been getting adequate resources but with particular emphasis on new projects. Industrial corridors are to come up across stretches in the south and the north — from Visakhapatnam to Bengaluru and Amritsar to Kolkata. This will add to important industrial infrastructure but in the process something else has been left by the wayside.

Investment in four operations — track renewal, doubling, gauge conversion and new lines — have seen a fall in allocation in the latest budget. New corridors are highly valuable



The worst train accident in decades happened in Odisha in June last year

Running Indian Railways is more than a full-time job. Until lately, the railways had a separate budget.

workers travelling from Assam, Uttar Pradesh, Bihar and West Bengal to Gujarat, Delhi, Punjab, Maharashtra, Karnataka and Kerala.

While this programme will be widely welcomed, there is another vital programme which has not yet received all the resources it requires. It is named 'Kavach' which is a term that comes from Sanskrit, denoting a shield and armour. It is an advanced electronic

but they cannot stand on their own. They have to be integrated into the existing infrastructure which has to be kept in good repair. Neglecting that will be counter-productive.

Even as there has been a succession of accidents, railway experts have focused extensively on Vande Bharat and other superfast trains in which well-heeled passengers travel in airconditioned comfort and in reclining seats. In contrast, most long-distance railway lines remain the same. Migrant workers inevitably travel in overcrowded, unreserved compartments in which it would be laughable to think of airconditioning.

Perhaps realizing that the sharp contrast was getting adverse publicity, the government has recently tried to make amends. It has announced that it will introduce 2,000 non-airconditioned trains on 25 popular routes in the next few months. This will be a blessing for

system, named the automatic train protection (ATP) system, developed by Indian engineers to transform railway safety. It oversees train speeds and assists train operators in identifying signals which are in danger, ensuring safe operations even during challenging weather conditions.

Kavach operates by automatically applying brakes to trains if the driver does not respond promptly. It uses RFID (Radio Frequency Identification) tags placed along tracks and in station yards to determine track positions and train directions. When activated, trains within a five-km radius stop to ensure the safe passage of nearby trains.

During a successful test highlighted by Vaishnav in 2022, Kavach demonstrated its ability to prevent rear-end collisions by automatically stopping a locomotive just 380 metres away from another in front.

But what is perhaps most unfortunate is that Kavach has made very slow progress. The latest economic survey indicates that there has been slow progress in particular on safety related work on automatic train protection and overhauling of signalling facilities at all stations.

The automatic train protection system has been deployed in a pitiful 2.14 percent of the total network and stations. Only eight of the 17 operational railway zones have become free from mechanical signalling.

The railways cannot be set right unless there is a management in place which is both competent and knows what it wants to do. Two years ago the government brought in place a new management system. The eight administrative cadres like traffic and engineering were all merged into one, the Indian Railway Management Services (IRMS). This was meant to end the practice of 'departmentalization' because of which members of a particular cadre running a department thought only in terms of that department and not the railways as a whole. Now, an IRMS probationer can be posted in any department and through his career be transferred to any, too.

The present reality is that the new system is yet to settle down. Plus, the immediate experience is that there is little clarity among the new entrants entering the civil service as to what the IRMS is all about. As a result, it is mainly those in the lower part of the civil list ranking that are entering the IRMS. All this does not bode well for the future of Indian Railways. ■

Subir Roy is a senior journalist based in Kolkata

Floodplains belong to rivers



**LIVING
RIVERS**

VENKATESH DUTTA

A river requires sufficient space to carry out its diverse functions. This space is delineated by the river itself, carving out the river valley and the active floodplain over thousands of years, each serving distinct purposes. There is a topographic depression along the course of the river — the river valley.

An obvious question arises: what exactly constitutes the active floodplain of a river, and how do we define it? Typically, this designation relies on hydrological criteria, such as the return period of floods. The flooding zone on both sides of a river is the area necessary to carry the flow of the maximum probable floods. This determines the extent of the active floodplain of a river in a specific stretch. Accurately mapping the width of the active floodplain is essential, as it greatly influences efforts to restore the river's natural state.

Many historical *ghats* came up along the rivers in the active floodplain without destroying river ecosystems. Lately, the *ghats* are being replaced by riverfronts. Many colonies are also coming up on active floodplains. From being a natural space, the river's terrace gets modified into built-up areas with many residential and commercial establishments.

In April this year, after reviewing a report by the Uttar Pradesh (UP) Irrigation Department on illegal encroachments on the Ganga floodplain in Kanpur, the National Green Tribunal (NGT) noted that the latitude and longitude provided by the Central Water Commission (CWC) for the area had not been designated a 'No Development Zone' or 'No Construction or Regulatory Zone'. In its 2017 judgment on the first phase of marking the Ganga floodplain from Haridwar to Unnao and Kanpur, the NGT stated, "No development or construction work can be undertaken within 100 metres from the banks of the Ganga."

In a similar case, in March 2024, the NGT directed the UP government to provide a report detailing the measures taken to demarcate floodplain zones along the Varuna and the Assi, which are tributaries of the Ganga in Varanasi. The green panel had responded to a plea alleging that the local civic body had failed to demarcate floodplain zones along these rivers, leading to ongoing encroachment.

Earlier, in May 2013, the NGT had stated that all constructions on the floodplains should be considered unauthorized, with necessary action being initiated against violators. However, despite such clear-cut orders and notifications, the prevalence of the land mafia in grabbing the floodplain is rampant.

A former secretary at the Ministry of Water Resources, River Development, and Ganga Rejuvenation emphasized that encroachments on the floodplains persist despite court orders due to the dishonest intentions of the executive wing. It is evident that such encroachments cannot happen without the collusion of officials and politicians. There is a general tendency of the states not to clearly define floodplain zones and place restrictive signboards stating that encroachment is illegal.

Several permanent constructions had come up on Kukrail river, a 28-km tributary of the Gomti in Lucknow which was earlier referred to as a *nala* or a city drain by many as it carries

Despite clear-cut notifications by the NGT, the land mafia has continued to grab floodplains of the river.

sewage from adjacent residential areas. In May 2023, the chief minister instructed officials from various departments and government agencies to prepare a report on the restoration of the Kukrail river.

The Lucknow Development Authority (LDA) issued eviction notices to more than 1,000 residents occupying the terrace of the Kukrail river, pointing out that their structures were built without LDA approval and were located in the flood zone. According to the LDA, the construction was in violation of the master plan and zonal development plan, and without obtaining necessary permissions.

In December 2023, demolition squads razed 58 houses in Bhikampur, and then moved to

Akbar Nagar which has around 1,400 houses and 101 shops. But the Lucknow bench of the Allahabad High Court issued a stay order while the appeals from the residents were pending. The court granted an interim stay on demolitions in Akbar Nagar for a month. The matter was slated for hearing once again on January 22, 2024. The court observed that the residents had failed to provide evidence of legal ownership titles. The matter was then

transferred from the single bench to a double bench of the Allahabad High Court.

The bench noted that petitioners occupying commercial structures had illegally erected multi-storied showrooms and workshops on extensive parcels of land which were owned by the state government. They were also filing income tax and GST returns, and many resided in residences across Lucknow city while also possessing other properties. In the first week of March 2024, the Allahabad High Court issued an order for residents to evacuate their homes by midnight on March 31. The court also directed the state government to ensure that all residents being relocated from Akbar Nagar slums were provided housing.

After this order, residents lodged three special leave petitions (SLPs) in the Supreme Court contesting the final judgment of the Allahabad High Court. They argued that it was a city drain and not a river; therefore, the encroachment was not on the floodplain. The petitioners enclosed several reports and documents wherein Kukrail was referred to as a "nala" or a drain.

The Supreme Court instructed the LDA to submit the supporting evidence, such as photographs and satellite images, to illustrate the catchment area of Kukrail to confirm that the stream in question was genuinely perennial, as opposed to merely being a city drain. The LDA submitted several maps and reports to show that Kukrail was indeed a river and not a city drain. The SC noted that the settlement was built on a floodplain area and that the petitioners' assertion was based on adverse possession.

While affirming the demolition of unauthorized constructions in the Akbar Nagar slums along the Kukrail river, the Supreme Court also directed that slum dwellers should not be displaced without being provided alternative accommodation.

Cases like these are not isolated incidents and raise significant questions about the failure of land authorities to designate floodplains before settlements crop up. The gradual development of these settlements over time begs the question of why basic utilities like electricity and water connections are provided, and why municipal agencies collect house taxes without proper regulation or consideration of floodplain zoning.

There is an urgent need for comprehensive land-use planning, stricter enforcement of zoning regulations, and greater accountability within government agencies to prevent similar recurrences. ■

Venkatesh Dutta is a Gomti River Waterkeeper and a professor of environmental sciences at Ambedkar University, Lucknow

FOOD STREETS

Everyday meals at Dacres Lane

AIEMA TAUHEED

An office break. Sprawling sustenance. Kind invitations of "Didi, bhaat khaabe?" from silver-haired vendors. Wafting aromas and the clatter of cooking and serving. When you are in the thick of Dacres Lane, you couldn't be anywhere else.

"Jaise Mumbai ka Chowpatty, Dilli ka Sarojini, waise hi Kolkata ka Dacres Lane bahut famous hai," says a bubbly Camelia Chatterjee, soft-skills trainer and a regular here.

In the heart of Kolkata's business district, Dacres Lane is a food street which is one of a kind. Office-goers turn up here, as do students and just about anyone in need of an affordable meal that is hot, clean, nutritious and tasty.

Dacres Lane, also known as James Hickey Sarani, has earned its reputation over the years. Generations of the city's residents have eaten here. Dishing out the meals are stalls tightly packed together but each with its own identity and special offering of one kind or another.

Food bloggers turn up here these days in search of stories to tell. But this is not the typical Pinterest destination. As a hangout zone it comes with old-fashioned charm, holding its own in a rapidly transforming city. It is no glitzy food court and doesn't even try to be. It can be sweaty, messy and squishy underfoot, but that is what it is.

What keeps people coming back? It is easy access for sure. You can be in and out without any bother. This is no fancy food hub where you must prepare to enter. Here you drift in and leave unnoticed. For working folks, it is hassle-free food on the go. For student couples it is the safe anonymity of the bustling crowd. But above all it is the affordable prices.

One could have all three meals in a day at the cheapest prices here: breakfast, lunch, and an early dinner. *Malai* toast is available for ₹20, and *chai* starts at ₹6. For about ₹30 one can get a filling lunch of *kulchas* and vegetables from Joy Ma Tara Hotel owned by Arun Da. A chicken roll is available for ₹60. For rice lovers, a *pulao* and chicken combo meal costs ₹100. A few outlets like Janta Hotel remain open for an early dinner, selling *rotis* for ₹10 and curry for ₹35.

"Anytime I feel like eating something I come



Chitto Babu's famous stall



It is difficult to find meals so affordable

This is no fancy food hub. Here you drift in and out. For working folks it is hassle-free food on the go. For student couples it is the anonymity.

here. I have been coming here daily for the past 10 years," says Taraknath, whose office is a three-minute walk away. Ten years, we wonder. Is that the kind of spell that Dacres Lane casts on all its customers?

"It's the familiarity for me. I have been coming here since I was in school. My grandmother would bring my mother along. And my mother continued the legacy by bringing me along," says Sampreeti, an aspiring English teacher. She says it is as good as homemade food for her.

Camelia thinks of it as the perfect lovers' lane for college students without the money for expensive cafes. It has cheap food and hidden,

congested lanes away from the family's prying and judgemental eye. She raises her voice to be heard over the clanking and clanging of steel utensils, loud conversations and the sound of heavy rain hitting the makeshift tarpaulin roofs of the stalls. Her eyes light up as she recalls dates over Chitto Da's famous chicken stew and toast with her boyfriend, now husband.

The relationship with Dacres Lane is a complicated one. It is an unlikely romantic rendezvous. People show up here out of necessity, but the ambience stays with them.

Today, both Camelia and her husband, Chandan, are here to take a break from the admission processes of the premium schools

around. Where else would they go but Dacres Lane?

Chandan is now a businessman who does not elaborate on their romantic trysts in years gone by. But he agrees that this was and remains one of the cheapest places to eat. Where else could one have a meal with a bottle of water for just ₹50?

Bubai Da tears up, recalling Chitto Babu whose iconic stall, started all of 72 years ago, he now manages. The stall is famous for its signature dishes of chicken stew, fish fry, and butter toast. It was Chitto Babu who set the tone for Dacres Lane — good food at affordable prices. He began with *ghugni* (chickpea curry), butter toast, and *chai*.

From politicians to football enthusiasts, Chitto Babu's regular customers show up at their chosen hours for conversations over fish fry and tea. Bubai Da proudly tells us that films like *Kahaani* featuring Vidya Balan were shot here, and among the personalities to stop by have been Mithun Chakraborty and Prosenjit Chatterjee.

The stall serves around 2,000 customers per day. They use Bisleri mineral water for cooking, consuming about 200 litres daily. And, he says, they make an effort to maintain hygiene with the use of phenyl and bleaching agents as much as possible.

He mentions that Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee has been planning to improve the cleanliness of the area: she stated, "Ami Dacres Lane ke shajabo." Bubai Da notes that this initiative was set in motion about a year and a half ago, and changes are already visible by way of food and water inspections.

Classic Fast Food Centre was started by Montu Haldar. He has had a very diverse career, ranging from being a fish trader to running a tea stall. He proudly says, "I've been a proper businessman. I've run multiple kinds of businesses." Having worked in so many different ventures, he considers Classic Fast Food Centre to be his final venture.

Another inconspicuous yet intriguing stall in Dacres Lane is Faltu Tea Centre, an eight-year-old establishment owned by Md. Ajaz. 'Faltu' literally means useless. When asked about the name, he says with a broad smile that it is a marketing strategy — "It's a unique name. People see it and come here."

The stall is renowned for its *malai* toast, sold for ₹20. "Anywhere else, these are sold for ₹50 or ₹60," he notes. Ajaz uses Kolkata Corporation's fresh *meetha paani* for cooking. Regarding garbage disposal, he says that the Corporation collects it regularly. "Problem usko hota hai jo paisa nahin deta," he adds.

Cities are big levellers. They promote innovation and enterprise. Everyone is in and anything is possible. Dacres Lane with its inexpensive meals and welcoming atmosphere is an example of how there is always something for everyone. ■

RANDOM SHELF HELP

Civil Society pictures/Lakshman Anand



Aruna Roy talking to the media during a right to information protest in Delhi

The gritty fight for equality

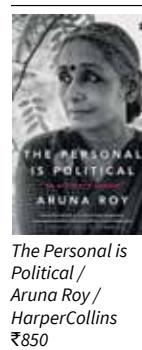
USHA RAI

ARUNA Roy, the IAS officer who gave up the civil service to live and understand life in rural India, is a celebrated feminist and activist. She believes in the power of social movements and collectives to transform the countryside and ensure the democratic rights of people, especially the poor and the marginalized. Some 34 years ago, she with Nikhil Dey and Shankar Singh moved

into a small hut in Bhim, 110 km from Ajmer, and with peasants and workers of central Rajasthan started the Mazdoor Kisan Shakti Sangathan (MKSS) to appraise issues from the grassroots, and understand their struggles for their rights.

Her memoir, aptly titled based on the feminist slogan 'The Personal is Political', is a gripping commentary on her own journey as a privileged, educated person and people's struggles with the caste system, hunger, poverty, inequality and the fight for rights enshrined in the Constitution. It was such collective struggles that resulted in the Right to Information (RTI) Act, the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA) and a School for Democracy in Bhim.

The fact that she was a teacher of English literature in her early years comes through very clearly in the book which is beautifully written and peppered with humane stories of



The Personal is Political / Aruna Roy / HarperCollins ₹850

Naurti, Billan, Mangi, Hassena and several others who wanted to lessen their dependence on the literate upper class as well as ensure they were not cheated of wages due to them. Her love for arts and literature and her erudition comes through equally well whether she is talking of Mohanji, the bard of MKSS, or drawing on the philosophy of Rabindranath Tagore, Brecht, Eduardo Galeano, Ibsen, Victor Hugo, Huxley or Orwell.

She explains that singing and chanting slogans together empowers and connects individuals to form a collective, but the emotions between different voices are highly individual. The unified chants empower individual thought. From this nourishing dialectic between the person and the collective emerges the seminal feminist slogan — 'The Personal is Political'.

The past two decades have been for her a gradual learning of how intimately connected personal lives are with political events, processes and the character of institutions. As an example of the encroachment on the right to religion and the right to marry a person of one's choice, she refers to the Uttar Pradesh Prohibition of Unlawful Conversion Ordinance, 2020, which contests inter-community marriages. "Though there was debate on it and many women protested, the law still stands and is known as the love jihad law."

Continued on page 30

Continued from page 29

In addition to all their woes, Dalit and underprivileged women are subjected to rape — not just as an assertion of lust but as an expression of power, often by upper caste men. It is punishment of the powerless by the powerful. Demand for justice or equality can trigger anger and revenge. The book recounts the story of the 11-year-old rape survivor who was brought by her father to a *mahila mela*, seeking justice. Hundreds of women were drawn into a discussion on sexual violence and a thousand women, with faces covered in keeping with local custom, participated in the rally in Kishangarh, carrying placards. They tied their black armbands on a thorny *babul* tree outside the court and handed their petition to the sub-divisional magistrate.

The memoir recalls the *sati* of Roop Kanwar in 1987 and the 1992 rape of Bhanwari Devi, a Women's Development Programme Sathin, for trying to stop a child marriage in a Gujar family. While the *sati* incident showed the upper caste promotion of patriarchy, the assertion in the Bhanwari rape case that no upper caste man would rape a lower caste, middle-aged woman generated ripples of anger and the birth of the Mahila Atyachar Virodh Jan Andolan. Women began to politically assert their rights and demand legal redressal for sexual harassment in the workplace, leading to the Vishaka judgment of 1997. The voices raised were of poorer sections of women, not the elite. These campaigns, including, later, the Nirbhaya case, successfully demanded public consultation in the framing of policies on women's safety and security.

Though men still dominate electoral politics, the reservation for women in panchayats saw the emergence of women sarpanches like Naurti, Rukmini and Kamla who made programmes work for the poor, especially MGNREGA. In fact, working class women's politics was taught to Roy by these women.

Roy, being Roy, has also boldly expressed her concerns about the present government and the whittling away of the gains of hard-fought battles for the RTI and constitutional values. The book refers to the new low reached in the history of civil rights in India during the 2019-2020 protests against the CAA (Citizenship (Amendment) Act) when challenging the majoritarian state led to the clamping down on all freedoms. Those who dared to speak truth to power were quashed into silence by a campaign of incarceration, hatred and fear.

"The tragedy of contemporary India is the violation of the spirit of the Constitution." She talks about the vigilantism and moral policing that heralds a fractured society.

The fight for a just democracy is on-going. Quoting Galeano, she reflects on how difficult it is to achieve utopia. "Courage lies in walking towards what may always recede." ■



We're working, what fun!

SIDIKA SEHGAL

TURNING a hobby into a business and also making a profit can go together. As a rock climber, Yvon Chouinard made a niche for himself by selling pitons. So popular were his pitons that he ultimately needed a team to help him out. It was the beginning of an enterprise built on the insouciance of outdoor passions. People were doing their own thing and serving a growing tribe of customers. Then came Patagonia, an iconic clothing brand with yet more outdoorsy appeal.

Let My People Go Surfing is a candid account of Chouinard's business style or perhaps the lack of it. When Chouinard's first company, Chouinard Equipment, came about, he was



Let my people go surfing / Yvon Chouinard Penguin Random House ₹850

the only employee for many years. The friends he hired were rock climbers, surfers and skiers who shared a love of being outdoors. The unsaid understanding among this rag tag group was that if the tide was right or if there was powder snow, they'd shut shop for a few hours and go surfing.

Years later, when Chouinard started Patagonia, an outdoor clothing company, this policy stayed. The policy was called "Let My People Go Surfing", which gives Chouinard's book its title.

Patagonia did many things differently and it stemmed from their philosophy of doing more good than harm, of doing business ethically. This core idea touched every part of the business — from how they produced their clothes to their internal policies for their employees to the steps they took to undo the environmental damage the business caused.

In building their supply chain, they looked for partners who shared their commitment towards doing as little environmental damage as possible. But finding such partners wasn't easy. So, they'd help them adopt better

practices and educate them about the benefits of doing so. For example, they worked with farmers to encourage them to grow organic cotton and with dye manufacturers to run the water through cleaners before dumping it into the river. It cost more, but Patagonia was happy to pay the price.

Chouinard knew that despite these efforts, the business was not "sustainable", and the best they could do was to minimize the harm they did to the planet. He imposed an earth tax on Patagonia which pledged one percent of their sales to small civil society organizations that worked on climate change.

Their marketing philosophy was just as unique. They rarely paid for ads because they didn't want customers who wanted Patagonia clothes. They wanted customers who needed their products for a hike or a rock climbing expedition. It was almost as if Patagonia didn't want to sell more — they encouraged their customers to bring back a torn pair of pants or shoes with worn out soles and the company would repair it for them so that they didn't have to buy a new pair.

It's hard to make sense of Patagonia encouraging customers to only buy what they need and wear what they buy for a long time when most clothing brands want their customers to be endlessly stuck in the wear-and-throw loop and buy more. The assumption is that this is the only way to grow a business, but Patagonia shows otherwise. Their continuing success is a testament to the fact that there isn't a choice to be made between what's good for the business and what's good for the customer.

And Patagonia combined this with a healthy work culture. Chouinard's advice is simple but difficult for companies to practise: "treat your employees right, and train them to treat other people right." It was one of those rare companies that offered parental leave. ■

Getting Rajiv's legacy right

MEERA SHANKAR

IT was with the largest electoral victory in independent India that Rajiv Gandhi's term began after Indira Gandhi's assassination in 1984. But later this huge mandate became mired in controversies that obscured his many forward-looking initiatives.

Mani Shankar Aiyar's *The Rajiv I Knew* is a labour of love to set the record straight on India's "most misunderstood Prime Minister". A close aide of Rajiv Gandhi, Aiyar has based the book on extensive research and makes a convincing case for a reassessment of Rajiv's leadership.

Thrust into prime ministership in tragic circumstances and with little political experience, Rajiv brought a fresh perspective and sought to peacefully end violent internal conflicts in Punjab, Assam, Mizoram and J&K. Some, like the Punjab Accord, and the alliance with the National Conference in J&K, unravelled. Others were more successful.

The 1985 Assam Accord brought the All-Assam Students' Union to the negotiating table and later into government, reducing violence in the state. The Mizoram Accord was Rajiv's most successful, ending one of the longest running insurgencies. The Mizo National Front was persuaded to lay down arms in return for its leader, Laldenga, becoming chief minister. Critical to the conclusion of these accords was Rajiv's willingness to put the national interest above that of his party.

Panchayati Raj was given constitutional status and was, perhaps, Rajiv's most transformative contribution. The legislation provided for regular elections to the panchayats and municipal bodies with devolved powers for planning, economic development and social justice. And 33 percent of seats were reserved for women. The Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes would also be represented in proportion to their population.

The Bill, which was introduced in the Lok Sabha in May 1989, was eventually passed in 1992, a year after Rajiv's assassination. Panchayati Raj has truly revolutionized democratic participation at the grassroots and ensured the unprecedented inclusion of marginalized groups, but state governments have yet to devolve financial powers and resources. It was Aiyar's close involvement in the evolution of Panchayati Raj that triggered his embrace of a career in politics.

Rajiv sought to harness the power of technology for solving everyday problems of health, communication, potable water and nutrition, leading to major advances in some of these sectors. His emphasis on computerization drew considerable media derision, but today information technology has become a key driver of India's economy.

Rajiv's visit to China was the first by an Indian prime minister after the 1962 border conflict. It set the stage for a thaw in relations while continuing discussions on a boundary settlement and peace and tranquility on the border. This led to the Agreement on Maintaining Peace and Tranquility along the border in 1993 and helped keep the peace for nearly three decades. However, the search for an acceptable solution to the boundary question failed to make headway.

New tensions have emerged in the wake of recent border intrusions by China in the Ladakh sector. Aiyar underlines the importance of working towards a fair boundary settlement with China. Undoubtedly, finding a fair and practical solution to the boundary question would be the key to

building a more stable relationship with China. But is China, under Xi Jinping, ready for a border deal or does it seek to use the border dispute to keep India under pressure?

Rajiv's efforts to improve ties with Pakistan under President Zia-ul-Haq were undercut by Islamabad's support to militancy in Punjab and J&K. With the election of Benazir Bhutto in November 1988, a window of opportunity opened up. Rajiv visited Islamabad for the SAARC Summit in December 1988 with a half-day bilateral Rajiv-Benazir summit. The highlight of the visit was the conclusion of the Agreement on the Prohibition of Attack against Nuclear Installations and Facilities.

This significant nuclear CBM [confidence-building measure] helped lower nuclear risks for both countries. But, with Rajiv losing the general election soon after, the impetus petered out. Aiyar argues for insulating India-Pakistan relations against domestic compulsions. The most formidable obstacle to this remains Pakistan's Army.

The Indo-Sri Lanka Accord of July 1987 sought to find a political solution fair to both the Tamil and Sinhala communities in Sri Lanka but soon unravelled over the intransigence of the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) and Sinhala chauvinism. An Indian Peace Keeping Force (IPKF) sent at the request of President Jayawardene got sucked into an active fighting role against the LTTE. Rajiv paid with his life for listening to his advisers who, in my view, did not appreciate that military intervention in an open-ended situation, which did not lend itself to surgical action, was bound to end in failure. In contrast, the military intervention in November 1988 in support of the Maldives government, which was facing a coup, was successful.

Rajiv was a staunch advocate of nuclear disarmament but advances by Pakistan towards nuclear weaponization forced his hand. A.Q. Khan told Kuldip Nayar in January 1987 that Pakistan had the bomb. In March 1987, in an interview to *Time* magazine, President Zia said that "Pakistan has the capability to build the bomb..." Rajiv took a difficult decision and the Department of Atomic Energy secretly began developing nuclear weapons.

Though Aiyar does not touch on Rajiv's economic policy, the gradual liberalization during his term delivered the highest industrial growth rates since Independence. Rajiv was poised to pursue a more determined economic liberalization, had he won the election.

Rajiv's term as prime minister was dogged by controversies. It began with a bloodbath against the Sikh community in retaliation for the assassination of Indira Gandhi by her Sikh bodyguards. The riots were eventually brought under control once Rajiv took charge.

The Bofors controversy petered out with no evidence emerging of any pay-offs to Rajiv Gandhi. The Supreme Court finally put an end to the controversy with its judgment of 2004 which held that no case had been made out. The ultimate vindication came in the Kargil conflict when the Bofors gun was critical to India's success.

The decision to unlock the gates of the Babri Masjid has cast a long shadow on Indian politics, sharpening religious cleavages. Aiyar believes that the decision was taken behind Rajiv's back. While this may or may not be the case, Rajiv did agree to the subsequent *shilanyas*. This alienated the Muslim community and was instrumental in Rajiv's defeat at the hustings. ■



Patiala, 1985: PM Rajiv Gandhi with Mani Shankar Aiyar as Joint Secretary



The Rajiv I Knew / Mani Shankar Aiyar / Penguin Random House ₹799

When life is a villa and a quiet beach

SUSHEELA NAIR

AS I clambered up a series of red laterite stone steps lined by lilies, spider plants and indigenous plants, I could already sense the healing touch of the environs. Adding to the verdant ambience were the winding pathways leading to my hilltop villa. A small wooden bridge led to the living room of my villa which was open to nature. The villa with its breathtaking sea view will arouse the muse in you. It is a perfect retreat from the fret of city life and deemed to be a haven for holiday-makers. Far from the madding crowd, hidden from the public eye, Coco Shambala is a favourite hangout of celebrities and film stars.

The focal point of the resort is the infinity pool which keeps you company while you dip, tan or sip a cocktail. From the open living room of my villa, I had a sweeping view of the infinity pool and the horizon. The living room was an open pavilion with a kitchenette, and the two bedrooms had their own sit-outs.

A harmonious blend of traditional Konkani aesthetics and modern design, it's home to four private, opulent villas, scattered across the property at different levels. Standing on an elevation above ground level, they are raised on steel columns. Giles Knapton, director of Coco Shambala, drew inspiration from the local style of open living pavilions familiar to this region. Each house in Sindhudurg has a private infinity pool facing out to sea, which allows you to reflect on your experiences whilst relaxing in gloriously cool water, a soothing contrast to the heat of the day.

Constructed using locally sourced materials, the property is surrounded by jungle-style gardens and blends seamlessly with the landscape. Wild and remote, one can see a juxtaposition of rugged nature and culture. A rope slung across the entrance informs the staff of your need for privacy. Each villa is set apart from the other, to avoid any disturbance. The eco-conscious principles of the owner are discernible in the use of the locally sourced materials, sloping Mangalore tiled roofs, polished concrete floors, proliferation of indoor plants, elegant coconut wood furniture and minimalist décor combined with laid-back vibes.

Coco Shambala Sindhudurg is a very special escape, but it's the location in southern Maharashtra, a spectacular gem of India, which makes the experience incredible. We were overwhelmed by the wild, rugged luxury



A secluded stretch of the white sand beach



The villa's living room and infinity pool

and the warm hospitality that makes you want to return.

BESPOKE MEALS Interestingly, the resort doesn't have a restaurant or reception. "Each meal comes with a different variety and is served inside at your designated time. The meals are prepared as per the guests' specific tastes. From home-grown herbs, microgreens and vegetables to the sizzling catch of the day, the cuisine is a celebration of local culture," says Suhas, the F&B manager. Chef Dilip and the culinary team whip up great repasts with Konkani flavours, paired imaginatively with other cuisines.

We gorged on an assortment of super-fresh seafood preparations as we listened in rapt attention to Chef Dilip rattling off the names of the different kinds of Malvani dishes. I relished the Curry Leaf Sungta (butter and curry leaf poached prawns with garlic slivers and topped with peanuts). Other equally popular non-vegetarian dishes include the Kombdi Vade (chicken curry and a special bread) and Murgh Malvani which consists of the traditional Malvani chicken curry (including chunks of

chicken with bones) with vade (like a puri, it is a fluffy, fried bread of wheat and nachni flour), onion, lemon and Solkadhi.

For dessert, I had Modak (Konkan-style dumplings stuffed with coconut, jaggery and dry fruits). I also savoured other mouth-watering creations like sweet Malwani chilli chocolate ganache (kokum sauce, local biscuit crumble, pomegranate) and Serra Dura (dessert with cream, biscuit crumble).

THINGS TO DO The relatively undiscovered Bhogwe beach is just a stroll away. It offers stunning views of the sea and sunsets! With the ruins of Nivati Fort playing sentinel to a secluded stretch of white sand, Nivati is amongst the most beautiful beaches in the entire stretch. It is dramatic and peaceful at the same time. One can either hike to it across the rocks from Bhogwe beach or take a 15-minute boat ride.

For the spiritually inclined, the resort arranges visits to the ancient Laxmi Narayan temple, the Mouli temple, and the Sun temple. One can also explore Sindhudurg's marine life by indulging in water sports like scuba diving or snorkelling with a trained expert. Embark on a boat trip for dolphin spotting, or drift down the Kurli river which joins the Arabian Sea, discover waterfalls, go on a birdwatching walk, or head out on a guided trek through the lush landscape that ends with a bird's-eye view of the surroundings. For a history buff, a trip to Sindhudurg Fort is just a boat ride away. Avoid the monsoons as the fort is marooned out in the sea. If you want to know more about indigenous art and shadow puppetry, ensure you visit the Thakar Adivasi Kala Aagan Museum and Art Gallery. ■

FACT FILE

Reaching there: Fly 91 has started direct flights from Bengaluru and Hyderabad to Sindhudurg. The nearest railway station, Kudal, is a 30-minute drive from the resort.

Contact details: Coco Shambala, Bhogwe Turtle Beach, Maharashtra - 416 523. Mobile: +91 80073 74123

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 Bazaar.



MANY FLAVOURS OF HONEY

INSTEAD of refined sugar, add a dollop of honey to your smoothie, yogurt, or breakfast cereal. Take your pick from a myriad of flavours that Shuddh Satvik has on offer. There's wildflora honey, *jamun*, acacia, *ajwain*, *tulsi*, eucalyptus, lychee and multiflora. These are all natural flavours and depend on which plant's nectar the bees feasted on. For instance, Shudh Satvik's bestselling *tulsi* honey comes from bees buzzing on Jharkhand's many *tulsi* plants. It is priced at ₹650 for half a kg, while the other flavours are for ₹600.

The organic brand is currently headed by Ankur Saini, the third-generation beekeeper in his family. They have been involved in this line of work since 1990.

He says he is carrying on his grandfather's legacy. "I have been doing this for 25 years. I learnt at the age of eight. One needs to be physically as well as mentally healthy to be a beekeeper," he says. The older buyers tend to prefer *jamun* and *ajwain* flavours but younger ones pick multiflora the most.

Apart from honey, the brand also sells peanut butter, mango chutney, *haldi*, *besan*, *desi khand*, *chyavanprash* and red chilli powder. All products are organic and made from scratch.



Reaching out via WhatsApp is the best way to place an order with Shuddh Satvik. You can send your order specifications along with your postal address and it will be delivered pan-India.

Contact:

Ankur Saini: 8468033979
Email: ankursaini.cse@gmail.com



TREASURE TROVE FROM AFGHANISTAN

WHEN Saifullah and Asadullah Nazari first came to India from Afghanistan, it was in search of a secure, stable and dignified livelihood. Back home, the brothers were raised in a family that did well for itself but instability made it hard to live there.

They took up making traditional Afghani tribal art in Delhi. Their newly established brand, Nazari Arts, creates unique antique jewellery for buyers in India. There are beautiful designs in an array of colours and sizes to suit every eye and pocket. Along with jewellery, they offer indigenous mirrors, collectibles in lapis lazuli and natural stones from Afghanistan.

The earrings and neckpieces are often bought separately. But, paired as a set, they look more stunning. For a fusion look choose chunky designs, a mix of traditional and modern. Afghan jewellery matches well with not just Indian outfits but western ones too! Not all their jewellery is chunky. They have intricately made necklaces and trinkets made from gemstones — lapis lazuli, jade and crystal, to name a few.

To buy you could either visit their stall at Dastkar Bazaar or phone them for more details. There is also an Instagram account that displays their vibrant collection.

Contact:

Phone: 8376832743
Email: saifullahturkman@gmail.com
Instagram: @nazari_arts

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.

FIGHT FOR CHILD RIGHTS

Child Rights and You (CRY) works for underprivileged children in 19 states across India. It is committed to ensuring that every child has access to quality education, health and nutrition, safety and protection.

Founded by Rippa Kapur in 1979, CRY is headquartered in Mumbai. It runs 102 projects which cover the entire gamut of child rights from child labour to child marriage.

CRY works with its network of grassroots partners in all 19 states. They engage with local communities to address poverty, illiteracy, and lack of healthcare. It reaches out and works with parents, teachers, Anganwadi workers, communities, governments and the children to address the issues confronting them.

The website has a volunteer registration form for event organizing, fundraising, spreading awareness and other work. CRY accepts donations, large or small, online.

www.cry.org | cryinfo.mum@crymail.org

+91 9115911500

CARE FOR THE DISABLED

Khushboo Welfare Society was founded in 1995 in Gurugram. It assists physically and mentally challenged individuals to become self-reliant by helping them reach their full potential. The aim is to create a society where physically and mentally challenged individuals can lead a life of dignity and respect with adequate care.

The NGO operates a day-care centre for people with disabilities.

It offers support to children, adolescents, and adults with cerebral palsy, autism, and Down syndrome. Khushboo's Life Skills Development programme includes training in daily

activities, vocational skills, and social skills.

The organization provides physiotherapy, speech and hearing therapy, psychiatric counselling, and recreational activities such as yoga, sports, and pottery. They also offer training for caregivers and families. One can partially or fully sponsor a person receiving care at their facility.

www.kwsindia.org
khushboowelfaresociety@kwasindia.org
0124-4140885

EMPOWER WITH EDUCATION

Akanksha Foundation has been providing quality education to underprivileged children in Mumbai, Pune, and Nagpur since 1989 when it was founded by Shaheen Mistri, a social activist and educator.

Akanksha runs several schools and after-school centres, offering a curriculum designed to foster academic excellence and character development for children from low-income communities.

The organization emphasizes not only academic learning but also the social, emotional, and physical development of its students. Through a blend of creative arts, sports, and life skills programmes, Akanksha equips children with the skills needed in today's competitive environment.

Volunteers can engage in teaching, mentoring, conducting workshops, and supporting administrative tasks. Applications and donations are welcome on the website. Options include donating to specific campaigns or sponsoring a child's education.

info@akankshafund.org

+91 9179306515

JOIN A HOLISTIC MISSION

Calcutta Rescue, founded by Dr Jack Preger, a British doctor, in 1980, provides healthcare, education, and social services to

Kolkata's impoverished and underserved communities.

Their healthcare services encompass medical clinics offering treatment for various ailments, including tuberculosis and HIV, as well as maternal and child healthcare. The organization runs educational programmes through its schools and tutoring centres, ensuring that children from disadvantaged backgrounds receive quality education and have the opportunity to build better futures.

Calcutta Rescue also runs vocational training programmes to equip individuals with skills needed for employment and financial stability. Other initiatives include distributing clothing and hygiene products in slum areas.

Volunteers can lend a hand in medical services, teaching, and administrative support. Donations can be made online, with options to contribute to specific projects or general support.

<https://calcuttarescue.org/>
info@calcuttarescue.org
033 2217 5675

DONATE BLOOD, SAVE LIVES

The slogan on BloodConnect Foundation's website reads 'Every blood donor is a lifesaver'. The NGO was founded by IIT Delhi students in 2010 as a project under the National Service Scheme. It soon evolved into a full-fledged organization with the mission of addressing the shortage of blood in India by raising awareness and connecting donors with those in need. The idea was to make India "blood sufficient".

The foundation's initiatives include blood donation camps in collaboration with colleges, companies and RWAs. It runs a 24/7 emergency helpline. BloodConnect creates awareness through street plays and sessions. It has a youth network that leads the blood donation movement

across the country.

BloodConnect's aim is to ensure reliable and sufficient blood availability in India, ultimately saving lives through the power of voluntary donations and by closing existing gaps in blood availability.

They welcome volunteers via their website. There is a form you need to fill, explaining the areas you are interested in. Financial donations can be made via cheque or online. Every donation of ₹50 saves one life, says BloodConnect.

<https://www.bloodconnect.org>
contact@bloodconnect.org

RESCUE SMALL ANIMALS

The Purple Patch Trust (PPT) was founded by Abhilash Puljal in New Delhi as an animal sanctuary dedicated to rescuing abused and abandoned small animals in the National Capital Region (NCR). The NGO provides shelter, healthcare and nourishment to small animals and birds that have been deserted, ill-treated, or neglected by their human families.

It has rescued and sheltered a variety of animals over time including rabbits, guinea pigs, hamsters, lab rats, budgerigars, finches, geese, ducks, and more. PPT does not take in animals protected under the Wildlife Protection Act, 1972 but offers to suggest animal shelters that accommodate such animals.

While their office is based in New Delhi, the Purple Patch shelter has been set up in Faridabad — offering a nurturing and gentle environment for the animals to get back on course.

You can donate through their website and contact them for volunteering opportunities. There are many ways of getting involved — by becoming a farm volunteer, reporting abandoned birds or small animals, or helping to raise funds.

<https://www.purplepatchtrust.org>
contact@ppt.org.in | +91 93190 19966

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