

Daan Utsav: Investing for a better 'Samaaj'

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

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

This is a beacon of hope in these bleak times. It is the signal in the midst of all the noise. It tells us that when people engage in concerted action to help others, then we are on a strong foundation to nurture a society that all of us, not just some of us, would like to live in and belong to. I have personally always structured my philanthropy around this simple idea. If we can continue to build a good, resilient samaaj, which derives its energy from a moral leadership; which is inspired by the interconnectedness of our fates; and which is driven to co-create positive change, then we can face any future with the optimism that is unique to our human species.

So how do I help this idea along? Luckily, there are hundreds of organisations in India that are trying to do something similar: they want to help people become part of the solution rather than remain part of the problem. They want to unleash innovation, find change-makers, and support them to become leaders and institution builders. They want people to engage as citizens,

especially at their local level and figure out how to come together to resolve societal issues. These cover a wide spectrum from water, health, education, livelihoods, public infrastructure, environment, and also issues of access and voice.

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

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

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

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

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

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