

# Civil Society



## ANGELS ON THE ROAD

How volunteers help police keep Bengaluru moving

*Chethan Elvis Das runs a tech firm by day and volunteers as a traffic warden in the evenings*

### POLICING LOVE CHOICES

Page 14 .....

### TRANSGENDERS IN A FIX

Page 16 .....

### VAJPAYEE, THE MENTOR

Page 18 .....

### INTERVIEW

### 'RICH SURVIVE CANCER BETTER THAN POOR'

Dr RAVI KANNAN ON WHY COMMUNITY CARE MATTERS

Page 8

### THE OTHER POLLUTION

Page 26 .....

### FOREST IS NOT A ZOO

Page 29 .....

### MASTERPIECE AS SAREE

Page 30 .....

**kirloskar**  
powergen

# OFFERING THE Widest Range of Gensets 3 kW TO 10 MW

Cleaner · Reliable · Flexible



www.kirloskaroilengines.com  
**KIRLOSKAR OIL ENGINES LIMITED**  
A Kirloskar Group Company

880 633 4433  
koel.sales@kirloskar.com

Marks 'Kirloskar' along with the suffix, or prefix, 'I' as shown and copyright 'Kirloskar' are owned Kirloskar Proprietary Limited. Product improvement is a continuous process. Kindly contact Kirloskar Oil Engines Ltd. for latest information. Images are for illustration purposes only.

# IN CIVIL SOCIETY EVERYONE IS SOMEONE



# ORIGINAL JOURNALISM

# 10 Millions+

Lives impacted through Cyber Suraksha Program



# 6,199

Received job offers in the Cyber Workforce

## Newly Enhanced AI Powered Program for A Bigger, Bolder Impact

Expanded multi-lingual content, advanced modules, and broader career pathways, now accessible to a larger audience nationwide.

### Shaping Future-Ready Cybersecurity Workforce

Learn more with NIIT Foundation's Cyber Suraksha Programs

Website: [www.niitfoundation.org](http://www.niitfoundation.org)

Contact No: 011 - 45512650



Scan to know more



## Fixing cities



COVER STORY

### ANGELS ON THE ROAD

Bengaluru's traffic wardens are volunteers who wear a uniform and spend at least 16 hours a week at intersections, keeping the city's mix of vehicles moving.

# 22

COVER PICTURE BY: RICHA JOANITA DAS FOR CIVIL SOCIETY

Love and the state .....	14-16
Transgenders in a fix .....	16-17
The all-time mentor .....	18
Citizen law forgotten .....	19
Edible oils attract FPOs .....	20
End of the superpower? .....	27
A war of words .....	28
Doon's urban forest .....	32
Products .....	33

Contact Civil Society at:  
[response@civilsocietyonline.com](mailto:response@civilsocietyonline.com)  
 The magazine does not undertake to respond to unsolicited contributions sent to the editor for publication.

WE shouldn't fool ourselves that volunteers, however spirited, can seriously bring order to Bengaluru's traffic. The idea is even less likely to work in the lawless streets of the NCR. Much more needs to be done in terms of traffic engineering and policing to improve flows and get drivers to follow rules.

Yet, any chance of improving the quality of urban life in India is lost without the participation of citizens. The example that traffic wardens set in Bengaluru is therefore to be celebrated.

The traffic wardens have day jobs and come from all walks of life. They are not paid and even buy their own uniforms. They are happy to be making a difference and, undoubtedly, seeing them in action inspires other citizens also to do their bit — even if that is just to follow the rules while driving.

Urban chaos builds slowly over the years and then becomes difficult to untangle from the hurly-burly that overtakes a city. Examples from across the world tell us that workable solutions are found at street level. Corporators, mayors, MLAs too need to get out of their offices to understand problems and solve them. It is then that the citizenry will be motivated to stay in line. The traffic wardens tell us that people they help on the streets are very grateful. It is not gratitude as much as seeing a fellow citizen trying to make life better.

Everyone knows a cancer patient or two these days. The incidence of the disease is rising. Private hospitals already see it as a business opportunity. But what about the vast majority of Indians? Do they find optimal treatment and when they survive do they have the wherewithal to endure the after-effects? We spoke with Dr Ravi Kannan at the Cachar Cancer Hospital for a perspective.

Our other interview this month is on the India Justice Report's assessment of the functioning of consumer courts. It paints a worrying picture of serious gaps in the system. Consumer protection is not working even as consumers are growing in number. Should citizens be left at the mercy of companies?

Sanjaya Baru in his column raises the problem of noise pollution. Much of it is on the streets because of the noisy ways of people. But there are any number of products in homes that should have much lower decibel levels. You wouldn't find redress for such a complaint in consumer courts the way they are now.

In the Living section we bring you the wondrous way in which masterpieces of Raja Ravi Varma have been replicated in sarees through weaving. It is extraordinary. We also check out the Tribes of India *mela* in Delhi's Sunder Nursery.

**Publisher**  
Umesh Anand

**Editor**  
Rita Anand

**News Network**  
Shree Padre  
Saibal Chatterjee  
Jehangir Rashid  
Kavita Charanji

**Desk & Reporting**  
Aima Tauheed

**Layout & Design**  
Virender Chauhan

**Photographer**  
Ashoke Chakrabarty

**Write to Civil Society at:**  
A-16 (West Side), 1st Floor,  
South Extension Part 2,  
New Delhi -110049.  
Phone: 011-46033825, 9354007703  
Printed and published by  
Umesh Anand on behalf of  
Rita Anand, owner of the title, from

A-53 D, First Floor,  
Panchsheel Vihar, Malviya  
Nagar, New Delhi -110017.  
Printed at Samrat Offset  
Pvt. Ltd.,  
B-88, Okhla Phase II,  
New Delhi -110020

Postal Registration No.  
DL(S)-17/3255/2024-26.  
at Lodi Road HPO  
New Delhi - 110003  
RNI No.: DELENG/2003/11607  
Total no of pages: 36

**Advisory Board**

- R. A. MASHELKAR
- ARUNA ROY
- NASSER MUNJEE
- ARUN MAIRA
- DARSHAN SHANKAR
- HARIVANSH
- JUG SURAIYA
- UPENDRA KAUL

Get your copy of **Civil Society**

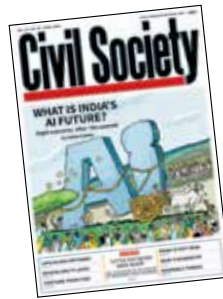
Have Civil Society delivered to you or your friends. Write to us for current and back issues at [response@civilsocietyonline.com](mailto:response@civilsocietyonline.com).

Also track us online, register and get newsletters

[www.civilsocietyonline.com](http://www.civilsocietyonline.com)



LETTERS



AI watcher

The cover story, 'What is India's AI future?' makes important points. AI has to be seen in a perspective relevant to India and the country's own stage of development.

Much has been made of the summit and the declaration that emerged from it. But we are fooling ourselves if we think India is a lead player in the AI game. Much work remains to be done and a large dose of realism is in order.

To imagine that it will solve all the country's problems from better school education to health care is to get it wrong. AI will be beneficial to the extent it is purposefully used to bridge social and economic gaps and relate to people's needs. Connecting AI to people is important because there is a real danger that it will lead to exclusion instead of inclusion.

India will continue to need teachers, doctors and engineers. Without them the country will continue to be a laggard in crucial spheres. China's strength comes out of having invested wisely and purposefully in its foundations, both social and economic.

**Srikrishna**

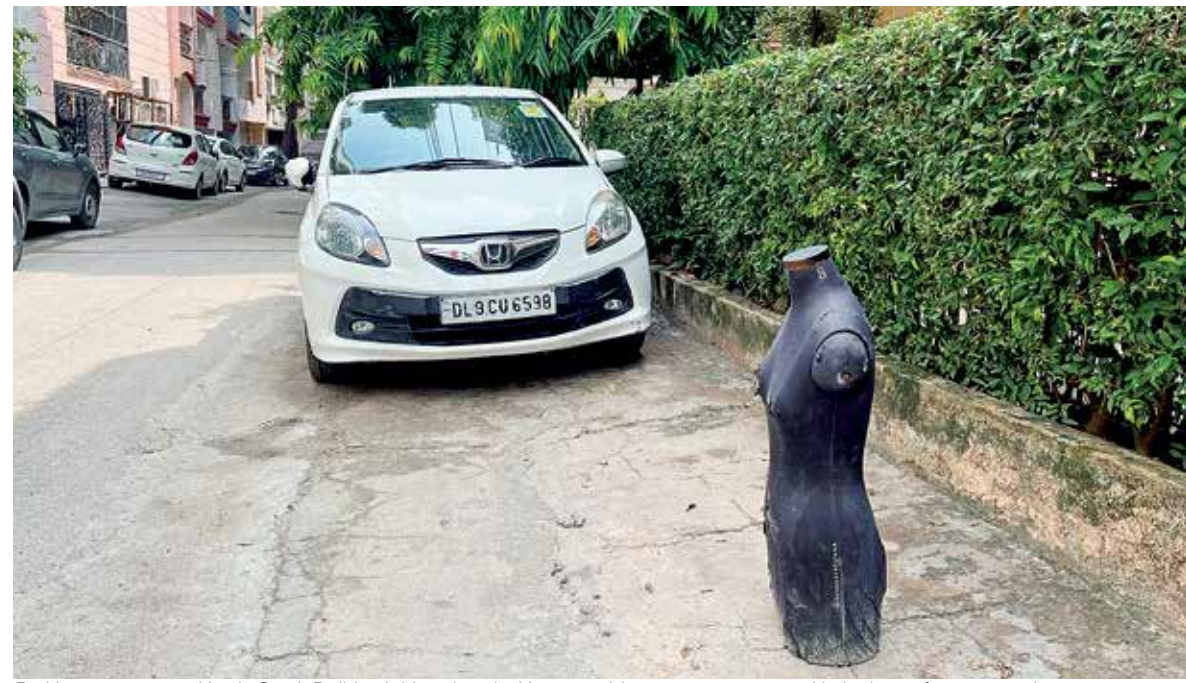
The illustration on your cover of AI being carried on a bullock cart by ordinary Indians is brilliant. It says it all. AI has become the new deity. Instead, it should be the tool that empowers people. We have a long way to go.

**Dilip S**

The cover visual was outstanding. An illustration often says more than a photograph. This was needed to balance the hype that surrounded the summit. Kiran Karnik rightly says the summit was like a coming of age party for India. It was far too celebratory. The drawing gives us the true picture.

**Puneet Saxena**

IN PASSING PARKING RIGHTS



Parking gets competitive in South Delhi neighbourhoods. Here a resident reserves space with the bust of a mannequin

Each of the eight points of concern over the AI summit declaration and AI itself is timely and should be considered by Indian policymakers and parliamentarians. Thank you for a balanced and sober story.

**Jharna Das**

The media falls in line with everything the government does. The AI summit is another example of the orchestrated celebratory tone. You have struck a different note and raised the issues that matter. Of course, AI is here to stay and will be useful in innumerable ways. But to embrace corporations for whom AI is a business is to miss the opportunities that AI really has to offer a developing country.

**Bhaskar Chintamani**

Fig story

How some Fatehabad farmers succeeded in growing figs in Haryana and making value-added products like juices is a story that shows that there are several pathways to rural prosperity. Farmers need to be supported in making the connections that help them cope with realities beyond their fields. A business development model is called for here.

**Akshay Goenka**

North to south

Shree Padre's story on the wonder

grinder invented by a Haryanvi farmer was amazing. It must have been a heartwarming experience for all those involved.

**Vimala Ramachandran**

Make a trip

Your story, 'Kashmir's villages keen to be on tourist map', was a well-researched article. This type of tourism can benefit people living in remote villages and open up new opportunities for tourism in Kashmir. It will also provide tourists an opportunity to experience the lifestyle of people living in such areas.

**Rafique Bhatt**

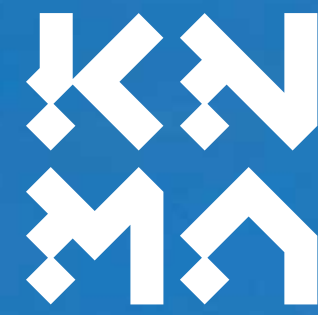
An all-rounder!

I have been a reader of *Civil Society* from almost its first issue. It has evolved into an eclectic magazine — from social development to politics and policy, culture and the arts. Importantly, *Civil Society* points a finger at what is wrong but also acknowledges what is going right. In that it truly reflects the ferment and fervour of society.

**Chethan Elvis Das**

Letters should be sent to [response@civilsocietyonline.com](mailto:response@civilsocietyonline.com)

Civil Society  
READ US. WE READ YOU.  
CIVILSOCIETYMAGAZINE  
Stay in touch with regular updates



Kiran Nadar Museum of Art

# Tyeb Mehta

Bearing Weight (with the lightness of being)

Honouring 100 Years of a Master

On view till 30 Jun 26  
KNMA, New Delhi

Tyeb Mehta, *Blue Painting*, Oil on canvas  
Collection: Kiran Nadar Museum of Art © Tyeb Mehta Foundation



## RAVI KANNAN ON WHY COMMUNITY-BASED CARE MATTERS

## ‘Survival after cancer is tougher for the poor than the rich’

Civil Society News  
New Delhi

WHEN Dr Ravi Kannan signed up with the Cachar Cancer Hospital in 2006, he was an accomplished surgeon based in Chennai. The shift to a remote corner of Assam was a conscious choice to take his skills where they were needed most.

The Cachar hospital had been set up with donations a decade earlier because no such facility existed in those parts. Now, roughly 20 years after Dr Kannan joined, it is a bustling facility with a staff of 500 of whom 18 are well-qualified doctors.

Cancer is a troubling cloud over India's public health horizons. The rich and middle class have access to the care they need. But the poor, both in cities and rural areas, struggle to cope.

Surviving cancer has become easier. But being a cancer survivor is a tough number. It requires savings, stable employment, access to nutrition, mental strength and social support.

Not surprisingly, the poor lose out even though they are the most affected. Hospitals like the one Dr Kannan runs in Assam are needed in multiples.

On a busy day, we spoke to Dr Kannan late in the evening after a long day of surgeries and OPD consultations.

**Q: You were in your OPD before this interview. Who were your patients?**

Our patients are extremely poor and take a lot of trouble travelling to this hospital in Silchar. Our policy is to see them the same day no matter what time it is. The OPD often runs late, till 8 pm or 9 pm.

**Q: And you have an OPD in the morning?**  
It's from 9 am and open all day.

**Q: What kind of cancers are you seeing? Which are the predominant ones?**

A lot of tobacco-related cancers, head and neck, oesophagus, and lung. And then in women, we see breast cancer, cervical cancer, gallbladder cancer.

**Q: And how many cancer cases in a year does your hospital see?**



Dr Ravi Kannan: 'Assam has done well because it has spread out its cancer centres'

We see about 5,000 new patients and around 30,000 follow-up patients. All of them may not be cancers. Cancers will be about 3,000.

**Q: This hospital existed before you got here.**  
Yeah, much before.

**Q: And it was set up because there weren't any facilities at the time.**  
Right.

**Q: How much of a difference does this one hospital make now?**

It is no longer one hospital. The Tata Trusts have created a Section 8 company with the government of Assam and they have what are called Assam Cancer Care Foundation Hospitals. They're looking at having, I think, 14 hospitals across the region. They have one in Silchar too. Assam has a population of about 40 million. The state sees about 50,000 new patients every year.

Guwahati has many cancer centres now. Earlier there was only the Barua Cancer Centre. Now, in the medical college they have a

State Cancer Centre. There are also a number of private cancer centres. The volume of patients is enough to keep many hospitals busy. If every hospital were to focus on the patient at hand, this is a problem that can be well tackled.

**Q: So, are you saying it is possible to catch up with the incidence of cancer in the Northeast?**

Yes, yes. See, unlike in many parts of the country where the number of patients far outnumbers the resources available, it is not the scenario here. We have enough. But there is tremendous poverty. And so, the need to support patients is very high. Many patients are daily wage earners. When they come to the hospital, they lose their earnings.

If they have to come to the hospital again and again, which is often the case with cancer treatment, there is a loss in their daily income. Then they have to spend money on transport, on staying somewhere, food, and also make sure people at home are cared for. At the same time, they have to ensure the patient is cared for as well.

Often patients report late because these

challenges are huge. As a result, outcomes are poor. If only patients would report on time, if only our community outreach would be stronger, if only early detection programmes could be implemented across the region, outcomes would be much better.

We have a smaller population in the Northeast compared to other parts of the country, around 50 million. The number of new cancer cases would be between 50,000 and 60,000 annually.

It is not a big problem to take care of 60,000 cancer patients in a year, because we have cancer centres in almost every northeastern state now.

**Q: It is manageable provided you have these facilities up and running and meeting the needs of the patients.**

Correct. A smaller population is the advantage we have compared to other parts of the country. But then there are barriers because of geography, weather and travel. I think if we put our minds together, these barriers can be surmounted.

**Q: So how should people be putting their minds together? What is the strategy?**

See, Assam has done particularly well because it has spread out its cancer centres. Each centre should invest time and effort in its own communities. They could go out, create awareness about cancers, create opportunities for early detection closer to homes, work with sub-centres and Primary Health Centres (PHCs) and all the medical infrastructure that is available across the region.

They should be disseminating information about the resources available so that patients are reassured that they don't have to be put out of pocket to get themselves investigated and treated.

In addition to what the government provides, each of these cancer centres can reach out to local communities for food, for shelter. They will all be willing to donate small amounts of money, say, ₹2,000 to ₹5,000, to get some simple tests done. There will be money.

So, if every cancer centre will take it upon itself to serve the communities they are located in, I think together we can make a huge difference. We can do what other parts of the country have not been able to do.

**Q: Does your hospital do outreach?**

We have a very large community presence in several districts around us. We are trying to decentralize. One of the things about cancer care is that if patients have to come again and again, which they need to for follow-ups, they will drop out. So, what we are trying to do, in addition to this hospital in Silchar, is to set up a hospital in Dharmanagar which is in North Tripura. We are looking at putting up a hospital in western Manipur. And then around each of

these hospitals, we will have satellite centres.

For major decisions, they may have to come to the main hospital, but they can go to the satellites for chemotherapy, for palliative care, follow-up, and diagnosis. Each of these satellites will be supported by what we call PEP facilities — Prevention, Early detection and Palliative care.

These are one-man shows — one trained health worker on a two-wheeler goes to homes. This actually started off with the purpose of providing home care to people who are dying but are too sick to come to the hospital — basically, palliative care.

But then we expanded it because when we go to homes in villages, the community collects to see what is this *tamasha* happening. They're a captive audience. It becomes an opportunity to talk to them about lifestyles, signs of cancer and symptoms.

We also have a questionnaire. As a result, for

**‘We treat a patient, he or she gets cured, but almost 80 percent will not go back to being employed. For whatever reason, they are unable to restart earning.’**

every 1,000 people we address, we spot one or five people with cancers. It becomes an opportunity for us to educate people and encourage early detection. We also tell them the PEP team will visit the homes of people who are on intense care.

A patient I have operated on and sent home with sutures and a drain doesn't have to come back to have the sutures removed. Somebody will go to their home and do it.

The fourth thing we're doing is to have active follow-up of patients we have treated. Many people don't come back to the hospital. We will go to the homes of such people to make sure they are well and don't have symptoms. If they have symptoms, we encourage them to come to the hospital. Fifthly, with the PEP programme we are trying to improve voluntary blood donation.

**Q: Is communication a challenge?**

Communication means basically talking again and again, using language that people can understand. Essentially, we are reassuring people that if there is a problem and it can be detected early, it is curable. To get detected early and treated, they don't have to lose their property, homes and cows. There is support available from the community, the government, and hospitals.

People also need to be helped to understand that healthcare is their right. It is not a favour that an organization or doctor is bestowing on them.

Healthcare is a basic human right and the doctor is paid a salary. The doctor is not doing anybody a favour by treating somebody. They should be treated well and respectfully. Nobody has any right to misbehave with them.

**Q: To what extent is the environment a cause of cancers?**

I think the bulk of it here is due to lifestyle, use of tobacco, alcohol, areca nut, dietary preferences and practices, amount of physical activity, some infections and inflammations. Generally, the community is physically pretty active. The cancers that we see here are all predominantly traditional cancers that are linked to tobacco or alcohol.

**Q: What is the survival rate for the poor after they undergo treatment?**

If patients are treated appropriately and, apart from drugs and surgery, they are given

physiotherapy, nutrition and rehabilitated well, the cure rate should be the same as amongst the rich.

But amongst poorer communities, cure rates will not be the same because they are undernourished and have a lot of comorbidities. They approach the hospital for treatment late and often defer treatment or default during treatment. Therefore, survival rates amongst poor people are lower.

**Q: What effect does cancer treatment have on people with low incomes?**

The poor are mostly on daily wages. When the breadwinner has to go to the hospital over and over again either for himself or someone else, there is no income. Kids drop out of school. More than 40 to 50 percent of them will not go back to school.

Several generations are impacted by cancer, heart disease or a major neurological problem. The other thing is, we treat a patient, he or she gets cured, but almost 80 percent of them will not go back to productive employment. For whatever reason, they are unable to restart earning.

Education and livelihoods are very intimately related. If we don't pay attention to these, we would actually end up doing more harm than good without even realizing it.

Today I was talking to a patient. She had come with her daughter who is not even 15 years old. I asked her where her father was. She

*Continued on page 10*

Continued from page 9

said he had gone to work. They were from Karimganj. The father goes to work in Haflong, in another district. He's a daily wage earner. He has a respiratory illness which prevents him from working on many days. I asked her how many siblings she has. She replied that she has two brothers. The mother explained that the elder one works in a hotel in Bengaluru. So, I said, let me talk to him. I wanted to because the mother has a bad cancer. She said the boy is only 15 years old. I asked how, then, did he go to Bengaluru to work? She said her sister's son also works there and he took him along to work.

This 15-year-old boy is supporting the family. The third child is in Class 2. The girl is now in Class 7 or 8. We come to know because we ask.

I would need to tell the social worker this woman will probably die. The father is unwell. The brother in Bengaluru is unlikely to go back to school. He was in Class 7 when they sent him to work.

I would also tell the social worker that we somehow have to protect this child's innocence and ensure she goes to school so that she doesn't lose opportunities in life. And the younger brother continues to study. How do we safeguard them while taking care of her mother? These are the issues that we have to grapple with.

**Q: Cancer treatments have quite an impact on the body. People can't go back to physical labour quite so easily. When is somebody really cured?**

It is very, very difficult especially in poorer communities. They have a lot of muscle wasting. Their muscles have to be built back. It is very difficult for someone who has been out of employment for two years to suddenly get up and start working.

**Q: Is survival from cancer a privilege only the rich enjoy? There are so many cancer survivors who might as well be dead.**

Many patients who are doing well are likely to be from affluent communities who have had good support, good care, who are not nutritionally compromised before we start treatment. They have access to good nutrition during treatment. Of course, their own mental strength cannot be underrated.

**Q: The quality of survival is what we should be looking at here.**

In rich communities too the emotional trauma cannot be minimized, but at least the physical component can be better handled.

**Q: There are poorer people with greater determination to come back into active life who recover much better?**

Correct.

**Q: It is often argued that we should be spending more on healthcare. Should we be looking at spending more money on helping people live better as part of our healthcare policy instead of just focusing on treatment in hospital?**

We need to spend a lot more energy and time on promoting health which is at present a low budget activity. The returns in terms of diseases prevented and livelihoods lost will be far more than in treating illnesses. I think as a nation our scientific minds, legal minds, economic minds and our will should be used for health promotion.

Cancer occurs because of tobacco, alcohol, dietary practices, lack of physical activity, and some infections and inflammations. Heart attacks occur because of tobacco, alcohol, dietary practices, lack of exercise. Stroke occurs because blood vessels in the brain get blocked or they rupture.

So many non-communicable diseases have the same etiological practice. When you go about preventing cancer, you'll also prevent heart disease, stroke, reduce diabetes, and hypertension. You'll promote overall health much more.

**Q: Cancer treatment figures prominently in the business plans of corporate hospitals. Cancer specialists are paid much more in the private sector. Why will they go to the public sector or remote areas?**

There are cancer hospitals in several cities across the Northeast. Most of them are in the public sector or with non-profits like ours. Most corporate facilities are centred around Guwahati, the biggest city here.

I think if the government were to plan its resource allocation in terms of specialists, they would be more equitably distributed. As the number of specialists grow they will out of necessity move from Tier 1 to Tier 2 cities, and to rural areas. It will happen on its own.

**Q: They will be the ones who couldn't get jobs in the city.**

It doesn't matter. Healthcare requires good knowledge, not extraordinary brilliance. There are protocols for the management of blood sugar, hypertension and so on. We have protocols for managing most stages of cancers.

We also now have what is called the National Cancer Grid. We have about 350 cancer centres across the country. We have also come up with India-specific guidelines — what cannot be compromised, what is ideal to have and what is good, if you have the resources.

Where cure is concerned there is no compromise. Where you're looking at some improvement in quality of life or some increase in survival. As a nation we can take care of our sick people much better than we are right now. ■

# 'Law is not giving consumer speedy redress'

## Justice Report shows gaps in staffing, lack of awareness

Civil Society News

Gurugram

COMPANIES eye the Indian market with great anticipation. It has been growing, for sure, but there is much more to come on the cards as incomes rise and the middle class expands.

It is time then to seriously empower Indian consumers to make choices, protect their interests and hold producers to account. So far, efforts in this direction have been mostly on paper or languidly taken up by do-gooders. Real action is needed on the ground — both by government and activists with true grit.

A consumer protection law was first passed in 1986. Then in 2019 a new law was passed to address contemporary realities brought on by technology and globalization.

The law seeks to set up an accessible mechanism for consumers to be heard in central, state and district consumer protection bodies. It relies on mediation and consultation. However, the institutions that were to be available to consumers across states right down to the district level either lack the staff needed to make them operational or don't exist at all.

Recently, a study on the working of the consumer protection machinery was published under the India Justice Report. As could be expected, it paints a sorry picture.

*Civil Society* spoke to Maja Daruwala and Valay Singh, editor and lead researcher of the study.

**Q: Has the Consumer Protection Act, 2019 and the dispute resolution structure that was put in place succeeded in protecting consumers?**

Maja Daruwala: It's hard to quantify and say to you with great certainty whether it has or hasn't done what it was intended to do. But I think it would be safe to say that its potential has not been realized.

**Q: It's a simple question. Are consumers better off today in terms of their rights**



Maja Daruwala and Valay Singh: 'The voice of the people needs to be louder and audible for more action to take place'

## 'The original idea was to have a really simplified procedure. But what we are seeing is just another court with the same problems of the mainstream justice system.'

**with this law and its framework than they were earlier?**

MD: In some instances, it works. But, overall, can you say that it works to the expectation of an individual consumer? I would say that it's far from what it could be.

**Q: Have the Act and the framework put in place reduced consumer grievance cases clogging the civil courts?**

MD: The data shows that less than 200,000 cases have come to these very carefully set up specialized local institutions. Yet the market is growing hugely. Consuming is happening much more. Money is being spent on goods and services much more in rural areas and small towns too. So that in itself tells a tale of how much it is being used.

**Q: This was supposed to be a pathway parallel to the civil courts. The objective was that it would assist in at least taking some areas of redress away from them.**

Valay Singh: The short answer is no. I think we can safely say that the existence of these commissions is not as well known as it should be. There is poor awareness. The data doesn't back the claim that these commissions are helping consumers in seeking redressal.

In 1986, when the consumer protection law was first enacted, it took four years and PILs (Public Interest Litigations) for the commissions to start getting formed in different districts and so on.

In 2019, more than five years after the Act was revised, there are vacancies across state and district commissions. There is a huge gap in the availability of executive and non-executive staff. All this adds up. These are simply existing more on paper or as low-level sinecures at the district level. I wonder how much confidence they are giving the consumer.

In one sense, the e-commerce companies have a self-correcting model. You can file complaints, a bot will respond and most likely your complaint will be addressed in 80 percent of cases. Around 20 percent of cases may not be addressed.

But if you leave companies like Zomato and Amazon aside, there is still a huge chunk of Indian companies and other companies which are playing with the health, safety and lives of consumers on a daily basis as reported in newspapers whether it is cough syrup, milk or cheap and dangerous plastic products.

**Q: Has legislation led to more lawyers**

**looking at consumer rights? You've pointed out in your report that the role of mediation has not worked at all, for example.**

MD: Yes, I think mediation is a sad story. And mediation really must up its game. Much needs to be done to have good mediators by training them and making sure that they are attached to consumer courts so that they are available when they should be.

As far as lawyers are concerned, certainly there are more lawyers, at least in Delhi and the main cities, who would specialize in consumer courts. If it's a big law firm, they may have one partner or a couple of juniors who do specialize in consumer courts. And it's a gentler path. So, there should be more lawyers.

But the original idea of having consumer courts was not to have any lawyers at all. And instead have a really simplified procedure where any individual can come forward with a complaint against a large or small entity.

It was supposed to be at the level of quick redress. Instead, this framework is showing all the pathologies of the mainstream justice system. So, the question is — are lawyers helping or hindering the process.

**Q: But surely a consumer needs specialized support for bringing a company with vast resources to book?**

VS: The picture we are seeing is of just another court with the same kind of problems as the mainstream justice system. It was especially supposed to be designed to assist a person. You are making the point that this is an individual who's pitched against an entity. Surely, he needs a lawyer to help him. But the idea was to have adjudicators who would be of assistance to consumers while acting fairly in relation to the other side. They were meant to be adjudicators, not neutral umpires.

**Q: You have flagged in your report serious staff shortages. How should, say, a state commission or a district commission be staffed?**

VS: For simple matters, if you have all the facts, you should be able to file a complaint online and then go to the commission's office and be able to present your own case. That is what the vision and spirit of the Act was.

But when a district commission does not have a president, and has two members, it cannot function. So, you need a president. You need the staff to serve the president and members of the commission. I think these are

Continued on page 12

**‘Law is not giving consumer speedy redress’**

Continued from page 11

very important structural gaps.

**Q: Can you tell us more about the state commissions or the district commissions? How many people do they need?**

VS: There is one norm, dating back to 2000, which says that for every 250 cases there should be a lower division clerk as secretarial staff. You divide Maharashtra’s caseload of 70,000 cases by 250 and you’ll get the number of lower division clerks there should be.

Our finding is that only Rajasthan and one more, smaller, state have met the 2000 norms of the Bagla Committee. Take the example of Assam, going into elections. Consumer protection will certainly not be an issue. The state commission’s sanctioned strength is six. They have hired 14. So, in percentage terms, they’re overstaffed. They have no vacancy. They’ve sanctioned themselves 14. It’s a joke that for a whole state, you have only six staff in your state commission.

Most states have double-digit sanctioned strengths, whereas their caseload would be in tens of thousands. The real needs of a commission are not being met. It’s just not a political priority or a governance priority for any state.

**Q: So, the district commissions must be even worse off. You have flagged the need for more benches as well in your report.**

MD: Some districts don’t even have a commission. One in every five is what our report says. The problem is at so many stages. Of the process being difficult. Access being difficult. The bench not sitting. Quorum not happening. We also found the money that is given to these institutions is very, very modest.

**Q: You mean they’re underfunded?**

MD: Well, you know, in a country like ours, everything is underfunded, and justice is not particularly overfunded. Therefore, you must have much better utilization and better accountability. Target the money where it should be.

**Q: What can be done to nudge the states into staffing the commissions by providing finances and ensuring that they function?**

MD: The Supreme Court has been trying to nudge the states. But when you have these endemic shortages, and they are not addressed year after year after year, then there comes a point of exhaustion.

The voice of the people needs to be audible and louder for more action to take place. Take milk contamination. This is a class action matter. You need a vibrant Central Consumer Protection Authority which

takes up such matters.

**Q: Politicians don’t see it as an issue. We might have had a consumer movement but perhaps it wasn’t strong enough to bring real change?**

VS: We want to be seen as a \$ 4 trillion economy but we are still a *roti, kapada, makaan* and toilet economy. I think it would be fair to surmise that we are not concerned about consumer protection outside the metros.

Even in the metro cities, what we find is a growing pendency of cases pending for more than three years. We find that, on average, in the state commissions, the pendency of cases is over 35 percent. In several metros and individual district commissions, it varies, but the average would be 25 to 30 percent. In Delhi, in one or two commissions it is over 40 to 60 percent. That is the range.

There is a national consumer helpline run by the Central government, which is more responsive. One has anecdotal evidence of that. But then again, you’ll have to have that doggedness to go to these commissions and seek justice.

The other issue is that many of the orders of these commissions get overruled by the high court or the district court, sometimes by the Supreme Court. If this happens a lot then people will lose trust in the effectiveness of the commissions.

**Q: But then the powers of the commission have to be defined more clearly by the judicial system itself?**

VS: And the executive in terms of giving the commission due capacity.

**Q: Do you think the answer lies in far more consumer activism? Jurisprudence in consumer affairs like you have in environmental affairs?**

MD: Yes, absolutely. You can witness that on social media. Conversations on consumer rights are happening at a subterranean level. There are people complaining, talking, taking samples of products, sharing their findings. And the food and drug agency is approached.

It is the executive’s duty to provide fora that actually work. That is what the Central Consumer Commission is supposed to be doing, raising awareness as well as intervening, taking class action.

**Q: As per your report, sectors especially being taken to the consumer courts are banking, insurance and housing. Why?**

VS: These sectors interchange at various levels and in different commissions. I think the impact of RERA [Real Estate (Regulation and Development) Authority] is yet to be felt. Our data set ends in 2024. Maybe a lot of cases are going to RERA.

We know a lot of housing matters went to the

National Consumer Disputes Redressal Commission (NCDRC) because that is the jurisdiction of cases valued at ₹2 crore and above. A lot of cases, between ₹50 lakh and ₹2 crore went to the state commission.

However, insurance is a cross-cutting sector — whether it is a motor vehicle case, or a housing case. The data labelling of these cases is not very precise so there is some overlap.

A lot of cases are marked as insurance, even though they may primarily be medical cases from hospitals. We just wanted to bring this to public notice — the kinds of cases in our system.

My point is, do orders in these cases have any weight? Do they carry that power which mainstream judiciary carries?

Secondly, lawyers will advise you to file in the consumer court as well as in the civil court just to make your case stronger. You’re basically trying to get justice in any way possible and end up filing everywhere.

**Q: What is it that made some states successful?**

VS.: Andhra Pradesh has done exceptionally well, according to their RTI (Right to Information) reply on the cases pending over three years, which is less than 5 percent. That is perhaps the only large state to have such a low share of cases pending over three years. They have a low number of vacancies except for the post of president.

That would be the case for Madhya Pradesh also. West Bengal has fulfilled the gender norms for hiring. But performance based only on numbers will perhaps be misleading because we don’t know the nature of disposals or how many were appealed against. We don’t know the quality of disposal either. Was it fair?

We have restricted ourselves to finding out the number of cases that have been cleared. And efficiency.

**Q: Which state is the worst performer?**

VS: Telangana is right at the bottom. One of the main reasons is because they did not answer several RTI questions. States that do not respond get a lower score. Incidentally, they called and wanted to know how come they’d been ranked so low. We’ve given them all the evidence.

MD: My point is if you don’t give data to an RTI request, then what does it mean? Are you not collecting it? Or are you collecting it sporadically? Dashboards of how many cases are pending in the commissions have to be in the public sphere. We have created an interactive website you can go to as a consumer.

**Q: Were there states which responded positively to the RTIs you filed?**

VS: At least half of them responded well, around 19 states. The other half did not and then it becomes a challenge for us. ■

**Civil Society**  
EVERYONE IS SOMEONE

**The magazine that goes places invites you to come along**

WHERE ARE WE BEING READ?

Shimoga, Theni, Ooty, Leh, London, Tezu, Wakro, Nadia, Bundi, Chennai, Gangtok, Puri, Mulaffnagar, Raigarh, Bengaluru, Aturi, Erode, Ravatmal, Vapi, Kolkata, Guwahati, Gurgaon, Gachig, Mulshi, Sirsi, Taluka, Farnaka, Rewa, Mumbai, New York, Mount Abu, Fort Bini, Bhargava, Jamnu, Mada, Patna, Chembur, Lonki, Indore, Dhenanal, Varanasi, Farukh, New Delhi, Kargil, Shimla, Panchgani, Ajmer, Tonk, Panchgula, Ghaziabad, Nasirabad, Dehradun, Cambridge MA, Mussoorie, Dahod, Pune, Hassan, Gurgaon, Chennai, Kohima, Mandi, Jalpaiguri, Alwar, Salem, Shillong, Coimbatore, West Garo Hills, Guwahati, Dondaicha, Hyderabad, Bhubaneswar, Kasaragod, Muzaffarpur, Raichur, Morapur, Virudhanagar, Nagapattinam, Gudalur, Proddatur, Shahpur, Banhatti, Markere, Kurnool, Mithal, Dubin, Kudal, Hovavar, Gaya, Khopoli, Lata, Bhogpur, Imphal, Feroze, Bargava, Nagpur, Udhampur, Midnapore, Khannara, Azamgarh, Sonehadra, Itarsi, Nandurbar, Shirwal, Dumraon, Nashik, Bhadravati, Karwar, Satara, Thirthahalli, Kangra, Kapurthala, Hingoli, Gulbarga, Katra, Manali, Loni Kalbhor, Bolangir, Shirampur, Gachhirol, Kodagu, Hazarbagh, Thanjavur, Ladwa, Udupi, Bhandara, Ottobalari, Belgaum, Deesa, Sangli, Koraput, Cachar, Doddi, Bundshapur, Chikodi, Pottayam, Marvi, Chandagiri, Kurda, Chandigarh, Solapur, Biliguri, Garheda, Jaipur, Shahjahanpur, Ludhiana, Rajkot, Fatehpur, Kodaikanal, Sivakasi, Porayar, Narsinghpur, Chopda, Kovilpatti, Ahmedabad, Kalugamalai, Gandhinagar, Lucknow, Itanagar, Fontenay le Fleury, Brisbane, Naperville, Gundlupet, Aurangabad, Asansol, Hathrus, Singhpur, Jabalpur, Dharmapur, Ujjain, Gangava, Sidhi, Thiruvananthapuram, Birmour, Sambalpur, Bhatinda, Patiala, Hospet, Tughalwala, Mangalore, Tenneri, Mada, Santoshnagar, Gorakhpur, Jamsheer, Wayanad, Puducherry, Vidodara, Mangao, Chandigarh, Bhilwara, Mysore, Penukonda, Hissar, Saligao, Raipur, Kashmir, Tezpur ...

# What does the state have to do with love?

## Gujarat plans law on parental consent

Aiema Tauheed  
Kolkata

WHEN two adults wish to marry, should the consent of their parents become legally compulsory? Most couples whose choice of partner wasn't approved by their parents say no, it is not at all necessary.

"I wouldn't have been as happy as I am today if I sought my parents' approval. They would have got me married to someone else, and I would have been miserable," says Anushree Dhaoriya, reflecting on her inter-caste marriage with Rajiv Samanto.

Both work as house painters on a daily wage basis. Anushree, from a Scheduled Caste, first met Rajiv, who is an upper caste, in Medinipur, West Bengal.

She was cycling down the road when his cycle crashed into hers. He apologized with chocolates and slipped his phone number into the packet. For the next six months they spoke over the phone.

When her parents discovered her friendship they beat her so badly her glass bangles broke and the shards pierced the skin of her wrists. The scars are still visible. Soon after, she eloped with Rajiv. When she called her parents, they said, "We are dead to you." Rajiv's family also rejected the marriage. The couple is happy with the life they've built away from their disapproving parents.

Yet, the government wants to weaponize parental consent for inter-caste and inter-faith marriages.

On February 20, 2026, Gujarat's Deputy Chief Minister, Harsh Sanghavi, proposed an amendment to the Gujarat Registration of Marriages Act, 2006, seeking to formally involve parents in the marriage registration process.

According to the amendment, adults who wish to marry a person of their choice must declare that their parents have been informed, submit their identity proof, phone numbers and residential addresses. The Assistant Registrar would then notify the parents within ten days of receiving the application, and only after that would the marriage be registered.

Asif Iqbal, co-founder of Dhanak of Humanity, an organization that helps couples trying to marry on their own, says, "Across states, we are seeing efforts to curb what they call 'love marriages'. It began with Uttar

Pradesh, then Uttarakhand, and now other states are following suit."

"UP's law initially focused on preventing the marriage itself. Uttarakhand extended it to live-in relationships. And now the trend is to legalize parental consent," he says. It bolsters the overweening importance placed on familial consent.

"If two consenting adults can't legally marry unless their parents approve then I'm afraid our generation will lose the courage to even pick such battles," says Sagar Garg, who married Varsha Maurya in 2024 without parental approval. They chose to cement their relationship through a religious ceremony.

Maurya is an OBC from the Koeri community of Uttar Pradesh. Garg is a general category Baniya. But caste never mattered to them. Until their families asked. Maurya was warned she'd face discrimination post-marriage. They held firm, their shared love for music, books and social justice anchoring them.

**BATTLE TO MARRY** Why do adults who decide to marry a person not of their religion or caste face such a mountain of disapproval — family, society, vigilante groups? Why this obsession around endogamy?

Iqbal points to control over women's sexuality and reproduction. "Women are considered the repositories of honour, values, social status, everything, by the family," he says.

Power and property also matter. "If the boy is from a marginalized family, a Dalit, an Adivasi or a Muslim, then they fear losing their property and of them becoming equal to you," says Iqbal.

Since 2004, Dhanak of Humanity has been working with couples facing family wrath for choosing their partners. Dhanak was started by a small group of inter-faith couples who wanted to help others like them who opted for a civil marriage.

Despite parental disapproval, Iqbal married Ranu Kulshrestha, a Hindu, in January 2000. They met as students studying social work at Jamia Milia Islamia in New Delhi.

Their main hurdle came at the marriage registrar's office in Noida. The sub-divisional magistrate (SDM) refused to register their marriage citing concerns over 'law and order'.



Asif Iqbal (centre) with the Dhanak of Humanity team



Asif Iqbal and Ranu Kulshrestha had an inter-faith marriage

The couple sought the help of an advocate and got married in Delhi.

"But Dhanak is not a marriage bureau. Marriage is only the first step of the journey of troubled couples," says Iqbal. Dhanak offers support. It provides legal and financial help, if required, shelter and counselling for mental health and relationships.

Laws which make parental consent compulsory will certainly impact people.

"Couples from Gujarat who are facing a crisis, being forced into an arranged marriage or facing a threat to their lives, will run away to different states and get married. They will find their way," he says.



Vinaya Kurtkoti married Tony Kurian, a Syrian Christian

The immediate consequence is that the couple becomes displaced, uprooted from their families and the threat of violence shadows them. Many couples from across the country come to Delhi, seeking help.

"In a crisis situation, a lot of couples decide to have a religious marriage because that's instant," he says. "When you are in a crisis, you cannot wait for a civil marriage under the Special Marriage Act, because it takes a lot of time and your entire identity, location, everything gets disclosed," explains Iqbal.

The Special Marriage Act remains one of the few legal options for such couples, but it is not widely used. "Very few people can use it," he



Varsha Maurya and Sagar Garg belong to different castes

says, noting that couples, especially from less privileged backgrounds, often resort to religious ceremonies because they are quick and easy.

It is inter-faith couples who become the softest targets. Asmita Konwar, an Ahom from Assam, met Hussain Ahmed from Varanasi on a work trip. They fell in love and by 2017 they were in a live-in relationship. They waited for six years for their families to agree. Konwar's family feared she would be forced into a burqa and polygamy.

Ahmed's family, on the other hand, thought Assam was primitive and feared violence against their community. Tensions eased only

when the families met in 2022.

In 2023 they married through an Ahom ceremony as well as a *nikah* ceremony. They also registered their marriage, finally overcoming years of resistance from both families.

Today, the two families have cordial relations. "I've not changed. I don't wear the burqa and I'm not expected to read the Quran," says Konwar. "In fact, Hussain fasts during Ramzan and Shivratri. This Shivratri, he influenced me to fast too," she says, fondly.

Konwar values parental consent, which is why they waited six years. Yet, she believes making it a legal requirement would take away choice. "Parental consent already exists socially and culturally. Making it legal would just fortify it," she says.

Vinaya Kurtkoti from Pune married Tony Kurian, a Syrian Christian from Kerala who is three years younger to her and lives with a disability. She counts herself lucky to have faced little resistance. The couple registered their marriage in 2022. "There is value for parental consent but it shouldn't be the sole deciding factor," she says.

**FACING FAMILY HOSTILITY** Actually, the state is expected to provide protection mechanisms to threatened couples such as safe houses. Gujarat, for instance, has established a safe house in Gandhinagar.

"But forget about inter-faith couples, they are not even using it for inter-caste couples or couples who are facing threats," says Iqbal. "I think the intention is very clear. The state does not consider itself responsible for those couples. It becomes the parents' responsibility. If parents are ready to accept it, fine. Else, we are going to separate them."

Social conditioning shapes how couples deal with such conflicts. The emphasis on reconciliation and parental approval, before and after marriage, runs deep.

"We ask girls and boys who are trying to convince their parents: don't you think your marriage can sustain without their presence or absence?" he says. For many, the question itself is difficult. "They have not been brought up with the thought that you are independent, you can choose, you can decide."

It is this mindset that makes it a challenge to frame a separate law against honour crimes. Even when women flee violence after their relationship is discovered, many hesitate to file complaints against their parents.

"She's not ready to name her parents. She's not ready to write anything against them. The belief that parents are always right runs deep, that whatever they do is correct, and ultimately we want to be under their patronage."

But a separate law to prevent killings that are largely underreported is needed. Formal recognition of honour crimes would make it

*Continued on page 16*

## 'What does the state have to do with love?'

Continued from page 15

harder for families to pass off such killings as suicides or ordinary murders, he says.

Despite occasional bias, Iqbal remains hopeful about the judiciary, which often becomes the last resort for couples. "By and large, the judiciary has been supportive of a couple's right to choose," he says, noting that courts have upheld this right under Article 21 of the Constitution and generally favour love marriages.

"Recently, the Allahabad High Court in a judgment allowed live-in relationships. So, it all depends on the judge, but more or less the judiciary does not disapprove." But access to legal remedies often depends on whether couples can afford a lawyer.

In *Shakti Vahini v. Union of India* (2018), the Supreme Court held that consent of family, community or clan is not necessary when two adults decide to marry and that any interference with such a choice violates constitutional liberty.

The apex court also issued preventive, remedial and punitive directions to states to protect couples from honour crimes and community interference, including setting up special cells in every district to receive complaints and provide protection.

However, there are gaps in implementation. "All the states and Union Territories complied in writing," Iqbal says. "But take Delhi. The city has 15 police districts. Each district is supposed to have one special cell for couples. Out of 15 districts, only one special cell is working. We know because we are in that district. The remaining 14 districts are either oblivious to this direction or, if they are aware, they are not practising it."

"Instead, they follow the conventional route. The boy and girl are separated. The girl is kept in Nari Niketan, the women's shelter home, and the boy is set free. So the idea becomes to separate them."

The contradiction runs deep. "Unfortunately, the government, on the one hand, is giving in writing that it is complying with the Supreme Court directions. On the other hand, they are practising the same old conventional method of separating the couple," he says.

If a couple seeks help, the police often fall back on conventional procedure. They ask for the marriage certificate and then inform the families. And once the families step in, chances of the couple being allowed to stay together become almost negligible.

"In most cases the families are informed because when a girl or a boy leaves home, a missing complaint is usually filed so the role of the police becomes very important," explains Iqbal. However, it is very rare for a couple to approach the police, seeking protection. ■

# Transgenders put in a fix after new law

Aiema Tauheed  
Kolkata

ROCHELLE Pinto, a 29-year-old transwoman who works as a human resources professional in Mumbai, has been undergoing Hormone Replacement Therapy (HRT) for over a year. Pinto was legally recognized as a transwoman until now.

The recent Transgender Persons (Protection of Rights) Amendment Act, 2026, invalidates her identity. The Act does not recognize people with 'self-perceived' gender identities as transgender.

"I would even be seen as a criminal, as someone who is living in this country without any legal aid or without any legal document," says Pinto.

The new law removes self-identification and narrows the definition of transgender. It includes the *kinmar*, *hijra*, *aravani* and *jogta* which are socio-cultural identities traditionally recognized as transgender. It also recognizes as transgender those with intersex variations at birth, and those "forced to assume a transgender identity by mutilation, emasculation, castration, chemical or hormonal procedures".

Also, to be recognized as transgender, the person will need to obtain a certificate after applying to the district management and undergoing a medical examination.

The transgender community points out that removing self-identification violates provisions of the landmark 2014 *National Legal Services Authority (NALSA) vs Union of India* judgment which officially recognized transgender individuals as the "third gender", and granted them fundamental rights under the Constitution. It upheld their right to self-identify their gender, based on their psychological, not biological criteria, and without having to undergo sex reassignment surgery.

Introduced in 2016, the Transgender Persons Bill faced nationwide protests, with activists arguing it had been drafted without consulting the transgender community. After revisions, it was eventually passed as an Act in 2019.

At least the 2019 law allowed them to self-identify. The question of who is a transgender person was also largely accepted. The transgender community has been demanding changes since then but the new amendment

is even more regressive, it says.

"It goes against the spirit of the Constitution and the essence of saying that we belong to this country," says Pinto, who calls it "fascist". By reinforcing that trans people like her are illegitimate, access to education, employment and a life of dignity will become harder than it already is for a community that lives with daily discrimination.

Twenty-five-year-old Rihaa, a human rights professional in Delhi and a transwoman, says the amendment completely disrupts her life.

"I'm not recognized under the law," she says. "My Aadhaar card, my PAN card, passport, and everything else says I am male. And unless I deny myself my self-perceived gender identity, I will face harassment at every single place."

"What you can't deal with is when people keep asking you to change queues at an airport. You look like a woman, so please go stand in the women's queue. When you're in the women's queue, the security guard will see your Aadhaar card and say, Oh, please, can you go to that male queue? A lot of these seemingly small things have a major impact because they become the gateway to harassment."

Chittajit Mitra, 32, is a gender queer translator and writer from Uttar Pradesh (UP). He is also general secretary of the state's People's Union for Civil Liberties (PUCL) and co-founder of the Resistance Alliance for Queer Solidarity (RAQS), founded in 2016 in Allahabad to address the lack of Hindi conversations on queerness in UP.

The three markers used in the legislation to understand transness — physical appearance, chromosomes, and genitalia — is a regressive step, he says. It confines all trans people as belonging only to socio-cultural identities like *hijra*, *kinmar* and so on. It also reinforces myths that trans people abduct children, force their transgender identity on others and are basically criminal.

"It feels less like a measure aimed at improving the lives of transgender people and more as if it draws from uninformed, everyday conversations happening at another tea stall in UP," he says, sardonically.

After the 2014 NALSA judgment, bodies like the National Council for Transgender Persons and state-level transgender boards had brought together members of the



The Transgender Persons (Protection of Rights) Amendment Bill, 2026, triggered mobilization across India



Chittajit Mitra

community from across the country. Yet, he says, the government chose not to engage with them while drafting the 2026 amendment.

By removing the right to self-perceived gender identity, the new law upends Section 4(2) of the 2019 Act and the 2014 landmark NALSA judgment, he points out.

Sex is what one is born with and gender is a social construct. "One can have gender dysphoria due to which some persons would like to change their biology. But gender by itself doesn't have anything to do with biology," says Mitra.

"Basically they have divided the transgender community into three groups—socio-cultural identities like *hijras* and *kinmars*, intersex persons, and those allegedly 'forced' into being transgender. Many in the more expansive ecosystem of trans people that the original 2019 Act recognized are nowhere in this law. It's very undefined."

He cites the example of Manipur's Nupi



Rochelle Pinto

Maanbi and Nupi Maanba. These are indigenous trans communities that find no mention in the new legislation. "There are many trans groups outside this conventional idea of *hijra* and *kinmar*," he says.

By centring on only a few recognized groups, he argues, the legislation risks reviving regressive ideas of "real" and "fake" transgender identities.

He points out that the law is harmful even to the socio-cultural communities it claims to recognize as it redundantly includes kidnapping and abduction provisions which are already covered by criminal law. "There is no need to put such provisions into the transgender protection of rights bill, unless you want to give this message that transgender people are specifically known to kidnap and abduct people."

Besides, Mitra explains, many young trans people in India wait to turn 18 to escape from natal family violence. They find refuge with

NGOs or with *hijra* or *kinmar gharanas*. But families often respond by filing abduction cases. It becomes a case of the family's word versus the young adult's before the police. The consequence is that the spaces that offer safety to queer and trans individuals are put at risk.

"The police will target you if you choose to save a trans person from their own family, who might even kill them. It is not unheard of in India for young transwomen to be raped by their own family members to teach them how to be a good 'woman'."

The amendment also puts in place a medicalised process of recognition, believes Mitra. "Now a medical board is basically going to check the bodies of transgender people when they approach the district magistrate for a transgender card. The magistrate, if he or she has doubts, will refer that person to a medical board." It is intrusive and flawed. In any case, the hospital will have to register the person undergoing the examination as a transperson.

A revised certificate of identity now requires undergoing surgery to change gender. Many adult trans people prefer to undergo transition surgeries privately. "If you are going to force them to change their documentation and force the hospital to report this, their lives will become very difficult," says Mitra.

"We need to understand that many trans people hide these facts from their parents, even while they are going through transition," explains Mitra.

The message from the community is clear — the fight for their rights is far from over. ■

ATAL BIHARI VAJPAYEE BIRTH CENTURY

# The all-time mentor

UMESH ANAND

**P**OLITICIANS are generally seen as being episodic and transactional. They move on easily and look back only when there is something in it for themselves.

So, when a politician who prefers to be different comes along, it is worth sitting up and taking notice. Vijay Goel, a veteran of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), is one such.

Painstakingly and with considerable emotion, he has put together a tribute to Atal Bihari Vajpayee to mark the late prime minister's 100th birth anniversary. A large-format book, it traces the life and career of Vajpayee in rare pictures, creatively displayed with production values that could hold their own in just about any quarter of publishing.

Vajpayee was a colossus in politics. A poet and orator, he was known for his principles and humane values, treating his adversaries with empathy and affection. He was universally liked and showed how it is possible to be in the cut and thrust of public life and yet rise above it.

Like most icons, Vajpayee has been given his pedestal but allowed to recede from public memory. Not so for Vijay Goel for whom Vajpayee was a mentor with whom he worked closely for over five decades. He was deeply influenced by Vajpayee from his student days and knew him personally as well because of his father. In formal politics, the high point of their association was when Goel served as minister in the Prime Minister's Office (PMO) under Vajpayee.

Goel remembers Vajpayee when it is not necessarily expedient to do so. His is a selfless, passionate effort. It comes at a time when politics needs all the nourishment it can get.

Goel's curation of pictures brings alive a Vajpayee not many will easily recall — and coming generations are certain to forget. To present Vajpayee over the years in his many avatars in a single volume is therefore a service and a contribution to contemporary history. It is a biographical mode that should be used more often. Many leaders come and go, remembered only by those who were close to them. In an age of AI creations, a personalized tribute has its own value for posterity.

The book has much biographical value. It



A poet and orator, Vajpayee was known for his principles and humanity

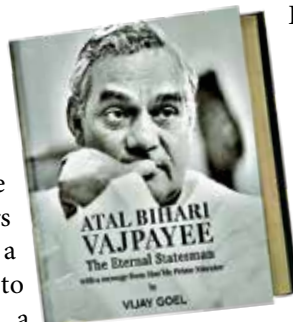


A rare gesture: Vajpayee praised Indira Gandhi for her deft handling of the 1971 war



Vijay Goel with Vajpayee, his mentor

begins in Gwalior in 1924 where Vajpayee was born, covers his student days at Victoria College and DAV College and his early association with the RSS. There are the Bharatiya Jana Sangh years under S.P. Mukherjee and Deendayal Upadhyay, and the protests of the 1960s and 1970s.



Vajpayee rose to the highest echelons of public life, but he rose from being a grassroots politician and what better way of tracing this narrative than through the rare pictures that Goel has assembled.

Goel has assembled.

His speeches at rallies were in a style of his own and drew crowds even in parts of the country his party didn't have significant followings.

Vajpayee's hallmark was his warmth and it showed in his dealings with his political

competitors as well. The book captures this, a particularly interesting picture being of Vajpayee and Indira Gandhi before the 1971 war.

The rise of regional politics and entities was recognized by Vajpayee and he foresaw the need to accommodate diversity rather than crush it. His inclusive nature was suited to governance through coalitions. It helped also that he was accepted personally across a spectrum of interests.

Goel's tribute has much to do with his own interest in photography. He shoots pictures. That he has a clear eye for a good book is evident from this one. He is a restorer too and has revived a *haveli* in Chandni Chowk in Delhi, a constituency he once represented.

*Atal Bihari Vajpayee: The Eternal Statesman* has been published by the *Heritage India Foundation*. It is available on Amazon. ■

# Why is a landmark law only on paper?

Jehangir Rashid  
Srinagar

**O**N April 9, 2011, the Jammu & Kashmir legislative assembly passed a landmark law, the Public Services Guarantee Act (PSGA), but it hasn't been implemented at the grassroots as yet, say activists of the J&K Right to Information Movement. If made operative, it will radically change governance and make it much more pro-people, they assert.

The PSGA aims to provide doorstep delivery of public services to the people of the state. The Act empowers citizens to enforce their right to receive public services in a time-bound manner. Penalties can be imposed on officials for non-compliance with its provisions. A range of government departments which interact directly with the people are covered by it.

"As on date 102 services are covered by this legislation including key departments, such as revenue, power, public health, consumer affairs, and transport. All these have been notified under the Act with clearly defined timelines of 15 to 45 days. There are also provisions for accountability, including penalties and compensation for delays," says Dr Shaikh Ghulam Rasool, founder and chairman of the J&K Right to Information Movement.

Fifteen years on, people continue to face delays, corruption and administrative indifference since the Act is not being taken seriously by the administration, he says.

The lackadaisical attitude of successive governments to the PSGA has compelled Dr Rasool to approach the J&K High Court with a Public Interest Litigation (PIL) through his advocate, Naveed Bukhtiyar.

"The PSGA was operationalized through reforms in 2012. It remains one of the most transformative governance

frameworks in the state. It redefines the relationship between the citizen and the government through a legally enforceable guarantee of time-bound public services," says Dr Rasool. Although the Act was passed in 2011 it took the General Administration Department



Dr Shaikh Ghulam Rasool: 'PSGA is not merely administrative but deeply democratic'

**The PSGA aims to provide doorstep delivery of services. Penalties can be imposed on officials for non-compliance.**

(GAD) of J&K seven years to mandate inclusion of services online for ease of doing business and for ensuring transparency and accountability. It was only on June 2, 2021 that the GAD finally issued a circular directing all departments to publish a citizens' charter and strictly monitor the implementation of PSGA.

The PSGA was passed during the tenure of the National Conference government headed

by Omar Abdullah in 2011. The People's Democratic Party-BJP coalition government which took office in 2015 did nothing to implement it.

Matters turned worse after the coalition government collapsed in 2018. For several years there wasn't an elected government in the state, which had been turned into a Union Territory. The National Conference came to power in October 2024 so people are now keen that it take steps to implement the PSGA.

"No records have been

Photo: Civil Society/Bilal Bahadur

benefits to citizens by mandating timely delivery of essential services. Much like the visionary Land to the Tiller Act of 1976 which transferred land directly to cultivators, the PSGA too shifts power from closed institutions into the hands of ordinary people, he points out.

But societies are not transformed by mere legislation on paper, it requires enforcement of farsighted legislation. "The promise of PSGA is not merely administrative, it is deeply democratic. It is about dignity, rights and justice at the grassroots. The time has come to move from intent to impact, from legislation to transformation," he adds.

Mohammad Anwar, a resident of Srinagar, says that when the PSGA was passed the people were hopeful that their issues or grievances would now be addressed in the shortest time possible.

"Under the PSGA the officers are held responsible for delay in delivery of notified services. The law also makes it clear that any officer who is responsible for providing a service should also ensure that there is no defect in the service being provided to the citizen. The Act is comprehensive and covers each and every aspect of ideal governance," says Anwar.

Some of the objectives of the PSGA are reducing corruption, increasing transparency and public accountability, empowering people to use their right to prompt delivery of public services, reducing the gap between administration and people, streamlining delivery of public services and strengthening democracy at the grassroots.

"We strongly urge the Omar Abdullah government, since this law was conceived and enacted under your leadership, it must now be your mission to take it to its logical conclusion. Strengthen it, expand and institutionalize it," says Dr Rasool.

He advises the state government to constitute a robust, independent commission to monitor implementation of the Act, notify more essential services and ensure that every public servant is held accountable to the people they serve. ■

# Coldpressed brings FPOs into markets

**Bharat Dogra**  
Karauli

IN recent years small producer companies have come up in Rajasthan to tap into the lucrative urban demand for coldpressed cooking oils. The state is India's largest producer of oilseeds and mustard is its signature crop.

In Karauli district of Rajasthan the Dang Vikas Farmer Producer Company (FPC), started a year ago, has set up a processing unit which churns out coldpressed mustard oil. The processing plant, located near Mandarayal, a small town, is attracting a lot of local attention.

The shareholders of the company are around 2,000 women farmers from Mandarayal, Sapotra and Karauli blocks. The processing unit was set up by SRIJAN (Self Reliant Initiatives Through Joint Action), an NGO which works on rural livelihoods, natural farming and social development.

The NGO helped small farmers here switch to growing mustard organically. But selling the crop at a decent price proved to be tough. So SRIJAN helped the women set up the processing unit to convert mustard seeds into oil and oil cakes.

The unit is ecofriendly. Farmers nearby bring their mustard seeds to the unit for processing. The farmers get a fair price and profits are shared with them. Payment is also prompt.

There's goodwill and enthusiasm for this effort among villagers here. Three women from the management committee, Rani, Pooja and Priyanka, said they were optimistic about better income for women farmers from this micro-enterprise. Along with the team leader from SRIJAN, Bhavani Singh, they talked about setting up a small plant for making cattle feed and grading farm produce for better prices.

The Dang Vikas FPC also sells its mustard seeds to a social enterprise which produces edible oils called Heart in Hills or HIH. Set up in 2023 by three young entrepreneurs, Satyam Bhandari, Mohit Rana and Rohit Singh, HIH buys oilseeds and produces a range of oils under its brand name, Foreka. Its main oil is mustard but it also produces and sells groundnut, sesame, and coconut oil.

The company's factory is in Hindaun city of Rajasthan. The oilseeds, preferably organic, are bought from nearby farmers. The oil is made using the cold-pressed technique. No blending



The edible oils are coldpressed and sold under the Foreka brand. There is no blending.

**'With FPOs transactions can be done in a spirit of trust. We collect produce from the farm gate, saving transport expenses for the farmer.'**

with other oils takes place. In a short while, HIH has earned praise from farmers and consumers.

"Farmers become vulnerable to exploitation when they take their produce for sale to *mandis* because of the number of middle men in the value chain. They don't get the price they deserve. We have established contact with FPOs so that transactions can be made in a spirit of trust. In most cases we collect produce from the farm gate, saving the farmer transport expenses," says Rana.

Farmers say that when they sold to middlemen they would get about ₹6,500 per quintal. HIH offers them ₹7,000 per quintal. HIH had a tough time convincing the farmers that they really would pay more. Women farmers feel that HIH doesn't just buy the mustard but tries to empower them. The mustard seeds are checked for pesticides and chemicals before procurement.

HIH also buys oilseeds from the Jhalkari Bai Mahila Kisan FPO, a women-owned FPO based in Mauraipur, Jhansi, in Uttar Pradesh that was incorporated in December 2020. As the company expands, more such reach-outs will be possible.

"Being fair and useful to farmers and protecting the environment and health are non-negotiable aims for us. We are social entrepreneurs and social objectives are integral to our business ethics," says Bhandari.

HIH plans to help farmer producer groups morph into companies. "The FPOs have noble intentions, good understanding, rural reach and understanding of farmer issues. But they need professional help to become businesses. Since we too have coped with some harsh market realities and unscrupulous elements we can link professional expertise to these practical realities," says Bhandari.

The three entrepreneurs received valuable support from the Buddha Institute, a SRIJAN initiative which funds enterprises that plan to uplift rural communities. Its Buddha Fellowship Program trains social entrepreneurs to create for-profit enterprises involving agriculture and rural livelihoods.

Bhandari says that as a fellow of the institute he received invaluable help in mentoring, funding, procurement and marketing. The institute also helped them set up the processing unit.

Bhandari, Rana and Singh come from Uttarakhand and their headquarters is in Kedarnath. They are currently procuring and selling millets from farmers in the state as well. At present they are working with 1,200 farmers and plan to scale that up to 10,000 farmers in Rajasthan and Uttarakhand.

In expanding and building capacity, they aim to retain their core values of putting farmer welfare first and providing healthy food. ■

DCB BANK

## DCB Niyo Savings Account

Zero foreign exchange mark-up on all international debit card transactions

Enjoy cash back upto **₹7,500 p.a.\*** on eligible UPI transactions in India



DCB Customer Care: Call 022 68997777 ■ 040 68157777 Email [customercare@dcbbank.com](mailto:customercare@dcbbank.com) Web [www.dcb.bank.in](http://www.dcb.bank.in)

Terms and conditions apply. \*Minimum Average Quarterly Balance (AQB) to be maintained in DCB Niyo Savings Account for cashback eligibility is ₹25,000. DCB Bank Limited

# WHEN THERE ARE ANGELS ON THE ROAD

## Volunteers as wardens in uniform keep Bengaluru traffic moving

Rashmi Gopal Rao  
Bengaluru

**M**OST days of the week the Banaswadi intersection is clogged with dense traffic. Cars, buses and three-wheelers arrive in a torrent as they make their way to residential areas, a software park and the airport on Bengaluru's northeastern fringes. During rush hour an unnavigable mess prevails.

On one such extremely chaotic evening, an ambulance ferrying a patient found itself stuck in the melee. Hemmed in from all sides, its siren yelping, the ambulance seemed to have little hope of getting through the traffic.

It was then that a wiry, youngish-looking man made his presence felt. He was wearing a white shirt and blue trousers and a reflective orange waistcoat with the words 'Traffic Warden' on it. Chethan Elvis Das purposefully walked into the thick of things, getting vehicles out of the way and opening up a path for the ambulance which then flew through.

There are in Bengaluru 740 traffic wardens like Das, of whom 75 are women. They help keep the city's traffic moving. They serve voluntarily in their free time but have an official identity under the Traffic Wardens' Organization or TWO, which falls under the police department.

Traffic wardens have a standard uniform and are trained in managing traffic. But they remain unpaid volunteers who are not on the police's rolls and can't issue tickets or take punitive action. Their enthusiasm, however, more than makes up for the lack of policing powers. They are buoyed by the spirit to serve society and tend to bring a gentler touch to policing.

Das vividly remembers getting the ambulance through as one of the high points of the 10 years he has spent being a warden. Episodes like this make the role rewarding. Indirectly, he helped save a life when otherwise he might have been doing something less socially valuable.

Das recalls: "That evening at Banaswadi was busier than usual. Traffic was streaming in from all sides. The sudden emergence of the ambulance added to the chaos. After some moments of great anxiety, we managed to successfully guide the ambulance out."

But that wasn't all. His effort didn't go unnoticed. Someone from the family of the patient, who was following the ambulance in a car, made it a point to express his gratitude to Das.

"Just as I stopped to catch my breath after the ambulance had passed, a gentleman made sure to stop and thank me, before rushing to the hospital," says Das, for whom it made his effort doubly worth it.

Das, 50, is a software engineer now serving as a director in a tech enterprise. He is the Assistant Chief Traffic Warden of the Banaswadi zone of the East Division. He recalls helping people reach on time for prayers during Eid. Many came back to say thank you with soft drinks and sweets.

"Such incidents make me feel that there is still a whole lot of goodness left in the world and our efforts are worthwhile," says Das.

"I joined TWO in 2016 after I met an acquaintance who was a traffic warden. He, incidentally, was an interior designer. I have always been inclined to do social work, so I was really excited when I got this chance. Apart from doing my bit to help people on the road, wearing the traffic warden's uniform is a matter of great pride and privilege," says Das.

Dr Omprakash S. has been a traffic warden since 2002. For him it is the next best thing to his dream of joining the police. He has degrees in management and law and works at Hindustan Aeronautics Ltd (HAL).

"I always wanted to join the police department, but fate had other plans. Being on the road gives me an immense sense of satisfaction as I help people get back home safe. People are very appreciative of our services and unknowingly this has really shaped my



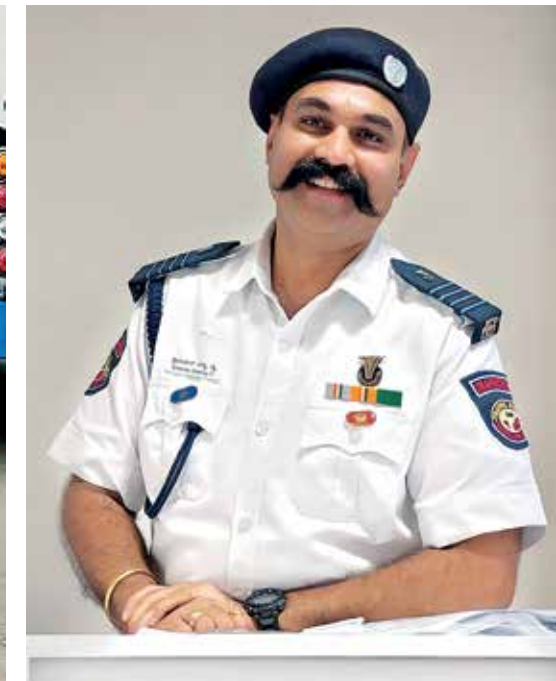
Chethan Elvis Das: 'There is a lot of goodness left in the world'



C. Sagayaraj, retired from BSNL: 'Volunteering is needed'



Shilpa Spoorthy, architect: 'I look forward to my duties'



Srinivas Shenoy Y, CEO of a tech firm: 'Volunteers are trained'

personality in a positive way. Apart from instilling a sense of discipline, I have improved my ability to resolve problems, my leadership and team building skills," says Omprakash.

Yet another interesting perspective is put forth by architect Shilpa Spoorthy. "I do not drive and hence many of my friends and family would say that I did not have a holistic picture of the challenges faced by the people who

actually drive. So, when I got a chance to join TWO, I took it up without hesitation. I am able to see what it is like to be in the midst of traffic and actually help ease congestion."

Spoorthy has been a warden for three years. Even though wardens are not authorized to impose fines, most of the time riders hastily put on their helmets the moment they see her.

"Even on days I am really tired, I look forward

to my duties as a warden because it makes me really happy," says Spoorthy, who switches cheerfully from her day job of designing buildings to directing traffic.

Giving back to society and doing something socially useful is a sentiment that motivates most wardens. Traffic is a big problem in Bengaluru. To be out in the midst of vehicles and bringing some order to the streets gives

wardens a sense of satisfaction.

Says Pradeep Devaraj, who is an IT professional and has been a traffic warden since 2010: "I always wanted to join the armed forces and so I like this role of warden. Along with helping people on the road, the experience of dealing with different kinds of people and situations is what makes the whole experience enriching."

"I recently faced abuse from a couple when I tried to report them via a public app for not wearing helmets. To my utter shock and surprise, the lady started accusing me of clicking her picture without permission. Luckily, her face was not captured and they left without creating a major scene. When I recall the incident, it still makes me shudder, imagining what would have happened if the situation had spiralled out of control. This is just a one-off incident; most of the time we have people coming and expressing their gratitude which is enough to keep me going," he says.

Arun Das, who runs an interior decoration firm, has been a warden for the past five years in the J.P. Nagar zone. He remembers his first day of duty as being quite terrifying.

"It was a bit overwhelming to stand in the midst of a sea of vehicles and although my hand was making a stop signal, I found vehicles whizzing past right under my nose and hand! Later I learnt that my hand was positioned a bit low and that I had to develop a more authoritative body language," he says.

"We get about two days of theoretical training after which we are given hands-on training on the road by a senior warden. After about three months, we are able to hold the show on our own. Also, it is in the initial days that many people try to ignore instructions but now most people are familiar and actually look out for me on days I am off duty!" adds Arun Das.

Volunteers are required to clock 16 hours of duty per week. Attendance is recorded through the WorkMate app and most traffic wardens do duty in a locality that is close to the place they live or work in. They also use tools like Google Maps to evaluate congestion which makes regulation more effective.

**BRIDGE WITH CITIZENS** With a population of over 14.5 million and counting, and close to a whopping 10.2 million vehicles, controlling traffic in Bengaluru is an overwhelming and daunting task. While the Bengaluru Traffic Police works tirelessly to regulate traffic, it is not enough and this is where the spirited wardens come in.

TWO was started in 1985 to serve as a bridge between the Bengaluru City Police and citizens. It is the country's only voluntary organization committed to traffic engineering and management, says Pandurang H. Rane, IPS (Retired), Chief Traffic Warden who has been heading TWO for the past year. Citizens who join are highly motivated and want to do their

bit by the city in their own way.

It is a firm commitment that the wardens make to the police department, says C. Sagayaraj, Additional Chief Traffic Warden. He recently retired as a senior accounts officer with BSNL, the government-run telecom company.

“While we sign up as volunteers, we also make a commitment from our end to discharge our duties to the best of our ability. Given the city’s growing population, volunteering is the need of the hour. It gives me happiness and pride since I help my co-citizens and also support police personnel. Also, our wardens have been able to develop an effortless rapport with citizens which augurs well for the whole cause of efficient and effective traffic management,” says Sagayaraj.

**VISION AND MISSION** TWO was conceived of by Dr Ajai Kumar Singh, an IPS officer, when he was Deputy Commissioner of Police (DCP) for Traffic. Its operations began in August 1985.

“The importance of public support and citizens’ participation in the smooth working of the police department cannot be underestimated,” he says.

“Irrespective of whether we are facing a problem of staff shortage or not, citizens’ cooperation is an invaluable asset and much required. And while it may not be suitable to have citizens directly involved in many areas of our operations, traffic is definitely an area where we can involve them,” says Dr Singh.

Recalling the conceptualization of TWO, Dr Singh says that when he took over as DCP Traffic, he happened to go through some old files in which there was reference to a similar organization in Kolkata and Coimbatore.

“This piqued my interest and I sought to find out more about the rules, set-up, roles and responsibilities of this organization. After extensive research, meetings and consultative sessions internally, we came up with a framework, guidelines and rules,” says Dr Singh.

“TWO was established through a Gazette Order by the state government of Karnataka. We appointed the highly capable Prof. C.E. Jestu as the first Chief Traffic Warden and since then the organization has grown from strength to strength. No funds were allocated for this endeavour and citizen volunteers wore only badges and caps at that time,” he recalls.

Headquartered at the Traffic Management Centre on Infantry Road in Bengaluru, TWO works in tandem with the Police Department, with the Commissioner of Police being its chief patron. The Chief Traffic Warden heads TWO and reports to the Joint Commissioner of Police (JCP) acting as per guidelines and protocols prescribed by the department.

The Chief Traffic Warden is supported by the Additional Chief Traffic Warden, Joint Chief Traffic Wardens and the Deputy Chief Traffic Wardens.



Traffic wardens help out on the road on special occasions like sports events and marathons



Pandurang H. Rane (seated) with, from left, Chethan Elvis Das, C. Sagayaraj, Srinivas Shenoy Y. ‘Our wardens did a commendable job on New Year’s Eve,’ says Rane.



Traffic wardens assisting citizens during rush hour

The scope of TWO is the entire city which, in turn, is divided into 10 divisions. It includes the East Division, West Division, North Division, South Division, Northeast Division, Southeast Division, Central Division, Whitefield Division, Vijayanagar Division, and HSR Division. Each division is further divided based on zones which are determined by the distribution of traffic police stations within the respective divisions.

TWO operates within this hierarchy with each division being headed by the Deputy Chief Traffic Warden. Each zone has a Zonal In-charge (ZI) who holds the rank of Assistant

Chief Traffic Warden. All traffic wardens of a zone report to the latter.

**FOR CITIZENS, BY CITIZENS** Bengaluru is the city of gardens. But to get to the Lalbagh Botanical Gardens for an early morning walk one needs to cross a busy traffic junction where five roads converge.

While there are traffic signals, the complexity comes from the fact that several roads face the West Gate. A particularly large central junction makes it difficult for pedestrians to cross with ease.

Says Bindu Rao, a morning walker:

“Personally, I have seen several senior citizens struggle to cross the road, since they are unable to judge where the traffic is coming from. However, their woes were mitigated when a traffic warden was stationed at the junction. The gentleman is not just friendly but also keeps nudging people to observe where the traffic is coming from. I find him very helpful. He uses a small handheld speaker to give instructions to pedestrians and ensure they cross the road safely.”

Traffic wardens are not paid. So, to qualify one has to have a stable income. It is a volunteering opportunity, not a career.

TWO invites applications and citizens of Bengaluru can apply online or offline as long as they meet the eligibility criteria.

“Specifically, people between 25 and 55 years of age can apply. The minimum qualification is a Class 12 or Pre-University Course certificate. Applications are screened and shortlisted candidates are called in for an interview after which there is a background check for successful applicants. The next step is a comprehensive two-day training where candidates are taught the nitty-gritty of traffic management and their roles and responsibilities explained. Finally, candidates procure their uniforms and are administered the Oath of Allegiance by the Commissioner of Police after which they are assigned their new orders,” says Srinivas Shenoy Y., Deputy Chief Traffic Warden & Head of Administration at TWO. Shenoy is the CEO at Credo Infotech and has been with TWO for two decades.



Karthik Reddy, Joint Commissioner of Police

Apart from regular traffic control, wardens help out as and when required by the area police station. This includes managing traffic for VIP visits, religious processions, marathons, walkathons, cricket matches and so on.

“Our wardens did a commendable job on New Year’s Eve and even the recent IISc open day which attracted close to 100,000 people,” says Rane. During the pandemic, traffic wardens were exemplary: involved in ration distribution, vaccination drives and the like.

Traffic wardens visit schools and colleges and educate youngsters about traffic rules, road safety, the importance of using safety gear and so on. There are similar educative sessions for employees of companies.

TWO also has an engineering wing where wardens give feedback on issues like unscientifically designed humps, accident-prone zones, faulty signals, unsafe pedestrian patches or even bottleneck spots that lead to congestion.

“We have several wardens who are road engineering and logistics experts due to their education and profession. After continuous study and evaluation of local spots, they have

the expertise to identify the issues facing a particular road, the root cause and potential solutions which can help resolve the problem,” says Shenoy.

Given that the backbone of TWO and its success is entirely dependent on the service of selfless citizens it is important to keep them motivated.

“While on most days, it is really fulfilling, sometimes there are people who question our authority. This happens more frequently if they see a lady regulating the traffic,” says Spoorthy.

It is not easy to be standing for long hours, sometimes in bad weather, and to have to also control instances of road rage.

“There are times when people run out of patience and threaten to report you but at the same time many people do come up and acknowledge the service we do. We take safety precautions like avoiding standing in the middle of the road, and we wear reflective jackets after dark, etc.,” explains Das.

So, it is not surprising that one of the main challenges TWO faces is a high rate of attrition which is over 30 percent.

“There are several reasons people become inactive; they become busy with their jobs, travel out of the city for work for long periods, get busy with family responsibilities and so on. And when priorities shift over time, we have people opting out on a regular basis,” adds Shenoy.

Therefore, the importance of having wardens motivated cannot be overemphasised. There is a points-based system accorded to wardens. High-performing wardens are awarded certificates and the names of star performers are mentioned on the TWO website.

There is also a system of promotion whereby Wardens can become Senior Wardens, Assistant Chief Traffic Wardens, and so on. They participate in the Independence Day and Republic Day parades.

The wardens band together as a cadre would. There are parades, a sports day and get-togethers. A spirit of being a force serving the city prevails among them.

The Bengaluru Police ascribes value to their contribution. Karthik Reddy, Joint Commissioner of Police for Traffic, says: “Apart from traffic regulation, they communicate effectively with the public, help us during special events and are also able to bring a holistic perspective regarding issues reported on the road. This is mainly due to the fact that they are well versed with ground realities and do not have a myopic view of the overall situation.”

“They also support us immensely with our Student Association for Road Safety (SARS) programmes where we educate schoolchildren on traffic and road safety. Their unstinting cooperation is a strength not just for us but for Bengaluru city as a whole,” says Reddy, a 2009-batch IPS officer. ■

## The other pollution



**DELHI  
DARBAR**

**SANJAYA BARU**

**W**HY is it that while the challenge of air pollution has been able to attract some public and policy attention in the national capital, there is as yet little focus on the other urban challenge — noise pollution? While noise pollution was officially identified as a major social problem in urban India a quarter-century ago, with the notification of the Noise Pollution (Regulation and Control) Rules, 2000, few state governments are willing to address it determinedly.

A sociological explanation offers itself up as a possible hypothesis. Air pollution does not discriminate between Lutyens Delhi, where everyone from the prime minister down lives, and a Karol Bagh or a Daryaganj. Noise pollution, on the other hand, is not as much of a challenge in the tree-lined avenues of upmarket Delhi while it rattles the mind across the metropolis.

Noise pollution rules notified under the Environment Protection Act, 1986, aim to stem the rising tide of urban noise through several sources, especially loudspeakers, traffic, construction, and public events. The rules acknowledged the fact that noise exceeding certain medically acceptable decibel levels not only disrupts peace but also affects the quality of life and health of residents, especially the young and the old.

The hazardous effects of sustained, repeated and high-decibel noise pollution are many and include hearing loss, inducement of stress, anxiety and contribute to cardiovascular and cerebrovascular disease. Individuals prone to nervous stress are particularly vulnerable to sharp and sustained noise. Noise pollution also delays recuperation and rehabilitation of ailing patients in hospitals, which is why traffic rules do not permit honking in the vicinity of hospitals. This rule is today observed in its callous breach.

Mention should be made that sustained neighbourhood noise has a deleterious impact on the learning abilities of children and youth

studying at school, college or at home. In fact, most urban neighbourhoods are no longer conducive to serious reading and study and the education of the young.

Living intermittently in a residential neighbourhood in New Delhi and Hyderabad, I have identified three prime sources of noise pollution that have become a public nuisance: (a) Vehicular traffic, especially honking by most drivers; the use of sirens by police vehicles escorting ministers and other senior government functionaries and political busybodies (a nuisance across the country); (b) loudspeakers deployed by mosques, temples and other religious places, as well as by political parties and social activists; and (c) construction activity.



*Sustained neighbourhood noise has a deleterious impact*

The use of loudspeakers in public places and residential areas has generally been limited in most cities to between 6 am and 10 pm. Any use after 10 pm requires special permission. This has not inhibited rampant use of loudspeakers through the night. During religious festivals loudspeakers are routinely deployed. This can range from loudspeakers blaring music from pandals with idols of a succession of Hindu gods to high-decibel speakers being placed in huge vehicles that carry idols around cities before their immersion, or accompany devotees such as the Kanwariyas. The blaring of film and religious music at exceedingly high decibels through the night have made these events a major cause of noise pollution in several cities across India.

Next to the Hindu community come the Muslims with muezzins calling the faithful to prayer with their often ill-trained and guttural voices, over multiple loudspeakers. Hearing

the screeching and often an audibly unmusical voice of a muezzin at a mosque, summoning the faithful to worship, in the early waking hours, one wonders how the faithful were summoned in the age before loudspeakers. In that distant era when humans did not have watches and alarm clocks the loud summoning of the faithful by a muezzin is understandable. But with everyone having a mobile phone does one require a loudspeaker to remind one that it is time for prayer, time to eat, time to fast?

When ministers drive around with police escort cars blaring sirens how does one expect the government and the police to be sensitive to the problem of noise pollution? Apart from the failure of authorities in checking noise pollution there is a cultural dimension to the challenge. Most Indians tend to be noisy.

This fact was recently highlighted by a directive issued by civil aviation authorities urging airline passengers to use earphones while listening to music or viewing entertainment on a flight. Indeed, one often has to request fellow passengers to speak softly so that one can read a book or get some shut-eye. The upwardly mobile Indian is a very noisy animal.

Urban India has become sensitized to an extent to the hazards of air pollution because it is beginning to feel the deleterious effect of toxic air, with rising incidence of lung disease. However, there is very little appreciation of how noise pollution is also a health hazard.

The time has come for a national campaign against noise pollution. Three immediate steps that can be taken and that would immediately reduce decibel levels would be (a) ban on use of loudspeakers at all places of worship, marriages and other social events at all times; (b) ban on loudspeakers being placed on trucks carrying idols during festivals; (c) ban on use of sirens by police vehicles escorting ministers and all other government vehicles, except ambulances.

Urbanization is not just about building the hard infrastructure of roads, flyovers, Metros, high-rise buildings, drainage and public parks. It is equally about creating a shared culture of urban living, of which minimizing noise is an important element. ■

*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.'*

## End of military dominance?



**LOOKING  
AHEAD**

**KIRAN KARNIK**

**A** prediction of the demise of military hegemony may seem premature, if not completely wrong, at a time when the headlines are all about how the US (and Israel) is battering Iran, threatening to bomb it "back to the stone age": President Trump's echo of Bush's words on Afghanistan. Yet, recent events provide enough evidence to make out a credible case for such a possibility as we look ahead.

What happens in Iran over the next few days — when this reaches your eyes — is uncertain. Yet, as this is being written, well over a month since the unprovoked US-Israel attack on Iran, the war has clearly not been won. While Iran's military capabilities have been deeply degraded and much of its nuclear facilities destroyed, it is far from being completely cowed down, strongly negating all demands for unconditional surrender. In fact, it has enough firepower and gumption left to continue targeting Israel as also US bases in and around the Gulf. Thirty-plus days into a devastating war, it is yet able to shoot down US planes and helicopters. The military might of the superpower is visible in the destruction it has wrought, but yet is incapable of forcing a surrender, or even stopping powerful retaliation.

In Ukraine, another (former?) superpower has been bogged down in a war of attrition for over three years. After an initial thrust, Russia has hardly been able to capture more territory and is, in fact, even now losing hundreds of soldiers. While its drones and missiles can hit practically any target in Ukraine, its own territory too is under attack, sometimes deep inside the country. Many, including Russia's leadership, thought that its troops would be in Kyiv within days of the invasion. Also, they expected that the Ukrainian president would be overthrown and the Russian army welcomed as saviours. Instead, he has become more popular than ever, and his grip on the country is stronger. The US made the same miscalculation about the regime in Iran. The murder of that country's top leadership and the war were expected to trigger an uprising within the country; instead, the regime now seems more entrenched.

Recent history shows that this is not an altogether new trend. The US has had to retreat — with its tail between its legs — from Vietnam in 1973 and, more recently, from Afghanistan in 2021. Between these, its invasion of Iraq and regime change in Libya are hardly seen as successful. While the US has tasted some success in Venezuela after its kidnapping and abduction of that country's president, it may be too early to declare victory. After all, it has not — after decades of threats, coercion, and sanctions — been able to force a regime change in next-door Cuba. Of course, the US has been cautious after its disastrous attempted invasion of the island — through Cuban exiles armed and financed by it — in 1961 in the Bay of Pigs.

The then-Soviet Union faced similar



*Military might inflicts terrible destruction but it can't force a surrender*

**Cyber and UAVs have enabled lesser powers and non-state players to inflict damage on more powerful nations.**

ignominy in Afghanistan, with the mighty superpower having to retreat in 1988. Though, before its superpower days, China too was rebuffed by Vietnam in their border war in 1979, withdrawing its invading troops in a month.

In the past, the superpowers of the day generally had their way. In 1884-85, under the Treaty of Berlin, the European colonial powers divided Africa amongst themselves. For about two centuries, the European superpowers held sway over their colonies across the world, till nationalism took root and forced them to depart. Yalta, in 1945, marked another milestone. The victorious allies of World War II — the Soviet Union, US, and UK — arrogated to themselves the right to decide who amongst

them would be "given" which countries, earmarking "spheres of influence". Despite the Cold War, this arrangement broadly sustained till the 1980s, when the decline of one superpower (the Soviet Union) increasingly led to global dominance by the other, the US (by then, the UK was no longer in the same category). The rapid rise of China and economic problems in the US have changed the scenario over the past 15 years.

As we shift our perspective from the rearview mirror to looking ahead, a major factor curbing the dominance of any superpower is not only the rise of an alternative one but the growth of technologies which enable new forms of asymmetric warfare. These, particularly cyber and unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs), have enabled lesser powers and non-state players to inflict deterrent damage on much more powerful nations. UAVs, in the form of drones, are game changers, being easy to produce (or procure and modify, if necessary, to carry bombs or explosives), portable, requiring minimal launch infrastructure, difficult to detect, and inexpensive. They can be used individually or in so-called swarms that are capable of so overloading detection, tracking and defensive measures that counteraction is never fully effective. With even minimal armament, they can cause immense damage to carefully chosen targets like fuel storage,

refineries, or power plants, and psychological impact through attacks on banks, hotels, government offices, or high-footfall locations like malls and stadia. The cost of countermeasures like interdiction are many times the cost of drones, leading to a huge asymmetric advantage.

Ukraine and Iran have used UAVs — drones and missiles — with great effectiveness to counter far superior military strength. Groups like Hezbollah and the Houthis too have similarly countered Israel with considerable effectiveness. We are yet to see cyber playing a similar role, but it can potentially be equally devastating in its impact. Further, it is more difficult to trace or attribute, can be done at even lower cost, and can be initiated by small groups (possibly even an individual).

Prepare, then, for the age of asymmetric warfare: of low-cost, high-tech, easily accessible, effective weapons. The bad news is that motivated groups can use them — with a little financing and support — to cause much harm. The good news (for most countries) is that this may end the days of bullying by big powers. ■

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

# A war of words



**WORLD  
VIEW**

**SHYAM BHATIA**

IN the current confrontation between the United States, Israel and Iran, the shift is both remarkable and unmistakable. The vocabulary of international politics has hardened into insult. Iranian leaders are described as “deranged scumbags”. At a Pentagon briefing, US Defence Secretary Pete Hegseth suggested Iran’s leadership was “desperate and hiding”, adding: “That’s what rats do.” The language may energize domestic audiences, but it signals something more consequential: a redefinition of the enemy.

Yet this erosion did not begin in Washington. It has deeper roots. Following the 1979 revolution, Iran’s Supreme Leader, Ruhollah Khomeini, routinely described the United States as the “Great Satan” and Israel as the “Little Satan”, framing them not simply as adversaries but as embodiments of evil. The language was theological, absolute and deliberately dehumanizing.

Diplomacy has traditionally drawn a distinction between governments and peoples. Even at moments of extreme tension, leaders preserved a minimal vocabulary of respect. This was not mere etiquette; it was strategic. Statesmen understood that once an adversary is completely dehumanized, negotiating with them later becomes politically — and psychologically — difficult.

History suggests that political language rarely collapses all at once. It deteriorates in stages. Opponents are first cast as immoral, then illegitimate. Eventually they are depicted as animals, parasites or disease. In Nazi Germany this progression became systematic. Under Joseph Goebbels, Jews were portrayed as vermin and infection — imagery designed to recast violence as cleansing. The objective was not rhetorical flourish but psychological conditioning: to make the destruction of human beings appear necessary.

The pattern has appeared in other political cultures. During the Cultural Revolution, opponents of the Chinese Communist Party were denounced as “running dogs” of imperialism — a phrase that reduced them to servile, sub-human creatures and stripped them of political legitimacy. The language was

crude, repetitive and ubiquitous, precisely because its purpose was not persuasion but conditioning.

Imperial language followed similar lines. British colonial officials and commentators routinely described Indians as “treacherous”, “degenerate” or “fanatical”, casting entire populations as morally suspect and politically unreliable. Such language did not always dehumanize in biological terms, but it served a similar function: to diminish, to distance, and to justify control.

The comparison is not exact, and today’s rhetoric does not carry the same intent or consequence. Yet the technique is recognizable. To describe adversaries as “rats”, “animals” or similar creatures is to draw from a well-established repertoire: the language of dehumanization.

The Middle East has long had its own lexicon of demonization, shaped by decades of



Pete Hegseth called Iranian leaders rats

ideological conflict and mutual hostility. The language on all sides has tended to frame opponents not simply as rivals, but as forces beyond the normal boundaries of politics.

Donald Trump has gone further still. In a recent statement, he referred to the “decapitation” of Iran and urged allies to “go to the Strait and just take it”. The language is not merely insulting; it is operational. It frames conflict not as containment or deterrence, but as removal.

What is striking in this phase is the convergence of this language across all sides. Washington, Tehran and Jerusalem increasingly describe one another not simply as adversaries but as entities beyond the normal bounds of politics. Once that boundary is crossed, the logic of restraint begins to weaken. Recent history shows how this shift can translate into action. The 2020 US assassination of Iranian general Qasem Soleimani marked a turning point: the targeted killing of one of the most

senior military figures of a sovereign state. It was justified as counterterrorism, but it also signalled a willingness to redefine the limits of acceptable state behaviour. The threshold had moved.

That is the deeper risk embedded in today’s rhetoric. When opponents are framed as vermin, animals or existential evils, their elimination begins to appear not only permissible but necessary. The movement from language to action is not inevitable — but it becomes easier, and over time it can begin to feel logical.

This was not always the case. During the Cold War, when nuclear confrontation was a constant possibility, leaders maintained a disciplined vocabulary. During the Cuban Missile Crisis, President John F. Kennedy spoke of “the Soviet government” and “Chairman Nikita Khrushchev”. The language remained formal even as the stakes approached catastrophe. The discipline of language helped sustain the possibility of restraint.

Earlier generations understood that words define the space in which diplomacy operates. Winston Churchill, for all his rhetorical force, directed his fiercest language at the Nazi regime rather than the German people. That distinction helped make post-war reconciliation possible. It preserved a conceptual boundary between enemy and humanity.

In many political cultures, such restraint remains instinctive. In Germany, the language of vermin and parasites is politically unthinkable because of its historical associations. French diplomacy avoids crude insult as a matter of tradition. Japanese political speech remains indirect even in moments of tension.

India’s first prime minister, Jawaharlal Nehru, once warned that words could become weapons. That warning feels newly relevant. Words do not merely describe reality; they shape it. They define who belongs within the bounds of humanity and who stands outside it.

Which raises a simple question: how will this moment be explained a decade from now? When textbooks describe this period, they may have to account not only for the conflicts themselves, but for the vocabulary that preceded them — why leaders spoke of other nations as rats, animals or Satans, and how such language became normal.

History offers a consistent lesson. When rhetoric descends into dehumanization, the distance between words and violence narrows. And once that distance collapses, events tend to move faster than anyone intends. ■

*Shyam Bhatia is the London correspondent of The Tribune.*

# Forest is not a zoo

**UMA SHANKER SINGH**

INDIA’s first night safari is likely to come up in the Kukrail Reserve Forest, Lucknow’s only green lung. Enclosures for the animals, roads, a tramway and a slew of visitor facilities will be built within the forest. As many as 4,808 trees will be cut. The Kukrail forest is home to diverse flora and fauna, including leopards, jackals, and over 200 bird species. It also houses an internationally recognized Gharial Rehabilitation Centre.

Increased human activity, bright lighting, even if muted like ‘moonlight’, noise, and visitors at the night safari will severely disrupt the habitat of the animals and cause them stress as well.

According to zoo management authorities, the creation of a night safari offers visitors a unique opportunity to observe catheermal, nocturnal and crepuscular species or non-diurnal species in specialized settings. Apart from entertainment, they claim, these specialized experiences contribute to conservation education, ecological awareness, and sustainable tourism by fostering a deeper understanding of animal behaviour and their ecological role.

A snapshot of nocturnal species to be displayed are mammals like bats, raccoons, leopards, flying squirrels, skunks and so on, and birds such as owls, nightjars, frogmouths, kiwi as well as moths, catfish, geckos, frogs.

Examples of crepuscular species (active at dawn/dusk) are deer, rabbits, hares, coyotes, foxes, lions, bears, hyenas; birds such as the common nighthawk, owl-nightjar, chimney swift; and insects like moths, beetles, flies.

The fact is that these species may not attract enough visitors because Indians are drawn more to seeing carnivores and big animals in the wild. Several research papers reveal this partiality.

A paper titled “Tigers, tourists and wildlife: visitor demographics and experience in three Indian Tiger Reserves” (Mathur et al) in *Biodiversity Conservation* (2017) reveals that domestic tourists formed 82.7 percent of visitors in all three Protected Areas studied. Tourists chose to have close encounters with large mammals, especially tigers. The primary attraction for visitors, apart from tigers, consisted of peacefulness, photography opportunities and bird-watching.

Tigers and leopards are among the most visited species in zoos globally. But, according

to a research study of eight big cats in Delhi’s National Zoological Park (Avni Gupta), both tigers and leopards displayed a high proportion of inactive and stereotypical behaviour — signs of acute stress, exacerbated by high visitor density.

People love to see big animals in the zoo but the night safari offers visitors the opportunity to observe catheermal, nocturnal and crepuscular species. Therefore, spending more than ₹1,500 crore on a Kukrail night safari project which does not have big animals may not be financially viable.

There are other issues to be considered.

Section 1c of the Night Safari Guidelines 2025 clearly says, “CZA (Central Zoo Authority) will not accord approval for creation of night safaris and safaris diverting forest land. The existing zoos may establish night safaris without causing any adverse impact on the animal facilities in the zoo.”



The Kukrail forest is vital green space for the city of Lucknow

The guidelines were framed in 2025 and the FCA (Forest Conservation Amendment) Act, 2023 is still under consideration by the Supreme Court by a February 19, 2024 interim order. The matter is sub judice and the government should wait till a final verdict is passed.

Section 21 of the Night Safari Guidelines 2025 states: “No same animal should be displayed for day viewing and in night safari.” The state government has not mentioned anywhere in its application to the Supreme Court the names of the animals in the night safari and day zoo, their procurement plan and the place of procurement.

In the chapter titled “Scope and Applicability”, the guidelines state: “All such operations, including those involving night safaris, must comply with the Wild Life (Protection) Act, 1972.” But the word ‘safari’ does not find mention at all in the 1972 act.

In its application to the Supreme Court, the

state government admits that Kukrail is in the centre of the city and surrounded by human habitation. The forest is highly vulnerable to encroachment. During 2014-17, several encroachments were removed and boundary walls constructed in critical stretches.

The UP government also states that no other accessible land of adequate size near the city with existing clusters of trees was available. Hence the proposed zoo and night safari site was identified within Kukrail forest over an area of 855.07 hectares. But it fails to say what local people feel about establishing a night safari in their area.

The adverse impact this may create on the neighbourhood has not been studied. The government admits that the project is expected to attract approximately 4,000 visitors per day on weekdays and around 8,000 visitors on weekends and holidays. This may result in devastating social and health impacts.

The Kukrail forest extends over 2,027.4 hectares and has been developed through sustained plantation efforts by the Forest Department. It forms a green lung and vital urban green landscape for the community. Hence, their opinion is extremely important. An environment impact assessment (EIA) should be undertaken.

According to the state government: “Soil of the project site is characterized by alkaline, poor-quality soil dominated by *Prosopis juliflora* (vilayati babool) shrubs with a few tall trees suitable for meeting the light-concealment requirements of the night safari.”

Research papers support the assertion that *Prosopis juliflora* acts as a pioneer species in alkaline and degraded soils and is eventually replaced by native broad-leaved species in later stages of ecological succession. Therefore, it is a successional species. *Prosopis juliflora* grows well in areas having high salinity or alkalinity levels.

According to the Chief Wildlife Warden the total number of trees at the project site is 24,274 of which 4,808 trees are proposed to be felled and 877 trees are to be translocated. If the project site has poor soil quality, there is no need to fell a small shrub and definitely not trees. Trees ameliorate soil. The state government has also not provided an enumeration list of trees according to species and diameter class.

The Kukrail forest should be preserved in its natural state. At a time when temperatures are rising due to climate change it is not wise to destroy Lucknow’s only green lung. ■

*Uma Shanker Singh is director and North India head, Vanashakti*



Gaurang Shah and Lavina Baldota explaining their painstaking work. Unlike painting, weaving does not allow for a second chance

## Masterpiece becomes a saree

### Weaving Raja Ravi Varma paintings into khadi

AIEMA TAUHEED

MERGING Mahatma Gandhi's khadi cloth and Raja Ravi Varma's iconic paintings sounds impossibly radical. But that's what two textile revivalists, Gaurang Shah and Lavina Baldota, set out to achieve. It took them all of six years to weave intricate paintings into cloth, using the jamdani technique, and create a collection of remarkable sarees.

Eighteen such sarees were recently displayed in Kolkata at an exhibition titled 'Khadi, a Canvas'. Curated by Baldota and Shah, the exhibition was presented by TRI Art & Culture, a nonprofit, along with the Abheraj Baldota Foundation.

In 2014, Baldota approached Shah, asking if he could recreate the works of Raja Ravi Varma in weaving. Shah, who has worked with textiles for around 26 years with over 7,000 artisans in 18 states, told her it was near impossible.

Pointing to the intricate detailing, facial expressions and folds of clothing on the paintings, he said it was unviable to replicate such detailing with thread.

Yet, he took it on. Conceived as an ode to Mahatma Gandhi on his 150th birth anniversary, the work had to be completed by October 2, 2019 — in khadi, using jamdani and natural dyes — reflecting the shared legacy of Mahatma Gandhi and Raja Ravi Varma.

Often called the father of modern Indian art, Raja Ravi Varma, who was related to the royal family of Travancore, democratized Indian art by creating lithographs of his paintings which were then printed on calendars, postcards and even matchboxes.

"He travelled the length and breadth of our country to capture the nuances and attire of every community in India that was struggling to find its identity under British rule," explained

Muskan Kaur Sukarchakia, co-curator at TRI Art & Culture.

Varma combined Eurocentric realism with an Indian sensibility. The idea of what gods and goddesses from mythological stories, or from the epics, looked like came from Raja Ravi Varma's style and form, and shaped popular imagination.

At the exhibition, Shah explained the painstaking work that went into replicating Varma's paintings on khadi. It took months for him just to understand what the project demanded. Then, 54 rare and intricate paintings were selected.

Each painting required its own colour mapping. Elaborate shade cards were created. Recreating natural dyes was a challenge since there were just five basic colours — indigo, yellow, red, black and green. The project demanded far more: skin tones, pinks, peaches, and countless variations of

greens, blues and more.

Shades were developed by master craftsman Junaid Khatri from plant and vegetable sources. Dyeing alone took nearly 10 months, a meticulous process of mixing precise shade combinations at controlled temperatures. Yarn dyeing took place in Ajrakhpur, and yielded nearly 600 shades and 200 kg of different types of yarn.

The paintings were woven onto the *pallu* of each khadi saree. Shah said that about five yarns were used to create a three-dimensional effect on the *pallu*: cotton khadi for the basic cloth, silk for backgrounds, muga for scenery, tussar for branches.

The weaving demanded extreme precision. A single line of weft could take an entire day to complete. When the project began in 2014 in Srikakulam, the designs were shown to experienced weavers. They declined, calling the detailing impossible.

Shah had been working since 2003 in Ponduru, a village known for its khadi and jamdani. A single weaver asked him for work. Gradually, the entire settlement joined in, taking on the challenge of weaving the sarees. By 2010, nearly 150 looms were running, and the village was thriving on steady employment. Tribal women, who did not know weaving, approached him, asking to be trained after seeing the economic stability weaving had brought to Ponduru.

Shah needed more weavers. Forty women were trained in the art of jamdani. "In fact, the tribal women proved to be so adept that they now do intricate jamdani designs which my traditional weavers had refused to do," says Shah.

"In 2014, when we began our project, our traditional weavers refused to participate. They said they could not do these designs. The women happily took it on. They had this fire in them to prove a point. People from the weaver community have rejected it, we will get it done, was their attitude," added Shah.

In three years, they completed 35 of the 54 sarees and the collection was released on October 2, 2019. Unlike painting, where colour can be layered or a line corrected, weaving allows for no such second chance. One misplaced thread cannot be undone. Absolute perfection is required, Shah points out. Pure *zari* was used. That precision extended to visual fidelity. The saree borders worn by women in Raja Ravi Varma's paintings were re-created on the *pallus* that carried their imagery.

Even the mistakes were displayed,

documenting the story of the process. Images flipped — an error that became part of the learning curve. Another *pallu* exposed the absence of a defining black outline. At first, the team relied solely on shading, assuming the forms would emerge on their own. They didn't. Only later did they begin outlining the figures in black, bringing definition to faces, folds and contours.

Raja Ravi Varma's *Radha Krishna* was one of the paintings woven onto a saree. To recreate



The weaving demanded extreme precision. A line of weft could take an entire day

**The paintings were woven onto the *pallu* of each khadi saree. Different yarns were used to create a three-dimensional effect on the *pallu*: khadi, silk, muga and tussar.**

the translucent cotton saree worn by Radha in the original painting, through which her pearl necklace is faintly visible, the artisans worked with astonishing precision. The thread used for the weave, explained Shah, is only one percent lighter than the saree itself. "We wanted everything in exact measurement," he said, "but the weavers were a step ahead of us."

**ART AND AZADI** Sukarchakia asked a rhetorical question: "How does an image find itself in the collective conscience of a nation, and what does it truly mean to democratise the arts?" She pointed to Raja Ravi Varma as a pivotal figure in that process.

He was deeply invested in ensuring that people could access his art and understand the

skill behind the art as well.

Ravi Varma was much sought after by royal families. He had more work than he could handle. It was on the advice of Dadabhai Naoroji that he established a chromolithographic printing press with his brother, Raja Raja Varma, who came in as the assistant and manager.

They appointed a German printmaker, Fritz Schleicher, to run its daily operations. The press produced calendars and postcards for clients in India and abroad, circulating Varma's imagery at scale. His iconography soon permeated popular culture — appearing on postcards, matchboxes, textile labels, and later influencing early Indian cinema, including the work of pioneer Dadasaheb Phalke. "In fact, *Amar Chitra Katha* was developed by the Raja Ravi Varma printing press," said Sukarchakia.

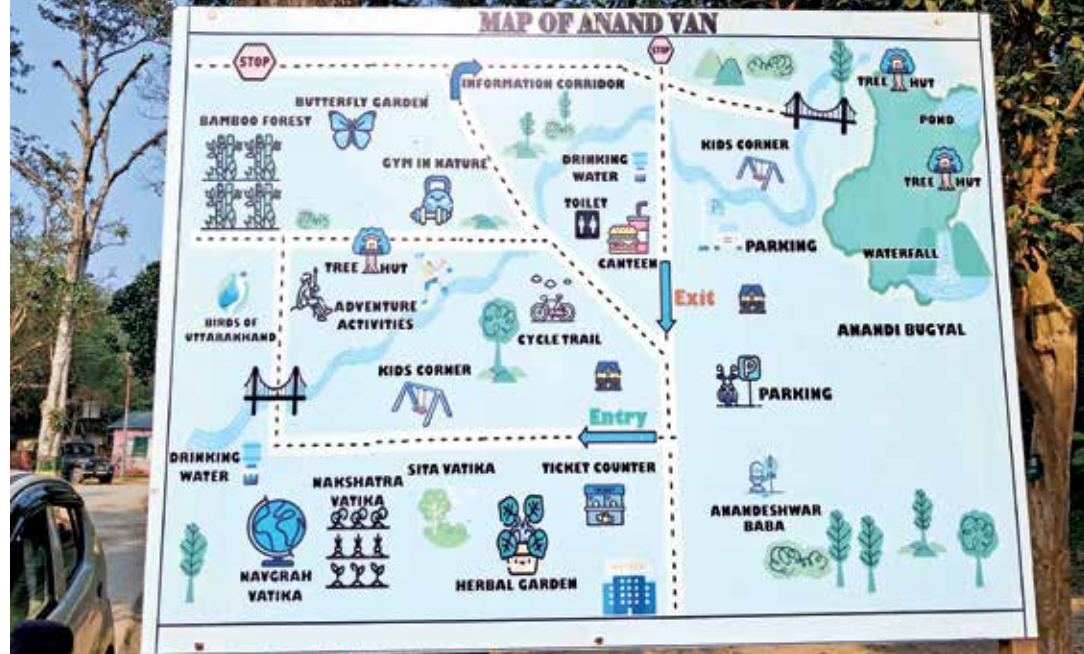
Original chromolithograph prints from the Raja Ravi Varma press, alongside rare lithographic stones depicting Shiva and Parvati, Ram and Sita, and Lord Murugan were on display. There were three such mammoth stones, weighing about 100 kg, sourced from a collector.

The exhibition also showcased Raja Ravi Varma's global cultural influence through early 20th-century objects including Japanese porcelain Ningyo dolls, German Bisque porcelain figures and Art Nouveau Majolica ceramic tiles from Japan. "So what was happening was, because there was such great demand for these symbols of religious iconography, that a lot of manufacturers in Japan and Germany started creating these dolls and selling them in India," said Sukarchakia.

As we headed to the first floor, the stairway had a *charkha* against a poem by poet Navkirat Sodhi, despairing the turn his country has taken.

*'What this land has come to  
The wheel now churns  
Lies after lies...'*

The *charkha* was not just a tool for spinning khadi. It offered space for reciting poetry and for discursive talk during British rule. Next to it hung three pieces of khadi of varying yarn counts. Visitors were invited to touch the white khadi pieces. "It's 300, 400 and 500 count of khadi, which is the finest possible in India today," said Baldota. A weaver from Bengal was weaving on a loom, quietly depicting the intense concentration, time and effort that goes into weaving. ■



Anand Van took three years to complete

## Urban forest to soothe Doon's city blues

RAKESH AGRAWAL

JUST 15 km from the centre of Dehradun, an urban forest has sprung up in the Jhajra Forest Range close by. It has dense greenery, walking and cycling paths, medicinal and aromatic plants and replicas of Uttarakhand's biodiversity.

Named Anand Van, the forest is of 50 hectares. It's been raised by Jai Raj who served as the state's principal chief conservator of forests. After he retired in 2020, Jai Raj and his wife, Sadhna, wanted to nurture a forest which would embody inner peace, spiritualism and meditation with nature.

The project took three years to complete and cost ₹43 lakh. It was inaugurated on October 17, 2020. Apart from peace and spirituality the forest creates awareness about local flora and fauna and, it is hoped, will bring down Dehradun's rising AQI. Anand Van is being managed by the Forest Range Office in Jhajra, Dehradun Division.

There is an entry fee of ₹50 for adults and ₹20 for children between 10 and 15 years of age. Parking costs extra. At the entrance is a temple of Maa Bala Sundari, a local Hindu deity. After walking for a while amidst tall trees you reach the Nakshatra Vatika. It has been created to honour Indian astrology or *jyotish*. It features 27 Nakshatras or lunar constellations in Indian astrology, each linked to specific stars, deities and traits that influence personalities.

There is a large blue globe at the centre surrounded by 27 plants. "Plants, trees or

herbs traditionally linked to one Nakshatra, as per ancient Indian texts, create a botanical representation of each celestial body. We have put up panels explaining Vedic astrology to visitors in a serene natural setting," says Kishan Singh Negi, who works for the forest department.

The Vatika is supposed to promote self-awareness, spiritual reflection, and harmony with cosmic energies through nature. Next to it is a Sita Vatika.

Dotted throughout the forest are replicas of animals and birds found in the hills: the tiger, snow leopard, musk deer, red panda, the Himalayan Black Bear as well as pheasants like the Himalayan monal and kalij.

Interestingly, a large grassland has also been recreated in the midst of the forest. Jai Raj has named it Bugyal which actually means a high-altitude meadow. It was not possible to nurture a real bugyal in the Shivaliks. At one corner of the grassland is a watch tower which people can climb to get a bird's eye view of the entire 50-acre forest.

There's also a Kids' Corner with swings and slides for children, a Picnic Spot with a waterfall nearby and adventure activities. Benches are made of logs. The forest attracts local and foreign tourists. "We are thrilled to be here," says Sophie Martin, a French tourist. "This place integrates spiritualism, religiosity, and nature. It is an oasis of peace."

The urban forest is a remarkable legacy to leave behind by the forest department, often accused of balding the hills, and the former chief conservator of forests in the state. ■

**A tribal mela at Sunder Nursery**  
*The historical grounds of Delhi's Sunder Nursery with the Humayun's Tomb in the background played host to a rambling tribal mela of art, handlooms, craft and cuisine.*

*Tribal groups came from across India and South Asia with striking products such as the Sri Lankan masks below.*



### Masks for your wall

Ranasinghe Muhandiram Palitha, from the southern part of Sri Lanka, displayed a variety of masks in his stall in different colours, sizes and expressions. There were other knick-knacks too but it was the masks staring down at onlookers which lured curious buyers.

Palitha is a wood carver and mask painter. The island nation has a rich heritage in mask making. His enterprise, Lanka Masks, makes three types of masks: Raksha, Kolam and Sanni. The Raksha masks frighten away dangers such as snakes, Kolam masks are for plays which include dance, and Sanni masks depict demons of 18 different illnesses. The masks are perfect as décor, or as an emblem of safety.

Contact: +94-912256205, +94-779073032  
Email: lankamasks@gmail.com;  
Address: Lanka Masks, 85/2 Galle Road, Ambalangoda - 80300, Sri Lanka

### Aggregator from Maharashtra

Shabari Naturals' stall with two earnest managers and just a sprinkling of products belied its true strength. Go to its website and it looks like the Amazon of tribal products. Mayur Bhoje explained that Shabari is based in Nashik, Maharashtra. The government found that tribal producers had a tough time reaching markets. So, the state came up with Shabari Naturals, a collective marketing and branding platform. Ninety percent of sales proceeds are given back to producers, eliminating middlemen. It has also helped producers standardize and value-add their products. Mahua has received special attention and a spate of new products like mahua soap, seed oil, a pain reliever, and chocolates have been created, and attractively packaged to reflect the identity of tribal groups.

You can also buy heritage wines made from mahua and strawberry, rare black rice, and three types of forest honey.

Take a deep dive into their extensive website and order online.  
Contact: www.shabarinaturals.com



### From beaded jewellery to rice vinegar

Sitting inside their small stall filled with an array of colourful products, two girls from Arunachal Pradesh caught our eye. Their micro enterprise had an important-sounding name, House of Macnok. Nouthai Massang explained that they specialized in making beaded jewelry, key chains, bracelets, crocheted items, embroidered frocks, souvenirs, baskets and rice vinegar. House of Macnok was started by Ninna Lego and around 500 artisans, all women, work for it.

"We design everything ourselves and we teach women at home how to make things. We have a shop in Pasighat. Some of us earn a regular income and the freelance artisans get paid per piece," said Nouthai. The response at the tribal bazaar was so good they'd run out of visiting cards, the girls said.  
Contact: House of Macnok - 8414902334, 8486042194  
Email: macnok2017@gmail.com

### Unusual sarees from Jharkhand looms

A line-up of handwoven cotton sarees in distinct colours and patterns was what three women from Jharkhand were hoping to sell. They were from the Marsal Prathmik Bunkar Sahyog Samiti Ltd, a Self-Help Group (SHG) from Kajri village in Hazaribagh, Jharkhand. "We are 25 Santhal and Oraon women who decided to earn a living by learning weaving. So, we went to West Bengal, identified a master weaver and brought him to our village to teach us. Now we can weave ourselves," said Sunita Lakra.

To make their sarees distinct, they took a decision to create motifs which would typically reflect their tribal culture. "That way our sarees and cloth get a distinctive identity. We weave mountains, trees, our local biodiversity and emblems into our sarees," she explained.

Coal India funded 25 looms. The dyes



are also all natural, thanks to an initiative by Coal India's Project Prakrit, Handloom Cluster Development Program.  
Contact: Suresh Murmu - 8709510195

### Naga wines made from fruit and honey

A family enterprise from Nagaland attracted attention for their unusual range of wines made with fruits and wild honey. Their brand name is Tsuipi. The wines are fermented in casks for a year, said Lovi Achumi who heads the enterprise. She went to Chennai to study how wines are processed, returned home and set up Tsuipi. The fruits that are transformed into wines include cherry, dragon fruit, gooseberry, mulberry, passion fruit and peach. "All our fruits are locally sourced and the honey is from the forest," said Lovi.

The bottles come in different sizes but sample packs of 350 ml are also available. One of Lovi's brothers designs and handles



packaging while the other helps with marketing.  
Contact: 9856316569; 8787687578; email: tsuipifoods@gmail.com  
Address: Tsuipi Food Products, Industrial Estate Colony, Dimapur - 797113, Nagaland

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.

## Roti Bank

An Indore-based informal initiative run by 12 working professionals who take time out every evening to distribute meals in government hospitals. Since 2015, the Roti Bank has been serving meals to around 250 patients or needy people. Cooked hygienically, the food is prepared without garlic or onion. You can support this effort by financing a meal on special occasions like birthdays, marriage anniversaries, etc.

Phone: 9926868935  
Email: rotibank216@gmail.com

## SABAR Institute

Based in West Bengal, it was founded by a group of social science researchers and academicians committed to using data and evidence-based research to improve the lives of disadvantaged communities in India. They also run a campaign called Know Your Neighbour, aimed at fostering communal harmony through dialogue and intermingling.

Phone: 8585859971  
Website: www.sabarinstitute.org

## Association For Social And Human Awareness

Established in Jharkhand, ASHA works with women and children especially those hailing from tribal communities. Its major issues of intervention are: preventing witch-hunting, human trafficking, promoting education, building awareness, empowering women and improving the health of women and girls. It also ensures safe migration, converges its efforts with developmental programmes, collaborates with local self-governance and helps capacity-building of marginalized communities.

Phone: 7979090915  
Website: www.ashajharkhand.org

## Chhanv Foundation

Based in Noida, it supports acid attack survivors through medical care, legal aid, education, and

counselling. Born out of the Stop Acid Attacks campaign, it combines rehabilitation with advocacy. Its Sheroes Hangout cafés, run by survivors, create dignified livelihoods while challenging stigma and raising awareness against acid attacks.

Phone: 97197900302  
Website: www.chhanv.org

## Khamir

Founded in Kukma village in Kachchh, Gujarat, Khamir works to strengthen the region's artisanal traditions. Started in 2005, it serves as a platform for crafts, cultural practices, and ecology, supporting artisans through collaboration, skill-building, and market access, alongside promoting sustainable, community-rooted livelihoods.

Phone: 9099908043  
Website: www.khamir.org

## The Banyan

Based in Tamil Nadu, it works with homeless persons with mental illness. It provides crisis intervention, housing, healthcare, and long-term community support, enabling individuals to move from the streets to recovery, social reintegration, and independent living with dignity and sustained care.

Phone: 9677121099  
Website: www.thebanyan.org

## Akshaya Patra Foundation

The Akshaya Patra Foundation, headquartered in Bengaluru, works to eliminate hunger in schools and support education. It has now expanded its services to schools in 16 states. Founded in 2000, the foundation implements the Central government's PM POSHAN programme, providing nutritious mid-day meals to children in government schools and addressing malnutrition and improving school attendance.

Phone: 8139924567  
Website: www.akshayapatra.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 support 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.

Website: www.butterfliesngo.org  
Phone: 999321098

## 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

## 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

## Brave Souls

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

## 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

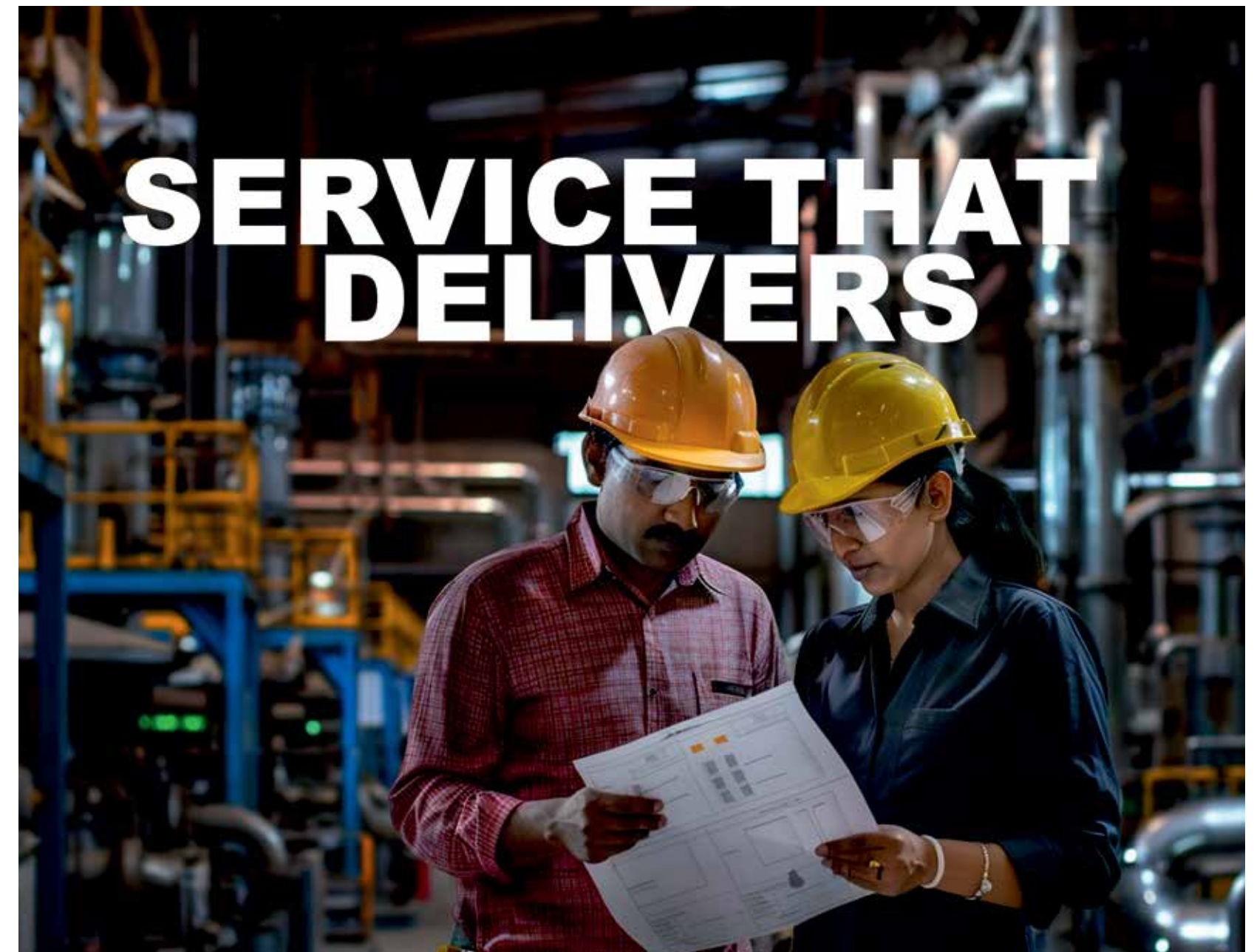
Founded to serve vulnerable communities in conflict-affected regions, Human Aid Society is a Jammu & Kashmir-based humanitarian aid and development organization working in the areas of education, women's empowerment, healthcare, disaster relief and rehabilitation. It was started in 2004 by Bashir Ahmed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

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

## HIV-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



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

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



Process and Energy Efficiency | Environment

www.forbesmarshall.com



**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