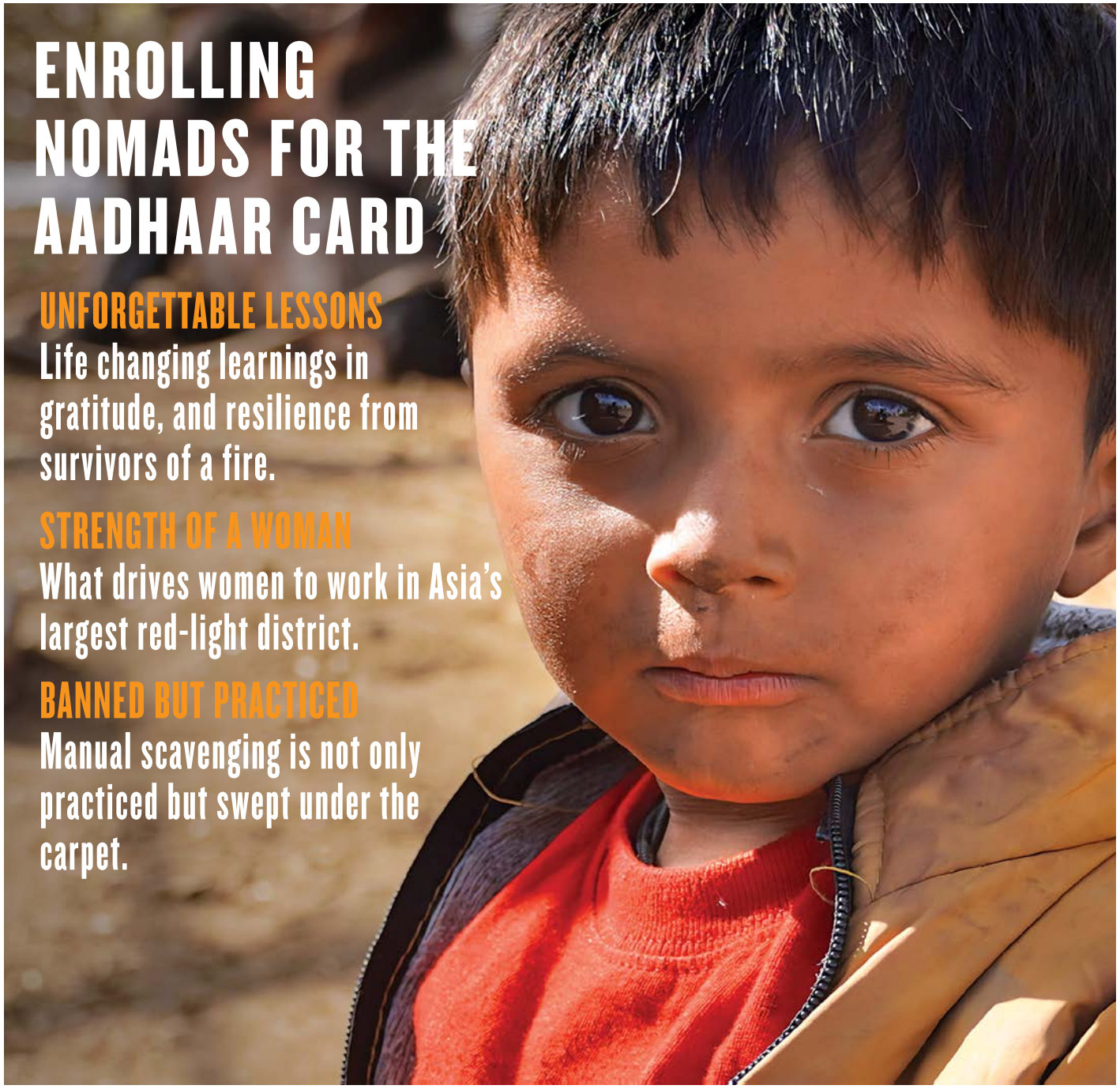
Bharatiya Vidya Bhavan's
SPJIMR

STORIES OF IMPACT

EXPLORING THE WORLD OF GRASSROOTS EXPERIENCES

Volume 2 2026
For private circulation only



ENROLLING NOMADS FOR THE AADHAAR CARD

UNFORGETTABLE LESSONS

Life changing learnings in gratitude, and resilience from survivors of a fire.

STRENGTH OF A WOMAN

What drives women to work in Asia's largest red-light district.

BANNED BUT PRACTICED

Manual scavenging is not only practiced but swept under the carpet.

EXPERIENCE, PAUSE, AND REFLECT

Experiential learning begins where the walled classroom ends. As a pedagogical approach it places learners in direct engagement with real-world situations and asks them not just to act, but to pause and reflect. Experiencing leads to stereotypes being questioned, understanding deepening through deliberate reflection—examining responses, questioning interpretations, and making meaning of what is encountered. In this movement between action and reflection, experiential learning brings the classroom and the world into a dynamic relationship, where theory is tested against reality and experience is interpreted through ideas. Learning, in this sense, is not merely the acquisition of knowledge, but its interrogation and internalization of the experiences—shaping both how individuals think and who they become.

THESE STORIES ARE OFFERED NOT AS CONCLUSIONS, BUT AS INVITATIONS—TO READ, TO REFLECT, AND TO ENGAGE WITH THE QUESTIONS THEY CONTINUE TO HOLD.

The process of curating this collection was both rigorous and difficult. From over 500 student narratives, a small set of stories has been selected—not as representative in any exhaustive sense, but as indicative of the range and depth of student engagement.

This volume brings together a set of student narratives emerging from their engagement with the field—moments of encounter, discomfort, insight, and reflection. Anchored in the philosophy of experiential learning, these accounts attempt to capture not just what students saw, but what stayed with them—questions that lingered, assumptions that were unsettled, and understandings that began to shift. The field, in this sense, is not merely a site of observation, but a space that demands attention, interpretation, and response.

The process of curating this collection was both rigorous and difficult. From over 500 student narratives, a small set of stories has been selected—not as representative in any exhaustive sense, but as indicative of the range and depth of student engagement. Many compelling accounts could not be included, often for reasons of space, quality of accompanying photographs, overlap, or the need to ensure diversity of contexts and experiences. The absence of a story here does not diminish its value; it reflects the challenge of selection within a rich and expansive body of work.

The narratives traverse a wide and often difficult terrain—ranging from disasters and manual scavenging to the lives of nomadic communities, and the complex realities of sex work. A significant number of these stories centre on the lives of women—engaging with questions of livelihood, nutrition, entrepreneurship, and the everyday negotiations of survival. Together, they bring into focus both the centrality of women's work and the structural conditions within which it unfolds.

In several instances, the challenge lay not only in understanding these contexts, but in representing them with care and responsibility. Questions of voice, dignity, and ethical portrayal became central to the act of putting this volume together. What emerges, therefore, is not a singular narrative, but a mosaic of perspectives shaped by varied contexts—reflecting the inherently interdisciplinary nature of these engagements, where issues of gender, livelihood, environment, and justice intersect.

At its core, experiential learning is not about arriving at answers, but about learning to stay with complexity. These stories are offered not as conclusions, but as invitations—to read, to reflect, and to engage with the questions they continue to hold. ●

Dr. Chandrika Parmar
Director DoCC, SPJIMR.

L: Social Impact Awards 2024; Centre: Ehsaas 2024; Right: PRME Chapter Meet 2023

Development of Corporate Citizenship (DoCC) at SPJIMR emerges from a simple but demanding belief—that management education must engage with the society it is embedded in. It cannot remain confined to classrooms, markets, or boardrooms, but must engage with the lived realities of communities shaped by institutional decisions.

In the early 1990s, following a national dialogue on corporate responsibility led by the Associated Chambers of Commerce and Industry of India (ASSOCHAM), SPJIMR was invited to explore how businesses could engage more meaningfully with rural India. This led to the establishment of DoCC in 1994—an early attempt to connect management education with social responsibility.

At the heart of DoCC is an immersive engagement with civil society. Each year, students work as an integral part of their curriculum alongside grassroots organizations across India, engaging with questions

DoCC

Water

Livelihood

Education

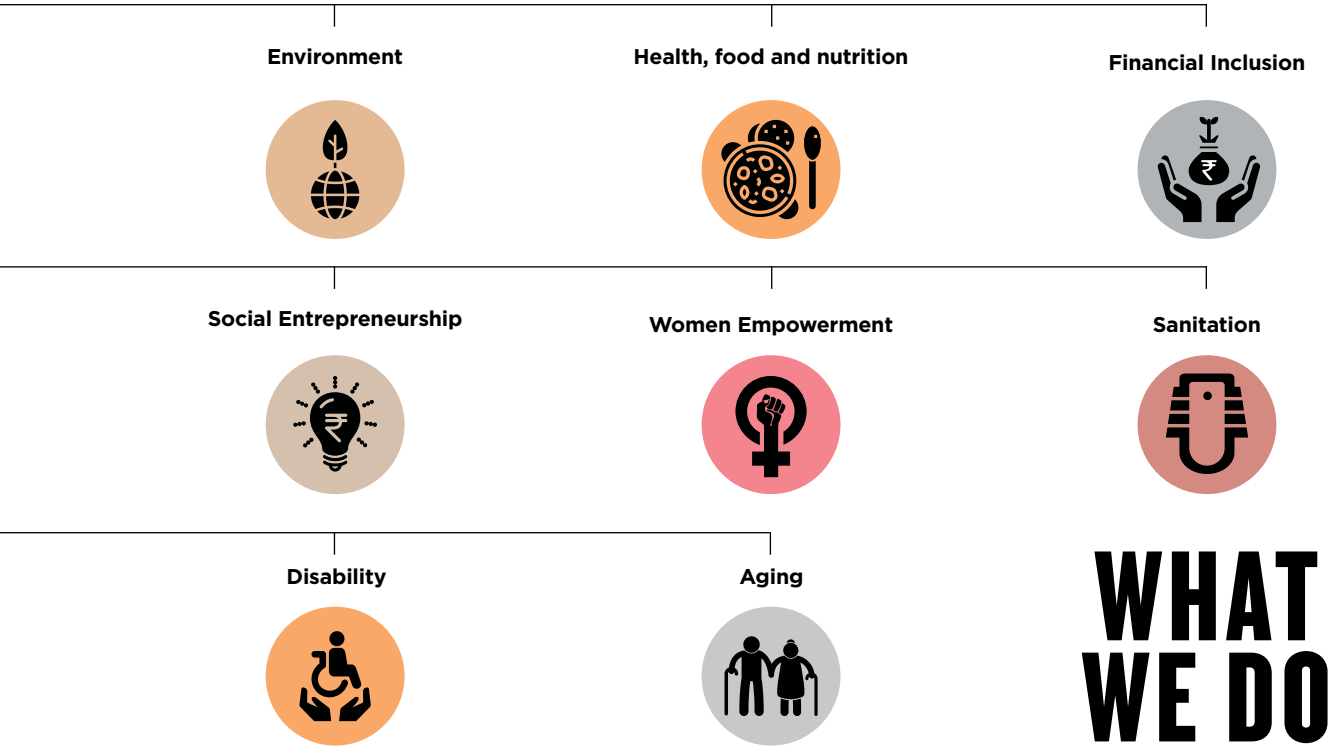
L: PRME Chapter Meet 2024; Centre: Aasra 2024; Right: Social Impact Awards 2025

of livelihood, inequality, and sustainability. These engagements are not designed as exposure alone, but as sites of learning—where familiar frameworks are unsettled and understanding is reshaped through direct encounter and reflection.

Over time, DoCC has evolved from an internship programme into a wider ecosystem of engagement. It brings together civil society organizations, academic institutions, corporates, and alumni into a shared space of inquiry and practice. This network reflects a recognition that the challenges of our time—climate transition, sustainable livelihoods, and social equity—require sustained, collaborative responses.

DoCC is both an intellectual and a practice platform. It foregrounds the knowledge that resides within communities, while emphasizing the responsibility of institutions to engage with this knowledge seriously and with humility. It also underscores a critical insight: that meaningful change cannot emerge from isolated efforts, but from ecosystems where diverse actors work in alignment rather than in competition.

As DoCC continues to evolve, its direction remains anchored in this larger responsibility—to create spaces where management education engages with questions of society, sustainability, and justice. The work ahead is complex and collective, extending far beyond any one institution. ●



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THE CITY OF JOY'S

FORGOTTEN WOMEN

Photograph: Salvacampillo, Shutterstock

Women carry the burden of society's scorn while saving their families from ruin in Asia's largest red-light district

Faded, bleached, grimy yellow walls, more melancholy than uplifting, slouched as the garland of filthy alleys and streets, with waste of every kind dragged them down. Narrow lanes and narrower alleys with rows of cigarette and tea shops and filled with shabbier and grimier men than I had imagined were everywhere. While it spelt poverty and deprivation, I wouldn't have identified it as a red-light area.

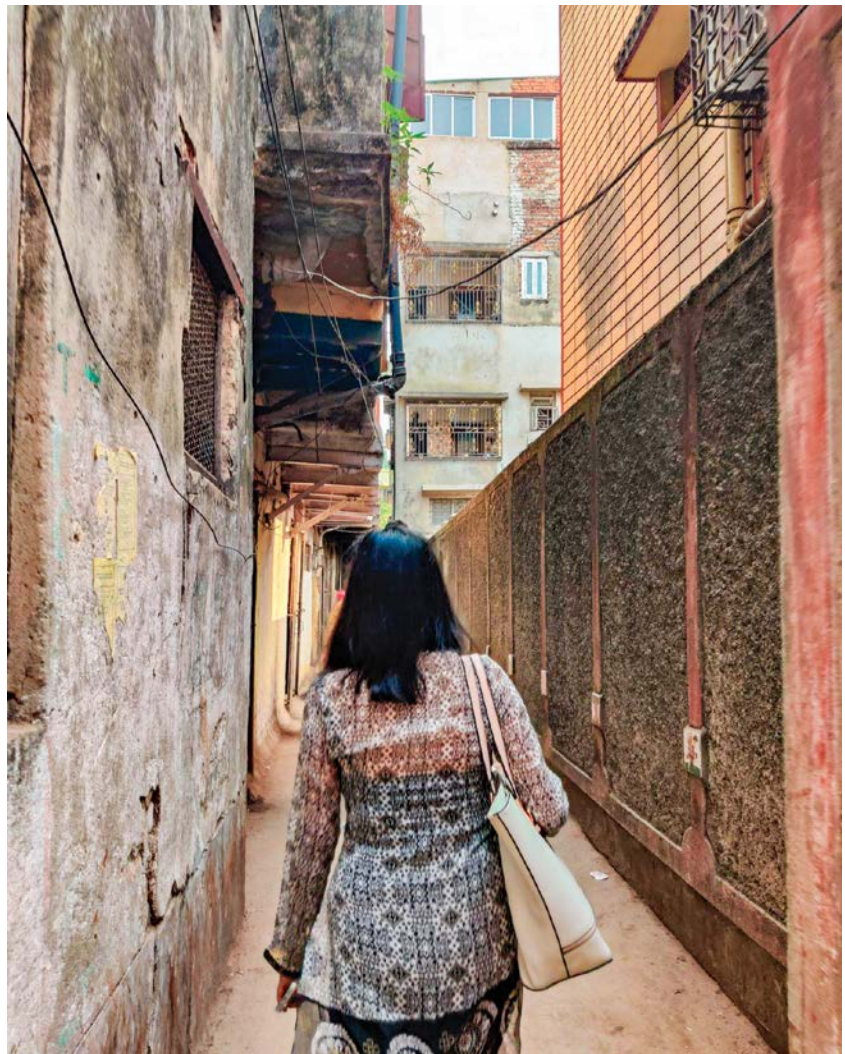
I was excited and fascinated to be in the city of Joy and by the once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to explore the lives and conditions of sex workers in Asia's most infamous red-light district. Sonagachi, Kolkata, Asia's largest red-light district, houses several hundred multi-storey brothels and an estimated 12,000 to 16,000 sex workers densely packed in a small area. This also includes

approximately 4,000 flying sex workers. It is a well-known concentrated hub with organised structures, while most of India's sex trade is fragmented and often hidden. A trade involving the official estimate of 657,000 to the unofficial estimate of 3,000,000 sex workers. This multi-billion-dollar industry ranks as India's third-largest illicit industry after arms and drugs. Sonagachi represents a fraction of India's scale but exemplifies organised brothel economics versus clandestine operations elsewhere.

Data from the early 1990s showed that the average weekly income of the sex workers from Sonagachi was ₹984, almost double the average urban income.

I was interning with Durbar, a collective of 60,000 sex workers in West Bengal, which had been working on women's rights and sex workers' rights advocacy, anti-human trafficking and HIV/AIDS since 1992. Multiple meetings with the Durbar team at their headquarters had reassured me that not only was I in the best-managed red-light area in the country, but also that I finally understood the lives of the sex workers. Bishakha, the secretary, informed us that sex workers in affluent localities often bill ₹ 30,000 a night. Most billings are at ₹ 700 or ₹ 800 for 10 minutes, while those at the bottom extreme bill between ₹ 150 and ₹ 250 per hour. These numbers made my head reel because data from the early 1990s showed that the average weekly income of the sex workers from Sonagachi was 984, almost double the average urban income. These figures made my eyes go wide, but not as wide as my first brothel visit.

I stepped into a world of young women shabbily applying makeup with a carefree attitude. Flesh was just another commodity sold to make ends meet. It was a business for the young, for after forty they no longer attracted customers. Those who managed to save migrated and began again; some took on menial, informal jobs, others resentfully remained, and a fortunate few moved into community support roles. Many faced destitution, with no social security to fall back on. Some arrived by escaping their families, some were sold by them, but most were victims of trafficking, poverty, and a lack of alternatives. What bound them together was their shared life. They cared for one another when illness struck, and when children were born. I was struck by the revelation that children were often raised collectively, nurtured by the women themselves. Against the odds, some of these children defied stigma to become white-collar workers and professionals. Still, in the end, they all grow acclimatised to living in brothels and become concerned just about "survival".



Photograph: Chelsi Bansal

Walking through Sonagachi lanes

Photograph: Chelsi Bansal

Children and transgender people from Komolgandhar during an event

But what left me speechless was visiting brothels for married sex workers who ply their trade for a few hours under various pretexts. A curtain strung between two buildings on a busy road not only indicated the nature of the business but also the category. Even before I could process this, I was chatting with a sex worker sitting on a bed in a decent-looking room, which could have passed off as a bedroom in a normal house. The only giveaway was the packets of condoms and alcohol on the table. The young woman with innocence in her eyes was so unexpected, that we hesitantly started talking. She confided that she had become a flying sex worker barely two months ago after her son had undergone open heart surgery. She and her husband had taken a loan to save their child, and she was working to repay the loan without informing anyone. She left home saying that she had a temporary, well-paying job. No one knew what she was doing to repay the loan to save her only child. I mentally screamed in anguish and abruptly stumbled out because a client had arrived and cut short the chat. I staggered through the day as I tried to understand the compulsions that forced a mother to willingly enter the sex trade.

She had become a flying sex worker barely two months ago after her son had undergone open heart surgery. She and her husband had taken a loan to save their child, and she was working to repay the loan.

I discovered that flying sex workers are mobile, non-brothel-based sex workers who travel between cities or operate in rented rooms, lodges, or client homes. They avoid brothel systems but lack collective protection, making them vulnerable to HIV, STDs and police harassment and exploitation. They are driven by flexibility, anonymity, and sometimes higher earnings compared to brothel-based work. Flying sex workers highlight the growing informalisation of the trade, with increased risks but also autonomy. I felt like I was in a movie in a sleazy brothel scene as I saw sex workers gossiping in groups, washing utensils, with clients or smoking. A group confided that they had been working for 2 years without people at their homes knowing about it. Financial reasons had pushed them, and they found their way here through conversations on trains and

Photograph: Chelsi Bansal

Roadside temple at Sonagachi

Participant showing her artwork at the children's fair

friends who were in the same trade. They said, 'Why would anyone come to this profession other than for money?' and were told that they got to know about the work through friends or women travellers. They knew they were morally in the wrong but did not have a choice, and one of them summed it up in a pithy 'Since we are doing wrong things, people will look at us wrongfully.' I was speechless as the counsellor accompanying us counselled her that she was doing what she was doing for her family. A young girl washing utensils in the same room interjected with a firm statement that there was nothing wrong with their labour of blood and sweat. She asked why people shied away and looked down on their services, whilst praising the services of doctors and lawyers. Her plaintive 'Why is this service wrong, and why were the real wrongs of rape and other crimes against women not questioned?' left me speechless and firmly on their side.

NGO: DURBAR MAHILA SAMANWAYA COMMITTEE, KOLKATA, WEST BENGAL

Inception: 1997
Focus: Advocacy for sex work, Community-led anti-trafficking, Education, nutrition, and development for children of sex workers
Impact: Securing electoral rights for sex workers safeguarding voting rights of sex workers • Participated at the 59th session of the United Nations Human Rights Council (UN HRC) in Geneva, Switzerland (June 2025), organised by the Sexual Rights Initiative (SRI) / Action Canada for Sexual Health and Rights • "Durbar 30" fair (12–15 July 2025). featuring panel discussions on health, media, and labour rights; fashion shows by sex workers and transgender persons; cultural performances; and children's activities. Judges, activists, academics, artists, and media personalities joined in solidarity • Represented Indian sex workers at the 3rd Nyéléni Global Forum 2025 in Sri Lanka (September 2025),

L: The buildings at Sonagachi; R: The lanes and bylanes of Sonagachi

Despite the language barrier and time constraint, all these women said the same thing – that they haven't been trafficked, that they came here of their own will, and that they are quite satisfied with the existing health structure. When a young sex worker informed us that her husband had bought her here, but she decided to continue. She still goes back to her husband every day and brings her 2-month-old child to the brothel. All rational thought driven from my mind, I mentally debated on moral values, the eternal debate between what is right and what is wrong, justice and trafficking.

I was overwhelmed. I was choked. There was an unbearable weight on my chest. I was breathless. I was angry at the world, wondering why women are on the receiving end when things are bad. Why do women take the steps they do? I questioned my privilege, the kind of protection that I have been offered from

I was angry at the world, wondering why women are on the receiving end when things are bad.

this world all my life. I couldn't imagine how it would feel to be a part of this and do a job that ostracises you from society for the rest of your life. A job that takes away the dignity that one deserves as a human being. Were these women cheating on their husbands? How could they?! They were doing it to save their children's lives, to have two square meals a day. The lens through which we see rights and wrongs isn't the lens that we can impose on them, but do we understand it? I felt sick to my core that whole day. I felt helpless for them; I wished they didn't have to go through this.

The words of Sahir Ludhianavi from the film Chaandi ki Deewar and performed by the incomparable Muhmad Rafi echoed what I felt.

Ye duniya do rangi hai.
Ek taraf se resham ode, ek taraf se nangi hai.
Ek taraf andhi daulat ki paagal aish parasti
Ek taraf jismoñ ki qeemat roti se bhi sasti
Ek taraf hai Sonaagaachi, aur aur ek taraf Chaurangi hai.
Ye duniya do rangi hai
The poignant lyrics translate to
This world is two-faced.
One side covered with silk, the other naked
On the one hand, the hedonism of blind wealth
On the other hand, bodies are sold cheaper than bread.
On the one hand lies Sonagachi, on the other Chowringhee.
This world is two-faced.●

By
Chelsi Bansal, Preety Purohit, Mohit Shukla and Siddhant Singh

THE FIRE THAT CHANGED MY LIFE

What a remote burnt village taught me about service, gratitude, and resilience

I felt I was thrust into another world. The air was thick with the smell of burnt wood and smouldering blackened rubble. The air smelled of burnt wood. Smoke was still coming from the houses that had been burnt,

Photograph: Mounika Inrakanti

and the ground was covered with charred remains of what were once homes full of life. Homes that once held generations of memories were reduced to nothing but ash. Families sat near makeshift fires, trying to stay warm, their faces carrying a mix of exhaustion and quiet grief.

The smell made me gag, and the acrid fumes made my eyes water. The devastation overwhelmed me.

A massive fire on January 1st, 2025, devastated Tandi village in the Jibhi valley of Banjar subdivision, Himachal Pradesh, destroying around 20 houses, including fodder and cow sheds. The houses in Tandi were built in the traditional Kath-Kuni architecture, using deodar wood, which is highly flammable. The fire started in a fodder shed and quickly spread to nearby wooden houses, fuelled by firewood and fodder stored for the winter. The fire spread rapidly, consuming one home after another. Families could do nothing but watch as their entire lives burnt away. The remoteness and the rough roads meant that the fire engines arrived too late.

I had never experienced anything like this. I was not prepared for this.

Although I was born and brought up in Hyderabad, I had visited Himachal Pradesh a couple of times and was quite excited about my field trip on women's empowerment and reviving and documenting traditional weaving and textiles. An unexpected tragedy – the fire at Tandi, which was barely 15 km but 4 hours away from Nagwain, where we were camped for my field trip, changed everything.

I wandered around the devastated village with the rest of my team with a lump in my throat. And tears running down my face. I still don't know if they were tears of grief or from the acrid smoke of the devastating fire.

It was freezing cold, and the temperature was almost zero. The fire had affected everyone.

Relief work isn't just about addressing immediate needs, it is about offering support and understanding during their darkest hours.

The affected huddled in temporary shelters, trying to stay warm. All around, I could only see faces full of exhaustion, disbelief, and sadness.

I felt a sense of helplessness as I walked through the village. How could I, with no experience in disaster relief, possibly make a meaningful difference here? My first instinct was to focus on practical solutions such as raising funds, organising supplies and ensuring that everyone received what they needed. But as I started talking to the villagers, I realised that their loss was not just material; it was deeply personal.

The villagers were not just mourning the destruction of their homes. They were mourning the loss of memories, of incalculable emotional value, and the security of their homes.

Photograph: Mounika Indrakanti

The charred remains from the fire

Photograph: Mounika Indrakanti

Food being cooked at the relief camp

This realisation changed how I approached the work. It was not just about providing relief; it was about offering support and understanding during their darkest hours. For someone used to the comforts of urban life, this was unlike anything I had ever experienced.

We rolled up our sleeves and jumped straight in. Our NGO PIPAL collaborated with another NGO, FOLK, and raised ₹ 150,000 to purchase critical items such as heaters to fight the harsh winter, kitchen gas pipes so that families could start cooking meals again and other necessities to help them regain a sense of normalcy. A simple heartfelt *"shukriya"* (thank you)as I handed over a package of essential supplies was a humbling experience. I realised that kindness and giving were not about the value of what we were giving but the underlying sense of support and care that came with it.

The villagers were struggling but grateful for assistance. Their eyes lit up with every package of essentials, and I could feel and sense that their heartwarming smiles were genuine. It not only moved me but also taught me what resilience and hope really look like. Watching them hold onto their dignity and hope amidst such loss was both humbling and inspiring. It reinforced the idea that relief work isn't just about addressing immediate needs; it is about helping people find the strength to move forward. Despite having lost everything, the villagers were smiling and helping each other. They were cooking for each other and their children, who, as children are wont to do, were milling around and playing away from the ruins. I witnessed what fellowship and humanity actually mean.

I, who used to be short-tempered and get agitated for trifles, was awestruck and wondered about the courage and resilience of people who lost everything.

Deeply moved, my colleagues and I used LinkedIn, Instagram, and WhatsApp to share stories of devastation and raise funds. Balancing honesty and hope was hard, but we quickly raised ₹ 60,000, bought more supplies, and returned to Tandi to distribute them.

The response overwhelmed us. I met Bina, who came up to me, and her simple heartfelt *"Aap log wapas aaya. Bahut bahut Shukriya."* (Thank you, Thank you so much for returning) Her house was the first to burn

A child playing with the debris

A Selfie with Bina who is the sweetest woman I met in Tandi

down, and she was homeless and living in a makeshift tent along with her 2 children. But what she did next reduced me to tears. Despite having lost everything, she invited me for tea. That small gesture of kindness in the ruins and so much loss taught me a lesson I will never forget. It showed me that resilience is not just about enduring hardships; it is about holding onto your humanity even in the darkest times.

I walked through the rubble and saw a man sifting through the still-smouldering rubble of what was once his house. Confident that he was searching for valuables like gold or jewellery, I asked him, *"Aap kya dhoond rahe ho?"* (What are you looking for?). Without missing a beat or looking up, he softly replied, *"Kuch yaadein... koi photo ya ek tukda jo bacha ho."* (Some memories... a photo or anything

NGO: PEOPLE FOR INTEGRATED PLANNING AND ADAPTABLE LIVING (PIPAL) FOUNDATION, BILASPUR, HIMACHAL PRADESH

Inception: 2021
Focus: Sustainable Mountain Development
- Alternative Livelihoods
- Knowledge Management

Impact: Strengthened 8+ women SHGs in high-altitude villages of Spiti.
- Technology-driven interventions like solar drying and improved packaging systems.
- Reached 700+ farmers through awareness and demonstration programs on climate-resilient horticulture and sustainable apple cultivation.
- Developed branding and market linkage strategies for mountain products, positioning them as premium high-altitude produce.

Photographs: Mounika Indrakanti

Villagers warming themselves in the relief camp against the morning chill

This experience did not just change how I see service; it changed how I see myself. It made me more aware of my own privilege and more committed to using it to make a meaningful difference in the lives of others.

that survived.) I was stunned into silence, and a lump swelled in my throat as I realised: this was not just about rebuilding houses. It was about restoring lives.

The time I spent in Tandi was really transformative. It taught me that service is not just about logistics and deliverables; rather, it is about connection and empathy. It is about seeing the humanity in every person I meet and recognising their strength even when they feel broken. The families in Tandi showed me the power of resilience. They reminded me that despite facing unimaginable loss, there is room for hope, gratitude and kindness. Their strength inspired me to approach challenges in my own life with greater humility and determination. This experience did not just change how I see service; it changed how I see myself. It made me more aware of my own privilege and more committed to using it to make a meaningful difference in the lives of others.

The people of Tandi showed us that resilience is not just about rebuilding homes but about rebuilding hope. Always short-tempered, I would often feel frustrated if things did not go as planned or if there were delays and obstacles before my field trip. Now, I have learnt to give situations some time and space, and often a solution emerges naturally. This change in approach has been something I consciously apply in both my professional and personal life. Another shift has been in my perspective on gratitude.

Earlier, I tended to take many things for granted, but the experience taught me to truly value the people, situations and resources I have in my life to such an extent that even my family and friends comment about it. I am grateful for the food I have on my table, my parents, my family and my friends. This field trip has made me more empathetic and open-minded. Interacting with the community and seeing life through their lens reminded me that challenges can be met with resilience and hope, qualities I now try to bring into my own work and relationships. ●

By
Mounika Indrakanti

DISCOVERING HIDDEN STORIES IN A GLASS OF MILK

How para-veterinarians and farmers weave unseen tales of trust, survival, and transformation into rural Maharashtra's dairy fields.

It started off innocently enough. My rural internship. I had done my homework. I was interning with Bhagirath Gramvikas Pratishthan, Sindudurg, Maharashta with a focus on Gopal, which was a programme that was reshaping community-led veterinary care in the villages.

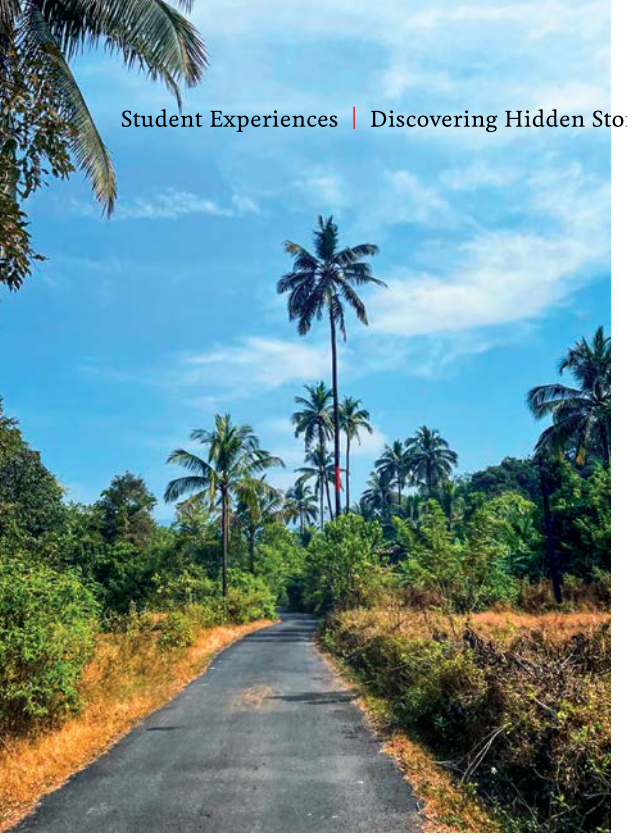
I had a simplistic view of rural economies. I assumed that lack of resources and education was

Photographs: MKD Stock

the main obstacle to growth. I expected to be collecting data and analysing figures. Instead, I discovered the heartbeat of the Konkan and, by extension rural India. Sindhudurg's lush green landscape in the southernmost part of Maharashtra welcomed me. It was a refreshing change from Mumbai. The clean air was energising. I looked forward to my role as a consultant.

The first stumbling block was language. I realised I was in for a new experience. Thankfully everyone knew and understood Hindi. Tentative conversations soon turned into eye-opening learnings. Before I knew it I was replacing my assumptions and theoretical knowledge with real-world insights. Instead of analyzing numbers which was what I had expected, I found myself walking with farmers in their fields, listening to Gopals explain the details of cattle care, and watching dairy operators as they went about their routine. Each interaction added a new layer of understanding, helping me see both the potential and the challenges of the Gopal project.

It was no longer an academic exercise. I had changed. I began to see rural India in a new light. Not as statistics or case studies, but as a living ecosystem of resilience and ingenuity. Dairy farming, though smaller compared to other industries, had immense potential. Bhagirath Gramvikas Pratishthan had tied up with milk cooperatives and financial institutions to improve the farmers' lot. While profitable and scalable, dairy farming faced challenges of limited veterinary care and low milk yields. Para-veterinarians seemed to be the answer to limited veterinary care access and



Photographs: Nimish Sharma

Roads leading to Sindhudurg's villages

low milk yields. BGP launched Gopal, a programme to train rural youth from farming families to become para-veterinarians. These trainees learnt practical skills in cattle healthcare, artificial insemination, and nutrition management, allowing them to support farmers directly. This decentralised model reduced cattle deaths, lead to healthier calves and increased milk productivity. It also gave rural youth not just a livelihood but a sense of purpose.

Every glass of milk hid stories of hard work, resourcefulness, and mixed desperation with determination. I learned that development is not only about scaling up but about sensitivity, sustainability, community and flexibility.

I met Ankush from Nivaje village with a great deal of curiosity. Our tentative acquaintance soon changed into a meaningful relationship. He became my local guide, interpreter, and teacher. Unlike many young people who migrate to cities in search of work, Ankush was determined to remain in his village. A 10th-grade graduate, he had once struggled to find a steady work. His fortunes changed when he joined the Gopal Initiative, where he was trained in artificial insemination and cattle healthcare. These skills made him indispensable to his community. Today, Ankush not only earns a steady income but also serves as a community leader, helping farmers improve cattle management and increase their incomes.

I gained a deeper appreciation for the technical skills on seeing the precision and care needed.

Every morning, even before the sun fully rises, Ankush Bhau starts his day. He sets out on his bike, carrying an artificial insemination (AI) kit, a liquid nitrogen canister, and unwavering dedication. He travels across villages, assisting farmers in artificial insemination (AI), providing veterinary first aid, and advising on cattle nutrition.

I accompanied him a couple of times and witnessed the insemination process. I gained a deeper appreciation for the technical skills on seeing the precision and care needed. Throughout our travels, Ankush constantly attended to calls from farmers seeking advice and assistance. It showed the strong bond of trust he had built with the community. I remember a farmer grazing his livestock who spontaneously waved Ankush to a stop to discuss his cattle problems during one of our many rides. Ankush not only paused but also patiently answered all of the farmer's questions. That moment made me realise how Gopals serve as the first line of defence for livestock health in places where formal veterinary services are scarce.

Ankush's success in artificial

Photograph: Bhagirath Gram Vikas Pratishthan

Ankush, the Gopal advising a farmer near the village Nivaje; Cowshed with the Buffaloes

insemination was remarkable. Farmers familiar with tradition were initially skeptical of AI Understanding this hesitation, he patiently visited farmers, explained the benefits, and demonstrated success stories. Over time, as milk yields increased and healthier calves were born, the community saw the value in his work. Sindhudurg's daily milk production grew from 4,000 litres to 25,000 litres.

His success rate of 55% compared to the average of 35% with AI earned him the community's trust. He is now accepted as a leader. He and other Gopals played a vital role in delivering last-mile veterinary care. In remote villages where access to trained veterinarians is limited, farmers rely on Gopals for artificial insemination, first-aid treatment, and overall cattle healthcare.

Beyond work, he also showed us the scenic beauty of the region, including historic forts and picturesque landscapes, reflecting his deep-rooted connection to his homeland.

Sharad's holistic approach to farming revealed how rural entrepreneurship can thrive when supported by the right financial and advisory ecosystem.

Through Ankush's connections, I met Sharad Dhuri, a humble yet forward-thinking farmer who owned three to four buffaloes. Unlike many small-scale farmers, Sharad had diversified into fisheries, a choice that reflected both adaptability and a willingness to take risks. As we walked through his well-maintained fields, he explained his agricultural practices, noting how his buffaloes and cows grazed freely in the open—a benefit of Sindhudurg's sparsely populated landscape.

Sharad had invested in rubber mats for his cattle sheds and relied on the expertise of Gopal-trained para-veterinarians to procure high-breed buffaloes, ensuring higher milk yields. His grasp of banking systems and cooperative societies was equally impressive. He kept himself informed of government schemes supporting animal husbandry and used small loans to expand his business. To further diversify his income, he had also started a small poultry farm.

Sharad's holistic approach to farming revealed how rural entrepreneurship and livestock management can thrive when supported by the right financial and advisory ecosystem.

Ankush also took me around to an Eco-Ganpati workshop managed by BGP. Experts were brought in. They taught children and all participants about the properties of soil, sustainable materials, and local biodiversity, and they created beautiful Ganpati idols from eco-friendly

clay. Witnessing their enthusiasm and engagement reaffirmed the NGO's commitment to holistic rural development, beyond just livestock care.

This field experience wasn't an academic project anymore. It was a transformative journey that reshaped my understanding of rural development, social impact, and the power of grassroots solutions. Interacting with Ankush, Gopal, Sharad, the farmer, and Gokul dairy operators made me realise that awareness, social networks, and trust in institutions are imperative to growth. Farmers are not merely passive recipients of aid; they are active decision-makers who assess risks, weigh financial options, and strategically diversify their income sources. Sharad's investment in fisheries, modern equipment, and his knowledge of cooperative financing demonstrated that entrepreneurial spirit is as strong in rural areas as in urban settings, but in a different context. He was an entrepreneur and a risk-taker. I realised how self-reliant and strategic rural farmers are.

One of the most profound moments was sitting by the lake in Sawantwadi, speaking with the veterinary doctor about the physical and emotional toll of working in remote areas. It made me reflect on the dedication required for true impact. This experience has deepened my commitment to social impact. I now see development not as a one-time intervention but as an evolving, community-driven process—one where business and social

Photograph: Bhagirath Gram Vikas Pratishthan

Ankush doing the insemination process.

NGO: BHAGIRATH GRAMVIKAS PRATISHTHAN, MAHARASHTRA

Inception: 2004
Focus: Act as a catalyst for economic growth in marginalised villages by introducing newer and more advanced methods of agrarian practice, energy and fuel generation, etc.
Impact: Trained 1,000 women and students making eco-friendly Ganesh. idols • Installed over 10,000 biogas plants • Distributed Interactive digital boards to 150 schools • Established 50 milk collection centres in Sindhudurg district • Trained 30 AI workers (GOPAL) to perform artificial insemination and primary treatment of dairy animals • Started goat farming training and artificial insemination centre • Trained 2500 women and farmers in poultry farming.

Photographs: Nimish Sharma

In conversation with Sharad Dhuri at (top)his residence and (bottom)in the fields.

good can coexist if designed thoughtfully.

Some experiences leave an imprint far deeper than words can capture. This internship was one such journey. Beyond the data, the models, and the numbers, it was the human connections that made this experience so profound. The warmth of the people, their resilience, and their willingness to share their lives, homes and experiences changed this project into something personal and unforgettable.

I had a textbook understanding of rural finance. Sharad, the farmer, gave it a face, a voice, and a story. Ankush became a friend, a guide, and an embodiment of the Gopal spirit. His passion for his work was contagious. His statement, "Cattle are my first love," made me appreciate the depth of his dedication. He didn't want to leave his village. He wanted to build something right there, in his home, for his people. He did. His impact is tangible—higher conception rates, improved cattle breeds, and better milk productivity. But beyond the technical skills, what sets Ankush apart is his simplicity, selflessness and enthusiasm which made him into a trusted community leader.

This experience changed my approach to problem-solving. It has taught me to listen first, to immerse myself in the reality of the people I aim to serve, and to co-create solutions rather than prescribe them. My academic project turned into a window into the resilience, ingenuity, and aspirations of rural India. I understood that rural development is not just about funding programmes but about creating self-sustaining ecosystems. It sharpened my ability to engage with diverse stakeholders—from NGO leaders and veterinarians to farmers and bank officials. Conducting field visits, asking the right questions, and synthesising insights from different perspectives will be invaluable in my consulting career. Witnessing how financial access, veterinary support, and dairy economics are interlinked gave me a holistic understanding of rural supply chains, a perspective that I can apply to future projects in the development sector.

The generosity, perseverance, and wisdom of the villagers have left a lasting impact on me. As I move forward, whether in business, policy, or social impact initiatives, I carry with me a powerful lesson: true change happens when solutions are built from the ground up, in partnership with those who need them most. ●

By
Nimish Sharma

Behind the postcard beauty lies the invisible lives of manual scavengers fighting for dignity.

THE OTHER SIDE POSTCARD PERFE

Photograph: Imtiyaz K, Shutterstock

Photograph: Akshat Patni

OF PICTURE
CT KASHMIR

Manual Scavenging for representational purpose

'If there is Paradise on earth, it is this, it is this, it is this.' This famous quote, attributed to Shahjahan, flashed through my mind as I sipped on traditional, goat-milk namkeen chai. The fabled Kashmiri Mehmaan Nawazi embraced us as I explored paradise on earth. I was lucky to be working with Magsaysay Award recipient Dr Bezwada Wilson's team at Safai Karmachari Andolan in Kashmir. The mesmerising beauty, blue skies and unpolluted air whispered joy and freedom as we went about our internship.

We were to interview and survey

L: On the road to Chiner Village : R: Posha's family waiting for us at Sheik Mohalla, Chiner Village

manual scavengers. I was horrified that it still remains a widespread practice after being banned in 1993. The practice being banned in the books lets the government officially have no accountability for the rights of "non-existing" manual scavengers, who face severe exploitation, with basic necessities and rights disregarded.

Reeling under this information and tasked with documenting the realities faced by manual scavengers in the Valley, I tentatively approached surveys and interviews in Srinagar and the Kashmir Valley. This information would be used to advocate for policy changes and initiatives to improve the lives of manual scavengers.

A group of over 18 people had gathered for interviews at the residence of Posha and her son Adil at Sheikh Mohalla, Village Chiner (Dist. Ganderbal), in the Kashmir Valley, and a two-hour drive from Srinagar. When they noticed that we were struggling to get their names right, they spelt them for us in English and also took a look at our forms. All of them were literate and had studied up to the 8th grade. Some more. I realised that most of them wanted to study further but were forced to take up this unpleasant job due to circumstances. Most were temporary workers and worked for barely a month or two throughout the year. Despite working on multiple jobs, they barely earned ₹ 4500-5500 a month. The amount that we spend on an evening out barely covers their necessities, which include food, clothes, electricity, school fees, books, uniforms, etc., for a month. Sometimes payment was a 50 kg bag of rice to be distributed among 4-5 people.

I lost my appetite as I met and heard about my host, Posha's granddaughter. She was quite a scholar and was preparing for her 8th-grade exams, which were a couple of days away. Although she wanted to study further, the family had decided to discontinue her education so that the money could be used to teach the younger ones in the family. But Ms Mahjabeen Bhat, the local convener, stepped in and volunteered to pay her fees so that she could study further.

Children as young as 7-8 were inducted into this profession to help with the family finances.

I learnt that everyone gathered belonged to the same Sheikh community and had been manual scavengers for generations. Children as young as 7-8 were inducted into this profession to help with the family finances. Despite the absence of casteism, the community was looked down upon and discreetly ostracised. Even children were not spared. The only silver lining was the unanimous consensus that schoolteachers tried to encourage children to mingle and be together, but parents of other communities weaned their children away from the Sheikh

Photographs: Akshat Patni

L: A selfie with the Posha and her family; R: 5-year-old Mashooq, who will be starting to work next year

community children. A sweet, curious little old boy sat beside me as I was sipping chai and, as children do, started asking me questions. His uncle said he was Mashooq, 5 years old, and stunned me into silence with a casual Mashooq will start working with his elders when he turns 6.

I froze. Jannat had turned into horror.

Walnuts from the garden

These families had accepted discrimination and lived on the fringes of society. Forced to live in often illegal and unauthorised houses, they are always insecure. What was galling was that they lived in constant fear of those who employed them. The employers, usually the landed, the well-off, and the municipality, through local and favoured contractors, contacted them for the unpleasant tasks. A carcass that needed to be disposed of, an overflowing sewer that needed to be cleaned, overflowing septic tanks that needed to be unclogged, and drains that needed to be periodically cleaned were the jobs available to them.

Those living in the cities also lived in rundown areas in illegal houses with almost no sanitation and outrageous power bills, often as high as ₹ 1000-1200 a month, despite 5-6 hours of power cuts. They never knew when the local authorities or the influential people who employed them through contractors would evict them. They lived in constant fear. To make matters worse, contractors pocketed most of the money from government contracts. Access to government aid and schemes was impossible because of bureaucratic hurdles. Despite the legal prohibition of manual scavenging, many manual scavengers continue to work in unsafe conditions due to a lack of alternative employment opportunities and societal pressure. The filthy, inhuman, and often hazardous working conditions with long hours, lack of safety gear, and constant risk of injury or fatality had me at a loss for words.

I was amazed by the resilience and positivity of the people we met despite their harsh reality. I realised that equality is only on paper and not all are born and treated equally. I was stunned into silence in just four hours of

Photographs: Akshat Patni

L: Waving goodbye to the family; R:Manual Scavengers showing the manhole where the accident claimed Aarshad's arm and his livelihood

conversation. I left with a handful of walnuts, a parting gift from the magnanimous matriarch, Posha Ma, and an equally large lump in my throat.

I realised I was not the same person who had walked into Srinagar. I was changing every day with every meeting. I remember meeting 24-year-old Sohail Ahmed Sheikh, father of two young daughters from Noor Bagh. A good student, he had studied up to his tenth grade and dreamed of becoming a doctor. His father, a municipal worker, and his mother, a homemaker, supported his ambitions and his siblings. Life took a sharp turn when his father died of tuberculosis in 2016 during his tenth board. As the eldest male of the family with an elder sister, an old mother and a younger brother to provide for, he took the tough decision to give up studies and start working. A juvenile with limited education, his options were limited, and he was forced to step into his father's shoes and become what he hated – a manual scavenger. He ensured that he married well, got married to an equally educated wife and made sure that his younger brother had a choice and didn't follow the hereditary occupation.

He was forced to step into his father's shoes and become what he hated – a manual scavenger.

In a matter-of-fact voice, Sohail shared anecdotes on how manual

NGO: SAFAI KARMACHARI ANDOLAN, DELHI

Inception: 1993
Focus: Eradication of manual scavenging and rehabilitation of manual scavengers
Impact: Mobilized over 6,350 volunteers across 439 districts
- Conducted the Bhim Yatra, a 125-day journey covering 500 districts in 30 states to raise awareness
- Filed a Public Interest Litigation in the Supreme Court in 2003, leading to a landmark judgment in 2014 that recognized manual scavenging as a violation of fundamental rights and mandated compensation for affected families
- Contributed to a significant reduction in the number of manual scavengers, from approximately 1.5 million to 200,000 by 2013

Shoel Ahmed Sheik's house at Noor Bagh

the proper tools had left him crippled for life and his family without a source of income. The working members take up collections regularly for him and his family.

An off-the-record meeting with workers of the SMC at Chinar Garden, Dalgate, Srinagar, was an eye-opener. They started work as early as 4 am in the morning and continued till 5-6 pm in the evening without safety gear, medical, or life insurance for a salary of ₹ 9,328. Absence of 2 consecutive days resulted in termination. There was no compensation for work-related injury, and often people lost their jobs because of a medical condition. All the workers between 28 and 58 years of age had similar stories. We could barely handle what we were hearing when a 40-year-old with tears running down his face joined his hands and, in a voice choked with emotion, broke down with *"Sahab, hum bohot takleef me hai. Please hamari madad karne ke liye kuch keejiye. Ye sarkaar aur sarkaari afsaro ne humko bas apna siyaasi mohra bana rakha hai."* (Sir , we are in deep trouble. Please do something to help us. we are nothing but pawns at the beck and call of the authorities and the officers.) The room went silent. The veneer of politeness and officiousness broke down. We stopped recording and questioning. We were stunned, speechless, feeling as helpless as they were.

Riyaz Ahmed Chechi at the dry latrine used by his family.

These experiences shook me up.

People talk about terror and inclusivity when they talk about Kashmir. They do not even know of problems like these. Authorities and the common man in Kashmir liberally use the quote attributed to Shah Jehan, 'Agar firdaus bar ru-ye zamin ast, Hamin ast-o hamin ast-o hamin ast', loosely translated as 'If there is Paradise on earth, it is this, it is this, it is this,' as a cover-up for a hellish life for the unofficially nonexistent.

Srinagar. Kashmir broke my heart and opened my eyes to the perseverance of a community that works at what does not exist. They smile through it all and hope for a better future. ●

By
Abhijay Kandi and Akshat Patni

THE POSTERGIRL OF GENDER EQUALITY

Bala Didi's journey from oppression to independence shows how one woman's courage can inspire an entire community.

Photograph: Jindal Stainless Limited

Hisar, Haryana, was a culture shock. As a South Indian who has spent his entire life in Tamil Nadu, this was the northernmost place I had ever been in India. The incredible warmth of the people left a very positive impression on me. A kind-hearted ex-army Sardarji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in security not only pointed us in the right direction when we reached the wrong place but also accompanied us to make sure we arrived at the main gate safely. Mr Brijinder Singh at the main gate, on learning that my name was Sriraam, playfully linked it to Lord Ram with "*Bhagwan aah gaya*, God has come, how can I not help him". His light-heartedness and willingness to assist made us feel instantly at ease. This warmth continued throughout our stay and helped me overcome my broken Hindi.

I was interning with Jindal Stainless Limited (JSL) on a women's empowerment CSR program "Village development through Women Empowerment", being implemented in collaboration with the not-for-profit organisation, Selfie with Daughter. The program focused on on the issue affecting women in the villages, which necessitated this travel to rural areas of Hisar.

Travelling from the city of Hisar to the lush green fields of Nalwa village was like a breath of fresh air. It was incredibly green, and the air was crisp, unlike anything I had ever encountered. I was surprised at the number of villagers using smartphones. They used the net to learn and for entertainment. I discarded my assumptions of rural India and wondered what was in store.

I was apprehensive about the scheduled meeting with Bala didi as we travelled the dusty lanes of Nalwa village. A welcoming smile and the aroma of tea brewed with milk fresh from her own cow were reassuring. She was at peace. Life, however, had not always been this calm, as she revealed during our conversation. Although

Society reacted strongly when she decided to leave her husband. For once, men and women were united in their disapproval.

she topped her school in the 10th board exams, her dreams were abruptly cut short by a societal norm that saw women destined for marriage rather than scholarship. Her father, a product of his times, dismissed her pleas for further education. Marriage soon followed, and with it, two daughters as well.

The widespread repressive mindset of the region deemed daughters a burden,

Photographs: Sriram Ashok

L to R: Sriram Ashok, Supriya - the local resource, Bala didi and Akshil my colleague

and Bala Didi bore the brunt of societal disapproval. Her husband, far from being a pillar of support, only added to her woes. He displayed a blatant disregard for her daughters' education, a stark contrast to Bala Didi's ambition for them. She refused to let history repeat itself. Staying in the marriage became a strategic move. Her desire to educate her daughters kept her going.

She had endured domestic violence and a husband who did not contribute to raising the family. The turning point came when Bala didi's father passed away. Bala didi had had enough. She chose to walk away. Society reacted strongly when she decided to leave her husband. For once, men and women were united in their disapproval. She was going against accepted practices. People did not want her to leave her marital home and return to her parental home. She had the unwavering support of her daughter, who stood by her at every step. Thankfully, she found comfort and strength in the embrace of her parents' home. A herd of buffalo, part of her father's legacy, became her starting point in her new life as a single mother. She sold milk and milk products, saved money. She started a store attached to her house selling kurtis, sarees and some local items. Her mother and daughters supported her and helped with both the store and the dairy.

Bala didi banked on her strength of being an extrovert and a people person. She got along with people. Things have changed in the ten years since then. The decision to part ways with her husband proved right. Her elder daughter was pursuing a BA degree away from home, while the younger had just excelled in her 10th boards with an impressive 92%. The house is now home to her mother, her daughter, and her brother's family, including three children.

The earnings from this boutique not only supported her daughters' education but also her entire family. She drew inspiration from the famous Phogat sisters, Haryana's wrestling champions, who had broken stereotypes, and used motivational speeches by renowned orators to encourage her daughters. Feisty Bala didi embraced Jindal Stainless's CSR program with Selfie with Daughter to transform her life, which soon spread across the village. She not only spoke openly about menstruation with

Bala Didi and Akshil with the Happiness Chart

her daughters but also persuaded her own mother to do the same. A period chart, proudly displayed near the entrance of her house, declared that menstruation was natural and nothing to be ashamed of. She believed that a woman's happiness mattered, and she worked tirelessly to ensure the well-being of her mother and daughters. Her positivity soon spilled over, touching neighbours and the entire village.

Unwittingly, she became a symbol for women's equality. Her small boutique, where she sells colourful salwar kameez, sarees, and chappals, was more than just a source of income. It was a symbol of her self-sufficiency and became a go-to place for women in the village. It has now become a hangout spot. Local women and girls gather there regularly at 3 pm with chai and biscuits to discuss fashion, clothes, makeup, and even developments not just locally but also in Delhi. The most dramatic change was that the entrance to their house prominently displayed the names of her daughters on a

Bala Didi in front of her house

NGO: JINDAL STAINLESS LIMITED, HISAR, HARYANA

Inception: 2004
Focus: Community development, Education, Environmental stewardship, Health, Skill development and livelihood
Impact: Benefitted overall 92,000+ individuals in rural and urban communities in FY 2024-25 • 14,000+ girls and women impacted through skill training, livelihood, and awareness • Reached 13,000+ people through community health initiatives • Impacted 35,000+ individuals through the Stainless Swachhta Abhiyaan (a solid waste management program focused at Environment Sustainability)

Photographs: Akshil Thakkar

L: Sonia with her menstrual chart and R: with the coveted Lado nameplate

The Lado nameplate showed the community that the women in that house had a say and that their opinion mattered.

board. It was in stark contrast to the times when their gender was a source of shame.

Over time, she became the brand ambassador of the NGO and influenced how local society now accepts and treats women. Her decision to leave an unhappy marriage coincided with the CSR program beginning its work in rural Hisar. She found support and people she could connect with, while the program found an example of success.

The Lado nameplates were a unique initiative introduced as part of the program. They wanted to include women's names on the nameplate as a gesture to acknowledge the woman's role in the discipline and running of the house. Traditionally, every house displayed a nameplate with the name of the present owner, his father and his grandfather. Women were conspicuous by their absence and not entitled to any share of the house. It was a strictly enforced. The region resented this blatant affront to patriarchy. A majority of people remain uncomfortable with it, even ten years after the practice began. Today, through the efforts under the program and witnessing examples like Bala didi, houses blessed only with sons now proudly display the name of their daughters-in-law.

Changing these traditional and ingrained habits was not an easy task. It needed acceptance and support from men who felt threatened and cornered by the changes in the emotional and social conditioning practised for generations. The elders were convinced that these women were a problem not only to their village but also to society, and that they would overturn all that was established. Yet, surprisingly, some enlightened men were completely comfortable with these changes. Some even actively supported them. They wanted their women to study, to become financially independent and participate in domestic decision-making.

The Lado nameplate was a psychological boost for women, showing the community that the women in that house had

a say and that their opinion mattered. It empowered them and encouraged them to voice their thoughts, while presenting the family as forward-thinking, educated, well off and receptive to change. A Lado nameplate respected and acknowledged women as equal to men.

Suitably impressed and inspired, we visited Satrod village. I was struck by meeting Sonia, a 16-year-old in the 10th grade, who is already making a difference. A strong advocate for girls' rights, she persuaded her grandmother and father not only to let her continue her studies and support her ambitions but also to put up Lado name plates with her and her sisters' names outside their home. This is a remarkable achievement in rural Haryana.

She didn't restrict herself to her own family; she ventured to educate people in her neighbourhood. The 16-year-old openly talked about menstruation, making sure that everyone knows that periods are normal for women. Taking up the "Gaali bandh chart", which aims to reduce swearing, Sonia figured out a way to make it work stronger, with the result that whenever anyone from her village swears, they bite their tongue, think about Sonia, and try not to repeat themselves.

I realised that changing perceptions and repressive mindsets is the only way to change society and make a difference for all of us.

Along the way, she has become a source of inspiration to her friends and peers, many of whom want to study and explore their potential.

She dreams of becoming a civil servant, not for the title but because she wants to help people. Her family and even the neighbours admire her for her maturity and her determination to make things better, and her parents' faces light up whenever they talk about her. She wants to make her community a better place and dreams of a career in social work. This kind of thinking from a 16-year-old girl in a small village is incredible.

My stereotypes collapsed when I met Nisha in Kanwari village. She was far removed from the usual image of a rural woman, striding through the lanes in Armani tracks and tees. A national-level kabaddi player with a master's degree in English, she has been working full-time with the NGO since 2024.

She used to accompany her friend, a member of the NGO, to meetings when an injury prevented her from playing. When she volunteered to teach Kabbadi under the program she found a mentor in Mr Sunil Jaglan, the Founder of Selfie with Daughter Foundation, and it changed her life. He introduced her to a simple yet powerful tool, the Happiness Chart. Seeing her chart filled mostly with "sad" markings, Nisha realised her introversion was holding her back. She began opening up to her family, sharing her dreams and anxieties. This act of communication transformed her life. She balanced Kabbadi with her Masters degree showing that women could pursue academic and athletic passions without being bound by social limits.

Once ridiculed for being an athlete and for playing kabaddi, a contact sport, she is now respected after competing in the National Games. Women look up to her. They see a reflection of their own potential in her. A reminder that dreams can take flight even in remote villages. She is the face of a new India, where tradition and progress walk together.

The intriguing Happiness Calendar is a tool devised for its members and participants, who mark how they feel at the end of each day. They record whether they were happy, sad or neutral. At the end of the month, the totals are compared, and the reasons for sadness are discussed, with the aim of reducing them.

I recalled a conversation with a beneficiary who said she would mark a bad day whenever she argued with her father. Since the calendar was displayed at the entrance door, visitors would often ask, *"arre, kal jagda kyu ho gaya"*(gosh, why did things go wrong yesterday) as soon as they stepped inside. This made her father uncomfortable, as he had to explain and justify the arguments repeatedly to guests. Over time, the arguments began to lessen.

This simple yet ingenious idea to increase happiness is a powerful tool that could benefit everyone, not just rural India. It reduced strife, encouraged positivity and promoted gender equality, empowering women and girls. I realised that changing perceptions and repressive mindsets is the only way to change society and make a difference for all of us. It is the only way forward.

By
Sriram Ashok

Photographs: Pavan Kumar Kulkarni

HOW TEACHING IN A VILLAGE CHURCH MADE ME RELOOK AT APPROACHES TO STRATEGY AND SUSTAINABILITY.

Photographs: Sakshi Nawani

Identifying places on the map with children at the Village Church

Facing bureaucracy, funding delays, and stretched teams revealed the resilience behind grassroots social impact and true citizenship.

My seven years of work experience conditioned me to establish organisational behaviour with clarity on strategies, stakeholder engagement, and sustainable business practices. I expected that during my field visit to the Prime Educational and Social Welfare Trust in Puducherry. I naively assumed that we would analyse case studies and devise strategies, just like corporations, and my engagement would be limited to consultations, discussions, and project planning.

I was in for a rude shock when I was placed directly in the heart of community engagement, working closely with underprivileged children and grassroots volunteers. The reality of working in an unstructured, dynamic environment where adaptability and empathy mattered brought back memories of my first job, a start-up which was almost collegial in nature, where everyone pitched in and collaborated. We all handled multiple roles, despite having designated ones.

I always assumed that NGOs worked smoothly under clear policies and strict regulatory oversight. I imagined them as corporations, systematic and predictable, guided by well defined strategies. I believed that government regulations ensured smooth operations, with steady funding from grants and donations. I thought their main challenge would be expanding their impact rather than sustaining their daily work.

The reality was very different. Prime Trust made an impact but faced many challenges. I learned that NGOs needed to follow a complex set of constantly updated legal rules. These include registering under the Societies Registration Act or the Indian Trusts Act, obtaining a Foreign Contribution Regulation Act (FCRA) licence to receive foreign donations, and keeping detailed financial records to meet compliance requirements. Government oversight, while necessary, often leads to excessive paperwork, slow approvals, and irregular funding. Financial sustainability was a constant concern.

The core team was driven by passion but stretched thin, managing multiple responsibilities. Besides handling administrative tasks, they were actively instructing children, organising health camps, and managing outreach programmes. Unlike corporate structures, where roles are clearly defined, NGO staff work under intense pressure and often juggle multiple functions. I saw

L: Children gathered at the Village Church; R: A girl trying her hand at Rangoli during Pongal

It was a stark contrast to the structured learning environments I had grown up with.

women working on accounts also raise funds. Teachers stayed back late until students returned from regular school to teach new topics and monitor their progress.

I was looking forward to tutoring underprivileged children, expecting it to be a simple but fulfilling task. Since my corporate background had trained me to approach problems with structured methodologies, I naively assumed that I could deliver this easily and be complimented for that. But the reality was otherwise. Language was an unexpected obstacle. The children couldn't understand any language other than Tamil. This made communication difficult. I found myself relying on non-verbal cues, gestures, and even drawing simple diagrams to bridge the gap. Over time, I picked up common Tamil words, and local volunteers helped me develop a method where I would teach in English while they would translate key points.

Many children struggled with basic addition and subtraction, and some were even unable to identify numbers. The varying ages of the students added another layer of complexity. A seven-year-old required a different approach compared to a fourteen-year-old, even if they were at the same educational level. For the younger children, storytelling and visual aids became powerful tools. I even explained addition by grouping pebbles together. The joy on the children's faces when they understood it was reward enough. Some older students had already developed anxiety due to repeated failures with percentages. I used examples around shop discounts and calculating the final price. The pride of achievement on a 15-year-old student's face as she successfully calculated a discount is embedded in my mind. It struck me how people could take undue advantage of her lack of knowledge and calculations and cheat her in everyday life. It was a stark contrast to the structured learning environments I had grown up with.

I remember teaching geography with foreign volunteers in a small church in the village of Villupuram. Teaching in a church was a unique experience. The children's enthusiasm was palpable despite the informal setting, limited resources and constant distractions. Their curiosity about the world encouraged me. The children came from different backgrounds and had varying levels of literacy and

understanding. This made it important to simplify the lessons so that no child was left behind.

We showed the children a world map and asked them to spell and locate countries. Their reactions and emotions ranged from pure excitement when they got it right to frustration and disappointment when they could not. The activity was more than just a geography lesson—it was an introduction to the vastness of the world and the endless possibilities it held for them. The experience taught me that teaching is not just about transferring knowledge; it is about inspiring curiosity, making learning enjoyable, and most importantly, meeting students at their level.

I realised that the purpose of education is to develop curiosity, patience, and resilience. I needed to understand that different students had different needs, and I needed to meet their mental level. I was rethinking my teaching methods to match the students' pace. I unconsciously learned stakeholder management. I had learnt to be flexible.

I discovered that social impact cannot always be quantified using corporate metrics where success is measured through performance indicators, return on investment, and tangible growth metrics. My interactions made me understand that real impact is often intangible. It is seen in the confidence of a girl learning to calculate or in the empowerment of a woman earning a livelihood through skill development programmes. These experiences challenged my preconceptions about impact measurement and showed me the value of long-term, sustainable change over immediate, measurable results.

My outlook on corporate citizenship had undergone a complete transformation. I no longer viewed CSR as just a corporate obligation but as a deeply personal responsibility. The DoCC experience taught me that real change can only happen when professionals step out of boardrooms and immerse themselves in communities,

Photograph: Pavan Kumar Kulkarni

Children learning through games from Sakshi

NGO: PRIME EDUCATIONAL AND SOCIAL TRUST, PUDUCHERRY

Inception: 2002
Focus: Education & Skill Development • Child Welfare and Protection • Poverty Alleviation • Capacity Building & Empowerment • Global Outreach & Partnerships • Disaster Support & Relief • Inclusive Social Development

Impact:
- Provided safe shelter and holistic care for vulnerable girls through Janani Home for Girls.
- Improved academic outcomes through remedial education programs, reducing dropout rates.
- Maintained strong international partnerships ensuring sustained financial and technical support.
- Engaged national and international volunteers and MSW interns.

Photograph: Sakshi Nawani

Pawan teaching children to identify countries by their flags

listening, learning, and working alongside those they seek to help. Change and leadership grow through emotional and personal connections, as well as long term commitment to social change.

One of the biggest hurdles NGOs face is inconsistent funding. Unlike corporations with stable revenue streams, NGOs depend on grants, donations, and sponsorships, which are often unpredictable. A delay in funds can disrupt programmes, affecting the beneficiaries who rely on them. I saw people working tirelessly to engage donors, develop fundraising campaigns, and maintain credibility to ensure sustained support. It was a never-ending treadmill of securing funds, allocating resources, and proving impact.

I had always assumed that the government unconditionally supported NGOs. But I soon realised that while policies exist on paper, implementation is often slow. Bureaucratic inefficiencies, corruption, and red tape hinder the effectiveness of many well-intentioned programmes. Even when government grants are available, accessing them takes effort and time. Many smaller NGOs lack the resources to do so effectively.

I have realised that it pays to simplify things and not depend on infrastructure and budgets.

One of the most eye opening moments was realising that NGOs must balance transparency with the need to secure funding. Donors, especially international ones, expect detailed reports on how funds are used. Preparing these reports is time consuming and difficult for NGOs with limited resources. The outcomes of educational programmes, women's empowerment initiatives, and healthcare projects are not always visible straight away. This makes it hard to provide the clear data that donors often expect.

These realisations completely altered my perspective on NGOs. I no longer saw them as entities simply executing charitable work, but as organisations that function in an incredibly complex ecosystem of legal, financial, and operational challenges. The resilience of Prime Trust's team left an impression on me. Despite the bureaucratic obstacles, funding uncertainties, and the immense workload, they continued to push forward, driven by a mission that was bigger than any individual challenge.

This internship taught me the importance of adaptability. Teaching in environments with minimal equipment, overcoming language barriers, and interacting with students with diverse learning levels improved my patience. I learned to step outside conventional formats, which has helped me in firefighting in my work today. It has made me think of the box and be more flexible in my approach towards situations at work. I have realised that it pays to simplify things and not depend on infrastructure and budgets. I was used to firefighting, but not at this frequency and intensity. The experience of working with children has taught me to stay calm, cheerful, use words carefully and control my temper, regardless of the situation. Handling children with a language barrier does change your outlook towards life. ●

By
Pavan Kumar Kulkarni

NOMADS KE KOI BHAGWAN NAHI HAIN

The cries of despair echoes across Rajasthan’s dusty Aravalli hills as generations of wanderers remain abandoned by society and ignored by progress.

Photographs: Mukti Dhara

Traditional cart of the Lohar community

Photograph: Harsh Kamlesh Shah and Aashutosh Tadse

Vipasna Centre which has rooms for visitors

Photograph: Mukti Dhara

Ruins of an ancient archeological site believed to have been built by the Pandavas during Mahabharat period

The comprehensive DoCC brief containing the NGO's name, location, the founder's details, the coordinator's information, and their contact particulars, along with a clear outline of what was expected, plus accompanying my father for his NGO activities albeit in an urban setting made me believe I was well prepared for the field visit, but my experiences completely overturned those assumptions.

We travelled 88 kms in 2 hours by road from Jaipur to a village named Viratnagar, nestled in the Aravalli hills between Alwar and Jaipur. Our temporary residence, located a short drive away, was situated on the outskirts of a smaller settlement outside Viratnagar. The 10-foot-high walls enclosing the farmhouse in a 1-acre plot in the desolate landscape reassured us. What was unsettling was the deafening silence and the fact that we were the only residents of the sprawling house with its many rooms. Our only companions were a Doberman and some peacocks strutting around. The closest streetlight was almost 500 metres away, and drinking water had to be pulled up from a depth of 1500 feet through a manual hand pump. We could taste minerals in the water, something we were unused to. The silence was absolute and befitting the place where Emperor Ashoka withdrew and meditated using *Vipassana* techniques and spread Buddhism after the bloody war of Kalinga. The farmhouse was also a retreat for people practising meditation and *Vipassana*.

I had built up a romantic picture of nomads and their lifestyle and wondered how Mukti Dhara got involved with them. I was stunned that a local advocate, Mr Ratan Katyayni, almost 40 years ago, noticed a crowd and found some people being dragged to a police station. He asked the reason, but was advised to maintain his distance because the people being hauled off to jail, members of the Nutt community, were known to be trouble-makers and criminals. People were scared of them and complained whenever they saw these nomads. This young lawyer researched and discovered that these marginalised people were nomads in the truest sense and did not have any permanent residence. History had been cruel to the people of the Aravali hills. A once

Photographs: Mukti Dhara

Children from Gadhiya lohar community playing

prosperous people were reduced to poverty by repeated invasions that started in the 10th century, forcing them to become migrants. The East India Company passed laws in 1872 classifying them as criminals, which were never repealed. This archaic law, allowing the police to jail anyone with no proof of permanent residency, was being implemented with a heavy hand. He was witnessing that law being blindly enforced.

This was how and why Mukti Dhara started.

Mr Ratan Katyayni began a movement to bring nomads, whose only fault was not having a permanent address, into the mainstream. He persuaded the government to grant them land to settle and become part

Photograph: Nimish Sharma

Aadhaar Card Drive, Thanagazi, Lohar Basti

The Gadhiya Lohar community

of the mainstream. His struggle was noticed, written about, and honoured, yet generations of habit made change painfully slow. The effort to house these long despised nomads provoked anger and resentment among society. He was threatened, beaten, and even stabbed. But he persisted.

His sons, Mr Anupam Katyayni and Anant Katyayni, who gave up a corporate life, now run Mukti Dhara after his demise. Anantji regaled us with local history and shared remarkable stories about the origins of Mukti Dhara and the people who supported it. He introduced us to its chairman, Hon. Justice Shri S. N. Bhargava (retd.), who is an active 90-year-old. He brings years of legal knowledge and experience to ensure the smooth running of the organisation. He had served as the Chief Justice of the Sikkim High Court and a Judge in the Rajasthan High Court, and he has also been involved in human rights and community service through Rotary International. He recounted stories of his blind father, who, besides being a freedom fighter, was the last signatory of the Constitution of India and excitedly showed us the first copy of the original Constitution of India. Interacting with a 90-year-old, unable to walk unaided, with barely 10% of our youthful energy but 10 times more grit and commitment, speaks volumes about his personality. This surreal experience is indelibly etched in my mind.

The weight of a founder leader's legacy is heavy; only their children know how difficult it is to keep the fire burning with the same intensity.

The weight of a founder leader's legacy is heavy; only their children know how difficult it is to keep the fire burning with the same intensity.

While these nomads are slowly absorbed into the mainstream, a lot of them still resist settling down. Unknown to many, these nomads have a fascinating history which is intrinsically tied to traditional occupations.

Kalbelias were snake catchers. The *Nutts* were roving acrobats and jugglers. *Banjaras*, which has come to mean wanderers, were salt traders or jaras travelling through vans or forests. *Bawarjas* were hunters, and *Lohars*, easily identified by their ivory jewellery and clothes in vivid colours, were ironsmiths who, according to legend, accompanied Maharana Pratap when he left Chittorgarh, vowing to return only after they

The Gadhiya Lohar reluctanlty settling down and forgoing their ancient nomadic lifestyle

reclaimed their lands from the Mughals. Four hundred fifty years later, they are still homeless. Even today, they settle temporarily in clusters of 2-5 houses on the outskirts of a village or by the roadside. They pick up their belongings and leave as soon as the local administration visits them. They move from one place to another and show no intention of settling down.

Our project was to document them and enrol them for the now indispensable and mandatory Aadhaar card. The problem arises because one cannot get an Aadhaar card without a birth certificate. Since most births happen at home or during transit, they do not have birth certificates, which makes them ineligible for Aadhaar cards, which are now a basic proof of identity and for availing of their benefits.

I remember meeting a lady named Rama Devi, 48 years old, who had taken temporary residence at Thanagazi. She was a Gadiya Lohar, a community of ironsmiths rendered unemployable because of industrialisation and changes in

Photographs: Mukti Dhara

L: A Gadhiya Lohar still practicing the traditional occupation of ironsmith; R: Aadhaar Card Drive, Thanagazi, Lohar Basti

The women of the Ghadiya Lohar community turn out in huge numbers at the Aadhaar Card Drive, Thanagazi, Lohar Basti

NGO: MUKTI DHARA SANSTHAN, VIRATNAGAR, RAJASTHAN

Inception: 1992–93
Focus: Rehabilitation of nomadic, semi-nomadic, and denotified tribes
- Women empowerment and livelihood training
- Constitutional awareness and human rights protection
- Sustainability practices

Impact: Advocated for constitutional inclusion of 24+ nomadic tribes in reserved categories
- Transitioned 70,000+ families to from nomadic to mainstream life
- Distributed solar lights to 1,000+ families near Sariska forest.
- Conducted Samvidhan Samaj Yatra for senior police officials and civil servants across Rajasthan
- Supported 200 nomadic families with educational kits under Project Ram Rajya

Photographs: Mukti Dhara

traditional agricultural practices. They lived in ingeniously designed carts which included sleeping quarters, a kitchen, lockers, and grain storage as they moved between villages and towns. This constant travel and lack of a permanent address led to social rejection and poverty. Over time, depending on the whims and fancies of the landed gentry, they occasionally worked as field hands or guards, but this was insufficient to qualify them as a self-sufficient society. These rootless people had an incredible diet. They subsisted on the widely available bajra, which was ground into flour and made into a roti. I was horrified when I saw Ramadevi make a solution of hot water and salt and dip her roti in it for lunch. It was a meal like any other. Her group was essentially an extended family of nineteen people and a couple of carts, and also included her three sons. These carts held all their worldly possessions. They pulled the carts themselves as they roamed through the region. A fortunate few used oxen to pull the carts. It was perpetual displacement.

There was no sign of her husband. Her eldest son, 21, sorted trash, sold what he could salvage and spent his earnings on beedis. The younger ones mimicked their elder brother. It was abject poverty. They could have availed themselves of the benefits of the Aadhaar card and gotten free education, but the kids would wilfully skip school and waste time.

Photographs: Harsh Kamlesh Shah and Aashutosh Tadse

L: The aadhaar card centre at Thanagazi; R: Members of the Lohar community at Viratnagar

Photographs Mukti Dhara

L: Members of the Lohar community at Viratnagar; R: Registering for the Aadhaar card at Thanagazi

She wanted to get identity cards for herself but was unable to manage the process. The Aadhaar card was vital because it led to the Janadhaar card, issued by the Government of Rajasthan. This card was the key to all state-sponsored schemes, including cash benefits, hospitalisation, medicines, etc. The unusual thing about the Janadhaar card is that it is allotted to women, presumably because they are the ones who anchor communities together. Unfortunately, like all the nomads, she did not have a permanent address and therefore could not get the cards.

Most members of these nomadic communities lack an Aadhaar card, and those who do have incorrect dates due to unregistered births and the combination of ignorance and illiteracy. Most cards issued to nomads have birthdates based on the discretion of the enroller, with dates, months and years born out of guesswork.

We participated in an Aadhaar registration drive focusing on children under five. Anatji recalled an earlier drive when a 14 year old volunteer was stunned to

Photographs: Harsh Kamlesh Shah and Aashutosh Tadse

Members of the Lohar community at Viratnagar

I wonder when the last time anyone who talks about inclusivity and equality actually made a donation or contributed towards the efforts being made to do that.

meet another 14 year old, already the mother of a two year old son. The way these camps were planned and scheduled was unusual. The Mukti Dhara team sought out nomads with smartphones, set up WhatsApp groups, and informed them of enrolment drives through voice notes in Hindi, Marwari and other local dialects, hoping for the best. Registration was slow and irregular because these nomads were always on the move and resistant to change. The promise of free rations, employment, access to health services, and a better future does not entice them. The nomads are so close-knit that Aadhaar card holders share their rations with the whole community. The non-Aadhaar members happily live off this. This mystifying attitude continues to baffle me. And since money was almost non-existent, Mukti Dhara covered the entire cost right up to the delivery of the card.

These drives took place in small shops and kiosks across dusty villages and towns, where the historic hostility between nomads and settled residents often led to beatings, fights, and displacement. The elders' indifferent, almost cavalier attitude baffled me. They had surrendered hope, showing no interest in life or in the future of their children and grandchildren. They seemed merely to be passing time, waiting for the end, eating little and surviving almost entirely on beedis. Violence was common. I have even heard of children striking their parents when forced into something they resisted. It is a self perpetuating and vicious cycle. They are branded vagabonds and treated as human refuse for their behaviour that only deepens the perception already held.

As a Marwari with roots in Rajasthan, I just couldn't handle what I saw. I was overwhelmed by hopelessness at what I experienced. Resignation and tiredness were written on their faces. They don't care anymore. Even society does not care. Can society really collect money, gather these children together, school them, house them, feed them and ease them into the regular workforce? Resources are not enough.

When I hear people say they want to help the poor and the needy, I wonder if they really want to do that or if they are just saying what is expected. Thoughts and speech without action are platitudes and pontification.

I wonder when the last time anyone who talks about inclusivity and equality actually made a donation or contributed towards the efforts being made to do that. *Nomads ke koi bhagwan nahi hain.* (Even the gods themselves seem to have to forsaken the nomads) •

By
Harsh Kamlesh Shah












LIVING WITH THE GUARDIANS OF THE FORESTS

How primitive tribal groups slowly move towards financial stability

Photographs:Centre for Tribals and Rural Development Trust

As a digital native born and raised in Mumbai, I was initially unsettled by my predicament. I found myself in Ulluvad village in the Nilgiris, 40 kilometres from Ooty, with patchy reception and limited connectivity. The nearest railway station was also 40 kilometres away, and Coimbatore airport was nearly 100 kilometres distant. Although the distance was not great, it felt like travelling back a century in time. I was interning with CTRD, an NGO working not only to integrate neglected tribal communities into the mainstream and make them financially self sufficient, but also to preserve their heritage and culture.

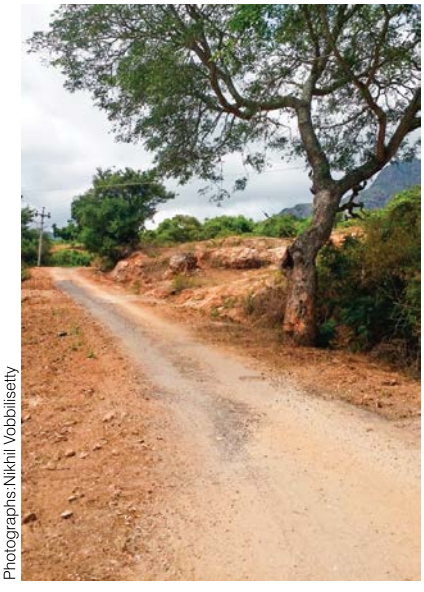
The Nilgiris is home to six primitive tribal groups, each small in population and distinguished by its own language, religion, art and way of life. Commonly referred to as Adivasis, these groups share a deep connection with nature and live in close harmony with their environment. Their lifestyle is unhurried and sustainable, something we describe today as "slow living", a practice they have embraced for generations.

The Panian, Kurumban, and Kattunayakan communities with whom I was working are primarily forest dwellers. They are separated by language but share similar cultural practices, centred on animism and respect for their natural surroundings and resources. Daily life follows the rhythm of work, the seasons and community gatherings. Houses are simple and practical, often built with local materials. The prohibition of hunting has altered their way of life and diet. Food is modest and usually includes millets, rice, tubers and forest greens when available. Children learn by watching and doing, such as how to climb safely, identify edible plants, prepare honey for sale, plant and harvest, and how to respect elders and sacred places. Music and dance are integral to life, celebration, mourning and teaching. Oral tradition preserves history, with stories of why certain hills are sacred, why particular trees should not be

Oral tradition preserves history, with stories of why certain hills are sacred, why particular trees should not be cut, and how ancestors endured difficult times.

Photograph:Geetika Jayaram

A light moment with the children



Photographs:Nikhil Vobbilisetty

The roads leading to the tribal settlements and villages in the Nilgiris

Photograph:Centre for Tribals and Rural Development Trust

The community women

cut, and how ancestors endured difficult times.

Although living in the 21st century, they continue their centuries-old tradition of living in clusters. Families remain close to one another, sharing space and responsibilities, and harmony is maintained through mutual support. Ulluvad, a village we visited, was a cluster of ten families living side by side.

A tribal house in the village

When one family lost a woman, the others immediately stepped in, caring for the children and preparing meals while the father worked in the fields. The sense of solidarity was striking. What stood out most was the quiet strength of this community spirit, expressed not in words but in everyday acts of kindness. In the midst of poverty and marginalisation, their way of living together revealed a resilience and generosity that felt both humbling and noble.

CTRD was nudging these marginalised tribals into the 21st century through solar power. Life here was very different from what I was used to. We had to manage everything ourselves, without the kind of support we were accustomed to in urban India. City life is fast and carefully planned, with tasks arranged one after another. Corporate routines demand calendars blocked from 9 a.m. to 7 p.m., with even breaks scheduled to maximise time. We are used to instant gratification and ten minute home deliveries. Here, it is the opposite.

Their concerns are different. They worry about leopards snatching away their livestock, dogs and children. Wild elephants often trample through their fields and kitchen gardens. While we complain about ACs not working, they rely on damaged solar energy panels for power, which is obviously erratic. They make do with whatever they have.

Since they are primarily forest dwellers, slowly being eased into the mainstream, they are on the periphery of society. Although they do not participate in the economic activities we take for granted, these communities are extremely self-sufficient. Generations of foraging, gathering, farming and living on the periphery of society have made them resilient. The biggest difference is that they live in harmony with nature and unconsciously practise sustainability without realising it. They are better citizens while

Photograph: Nikhil Vobbilisetty

With Ammini

we attempt to become better. They follow the cycle of the sun – wake up with the sun and go to sleep with the sun. Somebody my age would definitely be married and be a parent if they were to follow tribal rituals and traditions.

I realised I was privileged.

Many of these tribals were allotted land by the government, but because they regard land as communal property and a resource, they do not understand its monetary value or calculate the area allotted to them. More often than not, scheming and conniving people, taking advantage of their ignorance and lack of education, fleece them of their land for a pittance and employ them on the same land for a pittance. I heard stories of how some tribals were plied with food and liquor and, when numb or drunk, were forced to sign away, by way of thumb impressions, the government-allotted land for a day's worth of liquor and some food, forcing them to work for minimal wages, almost like bonded labour, though technically banned.

The Centre for Tribal and Rural Development (CTRD) Trust is a voluntary organisation working towards improving the livelihood, welfare and development of marginalised and disadvantaged tribal and rural communities in the Nilgiri and Coimbatore districts. We are on a field trip, and I was creating memories with every experience.

I remember the meals they shared on multiple occasions. It was different from what we were used to. A local variation of the Kerala red rice, very big, fat, and with a coarse texture, was the staple. A variant of sambar and rasam using foraged and local

NGO: CENTRE FOR TRIBALS AND RURAL DEVELOPMENT TRUST, EALAMANNA, THE NILGIRIS, TAMIL NADU

Inception: 1995
Focus: Health, Education, Livelihood, Women Empowerment, Housing, Sanitation and Biodiversity Conservation,
Impact: Installed 52 biogas units and 190 solar street lights • Formed and strengthened 1,180 SHGs. Conducted 3,000 health camps and 4,000 eye camps • Constructed 200 houses and renovated 300+ homes. • Built 600 toilets and established 48 evening schools for tribal children • Supported 1,400 kitchen gardens and distributed 100 beehives

Photographs: Centre for Tribals and Rural Development Trust

L: Banana Plantation; R: Banana fibre machine

I did not see a single packaged good in a ten-kilometre radius of where we were living.

vegetables and greens was very common. I remember a curry made with fish bones and fish offal. I couldn't handle the food, even when I assisted them in cooking a couple of times.

I recall Ammini, a Kattunayakan from Pattakolly village. She lived with her son and daughter. Two daughters had moved on after getting married. She had chickens and rabbits, which were rapidly multiplying, as they tend to. I assumed these were for consumption until she gently explained that they were pets and members of her family. Ammini's gentle words, "How can we eat the ones that we have raised? They are our pets.", demonstrated how habits had changed. The Kattunayakan tribe, former forest dwellers and hunters, had become protectors.

Our routines were so different from what we were used to that I cannot even begin to describe them. We stepped into their routines and also started our day with the sun. We did everything unassisted, with no help from anyone. I did not see a single packaged good in a ten-kilometre radius of where we were living. A small village store stocked biscuits or noodles a couple of kilometres away. It was remote.

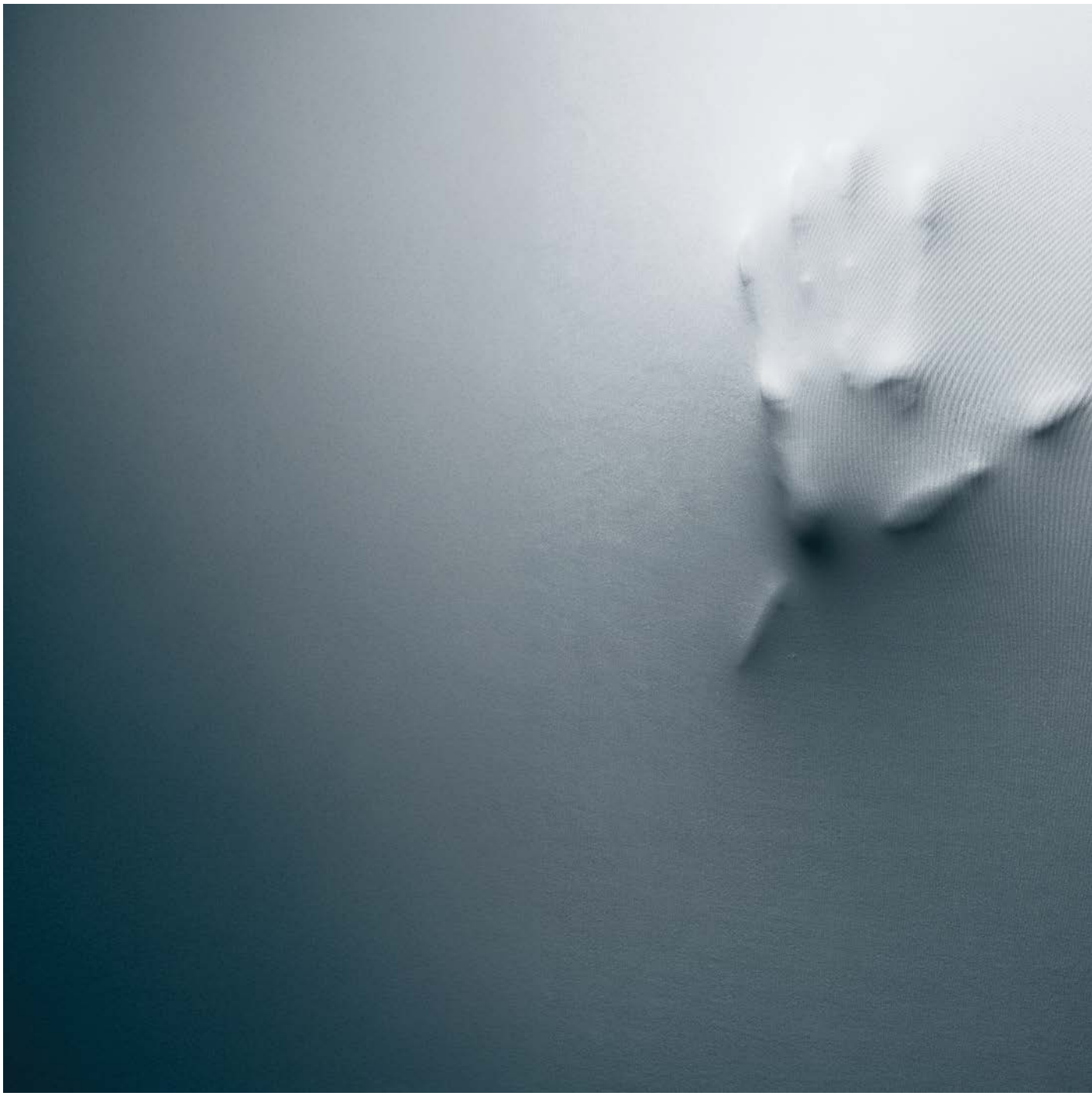
CTRD sought an inexpensive and sustainable project that would help these tribal communities earn a livelihood. Since plantains were abundant, we chose to focus on them and explored ways of monetising their use. The idea had immense potential: it was low-cost, sustainable, and required minimal investment, as plantains were already part of everyday life. It could be integrated seamlessly into their sustainable lifestyle and ensure that even the waste from banana plantations is reduced. Nothing was wasted. Absolutely nothing.

Banana fibre offers a low investment and eco friendly opportunity. A small scale unit can be established with an investment of around ₹ 5–10 lakh, covering machinery, workspace and initial labour. The cost of raw material is minimal, as banana stems are typically discarded as agricultural waste.

The process begins with the collection of stems after harvest. These are peeled and processed to extract long, strong fibres through simple mechanical steps of extraction, cleaning, drying and spinning into yarn. This fibre can be woven or blended with other natural fibres to produce consumer goods such as sarees, mats, handbags, eco friendly clothing, handmade paper and home furnishings, including carpets and curtains. Industrial applications include ropes, geotextiles, reinforcement in composites and biodegradable packaging. This low investment, profitable and sustainable industry could transform existing farm waste into valuable products, with the potential to generate monthly profits of ₹ 60,000–100,000.

Since Geetika was a mechanical engineer and I was a civil engineer, we designed a banana fibre unit. We marked out the space and gathered vendor details along with cost estimates. We also took the first step in training these tribal communities living in harmony with nature, nudging them towards financial stability, assimilation and urbanisation. We left the quiet of the Nilgiri forests and returned to the chaos and the cacophony of the urban jungle. •

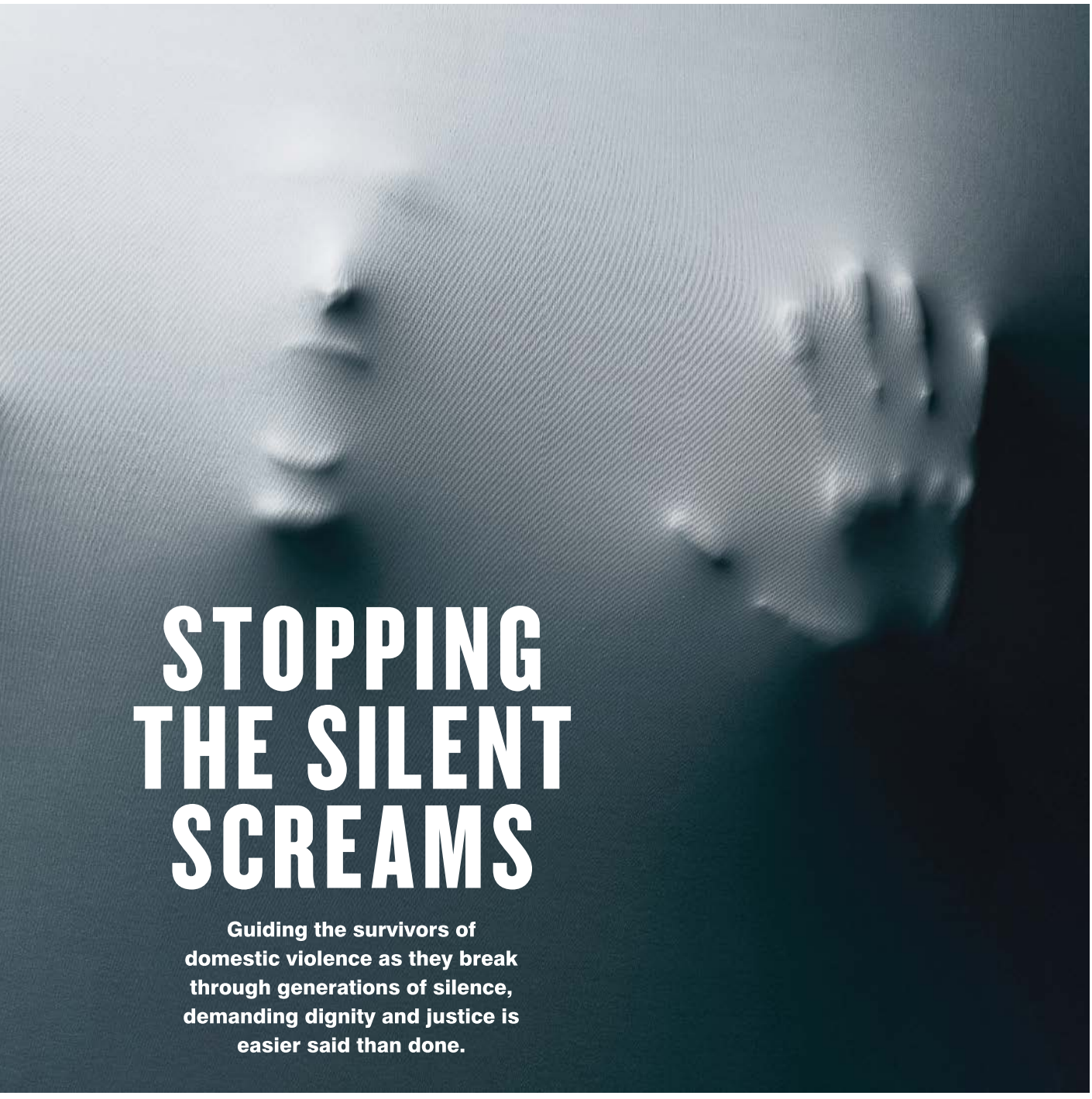
By
Geetika Jayaram and Nikhil Vobbilisetty



Photograph: BorisN66, Shutterstock

Thural village, Kangra District, Himachal Pradesh, outside, was a pleasant surprise. It was well-connected with frequent buses throughout the day. Powerful solar streetlamps cut through the darkness outside, which came early in the hills. But they couldn't cut through the darkness of ingrained biases and generations of stereotyping and upbringing. As the sunrise chased away the darkness of the night, it also illuminated the darkness of violence and abuse that was rampant in the beautiful hills.

Well-dressed, educated and financially independent, Meena was fed up with domestic abuse by her husband. Her mother encouraged her to speak up, for this was her second marriage. Tragically, it mirrored her first



STOPPING THE SILENT SCREAMS

Guiding the survivors of domestic violence as they break through generations of silence, demanding dignity and justice is easier said than done.

marriage, telling us how deeply rooted abuse was. Physical and mental torture wasn't an isolated incident. Besides being verbally abused and taunted for being "unclean" and "not getting enough in dowry", she was also physically and sexually abused. She, a nurse at the nearby Palampur hospital, broke down in tears as she shared her experiences. He claimed that he did not drink but frequently had alcoholic breath, especially when he was violent. He repeatedly grovelled at her feet after every violent episode, vowing repentance, only to repeat himself regularly. Her mother's support was a surprise, as she added that he consumed other substances too. The duo had made a decision and wanted an end to this regular abuse. All Meena wanted was a

L: The beautiful hills hide a sordid story, R: A selfie with Tina.

life of peace and dignity without having to watch her back. Her home was anything but a home. Their strength and decision were commendable considering that society would shame them and blame the woman, especially because she was already divorced once. This show of solidarity between parents and daughters was reassuring and encouraging. The facts were verified, and even incidents of stalking and verbal abuse at her workplace led to the sage advice of carrying something to protect herself for self-defence and divorce papers being filed.

It was during this cross-checking that we met with Tina at Palampur Hospital lawns. Her bubbly, effervescent nature immediately captivated us. The silent, fervent prayers for Meena's well-being turned to a hurrah when we met Tina, a 32-year-old widow and domestic violence survivor. Married at the tender age of 18 to a man who was 11 years older, she entered a house that turned into a prison. She became a mother and endured physical and verbal abuse from her husband and even sexual harassment from her father-in-law. The sudden demise of her husband triggered the same abuse towards her children. Searching for escape, Tina found support and help at the (FCWPs) Family and Child Welfare Project Society's project - PARWAJ. They helped her navigate the legal system, secure property rights for her children and reclaim her life.

She started working at a salon for two years and then at an ayurvedic fruit juice company as an assistant sales manager, earning well and taking care of not just her children but also of her parents. Her declaration, *"Jab aurat thaan leti hai ki usse kya karna hai, tab usse koi rok nai sakta"*, (when a woman makes up her mind, no force on earth can stop her)encourages domestic violence victims to speak up and fight adverse situations. She acts as a beacon of hope for the victims of domestic violence as she pays back in hope and encouragement to the deprived and oppressed women. Her cheerful and positive outlook despite her horrifying experience was simply inspiring.

The travels in the countryside revealed a deep-rooted misogynist and a chauvinist attitude. Women were not just taking care of the house but also worked hard and long hours in the fields. Very few

The police chowki at Dheera

Photographs: Disha Majitha and Neha Mishra

The irony of a travel agency named friends on Thural Village

men contributed to their families. This gender bias was pervasive. We experienced a version of this when we met members of the gram panchayat. While they did not encourage us, they also did not obstruct us. The headman's observation was that the intolerant behaviour and ganging up of women against men had led to the spike in divorce cases. This attitude was disturbing because it showed how deeply rooted gender bias and social conditioning were.

Disheartened, we went to the local police station to request that they not push a live case up the chain because FCWPS was actively investigating it. Pushing it up would lead to a delay in justice. They were warm and welcoming and put us at ease by offering us tea. A uniformed officer asked a woman colleague of the same rank to make us tea, and we looked at each other discreetly as gender bias innocently reared its ugly head in the police station.

The deeply rooted gender bias and social conditioning were disturbing.

With the police officers after registering the complaint

The typecasting and biases on gender stereotyping were innocently and proudly displayed during an anganwadi visit. It was a sweet moment when we saw children praying and playing. Boys, as they are wont to, were boisterously running around, and girls were dignifiedly going around in circles, singing *Chakki rani, chakki rani, Mein bhi atta pisungi, Gol Gol rotiya banaungi, Bhaiya ko khilaungi, Bhaiya school jaega, Babu banker aeyega.* (Queen of the

Photographs: PARWAJ

Selfie of tina with her sons.

mils, queen of the mills, I will also grind some wheat into flour, I will make round and fluffy rotis, I will feed my brother who will go to school and become an officer.).

We met with the Anganwadi staff to discuss the importance of gender-neutral education and suggested revising the curriculum to promote activities and language that wouldn't limit a child's interests or aspirations based on gender. The CDPO (Child Development Project Officer) promptly agreed to eliminate gender bias. The Aanganwadi surprised us further when we witnessed an officer addressing a group of 50 workers, where he encouraged financial independence and said that it could only start at home, citing the example of his working wife. This, he said, was imperative to growth and mental and fiscal well-being.

Our joy that equality was being encouraged in some quarters came crashing down when we met Dimple. She was mentally and physically scarred in her twelve years of marriage and had many fresh bruises. What churned our stomachs were video recordings

NGO: FAMILY AND CHILD WELFARE PROJECT SOCIETY, DHARMASHALA, HIMACHAL PRADESH

Inception: 1982
Focus: Active against the violence and violation of women and girls. Work with the marginalised to build gender conscious women leaders PARWAJ is implemented at the grassroots level in collaboration with the women's collectives, girls, Gram Panchayats, ICDS functionaries and protection officers.
Impact: Increased gender and rights awareness among nearly 500 women and girls. • Improved gender sensitivity among anganwari workers, police and youth in a patriarchal culture • Increased clarity on the legal provisions of Protection of women from domestic violence • Broken notion of patriarchy and masculinity among young boys and male officials and a sense of gender responsive behaviour is cultivated • Addressed 10 cases of gender based violence and violation, relief provided to 7 survivors of domestic violence.

The widespread, ingrained biases in these hills was baffling and made me wonder about what the future hold for these women.

of her mother-in-law pulling and dragging her as she sobbed while her screaming children with tears running down piteously asked her why she had married their father. While it was a cut-and-dry case, it still makes me wonder about what the future holds for Dimple and her children.

We realised that abuse, whether mental or physical, is not always directed towards women when we met Mintu and his family. They had been facing emotional abuse from Anjaani and her family. They had been married for three years after being in a relationship for seven. Mintu and his family had encouraged her to pursue her education. Anjaani completed her M.Com and a 6-month computer course from their marital home. Mintu mentioned that Anjaani did not acknowledge or reciprocate the welcome and love but withdrew and became distant. The emotional strain was aggravated after Anjaani's mother publicly abused and assaulted Mintu's mother, the village Mahila Pradhan, an act that not only upset the family but also dishonoured and publicly humiliated them.

Anjaani, in a fit of anger, took all of Mintu's original documents and jewellery, informed a third person that she would not return and left, which led to Mintu and his family approaching FCWPS, who reached out to Anjaani and her family. Their version was the opposite. They claimed that Anjaani was facing prolonged mental and physical harassment from Mintu's family, along with demands of dowry, which precipitated the decision to leave her marital home and move to Chandigarh. She was recovering from her traumatic marriage after she felt normal but ignored all phone calls and finally blocked all FCWPS and Mintus family members' numbers. She ghosted her in-laws and the NGO, disappearing without a trace, leaving no option but to file for a divorce.

This aspect of equality was as baffling as the widespread, ingrained biases in these hills. What was reassuring was that a large number of women spoke English, spoke up and had parental support. The hope that the changes in the Aanganwadi could move upstream to help reduce gender bias at an early age showed glimpses of a path filled with strength, hope, and most importantly, self-respect that women can claim as their own.

By
Disha Majitha and Neha Mishra

Photographs: Disha Majitha and Neha Mishra

At the Judicial Complex, Dharmshala

THE MASALA QUEEN OF MA

Photograph: Tanisha Sukhija and Geetanjali Goyal

ARKAL

How a loan of just 15,000 can become the the key to self actualisation, empowerment and open the gates to a tranformed life.

The stillness and calm felt unsettling. I was too accustomed to the urban noise of Delhi, where I was born, and Mumbai, where I was studying. I was in the village of Markal, 40 kilometres from Pune, for my rural internship, and it was my first real glimpse of rural India. Life seemed to have

been paused. There was no urgent honking. The asphalt was cracked, uneven and even missing in stretches with barely any vehicles. Small, worn houses with a single room, a kitchen tucked into a corner, and a washroom outside peppered the landscape. Though the houses stood were seperated by distance, everyone seemed to know what was happening in each other's lives. Strangely, televisions were conspicuously absent, but smartphones were present, though not widespread. The warmth of the people was unlike anything I had ever known.

I was basking in the unexpected warmth of the people of Pune, my temporary base. I had unwittingly landed at the wrong hostel, not knowing there were four hostels of the same name at 11:30 pm. An old lady at the reception realised my panic, calmed me with her behaviour, offered me a meal and accompanied me to the right destination. This gesture touched my heart and formed a favourable impression of Pune. The residual warm glow made it easier to travel by State Transport buses for the field visit of my rural internship with SOS, despite the 40 degrees heat that made the villagers of Markal water their roofs and stairs in an effort to make their houses cooler in the absence of fans, premises cold due to a lack of AC or in some cases, even fans. The village, a mix of pucca and kucha houses, covered a large area with houses far from each other. Topis for the men and the traditional navvari for the women proclaimed their Maharashtrian ethnicity.

We reached Ms. Trishali Sutra's house after a long walk in the scorching heat. She lived in poor conditions in a rundown part of the village. A rocky, uneven dirt track and a flimsy plank serving as a bridge over a ditch was the only way to her home, which also doubled as

Top: The Angadwadi of Markal Village;
Bottom: Scenes from the Markal village.

Her only income when she was lucky was ₹50 a day from grinding masala by hand. Education for her three daughters was a distant dream.

Photographs: Tanisha Sukhija and Geetanjali Goyal

her workplace. It was a kachcha house, with no doors, only a hole in the wall for entry and exit. She was a housewife who, like Sita in the Ramayana, never stepped beyond the "Lakshman Rekha" of her home. The family counted every penny. Her only income when she was lucky was ₹ 50 a day from grinding masala by hand. Education for her three daughters was a distant dream until she was introduced to the SOS SHG family cluster. She took a loan of ₹ 15,000 from SOS to buy a spice grinding machine. Her earnings rose to ₹ 300–500 per day. She became an entrepreneur. Her confidence grew. She began making decisions at home. With a little training from SOS, she moved from being unaware of basic calculation, addition, and subtraction to managing accounts. She grew into the role of vice president of the SHG. She now supervises a corpus of 18 lakh rupees, lends it to members at a nominal 1–2% interest, and oversees its accounting and bookkeeping. She regularly visits banks, manages her own account, and uses facilities such as fixed deposits, which she once did not even know existed.

The support provided by SOS has also greatly improved the well-being of Trishali's family. Her children received thorough health check-ups and access to nutritious diets, ensuring their holistic growth and development. The educational assistance offered by SOS has been equally important in shaping the aspirations of her children. Her daughter, making the most of these opportunities, now dreams of becoming a doctor, driven by the wish to make a positive impact in her community.

For me, as an urban person, this was eye-opening. I had heard about village life but had never experienced it. My ideas of rural living came from television or second-hand accounts. I expected a tough, harsh lifestyle, yet reality was far worse and unsettling. The value

L: Trushali Sutra's house; R: Trushali Sutra's masala mill

Photograph:Tanisha Sukhija and Geetanjali Goyal

Swati in her working area, sewing bags

of ₹ 10 changed overnight when I realised how much it meant to the villagers. I saw how they lived, the deprivations they had accepted, and how these had become a normal part of life.

Against this backdrop, Swati's experience stood out. She was slightly better off than Trishali. Although her main role was to care for the house and children, she also worked with her husband as a cobbler in their small shop on the edge of the village. Life was a struggle, with income barely ₹ 100 a day. Their earnings rose modestly by ₹ 50–100 per day when Swati began sewing and selling plastic shopping bags from the same shop.

I saw how they lived, the deprivations they had accepted, and how these had become a normal part of life.

Life continued in this way until her children reached school-going age. She needed to buy school bags for them and soon realised there was a demand for such bags. With children returning to school after COVID, attendance was rising, yet local shops did not stock good-quality school bags. She saw an opportunity. Skilled in sewing, she wanted to make school bags. Having grown used to making plastic bags, school bags seemed a natural step forward. The challenge was that the raw material was not only different but also costly.

SOS saw merit in her idea and her determination. They

NGO: SOS CHILDREN'S VILLAGES OF INDIA, NEW DELHI

Inception: 1964
Focus: Education, Health & Nutrition, Youth Skilling, Emergency Relief, Climate Change, Livelihood, Women Empowerment.
Impact: Caring for 5,500+ children in 32 Children's Villages • Reached 73,000+ program participants (2024–25) • Recognized with multiple national awards and CRISIL accreditation. • Signed MoUs with multiple State Governments for child welfare initiatives.

not only gave her a loan, which she used to buy raw materials, but also trained her free of cost because sewing school bags required different materials and skills. Soon, she was in business. She began selling school bags for ₹ 500–600 each, a huge leap from the recycled plastic bags she once sold for ₹ 50.

Before long, she was supplying almost the entire village. While she has thought about expansion, she is aware of her limitations. She needs to train others and secure funds to produce more bags. The impact of the school bag venture is also quite unusual.

Her husband worked for daily wages at an agricultural factory just outside the village. As demand for the bags grew, he began staying back to help his wife. Within a short time, he was spending more hours in the bag business and going to the factory only two or three days a week to ensure a steady income and a safety net.

This field trip, besides showing me how the other half lived, also helped me shape my long-term career goals.

Things changed for Swati. Although uneducated and traditional, she was now working alongside her husband and was more than an equal. Her voice carried weight, even though the final decisions were still made by him. Many of the restrictions she had once lived with faded away. She now dreams of growing and scaling her business with the support of her SHG community.

Photograph: Tanisha Sukhija and Geetanjali Goyal

The outskirts and the run down area of Markal Village

This field trip, besides showing me how the other half lived, also helped me shape my long-term career goals. I was witnessing change take place. Progress was slow but visible. I was struck by the number of women who took the initiative not only to start but also to run their own businesses after receiving encouragement and support from SOS.

The courage of these women, who stood up for themselves and learned everything from handling accounts to managing the paperwork for bank loans, was awe-inspiring. Although semi-formal and often lacking infrastructure, women were making meaningful contributions to the economy and their household incomes. I don't remember going even to one house where the women did not have some part to play in the household income. I always had an interest in social activity, and this experience would be of immense help to me and my long-term goals, which include public policy. •

By
Tanisha Sukhija and Geetanjali Goyal

FACING MY MOTHER'S WORST FEARS AND HER IDEALS IN A SLUM AWAY FROM HOME.

Lessons from childhood stories echo as I explore the harsh realities and nurture fragile hopes among migrant children.

The early sunrise warmed me despite the morning chill as I walked to Aasraa, an NGO in Dehradun. It felt like a start-up and functioned more like a corporation, in my opinion. Perhaps it reflected the disciplined and organised life of its founder, who relocated from the UK after working there for more than thirty years. The simplicity of the assigned tasks put a spring in my step as I stepped back to the city, only to be assaulted by the din of a cosmopolitan crowd.

Perhaps schools priming candidates for the Indian Military Academy (IMA) entrance exams or the fact that it is the gateway to the Char Dham Yatra made Dehradun crowded and busy. The economy was upbeat as the faithful gathered for their pilgrimage and the aspirants for the IMA. The crowd also included a huge community of migrant workers, the reason for Aasraa's existence.

Photograph: AASRAA

I accompanied the Aasraa outreach team to a construction site to see how they operate. The site was filled with migrant daily wage workers from Bihar living in unimaginable filth and squalor. Children were crawling, playing, and even eating in that filth. This scene was repeated at all the construction sites I accompanied them to. The bond between the team and the residents was evident when the team enquired about the children's absence from school. Strict with the parents for the children's absence, they were equally considerate of the reasons for dirty uniforms and repeatedly told the parents why it was imperative for children to be regular at school.

Bright yellow buses with children milling around and within them all clamouring for attention, punctuated the narrow lanes and construction sites. These buses fitted with TV screens functioned as classrooms in locations where parents could not send their children to school. Aasraa sent the school to them. They were so popular that students used them in batches. I was amused at nursery rhymes being played and children repeating them with great fervour.

Photographs:Rohit Roy and Allavarapu Sai Sowmitra Rayudu

L: Overview of Bihari Basti; Kiran, the gulbag addicts mothers house; Below: Kiran the mother of the gulbag addict

The innocent commitment of the children as they recited their prayers, and the enthusiasm they poured into learning, made me smile as I accompanied the team to a nearby slum, Bihari Basti.

The smile was wiped off when I met and spoke with the mother of the 12-15-year-old daughter, Rekha. I realised that the rebellion inherent in teens made them ignore parental advice and fall prey to negative influences across all strata. Only the incidents and context are different. Young girls in the slums looked up in awe at girls who defied convention and eloped at early ages to lead what they considered a free and unfettered life. Eloping was considered taboo amongst the poor, barely educated migrants, who stayed connected to their villages and returned at regular intervals for festivals and celebrations. Besides the social stigma of raising rebellious children, the families discretely confided that were also penalised a sum of ₹ 5 lakhs or ostracised. This was a death sentence for families earning just ₹ 15,000 per month and whose safety net was their community. Rekha was happy that her daughter had agreed to an arranged marriage and not eloped.

I realised I needed to alter my thinking. I had to take into account emotions and intangibles such as a sense of belonging and community, the repercussions of being ostracised, alongside the conventional socio-economic and educational factors I had long taken for granted in my planning and analysis. Reeling from the information that an arranged marriage for a 14-year-old girl was considered a cause for celebration, I met Kiran, another mother from the same basti. Her story, though deeply troubling, also carried a glimmer of hope.

I came to realise how profoundly friends and peers shape our thoughts and influence our lives.

Her son, not yet in his teens, had become addicted to gulbag, a local narcotic whose abuse was widespread. The fact that her husband was an alcoholic encouraged the boy, while his peers pushed him further over the edge. He grew abusive and violent towards his parents and even stole money to sustain his habit until Aasraa intervened and rehabilitated him. Now completely weaned off gulbag, her son, albeit reluctantly, had begun attending school.

These two incidents reminded me of how my mother always emphasised the importance of having a good circle of friends as I was growing up. I came to realise how profoundly friends and peers shape our thoughts and influence our lives. I felt a deep sense of gratitude towards my mother, whose moral values,

instilled through childhood stories, enabled me to enjoy the fruits of my father's hard work. This reflection led me to compare different social and economic strata, and I recognised that even those who are well-off can fall victim to peer pressure. Fortunately, they often possess the knowledge and resources to step back and return to a productive path. With my mother's warnings about choosing friends wisely still echoing quietly in my mind, I looked forward to meeting the children at the Aasraa's education centre.

While all the children were from migrant families, there were two different groups. The difference was stark. Children of beggars formed one group and those of construction workers another. Both were

The children of the beggars were street smart and wise to the ways of the world.

full-time occupations, and although migrants from the same locality in Bihar, their outlook and behaviour were markedly different.

Children of migrant labourer kids were spontaneous, joyful and bubbly. Their energy and enthusiasm were infectious and showed in all their activities. The children of the beggars, on the other hand, were much more cautious and calculative, which made me wonder if they were present only for the three free meals. Their participation was superficial and an act. This was reinforced by a game of Rumal chor, which involved tying up a handkerchief in the shape of a ball, throwing it behind a player's back and asking another player to catch the person with the kerchief behind his back. The children of the migrant workers were laughing and screaming with energy and joy as they flicked the balled-up kerchief all over, while those from beggar families were silent and merely going through the motions.

But the children of the beggars were extremely sharp and observant. They changed their behaviour according to the people they were engaging with, in sharp contrast to the other group, who behaved like normal,

Photographs: AASRAA

Children in the ONGC X Aasraa Mobile Learning Centre

Photographs: AASRAA

The indominitable Karan in his basti

carefree children. The children of the beggars were street smart and wise to the ways of the world.

I was reconciling this difference when I met twins Karan and Arjun at the Aasraa's education centre. Their energy and enthusiasm captivated me. The father was a professional beggar during the day and a professional gambler by night. Familiar with the local gambling dens and their timings, and recognising his sons' street smarts, he encouraged them to gamble. Arjun was good at this and added considerably to the family income despite his age. He and his brother started the day by collecting metal scrap for sale before going to school. Their father resented school and its homework because it reduced the family income. Arjun, wise and mature beyond his years, saw the merit of education. Besides being a good student, he was as focused as the Arjun of the myths. I remembered the stories about Arjun from my mother. Arjun was fearless in the face of adversity, pursued knowledge and skills, was compassionate towards others and devoted to his guru. Just like his namesake, the young Arjun spoke with his father and made an unusual arrangement. He wanted to study, but could not upset his father. The solution was that the boy would go to Aasraa while the other would accompany their father every day. The brothers alternated this practice and continued with their education. Arjun took the initiative and is now an influencer in his community and actively encourages children

NGO: AASRAA, DEHRADUN, UTTARAKHAND

Inception: 2009
Focus: Education, Nutrition, Healthcare, Skills Training, Shelter Home and Special Needs for children and youth
Impact: Reached over 28,600 children and youth and impacted the lives of thousands of families and their communities • Working with 21 Govt. and Govt.-aided schools benefitting over 7000 children • 8 Mobile Learning Centres and 2 Mobile Computer Labs to providestreet and slum children with interactive e-learning classes • Caters to more than 300 children in 4 Shelter Homes for girls and boys • Mainstreamed 2000+ out-of-school children into regular schools and NIOS-OBE

Photograph: Rohit Roy and Allavarapu Sai Sowmitra Rayudu

Children playing roomal chor

Photograph: Rohit Roy and Allavarapu Sai Sowmitra Rayudu

Photograph: AASRAA

L: Children showcasing their art; R: Children posing in front of the learning mobile

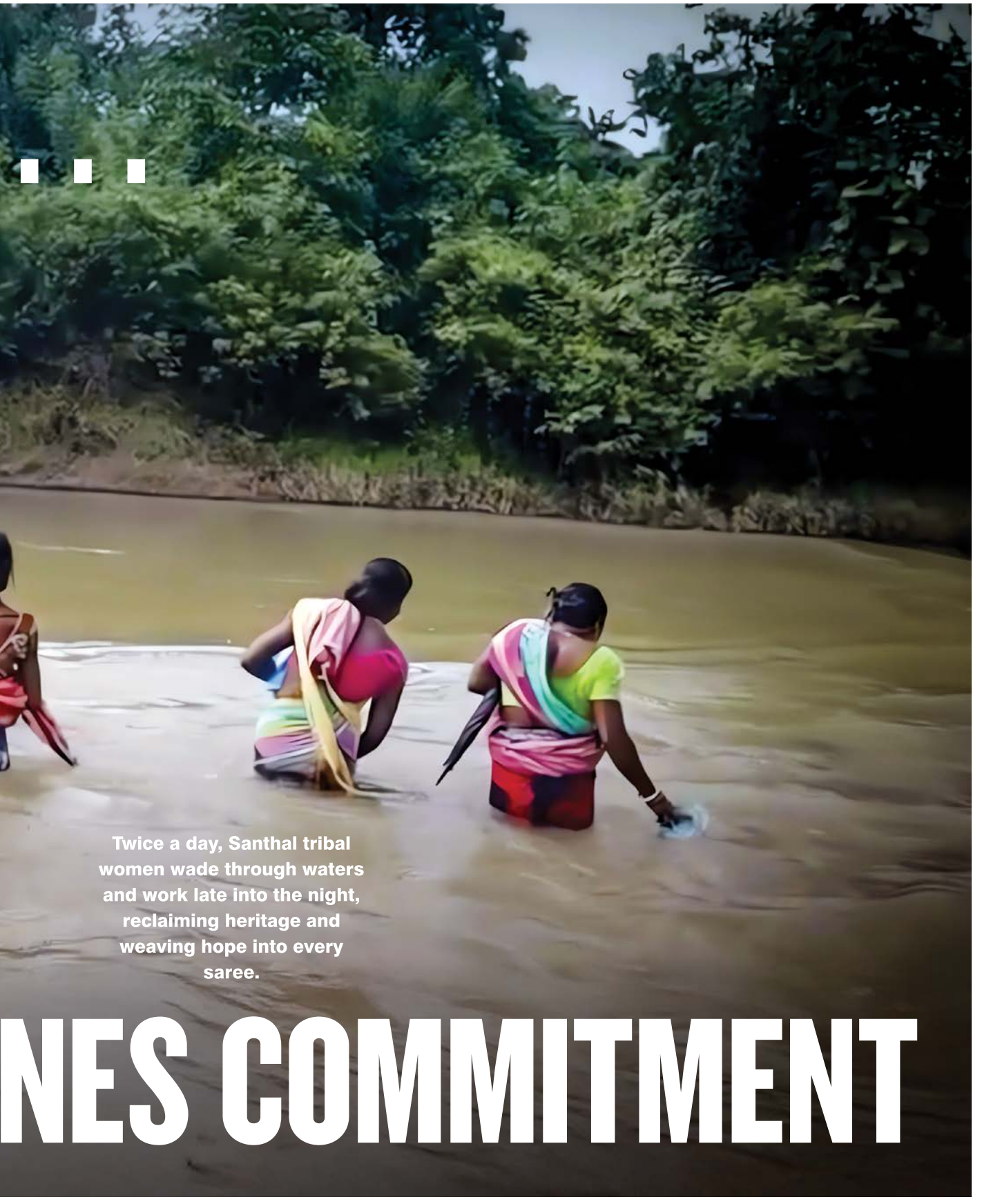
to connect with Aasraa for the ABC programme. Impressed by Arjun living up to his namesake, I wondered about the fate of the children of migrant workers.

Mintu was one such child. Unruly and indifferent when he first arrived, he gradually changed after observing other students. From not knowing the alphabet, he advanced to writing, reading and arithmetic, and was doing well. His behaviour, too, had improved. What concerned me was that education often came to a halt when parents relocated for work. A child would resume schooling only when he had access to an Aasraa's education centre, yet he was compelled to start afresh. This repetition of learning led to a loss of interest and, ultimately, dropouts. This set me thinking, and I proposed a modular teaching curriculum for constantly moving migrant children. A certificate recording what the child had learnt before relocation would be handed to him, enabling the next set of teachers to continue from where he had stopped. In this way, repetition would be reduced and progress sustained.

This idea led to a visit to the Aasraa tinkering lab, where children could experiment freely. It reminded me vividly of the accelerator and innovation lab at SPJIMR, and I mentioned this to the person in charge, suggesting they reach out to SPJIMR to develop a mutually beneficial relationship. This departure from the work life, where we are often mere cogs in the system, was both refreshing and encouraging. I felt reassured by my contribution, witnessed the impact of my involvement, and relived the memories and lessons instilled by my mother. ●

By
Rohit Roy


A DAILY COMMUTE
. . . THAT REDEFI



Twice a day, Santhal tribal women wade through waters and work late into the night, reclaiming heritage and weaving hope into every saree.

NES COMMITMENT

Our hotel did not accept the online booking, forcing us to look for accommodation at 10:30 pm in Bhubaneshwar. My instant reaction of throwing money and choosing the biggest and therefore the safest hotel did not go down well with my colleagues. We found safe and reasonably priced accommodation just down the lane. I realised I had to accommodate others and not indulge in easy solutions and overspending.

I was excited about my first internship and selfishly wanted an open, slow-charged environment where I could disconnect from the pressures of my urban life and recharge. I held an idealistic wish to make a meaningful contribution. I loved the countryside's openness and simplicity, and I was learning to adapt to others.

The travel to Udala the next morning, although long and tiring, was also refreshing. Natural beauty enveloped us as soon as we left the city. Although used to long drives in rural India, this was different.

Snapshots of Udala village

Udala was more rural than any place I had ever been to. It was painfully clear that language would be a problem as we drove past Odia billboards and shopfronts to reach our destination, Udala village in the Mayurbhanj district, Odisha, in time for lunch. The simple and light food reminded me of my beloved Konkan. Thedrumsticks and an extremely bitter neem chutney were unexpected and the taste lingered on long after the meal.

L: Workers at the unit; R: The author and colleague experiencing the dying process

The Mauna Dhwani Centre

We realised that Mayurbhanj district was also home to President Draupadi Murmu.

We realised that Mayurbhanj district was home to the Santhals, one of India's largest Scheduled Tribes, and also to President Draupadi Murmu. Santhals are deeply connected to the land and are primarily agriculturists and seasonal foragers. Colourful paintings of the mythical Navaguñjara and handmade mud idols of animals peppered the landscape aroused our interest. As we explored the interiors of the district, we realised that an animal and nature worshipping community once known for its sustainable, self-sufficient lifestyle, had fallen into decay. Lifestyles had changed, and a large number of tribals lived on the fringes. Industrialisation and exploitation had taken their toll. The slow death of the handloom industry had culminated in suicides for most weavers. The triple effect of poverty, being born a Dalit, and lack of employment guaranteed an uncertain future. An occasional daily wage of ₹ 100-150 through manual labour on farms was considered a gift. When Mauna Dhwani explored the idea of reviving the once common art of weaving, they were met with scepticism.

With nothing to lose, the tribals once again explored their traditional practices.

L: Workers handling the yarn; R: In conversation with Mayavati and the Babangad weavers

Photographs: Ikshita Jain

L: Weft winding and shuttle; R: Tribal sarees inventory

The saree I cut out of the loom

NGO: MAUNA DHWANI FOUNDATION, BANGALORE, KARNATAKA

Inception: 2017
Focus: Reviving dying crafts, empowering women, fostering sustainable rural development
Impact: 19 Training and Production Centres • 26 Tanta Sathi leaders • 800 Women impacted • 62 Mayurbhanj villages covered • 60+ Literacy programs for women weavers

Inventory Store at Chuliaposi

A family generously donated their livestock shed to be used as the first training centre as they started to reclaim their history. An expert trained tribal women in the old methods of extracting colours from flower petals and dyeing. A palette of 27 colours, including primary, secondary and tertiary shades, emerged, which was supplemented by carcinogenic-free Azo-free dyes.

A stipend of ₹ 3000 per month during training rose to ₹ 8000–9000 per month once they began working six to eight hours a day. This provided both security and stability, while giving the timid tribal workers the much-needed self-confidence. I understood why the training lasted a full year when we set out to learn and grasp the process by which raw materials such as cotton, jute, ahimsa silk and eri silk are spun into yarn, dyed, and then loaded onto beams connected to the handloom, enabling weavers to create designs. It was a demanding

These simple tribal women made me feel like a foreign dignitary.

experience. Although their main focus was the Mayurbhanj Saree, they also produced other sarees, *gamchas* (Towels), stoles, bedsheets, bags, laptop sleeves, and diary and calendar covers, among other items, to meet market needs.

I wondered about the drive and ambition of these tribals, who seemed content with so little. I experienced my first ride as a pillion passenger, since two-wheelers were the preferred mode of transport owing to the road conditions, as we began exploring the heart of the Santhal belt. The roads were more kutcha and often gave way to muddy trails.

I apprehensively rode pillion, and my visit to the Babangad village centre turned out to be an unforgettable experience. I experienced an interpreter for the first time in my life, Gaurishankar, as he took me to the centre using the same route as the tribal women. We had to stop at a river, and I was scared when I realised I would have to wade through it to reach the weaving centre. It was a scary experience, even though we waded through a shallow part of the river in the dry season. The river swells during the rains, and women would swim across with extra set of clothes, walk to the centre, change out of their waterlogged clothes before starting their work. I had never seen or heard of this kind of commitment in my life. It was simply unbelievable. Not just that, they often worked till 8:00 or 9:00 pm to justify their effort. Their husbands supported their wives by waiting in the centres and accompanying them back home in the dark. I came away with a sense of awe and a powerful new definition of commitment and dedication.

I was welcomed with a bouquet of wildflowers by the tribal women. To my surprise, I learned that the weaving centre was the only employer in the area. It became clear why so many women wanted to enrol. These simple tribal women made me feel like a foreign dignitary as they cut a completed saree from the handloom and ceremoniously handed it to me, while we began talking through the interpreter and a lone woman who knew some Hindi. They even tried teaching me how to say “My name is Ikshita” in Odia. I was struck by how many of them were the sole earners in their families, a clear departure from convention where men are usually the breadwinners. These women had high hopes for the future and wanted their children to have a better life. What was especially touching was that one of the women also said she wanted her daughter to study and get an MBA. Unwittingly, I became

Photographs: Varsha Priyadarshani

L: Manda Pitha and R: Rasogolla

Photographs: Online

Odia Thali

a role and an aspirational model. I was confused when the women collectively and shyly asked me to come out back in the field with them. It was an awkward but funny moment when I realised that that was where they 'went to the bathroom' since there was no toilet in the centre. I became one of the girls.

Multiple conversations across centres helped me to understand their lives and culture. I was introduced to regional and local food. The Manda Pitha, a dumpling native to Odisha made of rice flour with coconut or chenna (fresh cottage cheese) was astonishingly prepared without a single drop of oil. I was amazed to learn that the Rasogolla, which I had always associated with Bengal, has its historical roots in Odisha, and the state proudly celebrates 'Rasogolla Dibasa' in honour of its traditional origin after receiving the GI tag. Atta momos were local, as was the Kai, a paste made from red weaver ants. Known for its medicinal properties, it was awarded the GI tag in January 2024. Although I wanted to taste it, I had to be content watching it being made and sold in the local markets.

Learning about culture and cuisine was replaced with learning how to look at the larger picture. A conversation with the NGO head taught me how to think locally and stop relying on quick fix solutions. I reconsidered my initial idea of buying a generator to cope with the summer heat by simply adjusting the centre's timings. I realised the importance of thinking small, as motivation, structural and operational factors vary from place to place and directly affect productivity and output. Unique differences need to be recognised. I began to grasp business and understood that production, supply chain, operations, HR and management need to work together. I even picked up complex Excel skills from my peers who worked alongside me. I discovered the value of becoming sensitive and proactive. A lack of self-belief and confidence could hamper work and progress.

This changed my outlook. I discovered more about myself and realised I could challenge my limits and grow stronger.

This changed my outlook and I gained practical skills and management abilities, along with the softer skill of communication. In the process, I discovered more about myself and realised I could challenge my limits and grow stronger. This glimpse into social entrepreneurship sparked a deep desire. I hope to begin something of my own after gaining corporate experience and then give back to society. India is indeed rich with hidden and untapped potential.

By
Ikshita Jain

BOXER KAJAL: PUNCHING THROUGH PATRIARCHY

Photographs: Kajal

Her gloves struck more than opponents; they shattered tradition, inspired her peers and ignited a movement for women's rights in Himachal.

I was nervous about my rural internship. I had never been to north India or its hill stations, and I was surrounded by people I didn't know. Chandigarh airport, in stark contrast to Mumbai at midnight, was freezing cold. The thick, rough Haryanvi and Punjabi accents of the loud, aggressive drivers were hard to follow. One driver made us pay double, claiming it was for taxes and airport fees. The roads were deserted, and I felt unsafe. Very unsafe. To make matters worse, the hotel we had booked was shady and stood on a deserted road. The rooms were dusty and muddy. Everything was filthy, with layers of dirt and mud covering even the bedsheets and tables. The washrooms, crawling with cockroaches, completed the ordeal. Fresh hot parathas at 1:00 am offered some comfort and almost made up for it.

We braced ourselves for colder weather and numb hands as we reached Dharamshala late at night, ready for anything after the hotel ordeal. The morning set the stage for an unforgettable experience in the heart of the mountains, surrounded by lush greenery. Rocks glistened, sunlight danced on the snow, and smiles came easily as the crisp, clean air filled our lungs. I felt glad to be here. Words cannot truly capture the sheer delight of Rakkar, Himachal Pradesh.

The warm, informal first meeting, sitting in a circle on mattresses with the veterans of Jagori, the NGO we were interning with, was unlike any meeting I had experienced. Their seven to twenty year association with the NGO reflected their belief and commitment as they welcomed us into their close-knit warmth and shared plans. Their aim was to empower women and girls in a region where patriarchal norms had long shaped society. It took a great deal of effort in the conservative rural villages of Himacha,l yet progress had been made. They wanted to instil confidence, provide employable skills and help women achieve financial independence through peer group meetings, training and shifting mindsets.

An idea for a plumbing workshop for kishoris, adolescent girls, captivated me with its boldness, since even I had grown up seeing tasks like plumbing and electricity handled by my father or my brother. My mother and I were rarely involved in such work. This was so unique and refreshing

Photographs: Kajal

Practicing at Govt .Degree College, Nagrota Bagwan

that I absolutely loved it. I realised why these interactive workshops covered subjects such as gender equality, reproductive health, life skills and leadership development. They aimed to encourage education, dialogue, skill-building and networking, ensuring that adolescents gained knowledge, confidence, practical skills and awareness of their rights. The stunning landscape inspired me to walk and think. I felt my legs grow stronger and my mind sharper, and I realised why organisations like Jagori focus on women's rights in rural areas when I observed the gram panchayat.

While the law mandates female participation everywhere, at the gram panchayat level it often feels like a token gesture. The Kishori panchayat was created to challenge this. Volunteers identify motivated and mentally strong girls who want to improve and change their circumstances. With parental approval, these girls meet regularly and receive training on women-centred issues such as menstruation, gender equality and empowerment. Regular participants who are proactive and contribute insights and solutions are shortlisted and introduced to the gram panchayat, which then selects two to represent the women and the Sansthan. These kishori leaders speak on behalf of girls and women collectively, presenting their concerns to the gram panchayat. They have addressed issues such as streets without lights, which made girls feel unsafe when returning from tuitions, and cases of girls being harassed or troubled by boys at school.

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I was upset at the number of times I heard elders restricting a woman's role to child bearing, bringing up children and attending to her family.

Participation, unfortunately is a challenge given the chauvinist attitude. Families often see Jagori as an intruder and a corrupting influence against traditional values, and resent women's empowerment. The questioning and confrontation of long-established practices are largely met with anger and even distrust. Members of Jagori are frequently dismissed in a derogatory way as krantikaris, even though the lives of women have improved. I was upset at the number of times I heard elders restricting a woman's role to child bearing, bringing up children and attending to her family.

I was fortunate to attend one such peer meeting at an open school shed where there were 19 participants. Bold, rebellious, fashionable, 21-year-old Kajal, the sarpanch of the Kishori Panchayat, stood apart from the demurely salwar Khameez-clad teenagers in her jeans and tee shirt in the conservative rural Himachal setting. Along with her was 16-year-old Disha. Together, they represented the women and interacted directly with Pradhan of the Panchayat.

Kajal, a state-level boxer, shared how she had always been drawn to sports and athletics. Curiosity and a desire for self-defence led her to sign up for boxing when her school offered the chance to learn. As the only student boxer, she practised alone in the fields. The boys at her school mocked her, saying *"Yeh kya hawa mein mukke maar rahi hai, kaam kar jaake ghar ka"* (why are you punching thin air, go home and do something constructive), telling her to do household chores instead, like a good, obedient girl. Younger children copied them, and neighbours ridiculed her for boxing. These taunts became a challenge and pushed her to succeed. She gleefully recalled an incident with a school bully. Losing her patience, she slapped him, which led the principal to summon her and her parents. She stood firm, guided by her moral conviction and supported by Jagori. This was no small feat in a place where women are expected to remain silent, and any deviation from tradition is met with claims that the girl was a troublemaker and gone astray. The

Practicing at Govt .Degree College Nagrota Bagwan

perception of women as doormats runs deep. Her perseverance paid off when her name appeared across regional and local media after she won the state gold medal.

Villagers complimented and congratulated her. Congratulations from the bullies' parents abruptly ended the years of jibes, taunts and bullying. Her regular wins and medals at the State-level championships along with regular news coverage of her achievements are the sweetest revenge and the ultimate comeback. Her friends feel safe and more confident in themselves after this. The villagers proudly call her 'Boxer Kajal'.

In villages where girls are only expected to study just enough to get married off, stay home and cook for the family, Kajal created a new identity for herself - 'Boxer Kajal'. Her story stayed with me. We're often stuck with the labels the world provides for us, and she questioned it all, fought for herself and proved herself in the state boxing championship.

Kajol's story is not about boxing but about independence. Truly an inspiration.

It was fascinating to watch Disha and Kajal hold the attention of the crowd and lead the session with conviction and authority on topics of gender, discrimination and rights before an audience of 19 girls. It was nothing short of inspiring. Their ability to engage, educate and spark a sense of empowerment among their peers in such a short time was proof of the groundwork laid by Jagori. They demonstrated the efficacy of a Peer-Leader model in the struggle against gender inequality by empowering leaders and creating a ripple effect, inspiring and educating others within the community. It was clear that the Peer Leaders had grown from unaware, underconfident girls into young women who were not simply participants in a programme but active agents of change, challenging norms and advocating for women's rights. I noticed some members leaving the meeting suddenly when parents or brothers called them home to make dinner. It troubled me that these interruptions happened despite parental approvals and meeting schedules being known. I consoled myself with the thought that the beginnings of change were being forged in difficult conditions.

Kajol's story is not about boxing but about independence. Truly an inspiration.

The change brought by education and awareness was clear when I met confident 20-year-old Palak Kapoor, who was pursuing her B.Ed. She spoke with certainty about wanting to help conserve the environment and had striking clarity on issues such as landslides and river dumping in Himachal, as well as the importance of cow dung in organic farming. Her calm confidence was remarkable, and I could see the difference it made.

NGO: JAGORI RURAL CHARITABLE TRUST, DHARAMSHALA, HIMACHAL PRADESH

Inception: 2002
Focus: Feminist leadership and gender justice, Ending violence against women, Climate-resilient livelihoods, Youth leadership, Access to rights and entitlements
Impact: Reaches 300+ villages and 1,50,000+ people • Supported 5,145 families during COVID-19 under Caravan of Humanity • Provided emergency relief during the 2023 landslides in Kangra district. • National Secretariat for One Billion Rising campaign in India.

Photograph: Ayushi Arya

Meeting with Kishori Panchayat Heads- Kajal and Disha

Everything becomes possible once you believe you can do it. She inspired me to believe in myself. She taught me to trust my own confidence.

On the other hand, I witnessed a separation caused by domestic violence that left me scarred. The harsh realities of marriage, when combined with blindly following traditional practices, resulted in conflict, suppression and often led to violent domestic abuse. Women had to fight for their education and sacrifice their ambitions and hopes in the holy fire sanctifying their marriage if they wanted peace. Nothing could prevent a man from hitting his wife and treating her like a doormat. It made me question the institution of marriage, but also defined the context and the reason why gender biases need to be erased.

The rugged landscape, hauntingly beautiful, was also home to generations of inequality. Change was slow but spreading. Kishoris, adolescents, were becoming aware of issues that affected them. Societal and community norms had long suppressed women, yet growing awareness meant these norms were being questioned. Women wanted control over their lives and sought better conditions for themselves and their families. This constructive change promised benefits for their community and society in the long run. The inclusion of women in the panchayat was already shifting from a mere formality into something meaningful and inclusive. Women were no longer just representatives on paper. They were voicing concerns and influencing decisions that still rested largely with men. This was a quiet rebellion. It was about empowering women and ensuring they had a say in governing their lives. I realised that peer meetings were a training ground for future panchayat members and for lasting change.

What remained unchanged was the Pahadi culture and language. Dialects rattled away at breakneck speed, though thankfully they spoke Hindi with equal ease. I was gently scolded for my fast food preferences by a motherly Kiran, who explained how Western influence has altered our eating habits and harmed our health. We remain unaware of our own culture and food traditions as we grow more westernised. Listening to Kiran aunty describe her backyard organic farm, where she grows carrots, radish, potatoes and saag, inspired me to eat more healthily and pay closer attention to my diet. I realised that the rugged landscape also gave rise to energetic dances and music when I saw Nati performances. This feeling of tough ruggedness even spilled into the festivities, as I discovered during Holi. We smiled as our sins were burnt away in prayer to the Holi fire, but ran when we found cow dung used liberally alongside the expected colours. I was amused at how small details shift across geographies, yet the essence remains constant, even for national festivals. Festivals are what bring Indians together; festivals are what make India… India!

By
Ayushi Arya

THE PRICE OF LOVE AND DEFIANCE

Photograph: Sonal Taparia

Uma Tai from Umaria Gaon

A student's rural internship unravels stories of resilience, heartbreak, and unyielding courage, where survivors of abuse and abandonment rise against despair, teaching lessons in empathy and perseverance that no classroom could ever offer.

This was nothing like the life I was used to. I was meeting people I knew nothing about. I had no options but to use bathrooms that were dirty by my fastidious standards. I reluctantly was coming to terms with the fact that life was indeed different from what I was used to as I waited in a noisy, crowded room at Indore to begin my rural internship with Chaitanya WISE.

My learning began when I met the SHG women at Umariya village, an hour away from Indore. The absence of schools beyond 8th standard in the locality startled me. We have literally reached Mars, but village schools stopped at the 8th grade. The women weren't well educated, but the speed at which they did calculations mentally amazed me. They were faster than I was.

Listening to their chatter, I noticed an awareness about personal and marital relationships I didn't know existed. They were aware of challenges in marital relations and had accepted them. Some had normalised them while others accepted them. I listened. I was humbled.

I lowered my expectations when I relocated to Maheshwar,

166 kilometres from Indore. I was so exhausted that a clean Indian washroom made me happy. I accepted a dripping tap and sharing a single bed with a colleague on a mattress so thin that I could feel the wooden slats under it. I became grateful for the bare necessities and began counting my blessings with tears in my eyes in the darkness of the night. I was now thankful for everything my father and mother had given me. I missed Ma, but did not call her. My silent breakdown was interrupted by the sound of rats feasting on my food and plates outside the door. I realised I had become braver as I quietly switched on the lights, hoping to keep them away before falling asleep.

The next morning I met a lady who had fought with her family to educate her daughters as she spoke with pride about their salaries. I realised that that while those salaries were peanuts to me; it was her whole world because of her role in educating them. I was speechless, knowing I wouldn't be as happy even if I earned ten times that.

At a meeting of women discussing domestic abuse and steps to avoid and overcome that, I blurted that such husbands should be jailed and women should immediately file for divorce. The mystifying smile from Manisha Tai, a participant made me stop and sit up. This was my mom's smile, which meant I was too naïve to understand and offer real solutions. She informed me that she was a counsellor and sat at a desk in the village police station. She had resolved 78 cases from there and talked about a woman who hid her bruises with the drapes of her saree and a smile outside her home, till she came across Chaitanya Wise, the NGO I was interning with. A victim of domestic violence, she confronted her trauma that had continued for years, and finally gathered the courage to face her husband about his abusive behaviour. With a calm that masked her inner turmoil, she pleaded with him to change his behaviour for her and their children. To her surprise, he listened. She saw a flicker of remorse. Supported by Chaitanya WISE, the couple began counselling, confronted their demons together and started rebuilding their fractured relationship. She decided to use her experience to help others like her. Still supported by the NGO, she underwent legal training, hoping to make a difference. She volunteered to sit at the local police station, lending a sympathetic ear and a helping hand to those in need.

I reluctantly acknowledged that I not only start accepting the unacceptable but also think of multiple solutions.

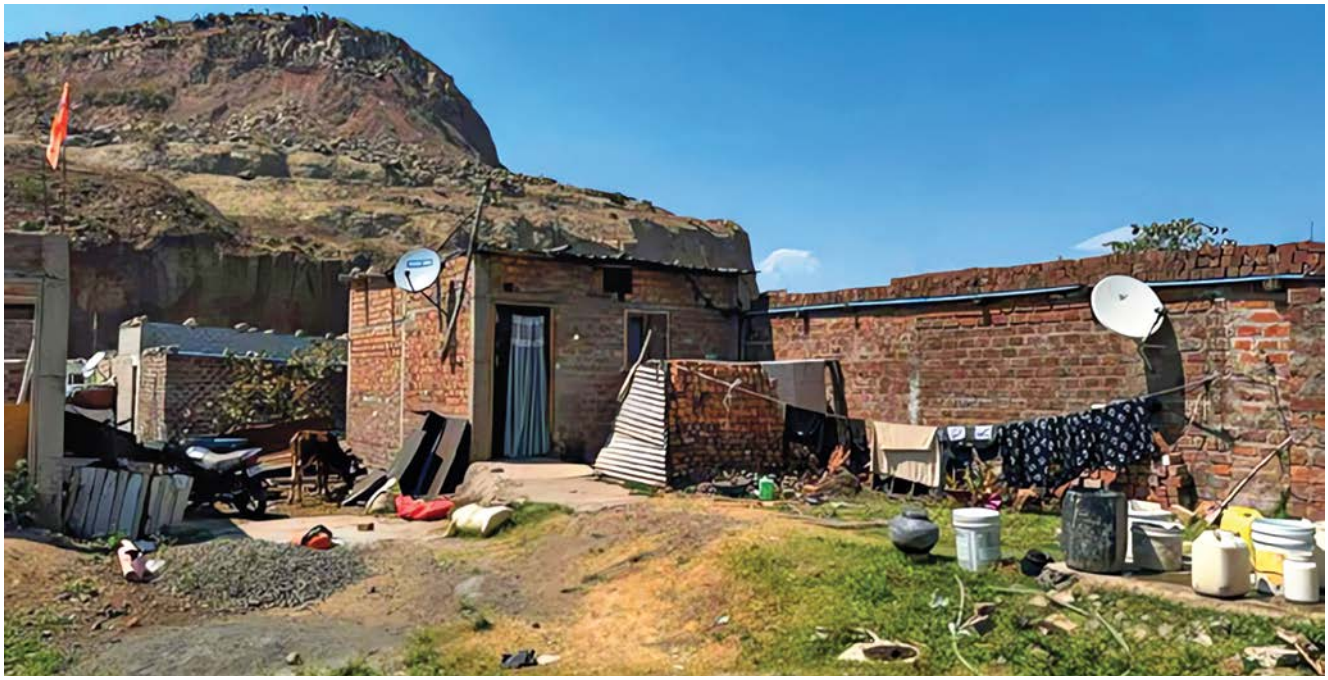
Photographs: Sonal Taparia

Bus ride to Maheswar

I was stunned when Manisha revealed it to be her story. I didn't know she was a victim. I reluctantly acknowledged that I not only start accepting the unacceptable but also think of multiple solutions. I learned the meaning of passion when I saw Manisha work to help the underserved with almost no resources. The fire in the eyes and zeal shamed me because I was dreaming about a cushy corporate life. It made me question my priorities. Stepping out of my comfort zone was transforming me.

Uma Tai's transformation, on the other hand, was a descent into hell. Born into an affluent family, she fell in love with a man she met on social media in 2018. She defied parental approval and got married within three months, a tribute to the power of modern-day 'Insta-Love'. The lockdown due to COVID-19 shuttered her husband's business. Soon, trivial disagreements turned into heated arguments and violence. Following well-wishers' advice, they decided to have a child in an effort to mend the fractured relationship. The fights reduced temporarily, but her husband's descent into darkness continued unabated. He sunk lower and started blaming the child for their troubles.

Uma Tai made the agonising decision to leave her husband to protect her child from abuse and turned to her parents, only to be met with rejection and disdain. They refused to shelter a daughter who had defied their wishes. With nowhere to go, Uma Tai resorted to working and living in a hut. With no one to care for her daughter, she carried her two-year-old daughter on her hips and back as she slogged nine-hour shifts earning a meagre ₹ 200 as a daily wage labourer. She did not smile, she did not talk. She listened blankly



Photographs:Sonal Taparia

Maheswar village

and remained aloof. She bore the heavy burden of lost love, shattered dreams, and severed family ties.

The consequences of decisions fuelled by passion reduced me to tears. I realised the importance of communication, understanding, and family support in navigating the complexities of relationships. She lost her husband, the support of her parents and the ability to smile or laugh. I wish her parents would stop being cold-hearted, turn over a new leaf, and welcome their daughter and grandchild home. I felt grateful that my family accepted my choice of a life partner and recognised the value of a supportive family. It taught me to tread carefully in matters of the heart.

Forty year old Jyoti from Kampel village in Indore district, tried to restart her life. She escaped an abusive first marriage and remarried in the hope of providing a father for her first daughter. She went on to have three daughters by her second marriage over time. Her second husband had run off with her eldest daughter and had been missing for almost three years. Her sister-in-law, taking advantage of her poverty, took away her youngest and was incommunique. She was in deep mental distress, and consumed by paranoia that someone might snatch away her remaining two daughters, when she tumbled into Chaitanya WISE and found solace. A visit to the police headquarters and a chance meeting with Himmani Khanna, on deputation from Chhattisgarh opened doors. A letter from AGP Pragya Shrivastav authorising Chaitanya Wise volunteers' access to police stations provided a much-needed breakthrough. Proof that communities and authorities

NGO: CHAITANYA WISE, PUNE, MAHARASHTRA

Inception: 1993
Focus: Institution Building and Microfinance, Gender Equity and Counselling Centres, Women Enterprise Development, Strengthening Livelihood and Forest Rights
Impact: Reached 1,363 villages across three states • Promoted women-led enterprises through 11 enterprise hubs producing 81+ products • Provided gender justice support through GECC centres • Strengthened 12,607 SHGs and 46 federations, empowering 1.4 lakh+ women • Promoted climate-resilient livelihoods and facilitated 67,500+ plantations

Photographs:Sonal Taparia

Jyoti tai after her second marriage and abduction of her daughters

working together can change lives.

The local Chowki, together with the village women, worked tirelessly to trace the missing daughter after nearly a year and discovered that Jyoti's second husband, unable to cope with the financial burden of raising three

The normalisation of domestic violence is alarming. The fear of being judged and ostracised by society forces women to endure abusive relationships.

daughters, had sold the eldest for ₹ 10,000 before abandoning the family. Jyoti was finally reunited with her family after four years. Chaitanya WISE stepped in to secure Aadhaar cards for the children and arranged for the missing daughter's admission to a government school. The women of the village, relieved at the reunion, collected funds to ensure that all three girls could continue their education without disruption. Jyoti now works as a farm labourer.

A storm of emotions overwhelmed me. I was compelled to look beyond myself. This human drama was an unforgettable lesson in empathy and compassion.

The shudders running down my spine eased, though they did not vanish, after meeting Ganga Tai. She had studied up to the 10th standard but was unable to continue due to limited opportunities. She once gave tuitions, but stopped after marriage becuase of societal pressure. She persuaded her husband to allow their children to pursue the education she had always longed for despite their financial limitations. They borrowed money to fund their daughters studies. Her elder daughter, an engineer at Infosys, is now completing her master's. The younger, with an MBA in finance, works at Central Capital in Mumbai, while her son is close to becoming an engineer. Her daughters now repay the loan.

She resisted both pressure to marry off her daughters, determined that they should achieve their ambitions and choose partners who would support them. The journey from a small village to Mumbai, the city of dreams, in pursuit of their aspirations was inspiring. It mirrored my own. My mother stood up for me and convinced my family to let me pursue my dreams.

My dreams were still intact but now layered with new learnings and insights. My heart ached with each meeting of a harrowed, psychologically manipulated and traumatised victim. I realised that education was powerless against a repressive mindset. Even educated women fall victim to domestic violence. The normalisation of domestic violence is alarming. The fear of being judged and ostracised by society forces women to endure abusive relationships. I discovered the power of speaking out against wrongdoing. Only by speaking up can we influence change and build a more just and equitable society.

I began to treasure the support I had taken for granted. The resilience of the abused women ignited a strength I was unaware of. Slow progress and setbacks do not frustrate me anymore for I know that each small step forward is a victory in itself. Transformation takes time, dedication, and perseverance. This field trip has provided me with insights, skills and knowledge while also instilling in me a strong sense of gratitude and empathy. It has been a journey of growth, self-discovery, and transformation. ●

By
Sonal Taparia

WHAT DOES IT TAKE TO REPLACE THE FIELDS WITH A CLASSROOM?

Where children once laboured in fields, alternative learning centres now cultivate ambition, turning students into ambassadors for a brighter future.

Photograph: Gayatri Seva Sanstaa

Photograph: Vaibhav Singh, Nitika Virmani and Geetika

Enroute from Udaipur Airport to my temporary residence

Village: Bhil Basti Karoliya.
Area: 535 hectares.
Houses: 151.
Population: 714.
District: Railmagra.
Distance from District headquarters: 30 kms.
Distance from Udaipur: 120 +kms.
Distance from High School: 7 Kms.
Distance from College: 25 kms.

The numbers seem insane. The Munshi Nagar campus, located in Andheri West, Mumbai, where

I was studying covered an area almost identical to that of Bhil Basti Karoliya. It not only housed more people, but its three schools and four colleges catered to 17,500 students every day. Things sure were different.

The region is sparsely populated. The area is covered with dense forests, and these foothills of the Arravalli hills are interspersed with settlements, some as small as 2-5 sq kms. It was expanses of open space with small pockets of people. These isolated settlements do not have schools for the logical and painfully simple reason that every school needs a certain number of students to justify its existence.

Travelling from Udaipur to Karoliya is not easy. Bhil Basti was even further away. A pucca road connected the Basti to the village, and it was built as recently as 2020. Earlier, the monsoons used to flood the entire region, often leaving the villagers stranded and isolated for long stretches of time, forcing them to fend for themselves during adverse weather conditions. Things have marginally improved. The basti, actually a hamlet, is connected to the village and the district headquarters now, so children after achieving consistency and a level in their education can now go to the primary school in the village and after that the

secondary school at the district headquarters.

Bhil Basti was as rural as one could get. Even experienced workers said that it was like travelling back a couple of generations. Open fields as far as the eye could see with a cluster of katcha houses and a few concrete buildings. I saw people, even small children, working in lush fields. Lifestyle, mindset and expectations are a throwback in time. Families typically consisted of three or four children. The elder child was tasked to look after the younger ones while the parents went to the field or work. Girls were expected to cook, take care of the house and do domestic chores. A child going to school meant one pair of hands less to help out with the chores and routines.

I saw people, even small children, working in lush fields. A child going to school meant one pair of hands less to help out with the chores and routines.

Although the classification of criminal tribes imposed by the British is long gone, generations of distrust and being side-lined has had their impact. It had taken years of effort by GSS, the NGO, for the basti to get electricity and a road link. Education is not a priority. Living is. Education was and still is a challenge, said Lataji, the Daksha (teacher), as she showed us the facilities and the premises of the educational centre. We were visiting an alternative education centre managed and run by GSS. Since the purpose of these centres is to prepare the children for school, all the students are local and from the same village. The purpose of setting up these centres is to ensure that the basic criteria for formal education are met, and they can enrol in full-time schools. Five or six students had been enrolled in mainstream schools by the time we visited the centre. The biggest challenge was attendance. Since there were only 25 to 30 students, Daksha had built personal relationships with the parents. She would go to the students' homes and speak directly with the parents whenever she noticed a drop in attendance.

Lataji, the only educated woman in the basti, was a Bhil herself, narrated the incredible story behind her education and becoming a teacher. She was the youngest in her family. Her father died when she was an infant, forcing her mother to work on construction sites as a labourer. Her mother was insistent on educating the young Lata and used to send her to school instead of taking her to the construction sites like other women in the community. Although uneducated, her mother insisted she continue with her education in the closest village, 5-6 kms away. Her brother used to accompany her as they walked the distance and returned home after the sun had set. She enjoyed learning, and as one of the rare educated women, she started working as a teacher. She completed her BA and started working as a teacher. She was married to a teacher who allowed her to teach and used her earnings to fund her B.Ed. This was a bitter-sweet statement because although

The journey from Udaipur Airport to my temporary residence

The lanes of Bhil Basti, Karoliya

Photographs: Vaibhav Singh, Nitika Virmani and Geetika

Nitika with a child at one of the centres

educated and working as a teacher, she had accepted her place in a male-dominated society and taken permission to work from an educated husband.

Interacting with these children was different and a learning experience. Despite the lack of facilities, I observed that the girls were quick and eager learners, demonstrating remarkable adaptability. This initiative not only encouraged them to study but also gave them hope of being enrolled in mainstream education centres. The 5-6 students who progressed to the state-run schools acted as ambassadors for this initiative.

This well-thought-out model was self-sustaining and benefited everyone in the village. The children were getting an education. The Daksha or teacher was getting a regular source of income, the village was benefiting with the number of literates increasing, which also helped to improve the perception of the village as a forward-thinking village. It worked at dispelling the notion that education cannot improve their lives. It demonstrated how, if you are educated, the right things will come to you. It demonstrated that education can take you somewhere better.

The purpose is to get children admitted into schools before their eighth grade so that they can appear for the board exams. Since the schools are far and few, parents are apprehensive of sending their children to distant places. Education often stops abruptly after the board exams because higher education was usually at a distance, and parents were wary of sending children to distances more than 20 kms. The Shikshalay tries to ensure that children complete their basic education, at least till their X grade.

The centre at Topali Mangri in the Salumbar district, on the other hand, was markedly different. Although in the same region, the welcome was unusually warm. The heart-warming smiles as we entered the village and met people are etched in my mind. The villagers not only welcomed us but also invited us into their homes for lunch, tea, and even evening snacks. Strangely enough, the Daksha here was not only recently married but was coincidentally named Lataji. She had children of varying age groups and ensured regular attendance by following the same process of meeting parents and finding reasons for their absence.

Her family members encouraged her to teach. The centre, rather the classroom, was one room on the first floor of her marital home. The room was well lit with an earthen pot (matka) filled with drinking water and Teaching Learning Materials (TLMs) displayed on the walls. This was reassuring to the parents who worried about the safety of their children. Most parents sent their children to the centre because they would be safe and hopefully learn something during their stay there. Overcoming the consensus that all children would inevitably become herders or farmers like their ancestors, despite education, was her first challenge. The second was the forgone conclusion that since girls were destined to cook, bear children and make homes, how could she, a girl child, benefit from education? The kids were painfully shy and reluctant to speak despite repeated attempts. I remember a girl finally disclosed her name after almost 5 minutes of interaction and compliments. She had changed her job to take up teaching with GSS. Her commitment to

Standing L to R Daksha Lata, Nikita and Vaibhav at Latajis residence-cum-school

Lataji teaching in a room of her house which has been converted into a classroom

Photographs: Vaibhav Singh, Nitika Virmani and Geetika

educating children despite this mindset speaks volumes about her commitment.

Meeting with the funder director of GSS was a revelation in itself. Shikshalaya was an initiative started by Gayatri Seva Sansthan to enhance the educational opportunities for children in the underserved rural expanses of Rajasthan, where children between 4 and 14 years face social, economic, systemic and traditional barriers. The attempt to dismantle these barriers by providing educational opportunities to school dropouts, irregular students, or even those who have never seen the inside of a classroom was showing promising results and was addressing educational gaps in the educational landscape of Rajasthan's marginalised communities.

The difference between the bustling metropolis of Mumbai and the serene city of Udaipur was stark. This when, mixed with the cultural and infrastructural differences, further enriched our experience. We were chasing power, money and driven by ambition, and the NGO was trying to bridge exclusion and access, ensuring that children who might otherwise remain outside

NGO: GAYATRI SEVA SANSTHAN, UDAIPUR, RAJASTHAN

Inception: 1987
Focus: Human and Institutional Development, Livelihood Enhancement, Natural Resource Management

Impact: Developed 10,000+ hectares through soil and water conservation. • Benefited 3,000+ farmers through improved agriculture programs. • Rescued 300+ children from child labor and trafficking. • Provides free education to 10,000+ children across 320 learning centers. • Established 5 Child-Friendly Gram Panchayats as sustainable models.

the formal system are identified, supported, and prepared to transition into mainstream schooling. Our conversation with Chetan Pandya, who left a well-paying corporate job to start GSS was a revelation His passion was contagious, and we learnt a lot from him. On our last day at the NGO, he spoke to us about how young adults do not have enough conviction in what they do when they take it up as a career. The reason for this missing spark,

We were chasing power, money and driven by ambition, and the NGO was trying ensure that children transition into mainstream schooling.

he believes, is that people always take the easier option and don't explore arenas that might be better suited for them. When asked how to avoid this trap, he answered with a smile that at our age, we should not at all be afraid of the outcomes and go valiantly after what we desire. These words are something that guide us in our decision- making ever since. The disparity between Mumbai's abundance and rural Rajasthan's constraints was disturbing and dramatised the uneven distribution of opportunity. A project to explore filling in the gaps in the education system to help underserved children in rural areas go to school became a life-changing experience. ●

By
Vaibhav Singh and Nitika Virmani

Photograph: Vaibhav Singh, Nitika Virmani and Geetika

Nikita reading aloud a story to a student

Photograph: Gayatri Seva Sanstaa

Giggling children at one of centres

MEMORIES OF ANOTHER DAY

Fieldwork leaves you with memories of encounters and experiences that challenge you to reconsider the life you thought you understood.

Fieldwork is like a box of surprises. It is full of unexpected moments, experiences and lessons. I often accompany students, criss-crossing different routes and visiting remote locations during their DoCC internship. One reason is to stay informed about what is happening on the ground. Another is to reconnect with organisations, their leadership teams, and to strengthen existing relationships. A further reason is to impress upon students the importance of a field trip, so that they can contribute meaningfully to the projects they have been assigned. More importantly, students freed from the restraints of the classroom begin to open up, ask questions, engage more thoughtfully and intensely, reconcile differences in perspective, and work together for the common good. It is exhilarating to see them become sensitive to what they have never previously experienced and gradually transform.

The conversations change in their quality. They often become more wide-ranging and more intense than what one sees in the classroom as they grapple and face new situations and circumstances. They have shared memories of their experiences and transformation in their stories from the field. I, similarly, wanted to share some encounters from the field that are etched in my memory.

I remember a field trip to Rajasthan where Maulik Sisodia and Pooja Bhatti, the leadership team of Tarun Bharat Sangh, spent an entire day showing me how and where their interventions had brought water to communities and how this transformed their fields. They were growing a variety of crops, their cattle had increased and they were exploring dairy farming. For women, it meant not having to walk 20 kms a day for a pot of water. While they still work the fields, their lives have been transformed by the access and

View from the Joth, on the way to the Chamba Hills, Himachal.

availability of water.

These women were not feminists in the way theory defines, but they spoke of feeling empowered by the time suddenly available to them once they no longer had to walk 20 kilometres each day. They lived and worked within a framework where womanhood was defined by marriage, children and in-laws, and where life was governed by entrenched caste divisions and conservative social rules. They were surprised that I, a woman who was not married, was travelling alone. The fact that I came from the same community broke the ice, earned me an unexpectedly warm welcome, and led to a free-flowing conversation without restraint.

Photographs: Dr. Chandrika Parmar

Converstions over cooking, Rajasthan.

They were not just curious but intrigued by my journey. I told them the reason lay with my father. He believed in education, not as an abstract ideal but as a form of independence. A lifelong learner, he was always reading, always curious. For him, education was never ornamental; it was infinite. It was the foundation of self-reliance. One phrase defined much of our childhood: "Pado – aur apne pair pe khade ho." Study — and stand on your own feet. It was not a mere slogan. It carried depth and expressed his way of thinking about life. Education was not meant to make us

With the women and children who have benefitted from the easy availibilty of water in Rajasthan due to the effors of Tarun Bharat Sangh

These women sat puffing their bidis – something that both surprised and amused me and showed me the limits to my way of thinking.

impressive; it was meant to make us independent. It meant that before relying on anyone else, one must first be able to rely on oneself. Education was both the key and the path to that independence.

The conversation shifted after this. We were no longer speaking of abstract ideas such as empowerment. Instead, we spoke of the small decisions and beliefs that shape the possibilities of a life. These women puffed their bidis as they reflected on what I had said. Some were cooking, others had grandchildren in their laps, their eyes drifting into the distance as we companionably shared silence and contemplated life. This both surprised and amused me. It also revealed how my own mind had slipped into inertia and showed me the way to expand the limits of my thinking. Sharing, discussing, and dreaming made this possible.

Fieldwork teaches us that life and situations are often beyond the scope of theory.

Water had changed them. Its arrival had given them something simple yet profound: time. Time no longer spent walking miles for a pot of water. Time to work their fields differently. Time to think about their children's schooling. Just as my father's insistence that we study and stand on our own feet quietly expanded the horizon of what our lives could become, I hope it has given them food for thought and the freedom to imagine different futures for their children and grandchildren.

Yuvraj posing for a photograph

Photographs: Dr. Chandrika Parmar

Yuvraj with his flock of sheep on the road to Joth, Chamba hills.

On another trip, on my way to Chamba, the rhododendrons blooming on both sides of the road as it snaked through the hills signalled that the weather was changing. Spring was coming. For many communities, especially the nomads, it was time to return home. I saw many Gaddis, the nomadic herding community of the Chamba hills, shepherding their sheep as they climbed back towards their villages. Every October and November, before winter sets in, the community gathers its flocks and moves down to the plains. The rugged mountain terrain and snow make survival difficult, with food scarce and fodder hard to find during the winter months. They spend four to five months in the plains and return to the hills at the first signs of snow melting, as spring replaces winter.

Rhododendrons signaling the beginning of spring

I met a 17-year-old boy named Yuvraj. He was with his father and brother-in-law as they shepherded their sheep. The two men had made countless trips over the years, but it was Yuvraj's first journey—not just out of his home but also to the plains. Because the mass of bleating sheep blocked the road for a while, I got off and walked with them.

As we walked together for a short stretch, I realised Yuvraj was suspended between two worlds. One was the traditional rhythm of migration that had defined his community for centuries. The other was the changing new world, where new roads were disrupting those rhythms. We began talking. Suddenly, this young boy looked at me with hopeful eyes and blurted, "Can I take a ride with you? Can you drop me at Jhot?" It was the highest uphill point. It was his first long walk, nearly 1,000 to 1,500 kilometres. He had been walking for eight days, all uphill. "Yes," I

Photographs:Dr. Chandrika Parmar

Old man, waiting for his time on a bench on the periphery of Minjar Maidan, Chambha town. Himachal Pradesh.

said. He turned to his father for permission. Once he received it, he hopped in. It was his first ride in a passenger car.

This turned out to be one of the most enlightening 120 minutes of travel. We spoke about many things: his life, the journey, and his relationship with the flock. He revealed that there were 1,860 sheep in his care. Each one had a name. He knew them all. His bond with them was living, built through years of care, memory and responsibility. The sheep were not just numbers or livelihood. The flock was part of him. Each animal was different and unique. He spoke of his favourites and described their idiosyncrasies. Some were stubborn, some slow, some easily frightened. It made me look at the flock with fresh eyes. I had always seen a flock as a group, while he knew each member as a distinct animal. I realised that what people considered a mass of moving creatures was, for him, an intricate tapestry of relationships.

This encounter forced me to reconsider my approach to how I saw and noticed things. A way of looking and understanding

"Budapa bahut buree cheez hai – old age is a very bad thing" he told me. "I am now just waiting to go." A lot was left unsaid. We sat in silence, in understanding.

that went beyond the surface. Not generic and standardised, but nuanced and thoughtful. I learnt that one can't put things neatly into a box.

The Chamba valley made me reflect on life during another trip in March 2022. I was driving through the picturesque 900-year-old town of Chamba, past Minjar ka Maidan. This maidan, famous for its annual mela, was the centerpiece of the town. I recalled the stories my mother had told me about it, about how the maidan overlooked the Beas River. As I gazed at the benches around the maidan, I noticed him.

A weathered face looking vacantly into the distance. Something made me stop.

"Kaise Hai?" How are you, I asked him.

He looked at me- quietly.

"Saab theek", I hope all is well, I persisted.

"Thanda Hai" It's cold.

Yes, he replied. But it's not the time to go, he continued. I sat down next to him. His name was Karam Singh. The name struck a chord. It was the same name as my father's closest friend. Different person, different place. The name touched me deeply. I had lost my father a year ago, and I was still grieving.

He was a washerman who had spent his life washing and ironing clothes. *"Budapa bahut buree cheez hai"* – old age is a very bad thing", he said. "I am now just waiting to go." A lot was left unsaid. We sat in silence, in understanding. Silence bridged our thoughts. I asked him if I could take his photograph. I took his photograph. Not his address.

4 years have passed since. I have often thought about him, wondering whether he is still sitting, waiting for his time.

Fieldwork leaves you with many such moments: brief conversations, unfinished stories, and faces that linger long after the journey ends. A reminder that life has its own unpredictable rhythm. It can unfold through the recovery of time with water, the seasonal movement of flocks across mountains, or the quiet resignation that comes with old age.

These experiences rarely fit neatly into theory. But they stay with you, asking you to look again at the worlds we often think we understand. People and situations in real life do not always fit neatly into boxes as they do in theory. We need to change the way we see people, situations and things. We think we understand, but fieldwork opens up a world we are often unaware of. ●

By
Dr. Chandrika Parmar

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