Introduction

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

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

In 2000, I had the opportunity to become part of the Pratham[i] network and work with the state government to set up their Karnataka chapter, as the Akshara Foundation.[ii] Our aim was to work with the education system and local communities to ensure 'Every child in school and learning well'. Our teams of highly motivated volunteers and staff worked in slums and government schools, partnering effectively with the education department of the government and many corporate donors. This time our efforts were more coordinated and hence successful, and it gave me more confidence. In 2001, I felt emboldened to set up my own foundation, named Arghyam[iii], which means 'offering' in Sanskrit.

Over the next few years, I took on more challenges as I began to learn the ropes of philanthropy. I joined the board of the Ashoka Trust for Research in Ecology and the Environment (ATREE)[iv] and Sanghamithra[v], a not-for-profit micro-finance institution. Both

taught me much of what I know about the environment and about people's economics. I co-founded and funded Pratham Books[vi] to democratize the joy of reading. The 10 years I spent at Pratham Books have been the most joyful of my career in the civic space. Watching the eyes of little children light up when a good storybook is put into their hands is an unmatchable experience. But more importantly, I learnt what is possible when one simple but powerful innovation unleashes imagination across the board. When we decided to publish our books under an open-source Creative Commons license,[vii] it instantly opened up spaces for writers, illustrators, translators, and editors from across the country to join the societal mission of 'A Book in Every Child's Hand'. Tens of millions of children[viii] have benefitted from this as a result. This adventure has played a pivotal role in my journey.

By then, I was sometimes referred to as a social entrepreneur, which was amusing because my real profession was journalism. When I came into some serious money in 2005, through the sale of my personal Infosys shares, I put it all into Arghyam to support the water sector in India. Then I was well on my way to becoming what people called a philanthropist – a descriptor that did not sit so well with me in the early days. My colleagues and I were learning rapidly just how hard it was both to do philanthropy and to implement a social mission! With every small success, there were also many setbacks. But we were never disheartened, as we had joined thousands of concerned citizens and hundreds of committed leaders among them. We collaborated with several civil society organizations (CSOs) that were capable and mission-driven. We found that issues like water, education, the environment, and livelihoods struck a chord with citizens and that the state and its bureaucrats were more than willing to work with us. Those were heady years, full of diverse experiences, tremendous learning, and camaraderie.

Friends and Mentors

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

Our flight had been delayed considerably and Sunita's bags had not arrived, which led to an impromptu stop at a generator-lit shopping strip nearby. So, when we started on our journey to Khagaria district it was already dark. However, our amiable host, Prem Kumar

Varma of our local CSO partner Samata,[x] assured us it was fine and off we went in the sturdy Scorpio taxi. On the way, Premji, as he is widely known, regaled us with many stories from the Sampoorna Kranti (Total Revolution) movement spearheaded by Jayaprakash Narayan[1], to the state of contemporary Bihar, its desperate poverty, and the then highly active Naxalite movement.[2] "Just yesterday," he said, "Maoists had clashes with villagers; homes were lit and trashed; and dozens were killed." "Er, where was this?" asked Sunita nervously. "I'll show you tomorrow, that's where we are headed now," he replied sanguinely.

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

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

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

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

Premji's story and this framework of the Samaaj, Sarkaar, and Bazaar had a powerful impact on me. Five days later, I experienced another poignant moment when I visited Bhitiharwa, Gandhiji's first ashram in India, and stood in tears in front of a plaque with my grandfather's name. It was exactly 90 years since my grandfather, Babasaheb Soman, had joined Gandhiji there in 1917, leaving his work and family to join the Champaran agitation. And over the

next few days, as we witnessed the deep poverty of the people, the flood economy, the latent violence of the Naxalite movement, the brutal response of the state, and the early signs of big business making inroads into Bihar,

I had a lot of time to let Premji's words sink in. When I returned, I started to do my own reading on the changing relationships and power equations between these three sectors. I started to develop and refine this framing, which has since become the cornerstone of my work. I owe a great debt to Premji for setting me off on this journey.

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

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

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*[xii] and *Bazaars, Conversations and Freedom* [xiii] For years, we had been talking almost daily about issues of Samaaj, individual action,

and eco-political life. Slowly, under the guidance of many experts like her, Arghyam began to root itself in a new understanding. Here's just one example from the many innovations Arghyam was able to back – together with hydrologists and other scientists, we supported communities across India to practice Participatory Ground Water Management (PGWM).[xiv] Our CSO partners helped make invisible ground water visible, and trained village communities to understand local aquifers and develop sound processes to use the finite, though renewable, water more sustainably. Slowly but surely, many models developed across the diverse hydro-geologies around the country. And the PGWM mandate found its way into policy documents for water management at all levels of the state. Together, we had found a way to work with Samaaj to influence the Sarkaar.

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

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

The Evolution of Samaaj

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

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

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

Nicanor Perlas echoes the same idea in his book, *Shaping Globalization: Civil Society, Cultural Power, and Threefolding*,[xviii] where he shows how global civil society can leverage its power to shape the political and economic realms. Steve Waddell explores another version of this idea in his book, *Societal Learning and Change: How Governments, Business and Civil Society are Creating Solutions to Complex Multi-Stakeholder Problems*[xix]. In it, he asks what makes a successful society and how we can ensure that the three societal subsystems – the political system, the economic system, and the social system – can integrate with each other. In the Indian context, Raghuram Rajan's *The Third Pillar: How Markets and the State Leave the Community Behind*[xx] examines how the three sectors interact and what can be done to address power imbalances in this continuum.

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

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

We must recognize that representational power is limited and fluid. For example, a government official who might accept bribes because everyone else does, will still want a bribe-free atmosphere when his children go to school. A manufacturer whose production process might pollute natural resources, will still want clean air and water for his family. Everyone needs a better society, a better Samaaj, to reach their potential and create the best opportunities for their families. If we forget that we are members of society first and foremost, and instead see ourselves as mere beneficiaries of the state or as mere consumers of the market in search of a better material life, then we endanger the foundational supremacy of Samaaj. And that inevitably will endanger our own interest over time, both as individuals and as communities.

By no means am I suggesting that Samaaj is a monolith with uniform interests. Samaaj is a patchwork quilt, made up of so many threads and patterns, stitched together by time and events. We cannot afford to idealize Samaaj. In India, we continue to struggle against a structured hierarchy of caste that can dehumanize Dalits and other so-called backward castes. There are still millions of Adivasis[4] whose wisdom we have been unable to recognize, whose forest-dwelling rights are ignored and whose desires and ambitions society has been unable to accommodate. Women everywhere still must assert their right to equality in every sphere. Similarly, there are other minorities who feel threatened and pushed back. Perhaps Samaaj

has not evolved too much beyond the metaphor of the warring tribes. Throughout history, there have been instances when some Samaaj actors have taken the law into their own hands, resulting in vigilantism and violence, or where the majority has stifled the minority into subjugation. We are seeing some resurgence of these trends in many parts of the world.

---

[4] *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*,[xxi] Tagore writes, "In our country, the samaj stands above all else. In other countries, the nation has preserved itself through many revolutions and emerged victorious. In our country, the samaj has protected itself for a longer period of time against all sorts of crises." Explaining Tagore's position, Mukherjee says, "Welfare was not the responsibility of the state but the collective or common responsibility of all human beings. The samaj was not something above the human being but was constituted by human beings whose humanity was constituted by the samaj." The poet was exhorting his countrymen to rise from self-interest to reciprocity. In my small way, I wish to echo the urgency to organize society towards this moral and strategic imperative.

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

Reclaiming Our Role as Citizens

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

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

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

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

ongoing pandemic and future ecological crises might exacerbate existing divisions.

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

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

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

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

It is almost impossible for activities of the state to effectively solve the problem of the last citizen, or what we refer to as the first mile. Nor, in an ideal balance, should its role extend so much that citizens are totally dependent on the state for their own welfare. We have already gone through the questionable impact of what was known as a *mai-baap sarkaar* (benevolent parental government) a few decades ago, when the poor had to be totally dependent on the largesse of handouts from the state. When citizens simply wait for

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

There is also some confusion among citizens about the role of elected representatives. When my husband, Nandan Nilekani, ran for a Lok Sabha seat in the South Bangalore constituency during the 2014 general elections, we got a ringside seat to the grand spectacle of our electoral politics. As a campaigner, I walked around for hours in the searing heat of March and April. I had to learn many steps in the delicate dance of democracy. Chief among those lessons was the realization of the expectations that the electorate has for those they vote into power. Without overgeneralizing, I can safely say that most voters wanted their politicians – whether at the local level as councillors of the municipality, as MLAs in the state government, or as MPs in the union government – to deliver local services and improve their daily lives. Whether they lived in low-income settlements or high rises, they all expected direct delivery of better infrastructure, increased safety, more healthcare, and improved access to resources like water. Not once did anyone refer to the role of MPs as legislators who are mandated to play a role in framing good laws for the country that would help Samaaj and Bazaar to work effectively with the Sarkaar.

Nandan lost the election, although he got a heartening number of votes. But as I reflected on the many interactions I had over those intense months, I realized how far we still are from the lofty ideas of the Westminster model of parliamentary democracy enshrined in our constitution. Our electorate expects too little from their politicians as lawmakers, even as they demand too much of the services that fall outside of politicians' roles. They are not holding politicians to their highest deliverables – to listen and represent constituencies, to frame good laws and enable their implementation, to maintain peace and harmony, and to help ensure inclusive justice and prosperity for all. This may be because politicians too have not been able to shape the narrative around their roles. It may be due to the gap between citizens' immediate expectations of rewards and an abstract idea of broader justice, or because citizens don't feel inspired enough to solve local problems on their own. Whatever

the reasons, the outcome is the same – we have enabled a political class that is happy to keep citizens grasping at straws and a Samaaj that takes a very short-term view of the usefulness of our electoral democracy and the power of their vote. It leaves us with a political system that locks in citizens as beneficiaries of the government rather than as co-creators of good governance.

The Potential of an Active Samaaj

There is an urgent need for a shift in our thinking. The strength of our democracy depends on an active and engaged citizenry. The pandemic has shown us how powerful society can be when it works together with the state and private entities to bridge service gaps and create innovative solutions for immediate challenges. Citizens who are empowered can work together with an agility and speed that the state and markets simply cannot match. Can Samaaj now take the lead to redress the imbalances within itself first, and then between itself and the state and markets?

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

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

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

There is still untapped potential in India to engage individual citizens in positive collective action. We have seen glimpses of this rich hidden trove only recently. The award winning national 'Bell Bajao' campaign by Breakthrough[xxxv] reached 130 million viewers, inspiring many to stand up against domestic physical abuse. Via Change.org,[xxxvi] millions have signed online petitions to trigger policy changes, sometimes with quick results. The 'Loha' campaign for contributions to the Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel Statue of Unity in 2013-14 was one of the largest social mobilization campaigns in the world. Over 100 tonnes of iron were donated by India's farming community to support the project.
The voluntary renunciation of the LPG subsidy by 10 million citizens in the 'Give it Up' Ujjwala campaign in 2015 is another expression of the power of our Samaaj.

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

forms of social bonding.

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

Co-Creating an Inclusive Future

In this digital age, technological innovation has further compounded the complex relationship between Samaaj, Sarkaar, and Bazaar, creating new challenges along with opportunities. For Samaaj, it has enhanced the opportunity for mass civic engagement. However, it has also made empty clicktivism an easy replacement for true action. Unequal access and generational divides have created digital natives, digital immigrants, and digital outcasts.[7] Algorithms on social media platforms have amplified sensationalism and misinformation and have deepened political and social fissures. Many of us are bewildered by the consequent polarization we experience, inside our own families and in the wider public discourse. Meanwhile, the Bazaar and Sarkaar are in the throes of a war over control. Tech giants with enormous ambitions find newer ways to expand and monopolize the markets, while the state attempts to use blunt force to crack down on companies to keep them in check.

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

Given the potential for many kinds of futures, from good to bad, it is critical for us to understand these rapidly changing digital trends so that we can leverage them to create

and empower a digital Samaaj – one that will be able to ensure its rights and hold Sarkaar and Bazaar accountable in both the physical and virtual world. By no means can and should this digital Samaaj replace the vitality of our physical 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.

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

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

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

Yet there is a huge opportunity to change that and make the digital arena a powerful space for Samaaj to reclaim its primary position. We need a digital Samaaj, with pockets of ethical leadership and deep technological knowledge. Civil society and its institutions will have to learn digitally to keep the Bazaar and Sarkaar of the digital age accountable to the larger public interest and to co-create better policies and new rules of engagement in the virtual world. If they succeed, I hope we can then move to a future which is technology-enabled and not technology-led;[xlii] where human destiny remains in our own hands, and not in the control of algorithms. If we are able to achieve this, advancing technologies in the information, material and biological sciences can play a big part in helping tide over many new crises, including climate change.

I have had the great fortune to witness the work of all three sectors at close quarters. From a very young age, I was involved as an active, although impulsive, citizen in public life, whether it was by naively nudging people to not throw trash, or through the many

opportunities for political discourse at college in Mumbai, when we were in the throes of the first real threat to our frail democracy in the late '70s. Later, I became involved with actual institutions of civil society such as Akshara Foundation, Pratham, Pratham Books and then, through philanthropy, with Arghyam and EkStep Foundation.[xliii] I met thousands of inspiring civic leaders and witnessed hundreds of CSOs doing their difficult jobs with intense passion and commitment.

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

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

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

I have been truly privileged to meet hard-working, open-minded government officers right from the level of the Gram Panchayat accountant to the senior secretaries in Delhi. Despite

the misaligned incentive structures, despite the arbitrary rules of their office, they persevere, optimistic about their ability to bring in positive change. It is to all these persistent people across Samaaj, Sarkaar, and Bazaar that I owe my optimism that we can build bridges (or cross in cycles on a boat) across our divides – with Samaaj hopefully sitting in the boatman's seat.

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

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

Revision #1

Created 3 July 2024 05:19:38 by Arvind Unnithan

Updated 3 July 2024 06:02:09 by Arvind Unnithan