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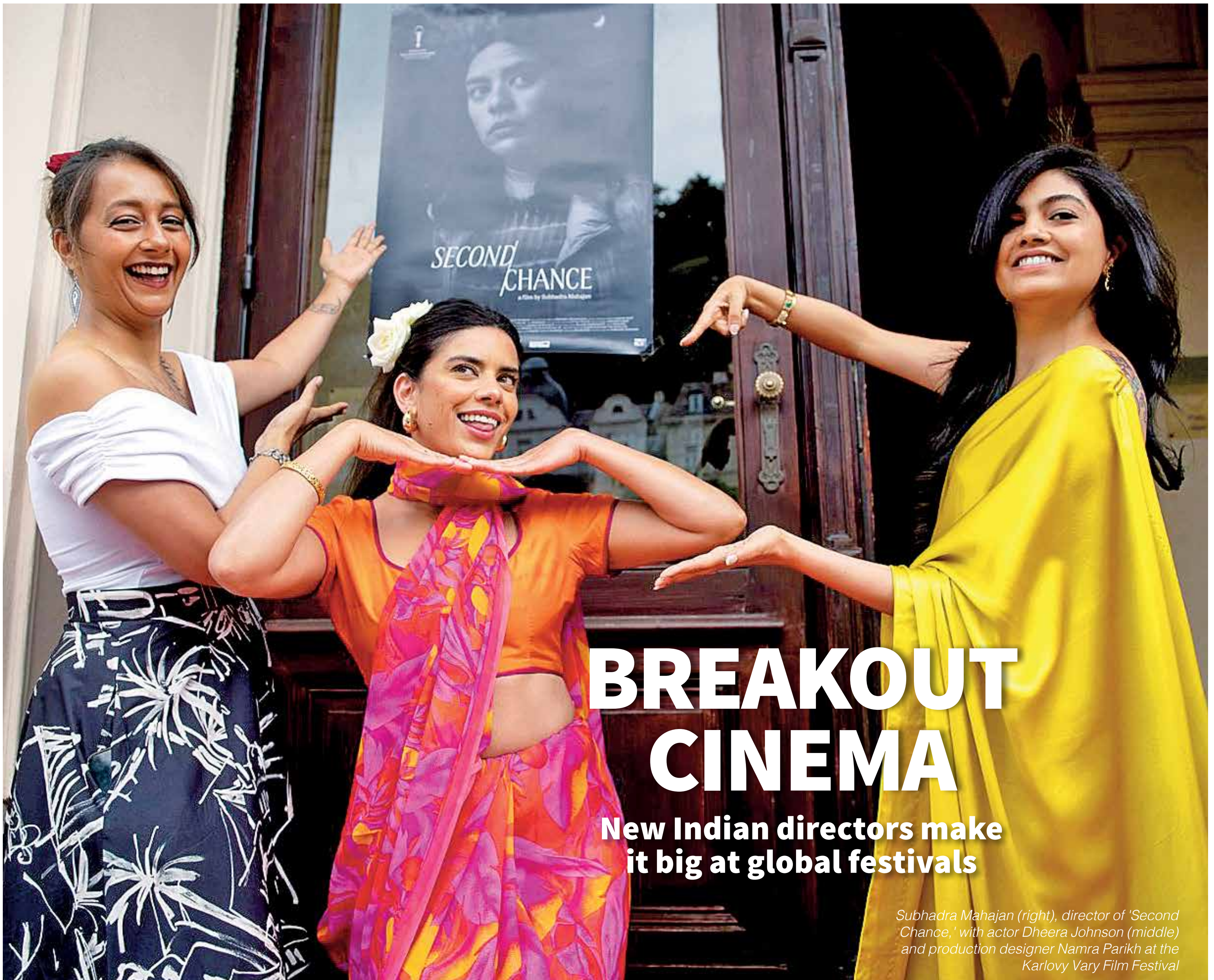

BREAKOUT CINEMA

New Indian directors make it big at global festivals

Subhadra Mahajan (right), director of 'Second Chance,' with actor Dheera Johnson (middle) and production designer Namra Parikh at the Karlovy Vary Film Festival

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BREAKOUT CINEMA

Unconventional Indian directors, many of them women and from small towns, have been walking the red carpet at international film festivals. We present a bouquet of new talent. 20

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response@civilsocietyonline.com
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Civil Society
READ US. WE READ YOU.

A new year

AS 2026 kicks in, what should we be celebrating? It's a tough call, swamped as we are by toxic air, collapsing infrastructure and India's largest airline going to pieces. Judging by the mess around us, it has been a dismal year and indications are the next will not be much better. Yet, we searched for a cheerful cover story to alleviate the gloom. It was cinema which came to our rescue. Unknown films from India have been basking in success at international film festivals. These filmmakers, many of whom are women, come from small-town India with real stories to tell.

It is the kind of bright spot to hold on to. Poor governance weighs heavily on us, but resilient and talented individuals offer hope and show that we can be world class. It makes us feel good.

Similarly, while cities are in a mess, yet there are some silver linings. A story we have been putting out thanks to Kirtee Shah's webinars on urbanization has been about the Jaga Mission in Odisha cleaning up slums and getting slum dwellers land rights. It hasn't made headlines and is not celebrated enough. But it is an example of what governments can do to make our cities not just more livable but inclusive as well.

So also the story from Karnataka, where doctors in district hospitals are being trained to be specialists. It has taken some years but 300 doctors have qualified in specialties that are needed in rural areas. Dr Alexander Thomas told us all about it in the Interview of the Month. Once again, as with the Odisha example, this is an outlier. But it is outliers which show the way forward.

In our Insights section, Sanjaya Baru questions Indian politicians making promises that will get fulfilled sometime in the future. What about here and now?

For all the year-round hype about India's future, January nudges us to be true to ourselves. Let us face it, in India none of the hallmarks of a progressive and modern economy are in evidence. The needle has barely moved on education, healthcare, transportation, housing, environment and public hygiene. The toxic cocktail that engulfs the capital is a stern reminder of the general collapse of cities big and small. If we can't get urbanization right, what growth and development can we hope for? Monopolies flourish, as we have recently seen with Indigo's shenanigans. Its glitzy board has shown no acountability. Flyers of course, but Indian consumers in general, are passed over.

Blame ourselves we must for we choose the people who represent us. Both opposition and government have performed dismally in addressing the things that matter. An MP of the Congress turning up in Parliament with a stray dog just to get attention must surely be the lowest point in an ongoing vaudeville.

Publisher
Umesh Anand

Editor
Rita Anand

News Network
Shree Padre, Saibal Chatterjee, Jehangir Rashid, Susheela Nair, Kavita Charanji

Desk & Reporting
Aiema 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
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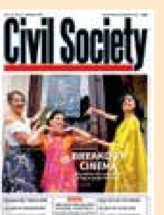

LETTERS

Troubled hills

Your interview with Dr Purnachandra Rao, 'Science shows a major earthquake is overdue', was disarmingly honest. The Himalayas are silently reminding us that they are still very much alive, and occasionally irritated. Dr Rao tells us what every scientist knows and every citizen politely ignores: Earth doesn't care about our pilgrimage routes, expansion of hotels, or ambitious road-widening projects. It simply keeps pushing tectonic plates at around 5 cm a year, the geological equivalent of a firm and patient "I warned you."

The central message from the interview is profound and painfully simple: earthquakes don't kill people — our architectural overconfidence does.

Nature releases stress; humans accumulate it through bad engineering, weak regulation, and the shared national habit of believing guidelines are 'suggestions' rather than survival manuals.

There is something philosophical in this. As if Earth practises impeccable emotional hygiene while we, self-proclaimed rational species, continue to stack cement on loose Himalayan soil and hope gravity will look the other way.

Yet, beneath the warnings lies an unexpectedly uplifting truth that our science is solid, the tools exist, and awareness is our only real superpower.

Dr Rao isn't predicting doomsday; he's nudging us, gently and scientifically, toward humility. In a world where glacial lakes burst, clouds shed water like overturned buckets, and mountains sink under the weight of our enthusiastic over-building, perhaps the wisest stance is not fear, but respect. Respect for terrain, respect for nature's rhythms, and for the inconvenient fact that democracy gives us rights, but not the right to ignore physics.

It's ironic how humanity behaves. We worry about asteroids hitting our Earth but build multi-storeyed hotels on landslide debris. On television we debate whether climate change is real while cloudbursts rewrite geography in minutes. We say "earthquake preparedness" with the same casual optimism we reserve for "I'll start exercising next month."

Still, the message is ultimately hopeful. Awareness can save lives. Codes can be followed. Buildings can be retrofitted. And humility, that rare, seismic emotion, can settle the ground we stand on more effectively than any engineer. The Himalayas are speaking. Not in prophecy, not in panic, but in pure, unembellished geology. The question is: Are we listening, or waiting for the mountains to raise their voice?

Venkat Manthripragada

Many thanks to *Civil Society* and to Dr Purnachandra Rao for this detailed and insightful perspective of what lies ahead. Dr Rao's explanation for the disasters we are seeing happen in the Himalayas with increased frequency is very clear.

Sanjay Jesrani

IN PASSING SNOWMAN IN A PADDY FIELD

Photo: Civil Society/Umesh Anand

Everyone celebrates Christmas their way

Illegal union

I read Bharat Dogra's excellent report, 'India's gentle battle to end child marriage', with interest. Recently there was a recent article in the *New York Times* on this subject. The Hare Krishna sect home-schooled a 10-year-old girl and got her married. A 13-year-old Muslim girl was married off to her 26-year old cousin.

In the US, different states have different laws on child marriage. It is banned in more than 20 states. I discussed this with the League of Women Voters in Illinois. They were not aware that in our home state one could get married at the young age of 16 with permission from both parents.

India has 1.4 million cases whereas we have around 30,000 such cases. However, teenage pregnancy continues to be an issue and often results in abortion. Our high schools have sessions by the local and national health care departments educating our girls not to indulge in premarital sex. The sessions, with educational role-playing, yield good results. Child marriage should also be handled by India as a public health issue. Thank you for covering this topic from the Indian perspective.

Porus Dadabhoy

Capital AQI

Chandra Bhushan's piece, 'Delhi's bad air: Govt has to get down to serious work', was practical and insightful. We know what needs to be done. Are the Central and several state governments focused on an action plan? Do they have the political will to tackle all the root causes of toxic air seriously and start delivering if not improving outcomes from the next quarter for the years to come? I have been following this terrible situation with anguish since 2015. What does it take to get us out of the ICU? Many more deaths?

Rahul Verghese

My food

Aiema Tauheed's feature, 'The heritage menu', sounded so enticing with its offer of organic food. We would like to visit and enjoy a meal there. You could have also given readers the address.

Hemant Raj Lodha

Here's the address: Amar Khamar, 21B Hindustan Road, Ballygunge, Kolkata-700029; 9330742283

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ALEXANDER THOMAS ON A MODEL IN KARNATAKA

‘300 doctors in districts trained as specialists’

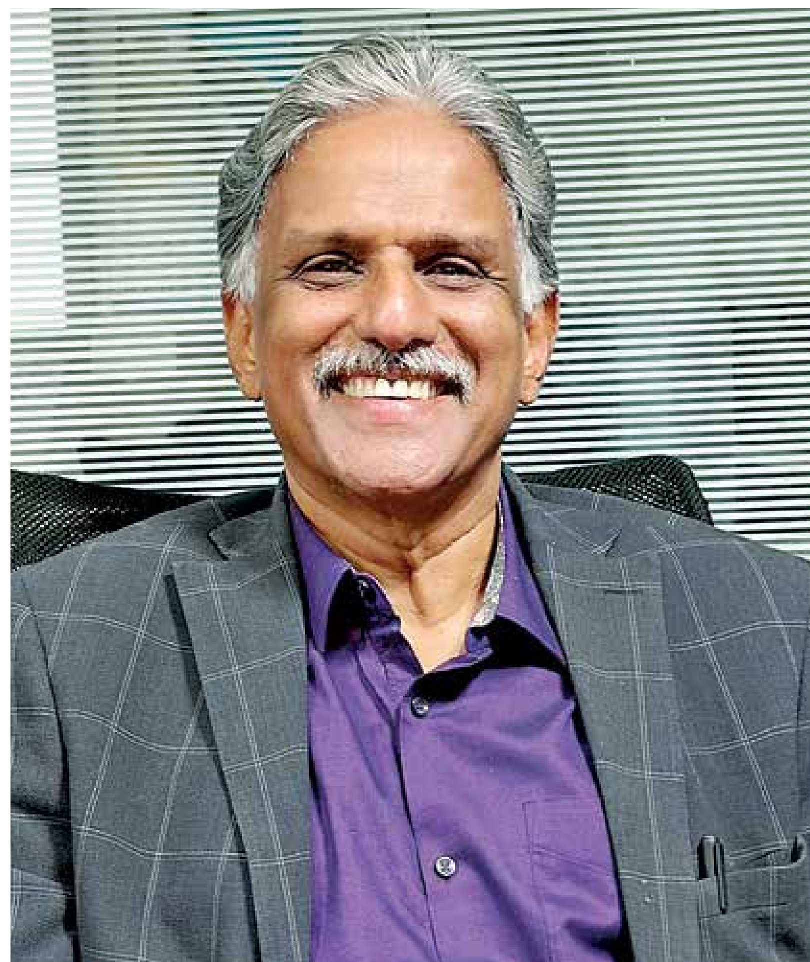
Civil Society News
New Delhi

WHEN patients in rural areas need specialty medical care, they invariably have to seek it in cities. How then can district hospitals be upgraded to handle such cases? While improving infrastructure is important, it is equally necessary to enable MBBS physicians in rural areas to acquire specialized degrees where they are already located.

To this end, a tripartite effort in Karnataka has delivered beneficial results. Doctors are being successfully trained in district hospitals in specialties that matter with visible advantages for local populations.

The programme came out of a tripartite initiative involving the National Board of Examinations in Medical Sciences (NBEMS), the Association of National Board Accredited Institutions (ANBAI) and the Government of Karnataka.

Civil Society spoke to Dr Alexander Thomas on how the Karnataka model has been developed and the results it is delivering.


Dr Alexander Thomas: ‘District hospitals have excellent and diverse clinical material’

Q: There has been an ongoing tripartite effort, a public-private partnership, in Karnataka to use district government hospitals for training specialists. How many specialists have you trained? When did this programme begin?
According to the latest figures, 300 specialists have been trained until now. Actually, the pilot for this programme started in 2017. We worked for about a year and a half before that to make the concept and the mechanism of how to implement it acceptable to all stakeholders. Apart from district hospitals, I think for the first time in our country, *taluk* hospitals were also used for training. We chose about three hospitals initially and we now work with 36 hospitals.

Q: Which hospitals did you choose?
I’ll give you a little background. I was the CEO of Baptist Hospital and part of an ambitious project by the Quality Council of India (QCI) to grade and accredit gram panchayats in Karnataka. It was a very successful project. We called all of them to a meeting in Bengaluru where the chief minister awarded prizes to them.

Fortuitously, I got introduced to C. Ranganathan, a very visionary chief secretary in Karnataka. I proposed the idea of accreditation of government hospitals by the National Accreditation Board for Hospitals (NABH). We also had a good mission director at that time, Dr S. Selvakumar, who is now principal secretary, Department of Commerce and Industry. We started the first accreditation of government hospitals. Initially, we chose two government hospitals in Bengaluru and got them both accredited.

One of the main issues which arose during this process was the lack of specialists. I was the founder of ANBAI or the Association of National Board Accredited Institutions. At that time, we worked closely with the National Board of Examinations in Medical Sciences. I suggested we try out this idea of training specialists in district hospitals because they have excellent and diverse clinical material, resources which are not so freely available in government hospitals because of the number of patients that converge there.

We had to actually talk to all the district health officials. Initially, they were reluctant. But Dr Parimala S. Maroor, advisor, medical management, Suvarna Arogya Suraksha Trust, Government of Karnataka, was able to convince them. Today, all of them have become our champions. We began with two hospitals with whom we had some interaction.

Q: Is there any broad way of categorizing the 300 specialists who have emerged from this PPP? What are the specialties they have taken up?
We have almost all the specialties. The important areas we focused on initially were maternal and child health for which you need paediatricians, obstetricians, gynaecologists, anaesthetists.

Take Gangavati Taluk Hospital as an example. It’s in a little backward district called Koppal in North Karnataka. Earlier, all cases, especially of C-sections, were being referred to the district hospital or to private hospitals in Bengaluru. Many women, I’m told, lost their lives.

But as of now, they do an average of 5,000 deliveries a year. The community is very confident. Complicated C-sections are being done there because they have the specialists: anaesthetists, gynaecologists, paediatricians. It’s made a big difference. The community reposes its trust in the hospital and the results are excellent.

There is a second hospital, again in a backward district, which started handling complicated spine surgery cases and is also doing joint replacement surgeries, which were unheard of in those days.

The District Health Officer (DHO), recently informed me that the Gangavati Hospital has introduced painless delivery, music in its labour room and aromatherapy. I was quite surprised and pleased because such facilities are usually available only in the private sector.

Q: When you say that you want to train specialists, please explain. Is this training or are these qualifications? Do you include specialties like neurosurgery, neurology, heart specialists, and cancer specialists?
We may not have all the courses that the National Board of Examinations has, like reproductive medicine, but we cover most basic specialties. That was what we were aiming for. Some of the centres, I am told, have started also doing super specialty courses, which is a great thing.

Q: Do you first assess which specializations are commonly in demand in different rural areas?
When we started, we were keen to tackle infant and maternal mortality. But we now cover a gamut of specialties including general surgery and orthopaedics. The initial effort was to improve infant and maternal mortality. But today the focus is on universal health care of quality to the community.

Q: Cancer’s incidence has been rising and we’re not even sure if those numbers are the actual numbers. Most care is suboptimal for people across the country. Is there any attempt to take this PPP to another level by identifying new outbreak areas where the demand is high, cancer being one of them?
Currently, in the *taluk* and district hospitals there is at least a surgeon who can basically diagnose cancer. There’s a gynaecologist who can also diagnose cancer or an orthopaedic surgeon who can identify orthopaedic cancers. Earlier, local people couldn’t even get a basic diagnosis because there were no specialists. But, yes, I think the next step would be to go into super specialization, and that has already started with the government hospitals.

Q: AIIMS in Delhi, for instance, has done very interesting work with Tata Memorial Hospital and in spreading out facilities. Is this the time now to look at more evolved partnerships, keeping in mind the needs of the population. Take diabetes or lung diseases which are affecting people in urban and rural areas.
Ultimately, that’s what we’re looking at. It’s been almost 10 years and the government hospitals are very strong now. They have good relations with the National Board. They have good leadership also. We have taken the first step and we can take it to the next level which is to train super specialists in cancer and diabetes.

We have also encouraged the government to look at family medicine, which covers a broad gamut of illnesses. We are working with the National Board and the National Medical Council (NMC) to see whether we can start courses on lifestyle medicine. You’re now looking at preventive rather than curative medicine. The great thing is that the individual controls his destiny by eating well, sleeping well, exercising well. The CMC (Christian Medical College) has been running a few courses but that is not part of this PPP.

Q: Infrastructure in district hospitals, across the country, is not known to be of the best quality or standards. Neither are management techniques. You’ve not had an environment of good quality physicians in government service in rural areas, or even at district level. How have these things been overcome in trying to do this PPP?
I’ll have to correct you. You will find probably the best clinicians in government service. See, they don’t have access to too much diagnostic equipment. So, clinicians in district and government hospitals are actually among the best because they see such an amazing variety of cases. They have to diagnose without a lot of diagnostic equipment.

That is what we physicians are actually supposed to do. But I think technology has spoiled many of us.

The exam conducted by the National Board is a very neutral one. For MBBS the exam is conducted in the host institution. For the National Board exam, the centre is far away from the hospital. The examiners and the students don’t know each other. The exam is of a high standard. Students in government hospitals in Karnataka have done better than their counterparts in private hospitals.

Q: You are saying this has worked beyond expectations?
Yes. Secondly, on infrastructure, we were very fortunate. We had responsive bureaucrats in the Karnataka government and the National Health Mission funded a lot of improvements. In some district hospitals, the local community pitched in and donated money for an academic block, etc. Because they found that high-quality medical care was being made available at their doorstep.

Third is my initial impression of government doctors. I thought they just served for four to eight years and then moved on. But when we undertook NABH accreditation of hospitals in Jayanagar and Malleswaram, there was NABH inspection, I got clinicians involved. Many of them stayed in the hospital for three days and made sure that everything went well. They’re very committed with a lot of loyalty to the government. In fact, they are champions of public funded health care. I’m part of a group where they talk — about their students, their first cases and so on. It’s been a good experience. But more than that, I think it has impacted millions at the grassroots.

> ‘We can take our work to the next level by training super specialists in cancer and diabetes. We have also encouraged the government to look at family medicine.’

Q: One reason even public-spirited physicians don’t work outside big cities has been the lack of facilities to live, schools for children, lack of urban facilities and so on. Secondly, after becoming specialists, do doctors continue to serve there?
The government job, at least in Karnataka, is highly sought after. You have stability, you go up the ladder, you have a career choice. There is a system by which the government gives doctors options for transfers, if they don’t want to stay in one place.

In Karnataka, the districts are not too bad to live in. Most of the clinicians I know have their families living with them. Districts have fairly good facilities for schooling.

People apply for these posts even with an MBBS. Probably one in 10 or one in 20 gets selected. Once selected, they have a stable job valuable in today’s times where you can be fired online in half a second. The salary is good. They have many perks and career progression. They are well looked after and retire with a pension. I think they are also allowed private practice.

Q: How replicable is the Karnataka model? What are the three things that any other state should learn from Karnataka?
This is eminently replicable because in all the states, they have district hospitals, staff, and MBBS doctors. The gap in most of these hospitals is a lack of specialists. The MBBS doctors can improve their skills through this route.

There is 50 percent reservation. The other 50 percent are from an all-India selection. They are expected to fulfil a one-year bond after they finish.

There are two advantages. While they are doing the course you have resident doctors 24 hours in-house. Quality goes up. When they finish, they have a one-year bond to serve the state.

It’s very easily replicable. I think Karnataka has got a lot of hands-on knowledge. ANBAI did this project pro bono. No huge investment is needed. For each medical college the government spends crores. If you

Continued on page 8

Continued from page 7

use your district hospitals and *taluk* hospitals, you need faculty, and the infrastructure and funds can be sourced from the National Mission. The patients are there.

Q: Where does the faculty come from in Karnataka?
The existing staff was already there, so they were trained. But the National Board has pretty strict requirements. You need two faculty in each specialty. In many places, there was only one in the government hospitals. In some there were none. That's where the National Health Mission in Karnataka stepped in. They took people who had just retired from district hospitals and appointed them. ANBAI helped in converting them into teachers since most of them were purely clinical people. They only saw patients and didn't have experience in teaching.

We were able to handle the first few batches of MBBS students because we got them involved in our programmes for the private hospital students. It's eminently workable. A huge outlay is not required, and it brings in huge dividends. In fact, I was recently asked if this would work in our neighbouring countries. And I said, yes, why not? Nepal and Bangladesh have the same system as us and so does the Maldives. If they are interested, I can talk to the National Board and see how we can work it out.

The National Board degrees are more valued than the MBBS degree. As you're aware, in the NMC and MCI, there was a lot of corruption. Quality too is very variable in the National Medical Council. I hope that changes with the new chairman. But the National Board degrees are more valued in the Middle East, Australia and the UK because they know the system of examinations. It is very transparent and there's no other criteria attached to it.

Q: If there is a district level hospital which wants to run these courses to help MBBS doctors become specialists, how does it go about doing this? How do these courses run? Who runs them? Do you have faculty coming in from time to time? Are you using online learning?
These courses are run by the National Board which is headquartered in Delhi. They ensure standards are maintained. For any specialty to be recognized, it's a very rigid process. They do an inspection, they see the faculty, the infrastructure, and the patients. These three are important.

You also need to have adequate faculty. They have criteria for faculty. You need to have five years of experience to be a junior consultant and eight years to apply for a post as a senior consultant. The infrastructure, operation theatres, duty rooms, and safety of the resident doctors have to be ensured. These are all minimum criteria. Very importantly, you need to have the caseload. If you don't have enough patients then there's no point in having a course.

Once an application is submitted, an inspector comes, checks all this and submits his report to a committee. They approve it. After that they have surprise inspections. The faculty and students are supposed to keep a logbook, the faculty has to draw up and submit a plan of action. The curriculum is laid out. It's all very structured. And being hands-on is crucial. They have to keep a logbook of what they have done, hands-on. If I'm an orthopaedic post-grad, I have to give them a logbook of what surgeries I've assisted in and what surgeries I have done myself.

Q: But how does the faculty function?
You have to have qualified full-time faculty who spend at least 25 percent of their time teaching students. There are no visiting faculty. It's optional for the institution to call in visiting consultants. It's very well laid-out criteria.

Q: Does political ownership of an idea make a big difference?
Let me put it this way: I think all the stars were aligned. We had excellent bureaucrats, and they had their own connection with politicians. We had some champions on the ground as well. The chief secretary and our health secretaries were wonderful. ■

CSR DIALOGUES

'Our board lets us fly, asks the right questions'

Sourav Roy on CSR as a tool for development

Civil Society News
New Delhi

IT has been a decade since companies were mandated by law to spend a percentage of their profits on corporate social responsibility or CSR. The company board, through a committee under it, became answerable for the choice of CSR projects and how they were implemented. What impact has this had on social initiatives that companies take up and what is the quality of interaction that takes place between the board and the people working with NGOs and local government to implement projects on the ground?

Tata Steel is a company we in this magazine have known for a long time. Many of their projects in healthcare, education and youth empowerment make great stories. Its annual tribal conclave, Samvaad, in Jamshedpur is unique and we have featured it more than once.

But it is worth understanding just how the Tata Steel Foundation, set up in 2016 and the CSR arm of the company, gets all this done while being under the direct gaze of the board. With this end in mind, we spoke to Sourav Roy, CEO of the foundation, for what is the first in our series of CSR Dialogues.

Q: At Tata Steel you have a legacy of social initiatives. How much does this legacy influence your current CSR philosophy?
There is always a lot of talk around the legacy we have inherited as a team. It has been underpinned by institutional support. It is not as though the legacy was left to fend for itself to see where it goes and so on. Instead, there has always been significant institutional investment.

The Tata Steel Rural Development Society (TSRDS) was set up in 1979 as the first corporate foundation. Much before CSR came about in its present form and as a mandate of the company board, there was a realization here that communities or social groups require dedicated institutional support and not just programme support.

This has matured now to allocate talent which is not, as you know, business-adjacent talent but talent that has skill sets to understand that the meeting of social objectives can't be merely a hobby or an attitude. Bringing in and supporting such talent is the task of the Tata Steel Foundation.

What we have is a trifecta of mandate, resources and skills driving the vision and legacy of the company

This is the first in a series of conversations with companies on their social involvement.

Photo: Civil Society/Ashoke Chakrabarty

Sourav Roy: 'Working with communities has become much more multi-dimensional'

Q: It has to be supportive of society with specific institutional support.
Specific institutional support with the mandate to solve for society. But the mandate is not to be only business-adjacent. If the business benefits, it is a very desirable consequence but only if something meaningful is achieved. Otherwise, it becomes myopic.

Q: In how many stages did the shift happen from traditional philanthropy to something more strategic?
Till about the 1990s, a lot of it was asset-based philanthropy that we used to do. Making schools and so on. It was the need of the hour. Then, in the 2000s, together with liberalization taking root, a lot of rights-based movements fructified into legislation. It became important to be in dialogue with communities. That was the time our first set of long-term programmes came up. Our Dalit and Adivasi engagement councils, for instance. The first seeds of our now hugely successful health programme, Mansi, were sowed in 2009 and 2010.

We started grappling with the intangibles. You know, working with societies has now become much more multi-dimensional than it was earlier. I think the pressure on some of us is much greater to be better informed — better rounded and broader versions of ourselves.

The talent allocation and the institutional support has worked to the extent that we have been able to anticipate and be ready for seminal shifts. I think up to 2030 a lot of our investment in intangibles is going to play out. We will be better placed to address peace and conflict resolution and outcomes at the margins of, you know, what is environmental, what is social? Ultimately everything is social.

Q: It is a nurturing legacy…
Yes, and much nurturing is required. A legacy can easily become a burden. But ours is a legacy that has been endowed honestly. There is a lot of humility in this organization that flows right from the board.

Q: How much of a role does the Tata Steel Board play in what the Tata Steel Foundation does? Does the board sit on your head?
It lets us fly and keeps asking us the right questions. The larger board and the CSR committee don't compromise on the rigour or complexities of the questions they put to us. They don't lower their expectations of CSR. The Tata Steel Foundation is subjected to the same level of audit, the same accountability as any other group company. From the board the mandate to the foundation is not to do fantastic CSR for Tata Steel but to go ahead and build an organization that does what needs to be done to make a difference in the development space.

Q: What does the board want to know from you in an operational sense?
We meet the Tata Steel Board four times a year in formal meetings and at least twice a year in the field.

Q: In the field means they come calling?
Yes and there are times when we think there is something they need to understand a lot better. They get to see the good work and also learn about the challenges. An exposure visit is followed by a longish interaction.

The question we face most is whether we are working for the people we should really be working for. Are we using our resources to good effect? Are we under-solving by keeping our sights too low? For instance, if something is working at the block level shouldn't we be trying it at the district level?

'From the board the mandate is not to do fantastic CSR for Tata Steel but to build an organization that can make a difference in the development space.'

Q: Are you asked how a programme is linked to Tata Steel?
Yes, we are and I think it is a fair question. The articulation is that if Tata Steel or the Tata Steel Foundation is doing it, please don't bring disrepute to the Tata or Tata Steel name. The burden is on getting things right and some of the processes are defined in that sense. If you want to stop child marriage, how do you do it. We can't be barging into people's homes. But setting up child protection committees, creating a social movement — that is perfectly okay.

It's also fair for the board to ask if a port or pipeline is coming up somewhere whether we are helping the project by going and creating relationships with the local communities. To my mind I think it is a fair question because 80 percent of the foundation's money comes from Tata Steel, 20 percent comes from anywhere else. I need to keep an eye out for their interests.

Q: But something like child marriage. Does it have to be within the catchment of Tata Steel?
For capital from Tata Steel, it is a precondition. Steel-making is essentially a deleterious industry. Unless you're offsetting the harm you are doing, I don't think you have the moral right to go anywhere else. We are going to Gumla in Chhattisgarh and Keonjhar in Odisha because we are there as a business. But to go somewhere completely away, we can take funding that comes from outside Tata Steel. Let's say,

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'Our board lets us fly, asks the right questions'

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from HDFC for funding a water project in Kalahandi. As an organization I have that mandate.

We also have our definition of proximate regions of where we are that has evolved over the years. You know, there was a time when you took a mine and worked within the radius of a kilometre from it. There used to be peripheral development funds and all those things. Now our definition of what is proximity has changed. If there are 100 villages to a panchayat you don't solve the problems of six but all 100.

'Our definition of proximity has also changed. If there are 100 villages to a panchayat you don't solve the problems of six but all 100. You map the impact on business differently.'

You map the impact on business differently. We are doing great work with water here but the Kharkai river's recharge zone is 25 km upstream from our place. Our definition of proximate regions has changed and that is also a position negotiated with the board.

Q: Very interesting. Now if you have a new idea how do you decide to take it up? What is the mechanism that you use?

Ideas come from both the board and the foundation. If you push me, I think right now about 95 percent of our ideas come from our teams. And then, of course, there's a little gestation period for that idea to catch on with the community.

The first checkpoint is where do we want to do it and if it is a real need. We then take it to the board in the form of a proposal. There's a fair amount of decentralization in terms of taking ideas along.

Having said that, there are also ideas that come in from the board once they have done field visits and we have had conversations, etc. I don't think we have the pressure to say yes to an idea because it has come from the board. In fact, there have been occasions when we have pushed back. There is a lot of two-way learning that happens. ■

Bengaluru is fixing its litterbugs with fines, rewards

Getting residents to segregate their waste is tough

Rashmi Gopal Rao
Bengaluru

HOW do you deal with litterbugs who throw bags of mixed garbage on the street, disfiguring the cityscape? It was the single biggest challenge civic agencies trying to clean up Bengaluru faced. Officials at Bengaluru Solid Waste Management Limited (BSWML), however, ideated a solution.

In every locality there were litterbugs infamous for stealthily throwing their garbage, all mixed up in a plastic bag, on vacant spots, under trees and even tied to electric poles. The BSWML decided to call them out. Citizens who reported such habitual offenders would be rewarded with ₹250. The offender would be fined.

Eventually, the fine collected totalled ₹5 lakh from 350 litterbugs. There were mixed feelings about BSWML's creativity but, on the whole, most residents thought it was a good idea.

"Around the end of October, we also organized an initiative called Kasa Suriyuva Habba or Garbage Dumping Festival, where the garbage of such habitual offenders was dumped back in their very houses," says Balakrishna N., junior health inspector, Basavanagudi ward in Bengaluru. "It was more of an awareness drive. We have imposed fines ranging from ₹1,000 to ₹10,000. The key takeaway is that such incidents have come down by about 30 to 40 percent and, more importantly, people have realized the importance of disposing their waste in a proper manner."

Often considered the fastest growing city in Asia, Bengaluru, India's IT capital, is witnessing rapid growth in population. It's likely to rise from about 12.3 million to around 14.7 million by 2031.

The city's stockpile of garbage will expand too. Currently, Bengaluru generates close to 6,500 metric tonnes of waste each day which is projected to double to 13,900 metric tonnes by 2031.

Unlike many apathetic cities, Bengaluru is trying to tackle the problem head-on. The civic administration, non-profits, resident welfare associations (RWAs) and private

Photo: G. Nagaraj

The Indian Ploggers Army. Runners collect waste and pack it neatly for disposal

e-waste companies are working in step to reduce, recycle and reuse waste.

AGENCIES AND CITIZENS The Bruhat Bengaluru Mahanagara Palike (BBMP) recently handed over the responsibility of the city's waste management to BSWML which handles the collection, transportation and processing of waste across the city.

The biggest challenge the civic administration faces is that citizens do not segregate their waste. A directive has been issued stipulating that households and bulk waste generators need to segregate their waste into wet (biodegradable), dry (recyclable) as well as hazardous (sanitary waste, e-waste, batteries, diapers, etc) waste. Figures indicate that only 60 percent of the total waste generated is collected. Only 10-15 percent is recycled. The rest ends up in landfills.

Despite public education and awareness programmes, mixed waste is often found in plastic bags casually tossed under a tree — resulting in the birth of 'black spots' in the city. There is also construction and demolition debris, discarded furniture, and other bulky dry waste that cannot be picked up by regular garbage collectors. This too is left to accumulate in public spaces, leading to a huge quantum of unmanaged waste on the streets, footpaths, in public parks and even near lakes.

Photo: G. Nagaraj

G. Nagaraj aka Plog Raja displaying the trash he has picked up

"There is pervasive littering and despite being aware, many citizens and street vendors continue to litter, creating 'black spots' or unofficially designated public dumping grounds," says G. Nagaraj aka Plog Raja, a Bengaluru resident and founder of The Indian Ploggers Army. "The most common items we collect are single-use plastics (bags, bottles, packets, cups) which defy the official plastic ban. This plastic is often mixed with wet waste, making recycling impossible," says Nagaraj who is an environmentalist and a runner.

ACTION AND REACTION In all fairness the BBMP has upped its budget for solid waste management to ₹1,400 crore, an increase of ₹400 crore from last year. Further, citizens have been asked to pay a user fee for waste collection along with property tax, depending on the size of their property. Several advanced waste processing facilities including additional bio methanation plants, sanitary waste processing units and bio CNG units were planned apart from investments and upgrades to existing landfill sites.

Real-time monitoring systems to track waste collection have been put in place. In June this year dedicated WhatsApp numbers were introduced whereby citizens could report details of black spots, illegal dumping sites as well as incidents of uncollected waste.

"For every area and, in fact, every street we have garnered the support of a few citizens and created self-help groups which makes the process more effective. We have a very active helpline. WhatsApp numbers have been provided to citizens who can alert us about garbage lying unattended. All they need to do is send us the picture and location and we then send a vehicle for the garbage to be cleared," says Balakrishna.

'WhatsApp numbers have been provided to citizens who can alert us on garbage lying unattended. We send a vehicle to pick it up,' says Balakrishna.

As a result, almost 200 tonnes of segregated dry waste is being sent on a daily basis to the Bidadi Waste-to-Energy (WTE) plant. Built and funded by the Karnataka Power Corporation Ltd (KPCL) in collaboration with the BBMP in June 2024, the plant now generates 11.5 megawatts of electricity every day. According to reports, this venture has reduced the quantity of mixed waste being sent to landfills by 10 percent. The BBMP now plans to send 500 tonnes of segregated dry waste to the plant, instead of 200 tonnes.

SAVING THE PLANET Joining hands with the civic administration are citizen groups, NGOs and private organizations who are leaving no stone unturned in managing the waste. All the golden rules are being followed

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Bengaluru makes headway in trash fight

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from reducing to recycling to innovating strategies.

"We have been running awareness campaigns on waste, but currently we are focusing on reducing waste itself. For example, while shopping we advocate the use of reusable bags. If people are shopping online, we request them to use the package-free option which many don't do. The paper bag seems eco-friendly, but ultimately paper comes from trees. There is a processing cost. So paper should be reused till it tears rather than be used to dump trash," says Odette Katrak, founder of Beautiful Bharat, a volunteer group working to take sustainable practices to every home and event.

Katrak is also a firm believer in zero waste cooking. Whatever can be eaten should not be decomposed, she says. Think lemon peel pickle, orange peel juice and even pineapple peel beer. "I call it Treasures from Trash and I have also created a recipe bank. Even though these are small measures they definitely make that much-needed difference," she emphasizes.

Reusable cutlery banks are also available across Bengaluru. People organizing events can rent cutlery for a small fee. The money is used for cleaning and maintenance. Some cutlery banks just charge a deposit which is fully refundable.

A Beautiful Bharat poster

Such services decrease the huge quantity of waste generated by disposable plates and spoons which, most often, are made from materials like paper and Styrofoam.

"Ploggers Army has a preloved bank which can cater to the underprivileged by connecting all the green dots. Right from clothes to toys and stationery, everything which is reusable and in good condition is collected by us and routed to underprivileged families through our bank. Rehoming is a much-needed activity in sustainability," says Nagaraj who has also been actively promoting the use of the menstrual cup as an effective alternative to single-use sanitary pads.

RWAs too are pitching in. Padmashree Balaram, president of the Koramangala 1st Block RWA, has coordinated the installation of about 50 leaf composting machines to tackle leaf litter piles across the city. "I floated the proposal with BSWML and also garnered the support of volunteers who will be responsible for each composting unit. We have the first batch ready from BSWML and we formally inaugurated our leaf composting machines on December 4," says Balaram.

There's also a proposal to instal around 1,000 composters in all city parks so that the compost generated can be used in-house for garden maintenance, true to the title of this initiative called 'Namma Yele, Namma Gobra' (Our Leaves, Our Compost).

Photo: Hasiru Dala

Hasiru Dala recently launched PPE kits for waste workers

E-waste too hasn't been cast aside. Attero, India's largest e-waste recycler, stepped into the D2C space in 2024 by launching Selsmart, its integrated e-waste consumer take-back platform.

Selsmart simplifies the entire process of recycling old electronics by enabling consumers to schedule doorstep pick-up and receive a fair market value for their devices. Attero currently processes 144,000 tonnes of e-waste annually, transforming it into green metals which are put back into the circular economy.

"The platform provides doorstep pick-up, instant digital payouts, and end-to-end traceability. We currently handle 150 orders per day from Bengaluru alone. Attero aims to scale up Selsmart to 5,000 daily orders by March 2026," says Nitin Gupta, CEO and co-founder of Attero.

FROM THE GRASSROOTS Hasiru Dala, a trust established in 2013, is a frontrunner in the entire chain of waste management from segregation to waste picker rights to recycling.

It manages 33 dry waste collection centres (DWCCs) in Bengaluru, including segregation and recycling. As a result of its efforts, over 8,500 waste pickers have received official occupational identity cards, a symbol of recognition for their work. It has also empowered waste pickers with social security schemes.

A firm believer in the circular economy, Hasiru Dala launched Hasiru Batte, its textile waste management initiative, in 2018. Former waste workers give discarded clothes a new lease of life. Textile waste is collected from 16 DWCCs and sent to a textile recovery centre (TRC).

The initiative is run by a former waste picker, Indumathi, who has now become an entrepreneur. Clothes and fabric are sorted, processed, upcycled and sold at a thrift store. The daily procurement and processing of textile waste at the TRC is 1.5 tonnes.

The recycled clothes have been displayed in pop-ups in places like Lalbagh, prominent engineering colleges and many others. Hasiru Dala has trained waste pickers to sort fabric based on material, quality and so on before sending it to the TRC. About 13 women are upcycling these fabrics into bags, pouches and the like. The organization claims to have successfully diverted 498 tonnes of textile waste since 2022 from reaching landfills.

Hasiru Dala has recently launched Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) kits for waste workers which includes gloves, boots, aprons, masks, all of which are designed with durability and comfort in mind due to their long working hours.

Another frontrunner in waste management in partnership with the government is HSR Citizen Forum. Headed by Dr Shanthi Thummala, this NGO has managed to achieve a waste segregation level of 80 percent. It sends 35 tonnes of wet waste to composting centres daily along with five to six tonnes of dry waste for recycling. The organization conducts workshops on allied areas like composting, urban gardening, celebration of festivals in an eco-friendly manner, and so on. The area also houses the Swacha Graha Kalika Kendra (SGKK) or the Composting Learning Centre which is the first of its kind in India and educates visitors about kitchen and garden waste composting. It is a unique experience centre that houses 20 home and community composting models which help visitors learn the nitty-gritty of composting first-hand.

Bengaluru has not yet been crowned India's cleanest city. It ranks a lowly 36 in the Swachh Survekshan audit of 2024-25. But with all hands on board it is perhaps making an effort to get there. ■

Photo: Dhritiman Mukherjee

India's last old-growth forest with a million rainforest trees is on the Great Nicobar Island

Great Nicobar in crosshairs

Experts write back to minister on port plan

Civil Society News
New Delhi

THE Union government's plans to convert the Great Nicobar Island into a bustling economic hub has caused deep disquiet among environmentalists, scientists and sociologists. The island, a green jewel in the midst of the blue waters of the Indian Ocean, is part of UNESCO's Man and Biosphere programme because of its ecological wealth and ancient indigenous people.

In a bid to alleviate the concerns, Union Minister for Environment Bhupinder Yadav wrote an article in *The Hindu* on September 12, stating that the project is needed for defence and in strategic terms is of national importance. It would also transform the island into a major hub of maritime and air connectivity in the Indian Ocean.

He reassured opponents of the project that it had undergone detailed and multiple layers of scrutiny before getting clearances. These include an environmental impact assessment and an environmental management plan. Mitigation plans had been drawn up by eminent research institutions. He said indigenous communities, the Shompen and Nicobarese, would not be displaced, tribal experts had been consulted and a dedicated budget set aside for tribal welfare. The minister said 136.75 sq. km of forest area is proposed to be diverted which is only 1.82 percent of the total forest area of the Andaman and Nicobar Islands.

However, around 70 concerned environmentalists, scientists and sociologists, some of whom have worked in the Andaman and Nicobar Islands, have questioned the need for the project. They are unconvinced by the minister's arguments and have written to him saying so.

They have said that the Great Nicobar Infrastructure Project is essentially for commercial purposes. The only component that is defence-related is a military-civilian airport which will cover just five percent of the total project area. Out of the remaining 160 sq. km, 130.75 sq. km is a rainforest which will be diverted and 2.98 sq. km will be reclaimed from the sea.

This entire land will be used to build an international container transshipment terminal (ICTT), a greenfield international airport, a solar-based power plant and a township for 3.5 lakh people — which will require shopping areas, hospitals, academic institutions and so on. The township will cover 80 percent of the project area whereas the defence township will cover just 12.6 sq. km. Currently, only around 8,000 people live on the island.

The proposed defence expansion is on land which was allotted to the military in the 1970s. Some land will now actually be taken from the Navy and given for building the ICTT.

Second, 15 percent of forest area will be taken, not 1.82 percent, and the second phase will require even more forest land. This figure of 1.82 percent has been calculated by dividing the forest area to be diverted with the total forest cover in the entire Andaman and Nicobar archipelago. Instead, the forest area to be diverted should be calculated based on Great Nicobar Island alone.

Also, it is not scientifically correct to club the Andaman Islands with the Nicobar Islands. The biodiversity of both is very different. The Andamans are an Indo-Burma Biodiversity Hotspot whereas the Nicobar Islands are a Sunda biodiversity hotspot. Their species and geology are quite different. The Great Nicobar Island is the biggest in the Nicobar group. It has a contiguous forest area with immense ecological wealth.

Also to be considered is that the forest area

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Great Nicobar in crosshairs

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to be cut down has a million rainforest trees and is India's last old growth forest. It is irreplaceable; 24 percent of rare species is found here. For the Shompen and Nicobarese, the two indigenous communities who've lived here for centuries, it is their only home.

Third, the economic rationale. The proposed commercial port will face stiff competition from other existing ports including an upcoming one being built by Indonesia in partnership with India in Sabang, just 190 km from Great Nicobar. It will require considerable capital and logistics. Have viability and profitability been seriously examined?

Besides, post-construction, there is the environmental fallout. Setting up the project will require clearing forests, dredging, landfills, hill slope cutting, change in water courses. This, in turn, will result in erosion, environment degradation, pollution and adverse socio-cultural fallouts. A lot of services to build and sustain such construction work will be required.

Fourth, there is concern about the people living on the island, who are Scheduled Caste and PVTGs (Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Groups). The development they want differs vastly from what is being currently created.

The indigenous islanders have been relocated twice. In the 1960s they were relocated to make way for settlers. Then they were relocated during the tsunami of 2004, rendering them internally displaced people on their own island. They want to return to their old location in the southeast and southwest part of the coast which is now part of the project area.

Even their basic needs are not being fulfilled. The North-South road, a key artery, is in disrepair, there are no proper health services, and schools lack teachers. For higher secondary education, young students have to relocate from the island. Transport is a problem. Helicopter services are not accessible to all, ships are insufficient. There is a shortage of petrol and LPG cylinders as well.

Fifth, the signatories dispute that policies for indigenous communities have been respected and implemented. The rights of indigenous communities under the Forest Rights Act have been violated. The Andaman and Nicobar Islands (Protection of Aboriginal Tribes) Regulation, 1956, and the Shompen Policy have been ignored to give clearances.

They point out there's been no engagement with the Shompen or Great Nicobarese to understand their perspectives on the project. Not a single person in the administration or the Adim Janjati Vikas Samiti (AJVS) can understand the Shompen language. Both the AJVS and the directorate of tribal welfare have not engaged with the communities.

As mandated by the Environment Clearance, a committee for monitoring tribal issues has been set up. It does not have a single anthropologist familiar with the two indigenous communities, they write. This committee has not met the Nicobarese Tribal Council which of its own volition has been writing to the Andaman and Nicobar Administration even before the environmental clearance was granted, expressing their disagreement with their lands being designated as project area and their traditional resource management practices not being recognized for conservation. The council was even omitted from a social impact assessment for a trunk road infrastructure project, allege the signatories.

After a recognition of forest rights (RoFR) certificate was issued, certifying that rights under the FRA have been recognized, the Galathea Wildlife Sanctuary was denotified and three new sanctuaries were notified without any consultation with the islanders who are the traditional owners and guardians of the island.

No ecological survey or biodiversity assessment was carried out to establish the significance of the area being notified before declaring the three wildlife sanctuaries though this is mandated under the Wild Life Protection Act, 1972.

Last, the letter questions the studies being carried out and the mitigation measures being put in place by various government-run institutions. For example, the Zoological Survey of India (ZSI) and the Wildlife Institute of India (WII) were given the task of drawing up 10-year conservation and management plans for megapodes, corals, leatherback turtles, crocodiles, and mangroves.

These include proposals to translocate coral colonies and crocodiles from Galathea Bay, build artificial enclosures for megapodes, reduce the approach way from 3 km to 300 m for the leatherback turtles who come to nest at the bay and much more. The plans proposed by the research institutes have been deemed unscientific, illogical and baseless mitigation strategies by experts, states the letter.

The ZSI, WII, Salim Ali Centre for Ornithology and Natural History (SACON) and Botanical Survey of India, all government-run bodies, have been appointed members of the biodiversity monitoring committee, creating a conflict of interest.

Instead, the signatories recommend independent institutes be made members of the committee and that all mitigation and management plans be subjected to scientific scrutiny and uploaded on the government's PARIVESH portal. ■

Photo: Dhritiman Mukherjee

Clearing thick forests and undergrowth will have an adverse environmental fallout

There's been no engagement with the Shompen or Great Nicobarese people to understand their perspective.

A biosphere as valuable as the Amazon

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The abandoned village of Chauni

City to village to city again

Rakesh Agrawal
Dehradun

THE silence is haunting in Chauni village, located in Bageshwar district of Uttarakhand. Last month it joined the state's infamous list of 'ghost villages' or villages that have not a soul living in them. Everyone has left. All that remains are abandoned homes, neglected fields and silent lanes.

Thirty-four people, 14 males and 20 females, used to live in this hamlet, part of Chamdthal panchayat. By 2015, only 15 families remained. In January 2025, the last family locked up and left. Chauni's status as a 'ghost village' is now acknowledged. In 2011, Uttarakhand had 1,700 ghost villages, according to the Uttarakhand Rural Development and Migration Commission. That number, according to rough estimates, has risen to 2000.

The state has long grappled with out-migration from its hilly regions due to limited job opportunities, poor infrastructure, harsh winters, wildlife attacks and natural disasters which have worsened.

During the Covid pandemic, people began returning, reviving deserted villages and the rural economy. According to the state's Rural Development and Migration Prevention Commission, 59,360 people returned to all 13 districts of the state by July 2020, mostly because they had lost their urban jobs. The highest returnees were to Pauri Garhwal, followed by Almora. By 2025, government initiatives like subsidies for returnees and promotion of rural tourism created livelihoods and reduced hills to plains outflows by as much as 20 percent in some districts. But 70 percent of returnees said they wanted to leave again.

The Migration Prevention Commission's 2025 survey tracked 4,000 success stories of reverse migration. It underlined the need for better roads, education and health services to encourage people to stay. According to the commission, 6,282 people have returned, including 169 from abroad.

Out-migration seems to have declined to some extent. Between 2011 and 2018, nearly 3.83 lakh people left Uttarakhand and between 2018 and 2022, 3.07 lakh people migrated to urban centres.

Most successful returnees have done remarkably well in small ventures in organic farming, horticulture, adventure sports and homestays. They spread their knowledge, provide jobs and build the village economy.

Among cited examples is 52-year-old Sudhir Sundriyal, who worked with India TV for 14 years in Delhi and returned to his village, Dabra. Shocked by the sight of barren fields and denuded hills, he learnt hill agriculture at Pant University and transformed his two hectares into a lush plantation of plum, apricot, peach, kiwi, avocados, apples and lemons. He also grew spices and extended a helping hand to other villages by planting over 800 fruit bearing trees.

Other examples include Anand Mani Bhatt who returned in 2013 to Alchauna village, close to Bhimtal lake in Nainital district, leaving behind a corporate job. Bhatt transformed his farm into a model of organic agriculture, growing colourful, nutrient-dense vegetables that fetch premium prices.

He also has a hatchery, where he raises Uttara fowl, developed by Pantnagar Agriculture University, a distinct, hardy, disease-resistant chicken breed, which fetches decent returns.

Returnees have also opted for adventure sports, including trekking and river rafting. Homestays have done well too. Sandeep Rawat converted his 100-year-old ancestral home into Heritage Homestay in Lansdowne village, Pauri district, in May 2023. He employs village youth. This model inspired similar projects, with the state promoting over 1,000 homestays to combat depopulation.

There's Pooja Singh's Homestay Initiative in Munsiyari village which offers organic meals and a panoramic view of the Himalayas. And Nirvan Homestay in Karauli in Champawat district started by 26-year-old Niraj Joshi, after graduating from France.

"Uttarakhand can realistically replicate the Himachal Pradesh model of high-value horticulture-led intensive agriculture by adapting its strategy to its own steeper terrain, colder valleys, higher rainfall in some zones, and different market access," says Anil Joshi, founder of HESCO (Himalayan Environmental Studies and Conservation Organization). "It can shift priority from cereal crops to fruits, off-season vegetables and flowers. Uttarakhand, like Himachal, must provide guaranteed Minimum Support Price (MSP) and improve access to markets."

However, agriculture, horticulture and homestays depend on how well the state manages its natural resources.

Agricultural land has shrunk over the years from 7.7 lakh hectares of net sown area in 2000-01 to 6.47 lakh hectares. Climate change-induced floods, landslides due to road construction and dam building, as well as wildlife attacks have caused people to abandon farming and look for urban jobs.

Ravi Chopra, an environmentalist and former chairman of the High-Powered Committee on the Char Dham Project, emphasizes that out-migration from Uttarakhand's hills is a direct consequence of environmental degradation and erosion of community-managed resources.

"Reverse migration is a potential reversal of this trend but without restoring forests and local institutions, returnees will find it unsustainable, leading to further crises like those in Joshimath or Rudraprayag, where villages are emptying out," he warns. "Institutions like van panchayats that have largely become appendages of the forest department and cooperatives must be revived."

Also, agriculture needs to adapt and become climate resilient and scalable, says Debashish Sen, director of People's Science Institute.

Most of all, the deplorable condition of villages discourages people from returning. Basic facilities like drinking water, toilets, roads, electricity, schools and hospitals in hill villages remain a challenge. "The state government has paid little attention to such issues," says Anoop Nautiyal of Social Development for Communities Foundation.

Recently, people started an agitation for a hospital in Chukhutia village in Almora district. They walked 300 km to Dehradun. ■

Odisha pulls off land rights in slums

Rina Mukherji
Pune

ACROSS Odisha, the slow pace of urbanization is striking. Towns and cities account for barely 17 percent of the state. Even so, this is where the Jaga Mission for Slum Transformation has been notching up several successes including dealing with the thorny issue of bestowing land rights on slum dwellers.

Since about 40 percent of the slums in Odisha are on privately-owned land, passing on the rights to the occupiers has meant setting up negotiations with owners and local municipal bodies and coming to workable solutions.

This and other interesting insights have emerged from two sessions of a webinar, 'Slums are Solvable,' held by the Habitat Forum which goes by the abbreviation INHAF. The webinar focused on the working of the Jaga Mission, the world's largest slum development programme.

So far 1,600 slums have been transformed and the quality of life for 412,000 households upgraded. This is an achievement unmatched in other states and also gives Odisha an edge in its governance of urban areas even before urbanization gathers momentum.

Anindita Mukherjee, an urban economist and development practitioner, said the Jaga Mission took shape in 2017, following an initiative by the state government to rid Odisha of its slums. The steps, she explained, involved identification and listing of all slums, participatory needs assessment, an infrastructure gap assessment or I-GAP, executing of slum upgradation followed by completion, delisting, land-locking and relocation after delisting.

Without holistic planning, slum improvement is always at risk, she said. To ensure slum upgradation worked, it was complemented with several other schemes. Mukherjee pointed out that 40 percent of slums in Odisha were not on government land. To deal with slums on private land, negotiations between the landowner, the urban local body (ULB) and the slum-dwelling community had to be carried out to decide on the issue.

Mapping was conducted through satellite imaging and after ensuring that no legal suits were involved, the Jaga Mission began work. Fortunately, there was no dearth of government land available for resettling slum dwellers, if relocation and resettling were deemed essential. Relocation was generally avoided but, when undertaken, was never done beyond a kilometre from the original settlement.

The INHAF webinar featured beneficiaries speaking about the transformation the mission had brought about in their lives. Mamata Rani Adhikari, member of the Slum Development Association (SDA) from Khurda, recounted how slum upgradation had provided running water, roads, electricity, and all facilities akin to what middle-class residents enjoy in urban centres. Most of all, she said, it had empowered women like her who now had a voice in their neighbourhood.

Since there were more women than men in the SDA in her neighbourhood, women felt important. "Everyone respects us now. We had never heard of a community centre, or a play area in our slum colony. This is the first time that we are benefiting from having both and we feel so happy," she said.

Officials carrying out a survey for the Jaga Mission

However, the slum dwellers had one major grouse. In spite of having land rights, banks were unwilling to give loans against their homes. Shishir Dash of Tata Steel explained that land rights were made non-transferable. Hence, slum dwellers could not transfer ownership of their land to anyone nor borrow money against it. This actually ensures stability of residence and prevents land speculation.

In the penultimate session of the webinar series, Kirti Shah of INHAF referred to the then ongoing COP-30 at Belem, Brazil, and how strengthening cities was an important part of Urban Climate Action. This was followed by several speakers analyzing the role of community participation in improving and upgrading slums.

Anand Iyer, chief policy and insights officer, Janaagraha, pointed out that one-fourth of urban residents worldwide, numbering more than a billion, live in slums, a figure that is expected to double by 2030. He spoke of the role of community participation in transforming and overhauling slums globally.

Iyer compared the success achieved by the Favela Bairro programme in Brazil, the Cano Martin Pena Community Land Trust in Puerto Rico, the Shack Dwellers Federation Project in Namibia, the Baan Mankong Programme in Thailand, the Ranya Low Income Housing Project in Indore, the Slum Networking Program of Ahmedabad, and the Kalyanpuri Redevelopment Project in Delhi. He noted how a flexible design in keeping with the needs of the community, finance and access to credit achieved the best results.

He also pointed to the commitment of elected representatives and administrators in every case. In Namibia, Thailand and Puerto Rico, land was held by the community through a trust. In Brazil, Indore and Delhi, selling was not allowed. In Namibia and Puerto Rico, selling, sub-letting and renting were all managed by the slum community through a trust. In some cases, the community arranged for and managed basic facilities. In others, individuals built their dwellings with access to inexpensive finance, while the government provided basic facilities.

Sangramjit Nayak, former director, municipal administration and mission director of the Jaga Mission, spoke at length about the processes involved in bringing the mission to fruition in Odisha. Every house in the upgraded slums now has an individual toilet, running water, and electricity. Slum colonies also have street lights, tarred roads, and stormwater drainage, money for which was provided through the concerned ULB or municipal administration. Funds had also been tapped through using 25 percent of funds allocated to every ULB for slum upgradation. After a slum was upgraded, it was the Slum Dwellers Association of the respective slum that was put in charge of applying for the delisting.

M. Srinivas, former executive officer, Konarak NAC (Notified Area Council) and administrator, municipal governance, spoke of participatory urban development, and the role of women's credit societies in upgraded slums. "The women in upgraded slums are now supplementing their income by selling vegetables and eggs," he said.

Ankita Khuntia, manager, state program (Odisha), Janaagraha, recounted the major challenges the mission faced and how such hurdles were overcome. The design of the mission, its processes and outreach, converted it into a people's mission from a government one, imparting dignity to slum dwellers. ■

Fishing in troubled waters

Jehangir Rashid
Srinagar

Photo: Civil Society/Bilal Bahadur

Snowtrout is no longer abundant in the Wullar lake due to pollution, sand mining and habitat loss

FROM 70 species of fish to just four. That's the state of Wullar lake, say worried fisherfolk. Fifteen species exist, says the Department of Fisheries. Fisherfolk say no, they can spot just four. How many species of fish populate the lake is, it seems, a matter of conjecture. But what is indisputable is the terminal decline of the picturesque Wullar lake, one of India's largest freshwater lakes, in North Kashmir's Bandipora district.

Sullied by pollution, throttled by encroachments, and scuffed by sand mining, the lake's ecosystem is being further ruined by a mafia that kills fish with electric shocks instead of using nets to catch fish, say fisherfolk. The local fisherfolk's union and the Nature Conservancy Alliance (NCA) have expressed alarm over the state of the lake and of the Jhelum river which feeds it freshwater.

In October, the sight of a large number of dead snowtrout (Schizothorax) floating in several stretches of the Jhelum caused widespread alarm. "This cold-water fish species, once abundant, has been declining rapidly due to water pollution, habitat loss and unregulated sand extraction. The Department of Fisheries has failed to conduct or make public a scientific investigation into the cause of this worrying incident," points out Ghulam Hassan Bhat, president of the Mahigeer and Singhara Association.

"When fish die in silence, it is not only an ecological warning — it is the slow death of our culture and livelihood," says Bhat, who fears the entire aquatic system of the lake and river might collapse. Inaction by the fisheries department has eroded trust in it as well as hope that the systemic degradation of the lake will be halted. Bhat demands a transparent inquiry into the causes of lake degradation and seeks restoration of fish habitats before the decline becomes irreversible.

Naseer Ahmad Dar, a fisherman, said residents of 33 villages living around Wullar are dependent on the lake for their livelihood. In 2012, a survey by the Wullar Conservation Management Authority (WCMA) estimated that around 100,000 people depended on the lake for their livelihood. That number has climbed to 200,000 people comprising 33,000 families.

Bhat flagged the rampant use of electric shock fishing. It has emerged as one of the gravest threats to aquatic biodiversity in the region, he said.

"The use of electric equipment to kill fish en masse destroys breeding populations, wipes out juvenile fish and leads to long-term ecological imbalance. It is not the first time that electric shocks have been used to kill fish. It's been going on for many years. The concerned authorities are turning a blind eye to this practice for reasons best known to them," says Bhat.

There are around 5,000 to 6,000 registered fishermen who fish in Wullar lake. Bhat says that two pieces of equipment used by the electric shock mafia were seized by the Department of Fisheries but no FIR was registered. He says that according to the concerned authorities there is no legislation under which the electric shock mafia can be booked.

"Electric shock fishing is ecological terrorism. It is a crime not just against nature, but against the communities who live by these waters. The state must act decisively. It should seize illegal equipment, prosecute violators and protect the remaining biodiversity of Wullar lake and the Jhelum," says Dr Shaikh Ghulam Rasool, a well-known climate justice activist and conservationist with the NCA. He alleges that the deputy commissioner of Bandipora was requested to act against such violators but no action has been taken so far.

However, Ghulam Mohi-ud-din, joint director, Department of Fisheries, dismissed such charges. He said incidents of electric shock being used to kill fish were not many. The department is currently facing a shortage of manpower and at times it gets difficult to catch the culprits, he explained.

"There are some mischievous elements in fishing activity. But they are a negligible number. The situation cannot be generalized. As and when we catch hold of such violators we take action against them and present a charge sheet in court," said Mohi-ud-din.

The lake was once well known for its fish, water chestnuts and lotus stems (locally known as *nadru*). "It has now lost its glory due to untreated garbage, sewage, unregulated sand mining, as well as using electric shock to kill fish," says Dar. He points out that due to lower production of fish, 70 to 80 percent of the fish in the local market has to be imported from other places to meet local demand.

Dar also attributes the death of fish species to shrinking oxygen levels in the lake. The water body has shrunk by around 50 percent, mostly due to encroachment, according to studies. Also, sand mining has been spreading from the Wullar and the Jhelum to other water bodies across the Kashmir Valley. The lake used to be a favourite habitat for migratory birds from different parts of the world but depletion of the water table has resulted in fewer bird species arriving at this wetland, says Dar.

The problem, he says, is that the government has been working in isolation to preserve the lake. Fisherfolk and their families need to be roped in and involved in its conservation. Cosmetic changes carried out to make Wullar a tourist attraction won't help. It is a freshwater lake which needs scientific revival.

The other problem is encroachment. "Large-scale encroachments in the lake have severely altered its hydrology. These illegal structures restrict fish movement, intensify siltation and degrade the lake's natural resilience. The result is a shrinking wetland, rising pollution and collapsing fish productivity," says Bhat.

"The restoration of traditional fishing zones and migration corridors, removal of all encroachments obstructing Wullar lake's natural flow and representation of fisherfolk in all decision-making and monitoring committees related to fisheries, wetlands and aquatic resource management needs to be taken up at the earliest," Bhat emphasizes. ■

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Nidhi Saxena, director of 'Secret of a Mountain Serpent'

Anuparna Roy with the Orizzonti Best Director award

Subhadra Mahajan at the Busan International Film Festival

Breakout films make it big

Global festivals notice new Indian directors

By Saibal Chatterjee

AT the 77th Cannes Film Festival in 2024, Indian cinema ended a 30-year jinx. Payal Kapadia's *All We Imagine as Light* broke into the Competition line-up, becoming the first film from India to do so since Shaji N. Karun's 1994 Malayalam-language *Swaham*.

Kapadia was the first Indian woman filmmaker to compete for the Palme d'Or (Golden Palm). The prize eventually eluded her. The FTII (Film and Television Institute of India) alumna had to settle for the Grand Prix, the award for the second-best film. But that was no mean achievement. No Indian film had ever won the Cannes Grand Prix since the inception of the award in 1967.

As the festival unfolded, Kapadia's impeccably crafted film, about two Malayali nurses in Mumbai balancing their troubling realities with their dreams, generated massive buzz and emerged among the front-runners for the top prize.

In the past, film critics would lament India's continued absence at major festivals. The tide now seems to have turned decisively. Not only are the top festivals consistently picking Indian titles, they are also bestowing awards on them.

Significantly, most of these break-out films have been directed by women with unique voices and strikingly individualistic idioms. Many filmmakers are from small towns who work outside Mumbai, telling stories that are close to their roots. It is such films, on the Indian reality, that are attracting global appreciation.

The year was special also because Kapadia's FTII classmate, Maisam Ali, raised in Ladakh, made history with a slot in the Cannes ACID sidebar. The Leh-set film, *In Retreat*, is about an unnamed prodigal who returns 'home' after a long absence. The film was the first-ever Indian entry in a section that was launched in 1992 to help independent films from across the world find distribution in France.

Equally significantly, 2024 saw a Kannada short film, *Sunflowers Were the First Ones to Know,* by another FTII alumnus, Shivamogga-born, Mysuru-based doctor-turned-filmmaker Chidananda S. Naik, winning the best film prize of the festival's La Cinef competition for film school students.

Payal Kapadia

India had never had it so good at Cannes, certainly not since Mira Nair's Camera d'Or (Golden Camera) win for 1988's *Salaam Bombay!*

The year of plenty wasn't a flash in the pan. While Mumbai-based Kapadia has been leading the way — her first feature-length film, *A Night of Knowing Nothing,* won the *L'Oeil d'or* (Golden Eye) award for the best documentary in Cannes in 2021 — several Indian filmmakers with small-town roots and no formal training are powering a resurgence of Indian independent cinema on the global festival circuit.

Among these directors are Gwalior's Jitank Singh Gurjar, whose maiden feature-length film *Vimukt* won the Netpac (Network for the Promotion of Asian Cinema) Prize at the 2025 Toronto International Film Festival, and Shillong-based Pradip Kurbah, who won a clutch of awards (Best Film, Best Director and Netpac Prize) at the Moscow International Film Festival this year for his fourth film, *The Elysian Field* (Khasi title: *Ha Lyngkha Bneng*).

Kurbah's film is a tender, mildly droll portrait of six people who hold on to hope and humanity in a remote village that has dropped off the map in the 100th year of India's independence. Its story of death, desolation and deprivation plays out over four different seasons during which the fate of the characters shows no signs of changing. The last inhabitants of the village frozen in time do not, however, give up on the land and the community.

"The audience in Moscow received *The Elysian Field* with great warmth," says Kurbah. "Many elderly people came up to me after the screening and said the film reminded them of their villages, their people, their past. It showed that even though the story is from Meghalaya, emotions of loneliness, memory and hope are truly universal."

It is noteworthy that the exciting efflorescence, probably still a work in progress, is being driven by directors who have consciously chosen to work outside Mumbai. Maisam Ali made *In Retreat*, a lyrical and languid film about home and belonging, about thriving on memories and living them down, in a style and space entirely his own.

That is the playbook many young Indian filmmakers are embracing. Anuparna Roy, first-ever winner of the Orizzonti Best Director award (Venice Film Festival 2025), was born and raised in West Bengal's Purulia district. That is where her heart still lies.

Like many of her ilk, Roy is acutely conscious of the power of universal stories that are anchored in specific geographies and cultures, of the dynamic joys and misgivings of remembering and reinterpreting past experiences in the light of new ones.

> **Many filmmakers are from small towns and work outside Mumbai. Their stories are close to their roots.**

Her feted debut film, *Songs of Forgotten Trees*, revolves around two young women, an aspiring actress who does sex work to pay her bills and an IT firm executive, who share an apartment in Mumbai, a city far removed from the places that they have arrived from. "I will always carry Purulia inside me," says Roy. "I still talk in my own language, which is very different from the Bangla spoken by elite Bengalis."

The response that *Songs of Forgotten Trees* received in Venice was overwhelming, the director says. "It was wonderful to see how it resonated with audiences beyond borders and cultures. It was enormously inspiring," she adds.

With the Venice win, Roy has joined an elite club of award-winning Indian women that includes Payal Kapadia, Shuchi Talati (Sundance 2024 Audience Award for *Girls Will Be Girls*), Varsha Bharath (Rotterdam 2025 NETPAC Award for *Bad Girl*) and Diwa Shah (San Sebastián 2023 Kutxabank New Directors Award for *Bahadur — The Brave*).

HILL STORY The latest to join the group of laurel earners is Sikkimese filmmaker and Satyajit Ray Film and Television Institute (SRFTI) alumna Tribeny Rai for the Nepali-language film *Shape of Momo*.

She won the Taipei Film Commission Award and the Songwon Vision Award at the Busan International Film Festival 2025.

The sorority is steadily swelling. Among them is Nidhi Saxena, whose first two films — *Sad Letters of an Imaginary Woman* and *Secret of a Mountain Serpent* — premiered in Busan and Venice, respectively, in a span of less than a year. She says: "I don't have a house in Mumbai. I go there to work but my base is Jaipur."

"It is important," she adds, "for artists to cling to their roots. Mumbai standardizes everything. It has become a factory and reduces us to factory workers and forces us to work within a set framework."

Secret of a Mountain Serpent, featuring Trimala Adhikari as a schoolteacher and Adil Hussain as an enigmatic writer-engineer who comes visiting, is nothing like a Mumbai film. It explores the magic and boundaries of female desire in an Uttarakhand hill town devoid of its young menfolk who are all away fighting in the Kargil war.

Saxena's two films make significant demands on the audience. "My inspirations are from Tarkovsky, Bresson, Mani Kaul and Kumar Shahani, besides Tsai-ming Liang and Apichatpong Weerasethakul," she explains. "In my first film, time is seen metaphysically; in the second, existentially."

"When we see time with the logic of poetry and not prose, we can be more experimental," she elaborates. "It adds a dimension to the narrative. I feel that films that we do not understand fully have a lot of poetry in them. So, we go back to them again and again. Each time we revisit the film, we get something new from it."

Stylistic individualism also drives Shimla's Subhadra Mahajan, whose first film, *Second Chance,* was part of the Proxima Competition at the

Pradip Kurbah won two awards for his film, 'The Elysian Field,' at the Moscow Film Festival

Jitank Singh Gurjar's film, 'Vimukt', got the Netpac prize at the Toronto Film Festival

2024 Karlovy Vary Film Festival. She swears by the creative sustenance that she draws from her hometown even though she now lives in faraway Mumbai.

Second Chance, a ruminative black and white film which also travelled to the American Film Institute Festival in Los Angeles and the Busan International Film Festival, is about a young woman who, after an enervating emotional setback, retreats to her family home in the hills to heal and regenerate.

Talking of hills, Diwa Shah lives in Nainital and makes films for the world. "I find it difficult to make films from anywhere else. I like being in the mountains. They keep me rooted, calm and inspired," says the writer-director of *Bahadur — The Brave.*

She thrives on "the feeling of community" that a hill town fosters.

"Everybody knows everybody here. Yes, opportunities are limited in Nainital. In Mumbai, you can explore a lot more things. But the flip side is that you get caught in a rat race in the bargain. You have to survive and sustain a stable lifestyle. You are unable to take risks as a result," she says.

WORM'S EYE VIEW What is it that has changed and led to festivals increasingly throwing their doors open to films from a country that had long struggled to impress programmers?

Says Shah: "Apart from festivals looking at Indian cinema with greater intent, it is also us finally trying to find our own system, our own structure, to make the cinema that we want to make."

Shah is doing just that. *Bahadur — The Brave*, about the plight of Nepali migrant porters stranded in her hometown during the Covid pandemic, fetched her the Kuxtabank New Directors Award at the 2023 San Sebastian International Film Festival.

She followed that up with a feat that holds even greater promise for her fledgling career. From October 1, 2024 to February 15, 2025, she was one of six selected filmmakers who participated in the 48th session of La Residence du Festival de Cannes in Paris.

At the session, she worked on developing the script of her second film, *Kyab — Refuge*, about third-generation Tibetan refugees in India. At the end of the four-and-a-half-month residency, Shah won the programme's top scriptwriting fund.

'Apart from festivals looking at Indian cinema with greater interest it is also us trying to find our own system, our own structure to make the films we want to make.'

With *Kyab* now a French co-production, her path forward would be expected to be easier than it was when she made *Bahadur — The Brave* entirely on her own steam. Her urge to tell stories of marginalized communities in her backyard, she says, "has a lot to do with my childhood and the place I belong to".

"Growing up, I had many Tibetan friends in school. We also had a Tibetan market. Back in the day, there was social harmony and we did not even pause to think that these people belonged to a different community. When we were asked to write an essay on Nainital, we talked about a temple next to a mosque, next to a gurdwara, next to a church. Sadly, that is not the case anymore," says Shah.

The Cannes residency, she says, has impacted her as a filmmaker and as a person. She adds: "Programmes like these make you braver with what you're trying to do. The exposure gives you more confidence and creates newer avenues. I hope it shows in my work."

Saxena, as far from Bollywood in spirit as Nainital is from Mumbai, won the Asian Film Fund for post-production from the Busan International Film Festival last year for her debut film, *Sad Letters of an Imaginary Woman*, about a lonely 40-year-old woman who has a phone conversation with her younger self.

Soon thereafter, Saxena, who is a published author in Hindi and has a background in the fine arts, won the Biennale College Cinema grant for *Secret of a Mountain Serpent*, which was developed during the 13th edition of the Venice Film Festival's programme for filmmakers making their first or second film. It premiered at the festival earlier this year.

Despite not adhering to Indian narrative cinema's established norms, Saxena has made two films distinct from each other in double quick time. "In ten months, to be precise," she quips. "My first film premiered in early October one year and the second one in early September the next."

There is clearly no dearth of action in the Indian independent cinema scene. While Kurbah's next film project, *Moon,* was selected by Busan's

A still from 'Bad Girl'

'Bahadur—The Brave' is about the plight of migrant Nepali porters during the pandemic

Diwa Shah (centre), director of 'Bahadur—The Brave', at the San Sebastian Film Festival

'All We Imagine as Light,' Payal Kapadia's impeccably crafted film

'Vimukt' is Jitank Singh Gurjar's maiden film

Telling a story rooted in his own culture is what excites Kurbah the most because 'you are opening a small window to your world, your people, your landcape.'

Asian Project Market, Jitank Singh Gurjar is close to embarking on his next film.

Says Gurjar: "I am working on a film about child abuse and domestic violence. I will shoot it during winter early next year. Although the film is set in a city, the language will be Braj like it was in *Vimukt*, a purely rural story."

Vimukt explores the family dynamic of an impoverished rural couple with a mentally challenged 26-year-old son. The three go on a pilgrimage to the Maha Kumbh Mela because the parents are led to believe that devotion could rid them of their misfortunes. Gurjar shot the film in 11 days, five of which were devoted to shooting pivotal sequences at the Maha Kumbh Mela.

"*Vimukt* is set in a village that is very close to mine. The physical texture and cultural nuance are the same," says Gurjar, adding that he plans to continue making films in the Braj dialect. He says: "If I don't, who will? The language has its own texture and rhythm but no films are made in the language. Because I do not work with big stakes, I have the freedom to choose what I want to do."

Referring to the crowd scenes in *Vimukt*, he says: "I told the actors to stay in character and get into the crowd, we will shoot you. They merged with the flow of the pilgrims while we filmed them from specific angles. My film has more extras than *Gandhi.*"

Even as their determination to tell stories that no one else will and their guerilla-style filmmaking keep them afloat, their freedom ends when it is time to look for exhibition outlets. Says Kurbah: "You may travel far, your film may move audiences abroad but back home, or in the larger Indian scene, it can still feel invisible."

He asserts: "Festival selections and awards open doors, give you confidence and credibility, besides connecting you to a wider world. But real change in distribution, support or recognition takes much longer

A scene from 'Secret of a Mountain Serpent'

when you come from a place that is still off the film map. Every festival journey is, therefore, a small victory. It reminds us that even from a small hill, our stories can echo across the world."

He reveals that discussions are ongoing for the Indian distribution of *The Elysian Field.* "The process is always challenging for an independent film, especially one in a regional language like Khasi, but I'm hopeful things will move in a positive direction," he adds.

Telling a story rooted in his own culture is what excites Kurbah the most because "you are opening a small window to your world, your people, your landscape, your emotions".

That, he asserts, is honestly what touches others. "When they connect, it's very special because it happens through feeling, not familiarity. A human story will always resonate no matter where it comes from. That is what keeps me going, knowing that emotions travel even when languages don't," he says.

Mahajan points out that the challenge of finding distribution is not bigger than convincing the public to come to the cinemas and buy tickets. "We did a limited five-city release of *Second Chance* in June 2025. I worked alongside the distribution team of Platoon Films with the limited resources we had for publicity. I learned that it is really a task to get people to go to the cinemas and buy tickets."

What is needed, she says, is "a highly targeted approach and a correct understanding of the audience for independent films". But one thing that she learnt from the experience, she adds, is that "nothing is impossible".

"International acclaim is nice, but it also makes you sad," says Shah. "Despite all the praise that you receive globally, there still are no avenues to get these films out to a wider domestic audience. People keep asking where they can get to see your film and you do not have an answer."

But, all said and done, the light at the end of the tunnel of a dodgy distribution system is bright enough for these filmmakers and the admirers of the work that they do, not to abandon hope. ■

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Politics of futurism

DELHI DARBAR

SANJAYA BARU

FUTURISM is the latest trend in Indian politics. If the Bharatiya Janata Party and Narendra Modi promise us an 'amrit kaal' and assure us of a 'Viksit Bharat' by 2047, the Congress party's Revanth Reddy has unveiled plans for a 'Future City'. Politicians in power who feel they may not be able to sustain their popularity based on today's performance are quick to shift the focus to tomorrow.

During the recent elections to the Bihar legislature it was curious to see a chief minister who has been in office for two decades seek votes based on promises for tomorrow. Returning to power in the new Andhra Pradesh of 2014, Chandrababu Naidu promised a new capital city and hoped that would help keep him in power for a decade but he was ousted in 2019. I guess the future in such political promises has to be far away for hope to be sustained.

This new trend reminded me of Prime Minister Manmohan Singh's first visit to Mumbai as PM. He famously declared that Mumbai would become "India's Shanghai". That was two decades ago. It was also a promise for the future. That future arrived soon enough for Mumbaikars to realize what a premature, and perhaps empty, promise it was. Anyone visiting Shanghai would be amused recalling Singh's promise.

Of course, in a democracy politicians seek office based on a manifesto about their plans for the future. However, such manifestos and promises have to be about here and now so that they can be evaluated against them at the next election and not by the next generation. Politicians who have been in power for a term or two or more have to also seek popular support on performance. Yet, it would seem that voters in India do not care about past performance and are willing to repose their trust in politicians based on the latter's promises for the future.

When the Congress party lost an election in 1996 despite the impressive record of the P.V. Narasimha Rao government on a range of domestic and external fronts, political analysts were quick to conclude that his government's economic policies, which placed the Indian economy on a new and higher trajectory of growth, were not enough to secure a second term. It was a lesson that Chandrababu Naidu did not learn when in 2004 he sought re-election based on his creditable economic performance and was soundly defeated.

After those two episodes the dominant opinion among political analysts is that performance does not guarantee power. One has to keep the focus on the future and make promises of better days. Such as 'Achhe Din', as Narendra Modi famously promised in 2014. When he was unable to deliver the promised 'good days' he shifted focus to a range of new vote mobilizing issues mostly focused on future delivery. In 2017 Modi promised that India would be a $5 trillion economy by 2020. Very quickly, the goal post was shifted to 2022 and then to 2025. We are now a $4 trillion economy.

Politicians now promise a better tomorrow instead of a better today

Realizing that short-term goals pose a challenge, he has now promised to make India 'Viksit' by 2047. Revanth Reddy's focus on 'Rising Telangana' and the building of a 'Future City' are ideas drawn from the same playbook: boost popular support with feel-good promises. So what if today's cities have pot-holed roads, inadequate municipal services and poor traffic management? All will be well in the future.

Futurism in politics is about brand building. Every politician in power wants to be remembered by an idea, an initiative, a policy or a project. It has replaced what I have often termed as the 'Taj Mahal Syndrome'. The Taj Mahal syndrome in public life is represented by foundation stones. Politicians build monuments, buildings, public works projects and so on and ensure that the future will remember them by their name appearing on the foundation stone.

Shah Jahan is not remembered for any policy or acts of governance during his tenure as emperor but by the edifice he erected in memory of his beloved. Every politician in power wants to put in place an edifice that he or she would be remembered by. Consider how many projects Modi has sought to be associated with, ranging from the Sardar Patel statue in Gujarat to a road bridge in Assam and a tunnel through the Himalayas.

But projects, once completed, are often easily forgotten and voters do not always reward politicians for projects completed. So ideas and proposals for the future have to be put in place. These have to be adequately long-term so that any shortcoming does not deprive the author of the idea of the image she seeks. Modi, for example, would have realized that his 'Achhe Din' slogan was misplaced. He promised good days ahead in 2014. By 2019 he was unable to deliver on that promise. An attack on Pakistan came in handy.

So the goal of Viksit Bharat is sufficiently far-off to keep anyone from asking if he has delivered on the promise. He would, however, be remembered by that term. Just as Indira Gandhi is remembered by her slogan 'Garibi Hatao'. But Indira Gandhi did not manage to banish poverty. In fact, poverty rates came down sharply in the decade after Narasimha Rao unleashed economic growth through policy reform.

It was during the tenures of Narasimha Rao and Atal Bihari Vajpayee that poverty levels fell sharply and continued to do so during Manmohan Singh's term in office. However, the idea of *'garibi hatao'* continues to recall to memory the leadership of Indira Gandhi. Modi must hope that when *'achhe din'* finally arrive for a majority of Indians and India becomes *'viksit'*, he will still get the credit. ■

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' (Penguin, 2025).

Invest in small towns

LOOKING AHEAD

KIRAN KARNIK

THE media carries reports, almost daily, of new projects for infrastructure in cities, especially big and visible ones in metros and larger cities. These include new flyovers, tunnels and subways to facilitate vehicular movement, road widening and modernizing, and expansion of the Metro (rail) system. Less frequent but also announced are social infrastructure projects: hospital and health facilities, new schools, water supply and drainage, electric power substations, air and water pollution abatement measures, and so on.

Sadly, maintenance of existing assets like roads and footpaths, utilities and public facilities — being less glamorous and not "news-worthy" — gets short shrift, budget-wise, and little serious attention. As a result, while the aim of the new projects is to increase the efficiency of the cities, this is considerably impeded — if not nullified — by the shoddy and lethargic implementation of maintenance works. The construction-maintenance cycle always promises future benefits, though that future never arrives, and the reality is ever-increasing pollution through dust clouds and traffic snarls that add to vehicular emissions.

Cities are engines of economic growth: agglomerations that bring together talent, finance, and infrastructure — both hard (physical) and soft — which attract various industries, creating a conducive ecosystem. Their contribution to the GDP, the overall national economy, and jobs/livelihood opportunities is substantial. They also act as hubs for culture, art, and literature, even as migration into them creates a cosmopolitan culture, with a diversity of language, cuisine, and lifestyle. Such diversity is often the seed for innovation and creativity. Little wonder, then, that governments invest ever greater capital and attention in cities.

As a result, cities keep growing, evolving into megapolises, with over 10 million residents. However, except for Hyderabad and Ahmedabad, in no city have services and infrastructure development been able to keep pace with the growth. In most others, civic services — from garbage removal and waste disposal, to water, sewage and stormwater drains — have deteriorated to crisis level. The result is traffic jams, dirty cities, floods at the slightest rainfall, air pollution, and "difficulty of living", making for an unattractive quality of life.

In a corrective effort, governments are investing ever more in these same cities. Yet, broader roads and more flyovers stimulate greater demand for personal mobility vehicles, causing continuing or longer traffic jams. Mass transport is focused on high-visibility but high-cost Metro-rail projects, rather than an expansion or modernization of the bus fleet. The former is also perceived as a showpiece for votes and — if the grapevine is to be believed — a good source for corruption. It is, doubtless, fast and efficient, but with no proper last-mile connectivity and poor planning (for example, insufficient parking for private vehicles and public transport, including taxis and autos; little thought for integrating Metro stations with shopping, markets, or entertainment complexes), this has mainly cannibalised commuters from other means of public transport.

People are moving to small towns and Tier 3 cities

Bus services, though more convenient and cheaper, are not as glamorous, resulting in their neglect (many cities now have fewer buses — often old and poorly maintained — than a decade ago). Yet, their potential ubiquity cancels the speed advantage of the Metro-rail, while the far lower investment (and, hence, cost) makes them the first choice for the poorest. Of course, in many cities, especially very large ones, the optimum solution will be a mix of the two. Wrong priorities have led to disastrous policies: for example, preference given to cars and two-wheelers has meant the neglect of cheap mass transport and quickly abandoning solutions like the bus rapid transit system (BRTS) — a proven success elsewhere.

At the macro level, policymakers now need to decide: looking ahead, should greater investments go into trying to increase the efficiency of big cities or should a substantial part be reallocated to improving the attractiveness of small towns? The former is likely to be a losing battle: better infrastructure and efficiency will only draw in more industry and migrants, adding rapidly to the number of vehicles (the NCR is already choking with 30 million!) and resulting in more congestion, greater pollution, unmanageable waste, worsening health, ecological degradation, and more rural-urban inequities. It may also worsen stress levels, drug addiction, and crime. Simultaneously, the demand for land/housing, water, electricity, drainage, and health care will not be met, leave alone open spaces for parks or playgrounds. Investing overly in the big cities is, therefore, a downward-spiralling cycle (inadequate infrastructure-investment-growth-inadequate infrastructure).

Technology now offers an alternative model: one of dispersal and decentralization, rather than large, centralized factories or mega-cities. The earlier paradigm, based on economies of scale, has led to ever-bigger, impersonal cities with little scope for resident involvement in governance, and a neverending appetite for large investments in infrastructure. Unsurprisingly, more people, unhappy with life and problems in big cities, are shifting base to their hometowns, or to places like Goa and Dehradun, where the quality of life is better. Already, the trend of outward migration from large cities — which seemed a Covid-induced temporary escape — is now attaining permanency. Small, selective investments in smaller cities, semi-urban areas, and 'Tier 3' cities can vastly and quickly improve their efficiency and quality of life. Making such places more liveable and better connected to the world (physically and electronically) could vastly amplify the exodus. One can foresee a reverse migration in future: from cities to rural areas and small towns.

To catalyze this trend and decongest the bursting-at-the seams big cities, we need both pull (better amenities and connections in small towns) and push (curtail large investments in infrastructure in big cities, which only result in bigger problems). The latter would free up funds for the former. The simple message is a radical mind-shift, a new model that stops pampering big cities and creates a new decentralized model of development. Are policymakers willing to at least experiment with this? ■

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

Britain's disdain for scrutiny

WORLD VIEW

SHYAM BHATIA

TO borrow a line from an old pop song, let me take you by the hand and lead you through the streets of London. A timely walk as Britain approaches 2026 and finds itself once again confronted by questions of accountability and national purpose.

And allow me to pause at four great British institutions: the British Museum, the BBC, the monarchy and the security services. Each is a national icon, each admired far beyond Britain's shores. Their histories differ, yet they share a single flaw that has shaped Britain's past and now clouds its future: a persistent, deeply rooted lack of accountability.

This is not a matter of political hostility. It is cultural. For generations, Britain has protected its most revered institutions by avoiding uncomfortable questions about how they behave, how they are governed, and how they acquired their status. The result is a country that excels at ceremony but hesitates when confronted with scrutiny. From afar, these institutions appear dignified and powerful; close up, they reveal vulnerabilities, moral, structural or both.

Consider first the British Museum, one of the world's most visited cultural institutions. Its relationship with its Asian and African collections remains fraught. The Indian case stands out. The controversy is not the 2023 internal theft scandal — that involved Greek, Roman and Hellenistic items — but the far older removal of the Amaravati sculptures, also known as the Amaravati Marbles.

These Buddhist reliefs, dating from roughly the 2nd century BCE to the 3rd century CE, were extracted in stages between 1845 and 1880 by British officials in the Madras Presidency. They were taken before India had any antiquities laws and without meaningful consent from local authorities. The Archaeological Survey of India, in its 2013 report, called the removals "an early example of unregulated extraction of India's cultural patrimony".

Even the Museum has conceded the ethical problem. In a 2020 research publication it stated that "the Amaravati sculptures entered the British Museum in circumstances that would be considered highly problematic today".

Similar concerns apply to temple carvings removed during the 19th century, objects taken after the 1857 uprising and items acquired during the Anglo-Sikh wars. None of these removals would meet modern ethical standards.

All of this raises a deeper question: is Britain, implicitly or otherwise, teaching new generations that might is right? British schoolchildren are not told this explicitly. But the silences in the national narrative — the euphemisms around imperial acquisitions, the language of "collections", the reluctance to confront the ethics of past removals — convey their own message. When children learn that the Museum "holds world heritage" without learning how those objects arrived, when institutions evade scrutiny because they are historic or prestigious, the implicit lesson is that power justifies its own privileges.

A senior civil servant in London captured this cultural habit succinctly when he told the Institute for Government that Britain is extremely good at ceremony and much less good at accountability. These instincts linger across public life and help explain why the country reveres its great institutions, yet so often avoids asking how they behave, who they serve or whether they meet the standards they claim to embody.

The BBC presents a parallel story. Admired globally and funded by a mandatory licence fee, it often assumes its reputation is a shield. Yet the 2021 Dyson Inquiry into Martin Bashir's 1995 interview with Princess Diana concluded that "the BBC fell short of the high standards of integrity and transparency which are its hallmark". A former prime minister, who had been misrepresented by forged documents used to secure the interview, described the affair as "a shocking blot on the BBC's integrity".

The Corporation was shaken again in 2023 when its chairman, Richard Sharp — an ex-Goldman Sachs banker, Conservative donor and one-time adviser to Boris Johnson — resigned after an inquiry found he had broken the rules governing public appointments.

The controversy was straightforward: while he was applying to become BBC chairman, Sharp had been involved in discussions about helping Johnson secure an £800,000 personal loan guarantee and Johnson was the very person who had to approve Sharp's prestige appointment.

The UK Commissioner for Public Appointments concluded that Sharp had "breached the Governance Code" by failing to disclose this conflict of interest. Although he denied wrongdoing, Sharp acknowledged the damage to the BBC's credibility and resigned, saying: "I feel that this matter may well be a distraction from the Corporation's good work."

The monarchy remains the most admired institution of all and the least accountable. Royal finances are exempt from the Freedom of Information Act, and the Sovereign Grant, which funds the Royal Household, cannot be scrutinized like ordinary government expenditure. For the coming financial year the Grant has been set at £132.1 million, a substantial rise driven by higher Crown Estate profits under the formula laid down in the Sovereign Grant Act. Yet there is no straightforward mechanism for the public to see how this money is allocated or to challenge how it is spent.

The Andrew-Epstein scandal shows how accountability works inside the royal system. Following the former Prince Andrew's disastrous 2019 television interview, Buckingham Palace issued a statement saying that he "continues to unequivocally regret his ill-judged association with Jeffrey Epstein".

There was no independent inquiry, no parliamentary examination and no public investigation of what occurred. Consequences were determined privately, using royal prerogative and internal procedures, rather than any open process. As former MP and Privy Counsellor Chris Bryant observed in the House of Commons: "There is no mechanism to hold the monarchy to account. None."

The security and intelligence services occupy an even more sealed space. MI5, MI6 and GCHQ are formally overseen by the Intelligence and Security Committee (ISC) of Parliament, yet even this body has repeatedly reported obstruction. Its long-delayed Russia Report in 2020 stated bluntly: "The Government has actively avoided parliamentary scrutiny." Earlier, in its 2018 reports on detainee mistreatment and rendition, the Committee wrote that it had "not been able to fully examine the extent of UK involvement".

After the Manchester Arena bombing, the 2023 inquiry found that "opportunities to prevent the attack were missed", yet the chain of accountability remained opaque. All of this brings us back to the larger question: what lesson does Britain pass on to its young? When institutions preserve their prestige but sidestep scrutiny, when history is curated but not confronted, Britain risks teaching that power protects itself — that, in the end, might is always right. ■

Shyam Bhatia is the London correspondent of The Tribune

India's antibiotic obsession

GETTING IT RIGHT

CHANDRA BHUSHAN

I have travelled extensively over the past three decades and never once fallen sick outside India — until my visit to Brazil last month for COP30. A simple viral infection ended up becoming a mirror, revealing how differently India and Brazil approach antibiotic use, and why this difference matters.

In India, like most people, I rely on a familiar ecosystem of doctors, chemists and well-meaning advisors. Over time, one becomes comfortable with this formal-informal health care network. For routine illnesses like coughs and colds, I consult them, weigh their advice, and take (or avoid) medication accordingly. The advice, however, is predictable. Every time I have had a viral infection, the prescription has included an anti-allergic and an antibiotic — even when the doctor clearly diagnosed it as viral.

The justification was always the same: "Take antibiotics to prevent a secondary bacterial infection." It never mattered that antibiotics do not treat viruses. Prevention became a catch-all excuse. A couple of years ago, this approach backfired. After one course of antibiotics, I developed a lingering cough that lasted months. Since then, I have been cautious with antibiotics.

THE PRESCRIPTION On my fourth day in Brazil, I fell ill. You never truly know where viral infections come from — long flights, crowded airports, air-conditioned taxis, or poorly ventilated conference halls. I followed my usual routine: steam inhalation, saline gargles, warm fluids and paracetamol. But by Day Six, the fever and congestion worsened, so I consulted my doctor in India.

As expected, he prescribed paracetamol, an anti-allergic, a broad-spectrum antibiotic, throat soothers, vitamins and a cough suppressant. Armed with the prescription, I went to a chemist — and what followed was eye-opening.

First, the chemist refused to accept my Indian prescription. Brazilian law requires a prescription from a local doctor. Second, he separated what he could sell without a prescription — lozenges, vitamins, paracetamol — from what he could not: antibiotics. Third, he directed me to a 24x7 government urgent-care centre and advised me to consult a Brazilian doctor. Reluctantly, I went.

The centre was spotless, efficient and welcoming. Though I spoke only English and the staff only Portuguese, a translation app bridged the gap. They took basic details and a copy of my passport. There was no consultation fee.

The doctor examined me thoroughly. I showed him the Indian prescription. He glanced at it politely and set it aside.

"You have a viral infection," he said. "It will resolve on its own in 10-12 days."

His prescription was astonishingly simple: paracetamol in case of high fever, a throat lozenge, and a saline nasal rinse. No antibiotics. No anti-allergic.

When I mentioned that my sputum had turned yellowish-green — something many Indian doctors treat as a sign of bacterial infection — he smiled gently. "That is a myth. Viral infections can also produce coloured sputum," he said. In effect, he refuted much of what I had been told about cough and cold management in India.

I returned to India still mildly symptomatic. Out of curiosity, I got a sputum culture done. After three days of incubation, the report showed moderate growth of a bacteria. My Indian doctor immediately advised me to start antibiotics. The Brazilian doctor, however, responded: "This does not require antibiotics. Minor bacterial growth often resolves naturally."

This time, I chose to trust him. Thirteen days after falling sick, I have recovered — without taking a single antibiotic or anti-allergic.

A SYSTEMIC FAILURE I share this not to criticize Indian doctors, but to highlight a systemic failure. Across the world, antibiotics are viewed as curative medicines — to be used only when truly necessary. In India, they are used preventively, routinely prescribed for viral infections that the human body is fully capable of handling.

This misuse and overuse are key reasons India is now the epicentre of the global antimicrobial resistance (AMR) crisis. The numbers are alarming:

- An estimated 300,000 deaths in India are directly attributable to AMR.
- Indian Council of Medical Research surveillance shows widespread resistance to commonly used antibiotics like ciprofloxacin, amoxicillin and azithromycin.
- Many Indian hospitals report 40-70 percent resistance rates among bacteria causing pneumonia, bloodstream infections and urinary tract infections.

And this is not solely due to human misuse. India is also indiscriminately pumping antibiotics into its food chain. In poultry and livestock production, antibiotics are used not just to treat illness but as growth promoters to fatten animals quickly. These drug-resistant bacteria travel from farms to food to humans.

The result? As my own test result suggested, most Indians are walking reservoirs of resistant bacteria. When we eventually contract a serious infection — one that truly requires antibiotics — we may find our options limited or ineffective.

IMPLEMENTATION PARALYSIS The tragedy is that we already know what to do. In 2016-17, the Government of India convened a committee to develop the National Action Plan on Antimicrobial Resistance (NAP-AMR). I was a member of that committee. We created a multi-sectoral plan for 2017-2021, spanning human health, agriculture and environmental waste. A revised plan for 2025-29 was released in November 2025.

Yet, the first plan largely remained on paper. Implementation was hampered by weak regulation, inadequate surveillance and a health care culture that favours quick fixes over medical discipline.

The real difference between India and countries like Brazil is not medical expertise but strict enforcement of a policy. It is the refusal to prescribe and sell antibiotics unless absolutely necessary. My Brazilian doctor summed it up best: "Use antibiotics when they are needed, not when you are worried." We need this culture of medical discipline and strict enforcement to solve the AMR crisis. ■

Chandra Bhushan is one of India's foremost public policy experts and the Founder-CEO of the International Forum for Environment, Sustainability & Technology (iFOREST)

Feeding pigeons isn't holy

CITIZENS IN COURT

MEGHNA UNIYAL

IN 2016, in *Jigeesha Thakore Vs Dilip Sumanlal Shah,* the Supreme Court upheld a Bombay High Court order prohibiting a family from feeding pigeons even from their own private balcony, stating that "a person cannot feed birds from a flat's balcony creating nuisance due to droppings and filth for other occupants in a residential society". Hon'ble Justices U.U. Lalit and Indu Malhotra stated, "If you are living in a residential society, then you have to conduct yourself according to the norms."

Pigeon feeding is currently banned in Mumbai due to public health concerns over diseases linked to pigeon droppings and damage to heritage structures. The Bombay High Court has ordered the Brihanmumbai Municipal Corporation to enforce this ban, including fines for offenders and the closure of designated feeding spots called *'kabutar khanas'*. An expert committee is also looking into addressing and resolving this critical public health issue.

What these issues reveal, though, is that India has no shortage of compassion or any number of versions and interpretations of it. What it lacks, often disastrously, is ecological literacy. Pushed as 'kindness', this behaviour is in fact a socially sanctioned form of ecological harm. It creates stress for the very animals being fed, jeopardizes public health, and causes the deaths of countless other creatures, seen and unseen.

One does not have to be an ecologist to know that animals respond to food availability, not sentiment. When food is available, provisioned or abundant, populations grow. When it is scarce, their populations decline. In Indian cities, stray dog feeding and availability of food via garbage dumps have had predictably harmful results — high population densities, large, artificially subsidized packs that become territorial and aggressive around feeding areas and chronic disease cycles maintained by congregation.

Pigeons follow the same pattern — food handouts like grains, bread and processed flour enable flock sizes that far exceed what any urban ecosystem can sustain. In nature, carrying capacity is fixed and non-negotiable. Provisioning of food to stray and unowned animals means artificially increasing their populations. The consequences are deadly — cities struggle with the spillover, people suffer and so do the animals.

What pro-feeding communities don't know, or at least don't seem to want to accept, is that the unseen victims of stray dog and pigeon feeding are millions of other animals. One of the most astonishing moral blind spots in these practices is the invisible violence embedded in the food itself. The chapatti tossed to a stray dog or the grain scattered for pigeons carries a hidden death toll — of insects, pollinators and small, farm wildlife — all killed through pesticide application, tillage, harvesting, land conversion and fertilizers.

Pigeon droppings cause disease and are a public health hazard

India's cropping systems kill trillions of insects every year. If the ethical impulse is to "save lives" or "care for animals", then deliberately creating more mouths to feed — each one dependent on ecologically costly agriculture — is ethically incoherent. Feeding stray dogs or pigeons is not kindness; it is moral displacement. The suffering is simply outsourced to species we do not see or care about.

Pigeon feeding produces dense roosts that create chronic respiratory hazards like hypersensitivity pneumonitis or 'pigeon-fancier's lung', asthma, fungal infections and contamination of private and public infrastructure. The birds fare no better — overcrowding leads to constant stress, parasitism and high chick mortality. What people perceive as helping is, biologically, a recipe for suffering. No responsible public health framework can endorse behaviour that makes exposure more likely. Nor does any law allow it.

Artificially inflated dog and pigeon populations impose a heavy toll on urban biodiversity as well. Free-roaming dogs kill ground-nesting birds, small mammals and reptiles. They displace native scavengers like crows, vultures, jackals, and mongoose. Pigeons outcompete native birds for nesting sites and spread disease.

Much of this 'kind' behaviour stems from a sentimental, individualized view and favouritism towards 'cute' animals as well as practices rooted in cultural and religious norms. The animals one can see become the focus of empathy; the millions invisibly harmed are excluded from the moral frame. This selective compassion is not harmless. It manufactures ecological imbalance, fosters zoonotic risk and produces chronic suffering for the very animals being fed.

True kindness requires aligning intentions with ecological reality. And this means discouraging and stopping deliberate feeding of stray dogs and pigeons and promoting education and awareness programmes that help people understand how species interact and affect health systems.

Compassion cannot just be a warm, fuzzy feeling; it must include responsibility. And responsibility requires acknowledging that feeding stray dogs and pigeons harms more animals than it helps. While public discourse, debates and court cases on the subject continue, it must be recognized that some matters are already settled via law, and our courts, citizenry and the country cannot be repeatedly held ransom to the sentiments of a few.

As far back as 1958, in *Md Quareshi Vs the State of Bihar,* Hon'ble Justice P.B. Gajendragadkar laid down that "In order that the practices in question should be treated as a part of religion they must be regarded by the said religion as its essential and integral part; otherwise purely secular practices which are not an essential or an integral part of religion are apt to be clothed with a religious form and may make a claim for being treated as religious practices within the meaning of Article 26. Similarly, even practices, though religious, may have sprung from merely superstitious beliefs and unessential accretions to religion itself". Some religions may promote feeding some animals, other faiths may consider some animals unclean.

Regardless, feeding animals in public places is not an essential feature or integral part of any religion, especially since it threatens public health and safety, and must not be condoned. ■

Meghna Uniyal is Director, Humane Foundation for People and Animals

The dung enterprise

Crafts from a spiritual journey

VALERIE D'SILVA

IN the ordinary, Nita Deep Bajpai discovered the extraordinary. Cow dung — usually dismissed as waste — becomes in her hands a material of transformation: tangible, purposeful, sacred. It carries the weight of centuries of tradition, the promise of wellness, and the power to uplift entire communities. Through this seemingly humble substance, Bajpai creates acupressure mats that ease tired bodies, therapeutic pillows that encourage rest, wedding jewellery that honours culture, 21-bead Rudraksha sets that strengthen meditation, anti-radiation chips that anchor modern life, and Bhij Ganesha idols that dissolve into soil and sprout medicinal plants. Every creation is alive with intention, connecting people to themselves, their communities, and the natural world.

Yet the brilliance of these products is inseparable from the story that led Bajpai to them. Her life, marked by learning, resilience, and devotion, shapes every creation.

A biodegradable Bhij Ganesha

Bajpai's life was once defined by relentless ambition and balance. A tireless student, she was pursuing her master's degree and training to become a civil judge, simultaneously nurturing a love for craft and jewellery design while raising her children. This dedication was a reflection of the "old Nita" her husband often encouraged her to be — the one passionate about learning and service.

Then, the ground gave way. Her husband died abruptly following a paralytic attack. "In the span of five seconds, your life can change," Bajpai reflects on the abrupt shift in her world. She was instantly thrust into managing his CT scan centre in Harda district of Madhya Pradesh, a responsibility that initially felt heavy and isolating.

The centre served a community stretching across 14 villages giving her an unprecedented window into the vulnerability and strength of rural women. It was here, at the crossroads of her personal sorrow and societal reality, that her purpose was revealed.

Nita Deep Bajpai with her handwoven cow dung acupressure mat

ETHICAL SOURCE The choice of cow dung was neither accidental nor arbitrary; it was a stroke of genius rooted in tradition, logistics, and economic viability. For Bajpai, cow dung is inextricably linked to memory and sanctity. She recalls the use of cow dung floors in the villages of her childhood — a sacred, grounding, naturally antiseptic, and cooling surface revered in Sanatan tradition. This material is both spiritually resonant and supremely practical.

From an entrepreneurial perspective, the resource is easily available and requires minimal investment to process. The primary energy source needed for hardening is readily accessible sunlight. Furthermore, Bajpai made the strategic decision to establish her production unit immediately adjacent to the *gaushala* (cow sanctuary). This eliminated the need for complex supply chains, drastically reducing transportation costs and providing a stable, localized source of the core material. This low-investment, high-impact model is a testament to sustainable business practice.

Bajpai's ethics demanded that her resource be sourced with compassion. Her model is founded on a profound rejection of the practice of abandoning cattle once they stop producing milk. In her *gaushala,* all cattle — cows, Nandi (bulls), and *govansh* — live out their full lives with dignity. By valuing the dung, Bajpai ensures the sustained care of the animals, effectively turning a discarded by-product into an economic engine that protects cattle from the dangers of being left on the streets. This ethical sourcing creates a self-sustainable *gaushala* model where nature is a partner, not a resource to be exploited.

The moment that shattered her isolation and focused her energy involved a woman named Farsana. Battered and bruised after fleeing an abusive marriage, Farsana was left for dead outside the clinic. Bajpai healed her, but in Farsana's pain, she saw the potential of countless other women: women from tribal groups, marginalized communities, and those who were differently abled — all intelligent, resilient, and skilled, yet trapped by illiteracy and lack of opportunity.

This realization became Bajpai's mission. Her husband's encouragement to return to her passionate self, merged with a deep, maternal urgency. Her vision crystallized: to use her intellect and emotion not just for her family, but to make women "financially, mentally, and emotionally strong". She resolved: "To live in the lives of a million people, not in just one home." The goal was to give love to receive love, and to use her own resilience to foster theirs.

The true heart of Bajpai's enterprise is social justice. Her workshop became a sanctuary of opportunity, fulfilling her vision of skill development for marginalized, underprivileged, and physically challenged women who felt they had no purpose due to illiteracy. She specifically works with communities like the Sahariya tribe, who often endure conditions without light or running water.

Bajpai's model is built on freedom and respect. She offers flexible work hours, allowing women to work as much or as little as they need, balancing income with crucial family duties. In the workshop, they learn sophisticated craft — rolling dung ropes, moulding intricate idols, and executing detailed painting. Each skill mastered is a step towards self-reliance. For these women, the repetitive, careful work of shaping the earth provides immense emotional restoration.

Wedding jewellery

CHIPS TO MATS Among her creations, the anti-radiation chip stands out for its quiet ingenuity. Small enough to sit behind a mobile phone or laptop, it embodies her philosophy of blending ancient knowledge with modern need. Made from finely powdered cow dung mixed with natural binders and sun-cured into firm discs, the chip symbolizes grounding in an age dominated by screens. Whether placed behind a device as a protective charm or kept on a work desk as a reminder of the earth's stabilizing presence, the chip links technology to tradition.

Wellness takes another tactile form in her acupressure mats and therapeutic pillows, products that translate earth, sunlight, and skill into comfort and restoration. The mats are crafted from ropes of cow dung rolled and woven by hand, then sun-hardened to create gentle pressure points that stimulate circulation and release tension. They offer relief for common ailments like migraines and backaches. Alongside them lie therapeutic pillows, filled with natural materials and shaped to cradle the head and neck in restful alignment. These tools remind users of their bodies' intelligence, the rhythms of breath, and the quiet power of self-care. In a world increasingly distanced from nature, Bajpai's wellness products guide people back to a simpler, more embodied state of being.

Spirituality, too, infuses her work in tangible ways. Her 21-bead Rudraksha sets anchor meditation practices with a biodegradable, earth-friendly foundation. The beads are mounted on cow dung bases moulded with precision, ensuring that spiritual objects remain aligned with ecological integrity. Crafting the sets is a soothing, meditative task for the women in Bajpai's workshop; they speak of finding their own grounding in the repetitive tying, shaping, and threading. The end product carries that sense of intention — each bead offering a moment of pause, each base carrying the energy of the hands that shaped it.

The most powerful fusion of ritual and regeneration is seen in the Bhij Ganesha idols. Crafted from sun-dried cow dung enriched with medicinal seeds, these idols do not pollute. Instead, they dissolve gracefully during *visarjan* (immersion). As the form disappears, the seeds settle into the soil, sprouting into new medicinal plants and manure. Devotion becomes a profound catalyst for new life, turning an act of faith into a ritual of reforestation — a true *guru dakshina* to the earth.

Bajpai teaching women crafts and life skills that transform their future

Eco-friendly diyas, idols, and sacred handcrafted pieces

The anti-radiation chip stands out for its quiet ingenuity. Acupressure mats are created from ropes of cow dung rolled and woven by hand and then sun-hardened.

Her wedding jewellery carries yet another layer of meaning — culture expressed without compromise. Lightweight, intricately moulded, and hand-painted with natural pigments, each piece tells a story of heritage preserved through sustainable craft. In a world where weddings often generate enormous waste, Bajpai's jewellery provides a path towards celebration that honours both tradition and the earth. Brides choose them not only for their beauty but for their story: that of artisans who have risen from adversity, making this an exquisite example of alternative sustainable fashion.

What makes Bajpai's work extraordinary is not only the innovation but the intention behind it. Cow dung, sunlight, and human skill become tools of empowerment. Tradition becomes modern. Ritual becomes sustainable. In the interplay of sunlight, earth, hands, and heart, Nita Deep Bajpai has revealed a profound truth: even the humblest materials hold extraordinary potential. Through cow dung, she has created a world where women rise, animals thrive, communities flourish, and the earth is honoured. Her story flows quietly beneath her creations, giving them soul — but it is the products themselves that speak most powerfully to the future. A future where every act of creation honours life, uplifts communities, and carries intention into the world. ■

Kodagu is an experience

SUSHEELA NAIR

WE drove down to Coorg from Bengaluru on the Madikeri-Mysuru highway, and quickly decided to skip over-crowded Madikeri, the main town of Kodagu district. We headed instead to Kushalnagar, a town on the Cauvery river, and spent two days at the TGI Redolent Resort & Spa, just two kilometres away, recharging and calming our city-frayed nerves. With its sprawling garden, silver oak trees, indigenous plants and manicured green lawns, the resort is a haven of peace and tranquility.

Winding pathways led us to 36 cottages set in clusters. What soothed our eyes immensely was the lush landscaping and architectural beauty. The rooms merge seamlessly with their beautiful surroundings. I found the red laterite exteriors a striking contrast to the lush greenery of the five-acre rustic property.

The cottages are large, with an enormous bedroom and patio. The plush interiors feature king-size beds, and silk brocaded cushions that promise the sleep of your dreams. Each room has large windows and doors that open to a verandah overlooking the garden with well-kept hedges and colourful bursts of flowers all around. The resort's unique design feature is the massive reception area from where one can get a panoramic view of the resort.

If you are the sedentary type, you can recline in a corner of the verandah with a book in hand and disengage yourself or sit in the room and watch the rains drench the pretty landscape. In fact, you can sit all day watching and listening to the occasional pitter-patter of the rain. Post-monsoon, it is a wondrous place for a winter break. The feathery mist lends a surreal touch to the scenic charm of the resort. So enveloping was the rainy mist that we could see nothing at times. Then, in a fraction of a minute, the mist would vanish, unveiling surroundings doused with drops of water. The salubrious climate and the picture postcard views make it a popular getaway throughout the year.

What catches one's fancy is Swaarasya, the resort's restaurant, from where you can admire the well laid-out swimming pool, cottages, spa and the games room. Amid lush environs, the specialities served here are as delectable as the fresh air. It is an ideal place to sip a cup of tea, nibble snacks and gaze at the blue water of the swimming pool. We got to savour the succulent *koli* curry (chicken curry) and *kadumbuttu* (rice dumplings) which are the most delicious dishes in Kodava cuisine.

Photo: Civil Society/Susheela Nair

There are 36 cottages set in clusters

You can recline in the verandah with a book and watch the rain drench the landscape. Or you can drive to nearby sights.

If you want to explore the sights nearby you can drive to some tourist attractions in Kushalnagar. During the monsoon you can experience the rapids on the Cauvery river along the stretch adjacent to the Dubare Elephant Camp in Kodagu. This stretch provides for some great river rafting for four months during the height of the monsoon. Post-monsoon there is still rafting available in the remaining months. The highlight of the season is the 1.5-hour whitewater rafting adventure on the roaring Barapole river, which originates in the Brahmagiri hills and flows towards the Arabian Sea. Adventure junkies can navigate a 4.5-km stretch of the river featuring four iconic rapids with thrilling sections reaching up to Class 4 for a duration of four months.

On our return journey, we stopped by Cauvery Nisargadhama, a breathtaking emerald green riverine island carved by the meandering Cauvery, soon after it reaches the plains. It is just two km from Kushalnagar on the state highway linking Madikere and Mysore. The sprawling 64-acre nature resort teems with luxuriant bamboo groves, rosewood and teak and has a deer park, orchidarium, *machans* for viewing and offers a boat ride down the river. The highlight of Nisargadhama is its magical blend of a serene sylvan setting with the meandering Cauvery. Earlier, it was a popular rendezvous for Tibetans from the nearby Bylekuppe settlement. Now it is a popular tourist attraction, drawing hordes of tourists from all over the country every day.

If you are searching for offbeat places in Kushalnagar, Chiklihole Reservoir is an ideal pick. It is also known as Sunset Point because of its breathtaking sunset view. Harangi, Coorg's only reservoir on the Cauvery, is another place one can explore.

The last halt of our itinerary was Bylekuppe, the Tibetan settlement with its famed Golden Temple, other monasteries and a bustling shopping complex that peddles authentic Tibetan ware. It's only after we drove inside for a kilometre that we realized the place pulsates with the sights and sounds of Tibet. We found monasteries, Tibetan schoolchildren cycling on the roads, monks in maroon and ochre robes with Buddha-like smiles, a flea market, and white prayer flags fluttering everywhere.

The bustling shopping complex sells authentic Tibetan ware like prayer wheels, *thangkas,* handicrafts, carpets, incense and other items. The Golden Temple, with its gold-plated roof, transported us straight to Tibet in all its splendour. The expansive halls in the Namdroling Monastery hold 40-foot idols of the Buddha and his disciples, Padmasambhava and Amitayus.

We culminated our sojourn with a visit to a Kodava family to take part in the Huthri celebrations when the paddy is ready to be harvested. The ceremonious cutting of the new paddy crop by the head of the family falls on a full moon night and is accompanied by chants of "*Poli, Poli Devd* (increase, increase, O God)". A single shot is fired to summon Lord Iguthappa, the presiding deity of the Kodava people of Kodagu. It was a splendid opportunity to experience a slice of Kodava hospitality and savour the delectable Kodava cuisine. ■

An adventure in Darjeeling

RASHMI GOPAL RAO

A chill in the air, towering pine trees, misty skies, rhododendrons, and the shrill whistle of the toy train. As I entered Darjeeling, the Queen of the Hills was just as I had imagined it to be. It is indeed a compelling place that offers a kaleidoscope of experiences in history, culture, religion and heritage.

Perched at an altitude of over 6,700 feet in West Bengal, Darjeeling is often touted as the gateway to the Himalayas. This is mainly because the hill station offers a stunning view of the third highest peak in the world, the mighty Kanchenjunga.

Replete with verdant tea gardens, Darjeeling was the summer capital of the Bengal Presidency during the colonial era. Whether you want to explore Tibetan culture, visit Buddhist monasteries, enjoy a ride on the heritage steam railway, catch a glimpse of colonial architecture or indulge in a session of tea tasting, Darjeeling is the place to be.

RISE WITH THE SUN Watching the sun rise at Tiger Hill is one of Darjeeling's tried and tested adventures. "An early morning drive to Tiger Hill is an experience you will cherish forever," promised our guide and driver, Manish, as he drove us to our resort in Ghum in Darjeeling.

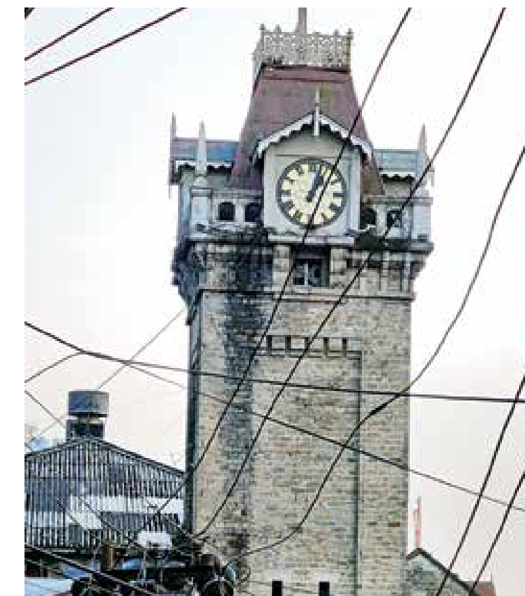
As promised, Manish arrived at what seemed a rather unearthly hour — 2.30 am! We quickly got ready and within minutes we were navigating steep winding roads to reach the top of Tiger Hill, which is around 1,650 feet above Darjeeling.

To my utter surprise, the roads were quite crowded at that hour. We had to park some distance away and, as we trudged uphill, we were greeted by hordes of locals who had set up shop on both sides of the road. They were selling everything you thought you might have needed at 4 am — piping hot lemon tea, shawls, stoles, socks and even steaming Maggi noodles!

The excitement was palpable as the time for sunrise approached. Nothing had prepared me for the breathtaking beauty of the sunrise. The crimson red head of the sun slowly appeared and grew in size, painting the sky in fiery tones of orange, yellow and even purple. It finally morphed into a fiery ball. People were ecstatic. I realized no picture or description could do justice to the incredible spectacle of nature we had witnessed.

Nature lovers can also head to Lepchajagat, home to the Lepcha tribe. Most of this region is blanketed with thick pine forests. As you approach the village, the fragrance of fresh pine and the chirping of birds is unmissable. The stunning beauty of the pine forest as the sunlight infiltrates the thick canopy is awesome.

Inside Yiga Choeling monastery



Darjeeling's historic clock tower

A TIBETAN TRAIL Located close to our resort was the Yiga Choeling Monastery, the first Tibetan Buddhist monastery to be built in Darjeeling. Belonging to the Gelukpa or the Yellow Hat sect, the highlight of the monastery is its 15-foot statue of the Maitreya Buddha. The monastery was built in 1850 and was home to several abbots who fled Tibet when it was occupied by the Chinese in 1959.

We then visited the Himalayan Tibet museum and admired its display of Tibet's topography, history, flora, fauna, socio-economic life and the Dalai Lama. Detailed photographs, models, objects and artefacts give visitors an insight into Tibetan religious customs, beliefs and rituals. Further, it has engaging displays on key Tibetans in Darjeeling, important political developments, and the Tibetan community in exile. One can also buy books, postcards and other souvenirs in the museum.

If you'd like to buy Tibetan handicrafts, visit the Tibetan Refugee Self zzHelp Centre in Lebong. Also known as the Hermitage, the centre was established in 1959 when the Dalai Lama fled Tibet. What started as an initiative with just four people has grown to a centre where over 130 Tibetan families reside. Apart from caring for the old, sick and needy, it is a centre where artisans are trained and handicrafts like shawls, bags, masks and prayer flags are made.

The Japanese Temple and Peace Pagoda situated atop the Jalapahar hills in Darjeeling is also worth a visit if you have time.

TRAIN RIDE AND MALL WALK Of course, no visit to Darjeeling is complete without taking a ride on the toy train which is part of the Darjeeling Himalayan Railway (DHR). This vintage narrow-gauge train built in 1881 is 145 years old. It is an engineering marvel and has a UNESCO World Heritage Site tag. We took a joy ride from Darjeeling to Ghum via the Batasia loop. It was nostalgic, picturesque and an adventure.

Ghum Railway Station is the highest railway station in India at 7,407 feet. Do visit the Ghum museum which has some invaluable information on world heritage and the DHR. The history, building and unique aspects of the DHR are displayed along with information on its loops, gradients and Z reverses.

Back in Darjeeling, we decided to stroll along the celebrated Mall Road and admire some relics from the British era. We gazed at the iconic city clock tower and St Andrew's Church. The clock dates back to 1850. It has a brick façade replete with arched windows, stone pillars and cast-iron awnings.

We also went to heritage outlets like Keventer's, Glenary's, and Das Studio. They exuded oodles of old-world charm. ■

At home with the Pintos

VALERIE D'SILVA

NO map pins, no star ratings, no influencer videos — yet the old-charm bars of Benaulim reveal themselves to those who seek them patiently, off the beaten track. These bars exist in another Goa — tucked between swaying palms, lanes painted in pastel hues, and the soft village breeze carrying the scent of fried *chorizo* and *feni*. They belong to the people, stitched into homes, upheld by family, tradition, and the gentle flow of daily life. A tiny yellow bulb hangs over the carrom board. Men play cards and *matka* outside, shouting at football matches on an old TV, while inside the grandmother stirs *sorpotel*, the wife fries cutlets, and the son pours drinks behind a counter once tended by his father. It's an aura no outsider can replicate — like a secret song you hum but can never quite download.

Raechelle and I were scouting Benaulim in my old Omni, windows down, following a lead about one such hidden gem. "A tiny hole in the wall," a friend had said. "Green walls, a soft yellow light, and the freshest *feni* in South Goa." After several wrong turns, we stopped near a man on a scooter. "You know a bar called Pinto Bar?" I asked. He nodded, a smile tugging at his lips. "Follow me."

Beyond Google guidance

We weaved through narrow lanes, the night air thick with the smell of toddy, fried onions, and salt. At the end of a quiet lane glowed a tiny yellow bulb, soft and inviting. "There," he said.

Outside, a dozen bikes rested neatly. Beneath the bulb, two men played carrom, coins clicking in a steady cadence. The walls were fluorescent green — loud, unapologetic, alive. Laughter spilled from inside, warming the quiet street. Pinto Bar wasn't any regular bar; it was the heart of a home. The kitchen door opened straight into the house and behind the counter, the owner moved with the calm authority of someone who has mastered both hospitality and the perfect pour. In Goa, many such bars follow this pattern: the father starts it, the son takes over, the wife and grandmother run the kitchen, and the family lives just a wall away. *Sorpotel* simmers while card games continue outside; *feni* is poured while football scores flicker on the TV — domestic multitasking at its finest.

There's food that announces itself before you see it — beef chops, *chorizo pav*, fish cutlets. Flavours that speak of history, care, and a touch of mischievous pride. After work, men gather outside over carrom, while women occupy the living areas, cooking, chatting, laughing — the gentle hum of domestic gossip blending with the clink of bottles. And when a woman walks in, everything shifts. The air softens, the jokes quieten, men straighten. Respect — instinctive, old-fashioned, real.

Pinto making his bills by hand

The food comforts before you even swallow

We felt safe. Protected. Part of something ordinary, yet extraordinary. When we left, he walked us to the Omni, waving as laughter and clinking bottles faded into the night.

When Raechelle and I entered, conversation paused. It wasn't hostility — just hesitation. The bartender-owner smiled, "You want to sit here?" He led us to a small plastic table near the entrance — a quiet spot where he could keep an eye on us while running the bar. Two chairs, a flickering tube light, and the scent of frying meat — our perfect corner. He poured my Old Monk and Raechelle's *feni.* Bottles on the shelves leaned perfectly, stocked to the brim. Around us, laughter started again. Men clapped over a winning card, someone shouted at a football goal, and a fresh batch of cutlets hit the pan.

Our food arrived — cutlet *pav* and *chorizo pav,* both steaming, golden, and divine. The beef chop was tender inside, crisp outside — the kind of food that comforts before you even swallow. There's a strange calm here, where you feel at home, cross your feet on the chair, conversations flow into your being, yet a safety net exists. No one bothers you unless you ask.

Raechelle and I stayed late. We laughed, drank, watched cards shuffled, football goals cheered. The owner ran the bar with old-school efficiency. He scribbled the bill on ruled paper — no calculator, no computer — just memory and a red pen to cross off the entry. Then, with a sly grin, he looked up and said, "Who says you can't work while enjoying a drink?" In that moment, the place revealed its soul: no rush, no performance. Just people being together, as they always had.

We felt safe. Protected. Part of something ordinary, yet extraordinary. When we left, he walked us to the Omni, waving as laughter and clinking bottles faded into the night. Behind us, Pinto Bar glowed like a secret treasure. The warmth stayed — the simplicity, the charm, the way life could move at its own pace if you let it.

In Benaulim, the bar is more than a bar. The food is more than food. The bulb over the carrom board is more than light. It's a heartbeat. A reminder that life, in its simplest form, can be full, blissful, and unhurried. The most beautiful corners of Goa aren't beaches or sunset bars. They are the small, hidden spaces where people live, laugh, play, and welcome strangers like old friends. Pinto Bar is one such place — lingering in memory like perfect *feni*, crackling cutlet *pav,* and the quiet joy of life lived well. ■

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