

# Samaaj Sarkaar Bazaar: A Citizen- First Approach by Rohini Nilekani

## **Summary**

"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."

"Samaaj, Sarkaar, Bazaar: A Citizen-First Approach" emphasizes the importance of a balanced relationship between society, the state, and the market, with the citizen at the center. Nilekani argues for an equilibrium where a strong and engaged civil society leads and holds both the government and businesses accountable, ensuring they serve the public good. Through case studies and examples, she shows the potential of a citizen-driven approach in creating a more sustainable future. Changemakers can utilize this book in the formulation of their own efforts, or for more insight into the process making progress possible.

## **About the Author**

Rohini Nilekani is an Indian philanthropist, author, and social activist known for her work in promoting civic engagement and sustainable development. She is the founder-chairperson of Arghyam, a foundation focused on water and sanitation issues, and co-founder of Pratham Books, a

non-profit dedicated to children's literacy.

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# Introduction

# 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](http://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 Executive Assistant Aparna Nataraju, have worked tirelessly to bring this book to some order.

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Importantly, I thank my dear husband Nandan Nilekani, my children Janhavi Nilekani, Nihar Nilekani, and my son-in-law Shray Chandra for critiquing my theory and contributing so much to its evolution. Nandan is always a bedrock of support, even when I am irritable during a writer's block!

Last but never the least, I thank my grandson Tanush, for always inspiring me in my writing. It is for his generation and beyond, that we must focus energies on building a better society.

# 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<sup>i</sup> network and work with the state government to set up their Karnataka chapter, as the Akshara Foundation.<sup>ii</sup> 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<sup>iii</sup>, 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)<sup>iv</sup> and Sanghamithra<sup>v</sup>, 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<sup>vi</sup> 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 unmatched 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,<sup>vii</sup> 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<sup>viii</sup> 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,<sup>ix</sup> and I had landed at the Patna airport on the evening of 15<sup>th</sup> 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,<sup>x</sup> 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<sup>1</sup>, to the state of contemporary Bihar, its desperate poverty, and the then highly active Naxalite movement.<sup>2</sup> “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.”

<sup>1</sup> The Sampoorna Kranti revolution was a political movement that began in Bihar in 1974 against state misrule and corruption.

<sup>2</sup> 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<sup>xi</sup> 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,<sup>3</sup> 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 conserve every drop of the scanty rainfall that fell over the land.

<sup>3</sup> 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.

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 Kutu: Journeys in Rediscovery of Gandhi*<sup>xii</sup> and *Bazaars, Conversations and Freedom*

<sup>xiii</sup> 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).<sup>xiv</sup> 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<sup>xv</sup> and John Locke<sup>xvi</sup> 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 20<sup>th</sup> century social reformer, expanded on this idea. He proposed a theory called 'social threefolding'<sup>xvii</sup> 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*,<sup>xviii</sup> 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*<sup>xix</sup>. 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*<sup>xx</sup> 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<sup>4</sup> 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.

<sup>4</sup> *Indigenous communities*

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 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*,<sup>xxi</sup> 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<sup>5</sup> 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."<sup>xxii</sup> 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.

<sup>5</sup> 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,<sup>xxiii</sup> fracturing Samaaj<sup>xxiv</sup> 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.<sup>xxv</sup> Globally, as well as in India, there has been a wave of collective action, from the #MeToo campaign,<sup>6</sup> to anti-

<sup>6</sup> 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<sup>xxvi</sup> 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,<sup>xxvii</sup> 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<sup>xxviii</sup> Solve Ninja<sup>xxix</sup> 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),<sup>xxx</sup> Ekta Parishad,<sup>xxxi</sup> the Mazdoor Kisan Shakti Sanghathan,<sup>xxxii</sup> and the Self-Employed Women's Association (SEWA).<sup>xxxiii</sup> 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*,<sup>xxxiv</sup> 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<sup>xxxv</sup> reached 130 million viewers, inspiring many to stand up against domestic physical abuse. Via Change.org,<sup>xxxvi</sup> 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

<sup>xxxvii</sup> and GiveIndia<sup>xxxviii</sup> 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.<sup>7</sup> 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.<sup>xxxix</sup> 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.<sup>xi</sup>

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 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.

<sup>7</sup> The term digital outcast was first introduced by Gareth White at the University of Sussex. He used it to describe

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.<sup>xli</sup> 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;<sup>xlii</sup> 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.<sup>xliii</sup> 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<sup>xliv</sup> 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<sup>8</sup> 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<sup>9</sup> 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.

<sup>8</sup> 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.

<sup>9</sup> 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.



# Chapter 1: An Active Samaaj



# Many Questions for the Dinner Table

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

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

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

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*

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

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

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.

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

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.*

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'

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

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





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

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

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.

# Chapter 2: Justice and Governance