

Civil Society

THE FLIGHT OF A GENERATION

India pays a high price by losing talent to the rest of the world

By SANJAYA BARU



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Civil Society
READ US. WE READ YOU.

The rush to get out

SOME years ago, we spent a week interviewing hawkers on Kolkata's streets. While talking to one of them, he suddenly said, "You, know if I were in Singapore I would be treated with much more respect as a hawker." The desire to be anywhere else in the world is a real one among Indians, rich or poor. It is the result of the poor quality of governance, absence of fraternity and the lack of opportunities to get on with one's life.

Our cover story this month is an extract from Sanjaya Baru's brilliant new book, *Secession of the Successful*, which is about emigration — particularly by the educated and well-off, who move on in search of a better life in the First World. The flight of such elites further dampens the hopes of the less fortunate, making them wonder if things will ever get better.

The inequalities spawned by India's growth story are well known. But they are most visible in the rush to get out. If, like that hawker on a Kolkata street, you can't be treated equally and given a chance to come up, what is the point of staying on? Worse still, if you can't get out and are forced to live with grim realities in our crumbling cities, just imagine the sense of hopelessness, especially when the privileged have all the choices in the world.

Who should be held accountable for this national sense of despair and hopelessness? Politicians, for one, because when they stand for election, they undertake to give people a better life through good governance. But there isn't a legislature in the country where time is invested in serious discussion on the things that matter to ordinary people. You could also call out the elites who don't bother to give back but are focused on taking care of themselves.

We have two fascinating interviews in this issue on how much of a difference robust governance can make. Vinayak Chatterjee argues convincingly for high-speed rail because of the way it will connect cities and trigger economic growth. The other interview is a sad one about workers losing their fingers on shopfloors in the supply chains of the big automobile brands. The good thing is that Safe In India, the NGO taking this up, has been winning over managements to do better. But why were they allowing it to happen in the first place?

The Pujas are always a great time to be in Kolkata. Some very socially-driven people put up those lovely pandals. We identified a whole lot of pandals that took up social causes such as acid attacks on women. Kolkata always has a conscience and a heart.

It is sad that Sonam Wangchuk has been put in jail under the NSA. The Wangchuk we know is a nationalist above all things and the causes he has taken up are a huge contribution to safeguarding the future of the nation. We pay him our salaams.



COVER STORY

THE FLIGHT OF A GENERATION

Indians have been settling across the world over generations. But what are the implications when educated, talented and successful Indians get out of the country to live in the First World?

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LETTERS



Range, quality

Can anything be better, or simpler, for staying in touch with India's swiftly changing scenes than *Civil Society*? I am astonished at the journal's range, quality, and reliability. You can depend on its arrival, and you can depend on the high quality of its reports and comments. I salute the commitment of the gifted individuals who cause it to appear, reappear, and again appear — each time enriching the reader's mind and arresting her or his interest.

Rajmohan Gandhi

Superb magazine

Civil Society is a superb magazine. Its journalism is refreshingly different. And its contents are not only unusual but also most impressive. The title might suggest that it is about civil society. In fact, its canvas is much wider. So is its perspective on polity, economy and society in India.

The cover stories span a wide range of issues such as education, healthcare, water, pollution, nature, wildlife, crafts, artisans, women, villages, rivers, food, travel, cities, and so on.

Its columns provide opinion, analysis, and ideas that are incisive, while its insights focus on diverse fascinating subjects. Its interviews are topical, substantive and engaging. Its contributors are eminent persons in their respective domains. The magazine richly deserves a wider readership.

Deepak Nayyar

A unique endeavour

It gives me hope that *Civil Society* magazine has completed 22 years of publication. Hope, since the magazine has survived despite its focus on unpopular issues and subjects nobody else writes about. Focussed on issues

IN PASSING LIFE IS A POND

Photo: Civil Society/Ashoke Chakrabarty



Photographer Ashoke Chakrabarty recently restored the pond on his land in a West Bengal village

such as sanitation, microfinance, agriculture, water harvesting and often politically incorrect stands — even on issues such as feeding and care of stray dogs! With no articles on Bollywood or politics it is a miracle that an Indian magazine continues to make a national impact.

With its online presence in recent years the magazine is popular among 'civil society' and especially the development sector. The archives with thousands of articles published over 20 years are a treasure trove for any researcher on India's sustainable development story.

Over the years, reading the magazine, I have learnt much on a diverse range of subjects and remain grateful and eager for the next issue.

Ratish Nanda

Congratulations

Civil Society is nearing its silver jubilee and its best part is the print edition.



The web is, no doubt, vital but it is the stray hard copy that outlasts the digital, says veteran journalist, media pundit and good friend A.S. Panneerselvam.

The best backed-up digital ecosystems can crash and when that happens we are almost reduced to clueless non-entities. Almost, because well-thumbed back issues of *Civil Society* would still be lying around in private homes and libraries. Like the good old copies of *The Illustrated Weekly of India*, the odd-sized *Civil Society* will stand out, ready to reconnect you to your past. So, happy reading and happy archiving.

E.P. Unny

Much needed

With more than 20 years behind it, *Civil Society* continues to be a unique offering to public life and social progress. While the cacophony of mainstream media showers misinformation, hate and divisive diatribe, *Civil Society* is a welcome voice reporting on grassroots change, democracy and incredible public action. *Civil Society* does not rant, nor is it preachy. In simple and accessible language it showcases the work of many remarkable individuals — their organizations, innovations and programmes. It congratulates, questions and critiques — all of which nourishes the civil society space.

The civil society space faces

unprecedented jeopardy today. NGOs are routinely discredited and damned as agents of foreign powers. Despite their immense contribution to building grassroots solutions, NGOs lack credible exposure and their reach to the public at large is quite limited. I consider *Civil Society* as that vital, missing link that civic action and public service organizations are struggling to make amongst each other and with the public.

The big-size format of *Civil Society* has never failed to attract — arresting cover page, sharp photographs and impeccable editing and writing. For Umesh and Rita Anand who continue to publish this month on month without fail, this is an act of love, labour and commitment towards the good work of good people in this country. This must continue!

Rajiv Khandelwal

The real India

We first came across *Civil Society* magazine several years ago — possibly 15, if memory serves me right — at a book store on Park Street, Kolkata. The size and format intrigued me and the contents were refreshingly different as well.

Over the years the magazine has

grown and found its niche place. Mainstream media doesn't care about people, their struggles, or how they find their own solutions to life's everyday problems, or how they learn to survive and do well. None of the stories — and they are all true-life — interest the 24x7 media as well because they are chasing TRPs and sensational news. Yet, what could be more sensational than a group of village women coming together and ploughing the land, making a profit, transforming lives? This truly is the 'other India' that we choose to ignore. Yet, it exists and it inspires.

Civil Society brings to us the stories we never knew, about people and communities we would rarely — if ever — meet. It makes you wonder as to which, in fact, is the real India. Or, the real Indians.

Deepa and Amit Dasgupta

The useful life

I am writing to express my profound appreciation for the anniversary issue with its razor-sharp focus on ground-level public health in India. The articles you featured provided an invaluable perspective on the gap between policy and practice in India's healthcare system. It's heartening to see your magazine dedicate space to such powerful, solution-oriented stories that often get overlooked by mainstream media.

The story of the Kerala Community Health Centre in the tribal area of Wayanad is a vital case study in effective local governance and public participation. Having the gram panchayat on the side of service delivery systems appeared to be key for success and sustainability.

Equally inspiring is the work of Dr John Oomen and his wife, Mercy, from Kerala, doing yeoman service in the tribal areas of Rayagada, Odisha, through their initiative called 'Community Dreaming'. Their commitment to enabling the community to define its own health goals is truly out of the box. I was deeply struck by their simple, yet profound, quote about choosing between an easy and worthwhile life: what is the use of money and an easy life if in

the end you have nothing to look back on? This reminded me of Dr Ambedkar's famous quote: Life should be great rather than long.

These narratives align powerfully with Dr R.A. Mashelkar and Sushil Borde's thought-provoking article on affordable medical innovations that deliver excellence to the greatest number of people.

Dr R.S. Praveen Kumar

Healthcare model

Your story on the primary health centre (PHC) in Noolpuzha was most interesting. It looks like a model health centre has been put in place. I sincerely hope all of us get such political support to have such PHCs in each and every district.

Preethi Rajagopal

A PHC like the one in Noolpuzha is much needed. Some good old news. And pointers to what's actually possible. Man does not live by bad news alone.

Frederick Noronha

Wonderful story. Solutions journalism is much needed today.

Shimaya

Healing hands

Your heading, 'The poor have the most complicated illnesses', is very true.

I hope the church continues to have the freedom to provide such care to the people in our land.

Dr Jacob K. Jacob

Heartening account of changing the trajectory of the poor and

deprived. May the scope of services expand and such nuclei take shape all over the country's rural, remote areas.

Bharati Mullick

Many thanks to Dr Deepak Singh for writing about the Chinchpada Hospital which was revived by him and his wife, Ashita. The medical profession calls for compassion first and foremost. They are both wonderful professionals serving the most needy. Thanks also for this heartening account of the progress and modern amenities acquired by the Chinchpada hospital, of which we have already heard glowing accounts from Drs Sunil Ninan and Shanti Mary. May the good endeavours endure.

Jessy Skaria

Food for thought

Dr Arun Gupta has done wonderful work. I read his article, 'Experts, not companies, should be deciding nutrition policies', in your magazine. We need more people, especially doctors and related subject experts, to join this campaign. We need to target highly processed food products continuously.

Narasimha Reddy Donthi

Skills and jobs

I read Rakesh Agrawal's story, 'At Saahas people get the skills they need'. Great effort by Saahas Resource Centre to train and help rehabilitate underprivileged and marginalized people. Although

they work in the hilly terrain of Garhwal and in the plains of UP, it's an inclusive and independent model which emerged from the efforts of a few kind-hearted persons like Shahab Naqvi and his close associates. No word suffices to salute them.

Dr Tarun Mandal

Dog trouble


Meghna Uniyal's column on the dog menace in Noida was insightful and raises some serious concerns facing Noida residents. Policymakers must act swiftly to balance public safety with humane solutions for stray dog management.

Debashish Choudhuri


The Noida Authority is telling the truth. Till about year 2000 or so, they had a dedicated budget to fund catching of stray dogs from the streets of Noida, in collaboration with animal welfare groups and others. The dogs were kept in the dog shelter in Sector 94. The stray dogs were sterilized under the supervision of vets at the centre. After 2000, the funds dried up and the NGOs gradually withdrew from this very important civic task. Why the budgeting was stopped and by whom, was never explained in any public forum. If Noida Authority has funds of more than ₹30 crore to open a dog shelter, it proves they have no shortage of money.

P.K. Roy Chowdhury

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Vinayak Chatterjee on linking cities, boosting economy

‘High-speed rail is the big move India should be looking at now’

Civil Society News
Gurugram

MORE Indians are flying than ever before. But in the process is air travel getting too clunky and burdensome? Perhaps it is time to balance the emphasis on flying with fast and efficient train services over short inter-regional distances.

An opportunity beckons in linking up cities big and small and in the process attracting investment in industries that might not otherwise head in these directions.

Some progress has already been made with the Vande Bharat trains. A bigger and calibrated push is in order. Dedicated railway corridors and superior technology could dramatically ease travel, speed up journeys, spur urbanization and join the dots that bring sizeable economic advantages.

Vinayak Chatterjee has for some time now been advocating high-speed rail services as the next big idea that Indian policy mandarins must embrace. High-speed rail would be a substantial improvement over current services and a notch or two below the bullet train. Preparations being made for the bullet train could easily be extended to ushering in high-speed rail.

Chatterjee has been an innovator in the infrastructure space for the longest time. For someone with large sums on his mind, he is also surprisingly inclusive and socially driven. Having built Feedback Ventures with friends and sold it off recently, he and his wife, Rumjhum, have co-founded the Infravision Foundation. Below is an edited version of a long and interesting conversation:

Q: You have put forward the view that high-speed rail is going to be a game changer for the Indian economy. Tell us three good reasons why. I think the most compelling economic reason — if you look back on countries in Europe and other countries that started high-speed rail perhaps two or three decades ago — is that their per capita GDP was close to where India's is now. Japan, of course, started much earlier.

Therefore, there comes a time in a society and an economy when you have a larger section of people demanding better services. Not just, you know, electricity, tap water, cooking gas and all of that. The desire of society is to move up in terms of cheaper air connectivity, better utilities, public transport...

There is a national desire that our creaking railway system should address this need for faster and more comfortable travel. India's economic indices, its development aspirations, the aspirations of its people, its per capita income, all indicate we are now ready to start high-speed train services.



Vinayak Chatterjee: 'We are losing customers willing to pay more for high-speed rail'

The second reason is that the railways subsidize passenger traffic to the extent of ₹64,000 crore per annum. It is interesting, when you segment it, that a fair chunk is for AC two-tier, AC three-tier, AC first class, and executive chair car in the Shatabdi trains. That segment of the population is rapidly moving to air travel or personal vehicles or luxury Volvo inter-city coaches. So you are actually losing a large chunk of customers who are willing to pay three or four times more for a high-speed train.

And if you continue to run creaky trains then, in marketing and business terms, you are allowing a large segment of your well-heeled customer base to migrate from your service. Does it make any sense?

Third, we are arguing for high-speed rail on dedicated lines, bypassing existing lines. A lot of technical studies in the railways have shown that there is very high choking of trunk routes and junctions. Probably the most congested junction is Mughalsarai, now called Deen Dayal Upadhyaya Junction, where a cluster of movement on limited capacity takes place. There is coal movement, iron ore movement, passenger traffic, container traffic, the eastern corridor — all crunched together on limited capacity.

So if you take a whole lot of high-speed rail and passengers on a separate track, you will free up capacity for freight trains as well as for existing trains, right?

Already, a chunk of the population has moved to airlines and low-cost air travel. It is inevitable that people will want to move to high-speed rail. That itself opens up an opportunity for next-generation manufacturing. Obviously, there is a bunch of choices: semiconductors, chips, nuclear, electronic assembly of mobile phones, etc., in the manufacturing sector.

But if you look at the infrastructure sector, there have been two major national programmes. One, the National Highway Development

Programme. Two, the switch to renewables.

Q: What has been their impact?

Both have transformed the Indian economy. Today, half of India's generating capacity is in renewables. Out of 400 gigawatts of our installed capacity, 200 gigawatts is renewable capacity, which is solar, wind, hydro.

This combination of highways and renewable energy has, in the past two decades, probably led to investments of around ₹100 lakh crore, which is no laughing matter. Infra investments yield a multiplier of three and have galvanized the economy, according to my back of the envelope calculations, to the extent of maybe ₹300 lakh crore.

What is the next big idea that India has? To my mind, it is high-speed trains. Seven corridors of around 700 kilometres each have been identified by the rail ministry. We, in Infravision Foundation, have prioritized four in our report. The point is that seven such corridors across 15 years have the capacity to again galvanize about ₹20 lakh crore of investments with a three times multiplier effect and create a huge number of jobs both in the laying of tracks and associated systems as well as in the indigenization of manufacture of all equipment from coaches to signalling to stations to safety. It's a massive programme that India can ill afford to turn its face away from.

Q: How long does it take for technology to sink through?

In my earlier years I was of the view that technology transfer takes time. I've been very pleasantly surprised for two reasons: the alacrity with which people in the railways designed the Vande Bharat train. I've travelled on the train myself from Delhi to Kanpur, and I can say it is 70 percent of what I would have expected from a Swiss or German train. It's completely indigenously built at one-eighth the cost at which foreign companies would have done it. And it didn't take long for our railway engineers, whom we criticize as being stodgy, to design and build it. The big picture is that the political class had confidence in them, empowered them, and we now have Vande Bharat.

My second point is there have been some issues with the Japanese because of the delay in the bullet train project. According to the grapevine they had kind of offered the next version, which was far more expensive than what we had budgeted for. The government has actually placed the order for two bullet trains, with a joint venture of Bharat Earth Movers Ltd (BEML) and the Integral Coach Factory. A ₹827-crore order has been given to this entity, two PSUs in partnership, to develop two bullet train rigs.

The fact is that we are almost there. Once the Japanese bullet trains come in, our guys are going to strip it down like the Chinese did decades ago. We have the scientists, we have the railway engineers, so I am far more sanguine about our ability to absorb technology in half a decade, be self-sufficient and start exporting at a reasonable cost to the developing world, to the African continent, and parts of Central Asia.

Q: How much are you being heard? What is the resonance with the government?

You know, to be honest, I am slightly perplexed. I am not getting a resounding yes. But it appears that the railway board or the railway establishment or even the political establishment has not yet announced publicly any intention of moving ahead on four or seven corridors of high-speed rail. I am not clear what is holding them back.

There comes a time in economic history when a movement up the technology ladder becomes inevitable. Is it that the railway board mandarins are very comfortably set in their existing bubble of doing things incrementally? You know, thinking we will go a little faster, we will do Vande Bharat, we will do station development, decongest, connect Kashmir, connect the Northeast.

My hypothesis is that the political class has influenced the thinking of the railway board in two ways. One is regional connectivity. You would have seen a lot of capex going into connecting Kashmir, the Northeast and border areas, which is a politically correct decision.

The second is station redevelopment. A large portion of the travelling public is just fed up with the dirty quality of our stations and is therefore moving to low-cost air services or Volvo coaches, etc. So station redevelopment seems a big item on the political agenda. It is also touch and feel development, so it gets votes.

The third, I think, is let's spread the Vande Bharat butter across the Indian toast before we embark on high-speed rail. I'm not saying this thinking is illogical.

Look at the speed of trains. The existing Rajdhani do about 120 kilometres per hour. The Vande Bharat is designed to do 160 kmph, but at peak it touches 128 or 130. It doesn't go faster because of the quality of tracks and because of lack of access control over large sections. You have cows coming in, you have people walking across.

The next is high-speed rail. If Vande Bharat is designed for max speeds of 160 or 170 kmph, high-speed rail is 200 to 240 kmph. Our Ahmedabad-Mumbai bullet train is 320 to 330 kmph. Above that is the highly specialized Maglev, or the magnetic levitating trains of China, which move at 350 kmph. So you have layers of segmentation of technology relevant to customer needs and the state of the economy.

The problem with Vande Bharat is that it is using the existing tracks. So we have the same old problem: while Vande Bharat wants to increase its speed, it is trailing a freight train or the Toofan Mail or the Howrah-Krishnanagar-Lalgola passenger trains. Their existing routes are crowded.

‘Seven high-speed rail corridors of around 700 km each have the capacity to galvanize ₹20 lakh crore of investments and create a huge number of jobs India can ill-afford to turn away from.’

Whereas high-speed rail requires a different track altogether so you're not constrained. My biggest criticism is if you are deprioritizing high-speed rail for political reasons, to further extend the Vande Bharat network, it's a good idea, but it doesn't do away with the constraint of existing tracks. What will we achieve? We will just lose another decade.

Q: Okay, so what you need is a special effort with high-speed trains, which also fits this growing pattern of demand.

Correct. And therefore, you know, like in air travel, you have the Udan Scheme where many sectors are subsidized by the government, or you get a viability gap fund. So, you are trying to get air travel and connectivity to integrate India's society so that more Hawaii *chappals* can travel — a fine idea.

The railways are not catering only to the construction worker going back home. Obviously, it's important and we should strive to improve the quality of services we're giving them. But there are layers of customers. While we are servicing one layer with traditional trains, there is the next layer, the Rajdhani, Shatabdi and Dorontos. The third layer is Vande Bharat and at the apex is the high-speed rail. There are clearly defined customer segments. And the customer for high-speed rail is the one that you're losing the fastest. They're going by air, they're buying fancy cars, jetting along.

You see the number of people who go on driving holidays now. There are lovely cars and highways and comfortable Volvo inter-city buses. You don't have to be on the waiting list of the railways. You are losing your highest paying customers. You can give better services and reduce the

Continued on page 8

Continued from page 7

₹64,000 crore subsidy you are giving which is actually benefiting your highest paying customers.

Q: The railways are crucial to the development needs of the country. But you need a more market-oriented railways.

Why did we set up NHAI (National Highways Authority of India)? After all, the Public Works Department (PWD) has existed for centuries. So, if you take that analogy, we needed a separate agency with separate public funding and PPP (public-private partnership) structuring to think afresh about the design of roads, alignments and not leave it to the PWD at the Central or state level. We saw India become a success story in roads and highways.

I'm arguing that we already have a High-Speed Rail Corporation (HSRC) which is implementing the bullet train project. Expand that corporation slowly by giving them more high-speed rail corridors. If you expect the existing railway board to suddenly wake up and declare that they are going to do high-speed rail, it will never happen.

You have an opportunity here for institutional reform where all corridors are given to high-speed rail. And we are gradually able to reduce the dominance of the railway system by the traditionalist mindset of the railway board.

The railway board has a tremendous amount of work to do. Northeast connectivity, moving cargo and moving passengers. So, allow a new system with a new mindset to come up.

My next point is public finance. High-speed rail has tremendous spin-offs for the geographies it passes through. A study by the London School of Economics, the London Business School and Hamburg University has pointed out that cities, across countries, that have a station on the map of a high-speed rail link have a city GDP growth 2.7 percent higher than a city that does not.

We are also looking at urban dispersion. Everybody can't live in Delhi and Mumbai, but now people can live in Surat, Baroda, Navsari. From 12 intermediate stations you can reach Mumbai and Ahmedabad in a jiffy.

The Centre is funding the entire Bullet Train Project. But for the Metro Rail projects, the Central government funds 50 percent, and the state the remaining 50 percent. For high-speed rail why does only the Centre have to fund it? We must have a system whereby rich cities, like Pune, Mumbai and Indore, with large cash reserves from their efficiencies and the state government must come forward and contribute for a particular segment of high-speed rail. It should not be only a Central subject.

Q: The elephant in the room is the slow and haphazard process of urbanization. Much of what you're saying actually hinges on a national urbanization effort.

I don't see it as having reached the collective

consciousness of our policymakers: the linkages of high-speed rail to economic growth to urban dispersion away from the big metros to increasing livelihoods. All these things are really one part. You can't just look at high-speed rail only by seeing a train or speed. It's not that. It's a transformation of society.

I'm slightly worried that the totality of the economic benefit, the national benefit and societal transformation, urbanization, all these pieces are not being easily grasped by public policy mandarins. Why isn't NITI Aayog publishing paper after paper saying let's do this? Why isn't the Prime Minister's Economic Advisory Council saying it should be the next big idea?

Q: If you were to set up three corridors, which cities would you connect?

First, since Ahmedabad and Mumbai are already to be connected by bullet train, it's only logical to extend it to Delhi. It's the highest economic corridor in the country. So, my first corridor is Delhi-Rewari-Jaipur-Ajmer-Jodhpur-Ahmedabad-Mumbai, of which Ahmedabad-Mumbai is already connected.

'I am arguing that we expand the corporation for the bullet train by giving them more high-speed rail corridors.'

Corridor number two: Chennai to Mumbai. It goes through a very high economic zone — Tirupati-Bengaluru-Tumkur-Davangere-Dharwad-Belagavi-Kolhapur-Satara-Pune-Navi Mumbai with a spur to Goa.

Third corridor: Delhi to Amritsar — Delhi-Sonepat-Panipat-Karnal-Ambala-Chandigarh- Ludhiana-Jalandhar-Amritsar.

Fourth corridor: Delhi to Kolkata — Delhi-Agra-Lucknow-Varanasi-Patna-Kolkata.

These are my four prioritized corridors. We have researched all of them in depth. The economics completely stands behind suggesting these four out of the seven or 10 that have been popularly talked about in railway establishments. We should get on with it.

Q: For a lot of people, actually, train travel is preferable to air travel. Air travel has become quite clumsy. Nowadays you end up spending a whole day getting to some city. What is the time you would be saving on a high-speed train?

Earlier, I'm told, there were eight direct flights from Delhi to Jaipur. Today there are only two. Apparently, there are no passengers opting to fly to Jaipur from Delhi. They are either driving

down or taking the Shatabdi/Vande Bharat or the Volvo coaches. That answers your question because the distance is 250 kilometres from Delhi to Jaipur.

So the answer is, wherever there is a difference of up to around 400 kilometres you will probably see traffic shifting to high-speed rail. These would be corridors like Mumbai-Pune, Bengaluru-Chennai, Delhi-Jaipur. Station development is important. You've got to make entry-exit from stations easier, and give people a sense of being in an airport, or at least in a mall. Our station development in the metros is disastrous, but that needs improving.

Q: High-speed rail requires a humongous amount of money altogether, especially to do it fast. What would we do here?

You know, money actually is not the problem. The Mumbai-Ahmedabad bullet train corridor costs roughly ₹250 crore per kilometre. Whereas the Metro rail today costs ₹500 crore per kilometre. Yet, the Metros are able to tie up the funding. Nobody has said that they don't have financial closure. And that is only a city-level development.

The funding today is for long gestation infrastructure projects. The world of finance has matured. NHAI has shown us this. Not only have they raised funds, they have been monetizing with InvITs (Infrastructure Investment Trusts) and others and rolling the money back. India has created a developmental financial institution called NaBFID (National Bank for Financing Infrastructure and Development). We have pension funds, insurance companies. We hardly use them for infrastructure development. And this is nation building.

Q: What about land acquisition? Is this also going to haunt plans for high-speed rail?

It only haunts projects if you have a massive political opponent in a particular state. The land for the bullet train in Gujarat was acquired without any hassle. It was the opposition in Maharashtra that stalled it in that state. Today, the only reason land acquisition is a problem is when you have very strident, top-level political opposition.

One of the biggest expressways is the Mumbai-Nagpur corridor. Has anybody talked about a problem in land acquisition? In UP six expressways have been built by the Yogi Adityanath government. Has anybody said anything about land acquisition? There is the new Jewar airport, the Navi Mumbai airport, the Tata semiconductor factory in Dholera. At prices being offered today, which are four times the market value, a lot of people in agriculture are only too happy to put the land to some other use because it's a subsistence existence. Believe me, land acquisition is not a problem. It has been made into a problem for reasons of politics. ■

Odisha shows how to turn slums into homes with rights

Jaga Mission works it out

Rina Mukherji
Pune

THE Odisha government's Jaga Mission for Slum Transformation is easily a standout project in India's slum redevelopment landscape. It ticks all the right boxes and would meet the approval of picky social activists. It has people's participation, land rights, delivery of services, infrastructure, gender rights, technology, NGOs and more.

The Jaga Mission is now the world's largest slum redevelopment initiative. It's being implemented across cities and towns in Odisha.

Twenty-eight Urban Local Bodies (ULBs) are now slum-free. Currently, 1,680 slums in various ULBs have been upgraded, and four new settlements have been set up in lieu of habitats where land rights could not be given.

"A holistic partnership with the community and the facilitating role of the government is the prime reason for its success," says G. Mathi Vathanan, additional chief secretary, Government of Odisha and director-general of the State Administrative Training Academy.

What can the rest of India, or the world, learn from the Jaga Mission? A six-part webinar by INHAF, a non-profit in Ahmedabad devoted to improving collapsing urban India, discussed slum development globally, and included a session on the Jaga Mission.

The inaugural session on September 30 began with a keynote address by UN Habitat Executive Director Ana Claudia Rasbach, who referred to the housing crisis being faced across the world. Currently, a billion people globally are housed in informal settlements and slums. "Housing is not just shelter. It spells dignity, and self-esteem," she said. UN Habitat is mobilizing data to produce the World Cities Report 2026, and help countries with the means and knowledge to provide housing for their populations.

K. Srinivas, secretary, Ministry of Housing and Urban Affairs, said there needs to be better understanding of how slums arise. It is well known that slums form when poor people migrate to the city to find work. Also, as cities expand, they swallow villages which slowly degenerate into slums. People flock there in search of inexpensive rental housing. Most often villages don't have the infrastructure or services to accommodate so many people.

These settlements, he emphasized, require a different approach. Both kinds of habitations and their residents need to be brought on a par with the rest of the city and have the same amenities.

So far, the government has been underlining the importance of ownership rights. But, he emphasized, what was important was the need to provide affordable rental accommodation for the floating population of young, mobile job-seekers all over India who come to cities. For this, a public-private partnership, (PPP) he felt, was essential.

Greg Mundry, director, Cities Alliance, a global partnership alliance, cited the difference between informal settlements and slums. While informal settlements get upgraded with services over time, slums only worsen, he said. He listed areas for global action, namely, land, spatial planning, governance, policies, community empowerment, data, finance



Before and after: In Odisha, the Jaga Mission provides all facilities



In Odisha, each redeveloped housing colony has spaces for children to play

and skills. He also explained how his organization was working in India, Brazil and South Africa to provide decent housing.

Alexander Apsan Frediani of the International Institute of Environment & Development (IIED) chronologically listed how approaches to slum development and upgradation have evolved over the years. Growth with equity and neoliberalism have now been replaced by the current buzzword, sustainable human development. Since 2020, the emphasis is on justice, inclusion, an anti-discriminatory approach, infrastructure, and systemic change to build caring, sustainable cities.

Somsook Boomyabancha, secretary-general of the Asian Coalition of Housing Rights, spoke of community-led slum upgradation and development projects that have been undertaken across Asia, especially those in Bofarang and Chumpao City in Thailand. In Chumpao City, 13 housing projects with 1,050 families were taken up. The projects involved beneficiaries and that helped to bring down costs. The communities worked with the architects and contributed to the layout. The upgraded slums have a community hall, a welfare centre for the elderly and a community garden where residents grow organic vegetables within the settlement.

Beth Chitikwe Biti of Slum Dwellers International objected to slums being viewed as a problem. Instead, citing cases in Kenya and Namibia, she referred to slums as "opportunities" for communities to come together. She recounted how women in the slums of Namibia had formed a collective, then formed a savings group, and ultimately, with the help of government allocation, financed their own housing needs.

Similarly, Maria Silvia Emmanuelli, who heads Habitat International,

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Odisha shows how to turn slums into homes with rights

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Latin America had come together during the Covid-19 pandemic to prepare a document on human rights, focusing on the right to water, sanitation and a clean environment. This document emphasized neighbourhood improvement through mutual aid networks.

In the second session held on October 7, administrators from the Odisha government discussed the nuts and bolts of the Jaga Mission. Most municipalities consider slum dwellers to be mere encroachers. The Odisha government turned this notion on its head. Migrants are essential for urban growth is its belief.

A project's success is best gauged by what its beneficiaries have to say. Khushi, a transgender and president of the Pragati Vihar Slum Dwellers' Association in Bhubaneswar, spoke gratefully about what the project meant for them. "We were helpless, ostracized by everyone. Now we can look forward to leading a dignified life. Forty-two households have land rights and one-third of families have started building their homes under the PM Awas Yojana (PMAY)."

A fisherman from Konarak, Pikki Tatilu, president of the Noliashahi Slum Dwellers Association, Konarak, recounted how the 1999 super cyclone had blown away their flimsy huts. "We had set up homes in a low-lying area, where dumping was rampant along with water stagnation. The government filled up the land, and we were granted *pattas*. We now realize this land is ours. Nobody can move us from here."

Explaining how the Jaga Mission achieved its objectives, Vathanan listed components of the programme: land rights, a liveable habitat, housing assistance through the PMAY, divergence of land, empowerment of beneficiaries, especially women, and turning slums into vibrant economic centres.

The Odisha Land Rights to Slum Dwellers Act, 2017, and the Odisha Municipal Corporation Amendment Act, 2022, were changed. Drone imagery and other technologies were used for mapping settlements. NGOs were involved. In 2019, slums in 115 cities all over Odisha were mapped.

According to law, 25 percent of the budget of every ULB was marked for slum upgradation. Change of classification in land has, so far, benefited 35 percent of slum families in Odisha.

Slums were found on different types of land: government lands, temple lands, forest lands, industrial lands, hazardous lands and king's lands.

In most cases, in-situ settlement was arranged. New habitats were found for slums on untenable land like hazardous land or forest land. Wherever necessary, land classification was changed to facilitate upgradation or resettlement.

In the case of forest land, the Forest Department and Forest Development Committees were brought in to assess the situation. But, in every case, the new settlement was never set up more than a kilometre from the existing habitation.

In every case of in-situ settlement, re-densification was undertaken too, with the new settlement being provided street lights, a community centre, a playground, piped water, and individual toilets in every home.

This was after an infrastructure gap analysis was done with the help of the respective slum community. Thus, the community was involved in every step of the process. Slum Dweller Associations were formed and presidents elected. The idea was to spot local talent and not bring in people from outside.

Finally, in every household, women were given joint ownership and land rights, spelling empowerment and progress. Land can be mortgaged and is valid as proof of address but it cannot be resold.

Backed by the Tata Steel Foundation, Janaagraha, the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, and Tata Trusts, besides many other organizations, the Jaga Mission is an ongoing project of the Odisha government that has already received accolades, including the UN Habitat Award. ■

A WAKE-UP CALL TO SAVE THE DYING HIMALAYAS

Civil Society picture/Lakshman Anand

Civil Society News

Gurugram

EVEN as Sonam Wangchuk was arrested and silenced in a Jodhpur jail, his message to protect the environment continued to reverberate across the Himalayan states — not in slogans and protests but amplified by Nature herself in benumbing devastation.

Never before have people in the Himalayas had to contend with such widespread occurrence of mountainsides crumbling, roads vanishing and homes being destroyed. There have also been accompanying deaths and, perhaps worse than death itself, the trauma of uncertainty.

In West Bengal, after heavy rain 28 lives were lost in Darjeeling and the entire Gorkhaland Territorial Administration was cut off. There were downpours in Himachal Pradesh too where floods had earlier rampaged through Manali and apple-growing country. Sikkim was similarly plunged into turmoil.

Wangchuk has been accused of being an anti-national, but the causes he has been raising have been about the environment, the involvement of local people in development and the growing crisis being brought on by global warming.

The people of Ladakh have a long and glorious record of loyalty to India. Over generations they have served in the armed forces. Their presence on the border has been a deterrent to China. But now they have been experiencing a sense of disenfranchisement. There is also a lack of opportunities. Their concern is that their traditional way of life and their fragile ecosystems are under threat.

Wangchuk was arrested in Leh under the tough National Security Act (NSA) when demonstrators seeking the Sixth Schedule for Ladakh turned violent and burnt the BJP office there. Leh looks to Wangchuk for leadership, but he is not a rabble-rouser. His charisma comes from being an environmentalist and inventor who founded an iconic school in Leh to promote alternative education. Videos on the day of the violence show him appealing to the young demonstrators to cool down and take the path of peace.

But feelings in Leh had crossed a point in a way that Wangchuk had been warning the government about. In 2024, when Wangchuk and 150-odd followers walked from Leh to Delhi, it was with a wake-up call. The government needed to at least discuss the Sixth Schedule status Ladakh had been promised after it became a Union Territory. Its water sources and grasslands needed to be protected in ways local people knew best.

Far from getting a hearing in Delhi, Wangchuk and his fellow walkers, mostly simple village folk and Ladakhis who had served in the armed forces, were corralled into Ladakh Bhavan where they remained fasting in protest and lying out in the open on the driveway.

The fast continued even as Wangchuk's own health deteriorated with a fever and fears of dengue and dysentery. Twice every day he would meet a random bunch of people, mostly admirers and journo from small websites. The leaders of the farmers' agitation turned up. There were some politicians who stopped by. The protest finally ended when a joint secretary from the home ministry showed up with a written promise that the government would discuss the Sixth Schedule demand.

When we met him under a tree outside Ladakh Bhavan for an extended interview while he was still on the fast and there had been no word from the government, we asked him how difficult it was to take up an environmental cause as he was doing. He had an interesting reply. Environment, community concerns and development were inextricably linked, he said. The national interest lay in trusting and



File photo of admirers greeting Wangchuk at Ladakh Bhavan in Delhi during his 2024 fast

empowering local communities. People who had looked after the Himalayas for generations knew best how to take care of the mountains.

"For the Himalayas as a whole I think there should be special provisions that give local elected bodies powers to take stewardship of their areas, mostly environmentally and culturally, because these cultures have kept the Himalayas alive and safeguarded for millennia," he said.

The Sixth Schedule of Article 244 of the Constitution would give indigenous tribal communities in Ladakh more control over how their areas are governed in terms of environment, land, forests, customs and so forth. This status had been promised by political parties twice in manifestoes.

Ladakh especially needs the Sixth Schedule after it was made into a Union Territory in 2019 along with the abrogation of Article 370. When it was a part of the state of Jammu and Kashmir, Ladakh's people had a greater say over how they were governed. Now they looked to a distant Centre and development decisions were being made without consulting them.

Especially worrisome from the Ladakhi perspective has been the investments that have been encouraged in the name of providing jobs. Solar power companies disrupt traditional livelihoods in animal rearing and the jobs they may provide are not what the Ladakhis need. Had there been consultation, both local concerns and the corporate interests could have been easily reconciled.

"These seeming wastelands are the source of food for tens of thousands of groups. Sheep. Yaks. They don't know that this is how life survives in Ladakh. It's not like lush green pastures. The pastures in Ladakh are very different," explained Wangchuk.

He said: "They think these are all easily available for solar power plants. If the locals had been asked, they would have shown other places

where animals don't graze. If I had been asked, I would have shown them how to take solar power from the tops of mountains and leave the pastures to the goats and sheep below. It would have been a win-win situation where the local herders would get twice their fodder and the nation, solar power."

"We should not see these mountains just as a resource to be exploited in a few decades by a few millionaires and billionaires. And then you are left with the devastation that you see in Sikkim, in Himachal, in Uttarakhand," said Wangchuk.

"It is very sad that governments give a free hand to corporations. Corporations squeeze and extract their profits in a decade or two and then leave the place. It is a use-and-throw style. And then when disaster strikes, like floods in Sikkim, or, you know, roads and entire mountains collapsing, that is dealt with through taxpayers' money. And then, finally, the local people have to bear the consequences for generations," he said.

For Wangchuk, the solution is local empowerment and proper popular representation so that the decisions taken have the involvement of people and keep their interests in mind.

"If your cause is big, nothing is difficult. If it is a non-issue, then anything is difficult. So, in absolute terms this may not be easy but when compared to the scenario which will take shape in the coming decades, this is nothing," he said.

"You know, in a place like Ladakh, which is on the ultimate border, flanked by hostile countries like China and Pakistan, when people, especially the youth, are unhappy, frustrated, it can lead to a big upheaval in the future. Maybe liberation movements. I am not saying it should. But it can. And if my little effort today helps in preventing that, even if it takes my life, it's just one life, not 5,000. So, it (the challenge and sacrifice) is very small when compared to what we are seeing," he said. ■

‘Workers losing fingers daily was shocking’

Sandeep Sachdeva on auto shopfloor safety

Civil Society News
Gurugram

IF you are feeling pleased about the car you drive, spare a thought for the workers who put it together for you. Some of them might have lost their fingers in the process.

Every year, a report titled *Crushed*, brought out by Safe In India, a non-profit, uncovers a large number of accidents taking place on shopfloors in the Indian automobile sector. The dangerous power press, used to shape metal parts, is mostly the cause of the injuries.

Workers, many of them young, end up maimed for life. They are inadequately compensated and invariably left to fend for themselves. Labyrinthine paperwork and official procedures are unleashed on them.

This is where Safe In India has been stepping in for the past 10 years or so. It began by opening a Worker Assistance Centre in Manesar, but is now addressing the needs of workers in many more parts of the country. Interestingly, the story is the same all over and Gurugram is no exception.

Safe In India also engages closely with automobile company managements in the hope of crafting solutions that extend deep into supply chains. It has taken time to motivate the companies, but improvements are visible.

To find out more, *Civil Society* spoke to Sandeep Sachdeva, CEO of Safe In India. A former banker, he set up the non-profit together with likeminded collegemates who, in midlife, were motivated to do something socially relevant.

Q: What made you take up the lack of safety in the Indian industrial sector and that too specifically in the automobile sector in Gurugram? I was travelling to India quite often after I started my social sector life in 2013. I came across a news item which said that 20 workers a day in the auto sector lose their fingers in Gurugram alone. Initially I thought it was just noise. But it turned out to be true. I got together with three of my batchmates. We thought these accidents should not happen and we could help improve safety standards. But it was tough. None of us is from the working class. Labour is a challenging, overlooked and ignored sector.

We decided to help injured workers access healthcare and get compensation from the ESIC (Employees State Insurance Corporation) scheme and learn from the process.

We opened our first Worker Assistance Centre (WAC) in December 2016 in Manesar. And we started finding injured workers left, right and centre. For a couple of years, we just talked to them, helped them through the process, understood their lives and so on. And there were some insights that emerged.

We were very analytical about it. We started capturing that qualitative and quantitative data into an IT system. And what we found as we reached 1,000 workers whom we had assisted in 2018-19, was that 80



Sandeep Sachdeva: 'We are solutions centric'

percent of them were getting crush injuries on their hands majorly from the auto sector supply chain. That's what led us into the auto sector supply chain. What we had was an organic insight-driven, evidence-driven decision.

We started going into those supply chains and opened a second WAC in Faridabad where the problem was worse. Then we went to Pune. The same problem repeated itself. We opened a fourth centre in Gurugram and our fifth in Pune.

We are expanding into auto sector hubs. We just recruited somebody in Chennai to open our next centre there because Tamil Nadu has a large auto sector hub. After that we will go to Karnataka, then Gujarat. This covers 80 to 90 percent of the sector.

Q: Are you saying this situation prevails uniformly across the country in each auto hub?

We don't just do surveys. We actually help these workers. We know them. We know their lives. Our surveys are not just data driven. We have gone to Rudrapur in Uttarakhand, to Gujarat, Chennai and Karnataka. There are similar stories everywhere. And the reason is the auto sector uses a lot of metal forming machines because they need those components. They are made in a machine called the power press. It is the power press which causes 65 percent of crush injuries. So, there is an engineering reason why these injuries are happening in the auto sector.

Q: Does this happen globally?

Metal forming in most countries and in developing, emerging markets leads to similar issues, but there is no data available to compare. Everywhere data is under-reported. In India, to give you an idea of under-reporting, Haryana has been reporting 50 accidents a year for the past 20 to 30 years. We, with just our six outreach executives, junior guys, go out into the community, and report more than 1,000 accidents a year. That's the scale of under-reporting that only our data shows. God knows what the reality is out there.

Q: You are helping injured workers access ESIC compensation. Is there no recognition in the official system of the number of people

that you were able to help?

No. People know that things are worse than what the data suggests. I think one of our big wins is the fact that we are robustly reporting this data, not based just on surveys but on real workers who get into the ESIC system to get their injuries and sicknesses treated. Our data shows that consistently, year after year, for the past seven years thousands of workers have been getting injured. It's a well-established trend now.

Q: Isn't it possible to prevent such injuries from taking place?

Once we started helping workers and got these insights, we started building our advocacy on workplace safety. Our advocacy also includes improving the ESIC quality of services, empowerment and communication. We have a Facebook page and YouTube channel in Hindi. For workplace safety we went to the top 10 brands in the country and told them, you have a problem and it's your responsibility to fix this. You have profits, power, influence over the government and implementation of policies on the ground through corrupt and non-corrupt means, right? And you have the technical expertise as well as the moral and ethical responsibility as per global trends, ESG norms, and India's national guidelines on responsible business conduct.

It's taken us three years but now those 10 brands have been gradually engaging with us. Our report, *Crushed*, is bottom-up evidence of the data of accidents, their nature, the kind of migrant workers injured: 90 percent are young, 60 percent below 30 years, 70 percent on contract. And by brand: how many accidents by Maruti, Hero, Honda, Eicher, Ashok Leyland...

Two years after we started *Crushed* in 2019 and 2021, we launched another report called *SafetyNiti* because we realized that their policies were not good enough for supply chains. We began tracking, rating and ranking those policies.

We are solutions centric. Our first value is worker centricity, and second value is solutions centricity. We will come to you with the solutions. You make recommendations to your supply chain based on these recommendations. These top brands have started improving their policy framework.

For example, a supplier code of conduct is a critical document to improve safety in the supply chain. Two companies had that when we started. Now nine have it. They all have it in the public domain. So, they're accountable to it.

We have implementation recommendations of Tier 2 audits. Maruti started reporting on Tier 2 audits, Bajaj started reporting on Tier 2 audits. We've created a platform for industrial safety and health. Maruti, Hero, Honda and Safe In India have done 30 audits and 80 percent failed. Some lessons came out of that.

As a result, in Haryana, where we started, accidents began declining in 2022 in four quarters and in 2023 in four quarters — that's eight quarters in a row.

In 2024, accidents went up again a little but according to the industry it was because of growth. We haven't published the 2025 data as yet. It has declined again. We had told the brands that until we see three years of consistent reduction, we will not believe it is being sustained.

Q: Is the rate of accidents lower in the south? Levels of industrialization, education, empowerment, etc are higher. But when it comes to worker accidents, has it made a difference?

We don't know because our centres are in Maharashtra and Haryana right now. We are just setting up in Chennai so we will know in two years. We were surprised that Maharashtra was as bad as Haryana. In some places things were better, in others worse. We measure many things. For example, how many fingers on average are lost in these accidents? Broadly, average loss of fingers in the power press is two.

We measure ESIC compliance because we found a correlation with accidents. Companies that are unprofessional about assessing compliance are also unprofessional about safety standards. So, they are worse off. ESIC compliance in some areas is worse in Maharashtra. We are in

Mohan Nagar and Chakan right now. We had thought Maharashtra will do better in everything because they're more compliant about reporting accidents than Haryana. So, it's a mixed bag.

Q: The car is not just a car, it's also a brand which comes with so much more. When you approach a company with this kind of data, what is the response? What level of access are you given? Who do you talk to?

There's a whole mix of people. When we started, R.C. Bhargava wrote back to us on our first report, promising action, and they did some great work for three years. At the other end of the spectrum — I won't mention the brands — they made us meet their industrial relations people instead of the head of supply chain, or a director who's in charge of Environmental, Social and Governance (ESG) compliance. But what I would say is that almost every brand has done something or the other in line with these requirements. There's a spectrum in safety. We rate and rank them accordingly.

The number one trend, for example, is that Japanese companies, on average, have a better response than non-Japanese companies, sadly. That is a fact. The more Indian ownership a company has, the worse it is, despite being a global brand. That's sadly true. The third is in terms of access. You see, SEBI (Securities and Exchange Board of India) now requires them to do a business responsibility and sustainability report (BRSR). That requires ESG reporting, including supply chain. But the supply chain doesn't get reported as well.

‘For workplace safety we went to the top 10 brands and told them, you have a problem and it is your responsibility to fix it... now those 10 brands have been gradually engaging with us.’

We are doing a project for the Ministry of Corporate Affairs where the BRSR reports of the 50 listed top auto sector companies are being analysed by us. The report will come out later this year. The auto sector is now engaged with the ministry and there is access to the sector.

Santosh Gangwal, who was the first labour minister when we came in, had actually called industry, along with government bodies, to work on our report and come up with solutions. There's engagement that happened at that level. But such engagement comes and goes, depending on how conscientious the person in charge is.

Q: In the equation between the regulator, in this case the government, and the management, it would appear that the management has the upper hand because the regulator, despite knowing all this is happening, is not able to take any action.

That's a great point. I come from an industry background. What I've seen of politics in the past 20 years, worldwide, is that business has the upper hand. Whether it's tech or the auto sector, business is ahead of government. Government is always trying to catch up. That's what's happening everywhere.

Even when the government makes regulations in India, the law is there but not the order. Who decides who will implement that order? Unless business wants to work with some conscientiousness, governments, especially in our country, are really not that powerful. On the other hand, they are also making their laws and regulations more business-friendly as opposed to being labour-friendly.

For example, in the labour codes, which are still not law and are still

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‘Workers losing fingers daily was shocking’

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not implemented, there are some labour-friendly provisions. There should be annual medical tests of all workers. Nobody’s doing it. But the inspector in the government department is already operating like an inspector-cum-facilitator. He doesn’t have teeth anymore to do audits. There are no surprise audits. They are, in effect, consultants.

In the labour codes, the daily working hours are 12 hours. Previously it was eight hours with a cap of 48 hours. Right now, the 12-hour work day has become the norm and acceptable. Nobody can challenge that because for the labour courts that’s fine. Nobody’s monitoring the cap. Overtime should be twice the amount paid but nobody’s monitoring that either.

Q: The managements of these companies consist of people who get high salaries. Most of them come from the best institutions in the country. How come they can’t see this? How come they don’t act? How come a management guy with a one-crore salary doesn’t know what his supply chain is doing? Yeah, they don’t have a philosophical issue here, right?

Q: So I’m asking you an even more blunt question. Do these people have blood on their hands?

Of course they do. Frankly, all of us do.

Q: No, that’s not answering the question. They run those companies, they run those managements, they access those supply chains.

The way I look at this issue is they are definitely responsible. Unfortunately, people like these professionals are slaves to their job description, and those job descriptions have only one major line — which is profit. Everything else is missing in terms of human or environmental impact.

The audits that happen on the supply chain are focused around quality, delivery and cost. It does not include safety of working conditions. Are they responsible for it? Absolutely. They are ignoring it. As a result, they are responsible for what’s happening.

Second, the supply chains are huge and powerful, and often corrupt. And it’s not just one sector. Supplier procurement departments are corrupt in lots of places all over the world. How do you expect a corrupt department to do things like workplace safety? I mean, philosophically, how does it go together? It doesn’t. They can’t say they don’t understand the problem. We have been telling them for eight years now. They’ve accepted the reports. So are they responsible for not solving it? Of course they are. ■



Working with adolescent girls has an impact

India’s gentle battle to end child marriage

Bharat Dogra
Barmer

A few years ago, a team from Action Aid, an NGO based in New Delhi, was journeying to several rural schools in Barmer district of Rajasthan to combat the pernicious practice of child marriage. One aspect of their campaign was to administer a pledge to male as well as female students that they would not agree to marry so young.

Halfway through the pledge the team realized that several students were feeling very uneasy. They stopped and enquired if anything was wrong. There was silence for a while. Then one boy spoke up: “How can we take this pledge of not marrying when we are already married?”

Caught on the wrong foot, the head of the team asked all those students who were married to raise their hands. Quite a few hands went up.

Many campaigners against child marriage face such awkward situations from time to time, reflecting the reality that despite decades of campaigns against child marriages this practice remains a significant reality in India as well as several other countries.

According to the National Family Health Survey (NFHS) data, child marriage declined in India from 47 percent in 2005-06 to 23 percent around 2020, inching closer to the world average of around 19 percent. India does not figure in the top 10 countries in terms of the rate of child marriages. Most of the

countries listed are in Sub-Saharan Africa. However, due to India’s large size, plus neighbouring countries, South Asia has the highest number of women who were married before the age of 18 — 285 million, compared to 650 million for the rest of the world.

According to UNICEF, 25 million child marriages were prevented worldwide during the past decade, of which seven million were owed to declining trends and nearly 18 million to special efforts. UNICEF has also stated that the rate at which this reduction is taking place needs to be hiked significantly if the SDG (Sustainable Development Goal) target of eliminating child marriage is to be achieved by 2030.

India has achieved success but needs to do more. In November 2024, the Union Ministry for Women and Child Development started the Bal Vivah Mukta Bharat campaign (Campaign for Child Marriage Free India). This campaign involves nearly 160 voluntary organizations campaigning in over 300 districts which have a higher incidence of child marriage.

The target is to reduce the percentage of child marriages from about 23 percent in 2021 to 5 percent in 2030. One sign of hope is the growing number of voluntary organizations which are working, directly or indirectly, in various programmes for adolescent girls, especially for improving their education and health.

Prayas is one such organization known for

its health, education and justice-based work among weaker sections, including Dalit and tribal communities in South Rajasthan. Its founder, Dr Narendra Gupta, says, “The best way of eliminating child marriage is to put much more effort and resources into extending the educational level of girls. Education should be accessible and attractive for the girls as well as their families.”

Prayas’ former director, reputed activist Khemraj Chaudhary, had started a residential educational centre for girls who faced obstacles in going to school in Chittorgarh district. Girls from remote villages are admitted to the school and efforts are made by teachers to ensure they catch up and soon join the appropriate class for their age. In fact, some girls are now going to college. The school has been made an attractive proposition with sports and extra-curricular activities.

A girl studying there said she was married off when she was eight years old. She didn’t know the boy or realize what was happening. Some months after the marriage, the boy died. Subsequently, rituals were performed to undo the earlier rituals, which too the girl did not understand. But the entire experience had a very distressing impact on her. Fortunately, she is now studying and has friends in whose company she can leave behind those memories and look forward to a new life.

Mahila Sangathan in Barmer district of West Rajasthan has been prioritizing curbing the incidence of child marriage in its work. Anita Soni, coordinator, says that the issue of child marriage involves sensitivities and so it is important to win the trust and goodwill of the communities.

Mahila Sangathan first won the trust of the women by being engaged with several issues beneficial to them. That helped them broach the subject of child marriage. Most of their meetings are with women, but in addition they have reached out to men who too have come out to support the campaign against child marriage.

Thanks to efforts like these, child marriages have come down significantly especially in Rajasthan which was once infamous for having the highest rate of child marriage in India. The government singled it out for special attention.

In the latest NFHS round, the child marriage rate in the state was found to be only marginally higher (25 percent) than the national average of around 23 percent. Moreover, the rate of reduction in Rajasthan during 2005-2021 was much faster than in the entire country.

While this achievement of Rajasthan is commendable, there are still instances of child marriage — coinciding with the Akshay Tritiya festival, or with certain ritualistic ceremonial occasions of several communities and castes.

The year 2005-06 was a landmark year as a national law to ban child marriage was passed. Under this law, marriage of girls below 18 years

and boys under 21 years was prohibited. Subsequently, various states framed their own rules to implement the law. In the case of priority states like Rajasthan, directives were issued by the courts to bolster implementation of the law and fix responsibility for this clearly.

However, legislation can be effective only when it is supported by grassroots campaigns with people’s participation. Hence, the contribution of voluntary organizations and social movements which can win over the trust and support of people is critical. Even they



Voluntary organizations reached out to men to support the campaign against child marriage

‘How can we take a pledge against child marriage when many of us are married’, the students told the campaigners.

have to be careful not to offend local sensitivities on socio-cultural issues.

Gopal Bhai, founder of ABSSS (Akhil Bharatiya Samaj Sena Sansthan), an organization working at the grassroots in Chitrakoot district of Uttar Pradesh, explains how a combination of overall positive trends, laws, policy decisions and efforts by voluntary organizations has worked to bring down the rate of child marriage.

Gopal Bhai and ABSSS have been working mainly among Kol tribal communities and Dalits of Manikpur block for over four decades. He says that at the start of their campaign, child marriages were quite widespread but are rare now. While laws have contributed, he says, so has the spread of education. One factor specific to this plateau and forested area called

Patha is that earlier it was overrun by dacoit gangs who made the lives of villagers miserable, especially at night. Parents were therefore in a hurry to marry off their daughters at an early age. Once a crackdown on the dacoits began, security improved and the pressure to marry off girls young also eased.

“Since we were organizing regular meetings on social issues, there were conversations on what the law says about the age of marriage and the importance of girls’ education. Educated girls and women also visited the

villages as a part of various programmes,” says Gopal Bhai.

“Earlier we concentrated more on ensuring elementary education for all by starting our own informal schools as there were very few government schools. Girls in particular did not go to schools if they were located at a distance. At a later stage, we placed more emphasis on girls completing secondary education. Girls who were educated, like Booti and Shyama, started teaching other girls and those like Sanjo won panchayat elections.”

He said the situation has improved to such an extent that about 18 girls in hamlets of Dalits and Kol tribals are now going to college. “We also try to facilitate their progress. Some girls are renting rooms in Manikpur on their own in order to be able to study further. This was unheard of earlier, not socially acceptable and not economically viable either. These girls in turn are inspiring other younger girls in their villages with their achievements and aspirations.”

This progress of girls’ education in remote villages helps create conditions in which child marriage has declining acceptability. “Parents are much less inclined to go in for child marriage. But what’s equally empowering is that chances of the girls themselves resisting this firmly are much higher.” ■

JAGDEEP S. CHHOKAR
1944-2025

Frank, fearless and great fun

UMESH ANAND

IN the historical records of Indian elections, the Association for Democratic Reforms (ADR) will have a special place. No single voluntary organization has perhaps done more to clean up politics and empower voters. Efforts by ADR have led to criminal records, educational qualifications and financial assets of candidates being put up for scrutiny. The opaque electoral bond scheme by which companies could anonymously fund parties for elections has also been cracked open, allowing its camouflaged transactions to be in full view. And, most recently, the Election Commission's intensive revision of electoral rolls in Bihar was subject to close questioning and scrutiny.

These battles have been doughtily fought in the courts over the years with a thoroughness and persistence that has been difficult to dismiss. As happens in court, outcomes have taken time to arrive. But ADR's hallmark has been to be meticulous and do the distance. It has steered clear of slogans on the streets.

Undoubtedly, ADR's low-key style flows from its founders — management professors setting out to inject transparency into the affairs of the state so that politicians and bureaucrats can be watched more closely and held to account. How successful they have been is seen in the seminal changes they have brought about.

But that they have caught the imagination of citizens became visible when one of the founders, Prof. Jagdeep Chhokar, passed away recently. Tributes poured in from all over the country with even feckless national papers carrying obituaries. An auditorium in Delhi was packed to capacity with admirers paying their last respects.

Prof. Chhokar, always a team player, did much of the heavy lifting and purposed the legal action that ADR took up. We, in this magazine, first met him for a long interview in 2019 at his apartment in New Friends Colony in Delhi. The elections were just over and we felt this was the time to talk about what all had changed.

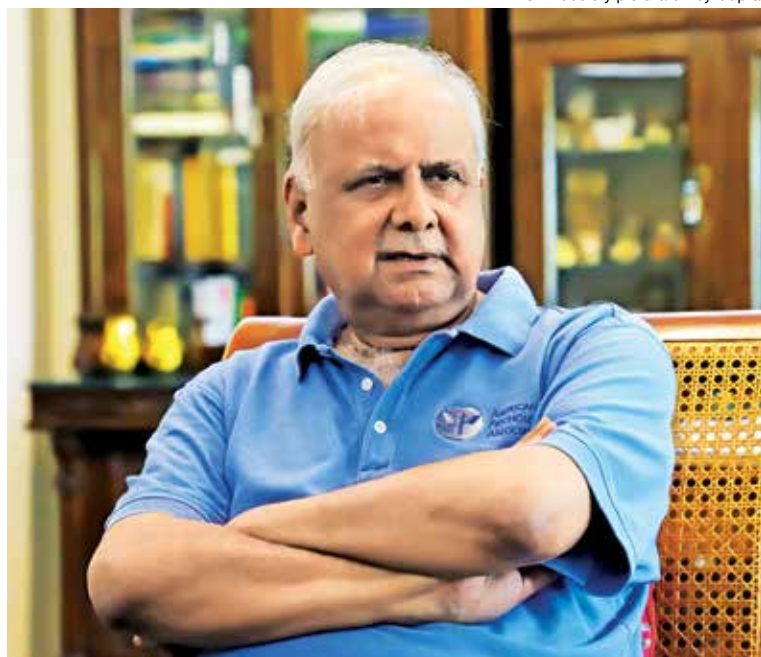
From that first meeting, over time, Prof. Chhokar became a friend. He wrote a column for *Civil Society* for several months dealing with thought-provoking issues and greatly enriching our editorial offering. It was admirable that he could be intense, passionate and engaged and yet stand clear of grand flourishes and displays of self-importance.

For all the weighty and complex concerns that he devoted himself to, he was not devoid of quiet humour. In an understated way he was witty and always up for a laugh. He was fun to be with. It is not easy to find activists who aren't weighed down by the causes they espouse. But Prof. Chhokar was masterly at not making much of himself.

'Fearless' was a word repeatedly used to describe him at the condolence meeting in Delhi. You have to be brave to take up the causes ADR has and Prof. Chhokar was unflinching in looking vested interests in the eye. But an aversion to being boring seemed to keep him from wearing his courage on his sleeve. He realized that reforming public life in India was a long haul full of stops and starts. It couldn't be the work of one organization or set of individuals.

"The way the country has gone in the past 10 years, it will take 50 years to bring it back to its original institutions and values. You are welcome to try if you want to but it will make no difference," he said with a laugh in one of our casual conversations.

But it was in citizen action that he believed. "You may not be in



Civil Society picture/Shrey Gupta

Prof. Chhokar: 'Every citizen is in politics'

competitive electoral politics, but you are in politics. Every citizen is in politics," he said to us in the context of people joining politics to reform it.

It was "theoretically possible" to reform the system from within. But the challenge would be in making those choices that didn't perpetuate the system.

"Today, Indian politics is such that anyone who has entered politics, competitive electoral politics, gets swept away. Once you are in the fish bowl you have to rely on the same feed that everyone else uses," he said.

He remembered meeting Aruna Roy in his office at IIM Ahmedabad in 2000 and saying to her: "Look, politics is a very dirty game and I have nothing to do with politics." And she said: "You cannot say you are not in politics. You are in politics even if you don't vote. You are in politics because you are allowing somebody to vote for you."

It was after much consideration that Prof. Chhokar agreed to join his colleagues in forming ADR because it was not what "professors like us" should be doing. But once he crossed over, he gave it all he had.

"All parties, without exception, are upset with us," he said, emphasizing it was important not to get aligned if systemic change was the goal. ADR's cases showed that when it came to money and power, politicians, irrespective of persuasion, were on the same side.

Incredibly, at the age of 58, Prof. Chhokar decided to study law, sharing space with students half his age. He was 81 when he passed away on September 12. Ill health in one form or another had crept up on him as invariably it does with age. But he remained sprightly, alert and you could even say young in presence. When we met last in Panjim, he got into his small car after a few drinks in the evening and drove us with his wife, Kiran, to the boulevard by the Mandovi. He was drawn by the insouciance of Goa and, of course, its cleaner air. He had joyously made the transition from the NCR and felt we should too. ■

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BOOK EXTRACT

For the longest time Indians have been fanning out into the world. They have gone as indentured labour and blue-collar workers. In recent decades, a growing number of young people have gone too

in search of higher education, jobs and a better life in the First World. Few return, preferring instead to adopt the societies that recognize their merit. What are the implications for India's economy? When the powerful, wealthy and meritorious signal they are giving up on the country, what impact does it have on those who are getting left behind? India suffers from entrenched inequalities in education, housing, healthcare and urban standards. When elites avail of the best and then leave, the rush to get out among the less fortunate becomes even greater. This draining of talent diminishes India's hopes of being a globally competitive economy.

In 'Secession of the Successful,' published by Penguin, Sanjaya Baru deals with emigration and its many consequences. It is his latest book. We bring you an extract.



THE FLIGHT OF A GENERATION

When the best leave, India gets left behind

SANJAYA BARU



IN 2024 India overtook China as the biggest source of tuition paying students with 3,31,602 students securing visas to study in the US, representing a 23 percent increase over the previous year. Indian enrolments increased primarily at the graduate level, reported *The Times of India*, accounting for 19 percent of the total student emigrants that year. Interestingly, those who had completed some course of education and stayed on for Optional Practical

Training (OPT) accounted for as much as 41 percent of tuition paying Indian students. Taken together Indian students reportedly spent up to US\$ 11.8 billion in 2023.

"You did it, India!", declared US ambassador Eric Garcetti, welcoming this enthusiasm in India for overseas education in the US. "The decision to study abroad, and your choice of the United States, represents a valuable investment by you and your families. We celebrate the strength of the Indian educational system that prepares students to compete globally and look forward to seeing India continue to lead."

Overseas students constituted a fifth of all students enrolled in colleges across Britain in 2022. With a decline in the numbers coming from China, due to political restrictions, and Europe, after Brexit, India has emerged a major source of fee-paying students with annual fees in the range of GBP10,000 to GBP38,000, among the highest in the world. Thanks to a differential fee structure, overseas students are effectively subsidising the education of British nationals. While US, UK, Canada and Australia remain the 'big four' destinations, the craze to go overseas and the search for lower cost options is taking Indian students to new destinations such as Chile, Estonia, Ireland, Korea, Kyrgyzstan, Lithuania, Malta, Russia, Taiwan, Turkey, Ukraine and so on.

According to Rajiv Ganjoo, founder CEO of LilacBuds, a consulting outfit facilitating overseas admissions for Indian students, "Tuition fee in the US ranges from \$20,000 to \$100,000 depending on the programme and university in comparison to tuition fee range of \$3,500 to \$15,000 per year for other emerging student destinations. Additionally, these countries need skilled professionals, providing increased opportunities for students from Bharat and all these courses are also recognised back in India."

Consider the fairly typical example of Council for American Education, a private consulting firm run by two US-educated Indians, Rajesh and Sudhir Arya, out of New Delhi's Defence Colony. Their website studyingoverseas.com claims, "Our mission is to provide assistance to the students seeking guidance or mentorship for education in the United States. We aim to establish Council for American Education as the educational consultancy of choice for the test-preparation and advising needs of students planning to study in the US. As a team, we are committed to set the academic objectives for ambitious and driven students and help them reach out to the stars."

There is a phenomenal growth in such consulting organizations that help Indian students prepare for overseas education. These outfits help aspiring students train for the admission process and assist them in

going through the process. While no guarantees are offered, a hefty fee is extracted. This is a phenomenon that has come to stay — families paying hefty sums at home for the education of their children to help them go overseas where they end up paying even more for higher education. Such investment makes sense only if at the end of the process overseas employment and then citizenship is secured, especially in a developed country. That is the way the economics of high cost education, at home and overseas, works. The numbers are there to see.

Liberalising the foreign exchange management policy, the Government of India introduced a new scheme in February 2004 that permitted Indian citizens to remit overseas an annual sum of \$25,000 for a range of personal purposes. These included (1) Private visits to any country (except to Nepal and Bhutan where the Indian Rupee is legal tender); (2) as gift or donation; (3) for going abroad for employment; (4) to facilitate legal emigration; (5) for maintenance of close relatives abroad; (6) for overseas travel for business, or attending a conference or specialised training or for meeting medical expenses, including a check-up abroad, or for accompanying a patient going abroad for medical treatment/ check-up as an attendant; (7) to meet expenses in connection with

medical treatment abroad; and (8) for overseas education. In May 2015 the ceiling for annual remittance overseas under these heads was increased to \$250,000. This has meant that over a four-year period an individual can remit a million dollars overseas and that in any given year a family of four can also remit a million dollars. Consequently, there has been a sharp increase in annual remittances overseas since 2015.

Data provided by the Reserve Bank of India show that of the total funds remitted overseas each year, under the LRS (Liberalised Remittance Scheme), travel overseas accounts for the largest amount followed by studies abroad. Together the two heads of remittance account for over 50 percent of funds remitted. While funds remitted for travel abroad would cover business travel and tourism, this head would also include travel for studies overseas. Further, one could suggest that funds remitted under two other heads could also be paying for overseas education, namely, 'maintenance of close relatives abroad' and the 'others' category that includes educational loan repayment and payment for overseas journals.

While RBI offers official estimates of funds remitted overseas for education, there are other estimates in the public domain. Overseas education consultants OneStep and University Living claim that Indian students could spend up to \$70 billion by 2025 for overseas education, mainly in the four English-speaking countries of US, UK, Canada and Australia. This compares with \$47 billion estimated to have been spent in 2022, the academic year after Covid. The number of Indian students overseas is expected to double from one million in 2019 to two million in 2025. In a tweet last year on X the former CEO of India's NITI Aayog and the Prime Minister's G-20 Sherpa, Amitabh Kant, claimed, "Indian students opting for higher education abroad would rise to 1.8 million with their overseas spending rising to \$80 billion by 2024."

Few, of course, believe that this clamour for overseas education is only

in search of knowledge and the experience of living abroad. Most see it as one step closer to emigration, overseas employment and eventual citizenship of a developed country. Indians, who have recently overtaken China as the most numerous migrants entering OECD countries, are more likely than Chinese to stay back in the country they go for higher studies, according to the OECD's International Migration Outlook 2002.

The OECD report concludes, "Indians are the most likely among all foreign students to stay back in their host country and join the local workforce." Indeed, most observers of the overseas education scene as well as private sector consultants believe that Indians are willing to spend liberally on overseas education because they view this as an investment in ultimately seeking employment, even citizenship, overseas. Thus the actual spending on overseas education may well be far higher than what the LRS data suggests if funds are provided through unrecorded channels.

Such forecasts also suggest that this phenomenon is not only expected to persist but that it would become bigger as middle class and upper class Indians become wealthier and are willing to spend more on overseas education. Finally, they also suggest that a large part of what India gets as inward remittances from 'skilled and knowledge workers' — Gulf labour

and H1-B visa holders in US — would increasingly go to balance the external account as outward remittances increase. There was a time when Indians went overseas to study. Today they study in order to go overseas.

The problem with out-migration of students is not just about numbers, nor even about the flight of talent, as a problem in itself. Indeed, it is not even about the foreign exchange outgo on account of the cost of education and stay overseas. It is all these but equally also about the social signals it sends at home and overseas. When the

children of a country's power elite — its political, bureaucratic and diplomatic leadership, its scientists and intellectuals, its business leaders and the leadership of its armed forces and such like go overseas to study and work in large numbers they reinforce the view across society that migration is an aspect of upward social mobility. Elite migration raises concern among the vast majority whether they would also not be better off making their future overseas.

What message does a nation send out when the children of all those who have occupied high offices like national security advisor, foreign secretary, central bank governor, cabinet secretary, armed forces leadership, national intelligence agencies and so on opt to study and be gainfully employed overseas. What stake do the parents have in this country when their children's future is no longer linked to that of the country? When the policies they pursue bear no consequence for the next generation in their families who have opted to hitch their wagon to distant nations? In the social circles of India's power elite families take pride in the fact that the next generation has succeeded from the country of their birth.

Every year when graduation day arrives at American university campuses it is interesting to see how many senior officials of the Indian state fix meetings overseas to be able to travel and be present at the ceremony as proud parents, knowing full well that their child will settle



There is a phenomenal growth in consulting organizations

down to a good job on the East Coast or the West. The social consequences of such elite migration are, therefore, long-term and serious. They damage a nation's image. Indeed, this preference for migration for education and employment among the elites can also be very corrupting. Multinational corporations and consultancy firms are happy to offer jobs overseas to children of the power elite. An insidious nexus gets embedded between the power brokers of the world. While economists calculate the fiscal and foreign exchange impact of overseas education, political scientists and sociologists must focus on the implications for politics and policies, national security and foreign policy and, indeed, national image and power.

Indian contribution to MAGA

Defending a liberal immigration policy, President Joe Biden told an election fund raising event in May 2024 that while 'xenophobia' and a lack of openness to immigrants was hobbling the economic growth of countries like China, India and Japan, the United States had in fact been a beneficiary of its openness to talented immigrants. "One of the reasons why our economy is growing is because of you and many others," Biden told a gathering of Asian Americans. "Why? Because we welcome immigrants." Addressing members of the Global Organization of People of Indian Origin-Connecticut Chapter (GOPIO-CT), US Congressman Jim Himes called Indian Americans "a secret weapon for economic growth ... the future of US innovations." "The brains of tech innovations are here... We have so much to do on immigration to enable the tech-savvy and entrepreneurial Indian-American community to have a smoother and faster way to have Green Cards and job visas."

Not to be left behind in attracting the Indian American vote Donald Trump announced automatic green cards for bright young Indian immigrant graduates coming out of US colleges and intending to remain in the US. "What I want to do and what I will do is — you graduate from a college, I think you should get a Green Card automatically as part of your diploma, a Green Card to be able to stay in this country." Trump said he was sad to hear "stories where people graduated from a top college or from a college, and they desperately wanted to stay here, they had a plan for a company, a concept, and they can't — they go back to India, they go back to China, they do the same basic company in those places." Educated Asian immigrants, Trump was telling his voters, would also help MAGA — Make America Great Again — his campaign slogan.

Indian Americans have contributed to US global leadership in a large number of fields ranging from medicine and healthcare to information technology and finance. President Biden's acknowledgement, however, was probably the most public and bold statement by a senior political leader. East and South Asian immigrants — Japanese, Koreans, Chinese and Indians — have powered the post-War dynamism of the US economy. Chinese and Indian immigrants, who have arrived on American coasts in their thousands over the past quarter-century, have

contributed handsomely to the continued global dominance of the United States as a premier Knowledge-based Super Power. Much is often made of the US contribution to China's and India's rise. Surprisingly, few have tried to quantify the Asian contribution to US global dominance as a technological power.

It is true that demographic shifts have hurt the growth prospects of many ageing developed economies. Biden was right to point to the economic cost imposed by the inward orientation of many developed economies. The US, however, has benefitted not just from her openness to immigration but in fact, and more so, by attracting highly talented immigrants, especially from Asia. Gone are the days when the typical immigrant landing on the shores of Manhattan was a desperate European. Of course, many of the world's impoverished, persecuted and desperate still enter the US. They too provide fuel to the engine of US growth and the comfort of American lifestyle. However, it is the 'best and brightest' from Asia that illuminate the top of the pyramid of power and knowledge in the US.

The realisation that innovation and the powering of the knowledge economy in the US requires a more liberal policy towards immigration of Indian American talent has had to contend with the more familiar and generalised opposition to immigration. Responding to such opinion Ignatius Chithelen published a study of Indian American contribution to business and innovation in the US provocatively titled *Passage from India to America: Billionaire Engineers, Extremist Politics and Advantage to Canada and China*. If President Trump restricts visas to Indians, Chithelen argued, there would be flight of talent to Canada and in the end China rather than the US would benefit. Chithelen pointed to the contribution that 'billionaire engineers' like Satya Nadella, Sundar Pichai, Shantanu Narayen and several other CEOs and persons of eminence have made and continue to make to powering US business and the knowledge economy. Biden has certainly got that message.

China and India have exported large numbers of highly educated professionals as well as skilled labour to the US over the past half-century. Their contribution to a wide range of fields including computer science and information technology, basic and natural sciences, medicine, nuclear and space technology, finance and business, government and public affairs has been considerable and highly visible. In an aptly titled study published two decades ago, *Give us Your Best and Brightest: The Global Hunt for Talent and the Impact on the Developing World*, Devesh Kapur and John McHale drew attention to this American search for talent from developing countries. A developed West was siphoning off talent from a developing South, their study warned, enabling the former to remain globally competitive and dominant. Better compensation, living and working conditions drew such human capital away from developing economies to the developed.

Post-War development economics did focus on the possibility of developed economies in fact continuing to benefit from their relations with developing countries even in the post-colonial era. Beginning with the early work of Hans Singer, Raul Prebisch and Celso Furtado in the 1950s an entire body of literature emerged in the 1960s and 1970s that



Microsoft's Satya Nadella with Donald Trump and Jeff Bezos

Indian Americans have contributed to US global leadership in a large number of fields from medicine and healthcare to information technology and finance.

questioned the hypothesis that developing economies could benefit from foreign trade, investment and aid. The Dependency School led by Andre Gunder Frank and Samir Amin and the World Systems school led by Emanuel Wallerstein went further to suggest that the 'centre' of the world economy, namely, developed industrial economies, were in fact contributing to the 'under-development' of the 'periphery', while the periphery was feeding the continued global dominance of the centre.

Teresa Hayter's classic expose of development aid showed how even aid money was not serving the goals of development but was in fact promoting the business interests of developed economies. This development economics literature viewed 'brain drain' from developing to developed economies within this dependency framework. What few foresaw in the 1960s and 1970s was the role that developing country talent would play in the early 21st century by contributing to the technological progress of the world's biggest economy through the continued augmentation of its 'knowledge power'.

Surprisingly though, there is no significant study of this phenomenon despite the fact that many Indian professionals are based in US universities, institutions and think tanks. As many as 22,000 persons of Indian origin are employed as full-time faculty across all US universities and 16 Fortune 500 companies are headed by Indian Americans. A recently published report on the contribution of the Indian diaspora to the United States merely skims the surface. Even so, it presents some startling facts. A low middle income economy, that India is classified as by international financial institutions, has invested up to \$40 billion in the world's biggest economy since 2008, while total US FDI into India since 2000 has been estimated to be \$64 billion. The irony underlying these numbers seems lost on the authors of the report, titled *The Indian Diaspora in the United States: Recognising Impact and Celebrating Contribution*. If these numbers are correct it could be claimed that on a per capita national income basis less developed India invests more in developed United States, than the other way round.

The contribution of Indian Americans and NRIs to the economic growth, technological development and global dominance of the United States remains to be properly quantified and documented. Economists have studied how global trade and investment flows in the post-War, post-colonial era have continued to benefit developed economies more than the newly industrialising economies of the Third World. The literature on brain drain, as we saw earlier, also examined the flow of human capital from developing to developed economies. In dozens of US institutions, in multilateral economic institutions and in private investment and financial research organisations scores of Indian economists and statisticians, including a couple of Nobel Prize winners, continue to devote a greater part of their time to studying India from afar. They publish copiously on issues pertaining to the Indian economy and on Indo-US economic relations. Yet, none has attempted to quantify the contribution of Indian Americans to sustaining the global dominance of the United States as a Knowledge Super Power.

In an early study of the economic impact of Indian and Chinese skilled immigrants, AnnaLee Saxenian observed, "when local technologists claim that Silicon Valley is built on ICs, they refer not to integrated

circuits but to Indians and Chinese engineers." Of the 11,443 high-tech firms that Saxenian found operating in the region in 1998, 774 firms (7 percent) were run by Indians and 2001 (17 percent) were run by Chinese and they collectively accounted for over \$16.8 billion in sales and 58,282 jobs. Saxenian's study concluded, "Skilled immigrants contribute to the dynamism of the Silicon Valley economy, both directly, as engineers and entrepreneurs, and indirectly, as traders and middlemen linking California to technologically advanced regions in Asia."

In a paper I wrote for the East West Center, Hawaii, in June 2000, on IT and the e-economy: "The Ballast for India-US Relations," I concluded, "The essential importance of the e-economy in Indo-US bilateral relations is that this is one sector in which the two countries are able to relate as equals with a spirit of give-and-take establishing a win-win relationship. The old paradigm of a one way dependence and a relationship of unequals is giving way to a new paradigm in which Indians see themselves as making a contribution of their own to the bilateral relationship and not merely being recipients of aid and largesse." I observed at the time that not only had US companies benefitted from trade and investment in the IT sector, but that the US economy had also benefitted by securing access to India's low cost but good quality skilled IT professionals. In the year 2000, when this paper

was written, most viewed the US-India relationship as one that benefitted India. Few saw the Indian contribution to the US as a game changer for the latter.

A more recent study of Indian American contribution to the US knowledge economy, conducted in the states of New York, New Jersey and Pennsylvania, observed that "Chinese and Indian knowledge workers are good for the regional economy. Industries that face competition from firms in other parts of the country benefit from having more of the available knowledge workers locate in this region, rather than elsewhere — most notably California." The study concluded that if the US government were to restrict 'knowledge workers allowed to enter the country', the jobs they currently fill would more than likely migrate to where those workers are — places like Shanghai and Bangalore. "Outsourcing

would benefit fewer people in the region than the kind of "insourcing" these knowledge workers represent. Evidence suggests that the cost to native-born workers who are in the same fields as the migrants is probably small, relative to the overall benefit to other workers, employers, stockholders, and taxpayers in the region."

While there have been many such micro studies of Indian American and NRI contribution to specific firms, industries and regions in the US, there is no macro study that quantifies the national and global impact of their contribution to the US economy as a whole. Biden's recent remark, therefore, should prompt us to try and estimate the Indian contribution to the US economy and its geo-economic dominance. Indian contribution to the US economy has been at three different levels. First, the contribution of highly qualified Indian professionals to US knowledge power; second, contribution of H1-B professionals and skilled workers to competitiveness of US firms; and, third, the contribution of Indian American business leaders to the global success of US corporations. ■



The Pravasi Bharatiya Divas organized by the government in India

A report says India has invested up to \$40 billion in the world's biggest economy since 2008, while total US FDI into India since 2000 has been estimated to be \$64 billion.

Defunct DVC's bright future



GETTING IT RIGHT

CHANDRA BHUSHAN

MOST of us know the Damodar Valley either from school textbooks or from its portrayal in films like *Kala Patthar* and *Gangs of Wasseypur*. Yet the valley is far more than what is captured in books or on screen. Spanning the coal-rich districts of Jharkhand and West Bengal, the Damodar Valley — often called India's Ruhr Valley — has powered the nation's growth since Independence. Coal from Jharia and Raniganj fuelled India's rise, while the steel plants of Durgapur and Bokaro and the fertilizer factories of Sindri became the celebrated "temples of modern India." The valley was an engine of national ambition.

Today, that engine is sputtering. The region stands as a stark paradox: rich in coal and industrial infrastructure, yet choking on the very resources that once made it prosperous. The air is thick with pollution, the rivers run contaminated, and the economic model that once promised secure employment is now creating a landscape of uncertainty. The mines that built modern India are becoming its tombstones. The imperative is clear: the Damodar Valley must urgently transition from a coal-based past or risk terminal decline.

The evidence of this decline is everywhere. In Dhanbad, the coal capital of India, nearly half the mines are abandoned or non-operational. By 2030, a staggering 80 percent of the mines will cease operations due to exhausted reserves or unprofitability. This narrative is echoed across the valley. For example, coal production in the Raniganj coalfield in West Bengal has plateaued at about 40-50 million tonnes per year and is likely to decline rapidly. Once the nation's largest coal producer, the Damodar basin has now slipped to third place, overtaken by coalfields in Odisha and Chhattisgarh.

The downstream industries are faring no better. Jharkhand, despite sitting on mountains of coal, is paradoxically a net importer of electricity. Ageing thermal power plants at Patratu, Bokaro, Bandel and Kolaghat have shut

down. Overall, less than 5 percent of India's thermal power capacity remains in the valley. Even the Damodar Valley Corporation's (DVC) multipurpose dams, designed for flood control, irrigation and hydropower, are silting up: their power generation is minimal and flood control capabilities increasingly compromised. Parts of West Bengal now flood annually due to diminished water-holding capacity in dams such as Maithon, Panchet, Konar and Tilaiya.

But this is not just an economic crisis; it is a human one. Over 200,000 workers — the very people who dug the coal and manned the plants — now face the spectre of job losses. The region's workforce participation rate is already a worryingly low 30 percent. Without a viable alternative, we are staring at a social and economic vacuum of immense proportions.



This degraded land is not a scar but an asset

Yet, within this crisis lies an unprecedented opportunity. The same assets that defined the valley's industrial age can be repurposed to build its green future. A recent assessment by my colleagues reveals that the districts of Dhanbad, Bokaro and Ramgarh (DBR) — the core of the valley — have the potential to become a major green industrial corridor.

Consider the resources. The region has over 100,000 hectares of barren and mining-ravaged land. Under the intense sun of eastern India, this land is not a scar but an asset — a potential site for solar farms capable of generating up to 10 gigawatts (GW) of clean power by 2030, far exceeding Jharkhand's 2027 target of 4 GW. The reservoirs at Maithon, Panchet and Tenughat can host floating solar projects and form the foundation for a green hydrogen industry. With India pushing for hydrogen-based steelmaking and fertilizer production, DBR — with its existing steel and fertilizer

plants and water infrastructure — is uniquely positioned to become a hub for green hydrogen, green steel, and green fertilizer. In addition, repurposing closed mines into solar farms, industrial parks, or even tourism sites can drive local employment and economic diversification, creating lakhs of new, sustainable jobs.

The infrastructure is already in place: robust connectivity via national highways and railways, and proximity to the upcoming Amritsar-Kolkata Industrial Corridor. Most important, the region has a young, resilient workforce eager for new opportunities.

To realize this potential, however, a deliberate and just strategy is essential. First, the Central government must partner with the states to create a new blueprint for the Damodar Valley, transforming it from a traditional coal economy into a vanguard of green development. A dedicated Green Growth Plan for the DBR region should be the starting point. In addition, the DVC itself must diversify into a green energy company.

Most critically, this transition must be just. The workers and communities who built the coal economy must not be left behind. This requires massive investment in skilling, social protection, and enterprise development. The Jharkhand government, in particular, must pioneer a Just Transition Policy to ensure that the shift to a green economy is equitable and inclusive.

History offers a powerful parallel. Germany's Ruhr Valley faced an identical crisis with the decline of coal. It chose a path of proactive transformation, investing in technology, education and culture. Its last coal mine closed in 2018, but today, former industrial sites are vibrant museums, universities, and green spaces. The Ruhr transformed a monoculture economy into a diversified, resilient hub.

The Damodar Valley now stands at the same crossroads. It has given its energy, its environment, and its labour to build the nation. But it must now confront the dual realities of depleting coal reserves and the global shift toward clean energy. The Ruhr teaches us that transformation cannot be left to chance — it requires foresight, planning, and investment. If India acts decisively, the Damodar Valley can avoid decline and instead lead the green transition in eastern India. ■

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

A Himalayan tragedy



LOOKING AHEAD

KIRAN KARNIK

WE need to review our policy if current development models are aggravating these issues. The Himalayas' situation is a warning bell." Concerned about environmental degradation, the speaker linked this to "faulty global development models and materialist and consumerist approaches". These strong words, opposing government policies like broadening roads in the Himalayas to promote development, are not those of a leftist, "urban Naxal", or an NGO-affiliated environmental activist. Instead, they come from the very powerful head of the RSS!

Meanwhile, a group of respected people, including ecological experts (and a very senior member of the ruling party) have requested the Supreme Court to review its decision permitting broadening of key highways in the Himalayas. This decision had come despite many top experts pointing to the dangers of such broadening (by mountain/rock cutting and deforestation) in the context of the well-established fragility of the Himalayan ecosystem. They had cautioned about this causing landslides and floods, especially with the increasing intensity of extreme weather events, like exceptionally heavy rainfall. All this was overruled on grounds of "security needs", though the main driver may well have been the promotion of pilgrimages through a vanity project (the Char Dham highway). Now, with roads blocked (or washed away), neither military equipment nor pilgrims are going anywhere.

When this broadening of highways was first proposed, one did not have to be an oracle to predict the dangers. Nor does one have to be a soothsayer to look ahead and see that the situation can only worsen. Sensible safeguards — like the creation of the Bhagirathi Eco-Sensitive Zone (BESZ) — have been given the go-by, and there are widespread violations. Following a spate of unprecedented floods and landslides over the past few years, causing much devastation and tragic loss of life, the regulatory bodies have woken up. The Supreme Court took note of logs floating down with flood waters, indicating large-scale deforestation activity. The National Green Tribunal (NGT) took suo moto cognizance of

reports on rampant construction near Gangotri Dham posing a threat to the shrine and sought responses from the Central and state governments. Violations such as the construction of homestays and the like in flood plains have suddenly been noticed.

Of course, the floods and consequent damage this year is on a scale that would wake up anyone. Apart from the impact at higher altitudes and rural regions, Dehradun too suffered much damage and, sadly, 29 deaths due to the floods in September. Further east, the intense rainfall in early October washed away roads and bridges in the Darjeeling area, and early reports mention 20 deaths in the region. Punjab too has seen unprecedented floods, leading to a serious impact on crops and the loss of 500,000 trees, depleting its already low (3.7 percent) forest cover. Clearly,



What is at stake in the long run is our survival

One did not have to be an oracle to predict the dangers. Nor does one have to be a soothsayer to see the situation can only worsen.

the extensive floods will not only affect families, but also the economy of the state.

One more consequence of floods is the inevitable spread of disease — possibly epidemics — with long-term health effects. The immediate economic impact too is substantial, especially in hill stations which have few jobs when tourists don't come. Loss of jobs and income means a daily-life crisis for many.

Official reaction has followed the standard playbook for such disasters: announcement of compensation for those affected, a committee to assess the damage, aerial surveys by VIPs,

pleas by the state for funds from the Centre, and statements about the "unexpected and unprecedented natural events". There is never even a hint that these tragedies may well be man-made events triggered by thoughtless projects, along with encroachments and illegal construction: local follies that compound the effects of overall climate change.

The future portends a worsening, with global warming triggering even greater climate change and extreme weather events. Reversing this is an uphill task, but what is at stake — in the long run — is our very survival. Possible scenarios include rising sea levels that threaten islands, coastal cities and regions, deep droughts and intense rainfall. As glaciers begin to melt, this too will seriously affect India. These disasters are being amplified by policies and projects that add to our woes.

In cities, hills are being levelled, trees cut, lakes built over: all in the guise of "development". Public reaction, muted or resigned to fate earlier, has recently become more strident — and no longer limited only to fringe environmentalists. While "security" is yet a largely unquestioned cover for projects, more are protesting against the dilution — often waiving — of environmental regulations to promote "ease of doing business". Now, media coverage is more extensive, with photographic evidence: of rampant illegal construction in the Aravalis, for example. Shockingly, this includes structures — on notified land — by government agencies; unsurprisingly, these have been recommended for "post-facto approval".

How this was allowed and why no action was taken is a mystery, especially after the Supreme Court had, in September 2022, directed the Haryana government to remove all illegal construction on notified Aravali land! Ironically, the Haryana government now wants to redefine the Aravalis to release more land for construction. Meanwhile, like the rest of the National Capital Region (NCR), residents in Gurugram and other cities in the state are choking on the air they breathe, when they are not marooned by road-rivers.

The politician-builder-technocrat-bureaucrat nexus and slow-moving, indulgent regulators hold citizens to ransom with on-going deforestation, hill-levelling, and illegal construction. Builders and vanity projects, it seems, matter more than people's lives. In this seemingly bleak future, growing public awareness and protests are the only sign of hope. ■

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

Pets must follow rules



**CITIZENS
IN COURT**

MEGHNA UNIYAL

THE issue of dog attacks is nothing short of a public health and safety crisis in India today. While stray dog attacks have reached epidemic levels, pet dog attacks are also occurring at a worrisome rate, revealing irresponsible and dangerously negligent owners. As the Supreme Court tackles the vexatious matter of stray dog attacks, it is equally important to address the growing menace of pet dog attacks.

The most important aspect is to understand the causes of dog aggression. If the reason was simply hunger, no pet dog would ever bite. But we know that even the most well-cared for, well-fed dogs can and do bite. Dogs are descended from wolves and display aggression for a variety of reasons – territoriality, diseases, predatory reflexes, lack of early socialization, individual temperament, sexual/litter aggression, lack of training, inbreeding, pack mentality, medical issues, etc.

A lack of awareness of relevant pet ownership laws and liabilities, mishandling of dog attack incidents and arbitrary orders by local authorities or the police and undue interference by animal rights NGOs and activists, have worsened the problem in India, leaving the public unsafe, and wrong doers emboldened. The usage of terms like “pet parents” and “furry babies” further obfuscates the problem of dog bite attacks.

A recent diktat of the Surat Municipal Corporation asking people to get permission from their neighbours to keep a pet, has predictably, annoyed pet owners. This also contradicts the Animal Welfare Board of India’s (AWBI) claim that keeping a pet is a ‘fundamental right’. Both propositions are equally absurd and do not find any basis in law.

Understanding and enforcing statutory provisions, laws and judgments is critical to addressing the problem of dog attacks, that can lead to life-long injuries, disabilities, trauma and can even be fatal. Across the world, pet dog attacks are prevented and dealt with by enforcing strict pet ownership laws, including criminal liability on pet owners for any injury/damage caused by their pet.

Globally, as well as in India, licensing and registration are the first important steps for pet ownership, mandated under every single State Municipal Act in the country. This is because anything owned by a person that may impact society, is regulated by the government – animals, arms, vehicles. That’s why you need a license for your pet, gun and car and not your sofa set.

Often confused as to why pet licensing is compulsory, pet owners mistake it to being penalized for keeping a pet. On the contrary, licensing and registration of pets helps build a sense of ownership and responsibility in pet owners, helps unite lost pets with owners, makes it possible to trace abandoned pets to their owners so that they can be penalized and



Licensing of pets helps build a sense of ownership

Under the existing laws, keeping a pet is not a right. Local authorities can put reasonable curbs on pet ownership.

to identify owners for liability and prosecution in case of pet dog attacks.

Relevant laws cover instances of irresponsible and dangerous acts by people involving or using animals, even if they don’t actually own them but are in possession of an animal for whatever reason. BNS Section 291 ‘Negligent Conduct with Respect to an Animal’ penalizes “Whoever knowingly or negligently omits to take such measures with any animal in his possession as is sufficient to guard against any probable danger to human life, or any probable danger of grievous hurt from such animal...”

A 2025 Madras High Court judgment, in a dispute between neighbours over keeping pet dogs, has also laid down important legal principles with regard to dog ownership, public nuisance and Article 21 rights of citizens. The court stated that that Article 21 of the Constitution guarantees citizens the right to live peacefully without noise pollution and hazardous conditions and that “Keeping animals detrimental to the interest of other residents cannot be a right of any person.” The court held that a private nuisance (typically affecting an individual or a group of specific people) can in fact be deemed a public nuisance (affecting public rights) in matters of animal ownership as it impacts society at large.

The court went on to state, “In a civilized society, everyone has a right to live peacefully without noise pollution and a health hazardous atmosphere, which has been recognized as a fundamental right guaranteed under Article 21 of the Constitution of India.” And that “Noise pollution and emitting foul smell by keeping dogs in a residential area is no way a lesser hazardous condition than a factory creating noise pollution. Barking and howling of dogs and emitting foul smell in a residential area is undoubtedly a public nuisance.”

Pet owners are legally required to pick up after their pets as BNS provisions make it an offense if a person “unlawfully or negligently does any act which is, and which he knows or has reason to believe to be, likely to spread the infection of any disease dangerous to life...” Not only is manual scavenging illegal in the country and no municipal worker can be asked to clean up faeces, dog excrement is highly toxic and pathogenic, creates unsanitary conditions in public places and significantly contributes to the burden of infectious diseases in the country.

Existing laws, court orders and statutory provisions with regard to pet ownership and/or animal possession, establish several legal principles — keeping a pet is not a right, local authorities can in fact put reasonable, common sense restrictions on pet ownership like a ban on dangerous breeds, prohibit the keeping of numerous dogs in an apartment and deny pets the same freedoms that citizens have in public places as well as in private premises. Treating a pet like a family member and giving it the same status as that of a child at home, is entirely the prerogative of pet owners. But society and law are neither required nor can be expected to do the same. ■

Meghna Uniyal is Director, Humane Foundation for People and Animals

The longing to be White



**WORLD
VIEW**

SHYAM BHATIA

I met Joe in the British city of Birmingham — a confident young Sikh with neatly cropped hair, stylish trainers, and a quick grin. “My friends prefer to call me Joe,” he told me, explaining that his full name was Joginder Singh, but it sounded “too heavy” in local circles. He claimed to speak five languages: Hindi, Urdu, Punjabi, Farsi, and Arabic. Impressive, I thought.

But when I casually asked him in Punjabi to name his parents’ village in Punjab, he blinked. “Sorry, what?” he said. He didn’t understand the question or the language. It became clear that Joe’s Punjabi was, at best, ornamental. He knew nothing of his ancestral geography, nothing of the land his name came from. The loss wasn’t just linguistic, it was existential.

There are many like him: second-generation, urban, global-facing, but adrift from their own roots. Whether through name changes, borrowed accents, or inherited discomfort with indigeneity, they have become fluent in many things, except themselves.

This is not merely about names. It’s about longing, discomfort, and — perhaps most of all — a quiet, persistent shame. The legacy of colonialism in India is not just political or economic; it is psychological. Its symptoms are often subtle: a switch from Ramesh to Ray, a declared distaste for Indian food (“too oily”), a conversion to Christianity in private while performing secularism in public, a refusal to speak the mother tongue to one’s children. Together, these gestures form a pattern, not always deliberate, but telling.

Name-changing is often the entry point. Sometimes it’s explained away as practical, a way to avoid awkwardness in a London boardroom or on a Zoom call from Singapore. But why must Raghav become Ron, or Arundhati, Annie? Why not assert the original name instead? When these changes are unprompted, they signal something deeper: a subconscious effort to align with a world that still privileges Whiteness.

Even at the highest levels of public life, cultural fluency can become both performance and puzzle. Former Prime Minister Rishi

Sunak — who famously lit Diwali lamps on the steps of 10, Downing Street — is often heralded as a symbol of British multiculturalism. But for all his outward pride in heritage, questions persist about his comfort with the languages of his forebears. Born to Punjabi-speaking parents from East Africa, Sunak rarely, if ever, speaks Punjabi in public. By contrast, his wife, Akshata Murty — a first-generation daughter of South India — is said to be fluent in Telugu. The irony is not lost on observers: assimilation and amnesia often travel together.

There is another consequence to this assimilation: vulnerability. The assimilated, successful Indian, especially in the West, is often seen as ideal prey. Smooth, wealthy, deferential, and eager to belong, they are



Cultural fluency can become both performance and puzzle

In India, the legacy of colonialism is not just political or economic; it is psychological. It’s subtle: a switch from Ramesh to Ray.

quietly courted as donors to prop up failing institutions that wouldn’t dream of diversifying their boards or returning colonial loot.

At one London tennis club, I heard a well-connected woman describe how the British Museum, despite its standoffish public image, was “actively courting wealthy Indians” to fund a new India exhibition, maybe even an expanded India gallery. No mention was made of restitution. Just glitz, access, and the implied honour of being seen.

The “good wog” — to borrow the crude but still-used term — becomes both ornament and cash machine. Their money is welcomed; their

questions are not. As one insider at a cultural foundation admitted, “They want Indian money, not Indian memory.”

The British honours system, too, has long served as a subtle mechanism of absorption and control. When brown men and women are knighted, ennobled, or made dames, they are symbolically welcomed into the establishment — but rarely on their own terms.

For every Lord Patel, Baroness Verma or Dame Priti, there is a quiet expectation: that they will not disrupt the consensus that elevated them. They must wear their distinction with grace, not grievance. Advocacy for caste justice, reparations, or museum restitution rarely figures in their maiden speeches in the Lords. Some even go further,

aligning themselves with right-leaning agendas to prove loyalty — immigration scepticism, cultural “integration” or unwavering fealty to crown and empire.

This isn’t to suggest cynicism in every case. Many accept honours with genuine pride. But the institution rewards a certain kind of Indian — urbane, non-threatening, publicly grateful, and, above all, post-Indian in tone.

To be celebrated, one must be seen as safe.

A recent case in China offers a revealing contrast. Cindy Yu, writing in the London *Times*, described how a young Chinese woman’s relationship with a Ukrainian gamer exploded into national scandal. She was expelled from university and accused of ‘damaging national dignity’ — not for breaking the law, but for being seen with a foreigner. The incident triggered a wave of online misogyny and nationalist outrage, revealing how deeply some Chinese remain haunted by colonial-era humiliation. As Yu notes, even today, foreign approval — or the perception of it — can provoke national anxiety.

The outrage fell hardest on the woman herself, not on the man who leaked the videos. The scandal exposed a different form of post-colonial psychosis: not mimicry, but hyper-vigilance. Where Indians may try to please, the Chinese lash out to protect dignity, even at the cost of their own.

This performance of cultural discomfort is not new. In 1835, Thomas Babington Macaulay laid out a vision for an Indian elite that would mirror its rulers:

“We must at present do our best to form a class who may be interpreters between us and the millions whom we govern — a class of persons Indian in blood and colour, but

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The longing to be White

Continued from page 25

English in taste, in opinions, in morals, and in intellect.”

Nearly two centuries later, Macaulay’s children walk among us — suave, erudite, and unsure of their own skin.

The Indian education system, especially in its elite iterations, still subtly rewards mimicry. English remains not just a language but a status marker. A polished accent is admired; an authentic Indian one is mocked. As political psychologist Ashis Nandy put it:

“Colonialism is first of all a matter of consciousness and needs to be defeated ultimately in the minds of men.” (*The Intimate Enemy*, 1983)

In Delhi recently, an American diplomatic contact told me how he and his colleagues were astonished by the reluctance of local Indians to speak their own national language. “What they all like doing,” he observed, “is using a hybrid tongue they call ‘Hinglish.’” No other nationality, he added, seemed so shamelessly dependent on the language of its former conqueror.

And yet, defeat is far from complete. The psychic scar endures.

There is also the matter of religion — or, more precisely, its abandonment. While many have genuine reasons for religious conversion or secularism, it is difficult to ignore the pattern among some urban elites who quietly adopt Western religious identities for social convenience. A friend who now attends church services in central London admitted he doesn’t believe in God but finds the congregation “better connected.”

This extends into other cultural practices. Yoga is passé, Pilates is in. Diwali becomes a bland “festival of lights.” Holi is reduced to photo ops. A senior editor at a London publishing house recently asked me to “avoid anything too mystical or saffron” in a pitch, as though Indian spirituality were a liability to be managed.

The word emasculation might sound provocative, and is, by design. But the anxiety is real. There is a growing sense, especially among men, of needing to shrink themselves to be accepted: to speak less loudly, smile more, apologize for one’s accent, avoid seeming “too ethnic.” Frantz Fanon wrote in *Black Skin, White Masks*: “The colonized is elevated above his jungle status in proportion to his adoption of the mother country’s cultural standards.”

That elevation, however, is always conditional. Even the most “assimilated” Indian can find themselves on the wrong side of a microaggression — or worse — with no cultural grounding to return to.

Too often, the celebrated Indian in the West is not merely being honoured but enlisted. The knighthood, the barony, the board seat at a think tank or museum, come with invisible

strings. Behind the flattery lies function: to reassure, to influence, and, sometimes, to deflect.

These well-placed individuals are quietly expected to legitimize British (or Western) narratives — not Indian ones. Whether it’s defending the retention of looted artefacts, echoing foreign policy lines on Kashmir or Palestine, or criticizing elected Indian or diaspora movements deemed “too radical”, the role is clear: be brown, but speak White.

Would their son, born fluent in English but stripped of Punjabi, be recruited by GCHQ or MI6 as the “perfect asset” in Lahore or Delhi? Would he, in a future war framed as humanitarian, be deployed to South Asia as a British soldier — tasked with pacifying a people he no longer recognizes, but vaguely resembles? The cycle is cruelly elegant: disinherit a boy or girl of their past, then send them back to conquer it.

There is a growing sense, especially among men, of needing to shrink themselves to be accepted.

This is not always conscious. But the structure rewards those who distance themselves from nationalist sentiment, cultural assertiveness, or demands for historical redress. It punishes those who don’t.

In essence, the assimilated Indian becomes a bridge — not between cultures, but between empire and erasure. Their function is often not to represent India, but to pacify it especially in spaces where the West still hopes to extract loyalty, capital, or silence.

To be clear, this is not an attack on modernization or multiculturalism. Names evolve. Faiths shift. Languages mix. But what’s worrying is when these changes are driven not by curiosity or confidence but by fear, shame, and a desire to disappear.

Across the Atlantic, Indian Americans are navigating a similar tension — but with different levers. The Pew Research Center’s recent surveys of Asian Americans note that most Indian-origin adults are highly English-proficient and comfortably bilingual at home, and that the community’s median household income sits at the very top among US groups. Those facts make “practical” name-smoothing tempting, and they explain why museums and universities so energetically court Indian donors.

Yet Pew also records a quieter undertow: a noticeable minority admit to hiding parts of

their heritage in certain settings. Prosperity has not erased the psychology of fitting in; it has sometimes just made it tidier.

By contrast, Chinese and Japanese diasporas often present different compulsions, for structural reasons. Chinese communities abroad maintain dense weekend language schools and, until recently, a network of roughly a hundred Confucius Institutes on US campuses, normalizing public use of Chinese and lowering the felt need to anglicize identity to succeed.

Japanese Americans, meanwhile, are one of the most multi-generational and US-born Asian groups; English-dominant and long embedded, they show deep assimilation — but it is generational and organic rather than the sudden mimicry demanded of newer professional migrants. The outcomes look similar on the surface; the routes and pressures are not.

Inside India, there are anchors that resist the script. In the South, a century of language-pride politics, from Periyar to the anti-Hindi agitations of 1965, created public norms that make Tamil, Telugu, Kannada, and Malayalam respectable in elite space. Scholars such as Duncan B. Forrester chronicled how those movements shifted policy as well as pride.

Among Adivasi communities, sociologist Virginius Xaxa has argued that the battle is less about aping the West and more about fending off assimilation into dominant groups; where communities retain schooling, land, and ritual life, cultural continuity is stronger. Different histories, different inoculations — and fewer incentives to perform “Whiteness”.

And there is a strategic cost to getting this wrong. A country that speaks of itself as a future world power cannot outsource its voice to mimicry. Soft power is not a costume; it is the residue of confidence carried in names, languages, and an unapologetic sense of origin.

If India expects to be taken seriously in chancelleries and boardrooms — from climate talks to tech standards — then its envoys, entrepreneurs, and diasporic elites have to bring India into the room without apology. Otherwise it will not work. Power that disavows its own texture becomes a subcontract, not a strategy.

B.R. Ambedkar once wrote: “The assertion by the individual of his identity is a declaration of war against the social order that would keep him in his place.”

Perhaps what India — and Indians — need most now is not another global ranking or rebranding campaign, but a return to cultural self-respect. Not a wall of nationalism, but a quiet, firm confidence: to speak one’s name without apology, to live without the need for mimicry, and to recognize that the longing to be White is, in the end, a longing to be someone else entirely. ■

Shyam Bhatia is an India-born British journalist



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Scan to know more



The heritage menu Kolkata eatery goes back to roots

AIEMA TAUHEED

IN the comfort of your home, you can savour meals from around the globe — picking whatever your heart desires. The options are many: low-calorie, protein-rich, keto, vegan, paleo. And yet it is the home-style meal that is unobtrusively winning the battle for taste buds. Nourishing, nostalgic, slow-cooked and aromatic. Cooked with love. Relished with idle talk and gentle humour.

Alas, time is scarce and scribbled recipes handed down by loving grandmothers often contain all the twists and turns of a detective novel. But what if, once in a while, you could eat a home-style meal out, a throwback to the past — with deep links to the soil, to the place you came from?

In Kolkata there is Amar Khamar Lunch Room in Ballygunge which serves such home-style meals prepared with fresh, seasonal produce sourced directly from farms.

“Amar Khamar began in 2019 as a small, six-seater tasting space for our products, which has now grown into the Lunch Room,” says Sujoy Chatterjee, who co-founded Amar Khamar as a social enterprise.

Chatterjee has also helped develop grassroots entrepreneurship in India. A graduate in management and literature from Kolkata, his interest in Bengal’s history, culture and cuisine often channels into his work.

Amar Khamar started as an experiment to link farmers with conscious consumers and wider markets, and highlight Bengal’s rich agricultural and culinary traditions. The restaurant emerged as a natural extension to bring farm produce and value-added products directly to the table.

Chatterjee and his team work with small and medium farmers across Bengal and other states to preserve heirloom crops and improve production and quality. The remuneration model is designed to favour the farmers.

“In Amar Khamar’s model of work, the farmers are free to decide on the price of their produce,” he says. “We encourage farmers to add as much value as possible at their end so that they can maximize their revenue. For example, they can make puffed or hand-pounded rice instead of simply selling paddy.” The result is a range of high-quality products that reach consumers across India, who, he noted, appreciate the commitment to quality.

The vegetarian and non-vegetarian menus, designed like postcards with diners’ names, feature climate-sensitive, zero-waste dishes served on banana leaves.

“We decide our menu by first understanding the season and identifying which ingredients will be at their peak within our network of farming communities and city markets,” explains Chatterjee. “Sustainability is the pillar for everything we do. Eating seasonally is one of the simplest ways to bring this about,” says Raina Talukder, Head of Brand. She has a master’s degree in gastronomy from the University of Gastronomic Sciences, Pollenzo, in Italy.

Wholesome lunches are served on weekdays from Tuesday, while the *Chutti-r Bhaat* (or holiday rice) is reserved for the weekends. Guests can book a table through the number listed on the website, but walk-ins are also welcome.



Sujoy Chatterjee: ‘Amar Khamar links farmers with consumers’

Portraits of rice grains on the ceiling reflect a focus on rice. The summer menu’s *Chutti-r Bhaat* alone presents three distinct rice varieties in three spreads: the aromatic *Chine Kamini* in the first course, followed by *Dudhersar*, and finally *Mohonsal*.

“Rice is the heart and soul of Bengali homes. We rarely say, ‘Come over for a meal at my house.’ We say, ‘*Bhaat kheyje jaben*’ — please have rice at my house. Meal and rice are synonymous in Bengal, intertwined with our history. Rice is also the heart and soul of Amar Khamar,” says Talukder.

Amar Khamar currently stocks more than 50 indigenous varieties, with over 200 preserved by farmers associated with the organization. “Farmers across Bengal have been able to preserve about 500 indigenous varieties. When we compare these numbers to the 5,500 that existed in Bengal in the 1960s, we really understand the urgency and importance of conscious consumption and preservation,” Talukder says.

Among the standouts on the menu are dishes that have quickly

become favourites. “Many of the dishes we serve are not generally found anywhere else, and some use special ingredients that even many Bengalis from the city are unfamiliar with. One such dish is *Chui Jhaal Mangsho*,” says Chatterjee.

Chui, he explained, was Bengal’s native pepper before chillies were introduced by the Portuguese in the late 15th century. Particularly abundant in East Bengal (now Bangladesh), the roots and stems of chui (*Piper chaba*) have for decades been used to spice fish and meat in Bengali households. At Amar Khamar, mutton is prepared with *chui jhaal* and served with a side of *Chui Jhaal Achar*.

“*Tormuj-er Shukto* is another dish that has surprised many of our diners. *Shukto* is a classic Bengali dish, however, what many don’t know is that it is more like a category than a dish,” says Chatterjee. Varieties of *shukto* appear across Bengal and embody a culture of resourceful cooking — long before ‘zero-waste’ cooking became a trend. “We are making ours with watermelon rind, which is not commonly found, but again shows the ingenuity and sustainable practices of Bengal’s kitchens.”

For dessert, *mishti doi* is finished with *taler gur*. Unlike *nolen gur*, which dominates Bengal’s winter sweets, *taler gur* — a jaggery made from palm fruit sap — from North 24-Parganas, is a summer specialty that has been given pride of place on the dessert menu. “Both are delicious and reserve their own space as Bengal’s winter and summer jaggeries. You will rarely find *taler gur* in any *mishti* shop in Kolkata and it was about time that changed,” says Talukder.

Our first course was similar to a tasting menu. Served, naturally, on a banana leaf, it consisted of rice, bitters, vegetables, and vegetable paste. The rice, called *Lal Kamini*, was sourced from coastal Sundarbans. It was served with a generous dollop of *Kalimpong ghee*. The aroma melted into a warm, toasty flavour.

The rice was accompanied with *Tormuj-er Shukto*, a stew made from the white rind of watermelon with chunky soft *mattar dal boras* (lentil fritters), mildly bitter and refreshing, followed by *Aam Shorshe* — tart mango slivers flecked with ground mustard.

We then relished a mushy *Deshi Potal-er Khosa Bata*, a mouthwatering paste made from pointed gourd peels. The dish, born in Bengal’s famine years, was a reminder of how resourcefulness and resilience have long shaped the region’s cuisine. Using vegetable peels to make *bhaja* (fried vegetables) or *bata* (pastes) has long been common practice here.

The leafy *Shak Bhaja* that followed had crunchy bits, which I learned were smaller *masoor dal boris* and served with green chilli pickle.

The second spread consisted of another round of *bhaat* (rice), *bhaja* (vegetable fry), *dal* and *torkari* (vegetable curry), each in small, precise servings. The rice was red-white *Dudhersar*, its grains still clinging to brown bran. The ghee, from North-24 Parganas, was delicious. It blended into the rice like a milky-gold ribbon.

It came with a summer favourite, *Aam Diye Masur-er Tok Dal* — a tangy red lentil soup made with mango. Alongside came *Pata-r Bora* —

light, crisp, golden fritters made from jute leaves. The pointed gourd in mustard gravy was accompanied by two whole *potols* (pointed gourd) this time. This spread, eaten with a sweet-sour jammy mango pickle, was classic, no-nonsense comfort food.

The non-vegetarian and vegetarian main course were served with an indigenous variety of rice from West Bengal’s Bardhaman district.

My vegetarian spread featured *Thor-er Ghonto*, a dry but moist dish of banana stem, full of flavour. Alongside was the *Lau Pata Diye Chhanar Dolma-r Jhal*, crumbled paneer wrapped in a bottle gourd leaf floating in a thin and deliciously spicy gravy.

The non-vegetarian menu comprises four dishes of egg, fish, chicken and mutton. You can pick any two. My friend picked *Campbell Hnas-er Dim Posto*—duck eggs cooked in a poppy seed gravy, a cult favourite, and Amar Khamar’s special *Chui Jhaal Mangsho* with *Chui Jhaal Achar*, a mutton curry infused with the pungent heat of *chui jhaal* — often likened to fresh pepper or horseradish. The mutton was tender and tasteful.

Accompanying the meal were small triangular pieces of *papad* with bright yellow tangy mango chutney.

A Bengali meal is, obviously, incomplete without dessert. We savoured the *mishti doi* and *Badshahbhog chal-er payesh* — both liberally crowned with jaggery made from palmyra. Sweet, creamy, and a delightful note to end on.

How were such recipes curated? Chatterjee explained that the idea was to create wholesome, comfort meals they themselves grew up eating. “Our recipes are a collaborative effort, drawn from our homes — our kitchen and farm teams, as well as mentors-cum-family friends,” he said. These are dishes from everyday kitchens that rarely find representation in Bengali restaurants. The aim is to serve wholesome food rooted in the wisdom of daily cooking.

In the kitchen, the team is guided by mentors and some of the farmers themselves, who often visit the restaurant to taste the food and advise the chefs. “Our entire team regularly goes through rigorous training from members in the field, who let us know the processes of production, so we understand the core of a dish, be it a grain or a spice,” Talukder emphasizes.

So far, the Lunch Room has been warmly received by a diverse audience. “I think people are inching closer to understanding what they are consuming. There are many more conscious diners today, who crave a deeper connection, and food is no exception,” says Talukder. “Many of our guests at Lunch Room are young diners who want to understand their ingredients better and also look forward to sharing the experience with their parents.”

Chatterjee noted that guests from across India and abroad have embraced the Lunch Room. Vegetarian dishes were especially well-received among non-Bengali audiences. “What Lunch Room offers is more than just cuisine — it’s an experience,” he said. “It’s about conversations and a deeper understanding of consumption, history, culture, and sustainability — at the table and beyond.” ■



The meal, served on banana leaves, varies according to the season



The Amar Khamar restaurant

Pandals and their causes

Aiema Tauheed & Photographer Ashoke Chakrabarty criss-crossed Kolkata



Condemning acid attacks

The theme at the Dakshindari Youth pandal was Dahan or burning to protest against acid attacks on women. Artist Anirban Das conceived it after meeting a survivor. The entrance wall featured a stark monochromatic painting of survivors holding placards while, above, a phoenix spread its wings. Inside, performers mended shattered terracotta figurines, symbolizing hope. Jute-wrapped pillars concealed engravings of women. Dusty, opaque mirrors lay around. A hollow-bellied Goddess evoked scarring and strength. There was also a deeply moving performance by survivors.



Speaking Bengali with pride

The Chaltabagan Sarbojanin pandal's topic was 'I speak in Bengali' (Ami Banglai Bolchi). It was designed by Pradipta Karmakar, an artist, to honour the Bengali language and revive pride in the mother tongue. The recent crackdown against Bengali-speaking migrant workers in Delhi and Gurugram made the theme even more emotive. The pandal included a 'tree of evolution' tracing Bengali's linguistic roots.

Women as the first farmers

The Tala Prattoy pandal's theme was Beej Angan or 'seed courtyard', curated by artist Bhabatosh Sutar and chosen by Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee. The pandal presented the seed as a vessel of memory, knowledge, and continuity. The Goddess appears as a primeval peasant, honouring women as the first farmers who brought forth seeds. Her plough becomes a trident as she battles demons, pesticides and harmful policies.



Dying art forms

The Hindustan Park Durgotsav celebrated its 95th year with Lokoj, or indigenous folk culture, conceptualized by artists Moloy Roy and Subhamay Sinha. It sought to revive Chador-Bador, a Santhal puppetry tradition, performed by the community's purportedly last generation of puppeteers. The open to the sky set-up evoked a village with earthen pots, tribal instruments, and empty puppetry houses. The Durga idol, modelled on a village woman, and performances by Santhals brought the theme to life.



Children caught in broken homes

The Golaghata Sammilani pandal, by theme artist Manash Roy, explored the impact of divorce on children. Organizers clarified that they were not against divorce. Children's drawings of their parents formed the backdrop, alongside a Kalighat Pattachitra painting on infidelity and a painting of struggles in school. Facing the Goddess were figurines of children holding placards asking, "What is our fault?"



World turned upside down

SUBIR ROY

HOW can India deal with the “six simultaneous global transitions” that are currently in play? *Everything All At Once*, by Rajiv Kumar, former vice-chairman of NITI Aayog, for five years from 2017, and policy analyst Ishan Joshi, has a clear notion of what needs doing. Kumar has been a part of the process that has been seeking to deliver a response for over a decade now.

The six transitions are defined as the following. First, there is a geo-political transition happening with the return of Donald Trump who is seeking to take the US along a path very different to what it has broadly followed since the end of World War II. Second, the global centre of happenings is moving to the Indo-Pacific region after two centuries of dominance by the western colonial powers.

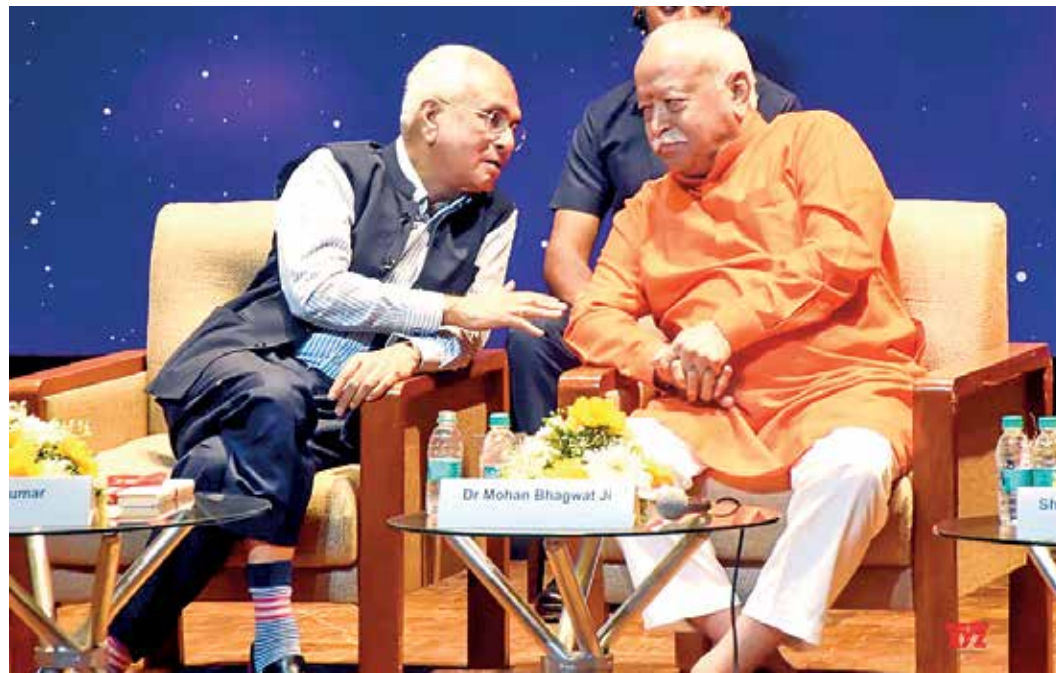
Third, this is happening along with a geo-economic transition. Fourth, the emerging new dominant players are the economies of the Global South which are seeking to leave behind the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) whose members are made up by the likes of the US, Canada, the countries of Western Europe, Japan, South Korea and Australia. Note that China or, for that matter, India was not part of the order that dominated the modern era but they are now seeking to come to the fore.

Fifth, the geo-political changes that are taking place are happening even as a seismic change is occurring through the technological revolution generated by digitally driven artificial intelligence. Sixth, there is no time to sit and stare as the environment is being threatened by the surging carbon footprint and the urgent need to reduce it.

Even as the US economy is being threatened by a rise in interest rates wrought by the Fed to rein in inflation, China has taken second place in terms of GDP, four times that of Germany despite the aggregation of West and East Germany.

Today there is a chance to transform the lives of the so far dispossessed with the help of digital technology as Indian software skilled workers are prominently present across the world. But this will not happen if temperatures are not reined in within less than two decades.

In this age of change, opportunity and risk, what is India seeking to do in order to become a developed country? The goalposts



Rajiv Kumar with Mohan Bhagwat, the sarsanghchalak of the RSS, at the book launch

The authors write about the six big global transitions taking place and how India's goals could be defined to fulfil its aspirations.

are high. It needs to grow annually by 9 percent over two and a half decades. Plus, it has to achieve a share of 18 percent of the PPP-based global economy by reaching \$48 trillion by 2050.

To break it up in real terms, one way would be to construct an index of gross welfare product (GWP) to measure the real level of people's welfare made up of the following components: growth in per capita incomes; progress towards achieving net zero through the annual reduction in per capita emissions; continual raising of educational attainments in terms of enrolment and quality of learning; raising of health indicators of children and mothers, particularly; making available of public services; and also keeping in mind the per capita income of the last decile of the population.

Along with this India needs to have a new global agenda. It has to decouple from the focus on the India-US relationship and move to Sino-Indian relations. These two must learn not just to live together but also to

benefit from each other. In a key sentence the authors assert that “India has a chance to convert its long-term strategic competition with China into a not entirely unfriendly rivalry.” There are many historical examples of bitter enemies changing to cooperate and creating “win-win situations for themselves”.

The end game for Pax Americana has begun and it will gather pace in the years ahead. The rise of China is now there on the ground. India must learn to understand, accept and make peace with this. As two neighbouring civilizations, home to over three billion people, they “can be the driver of prosperity, security and stability in the twenty-first century”.

The authors suggest how India's goals could be defined and lay out the difficult but inescapable steps which will be required to achieve the aspirations of over 800 million young Indians beset by insecurity and inequality. Each state government should as soon as possible dismantle a lot of the dead weight of old systems, regulations and compliances of the past. Over the past decade a lot of ease of doing business has already taken place with digitalized compliances.

The way forward can lie through the public-private partnership mode, through minimum government and maximum governance. This has to start from the village panchayat and go up to the zila parishad and district administration. Thus, a bottom-up system in which the public versus private antagonism of the past can be left behind with a new cooperative structure. This is being facilitated by abolishing office files and putting in place digital systems. ■



Everything All At Once / Rajiv Kumar & Ishan Joshi / Rupa
₹695

Soaking in Yelagiri's desi charm

SUSHELA NAIR

AS our vehicle scrambled up the Ghat Road from Ponneri to Yelagiri, navigating sharp, meandering U-turns and 14 hairpin bends, we passed through evergreen forests interspersed with towering eucalyptus trees. Interestingly, all the hairpin bends are named after renowned Tamil poets and personalities.

On the way, we stopped to soak in the verdant surroundings and click pictures of bright red May flowers, a striking contrast to the lush vegetation. We feasted our eyes on the scenic hill slopes aflame with the vibrant hues of flowering lantana running wild and also the inverted D-shaped bee hives, hanging quite precariously from branches. The mist-wrapped hills were a welcome relief after the heat and dust of the plains of Tirupattur and Jolarpettai.

Driving past the dense vegetation, breathing in lungfuls of fresh air, we felt rejuvenated. As we stopped by the seventh hairpin bend to enjoy the scenic feast, the morning mist lifted, revealing a platter of pastoral delights in the valley—a cluster of hamlets, harvested paddy fields, small patches of greenery abounding in coconut plantations and vegetable farms.

Entering a semi-evergreen stretch, there was a perceptible drop in temperature and we could feel the serenity of the hill station enveloping us. A BSNL tower loomed into view, assuring us that we were in close proximity to the small township. We could sense the quietude of the hill station.

Sprawled over 72 sq. km, at an altitude of 3,500 feet in the Eastern Ghats, Yelagiri is sandwiched between Vaniyambadi and Tirupattur towns in North Arcot district. The erstwhile property of the Yelagiri Zamindar family, it was taken over by the Government of India during the early 1950s.

One can still see the ancestral house of the Yelagiri Zamindars in Reddiyur in the plains. Yelagiri exudes a more *desi* charm than many hill stations as it is sans colonial mansions and vantage points named after British rulers and soldiers. It has metamorphosed from being a favourite watering hole of rich leather merchants from Vaniyampadi to a popular weekend getaway in contemporary times.

The laid-back hill retreat of Yelagiri comprises a cluster of 14 hamlets. There is some conjecture regarding the origin of the name Yelagiri. Strolling around, I came across some villagers engaged in relaxed chatter. Narrating their antiquity-steeped folk lore, one



The Yelagiri Aiyandar, guardian deity of Nilavoor village

of them said, “When Lord Venkateswara visited this world, he put his feet on this hill and it could not stand his divine strength. The people of the hills were terrified and screamed ‘yelo’ (to shout) and ‘kili’ (fear) which subsequently became Yelagiri.” The group then even offered to guide us to the footprints of the Lord on Iyyappan rock near Nilavoor hamlet to substantiate their belief.

We chose to potter around instead, starting with the Punganoor lake. After a leisurely stroll along the circular walkway around the artificial lake, we hired a rowboat. We boated for an hour, and then simply relaxed on the water's edge — watching the ripples on the surface.

Exploring the small settlement itself is a delight, what with its meandering and uncluttered lanes leading to picture-postcard hamlets surrounded by miles and miles of ripened paddy and mustard fields vivid with brilliant yellow flowers. We ambled around villages like Athanavur, Nilavoor and Kothayoor and savoured a slice of rustic Tamil Nadu. We had a glimpse of their pastoral lifestyle. The mud-walled, thatched-roof dwellings and granaries of the farmers contrasted dramatically with their verdant environs.

We saw villagers escorting cattle languorously on green pastures, and heard the bleating of goats in the distance — all with the backdrop of the hills. While ambling around the countryside, we came across some Malai-Allees (presumed to be the descendants of a fleeing warrior clan during the regime of Tipu Sultan) returning home with loads of firewood and their cattle.

We headed to Nilavoor village, known for its lake and an Amman temple where villagers congregate for a special *puja* on Fridays. A brightly coloured idol just by the side of the lake grabbed my attention. These guardian

deities (known as Aiyansars) are worshipped as protectors of villagers. Relaxing in the shade under a sprawling banyan tree, the only sound that interrupted the tranquility was the tinkle of cowbells and the chirping of birds. The hilltop Velavan temple, dedicated to Lord Murugan, with a gigantic statue of Ghatotkacha in front, is not only an interesting place of worship in Yelagiri but also a perfect view point.

The place exuded a meditative calm and silence. The temple comes alive on Fridays when villagers flock here for a special *puja*. During the Tamil month of Adi (July-August) one can take part in the local festivals which provide a colourful insight into the rich culture of the region.

For the adventurous, there are activities galore — hilltops to scale, jungle paths and birding trails to explore. The trek to Swami Malai, the highest hilltop (1,128 ft), is arduous but well worth it for the stunning views. All along the way, one can listen to birdsong from the woods. En route, there are huge boulders on which you can rest to recoup energy. Once you reach the top, you'll find a small cave temple below a massive rock. A traditional torch is lit atop the rock during Karthika Deepam and the surrounding hills come aglow with the light. Standing on the rock, you can glimpse a green blanket of flora all around when the clouds part momentarily. ■

FACT FILE

Getting there- By air: The nearest airports are at Bengaluru and Chennai.

By rail: The nearest railhead is Jolarpettai, 19 km away.

By road: Buses and local taxis are available from Jolarpettai Railway Junction.

When to visit: Throughout the year.

Where to stay: Amberle Resort, Sterling Yelagiri, Hotel Landmark.

So you want to do your bit but don't know where to begin? Allow us to help you with a list especially curated for *Civil Society's* readers. These are groups we know to be doing good work. And they are across India. You can volunteer or donate or just spread the word about them.

Shelter for couples

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

www.dhanak.org.in | Ph: 7669078681

Acid attack survivors

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

www.bravesoulsfoundation.org
Ph: 9654240057

For troubled minds

The Live Love Laugh Foundation raises awareness around stress, anxiety, depression and mental health in India. It helps people access psychiatrists and counsellors, especially for those in remote areas, and ensures affordability with low-cost services. Its rural programme has treated 17,105 individuals and supported 39,489 caregivers across seven states.

Initiatives include training for frontline workers and providing free treatment. Services are available in English and local languages, ensuring comprehensive support in Karnataka, Tamil Nadu, Odisha, Madhya Pradesh, Himachal Pradesh, and Kerala. Donations can be made online.

www.thelivelovelaughfoundation.org
info@thelivelovelaughfoundation.org

Families in court

Marital disputes are stressful, and facing them in public courts

can be overwhelming. Sukoon is a field project of the Tata Institute of Social Sciences that promotes litigant well-being by providing free psycho-social services in family and district courts in Mumbai, Thane, and Kalyan, the High Court and the Mumbai District Legal Services Authority. Individuals, couples, and families can seek help.

Sukoon also conducts research and workshops on marital issues.

www.sukoon-tiss.in
Ph: 02225525068

Help for children

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

www.ashiyanafoundation.org
helo@ashiyanafoundation.org

Hope in conflict zone

Founded to serve vulnerable communities in conflict-affected regions, Human Aid Society is a Jammu & Kashmir-based humanitarian aid and development organization working in the areas of education, women's empowerment, healthcare, disaster relief and rehabilitation.

It was started in 2004 by Bashir Ahmad Mir, survivor of a terrorist attack.

www.humanaidociety.org
haskashmir2004@gmail.com

Living with HIV

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

HIV infections through expanded prevention efforts.

www.uknpplus.org | Ph no.: 8909935218

Support Dalit girls

Over 17 years Dalit Sthree Shakti has come to the rescue of Dalit and Adivasi survivors in 1,700 cases of rape and domestic violence. The NGO is active in Andhra Pradesh and Telangana. It responds to both inter-community and intra-community violence.

www.dalitsthreesakthi.org
Ph: 9849451849

Preparing for disasters

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

www.geohaz.in | Ph: 01146509848

Safe spaces for women

In conflict-hit Kashmir, everyday struggles like menstrual health and gender violence often go ignored. Stand for Kashmiri Youth (SKY) Trust creates safe spaces in rural areas where women can share and find support. The trust has mobilized over 50 young volunteers — many former beneficiaries themselves — who drive change across villages. It works closely with youth and women on awareness, legal rights, and self-empowerment and organizes workshops, seminars, and training programs in partnership with government agencies and NGOs to raise awareness of critical social issues.

www.jkskytrust.org
Ph: 8491064844

Boosting young leaders

Founder Deepa Pawar's experiences with poverty, gender violence, and casteism shaped her work in sexual health, safety, and education. Alongside like-minded women, she founded Anubhuti to empower grassroots youth leaders. The organization reaches the youth and women in underserved urban and rural areas of Mumbai and Thane.

www.anubhutitrust.org
Ph: 9820778330

Forced into prostitution

In Neemuch, Madhya Pradesh, the Bachada and Bedia communities often push young girls and sometimes minors below the age of 10 into sex work for economic survival. Jan Shourya Social Welfare and Development Society protects their rights through awareness, rescue, and rehabilitation, and engages local youth to promote dignity, education, and alternative livelihoods.

www.janshaurya.org | Ph: 8770673651

Mental health awareness

Mental health doesn't get the attention it deserves. Anjali has been working to mainstream mental health issues. It seeks to improve the quality of life for people with psychological disabilities. It has been working with the state government and municipalities in West Bengal.

www.anjalimhro.org | Ph: 03335392788

Help a riot victim

Where do people displaced in riots and gender violence go for help? Who fights their cases in courts? Where do they find shelter? The Afkar India Foundation was set up in 2013 to help such people. It also promotes peace and harmony and documents violence for accountability.

www.facebook.com
afkarindiafoundation.org | Ph: 9560872249



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

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TATA STEEL FOUNDATION



WOMEN IN LEADERSHIP: BRIDGING UNSEEN BARRIERS

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