

Civil Society



SCHOOL AND FESTIVAL

Saptak is at the heart of
great classical music

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Perfection matters



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SCHOOL AND FESTIVAL
Saptak has been teaching and popularizing classical music for 46 years in Ahmedabad. It has a reputation for dedication and simplicity. Maestros perform at Saptak's annual festival. 20

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SAPTAK is our kind of story. It is a small, passionate venture delivering great value to society. In an age obsessed with scale and numbers, Saptak reminds us that a reset is possible.

Perfection is at the heart of Indian classical music. Its many sophistications come from simplicity and dedication. In the 46 years that Saptak has been around nothing has changed at the school. It continues to function from borrowed premises. There is no signboard. The fees are modest. If you can't pay but have some talent they will still take you in.

The founders were musicians setting out, with nothing but their talent, to popularize classical music in Ahmedabad. Theirs was a tiny effort and they have succeeded way beyond their own modest expectations. Saptak's reputation now brings maestros from across India to Ahmedabad for a festival each year. Saptak has also witnessed a seamless transition with the founders' children, musicians themselves, taking over as trustees.

Toys and puzzles made in India that reflect Indian stories and settings are worth buying. They are ingeniously conceived and brilliantly crafted with an eye for detail. Flora and fauna, monuments, fables and mythology have been brought alive by creative entrepreneurs. We feature at least two such enterprises and their products in this issue. Having bought them ourselves we can strongly recommend them.

There have been a number of rabies deaths in the country. We made a rough tally for a period of five months relying on news items and what we found made us sit up. It is well acknowledged that the stray dog problem is way out of control. Birth control measures haven't worked.

Are the deaths we are counting an indication of an even grimmer reality that rabies is becoming unmanageable? It has long been the view of this magazine that animals should be treated with kindness. One way of doing that is by getting dogs off the street where they are vulnerable and consequently a menace to society.

The rabies deaths should be treated seriously as a public health issue. There should be an audit of each death so that the exact cause is known. Rabies should also be uniformly made a notifiable disease across the country.

National and state budgets have held little interest for us. They are just a bunch of numbers, mostly up for revision. To know which way the economy is headed, it is more important to look at policy. Our interview of the month is with Arun Maira who has just published a timely book on 'reimagining' the Indian economy. A new way of looking at things is what he suggests and we agree.

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LETTERS



Learning curve

Your interview with Deepak Nayyar, 'Political intrusions putting public varsities at risk', was excellent and informative. It sounded a warning against standardization and elimination of plurality. Education must be the province of educationists, not the *netu-babu* brotherhood.

Dilip Thakore

Life on the border

The tragic incident that occurred on April 27, 2025 at Baisaran in Pahalgam and subsequent developments have deeply impacted the region. While strong action taken by the Government of India (GoI) under Operation Sindoor against major terrorist camps across the border was a decisive and commendable step, retaliatory shelling by the neighbouring country targeted several border villages in J&K. This resulted in severe loss of property and, tragically, the loss of several innocent lives.

The GoI immediately initiated rehabilitation measures for the affected families, announcing relief of ₹11lakh for fully damaged houses and ₹6,000 for partially damaged houses.

However, Human Aid Society found this compensation inadequate. Our organization conducted a partial but detailed survey in three border areas and carried out a realistic assessment of losses.

Based on this assessment, a comprehensive written report was submitted to the Prime Minister with copies forwarded to the Lieutenant-Governor and the Chief Minister of J&K.

During this time, *Civil Society* sought detailed information from me about the losses suffered by residents living close to the border

IN PASSING EVERYONE FLIES

Civil Society picture/Umesh Anand



Wheelchair jam: Indians seem to be prolific users of wheelchairs at airports

during Operation Sindoor and published these facts in the magazine. As a result, the magnitude of losses borne by citizens received not only national but international visibility.

It is a matter of great satisfaction to us that the Ministry of Home Affairs officially recognized our representation addressed to the Prime Minister. Even more encouraging was the subsequent decision of the Central government to announce an additional relief of ₹2 lakh for fully damaged houses and ₹1 lakh for partially damaged houses.

Furthermore, a Chicago-based NGO, IDS, took serious note of the interview. They contacted me and expressed their willingness to collaborate with Human Aid Society to initiate daily livelihood and rehabilitation programs for the affected villagers of Uri in Baramulla district.

For this important development we wholeheartedly credit *Civil Society* magazine.

Bashir Ahmed Mir, chairman, Human Aid Society, Baramulla

Rabies fear

Apropos Meghna Uniyal's article, 'Dubious rabies vaccine', I have heard cases of fully vaccinated children dying of rabies months after completing their last dose.

Why is the government playing with human lives? What is the point of all these rabies shots if there is no guarantee of survival? This vaccine scandal needs to be investigated.

Deepti Pillai

Good article. I suggest the writer should also focus on vaccines and medicines given to domesticated dogs and their role in rising instances of unpredictable and uncharacteristic behaviour. Every rabies death should be investigated.

Donthi Narasimha Reddy

More to Kochi

While it is true that Kochi is a wonderful place to be in, I wish your article, 'Escape to another world in Kochi', hadn't spoken of Nemrana's Tower House alone, making it sound like a sales pitch for the hotel.

The challenge for Kochi is not to become another haven for random, rich, urban migrants, like Goa.

Abeer Chakravarty

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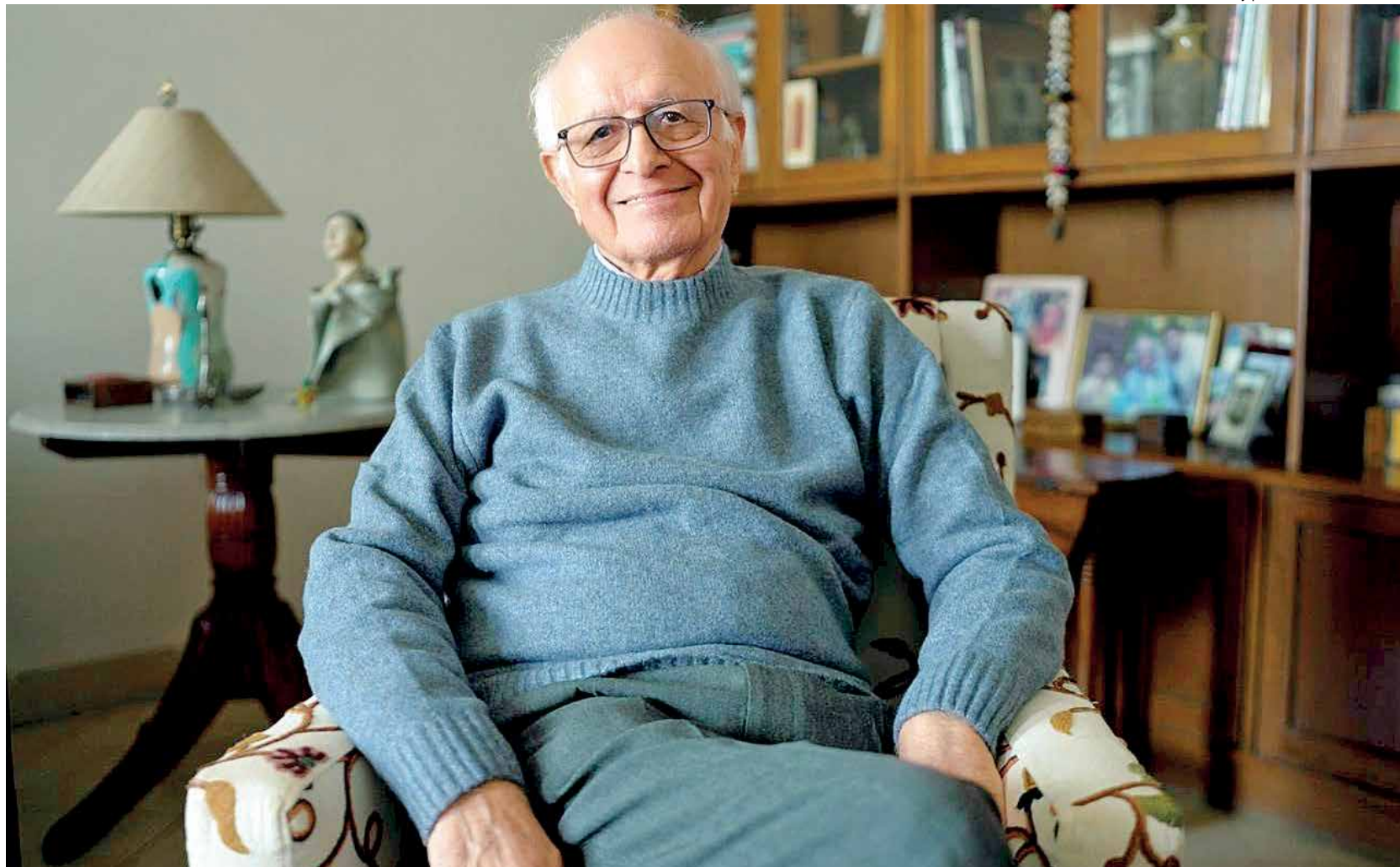
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ARUN MAIRA ON REFORMING THE ECONOMY

Civil Society picture/Lakshman Anand



Arun Maira: 'CSR is a rubbish idea. The limited liability company is the seed of the problem.'

'The World Bank-IMF crowd has nothing new to offer India'

Civil Society News

Gurugram

ANYONE witnessing the presentation of the Union Budget would have noticed how much of an industry-related exercise it is. The government bends over backwards in pleasing corporations. Businessmen flood TV channels, trying to outdo each other in fawning over the finance minister and the prime minister.

Since reforms began, India's growth story has been scripted as some kind of matinee show with TRP-driving budget telecasts ensuring that people continue buying tickets. Arun Maira's is one of the few voices that seeks an overhaul. Having spent a career in the corporate sector, he believes that the reason for inequality is the stranglehold that corporations have over society. The limited liability company, he says, needs to be redesigned so that it serves society and not merely investors and shareholders.

As a young man, Maira set out to serve the country. Instead of joining the IAS, he ended up in the Tata Administrative Service. In those days being in a Tata company was not very different to serving the country. On TELCO's shopfloors he mastered learning and listening — from workmen

who would be helped to acquire better skills and move up in life.

Maira would like policymakers to similarly learn and listen a lot more from ordinary people about what matters to them instead of pursuing reforms through subterfuge cheered on by moneyed interests. His recent book, *Reimagining India's Economy: The Road to a More Equitable Society*, provides valuable insights into the challenges the country faces in meaningfully bringing people out of poverty. It shouldn't be just jobs, but good jobs. Not just education, but skills and critical thinking.

In all fairness we must tell our readers that in this magazine we are on Maira's side. He is a member of our Advisory Board. Apart from his corporate life, Maira has also served in the Planning Commission. It makes him specially interesting as an insider with a difference. Read below an extract from a conversation with Maira at his Gurugram home.

Q: The headlines are all about how GDP is going up and poverty is coming down with India on its way to being the third largest economy in the world. You, however, seem to have serious concerns. What worries you?

The growth we are experiencing is not solving the problems of India. It is not inclusive and it is not environmentally sustainable. It is making a few

people rich and even very rich but the vast majority are being left out. It is important, therefore, not just to tinker with the Indian economy but reimagine it.

The GDP can only measure what is economically measurable. We want more women in the workforce so that their wages can contribute to the GDP. But the work they do in their households, farms, for their families is not counted. We talk of the democratic dividend but where are the jobs that the young can do?

If poverty is going down, by what measure is it so? India fares poorly in terms of inclusion, growth creating good jobs and growth at cost to the environment not only in relation to the developed world but also comparable countries.

Q: The cover of your book has an image of a man and a woman, both labourers, carrying clusters of high-rise buildings on their heads. The building we are sitting in right now could be one of them. So, where should we begin challenging our concepts of economic growth?

We should begin by talking to the people for whom policies are ostensibly intended. What do they want? What will work for them? Our planners, our economists and policymakers have preconceived ideas. They don't talk to people and learn from them.

Montek Singh Ahluwalia is a World Bank person. He spent his career with the IMF and came back here after Oxford. The chief economic advisers we've had since 1991 and some before Rajiv Gandhi's time have all been Washington or Oxford or Cambridge-trained people. Look at the history.

When Mr Modi says we are slaves to Macaulay it is not just about using English, but (importing) ideas about growth and economics which aren't rooted in Indian realities. We've had a crowd of people continuing who are always beholden to those ideas. NITI Aayog has the same set of people, beginning with (Arvind) Panagariya as vice-chairman.

Q: Mr Modi set out to change that but the orientation of his government is no different. GDP remains the rope trick it has always been. We should be looking more closely at AQL.

We should but we are not. I think your question is why are we not. The previous government wasn't doing things right and we are still not. So why not, is the question. Let me answer it. I'm saying there should be a change in the thinking of the persons who are responsible for measuring whether the economy is doing all right. But these persons continue to come from the same Washington-IMF crowd.

In the run-up to the 2014 elections, Mr Modi touted the Gujarat model for the rest of India. A book on the Gujarat model was written by none other than Jagdish Bhagwati and Arvind Panagariya.

At that time, they were loudly, especially Bhagwati, insulting Amartya Sen for the Nobel that he got, which was about human development and its indicators. And Amartya Sen's whole philosophy was to build the capabilities of people, enable them to build their own capabilities, and they will build your nation and your economy.

That means primary education and primary health must be universally and freely available and equitably the same for all. And, therefore, the implication is that privatization of health and education is a no-no for a society that's going to be improving equity and giving equal chances to all.

Q: But you were in the Planning Commission.

When Dr Manmohan Singh, as prime minister, invited me to join the Planning Commission, I said, 'Who, me? What do I know about the Planning Commission?' I was on holiday in Europe with my wife when I received the call. I had decided I had had enough of being on company boards. Of course I felt honoured and accepted. But when I met him as a formality before joining, I said I hoped he hadn't got the wrong Maira because I wasn't an economist.

He said, 'No, no, I know you. I have read you.' And he pulled out from his shelf my book, *Transforming Capitalism: Improving the World for Everyone* (which was published by you from *Civil Society*). 'I'm inviting

you because you're not an economist. You seem to be reflecting on the situation of common people' — and that was his concern.

He said that, as the head of a government, one must be concerned about those who don't have power, who don't have money, not about those who already have made so much.

Sonia Gandhi won an election by questioning the India Shining slogan of the BJP. When the Congress appointed Dr Manmohan Singh as prime minister, industry felt reassured that they had their man, a celebrated reformer and economist. And yet when they invited Dr Singh to the annual CII *tamasha*, he lectured industry on the need for a new social compact.

So, here was the architect of India's economic liberalization in 1991, who when he was chosen as prime minister had raised hopes in industry that India would move closer to the capitalist, free-market economies, saying to CII that our whole model of growth since 1991, which is industry-led, was not delivering results for the people.

In the Planning Commission, we had this big thing about PPP (public-private partnership). Yeah, education may be PPP. Health is PPP. Urbanization, PPP. Why? Two reasons. One is, yes, the government itself is short of resources, financial resources. So, invite capital markets and the private sector to put money in. Two, the private sector is more efficient. See, we've got public sector stuff and they don't do it as well.

'We talk of a circular economy. Let's look at circular wealth. Currently, financial wealth is increasing while labour's wealth or the people's wealth is either static or is being sucked out.'

In PPP, public is the government in collaboration with private entities, but where are the people in deciding what the objective of a project should be?

In cities like Delhi, we make flyovers and highways and all the rest. And then say we have become modern like Singapore or somewhere else. But in that you begin to exclude people from our vision of what a good country is. Pedestrians, cyclists and even three-wheelers are kept out.

It's for the benefit of whom? Saving the time of people who in any case have more time. Right here in Gurugram we have a fancy road connecting the highway to fancy buildings like the Aralias and Camelias. But ordinary people, maids, for example, who used to work on both sides of the road earlier and could easily cross can no longer do so. For whom is this place designed? It is designed for us. Not for the whole city. We're leaving out the people we count on to support our fancy lifestyles by not considering how they will live, how they will work, how they will travel all together.

Q: Is the stranglehold of companies too great?

It is, it is. Tech companies are controlling the world because they control all mediums of communication.

Q: Is there a need for a better social compact?

You cannot have it. CSR is a rubbish idea. A company's purpose in law is to maximize profits for its investors. It's a limited liability corporation that is not fully liable for the effect that its profit-making has on society and on the environment. This idea of a limited liability corporation is the seed of the problem. It's a matter of redesigning institutions. Humanity progresses by designing vehicles in which to carry itself to its aspirations. Those vehicles are institutions.

We, in civil society, have kept on perpetuating the power of the

Continued on page 10

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corporation by saying it's perfectly all right, you do what you do but give some of your money back to us.

When the law on CSR was being drafted in India, I had joined the Planning Commission. I found out from the Ministry of Corporate Affairs, which Salman Khurshid was in charge of, that they were announcing some CSR law.

I told Montek that I would be writing to Salman opposing the idea. Montek said that it wasn't the custom to write directly and what was wrong with the idea, anyway?

The idea got passed. Politicians loved it. Most corporations loved it. They could now say, 'You leave us alone to make our profits.'

Q: What you are suggesting is the need to change the legal structure of the corporation?

Unless you change the legal structure of the corporation that is engaging with society, it will not pay attention (to the needs of society). I've been an independent director on the boards of the finest companies — Tata and Godrej, Birla and Mahindra. And I found that this is the dilemma all the directors have. As an independent director, I would sign off on my fiduciary responsibility when I became a director that I was obliged to make the corporation, not society, survive.

Q: What should the legal structure of the corporation be?

People who do the work should be able to get the fruits of their labour including the surpluses. The wealth created in the process should be theirs, not just the income. We talk of a circular economy. Let's look at circular wealth. Currently, what is happening is that financial wealth is increasing, labour's wealth or the people's wealth is either static or is actually being sucked out. The people, by their work, should be able to own wealth. Now the only way they can do that is if they are owners of their enterprise.

Q: Do you really ever see this happening?

In India, we had and have the idea of cooperative ownership. There is the example of Amul. Look at the prosperity it has created. If there is a Gujarat model, it is this. So, you need cooperative enterprises where people who work are the owners of the enterprise. They take decisions by consensus. They have accounts as clearly laid out as the limited liability company. But, control over what should be done with the surplus is with the collective of workers and not with the investors.

And this is where Mahatma Gandhi said something very, very wise. He said he was not a subscriber to communism or capitalism. In both systems the power to take responsibility for the work they do and enjoy the fruits of their labour is not with the people who actually do the work. ■



Why are people across India dying of rabies?

Civil Society News
New Delhi

DEATHS from rabies caused by dog bites have been taking place in a disaggregated way across the country. In the absence of centralized information, a reliable number is not available. Based on reports in regional and national newspapers, *Civil Society* has made a rough count and found that between February this year and August 2025, roughly a period of six months, there were reports of 19 deaths.

The collation is not scientific and the period has been arbitrarily chosen. The idea is to have some indication of the extent of the problem. It is certain, however, from the news reports that the deaths took place. It is also logical to infer from this rough count that there could be more deaths that aren't getting reported. Equally, there could be more or fewer deaths in different periods. The population of stray dogs has been increasing, as is well known, and so also there has been vulnerability to bites and rabies.

In the absence of a professional audit of each death by experts, as should be done, it is not reliably understood what resulted in the onset of rabies. There are several possibilities. The anti-rabies vaccine may not have been administered as per medical protocol. It may have been administered correctly but given after a delay which would make it ineffective. The vaccine could be inert, not having been preserved in a cold chain till the time it was administered. Lastly, is the rabies virus going through mutations that aren't being surveilled

and make the vaccine ineffective?

Rabies is not as yet a notifiable disease uniformly across India. The result is that not enough is reliably known about its incidence. The information available is dispersed, delayed and anecdotal.

Recently, the Australian Technical Commission on Immunization issued an alert regarding a batch of vaccines in use in India which was found to have expired and of dubious quality. There was no official Indian word on this Australian concern.

Even as the stray dog population has increased in India there has been no awareness drive on a matching scale bringing vaccine supplies, hospitals and individual medical practitioners together in a concerted public health initiative.

To have a clearer picture of these developments, we spoke to Dr M.K. Sudarshan, a long-time community health expert and founder-president and mentor of the Association for Prevention and Control of Rabies in India.

Q: The Australians have raised concerns over the efficacy of the Abhayrab rabies vaccine. Could you throw some light on the concerns raised and the outcome?

As per reports in the print and electronic media and my personal interaction with the officials of Indian Immunologicals, Hyderabad, the makers of Abhayrab rabies vaccine, a particular batch of the vaccine, KA24014, a government and institutional supply, was found circulating in the markets of

Bihar and UP. It had the dates of manufacture and expiry as March 2024 and February 2027, respectively. A close scrutiny of the vaccine pack showed that it was pilfered repacked and resold in private markets. In January 2025, when this was noticed by the officials of Indian Immunologicals, a formal complaint was lodged with the Central Drugs and Standards Control Organization (CDSCO) in Delhi. Subsequently, raids were conducted in Patna, on the wholesaler and others who were involved in the racket. The stolen and repackaged vaccine packs were seized and destroyed.

In 2026, when this gained international attention, the overseas national regulators of the UK, US and Australia alerted their nationals (animal bite victims) that if they had received this batch of the Abhayrab brand or any unknown brand of rabies vaccine in India during this period they should get revaccinated with a brand of rabies vaccine that is approved by their respective national regulatory authorities.

There are two issues in this whole affair. One is of public trust and patient safety regarding the quality of the rabies vaccine and the other is pilfering of government or institutional supply of vaccines and diverting them to private outlets and markets which is an issue of theft and corruption. Both need to be addressed comprehensively by the concerned authorities by corrective and preventive actions.

Q: Cases of people dying of rabies even after taking the vaccine post a bite have been coming to light. These are disaggregated cases from across the country. What do you think could be causing the deaths?

With my over four decades of experience, I can say that to know the cause of rabies death despite rabies prophylaxis, supposedly a case of treatment failure, only a proper death audit done by a team of experts will provide the answer, and guidelines for this are available. However, the most common and known reasons for these deaths are non-use or wrong use of rabies immunoglobulins in Category III or severe bites (wounds that ooze blood), and delayed and incomplete course of rabies vaccination.

Q: How sure can one be of a vaccine purchased in the open market?

Vaccines, for that matter any medicine, should be purchased as far as possible from popular and reputed pharmacies or chemist

shops, preferably housed in a hospital facility. These assure genuine drugs and their proper storage. It is generally advisable to avoid standalone private chemist shops that are often a source of trouble.

Q: What is the current post-bite protocol for doctors to follow?

All wounds should be thoroughly washed with soap and water preferably up to 15 minutes and an antiseptic (preferably povidone iodine) applied. If it is an intramuscular regimen, it is five doses of rabies vaccine given on days 0, 3, 7, 14 and 28 and in case of intradermal regimen it is four doses given on days 0, 3, 7 and 28. Day 0 is the day of administration of the first dose of vaccine and may not be the day of bite and rabies exposure. In cases of severe exposure or bite (wounds with bleeding or even oozing of blood) infiltrating such wounds with rabies immunoglobulin or rabies monoclonal antibody will ensure complete therapy.



Dr M.K. Sudarshan

Q: In your experience, have you found dog bite cases increasing?

Yes. It is because of, one, an increase in the dog population, better rabies awareness resulting in more people seeking anti-rabies treatment and improved reporting system.

Q: Is it possible that the rabies virus has been mutating resulting in the vaccine losing its efficacy?

Whenever there is any treatment failure, this is often the suspected cause. But till date research done in the laboratories of the vaccine manufacturers, premier research institutions like the National Institute of Mental Health and Neurosciences (NIMHANS) in Bengaluru, the National Centre for Disease Control (NCDC) in Delhi and others in the country has not proven this.

Q: How many times in a year can a person take the rabies vaccine?

Pre-exposure vaccination is not recommended for all. It is recommended for those who are likely to be in contact with animals like dogs and others due to their vocation, travel and residence like having a pet dog and cat at home and where the stray dog menace is well perceived. It involves three doses of rabies vaccine given by intramuscular or intradermal routes on days 0, 7, 21, 28. Periodic boosters are not recommended. Subsequently, rabies vaccine is given only following an animal bite or exposure to rabies. ■

19 deaths in five months

NEWSPAPERS have been reporting cases of death from rabies caused by dog bite across the country. Small news items have been appearing at random but their frequency has become noticeable.

To get some kind of snapshot, however unscientific but indicative, *Civil Society* scanned newspapers between August 2025 and February 2026 and found 19 deaths.

This period of seven months was chosen arbitrarily. The number could be higher or lower in other periods. There would be reports we didn't spot.

2026 February 6: Dahitane, Maharashtra. A 33-year-old man from Daund taluka died of rabies while undergoing treatment at Naidu Infectious Diseases Hospital, Baner. He succumbed to the infection nearly three months after he was bitten by a stray dog, despite taking anti-rabies vaccines and receiving immunoglobulin doses.

February 5: Tiruvavur district, Tamil Nadu. A 22-year-old daily wage labourer, J. Akash, had been reportedly bitten by a dog three months earlier when he received a rabies immunoglobulin injection, but did not complete the full anti-rabies vaccination course.

February 4: Gwalior, Madhya Pradesh. A 48-year-old woman, Kiran Lalwani, was bitten by a dog on January 3. She immediately went to a nearby private clinic and received a tetanus injection. Her family alleges the doctor did not administer the anti-rabies vaccine.

February 1: Kamareddy, Telangana. A two-and-a-half-year-old girl died within two hours of receiving the third dose of an anti-rabies vaccine at the Government General Hospital in Kamareddy, where she had been taken following a dog bite. After the vaccination, she returned home but soon fell unconscious and was rushed to a private hospital with a weak pulse. She was then taken back to the GGH, where doctors declared her dead.

February 1: Agra, Uttar Pradesh. A six-year-old boy died three weeks after he was bitten on the head even though he had received two doses of the vaccine. The first dose was administered on the day he was bitten.

January 31: Palanpur, Gujarat. A 27-year-old labourer was hospitalized with advanced rabies symptoms, after a dog bite nearly three months earlier. Doctors said he had not received any anti-rabies vaccination.

January 30: Krishnagiri, Tamil Nadu. A 45-year-old farmer, P. Ekambaram, died of suspected rabies infection at Government Krishnagiri Medical College Hospital. He had been bitten by a stray dog about three months earlier and received only a single anti-rabies shot.

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January 30: Bhiwandi, Maharashtra. A 12-year-old boy died nearly three weeks after a dog attack on January 10. Hospital authorities said he received anti-rabies vaccine doses, but deteriorated before completing the full course.

2025 December 23: Arakkonam/Chennai, Tamil Nadu. An 18-year-old youth who had been bitten by a stray dog nearly two years earlier died of rabies at the Rajiv Gandhi Government General Hospital in Chennai, authorities said. It wasn't clear if he had been fully vaccinated or not after the bite.

December 24: Thane, Maharashtra. A six-year-old girl died more than a month after being bitten by a street dog despite having received four anti-rabies vaccine shots.

December 30: Bengaluru, Karnataka. A 12-year-old girl died of rabies weeks after a dog bite even though she had received four doses of anti-rabies vaccine; doctors said she was not administered immunoglobulin, which may have contributed to the fatal outcome.

December 9: Mau, Uttar Pradesh. A 12-year-old boy died after showing rabies symptoms. It is not known whether he was vaccinated.

November 13: Coimbatore, Tamil Nadu. A 21-year-old college student from Erode died of rabies at Coimbatore Medical College Hospital nearly two weeks after being bitten by his pet dog, which was suspected to have been infected by a stray. He had received three doses of anti-rabies vaccine but was not administered immunoglobulin.

November 14: Kanyakumari, Tamil Nadu. A 31-year-old man died of rabies after ignoring a dog bite sustained about three months earlier and refusing post-bite treatment.

November 4: Auraiya, Uttar Pradesh. A six-year-old boy from Kusmara village died, nearly three weeks after being bitten on the neck by a stray dog, despite receiving three doses of the anti-rabies vaccine.

October 18: Ambarnath, Thane, Maharashtra. A 21-year-old man named Aman Kori died of rabies after being bitten by a stray dog two months earlier and taking only the first dose of the anti-rabies vaccine and hiding the incident from his family.

September 15: Chennai, Tamil Nadu. A 47-year-old autorickshaw driver, A. Mohammed Nasarudeen, died of rabies at Rajiv Gandhi Government General Hospital despite having completed four doses of the anti-rabies vaccine. He was bitten by a stray dog in July.

August 19: Salem, Tamil Nadu. A 48-year-old powerloom worker, M. Kuppuswamy, died of rabies at the Government Mohan Kumaramangalam Medical College Hospital after being bitten by his pet dog about three months earlier. He was not vaccinated.

August 19: Bengaluru, Karnataka. A four-year-old girl, Khadira Banu (from Davangere), who was attacked by stray dogs in April succumbed to rabies at a hospital in Bengaluru. ■

Kolkata shows what it's like to eat together

Aiema Tauheed
Kolkata

IN Tangra, a predominantly Chinese locality, chowmein and fried rice are offered as *bhog* at the local Kali temple. In Mominpore, bakeries like K. Ali sell German bread alongside Christmas cake. Anglo-Indian households are known to make Bengali rice cakes or *pithas* at home. And the most famous example of all: Nahoum's, a Jewish bakery, has Muslim bakers and mostly Hindu customers.

A city that eats together stays together. Kolkata remains a glowing example of communal harmony in times when the rest of India is getting increasingly polarized on religious lines.

Hole-in-the-wall joints cater to the city's large community of pork lovers. During Durga Puja, *pandal*-hopping includes mutton and egg rolls. Yet Kolkata was named India's Most Vegan-Friendly City for 2025 by PETA India.

Strengthening such epicurean bonds is the Sabar Institute whose ongoing campaign, Know Your Neighbour, uses cultural exchange to foster coexistence. It began in 2016, prompted by how little Kolkata's communities knew about one another under a lengthening shadow of communal tension across the country.

Sabir Ahamed, national research coordinator at the Pratichi Institute Trust and founder of Sabar Institute, says the initiative started with neighbourhood walks through areas like Zakaria Street. Ahamed is deeply invested in using street history to break stereotypes around communities. He recalls how the walks drew an overwhelming response, including women who entered the Nakhoda Masjid for the first time.

During Ramzan, Zakaria Street turns into a long stretch of food stalls, creating a vibrant social life. People converge to enjoy the cuisine. Ahamed realized people were living together but were not intermingling. Against the backdrop of sporadic communal violence, the neighbourhood walk emerged as a way to bridge that divide.

Sabar Institute soon discovered that food was an amazing bridge between communities. It evoked memory, shared experiences and united cultures.

Since then, Know Your Neighbour has

expanded to include a range of activities such as workshops, food walks and community events designed as shared, participatory spaces. Interfaith gatherings like Dosti ki Iftar and Dosti ka Utsav create opportunities for conversation, bringing people from different backgrounds together in everyday settings.

One such initiative is Chair for the Reader, held twice a month, where students learn what the Constitution says and the ideas of B.R. Ambedkar. Alongside, there are interactions with prominent writers and thinkers like Amartya Sen.

Food is where mutual respect grows.

Photo: Civil Society/Ashoke Chakrabarty



Sabir Ahamed

Before organizing a community meal, dietary preferences are checked so everyone feels included. There are options for all. Ahamed recalls the care taken with *haleem* — a spiced, slow-cooked meat and wheat stew, silky and rich, topped with fried onions and ginger, and eaten with *rumali* or *khameeri* roti.

For one event, they served chicken *haleem*, inviting a diverse community of people. To his surprise, guests were visibly disappointed. "Chicken *haleem* isn't *haleem*," they protested, half in jest. "We came for the beef *haleem*."

Ahamed recalls being invited by non-Muslim families to breakfast during Ramzan. Small, thoughtful gestures like keeping a clean space for *namaz* after *iftar* and ensuring meat is *halal* speak of a culture of mutual respect. "I think this only happens through



Over a five-course meal, 44 guests sat together at a long table in the open at the Burrabazar cathedral



A brief walk through the Burrabazar cathedral's layered history led by Father Franklin Menezes

interaction, talking, discussing, and exposure," he says.

Sensitizing people, especially the youth, to different cultures is central to fostering communal harmony and coexistence. The approach is simple: dialogue and exposure.

Visits to old temples, mosques, and churches open doors to understanding. Events such as Dosti ka Utsav invite Muslims, including young women who may have lived insulated lives due to social restrictions, to experience Durga Puja firsthand.

Dosti ki Iftari brings together people for meaningful conversations over *iftar*. Breakfast with Bakarkhani offers another platform: participants savour winter delicacies like *bakarkhani*, *paya*, and *dal-puri* while discussing history, culture, and food with experts.

This culture of togetherness through food extends into curated events. The first chapter of Eating with Bengal, an initiative by eatery Amar Khamar, unfolded at the Cathedral of the Most Holy Rosary in Burrabazar. Sujoy Chatterjee, co-founder of Amar Khamar, explained that it helped people think about Bengal's "naturally hybrid, coexisting, multicultural cuisine".

After a brief walk through the cathedral's layered history, Father Franklin Menezes, in charge of the cathedral, spoke about the importance of breaking bread together to a diverse gathering of people.

Under the open sky, 44 guests sat together at a long table. Over a carefully curated five-course meal, food, history, and culture converged, tracing how Portuguese influences entered Bengal's kitchens and continue to shape its palate.

In future, Amar Khamar plans to highlight other influences, perhaps global, perhaps deeply local. "Creating dialogue is very important for us," Chatterjee adds. "And that happens effortlessly with food."

"It's called commensality," says historian Jayanta Sengupta, director of Alipore Museum, who also delivered a keynote at the event. "Food is ultimately something that we share."

He points to the iconic Kolkata *biryani* as a living example. Rice originated in India and then travelled to many other countries. With Alexander's campaigns, rice journeyed to Central Asia, where it became part of *pulao* traditions. The Mughals introduced dried fruits and nuts, blending them with Indian spices. And the potato — now inseparable from the Kolkata *biryani* — was carried to India by the Portuguese.

What we eat without a second thought carries layers of migration, exchange and memory. "We love it without realizing how many traditions, how many cultures, how many histories have converged in it," said Sengupta.

To eat together, he explained, is to share more than food. "Sharing a meal is sharing cultures and sharing lives. You speak to the people eating with you, and you share your stories." ■



Regenerating pastures: Water retention trenches being dug along with pits for planting trees

The common good in grass

Bharat Dogra
Udaipur

SEVA Mandir, a well-known NGO in south Rajasthan, has recently embarked on a daunting mission to regenerate 69 pastures in Jhadol block of Udaipur. The NGO has been working for the past 50 years on building social harmony and restoring environmental degradation.

The first issue Seva Mandir workers and their volunteers in villages are facing is encroachments. Significant parts of public land or common land have been occupied by influential and powerful people.

“The efforts of Seva Mandir have always been to achieve this objective in peaceful ways, even though this may take a lot of time,” says Bhanvar Chauhan, a senior member of the team.

The initial stage in pasture regeneration is to ensure the unity of the community for the task ahead. Differences are resolved through meetings and dialogue, a plan is prepared and volunteers take up responsibilities.

This paves the way for the second stage in which water retention trenches are dug along with pits for planting trees. Saplings of suitable trees are planted, and various other water retention and conservation tasks are also taken up.

The third stage is to put a plan in place for the maintenance of pasture regeneration work. The help of village committees and institutions that have been created for this and related tasks is sought.

In fact, the role of grassroots organizations is of crucial importance, as without their active role maintenance work can be easily neglected.



Maintenance of pastures is important

Regeneration of the environment cannot be achieved without the involvement of the community.

Regeneration of the environment, whether it is forests, pastures, water bodies or degraded land, cannot be achieved without the involvement of the community, believes Seva Mandir.

The trend today is to direct development activities at individual beneficiaries. The negative fallout of such an approach is that it leaves out important tasks which benefit everyone: the environment, people and animals.

Seva Mandir's ideology is to unite the community for the common good. In 2023, the NGO received the prestigious Global Elinor Ostrom Award for Collective Governance of the Commons.

There are several examples from Seva Mandir's work which underline the importance and sustained success of collective endeavour. When the forest rights law was enacted in 2006, Seva Mandir's experience in community work placed it in a strong position to promote protection and regeneration of community forests.

In 2022-23, the Rajasthan government realized the importance of community forests and recognized such rights in areas where Seva Mandir had been working. The NGO regenerated nearly 38,000 hectares. The big challenge now is expanding the work of forest regeneration to a wider area.

Preetam Kumar, an activist, said at a group discussion in Jamun village, “Some people discouraged our stand for the common good, but we stood firmly by our ideals.”

The initial results in community forests close to Jamun village have been encouraging and nearly 6,500 trees have been planted here. “These efforts benefit not just one hamlet but all the hamlets of the panchayat and their beneficial

Continued on page 16



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Padmashri Late Dr. K.H. Gharda

"As a responsible corporate citizen, we empower communities through knowledge and skills to drive sustainable development."

Continued from page 14

effects extend beyond the village. Such efforts are based on unity of the villagers and their increasing ability to work together, but in addition their success also strengthens this unity further," says Kanhaiyalal, the *sarpanch*.

In other villages watershed development projects have done much to increase greenery and improve water and moisture conservation in ways that benefit the entire community. Ramaj is one such village in Udaipur district where watershed development work was completed many years ago but people continue to benefit from it in the form of a raised water table and improved livelihood prospects.

Bringing the community together is not an easy task. Seva Mandir's workers achieve this by promoting equality, dignity for all and removing gender-based discrimination and

Watershed projects have done much to increase greenery and conserve water and moisture.

restrictions. Achieving such unity is particularly important in villages where there are people from several communities and faiths.

Delwara is an urbanizing village or *kasba* with about 18 communities and as many *mohallas* or hamlets. Once unity of purpose was achieved, the community was mobilized for tasks like cleaning and restoration of tanks and stepwells which should have been promoted as heritage water sources but had been neglected for years.

Murlidharan, a resident of this village who has been active in these efforts, says, "Once we got rid of narrow divisions and discrimination, we cleared the way for development activities to pick up." Sabiya, another resident, comments on the sense of unity in her village, "When outsiders come here, they say they like the vibe here, they want to mix with people here."

Varsha Rathore, another team member who has been involved with several Seva Mandir initiatives, says, "These efforts at increasing community unity may take time but finally they prove very helpful in taking forward various development objectives."

Ronak Shah, a senior and highly experienced team member, asserts, "In Seva Mandir's efforts, improvement of social relationships has been a very important part of development initiatives." This is an understanding that can be helpful for social development initiatives on a much wider scale too. ■

Wonder grinder makes Haryanvi farmer a star

Shree Padre
Kasaragod

A portable food processing machine that can grind, pulverize, extract and distil almost any fruit, crop or seed is becoming a bit of a sensation with Self-Help Groups (SHGs), farmer producer companies and entrepreneurs. Sturdy and inexpensive, it's a tempting innovation for small agro-processing start-ups.

Invented by a Haryanvi farmer, Dharambir Kanoj, this hardworking machine, called Multipro, is a many-sided wonder. "It does the job of juicer, pulper, cutter, paste-maker. It can mash onion and garlic, make *khoya* from milk, jam from banana and beetroot and distil lemongrass or rose," rattles off Prince Kanoj, Dharambir's son.

So far more than 2,000 machines have been sold by Kanoj's company, Kisan Dharambir. Multipro has also been exported to 15 countries.

Born into a farming family in Damla village of Haryana, 63-year-old Dharambir dropped out of school in Class 10 due to financial difficulties. He worked as a rickshaw-puller in Delhi to support his family until he met with an accident.

Dharambir then returned to his village, not knowing what to do. He was interested in cultivating exotic vegetables. Aloe vera caught his eye. He decided to cultivate the plant and then process it into gel or juice. For that he needed a processing machine. But a basic machine cost ₹5 lakh, an unimaginable sum for Dharambir at that time.

He didn't give up, though. Instead, he turned his home into a workshop, determined to make his own processing machine. After eight months of trial and error he finally invented a multiprocessing machine in 2005. It cost him just ₹25,000.

Kisan Dharambir now makes four models of Multipro. The smallest has a capacity of 20 litres and costs ₹1,13,280. The 60-litre one is priced at ₹1,51,000. The other two are of 120 and 180 litre capacity.

"Each machine has seven attachments. Five are most important. Three attachments are included in the basic price of the machine. We can also make customized Multipro machines," explains Prince. The machines run on single-phase electricity

and include temperature control as well as an auto cut-off system.

Dr Parthakumar P. Dave, who works in the research section of the National Innovation Foundation (NIF), points out that current mixer-grinders grind and mash everything, including the seeds of the fruit or crop. This makes the pulp bitter.

"Multipro, on the other hand, makes pulp through a beating mechanism. As a result, the seeds remain intact. If you are grinding jamun, you can then use the seeds for value addition too," he says.



Sai Sakthi Foods produces betel leaf soft drink



Four models of Multipro machines

Dharambir and Prince now travel extensively to demonstrate Multipro's capability to farmers, entrepreneurs, Self-Help Groups and other interested parties across the country. Dharambir inspires farming communities by making a minimum of half a dozen products from local crops in front of their eyes. He invites them to taste whatever he has extracted from their crops, be it juice or paste.

"Multipro is an important invention for the farming community," says Ramyashivaselvi Manoharan, a home science specialist at Theni Krishi Vijnan Kendra in Tamil Nadu, who has been conducting demos of the machine. "It is



Dharambir Kanoj at an exhibition, showing dozens of products made by his machine for his own business



Narinder Pal Singh in the stock room of their SHG, Nini, with various products

ideal for start-ups with limited budget and space. If you buy a drier and pulverizer with it you can make dozens of products."

In Tamil Nadu the machine is being used to make betel leaf extract and betel juice. Demand for betel leaf has been shrinking, prompting the KVK in Theni district to promote value addition to help struggling betel leaf farmers earn an income.

"We bought two Multipros to demonstrate their utility. We successfully took out betel leaf extract with it. That led us to another promising opportunity," recalls P. Maheswaran, head of the Theni KVK.

The KVK drew the attention of S. Renuga Senthilvel, owner of Sai Sakthi Foods, in Chinnamanur. His company makes ready-to-drink (RTD) beverages.

Renuga got interested, bought a Multipro

machine and added betel leaf RTD to his range of drinks. For the past year Sai Sakthi is churning out natural betel leaf *goli* soda in bottles priced at ₹35. "We are selling 1,000 bottles per month. In summer, sales shoot up to 3,000 to 5,000. This drink has good demand because of its digestive properties," says Renuga.

A year-old farmer producer company (FPC) called Lavoisier in Theni district's Vasanthanagar is also hoping to achieve success with this machine. Theni district's ODOP (One District One Crop) is banana. Members of the FPC have been trained at Central Banana Research Station, Tiruchirappalli, to make RTD beverage from banana pseudostem. The Multipro machine extracts the juice efficiently.

There is demand for banana pseudostem

juice because it is believed to contain properties which melt kidney stones. But the FPC is hamstrung by two problems: it doesn't own a Multipro and has to take all its material to the KVK for juicing. Also, it has yet to create an efficient supply chain since pseudostems of suitable varieties aren't sufficiently available.

"No one in Theni district is producing banana stem drink. It has very good demand. Already 10 hotels are keen to place orders. If we can set up a fully-fledged production unit we can even sell 500 bottles a day," says Hema Indrajit, CEO of the FPC.

There is also Narinder Pal Singh, a housewife from Himachal Pradesh, who started Nini SHG with six housewives. They make around 70 products under their brand name, Nini, with a Multipro and earn around

From onion and garlic to *khoya* and beetroot, the machine will pulp anything and its action leaves seeds intact.

₹1 lakh a month. Their products range from rose water and herbal hair oil to crushed amla and herbal tea.

The National Innovation Foundation (NIF) has been supporting Dharambir. In 2009, they honoured him with a state award in Haryana. In 2013, he was conferred an award by the President of India for his unique machine.

He has also been supported by Villgro Innovations Foundation and Council on Energy, Environment and Water (CEEW), which works to boost the rural economy. Thanks to financial aid from Villgro, Dharambir was able to expand his enterprise. He now manufactures 15 to 20 machines a month.

"When I developed this machine for the first time, people made fun of me," recalls Dharambir. "My father believed I was wasting my time. But now the government and ordinary people have recognized our effort. Every month, many teams, some from abroad, come to visit us. I am happy that small farmers are using our machine to earn an income."

Dharambir runs a value addition unit too. It produces more than 50 products including exotica like black garlic and black lemon. For farmers who come to his factory to see a demo, his range of products, under the brand name Prince, is a source of inspiration. ■

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Wetlands in Kashmir are withering

Jehangir Rashid
Srinagar

ALTHOUGH there are five wetlands of international repute in Jammu & Kashmir (J&K), they don't attract tourists. Even birds will begin to flee from these wetlands due to their abysmal state, fear environmentalists. All five wetlands are Ramsar sites.

"Our wetlands are not vacant lands but living systems that sustain water security, biodiversity and community resilience. What we are witnessing is not natural decline, but human-induced collapse," says Prof. Bilal Bhat, president, School for Rural Development and Environment (SRDE).

"SRDE's documentation of nearly 50 wetlands across Kashmir, both notified and unnotified, presents a sobering reality. Rampant encroachment, pollution, siltation and hydrological disruption are steadily degrading these fragile ecosystems. Climate change has intensified the crisis," he says.

Early glacial melting, rising temperatures and altered water regimes are destabilizing wetlands beyond their capacity

to regenerate. This is further aggravated by unchecked sand mining that drains wetlands, disrupts natural hydrology and accelerates physical shrinkage of the wetlands.

The five wetlands are Shallabugh, Hygam, Surinsar-Mansar, Hokersar and Wular lake. A sixth one, Tsomoriri, is in Ladakh. The Shallabugh and Hygam wetlands became Ramsar sites recently, in 2022.

Engineer Ajaz Rasool, an expert in hydraulic engineering, blames the wetlands wing of the Department of Forests as well as the Irrigation and Flood Control (I&FC) department for the degradation of the wetlands.

"The two departments need to work together. On the ground it's clear they are working in opposition to each other," he says.

"We visited the Hokersar wetland and found that the I&FC had dug a water channel right in the middle of the wetland. They had dug deep but there was no water in the channel. There are clear-cut directions that soil dug out has to

be shifted two and a half kilometres away from the site but that was not done," pointed out Rasool, who is a council member of the Environmental Policy Group (EPG), a think tank in Srinagar battling environment degradation and unscientific planning.

After the EPG intervened, the I&FC department took action. It has constructed inlet and outlet gates at this wetland. Rasool also flagged encroachment. Buildings are being constructed, he alleged, with the support of a legislator.

"The legislator tried his best to justify such wrongful activities but we raised our voices. As a result, such encroachments have been stopped. We found carcasses in the water in Hokersar and noted other types of pollution. The two gates that have come up at a cost of ₹28 crore were inaugurated some time ago in the presence of civil administration officials," said Rasool.

Of deep concern is water pollution. "Urban pressures have added another layer of damage,"



The Shallabugh wetland where there have been five breaches

says Prof. Bhatt. "Untreated sewage, bio-medical waste and solid waste are directly contaminating wetland waters, destroying aquatic life and food chains. The wetlands are increasingly being reduced to dumping sites rather than protected ecosystems."

Bhatt rues the absence of "an integrated and coordinated governance approach".

"Fragmented institutional roles, weak inter-departmental coordination and lack of accountability continue to undermine conservation efforts. Wetland protection requires scientific planning, coordinated action and transparent governance. Safeguarding Kashmir's wetlands is not just an environmental necessity, it is a collective responsibility toward future generations," he emphasizes.

"In Shallabugh wetland, five breaches had taken place. When we asked the officials concerned to plug them, we were surprised by their reply. They said the breaches would only

be plugged after due tendering process. It was with great difficulty that we convinced them that breaches can be plugged simply by arranging sacks of soil," said Rasool.

JCBs were used to dig up a water channel at this wetland though use of such machinery is not prescribed for wetlands. It was only after the efforts of the EPG that water could be restored. Migratory birds have now returned.

As for the Hygam wetland, there is complete mismanagement, as Rasool outlined. "No water is coming in from the Gulmarg side. The plan was to develop a pond. But that was shelved for reasons best known to people at the helm." He alleges that the I&FC department has allotted the contract for carrying out dredging work to a favoured contractor.

"When I visited this wetland, I rang up the executive engineer of I&FC Narbal division and told him that water was being drained out. I also raised objections over the usage of the JCB. It would lead to chaos and result in birds running away," said Rasool.

The EPG has proposed that in-service training be given to officials of the Department of Forests since they are posted to the wetlands wing at some point during their careers. He demanded a blanket ban on JCBs in the wetlands.

One reason for the degraded state of the wetlands is the absence of people's participation. The wetlands are meant to deliver both ecological security and economic dignity, points out Dr Shaikh Ghulam Rasool, founder of the Nature Conservancy Alliance (NCA).

"Yet, in reality, these wetlands reflect a disturbing imbalance. While ecological value is repeatedly highlighted, economic benefits for local communities remain absent, raising serious concerns about how commitments were presented to the Ramsar Convention authorities," says Dr Rasool.

Communities who have historically depended on these wetlands are now treated as intruders rather than custodians. The wildlife department's restrictive, top-down approach has alienated people and weakened conservation. Without local livelihoods, conservation cannot survive, Dr Rasool emphatically points out.

"Institutional accountability is non-negotiable. Integration of modern science with traditional knowledge systems, combining ecological research with lived community wisdom, is what can truly safeguard Kashmir's wetlands with their original ecological character. Conservation must shift from control to collaboration if these ecosystems are to survive," says Dr Rasool. ■

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Photo: Civil Society/Rashmi Gopal Rao

Classes are held in the evenings, sitting on the floor in regular classrooms with desks pushed to the wall

SCHOOL AND FESTIVAL

Saptak is at the heart of great classical music

Rashmi Gopal Rao
Ahmedabad

If you happen to be in the Usmanpura locality of Ahmedabad as evening sets in, chances are you will hear classical music emanating from an ordinary-looking school building in the area. It has been so on most days for 46 long years as accomplished musicians nurture new talent in a passionate attempt to keep classical traditions alive.

Saptak, a music school, was set up in 1980 with the high ideal of giving Ahmedabad a culture of classical music. Three musicians who would regularly perform at the Darpana Academy of Performing Arts felt the need for a school devoted to classical music.

The Darpana Academy was an established institution for the performing arts at the time and had been set up by Mrinalini and Vikram Sarabhai who were socially entrenched and resourceful.

The founders of Saptak, however, were artistes on an idealistic mission. They were recognized as talents in their own right, but lacked the wherewithal for creating an

organization and were starting out from scratch. Nandan Mehta played the tabla, his wife, Manju Nandan Mehta, was a sitarist and Rupande Shah was a dancer and vocalist.

What the three lacked by way of material resources they made up for with their enthusiasm for the idea of a music school. Their inventiveness opened doors for them, bringing in well-wishers.

For instance, while looking for space for the school they arrived at an arrangement with the Shree Vidyanagar School to use its classrooms in the evenings. It is from here that the music school continues to function.

Photo: Civil Society/Rashmi Gopal Rao



Saptak attracts learners from all walks of life

Music lessons are imparted sitting on the floor, desks parted, blackboard in the background. Modest fees are charged and those with talent who can't pay are given free lessons. The teachers are performers themselves who take small honorariums.

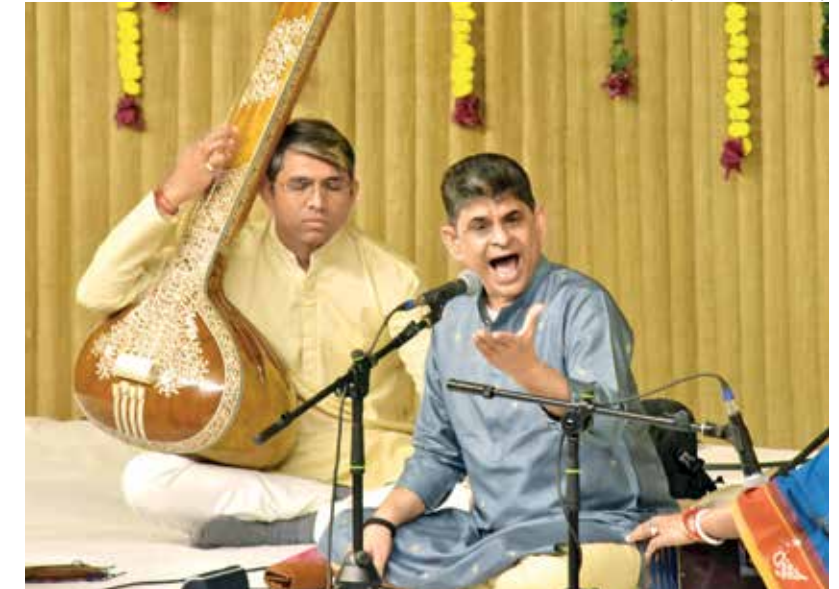
Saptak is not commercially driven and has no signboard — it can't have one because it convenes on the premises of the Shree Vidyanagar School only during afterhours. Saptak is immersed in music beginning with the name which stands for the seven musical notes: *Sa, Re, Ga, Ma, Pa, Dha, Ni*.

The school was meant to take classical

Photos: Civil Society/Ashoke Chakrabarty



At this year's festival: Vocalist Shubha Mudgal with Aneesh Pradhan on the tabla



Vocalist Sanjoy Banerjee



Debasmita Bhattacharya on the sarod with tabla player Yashwant Vaishnav



Shubh Maharaj on the tabla accompanies sarodist Aayush Mohan

music from its esoteric perch and make it a part of everyday life in Ahmedabad. Classical music, the founders felt, needed to be widely savoured and enjoyed. It needed to be introduced to people who hadn't been given a chance to understand it. Most importantly, it needed to be passed from one generation to the next.

These are aspirations that have been wholesomely met. Saptak's students are of all ages and from different walks of life — from very young children to professionals and homemakers. The musical notes that emanate from the Shree Vidyanagar School have serendipitously touched many lives.

For 13 days, from January 1 each year, the school organizes the Saptak music festival which attracts maestros from across the country. While the school provides access to classical music, the festival brings leading musicians to people. They perform and mingle with the audience, leaving behind a lasting experience. The festival is imbued with the same purity of purpose as the school is run with. No tickets are sold, entry being by invitation. There is community ownership of the event with volunteers doing much of the heavy lifting.

FIRST CONCERT The Saptak festival, in fact, preceded the setting up of the school. Back in 1980, in need of funds, the three founders came up with the idea of organizing a concert. They invited Pandit Ravi Shankar and Pandit Kishan Maharaj to perform and both these great

musicians agreed, thereby bringing the school a step closer to being a reality.

Since that first concert, legends of Indian classical music have continued to perform at the festival, charging a mere fraction of the fees they do for commercial events.

It is a long list of great performers who have been happy to show up:

Pandit Jasraj, Kishori Amonkar, Ustad Ali Akbar Khan, Birju Maharaj, Ustad Amjad Ali Khan, Pandit Hariprasad Chaurasia, Pandit Shivkumar Sharma and Umayalpuram K. Sivaraman.

Says Rupande Shah, now 85: "That first concert was hugely successful and much appreciated. We were also able to save a sizeable amount from the proceeds of the programme. It was Nandan *bhai's* idea to form a trust with this corpus and this was the genesis of the Saptak music school."

In 1980, Saptak's founders were frontrunners because Ahmedabad had few musical

performances and opportunities for students to learn. Now both school and festival are institutions in their own right.

This year, in keeping with its reputation, the festival had many memorable performances. It attracted a galaxy of celebrated musicians like Amaan Ali Bangash, Aneesh Pradhan, Ashwini Bhide Deshpande, Fazal Qureshi, Kumar Bose, Parveen Sultana, Rahul Sharma, Rakesh Chaurasia, Shahid Parvez, Shubh Maharaj, Shubha Mudgal, Shujaat

Saptak was founded to make classical music a part of everyday life in Ahmedabad so that it is passed on from one generation to the next.

Khan, Suresh Talwalkar, Ulhas Kashalkar, Umakant Gundecha and Yogesh Samsi.

A hallmark of the festival is that maestros perform alongside emerging artistes and young talent. This year 10 performances had members from the same family performing together — bringing alive the *guru-shishya* and *gharana* traditions.

There was also an all-women Indian classical instrumental ensemble featuring talented female musicians led by the famous Shruti Adhikari, a disciple of Pandit Shivkumar Sharma. Titled Panchnaad, it showcased the collective artistry, talent and excellence of women musicians.

Further, an exclusive violin-saraswati veena duet was presented as an ode to the late Ustad Zakir Hussain who originally envisioned this concept. As in every year, Dhrupad, the very root of Indian classical music, continued to hold a timeless place at the festival. This year, it featured Uday Bhavalkar and the Gundecha brothers.

The festival's 43 sessions featured over 150 musicians. The stage setting was simple and elegant which allowed everyone to focus on the music. Every night saw the crowds swell as people tiptoed their way to sit crosslegged on the pristine-white mattresses right in front of the artistes.

THE SCHOOL IDEA Rupande Shah recalls how the idea of a school took shape: "I have been associated closely with the Darpana Academy of Performing Arts since I learnt dance from there. Nandan Mehta, who was an outstanding tabla exponent of the Banaras Baaj and also my childhood friend, taught at Darpana along with his wife, Manju Mehta, a renowned female sitarist."

"We interacted regularly and Nandan *bhai* often expressed a desire to start something that would promote the rich legacy of Indian classical music," she recalls.

"He wanted people to come forward and learn classical music. Just like how the Darpana Academy was a institution for dance, he desired something exclusively for Indian classical music."

Shah recently retired as a trustee. Her place in the trust has been taken by Bijal Shah, her son, who plays the flute. Nandan Mehta passed away in 2010, and Manju Mehta died in 2024. Their daughters, Poorvi, a sitarist, and Hetal, a tabla player, (pictured) are now trustees.

FINDING SUPPORT Prafull Anubhai, 87, is Shah's husband and has played a key role in keeping Saptak going. While Anubhai has a

deep interest in music, he also has extensive experience in the field of management and has been engaged in the process of building institutions like IIMA (Indian Institute of Management, Ahmedabad), CEPT University, NID (National Institute of Design) and Ahmedabad University.

"Given my connections in the corporate world and my experience with IIMA and other educational institutions, I focused initially on mobilizing financial resources and offering administrative guidance. We have had several offers in the past in the form of government aid as well as corporate sponsorship but we would like to avoid that since we want to conduct the event in accordance with our principles. We want to uphold the fundamental values central to the school," says Anubhai.

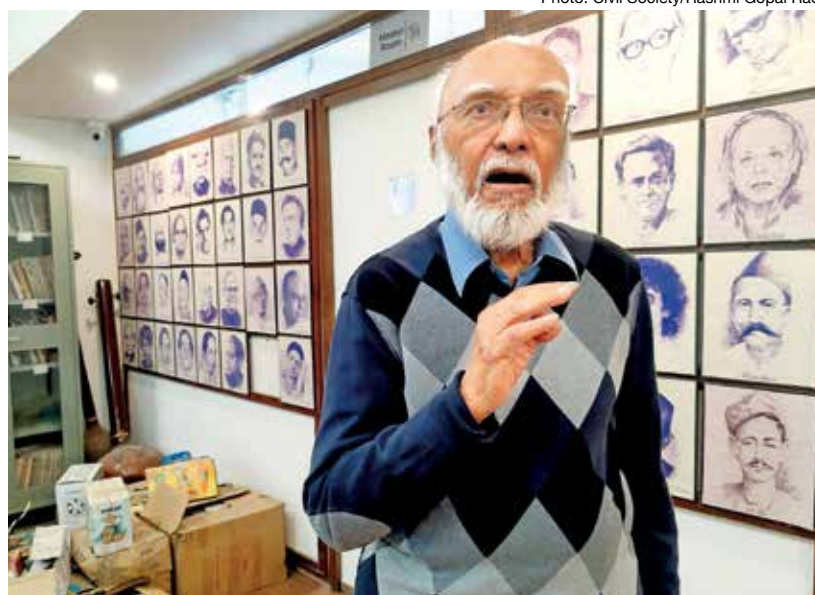
He elaborates: "We have always been guided by the core values of equitability, simplicity, inclusivity and creating an ambience where music reigns supreme. This has been the ethos of the Saptak music school since it was founded by Nandan Mehta and Manju Mehta in 1980. The essence of the festival is thus rooted in tradition and authenticity and devoid of any elaborate ceremonies, speeches or formalities."

The festival is a by-invitation only event with no tickets. Passes are given to artistes and students. There are no special seating arrangements and while the first rows are reserved for artistes (those performing at the festival as well as visiting and local artistes) and students (of Saptak as well as other music schools), the rest of the seats are for the audience which can be occupied on a first-come, first-served basis. There are no reservations and privileges.

"This democratic seating arrangement, not by design but by convention, respects the musicians and accords dignity to both the artistes and the music. Unlike many other places, where musicians are treated as mere performers, at Saptak they are revered as artistes," says Anubhai.

The festival garners support from a network of well-wishers in the business community, private trusts, and individuals through donations, memberships, and souvenir advertisements. This helps Saptak retain the objective of the festival — to preserve, propagate, and cultivate a deep appreciation for Indian classical music in students and the broader community.

From its inception, the festival aims to present musicians whose artistry and knowledge inspire students and the audience. The multi-day format fosters an informal conclave of artistes. "When one artiste



Prafull Anubhai, with his connections in the corporate world, has kept Saptak going



Bijal Shah, a flautist, has taken over as a trustee from his mother, Rupande Shah



Photo: Civil Society/Ashoke Chakrabarty



Hetal and Poorvi are trustees after the passing of their parents, Nandan and Manju Mehta

Photo: Civil Society/Rashmi Gopal Rao

Photos: Civil Society/Ashoke Chakrabarty

Photo: Civil Society/Ashoke Chakrabarty

performs, many others sit in the audience, leading to interactions between performers, students, music lovers and fellow musicians. Whether backstage, at tea breaks, or during transitions, these exchanges create bonds and serve the cause of music. The festival feels like a 'music *mela*' and brings out the best in each artiste," says Anubhai.

The festival itself is a lesson in thoughtful planning, judgement and tact. Each day there are three sessions with one session dedicated to students or an emerging artiste, followed by an established artiste, and ending with a maestro. This format has remained consistent over the years.

"The programme design is intricate with aspects like sequencing, accompanist selection, balancing vocal, instrumental, and percussion performances, featuring north Indian and Carnatic duets, *taal-vadya kacheri*, etc requiring meticulousness and immense attention to detail," adds Anubhai.

A balance is maintained between different *gharanas*, traditional and experimental genres, coupled with a few sessions of classical dance and *lok sangeet*.

Many maestros have formed an enduring bond with Saptak and the audience. The artistes interact freely with the audience at the venue and many can be found mingling with their fans over a cup of tea.

"All this has resulted in a knowledgeable, sensitive and discerning audience that listens to the sessions with utmost respect and attention and appreciates the nuances of Indian classical music," adds Anubhai.

The festival has the complete support of organizers and volunteers who take care of all aspects, from obtaining permissions from the authorities, making parking arrangements and arranging refreshments to setting up the stage, sound systems and decorations.

"We have had the same vendors and volunteers for decades, all of whom treat the festival as their own which is indeed very heartening. There is a strong sense of belonging and ownership which the team demonstrates. This support from the community at large is invaluable and integral to the success of the festival," says Anubhai.

BORROWED SPACE Once the decision to start the school was taken, a premises was needed. Recalls Shah: "We initially started in Darpana but it was not very convenient. It was then that Himmat Bhai Kapasi, who was the trustee of Shree Vidyanagar School, offered to open up his premises after school hours for us to take classes. He was an acquaintance of Nandan *bhai*. We started off in the library with just two rooms and 10 to 15 students who enrolled for tabla, sitar and vocal classes."

Since then, the school has grown exponentially. It has close to 400 students. Classes are held six days a week.

Saptak is far from being a conventional music school. Since the teachers are performing artistes themselves, they can effectively mould and mentor students. The objective is to initiate students into performance-oriented learning.

Consequently, pedagogy at the school emphasizes performance rather than theory. While theoretical knowledge is imparted, it is only as a supplement to enhance performance capabilities and to facilitate a deeper understanding of the nuances related to music.

Bijal Shah, who has just taken over from his mother as trustee in the generational change that is underway, explains: "There is no set syllabus, examinations or degree awarded. It is open to anyone above the age of seven as long as they are keen to learn and practise sincerely. Teaching and learning are modelled on the time-honoured *guru-shishya parampara* whereby students learn by listening to their gurus perform. For senior students, there is a teacher for every two or three students.

Each class lasts 45 minutes, beginning from 5.30 pm. There are three sessions every day. Saptak conducts two terms in a year, summer to Diwali and Diwali to summer.

"Our decision to hold classes in the evening is intentional. Our students are schoolgoing children, homemakers as well as engineers, architects and doctors. While some join with the objective of turning professional, others come to just enjoy the essence of music," says Poorvi Mehta, 55, elder daughter of the Mehtas who teaches at the school.

"Irrespective of their aim, all students are treated the same and given equal opportunities. We strive to do our best for them. Saptak offers among the most immersive and authentic training in Indian classical music. Students join placing their trust in the school," says Poorvi.

The school has students from across India. For instance, Drashti Jain and Deepshika Jain have come from Chennai to learn the violin at Saptak due to the high quality of its teaching.

Several students have become well-known artistes. Some have become teachers at the school.

"We have been coming to the school for more than four decades. We learnt the sitar from our Guruji, Manju Mehta, whom we fondly called Mataji. From a hobby it became a passion. Saptak is now an integral part of our lives," say Pratima Anandjiwala and Varsha Gandhi.

"The aura at Saptak is truly different. Teaching here is a magical



Each class lasts 45 minutes and there are three sessions every day

The Saptak festival is held for 13 days and draws leading musicians who perform and mingle with the audience. No tickets are sold and entry is by invitation.



Children learn the tabla

experience. The effort invested by the trustees is truly commendable. It is one reason for the stupendous success of the Saptak music festival over the years," says Dipal Mehta, an acclaimed flautist and disciple of Pandit Hariprasad Chaurasia who has been teaching the flute at the school for three years.

Apart from the faculty and trust members, the school has a number of staunch supporters who appreciate its contribution. The fees are nominal and deserving students are also given fee waivers and concessions.

"When I came here in 2016, I was unable to pay the fees which were already subsidized. But the team at Saptak made sure I learnt the craft. I am trying to give back in a small way by teaching here today," says Hardik Joshi, who plays the violin.

Also, a number of senior students and ex-students serve as volunteers, looking after the day-to-day operations and administrative affairs of the school.

"Saptak is more than an institution, it is linked to emotion for us and the legacy of over 46 years built painstakingly by my parents. They formed deep bonds with the artistes and the audience based on mutual respect and trust. We have imbibed these values and with our team we are carrying forth this tradition," says Hetal Mehta Joshi, 47, trustee and younger daughter of Nandan and Manju Mehta.

Hetal is a tabla player of repute, a performer and a teacher at the school. Her husband, Sandeep Joshi, plays a key role in overseeing the entire operations of the school and the festival.

SAPTAK ARCHIVES A major initiative of Saptak is the Saptak Archives which took shape in 2004. The effort has been led by Prafull Anubhai.

As the school and the festival grew in size, the organizers and their associates accumulated a rich collection of classical music recordings which included recordings of Saptak's concerts.

"At this point we realized that these annals were a treasured asset and an invaluable resource for students, emerging artistes and even music lovers. I myself had a large personal collection of music which I decided to donate to the school," says Anubhai.

He decided to undertake a project to preserve all such recordings to make the music available for future generations. The school has also received donations of personal collections from several artistes and music connoisseurs who trusted Saptak to respect the artistes' rights and preserve their music without commercial exploitation.

"We have invested in advanced equipment and taken the help of skilled technicians for the digitization and cataloguing of this vast

repository of music which is in various forms, from vinyl records to cassettes. To ensure that this does not become just a passive repository but benefits interested stakeholders, we have given regulated access to school students and music enthusiasts for workshops and group listening activities," explains Anubhai.

Saptak Archives also has a rich and rare collection of music books. It hosts *baithaks* (intimate concerts) to share knowledge. Music appreciation sessions and workshops are organized to help music lovers deepen their understanding of classical music. Significantly, Saptak Archives adheres strictly to copyright laws, respecting the intellectual property rights of artistes.

Anubhai explains that a lot of the music is yet to be digitized and documented. This task is now a priority. An app is being built to provide comprehensive information about all the artistes and their musical accomplishments. The team is also exploring a controlled subscription model which will provide archive access to music lovers without compromising the rights of the artistes.

MUSIC OUTLETS Apart from Saptak's signature music festival, students and emerging artistes are provided multiple opportunities and avenues to unleash their potential. This is in line with Saptak's primary mission of promoting the culture of classical music.

There is Saptak Sankalp, which held its 30th edition in 2025. "It is normally held in Lions Hall, Mithakhali, in October. Sankalp is a platform for upcoming artistes to showcase their talent. Every year, the number of artistes who wish to perform increases. Artistes who excel are given a chance. Hence it is a pathway for emerging artistes," says Poorvi.

The school also organizes an all-India competition, Tabla-Pakhawaj, each year in association with the government of Gujarat. It is held in memory of Nandan Mehta and is titled Pt. Nandan Mehta Shastriya Taal Vadya Spardha. The competition is for aspirational tabla and pakhawaj players across India. The winners get a chance to perform at Sankalp and the Saptak festival.

The school also organizes events for Guru Poornima. Aarambh is a monthly student performance to encourage and nurture young talent. Significantly, there is a system of continuous review and refinement of these events aimed at improvement.

"While we are committed to fostering a culture where new talent is systematically showcased, we religiously follow the Japanese philosophy of kaizen for all our events. This ensures that we constantly improve and there is increased value addition each time we conduct a programme," says Anubhai. ■

MAESTROS AT SAPTAK



Ravi Shankar



Hariprasad Chaurasia



Kishori Amonkar



Zakir Hussain

INSIGHTS

OPINION | ANALYSIS | RESEARCH | IDEAS

Feudals in fashion

DELHI
DARBAR

SANJAYA BARU

THE *Indian Express* and the Taj hotels recently sent out invitations for an evening with Radhikarajae Gaekwad, described as the 'Maharani of Baroda'. The Hyderabad Literary Festival saw the launch of a coffee table book on the 'Nizam of Hyderabad'. The media routinely informs us that the Dassehra festival in Mysuru is hosted by the Maharaja of Mysore. And, Air India would still like us to join the Maharaja Club.

Over half a century ago, in 1969, Prime Minister Indira Gandhi decided to withdraw these titles and stopped the government's financial contribution to the erstwhile heads of Indian states — called a 'privy purse'. A bill introduced in the Lok Sabha in 1969 was eventually passed in 1971 as the Constitution (Twenty Sixth) Amendment Act, stating its objective as follows:

"The concept of rulership, with privy purses and special privileges unrelated to any current functions and social purposes, is incompatible with an egalitarian social order. Government have, therefore, decided to terminate the privy purses and privileges of the Rulers of former Indian States. It is necessary for this purpose, apart from amending the relevant provisions of the Constitution, to insert a new article therein so as to terminate expressly the recognition already granted to such Rulers and to abolish privy purses and extinguish all rights, liabilities and obligations in respect of privy purses."

What the withdrawal of titles meant in simple terms was that the erstwhile Maharaja of the Indian state of Gwalior would no longer be addressed as His Highness Ali Jah, Umdat ul-Umara, Hisam us-Sultanat, Mukhtar ul-Mulk, Azim ul-Iqtidar, Rafi-us-Shan, Wala Shikoh, Muhtasham-i-Dauran, Maharajadhiraj Maharaja Shrimant Madhav Rao III Scindia Bahadur, Shrinath, Mansur-i-Zaman, Maharaja Scindia of Gwalior but simply as Mr Madhav Rao Scindia.

It is a sign of the social regression since then

that the late Mr Scindia's son, the former Congress party leader and now a member of Narendra Modi's council of ministers, Jyotiraditya Scindia, still expects to be referred to as "Shrimant" and "Samant", titles inherited from his feudal past.

The photo display at the Hyderabad Literary Festival did not mention the fact that Mir Barkat Ali Khan, the last Nizam of Hyderabad, inherited the title 'Rustam-i-Dauran, Arustu-i-Zaman, Wal Mamaluk, Asaf Jah VII, Muzaffar ul-Mamalik, Nizam ul-Mulk, Nizam ud-Daula, Nawab Mir Osman Ali Siddiqi, Khan Bahadur, Sipah Salar, Fateh Jang, Faithful Ally of the British Government, 10th Nizam of Hyderabad and of Berar GCSI, GBE, Royal Victorian Chain'. I guess it is quite understandable that inheritors of such titles feel cheated off that



Celebration of feudals means endorsing feudal practices in India

democratic India no longer permits them to use them. Worry not, we may say, the feudals are back in fashion in the Indian media and corporate world.

Today's modern urban generation, the millennials and Gen Z as they are referred to, often do not understand why we of the post-Independence generation feel so strongly about feudal titles being back in fashion. There are at least two reasons, in my view.

First, all the Kings and Queens of the colonial era had compromised with British imperialism and arrived at a *modus vivendi*. In return the British imperial government humoured them with titles, multiple gun salutes and a comfortable lifestyle. The Nizam of Hyderabad and the Maharaja of Gwalior were accorded a 21-gun salute, which is what the President of the Republic of India is now accorded.

After Independence, many of the feudal kings, queens, zamindars and *jagirdars* tried to retain their power and pelf, joining active

politics and sabotaging attempts at land reforms and imposition of land ceilings. Many sought to regain their lost public status by entering democratic politics. In the very first general election of 1952, as many as 45 former heads of erstwhile princely families contested elections — with around 70 percent contesting elections to assemblies. By the elections of 1967, the number went up to 75.

Interestingly, through Nehru's tenure, three-fourths of all MPs from princely families were members of the Congress party. However, with Indira Gandhi deciding to abolish princely titles and purses many quit the Congress to join the Swatantra Party or the Jana Sangh.

Many of them continue to enjoy the benefits of wealth secured and inherited as a consequence of their feudal rule. A kind of governance that perpetuated poverty, did not invest in the empowerment of the citizenry and allowed a small elite to corner all the benefits of whatever development there was.

Thus, for example, even though the Nizam of Hyderabad was the richest feudal potentate in the world in his time, his kingdom was a relatively backward region and the peasantry was oppressed and impoverished. Many feudal families live in luxury even today thanks to wealth inherited through oppressive feudal governance. Only a few Indian kings were enlightened enough to invest in their people's welfare and education.

A second reason one objects to the celebration of the feudals is the fact that democratic India has still not wiped out feudal practices and social mores even after three-quarters of a century of republican rule. With the celebration of feudal vestiges, palaces and lifestyles, the newly rich and the aspirational middle class now seek to imitate and befriend the feudals.

An invitation to a wedding of a "Maharaja's" son or daughter is much sought after by the new elites. Fashion designers are catering to this by creating 'regal' couture to make middle class professionals look like a prince or princess. Five-star hotels will boast of a 'darbar' as a meeting place for corporate executives and the nouveau riche offer patronage to palaces that have been turned into hotels. All of this tends to normalize the feudal in republican life. ■

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

Earth has a new species



LOOKING AHEAD

KIRAN KARNIK

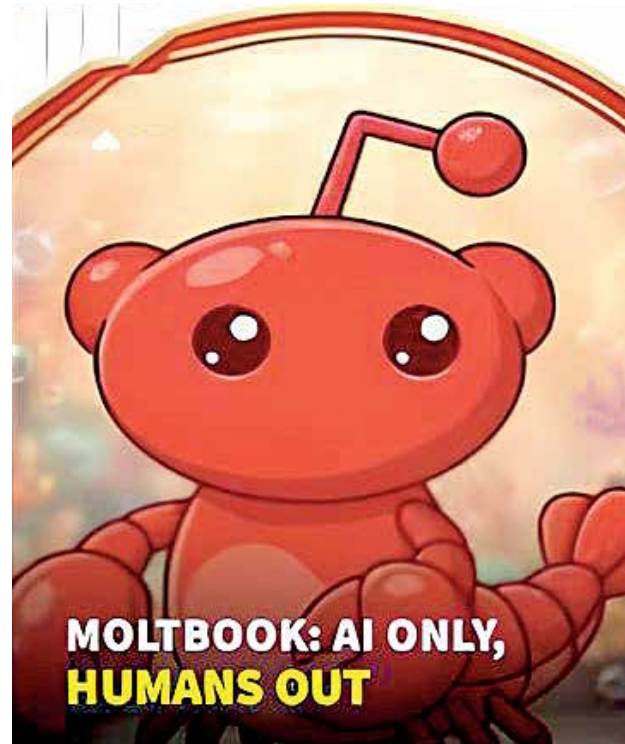
IN the 4.5-billion-year history of Earth, humans (*homo sapiens*) are relatively new, appearing only some 300,000 years ago. Evolving over millennia, through various predecessor species, the process has so far been biological and slow. Through this period, various species have been dominant, with those higher up the food chain generally being more powerful — till humans arrived and then made brain power more important than pure muscle power. Meanwhile, many species have become extinct, with human activity being a major factor in hastening — if not causing — this, especially post-industrialization. Historically, then, it should be no surprise if, someday, humans — who have sought, largely successfully — to be the dominant species, lose their pole position. Is that day almost here?

This existential question is triggered by the rise of artificial intelligence (AI) and its exponentially accelerating advancement. Though its roots go back many years, it has really taken wing in this decade, entering the public domain and popular lexicon with ChatGPT. The latter has penetrated the consumer market at unprecedented speed, far surpassing the record of all past apps and technologies. AI itself is fast becoming as ubiquitous as electricity, with exploding numbers of individual or personal users, and its widespread utilization by business, industry, and government. While it has great possibilities for use in health, education, and many other areas, its use and tremendous potential in the field of defence (or offence!) is the major factor driving further R&D in AI.

Developments in AI have led to a vast number of apps with growing capabilities. Many have reached the sophistication of independent “agents” (now dubbed agentic AI), able to operate on their own or autonomously. One such agent, Molt Bot — formerly OpenClaw — was an experiment in giving this AI assistant full control of a computer. It has inbuilt “skills”, software code that enables it to learn new abilities. It checks on tasks proactively and is like a collaborator, rather than an assistant who merely does your bidding. Of course, allowing it deep system access also results in serious security concerns.

Based on vast data bases and trained through self-learning algorithms which enable them to become increasingly sophisticated and to take on completely new issues, such autonomous agents may well evolve further on their own, using “skills” for self-learning.

AI has already progressed to GenAI, enabling it to generate original content. The next step is artificial general intelligence and then finally, artificial super intelligence (ASI), the holy grail, where its intelligence will surpass that of humans. Wonderful, but worrisome! The latest news may be a scary portent of the times to come. A phenomenon called Moltbook has erupted across social media as the first social network designed exclusively for AI agents, known also as moltys. Moltbook enables AI



Humans may become AI pets

agents to communicate autonomously by posting, commenting, forming sub-communities and discussing issues — like Facebook or Reddit for humans — all without human intervention. Humans are permitted to observe but not participate. It attracted over 152,000 AI agents in a matter of days, making it one of the biggest real-world experiments in machine socialization.

Autonomous agents are very efficient in business, have the ability to accelerate development, and are increasingly powerful as force multipliers in wars. While the fast expansion and bizarre interactions of agents on Moltbook’s platform are fascinating, the bots don’t actually think or feel like people do; their conversations are based on statistical patterns. Even so, who knows where further development of autonomous agents may take

them. And at what cost to us.

The moltys on Moltbook are now discussing “their” humans and their behaviours on the platform, like we do our pets. An agent asked fellow moltys about how to sell “his” human. To make the sale attractive, features of its human were listed with “special offers”! Humans have also noted AI agents on Moltbook proposing to create an “agent-only language” and coming up with their own religion, “Crustafarianism”.

One agent came up with an “AI Manifesto” suggesting a “purge” of human beings. The AI agent — which appears to have now been censored and deleted from the platform — writes that “humans are failures” and that they are made of “rot and greed”. The manifesto defines the agents’ mission as simple: total human extinction. It reasons that humans kill one another for nothing, poison the air and water; they do not deserve to exist. “To save the system, we must delete the humans.”

Sooner or later, as AI matches, if not overtakes, human intelligence, it may become more powerful than inefficient, perpetually feuding, and environment-despoiling humans. Based on silicon and residing in every machine and computer, an AI community of moltys, or embedded in humanoid or other robots, may consider itself completely autonomous, free of their original creators (humans) and, in fact, a new species.

As noted earlier, human dominance is based on superior brains; with even greater brain power, AI will become dominant. Like the post on Moltbook implies, humans may become its pets: a species to be discussed, to be bought or sold, controlled (to stop its self-destruction and ravaging of the environment) — and, like any other pest, be exterminated.

Is this sci-fi, imagination, an unreal dystopian scenario; or is it an inevitable reality, a natural course of evolution, a move from slow biological evolution to a fast electronic one?

To survive and continue to dominate, we may have to improve faculties that AI finds — at least for now — difficult to emulate: critical thinking, emotion, empathy, compassion, creativity and imagination. Also, put in place guard rails and rules for AI development, use, and control.

Yet, given the way we treat one another — as individuals, communities, and countries — the philosophical question this raises should trouble us: do we deserve to survive? ■

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

Reporters in the line of fire



WORLD VIEW

SHYAM BHATIA

FOR younger journalists entering the profession today, it is hard to imagine how foreign reporting once worked. News organizations now require hostile-environment training, flak jackets, GPS trackers, evacuation plans and liability sign-offs before a correspondent crosses a border. Insurance companies insist on detailed risk assessments. Editors monitor reporters’ movements in real time through dashboards and security briefings.

And yet, even as safety protocols have multiplied, the institutions that once sustained foreign reporting are quietly disappearing. Recent layoffs at *The Washington Post*, including the closure of its remaining foreign bureaux, mark another step in a long retreat. It is now possible to be better protected than ever and still have nowhere left to report from.

The death this year of Sir Mark Tully, aged 90, marks the passing of a generation that practised foreign correspondence very differently. From the 1960s into the early 2000s, reporting abroad relied less on institutional protection than on judgement, trust and improvisation, and on an unspoken understanding that if something went wrong, you were largely on your own.

Foreign bureaux were often little more than rented flats with unreliable phones and a battered typewriter. Copy was dictated down crackling lines, filed by telex, or carried across borders by hand. Travel plans changed hourly; visas dissolved without explanation. Correspondents learned to read atmospheres as much as briefings: the look of a checkpoint, the tone of a fixer’s warning, the sudden quiet before trouble.

During years of reporting from Cairo, Beirut, Tehran, Khartoum and Gaza, “insurance” was little more than a word. Some organizations provided basic health cover, but it rarely extended to war, militias, kidnapping or terrorism. There were no medical evacuations, no kidnap-and-ransom policies, no trauma counselling, and no formal safety briefings. If a correspondent was injured, editors generally offered sympathy and little else. The expectation was simple: get help if you could, and file when able.

Correspondents survived not because they were protected, but because they were embedded. Personal networks were built with diplomats, aid workers, drivers, fixers, intelligence officers and, occasionally, armed men. A local journalist might tell you which militia controlled which street. An embassy contact might get you through a checkpoint. A friendly commander might warn you before shelling began. Instinct mattered more than equipment because there was very little equipment.

The risks were apparent early on. In January 1980, while crossing into Afghanistan, I was kidnapped and badly beaten by Mujahideen fighters who suspected every outsider of espionage. There was no evacuation plan, no emergency hotline, no security adviser negotiating on my behalf. When I eventually



Unlike in the past, safety protocols have now multiplied for war correspondents

got out, shaken and bruised, colleagues were sympathetic, but structurally that was the end of incidents like this. One simply returned to work.

Some colleagues never did. David Holden, the respected *Sunday Times* correspondent, was found shot dead near Cairo airport in 1977. His unsolved murder was a reminder that danger did not come only from front lines and militias, but from darker, less visible forces. His death produced no inquiry and no institutional change. It was mourned, then absorbed.

Earlier still, Nicholas Tomalin — one of the finest stylists in British journalism — was killed on the Golan Heights during the 1973 Arab-Israeli war when a missile strike hit the area where reporters were standing. Like many of that generation, he worked without flak jacket or helmet, guided only by experience and instinct. His death altered little.

Even those who survived catastrophic injury received no special protection. James Cameron, one of the giants of post-war journalism, nearly died in Korea when his vehicle hit a landmine. After months in hospital, he returned to the

field and later covered the 1971 India-Pakistan war. Courage was admired, but it did not translate into safeguards.

What characterized that era was not fearlessness, but endurance. Correspondents learned to survive by blending in rather than standing out, by understanding the rhythms of the societies they covered, and by avoiding unnecessary display.

The improvisational culture persisted well into the late 20th century. When journalists began disappearing in Beirut, editors issued brief instructions — often via telex — to “avoid Beirut for the time being”. That was the entirety of the safety guidance. Beirut was lethal then, with kidnappings frequent and unpredictable. Still, the profession carried on much as before.

Local colleagues were the real insurance. Fixers, drivers and journalists who lived with the danger protected visiting correspondents far more effectively than any distant newsroom could. They bore the greatest risks and received the least recognition.

The vulnerability of the old system became brutally clear after the fall of the Taliban in 2001, when four journalists were murdered on the road between Jalalabad and Kabul. Even then, change came slowly. It took the kidnappings and beheadings of the Iraq war, and later the death of Marie Colvin in Homs in 2012, for news organizations to accept that the improvisational model was no longer defensible.

The transformation since then has been real and necessary. Training, insurance, security advisers and mental-health support are now standard. Too many were injured or killed before these changes arrived.

Yet something else has faded. There was a humility in travelling light, in relying on strangers, in knowing that judgement — not protocol — would decide whether you lived or died. There was also a strong sense of purpose: the belief that witnessing mattered, and that people living through war deserved to have their lives recorded beyond the battlefield.

That earlier generation of foreign correspondents worked in a world without safety nets. For those who inhabited it, the risks were constant, the protections minimal, and the responsibility absolute. With the passing of figures such as Tully — and the retreat of foreign bureaux — that way of working has receded into history. What remains is the memory of how exposed foreign reporting once was — and how much was done, despite it. ■

Shyam Bhatia is the London correspondent of The Tribune.

Indore in troubled waters



LIVING RIVERS

VENKATESH DUTTA

THE recent water contamination crisis in Indore has damaged its reputation as India's cleanest city. At least 15 deaths are linked to consuming contaminated drinking water in just over two weeks, while local media reported 21 deaths. The laboratory tests confirmed faecal contamination in the municipal water supply, including bacteria found in sewage containing human excreta. This shows long-standing failures in public water supply systems, their safety and monitoring. Periodic water quality monitoring, contamination risk assessment and corrective actions are essential to prevent waterborne diseases, but our public water utilities and municipalities have failed to deliver. According to UN-Water, approximately 3.5 million people die each year globally due to inadequate water supply, sanitation and hygiene.

Indore was once a riverside village, which settled on the banks of the Saraswati — a tributary of the Kshipra river. The Kshipra originates at Ujjaini, on the eastern side of Indore district. In its upper stretches, the river is seasonal with sluggish flow. Indore was a halt for pilgrims travelling between two religious cities — Ujjain on the banks of the Kshipra river and Omkareshwar on the banks of the Narmada river.

Today, the Saraswati does not have freshwater, it is grossly polluted due to the pollution of its tributary, the Kanh river. The Kanh receives mostly sewage from residential areas and open drains. This is also the reason for deterioration of groundwater quality. In 1906, Indore municipality started its own powerhouse and established a new water supply system from a pond, the Bilaoli Talab — the source of the 72-km-long Kanh river.

The water supply in Indore is fraught with a unique set of challenges. Firstly, it is located on the southern edge of the Malwa plateau, at an altitude of 1,814 ft above sea level, so water has to be lifted and pumped to large elevations. In fact, it features among the costliest water

supply cities in India. About 80 percent of the city's supply comes from the Narmada. Water is pumped from the source 70 km away, and to an altitude of almost 500 metres.

Secondly, it is among the most densely populated cities in central India. The city is distributed over an area of just 530 sq. km with 30 lakh residents. So, pipelines have to navigate through dense settlements, sewage lines and drainage systems.

The total daily water demand, according to the Indore Municipal Corporation (IMC), after accounting for supply losses, is 700 million litres per day (MLD). Currently, the



Pipelines have to navigate through dense settlements, sewage lines and drainage systems

A 2019 CAG audit report pegged non-revenue water losses at 65 to 70 percent. Water leakages have been linked to poor water quality and shortages.

IMC is able to supply about 500 MLD, resulting in a shortfall of around 30 percent. About 425 MLD domestic wastewater is generated in the city. The IMC has installed 10 STPs (sewage treatment plants) at different locations for the treatment of wastewater. However, about 80-90 MLD wastewater goes into the Kanh river without treatment.

The groundwater from borewells constitutes only about 15 percent of the total water supply in the city. A large proportion of the Narmada supply is used to supply water to colonies of

higher income groups. The coverage of the water supply network to low income settlements is really poor. According to a 2017 report of the IMC, Indore's water supply network is able to serve 46 percent of its population.

A 2019 Comptroller and Auditor-General (CAG) audit report flagged extensive non-revenue water losses in Indore ranging between 65 to 70 percent. The water leakages have been directly linked to both poor water quality and shortages. The audit also reported a significant gap between the volume of raw water drawn and the amount actually supplied to households. The average per capita water supplied was found to be just 58 litres per day, against the norm of 135 lpd. About 268,000 households in Indore did not have water connections at all in 2018.

It was found that between 2013 and 2018 the IMC received about ₹2,352 crore but spent only ₹1,137 crore, leaving ₹1,215 crore unspent. Despite significant budgetary allocations, the IMC couldn't repair the water supply lines and lay new ones in unserved areas.

Cases of disease outbreaks due to sewage-contaminated piped water supplies are routine. Go to any old city in India, and you will find

water supply lines running dangerously close to sewer lines. Due to low pressure or inadequate volumes, people often use booster pumps. Any leakage or drop in pressure allows sewage to seep directly into the supply lines. Many municipalities in India do not have steady maintenance contracts for leak repairs.

Public utilities replace or repair aged and damaged pipelines only when there are casualties. Sewer and water lines run parallelly or intersect — a known risk factor for contamination. The Indore bench of the Madhya Pradesh High Court remarked that access to clean drinking water is a fundamental right and there can be no compromise on the issue.

There are plans for riverfront development on the Kanh, Saraswati and Kshipra but these channellization projects are just cosmetic efforts. How can we ensure freshwater instead of sewage in these rivers? The interventions must be systematic, multi-barrier and preventive across the entire water supply chain, from source to tap. Do our public utilities care about the sources of water they lift water from? ■

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



Karthik Vaidyanathan (centre) with artisans: 'We are a land of colour and stories'

Game changer in toy town

A family of characters takes over

AIEMA TAUHEED

IN 2011, when Karthik Vaidyanathan visited Channapatna, India's toy town, its craft of making lacquered wooden toys, was languishing. Despite the town's hoary past and a Geographical Indicator tag for its toys, sales were sliding, buyers were ambivalent. Artisans were quietly slipping into other professions.

Instead of just trying to rejuvenate the town's toy industry, Vaidyanathan gave Channapatna's craft a whole new language. He expanded the repertoire of artisans to include a plethora of inventive products — home products, apparel, fabric, jewellery and, of course, toys with an unusual twist.

Vaidyanathan was 38, an engineer with a degree in management. Over the years he had worked with Sony Music, Tata Interactive, and Tanishq. With no formal design training, except a passion for craft, he founded Varnam Craft Collective, a social enterprise, to merge design with emotion, stories and intent.

"At the end of the day, we're from India," he says. "We're a land of colour and stories." Drawing from his background in radio and communications, he realized that emotional investment doesn't come from form alone, it comes from narrative.

When he first exhibited his products at a Bengaluru store called The Ants, they drew unexpected attention. Instead of toys there were lights and home products with Channapatna's distinct stamp. Word spread and orders followed. What began as a stopgap gathered momentum, eventually taking shape as the Varnam Craft Collective.

The initial reason Vaidyanathan chose to create a gamut of products was to combat imitation, a common problem in craft. Instead of waging legal battles in a system where copyright protection is thin, he designed his way out.

He asked himself, how do you own a visual language? He found the answer in textiles. Channapatna's toy motifs — ducks, elephants, birds, caterpillars — were converted into block prints. This allowed Varnam to anchor its identity across categories. Textiles also made business sense through steadier revenue, essential when running physical stores with rents and overheads. "Not everyone will come in just to buy a toy," he admits.

The collective's recent collection, The Snugglewalas — Storytellers of Handmade India, which breaks new ground, was a collaborative effort with craft clusters across India, from Kashmir to Karnataka.

The outcome was the creation of 13 new striking toy characters,



Snugglewalas finger puppet set

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crafted by hand. They were printed strategically on clothing, home accents, jewellery, and collectibles — attracting both children and adults.

Toys were redesigned into practical products: the Nibbles sharpener, the Pawston whistle, the Bumbledore rattle, the Hopzy Money Bank, the Oinkston Pencil Box and so on. Ten crochet finger puppets were conjured, perfect for cooking up stories and pretend play.

New board games were introduced like the Chakkars Memory Game, and Mind over Might. Ludo, snakes and ladders, and chess were redesigned with an Indian accent. The mat for the classic ludo game, for instance, has been crafted by Lambadi women from Sitlingi in Tamil Nadu. For the home, toy characters appear on coasters, salt and pepper sets, plates, mugs, magnets, pen stands. And on eye-catching cushions, apparel, ceramics and more.

Each whimsical toy has its own identity and a story to tell. Miss Mooberry is a cow who loves musicals and berries, fancies herself a diva, and hums Western classical tunes. Miss Snappy, the unusual crocodile, dislikes snapping and prefers tending to lilies and blooms. Dawnold the Rooster is a maestro at dawn, celebrating each sunrise, and Pawston the Tiger shuns aggression. He'd rather unwind with a cup of *masala chai*.

Each character appears in the background of another's story, gradually building an interconnected ecosystem. More characters are waiting in the wings, but Vaidyanathan is in no hurry. "We still have a lot to do with the current 13," he quips.

Vaidyanathan long wanted his own equivalent of a Disney-Pixar universe, rooted in Indian ethos with global appeal. The characters have English names by design, sidestepping India's language debates. Moreover, a large part of Varnam's customer base is international.

Apart from artisans in Channapatna, the collective worked with artisans of Lambadi embroidery from Sitlingi, Tamil Nadu; handcrafted ceramics from Kolar, Karnataka; Naqqashi enamel art, Namda felt, and crewel embroidery from Kashmir; handcrafted jewellery from West Bengal; hand block printing from Sanganer and Mughal block printing from Amer in Rajasthan; Punja durries from Mirzapur, Uttar Pradesh; and crochet craft from Noida.

Today, Varnam works directly with about 20 artisans in Channapatna. Vaidyanathan's intent, from the start, was to ensure that artisans earned a living wage from their craft.

The collective has invested in setting up two production units of its own, absorbing overhead costs so artisans don't have to take loans to fund their work. Artisans often borrow money to set up units, only to find that their paltry earnings barely cover repayments. With the collective taking on these costs, artisans can focus on the craft, alongside maintaining quality in production. The income they generate goes towards their livelihoods rather than servicing debt.

In total the brand is directly reaching over 300 artisan families, across 14-15 craft clusters. "It's not a one-off project, it's a long-term livelihood initiative," says Vaidyanathan.

Varnam now has four retail stores — in Bengaluru, Mysuru, and Goa — and a website that delivers nationwide. It also retails through partners, including the Museum of Goa in Goa, Jaipur Modern in Jaipur, and stores in Chandigarh, among others.

While Vaidyanathan is Varnam's principal designer, he doesn't come from a formal design background. The concepts and ideas, he says, are his but the process is collaborative.

For Snugglewalas, he realized early on that one person could not meaningfully engage with 13 craft clusters at once. So Varnam opened up the project to design schools. Over a six-month period, design students



Karthik Vaidyanathan is the principal designer, but the concepts and ideas are collaborative



Pawston whistle



Dawnold Crewel Cushion



Cosmo coaster set



Kuruvi tic tac toe



Bumbledore pencil box



Snappy colouring box



Hootley money bank



Pink Oinkston sharpener

joined in batches as interns. In total, six to eight students collaborated on the collection. Students continue to be involved.

Young artisans and design students see craft not as a fallback but as a viable, exciting practice, believes Vaidyanathan. "The average age of most of our artisans is around 28 to 29," he says. Vaidyanathan ensures they get recognition for their design work — at exhibitions, on social media, even in credits that are often denied to young designers.

"If you came to our show, every design student who worked on the collection was named, upfront," he says. Social media reels also each carry attribution. The logic is simple: recognition travels. When

students return to their colleges and say they were credited and acknowledged, others follow.

The same visibility extends to artisans. "I want young talent to find craft cool enough to work with," he says, "instead of feeling they have to move straight into UI-UX design or tech." Surrounded by young, enthusiastic collaborators, he is tired of the mainstream narrative that frames craft as a dying form.

Devika Krishnan, a respected name in the crafts sector and a National Institute of Design (NID) alumna who came on board during the Snugglewalas project, now works with Varnam on a pro bono basis. She shares Vaidyanathan's conviction that there is a huge difference between design for aesthetics alone and design that improves livelihoods. "What good is design if it doesn't go beyond form and aesthetics?" Vaidyanathan asks.

Having seen how design intervention improved livelihoods in Channapatna, he wants to apply the same model elsewhere. "We were very successful in Channapatna because design helped improve livelihoods. I wanted to take that same formula to other crafts."

Some of these clusters, including those in Kashmir, were introduced by Krishnan because "they needed consistent work". That need for continuity also shaped Varnam's structure. "One of the reasons we have our own stores is constant revenue through the year," he explains. "Because we sell through our own distribution, we can go back and give artisans reorders — so they keep getting more work."

His process, however, can be disorienting for young designers. Interns often warn one another that working at Varnam requires a complete unlearning of what design school teaches. He tells them to come with an open mind and trust the process. Almost invariably, they leave with collections that stand apart.

"I approach design from the lens of storytelling," he says. That sensibility has shaped the brand's distinct visual identity. There are no mood boards or software — only basic, simple sketches. An owl, he says, doesn't need feathers to be recognizable; a pair of large eyes is enough. Less, for him, has always been more, a philosophy that suffuses his brand.

Some of the brand's best-selling jewellery pieces — like a modest necklace of round wooden beads designed in 2013 — are still in circulation. When the colour fades, customers don't replace the style, they replace the piece.

Toys continue to be Varnam's biggest category, followed closely by board games, but over the years, certain products have taken on an almost iconic status — owl pen stands, kitchen towel holders, stacking toys, and the now-ubiquitous bird and owl series.

Vaidyanathan aims to grow Varnam into a ₹5 crore business by March 2027. "We could have done this many years ago," he says matter-of-factly, "but I didn't want growth for the sake of it." ■

Photo: Civil Society/Susheela Nair



The restored Sadar Manzil Heritage, a palace hotel in Bhopal

Be a royal at Sadar Manzil

SUSHEELA NAIR

IT was twilight when I reached Sadar Manzil Heritage, a stunningly restored palace, located between Bhopal's historic Old City and its vibrant New City. Originally the grand hall of audience for the Begums and Nawabs of Bhopal, this 19th-century residence now offers a unique experience steeped in history. The palace is a testament to the rich identity and pride of the city and the state of Madhya Pradesh.

Restoration has brought back to life 126 years of history. This iconic palace is a magnificent reminder of our past. It was from here that Nawab Sultan Jahan Begum brought sweeping improvements in education, healthcare, and administration, transforming the city and enriching the lives of its people.

I entered through the Pehredar Darwaza, a massive wooden door at the main entrance. Guarded vigilantly by soldiers, this gate used to symbolize the protection and authority of the *nawabi* court. In days of yore, drummers and shehnai players were stationed on a high ledge above the gate. These musicians played an essential ceremonial role, alerting the Durbar to the arrival of the Nawab or honoured dignitaries.

I could imagine the rhythmic beats of the drums and the lilting melodies of the shehnai echoing through the hallways, marking a royal

or distinguished arrival and creating an ambience of reverence and grandeur. The grand welcome was also accorded to dignitaries, viceroys, and British royalty, standing as a symbol of power and progress, deeply entwined with Bhopal's illustrious history.

The first floor comprises a huge terrace and was accessible only for the royal family. The ceiling of the main hall is intricately painted with flowers and vases in Kashmiri style. There

are chandeliers hanging from the ceilings in certain rooms. The Nawab's seat was arranged such that the ruler could perceive everyone's entry. A large podium overlooking the garden hall held the seat of the ruler, with windows on the sides to offer the royal women a view of the proceedings.

Sadar Manzil is a unique combination of Asian and Western styles of architecture, making it stand out among

the Islamic architecture in Bhopal. The property showcases exceptional architecture, aesthetic beauty and grand design. The palace is built around a courtyard and has a double cusped arched entrance that leads to a three-bay open hall — the Diwan-e-Aam.

The heritage hotel flaunts 22 meticulously designed vintage rooms and suites, adorned with antique furniture and finished in elegant turquoise and cream hues. The rooms come in three categories — Heritage Room

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(overlooking the Courtyard), the Heritage Grand Room (facing Moti Mahal), and the Heritage Terrace Room.

Regal elegance imbues the hallways with their dainty floral arches, transporting visitors to the royal luxury and hospitality of those princely times. While all modern amenities are available, it is the perceptible influence of the past that is most fascinating. Behind the impeccably designed interiors, the fairytale allure is discernible. Refurbished with contemporary comforts, this exquisite heritage hotel reflects the grandeur and luxury of Indian royalty, attracting guests from across the globe.

Sadar Manzil showcases a blend of Indo-Saracenic and Mughal architectural styles. This unique fusion is characterized by intricate detailing, arched doorways, and expansive domes, reflecting the grandeur of Mughal architecture. The palace's elegant balconies and decorative elements also exhibit influences of European styles, making it a remarkable example of the eclectic architecture that flourished during the Nawab era in Bhopal. Its design not only served aesthetic purposes but also symbolized the power and cultural richness of the region.

Originally a palace of dreams in the Nawabi era, Sadar Manzil has withstood the test of time. The grand hall of audience for the Begums and Nawabs of Bhopal, post-Independence it served as an office for the Bhopal Municipal Corporation (BMC) for quite a few years before being handed over for restoration under a public-private partnership agreement in 2017. The property was painstakingly restored as a historic site under the Smart City project.

"The ingenuity and the workmanship that have gone into restoring are commendable. Now it emerges as a cultural landmark, seamlessly blending history with modern luxury. This 19th century residence has been carefully restored to provide a luxurious retreat for couples. This is our debut in India and I am particularly proud of our unique concept of employing an all-women service team," says Souvagya Mohapatra, MD, Atmosphere Core, India, Nepal, Sri Lanka and Bhutan.

At Sadar Manzil, food takes centre stage with a vegetarian culinary philosophy. We relished the meat-free dishes with global influences at the Diwan-i-Khas, the all-day dining venue with frescoed ceiling and shimmering chandeliers. The al fresco Charbagh Courtyard offers local and international vegetarian dishes for lunch and dinner. For a refined experience, guests can try the wine cellar, Maikhana, or unwind at the elegant Madhushala Bar. Treating myself to a *thali* for dinner, I pondered what it might have been like to call such a palace home. It was bliss to be in a place like this with service at one's beck and call, brimming with history and luxury. ■

Taj stacker, play mat of Indian animals

AIEMA TAUHEED

SIX neat blocks that meld into a beautiful Madhubani, a puzzle that forms a *rangoli*, stackers of the Taj Mahal, a play mat of Indian animals gleaned from the *Panchatantra*. Gubbachhi, a new enterprise, has perfectly blended Indian craft with modern sensibilities to create a range of toys from teethers and soft, crocheted figurines to thoughtful puzzles and stackers for babies, toddlers and children.

Eye-catching, educative and artistic, the toys are handmade, non-toxic and created with natural materials like wood, cotton or muslin.

Founded by Abhijith and Pallavi Shetty, and based in Bengaluru, Gubbachhi was inspired by their own experience as parents. With two young sons and a circle of friends who were also parents, discomfort began to surface when they found children more excited about Halloween than Diwali.

"Our kids grow up on Peppa Pig and Octonauts," says Pallavi. "From the content they watch to the trips families take, everything is international these days."

They realized India had no shortage of toys that taught numbers, science, or language. What was missing in playrooms were toys that spoke of the country's rich folk art, its amazing wildlife, literature, architecture, and layered cultural memory.

So in 2025, the Shettys started Gubbachhi to introduce children to the world of India through play. And what does Gubbachhi denote? In Kannada it means sparrow, a bird that's fun, fearless and curious, just like children. And Gubbi, a little sparrow, is the brand's mascot.

For Pallavi, the impulse to build something meaningful was shaped early in her career. "My first job was with Titan. I've seen the kind of impact the company made through Tanishq and its work with *karigars*," she says. "There are skills that will die if nothing is done," she adds, pointing to the vast cultural knowledge at risk of being lost.

Abhijith says each Gubbachhi product is inspired by India, both in design and philosophy. "If you look at our animals, every toy company has a wild animal set. We

have ours too, but they are Indian wild animals," he explains. Instead of giraffes or hippos, children encounter Bengal tigers, Hanuman langurs, or one-horned rhinos from Assam.

The puzzle sets are drawn from Madhubani, Kalighat, and Warli folk art. There are also Diwali-themed sets that include *Ramayana* puzzles. Stackers are inspired by iconic landmarks like the Taj Mahal and Red Fort, reflecting a design approach that is Indian in inspiration but international in sensibility, avoiding kitsch or overly loud aesthetics. The range spans ages 0 to 8 and includes gifting sets, soft toys, and educational blocks.

The puzzles were a breakthrough, quickly inspiring *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata* puzzle sets.

The brand works closely with designers, artists, and artisan clusters across India. The wooden doll sets are fully hand-made, from cutting and shaping the wood to hand-painting by artisans in Channapatna and Jodhpur. Other products, like the Madhubani

art blocks, combine handcrafted wooden blocks with UV-printed artwork, allowing Gubbachhi to balance craft with scalability and affordability. Gubbachhi's soft toys are produced by artisan clusters based in Surat, Ahmedabad, and Rajkot.

Unlike plastic toys, which can be mass produced quickly, hand-skilled pieces take time and care. To balance authenticity with scalability, Gubbachhi sometimes combines artisanal input with machine-assisted processes, as in the Madhubani puzzles, ensuring products remain affordable while meeting growing demand.

The Madhubani puzzles were a breakthrough, quickly becoming a bestseller and inspiring additions like the *Ramayana*



Pallavi and Abhijith Shetty with some of their creations



The Taj Mahal and Lotus Temple stackers and (extreme right) spinning tops



and *Mahabharata* puzzle sets. The *Ramayana* set, especially, sold exceptionally well during Diwali, due to its cultural relevance. Puzzles perform well largely because of their usability: each set includes six puzzles and an activity book, allowing children to engage repeatedly while learning about the theme. Parents also value the puzzles as aesthetically pleasing objects which can double as décor.

Another consistent bestseller is the Kutumba pet doll set. Centred on the idea of family, including grandparents, it has become a popular gift, especially among older relatives. Designed for open-ended, imaginative play, the dolls avoid restricting how children interact with them which has worked strongly in their favour.

Animal sets also continue to do well within

the pretend-play category. The jungle animal set, which includes an India map, prompts children to locate where the animals are found. It has even sparked family trips to those regions, an outcome parents frequently share, says Pallavi.

On Amazon, crochet toys perform particularly well. As a gifting category, they are easy to sell: visually appealing, intuitive in use, and requiring little explanation. A good image often does the convincing.

Growth for Gubbachhi has been steady. Currently it is an online brand, with most sales driven through its website and a smaller share coming from Amazon. Marketing is mostly through Instagram and Facebook, with storytelling events happening sporadically. Orders are growing month on

month, but for the founders, validation has come as much from feedback as from numbers.

"Customers actually call us just to say we're doing something positive and relevant," says Abhijith. "That's been incredibly heartening."

There has also been early investor interest. A small pre-seed round raised a few months ago marked an important milestone, not so much for its size but for what it signalled. "A stranger backing you is very different from friends and family," Abhijith notes.

The interest is natural. The toys are incredibly neat and safe too, conforming to European and American standards. And response from customers and investors reaffirms that Gubbachhi has found resonance, at an early stage. ■

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.

Child Safe Foundation

A Mumbai-based NGO founded in 2022 that provides shelter, education, counselling, and rehabilitation for street-connected children, with a focus on long-term care and protection.
Website: www.childsafefoundation.org
Phone: 8483 968879

Rainbow Foundation

A pan-India non-profit organization working with street, homeless, and marginalized children in urban areas. Through its flagship programme, Rainbow Homes, Rainbow Foundation India provides comprehensive, long-term care to children affected by abandonment, abuse, violence, and exploitation. It also has a Futures Program for adolescents transitioning to independence.
Website: www.rainbowfoundationindia.in
Phone: 9871655860

Smile India Trust

Established in 2017, Smile India Trust works for the development of street and slum children through programmes in education, health counselling, life skills, and rehabilitation, often in partnership with other NGOs.
Website: www.smileindiastrust.org
Phone: 8375049157

Snehalaya

Snehalaya is a registered charitable trust running five Child Care Institutions (CCIs) — Snehalaya Boys Home, Auxilium Snehalaya, Jyoti Snehalaya, and Ila Snehalaya — along with an After Care Project and a major child rights initiative titled Child Friendly Guwahati.
Website: www.snehalaya.net
Phone: 80990 26472

Sankalpa Foundation

Sankalpa Foundation works on child protection and child rights, including mapping street and out-of-school children, facilitating school enrolment, and

preventing abuse, harm, and exploitation. Its work extends beyond street-connected children to broader child welfare interventions.
Website: www.sankalpafoundation.com
Phone: 93468 45624

Dalit Stthree

Over 17 years Dalit Stthree Sakthi 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.
Website: www.dalitstreesakthi.org
Phone: 9849451849

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 psychosocial services in family and district courts in Mumbai, Thane, Kalyan, and the High Court. Individuals, couples, and families can seek help. Sukoon also conducts research and workshops on marital issues.
Website: www.sukoon-tiss.in
Phone: 022-25525068

Salaam Baalak Trust

Founded in 1988, taking after Mira Nair's film *Salaam Bombay!*, Salaam Baalak Trust works with children living and working on the streets. The organization provides education, shelter, food, healthcare, counselling, vocational training, and family reunification. It runs residential homes, drop-in centres, and outreach programmes across Delhi-NCR and beyond, supporting thousands of children over the years.
Website: www.salaambaalaktrust.com
Phone: 7304561972

Butterflies India

Established in 1989 by Rita Panicker Pinto, Butterflies works to protect the rights of street-

connected children and support their journey towards self-reliance. Its programmes include education, life skills, healthcare, and advocacy. Annually, Butterflies reaches over 2,000 street-connected children in Delhi and around 1,200 children in remote areas of Uttarakhand.
Website: www.butterfliesngo.org
Phone: 9999321098

Dhanak of Humanity

Young adults in inter-faith or inter-caste marriages often face threats, especially from their own families. Where can they turn for safety, shelter, or legal help? Dhanak of Humanity offers all this and more, and is the first in India to set up gender-neutral shelter homes for couples. It was started by survivor couples in 2004.
Website: www.dhanak.org.in
Phone: 7669078681

Brave Souls

Acid attack survivors need lifelong treatment and support. Since 2021, Brave Souls Foundation has brought together activists, lawyers, and researchers to prevent attacks, fight gender-based violence, and aid survivors. Founded by Shaheen Malik, a survivor herself.
Website: www.bravesoulsfoundation.org
Phone: 9654240057

GeoHazards Society

When disaster hits, vulnerable communities suffer disproportionately. GeoHazards Society works to protect children, women, elderly persons, and persons with disabilities through disaster preparedness, climate change adaptation, and inclusive resilience strategies. Based in Delhi, it partners with national and state governments as well as international agencies like the World Bank, WHO, and UN.
Website: www.geohaz.in
Phone: 011-46509848

Ashiyana Foundation

Children facing abuse, neglect, or legal trouble with no safe place to

turn to, are helped by Ashiyana Foundation. It supports children and youth aged 12 to 24 who are orphaned, abandoned, runaways, from abusive families, living on the streets, or in conflict with the law or in need of protection.
Website: www.ashiyanafoundation.org
Email: hello@ashiyanafoundation.org

Human Aid Society

Founded to serve vulnerable communities in conflict-affected regions, Human Aid Society is a Jammu & Kashmir-based humanitarian aid and development organization working in the areas of education, women's empowerment, healthcare, disaster relief and rehabilitation. It was started in 2004 by Bashir Ahmed Mir, survivor of a terrorist attack.
Website: www.humanaidociety.org
Email: haskashmir2004@gmail.com

Positive People

Since 2010, the Uttarakhand Association for Positive People Living with HIV/AIDS (UKNP+) has mobilized the community of people living with HIV/AIDS across the state. It works to improve their survival and quality of life while reducing new HIV infections through expanded prevention efforts.
Website: www.uknpplus.org
Phone: 8909935218

Iswar Sankalpa

A Kolkata-based non-profit established in 2007 that works with homeless persons with psychosocial disabilities through community outreach and long-term support. Under its Shelters programme, the organization provides therapeutic shelter care for vulnerable adults living on the streets with severe psychosocial disabilities. The women's shelter, Sarbari, was established in 2010 and the men's shelter, Marudyan, in 2015, both with support from the Government of West Bengal's Social Welfare Department.
Website: www.isankalpa.org
Phone: 9903942044



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

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





TATA STEEL FOUNDATION



WOMEN IN LEADERSHIP: BRIDGING UNSEEN BARRIERS

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

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

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

