# SAMAAJ
SOCIETY

# SARKAAR
STATE

# BAZAAR
MARKETS

a citizen-first approach

**ROHINI NILEKANI**

**Rohini Nilekani** is an author and philanthropist and has been a strong influence in the Indian social sector over the past three decades. Her philanthropic work spans different sectors of Indian civil society. She founded Arghyam, a foundation for sustainable water and sanitation, and co-founded Pratham Books, nonprofit enabling access to reading for millions of children. Currently, she is the Chairperson of Rohini Nilekani Philanthropies and a Co-founder and Director of EkStep, a nonprofit education platform. Rohini and her husband, Nandan Nilekani are signatories to the Giving Pledge, pledging to give away half of their wealth to philanthropy.

Rohini's first book, *Stillborn*, a medical thriller, and her second, *Uncommon Ground*, were published by Penguin Books India. She is also the author of 16 books for young children.

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Cover by Ruhi Sridhar, Cracker and Rush

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### ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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# Preface

Many writers and thinkers periodically bring out an anthology of their writing over the years. It allows people to see their evolving point of view with more clarity. I have chosen to do the same and beg the indulgence of the reader.

This book is a compilation of some of my speeches and writing on the subject of Samaaj, Sarkaar, and Bazaar i.e. Society, State, and Markets, over the past 15 years. I have chosen to categorize them under the headings: 'An Active Samaaj', 'Justice and Governance', 'Water and Environment', 'CSOs and Strategic Philanthropy', 'Bazaar and the Public Interest', and 'Looking to the Future'. While many pieces in the collection overlap across categories, this classification will make it more useful for the reader to pick out articles of personal interest. In the introduction I have tried to give an overview of my Samaaj-first philosophy, which has guided my civic involvement and personal philanthropy for the past three decades. The epilogue attempts to capture some of my worries, but mostly my hopes for the future.

This book is self-published under a Creative Commons license. The goal is to allow people to download it freely as a pdf, to read it and to share it forward, so as to further a meaningful discourse on the roles of Society, State, and Markets. It is also available for purchase on the usual e-commerce platforms, with the proceeds of any sale going back into organizations supported by my philanthropy.

In the future, I hope that the website www.samaajsarkaarbazaar. in might become a hub for thinkers, writers, activists, students, and researchers to further the narrative of the role of these three sectors.

There will be many views different from my own, and I welcome them. I hope to remain open, curious, and humble as various opinions and voices chime in. I look forward to a courteous and animated debate.

# Acknowledgements

Any author has many people to be grateful to for their book's existence. In this case, if the list was comprehensively created, it might be as long as the book! After all, most interactions with members of Samaaj, Sarkaar, and Bazaar have furthered my understanding of the continuum and its dynamic balance. So let me name a few people who have played the most critical role.

Unusually, I begin with my late grandfather Sadashiv Laxman Soman (Babasaheb), whom I never met, but who is a legend in my family. In his life, he displayed the greatest concern for those less privileged and was among the very first volunteers to respond to Gandhiji's call in Champaran in 1917. It is easy to give of one's wealth and hard to give of one's self. That's the standard I hope to live up to in my work. In the book, as here, I acknowledge the late Prem Kumar Verma for triggering my thinking on Samaaj. Thanks to Rajni Bakshi for her friendship and our deep discourse. Thanks to my sisters, Meera Dixit and Ameeta Kaul, for their love and constant support.

I thank Arghyam's whole team over the years and all our partners for helping deploy this thinking on the ground. Indeed, I thank all the partners, more than 200 leaders and their organizations, that I have been fortunate to be associated with over the years. So many of them have been my mentors on this journey.

I thank my colleagues Gautam John, Natasha Joshi, and Sahana Jose, the team at Rohini Nilekani Philanthropies, who always help sharpen the debate over countless discussions, and who, along with my

# Introduction

2022 marks exactly 30 years since I started my formal journey in civic engagement. Like many journeys in the civic space, mine began with an external catalyst too. I had lost dear friends to a horrendous car accident on the Bangalore-Chennai highway, which took their unborn daughter and orphaned their three-year-old son. The unnecessary loss left a searing impact on me, perhaps because I was carrying my then unborn daughter at the time. Although I always had an itch to involve myself in social activism, this incident moved me enough to want to do something – anything – to improve road safety. Luckily, there were like-minded citizens who felt the same urge and we jumped into the fray, rather naively but full of goodwill and energy.

In 1992, we launched a public charitable trust called Nagarik, with the tagline 'For Safer Roads'. This was my first experience working in a formal civil society organization and it was a steep learning curve to rally teams and create meaningful impact. In the end, Nagarik collapsed because we were unable to sustain a momentum of citizen interest and involvement. But this early failure left me with a strong understanding of what could be done better the next time around. I realized that social change requires collective action, where citizens are inspired to actively become part of the solution. I also learned that any team that claimed, like us, to be acting on behalf of citizens must be empathetic, innovative, organized, and strategic. It was a humbling experience, but a crucial one for my personal journey.

In 2000, I had the opportunity to become part of the Pratham[i] network and work with the state government to set up their Karnataka

chapter, as the Akshara Foundation.[ii] Our aim was to work with the education system and local communities to ensure 'Every child in school and learning well'. Our teams of highly motivated volunteers and staff worked in slums and government schools, partnering effectively with the education department of the government and many corporate donors. This time our efforts were more coordinated and hence successful, and it gave me more confidence. In 2001, I felt emboldened to set up my own foundation, named Arghyam[iii], which means 'offering' in Sanskrit.

Over the next few years, I took on more challenges as I began to learn the ropes of philanthropy. I joined the board of the Ashoka Trust for Research in Ecology and the Environment (ATREE)[iv] and Sanghamithra[v], a not-for-profit micro-finance institution. Both taught me much of what I know about the environment and about people's economics. I co-founded and funded Pratham Books[vi] to democratize the joy of reading. The 10 years I spent at Pratham Books have been the most joyful of my career in the civic space. Watching the eyes of little children light up when a good storybook is put into their hands is an unmatchable experience. But more importantly, I learnt what is possible when one simple but powerful innovation unleashes imagination across the board. When we decided to publish our books under an open-source Creative Commons license,[vii] it instantly opened up spaces for writers, illustrators, translators, and editors from across the country to join the societal mission of 'A Book in Every Child's Hand'. Tens of millions of children[viii] have benefitted from this as a result. This adventure has played a pivotal role in my journey.

By then, I was sometimes referred to as a social entrepreneur, which was amusing because my real profession was journalism. When I came into some serious money in 2005, through the sale of my personal Infosys shares, I put it all into Arghyam to support the water

sector in India. Then I was well on my way to becoming what people called a philanthropist – a descriptor that did not sit so well with me in the early days. My colleagues and I were learning rapidly just how hard it was both to do philanthropy and to implement a social mission! With every small success, there were also many setbacks. But we were never disheartened, as we had joined thousands of concerned citizens and hundreds of committed leaders among them. We collaborated with several civil society organizations (CSOs) that were capable and mission-driven. We found that issues like water, education, the environment, and livelihoods struck a chord with citizens and that the state and its bureaucrats were more than willing to work with us. Those were heady years, full of diverse experiences, tremendous learning, and camaraderie.

**Friends and Mentors**

It was only in 2007, a full 15 years after I started working in the civic sector, that I had a fortunate encounter that helped crystalize these early experiences into a philosophy and action framework. It all began with a conversation on a bumpy four-hour car ride from Patna to Khagaria district in Bihar. Sunita Nadhamuni, CEO of Arghyam, Eklavya Prasad of Megh Pyne Abhiyan,[ix] and I had landed at the Patna airport on the evening of 15th April, 2007. We were on a field visit to Bihar for eight days to see the work of Arghyam's partners.

Our flight had been delayed considerably and Sunita's bags had not arrived, which led to an impromptu stop at a generator-lit shopping strip nearby. So, when we started on our journey to Khagaria district it was already dark. However, our amiable host, Prem Kumar Varma of our local CSO partner Samata,[x] assured us it was fine and off we went in the sturdy Scorpio taxi. On the way, Premji, as he is widely known, regaled us with many stories from the Sampoorna Kranti (Total

Revolution) movement spearheaded by Jayaprakash Narayan[1], to the state of contemporary Bihar, its desperate poverty, and the then highly active Naxalite movement.[2] "Just yesterday," he said, "Maoists had clashes with villagers; homes were lit and trashed; and dozens were killed." "Er, where was this?" asked Sunita nervously. "I'll show you tomorrow, that's where we are headed now," he replied sanguinely.

It was during this memorable drive that Premji shared his core understanding of contemporary India and the power shifts that had taken place over the years. "In the good old days, Samaaj used to be on top. In some sense, the Sarkaar was below it, even in kingdoms and fiefdoms, as the representatives of the Sarkaar would carry out Samaaj-related functions and Samaaj had its own strong organizational structure. The Bazaar was well below the Sarkaar," he opined. Although I was not sure about his theory of 'the good old days', we listened in fascination as the Scorpio ate up the miles and the dust. Behind us, loaded trucks and petrol tankers blared their horns on the national highway, their headlights blinding us all.

"During the British Raj, the Sarkaar climbed up to the top of this triad," he continued. "Samaaj was forcefully pushed to second place and the Bazaar stayed at the bottom. Post-Independence, this continued, but with a nascent struggle between Samaaj and Bazaar. Bazaar was trying to get closer to the Sarkaar. People had been left pauperized and weak. After globalization and liberalization, the reversal is now complete," Premji declared. "The Bazaar has managed to move past Samaaj and even Sarkaar. Now Bazaar is on top, Sarkaar is in the middle and Samaaj is in third place. That leaves Samaaj completely *shoshit* (exploited), unable even to defend and help itself."

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[1] The Sampoorna Kranti revolution was a political movement that began in Bihar in 1974 against state misrule and corruption.

[2] The Naxalite movement began as a people's revolt in West Bengal in the 1960s and has since spread to other states. Maoist groups known as Naxalites have been engaged in an ongoing conflict with the government since then.

Premji's story and this framework of the Samaaj, Sarkaar, and Bazaar had a powerful impact on me. Five days later, I experienced another poignant moment when I visited Bhitiharwa, Gandhiji's first ashram in India, and stood in tears in front of a plaque with my grandfather's name. It was exactly 90 years since my grandfather, Babasaheb Soman, had joined Gandhiji there in 1917, leaving his work and family to join the Champaran agitation. And over the next few days, as we witnessed the deep poverty of the people, the flood economy, the latent violence of the Naxalite movement, the brutal response of the state, and the early signs of big business making inroads into Bihar, I had a lot of time to let Premji's words sink in. When I returned, I started to do my own reading on the changing relationships and power equations between these three sectors. I started to develop and refine this framing, which has since become the cornerstone of my work. I owe a great debt to Premji for setting me off on this journey.

Around the same time, another one of my mentors, Anupam Mishra, who was then the Director of The Gandhi Peace Foundation[xi] and an expert on traditional water conservation practices, had also inspired me to see the power of Samaaj in a new light. An incredible storyteller, he would regale us at Arghyam with tales from the pre-colonial era, when communities, especially in water-scarce geographies, had developed ingenious ways to conserve and share precious water resources. The real work ahead, he would say, was to restore the confidence of people in their own abilities to manage key natural resources. He spent years documenting traditional rainwater harvesting practices in Rajasthan. Along with many protégées like Farhad Contractor,[3] he demonstrated how, with very few resources, it was possible to bind Samaaj together with an inclusive vision and a practical action plan. He guided the collective action needed to

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[3] Farhad Contractor is the founder of Sambhaav Trust, a voluntary organisation that works on reviving and strengthening ecologies. He is a water and forest conservationist.

conserve every drop of the scanty rainfall that fell over the land.

One fascinating custom they helped revive was the *laash*. This is a tradition where villagers invite neighbours from surrounding villages to help complete a public project such as digging a water body, with their *shramdaan* (labour as a gift). These reciprocal events were always replete with a feast courtesy of the host village, and much merriment after the work was done. The *laash* system was the key to community harmony, resilience, and sustainability. Anupamji's narrative always rescued hope from the tyranny of despair. It led us to understand how communities could take back the locus of control and how Samaaj could reclaim its rightful space, which had too often been yielded to the Sarkaar or the Bazaar.

I was also lucky to have friends like Rajni Bakshi, the Gandhian scholar and author of books like *Bapu Kuti: Journeys in Rediscovery of Gandhi*[xii] and *Bazaars, Conversations and Freedom.*[xiii] For years, we had been talking almost daily about issues of Samaaj, individual action, and eco-political life. Slowly, under the guidance of many experts like her, Arghyam began to root itself in a new understanding. Here's just one example from the many innovations Arghyam was able to back – together with hydrologists and other scientists, we supported communities across India to practice Participatory Ground Water Management (PGWM).[xiv] Our CSO partners helped make invisible ground water visible, and trained village communities to understand local aquifers and develop sound processes to use the finite, though renewable, water more sustainably. Slowly but surely, many models developed across the diverse hydro-geologies around the country. And the PGWM mandate found its way into policy documents for water management at all levels of the state. Together, we had found a way to work with Samaaj to influence the Sarkaar.

This people-first, society-first approach began to infuse all aspects of my philanthropy over the next few years. As I went beyond Arghyam and water, to support issues of access to justice, gender equity, independent media, active citizenship, and the environment, it became increasingly clear to me that strengthening Samaaj in all its facets was critical in my quest for the good society that I wanted to be a part of. So, we looked for the best ideas, individuals, and institutions that were working to resolve social issues from within society itself. We looked for leaders who were passionate, committed, and of high integrity – and we found so many. Importantly, no matter which sector we work in or support, the single thread that unites it all is the desire to build a strong, resilient Samaaj.

Today in many societies around the world, there has been rapidly escalating economic inequality, with the staggering rise in the wealth of the top 1%, ironically even during the pandemic. This has invited a rethink on the role and responsibility of wealth. I believe no Samaaj can tolerate the rise of such wealth for too long, unless such wealth creation is seen and believed to be acting in the public or national interest. Charity and strategic philanthropy can both play a critical role in mitigating some inequity. In fact, civil society organizations depend on the moral imagination of the privately wealthy to carry out their societal work. In India, there has long been a tradition of giving forward, but the wealthy can and need to do far more. A healthy Samaaj requires such corrections by private citizens, when an imbalance in the Sarkaar and Bazaar creates too much personal wealth in too few hands. It is with this in mind that we give forward from what we have been given.

### The Evolution of Samaaj

I began to write and speak on this subject of Samaaj as the foundational

sector, tentatively at first, but I hope, with mounting confidence from my own experiences and experimentation. This book puts together 15 years of the evolution of my thinking on the dynamic continuum of Samaaj, Sarkaar, and Bazaar.

Of course, with a subject like this which encompasses all human interplay, I concede that there is a high likelihood of generalization, oversimplification, reductionism, and the exclusion of vital historical trends. I beg the reader's indulgence. I write as a concerned citizen and not as a scholar. I also wish to acknowledge that I am by no means the first person, and certainly not the most erudite person, to talk or write of the intersection of the three sectors of the state, markets, and society. Many others have acknowledged this continuum, and the ebb and flow of exchanges and power dynamics between the three elements.

Early modern philosophers like Thomas Hobbes[xv] and John Locke[xvi] theorized that a civil society, the community that maintained civil life and virtues, must coexist with the state and that political power must be held in check to prevent instability. With the emergence of a robust market force, Rudolf Steiner, an early 20th century social reformer, expanded on this idea. He proposed a theory called 'social threefolding'[xvii] where he distinguished between the political, economic, and cultural spheres of society and argued that when each balanced and corrected the other, social progress would ensue.

Nicanor Perlas echoes the same idea in his book, *Shaping Globalization: Civil Society, Cultural Power, and Threefolding,*[xviii] where he shows how global civil society can leverage its power to shape the political and economic realms. Steve Waddell explores another version of this idea in his book, *Societal Learning and Change: How Governments, Business and Civil Society are Creating Solutions to Complex*

*Multi-Stakeholder Problems*[xix]. In it, he asks what makes a successful society and how we can ensure that the three societal subsystems – the political system, the economic system, and the social system – can integrate with each other. In the Indian context, Raghuram Rajan's *The Third Pillar: How Markets and the State Leave the Community Behind*[xx] examines how the three sectors interact and what can be done to address power imbalances in this continuum.

It is into this abundant ocean filled by so many thinkers, philosophers, economists, and experts, that I would like to humbly add my few drops. I hope it will add some value to the ongoing discourse on the roles of the state, the market, and society. I also hope that it will serve as an invitation to others to add their own interpretations and ideas.

At the heart of my work is the belief that we are all citizens first, rather than simply subjects of the state or consumers of the markets. Even during the reign of monarchs, people interacted freely as civilians or *nagariks* and only identified as subjects when the gaze of the king turned to them. The Samaaj sector comes first, after all. The Sarkaar and Bazaar were created over millennia to serve an evolving human society and the larger public interest. Even when we act as representatives of the state or the market, we do not forgo our rights and duties as citizens. When we leave our places of work, we return home as citizens, as members of the public, as humans in a collective. All individuals, regardless of their position in the current power structure, need to belong to a society in which they can exercise agency and freedom, and thrive in the association of other citizens.

We must recognize that representational power is limited and fluid. For example, a government official who might accept bribes because everyone else does, will still want a bribe-free atmosphere when his children go to school. A manufacturer whose production process

might pollute natural resources, will still want clean air and water for his family. Everyone needs a better society, a better Samaaj, to reach their potential and create the best opportunities for their families. If we forget that we are members of society first and foremost, and instead see ourselves as mere beneficiaries of the state or as mere consumers of the market in search of a better material life, then we endanger the foundational supremacy of Samaaj. And that inevitably will endanger our own interest over time, both as individuals and as communities.

By no means am I suggesting that Samaaj is a monolith with uniform interests. Samaaj is a patchwork quilt, made up of so many threads and patterns, stitched together by time and events. We cannot afford to idealize Samaaj. In India, we continue to struggle against a structured hierarchy of caste that can dehumanize Dalits and other so-called backward castes. There are still millions of Adivasis[4] whose wisdom we have been unable to recognize, whose forest-dwelling rights are ignored and whose desires and ambitions society has been unable to accommodate. Women everywhere still must assert their right to equality in every sphere. Similarly, there are other minorities who feel threatened and pushed back. Perhaps Samaaj has not evolved too much beyond the metaphor of the warring tribes. Throughout history, there have been instances when some Samaaj actors have taken the law into their own hands, resulting in vigilantism and violence, or where the majority has stifled the minority into subjugation. We are seeing some resurgence of these trends in many parts of the world.

It is precisely the conflicts from competing interests within Samaaj that required the creation of the state for maintaining a rule of law, and the creation of the markets for defining value and coordinating exchange. In fact, much of the work ahead may be to resolve

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4 *Indigenous communities*

emerging conflicts of identity, power, and resource sharing within Samaaj entities themselves. Yet, I resolutely believe that these issues will have to be settled sustainably within the realms of the Samaaj space, no matter how long it may take. We, as citizens, cannot delegate or offload these responsibilities to the state or to markets. Sarkaar cannot and should not be the sole arbiter of peace and justice; and the Bazaar cannot and should not be the sole provider of community goods and services. For true equity and justice to prevail, it should be elements within Samaaj that assert moral leadership and maintain harmony; that unleash social innovation; and that sustain an atmosphere of respectful social association.

There is much to mine from India's highly diverse Samaaj, with its 5000-year-old history replete with tensions, differences, trade-offs, and periods of harmony. In his essay, *'Bharatvarshiya Samaj'*, Rabindranath Tagore describes how Indians built their unity not around state powers but around a diverse society. Quoted in Rudrangshu Mukherjee's book, *Tagore and Gandhi*,[xxi] Tagore writes, "In our country, the samaj stands above all else. In other countries, the nation has preserved itself through many revolutions and emerged victorious. In our country, the samaj has protected itself for a longer period of time against all sorts of crises." Explaining Tagore's position, Mukherjee says, "Welfare was not the responsibility of the state but the collective or common responsibility of all human beings. The samaj was not something above the human being but was constituted by human beings whose humanity was constituted by the samaj." The poet was exhorting his countrymen to rise from self-interest to reciprocity. In my small way, I wish to echo the urgency to organize society towards this moral and strategic imperative.

Another Indian figure who prodded and inspired people to participate in their own liberation was Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi. Whether

it was through civil disobedience with the simple act of picking up a fistful of salt, or through exhortations like the Quit India Movement[5] he deeply understood the primacy of people in achieving *swarajya*, i.e., rule of the self, not only over the colonial oppressor, but over one's own prejudices and passions. "Swarajya," he said, "is to be attained by educating the masses to a sense of their capacity to regulate and control authority."[xxii] For him, an ideal society would opt for a local self-government leading to as much self-reliance as possible.

## Reclaiming Our Role as Citizens

As India marched past monarchy and colonialism to become a democratic nation state, we have seen the massive expansion of the regulatory state and the globalized market sector. Civil society has also expanded into millions of established entities from the arena of sports to the struggles for social justice. It is now imperative that we reimagine the balance between all three sectors. While I do believe that Samaaj must be clearly seen as the foundational sector, there is a tremendous synergy with the other two. After all, it is in the interest of the markets and civil society to work together to ensure that the state does not overreach in exerting its power. Meanwhile, the markets have a vested interest in avoiding societal upheaval and therefore need to support civil society institutions that maintain peace and stability. On the other hand, if actors in the Bazaar stifle competition, mistreat employees, or create negative externalities, the Sarkaar and Samaaj must step in and hold them accountable. Similarly, the state and markets can also work together to ensure a robust economy and society, through good government policy and market innovation that creates better consumer goods and services.

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[5] *The Quit India Movement was a mass protest launched in 1942 and spearheaded by Mahatma Gandhi and the All India Congress Committee. They demanded an end to British colonial rule in India.*

When the three sectors do not fulfil these roles and responsibilities, when they do not nurture these partnerships, there can be severe imbalances of power, which eventually affect Samaaj the most. Such imbalances can lead to market crashes and recessions, the curtailing of civil liberties and discrimination, increased lawlessness, environmental destruction, and even war. We have witnessed these shifts in power very clearly over the last century. Following World War II, the state's power increased exponentially and new globalized companies working in tandem with governments, accrued more control over the marketplace than ever before.

In this century, that trend has continued with big tech companies becoming arbiters of consumer destiny and the state exploiting advancing technologies for more surveillance power over citizens. Recent years have seen wealth disparities increase significantly, widening the economic gap between classes. The rise of authoritarian governments globally has led to increased discrimination and fears of civil liberties being curtailed. The worst-case scenario can unfold when big government and big markets work closely together, because that combined big power leaves society and individual citizens with very little space to assert their rights. To add to this, the digital revolution has unleashed an exponential increase in misinformation and hate speech,[xxiii] fracturing Samaaj[xxiv] even further. And the ongoing pandemic and future ecological crises might exacerbate existing divisions.

This is not to suggest that no good has come out of these power shifts. We have seen a huge wave of innovation that has been unleashed, the welfare state has reached new heights in dispensing social benefits, and millions of people have escaped crushing poverty around the world.[xxv] Globally, as well as in India, there has been a wave of collective action, from the #MeToo campaign,[6] to anti-

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[6] _The #MeToo movement is a global campaign against sexual abuse, sexual harassment, and rape culture._

corruption movements and massive protests against authoritarianism, signalling a civil society that is intent on making its voice heard. But the question we must ask ourselves is whether our Samaaj is strong enough to push back successfully and effectively – through its institutions, moral leadership, and public movements – against the enormous power accrued by the state and markets. To me, the quest for a good society begins with strengthening those forces and sparking the realization that we are citizens first and that we must actively work towards addressing the socio-political, ecological, and economic issues that we individually and collectively face today.

Given the complex societal problems of contemporary India, we need all three sectors to work in tandem and with mutual respect. However, many citizens do not believe in their own power. They act as innocent consumers of a sometimes-rapacious market. They believe that they bear no responsibility in governance; that they should simply benefit from it without co-creating the good governance they crave. Through many of my field visits, I have often heard citizens complain about dirt on their streets, the rise in corruption, or the state of their neighbourhood parks and public facilities. In frustration, they say, "This is the job of the government, the work of the municipality. They just don't do it!" There is little self-reflection on the role of the citizen to prevent the problem from snowballing beyond the state's capacity to resolve it. If citizens stopped littering, took collective action against bribes, or created local committees to care for parks, everyone would benefit. There is a natural limit to what the state can do.

It is almost impossible for activities of the state to effectively solve the problem of the last citizen, or what we refer to as the first mile. Nor, in an ideal balance, should its role extend so much that citizens are totally dependent on the state for their own welfare. We have already gone through the questionable impact of what was known as

a *mai-baap sarkaar* (benevolent parental government) a few decades ago, when the poor had to be totally dependent on the largesse of handouts from the state. When citizens simply wait for the state to solve their problems, they lose their sense of agency; they feel helpless and hopeless. I have witnessed first-hand the differences between an apathetic community and those that band together to create solutions for themselves. For example, in east Bihar, which receives abundant rainfall, people were still unable to harvest it for safe lifeline water. Whereas in parts of Kutch in Gujarat, communities worked together to safely catch every drop of scanty rain to last them the rest of the year. Similarly, I have seen communities that enthusiastically ensure all the children are enrolled in schools and learning, and others that simply leave children to their fate in underperforming local schools. Maybe this apathy stems from being unable to see a path to self-efficacy, or from an excessive belief in the efficacy of the state or the markets.

There is also some confusion among citizens about the role of elected representatives. When my husband, Nandan Nilekani, ran for a Lok Sabha seat in the South Bangalore constituency during the 2014 general elections, we got a ringside seat to the grand spectacle of our electoral politics. As a campaigner, I walked around for hours in the searing heat of March and April. I had to learn many steps in the delicate dance of democracy. Chief among those lessons was the realization of the expectations that the electorate has for those they vote into power. Without overgeneralizing, I can safely say that most voters wanted their politicians – whether at the local level as councillors of the municipality, as MLAs in the state government, or as MPs in the union government – to deliver local services and improve their daily lives. Whether they lived in low-income settlements or high rises, they all expected direct delivery of better infrastructure, increased safety, more healthcare, and improved access to resources

like water. Not once did anyone refer to the role of MPs as legislators who are mandated to play a role in framing good laws for the country that would help Samaaj and Bazaar to work effectively with the Sarkaar.

Nandan lost the election, although he got a heartening number of votes. But as I reflected on the many interactions I had over those intense months, I realized how far we still are from the lofty ideas of the Westminster model of parliamentary democracy enshrined in our constitution. Our electorate expects too little from their politicians as lawmakers, even as they demand too much of the services that fall outside of politicians' roles. They are not holding politicians to their highest deliverables – to listen and represent constituencies, to frame good laws and enable their implementation, to maintain peace and harmony, and to help ensure inclusive justice and prosperity for all. This may be because politicians too have not been able to shape the narrative around their roles. It may be due to the gap between citizens' immediate expectations of rewards and an abstract idea of broader justice, or because citizens don't feel inspired enough to solve local problems on their own. Whatever the reasons, the outcome is the same – we have enabled a political class that is happy to keep citizens grasping at straws and a Samaaj that takes a very short-term view of the usefulness of our electoral democracy and the power of their vote. It leaves us with a political system that locks in citizens as beneficiaries of the government rather than as co-creators of good governance.

**The Potential of an Active Samaaj**

There is an urgent need for a shift in our thinking. The strength of our democracy depends on an active and engaged citizenry. The pandemic has shown us how powerful society can be when it works together with the state and private entities to bridge service gaps and

create innovative solutions for immediate challenges. Citizens who are empowered can work together with an agility and speed that the state and markets simply cannot match. Can Samaaj now take the lead to redress the imbalances within itself first, and then between itself and the state and markets?

Fortunately, we have a long tradition of social movements, and even today, thousands of civil society organizations in India actively focus on inclusion and empowerment. In the '70s and '80s, we saw the spread of the Chipko movement, a powerful community model to save ancient forests from felling by corporates with government sanction. In the late '80s, we also celebrated the emergence of the self-help group movement in India, which eventually drew in more than 60 million women to harness their social collateral to improve their social and economic lives. In these last two decades, we can applaud the emergence of young leaders with new ideas and perhaps less ideological baggage, who are forging new institutions that can trigger active citizenship. For example, organizations like Haiyya[xxvi] are empowering young leaders, civic associations, advocacy groups, and social movements. They are teaching them how to organize communities and drive change through campaigning and leadership development across issues of social-political-economic development. Another organization, Civis,[xxvii] harnesses the energy of citizens to better inform policies, by digitally enabling over 16,000 people to provide contextual inputs on policies that have been placed in the public domain for comments. Reap Benefit's[xxviii] Solve Ninja[xxix] program has engaged over 50,000 young people who are taking actions to resolve local civic issues, from clearing garbage to getting the municipal corporation to fix potholes. There are many other such organizations, hundreds of which we know directly and greatly respect, that help distribute the ability to solve, contextually and locally.

At the same time, it is important to stress here that the work of Samaaj is not the work of a few organizations alone. While CSOs energize and enable Samaaj, it is ordinary people, volunteers from every nook and cranny of the country, that are the real bedrock of society. Volunteerism is thriving in India, most often encouraged by faith-based groups, ideology-based groups, or unions. Some examples are social movements and membership-based organizations such as the Swami Vivekananda Youth Movement (SVYM),[xxx] Ekta Parishad,[xxxi] the Mazdoor Kisan Shakti Sanghatan,[xxxii] and the Self-Employed Women's Association (SEWA).[xxxiii] Many other organizations draw tens of thousands of citizens into social service on a routine basis.

Much has been written about the societal contributions of faith-based organizations such as the Ramakrishna Mission, the Sathya Sai institutions, the Art of Living institutions, the Missionaries of Charity, Sikh Aid and the Isha Foundation projects, among countless others. They have inspired a whole new group of volunteers from the professional class at an impressive scale. Each of them, including the outreach arms of the millions of temples, mosques, churches, and gurdwaras have a strong role to play in their communities, as they often reach the most vulnerable with the bare necessities of life. Together with other ideology-based organizations and social affinity groups, they foster the social capital that people can bank upon. In his book, *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community,*[xxxiv] Robert Putnam looks at the role of religious institutions and labour unions in fostering social solidarity and connectedness – two factors that drive social trust and in turn societal resilience.

There is still untapped potential in India to engage individual citizens in positive collective action. We have seen glimpses of this rich hidden trove only recently. The award winning national 'Bell Bajao' campaign by Breakthrough[xxxv] reached 130 million viewers, inspiring many to

stand up against domestic physical abuse. Via Change.org,[xxxvi] millions have signed online petitions to trigger policy changes, sometimes with quick results. The 'Loha' campaign for contributions to the Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel Statue of Unity in 2013-14 was one of the largest social mobilization campaigns in the world. Over 100 tonnes of iron were donated by India's farming community to support the project. The voluntary renunciation of the LPG subsidy by 10 million citizens in the 'Give it Up' Ujjwala campaign in 2015 is another expression of the power of our Samaaj.

Not so long ago, such social missions had to be coordinated in the physical world. In just three decades, so much of the world has gone digital. A new global digital commons has sprouted digital communities, large and small, local, national, and international, creating new forms of social bonding.

Will this create the opportunity for a more harmonized global Samaaj? The most recent example of this potential was seen in response to the pandemic. While the Sarkaar and Bazaar struggled to respond to the scale of the crisis, citizens and CSOs were able to serve as emergency responders, organizing aid for complete strangers by collaborating effectively across boundaries. Digital platforms like WhatsApp and crowd-funding platforms like Milaap[xxxvii] and GiveIndia[xxxviii] were critical to this response. The pandemic offered us a glimpse of what a resilient, resourceful, and responsive Samaaj can do, by leveraging technology for good.

### Co-Creating an Inclusive Future

In this digital age, technological innovation has further compounded the complex relationship between Samaaj, Sarkaar, and Bazaar, creating new challenges along with opportunities. For Samaaj, it has enhanced the opportunity for mass civic engagement. However, it

has also made empty clicktivism an easy replacement for true action. Unequal access and generational divides have created digital natives, digital immigrants, and digital outcasts.[7] Algorithms on social media platforms have amplified sensationalism and misinformation and have deepened political and social fissures. Many of us are bewildered by the consequent polarization we experience, inside our own families and in the wider public discourse. Meanwhile, the Bazaar and Sarkaar are in the throes of a war over control. Tech giants with enormous ambitions find newer ways to expand and monopolize the markets, while the state attempts to use blunt force to crack down on companies to keep them in check.

Experts describe the future as a "tele-everything" world, with yet unknown implications for society.[xxxix] Some foresee worsening economic inequality as the future will favour those with access to digital tools; an erosion of privacy as big tech firms exploit their market advantages and tech innovations such as artificial intelligence (AI); and the potential for social unrest as authoritarian leaders and polarized populations spread misinformation campaigns, lies, and hate speech. Others hope that the changes will make things better for Samaaj, enhancing the quality of life for many people, using AI and other tech innovations to help people live smarter and safer lives, and for new reforms to ensure social justice and equity.[xl]

Given the potential for many kinds of futures, from good to bad, it is critical for us to understand these rapidly changing digital trends so that we can leverage them to create and empower a digital Samaaj – one that will be able to ensure its rights and hold Sarkaar and Bazaar accountable in both the physical and virtual world. By no means can and should this digital Samaaj replace the vitality of our physical

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[7] *The term digital outcast was first introduced by Gareth White at the University of Sussex. He used it to describe people who are left behind the innovation curve with respect to new advances in technology.*

human interactions, which foster the empathy and exchange that make us whole. The digital world can only be complementary to the physical world, notwithstanding many science-fiction fantasies.

There are already billions of digital citizens, but there are many others waiting to migrate to the digital world to unlock value for their future lives. In India, there is much work ahead to bridge this digital divide.[xli] Civil society needs to step in to bridge this gap, as it has done over decades in other areas such as healthcare and education. It is important to imagine what a full digital citizenship can look like, so that new digital civil society institutions can spring up, building a pedagogy of values and approaches to create a more equitable society in both the digital and physical world. This could provide a faster pathway to economic democracy.

Unfortunately, India's civil society organizations have been reluctant to fully embrace the world of new technology. But they need to do so. Even to be able to critique its impact on society, even to play their true role as mirrors to society, they need to be a part of the digital world. There are too few CSOs that have developed the capability to do so, leaving Samaaj vulnerable to the unequal power structures created by big tech and big government.

Yet there is a huge opportunity to change that and make the digital arena a powerful space for Samaaj to reclaim its primary position. We need a digital Samaaj, with pockets of ethical leadership and deep technological knowledge. Civil society and its institutions will have to learn digitally to keep the Bazaar and Sarkaar of the digital age accountable to the larger public interest and to co-create better policies and new rules of engagement in the virtual world. If they succeed, I hope we can then move to a future which is technology-enabled and not technology-led;[xlii] where human destiny remains in

our own hands, and not in the control of algorithms. If we are able to achieve this, advancing technologies in the information, material and biological sciences can play a big part in helping tide over many new crises, including climate change.

I have had the great fortune to witness the work of all three sectors at close quarters. From a very young age, I was involved as an active, although impulsive, citizen in public life, whether it was by naively nudging people to not throw trash, or through the many opportunities for political discourse at college in Mumbai, when we were in the throes of the first real threat to our frail democracy in the late '70s. Later, I became involved with actual institutions of civil society such as Akshara Foundation, Pratham, Pratham Books and then, through philanthropy, with Arghyam and EkStep Foundation.[xliii] I met thousands of inspiring civic leaders and witnessed hundreds of CSOs doing their difficult jobs with intense passion and commitment.

Thanks to my husband Nandan's corporate career and the idea of Infosys[xliv] shining large on our personal lives, I have also met hundreds of business leaders and professionals, many of whom share the pulsating dream of a prosperous nation. I have seen the deep motivation for efficiency and innovation, not just from boardroom executives but also from entrepreneurs on the street. I will never forget an experience on an island on the mighty Kosi River in Bihar, inhabited by people who felt stranded by their destiny. Quite overlooking the irony of our visit all the way from Bangalore, the local district magistrate had complained to us that without the bridge he had proposed to the government, he found it hard to go across to the islands and support the people there. But one ice cream seller saw no such hurdles. He and his trusty bicycle, loaded up with cold goodies, were with us on the sturdy little boat across the temporarily calm river. It was the Bazaar at its best, rewarded with the delighted

smiles of the little children with whom we were able to share the most delicious ice cream cones.

Again, thanks to Nandan's career in government, as the head of the UID-Aadhaar project[8] and also due to the many government partnerships we engaged with in all the institutions I have been a part of, I have closely observed how the government works at all levels, from urban local bodies and the panchayat to the state and the Union Government. I have seen how a well-crafted government program can capture the imagination and raise the hopes of people everywhere. Certainly, programs like MGNREGA[9] have done so. MGNREGA sparked the zest of many government officials to co-create public infrastructure and brought dignity and relief to countless people.

As far as the UID project is concerned, an amusing incident occurred in the early days. Nandan and I were crossing a pedestrian walkway at the airport when a car heedlessly rushed by, forcing us to jump back onto the pavement. As we were recovering from the shock, a taxi driver nearby shouted, *"Sir, aap usko Aadhaar card mat dena!"* (Sir, don't issue him an Aadhaar card).

I have been truly privileged to meet hard-working, open-minded government officers right from the level of the Gram Panchayat accountant to the senior secretaries in Delhi. Despite the misaligned incentive structures, despite the arbitrary rules of their office, they persevere, optimistic about their ability to bring in positive change. It is to all these persistent people across Samaaj, Sarkaar, and Bazaar that I owe my optimism that we can build bridges (or cross in cycles on a boat) across our divides – with Samaaj hopefully sitting in the boatman's seat.

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*8 Unique Identification (UID)- Aadhaar project is a country-wide initiative by the Government of India to provide every citizen with a unique identification number, which can help them avail of services and benefits.*

*9 The Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (2005) or MGNREGA ensures the right to livelihood for citizens in rural areas, guaranteeing a minimum of 100 days of wage employment per household.*

# AN
## *ACTIVE*
## *SAMAAJ*

*Samaaj is the first and foundational sector and so it follows that we must begin unpacking this framework here. An active Samaaj implies a civil society that is engaged and participatory. It takes on the agency and responsibility of co-creating good governance and holding the state and markets accountable to the people that they serve.*

*In this section, you will find articles on the importance of citizen engagement, why it is crucial for Samaaj to safeguard individual agency, and how our personal choices affect the planet. This section offers thoughts on the need to re-imagine our cities, a new approach to gender empowerment that includes men as well, and the potential ramifications of the pandemic on our personal freedoms.*

# Many Questions for the Dinner Table

*This article was first published by The Hindu in July 2007.*

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**H**ow do we produce food? How do we distribute it? And how do we consume it? These are questions that are increasingly understood to be at the core of sustainable economies. And how we regard food, think about it and treat it, is clearly at the heart of sustainable well-being.

There is no time like the present in India to be thinking aloud on these issues. We are on the verge of a revolution in food retailing, procurement and distribution — much as the countries of the North were two decades ago. So we are at a vantage point when it comes to learning. It is critical that we understand from the actual experience of the developed world why they have put so many questions on the table now, about how they have dealt with food.

As we get more and more variety into our food markets at more and more affordable prices for those who can get in, we need to ask if this is a double-edged sword. Can we as consumers afford to be placid anymore? Here are some facts that could serve as wake-up calls:

Langoustines (large prawns) harvested in Scotland are flown to Thailand to be shelled by cheap labour, and flown back to be sold in Scotland. The United States exported $666 million worth of sugar and

imported sugar worth $188 million in 2002. And this is true of many countries which import and export the same product.

Far too many of the hungry people in the world are themselves producers of food. Obesity or self-starvation co-exist with real starvation — for example, in Lesotho 15 per cent of children under the age of five are underweight for their age and 21 per cent are overweight (WHO 2001).

What does all this mean for me, as I go to the market (or send someone there) to procure food for my family?

There are many complex ecosystems at play here, and many choices to be made about our development models in the face of urgent climate change issues. But no one in his right mind can make choices at a moment-to-moment level keeping the planet in mind. And so, while there is no one good answer, there are many good questions — maybe some that need to be discussed at the next family mealtime, whenever that might be. These are real dilemmas that the developed countries are beginning to ponder, and which the argumentative Indian can take to heart.

The first question has to be: How much should we eat? Should I eat more because I can afford it? If not, how do I define my limits?

And the bigger question, a very personal one that it might be even offensive to ask. Yet, we have seen that obesity is growing in India with its attendant diseases, such as diabetes. Hot on its heels is the bewilderment about real hunger and starvation in India. And while we cannot evoke the middle-class American mother's rebuke to her children in the 1960s to eat well because children are starving in India, we can begin to ask whether there is indeed any correlation between excess and access.

The second question, then, is: What should we eat? Traditional foods versus aspirational foods — do we know why we eat what we do? Food

habits across the world have always been in transition. The tomatoes and potatoes that we claim in our cuisine today came from other shores in a different kind of globalisation. What dictates our choices today? Is it convenience? Is it nutrition? Is it access? Is it one upmanship?

The bigger question: Why are both farmers and consumers, even in the lower socio-economic classes, deserting local crops such as ragi? Is it peer pressure? Or is it due to command-and control procurement, with high prices for some crops and not for others?

The third question: What is a good diet? This question has become more complex than ever before in human history, due to the development of standards and regulatory frameworks around personal consumption. The market has traded very well on fears that we may not be consuming this 'adequate diet.' "Am I getting enough Vitamin K? And what is Vitamin K?" Is choice a burden as much as a relief?

The bigger question: Why do so many people not have enough to eat? And why, even among people eating at least two meals a day, is there so much malnutrition?

Underlying these three big questions are even more questions, as more and more evidence crops up of a failed model, or at least an immature one. There are questions of equity and fair prices, and of proper accounting of the ecosystem services used in the production and the journey of food that will shake the very foundation of the business-as-usual paradigm. Yet, while we wait for the big changes to happen, there are small actions to be put into effect.

And so, is it worthwhile for us as we gather to eat our daily meal, to think about some key issues about the food at our table?

Organic: How is this item of food grown? Is it high on pesticides that

can harm me? Should we try to eat more organic foods? How will we know they are organic? Am I prepared to pay more?

Local: Should we try to eat more of what is grown locally? Locally across what geography? Is Ratnagiri local in Bangalore compared to London when I want to eat Alphonso mangoes? Or is it best to eat locally grown Neelam? How can I count food miles before every meal?

Vegetarian: How much meat should I consume? Since the meat industry has been harmful to the environment and inimical to animal welfare, and since overexploitation of fish is drying up the catch, should I go vegetarian? Or can I avoid red meat?

Carbon footprints and other global issues: Is my meal sustainable? For my family and for the planet? How much energy, water, land and other inputs went into my green beans? Or the corn I roasted for the kids?

These questions, if posed aggressively, are enough to turn family meals into nightmares. But if asked with some gentleness and a desire to find a better path, perhaps they can encourage families to dream. After all, these choices are real ones and put the locus of control firmly in our own hands as we lift them to our mouths. We should never underestimate the power and will of individuals, or that of united families. And as families begin to find some answers, governments and markets will listen and shape their policies, and their supply chains, to match them. ✕

# New Indignation, New Alignment

*This article was first published by Bangalore Bias in March 2015.*

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Sometimes, it seems as though much of the world is trying to crowd into Bangalore. Hold that thought. At almost seven million, our population in this city is already more than the population of new-age countries such as Ireland, and almost half of that of Chile.

Opportunities and desires are clustering together into this new world metro as nowhere else in India. Whether we like it or not. Apparently, we do not. Not one bit. Even if we ourselves came here only 10 years ago. Or yesterday. Now we are the legitimate Bangaloreans and everyone else the outsider trying to encroach on our diminishing comfort zone.

Talk to people, read the papers, listen to the radio. Everyone is puzzled about the apparently sudden collapse of the idea of the city. Infrastructure has become a focal issue. Or the lack of it has. And with good reason. No amount of political grandstanding can change the facts.

Bangalore has become a new city of the world in the past 10 years. There is a global buzz about Bangalore. It continues to attract people, business and dreams. And will no doubt continue to do so. Yet, its infrastructure metrics show it up in very poor light compared to other cities.

Just take Santiago, the capital city of Chile, a city of about six million, with a very strong local government and a thriving economy not dissimilar

to our own. It has gone through a growth spurt almost like ours. Yet, its infrastructure has managed to almost keep pace. Remarkably, 90% of its citizens have access to running water, sewerage, and garbage collection. There are multiple modes of transport. By contrast, these numbers decline to between 20% and 60% for different services in our metro.

What is the difference? Is there some magic wand that makes things work in Dublin and Santiago? Do they have a more innate understanding that the individual good resides in the public good? OF COURSE NOT. But, perhaps, there are critical differences between our civic culture and theirs. In both these cities, people are very vocal about their needs, their ideas. They drive for consensus on city development, sometimes through long and fractious debate. In Santiago, budgetary allocations are made through a prioritisation of basic infrastructure needs in different localities, with transparent and participatory processes of decision-making.

In this city, as we realise that we can no longer sit back, complain and expect an improving quality of life, things are beginning to stir quite nicely. I am delighted to watch the transformation of many people I know who would never have believed there was an activist within. We are asking questions about and from government that we never did before. What are your budgets for such and such, where are your budgets, what are your performance metrics?

We have hundreds of NGOs in this city and they have been galvanised in the recent past. Campaigns like CIVIC and Janaagraha are in full swing, asking citizens from every sector to come forward and claim a spot on the ringside of third-tier democracy. And it is working. We are actually getting a little bit involved. More people have debated and opined on the city's CDP [Clean Development Plan] than could have possibly been imagined even five years ago.

The political establishment has responded with its own salvos and quite rightly so. Unfortunately, it is more the state government than the city government that has been confronting the ire of the citizens of Bangalore. That too will change. Bangalore is maturing politically. Make no mistake about it. There is more dialogue and debate than there are protest marches and rioting. That is one positive sign.

Neighbourhood associations of all hues are filling the vacuum in local government where there are no ward committees. Assistant engineers and commissioners are in equal active engagement with citizen bodies. Elected representatives will follow suit as the pressure builds up. Could it be that a new idea of an old city that was built and almost lost is taking shape again?

Bangalore is unique in that its growth has come from a sudden burst of middle class, tax paying, high maintenance migrants along with an equal influx of poor, determined and hard working laborers. Both groups are talking a new language of demand and aspiration. Bangalore Vs. Bangalore? It is going to be messy, dramatic and long drawn. But something is in the air. A new indignation, a new self-confidence and new alignments. Maybe Bangalore will never look as seamless as Santiago. But this once and future city cannot be kept down for too long. ✕

# Want to Make a Difference? Then initiate it.

*This article was first published by Bangalore Bias in March 2015.*

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**G**ood governance is a term that has been used quite liberally in the past couple of decades, both internationally and in India. Even if we do not know its exact definition, we all know what we mean by the term. To most of us, it means that our government and the elected representatives work to create or enable the public infrastructure and services that allow citizens in a democracy to live their lives fully. We know it means that the government is accountable to citizens; that it should be transparent in its decision-making processes; that it upholds the rule of law. We know it means that there is universal access to justice and an independent, free media. Most crucially, we know it means a government and a society that manages painful but necessary trade-offs based on widely accepted principles of justice and inclusion. In the 21st century, good governance also requires a fair balance between short-term and long-term needs of humans, of other life forms and of the planet as a whole.

It is impossible, perhaps, to expect perfect governance. But many countries around the world have shown that it is possible to have a high level of it. Indians travel abroad in larger numbers each year, and surely it is no coincidence that they go mostly to countries with highly developed infrastructure and rule of law. They have witnessed just what

a difference it makes to public life when governments deliver and when civic institutions flourish.

Yet, we often lament that there is not much hope of seeing the same transformation in India any time soon. Perhaps we forget that those countries had to struggle for decades if not centuries to reach where they are. That it took good leadership, not just in politics, but also in civil society, in academia, in the courts, in the media. That it also took good "followership" of citizens who understood that you have to give up something to get something of a higher order, that you had to always do your bit to achieve a larger, more inclusive vision.

In many of those countries, there was also big philanthropic capital that went into supporting the innovations and the movements that brought about better governance. Movements for the rights of minorities, for protecting the environment, for changing regressive laws, for building new institutions of democracy; innovations through research and technology to make governments more transparent and accountable, and so on.

It is time now that Indian philanthropy supports Indian governance initiatives in a big way. The time is certainly ripe for it. There are hundreds of organizations with innovative ideas, with passion and commitment that are laying the foundations for improving governance in a myriad ways. Let's try and imagine what such initiatives could do.

What if one organization focused on enabling parliamentarians to better understand the issues being debated and the bills being tabled in Parliament? Would it not help members of Parliament (MPs) to make up their own mind on issues? Despite party whips and current law, which do not allow MPs to vote against their party's stand, would such empowerment push for changing such a retrograde law? Would we then

be a democracy in which we could directly influence our own MP to speak out for us and not necessarily only for the party?

And what if another organization simply decided to take the government's own data and show it to us in readable form? Not as lines and numbers and squiggles, but as data stories that tell us things we could not know from the way government presents its data to us? What if that way of splicing the data informed us that in fact, some programme which politicians like but taxpayers hate was in fact doing worse than was reported, or equally, what if taxpayers had to face that they got higher subsidies than the poorest of the poor? Would that help make politics become more about evidence and universal values?

And then, what if a group of highly qualified young lawyers decided that their energy was best spent trying to make sense of the world's longest, largest compendium of laws? What if they decided to work on making our legal structures more explainable, more contemporary, more integrated? Would it help ordinary people who run from pillar to post in the legal system actually get fairer and speedier recourse to justice?

What if a group of people worked long and hard with several panchayats, enabling them to become more autonomous and use the best management practices to deliver better on their obligations? What if that movement became viral as panchayat representatives and villagers saw the benefits from it?

What if some practitioners came together to pool data, to share best practices, and to work with governments and barefoot engineers to enable the conservation of India's one million springs, which provide local, reliable water to 75% of India's villages? What impact would that have on the growing water crisis and the governance of our key resource?

All over the country, there are people who are working on exactly these and other such problems. Together, it makes for a tantalizing possibility. If such people had sufficient support, what could they together achieve? How would the governance of our resources, our institutions, and our public delivery systems change? And what impact would that have on the dreams of a billion people?

The best way to find out is to support such efforts. After all, government alone cannot design good governance. If the privileged in society can use that privilege to privilege others, then the consequences can be tremendous. We cannot be mere consumers of good governance, we must be participants; we must be co-creators. There are no short cuts to this process. ✂

# The End of Secession: Why the elite withdrawal from public services is coming to an end

*This article was first published by The Times of India in November 2017.*

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**W**ith the approaching winter the air quality in many Indian cities, especially in Delhi, becomes a public health hazard. Something so fundamental as breathing easy can no longer be taken for granted. It's a wake-up call worthy of a civic revolution.

For decades now those who could afford it (very much including this writer), have seceded from public services. The Indian elite send their children to expensive private schools, bypassing the public school system. They have their own infrastructure for water, with sumps to store it, pumps to lift it, and fancy filters to de-risk from erratic, polluted government water. Most access private healthcare to bridge the health services deficit. Many have their own energy infrastructure, with diesel generators, solar plants, UPS and stabilisers, to safeguard against unpredictable energy supply. We have private cars and more rarely, private planes to bridge the public transport deficit.

The wealthy can vacation abroad and avoid poor domestic tourist facilities. Some have private security services to augment routine

police protection. Some even have access to high-end private capital, or alternate currencies, hidden away from the public gaze, bypassing public sector financial systems or open stock markets. Finally, the elite have their walled and gated communities, islands of efficiency in a sea of broken promises.

The middle classes, equally frustrated with the poor quality of government services, have also drifted into this private world, withdrawing children from government schools, and mustering their own solutions for water, health, energy, transport and finance.

But what has this meant for hundreds of millions of people who cannot or will not bypass goods and services that the modern nation state is supposed to provide, or at least enable for its citizens? It has meant that the quality of public services has remained stagnant or even deteriorated, as all citizens with voice and power have fled from them. This has made even more people flee, as soon as they can afford it, finally leaving public services to those who have little choice.

In Scandinavian countries, which practiced social democracy and have created common taxpayer funded health and education systems, everyone experiences a fairly high quality of public service delivery. There is tremendous pressure on the state to keep elevated standards since everyone has skin in the game. In India, those who could apply that pressure have simply exited from the service, and therefore have little stake in its improvement.

Government after government has spoken of deeper investments in public infrastructure but the demand and supply mismatch are so great that every new power plant, every new road, every new water pipeline is soon overwhelmed. Plus, in representative democracies, political parties tend to favor short-term goodies, neglecting long-term

needs. Government investments are also very vulnerable to capture by various lobbies that try to squeeze benefits for their own constituencies. Arguably though, the time for the richer Indian to secede has come to an end. The foul air in Delhi is a perfect example. It is a great leveler. Rich and poor alike must breathe in its health hazards. Facemasks and air purifiers can take the edge off, but quality of life declines regardless.

Issues of water are not far behind. The pollution of so many of India's rivers and aquifers affects everybody, no matter how many purifiers are installed. Urban floods and rural droughts have cascading effects on the whole population. Think of Chennai floods, or Punjab droughts.

Let's take transport. The fanciest Lamborghini can hardly race past potholed roads, traffic snarls and hazardous highways without personal risk. The lack of good healthcare and education for millions destroys lives but also comes back to encircle the elite by destroying the country's demographic dividend.

The list goes on. The wealthy cannot even escape the country easily anymore, what with tightening global movement across borders. There is, literally, nowhere left to hide.

This is a wonderful opportunity. The time is ripe for a full realization of the interconnectedness of a billion lives and destinies. The better off Indian can engage more deeply with political process to demand effectiveness from the institutions of the state. We can raise our voices for better education and healthcare, for better public infrastructure, for cleaner air. Not just for us, but for all citizens. For good governance is not something citizens can just consume; we must participate in its creation.

A quarter century of liberalization has given crores of people a chance at a new kind of prosperity. It has also left crores behind, thirsting for more but anticipating less. They cannot wait any more.

Public goods and services are at the heart of the transformation India needs to unleash. People with influence, power and a moral vision for this country must speak up loud and clear. It needs that and more to build strong public pressure on the political class and the executive. We can commit to a society where every resident experiences the same basic quality of life that we have been so far privileged with.

As we draw bad fumes into our nostrils, let our suffering lungs issue a call to serious action. Let's fight for all, not just some Indians to breathe and live free. ✗

# Want to Empower Women? Start thinking about how to help young men.

*This article was first published by India Development Review in December 2017.*

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Every day, we hear of horrible atrocities that have taken place against girls and women in India. This is despite the fact that as a country, we can boast of having some of the most progressive policies and civic movements. It is despite the fact that we have the world's largest pool of elected women representatives – adding up to more than one million across all tiers of government. It is despite the fact that tens of millions of women belong to self-help groups that are working to empower them. And, it is despite the fact that as a society, we are becoming more and more aware of our inherent gender bias and gender-based problems.

I wonder whether, in our work to empower young girls and women, we are ignoring one half of the problem, and therefore underestimating one half of the potential solution.

If there is a morally undeniable societal goal of *sarve bhavantu sukhinah* – "May all be happy" – then we need to think about the situation of the 200 million young men in this country. And we need to turn to them with as much urgency and focus as we spend on the millions of young women, and their multiple needs.

Globally, India has one of the largest cohorts of young men between the ages of 13 to 26 years. Their situation within the country however, needs to be addressed. Far too many of them are under-educated, under-employed and stuck in a low equilibrium. Far too few of them have positive role models and secure family lives.

In addition, most of them wrestle with the perception of masculinity, which, in a feudal society like ours, is very conditional. It is commonly believed that you are not masculine enough if you are emotional, sensitive, or compassionate; that you are not 'man enough' if you are not strong, if you are not the breadwinner in your family.

It is hard to escape these social beliefs, as they remain entrenched within communities and societies, even though the global idea of what it is to be a man is being redefined in the 21st century.

And so, we need to put an empathetic lens on, because if we don't, these issues will present a huge challenge to the country as a whole.

Even empowered women face violence. This is because empowerment of women alone is not enough. For change to occur, the ecosystem of power around women must be different.

We often talk of men as people who need to alter themselves so that women can be better off. However, we rarely offer concrete, innovative strategies for young men to face issues of patriarchy and masculinity head on and become their best selves. And the fact is, if we want that ecosystem of power around women to change, we need to help men be healthy, happy and supportive partners to women who are healthy, educated and earning.

We can continue all that is being done for women, and do much more for them, while also working with men. As a country looking to better engage our young boys and men, we can start with:

## 1. Creating Safe Spaces

We need to create safe platforms for young men to share their fears, their doubts, and their insecurities about sexuality, patriarchy, masculinity, and the burden of expectations they bear.

We need structured activities that are not only political or religious, but that get young men together to unlearn gender norms and learn equitable behaviour. It does not matter what the activity is – be it sports, music, theatre or even bird watching – so long as it allows young men to be free from narrow, negative, and gendered identities.

Many countries have examples of successful programmes that use sports, music, mentoring and more to deliver success in helping young men (especially teenagers) direct their energies positively, and build leadership potential. Programmes like El Sistema in Venezuela have successfully used classical music to help young boys find meaning in their lives. Similarly, the Big Brother programme in the United States allows young boys to be mentored by adults to help put them on the path to success.

In India, while there are some initiatives working with and for adolescent girls, there are too few state-sponsored programmes for adolescent boys, be it rural or urban. We need more imagination, more innovation and more public financing for projects and programmes that harness the positive energy of young men.

## 2. Re-defining the Legal Framework

Our legal frameworks need to step up to the challenge of a truly gender equitable society. Often, our laws and policies reflect patriarchal biases that can trap men in stereotypes – for example, the idea of guarding the modesty of a woman serves neither men nor women nor any other

gender – instead, it comes from the same strong patriarchal framework that we need to confront and reject.

### 3. Sensitising Skilling Programmes

The government and private sector are already running skilling programmes across the country. Integrating a gender lens into these initiatives to make them address questions of gender-based power structures in the work place, and sensitise both men and women to them, would be both cost-effective and societally useful.

### 4. Tapping into Organisations that Work with Girls

Civil society organisations that work with girls and women could be engaged with to share learnings, provide support and even aid in designing programmes for men and boys. For this to happen, philanthropy must come forward to actively support such organisations and innovation.

And so, while we have rightly worked on women's empowerment, perhaps we have missed an opportunity to include a key group whose fates are intertwined with women.

We need to support the few organisations working in this space. The young men of India need us to do more for them. We need to do it for men in their own right, and we need to do it even more urgently if we really want women to be empowered too. ✕

# The Impact of Samaaj on the Work of Sarkaar and Bazaar

*An excerpt from the speech addressing the eGovernments Foundation in July 2019.*

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**S**ince the past 25 years, I've been deeply involved in the civil society sector of India, which is very thriving and diverse. From listening to people, especially at the grassroots level, reading a lot, talking to people, and observing what's happening around us from the lens of Indian society, I have tried to create a certain philosophy for myself through which I can do my work and see the world.

So, the theory is fairly simple – that there is a continuum of Samaaj, Bazaar, and Sarkaar. But we must understand that Samaaj is the foundation, Samaaj is the pillar, Samaaj is the first sector, not the third sector, as people sometimes call it. And over centuries, Sarkaar and Bazaar developed in the service of the Samaaj. The Bazaar and Sarkaar evolved as responses to the needs of diverse societies.

We are citizens first, not consumers or subjects of states and kingdoms. The Bazaar and the Sarkaar are set up and are expected to be accountable to the larger needs of Samaaj. So, this is the starting point of all my philanthropic work which embeds itself in Samaaj and actors of Samaaj. eGovernments Foundation (eGov) is a Samaaj actor that is working with the Sarkaar and the Bazaar.

Over time, this dynamic between Samaaj, Bazaar, and Sarkaar obviously keeps evolving and shifting, and there have been many tugs. At the heart

of everything is always power and power structures. So, depending on how power structures are playing out, the fluidity, roles, responsibilities, and strength of these three sectors can keep changing. For example, my lessons from the last century is that both Bazaar and Sarkaar became very powerful and extremely oppressive in many parts of the world. With examples like Mao and Stalin, we have seen how the state began to get very powerful and took over people's lives, oppressing the Samaaj they should be serving. Post-World War II, as reconstruction was taking place all over the world, capitalism began to advance and make substantial inroads, to the point of even dismantling the Soviet Empire. The markets began to gain an increasing amount of power, which we can see even today. Back then, they called it the military-industrial complex, but the fact is that the market had acquired a lot of power even on the consumer side, affecting the Samaaj. Today we know what is being discussed – how a clutch of transnational corporations, tech companies who represent the market, have pretty much decided how we should think.

**An Age of Extremes**

The pendulum has swung too far that in many cases during the last century, we have observed the market and the state colluding. When that happens, Samaaj must remain happy with crumbs. So, this is really dangerous for Samaaj. And remember, Samaaj is not one homogenous unit. By Samaaj, I mean all the identities. Social identities that we hold, the human identities that we hold, the groupings that we hold, the institutions of society that exist – that's what I mean by Samaaj.

But today, we are finding that individuals in the Samaaj sector are really subject to enormous forces of the state and the Bazaar. In 25 years, with the Internet and the mobile phone revolution, we saw individual liberties being stretched so far as well. Anybody can do anything they want from

anywhere, at any time, and that includes the ability to spew hate and encourage violence, without any accountability. So, from the Samaaj side there are issues as well.

On the Samaaj side, we have begun to see a response to this kind of accumulation of power, which strangely enough gave individual liberty one last run in these last 25 years. I feel that we are in the middle of a huge societal correction, where we will see some new societal norms being formed around this notion of individual liberty, market power, and state authoritarianism in a digital age. I don't know where this will lead, but I can see the corrections happening, they look like upheavals right now. Recent advances in technology have led to the fear of the capture of our days, and our hearts, and our minds by the power of the Bazaar through technology and the surveillance state.

Now, while all of this is going on, a lot of other things are happening that are very positive as well. I really don't believe in black and whites unless I'm fighting with my husband, in which case I always do. But otherwise, a lot of very interesting things are happening in the Samaaj sector in response to this accumulation of power. Because when power accumulates, there's always a responsive force that tries to pull it back and maintain a dynamic balance. And so, you're seeing the emergence of many civil society actors around the globe who are responding to this accumulation of power by the state and the market. And that is the interesting space in which I work.

### Seeing Like a State

This brings me to the reason why this understanding is so crucial when thinking about organizations like eGovernments. I think eGov has done a fantastic job of working on the supply side for urban areas, which was so broken and almost non-existent before. The pioneering teams here did a

successful job of coming from good intentions and were able to gain the trust of the state at all its levels.

eGov was able to understand the political economy and work with the state's institutions, bureaucrats, administrators, and officials to ensure more transparency, efficiency and accountability. But this was done from inside, behind the walls of the state. In James Scott's book, *Seeing Like a State*, he talks about how the state needs to look after equity, since the market is naturally interested in profit. The main responsibility for maintaining equity on behalf of the Samaaj, falls to the state. However, while the state is mandated with the idea of equity, it often is more comfortable with efficiency. This is because efficiency is easy to measure, it is easy to design for, and it is a placeholder for equity. You feel like you're moving somewhere good when you try to put efficient systems in place. So that's what James Scott calls "seeing like a state."

Here, the state looks to organize citizens and issues in a way that is efficient and convenient to deal with. So, you try to create visibility for the state, and not so much for the people. Scott describes many experiments, including Le Corbusier's work, the collectivization of the farms in China, and similar land experiments in the Soviet Union. He talks about the redesign of agricultural places like Tanzania and scientific forestry in Germany as examples of actions that were designed to create efficiency for the state, but did not always translate into public benefit. Even with the best of intentions, the way the state sees us is very different from how we would like the state to see us. So, when eGov is sitting on this side, we have to always keep in mind the original intention of eGov is to genuinely make the state more accountable to the public good in the best way it can. So, no matter what all we do from the supply side, if we don't hold this as a principal value of the design of whatever supply-side work we do, you may end up with unintended consequences.

For example, the Grievance Redressal mechanism, even if it's designed efficiently, unless it actually works on the ground for citizens, it cannot be called a success. It may function beautifully from the state's point of view, and it makes bureaucrats work more efficiently, since they can process 1,000 complaints at a time instead of just one. So, while it brings efficiency, it may not bring equity, it may not bring well-being on the other side. This is why the lens of the Samaaj is crucial for eGov because you have come very far with bringing supply-side to some point where it understands its accountability, it understands the need for transparency, it understands how technology can transform the needs of the citizen.

So, now we need to identify the actors within Samaaj who can work with eGov to make sure that all the amazing groundwork they've been doing for 16 years gets translated into real public good. This might mean going back to the drawing board, to rethink the designs of some systems that are already in place. From the citizen's side, what are the challenges for them and how can we redesign to their benefit. When we want efficiency, standardizing systems is the most convenient thing to do, but in reality, these need to serve a diverse group of people. And if we're trying to look at Societal Platform Thinking, where the goal is to address complex societal problems, one of the principles of this is to hold on to and cater to that diversity. This applies to the context of eGov as well. Diversity is at the heart of resilience, so if we want to respect and understand the importance of diversity, especially in a place like India, then we have to be willing to design for that diversity at scale.

### Diversity at Scale

When we think of designing for diversity at scale, the challenge is figuring out how to standardize change. Cookie cutter standard mechanisms will kill diversity, but if you believe in diversity as a fundamental principle of

good design, then you have to design for diversity at scale. Within the Grievance Redressal mechanism, for instance, the diversity of language has been taken care of, but there may be other contextual, cultural things which we might need to redesign for, to make it effective for both state and citizen.

This is what we've tried to do at Pratham Books, where we decided it was time an Indian publisher was able to distribute and democratize the joy of reading. We kept this principle of diversity at scale, to unlock the potential of ordinary people who created a whole reading movement for the children of this country. There are 250 million children in India, the total population of many other countries. So how do we unlock the potential of parents, teachers, writers, illustrators, translators, editors, and storytellers, in order to make a movement of people? We did this by creating an open platform, a Creative Commons platform, which allowed everybody to participate, putting a book or a story in every child's hand.

Since I have left, the next team has done even better. Sometimes you have to leave so that the next creativity can come into an institution. And the next platform, called StoryWeaver, allows anybody, anywhere in the world to write and publish a story, to translate somebody else's story, and to illustrate somebody else's story. Of course, the original has to be acknowledged. You can print other people's stories, you can sell other people's stories, because once you take greed off the table, once you take certain power ideas off the table, you can unleash public good and creativity. So, tens of millions of children around the world have benefited by unleashing the imaginations of writers, artists, mothers, fathers, and teachers. But all of this comes from the philosophy that the Samaaj must form the base, and the Sarkaar and Bazaar should not oppress them. Instead, they should unleash the potential of Samaaj.

When we think about organizations like eGov, the time has come to shift to the Samaaj side and look at eGov's work from that lens. We need to strive to not see like a state, but see like a citizen.  ✕

# The World After Covid-19: Unless we are alert, the pandemic could become the last nail in individualism's coffin

*This article was first published by The Times of India in April 2020.*

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**F**or centuries, individualism or the notion that every human individual has intrinsic value has underlined ideas about societal organisation, the economy and justice. Recently, however, the primacy of the individual's inalienable rights and freedoms has come under immense pressure.

Individualism in the West originated from the Enlightenment. It believes in the moral worth of the individual and that his/ her interests should take precedence over the state or the social group. This birthed laissez faire capitalism, in which the individual is a free market agent.

Western style individualism has had its greatest run since World War II. Even with large parts of Europe behind the Iron Curtain, and even with China in pre-market mode, the sheer hegemony of the US ensured a bull run for the frontiersman idea of individualism – with the rugged, proud individual at its centre, spinning progress from the unbroken thread of his free will.

Another form of individualism was also at play in those same years, based on the belief system of Mahatma Gandhi and his mentors. Their

individualism had spiritual roots. Gandhi recognised that Western style individualism could end up as mere materialism. He saw the individual as an autonomous moral agent, not just someone with the means to fulfil personal desires. The individual's inviolable human rights are placed at the heart of societal progress. The focus is on the personhood of the last, most vulnerable human being, in whose name state and society would practice their dharma.

The first idea of individualism propelled furious innovation for three centuries. The entrepreneur, the creative artist, the public intellectual generated a global marketplace for ideas, products and services. Arguably, this generated more material prosperity for more people than ever before.

The second idea has driven the largest state and societal intervention of welfare and patronage to various vulnerable groups of individuals. It has been a grand experiment, though not fully realised, to leave each individual with social safety nets, while preserving his dignity and risk taking capacity.

However, over the past decade or more, individualism and the primacy of the individual have been seriously threatened.

There are three key reasons for this. The first is terrorism combined with economic collapse. When 9/11 happened, it changed things overnight, giving the biggest shock treatment to individual agency. People in the US, the absolute stronghold of individualism and libertarianism, had to give up many cherished freedoms and privacies in exchange for the promise of public safety. Then came the financial meltdown of 2008. In its wake, we entered a post-globalisation world, which coincided with the rise of authoritarian regimes that consolidated state power.

In many countries romantic patriotism, where an individual's love for the country could be expressed as honest criticism, shifted to a harder nationalism of 'my country, right or wrong'. Dissent was discouraged, and this nudged the independent individual further off the political stage.

The second reason is the rise of the internet giants with their massive social platforms. At first, these appeared to bulwark the primacy of the free individual. The anytime, anywhere, anything consumer was king. The labourer employee was now a self-employed entrepreneur; and the citizen was now a netizen, expressing his opinion around the world.

Unfortunately, individual choice turned out to be an illusion; a shimmering mirage. This was the beginning of what is now feared as surveillance capitalism, where the gig worker remains underpaid and overworked; the consumer is but a packet of data, and his free will can be bent by artificial intelligence. These same technologies also further enabled the surveillance state, shrinking the individual's rights and privacies at an alarming pace. Even an individual's vote, his most precious gift in an electoral democracy, has become an object of manipulation.

Third, the world has become even more interdependent. Climate change and air pollution know no borders, and antibiotics resistance respects no boundaries. Bacteria from Africa can make people in America sick. The burning of Indonesian forests can keep Asia gasping for breath.

Now, the Covid-19 pandemic might well be the last nail in the coffin of individualism, unless we are alert. It has quickly led us to surrender personal privileges and submit to the diktat of the state or the decisions of the proximate group – the apartment complex, the village and the city. We have rightly been willing to give up our individual freedoms, because we sense the danger from exercising this freedom willfully.

Frontiersman ideas of individualism stand exposed as we realise just how much our actions impact others.

But we must beware against losing the positive aspects of individualism. We must ensure that the individual identity is not subsumed by a coercive group unaccountable to larger structures or to the rule of law. It is one thing to obey a government order. It is quite another to succumb to resurrected irrational fears, especially of 'the other'. We are already witnessing the rise of vigilantism, and even mob rule. Fearful villagers ban all outsiders; doctors are prevented from returning to their urban homes; the policeman wields a lathi with impunity.

Such reactions to this pandemic could bring about the end of positive individualism for the foreseeable future. Samaaj must act quickly and creatively to recover the balance between individual agency and the collective good. No man is an island, but let's not undermine the intrinsic value of every individual human being. It is the foundation for all good societies. ✕

# Daan Utsav: Investing for a better 'Samaaj'

*This article was first published by Bloomberg Quint in October 2020.*

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**F**rom the beginning of October and through the end of December, our minds are more attuned to giving and sharing. The giving season starts with Gandhi's birthday and goes on well past Christmas. In between, there are many festivals of sharing, and gratitude, including Dassera and Diwali. India's Daan Utsav is well-timed to enhance the feeling of fellowship and to encourage people to open up their hearts, minds, and pockets.

This year, the pandemic gives us even more reason to share the burdens of others, and to practice kindness to strangers. We have learned in these past few months what the state and the markets can and cannot do for us. We have also learned what the samaaj or society can do. We have seen generosity pouring out across the country; we have seen a rise in the philanthropy of ordinary citizens, both in terms of their time and money. We have seen the civil society sector, and the voluntary sector, rise up to stem the worst of the suffering.

This is a beacon of hope in these bleak times. It is the signal in the midst of all the noise. It tells us that when people engage in concerted action to help others, then we are on a strong foundation to nurture a society that all of us, not just some of us, would like to live in and belong to. I have personally always structured my philanthropy around

this simple idea. If we can continue to build a good, resilient samaaj, which derives its energy from a moral leadership; which is inspired by the interconnectedness of our fates; and which is driven to co-create positive change, then we can face any future with the optimism that is unique to our human species.

So how do I help this idea along? Luckily, there are hundreds of organisations in India that are trying to do something similar: they want to help people become part of the solution rather than remain part of the problem. They want to unleash innovation, find change-makers, and support them to become leaders and institution builders. They want people to engage as citizens, especially at their local level and figure out how to come together to resolve societal issues. These cover a wide spectrum from water, health, education, livelihoods, public infrastructure, environment, and also issues of access and voice.

With my amazing team's help, I try to find and support ideas, individuals, and institutions that resonate with the vision of building a strong samaaj, a good samaaj, through personal action. We call this portfolio – Active Citizenship. Citizenship is typically seen through the lens of voting during elections, making claims of the state, and sometimes of active resistance.

But there is ample space for deepening this idea of citizenship. Here's just one example. We are a young nation coming of age in a digital era. This can upend the traditional imagination of citizenship and citizens' engagement. Emerging digital technologies, now widely adopted around the world, increase the possibility and space for participation. They can allow you to better understand your community's issues but also your own rights and duties. They can help find allies outside one's narrow circles. They can increase the discovery of other people's solutions.

Luckily, India's voluntary sector is just beginning to tap into this potential. There are many initiatives, both urban and rural, rising up from the samaaj, to expand citizen participation. There are instances of new, diverse institutions of the people – from neighbourhood societies to digital, issue-based affinity groups.

I have been able to support about a dozen wonderful organisations, most led by young, dynamic leaders. Organisations like India Rising Trust and Reap Benefit work to build more opportunities for civic engagement at scale, to solve hyper-local problems. Jhatkaa works to mobilise citizens around issues and help them take action. Other grantees work to reduce the friction between the citizen and the state. Civis is a platform that helps citizens understand and give feedback on drafts of legislation and government policies. Nyaaya works on the other side, helping citizens understand laws and regulations. Socratus Foundation for Collective Wisdom looks to understand wicked problems and bring all stakeholders together through a deliberative, outcome-oriented process.

I find great inspiration from the work of these leaders and institutions, no matter their size. I do believe that this space needs to be better seeded with magnanimous philanthropic capital. I hope much of it will come from small givers giving big. I hope some of it will come from big givers giving big. During and beyond Daan Utsav, we must support organisations that activate people to become better citizens – first for themselves, and then for society. So that we can all thrive in a better samaaj. ✕

# Stewards, not Bystanders: Civil society creates new opportunity to co-design cities

*This article was first published by Hindustan Times in December 2020.*

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**T**his year, I have been from Bengaluru to Kabini and back several times. Every time I return from the forest and the rural countryside, my eyes and senses hit refresh, and I see my home city with a new perspective.

The overwhelming impression is of a metro undergoing a painful renewal. Masses of threatening concrete overhead, piles of rubble underneath. And through this grey canvas, dots of colour as hapless citizens weave through the traffic, without proper visibility or signposts, navigating past trucks and haulers, moody traffic signals and perplexing roundabouts.

It feels as if Bengaluru, like so many other cities in India, is testing its residents. The unfinished infrastructure is a poster promise of a better future. The city demands patience, demands faith, demands hope. The residents experience resignation, weariness, and a lasting numbness.

When I finally get home, I enter an urban version of the forest I left behind – my neighbourhood has a dense canopy of trees. Yet Bengaluru is not homogenous, and my sylvan surroundings are an anomaly now in the erstwhile garden city. It has a criss-cross of diverse identities and designs. It has layers and layers of privilege on top and tiers of

disenfranchisement below. Yet, the dysfunctionality of the city creates a perverse equaliser. It brings an end to the secession of the elite. Our bubble breaks with the chaos of the traffic, the pervasive pollution and limitations on personal spaces.

But there are now new opportunities to engage with the city's future.

All over India, there are efforts inviting citizens to re-imagine belonging. To make the city their own. The discourse has firmly shifted from whether the city should grow to how it should grow and change, and who should participate in the change-making.

Today's technologies enable mass participation in civic design. In metropolitan areas and beyond, digital age civil society organisations (CSOs), often helmed by creative young leaders, use tech-enabled design to challenge the supremacy of the State in urban futures. Thriving Residents' Welfare Associations (RWAs) and dynamic CSOs seem determined to take back their city.

For example, during the lockdown, Yugantar filed a Right to Information (RTI) petition to find the total number of slums and their population in the Greater Hyderabad Municipal Corporation. This data was then shared with local NGOs to better target relief work. Haiyya, through a local campaign called Health over Stigma, helped hold service providers accountable for providing safe, non-judgmental sexual and reproductive health services, especially for unmarried women. Reap Benefit in Bengaluru has developed an open civic platform that comprises a WhatsApp chatbot, a web app and a civic forum. The chatbot guides users with simplified steps through a variety of civic challenges that are engaging and fun. If you see a pothole on the road, you can send photos, but go beyond reporting to next steps. A friendly technology helps convert agitation into action and turn bystanders into stewards.

Civis understands that technical environmental legislation can sometimes bypass civil society, even though we are all heavily impacted by environmental degradation. In March 2020, a draft notification with radical new rules was put up by the environment ministry for public consultation. Civis put up a simplified version and more people were able to directly participate in the consultation.

We must encourage these and many other samaaj-based efforts. More importantly, we must each find our own way to participate in these ventures. Democracy cannot be a spectator sport. Good governance must be co-created, not just consumed. No matter who you are, you are first a citizen. Even if you head a government department or a successful business — you remain a citizen first, a part of your community. And I believe it is only the samaaj and institutions of the samaaj that can hold the State accountable to the larger public interest of making our cities more livable for all.

Luckily, today's new technologies allow us to participate more effectively with relative ease. I am not talking about simple clicktivism, but how a tech-enabled, societal ecosystem can distribute the ability to solve; can democratise civic engagement; and can help people co-create their city's future.

However, there is an important caution here. We need civil society itself to get more digital in the digital age. Especially because only an engaged digital samaaj can keep tech corporations more accountable and prevent them from unleashing tools that distort the political and democratic process or reduce individual and collective agency. Urban movements are critical for this cause.

The pandemic has forced us to speed up our thinking on what cities should look like in the future. Citizens now have more opportunities to

take active part in building urban resilience. Young leaders are creating more options for empowered citizens to co-create more humane environments. When we return to the city from the forest, we should feel a buzz, not a burn. �

# *JUSTICE* AND *GOVERNANCE*
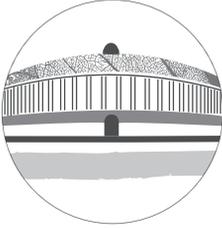
*Good laws and governance are the bedrock on which Samaaj, Sarkaar, and Bazaar can maintain cooperation and peace. It is therefore in the interest of all three sectors to uphold the rule of law. By fostering a Samaaj-driven ecosystem for justice and governance in India, we can ensure that our democracy remains vital and equitable.*

*This section expands on the importance of laws and how they affect ordinary citizens, the interest of the Bazaar in supporting the rule of law, and the primary responsibility of our politicians today. It also includes a suggestion to introduce more humour in our public life and asks us to consider the idea of justice and re-examine our laws accordingly.*

# Good Laws Make Good Societies: Unfortunately, we now have a spate of excessive legislation that criminalises ordinary citizens

*This article was first published by The Times of India in December 2019.*

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**T**he Union Cabinet recently cleared amendments to the Maintenance and Welfare of Parents and Senior Citizens Act, 2007. The amendments, according to reports, expand the list of those responsible for looking after aged family members. Now not just biological children, but also sons-in-law, daughters-in-law, adoptive and stepchildren will be liable. Official caregivers who fail to comply can face a jail term of up to six months, against the current maximum of three months, if these amendments become law.

As ordinary citizens, we don't spend much time reading about and thinking through the creation of new laws or amendments of old ones. We forget that the main constitutional responsibility of the MLAs and MPs that we vote for is law making, and oversight of the executive to implement those laws. During my husband's 2014 election campaign, I did not hear a single voter mention this aspect of the legislator's role. Most were concerned with local issues, which they felt helpless to address, and expected the MLA and MP to personally deliver on. Yet, it is good laws that make for the good, functional society that most voters crave. Good

laws are fair, do not discriminate against any group and are reasonably implementable. These create the very bedrock, on which samaaj, sarkaar and bazaar can maintain cooperation and peace; be more productive and reach for higher goals. Bad laws, on the other hand, can harass and persecute innocent people; put the burden of proof on the citizen instead of on the accuser or the state; give excessive punishment; and create an atmosphere of fear. They also create opportunities for rent seeking and corruption by putting excessive discriminatory power into the hands of enforcing authorities.

Once in a while, as in the Nirbhaya case, the broader middle classes get agitated and rightfully express rage and helplessness. This creates the environment for passing newer, harsher laws or amendments for terrible crimes. Unfortunately, there is little evidence that more severe punishment in the law acts as enough deterrence for future similar crimes. Recent events in Unnao and Hyderabad require us to pause and think, even as we grieve. Societies have debated the severity of punishment for vile acts over millennia, with complex moral arguments on both sides of the question. But citizens and society should pay more attention to the trend of over-criminalisation of common human failings and frailties. Some laws have moved issues from the civil to the criminal domain with severe penalties and jail sentences for non-compliance. This is by no means new. But recent Parliament sessions have been more productive than ever in terms of both attendance and legislation, though there has been very little substantive discussion on the Bills. And this has led to even more policies, bills and laws that fall into this category. Let's take a few examples, in addition to the proposed amendment on parent welfare.

The Banning of Cryptocurrency and Regulation of Official Digital Currency Bill, 2019 proposes up to 10 years in jail for possession and trading in cryptocurrency. Recent amendments to the Motor Vehicles Act

include prison terms for certain violations, such as driving an uninsured vehicle. The Muslim Women (Protection of Rights on Marriage) Act, 2019, declares triple talaq a criminal offence, punishable with 3 years' imprisonment. The Union government recently banned e-cigarettes and now, even just the storage of them can merit a jail term of up to six months for the very first offence. Offences on a private member's bill to prohibit Paan and Gutka similarly proposed a criminal liability of 10 years' imprisonment. The Central Goods and Services Tax Act, 2017, introduces greater scope for GST officers to arrest tax evaders and offences are non-bailable if the amount involved exceeds Rs 5 crore.

A similar attempt at criminalisation was made for non-compliance of the obligations for Corporate Social Responsibility. Every officer of the company in default could face imprisonment for up to 3 years. That received such a reaction from powerful corporate lobbies that it was withdrawn in a hurry. But not every policy or law has an affected constituency with such a direct line to the government as business does.

These are just some examples of a creeping trend that should worry us all. Criminal law may be quite unsuited to address many societal issues. Some of them are about inter-personal obligations and duties, such as the very basic duty to look after your own parents who gave you life. Others affect individuals and create private wrongs and may not require a public law remedy, or may have already a civil law remedy.

Equally importantly, if 'justice delayed is justice denied', we have to think of the implication of more and more offences that lead to more and more imprisonment. It takes up tremendous resources of the state. Our prison system is already over-crowded, with absolutely inhuman conditions. A majority of prisoners are under-trials, which means that their guilt has not yet been proven. None of us would like to be imprisoned without a just verdict.

Maybe it is time to reflect and reimagine what issues belong to samaaj to address, however slowly and painfully, and which must fall to the state or sarkaar to uphold. Meanwhile, let's communicate strongly to our legislators. Let's hold lawmakers accountable to draft, to pass and to uphold good laws that work for citizens and not against them. ✕

# Corporates Should Support the Rule of Law

*This article was first published by India Development Review in January 2020.*

I have often talked about the continuum of sarkaar, samaaj, and bazaar, and why, for a successful society, these three sectors must work together in a fine balance.

Ideally, sarkaar, or the state, should not grab too much power, bazaar, or the market, should not flout the rule of law or appropriate public resources, and vigilantes from the samaaj, or civil society, should not take the law into their own hands.

This requires awareness and active participation from all citizens. After all, we are citizens first; our primary identity is not as a subject of the state or as a consumer for the market. As citizens, how do we then help build a good society?

### The Bazaar's Interest in the Rule of Law

There are many interests between samaaj and sarkaar; bazaar and sarkaar; as well as between samaaj and bazaar. For the purpose of this article, we will examine the congruence of interest between samaaj (society) and bazaar (markets). And it starts with the rule of law.

We all want and need the rule of law to be upheld. In fact, the bazaar—or at least the modern corporation as we know it—would not exist if the rule of law had not created the limited liability company 300 years ago. This allowed innovation to flourish over the centuries, and also provided for the absorption of failure, because wherever there is innovation, there is failure. It is because of the rule of law that companies can fail without going under themselves; and therefore, for their own sake, corporations have a great stake in upholding it. They need the enforceability of contracts, protection of property, availability of fair competition, and so on, otherwise they simply cannot function. But even beyond this, they need the law to be upheld by society at large, because no business can thrive without social stability outside its gates.

Civil society and business therefore have more in common than either believe. Sure, in some cases, civil society has to position itself against business interests, when those interests are being deployed unfairly on the ground. For instance, in the case of public goods like water and land commons, or with environmental issues like pollution and contamination, civil society and business knock up against each other. But they also have a common concern—to keep the sarkaar in check.

**Keeping the Sarkaar in Check**

State power worldwide tends to accumulate, and it is to the advantage of both business and civil society, to make sure that the state does not abuse its own power.

Many corporations have been subject to the vagaries of state power while running their businesses; excessive discretionary power also adversely affects the climate in which businesses operate. If the alignment of samaaj and bazaar is understood and worked on, it helps restrain the state.

For example, civil society institutions and business corporations might together, or separately, appeal to the state on poorly framed laws. In the recent proposal to criminalise non-compliance of CSR, both samaaj and bazaar would have been adversely affected.

Both successfully voiced strong reservations against it, and it was rolled back.

We all need good laws, and an independent, impartial, and efficient judiciary to verify the constitutionality of those laws. We all require equal access to the justice system. We also need effective public institutions that help uphold the rule of law. It is the only way to both empower the bazaar and uphold the rights of the country's citizens.

The samaaj has an interest in the rule of law as well, as it is critical for addressing access issues, especially for the poor. Civil society organisations (CSOs) representing samaaj are often driven by passion and a commitment to rights and freedoms.

Sometimes, at great personal risk, they go up against the power of the state and corporations, to create campaigns, build institutions, and push for more agency for people who are left out. Civil society must however learn to communicate better the long-term benefits of such work to business.

Because, the bazaar itself cannot do this work. Though they benefit indirectly, corporations cannot support or implement politically sensitive programs, and risk the fallout of such action. It would make them vulnerable to all sorts of state action.

But they can certainly do more than what they're doing at the moment.

With the civil society institutions that they trust and already have a relationship with, they can, and should, give core institutional support

to continue work beyond project-based funding. Even if they do just this, it strengthens civil society capacity to take on issues of rights and exclusions that are adjacent to their work on service delivery.

**It's Time to Take Big Bets**

Swami Vivekananda said, "Take risks in your life. If you win, you can lead, if you lose, you can guide."

Indian philanthropy doesn't take enough risk. However, it cannot achieve its potential without risk-taking. It's good to keep honouring service delivery improvements, but it's time to look at our society as a whole, and for the philanthropic sector to step up and get into more important areas such as access to justice. And the congruent interest of samaaj and bazaar is exactly why.

From a recent Boston Consulting Group report—'Total Societal Impact-A New Lens for Strategy', it's clear that corporations which align with samaaj's ideals will be better off in the long run. There is now exhaustive research that shows that the non-financial side of business is linked to its financial side, and that companies that do well when it comes to ESG—environmental, social, and governance issues—also consistently show better results on their bottom line.

Can we—as corporations and philanthropists—pledge that we will no longer do only incremental work, but will try something transformational? The time has come to align self-interest and the public interest in support of the rule of law and constitutional values.

**The Common within Uncommon Ground**

It doesn't have to be the state versus civil society, or business versus civil society, or the state versus business. They are not necessarily antithetical to each other.

Society is successful when it reduces the friction for the three to co-create solutions. And it's important for all the three sectors to recognise that—to discover the common within the uncommon ground.

It is an especially opportune time for business and civil society to act more creatively from their own, unrecognised common ground. Poised at a new decade, we can together ensure that this country's solemn promise to itself—to secure liberty and justice, social, economic, and political—for all its citizens, will be met, and met in abundance. ✖

# Covid-19: Securing the Present and the Future

*This article was first published by Hindustan Times in March 2020.*

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**P**oliticians are elected because they campaign in poetry, but voters don't always account for the fact that elected representatives must govern in prose. That chasm between the promise and the delivery becomes more dangerous at times like these. Just like wartime generals have to be different from peacetime generals, crisis-time politicians have to step up from being normal-time politicians.

In times of the coronavirus pandemic (Covid-19), we need our leaders to assume new responsibilities. They must first educate themselves about the crisis by listening to, and learning from, experts. Then, they must communicate what they know to us, without creating undue alarm. They must be honest enough to admit their fallibility. They need to be inspirational enough to command our cooperation. They need to lobby for their own constituencies to get a share of central and shared resources. They need to transparently prioritise these resources for those who may need them most. They have to be frontline responders.

Simultaneously, they also have to safeguard the future. History has shown us that in crises, a centralised, and unaccountable leadership can emerge. Unless carefully managed, this can lead to a breakdown of trust between the government and the public. Other politicians must then

evolve into system leaders. They must safeguard democracy itself; to protect against a creeping authoritarianism that is hard to push back when normalcy returns. To do so, they must demonstrate the relevance of empowered local government.

Is it even possible for our politicians to step up to the plate? Will we allow them to, even if they wanted to try? Can voters respect the difficult situation their representatives find themselves in? Can we give them space to think ahead, even as they try to contain the immediate calamity?

Benjamin Disraeli once said, "The world is weary of statesmen whom democracy has degraded into politicians".

One reason for such a deterioration is that voters expect too much from representatives. Strangely, we barely hold them accountable for their primary duty as lawmakers. We don't always appreciate that good laws make for good societies, and that our representatives have the constitutional duty to help craft those good laws. Instead, most people expect their elected representatives to be at their beck and call, to provide patronage and brokerage, to help their communities through small but urgent hardships. It is a 24/7, largely thankless job for most politicians.

I saw this personally in my husband, Nandan Nilekani's, unsuccessful Lok Sabha campaign. He would imagine big possibilities for the country, which would also make people's lives much better. Most voters, though, asked about things that affected them in the here and now — whether a community hall could be built, or the speed bumps could be removed outside their gates or if the stray dogs would be taken care of.

Inevitably, voters feel frustrated when all these requests cannot be met. Sometimes, politicians give up on this impossible quest and ride roughshod over their constituencies. It is not too surprising that we have

politicians across all parties with criminal records, who keep getting re-elected, even from prison. Many have their troops of men to fulfil some of the basic wishes of the voters, keep things in check, and appear to be locally effective.

Of course, we still have several wonderful politicians. They work as hard as they possibly can to serve their people, help pass good laws, represent the interests of their constituents at every opportunity and also reach out and communicate with their voters.

We must help their tribe increase, especially now. American theologian and author James Freeman Clarke observed: "The difference between a politician and a statesman is that a politician thinks about the next election while the statesman thinks about the next generation."

There are wonderful instances from India's democratic history where India's statesmen have done just that. Former Prime Minister (PM) Jawaharlal Nehru's government built the nation's core infrastructure. PV Narasimha Rao's government opened up the economy for next-generation entrepreneurs. Atal Bihari Vajpayee's government filled critical gaps in the education system, and developed the nation's roads and telecommunication networks for today's digital or migrant citizen. Their eyes were pinned to the horizon.

The pandemic and the economic downturn that accompanies it offer a creative opportunity for politicians to become statesmen. As poet Muhammad Iqbal wrote, "Nations are born in the hearts of poets – they prosper and die in the hands of politicians." If our politicians focus on the word "prosper", and if voters allow politicians to do what statesmen must, perhaps this unprecedented crisis would serve to strengthen our democracy for future generations, and not to undermine it.

All over the world, people are looking to their leaders to guide them through the double whammy they are facing: the Covid-19 pandemic and the unfolding economic crisis. This has been probably the most challenging time for politicians since the World War II. They need our empathy and our forbearance.  ✄

# Democracy's Handmaiden: Humour. In today's India, we need more of a funny bone in our public life

*This article was first published by The Times of India in July 2020.*

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In these dark times, there is no harm in easing up with some sharp humour. Like the coronavirus, humour is infectious, but can spread much needed joy. The world over, social media is lighting up with witty memes around the pandemic. Bumbling politicians have been prime targets, and especially President Donald Trump. "Calm down, everyone," reads one meme, "A six-time bankrupted reality TV star is handling the situation."

But that is the US, where comics can get away with a lot, without political backlash. Where in fact, politicians themselves can create the humour.

In 1985, I was lucky to be a reporter in Grand Rapids, Michigan, where former President Gerald Ford hosted a three-day conference on 'Humour in the Presidency'. Ironically, Ford was hardly known for his sense of humour. When asked why he had hosted a conference where he himself might be the butt of many jokes, he disarmingly said, "I thought a look at the lighter side of politics may help us to realise that perhaps sometimes we take ourselves too seriously."

This is the crux of the issue, then and now. When politicians take themselves too seriously, and when the public takes its politicians too seriously, unintended yet harmful consequences can emerge. Imagine if more people had laughed outright at the self-important demagogues of the past century. Could that have prevented some from taking their own absurd and dangerous ideas to fruition? We don't know; but it is worth thinking about.

The Ford conference was a refreshing change after the humorless years of the Nixon presidency, where America had perforce to look into the dark soul of its politics and its president. There was a steady stream of jokes about US presidents, with Ronald Reagan, Jimmy Carter, and John F Kennedy as the favourites. Conference speakers remarked on how the smarter politicians would make self-deprecating jokes before others could mock them.

President Kennedy had the best flair for it. Criticised for bankrolling his campaign with his father's money – he retorted, "I just had a telegram from my famous Daddy: Dear Jack. Don't buy a single vote more than is necessary. I'll be damned if I am going to pay for a landslide." Similarly, Reagan was very skilled at winning over crowds and critics with his jocular manner. "I'm not worried about the deficit," he famously said. "It's big enough to take care of itself."

In today's India, perhaps we need more humour in our public life. Are our politicians able to joke about themselves? Or do they mainly use ridicule? And what about us? Do we lack a political funny bone?

India has had a long, strong history of political satire. The kingdoms of India appointed court jesters or vidushaks to lighten the atmosphere. They would take pot shots at the public, at visitors and sometimes at the king himself. Remember the stories of Tenali Ramkrishna, Birbal, Gopal

Bhar and Gonu Jha? Their job was to bring wit and humour to expose oppression and injustice.

Through India's freedom struggle too, there were many lighter moments. Sarojini Naidu's descriptions of the Mahatma as Mickey Mouse and Little Man did not anger him. Instead, he signed off as Little Man in his letters to her.

Today, too, we have a burgeoning number of stand-up comics, especially in Hindi. At increasing personal risk, they take sure-fire aim at our politicians, who manage routinely to generate great material for satire. But in India, this is still a cottage enterprise compared to the full-fledged industry in the US, now in full spate through Trump's term.

Arguably, today, there has been a chilling effect on our humorists. Cases of sedition have been initiated on cartoonists and others, for criticising the government or the ruling party. Intensive trolling and threats have inundated those who raise important issues in jest. Certainly, today's humorists have to be braver than their profession should require them to be.

As citizens, we should renew our understanding of why political humour is critical to society. Historically, too much power and secrecy has often coincided with a lack of tolerance for satire, leading to a breakdown of trust between the public and the government. Humour can provide a safety valve when social pressures are building. It can inform us about social relations.

Concentrated power without feedback loops is dangerous. We all know the story of the emperor's new clothes. When they mock elites, humorists can hold leaders accountable. They create safe space for us to think through things, to question our beliefs and to change our minds.

That's precisely why governments and politicians don't like humorists. They hate to be challenged. But it is also why the samaaj must support humorists. We need mirrors held up to us; we need new ways to refract reality.

Of course, there is a Laxman Rekha that is crossed at great peril to both humorists and society. Comics need to practice both restraint and sophistication. They need sensitivity to local histories and culture. But offence is taken, not given. Even if some humour makes people in power uncomfortable, it may simply be because the truth sometimes hurts.

The best example often comes from the top. At the White House, when Eleanor Roosevelt, wife of President Franklin Roosevelt was asked where the President was, she said, "Where the laughter is."

Would that we could say the same, here, and soon. ✕

# A Quest to Balance State, Society, Market

*This article was first published by Hindustan Times in May 2021.*

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**O**n April 24, one more life came to a premature end. Civil society lost yet another leader. Prem Kumar Varma died in Delhi at the age of 65. He was the founder and secretary of Samta, a non-governmental organisation (NGO) in Bihar's Khagaria district. Everyone knew him simply as Premji.

Premji could have had two more decades to thrive and work on his crusades against man-made flooding, and the injustices that continue towards the Musahar community. It was not to be.

Like many others, Premji began his civic engagement as a socialist student leader influenced by the teachings of Ram Manohar Lohia. Later, in the 1970s, he became a follower of the Gandhian socialist Jayaprakash Narayan, with others such as Bihar's chief minister Nitish Kumar. Their goal was social transformation through "Sampoorna Kranti" or Total Revolution, but many landed in jail for their pains.

Those were difficult but heady days for India's civil society, as the clouds of authoritarianism were gathering before the Emergency in 1975. Many groups were able to band together to defend democracy, constitutional rule and justice. It was hard and dangerous work. But it has served as the foundation for much of the expansion of civil society movements in the country, headed by a host of idealistic leaders with an inclusive vision and a mission of equity and justice.

Premji went on to establish Samta with the goal of a more egalitarian society. He focused on the most socially and economically marginalised Musahar community of Bihar, working on issues of human rights, flood relief and rehabilitation, safe drinking water, sanitation and livelihoods. Samta joined the water security collaborative, Megh Pyne Abhiyan, that my foundation, Arghyam, was privileged to support. For half-a-century, no matter the setbacks, he persevered in the mission for social change and justice.

On a memorable visit in 2007, when we travelled together in Bihar on a field visit, Premji explained to me his theory about why things were so lopsided in the world.

"Earlier", he said, and I am paraphrasing here, "even when there were kings and emperors, people's lives revolved around their communities – the samaaj. But ironically, post monarchy, the sarkaar began to get very powerful around the world and claimed a mandate for people's welfare and began to act on behalf of the samaaj. And then later, the corporations of the bazaar began to go global and acquire even more power than the State.

So samaaj, which used to be the apex formation, was slowly replaced by the power of the State and then the power of the market. Now, samaaj is at the bottom and we are struggling to make the State and the market responsive to us as citizens."

His words had a profound impact on me, and I began to chew on the idea and read more of history to develop the theory further. I became convinced that the work of this century is to restore the balance between samaaj, bazaar, and sarkaar. I dedicated my philanthropy to keep active citizens and society at the centre, so that markets and the State are more accountable to the larger public interest.

A heartfelt thank you, Premji, for starting me on this journey.

There are many Premjis in this country, who are totally immersed in the struggle to consolidate constitutional values in society. Sometimes, they risk life and limb in the pursuit of societal transformation.

The passing on of such leaders may not be understood for the social tragedy it is, for some time to come. As various factors, including the constrictive policies of the State, force many small organisations to fold up, samaaj will feel the impact over time.

Even the smallest NGOs go where the State and market often cannot or will not. They give voice to people. They shine a light on issues which can be tackled to prevent a future cascade. They make a good society more possible.

In the memory of such social sector professionals and volunteers, we have to rededicate ourselves to the work of supporting and sustaining a resilient samaaj. What better time than this current moment? ✕

# Laws and Criminal Justice: Where the Indian elite can't secede

*This article was first published by Hindustan Times in June 2021.*

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It is extremely important that the Supreme Court is re-examining colonial era sedition laws, which were repealed in the United Kingdom (UK) itself, but which no government in India has revoked, and in fact, each has used to stifle dissent. Sedition laws, however, are at the apex of a mountain of laws that need to be examined with fresh societal eyes.

Most of us believe we are good, law-abiding citizens. We have faith that laws are made with the highest public and private good in mind. We try to obey all the laws that we know of. By doing so, we participate in a society that is justly governed by the rule of law. We don't worry much about going to jail or about the state of our prisons. We cannot imagine anything we do that could land us behind bars. And if we got caught by mistake, surely there would be a way around the problem? Jail is for others.

Is it time to revisit all these assumptions?

Many of our laws, when examined even cursorily, do not appear to propose punishments or jail sentences proportionate to the crime. Many also shift the burden of public order from the State and its apparatus to the individual citizen and his actions. These kind of laws can turn ordinary citizens into criminals with one deadly strike. Sadly, many have been

passed without any legislative debate. Nor has there been widespread public discourse on things that should keep us all awake at night.

For example, did you even know that you could get arrested if you did not properly walk your dog? The maximum sentence is three months. Did you realise that flying a kite with banned thread can lock you up for two years? That driving an uninsured vehicle could get you three months in jail? These are just a few examples. Yet, most citizens have found it difficult to apply themselves to issues of law-making or criminal justice.

Apart from all the harsh, even draconian, laws that have been around for decades and even centuries, there have been new laws and rules that give sweeping powers to the State. Mercifully, there has been a lively public debate on recent laws around free speech and privacy. In one such victory, Section 66A of the IT Act was struck down as unconstitutional. Other regressive speech laws still exist, but partly because of the ubiquitous use of social media, more citizens are realising the chilling effect on their lives.

Let's take another recent example. The government invoked the Disaster Management Act of 2005, for the proper management of the pandemic. But some of the rules pertaining to Covid-19 could potentially make millions of citizens susceptible to sentencing, if they were to be strictly implemented. The spreading of fake news about Covid-19, including forwarding WhatsApp messages which are later found false, could attract up to a year in prison. Technically, not wearing compulsory face masks, without reasonable cause, could also put you in jail for up to one year.

Some of these laws are simply unimplementable or may not be on the radar of the officers of the State, who have the powers to make arrests under them.

But the point is that they are still on the books. And circumstances could turn in a way that someone could get into more trouble than is warranted by an unintentional infringement. All the laws I mention above have actually resulted in arrests.

Should such laws with such disproportionate punishment even exist? Should they be better understood before they are passed? Do they even serve the purpose and intent with which they are framed – usually public order and safety?

There is not enough evidence to show that severe punishment acts as the deterrent it is meant to be. Research shows that imprisonment under harsh conditions often results in a greater rate of more violent recidivism. On the other hand, there is encouraging data emerging from restorative justice systems, including the open jails in India. Can we use such evidence to re-imagine our retributive justice system to be more just, more humane and more effective at reducing crime?

So far, we, the elite, have not participated in serious public discourse on law-making and prison reform. The series of lockdowns caused many of us to experience a pale yet frightening imitation of what an actual incarceration might feel like.

Is this an opportunity for society, samaaj, to participate more vigorously in debating laws that criminalise too easily? And from there, to become more involved in the broader issues of criminal justice, including the human rights infringements in our overcrowded prisons, with 70% of inmates being potentially innocent undertrials?

The Supreme Court has now turned the spotlight on sedition. The pandemic has thrown light on the Disaster Management Act. It's time for deeper conversations with parliamentarians and state legislators — our

law makers, on how better laws can lead to a better society. In the case of Section 66A of the IT Act, such a dialogue led to its annulment.

India's elite has managed to secede from every common public service — be it education, healthcare, transport, or energy. Pollution and the pandemic awakened us to the rude reality that we cannot secede from bad air and bad germs. Well, we cannot secede from bad laws either. ✕

# WATER AND ENVIRONMENT
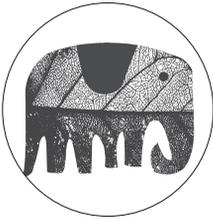
*Despite its dense population, India is one of the world's biodiversity hotspots and has a long history as a ground water civilization. However, human activities in the last few decades have been particularly damaging to our ecologies. If we continue to treat the sacred relationship between nature and human life with hubris and mismanage our water, it will be to our own detriment – economically, nationally, as well as individually.*

*This section includes a glimpse of the urban rainwater harvesting initiatives in Bangalore in 2005, the crisis point of ground water usage in 2015, and India's water challenges and the need for community-based solutions that distribute the ability to solve in 2020. Across the years, there is an urgency in responding to issues around water and the environment, and the need to leverage technology and reimagine our relationship with our natural resources.*

# The Answer is Blowin' in the Wind

*This article was first published by Bangalore Bias in December 2005.*

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**B**angalore citizens are making their displeasure known loud and clear. Our quality of life is deteriorating and if government cannot do anything, we will. We will file public interest litigations, we will refuse to pay taxes, we will protest. We will be heard.

The politicisation of the people is all to the good in the long run. Interestingly though, the voices of the elected representatives of the city - the Corporators, the MLAs and the MPs have been largely missing in the general din. Which reflects the true state of affairs in this hapless metropolis.

In all the crises that have overtaken the city, one that looms grey and large is the effect of excess rain. Overflowing lakes, tanks and drains have almost made us forget that other and worse crisis that often affects the city - water scarcity.

When rainfall is inadequate, the water supply dries up alarmingly. And then begins a whole parade of woes. This may quite easily happen next year. So, did we plan for that by capturing this year's rain? Not at all.

Apparently, the city can manage neither plenty nor scarcity.

Yet, as far as collecting rainwater goes, it is something Bangaloreans need not wait for government to do something about. Any one of us can capture rainwater through rooftop harvesting or other means.

It is the one safe, non-controversial, participatory and mutually beneficial act that all of can undertake as well-meaning citizens. And one citizen, S. Vishwanath, of the Rainwater Club has been working overtime advocating rainwater harvesting for the past ten years.

The Rainwater Club is a virtual forum where all interested people gather to share thoughts and work towards popularising water conservation and especially rainwater harvesting. A most unusual organisation it may be, but its founder, Vishwanath has built a formidable reputation as a domain expert in water. His passion is rainwater harvesting. He has studied practices from around the world and developed low cost-effective designs to suit various clients; from a slum dweller with a tiny roof to an entrepreneur with large factories. And, of course, his own home, where he lives with his wife and ecology architect Chitra, is a showcase of every water conservation technique known to man and a virtual museum for water-saving devices and models.

"When you collect water on your roof or on your site, you begin to feel part of the solution instead of part of the problem," he says. If all of us captured rain for the nine or so months when Bangalore receives rain, we could reduce the need to pump water from the Cauvery in increasing amounts each year. We could also prevent the flooding nightmare that we witnessed this year in the city. And we would help recharge the ground water as well.

In fact, Vishwanath surmises that we could do without Cauvery water altogether if rainwater was prevented from running off.

"A 30/50 sq ft site receives an average of 1,50,000 (one and a half lakh) litres of rain in a normal year," he says. So, imagine how much water the 8,50,000 households in the city could collect and store.

Just thirty years ago, we were self-sufficient in water. Today, the situation is such that even the mighty Cauvery is not enough to slake the thirst of this city. More than thirty percent of Bangalore's water usage comes from borewells. Dug deeper and deeper in the ground. Worse, there is no regulation of ground water in the state. And tankers ply regularly to provide expensive water to those who the BWSSB [Bangalore Water Supply and Sewerage Board] leaves out. More often than not, these are the urban poor.

There is almost no piped water supply and no sewerage in slums, in which 15-20% of the city population lives. But everyone needs water. For drinking, washing, cooking. So how do people get it? They all pay private contractors to provide them this basic commodity. They buy as much as they can when they can. At a rate that can be 1000 times higher than that paid by regular clients of the BWSSB. Many buy water on a daily basis, depending on their wage earnings.

We can easily, quickly and cheaply change all that. The Rainwater Club has already initiated rooftop rainwater harvesting in the Rayapuram slum. People who came forward to make initial investments in their water security are now very happy. Rooftop harvesting is simple to implement and provides precious, safe water - good enough to drink.

So let's do something for ourselves and for the city, even before government makes it mandatory. Let's turn back the Cauvery. How simple it seems. In this case, it really is. ✕

# Invisible Water, Visible Crisis

*This article was first published by India Today in August 2015.*

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**B**y now, everyone in India understands that we have a serious water crisis. Too many of our rivers are polluted, dammed, or dying. Rainfall is becoming increasingly erratic, and expected to become more so. Our groundwater is depleting fast. Our lakes are drying up or filling with sewage, especially in urban centres. Our water and sanitation infrastructure is old and creaking in many places and does not even exist in others. Agriculture, industry and urban settlements all compete for the same scarce resource. It is no longer a problem that can be discussed without remedy. Rich or poor, it affects us all, here and now.

But if we had to choose one area for immediate attention, it would have to be groundwater. Groundwater is fuelling much of India's growth in rural and urban areas. This has resulted in severe scarcity and quality issues, especially in these high growth areas.

India has always been a groundwater civilisation. For thousands of years, different regions had the most aesthetically designed, functional open wells that tapped into the shallow aquifers. People had thumb rules that allowed them to use the water sustainably across cycles of good monsoons and drought. The coming of the deep rigs and the borewells

in the 1970s completely changed the way India used its groundwater reserves. The most significant indicator is that the share of groundwater for irrigation went up from a mere 1 per cent during 1960-61 to 60 per cent during 2006-07.

India is now the largest user of groundwater in the world. We draw more groundwater than two giant economies - USA and China. We have approximately 30 million wells, including the new borewells and the old open wells, drawing 250 cubic km of water. Groundwater now contributes to about 85 per cent of India's drinking water security, 60 per cent of its agricultural requirements and 50 per cent of urban water needs.

The big irony is that despite this reality, much of India's public investments have gone into surface water-dams and canals for irrigation, huge pipelines for drinking water, and increasingly for diversion to industry-especially to the energy sector. Essentially, groundwater extraction is a private enterprise in India. Most Indian wells and borewells are privately owned and operated. Overwhelmed by the arrival of a new technology that allowed rapid scale-up, the government's response has been slow. There is little and haphazard regulation of groundwater. This is a rare phenomenon in the world. Many countries have delinked land ownership from the ownership of the water beneath, and have complex systems of water rights, pricing and tight regulation.

Water is a state subject in India. Administration at the Centre as well as in the states has tried but failed to fully resolve the questions of who really owns the groundwater, how it should be mapped, extracted and replenished.

So, through ignorance and with impunity, farmers, governments, industry and ordinary citizens have drilled deeper, and just about

anywhere with frightening results. Sixty per cent of India's districts have serious issues of either depletion or pollution, according to one study.

Excoriating the earth has unleashed geogenic chemicals such as fluoride and arsenic into our drinking water. Since authentic quality testing is difficult in most places, we do not yet know what we are doing and what awaits us.

According to a study by Jadavpur University, Kolkata, 66 million people are at risk from fluorosis and as many as 500 million from arsenic-induced health issues in the Ganga-Meghna-Brahmaputra plain. At the same time, poor sanitary practices have led to faecal contamination. Millions defecate in the open, and millions of others unknowingly contaminate groundwater through leaching from toilet pits.

A WaterAid report suggests this directly affects around 37 million Indians annually through water-borne diseases. If you like that sort of imagery, it evokes a manthan gone horribly wrong. It is imperative to look at what must be done, and done quickly. What are the top five things that the government, civil society organisations and citizens can do to make our groundwater civilisation more sustainable?

### Make the Groundwater Mapping Visible

Right now, there is an asymmetry of information. We need to change that by putting aquifer data in the public domain. Make invisible groundwater visible to all, so that people can prevent abuse. The government has an aquifer-mapping programme. But it needs strengthening and re-alignment. It is a top-down approach. It need not be. People need granular data to be water-wise. Aquifers can be mapped within five years with smart, crowdsourced, ground-up information, in combination with technologies such as satellite data.

### Manage the Demand

It is linked to the first point, and reminds us that a supply-side approach will not work. We need to use water more efficiently, and need better market signals for that. Groundwater in India is a private and under-regulated market, and does not have the benefits that transparent, embedded markets can bring.

There is also a deep nexus between groundwater and energy. If we will not price the water, we have to price the energy. Appropriate economic incentives must come sooner rather than later. There may be less resistance than the political class fears, and there are some good examples in the country already, such as the Jyotigram in Gujarat.

### Rationalise Groundwater Use

This is linked to the points above. It is not good economics or good environmental stewardship to drain the aquifers of Punjab to grow rice, nor those of arid Kutch to grow sugarcane. These are no longer questions that economists can leisurely mull over. We have to incentivise the shift in production from water-scarce to water-surplus aquifers, but in a sustainable way. Let's shift public resources from surface water budgets if necessary to achieve a better water balance.

### Enable Civil Society Participation

It will be very difficult for the government to retrofit a sensible governance system on the current model of private, dispersed and democratised access to groundwater. NGOs do a better job of engaging people in a participatory approach, by encouraging stewardship rather than exploitation. Good public policy and laws help, but we truly need new behavioural responses that allow us to respect water.

**Recharge and Reuse**

We need a massive national effort to recharge our aquifers. This requires the creation of appropriate institutions that allow us, as a society, to frame a new relationship with groundwater. Some institutional frameworks have been attempted, such as the Central Ground Water Board, with its mirrors in the states. But we need to repair and innovate these institutions. It is critical to set up new entities that help understand and manage urban groundwater better.

   As a society, we are now faced with tough choices. It is worth betting big on groundwater, which can actually lead us to water security. And we can become a mature groundwater civilisation. Again. ✕

# Water Conflicts Workshop

*An excerpt from the talk organized jointly by the Forum for Water Conflicts in India, TERI, and ATREE in October, 2016.*

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**O**ne of the most important questions in the country and possibly around the world, is the management of conflicts around this key resource – water. My first disclaimer is that I am not an expert. 12 years ago, I set up a foundation called Arghyam through which I have been engaged with the water sector. I knew nothing about it before, I know something about it now, but every day I learn more. I have also been involved in a lot of civil society activities over the last 20 years and supported the work of amazing NGOs that do incredible work all around the country. My husband, Nandan Nilekani, has been in the corporate sector for the last 35 years, and that has given me a ringside seat to see how different fora in the world interact on issues like resource management and how the business community is responding to challenges.

So, today I bring you an outside perspective, trying to see upstream, non-water sector linkages to how they also impact the conflicts that you are going to be diving deep into, and perhaps to see if we can come at it from many different lenses.

### Conflicts Are Opportunities

I think all of us can agree that conflicts are opportunities. Sustainable paradigm shifts can happen, can emerge from deep conflicts. For example, World War II with its tens of millions of casualties and a deep realignment of world politics, did allow for one thing to happen, which is the engagement of women in the workforce. In the last eight

decades, women have taken back more and more space in the world to improve their own economic opportunities. So, I always think of this as one positive example, though it came out of one of the worst conflicts in human history. Of course, this does not mean that we should create conflicts deliberately just to yield beneficial side effects. But we need to acknowledge that conflicts can yield a lot of information about resources, competition, mismanagement, power structures, and latent demand.

So, looking at these conflicts dispassionately with a partly academic, and very humane perspective can really be the first step towards reducing or preventing conflict. Analyzing them and devising taxonomy and typology becomes extremely useful in terms of creating a whole basket of approaches for resolving current conflicts and trying to prevent future ones. It's useful in this sector to have a Big Hairy Audacious Goal, or BHAG, such as - one day there will be no more conflict around water. If we keep that as a faraway vision and then work systematically towards it, who knows what will happen one day? Though we still have a long way to go.

Over the past 12 years I've seen that sometimes those of us who engage in the water sector often come from a water mindset, and that could limit opportunities to look for solutions. I urge people working on these issues to sometimes step outside the sector and look upstream at linkages elsewhere that could help you with your own work. Broadly speaking, the two main reasons why there are conflicts are due to quality and quantity issues. We can immediately see how many externalities exist in the question of both quantity and quality. Agriculture, industry, culture, personal choices, and climate change are some of the many determinants of water conflicts. So, to prevent conflicts or reduce their negative impact in India, we need to start officially moving towards a low water economy.

In India, we have some history and tradition of being a low water society. Coming from a perspective of ecological and intergenerational justice, people have always thought of water as a valued resource that should not be wasted. So, in a sense, we have a lot of rich tradition of being a low water society. Can we then also become a low water economy? As our governments draw us into the narrative of a high growth economy to lift people out of poverty, can we simultaneously look at being a low growth water economy? Can we design systems and improve processes so that they use less water? How can we look across the supply chains of agriculture, industry, and urbanization? When we design the next 7,000 towns that need to be updated with public infrastructure, how can we rethink water infrastructure so that the towns reduce their water footprint? What would this require? This will require immense data collection, analysis, and dissemination, but in a very transparent manner, so that all stakeholders can monitor the progress.

Farmers, corporations, and city managers need to have an idea of what their water footprint is, and then be able to set ambitious goals for reducing it. We must keep an eye out for all the amazing new technologies that make it possible to bring this data together from diverse sources, which may include crowdsourcing – through research, government data, primary data, or secondary data. There are many new technologies that have made it easier to do all of these things, and other technologies that enable us to create better visualizations of this data so that people can understand it easily.

### Leveraging Technology

Recently I met Alejandro Iñárritu, an Oscar-winning director. He's very concerned about the issue of migrants, refugees, and immigration around the world. So, his next movie is going to be a partial documentary

using virtual reality. When I asked him why he was doing that, he said, "When you can allow people to immerse themselves in the situation of a refugee on a boat coming from Syria, for example, then you help people to improve their empathy." So, unless we begin to exercise our empathy muscle, I can't imagine reducing any kinds of conflict, including the water conflict.

Technologies like virtual reality or augmented reality might be a way to create water consciousness in people by directly letting them experience things like the plight of people in the Bihar floods or the Cauvery Basin situation. Imagine immersing yourself in Vidarbha or Marathwada, or in Orissa where the Mahanadi issues are coming up. What will that mean in terms of moving dialogues and discourses forward? The water practitioner community has a role to play in feeding the creative imagination of people who are going to create such multimedia efforts. I don't think we should knock this because it's the way the world is moving, and we have to learn to move with them.

There is a game my son pointed me to called 'Fate of the World'. It is meant for ordinary citizens to begin to address the extraordinarily complex problems we are facing today. For example, how on earth are we going to address climate change? Fate of the World allows you to actually immerse yourself in a global game, where you get to be a policy maker and figure out how to resolve things. What would you do about climate change? What policies would you think of? These are simple things that may trigger people to think more critically about their own choices. We have a sophisticated basket of technologies, at the back end of these very serious gaming techniques. We have machine learning, big data analytics, artificial intelligence, and as these emerge, all of us in the water sector have to keep an eye out to see how we can use these technologies to achieve our common societal goals.

## Ways to Minimize Water Conflicts

People have started talking about the world already being at peak water. Unlike peak oil, peak water seems to be quite a contestable idea because water is on an annual renewable cycle. However, it's important for us to think of it this way because what it essentially means is that we are using up our fossil water. We are taking all our renewable water for human use and starving the ecological needs of the planet. When we talk about peak water, we're really talking about reaching the physical, environmental, and economic limits on meeting human demands for water and the subsequent decline of availability. But as I mentioned earlier, conflicts are always opportunities.

What happens when you hit peak water? Look at what's happening in oil or other commodity prices around the world as we reach peak levels of commodity use, availability, or economic viability. In some parts of the world, we seem to have already reached peak water demand. To cite Peter Gleick from the Pacific Institute, the latest data (released in 2014) shows the continuation and acceleration of a stunning trend. US water withdrawals for all purposes are declining, not growing. The world's largest economies, China and the US, are coming to grips with their water situation and rapidly innovating their way out of excess water use.

In five years, mark my words, you will see similar data coming out of China. They are working very aggressively to reduce their water footprint. India is at that cusp. Per capita consumption in some parts of the world is also going down, with more efficiencies built into taps, pumps, pipes, and shower heads. European cities are moving their norms of litre per capita per day (LPCD) downwards, from 135 to 100 LPCD. They did this because they have found that we don't need more than 100 litres per person per day in an urban environment, due to all the efficiencies they've generated through reuse and making the cycles of water use

smaller. So that's interesting to us in India as we look at how we should develop our next 8,000 towns and cities. Can we take the 135 LPCD norm that we have today down to 100? Multiply that by the number of people, and you get significant water savings.

People's eating choices are also making a difference. A recent study attempts to deepen the understanding of the impact of diets on resource use by analyzing the effects of changes in diet on consumptive water use at a country level and at a global level. It first analyzed the impact of modifying diets to fulfil the dietary guidelines by the WHO, and then the effect of shifting from animal-based food products like meat to more plant-based diets. In both analyses, the diet composition was kept as close as possible to the traditional and culturally acceptable food composition. The study found that by reducing animal product consumption, global green water use would be reduced by 21%. The effect on blue water use in food production would be about 14%. Now to think about this, the less meat people eat, and the more they care about local, organic, artisanal produce, what impact could it have on water futures?

India's people and their changing food habits will impact global green water use quite significantly. And one way to minimize future water conflicts in India would definitely be to include a national information campaign. We need a national information campaign on both nutrition and embedded water, and its impact and reflection on how we produce food in this country. In agriculture around the world, people are trying to produce more crops per drop, and to respond to climate change-driven changes in rainfall, both in terms of location and quantity. Farmers in the US are relooking at dry land farming. They've had so much drought in the last few years that they are rethinking how to have rainfed agriculture, but with much more innovation through technology. If we start thinking like that, the whole scenario of water availability begins to change. They

have understood that it is less about maximizing this year's crop, and more about protecting the crops of future years because they can see the patterns now.

Sometimes I feel that India has not yet caught up in the global technological race. That may be to our advantage because now, we can perhaps retain some of our water wisdom, while bringing in new technology so that we don't go the wasteful way of the West. We have the capability to look at diverse perspectives and data sources to build out models for future water use in India. The key is for us to keep pushing for data to be democratically collected, kept on open platforms, and shared transparently. When you put relevant data, democratically gathered, in the hands of people and communities, they are much more likely to devise their own creative social protocols, restrained practices, right price signalling, and other incentives that are required to manage water more equitably and perhaps a little more sustainably. The work that Arghyam and its partners have done in Participatory Groundwater Management over the last six years has proven this to us.

## The Third Age of Water

Industry is completely incentivised right now. It's under extreme duress and needs to use less water throughout its production processes. Small factories in India probably suffer the most. Recently, a garment factory in Bellary had to quarter its production because there was simply no water. Similarly large companies like Mahindra and Mahindra had to shut down a plant in Maharashtra because they could not get water. Industry is very sensitive to the question of water, and most large corporations can't get away with bad practices. They are responding and the government is also responding. In April 2016, the environment minister, Javadekar, said that "India will aim to reduce industrial water usage by half in the

next five years by using the latest technologies to reuse, recover, and recycle water." These are things worth holding government to. We talk of surveillance and worry about surveillance, but there is such a thing as sousveillance, which means looking up from below. And that can create a very powerful push on the supply side to change behaviour and be more publicly accountable. Never forget the power of sousveillance.

Meanwhile, bigger corporations around the world are signing on to a global campaign for water disclosure. This would mean disclosing how much water they are using, both in the factories, inside their fence, and throughout their supply chain. From beverage companies and info-tech to hospitality, automotive, and agri-companies, they are really trying to get more efficiency from their water. Often for economic reasons and because of public pressure, it's getting harder for them to get the water they need, whether from the utilities, the ground, or the rain. Companies that achieve zero discharge, reduce their pollution, or improve their water efficiency are getting recognised around the world. This is one of the drivers for industry. There are many rogue sectors like energy and mining that are not caught up with this at all, but that gives us an opportunity to pressure them when other sectors are leading the way.

Additionally, there's an increasing sensitivity about wastewater reuse. The good news is that in India, we are so bad at it that the only way is up. After 20 years or so, we may actually have contained the global, and hopefully the Indian, demand for more fresh water. To me, that is a really positive way of looking at reducing or preventing conflict. Peter Gleick has said, "the first stage of water was when human civilization had barely begun. Water was just something we took from the natural environment where we needed it. But as populations grew, as civilization expanded, and as cities developed, we outgrew our local water resources, and started to develop the second age of water. This

was when science and technology began to play a role in helping us understand what we were doing to our water resources and how to access the water we needed in a much more concentrated, intense way. So we started to build dams, irrigation systems, water treatment plants, and massive distribution systems that characterize water use today. But the second age of water is also ending. We are moving into a time when the manipulations of the second age also are not enough. They have massive contamination, overdraft, and unsustainable use of water. We have contamination of water resources and water related diseases, and we need a new way of thinking about water. This is where the third age comes in. The third age is ultimately going to have to be a sustainable water management system. We will have to learn to live within our means. We will have to realize that ecosystems are a critical component of our water cycle — that it's not just humans alone. That it's humans and the natural environment together. The third age ultimately is going to have to be a sustainable age."

It is absolutely critical to keep learning in order to solve the current conflicts that India is experiencing today. We will need to learn more about people, the environment, about sharing, power structures, cultures, and about the painstaking nitty-gritty of getting people to sit across in dialogue and hammer out solutions. We also need to keep our minds open to new ideas and to believe in the human capacity to innovate. If we take desalination as an example, most people's hair stands on end because we've been trained to think of it as a horrible thing. It seems ecologically and financially unsound. But what if we stepped into the mind of a techno-optimist? What if we figured out a much cheaper, less energy embedded way to desalinate? What if we figured out what to do with the effluents and how to not impact the pH balance of the coastal areas? We have to keep our minds and hearts open, as we look into the

future, as we look into the deeper and more politically complicated issues like the Cauvery and Mahanadi basins, or even the conflicts around the local aquifer or local tap.

As we look at how to address water conflicts, we must be self-aware, have a self-critique, and be open to different scenarios from different perspectives. Is it better to work with the politicians or is it better to work with the farmers? Is it better to go to industry or is it better to help people change their eating behaviour? How will we, based on our priorities and our passion, focus our work so that we really get the best returns, and we can reduce the human and the ecological damage from unnecessary water conflicts?

Those of you who are working in this sector are going to be the most important people in this country, along with our many leaders - because water management, reducing conflict, thinking of future generations, thinking of our fragile ecosystem is going to be the most important work. You cannot have economic growth without doing that. You cannot bring prosperity without doing that. You cannot have peace without doing that. ✕

# People's Struggle to Find Solutions to Water Challenges

*This article was first published by Livemint in March 2018.*

ndia's water challenges are intractable, messy and perennial. While citizens wait for the state to deliver on its obligations, they also scramble for their own solutions, some old, some new, some workable, some not so much.

With the summer looming, water comes more easily to the urban mind. Even for those who had been reasonably secure all year long, it is an uncertain time. Maybe it is time to build a sump, to invest in a rainwater harvesting system, or to try, again, to dig a private borewell.

Apartment residents may finally succumb to the new water saving aerators that they have resisted; that neighbours keep boasting about. They feel more ready to pay up for the new recycling plant the association wants to install.

Borewell entrepreneurs are preparing too. There will be much demand for their services. They are innovating furiously to coax out water from the unyielding aquifer. Their livelihoods depend on it.

Open wells are making a comeback. People hunt for the remaining old-timers who knew exactly how to excavate the precious, hidden groundwater.

In slums everywhere, the daily battles are made easier thanks to water ATMs, put up by politicians, philanthropists or aid agencies. For Rs 5, or Rs 10, clean drinking water for the family will be available, even in the harshest months.

By now, farmers everywhere, especially in rain-fed areas, feel the familiar anxiety building up. Their old knowledge systems, honed over centuries, are failing them. The meteorological department is getting more accurate in its predictions but the monsoon itself is changing. It rains too much at once, rains when it should not, drizzles when it should pour, or rains where it never has. How does one plan in such a situation? When to sow, what to sow, where to sow?

Some of them have been experimenting with drought-proof crops. Millets are capturing the imagination again. There is a strong urban demand for ragi, jowar, bajra, and more. Where market linkages are built, farmers are growing more of the crop their grandfathers did, with less water.

Farmers in areas downstream of large cities sometimes reap an unexpected bonanza, even without rain. Bengaluru lifts up water at great cost from the Cauvery, perhaps depriving farmers along the way. But after use, it releases volumes of wastewater that flows to the Hoskote valley. Cities are now irrigation streams, creating new possibilities of symbiotic water management.

Other farmers are worried about too much water, especially in the Gangetic plains. They are tired of living in a flood economy, with their

assets literally being washed away every year. Some wish they could just bottle all the water and sell it like the big companies do. But they too are experimenting with crops that can withstand flooding.

In the western desert, communities are planning to capture every drop of rain. They are past masters at it, and will do it again. Some are switching to solar energy as a better income source than agriculture. Now, though, they are telling each other a new cautionary tale. It might rain too much this year, as it did a while ago. They must prepare for unfamiliar diseases like dengue and chikungunya.

In the North-East, people are fed up waiting for piped water. They are combining traditional wisdom with modern practice to revive the thousands of springs that flow through their lands. These springs then feed the rivers, and grateful populations downstream benefit from the hill people's efforts.

In the southern forests, it is already scorching hot, and the water bodies are drying. Environmentalists work with the forest department to dig and fill up tanks with groundwater drawn by solar-powered pumps. Now, the tiger and the deer will have water to drink and the tourists can quench their thirst for good photographs.

At the peninsular coastline, too many rivers do not flow to the sea anymore. Farmers worry as the ocean begins to creep into the land, rendering farms saline. They valiantly try pisciculture, or plant new crops that tolerate brine.

Scarily, new quality issues emerge everywhere. Salt, fluoride, arsenic, nitrates and heavy metals show up in drinking water.

Old remedies like eating amla are combined with several new filters and technologies, some of which give only psychological relief.

India's water issues are frightening and complex. The sarkaar and the bazaar deal with these in their own framework. But this is a glimpse of the samaaj's imagination, and the people's response to emerging water challenges. ✕

# Our Cities, Our Rivers: Reimagining the relationship

*An edited version of a conversation with Dr Mihir Shah at Knowledge Factory, held in Bangalore in February 2019.*

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**A**s 1.3 billion people seek better lives in a monsoon-dependent economy, the white and green revolutions may have produced grains and milk. But in some parts of India today, water is more expensive and less accessible than milk. Ground water resources are depleting, and NITI Aayog sees a crisis by 2020. So how do communities, policymakers, and corporates create constructive solutions to this problem?

**The Relationship Between Rivers and Cities**

When we talk about reforming policy or making a change which would actually impact people positively on the ground, there are a couple of things to keep in mind, which Dr Mihir Shah, with his experience on the planning commission and his work in Samaj Pragati Sahayog, puts across succinctly. The first is to be in a position to reform government systems and processes, because we cannot solve problems like water without involving the government.

While drafting the Twelfth Five Year Plan for India's water policy, Dr Shah created a working group of experts from outside the government, despite resistance from the Prime Minister's Office. He brought in experts like Tushar Shah and Sunita Narayan to influence policy which was focused on arriving at a common ground on water. Everyone was

forced to put their fundamentalisms outside to arrive at this common ground and make compromises. However, they were able to sign off on a document that represented a paradigm shift in how water will be managed in this country.

This is one sort of model if we are to re-imagine the relationship of rivers and our urban settlements, where we create working groups, bringing together elements of the continuum of Samaaj, Bazaar, and Sarkaar. You cannot solve complex societal issues without reducing the friction to collaborate between Samaaj, Bazaar, and Sarkaar, and this example shows us the way forward. We know that the Bazaar has a lot of innovation, including technological innovations to offer the water sector and I think we've not deployed enough of those. From Samaaj side, sometimes there has been a resistance to using technologies but I think the time has come when we seriously need to look at many new technologies which need the Bazaar's active involvement to put them out into the world, with policy support from the state.

With these working groups that were set up under the Planning Commission, there was a paradigm shift in water management governance as well. As Dr Shah points out, we applaud higher rates of growth, but do not realize that these cannot be sustained unless we also take care of the larger ecosystem, the ecology that is sustaining this process of economic growth.

For example, if we look at the relationship between cities and rivers, there is an engineering cliché, that rivers which flow into the sea are a waste and they should be dammed to bring water to the cities around it. But if we remember the lessons on the hydrological cycle that we learnt at school, we would know that it doesn't make any sense not to allow rivers to flow into the sea. Many of our rivers today are not reaching the sea and that's going to have serious consequences on the hydrological

cycle and the monsoon patterns over time. To say that we are wasting water when we let it go into the ocean is ignoring very basic science that we learnt in third grade.

Instead, we are redirecting rivers to our cities, encroaching on the drainage lines which means encroaching on the channels through which these rivers are flowing themselves. If the water is not allowed to flow through its natural course, when heavy rainfall or climate change events arise, we then face problems of urban flooding. Life and livelihood on the subcontinent could be deeply threatened. So, if we don't understand ecology and how to sustain our rivers, then we are already dooming ourselves, and our cities.

## A Problem of Imagination

The situation in Bangalore is particularly interesting because we bring water from the Kaveri at great expense and at a great energy cost. We actually pump up the water from a great distance, but so many of us in the city take the Kaveri for granted. We don't think about who is being deprived of that water by this relocation, and instead we use it, pollute it, fail to treat it, and then we send it off, creating a lot of negative downstream impact because of that.

ATREE, an organization that I support, has been doing a lot of work on the Vrishabhavathi and the Arkavathy – two rivers that were tributaries of Kaveri, that were flowing through our city. Vrishabhavathi originates from the bull-temple itself, and the Dakshina Pinakini is not far from the city, originating in the Nandi Hills. There are a lot of people trying to understand how we can revive these rivers and drive back the Kaveri because Bangalore does have enough rain and lakes, and we would also have rivers if we are able to rejuvenate them. We really don't need to bring Kaveri water to feed this thirsty city. But as of now, the

Vrishabhavathi is nothing but a drain. The imagination of citizens with their rivers is destroyed, so we have no relationship with the idea of a river anymore. Nobody remembers a healthy flowing river in this city anymore, which is a real pity. But imagine if we could bring back these three rivers, the Dakshina Pinakini, the Vrishabhavathi and the Arkavathy – that would mean so much.

Some of the research that was conducted at ATREE showed that one of the reasons why the Arkavathy is not flowing anymore is because there has been so much groundwater pumping in an unrestricted fashion, which is affecting the base flow of rivers. In India, we have an un-channelled groundwater regime, and so our river flows are getting seriously affected because people are sucking groundwater from anywhere, without any regulation. Usually, after the monsoon, these rivers gain water from the groundwater basin. However, since groundwater has been extracted, deeper and deeper, the water now flows from the river into the ground, which results in them losing water and eventually drying up.

As Dr Shah notes, we need policy changes as well as a people's movement to protect our water. This work cannot be achieved by the government alone, citizens also need to understand the management of groundwater. As of now, the government has initiated the Atal Bhujal Yojana as part of the Twelfth Five Year Plan, with six thousand crores (three given by the World Bank and three coming from India). However, along with cooperation from bureaucrats and hydrogeologists, we need the citizens, who are the primary stakeholders, to come together. The dissemination of this information to people who are actually using this groundwater will ensure that they use it sustainably. So, it's a complete relationship of interdependence between different forms of water and between nation and society. That interdependence has to be embodied

in powerful partnerships for change. Without that, we will continue to make mistakes and the paradigm shift will not come.

So, we need to focus on local solutions which are reviving lakes, roof-water harvesting, managing the groundwater more sustainably, and using waste water more creatively. Wastewater is another problem, as Dr Shah mentions, because water quality is becoming a very serious issue in India. Unless we are able to recycle water and make it of the requisite quality, we are causing a great deal of ecological damage. Our cities only imagine treatment plants at the ends of its bounds, but actually they need to be throughout the city so that clean water is being returned to the storm water drains. We can see successful examples of this in Jakkur and small towns where, instead of making the same outmoded mistakes, we are able to bring in 21st century technologies to treat wastewater. So, it's a question of breaking down the pure engineering paradigm, understanding the power of decentralization, and keeping an interdisciplinary, ecology-based, landscape-oriented design.

## We Need to Work Together

If we look at urban governance in India, we can see clearly that our current model of both our cities and rivers has not yet emerged. Even in a powerful place like Delhi, the Yamuna is nothing but a drain. It's the most polluted stretch of river imaginable, which is surprising when you consider that there is no lack of money, and that our nation's capital should be setting an example of how to look after our rivers. But unfortunately, we have not empowered our cities at all, in terms of how they are run, who elects the mayors, how long the mayors are empowered to do their job, or how they can raise financing to do intra-city projects. It's these things that also allow citizens to be directly in contact with a responsive and accountable administration. I think Bangalore is also suffering for the

same reasons, because we do not have the right governance institution for urban management.

Many countries in Europe show how a decentralized, accountable governance model actually has the capacity to raise capital for things like this. A lot of us take hope from the situation of the River Thames. In the '60s, it was a biologically dead river, but the city got its act together and today the River Thames in London is the cleanest river in Europe. There are 125 species of fish in it now, and we can see how rivers and biodiversity ecosystems are so inextricably linked. It's a question of imagination as well. Can we imagine Bangalore with two rivers flowing, with clean, treated water feeding those rivers? I want to imagine our lakes being revived because we collectively did the work of reviving them. I think we should strive for that imagination.

When I went to Uttarakhand with Ravi Chopra of People Science Institute, we visited 16 river valleys, and it was heart-breaking to see how the dams were built back-to-back and to serve far away cities. Rivers that were so full of life became slowly choked as they reached Delhi. We need to realize that we cannot afford this. As Dr Shah said, the economy rests on the base of the ecology and if we forget that connection, we're not going to be able to have the sustainable growth that is necessary to lift the remaining 300 million people out of poverty in this country. We need to view water in a multi-disciplinary manner, in a cross-disciplinary manner and with multiple stakeholders all coming together, sitting across the table with mutual respect for each other.

So, we need to create a citizen movement, to put pressure on our politicians. Without water, there is no life. Our urban economy suffers, and we can already see that in parts of Bangalore where there is water scarcity. Some people think that the city will see mass relocation, if we

are not able to manage our water properly, and we cannot afford to let that happen. We need to start thinking about re-engaging with our city's water future, because that can make the difference between whether our cities are going to thrive or have to face a serious crisis. ✕

# The Jewelled Aghanashini: It's the last major free flowing river of peninsular India, don't put the squeeze on it

*This article was first published by The Times of India in May 2019.*

F or its entire 124 kilometres, this jewel of a river flows free. It is probably as old as the Western Ghats, older than the Himalayan range. Though not especially long, this west flowing river has a volume of water equal to the bigger Kali or Sharavathi rivers nearby. It originates in Shankara Honda in the town of Sirsi and meanders clean and clear through gorges, unique swamps, ancient forests and agricultural fields, till it flows to the Arabian Sea at Kumta, in Uttara Kannada district, Karnataka. Its forest floors are carpeted by bioluminescence, its estuary is rich with bivalves, crabs and mangroves harbouring dozens of varieties of fish.

Because of its gradient, it is the site of many spectacular waterfalls, like the Unchalli Falls, near which, on a full moon night in winter, you might even glimpse a moonbow – a rainbow generated from the moonlight. This is the river Aghanashini – 'the cleanser of sins'.

This peninsular river is unique, because it is free flowing, unpolluted and retains its millennia old natural course. Most rivers in India are not free; they are dammed, or forced into channels. Others have just given

up because their catchments have been destroyed; their drainage paths encroached upon. Most of our rivers do not even reach the sea anymore. Yet the hydrological cycle and the monsoon depends on rivers flowing to the ocean. A prevalent hydro schizophrenia refuses to acknowledge this reality, and we continue to build infrastructure along our rivers.

For the lakhs living along its banks, the Aghanashini has given people life and livelihoods. Even today, around 2 lakh households are directly dependent on the estuary, famed for its protein rich bivalve, crab and shrimp harvest. For the thousands of pilgrims that come to its many sacred spots, the river offers spiritual solace. For the growing number of tourists and researchers, the Aghanashini tract offers unique sights. Its sacred groves where trees have never been felled, its dense mangroves, its endangered lion-tailed macaque that came 5 million years ago, its tribal populations like the Halakkis that keep the Yakshagana art form alive; its appemidi wild mangoes that make the best pickles; its salt and pest resistant kagga rice – the list is endless.

Periodically, infrastructure is planned along this free-flowing river of peninsular India. Once, industrial salt production was tried and abandoned. Then came a hydroelectric project, a thermal power plant, a port and a scheme to divert the river water for faraway towns.

People poured out in strong and sustained protests; people from every walk of life – ecologists, spiritual leaders, and fisher folk. The plans were shelved. The river ran free.

Now, a mega all-weather port is once again imagined at its estuary, as part of Sagarmala. This port, which will expand the existing small Tadri port, will be built at an expense of about Rs 40,000 crore.

Karnataka already has 13 ports along its 300 km coastline, out of which one, Mangaluru, is a major port handling the bulk of shipments to and

from the state. It is not clear on what basis the state expects Tadri port to be viable when nearby ports remain underutilised.

Just 25 km north is the Belekeri port, which was used to export iron ore and import coal before the industry collapsed. Just 25 km south is the Honnavar port, with a recorded maritime history going back centuries. Both these are well connected through the Konkan railway line and NH-17.

While it is unclear whether this port will ever be economically viable, environmental clearances have speeded up, with the usual contestations over what the reports left out in terms of the natural wealth of the region, and what would be lost through the creation of this port.

Meanwhile, the economic and future proofing opportunities created by the river and its catchments have not been properly documented. With its extreme natural beauty, just the potential of eco-tourism, if properly handled, could yield substantial revenue. The Western Ghats together with the sand and mangroves at the estuary are also effective carbon sinks. They provide untold ecosystem services in the region, including flood and erosion prevention.

If the port is built, it will require extensive dredging, as the current water depth is hardly two metres at the estuary. For ships to dock, it will have to be dredged up to almost 20 metres, releasing a vast amount of carbon rich soil and sand. Who will benefit? We often destroy ecology-based livelihoods in the name of employment creation. Who will be accountable when the marine production drops, as has been the experience at ports close by?

Economic discipline requires an ecological discipline as well. If we go ahead with each and every port designed for the Sagarmala project, we may create stranded assets and waste billions of dollars in underutilised infrastructure. Exactly the same result is visible in the Himalayas where

dam after dam was built without making a holistic, scientific assessment of the total impact on the land and the economy.

In this great nation of saints and poets, public administrators and ingenious architects, has our national and local imagination shrunk so much that we cannot leave the last major free flowing river of peninsular India alone, for future generations to explore, enjoy and benefit from? Let the Aghanashini flow with *Aviral, Nirmal Dhara.* ✕

# Distributing the Ability to Solve

*This article was first published in the September 2020 issue of the India Climate Collaborative newsletter.*

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**W**ater is the key sector when it comes to climate change related challenges. It is ever changing and complex, with equity, quality and quantity issues rising routinely. Usually, water issues have to be dealt with locally, in context. For example, even if you planned to bring water from a faraway river to a city, it is the city planners who need to engage with how equitably that new water will be used; they will have to design to carry away excess flow and sewage and so on.

For that, you need local talent. You need communities to come together along with trained professionals and local leaders to understand how THEIR water behaves, both above and below the ground. They must be able to find granular solutions that accommodate upstream and downstream solutions created by others. For example, to manage groundwater sustainably in one panchayat, you need to find out if you are sharing an aquifer with another panchayat, and co-create an equitable system.

This means that we cannot push for one size fits all solutions. Instead, we must design capacity building in order to distribute the ability to solve. A technology backbone, which is unified but not uniform, which

allows local, contextual problem solving at scale is the need of the hour. Our teams at Societal Platform.org and Arghyam are beginning to build just such an open, digital, shared public infrastructure.

Nurturing community capacity and resilience in the face of climate change is critical. In the water sector, for life and livelihoods, it is especially so. ✕

# CSOs AND
# STRATEGIC
# PHILANTHROPY
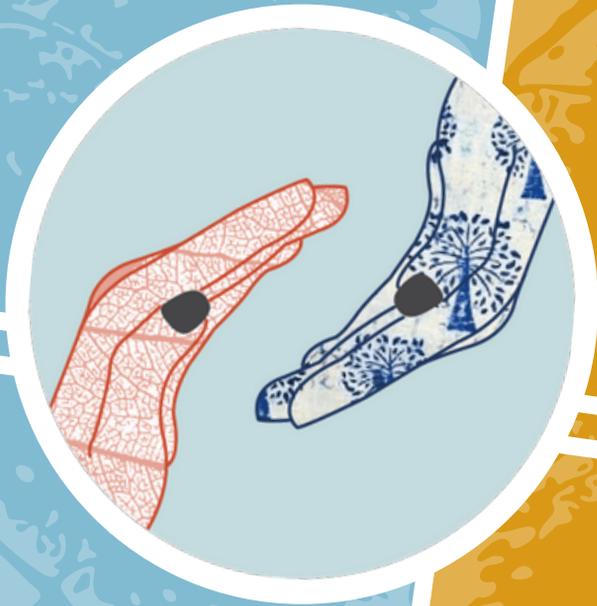
*India has a vibrant civil society, with around three million CSOs in the country working on a range of issues from human rights, to the environment, to health and wellbeing. They form the backbone of our Samaaj, and represent citizens' interests. Today, CSOs face many challenges and the digital revolution has meant changes that often outpace their ability to keep up.*

*This section includes memories and learning from 30 years in the civil society sector, and ways to tackle the challenges facing Indian philanthropy such as taking big risks, embracing failure, and collaborating with others. It also explores the role of CSOs as mirrors to society and introduces a new framework for solving complex societal issues at scale.*

# Emerging Challenges for Civil Society in India

*A keynote speech delivered at the 25th Anniversary of Rotary club in 2008.*

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The Indian third sector, as the non-profit sector is sometimes called, is one of the largest and certainly the most diverse in the world. There are civil society organizations in virtually every area of human endeavour, including community bee-keeping!

As for size, a sample survey of the sector showed that there are about 1.2 million organizations in India, which engage more than six million people. And this number is growing steadily as new non-profits get registered every other day.

Civil society remains the vehicle of choice for social change. And in fact, we can safely say that civil society organizations have been very effective on many fronts in India. Not only have they filled social services delivery gaps left by the government, they have also succeeded in generating awareness, driving new legislation, uncovering scams and malafide intentions and in fact, done everything that the civil sector – as the conscience and the ombudsman of the nation's agenda – is supposed to do.

In the seventies, there was a sudden upsurge in the setting up of NGOs, perhaps echoing the greater community activism that emerged in the West as part of the green movement and the peace movement. Today,

many of those organizations, just like your Rotary, are close to their 25<sup>th</sup> anniversaries. To name a few, MYRADA, Development Alternatives, CSE and TERI and the Narmada Bachao Andolan.

They all emerged out of a sense of dissatisfaction at the way things were going in a state-controlled economy, and which was not catering to our democratic vision of equal opportunity and a decent quality of life for all.

Each organization found its own model of resistance to or partnership with the state in order to meet societal objectives. And each has evolved tremendously over the past two decades, though they began with the traditional idea of working in the community and for the community.

Arguably, the 90's saw another great push in the number of civil society organizations. This was a new breed of non-profit organization – and they were in a sense reacting to the increasing presence of the private sector in India post economic liberalization.

The beginning of this century has seen the emergence of yet another kind of non-profit organization – one that is taking advantage of the new media, the new economy and new technology. Akshara Foundation could be an example of this type of organization as could Janaagraha and eGovernments Foundation, all home grown right here in Bangalore.

The hallmark of these kinds of organizations is that they prefer to work with the government wherever possible, prefer to push the ideals of a modern democratic state, see the market as a possible ally and not necessarily an enemy, and are driven by specific goals and desired outcomes. They use modern management techniques, attract professional talent, and pursue scale through the use of modern technology. These organizations are often funded by the new wealth that has been created by the post liberalization economic boom.

While it may be a little early to judge their overall effectiveness, they have brought about a whiff of fresh air into the third sector and are being watched with great curiosity by observers around the world.

And yet, with all these thousands of organizations of all shapes and sizes and beliefs and objectives – all working by and large for the goal of an equitable, effective, sustainable society – we have not yet seen that goal actually being realized. If anything, social commentators are lamenting the increase in inequity in India despite good growth and despite an abundance of material wealth creation.

So, what can civil society do to increase its effectiveness? What are the major challenges before us?

I think the first challenge is that of enabling good governance. Most problems in this country come out of a lackadaisical attitude towards governance practices. In whatever field the CSO is engaged in, its work will have a multiplier effect if it can understand and rectify governance issues. For example, in education, taking a look at the Bangalore Municipality (BMP) primary schools, we were able to show that in spite of a generous per student budget, municipal schools were completely insufficient even in the provision of simple infrastructure. How then was the money being used? Who was looking at inputs v/s outcomes? Who was responsible if the money was not used properly? How were schools involved in a feedback loop to government and decision makers? By focusing our attention on these issues, we were able to achieve a small degree of success. But that experience emboldened us to take issues of input and outcomes to a larger canvas. This past year, in close partnership with the Government of Karnataka (GOK), we launched the Karnataka Learning Partnership (KLP) to enable learning outcomes in schools. Using technology, such as GIS, using good tools to collect

data at the level of every child and every school, we were able to help the government identify exactly which children in the 1400 schools of Bangalore Urban District needed help with their reading skills. And we were able to help school teachers roll out a time bound, goal oriented reading programme to get those children – about 75,000 of them to become readers.

We think the success of this programme was in no small part because we created the framework of good governance – such as identifying the problem, the actors, the approach and the finances, and finally mapping the outcomes and rewarding good effort.

If more CSOs could focus on better governance, I think we could all become more effective more quickly.

Secondly, the challenge of scaling up. In India, we have a million great examples of pilots and models that have succeeded brilliantly as islands of excellent work. But we have before us in India, in the world's most populous nation bar none, the very real issue that we need to go beyond pilots and good examples to reach the staggering number of 400-500 million people who still do not have a satisfactory quality of life. How do we reach every last citizen in this country? We need to find ways and means to effectively scale up the delivery of social services in all sectors. Civil society can take up these challenges by focusing on what parts of their work are ripe for scaling up and on the partnerships that would be required to bring that scale. At Akshara, we have tried to use good governance practices coupled with technology to enable much needed scale. If all goes well, we hope in this academic year to take the KLP programme from 1500 to 15000 schools and then eventually to every single school in the state – 50,000 of them, and make sure every primary school child in the state is competent in the basic skills of reading, writing and math. For this, we are working with many partners and would be

very happy if Rotary clubs across Karnataka could play a meaningful role as well.

The third challenge, I think, is creating effective partnerships. Today the civil society sector operates very often in silos or in isolation from others. There is tremendous polarization in the ideologies of organizations working towards a common goal. One very good example is in the water sector – where anti-privatization groups clash routinely with those that are either pro-privatisation or simply interested in getting things done rather than in who is doing them. This leads to tremendous acrimony, and a waste of time which in fact allows business as usual to have a longer run than it deserves.

Now that the whole planet's sustainability is at stake, we will have to find common platforms where, agreeing to disagree in some areas, we nevertheless can take the agenda forward. And learning to work with the government, which remains the single largest player in the social sector, is one of our best opportunities to create lasting change.

The fourth challenge, perhaps, is that of the capacity building of the third sector. How can we train ourselves more, equip ourselves with better skills in finance, HR, admin, communications, etc. that could help us multiply our effectiveness? Today, many CSOs are trying to tackle 21st century problems with 19th century tools. Ramping up our tools, investing in better training, will go a long way to improve our effectiveness.

The fifth challenge perhaps, is how to unleash the creativity of the civil sector. We are at the very brink of chaos, at the collapse of the natural resources base. We can no longer afford to think in the old ways. Nor can we wait for the state or the market to come up with ideas. We need to harness the passion for change that is the main driver for all civil society organizations and come up with new ideas to solve old problems.

And last but not least, civil society needs to turn the torchlight inwards, upon itself. That is also a very big challenge. We preach but do we practice? We want the government to be transparent and accountable and give us information on demand. We want business to be accountable to all stakeholders. We want notions of equity to be the base of all decision making everywhere. How could our own mechanisms in our own organizations? Do we have fiscal transparency and accountability? Are we internally democratic? Are we measuring the outcomes of our own work? I think, if we can get our own houses in order, we may better be able to make the difference out there. Be the change you want to see, as Gandhi said.

I think civil society organizations in India have been the backbone of this country's democracy. And I think they are very much our hope for the future. As Marianne Williamson said, "In every community there is work to be done. In every nation, there are wounds to heal. In every heart there is the power to do it." ✕

# Looking Back | Chairperson's Letter at Pratham Books

*This letter was written for Pratham Books Annual Report 2013-2014.*

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**W**e had more passion than experience. We had more commitment than competence. Like most start-ups, Pratham Books began with little more than a dream.

Sure, it was a grand vision. We wanted to enable 'A Book in Every Child's Hand'. Born out of the Pratham network, we set ourselves up as an independent, non-profit publisher of children's books on January 1, 2004. We would enable appropriate, indigenous content of high quality and an attractive price, and in multiple languages, to democratize the joy of reading for India's children.

As Founder-Chairperson and chief funder for exactly ten years from that date, I can truly share that we have moved closer to that vision than co-founders Ashok Kamath, Rekha Menon and I thought possible on that cold January morning. Ten years later, we have nearly two thousand books, millions of readers, and a truly inspired volunteer community apart from a dedicated in-house team. And we have tried disruptive innovations every step of the way.

It has not been easy. We had to convert our lack of baggage into an advantage. While Ashok, our Managing Trustee had to quickly learn

the difference between offset and digital printing, he also had to retain his fresh eyes. While some of us, including myself, had to become children's authors overnight, we also had to build out a plan to draw in real professionals.

We learnt rapidly along the way. We wanted to scale access, and we had to think differently. We chose to build a hybrid organization - with significant philanthropic capital, with a market-ready approach and with strategic alliances across the big players - the government, other publishers and non-profits. We had to innovate across the distribution cycle, and go where no publisher could go before. We tried everything we could. Our books went along with the door-to-door sales women of Unilever, they went with the Indian Railways; they landed up in kirana stores and rode in the backpacks of solar energy salesmen.

Not everything worked. But we learnt from our failures and continued to innovate. We successfully drew in an ever enlarging circle of writers, illustrators and even co-publishers. We leveraged both technology and common sense to keep our costs low and our productivity high. We enabled more simultaneous translations per title than most other publishers. We did not get paralyzed by the desire for perfection; we knew our books and our outreach could be better and we focused on doing the absolute best we could do, with the resources that we had.

It helped that ours was a societal mission. This was not about us. Pratham Books clearly wanted to be a catalyst, a platform, and a bold innovator. There was just one real goal - to democratize the joy of reading. Many people naturally veered towards this mission. Not just writers and illustrators but many others who gave generously of their time and talent. Volunteers came forward by the dozens to help more children access more books.

I believe the real transformation came when we realized that the only way to truly break out of a low equilibrium was to leverage new technologies and new ideas. We decided to put up a lot of our content on the Creative Commons, allowing people to use our content freely, making stories available to children everywhere in a digital format, and on multiple devices so as to increase access. If we could not do it alone, we would enable others to do it with us.

They did it and how. Today, Pratham Books has one of the largest repositories of free children's content. Enthusiasts across multiple countries have downloaded our books, rewritten them, translated them into many languages, printed them, distributed them, and even sold them. That's been fine with us; we are happy with a small attribution about the source.

With that big idea, we have broken free of many constraints. Potential new distribution channels have opened up. A printer in, say Guwahati can now simply print and sell our Assamese books, if she wishes to.

Many more contributors have understood that this platform may not give them much money but will give them unprecedented reach, with all its implications. Non-profits have been happy to have good content, free, to give to the children they work with. I believe this has been a game changer for us.

I cannot resist a personal testimony. The Annual Haircut Day, which I myself penned under the pseudonym Noni, about a character called Sringeri Srinivas, has become astonishingly popular. Sringeri's stories have been read not just in many Indian languages but also in languages around the world. Such as French, Chinese and Lojban, which is an Internet language! This could never have been possible if we had not freed up our content for others to use. I may never know exactly how

much 'print revenue' we might have given up on Sringeri Srinivas, but I do know that our policy has made it possible for millions more children to have the same access to stories that I had, albeit in a more modern form.

This is why I can say with conviction that Pratham Books, in a short span of ten years, has moved energetically closer to its vision. Best of all, under Suzanne Singh's leadership as the new Chairperson, with her vast experience as the earlier Managing Trustee, Pratham Books is set to take things to an entirely new level, as you shall soon see. I wish Pratham Books all the best for its second decade.

Everyone can help. I hope you will join Pratham Books in its mission. "A book in every child's hand - or on her mobile phone!" ✕

# CSOs: Mirrors, not just handmaidens

*This article was first published by Livemint in June 2015.*

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**W**e cannot imagine democracies without a vibrant civil society. In a socially and economically diverse country like India, civil society plays a key role in voicing the needs and aspirations of different communities. The world over, it is understood that civil society organizations (CSOs) provide checks and balances to counter the unbridled power of the state and any abuse of that power. They also act as a deterrent to the unlawful accumulation of power and resources by markets.

Is the nation making social progress? Who is being left out? Are there risks that have not been understood and mitigated? If we care to listen, CSOs provide a set of diagnostics that let us understand the health of a nation or society.

The ideas, interests, individuals and institutions that make up civil society deliberately or unintentionally help nations in many ways: by exposing corruption; by upholding the rule of law, promoting good governance and upholding human rights and environmental justice; by putting out data, research and analysis so people can make better personal and political choices and by mediating across conflicts and paving the way for just trade-offs.

CSOs can innovate more easily than a government can. They have the freedom to experiment, take risks, develop and prove models on the ground—and, therefore, inform society and markets and the government of various choices. India's experience has been particularly notable on this front. Many progressive policies have come from non-governmental organization (NGO) advocacy.

Nonprofits are not just about antagonism. CSOs often create a bridge between the government and citizens. The most activist of organizations often work with government agencies on specifics.

However, when a government limits the freedom of NGOs to criticize, by creating a chilling effect on dissent, as seems to be happening now, it prevents CSOs from doing what the government needs them to do—perform the bridging role. CSOs cannot just be handmaidens of governments; they must be the mirrors too. Sometimes, they may go too far, sometimes they may overreact or make the wrong decisions, as they do. But it is better for society at large that they be allowed to do so, within the framework of law, than be suppressed. When dissenting voices are silenced, when debate and dialogue and protest are discouraged, governments and societies can make huge mistakes. History shows us this. Think of China and the cultural revolution, US and the Joe McCarthy Era, USSR and the Stalin purges, India and the Emergency.

When India is making big bets on the economic front, we need critics more than ever. In such a fast-changing situation, we need to know that genuine progress is being made, that swathes of people are not being left out, that the rule of law and natural justice will prevail. We need strong and healthy institutions of the samaaj (society) to ensure that the sarkaar (government) and the bazaar (markets) are actually serving the public interest for which they have been created.

India appears to move slowly, but with its extreme diversity, it also moves in multiple small ways at once, where local contextual solutions that work often get scaled through CSOs. Though sometimes frustrating, because it is the opposite of the big-bang, one-size-fits-all approach, it might be a better way to build a 21$^{st}$ century society—flexible, decentralized, derisked and innovative. Strong, committed and fearless CSOs are an inevitable part of this design. And so, the recent crackdown on certain kinds of NGOs and their funders, which had already begun at the end of the previous regime, is pretty hard to defend.

When the Indian government is so open to every manner of foreign investment, why is it so opposed to foreign philanthropy of a certain kind? Why are self interest and anti-national intent assumed in one and not in the other? Is foreign investment coming into local markets for national interest or for the interest of the foreign capital itself? We cannot make one argument without encountering the other. Just as international capital flows across nations and geographies, creating a complex, interdependent world, so also issues of society and the environment flow beyond national boundaries.

Let us not confuse the foreign funding of local activist organizations with the importance of dissent itself. Governments do have the duty to protect national interest. But we should not be afraid of foreign funding of Indian CSOs, unless malintent can be proved. And when governments begin to decide which CSOs are good and which bad, which ones can receive foreign funding and which must not, it is often at the risk of democratic freedoms.

On the other hand, it is perfectly correct to expect Indian philanthropy to step up to support the activities of Indian NGOs working on environmental and inter-generational issues.

Indian philanthropy is growing, and is at a very exciting stage with Indians looking to give to causes besides just education and healthcare. Perhaps this crisis will provide further impetus. New institutions seem to be coming up every day with innovative ideas on improving access to energy and ensuring government accountability. Many of these are backed by local philanthropic capital.

Urban middle-class activism is also growing and new institutions are emerging to challenge old power structures. After all, it is not only in the coal-mining areas and the forests and dam sites that protest is building. Resident welfare associations in cities that protest new roads that raze their members' homes are no different from people fighting against dams that take away their livelihoods.

Rich or poor, we all need organizations that can represent us; we all need modes of collective action when individual action does not yield justice. And so, Indians who want to give more to create a just, equitable and transparent society should look at the recent government action with concern. When a government is in fear of dissent from its own citizens, and when its reaction is to shut out that dissent, we should all worry. ✕

# Solving Complex Issues Through Societal Thinking

*An excerpt of the closing keynote address delivered to the 2019 class of the Strategic Non-Profit Management – India, developed in conjunction with the HBS Social Enterprise Initiative and offered in association with the Centre for Social Impact and Philanthropy at Ashoka University.*

I think we are at a fairly critical time. People often refer to the social sector as the third sector, but I would argue that it actually has to be the first sector. In the continuum of Samaaj (society), Bazaar (the marketplace), and Sarkaar (the state), Samaaj must come first. Bazaar and Sarkaar were created to serve Samaaj. Samaaj includes all of us, and it created the Bazaar to serve its economic interests, and the Sarkaar to serve equality to all people, on a large scale.

But what has happened over the centuries, especially the last century, is that the state and the market have acquired tremendous power. Technological advancement has enabled the accumulation of that power in ways completely unimaginable even a few years ago. It is crucial that we understand the implications of the accumulation of power by the state and markets. In our hearts, we are citizens first. We are not consumers first, though sometimes a couple of companies would like us to forget that nowadays. And we are not subjects first, though a few governments might like us to forget that too. We are citizens first, we are human society members first, and we create institutions of social

organization that are supposed to increase the well-being of Samaaj, but also hold the Bazaar and Sarkaar accountable.

**Balancing the Scales**

Both Bazaar and Sarkaar have grown extremely successful at driving scale, especially over the last few years. The market will always chase profits, acquire more customers, and accumulate power. Similarly, when the state achieves scale, it accumulates a lot of power for its continuing legitimacy. Both these forms of accumulation of power can create tremendous public good. Markets improve our lives in amazing ways every single day. The state enables the distribution of public services in a way that a sole individual could not possibly achieve.

So, what I'm talking about is more of a checks and balances mechanism that we need in the social sector, to hold these powers accountable to society. I think today, civil society has an especially critical role in holding the state to increase equity, along with efficiency, and holding the markets to reduce negative externalities to society. And it's a very interesting time to do this because both the state and the market have also recognised that they cannot do anything on their own. Human problems are so interconnected today, especially driven by things like climate change, that the state and the market are quite open to the intervention of civil society in many areas.

While at the same time, there are other global threats as well. The three freedoms of democracy – the right to speak freely, the right to associate freely, and the right to practice one's own beliefs, come with duties which we do not talk about enough. People must have the right to speak freely, but without deliberately hurting others; the right to form associations without turning into mobs; and the right to practice one's beliefs, without preventing others from practicing theirs. So, there are

duties and rights, but these freedoms are increasingly coming under various kinds of shadows.

Never has it been more important for all of us in the social sector to play that balancing role. While the state and markets have been remarkably successful at achieving scale, whether the social sector can do that always remains a question. I wonder if being unable to scale is a failure of imagination on our part. Mahatma Gandhi did not just try to improve the lives of people in Porbandar District. He did not just try to improve the lot of all of the citizens of India. He was trying to transform humanity at its core. His imagination was that big and nothing would come in the way. The trade-offs were not going to be that we would get independence by sacrificing our humanity. That was the scale of the imagination of his work.

There are so many other examples. Take someone like Vinoba Bhave. He was not trying to rescue land from just one district. He was talking about the redistribution of land, a very primary source of inequity in this country, across the nation. Jayaprakash Narayan's Sampoorna Kranti was not only about one class or one identity group replacing the other. It was an imagination at a much loftier level. And that's how they achieved scale, because the scale of their imaginations and their intent was powerful and very clear in their minds. Have we, perhaps, in the first sector lost a bit of that zeal for imagination? Sometimes I wonder about that. We belong to the tribe of Gandhiji, Vinoba Bhave, and Jayaprakash Narayan, and we need to look to the state and markets to understand how we can achieve scale in this sector as well.

### The Need for Societal Platform Thinking

The motivation for scale is different in all three sectors. In the social sector, our goal is to improve human dignity, to create better access to

goods and services, to restore agency, to increase creativity, and much more. Essentially, it is to give Izzat, Insaaf, and Imandari (respect, justice, and truth) to people. That is our real job, no matter which sector you work in. So, when we want to scale, can we think of scale the same way that the Sarkaar or Bazaar does? I don't think so.

Over the last 30 years, Nandan and I have been working in very different fields. Nandan has been a successful entrepreneur with Infosys, while doing philanthropic work. I have been working within the social sector for the last two and a half decades, helping individuals, institutions, and ideas spread and grow. Through our work, the goal was to create more public goods in the public sphere, but we have also failed a lot in our work in the social sector. I've learnt that it's far easier to become a unicorn in the market or to become a successful state, than it is to create real, lasting social change. I meet many billionaire philanthropists around the world, and they express this very humbly after first thinking "If I can create a great business, why can't I create a great social sector organization?" But when they actually try it, they find just how hard it is to create scale in the social sector. And that's because we have to understand why scale is very different in this sector.

Since 2015, Nandan and I have been working together on EkStep, with the goal that we will reach the 200 million children in this country with increased access to learning opportunities. What keeps us together is that we have different but hopefully complementary skills and we have brought those skills together with the pursuit of this goal. We have learned a lot from each other and so we have developed something called Societal Platform Thinking. We have to be careful when we are trying to solve complex, interdependent societal problems. Our methods have to be based on certain morally undeniable principles and philosophies.

We have arrived at five of these basic principles, to help us and others get started.

The first thing we have learned is that a single solution will not work, no matter how great it is. If our aim is to solve the problem at the root cause, and scale, we have to design to distribute the ability to solve. We need to trust people and their ability to be part of the solution implicitly. Everyone can learn, everyone can solve, and everyone can be part of the solution. It is a question of design: where people need to see clearly, and where they need to be trusted to get involved in coming up with solutions. So, we have to also distribute the ability to see to solve, and we've come up with more detailed architecture about how to do that. That was the first big thing.

A second thing that we have learnt over time is that resources like talent, people, and money are hard to come by. When trying to scale, in terms of public good, a lot is hard to come by. So, we began to think through this, and we found that if you unpack complex social problems, you often find a core that is common. When you look at the common core, you realize that there are ways to make those scarce resources plentiful. Because sometimes there is abundance under your nose, it just exists in different forms. For example, if we think about education, it is very difficult to find professional, competent teachers. It's very hard to train great teachers. But if we look at the system, there are parents, and teachers in abundance. So, that's a simple example of how you can find abundance and make scarce resource un-scarce. We need to keep this in mind when we design for scale.

The third learning that is very dear to my heart, is that if we want to scale in a country like India, you need to address the diversity of context. Most of the problems that require scale are contextual. The solution that

might work in one place may not work 100 kilometres down the road or it needs a few extra spices to be added into the mix to really work well – whether it's food or social solutions. There is a lot of diversity, and pushing something will not work. So how do you design to scale up diversity? How will your solutions and your framing work to reflect diversity at scale? For that, in your design, you have to create a unified but not uniform intervention, design, infrastructure, and framework. Unified because we all have to achieve the same goal.

And for that, of course, you need good feedback. You need a digital tech backbone to distribute the ability to solve because you need multidirectional feedback loops. You need data coming in, not just being sucked up at one end, but moving around all the streams so that people can use the data well, in whatever form and when they need it. So, you do need technology. But we have learnt that you have to be technology-enabled. If you are technology-led, you tend to make a lot of mistakes about outcome-thinking, because technology-led solutions can give you a false sense of success. You can just rack up the numbers, rack up some data points, but you may not actually get the social outcome that you want. This is important to keep in mind because people today can get carried away thinking that technology is the solution.

These are some of the building blocks we are using at EkStep to design and reach those 200 million people. Because of this kind of thinking, we are working with the state, civil society, and the markets to move the needle to reach those kids. And so, in the social sector, when we think of scale, not everybody needs to do 200 million, right? Obviously, we can't, if all of us are trying to chase billion and two billion numbers, it will be crazy. We need many people to be doing small things well, as well. We need social innovation labs that can take some of these ideas, because failure is very important.

### Taking Risks and Embracing Failure

We all fail, but what is important is that we do not grow afraid of failure. I think a lot about Gandhiji, and how one of the reasons he went to South Africa was because he had failed as a lawyer. Imagine, that failure launched a transformational epoch for humanity. So, we will all fail, but it's how we deal with failure that's going to be important. And so many of these social innovation labs allow for the pull and push of failing, getting up, failing again, and succeeding. It's not that every organization needs to scale, but some of our ideas need to scale.

In this sector, it is very hard for us to acknowledge failure. Philanthropists are extremely risk-averse. Usually, philanthropists are very successful in business, and they have taken huge risks to get there. But when they move to the social sector, they forget how to take risks. Since they are now dealing with people's lives and futures and common public goods, they want every venture to succeed. Businesses are allowed to fail. In fact, failure in Silicon Valley is celebrated. But in the social sector, if you fail, you might adversely affect a thousand people's lives because of your mistake. As social sector organizations, it is very hard to tell your donors that you have failed, while needing more money from them. It's very hard to do that. So, then everybody stumbles by trying to prove just how successful they are.

It is time that we create spaces and platforms where donors, foundations, and members of civil society organizations come together and destigmatize this notion of failure. The question we should now ask is, how do we deal with failure so that we can keep innovating? When we think about scale, failure is inevitable and necessary because without it there is no innovation, and without innovation, there is no solution for scale. The fear of failure may also lead to fear of scaling, and I think we are stuck somewhere within that fear. And there is not enough celebration

of the failure that leads to other successes, like Gandhi's first failure as a lawyer. We need to strive for platforms where donors and civil society organizations can meet in a safe space to talk about these problems.

Another thing I want to touch upon is how to think about scale in this digital age. Although we live in a digital age, civil society in India has a lot of catching up to do. Some of my civil society friends are downright technophobic, and they assume all technology is bad. This is a huge challenge for us as a country of people who are not digital natives but need to advance a younger population who are. We cannot afford to stay the way we are, we cannot stay outside the gates, because the accumulation of power is also happening digitally. Unless we understand how to work efficiently in a digital age, and through digital means, we will not have the internal resources and external tool kits to hold sarkaar and bazaar accountable. So, kicking and screaming, the Indian civil sector needs to come into the digital age, which means the donor community needs to support this as well.

At the heart of it all, we still want to restore dignity and agency to people. Theodore Roosevelt once said, "Look to the stars, but keep your feet on the ground", and I think that is what we should keep in mind when we think about scaling our work, especially in the philanthropy sector. ✕

# My Philanthropic Journey: How I learnt to stop worrying and embrace failure

*An edited version of a conversation with Vidya Shah, Chairperson & CEO, EdelGive Foundation at EDGE 2020.*

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**M**y work in philanthropy spans different spaces, from groundwater and sanitation, early learning, social justice and governance, to the arts. I have portfolios on active citizenship, young men and boys, environmental issues, and how to collaborate on better access to justice. It may seem like this approach makes me a jack of all trades and master of none. But I would like to put this in perspective, because while these are all different issues, to my mind they focus on the same thing, which is the strengthening of Samaaj.

I've said many times that making the Samaaj strong enough to solve its problems on its own, obviously with collaboration, remains the single driving spirit behind my philanthropy and my other work as well. Regardless of what field we are working in, what I look for is ideas, individuals, and institutions that have the integrity, commitment, and passion to solve something that they care about. These are all societal issues, and through my philanthropy, I hope to strengthen communities and Samaaj to respond to problems and see themselves as an active part of the solution. Thanks to India's thriving civil sector, I am able

to work across these areas and have the privilege of supporting some amazing organizations.

## How to Strengthen and Support the Social Sector

There are so many things acting on civil society right now. Pressures of fundraising, pressures of all kinds of reforms that the government is undertaking that are worrying the sector a lot right now. And on top of that, because of the Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) law or because of various diversions in ideological beliefs, many rich philanthropists have undertaken initiatives to implement their aims on their own, hiring their own people and operating within their own gate. They may be collaborating with the government, but not necessarily with existing civil society institutions. This is a worrying trend because these civil society organizations have their feet very firmly on the ground. They've done the work for decades, they understand how problems evolve, and how sometimes a new solution may give rise to a new problem. Unless you have a deep, contextual understanding of the issue, you can't really grapple with the inequities that common people have to face. So, I would say to philanthropists, even if you implement within your own organization, make sure to find those people who are already doing good work. And I think many of them do that. For example, at EkStep we are rolling out a huge platform along with the government, but we also made sure to include many civil society organizations in it.

We need to collectively work on making our society strong, and that means strengthening its institutions, leadership, and a moral base so that we can confidently hold the markets and the state accountable to the common public interest. Society is not homogenous, especially in India, so it is a tricky task to ensure that societal tensions do not spill over. For that, I think the first thing is we need to go back to the basics.

We must start having conversations about how do we see ourselves as citizens first? How do we see ourselves not just as consumers or subjects of the state, but as active participants in society?

Today it is so easy to wake up in the morning as a consumer, you know? The first cup of tea you have and until you go to bed, something is there which ties you to the market very closely, especially digitally. Today, states are so powerful. From morning to night, you're also ruled by a million laws, some of which you don't even know. So how do we grab back for ourselves? We need to understand that we are citizens first, and that we must work to make our society better for everyone, whether that means just doing something within your building, house, neighborhood, city, or for the whole country. So, just that flip from realizing you're not a subject, you're not a customer, you are a human being and a citizen first – once these layers are understood, it becomes easier to do the work which strengthens Samaaj.

The task before civil society and the media now is to make people see that they need to be giving back to society, and the work that they do through their businesses is not enough. Because that old idea that the business of business is business, that's over right? We have understood the interconnections so much better, especially in 2020, that I think for more business people and wealthy people to start giving forward into areas that they don't directly benefit from, it's a very critical way forward, even for themselves. Because you and I know what kind of satisfaction and joy and discovery we get from doing this work. I think it is up to us also to tell these stories a little better than we are doing right now, to draw in more people into this adventure. So, there's work ahead on all sides.

This is more complex for women, since many women do not have control over their finances and being able to give is a tricky issue. Personally, I had to battle for my identity because Nandan takes up such

a large space. I had to work and demonstrate over time that my approach is complementary and different to his. I was fortunate enough to put my own money into Infosys, so I became independently wealthy and have more control over my own finances. Families need to understand that women can use their talents, not only in their jobs and home life, but can also work to improve their community. I urge women to take this up confidently, start as small as you feel comfortable with, but do not be afraid to make the demand on money to give forward, because it's another way to contribute to the family and instill important values in the next generation.

In the last two decades, people have had these conversations and learnt from each other in the sector. They are beginning to join head and heart and pocket. It is true that people start either from the heart or from the head, and strangely the journey from the heart to the head is actually a very long and deep journey. It's an evolution. It's a learning path, and people who start from head quickly realize that they need a bit of heart, and people who start from the heart realize, "Oops, we need to think this through much more for systemic change." So, they get there eventually, and again, we must make sure those of us who are so passionate about this sector, ask how we can keep more resources out there so that people can converge their head and heart and not forget about their pockets as well. Open your head, your heart, and your pocket.

Most people have understood that they have to work with the government, the biggest player of all. And that doesn't necessarily mean the Prime Minister's Office. It could mean working with the local panchayat, ward councillor, or mohalla committee, or it could be any form of a state or a para-state organization. So first of all, we need to understand what we mean by government. And if you're new to

philanthropy, begin small. There are a variety of opportunities to engage with the government and it will help to expand your own work, even if it is at a very small scale. Today, if you go to your ward councillor and say, "I want to give books and uniforms to one school", you are already working with the state and the political system. If you begin small, you will quickly understand how that will help you to scale up your work.

### The Challenges for Indian Philanthropy

I think philanthropists who are business people who have to constantly work with the government, are generally very nervous to take on risky things which the government might think are anti-government. Even though they may not be, right? If something is pro-people, it's not necessarily anti-government. So, we have to be very careful in our philanthropy. It must be pro-people or pro-ecosystems that also benefit people. And I think Indian philanthropy needs to take a very hard look at what is actually happening on the ground. Why are people suffering? With climate change, who's going to suffer? Those who live at the edge of livelihood and land, livelihood, and water, those kinds of places.

If we do not understand now that the economy is, as they say, a wholly owned subsidiary of the ecology, then even businesses will not thrive. Otherwise, corporates will shy away from the hard questions about pollution, water sustainability, land issues, agriculture, and many more issues. Being pro-people and pro-environment for our country is important right now. We can afford to take more risks, even in terms of access to justice. How many people are languishing in prisons without trials because they do not have easy access to courts and lawyers? Societal issues are intricately linked together, and those connections are being woven tighter together as time goes by. We need to understand this and use those insights in our philanthropy.

I think that civil society in India needs to realize that they were dependent on foreign and multilateral organizations for funding, and that they did not spend enough time and energy to bridge divides between them and Indian funders. Instead of assuming that people will not fund them, they need to now tell their stories in a way that will help funders understand. So, there is a lot of work that civil society needs to do to reach out to Indians who are becoming wealthier or are already wealthy. We need to galvanize our own super wealthy, and get the wealthy to start openly giving. When we talk about wealth in India, it is often in hushed tones. Wealth creation is actually a good thing because that's how you bring more and more people into prosperity, which is why societies allow it and the state encourages it.

But wealth must be used and must be seen to be beneficial for all society. If only a few private people are benefiting from wealth creation, and masses of people are not seeing the benefit of that wealth creation, then clearly something is very seriously wrong. So, there is a lot of churn going on right now. These last 20 years, a lot of economic papers have celebrated billionaires, but I think we are seeing a tipping point now. People have understood that while wealth creation is good, accumulation of so much wealth in few private hands that is not visibly being deployed for societal interests, people are beginning to wake up to the problems that that poses. And I think today all wealthy people need to reflect on the opportunity to be more useful to far more people and do it visibly. I think the time to be shy about it is over.

Finally, we need to look at retail fundraising. How do Indian civil society organizations tap into this more effectively? While I think we do need to professionalize civil society, the core of the sector is the volunteer energy that people have in them. The desire to do good for its own sake, without transactional results, is what motivates us. That is what we need to see coming up again, so civil society has to learn to tap into that.

**Moving Towards a Digital Civil Society**

The pandemic has helped us realize the importance of digital spaces, especially when it comes to creating a more resilient civil society in India. Whether in terms of organizations' capacity to quickly respond to emerging problems, or the capacity to not be dependent on a few funding waves, the sector would benefit from the move to the digital. In order for this to happen, we need capacity building to evolve as a sector in philanthropy and civil society. We need to provide more training, tools, and resources to civil society organizations because without financial support they may not be able to do it.

Over the past few years, our teams at EkStep and at the Societal Platform have been thinking about how to use technology to build for inclusion. Although I am not a techie, I have learned to expand my definition of tech – farmers use the plough, Gandhi used the charkha, we moved from bullock carts to cars, and these are all examples of technology. Everything is technology, but information technology particularly is double-edged, and we know it can be used for both good and bad. Information technology amplifies intent, so working on intent and declaring it is very important. We need to constantly make sure that our technology does not lead us away from our intent. So how do we make technology work for society, to serve Samaaj? This is why we designed Societal Platform Thinking. If we want everyone to have an education, healthcare, access to justice, water, or any other basic necessity, can we use the power of all these emerging technologies to do that instead of trying to capture value at one end of the spectrum?

There are no simple solutions, but I believe the way forward is to create open public digital goods so that everyone can be a part of taking back technology for society. I don't see how else we can solve these complex societal issues, which is why I urge civil society organizations to bring

themselves into the digital age, because the new societal problems are going to be digital age problems. We need a healthy digital civil society to tackle digital age issues on virtual platforms. These are complex issues, but they can be made simpler with the goal that technology must enable inclusion, choice, access, and agency. And we have to design for all these principles, which is what we hope Societal Platform Thinking will do. ✕

# Casual Conversations
# with Citizens

*An excerpt of a conversation with Gopal Sankaranarayanan in May 2020, part of a series titled 'Casual Conversations with Citizens' on myLaw (www.mylaw.net).*

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I grew up in a fairly middle-class household in Mumbai, and my parents wanted the best for my sisters and me. My mother was from a land-owning feudal setup but wanted us to have a liberal, convent education and be independent. The stories we were told, and the values we were taught said that wealth does not come from possessions or money, but a good education and how it is applied.

My grandparents inspired me a lot as well. My grandfather, Babasaheb Soman, was from the Belgaum-Khanapur area. Despite being in the legal profession, he spent most of his time trying to convince his clients not to go to court, which in turn meant that he did not earn much money. My grandmother, on the other hand, came from Gwalior as a young second bride to Babasaheb Soman. Her father was an ambassador to the court, so she came from palatial surroundings to my grandfather's relatively humble home.

Their stories were told a lot. I didn't meet my grandfather – he worked with Gandhi during Champaran and died just before Independence. But his stories are alive in our family. My grandmother, who I did meet, showed me how to really live. Having gone from wealth to humble living,

she decided to go into severe austerity for the last 20 years of her life by living in one single room. So, it was quite a journey.

I met Nandan in December 1977, when he was at IIT and I was at Elphinstone College in Mumbai. At the time we were young and free and trying to be radical, and not thinking about wealth. Even 10 years into Infosys, nobody thought we would come into this kind of unprecedented wealth.

## Law and the Power of Knowledge

As a journalist you get to see people encountering the law because you write their stories. I remember as a cub reporter, I had to report on a murder, for which I had to think about issues of justice, policing, and crime. I think as a reporter you are constantly doing stories that involve jurisprudence in some form, but otherwise journalists don't really encounter the law. In fact, we're quite privileged in that regard. A good example of this is when I was covering a protest against a dowry-related act of violence that had taken place. Some people had killed a woman, so we were outside that house, and I had my camera and my notebook with me. When the police came, all those people got arrested, but I didn't because I was also reporting. Which is to say, when you're reporting, it's a very different privilege.

Later, when I went to see how a high court functions, I was quite appalled because nobody could hear the judge. The audio system was poor and the crowd was too big, there was so much confusion. I saw a lot of people outside. One fellow was actually crying when I was talking to him, saying, "This is the 30th time I've come, and my case has been adjourned. My life is falling apart". It really bothered me that something as simple as decent and competent access to a court is not a reality for most people.

So, I've always been interested, both as a journalist and writer and because my grandfather was also in the legal profession, about the issues of law in society. How does the law interface with society? Who learns from whom? It's a two-way conversation, but often not discussed enough in the public domain. It seems to be hiding behind black robes sometimes, but it should be out in the public domain because law is about society. And so those issues are really important to put out into many languages, into casual conversations on the streets and in our homes, and that's what made me suggest the idea of a portal that makes the law easy to understand for ordinary people.

We still need to find ways to make law making more transparent. In this, civil society plays a big role. I think we are also to blame as voters. I've said this before – we don't realize that law making is a very critical function of the legislators we elect and then expect to solve our personal problems individually. If we also took the time to understand that making good laws is a significant part of the work that legislators must do, then they can have a conversation with us to say, "Okay we are thinking of such a law, do you even have an opinion on it, then we can represent you when those laws are being framed." I think that needs to start happening and it's a two-way conversation, we must use our legislators. We can have civil-society organizations step in, so there is a much broader democratic consultation before laws are made.

There is also an issue with the regulation of laws. There is no law that says, for example, that people can go and dump effluents in Vrishabhavathi river in Bangalore. Nothing allows you to do that. But people wait for everybody else to be asleep and go and do it. So, how many policemen, how many people do we need to watch over other people's bad intent from being practiced? We need our governance institutions to step up and say, "Look, this pollution is going to affect all of us together." So, we

definitely have deficits of governance and regulation. We have deficits in terms of how laws are framed. And this is a wonderful time for more people to get involved with these issues of law and society and do all they can to improve the discourse, at least. Everyone can be a part of that and reduce some of the polarization in thinking. How can we do much more preventive work like mediation outside the courts? How can we think of ways where people can do much more peace-making and prevention before things even reach the courts? So, I think there's a role for a lot of people to get engaged with these questions.

We need to give first-time legislators a primer on how to go ahead with law-making. The work that PRS Legislative Research and Vidhi Center for Legal Policy are doing are good examples. Vidhi is trying to help legislators and parliamentary committees make laws that are more clear, contemporary, and within the frame of the constitution. PRS Legislative Research, on the other hand, is helping legislators and parliamentarians understand what laws are on the table, how to make better votes happen around them, and how to have better debates.

Finally, when it comes to the judicial academy, it should be similar to medical education where you have continuing education to retain your license to practice. Given that change is happening at a dizzying speed, especially because of technology, this is the right time for it, because otherwise how are judges supposed to keep up?

## Gender is a Cross-Cutting Theme

I'm not a career woman in the conventional sense of the term. As a journalist I only worked for a few years, after which I did a lot of freelancing. I gave up my job when my daughter was born because I found it hard to juggle both. But I was in a privileged position to be able to do so, and to take six years off from work to dedicate to my children

because Nandan was very busy at the time. Additionally, my profession allowed me to write articles and do simple things on the side, so I was able to take advantage of that.

In that way, I did have the struggles that other working women have. All the things that women have to balance can be very tough. The demands keep changing and you have to make many sacrifices, because it is impossible to do it all, no matter what people say. Something has to give. If you're lucky, you have a support system around you. Which is why it is so necessary that we work with men and boys, so that we can enable them to become the support system that women need.

In my three decades of work so far, what I've seen is that no matter which area you work in, gender is a cross-cutting theme. Take water, which is an area I have worked on for 15 years now – the burden of water is on women at a household level, and in that way, gender is an important part of our work in water, though we do not necessarily call it out.

At a macro level, as a writer and a reader, when you are looking at what's happening around us and trying to unpack things, you begin to think about the other side. In this case, that is thinking about who a woman is dealing with – she is dealing with a man on the street, or her husband, or her father, or her son, or somebody who has a different way of looking at women's empowerment perhaps than she does. That makes her choices very complicated.

Having thought of this I then began to look at young men, and asked myself where do all these things spring from? What is the root of patriarchal thinking? What do young males think when they are 13 and their hormones are raging?

It was this line of questioning that made me look at what work was being done in this area, to try to support more of it, and create a whole portfolio across India where young men can safely examine their masculinity and come to terms with who they are. This is necessary if we want women's empowerment.

### The Need for Collaboration

In terms of collaboration, there are two kinds of models that we can look at. The first is between philanthropists, and the time has come when philanthropists globally are recognising the need to work together. This is an important point in the journey of The Giving Pledge where if we look at the difference between how much has been promised versus how much has been given, there is a huge gap. People don't necessarily know how to give money, it's not so easy. There are many intermediary organizations that are also helping bigger philanthropists, bigger foundations to connect with smaller first-time donors. And there are many, many more open spaces for that sharing and discovery. So, this is actually a very great time for that.

In this context, there is a need for all of us to learn from those who have given better and given more. It's a great time for cross-learning in the space of philanthropy.

The second kind of collaboration is between philanthropists and the government. Here, it is especially important to note that the money that even a philanthropist like Bill Gates has, is nothing compared to what the government has. However, what philanthropists or people who want to invest in social change do possess is the ability to take some risks with their capital. They can say, "Let's just try something. And if it fails then we'll try something else." This is not a luxury the government has.

Indian governments, whether at the centre, state, panchayat, or even

the municipality level – are usually open to suggestions. From there, it is a journey of co-creation between the government body and the philanthropist. The government body will have ideas, because they have budgets, schemes, or programmes, and as a philanthropist you have to fit into all of that. But you do get the space to innovate and that's the important thing.

Take Arghyam as an example. Approximately 10-15 years ago, there were marvellous institutions doing work on groundwater, at a time when there were no groundwater laws. Arghyam, in collaboration with these civil society organizations, came up with something called Participatory Groundwater Management which is now a cornerstone of all government policy on water. Which is to say that it is possible to find space and opportunity to work very well with the government.

**On Successes and Learnings**

When I think about my success, the first success that comes to mind is Pratham Books which I co-founded in 2004. When we set it up in Bangalore, our goal was to get a book in every child's hand. I stayed there for 10 years, and the next team came in and took it on. Over the years, millions of children have been able to get books in their own language, get them free or at very affordable prices, access them across the country, and soon all across the globe, thanks to the Creative Commons platform we created. I think that I consider it a genuine success.

If we are considering the future of citizens as lawmakers and law abiders, it is especially important to ensure that children learn better. To this end, I have worked with two kinds of organizations. With EkStep, our mission is to increase access to learning opportunities for 200 million children by next year. I think we are on track to do that because we are working very closely with all the governments – approximately 28 or

30 states now want to develop a platform for getting teachers to teach better and access resources. EkStep does not create content. Instead, it supports the whole content creation ecosystem. In that sense, we do not decide what needs to be taught, but we focus on ensuring that whatever is being taught is being taught better, be it in terms of access, ability to discover, or ability to share. In essence, it is a technology-enabled platform.

On the other hand, organizations like Akshara Foundation, which I have been involved with deeply, looked at the importance of teaching values, what the atmosphere in a classroom should be like, and what the relationship between children and teachers should be. Together, I think we are able to engage with different parts of the system. The present is a great time for us to really engage with the whole school system so that children are more curious and connected to issues of future citizenship.

The other success that comes to mind is Arghyam, where we've made some serious inroads in policy when it comes to water. We've been able to support dozens of organizations that have been working on the ground for decades. The government has already come out with two massive schemes in water, the thinking for which came from some of Arghyam's partners. These policies in turn impact millions of people across the country.

A learning experience that stands out for me was with an organization called Nagarik. I had just lost a very dear friend in a ghastly accident and so we set up this organization for road safety in 1992. We were spectacularly unsuccessful. Though there were amazing people like Shiv Kumar and Kiran Mazumdar and Jagdish Raja involved, we just didn't know what to do. We were perhaps a little ahead of our time and we were doing the wrong things and under-investing, and so it did not work. But it taught me that just passion and unstructured use of your time is

not going to make any change possible. Knowing what I do today, I would do Nagarik very differently. But that is how we learn – by failing.

## The Need for a Strong Samaaj

There are issues that remain unresolved in India on ground water, and that's just one example of the commons. So, who owns the commons? Whose land is it? Whose water is it? We haven't really resolved that. Different countries have resolved this in different ways, but personally I worry about the hard edge of that. To say that either the community owns it, or the private sector can be given a lease on it, or the state holds it in trust and decides whether the private sector gets it or you and I get it – they are all problematic constructs. So, we need a stepped-up governance architecture on the public commons. We have to use the principle of 'subsidiarity' where possible. For example, even if we say the state is a trustee of the commons, we have to leave some of it to be solved at the most local possible level. So, panchayats under the 73rd amendment need to be rejuvenated now but many local water bodies can be managed through dialogue and within those small areas or even across, within district boundaries. So, in practice, community resources are being managed by communities.

Once in a while a heavy-handed law will come down and an eminent domain will be called in and will say, "We are putting a mine here, we are putting a road here," and there's always conflict at those points. But I don't even know if this can be resolved once and for all. We have to keep learning from the best examples available to us and then framing and sharpening our laws accordingly.

But you see, it's when it comes to finite public resources that all these conversations arise. In education, if you have five extra books, I don't get one less book. I can get five books too. If you get an education, I don't

get less of an education. But when it comes to these finite public goods, that's when these contestations arise, and I think those discussions are still wide open in India. And we have to be wary of saying that the state will be the final authority. The common thread that runs through all my work is the dynamic continuum between Samaaj, Bazaar, and Sarkaar. Today, we need to strengthen Samaaj because right now it is very divisive and polarized. We have to start a deep conversation as to what is a good society. And then, therefore, redefine the role of the state and the market so that they remain accountable to the larger public interest. Otherwise, we fall into the trap of becoming consumers of the market or subjects of the state and forgetting that the real work for all of us, as citizens, is to contribute to a good society. We have to co-create good governance because the state alone will not do it. We have to co-create good markets that work for us, because the markets alone will never do it.

With this in mind, we need to be thinking about how we re-invest the commons with regenerative property so that more people can use them equitably and in a just manner. This is something the Samaaj sector needs to collectively think through. Here, the law needs to be engaged to enable implementation in a way that is equitable and just, and looks at intergenerational justice. These are the issues that keep me interested and I get to support so many good organizations that are deeply thinking through these issues.

### The Future of Indian Philanthropy

Going forward, India's super wealthy need to be more generous and more transparent about how generous they are. There are some people who are very generous and don't like to talk about it. But for more people to increase their generosity, we need to build bridges of trust amongst the wealthy. People often get insecure and feel the need to protect their

wealth. When economies are doing well or when people see a trajectory for their children, they are reassured and become more generous.

Even if people are more generous, I hope that philanthropy doesn't remain charity. I also hope that philanthropy and justice do not remain orthogonal, and that there is more convergence between the two. Because it is true philanthropy when you have understood there are structural issues of inequity that you have to address through your philanthropy.

That being said, you can't do it alone. Nobody has figured out how to have a perfectly equitable society, but we can move towards an ideal where this kind of runaway wealth becomes structurally impossible to garner, because nobody needs this kind of wealth. So, how do you then, in your philanthropy at least, keep some portion of your portfolio to look at issues of justice, to find organizations you can trust who will work on these issues, so that the burden of philanthropy itself is reduced on people. That's a long, hard journey for many people. And we also need many more institutions working on justice to better communicate what they do and the importance of their work, so that they are able to attract investments. So, there's lots of work ahead but it's a very exciting time because people have recognised how interconnected our destinies are. ✕

# Trust is the Absolute Foundation of Any Partnership

*An interview with Societal Platform, published in March 2021.*

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**How did you arrive at this idea that value is created when the civil society, government, and markets come together and co-create to solve societal problems?**

Since childhood, I always felt very strongly about citizens banding together to do some things. But putting these three things together really happened in 1997 – when I had gone on a field visit for our work on water in the Northern state of Bihar in India.

I got talking with one of our partners there, with whom we were working through Arghyam. He said to me, "in the good old days, society used to be very strong. And then in the last century, the government became stronger (starting with colonialism and onwards), followed by even stronger international corporations, especially with globalization. In the process, society kept getting pushed back and back and back to the lowest point instead of being at the top".

This really made me think. I started reading and learning about societal movements, about social change, about power structures. And it occurred to me that in this continuum of society, and markets, and the state – in this continuum, the most important sector was the societal

sector! That if we want any change to happen, we have to look at the role of all these three sectors. I've been feeling for a very long time now that the social sector has to be the strongest foundation so that the markets and the state can be responsive to the needs of the society. So all of my work has been on how we can strengthen the foundational society, to actually try and come together to solve problems for itself, and include bazaar and sarkaar without letting the societal power reduce. Without creating an imbalance.

**This idea of Societal Platform Thinking was germinating in your mind and manifesting through your work since 2004. What were your personal experiences, how did you come to this construct of Societal Platform Thinking?**

Through my work at Akshara Foundation, I learnt a lot about how to work with the government. But it was when we started Pratham Books, whose mission is to 'put a book in every child's hand', there I realized that even working with the government would not be enough. You have to involve a broad section of society to make sure that every child is given the gift of a reading life.

We knew that the publishing industry in India was in dire need of change: if we cannot find more than 600 books in any mother tongue language put together but English, and we have 300 million kids! Something needed to be done with urgency! So we decided that we have to unleash the creative energy of all the people in India, because every household is a storytelling household in India. Everybody tells the stories of the epics to their children and grandchildren. So how could we transition from an oral culture to a written culture?

We started working with publishers, with state governments, and we worked with every single creative artist we could find. It taught me the

power of unleashing the most amazing positive energy of people. Writers, illustrators, translators, editors, publishers, governments, philanthropy – everybody came together. We innovated on how to make a book cheap to publish, and financially accessible to many? Even though it was underwritten by philanthropy, we wanted it to be eventually financially sustainable. And, we did.

So, innovation mattered a lot. Partnerships mattered a lot. I learned about unleashing the societal energy that people have in them to achieve a common goal. And this learning has informed the coming together of Societal Platform Thinking.

**You have always stressed on leadership for the society and of the society. So when you think about leadership, how do you look at that dimension?**

The true idea of leadership has to come from a place where I feel the responsibility to change something that I think is not correct in the world. It could be anything. And if leadership is born from that – that idea of transformation, then you have to shoulder the responsibility to make that transformation happen.

And we all know that we can't do this by ourselves. Leadership is about being a follower of other people's ideas, because we are always standing on the shoulders of other giants. But it is as much about being able to create a followership. We ensure that by our example

For me, the power of intent always matters a lot. I did realize on the way, however, that just the power of intent is by no means enough. When I co-created my first institution in 1992, Nagarik, we wanted to have safer roads in India. While the intent was strong, by every metric it was a disaster – now I realise that we didn't yet have the language or the grammar of that intent, so that we could be effective. A leader must

learn with their team how to create a grammar, so that people can build a language. So for me, leadership is about enabling the grammar of that intent, so that everybody can work on enriching the language of that mission or whatever that we decide to do together.

**You are an advocate for creating safe spaces to embrace failure, and you have talked a lot about this. So we'd love to hear your perspectives on failure and how you look at failure.**

In the social sector, it's very hard for us to talk of failure publicly. I do understand where it is coming from – most social sector organizations need funders, and funders like to hear nice things about what they're funding. It's only now that there is much better sense that funders need to know about what didn't work. So that they are able to fund that as well.

We are beginning to learn that failure is okay. In fact, we had a failure conference in Bangalore three years ago, where icons of the civil society movements in India came and said, "here's how we failed. Here's why we have failed. We take the responsibility for that failure. But here's what we learn from the failure."

Nobody wants to fail – so we should be careful of not glorifying failure. But in our organisations, we really must make time to understand failure, to accept failure, to discuss failure, and then where possible, to pin accountability without demeaning that person or team so much that they won't try anything different again.

**You have led the charge in philanthropy in India in many ways – with investments in Societal Platform and the way you have been a risk funder through trust. Tell us more.**

I started off as an activist in some sense – whether it was at Nagarik or Akshara or Pratham Books. I was inside these civil society organizations,

and I knew how difficult it is to have to respond to donors who don't understand the ground reality. The reality is that things keep changing, and you need to be able to respond to that changing situation in a flexible manner. Whereas, if you're stuck with some programmatic kind of backed donation or something very specific, it really makes the organization very rigid, and makes people very anxious about reporting to the donor. So, I know the feeling and the hardships – I had been on this side.

So now as a donor, I know that I cannot, cannot, cannot thrust my own ideas and opinions and rigidity on to any organization and expect them to succeed. There's just no way! I recall, one of the first people that I gave a large chunk of money to, Mihir Shah in Arghyam said, "Rohini, don't make the mistake of calling your partners grantees. You should not be a donor and they should not be grantees, you should be partners." We really try our best to always do that. Trust is a basic currency we need. You just have to work on trust. Of course, you have to do some due diligence and sometimes your trust will be betrayed, but you learn. So for me, trust is the absolute foundation of any partnership. ✕

# To Fail is to Have Dared

*This is an interview published by India Development Review in April 2021.*

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**When working on complex issues of social change, failure is inevitable. Yet, people in the social sector are reluctant to talk about it. Why do you think this is the case?**

When I think about failure, I think about the different ways in which it is perceived across samaaj (civil society), sarkaar (state), and bazaar (markets). In bazaar, failure is underwritten structurally by financial markets. You're allowed to go there and try something really crazy. And if you fail—not that anybody chooses to fail—there is a safety net for you. That's why bazaar can afford to glorify failure a little bit, and say 'fail forward' or 'fail fast'.

Sarkaar, on the other hand, is not incentivised or structured in a way that invites failure. That's why they will prefer to see a proven model that they can take to scale, rather than try to innovate, because innovation involves a lot of failures. And this is alright because the government's goal is not to provide risk capital to society, but rather to provide equity and service delivery.

Coming to samaaj, there is a greater risk appetite to try out things to help society, but there is less underwriting of the risk of failure. And this needs to change, because we are talking about people and their lives; we're talking about their emotional, financial, and social well-being. So, in this context, it is important for social sector organisations to talk about

failure, recognise it early on, and course correct. To do this effectively, we need patient philanthropic capital that will allow organisations and missions to experience some failures, some learning, and some experimentation, to find what works.

**You make a very important point about philanthropy providing risk capital and staying the course. What does this look like in practice?**

The way I see it, there are three main things that can create an enabling environment: trust, patient capital, and allowing the conversation on failure and innovation to be upfront and transparent. For me, it all begins with trust. The relationship between the philanthropist and nonprofit partner has to be built on trust, so that the nonprofit feels accepted when they are trying to do something different. Because if they're not trying to do something different, how are things going to change? And some of these experiments will fail, either because the demand for those services or the institutional structures that support them are not ripe enough. Philanthropy needs to create space for these failures to be talked about and explained, and then allow more experimentation.

We also need to be very conscious of timeframes, when talking about failure. Take the education sector in India, for example. About 25 years ago, parents were not very committed to putting their children through 14 years of schooling. Dropout rates were high and the number of out-of-school children was large. But thanks to the work of nonprofits, government policies, and markets, the understanding that education might lead to a better life for their children began to grow, and the demand for education built up rapidly. Today the idea of education being necessary has been completely internalised in India. Though it took some time, what might have initially seemed like a failure to the nonprofits and philanthropists working in the space, (the number of

children with no access to education), today looks like a lot of success.

Once a funder trusts an organisation, they need to think about committing to multi-year funding so that the nonprofit is not spending 30 to 40 percent of their organisational bandwidth trying to raise funds, instead of trying to innovate on the ground.

**In spite of a growing recognition among philanthropists that the programmes they support might not work, nonprofit grantees might still be hesitant to talk about their failures in fear of losing funding. How do we address this?**

I think the social sector putting forward more stories and examples of short-term failures that allowed them to innovate and succeed in the long-run will build an understanding and make philanthropists more open to having a longer timeframe with their grants. In doing this however, both the philanthropist and the organisation need to make sure that failure is not glorified. We are not trying to achieve failure; we are going to fail because it's not always possible to succeed, and it's important to accept that.

While doing this we also have to be careful to distinguish between the failure of the organisation and the failure of some individuals within the organisation. There is a different way of responding to failure of some individuals—perhaps from a moral lapse—than a failure coming out of a good intent to innovate. The analysis of the failure and its origins is extremely important. Creating the space to do this—first internally by the organisation and then a little more openly—should become a structured process. I'm sure many organisations do this already, but it would be helpful if we could come together to create frameworks, toolkits, and processes, which are easy for organisations to follow and share publicly.

**Beyond acknowledging and analysing failure internally within organisations, what can we do to ensure that others can also learn from failures, even if not their own?**

This is a very important point because the goal of the social sector should be to ensure that even if organisations, institutions, or leaders fail, their mission shouldn't fall by the wayside. We need to keep space for others to continue the task—the societal task—even if some organisations fail. One way I see of doing this is by converting the effort and knowledge of organisations into digital public goods; using open source technologies that allow people to come in and share, discover, and learn. In a sense, this is a de-risking from the failures of individual leaders, organisations, and innovations—sharing knowledge so that we don't make the same mistakes again.

But beyond just individual organisations or philanthropists, how can we learn from the failures of the social sector as a whole? To me, what would be interesting would be if we had a process to look at the failures of the social sector in India over the last 40-50 years. Because by now, it should have been in a less risky space. Could we have done something differently, together?

We are now seeing a new wave of young social sector actors using technology and other new methods to increase equity and access. What can they learn from the old wave of social sector players, who worked from the 1970s to the 2000s? What were their failures? What can we learn from them and do differently?

**Can you tell us about some of your failures, and what you've learned?**

In my professional life, I've experienced many failures, some worse than others. But my very first failure in my professional life as an activist philanthropist was way back in 1992, when I set up an organisation called

Nagarik, after one of my very close friends died in a horrible road accident. Along with a few others, we laid out our goal to create safer roads.

We worked on it for a few years without a large budget, but I don't think the budget was the problem. I think the problem was that we didn't quite know how to go about it. There was a lot of enthusiasm, passion, and intelligence in the group, but I think we didn't structure ourselves. And so, the whole initiative faded away; but the problem didn't go away at all. India continues to have the highest number of road accidents and deaths in the world, with 150,000 annual deaths.

It was a failure at many levels and I take a lot of the blame for the lack of strategic thinking on myself. But it taught me a few lessons about how not to do things, how to think through things, how to set realistic goals, and how to ensure that you have a professional cadre working with you—not just enthusiastic, good Samaritans.

And when I think about my own failures, I also go back to the fact that what looks like a failure today may look like success tomorrow. We cannot predict when this will happen, and especially as philanthropists, we need to be aware of this. It's been nearly 15 years since Arghyam, the nonprofit organisation I set up and fund, started working on supporting sustainable water and sanitation solutions. Somebody could look at us and say that the water situation in India has actually gotten worse in this time. Is this a failure of the organisation and the vision? I think we could say that Arghyam could have been much more impactful. But one could also say that the water problem in India is so huge and so complex that it is completely unrealistic to expect one organisation to do anything more than shift the needle in some aspects of the water situation. And we have been able to do that. We have been able to make the issue of groundwater more visible among practitioners, donors, and policy circles. Some of the policies that our partners have

been able to embed in government frameworks will hopefully create more sustainability and equity in the water sector, sooner rather than later. To a certain extent, we succeeded in nudging, catalysing, and innovating. But of course, if you look at the whole water sector, then Arghyam has by no means finished its journey towards its mission. ✕

# Succeeding in Partnerships: In conversation with Arun Kumar

*An edited version of an interview with Arun Kumar in April 2021. At the time of this interview, Arun Kumar was the CEO of Apnalaya – an organization that works with the disadvantaged to overcome social, political and economic barriers and help them lead a better quality of life.*

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**C**ollaboration is an important topic in the social sector today. Collaboration as an idea should, in its essence, be an equal partnership of different players and actors. You cannot call it collaboration if there is one power centre and everybody has to follow that power centre. Collaboration is difficult in practice because it requires that all collaborators should have a common vision and mission, and learn to give up control. In collaboration, we need to see everyone as a leader or rather as players on the same team, rather than seeking leadership roles. Good collaboration is possible only if we let go of control and truly co-create a path together. There are many forms of collaboration, which can be light touch or very deep, but I believe that this is the era for us to learn how to collaborate better, both in the social sector and in the philanthropy sector, and between the two.

According to Arun Kumar, collaboration is about conceptualizing and visualizing the bigger picture that perhaps needs to be completed by a collective. One of the biggest challenges is to enable every participant to

see that bigger picture and agree on its broad contours, which includes a commitment to a certain concept or ideology, which are called non-negotiables. Those who have the ability to think in abstracts and to conceptualize the big picture may not always be the most skilled in facilitation or negotiations to get the collective going. This often results in issues of attribution, clashes of egos, representation, and leadership.

To be successful in your mission, a broad agreement is necessary. Kumar mentions the example of Child Rights and You (CRY) which headed an almost seven-year long campaign with a coalition of more than 200 organizations from all over India. Although there was no agreement on how to start a common school system or the medium of instruction, there was one common goal theme that everyone was committed to – that there should be free, compulsory universal education. Kumar also mentions the Right to Information and food security as other successful examples of collaborations.

Kumar speaks about his experience in 2020, where after the lockdown was announced in Mumbai, 14 organizations came together to collaborate and coordinate, to share information and find the cheapest mode of transportation, making sense of the procurement. They were organizations working in different geographies and on different issues, but there was an overriding need, and they came together beautifully. Another example shared was of Mission 24, an initiative by Apnalaya. It was aimed at improving entitlements in M-East Ward, which is right at the bottom of all 24 wards of Mumbai. With limited resources, it was difficult to keep people together on questions of advocacy, and to keep them committed for a long time. Advocacy and policy level change invariably knock at the door of ideologies, so it becomes that much more difficult to keep everybody together. However, if we are aiming for sustainable change and sustainable impact, there is no running away from collaboration.

But we also need to consider broader questions when it comes to collaboration. For example, Kumar asks whether we can view collaborations beyond the lens of a funding project, and view them as an investment in a longer term cause. What we can focus on is research, data, evidence, advocacy and policy change since these are areas where funding is scarce and collaboration difficult. This would mean looking beyond implementation and multiplying operations in the name of collaborations.

Having set up and worked with many organizations like Akshara Foundation, Pratham Books, and my foundations, Arghyam and EkStep, I think philanthropists have understood the need to collaborate. More so among themselves so that we can fund areas broadly, which it is hard for individual philanthropists to continue to fund, till it reaches the impact that it needs to reach.

There have been a few good examples of collaboration recently. The India Climate Collaborative (ICC) has more than 20 donors and donor organizations working together to respond quickly and effectively to the challenge of climate change. The scale of the problem is only going to grow, and although we are still finding our feet in the ICC, the commitment and collaborative framework is in place. Similarly, with the Independent and Public-Spirited Media Foundation, we recognise that good media is the foundation of a good democracy and a good society. A few of us came together to birth this organization which has noteworthy trustees - who make decisions to find good media so that the voices of the people around our country can be better represented through various media. This has also been a collaborative effort from the beginning.

It is becoming clearer that collaborations can help you to de-risk from all kinds of failures. I think the era of collaboration in the philanthropy

sector is upon us. I hope this means that a diverse set of civil society organizations will get funded.

Diversity is crucial when it comes to solving complex societal problems because we need different kinds of ideologies, methods, experiments, and innovations to be backed by philanthropy, citizen movements, and civil society leaders so that when something works, we can try to scale. Cookie-cutter solutions will not work at scale – this is why our team has conceptualized what we call Societal Platform Thinking. Our main goal for this was to ask ourselves, during these challenging times, how we achieve the most impact at scale. Carrying out a successful pilot and then trying to scale up was not as effective, so we are flipping that around to understand what works at scale. For that, we need the Samaaj, Bazaar, and Sarkaar, to be involved if we are going to solve complex societal issues. Our whole effort was focused on reducing the friction to collaborate between these three sectors. In order to do that, we've put together a framework on www.societalplatform.org, along with many public digital goods for people to use, toolkits, processes, and our team is always available to answer questions.

Solutions do not come from only one end of the pipeline, and if we want more collaboration, we have to learn how to distribute the ability to find solutions. How do we create more agency in a distributed way? How do we scale up diversity? How do we use technology for the public good? How do we allow people to solve problems in context? And how do we bring Samaaj, Bazaar, Sarkaar together to do what they do best? This is how we are looking at collaboration. Globally, we are seeing increasing examples of good collaboration as well as from the civil society side in India. NGOs like Pratham, probably the largest education NGO in the world, require all kinds of collaboration at all levels.

While collaboration remains extremely difficult because it is hard for people to give up their space, egos, branding, and their need for attribution, the need for collaboration has trumped the need to go it alone. The pandemic has made it increasingly clear that we need to work together rather than in silos. We saw this happen over the past year, with people coming together in ways they had never done before, mounting a whole logistics model to tackle pandemic-related issues. They had to resolve their differences to be able to work together, and I think it has taught us how to collaborate a little better from the heart.

It is not an easy task to work across sectors, but we must keep at it and keep in mind that there is a common interest between society actors, civil society institutions, and market actors to work together to uphold rule of law.

Civil society organizations come from a lens of equity, and social justice; I am sure many in the market do too, but it is also about innovation, efficiency, and creating prosperity for a wide number of people. Both of them must uphold the rule of law to be able to function and have the license to operate in society. Corporations need to not only follow the rule of law to the extent possible, but also uphold the rule of law so that business can be done peacefully. Of course, the state is not infallible, in our country or anywhere else in the world. Power does extend itself in human beings and when they have power, they try to extend their power, and the state has a monopoly on many powers.

It is in the interest of civil society institutions and market institutions to make sure that the Samaaj, Bazaar, and Sarkaar remain in a dynamic balance and that one sector does not become so powerful that the other two are left at the mercy of any one of them. Each needs to work together to keep the others in check if we want a good society.

Global research points to the fact that when corporations attempt to become better corporate citizens - by reducing negative externalities which society has to pick up the cost of, by treating their employees better and working towards improving the world rather than destroying it, those companies are doing better. There is not only a moral but a strategic imperative to get there. Businesses are not going to put themselves at risk because they constantly need the state to approve of everything that they do. But there are always openings to collaborate on some aspects which are morally undeniable and need to be done for a better society.

In India there is a good separation between the markets and the state, and I see the opportunity for Samaaj institutions to work with the state to ensure that we have better markets which do not try to capture value only but distribute value down the line. The age of partnerships and collaborations is truly here and whether we fail or succeed, we have no choice but to keep trying.

It may not be easy for civil society organizations to collaborate with people whose ideas may be completely different from theirs. However, given the circumstances now where the trust between the state and civil society organizations has reduced considerably over the last few years, I think it is imperative that civil society actors create new networks for collaboration so that the interests of society are better represented with a diversity of views.

Civil society institutions need to come together and collaborate better. They can seek some philanthropic support for this as well, because sometimes we may not be good at storytelling or presenting our messages. I would request my civil society friends to come together through more platforms to tell your stories and bridge the divide between yourselves and Indian donors. The age of the foreign donor is going

away and there may be a kind of philanthropy nationalism emerging. Everyone wants to fund in their own countries and Indian philanthropists are coming together to fund new areas and new collaborations. So civil society actors have to come together as well. ✕

# *BAZAAR* AND THE *PUBLIC* *INTEREST*

*The Bazaar is a sector that fosters creativity and innovation, evolving at a rapid pace and with high stakes. We often frame civil society and the markets as opposing binaries, however they have more in common than we think, and more to gain collectively, by collaborating. So, we need to find ways to rebuild the trust between the markets and the state, as well as the markets and consumers.*

*This section examines economic trends that India has seen over the past 150 years, corporations' responsibilities to safeguard our ecology and the environment, the self-help group models, and the crises of the microfinance sector.*

# Lessons From Below

*This article was first published by Livemint in February 2009.*

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Looking for models of financial prudence and sustainability? We don't have to look very far. Tucked safely away from the scorching heat of the meltdown, at least so far, is the vastly distributed microfinance sector in India, which offers us fascinating lessons.

With an estimated 4.3 million self-help groups (SHGs) scattered across the country, with an average membership per group of 15, mostly women, and an average savings mobilization of Rs 22,000, we have the world's largest microfinance sector and certainly its most diverse. We have SHGs that operate in the classic NGO mould, politically sponsored "vote bank SHGs", for-profit microfinance institutions and so on.

Yet, there are many common values that have held fast in this diversity that we should pay attention to.

Microfinance rests on an axiom of mutualism. This is very different from the individualism that rules free market economies and might have expedited the current economic crisis. Members in a genuine, self-selected, affinity-based group are mutually responsible for the financial transactions of each individual. When a request for a loan comes in, members discuss the need, the prospects for repayment, and allocate resources accordingly. Caution is but rarely thrown to the winds. And with good reason. Everyone understands that failure for one is failure for all. After all, there is no possibility of externalization, and there is

unlimited liability in the aftermath of failure. If something goes wrong, you just sell your home, your business, your mangalsutra and even your children, if you have to. We have all heard too many such heart-rending stories. And no group and no one in the group is too big to be allowed to fail.

Imagine if that had been true for the Wall Street companies that are now getting all those lovely bailouts. Imagine if Messrs Lehman Brothers, Bear Stearns and others had to be part of a group where risk remained within. If they could not externalize their financial losses to society at large, I suspect they would have looked a little more closely at each other's dealings. And maybe they would have sat over coffee at their weekly meetings, checked their account books and rotated leadership, just like they do over at the Stree Shakti Mandals all around India.

This is not to say that all is rosy in the microfinance sector. There are charlatans everywhere. There are also attempts to subvert the ethic, some by entrepreneurs pushing ultra-rapid growth and some by politicians who love to give away freebies at no cost to themselves. A channel of 45 million citizens is just too tempting for some people.

It is to the credit of government institutions such as NABARD and RBI that in spite of these efforts, the microfinance sector remains healthy. All entities in this sector report consistent financial discipline among their borrowers, with low NPAs and loan repayment rates above 97%. Thanks to the intense lobbying of visionary and compassionate leaders such as Aloysius Fernandes of MYRADA, which pioneered SHG formation in India, there are some remarkably progressive policies in place that empower those with little security.

For instance, RBI allows banks to lend even to unregistered SHGs, provided they have a good savings record and evidence of good bookkeeping. There is no conditionality about the purpose of borrowing.

Physical collateral is not required, provided—and this is the key difference—there is evidence of social capital—trust, and affinity and a traceable record of internal savings and lending and recovery.

Many people have rightly argued that it is unfair to expect poor people to remain in groups while each one of us reaps the rewards of individual liberty. Now that we all know individual security is something of a chimera, what with the meltdown, terror and global warming, maybe it is our turn instead to look creatively at the advantages of mutualism and to question current models.

When successful group dynamics are in place, other social goods are produced that cannot be measured just in terms of loan size, or repayment rates. I would put the empowerment of women at the top of the list. It is a silent revolution in the country that is bound to accelerate progress on any indicator—economic, social, or political—the last fairly visible with most of the one million women elected over the years at the panchayat level coming out of the self-help groups.

To me, the real microfinance story is neither about the numbers nor about rapid growth. In fact, it is about the slow movement—a value-based, de-risked, diverse, widely spread, bottom-up social transformation.

Clearly, this is the exact opposite of the dizzying development in financial markets around the world. That's why it merits discourse.

As a society, we have often looked for models that we hope will trickle down. Maybe it is just the right time for some lift irrigation for the dried-up systems on top. ✕

# Microfinance, Macro Trends

*This article was first published by The Times of India in December 2010.*

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**T**he macro crisis in the microfinance sector may not get resolved anytime soon. But it is a symptom of a much larger trend moving through the country.

The Indian microfinance model developed differently from that in its original home in Bangladesh. It took root with self-help groups (SHGs) set up in Karnataka by MYRADA, with NABARD's support, back in the early 1980s. These affinity groups created a social glue among poor women which allowed them not only to offer their mutual guarantee as collateral against their borrowings, but enabled them to work collectively for other causes in their communities. There are hundreds of documented stories of how the SHG movement has generated social change and political empowerment, in addition to accessing more finance for the poor than ever before in independent India.

As the fledgling sector began to attract notice from banks and markets for its excellent repayment rates, well into the high 90s, a lot of things began to change. From a vision of creating slow and steady small fortunes 'for' the bottom of the pyramid, some microfinance players moved to selling a glittering story of quick and large fortunes 'from' the bottom of the pyramid.

Within a short span of five years, the microfinance sector in India, built around carefully nurtured affinities and an appropriate pace of scaling up based on capacities, has turned into a chaotic marketplace with little

regulation. It now has diverse offerings from multiple players and scant regard for proper group formation. An estimated Rs 30,000 crore is chasing the poor and being collected from them, whether they are ready for it or not.

A movement that was based on the hope that women working closely together could create for all of them some economic and social value has been overrun by the idea that loose coalitions of joint liability groups can enable individuals to escape poverty. This subtle shift rides on high theory. When we the elite do not need to form groups and prove our book- keeping skills to access bank services, how long should we expect that of the poor? Hence the sector has moved to many financial products designed for individuals. Fair enough, so long as there is informed consent of the risks of indebtedness.

But the strategy shift also surfs a wave in the current polity. We are witnessing the march of socio-economic rights in India. We have had the right to information, to education and to work. We will soon have the right to food and maybe to water. Each day, someone thinks of a new entitlement to frame as law. This rush to secure individual rights seems to suit everyone.

For rights-based activists, every success brings a heady sense of power and progress. Compared to the hard and long struggles undertaken by NGOs for sustained collective action to preserve the commons, for example, the rights movement has seen relatively quicker policy wins. And it seems they plan to continue on that path.

For market players, who deal with citizens mainly as consumers, the emerging sense of entitlement is useful to consolidate messaging around high individual aspirations. As India becomes the newest focal point for all the world's leading brands, Indian consumers will be able to satisfy any whim, if they can afford it, or can access 'buy now, pay later' services.

And for a government committed to a market economy and struggling hard to deliver to a growing population all the public infrastructure that the urban elite takes so much for granted, the individualisation of demand creates an easy way to channel resources into individual citizen pipelines. Clearly, this is simpler than creating the public school education, health care services, roads and energy and communication services that the urban middle class has enjoyed and built its future on. All those services were created by the state in its more socialist avatar. Today, many governments across the country talk of public-private partnerships as the only viable model for infrastructure development. These are powerful though subtle shifts in the economy that arguably could put India on a path to more human dignity and prosperity.

But is there something we are missing, something we are losing out on, in this splitting up of the collective for the benefit of the individual? To those organisations struggling to pull people together beyond their individual or caste and creed-based identities, the answer is obvious. The focus on the individual takes away the focus from work that requires collective action. Individuals cannot preserve water bodies. Individuals cannot protect forests. Individuals cannot prevent coercive states or uncaring corporations from taking away lands and livelihoods. All of these require continued and creative united efforts.

Perhaps the old institutional forms may never return; they have lost their moral power. Some cooperatives that collapsed on greed, some Gandhian groups that compromised on truth, some communists who took to extreme violence, all have made 21st century Indians wary of old paradigms and formations. And there is no denying the arrival of legitimate individual ambition in a young and economically stronger India.

Yet, if we want to belong to a nation where poverty is history and nature's power to nurture and sustain is restored, we have to find viable

new models of cooperation. Otherwise, the securing of individual ambition may remain a mirage.

Some homegrown ideas and forums are emerging. There is also hope in the innovative way in which technology commons are being used to build virtual bridges across physical divides. But, as the serious distress in the microfinance sector warns us, we must not undermine the models we already have. �

# Foreword: The Blue Sweater

*An excerpt from the Foreword to 'The Blue Sweater', an autobiography by Jacqueline Novogratz, published in 2012.*

India is experiencing a massive transformation. Economically, socially and politically, it is a time of rapid change. The second decade of this new century is critical. It gives us a window of opportunity to complete the unfinished agenda of inclusive growth; of universalizing access to opportunities. Old debates about the role of the state and the role of the markets towards this end are being sharpened anew. It is a time of experimentation and renewal. Citizens are challenging and nudging the state to deliver better public services and improved governance. Consumers are driving markets to more innovation in products and services at lower prices across a broader geography. No doubt the lines are not drawn evenly and power is not distributed equally. Yet it is impossible to ignore the roar of a billion hopes and fears blowing in the winds of our democracy. Two decades of market reforms have created quick and unprecedented wealth for those who were poised to take advantage of the open economy. Now the rich have to show why this wealth creation is good not just for a few but for the whole country. Recently, philanthropy has come under the glare of the media. As more Indians learn to give away more of their wealth, there will hopefully be a diversity of models for giving. Indians will tailor their philanthropy to local conditions and may not follow existing models. That is the rich promise ahead. Some of this philanthropy will go towards building institutions - for education and health, for arts and culture, for the protection of the

environment. Some philanthropy will support movements for socio-political change. Increasingly however, it looks as though some of this philanthropy will underwrite social entrepreneurs and a market-based approach to problems of poverty.

Making markets work better for society is absolutely critical if economic freedom is to thrive. Post the economic crisis, there has been a strong backlash against the role of global financiers and the opaque financial markets they straddle. But unless there is a counter movement to demonstrate how capital can work differently, nothing much will change on Wall Street.

Philanthropy has a small but important role to play in this direction. Patient capital is needed for businesses that serve the poor and the underserved. Nothing can or should replace the role of the state in ensuring basic goods and services to all, right up to the last citizen. But markets (bazaar) have always been an important third leg after society (samaaj) and the state (sarkaar). Without adequate public infrastructure, and without access to formal credit it is a gargantuan task for entrepreneurs serving the poor to succeed. Often, their models are built by carefully listening to what their potential clients actually want, whether it is in low-cost energy devices, housing, education supplements or livelihood-enhancing services. They do have the potential to create successful double bottom-line enterprises. What they lack is financial support that will not hold them to a model of maximum profit extraction at any cost. They need money and mentoring that allows them to experiment and to sometimes fail. These entrepreneurs need financial backing that allows them, when they do succeed, not to destroy the very foundation on which they built their dream; not to trample over the poor as they themselves rise. For now, only philanthropic capital might be available for this purpose. But within that, perhaps, lies the seed to reclaim

the role of the bazaar as an enabler and not a master of the samaaj.

Acumen Fund, perhaps more than any other such entity in the world, has succeeded in drawing such philanthropic capital and other resources from an ever widening base. In a short period of time, it has established a strong though small presence in three continents. Its vision to combine business and philanthropy to break the cycle of poverty, its focus on dignity not dependence have attracted many talented people to its fold. My husband Nandan and I made a small commitment to Acumen Fund when it started operation in India and have admired how its efforts have spread from safe water to alternative energy and sustainable agriculture. The powerhouse behind Acumen Fund is Jacqueline Novagratz, a woman I greatly admire for her courage and humour, her open mind and her universalist humanism. Jacqueline's highly infectious enthusiasm for life and her conviction that people can make anything of their own lives with the right help make her one of the most extraordinary people I know.

The Blue Sweater is a remarkable story of her journey across continents and across a political canvas of despair, hope and sheer grit. Written from Rwanda and Kenya, India and Pakistan Jacqueline's book reminds us of how shared our destiny really is in an interconnected world. She sought out men and women of extraordinary courage in her desire to 'change the way the world tackles poverty'. She has had the courage herself to learn from them and evolve her own ideas and reverse her assumptions about the role of pure charity or even that of markets. "I've learned that generosity is far easier than justice," she writes, and her work towards a more just world then yields to her, as in Tennyson's Ulysses, that " I am part of all that I have met". She then adds "And they - every one of them, good and bad – are part of me."

This understanding, embodied in a phrase familiar to Indians – *vasudhaiva kutumbam* - really defines Jacqueline's quest. I hope many,

especially young people in India, will read and be inspired by The Blue Sweater. There is so much work ahead to ensure that all our people can live in dignity and prosperity. This book offers many insights and raises the possibility that patient capital can take on a part of that task. India's new wealth combined with its growing band of social entrepreneurs can surely move us closer to make the bazaar more accountable to the needs of the samaaj. ✕

# Stop the Waste from Burying Us: State or society is usually blamed, but let's look upstream at producers of waste

*This article was first published by The Times of India in February 2018.*

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**Y**ou cannot walk or drive more than a few metres in any Indian city without encountering mounds of rubbish. Even in our villages, you will find garbage billowing around fields, piling up along roads or even lining the forest floor. At many beaches, you are as likely to find your toes tickled by strands of plastic as by little fish.

It is no longer possible to look away.

India's waste problem is gigantic, and with its economy growing steadily, it will be compounded manifold. Yet, our waste stream management has not even got off the ground.

Swachh Bharat and all its predecessors are welcome initiatives of the government. Recently amended rules for e-waste and plastic waste management, which include many forward-looking ideas, are critically important.

Yet there is little ability to implement these policies or follow up on performance goals. Much of the mandate rests with the Pollution Control Boards, or local governments, which have inadequate resources and staff, and not enough power to pursue offenders.

When we think of waste stream management, we often think of downstream solutions. Citizens must consume less; they must use eco-friendly products; they must segregate garbage at source; and they must compost wet waste. Local governments must do more, faster and more efficiently to collect and treat garbage, but not in my backyard (NIMBY).

Slowly but surely, the primary responsibility for reducing and managing waste has moved to the state (sarkaar) and to society (samaaj). But what of the market (bazaar)? Not so long ago, the onus was shared by producers. Remember when fizzy drinks or milk would come in glass bottles and be picked up for reuse? Cheap plastics and a use-and-throw culture changed all that. But we must swing the pendulum back, and quickly.

Let's look clearly upstream – to the producers of this waste.

The spotlight must shine on companies that manufacture all the products and create all the services that we use. For far too long, they have been allowed to privatise the profits that come from an expanding economy and socialise the costs of managing the generated waste. The fortune of the bottom of the pyramid might have been realised by companies and their shareholders, but the people at the bottom of the pyramid have been left to cope with the detritus of that fortune.

Things will probably get worse, not better, unless producer responsibility is taken seriously. With India going digital, we have a massive and dangerous e-waste problem. India has the dubious distinction of being one among the top five countries in e-waste generation. Recycling does

harvest valuable metals from this waste, but not enough, and the rest is highly toxic, leaching into the ground and water bodies.

Or take e-commerce, the newest sunrise industry in India. Online retail is estimated to grow to $200 billion by 2026, up from just $15 billion in 2016. Yet, the true cost of packaging is not factored in market pricing mechanisms, so companies have zero financial incentive to choose more sustainable options.

Now think of women and babies and their legitimate hygiene needs. In 2014, market penetration for disposable diapers was only 7.6%. Diaper sales are predicted to double by 2020. Similarly, the penetration rate of the sanitary napkins market is expected to grow to 42% from the current 24%.

With just these examples, imagine the tonnes of packaging and toxic waste that will accompany this growth. Now think where all that styrofoam, cardboard, plastic and metal will land. Dwell on the public health and environmental hazards that are the inescapable result.

Unmanageable waste has turned into a worldwide crisis. No matter how much local authorities do, no matter the level of public cooperation, no matter how much is recycled, the problem continues to grow.

The only real solution is to encourage massive innovation in the production of stuff the world uses. Production of everything must be re-imagined. It has to weigh less; be made of more earth friendly material; be easy to disassemble and recycle; use less packaging, and so on.

India can be a leader in this movement. It has already moved ahead in fuel emission standards for the automobile sector, by announcing the adoption of BS-VI norms by 2020.

We can be inspired by and renew our ancient culture of sustainable design and living. Why not set standards for producers and importers

of all goods and services sold in India? This would fuel R&D investments and give a whole new energy to what Make in India means.

If companies do not get ahead of the curve, sanctions are inevitable. Coca Cola has read the writing on the wall. Greenpeace estimated that the beverage giant produced 110 billion throwaway plastic bottles in 2015. Most of these go to landfills or to the ocean. Owning up to its responsibility, the company recently announced that it would make all its packaging recyclable by 2030.

This is laudable but we have to push further. Public opinion must form around this issue, for it affects us all. Why can't production materials and packaging be fully reinvented?

There is already exciting research into new materials that are greener or that disintegrate. We need to incentivise such innovation. Or bring out a policy stick. Only then is there hope that a country that aspires to democratise abundance will not first be buried in its own waste. ✕

# Samaaj and Bazaar: Congruence over divergence

*An excerpt from a keynote address at Dasra Philanthropy Week 2019 in Mumbai.*

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**W**e've all come a long way in the philanthropy sector in India. Apart from the older, very well-known philanthropists, we are seeing the arrival of so many new and committed philanthropists engaged in the sector. And yet as we look around, we see that no matter which sector we are engaged in – as civil society institutions, corporate CSR agencies, or as philanthropists – the problem seems to rush ahead faster than our approach, our solution, and we don't seem to quite get there.

Even today, after so many people and civil society organizations working in the area of education and most of the philanthropic capital having gone to the education sector, if you look at this year's ASER report, it feels like we might have failed our children. Even now, so many of them cannot do division and multiplication in class five. Where are they going to land later, we know that.

So, it's very important for us to understand why we have not achieved as much as we would like to, though we have done so much. And I really believe in the power of intent. So, I do think that we are going to do better, but societal problems are very complex and none of us individually or even as sectors (like philanthropists, civil society, markets, or the state) can achieve those things on our own.

It really requires the whole continuum of Samaaj, Bazaar, and Sarkaar – civil society, markets, and the state – to work together with reduced friction to actually solve complex societal issues. Which is why we come to collaboration, which is absolutely essential as we need to account for the role of different actors in these sectors, the varied skill sets, and the different context from which to come at a problem from multiple angles.

Luckily, there is a lot more opportunity today to be on collaborative platforms such as Dasra, Co-Impact, the India Philanthropy Initiative, and others. Some of us also got together to look at an area like independent media and have set up a collaborative giving platform called IPSFM [the Independent and Public-Spirited Media Foundation]. A very new and exciting area that we're looking at in collaboration is climate change. Led by Tata Trusts, some of us have founded The India Climate Collaborative. It has fairly ambitious goals to spur the ecosystem around working on climate change. So, there's a tremendous opportunity right now to think of collaboration.

In our work over the last four years, my husband Nandan and I have begun to see how we can create a framework around collaboration. We are calling it Societal Platform Thinking. But I acknowledge that collaboration is easier to talk about than to actually do. There's a lot of friction to collaborate, and maybe two reasons that we cannot achieve the outcomes that would come only through collaboration is that we are not able to really embrace risk and that we don't know perhaps how to trust, how to let go, how to get out of our comfort zones and do things that we know might fail. So, embracing risk is a lot about failure and the ability to trust. When I say trust, it means that if you are a philanthropist, you have to be able to trust your grantee partners. That means you give them enough flexibility to change what they're doing based on context and not asking them to give ridiculous amounts of reporting, just so that you feel you are doing all right as a philanthropist.

You have to be able to lead with trust. Through my 30-year journey in this space, I've found that once you start off with a relationship of trust, magic happens. Of course, there are some caveats to whom you work with. You should be able to work with trustworthy partners. But I just wanted to highlight that trust is key if you want to achieve social outcomes. By embracing risk and allowing ourselves to trust, we open up our minds and spaces for us to act in. We have to be prepared when we embrace risk, of course, to embrace failure. And once you say, "I'm willing to fail", it allows you to go where you have not gone before with much more confidence.

So today, for example, as our economy is growing and as our government is able to do much more social spending, there's a lot of attention being paid to how we can implement government programs better. Certainly, CSR has become better at doing that over the last few years. There are many civil society organizations that have helped the government achieve its own mandate at the implementation level. But there are so many areas of society that don't get looked at enough, where the government is not necessarily doing enough, and where we as philanthropists and civil society organizations need to do much more. Look at issues like mental health, disability, access to justice, environment, and livelihoods. If we were to embrace the risk and not fear failure, we would go into those areas as philanthropists and as new CSO organizations and innovate solutions that could get us out of the usual rot of our societal problems.

Sometimes, I wonder if we are suffering from a lack of imagination. When Vinoba Bhave started 'Bhoodan' and Mahatma Gandhi started the 'Salt Satyagraha', they were thinking at a universal human level of change. Now when we talk about one district or even 10 districts at a time, that is not enough. At least some of us should be able to say that

we will go beyond just doing incremental things and look at achieving a population scale. There is a method to achieving that, and here, intent is not enough. We will need collaborative frameworks that are designed for scale.

I want to talk a bit more about failure. Failure can lead to a lot of very interesting stuff. Certainly in 30 years, we have failed repeatedly in the work that I do. And in an article I recently wrote, I was thinking of how Gandhi actually failed as a lawyer. He just couldn't get his practice together, and then he embraced risk and set off in a boat to South Africa. And look what that one failure led to – the transformation of humanity. So, we should not be afraid to fail, but then immediately thereafter, to embrace risk and set out to sail to shores yet unseen.

I feel there are three lessons from all the failures that I was able to embrace in 30 years of working in the social sector. The first lesson is from when we started Nagarik for safer roads in 1992. We didn't understand the root cause of why our roads are not safer. And when you don't go deep enough to analyze an abstract problem you're working on, you tend to just work on bandaged solutions. Due to this, the whole thing collapsed under its own weight. The second lesson I understood when I worked at Akshara Foundation, Pratham Books, Arghyam and now EkStep. It's that you need to clearly demarcate the roles of Samaaj, Bazaar, and Sarkaar and not confuse them. Allow Samaaj to do what it does best, allow Sarkaar to do what it does best, and encourage Bazaar to do what it knows how to do best. But if you force Bazaar to go below the line of profitability, if you expect Sarkaar to do what citizens should be doing, if you expect citizens to take on the ownership of what Sarkaar should be doing, it tends to create confusion and not achieve the societal outcome you need.

And the last thing I learned was – and this is very important for philanthropists to really understand – if you want societal level transformation, none of us have the answers. But there are people who have answers in their own context.

So, how do we distribute the ability to solve? A very key way to distribute the ability to solve – instead of pushing one solution down the pipe – is to open up, to create platforms and to allow public goods to be created from the work that we do. So, for example, in Pratham Books, once we created a Creative Commons platform where everybody could do what they do best, we were able to open up the creation, the distribution, the translation, and the sale of books. We were able to scale to tens of millions of children. So, this is a very important lesson.

When philanthropic capital is being used, we owe it to the work that we do and to the ambitions that we have, especially now in the digital age, to create open digital public goods. So that other people can build and innovate on a platform that we support as philanthropists, in areas that perhaps people have not been bold enough to go before.

Dasra's journey is synonymous with the new age of Indian philanthropy. As we begin this third decade and re-dedicate ourselves, let us all say today, no matter who we are, no matter what work we are doing, that we commit to at least in one area, we will not just do incremental but transformational. And we will do that through collaboration, by embracing risk, and we will do that without fear of failure. ✕

# LOOKING TO THE *FUTURE*
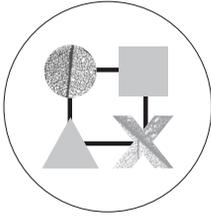
*Our digital age has created both challenges and opportunities – to amplify existing divisions or to rebuild a more equitable and inclusive society. What the future holds depends solely on whether we can change our current mindsets and approach issues with empathy and creativity.*

*This section includes the impact of technology on the next generation, technology's role in enhancing the work of CSOs and public institutions, and what a Samaaj-led state can look like. It also explores the future of philanthropy in India and the ramifications that the pandemic has had on our country. Finally, it includes some hopes, fears, and advice for the next generation.*

# Digital Dependencies

*An excerpt from a panel discussion at the Digital Impact Mumbai Conference presented by the Stanford PACS in February 2018.*

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I'm so glad this conference is happening because it's a very critical question that we are discussing about digital dependencies. India's very young population is going to mature in this new digital age, and I think it opens up questions for society. And especially for civil society and how it is going to react and create a whole new era of functioning in a democracy. I think from what I've seen of India's civil society organizations, some of them have quickly learnt and joined this digital universe very effectively, but the bulk of the organizations probably are just waking up to its immense potential. And there are some organizations that are almost technophobic, and I think we need to address the fears that some of them have about participating in a digital universe that is controlled by large corporations or perhaps they fear surveillance by the government. So how do we bring them to the discourse table?

One of the things I do believe is that the same technologies that allow for surveillance equally allow for participation and sousveillance, which means looking at power structures from below. We really need to see how we can employ that potential in civil society's work. I think that in the continuum of Samaaj, Bazaar, and Sarkaar, i.e. society, the markets, and the state, it is going to be very important to understand that we cannot hide too much from this digital world and therefore

how can civil society organizations also act as a check and balance on this potential of technology to amplify everything, both bad and good? And how can we think of a new design for civil society itself?

Let me give you a small example from the work that we have been doing in Arghyam, which is the foundation I set up for water and sanitation back in 2005. When we developed the India Water Portal, which was envisaged as a knowledge platform on water, it was born in an area where some of these fascinating new technologies were not being deployed. So, it is sort of an old fashioned idea of a digital presence. And you can't take something that was designed then and retrofit it. So, we now have to rethink it completely.

On the other hand, EkStep, which is the learning platform that my husband Nandan, Shankar Maruwada, and I set up two and a half years ago, is already born in an age where so many digital technologies have converged and combined. So, the way this organization is born is very different. And we have had a sharp learning curve from our earlier work, my husband and I. So, I think this organization is developed as a new child of the digital age and incorporates a value structure which I believe is dear to my heart and very important to articulate — that this platform will be open, it will not hide behind proprietary walls, it will have many shareable structures. It has simple-to-use toolkits. It allows many actors to talk to each other. It is mobile-friendly.

We are talking about things like offline internet for those with poor access to the internet. We are also talking about creating three layers, a shared digital infrastructure, and toolkits co-created by many of the actors in that sector, and then an amplification layer. So, I think there's tremendous potential for civil society organizations to scale their work, to find new partners across geographies, to de-risk from any local conditions, and to pull in the power of collaboration and co-creation. I

hope we can enable India's thriving civil society to participate more fully in this inevitable digital universe.  ✕

# Are We Suffering from a Lack of Imagination?

*An interview published by India Leaders for Social Sector (ILSS) in December 2018.*

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**How do you think Indian philanthropy has evolved over the years? How have the approaches and discussions around giving developed?**

I think Indian philanthropy is at an exciting stage; it is continually evolving. One of the most interesting things is that the ecosystem of philanthropy is evolving too, along with philanthropy itself and the idea of giving. Like yourself [India Leaders for Social Sector], there are many ecosystem players that are coming up, looking at leadership in the sector, matchmaking between donors and recipients, building the capacities of the sector, looking at bringing new issues to the fore, and so many other things [such as] auditing the sector. And, of course, with so much more wealth creation happening in the country, the spotlight is on what that wealth is doing for the country – I think we are seeing many interesting developments in Indian philanthropy.

**Is that increased philanthropic wealth doing enough?**

No, I think we need the philanthropic muscle in India to be exercised much more. There are some constraints, though, as to why that's not happening as much as we would like to see.

One factor is the trust deficit. Although the wealthy want to give, there is a lot of philanthropic capital all dressed up and with nowhere to go,

largely because of this trust deficit. How do you give, who do you give to, how do you get impact? You still don't feel very sure, because of which many of us just land up creating our own organisations, trying to create the change ourselves.

I believe that a healthier thing is when the donors – I am speaking about the super wealthy—find enough channels to give through so that there is no burden of doing things themselves: because we do need a thriving civil society in a democracy. Civil society actors come from passion, from vision, from innovation, from being tied to their communities and from having deep and great context. Having a thriving civil society in a trustworthy, trusting relationship, with donors is something I consider ideal in a democracy. I think we are a little far away from that.

**What opportunities must Indian philanthropy invest in to make a larger, lasting impact?**

Building the capacities of the system is important. Unless the pipeline opens up to receive funds, you will not see philanthropy grow. I talked about trust before – that's important too. But also models of how things are really working in, say, education, health, environment, climate change, livelihoods... there are a hundred things where philanthropy should invest in, including the arts and culture. We need museums, we need performance-based culture to be supported, we need new institutions that allow people to understand the world around them. Different people are working in these areas based on their passion.

But I also think that when we talk of the disparities in India and how far behind some people are left, we have no choice but to go back to talking about the human rights framework. Some donors feel uncomfortable about this because of various things they don't quite

understand: does that mean hyper activism, does that mean getting into trouble with the state?

No matter what you call it, it is about caring about the 300 million people in this country who are our fellow citizens, who need to be supported, who need help across the board. How can Indian philanthropists, those who want to change the world for the better, start thinking a little innovatively to work with this segment?

We need to look into the future, for what's coming at us, whether it is livelihoods, the future of work or climate change—that's where philanthropic capital should want to step in because they can afford to take risks, they can afford to do the things that the government cannot afford to do, things that civil society doesn't yet have the support to imagine doing. This is the kind of challenge and opportunity for the Indian philanthropic sector.

**Do you believe talent can be a limiting factor as organisations in the social sector aim for scale and sustainability?**

With 1.3 billion people, we shouldn't have to talk about the lack of talent. I think the talent is there, the grooming of the talent needs to be taken very seriously. In this sector, we must not forget to ask if there is enough commitment: if we can draw people's commitment, people's passion, people's real need for their lives to have meaning, then I don't think talent or human resources is a problem.

Having said that, because of the way the sector is growing, we really need different kinds of skills for the specific things that we need to do. I think people are recognising it. People like ILSS are coming into the sector to create the necessary talent, but we have some years to go, no doubt about it.

**What can civil society organisations do to develop their leadership pipeline? How can funders help this effort?**

I think we have a succession crisis in the sector right now. Many of the organisations came out of some cataclysmic events in the sixties and the seventies that brought out this amazing moral leadership in this country, which has for the last 30-40 years built a very solid civil society foundation. We are seeing succession issues in many of these organisations: after that one dynamic founder is gone, then what? We do have a leadership crisis in the sector. What ILSS and some others are doing to create the next generation of leaders is very important.

Inside organisations, people really grapple with creating leadership. So, if CSR could support short courses for organisations to build their leadership, it could be very useful. Funders need to support much more institutional capacity and much more sector capacity. Leadership doesn't come out of a vacuum and if funders could begin to think like this, it would really help.

**Given the current context, what skill sets would you like to see in the social sector?**

Of late I've been thinking, is there a lack of imagination, are we suffering from a lack of imagination? I mean, look at how the problems are outpacing the solutions. I'm not criticising; I see myself as a part of the sector so, if anything, this is a reflection rather than a criticism.

When Gandhiji just picked up a fistful of salt, what was he launching? When Vinobaji was talking about *bhoodan,* what was his imagination? It was not for one district, it was not even for one nation, it was for all of humanity. When Jayaparakashji started the *Sampoorna Kranti* and *Sarvodaya,* they were talking about transforming humanity itself. Have

we lost some of this spirit? How do we spark our imagination to think much bigger?

The second thing is that, while we unleash our imagination, we should also be putting our noses to the grindstone to be much more rigorous in finding out what really works and how to build systematic structures around it. That is another skill we need to build. One more thing I would like to add is about sharing and collaboration: so, for example, if you are working in education, being curious to know what someone is working on somewhere else and being able to reach out for that.

**How can the talent in corporate India engage more deeply with the social sector?**

It would be great if corporate professionals, who've made a success of their lives, could see the kind of problems that are emerging and how they can apply their skills to solve some of those. It would be great if they start to reflect on how they would like to see the world become better and then agree to spend some of their personal time understanding that issue — because they are not just professionals, consumers, or subjects of the state; they are citizens first.

And to be a citizen means to engage with other people and to take responsibility for creating a better society because today we are more interconnected than ever. So, when we get out of our offices and cabins, how can we reconnect with all the other things that really make our lives meaningful beyond our jobs? There are so many opportunities now; there are so many young people with amazing ideas, who want to engage corporate professionals. Go and find out who's nearest to you and I promise it will make your life richer.

**What is the one cause that is closest to your heart?**

The common thread in all my work is around giving people a sense of their own involvement in resolving whatever the situation may be. Whether I work in water or environment or in issues of young males in this county or the climate collaborative, that's at the core: how do we distribute the ability to solve, how do we help people collaborate with each other? No amount of pushing solutions down the pipeline can create anything sustainable. So how do we build the strength of the samaaj sector? That's the underlying issue that I care about.

A new area I am working on are the 250 million young males in this country – from puberty to the age at which they are supposed to be settled with jobs and families, but are not–and the frustration, the restlessness, the helplessness, the fear, the insecurity associated with being forced into patriarchal identities without even having thought much about it, without having role models or family connections sometimes.

How little we have done for that cohort in this country! Can we devise programmes that allow for more positive modelling for these young men so that they can be the best they want to be? This is something I have been engaged with, primarily to empower the young males themselves, but also because if we don't focus more on them, we are never going to achieve our women's empowerment goal. Empowering women is absolutely necessary, but to send an empowered woman into a disempowered situation gives her very bad choices.

The most ambitious thing I've done so far is in the context of societal platforms thinking. Societal problems are so complex that they require samaaj, sarkaar and bazaar to work together; but it's very difficult for them to work together in a really effective way. So, what can we do to reduce the friction and enable these sectors to collaborate? Can we create a technology backbone? How can we keep unpacking the commonalities

across these sectors so that contextual solutions can be built on top of them? How can we build something that is unified but not uniform, so that we can allow diversity to scale? How can we allow real collaboration and co-creation, and at the same time create an engine that will offer all the data when it is needed and also allow people to learn? It's a big play; it may work, or it may not work, but we're very excited and enthused about it.

**What role do you see for technology in the civil society space?**

I've begun to realise that if you want to respond to problems at the scale and the urgency at which they are spreading, civil society really needs to rethink its relationship with technology. I risk saying that when we see emergent backlash against technology for various good reasons. When you're going to be technology-led you're going to have problems, if you're technology-enabled, you're going to have different opportunities.

A very crucial thing I've learned is that when the young people of this country are going to be digital citizens, civil society has no choice but to be digital. Even to be able to respond to the abuse of technology, it has to learn to act in technology domains. At Arghyam, we are trying to see how we can be an infrastructure provider instead of just a donor.

A digital civil society, where you offer checks and balances on a digital age, is something we need to strengthen in India.  ✕

# Comments at the Launch of the #DigitalDecade to Strengthen Public Institutions

*An excerpt of a keynote address at an event hosted by New America and the UN General Assembly in September 2020.*

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**W**e have reached a tipping point when it comes to digital public platforms and that's marvellous news. And I believe that societal platforms are the most critical thing to focus on in these times, because when we forget to do that, I really believe that the markets and the state become far too powerful. If we want to really move towards our goals of equity and sustainability, then we have to design for the inclusion of all those in whose name the state and markets function, right? So, we call this effort Societal Platform Thinking and it has design principles and core values to guide us, and we really intend to empower the first mile, not the last mile – we call it the first mile, where the problem manifests and we aim to restore agency.

So, we know that societal problems are large, complex, and dynamic and that any effort to address them has to be anchored in the creative collaboration between society, state, and markets. But how do you

reduce this natural friction to collaborate? How can you create platforms that allow for contextual problem-solving? How can these be designed in a way that is unified but not uniform, so that we can support rich diversity at scale? And that's what keeps our teams awake at night.

To solve these complex problems, maybe we don't need a single platform, but an ecosystem of platforms that play different roles. So, some can act as context-independent foundations, like mobile, cloud, or GPS. And this is the digital public goods infrastructure that we are talking about, that allows everyone a unified platform to engage with. The second layer is the context-aware layer, which allows the co-creation of tools that build trust. That allows all actors to work together with a shared understanding of processes. And the third layer is the context-intensive layer and it is very domain-intensive because it allows people to actually deploy and amplify solutions in specific sectors, whichever they may be, livelihoods, or water, or education.

To us, Societal Platform Thinking is a kind of wrap-around that allows all these platforms to work together to serve society. So, let me give you a very quick example in education, which we all know is highly complex, and that while we try to keep the child at the centre, a host of people and institutions are required to help children learn and to keep them learning, right? So, the team used all our new thinking to help India's union government build a national education platform that they wanted to call DIKSHA. This educational infrastructure also creates a bridge between the familiar physical world of the textbook and the classroom, and bridges it to the emerging digital world. So, for example, through this effort, India's state governments had printed QR codes in 600 million textbooks in about 16 languages in the past year, and teachers are creating digital content on this platform that links to

the static chapters in the textbook and makes students get any time access to learning.

And just see where that led us recently. When the pandemic forced schools and colleges to shut down, the education system had to go online. It was extremely urgent to stem the loss of learning to 320 million children in India. And surprisingly, teachers, parents, and children seem to adapt and shift very quickly to this platform. And just look at the statistics. 1.2 million teachers trained, 175 million learning sessions done, on this government platform, just in these past few months. And a lot of innovation has also gone into making sure that those who don't have access to digital devices can also participate, and we call that online for offline. That is the power that public institutions can pull together in this digital age. But to achieve this, we really believe that every actor, and every institution has to hold one core value that we, as a team, hold very dear – to restore agency. Because we all know that talent and innovation is everywhere, we have to unleash it so that more people can become part of the solution instead of remaining part of the problem.

The point is, after all, digital platforms are just digital platforms! But what makes it play well for society is the power of intent. And even the power of intent is not enough, we also have to deploy the grammar of that intent. That's why we think what we call Societal Platform Thinking (but it is just one way, many other people are doing similar things) is critical, because it incorporates the design principles shown here, that allow people to appreciate that grammar of intent and to use that grammar to create their own language, their own poetry, their own prose, if you will, to fulfil their societal missions. As a team, we are very excited with this approach and the potential of this digital age. We are eager and impatient to collaborate with everybody, and what's

happening here is music to our ears. So, let's just get together and make digital technology work harder to service society. ✕

# Reimagining Abundance in Post Covid-19 India

*This article was first published by Hindustan Times in May 2020.*

**A**s people return to life and work post the lockdown, some predictions point to a mad rush to do even more than before. Travel more, buy more, meet more people, eat out more — do more of more. The government too is expected to do more to restore economic growth and livelihoods. Much more is anticipated from the State. Some see it as an opportunity to overtake China.

To achieve this, many states might roll back labour laws that took decades of human rights movements to build, and push aside hard-won environmental protection.

If we succumb, will we return to the old normal, or an even older 19<sup>th</sup> century normal? Will the "more" being planned heal the economy or plunge us faster into the next disaster? Is there another imagination to achieve the common goals of opportunity and prosperity for all?

This crisis has demonstrated that prosperous, healthy and well-governed communities can tackle public health emergencies well. But how do we define prosperity and move towards such a society?

For centuries, prosperity has been easy to define in material terms. At a personal level, by how much one earns; how much one has. At a societal level, through Gross Domestic Product (GDP), a computation

of all assets and interactions within an economy. GDP cannot discount products and services that are bad for society, such as the output of polluting industries, or of sweatshops. Several attempts to retool GDP have made little headway.

However, during the pandemic, most people, including the elite, experienced different forms of frugality, simplicity, and dignity associated with personal labour. After decades, urbanites also encountered purity — of air and water, and diversity — of flora and fauna. Simple things acquired fresh value for many. The time may be ripe to retool GDP. We now hold a brighter vision of how things can be, and can converse creatively with our future from an altered present.

One pathway is to shift from a mindset of scarcity to a mindset of abundance. For there is abundance everywhere, if only we look for it. If this profusion of resources goes from being just abundant to being effective, perhaps we could lean away from economic choices that appear inevitable, but that destroy natural capital and human well-being.

Let's list some things that are abundant in India.

At a societal level, India has the world's largest working population. At 13 million, it also has the most number of teachers. It has health care professionals, from super-speciality doctors to accredited social health activists (ASHA).

At a physical level, India is blessed with a rich biodiversity of flora and fauna. We have a predictable monsoon, and a vast network of rivers and water bodies. We have one of the longest coastlines. We have enormous access to solar energy.

We also have among the world's most sophisticated digital infrastructure, and an increasing penetration of internet services and smartphones.

At a spiritual level, we have a plethora of practices and leadership

across religions. And we enjoy the affluence of volunteer energy, as evidenced recently. This is not just an inventory of our assets, but the robust foundation for what we want to achieve.

During the pandemic, food bloggers came up with a simple and potent idea. They asked what was left in people's refrigerators, and helped them cook up wonderful new recipes with existing ingredients. They re-purposed what existed, and allowed people to experience plenty from paucity.

This is a perfect analogy for what the nation could put into practice, and, is already experimenting with.

Using digital infrastructure, like DIKSHA, millions of teachers are creating and sharing better content and classroom practices, both physical and virtual. Parental creativity and peer groups, both plentiful resources, are also being engaged to help children learn better.

Using the Extension of Community Healthcare Outcomes (ECHO) model, health care workers are receiving virtual, guided mentoring. This moves knowledge instead of people, to build faster, more sustainable capacity across the chain.

Overnight, you can overturn an apparent scarcity — the lack of good teachers or skilled health workers — into an abundance of distributed, empowered talent.

Opportunities are everywhere — in energy, in mobility, in agriculture, and in livelihood generation. If we can use this flipped thinking, it can create more headroom for those who genuinely need resources — more carbon for the energy-deficient; more land for the landless; more mobility for transport deficit areas, and more potential for sustainable and meaningful livelihoods everywhere.

For example, India's ubiquitous building infrastructure can be re-purposed to harness solar energy, or for vertical and terrace farming.

Work from home will relieve the pressure on urban infrastructure and land, which can be released for mass housing or public transport, and critical lung space.

Last but not least, let's unlock our spiritual treasure trove. Most disciplines invite us to more mindfulness, and more contentment. Not by consuming more externally, but by harvesting more from within, and by sharing more without. Neurosciences and behavioural sciences increasingly corroborate this ancient wisdom — joy can come from giving, and unlimited happiness from bonhomie.

Flipping to an abundance mindset is a creative-yet-practical task for samaaj (society) first, but also for the bazaar (market) and sarkaar (State). We know now that we need to emerge from this crisis together. Let's boldly use the stimulus to redefine prosperity and redirect resources to make abundance effective. ✖

# Comments from the Annual Desh Apnayen Awards Ceremony

*An excerpt from a speech addressed to a group of students at the ACTIZENS awards ceremony hosted by the Desh Apnayen Sahayog Foundation in April 2021.*

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**Y**ou and your friends, and all the young people like you in our country, have a really joyful responsibility to hold a brighter future and not to get weighed down by it, but see yourselves as trustees of a bright shining future for our country. I truly believe that if we can get our country right, if we can get India right in so many ways – including on the front of equity and justice and environmental sustainability, and opportunities for all – it is much easier for the whole world to be in the right path, because we are soon going to represent 1/5 of all humanity. So, think of the future as a road on which we will all walk together, carrying a light, joyful responsibility on our shoulders, because we are poised for so many good things. But as Vallabhbhai said, "Each one of us if we're not active, this potential can fall apart." They keep saying that what we call a demographic dividend can become a demographic disaster. And I must apologize for my generation, we seem to have left young people with a host of problems. But, in some sense, I think sometimes the crisis as we saw last year, the crisis of the pandemic, showed how much marvellous humanitarian energy could be put forward into the world.

So if we decide to look at the potential of abundance everywhere, I think we can genuinely collaborate to make a better future than some people claim that it might become. And democracy is a very important part of this, I believe. Because what do we want when we all sit and quietly think, what kind of society do we want to belong to? Just like you and I, all want our freedoms – the right to act, to speak, to wear what we like, to work, to improve our opportunities, and to improve the opportunities of the people around us. Everyone wants the same thing. So, the minute we step out of ourselves and into our communities, we realize that pretty much everyone wants the same thing. And therefore, what can I do? Because all of us here, some of us are more privileged and I accept that. Definitely, I belong to the very lucky privileged class. But all of us who are gathered here today are very, very privileged people in this country. And we know there are so many people out there who are not as privileged as we are, and yet, they have the same dreams, the same aspirations, and the same hopes that all of us have. So, one of the first things I believe we need in this century, which is already somehow 20 years old, is empathy.

I keep telling young people to stay curious because there's so much that we don't know. And life is full of so many possibilities. So, one: Stay curious. Two: Stay connected, because everyone is dependent on everybody else. And sometimes we forget that we are part of this big web. So, stay connected, understand all the connections. This small little virus has taught us that. And third: Stay committed. Because all of us, especially when we are young, are trying to find our little space in the world, right? Who am I? What do I want to be? What about my personal ambition? But what about everything else? And from what I've seen and heard of all of you, you're already much more mature than I was at your age. You are very clear about what you want to do. And I salute

you. Really, I meet many young people in this country, except in the last year, which I feel so sad about. But they have shown me the limitless possibilities of India's future. So again, I thank you for taking on this project, which Vallabhbhai started a few years ago.

So, when I was like you, I must say that I was an activist. I was a bit aggressive, which I don't recommend. But I was like that. And I used to say everything must be right. I grew up in Bombay and actually, I was very lucky because we had very good public services. Some of you who are in Bombay may not have even experienced what I had in the 70s and 80s. We had a good bus service, good electricity, good water, public safety, and women could go safely out at night. It was a different time and a different city. But sometimes people used to throw garbage. I used to get very upset, and I used to go and pick up the garbage in front of everyone and glare at the person who had thrown it. Now, while that seems like the right thing to do, I soon realized that it didn't make me any friends. Why? Because even though I was doing the correct thing, which is picking up trash from the public, I think my attitude was not right. I was doing it in a superior way, not accepting that I also have so many faults, other people have faults, we are all on individual learning journeys. So even as you pick up that trash and put it in the dustbin – we had proper dustbins in those days – something was not right, okay? And I had to learn, my young friends, over the years that the 'what' is less important than the 'how'. So, I grew up and became more mature over the years.

When my husband was working for the government, outside our house in Delhi there was a tea stall and people used to drink tea and throw the paper cups right there. Now I said, "Should I go and make a big fuss? What should I do?" Then I said, "Be calm." And I used to go every day and very quietly, without making a fuss, picked up those cups and disposed of them correctly, and smiled and did namaste to those people,

because really, I'd learned that we cannot sit so much in judgment of other people. And when I did that, young friends, to my great surprise, within two days, the throwing of those paper cups stopped. After that, till I left that house, not one single piece of garbage I saw anywhere around me. Why am I telling you this simple story? It's because we all evolve, yes, but I would like you to learn from my journey that sometimes when we do the right thing in the wrong manner, it really doesn't help anybody.

So, having said that, always participate. All of us know things around us are not right. Some child may think, "Oh, why are we wasting water?" Some other young person may say, "Oh, what about our rights of expression?" Some other young people may be interested in other environmental issues. Please learn more about that thing which you care about and are passionate about and you want to change, and then think, talk to your elders, talk to your friend, "How can I participate in making real change and not make the mistake which Rohini did?" Participate with humility, participate without judgment, participate with self-reflection, and you will see the difference between doing it one way and doing it another.

Young friends, I was very lucky because Infosys, the company my husband set up with Narayana Murthy and others, that we became very wealthy, but not immediately. Infosys had to work for a very long time, very hard. It was after 15 years or so that Infosys succeeded wildly and beyond anybody's expectations. And I had made a very early investment. From my small amount of money which I had in Infosys, I turned into a wealthy woman. Now, why do I tell you that? It is because in my family, wealth was not considered something great to be proud of. One of my grandfathers was very wealthy and did a lot of philanthropy. The other grandfather, my father's father, Babasaheb Soman, was a lawyer who half the time didn't want to take his case to court and asked his clients to settle issues out of court, and so he got no fees.

So, he was certainly not wealthy, but both of them had wealth of mind. My father's father joined Gandhiji when Gandhiji made his first clarion call for volunteers to come to Champaran in 1917. He was among the first people to go and was there with Kasturba and Gandhiji for several months. They built schools, they built toilets, they did a lot of work and then my grandfather joined the freedom movement. But always we were told that wealth is not what you aspire to, you aspire to high thinking. So, when I came into so much wealth, I was very confused, "What should I do?" Because I was on the other side before, and now I was on this side. Now I was the wealthy one. And it took me a long time, my young friends, to accept that wealth although it was ethical wealth. It came about the right way. And what was the responsibility of that wealth in society? I slowly learned that I was only a trustee of that wealth, and that it must be used for society.

The responsibility of wealth in a democracy is to be useful to society. And then I started my more serious philanthropic journey over the years, working with several organizations. Today, my husband Nandan and I have signed The Giving Pledge, which is a global pledge, where we have committed publicly to give half our wealth away to good causes in our own lifetime. And I tell you, it's not easy at all to do that well, okay? It's a huge responsibility, but we take it very, very seriously and if God forbid anything happens to us, our children have promised to fulfil that pledge.

The last point I will say is that in the continuum of the state, society, and markets, my strong belief is that society must come first because at the end of it, no matter who you are, you may be a student, you may be a teacher or like Vallabhbhai, you may be a very successful investor, you may be doing very well in the Army or in politics, or anything, but who are you first? Of course, you're a human being first, but after that,

you're a citizen. You're a citizen of your society, you're a citizen of your nation, and you're a citizen of this world. So, you're a citizen before you are an employee, you're a citizen before you are a consumer of market goods. You are a citizen before you are a subject of the state and good citizens together make a good society, and a good society can make sure that governments are accountable for the larger public good. They can also make sure that markets don't become runaway powers and are accountable for a good society. So, by being the first building block of a good society, as citizens, together we can build a democratic society, where we can hope that, that child whose face you sometimes see when you're coming to school or when you go for a vacation somewhere, who doesn't have the benefits that you do, even that child can be included in a brighter future. So again, I say, stay curious, stay connected, stay committed and magic will happen. ✂

# What Lies Beyond the Great Anthropause

*This article was first published by Livemint in May 2021.*

R ecently, Apple TV released a documentary called The Year Earth Changed. It takes viewers through some delightful scenes of what happened in the world of wild animals while humans were forced to take a break from their normal activities due to the zoonotic pandemic. Leopards checked into safari resorts in Africa; deer, bears and even penguins strolled around urban areas; and dolphins and humpback whales sang free again.

For months, social media worldwide was abuzz with pictures and videos of animals and birds taking back what might have been theirs if it were not for us. Nature, it seemed, had returned to everyone's backyard.

Yet we need to go way beyond the romance of beautiful photographs to understand what is really at stake here. We are still in the midst of the sixth mass extinction. It will take a radical shift in our development models for nature and wildlife to become truly resilient again.

It was a team of UK researchers writing for Nature Ecology And Evolution in June 2020 that came up with the catchy phrase "anthropause" to describe the global reduction of human activity and mobility during the pandemic.

Scientists have long tried observationally to measure the impact of increasing human footprints on different aspects of animal biology and behaviour. This knowledge is absolutely critical for the future. It helps us understand ecosystem connections and how to preserve biodiversity, how to prevent species collapse, how to predict zoonotic crossovers into human populations, and how to keep up with the environmental change that is speeding up around the globe.

The last 30 years have been particularly devastating for many species. The next 30 will determine whether they, along with humans, thrive or just about survive.

The anthropause gave scientists a never before opportunity to create and pool data sets across large geographies. New global collaborations are quickly developing to formalise the observation and sharing of such data to inform the future. Researchers want to use bio-logging and other strategies to uncover many mysteries. How do human-built environments affect the movement of non-human beings? Which species can adapt well to human activity and which ones are left more vulnerable? And most importantly, can small changes to our lifestyles, or smarter design of our mobility networks, have a disproportionately beneficial impact on wildlife?

What are the early results telling us?

The great human confinement brought clean air, cleaner water, reduced light and noise pollution for all. It allowed non-humans a renewed chance to move and breed more freely.

Importantly, though, it is not only a rosy picture of nature bounding back. Some species have developed an inordinate dependence on humans. Many animals subsist on food waste left lying around our streets and in gutters. Others depend on our sometimes unwise

generosity in feeding them. The dramatic slowdown in normal human activity left unknown numbers of rodents, cats, squirrels, street dogs, monkeys, cows and others without sustenance.

In many places, the world's poor, pushed back further into poverty, had to depend more on ecological resources—on subsistence hunting, logging, fishing from the wild. In India, researchers observed the near doubling of species "illegally" killed for food during the lockdown last year. Without human surveillance, protected areas have been more in danger of poaching too. And feral dog packs, the biggest threat to India's sanctuaries, roamed unrestrained.

While citizens have reported much renewed love for returning natural beauty, some researchers have noted a simultaneous increase in the sentiment against nature and wildlife. Perhaps it is a fear reaction from knowing that this pandemic emerged from the animal world. Bats, especially, have become the target of increasing human wrath. This is unfortunate as bats are important pollinators in a worldwide decline of pollinators. Another danger is that children could absorb this fear from adults, reducing their potential to preserve their own future by conserving wildlife.

With this mixed bag of effects on the human-wildlife relationship, what can we learn? What should we do better?

If anything, this past year has taught us that small things matter. That we can personally create change that quickly and positively impacts others. Millions of people have been wearing masks to that end.

What the urban elite does matters more than ever. If even 200 million urbanites of India make some small changes in habits and lifestyle, it could have a cascading effect. It can even create a subtle system shift, leading to more positive feedback loops over time.

Here are some suggestions for citizens from environmentalists, researchers and urban designers whom I reached out to.

— We can easily contribute to reduced light and noise pollution, to allow birds and other species more freedom. If you can, shift any lights near trees where birds nest or roost. Work with your local municipality office to redesign street lighting for safety for pedestrians but privacy for birds and animals.

— Respect all life—learn what role the smallest creatures like moths and spiders play. In neighbourhood parks or private gardens, leave some spaces undisturbed and dark for birds and insects to forage and breed or rest.

— Participate more in waste management, at home and outside. Don't throw your garbage where animals can get at it. Plastic and cows, for example, are a lethal combination.

— Rethink your mobility patterns post-pandemic. Virtual conferences have a lower ecological footprint. Avoid travelling for unnecessary meetings. Club outside activities when you can. Join the "No Honking" campaign. It is astonishing how many birds and animals benefitted from a quieter environment last year. The Year Earth Changed has particularly poignant scenes of birds singing again near desolate airports and cheetahs being able to safely call out to their cubs without the rumble of tourist jeeps in the savannah.

— Don't stop going into the wild. Forest bathing can heal us. Many local economies depend on nature tourists. More watchful eyes on protected areas can also prevent poaching and fires. Wildlife tourism rupees support conservation and help compensate for human wildlife conflict. What we can change is HOW we go into the wild. Can we be more "in the wild"? Can we reduce our noise and light, simplify our food and other conveniences?

— Policy matters. Speak up more against the roll-back of environmental protection, in our neighbourhoods, but also for all the wild places we may never visit. Each voice resonates.

— Spread new ideas for people to chew on. Should safari parks, for example, be shut once in a while to let animals breed in peace? Should we stop vehicular traffic once a week?

— All traditional fishing communities around the world across recorded history have customary practices that stop them from fishing in breeding season. Maybe we can learn from that.

If enough of us shift our mental model to incorporate such suggestions, say the experts, people may enjoy the benefits of last year's lockdown without its tremendous suffering.

Let's listen to what researchers and citizen scientists are telling us from this year of observation. Maybe we can mitigate the next catastrophe, not with another great anthropause, but with a gentle withdrawal from our most harmful habits. Wishful thinking—maybe the next documentary could then be titled "The Year the Earth Changed—Forever." ✄

# Schemes to Systems: Samaaj-led welfare delivery models

*A keynote address at Indus Action's Schemes to Systems conference in April 2022.*

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**C**ivil society groups must find ways to interact ever more with the political class and the business class – after all we are neither anti-government nor anti-market but we are pro-people, pro-Samaaj. That is the first calling of the civil society sector. And everybody, bar none, is a citizen before they are a politician, a bureaucrat, a CEO, or an employee, we are all citizens first, and last too, when we shed our day job identities and go home.

It is now exactly 15 years since I started speaking and writing about the continuum of Samaaj, Bazaar and Sarkaar – and it is a continuum always in a dynamic balance and the continuous quest is to make the balance more just to all. And I have been saying that Samaaj must become conscious that it is the first sector, and it has to work to make Sarkaar and Bazaar, which come later, accountable to the larger public interest of the Samaaj.

But what is the role of Samaaj actors in times like these, when people the world over, and in India too, seem to be fearful and insecure and retreating to narrower and polarized spaces?

I really believe, and this came to me strongly this morning as I wrote this speech, is that today, as always, the role of empathy is absolutely critical. Empathy within, for ourselves, and empathy for others.

This is the important inner to outer journey we all struggle to make as civil society actors, isn't it?

And in this aspect – how civil society institutions themselves behave becomes important –

How can we avoid the cancel culture so prevalent in the west, how can we reduce 'otherization'? It is hard to eliminate otherization completely perhaps, because humans do seem often to define themselves against something else, maybe even an enemy, possibly as part of our evolutionary biology – but can we reduce this tendency through more awareness of the benefits of coming together? Can we look outside our ideological walls if we want others to look outside theirs? Is it the work of Samaaj institutions to create windows in all such walls? Can we create those shared spaces, which are held without judgment, so we can discover ways to build a better society, a better Samaaj?

How do we awake to and help awaken people to see ourselves as more than subjects, more than beneficiaries, more than consumers? To see ourselves as humans in a complex web of humanity, as citizens, as nagariks? And then, what are these citizens, these nagariks? What do citizens do?

Citizens are aware, they are alive to what is happening around them socially, economically, ecologically, politically. They belong to a community of other citizens. And it doesn't matter if that is a small neighborhood community or a global one, each is important, especially if it has thick bonds. One problem that has emerged is that social media has allowed the thriving of very thin bonds, and that has created groups of people that can be easily aroused to negativity. It is part of the work

of civil society groups in fact to help build social bonds that are thick, so that people can work together in more harmony for a common cause.

Citizens, when fulfilling their role, are curious about and willing to participate in the co-creation of a society that makes their own lives and all others better, more abundant, more creative. And after empathy, for me, creativity is an important word because the zenith, the apex of human history, may be the ability of people to generate beauty, through their own talent, agency and co-operation with the talent and agency of others.

To create is to be human. And I don't mean just art and sculpture and beautiful buildings and things, but also the creation of big new social ideas and societal movements too, that enable humans to take such giant strides of consciousness, as in the universal vote, as in so many freedom struggles, and so much more.

That creativity is the most precious thing for Samaaj organizations to nurture. And we need to debate much more on how we can generate more sympathy and more creativity as the green fuel for the engine of Samaaj as a whole and for CSOs too.

But these are challenging times, and our work is not so easy.

In a kind of reversal of the global liberal order which had perhaps gone stale and lost its relevance, and more importantly, its creativity – we seem to be in the grip of a shrinking of identities to narrow and narrower selves –

From Global to National

From National to Regional

From Regional to Religional

From Religional to Tribal

I don't know where it ends from here.

For the political class, this narrowing of identities, frankly, can be useful, as it creates easy to capture voter groups. For markets too, it can be beneficial, as it creates good segmentation to capture consumer bases.

In fact, sometimes, I only half-jokingly say – Bazaar has made the tyranny of choice so complex that even to buy a daily staple like rice, we have to choose between price ranges, polished and unpolished, red and white and brown, organic and non-organic, and so on, endlessly. And the pandemic has made personal/ family choices in the social space so frightening that people want simplicity in their politics- just delegate to one entity and forget about it.

But this is a cop-out and we must all beware of this trap.

Because when we cop out of being citizens, full citizens, what we are likely to get is a monopoly or monoculture of ideas and of practices that eventually will start to make societies less stable and less sustainable. We all know the cliché of the plantation and the rainforest, and most people agree that the rainforest, with its diverse ecosystems is more healthy and sustainable, and so it is with societies too. But to maintain the diversity in society, citizens, unfortunately do not have the luxury to sit back and relax. We have to tend to our social gardens, however small they might be, and in all seasons.

Because, no matter what the benefits may be to Sarkaar and Bazaar, for Samaaj, and for civil society, this shrinking to the smaller self only generates more fear, more insecurity and more divisiveness, inevitably leading to conflict over identities, ideas and resources.

So the role of CSOs then is to inspire people to see ever more of themselves in relation to the outer world- through collective action, collective creation, through campaigns, projects, workshops and more. And eventually all of these hopefully, will foster more empathy, allowing people to see themselves in others' shoes, even looking to

the well-being of future generations, and thus to become the highest embodiment of themselves.

Is this all too idealistic? Yes, of course it is. But if we together believe in this grand human project – of increasing empathy and creativity in society – even if it takes 25 years or a 100, then we can move inexorably towards this magnificent goal with a feeling of hope and belief that all our actions, however small, like little drops of water – will eventually create the ocean. ✕

# Epilogue

I am so happy that the phrase 'Samaaj Sarkaar Bazaar' has received widespread acceptance recently and has come into regular usage across the board. I am certainly not claiming to have invented the phrase but am perhaps guilty for overusing it. I find it especially gratifying when people who do not speak any Indian language still attempt to use these three unfamiliar words, along with Society, State, and Markets.

This is just the tip of the iceberg. There is so much more to be analyzed and written about this framework, where I posit that we should think of Samaaj as the foundational sector, which alone can hold the Sarkaar and Bazaar accountable to the larger public interest. I have put this book together with the fond hope that it will trigger thinking, especially among young people, about the role of all three sectors.

Given India's demographic, with 43% of the population under the age of 25,[xlv] young people may have to bear the brunt of a Samaaj that cannot heal itself. With rising inequality, there is potential for a backlash against wealth creation itself. With rising climate anxiety, there is fear of a return to a zero-sum mentality. With rising polarization, there is dread of the breakdown of the social order. All these will disproportionately impact young people and their future. To counter these negative energies, we can be inspired by the simple truth that to be human is to have empathy. To be human is to be creative. To be human is to collaborate.

In the face of the negative trends mentioned above, we need to build societal muscle to prevent and reduce conflict. We need safe spaces for people to talk across their divides in our thriving democracy. Years ago, I experimented with bringing leaders from the corporate and social sectors to talk to each other instead of at each other. I hosted a show called 'Uncommon Ground' on NDTV and wrote an eponymous book[xlvi] later. Now Kshetra,[xlvii] a new social start-up, is going way beyond that to build safe spaces for dialogue. They are developing creative tools and processes that groups can use to talk beyond divides and to nurture empathy. So far, the demand has been more than the team can manage, which is a good portend.

I also feel very inspired by the hundreds of organizations that have sprung up recently to galvanize young people into civic action. When I catch up with young, dynamic leaders like Krutika Ravishankar and Arti Dhar of Farmers for Forests,  Shloka Nath of the India Climate Collaborative,[xlix] Jithin Nedumala of Make a Difference,[l] Abhay Jain and Swapnil Shukla of Zenith Legal Services[li] and many others, any anxiety I might be feeling about the future simply vanishes. They bring so much energy, passion, diversity, and creativity into the work they do, whether it is for better access to justice, or more environmental sustainability, or for the rights and dignity of the most vulnerable of communities. Slowly but surely, they are building solid processes for youth to become more active as concerned citizens. That is tremendous news and makes me hopeful for the future.

While Samaaj must look inwards first, it also needs to reach out to the state and markets. Given that we are facing incredibly complex issues in this century, it seems imperative that Samaaj, Sarkaar, and Bazaar reduce the friction to cooperate, since no problem worth solving can be resolved without all three sectors doing what they know best. As

examples, we are seeing some interesting tripartite partnerships being attempted, especially in the existential issues of clean energy and climate change.

At its best, such inter-sector cooperation can do wonders. I glimpsed this potential at Pratham Books, where we saw how a societal movement to create content for children can be unleashed by using open-source platforms, partnering with the state, and inviting the market to leverage the content for a fee. Perhaps it is relatively easy to reach tens of millions of children with stories, as society is well-vested in children.

We saw a more recent and powerful example[lii] of the collective power of cooperation during the global pandemic of Covid-19. In so many places around the globe, and certainly so in India, ordinary people, civil society institutions, private philanthropy, the state, and also markets came together in record time to push back the virus. For all the dark days of death and desperation, it was truly an important two years in human history. We have learnt so many lessons that when the next crisis comes around, we might be better prepared to cooperate more quickly and effectively.

For some years now, my husband Nandan, myself, and our many highly talented colleagues such as Pramod Varma, Shankar Maruwada and Sanjay Purohit, have been imagining a new framework, which we hope will provide one of many pathways to better align the talents of the three sectors. We call it Societal Thinking.[liii]

Here is the official descriptor of Societal Thinking – "It is a systemic approach, including a set of values and design principles, to reimagine and induce exponential social change by redesigning the core interactions between all the actors across Samaaj, Sarkaar, and Bazaar."

In essence, the approach is fairly simple. Most people might agree that we need to create mechanisms for the three sectors to work together with some common shared infrastructure, which is unified but not uniform, since problems have to be resolved contextually in diverse situations. For this, we believe there is a need for an open-source, technology-enabled backbone that helps many nodes connect to many others. This allows for rapid knowledge exchange which leads to better feedback loops and coordination. As the network keeps growing, everyone can contribute to this system, which leverages the strengths of each one and improves the value of all.

For example, Sarkaar brings in the scale for greater impact. There are more than 13 million teachers in India's government school system and more than a million ASHA health workers. No other sector can bring in such numbers. The Bazaar knows how to put energy and investments behind reducing the cost of products and services, bringing in much needed innovation and efficiency. The Sarkaar and Samaaj cannot match that ability. And last but not least, Samaaj brings in the diversity, the context, and the empathy. The state and the markets simply cannot reach or tailor to the last mile (or as we prefer to say – the first mile). By working together without stepping on each other's toes, the three sectors can generate high impact at the near scale of any societal problem, and hopefully with the urgency that it usually demands. Societal Thinking can be applied to almost any sector of development. It allows people and institutions to cooperate on an open platform, allows leaders to distribute the ability to solve, and to tap into the collective intelligence of society. As an evolving, learning network, the platform interaction can crunch the time to generate sustainable impact.

We are beginning to see some results from the deployment of societal thinking in many sectors, though we admit it is early days. One such

example is through our work at EkStep Foundation. We worked closely with the Union Ministry to set up the DIKSHA[liv] platform they had envisaged, to build the capacity of teachers across the country and to enable the creation of more learning resources for students. Within a short time, millions of teachers were able to use the system that we helped the government design, to get right-sized, just in time content for their classrooms; to exchange best practices in a peer-to-peer network; and to draw in children from across the country and sometimes parents as well. During the pandemic, which forced all teaching to go online, the number of teaching/learning transactions on DIKSHA reached the billions, allowing millions of teachers to enhance access to learning opportunities for their pupils. DIKSHA continues to evolve in many directions, inviting more participation from philanthropy, markets, CSOs and citizen volunteers too, through many extensions of the platform. This learnability, this evolvability is at the heart of sustainability in Societal Thinking.

To be honest, though, the real issue preventing more such inter-sector cooperation is the trust deficit. People don't trust each other or the government and markets; the government doesn't trust civil society institutions; the Bazaar is wary of the state; and so on in multiple combinations of mistrust. While some of that is creative tension that separates the powers and responsibilities of each sector, it can also delay common goals of abundance and inhibits freedom for all.

Civil society organizations are good at helping bridge this trust divide between citizens and citizens; citizens and their governments; corporates and the state; and markets and consumers. They create mechanisms to cool passions, enable compromise by holding community meetings during turbulences, and they can help shine the torch on problem areas before they cascade by compiling good data and through compassionate journalism.

Social media, with its ability to trivialize, to heighten the emotional response, and to sustain mutual animosities makes this job much harder. It gives more voice and power to trolls than to ordinary citizens who may hold back.

As we redesign our democracy for this new digital age, how can the space for civil society institutions – including professional media, which I believe to be the cornerstones of democracy – be reimagined? Can there be better policy environments so that CSOs can operate in today's polarized atmosphere without fear, to play their role as mirrors and conscience-keepers more effectively?

In 2022, it does feel as though India is at a crossroads yet again. Which path will the Samaaj of India choose to go?

Will it find its true bearings in the founding values of the Indian Constitution, a document of hope writ together by hundreds of leaders after years of active, open debates? Will this nation of ancient, shared histories, remain true to its syncretic heritage? Will an inclusive, liberal idea of India, wrongly and unfairly assumed to be owned only by a Western educated elite, be replaced by a new framing in a culturally resurgent India? Will India's youth, who are naturally idealistic and optimistic, choose freedom from what Tagore called "the dreary sands of dead habits", and choose to swim in the "clear stream of reason"?

Many people I have spoken to express an enduring faith in the resilience and diversity of this 5000-year-old civilization that has assimilated so many cultures into its polity and traditions. The more one group in Samaaj has tried to dominate the narrative, the more other groups have risen up to balance the equations again. We have often been unified but we have never been uniform. As in nature, our diversity may be our biggest strength in the decades to come.

Looking ahead, I feel optimistic for the long term. The arc of history would suggest that we are capable of moving towards ever greater inclusion, ever more dignity, choice, and freedom. If we map the big social movements that have swept the globe in the past three hundred years or so, we find some evidence for this idea. Think of the anti-slavery movements, the anti-apartheid mission, the anti-caste movements, national campaigns for independence from colonial and imperial powers, and the women's movement, including the power to vote. Let's also remember the role of art and culture groups that consistently and sometimes radically inspire Samaaj to learn from its past in order to reimagine its present and future. Of course, there are always temporary setbacks, just as there are strong backwashes in a rising tide. The pandemic was certainly one such setback, throwing India's development trajectory off track[lv] just when millions had moved out of poverty. But these might just benefit the future direction towards inclusive justice by unleashing introspection, innovation, and investment.

The world of nature, especially in India's rich, multihued forests, has been my refuge, my inspiration, and the temple for my sadhana (practice) in this personal journey. As I look to the horizon, the lasting image for me is that of the miraculous murmuration of starlings. As they fly in high-speed synchronicity, thousands of these little birds can project in the collective the same form as in the individual. The big sky shimmers with the mesmerizing starling form made up of myriad small starlings. The metaphor of this dynamic fractal is incredibly powerful. When we are engaged in action with mindful awareness of those around us, together we become better and bigger versions of ourselves. If only we could imagine a murmuration where Samaaj, Sarkaar and Bazaar could move seamlessly together, with Samaaj at the head, painting a gigantic picture of a being at its humane best.

# Endnotes

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A collection of over a decade of articles, interviews, and speeches by Rohini Nilekani, *Samaaj, Sarkaar, Bazaar: A Citizen-First Approach*, showcases her journey in civil society and philanthropy. She outlines her philosophy of restoring the balance between the state and markets, by positioning society as the foundational sector.

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"Rohini Nilekani spotlights the lack of equilibrium between the state, society and sustainability which will spiral into a socio-economic catastrophe unless we the citizens demand better governance. A must-read for every concerned citizen who wants to challenge the status quo."

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Vice President - Pune International Centre

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RUKMINI BANERJI | CEO - Pratham Education Foundation

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