Chapter 1: An Active Samaaj

Many Questions for the Dinner Table

How 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

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.

Good 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

With 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.

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

Since 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

For 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'

From 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 oppurtunity to co-design cities

This 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.