

Civil Society

WHAT IS INDIA'S AI FUTURE?

Eight concerns after the summit

By KIRAN KARNIK



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A low point for the world

WHEN schoolgirls are killed in an age of precision bombing, a terrifying low point has been reached. That this tragedy in Iran followed the widespread killing of innocents in Gaza only speaks of a trend. It should be a matter of concern that the Indian government has not found the moral strength to condemn these pogroms though Indians generally find them abhorrent. Diplomacy is cited as the reason for the silence. But India's place is not with Israel and the US. It is in the Global South where its leadership is sought. An India without the self-confidence to speak up can surely only be on the way down.

Governments and corporations know to flatter to deceive when they seek to expand their economic influence. It is in the interests of countries like India not to succumb to manipulation while engaging at the same time. The future of countries in the Global South lies in standing up for values of equity, justice and peace that will allow them to develop.

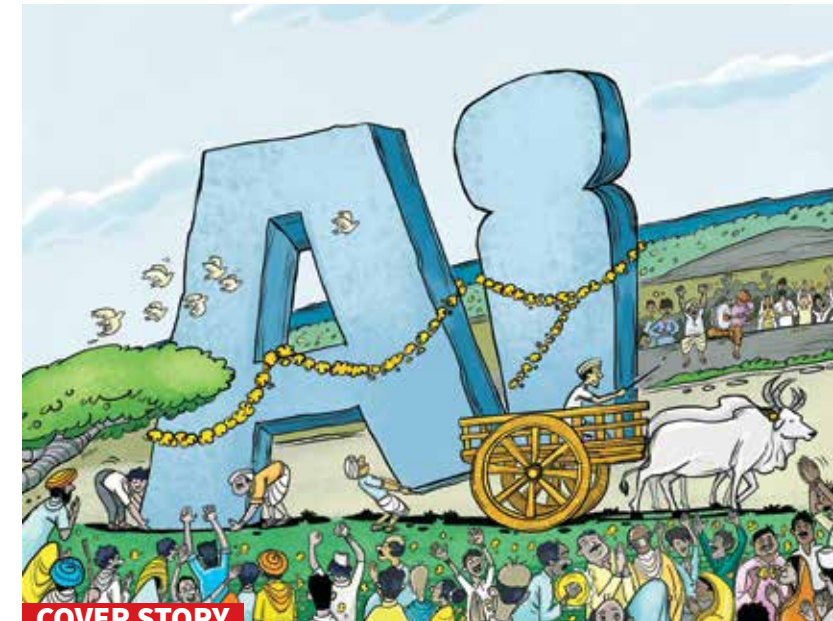
The recent AI summit in Delhi is an example of the hoopla and false flattery India needs to shun. Across the developed world AI is regarded with caution for its consequences on humankind. Data centres are being pushed out of regions because of the environmental harm they do. India is not doing itself a service by unquestioningly embracing big tech companies which are seeking markets to justify the billions invested in them.

We could think of no one better than Kiran Karnik, our columnist, to weigh in on the New Delhi Declaration of the AI summit. We hope his cover story will put many of the issues around AI and how it can be employed in India in perspective for readers.

Adil Rustomjee's book on the history of the Bombay Stock Exchange landed on our desk with a thud. It is that kind of book, almost a thousand pages! We feature him as our interviewee of the month.

From Bengaluru we bring you a story about citizens sprucing up their lakes. A farmer-producer company in Haryana has found its fortune in figs. Beggars at street lights, especially children, are a sad sight and we speak to an NGO that has been working with them.

We also bring you our columnists: Sanjaya Baru on MAGA not being MIGA, Shyam Bhatia on Iran's monarchy and Venkatesh Dutta on small rivers.



COVER STORY

WHAT IS INDIA'S AI FUTURE?

The AI Impact Summit held in Delhi recently was a high-voltage event with a final declaration addressing humankind. We take a look at the fine print.

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LETTERS



Saptak's story

The Saptak music school is a brilliant example of how traditions pass from one generation to the next. For 46 years, Saptak and its founders have quietly served Indian classical music from a corner of Ahmedabad. Teaching is a delicate process. The intricacies of classical music require devotion and dedication from both the teacher and the student. Commercialization destroys education. Saptak is therefore an example for our education system in general, even though it is primarily a music school. It is fascinating that Saptak the school and the festival have remained a well-kept secret. Your story shows what is possible when the means matter more than the ends.

A.K. Gupta

Saptak's efforts to promote Indian classical music are to be admired. Sanjaya Baru's attack against the persisting privileges and the hypocritical attitude of the middle class and several other issues were well presented. You are keeping up the fight.

Gautam Vohra

News, views

I have been increasingly impressed with your magazine *Civil Society* which, I think, has reached its high-water mark with your issue of March 2026. Congratulations and looking forward to more monthly enlightenment.

Mani Shankar Aiyar

Rethink business

Your interview with Arun Maira, 'The World Bank-IMF crowd has little to offer India', represents a paradigm shift. It is absolutely essential to bridle the liberties of corporate entities with ethical and societal considerations of all stakeholders.

Henry Waller

IN PASSING TRUMP'S UGLY WAR



This was a primary school for little girls in Minab, Iran, before it was hit by American missiles on February 28, leaving at least 165 dead

Arun Maira's is an important perspective. Alongside efforts to make corporations much more accountable, another complementary path may be to strengthen the broader economic architecture that enables wider participation in markets.

India's experience with the digital payment systems shows how shared infrastructure can expand opportunity, reduce frictions, and empower individuals and small enterprises to engage directly in economic activity.

At the same time, an adaptive regulatory framework, where regulation evolves with changing technology and market realities, balancing long-term social goals with ground-level economic dynamism, is also needed.

Deepak Khatana

Fading royalty

Sanjaya Baru is right about the Indian elites' obsession with the former maharajas and maharanis or at least what remains of their families. As a democratic republic we need to move on from royalty and embrace equality and fraternity.

Piyush

Dog bites

Your interview with Dr M.K.

Sudarshan on why people across India are dying of rabies did not offer information of much substance.

The questions which were asked at the beginning of the article continue to remain unanswered. The efficacy of the rabies vaccine is of serious concern.

It needs research to assess the reasons. Unfortunately, that is not being done. There is as yet no evidence about repacking/spurious RBV. It appears that this is being floated merely to protect markets.

Donthi Narasimha Reddy

A number of deaths caused by rabies across India have been reported in the newspapers and you have done well to highlight this trend and also explore the possible reasons in the February and March issues.

Dog bites are increasing. If strays can't be removed, prevention of rabies must be ensured. Not a single life should be lost because of dog bite.

Priyanka Bhasin

Farmers' friend

I refer to a story by Shree Padre which appeared in your magazine some years ago. Titled 'The Pepper Doctor', it profiled M.N.R. Venugopal, a retired scientist of the Indian Council for

Agricultural Research (ICAR).

As a silent follower of Dr Venugopal's work, I felt compelled to express my appreciation after reading the article. Coming from a research background myself, I deeply admire the scientific clarity, commitment, and compassion Dr Venugopal brought to pepper cultivation. His dedication to empowering farmers, simplifying complex agronomic concepts, and standing by them with genuine affection is truly inspiring.

His work doesn't just improve crops — it uplifts livelihoods, restores confidence, and strengthens the entire farming ecosystem. He sets a benchmark for what true agricultural leadership looks like.

Dr Girish H.R.

Errata

In the March issue, it was erroneously mentioned in the story, 'Kolkata shows what it's like to eat together,' that the campaign, Know your Neighbour, was an initiative by the Pratichi Institute Trust. It is the Sabar Institute, founded by Sabir Ahamed, that is carrying out this campaign. The error is regretted.

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ADIL RUSTOMJEE ON THE HISTORY OF THE BSE



Adil Rustomjee: 'As long as people are behind the buy buttons, there will be swings'

'The little guy has never been so safe in the stock market'

Civil Society News
New Delhi

MORE ordinary Indians engage with the stock market than ever before. They are egged on by government policies, influencers on social media and television, bankers acting as agents for funds and the freedom to make instant decisions through apps.

Technology makes it super easy now to put savings into shares. But for all the proximity that the market has to people, it remains nonetheless an enigma. Its ups and downs are tricky to second guess. A phantom seems to orchestrate its movements.

One reason for the market being a mystery is that it is dominated by traders and analysts who comprise a club all their own. There has been little effort to tell the story of the market by bringing its history alive and placing it in the context of social and economic developments.

But one effort at doing so is now available in a 1,000-page history of the Bombay Stock Exchange: *Running Behind Lakshmi*.

Adil Rustomjee, an investment adviser, has worked assiduously on

stringing together primary and secondary sources. He has brought past and present together in a lucid, often humorous, account of how the market works.

Interestingly, Rustomjee tells us that regulation and all the backend work that goes into assessing companies and choosing stocks actually makes the market safer for small investors. A lot of the ground work is being routinely done for them — even though making sense of those flickering screens may be just as tough as decoding old-style signalling by brokers on the stock market floor.

Q: Your book begins with India's first bull market, the Cotton and Share Mania in 1865. Many present-day bubbles and manias have been similar to that one though 150 years have elapsed. Is it that nothing has intrinsically changed in the way markets are made and collapse?

Your question goes to the heart of that stock market cliché: "This time it's different." The issue is what changes and what remains the same. There is no easy answer to that.

Interest rates matter in all this, but the inverse connection between them and markets cannot be taken for granted; in India, bulls and bears have happened across a range of interest rates. Corporate profits matter, and yet price earnings ratios can change so much that the market's price can justify a wide range of corporate profits.

Displacements seem to matter too — cotton, railways, radio, transistors, internet, and now AI. The fact that there is a displacement does not change, though the nature of the displacement changes.

My chapter on the software mania of the late 1990s uses the analogy of the tsunami — causing fishing boats to bob about in the open ocean as it passes under them, but leading to a huge tidal wave as it approaches shore. A displacement (and especially one caused by technological change) is a little like that, causing the venture capital/private equity crowd to bob about, while leading to a huge wave as it crashes on a market shore.

Across global markets, what does not change much is the human element. As long as people are behind the buy buttons, there will be these swings. The wide range over which markets value the moves in interest rates, profits, and displacements, implies that this human element is still quite strong. I show this for a single emerging market, but these themes are universal.

Vicarious exposure through the accounts of others at least makes the participant aware that much of this has happened before. This can be a source of comfort, to a certain temperament. The human element comes into outline in the book, but whether that translates into better decision-making in the present will depend on many things, with the usual variation in outcomes.

Q: If investing in the stock market remains a game of chance, where does that leave the small investor who shows up with precious savings? Are they as vulnerable as the small investor 150 years ago? Or have regulation and IT made the market safer and more transparent?

On balance, the small trader/investor has been the biggest beneficiary of all these changes. Remember, if we're talking about the democratization of market activity, that, by definition, has to have benefited the little guy.

Here it is useful to separate the activities of trading and investing (handled by a market intermediary's front office) from what happens behind all those flickering prices you see on the screen (handled by their back office).

There is a large amount of work behind those flickering prices collectively grouped under the rubrics of clearing and settlement, compliance, etc, that is handled by a back office. Before the 1990s, these areas were a hit and miss affair, but the reform to the microstructure has sorted them out. So much so that nowadays people take a clean market for granted, but it was not always like that.

So, this has led to benefits going unambiguously to the public. It has reduced the chanciness of dealing with a dodgy broker, or of non-completion on a routine transaction. That element of back-office chance has gone for the small investor and this is a huge achievement compared to the past.

Actual market risk, the chance/risk of buying high and selling low, the hazards that come from trading and investing as the public interfaces with the intermediary's front office will remain. But it reduces if the diversification habit catches on; the spread of the SIP product has also reduced the urge to time the market. But most important to curbing chance is curbing the trading/speculative itch as the chapter on storming or laying siege to Lakshmi demonstrates.

So, regulation and tech have done away with back-office risks (in large measure) but cannot, by definition, deal with market risk, which always remains.

Q: The Indian stock market has grown manifold, especially after economic reforms. What drives it? Speculation or investment?

In previous generations, speculation was so pervasive that investing

would have been seen as eccentric. Now there is an even balance between both activities in the modern Indian market that not many have noticed.

A certain amount of speculation is vital for any market. After all, if everybody put away their shares in demat accounts after being allotted them at IPOs, there would be no market. It is speculation (or its euphemism, trading) that builds the thick order books the modern buy side of mutual funds/LIC, etc. thrives on. More technically, electronic limit order books (ELOBs), those little screens you see on your computer, don't have specialists behind them i.e. dealers who make markets in those counters. In the specialist absence, it is speculation that leads to that most vital of outcomes — the thick order books that bring about price continuity over time.

Yet the market gets more investment-oriented with each passing year. This is due to the spread of the mutual fund industry and rupee cost averaging products like the SIP. Stock picking and the search for value are also inherently investment driven activities. Long pull trades of six to 12 months combine elements of speculation and investment, and are surprisingly common among the Indian buy side.

An unrecognized irony is that the speculative element seems to have increased in the modern era, mainly because of the rise of a colossal

'Speculation is vital. Yet the market gets more investment-oriented with each year. This is due to the spread of the mutual fund industry and products like the SIP.'

derivatives segment, the world's largest by some measures (like numbers of contracts traded). The aim of the reform effort was actually to bring down the speculative element by abolishing *badla*. But the rise of a substitute product, derivatives, put paid to that aim. The public's need for a leveraged product is simply too strong and your friendly neighbourhood broker is always at hand to encourage that need. So, today's market allows full play for both approaches and this distinguishes it from earlier times.

Q: It is common to equate the rise in markets with the robustness of the economy. Is it really so? As a researcher, what does history tell you about the interplay between the stock market and the national economy?

This is a vital question. Traditionally, the stock market was to be a barometer for the real economy, soaring or swooning if it sensed better or worse times ahead. (But always times "ahead", rather than in the present moment, because of the discounting function.) The market is usually slotted into the list of Leading Economic Indicators (LEIs).

The market should reflect the real side, but that is becoming rare nowadays. That connection was tenuous in the past and, surprisingly, continues to be so.

Part of the problem has to do with what we call The Market itself. It's usually taken to be an index, but these are narrowly constructed in India. The Nifty has 50 and the Sensex has 30 stocks, while the universe nowadays is about 3,000 stocks that trade on a (more or less) regular basis. Broader indexes exist, but are rarely taken to be "The Market", because of past habit.

Besides, there are entire sectors like agriculture that are underrepresented in the universe, let alone the narrowly constructed indexes.

Lags also matter and these can be long and variable, making

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connections and interplays with the real economy difficult to discern. There seems to be a trinity of Sentiment, Value, and Liquidity that comes into play. “The Market” evaluates the real economy through The Value leg’s discounting function. But remember Sentiment and Liquidity act as confounding elements, and especially at the great turning points. Broadly, as I show in the book, Indian markets are biased long because of the long corner, the absence of a short selling product, hazy uptick rules, and the absence of global diversification. So rather than sense the real economy cooling (and falling as a result), they simply keep moving along. This was most apparent in the early years of the ongoing SIP Bull, and more dramatically during the Covid break and pullback.

Q: In your book you spend some time on the Keynesian beauty contest. Picking not the prettiest contestant but the one that will most likely appeal to a lot of people. Tell us about that.
The Keynesian beauty contest is a standard way to describe stock picking in liquidity constrained markets. The idea is to select counters that others fancy, because the money flow into them is what drives their prices higher. This helps avoid liquidity traps.

If practised with some common sense, it combines investment and speculative features, and note that the Indian market combines both approaches as well. It has been practised for a long time by people who have not labelled it as such.

It is particularly applicable to displacements caused by triggers like government policy. As the book illustrates, pending policy changes on, say, PSU bank recapitalization is signalled in advance by Delhi officialdom, and the participant, after sensing and confirming flows into such counters, gets on for the ride.

It was more applicable in previous generations when liquidity was an issue, but system-wide liquidity seems to be less of a problem nowadays. Nevertheless, the market is fickle and these conditions can change.

Q: It brings us back to small investors who may neither have the intuition nor the information to make a choice. They are also exposed to noise on TV and the internet about stock picks.
True. Noise — Fisher Black’s idea that a large number of small events matters more than a small number of large events — is endemic here. There’s just a colossal amount of noise in the environment and TV channels are the best example of the phenomenon. The internet and the chat boards are also dens of rumour mongering and hearsay.

Regulation is not required to curb it, as this is just how things are in the bazaar. Remember also that much of the securities business is geared towards getting the little guy into the market to trade (that’s how the wire-houses generate their commissions). These are usually less informed traders trading noise, and this is also just the way things have always been.

For such people, the vigorish (or the cost of a round trip transaction in its entirety) has to be watched carefully. Rather than the seen components (the taxes and transaction costs), it is the hidden components of the vig (the bid-ask bounce and impacts) that really mount with the trading approach.

Thankfully, most of the public exercises caution most of the time and only uses some fraction of their folios to trade. The problem is usually at the turning points, when most are long. Also, in the derivatives markets, what with the public’s tendency to abuse leverage there.

For small investors, investing is a safer option. The passage of time (in this case, accretive rather than corrosive) and the dividend cushion cover up many mishaps.

Q: What or who gave you the idea to do this book?
I never set out in life thinking I would one day write a major work on a financial market; I don’t think anyone ever does. It sort of evolved from my previous actions.

I had been writing an occasional column for a digital news site. Pranay Gupte, a *New York Times* and *Newsweek* foreign correspondent, noticed it and suggested I write a book. The initial suggestion was to put together the columns (after suitable modifications) with a sort of introductory essay for each part. But I had always been taking notes on trades and exploring the archives. I was also struck by the lack of material on India’s market and the reflexive habit of participants of quoting foreign material. This, despite the fact that the market here went back a very long time.

After Pranay’s suggestion, the idea of putting all this together came to me one day.

Q: How challenging was it to get to the primary sources?
The conditions were challenging. Most of the primary sources are in

Bombay as that city is the financial capital. Mumbai’s dominance continues into the present era as the buy side is still concentrated there.

The physical condition of archives is always an issue in India, mainly because of the monsoon, and Mumbai gets the monsoon in full force. It’s a good thing that now at least the sources are all identified and listed in one place (the book); the bibliography is the first collection of primary and secondary sources on the Indian stock market.

Increasingly, a fair amount of material is online. Some of the very

early material is abroad, either at the Library of Congress or in London.

This is the first book on a stock market that deals with its history and its methods in equal measure. But only the first part of the book deals with the market’s evolution, where the focus is on the subject of your question — sources and such like. The remaining three parts deal with methods and participants, which also involves a fair amount of academic work drawn from various fields like microstructure or valuation and investment methodology.

The intellectual reviewer class tends to focus on the first part and its concerns such as primary sources; also, its novelty stands out. Practising market participants will find the remaining parts more relevant (but they don’t write the reviews.)

Q: You have put together almost 1,000 well-written pages of invaluable information. How long did it take?

It took a fair while. Ability in handling primary material had to be built first, together with facility over a wide range of subfields, some of which are outlined in the preface and the chapter on financial advisers.

The book’s size was not apparent from day one. Rather, it kept expanding with the material and the conception kept changing. Because nothing had been done in the field, it took many years for me to “see” my subject. I was also concerned with style; as part of that, one concern of writing in this genre is a certain sense of motion, of getting from A to B. There is also wrestling with the familiar trade-off between chronology and theme that dominates arrangement in such works. Arrangement and rearrangement, till it flowed well and without repetition, took time. ■

‘It’s a good thing that now at least the sources are all identified and listed in one place (the book); the bibliography is the first collection of primary and secondary sources on the Indian stock market. A fair amount of material is online. Some material is abroad.’

‘It is not a high cost to support artisans. They have the skills’

Poonam Muttreja on a boost for handicrafts

Civil Society News
New Delhi

ALMOST four decades ago Poonam Muttreja was a co-founder of Dastkar, the iconic nonprofit that helps craftspeople come into their own with small enterprises. She now returns to the organization as chairperson to further strengthen its efforts to promote handicrafts in India and help artisans access the finance, marketing prowess and technology they need. Muttreja has proven organization-building and collaborative skills, often tapping into opportunities already available with government.

In addition to Dastkar, she will for the time being continue to also lead the Population Foundation of India (PFI) which has taken many strides under her.

Muttreja believes artisans’ interests can be served by accessing the wide range of government schemes relating not just to their skills but also gender, finance and information technology.

Q: What are your plans for Dastkar once you take over?
First of all, I want to focus on guiding and strengthening our current staff. One of my strengths is to mentor people, help them skill, learn more and motivate them to do things differently. For instance, in finances I want to bring in software. I want to bring in technology for greater efficiency, for scaling up and expansion, because technology is a route to that. The idea is not to have people lose their jobs, but do them better.

Working in Dastkar is a very creative experience. I want to make sure that my colleagues spend time reading, reflecting, and absorbing the creativity that Dastkar represents. So, my focus is capacity building, enjoying one’s work beyond the call of duty and being as creative as possible.

Q: Are there any particular crafts which you would like to promote?
No. India has not done what it should have for its artisans. The numbers are huge. In Dastkar, under Laila’s (Tyabji) leadership, we managed to do a lot of wonderful product and design development. We brought artisans into the bazaar, with the objective of not just selling their crafts but also understanding their buyers — both individual buyers and institutional buyers.

We would like to place our close to three million weavers on the map of the country and embed them in government policies, programmes and infrastructure. I’m an advocate at heart. Whether I succeed in repositioning craft depends on the government, given that it has not invested very much in the sector.

We talk about skilling people but craftspeople are already skilled. More than 75 percent of our weavers and artisans live in villages. And if we could build much more urban-rural infrastructure, this industry could employ many more people.



Poonam Muttreja: ‘It is important for artisans to have access to information’

‘We would like to place our close to three million weavers on the map of the country and embed them in policies, programmes and infrastructure.’

And also women. One of the reasons women are not in the workforce is because there are small children to take care of at home. Given the absence of creches and of child care, this is another area I will work on. I do that in my current job too.

You know, in population issues, I always say, learn what not to do from China. But in the craft sector we need to learn from the Chinese. With very few skills, look at the way they have captured the global handicraft market. And India, with so much richness and diversity in crafts, arts, skills, is lagging far behind.

I also believe that the support artisans or weavers need is not high-cost. You are not skilling them afresh. What you need to do is upgrade their skills and create infrastructure that will help everybody. And, you know, let’s not forget that after agriculture, the highest number of skilled people are in the crafts sector.

Q: You’ve been working with government for a long time. How are you going to make them see sense in the handicraft sector?
First of all, there is the data. A majority of weavers are women, more than 50 percent. You need to invest in them.

Q: What specifically would you like the government to do? Build rural infrastructure? Provide credit?

First is upskilling. Most of our people in the sector are outright illiterate

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‘It is not a high cost to support artisans. They have the skills’

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or have very low literacy levels. But we have seen they are able to use a smartphone. So, teaching them skills through use of technology in a simplified form is one. An electronic notebook or an iPad can be given to women weavers, the kind the government is giving to ASHAs (Accredited Social Health Activists) and ANMs (Auxiliary Nurse Midwives) to use. ASHAs, I understand, have studied almost to Class 8 or Class 7.

It’s important for artisans to be able to gain access to knowledge or information through the internet to find out, for instance, where do you get the cheapest raw materials? How do you do online purchases as well as sales? They do have educated younger people in their families. And these are family enterprises where they are traditionally trained.

I mean, at the AI summit they were weaving sarees with AI. The design work would become so much easier. We could use such technologies for design, and product development.

We have a huge number of people who have graduated from our design schools like NID (National Institute of Design), NIFT (National Institute of Fashion Technology), and so on. And now the education ministry is itself setting up a design school. We can definitely use their skills in the craft sector.

Second is credit. We have to have an allocated amount for artisans. We also need to undertake a market analysis of the crafts sector. I am planning to do a state of the artisan report with my colleagues in Dastkar, along with Laila who has been the lifeline of the organization.

We will assess and put down the needs of the sector in terms of credit, technology, infrastructure and, most importantly, marketing outlets. Our emporiums are lying idle. They’re becoming godowns. Three or four decades ago if you went to an emporium on a holiday, you would meet everyone. So, the idea is to once again revive the emporiums.

The emporiums should be seen as cooperatives run for the artisans and not merely as a commercial activity. It is about our cultural heritage. And it requires creative people. We have young people who come and work with us at Dastkar and do wonderful things. Senior designers have now approached me asking, Can I do a range of woodwork for you? Can I do a range of kurtas for Dastkar? I am going to make a directory of designers keen to help us.

But definitely we don’t want the government to nationalize creativity. The Khadi Village Industries Commission (KVIC) began to die when the government nationalized khadi. I hope we can learn from our mistakes and our successes.

We also have so many museums across the country which could also house craft shops. When you travel abroad, one of the most exciting things about going to a museum is visiting the museum shop where you can buy creative products. Now, these are my aspirations, but at least even if we can get some of it going, it’ll be a step in the right direction.

Q: You do have a permanent market now, the Dastkar bazaar in Delhi, and entrepreneurs are also given space. Shops keep changing hands.

The Dastkar philosophy is not to keep working with the same artisans. When groups or individuals become successful in being able to sell themselves, and get to know individual buyers and wholesale buyers, we encourage them to go independent. We can then work with newer groups of artisans. We prefer to make ourselves redundant because there are so many more to work with.

Q: There have been recent controversies regarding intellectual property rights for the sector. But, is there room here for more creative collaborations between international fashion houses and our craft and weaver sector?

Absolutely. But you have to create an atmosphere in our country where people see working with artisans not just as preservation, but as a good economic plan.

The challenge is artisans work in rural areas. How do you reach these remote areas? How do you communicate on technology? The second is finance. Artisans, by and large, do not have the money to even make samples. Designers are not going to make an exception for just that. Artisans need working capital and the ability to do product development.

We can’t also change the culture of the commercial world where they pay you after you have delivered the products. Sometimes, payments are given after six months or a year. That’s what kills these artisans who are marginalized, or are from lower caste backgrounds, and don’t have family assets or savings to be able to access credit.

The government does give soft credit to small entrepreneurs. It can be extended to the craft sector. Just like they’re saying they want ‘Lakhpati didis’, well, we want ‘Lakhpati weavers’.

Q: The government has been promoting various products under its ODOP (One District, One Product) scheme. It has also been encouraging farmer producer organizations. Is Dastkar helping artisans to form collectives or small craft companies? You have the RangSutra example.

Absolutely. See, RangSutra used to come to Dastkar when they started. Today, I am proud to say they don’t need us. The private sector, like Fab India, has also invested in RangSutra. They’re trying to get more investments. It’s a great model for us.

We must scale up as we plan for the artisans. It makes the economies of scale — purchasing, marketing, et al, work better. There’s an advantage.

Artisans live in clusters. In Moradabad, you have all the brass workers collectively working there. Similarly, across Rajasthan, in Tilonia and Jawaja you will find clusters of weavers. You’ll find a whole lane of, say, leather workers living in the same neighbourhood. It translates into economies of scale.

That cooperative concept has lived with us in Amul, but we have not pursued it. It is a Gandhian approach. For the crafts sector we need to re-establish and reimagine it in a much more technologically advanced world. And RangSutra is a great example of how to do that.

Q: Has there been any study of the clusters, the issues they face and if they can morph into cooperative models?

There is evidence in the latest handloom survey. After a long time, a study has been done. We have got access to the data, but we haven’t got the report. They’ve even given data on the education levels of handloom workers who’ve never attended school. It is one in four. In terms of education, the findings are similar in both urban and rural areas.

The report also has caste-wise data. The most marginalized communities, in terms of income, education, caste, are in the handicrafts sector. The contribution of the handicrafts sector to the economy through the business world too has been captured.

What we need to do now is see what kind of investments are needed for the clusters. In 2016, the government launched a Pehchaan scheme, to provide a new identity to handicrafts in India. They said they would be rolling out various benefits for the sector but it is taking time. One of my tasks is to monitor that and then push for it to be implemented well.

Q: We also need to export much more by tapping into global markets. How do we create an ecosystem for this?

The government and the private sector have to do their bit by integrating crafts into their regular production lines. Take the new airport in Mumbai that has been designed by Rajiv Sethi. You see millions of skills there.

If today there was an award for the most aesthetic and beautifully done airport in the world, it would go to that airport. Where do the aesthetics come from? Craft. We need to take craft into the building industry. And into households. The best example I can give is the Mumbai airport. Who funded it? People are going to be very unhappy, but I’m very glad that Gautam Adani, who’s made so much money, used his money to support that. ■



Spirited residents at the Jakkur lake

Reviving Bengaluru’s troubled lakes

Rashmi Gopal Rao

Bengaluru

IN recent years some of Bengaluru’s silently suffering lakes, full of filth and pollution, have transformed into thriving ecosystems. While government agencies have done their bit, the champions of the city’s lakes are local citizens who keep an eye on each restored lake, ensuring its waters are pristine and its banks green.

The task of rejuvenating languishing lakes might not have been achieved without people pitching in.

“When I shifted to Bangalore in 2006, I could not bear to see the sight of the Puttenahalli lake, filled with construction debris and sewage,” says Usha Rajagopalan, founding trustee and chairperson, Puttenahalli Neighbourhood Lake Improvement Trust (PNLIT). “In 2008, I took the help of my neighbour and approached BBMP (Bruhat Bengaluru Mahanagara Palike) to include the lake on their rejuvenation list. It was done by them by 2010.”

PNLIT signed a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) with BBMP for the maintenance of the Puttenahalli lake in May 2011 and since then the lake has been flourishing. It boasts of more than 125 species of birds including spot-billed pelicans, spot-billed ducks and Indian darters.

In fact, PNLIT became a model for several citizen groups and NGOs working with lakes. Jalaposhan, another citizen group, signed an MoU for maintaining the Jakkur lake in 2015.



The Jakkur lake now has a rich population of fish and 197 species of birds

The fishing community is also an active stakeholder in this endeavour. The lake now has a rich population of fish and 197 species of birds, including pelicans and peafowl.

SAVIOURS, AGENCIES, COURTS It was around 2005 that the state began the task of reviving the city’s dying lakes. From thousands of thriving lakes, Bengaluru had been left with just 40 restorable lakes due to the relentless march of urbanization. Offices, homes, malls, roads, IT Parks had buried the lakes.

Lake rejuvenation efforts began in 2008, led by the Bangalore Development Authority (BDA) which began the task of cleaning, desilting, de-weeding, development of

wetlands, installation of Sewage Treatment Plants (STPs), fencing and so on.

Many lakes were also handed over to the BBMP in 2011 with a formal budget allocation of ₹150 crore. Some of the lakes that were restored were the Rachenahalli, Sampigehalli, Puttenahalli and Jakkur lakes.

However, once a lake is restored, it needs maintenance and here the role of citizen groups, and fishing and farming communities is crucial.

“It isn’t always possible for government agencies to do everything. Usually citizens who live close by are more aware of ground realities,” says Dr Annapurna S. Kamath, founder-trustee

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Reviving Bengaluru's troubled lakes

Continued from page 13

of Jalaposhan — “Nurturing the Jakkur Lake”.

“Government agencies are the custodians of the lake. They have been vested with the authority of doing development work. But activities like raising awareness, educating the general public, garnering support and attracting volunteers can be done by us.”

From 2011 itself the BBMP began outsourcing lake maintenance to local citizen groups and non-governmental agencies. The latter shouldered the responsibility of maintenance and garnered community support, raised funds and created a vibrant cultural hub and recreational area around the lake.

However, on March 4, 2020, the Karnataka High Court passed an interim order in response to a Public Interest Litigation (PIL) filed by the Citizens Action Group. The court ruled that the BBMP and the state government should not enter into or renew MoUs with private corporate entities for lake maintenance. Chief Justice Abhay S. Oka observed that, with maintenance MoUs, “the state is virtually parting with the lakes to private corporate entities”.

“While citizen groups are not corporate entities, BBMP chose caution. As a result, MoUs even with citizen groups have not been renewed since the order,” says Rajagopalan. “We have stopped our maintenance work since July 2025 which is very disheartening. We have not been able to repair the aerator fountain and pumps which require immediate attention. We have been trying to get a meeting with the Greater Bengaluru Authority (GBA) to chart our future course of action.”

The GBA is now the apex governing body for Bengaluru. It formally replaced the BBMP in September 2025.

As Rajagopalan points out, citizens too have a primary responsibility towards the lake and when citizen groups are involved, they are able to achieve a great deal more.

“Apart from soliciting local support and raising CSR funds, we did a lot of research. With the help of experts we were able to divert the excess treated wastewater from the STP of a nearby apartment complex to the lake. This helped supplement rainwater and we were able to water the 125 saplings we had planted in the first year itself by drawing water from the lake. We also installed an aerator fountain in the lake,” says Rajagopalan.

THE LAKE PEOPLE A spate of NGOs and individuals have been very active in lake rejuvenation. United Way Bengaluru (UWBe) launched the Wake the Lake Campaign in 2011 and has partnered with the BBMP, *gram panchayats* and minor irrigation department



Citizens' walk at the Puttenahalli lake



Usha Rajagopalan

Dr Annapurna Kamath

to undertake lake rejuvenation projects in areas like Hebbal Nagawara, Challaghatta, Vrushabhavati, Arkavathi, Koramangala and Suvarnamukhi Hills.

Sparking a novel trend of sustainable and ecologically friendly conservation since 2017 is Anand Malligavad, also known as the ‘Lake Man of India’. He played a pivotal role in rejuvenating the Kyalasanahalli lake outside Bengaluru city with the help of CSR funds from his employer, Sansera Engineering, and local volunteers who planted a whopping 18,000 native saplings on the lake bed.

Anand, who heads the Malligavad Foundation, is committed to rejuvenating lakes across India in an ecofriendly, cost-effective and self-sustaining manner which includes the planting of native species of trees, enhancing biodiversity and engaging the local communities.

The restoration of the famous Lalbagh lake in South Bengaluru is another example of a scientific, nature-friendly approach which includes biological and mechanical treatments. Lake rejuvenation here was headed by Guranandan Rao, founder and president of HandsOnFoundation.

Wetlands or floating gardens were installed on platforms on the lake which acted as bio filters that helped remove toxic elements like excess nitrogen and phosphorus and improved oxygen levels of the water. A high-impact

cascading aerator fountain and submersible aerators were installed to augment the supply of oxygen deep inside the lake. The entire exercise was supported by Teva Pharmaceuticals’ CSR initiative.

Before a lake is adopted for rejuvenation it is important to study key aspects related to feasibility of rejuvenation, details of the lake profile, level of water contamination, hydrology, catchment landcover, detailed maps and so on.

“It is vital that decision-makers have access to all crucial information so that they can arrive at an informed decision based on scientific data and evidence,” says Khushbu Birawat, an environmental engineer based in Bengaluru who has worked extensively with Paani Earth Foundation, an organization that focuses on water-related research.

“Earlier, with the MoU in place, we would not need permission for every activity or event we conducted at the lake but now we liaise with the local corporation. We still organize educational, volunteering and clean-up drives for which there has been no resistance. We are following a conservative approach until we get a clear directive on the matter from the relevant authorities,” says Dr Kamath.

After the order, many lake groups did argue that they were not corporate entities and should be allowed to continue. The Karnataka Tank Conservation & Development Authority Act, 2014, permits community involvement in conservation.

The citizen groups have been seeking clarification and the legal battle over who can maintain the lakes has continued for years. The BBMP had been working on a new “Community Involvement for Lake Conservation Policy” since 2024, to formalize how private parties can contribute without ownership being handed over. People are waiting patiently for new policies to emerge. ■

Fatehabad finds its fortune with figs

Shree Padre

Kasaragod

OVER the phone, Mukesh Kumar asked a simple question, “Our story is a long one. Will you listen, sir?” He is the CEO of the New Nenadevi Farmer Producer Company (FPC). It makes a range of products from figs or *anjeer*, a fruit totally alien to the soil of Haryana.

Here’s his story. Five years ago, a private company appeared in his district, Fatehabad, in Haryana. It started promoting figs, a crop unfamiliar to the local farmers. If the farmers grew figs, the company would buy their crop at ₹300 per kg, it was promised.

The company even offered to plant the figs. It recommended Diana, a variety which starts yielding fruit in the first year itself.

Punjab and Rajasthan are close to Fatehabad district. Farmers for decades have been growing staples like wheat, cotton and mustard.

The deal, however, sounded very attractive. The farmers responded enthusiastically. The company planted figs on a vast area of 1,000 acres and charged ₹156,000 per acre. Orchards of figs appeared and staple crops disappeared.

The company began buying figs from the first few farmers whose orchards had begun yielding fruit. This was noted by farmers who hadn’t planted figs. They too joined in and fig cultivation expanded to 2,000 acres in fields abutting Haryana, Punjab and Rajasthan.

The company’s payments started becoming irregular. They began dilly dallying. The farmers protested. The company vanished.

The farmers were deeply shocked. Fig was an alien fresh fruit. There was no *mandi* they could offload it to. Some adventurous farmers took the fig crop to nearby towns and cities, hoping to find buyers. They returned home with their figs. There were no buyers.

The farming community was now staring at a significant loss. With no hope in sight, they began cutting down their fig trees. But in Kharkhedi village, Mukesh Kumar and three young men had planted figs on five acres but without any help from the company. They too didn’t know whom to sell to. They realized the situation was dire.

They thought, Why can’t we make some value-added products from our figs? They couldn’t transport the figs to a distant city because the fruit has a short shelf life and they didn’t have access to cold storage facilities.

Mukesh Kumar approached some of the farmers and started the FPC. With bags of figs, they knocked on the doors of nearby research centres and agricultural universities to ask how they could make products from the fruit.

“We went to each and every research centre, agricultural college or agricultural university. We didn’t leave out a single one,” emphasized Mukesh.

Finally, the fruit technology department of Government

Polytechnic College in Adampur, Haryana, sent a group of its students to Kharkhedi village to see what products could be made.

The students stayed in Kharkhedi village for a month. They experimented and developed a series of products from figs. The most promising ones turned out to be two ready-to-drink beverages: a sweet *anjeer* juice and a spicy *anjeer* juice.

The FPC named its industry New Krushidhan Food and Beverages. They now make several products from fig. Apart from *anjeer* juice, there’s mango, mixed fruit, litchi, lemon juice blended with five percent fig juice. Their portfolio includes fig chutney, fig pickle, fig *murabba*, fig ketchup and three varieties of fig jam under the FPO’s simple brand name, Anjeer.

Half their juices are bought by a company in Delhi. The FPC takes part in all agricultural exhibitions. Last year, at the Chaudhary Charan Singh Haryana Agricultural University’s exhibition, they sold products worth ₹2 lakh. Two shops in Hisar and a few in adjacent areas stock their products.

About 80 percent of their company’s income comes from the two *anjeer* drinks. “These have 14 percent fruit pulp and we don’t use any essence,” says Mukesh.

After starting production, the FPC came to know about Dharambir Kamboj’s Multipro machine.

The team went to Kamboj’s factory, saw a demo of the machine and bought it. They are using it to make *anjeer murabba*, *anjeer* candy and *anjeer* chocolate candy.

Four local youths — Sunil Kumar Hanuman, Surender Hanuman, Veera Singh and Sukhdev Singh — form the core team of the FPC. They have employed about 10 to 12 people to work in their factory in Hisar.

The FPC has spent ₹6 lakh on travel and ₹10 lakh on machinery. Last year their total turnover was ₹25 lakh out of which the company earned a net profit of ₹4-5 lakh.

Fig trees yield fruit from May till December. The FPC is growing figs on five acres and it has a 10-tonne capacity cold storage facility as well. They have inspired nearby farmers not to give up on fig cultivation.

The company has also contracted fig cultivation to a farmer in Rajasthan who is growing the fruit on seven acres.

“Rajasthan seems to have soil ideal for fig cultivation. We have received an enquiry from a farmer in Rajasthan who has 110 acres of fig orchards,” says Mukesh.

“Our farming community learnt a bitter lesson from that unscrupulous company. They deceived everyone in the name of contract farming. But, looking back, we don’t regret that tragic chapter. Because of that crisis, our company and fig products came into existence,” says Mukesh.

In addition, the entire saga led to another dramatic change. Fig juice is now a popular drink in this area thanks to the FPC’s enterprise. Nobody eats the fresh fruit, though! ■



The farmer producer company now has a range of products and two principal types of juices from fig.



Mukesh Kumar

Contact: Mukesh Kumar — 99922 30645

Villages keen to be on tourist map

Jehangir Rashid
Srinagar

THERE are destinations off the beaten track that tourists with a yen for adventure can explore in Kashmir. The list is an enticing one: sprinkled with gushing waterfalls, rambling pastures, wildlife spots, skiing slopes, hot springs, pine forests.

Instead of Gulmarg, Pahalgam, Sonamarg and those Mughal gardens, come and stay with us in a picturesque village and get a taste of life deep in the hills and meadows of Kashmir, say villagers of the Pir Panjal range.

Districts like Budgam, Pulwama, Shopian, Baramulla as well as Rajouri and Poonch districts of Jammu division have the potential to expand the horizon of tourism. Best of all, tourism can be developed without causing any damage to the environment.

“Eco-tourism is the current buzzword. There is no need to go for construction of hotels and guest-houses in these areas. People can convert their small houses into homestays with traditional food being served to guests,” says Mohammad Akhtar, a resident of Khag in Central Kashmir’s Budgam district.

The villages identified for ecofriendly tourism are Sukhnag, Ringzabal, Brenwar, Drung, Khag, Gogaldara, Hajin-Gulistan, Naristan, Sedow, Hirpora, Dubjan and Gaader (a meadow).

What has disappointed residents is that the tourism department and other departments associated with tourism have not taken any worthwhile measures to boost tourism in such villages.

In February this year the district administration organized a winter carnival to promote Dubjan as a tourist destination. A few days after this festival the restrictions imposed following the Baisaran-Pahalgam attack in April last year that left 25 tourists and a local dead, were finally lifted.

Dubjan hosts snow sports like skiing. It has stunning views of the Pir Panjal mountains and natural hot water springs which are regarded as therapeutic.

“Dubjan needs to be promoted as one of the best eco-tourism spots in the district. Once this is done people will come. Holding a winter carnival without an adjunct promotion

campaign makes it a useless exercise,” pointed out Abdul Samad, a Shopian resident.

The closure of major tourist destinations such as Doodpathri, Yousmarg and the Aharbal waterfall led to considerable economic distress among communities whose livelihoods depend entirely on tourism. Residents say the prolonged restrictions left hundreds of families struggling to meet daily expenses.

Pir Sheikh Ghulam Mohideen, vice-chairman, Pir Panjal Conservation Foundation, says the closure pushed many families into economic uncertainty, especially pony handlers, nature guides, taxi drivers, food stall vendors, ATV operators and homestay owners.

“Tourism is the lifeline of villages around



Photo: Civil Society/Bilal Bahadur

The ruggedly scenic environs of the Aharbal waterfall in Shopian district

Doodpathri and Mujpathri. People are surviving on loans and borrowings. Conservation of nature is important, but the survival of local communities must also be safeguarded,” emphasizes Sheikh, a resident of Mujpathri.

Molvi Maqbool, chairman, Sukhnag Conservation and Development Foundation, points out that the restrictions have had dire consequences. “Tourism once provided seasonal employment to hundreds of youths in Sukhnag and nearby villages. Today many young people remain unemployed. Small vendors, tea sellers and transport operators are struggling to sustain their families,” he says.

People are also upset that the tourism department is simply sitting pretty instead of working to promote destinations which have been identified by residents.

The waterfall at Drung in Budgam, for example, has been categorized as a tourist attraction. But, on the ground, facilities are missing. The infrastructure for providing

amenities to tourists was not developed.

“It is imperative that all facilities be provided so that tourists carry a positive message to other likely travellers. If basic amenities, such as restrooms and drinking water, are not available how can we expect more people to come and enjoy the beauty of the Drung waterfall? The stakeholders need to chip in for a better future,” says Shakeel Ahmad, a resident.

The Aharbal waterfall in Shopian district, another exquisite attraction, is also under-utilized with regard to tourism potential. Aharbal has a development authority but very little improvement of facilities has actually taken place. The waterfall has hardly been promoted, say locals.

“The Government of India has been very generous in allocating funds for tourism and tourism-related activities. One fails to understand where the money goes. Virtually no development has taken place at this tourist resort and very few people come to take a look at our waterfall,” rues Reyaz Ahmad, a resident of Shopian.

Along the Mughal Road that connects Kashmir with Rajouri and Poonch districts, homestays and small tea shops have come up at places like Hirpora and Sedow, but they are few and far between. Incentives are needed for locals so that more homestays for tourists come up.

“There is scope for religious tourism. The Pir Ki Gali shrine is visited by people irrespective of belief or religion. Here too basic facilities like drinking water and public toilets are missing. The lack of such facilities hampers the tourism potential of this revered shrine,” says Zahoor Ahmad who frequently visits the shrine.

Dr Shaikh Ghulam Rasool, founder, Tosamaidan Bachav Front and the Nature Conservancy Alliance, emphasizes the need for a balanced and community-centred tourism strategy. He says identification of neglected landscapes could open up new vistas for eco-tourism.

“While ecological concerns must be respected, blanket restrictions without livelihood alternatives can devastate fragile mountain economies. The government should identify and develop neglected landscapes with tourism potential and promote nature-based community tourism models,” says Dr Shaikh. ■

Goans want Goa to be Goa again

‘Enough is enough’ is the anguished cry going out

Civil Society News
New Delhi/Panaji

FULL-page advertisements in national dailies promise beaches, greenery, quietude and everything else that is associated with *susegad*, the easy Goan way of life. But Goans themselves aren't quite so sure what they have got left to offer.

Decades of property developers carving up Goa have resulted in lasting damage to the state's sylvan character. So large, however, is nature's bounty bestowed on Goa that even after plunder much exists. But the question Goans are asking is, for how long?

Deleterious changes have been happening rapidly. Orchards, hills, paddy fields and the seaside continue to be turned into real estate with little accountability for the impact such development is having on the intricate topography of the state. Once-pristine settings brimming with the biodiversity of the Western Ghats are being morphed into flats, villas, hotels and whatnot. There are casinos on the magnificent Mandovi river.

Goans are concerned. They live in the grip of politicians and big money. Yet, when given a chance to speak up and protest they do. So, when retired Justice Ferdino Rebello decided in January to get people together, they turned up in droves to a meeting in Panaji, informing one another by word of mouth. Rebello had expected 50 activists to show up, but instead 1,500 or so Goans came, prompting a change of venue to accommodate the large number.

‘Enough is enough’ is how Rebello had issued his call for the meeting. It was a cry that resonated with anguished Goans and is now the name of a movement to hold politicians, bureaucrats and business interests to account.

Traditionally Goa has known decentralized governance with decisions taken in villages to serve the interests of the community. The system is still decentralized, but it no longer works that way. Average Goans find they aren't taking the decisions that shape their lives. They have been outgunned by powerful politicians who call the shots.

The quality of life for Goans has been declining. Raucous nightclubs play loud music late into the night, keeping traditionally quiet families awake and leading to protests in the streets. Traffic snarls, uncleared garbage and, most shocking of all in a rain-rich zone, water shortages all point to the lack of systems. There are also no jobs except those frivolous ones that seasonal tourism can provide.

“It is not development which is taking place in Goa. It is just the construction of apartments and bungalows. A builder comes in, constructs, makes his money and then leaves the state. Development should benefit the people of Goa. It should generate employment. But this model of growth is not helping anyone except a few vested interests,” says Rebello.

Conversion of land to facilitate construction is a key concern. A series of policy decisions have taken away checks and balances, making it easy for construction companies to get permissions ignoring the ecological harm they could be causing.

Orchards, paddy fields and hillsides are now up for grabs. Goans whose lives are directly impacted by such land changes are now left to battle it out in courts. It is tough for them to stand up against both



Ferdino Rebello: ‘This model of development is only helping vested interests’

politicians and moneyed interests.

The movement wants to reset the clock in favour of ordinary Goans. Rebello and the core group have drafted a bill which will reverse all the decisions relating to conversion of land. The bill has also been tabled. But it seems to have little chance of becoming law since politicians across party lines have so far gone along with the real estate boom.

The movement has also asked the government to allocate funds for conducting studies to determine the carrying capacity of villages.

Asked what chance the bill has of being passed, Rebello says: “It may not have a chance, but that is a base for us to move forward. We can tell the people that we gave the current set of politicians a chance but they were not willing to change the law. It's up to you now to bring in people who will change this law.”

The movement has no intention of converting itself into a political party. Members of its core group also can't hold positions in parties, says Rebello.

But it hopes to succeed in bringing politicians together in support of a progressive development agenda for Goa.

A 10-point agenda that followed the meeting generally has the support of all parties. But that is because they can't be seen opposing a good thing. Suggestions like keeping the bureaucracy independent so that it doesn't do the bidding of politicians will be tough to implement. It would not be unrealistic to expect the political class in Goa to find ways of wriggling out.

“We want political parties which are existing in Goa and have supported the movement's charter to come together. And for the people to bring them together. That's for their thought process. So, as far as we are concerned, this is not going to be a party. We are not going to convert ourselves into a political party,” says Rebello.

The movement has succeeded in highlighting the omissions and commissions of the political class. But this is not the first time that activists in Goa are speaking up. They have been protesting and going to court and also winning court orders. But these efforts have done little to deter politicians and the government.

But Enough Is Enough could be different. It brings groups from across Goa together. It also places in sharp focus the misdemeanours in governance. An example is the proliferation of casinos — an absurdity in a small state with a population of 1.5 million. Through a bureaucratic fiddle, casinos on ships have been allowed along the river front. Permission for yet another ship has been stalled after the movement took off. It is an early gain but perhaps a sign of things to come. ■

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BEING
READ?

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Chopda, Morena, Howrah, Khunti, Rajanna Sircilla, Hooghly, Chembur, Balrampur, Velagapudi, Virudhunagar, Hazaribag, Pithoragarh, Haridwar, Kavaratti, Thrissur, Harda, Saligao, Ayodhya, Hapur, Mandla, Coorg, Tezu, Chikkaballapur, Gwalior, Sirsa, Madurai, Koraput, Gundlupet, Gumla, Khargone, Pali, Balod, Kondapur, Goraiyaghat, Jabalpur, Bengaluru, Amethi, Vaishali, Gopalganj, Baurari, Solapur, Ambedkarnagar, Jalpaiguri, Siwan, Gonikoppal, Hubli, Bharuch, Narsinghpur, Raisen, Barisbane, Goner, Pilibhit, Sambhal, Lakhimpur Gondia, Rajapalayam, Vellore, Khopoli, Jharsuguda, Gonda, Gomati, Ballygunge, Hardoi, Leh, Gokak, Katihar, Godda, Christian Basti, Daporijo, Sheikhpura, Buldhana, Giridih, Maharajganj, Hisar, Gir Somnath, Betul, Narayanguda, Gurdaspur, Hosur, Gandhinagar, Chaibasa, Sukma, Hingoli, Bhandara, Nagapattinam, Gaya, Kalugamalai, Honavar, Gavipuram, Thirthahalli, Lalitpur, Garkheda, Bhogpur, Sirohi, Khandwa, Gariaband, Meerut, Koloriang, Purba Medinipur, Gulbarga, Kathua, Thizama, Hawaii, Beed, Vasantha Mahal, Gurugram, Silvasa, Vizanagaram, Raipur, Warangal, Udampur, Gangera Hill, Sanguem, Pernem, Nadiad, Dantewada, Chapra, Gudalur, Jalgaon, Khandala, Singapore, Ballia, Hoshandabad, Firozabad, Fatehgarh, Farukhabad, Delhi, Etan, Esinghbum, Erode, Ernakulam, Bomdila, East Godavari, Dwarka, Narnaul, Durg, Gangavati, Dumraon, Bhadohi, Khandagiri, Balaghat, Canara, Azangam, Danka, Raigarh, Dondaicha, Churu, Doddi, Balasore, Doda, District Pali, Dispur, Shamli, Dindori, Puducherry, Burhanpur, Dimapur, Gadhwa, Dharwad, Dhule, Jalgaon, Dhar, Rewari, Kanker, Dhantari, Peren, Gangtok, Chandigram, Mandsaur, Chandauli, Dhalai, Kasganj, Dewas, Gorakhpur, Dewan Bagh, Hanamkonda, Deoga, Sittilingi, Bhadrak, Vidisha, Deoghar, Haveri, Guntur, Deesa, Srinagar, Arangottukara, Cambridge, Narayanpur, Lalgudi, Raigad, Samba, Cowl Bazar, Mahabubnagar, Sri Ganga Nagar, Davanagere, Kapurthala, Datia, Botad, Gadchiroli, Darjeeling, Sonbhadra, Thiruvananthapuram, Darbhanga, Proddatur, Shajapur, Nadia, Arera Hills, Mumbai, Curchorem, Hathras, Muzaffarnagar, Cooch Behar, Sitapur, Nandurbar, Hamirpur, Prayagraj, Bijapur, Chhotaudepur, Panchgani, Gadwal, Karauli, Ghaziabad, Lakhisarai, Kolkata, Srikakulam, Tapi, Anuppur, Dang, Siliguri, Ahmadnagar, Jhalrapatan, Croydon, Madinaguda, Gadag, Kannauj, Champaran, Shahdol, Buxar, Somajiguda, Village Lathao, Bulandshahr, Karimnagar, Panchkula, Rajkot, Bolangir, Singhbhum, Bokaro, Birbhum, Thane, Bilaspur, Coimbatore, Bijnor, Raichur, Aravalli, Bidar, Bicholim, Bhuj, Champawat, Jhansi, Bhadravati, Hasan, Karnal, Theertaamala, Kasaragod, Penukonda, Chatra, Palakkad, Daman, Peddapalli, Baga, Raebareli, Badami, Aalo, Vikarabad, Shimla, Shillong, Port Blair, Pangin, Jhargram, Jaipur, Itanagar, Dhanbad, Belgaum, Aizawl, Zarkawt, Agartala, Tillo, Tezpur, Kra Dadi, Seppa ...

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going places.
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Tackling the root cause of begging

Kavita Charanji
New Delhi

IN 2020, 18-year-old Raghendra Pratap Singh, a student at Delhi University, teamed up with friends to start a voluntary group called Helping Hut. They wanted to help children begging at railway stations and bus stands by providing informal education. But the Covid pandemic derailed their plans.

Instead, Helping Hut reached out to volunteer groups in other cities and set up helpline numbers in as many as 35 cities to respond to people's need for oxygen and other medical facilities.

Post-pandemic, Helping Hut didn't dissolve but returned to its original plan. Led by Singh, it decided to help child and adult beggars. The group's objective is to make cities free of beggars by ensuring adults earn an income, and children get an education. Under its 'Beggars-free Project', beggars are counselled and people motivated not to offer them money.

Helping Hut's first priority was to set up an Udaan Street School for child beggars. "We feel that children will follow their parents and turn into habitual beggars. And once begging becomes habitual it will be that much harder to change their mindsets," says Singh, who is now project associate with the Indian Institute of Science (IISc) in Bengaluru.

The aim of Udaan Street Schools is to prevent such intergenerational misery. Currently, there are Udaan teaching centres in Delhi, Gwalior, Mhow and, most recently, Varanasi and Dehradun.

At the Udaan Street School in Pragati Park in Delhi's Dwarka, children are kept busy with fun classes and playtime. Most are in formal school but among them is seven-year-old Balvir Kumar who is out of school because he doesn't have an Aadhaar card.

Kumar's father is a construction worker while his mother works as a guard. Why does Balvir not have an Aadhaar card? "They live in a makeshift house with a plastic cover for a roof. They are ignorant about the importance of the document," says Rishika Giri, a volunteer with Helping Hut who works with Firstgig Source. "We try and enrol children in government schools. We help them get basic documents like the Aadhaar card," says Giri.

Udaan runs two-hour afternoon classes at Pragati Park. Classes are held regularly and not merely on weekends, says Singh.

There is Sunita whose son attends classes here. She says she wanted to study when she was young but her father passed away, ending her dream. "Helping Hut has been very supportive and provides education to my son," she says.

Meanwhile, 11-year-old Gayatri Kumari, the daughter of a rickshaw puller, is clear that she wants to be a teacher when she grows up. She studies in a government school, thanks to Helping Hut volunteers.

The objective of the NGO's "Beggars Transformation" project is to empower beggars and enable them to live with dignity. They are encouraged to learn new skills, find employment and lead productive lives. It is a better path to self-sufficiency than offering money, says Singh.

A former tailor became a beggar during the pandemic since it was the only way he could survive in those days. Helping Hut came to his rescue by giving him a sewing machine. It also helped to set up his shop and get it going. He is grateful to the organization. "God sent me this machine through Helping Hut. Now I have some hope to live," he says.

Helping Hut also runs an Utthan Abhiyan campaign which educates underprivileged people about government schemes that benefit them such as Ayushman cards, ration cards, BPL cards and gas registration. Helping Hut enables them to connect with these schemes.

The NGO has a clear-cut strategy to reach the underprivileged. It identifies a few slum areas in every city where it has volunteers. A survey reveals the requirements of the slum and accordingly the Helping Hut team decides its priorities. In slum areas female volunteers fan out to inform women about basic sanitation, the importance of using sanitary pads and how to use them.

Helping Hut insiders say that over the past five years they have reached out to around 85,000 people. This includes students who are provided education, as well as recipients of food, clothes, rations and sanitary pads.



Volunteers help at an Udaan Street School for child beggars



The children are enrolled in government schools

They have also led drives for distribution of meals, stationery and clothes. Over 2,000 volunteers are registered with Helping Hut, while 640 students are registered for the Udaan campaign. Helping Hut has a partnership with National Services Scheme (NSS) and Rotary Club.

State governments are likely to support the initiative to ban beggary. The Indore administration imposed a complete ban on begging and alms-giving from January 1, 2025. It is also aimed to register FIRs against those giving money to beggars. Indore is one of 10 cities identified under SMILE (Support for Marginalized Individuals for Livelihood and Enterprise), a Government of India initiative to make cities beggar-free.

The NGO depends on monetary assistance from friends, volunteers, college professors and acquaintances who are encouraged to donate a small amount every month.

Weaning people off begging is not easy. Most projects have failed. However, Singh is confident of taking the NGO ahead. He cites the example of a group of women in Gwalior who picked and sold garbage. Helping Hut trained them to make useful products like small toys made of wool. Singh is now planning to launch similar recycling projects in multiple cities. ■

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WHAT IS INDIA'S AI FUTURE?

Eight concerns after the summit

BY KIRAN KARNIK



THE abbreviation for artificial intelligence, AI, is now as commonly used as TV. And like television, artificial intelligence has permeated everyday life. It became even more ubiquitous when the AI Impact Summit was held in Delhi in February. A media barrage amplified AI's visibility for the government-led event which heads of state and globally renowned industry figures attended.

AI models on display drew such large crowds to the exhibition section that the event had to be extended by a day.

The New Delhi Declaration, finalized at the summit and endorsed by over 80 countries, was well-crafted and said all the right things, in keeping with its theme of 'Sarvajana Hitaya, Sarvajana Sukhaya' (welfare and happiness for all). It positions AI as a global public good that must be democratized, not monopolized, and emphasizes collaborative, trusted, inclusive AI development. One would assume that these motherhood statements would be universally acceptable; yet, the Declaration is voluntary and non-binding, with no enforcement mechanism. Further, in keeping with its general disdain for any multilateral agreements, the US explicitly stated it "rejects global governance of AI".

The mega-event, including showcasing of indigenous capability at the exhibition, made it seem like a coming-of-age ball for Indian AI. The presence of so many heads of state, public statements by global tech leaders lauding India's tech capabilities and prospects in AI, and self-congratulatory statements by India's leaders made a heady amalgam. On this count, hype overtook reality by a fair margin.

GETTING DOWN TO IT Now that all the hoopla is over, it is a good time to look dispassionately at the AI Impact Summit, its outcome, and the broader arena of AI. While the summit addressed many areas, some vital issues were swept under the carpet, glossed over, or otherwise neglected. These have deep consequences, calling for serious attention. Amongst them:

- 1** Fostering industry-government and cross-country collaboration on using AI for social development (focussing on the UN Social Development Goals, SDGs), along with financing for such an effort.
- 2** Using AI to create new jobs/livelihoods and to supplement rather than supplant humans.
- 3** Mechanisms to protect individual privacy as a part of basic human rights amidst the frenzy to capture data and the ubiquitous surveillance via satellite, aircraft, drones, and CCTV cameras.



The summit was a heady event

4 Data sovereignty, responsibility for protecting confidential data (of individuals or entities), and not capturing or using/exporting personal and non-personal individual data or community data without explicit informed consent.

5 Safeguards and guard rails against AI's runaway development or uses, especially in autonomous, human-independent modes.

6 Protecting countries against exploitation by a few country-company tech monopolies.

7 Weaponization of AI, in war and in trade.

8 Other dangers posed by AI, including deepfakes, biased training models, hallucinations, and the development of artificial super intelligence (ASI).

As a major new and disruptive technology, AI has multifarious impacts. Many of these evoke considerable concern and the road ahead, with even more sophisticated AI, seems full of possible dangers. At the same time, AI also opens up immense new opportunities, leading technophiles and most tech experts to argue that advancing technology in this field will be good for all humans.

Without getting overly carried away by all the hype, or by apocalyptic doomsday scenarios, here we focus on a few selected issues from the eight listed above.

SOCIAL GOALS While AI's relationship with weapons and coercion is strong, as already visible in the war against Iran and the earlier abduction of President Maduro from Venezuela, its most promising and exciting uses are in the arena of social development. The possibilities, especially in health and education, are so immense that the only immediate constraint may be our imagination.

This is an area of critical relevance for India, since it is the health, education and general well-being of citizens that should most concern us;

yet, India's record here has been dismal, as reflected in the United Nations Development Program (UNDP)'s Human Development Report (HDR). This uses a composite index to measure a country's progress, its overall performance and its relative standing vis-à-vis other nations. Despite having the fourth largest economy (amongst the fastest growing), and superpower aspirations, India is ranked 130 (out of 193 countries) in the 2025 HDR (marginally up from 133 in 2022), on a par with Bangladesh and far below China (78) and Sri Lanka (89).

HEALTHCARE The health of an organization can be quickly gauged by the cleanliness of its toilets. Similarly, the true wealth of a nation is reflected in the well-being, health, and wellness of its people. Though progress has undoubtedly been made, India yet compares badly on the health front, even amongst countries with similar per capita incomes. Despite a few world-class hospitals and its emergence as an aspiring "medical tourism" hub, the public health infrastructure is generally poor, especially in rural areas and more so in the East and many states in the North. Budget allocations for health — in the states and at the Centre — are small and grossly inadequate, reflecting low political priority. Meanwhile, the sorry state of government healthcare facilities is pushing people to private clinics and hospitals — a backdoor method of privatization of public health which is impoverishing many of the poor.

Amidst this, there are signs of hope, with tech and AI giving glimpses of what might be feasible. New AI-linked devices and methods of diagnosis — often non-invasive and simple, involving minimally-skilled paramedics and low costs — are being invented. These also make possible remote diagnosis and can be implemented at scale, extending the reach to rural and remote areas with poor health infrastructure. Leveraging this and the growing communication infrastructure, AI will hugely enhance the possibilities of healthcare through automated diagnostics and remote

expert consultation. Sophisticated but simple and inexpensive devices are making possible home/self-diagnosis (going beyond infrared thermometers, oximeters, blood tests, and self-administered Covid tests). Some examples are mentioned in the excerpts from *More from Less for More* (Mashelkar and Borde), in *Civil Society* (February 2026).

At hospitals, AI can facilitate better healthcare. This begins with the simple (but forbidding for so many) task of navigating one's way through the hospital rigmarole of registering, seeking an appointment, booking time for any required tests, etc. Other hospital administration tasks can be

automated, freeing up the doctors' time for their core task of patient consultation, thereby improving quality and efficiency. At the medical level, AI is driving big improvements, from better diagnostics to facilitating robotic surgeries. It is making possible a move towards personalized medicine, with patients getting the most appropriate medicines in the dosages optimized for their individual situations.

Wearables are transforming healthcare through continuous monitoring of key

parameters, making possible early warnings and action, even preemptively through AI at the back-end. They are also prompting greater health consciousness and will contribute to a healthier and fitter population. AI is helping researchers discover new medicines or treatment routines, and speeding up not only this process but also the validation tests that are required before these reach patients. At the same time, AI is facilitating work on organ replacement. A combination of health science, electronics and AI may, in years to come, make it possible to replace almost any organ of the body.

For India, which functions in different centuries at the same time, the grassroots, bottom-of-the-pyramid problems are of great importance, more than state-of-the-art tertiary care hospitals. What has been only cursorily outlined above indicates that it is precisely in this most-needy segment that AI can make the biggest impact.

The Declaration positions AI as a public good that must be democratized but it is not enforceable.

EDUCATION AND SKILLING Like healthcare, education and skilling are areas of vital importance. These have inherent value and are key elements in helping individuals attain their full potential. They also enable better livelihoods for individuals, and social and economic development of the nation. AI is already facilitating this and can be a major contributor in scaling and universalizing quality education.

AI can help to design modules for education or training, and re-design them to adjust content, its pace, language, and examples to suit the intended audience. This can be done for in-person courses as also for online ones. In fact, such learner-responsive programmes can be crafted in a manner that suits the level, understanding, and grasping power of each individual. These personalized programmes will not only make education and skilling available to persons anywhere, at any time, and on any device — all at an affordable cost — but will raise the quality of education by using the best teachers and ensuring comprehension.

This can be further enhanced by using a virtual online tutor, who/which can help clarify any doubts and questions: a guide, constantly at your side, to make sure you understand all the material. The immense possibilities that this opens up were covered in an earlier column (see “Your AI Guru”, *Civil Society*, July 2025).

In the emerging and rapidly-changing world, continuous re-skilling and upskilling will be required, and AI-aided virtual learning will be the quickest, easiest, and cheapest way of doing this. Such education/skilling will also enable one-step-up work, facilitated by AI at the back-end. Thus, a villager provided basic education and skills (via an online programme) could become a nurse at a PHC, with AI aiding her as a virtual (remote) guide or coach. In other fields too, such a human-plus-AI approach would ensure jobs, even as lowest-level bottom-of-pyramid tasks get automated. Continuous and rapid upgrading of skills will ensure that humans stay one step ahead of automation, with abilities which AI cannot immediately replicate. Also, higher productivity will lead to higher wages. Thus, AI would complement or supplement, rather than supplant humans.

These opportunities in health, education and many other social development areas — so important for all of the Global South — need development of specific AI models. One would have liked to hear more discussion about this, and the formulation of an action plan at the AI Summit. Nationally, too, we see so little attention paid to this, in contrast to big plans and claims about basic foundational models (like Large Language Models or LLMs), compute facilities, data centres, etc. Yet, this was a chance for India to take the lead, to initiate the creation of something that the 100-plus developing countries could use. As one of the very few countries where social need meets tech capability, India should have been at the forefront. Maybe, though the Summit is over, it can yet be.

AUTONOMOUS WEAPONS As with most technologies, the real driving force behind AI's development is its military use. In conjunction with existing tech, AI acts as a big force multiplier, taking capability to a new level. Smart bombs and precision strikes are made smarter and more precise; surveillance can be at higher resolution, and troop or weapons movement analyzed instantly to decipher enemy plans, with super-fast simulations suggesting alternative deployments to counter these. Many such uses will give a huge advantage to those who possess greater AI capability.

These, however, mark incremental — though sometimes large — changes. Of greater concern is a more fundamental change: the move to autonomous weapons. These — AI embedded in devices or platforms (drones, planes, boats, submersibles, or even robot-soldiers) — can be trained to find, identify, and neutralize any given target without human intervention.

Once programmed, autonomous weapons will make their own decisions about whom (or what) to attack and the best time to do so.



Learner specific models are required to suit the intended audience

Meanwhile, with hypersonic missiles and neighbours as possible enemies, the reaction times have reduced vastly. Therefore, any anticipated attack necessitates a superfast creation and evaluation of options, choosing the best one, and taking immediate action: steps done quickest through full automation, without the slowness of humans-in-the-loop.

While there are moral or philosophical issues around autonomous weapons, a more practical concern is whether this will promote wars, as the threshold for mounting a war is likely to be far lower. The more cynical may argue that automated weapons, particularly robot-soldiers,

are fine: after all, human lives are not being lost and “body bags” are not coming back. The worry, consequently, is the casualness with which nations may get into wars, as these begin to resemble video games (with little actual bloodshed for tech-capable nations); it is also possible that at some point, agency may shift from humans to AI. When, against whom, and with what intensity to wage war may then be

determined by AI and not by humans. It is for this reason that many thinking people are urging a moratorium or outright ban on the development of autonomous weapons.

Historically, in two other areas of advanced and dual-purpose tech, nuclear and space, India was at the forefront in trying to promote their use for development — through both example and advocacy for global agreements. The recent summit was an ideal platform for India to have done this with regard to AI and its off-shoot, autonomous weapons. We would have had the strong support of the Global South, and of many thinking people in the developed world. It was a chance missed to do some global good and once again position India as the moral voice and conscience of people everywhere.

MICROCHIP ELITES Technology has always been used to create weapons, and it has often determined who wins a war. Now, technology has itself become a weapon used in global trade. The ubiquitousness of tech and its use for critical applications in all areas has made vital sectors of the economy in all countries dependent on it. As AI gets embedded in everything, one has to depend on readymade solutions from a very limited number of vendors. Trying to develop apps will require access to the underlying models (LLMs). These are owned today by very few



AI can address the backlog in healthcare

companies, almost all only from one country (the US).

Components like microchips are now the building blocks for all possible systems and products. Advanced microchips are available from only a handful of countries, and the graphic processing units (GPUs) — essential for large and fast computing facilities needed for AI — are available from even fewer sources. More basic, and as necessary, are minerals like rare earth elements; rare earth magnets are vital for many applications, including electric motors and vehicles. On these, one country (China) has a virtual monopoly.

This has led to a few select countries (the US and China, in particular) beginning to use this, not only as leverage in trade negotiation but also by imposing selective restrictions on exports of certain products, technologies, and essential elements, to some countries: sanctions that prevent access. Given the dependence of countries on these technologies, this has become a new coercive weapon, a new form of gunboat diplomacy of yore, almost like a military threat.

Such weaponization is used through companies too. For example, in July 2025, sanctions by the European Union against Russia were cited by a US megacorp (Microsoft) as the reason to cut off critical software (cloud services, Outlook, and Teams) being used by a major Indian oil refinery (Nayara, partly owned by Russian firm Rosneft). This tech-coercion now supplements — almost supplants — the use of the global payment system (the US-controlled SWIFT for inter-bank transfers) as a lever to enforce sanctions.

With such controls, Gen AI may no longer be an abbreviation only for Generative AI, but also for (army) General AI.

Given the global spread of supply chains and the need for continuous tech support and devices, there is need for an international agreement on free trade for civilian use. The summit would have been a good forum to raise this and initiate some negotiations. Similarly, some regulations are required to counter global monopolies.

DATA PROTECTION AI is built on data, which is the raw material that helps create and train the LLMs, the backbone of all AI. It is also used to target individuals as consumers, since extensive data about an individual can now be gleaned from a very wide variety of sources — from payment data (credit cards, UPI) to medical tests and hospital records. Countries are now increasingly aware about both the value and the privacy issues around this data, leading to calls for data sovereignty (no export of data)

and no collection and use without consent. While India is yet mulling over the regulations and export restrictions, the European Union is greatly concerned (especially about US MNCs) and already has tough laws (like the General Data Protection Regulation) regarding its data. On the other hand, in a recent (February 18, 2026) cable, US Secretary of State Marc Rubio has asked that diplomats follow “a more assertive international data policy” and that diplomats “counter data localization mandates”. Clearly, there is need to balance data flows, data sovereignty, and privacy: an issue that called for the summit’s attention and requires global agreements.

The growing danger of deepfakes, created through the use of AI, of intentional or hallucinatory misinformation, of AI-induced mental health problems (sometimes ending in suicides), and of cybercrime are widely recognized, even experienced. These global problems could have been addressed at the summit and action sought.

LOOKING AHEAD Apart from the dangers of AI-controlled autonomous weapons, there are concerns about the rapid development of AI, including its self-learning. Looking ahead, there are many — including sci-tech leaders — who are greatly worried about the emergence of superintelligence (ASI), the final step after Gen AI and artificial general intelligence (AGI). ASI marks the point at which AI is superior to the human brain. This is not sci-fi from some vague and far future, but may be closer than we imagine. For example, Sam Altman, founder and CEO of OpenAI (arguably the world leader in developing and mass-marketing AI to hundreds of millions), said at the AI Summit: “On our current trajectory, we may only be two years away from early visions of true superintelligence.” This writer too has pointed to the possibility of humans losing their pole position as the dominant species and becoming subservient to AI.

Tackling this existential danger may require a global agreement on a moratorium on AI development: another issue that was ripe for discussion at a global forum. Though lacking teeth without any enforcement mechanism, even resolutions, guidelines and guard rails have value as normative documents that may nudge behaviour and action.

These are issues yet on the table. They merit dialogue and debate: domestically and globally. India must play a major role in this. ■

MAGA is not MIGA



A hopeful Indian prime minister once said that MAGA (Make America Great Again) can also help MIGA or Make India Great Again. The end of a quarter-century-old India-US 'strategic and global partnership' has just been announced. Speaking at the Raisina Dialogue in New Delhi, the deputy secretary of state of the United States, Christopher Landau, put it candidly: "The US will not give India the same kind of economic advantages it gave China. US will not allow India to become its competitor. The Trade Deal will keep 'America First'."

This should not come as a surprise to anyone following the India-US bilateral relationship over the past decade. The departure from the Atal Bihari Vajpayee-Manmohan Singh era in the bilateral relationship began in 2017 when Donald Trump began targeting India on the trade front. The withdrawal of the Generalized Scheme of Preferences, that gave beneficial access to the US market for certain Indian exports, was the first step. While President Trump's target was China, India suffered collateral damage.

Prime Minister Narendra Modi responded to the 'transactionalism' of Trump by deploying his personal charm, walking hand in hand with the US president at a huge rally in Houston and declaring on the eve of the 2020 US presidential elections "Ab ki bar Trump sarkar" at yet another huge rally, this time in his home state of Gujarat. But that was wasted investment since Trump was trounced.

President Joseph Biden persisted with transactionalism, demanding India buy more defence equipment from the US in order to keep the relationship going. Many geopolitical and foreign affairs commentators explained this by stating that the India-US bilateral relationship was no longer 'strategic' but had become 'transactional'. The faithful, however, persisted. The focus of the strategic partnership is now on technology, they said. The US will

now give India access to high and advanced technology. Various agreements were cited as evidence. Many in the think tanks and in the media in New Delhi kept faith.

The first shocker came from one of the earliest American advocates of US-India partnership, Ashley Tellis of the Carnegie Endowment. In a lengthy analysis of the bilateral relationship published in 2024, Tellis made the telling point that an earlier assumption that India's rise would in itself be in the interests of the United States no longer has any takers in Washington, DC. Everyone who matters in the US, said Tellis, asks the question, "What's in it for us?"



Trump's shockers came one after another

I was reminded of what a visiting group of US Congress members told Manmohan Singh in early 2008: "It is 123 for 126" — implying that their support for the 123 Agreement, required to enable the civil nuclear deal to go through, was based on the understanding that India would place an order for 126 fighter jets. In the event, India chose to buy from the French. But then, India has spent billions buying other stuff from the US to keep the relationship going.

Under President Trump, 'America Maange More!' The US wanted India to buy more goods and reduce the bilateral trade surplus. The US wanted India to bring down its tariffs. The US wanted India to not insist on data localization. And then the US wanted India to stop buying oil from Russia. Trump's message was that song from *My Fair Lady* — "Don't talk of love, show me!" Go hug the world, but bend before me.

Trump's shockers came one after another. It all began with Trump inviting Chinese

President Xi Jinping for his inauguration in January 2025 and not inviting Modi. Foreign minister S. Jaishankar rushed to Washington to secure an invitation for the PM but managed to just get one for himself. Then came Operation Sindoor and Trump's repeated claims that he imposed a ceasefire on warring neighbours and deserved a Nobel Peace Prize. India insisted the US had no role in its decision to hold fire. The Pakistanis not only thanked Trump but nominated him for the Nobel Prize.

Then the India-baiting Pakistani Field Marshal, Asim Munir, secured a historic lunch invitation from the US president. An unprecedented gesture. Diplomats in Delhi and Washington noted the fact that when Modi dropped in at the White House, Trump was not even at the door to receive him. And Trump kept meeting Pakistani leadership and was buddy-buddy with them and they were doing 'Sirji' to him all the time.

Nothing makes a Modi *bhakt* in India more angry than someone being nicer to Pakistan than India. They are willing to excuse countries that favour China more than India because they understand that money talks. China is bigger and richer. So how can we object if all our friends keep their relations with China intact. But Pakistan? A failed and flailing state. Our sworn enemy. How can anyone be nice to Pakistan? Well, Trump decided to be.

Despite all these slights and put-downers India decided to stop buying Russian oil. Modi decided to visit Israel and repeatedly hug Benjamin Netanyahu, perhaps hoping that the rich Jewish lobby in the US would get Trump to get off Modi's back and be nice. India even decided to remain quiet when Israel and the US bombed Iran and assassinated its Supreme Leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei. The US heaped further humiliation on India by bombing an Iranian naval vessel close to Indian waters and then announcing that it would "allow" India to buy Russian oil to make up for the disruption in Gulf supplies.

Insult after insult. Then arrives Mr Landau, saying, "Yes, we created a problem for you by enabling China's rise but we will not solve that problem by enabling your rise." Get the message? MAGA does not need MIGA. ■

Sanjaya Baru is an economist, former newspaper editor and author. His most recent book is 'Secession of the Successful: The Flight out of New India.'

Iran and its king



ON a London high street lined with Persian grocery stores and kebab shops, Iranian exile politics has found an unlikely stage. A restaurant window advertises a 20 percent discount to anyone who walks in and says a phrase long taboo in the Islamic Republic: Javid Shah, long live the Shah.

The poster shows Reza Pahlavi, son of Iran's last monarch, framed by images of his father and grandfather beneath the old lion-and-sun emblem of pre-revolutionary Iran. The message is simple: say the words and receive the discount.

It is a small and almost playful gesture, but it captures something real about the mood among parts of Iran's diaspora. What for years survived mainly as nostalgia has begun to surface more openly. Protest against the Islamic Republic, many exiles now believe, has reached its limits. What must follow protest, they argue, is a credible alternative — though republicans, secular liberals and other exile opposition groups remain sharply divided about Iran's future — and that inevitably revives the question of the monarchy.

The scene in that London shop window brings back a memory of the man whose name now appears on so many diaspora posters.

In July 1980, a colleague from the French news agency Agence France-Presse (AFP) asked if I would accompany him to Cairo's Maadi Military Hospital. Iran's deposed ruler, Mohammad Reza Shah Pahlavi, lay unconscious there, suffering from the cancer that would soon kill him.

There was little security as we made our way along the corridor and into his room. The once powerful monarch lay motionless beneath the bedclothes. A metal hoop-like frame raised the sheets above his midsection. No guards stood watch, no courtiers hovered nearby. Only the upper part of his forehead was visible above the bedding.

As we stood there, a cockroach suddenly scuttled across his forehead before disappearing beneath the bedding.

A few days later the Shah was dead.

His funeral later that summer in Cairo was a subdued affair. Egypt's president, Anwar Sadat,

attended, along with a handful of foreign dignitaries including former US President Richard Nixon and Greece's exiled King Constantine. Nixon later wrote of the Shah: "He was one of the most courageous leaders I have ever met."

More than four decades later, memories of the Shah's rule have become strangely selective. Many younger Iranian exiles speak admiringly of the Pahlavi era. They point to the economic expansion of the 1960s and early 1970s, when oil revenues funded ambitious industrialization projects and Tehran aspired to become a regional power.

Iran's international profile also expanded during this period, with the Shah cultivating close ties with leaders across both Western and non-aligned countries, including India, whose leaders maintained cordial relations with Tehran during the Cold War era.



Pro-Shah protest: Selective memory of the past

They recall the Shah's White Revolution of 1963, which expanded education, redistributed land and granted women the right to vote and hold public office.

Compared with the restrictions imposed by the Islamic Republic, the pre-revolutionary era can appear, at least in retrospect, as a period of relative openness. Women were not required to wear the hijab. Western music and cinema circulated freely. Iran projected an image of modernization and prosperity.

Yet the Shah's rule was far from the golden age nostalgia sometimes suggests.

Political life remained tightly controlled. Opposition parties were suppressed or marginalized, and the regime's secret police, SAVAK, developed a reputation for surveillance, imprisonment and torture of political opponents. Critics of the monarchy — whether secular or religious — faced censorship and harassment. Among those forced into exile was the cleric, Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, who would eventually return to lead the revolution that overthrew

the Shah in 1979.

Many Iranians were also angered by the extravagance of the royal court. The most famous example came in 1971, when the Shah staged an elaborate celebration at Persepolis marking what he described as the 2,500th anniversary of the Persian Empire.

Heads of state, royalty and senior officials from around the world attended the lavish desert ceremony, including representatives from countries such as India, whose president, V.V. Giri, attended as the Shah sought to underline the ancient cultural ties between Persia and the Indian subcontinent. For the Shah it was meant to symbolize Iran's return to the centre of world civilization. For many Iranians watching from afar, however, it reinforced the image of a ruler increasingly detached from the realities of life at home.

By the late 1970s the discontent had become impossible to ignore. Demonstrations against the regime spread across the country. Students, clerics, merchants and intellectuals joined the protests. In a televised address in November 1978 the Shah attempted to calm the crisis, telling Iranians: "I have heard the voice of your revolution."

Within weeks he would leave the country.

What followed was not the democratic transformation many protesters had imagined. The Islamic Republic that emerged under Ayatollah Khomeini imposed its own system of political control and social restriction. Over time,

that disappointment has fuelled a growing nostalgia among some Iranians for the stability of the pre-revolutionary era.

But memory has a way of simplifying the past. The Shah's rule combined genuine modernization with authoritarian politics, corruption and widening inequality. The revolution that overthrew him was driven not only by religious fervour but also by widespread frustration with repression and political exclusion.

Today many Iranian exiles mourn the fall of the monarchy and imagine that restoring the Pahlavi dynasty might offer a path back to stability. Yet the history they recall often leaves out the reasons why millions of Iranians once took to the streets demanding that the Shah's rule come to an end.

A restaurant doorway in London may now invite customers to say the forbidden slogan aloud. Whether the same words would be spoken with the same enthusiasm in Tehran is another question entirely. ■

Shyam Bhatia is the London correspondent of The Tribune.

Small rivers, big warning



LIVING RIVERS

VENKATESH DUTTA

OVER the past weeks, we surveyed six tributaries of the Gomti river — Mala, Kathina, Bhainsi, Sarayan, Sai and Behta — across Pilibhit, Shahjahanpur, Lakhimpur Kheri, Sitapur and Hardoi districts. These lesser-known alluvial streams are sustained by groundwater and rainfall. We first surveyed these rivers 15 years ago in March 2011.

Returning now, we see a clear change — flows have diminished and natural vegetation on the banks had been levelled for crops. In many stretches, the flow had noticeably diminished. Some channels that earlier carried steady water now show signs of sluggish discharge, shallow depth, and fragmented connectivity with surrounding wetlands and floodplains.

At several places, stretches of these rivers dried up due to encroachment and farming on the riverbed, which also endangered aquatic biodiversity. At many places, we could simply cross the river in barely knee-deep water.

From early morning to late evening, my scholars walked through the river channels, measured water quality, stream flow, and riparian vegetation, and listened to what these rivers were telling us. These rivers may look small and inconspicuous on the map, but they are lifelines. They are vital ecological arteries that sustain the Gomti, which in turn contributes to the flow of the Ganga. The Mala and Kathina pass through the Pilibhit Tiger Reserve where tiger population has increased by 300 percent in just 12 years. These rivers are important biodiversity corridors. The natural vegetation on the banks is a safe refuge for insects, birds, reptiles and mammals.

But the signs are worrying. The landscapes that once sustained these rivers are rapidly being converted to intensive farmlands powered by groundwater extraction. Aquifers are being pumped faster than they can recharge, and floodplains are steadily shrinking. Unlike snow-fed rivers, their perennial nature is maintained largely by the steady seepage of groundwater into the channel. When aquifers are healthy and floodplains remain intact, these rivers continue to flow even during dry months. But when groundwater is excessively extracted or the

natural floodplain is altered, the baseflow that sustains the river begins to decline.

Tubewells and pumps operate continuously during the growing season, extracting water from aquifers at rates that often exceed natural recharge. When groundwater levels fall, the consequences are felt directly in nearby rivers. The groundwater that once seeped slowly into river channels — maintaining baseflow during dry months — no longer reaches the surface in sufficient quantities. As a result, rivers that were once perennial gradually become seasonal.

Another factor contributing to the degradation of these rivers is the absence of effective floodplain regulation. Floodplains are not merely vacant lands awaiting development;



Scholars undertook a scientific survey of the Gomti's six tributaries

These rivers are vital ecological arteries that sustain the Gomti and contribute to the flow of the Ganga.

they are crucial ecological zones that absorb floods, recharge aquifers, and support river biodiversity. When these areas are encroached upon, levelled, or converted for agriculture and construction, the natural processes that sustain rivers are disrupted.

Large rivers often dominate public attention, policy debates, and restoration efforts. Yet the health of these major rivers depends critically on a network of smaller streams and tributaries that sustain their flows. In the Ganga basin, these lesser-known rivers quietly recharge landscapes and replenish the larger river

systems. Today, many of them are under severe stress.

Despite the ecological importance of these rivers, they rarely receive the policy attention given to larger water bodies. Conservation programmes and public discourse tend to focus on major rivers such as the Ganga or Yamuna, while their smaller tributaries remain largely overlooked. Yet the reality is simple: without healthy tributaries, large rivers cannot sustain themselves.

There is some progress. We have secured official floodplain zoning orders for the Gomti and Kukrail rivers, and we are pushing for similar protections for other rivers. Such measures represent an important step towards recognizing the ecological value of river corridors. However, floodplain zoning must expand to include more rivers, and enforcement must be consistent and science-based.

At the same time, regulating groundwater extraction has become an urgent priority. Groundwater management policies must account for the ecological requirements of rivers, not just agricultural demand. Sustainable extraction limits, aquifer recharge strategies, and landscape-based water management approaches are essential to restore balance between water use and river health.

If the current trends continue unchecked, many of these tributaries could lose their perennial character within the next five years. Such a transformation would not only affect local ecosystems but would also weaken the hydrological resilience of the entire Gomti basin. Reduced flows in tributaries eventually translate into reduced flows in the main river, amplifying water scarcity, degrading aquatic habitats, and undermining the long-term sustainability of the region's water resources.

The message emerging from the field is clear. Protecting large rivers must begin with protecting their smallest streams. Conservation efforts should prioritize the protection of groundwater recharge zones, the restoration of riparian vegetation, strict regulation of floodplain land use, and the adoption of sustainable water management practices.

These small rivers may not command headlines, but they are the hidden lifelines of the river basin. If we fail to protect them today, the consequences will inevitably flow downstream. The time to act is now — because the future of our great rivers depends on the survival of these small ones. ■

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

LIVING

FOOD | TRAVEL | REVIEWS | PRODUCTS | GIVING



Bust of Madras Sappers, Munisamy



Re-creation of nostalgic landmarks



The Dak Runner carried a mailbag

Making keepsakes keepable

The curated memento as a thing of joy

RASHMI GOPAL RAO

AT the end of a trip, you invariably arrive home with touristy souvenirs in your bag to gift or as keepsakes. It's the usual stuff: keychains, fridge magnets, maybe coasters, or T-shirts emblazoned with slogans. But what if you could pick up something more inimitable?

Reinventing the meh souvenir is the passion project of N.M. Spoorthy and Shilpa Spoorthy, architects and husband-wife duo. They believe souvenirs are more than shelf-fillers. They are vessels for storytelling.

Their enterprise, IND in a BOX, an acronym for India in a Box, creates keepsakes that embody the spirit of the city, town, village through sculptures, murals, dioramas. Think dioramas of the Mumbai *dabbawalla*, monuments like Victoria Terminus or sculpted scenes or murals. Families, keen to preserve the memory of a loved one, approach them for busts and portraits.

"Souvenirs are way beyond trinkets like plastic keychains and magnets," says Shilpa. "They are objects that connect a person to a place, a moment, or a personality. Whether it is a monument or a memory, we believe any kind of nostalgia can be given a form which you can touch and feel."

"There is a dearth of souvenirs that meet

global standards while remaining authentically Indian," she adds.

The objective of the team is to create pieces that you would be proud to display in a high-end living room or on a corporate desk.

The Spoorthys work closely with Sriram Seshagiri, a digital artist and head of 3D production. He manages the complex journey of a design from a 3D digital model to physical reality, bridging the gap between architectural precision and industrial production.

BONDS THAT BIND IND in a BOX's journey began with a simple, profound observation by the founders: we are surrounded by an incredible wealth of history and culture, yet it often feels disconnected from our modern, daily lives.

"A pivotal moment for us was in 2023, when we curated exclusive keepsakes themed after the great Kannada actor, the late Dr Puneeth Rajkumar. After we witnessed the joy these pieces brought to his family, we realized that we could create souvenirs that encompass the vastness of India into an exclusive tangible experience. Driven by this desire to bridge the gap between deep-

seated nostalgia and the humble souvenir, we launched IND in a BOX in 2025," says Shilpa.

IND in a BOX is a multidisciplinary collective and acts as a link between the past and the future. "Our background in architecture allows us to view heritage not just as a static image, but through the lens of spatial design and curation. As ethnographic curators, we dig through dusty archives, interview stakeholders and uncover human stories that are integral to the object.

In short, we set the soul of the project before the first sketch is even drawn."

They have sculpted scenes that evoke nostalgia, like that of a child happily rolling a tyre with a stick, or two children turning the chore of pumping water at a borewell into a rhythmic game. They have also reimaged the first streetlamp in India into a functional tabletop accessory.

IND in a BOX uses city airport codes to define their sub-verticals because they represent the starting point of every journey. It is also the last place people experience before they leave the city.

So, in the MAA in a BOX (Chennai) collection, their focus is rooted in the city's

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Bengaluru's Vidhana Soudha

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military and colonial soul. Hence, they have worked extensively on the Madras Sappers' legacies, translating their grit and history into tangible art.

In BOM in a BOX (Mumbai), the team has captured detailed dioramas of the *dabbawallas* and monuments like Victoria Terminus. BLR in a BOX (Bengaluru) captures landmarks like the Vidhana Soudha and the TV Tower.

"Beyond specific cities, we also curate what we call 'Emotive Dioramas' — capturing places and moments lost in today's fast-paced world. We have recreated iconic landmarks that exist now only in our memories, like the Chitchat restaurant, Plaza Theatre and Cauvery Theatre in Bengaluru," says Shilpa.

Attention to detail is paramount in all their creations. So the team captures nuances, whether it is the way a *dabbawalla* balances a crate or the specific architectural curve of a dome.

The team recently did a project in association with the Madras Sappers Museum & Archives (MSMA), Bengaluru, by recreating a life-like bust of Mule Operator Munisamy, an iconic hero of the Madras Engineering Group (MEG).

For decades, the memory of Munisamy was preserved only in an archival photograph. Through ethnographic curation the team transformed that two-dimensional memory into a tangible, high-definition 3D exhibit. The bust will be a permanent exhibit at the museum at the College of Military Engineering (CME) in Pune.

"The Madras Sappers project was an emotional milestone and the work we did is perhaps the best example of our mission to give a face to the 'unsung'. For centuries, Sapper Munisamy — the first Mule Operator — was merely a name and a description in military archives. Our team took those descriptions and sculpted a face for him, giving him a permanent place in visual history. We also took a single, grainy archival photograph of the Decauville (Sapper Train) and reconstructed it as a miniature," says Shilpa.

Another significant work was a wood mural of the Mandalay Gate and the opening of the Zoji La. "Our digital artists and 3D experts worked in tandem to ensure that every bolt on the train and every stone on the gate was historically accurate. We have also created fridge magnets of the opening of the Mandalay Gate and Zoji La," says N.M. Spoorthy.

LEGACY AND MEMORY Most of their bespoke creations are customized. Their city-specific range celebrates collective heritage. But sometimes they are approached to preserve the most intimate of



Sriram Seshagiri, N.M. Spoorthy and Shilpa Spoorthy with the bust of Lt Col Niranjan Ek, martyred at the Pathankot airbase



A life-size whale shark created for a roundabout in Djibouti to commemorate 40 years of the country's independence

histories and family legacies.

"We have a growing number of clients who come to us with photos of their beloved parents or grandparents who have passed on. They don't just want a generic statue, they ask us to capture a 'characteristic' moment, a specific body language, a familiar pose, or the way they held a book or wore a shawl," says N.M. Spoorthy.

IND in a BOX through their 3D



Pumping water

Playful activity

sculpting expertise creates personalized busts and full-body models that serve as a physical presence in homes.

"It is indeed special as we are entrusted with a family's most precious memories and help turn a flat photograph into a form they can touch and hold once more," adds N.M. Spoorthy.

3D PRINTING Souvenirs by IND in a BOX are created using 3D printing, a high-precision technology. "Every piece begins as a high-fidelity 3D digital model. We spend several hours on it to capture intricate textures and geometries that would be impossible with traditional moulds. We use a specialized UV-curable liquid resin. A high-powered light source selectively solidifies the liquid, gradually building the piece. This technology allows for a resolution so fine that it captures even the tiniest details," says Sriram Seshagiri.

Once the "print" is complete, each piece undergoes a series of refined finishing steps including precision

washing to remove excess material and a controlled UV-curing cycle to ensure the structural integrity and durability of the souvenir. After this, the souvenir goes through a multi-stage refinement process where specialized abrasives are used to level the surface and prepare it for the final painting.

"It is during the painting process that the souvenir truly comes to life. We use a combination of airbrushing for smooth gradients and hand-brushing for the finer details. Every piece is finished with a high-grade, UV-resistant clear coat. This protects the paint from oils on the skin and prevents fading over time, ensuring that the souvenir remains a keepsake for years," explains Sriram.

"Our team has mastered these techniques through years of iterative development, blending industrial engineering with fine arts. While 3D printing technology itself was born from early patents in the 1980s that have since

'It is indeed special as we are entrusted with a family's precious memories and help turn a photograph into a form they can touch.'

moved into the public domain, our specific value lies in our proprietary workflow and custom material blends," adds Sriram.

The team also collaborates with other specialized digital artists as they do not believe in a one-size-fits-all approach to art.

"We work with masters of architectural rendering for our buildings, and specialized character sculptors when we need to capture the subtle expression on a human figurine. By bringing together the historian's curiosity, the sculptor's touch, and the engineer's precision, we make sure that every 'box' we produce is a masterpiece of collective talent," explains Shilpa. A single souvenir can take anywhere between one to five days, depending on the size and the amount of work involved.

The team has a dedicated 'privacy first' policy. IND in a BOX does not commercialize, publicly announce, or showcase their creative works until they have explicit, written permission from the concerned individual(s) or organizations.

"We believe that heritage is personal before it is public. Our role is to be custodians of these stories and legacies and not just creators," emphasizes N.M. Spoorthy.

Customers can reach out to IND in a BOX directly through their social media platforms like Instagram. ■



Mala Dhawan interacting with an artisan

Hands up for handmade

RASHMI GOPAL RAO

WHEN Sonia and Mala Dhawan, sisters from a *fauji* family, decided to help a women's farmer group sell their products, they inadvertently set off a chain of events culminating in the formation of Bengaluru's oldest handmade collective, A Hundred Hands (AHH), in August 2010. Started with just 20 artisans, their collective grew and grew and now supports 200 artisan groups every year.

Back in 2000, Sonia and Mala had offered their own garden space so that the women's farmer group could sell food products to urban consumers living around their home.

"We made handmade posters and placed them in nearby shops, announcing the sale. The response was truly overwhelming and the products were sold out in a day. We then started getting approached by individual

artists and groups who were looking for a platform to market and sell their products," says Mala, 59, who holds a Master's degree in Business Administration. Incidentally, she has extensive experience in the field of brand strategy. Sonia, who is 62, has a PhD in human genetics and is trained as a naturalist.

"We have been interested in art and craft since childhood. In our family, we were always encouraged to make things by hand whether it was a greeting card, a present or gift wrap. The philosophy to repair, reuse and recycle was

ingrained in us," says Sonia.

"Although our father was a fighter pilot, he cultivated carpentry as his hobby and had a little DIY workshop. Our mum was a nurse but she had an incredible talent for sewing and created the most exquisite pieces of embroidery. So, craft and creation were an intrinsic part of our lives and kept us occupied as we lived in Air Force Stations across India."

Registered as a charitable trust, the primary mission of AHH is to provide a platform for

the artisans where they can interact with the end consumer directly and showcase their skill and products.

While people do appreciate craft, the artisan is often not projected in the forefront. That space is taken up by various middlemen or patronized by big businesses. The middlemen generally control prices, designs, marketing and sales.

"We connect artisans to the right customer bases. They are free to price their work and rightfully retain the whole consideration," says Mala. AHH acts as a support system which also mentors artisans by guiding them on insights related to design, innovation, pricing, collaboration and so on. Apart from learning to elevate their craft and adapt it to contemporary needs, artisans also acquire a sense of reassurance and confidence through such interactions.

AHH supports a diverse array of crafts from

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Hands up for handmade

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leatherware, puppetry, home décor, pottery and terracotta to textile weaving, metal work, stone carving, ceramics and seashell craft. The collective has given a new lease of life to dying art forms like Sanjhi, a form of papercutting practised in and around Mathura, Rajasthan's Mughal miniature art, and Bhil tribal painting. AHH has helped make such art forms sustainable through workshops and by sponsoring exhibition stalls.

"I specialize in Sohrai painting from Jharkhand, a form of tribal wall art traditionally created using natural clays (black, red, and yellow soils) without brushes. We use twigs or our fingers. Now we paint on paper and canvas too. A Hundred Hands has enabled me to

AHH works on an annual subscription model. Every year 200 groups are supported. Each has around 50 craftspeople.

promote Sohrai art to wider audiences," said Manikchand Mahato, a Sohrai painter from Jharkhand who has been a member of AHH for the past three years.

"Through this platform, our art has gained recognition, better pricing, and commissioned work opportunities. I have trained about 15 artists who now practise it full-time."

Mahato felt he had gained access to customers who truly understand and appreciate his craft. Despite cultural and language differences he received a lot of love and respect from customers, he said.

"Being associated with A Hundred Hands felt like a turning point in my life. Our little known craft and community found visibility, dignity, and belonging through this collective," said Hanuman Luhar who hails from a traditional blacksmith community of Rajasthan.

"While we have been making traditional agricultural tools, cookware, and decorative objects in iron, over time, I began exploring possibilities in metal. I now specialize in handcrafted iron insects, using traditional forging techniques without welding," said Hanuman, who has been a member of A Hundred Hands for about 11 years.

The collective holds a vibrant bazaar a few times each year in Bengaluru and other cities. It also undertakes corporate and festival gifting. Artisans have secured corporate projects including large format installations



Sonia Dhawan helps a child with artwork



Buyers and sellers: A glimpse of the AHH marketplace



Hanuman Luhar displays his products at the fair

and murals for brands such as Flipkart and institutes like the Azim Premji University.

"We also promote artists on social media and connect them to customers directly," adds Mala.

A Hundred Hands works on an annual membership model and every year about 200 groups are supported. The groups, in turn, include an average of about 50 people and hence about 10,000 livelihoods get supported through AHH initiatives.

"The membership supports the office. We divide the bazaar costs; some are free while other categories pay according to their size.

Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) and sponsorship help to cover some costs. In addition, we do corporate engagements and workshops that help build the team," explains Sonia.

AHH receives scores of applications each year. Each application is scrutinized before granting membership. The group applying has to fulfil certain criteria like dependency of the craft on the livelihood of the artisans, the craft being practised, the requirement for support, ability to innovate, desire to preserve and help the craft grow, etc. "Based on all these criteria we grant membership to artisans, NGOs, craft entrepreneurs working or reviving niche crafts," adds Sonia.

AHH also runs a volunteer programme called Blanket of Love, encouraging crocheters and knitters to make blankets for an orphanage every year.

"We are at the crossroads of developing a plan on deeper incubation, mentorship, documentation and collaboration across disciplines," conclude Sonia and Mala. ■

RANDOM SHELF HELP

A GOOD COOK'S NOTES FROM KOCHI TO GOA

ANITA ANAND

IN this age of the internet, cookbooks may well have become passe. However, every now and then, on and offline, one catches the eye and says, "Pick me."

Such is *Tale of Two Kitchens*. It is not only a culinary journey through two coastal Indian states but also the story of the author and her family, and how she came to be the person she is today. Originally from Kerala, Crescentia, or Cres, as she is known to friends, was born and raised in Ernakulam on the island of Vypeen.

The cookbook is a delight. With glossy pages for the colour photographs accompanying the text, it contains recipes and Cres's personal history of the food, ingredients, and recipes of the two states. The chapters are devoted to her time in Vypeen, the three bungalows she lived in, and life on the island. After schooling and college in Ernakulam and Cochin (now Kochi), she moved to Kolkata to work, then to Mumbai. Her stay in Mumbai was short, as she met her husband, Chrys Fernandes, at a wedding in Kolkata and then moved to Delhi for marriage and a new life. Cres had a long career with UNICEF in Delhi and subsequently retired early to start a pickle factory. Imagine!

Between 2004 and 2018, Cres and her husband ran Bernardo's, a successful restaurant serving Goan cuisine, in Delhi and then in Gurugram. Bernardo's was lauded by food writers and attracted considerable interest till it closed.

Since then, Cres does pop-ups, teaches Goan cuisine, makes Goan sausages and Christmas cakes, and caters to parties and dinners. She now lives on a farm in Farrukhnagar in Haryana with some 32 dogs they have given shelter to.

The first recipe in the cookbook is Fish Kozeeth, a light fish stew. I like that the recipes are only a page long. In the upper left corner of each page, the category (e.g., main dish), yield (e.g., 6-8 persons), and serving instructions (e.g., serve with hot steamed rice) are provided.

Then there is a description of the dish's origins and preparation method. On the right side of the page are the ingredients and measurements. In both Goa and Kerala, coconut milk and unpolished parboiled rice are essential ingredients in the cuisine and are included in recipes; there is a note on how to prepare them. Most helpful.

Cres's love of cooking is natural, as she grew up in a family that lived in harmony with nature. The homes of her childhood were typical of Kerala architecture, with wooden floors and staircases and Mangalore tiles on the roofs. There was a vegetable garden. Her father was knowledgeable about and loved animals and poultry, rearing turkeys, pigs, ducks, geese, and chickens. Not surprisingly, the food on the table came from their backyard. As with families and communities of that time, this was true of both daily fare and celebrations. An idyllic existence.

Despite this, Cres says she didn't learn to cook at home, but she remembers the aroma and taste of the food well. In creating and recreating recipes for the book, she reached out to her older sisters and other family members. Thanks to them, the cookbook offers recipes for cakes, other typical sweets, pickles, fish and pork dishes, and those



Tale of Two Kitchens: A Culinary Journey through Cochin and Goa Crescentia Scolt Fernandes/₹990 on Amazon

made for special occasions, which in both states are linked to farming festivals and celebrations.

There are recipes for two of my favourite sweets: bebinca and patoleos. Bebinca is a multi-layered sweet made with egg yolks, flour, coconut milk and ghee. I took a workshop in Goa last year on how to make it. Patoleos is a tea-time snack made from rice paste filled with coconut and jaggery, wrapped in turmeric leaves, made on August 15, the feast of the Assumption of Mary, also known as the Konsachem Fest, when farmers give thanks to God for a good harvest and pray for the next harvest to be good. Our part-timer, Mohini, brought me these, and I couldn't get enough of them. They are addictive.



Crescentia and her husband, Chrys, at Bernardo's, the restaurant they used to run

Fish Kozeeth

Light fish stew

Ingredients:

- Fish: 1 kg cut into ½ inch slices
- Curry leaves: 2 sprigs
- Dry red chillies: 5
- Garlic cloves: 6
- Green chillies: 2
- Ginger: 1 inch piece
- Turmeric: 1 tsp
- Shallots: 5 to 6 small
- Coconut oil: 2 tbsp
- Vinegar: 1 tbsp
- Salt: to taste
- Water: 1 cup

Method: Coarsely grind red chillies, green chillies, ginger,

garlic, onion with turmeric in a blender. Wash blender with a little water and reserve this masala water.

Heat coconut oil and add all the ground ingredients with the curry leaves.

Fry for two or three minutes. Add the masala water and salt and cover till it comes to a boil.

Check the salt and slide in the fish. Simmer until the fish is cooked (around 10 to 12 minutes).

Once cooked add vinegar and turn off the heat. Serve hot with steamed rice.

There is a useful glossary of terms used for the ingredients and common local foods featured in the cookbook. An additional note that appeals to me is how to prepare homemade toddy. I'm not sharing this, so I guess you'll have to buy the book!

The cookbook is a fascinating read and a great gift for oneself and for others who cherish coastal cuisine and enjoy cooking. For those who aren't adept at cooking, it's a great coffee-table book to peruse while watching the sunset with a mug of tea or coffee, or something stronger. ■

Anita Anand first visited Goa in 1986 and continued to do so for many years. She moved to Goa in January 2025. She writes, paints and enjoys nature.

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.

Movement for Scavenger Community

An organization based in Assam, it works for the children of sanitation workers by providing education, skill development, and entrepreneurial training so that they become self-reliant and break the cycle of caste-based sanitation work.

Phone: 93550 05999
Website: www.scavenger-movement.org

Tapish Foundation

A trans-led grassroots organization based in Indore, Madhya Pradesh, working for the dignity, safety and equal rights of transgender and gender-diverse communities. The foundation's work includes community support, shelter, and initiatives on health, housing, education, skills and livelihoods.

Phone: 74153 56507
Website: www.tapishfoundation.org

Timbaktu Collective

Based in Andhra Pradesh, Timbaktu is a grassroots organization working with marginalized rural communities in drought-prone regions of Ananthapuramu and Sri Sathya Sai districts to promote sustainable livelihoods, organic farming, ecological restoration, rural enterprises and community-based institutions.

Phone: 85208 61942
Website: www.timbaktu.org

Raahi - A Journey Towards Dignity

A nonprofit in Karnataka which works with the AFAB (Assigned Female at Birth), Queer and Intersex community, including trans men, partners of trans men, queer women, lesbian women, and bisexual women. It has opened Karnataka's first shelter home for the community.

Phone: 97397 80319
Website: www.raahithejourney.org

Sukoon-TISS

Marital disputes are stressful, and facing them in public courts can be overwhelming. Sukoon is a

field project of the Tata Institute of Social Sciences (TISS) that promotes litigant well-being by providing free psychosocial services in family and district courts in Mumbai, Thane, Kalyan, and the High Court. Individuals, couples, and families can seek help. Sukoon also conducts research and workshops on marital issues.

Phone: 022-25525068
Website: www.sukoon-tiss.in

M.S. Chellamuthu Trust and Research Foundation

A Madurai-based nonprofit founded in 1992 by psychiatrist Dr C. Ramasubramanian to make mental health care affordable and accessible. The organization provides treatment, rehabilitation, community-based mental health services, vocational training, and advocacy, supporting children, adults, the homeless, and persons with mental disabilities. It runs residential rehabilitation programmes and community mental health initiatives to help people recovering from mental illness regain independence and reintegrate into society.

For queries: 73050 03041
For donations: 96003 14219
Website: www.msctrust.org

Vanangana

A grassroots organization in Uttar Pradesh, Vanangana is a women's rights organization tackling violence and justice for women through community, legal aid, counselling, and collective action. Founded in 1993, the organization works mainly in Bundelkhand (Chitrakoot and Banda districts), building women's leadership and supporting survivors of gender-based violence.

Phone: 90262 29583
Website: www.vanangana.org

Salaam Baalak Trust

Founded in 1988, taking after Mira Nair's film *Salaam Bombay!*, Salaam Baalak Trust works with

children living and working on the streets. The organization provides education, shelter, food, healthcare, counselling, vocational training, and family reunification. It runs residential homes, drop-in centres, and outreach programmes across Delhi-NCR and beyond, supporting thousands of children over the years.

Phone: 7304561972
Website: www.salaambaalaktrust.com

Butterflies India

Established in 1989 by Rita Panicker Pinto, Butterflies works to protect the rights of street-connected children and supports their journey towards self-reliance. Its programmes include education, life skills, healthcare, and advocacy. Annually, Butterflies reaches over 2,000 street-connected children in Delhi and around 1,200 children in remote areas of Uttarakhand.

Phone: 999321098
Website: www.butterfliesngo.org

Dhanak of Humanity

Young adults in inter-faith or inter-caste marriages often face threats, especially from their own families. Where can they turn for safety, shelter, or legal help? Dhanak of Humanity offers all this and more, and is the first in India to set up gender-neutral shelter homes for couples. It was started by survivor couples in 2004.

Phone: 7669078681
Website: www.dhanak.org.in

Brave Souls Foundation

Acid attack survivors need lifelong treatment and support. Since 2021, Brave Souls Foundation has brought together activists, lawyers, and researchers to prevent attacks, fight gender-based violence, and aid survivors. Founded by Shaheen Malik, a survivor herself.

Phone: 9654240057
Website: www.bravesoulsfoundation.org

GeoHazards Society

When disaster hits, vulnerable

communities suffer disproportionately. GeoHazards Society works to protect children, women, elderly persons, and persons with disabilities through disaster preparedness, climate change adaptation, and inclusive resilience strategies. Based in Delhi, it partners with national and state governments as well as international agencies like the World Bank, WHO, and UN.

Phone: 011-46509848
Website: www.geohaz.in

Ashiyana Foundation

Children facing abuse, neglect, or legal trouble with no safe place to turn to, are helped by Ashiyana Foundation. It supports children and youth aged 12 to 24 who are orphaned, abandoned, runaways, from abusive families, living on the streets, or in conflict with the law or in need of protection.

Email: hello@ashiyanafoundation.org
Website: www.ashiyanafoundation.org

Human Aid Society

Founded to serve vulnerable communities in conflict-affected regions, Human Aid Society is a Jammu & Kashmir-based humanitarian aid and development organization working in the areas of education, women's empowerment, healthcare, disaster relief and rehabilitation. It was started in 2004 by Bashir Ahmed Mir, survivor of a terrorist attack.

Email: haskashmir2004@gmail.com
Website: www.humanaidssociety.org

Positive People

Since 2010, the Uttarakhand Association for Positive People Living with HIV/AIDS (UKNP+) has mobilized the community of people living with HIV/AIDS across the state. It works to improve their survival and quality of life while reducing new HIV infections through expanded prevention efforts.

Phone: 8909935218
Website: www.uknpplus.org



Since inception we have worked closely with Industry to optimise processes and make manufacturing practices more sustainable. We offer a full suite of products ranging from boilers to steam systems, to water quality analysers, to emission monitoring equipment, and much more.

Our focus on R&D results in a constant flow of differentiated products to stay ahead of the customer's evolving needs.



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TATA STEEL FOUNDATION



WOMEN IN LEADERSHIP: BRIDGING UNSEEN BARRIERS

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

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

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

